

# The Reeling

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Synopsis: A man recounts the metamorphosis of his fiancée  
and the collapse of his world into one of High Strangeness

*Look at me oh look at me, is this the way I'll always be? Oh no, oh no. - Passion Pit*

# Part I - The Upheaval

The fire consumed Macy, and I could only watch.

Not flames of heat, though the invisible blaze burned away her old flesh all the same. Gone was the smooth skin I caressed, the arms I embraced, and the lips I kissed. All replaced by a form able to meet the challenge of a collapsing rational world, the old magick seeping through fresh cracks to make sure that mankind's memories lived on, one twisted way or another. The artist might consider it beautiful, the scientist too for that matter. But I didn't see beauty, all I saw was the woman of my dreams taken away from me... when she didn't want to go. I saw no beauty in that crimson and cream pelt that emerged along her flanks, racing across her throat and meeting with her frazzled hair. I saw no beauty in the twisting and crunching of her body into the form of a vixen, human limbs rendered to beastly proportions. I only feared that she was gone, taken by the Upheaval at last like so many others.

But when she walked up to my crouching, sobbing form, when she nuzzled against my face, her cold nose pressed against my tear-streaked cheek, I realized her mind lived on, gazing back from behind fox eyes. Our journey

wasn't over, not yet.

I didn't care what form she'd been forced into by the High Strangeness, I still loved her, I'd still do *anything* to protect her... to keep her safe from the cruelty of a world that defied its own established rules, of a world that no longer made any sense. Yes, that became my new duty, my sole purpose, one that provided direction through a torrent of madness. My insurance salesman visage melted away, the 9-5 grind cast aside, a survivalist awakened in its stead, a man who faced the shifting energies of a reborn world.

Together we pressed on.

The Upheaval first arrived late in the night, beyond the witching hour. I remembered it being around Daylight Savings, that much I knew... but whether it was *fall back* or *spring ahead* I could not say for certain. Those early weeks were a blur, a fast merry-go-round that you couldn't get off no matter how much you screamed, flailed, tried to ground yourself in reality. Instead you got to watch colors beyond reality, of seeping madness, the breakdown of order...

and for the adaptive and ambitious, this moment heralded the arrival of new opportunities. But I didn't want to adapt, I didn't want to change. I only wanted to protect my significant other.

Macy changed about three days after we left New York City for The West. Together we managed to cross the Mississippi before it froze over. Whole thing ice solid, one congruent block that rested upon endless mud. Middle of summer too, flash freeze. The River Queen still traversed it, slipping through as if the river continued to ripple and flow just as before, though the great steamship is itself now pure ice... translucent but ornate. I wasn't there to see the big chill myself, but a man in Shermantown later showed me pictures. Pilgrimage, he called it, one's duty to see the icy queen. Whatever. She apparently floated through the cracking ice sheet, just along the riverbank. Paddlesteamer had an entire crew of vintage 1880s snowmen clad in coal tar top hats smoking makeshift pipes lining her decks, each waving with little wooden arms toward those milling about the frozen docks. Again, I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen the pictures.

We headed further west, we had to... our minds couldn't process turning back... only the beacon of safe California was on our minds. I, the man with the tame vixen on his shoulder, wandered along asphalt paths filled by tropical

flowers that didn't belong. Environments and weather contorted with each step I took, different biomes rising and falling within a single afternoon. If the extreme temperature shifts weren't so grating, the picturesque scenes would be holy, heavenly even.

But I suffered under those seasons, the prospect of escape a powerful motivator to push forward.

As we carried on, Macy and I formed our little communication game, of trying to translate between human words and assorted fox noises. She gave her growls and yips, to answer each of my questions with her own vocal inflections beyond simple headshakes for 'yes' and 'no'. I never quite figured her out though, she'd get too complex on me.

Macy still looked human in my dreams, though she never said anything new. Every time she showed up, I only relived memories. Good memories, though, memories of us enjoying each other's company, each other's time. I still remembered her old voice, too.

"Do you think the world can get any weirder?" Macy flipped through

news channels while waiting for me to finish my tie. A fancy dinner date, finally attended after weeks of scheduling conflicts. Just me and her, reigniting our relationship over a Michelin star. I thought of going for two, but my wallet could only take so much abuse.

“On the contrary, I think the world is getting more normal. We’re only getting better at amplifying the weird. The old strange is dying out, now we have to go digging for our fix of the paranormal.”

“You’d be a real bore on one of those podcasts... those late night radio programs.”

“I could call into Coast-to-Coast AM and concoct some alien fiasco for a laugh. I really could.” I slipped into my evening jacket, keys already clinking and jingling in my pocket.

“I don’t know, I think they’re pretty good at detecting when someone is dangling a fantasy in front of their eyes.” Macy slipped up against me, her hands focused on adjusting my tie. I could never quite get it to her liking.

“Unfortunately, I don’t think I agree. I think there’s a sincerity to the art

that cannot be subverted or else you lose the magic of the program. Like, think about it, they have to get people to call in. The attention isn't always positive. There's a backlash, though. Nobody wants to be viewed as crazy, and the cash-in from money can't make up for a ruined reputation."

"I'd still try to tell my story."

"*Cascadia Gambling Hall and Resort! Open now! Vacation packages are-*" The TV managed to sputter an ad before Macy walked back over to the couch, seized the remote, and silenced it.

"Vacation would be nice, no? A quick beach weekend." My eyes still watched the muted advertisement.

"Commercial jingle got you thinking?" Macy rolled her eyes and grabbed her purse.

"I'm easy to win over. Plus I've never been to the Pacific Northwest."

"It's wet."

We stepped out into the night, an overpriced feast waiting for us... one that would likely segue into fiddling through curated Netflix recommendations as we cuddled, debate growing as we struggled to compromise on what to watch. There was a certain predictability to it all, a pattern to the mundane nature of our lives.

Oh how I now missed it.

“I wish we’d get a little excitement. Honestly. That would be rich.” Macy whispered in my ear as I clutched her close after we’d returned from our haute cuisine spending spree. “Like we could have a good dinner, but then there would be an alien invasion or Atlantis itself would rise from the depths-”

“Disney’s or Plato’s?”

“Plato’s”

“Rise from the depths off of New Jersey?”

“Straight from the continental shelf, Greek columns reaching to the clouds, sea salt drying on marble altars, stone priestesses awakening to bow before the throne-”

“I didn’t know you gave this so much thought.”

“I can be clever when I want to be. Though I’d totally ham it up like that one real estate guru’s commercials, that John Darcy guy.”



“Oh God, I can already hear the jingle. Well here’s an invisible toast to High Strangeness.” I gave her shoulders a little squeeze and she trembled and pressed closer against me on the couch.

“How is *that* a toast!?”

“Do you want me to get some wine?”

“No, no. You’re silly, that’s all.” Her fingers drifted through my hair, she *always* liked petting me whenever she could get away with it. “So silly.”

“So comedy night then?” My thumb quickly browsed through Netflix, hopping between genre bars in anticipation of Macy’s decision. Her word was always final, no ifs or buts. But her superior taste always triumphed over my own if we butted heads.

“No, no. Let’s watch something strange. Weird. Horrifying. Not comedy, not Disney’s Atlantis.”

“Alien invasion it is then.”

“Something found footage and low-effort. Something we can mock while eating popcorn.”

“Deal.”

“I like how the alien looks like a Spirit Halloween costume, though I’ll give them credit that the makeup is at least upper-rack.” Macy quickly reminded me that I had my own MST3K substitute sitting next to me.

“They don’t know that what makes found footage work is how little you *do* see, makes it feel more impromptu, more real.” Before my very eyes the onscreen alien attempted to charge the camera, floppy rubber limbs flailing around as the lead actor screamed at the xenomorph-knockoff.

“They really don’t. Those poor, poor indie filmmakers.” Macy shoveled another handful of popcorn into her mouth.

“At least the distributor got them a Netflix deal.”

“What a big break, oh my God!”

“I bet we could make a better film.”

“Oh absolutely, we can totally make a hit found footage movie without any prior experience.” Macy booped me on the tip of my nose, her little *gotcha* maneuver.

“That’s talent!”

“Yeah that’s talent alright... though if I had the ability to actually start a film project, I would want it to be something weirder than aliens, beautiful almost.”

“Such as?”

“Like someone who stumbles into heaven... only to find that it isn’t the pearly gates the protagonist was conditioned to believe... and they have to travel through all these different layers.”

“Sounds a bit like a modified Dante’s Inferno, traveling through the

afterlife part.”

“It’s only an idea... you could have all sorts of different Gods and spirits... ooh and maybe the villain will be another human who stumbled in and decided to *change* things, like heaven wasn’t *good* enough for them so they start ripping it apart--”

“I would see that movie. Maybe I’d even like it.” I smirked as the alien onscreen was finally defeated by the final girl.

“Our lives could always be more weird. There’s only so much tedium and Netflix nights you can tolerate.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll go on an adventure soon.”

What a foolish line of thought. At least it didn’t take long for us to realize our error, that the adventure of a new world *wasn’t fun*. We hit the ground running, not in dress shoes but lockstep hiking boots and paws.

During another reality shift, the depths of the humid mid-western summer cracked and yielded to a cold front straight out of the arctic, the kind of cold that seeped into your bones. No threat of dying, I found that out quickly as my hands went numb, but frostbite never came. A night of misery, that’s all it was, I’d weathered them before.

Macy curled up against me, but we didn't have a blanket anymore. She wasn't freezing, not with that heavy fluffy pelt, but she knew I was, and she did her best to help me through the night. In truth, I wished I had a pile of Macy to sink under to keep the chill off.

She winced at each of my trembled chills, like I was trying to shake off a fever. Macy wanted to help me cast off the exposure and fight the unexpected winter.

What would I do without her?

"I'll be okay by morning." I sank my hands into her fur and clutched her tight, the numbness fading for an instant as her warmth seeped into my numb fingertips. "I promise."

The next day we stumbled across a derelict Ford F-150 with half a tank of gas sitting in a divot beside a back road. As luck would have it, the keys were resting on the passenger seat, and soon we shot off toward the horizon. The engine screamed at us the entire time, no doubt why the vehicle had been ditched, but putting up with the noise was better than walking.

## Part II - Morganville

Near Kansas City, Kansas... not Missouri... I watched as a great dragon erupted, translucent wings spread wide, out of chemtrails misting from behind a black-painted 747. The creature's body grew larger and larger as the fog trickled down to earth like a broken shooting star; it became quickly apparent that the creature was still learning how to fly. Eventually those ethereal wings hardened into a hundred thousand interlocking crystals, glass chainmail that clinked and cracked, emerging at odd angles from the fog of its torso. The chemical dragon cast no shadow, but as the great reptile passed overhead I felt my eyes sting, and Macy coughed and pawed at her sniffing nose.

The dragon swooped down miles ahead of us, and though it was gone by the time we reached its point of landing, we saw the aftermath of men and women turned to hissing and snarling human-sized dragons that flapped and fought over scraps of food. While they preferred to roar, sometimes they slipped back into human curses and complaints.

“Pretty nasty business.” A lone ruby-scaled dragoness clad in shredded business casual attire landed beside our struggling F-150. “Everyone barely gets along and then all hell breaks loose.”

“We saw the beast form in the sky--”

“Ay, we saw it coming. Didn't matter with how fast it hit.” The dragoness

bowed her head, magnificent ivory horns flexing in the afternoon sunlight.

“Guess I’m stuck like this now.”

Macy gave a little chittering yelp, a sound of agreement and understanding. Macy got a raw deal though, this dragon might be monstrous and inhuman but she could **fly** and **speak**, two useful skills even in the apocalypse.

I was always at a loss of what to say in these situations. Should I have claimed to understand? That somehow I empathized when I still couldn’t understand what these transformed individuals **went** through? I didn’t even know how Macy truly felt about losing her human shape, and I’d known her for years. Sure most of these other changed individuals could talk and explain themselves but-

Did Macy and I have the time to stop, listen, and learn? If we did, would The West elude us forever?

I regretted my choice soon after, the more that I thought about how I said my condolences and left the dragoness in the dust by pressing the accelerator on a truck about to quit on us. Macy didn’t seem mad at me, or maybe she hid it well behind those stoic, glimmering eyes. But what I did was

still wrong.

I vowed that next time I would stop to talk, stop to listen, and stop to learn something for a change. Surely I would get more opportunities, right? As dark as that thought was, it struck at the truth of the path I walked. Times **had** gotten stranger, far more bizarre. There would be more transformed faces, mutated and stretched into forms both natural and supernatural, waiting for us along the way.

With the entire world gone mad, and each stop more insane than the last, what were ten minutes of human understanding?

When the F-150 finally quit on us, we stole a Jeep from a dealership in the suburbs of Kansas City, society had broken down enough that the public lots were unguarded enough for a man and his fox to pick a lock and hotwire a transmission before being noticed. From there, we continued further out west... toward the coast. That was the only sense we could make of things, that maybe we could escape the Glamour... the High Strangeness... that if we



pushed the pedal down far enough, get the car going fast enough, that we could exceed whatever miasma cloaked us, changed us. 70 mph turns to 80... then 90... but Macy still stuck her head out the window, tongue lolling as she enjoyed the splendor of the Great Plains. I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it too, letting my arm hang down to the door handle, wind rippling through my fingers. We flew down that highway so fast that I thought at times we'd take off, a plane cutting through the air, bound for parts unknown. Heh, maybe our dust would turn people into dragons... or armadillos.

The faceless men stopped us at a tollbooth roadblock near the edge of West Kansas, a shaky creaking wooden plank serving as the station gate. Each wore the same pair of jeans and pine green button-up, tucked with a diamond-patterned brown belt. Some leaned against parked SUVs... a few stood beside the gate... one sat cross-armed behind the glass windowpane of the toll station. Where their faces should be, there was the Glamour and High Strangeness, alternating tiles of pure white and pitch black. Occasionally from out of the empty faces came a vortex of kaleidoscope insect eyes, peering at me and Macy with intent and accusation.

“You must destroy the Old Gods.” They all spoke in unison, gesturing for me to step out of the Jeep. Several had AR-15s trained on my chest and

face. One pointed a .357 magnum revolver at Macy. “The existence of old reverence, old symbols, that is our pain. All statues must fall before the New Gospel of the Grand Dodecahedron. Swirling and turning, the new sun... Do you reject the old ways?”

“I don’t know what the old ways even are, friend. I’m trying to make it west.” I kept my hands firmly on the steering wheel, white-knuckle as I weighed my options.

“That fox... was once human.” The faceless man turned his attention to Macy. “She was once yours... yes... I can see her as she was, as she is, and what she will never be again.”

I tried my hardest to hold it together, as I’d been thinking the madness of High Strangeness could be laughed off, even Macy’s transformation... everything had a cure in the end... right? But with those guns pointed at me, by men and women without faces, I realized that I’d driven deeper into the eruption, that reality didn’t have *any* consistent rules anymore... High Strangeness permeated beyond a shift of the physical, it directly impacted conversations, thoughts, identity...

High Strangeness was *dangerous*.

“I’m not getting out of this car.”

“Yes you are.” More kaleidoscope eyes emerged from the man’s absent face, bulging diamonds that stretched and distorted each other, crowding out insect eyes, compound and busy... staring me down as the screwfly lusted after rotting flesh.

Macy didn’t say the words, but I interpreted her growl as *Gun It...* which maybe in hindsight was stupid, but that reflex saved our skins the moment I slammed down the pedal. Despite their inhumanity, their distortion... none of the faceless ones fired at us. Maybe we weren’t worth the ammo... maybe they thought they could get us later... The Jeep smashed through the wooden gate, the plank tearing into pieces as we picked up speed. My heart pounded in my chest, I felt the pressure, the roar of the engine... Macy yelped again, sharing my terror.

Against my better judgment and with my foot still lead on the accelerator, I glanced up at the rearview mirror, a wide panorama of the empty plains behind me stretching for miles...

They were gone, the entire roadblock... SUVs and tollbooth... as if they’d never existed at all, a walking mirage. No faceless men in green shirts and jeans stood around, and... more importantly... no aimed gunshots pierced the Jeep’s wide windows. Macy looked back too, after she saw my relief and felt the car

start to slow. She gave a little yip of approval, a happy, pleased noise. A victory to celebrate, for sure, albeit not one either of us expected.

As for the faceless men... I hoped we never have to see them again.

If only we were so lucky.

We pulled off the interstate to fuel up at a truck shop. Judging by all the other cars parked or idling around the complex, we weren't the only ones who needed to top off the tank. Both Macy and I were fully on edge, my hands balled into fists as if more faceless men might emerge from thin air and pin me down... drag me into High Strangeness, make me join their swirling, empty, soul-sucking void. As if they might make me one of them... a form worse than crawling around as a beast... maintaining human speech but lacking actual humanity...

I didn't think I could survive without my identity... without knowing my name.

Several men and women, luckily this time with faces, waved at us once I pulled up to the pump. Their leader quickly introduced himself, he sported a name tag that says Gustavo but he insisted on being called Gus. Dressed for construction, all of them were, with hard hats and working boots, Gus started the discussion of our arrival in earnest. Trusting but fearful, that's the vibe I suspected because of their eyes and that was the vibe I confirmed from their words.

“Have you been getting a lot of traffic through here?”

“Yes, surprisingly enough. Arteries of the country are still flowing.” Gus smiled and offered me a bottle of water, a kindness that I accepted, though I gave the first laps to a thirsty Macy.

“We ran into a roadblock set up by these... things.”

“Oh the faceless ones, they come and go with the dust devils... swirls of wind carry them too and fro... bad luck to meet them on the road.”

“I felt lucky to get away.”

“Ay, you were. They'd be apt to make you one of them... cast the missus here into the plains with nary a chance of survival and... well you wouldn't even care at that point, you'd be serving the infinite.”

Macy's paws dug into my collar as she curled around my neck, balancing comfort and protection. She wanted to be close to me, always by my side. I felt

the same pull, albeit mixed with a tinge of guilt that I couldn't yet save her from her fate, that I had to speak for her because words were still denied to her.

“The faceless are called Iconoclasts. They destroy symbols that they think are holding humanity back from embracing the weird... from embracing irrationality...” A woman, whose name I later found out was Meredith, clutched a shotgun as she stared at the empty stretch of road behind us.

“And they simply come and go out of thin air?”

“Sometimes, yes. But they live in Xanadu Station, another truck shop about fifteen miles west of here... near the abandoned town of Swedenborgia.”

My mind raced to ponder their origins. Perhaps a twister formed, tore through the settlement... conjured winds stronger than anything formed by nature. Or perhaps the earth itself opened up, a fissure from which the faceless horrors crawled into existence and consumed the town. Or perhaps-

“The town depopulated over the years, totally emptied by the farms getting gobbled up by a land developer for some botched strip mall. A sad story... common story on the Great Plains, I'm afraid.”

“Are we safe from the faceless men here?” I didn't even ask if we were welcome to stay. I only assumed it. A stupid thing to do when rules stopped mattering, when social interaction broke down.

Luckily it didn't matter.

“You can both shelter here as long as you like, you and your fox-”

“Her name is Macy, and she was once human. The Glamour swirled around her, casting her into this form. Just... so you know...” My hand instinctively cupped the side of Macy’s whiskered muzzle, my fingers sinking into her soft pelt. Her agitation and fear abated as my touch calmed her down.

If I could trust these people, so could Macy. Nothing to fear.

“So you’re looking for a cure?”

By now the crowd around us dispersed back to their daily tasks, a community erected around dueling truck stops... one of good-natured folk and the other a beacon of faceless madness.

“That would be nice, very nice. But for now, I’m only looking to get to the Pacific.”

“Why?”

*To outrun the Strangeness* didn’t seem like the most sensible answer, especially when reality had only grown more distorted the farther we traveled. The Mississippi might be frozen over, but there were no faceless Iconoclasts wandering around its banks when we crossed it.

“Feels like the right thing to do. And Macy hasn’t complained yet so... I’m letting her serve as my navigator.”

“Yeah the foxes can sense the magnetic fields... animals, er... pardon my expression.” Gus gave an awkward laugh, cupped a firm yet friendly hand on my shoulder. “We’re all tired and trying to make ends meet here... no

offense.”

“Apologize to Macy, not me!” I braced myself for Macy’s playful bite at my neck, her bite gentle but teeth still sharp enough to leave enough of a sting to get her point across.

“She’s a feisty one, heh. Glad to see she’s still in control of her faculties... still got a human mind.”

I glanced down at Macy still perched on my shoulder, her slitted eyes rolling at the compliment.

*Still got a human mind.* That others could weather her fate and not be so lucky... dreadful... or maybe a blessing in disguise... that they wouldn’t *know* what they’ve lost.

We walked into the Morganville complex itself and found it was still very much a truck stop, albeit one looted of any extravagance and instead covered head to toe with necessary supplies... the rows of convenience items replaced by stockpiled rifles, canisters of clean water and gasoline, stacked MREs, and several bubble-wrapped portraits of the Founding Fathers.

“We have to resist the High Strangeness... the Iconoclasts... scavengers... but we don’t turn away people who are honest, people who have needs.”

“If we’re going to stay here, I want to help out. It’s the least I can do.”

“We could use an extra set of hands to help with some fortification



projects... if you don't mind exchanging labor for shelter... then we don't mind at all."

That was how I ended up helping Gus install thin steel plates around Morganville's skylights.

"Someone could lob grenades through." Gus' reasoning wasn't **wrong** per say, but that wouldn't have been my first **concern** about reinforcing a gas station.

"Wouldn't they have to get close to do that...?"

"Son, if the iconoclasts showed up with a stolen news helicopter, I wouldn't be surprised. Reality... doesn't make sense... the threats against honest folk... don't make sense... like all these people out here across the plains and deserts building these lavish casinos and shopping malls... not realizing that there can only be one Vegas."

So the steel plates made sense... until the helicopter became a tank... a train that didn't need tracks to race across the plains... a tsunami of boiling molasses inching closer... because there were no more rules. Anything could happen at **any** time, and there was **no** place to run, no place to hide across the endless flat expanse of grassland.

"What do **you** think caused the High Strangeness?"

"If you asked me a few weeks ago... I would have said divine

intervention... divine punishment.” Gus took off his work gloves and wiped sweat off his wrinkled forehead.

“But what about now?”

“A lot of people have wandered along this road... and one of them worked as a doctor... he told me about a place further on west... in the Cascades... where there’s this facility.”

“Facility?”

“Supposedly military-industrial... he said all sorts of brilliant men and women were gathering there for years to work on top secret projects.” Gus slipped back into his gloves and moved onto the next plate.

A secret government conspiracy. Of course, right? That was exactly what it had to be in the end. Nothing spiritual, simply humans unleashing some undiscovered force of the universe.

“Was he really a doctor...?”

“Looked and talked the part. When you’ve interacted with so many faces over the years as I have... you get good at discerning the liars. He was being truthful, or... rather... he believed what he was telling me because he was headed there himself. Said a wealthy benefactor was dumping money into the project.”

“I see.”

The topic died while we finished the rest of the roof, and I thought that

was the end of it until Gus stopped me near the ladder down.

“The doctor wrote down the coordinates for me. I can give them to you... maybe they can help your wife.”

She wasn't my wife, she was **going to be...** but we never crossed that bridge.

“Yeah... maybe they can. Does this secret facility have a name?”

“Parsons.”

We finished the reinforcements on the roof only to immediately jump to piling makeshift sandbags in front of the auxiliary doors. Where employees once crossed for smoke breaks now stood an impenetrable wall of sod and clay. The fortification made me think of old pictures of Civil War trenches, earth behind planks, propped up by weary men leaning heavy with their percussion rifles.

“It's not easy work, but thank you.” Gus dabbed away the sweat collecting on his forehead.

Macy watched us from atop the column of sand, her slitted eyes following my toil with an *at least I don't have to do that* glee. She's taken the role of my vulpine cheerleader, her shadow always matching mine as I walked beside the improvised wall.

“Of course, anything to keep the faceless ones out.” I tapped my foot

against the lowest sandbag.

Would it hold? Did I want to be here to find out?

Gus gave me a playful smack on the shoulder. “Ay. I only wish there was an easier way of protecting this place that didn’t make me feel like an animal.”

The residents of Morganville metamorphosed into werewolves about a week after our arrival. Happened during a town meeting too, when new resolutions and **battle plans** against the Iconoclasts’ Xanadu Station were being drawn. The gathering started with Gus up on the podium, speaking to the assembled masses... pretty much the whole town was in attendance. Nobody ever told me it was mandatory, but with the boring pace of the typical day I wouldn’t blame people for finding *civic spirit* in trying times. When he cried out in pain, several townsfolk, myself included, must have thought he was having a heart attack.

Turns out it was a very different medical emergency.

Then they saw the bristling gray and white fur erupt from under his clothing, watching the crunching and bending of his bones as his body

reshaped into a lupine form. His leering amber eyes stretched wide in fear, rage, and anguish. The transformation spread too, soon others clawed at themselves with hands halfway to being thick canine paws.

The metamorphoses were far more violent affairs than Macy's more mystical transformation. Her body bent and remolded, but that vulpine shift was a match struck against sandpaper. Fast, painless, and over before she even realized what had happened to her. This transformation was *different*, all the agonies of old flesh becoming new shown directly to close friends who get to watch their familiar faces get twisted and morphed into beastly snarling muzzles, black lips and vicious fangs dripping fresh saliva.

**“YOU. YOU DID THIS. YOU MUST WORK FOR THEM. YOU’RE DOING THIS SO THEY’LL TAKE YOUR FACE.”** Gus’ distorted voice snarled out from between glistening, razor-sharp teeth. His amber eyes now held a feral glint. **“I SEE IT NOW.”**

“Gus, wait. I didn’t have anything to do with this-”

**“LIAR.”** Gus stumbled toward us upon unsteady paws. His human thumbs reduced to canine dew claws scraped uselessly against the linoleum floor as he shuffled forward and slipped out of the tattered remnants of his construction boots. His hardhat drooped to the side, one pointy ear flecked

up. The sight was almost comical, or it would have been if the shifting pack didn't close in from all directions. Even beyond the assembly hall's double doors, I heard more howling and tearing. All of Morganville was changing. The High Strangeness finally arrived.

Before the pack lunged at me, Macy sprinted forward, her own teeth bared. She snarled and screamed at Gus, enough to make Morganville's leader pause in his advance. But despite her diminutive size versus the full-grown wolf, Macy pressed forward until her vulpine fangs were inches from Gus' wolfish incisors.

"He probably changed you too, eh?" Gus hissed at Macy, his hardhat finally tumbling down off his broad skull with a clatter. "Being around him probably ripped your soul straight out."

"Maybe she works for the faceless ones too! Some demonic familiar! That's why she can't talk!" Meredith, now a shewolf and shotgun-free, barked from behind Gus. "They're all in on it!"

Even surrounded, they didn't press closer.

"Please." I shook my head. "This has to be a misunderstanding, I didn't-

"THEN WHY ARE YOU STILL HUMAN!?" Gus snapped his head

upward, glowing amber eyes beaming straight at me. His primal fury burned right through my cowering form, my skin as paper as I feel the wolves salivate not out of hunger, but out of hatred. Any fatherly kindness was gone, replaced by a seething jealousy. I supposed that maybe if the roles were reversed, I might feel the same way... but I couldn't see myself turning so violent so quickly. "WHY ARE YOU THE ONLY ONE WHO HASN'T CHANGED?"

Maybe in a different headspace I would have fumbled my way through a proper explanation, trying to reason with the furious pack. But in that moment all I cared about was *escape*. Lunging forward, I scooped up Macy, who gave a surprised yelp as I clutched her against my chest, and I rushed toward the meeting hall doors, bursting through them shoulder first. They must not have wanted me that badly, for they didn't give chase.

As soon as I got outside, a barrage erupted from the distant midnight plains, rockets shooting up in the air and arcing toward me. Sprinting for the Jeep, I craned my neck to catch the trajectory as those missiles soared straight toward Morganville's reinforced roof. The explosions weren't substantial, I didn't get thrown to my knees or anything, but the warheads were incendiary and the fire immediately spread.

Holding Macy close, I hustled to the Jeep and immediately locked the doors once we were safe inside. Not bothering with the headlights, I jammed my key in the ignition and turned... and turned... and turned... all to no avail. The engine wouldn't start, instead the car's transmission churned and huffed.

“**Betrayer! Betrayer! Corrupter! Betrayer!**” The howls of the Morganville wolves were only slightly muffled by the Jeep's thin cabin. They circled around the burning truckstop, prancing and dancing with an animal finesse, each movement deliberate... though their attention was scattered by panic from the inferno triggering ingrained animal instincts coupled with the rush of having their humanity stripped away.

Just beyond the asphalt, where Morganville yielded to the great plains, the faceless Iconoclasts stood shoulder-to-shoulder, hair and clothing unmoved by the evening winds. The assembled legion shifted from watching the wolves to watching me while my hand frantically twisted the Jeep's ignition. The engine groaned, the grinding of metal accelerating in tandem with the beating of my heart.

Even fighting the ignition, I couldn't take my eyes off the Iconoclasts, not when they all slowly raised their hands and clapped in perfect synchrony. The



applause, cut short by the wailing of the wolves, celebrated the cracking of Morganville as the building's foundation began to buckle under the intense flames. Then Macy screamed. I jumped to attention, snapping my head toward her. She had her paws up on the dashboard, near the glovebox, and kept yelling with her head pointed forward, toward something unseen in the darkness.

With a roar that mixed with Macy's terrified cries, the engine finally churned to life. The screeching was soon joined by the click of Jeep's high beams and my own 'Dear God' moment as I stared face-to-face with a monstrosity that made the snarling werewolves and legions of iconoclasts look like a cheap jumpscare in a horror film, unearned terror rather than true horror. Shock rather than deep revulsion.

The malformed figure loomed as a shadow against the backdrop of a 747 painted an impossible black. How the plane landed without a runway strip wasn't my first concern, nor that the aircraft closely resembled the one we saw releasing the dragon over Kansas City. No. All Macy and I cared about was the gangly misshapen carcass standing upon two legs, exposed deer skull adorned with a vintage WWII bombardier's cap. Eyes burning as fiery coals let us know its true intentions, as did the fanged smile that jutted from the corners of a herbivore's withered bony jaw.

The creature strode up to the driver-side window and tapped a long claw against the glass. Merely a little pitter-patter at first, then the cracking started... the fissures that met and encouraged each other to spread.

Macy's low growl continued even as the window shattered, my hands immediately flung up to shield my eyes from the slashes that were sure to come and-

"You just could have opened the door. Would have been easier." The creature's voice was calm yet authoritative... and unmistakably female. "I hate that I had to do that to a perfectly good Jeep."

"P-please don't hurt us-" I begged the living deer skull. "Please!"

"Hurt you?! What, simply because I'm an unholy abomination that means I'm automatically out to do you harm? Look, I think the regular old *living* animal kingdom has your numbers, folks." The creature's bony eyebrows lifted as she gestured for us to follow her away from the warring wolves and faceless Iconoclasts.

The werewolves bellowed a piercing howl that forced my eyes to glance at the rearview mirror just in time to witness the carnage unfolding as the

Iconoclasts marched on the burning Morganville station. Bracing myself, and keeping Macy firmly clutched in my arms, I got out of the car and followed the bony apparition. To keep pace into the night, I had to hustle and trust that my feet weren't going to slip into a stray prairie dog hole leaving me sprained or broken. Luckily, no such accident came my way, only a growing revelation that I was following this strange corpse-deer into parts unknown.

“Land is flat enough to land without *too* many issues.” Pride resounded in the creature's voice as she waited for us by unfurled stairs leading into the jet's cargo bay. “It's bumpy, of course, but I have yet to die.”

Macy gave a sarcastic yip in response, the kind of remark that said ‘yeah, maybe you’. That the rotting abomination didn't fear death was par for the course, but maybe she *could* die. What even were the rules anymore?

“Pardon me but, what are you?”

“Wendigo, spirit of the hungry wind.” The pilot almost seemed proud of that fact.

“Are you hungry?”

“I'm hungry for adventure, yeah. And also meat, flesh... I've got cravings, friend. But that's not important.”

“But you aren’t going to kill us if we step aboard your airplane?”

“You’re not very trusting.” The wendigo already started climbing the stairs, a shrug in those burly shoulders to show her disinterest. “Guess I could leave you here.”

Macy snapped her head back toward the distant glow and hissed, her fur bristling. Whatever forces drew near, faceless legion or hungry pack, hid from my comparatively dull human senses.

“Okay, fine. But you can fly anywhere, right?” My hand grasped the railing of the stairs, my body already making the decision for me. Facing the vengeful wolves or finding out how the Iconoclasts absorbed new members weren’t high on my list of priorities.

“I haven’t had to refuel since I first started flying, guess reality cracking can have *some* perks.” By now the wendigo dipped inside the plane, Macy and I hot on her deer-toed heels.

“But to really answer your question, I’ll fly you both to Klamath Falls. I can’t cross the Cascades.” The wendigo stopped me at the final step. “So if that’s a dealbreaker, we’ll have to work out an alternative.”

“No, that’s fine, but why?” The question was more about why *Klamath Falls* and not going over the mountains, but that nuance was lost on the

antlered pilot.

“I simply can’t.” The wendigo broke into another toothy grin, one that slowly closed as tears well in her burning eyes. “I can’t fly over the wall. I’m bound, baby. Prevented from seeing the Pacific Ocean. Prevented from dipping my toes into the surf, my lost husband holding my hand... Prevented from living and loving life, baby. My world is dead and rotting. I think that’s why I look like this, actually. It’s a cosmic joke, but at least I’ve still got a purpose to serve.”

“This plane, we saw it over Kansas City. There was a dragon--”

“Oh that thing. You know how in shows and movies there’s usually a glowing red button that you press as a last resort? Well I was curious and curiosity killed the cat, or, erm, did anyone die from that?” Her vicious claws scraped at what velvet is left on her dried antlers, an *aww shucks* moment from an abomination, though admittedly a kind one.

“Not that I could tell. They changed, became draconic.” We’d only witnessed the aftermath of the yearning dragons struggling to take flight, most still clad in stretched or tattered cloth. “Some took flight, others sat upon the

ground in confusion. I don't think most people ever expect to become monsters."

"Makes sense. I certainly didn't expect to see this face in the mirror that morning." The wendigo adjusted her bomber cap, its leather flaps now hanging over the empty holes where ears *should* have been. "So are we going to fly or what?"

"You're the one blocking the door."

"Oh! Right! Ha!" Her massive form leapt aside. "Welcome aboard!"

The plane contained liminal space, its metal cargo hold providing not only seating for passengers and room for long-haul mail, but an interlaced labyrinth of felt-straps that restrained movement just as well as they held parcels.

"Was an international mail-carrier... flight-log listed every city you could imagine. Even ones you can't!" Our monstrous pilot arched her back, a bony hump protruding through her dusting of rotten fur, her muscular arms stretching out wide between several remaining crates, each marked in languages I didn't recognize.

Macy fidgeted on my shoulder, agitated by the corridors that feel cramped despite the curved ceiling that should let us breathe. Her frazzled brush beat against the back of my neck, her claws dug through my shirt collar, and her subtle whines in my ear weren't lost on our monstrous host.

“There's nothing to fear.” The wendigo cracked her bony neck, fresh vertebrae poking through the thin leathery skin of her back. “This plane is well-constructed... and touched by High Strangeness. That much I can assure you. It's been painted by weird, and because of that this plane *soars* beyond where any plane should.”

“Is it still affected by turbulence?”

“Oh yes. Buckle up.” The crunching of bone forced into a smile and the glow of deep-set yellow eyes clashed with the humorous tone in her voice. This was all a game to her. Sure she claimed her tragedies, but with that bombardier cap and loose aviator goggles, clearly there was an underlying parody. A flying beastly corpse, a monster that shouldn't be able to draw breath, and yet the wendigo lunged with intent, talon-claws raking off the plane's metal floor, and ripped open the cockpit door to get to the controls.

Macy groaned first, but I soon understood her concerns.

“But that's facing the opposite wing, not the front-”

“Direction can be tricky. So fickle, really. This plane isn't arranged like

normal planes, never has been. We steer facing the wing. Now, do you want to ride in the cockpit or would you like to strap yourself in the cargo hold? Either is fine with me, but we gotta follow safety protocol otherwise I might lose you.”

I didn't like how she emphasized the word *lose*. Ulterior motive or withheld knowledge, such a vibe was what I gleaned from those words. Macy, for her part in all this, glared at the wendigo. She didn't bare her teeth, but I could feel her trembling across my shoulder.

“Alrighty then, let's fly.” The wendigo grinned with her distorted teeth, ruminant enamel not given the chance to grind down upon grass over years.

On dark wings we left behind the burning Morganville, the ongoing clash of faceless man and man-turned-beast below as we turned our path toward the facility in the hills. *Parsons*, assuming Gus wasn't pulling my leg with some conspiracy theory. The idea sounded like one, I confided in Macy, but she merely looked back at me with slitted eyes that said *go* and I knew there was no more discussion to be had. We needed answers, we needed direction, and westward laid our path.



## Part III - The Parsons Facility

For as terrifying as the Wendigo's face had been during the fall of Morganville, her meticulously handled flightpath was remarkably smooth. Macy even dozed off while I made small talk with our monstrous pilot.

“Are you familiar with a place called *Parsons*? A laboratory?”

“A place? No. A person? Yes.” The wendigo pressed a button on a small square box resting on the cockpit floor. A small bubbling noise preceded a burst of steam and coffee dipping into a foam cup, one that was quickly snatched up by a bony hand and nearly crushed as she downed the brew through her patchwork throat.

“Maybe they're related.” My hand ran along a sleeping Macy's back, her

little snores and grunts making me smile. She was dreaming about a chase, likely, with her little black-socked feet tensing and kicking lightly against my shirt.

“It’s possible. Are you familiar with the story of Jack Parsons?”

“Can’t say that I am.”

“It’s a sad story, about a man who dreamed about the stars, but died before he could reach them.”

“I see.”

“It’s also the story of a man who was also obsessed with the supernatural, wanting to see God that he tried to summon the devil.”

Now that was more in line with the way the world was headed. Great, a ‘scientific’ facility named after an occultist, if it was real then it was surely corrupted by this same madness... hell, maybe they even started this mess. The news never sussed out an origin point before society collapsed.

“Did he meet God?”

“He wandered into a storm tunnel and called upon a great Lady of Babylon, a Queen Goddess. Then he died under mysterious circumstances years later.”

“As these dabblers in the mystic arts tend to do.”

“His end was rather... explosive...” The wendigo shrugged and pressed a few keys on her control panel. “But it’s a similar fate for all those who dabble

in the arcane. They either burn out and die, or fall into a pattern of grifting. I used to listen to Coast-to-Coast AM back when I was first training as a pilot. Helped with the long nights.”

“Nothing quite like it these days.” My vague memories of Art Bell came rushing back from my own sleepless evenings.

“Friend, we’re living it.” The deer skull contorted as she laughed, like the bone could shift as rubber as per her command.

“We are.” I looked down at Macy’s kicking legs and her sniffing nose as she continued to act out the dream.

Would I ever hear her voice again? Each day that went by I remembered what she sounded like less and less. Her face faded from my memories too, no doubt helped along by the miasma that covered the world.

I needed answers, and I needed them soon.

The wendigo pilot unceremoniously dropped us off at a remote airstrip nestled in a small flat valley near Klamath Falls. She didn’t have the courtesy to leave a map in my hands, only fresh water and plenty of MREs, so I relied on my foxy navigator to see if any lingering diesel fumes might point us toward a government road.

“Think she’s waving to us as she goes?” I crouched down and scratched

Macy between her perked ears. “Think she’ll hit the dragon button?”

Now there was a thought, although *the form draconic* wouldn’t be a burden right now, not when we had a secret facility nearby to find. God, I hope this didn’t evolve into another Mel’s Hole situation, only lies and merchandise to cash in on a tourist trap hoax... I did receive this information at a truck station... hmm...

Well, in the worst case scenario I would die in the woods, and Macy would have to get used to life as a wild vixen. A pretty awful outcome, emanating from a thought train I needed to seize and push aside *ASAP*.

The cellular towers gave the location away, I saw them poking up beyond the tree canopy. Different antennae clustered around large, sunken satellite dishes. A concrete shed linked by gravel overgrown with weeds sat in bushes about thirty yards from the towering array, trying to be inconspicuous, forgotten. Whole place was simply another telecommunications outpost in the mountains, allegedly nothing else of note.

But Macy and I found ourselves compelled inside nonetheless, my shoulder slamming against the shed’s metal door, hinges rusted and giving way on the seventh shove, opening to a set of poorly illuminated stairs leading to another door, this one wooden and, after a testing turn of the knob, apparently

unlocked.

“It’s been a while since someone has wandered into Parsons, welcome to a glimpse into the future... where *High Strangeness* can combine with innovation to produce *controlled chaos*. Parsons Dome has all the solutions to our turbulent times, as we try to understand the mysterious force unleashed upon our fair planet.” A man with bloodshot, dead eyes greeted us and went off like an animatronic, Pirates of the Caribbean... Small World... He had his spiel down to rote memorization, prepped for any fresh faces who wandered into the Parsons Facility Dome. “Each sector is concentrated on a unique practical application of science, funded by both governmental and non-governmental organizations, primarily the latter--”

“How many people are still here?”

“Pardon?”

“How many employees still live here?”

“Oh you misunderstand, no ‘employees’ reside at Parsons... we are our own bosses... each of us a king of his own domain... every man a king... we pray to the Kingfish... for the Long tomorrow...”

The researcher’s eyes were fully glazed over, his soul completely dead. He existed as a component of a great undying machine, forged by High

Strangeness yet walking independent from it.

Macy growled on my shoulder, letting me know of her unease. The hackles on her neck raised, fur that looked touched by static...

Maybe there was static here, lurking in the air. Generated from the depths of the cavernous facility where machines of both flesh and metal toiled.

“We push the envelope of what defines true science. We are true explorers... in the past some have claimed the world is fully discovered... but it is not... High Strangeness has revealed more beyond the thin surface layers of reality.” He couldn’t stop himself from sharing the spiel, it was memorized and had to come out whether he wanted to share or not. We were fully committed to the tour.

“What are your biggest achievements?” I offered a counter of my own, to better *understand* this place.

“We have unlocked cold fusion, broken the seals restraining deeper knowledge of the universe. I have seen God, and He looks like Andy Griffith.”

The man cried now, streaks of tears dripping down his rosy cheeks as he sought to feel something more beyond silicon chipsets.

“Is this a joke or-”

“God looks like Andy Griffith, God looks like Don Knotts, God looks like you and me, God is the machine dwelling inside our rotten hearts.” He coughed when he got to the word *heart* as if mentioning it triggered some

impulse within him. “But understand that God is not Opie. There is no innocence in the heart of the divine. God knows *too* much to be pure.”

Invisible wires, microwaves... had fried his mind. There was absolutely nothing left behind those cold eyes, not a spark of anything human at least. Macy in her current state was more human than this sack of meat was, and she couldn't even talk, beyond yips and yelps, or walk upright anymore. Parsons apparently was a hell built into the earth, of entirely human design and intent. So why didn't I run?

“Can I give you a full tour?” The man's face drooped, though he fought to keep up the welcoming smile.

“Why not.” Indulging his impulse was probably encouraged by invisible radio waves of undulating frequencies bathing my mind from the moment I descended into the depths of Parsons. Why else would I keep saying yes in such circumstances?

“Anyone can look upon us, but you can *know* us... know our passion... know our plight.”

“Right. Hey, can I ask you something.” I had to restrain myself from leaping forward, seizing his collar-

No, that would just upset Macy.

“Of course.” The man's eyes brightened, showing me there was a little

piece of his soul left, but it too served these dark halls. “I’ll tell you anything.”

“Did you scientists blow a hole in the universe, did you let something out... is this a science-fiction novel-”

“We look outside, we look at the shimmering clouds and faceless men.” The scientist broke into a wide grin, his teeth crooked and coffee-stained. “Each day brings a new calamity and blessing, each day shows us how little we know-”

“Did. You. Open. The. Doorway. Tell. Me.” I felt like I’m asking for Macy too... and Howlin’ Gus... and my old friends camping beside the icy Mississippi... and my family who either turned to dust, doves, or something between.

“No.” The scientist’s grin turned into a frown. “Not that one at least. Oh how I wish we did... how I wish we could have opened up the tears and let passion flow into a cold, *real* world. But we didn’t, we only were around to watch.”

The answer was unsatisfactory, but neither Macy nor I were ready to call it quits.

“Show me more, uh, do you have a name?” Looked like my manners hadn’t entirely survived the apocalypse either, sloppy sloppy.

“Not anymore.” The man shuffled closer to me, and leaned in at an angle where I can’t avert my gaze. His dead eyes were wrong, a pressure



loomed just behind them, scarcely contained. An intelligence that wasn't quite human simmered there, lurking at the edges of his pupils. If I looked closely, I could see that his eyes rapidly undulated. "Not since I went to sleep and started *dreaming*."

We traveled deeper into the bowels of the facility, each level sprawling into connected micro-spirals of reinforced concrete with chrome paneling. I quickly found out that if you looked carefully enough that you could rank the decay by the smudges on the chrome as well as the rust gathering at the edges where the metallic skin of the walls peeled away.

"This is the main command center of the facility." The scientist pointed into an empty room with beige walls.

The room, or corridor really, stretched the full length of a football field, and I could see human silhouettes plastered against the distant wall. Pitch black against the off-white paint, the forms in various positions with hands reaching toward the ceiling or down toward the carpeted floor. Even from this great distance, I saw that the poses were unnatural and bent.

"Who or what are they?" I pointed toward the smattering of shadows, Macy taking the flank parallel to my arm to parallel my gesture with her nose.

“They are the living paint. Oil received from the source of High Strangeness. We draw up the hydrocarbons and pull out their memories.”

“What human beings are going to be in oil? Isn’t that dinosaurs or-”

“Oh my friend, the shape of the death in oil is not limited to what the old flesh once was. Down here we are malleable. Down here we can be *anything*.”

I saw the shapes on the wall contort, changing as their arms locked with each other. Macy snarled, her thin vulpine lips curling back. The figures danced 300+ feet away, and yet I worried that they’d reach out and grab me, pull me into their wallpaper reality. Whatever they’re thinking, dreaming, experiencing in a state of resurrection, I wanted no part.

“They are but one of our conjurations. For a brief period, we delegated authority to them. No longer. They are oil and water upon the wall. But they do not command us, not once we realized that all the oil wanted to do was permeate and corrupt. We take the threat of corruption by High Strangeness here very seriously, you understand?”

“What else is there to see?”

“Come. Onward.”

Our scientist guide led us to the doorway of a brightly illuminated square

room, only about fifteen feet by fifteen feet. In the center sat a pedestal, complete with its own overhead lighting, and on that minute platform rested a small pocket knife.

“What is that?” I pointed at the knife, its red and black sides bearing no logo. “Some sort of new product? Smart tech?”

Macy hopped off my shoulder and approached the altar. Whatever reservations she had about this place evaporated while she went about her foxy task of sniffing at the base of the pedestal before jumping upon it. No silent alarm went off, so she didn’t trigger any pressure plates or lasers when she snatched up that knife in her jaws and brought it back to my feet like a retriever.

“Is this... is this okay?” I turned to the scientist, who stared blankly at me, the same vacant eyes I’d gotten used to. “Can I take it?”

“It’s a penknife designed to kill spirits, to kill Gods that lack innocence.”

“But can I take it? If I’m not allowed I-” But my protest sounded stupid, naive even in the face of High Strangeness. I was still learning back then, still processing traumas and terrors in a world that made less sense each day.

That apprehension to embrace the divine didn’t stop me from picking up Macy’s gift for me, and my vixen quickly crawled back onto my shoulder.

“We started making it with a meteor alloy recovered from a dig site... of the Permian-Triassic extinction... the Great Dying... all those genera of

species... families... orders lost and buried in the mud... turned to stone. That spirit was seized and placed inside the alloy of the blade. It **can** cut away the excess of a world gone mad.” The scientist held pride in his work, his tone boastful. Maybe he wasn’t completely inhuman inside, because I saw something light up behind his jittery eyes. Perhaps I misjudged this place as only being for decaying madness, maybe answers lurked in these long halls.

“Beyond that, what makes it special-”

“It is a knife that can cut heaven itself, a blade of spirituality.”

So Parson’s did live up to its namesake. The occult styling was impossible to escape. Heh. I really should have seen this turn coming.

“So,” The scientist put a hand on my shoulder, the one not presently occupied by a stressed Macy. “Will you join us here? Discoveries await the curious, if you have the desire we can get to the bottom of your Glamour and utilize it-”

“Sorry, I’m not interested. Thanks for the offer though. Maybe next time.”

“You’re making a beginner’s mistake. The world outside no longer has rules-”

Macy turned her head around, watching the rest of the hallway. At the very least, I won’t be sneak-attacked from behind by orderlies. No being hauled off to cells for me today, Macy and I had quite a track record for

miraculous escapes to maintain.

“Good thing we have this knife for protection.”

“Hmm...” The scientist shook his head but also didn’t stand in our way.

“You’re making a mistake—”

“Look. We’re going to The West. If we find help, we’ll send it your way.”

“Why would you leave such sanctuary? Why would you leave the gateway to heaven?”

Nobody stopped us on the way out, the shuffling feet and grinning faces of the scientist remnants that poked out of fluorescent corridors didn’t raise arms against us... no door locked me down in the old world with them. Soon I felt sunlight on my face again, and Macy licked at my cheek to let me know that she approved of what transpired. I didn’t always feel confident about the choices I made, but this was one that I didn’t regret in the slightest.

“How bizarre, Macy. The emptiness of that place. Like a tunnel to another world.” I ran my fingers through her soft pelt, petting her as we took a breather along our hike. I was pretty sure we weren’t in Washington yet...

likely Oregon. But my increasingly scattered sense of direction didn't leave me feeling confident, not with a compass that unfortunately no longer pointed north. But Macy seemed to know the way, and I followed her lead... her whiskers tickling my cheek as, perched on my shoulder, she pointed with her muzzle at the direction I should go.

## Part IV - Column Lake

A cascade straight into the sky greeted us, millions of gallons of water constantly blasting upward, an eruption of pure crystal. I was able to safely get close too... there was no reversal of gravity, no call of the void urging me closer to the great pillar. Instead, I stared into the liquid mirror... saw my face unchanged. Same old grizzled face, rough around the edges with an untrimmed beard. But Macy no longer had a vulpine muzzle, her old face instead peeked over my shoulder with a friendly, loving smile. In the upward waterspout, the spiral, she became my Macy again. The fox left, and the woman I love came back.

I felt the phantom sensation of hands massaging my neck, but only for a fleeting second... the touch quickly replaced by the rubbing of a fox's brush.

"Interesting place." I turned away from the column, my hand scratching

at Macy's ruffled neck. "I remember seeing pictures about Crater Lake online... never got to go before it *changed*."

Macy grumbled in approval, then segued into her shrill vulpine laugh. I can almost understand what she said, whenever she tried to talk in the old, human manner I *almost* got it. It pained her that she couldn't speak, I could see the frustration in her eyes. She wanted to talk to me, to converse with me beyond animal grunts and growls. Hell... she used to be able to *sing*, we'd cycle up at karaoke bars and she'd always kill any song thrown her way. But now she stood fluffy and flustered, and it took the gentle rubs of my hands across her flanks to calm her down.

"Macy. Everything is going to be okay." I held her close as she started to sob. I figured it was the only thing I could do to try to comfort her, that somehow my physical touch can get past her sadness in a way my words can't. "I'll always keep you safe."

She pulled her head away from my grasp and licked me on the cheek. Her way of agreeing, I supposed.

"Plus, you're my little compass. I'd be completely lost without your guidance."

This triggered a little ghost of a smile forming at the edges of her foxy lips.

Despair could never get us, for as long as we had each other and the pull of The West, nothing could get in our way. We would escape the High Strangeness, we would persevere in a world gone mad, and I would restore Macy's humanity **somehow**.

We made camp near the tower of water... I wanted to see if it touched the stars.. how high it actually *reached*, and if the distorted glimmer of the Milky Way shined through the flows... and oh did it shine. Normal stars to the left and right and in the middle a shifting prism undulated among the water. At times I could see more faces... perhaps the dead... or another world... rows of people marching through fields that didn't look like the Pacific Northwest... instead the grain was Mediterranean, like the estates of Imperial Rome. Another planet in a parallel universe... or the dead souls of 2000 years prior. Who knew for certain?

What did they think of me? If they could see me as I saw them?

“Maybe they see me as the trickster beyond the veil... though you're the fox... heh...” I scratched Macy between her ears as she tried to slip into sleep.

I was still looking at the faces walking the pale beyond the moon when I heard the rattle, a shaking of beads inside a hollowed gourd a few inches from



my ear, deafening, shocking... outright terrifying... but I couldn't move. At a deeper, instinctual level... it was because I *knew* exactly what creature sat beside me...

An agitated rattlesnake, diamondback perhaps... poised ready to strike next to my ear, hissing and simmering with an agitation that betrayed its inhuman origin. This wasn't a creature touched by High Strangeness, rather it was born of the forests, bred with fear toward humans... and ingrained knowledge of its own killing venom. Would the fangs sink into my ear... my cheek? Would it merely hurt, or would the envenomed wound turn my blood septic... my flesh necrotic...

Despite my quiet paralysis, Macy stirred from sleep. Once awake, she heard the rattle too, but she didn't freeze in place as a statue... no... she leaped to action at the threat, charging the rattlesnake as a blur faster than my eyes could process. In that moment, I didn't feel that I knew her... she's been replaced by the instinctual predator, acting on animal impulse rather than human thought.

She fought with the rattlesnake as I lifted myself upright, ripped through my pack for my spare flashlight, as if a mag-lite could somehow solve this problem-

Macy snarled and closed her vulpine fangs upon scaled flesh, the rattlesnake tossed through the air until it stopped moving-

I turned on the light, illuminating the scene... minimal blood, but Macy with a dead snake in her jaws awaited me. Falling to my knees, my hands are running through her fur, thanking and comforting her for protecting me, pulling the snake away from her jaws and-

I saw the bite on her shoulder, barely visible through her ruffled fur, but the fang marks lingered as two little droplets of blood, still mixing with clear venom...

She collapsed moments later, and I clutched her close to my chest and pleaded... please... *please don't go, please hold on...* as if my voice could reach whatever God controlled High Strangeness and the rules put into place without my consent.

My frantic prayers go unanswered.

Macy died in my arms.

I wandered north from Crater Lake after I buried her, her final resting place a cairn assembled from whatever polished stones I, in my grieving state, piecemealed together into a worthy monument.

She died stripped of her face, stripped her voice, nearly stripped of her very soul... but even in those final moments she held onto the hope that our travels would provide substance to existence, meaning in the face of the meaningless... and her life ended after fighting a nameless snake, a random creature of existence that, too, wandered under the auspices of High Strangeness without even knowing it. What a world.

I stumbled off toward overgrown trails, no more park rangers around to care about maintenance. Only my own thoughts accompanied me, a lifted weight on my shoulder causing me to tear up whenever I noticed it... I had to run further, to push further beyond the black hole pulling me backward, compelling me to curl up beside Macy's cairn and to abandon myself to the elements... to accept oblivion in turn.

No. That couldn't be me, that wasn't what she would have wanted.

I wandered for days... weeks... exhausting the rest of my supplies. I fell

into the role of scavenger, the lowly animal who walked the wilderness picking up whatever other, likely terrified humans, had left behind. Whether or not some of the food could have been willed into existence by the High Strangeness itself wasn't a possibility that crossed my mind, all I focused on was heating up cans of chili over a fire pit and filling my aching belly.

The unexpected doldrums of survival swept across me, the act of turning my brain off lest my mind turn to sadness and regret becoming part of my morning ritual. I had to run from the past, because if its icy fingers get around me then I was forced to remember the banks of the frozen Mississippi and every nightmare that transpired since. I came to realize that I *could* live out here, surprisingly enough, but without Macy I had no true direction. I couldn't find The West...

The Morganville wolfpack set upon me on a night lit by thirty different lunar phases passing across the sky all at once. Their teeth weren't bared, but I saw the simmering emotions behind their glowing amber eyes. Hatred. Forgiveness. Apathy. Joy. A real twister that pulled at my heartstrings, and let me know that any conversation to come would be unpredictable and raw.

How was I so sure? Well... I knew that they wanted to talk because they didn't immediately tear me to shreds.

“We all lost our minds that night, howling before the fire.” Gus’ monstrous bass voice was gravel crushed underfoot. “What you did to us hurt, but we mended those wounds. And a great battle was fought on the fields beyond Morganville. I’ll spare you the gory details but... The Iconoclasts didn’t win. They also aren’t gone, in case you were wondering about that too.”

I wasn’t particularly concerned with The Iconoclasts at this point. How this pack of hungry wolves felt about *me* was a bit more concerning in the moment. I knew better than to profess my innocence, my words wouldn’t change their beliefs. They still thought I was guilty, but they had another enemy to occupy their attention.

“Whatever is inside you changed us. We can see it now, pulsing within you. You’ve got a piece of High Strangeness right inside your heart, it’s this expanding and contracting flower with infinite curling petals.” Gus blinked his amber eyes and took another step forward, his heavy paws as big as my head.

“No, I can’t see anything. I don’t feel any different!”

Gus broke into a guttural growl, at least until Meredith stopped him by interceding between us. The shewolf had the same black locks that she did as a human, though the wrinkled tobacco-aged skin was replaced a ragged pelt. I

didn't see those similarities back in the panic of ruined Morganville, but I also can't fully *appreciate* those details now.

"Let him talk, Gus. We should reach an understanding." Meredith's tone, at least, was a far cry from the cruel streak she'd shown back in the Morganville chaos. Maybe, just maybe, I wasn't completely doomed.

"An understanding, she says." The alpha wolf now bared his fangs, gritted them, then let his hackles and snarl abate. "Very well."

"I genuinely don't know what's going on-"

"That's alright but-" Meredith began, then stopped when she realized she cut me off.

"Look, Macy, she got bit by a rattlesnake. She died. I've been lost. I don't know where to go. Please let me pass." My words ran unrestrained, my voice cracking as I broke down. I didn't realize how being lost wore away at my sanity, that running in circles brought me closer to snapping.

"That's a hard run of luck. We've lost a few members ourselves. Not to snakes though, no, we fell to the guns and knives of the old world." Gus seemed to be settling down. "And, of course, to hunger."

Was that a jab at my current situation? Probably.

"Please, just let me go."

"He's apt to starve out here anyway." Another wolf spoke up from behind me. "Might as well leave him to that fate."

“Our teeth would be too good for you. That’s what he’s saying.” Gus sneered at me with those knife-like fangs.

“Ayyyyup.” The wolf behind me clarified. “Exactly.”

“Our paths won’t cross again.” Gus nodded, and the pack began to back off me.

Alone, they were going to leave me alone to die. The *generosity* of their terms was quite clear, but I couldn’t care about the implications. I wouldn’t be shredded by tooth and claw, instead I had a chance to find my way out of this woods. Despite their belief in my impending death, I now had to prove it to them that I could survive... prove that Macy’s sacrifice wasn’t in vain.

I watched the gray-furred pack slink into the foliage and disappear. Their little internal conversations, no more than stifled growls and guttural whispers, carried along the wind until that too finally abated.

Another week in the elements took me close to the brink.

“Some good you were.” I spoke to the ‘spiritual’ pen knife resting against my calloused palm. My voice, betrayed by my parched throat, wavered as I weighed my options. Fresh water was fleeting, the forested canyons sending me in circles that sapped my strength. Today’s afternoon struggle was no different.

Just as I was about to consign myself to death by exposure, the hillside erupted into a crackling fissure and released a great bellowing steam to accompany an inhuman visitor in my midst with an awful lot on his mind.

“I’m a gorgonopsid. Apparently. I lingered in some iteration of the Christian afterlife, but now I’m here as this... monster... animal... it’s not a mammal even though I am warm-blooded. Very peculiar, all things considered.” The rapid-fire voice brought me out of my daze just in time for me to cough on the old, thick air that issued from the gaping hole in the rocky earth.

The posh British accent partially prepared me for what I saw when I looked up from the knife in my hands to the bizarre creature standing before me. The outfit made sense... with Victorian trimmings and a fancy top hat. But the face... no the bloated face stretched into a ferocious bulky muzzle, one with massive toothy fangs that slipped over thin lips. He said he wasn’t a mammal, but he was coated in thin hairs that merged with long whiskers.



“I was a devotee of Empiricism, and beyond that was influenced by the works of Berkeley. I thought the whole world wouldn’t exist if I blinked. That if I died, everything would leave except the light, a river that I would drift along forever. And for a time, that’s what it was. Not so much any longer.”

“Wha- Who are you!?” I dropped the Parson’s knife from my hands, and scampered backwards away from the apparition.

“I am an emissary of the Great Undying. The Permian-Triassic extinction event led to the greatest loss of life this planet has ever known... but those souls can return, even hundreds of millions of years later. Such is the way of the world. A very weird way, I might add... I didn’t think that in life I would be special enough to be brought back in such a form to profess Berkeley’s Universal Perceptor but... well... when in Rome, right?”

“Right.”

“My belief, partially challenged but **still** my belief at this junction, is that the world only exists in the eye of the beholder. The material world is pointless if we look away, we have to ascribe meaning to the artifacts and people who

cross our lives. What meanings have you ascribed?”

“I’m lost. I need to get out of these hills. I need to find other people... or animals that once were people. There’s my meaning. I don’t care at this point. Can you help me?”

The strange creature smiled with jagged teeth dripping with saliva. “You already have all the tools you need. You’ve had them all along. You only needed to stop and think.”

“Okay well I’ve stopped and I’m thinking.”

“Good start. So what do you have?”

“Dwindling supplies, and this knife from Parsons.”

“A knife that defies High Strangeness? A knife that can cut through magic, yes?”

“I don’t see how this is going to help me-”

“Get creative.” The creature bobbed its oversized head, top hat dipping down over inhuman eyes before stubby claws adjusted it back into place.

“Look I could really-”

“Your compass doesn’t work, yes? Hasn’t for a while? So make another compass.”

Nodding, I balanced the penknife in my palm and held it up to the sun. I felt it twitch, first a little tug then a firm lurch.

“There you go!” The gorgonopsid already started to fade out of existence, as if his tether only existed for as long as I was lost. “Now you don’t have to entertain an old dinosaur!”

“Are you a dinosa-” But he was gone before I could finish my question. I supposed a history book could fix that little query if I really wanted to know.

The knife pointed to the magnetic north, and I knew how to find my way again. I still felt cold, I still felt hunger, but at least I felt genuine direction. I had friends in high places, apparently, ones who came to me in my hour of need. Couldn’t save Macy, but they could get me to treat a knife like a compass.

## Part V - Sherman Town

“You look awful.” The 20-something woman wearing jeans, a plaid button-up, and a cowboy hat was curt with her words as she rode up on horseback, brown ponytail bobbing, to meet me at the gates of the village nestled in a dusty valley between two peaks.

“I feel awful. Been out on the road for...” I couldn’t even remember how long it has been since Macy and I left Morganville.

“Time gets funky these days, don’t worry about it. You’re safe now.” The woman smiled and dismounted her horse, batting cerulean eyes as she walked over toward me with an uncapped canteen outstretched in her gloved hand.

I took it and downed the ice cold water, letting the cold wash away the clinging humidity and root me to this moment like some twisted man-shaped tree.

“I take it you came from the south?” She waited for me to finish.

“I don’t even know anymore.” I handed the canteen back and wiped my mouth, letting the stray drops of water cut into the accumulated grime across my face.

“Fair.”

Beyond her, back past the oak plank fence, I saw the outline of the town. It wasn't Oz at the end of the Yellow Brick Road, but it would do. The cowgirl saw me gazing too and quickly called me out on my gawking.

“Sherman Town is a beauty, isn't she? Protected from High Strangeness... the valley keeps the weirdness out... lets the normal in. You're pretty lucky to stumble our way, stranger.”

“Yeah... I guess I am.”

“Name's Caitlin... what's yours?” She extended a hand this time, gloves caked with dried dust from riding and ranching.

The shiny silver of the Colt .45 revolver peeking out from the holster at her hip let me know she was thoroughly committed to the part.

“I...”

I didn't remember my own name.

“It was...”

“Hey. Don't worry about it. The High Strangeness messes with our heads, don't get flustered. We can always sort out formalities later.”

“Thanks.”

The cowgirl tipped her hat and smiled. “I’m the official greeting party for the town, anyway. I like to ride out and see the fresh faces who wander in... though it has been fewer as of late.”

There a sincerity and somberness dwelt in Caitlin’s eyes, a learned truth. I could tell she was once an optimist.

“It’s a harsh world out there.” I waited for her cue to proceed, I wanted to let her invite me inside. No sense being rude.

“If you don’t mind following me, I can show you around... introduce you to everyone else. They’d love to meet you.”

Sherman Town was indeed a piece of civilization that I’d been missing, it wasn’t the wilderness but rather human beings living on the edge of an 1800s frontier, a historical village helped along by the current state of the world.

“There’s square dancing at the hall every Friday night... we try to keep the art alive... again, I apologize that we’re simple folk, some of us were reenactors in our day.” Caitlin pointed over toward a repurposed barn next to

a general store.

*In our day.* Before the world went mad.

“I can show you the ropes, I've been looking for a dance partner.” Caitlin shrugged and dropped the topic as soon as it was brought up... as if that was my cue to follow along and press her for more.

Dance partner. I see.

“I can't square dance.”

“Can't remember or just can't... two different situations, friend?”

“I was never much of a dancer.”

A brief memory flickered across my eyes, half-formed and hazy, but it was Macy and myself wandering a ballroom in vintage clothing, of the Edwardian era and... wait, no that can't be... had to have been a reenactment or a theme party... I wasn't not that old, I didn't remember life over a century ago and-

“Hello...” Caitlin snapped her fingers right in front of my nose, but her face was amused rather than indignant. “Everything alright? You stared off a little.”

“Am I?” The memory faded and I was in motion again, boots kicking at the dusty topsoil.

“Yea. Happens, I get it... with the memories. There's stuff I've forgotten too-” Caitlin shrugged, and continued to lead me on the *official* tour through

Sherman Town.

“I think at one point... I knew how to dance. Fancy ballroom...”

“Fancy indeed, they’ll take you for a city slicker around these parts.”

“I suppose I am.”

More faces emerged from the stores and saloons, some were dressed the part of rural ranchers, others in more casual and modern attire. Their faces, a mix of amused, puzzled, indifferent, and concerned, watched me with intent. A few stood extra tense, their hands reaching for the holstered revolvers at their hips. The welcoming committee, it seemed, had a stony disposition compared to the smiling cowgirl at the gates.

I would soon learn why.

“There’s something about his presence, it’s putting me off...” Alderman Walter stared me down at a gathering of Town Elders. My official induction ceremony got off to a rocky start as it turned out they didn’t actually want me.

“What do you mean?” Honestly nothing really surprised me anymore.

“You have a Glamour about you, a corrupted... beastly... energy. The outside world, the High Strangeness, isn't welcome here. And that has no



bearing on your personality, or your soul... merely what I can see.” Walter tipped his hat, its felt black like an undertaker’s. “I’m sorry, son. We can’t have you-”

“Now wait a moment!” Caitlin interceded on my behalf. “He’s the first face to come to this town in months! We had no sign that there was still life outside beyond the mountains. Well, our proof just walked in, and you want to kick him out!”

“Don’t you see his-”

“No. I don’t see his soul or Glamour. I don’t see someone tainted by High Strangeness. I see someone who is normal! Normal for crying out loud!” Caitlin turned to address the rest of the town elders. “Do any of you see something wrong with him?”

Slowly but surely there were murmurs of ‘no’ and ‘not really’ that gradually picked up until the mayor finally sighed and allowed me to stay.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.” I pulled Caitlin aside after the gathering, but she only smirked and placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Friend, don’t sweat it. I’m not going to let them kick out somebody with a spark.”

“Spark? Wait, so you *can* see something in me?”

“Yeah. Guess I have the gift.” Caitlin rolled her eyes and tipped her cowboy hat. “I’m a seer just like the Alderman. He thinks that little flower inside you is dangerous, but I think it’s kinda cute.”

“I had someone else tell me it was a flower...” I kept the details about **cursed wolves** out of the conversation. “With infinite petals curling forever.”

“It’s rather dashing, I have to say.” Caitlin turned away, already walking back out toward the horses lounging beside their trough in the hot afternoon sun.

I was here to stay, here to sweat to my heart’s content to *build* something out in the shadow of the mountains. Maybe I slipped through a time warp, or maybe I was always meant to end up here. But regardless, Sherman Town became my new home.

“I get the feeling you’ve never been on a horse before.” Caitlin rode several yards ahead of me on a brown speckled mare.

“Years ago I was on pony rides at the county fair, actually.” My own horse, if insulted by being compared to a pony, didn’t show it. No, he just kept trudging along, pacing forward.

“I guess I can’t judge you too harshly, the horse hasn’t thrown you yet.” Caitlin turned her shoulders, gazing back at me without a care in the world as to where her mare will take her. I don’t have to fish you out of the creek or pry you out of some thorny bushes.”

Now there was a thought, getting thrust off a horse and having to deal with *1800s* medicine. I wonder if these folks considered themselves sophisticated enough to use ether or if they went straight for rectified spirits.

“Look, I promise I’ll be ready for the rodeo-”

“We actually do a rodeo every fall.” Caitlin cut me off with her horse, an aggressive maneuver straight out of a New York driver’s manual. “Maybe I can train ya for it.”

“I’ve already got my costume at least, unless you want me to be the rodeo clown.” Indeed my new digs, courtesy of the town’s generosity, had me looking exactly like them.

But it wasn’t all work, no play, no I got acquainted with *the culture* about a week later.

Stepping into the dance hall was like walking directly back into the 1880s, a saloon vibe stripped of any seediness and replaced with warmth and a sense of genuine community.

The square dancers initially viewed me with uncertainty, I was the newcomer after all, but over the course of the evening they warmed to me as I slipped among the lines. Never without Caitlin though, she was practically one with me as we moved and spun. Which was a good thing, because my balance teetered considerably out of whack. I somehow lost coordination during those weeks out wandering the forests and hills. The survival portion of my brain had ditched all dancing knowledge to make room for starting fires and keeping out of the rain. But all was well, because I had Caitlin now. When I stepped incorrectly, she linked arms with mine and fixed my footwork. And it wasn't just for me, I suspected. No, this was her way of showing the other townsfolk that she'd found a new partner, I guess. After wandering alone for so long, she was quickly becoming a bright flame of companionship.

“So how does this quaint little town suit you?” She piled fresh barbecue ribs onto a plate already overflowing with sides.

It suited me well, a refuge from the outside madness. Seemingly untouched, full of honest faces. Morganville was friendly too, before they went wolfish, but the faceless men always loomed over that little fort in the prairie. This was a different vibe altogether, felt genuinely safe.

Sherman Town felt **normal**.

“Town’s fine, but my square dancing is not.”

“It’s bad, yes.” Caitlin laughed, nearly spitting out her sweet tea. “Awful, actually. But don’t worry. I’m a good teacher.”

“Are you now?”

“I actually did teach a square dancing class back in college, stepped in for a professor.” Caitlin filled up her own plate, her hands juggling utensils and cups as she methodically worked her way down the buffet line.

“Really?”

“Surprised that the rancher cowgirl actually has an arts degree? Don’t be, that saddled debt is the reason I’m still wrangling cattle and drilling posts. Physical labor is my salvation... well... back before the weirdness took the world.”

“I didn’t know that.” We finally sat down, in a secluded corner at the far end of the dance hall where we wouldn’t be interrupted. We nearly dipped into the shadows.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me. Mostly how I wandered up here

from Los Angeles. Did you know that the angels all returned when the first wave of strangeness hit? Whole dominions rising up from the cemeteries. Quite angry, too.”

“That must have been quite a sight.”

“Beautiful and terrifying. Those were the words my father used.”

“Is your father here?”

“Yeah, he tried to throw you out for being contaminated by glamor.”

Caitlin tore into her pulled pork sandwich.

Realization flushed across my face, now that **was** a surprise. They didn’t look particularly alike, Alderman Walter and Caitlin. One the stern elder, the mayor no less, and the other comparatively happy-go-lucky as far as cowgirls went. But now that I looked closely at her physical features, I could see the stoic toughness passed from father to daughter, just expressed in different ways.

“Well I’m glad you didn’t send me packing. I promise I can be useful.”

“Not at square dancing though.”

“No, not at all. Ask me to build something instead, any carpentry... I’m not licensed or anything-”

“As if licenses matter, right?” Caitlin grinned at me. “You think I’ve got a permit to do anything I do around these parts? I’m just winging it, we all are.”

“You all play the part well, I’ll give you that.”

“After things wind down here, I have a place to show you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Save your energy, though.”

“Guess the square dance took more out of me than I realized. My endurance isn’t up to par.” I sat down on a stony outcropping with a plop, boots hiked up and hands across my knees as I caught my breath.

“It’s a tough hill for anyone. Works up an honest sweat.”

“I shouldn’t complain so much. Not when this is the best I’ve had it in months.”

“Up here all you see is the beauty of our quaint little village. All of it under clear skies.” Caitlin took a seat beside me.

“Whole town?” I looked down from the hillside across the smattering of wooden houses and the dusty roads between them. Only a few stray cars, barely functioning due to lack of maintenance, took me out of the illusion that I’d stepped back into the Wild West.

“The parts that matter anyway. We’ve got a few people who live on the outskirts, higher up in the hills. A prospector here or there. But it’s harsh out beyond the valley, and we don’t get the rains that keep the Pacific Northwest damp.” Caitlin drifted closer to me, inching along the dirt until her hand brushed against mine.

“What future do you see for this place in 5, 10 years? Do you think-” She interrupted me mid-sentence with a kiss.

“Let’s not worry. Please. Let’s live in the moment, right now. We’ve got a beautiful little place here, protected from all that weirdness that trickles in.” Caitlin pulled away, but not before running her fingers along my cheek. Her hands aren’t coarse, worn by work in the dust like I expected them to be.

“Living in the moment is more than okay with me.”

Two months later, Alderman Walter pulled me aside from my daily corral upkeep for an unexpected sojourn to the outskirts of town. For a



moment, I wondered if this was his way of threatening me for bringing my supposed *Glamour* into this town, or for secretly dating his daughter, but he no longer cared not about the former and didn't yet know of the latter. Instead, he just wanted to show me a landmark that I hadn't yet had the pleasure of seeing.

"Tunnel's called The Duplessis." Walter and I paused at the mouth of the ancient train tunnel, a looming black pit that seemed to want to swallow me whole.

"Strange that a tunnel in these parts would have a French name."

That names could be strange anymore, what a silly thought.

"It's a nod to the Quebecois... we call the tunnel The Duplessis because it is the Grande Noirceur... the Great Darkness."

"I see. But who was around to name it that? To create that reference?"

"At one point we had a mayor named DuPont. He came from Montreal, I believe. Before the world lost its mind, he came to us and embraced our quirky lifestyles. Even named the tunnel. Then he passed on."

"Right. So the tunnel. This 'Great Darkness' as you call it, where does it lead?"

"That's the thing... we don't know. From what we can tell, it doesn't slope downward, the tracks are level into the abyss... could go through the Cascades... could just be a dead end." Walter's shrug was honest, final. There

was nothing else to say because there was nothing else to know. An unexplored landmark that was ominous in existence, not practice.

“I’ll be sure to stay out of it-”

“That’s a smart idea, uh, well there was someone who went in before but-” Walter dabbed at the sweat caking on his forehead. “Say, why don’t we go to the tavern for a drink eh? We can talk about something happier, like our expansion projects for the corrals or--”

But my interest was piqued, and now I simply had to know.

“Who went into the tunnel?”

“Look I shouldn’t gossip about the dead, it’s a bad omen. And it happened before the Upheaval, anyway. Might as well be ancient history.” Walter frowned, his brow furrowed as if he’s simultaneously remembering the events and still fighting himself on whether or not to tell.

“Look I don’t mean to wear my welcome out, just trying to understand this place a little better. That’s all.” I tipped my cowboy hat, the one Caitlin got me to cover up the fact I haven’t had a haircut in months. She’d given me a stern warning about the self-taught town barber and his cuts against humanity.

Walter looked directly at me and sighed, then turned his head to both sides to make sure nobody else was around to hear.

“He was a land speculator, a developer. We’ve gotten a few of those types around these parts, mostly for mining and logging rights. But this man

wasn't here about coal or timber, no, he wanted to build a shopping complex, a big one."

"We're in the middle of nowhere-"

"That's the thing! It made no sense. But oh did he put on a show, full vaudeville flash. He had half the town worked up about his *big sequel project* as he put it. Apparently this shopping complex he had in mind was a copy of another one he'd built near Tacoma."

"So why did he go into the tunnel-"

"I'm getting there, okay?!" Walter held up a finger. "So he's putting together this project, showing us the plans for a two-story shopping mall, he has the capital... Apparently he's a big deal and then... he announces that he's scoping out possible locations in the surrounding hills. Gets up at 6am... grabs coffee downtown... goes out into the hills with some hired surveyors. Then at about high noon he comes back and announces that he's changed his mind... that's all he says, *I've changed my mind*, and then he calmly walks into the tunnel. Never comes out."

"That's weird."

"Yeah, then the Upheaval happened a week later. Maybe the developer's madness was the prepper course for all insanity that followed."

"Was this guy famous enough that people would know him? Like maybe he had enemies or-"

“Dunno. I had never heard of him before he walked into my office and started pitching his deals. He said his name was John Darcy.”

The Duplessis called to me, though I didn't know it at the time.

At another town square dance, a few weeks after learning about the tunnel to nowhere, the entire town transformed into coyotes.

I'd just locked arms with Caitlin, a belly full of food giving me an extra pep in my refined footwork, when I heard the gasps erupt from the other line dancers. Snapping to attention, I saw men and women alike clawing at their clothing, tawny fur erupting from under the fringes of their jeans and button-up shirts. A few stray cowboy hats found themselves knocked aside by growing canine ears.

“It's happening again...” The words slipped out of my mouth before I

could stop them. I... it *was* my fault all along. What happened at Morganville was reoccurring here before my very eyes. I'd doomed all these people to become beasts by my mere presence alone.

Then I felt the prickly sensation of fur brushing against the exposed skin on my arm, and I turned to see Caitlin mid-metamorphosis, her face jutting out into a coyote muzzle complete with wet, dark nostrils huffing in deep breaths. The look across her mixing half-amber, half-cerulean eyes contained both shock and surprise, but also fascination at watching her body morph.

My nerves, however, failed me. I made a break for it, bolting as fast as I could with my boots slamming off the wood floor as I darted past the changing townsfolk. Escape, I had to escape. I had to go far away, where this curse wouldn't afflict anyone else. A place where I could hide in darkness, where I could take some time to figure out *why* this was happening, why High Strangeness decided that my mere *presence* stripped away the humanity of others.

Rushing back to my room at the inn, past the now-coyote owner who gave me a puzzled look, I gathered my personal effects. My vintage revolver, a flashlight, and a few stray pieces of survival gear went into my rut sack. Not that any of it would keep me alive for long back out in the hills of the Cascades, not even if I stumbled upon fresh water.

My will to press on, sapped as it was by revelation stacked upon revelation, circled around one location that beckoned to me as a place where I might just find something different. A shot in the dark, for sure, but worth a chance.

I wound up sneaking inside the Duplessis, just to the cusp where the moonlight angled through the mouth of the tunnel intersected with complete darkness. At this point was where the heat of the outside plains, even at night, pressed against a colder front billowing outward.

Settling down on the line between the abyss and the world I seemed to poison, I gathered my strength to will myself onward. Was I really going to walk through a supposedly endless tunnel? Would the tunnel branch, leaving me lost in darkness forever? Would I encounter crawling troglodytes without eyes that hungered for a fresh meal? Could the 'magic' pocket knife from Parsons ward them off?

Then I heard the noise echo off the walls, the troglodytes of High Strangeness come to rend my flesh. My luck, as it would seem, continued to degrade.

## Part VI - The Summerlands

But as I reached for my gun, I realized that it wasn't a monster following me into the depths.

Just a coyote with mixed amber-cerulean eyes.

"Do you really think you're going in there without me?" Caitlin's unchanged voice put me at ease. She could still speak... still reason.

She followed me into The Duplessis, the outline of her coyote fluff cast by the moonlight slipping in from the entrance of the tunnel.

"The wolves of Morganville wanted to tear me apart." My hand retreated from my holster, but I didn't pull myself from the wall as the coyote drew nearer. "On more than one occasion."

"Good thing I'm not a wolf then. I've got that coyote blood now." Her sharp fangs caught the flashlight too, pearly white and *hungry*.

"So you're still in there?" I held out my hand, only for her to sniff at it like a curious dog. "And you don't hate me?"

"Some instincts." She licked at my palm. "Controllable. Somewhat. And no, I don't hate you. Why would I *hate* you?"

"Because this is all my fault. It's that... weirdness you saw inside me. It has to be, right?"

"Do you even know that for sure?"

"I know patterns. And sometimes they can't talk... the changed... their



minds tortured from being rendered mute... filled with animal impulse..." A tear streaked down my cheek at the memory. "I saw the decay, the pain."

Why did I have to talk about this?! Why?? Why couldn't I just let Macy go? Leave her in peace? Move on... why was her fate following my life, among the faces of crowds I met. Humanity could rebuild, I could be *part* of the post-apocalypse if I could only figure out what beastly curse clung to my coattails.

"Yeah well... it's going to take more than becoming a mangy coyote to shut me up. Even if I did lose my human voice, well, you'd bet I'd still find a way to sing." Caitlin grinned at me with her sharp canine incisors, but the gesture was friendly and unmistakably human.

I knew what that would sound like, mournful... weeping. I heard it at Morganville Station, growling and yipping curses, human-like words straining across mutated vocal cords. Those folk condemned me as an interloper, as chaos walking... would Sherman Town do the same?

"How are the others?" I couldn't hold back my curiosity any longer.

"They've been better. Most figured the High Strangeness would get them eventually. "Course, no one could have seen becoming a coyote as the end all... as I said when you first walked in... transformation is unheard of 'round these parts." She nuzzled against my hand, my fingers sinking into her fluffy coat, coming away with only a tinge of dust. No doubt she rolled in the dampened soil after the midnight rains before seeking me out. "But they'll

come around. My father is still trying to balance his hat atop those ears.”

“Heh. I bet that’s a sight.”

“Why did you come here of all places? This dingy tunnel is so... eerie.”

Caitlin tilted her head.

“I didn’t know where else to go. This is the only place where I don’t know what’s waiting for me at the end.”

“You wanna go through alone?”

“Yes but... it’s so dark, Caitlin.” Indeed, the next mile of tunnel would be in total blackness sans the faint glow of my weak flashlight.

“Hmmm... If only you had a companion with enhanced senses, then it wouldn’t be a problem at all!” She tilted her head, the movement decidedly dog-like. “But where could you possibly find someone like that?”

“You *really* want to come too?”

“Of course I want to come! I want to go wherever you go!”

All she showed me from the moment I strode into town was kindness, even stepping out against her father to make sure I *stayed*. I couldn’t ask for more. Yet I caused a nightmare to unfold.

“I’m just shocked you still like me after what I caused.”

“Of course I do!”

“You don’t care about the fact that I’m almost certainly responsible for you being a coyote. Like, I *have* to be the common link here with villages

getting upended.”

“No, I don’t care. Know why? Because being a coyote is *fun*. I can run faster, hear and smell things I never *dreamed of*, and I feel so much more connected to the world around me.” She put her paws on my leg. “So please get up and let me come with you.”

“Heh. Alright, let’s go on through and see where this leads.”

About two miles in, we reached a dead end, but Caitlin paused and told me she could hear birdsong beyond the stone. So I pressed against the rock, and I passed *through*. Stumbling, I slipped through that final wall, damp dirt molding around my face like clay... then turning brittle and crumbling away, taking the darkness with it. An overhead sun, burning bright so deep under Cascadia, greeted me with a heat that I hadn’t felt since the summers on the Great Plains. Vegetation straight out of a Bob Ross watercolor painting assailed my senses, there was pollen in the air more alive than anything I tasted before, and the shimmer of the air carried an otherworldly glow that had genuine weight to it. Trailing my fingers through the glistening fog that collected around

me and Caitlin, I watched as the shine clung to my skin, little crystals resting upon the tips of my fingers. What this did to my lungs probably made asbestos look tame by comparison. At least the little flecks weren't getting into my eyes, not yet at least.

"It's so pretty..." Caitlin's tail wagged as she drank in the sunshine. Rolling onto her back, she flopped and rubbed against the soft grass. "Oh my God it's so much nicer than any of the sawgrass we had on the ranches. This is like heaven!"

"Caitlin... I... I think this *is* heaven. Or *a* heaven at least." As my eyes adjusted to the overbearing sun, I could see distant buildings of pure white marble clinging to the hilltops. Some were arranged as Roman palaces, others as Eastern Bloc apartments, and some looked like typical quaint cottages, only made out of polished stone.

"Heaven has neon signs then, didn't expect that." Caitlin, still on her back, looked ahead from an upside-down perspective.

"Wha-what?"

But Caitlin's observation proved correct, and a tower of a sign lurked about a thousand feet ahead with big bold letters saying *Summerlands*.

"This is weird." I looked back toward Duplessis, fearing that maybe the tunnel closed upon itself, leaving us stranded here. But no, the same cold empty hole in the mountain still waited for us, a blight compared to the joyous

glistening sunshine around the mouth.

“No weirder than from where we came.”

She had me there. This *was* strange, but we weren't being pounced upon by transformed humans and no faceless angel-demons circled overhead with raven wings.

“Why don't we explore a little?” Caitlin flipped back over into a quadrupedal stance.

“And let the chaos in town settle down a bit? Yeah, I wouldn't want your dad to tear my throat out.” I started walking closer to the sign. Maybe it'd be a crossroads of sorts, a hub where we could speak to a denizen for some answers.

“He'd certainly try.” Caitlin's tail wagged as she zipped and zoomed ahead of me. I couldn't tell if she was joking or not. The energy in the air kept me alert, but whatever it did to Caitlin's coyote biology turned her practically hyperactive.

We stood in the shadow of the glorified marble billboard, its lighting a mix of neon and traditional incandescent lamps arranged like a movie theater premier. Plenty of glitz and glam, impressive were it not taking up space in what appeared to be a natural paradise.

“Doesn't really belong here.”

“You know, I feel the same way.” Caitlin crept toward the base of the tower, peering at her own canine reflection in the reflective marble. “The ground around it isn’t fully settled either, this is recent.”

“Yeah... and I don’t think it’s alone. Quick, what do you see over there?” I pointed and Caitlin followed my finger like a sighthound directed toward a flock of geese.

“Looks like a building atop that hill. And a *lot* of stairs leading to it.”

“All I see are buildings popping up on these hills.” I squinted my eyes at the distant temple, its columns more overgrown than the gaudy fresh construction. Each mound of land, now covered with different landmarks, overwhelmed my line of sight. “It’s like they’re multiplying before our eyes.”

Was this place heaven?

“Hey, do you see the one at about 8 o’clock? The temple?” Caitlin barked at me, excitement welling in her voice.

“Yeah what about it? There are a lot of temples.”

“Yeah, but that one *looks* like it should be here. It’s got class. And moss.” Caitlin nudged me forward. “There are stairs so why not check it out? Maybe we’ll get some answers.”

“It’s going to be hell on the legs.”

“Maybe there will be a hot spring on the top of the mountain? Or even fancy Roman baths! We can both relax and take some time to process all this.”

Since High Strangeness began, I walked countless miles. As much as I didn't want to walk more even in this surreal watercolor land, the hilltop was the best bet for getting a vantage point of the *scale* of the world we currently resided in. But despite this being allegedly a heaven, the climb up those thousand stairs was absolute hell on my knees. I still did it though, with Caitlin's claws clicking against the marble as we inched up the mountainside. At no point did I feel in danger, like I was at risk of slipping on the marble and falling off the edge. Instead, this gravity rooted me, keeping my posture steady as I ascended.

As I crossed those final steps, a Grecian temple, as if to Artemis herself, greeted me with columns of hand-carved marble and ornamental statues of warriors in various stages of beastly metamorphosis. Before my eyes, I witnessed the images of men sprouting antlers and becoming noble stags, women growing muzzles and becoming vivacious happy wolves. Familiar sights, for uncomfortable reasons. Caitlin and I stood before a palace of change, a temple of transformation.

“Should we go inside?” Caitlin asked me, her amber-cerulean eyes staring up at me intent on hearing my answer before she took another step.

“I don’t see why not.” I turned back toward the stairs, and I looked out toward other hilltops and the valleys and canyons between them. All filled with nature wrenched apart by marble and concrete, the scene felt deeply wrong and triggered a sense of foreboding inside my stomach. What *exactly* was happening here? We didn’t *cause* this by showing up, did we?

“Okay, after you.” Caitlin flashed her coyote fangs and stuck out a doggish tongue.

“Right. After me.”

The interior of the temple was a vast enclosed auditorium, where footsteps, even across lush carpeting, carried across the far walls of a chamber lit by torches. Immediately I sensed a feeling of warmth, of welcome. The positive energy wanted me here, wanted me to stay. I soon learned why.

Upon a sculpted marble throne, Macy sat crowned as Kitsune Empress. Anthropomorphized, with nine wispy and ethereal golden tails undulating around her, she looked upon me and my coyote companion with a bored smirk across her vulpine muzzle, a look that soon turned to shock and



recognition as we drew nearer. She had clearly thought us to be random stragglers in this strange land, not a long-lost fiance and his new girlfriend-turned-coyote. I could say with all honesty that I shared her shock and surprise, so much so that I took off running toward her. If this was a trick of heaven, I didn't care. I needed to see her, needed to hold her again.

“I-I thought I'd never see you again.” Tears streaked down Macy's furred cheeks, her vulpine muzzle and ears drooping as she struggled to compose herself even in her regal and angelic state.

I'm crying too, for I never thought I'd hear her voice again.

She'd died, that much was irrefutable, undeniable. I'd held her in my arms as she'd passed on from the venom, and yet here she was sitting before me. Was this another apparition? A ghost from my memories. Or was it really-

Macy slipped off the throne and pounced upon me, furred arms wrapping around me as she buried her face into my chest. She's squeezing tight enough to where it almost hurts.

“It's me! It's really me.” She whispered, still crying with the tears staining the gentle fluff of her face.

It was as if she was reading my thoughts, listening to my doubts, and then pushing them all away.

With my peripheral vision, I saw Caitlin sitting on her haunches and watching the reunion with curious eyes.

“Have you been here the entire time?”

“Yes, this is my heaven. This is The Summerlands.”

“We know, we saw the sign.” Caitlin’s voice made me realize that I had an introduction to make.

“Macy, uh, this is Caitlin. She’s, uh, well I met her in a place called Sherman Town and we’ve been dating. It, uh, well what happened to Morganville also then happened to Sherman Town I’m afraid.” Awkward, so dreadfully awkward on my part.

“I see all the women you like end up turning into dogs.” Macy snorted and playfully struck me on the shoulder. “You’ve got a type!”

Caitlin erupted into laughter and fell on her side, four legs kicking the air as she bellowed. “You mean this has happened *before*? Oh my God, that’s rich!”

“Yeah it’s happened before.” I muttered under my breath, looking upon Macy’s spiritual form. From the silks to the jewelry, she looked like she’d stepped off a renaissance mural... albeit one featuring a fox woman.

“You didn’t tell her about Morganville.”

“I told her about that, I just didn’t tell her about, well, uh-”

“You didn’t tell her about me.”

“I’m so sorry, I was in pain and-”

“I’m not mad, you mourned me and you moved on. That’s how it’s supposed to work.”

“Wait did you... die or?” Caitlin tried to follow along as best she could.

“Yes. But then I wound up in heaven, with renewed purpose.”

How could I make this choice thrust now upon me? Falling for Caitlin was organic, we’d connected... but Macy and I were *engaged*, we have plans that stretched-

“And as bearer of that purpose, it’s time for a harsh truth” Macy noticed the awkward concern flush across my face, looking down in anticipation of delivering some bad news.

“I’m ready.” Though I really wasn’t.

“You can’t stay here.” Macy closed her eyes, nearly choking on her words. “I want you to stay so badly but, you can’t stay here. This is the afterlife, you know. It’s The Summerlands, where the spirit can experience all the pleasures of life without any of the pains.”

Of course my brain started coming up with excuses.

“But... But I can’t go back! Not with my condition! I can’t continue to spread corruption, spread the change! It’s not fair for others if being around me causes them to turn into beasts, mute or otherwise.” My petition to stay in heaven came half from a place of selflessness and half from a selfish desire to make things right with Macy. But staying here was also the logical decision, especially since Caitlin and I crossed over to these *Summerlands* without issue. With a world gone completely mad, how come I couldn’t stay in the afterlife where somehow reality felt more normal?

“If you stay, the Glamour inside you will poison these lands and turn them over to the Iconoclasts. Heaven too can burn.” Macy audibly sighed, and gripped me tighter. “I will not let more faceless horrors trickle into paradise, not when their leader already roams these hills...”

“But if you send me back-”

“There’s a way for me to help you.” Macy’s slitted eyes widened, and she bit her lip as if whatever she’s about to say will hurt me. “I can conceal the Glamour surrounding you, put it inside you.”

“And that would stop others from changing by being around me?”

“Yes. All I would have to do is-”

Loud clapping interrupted Macy, and her slitted eyes widened in anger and fear as she leered over my shoulder toward the approaching sound of footsteps entering the temple.

“No...” Macy’s voice diminished to a whisper. “Not him.”

“Good show! Good show! Another soul touched by Glamour has crossed the boundary. Looks like the scales are finally tipped, my ethereal foxy friend.” The ageless voice echoed, simultaneously youthful and elderly in composition. “And here I was growing impatient.”

“Don’t go near him.” Macy hissed in my ear, her claws digging deeper into my shoulder. “Don’t listen to his lies, he’s too far gone. He’s pure poison.”

Caitlin brushed past my leg, quickly huddling behind me. Her tawny gray hackles were raised and her glistening fangs bared at whatever figure now walked within the temple's boundaries.

I expected some Lovecraftian horror or maybe even the devil himself, Lucifer a holdover in this decidedly un-Abrahamic afterlife, but instead when I turn around, I'm instead greeted by a decrepit and wrinkled man in a 1970s navy blue three-piece business suit with a floral tie showing white threads of blooming snowdrop petals. Meticulously polished brown shoes almost outshine piercing yellow eyes that glow like coals.

I pulled away from Macy and Caitlin, both giving yelps of surprise as I walked directly toward the old man. A voice inside my head compelled me to shake his hand, to test that he's real like Macy and not another apparition of this palace afterlife. He met my gesture, showed me that he is indeed *real*.

“How are you enjoying The Summerlands, Glamour-Touched? A place where water runs in all directions, larval angels crawl out of casket cocoons, and I have an entire empire of High Strangeness to construct!” The old man's withered fingers thickened, rejuvenating as we shook hands.

By the time we finished, the only thing about him aged was his 1970s three-piece suit.

“My name is--”

“You have no name, you are the Glamour. Nothing more.” The now 30-something man cut me off, smiling the entire time with perfect white teeth. A small glistening red rose instantly bloomed on his lapel, one with infinite glitter petals in a forever-spiral that undulated and shimmered as it caught the torchlight. “Your human agency is subservient to your need to warp, shift, transform.”

Again, I felt a strong urge not to contest his words.

“Okay, so if I’m nameless, then who are *you*? Also nameless?” I stood my ground, not flinching as the man leaned closer to inspect my face.

“Glad you asked. Heh. Perhaps you’ve heard of me. Maybe you’ve seen me on television. Perhaps you’ve even *been* to my shopping malls or casinos. I’m John Darcy, Architect of *The Wonderlands in The Summerlands*. I take this untamed afterlife, a place for souls lost and found, and I build... *all* the palaces and towers that this untouched natural ‘paradise’ is missing. Turns out you don’t need permits to construct in heaven, no angels hassle you at the county supervisor meetings, no union bidding gets in the way... here all I have

to do is dream my masterpieces, and they're built."

His sincere voice carried decades of experience behind each word. I fully believed that this man built commerce empires, a lord of trade and construction. John Darcy worked with temples like the one that Macy dwelt inside, but his were garish and fake facades to provide a sense of culture to raw materialism. In the real world, I wouldn't have cared. I didn't hate casinos or lavish shopping malls. But we weren't in the real world, this was the afterlife, the genuine *afterlife*, and John Darcy wanted to uproot heaven to complete his vision.

So, naturally, his vision didn't belong here.

"You need to leave." I commanded him. "Go back out through the Duplessis and never return."

"Oh no. Oh no no no that won't do at all. I'm staying right here." John Darcy grinned and adjusted his tie. "There's so much yet to be done, and I've never trusted an unsupervised crew."

Marble walls bent, and the temple's forward-facing columns melted away



as John Darcy's backdrop became less holy Grecian and more pastoral Arcadian. He now served as a silhouette against The Summerlands' transcendentalist fever dream of curling vines. The air around us started swirling, a distant hum erupting as shimmering gates open both in mid-air and along the flowing river. Nothing came through those gashes in reality, and nothing left heaven in turn, but their presence put me instantly on edge. Their existence was *wrong*. Shadows moved in the spacial wounds, faces slowly materialized out of the dark swirling fog and peered inward at us. Faceless Iconoclasts and the dead-eyed scientists of Parsons standing shoulder-to-shoulder... watching...

“Don't like that eh?” John Darcy's eyes grew wide. “Don't like watching a man build doors? Create new opportunities? That stupid tunnel might be the only way to get here, but it isn't the only way out. I figured that out quickly. My little payouts to the sweaty analysts at Parsons actually yielded fruit. I didn't understand even 10% of the technobabble and vaporware they churned out over the years of me being a *welcomed* guest on their board. But when I asked for doorways, they gave me doorways. And when you've got tunnels, you can start building highways.”

“Highways?”

“I’m going to fix a world ruined by High Strangeness by letting Heaven drift into it. The old world needs The Summerlands. The living and dead can mingle again, people will be able to reunite with loved ones just like you did, hell I’ll be the first to pull John Darcy Senior and Lady Darcy up from six feet under Westwood Village Memorial Park and dance with them! But. And this is an important detail... Above all else, every living soul will be willing to pay a hefty sum to be able to feel that closure. That warmth. Heaven, Glamour-touched, can be a *commodity*.”

“Your presence here is desecration!” Macy’s voice wavered even as she summoned her own glittering will-o-wisps, fox-fire. “You have to leave!”

“I’ll stay right here, thank you very much. This is a great vantage point for what I’m planning in the river valley below. That forest, all those trees, just imagined them forming the foundation of a temple to man’s control of nature. What’s true in life, now true in death. Ha! Ha ha!” John Darcy clasped his hands, his grin never slipping from his thin lips. “We’re so close to making *heaven* right.”

“Step aside.” Macy’s voice was now just a whisper in my ear, and John Darcy didn’t seem to flinch so-

I jumped to the side, and Macy's fire lurched forward past my shoulder. The orbs of flames erupted against John Darcy's suit, and are quickly sucked into his lapel flower, the red rose burning brighter with hues of yellow and orange flickering across the folds.

“Even a spellcaster of the dead has no bearing against the indomitable will of the living. If you wanted to best me, Kitsune, you shouldn't have taken the rattlesnake venom.”

“This is an untouched heaven!” Macy screamed, fur standing on edge as her form shimmered with a foxfire glow, I see that she can channel the midnight will-o-wisp across the marsh. Darcy made a mistake.

More orbs of fire launched across the polished marble floor of the temple, but the man at the door just kept eating them. Stoic in the face of the heat, John Darcy laughed and raised rotating metal-rimmed portals behind him, letting them cross and combine into three-dimensional space. A corral of interlocking wrought iron bars, filled with empty space ringing hollow. Macy's final barrage was followed by a few moments of silence, then a bolt of blue electricity leapt from John Darcy's fingertips and struck the Kitsune Queen,

knocking her back across the temple floor.

“Pathetic.” John Darcy grinned, his teeth alternating between unnaturally white and heavily coffee-stained. The realistic vs the idealistic, a mortal man who danced with the prospect of his own divinity.

As Macy snarled in pain, I lunged forward and punched John Darcy with a left hook to the face. His head twisted, but his stance didn’t buckle or break.

“Look, I know they don’t readily teach boxing in university these days but really you should look into practicing more on your own. You might have a spark of potential.” John Darcy rubbed his cheek, no visible wound present. I didn’t even split the skin. “Because there’s so much for us to build here, so much for us to cultivate. I look upon this ‘glorious’ Arcadia, and I immediately question WHY people think it’s all so grand. It’s just a forest and these poor imitation Grecian temples. Bah!”

“This is an untouched heaven!” Macy whimpered in pain as Caitlin looked at the Kitsune’s wounds, unsure of how to help.

“No it isn’t. Hasn’t been since I first crossed that tunnel. This is my

heaven now, not yours.” John Darcy held up a single finger, more electric sparks growing at the tip, a bright blue flare, mirrored lightning. “Now you know for sure.”

I stepped between John Darcy and the whimpering Macy just in time to catch the jolt of electricity across my chest. Burning, lashing pain shot across every inch of my body that took the energy, feeding the Glamour inside me. A heartbeat that was not my own welled inside my chest, the *othersoul*. My flower ate the fire, the lightning, the slash of Darcy’s spiritual blade. I consumed his energy, and John Darcy cursed under his breath, though his fingers spun up another bolt.

“I won’t let you hurt her, I won’t let anybody hurt her.”

“It’s too late for that, she’s already dead! You already moved on! But now you get a taste of the old ways and you *revert*, such a human tendency. Always looking backward, never forward! I can show you progress! You need not worry about that silly fox or coyote!”

I didn’t want his progress. I didn’t want to see him rip such serenity apart with his high rises and overpasses. A brief shock was worth standing in his way, taking his energy and eating it. Keeping The Summerlands safe, protecting Macy and Caitlin. My metamorphosed significant others stretched across worlds living and dead needed me, especially after all the havoc I’d invariably caused.

I would make things right.

My cowboy boots thumped off the carpeted temple floor as I again approached the crackling visage of John Darcy. His form started to fray at the edges, little slivers coming away to reveal a darker writhing mass of thorns underneath. But the lapel of the infinite flower stayed, his Glamour on display while mine was tucked within my own heart. He fed his desires, I fought them.

Once I drew close enough, John Darcy put an arm on my shoulder and sent fresh knives racing down my back. He grinned as he did it, as if the sudden electric agony was his way of welcoming an old friend. “Stay with me, you’re not dead like the rest... stay with me and we can reshape heaven in our image. You can even keep the mangy coyote as a pet--”

I plunged the Parson’s pen knife through his exposed lapel, the tiny blade piercing the crimson flower and going no further.

But it didn’t need to, the severed magic withered and died.

John Darcy didn’t curse me out, didn’t scream, and didn’t metamorphose into a giant flesh-eating thorn dragon to rip me asunder. Within half a second of being stabbed, he curtly smiled, flashed a small forked serpent’s tongue between his lips, and vanished without a trace.

“T-Thank you.” Macy panted as she rose to her feet, adjusting her wrinkled Goddess robes. The Temple of Metamorphosis, the terrace garden palace of The Summerlands, still stood strong despite the intrusion that removed its front half.

“That was insane!” Caitlin interrupted, her blended eyes wide with shock. “A wizard duel!”

“Hardly. I’m not a wizard or a witch for that matter. I’ve just... moved on. This is my home now.” A pained smile crossed Macy’s dark lips. “And now you’ll both have to depart so the doorways can close...”

“Wait, Macy, but what about *my* Glamour?”

“My original point still stands. I’m going to have to bind the magic inside you, to seal away the contamination. You will no longer be a source of glamor but-”

“But what?”

Macy refused to make eye contact with me, she knew something that I didn’t.

“I need to know, Macy. You need to tell me.”

When she looked back at me, there was a deep sadness in her slitted eyes. Her next words were somber.

“By welding it to your very soul, *you* will change instead. Your body will become canine.”

I didn't know why, but I felt like this would be the ultimate outcome, the dealt hand far too poetic not to be. So to stop the curse from spreading to others, I had to bind the glamor and become a beast. Maybe the old me would have protested, would have refused to instead live alone as a remote hermit. But I'd come too far to let everything crumble any further.

“Okay.”

As soon as I opened my mouth, the remaining half of the temple behind *us* turned to smoke, all of The Summerlands flickering out of my field of view. Caitlin, too, vanished.

“I've returned her beyond the tunnel. She'll be waiting for you.” Macy flexed her fingers, her eyes narrowing in concentration. A fresh fire erupted between her clawed fingertips, a will-o-wisp sprite that danced across her padded digits. Her many tails floated, undulating with a crackling electricity that sparked between the tufts of her brush.

All around us, the world faded to an off-white. Macy and myself are the only souls left alive in this perfect void.



“It won’t hurt. I promise.”

She was completely right though, it didn’t hurt when the blaze spread from her hands to consume my own skin, to twist me into a scrawny coyote with a russet pelt and amber eyes. The burning felt *good*, liberating even as the fur erupted across my entire body. Senses unleashed from an unknown animal corner of my mind, access instantly provided information that humans *shouldn’t* know. Colors became pointless, what mattered were the frequencies of sound beyond man’s ear and the scents beyond man’s nose that rushed me. The ‘empty’ void, it seemed, wasn’t quite so empty after all.

“It’s a taste of your new world before I place you back in the realm of the living.” Macy’s somber voice increasingly came from above as I realized that I was shrinking before the Kitsune.

Bones crunched and condensed as my hands lost their dexterity, my fingers turning stubby as thick pads formed on my palms. A similar change greeted my shrinking feet, digitigrade paws slipping out of my boots

“To run through the forests, bounding faster than you ever dreamed.” Macy audibly sighed and bent over to scratch the shifting human hair between my ears, the pattern merging with the rest of my pelt. “To feel raw nature, unrestrained and honest. To see the world beyond human senses... a joy and a curse.”

My face stretched forward, black and cold nose tipping a canid snout as I drank in more of the balanced pine and poppy aromas of heaven. Despite the white void, the air smelled of the earth after a soft rain. I wanted more, and yet I knew this moment existed only as a final goodbye, both to Macy and my humanity.

By the time I hit all fours, my digitigrade paws splayed ready to run, my new coyote tail wagging behind me as the finishing touches to my coat bristled and overlapped. There was no mirror nor pool of water for me to glimpse my reflection in, but the mass of snout between my eyes gave me a good enough idea of how doggish my changed face looked. Oh well, best to save that *this is the new me* moment of shock for once I was back in reality. Caitlin would love to see that one for sure.

“So this is it then?” I looked up at Macy, Kitsune Queen of The Summerlands. The way her tails glow juxtaposed against the static void makes my heart pound. Was this really *my* Macy anymore? I wasn’t so sure.

“We’ll see each other again.” Macy closed her eyes in concentration. “As for when, I have no clue. But there’s a world still warped by High Strangeness always shifting the rules. Maybe it’ll be a lifetime, maybe it’ll be next week. Who knows. But in the meantime, that Caitlin is a good match for you. I approve.”

“Uh... Thanks... Have any Ethereal Gods caught your eye recently?”

“A few lesser spirits, but they’re honestly so boring and distant. None of them have a sense of humor.” Macy opened her eyes for half a second to flash me a wink. “Not like you do.”

The ground without gravity and depth, trembled beneath me as reverberations shot up my legs into my ruffled pelt. The moment of my final departure drew near.

“I love you.” The void closed in on me, Macy herself drifted into the fog. Goodbyes never were easy, not when you had time to think them through.

“I love you too.”

When I opened my eyes, I rested on my haunches in the mountainous badlands on the edge of Sherman Town just before sunrise. No smoke filled the air, so at the very least the settlement was in better shape than the makeshift truck stop from a lifetime ago.

I found myself slipped into the very position of those touched by my glamor, my new muzzle still distorting my muted vision as I turned toward the distant hills, the faint patches of overgrown farms still visible in the shadow of cliffs of shale. Caitlin appeared beside me again, her cold nose brushing against mine as she poked, prodded, and teased my altered form.

“You look amazing! I can still tell it’s you with that hair style!” Caitlin

playfully bit at my ear, her teeth snagging near the tip so she could pull on my changed form further.

“That’s not my hair-” I shook my shaggy head, pawing at my new ears and cheek fluff. “It’s fur.”

“Eh close enough.” Caitlin kept up her play, despite my protests. “You’ve still got some of the curls, at least.”

We walked in tandem down the path from the mouth of the tunnel. Hints of another day’s dusk set in, but new senses read the world through sights and sounds unhindered by dying light. Cascadia was ours, the new Arcadia in the post-Upheaval world. I didn’t know I could feel this free. Running, playing, no... frolicking in the splendor of nature. My paws carried me beyond Caitlin, my lanky form bounding over her’s as we tussled and snapped with our jowls. Teeth so scary to the outsider, but we could read intent in each others’ beastly eyes. This was all just a game.

Maybe I could set things right with Alderman Walter and the rest... maybe I could explain what happened and find some form of forgiveness. Cooler heads would prevail, and I knew that Caitlin would vouch for me. Maybe.

“You’re being so slow!” Caitlin bounded ahead of me, shaggy gray tail wagging as she drank in the rising sun. The air hung crisp and dewy, the high noon heat still hours away. The silence upon Sherman Town let me know that the other coyotes already departed. As to which way, well, their scent was on wind. I didn’t think we would follow them yet, not with appropriate blame still cast my direction.

My path was less sure than when I started, choice paralysis spreading through me. Far too many options weighed on my mind as to where my four legs would carry me. My flesh shifted because I touched heaven, and my body would never be the same. But with Caitlin at my side and Macy watching over me from parts unknown, I knew that despite the constant events that left me reeling, everything would turn out to be okay.