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The Butte

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The Butte

[Small Stories About A Small
Town In The Pacific Northwest]

By Natasha Bailey

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing

Linfield University

April 22, 2021

Approved by Joe Wilkins

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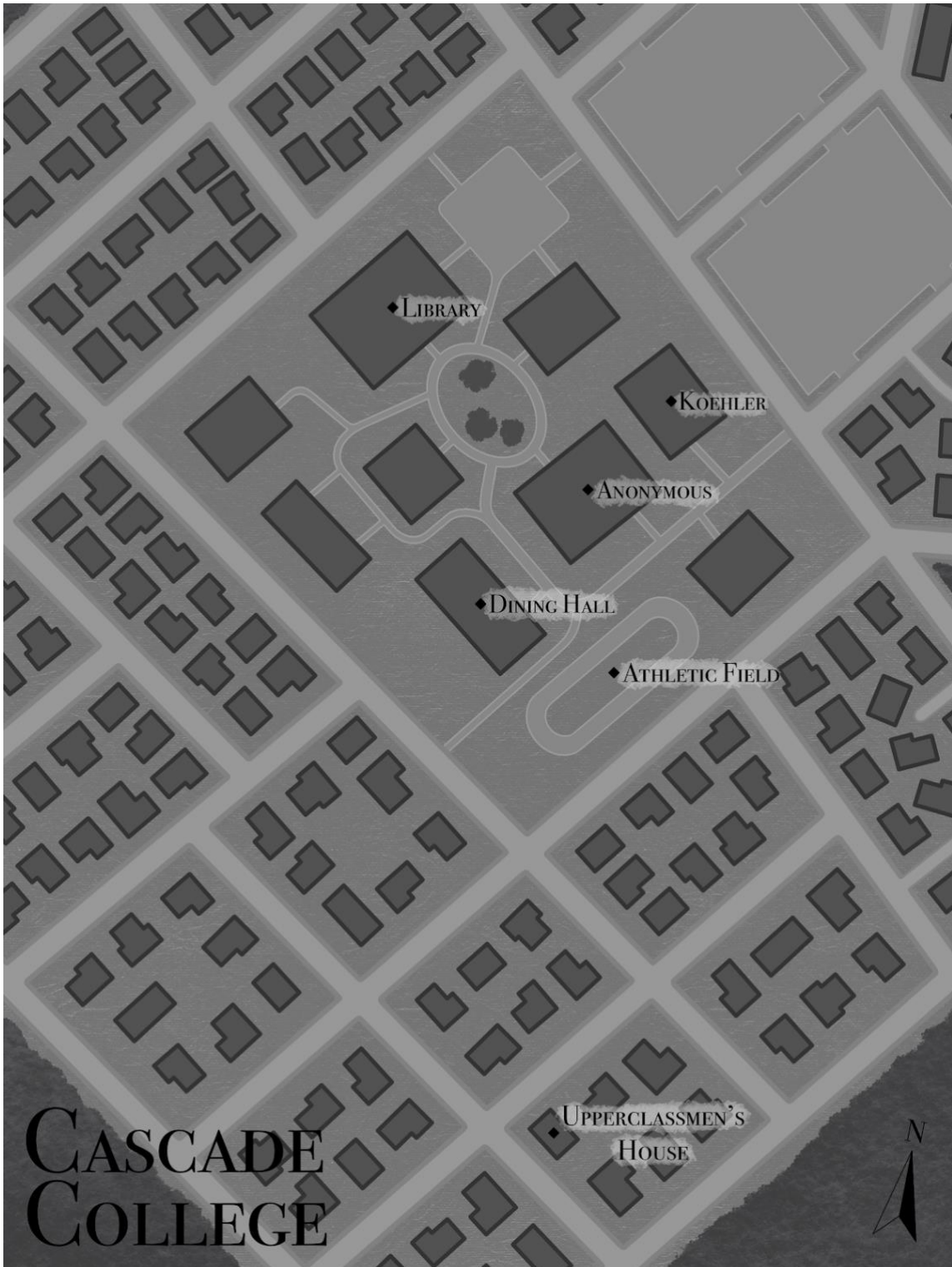
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The Singing

Yuma

Not everyone heard the singing.

It was both sound and sensation. Like the shudder of violin strings. However, it didn't usually impede the everyday aspects of Yuma's life. Yes, it could get rather annoying. Yuma would sometimes walk into a place only to go right back out again, flinch at the oddest things, and get massive headaches.

Yuma Hara had lived her life well despite the singing. By the age of five, she'd learned to keep knowledge of its existence tethered within, for its mention only prompted visits to the doctor.

At the age of thirteen, she'd told her best friend that the world sang to her and the girl had simply turned and said, "That was very pretty, Yuma. You should be a poet."

When she learned how to drive after her eighteenth birthday, Yuma discovered that the world outside of her city sang too.

She drove to the Snake River once, and after spending several heartbeats staring out at the slithering waterway, Yuma folded herself back into her father's small grey car and went home.

Over the next decade, she discovered the hows and wheres of the singing. It was not connected to inlets or forests, urban or rural (though it did prefer the later), and it did not seem to be contained in any physical sense of the word. It could fade or intensify, depending on... well, she didn't know. Because while Yuma heard the singing, she certainly didn't enjoy it. Sometimes it rang so powerfully through her skull that blood would sting her nose, and when she tried fighting it instead of running, darkness would polka dot her vision. These symptoms made driving through untested areas dangerous, so Yuma had taken to public transportation.

On rare occasions, so few and far between Yuma often forgot they existed, the singing could be a bit beautiful too. Floating around like a lullaby in time with her breaths. But she ignored it. Yuma pushed all singing from the currents of her

mind and only allowed herself to acknowledge its presence when absolutely unavoidable.

Like now, for instance.

Yuma presently sat in the passenger seat of a cab, traveling far from Seattle. She'd memorized the route from a map, but it still surprised her how much taller the evergreens climbed in the mountains. The trees stretched so high they cast the path ahead in dappled light.

The cab had arrived five minutes before schedule, glimmering black in the morning sunlight. A little sign on the sun visor had read: Hi! My name is DALLAS.

The driver, Dallas himself, could only be described as jovial. With his hair done up in a bun and dressed casually in red flannel and jeans, Yuma's first thought was, "Oh no, I'm going to be spending the day with a lumberjack." But that belief disintegrated after he shook her hand, made an absolutely abominable knock-knock joke, and proceeded to ask her a series of questions probably meant to help pass the time.

He asked Yuma about her job (she confirmed she worked as an editor and journalist), if she had any pets (a Newfoundland named Barnacle), and asked her quite seriously what her thoughts on starlings were (and yes, there was a right answer).

She relaxed into the passenger seat a bit more, less prepared to throw herself from the car in case he took a wrong turn. Dallas kept up a steady stream of commentary which Yuma listened to with genuine interest until they exited onto a thin excuse for a highway. It was then she felt the singing.

The singing wasn't exactly a thing Yuma heard, so much as felt. It always started as a warm tingling in her ears, as if someone had pressed their mouth against her head and began to hum. It was bearable. Until it spread.

"So, Ms. Hara, what brings you all the way up here? I'd always thought the most exciting news happened in the city, not in places tucked out of the way like this."

“Normally I’d agree with you, but one of my people came up here and wrote something so far-fetched that, frankly, it needs serious corroboration before going to print.”

“That wild, huh?”

“It was extremely unlikely.”

“Must be for you to travel out of the office yourself, Ms. Editor-And-Chief. Wouldn’t it be easier to send someone else?”

“Possibly.”

They wound into the trees, green arms reaching to pierce the clear blue sky. The shadows they cast across the highway helped cut through the September heat.

Dallas pointed out a glittering river running next to them through the boughs and started telling her all about it. Yuma’s eyes widened in realization.

“Have you driven here before?”

“Oh, sure,” he said, chipped tooth flashing. “It’s definitely out of the way, but I drive students from Seattle every year. It’s fun, actually. Cascade College has these real odd courses, so when I ask the kids what they’re studying I always get great answers. Plus, they love how pretty it is, all the nature and stuff. Lots of hiking trails. Town’s cute, too.”

“What kinds of courses?”

“Well, one lady told me she specifically studied theology of cults and the occult, but my favorite was a kid that said they were majoring in mushrooms. Did you know that mushrooms are considered neither plants nor animals? When they told me that, I nearly went cross-eyed.”

His merry voice fell away as the singing rasped softly against Yuma’s fingers. She flexed her hands, praying that it wouldn’t get any worse. But even prayers had bad service up here, because as soon as they passed a state marker reading “Welcome To The Butte,” the singing trilled from the roots of her hair all the way to her toes. *Ah, hell.*

“You good? We’re almost there, just another three miles or so until the official turn-off. There’s another road before it, but it takes you to the residential

area, and we're aiming for downtown. The second road is easier to spot too. You'll see in a minute."

If Yuma hadn't rented out the car for the day and spent a good two hours traveling, she'd have the gangly cabbie turn around and drive until the static stopped. Instead, she fisted her hands in her lap and imagined the singing floating up and away from her.

Yuma became so engrossed in this exercise, she nearly missed any indication of the turn off, but as Dallas slowed, she spotted a ruby red sign. They turned and suddenly gas pumps, a parking lot, and what looked to be a diner with big lettering overhead immediately appeared. But they drove by too quickly and it was soon swallowed from sight.

"That's one of my favorite places to park when I'm up here. Fantastic food and company, and I'm picky on both accounts."

Yuma had a hard time believing him. The guy was like a German shepherd; he looked big and rough around the edges, but boy was he friendly.

"I'm taking you to the sheriff's place, right?"

She hummed in response. The singing made her tongue tingle. It had never been this loud before in her life.

The Butte was officially the last place on earth Yuma wanted to be.

Dallas

The Butte was exactly the place Dallas wanted to be. The pine trees filled the summer breeze with smells he could only find in air fresheners.

As the town absorbed his cab into its embrace, Dallas released a sigh of pleasure. The Butte was the kind of place he'd wanted to live in as a kid, all bright people and shiny window fronts. He imagined it looked charming as a storybook when it snowed, but he was never fortunate— or unfortunate— enough to get stuck up in the range during the winter. The Butte was like an affectionate cousin of his; always too far away, but a joy when visiting.

Dallas planned on stopping by SweetTooth Bakery before Ms. Hara wanted to leave. They had perfectly crumbly lemon bars that he and his husband loved, and Dallas was thinking of bringing Bert up here for their anniversary. It was nothing fancy, but it'd be a quaint little getaway. He loved that kind of stuff.

But with the way Ms. Hara looked, they wouldn't be sticking around longer than they'd have too. The woman's face scrunched in a particularly uncomfortable way, and Dallas wondered whether she got car sick. It happened more often than people thought with all the winding and high elevation. Even her hair, straight as it had been at the beginning of her journey looked as if it was trying to escape. Dallas could only stare as black strands seemed to float around her.

“Do I have something on my face?”

“No, miss. But your hair... looks like someone rubbed a balloon on your head.”

Ms. Hara immediately brought up her hands and tried flattening it.

“Here.” Dallas pulled a hair band off of his gear shift. He had plenty to spare.

“Thanks.”

Dallas noted her growing irritability and sped up a fraction more. Maybe getting out of the car and breathing some of that pine-scented air would be good for her.

“We're almost there.”

They drove down Main Street, the road lined in oak trees, warmly lit shops, and outdoor seating. A band played on the corner and, as they passed, the sound of acoustic guitar drifted by. Dallas couldn't help but smile. How could you not find joy in this little slice of life?

The sheriff's department looked less like a police station and more like an old house, big with a slanted roof, lots of windows, and a bright yellow door.

“Well, can't say this is a normal sheriff's department...” Dallas murmured.

“Can't say this is a normal town.” Ms. Hara gritted her teeth. “I'll probably be a half-hour.”

“All righty, I’ll see you then,” The words had barely left his mouth when the passenger door slammed shut.

Walking down Main Street into SweetTooth Bakery was like walking into a honeyed dreamscape. There were long windows to take advantage of any natural light, tables and chairs of all different styles and colors, and, of course, the *smells*. Rising bread, cinnamon, and sugar all swirling together around the woman of the hour herself, Miss Sayles, who was cute as a button and wrapped in a flour dusted apron.

When Dallas looked at her, surrounded by hundreds of potted plants dripping from the ceiling, off counters, and windowsills, it became clear that *if* there was such a thing as the fae, she’d be one of them.

“Look who’s back after all this time,” Sayles said with a sugar-cookie smile. “Here to steal some more lemon bars I presume?”

“Now how in the world do you remember that?”

“Oh hon, you should know by now I never forget a face, or an order for that matter.”

“That’s quite the gift.”

“I suppose you could see it that way. You’re in luck, I just finished a batch. Be right back.”

Dallas watched as her big blond bun drifted behind racks of muffins and cookies. The woman was a treasure.

Returning with not one, but *two* bags in hand, Sayles rang him up.

“I packed a little extra this time for whoever you’re carting around today.”

Dallas could only blink at her in surprise. “How’d you know?”

“You’re a cab driver, aren’t you?” Her cornflower eyes shone. “You came in last month and we talked a bit, don’t you remember?”

“Oh, yes...” The memory was vague, drowned out by the more powerful impression her sweets made. “Thank you, Miss.”

“My pleasure, see you again soon.” He could feel her wave at his back as he left.

Yuma

The singing snapped against her skin as she shut the passenger side door closed behind her.

“How’d it go?”

“The sheriff wasn’t even there.” She stuffed a file and her pen back into her satchel. “But there was a woman named Stevie manning the place and she gave me that” –she gestured to the bag– “and had plenty of rumors to share, but when I told her I needed real physical proof, she told me to find a woman named Jodie. No last name. Only an address. For someone who works at an informational desk, she’s pretty bad at it.”

The cabbie puckered his lips, “That sucks. Here.” He handed her a pastry bag. “Courtesy of the notoriously divine Miss Sayles.”

Suspiciously, Yuma peered inside where a golden bar sat, dusting the bag in puffs of powdered sugar.

“How sweet of her. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Now what’s that new address?”

They backtracked through town towards the diner and turned off the main road onto a gravel drive, leading into the cool shade of evergreens.

The singing was a constant vibration in every part of Yuma’s body, and though eating the lemon bar didn’t help, the perfect balance of sweet and sour gave her something to focus on besides her crawling skin. What was wrong with this place?

The tree line thickened, and just as Yuma believed the road would dead end, and Dallas was actually a serial killer intent on dumping her body where no one could find it, a low overgrown building sprung from the earth; grey and shabby looking. A mustard-colored logo above the industrial metal doors read: Animal Control.

“Do you want me to tag along?” Dallas asked.

They both eye-balled the place distrustfully.

“No... I’ll go.”

The gravel crunched under her shoes, but before she’d made it halfway to the door, it clanged open.

“What do you want?”

The woman who stood before her was built like a hammer, big boots, hard eyes, broad shoulders, and tight black twin braids to top it all off.

Yuma offered her hand, “Nice to meet you, I’m Yuma Hara, Editor and Chief of the PNW Pen & Ink Journal. I’m here to ask a favor.”

The woman, who Yuma assumed was Jodie, crossed her arms and stared her down.

“And what would that be?”

“Copy of some records.” Yuma tightened the grip on her bag, fighting the singing. “One of my employees came to me with a story that I need to verify.”

“What’s the story?”

“Simply– it’s about The Butte: the folklore, history, and the people who live here. It’s an interesting town and someone told me you had some more than interesting stories.”

“And not so simply?”

Yuma couldn’t just come out and tell the woman that she was looking for evidence of the unnatural. Just like she couldn’t tell anyone about the singing. It was just too weird. But this story had sunk its teeth into her, and there was no way she’d leave it unexplored. Yuma had answers in her sights, she just needed to pull the trigger.

“It’s about some of the unexplainable things that happen here.”

Jodie squinted at her, like she was deciding whether to shoo Yuma off the property or let her in.

“That writer who was here before said that your journal was some sort of big deal. Official right? Not some scandal newspaper?”

Yuma nodded. “I can show you some credentials if you’d like.”

“I’ll take your word for it. I’ve got something... Not sure how helpful it’ll be. Stay right there.”

As the door swung shut, Yuma turned to give Dallas a wave she hoped communicated: “All is well. She’ll be right back.”

Dallas shot her a thumbs up that she took to mean, “Cool. I’ll sit right here and keep an eye on things. Make sure no cougars come out of the woods to eat you.” Ok, maybe she added that last part.

Quicker than Yuma expected, the woman reappeared and handed her another file, still warm from the printer... perfect.

It felt thick, and the fresh parchment made the electric current running along her skin flicker, but as Yuma flipped through, she noticed a distinct lack of pictures or physical evidence.

“This is it?”

“Yep.”

“Are you willing to go on record and vouch for the accuracy of these reports?”

“Absolutely not.”

And on that note, the woman slammed the door firmly shut.

“She looked friendly.” Dallas remarked as Yuma settled in.

The cab’s air conditioning skated across her skin, refreshing after standing under the sun for so long. The sweat at her brow cooled.

“She certainly wasn’t very forthcoming.” But Yuma found her lips tilting upward a little. Yes, Jodie hadn’t been a wealth of information, but she still had plenty of strange reports, if the weight of the file was any indication.

Flipping through the papers again, Yuma noted the various names and dates stretching back years. Either the town’s lore had gotten completely out of hand, or there was actually something brewing in The Butte. She didn’t dare voice any of her suspicions aloud, though, so she merely added, “Small towns.”

“Small towns.” He echoed and turned the key in the ignition.

They had one more stop to make, and Yuma prayed they’d arrive before the singing drove her insane.

Dallas

The Butte's library was underwhelming. As they pulled up to the poor thing, it seemed to sag in on itself. Dallas was one thousand percent confident that if Bert ever saw how sad the place looked, he'd shed a tear.

Ms. Hara scurried in and out within a minute.

"The custodian said that they'd transferred most of the books and town records to the college library decades ago, and what they wouldn't take was pushed to the high school. All that's in there now are boxes. The address is—"

"It's fine, I know the way."

Ms. Hara's hooded eyes drooped, and Dallas wondered if it would be polite to suggest stopping for coffee. The woman seemed to grow more frazzled as the day wore on. Perhaps it was the heat. Some folks weren't built for running around under the sun.

The Butte was secluded from the rest of the world in general, but Cascade College was a realm in-and-of itself. An offshoot of town where academic quirkiness blended with the heartiness of community. The semester had already begun, and students wandered the campus lethargic in the sunshine, as professors rushed madly to-and-fro with an air of importance.

The campus library looked much more stately than the one they'd abandoned, with high arching windows laid into simple stone and mortar. Nothing fancy, but certainly not depressing.

Ms. Hara spent three hours inside and Dallas made himself comfortable, people-watching as he nibbled on a lemon bar.

A lady drifted by with full sleeves of tattoos, then a sweater-vested boy, next a nervous gaggle of first years, and lastly a strapping man, tall as anything, strode by carrying a mug that read something about Greece.

Dallas made up mad stories about all of them to pass the time and eventually dozed off in the front seat under the afternoon sunshine as an occasional white cloud drifted overhead. Overall, it was a pleasant way to spend the afternoon. He even rolled down the windows to let in some fresh air.

When Ms. Hara returned, she thanked him for waiting so patiently and asked Dallas if she could buy him an early dinner before they made their way home.

Delighted, he took her to the diner they'd passed on the way into town and let the pretty man behind the counter list the specials written on the kitchen's board. It was cozy and crowded with grizzled truckers and locals chatting up a storm. The two of them, outsiders as they were, and practically strangers to each other, spent very little time chatting and instead inhaled loaded fries and something called a Tillamook-Blue Burger.

The sun still shone low in the west when they pulled out of the parking lot and glided out onto the road. As the highway stretched out before them again they both let out loud sighs. One relieved, the other somber.

Dallas and Yuma's eyes met, and they grinned.

"So, Ms. Editor-and-Chief, was our trip today successful?"

"I'd like to think so," she said, rolling out her neck and rubbing at one of her ears.

"What is this story even about? I didn't want to be impolite before, but why didn't you trust your writer to check all their info?"

Settling back into the passenger seat, she blew out a breath and deflated – hair and all.

"A few days ago, they came into my office all excited. Said they had a pitch for me. One that would A) Engage some of our more disinterested readers and B) Generate more tourism, of a kind, for The Butte. Because who doesn't love small town paranormal activity?"

"My guess is the people who live in that small town."

"My thoughts exactly. Also– the supernatural? We're a respected journal. I can't just approve ghost stories, no matter how interesting."

"It must be real interesting then."

"Well, you'll have the chance to read it soon and so will everyone else. I found what I needed." Ms. Hara's dark eyes glittered.

"And what would that be?"

“Enough official records to give the story more credibility, and a bit of historical context.”

The sun began its journey downwards, slipping slowly from above to below the mountain range. Cotton candy pink clouds blushed against the blue horizon.

“I can’t wait!”

They passed a sign reading “You Are Now Leaving The Butte.”

“Me neither.”

Yuma

They traveled in a content silence back to the city. Every mile between The Butte and the cab meant another inch between Yuma’s shoulders and her ears. The singing first fell away from her scalp and toes, then the tingling along her skin subsided, leaving only the tips of her fingers and ears buzzing.

But that was manageable, and soon those too would fade.

In her purse were strange files, personal accounts of strange happenings, and strange *things*. Her reporter wanted to write a story about a small town hidden in the mountains. A place where the unexplainable was drawn. The story itself, about monsters and spooks, sounded like pure gossip and a cry for attention, but it had potential to be nothing if not an amusing article for the journal. Yet that was not what ultimately convinced Yuma to give the story a go ahead.

It was the singing.

For years she’d never been able to explain it. The why or the how. But after reading the story, gathering the reports, researching the history, she went and experienced the town herself. And with experience came understanding.

Yuma decided that either the strangeness grew from the singing, or the singing grew from the strangeness. A lifetime of ignorance, and now, perhaps, a thread. A connection. And it had led to The Butte. It wasn’t a lot, but it was more than she’d ever had before, and that would be enough... for now.

Not everyone heard the singing.

But she did.

And Yuma wanted to learn how to silence it once and for all.

Local Cryptid

There was no one but George Arno Bright III and Hobbes in the Guzzle & Go when I arrived. George stood behind the counter as usual, wearing a ruby red apron and a white cap that sat like a boat upon a sea of black curls. The poor man was letting Hobbes, a boney little guy sporting a salt and pepper mustache, lean across the counter and ramble on and on about his most recent sighting of The Butte Ghoul– the thirteenth encounter he'd claimed this year alone.

I rolled my eyes in sympathy for George and slid a few damp bills next to the register.

He knew my usual, gave me a nod, and before I could even see him move, a fresh cup of coffee was warming my chilled fingers.

Boots squeaking on the linoleum floor, I sat at what I liked to think of as my personal corner; the leather booth closest to the entrance, with my back to the doors. It was one of the rare blind spots in the diner, hiding me from the piercing eyes of most customers, even the talkative ones like Hobbes.

I wiped at the rain dripping from my hair into my eyes and took my first scalding sip of coffee, black but for a single shot of peppermint sweetener. Perfect. It had been misting through The Butte for the past week, and I– as well as the window I sat at– was dripping wet.

Most of my mornings were spent at the Guzzle & Go, with headphones on and eyes cast out over the parking lot to the highway. Everything felt peaceful like that. But today the headphones I kept in my pocket were gone. I even went so far as to shake the jacket upside down, spraying water in all directions, in the hopes that they'd mysteriously appear, but no such luck.

I'd just resigned myself to spending my morning in quiet when Hobbes' watery voice rose above the gentle drone of the Guzzle & Go's heater.

“I'm telling ya' Arno, it's a monster out of one of my nightmares, all bloody with vines sprouting from its skull like horns!”

I tried not to groan. I did not want to hear this again.

“Ol’ One-Handed-Bob said it was giant with a wolverine-like monster draped over its shoulders and a tree branch in hand!”

“I can only imagine,” George responded with an indulging drawl. “I’m always shocked to hear how often you run into our resident ghoul.”

Hobbes sniffed and tugged at his grey vest which, in yellow letters across the back read: Animal Control. “Hazard of the job, I s'pose.” I felt my eye twitch. “You know Jodie makes us go out at odd hours to some of the most remote spots. Gosh, have I ever told ya’ about that one time—”

A faint buzzing came from his coat pocket. Hobbes fumbled for his phone. “Darn, that’s Jodie now, better get going. Make sure you remind me to finish that story, Arno.”

“Of course. Good luck out there.”

Hobbes, pale and smelling faintly of spoiled milk, wandered out into the rain. The bell above the diner’s door rang cheerfully.

Thank god, I wouldn’t have to hear any more word vomit.

It was now just George and I, and to my relief he didn’t try to start a conversation. But Hobbes’ words kept eating at me: a monster out of one of his nightmares... if only he knew. If only they all knew.

I glanced up to see George’s warm eyes studying me from behind the counter. I must have been pulling a face or something. The Butte Ghoul tales hadn’t bothered me until recently, when Hobbes started using them to scare the snot out of people.

George tilted his head to the side, silently asking if everything was alright.

“Do you want to know the truth?” It was the first time I’d muttered anything but my order to the guy since I first started coming here, and I think it shocked the both of us.

“The truth?” George raised an eyebrow. “About what?”

I swallowed some hot coffee, steeling myself. “About The Butte Ghoul.”

George slowly made his way out from behind the counter but waited to sit opposite me in the booth until I gestured for him to do so.

“I think we have a few minutes before anyone bothers us.” George said.

I guess that was as good an invitation I'd get. Inhaling heavily, I began to tell my story for the first time.

Remember last fall when the suburbs' chickens started going missing? Now, obviously, we live in an area where stuff like that happens. Our block borders the stretch of woods lining the highway. Hawks snag one every few months. Raccoons sometimes. But the neighborhood birds were going missing at night when all of them were locked up tight in their coops. And if an owl or raccoon broke in, there wouldn't be one chicken missing. There'd be a massacre.

The *extra* weird part about it all was that there were no signs of break-in. No fence torn. No holes in the wall. Nothing.

Chickens were missing all up and down the block including three from my own coop and no one had any answers. It was a mystery that sent the town gossips into a tizzy, and after reading one too many Nancy Drew books as a kid, I was determined to figure it out.

Cameras were out of the question— the fog makes them useless— and traps weren't working.

One-Handed-Bob lives a few houses down from me. He's the guy who has a dwarf goat named Lefty because... well... you know.

Anyway, he was about to blow a gasket. He'd made the coops for some of us a few years back and was outraged at what he deemed "a failure of engineering."

For some reason or another, my house was the only on the block that autumn to have a dog. Pumpkinhead (I call her Pumpkin for short) is not the sharpest tool in the shed. She's this ugly brown-orange color, built like a sausage, and more cowardly than a mouse, but I put her to the task as a lookout.

As evening fell, I locked Pumpkin outside, hoping she'd bark if the chicken thief came. I settled just inside the backdoor with a heavy wooden bat in hand.

And I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

I didn't know I'd fallen asleep until the door jostling at my back woke me, accompanied by Pumpkin's frantic whining.

I rushed to my feet, still half asleep, and stumbled outside only to trip over her as she bum-rushed the door. The motion sensor lights flickered on as I fell to my knees, scraping them raw on the back patio.

I looked up just in time to see a *thing* with a grey coat, that definitely was *not* a fox, making a B-line across the yard to the woods with one of *my* chickens in its jaws, the third one it had taken from my coop that week.

Without hesitation, I took off like a shot after it.

Looking back now, running headlong into the night to rage-chase a carnivorous creature through the backwoods of The Butte was not one of my brightest ideas, but it was the only one I had.

The thing couldn't move very fast, mind you, so I managed to follow it through the pre-dawn gloom and catch up as it wiggled its way into a small, muddy den. Luckily, most of the woods' undergrowth was in hibernation, and the leaves underfoot weren't slippery with rain yet, so I ran pretty easily. But what I didn't realize, in the fog, was that the dormant bushes surrounding the den were, in fact, blackberry thickets. So, when I launched myself face first after the fiend in an attempted capture— it did not go well.

Scatched to high heaven by thorns, my face, arms, and neck burned, but I scrambled even further into the den. No way was that damn *thing* getting away with eating another one of *my* chickens no matter how dead it likely was.

My fingers touched something soft and feathery—

I latched on, but whatever it was held on harder. I dropped my baseball bat, using both hands in a spite-filled tug of war over a chicken.

Shouting profanities at this *thing*, an epic battle of wills ensued where I ended up flat on my ass in a puddle of forest sludge.

Victory.

Bruised and scratched with a feathered corpse swinging at my side, I frantically stumbled my way back through the forest.

All too soon I realized three equally disturbing details.

One. I had no idea *where* I was. All I could make out were the ghostly, grey-blue silhouettes of trees. Was I walking towards The Butte highway? Northpoint? Or back toward Pumpkinhead the cowardly dog? The fog made it impossible to tell.

Two. In my rush to leave, I forgot my bat.

Three...

I was being followed.

And I'd bet One-Handed-Bob's last few fingers that it was that same damned creature.

I broke into a run, chicken swinging frantically at my side.

But sprinting through the woods only works when you can see more than a foot in front of you, and before I'd made it too far in any direction, I ran face-first into a tree.

When I came around, it was to the sound of my own agonized moaning.

My world, coming into focus through black static.

Sitting up sent my stomach twisting, and a stream of blood steadily dripped into my right eye.

To make matters worse... There was definitely the sound of growling coming from behind me.

I scrambled half-blind on all fours for the bird.

Hissing like some demon out of a bad horror film, it came lumbering out of the fog, hackles raised. At that exact moment my fingers found feathers. I grabbed the chicken and ran back to where I thought I'd left the bat.

After five frantic and altogether embarrassing minutes of rushing back the way I'd come, I stumbled into the blackberry bushes *again*.

At this point I didn't even bother trying to detangle myself, and just let the vines cling mercilessly to my jeans as I searched for my stupid bat.

Through the darkness, I spotted a worn wooden handle and I lunged forward, taking many of the barbed wire-like vines with me.

Armed and chickened, I made my escape. Before, my goal had been to off the neighborhood thief, but after what had to have been an hour of chasing and being chased, I was beyond done. That *thing* was a whole other level of clusterfuck I was not prepared to deal with. My only thought was that I needed to head home before it found me again.

Unfortunately, the *thing* had other plans. Before I could decide on which way to flee, it came barreling out of the fog, teeth and claws bared. I swung with the bat, and felt it make contact. Needless to say, I didn't stick around to ask it for directions.

I ran screaming into the unknown for at least fifteen minutes, and the fog didn't show any sign of lifting, nor did the woods seem to end, but I kept on moving. Fear of the *thing* made me run faster.

Eventually, my feet hit pavement and I had to stop, my lungs burned, along with muscles I didn't even know I had. At least I knew where I was, the two-lane highway that runs almost parallel to town. The sun began to rise somewhere in the sea of fog, turning the hazy world around me a little brighter. I could now see the blurry shadows of trees framing the highway like giants.

Still gasping for air, I decided to walk on the cheery, yellow line in the middle of the road, praying that if a car came by, they'd pick me up and drive me the mile back home. Even if they didn't, the road could provide enough safety for me to walk that distance without the *thing* coming after me again.

As I stumbled in a direction I hoped was south, the adrenaline began to wear off and I became acutely aware of how much I hurt *everywhere*. My head ached, blood had dried and crusted over my eye gluing it shut, and my arms and legs were in ribbons thanks to the blackberry vines still wrapped around me. Paired with the fact I was carrying a chicken corpse and a baseball bat, it was no wonder that, as an old pick up came inching down the road through the mist, it sped up when I waved for it to stop.

I almost made it to the turnoff that eventually led to my neighborhood when I heard it again. The same growling, chicken-thieving beast I'd convinced myself I'd escaped.

I'll never understand why it was so determined. Maybe it was because I'd invaded its home, but fair is fair! You crawl into my backyard and I'll return the favor. I swear whatever this *thing* was had no sense of decorum.

Anyway, by this time I was beyond done. I was tired, pissed, and ready to slide into a warm shower, so this *thing* was about to get its ass handed to it.

I turned and waited on the yellow line, ready for the dual of a lifetime.

It appeared out of the fog, running at its full speed. I'd like to say I faced this *thing* with dignity, but to be honest, the whole time I beat it back I screeched like a banshee.

So, as not to seem like some sadistic son of a bitch, I need to clarify that *it would not stop coming for me*. It wasn't until it stopped moving that I realized I'd dealt a fatal blow.

Now any normal person harassed to hell and back by this *thing* would have just left its hairy, blood-streaked body on the highway like roadkill. But it had been a worthy opponent, and despite myself, I held some semblance of respect for it. The thing was hefty, but I slung its limp body around my shoulders, intending to bury it with some dignity.

I finally made it to the turnoff of my neighborhood. At this point, I could see the ghostly outlines of houses on either side of the road, the lights from kitchen windows glowing hazily as the town slowly blinked itself awake. I stuck to the center of the street, practically dragging myself down it.

When I neared my own house, Lefty the goat either caught wind or sight of me and issued some nervous sounding bleats which had One-Handed-Bob racing outside, likely worried that the *thing* dead around my neck had leveled up from chickens to tasty little goats.

I gave a tired wave of my bat but kept shuffling down the road to my house.

After dumping the bodies in my backyard, a scalding shower and change of clothes were in order. I shed mud, blood, half a forest worth of plants and lord knows what else down the drain. My hair mostly covered the large lump that took up half my forehead, and Band-Aids patched my body, but otherwise I looked fine. After that, I took a well-deserved nap. I was sure One-Handed-Bob had already told the neighborhood that I'd taken care of the chicken thief.

However, while I slept, One-Handed-Bob told a very different story.

When I finished speaking, I dared to look back up at George.

“Damn.” His eyes were wide, but bright. “Been waiting to get that off your chest, haven’t you? That was one of the best stories I’ve heard in a while. Certainly better than anything Hobbes has come up with.”

Blood rushed to my head.

He continued, “Hobbes was the one who drove by you, I think you scared a good year off his life.”

“By the time I’d woken, all of it had circulated through your diner, the Thursday morning prayer circle, the neighborhood watch Facebook group, and the high school’s first period classes,” I blurted.

George laughed. “There’s no stopping it. So, that’s how The Butte got its local cryptid, huh?”

I nodded and went to take another chug of coffee before realizing it was empty. George gently took the cup from me and stood.

“I’m guessing that, despite this colorful confession, you’d like me to keep quiet?”

I felt my eyes nearly pop out of my head. God, it had been good to say it all out loud, but the thought of everyone knowing it was *me*... I’d surpass One-Handed-Bob as town weirdo.

“Plea— Pl—”

George gave me another smile. I never noticed he had dimples until now.

“Yeah, you didn’t strike me as the type to want the limelight. Don’t worry, your story is safe with me.”

He went back behind the counter, and I let out a sigh. Coffee gone, story told, I began to collect my things, still damp to the touch, when George reappeared.

He repositioned himself across from me, setting the ceramic cup, refilled, between us.

I looked down in surprise. With a charming grin, George asked, “You have any more stories to share?”

The Night Shift

Dr. Tamura starts her day at eight.

Eight PM– not AM. This isn't because she is lazy, depressed, or even a vampire; it's because she works the night shift at The Butte's only medical clinic.

Non-Butte residents might think: *What a lonely job! It must be really creepy working at a doctor's office alone at night!* But in actuality, The Butte has a lot of nightlife... in more ways than one.

For example, after Dr. Tamura's sunset run, she heads to the Guzzle & Go for its strongest and hottest cup of coffee and returns after her shift ends for her morning dinner.

You see, the Guzzle & Go, as well as the local bar, college library, gym, convenience store, and a few other places, are all 24-hour facilities.

After only two weeks, Dr. Tamura estimated that about a fourth of The Butte lived their lives by night, but no one ever really talked about it, and she'd yet to figure out why. She suspected Night Crawlers like her were what kept The Butte running and functional, to what degree? Well, no one would tell her. The Guzzle & Go was just one of the many catering to the nocturnal people, and she was just relieved to have been transferred from the West Seattle ER last month.

The stress and chaos of the city had convinced her she needed a change of pace, and The Butte sure was that. Even though her suits and heels made her stand out sharply from the locals, everyone acted pleasant, and Dr. Tamura had been told several times that she "classed up whatever joint she wandered into." She wasn't certain exactly what that entailed, but she liked the sound of it, especially when she heard it from George Arno Bright III.

George had been working the Guzzle & Go for years (mostly during daylight hours) and knew how to smooth talk every customer that came through his doors, but not in a sleazy way. No, he did it in a way that made even the crustiest truckers crack up.

Dr. Tamura attributed all of this to George's insistence that everyone call him whichever of his names they liked, and his permanent dimples. Those, she had to admit, were killer.

It had taken a few weeks, but Dr. Tamura had finally gotten into an acceptable rhythm. Wake up, run, coffee, work, dinner and finally a few hours of soft daylight for inward reflection and unwinding. Everything organized, controlled, and effective. Just the way she liked it.

That is until work became exactly the opposite.

The clinic was altogether a small place downtown, old, sterile, and quiet with the natural loneliness which accompanied the early morning hours of the night shift.

Dr. Tamura dealt with odd patients, but she had experience with the odd. Someone would show up drunk complaining of seeing a talking deer, and she'd have nurse Cobb sit them in a chair with a Gatorade and a pillow. Or a kid would wander in with a gaping wound in their forehead but hadn't come until they "threw up a perfectly good bowl of chicken noodle soup." Hell, a man everyone called One-Handed-Bob showed up her second night asking Dr. Tamura to make up stories for the nosy kids as to how he'd lost his appendage. He cheerfully said if he heard a truly original tall-tale he'd buy her a cup-o'-Joe.

Stuff like that was weird, but harmless. Easy to log. Everything done step by step, rules followed religiously.

Nurse Cobb, who Dr. Tamura guessed was about twenty years her senior, usually manned the front desk. The Butte was so small, and the nights so slow it didn't make sense to hire anyone else, and whenever a particularly listless evening fell, they sat up front together. Under the clinic's humming fluorescent lights nurse Cobb showed the young doctor how to play card games and managed to keep up a steady stream of gossip so detailed that at times Dr. Tamura wondered if the greying, frizzy-haired woman had bugged the whole town.

One especially leisurely night, when the moon hung plump and full in a summer sky, nurse Cobb had the evening off. So, Dr. Tamura found herself sitting at the front desk leafing through some old manilla files, trying to find out what

had *actually* happened to One-Handed-Bob when a teenager walked through the clinic's sliding doors.

This was not unusual in itself, but Dr. Tamura hadn't heard the normal whoosh of the doors opening or seen them enter, so it nearly sent her into cardiac arrest when she looked up from her desk to see someone looming over her.

Dr. Tamura did her best not to shiver. The day shift had left her a bubblegum pink sticky note pressed to the right corner of her computer saying the AC had been giving them trouble recently, but she didn't feel the chill until just then.

"Welcome to The Butte Medical Clinic, how may I help you?"

The kid turned pale, and Dr. Tamura leapt to her feet. They stood eye to eye.

"Let's get you seated. How does that sound?" She came around the desk and gestured to the nearest chair, plastic and hard as it was, it was still a better option than the floor.

"What's your name?"

"Sam"

"Alright Sam, can you tell me why you're here today?"

No answer.

Studying the kid, Dr. Tamura recognized blood-shot eyes and shaky limbs. Drugs perhaps? They were thin as a twig too. She hadn't seen any tweakers since she'd arrived and The Butte didn't have a big drug scene, but there were always outlying cases.

"Is Sam short for Samantha or Samuel?"

"I don't know"

"Alright."

Dr. Tamura placed the back of her hand against Sam's forehead, and her fingers came away clammy. Damn, what did this kid take?

"Can you tell me if you've ingested or otherwise taken any harmful substances today?"

Silence. Just those same red eyes gazing listlessly at the sterile-white floor.

“Sam...”

Goosebumps puckered her skin, and she inwardly cursed the wayward AC unit.

“Sam—” This wasn’t working. “Is there anyone I can call for you? A parent?”

She should keep them under observation at least for the rest of the night, and if they wouldn’t talk by the end of her shift, she’d walk them over to the station, and—

“I am not supposed to be here” Sam whispered.

She crouched down, and tried to make eye contact again, “What was that, Sam?”

“I am not ” Their face began contorting itself, “not supposed to be here”

Each word was a growl.

Sam’s eyes met hers; wide, angry, red, and so very, very *wrong*.

Dr. Tamura carefully stepped away.

“I’m going to get you a blanket,” *and I’m going to call the sheriff.*

But right as she turned on her heels—

The lights went out.

Only for a second.

In fact, Dr. Tamura would have called it a flicker more than anything else, but fear seized her by the throat, and she spun back around only to find—

Nothing.

Sam was gone.

The colorless chair shining empty under the clinic's glaring lights.

She’d had patients in Seattle walk into the ER with missing limbs and dripping with their own blood, but she had never been left as unnerved as she was at that moment.

What the fuck had just happened?

She rang Stevie, the sheriff's secretary, to tell her to keep an eye out for a pale kid, about 5'10", short hair, and looked like they're about to fall over. Dr. Tamura didn't tell her that she never heard Sam come or go. Never heard the door whoosh out into the now ominously pleasant night.

She checked the computer clock: a quarter past one.

Goosebumps skittered across her skin and the faint smell of disinfectant burned her nose.

It was going to be a long night.

"Dr. Tamura." Nurse Cobb stopped her.

The doctor had just finished giving Guy Hobbes three stitches on his ass. He'd been mumbling something about mad squirrels.

"Did you submit an incident report Friday?"

"Yes..." She'd chosen not to fill the nurse in on the kid last week, and instead wrote up a detailed report and filed it away herself. No need for The Butte gossip mill to sink its teeth into whatever the hell had happened.

Dr. Tamura still couldn't fully wrap her head around it.

"Well, it's flagged as incomplete in my records. Did you forget to fill it out or something?"

"No." She'd done everything in her power not to have this conversation.

"It looks like you signed and dated it, but never filled out the actual report."

"*What?*"

"We can finish it up now if you want!"

With a sigh that traveled through her whole body, Dr. Tamura recalled the incident with Sam.

At the beginning, nurse Cobb diligently recorded what she described, but as Dr. Tamura continued, the nurse's fingers stuttered across the keyboard and then fully stopped.

Instead of finding the gossipier's gleam in Cobb's eye, Dr. Tamura found herself flung against a rock-hard stare.

“Honey,” nurse Cobb deleted the file and stood, “We don’t treat those *things*.”

“Those *things*?”

“Yes, the ones that pop in without a sound, that don’t notice us unless we draw attention to ourselves, or make the place feel cold as January. We ignore those *things*. They disappear sooner or later.”

She headed toward the patients’ rooms but flung one last piece of advice over her shoulder, “Don’t bother trying to make a record of them or writing up a report like you did. They always end up erasing themselves anyway.”

The door swung silently closed behind her.

Dr. Tamura, understandably, had no idea what to do with this information. Did her nurse just tell her that Sam was a *thing*? As in a not-human-*thing*? Like... like a ghost?! Should she tell someone that Cobb had lost it? If she did, then who? She’d only been stationed here for a few weeks, and besides George Arno Bright III, Cobb was her only friend (which, the more she thought about it, made her slightly depressed). Besides, Cobb had been here for decades. She was an established employee; it would be hard convincing anyone she’d lost it... and how would she then explain what she saw? Oh no. What if *she* was the one who’d lost it?

This circular thinking resulted in nurse Cobb re-entering the clinic waiting room only to find Dr. Tamura’s head in her hands, high ponytail askew.

“Oh honey, I’m sorry I forgot how startling it is to see them at first. Here,” She handed her a five-dollar bill, “go walk on down to the Guzzle & Go and get yourself some coffee. That’ll freshen you up, go on now.”

“I’m your superior. I’m supposed to tell *you* when to take your breaks,” Dr. Tamura mumbled weakly.

“Of course, dear.”

She took the fiver.

It wasn’t too late into her shift, and the warmth from the daylight hours clung to the night as Dr. Tamura shuffled the few blocks to the diner.

The Butte wasn't a scary place when the sun went down. Dr. Tamura had found out she could walk most of downtown any hour of the night and find it well-lit and with more than a couple people out and about. Main Street ran like a seam through the belly of town. It was brightly lit with fairy lights and iridescent shops. Unlike most small towns, this place was built for Night Crawlers, it just seemed to attract the kind of people who preferred odd hours. The Butte had a record number of job openings and opportunities for those willing to work the night shift like herself. It was strange to find that outside of a city, but The Butte found ways in which to remain awake even in the dead of a summer night.

She didn't know how lively the area would be in the autumn or winter, but right now everything emanated a peaceful glow. It reminded her of Van Gogh's painting *The Café Terrace*—a copy of which hung in her mother's kitchen. Yet, all Dr. Tamura could think of was what else lurked in this seemingly picturesque place.

When she saw the ruby lights of the Guzzle & Go, ringed by a protective layer of semi-trucks waiting patiently for a turn at the gas pumps, she smiled. No ghost would get her there.

After receiving a piping hot to-go mug, some oddly specific advice from George Arno Bright III about keeping her head in the game, and an uneventful walk back to the clinic as the stars twinkled cheerfully overhead, Dr. Tamura had made up her mind.

She would tell no one. She would not commit nurse Cobb to an asylum (because she'd have to join her). And she didn't believe in ghosts, but if she wanted to keep her job in this bright, peaceful little town she'd sure as hell learn how to deal with them.

But all her planning went to shit when she walked back through the clinic's sliding glass doors.

Floating near the top of the room was an Asian woman, old enough to eerily look like her mother. But, very much unlike her mother, this woman wore

clothes from the American 1940's, appearing old, patched, and in disarray. An ID tag waved from her coat collar as she spun slowly in place, and—

Oh god...

The woman's neck was wrung.

Totally and completely wrung. Like a chicken's. Her neck twisted so violently around that the back of her head rested on her collar bones.

She just floated there in the air, head all wrong.

It could have been the horror of the body in front of her, the levitating in mid-air, or the resemblance to her mother. It could have been any of those reasons really, or all of them.

But whatever it was made Dr. Tamura open her mouth wide and scream, and scream, and *scream*.

She took two nights off. Two all-too-long nights to decide whether she wanted to keep working with Cobb— with the clinic— and to stay in The Butte.

Her only other option was returning to Seattle. Where her mother waited expectantly for her to give up and return. Where her friends called and told her all she was missing. But when she heard about their 48 hour long shifts, how her mother's loud neighbors were waking her in the middle of the night, and the chaos of her old home, Dr. Tamura could only imagine Main Street in the black hours of the morning and how that peace, this new place, felt more like *her* than anywhere else.

So, she stayed. And, for the next week, Dr. Tamura allowed nurse Cobb to talk her ear off about ley lines and drank an obscene amount of caffeine to keep herself alert. George Arno Bright III told her he'd cut her off if she didn't stop drinking five cups a shift, and nurse Cobb invited her over to Sunday tea with Mr. Cobb. Everything was working out.

One dark, new moon evening, when Dr. Tamura had no emergency patients and had completed the filing, she felt a chill sweep over her body.

When she walked through the steel door from the patients' rooms to the waiting area, she found a man standing behind the front desk with an axe splitting through his chest.

He did not greet her, and she did not acknowledge him.

After a few moments, the *thing* took notice of the silver desk bell, reached out a large, blood-rusted hand, and rang it.

The moment the bell rang out, he disappeared.

Letting go of a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding; Dr. Tamura took her seat behind the computer.

Nurse Cobb wandered in a few seconds later.

"I thought I heard the bell, is everything all good in here?"

"Oh, it was nothing."

They gave each other a smile.

Nothing indeed.

Guzzle & Go

Throughout the year, The Butte's local 24-hour diner, the Guzzle & Go, is the perfect spot for good food, drink, and company.

In the spring, flowers bloom from its gutters and college kids pack the red leather booths at all hours. Linoleum floors squeak when met with rain-drenched boots. The regulars always leave extra pens or pencils at the counter for the students panic-studying during midterms and finals week, and the windows are always propped open to let in a sweet breeze and let out the soul music crackling from the well-used stereo sitting on the back counter.

In the summer, the staff wear white T-shirts with "Guzzle & Go" spelled out in ruby red on the back. Milkshakes are the #1 Food Of The Week on the diner blackboard for three months straight. The AC— when it works— makes the barstools and counter refreshingly cool to the touch, and when it doesn't, an old fan rotates on a stand, feebly blowing air back and forth... back and forth... back and...

In the autumn, the whole place smells like cinnamon and boiling apple cider. Red and orange leaves sweep across the floor whenever someone enters and covers the semi-trucks taking refuge from the highway. Pumpkin pie permanently sits in the glass display and truckers gather at the bar in thick flannels and scruffy beards.

And finally, in the winter, when George's story takes place, the neon print of the Guzzle & Go sign glows warmly through the fog. The steel chimney creates soft grey clouds which blend into the moody sky, and when it snows, truckers converge on the diner and hot cocoa is passed out for free to cold, stiff fingers. The place is lit up with fairy lights and the tip jar is always full.

The Guzzle & Go is perfect. At least, that's what most believe.

George Arno Bright III, has worked at the diner since he graduated from Cascade College at the age of twenty-three. He'd been the only black man in his class, and now, almost a decade later, he hosts the community's favorite food stop. George stuck around because he fell in love with the mountains and hills;

the smell of rain on fresh tilled soil, and the town, while small, wasn't half bad either. He was always doing that, falling in love with places and little things. So, George became an integral part of The Butte and anyone who ventured through the glass doors of the Guzzle & Go did so as much for his company as the food.

At the dawn of a rather misty and blustery November, George took up the call to arms for his diner. The graveyard shift host had quit, and for all the desperate college students and citizens of town, not one person wanted the job.

So, on a particularly foggy evening, when all one could see of the diner were its bright red letters glowing from the roof, George Arno Bright III tied a crisp white apron around his waist and got to work. The dayshift folks would just have to do without him for a while.

This wasn't the first time George had worked the night shift— he'd done it off and on when needed— but it was the first time he'd done it *alone*. Well... practically alone. There was, of course, Cook, the elusive and mysterious person who took over the kitchen after the 8 PM dinner rush. George figured Cook liked the quiet drone of the graveyard shift at the diner because the guy —or gal, or really, who knew? — never said a word to him no matter how many times George gave them sugary sweet thank-you's or shot a smile toward the kitchen's food window. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. No reaction.

He guessed some people just didn't like honey in their tea. But Cook always got meals out hot and on time, and that's what mattered.

The graveyard shift at the Guzzle & Go had its regulars. There were those who began their days at nine or ten at night, craving some crispy hash browns, buttery pancakes, and George's infectious energy. The impeccable night shift doctor who warmed up to him once he managed to have her order— one extra-large, extra-strong black coffee-to-go with a cup of honey yogurt— ready for her when she stepped in from the blue-lipped night at exactly 9:47 PM.

The locals stopped crowding the breakfast bar after midnight, but once the stereo's lights read 12:00 AM, the truckers who burned the midnight oil up and down the Cascades arrived.

Many of the Oil Burners knew him.

Mr. M.J. Barlyee made a point to swing by every time he made his way west. The old Louisianian recognized George as another southern-raised soul and immediately befriended him. Now, George Arno Bright III was a regular part of Mr. Barlyee's route. George had four Christmas cards from the man up on the diner bulletin.

The first week George worked the night shift, Mr. Barlyee rolled in around 12:30 PM giving his old friend a hug and another family Christmas card since he didn't think he'd be making his way back up from San Francisco before the holidays.

"What do you want to indulge in tonight, Mr. Barlyee?"

"Well now." The older man scratched at his beard. "What's on the board this week?"

George turned to look at the blackboard hanging above the kitchen window. He'd never seen anyone change the writing under the #1 Food Of The Week slot, but it always appeared in lovely chalk penmanship. George suspected one of the cooks did it, but he couldn't be sure.

"Looks like it's Cook's CinnamonRoll Crust Pie tonight."

"Never had that one before!"

"Hey, first time for everything. And if you like it I'll pack you another for the road."

"You're a good man, George."

"Anytime." He flashed his dimples and gave Mr. M.J. Barlyee a conspiratorial wink which sent the man into a fit of laughter.

"Grab me some of those fries too. You know, the ones with the hot sauce, sour cream, and the—"

"I'm on it. How about a coffee too, I have a feeling you're gonna continue down the highway once you're done here."

"You've got me pegged, George."

"You bet."

George slapped the order slip down at the kitchen window and a few minutes later, fries, coffee, and pie all appeared, piping hot.

“Order up,” George whispered jokingly.

Needless to say, Mr. M.J. Barlyee got that second piece of pie to go.

After waving good-bye to his friend, George turned to take his plates but found the front counter clear and clean. After staring for a second, George shrugged and got back to work. If Cook wanted to bus the dishes, they could do as they liked.

Roughly two weeks into the graveyard shift on a damp night, the kind where rain streaked the windows and created a steady pitter-patter on the roof, George finally noticed something wrong with the radio. All the booths and stools were uncharacteristically empty at 1:13 AM as George mindlessly polished a greasy spot from the counter.

Otis Redding echoed peacefully from the speakers and, because no one was around to mind it, George Arno Bright III whistled along to the final notes of the song.

But they weren't the final notes, because the song began *again*.

George paused whistling, lips frozen in an O. Someone from the radio station must've slipped up, but George didn't mind and listened to the song all the way through a second time.

When the song began for the third time, George wiggled out. He fiddled with the old dial, but no matter how fuzzy the signal got one thing became very clear:

Somehow, somehow, every single station was playing Otis.

He paid attention every night after that and whatever song played at exactly 1:13 AM would repeat three times. One night George even tried to shut off the stereo, but it managed to pop back on by itself and in retaliation for George's rebellion, played Cotton Eyed Joe over and over and over and over and over and over.

One of the Oil Burners pointed it out.

“Have you noticed that that damn radio is playing this song again?”

George shrugged and filled the man's coffee with a smile. “It just does that sometimes.”

You see, to George Arno Bright III, that kind of stuff did just happen sometimes. Whenever the coffee came out of a freshly boiled pot cold or a customer disappeared without taking a sip of tea, or the lights flickered when people were rude, George would simply shrug and say, “It happens.”

That year’s Thanksgiving weekend rush ran wild, but George counted himself lucky because while he single-handedly served a diner full of homesick and starved Oil Burners, the Butte’s power went out. Every house, business, lightbulb, and heater snuffed out like a candle in a gust of winter wind— all except the Guzzle & Go.

And, like moths towards a flame, night owls, nocturnal locals, and insomniac students all flocked towards the highway-side diner, its neon-lit roof a beacon against the night sky.

But while the graveyard shift was severely understaffed for a crowd the likes of which they had, Cook somehow kept up with the rush and George handed out steaming mugs of apple cider, cinnamon hazelnut coffee, and a specialty peppermint cocoa to Guy Hobbes who had been spooked by what he claimed was The Butte Ghoul in the woods.

“Thanks, Arno,” Hobbes muttered, eyes wide.

“No problem buddy, but I think you should take a few days off from work. This job is waaaaay too stressful for the likes of you.”

If possible, Hobbes grew even paler.

“Jodie would have my head.”

“I’ll give her a little talk. You know no human on earth can resist my charm.”

“You’re the best, Arno.”

“Warm-up here, then head on home, Hobbes.”

“Alright. Yeah. Alright.”

That night, it was as though everyone’s drink refilled itself, and when The Butte’s power came back on, everyone was warm and happy again. George even had time to show Dr. Tamura how to use the diner landline to phone her mother, breaking out into Japanese with a warm smile on her lips.

Thanksgiving weekend was a hit. People's hearts, and George's tip jar, were full.

December embraced The Butte with frozen arms, but the ice and lack of visibility didn't slow down the Oil Burners. So, the graveyard staff continued to take in wanderers.

One particularly misty-breathed night, as George took out the trash by moonlight, snowflakes began to pepper his apron. It was when he looked to the sky, watching the soft ice glide through the darkness that he heard it.

A wailing.

A part of George wanted to crawl out of his skin, but the more logical part of his brain made him inch forward, heavy trash bag gripped tightly in his fist.

The sound grew louder, seeming to emanate hollowly from inside the dumpster.

Fantastic.

Maybe he should call Animal Control...

He thought of Hobbes and how often he walked into the Guzzle & Go near fainting and decided against it. Whatever it was, George was sure he could handle it better than Jodie's boys could, bless 'em.

Placing the bag gently on the ground, George Arno Bright III cautiously opened the dumpster lid with one hand and held his phone flashlight in the other.

The moment before his eyes adjusted, George remembered all the talk revolving around The Butte Ghoul the past two years. If that *thing* was in his dumpster, he'd be bonding with Hobbes in therapy sooner than he'd expected.

He shined the light back and forth around the bottom of the empty bin. It had been quiet for a quick minute now, maybe whatever it was had—

George caught something small and hairy in the beam of light at the same time a high pitched "MEEEEEEW" sounded.

George screamed, dropping the dumpster lid and hopping away before he'd processed what had happened.

"What in God's name?!"

Shifting his weight from one foot to the other, George took a moment to catch his breath.

Pull yourself together man, it's probably just a possum. Not that he liked possums, but they were better than ghouls.

He exhaled deeply, sending snowflakes tumbling through the air.

The noise came again, so familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on exactly what it—

Wait a damn minute... It couldn't possibly be... Oh, sweet Mother Mary.

Flinging the lid back off the dumpster with a thunderous BANG, George frantically shone his flashlight through the shadows until he found it. And there she was, shivering relentlessly in the cold. A kitten.

I'll be damned.

Her black coat camouflaged well against the grime of the trash bin, but once George saw her, she was impossible to miss.

“Hey baby girl,” he cooed, flinging one leg over the side of the dumpster, “I've got you now.” Filthy and half-starved, George honestly didn't know how she'd survived as long as she had all alone.

Baby cradled easily in his palm, George became hyper-aware that he stood in the backlot's trash bin in the middle of the night. He would look ridiculous if anyone saw him right now. The kitten gave another cry, and he decided it was time to go back inside.

The Guzzle & Go felt cozier and warmer than ever before as George entered. The lights were steady and the music echoing into the kitchen from the front was bluesy and smooth. Cook was nowhere to be seen, but that wasn't anything new. They were probably doing his job for him.

He spent the next few minutes running the small creature under a stream of sink water, then towel-drying her. George would have to remember to give Cook a portion of his tips tonight as thanks for covering his ass.

After she'd stopped shivering, George found an empty box and stuffed it with old rags. The baby's eyes were just barely opened— how many weeks old did

that make her? He hoped Cook didn't mind if he left her in the corner near the heater.

Before George returned to the front, he poured the last bit of milk out of a carton and set it near her. He bit his lip and hoped that would do for the moment.

The bell above the diner door sounded, and George went back to work.

There were a handful of regulars scattered throughout the diner for a late breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Jodie Pérez sat at the counter in her signature overalls, chowing down on an extra meat-lover's special. A panicked college kid had taken over a booth, designing god knows what for an end of semester final. At the far end of the counter in his special stool sat Mr. Quiet.

Well, George didn't actually know if that was his name, but he never said a word to George or anyone except for his order. Mr. Quiet always looked so grey and down, and although George encouraged him to try something new every night, he always sighed through his nose and said, "Earl Grey, please."

Tonight was no different.

"Coming up."

George placed a steaming mug in front of the man as he did every night, and, just like every night before, the grey man never drank it. He simply sat there for half an hour holding the cup until it grew cold, then disappeared. George never saw the man leave but he always left more than enough cash, and even if a few of the dollars looked like they'd been rolled in dirt, money was money.

"I found a kitten outside today. You shoulda' seen her all curled up in the dark, hiding from the cold," George told Mr. Quiet as he began wiping down the sticky countertop. "I know black cats are supposed to be bad luck or something like that, but I think I'm going to keep her around anyway." He squinted at a particular spot that wouldn't come off with any amount of scrubbing.

"I'm thinking though," George said, turning, hands on hips, to Mr. Quiet. "If I'm planning on keeping her, she should have a name. Have any ideas?"

"Who the hell are you talking to there, George Arno Bright?" Jodie was one of the few who called him by his full name but hated adding "III" because "It sounds pretentious."

George looked over at her, brow scrunched.

“I’m taking to—”

He turned to gesture towards Mr. Quiet at the end of the counter, but the man had vanished. The tea sat there alone, cold to the touch. The stool wasn’t even spinning from Mr. Quiet’s sudden absence. Odd.

George turned back to Jodie, dimples shining.

“I’m talking to you, lovely Jodie.”

She snorted, “Well if you’re talking to me, look me in the eye when you do. It creeps me the hell out when you’re just talking into space.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And don’t call me Ma’am, I’m not much older than you.”

“You may be youthful as a spring daisy, but any woman who manages to scare the spit out of Hobbes, Bushes, *and* O’Dearie deserves the title of Ma’am.”

She gave a short guffaw. “A pet bunny would scare the shit out of those idiots.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“So, you wanna’ name for your new friend, huh?”

“What?”

“The kitten you’ve got holed up somewhere.”

“Oh, right.”

“How about Garbage? Since, you know, that’s where you found her. Or maybe Oilspill, since she’s gotta’ black coat.”

George pitied Jodie’s future offspring if that was her idea of viable names.

“Well, she’s mine. I found her. She’s my responsibility.” *I guess I’m a pops now.* “How about Georgie? Georgie IV. Yeah, I like the sound of that.”

“Oh, God.” Jodie rolled her eyes so hard George worried they’d fall out of her head. “You’re a narcissist.”

“Hey, you wanted to name my new child Garbage, you have no right to judge.”

“Fine.”

They grinned mischievously at each other.

A loud ringing sounded from Jodie's phone. She groaned when she saw the caller ID.

"What is it now, Hobbes? You're interrupting my break."

George started to wander back to the kitchen to check up on Georgie IV when five things happened.

One.

The stereo clock read 1:13 PM, meaning Leon Bridges would sing the same song again, and again, and again.

Two.

"Hobbes you did not see what you thought you saw! You were called out for a deranged deer, correct? So, is it a deer or not?" Jodie shrugged on a jacket over her overalls and slapped money on the counter, "HOW CAN IT BE A DEER AND NOT A DEER HOBBS? THAT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE. Ok, stop crying, I'm coming. I SAID I'M COMING STAY RIGHT THERE DAMN IT."

Three.

The diner lights flickered in warning.

Four.

The Guzzle & Go doors blew open.

Five.

A thin white man with horribly chapped lips and a gun walked in.

"This is a robbery." He leveled his weapon directly at George Arno Bright III, who didn't seem all that particularly worried. "Empty out the register."

Well, the Guzzle & Go had seen some shit. It had fought off blackouts, experienced blowout birthday parties, burnt coffee, stolen silverware, and recently a stray kitten gagging up a furball on the diner's floor. But this was unacceptable. The Guzzle & Go would not stand for a robbery within its walls. This would not do.

So, the diner retaliated.

Before anyone could so much as breathe, the Guzzle & Go attacked. The open doors the robber stood between slammed violently back into his face,

breaking his nose. He dropped the gun, but instead of allowing him to stumble backwards, the doors swung forward again, forcing him to stagger further into the building, clutching at his face. His mistake.

The coffee pot launched itself from its seat on the counter and sprayed piping hot liquid all over the man. And to top it all off, the criminal slipped, falling directly into the edge of a booth table, knocking himself silly.

This all took place within the span of seconds.

Leon Bridges' voice echoed peacefully through the sudden silence.

George still stood behind the counter, Jodie was frozen, and the student removed their headphones to ask, "What the fuck just happened?"

"Great question, kid." Jodie looked to George for answers, but he just shrugged.

"Jodie, do me a favor and tie him up for me? I'm going to call the sheriff."

"George Arno Bright, what the hell just happened?!"

George threw a "who knows" over his shoulder and picked up the phone.

After the red and blue lights from the sheriff's car faded down the road, George cleaned up the mess left behind.

Thank God no one had wanted to question Cook, because then George would've had to explain why he'd never caught hide nor tail of whoever worked the kitchen at night. And thank goodness Jodie had supported his freak-accident spiel. But what else could she say, really?

Snow continued to fall outside, and Georgie IV had managed to cat-nap through the whole ordeal. 5 AM at the Guzzle & Go was oddly peaceful. Even the radio had sensed the shift and switched itself to a holiday station. The #1 Food Of The Week on the blackboard had rewritten itself in fancy calligraphy to Peppermint Cocoa, which George took as a literal sign to sit his ass down and drink some.

Cradling Georgie IV in one arm, he settled into a red-leather booth with a steaming mug to watch the snowfall outside.

When George Arno Bright III had started working the graveyard shift, it hadn't taken him long to realize that things worked a bit differently at the Guzzle & Go at night.

The dishes washed themselves.

Cook spat out hot meals without ever being seen.

Decor rearranged itself, and unwelcome customers left quickly.

George Arno Bright III knew everything was not as it seemed to be.

But that didn't make it bad.

The two of them rested there together as the snow continued to fall, until the first semi-truck of the early morning pulled into the parking lot from the cold.

"Welcome to the Guzzle & Go," George whispered. And above his head, on the roof of the dinner, the neon lights flicked in response.

College Madness

There are very few things I'm sure of anymore.

Not because I'm having some kind of existential crisis (which I totally am). Or because my brain has officially given up on me (which is likely).

No.

It's because I somehow completed all my finals, wandered around town, and held full conversations with people and objects over the past three days, and I can't remember doing it.

My life had abruptly become shadows and colors, no linearity, no memories— just a dreamy cloud of happenings.

Everything happened at once, or never happened at all. All because my housemate decided he wanted to play Dr. Frankenstein and create a monster: Me.

My housemates filled me in on the events of the week, and I'll relay it as best I can— all I ask is that you don't judge me. Don't look at me weird when you see me in class or when I stop to grab a pastry from The Butte's one and only bakery. I swear anything I said or did during those few days is not a reflection of me.

At least, I hope it isn't.

Let me start from the beginning— before my mind and body got turned inside out.

PART 1: My Housemate Gets Me High

Late spring, the morning fog burns off quickly, and the professors have zero fucks left to give dead week at Cascade College.

Sunday night. I had four essays due in the next few days, as well as a project for my Ancient Mediterranean history class. By 11:13 PM everything was going well, essays were ready to be turned in, and I was nearly finished with my project.

You could say I was happy, content, and not at all nearing a mental breakdown.

That is, until the unthinkable happened.

Every college student has nightmares about homework going missing or being accidentally deleted.

This...This was worse.

My computer wasn't old, but it wasn't new either. I had to keep it plugged into an outlet every time I used it, and wires were exposed, fraying at several points, but that was a small price to pay for internet access.

I had just finished re-writing my final rebuttal when the overhead lights of my room flickered. This wasn't an odd occurrence, since I rented an old house off campus with four other upperclassmen who hated dorm life, and we obviously couldn't afford the most up-to-date accommodations. That being said, the lights flickered, and then they went out, just for a second, but long enough for me to instinctively reach for my phone to use as a flashlight.

That was the first big mistake of my night.

You see, on the desk right next to my computer, I'd placed a cooling mug of instant coffee. Hey, I don't want you to think I'm irresponsible. I'm the kind of person who always puts their drinks on a coaster, I always put my laundry away as soon as it's done drying, and you'll never find random trash lying on the floor of my car. Clumsiness is not my claim to fame, but what I did next will forever define who I am today.

So, the lights flickered, then went out. I reached for my phone, but instead grabbed a hold of a boiling hot ceramic mug.

The lights popped back on, but by then it was too late.

I jerked my hand back, inadvertently slapping coffee directly onto my already crippled laptop.

An immediate burning smell hit my nose as electricity and liquid united, and as I jumped up from my chair, a loud BANG sounded. Sparks spewed from my computer, curses flew from my mouth, and shoes pounded up the wooden staircase as my housemates came to the rescue.

Cameron arrived first, unnecessarily and aggressively flinging my flimsy door into the wall. She'd left a dent...Fantastic.

Adonis entered next, calmly taking in the scene with stony eyes. The guy was the fucking tallest man I'd ever met, and rarely spoke. I assumed it was because English wasn't his first language, but he was nice enough.

Behind him cautiously trailed Joe with his all-too-big glasses and Pepps with her twin red braids.

"What the hell happened?" Cameron demanded.

My laptop sparked like a live wire, but I was desperate and leapt upon it, frantically tapping at the keyboard hoping beyond all hope that the blackened screen would revive itself.

It was no use.

Weeks and weeks of work... Gone.

Files of research... Wiped out.

Perhaps if I flung myself out my second-story window I'd-

I must have looked absolutely insane because, next thing I knew, Cameron dragged me back from the desk. "Hon, you're going to electrocute yourself. Stop it!"

Joe studied my computer from afar, watching as sparks danced from the space bar.

"I'd say she's toast."

I groaned. This was true pain. True agony. I'd fail every class. I'd never graduate. I'd die alone and unaccomplished. Oh, sweet Mary and Joseph. I'd...

"I will help." Adonis murmured, turning to go back down the house's one and only staircase.

I looked helplessly at Joe.

"Please, if you could--"

"I'll do what I can." He tried to give me a reassuring smile, but his glasses slipped down his nose and ruined the effect.

"I am so deeeeeead."

“Come on.” Cameron dragged me from the crime scene with an arm thrown across my shoulder. I’m pretty sure I heard innocent, little Pepps ask Joe if they could soak my laptop in rice like an iPhone.

I thought I was going to cry, there was definitely a lump in my throat, but maybe that was a building scream.

We found Adonis in the kitchen standing over the crusty stovetop with a large cast-iron skillet. A part of me hoped he planned on hitting me with it.

No such luck.

“What are you doing?”

“I will help. I have a spare laptop.”

Cameron stepped in. “Look man we appreciate the sentiment, but that was weeks of work, there’s no way...”

Adonis ignored her and looked me dead in the eyes. “I said I will help. Get the computer.”

What I saw and smelled next were the last things I clearly recall.

Adonis retrieved caffeine pills from some unknown corner of the house and began to crush them methodically into dust. As he did so, he had me pour coffee grounds and water into what he called a briki (some sort of pot) and brought it to a boil.

Once he finished with the pills and the coffee began to foam, Adonis poured it onto the glowing hot skillet where he’d laid out the pulverized caffeine pills in a manner which unnervingly resembled a line of coke.

The whole house began to smell like burnt coffee, bringing everyone into the kitchen to investigate.

Joe had brought down my old computer with him, but it was clear there was nothing he could do. He placed it a safe distance from Adonis’ laptop –which I’d grabbed from his room– as if he were afraid that whatever bad luck my computer had was contagious and didn’t want to risk infecting other electronics.

The four of us sat around the kitchen table and watched as Adonis slowly brought his strange, caffeinated concoction to a boil.

Finally, when the smell grew almost too much to bear, Adonis poured the liquid, grounds and all, into his favorite mug. I'd gotten it for him last Christmas, thinking the quote "It's all Greek to me" would make him laugh. Now, it mocked me.

He carefully put three tablespoons of sugar into the drink and gave it a gentle stir before setting it down in front of me with a damningly soft thud.

Everyone stared at Adonis and I like we couldn't be serious. Odds were that the coffee from hell would kill me before helping me. But then again, if I didn't do what Adonis said, I'd be dead anyway. My GPA would be a joke. I'd fail all my courses. It was now or never— and, hey, they don't call it dead week for nothing.

Using my teeth to filter out the grounds, I sucked it back.

One—

Two—

Three pulls from the mug and I felt something. A tugging sensation in my chest.

I felt the blood leave my head as I looked up at Adonis.

The last thing I clearly remember was a wolfish smile stretching across his face.

PART 2: Dead Week Kills

This next part can only be confirmed by email chains I found from my professors and my friend's retellings, because I can only drudge up two clear memories: A) The computer cursor blinking tauntingly from a blank screen and B) Adonis is definitely an old god.

By some miracle, I got an extension on all of my due dates (shoutout to Dr. McKenna who also offered to hook me up with her therapist), and finished everything ahead of time, because apparently, I didn't sleep for over seventy-two hours. And NO, not like the fools who complained that they "haven't slept" but in

fact got a few hours in between blinks. No. Apparently, I was wired and wild for three days straight.

Pepps, Joe, Cameron, and Adonis all took turns babysitting me, but according to Pepps they had to take Adonis off the rotation because every time he was around me for too long, I'd start theorizing about which minor deity he was and get distracted for hours. Apparently, all he did was laugh in response. It freaked everyone out.

Now you may be wondering why I needed to be looked after. You see, in between rewriting and turning in research papers, I would...wander.

I disappeared from our old house the first time about five hours after Adonis got me high. Everyone had crashed and left me writing at the kitchen table, the smell of burnt beans still seeping into the creaky floorboards.

Cameron woke up early the next morning for lacrosse practice and found the table deserted and my bed unslept in. Thus, the manhunt for my high-as-fuck-self began.

Somehow, I'd made my way downtown. There were reports of me getting into arguments with birds on the side of the road, but my friends didn't have a solid lead until they stopped by the SweetTooth Bakery.

According to Miss Sayles, the owner, I'd wandered in barefoot, holding a mug, and loudly asked for some hot chocolate in front of several other customers. Obviously, it was a concerning scene, but Miss Sayles, a sweet and accepting woman, filled up my mug and then politely asked if I was alright, despite the fact I tried to pay with some pebbles I'd collected from the side of the road. Every single person in that shop then heard me say, "I'm dandy, but I can't remember how to blink. Thanks for the drinkie, got to go pick a fight with a house. Bye!"

Pepps found me sitting in the back lot of the Guzzle & Go conversing with the diner. According to her, I was deep in a discussion about the ethics of the coffee industry, but it seemed to be very one-sided. She couldn't pry me from the pavement until the gang arrived in Cameron's pickup truck to carry me home.

Pepps said I rolled down the window to wave at the receding building and shouted, "We'll continue the conversation later! It was lovely to meet you!"

After the incident, they kept watch. Close watch.

While re-writing my papers, Joe said, with a sort of awe, that I ate two whole boxes of pop tarts in a single hour. On Cameron's watch I hallucinated seeing The Butte Ghoul outside our kitchen and hid in Adonis' room for the rest of the morning (because it was the only place with no windows). Then, when everyone ate ramen in the living room while watching reality TV, I told them a ghost lived in our house, but not to worry because she was old and only asked that we bake more cookies in the future because they smell so nice.

I was a pure menace.

But somehow, somehow, I finished all my work on time and got a passing grade on all of it. Don't ask me what I wrote because only my professors and God herself knows. Although I suspect the topics must have been quite weird because Dr. McKenna told me she would be contacting her therapist on my behalf on Friday. But she also gave me a B+ so it is what it is.

PART 3: The Aftermath

Seventy-two hours.

Seventy-two hours of no sleep, creeping the hell out of my friends, hallucinating, and going batshit crazy.

Then I disappeared.

Again.

Vanished.

I was only gone an hour, but no one knows what happened during that time.

To this day, it's still a mystery.

I must have seen *something* though, because when I turned up on the front stoop, my eyes were dark and bloodshot. I shook so hard my teeth clattered together like rattling bones. And I had odd bruises coiling up my arms.

Wednesday night I finally crashed.

Cameron said I was telling her animatedly about how Adonis must be one of those old gods cursed to wander the earth forever when I simply stopped mid-sentence. I turned, looked into dead space, declared: “I’m tired,” then walked to the couch, and immediately passed out.

Joe said Pepps actually shed a tear, she was so relieved.

I was comatose for a week afterwards. I slept through most of the day because light burned my corneas, dark circles bloomed like mushrooms under my eyes, and I refused to eat anything but toast with smooth peanut butter.

It was rough.

After day three of not showering, Adonis said I offended his nose, to which I replied I was offended by his face, and Cameron dragged me to the shower. She watched me lather up herself to make sure I didn’t fall asleep under the stream of water and drown. I lost ten pounds and forgot what sunlight looked like, but at the end of the week, I was somewhat back to normal.

Yet we all soon realized that the longest ten days of our lives would not simply fade into memory, because to this day we have residents of The Butte telling stories about me.

Like how I drank out of a birdbath.

Got into a screaming match with Lefty the goat.

Or told pedestrians that the local medical clinic was haunted.

And so-on-and-so-forth, until we were all convinced that I’d managed to terrorize most of The Butte before Pepps had found me that day.

So, like I said, there are very few things I’m sure about anymore.

If you saw me do anything out of the ordinary, please keep it to yourself.

I don’t *really* think buildings can talk, or that ghosts exist, and I definitely don’t believe Adonis is an old god— but at this point, who knows what’s real?

I can’t be an accurate judge of reality anymore.

I don’t know if I really hear voices when The Butte wind blows.

I don’t know why I see *things* out of the corner of my eye that couldn’t possibly be.

What I do know is this: I’m sticking to tea for the rest of my life.

The Halloween Party

Seven of them sat in nurse Cobb's spacious living room on Halloween night.

Their house up on Northpoint was rather large, but the old couple had compensated by filling it with comfort and memories. The living room was the focal point of their decorating, so once a visitor walked over the threshold, they were met with crowded bookshelves, a brick fireplace, sofas, dozens of throw pillows, and several generations of family and friends staring at them from cedar walls.

Of course, Mrs. Cobb sat cozied beside her husband, Mr. Cobb, on the loveseat. Both wore matching wool sweaters and clutched steaming mugs as they talked animatedly with Janelle and Luis Narada to their right.

The Naradas had brought their daughter Luz, who nurse Cobb had helped deliver over twenty years ago. The Cobbs and the Naradas were the kind of friends that invited each other to cookouts, shared a pew at church, and whose children grew up babysitting one another. And although Luz was a budding adult now, she still went with her parents to the Cobbs' every time they called.

The sixth guest, seated in a leather armchair, was town-newcomer Dr. Tamura. She'd dressed just a tad too formally -in pencil skirt and heels- for the occasion and sat so straight, Janelle Narada wondered quite innocently whether she'd sat on a pin needle and was too polite to mention it.

Nurse Cobb however knew it was most likely because of her scheming that the young woman was wound tight. Cobb had asked Dr. Tamura to bring a friend, knowing full well that the only other person the poor doctor knew in town was Mr. George Arno Bright III, who made up the seventh member of their party.

Arno had made himself comfortable by leaning against the brick wall of the fireplace, a cheery flame leaping near his boots. He kept shooting what Luz labeled his "woman-stealing smile" at the doctor. Mrs. Cobb had liked the term so much she'd told Arno about it which only made him do it more. Cobb had yet to

see the doctor blush, but she suspected she'd see it tonight if Arno couldn't keep those dimples to himself.

They'd all gathered rather unconsciously in a distinct U around the golden fireplace, each with a healthy glass of cider in hand to warm them up from the crisp October night. The room smelled of smoke and mulled spices.

Luz, the youngest of them, her black curls teased out big and beautiful, had sat herself on the rug and wrapped one of the Cobbs' many woven blankets around her shoulders.

She'd just finished regaling everyone with a childhood story when a lull in the conversation descended. The Cobbs and Naradas were used to such things, but as the seconds ticked by, Dr. Tamura grew increasingly uncomfortable, until she finally asked the question that had been haunting her since she'd walked through Cobb's front door.

"I was wondering..." She tightened her grip on the mug. "I noticed, on the drive here, that there were no trick or treaters, and most of the stores down on Main are closed... No one seems to have any decorations up either."

Everyone looked at her, eyes a little wide, like they were all remembering something for the first time together.

"Is there some kind of weird thing here with Halloween? Even when I'd asked my patients, they brushed me off. They couldn't even tell me where any of the best pumpkin patches are. Maybe it's just me, but--"

"Oh, no dear," Mrs. Cobb waved a hand to dispel the doctor's worry, "No, no. I'm sorry, Vivian. We've just forgotten how new to town you are! We don't celebrate Halloween here in The Butte."

"What do you mean, you don't celebrate?" Dr. Tamura did begin to blush at that very moment out of embarrassment. "The whole town? I thought people loved the holiday around here. There are places like Sweetcreek's Spooky Carnival and St. Hellen's Halloween town all around. Don't people live for this kind of stuff?"

Arno chuckled from his corner of the room, and the doctor shot him a sharp look.

“We should tell her,” Luz piped up.

Mr. Narada nodded his head in agreement. “Janelle should, she has a knack for stories.”

Mrs. Narada leaned over to give her husband a kiss on the cheek. “Is that alright with the rest of you?”

“Fine by me, I think this is the perfect time for the good doctor to hear our town’s *dark secret*,” Arno said with a grave voice. His dimples ruined the effect.

Everyone shot Mrs. Cobb a look. The old nurse’s face was pale and drawn, but she just fluttered her hand through the air as if to tell them to get on with it.

Mrs. Narada took that as her cue.

“Halloween in The Butte isn’t what you expect it to be because there is no Halloween. There are no shouts of ‘trick-or-treat,’ or doorbells ringing because nothing needs tempting in this town. As you’ve seen yourself, perfectly respectable fall decorations are hung down Main Street, and even the Guzzle & Go puts out a few hay bales for the kids to climb on. But no one pushes it further than that.”

She then looked directly at Dr. Tamura, who was leaning forward, listening keenly. “You may believe that these are the stingy superstitions of a small town, and you can go ahead thinking that, but for nine years, unexplainable misfortunes occurred on All Hallows Eve.”

“*Misfortunes?*” Dr. Tamura emphasized the word like Mrs. Narada had done and crossed her arms. “No one died right?”

“No one died,” Mrs. Narada conceded, “But... things became strange.”

“How strange?”

The First Story: Pumpkin Misfortunes

“As most of us know, Northpoint is famous for their pumpkins. But for a long time, it wasn’t just because of their size. They were best recognized for their wild and outlandishly spectacular designs. Roaring gorgons, life-sized zombies, and great gory scenes. So much effort went into these jack-o’-lanterns each year

that, eventually, Mrs. Cobb convinced us that there needed to be a contest. So, The Butte Jack-O'-Lantern Competition became common practice, and every year Mrs. Cobb's household was proclaimed the winner. She was especially skilled, and because of her work at the clinic, she had plenty of inspiration for her terrifying designs."

Mrs. Cobb and Dr. Tamura shared a look. She had no idea how right she was.

Mr. Cobb gave his wife a proud little shake. "She was a damn mastermind, and I sure did enjoy that victory whisky."

"Except for *that* year," Mrs. Cobb muttered into her mug, a frown pursed at her lips.

"Yes," Mrs. Narada agreed, "except for that year. That first year of the Misfortunes. Now, I'll be upfront with you, Dr. Tamura; no one quite knows what happened.

"Early in the evening on Halloween, a fog thick as any blizzard rolled in from the hills. It was enough to deter most trick or treaters, but not enough to stop the All Hallows' Eve Festival on Main Street. Seeing that not many children would be knocking on their doors, the residents of Northpoint meandered downtown for a bit of revelry.

"Doors were locked. Lights off. No one noticed that methodically, the jack-o'-lanterns candles were being snuffed out.

"Now, I wasn't there. And I know Mrs. Cobb doesn't like to discuss it, but our dear Mr. Cobb was present. Perhaps he can do the next part justice?" Mrs. Narada said, glancing imploringly toward the man in question.

Mr. Cobb scratched at his grizzled chin. "Well, it was 'bout midnight by the time most of us came stumbling back. Most walked, 'cuz the fog was all soupy. No one really noticed anything until we reached our front door. Then... chaos. Our pumpkins were mutilated. No— that's not right. More like drawn and quartered! It looked as if someone had thrown one of them at the house! Pumpkin guts hung off the door and had smeared everywhere. More was scattered in chunks across the yard and well past the sidewalk into the street. My girl was just

in pure tatters, bursting into tears at the sight of it all. But our house wasn't the only one.

He stopped to take another swig from his cup. "The officers called on scene described the neighborhood properties as 'utterly defaced and defiled.' No pumpkin, house, lawn, mailbox, or car was spared. It was pumpkin Armageddon! They never did arrest suspects, and all of Northpoint was coated in rotting pumpkin meat for weeks. I still remember the damn smell." He scrunched his nose, already flushed from the cider.

Mrs. Narada picked the story up again, "To give the people of Northpoint some credit, they tried again the following year, but the same thing happened, and not just to them, but to any home in The Butte sporting a particularly terrifying jack-o'-lantern."

Arno shifted his feet, readjusting his position against the fireplace, and captured the good doctor's eye. Dr. Tamura patted the arm of her seat, motioning that Arno was welcome to sit if he got tired of standing.

"So, some kids were going around and exploding jack-o'-lanterns to terrorize people and you canceled everything?" she asked.

"Well," said Mrs. Narada, "Some say they saw the person doing it. Others claim it was not *someone* but *something*, tall and spindly, with a head which glowed from within like a jack-o'-lantern itself. But remember, this was only the first of the Halloween Misfortunes. The year after the end of the pumpkin massacres, whatever bad luck we caught turned its attention to the festival."

"The same one the Cobbs had gone to? The— what did you call it? The All Hallows' Eve Festival?"

"The very same!" Mrs. Cobb shook herself. "Such a shame too! I wish you could've seen it, dear. The festival was held down Main Street. Bars served cocktails decorated like potions, turning our lips different colors. SweetTooth Bakery made these beautiful treats which looked so real! Games were set up, bands played, and the old granary was converted into a haunted house just a few blocks down." Mrs. Cobb's eyes glittered with the memory. "The All Hallows' Eve Festival was something special, Dr. Tamura, just something special!"

“It certainly sounds that way.” The doctor turned back to Mrs. Narada.
“So, what went wrong?”

The Second Story: Festival Misfortunes

“It was all fun and games... until the spontaneous and distressing death of fifty-three goldfish.

“Yes, you heard me right: goldfish. They were prizes for the kids. The carnival director left the station for only a moment, but when he returned every single fish was floating upside down in their bags. Miss Sayles found him sitting behind her bakery sobbing over them.”

“I heard she had to give him a cup of her famous At Peace tea just to calm him down.” Luz whispered loudly. The doctor raised an eyebrow.

“That was just the beginning. The Ferris wheel that year came to a shuddering halt, and as evening fell, the poor soul who’d volunteered to work the dunk tank plummeted into the water... and... well... no one knows how, but it was practically boiling. They had to pull him out screaming.” All three of the Naradas grimaced at the memory. “We had nightmares about it for weeks. Then, after everything had calmed down a bit, Luz wanted a swing at the high striker.”

“The what?”

“A game where you use a mallet to ring a bell. It’s a classic. And you have to be strong to make it go off. The bell was just out of everyone’s reach. Even Luis couldn’t do it. But Luz was convinced she could. The mallet itself was nearly as big as her at the time, but she managed to lift it above her head and smack it down.

“Without warning, the bell flew off the top of the machine with a CLANG and crashed into the roof of a hot dog stand, destroying it.”

“... Come again?” said Dr. Tamura, mouth agape.

“Yep. At the bright young age of six, I became a vandal,” Luz said, jutting her chin out proudly.

“We all know the high striker had to have been broken.” Her mother lowered her voice a bit, making everyone lean in to catch each word. “All of these

events put the town on edge, but the worst disaster of the night was still to come.

“Remember the realistic creepy-crawly treats Mrs. Cobb told you about? Well, that year they had a bit more life in them than anyone could have anticipated. Once the sun went down, One-Handed-Bob snagged a muffin shaped like a rat and tried to take a bite. Turns out it wasn’t a muffin...

“More news came in of candy spiders crawling from mouths, kids losing teeth when biting into candy corn, and of hot dogs squirming out of their buns and proceeding to slither away– the festival was total pandemonium. Reports were filed. Customers were refunded, and everyone chalked it up to a year of pranks gone wrong. Except it lasted far more than a year.”

Mrs. Narada paused to push the dark hair from her eyes and settled closer to her husband’s side. “The following Halloween was just as disastrous. Carnival rides and activities continued to malfunction, snacks were somehow replaced, and drinks permanently stained bar-goers’ teeth. The town dentist was booked out for two months.”

Mrs. Cobb refilled everyone’s ciders and ventured into her kitchen for some fresh brownies. The rest of them sipped on their cinnamon-spiced drinks as Mrs. Narada continued, “The hits kept coming, The Butte tried hosting the festival for three more Halloweens, but so few people showed up to the last one that the town decided to scrap the whole event to save money.”

As Mrs. Cobb re-entered, she added, “I believe the only attraction left untouched from the Misfortunes all those years was the haunted house. Come to think of it, the poor old thing sits unused to this day. Pretty sure all the decorations are still in there, gathering dust.”

That made everyone go quiet.

Sometime during the last story, Arno had made his way to sit on the arm of Dr. Tamura’s chair and the two shared one of Mrs. Cobb’s brownies.

Mrs. Cobb herself sat back down next to her husband and looked a bit too smug for her own good.

“That only makes seven,” said the doctor after some time.

“What was that, dear?” said Mrs. Cobb.

“That was only seven years. You said there were nine. What happened those last two Halloweens?” Dr. Tamura detected a distinct discomfort in the room and doubted whether she wanted to hear what they had to say.

The Final Misfortunes

“So,” Mrs. Narada forged ahead, the light from the fireplace flickering over her features, casting dark shadows, “You see, despite the fact that other events in town had been put to a stop by this point, there were still children who went about trick or treating, and there were, of course, a few holiday celebrations thrown. Neither lasted long.

“Both the house parties and the trick or treating were foiled those last two Halloweens. You see, The Butte’s college scene is a bit different than the rest of town. Cascade campus itself is surrounded by old neighborhoods. It is what we call the Cascade Corner.

“During parties, students said they heard a knock on the front door, but when they opened it, not a soul was there. Then, after shutting themselves in again, a groaning began. Soft at first, like the moaning of creaky pipes. Yet, as the night wore on, it became impossible to ignore. It would grow so loud that eventually someone would leave to hunt down whatever it was. What they found instead was disaster.

“It was as if their front lawns had been tilled up, with decorations torn to bits. And the strangest part: muddy footprints trailed down the sidewalk. Then *vanished.*”

“It was some damn vandals!” declared Mr. Cobb, whose cheeks had grown considerably puce. “Horrible low-lives with nothing better to do but mess with people just trying to have a good time. The same happened at every single Halloween party across town. The next year, a fraternity threw a rager in defiance. Everyone stayed out on the lawn. But when a fella went to go use the bathroom, he discovered that not only had the plumbing exploded, but dirt had clogged every sink and toilet! Folks stopped throwing Halloween parties after that, with a few minuscule exceptions,” he winked, but Dr. Tamura felt a small chill creep over

her despite the cozy atmosphere.

“But, while the partying ended because of necessity, the trick or treating was ultimately halted out of fear.” Mrs. Narada nervously played with the ends of her hair until her husband placed a gentle hand over her own. “The fear our children experienced those same last years was the final nail in the coffin.”

“Hey, I want to tell this part! It’s more my story than anything,” chirped Luz, “I was, what? Eleven? I somehow convinced Mom I could safely trick or treat in our neighborhood alone that year.

“I’d hoped to meet up with my friend Olivia, remember? The one who’s dad did her braids with the colors in them? You know who I’m talking about. Unfortunately, I never made it to her house.

“I technically wasn’t alone, there were kids all up and down the street in masks and capes, but I walked alone, and that made a difference. At every house I visited, the curls at the back of my neck tingled. You know? Like when you’re being watched.

“I remember trying to figure out how many licks it would take to reach the center of my lollipop when I saw it. A guy crouched by the corner of a house. He was wrapped head to toe in bandages like a mummy, and I thought, ‘this guy must really like dressing up,’ before I rang the doorbell.

“I got my candy, and still felt weird, so I skipped the next few houses and headed straight to Olivia’s. But soon as I started down the street, he was there. Like literally standing right in front of me. And, man, did he smell bad. He was dirty as hell too, and I just looked up at him and realized this guy had no eyes. Like, full-on pits for eyes. I nearly peed myself. There were some other kids right behind me and they just started screaming. We all ran home, but the guy shuffled after us a few blocks before we lost him.”

“It wasn’t just her,” said Mrs. Narada with a shiver. “Kids all over town said people dressed in terrible costumes were following them. Even parents spotted people in really horrifying states, circling the block. People practically forgot about the incident until the year after. Even more of these *people* wandered the streets alongside the children. Watching. They all looked disgusting. Luis

went out with Luz that final year and he saw them creeping about.”

Mr. Narada jumped in then, telling Dr. Tamura how some of the creepers even tried ringing the doorbells and how the streets had emptied out after dark.

“Everyone was too scared,” Mrs. Narada finished, “That was the last straw. First the pumpkins, the festival, the parties, and then *that*? We pulled the plug, and The Butte had Halloween no more.”

Luz patted her mom’s knee in comfort, and Mrs. Cobb shook her head, “So, you see dear, that decade was so bad none of us really enjoy talking about it.”

Dr. Tamura gripped her cider a bit closer than she had at the beginning of the evening, and curled up in her chair.

Arno took the blanket from the back of the good doctor’s seat and draped it over her lap, saying, “So, on October thirty-first everyone stays home eating candy and watching movies. Celebrating All Hallows’ Eve seems to only invite trouble, no matter which way you twist it. But the proof is in the pudding, as they say, because, since then, not a single pumpkin has been violated, no pranks have gone horribly wrong, and the creeps have kept away from town since. At least, for the most part.”

“Now you know, dear,” said Mrs. Cobb as she prepared to get up from the couch for a second time.

“I hate to ask.” The doctor looked up at Arno. “But doesn’t this technically count as a party? Doesn’t this— I don’t know— ‘tempt fate’ or whatever?”

“Don’t be silly, dear,” Mrs. Cobb called from the kitchen. The smell of chocolate drifted into the room. “All that happened years ago, and a little gathering between friends on a lovely autumn night never hurt anybody.”

A relieved smile parted Dr. Tamara’s lips, everyone seemed relaxed again as Mrs. Cobb made her rounds, this time with an old bottle of her prize whisky.

“If you say s—”

A soft knocking sound emanated through the cozy atmosphere, shattering everyone’s easy manner. A photo on the mantle shuddered.

“Did you hear that?” Dr. Tamura whispered to no one in particular.

All Mrs. Cobb could think to say was, “We have a doorbell.”

They waited a few more moments, barely daring to breath. All was silent except for the crack and pop of the fire.

Then...

Knock...

Knock...

Knock...

There it was again.

Someone, or something, was at the door.

Patiently waiting to be let in.

Animal Control

Jodie Pérez Audio Transcript:

The boys are idiots. No, let me rephrase that: I'm the idiot for hiring them. They seemed alright at first, but I should have known better than to...

[BANG]

[CRASH]

[Muffled Screaming]

[Crackled Sigh]

I just shoulda' known better, period.

That was O'Dearie, he brought in a badger last night and is learning that they bite. Anyways, for the record, this is Jodie Pérez and I run The Butte Animal Control Center. We handle disturbances caused by creatures and send some to the rehabilitation clinic if necessary. I'm making this file because my employees [Clyde] O'Dearie, [Milton] Bushes, and [Guy] Hobbes are complete and utter buffoons.

I don't know why I trusted them to work together, but that's trust for you: Hope getting in the way of reality.

The point is I speak four different languages, and yet I've never before in my life heard the kind of ignorance that comes out of their mouths. Talk of ghouls, ghosts, and all sorts of things that are too damn stupid to mention. But I'm required to keep a record of all their reports, regardless of how blatantly untrue they may be.

So, this is my first, and hopefully final entry in file 113. Or as I like to call it: The Bullshit File.

**File 113 Clyde O'Dearie Audio Transcript_ August 13th
(Five Years Ago):**

O'Dearie: I've lived my whole life on a farm. My parents grow hops east of The Butte and my great great granddad planted potatoes. But besides crops, my family has always been good with animals! I've worked with all sorts of creatures: pigs, cows, chickens, and even nursed an owl back to health after my dad... well... So, while tending crops is the family calling, animals have always been mine.

Jodie: Is there a point to this, O'Dearie?

O'Dearie: Yes, boss, I just wanted to set the scene.

Jodie: What happened today, kid?

O'Dearie: Well, you remember the reports we've been getting this week about gardens and lawns in upheaval?

Jodie: Yes. But I also remember us deciding that it was vandalism, not the work of wildlife, and decidedly leaving it in the sheriff's hands.

O'Dearie: Right you are, boss. But early this morning – before you or the sun were up– the phone rang. It was Mrs. Narada, and boy, was she mad. She said the Devil had ripped through her yard, but she doesn't trust the sheriff, so she called us. Hobbes chickened out so I went myself. I had an inkling this was critter related.

Jodie: Going alone is against the rules, kid. You know that.

O'Dearie: Yeah, but I was just planning on taking a report.
You know, for our records! How was I supposed to know
I'd be chasing the Devil through folks' backyards?

Jodie: This conversation is giving me an ulcer.

O'Dearie: Well, I can't be certain it was really the Devil,
but it sure moved like it. I heard shouting as dawn
broke beneath the tree line and so it was still kinda
dark, but the thing had knocked over three mailboxes
and ripped up full hydrangea bushes! Roots and all!
The thing moved like a blur. This case is definitely
our department Jodie.

Jodie: Fine, you wanna' chase the Devil? Go for it, you
have my full permission to pursue, but don't let this
get in the way of other calls and for the love of God
take one of the boys with you. Even if you have you
drag 'em out by the ear.

CONTINUED

File 113 Clyde O'Dearie Audio Transcript_ August
14th (Five Years Ago):

Jodie: Explain on record, just why the fuck I got three
complaints and a personal call from the sheriff as to
why you were "disturbing the peace" in the East
Suburbs last night?

O'Dearie: Well, in reality, boss, it was more accurately
sometime in the wee hours of the morning, and Hobbes
was there too.

Jodie: Yet I didn't get a call saying that Hobbes was
involved in the destruction of a swing set, three rose
bushes, a chicken coop, and whatever the hell happened
to Bob.

O'Dearie: Ah, no. That was definitely me and the Devil, of
course.

[Muttering, Language Unknown]

O'Dearie: Look, you know I don't understand whatever dialect you and Bushes speak in but imagine if I muttered in Gaelic whenever I was cross with the both of you, I'm sure you wouldn't appreciate it.

Jodie: I imagine you won't appreciate my foot up your ass.

O'Dearie: Fair point.

Jodie: Spill. Now.

O'Dearie: Hobbes and I got the call around three in the morning, I dragged him along as you said, and he drove us around until I spotted the Devil tearing up a lawn.

Jodie: How?

O'Dearie: Pardon?

Jodie: How. did. it. tear. up. the. lawn.

O'Dearie: Magic.

[...]

O'Dearie: Or demonic energy. Either, I suppose. I couldn't tell. But even Hobbes says the thing glowed green and the lawn was in havoc—

Jodie: Need I remind you that I have an ulcer with your name on it?

O'Dearie: Anyhow, I leapt out of the van and wrestled a rope around its neck before it took off, and well... I just held on. Probably didn't help though, it still got away and, as you said, I caused more trouble than prevented it.

Jodie: I'm still confused. What the hell was it?

O'Dearie: Oh! That's the funny thing. It was a goat.

[...]

Jodie: I'm sorry, what.

O'Dearie: A green-glowing, exceptionally strong, miniature goat. It was greyish I think, but it was hard to tell in the dark and I dropped my flashlight as I roped it. But it was definitely a goat.

Jodie: You're telling me that you were bested by a miniature goat.

O'Dearie: Yes well-

Jodie: Get out.

CONTINUED

File 113 Clyde O'Dearie Audio Transcript_ August 15th Five Years Ago):

Jodie: You will say everything once and then you will never speak of this again. Is that understood?

O'Dearie: Yes, boss.

Jodie: You may begin.

O'Dearie: Bushes called me this morning to tell me my Devil was back. He picked me up in the van and handed me the tranquilizer gun. I'd never shot it before, but I knew the basics.

Today was different. I could tell because it was late for the Devil. Well, still early for everyone else, but dawn had broken, and the sky cleared of clouds and we could see it tearing down Main Street like a bat-out-of-hell.

Bushes drove fast as he could, and we chased it all the way back to the East Suburbs. We then took off on foot, but everywhere it went the green light spread, destroying fences, and plants, and anything else in its way.

Bushes fell behind. Being older, you know? But I followed it, cornering the green Devil in front of Bob's house. A kind of karma I suppose.

Just as my finger tickled the trigger, Bob himself, (Well One-Handed-Bob now I suppose) dressed in nothing but his boxers, blew open the front door of his house and shouted, "Stop! It's just a goat."

And all of a sudden, the green mist around the furry thing fell away.

I still had the gun pointed at it, intending to take it in, but One-Handed-Bob then said, "Stop. This goat is mine."

And all of a sudden, the little thing grew docile and sat itself right down at One-Handed-Bob's toes.

Eyeballing his bandaged hand, I said, "But sir, just yesterday you—"

He cut me off and declared that, "This creature is mine and I am hers. You may take your leave now."

I still didn't believe him, but he said it with such confidence I wanted to. So, I said, "Fine, if it is yours, what is its name?"

He didn't even hesitate.

"Lefty."

And boy did I start laughing, and I didn't stop. I laughed when Bushes wheezed up to me. I laughed when we made it back to the van, and I was still laughing when I came in and saw you sitting here braids undone and a scowl on your face. Am I fired?

Jodie: No, but you should be.

O'Dearie: Do you think One-Handed-Bob will be able to
[Exaggerated Coughing] *handle* Lefty.

Jodie: We'll see.

O'Dearie: Is that all, boss?

Jodie: I don't know. It depends. Do you recall the events
of this morning?

O'Dearie: Not at all boss. I was fast asleep.

[End of Transcript]

File 113 Milton Bushes Audio Transcript_ Feb. 28th

(One Year Ago) :

Jodie: Bushes, I don't like pulling words from you like teeth, but you were the only one besides Hobbes on duty and he's in an embarrassing state right now, so I need you to open your goddamn mouth and tell me what happened.

Bushes: He said it was The Butte Ghoul, Ma'am.

Jodie: [Sigh] I know what he *said*, Bushes. But I need to know what you *saw*. That folktale has been floating around since November, you think Hobbes would have the brains to come up with something new by now.

Bushes: Don't know much Ma'am.

Jodie: Well, you can start by explaining how you both trashed your uniforms.

Bushes: The river, Ma'am.

Jodie: The river?

Bushes: The river.

Jodie: [Sigh] What were you two idiots doing seven miles out at Tsal?

Bushes: Hiker saw a wild animal.

Jodie: Bushes, if you don't start getting talkative really quick, I'm gonna fire your ass.
[...]

Bushes: Couldn't ID what kind of animal it was. But they said it chased them growling and such for a mile until they had service and called us. By the time we arrived at Tsal, Hobbes already had it in his head it was the Ghoul, so he brought the tranquilizer gun. Hiker described the whereabouts, and we went looking. Hobbes went ahead. Next thing I knew he screamed. Caught up to find him halfway down the embankment, covered in clay and dirt. When he fell, he managed to shoot himself... err... somewhere... and was near fainting.

So, I went on down and pulled him out. It wasn't a clean job, Ma'am.

Jodie: You're telling me that Hobbes scared himself shitless, fell, shot himself full of drugs, and you had to not only rescue him from possibly drowning but also carry him a mile back the way you came.

Bushes: Yes, Ma'am. He hung on to my braid as I brought him back. It is... quite disgusting now.

Jodie: And you saw nothing Hobbes' claims he did.

Bushes: Not with my own sight, Ma'am.

Jodie: [Groaning] Take tomorrow off.

Bushes: Tomorrow is Sunday, Ma'am.

Jodie: Then take Monday off.

[Continued Conversation (90 seconds): Language Unknown]

[End of Transcript]

File 113 Guy Hobbes Audio Transcript_ Dec. 6th (Newest Entry):

[Shuffling sounds]

Jodie: God's sake Hobbes! For the last time I don't want to hear it. Record it then move on you...

[Garbled Speech].

Hobbes: Well at least this is easier than writing, that's for sure.

[Unintelligible]

Hobbes: What d'ya'mean "Of course I'd say that?!" Fine, fine I'll tell it. I said I'll tell it!
Dang that woman is prickly as a hedgehog.. or is it a porcupine?

Anyways, I'm here to report the incident which took place down the highway tonight. Or this morning? I'm not sure exactly what time it was and to be honest I don't rightly know what time it is now, but Bushes, O'Dearie and I got a call soon after Jodie went for a cup of coffee. It didn't sound like anything serious. Some kids hollered at the sheriff about a deranged deer two miles up the road from the Guzzle & Go, and the sheriff called us.

I can't say I was happy wandering out in the dark, but at least it wasn't raining or freezing.

Bushes grabbed the van and O'Dearie and I hopped in the back. The van is this old white beast with rust rimming its corners, but she gets us where we need to go. The back of the van is hollowed out like the belly of a whale to hold a cage and a whole bunch of other junk, but— then again— I'm not quite sure whales have hollow bellies. But they must have because that Jonah fellow lived in one for some time, didn't he? When I was little, I was of scared of being swallowed by a whale, it's why I never go boating, not that anyone has invited me boating before—

Anyway, we were all cruising up the highway, and it was dark but not too dark because the moon shone silver in the sky like a quarter. We'd made it to the heavily wooded part of the hills when our lights bounced off the deer's hide.

Bushes didn't say a thing, but he slowed us down quick and we got our bearings.

Besides the fact that it stood there in the middle of the highway, it didn't look deranged like the kids had said. O'Dearie suggested we should just try driving it off the road, but Bushes didn't wanna be responsible for the van getting dented if it spooked

and ran into us. Like what happened with the elk last spring.

So, I hopped on out of the van and worked my way forward.

The headlights only lit up its rear, but as I scooted closer it looked to grow in size. I thought for a second that we'd been mistaken.

This wasn't a deer, it had to be an elk. But then I remembered in all my years, I did never see an elk travel through here in the winter. They don't migrate like that, and they rarely travel alone.

Standing between the deer and the van, I was lit up from behind by crusty old headlights, but it still didn't seem to notice me.

I shouted a little then, to spook it, but the *thing* didn't move.

That's when I realized this wasn't a natural stillness.

An uncomfy feeling began to creep into my belly and without meaning to I stepped away.

For some reason that seemed to catch its attention more than my yelling had, and it swung its head around to look.

That was no deer.

I've never heard of a deer turning its head all the way around like that... Or looking at people with eyes like *that*.

I'm not ashamed to say I ran. You would too if you saw it. And good thing I did too, because it came after me.

"DRIVE," I said, "STEP ON IT."

Bushes and O'Dearie were confused. They didn't see the thing like I did. They didn't know any better.

Until they did.

The *thing* jerked forward on long stilted legs, quick and disjointed.

I screamed, "GET US THE HELL OUTTA' HERE BUSHES."

But Bushes, though his eyes had gone all wide at the *thing*, still must have thought it was a deer. Because it looked like a deer, but it also *didn't* look like a deer. And it definitely didn't *move* like a deer. I'm not describing this right, but it was *wrong*. Bushes could tell it was wrong, but he didn't move the van until the *thing* stepped right in front of us.

It fell still for a few heartbeats and none of us dared breath. It just watched us through the glare, giving 'deer-in-headlights' a whole new meaning.

Then O'Dearie said, "Someone better call Jodie."

The *thing* heard him, wrenched forward again, and like a puppet on invisible strings, began to raise itself to standing on a body that was all kinds of wrong. When I realized it cast no shadow, my stomach just about dropped out of my ass.

Bushes must have finally reached his limit too.

Throwing us in reverse, we sped as far and as fast as we could. As we drove, I called you and tried to explain, but I couldn't, not until I knew that *thing* in the dark was far, far away.

That's that I suppose. Maybe it was possessed.

Jodie: Or maybe you're a trio of scared idiots.

Hobbes: You weren't there boss!

Jodie: No, I wasn't. And if I was, I would have done my job.

Turn that thing off and pack up. This one is going in The Bullshit File.

[End of Transcript]

Cascade Blackout

Adonis had learned over the years that a thing did not have to be magnificent to be beautiful. A city did not have to have centuries of architectural flair like Paris, and man did not have to mirror the likeness of Michelangelo's David to be considered lovely.

No, beauty lay in what made him feel.

Happiness, longing, curiosity, these were the things The Butte brought to him.

And so, while the small town did not glow like the Alps or shine as brightly as Venus, Adonis chose it to be his immediate home anyway. Because, if there was one thing The Butte offered, it was feeling.

The town had moods.

He tried explaining it to Joe once, but the young man's glasses just slipped off his nose.

"Can you explain it in a different way?" he asked.

Adonis, in fact, could not.

The Butte was experiencing a blackout. He found it happened from time to time. Up in the mountains and hills as they were, isolated from most light pollution and respectable coffee shops, electricity would get lost on its way and they would all be left alone in the dark. And it is in the dark where The Butte has its most fun.

Of course, there were backup generators for the essentials, but, for the most part, lights were snuffed out, and all throughout the Cascade Corner the narrow beams of flashlights shone through windows.

At home, battery-powered fairy lights were hastily wound around the kitchen counters and up the stairs to help avoid bruised hips and shins.

Adonis slept on the couch. At the end of each day, he just stretched out his too-long legs until his feet dangled well over the arm of the sofa and closed his

eyes, relying only on the sunlight filtering through the window to wake him up in place of his alarm.

The Butte, he assessed, was in a particularly good mood, which meant most everyone else was in a bad one. The outage had lasted one-hundred and thirty hours thus far and was three hours away from becoming the longest power outage the community had endured.

Joe, Piper, Cameron, and Aspen's phones all croaked on the first day of the Blackout and they'd grumbled about it ever since. And because every one of them were absolutely inept when it came to fending for themselves, Adonis had been leaving snacks out on the table and grabbing dinner from the Guzzle & Go before he came home every night. Miraculously, the diner was the only place that consistently remained unaffected by The Butte's everchanging dispositions. There seemed to be a truce between the building and town, one Adonis admired, but did not seek to understand. Understanding, he found, sucked the magic out of places like this.

Cameron had decided to join him on his walk to campus the sixth morning of the blackout.

"I don't know how you manage without a phone all the time. I'm about to pull out my hair."

Adonis glanced absently at the state of his friend's short dark cut and believed that she already had. The woman looked utterly ruffled.

"I have a computer. That is enough."

"Uggg." Cameron shook her lacrosse stick at the salt-grey sky. "If that stupid storm hadn't blown through!"

"It is just a Butte mood."

"What?"

Adonis thought better of it.

"Never mind."

"Fine then." They walked in silence until they reached the sopping field Cameron's team used for practice, then split comfortably without a word. The woman could be blunt and loud, but Adonis didn't mind it as others would. He'd

met worse and better people, and Cameron fit in an irritating, but likeable, spot in between. But most importantly, she didn't ask too many questions.

Adonis' leather shoes continued splashing against pavement as the campus buildings emerged from the water-logged grounds ahead. Despite the on and off downpours, those swooping like crows from building to building couldn't be seen holding umbrellas. They were the tools of tourists in this strange place, and even though Adonis found them useful, he'd stopped bringing his.

Cascade College gave the impression of an overcast mausoleum during blackouts, but classes still carried on. Professors wiped water droplets from their glasses as they lectured in shadows, and students brought mugs of steaming coffee into the halls, not to drink, but to warm their hands.

The familiar January cold stuck to Adonis's ribs, and he breathed it in, relishing the smell of a rain-soaked world.

A glimpse at the silver hands of his watch told him he had one minute to make it inside the Anonymous building, walk to the end of the hall, and take attendance all before Professor White arrived. Teacher's Assistant was a role he'd taken on to keep himself from total academic boredom. But Professor White made sure Adonis kept both interested and busy, and he liked her profusely for it. He shut out everything else the watch had to say like a door against a brisk breeze.

Ducking into the classroom, Adonis took his seat at a desk positioned out of the way for him so he neither sat with the students nor totally up front with the Professor.

Shadows hung overhead so thickly that the high ceiling became indistinguishable. The only light came from several enormous floor to ceiling windows, casting the room in a weak, grey hue. This had forced the students who preferred the back rows to find seats closer to the board. Some had even brought headlamps.

"Well, aren't we cozy," said Professor White as she sailed through the door, shutting it snugly behind her.

"Today we will be diving in depth into the iconography of dung beetles and their role in North African Culture."

No one pulled out a laptop. Instead, pens clattered across hard-wood desks and sheets of paper ruffled throughout the hall.

Professor White traditionally stood during the lecture with a headscarf wound warmly round her and heavy boots planted firmly on the stone tiles, but today she took a seat behind her own table, spreading vast notes across it. Queen of her classroom, commanding from her throne.

Adonis wasn't presenting, so he sat back in his chair and listened. Professor White never stuck to a single script; there was always new information to absorb, new anecdotes, facts, jokes, or stories; even if a student took the same class twice, they would learn something they hadn't before. This was his third time.

After two hours of the Professor's voice piercing through the sound of rain, her lesson brought itself to a natural conclusion. She let her students scurry off early to their next lectures with just enough time to fill their mugs and perhaps absorb the wealth of information they'd been given.

A moment later, Professor White approached Adonis with a pleased look about her, like she was about to set him a challenge. Good news, then.

"Adonis. Please prepare for our lesson next week regarding the basic beliefs of death and burial along the River Jordan during the fourth century BC."

"Of course, Professor."

She raised a single brow. Pretend shock.

"This won't be an issue with the..." She waved her hand about, gesturing to the darkness tucked into the corners of her class.

"No, Professor."

"Very well." And she swept from the room without a second look.

She was sharp. And unlike Cameron and his other friends, she was in the habit of asking pointed questions. Adonis wondered if she suspected something. Someone always did eventually. The knowledge he held, the way he talked, acted, was unfitting for someone who looked his age.

But, after staring into Professor White's shrewd eyes, Adonis believed that if she suspected him of anything, it was of unmined talent. She looked at him and

thought, “This is a person who I can mold into a genius.” He knew that look. He recognized it in every teacher sharp enough to see his mind, but dull enough not to know the truth of it. In this case though, he would have to actually research to impress her. He’d seen the professor tackle this topic twice before, but that wouldn’t be enough. He needed to go to the library.

Adonis swung his feet down from the desk and started for the door. He was one of *those* people who didn’t need to take notes unless the topic was repulsively mathematical, so he had no need to collect his things. When Cameron had discovered he not only passed but excelled at his classes in that manner, she’d spent an hour ranting about “the unfairness of it,” a week sulking about his “unreasonable luck with looks and brains,” and a whole semester mumbling to Aspen about “his freakish ability” when she thought he was out of ear shot.

He was never out of ear shot.

The cold rain fell in rapid succession, and though Adonis never ran anywhere, he did lengthen his strides ever so slightly while venturing to the edge of campus.

Normally, Adonis could admire the shape of The Butte during his walks. The town was reminiscent of a gently curved bow; Northpoint at one end, climbing steadily into the hills, and Cascade College on the other point, displaying a view of downtown below. Students and teachers alike flocked there on clear days, drawn like moths to a flame, and locals loved seeing the academics crawl out of their corner of the world to join them.

Except for days like today. The Butte must have felt exceptionally lively, because on top of the rain, on top of a blackout, on top of a near-freezing winter, a fog had billowed in over the past hour, concealing the scenery and even some of the campus buildings from sight.

Adonis discovered ages ago that there are many different kinds of fog. In Ireland, he learned about the fog of a sea-facing cliff, which rolled in along the waves. He learned about the fog of warm soil in Chile, the type that rose like steam as it kissed crisp air. He learned about the blue fog of city streets, and warm suffocating fog, and fog that swallowed you whole with sharp icy teeth.

However, this was a Butte fog. A fog of mountains and valleys. Stirring and alive, it whispered things to him, telling secrets and playful lies.

That was the danger of staying in a *living* place; it would recognize him and try to engage with him. But Adonis had to establish boundaries long ago in far off lands, and besides, those kinds of games only led to trouble.

Entering through the front doors of Cascade Library, Adonis was enveloped in gloom. Inside, the building felt warm and dry, and as his eyes adjusted, he recognized the chairs littered haphazardly around the main floor. A few were taken by those arguing over project proposals, and one student seemed to be dead asleep; a hoodie dipped over their eyes and a backpack clutched to their chest. At least someone enjoyed the benefits of the blackout.

Cascade library held two floors: the lower for conversation and exploration and the upper for silent study. Adonis always made a beeline for the stairs, but today there was a variable out of place.

Long black hair. Trench coat. And that telltale umbrella.

At the front desk, bothering one of the rotating student clerks, was a woman who did not belong.

The Butte told him so.

Adonis paused and took a heartbeat to stare, but... a sliver of old dread gnawed through his gut. A reminder not to interfere. That was the most important rule after all.

Leaving behind the faint smells of frayed carpet and stale books, Adonis ventured up to the second floor where everything stood blissfully still. Windows lined the entire circumference of the room, allowing natural light to spool and collect in a silver haze over the tables set beneath them. In the center of the landing, shadowed and thick with silence, were the stacks.

He'd seen first years get lost in them, become overwhelmed, but not dare to cry out for help and break the principal rule of the library's top floor. It had been stamped above the entrance to the second landing in ink: Study In Silence.

On the desk closest to the staircase lay an abandoned coffee cup and some books. So, Adonis did the only reasonable thing and walked around the ring of the

room until the shelves completely blocked sight of him, picking the spot farthest away from whoever studied there.

After using his wool jacket to claim a chair, Adonis took the time to roll up the damp cuffs of his sleeves to avoid wetting the books. He didn't need the stacks getting angry with him, or he'd have a difficult time finding anything he really needed.

His watch's onyx face flashed darkly at his wrist, roman numerals glittering.

It told the time, along with other things... Right now, his friends were stumbling around in the rain like the beautiful idiots they were. Cameron was dripping wet, hangry, high on adrenaline after practice, and jogging back home for some food and a change of clothes before lab. Aspen and Pepps had just taken their seats for class and had begun to realize that it was not History of the Zoroastrian Empire, but that they'd accidentally gone to the wrong lecture *again*. And Joe happened to be late for his brunch date with his first boyfriend of the semester, having no phone to check the time.

Adonis allowed himself the tiniest of smiles, alone in the obscurity of the Cascade library, thinking about what disasters they all were. With them, it took little effort to avoid interference in their lives... except for that one time. And he promised himself he'd never do that again. No matter how funny—

Footsteps echoed from the staircase and Adonis dove headlong into the shadows of the stacks, plucking the books he needed from the darkness out of sheer luck, some whispers from The Butte, and an unbecoming amount of squinting.

Carrying a pile back to his table, Adonis hoped that if the individual had heard him roaming about, they would keep their distance.

So, as milky fog pooled outside, he plunged into what looked to be promising work.

What couldn't have been more than an hour into the endeavor, Adonis heard the disconcerting noise of footsteps drawing ever nearer.

Too quickly for him to flee, the stacks bore a woman to him.

Adonis refused to look up. Maybe she had become lost in the shelves and popped out, unfortunately, right where he was bent over the Tanakh. Her flat-footed steps grew closer until he saw the shiny, black toes of her shoes in his periphery.

She waited there, but Adonis didn't tear his eyes from the passages he was comparing. Let her stand there. She wouldn't—

“Excuse me.” Though her words fell softly, they sang like shattered glass throughout the otherwise empty floor.

Adonis repressed a shiver as the entire room rippled around them. This woman had thrown the library off kilter, and it was not pleased. Even the fog seemed to press closer to the windowpanes to see what would happen next. Perhaps the books would spring alive and eat her. Adonis wouldn't be surprised.

He looked the woman directly in the eye, but still refused to break the cardinal rule. It was the woman who'd been at the front desk, the one who didn't belong.

“I was hoping you could help me. You see I'm looking for maps— or old atlases— and keep getting turned around. The shelf is number AAA-13 and I thought it would be clear, but it's like the place keeps moving on me and I can't seem to—”

Adonis stood abrupt, sending her skittering backwards like he'd physically pushed her. She looked up at him with a grimace curling at her lips.

Adonis held out his hand, and reluctant as anything, the woman gave him a slip of paper the desk clerk had written for her.

Melting into the shadows, Adonis didn't check to see if the woman followed him. The library was known to hide things from students, but not from him. Rarely from him. Like calling to like and all that nonsense.

He followed the flow of the stacks until a particular one stood out to him. Sure enough, AAA was embossed in wood on its side, and he strained his eyes to see the small numbers printed on the shelves' rims. If The Butte didn't return the power soon, he'd be forced to get glasses. And... there: 13.

Adonis turned to find the woman had indeed followed him. She was a bit scarier looking in the dark. Her hair seemed to flutter about her face.

He gestured to the shelf before setting a path straight back the way he'd come.

"Thank you," said a whispered voice, and he was sure the stacks gave an audible groan.

Adonis felt... unnerved. It was an uncommon enough feeling that he sat on the edge of his chair the rest of the afternoon, ears prickling at phantom sounds. One didn't simply break the library's rules.

He left earlier than he'd planned, but a sneaking suspicion had told him that if he stuck around much longer, the little woman would find him again and ask more questions. It turned out he was right, but in the wrong way.

At the bottom of the cave-like staircase stood the lady.

"I wanted to apologize." She followed him from a healthy distance as he had the library clerk file the books away for his return tomorrow. They couldn't very well let him wander about in the rain with their only full Hebrew copy of the bible, now could they?

"Wait, you can read that?" The woman sounded half impressed.

"I can read many things."

"Alright then."

He made to turn away and leave her behind, but she continued to follow him. The rain had stopped, leaving the campus sodden and water-stained.

"Again, I just wanted to apologize, I didn't see the sign about not speaking— the blackout and all. By the way, how often does stuff like this happen?"

Adonis mustered a shrug.

Even though it was before sunset, the library had emptied itself out. No one stayed too late on campus during blackouts, especially during the winter.

"Do you mind if I ask you some questions?" She was old enough to be a professor but babbled away like an eager first-year.

"Yes."

“Oh– errr. Well, never mind then.”

Adonis liked to feel things, yes, but not things like guilt or regret, and at that moment he felt... bad.

He let out a sigh. “Ask.”

She paused, as if to gather all her questions around her, then barreled on, “Do you know what this town was built on?”

“Stolen land.”

She looked taken aback. “Yes, well, of course. But like, physically built on, or over?”

“Bones.”

“Again, you are not wrong, but I’m talking about the earth.”

He considered telling her to go ask Professor Smith in the geology department but didn’t feel like giving him the same headache Adonis felt slowly coming on. Around them, The Butte, which always told Adonis *something*, was oddly quiet. Listening.

“I have been taught the different combinations of volcanic, sedimentary, Tokul, and other varieties of soil across the Cascades. But I found the study of rocks unsuited to my tastes.”

“You’ve been taught? Are you a student here? I thought you were a professor!”

“What gave you that idea?”

She looked flabbergasted at that moment, so he took pity on her, mentally sending an apology to Professor Smith.

“The geology department is next to the Anonymous building. I could walk you.”

“Well– I... Uhhh...” She misstepped and visibly flinched, quickly backing away from him. “That would be greatly appreciated. Thank you.”

As they walked, the dense fog coiled around them. He should have guessed she wouldn't stop with the questions, but at least the next words out of her mouth weren't about his accent. He hated dancing around that. First it was the

way he spoke, then it was where he was from, until it snowballed into them wanting his entire life story, and he didn't have the willpower to lie today.

"Why do you call it the Anonymous building?"

"Because that is its name."

"Oh, why?"

He seriously considered saying "I do not know," but instead—

"Cascade has an anonymous donor. No one knows who it is. So: Anonymous."

"What studies does it house?"

Adonis looked up for something to save him from these insistent questions, but there was only the mist. "Histories of all kinds. And languages"

"Is that what you study? Languages, I mean?"

"No." She opened her mouth again, but he beat her to it. "History of Religion."

"You have such... odd courses here. It's quite amazing that they teach them at such a small school."

"Where else would they be taught?"

"I... I don't know actually."

At that moment, the Anonymous building appeared through the haze, and next to it, lower to the ground and tucked to its side like a small child, was the Koehler building where the geologists labored.

"There." He gestured politely for her to go on ahead. "Ask for Professor Smith."

"You've been a huge help." She looked like she wanted to say something else but wasn't brave enough. "Thank you."

He nodded, and the woman disappeared into Koehler as quickly as her little legs could carry her.

Once she was out of sight, The Butte murmured back to life, and the strangeness of the day faded away as Adonis heaved a cloudy breath and began the journey home.

The normally lamp-brightened walk was dark as dusk approached, but the small, lovingly abused houses and rentals were lit up in every creative manner imaginable.

Adonis grew more and more amused. Through his neighbor's windows he witnessed flashlights swinging from ceiling fans, candelabra props borrowed from the theatre department being put to use, and glow sticks cracked and left on windowsills.

The sun had descended beneath the horizon, and the evening fog moved out lazily like the tide. The hills and sky were revealed for the first time in days, and appeared blue, as if veneered in ocean-tinted ink.

Even though it was January, the blackout forced the neighborhood to revive all its woodfire grills to cook. Adonis could not only see the smoke floating up like apparitions from backyards but smell the char on the faint breeze that was still sweeping away the last of the day's clouds.

A child's laugh rang through the chilly air just as Adonis arrived at his front stoop.

But, when he turned the latch to the door, his world erupted into chaos.

"The backup generator blew!!!" Cameron shouted in greeting from the kitchen. Cheeses, packages of beef, wilted carrots, ice cream, and at least a dozen frozen pizzas were scattered across the countertop and table.

"But we kept the lights off," Adonis said rather pointlessly. "Left everything unplugged."

"Not everything apparently."

Joe shouted down the stairs. "Well, I'm sorry, ok? I'm sorry that I needed to check my email for a once in a lifetime internship—"

"CAN IT, NIMROD," Cameron bellowed. "I HOPE YOUR BALLS FREEZE OFF TONIGHT."

Pepps, wrapped in an old blanket, sat eating perishables as Cameron threw them from the refrigerator's shelves. With how cold it would become, the thinly worn walls would do nothing to drive off the winter chill.

"Where's Aspen?"

“That sweet, beloved child is knocking on our professors’ doors and begging for blankets.”

Adonis pinched the bridge of his nose. “We need a plan.”

“Yes, that would be nice.”

Adonis loved The Butte’s moods. He really did. And if it were up to him, he’d let this one run its course, but for nearly six days now his home had been dark and cold, his friends had lost their minds, he was certain it would drop below freezing, and The Butte’s recent rumblings made him believe this would not stop anytime soon. He’d have to interfere. If not for his sanity, then for his friends, and if not for his friends, then for everyone else.

“Pepps.” Adonis was already moving, picking up the keys to Cameron’s truck. “Bag the food. Cameron, I am taking the truck.”

“Fine by me.”

Joe wandered downstairs as they headed towards the front door.

“Where are you guys—“

Before he could finish, Adonis reached a hand out and slapped him upside the head. Pepps let out a sharp, surprised laugh.

“Hey!” cried Joe, but they were already out the door.

Adonis reasoned with himself on the drive through the Cascade neighborhoods. Bringing power back to The Butte wasn’t a big deal in the grand scheme of things. When he’d accidentally introduced Hellen to Paris while on a bender, *that* had been a big deal. But electricity in a small town in the middle of nowhere? That couldn’t be too influential right? He just had to change The Butte’s mood. But how would he do that? Did he even remember how to effectively meddle with the *living* world? There were years... decades and even oceans between who he was now and the Adonis who’d felt like he could change the world.

Pepps’ teeth chattered despite the blanket still thrown over her shoulders, her obtusely orange hair frizzing on contact with it. Adonis glanced down at her feet to find them clothed in nothing but socks and sandals.

The Butte laughed— a rippling in the air— at the ridiculousness of his predicament. It liked having his attention.

Adonis, though unbothered by the cold, quickly turned on the pickup's sputtering heater.

“Where are we going?” Pepps asked, freckles standing out boldly on her pasty cheeks.

“You are dropping off food to Professor White.”

If it was possible, the girl grew even paler. Adonis wondered how white people didn't just fade away altogether.

“She's scary.”

“Only if you are easily scared.”

“I— I can't handle Minecraft in survival mode.” She gripped the plastic bag full of not-so-frozen food tighter to her chest.

“Fine.” The food needed to survive long enough for him to pull off whatever it was he was about to do, so when he pulled up to Professor White's neatly trimmed home, Adonis grabbed the bag off Pepps' lap and knocked on the door himself.

“Adonis, this is a surprise.” A fond smile pressed at the professor's lips as she leaned against the doorway, crossing her arms against the frigid air.

“Our generator broke. I hoped you would store these for us. As payment you can keep the ice cream.” The tubs of Ben & Jerry's were Joe's, and he owed them.

“Sounds fair.” Professor White daintily took the outstretched bag. “Wait here a moment.”

She returned a second later with a tidy pile of blankets and something hot wrapped in tinfoil.

“Stay warm!”

She watched as Adonis climbed back into the truck and drove off.

“See,” Adonis said as Pepps cloaked herself in one of the newly obtained blankets. “She is nice.”

Muffled words that sounded suspiciously like, “I guess” emanated from the passenger seat. Adonis half-smiled.

He dropped her off at the house with the blankets and kept the mystery snack for himself. By then he had the beginnings of a plan whispering through his skull. Adonis wasn’t sure if it was of his own making or if The Butte had put it there, but it was worth a shot.

Using the pretense of buying them all a warm meal, Adonis turned on the headlights, revved his engine, and took off into the twilight.

Adonis wondered where the best place to talk to The Butte would be. It talked to him quite a bit but talking back—making it listen—that was a whole other battle. Perhaps, if he just kept driving, he’d *feel* where to go, but even in his head it sounded wrong. He wasn’t in a fairytale; this was the real world, full of old gods and cryptids.

Perhaps he should...

Adonis’ watch ticked methodically against his skin, reminding him of its presence. No. Not yet. That wouldn’t help. He hadn’t intentionally used the watch since Aspen went missing, and, even then, it had led him astray. So, instead, he drove to the place everyone went when there was a blackout: the Guzzle & Go.

Even though it was dark and cold outside, the diner blazed like a bonfire. Adonis could feel the radiating heat even before the doors opened, pouring a river of voices, smells, light, and music into the azure night.

The place was packed. Booths were doubled up, all the counter stools were filled, and some customers even took to standing. To an outsider it may have seemed miserably crowded, but the place was frothing over with smiling faces and open arms. Even the wait staff didn’t seem to mind, effortlessly slipping under flailing arms and over—wait, was that a cat?

Adonis wove his way through the maze of bodies to the counter, where a smiling girl with braces took his to-go order and gave him a number slip. The #1 Food Of The Week on the blackboard read: Blackout Mud-Cakes.

Adonis couldn’t help but snort.

As he waited, he spotted the cat again. It slipped like a shadow under foot, but no one seemed to notice. It approached him with feline grace, and the watch at his wrist seemed to tick faster.

He crouched down and reached out his palm.

“Georgie!” A voice lilted through the din.

Two brown hands reached down and wrapped around the cat’s middle, lifting it into the air.

“Sorry about that! I was supposed to be watching her, but I got distracted.”

A beautiful woman held the cat to her chest. She was tall, made even more so by stiletto heels and a high ponytail.

“It’s fine,” he said at the exact same time someone cried out, “Number one-thirteen!”

“Here.” Adonis waved his order slip in the air– it was impossible to tell where the voice came from. The flood of people parted, making way for a man effortlessly carrying three too many to-go bags than realistic.

“Adon-is, right?”

“Adonis.”

“Ah, right. Here’s your order. Oh, I see you’ve met Georgie IV.”

Adonis could only nod as the man, with a smile as bright as the sun, piled bag upon bag into his arms.

“Sorry, George, she just slipped away so quickly,” said the woman.

“That’s alright, Viv.” He gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

The watch’s little heart beat frantically against Adonis’ skin. He looked between the couple and an idea sparked to life. He began wading towards the door.

“Hey buddy, do you want some help with that?” The sunshine-man called from behind him.

“No, thank you! You have been very helpful already.”

The shock of night air electrified him as Adonis made his way to the pickup and threw the food in the back seat. So what if it got cold? If his plan worked, they’d be able to microwave it all by the time he returned.

Adonis had settled in The Butte because it made him feel things. It broadcasted feeling to him every chance it got. Every person he met, every street he walked, bubbled with rivers of feeling. So, if he used that as his anchor to The Butte, then it would make a strange kind of sense that where Adonis had *felt* the most, would be the perfect place for him to return the favor.

The truck came to life beneath him, and Adonis set out for Main Street.

Downtown acted as the heart of The Butte; it was where strangers and friends were drawn on good and bad days. It was small in comparison to the arteries of massive cityscapes, but it thrummed with an unmistakable strength.

This is where things happened. This was where he first learned of Cascade College and decided to help it along with a few liberal donations. It was where he'd met Aspen in SweetTooth Bakery, and where his friends had all come to the decision to move in together over several too many drinks. It was where holidays were celebrated, and novelties were enjoyed. Where businesses were born, and dreams transformed into reality. He even recalled, thanks to Professor Smith's teachings, that a natural fissure ran straight down Main Street itself. Volcanic rock split by a river of shale, forming a seam.

That was where he'd be listened to. *That* was where he'd be heard.

Main Street itself was pitched black under a moonless night. All the lampposts and shops lining the road had been snuffed out, and anyone not at home was back at the Guzzle & Go. The heart of The Butte was all but abandoned.

Adonis turned the ignition key, killing the engine.

On instinct, he took hold of the tinfoil mystery Professor White had given him before he opened the truck door and clambered out into the quiet asphalt.

Under the influence of the blackout, the street emanated the same sort of energy as Cascade Library. Present. Aware. Waiting.

Uncertain, Adonis roamed into the road until his polished shoes glistened atop the center white lines.

Not having a better idea, he stood there, tinfoil clutched in hand, and asked The Butte, "Care to make a trade?"

A soft breeze played with the ends of his hair, but otherwise all was silent. Adonis hoped that it was a sign the town was willing to listen.

“I must ask that you give power back to us.”

The breeze turned into a gust, sending his jacket flapping.

“Because a week is far too long to keep your hopeless residents at a standstill. I beseech you.”

The air stopped moving. The Butte waited.

Adonis unwrapped the aluminum in hand, revealing homemade pita. Cold after some time, but still good. Fresh cracked salt and pepper flaked the top and filled his nose. A delicious gift in his humble opinion. Most places didn't need a feast, or a bloody sacrificial lamb, sometimes they just needed a little gift of appreciation.

He took a lighter out of his pocket and set the gift on the ground. With care, he set fire to the edge of the golden bread and watched as the sacrifice turned to ash.

But the town's lights did not flicker to life. The night remained untouched.

Running his fingers through his hair, Adonis let loose a shaky breath. If it didn't work, then it didn't count as interfering. He couldn't get sucked into a game with a *thing* that didn't want to play. That meant no deals gone wrong, banishments, no curses.

He was shifting his weight back onto his heels to leave when the watch stopped ticking.

It had never stopped. In all the decades he'd survived, in all the lands he'd wandered, the hands were never interrupted.

Adonis lifted his arm and simply stared.

The little onyx face didn't even twitch. It was a reminder not to waste the time he'd been given, and a curse to conjure all that had gone. The watch had rested at Adonis' wrist for almost two hundred years, and it had been charmed for nearly just as long.

How had The Butte done such a thing? Perhaps it wanted it as an offering.

“No. I will not give you that.”

The air around him gave an indignant shiver.

He sighed, “But I can give you a story.”

A pause.

“My story.”

For the space of a breath, the world did not move. Not even the distant stars flickered, and Adonis wondered if he’d misstepped. But as unmarked time continued, Adonis realized that The Butte had not forsaken him.

It listened.

So, Adonis took a seat in the center of Main Street and unraveled his history into words. He did not tell it from the beginning. Instead, he unspooled himself backwards, for the recent past was easier to grapple with. He made sure to fold feeling into it. That was only fair, of course, The Butte had given him so much to experience over the years and it was past time to return the kindness.

He nearly drowned in his own story. Adonis unfurled tears and rage and affection and passion so unchecked that there were times words failed him, but—as he could hear The Butte when no other could— The Butte could understand him too. And in the end, when he ran out of things to say, his well run dry, the ticking began again, and time resumed its proper course.

Wobbling, Adonis stood, collecting the soot-smearred tinfoil as he went; he’d done too much to let The Butte refuse him his favor just because of litter.

“What are you doing?”

Shakily, Adonis turned to find a woman striding towards him down the road.

“I didn’t expect to find anyone out here with this going on.” She gestured around her to the lights that still remained unlit.

Adonis shrugged. It was all he could do. He was too busy pulling the pieces of himself back together.

She drew closer but came to a flinching halt a few meters away; her eyes going wide. It was the wince that made him recognize her more than anything. The woman from the library.

Oh dear. Professor Smith must have told her about the natural rift. This was too coincidental. He couldn't have her poking around. He couldn't have her-

“You're not normal, are you?”

He'd just have to ignore her. Avoid the library for a week. Call in sick from classes. Disappear for a few days. She'd forget all about him. Adonis refused to leave this place. Which was ironic, since he promptly turned and began walking as quickly as possible back toward the pickup.

She didn't come after him, but her voice pitched wildly, “You sing. So strongly I can hardly bear it.”

He stopped in his tracks.

“Do you hear it?” She sounded so terribly frightened to be saying the words out loud. “The singing... can you hear it?”

Adonis wavered. Did he have the strength to lie after so much truth had been wrung from him?

He turned, hesitant.

“I know what you speak of.”

“You're like me?” Her relief visibly poured from her in waves. Poor woman. The Butte sighed around her, bracing her.

“No.”

She trembled, silver glistening in her eyes.

Alone. Adonis just told her she was alone. How cruel of him. He had to give her something. Anything.

The Butte whispered to him.

“I am not one of you,” Adonis said. “But I know someone who is.”

The stranger looked at him through unshed tears and smiled.

Back in the truck, Adonis drove to Cascade Corner. Towards home. The warmth of the takeout fogged up his windows and he imagined the grateful smiles he'd receive when he walked through the front door, food in arm. It would have to do.

The Butte had given him a name. An offering to the lonely woman. But it had not ended the blackout.

Maybe one blessing was all his story was good for.

Wait...

Rounding the crest of the Cascade Corner, a small spark appeared in the distance.

Adonis screeched the car to a stop.

Below, in a sea of night where The Butte lay its head, drops of light bloomed to life like flickering candles. One, after another, after another, after another.

An awed, unconscious smile overcame him.

Adonis' story had brought home the lights after all.

The Butte

Not everyone heard the singing.

But he did.

And he didn't call it that.

He called the diner Mischief, which only made it laugh in the old tongue. He called the cranky spirit of The Butte something less polite, but wholly accurate. And the singing had a name unto itself too: Friend. But he allowed the *things* in his life to name themselves. It was best to listen to folks wishes and respect their chosen names. It never gave him any trouble. Unlike the woman standing on his front stoop shouting...

“Roberta? Roberta Day?”

He never liked that name. The one his mother had called him was much better, and the name he'd taken after she'd gone fit him even better. He'd grown quite attached to the name folks called him around The Butte too, but *that* name by far was his least favorite, and this crazy lady was standing out in his front yard calling it over and over again.

He'd refused to answer the door when she'd knocked plain and simple. No one knew him by that name but those who brought trouble, and she was trouble.

His Friend didn't like her either, it twanged like a broken guitar string when he'd stretched out his mind. So, he wouldn't let her in. If she was from the state, he'd—

Lefty, who'd taken up position by the door, gave a sharp bleat. Her green little goat eyes followed the stranger through the window.

Something had apparently changed.

He rushed to the door. The day's business couldn't wait much longer. He'd half considered sneaking out the back and hoofing it through the neighbor's yards, but maybe it wouldn't come to that.

He scrunched up his face to peer through the peephole but couldn't see much of anything, so he joined Lefty at the window for a better look.

Right there, staring at both him and his goat, was the stranger, and she looked pissed.

He jerked back, but it was already too late.

There came a slow methodical knock on the door, and the whole house went haywire.

Enough was enough.

“Fine! Fine! I’m coming. Just stop all that racket!”

He threw open the door. Startling Lefty, who let out an indignant bleat and braced herself protectively before the threshold, causing the troublesome woman at the door to spook.

She was a young little thing. Well... young in comparison to him meaning she wasn’t grey yet and probably still had all her teeth. Short too; they stood eye to eye.

The stranger’s dark eyes went wide, and her hair flared out around her head like a crow’s wing.

“*You’re* Roberta?”

“You’re the stranger harassing my doorstep? You know I should have called my niece down here to rough you up. She’s built like a bear!”

“Look, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, but are you, Roberta Day?”

“No!”

“Then may I ask where—”

“Look kid, folks around here call me One-Handed-Bob so I must insist that you use that or my proper name from now on.”

“What is your proper name?”

“Well, if you don’t know, then I’m not telling you!”

“Sir, I’ve been looking for you.”

“Who sent you? I swear if —”

“No one sent me! A- a friend gave me your name. Said you could help me.”

“If they gave you that *name*, they are no friend of mine.”

His Friend splintered against the stranger's skin, shocking Lefty who then rammed her horns into the lady's knees, sending her back a few steps.

"Look, my source wasn't exactly official, I'll call you whatever you'd like but please, it took me weeks to track you down. At the very least I'd like to speak with you for a moment about—"

"I'm busy today. Come back never." He again tried to close the door on her, but Lefty was still standing right between them and she wasn't moving. Before he could call the goat back inside, the stranger saw him start to leave and cried, "No wait!"

A wave of his Friend -broken and forced- pushed its way over the threshold, slamming the door fully open.

They all stood there for a moment, blinking. One-Handed-Bob squinted accusatory at Lefty, but no green smoke tinged her coat.

His Friend rippled, shell-shocked around them.

"Now just what the hell do you think you're doing? Don't you know better than to use a Friend like that?"

"What?"

"Listen here lady, what you just did was very rude! Just because you can use my Friend doesn't mean it likes to be used. Just shameful! Now the whole block will be off kilter for days—"

"Wait, wait, please. This is why I'm here! You're like me. You can feel the singing, can't you? My friend said that Rob- you could help me. I don't know how to get rid of it."

"Get rid of it? Oh no, absolutely not. You see," He turned to address Lefty, not bothering to close the door as he grabbed his leather jacket and Stetson, "I told you I don't have time for this today. This is the last thing I need. A stranger with the gift. Understanding nothing. Well, I just won't do it. Too busy. Too old. No, I won't help."

He walked through the door and passed her, determined to leave. But the lady followed after him.

“Sir, I’m truly sorry for any offence I’ve caused to you and your goat, but I need your help. I was told you know about the singing.”

One-Handed-Bob laughed, “Is that what you call it? Well, it doesn’t like you, and for good reason. You’re the human version of constipation.”

“Excuse me?”

“You make my Friend uneasy, using it without permission, forcing it out of shape. I’m not inclined to like you much either, calling me the wrong name, messing with ‘the singing’ in my own home. You are a stranger, best make like one and leave.”

One-Handed-Bob made it all the way to the end of his yard before two things stopped him: his Friend and Lefty.

Though completely out of sorts, his Friend settled gently within his feet while Lefty braced herself in front of him, head in the perfect position for butting if he moved another step. It seemed like no one wanted him to get anything done today.

He sighed, put his hands on his hips, and turned around to face the stranger.

“What is it you want?”

After everything, she seemed hesitant to ever open up her mouth again. “I hoped... you could tell me how to stop it. The singing, that is.” She approached him carefully, making sure to maintain a respectful distance.

“It has bothered me since I was a child and the older I get, the more sensitive to it I become. I can’t drive, move, or do anything of importance without it disturbing me. Please, it’s more than a nuisance to me now, it makes me feel—it makes me feel like I’m being ripped to pieces.”

“Yes, I can see that.” And indeed, he could. His Friend flowed through the world like water, changing color and tenor with everything it passed through, but it bounced off the stranger, bending or breaking and flashing white in distress.

“I hate to tell you this kid, because I’d love for you to stop bothering me and my Friend, but you can’t get rid of it. And you never will.”

The look that came over her was one which had been carved into One-Handed-Bob's own wrinkled face after years: frustration, failure, a kind of exhaustion. Sister to pain.

Damn it all to hell.

"What's your name, kid?"

"Yuma Harra."

"Well, Yuma, do you have a ride?"

Five minutes later, they were both sitting in the back of a cab, listening to the giant driver yammer away about birds. One-Handed-Bob hadn't said a thing since giving them an address, and Yuma, after pounding away on his door for a half hour, had fallen quiet too, but maybe it was because of his Friend.

Pressure had built around her, white broken pieces collecting on Yuma's skin like shards of bone. He couldn't imagine it was comfortable for either of them.

Why did this woman have to fall into his lap today, of all days? It was such a horribly timed coincidence. One-Handed-Bob had a sneaking suspicion that The Butte had something to do with it. But it didn't matter now.

They pulled up to a soft pink house in the West Suburbs surrounded by lush rose bushes. For a March morning, the weather wasn't all too terrible. The sky appeared mostly grey, bearing signs that it could rain, but every now and again a bright cornflower-blue patch appeared overhead. Yuma had dressed smartly in boots and a jacket, and One-Handed-Bob hoped she wouldn't be too whiney if it started to drizzle. City dwellers were so soft.

He jumped from the car and made a beeline for the front of the house. The other passenger door opened behind him, but One-Handed-Bob didn't bother to turn around.

After knocking three times, he waited, hand in his pocket.

Just as clear sky cracked through the clouds overhead, Mrs. Narada opened the door.

“Oh hello! Is it a month gone already? How is *el pequeño demonio*?” She quickly whipped her dirt-dusted palms off on her gardening apron and gave him a swift hug.

“Lefty is doing alright, Janelle. We’re both doing just fine. Just here to pick up the usual.”

“You know, I’m so glad we’re still doing this. Thank you for appreciating my work. I’ll be right back!”

Mrs. Narada left the door open and disappeared back inside. The sweet, botanical smell that always permeated her home swept over One-Handed-Bob, making him smile.

He felt Yuma approach.

“What are we doing here?”

“I’m collecting some flowers.”

“May I ask why?”

“You may, but I won’t tell you.” He hesitated, then added, “but you may ask me questions about my Friend.”

“The singing?”

He loosed a sigh that resonated deep in his ribs. “Yes, ‘the singing.’”

She went silent, thinking. They could hear Mrs. Narada humming as she rummaged around her house.

“What exactly is the singing? I know how it makes me feel, but what is it?”

“It is a Friend.” He felt Yuma tense, but he let her stew for a moment before continuing, “Think of the world as a river. There is an energy running through it that lives and breathes.” He tried to describe how it passed through everyone and everything. And that some folk could feel it and play in its currents, *if* it’s wishes aligned with their own.

Before Yuma could reply, Mrs. Narada reappeared at the door holding a small potted plant; a short green stalk shooting out towards the sky with several delicate leaves attached, no flower in sight.

One-Handed-Bob took it gingerly from her with a “thank you,” tucking it in the crook of his left arm and proceeded to hand her an envelope of cash with his good hand.

“Now Bob, you know I don’t need your money. I’m satisfied knowing we’re doing some good.”

“Then you’ll be happy to hear that this isn’t my money, Janelle. Besides, we need to keep this operation running long as we can, and the way I see it, the best way to do that is to keep you funded.”

“Okay, fine. But no more than the amount we discussed.”

One-Handed-Bob only winked at her and turned away before Janelle could inquire about the stranger at her door.

Yuma followed shortly after, trotting back to the car as One-Handed-Bob gave the cabbie a new address.

They sat in the back as the taxi away pulled from the curb.

Yuma lowered her voice, “If you’re using us for a ride today, does that mean you usually *walk* across town for that?”

“Yep, this is really saving some time. I usually hobble around getting these things, then ask someone for a lift.”

“Why don’t you have a car?”

“Why would I when most everything I need is in walking distance? And I don’t want anything to do with the nasty business of cars and gas. Sure, I’d get places faster, but at what cost?”

Yuma lowered her voice even further. “So, what’s the—”

One-Handed-Bob held up his good hand to stop her. “If you’re not comfortable talking about the singing with others present, you’d better wait, because I’m not inclined to whisper, nor to leaning so close to someone littered with debris.”

She blew out a breath and muttered about him talking in riddles, and he hooted, “If you think I’m full of riddles, I wonder that you’re not dumbfounded by your very existence. You’re the weirdo in this car, kid.”

They pulled into the Guzzle & Go’s parking lot, and One-Handed-Bob jumped out with the plant before the car finished rolling to a stop.

With an energy that had no right existing in a man his age, One-Handed-Bob greeted Mischief at its doors and waited for them to blow open themselves before stepping in. It was always best to be invited into a place before entering it.

Oil Burners sat packed —shoulder to shoulder— in the booths, chowing down on the best breakfast The Butte had to offer. The place overflowed with the smell of cinnamon, coffee, and fries, making One-Handed-Bob lick his lips.

He greeted George Arno Bright III with a smile and, as always, his full name. The host seemed surprised to see him.

The man peeled off his apron and came out from behind the counter to give One-Handed-Bob a bearhug. It looked like he just finished up his shift.

“Well, you’re here early! I’m just finishing up. My shift ran late. We’re a bit busy at the moment, and totally understaffed, but there’s an open seat down at the end there. I’ll be right back.”

One-Handed-Bob took a stool at the counter’s end, an unnatural chill curling down his spine. Shaking it off, he placed the plant before him, keeping what few fingers he had on the pot.

The bell above the diner doors rang, and Yuma’s disturbance filled the room. She took the red leather stool right next to him and ordered coffee from a passing waitress.

George Arno Bright III returned out of uniform, strapping in a nice sweater and jeans. One-Handed-Bob suspected the good Dr. Tamura had bought both for him.

He’d carried with him a to-go bag filled with the diner’s own compost concoction.

“I’ve been saving this up for a month and I think this is the best eggshell soup we’ve ever made! Oh, is that the little guy?”

“Yep. It's a bit of a runt, but I'm sure your stuff will work wonders on it.”

“Well, normally I'd have Viv drive you to the trailhead since she's not at the clinic today. But I'm just about done here, so I can take you!”

One-Handed-Bob loved him dearly, he really did, but George Arno Bright III ran himself ragged with kindness. He was the biggest ‘yes-man’ One-Handed-Bob had ever met, and it was wearing the young man out. Even his beautiful curls looked a bit frazzled.

So, it was a relief to say, “That's very kind of you, but I've actually got myself a ride this morning.”

“Oh, well that explains how you made it here before noon. Hey—” George Arno Bright III gave One-Handed-Bob one of his dimpled smiles. “I know Hobbes isn't exactly the best source of information...”

One-Handed-Bob snorted. “He isn't exactly the best source of anything.”

“You may be right, but he came in here at the crack of dawn talking about that not-deer again, and about how Jodie took off after it with the gun. Could you do me a favor and give her a call before hitting the trail? I know it's morning and all but...”

One-Handed-Bob waved him off.

“All right, I'll do it. But you better catch yourself from becoming a worry-wart like Hobbes or you'll be insufferable.”

“Just looking out for my favorite old man.” George Arno Bright III set the compost bag next to the plant and gave One-Handed-Bob a pat on the shoulder before heading out into the grey light of day.

Beside him, Yuma sipped on her coffee, her hair billowing as though perpetually electrified.

“You should really just let our Friend in, and that hair problem will stop,” One-Handed-Bob said while rummaging for his phone.

“Excuse me?” Her voice was scathing, but he had already dialed Jodie and held the phone up to his ear, listening as the other line rang to no avail.

At the beep, he left a short message, reminding her that it was planting day, and that George Arno Bright III had asked him to call.

When he finished, the questions began.

“What kind of language was that?”

“What kind of language was what?”

She rolled her eyes and took a sip. “So, the singing...” One-Handed-Bob sought pity from the universe in the ceiling tiles. “You obviously feel no pain from it. Why does it like you and not me?”

“Like you? It doesn’t even know you!”

“Know me?”

“Yeah, kid. Your hair, the discomfort you’ve got going on under your skin, it’s because you’ve got some kind of block.” He sighed, dragging a hand down his face. “No one teaches you poor kids anything anymore. No wonder you feel all beaten up.”

“Do you take pleasure in making absolutely no sense? Didn’t you decide to help me?”

“I said no such thing.”

Her nostrils flared, and he got the feeling that if she had any true sway with his Friend, Yuma would have tried some shenanigans by now.

“Look. You’ve caught me on a very important day, and I’m very old. I only got one kind of way of talking, so if you want good answers, ask some good questions, but don’t get all ticked when you don’t like my response, especially when you’re bothering me at work.”

“At work?”

“I’m not too fond of repeating myself, kid.”

“And I’m not too fond of having my leg pulled.”

“No one is pulling anything. But you need to stop having unrealistic expectations about things making sense. They don’t. My Friend doesn’t. The Butte doesn’t. And I certainly won’t.”

“You talk like The Butte is separate from the singing.”

“Ah, now you’re using that big brain of yours.”

One-Handed-Bob hooked the compost-bag on his arm, curled the plant to his chest, and headed for the door.

After a moment, Yuma trailed after him.

She was hard-headed— maybe as hard-headed as himself— but that was good. Maybe she'd actually learn something.

He gave the cabbie their next location as they turned off onto the highway, and they drove a few minutes south before pulling off onto a patch of gravel. The trailhead was marked by a sign painted with an image of a hiker and could be seen winding for a few yards before disappearing into the lofty fir and cedar trees. Spring rains had saturated the forest, and new growth made the world glow green around them.

When One-Handed-Bob stepped from the vehicle, the smell of impending rain filled his nose.

Yuma leaned into the front seat and asked the cabbie to come find them if they didn't return in an hour.

One-Handed-Bob poked his head back inside the car.

“Make that four hours, kid. I'm old and we've got things to do.” Then he shut the door with his foot.

When Yuma caught up with him at the beginning of the trailhead, he handed her the compost bag, its red Guzzle & Go lettering smiling out from the plastic.

“What are we doing here?”

“We are going for a walk.”

“Are we planting something?”

One-Handed-Bob looked slowly between the bag and the plant. “It looks that way, doesn't it?” Then he began walking.

He didn't know what Yuma thought of the trail— didn't know what she thought of hiking in general, especially with how heavily the broken shards of his Friend clung to her. But for the first few minutes of walking, she remained quiet.

One-Handed-Bob listened as the birds chirped overhead, and the trees — older and taller than humpback whales— stretched out before them in a curtain of pine.

There were dozens of trailheads circling The Butte. Some known; others yet to be discovered. He supposed that, if one really put their mind to it, they could find several trails that connected to create one giant (confusing) path around town. He also supposed that a person would become lost in the process.

The trail they followed wound up further into the foothills towards the mountains. The ground was soft and collected the impression of Yuma and One-Handed-Bob's footprints as they walked. They would pass many more obviously marked trail heads and have to jump a few streams before they got there, but if they moved steadily, they'd make it back before supper. There would be no spectacular views for Yuma to gawk at on this trail, they were already far from The Butte and they wouldn't venture high enough to catch a glimpse of anything other than underbrush.

One-Handed-Bob glanced at his phone one last time to see if Jodie had called. They wouldn't have service soon, and he told Yuma so as he watched the final cell bar disappear.

"You know, normally hiking into a strange forest with an obviously unhinged man would scare me, but you're so old I think I'd be able to outrun you."

Her bluntness took One-Handed-Bob by surprise, and he let out a booming laugh, sending several robins flying.

"You know," he wheezed, "I think I'm beginning to like you."

"Sorry I can't say the same."

He let out another hoot.

They walked a few more minutes, and One-Handed-Bob could feel Yuma's mind churning fast. The forest had a way of doing that; quieting everything that wasn't important, making you think. That's why he loved it. When Jodie was little, he'd take her out here and teach her everything he knew, from the sap of the pine to the roots of hemlocks.

When the sky started to darken with storm clouds overhead, he decided she'd thought enough.

“Listen, kid. I know I’m not easy to talk to, and I know you’ve got questions. But you’ve stuck with me this long. So ask, and if I can answer I will, just don’t twist yourself into knots if you don’t like the answers.”

Yuma took a few seconds to respond, which One-Handed-Bob took as a good sign. Hopefully it meant she wouldn’t waste his time with stupid questions.

“If it’s true The Butte is separate from the singing, then what is it?”

“Ah, it’s just a spirit. Powerful, but a spirit, nonetheless. Can’t do much but cause problems and piss me off.”

“I don’t believe in spirits.”

One-Handed-Bob stopped in his tracks.

“You’re telling me you interact with the singing, but don’t believe in spirits? That you are able to throw doors open with words, and track me down after I burned my dead name from this world, after I successfully avoided government intervention for years, and you don’t believe in spirits? I thought you were smarter than that.”

He started off again at a quick pace.

“Fine then!” She called after him, jogging to catch up. “Whose spirit is it then?”

“Kid, spirits aren’t always people.” One-Handed-Bob then went on to describe The Butte as the essence of a place, of land and culture. He told Yuma that the singing existed long before The Butte, but the flow of energy helped the spirit along. How it didn’t just pop out of the ground one day fully formed, it built itself into creation, and was filled with memory and experiences.

“Just like you or I,” he said. “Now it just inhabits town and the surrounding area, causing trouble”

“I’m not sure that makes sense.”

“Kid, *you* don’t make sense.”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t know what you mean.”

One-Handed-Bob let out a long-suffering sigh as they made their way up a particularly steep incline littered with tree roots.

“That’s not your fault. It’s not like the gift is hereditary, your folks wouldn’t have known. We are few and far between. I *assume* because you were never taught about it or felt comfortable with the strange sensation, your body developed a block to it. Like how trauma can block memory. But that’s not healthy. For you or my Friend.”

“Your friend is hurting me, not the other way around.”

“Wrong!” The incline flattened out again and One-Handed-Bob took the opportunity to set down the plant and stretch out his back.

Yuma put her hands on her hips, causing the bag to swing against her side with the sound of old eggshells cracking.

“Hey, careful with that! Can’t have it splitting, or we’re gonna’ have a longer day than either of us want.”

“What even is this stuff? And why do you keep telling me I’m wrong? I know what I’m experiencing!”

“That, my dear, is compost, and *you* are the cause of your own suffering.”

Yuma held the bag a bit further from her body, her brows scrunched so tightly together, they created one thin line across her forehead.

“You’re going to give yourself wrinkles if you keep pulling that face. I should know. Come on.” He picked the pot up again. “Let’s keep moving.”

One-Handed-Bob couldn’t see much of the rolling black sky through the canopy, but all at once the clouds above darkened. Spring days could change their moods in a minute if they had a mind. For all he knew, by the time they finished, they’d have to shed their jackets so as not to overheat.

“How can I be the cause of my own pain?” Yuma finally asked from behind, and though One-Handed-Bob couldn’t see her face, he was sure she scowled. His Friend grew stronger the further they traveled.

“That is one of the better questions you’ve asked me today.”

“So?”

“So, you tell me! You’re here to learn.”

“But you haven’t told me anything really important.”

“Then you haven't been listening.” One-Handed-Bob turned around to wink at her and saw the white, warped shards of his Friend clinging an inch thick to her skin and hair. He shook his head. He'd never be able to talk her through all of it, she'd have to do most of the work herself.

He let them walk in silence for several minutes. It was probably the longest the woman had gone without asking a question, and it made One-Handed-Bob antsy as anything.

Finally, he stopped them before another incline and handed her a bottle of water he'd stowed away.

As he used his Stetson to fan his face, he said, “Got any ideas yet?”

“A few.”

“Want to share with the class?”

She took a swig and handed it back to him, then looked up as if studying the trees.

“You say that the singing is like a river of energy running through everything.”

One-Handed-Bob nodded her on.

“You also said I'm blocking it because I can feel it. You also feel it, but you're not in pain. The only difference between us is that you let it in, and I don't.”

“Congratulations.” One-Handed-Bob stuffed the water back into his pocket and led the way over another hill. “You have the deduction skills of a third grader.”

“Does that mean I'm wrong?” She called after him.

“No, no. You're right. And you've built up resistance to it, as well as your own nature. You are supposed to let it flow through you. You are currently a rock that my Friend breaks itself upon. You disrupt the flow of energy, and the broken stuff attaches itself to you quite aggressively. You're just covered in it!”

“Wait. You can see it? You can see the singing.”

“Yeah, kid. And you can too, eventually, if you work *with* it instead of against it. Maybe one day you'll even have the honor of learning its name. But for

now, don't try using my Friend against its will. You just end up causing more damage than anything. My house won't feel the same for a week."

"And you're sure there is no way to stop it." Her voice sounded small, but One-Handed-Bob couldn't give her the answer she so obviously craved.

"No. It is just who we are."

They walked the rest of the way in silence. His Friend in the forest became thick vibrant rivers of color and texture. The trees thinned, thickened, then thinned again until they reached a crossroads. The path they followed split, but instead of choosing one or the other, One-Handed-Bob walked straight into the green veil of trees, leaving Yuma no choice but to follow.

Several yards into the forest, the world gave way all at once to a flat clearing. An enormous glade where a flat-topped, steep-sided tower of rock rose tall as the evergreens.

Yuma gave a high-pitched yelp when she left the trees, dropping the compost and clutching at her head.

"What the hell!" She fell to her knees and promptly threw up all the water she'd drank.

One-Handed-Bob just kept walking further into the clearing, offering only words for comfort. "This is where my Friend is the strongest. It will also be the easiest place to let it in! Focus on one part of the singing and let yourself give way to it."

He placed the plant at the base of the grey, stone obelisk and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

One-Handed-Bob knew he was stubborn. He also knew he liked stubborn folks. But he had the wisdom that came with age to know that there was such a thing as too stubborn. The kind of stubborn that got someone hurt.

The woman's hair floated in the air like a witch. She was not relaxing but tensing like she heard nothing he'd said. One-Handed-Bob watched as her narrow black eyes streamed with tears, staining her face crimson.

After a minute of Yuma going on like this, One-Handed-Bob walked back over to the edge of the clearing where she crouched.

Making sure to give her space, he leaned down and said, “Call on the names of things. Look there—” He made sure her eyes followed his finger towards the eroded pillar before them, still a massive wall earth despite the centuries of wear and tear. “Ask it its name. Go on. Names have power. Ask. And *listen.*”

For a second, he thought she wouldn't do as he said and wondered how difficult it would be to pull her out of the meadow. But then she abruptly relaxed.

Her hands dropped away from her ears, and One-Handed-Bob saw, with more than a bit of satisfaction, a sheet of broken energy fall away and a sliver of purple energy slowly —gently— begin to flow through her. The broken parts of his Friend weren't all gone, but it looked like for the first time since he'd met Yuma, perhaps for the first time in her life, she'd let their Friend in.

“What's its name, kid?”

“The Butte,” she said, eyes glassy. Then she pointed to where he'd gestured, at the seemingly random tower of stone. “What is that?”

One-Handed-Bob laughed. “You just said it, kid! That's a real-life butte! Come on, let me help you up.”

Yuma gave him her arm and he helped her stand. The knees of her jeans were stained black where they'd sunk into the rich soil.

“You'll be alright now, just get used to the feeling. It's nice right? Feels natural?”

“Yeah,” she murmured. “This wasn't on any of the maps.”

“Excuse me?”

“I— I've been doing research on The Butte. Trying to find out what makes it tick. I thought the name was just a gross mislabeling, some idiots not knowing what a butte really looked like. But here's one just miles from town.”

“Well, there's more than just one,” One-Handed-Bob said, taking off his hat and scratching the top of his head. “There are thirteen of them scattered all along this flat up here. Must have had some serious glacier work going on back in

the day. If we kept on walking, there would be twelve more tucked out of the way, hidden by trees. Our town's best-kept secret, and trust me that's saying something."

He picked up the compost bag and walked back where the plant sat. Yuma's eyes stayed glued to the protruding stone so much that One-Handed-Bob called out, "Watch your step."

Yuma barely stopped herself from treading on what looked to be a flower. She looked around again, realizing that there were hundreds surrounding the butte. All with pretty heart-shaped leaves, a long flute-like stem, and bespeckled with clusters of little purple flowers.

"What are these?"

"This is my project. It's also why the singing is so strong here. It likes them."

"Because of flowers?"

One-Handed-Bob straightened his shoulders in indignation.

"Because of *special* flowers."

"Why does the singing like them?"

One-Handed-Bob kneeled, removing a small trowel from another one of his pockets and started digging where he'd set the plant. A light rain began to fall, which made digging a bit easier. The water was a soft patter on the brim of his cap as he worked.

"Years ago, I started a project to return the land home. The singing has always existed and radiated through The Butte, but this is a natural reservoir for my Friend to gather in before wandering back out into the world. I've found, over the decades, that returning things back to the way they were strengthens them. I see this as my job. As mayor, I have to take care of this place best I can, given what folks have done to it. These flowers here are endangered, but indigenous to the land."

Yuma just blinked at him, long and hard, then shuddered as if she'd gone through a terrible shock.

“Wait a minute. *Wait a minute.* You’re the mayor! *You’re* the guy who ran on the platform of ‘Let’s Stay Alive’? The guy who won two decades ago and hasn’t lost a race since because no one else wants the job? You’re the guy I’ve looked high and low for, but everyone claimed you didn’t exist? The mayor that closes town on holidays? You’re the man,” she laughed then, near hysterical, “that managed to convince all of The Butte to participate in the Land Back movement? You? *You!*”

He kept digging while the rain fell with a vengeance.

“Come help me with the compost, kid.”

Yuma did as asked.

One-Handed-Bob directed her to spread the eggshells and herbs in a circle rimming the inside of the hole. Then, with one wrinkled palm, One-Handed-Bob deftly transplanted the flower, and finished by guiding the soil back into place around it.

“This was the best way to help my people and this place get back to their roots. Make us all strong again. And I succeeded.” He scowled. “For the most part. The damn college didn’t participate.”

“You’re amazing,” Yuma said and the appreciation in her voice startled him.

“Now don’t you go soft on me. I’m still the asshole you know and hate.”

“An amazing asshole.” Her mouth opened as she came to another realization. “So, everyone is in on it?”

“Not everyone, but everyone important.” One-Handed-Bob had her sprinkle the remaining compost around the flower’s resting place, then he used the rest of his bottled water to rinse her hands off despite Yuma insisting this was unnecessary, considering the torrential downpour.

“Thank you,” she said as they got to their feet. “Thank you for your help.”

“Now look at me, kid. This is not gonna’ be an easy process, and it’s not a one-off sort of thing. It’s going to take work to let our Friend flow through you after all these years. It’s going to take some old-fashioned practice.”

“I understand.”

One-Handed-Bob studied Yuma through the rain, surrounded by the swirling energy.

“Yes, I believe you do.”

They began picking their way around the flowers, heading towards the edge of the forest. They were halfway across the clearing when a shadow moved to block their path.

One-Handed-Bob snatched Yuma's jacket and hauled her away from the tree line.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

He dragged her until both their backs hit the butte. Water snaked down the massive stone and into their collars.

“I forgot to mention something very important. Or you forgot to ask something important. Either way, there is something you are unaware of and I have willingly ignored.”

“And what is that?” Yuma shivered.

“If we can feel the power of the singing, what else can?”

His voice seemed to reverberate through the rain-streaked glade.

The shadow moved again, then stepped out from the trees.

“It’s just a deer.” Yuma said, but it came out as a whisper. Her arm tensed under One-Handed-Bob’s grasp.

“That,” he said, weakly, “is no deer.”

The *thing* tilted its head to one side, as if listening to their conversation, which of course was impossible, but didn’t make it any less true.

One leg coming disjointedly after another, it took step after methodical step forward. Stalking closer and closer.

This was not the first time One-Handed-Bob had witnessed the creature, but never had he seen one venture into daylight.

It was partially his fault. The Butte had always been a beacon for things which attracted or fed off of his Friend. But he wanted to mend things. The plants, the rights of ownership— it strengthened everything. The risk had been worth the

reward, but it seemed like One-Handed-Bob and poor Yuma were about to pay the price.

The *thing's* joints *rippled*.

Yuma's grip on One-Handed-Bob tightened even further. "We have to run."

He wouldn't make it. He was too old, but maybe if they both ran, it would take him down first. And she'd get away.

It shouldn't be out during daylight, not even with the sun hidden behind the clouds.

Nevertheless, there it was, creeping toward them.

Its eyes were locked on One-Handed-Bob, but, to his relief, it studiously avoided the flowers.

The wind picked up, sending the rain sideways, and the not-deer decided it was done pretending. On powerful, trembling joints, it rose up on its hind legs like a man.

Then, in an act more horrible than One-Handed-Bob could have imagined, the *thing* peeled back its lips and smiled.

Not everyone heard the singing, but they did.

One-Handed-Bob and Yuma were not the strongest, fastest, and definitely not the bravest people to face down the *thing* in front of them. Hell, they didn't even have a weapon.

But they did have a Friend.

The singing danced through the rain, jumping from droplet to droplet in a brilliant blue light. Unbothered.

Yuma made to run, but One-Handed-Bob anchored her in place.

"You'll never make it. And it's time I taught you a little something that folks like us can do."

The whites of Yuma's eyes were bright, her nose flaring and fear quaking her body, but she held herself in place.

The *thing* took its time circling them, probably waiting for a chase.

“Now, kid. If you could crack that door inside you a bit wider that would be great, but if you can’t, we’ll make do. Remember how I told you to ask this big rock here its name? Well, names have power. Hell, all words have power, but it helps to have a name. It’s how I manipulate the world around me. So, what we’re gonna’ do is ask the singing to tell us that *thing’s* name, alright?”

She didn’t respond, just continued staring at the creature. One-Handed-Bob waited until he saw the little stream of energy trickling through her widen, then he began to mutter in the old language, cajoling his Friend.

The blue dancing sparks paused, listening, then began to flow closer to the beast.

Still smiling with needle-like teeth, the not-deer paused not three yards away from them, sensing a shift in energy.

On hind legs in the pouring rain, the *thing* loomed over them, reeking of wet animal and rotting meat.

Yuma and One-Handed-Bob clung to each other, shaking, blinking the water from their eyes as best they could.

The *thing* bent it’s too-long neck at an unnatural angle and leaned towards them, waiting for one or both to run.

They pressed themselves flush against the butte, stone digging hard into their spines.

One-Handed-Bob’s lips wobbled as he asked his Friend for help, his face wrinkled in concentration.

The blue light flickered in the downpour, shining brighter, and for a moment One-Handed-Bob thought he heard a whisper.

The not-deer froze.

Then it all fell to pieces.

His Friend dimmed.

The whispering stopped.

And the *thing* lunged.

One-Handed-Bob and Yuma threw themselves out of the way, but the not-deer moved fast and sank its jaws into the old man's shoulder.

Pain exploded down One-Handed-Bob's body, breaking any and all concentration he'd maintained on the singing.

He could only stare into the white, sharp eyes of the hunter about to eat him raw.

Without warning, the singing erupted around them.

One-Handed-Bob lay prone in the mud, slicked in rain and his own blood.

He'd fallen and the creature only clung harder, jaws grinding against his shoulder blade. But in its haste, it had made a mistake.

Crushed beneath one of its hooves were the remnants of a purple flower, its petals scattered and broken.

His Friend roared to life, but before Yuma or One-Handed-Bob could do anything, a warrior's cry sounded.

Jodie, ax in hand, came out of the tree line, followed by a shotgun-wielding Bushes.

Bushes fired a warning shot, scaring the not-deer off One-Handed-Bob.

The *thing* contorted its horrible head towards the newcomers.

It stood tall as two men, but Jodie didn't hesitate.

She threw her ax, hitting it directly in the shoulder, and it loosed a high, awful shriek, stumbling with the force of the blow.

But it did not fall.

Instead, the *thing* zeroed in on her, the ax still stuck deep in its body.

"Bushes!" Jodie cried, and a volley of gunshots rang out.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five shots rang out before the not-deer turned tail and dashed into the woods, its strange screams echoing amongst the trees.

By the time Jodie and Bushes reached One-Handed-Bob, Yuma was applying pressure to the bite.

“He’s going to be ok!” Yuma told Jodie as the woman knelt beside him.

One-Handed-Bob choked out a cackle, which ended in a gasp. “I think I’m gonna’ need a round of rabies shots.”

“Shut up old man.” Jodie said, taking over for Yuma at his shoulder.

“What were you thinking?”

“It was planting day,” One-Handed-Bob muttered, head rolling to one side. They did a shoddy job of patching him up, but it would do until they reached the clinic.

Jodie instructed Bushes and Yuma to get him on his feet, then slung his good arm over her shoulder.

The rain stopped, but by that point they were so all so soaked and coated in muck that it didn’t matter much when an island of blue sky appeared overhead.

Upright, One-Handed-Bob could finally see the dozen or so trampled plants. “The flowers, Jodie. Our poor flowers.”

“You’re lucky it was the flowers and not you who are gone. The Naradas will grow more, don’t you worry about it.”

They trudged into the woods, leaving the butte to stand in its clearing. Alone again, as it was meant to be.

One-Handed-Bob continued to use Jodie for support while they made their way through the woods and down the trailhead.

“Have I ever told you you’re the best niece I could have asked for?”

“I better be. I wasted an ax saving your sorry life.”

He laughed again, but after the soft sound petered out, they walked in silence, listening to the creature’s sporadic, piercing screams echo through the woods behind them.

No one talked to One-Handed-Bob until he received thirty-one stitches and a pint of blood. He'd complained the entire time that it was the dayshift, not Dr. Tamura, fixing him up.

She came anyway. They all did. Vivian Tamura, George Arno Bright III, Janelle Narada, even Mrs. Cobb came to call, bringing food, blankets, and whisky.

Dr. Tamura had blown through the office doors in three-inch heels and immediately made her way back to the patent's rooms. George Arno Bright III trailed after her but took a seat with Yuma and the rest of them, handing out hot coffee and warm words. Mrs. Narada and Cobb shared stories with her about all the other times One-Handed-Bob had landed himself in the clinic.

The sheriff had come sniffing around, taking reports and asking questions. But Yuma was the Editor-and-Chief of inquests, and she spun a story so convincing and long winded that by the time she was finished, Jodie and Bushes' lackluster (and suspicious) responses were a non-issue.

It was hours before they were done fussing over him, and another hour after that before Yuma was allowed into his room.

The first thing One-Handed-Bob said to Yuma when she peaked into his room was, "Did you learn something?"

"You tell me." Yuma sat gingerly on the edge of his bed.

Through the white dust of disrupted energy sticking to her, he spotted a little lavender-tinted river, running through Yuma's chest.

"I guess I'm not a half bad teacher." One-Handed-Bob's voice was gruff, and in that moment, he felt as old as he looked. "So, now what are you going to do?"

"To be honest with you, I don't know. This is still new to me."

He pursed his lips together, thinking, and said, "It seems to me, you have your pick of the litter. You could go on as you once were, being your disruptive self. You could leave, and continue working on your lonesome, or—" he paused and glanced down at his lap. "Or you could stay."

"Pardon?"

“You could stay. Learn from me. I’m getting old, and while Jodie understands what I’m doing, she doesn’t have the gift like us. I could train you, kid. You could learn more about what you are, and you could look after this place once I’m gone.”

“That’s a lot to ask.”

“I know.”

“To uproot my life, find a new job.”

One-Handed-Bob raised his silver eyebrows suggestively. “Well, it helps that you know the Mayor now, doesn’t it? I hear he knows a lot about The Butte and is pretty good at finding folks work.”

That made her smile.

“I’ll think about it.”

“You do that.”

She got up and headed for the door, but before she left, he said, “Yuma. Not everyone hears the singing. Not everyone knows what we do, what we experience. But you’ll always have a place here, in The Butte, whenever you need it.”

And in that moment, they both knew it to be true.

Afterward

“The Butte” is a collection of short stories about a small town in the Pacific Northwest. In these short stories I explore idealistic small-town culture and blend it with the Pacific Northwest’s own (modern) paranormal mythology. This medley of different genre aspects in my stories makes The Butte difficult to label, but ultimately, my goal while writing was to explore various styles and points of view.

The nine stories set in The Butte shift styles on a variety of levels from character switching, point of view (1st person, 3rd person, and omniscient), and formatting (structure and linguistics). These tales focus on ordinary people dealing with the extra-ordinary. Each character is either working to find a place in their community or already has an important role in the lives of the people around them. It was important for me to find the people in small towns we take for granted or overlook and give them all a little adventure.

As I continued to write, I fell in love with the community I created. This fascination drew me to explore new characters, and ultimately allowed me to imbue the paranormal folklore of the Pacific Northwest into my own personal experience with small town life. I wrote these short stories by blending two parallel cultures I admire, but rarely see converge. The Pacific Northwest has always been labeled a weird but charming place, and these tales are meant to highlight that.

This is not the end of The Butte. I see this collection as a beginning, merely the first group of stories to be told. There are more characters and elements to be explored, a promise of greater and stranger things than I could have hoped to imagine, and so while these pages must close, The Butte is not done yet.

Dedication & Acknowledgments

I would like to dedicate this piece of work to my sisters, Jordan and Aspen, for always pushing me to come up with better stories. To my dad, Wayne, for supporting me throughout my whole life and through this tremendous endeavor. And to Simone who took the time over the past year to edit all my work and create beautiful maps highlighting the fictional town of The Butte. I love you all and could not have accomplished all this without your love, talent, and kindness.