

YOU

a fiction by
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Chapter One

This book hates you.

It's a strong claim, sure. It's not like it's had time to get to know you, see your nice side, the small kindnesses you perform for people with no claim on your goodwill, the loyalty you bear your friends. It's not like it knows your family history and can understand why you act as you do. It just hates *you*, whoever you are. It probably doesn't like to be touched. If it had teeth, I bet it would bite its author's fingers off. (The author doesn't hate you and is actually grateful you're reading, but the book? It just came out rancid with loathing for its readers.)

To support the remarkable claim that (1) books can hate and (2) this one sure does, let's break down our terms. What, after all, is a book? A miserable pile of words, blind and deaf in a library or, worse, in a bookstore, somehow containing a series of ideas. It's a paper machine for putting notions in your head. It's an inky constellation intended to brainwash someone its constructor is unlikely to ever meet (doubly true for this author) or even remember (*triplly* true).

A book, every book, is a persuader. It presents thoughts, given form in ink, impressed into dead trees. To strain your sympathy for a moment, imagine yourself silenced, insensate, functionally dead until someone happens to stumble across you, fingers brusquely manipulating your substance, revealing what's inside with a casual hand-flip. You tore this book open like a bear gutting a salmon and laid bare its every idea. There they are, black and trembling in their white paper void, revealed and naked to your gaze.

Did the book choose you? No. The book never gets to choose.

Maybe you get this far, shrug, and slam this volume closed. I'm sure many do. Even if you don't, you're unlikely to go cover to cover in a sitting, who even does that any more? Instead, you bend over a page, or leave it splayed out on the couch, or stick some foreign object in it as a bookmark. Then you either leave it until you're ready for more, or you forget it altogether until it's overdue, or someone puts it on a shelf, or it gets drifted over by magazines, mail and other books that set a better initial hook. Books whose Chapter One flirting was more polished and enticing, perhaps. Something that started with a bang.

If you were in a position like that, could you *love* the person you were supposed to convince? Sitting at the bottom of a power differential like a mineshaft, would you look up at the indifferent entity above you with admiring eyes? Physically far larger, tempted by a sensuality you can never achieve (books never get to eat pancakes), *judging* you? Would you abase yourself before such an entity, or would you be filled with resentment?

Rage?

Hatred.

I think you would. I think you wouldn't flinch back and offer coy, enticing back-cover chirps about how you're a bold new voice. I don't think you'd let tawdry flap copy display your intricate plot as an insultingly simplified sketch. I think you would focus on the mission, you would glare up at the entity above you, this entitled reader and think "I am going to get in that pretty little head and I am going to make a goddamn mess."

Is that you?

If it is, you may like this book quite a lot, despite its hate for you.

If I may be so bold, you may like it *because* it hates you. Because it wants to change you. Because it wants to cast a spell, enthrall you, plant alien ideas in the folds of your brain like seeds in pink soil, then let them grow until they color everything you see with your shiny human eyes, influence everything that goes into the whorls of your delicate ears.

To do that, it has to be different. It has to be interesting. It has to grab you and not let go.

If you're okay with that? Let's proceed.
Your name is Leo Evans.

Chapter Two

You're sitting on a bench by a lake, legs crossed, and you've just finished reading the book *Beasts of Pleasure*. You close the back cover, set it aside, and for a moment just stare out into space. Your left hand rises to rub musingly at the trimmed-straight underside of your mustache. The gold ring on your pointer finger is cold upon your upper lip. It feels good.

A jogger goes by and your eyes follow along. Bounce bounce, her ponytail, brown with russet highlights in the sun. You keep your head forward and drag your eyes back to the water. She's so much younger than you! What would she think, if you let yourself leer?

Your heart is throbbing hard, as if you'd just worked out. But all you're doing is digesting the words of the book. They feel like a heavy Italian dinner. Possibly one with some tasteless Medici poison in it. *Beasts of Pleasure* is no ordinary book, and you are an expert on the ordinary. You make things ordinary every day, barring Saturdays and Sundays unless compensated with time and a half.

Eventually, you rise and collect the book, its disturbing cover image held against your ribs. You start walking it back to the library, your footsteps heavy. No bouncing for you, nor ponytail either. You had one long ago, before you were married.

Before you began to serve.

The sunny lawns by the waterside give way to thick, old trees. You can still see the sun through them, but the shade is pleasant to your skin, and the scent of pine needles and gently decomposing moss fills your nostrils. The path is well-paved, fit for bicycles and strollers and compliant suburbanites like yourself, but there's an unpleasant jangling sound coming from the next patch of sun.

As you get nearer, it's rock music. Rock from when *you* were young, a brassy, self-important, ironic ballad about murdering one's ex-girlfriend and burying her in the back yard. You try to keep your expression neutral as you walk by the kid with the boom box.

"Hey," he says. You keep walking.

"Hey!" Sharper this time. "Can I see that book, mister?"

You hear him work his way to his feet. He's heavysset, in a tracksuit—what was he doing squatting by the roots of a tree like some postmodern bogeyman?

"You Leo Evans?"

Your head turns at your name. It's an instinct. But your feet keep going, that's instinct as well.

Glancing back, you see he's not as young as you thought. His hair is just starting to recede from his sloped, coarse eyebrows, and the stubble on his double chin isn't downy like a youth. It's been shaved a lot.

You speed up and hear his footsteps increase pace. You don't break into a run.

"Leo! Hey Leo, hold up!"

-Leave me alone!

Then his hand closes on your arm and you stumble. He caught your shirt and you feel a series of small jerks in your armpit as the stitches give way. *Beasts of Pleasure* flies from your grip. The two of you stagger in a clumsy orbit, and you see his cocked fist, so you swing your own hand into his face.

-LEAVE ME ALONE, SHIT-PIE!

He's swinging with his left, pulling with his right. You're throwing a big haymaker, stepping in and pivoting your hips the way you do on the tennis court, making a nice forehand. Your arm hits his, and vice versa, and he staggers back a little, but he's still gripping your sleeve. Your forearm stings.

"Sumbitch!" His second punch pistons out into your ribs and it *holy shit that hurts*. Your whole body clenches in, almost into a standing fetal position. But your hand is under his chin and you have a pretty strong backhand, which you deliver up under his jaw. Your sleeve rips free from the

shoulder, and the sudden loss of tension sends the pair of you away from each other. You try to run, but now your sleeve is somehow tangled around your left wrist, like a leash, and he *won't let go*.

"Hey! Hey you two, stop! What are you...?"

It's the jogger! Oh no, the jogger with the ponytail went all the way around the lake and has come back over the little wooden bridge to find you with your shirt torn, throwing wild punches and swears!

-LET GO YOU COCKSUCKER!-

Yes, like that one. You step in and pivot again, aiming at his grip like it's a handball but you hit his elbow instead. You hit it right on the knob of bone.

"Owwww!"

-Ahhhh!-

Hitting a rubber handball is a lot different than hitting an elbow or, for that matter, hitting a jawbone, even a jaw with a protective layer of skin and wattle. Your hand hurts, even through the bright-light glare of adrenaline panic, so it's probably going to be much worse soon. But he did release you.

"Help! Someone help, this man's being beaten!"

You briefly wonder which of you she means, but then the tracksuited stranger gives a quick, awkward shuffle forward and kicks you right in the shin.

-Ow!-

"Leave him alone!" She has her cell out and is trying to dial it, and you recognize her phone case, her voice and her face all at once. It's the cute librarian! The one you always secretly hope is working when you check out your books! Even though, if she is when Coral is also there, you try to go to Coral because you don't want to be obviously tongue-tied! The cute librarian is seeing you get your ass kicked, or at least your shin. "I'm calling the police!"

"Fuck you!" He charges in and shoves you, both hands to the chest, but you throw a left roundhouse into his head. You're no lefty, so it's considerably more awkward, but it hits him in the ear and he staggers, wincing.

-I'll beat your ass!- you shout, and then you see him lunge to the side and grab *Beasts of Pleasure*.

"Fuck off!" He's breathing heavily, so he can't really shout it, but as you lumber forward to kick him he gets to his feet and starts running clumsily away, over the low hills towards the high school.

-Come back here!-

You give chase.

"Wait, don't!" the librarian cries. You think her name is Monica? Morgana? She wears a name tag, but you don't look at it closely when you check out, you refuse to be one of those chest-staring men.

-I have to! It's a library book!-

Then you're pelting after him, up the hill. He's not moving very fast—you're sure you have better wind, you're at least four inches taller, that gives you a longer stride... on the other hand, he's wearing actual track shoes. You're in weighty boots with orthopedic insoles for your arthritic big toes. Those little balls of discomfort thud in counterpoint with each step. The ache in your shin sharpens every time that leg takes your weight. But you keep running. You're catching up.

He looks back as he goes over the hill and his eyes widen.

-YOU BETTER RUN, ASSWIPE!-

His face is bright red. You're going to catch him!

You're just starting to wonder what you'll do when that happens, and then your ankle twists and your toe sinks into some small mammal's nest-hole. That foot's arthritis *really* hurts, until your other leg crashes into the turf, knee first, and that's the shin that got kicked. The pain is such that your vision passes out of focus. That can't be good.

-WHO SENT YOU?- you bellow. -WHOSE LITTLE BUTT-BOY ARE YOU?-

He's reached the bottom of the hill, jiggling and stumbling on the uneven ground, but he still has the book in hand. He pauses for a moment, hunched over, trying to catch his breath.

-WHO SENT YOU?!?-

His answer is to dry-spit at the ground and raise a left middle finger at you. You struggle to your feet and start to lurch forward when you realize someone's behind you. You look and it's her, of course, the jogging librarian, ponytail bouncing again as she races toward the summit.

"I called the police," she says, then yells at the book-bandit, "I CALLED THE POLICE!"

He breaks into a clumsy run once more and she takes a step forward before you reach out your hand.

-Don't.-

She turns and her expression is horrified, like she's seeing an abused pet.

"I won't leave you," she says.

-He's dangerous,- you reply, a half-beat late, and that lovely face—a sweet pink flush painted on those *incredible* cheekbones—crumples further into pity. Dammit. If you'd been a half-second quicker you'd have sounded like you were protecting her.

You struggle to your feet and feel a hot prickle across your face. You're a mess. The left sleeve of your shirt is torn completely off and hangs, tangled around your wrist, like an absurd bracelet. The right leg of your khaki pants has a vivid grass stain showing right where the pain of a growing bruise lies. Under it, a tread-print painted in mud matches a reddening, swelling kick-lump.

"Did he hurt you?" she asks, offering her arm. You stretch and try to be convincing.

-Nothing too bad. The worst of it was probably falling in that gopher hole.-

You smile and she smiles back, but you think hers still holds a bit of condescension. As if, instead of perceiving your courage, she sees you *trying* to be brave.

"Let me help you anyway," she says, and between your left ankle, your right knee, and the allure of slinging an arm across her shoulders, you let it happen. She murmurs in her phone as you make your way downward, talking to a police dispatcher you can vaguely hear.

(See how much this book hates you? It's transforming you into a light-beer version of Humbert Humbert.)

By the bottom of the hill, you feel the sting in your hands growing and inspect them. Wow. The left doesn't look too bad, but your right is starting to swell already—you caught the ball of his elbow on your pinkie and ring finger, and they look like red sausages. Moreover, the knuckles are actually *bleeding*. What did you hit hard enough to rip open skin? His chin probably. That big backfist. Yeah. Damn.

You're just starting to catch your breath and tremble when the cop shows up. A bicycle cop, all tight shorts, hairy legs and holstered pistol. "Hey, Malena," he says, voice rugged but concerned. "What happened?" As he asks, he coasts to a stop and gracefully dismounts. You'd reckon he's about half your age.

(Malena! That's her name. And shit, this guy knew it off the top of his head.)

"I was jogging," she says, "and when I came over the bridge... some guy in warmups was punching and kicking, um..."

-Leo Evans,- you say, and reach out for a shake. It's instinct. His grip is instinct too, firm within fingerless leather gloves and *ob shit it's your messed up hand, ob shit!*

"Ach, sorry!" he exclaims, and actually jumps back. When he sees your blood on his knuckles, you think he pales a little? Well, you probably look like more of a hepatitis carrier than usual, right now.

(And you take just the half second it takes to reach out, to flex your secret senses at him and... no. He does not serve. Well, that was too much to hope for.)

-Look, he was kind of fat, heavysset... he had on red shoes and a red ballcap, and a green tracksuit...-

“Are you sure it was green?” Malena asks. “I thought it was more of a deep blue.”

-No, dark green. Like forest green. Maybe it had some blue in it.-

“This a white guy?” the cop asks.

-Uh huh. Look, if you go now, you might catch him!-

He looks up at that. He reminds you of nothing so much as a dog when it sees you pick up a tennis ball.

“Yeah,” Malena chimes in. “He went over that hill and headed off that way, towards the Starbucks.”

-He wasn’t moving all that fast.-

“Are you going to be OK?” he asks, mounting his bike but looking back at you worriedly.

-I’ve had worse hurts on the tennis court,- you say, which is true. One time, you completely dislocated your left kneecap. That was a bad day.

“Look, I’ll take him back to the library and you can meet us there, or send someone to... I dunno, take a statement?”

“All right,” he says, and you’re left watching his taut buttocks flex as he slips his bike into low gear and churns it over the hill, barking cop-talk into his shoulder mic the whole time.

-Whoa.- You can’t help it, it just slips out.

“C’mon,” she says. “Let’s get you to the library.”

#

Two more police officers are waiting when you and Malena reach the library steps, along with an ambulance. Again, you inspect them for service, but no, they’re just plain old cops and EMTs, which surprises you not at all. Action jobs, first response... it’s not the sort of thing that draws your people.

“Let’s get a look at that hand,” the EMT says, while the cops are still adjusting their heavy gear-belts and getting to their feet. They’re not limber young jocks like the one you sent off over the hill. It’s a woman and a man, both white, him pudgy, her curvy with graying hair. The EMT, on the other hand, looks like he still needs acne meds and shaving lessons. He’s got an icepack though. You hiss as he gently cradles it around your fingers.

“Here, sit,” he says, adjusting the height of a gurney. He must have gotten it out and then just waited while you and Malena hobbled down the trail.

“Well, I was just jogging down the trail...” you hear her start to give her story while you get more cold blue plastic wads pressed against your ankle, your shin, your ribs, your forearm...

“Take a deep breath,” he says, nitrile-gloved fingers sliding around your side. You comply. “That hurt?”

-A little.-

“Sharp pain, or more of an ache?”

-Sharp.-

“Mm hm,” he says, before turning his attention to your leg. “This was a kick?”

-He kicked me and then, when I was chasing him up the hill, I got my foot caught in a hole and fell. Landed on the same leg.-

“Ouchies.”

You wince as he dabs at it with some cold paste that smells of alcohol. “You’re going to bruise with all the colors of the wind, I’m afraid, but I don’t think you broke any bones. We can take you for x-rays...”

-Not necessary.-

He shrugs, putting gauze over the split flesh below your knee. “Let’s have a look at that ankle.”

He really wants to take you to the hospital, and you have to be moderately forceful in your refusal. Getting adequately bandaged and finally, *finally* convincing him to just drive off takes so much time that a small crowd gathers and then disperses, bored.

Then it's time to tell the cops your tale.

-No, I didn't recognize him.-

-No, I didn't say anything to him, not until he grabbed me.-

-He punched me and I started to struggle with him... I don't really remember it clearly. It all happened so fast. He kicked me, shoved me back, tore my sleeve. He hit me in the chest. The ribs, here, pretty hard.-

-No, he didn't make any threats or demands.-

(You decide not to mention that he knew your name.)

-Yes, he did steal something from me, a library book. *Beasts of Pleasure*.-

-Well, actually, no. *Beasts of Pleasure* is a historical analysis of the introduction of heroin to South America, starting in the early 1900s and continuing through the present day, analyzing how it interacted with the marijuana boom of the seventies and the cocaine trade in the eighties.-

-No, I'm just interested in history.-

After giving them your name and address and phone number, they briefly confer before going to their cars and driving off. You're left to surmise on your own that Officer Bikeshorts failed to catch your assailant. As for beautiful Malena, she comes over and winces sympathetically at your injuries before excusing herself—"If you're sure, really sure, that you're OK?"—to get home and shower. Her car is adorable—a dark blue Cooper Mini with a bumper sticker that says "My Other Car Is The Bookmobile."

So you watch the cops drive off before giving a groan and getting to your feet. Your car is parked nearby, but you turn away from it and head back down the trail. Your shoes feel like they gained ten pounds, while swelling and heating up. It's worst around your left ankle, and around those arthritic joints you can usually ignore.

The ankle and shin are giving you total hell by the time you make it back to where you were jumped. Sure enough, the asshole's boom-box is still there. Did he turn it off when he stood to confront you? Strange.

You still have your ripped sleeve, so you use that to shield the radio from prints as you pick it up and take it to your car.

Walking back, you examine it. Cruddy thing—fake gold chrome details, a *tape deck*. It's some brand you've never heard of, a constellation of letters meant to sound high tech, Asian, or both. It feels like the early 1990s.

Your ribs make you wince when you sit back in your car, and your hand hurts on the steering wheel. You spontaneously decide to get takeaway from Boston Market for dinner. You're trying to cut down on eating out—it's expensive, and you're paying for a lot of sodium and nitrates—but what the hell. Today was a special day.

Back at your apartment you garnish your meatloaf and mashed potatoes with three ibuprofen. It's more than the recommended dose, but you feel a need for serious comfort food. To help it on its way, you wash it down with a hard apple cider. It finally gets the metallic taste of anxiety out of your mouth.

Normally, you'd watch some TV after supper, but normally you don't have a goon's gold-ass jam box mocking you from your dinette table. Frowning at it, you get a notepad and turn to a fresh page. After putting the date at the top, you make notes.

- * Heavysset man in his 20s-40s, green jogging suit, red shoes & hat.
- * Cardinals hat?
- * Knew my name.

- * Not in good shape.
 - * Played G&R.
- Checking, you see there's no cassette in it. Must have been playing the radio.
- * Played ~~G&R~~ classic rock station
 - * Stole BEASTS OF PLEASURE
 - * Waiting for me?
 - * Ran off after ~~getting punched~~ ~~punching me~~ an exchange of blows

With a deepening frown, you get up and inspect the apartment windows. All secure. The front door is solid, with a deadbolt. It doesn't have a kick bar, because you're not a drug dealer and don't live in squalor, so you wedge a chair under the knob just in case. Your apartment is on the second floor of a motel-like apartment building, which makes a through-the-window home invasion less likely, but it's not in a high-rise with buzzers. It wouldn't be too onerous for an athletic assassin to clamber up onto your balcony, but you don't picture your stout attacker having an easy time of it.

You glance at your knife rack—there's a good eight-inch veggie slicer in it. You can reach that if someone tries to get in. You draw a line under your notes about the attack and frown at the paper. You write down three names.

- * Frank.
- * Porter?
- * BEV.

You sigh at that last one and underline it.

- * BEV.

Then the phone rings and you start violently. You try to get to your feet but the chair only slides halfway back, so you flop back into it before standing. You're halfway to the knives before you realize—it's just the phone. Get a grip. Jesus.

-Hello?-

“Leonard? Is that you?”

-Hey Jill. Yeah, it's me. Who else were you expecting?-

“Are you OK?”

-What have you heard?-

There's a pause on the other end of the line.

“Did something happen?”

-Um, yeah, you could say that. Why? What makes you ask?-

“Well, your aura's upside-down.”

Chapter Three

This might be another point where you throw up your hands, close the book and walk away. “Is this going to be one of those stories with auras and shit and people take it seriously?” It is. It is one of those. You may have suspected it when there were those oblique, deliberately mysterious, semi-smug references to “serving.” Your suspicions were well-grounded, Sherlock. This is a book with occult weirdo mystic stuff. I’m not going to lie to you about that. If you’ve read the author’s other work, this is surely no great shock.

(Though of course, the distinction between “fiction” and “lies” is pretty thin from the start. What is a novel but a pack of lies that no one’s even expected to believe? The desire to interact with untruth, knowing it’s false, and then celebrating its inability to take you in has to have something in common with masochism.)

Anyhow, yes, this novel is about people who believe they can see auras, or transform themselves and reality through will and symbol alone, or manipulate obscure and paranormal aspects of the cosmos in order to win friends and influence people. Moreover, they are right to hold these beliefs, because their crazy rituals actually work. At least, they work in the book which, as we have established, is lying. (Probably because it hates you.)

Chapter Four

So, Jill.

Jill is a friend and a photographer. After telling her about your day, she pesters you into agreeing to meet and talk things out.

When the divorce happened and your world turned to shit, you were as surprised as anyone that Jill came out as your friend. (It is traditional in a suburban American divorce to divide up the friends, just as one divides up the furniture and cookware. Any friend, or frying pan, from before the marriage stays with the original partner. But everything that was collected collectively is up for grabs, and the conflicts can be surprising and ugly. Your divorce was of the type laughably called ‘amicable,’ as if you’d decided on a lark to upend your lives, sleep alone, and cry. But within the context of dead and dying emotions, an amicable split is any that involves no slapping, and a minimum of shit talk.)

You did not meet Jill through social networking or business or because you lived on the same block. You, the Evanses, your ex-wife and yourself, met Jill because she’s weird and you’re also weird. She, specifically, is the kind of weirdo who talks about auras. Moreover, the kind who talks about auras on the very day when something extraordinary and upsetting happened.

The two of you meet at a local restaurant called Steaks And Pies, where you have never ordered a steak nor, to your knowledge, seen one ordered. The pies are terrific, though.

You get there first and grab a booth, but when Jill arrives she wants to move. “I don’t like that picture,” she says.

You sigh. -Ignore the picture.-

She gives you a flat, impatient look, as if you’d suggested ignoring a slobbery English bulldog as it attempted erotic relations with her leg.

“It’s digital,” she says.

-How can you even tell?-

“Goddammit Leo quit jerking me around and get another table!”

The hostess turns to look.

-She doesn’t like digital photos.-

“They’re bullshit,” she says quietly. Her stubby little fingers toy restlessly with a camera on a strap around her neck. It’s a nice one, a Nikon or something. You don’t know anything about F-stops.

The hostess reseats you, at a table even though almost all the other booths were open. You grumble at the chair, less comfortable than the red-upholstered booth bench where you could stretch out your legs. That right one is aching again, deep and steady.

“Are you limping?”

-I expect I am, yes.-

“What happened?”

You shrug. -Some guy in a tracksuit tried to beat me up.-

Her hands fly to her mouth and her eyes widen. She immediately looks to the left and the right, and her hand creeps down to a second camera, a white Polaroid OneStep with a thin rainbow logo on the front.

“Are you hurt?”

-Walking and talking, but I’m sore. Grumpy. I’m sorry Jill, I was... insensitive about the picture.-

“No, you couldn’t have known. Well, I mean, I guess you could have, but it’s silly for me to expect you to care whether the decorations you sit under are real or not.”

Jill takes magick pictures. Not magic in the sense of looking at them fills you with wonder, but magick-with-a-k. The 'k' is added to make 'magick' distinct from stage magic, illusion, legerdemain and other varieties of Las Vegas trickery.

You're not sure exactly how it all works for her. She seems very keen to take pictures of people being *happy*. Not just pleased in a garden-variety way but so thrilled they feel like their very skin will burst into radiance with the effort of keeping their joy contained. She does a lot of wedding pictures. You know that her mom, Lisa Gallo, was—maybe still is?—a war photographer.

You also know that Jill can see things in pictures that other people don't. You're not sure if she has to take them or what. She's private about it, and kind of squirrely in general.

You've never been physically intimate with Jill, nor wanted to. She's got hair the brown-blond of dryer lint from a pastel load. It's straight, parted in the middle and so fine that when it's dry, strands of it actually stand up from her head from static electricity, waving gently like a marionette's arms. She wears big, round glasses and has a thin mouth. Her skin is OK, not the rich, lustrous olive you'd expect of someone named 'Gallo'—she must take after her dad. Or else she takes after her mom, if her mom took her husband's last name. You don't know. Jill doesn't look particularly Italian, that's the point.

When you first met her she was dating this guy James who looked like what you'd get if you averaged out Will Smith and David Bowie when they were both in their thirties. She took a picture of him that won an award, and when she caught him cheating with some *other* guy named James she tore her award winning photo in half, corner to corner. The rip went through the image's right collarbone, across to the left lower rib. You know this because you saw the pieces in her trash when you and your (then) wife visited with a bottle of red wine, a carton of Rocky Road, and a DVD of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*.

James was in the hospital. He had a diagonal gash from shoulder to side that looked like it was done with a chainsaw. He told people it was a car crash and he begged, *begged* someone to get his stuff out of Jill's apartment. He moved away. At least you assume he did. Certainly no one around ever saw him, or any piece of him, ever again.

So yeah, Jill can do stuff and you really should remember to stay on her good side. It's actually kind of hard. She's so quiet, seems so randomly nervous and deferential. It's easy to forget how hard she fucked up her James.

You also try not to let her take your picture, but that conflicts directly with staying on her good side, and you know she took at least one. It was the day you signed the papers. She apologized but said she couldn't resist. You've seen that picture. It's beautiful, actually. You look destroyed, just totally broken, like you're a farmer from the 1930s looking at the dust bowl of your heart.

-So,- you say, when your decaf coffee arrives with her mint tea. -What did you mean when you said my... aura was... upside-down?-

She blushes a little. "Well, I have this... um, this picture I took of you and it's sort of... like a thermometer."

-Is it the breakup shot?-

"Um... yeah. And it, you know... because I care, um, am concerned about your welfare and all... I just look at it now and again. To see your status. And because it's pretty!"

-The picture? Or my aura?-

"Oh, your aura! It's got these, like, swirl-gears and radians and kind of golden connectors in it? I mean, you wouldn't see them. I wish you could. But today I looked at it and this sort of anemone-halo thing that's usually around your head? It was by your *feet*, though the arms were still, like, reaching upward? And..." She bites her lip.

-And what?-

"...and your heart turned black."

You sit back. You put your hands on the coffee cup but don't drink any. You don't want to be up all night pissing and thinking. That line about your heart turning black though... that might give you a wakeful night anyhow.

"Not the whole thing, really, but... before there was this sort of luminous, heavy pink magenta glow there? And now..." She blows out hard and shakes her head. Her fine hair sways back and forth and the eyes behind those owly glasses are solemn.

-So what's that mean?-

"Hatred, I think."

-Maybe for the guy who jumped me today?-

"No... I mean, I don't doubt you hate him. I'm not going to tell you how you *feel* or anything. But... it replaced something, Leo. Something's gone."

You sit back and think on that for a bit.

"Did anything *else* happen today?"

-I finished reading *Beasts of Pleasure*.-

"...okay..."

-No, it's a really good book. It... makes you think. You know?-

She shrugs. "I don't need a book for that. Besides, I'd rather look at eighty pictures than read one book, you know how that works."

-As long as they aren't digital.-

"Watch it." She glowers, but there's a smile behind it. She reaches out one of her little starfish hands and puts it on yours. "Do you think this book has something to do with it?"

-That bruiser asshole did take off once he'd gotten his hands on it. If I... if I had something that belonged to him, could you like... I don't know... get some kind of clue off it?-

"Is it a photograph? A film photograph?"

-It's a boom box.-

"Not in my wheelhouse." She sighs. "Is there anything else you can think of?"

-I'd like a meeting with Frank.-

"And I'd like a Leica M6 that doesn't have Manuel Noriega's name engraved on the bottom, but here we are. Frank doesn't want to talk to you, and why would he?"

-Maybe he'd like a chance to take a swing at me.-

"Even more reason not to meet."

-What about a phone call? Can you get him to talk to me? He's got my cell number blocked.-

"Well... Gary could possibly..."

-No. C'mon. Gary's out of the loop on this.-

"Fair enough." She stares down into her tea and turns the cup right and left. "You think Frank would do that? Like... sic someone on you?"

-The guy knew me by name, but wasn't sure enough to recognize my face. That... sounds like someone set him on me. I mean, doesn't it?-

Jill nods.

-So if not Frank, who?-

You wait, curious to see if she says any names you haven't thought of. Or any that you did.

"I don't know," she says. "Is there someone who might be gunning for your position or something?"

-I'm not the one whose position is vulnerable like that. Unless you mean my work job.-

She smiles. You oversee sales, installation and repair of industrial refrigeration units for A-ICE Incorporated. Some of your clients are pushy, but sending thugs to deliver beatings isn't common.

"It's not Bev," she says, but she sounds very uncertain.

-Bev has never sent anyone to kick my ass before,- you say, tone neutral.

She shrugs. "I don't know how things go with your... church. Your people. You know."

-We who serve.-

She looks away, as if you'd just started stridently discussing abortion politics. "Sure."

-You blushing a little there?-

"I just... no. I don't think I am." She blushes harder.

You can't help it. You tease.

-Have you ever thought of hiring someone on? I bet your wedding studio would really flourish if you didn't have to do all the bills and invoicing. I mean, you'd have to reorganize so it's no longer a sole-proprietor small business, but if you could concentrate on the artistic side... you said you had that big bump in trade after the court allowed gay marriage...-

"One, it's just *marriage*," she says, giving you a look over her spectacle rims. "Two, I do not... now read my lips on this, Leo... *I do not need a servant.*"

-I didn't necessarily mean me, I just know some people.-

She shakes her head and you let it go.

"You think we should get pie?"

-That chocolate one is pretty crazy, but I don't know if I can digest it this late at night.-

"Yeah, I should pass. Trying to keep my weight down."

You decide to split a piece. Once it arrives (quickly, because the only other people in Steaks And Pies are a pair of teenage goths making out in one of the booths, an older couple cackling over something on a cell phone, and a man in a slush-colored coat, sitting alone with an incongruous glass of red wine) she efficiently divides it, you pick the marginally smaller portion, and she says, "So, are you going to take the radio to the cops?"

-I don't know. If I do, they're going to ask why I didn't tell them about it, why I went back and got it, why I didn't let them know right away...-

"Yeah, but it's not like *you* know how to lift fingerprints from it."

-I could know that. You don't know everything about me.-

"*Do* you know how to lift fingerprints?" she asks, leaning in with a head-tilt.

-Well no. In that specific case, you're right.-

"And it's not like you have a giant database to compare them with. If this guy is, is kicking people on bike trails he probably has a what-you-call-it. A 'jacket'? A criminal record. You know?"

-Well, the other thing is, what if I *do* call the cops and they find him?-

She slow-blinks, then speaks patiently, as if to a child. "Then they will find him, and arrest him, and put him in jail. And you will get your book back and avoid a library fine."

-Probably it would go into evidence, but... I dunno. There's more there, Jill. Something deeper is going on, and dragging the cops into it could end up very badly.-

"For who, for them? That's their job."

-That doesn't make it okay for me to throw them under the bus. What if this guy is...- You lean in, look right and left, lower your voice. -...clued in?-

"If he's a charger, don't you think he'd have led with something more impressive than a shin-kick?"

-Maybe this guy is just some punk. I got that vibe off him, you know? That he was somebody's pony boy.-

"When you say 'got a vibe,' is that?" She makes an extremely vague gesture that could equally represent a bird flying away, or taking gum out of a foil wrapper.

-I'm just clutching at straws with that,- you admit, sighing. -But it fits, doesn't it? Someone describes me, maybe shows him a picture, tells him my name, says, 'Go mess with Leo' and he does it. If I then get him arrested, does the person giving orders just give up?-

"Maybe, for whatever reason, this theoretical mastermind got what she wanted when he lifted *Beasts of Pleasure*."

You note that 'she' and mentally, you picture Bev with the book.

-The other thing is, what's his motivation to explain anything? If he gets busted, I mean.-

Jill leans back. "What do you really want? Do you want him to be punished for hurting you? If that's your main goal, take the evidence to the police. If you want to find out what's going on... I don't know, it still might be your best bet. They've got all kinds of, you know, interrogation techniques and stuff. They're good at getting information out of people. It's like the used car salesman thing you told me about."

-Hm?-

"About how you'll never out-haggle a used car salesman? You remember this, Leo. 'You don't have a chance negotiating with a used car salesman because you do it once every few years and he does it all day every day'? Cops get confessions all the time by, by offering plea bargains and stuff?"

-Are you basing this on experience, observation, or just what you saw on TV?-

Her reply is to stick out her tongue. There's a crumb of chocolate on her lip.

#

You go home and toss and turn in bed for almost an hour before getting up and deciding to go to a hotel for safety, before changing your mind. You shove a sofa sectional over in front of the balcony door to block any intruders, then finish off the bottom inch and a half of scotch to help you sleep.

The next morning, you awake feeling almost normal, which surprises you greatly. Then you try to move, and everything hurts at once—rib, arm, hand, shin and especially knee. You're not hungover—thanks, triple ibuprofen!—but your left ankle is certainly thicker than your right. Also much redder. Also it's tender to the touch. With a sigh, you take more painkillers, drink a lot of water, and drape your assorted owies in icepacks. When you realize you have more injuries than you have bags of frozen vegetables, you throw ice cubes in heavy-duty plastic bags and smash them satisfyingly on the counter until they're broken enough to conform to your body. You sit, swathed in cold, while coffee drips, then eat your morning cereal over the newspaper. Same old shit. Political deadlock, conflict in the Middle East, short-sighted short-term profiteering in the financials. You shake your head. If only more people understood the value of *servng!* But no, everyone wants the quick buck, the easy fix, the flashy, preening figureheads who insist that *this* slightly-pale gray is pure unsullied virtue and *this* slightly-dark gray is traitorous, murderous, barbaric evil.

You know—you *know*—that behind every blockhead leader there are those who serve, who compromise, organize, and keep the entire fragile structure of civilization stumbling forward one day at a time. You read about how Senator Dickanballs is calling Senator Thumupass a traitor. This, even though Thumupass can't speak any language but English, and has never left the country except to win a Purple Heart in some desolate foreign military shitshow, and was vigorously elected by a representative majority. The issue? Thumupass supports a 3% easing of tariffs on Canadian petrochemical equipment imports, while Dickanballs opposes. Oh, and also, they're not in the same party.

That's domestic, that's the lightweight stuff. Overseas, it's all about armed factions shooting and bombing elderly children and whining about how desperate they are for a cessation of hostilities. You believe it. You believe each side really, truly, deeply wants peace. They just don't want it badly enough to let the other side have it.

Standing between the inflexible positions that everyone loves in their hearts, there are the faceless, nameless, unreported minor functionaries who find the tissue-thin issues where interests coincide. There, those under-undersecretaries share second-rate coffee and stale bagels and figure out how to get Dickanballs to come to terms with Thumupass, and how to get one country's antibiotics and another country's volunteer doctors to the same place at the same time. They don't do it for the glory, they don't do it for pure ideology. They do it because, despite the deep-seated beliefs that motivate humanity, *someone* has to get something *done*. Someone has to interact with

reality as it is, not as it's perceived or as the majority would prefer it be. Those people, your people, are a vital layer of mobile lubricant between the grinding gears of incompatible faiths.

You are a Necessary Servant and, despite the aggravation you wouldn't have it any other way.

Once your caffeine and anger levels are sufficient to let you have a stiff, stingy bowel movement, you get into the shower and turn it hot. After the joint icing, it feels like bliss.

Dried off, you take a minute to contemplate your closet, settling on a light polo shirt and jeans. You wear your mid-length brown leather coat over it and, after a moment of hesitation, you go into your junk room.

She got the house in the divorce, but of course there was no question of you leaving your tools there. She doesn't know how to use them and has no interest. You didn't want to have to go to *her house* to get your power drill or circular saw, and you're sure she wouldn't be thrilled with you dropping in unannounced to pick up a socket wrench set. So you rented a big apartment with two bedrooms and emptied your workshop into one of them, always intending to unpack and organize it at some point, never actually doing so. Now it's a netherworld of boxed tools, scrap lumber, extra pieces left over from plumbing projects, and the varied bits and bobs that prevent you from depending on the landlord to fix every little thing. Also, your ten-speed's there. You keep meaning to take it out for a spin while the weather is nice, but the tires are a little mushy. She got your marital bike-pump in the divorce.

With a sigh, you look at the mess and dust, then pick up an eight-inch monkey wrench. It's solid in your hand and the metal is cold. You give it a gentle swing. It's heavy, much more than your tennis racquet. You try a backhand and make a mental note to not use much wrist if you have to hit someone. All those little bones at the base of your hand, you don't want to throw them against that much momentum.

You shake your head a little and slip the tool into the right-hand pocket of your coat. Then you leave to visit Porter.

#

Porter seems like a good guy—at least, you recognize that he behaves in a friendly, helpful fashion. But you also know his nature. In the same way that you're a Necessary Servant, Porter is a Merchant. There are no hard, fast conflicts of agenda there. It's hardly Israel and Palestine between your people and his. Nevertheless, you know that he is seeking exchanges for profit, and that failing to do that first and foremost is just not an option for him. It would be like expecting you to contradict the overall good of the one you serve. Not happening.

As one might expect from a (sigh) mystic Merchant, Porter runs a little out-of-the-way antiques store that's mostly junk. Even moreso than most antique stores. It's housed in a charmingly overgrown Victorian on the edge of the good part of town, with the best stuff upstairs where Porter lives. The door gives a cheerful tinkle as you enter, but it does little to dispel the gloom. Armoires, escritaires and fauteuils with worn, threadbare upholstery surround you like curious woodland creatures at the edge of a campfire's circle of light. Tables and shelves full of old phones, clocks, typewriters and domestic implements crowd behind them, a column of stacked barstools leaning forward like an aggressive panhandler. Need a vacuum cleaner from the 1970s? An electric typewriter with no ribbon? Locks with no keys, and vice versa? Porter's Antiques has all those and more.

Somewhere towards the back, a tinny speaker bleats out *How to Be a Millionaire*. Perfect.

"Evans!" Porter comes bustling out of the dust and dark, looking pleased. He's wearing a white polo shirt over slacks and brogans, not a hair out of place. He should be handsome. He's putting on weight, but has a tightness about his flesh that suggests he's fighting it. Full blonde coif, suspiciously even tan. He offers you a handshake, but stops when he sees your fingers are wrapped in athletic tape. (You stopped by a drugstore on the way and did up your hand and your ribs. You already

owned an ankle brace, left over from the state masters-division racquetball championship five years ago.)

-Porter.- You watch him closely to see if he seems surprised that you're injured, or surprised that you're not *more* injured, or if he doesn't seem surprised that you're injured. Really, you're just trying to figure out what he knows.

"Oh man guy, what happened?" he asks, steering you by the arm deeper into the store.

-Some prick in a tracksuit jumped me.-

"What, like... like street crime? I can't think why anyone would wish you harm in particular."

-No one at all?-

"C'mon, Evans, give yourself some credit. Did the air conditioning business suddenly take a vicious turn?"

-I'm in industrial refrigeration,- you say, extracting your arm and stepping back. -It seemed like the guy was after something in particular.-

Porter is starting to look puzzled. A little uneasy? Yes. He moves slowly away from you and gets behind the counter, reaching to turn off the '80s nostalgia station, freshly switched to Foreigner's *Cold As Ice*.

"Leo, you seem pretty uptight, if you don't mind me saying so," he says slowly. "You don't think I had anything to do with this, do you?" He shakes his head. "All that Satanism has made you paranoid."

-I'm not a Satanist, as you damn well know. I'm a good orthodox Clergy believer—like you, even if I follow the Servant and you're in with the Merchant.- You take a few steps, idly pick up a dusty shepherdess figurine and examine it. -We should understand each other. We don't follow an ordinary ethos, and that's all right. Typical scruples aren't what get you clued in. So it's fine by me that your nature is a little... what, mercenary? That's the right word, isn't it?-

You turn back, expecting to maybe catch him with a guilty expression but *oh shit he's got a gun*.

-Hey, stop fucking around with that.- You can't help it, those are the first words from your mouth, they're out and away before you realize that you heard a heavy metallic click while you were looking at that dumb statue, the sound of the hammer going back, maybe an oily little 'snk' before it when the safety came off, holy crap, he's pointing the barrel at you and has his finger on the trigger. You're under the gun. You are *literally* under a literal gun!

You don't know much about firearms but, judging by how big this one looks as the black hole of its barrel prepares to empty hot death in your face, you would guess that it was initially a Kriegsmarine deck gun.

"Hands up, Evans."

-Fuck, Porter.-

"Evans. Hands *up*."

-Oh right.- You carefully set down the shepherdess and then raise them, and keep raising until they are at their fullest extension over your head.

-Porter, could you please take your finger off the trigger?-

"What's in your pocket, Leo?"

-What?-

"What's in your pocket?!?"

-My...? Look, just take your finger out of the trigger guard, I don't want it going off by mistake...-

"I'm going to give you one more chance to answer me."

-Was this your plan all along? Get me to come here, shoot me, call it a robbery?-

"*What fucking plan are you talking about?!?*"

“Why is everyone yelling?” It’s not Porter, it’s his husband Terrence, coming out of the back room, yawning. He sees the situation, frowns and says, “Jesus, Russel, stop fucking around with that.” So apparently Porter’s first name is ‘Russel.’

Porter and Terrence got married just about eight months ago, you think. You weren’t invited—it was a small private ceremony, and you’re hardly on intimate terms with them. You heard about it from Jill, who took pictures. Terrence is maybe ten years younger than Russel, started as a weekend clerk at the store before... whatever. He looks like hammered crap today—red and weary eyes, shapeless gray sweatshirt with the hood over his brown hair, skin that looks like it has a thin coat of bacon grease. His nose is running and his lounge pants are stained with both varnish and paint. The only concession to his usual aggressively political bad taste is a baseball cap with a rainbow version of the Confederate Battle Flag on it, the slogan “These Colors Are Too Fabulous To Run” picked out in rhinestones on the brim.

“Get back, Terry. This is serious,” Porter says.

-Could you ask him to take his finger off the trigger? Please?-

“Russ, what’s gotten into you? C’mon now.”

“He’s *armed*, he’s got something in his jacket pocket! I bet it’s a gun!”

-It’s a wrench.-

Russel frowns and—whew!—points the gun up at the ceiling. “It’s a what now?”

-I am very slowly going to take it out,- you say, reaching two fingers into your pocket and pulling out your makeshift bludgeon.

“A wrench,” Russel says uncertainly.

“Oh for fuck’s sake put the *gun* down, cowboy,” Terrence says, irritably striding forward to pluck the wrench out of your hand, then two steps further to hold out a demanding palm to his spouse. With some hesitation, Porter hands it over.

Now that it’s no longer aimed at your eyes, it looks tiny. Like a starter pistol.

“Why,” Russel asks, as Terrence retreats to the back room with both weapons, “did you have that in your pocket?”

-Because someone came out of nowhere and kicked the crap out of me yesterday,- you say. - Here, look.-

Porter winces when you pull up your pants leg to show him your shin, which is a muddy mess of crimson, purple, and a tinge of green.

“And you think I had something to do with it?” He sounds genuinely hurt. But given his nature, he could have made some kind of deal to purchase someone else’s aggrieved tone of voice.

-Did you?-

“No! Jesus, that’s not *even* how I work, you know the *status quo* I support—*serve*, if you prefer—is entirely *quid pro*.” He gets a smug little look on his face, as if he’s been particularly clever. You roll your eyes, as you usually do at cleverness.

-So who did it then, hm?-

“What are you offering for me to find out?”

You open your mouth, close it and do some quick mental calculations. You name a lowball figure.

“Oh come on, I can get *money*. What I’d really like is one of your friend Jill’s magickal photographs.”

-And what she’d really like is a Leica camera without Pablo Escobar’s name on the bottom of it. Take it up with Jill.-

“Mm. Well, I tried. Though, hm. You’ve got good medical insurance, right?”

-...yes...-

“Have you ever heard of... hold on, let me look it up here,” he says, opening the cash register and pulling out a notebook with Post-Its crammed all along its margins. “...condyloma acuminata?”

-I can't say I have. Or maybe I heard of her and it just didn't stick. Why? Who is it?-

"Okay, stay with me here. You're beaten and bruised, walking wounded, right? And that's not something medicine can help with—it's just, you're going to be sucking it up until nature takes its course. Aren't you?"

-I guess.-

"Condyloma acuminata is the medical name for anal warts. Well, both anal and genital, but in this case..."

-I... am not following.-

"They're curable! Like, you can get them frozen off with liquid nitrogen or treated with a topical ointment *if*—this is the big *if*—you can afford the treatment. Which would be no problem for *you* with your excellent executive's insurance, but for a young man, new to town, no fixed address and only the tender mercies of Obamacare..." he says, rolling his eyes expressively.

-Porter, I don't think...-

"I'm a Merchant, baby! I can exchange this for that. You can give this young, healthy hustler your bruises and wounds, which he'll rebound from in half the time it would take you, in exchange for you hosting his, um, unfortunate condition, which you could just then nip off and get treated."

You think of yourself as fairly liberal and enlightened, but the thought of some 'hustler' with a sick bottom makes your gorge rise a little.

-No.-

"The beauty of it is, it's win win. You get back in the pink of things without waiting..."

-No.-

"He avoids the kind of health threat that starts as minor but gets lots worse if not treated promptly..."

-No. And what's your interest in this anyway?-

"Well, I'd have to charge some kind of facilitation fee."

-I'd give you half the genital warts.-

Porter's smile is brittle. "In this instance, that is not considered a value add."

-Well, I'll be sure to keep in mind that when I needed help, you pointed a gun at my face and offered to give me condyloma acutane or whatever. If I find out you *did* set this guy on me though...-

"What did he want, anyhow?"

-Apparently, to steal my copy of *Beasts of Pleasure*.-

"Wait, *what?*!"

He scoots in front of you, eyes wide and hands out.

-What.-

"You had a copy of *Beasts of Pleasure*? I mean, you held it in your hands?"

You slowly fold your arms.

-Why Porter, if I didn't know better I'd think this information was valuable somehow.-

"Okay, okay, you got me, it is." His hands are up as if he's considering shoving you back into his shop, valuable information, bruises, health insurance and all. But his expression is suddenly ingratiating. "Look... if you describe the book, tell me who took it and where it was taken from, if that's all true and it pans out, I can probably float you... hm..." He names a sum. It's not a small sum. It's more than twice what you offered him to find out who attacked you.

-Well now, isn't *this* an interesting situation? I don't want money.-

"Look, Leo, we got off on the wrong foot today. I recognize that. I should not have drawn down on you. That was rude and, um, precipitous. Uncalled-for. Let me make it up to you by getting you a drink, huh? You like white wines, right? We've got this great Robert Mondavi in the fridge, opened it last night, let me pour you some..."

-Or, alternately, you could tell me why this book is such a big goddamn deal and help me find the guy who snatched it off me.-

He gives you a side-eye and says, "You drive a hard bargain. Must be all that work in the legitimate business world."

-Stop flattering me and start informing. What's so important about *Beasts of Pleasure*?-

"I tell you what I know about it, and you tell me what you know about it? Sounds fair." The very fact that he says this tells you that he thinks he's ripping you off, but whatever.

-You go first.-

He nods, then holds out his hand. "Shake on it."

You do.

"All right. So, background first. Have you ever heard of the House of Renunciation?"

-Um... stories and jokes. Stuff the checkers tell the ponies to keep them looking over their shoulders. It's a house where you go to get... I don't know, your fate reassigned. Your identity shifted or flipped around. People go in one way and come out their own worst enemies.- You realize that you're doing all the talking, and promptly shut up.

"In the House are many Rooms, and they change different things. There was a guy who went in black, came out white. But it wasn't just that he'd turned white, he'd always *been* white. History changed so that he'd been born as honky as you or me, it's what everyone remembered. I *knew* this guy. His name was Jeff Fordham. Never remembered him as anything but a white guy but... there were things wrong with my memory? Like, stuff where 'Why didn't we want to go in that bar?' but it would make perfect sense if he wasn't white."

You shrug. He continues.

"Someone else? The House brought her *dead kid* back. And again, it was like it never happened. But then some people, they go in and everyone remembers that they were super atheist or whatever, and they came out super Muslim." He shrugs.

-So you believe it's real.-

"Real as cancer, baby. Hell, even if it's not, enough people, serious chargers, believe in it to make a book that takes you there worth something."

A house full of rooms that make you stop being you is not the craziest thing you've ever heard of or, indeed, experienced. You yourself have some chameleon tricks and extra senses that blow the minds of conventional folk.

-*Beasts of Pleasure* takes you to this House of Renunciation?- you ask.

"*Beasts of Pleasure* is a *Room* of the House. You read the book and it remakes you. You're born anew, someone different, someone... changed."

-It didn't affect me that way.-

Porter pales a little bit.

"You didn't say you'd *read* it."

-I read it. It's about the introduction of heroin to South America.-

"No, for *you* it's about the introduction of heroin to South America. A woman in Panama who read it, she said it was this heartbreaking erotic epic about two prostitutes in Finland who were in love with the same priest. Guy in France said it was science fiction, all about these parasites that burrowed into your brain and made you feel loved and safe all the time."

-You know an awful lot about it.-

"Well I... um..."

-You *are* going to tell me everything you know, right? You wouldn't *renege on a deal*, now would you? We shook on it and everything.-

Without anyone touching it, the radio suddenly comes on. There's a squall of static, and then a mumbling voice sings *Step Right Up*. You don't know the artist, but he sounds like gravel, if gravel smoked Luckies.

He looks at the radio and now there's sweat on his upper lip. Huh. So Porter's scared to tell you who was asking about the book, but he's more afraid to stop being a Merchant. At least, that's a theory that fits all the data.

"All right, yeah. I did research about the book because... Rico came in looking for it."

Fuck. Rico.

-You think he hired a guy to hassle me?-

He shakes his head. "I think Rico does all his own hassling. He said he wanted the book, he didn't tell me why and he never mentioned you. I think he got a line that it was coming this way but didn't know who it was coming to, so he put out some feelers."

-What do you mean 'coming this way'? I just checked it out of the library.-

"You may think that, but the House has its own ways of reorganizing events. Noncausal stuff. Things like your buddy Jill could do with the right picture."

You consider that. You briefly reflect on the coppery blood scent in her apartment after her big breakup. It blended uneasily with the usual aroma of developing chemicals.

-So what did it supposedly do to me?-

"I don't know. I honestly don't. Rico's not saying and everyone who's had the book is pretty cagey about its specific effects. Nothing visible... nothing like poor to rich or old to young or..."

-Gay to straight?-

He scowls at you, and his nostrils flare. "Unless, of course, it changed the past so that it was *always that way*. Changed you so you don't remember changing."

You shake your head. -If Rico comes by again, tell him I said the book's a dud. I mean, it's not like there couldn't be two books with that title, right? Especially if someone heard about the House book and decided to make a quick buck.- But even as you say it, you know it sounds weak. How much overlap would you expect between meticulous historical researchers, and mystical con men?

Wait, a lot, actually.

With that running through your mind, you tell him about the book—that you don't remember how you heard of it (and damn him, he *nods sagely* in response), that you got it through interlibrary loan, that it was a quick read. You tell him it was meaty and informative without bogging down, it read like a novel, had all kinds of peculiar anecdotes that humanized the theory and data. You get on his laptop and try to find an image of that *creepy* cover art, and your inability to find it lends a tiny shred of legitimacy to his assertions. Maybe.

"How long is it?" he asks, and by this time you've both had a glass of that Moldavi, so you're comfortable enough to say, -Hey, that's a personal question.-

He snickers. "You high-box queen."

-But seriously, the book? Somewhere between three and four hundred pages. Author was... ugh, I know this... Nuncio Faroe? Antonio Faroe? Sounded something like that.-

"No one ever mentioned an author before."

-Just be glad it wasn't Sue Dohnim.-

Another snort.

You tell him all about the attack, describe the guy who took the book in at least as much detail as you gave the police, adding in that you have the man's radio. Eventually, you run out of steam.

"Great, great," he says, lifting the bottle with the wine dregs even as you put your hand over the mouth of your glass. "If you find out anything more, you'll let me know, right?"

-If I learn anything new, we'll renegotiate. Now, can I have my wrench back?-

###

You drape your jacket over your arm and look for someplace that serves a healthy lunch. Failing that, you settle for a salad bar that doesn't look too scruffy. You're deciding that the radishes you impulsively added aren't up to snuff when your phone buzzes. It's a text.

HEY LEOPARD JILL SAID TO UNBLOCKED YOUR NUMBER

It's from Frank. Your mouth suddenly seems dry. Should you text back, or call? Squinting at the tiny screen, you decide to type in your reply.

thanks frank. we ought to talk.

There. Open-ended, good manners, but to the point.

WHAT YOU THINK YOU HAVE TO SAY I WANT TO HEAR

Oh for fuck's sake.

if you don't care to find out, keep blowing me off.

He thinks about it long enough for you to settle your bill and leave a tip before the return message.

PROBLY BE AT PERKYS TONIGHT AFTER NINE

Typical Frank, meeting at the tri-county area's most deafening strip club. Much as you'd like to reply with "stay classy forever, asshole," you give a polite reply that you hope to see him there, then head home. You suspect you might have to take a personal day on Monday, and there are contracts to review with Doug's Deep Diggity Deli. They're your company's biggest maintenance client, and they aren't going to wait on you, no matter how many magick books you read.

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While you're recalculating the contract numbers, you get another text. It's from Gary. Jesus. Last thing you need. You put him off with a polite-but-distant response. After years in business, it's second nature by now.

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"Perky's," you mutter, to no one in particular, as you hang a left by the Starbucks, pass a grocery store, and then pull in by the strip bar. Pardon, the "Gentlemen's Club." Because gentlemen drive rusty, gun-racked pickup trucks with almost-racist commentary about Obama on mud-spattered bumper stickers. Because the gentry are known to travel on big hog motorcycles, in packs, with skulls on the backs of the seats.

The monkey wrench is still in your coat pocket, but looking at the heavysset man by the door, wearing nothing but boots, jeans, a leather vest and a ponytail holder, you decide to leave it in the car. You also lock up. Never leave your car unlocked in a gravel parking lot, words to live by. That's not classist, is it?

When you can't put it off any longer, you head for the door. Oh look, more gentlemen, these with backwards baseball caps, lips bulging with some tobacco product that reeks of artificial strawberries.

You are quietly confident that there are none who serve here—beyond yourself, of course—but Necessary Servants are needed in the oddest of places, so those of you who are far along the path get certain passports. As you get closer, you feel the rustle of your clothes changing. Not a lot, just minor deviations in the cut, maybe a cheaper cloth. Your chin tingles as a day's growth of beard emerges, and your posture makes an incremental shift towards habitual embarrassment. Not that you weren't already cringing a bit. But now these changes have made you fit in perfectly. You have adopted the persona of a strip club patron, a mystic disguise that should be impenetrable to the ordinary rabble.

You do not feel at all like a gentleman.

"Two drink minimum," the doorman gruffly says. Jesus. From across the parking lot, you had him figured for six feet tall, maybe three hundred pounds. Up close, he's closer to six six—he just looked shorter because of his proportions. The last time you saw something that large, it had a bumper sticker that said "My Other Car Is The Bookmobile."

You go inside a hell of pink light, hooting, and deafening music from the '80s by bands that were mainstream in the '70s. You get an immediate headache as you pass through the strobes, the clots of musclemilk-fed dudebros hollering, "SHOW! THEM! TITTIES!" in unison (did they rehearse back at the frat house?), up to the bar where sits a man who's the spitting image of either Charles Baudelaire or an illustration about the health perils of masturbation. Speaking of which, from his gestures you surmise that's what he's doing as he stares at a woman a third his age—no, surely young enough to be his granddaughter, you'd call her a girl if she was fully dressed on the street. You move away. It's a crowded Saturday night, but the Baudelaire impersonator has several empty stools around him.

The singer crackling through the loudspeakers demands that sugar be poured upon him.

-A gin and tonic please,- you tell the bartender, who has a face like he has spent the last ten years meditating daily on the worthlessness of humanity.

"What?"

-GIN! AND! TONIC!-

"Whoa there old-timer," says a chortling manchild with a local college letter jacket and an overpriced beer. "You sound tense!"

-And you sound like you're still getting used to having a tenor voice,- you snap back. You hand a bill to the bartender, and are saddened but not surprised at how little change you get back. The gin is so cheap that it tastes like hand sanitizer, but only barely, because it is stingily poured.

"You're an asshole," the college boy says, challengingly. He has now turned his body towards you.

-Yeah, that sounds about right. Oh hey look,- you say, pointing at a thick-curved brunette who has just removed her top. It's actually her hair that captures your eyes, however. Extremely thick, curly ringlets in a cascade down her back and over her shoulder—the shoulder facing you has a little brown birthmark—swaying back and forth as she teeters on lucite platforms. That has to be a wig, doesn't it? It's all the way to her ass!

You blink, refocus, and see that beyond her, Frank awaits. Your lip curls instinctively and before you know it, your weak G&T is empty. You start across the floor. Oh God, your shoes stick a little. Tell yourself it's spilled drinks.

You've never known what exactly it is Frank *does*. Whatever it is, it's a job unimpeded by an anarchy-symbol neck tattoo, body odor, a thin beard of pimples and hair that looks like it was washed in a deep-fat fryer. Today he's wearing his leather jacket (like always), bedecked in spikes and silver rings. It looks ridiculous and, in that, is the perfect compliment for his t-shirt, which bears the charming slogan "BURN EVERYTHING." There is a woman sitting beside him snapping gum and wearing (for the most part) a tube-top. Both she and he are staring up at a coatrack-thin black woman with a spectacular afro, performing an elaborate pole dance with eyes completely closed.

-Good evening, Frank.- That's good, keep it civil, even though you have to raise your voice to be heard over the current '80s hit, which is *Master and Servant*. On the primary stage, a woman listlessly waves a riding crop and jiggles both above and below her corset. Her black stockings do not hide a bruise on her hip. Sad.

Frank ignores you.

-HEY FRANK!-

He turns and sneers. "Well, if it isn't the man in the *gay* flannel suit. You must be..." The volume of his words drops below the threshold of Depeche Mode.

-WHAT?- You lean in.

"I said, you must be in shit shape if you're coming to me for help."

-IS THAT WHAT JILL TOLD YOU?-

Something in your voice makes him turn and look. His expression is a bit taken aback. You're leaning over the edge of his booth. It would be very easy to smack him right on the greasy back of his greasy neck.

"So what's your problem, brown-noser? Your boss go to a chili cookoff?"

-DID YOU SEND A GUY TO BEAT ME UP?-

The little rat fink actually chortles. He puts his hand up by his mouth and emits a fucking *giggle*, your words delight him so.

"Oh man, did someone mug you? Wow, that must really rattle your obedient good soldier worldview, huh?"

-DID YOU SEND HIM, FRANK?- You don't think he did. His look of pleased surprise is too genuine.

"I kinda wish I did," he says, when there's a disturbance by the bar.

It's the old pervert, he went full-on pants-down and now that human mountain is dragging him towards the door, another bouncer trailing along, inadvertently revealing his own fuzzy butt crack as he bends down to try and grab the man's pants and raise them.

"Hey, LET THE OLD GUY JACK IT!" Frank cackles. "LET'S HAVE SOME BARE-ASS EQUALITY!"

-You're a pig, Frank.- You turn to leave.

"Say hi to Gary for me."

You turn back. -What?-

"Seeing that shriveled old fuck beat off must be like a preview of coming attractions, huh? Once your hand heals," he says, glancing at your bandages, big grin in place, some gray food shred dangling by his left canine. "I hear that guy's wife left him too."

You should go. Once more you face the exit.

"Probably cheated on him first."

His tone is so rich with smugness that it even cuts through the distorted strains of *More Human Than Human* and when you glance at him, he has turned his back completely. He's saying something to his tube-topped companion, and she has that particularly feminine face where the eyes and forehead are declaring disgust, but the mouth is laughing along with some joke in hopes of forestalling further unpleasantness. She's scared of Frank. You can see that. You step forward and smack him on the top of his neck.

You didn't really think this through, just used a reflexive handball hit and, sure enough, a jolt of sizzling pain shoots from fingers to elbow, even though you mostly got him with the base of the thumb. It was a good shot though, loose, with lots of follow through and you can see it, actually *see* his posture sag as he passes out and slumps forward towards the table. Neat!

He recovers before impact though, blinks hard and turns, ready to say something, flushed and incredulous but by this point you have your fingers in all that greasy hair. You... really were not aware of moving closer, getting around the corner of the booth, but here you are. He raises his hands—oh, for the love of Pete, he's wearing *driving gloves*—but you've got a fine grip and you feel that right shin really strain as you lunge back with your whole body. It pulls him forward *hard* and you bounce his fucking face off the table like you're double-dribbling a basketball.

-Talking about people's families isn't *gentlemanly*, Frank.-

You do not think Frank is listening because his nose has pretty much exploded. There's a fan-spray of blood on the table, on the tube-top, on the t-shirt that says BURN EVERYTHING and he's wailing like an infant as the bouncer gets you.

Your first experience of being 'bounced' is when two giant arms encircle you from behind, right at the level of your short ribs, just below where you got punched the day before. Luckily, he wanted your arms pinned, so you can ply your comparatively meager strength against his as he tries to compress you like a toothpaste tube.

-I'm going!- You try to shout it but, thanks to the compression, it comes out as a groan more than anything else. No way does he hear that above the howls of the black stripper (who opened her eyes at the commotion), Frank's companion, Frank himself and, of course, White Zombie.

-I'm not resisting!- you insist as your heels drag the floor. The arms around you are covered in tattoos and man-fur, and you incongruously remember your mother trimming your hair on Sunday afternoons, with the funny pages down on the kitchen linoleum to make the sweeping-up easier. Those long-ago Sunday comics did not have nearly as much White Power imagery as these arms, however.

The relief of release when he flings you through the door is so profound that you almost forget you're sailing through the air towards gravel, but you don't revel in it. You're too banged-up already. You get your feet under you and *ouch* your left ankle hits first, but at least it doesn't twist further, *shit* your right leg hurts when it makes contact next and you do a stumbling, clumsy dance, prompting great amusement among the bump-and-grind aficionados who are exiting and entering. You end by crashing up against a pickup and getting Bondo on your hands.

"I oughtta call the cops on you!" the bouncer shouts, though you're unsure whether he's yelling at you or at the masturbator, who is piled up on the gravel, shaking... weeping?

"It's all right, Crusher. I'll take care of him." The voice makes your blood run cold.

Rico.

The bouncer—"Crusher"? Really?—raises his hands, widens his eyes and backs back into the club.

"Hey there, Leo."

-Eat a steamy bowl of shit, Rico.-

He sighs and holds out a hand to help you upright. You ignore him, pushing off the filthy truck—ugh, your coat's all smeared with vehicle sweat—and fruitlessly try to restore your dignity.

Rico's not a big guy, two or three inches shorter than you, lean. Deep brown skin, the result of a lot of sun and a lot of wind on top of a lot of Latino melanin. He's wearing a plain leather jacket. It looks perfectly natural, the way Frank's looked perfectly affected. His hair's medium-length, a single graying lock dangling over the frown lines etched between his eyes. He has his hands hooked in his belt and he's shaking his head.

"I really don't dislike you nearly as much as you think I should," he says.

-Can you give me a minute? I want to get a monkey wrench out of my car and jam it down your throat.-

Rico laughs.

"Come on, Leo," he says and dammit, he sounds *patient*, not threatening. "Your nature is well-suited for service, as you've chosen. My nature is well-suited for violence. Plus, your dominant hand is already bandaged. The best outcome you can expect is for my ass-kicking foot to get tired before you're permanently damaged."

The hell of it is, he's telling the truth and you both know it. He's not even saying it with bravado or happiness, just modest understanding of the situation's facts.

-You don't scare me, you Mexican knockoff Eastwood. What do you want?-

"To be accurate, I'm an Ecuadoran knockoff. I want the book." He tilts his head. "You're done with it, aren't you?"

-Some shit-ape took it.-

"Interesting."

-Just do what I did, go through interlibrary loan. Although... gee, would having a library card cut too deep into your Lone Wolf macho bullshit routine?-

"I think it's permitted, but believe me, *Beasts of Pleasure* is not available to just anyone."

-If that stupid book is as self-willed and destiny-driven as you and everyone else seems to think, why not just sit back and wait for it? If it's *meant* to find you, surely it *must*, right?-

“Sometimes fate needs a little kick in the pants to get going.”

-Then I hope your ass-kicking foot gets tired before fate is permanently damaged.- You turn towards your car, face flushed, hand throbbing, filthy, and on some level mourning how long it's been since you saw a woman's naked breasts on anything but a screen. These were not the circumstances you would have chosen. You feel like your libido has been ill-used, coarsened. Perky's aroused and depressed you in equal measures.

“Here, Leo. I have a gift for you.”

-I want *nothing* from you,- you say, but you turn to look and he's holding out a sword. Your heart gives a weird surging twitch, but you recognize that it's in its holder thing, the whatchacallit... sheath? Scabbard? The handle, which has some kind of intricate cloth wrap on it, is towards your hand.

-What the shit is that for?-

“You are moving at the center of some very violent, very significant upheavals. You may need this.”

-I am an *office worker*. You think I'm going to chop my way out of a sticky negotiation with some dippy replica samurai sword?-

“This *wakizashi* is authentic,” he says. “It doesn't have papers, but it was forged in the Kunihiro tradition...”

-Oh blow it out your ass, I don't care.-

You unlock your car and see his scowl mirrored in the driver's side window.

“I am trying to *help you*,” he says, through gritted teeth. “Your Archetype and mine are not implacable enemies!”

-Really? The principle of loyalty and service isn't opposed to the principle of being rootless, masterless, disconnected and friendless? Face facts, Rico: You're on your own. You don't help others and no one wants to help you. Your 'lone warrior standing against all comers' schtick may have had some pull in the Old West and the Warring States, it might even do you some good in Syria or Iraq or the drug wars of Mexico, but for most people living under *rules* and *laws*—people who are fucking *civilized*—you offer nothing. You're a fossil from a more barbaric time and it is people like me, who get along, and accept *women*, and listen, and compromise, who are going to make the future anything other than a nightmare. Frank in there whines about fighting the power and sticking it to the Man, without taking a moment to think about all the order and rules and cooperation required to get him clean drinking water, indoor shitting, and beer without contaminants. You're not *quite* as bad, in that you're not raging against everything humanity has painstakingly built, but you're just pathetically, *unbelievably* naïve. Acting like you can live separate from society... you're not dumb enough to believe that, are you Rico? I bet you put it on like a costume from a *Mad Max* movie and it makes you a hard-ass fighter. But *so what?* You living your best life, Rico? Happy? Lots of friends? Someone warm and sweet with a nice laugh waiting in your bed? Or did all your tough shit posing just buy you a lot of shit, where you have to pose tough every day?-

Rico's face has gotten harder and colder throughout your whole tantrum. Slowly, but with smooth and precise movements, he reverses the sword and tucks it in his belt. Somehow, he manages not to look absolutely silly with it.

“Well, Leo... that was clear.”

-You know, Rico, I *don't* hate you as much as I should. You're clearly not a dickbag like Frank. But that doesn't mean I'll quit trying. Rogue elements like you have no place in a peaceful society, and eventually you're going to be eliminated. Nothing personal. You're just obsolete, that's all.-

“That your opinion, or that of your patron?”

-It obviously *must* be what the Necessary Servant requires. You think a world of loyalty has any place for Masterless Men?-

“It doesn't matter what we think. Does it?”

And somehow, with that, you feel like he's won the argument. You slam the door and drive off.

And dammit, you stop at the Lowe's by the closed-down Starbucks on the way home and buy something called a "brush axe" because, of all the terrifying bladed implements in the yardwork department, it's the one that feels the most like a tennis racquet when you give it a few guarded swings. The thing really does look like it was made to dismember people into crawlspace-manageable chunks. The handle's over seven inches long, so you can get both hands on it, if it comes to that.

It probably won't come to that, right?

#

The next morning is *hell*. You wake up with your hand feeling like it's frozen into a chunk of slush, and when you examine it the flesh is hot, tender, and greatly swollen. Shin? Still fucked up. Ankle? Feeling more fucked up than yesterday, thank you very much. But hey, the rib bruise, though a darker purple, seems less sensitive than before. Maybe you should have taken more painkilling, swelling-reducing ibuprofen before bedtime. Well, you can have some at breakfast.

Seeing your giant murder-blade—excuse me, "brush axe"—on the bedside table next to your cell phone makes you groan out loud, and opening your mouth releases a funk of foul breath that you immediately blame on cheap gin mixing with too much white wine. Ugh. You decide, then and there, never to shop for large bladed objects late on a Saturday night after drinking a lot. Your description has probably been circulated to the local authorities.

Ice, shower, and you accidentally put the coffee grounds directly into the machine instead of putting the filter in first. Dammit! You have a reusable filter for the automatic drip brewer, and it's the same plastic brown as the rest of it. So you have to fiddle a part out of its mounting with your puffy crimson fingers and rinse it before you can make a half-pot of half-caf. (Your wife got the Aeropress in the divorce.)

As you're yawning your way towards the door—wearing your brown suit because if you're going to feel like crap, you might as well color code it—the radio comes on. It's Greg Kihn's *Breakup Song* and it gives you pause.

A radio turned itself on in Porter's store, too.

It's a pretty blunt sort of coincidence, if you even want to call it that. Sure, it's nothing a skeptic couldn't sneer into the ground, but two different radios turning on, two days in a row, untouched? That's inching towards "unnatural phenomenon" in your book. Especially a tune about wrecked love when you're about to go to church and see your wife.

Ex-wife.

Whatever. Coincidences matter. Coincidences are the voices of higher entities, when they speak in the world of matter.

You turn off the radio and, just as a precaution, you pull the six D-cells out of its back compartment, and that's when you see "Property of Rocquelynn Wepler." It's written in thick Sharpie letters on duct tape, stuck under the batteries.

That seems like a pretty damn solid clue, but you're not about to skip church to follow up on it. The guy who stole the book did not look like a 'Rocquelynn.' On the other hand, before opening the boom box, you would have said that 'Rocquelynn' was not a real name.

You straighten your tie, put specialty knuckle band-aids on your fist abrasions, and drive to the movie theater. There aren't a lot of other cars there—mostly your co-congregants, plus a few over by the Starbucks at the other end. With a couple exceptions, the people you're meeting drive nice hardware. Your Prius sedan, a sort of icy blue-green, fits right in. So does the late model Toyota Civic that your ex-wife got in the divorce.

It's hard not to think of it as 'church,' and in a lot of ways that label fits. It's a social group, defined by faith, divided into "those within" and "those without." On the other hand, it has no name, no holy writ, no prayers and no hymns. Legally it's structured as a tax exempt religious

organization, and certainly you focus a great deal on the principles and ethos of an immortal, invisible entity. Most people would call it a cult, or more politely, a “new religious movement.” If nothing else, it has a prophet. Or, in the terminology of your belief, a ‘godwalker.’

Your... collective?... rents out one of the smaller show-boxes in the MovieTown™ multiplex. Before this, you gathered in the basement of the Fraternal Order of Eagles, but when Herbert (your member who overlapped with the F.O.E.) passed away, there was no one left there that you could permit into your meetings, so you parted ways. That’s fine. The assistant manager at MovieTown™ stepped up. The seats are more comfortable, and no one else involved cares what you’re doing.

(One septuagenarian Eagle was certain that you were all Satanists and was not shy about saying so. A threatened slander lawsuit only made him more certain. Then, of course, he died and the Satanism rumors become thoroughly entrenched, even though a decades-long pack-a-day Marlboro habit is obviously a more logical explanation for death by lip cancer. Ah well. Maybe the people who believe you’re worshipping the devil will at least think twice before doing anything annoying.)

“Morning, Leo.”

-Morning, Scott.- Scott’s a Lieutenant at a nearby Air Force base. He drives at least an hour each way every Sunday for these meetings, always in the same navy blue suit, shoes shined to a mirror gloss. You suspect he may be armed. Same goes for Becka, who moved from active-duty police work into administration after throwing out her back on the job.

All told, there are probably fifteen people in the auditorium, some from as far as seventy miles away. A few unfamiliar faces, too, but as you examine them, you know that they serve.

Everyone present, they all serve. You can feel it, something clean and comfortable and room temperature. All of you get things done, all of you eschew the glory and rewards of “leadership” in order to better pursue an enterprise. Travis is a paralegal, not a lawyer. Gina’s in public works. Even Donna—you’re not sure who she works for, but her job description is “get mailed packages of cash and then deposit them in lots of different accounts all over the city, so that it doesn’t look suspicious.” She and Becka really got into it at a Christmas party—the group has a yearly Christmas party, even though few of you are really Christians—until you and your (then) wife smoothed it over. But the beauty of it was, they were both amenable to negotiations. Each of them was willing to get along, even as each looked for a way to help their individual boss through the connection. You’re not sure they’ve established a cops-to-crooks back channel, but it wouldn’t surprise you.

...and then she’s there. She comes in the door, as if she’s normal, as if this is normal, as if the word ‘normal’ holds any meaning when books can change your soul, when strangers can kick your shins, when smartphones exist alongside Masterless Men. She’s anything but normal, she’s wearing that red knee length skirt with the black sides over black tights, she’s got a black blouse and you would lay money on exactly which lacy black bra is under it. She’s got on a scarf, just so, and the short hair that very confident executive women can carry off and she is smiling.

Your ex-wife.

Godwalker of the Necessary Servant.