

# 314 CRESCENT MANOR



The landlord is expecting you. *by M. Jones*

## **314 Crescent Manor**

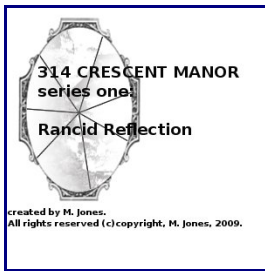
© copyright M. Jones, 2010. All rights reserved.  
Published by Bloodletters Ink, first electronic edition.

This is a work of fiction. There is no resemblance to anyone living or dead, and any such resemblance is purely coincidental. Excerpts from this work for use in reviews online and in print are permitted, but are not to exceed a chapter's length. This book is not to be copied. Commercial use of this work is not permitted.



For more stories and works published by Bloodletters Ink please visit:  
<http://bloodlettersink.com>

## episode one: noisy neighbour



Nathan Connor is a mess of a human being.

He thought about this as he accidentally splattered ink on the corner of his kitchen table. He tried to obscure it by smearing it with his thumb into the worn pine, only to permanently stain it a dark grey. He cursed and grabbed a paper towel, and tried to rub the grey shade out, then loudly cursed again as a thick red paste was added to the mix. The supposedly clean paper towel had come into contact with the open bottle of red ink at his elbow. He gave up the effort and tossed the paper towel onto the floor, where the oak planks at his feet were littered with crumpled papers and ink blotches and the crumbly remains of breakfast toast. He rested his elbows on the surface of the table and pressed the heels of his hands at his temples, which were already bearing the warrior marks of his efforts, thick smudges of grey, black and red ink leaking into his scalp.

He studied the pencilled in illustration framed beneath him, a depiction of a large, burly Sasquatch with massive clawed hands and shark teeth drooling over a meek, t-shirted young man sitting in a chair in front of his TV. The large question mark over the young man's opened skull was of profound significance. Nathan had been very careful in his detailing of the brain of the youth. He hoped his idea of subversive resistance, expressed through the imposing violence of the Sasquatch upon the suggestion of a questioning thought would go over better with the chief editor of *The Weekly Weird* than his last illustration had.

"We're not a horror magazine," Dottie Kane had advised him yesterday morning, tossing his work back at him. "I don't care if you think a detailed image of a vivisected cow made to look like a serial killer's masterwork is a metaphor of overconsumption. It's gross. It'll have PETA on my ass. Worst of all, it'll lose us readers. Honestly, what were you thinking? This doodle of yours has nothing to do with the editorial it's supposed to illustrate."

His cheeks burned in prideful fury. "Yes it does!"

"No, Nathan. The editorial is about Lady Diana's shoe collection and how the sales of it are going into private coffers instead of to charity, which we all know she would have preferred."

"She had over four thousand shoes," Nathan reminded her. "Imelda Marcos would have been jealous. I'd call that overconsumption."

"I'd call it every woman's dream," Dottie shot back. "Go home, and try again. I'm warning you, Nathan. I don't want to see any blood and guts this time. Don't look at me like that, I'm not some dragon cramping your style. You're new here, and maybe the stress of coming to a new city and your trouble with finding an apartment and getting settled is affecting your work. I'm willing to believe that." She tapped a plain, shining pink nail on the surface of her desk, her thin pale lips a taut line of disapproval. Dottie had the eerie knack of making you feel like you were at the principal's office, waiting to be handed a suspension. "I want it on my desk by tomorrow afternoon. No later. You came highly recommended from your teaching stint at the College Of Graphic Media in New York. I've got

high expectations, so make sure it's good."

So now here he was, well past his deadline, stuck in his cramped bachelor apartment with a detail of an open skull and its leaky brain glaring back at him from the pencilled illustration. There was no question in his mind that this was going to get him fired, but if that cow Dottie thought he was going to compromise his artistic principals just because she had a squeamish streak, she had another thing coming. He gritted his teeth, and poised his pen over the paper, the Sasquatch clawing at the nub with glee at the prospect of giving his violence some permanence.

He placed the tip of his pen on the paper, and began to carefully trace.

A sonic boom pounded through the tiny apartment, followed by another, and then another, and then screaming and shouting, a horrific cacophony that was fit to raise the dead. The careful working of his pen on paper was wrenched from him as the apartment shook from the onslaught, black ink leaving a nervous line directly across the Sasquatch's angry face. His terror had been cancelled out. Cursing, Nathan tried to fix the mistake, only to be outdone once again by the loud noises of the apartment next door, the screaming and pounding breaking all concentration and leaving him as furious as the cause clearly was. "For God's sake, keep it down!" he shouted at the far wall, but as usual the request was futile. His neighbours were too earnestly violent to hear him.

Angry, he reached across the table to turn on his small CD player, the volume ratcheted up to the max, the funky rhythm of The Specials blasting Monkey Man into the din. This of course started what he knew would be a chain reaction, with the neighbour beneath him now pounding on his ceiling, demanding he turn that goddamned shit off. Annoyed at how his work was nearly ruined, and edgy over its lack of progress, Nathan stomped his feet on the oak floors, echoing the blows beneath him as a therapeutic catharsis.

Unfortunately, all this served to do was knock over the red bottle of ink at his elbow, covering his hard day's work in a ruining bloodbath.

"Aw, fuck me!" He stepped away from his kitchen table, his lap thick with red ink. He took a few pieces of paper towel off the roll and tried to wipe it off, only to prove the extent of the damage was considerable. Good thing he only ever wore black, at least his clothes were salvageable. His chest, however, was now a rosy pink hue that clung to his skin like a Hello Kitty burn. Red footprints were left in his wake as he headed for the kitchen sink, the water running red as murder.

"Bastards," he muttered, barely able to hear himself over the chaotic din of old school ska, his angry ceiling banging neighbour beneath him and the insane, monstrous bedlam that was hammering and screaming against the brick living room wall of his flat.

"Shut the devil up, why don't you!" he shouted back.

A sudden, eerie quiet lay behind the whitewashed brick wall of his flat, and he quickly turned off his stereo, the last trailing thumps of anger from his neighbour below him trickling into tense silence. Carefully, on tip-toe, he made his way to the pull-out couch that was pressed against the brick wall, a feat which in this tiny flat only took him ten long steps. Balancing unevenly on the cushions of his beige tartan sofa, Nathan pressed his ear against the cool, white-washed bricks.

A resounding thump pushed him off, the apartment next door exploding into pounding punches of violence. The vibrations against the brick wall were severe enough to knock down Nathan's framed, vintage 'Solidarnosc' poster, the corner hitting the side of his head as it crashed to the hard oak floor. Cursing, he tested the sore spot at his temples with his fingertips, which were now genuinely stained with droplets of blood.

"Son of a bitch!" he shouted. He pounded his fists on the white bricks, demanding silence. Chips of

concrete fell onto his worn sofa. His fury earned him nothing but sore hands and greyish-pink ink smudges on the crumbling white bricks.

This wasn't the first time this happened since he'd moved here a month ago, and he was already tiring of the conflict. He turned and leaned his back against the cool bricks, the fighting behind him massaging the kinks in his spine. His poster lay massacred on the floor, his work in a likewise state from this view into the corner that served as his dining room. So much for cheap rent and the room to act out his particular brand of genius on a tight budget. He almost regretted leaving that awful teaching job back at the college, but he was determined to be a professional doodler and practise what he preached. His artist's soul depended on it.

Even if the pay was shit.

Speaking of starving artists, he was damned hungry. Where the hell was Mark with his dinner? He'd promised to be here half an hour ago.

Careful to avoid any cutting blades of glass, he left his sofa to attempt a good view out of his second floor apartment window. The glass was ancient and warped, original to the building's construction in the early 1920's, as the landlord had proudly boasted. The dark grey hue of the world outside the glass suggested to him it was raining, and there were warped, colourful circular patterns moving like an assembly line on what he knew was the busy sidewalk below. He opened his window, allowing in a thin sheen of rain that collected in ashen grey puddles on the windowsill. The circles were umbrellas belonging to harried pedestrians, rushing to get somewhere dry, some undefinable elsewhere that would provide them with calm, cozy warmth.

When he and his brother Mark had first moved to this city, it was on a warm, sunny day full of promise and excitement, a new page turned in the ever thinning volume that was his biography. It wasn't long before the real soul of the place showed its opaque, unfriendly face and the constant view out his window became grey and depressing, full of that inner city grime that was so pervasive of congestive downtown living. Granted, living in a dying building, as Crescent Manor was, didn't help the feeling of encroaching decay. The landlord may hold pride in how the lovingly preserved original fixtures and decor gave the place the illusion of a historic building, but it was merely a decrepit shell of itself, with the dirt original to the construction.

Nathan sighed, thinking that he and his brother should have sensed an ample warning thanks to the massive stained glass window embedded against the outside wall of the main staircase. It curled inward from the right side of the elevator, a contraption so old the permanent 'Out of Order' sign taped on it was yellowed with age. The stained glass mural was plainly visible to the main street, a source of embarrassment for nearly a hundred years, Nathan was sure. The artwork was solid enough, a good example of early art nouveau styling depicting a large, black, olive green, gold, and red tree, but the construction crew of 1921, not being art aficionados, had accidentally installed the window upside down. Thus, the grim tangle of black roots crawled eerily towards the ceiling of the grand staircase of Crescent Manor, right up to the fourth floor. The equally crawly olive green and dark gold leaves and branches strained towards the lobby, as though trying to claw the inhabitants of the Manor into the central red and black maw that was its trunk.

Just thinking on the sombre hues and mixing it with the grey of the early evening and the constant, now low thumping and complaining from the apartment next door put Nathan into a deep blue funk. He rested his elbows on the windowsill, the misty rain pelting his face. Not for the first time he wondered what the hell he was doing here, in this stupid city, following his brother around like the connection they shared even mattered. So what if they were twins? They were fraternal, not connected in any special way like identicals were. They were just ordinary siblings. Just because Mark got a job at the hospital here didn't mean Nathan had to pack up and run along with him.

It wasn't like they were close. Hell, they were barely strangers for all they had in common. It was madness trying to force a connection that refused to exist, but as usual, Nathan got the word, handed in his notice, and ran with Mark to this town like the devil himself was after him. He sighed. There was his demon now, walking with hunched shoulders, his neat beige trenchcoat soaked at the back, a clear plastic bag holding several Styrofoam packets in his damp grip.

"Hey!" Nathan shouted out of his window, the stranger who was his brother looking up at him. "I told you to go to Henri's!"

Mark shrugged, his eternally weary stance ready to collapse into a puddle at his feet. "He wasn't open. He closes at five on Mondays." He held out the clear plastic bag and its contents as a promised peace offering. "I went to Wong Fu's instead."

"La Patisserie Rouge et Blanc is the only place worth eating in this shithole of a city, and you know it!" There was a pounding of violence on the far wall of his flat and he gave it a cruel sneer. "Just bring it up!" he shouted, and slammed his window shut.

~\*~

"You didn't have to be an ass and shout at me like that. It was very rude." The front door of the flat opened into the tiny galley kitchen, and Mark pushed his way past his brother into the cramped space, their meal placed on the dusty stove next to the sink. "There wouldn't be any issues at all if you'd learn to forage for yourself. This thing, right here? I believe it's called an oven. It gets hot and you can cook things in it. And that white, rounded shape on the other side, here? This is what's known as a refrigerator. It keeps the things you cook cold, so they don't spoil." He gave the grimy, noisy white box that was crammed into the corner like a wrinkled pop can an uneasy sniff. "Good Heavens, Nathan, what the hell is that sour smell?"

"Probably food that's been in that thing since the place was built," Nathan replied. "Hell, you know how crazy that landlord is when it comes to his 'historical authenticity'. I've never opened it, so I couldn't tell you what's in there. Stuff that predates this place, for all I know." He grabbed a pop can out of the clear plastic bag and noisily opened it, taking a refreshing cool swig of root beer as he headed for his kitchen table. It took him a few moments to realize Mark wasn't following him.

"What the hell..." Mark said. He was brave and opened the fridge, releasing a stench that resembled sour milk and dog shit. He quickly closed it again, dry heaving. "For God's sake, Nathan, a little bit of bleach won't kill you."

Nathan cleared the kitchen table by wiping the red massacre from earlier off with a quick swipe of his arm, the papers and all attempts to keep his job now laying in white, red, and black tatters on the floor. "I told you, I haven't opened it since I moved in here. What's in it? A rancid collection of squirrel meat?"

"Nothing. It's just old and broken." Mark coughed and gagged as he walked up and reached behind Nathan to open the window, allowing in the damp freshness anew. "I don't know how you can live like this. This flat is like the bottom of a restroom wastebasket." He glanced to the right and caught sight of the framed poster smashed to bits on the sofa. "You've had that picture since high school." He bit down on his bottom lip, his mood suddenly darker. "What happened here, Nathan? Are you in trouble again?"

"No, I'm not in trouble," Nathan spat, and he tossed Mark's Styrofoam packet across the table at him before slumping into his usual seat in front of the window. Mark cautiously sat in the squeaking pine

chair, his beige trenchcoat still on, his food stubbornly untouched.

“If it’s money...”

“I told you. I’m not in trouble.”

“It’s a girl, then. Girl trouble.” Mark’s thumb went to his bottom lip, and he chewed on the nail nervously. “Her boyfriend came by, and tried to rough up the place, and you, am I right?”

“Not by a long shot,” Nathan said. He opened his Styrofoam packet and was happy to see that Wong Fu was a firm believer in simple, nutritious fare. Plain white rice. Greens. Veggies. Easily identifiable beef.

“I wish you would confide in me,” Mark sulked. “After all, I do understand these sorts of problems.”

Nathan let out a derisive snort. “Like hell you do. The only girlfriend you’ve ever had was Mandy Turner.”

“Who is still sending me hate mail,” Mark reminded him.

“Yeah, okay, she went wacky. But it was twelve years ago, Mark, and she’s been in the nuthouse since then. It’s time to let it go, and stop reminding me how you are some kind of expert on psycho relationships, because it’s gone beyond old. It’s officially Jurassic.” He stabbed an angry chopstick into the mound of white rice. “Again, for the record, there is no trouble going on. The poster fell off the wall. That’s it.”

If Mark was doubtful, his feeling was suddenly exacerbated by the shuddering smash of a hard, large object against the other side of the brick wall. He gave the increasing violence a horrified study as the bricks seemed to heave beneath it, bits of white concrete flaking onto the ugly beige tartan sofa, leaving small grey wounds in the wall. His shock turned to ire at his brother, as if it was he who had something to do with it. Nathan shovelled another plastic forkful of white rice into his mouth. “They’re at it day and night,” he said, his voice muffled. He sprinkled a liberal amount of soy sauce onto the greens and began digging into them. “I mean, it was going on when I moved in here a month ago, but it’s really become a habit with these idiots. I don’t know what they’re doing in there, but it’s probably illegal in most parts of the world.”

Mark reluctantly opened his own Styrofoam packet, his fare considerably more fatty and drenched in sugary sauces than Nathan’s. For a doctor of pathology, he certainly didn’t care what he did to his arteries. “You shouldn’t eat that crap,” Nathan said, the stir fried beef in his own helping grabbing the attention of the wooden chopsticks he held experimentally in his grip. They slipped out of his fingers and onto the floor, forcing him to go back to the comfort of his plastic fork. “I’d hate to think what your blood looks like under a microscope.”

“They really are going at it in there,” Mark said, worried. He poked at his meal, but the fighting behind the whitewashed bricks was clearly eating at his hunger, making him queasy. Nathan, in a rare move of sympathy, shoved the extra can of root beer his brother’s way.

“Have you met them?” Mark asked.

“Met who?” Nathan asked, giving his strip of beef a curious sniff.

“Your neighbours. What apartment number is it?”

“#220,” Nathan said. He popped the questioned strip of beef into his mouth. “No, I haven’t met them. All I know for certain is that they can’t possibly have jobs, they fight all day and all night.” He sighed as he looked at the mess of his sofa. “I loved that poster like some men love a woman. Look at how torn up it is now. Lech Walesa is weeping along with me.”

“I think there’s more important issues going on here than the death of a vintage propaganda poster,” Mark countered.

“I should think not! Come on, Mark, haven’t you learned anything from me? That poster was one of the pivotal signals that the death of the Cold War was imminent!” He pointed his index finger at his brother accusingly. “We were one shadow away from a goddamn nuclear winter, and you know it!”

“No, I don’t,” Mark wearily replied.

“The KGB put a bug in a plaque for God’s sake. It sat in the oval office for six years before it was discovered. Don’t tell me there isn’t more of that shit still out there, quietly taking down our every move!”

“Nathan, I’m really not in the mood to play the part of Reason versus Paranoid Delusion this evening, okay?” He opened up his root beer and took a tentative sip. “I’ve had a horrible time of it. Some surgeon ripped into me today over my lab report being late. I had to remind him there was no way of my knowing it was supposed to be prioritized if he doesn’t make a note of it, and there was no reason why he couldn’t have paged me personally.” Mark sighed. “Hospital pecking order politics all over again. I hate being the new kid.”

If he was seeking sympathy from his twin, it was a futile exercise. His brother scratched the back of his head, a bored aura clinging to him at this forced company. He didn’t know why Mark bothered coming here every day at five, nor did he understand why he himself encouraged it. They had nothing in common save some stray strands of DNA. His work issues held no interest to Nathan, as there was little interest on Mark’s part in Nathan’s world, save for the cool assessment that followed criticism. To an outside observer they would be cold, unfeeling automatons towards each other, two people missing important components of humanity.

They barely even looked related, Nathan morosely thought. You could hardly tell they were brothers, let alone fraternal twins. Nathan’s hair was black and cropped short, spiked in a messy arrangement that belied his artistic leanings. Though his wardrobe was always basic black, he still appeared unkempt and wrinkled, with Mark providing a stark contrast in his neatly arranged trenchcoat, beneath which was a blue pinstriped dress shirt and dark tie, minus the suit jacket. Mark was a good foot and a half taller than Nathan, and though his wardrobe was neat as a pin, his hair was cut in a messy brunette shag that was more fitting on an Irish setter than a doctor of pathology.

The brick wall shook again, and Mark gave Nathan a bored sigh. “A whole month of this?” he asked.

“Pretty much,” Nathan replied.

“And you didn’t think to call the police?”

“Why would I? They’re still alive by the sound of things.”

Breaking glass, heavy furniture and a blood curdling scream met this statement, echoing inside of Nathan’s tiny flat and shaking its lazy chaos into full wakefulness. Nathan and Mark sat silently at the kitchen table, facing each other with bland indifference.

The sudden silence was worse than the screaming.

“Shall I call 911, or will you?” Mark said.

Nathan picked at the last of his stir-fried greens. “You know I don’t have a phone,” he replied. He pushed his meal away and crossed his arms over his chest, the heel of his black Doc Martin’s perched on the corner of his kitchen table. “I don’t know how many times I have to remind you that the CIA and KGB still have wiretaps embedded in the land lines since 1981.” He shook his head in disappointment as his brother attempted to dial out on his cell phone. “Honestly, Mark. All these years between us, and



it's like we can't be bothered to know each other at all."

Mark had his cell phone pressed close to his ear. He glanced up at his brother, frowning. "I'm sorry, did you say something?" he asked.

"Nothing," Nathan said, turning away from him, the chasm between them impossible to breach.

## **episode two: oblique siblings**



There was nothing on the other end of the line, not even a thin hiss of static. Mark snapped his cell phone shut and shoved it impatiently into the pocket of his trenchcoat. His discomfort at the situation was further exacerbated by a low, keening moan burrowing its way through the brick wall in his brother's living room, the suffering accompanied by a loud smash of exploding glass.

"See?" Nathan said, completely unperturbed. "They always survive to hand out another blow. I'm thinking they're part of the S&M crowd. All whips and chains and red rubber balls, that kind of thing. Whatever, to each their own, I just wish they'd keep more regular office hours."

Nathan's apathy didn't shock Mark as he was used to this selfish point of view that had followed him around since birth. Mark was, admittedly, more sensitive to the plights of others, a facet that worked well with his chosen medical profession. He regarded his twin with his usual tired exasperation, and wondered why it was they felt this need to connect every day at five p.m. when it was plainly obvious they were so far apart from each other they'd have a hard time being passing strangers.

"One must have a vocation," Mark said. He didn't miss his brother's slight flinch at this. "So, how is the new job going?"

"Gone," Nathan said, without remorse.

Mark could feel a familiar argument creeping along the periphery of the wall that was between them. "Already? It lasted, what, four weeks? Maybe three? A record for you, lately."

"Doesn't matter. I've got other plans."

Which meant, of course, that he didn't have any. Nathan firmly believed that his lackadaisical approach to responsibility in order to feed his supposedly subversive bohemian lifestyle was the direct result of

his unrecognized brilliance. This irked Mark, who always valued hard work and a reasoned, orderly plan to life. Not to mention that he knew damned well that Nathan was no genius.

His concentration on study and keeping his goals in plain linear sight had rewarded Mark with a respected career as a doctor of pathology, a vocation he took to with the same, calm plodding that he fashioned his life upon. It was important to keep his days neatly categorized into specific treasure hunts for blood diseases and carcinomas. There was comfort in placing thinly sliced sections of disease onto slides which he examined with practised precision for exactly nine hours, six days a week, with Sundays off for good behaviour. This ordered life had rewarded him amply for his efforts, and his bank account was healthy, as were his living surroundings, which he kept tidy save for a few scattered medical texts on his coffee table, and the odd urine stain on his bathmat thanks to his overweight tabby cat, Meister.

“I thought you were calling the police,” Nathan reminded him.

“I tried to, but my cell phone battery died.” Mark took the cell phone out of his trenchcoat pocket and handed it to Nathan as proof. “I bought it yesterday, too. At that big electronics box store just a couple of blocks down from the hospital.” Mark sighed sadly over it. “Meister tore up the receipt. I wonder if they’ll still take it back, what with it barely out of the packaging.”

“You should drop that miserable cat off with it,” Nathan said. He opened the cell phone and began pressing every button on its surface. No signs of life were present.

“That’s not a very nice thing to say,” Mark said, frowning.

But Nathan was unapologetic. He gathered up the Styrofoam packet that had held his dinner and tossed it into the clear plastic bag it had come in. He was about to take Mark’s as well, but Mark placed a firm hand on it, reminding his brother he hadn’t had one bite of it yet. “You’re too damn sentimental,” Nathan accused him. “That damn cat ripped the shit out of your leather couch and he’s already done a number on your bathroom door. He’s practically reduced it to splinters. If the landlord sees that, he’ll have a bird and make you pay to replace it, not to mention that I’m sure there’s something about not keeping pets in the lease. There’s no hope for it, Mark. You need to get rid of the stupid cat.”

“I’m not getting rid of Meister,” Mark stubbornly replied. He snatched his broken cell phone back, and shoved it into his pocket. True, the cat had presented considerable problems behaviour-wise since they’d moved to this city, but the thought of going home every day to an empty, overly clean apartment devoid of life was too depressing for Mark to contemplate. Besides, he’d had Meister since his college days, and the cat had been instrumental in aiding his lonely hours of studying, his warm furry body cuddled in Mark’s lap while he studied the shapes of various forms of leukemia cells. Meister proved to be an emotional balm against the known effects of the diseases Mark studied, the faces of the patients and their suffering fading beneath tabby stripes and a relentless, demanding purr.

“The lease specifically says we are not permitted to house dogs over 80 pounds, chickens, or hooved animals. There’s nothing at all against a cat.” Mark chewed his thumbnail, thinking on this. “I guess apartment chicken rearing was a problem in 1921. Imagine the unsanitary mess that must have created. It would be like a poultry grow-op.”

“You should drop him at the pound,” Nathan said, refusing to give the subject up. “Trade him in for a real pet. Like a goldfish. Or a budgie.” He raised his brow at his twin, harsh judgement at the ready. “Or better yet, swear off all animals and go for the instinct instead. Meaning, get yourself a damned girlfriend.”

Nathan, being the self-centred ass he was, just had to bring that sore spot up. Mark shifted uncomfortably in his small seat, longing to leave and yet feeling compelled by that unspoken

agreement to stay for at least half an hour. Nathan understood nothing of him, Mark thought with no small amount of bitterness. After that Mandy Turner business, it had been difficult to even sit next to women, let alone engage in any intimate contact.

Mandy Turner, Mark reminisced with disgust. That had been an unfortunate eye-opener into the realms of human psychosis. He'd been an easy enough target for her, being shy and cautious and more than a little inattentive thanks to his studying. She'd filled what free time he'd had up with her mad ramblings and bold attention that in retrospect were clear signs of mental illness. His field of study kept him embroiled over the microbiological components placed quietly on a slide beneath a microscope, and he hadn't noticed her slow, two year descent from a bubbly, happy humanities major into a brooding paranoid philosophy minor, which culminated in year three as a full blown psychotic machete wielding murderer, for which she obtained her master's degree.

It was rather cruel of Nathan to bring the matter up. This relationship blight followed him into his adulthood, marring any prospect of having any kind of healthy bond with a member of the opposite sex. In many ways, Mark blamed himself for Mandy's psychotic break, especially since he barely registered that she was present in his life during those years in college, her feelings and woven deep connection with him a decidedly one sided affair. Yes, they were a couple, but singularly so. Even now the thought of her filled Mark's soul with an uncomfortable disquiet, a hint that from the very beginning, there was that indefinable something missing from his being. He wasn't a sociopath, for he certainly had enough empathy, often to his own detriment. No, he thought with increasing discernment, whatever was missing was that thing always brought to the fore when he was in the company of his brother. A vast, impenetrable chasm that left him feeling partial instead of whole.

He was often assured by his peers that Mandy was an isolated incident. An unfortunate fluke. That she had lost her mind and murdered her physics professor in a fit of rage was not Mark's fault. And yet, even now, twelve years later he still found room to brood on it, and wonder if his strange disconnected absence from their relationship had been the final hammer blow that cracked her.

"This place is disgusting," Mark said, neatly changing the subject. He shrugged inward, as though warding off the various impending viral diseases that lurked in the very air of Nathan's filthy flat. "I don't know how you can live like this. Pigs have tidier surroundings."

"Pigs are actually very clean animals," Nathan said in his own defence. "There was an article in The Weekly Weird about it last week. Did you know they get bored and depressed? Smart animals, pigs." Nathan tapped the heel of his black boots on the corner of his table, the vibrations answered by a loud thump on the other side of his brick wall. "I got a girl coming here tonight. Met her at The Underground last Friday."

"The same one as last time?" Mark asked, not really interested.

Nathan placed both feet flat on the oak floor, and leaned across the table to bring his brother into his confidence. "Nope," he said, and grinned. His scratched the underside of his chin, his nails rasping against the lurking five o'clock shadow at his pale neck. "I can always ask if she has a friend."

Mark couldn't help but elicit a small, derisive choke at this prospect. "I've seen the things you've dragged home from that place. I have no interest in overly made up women whose pallor could put a corpse to shame."

"Goth girls, stupid," Nathan said, offended. "They're called 'goth girls' and there's nothing they like better than a prototype ex-punk rocker artist who's proved that living on the edge of society's expectations is viable."

"On the edge of what expectation, exactly?" Mark asked, his expression dour. "Abject poverty?"

“It is pointless to tell you anything. You’re so damned judgemental.”

“I’m just saying that your revolving door routine is getting old, Nathan. One of these days it’s going to get stuck and nothing is going to get through. You need to start getting more serious about who you hop into the sack with or risk permanent damage, to both your health and your well being.”

“My being is just fine,” Nathan snarkily replied.

“A new lay a week because the last week’s lay won’t call you back is hardly an indicator of your prowess. It’s actually rather sad.” Mark massaged his fingertips against his forehead, a familiar headache brewing. The conversation was had too many times in the past and he understood it to be pointless. “Is she at least well groomed? Holds onto the basic tenets of hygiene, unlike yourself?”

Nathan grinned at the memory he was clearly conjuring in his mind. “She’s got style. All jet black kinky hair and black rimmed eyes and big burgundy red lips, and leather from head to toe, all ending in a nice pair of spike-heeled dominatrix boots. She’s more than just a bit of all right, if you get my meaning.”

“Another undead emo wannabe,” Mark cruelly observed. He sighed in helpless understanding.

“Another scabby mime.”

“If you’re going to be an asshole about it, you can take your crappy, syrup coated dinner home and eat it alone!” Nathan stabbed his plastic fork through Mark’s Styrofoam packet. “You can share your poisonous world view with that goddamned miserable cat. The way things are with you these days, Meister is the only company you’re going to have for a long while.”

Mark gathered up his meal, figuring now was as good a time as any to do just that. He gave his brother’s angry mood a resigned nod. “Same time tomorrow?” he asked.

“Whatever,” Nathan petulantly replied. Then, as though fearful the tenuous connection between them was about to snap, he tempered his angry mood with need. “Make sure you get the mulligatawny soup from Henri’s. La Patisserie Rouge et Blanc, right across from the hospital.”

“It’s not like I can miss it,” Mark said, annoyed at Nathan’s demanding attitude.

“Just tell Henri you’re Nathan Connor’s brother. You’ll get it at a discount.”

Mark was uncomfortable with this information, and he bit his thumbnail in nervous thought, its edge now well worn to the quick. “How did you manage to wrangle this ‘discount’? I should hope not in the usual way.”

“What usual way would that be?” Nathan accused.

“I’m just presenting a sense of caution,” Mark assured his brother, but his flagrant accusation wasn’t going unchallenged.

“For the last fucking time, Mark, I’m a bloody artist. Yes, I screw random women. No, I do not have a nine to five soul encrusting job. Why yes, I do happen to survive on my merits as a creator of visual delights and horrors. I am not, repeat the not as many times as you can, selling oxycotin to minors or peddling heroin to infants in order to support my art-inspired bohemian lifestyle.”

“I didn’t say that,” Mark interjected.

“You didn’t have to,” Nathan astutely observed. “Why does every idiot around me seem to think that openly living the life of an artist means I’m one sliver of a needle prick shy of ending up in a rehab centre? It’s like some unwritten code, wherein I’m supposed to write a book about my down and out experiences, get published and end up on Oprah’s ‘Little Guy Does Good After Being A Fucked Up Twat’ afternoon special.” He curled his hands into fists, red blotches of embedded ink giving his skin a

choleric sheen. “I’ve never been one to follow stereotypes, Mark, and I resent you trying to pigeonhole me into one.”

“I don’t know how you manage to make ends meet, is all,” Mark said, unapologetic. “You had a good teaching job back in New York, with students and staff who respected you. I can’t understand why you are here, wasting your talents on some doodling job—Your words, Nathan, not mine—when it was clear you were a success. It’s like you’re having some kind of premature mid-life crisis, and you’re determined to undermine your own capabilities.”

Nathan’s tight fists softly relaxed at this outburst. His thumbs turned over each other, an uneven rhythm in keeping with the pounding on his wall from the assumed S & M patrons of whoever was in the apartment next door. “I painted his sign,” Nathan said, a well of pride leaking out from his morose admission. “La Patisserie Rouge et Blanc has my design and my work blaring out there onto the main city street.”

Mark couldn’t suppress a tired sigh at this.

“Let me guess. You didn’t get paid.”

“Sure I did!” Nathan exclaimed. Then, with less confidence. “Okay, he gave me the money for the materials. The paints and brushes and all. But I love that cafe, and Chef Henri promised me free dinners and coffee there for the rest of my life...”

“...Or for as long as he stays in business,” Mark reminded him. “Honestly, Nathan. There’s nothing wrong with getting a cheque once in a while.” He gave the mess of the tiny flat a shuddering glare, and kicked a few balls of ink stained paper out of the way of his shining black leather loafers. “As for having artistic license, I imagine the landlord is going to have a field day should he ever see what you’ve done to the flat. It specifically states in our lease that we are not to alter the original designs of the apartments. I don’t imagine he’ll take too kindly to you whitewashing that weird vine design on the kitchen cupboards, or painting over the red bricks.”

“If the rules didn’t apply to that psycho vine obsessed artist, then they shouldn’t apply to me.” The small flat shook again, this time sending a tiny spider plant crashing to the floor, its terracotta prison exploding on impact.

“If you were more responsible over your work habits, you wouldn’t have to live here,” Mark reminded his brother. He felt a well of pity for him for the path he was choosing, much the same as one would feel for a stranger begging for alms from his perch on a wet sidewalk. “You could get a nicer apartment if you took on a steady job, at least for a little while.”

Nathan was wholly unimpressed with Mark’s assessment of the situation. “You are not my mother,” he said, his voice darker than its usual irritated stoicism. His arms were crossed tight over his chest. His voice was close to shouting, a very real feeling of violence brewing between them at Mark’s seeming refusal to understand. “Just because we didn’t have much of one in the first place doesn’t mean you’re sent here to take up the slack!”

A shuddering slam coursed through the tiny apartment like a vicious slap. It had all the echoing recoil of a gunshot, its implications brewing a shocked silence between the two feuding brothers, their eyes mutually wide, their faces pale. Mark chewed hungrily on his thumbnail as he stared at the whitewashed bricks, almost convinced they were going to crumble and let whatever godawful thing was behind them into Nathan’s flat.

“We have to do something,” Mark said, but the tone of his voice betrayed a lack of conviction that this was their job to perform.

“Like what?” Nathan angrily replied. “Go and knock on their door and politely ask if they’re committing bloody murder?”

“Yes,” Mark said, resolute. He got up from his cramped seat in the small pine chair and headed for the front door of the flat.

“You can’t be serious,” Nathan said, getting up and following close behind him. “You don’t know what you’re involving yourself in. They could be serial killers!”

“All the more reason to knock on their door,” Mark said, his voice stern, though his always anxious nerves were now jumping somersaults and juggling knives in his stomach.

“You’re off your rocker, you are,” Nathan chided him. “If you’re going to knock on that door, you can count me out of it. I’m not getting involved!”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t hold to your brand of apathy,” With a confidence he absolutely did not feel, Mark dared to open the door to his brother’s flat, allowing in a quick flurry of stale, dusty air from the main hallway.

The door creaked as he gently opened it further, a sliver of his face visible as he peered around the frame in a vain attempt to get a quick survey of apartment #220’s door and the surrounding hallway. Mark’s reluctant face was accompanied by another thin visage above him, Nathan, more edgy and nervous, his large green eye twitching, while Mark’s steady amber hued gaze rolled up at him.

“Well, go on,” Nathan nagged him.

“I thought you weren’t interested,” Mark said.

“Are you going to knock, or aren’t you?”

He fought to keep his nervousness from showing, his thumb itching to be chewed, and he clenched his fist tight, imprisoning the anxious digit. He stepped away from Nathan’s door and into the dark, oppressive main artery of Crescent Manor. The halls of the Manor were decorated with bright red carpets, the walls in a matching red and gold velvet brocade that spoke of a wealthy former glory. It had long since fallen into ill health, Mark observed, with the edges of the wallpaper peeling and ripped at intervals, the glass of the incandescent light fixtures giving off an unpleasant, sallow glow. If Mark were to use his expertise and make a diagnosis, he’d say that the bleach stains on the carpet near the stairs and the various black cigarette burns near the elevator suggested a form of architectural leukemia. The dusty, decayed air spoke of the Manor’s unhealthy state, and Mark had no doubt the ailment was terminal.

Nathan, for all his loudmouth bravado, was firmly entrenched at his door, his fingers pressed white-knuckled against the dark wood of its frame. “Go! Go!” his mouth silently bid, and Mark had to fight the urge to smack him.

The door to apartment #220 was identical to Nathan’s, save for the obvious fact that it was less beaten and cleaner, with no ink smudges surrounding the knob in a grubby halo, and no deep scratches at the base. What was prominent was the large, brass knocker situated directly in the epicentre of the dark wood, and it was this object that mocked Mark in his quest, offering him a dare that Nathan wasn’t about to let him back down from.

With one final warning look at his brother, who ducked back into his own apartment in fleeting terror at Mark’s unexpected audacity, Mark grabbed the brass knocker in a firm hold and banged it with all he had three times against the dark wood.

The demand rang loud down the central line of the Manor, echoing through the main staircase, and through the all of the hallways, right up to the fifth floor. In Mark’s mind, it seemed to garner strength,

a burrowing crescendo that culminated in Nathan's wincing whimper.

No one answered.

Mark stood in front of the door, his thumb inching towards his bottom lip, only to rest at his chin. He cocked his ear to one side, and then more bravely pressed it against the door itself as he tried to discern any semblance of life within. A stark, eerie silence met him, and it was this silence that brought Nathan out from hiding, to stand to one side of his brother, the dark door of apartment #220 jeering at them with its domestic calm.

"That's strange," Mark said, deeply perturbed. He petted the surface of the door, the black lacquer smooth beneath his palm. "I can't hear a thing. It's like there's no one home."

Mark didn't see the thin shadow creep up behind him and stop at his shoulder. He didn't notice Nathan sneaking back into his own apartment, shutting the door and locking it with a tiny, unobtrusive 'click'.

A bony finger pressed hard against Mark's clavicle. He swallowed deeply as he turned, his mouth dry, speech failing him.

"What do you want?" the tenant of apartment #220 asked.

### **episode three: mirror wall**



Mark could feel it, like a stone in the pit of his gut. It rolled around in his stomach, making him queasy.

Awkward moments. They never did digest well.

On the best of days, Mark was merely uncomfortable around strangers. Adding a sense of conflict to the mix only served to increase his impending anxiety levels to a near hysteria, one which he aimed to quell by instantly chewing on his thumbnail, his mind searching in an endless, helpless loop for words that might ease the discomfort of the moment.

"My brother lives next door," he managed to mumble. The stranger stood in front of him, expecting more. He was a tall, gangly man in his late thirties, his eyes rimmed in dark circles that hung in limpid welts just above his hollow cheeks. His face was lean and unsmiling, and his thinning black hair was heavily contrasted with the thick black eyebrow that ran in a singular line above his hooded eyes. It was on the tip of Mark's tongue come right out and ask him who he had been out murdering, but the man's arms were laden with two brown paper bags of groceries, pulpy wet from the rain.

“We heard a noise. We thought someone had broken in.” Mark swallowed, knowing well he was a terrible liar, and he was certain this stranger had already figured him out. From the evil glint in his black gaze, Mark figured he was planning on how best to fillet this unwanted interloper, to make him suffer like the thing that bashed itself over and over against the common wall between the two apartments.

But at the mention of a possible burglary, the man’s darkness suddenly ebbed, his shadowed eyes widening in anxious surprise. He clutched his grocery bags tight against him, and fumbled with his key at the door. “Burglary? Are you sure? Dammit, this is the whole reason I left my last apartment. Break and enter crime ring, over on the east side. Bastards wiped me out, didn’t even leave my toaster behind.” The key rattled against the lock, refusing to catch. “Dammit. I can’t afford to start over, not now. I don’t have insurance yet.”

He certainly didn’t look the part of a murderer at present. If anything, he looked more the timid victim. Feeling a wave of pity overtake him, Mark took the key from his tremulous grip and slid it with ease into the lock. “You have to jiggle it just so,” Mark showed him, the latch opening, the door swinging wide. “A shake to the left with your wrist. I have the same problem.”

Taking his opportunity as it presented itself, Mark boldly walked into the flat, the tenant fearfully trudging in behind him, as though certain some bogeyman or knife wielding burglar was poised to do them in. “We heard a lot of noise coming from your flat,” Mark said, confused by the neat and sparse appearance of flat’s interior. There was a layer of dust on the coffee table, and Mark absently ran his finger through it, leaving off with a small swirl at the end.

“I’m not home much,” the tenant said as he placed his groceries on the kitchen counter. “I’m a computer program developer, and I’m on the road a lot, going state to state for different clients. I thought about subletting the place, but I didn’t want just anyone moving in. My buddy is popping by tonight and he’s between places right now, so I’m going to suggest it to him.”

The tenant had an obvious tired, passive nature, and Mark realized this was no serial killer snacking on body parts from his fridge, nor prone to cooking human tendon soup on his stove. The apartment itself, however, was another story. It was significantly larger than Nathan’s, and a quick inspection of their conjoined wall suggested that Nathan’s flat was a later construction, and in truth was once a part of #220. The apartment was currently comprised of fairly large kitchen and living room area, with a master bedroom accessible through a door in the dining room. He glanced through it, and caught sight of a room about the same size as Nathan’s flat, the bed neatly made, as though untouched for days, the open door to the ensuite bathroom revealing a pink towel carelessly thrown on the floor. There was no evidence of any violence struck upon the place, its dusty air and stuffy cleanliness suggesting neglect and abandonment. He carefully looked beneath the coffee table, and did a quick sweep of his arm underneath the couch situated at the sole window. No broken glass. No splatters of blood and guts. No bullet holes. No chips or dents in the plaster. Nothing.

The apartment, however, was not an innocent entity, a feeling that grew in eerie proportions upon Mark’s senses as he straightened up and gazed with uncomfortable fascination at the living room wall that was shared with his brother's flat. From floor to ceiling, the wall was covered in a myriad antique mirrors, their frames embedded deep into the plaster that covered the red brick. The wall had been painted afterwards, messy black and red streaks with the odd shock of white peeking out from inexpert, sloppy work. The rusted surface of many of the mirrors suggested they were old, antiques of the era from when they were first embedded. Mark ran his hands along the gilded frames, some of which were so intricately etched they depicted entire forest scenes in scrolling, windswept brass. There were smaller mirrors as well, women’s vanity mirrors balanced in every available space between the larger examples. Mark didn’t bother counting them, but it was clear there were easily over a hundred



plastered into the wall in a haphazard, circular pattern. He stood back to get a proper overview, his reflection cast in several rusted mirrors, an imperfect rendering that left him shrouded in a grey mist.

“I’m sorry to have bothered you,” Mark said to the tenant, who left the kitchen to stand behind him. “My brother and I could have sworn we heard a row going on in here. It’s obvious we were mistaken.”

Nathan’s neighbour still exuded nervous worry, his eyes hooded and wary. “You’re new here, right?”

“Yes. My brother and I just moved into Crescent Manor a month ago.” Mark turned back to the wall of mirrors, his image cut into a thousand pieces of confusion. “Are you a collector? Some of these look very old.”

“They came with the apartment. I hate them, but what can I do? The lease says they’re of ‘historic significance’. Did you know we’re not even allowed to touch up the paint?”

Mark felt a sickening ball well into his gut at the thought of the trouble Nathan and his newly whitewashed apartment was courting. “No,” he lied, covering for his brother. “That’s very interesting.”

“That’s not all,” the tenant said, suddenly eager. He escaped into his bedroom, and when he came out again he held a large, yellow box-shaped object in his hands. He held it in front of the wall and pressed a black button, a series of strange clicks and whistles emitting from it. “Cool, huh?” he said to Mark, who couldn’t possibly fabricate an opinion on the strange object. “It’s a Geiger counter. Measures radioactivity. Some of the mirrors go off the scale, and then others don’t register at all. Kind of freaky.”

He gave Mark’s confused disinterest a dismissive shrug. “Picked this thing up at that store up the street. Boxworth Electronics. Check it out, Russian instructions on the side.” He held the yellow box close to him in a sense of consumer pride. “That store stocks the weirdest shit. You should check it out some time.”

“I’ll be sure to,” Mark said, thinking on the broken cell phone in his pocket and the increasing unlikelihood he would get a replacement let alone his money back. He nodded a quiet apology. “Sorry to have bothered you,” he said.

Nathan’s neighbour held the Geiger counter loosely in his grip, his shoulders drooped as he stared at the thousands of tiny pieces of his tired self in the wall of mirrors. “I hate the damn things,” he admitted. He turned away from them, his hand roughly rubbing the back of his neck in weary resignation. “If it were up to me I’d smash every damned one of them.”

~\*~

Mark made a move to knock on his brother’s door, only for the deadbolt to slide free and the door to wrench open as he stood with his fist in mid air. “Well?” Nathan blurted out in impatience.

“Thanks for watching my back,” Mark instantly retorted. “After all, what are brothers for?”

“I wasn’t about to get myself pummelled just because of your insane curiosity,” Nathan said. He pouted in expectation. “Well? An S & M den, am I right? Complete with Marilyn Manson posters and fake corn syrup blood?”

“Hardly. Try neglected empty apartment with thick layers of dust and not a broken thing in sight, human or otherwise.” Mark watched his brother’s reaction to this carefully, wondering if that was a flicker of disappointment that rushed across his eager, fox-like features. “There was one oddity, however.”

Nathan latched onto this with far too much ferocity for Mark's liking. "Yes? What was it?"

"Mirrors," Mark said, purposefully remaining cryptic.

"Mirrors," Nathan repeated in a half whisper, as though uttering a name at a seance, or absorbing some great secret from a Cold War deathbed. He blinked and brought the present back into focus. "Broken, I assume?"

"No," Mark replied. "The wall you share, it's covered in antique mirrors. He said they were there when he rented the apartment. They're embedded into the plaster, some artistic conceptual rendering made with the original owner's blessing, I assume. The landlord, of course, has deemed them historic and refuses to remove them."

Nathan kicked absently at the base of his apartment door, digging further rivets into the dark wood with the steel tips of his boots. "A wall of mirrors," he repeated, the mystery deepening with further conspiracy in his mind. "Imagine having to get up in the middle of the night and having all those visions of yourself in the dark. Gives me the shivers just thinking about it."

Mark had to agree with his brother's assessment of the situation, since seeing himself within those dark, gilded frames had left him feeling queasy. Those glimpses of himself in the grey murk played on his empathetic imagination, his reflection so distorted it was difficult to discern who he really was. "I'm thinking he must have left his television on," Mark said, though he was well aware it was off when he entered the apartment, the air oppressive with silence. "Maybe the *Scream* channel. As for all the bumping and thumping, this is an old building. Pipes and settling foundations may have played a part. Or perhaps the issue had nothing at all to do with the apartment, perhaps it was another floor altogether and it's carrying down between the spaces in the drywall."

"Yeah, sure," Nathan said, clearly humouring his brother's apparent ignorance.

Mark shoved his hands into the deep pockets of his beige trenchcoat, ready to be rid of Nathan and his accusing, suspicious nature and the enforced hour he'd spent with him. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

"Yeah, I guess..No, wait!" Nathan halted Mark's departure with a faltering smile. "I just... Tomorrow is rent day, right?"

"I'm just about to drop off my cheque to the super," Mark replied. He inched away cautiously, but his brother reeled him back in with his usual expert cloying need.

"I'm a little off," he said. He gave Mark's stiffening jaw an imploring request for charity. "Oh come on, Mark, I just lost my job..."

"You lost it on purpose," Mark reminded him.

"It's just a hundred bucks," Nathan said, as though this shouldn't mean anything between them. "A hundred bucks short, that's all, and I'll pay you back eventually, in spades, you know I will."

"No, I don't know you will," Mark reminded him. "We're still waiting on your eminent genius to be discovered, remember?"

"Fine, if you're going to be an ass about it, I'll just wait for the eviction notice," Nathan spat back.

"Thanks for the meal. It sure beats the soup kitchen."

"Or for God's sake, Nathan..." Mark's protest trailed off as he looked down on the angry, wiry figure of his twin. Disconnected and unfamiliar as they were with each other, he was still sharing a good portion of his DNA, a trait that very few people on this planet could claim. He was the last tendril of the mystical realm that was family, and it was this that made Mark take out his chequebook and write a

new amount that covered both his own and his brother's rent for the month. "We moved here because it's cheap. The cheapest place to live in the whole city, and yet central enough to walk to work. I'm warning you, Nathan, I'm doing this once, and that's it. I'm not going to go broke trying to make your ends meet."

"You're the best, 'bro,'" Nathan said, punching his brother in the arm, the friendly gesture stiffly received. "Coffee tomorrow morning. My treat."

Mark wasn't about to argue the finer point that Nathan got his coffee from La Patisserie Rouge et Blanc free of charge, and he highly doubted the dubious Chef Henri would offer a second free breakfast into the bargain. "Can't do it," he said, instead. "I'm going in early tomorrow. I'm scheduled to take some direct samples from surgery at five a.m."

"Next time," Nathan blandly said, the offer nebulous. He closed the door on his brother, shutting him and his generosity out with nothing more than a grunted thanks and a half-hearted nod. Mark stood alone in the red hallway of the Manor, a slow burn creeping along his sensibilities, asking him just when was it he would stop giving a rat's ass about this brother, this supposed twin, who didn't give a damn about anyone but himself?

Inwardly grumbling about this, Mark trudged down the main staircase to the ground floor, careful to avoid the loose step thirteen up from its base. Rumour had it the loose plank had been the culprit in a young woman's demise several years ago. The landlord claimed it was fixed, over and over, only for it to stubbornly remain loose. He'd cited shifting foundation blocks and the push and pull of cold and hot weather on the structure of a building, but Mark had already figured the issue had more to do with one elderly, arthritic superintendent than actual structural damage. He made his way to the ground floor, the super's flat clearly marked as the second door nearest the front foyer. The name Gerald Gain-Superintendent marked in simple letters on an equally plain brass plaque at eye level on the apartment door glinted in the half light of the hallway. Mark braced himself, the new cheque in hand, his heart heavy at the thought of this unwanted interaction.

He knocked on the door, and it was instantly wrenched open by a hunched, thin man who had to be in his nineties, his overly large head bobbing up and down on his neck like a dashboard toy. "Fourth of the month!" he exclaimed, and blinked up at Mark, his tiny, squinted eyes dwarfed by the massive lenses in his black framed glasses.

"I have the rent," Mark said, the cheque gently held in front of Mr. Gain's perpetually bobbing face. "There is a bit of an issue, however, as it has both my brother's and my own rent included in it. Is there a note of any sort I should attach with it, to ensure it goes through properly?"

"Rent's due on the fourth of the month!" Gerald Gain exclaimed.

"Yes, I understand that. Which is why I'm here. This cheque covers both my own and my brother's..."

"Fourth of the month!" Gain repeated. He snatched the cheque from Mark's hand and held it up to the dim light fixture in the hallway, his bobbing head and squinting eyes taking in nothing save the name printed in dark black ink in the corner. "Connor. Connor." His large bushy eyebrows knit together into a single line of thick white fur, his mouth twisted into a concentrated grimace, revealing yellow, gnashing rodent teeth. "Fourth of the month! You're past due!"

"I don't think so," Mark said, doing his best to humour the old codger. He took the cheque back and pointed to the date in the upper right hand corner. "See? It's the third of the month today. October third. I'm a day early."

But Gerald Gain was having none of it, and he let Mark know by ignoring the offered cheque, opting instead to totter unevenly into the depths of his apartment. Mark could hear the distinctive buzz and

click of an ancient tube television being turned on accompanied by a slouch of fabric and the spring-loaded laziness of an armchair. From his position at the door, Mark could see directly into the apartment, Gerald Gain's comfortable form sighing in relief as he sank into his dark green La-Z-Boy, the snowy reception of his black and white television tuned into what seemed to be a Discovery channel special on dung beetles.

"Mr. Gain?" Mark knocked helplessly on the open door. "Mr. Gain, I have to explain the cheque."

"I don't know why yer wasting yer breath, the old sod can't hear for now't, and he wouldn't know what to do with what ye said anyhow." A pushy little gran exactly half Mark's size rolled past him like a chubby marble, her blue hair carefully curled and coloured, her lipstick a garish pink hue that had been out of style since 1971. Her nails were immaculate and of the same pink as her lips, her rosy hand holding onto the envelope containing her rent cheque. Her grip was strong and unwavering as she tossed her cheque into what looked to Mark like a Christmas ballot box, complete with candy canes taped on the edges, the exterior wrapped with garish, Santa Claus encrusted gift paper. He watched as she wrote her name on the dirty scrap of paper tacked to the wall behind the box, and finished her signature with three numbers. #515.

"You have to make a careful note of everything in this place," she said, her thick Scottish accent tutting over the bother this presented. "I lived here twenty odd years now, and Gerald there is looking younger than when I first met him. It's no use at all to bother with reasoning with him. When they put the bricks together on this place, I think one of them caught him full front in the noggin'." She smiled sweetly as she adjusted her bifocals on her nose, her chubby fingers scrubbed pink. "Now, you are a new face. Just moved in, have you?"

"Last month. My brother and I—I live on the third floor, and Nathan is on the second."

"Yes, of course," the elderly woman replied, her denture white smile oddly strained. "Into that wee flat next to apartment #220." She held out her hand to Mark, shaking his in greeting with a ferocious strong grip that left his knuckles hurting. "Bonnie McDonald. Token octogenarian. I live on the fifth floor, as you can see." She cast a quick glance into Gerald Gain's ugly flat and bid Mark to bend low into her confidence. "Always mark down you've paid," she whispered into his ear. "Poor old Gerry can't remember when he last took a piss most days. If you don't mark it down on that scrap up there, you'll be getting an eviction notice by the 'morrow. Don't let that landlord's smooth talking fool you. He's a right tight bastard, he is. One hour late, and you're out!"

"That's hardly fair, taking the word of a confused elderly man over reason," Mark said. In the background, Gerald Gain shifted in his La-Z-Boy and grunted, an indelicate stream of flatulence clearly forming an opinion on the matter. Recognizing defeat, Mark placed the doubled up rent check into the ballot box as Bonnie had, and marked both his and his brother's name onto the dog-eared scrap of paper. "I can't blame this poor man, but I do blame his employer. Leaving so much responsibility in the hands of someone who is incapable of fulfilling it is a strange form cruelty, in my opinion. Perhaps I should make a complaint..."

Bonnie grabbed Mark's arm, her strong grip so tight his bones felt bruised. "Don't you be doing anything rash, son," she warned him. "I agree, it's a sad case, a very sad case, but it's destined to be sadder if you have his only livelihood yanked out from him. Just where do you think he'll go, our Gerry? He's got no family and no one in the world save a few strangers to watch out for him. The landlord would be more than happy to tip the old soul onto the street." Her eyes were magnified in her bifocals, their brown scrutiny sparkling and clear. "Think about it, now. Do you really want that on your conscience?"

No, not when she put it that way. Mark rubbed at the sore spot on his arm where her moral high ground

had left a growing bruise. “I suppose some sacrifices are in order. After all, the rent \*is\* cheap.”

“Both a blessing and a curse, if you ask me,” Bonnie said, her rotund form moving away from him as she headed towards the front door. “Like attracts like and all. The desperate seek out a place of desperation. Oh, he’s been good that way, our landlord, of course he has, in weeding out the real undesirables. But every now and then, like a little viral infection, someone wanders into this place and puts all the world into a bloody muck.”

Deep, murmuring voices echoed beside Mark, and he listened in on the drifting snippets of conversation. The apartment door nearest to the entrance opened, but no one left. Just past this door, on the wall leading to the front foyer of the building, were exactly four holes, the ancient wallpaper peeling around them, revealing the white plaster beneath. Entrance wounds, Mark thought. Their exit would be on the other side of this wall, inside of the apartment. Since they revealed nothing but a black emptiness, he figured the holes had been repaired by the apartment’s current resident.

“You need help...”

“I already told you,” an angry voice replied. “I don’t need anyone’s fucking help.”

Bonnie’s tutting in front of him grabbed his attention away from the drama unfolding just a few feet beside her. She shook her head as she looked on Mark, her pale, pink lips pressed tight in disapproval.

“Like I said, some people don’t know the trouble they cause.” She nodded not so discreetly at the open door, the voices within growing louder and more heated. “This one loves to invite trouble. I don’t know about you, son, but I wouldn’t be caught dead or alive in a place where I gunned a body down.” She tapped the side of her head sagely. “It’ll do you in up here, something like that.”

“Gunned someone down?” Mark repeated.

“I’ve gone and said the wrong thing,” she curtly replied. She moved closer and Mark flinched, wary of her freakishly strong grip. “I can see it now. It were murky before. You got a keen spirit under all that nervous tension.” She ‘tched’ and shook her head, blue curls rigid, unmoving. “Trust me, with all my eighty-three years behind me, I can tell a terminal case of curiosity when I sees one.” She blatantly pointed into the open apartment. “Watch yourself. Once you start poking, nothing’s safe.”

“I’m not curious,” Mark insisted.

But Bonnie wasn’t stupid. “Aye,” she said, a strong shoulder pushing open the cracked glass door leading to the darkening street outside. “It can’t be helped, son. You already got a warning, but you just took it for a puzzle, and you have the kind of mind that needs to figure them out. You’d have to, wouldn’t you, since you have a big piece of yourself missing. How else will you find it, poor soul. Yes, curiosity’s a curious man’s disease. It nae matters if you don’t feel its claws in you yet. You will. Like I says, you watch yourself. Them talons are deep.”

## **episode four: the Event**



He was a cop, if Mark went by the rumours the landlord enjoyed spreading, this tidbit of gossip confirmed by the conversation drifting angrily into the main hall. “I keep telling you, Paul, the guys back at the precinct have a running joke about you. They been calling you Ostrich Nash.”

“What can I say? I have a habit of sticking my neck in where it doesn’t belong.”

“No, Paul. They call you that on account of you burying your head in the sand instead of facing your trouble.”

A giant of a man in his late forties left the apartment, his height easily a couple of inches taller than Mark, measuring him at six foot three. He ran his large palm through the waves of his thick white hair, the buckle on the sleeve of his beige trenchcoat catching at his temple. He swore as he tore his arm away, his eyes roving in irritation over Mark, who was wearing the exact same coat.

“Happens all the time,” Mark said, gesturing to his own buckled sleeve. The visitor answered Mark with a tired sneer.

“I don’t give a fuck what the hell those bastards are saying!” an angry voice from deep within the apartment replied. “They can mind their own goddamned business!”

There was a loud clatter, what sounded like a ceramic mug tossed into an empty steel sink. The large man was stoic in his calm, a book-end to Mark who hovered in Gerald Gain’s doorway as if looking to have a conversation with the addle-brained man. He looked away, red faced, when the overbearing stranger beside him gave him a proper scrutiny.

“You’re a new one around here, aren’t you?” the man asked. He held out his meaty palm, his fingers thick and stubby, like Serbian sausages. “Jim Horlock.”

“Mark Connor.” Made braver by this offer of small friendship, he inched closer to the open door near the building’s entrance. “Do you live here?”

Jim’s eyes widened at this. He laughed as though this was the most hilarious suggestion he’d ever heard. “No way,” he said, his huge hands diving deep into the pockets of his matching beige trenchcoat. Then, as though recognizing Mark was of those unfortunate beings who actually did reside at the Manor, he back-pedalled with banal, half-hearted reassurance. “Mind you, the rent is cheap.”

A copious amount of swearing drifted into the hall, and stood like a person between them. “That’s Paul Nash,” Jim said, nodding in the direction of the open door. “You’d have heard of him, of course. He’s a damned legend in this building.”

“I’ve just heard some silly rumour,” Mark said, dismissive.

“Oh? Which rumour might that be?”

Mark pointed to the injured drywall at the building’s entrance. “That he put those holes there when he gunned down a drug dealer and a prostitute during a police raid.”

“Is that what they’re saying, then,” Jim said, peering down at Mark in a decidedly less friendly manner. The shadow of disquiet was quickly erased, however, by his sudden, large, magnanimous grin. His teeth were large and white, accentuating his giant status. “Nothing like a bit of fantasy to fill in the gaps and make reality more palatable.”

“So, that isn’t what really happened?” Mark asked.

Jim laughed again. “Hell, no.”

“So he didn’t kill anyone,” Mark said.

“I didn’t say that,” Jim qualified. “You’re mighty inquisitive for a common civilian. You a cop, too?”

Mark was taken aback by this. “No. I’m a pathologist. I work at the hospital. St. Benedict, to be exact.”

“Ah, so you’ve been around the murder block once or twice then.”

“No,” Mark said. Was that disappointment flickering across Jim’s face? “I specialize in blood diseases.”

“Oh,” Jim said, suddenly uncomfortable. “So you’re the bastard who goes around telling everyone when they’ve got the cancer.”

“I suppose that’s one way of putting it.”

“Jesus,” Jim said, his giant’s throat thick and deep with sympathy. “That sucks.”

“Jim?” Paul’s voice from within his apartment shouted. “Are you pissing off or are you going to just stand there in the hall like food for roaches?” He approached his front door, and stopped at its frame, his arms bracing the doorway. He was a fit man, Mark observed, shorter than himself by about three inches, a stockier build that boasted of layers of well maintained muscle. Though he was wearing casual attire, a white tank top and a pair of baggy jeans, there was nothing sloppy about him, if anything he exuded a sense of neatness that Mark could find kinship with. His shaved head retained a layer of thick stubble, but his most outstanding feature were his eyes—two blue shards of ice that pooled all they surveyed into a thick clutch of frostbite.

“Who the fuck are you?” Paul asked.

“Me? I’m... We aren’t familiar with one another. I’m Mark. Mark Connor.” He held out his hand, but Paul didn’t take it. Mark faltered, his hand retreating as though it were unsure if it wanted to be a part of the rest of this highly embarrassed body. He hated introductions, an openly unwanted one all the more. “I live on the fourth floor. My brother, Nathan, he’s on the second.” He rolled his eyes to the ceiling and awkwardly pointed upwards. “He’s in the flat directly above yours, actually.”

“Really,” Paul replied, his demeanour becoming more unpleasant with this information. “So that’s the bastard who won’t get his kitchen tap fixed, and is leaving a big mold stain on my dining room ceiling.” Paul crossed his arms, which were growing in size and strength with every minute Mark spent in his company. It wasn’t natural to see that much muscle outlined on a person, Mark thought. He’s like the strong man from the circus.

“Your brother must also be the little shit who keeps turning up the radio at all hours, blasting fucking Bob Marley circus clown music.”

“It’s ska,” Mark said, blandly correcting him. “It’s its own musical genre.”

Paul’s massive arm muscles flexed, and Mark felt his mouth go dry. There was no doubt the man could pack a wallop if he wanted to. Mark was very, very unhappy with himself for allowing curiosity to drag him into this situation, and even more unhappy with his twin, who as usual was the root of the conflict.

"I don't care if he's blasting John Tesh, I don't want to hear it!" Paul glared at his friend. "Jim, just tell the boys at the precinct I'm not coming back. I've got enough on my plate right now. I got to sort myself out, and that's not going to happen any time soon."

"Whatever you say, boss. Still, without you there, homicide just ain't the fun place it used to be." Jim gave his friend a thin smile and a knowing nod. Mark conversely earned a hearty grin. "Nice meeting you, friend," Jim said. He nodded at Paul's angry stance. "Don't let his bull and bluster get to you. Been through a lot this guy, but he's got a chewy moral centre. We'll be seeing you around, Paul." Jim left the building, the front door of the Manor creaking slowly shut as his large bulk was absorbed by the stark black ink of the night. Mark was left alone with his curiosity and Paul's lingering anger, neither of which were mixing well.

Paul had his apartment door halfway closed when Mark said, "He only does it to drown out the fighting."

Paul's apartment door opened fully with a long, thin creak of its hinges. "What did you say?" he asked, and to Mark's surprise the tough guy was suddenly pale, his skin a matching white hue to his spotless white tank top.

"There's always this horrible row going on in the apartment next to his, on the left side. They share a wall." Mark tried to mentally measure the differences from this floor and the one above it. "My brother's flat cuts off about here, and this is where the one next door starts. It's a constant stream of screaming and banging and carrying on. But after tonight, I'm not even sure if it's that apartment that's the source of it. When I took a look, there was no evidence there was anyone there at all."

"You actually went in there," Paul said, his eyes wide, a sincere fear in the hushed tone of his voice that made Mark's nerves jump and itch, putting his hackles on edge. A tough guy, a cop even, terrified of noise in an apartment. Definitely the kind of strange Mark didn't want to be involved with.

"Perhaps you could get someone to investigate, seeing as how you are a lawman," Mark said. "I understand domestic issues aren't your area of expertise, but if you called a fellow officer who specializes in such disputes..."

"I can't help you."

"I don't think you understand," Mark said. "The noises are quite violent."

"It doesn't matter. I told you, I can't help you."

Mark was confused. "This is hardly acceptable. I'm telling you there is a possible crime being committed, and I assumed that as an officer of the law..."

"I'm not a cop, not any more," Paul said, cutting Mark off and pushing the dimly lit hallway into a edgy, dense silence. He ran his palm over the circumference of his head, fingers roughing up bristle. "Sorry to hear you have a noise problem," he said, refusing to look at Mark, the carpet, the light fixtures behind him, the dust in the air taking on his full attention. "I really can't help you."

Paul shut the door to his apartment with a loud slam, leaving Mark alone in the hallway, with Gerald Gain's soft snores over the dung beetle's life cycle playing on the Discovery channel drifting past him. Quite the unfriendly bastard, Mark thought of Paul, his sensitive nature wounded by the man's harsh refusal to help. Machismo jackass. No doubt he was one of those live-at-the-gym types, all brawn and mouth with little to show for personality. He stuck his tongue out at the mysterious Paul's door, not caring if the jerk had his evil little ice-eye pressed against the peeper or not. He'd been insufferably rude, with no good reason for it. With a huff of indignation, Mark left the first floor to make his way up the grand main staircase to the fourth floor, his near terminal case of curiosity officially cured.



This day had proved taxing on his nerves, from the argument with the surgeon over his routine, to Nathan's noise problem and subsequent need for rent money, to Gerald Gain's dementia, and finally to this Paul fellow, who in retrospect clearly had some unresolved psychological issues, mostly to do with his little anger problem.

There could only be one cure, Mark knew, and he relished the thought of entering his apartment, running a hot bath and making a cup of weak tea to accompany him. He was eager to read his new copy of a professional text on blood diseases, the thought of poring over mutated red cells and devastated immune systems calming his outlook.

A car alarm was screaming full force from the small parking lot in the direction of his brother's flat, its high pitch muffled by the thick red carpet covering the stairs. He was careful to step over the loose board, thirteen steps up from the bottom, his long legs taking him easily over it. He wondered how the elderly woman Bonnie McDonald managed it, with her short legs and wobbly gait. It was a shame the elevator was on permanent hiatus, and he pitied her for having to walk this gauntlet every time she dared to venture outside.

The vast, stained glass mural that decorated the outside wall from the ground floor up to the fourth allowed in little visibility, making the journey more treacherous than it had to be. Mark fought through the darkness to find his footing, each step carefully hunted for within the dim, sepia glow that served as lighting. He might as well be using a candle, he thought. How in the hell did Bonnie manage?

The mural, and its upside down tree, bore down on him with oppressive judgement, its long, black roots crawling towards the ceiling with spidery malice. An unusual mistake, and on such a grand scale—Mark wondered of the construction crew was ever taken to task for it. For certainly, the stained glass tree seemed to hold a grudge against those who passed it every day, its bitterness personified in dim lighting and black shadows. The car alarm continued to bleat outside, accompanied now by a swearing tenant, whose location could never be properly identified. This routine was set to continue for the next half an hour, and without glancing at his watch, Mark was aware that the evening was aging, approaching well on eight-thirty.

He was halfway up the flight of stairs leading to the fourth floor when it happened.

How he first noticed it would forever be a question he couldn't properly answer. Was it the long crack that suddenly appeared at his right, the plaster ripping apart, spewing arteries of steel cables and snapping wood? Was it the rain of stucco that descended on him from far above, the ceiling collapsing in a kind of cruel slow motion, promising him a battered death? As in all catastrophes, the horror was measured in the slow, rhythmic count of fractioned seconds, the single beat of a heart pulled into molecular time stamps, the blood halted in its flow, his face paling, lung capillaries collapsing. Even in this moment of stark mortal clarity, Mark remained half-hearted, an incomplete understanding dawning on him. The building was collapsing. The bricks and mortar of 314 Crescent Manor was breaking down all around him, set to bury him beneath their weight and crush every bone in his body to dust.

He was going to die.

It should have frightened him. Anyone faced head on with the terror of one's demise plainly thrust before them has that moment of utter panic, the primal need to survive kicking in and begging for the imminent carnage to stop. Even in confusion, fear lurks.

But Mark Connor wasn't sure what to feel. In that second of mortal destruction he was faced with an exact image of himself, and this self was strangely ghost-like, a willowy image that made little impact on its surroundings. A person as fractured as the building was, a soul not made properly whole.

"Well, that's too bad," Mark sadly said, a note of sympathy for this poor, half-finished design before it

was brutally snuffed out, his body crashed four floors to the very basement of the building, the red carpet ragged, its edges curling into the white dusty murk like blood clots.

Mark sucked in a breath. His lungs, deprived of oxygen for a good few minutes, latched onto this injection of life with healthy gusto.

He blinked, staring at the step in front of him, the one leading to the top landing of the fourth floor. It was old, yes, the carpet worn and with a few black spots from cigarette burns, but it wasn't destroyed. With tentative steps he managed to move forward, his legs not quite co-operating, as if they carried a much lighter weight. His coat didn't fight right, either, and he shrugged it around his shoulders, where it slipped and hung on his frame like an oversized burlap blanket.

Still shaken from the Event—for what else could he call it? A hallucination? The first signal for his impending madness?—he reached into his coat pocket, his hand dwarfed within its depth as his fingers sought out his apartment key. How strange, he thought, his heart still hammering a grateful rhythm in its joy over being alive. It was all so real. He rubbed his arm, a kink still in it from his imagined fall. No bruise met his touch, no soreness. Imagined, then. Conjured. An unfortunate conscious nightmare.

Where was his brother? Did he experience this, too? A sense of horror invaded Mark's consciousness, his mind looping into a deep worry. Was Nathan all right?

Mark caught himself, wondering why Nathan figured so strongly in his thoughts, a sudden outpouring of feeling for his twin's well being overpowering his emotions. It was all he could do not to barrel down the stairs and bang on Nathan's door, to ensure he wasn't buried beneath that pile of white bricks in his living room, with whatever evil thing was living behind them ripping him to pieces.

Odd thoughts, Mark remarked to himself. He brushed the back of his hand across his forehead, confused when he didn't find chunks of drywall embedded in his mop of hair. He felt smaller. Lighter. Unquestionably not himself.

He didn't need a weak cup of tea, he chided himself. He needed a stiff drink, one that preferably came with gin. Seeing a building topple around you and drag you down with it, only to blink and have it all built back up again had to be a sign of stress. No doubt, a stress that was Paul Nash and St. Benedict Hospital and Nathan and dotty Gerald Gain induced. It had been a terrible day. He was to put on a classical CD the minute he got home, pour himself a strong drink, run a bath, curl up in bed with Meister and his new book on blood diseases. He'd banish all concerns for his brother, for Nathan surely wasn't thinking of \*him\*. Another rush of feeling hit Mark, and he had to shove it out of his consciousness with effort. How odd, how strange to be worried like this about his twin. Nathan's presence in his life only invited obligatory thoughts of care, like giving alms to a beggar. A few panicked seconds couldn't possibly change their relationship this drastically. Mark scoffed at his own foolish ruminations and headed into the dimly lit hallway toward his apartment, the door to the fourth floor closing shut with a whisper behind him.

Still, there was definitely something off balance about himself, though the more he concentrated on it the more nebulously correct it seemed. After all, if one was involved in a catastrophic Event, it would be normal to worry about your one relative, who may also have fallen victim to it. It wasn't a terrible thing to care. If anything this was an improvement on his personality, one which he should cherish. A sudden, remarkable understanding of the plight of his fellow man, especially in connection with his hitherto emotionally estranged twin. It wasn't that Mark didn't have empathy, he had it in spades, but now it seemed so strangely whole, like an abstract understanding brought into full focus and blinding him with its powerful clarity.

He was thinking deeply on this as he made his way down the hall, memories of himself impatient and anxious at their imposed half hour dinner meetings during the week were now recognized as being

hollow. This had to change, of course. They had things to talk about now, Mark was sure of it. He'd admonish Nathan more forcefully about his irresponsible lifestyle and how it prevented him from any real success. He would push the man to obtain gainful employment—While he could empathize with the need for artistic freedom, he wasn't about to allow the 'starving' part of that equation become the focus.

He paused at last in front of his home, the door of apartment #432, and quickly unlocked it with the skeleton key held firm in his grip. Meister was already on the doormat in front of him, his massive tabby girth displeased with his owner's late arrival. Mark reached down to give him a reassuring scratch behind the ears, only to earn a harsh, frightened hiss and a nasty bite to his hand instead.

“Ow! Damn you, Meister, you drew blood!”

His voice felt strange. Higher pitched, with a breathy quality to it that he knew he didn't possess. He touched his throat, wondering if he was coming down with some ailment or other. Working in a hospital one never knew what one was bringing home.

There was something wrong with his throat, but it wasn't any ailment that Mark could easily diagnose. He stroked his throat delicately, feeling its smooth contours, a terrain he knew was normally rough, with a distinctive hill that jutted out sharply about an inch beneath his chin.

He slid off his beige trenchcoat, his body nearly lost in the massive length of the sleeves. He hung it carefully on the hook beside his door, his back at the mirrored sliding doors of his coat closet pointedly ignored.

Something had changed. Most terribly and obviously. He wasn't sure he had the courage in him to face it.

Mark Connor, for all his inward insecurities, can be counted on to go to battle when necessary. He stood at the door of his apartment, his forehead pressed tight against the peephole, the truth waiting with just the merest glance at his shoulder in the mirrored closet doors beside him.

He cast a tiny, peripheral glance at the woman in his mirror.

It was all hallucination, of this he was sure. Disturbing as it was that this woman made the same facial expressions as him, who moved her arms and body in exact synchronicity, he knew this wasn't his true reflection.

Terrifying, yes, but it did cure her unexpected worry about her brother. How much easier it was to chalk it all up to simple hallucination! A cursory physical inspection failed to prove this dream-state, especially with the addition of two rather small, soft bumps at her chest and a decided lack of one between her legs, but Mark had full confidence that the power of the mind often superceded reason, as was presently the case. She placed her hand over her hammering heart, the small boned woman in the closet mirror doing the same, her naked, panicked expression so bare she felt embarrassed by it.

Was this his brother's doing? Mark suddenly thought, her jaw clenched tight, the tiny chin inspected by her new, thin fingers as they tapped around it. Nathan insisted he had nothing to do with drugs, and Mark had been inclined to believe him, but with this unexpected transformation, one had to have suspicions. She frowned, her brow furrowing into tiny rivulets. Strange how the more she looked on this version of herself, the more she could see her original male version superimposed upon it. There was a softening of the harsher angles of her face, a muting of the broad width of the shoulders, and while the height remained the same, the muscle mass was slightly diminished, replaced with lean curves and gently rounded hips. With this new softened structure of her cheeks and chin, Mark's lips took on a downright pouty expression, the messy mane of thick dark hair a sultry halo that hid the furtive glances of her slightly almond shaped brown eyes.

It was unlikely her brother had done any such thing to her, she reasoned, for he hadn't the opportunity for one, and secondly, this sort of prank didn't jibe with their cold relationship. A renewed pang of guilt tugged at her for even suspecting Nathan, and it was quickly replaced with anger at Wong Fu's, for surely there was some additive placed in the fried rice that was to blame, some evil prankster chef unkindly poisoning his customers. She ignored the fact that she hadn't yet taken one bite of her dinner, that it was still in the Styrofoam container at her feet. Meister chewed on the corner of it with gusto, his purring increasing in volume the more he managed to gain access. With a few expert tears he chewed the corner off and began sneaking strips of pork into his greedy maw.

Much to the cat's chagrin, Mark picked up the packet and stormed into her kitchen, where she threw it into the garbage. Nathan was right. No more fast food, from now on everything put into their mouths would be from quality establishments and clean environments. Wong Fu's would be hearing from \*him\* in the morning, when the after-effects of this disgusting experiment were through. Perhaps he would even press charges. It was a dangerous thing to do to innocent people, and who knew how many were currently affected. The hospital was going to be over-run with these cases, Mark was sure of it. There'd be lots of slides to analyze tomorrow, well on top of the amount of work already waiting for him. Irresponsible, criminal jerks!

Thus justified, her strange female body beginning to fit properly the more she moved with it, she forgo her bath for a stiff drink and a march into her bedroom. The book on blood diseases was waiting for her, as was the warm comfort of her bed, and the purring fat body of Meister, who was already perched on the pillow beside hers. The best course of action when presented with this kind of hallucination was to ride it out, with reason superimposed upon it. What was happening was not real, and was in fact the result of a criminal act. She would test her own blood at the lab in the morning to see exactly what drug had been ingested, and she would then go immediately to the police. Perhaps she would run into that nice Jim fellow he had talked to earlier. Not his friend and fellow tenant Paul, however. He had proved himself useless. Just because he was an attractive sort didn't cure the fact he was an ass.

This tiny blip on her consciousness that stated, very frankly, that she shouldn't be considering the laws of attraction at all if she was still male, was easily pushed aside as she slid into bed, the solidity of leukemia in the blood book taking her full focus before she drifted off into sleep. Meister's tail flicked at every groan and creak the Manor sighed as it also readjusted itself into its new form. Small differences plagued the hallway outside of Mark's apartment. The shade of carpet was now a dark burgundy instead of red. The lights were slightly less opaque, giving off a beige glow instead of a dim golden. The main stairs, once drenched in darkness were now flooded with fluorescent brightness, illuminating the most vast transformation of all.

With its branches crawling upwards, as though stretching in awkward wakefulness, the stained glass tree remained a proud focal point from the ground floor to the fourth, its dark colours devoid of their usual oppressive weight. The roots stretched deep towards the lobby, its central maw yawning. The reason for this was obvious. Though Mark longed to deny its resurrection, the Manor was set to present her with another proof of profound change. The morning was set to bring with it the highly unpleasant evidence that her world was now far more complicated than she'd first anticipated.

Crescent Manor's stained glass window—that massive art nouveau tree—was no longer upside-down.

## episode five: pennies from heaven



Nathan closed the door behind his brother's visit with a sense of relief. Something had to be done about these five o'clock visitations, endured like some kind of parole obligation between them. One of these days he was going to have to have a proper blow out with Mark and completely cut all ties from his twin once and for all. There was no sense of animosity in this, no real rivalry that pushed them apart. It was simply a fact that nature had never quite gotten the gist of them being together. Everything about their relationship felt so inexplicably incomplete, and with this was a sense of alienation lurking between them that invaded Nathan's usually positive outlook. Sure, he was flesh and blood, but that couldn't count for everything, could it?

Even with the pull of this idea of breaking free of his stranger-brother, Nathan knew there was no hope in it. Being around Mark was increasingly frustrating, but he also held a strange thrall, an expectation that someday this weird hole in their relationship would be filled. With what, Nathan wasn't about to hazard a guess.

He hoped it had nothing to do with whatever the hell the folks in #220 got up to. They were quiet now, and Nathan was cautiously grateful, the mess of his papers slowly picked up and placed into the trash, the broken glass from his beloved Solidarnosc poster swept up and dumped in the bin. Domesticity never came easily to him, and with the assurance that there was nothing in the immediate vicinity that could cause physical harm, Nathan deemed his living space 'clean'.

He checked his watch, noting the time was seven o'clock. He had only an hour to shower and primp his hair into a spiked halo of disestablishmentarianism and make sure the sheets didn't display obvious stains. That sweet little dominatrix waif was showing up at eight, and he was keen to make sure she was a repeat performance, if only to prove his snotty brother wrong. He could string a bird along for a week as good as the rest of them. No one night go here, he'd stretch it out long, for two or three. He wouldn't be able to accuse him of the once a night special then. He was pretty sure he could make it look like a proper relationship for a week, it couldn't be that hard. Let Mark chew on that for future reference.

After all, the birds loved him. Once he strung them the starving artist line, they all came flocking, every one of them envious and flattering in their praise, even the ones who pretended to be churlish and mocking. There was no question he was good at what he did, he had a cult following not long after he completed art college, and this certainly banked a long string of Friday nights that he never spent alone.

Mind you, he wasn't picky, either, and that helped. The younger Goth Girls fresh in their second or so year of college were naive enough to think his lack of funds and torn jeans and obvious smarts against

the rising proletariat made him a decent enough lay. These black eyeliner girls who drifted in and out of his bed were pleasant enough company, even if they did tend to disappear afterwards, and never call or drop a note or so much as leave a dime for coffee. Sure, the trysts were fleeting, the responsibility nil— But this was hardly a bad arrangement, as far as Nathan was concerned.

He didn't care that his peers looked down on him, they who long ago gave up their bohemian dreams to settle into bungalows and marriages and the obligatory triad of sprogs that whined and screamed and needed Baby Gap slippers, ruining all sense of the free artistic spirit. Not for him was that kind of choking responsibility, no way, Nathan Connor lived his life off the grid. He was a living example of his art, a free man who couldn't be beaten down by the systems still poisoning the world long after the Cold War had ended.

He ignored the tiny, barely perceptible voice of derision that sounded oddly like Mark. "Oh shut up, you scrawny, broke cliché. The birds won't have you because you don't have two dimes to rub together and the only reason half of them even show up is because they thought you were dealing drugs. Nothing pisses off a Goth chick junkie whore like a secretly healthy lifestyle."

"I'm not that healthy," Nathan grumbled, his thoughts straying towards a longing for Henri's amazing mulligatawny soup.

The slam of a car door captured his fractured attention, and he jumped on it, scuttling to his living room window, and opening it a tiny crack. This window ran in close parallel to the one in the tiny corner that served as his dining room, the only difference between the two being that this window had no black screen filtering the outside world from his small acts of mischief. From this angle he was in a direct line beneath the tiny postage stamp of black tarmac that served as the Manor's parking lot. He rubbed his hands together in eager glee as the driver of the pale blue Toyota Corolla opened the car door, his arms laden with piles of manila folders and a battered green briefcase with a broken plastic handle. The rain and wind had increased in scope since his dull dinner half hour with his brother, a seedy darkness made all the more unpleasant by the torrent of ice pellets that formed within it. The driver struggled with the files in his arms, his car alarm blaring a warning of his arrival. It was awkwardly silenced after five struggling presses of a remote button attached to his key chain. A vicious snarl of wind attacked him in the updraft where the corner of the Manor and the parking lot met, pulling a thin sheet of paper free. Nathan heard a soft, but audible, curse.

If Mark was a proper brother, and not the staunch, boring, anxious and utterly humourless human being he had grown up to be, Nathan would have happily invited him in on his private joke against this unfortunate innocent citizen. Other brothers, hell, siblings in general, understood the measure of what it was like to join together on some not so wholesome fun, to play harmless maverick and banter back and forth over the results. It was at times like this when Nathan felt a genuine longing for family connection, one that had been so cruelly denied them. He couldn't even say for certain that Mark felt the same way.

He doubted it.

For one, Mark wouldn't understand why it was so important to keep that cache of pennies in a cracked mug on the windowsill. He had no room in his analytical mind for why silliness was an important facet of creative expression. He would call Nathan cruel, or at the very least, juvenile. And perhaps he was right. The accusation would be bland, the protest against his actions half-hearted and bored. Like when you passed a stranger pissing against a wall, but refrained from commenting on how disgusting it was to use the open street as a public toilet. A quiet 'tch' being all that was encompassed in your sense of disapproval. What happens to that pisser is not your concern. He has a different world from yours. He will never become a part of it.

Nathan patiently waited for the unfortunate victim with his armful of folders and his broken briefcase to get far enough away from his car so as to not notice the sudden, soaring projectile that zipped from Nathan's hand through the sliver of his open window. It hit the roof of the car with a tiny ping.

The car alarm violently roared back into life. Nathan ducked beneath his windowsill, hiding his mad giggling beneath his palm. He lifted his head cautiously after a few moments, his eyes level with the windowsill as he peeked out to get a good view of his handiwork. The driver was returning to his car, his fingers stumbling around the key chain, the low battery within it making turning off the car alarm a difficult process. He was soaked beneath the icy onslaught of wind and rain, his manila folders once beige now a deeper, yellowed hue, the labels smeared with wet, blue ink. Nathan watched as the harried man turned away from his finally silenced vehicle, another muttered curse against the rain and wind carried along the updraft.

Nathan flung another penny out the window. This time he didn't bother to duck.

The car erupted into a howling wail, one that seemed louder, though by acoustical standards this was obviously impossible. Irritating noises always had fluctuating decibels to the untrained ear. A gravel voiced man two floors up was woefully uneducated of this fact, his shouts of "Shut it off, you asshole!" stilted by the gale winds that cut across the tiny parking lot, his curses lifted past the roof, to tangle in the cable antennae. Out of habit, Nathan checked his watch. Seven thirty-seven. His gravel voiced neighbour was nearly fifteen minutes late this evening. He wondered what could have caused the delay.

He really should be getting ready for a night of debauchery instead of this idle mischief, he thought, but the lull of juvenile antics was a strong one, especially when it had built into a month long routine. Unfortunate tenant would arrive home either at seven p.m., or eight-thirty p.m., dependent upon his shift. Nathan would wait until he was near the front entrance of the Manor before pinging pennies off his car and setting off the alarm. Or he would allow said tenant to get all the way to his apartment before pinging pennies off the car (usually at eleven p.m., as he wasn't cruel enough to prevent the poor sod from getting at least an hour's worth of sleep in first) and setting off the alarm. Then there was his favourite, which was rare but well worth the wait. The frazzled, had a bad day and is overloaded with work tenant who would lose his mind and have a proper fit after the third penny was dropped.

Nathan's victim managed to turn off the car alarm, his manila folders held dangerously askew in his arms. Nathan was poised to throw the last cent, but it was the sudden burst of hail and wind that worked its magic, not him. The car alarm burst into furious rage, the neighbour two floors up from Nathan showering the heavens with his own gravel obscenities, in a language that sounded distinctively Prussian in origin.

Nathan's unfortunate victim slipped, his papers and briefcase flying, folders and receipts carried on the wind as he slid halfway underneath his car. He lay on the ground, his fists pounding into the puddles surrounding him like a mucky halo. Curses spilled from him in an uneven, struggling rhythm that suggested he wasn't used to swearing.

"Fuck! Fuck a duck! Fuck!"

Nathan felt an unexpected pang of pity for him. Someone had to give the poor slob a slang dictionary for his birthday. It was wrong to be that stunted when it came to cursing.

He crawled out from beneath his car, his palms deep in the puddles that surrounded him. With as much dignity as he could muster, Nathan's victim stood up, his dark, short hair wet and plastered close against his forehead and scalp, his ugly blue striped tie smeared with engine grease. He was a rather petite fellow, Nathan observed with detached interest, about five foot five, with quick features and a dark shadow permanently etched across his chin, as though outlined in ink. He wasn't a bad looking sort, Nathan reasoned, but he could do with a few pointers on how to properly dress. The polyester dark

blue suit he was wearing was one ruffled shirt shy of a seventies leisure suit, the little crest at his breast pocket doing little to ease up on the geek factor. Nathan braved the howling wind to open his window up a little higher so he could gain a better view. His fellow tenant was now gathering up the soaked folders, every facet of his being drowned to the core. The crest on his breast pocket was clearly visible to Nathan beneath the street lamp where the tenant was gathering most of his lost papers. Happy Employee of Boxworth Electronics! it read, the bright yellow words arranged in a kind of school crest sewed onto the polyester fabric.

So this was the bastion of such horrid taste in uniform. This fully grown man in his, what, thirties? Pushing forty? had been forced to drape his body in threads that amounted to little more than a cheap knock-off of a private school uniform, only without the prestige and the possibility of college-level career advancement. It was a strange horror of fashion to see on a full grown man, turning him into a metaphor of broken dreams. Blue polyester suits belonged on people who had been forced to quit any sense of lofty ambitions early in their lives. They made a man reek of unrealized potential.

“You missed one,” Nathan shouted down, pointing to the back wheel of the Corolla. His victim dutifully got to work scrambling to gather up the pieces that comprised his destiny of drudgery and unappreciated difficulties. Nathan watched as the man got up from his knees, the folder wiped on the knees of his polyester pants, leaving thick streaks of polluted muck on his person. “Thanks,” was the reply, the dejected soul glancing up at Nathan with defeated blue eyes, his mouth a quivering conglomeration of misery and rage.

A well of pity rose within Nathan as he stood at his window, his inward mantra of ‘I’m not an asshole’ falling flat as the pennies he’d thrown glinted copper circles beneath the light of the street lamp. The poor fellow below looked to be a person needing to be cared for. To have someone looking out for him, like a wife, or a girlfriend, or a sister or a brother. Family. They were all bereft of this in this lifetime, set to go it alone, like newly hatched prey thrust upon a vast desert of sand before finally being gobbled up by some predator wind.

Nathan leaned on his windowsill, his chin balanced in his palm as he looked down on his struggling fellow tenant who had forgotten his broken briefcase in the deep puddle near the front bumper of his car. It was all so futile, Nathan thought, a sense of uneasy depression hitting him. The endless one night stands he’d been so proud of, Mark’s weird distance, his own need to push away all semblance of success. “You have to wonder what we struggle for,” Nathan shouted to the downtrodden figure picking wet papers out of the puddles and shaking them off. The smeared black ink had made them abstract, grayscale watercolours.

Nathan’s victim heard him and raised a brow at the observation. “Some would say survival.”

“We’re all Darwin in action.”

“I have to disagree. Survival is a minimal requirement. What we are really after is striving.”

Nathan opened his window wider and leaned out, getting a better view of this messy study in philosophy. “Yes, but what do we strive for? There’s nothing.”

“An arrogant assumption,” was the terse reply, one that gave Nathan pause. He’d misjudged this fellow, who looked quite hot at the turn of this conversation. “You can’t decide for others that just because you yourself may have no destiny that others are painted with the same brush.”

“So you’ve got some reason in mind, then, that allows you to accept being a cog in the Boxworth Electronics hamster wheel.”

“Who says I accept it?”



“You do, with that uniform you’re wearing.”

“If that’s your criteria for understanding another human being’s soul, you have shallow assumptions.”

“I’m not assuming anything. That polyester boy’s suit of yours is an expression of your inner demons.”

“Or it could be a mask for more pressing ones.”

“Either way, you’re tormented.”

“Shut the fuck up, both of you, you stupid, you stupid small minded peoples! You don’t talk silly teeny philosophy through windows! Don’t know Sartre from your asshole, you nothings! I break your windshield with shoe you stupid fucking existential bastards!”

Ignoring the swearing Prussian neighbour above him, Nathan continued his shouted conversation.

“Myself, I see no point in suffering. If I have a destiny waiting for me, why kill myself when it’s predetermined to find me?”

“Again, you are working on assumptions. My destiny may well be this particular job and this horrible night. By doing a specific series of events, I may have reshaped it.”

“What events?” Nathan asked.

A brown loafer hurtled down from above and hit the middle of the car’s roof, sending the alarm blaring.

“This one,” his new friend shouted back, his voice fighting to be heard over the din of his car. “Or something else entirely. We don’t know until we’re in the thick of it, and its repercussions start playing out, like a long note that never wavers, only fades.” He was caught up in his own thoughts on this, his voice shouting up to Nathan, but his words clearly a posit that he was mentally working out. “We’re all hurtling towards a pivotal moment. Some Event that changes everything.”

Interesting guy, Nathan thought, a sense of respect replacing his feelings of pity. “Nathan Connor,” he shouted down, introducing himself.

The rain and sleet nearly carried his new friend’s name away. “Charlie Weiss,” he replied.

“Angry, Fed Up With Stupids Bastard! That’s who \*I\* am!” the Prussian neighbour above proclaimed.

“We ought to head out for drinks some time,” Nathan cheerfully shouted.

Charlie wiped a slick layer of wet from his brow, his fingertips dripping. “Nah...Sorry...”

“Why not?”

“I’m not...I’m flattered and all, but...I’m not really keen on...You should know, I don’t have to say anything.”

Nathan was more than just a little taken aback and he couldn’t help but laugh at the accusation. “What? No way, man, come on, I’m not gay.”

“I’ve learned not to trust that statement,” Charlie brusquely replied. “Thank you for the offer, but I’m very much a breast man.”

As am I, Nathan was about to shout furiously back at him, but he bit down on the retort, deciding it was best to let the matter rest and to retreat back into his apartment instead. Interesting guy, sure, but he clearly had hang-ups. He closed the window, his feet wet from the puddle that had dribbled in between pranking and philosophy. He checked his watch. Eight o’clock. No time for a shower. Dammit. His hopes of a repeat performance were going to be nil if he didn’t manage to slough off some of his manky mansmell.

The brick wall of his apartment began vibrating, the violence behind it a pitter-patter of running feet

that ran in circles and in figure eights across it like a two hundred pound cockroach escaping the light. Nathan's wish to bridge the chasm between himself and his brother was eroded with every footfall, for it was impossible for Mark to have walked in that apartment and not seen at least one tiny shard of evidence that all was not well behind the whitewashed bricks. A wall of fucking mirrors, he'd said. Hundreds of them, reflecting back a naive jackass. There had to be a secret door, some passageway, a set of stairs to a hidden sex dungeon.

The running stomps along his wall broke free of physics and suddenly ran in a beeline across the ceiling of Nathan's flat, and down the outside living room window. There was the sound of breaking glass on the ground below, and Nathan tossed open the window, to get a good view of the parking lot.

Charlie Weiss's Toyota Corolla, crumpled like a tin can. The metal groaned, as though from a massive weight. In the black shadows that surrounded it, Nathan could discern a fast moving shimmer that crawled along the outside of the Manor, the grip pulling out bricks in its path, every apartment window smashing as it rose.

Horried, he stepped back. The brick wall separating his apartment from #220 was heaving in and out, deep breaths taken before the final shout. Nathan stood in the centre of his flat as the bricks exploded towards him. The fridge crumpled like a soda can as it fell through the floor, the remainder of the minuscule flat following it down into the basement depths. Nathan Connor, broke bohemian genius with lacklustre drive, was buried beneath the crushing plaster, wooden beams and splintered concrete as the fifth floor came crashing through the first.

## **episode six: goth chicks and breast men**



Nathan lay curled in a tight ball on the floor of his dining room, the blaring of a car alarm slowly bringing him back to consciousness. He flexed his fingers, pushing the dirt around their circumference, amazed that there was no pain, and yet surely he had been smashed to bits, his back broken by the

exploding bricks as they poured inward, crushing his body into a pulpy mass. He curled his knuckles, amazed that paralysis was not the case, nor was there any evidence that the violence that occurred not five seconds ago had even happened. He dared to test this theory with another gentle nudge of his thumb against the raw oak flooring, a splinter finding its way through the surface layer of his skin. Alarmed by this sudden, sharp pain, he brought his thumb to his mouth, shocked yet again to find that his limbs were whole. With a tentative stretch he managed to pull himself up from the floor, his palms self-consciously smoothing away imaginary bits of drywall and concrete that he was certain had killed him.

But the more Nathan investigated, the more the pronoun 'he' took on a nebulous formation, especially with the strange addition of two very large, obvious bumps on the upper part of his chest and a decidedly more curvy shape as evidenced by the dip at the waist, and the rounded mound of her hips and ass. With palms running alongside her body in a fugue-state of question, Nathan was able to determine, at a rough estimate, that she was now the proud owner of a set of double D's and at least a 34" width at the hips. While this would put the most effeminate of males into a state of unreasonable panic, Nathan merely pulled the collar of her t-shirt over her face to get a good look at the new digs. They were certainly mammary in shape and size, and fairly attractive, if a man were a 'breast man', as Nathan in his male state usually was. She dared to undo the top button of her jeans and give the specifics a cursory inspection and was informed, at least visually, that not only did the carpet match the drapes, she now owned an innie instead of an outie.

If she hadn't been forced to face her imminent demise only moments before, this entire scenario would no doubt contain a significant amount of shock. As it was, Nathan was simply happy to still be alive, and whatever state her current body was in was a moot point to this revelation. The details of her surviving would be worked out later. Much later. As in when the mind would finally catch up with the abject horror of waking up from certain death in a body that is, by all sensory understanding, her own, but seriously morphed into a gender that wasn't part of the original plan.

So, perhaps, Nathan can be forgiven for her odd lack of thought on this particular event, enjoying instead those first few breaths that signalled she was well and alive and Crescent Manor through some force of otherworldly miracle was still standing. She was thinking on this fact for a good few more minutes before she finally realized that someone was knocking with vigorous, angry force on her apartment door. She checked her watch, now slightly loose on her smaller wrist, the time reading 8:35 p.m.. Goth Girl, Nathan thought, a rising panic welling within her being. Late, and from the sound of her high-pitched voice, an unfriendly visitation.

"Nathan, answer this fucking door," she shouted through the keyhole. "Come on, I don't have all night. I have another place I gotta be."

Nathan teetered unevenly towards the door, her steps expecting rubble only to find a fairly clear pathway, her shoulders slumped, her joints uneven. She shook her arms, bringing them into better balance, and cricked her neck with an audible click that gave some measure of relief. She braced her shoulders as she slowly opened the door, bringing the surly visitor behind it a good view of what had to be himself, a mucho macho male Nathan in a hallucinogenic state.

The bone thin spectre in the hallway placed an impatient hand on her hip, bubble gum smacked loudly behind black tinted lips, her hair a clownish frizzy halo of crimped black, her bloodshot eyes rimmed in red and black eyeliner. Though she was going for the partially dead look, Nathan couldn't help but inwardly remark that she looked more like a mirrorverse version of that woman from that kid's show. He fought to remember it, knowing the daycare at his college used to play it constantly in the nursery, an irritating call for ten second tidies always coinciding with those moments he walked to the nearby coffee machine and stocked up on some black, nervous energy. Big Comfy Couch, she thought,

glancing at her own uncomfortable, tartan monstrosity. All the young woman at her door needed was the red clown nose and she'd be a dead ringer, in an unexpectedly literal sense.

Goth Girl shook her frizzy halo of black hair, its body so thick Nathan was sure you could hide all manner of things in it. Her bangles jostled at her hips as she swung them side to side, her bottom lip bit in an attempt at subtle flirtation. She bit on her thumbnail, ruining the effect for Nathan, who was instantly reminded of her brother. Mark, she thought as Goth Girl worried her nail, the dark blue nail polish injected with silver glitter. Where was Mark? How was she going to explain this to him?

"Okay, so what's the deal?" Goth Girl coquettishly said. "Where's Nathan?"

A cold sliver coursed through Nathan at this. All hope of this being illusion was lost in the small statement. "I...I thought he was right here," Nathan honestly replied.

"Shit." Gothic Girl reached into her small purse and dragged out a cigarette and before Nathan could protest she had it lit and showering ashes onto the Manor carpet in the hallway. Strange, Nathan thought, taking in the tiny detail. The carpet had a deeper shade now. More like a burgundy. "Tell that sicko son of a bitch I'm not into doing chicks, okay? If he wants to get his kink on, that costs extra."

"I don't think..." Nathan's mind trailed off, the impact of what had happened inducing a state of lightheaded confusion that was only compounded by the unbelievable lack of, well, lack of \*attraction\* she was having at present for this overdone death clown and her smelly cigarette and her total lack of subtle innuendo. Her fists gathered into the hem of her t-shirt, twisting it fiercely around her knuckles. It simply wasn't possible that Nathan was suddenly part of the opposite team, not when the reverse had been so anticipated not twenty minutes before. This had to be the fault of some additive, some type of poisoning...Wong Fu's, of course, that was it! A psychotic cook lacing the sweet and sour sauce with LSD. Damn Mark for bringing that slop here!

However, the bored woman at her door defied this explanation, for though she appeared corpse-like enough to be an upstanding citizen of Hallowe'en Town, her statement suggested she believed, along with Nathan, that himself, now herself, was a she and not a he, and not a she that looked like a he acting like a she.

"Do I look female to you?" Nathan abruptly asked her. "I mean...\*Really\* female? As in DNA kind of proper female?"

The frizzy haired corpse clown gave her a good once over, her glittery blue and silver nails glinting against the black taffeta of her dress. "If you got a tranny in there, I'll do her for free. I'm really into the trannies. I won't even charge extra, just the standard fifty dollar rate." She cracked her gum and cocked her head to one side, a nasty sneer curled against her black lips. "But you ain't staying. I don't do white bread America cheerleaders, especially ones trying too hard to be Scene."

"So, I look female to you?" Nathan reiterated.

"If you were any more girl, you'd be a discounted Barbie. Complete with pink parasol."

"Jesus."

Nathan stood pale in her doorway, swaying slightly at this information. She liked being a man, she thought, tiny pinches on her arms daring her to believe this was all some insane, bad Chinese take-away induced dream. As a man, Nathan had gloried in the freedoms his gender had brought with it, things like the freedom to be a mess, the freedom to lack real responsibility, the freedom to spread his love wherever it fell, even on scabby, caustic Goth girls who looked like psychopathic killer mimes.

"Hold on," Nathan said, suddenly aware of a tiny point of contention burrowing in between her shock. "I'm sorry, you said something about a 'price'?"

“Fifty bucks for a ten minute quickie. Like Nathan agreed back at the club last night.” She impatiently checked her watch, and smacked her gum. “The clock’s already ticking, far as I’m concerned. He’s got five minutes left. That ought to be enough.”

“Okay. No.” Nathan held up her hands, giving this visitor a full stop. “I do not hire prozzies.”

“Yeah, whatever. No one asked \*you\*. Nathan has three minutes left.”

“I’m a...Nathan is an artist. Hiring prozzies isn’t his style.” She pushed her shoulders back in puffed up pride. “He doesn’t need to spend money to find his happiness.”

“Everyone’s an artist,” the Goth girl sneered. “Dime a fucking dozen, and they never pay on time, either. I knew this was a bad idea. Time’s up, Nathan can be happy without me, no doubt like he usually is.” She gave Nathan a middle finger salute as a goodbye. “When you see that asshole, tell him he owes me my fifty bucks, and he’s not to show his face at The Underground until he has it. I’d threaten to kick his ass, but he’s kinky stupid enough to think that’s a come-on, so just tell him to have my money or he’ll be sorry he ever met me.”

Nathan already was. What a gruesome beast, she thought as this unnamed creature made her exit, her white arms swinging at her sides as she rocked her black silk handbag back and forth. Perhaps, as a man, Nathan would have found the entire scenario titillating, a kind of push and pull of wills that he’d think, with his male ego, had to do with the thrill of the chase. But as a woman, Nathan understood there was nothing of a seductive nature in what her visitor had suggested, that this was purely a business transaction. Nathan as a man was sure he’d never hired prozzies in the past, but Nathan as a woman, with her new perspective not tainted by sexual attraction had to wonder if the odd twenty that went missing, or the sudden disappearance of his Visa card had been payments he wasn’t aware he’d been making. It was an unsettling realization, and Nathan closed her apartment door on it.

There had to be positives to this. She could start all over, reinvent herself. Of course, that had been the original plan with his moving here, but now that he was a \*she\*, there was the possibility of moving into arenas that had been closed before. She could start her own business, right from the ground up, using her namesake, Nathan as a former employer. There were ways to make this work. She’d find them, and Mark...

No, her brother wouldn’t be able to wrap his mind around this, even with his medical background and his slides and microscopes. He was fiercely linear in his thinking, and there was no way he’d find it in his heart to understand that this person, this woman, standing in front of him was in fact his brother. Mark simply didn’t have that kind of imaginative reasoning, nor did he even have enough care or knowledge of Nathan’s inner soul to dive in and hear her, and simply \*know\* that they were now brother and sister. A sudden well of loneliness built inside of Nathan at this, and she wrung her hands over the loss of the one person she suddenly wished to have a firmer bond with, one who had been, if peripherally, a participant in so much of that old half-life.

Not knowing why, she felt a real urge to find Mark and apologize to him, a feeling of guilt eating at her at the thought of Mark all alone in the world, wrenched of his twin, an anxious soul drifting, wondering what had happened to make Nathan do such a cruel thing as to abandon him. A strange guilt to have, since both Nathan and Mark drifted through each other’s lives as strangers, but they were comfortable strangers, and even though it took them most of their lives, perhaps if it had continued they could have found a way to be friends.

They could have found a way to be brothers.

Family.

Again, an elusive goal.

She flexed her fingers, marvelling at how they were now long and graceful, tapering towards delicately shaped nails. She headed towards the shower room, her palms smoothed over the odd dip in her waist back up again to the circumference of her ample breasts. She should have felt horrified, and yet the entire scenario played out with morbid fascination, like a bad dream discovered and brought into the dreamer's control. Her tiny shower was comprised of a sink, shower stall and toilet, all crammed into a space the size of a tiny closet. She stared at the face looking back at her from the small, cracked vanity mirror bolted to the wall.

Her hair was still the same, a brush cut that stuck out at all angles, and for some reason looked more messy than stylish on this new female form. She tested the shape of her cheekbones with her fingertips, not feeling any marked change other than the smoother feel of her skin, which retained a soft, radiant, healthy glow. It was strange, how much she looked the same and yet was remarkably different with just the addition of a few softer lines around her green eyes, the harsh angular cut of her jaw smoothed into a pleasing, feminine shape. As women go, Nathan wasn't bad looking. A little big on the hips, maybe, but then the front part of the story was taking up the fore quite well, creating a sort of curvaceous balance. Sure, Nathan thought as she gave her new digs a serious inspection. Nathan the man would have done herself, no question about it.

The question of how this *she* had come about was now weighing foremost on Nathan's mind. A dull thud from behind the shower stall signalled the resurgence of her neighbour's violence. Now there were gentle, uneven thumps, more fearful tapping than outright blows. She had to wonder if the Event had changed it as well, its animal personality now morphed into something softer, as Nathan clearly was.

The sudden howls and screams and breaking glass that rumbled through her apartment stated such thoughts were folly, and she was due to be punished for them. She scowled, her pretty forehead creased into a small, tight 'v'. There was another explanation, one that Mark most assuredly would dismiss outright, and in more normal circumstances she would have agreed with him. But clearly, with the addition of a set of double D's Nathan had to address the most logical conclusion, however fantastic it was.

She'd been a study of the powers of suggestion used by certain nefarious individuals in certain equally nefarious organizations known throughout the world for their subterfuge. The plaque in the oval office was only the beginning. There were implantations, microchips, chemicals in the water sending electrical currents as a form of water based espionage. It was all around them, all the time, the ticking bomb that hovered close to the bosom of 1987, the official ending year of the Cold War. Nathan had done his best to keep off the radar, but perhaps by doing this and being so vocal about it as he was, the powers that be had finally decided to put a stop to his uncovering of their lies. So, maybe, she wasn't a he at all, and it was all some kind of elaborate mind control experiment just for his benefit. Like the Prisoner, only it was his own body that was being put to the test, and he was set to be driven mad by inconclusive hormones and foul-mouthed skanky Goth girls with unreasonable rates.

He wasn't sure where it started. That's right, he was using the pronoun 'he'. He. Him. His. Man, oh man. Nathan Connor, strictly XY, regardless of what the CIA, KGB, OFA or CUPE was trying to make him believe. He had to think back, wondering when he had last felt that small sting of fear that signalled the ever encroaching eye of surveillance. His mouth went dry, thinking on the ancient eight track player he'd found two weeks ago in the basement of Henri's cafe. Of course, early seventies equipment were rife with ancient listening devices and subliminal message systems. Just because the stuff was junked didn't mean the worn out McCarthyesque technology didn't still pack a freedom eroding punch on the way to the curb.

A car alarm screamed outside Nathan's window, and he left the shower room to investigate. A familiar

scene appeared to be stuck in a helpless loop beneath Nathan's living room window, and he opened it wide. The rain was replaced by a cool, but still evening, the scattered papers surrounding the hapless soul in their midst in a pixilated semi-circle. No wind or hail or flying pennies had set the car alarm off, but it continued to wail as Charlie Weiss struggled to bring the night back into silence. Nathan braced her palms on the windowsill, which was perfectly dry, as was the street below. A warm wind teased her scalp, the uneven lengths of her messy black brush cut tangling slightly within it. It felt like a summer night, she thought, closing her eyes and enjoying the pleasant warmth. In all appearances, her world was already vastly improved.

Which only served to make her suspicious.

"Hey there, Charlie," she shouted down to the dishevelled figure who was picking up the last of his scattered papers while the car alarm continued to bleat. Charlie fought with the button on his key remote, only to give up with a resigned sigh, and open the car door, the key pushed into the ignition and finally silencing it. His blue polyester jacket hung askew on his shoulders, his ugly matching blue striped tie halfway undone.

"Hey! Harry Potter!" Nathan shouted down again. Charlie blandly looked up, the very image of a man ill-used by the universe.

"Did you happen to see this building have a... What did you call it? An Event. Definitely an Event."

"Depends on what you mean by an 'Event'."

"Did you see this building crumble to the ground and then rebuild itself in a matter of seconds?"

"Can't say that I noticed," he replied. He slammed the car door shut, the force of which set off his alarm again. Instead of reacting in a mad rage, as would have been normal for any human being at this point, he simply sighed, and fumbled once again with his set of keys.

"That is so weird," Nathan said. Then, shouting down to her new friend. "Did you see anything strange? Anything at all?"

"No," he tersely replied. The key in the ignition wasn't working. The car continued to howl like a tired, psychotic baby who refused to be placated. The pile of papers close to his chest were getting a serious wrinkling.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Nathan said to herself. She glanced down, the car alarm not seeming to alert the usual expletives from the caustic neighbour above her, and she had to wonder. Perhaps an outside source would be the best judge of a situation, especially one who made clear he was passionate on the subject. Charlie Weiss would do.

The car was brutally kicked, and this finally brought it into a tense silence, one that was paused over for about two minutes before Charlie finally decided he had learned how to deal with the Corolla's temper tantrum. With his pile of manila folders and crinkled papers, he was about to go into the building, and well out of Nathan's sight and earshot. She frantically sought his attention: "Hey! Wait!"

The poor man looked about ready to collapse in an exhausted heap on the tarmac. Poor Charlie, she thought, a strange pity filling her, he wasn't a bad sort, not at all. Kind of cute, even, if she dared to think on it, and she could since, well, it wouldn't exactly be a gay thing, would it? Not with actual ovaries involved, even if they were a product of intense brainwashing.

Charlie could barely keep his blue eyes open as he looked up at her, and she had to fight her instinct to invite him up for coffee.

"Yes?"

“Tell me what you think of these,” she said, and lifted her t-shirt over her head. She placed her hands on the top of her bared hips.

He stood rooted to the spot, his jaw dropped, his shock silent. The manila folders in his arms fell to the ground, a sudden wind carrying their contents off and streaming them like freedom down the centre of the main city street. Nathan watched Charlie’s near comatose shock for a few moments before shrugging and closing her window, her t-shirt grabbed and put on again. Not a mind control experiment then, as she had suspected and hoped for. She’d been physically altered, by what or how was impossible to ascertain. One split second, that’s all it took, and everything Nathan Connor had thought he knew about reality had changed. She wondered if these changes were for good or ill.

She glanced down at the pair of healthy mounds on her chest before taking a look out her window. A partly obscured shadow was still present in the parking lot, large rectangular pages of confetti flying away from him like a celebration.

With an unexpected feeling of optimism, she was banking on good.

## **episode seven: human layers**



Mark pressed her eye against the lens of the microscope, the leukemia cells brought into view offering no distraction. Despite sleeping for exactly eight hours and drinking copious amounts of water and



herbal tea in an effort to detoxify her system, Mark's impression of her body remained stubbornly, physically, female. She impatiently checked her watch, the time now 3:00 p.m., her busy shift slowly winding down to a close. She wondered if anyone would notice if she left early, only to chide herself at the very question. Since his arrival at St. Benedict Hospital a month earlier, Mark's interaction with the staff had been fleeting at best, his expertise in high demand, but usually delivered from the secretive corridor containing the hospital's lab.

Thus, she couldn't count on the glib half nods in her direction as being indicative that this double-X transformation was indeed the product of a long lasting hallucination and not some inexplicable bend in reality. The lab assistants had their own office directly across from his own, and his half-hearted attempt to hide her face as she passed them was all for moot. They never acknowledged him anyway, the results handed over anonymously to a RN, who would then deliver the findings to the upper floors. From there the various surgeons and doctors would proclaim the lab results to their suffering patients, giving both the good and bad news of their ailments as though it was they themselves who had discovered the degree of severity. This lack of fanfare suited Mark, whose strict introverted outlook had formed into a stubborn bubble of avoidance, one that was only tentatively broken by his occasional curiosity and the five o'clock dinner half hour routine with his brother.

His brother. Now there was an issue Mark didn't want to think on, but it had risen to the fore, now, with that dreaded half hour creeping closer with every click of the minute hand. The very subject was set to send Nathan into a paroxysms of laughing hysteria, and Mark wasn't keen on being the brunt of a long line of in-jokes that would stretch the chasm between them and lock their relationship into a most mentally unhealthy place. It was an impossibility imposed on him, there was no easy way to tell someone you don't believe you are your usual gender, and not in through a hitherto unknown gender dysmorphic disorder. You have a belief that something terrible happened, and you see yourself already in that other human form. You can feel the added and lost physical appendages as solidly as that uncomfortable pine chair you are sitting in. After the peels of laughter die down at this revelation, how was Mark going to go about discussing how this caused a change within, as if something missing was suddenly slid into place? That last was the hardest of all to explain, since Mark had little ability to understand it himself.

Of course, there was also the more despairing issue, however unlikely it was, that he had, in some magical fashion, actually become this morphed physical manifestation. If this were the case, the very act of knocking on Nathan's door would be pointless, since his brother would never recognize this female person as his twin. They would be true strangers, then, unable to interact, and this strange closeness that Mark had suddenly mentally cultivated would never be nurtured between them. They would be immediately fractured from each other. A permanent separation.

Mark chewed her thumb over this, her nervous feelings ringed in sadness.

A knock on her office door jostled her out of her thoughts, and she bid the visitor to come in. The door opened, and a familiar surgeon walked in, his cheerful demeanour unwelcome. "Got a guy upstairs prepped and ready who's going to need an expert eye," he said, clicking his fingers as he pointed towards the ceiling. "Gave him an ultrasound about an hour ago. He's pretty lumpy, if you know what I mean."

Sadly, Mark did. "Cancer?" she asked.

The surgeon, who Mark knew as Dr. Josh Horihito, shrugged. "Whatever you say. You might want to wait until you have the biopsy first."

Mark swivelled her chair to turn her back to him, annoyed. She earned enough smartass comments from her brother, she didn't need them from her co-workers too. She tossed a requisition form at him,

plunging the room in ice. “Specify the time you need the frozen section. Be sure to sign and date it.”

“You could just come up to surgery,” Dr. Horihito said.

“No. As I recall, yesterday you made a point of how important it was to follow proper procedures, and I am not leaving this office without dotting every ‘t’ and crossing every ‘i’.” She frowned, knowing something wasn’t quite right about that statement, only to shake the feeling off and continue. “I am not leaving myself open to your passive aggressive work related politics.”

“Bitch-y. I like it. Don’t sweat it, I was just reminding you of procedure.” Dr. Horihito adjusted his surgical cap, the fabric dotted with what looked to be bloodied bullet holes. He caught Mark’s scrutiny and smiled. “Cool, huh? My wife made it for me using some old Hallowe’en fabric she found on sale. It’s a real ice-breaker with the patients.”

“I imagine so,” Mark said, thinking that she wouldn’t be all that keen on having a surgeon whose head was riddled with bullets, even if they were symbolic.

“I don’t know why you’re so tense about that scheduling issue. I’m pretty sure you weren’t the one I handed it to, but I could be wrong. All you lab rats look the same to me.” He shrugged as if this glib insult was mere fact and folded the form he took from Mark in half. “You’re new here, aren’t you? I’m sure I know you’re name, don’t tell me it...Marsha...Marcy?” He frowned as he caught a glimpse of the simple black and white name tag pinned to her lab coat pocket. “Mark?”

“It’s a typo,” Mark quickly replied. “It’s supposed to be a ‘s’ instead of a ‘k’.”

“Mars?” Dr. Horihito said, causing Mark to wince at her hurried mistake. He raised a brow at her, his grin annoyingly flirtatious. “Is that where you’re from?”

“On occasion,” Mark replied.

“You’re going to have to get that fixed, since your permanent tag is probably in the mail. That’ll be the one with your picture on it, and I doubt anyone found the mistake. Don’t sweat it, though. They screw up like this all the time. It’ll be easy enough to fix, I mean, come on, Mars might be an unusual name—I guess your parents were hardcore retro hippies, huh? Right into Frank Zappa and his Moon Unit stuff—but Mark is a hell of a weird name for a woman, even with the flower power roots.”

Mark was glad she was sitting down. Dr. Horihito’s assumptions about his upbringing were way off the map, but he made it quite clear that his (no, \*her\*) understanding of hallucinogenic states was also incorrect. Mark had become Mars—a feminine version of his former self, a person unchanged save for a few added lines to the Y chromosome, the method and reason for it remaining a mystery.

Dr. Josh Horihito checked his watch. “I’m heading into surgery now,” he said, and gestured for her to follow him. “I’ll be needing the results of the frozen sections as fast as possible. If this guy is full of cancer, I have to know which bullets to bring.”

“If I rush them, I can have the results for you within fifteen minutes,” Mark confidently replied.

“I’d prefer ten.” Dr. Horihito gave her a saucy wink. “But for a pretty thing like you, I’ll let those five minutes slide.”

///

She swiped the ID tag that gave her access to the long, winding white hall leading to the surgery, her hand shaking as she tacked it back onto the breast pocket of her lab coat. Mark had worked in other hospitals before, but the stark, clutter free cleanliness of St. Benedict gave her pause, its anti-infection regime lauded as an excellent example to the rest of the country. No carts littered the hallways, no gurneys, no random stick nurses ready to take vitals, no tired drudge from housekeeping pushing

wheeled bags of soiled linen. St. Benedict Hospital had managed to create an environment that was not only spotlessly clean, but wholly impersonal. As if the human element was washed away along with all viral activity.

Dr. Horihito was way ahead of her, the echo of his steps eerily bouncing back to her. She could sense from the heavy weight of his footfalls, the tense determination within him, a man walking into surgery with all the will of a war weary soldier ready to take on the fight for one last, final push across the enemy barrier. The enemy, in this case, Mark already assumed to be cancer, that disfiguring, murderous bastard dictator of cells she sincerely hoped Dr. Horihito would be able to dethrone.

So she followed what she believed were the sounds of his steps down a long, narrow white hallway that curved at a such a gentle angle it felt as though she walked for miles along it, earning no real progress. She didn't mind the illusion, for it gave her a feeling of time to think. Dr. Horihito had proven she was, in fact, female, the hope of hallucination dashed. How this happened was yet to be determined, and as her expertise made her as much a sleuth as a doctor, a few personal hours spent in the lab studying her own blood and DNA structure would be time well spent.

She was thinking this would be best performed after hours, preferably in the early evening. Five-o'clock, p.m. if she was absolute in her timekeeping. There was an unexpected pang in her conscience at this not so subconscious selection, one which could sever the thin tie she had to her brother. The five-o'clock dinner hour that was the knot to her twin. She pressed her lips tight together, as though biting down on the tough ethical gristle this presented. Yes, he was her brother, but Nathan wouldn't be able to wrap his unscientific mind around such bizarre realignments of physics as Mark was currently experiencing. Nathan was an artist, yes, but an armchair philosopher at best. For God's sake, Nathan couldn't watch Doctor Who reruns without getting ridiculously confused. If the information relayed to him had nothing to do with Cold War conspiracy theories or anarchist cookbook sensibilities, there was no hope for it.

Nathan simply wasn't going to understand.

Her attention was broken by a small door, its width far too narrow to be the entrance into the main surgical arena. Mark pushed the door, which opened with a small hiss and slid to one side in the manner of a subway door, giving her admittance into what looked to be a large, sparsely furnished office. Ignoring the inner voice that insisted her curiosity was getting the best of her yet again, Mark dared to enter the room, its strange, octagon shape decorated with clear glass and resin ornaments and matching transparent twin desks and chairs.

Mark was about to venture in, only to be halted in her approach by two young women with clipboards pressed tight against their chests, their movements fluid and mirrored as they barricaded Mark from exploring further. With their long, black hair cut in the exact same style, their short, petite forms dressed in equally identical white lab coats with sleeves ironed to sharp edges, their creepy uniformity gave Mark's curiosity a serious pause. Identicals, Mark realized with great discomfort. Unlike herself and Nathan, who were fraternal twins, these sisters were examples of what happens when one human cell spontaneously decides to be two people instead of one.

"I'm sorry," Mark said, giving their dour, blank expressions what she hoped wasn't too strained a smile. "I was heading for the surgery. I guess I took a wrong turn."

"Down the hall."

"To the left."

"You can't miss it."

"You can't."

They advanced on her in tandem, and Mark instinctively backed away from their unified push. “Mars?” Dr. Horihito shouted from what seemed to be a vast distance, but was in fact only a few feet away. He rounded the corner, stopping dead when he saw who Mark was interacting with. Mark couldn’t be sure, but there was a good chance Horihito actually swore under his breath.

He nodded at the two women, taking his bullet hole riddled surgical cap off in deference. “Ladies,” he said, giving them the most insincere grin Mark had ever seen. “Meet Doctor Mars Connor. She’s the new pathologist for this antiseptic dump. She took a wrong turn, back at the bend near the entrance.”

“Wrong turn,” one twin said.

“So wrong,” echoed the other.

Dr. Horihito steered Mark away from their eerie, unwelcome scrutiny, the door to their office sliding closed as they stood beside each other, immovable reflections keeping Mark focused in their sights. There was a mutual, unspoken understanding moving between them as they studied their subject, thoughts finished by one to be started by the other.

Dr. Horihito’s hands were on her shoulders as he neatly pushed her away and further down the hall, to a bend that she had missed, its visibility hampered by the nakedness of the surroundings. Dr. Horihito’s palms were hot, and he took his hands off of her shoulders only when they were well out of range of that wrong turn, the imprint of his sweat lingering on Mark’s lab coat. Mark found herself looking over her shoulder, as though wishing to catch another glimpse of their odd symmetry. She couldn’t help but be both envious of their closeness and repelled by it.

“The Redrum twins.” Doctor Horihito shook his head, a thin sheen of sweat teasing his upper lip.

“Doctors Monica and Mona Nash. They don’t practise here, they do neurological research thanks to a generous grant from the city university.” He slid off his surgical cap, his fingers tracing around the bullet hole graphics imprinted on the cotton. “They open people’s head up and poke around. I guess you could call them the brain trust.”

“Nash,” Mark repeated.

“They’re related to Doctor Nigel Nash. He’s their father,” Horihito added. “He’s on the third floor. Gynaecology. Whatever you do, don’t get on his bad side, he’s a real asshole who isn’t afraid to rip into fresh off the press sweethearts like you. Lucky for you, you’re pretty much locked in the lab and Nigel hates going into the basement depths. I doubt you’ll ever meet him.”

“Nash,” Mark repeated. “Are they any relation to a man named Paul Nash?”

Dr. Horihito stopped dead in his tracks, the lack of movement so sudden Mark nearly slammed into his back. He turned slowly to face her, as though convinced Mark was an as yet uncategorized monster.

“What did you say?” he asked.

“I wanted to know if Paul Nash...”

“I heard you,” Dr. Horihito said, shaking his head from side to side in mad fury. “You’re never to say that name again, do you hear me?” His right eye twitched as he sidled close to Mark, his emotions running high enough to be considered a psychotic break. “Do you know him? You’ve actually been there?”

Mark figured it was best to remain cryptic. “Been where?” she asked.

“Where, she asks. Of all the questions she could have, she just says ‘Where?!’” Dr. Horihito placed his surgical cap back on his head, the bullet holes imprinted on the fabric taking on a gruesome, realistic appearance against the blank white backdrop of the hallway. “314 Crescent Manor, of course! What

other place is there that's a one stop shop of a horror show. That's where he lives, no surprise there." Dr. Horihito spun around and grabbed Mark forcefully by the arm, his grip so tight he bruised her. "Steer clear of that place," he warned. "If you got friends living there, ditch them and get new friends. I've seen more than my fair share of weird coming out of there. I won't walk past it without a crucifix in my goddamned pocket."

~\*~

Dr. Horihito's patient didn't have cancer.

He had something far worse. An association with a dreaded address.

"I've checked and rechecked, just to be sure," Mark assured him, gesturing at the microscope before her as though it were this that were the offending culprit. "I naturally couldn't believe what I was seeing at first, but there is no other explanation." She stood back, giving Dr. Horihito some room. "Take a look yourself."

He remained rooted to the spot near the entrance to the lab, his upper lip glistening with tense sweat.

"No," he replied.

Mark sighed and opened the folder containing her lab report. "There is no question that the frozen section I took from your patient, one Darwin Smith, contains lung cells, very healthy ones I may add." She pressed her fingertips to her forehead, willing the pain in her head to go away. The information she was forced to relay was incomprehensible in its ramifications, and it was difficult to look Doctor Josh Horihito in the eye and say what had to be said without facing certain ridicule.

"He has a lung growing in his liver," Mark stated.

Dr. Horihito coughed into his fist. "And his spleen?"

"Definitely heart cells. Again, very healthy."

"He has a heart growing in his spleen and a lung growing in his liver."

"That's correct."

Dr. Horihito's twitching silence on the matter gave Mark some time to check the patient's admittance record. There was no evidence whatsoever that he had ever lived the life of a mad scientist's lab rat, despite the evidence. According to the patient records, Darwin Smith was an IT specialist, working downtown for an accounting firm. He spent his days in front of computers, doing his best to get them to talk to one another without scrambling the signals.

Pity Darwin Smith's body never managed to learn that particular skill.

"He died of a heart attack," Dr. Horihito said. He shoved his hands deep in the pockets of his green scrubs. "Twenty minutes ago. There was nothing we could do."

"You know that isn't what happened," Mark said, frowning. "I have the slides. I have the official report."

Dr. Horihito pursed his lips, balancing himself back and forth from his heels to his toes. He gave a nod to a RN passing by in the hallway before gently closing the lab door after she was well out of earshot. He inched close to Mark and harshly whispered at his colleague. "Listen, if you know what's good for you around here, you're going to list his cause of death as a heart attack."

“But it’s not true,” Mark protested.

“What do you want to do with this information?” Dr. Horihito harshly asked. “I know there’s nothing in that patient file that links him to that Hell Hotel called Crescent Manor, but I’ll bet my wife’s sewing skills there’s a connection we don’t know about.” He wiped at his upper lip with the back of his hand. “Shit like this is weird, but it happens around here, far too often for my liking. What exactly do you want me to tell his family? In my opinion, the poor bastard’s dead and we give the family the best answer for it we can, and I hope to God you aren’t going to suggest that it be: ‘Your son spontaneously turned into an organ donor smorgasbord and that’s what killed him’. Sorry for your loss, but yay for kidney transplantees.”

“He had four of them growing in his stomach lining,” Mark said. She gave Dr. Horihito a tired sigh. “I can’t lie to them.”

“You don’t have to. That’s my job.” He snatched the file from Mark’s hand and without giving so much as a warning, he stormed out of the lab, his will to protect the innocent more pressing than the ethical dilemma of exposing monsters in their midst.

At any other time, Mark would have argued the point, but seeing as how she had serious monstrous issues of her own she wished to secret away, Mark decided to keep her hypocrisy at a minimum.

When she was confident Dr. Horihito was long gone, and she was alone in the lab, she locked the door and turned off several of the lights, making the room appear uninhabited. She checked her watch. 4:30, p.m. Swallowing back a now familiar lump of fear she reached into the deep inside pocket of her lab coat and pulled out the results of the DNA test as well as the tox-screen she had performed earlier.

No toxins at all were present, which was surprising. Considering the stiff drink she’d poured herself to get through the morning she had assumed at least some tiny fragments of it to remain. Clearly, she metabolized gin remarkably well. The story of her DNA, however, was a more complicated tale.

At first glance, nothing was amiss. The stamp of her existence was as plain and ordered as any other fairly healthy human being, with specific markers within it that would link her ancestry with her brother. However, one small point was significant enough to give her pause, these being the small X and Y chromosomes that determined a human being’s gender.

They were now, most remarkably, absent.

She rolled up the sheet of plastic and tucked it back into her lab coat. It violated every law of biology, but then so did mysteriously morphing from one gender into another without provocation. She checked her watch again. 4:45. Leaving fifteen minutes early wouldn’t kill anyone, she hoped.

It didn’t matter if he wouldn’t believe her. She got a good look at herself in the paned glass of the cabinet holding the various beakers and slides. Attractive enough, she figured. Even if he couldn’t see her as his brother, or his sister, Nathan’s irritating knack for inappropriate flirting would win out. He’d hear her out, even if he did believe her stark raving mad at the end of it.

Swallowing back bile, the woman from Mars grabbed her trenchcoat, leaving the lab and its uncomfortable secrets behind.

## episode eight: twin issues



The five police cruisers, two fire trucks and the single black station wagon marked ‘Coroner’ told Mars of 314 Crescent Manor’s state of chaos, one that had ultimately resulted in a fatality. She kept the name she had given herself hidden in her consciousness, knowing the hot red planet suited her well, her blood boiling with anxiety, her palms cool on her heated cheeks. She trudged up the concrete steps, pausing at the front entrance which was blocked with what appeared to be a dozen or so tenants, police officers and lingering firemen. When the stretcher was brought out, a thick black body bag holding its unfortunate victim within it, there was a sudden hush over the gathered crowd. A fierce grip pierced Mars’ arm, and she turned to see the rotund figure of Mrs. MacDonald tutting over the situation, her lipstick a sickly, day-glo shade of orange. “Second floor,” she said, her voice dour as she shook her head. “Poor soul never saw it coming.”

Nathan. Mars swallowed back the sudden lump of fear that welled within her throat, her knees weak as she pushed herself through the crowd, panic guiding her. Snippets of conversation among the police officers drifted towards her like the grey ash of a nuclear fallout.

“Bloodbath.” “Never saw it coming.” “No real structural damage.” “Paul Nash lives in this building, did you know that?”

Paul Nash wasn’t in his apartment, though the door was open wide, revealing the neat precision within it, despite the clutter. Drawn to this sense of order, Mars took in antique furnishings, heavily patterned oriental rugs, several piled on top of each other, a large but clean collection of ceramic bric-a-brac more in keeping with an elderly woman than a healthy man in his late thirties or early forties. She turned away, the tiny detail of Paul Nash’s home catalogued away in her memory as she sought out the source of the chaos lurking on the second floor. She didn’t want to think of Nathan being the one who had taken that trip within a black body bag on the gurney, heading for the coroner’s knife. An image of a ‘Y’ incision played in a loop in her mind, and Mars held her now hot palm tight against her anguished mouth, holding her horror in.

“Are you all right?” a woman at the base of the main staircase asked. She scratched at the back of her head nervously, her black brushcut a messy halo around her strong features. Mars noted the black t-shirt, cut small and tight around her bosom, the deep ‘v’ revealing she wasn’t wearing a bra, though she clearly should have been. There was something irrationally familiar about her, but Mars was sure she’d never met her before.

“What happened?” Mars asked. The woman sighed, and leaned against the brick wall leading to the stairs, her facade of bored peace irritating Mars who was openly ashen-faced and shivering.

The woman rolled her eyes, as though infinitely inconvenienced by the whole proceedings. “The guy living in the apartment next door to me got the snot kicked out of him. The cops are saying his friend did it, but he didn’t look too good himself when he was shipped out of here this morning.” She shuddered and crossed her arms, warding out the inward chill that Mars herself knew well. “He threw himself into the hallway, screaming for someone to call 911. I don’t have a working phone, so I had to dive into his place to call out. It’s awful. Place is a real bloodbath. I don’t know how he managed to scream for help.”

“Your neighbour,” Mars repeated.

“Yeah. Noisy bastard, too. I was just waiting for something like this to happen.”

“Apartment #220. That’s where this happened.”

“That’s right. How do you know?” Red, pouty lips curled over white teeth, giving her uneasy grin the appearance of a snarl. “You got some more info to pass along to a curious rubbernecker?”

“For pity’s sake, Nathan, what the hell is going on?”

His brother, no—her sister—choked on the forced revelation. “Mark?” she dared to whisper. The blood drained from her face, the black halo of her hair making her ghostlike in the stark fluorescent lighting of the main stairs. Her hand went to her mouth, as though stuffing back the words she was set to choke on. “I can’t believe this. Of course, well, we have to believe it, it’s not like we have a choice.” She gave her tall, thin sister a good once over. “It’s weird. You still kind of look the same, just...I don’t know. Softer, somehow.”

“As are you,” Mars said, gesturing the large mounds accentuated through Nathan’s tight black t-shirt. “Practically soft porn, actually.”

Nathan was instantly incensed. “You’re starting it already, you and your stupid judgemental attitude. I don’t exactly have any size D bras sitting in my dresser drawers, do I?” She gave them both a quick visual comparison. “I can’t help it if I have more to offer.”

“You’re \*offering\*?”

Nathan grimaced, her hands flying to her head as though trying to keep the ideas welling inside of it from spilling out. “Stop it, Mark! Just stop it!”

Mars self consciously pulled her trenchcoat around her tightly, unknowingly accentuating her new curves rather than hiding them as she had intended. Nathan paced at the base of the stairs, and Mars chewed nervously on her thumb. “I saw the building crumble,” Mars said to her, the secret bonding them tightly together. “I fell from the fourth floor, went right down with the bricks and mortar.”

“The wall exploded,” Nathan agreed, her green eyes veiled in glassy tears at the horrific memory. “I was dead. I really was, Mark. It was awful.”

Mars grabbed her sister’s shoulders and gave them a fierce squeeze. Nathan sank into the comfort offered, her sniffing significantly unladylike. She pulled a tissue from her pocket, and blew into it, a nasty phlegmatic sound causing Mars to release her tight grip just a little, if only because Nathan was making her already unhappy stomach clench on bile.

“I guess you lost your job,” Nathan said, drawing in a shaky breath of air. “I don’t know how we’re going to survive. I’ll find a way, but damn it, Mark, you’re career is finished. All your records, your schooling, your damned resume—They won’t be expecting a woman named Mark...”



“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Mars said, suddenly tense.

“What do you mean?”

Mars shifted where she stood, the rich oriental pattern of the carpet adorning the stairs taking the full interest of her heel. Simple black patent leather shoes. Strange how they fit so well, as did the rest of her wardrobe. As if her closet had been morphed as well, but not blatantly into feminine influence. Her clothes had always been stubbornly bland. She eyed her sister’s basic black ensemble, and the Doc Martin’s she wore, which were standard men’s sizes anyway. Everything changed, and yet it all remained close enough the same to not create a massive ripple. Their gender switch was incidental. “They didn’t notice,” she said. She gave Nathan’s incredulous jaw drop a roll of her eyes. “I don’t interact a lot with the rest of the staff. I spend most of my time in the lab. I guess I don’t make much of an impression on people.”

“But your ID tag! It says ‘Mark’!”

“I told the surgeon it was a typo,” Mars quickly replied. She could feel her face redden at the memory. “The ‘k’ is supposed to be a ‘s’.”

“You named yourself after a planet?” Nathan said, her jaw working over this information. “Makes sense, you’ve lived like a goddamned alien most of your life. It would certainly explain your lack of \*presence\*.”

“I’m not that forgettable,” Mars said, but there was a sincere lack of conviction in the statement.

She inched closer to the base of the stairs, Nathan remaining at her side as several officers descended. The giant shadow of Jim Horlock slid along the white walls, the acoustics of the stairwell rendering his already deep voice into a shuddering crescendo. “Watch your step, lads!” he boomed. “Nearly broke my neck on that loose board earlier.”

A scrubbed young cop in uniform gave Nathan a wide grin as he followed his superior down the stairs. He nodded at her in cocky familiarity. “You can go back to your apartment now,” he promised her, his notepad scribbled in hastily. He tore off a piece of paper and handed it to her. “If you can find yourself a phone, give me a call sometime. You know, if you think of anything else, that is.” He chewed his bottom lip, his head held high and his grin not at all related to the work at hand. “Nice meeting you, Natassia.”

“Yeah, sure,” Nathan said. Shoulders back. Tits out.

Not really, but they might as well have been. Mars waited until the young officer was well out of earshot before turning on her sister. “I don’t believe this! You actually flirted with him!”

“I wanted the inside scoop if they found anything in #220. Don’t you dare judge me, you would have done the same thing.”

No, Mars knew with absolute certainty, she wouldn’t have. They were vastly different people still, and while this didn’t surprise Mars, her sudden level of judgemental superiority over her sister did. “It’s strange, but I’m very disappointed in you for some reason,” Mars admitted. She chewed her thumbnail, cursing when a tooth bit too deep at its corner. “I don’t think it would disturb me so much if you at least had waited until you were a bit more familiar with this new skin. For example, I haven’t yet seen myself naked, so this would seriously hamper any effort of flirtation on my part, not to mention the ramifications this has in regards to my gender identity.”

“None of which stopped those horny Victorians, and it’s not stopping me,” Nathan countered. She placed an impatient hand on her hip at Mars’s deeply entrenched frowning. “Oh come on, I’ve got the car, I might as well drive it.”

“You named yourself Natassia,” Mars said, shaking her head.

“Yeah. Natassia. No special reason why I picked it, Ms. Moonbeam, so don’t get on your high horse about it.” Nathan drummed her fingers on the oak rails that curled along the outside of the staircase. “It just came to mind, is all. Kind of sounded sexy. Like a Russian porn star.”

“You really are an idiot.”

Tense sisterhood aside, there were more pressing matters at hand, notably the events that had occurred in apartment #220. Paul Nash stood at the top of the landing leading the second floor, deep in conversation with a plain clothes officer. Mars couldn’t help but let out a snort of discontent at the man’s insufferable hypocrisy. She stormed up the stairs, intent on a fight that would end in blows if need be, only to pause, and fix him in a knowing glare. He stared after her, his icy blue eyes not registering the fury welling within her soul.

“You could have prevented this,” she snapped at him. Adrenaline rushed through her at this confrontation, a horrible, sick sensation akin to fear riding atop of her anger. One false move and she would be forced to strike out, even push him down the stairs if she felt her point would be made clearer by it. There were few things Mars could tolerate less than human apathy, and this feeling was exacerbated by the sudden wholeness of spirit she felt. The sensation frightened her. She bit down on her thumbnail, only to force her hand at her side. Courage against a definitive wrong need not be forced.

“That poor man died because of you,” she added.

Paul remained at the top of the stairs, turning to face her accusation with his hands firmly on his hips, his stance decidedly aggressive. With the way he managed to make her feel small, despite his being a good few inches shorter, there was little mistaking Paul Nash for a simple civilian. This was a man well experienced in imposing his will on the dangerous, negative portion of the populace. It was bit much for an empathetic person, as Mars Connor is, to bear, but though her knees shook, she knew she was in the right. She refused to let his powerful bearing bully her.

“What makes you think I had anything to do with this?” Paul said, his voice accusing.

“I told you there was violence happening in this apartment,” Mars snapped, furious at the man’s gall. “My brother suffered through an unimaginable din of fighting and banging and yelling every night, and I asked you, as a man with connections in the sphere of law, if you could pass along this issue to an acquaintance specializing in domestic disputes.” Mark marched up the stairs to stand beside him, her head held high, her back straight, her chin extra haughty as she looked down her nose from her six foot two vantage point at the stocky, overly confident asshole known to her as Paul Nash. His smirking once over of her was not appreciated.

“You’re a real firecracker,” he said, giving her an infuriating wink. “I think I would have remembered talking to you. As it was, some guy was the one who pestered me about some bullshit or other about why his brother was blasting his stereo.”

“My cousin,” Mars hastily replied. “You talked to my cousin.”

“You seemed pretty keen to be the one to take the blame for that little conversation,” Paul observed. His icy blue eyes narrowed in on her, trapping her in the not so white lie. “I don’t remember much of it, to be honest. Except for the fact your cousin admitted to being in that apartment. Considering what’s happened, where is the nosey bastard? I’m guessing he’s heading down the precinct, giving his statement of the events. At least, I hope that’s what he’s doing.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Mars quickly replied. She was really trapped now. Nathan, as usual, had pushed

way ahead of her, uncaring of her awkward predicament and swearing over the imposition of yellow police tape partially blocking her entrance into her apartment. “My cousin—Mark. He’s...He’s gone on sabbatical.” She could feel her face redden, her temperature flustered within the lie. She wasn’t used to spouting falsehoods, and it showed. Worse still, Paul Nash was clearly not buying it, his narrow-eyed scrutiny making her stutter. “H-He—He’s gone to Africa. The Sera—The Serengeti desert.”

“Really? What for?”

“Sabbatical. He left this morning. A five a.m. flight.”

“A sabbatical in the Serengeti desert. I see.” Paul’s hands remained stubborn, immovable on his hips, his lips teasing into an infuriating hint of a smile. “So he’s a professor?”

“Scientist.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He’s studying the dung beetle. The dung beetle of the Serengeti desert.”

“That must be interesting work.”

“It is. Very much so.”

“Pity he isn’t a plumber. I could use one to fix that moldy shit hole in my kitchen ceiling. Caused by his brother, by the way. The jackass with the too loud stereo.” Paul cocked his head to one side, and without warning stepped closer to her, forcing Mars to take one step back. She could hear her sister swearing from where she was standing, her tiny bachelor pad turned upside down from a police search. Nathan’s cold war paranoia was in full swing, and shouts of ‘They’re the damned KGB!’ punctuated the already tense negotiation happening between herself and Nash at the top of the second floor stairwell.

“I have to go,” Mars curtly said.

“What, no more picking on me and my imagined lack of responsibility?” Paul replied. He placed his hand on her arm, far more gently than his bulky strength suggested he wanted to. Uncomfortable, Mars pulled away. “Your cousin knocked on my door last night acting like I owed the world a personal favour. Just for the record, I don’t.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Mars coldly replied. “However, I would think that as a former member of the city police force you would have taken his concerns more seriously.” She crossed her arms, her chin held high in what she knew was righteous indignation. “We would not be standing here if you had.”

“Sweetheart, it wouldn’t matter if you asked that of God Himself. Nothing was going to change what happened here.” He was standing close to her now, so close she could feel the heat rising from his body, mingling with the hot burning sensation coursing across her cheeks. She placed her palms on her face, wishing her hands were made of the same ice as his frosty, ice-blue stare. A strange feeling overtook her the closer Paul Nash was. Almost like fear with the way it made her heart hammer and her knees quake as Paul picked off an invisible piece of lint from her shoulder.

“If it had been you, and not that nosey cousin of yours, it might have been a different story. I just might have run up these stairs and busted down that door with my bare hands.”

“I don’t believe you,” a highly discomfited Mars replied.

“Believe it,” Paul Nash said, his proximity far too close. She could feel his breath on her neck, gooseflesh telling her the situation was getting too familiar.

“You’d have knocked down that door.”

“That’s right. Just for you.”

“I suppose you think you’re a real knight in shining armour.”

“I like to think of myself as a pro-active sort of guy. I’d have smashed the door to #220 by any means necessary. Chivalry ain’t dead, sunshine.”

“Would you have riddled it with bullets?”

He pulled away from her as though she’d struck him full force across the face, his icy eyes thawing as they blinked her assault away. “Wow,” he said, bending slightly at the waist, as though feeling a phantom blow. “You really know how to hit a guy where it hurts.”

Mars wasn’t keen on playing games, especially with rude jerks who shouldn’t have enigmas wrapped around them in a strangling choke hold. The overly bright lights now adorning the main staircase hurt her eyes, a terrible headache brewing behind them. She pinched the bridge of her nose, willing the migraine creeping up on her to leave, but it remained stubborn in the form of Paul Nash, who was now whistling, his overly friendly manner now decidedly more aloof and caustic. “That cousin of yours has a lot of nerve spreading rumours like he is,” Paul said.

“They aren’t rumours,” Mars countered. Odd, how she seemed to revel in this confrontation. Had this happened last night, as *himself* he would have run from it at first opportunity rather than provoke the man further. There was something electric about this vicious banter between them that Mars couldn’t help but enjoy. It was this that truly made her nervous, and she expressed it with a small nod of her head and a purse of her lips in cold disapproval. Paul Nash had nothing further to say, and for this she was grateful. She wasn’t sure she had it in her to leave him with the last word.

Nathan was picking yellow police tape off of the corner of her door, which was in turn reapplied by an angry officer. “He’s dead. I don’t think some sticky tape is going to resurrect him.” Mars groaned inwardly at the thought that perhaps it would make all the difference—One never knew what forces were going to create a Lazarus effect on the populace of Crescent Manor, especially considering both her own and her sister’s near brush with death the night before. She had noticed, of course, that the stained glass art nouveau tree mural was now right-side up, a small point to ponder in her estimation. With the way things were changing, she could only hope she didn’t wake up in the morning swimming in a goldfish bowl placed in the odious Paul Nash’s apartment. If it had been so easy for them to switch genders, it didn’t seem too far a stretch to believe they were at risk of cross-species contamination as well. She plunged her hands into the deep pockets of her trenchcoat, her shoulders bent forward, a terrible chill assailing her soul. Oh well, at least Meister could have a proper companion, then, so long as they didn’t end up abandoned and sent to a 2X2 steel barred hotel room at the local ASPCA.

“He might just spring back to life. You never know,” Nathan said, vocalizing Mars’ inner thoughts. She gave her twin a crooked smile. “What do you think? Maybe he came back as a woman—it would be just like those sycophants of King James to leave an important detail like that out.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Lazarus, you idiot. Maybe he became a woman.”

“Nathan...Sorry...Natassia...Do you honestly ever hear the nonsense spewing out of your mouth? Your neighbour in apartment #220 is dead and probably due to the circumstances relating to us in some way. How, I don’t know, so don’t ask. Don’t ask me why, either. And if you so much as whisper the word ‘what’, I’m going to strangle you.”

But despite the seeming congruity, Mars was way off when it came to understanding what was on Nathan’s mind. “He likes you.” She raised a brow and peered over Mars’ shoulder, forcing her to turn around. Paul Nash was now in the second floor hallway, his hands still arrogantly arranged on his hips as he surveyed the scene. Mars wasn’t completely ignorant, however, of the small glances the man stole

her way.

Nathan giggled at Mars' discomfort, earning another sneaky glance from Nash. "I know that look. It smacks of heightened interest, bravado and lonely desperation. Just say 'Go' and the man is ready to drop his drawers and beg 'when'." She shook a knowing finger at her sister's shocked expression. "Don't knock the idea, not when you don't know which side of the fence you're on at present, and I'm hoping it's not the asexual one, because that's just plain against Nature. Look, since I'm guessing you were straight up male, that means you would also be straight up female, considering the biology template we're gleaned from. I say go for it, have yourself a good shag, then report back to me and let me know which mistakes not to make. As sisters, who are also twins and thus share a near supernatural bond, I say we learn from each other's experiences."

"You're stark raving mad," Mars observed.

"I'm starving," Nathan whined. She pushed her sister towards the main staircase, her bachelor flat abandoned to the melee. "I'm staying at your place tonight and possibly tomorrow. There's no way I'm hanging about here, waiting for that wall to collapse on me again and get the job done right. Stiff drinks and mulligatawny, that's what this night calls for. Aw, shit, you didn't go to Henri's, did you? Damn, Mark. That's twice in a row. Honestly—You could have thought about me at least once."

## episode nine: Meister's opinion



The first thing visible in Mars' apartment was the threadbare black and white couch, a thin, flowered blue sheet strewn over it to hide the bits of stuffing poking out of the random holes. Natassia jokingly referred to it as the 'Swiss cheese sofa', a moniker that stuck despite the fact it was a fat cat, and not a mouse, who had performed this act of vandalism. Meister yawned as Natassia walked in the door, Mars following behind her, his feline routine altered by this rare visitor. When it became clear that he wasn't going to get his can of cat food as prescribed daily at exactly six-thirty p.m., Meister let out a low hiss and swatted at Natassia's ankle. His displeasure thusly delivered, he waddled on his four tiny paws to the couch and began to pluck at his newest artistic creation—a hole in the side in the vague shape of Mars' head.

"You need to get rid of that cat," Natassia complained. She inspected the scratch, and was disappointed

to see the sneaky rotter had been smart enough to refrain from drawing blood. "I guess I won't need a tetanus shot," she muttered.

"You wouldn't anyway, you know I'm religious about getting Meister vaccinated," Mars replied. She poured herself a tall glass of orange juice, topping it off generously with a good helping of vodka. Her sister's raised brow encouraged her to get out a second glass, and pour an equally strong mixture for Natassia.

"Don't be stingy," she said, frowning as Mars poured.

"I'm generous to a fault," Mars assured her.

Meister remained suspicious on the other end of the couch, his tail twitching furiously as he gave Natassia his usual unblinking, reptilian glare. She took the glass Mars offered her gratefully, and took three good, long swallows before saying what she knew had to be said. "This is so fucked up."

Mars, as usual, remained infuriatingly stoic in the face of certain madness, her movements calculated and precise as she poured herself another measured drink in the kitchen. Natassia downed the rest of hers and longed for another one, but she knew enough to leave it to Mars to decide on the issue. Mars as both sister and brother could be stingy with the firewater if it meant Natassia was earning a happy buzz.

So, to avoid further conflict, Natassia slumped deeper onto the couch, the tall, empty glass balanced on her knee. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been in Mars' apartment since they'd moved here, and it was with some surprise that she realized it was because she'd never entered it. She pressed her lips tight together as she took a good look around, searching for some tiny shred of change. If it weren't for the fact the kitchen island was off to the right rather than placed in the centre of the dining area, Natassia could easily mistake this apartment for the last place Mars inhabited. The same dark, masculine hues of deep browns and greens adorned the walls and furnishings, the one coffee table and the chair and matching couch arranged in the exact same position against the window and the wall in a cramped 'L' shape. Mars was stubbornly hateful when it came to bric-a-bric, thus all surfaces were barren, with no hint of life upon them, not even a thin layer of dust. A den would be a proper name for such a place, for where else could be so dark and womblike, with no hint of distracting items that would take away from the space's ordained purpose of enforced relaxation and sleep.

Natassia (might as well get used to the name, she thought, feeling an inward kick against her lost masculinity) couldn't feel comfortable in such antiseptic surroundings, a genuine need for disorder and mess creeping in on her. At the least the couch was a disaster, and for this she felt an unexpected kinship with the moody Meister, who was now laying on his back, his round belly purring in ever increasing decibels. The empty glass wasn't earning a refill as it remained poised on her knee. She made a move to get up and fix another herself.

"In a way it's not so terrible, what happened," Mars quietly said.

Natassia sat back down, her glass again cautiously perched. Meister let out a questioning mew as Mars plunked onto the sofa next to her sister, her face pinched, her thumb anxiously chomped. "I don't know how to explain it, but ever since the..What would you call it?"

"The Event," Natassia added, helpfully.

"Yes, the...The Event. I've felt different in more ways than mere gender rearranging which, regardless of the obvious physical differences we both have, is not in actuality all that important on the genome scale. I mean, we're talking about a tiny arm of DNA. A dash of information in the grander schematics of human building blocks." Meister, as though sensing her uneven mood, rolled towards her, his fat girth needing a shove of her palm to help him make it onto his right side. He purred with aggravated

force as Mars tickled his wide belly with her fingertips. “What’s more interesting to me is the strange amount of feeling I’m suddenly having. And not only feeling, there’s all sorts of other symptoms. My eyes are focusing better. My limbs are more coordinated. There’s a sense of belonging to this world, and I hadn’t realized how utterly devoid of that sensation I was.” She gave her sister a worried frown. “My first thought, when I was whole again, was about you.”

“Me?” Natassia said. She made a face. “I don’t like being in your thoughts.”

“I don’t like having you there, either, but it couldn’t be helped. I was instantly concerned about you. I was worried you had died.”

“It’s not an awful thing to worry about your twin’s mortality,” Natassia said. She gestured at the empty glass, which was absolutely begging for more orange juice and vodka, but Mars wasn’t getting the hint.

“It wasn’t a totally unselfish thought,” Mars said, reflective. “I was concerned about being left alone.” A flicker of confusion crossed over her features before she turned to her sister. “I had never thought of you as anything other than an obligation, and no, I won’t apologize for a sentiment you very much possessed yourself.”

“We were strangers, who happened to share the rental space of dear old Mother’s icy lake of a womb.” Natassia scowled. “That distance we felt between us, that was all her fault. She never gave us anything other than the basics. We were just lodgers in her life, it’s no wonder we didn’t know how to properly interact as siblings.”

But even as she said this, Natassia could feel the hollow emptiness of the excuse, for their parents were yet another symptom of that strange, unnameable disease of apathy they cultivated between them. It didn’t take much to explore what was missing in their lives, what with the blank absence of family photographs and heirlooms, both Natassia and Mars living in sparse apartments with only the hint of an outside influence stamped upon them. As a child he had understood his family was different from others, but it hadn’t bothered him then as the memories do now, each unpleasant moment unwrapped like an unwanted gift. Other children had birthday parties. Other children celebrated holidays and family trips abroad. But they had spent their childhood aloof in their mother’s condominium, all three of them separated into different rooms, enjoying their own company, unable to interact properly with one another.

“She barely ever spoke to us,” Natassia said, bitterness rising like bile in her throat. “As for our father—When he did ever bother showing up, he couldn’t string two sentences together with any shred of sense.”

“He’s sick,” Mars reminded her. “He was never right when he came back from the Gulf.”

“He was never at the Gulf,” Natassia impatiently replied. Anger was boiling inside of her, the emotion rushing through her like a high. “There’s never been any proof he was a soldier. He got those uniforms from the Army Surplus store in town. Cheap and durable, and wouldn’t put a dent in his disability cheque. The perfect gear for sleeping on the streets.”

Mars remained silent for a long moment after this. She clenched her fists on her lap, her nails digging hard into her palms. “Regardless of what you believe, our father’s mental illness didn’t take away the fact he cared about us. It may not have always expressed itself in what others would consider a normal manner, but I don’t remember him ever hitting us or yelling at us, or showing any anger whatsoever in our direction. If anything, his confused monologues always seemed to hint at a feeling of pity for us, as though he truly understood the void our mother’s emotional distance created.”

“If you’re going to let him off the hook, you have to put her in that package,” Natassia taunted, knowing this was a weak spot in Mars’ argument. She couldn’t outright prove it, but her cold

demeanour was surely what prompted Mark to take on a psychotic girlfriend, her crazy bearing mistaken for warmth. Mars stiffened where she sat, proving that Natassia had hit a frayed nerve. Now that she had the upper hand, she wasn't about to let her death grip on it go. "There was nothing normal about our upbringing, even if you do put the crazy into the equation. Remember, when we went to grade school, how all the other kids would talk about going to see their aunts and uncles, their grandparents, their cousins? All we had was our separate rooms and Mother, who barely left the chair by her condominium window, staring out of it for hours like she was guarding the street God Himself wandered up and down. We know nothing about either of them, it's like they were plunked here from some alien planet and left to fend for themselves. In my opinion, they've done a terrible job of it."

"She has a Swedish accent," Mars half-heartedly reminded her sister. "She's not an alien, she's just from another country. From Sweden."

"Yeah, like dad served in the Gulf War and Santa Claus runs an elf sweat shop. There's no proof of anything, no papers of citizenship, no passport. And don't go rolling your eyes at me, not when I was the one who actually looked for them."

"She might have thrown them out. Come on, be reasonable. You can't fake a Swedish accent for over thirty years."

Natassia wasn't convinced. "In all those years, I can't remember her saying more than a couple of dozen words to us. I thought she was a mute until I was twelve and I overheard her on the phone, cancelling a magazine subscription." She sank back on the couch with a sad sigh, the anger that had brewed earlier now cooling off into helpless acceptance. She shoved her empty glass at her sister, who took it, and infuriatingly balanced it on her own knee instead of offering the much wanted refill.

Mars' fingertips slid along the rim of the glass, its shape too uneven to surrender a tone. "I wonder if it would have made a difference to either of them, seeing us as daughters instead of sons."

"I doubt it," Natassia said, confident this was true. "What was going on in our house had nothing to do with gender."

Mars' fingertip stopped midway across the rim of the glass. Her brown eyes concentrated on a place deeply beyond the plain beige carpet at their feet. "What was going on at our house, Nathan?"

"It's Natassia," Mars was reminded. She sat up, earning a glare from Meister whose wide girth was slightly jostled at her movement. "Nothing, that's what. A very long and protracted Absence. One which, until now, we wholeheartedly participated in."

Uncomfortable, Mars left the couch to head for her coat closet, the mirror opening to reveal the neat arrangement of lab coats and three beige London Fog trenchcoats hanging with sharp precision on their assigned hangers. She reached into the side pocket of one of the lab coats and pulled out a rolled sheet of transparent plastic. "I did some checking when I was at the lab," Mars said, handing it to her sister, who took it with quizzical interest. "This is my current DNA profile. Since you had the same experience as myself, I'm assuming yours has an identical anomaly."

"What am I looking at?" Natassia asked as she unrolled it. The thick and thin lines of black and grey meant nothing to her. A circle had been made in black marker at the far right corner. There was nothing within it.

"There are no X or Y chromosomes," Mars explained. "They are completely absent. An impossibility, yet there it is." She sucked in her breath as she stood over her sister, anxiously wringing her hands, her head turned away as though unable to inspect for too long what Natassia was trying to decipher. "There was another man in apartment #220, wasn't there? You said there were two people."



“Yeah, some friend of his from what I could figure. He was going to sublet or something, that’s what that cop I batted eyes at told me. He didn’t look too good when the paramedics took him out.”

“He’s doing a lot worse now,” Mars evenly said. “He’s dead.”

“Bummer.”

“It’s not a joke Nath...Natassia. I was prevented from reporting his cause of death by his surgeon because it would be too upsetting for his family. Crescent Manor seems to have a running gag going on with St. Benedict Hospital, one which we have somehow become entangled in.” Mars leaned close to her sister, her low whispering hard to hear. Natassia couldn’t understand who in the room Mars was keeping this confidence from. They were the sole human inhabitants, and Meister the tabby certainly didn’t seem to care what package they came in as long as one of them opened up his can of food at the appointed hour. “This patient came in, and I had to do a frozen section of what was originally believed to be tumours. He was riddled with them, the poor man lumpier than day old gravy. You won’t believe what I found.”

Mars didn’t continue. Natassia fought the urge to claw at her. “Oh for God’s sake, stop the whispering, there’s no one else here but the cat, and all he wants is his damned Tender Vittles!” Natassia stood up, shaking off the creepy vibes Mars was sending her way. “I know this is a safe apartment, I checked it for defunct cold war doodads ages ago, and there’s nothing here that would be of interest to any third party. So the poor bastard was lumpy and no biopsy was going to save him. Big deal.”

“They weren’t benign, but they weren’t cancer, either.” Mars took in a deep breath, her brown eyes wild as though she were revelling in this strange information. “He was growing organs. Lots of them. Randomly throughout his body. Lungs in his liver. Kidneys in his stomach. New nerve endings looping through his heart. Don’t you find that interesting? Shuffled up guts, rearranged in a haphazard pattern. Unlike the two of us, who I guess were lucky. Our rearranging came in a more linear package.”

“Now who is crazy,” Natassia muttered. She snatched the empty glass from Mars’ grip and marched into the kitchen. Meister let out a small meow and rolled off of the couch to pad on heavy paws towards her, his small cries becoming more demanding the closer he got to the cupboard containing his food. The greedy feline was just going to have to wait. Natassia grabbed the vodka first before pouring in the orange juice as an afterthought chaser. She downed half of the strong drink in two gulps, her throat searing fire.

“Something bigger happened between us,” Mars insisted, her voice higher pitched. Close to manic. Natassia watched her sister’s animated movements as she expressed her thoughts, a nagging for caution burning against the back of her mind. “I know that you can feel it too, how the dynamic between us has changed. When we were brothers, it was just in name only, but now that we are sisters, it’s like a puzzle piece has been put into place. What was missing is now whole.” Her thumb pressed against her bottom lip, but she didn’t chew it. “Now we feel like a family. I don’t suppose that makes sense.”

Natassia understood what she was getting at, but she ignored the feeling, opting instead to concentrate on Meister and his needs as he pawed frantically at the cupboard door. “Hold on, you fat furball, I’ll get it. If you ask me you could use a bit of starving. Get any bigger and your paws won’t touch the floor.” She pulled out the bag of cat food and filled his dish. Meister’s purrs were interrupted by his greedy swallowing, the silence in the apartment broken by his gluttony.

Male. Female. It certainly didn’t matter to him. The world hadn’t changed that much, according the cat. We probably all look the same to him, Natassia thought. Two legged pink beasts that were designed specifically to give him food and water whenever he needed it. DNA didn’t mean a fig to Meister. Save for his basic needs, in Meister’s opinion, Mark and Nathan had always been irrelevant.

“No one noticed,” Natassia said, mostly to herself. She quietly downed the rest of her drink, the vodka taken in small sips. This didn’t help in how it went down, the acidic liquor a burning stone in her stomach, not giving her the release of tension she’d thought it would. Mars remained on the couch, her hands wringing, her mind calculating all manner of insane biological repercussions that could have befallen them, but didn’t.

Meister choked on his purring as he swallowed another large mouthful.

He had no thought for either of them.

He turned away from them both when he was finished, his fat form waddling down the hall towards Mars’ bedroom. He belched, rather loudly for a cat. The stench of tuna followed him.

## episode ten: Paul Nash’s Garage



Paul Nash was intrigued, and this wasn’t healthy for him, or anyone else. Forcing his mind to remain on the task of dusting off the hundred or so pieces of ceramic bric-a-brac that cluttered his apartment, he was able to push thoughts of her from his mind for about five minutes. Not a good track record, he thought, a familiar sense of panic growing within him. Keeping his thoughts under tight control had been the crux of his existence as of late, and considering how interesting she’d proven herself to be, there was no way he should be entertaining thoughts about her, especially with how it put her at risk. Furious with himself, because of course, he was thinking about her again despite his inner protests, he rubbed at the head of a brown, ceramic rabbit with a clean dishtowel, the white residue of dish soap clinging inside of its pointed, carved ears. He set it on the kitchen counter, to sit primly with all the others, and braced his hands on either side of the steel sink, the fluffy pink towel clutched in a tight ball

in his fist.

This wasn't what he'd been expecting, this partial life he was leading. When he was still on the force, his days were adrenaline punched, his body riding high on nervous energy. He'd loved every second of his work in homicide, from hanging at the gym with his fellow cops to chasing down a gun wielding creep down a dark alleyway. Never shying away from the limelight, he was always the first selected to address the press, his words about each case carefully guarded while at the same time promising a speedy and just resolution. When he worked homicide, he was a man of fearless confidence, his world an endless social circle of other cops, caseloads, witness interviews and hitting the pavement for hours on end for even the tiniest lead. He was exhausted, but exhilarated at the same time. He neglected to eat properly, to sleep. It was all about the job, because without the job the world would descend into chaos. Bad guys had to lose, the good guys had to win. That meant the good guys, such as himself, they had to work doubly hard, and make sure the bad guys never got the upper hand.

He'd been so stupid back then. He thought he was succeeding.

He placed another dusty ceramic item on the kitchen counter, a small grey mouse holding onto a tiny, wrapped gift, the bow adorning it a sickly shade of green that contrasted with the sky blue of the box. It was mundane details like this that took up all his days now. His fervour and his passion caged into a small one bedroom apartment, the massive sweep of his influence reduced to minutiae. He closed his eyes and rubbed at his jaw in anxious thought, the soapy water clinging to his fingers, leaving suds on his cheeks. He was a parody of what he knew he was supposed to be. All because of one event.

No. He couldn't think about that now.

He glanced up at the black moldy hole in his kitchen ceiling, worried his thoughts had been overheard. She was up there, he knew, crawling around on all fours, eating garbage, spewing her poison all around her while she waited for his mind to slip up just once, just for the tiniest moment. He held his breath, waiting, ice blue eyes slowly turning away from the spore laden corner, as though it were of no consequence, his attention once again forced upon the two dozen or so ceramic ornaments still waiting to be cleaned. He picked up a dusty pink cat, and ran his thumb over her back, an unbidden thought of that woman's graceful, long neck searing up from his memory.

It had happened nearly a week ago, and yet he still couldn't push her completely from his mind, not like usual. People fell apart, they attacked each other, they tripped, they broke limbs and necks. Domestic disputes. Domestic accidents. As long as he kept his mind focused on what he had to do here, his hands in a hot sink, his skin scorched pink, there was no risk of thinking these events were anything more than simple, ordinary, boring, every day phenomenon.

He paused as he wiped the suds off the pink cat, his body suddenly tense in anxious understanding. He kept his hands in the hot, soapy water, his fingers curled secretively beneath the suds into tight, moist fists. Above him, in the black corner of the kitchen ceiling, a familiar sound eked out.

Barely perceptible. Paul had to hold his breath to hear it.

A rusty hinge, opening very slowly.

With careful movements he backed away from the sink, his icy gaze stubbornly rooted to the floor as he made his way out of the kitchen, and into his living room, where he hoped his favoured hiding spot hadn't yet been ferreted out. He tiptoed to the corner near the window that gave a direct view out into the parking lot and sank in the worn winged back chair he had placed there what felt like decades ago. He pressed his head against the back of the chair, his breath held, released only when his lungs began screaming for mercy. One false move, one wrong thought that brought him to Her attention and it was all over.

It was completely against his nature to hide like this, but this was no foe he could easily kick down with a well placed punch or two, no bullet was going to quiet this villain. He held his breath, fighting against the thoughts that erupted through him so fast and furious in their insistence. That cousin had said he'd been in that apartment. Both he and his brother, they'd heard that noise, the banging, the screaming, the tortuous violent harangue that refused to let Paul live in peace. She knew about it, too, that long necked beauty, her proud chin and the tight cinch of her belt at her waist doing far more to Paul's imagination than he was willing for Her to see. He pressed the heel of his palm against his forehead, as though he could physically hold his thoughts in.

The creak of the hinge grew louder. Paul sat tense in the chair, sweat beading at his temples. Dewdrops of terror slid along the back of his neck, an involuntary shudder coursing through him as it slipped like a long, cold fingertip down the centre of his spine.

There was a bottle of brandy at his elbow, perched on the oak side table along with a Holly Hobbie vintage mug. He poured himself a generous amount, and drank it as though it were his first cup of coffee for the day. It burned through his throat, but he didn't mind. For once, a Christmas gift from his sisters actually had a practical purpose. He downed several more gulps, swallowing with effort, his eyes watering against the burn. He could feel the edge of his panic start to weaken, and he hoped it had been dulled enough to fool that rusty hinge into closing, its horrors receding back into the black corner of his kitchen.

A loud bang rattled the dishes in the cupboards, a piece of drywall landing in the sink with a violent splash. The din that followed was a boiling rumble that stretched from one corner of his apartment to the other. He downed the rest of his brandy and put the mug down with a shaking hand. She had found him. There was no choice now except to wait it out.

With his fate imminent, he allowed his mind to travel back to that attractive woman, her elfin features and fragile manner pulling on every physical sinew of his male instincts. She was a strong woman, that he was sure of, a smart one, too. He was just the kind of guy she'd go for, the brawny type who wouldn't be afraid to drape over her, his sweat mingling with hers, her body so wracked in pleasure she'd beg for him to take her. He ran a palm across his scalp, beads of sweat smoothed against the stubble. Damn, it had been too long since he'd had a woman in his life. One heated, verbal exchange was all it took to focus his thoughts into pornographic shapes. He'd sure as hell had fallen down that rabbit hole of desperation.

Beside the bottle of brandy was a framed photograph, and Paul took it into his hands, feeling the heat of the brandy coursing through his veins and offering a pleasant haze over the raw emotions itching their way along his consciousness. The photograph was a portrait of a young woman, blonde with rich ruby lips stretched wide in a picture-perfect smile. He ran his thumb along the circumference of her mouth, memories of his own crushed upon it assailing him.

"She's nothing like you, Carol," he promised the photograph. "She doesn't need me, I can tell. She does fine on her own. But not you, Carol. That was always our problem. You were always so fucking needy."

The rusty hinge creaked loud, the door of the Garage opening wide, its creaking wakefulness cracking the apartment in half. Jagged pieces of drywall fell around him, in a perfect circle around the winged back chair. Paul remained still in his chair, the view out of his window morphing as it always did from a plain parking lot with an extended view of the busy downtown street into a desert wasteland filled with crumbled bricks and shards of concrete. The wind in the Garage picked up, whipping small stones and loose pieces of rotted debris against the window.

He could feel her at his ear, her foul breath making him gag. He'd seen plenty of corpses in his time,

most of them good and ripe, but there was nothing to compare to this kind of rot, as though the ugliness of her soul was a festering soup of putrescence inside of her, her breath spewing poison against his skin. He held his breath, fearful of being tainted by her diseased proximity.

“Forget about her, Paul,” she warned, her voice grated, bloated flesh on jagged metal. “It’s you and me, baby. There’s no room for anyone else.”

He flinched when a spindly finger brushed against the back of his neck. Nothing but bone and slimy lumps of tissue now, but that didn’t take away the fact that one false move and she’d happily snap his head right off.

“Was it you?” he had to ask. “Did you murder the tenant of apartment #220?”

“Always a cop first,” she sneered. He tensed as her hand rested on the back of his neck, splintered bones poking against his neck like needles. “First a copper, last a lover.”

He kept his eyes fiercely shut, refusing to look into the milky dead gaze she fixed on him. “Was it you?” he repeated.

He could feel her retreat, but the Garage was still thick around him. His lungs were lined with the dust of the dead.

“You were always so quick to blame me,” she said, false sadness creeping along his already tense nerves. He understood the careful precipice he was on with her at this moment, the knowledge she could dig her splintered fingers into his flesh and rip it off hovering at the surface of his fear. She pressed her face close to his, her mouth hissing out a harsh whisper that reeked of sewage and human filth. “It wasn’t me, baby. It wasn’t you, either. Weird, huh? Things actually happen outside of ourselves. Imagine that.”

He clenched his fists, ready to strike her before she let out her banshee cry and rip him apart. “You can’t...” he began.

A sudden whip of air blasted him with its sandy breath, the loud, hollow scream of the rusty hinges suddenly slamming Carol and the Garage tightly closed. He blinked, taking a few moments to finally realize he was once again alone in his apartment, seated in his winged back chair, a bottle of brandy spilled on the oak table beside him. The disorientation was always hard to get used to, but gradually he could discern this world was stubbornly ordered and clean, the view outside bustling with life and not decay. He pressed his thumb and forefinger tight against his eyes, forcing his consciousness to focus on the one anomaly that had invaded this otherwise moderately peaceful sanctuary.

His apartment door.

Someone was knocking.

## **episode eleven: clever confrontation**



Mars Connor was happy to have a well deserved day off, and she celebrated by wearing fuzzy pink slippers and an equally fuzzy pink bathrobe, both of which were purchased on a whim on her way home from work the previous evening. Meister wasn't sure about this particularly cheerful shade, and he let her know with a questioning meow, only to give up and start pushing his food dish along the floor in a not so subtle reminder of breakfast. Mars sighed and pulled the fuzzy warmth closer around her, the hint of an early winter digging a deep chill in her bones. She reached into her kitchen cupboard and took out her small, manual percolator and began brewing coffee. Meister, not at all happy over being ignored, let out a loud, demanding meow, and began slapping the cupboard door holding his food with his paw. Mars pulled out her favourite brown mug, and waited patiently for her coffee to brew.

“For fuck's sake, I'm going to strangle that cat.”

Mars inwardly groaned, hating the thought of having to share her single serving of gourmet blend yet again, the careful process of grinding, boiling and pressing the java beans a morning ritual that she had happily shared with Meister alone, who thankfully never demanded a cup. She pulled out a chipped white mug, its inside grotty with all manner of ancient cups of tea, booze, coffee and whatever else her former brother had decided to pour into it. She was quite certain that the reddish tint to the inner cracks was due to using it as a paints mixer. For a person who favoured organic foods of suspect nutritive value over the usual domestic fare, Natassia clearly had no understanding of how her self imposed toxic environment completely obliterated any benefit her diet gave her.

“I'm going to have to make a second brew,” Mars said, trying to keep the annoyance out of her voice. “I didn't think you were going to get up this early. It's not like you've made an effort to move a muscle before noon for the past week.”

Meister continued to slam the cupboard door open and shut with his fat paw. Natassia burrowed under the white comforter she was mummified in on the couch, the tip of her black brush cut visible through the small opening at the top. “Fucking cat,” she mumbled into the feather down. Cursing again, she rolled with effort onto her back, the comforter tangled around her unevenly, her foot dangling off the edge of the couch. She pressed her palms over her face, rubbing away the sleep that continued to hover over her consciousness. “I have to get up,” Natassia admitted. She yawned, the gesture mimicked by Meister. “I need a shower.”

“Don't use up all the hot water,” Mars warned.

Natassia waved her concern off as she sat up on the messy couch, the holes Meister had plucked into it plainly visible and spilling foam. “I got a job offer,” she said, nearly knocking Mars off her feet in shock. “A sign painting job for that big electronics boxstore a few blocks away from here. Henri put in a word for me to the owner.” She gave Mars' look of shocked surprise a superior grin. “I didn't get paid by Henri, but I am getting paid, very well, by this new guy. Don't worry, Sis, I won't rub your nose in my marketing genius.” She gave Mars's fluffy get up a sneering once over. “What's with the pink?”

Mars shrugged. “I figure if I'm forced to play the part, I might as well get used to the perks.” She

petted the velvet arms with cozy pleasure. "I've never owned a bathrobe this soft. "

Natassia unwrapped herself from the couch, but kept the comforter draped around her shoulders like a bulky shawl. She got up and walked to the window, pulling the dark brown curtains wide and allowing in the bright sunshine of the morning to invade Mars' sombre interior. "Hey," Natassia said, nodding her chin at her sister. "You should see this."

Curious, Mars filled her mug with black coffee and made her way behind her sister's shoulder, looking over it out onto the street below. Her apartment had a much longer view of the main city street, with the corner of Boxworth Electronics jutting out from behind the tall, bleak grey and black executive skyscrapers that lined the sidewalks like polished cliff faces. Her attention was directed immediately below them, where the entrance of Crescent Manor was clearly visible on the right. Paul Nash was standing on the front step, his hands in the pockets of his jeans, his white t-shirt glowing in its bleached perfection beneath the morning sunlight. He took a tentative step forward, only to take two back, his hands deep in his pockets, his head held down as he repeated the action three more times.

"What's he doing?" Natassia asked.

"I don't know," Mars replied.

Paul Nash varied his pattern by walking in a complete circle four times, and on the last loop he managed to leap off of the step, to land in front of the small, orange City Post newsbox. He grasped the metal handle of the box, only to let it go, tearing back up the front steps and through the main entrance back into the Manor as though the devil was licking fire at his heels.

"That was certainly a Freaks R Us Moment," Natassia quipped. She pulled away from the window, the comforter discarded messily onto the couch as she headed for the shower. "I guess he didn't like today's headline."

"No," Mars said, frowning as she stared out of her window at the now serene scene below. She watched as the elderly Mrs. MacDonald toddle towards the box, placing her change into it with steady hands. "I think he was just trying to pick up the paper," she said.

Natassia couldn't hear her. She was busy in Mars' shower, using up every drop of hot water.

~\*~

It was her day off. The pathology book on blood diseases that she had been dying to read since she'd purchased it remained sadly neglected on her coffee table, its enthralling contents doing nothing to hold her interest. Natassia had been long gone since morning, and now, at noon, Mars had to concede that her day was simply piddling away. She stretched and wondered if a walk would do her some good, a cup of coffee at Henri's or another small shopping spree to further feminize her wardrobe. Everything in her closet still fit her, strangely enough, but she discovered a quirk in herself that she hadn't recognized before. In her male version of herself, Mark's wardrobe had been selected in terms of extended workability and practical use, which had resulted in a stubbornly unisex outlook. There were slight differences that confused her, such as feminine designer labels replacing the usually masculine ones, but the structure and purpose of the clothes still remained the same. Dull greys, whites, black and the odd brown socks. No brassieres, but there were tank-tops that had decidedly more feminine contours to them than before. Their labels were as generic as their function.

However, this was not what was foremost in her mind as she tried, once again, to immerse herself into her book and its fascinating world of granular leukocytes, specifically neutrophils. The pale, lilac

coloured white blood cells were replaced in Mars' mind with the pallor of Paul Nash's ice-blue eyes, memories of his haughty, thoroughly unpleasant personality coursing through her in a rampant infection. She slammed the heavy text shut, startling Meister out of his purring dreams and sending him hissing and scuttling into her bathroom. He was sure to pee on her bathmat thanks to this unkind stressor, but there were far more pressing issues at hand than the harsh opinions of an overweight tabby cat.

~\*~

She had picked it up earlier, and now held it tight in her hand, only gaining the courage to use it as leverage in the last hour. Her journey down the main staircase was brought to an abrupt halt by a harried young man wearing what looked to be a navy blue polyester school uniform. Upon closer inspection, it was clear he was an employee of Boxworth Electronics, the ugly yellow crest on his jacket reading: "Go Back To School With Boxworth Electronics!". It was an unfortunate costume for a man who was clearly well into his mid-thirties, and Mars stopped their back and forth dance by pressing against the stair rail and waiting for him to finish his climb.

"Watch the step," she said to him, and gestured to the loose board, thirteen up from the bottom.

"I suppose I ought to," he said, his voice strangely cheerful. He had a couple of thin, partially dead roses clutched in his hand, tiny scratches on his palms signifying he hadn't been careful with them. His voice was breathless, as though he had been running for good while and the stairs were a further aerobic exercise. "You don't happen to know where Natassia Connor lives, do you?"

Mars frowned. "I'm not sure..." she began.

"Oh, wait!" He excitedly pulled out a worn piece of paper from his navy polyester pants pocket. Natassia's familiar scrawl was in evidence. "Flat #221. Got it. Sorry, of course you wouldn't know. Or maybe you did. But you don't need to now. Thank you. Or not. Never mind."

He bounded up the stairs past her, leaving Mars in a state of profound confusion.

Being alone to gather her thoughts was clearly not on the day's agenda. Mars wasn't altogether pleased to see Mrs. Bonnie MacDonald in the front foyer, her ugly orange lipstick now replaced with an equally hideous shade of purple. She gave Mars a sweet wave as she walked back into the building, her bulky black sweater hugged tight around her. "Nasty bit of chill out there," she observed. "Early winter this year."

"I'm sure," Mars said, and gave her a thin smile.

"New here, are you? Any relation, I wonder, to those two lovely young men. Brothers, I think they are." The way she looked Mars up and down made her highly uncomfortable. Mars pulled her grey sweater tight at the waist, cinching the belt through the metal loops.

"My cousin," she muttered. Then, remembering her half-baked lie about a week earlier: "He's in Africa. Studying dung beetles."

"It's amazing how fascinating shit can be," Bonnie astutely observed. She eyed the object in Mars' hand. "Bit late in the day to pick up the paper. Myself, I like it with my morning cuppa."

"I prefer the afternoon editions," Mars quickly replied. She gave Bonnie MacDonald's overly sharp scrutiny a brusque nod. "Have a pleasant day."

"I'm not sure it's possible, dearie. Not with the wind chill the way it is." She cocked her head to one



side, as though performing some inner feats of geometry and physics over Mars' appearance. "Terrible business, what happened near on a week ago now. Happened on the second floor, as I recall. Poor young man. Broken to bits he were." She tutted and ambled on down the hallway ahead of Mars, pausing in front of the superintendent Gerald Gain's door. "Can't understand how anyone can live so close to a place just bursting like it does with all that noisy violence. Oh dear me, dearie, you look so pale of a sudden! You needs a good strong cuppa tea in you, that's right. Put some colour in them white cheeks of yours. It won't do to be pasty. I always makes sure I got a good bit of rouge on meself."

Rattled, Mars left Bonnie MacDonald and her ominous words behind, the newspaper rolled tight in her grip. She cast a wary glance over her shoulder at Bonnie, who had stopped by to pick up a key from Gerald Gain, and was now leaving to toddle up the main staircase to her apartment on the top floor. "Oh, my bones feels weary on these cold, damp days," she complained, but she seemed to do better than most, her toddling gait suddenly gaining strength when it was clear there was no one there to witness her supposed ailment.

Mars remained rooted in the centre of the hallway, waiting for Bonnie to get up to her floor. She didn't want any eavesdroppers, and the octogenarian Bonnie had already proven herself to have a highly fine tuned internal antennae for gossip. When she was confident the elderly woman was at last out of earshot, Mars smoothed down the wrinkles in her grey sweater and approached Paul Nash's door. She held her breath, and let her knuckles do all the talking. Two solid knocks. That had to be enough.

There was a great deal of shuffling going on in Paul's apartment, the sound of clinking ceramic and furniture being moved eking through the keyhole. Mars had to fight the urge to peek through it, and get a good view of the enigmatic man's home. As it was, she didn't need to pry so slyly—Paul Nash opened the door, his face flushed, his skin exuding a clammy aura.

"What do you want?" Harsh. Unfriendly. The usual. She supposed some women would find that sort of man sexy.

Mars held her head high, her determination seeming to pay off with the way he instantly appeared uncomfortable before her. He anxiously rubbed the back of his neck with his hand, his eyes trained stubbornly on the burgundy carpet lining the hall. "You need to get to lost," he said, and made a move to shut his door.

Mars, shocked by her own audacity, placed a halting hand on the door, keeping it open. "I have the day off today," she informed him, her voice retaining as much dignity as the fear jumping around the pit of her stomach would allow. She shoved the rolled newspaper at him. "Here. I believe you were wanting one of these."

He took the offering with a great deal of suspicion, and she was quick to note the slight tremor in his strong hands as he unrolled the paper and caught a good view of the headline. Two photographs of the victims of apartment #220 stared back at them—one a gangly young man that Mars as Mark had met the day before his death, and another photograph, of a man Mars only knew as her smorgasbord organ donor patient. Paul folded the paper in half, hiding both the victims and their mysterious deaths from his sight. "Thanks," he muttered. "Now get lost."

"I don't think so," Mars said, pursing her lips in thought. "You see, I don't appreciate people being rude to me without provocation, and I certainly don't see how my small act of kindness should precipitate a fight on your part. Yes, I see you are already becoming angry and want to give me a biting retort for my honest criticism, but as always, Mr. Nash, I am impermeable to your barbs. I am a doctor, and I will not allow your deflection of your frustration with your illness affect me in any way." She gave him a firm smile, a sense of confidence overwhelming her with its power, especially with the way he stood mute in his doorway, staring up at her as though she were some sort of alien or seventh world wonder. Her

newly awoken ego was hoping on the latter.

“I’m not diseased,” he stammered.

“I didn’t say you were diseased, I said you were ill, with this particular malady being neuropsychological in origin. You do admit, don’t you, that you are agoraphobic?”

Paul Nash clearly bristled at this, his shoulders shrugging forward as his confusion quickly manifested into fury. “You didn’t have to go and get me a paper if all you wanted to do was confirm your goddamned diagnosis. Here, take it back. I don’t need to be a bug under your microscope that you figured you owed a bit of charity.”

“Contrary to your thoughts, I have no interest in offering you charity or studying your agoraphobia. I merely used the offer of the newspaper as a segue into the conversation I do want to have with you.”

He was clearly uncomfortable in his doorway, his face increasingly pasty pale. “You sound like my damned sisters,” he growled.

“Doctors Monica and Martha Nash. I’ve met them, but only once. They have excellent reputations as scientists.” She put the pressure on, liking the way it made him squirm. “Your father works at the hospital as well, does he not? As a gynaecologist, I believe.”

“And my mother is a RN,” he caustically replied. “Now you know my whole damned family tree. What’s it to you?”

“Quite a lineage of health care professionals. I don’t suppose you ever wanted to go that route.”

“Maybe I just didn’t have the aptitude for it.”

Mars snuck a concentrated glance over Paul’s shoulder and into the apartment. The bric-a-brac piled everywhere sparkled in the shaft of sunlight streaming in from the large window overlooking the parking lot. Even from where she was standing, the apartment shimmered with sleek cleanliness. That kind of clean came from a strict regime, one that didn’t let a spot of dust touch any surface. “I have to wonder, knowing that you would have absorbed all that medical knowledge...”

“Last I looked, I wasn’t a sponge,” Paul countered. He moved out into the hall, closing the door behind him and preventing Mars from further fact gathering.

“You do deem yourself clever,” she said.

He gave her a crooked grin at this, disarmed by what he believed was innuendo. “I’m the cleverest guy I know,” he said.

“Then it wouldn’t be unheard of for you to have gained some understanding of how the human body works,” she said. She smoothed her palms over her hips, anxiously looping her thumb through the belt of her grey sweater. She could get fired for this, she knew, but she couldn’t possibly hold what she knew in, not when every facet of ethics insisted she report it properly to someone who might make a difference. “You know what happened in apartment #220. You were the one who called 911. Don’t bother denying it, because that isn’t what matters. What matters is what state you found the tenant of #220 in when you went to investigate.”

“I can’t see how that’s any of your business,” he sharply replied. He held his hands palms forward, determined to bring the conversation to a full stop. “Look, lady, I don’t know what you thought you were going to get out of this, but we’re done talking. See you around.”

“I know why his friend was in the apartment. He was going to sublet it to him while he was away on business. I think his friend became a tenant and... That’s why what happened to him, well... Happened.”

Paul stood in front of his closed apartment door, his feet slightly apart, his hands on his hips in a typical cop posture that would have put Natassia instantly on edge. Mars, as Mark, had never had negative encounters with the law and thus didn't understand the subtle arrogant blame being cast through his body language. The police Mark had encountered in the past were sincerely sympathetic to him in light of his ex-girlfriend's pure, Bunsen-burner induced madness. "Don't you feel it sometimes?" she had to say to him. "There's something very wrong with this place."

"I don't know why you'd say that," Paul countered.

"I guess I'll add blind to your list of ailments. I know what happened to his friend, to Darwin Smith. I analyzed his cells myself. His surgeon told Mr. Smith's family he died of a heart attack, and that if I knew what was good for me, that's the call I'd make on my report. But that isn't what he died of, and I can't help but feel a strong sense of guilt attached to the case." Mars brought her thumb to her mouth, and nervously chewed the edge of the nail. "There is no telling the ramifications, especially if others in this building are doomed to a similar fate, or worse."

"There's always worse," Paul cryptically repeated. He crossed his arms, strong muscles folding over each other with effort. "So if it wasn't a heart attack, what did this Darwin Smith die of?"

Mars decided to remain cryptic. "You knew about the apartment, what I... What my cousin meant when he told you about the banging, and the shouting. The violence has been brewing between their walls for some time, and seeing how you've lived here a lot longer than either of us, I have to assume you've been well aware of it." She clenched her fist, shoving it into her sweater pocket to prevent herself from chewing on her thumb. "Perhaps the greater question isn't why you didn't do anything about it, but why are you so afraid of it?"

Paul Nash raised a brow, ice-blue eyes burrowing into her, leaving her resolve chilled in frostbite. "The trouble with civvies like you is that you all think you're detectives. Try leaving that tack to the professionals. You won't look foolish that way." He opened the door to his apartment and turned his back on her as he went back inside.

"I am a detective," she said, forcing him to stop midway into his home. She braced herself against the door, her greater height diminishing his bravado. "As a doctor of pathology I obtain the medical facts of every one of my cases and I am the one who determines what the root causes of their ailments are. I'm the one who follows the clues their bodies give me to make the final diagnosis."

"Then you don't need me, do you?" he snapped.

Mars was hurt by the lack of progress in the confrontation. "Mr. Nash, I understand that the subject may be uncomfortable--occurrences this inexplicable are--But with the noise that continues to rumble through my brother's flat among other... things... I think it would be best if we all got together over a cup of coffee and compared notes in order to gain some insight into what is happening. I understand perfectly well that you don't like me, and consider my investigation presumptuous, but in the interest of the other tenants of this building and their innocent relations, I feel it is important to at least air our concerns."

"You are so wrong," Paul said, his thin lips twisted in a patronizing sneer.

"Very well. I did my best. If you wish to continue wallowing in your purposeful ignorance, that is your prerogative."

"That's not what I'm talking about." He braced his hand on the door, his head turned away from her. "I do like you. That's the whole problem." He paused, as though longing to say much more. As usual, his frustration won out.

“I can’t help you. I really can’t.”

He shut the door on Mars and her pleas for reconsideration. She stood helpless in front of it, marvelling at how a simple barrier of a hollow door with a cheap oak veneer could be so effective in shutting the universe out.

## **episode twelve: subversive sign painting**



Sign painting is a chauvinist’s art. Art Boxworth, owner of Boxworth Electronics made this fact very clear with more than just his sneering once over of Natassia as she approached. With his Buddy Holly glasses perched low on his nose, he looked down on her with contempt, the common decency of manners anathema to him. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and offered it to hers to shake. Natassia’s warm smile turned into a disgusted grimace as she refused the greeting.

“I was expecting a man,” he said, blatant sexism as obvious as his lack of social graces. “Henri said he used Nathan Connor to paint his sign, so I was expecting a man. You clearly aren’t a man. Are you?”

The weird simplicity of his speech made Natassia wonder if Art Boxworth was suffering some mental malady, especially with the purplish colouring of his skin which deepened in hue the more he stood in her proximity. The suspicion of his simplemindedness was broken, however, by the sweeping gesture of his palm over the fifty or so gallons of paint Natassia had special ordered a couple of days ago.

“These aren’t the colours I was expecting,” he said. “I wanted yellows and blues, and these are all marked red, and black and terra cotta. I know what terra cotta is, it’s orange, and I hate orange. I want blues and yellows, to match the company uniform.”

Natassia did her best to be diplomatic, but it was always difficult in talking to non-artists about her vision. Even Henri, who was more open-minded than most, had at first been scandalized by her creation, and had educated her in the subtleties of French profanity as a result. The eye-catching depiction of a mad chef brutally murdering a squash, complete with grey seeds splattered around it, signifying brain matter, had appealed to the surprisingly large number of vegetarians in the area, who found the sign deliciously ironic. Henri’s business boomed, and he owed it all to Nathan Connor, who in his present incarnation as Natassia Connor, was set to set the city on fire with her sign painting wonders, putting this little halfway to a big city stretch of highway properly on the map. Unfortunately, the way to infamy was paved with idiots, and it was difficult to avoid tripping over the occasional obstacle they presented.

Mr. Boxworth sucked in a deep breath with effort, his meaty hands poking around the various cans of paint with suspicious inquiry. “I was expecting a man, and I was expecting the right colours. This isn’t

starting well at all.”

“I assure you, Mr. Boxworth, I am more than qualified to paint your sign.” Natassia said.

“I don’t know. I don’t like surprises, and this is two too many. I’m not sure about having a woman paint my sign. I don’t want no flowers and hearts, this is a discounted electronics store, not a Barbie house.”

Now that was just downright rude. Natassia picked up her paint brush, which was still damp from doing the last finishing touches with the white primer. She wanted to blame it all on the fact that she was female and this was why he was giving her a hard time, but instinctively she knew that Boxworth was of that whiny, complaining camp who would never be fully satisfied no matter if Michelangelo himself carved a mural into the wall using nothing more than a hammer and a Philips screwdriver.

“I’m the one who owns the business,” she coldly informed him. “Nathan Connor, my brother, he works for *me*.”

“Did he approve these colours?” Boxworth asked.

Natassia clenched her fist tight around her paint brush, fighting the urge to shove it somewhere highly unpleasant on Boxworth’s person. She gritted her teeth and was ready to fly into a rather long tirade on the value of artistic freedom versus the short-sighted bland myopia of certain pudgy, purple faced, sweaty bastards who wouldn’t listen to reason, only to have it cut off before she started by the opening of the side door. “Mr. Boxworth, the Christmas decorations have arrived,” Charlie Weiss said, stepping out to meet him, his eyes widening as he took in Natassia standing like a soldier beside her piles of paints. He opened and closed his mouth as though he had forgotten the proper way to breathe. “It’s you,” he managed to say to her.

“You two know each other?” Boxworth asked.

“I..We are acquainted,” Charlie began, a quick glance meeting Natassia’s chest, only to shoot back up to her face and then to Mr. Boxworth, his nervous disposition heightened to a near cartoonish degree.

“We live in the same building,” Natassia explained, much to Charlie’s relief. She couldn’t help giving him a conspired wink, however, and enjoyed the way it made him squirm.

Boxworth, his face increasing in purple tones the more he surveyed the scene, wasn’t at all happy with their acquaintance. “I didn’t peg you for hanging around with artists and such. I always thought you more of a numbers man. Only poofers hang out with artists. Poofers and French people, like that Henri...”

“Henri is Algerian,” Natassia corrected him.

“...I don’t like this about you, Charlie, not at all. It won’t do for a man waiting on the manager’s position to go hanging out with undesirables, especially when I got a proper business to run. I need trustworthy employees, Charlie. As in those who aren’t going to run out and sell dope on the side to support themselves, like the stock boy does.”

“Jimmy is a licensed homeopath,” Charlie quietly explained to Natassia. She nodded in mute understanding.

“No sir, it won’t do,” Mr. Boxworth drawled, fingers tapping at his chin. Then, as though just remembering that Charlie was still there, “What’s this about Christmas decorations? It ain’t even Hallowe’en yet.” Boxworth sighed, cutting off Charlie before he spoke. “Well, if we gots them, put ‘em up. No point wasting what’s been given to us.”

“But, Mr. Boxworth, as you said, Hallowe’en is still three weeks away. It doesn’t make sense to put up the Christmas decorations this early. Customers will believe it smacks of desperation on our part,

bankrolling on every holiday that dares to cross our path. You might as well throw Thanksgiving in there as well, and have Santa Claus broiling a turkey.”

“Sounds great, Charlie,” Mr. Boxworth replied, not really listening to the argument presented to him. “Go ahead and put ‘em all up.”

“Mr. Boxworth...”

His employer turned a highly unhealthy shade of chartreuse, one that was steadily increasing into blueberry territory. By the time he passed that fruit, he was well into eggplant, his face such a dark pressurized violet Natassia was sure the man’s head was about to pop like a dropped water balloon. “I says put ‘em all up! Don’t you question me, you ignorant upstart! You don’t own this store, *I* do! I run the show! All decisions, from the stockroom to the sales price, they all depend on *me*! And don’t you forget it!” He wiped a layer of thick sweat from his neck with the back of his hand, his tiny eyes dwarfed beneath the thick rims of his Buddy Holly glasses. “Where did I park my car?” he asked.

“Near the front entrance,” an emotionless Charlie replied. “Like you always do.”

“Front entrance,” Boxworth repeated.

Charlie pointed due left. “That way,” he said.

Both Natassia and Charlie watched him carefully as he left, the keys jangling in his grip. He dropped them twice before he managed to get them to unlock the driver side door. A sick feeling welled in Natassia’s stomach as she heard the key turn the ignition. “Is it really safe for him to be driving?”

“Probably not, but the city hasn’t taken his license away yet. He had a stroke a couple of years ago, and he hasn’t been right since. Don’t take anything his says personally, it’s his wife who owns the business. She’s a very successful day trader, and she operates this place on a loss. It gives her a tax break, and it keeps him out of her way. I guess you could see it as a kind gesture on her part to give him the illusion of independence.” Charlie looked over her collection of paint cans with animated interest. “So, you’re a sign painter.”

“No,” Natassia curtly replied, the paint brush in her grip tapped at her chin in thought. “I’m an artist.”

“Is there a distinction?”

“Of course there is. I work from my own vision, not some pre-arranged template. I’m not some grunt labourer.”

“That’s a rather unkind assumption against your fellow sign painters. That’s one wide brush you’re using.”

“I’m not painting them all as untalented hacks, I’m just saying that I am approaching this work from a definite, artistic angle, one without restrictions imposed upon me from those who have commissioned my work.” Natassia was ready to burst with self indulgent pride. “I’ll have you know I studied at the New York School Of Visual Art, and even secured a teaching tenure there for a while.”

“I meant your brush. It’s very wide, you’ve just painted your neck white.”

Natassia choked slightly on this, her fingers testing the damp wet at her neck, her fingertips smudged in a chalky film. “Great,” she said, tossing the errant paint brush onto the pile of cans. She placed her hands on her hips, white lines of primer dotted in long splattered lines down her dark green tank top. It was an autumn day and too cool to be wearing anything less than a thick sweater, but Natassia knew that once she got working the creative spark would give her one hell of an intense workout, her muscles strained to their limit as she pushed herself to complete the project. There was an exhilaration in this freeing of her mind and soul into the complete absorption into the process, until where she was as a

person and the paint brush began blended into a singular event. That was when magic happened, Natassia knew. Lost in the lines and colours of her art, that was when the world began to really change shape.

“Do you care to watch me work?” Natassia asked, not minding an audience. She gave him her most dazzling, charming smile, and was glad to see it worked as well on him as it did on the birds when she was a he. Better, in fact. She could feel a strange heat rising behind the back of her head, like a spike of intelligent thought she hadn’t fully explored yet. “After all, you are on the fast track to becoming store manager. Maybe you should make sure I don’t ruin your boss’s day. It might give you brownie points if you can tell him you steered my artistic vision into the blander hues of his dulled imagination.”

“I’m not interested in becoming the store manager,” Charlie said. His hands were deep in the pockets of his pleated, schoolboy blue trousers, his blue cotton shirt rebelliously sloppy against his black belt. “Bill has that job, and he needs it for the benefits.”

The side door creaked open ever so slightly. Natassia managed to gain a quick peek at a terrified eye before it retreated back behind the door, which closed with a purposeful click. “Bill has a severe social anxiety disorder,” Charlie explained. “He needs the benefits so he can afford therapy.”

“Poor Bill.”

“Everyone has their issues.”

Natassia raised a brow at this. “And what about you?” she asked, enjoying the false bravery he was exhibiting in her presence, because no man could possibly be that cool and casual, hands in pockets as he rocked back and forth on the heels of his black patent leather shoes. If the situation had been reversed, Nathan would find the whole exchange nerve-wracking, but of course thrilling at the same time. The thought crossed her mind that Charlie would make an odd looking woman, especially with that short, messy brown ‘do that made him look like he’d just rolled out of bed and the lingering five o’clock shadow that crept along his jaw in a dark outline against his pale skin. Just as well that she was given the role. She pushed back her shoulders, no doubt giving Charlie a rather pleasant flashback. “Last time we talked you had some serious issues with the concept of destiny. Life is one big twang to you, as I recall. A resonance of consequences, with all of us forced to follow it along no matter how much we hate the tune.”

“That’s not entirely what I said, but it wasn’t you I was discussing it with,” Charlie replied, confused. “I meant that each action we take creates a series of consequences. We are responsible for the world as it unfolds, and it is not out of our power to constantly change it. Though, admittedly, this is not always the best recourse. Perhaps things move along far more smoothly without forcing that resonance to vibrate beyond that which it has been attuned. A happy, even existence could suddenly be plunged into irretrievable chaos.” He frowned, his feet kicking up a small cloud of dust as his heel dug into the gravel parking lot. “It must have been your brother I was talking to. Nathan Connor. And you are Natassia Connor.” He tested her name on his tongue, a tiny smile forming around it. “Natassia.”

He shyly kicked at the ground a few more moments, his head down, a hidden grin keeping her guessing. “I should get back in the store,” he said, gesturing over his shoulder with his thumb. “There’s an iron cauldron and a box of stuffed elves waiting for me and the guys to unpack.”

Natassia eyed him with increasing interest. “Be sure to check back on my progress,” she said.

He glanced up at the massive side wall, its primed blank canvas prepped and ready for her to wreak her masterwork upon it. “No,” he said, his shy grin hinting at mischief. “You’re a professional, after all. I trust you to do the job right.”

The side door closed behind him, leaving Natassia alone with her collection of paint cans and her

increasingly complex thoughts. A professional. There weren't too many occasions in her life when that word had been applied in regards to her work.

Damn, that shy little smile of his downright melted her. In all kinds of strange new ways.

~\*~

“Fuck a duck.”

Mr. Boxworth's opinion on her twelve hours of work was not the vote of confidence she had been expecting. She had already rehearsed her arguments against outright hatred of the piece, using the backdrop of Boxworth Electronics' defunct, discounted merchandise as both an inspiration and a warning. She wiped at her chin with the back of her hand, smudging a thick glob of black paint across her jaw, and smearing her knuckles grey.

“Is there a problem?” she asked.

Mr. Boxworth stood stock still before the massive mural, either too angry or overwhelmed or both for proper speech. “I...What...” He closed his tiny eyes and took a long, wheezing breath before turning to face Natassia. “Abomination,” he said, simply.

Natassia was now properly annoyed. She placed haughty palms on her hips, ready to do battle with whatever argument Art Boxworth was about to throw at her. It had been a subconscious, but relevant observation that much of Boxworth Electronics' stock was comprised of gadgets well past their prime, bought in bulk online from Ebay and Craigslist, from wholesalers based in the Eastern block. Thus, the large conglomeration of junk depicted in a heavily detailed black outline, filled with old televisions, tube radios, seventies' styled stereos, 8-track cassette players, and box speakers all oozing into a thick miasma that tapered messily into the shape of an iPod, which bled out onto the side door. Granted, the large orange and red slogan she'd fashioned out of military styled lettering had a distinctively Cold War USSR slant (“Comrades For The Future!” the huge, red letters proclaimed), but it wasn't her fault the inspiration was so readily at hand.

“I'm selling electronics,” Mr. Boxworth said. His hands clutched at his head, fingers pulling on the tiny tufts of hair that remained at his scalp. “I'm not sending arms to Cuba.” He turned to Charlie, who stood mute and stoic beside him. “Am I?”

“No, Mr. Boxworth, you aren't.”

“That man from Homeland Security called me last week...He said there was a problem.”

“Not one that we can't handle Mr. Boxworth,” Charlie cheerfully replied.

Mr. Boxworth slid the thick, black frames of his glasses further up his nose. His tiny eyes squinted at the vast mural, his nose wrinkled, and his top lip curled upward in a concentrating grimace.

“Abomination,” he repeated. “I don't think I should pay for this.”

Natassia was ready to let fly a tirade at this injustice, but Charlie was already well ahead of her.

“Payroll already took care of it, Mr. Boxworth,” he said. “As you may recall, the contract you signed with the Connors specifically states that there are no refunds.”

Mr. Boxworth was very unhappy to hear this, if the burgundy hue of his skin was any indication.

Natassia instinctively stepped back, just in case the man decided to compete with the depiction of the bloodied iPod and blow up in messy chunks in the shipping and receiving parking lot. He pointed a pudgy finger at Natassia's face, his body shaking in sudden, confused rage. “I'm calling my lawyer!”



His anger diminished as suddenly as it had come on, and he blinked at Charlie, as though suddenly realizing he was there. “I need to see my lawyer. Where’s my car?”

“At the front entrance, like it always is,” Charlie said.

“Front entrance,” Mr. Boxworth repeated.

“That way,” Natassia said, pointing to her left.

“Thank you,” he said as he unsteadily toddled towards his black Acura, keys jangling haphazardly in his grip. “Lovely young woman,” he mumbled to himself. He cast a quick glance up the side of his store and shook his head. “Damn punks. Vandalizing my store.”

“He’s even more confused than this morning,” Natassia said, genuinely worried. Mr. Boxworth was already in the driver’s seat, set to dottily kill anyone in his path. “My sister is a doctor. She could get him taken care of quick, all I have to do is page her and let her know.”

“He does this every day,” Charlie said, his lack of concern irking her. “Besides, Jimmy the stock boy has him on a new detoxification regime to help break down the plaque around his vena cava and to restore the memory loss. Heart and mind care, that’s Jimmy’s prescription—usually two or three drops of some diluted poisonous medicinal herbs snuck into Boxworth’s morning coffee. I don’t know the details, but it seems to be working. A month ago, Mr. Boxworth couldn’t remember his own name let alone drive.”

She felt like a heel for being so cruel about the poor man’s ‘simple mindedness’ that morning, his erratic behaviour now pitiable rather than boorish. Still, even if he was one half-step beyond the rest of them, he’d made his raw, honest opinion clear. He hated what Natassia considered her greatest masterpiece, and it was this that cut her to the core. It didn’t matter the source, or how much she insisted she didn’t care about the feelings of others in regards to her work. She’d sweated blood and guts for several days over this design, the concept so entrenched in her soul she was ready to paint it on a highway billboard if that’s what it took to get her obscure message seen by the masses. She’d been so full of confidence in its creation, but now, with a curmudgeon who’d given her his negative opinion twice—both times a fresh critique since he suffered short term memory loss—she was forced to contend that perhaps her efforts were all in vain.

Charlie stood behind her, his hands in the pockets of his pleated blue trousers, his ugly blue striped tie blowing over his shoulder in the wind as he stared up at the large mural with a thoughtful concentration.

“I like it,” he said.

## **episode thirteen: going underground**



“No. Absolutely not.”

Natassia rolled her eyes at her sister, who was now pacing anxiously in her kitchen, Meister following her every step with meowing question. She scraped at the paint that was still embedded beneath her fingernails, black and red flakes drifting onto Mars’ couch. “It wouldn’t kill you to get some proper socializing in. You can’t hide out in this apartment your entire life, you have to interact with other human beings other than at work at some point. And frankly, I don’t think your little tiff with Paul Nash counts. From what you’ve told me about his little ceramic figurine obsession, he’s giving off the creeper vibes big time.” She picked absently at the white paint splatter on her tank top. “I need to shower first,” she said. “I’ll try not to use up all the hot water.”

“I’m not going,” Mars angrily repeated. Meister let out an agreeing meow, his fat body purring against Mars’ shin.

“You could invite him along. I’ve suffered through worse company,” Natassia offered.

“He’s agoraphobic. He can barely leave the front step to pick up a newspaper, there’s no way he could be convinced to go to a bar.”

“It’s not a bar, it’s a nightclub, and it’s only across the street. If he has that much trouble leaving this building, I can construct a tunnel out of parachute material and chicken wire. We could connect him to the rest of the block that way. They’d be like portable hamster tubes.”

“You are such an ass,” Mars shot at her. “I don’t know how you can be so damned comfortable with all of this. It’s only been a week since we’ve been female, and personally, I’m not adjusting to the concept as easily as you are. Physically and emotionally, everything does feel more whole to me, somehow, but the methodology by which it happened is still deeply disturbing to me. I can’t just let run with it like you are. I need to know the why of it, or I’ll never find peace.” Mars fixed herself a cup of hot tea, her spoon cracking against the sides as she furiously stirred in a teaspoon of sugar. “Besides, you’ve never needed me to accompany you to a bar before. What’s so different now?”

“It’s a night club,” Natassia pouted. She rested her chin in her hand, wondering how much she should tell her sister. The vase of flowers she’d brought up with her to the apartment was the only injection of happy colours in the subdued environment. Bright purples and yellows and pinks, with little dots of white baby’s breath. She pulled on one of the tiny buds, the minuscule flower dry between her forefinger and thumb. “This guy Charlie is coming along with us. He lives in the building.”

Mars raised a brow, and Natassia fought the urge to swipe her eye out. “The harbinger of those flowers, I assume. I met him on the stairs this afternoon. He was quite out of breath, as though he’d been running.”

“He left them at my door,” Natassia said, dreamily, her mood cheered the more she concentrated on the bright hues of the flower petals. “That was so sweet.”

Meister leapt up onto the couch beside her, the happy aura surrounding Natassia rubbing off on his usual grumpy attitude. He plucked at the sheet covering the couch, his paws kneading the lumpy springs, his ample butt touching Natassia’s thigh as he set upon her with a deep, vibrating purr. “I’ve never been on the receiving end of someone’s pursuit before. I rather like it.” She scratched Meister behind the ears, sending the cat into paroxysms of furiously purring and drooling joy. He flopped onto his back, his arms and legs akimbo as she rubbed the wide mound of his belly. “His name is Charlie. Charlie Weiss. He lives on this floor, just two down from you, apartment #408.” Her soft lips curled into a secretive, sultry smile. “He must have snuck out and ran up to my flat on his lunch break. Didn’t say one word to me about it, the cheeky little sneak.” Her smile broke into a highly personal grin.

Mars was not so enamoured with the idea. She pulled her grey sweater close around her, warding off the chill she herself was responsible for. “This doesn’t feel right to me. The man I met on those stairs seemed balanced enough, but there is the issue of his strange suit—”

“It’s a uniform,” Natassia quickly interjected. “He’s forced to wear it for work.”

“No one is forced to do anything, least of all stay in a dead end job managing a third rate discount electronics store.”

Natassia bristled at this. “I’ll have you know he’s not the manager.” Then, her pride in her person of interest slightly deflated. “He’s a sales clerk. But he does have a lot of responsibility, so don’t look at me like that.”

“And just how am I looking at you?”

“Like you’re thinking he’s some sort of weird bug that you have to shake outside. At least he manages to leave his front door every morning, and head out into the world. I don’t see your fascinating little specimen doing that!”

Natassia flopped back onto the couch and pouted, knowing well this conversation was getting her nowhere. Though it was true that the Event that rendered them sisters instead of brothers had cured of them of their usual apathy towards each other, this invasive, concerned judgement on each others’ lives was an unwelcome side effect. To Mars, Charlie was nothing more than a working drone, a man without prospects, or ambition. She wouldn’t see the subtleties of his position, the level of responsible care he took in keeping both his sales staff and the public at large safe. It was on the tip of her tongue to start bragging about how Charlie, with his own self taught genius, had once managed to diffuse a miniature atomic reactor that had shown up with a shipment of old Russian Geiger counters, but she wisely kept this information to herself, knowing it would cause more conflict rather than heal it.

But her sister surprised her, giving her a resigned, long suffering sigh rather than a long lecture. Natassia was happy to accept it as an alternative. “Fine. You think this guy is special. I can’t see it myself, but I trust you’ll be able to tell me why in due course.”

“I can tell you now,” Natassia eagerly replied, her legs curled under her on the couch, her knees bouncing happily, her sudden joy earning her a dirty look from Meister, who padded in disgust out of the living room and into the bedroom for some peace from all this exuberant human emotion. “I met him before the Event. I was pinging pennies off his car, and setting off the alarm and—”

“Of course,” Mars replied, her voice dour. “You’re responsible for that nightly row.”

“His car alarm’s busted now, so don’t get pissy,” Natassia replied. “As I was saying, we were already acquainted with one another, which made my day at Boxworth Electronics at least bearable. The owner hated my work, he was a real prick about the design and he wanted his money back and threatened to sue me. Don’t worry, he’s got short term memory loss and he forgot who I was ten minutes after his abusive tirade. It’s very uncomfortable seeing a jackass falter like that. You want to feel sorry for him, but it’s the disease you end up pitying since his soul is downright putrid.” An important point nagged at Natassia, her concern edging out her excitement. “He’s still driving on the highway, can you believe it? Forgetful road rager. Makes me glad I don’t own a car.”

“You don’t even have your license,” Mars nagged at her. She fussed over the kettle at her kitchen stove. “Do you want tea or coffee?”

“Tea. Darjeeling. The organic packet I left here, it’s in the freezer to keep it fresh.”

“Are you sure that’s Darjeeling? Meister went nuts the last time I brewed it. I swear it’s cut with catnip.”

Natassia ignored her sister's distracted observation. With one rustle of the packet, Meister came running out of the bedroom, his fat belly whomping on the floor in excited, junkie glee. "So you can imagine how low I was feeling about my work. I mean, here I am, an out of work artist getting gainful employment by word of mouth alone, already misunderstood by the masses, or at least rag mags like *The Weekly Weird*, and here's this bloated, eggplant faced jerk telling me I'm no Picasso because I refused to use a paint by numbers set to create his damned sign. I put my heart and soul into everything I create." She punched a tight fist lightly at her heart, accentuating every syllable. "Ev-er-y-thing." She took the cup of tea offered to her with angry satisfaction. "The world is full of colour blind twats."

"I take it Charlie isn't colour blind, then," Mars said. She sipped at her tea, Meister meowing furiously at her feet.

Natassia's face took on a dreamy expression. "There I was, stomped and smeared on the heel of an uncaring, narrow minded universe like some shred of dog shit destined to be wiped off on a stretch of well manicured lawn."

"What is wrong with you?" Mars chided Meister, who was now rolling around her legs and plucking at her trousers in want.

"Then, there he was. Charlie. After Mr. Boxworth left, he's standing there in front of my masterpiece, quiet and thoughtful as you please, his head cocked to one side, studying it intently." Natassia blinked, her eyes glassy from the emotional memory. Mars remained unmoved, a fact that irritated her sister. "He says, just plain out raw and honest: 'I like it'."

Mars took another sip of tea. The quiet pause cleared the air of all pretence. "I get it," she said, her smile leaning to one side. "He touched a nerve."

Natassia was suddenly uncomfortable at her choice of words. "Yeah. I guess so." She glanced up at her sister, and then quickly looked away. "You could say he touched a lot more than that."

"What do you mean?"

"I kind of let him feel me up in the shipping and receiving dock. Geez, for an electronics geek he sure knows how to work his hands. For fuck's sake just stop with the gaping dead fish mouth, will you, he didn't get beyond second base!" Natassia paused over her cup of tea, instantly reflective. "Though, I admit, I would have given him a homer if he wasn't so freaked out by the whole 'I'm a virgin' thing. I thought that would be a marketable point, but no go. All full stop flop after that. I hope the virgin issue doesn't disqualify me as a slut, because that would really put a kink in my social life."

Mars carefully placed her cup on the kitchen counter, and Meister managed to wrangle his way up next to the discarded tea, his tongue eagerly lapping up the now lukewarm liquid. Mars paid him no heed, her thumb and forefinger pressed tight on the bridge of her nose, her eyes closed in mental imagery she did not want to possess. "I really shouldn't be surprised," she said.

"I don't get the big deal. So what if I let him cop a feel, it's my prerogative, right? I can screw whoever I want, whenever I want. I'm a feminist, after all. Camille Fucking Paglia, that's me."

"'Feminist' and 'slut' are not interchangeable terms," Mars said.

"You're just jealous because you've been too chicken to try out your feminine mystique."

The cup of tea was overturned, splashing the counters and the ceramic flooring with sticky, lukewarm Darjeeling. "Dammit, Meister!"

"We're going to The Underground. I told him we'll meet him there after he gets off work at nine. Wear something with some indecent cleavage, it'll do you good. It's ladies night, tonight, and you know what that means." She gave her sister a wink that suggested lewd times were ahead.

Mars was dumbstruck by the chaos around her. She stood silent and helpless as Meister lapped the last drops of tea at her feet.

“Ladies night?” Mars repeated, fear oozing through every pore of her being.

“Hello-o?” Natassia said, impatient with her sister’s terrified confusion. “Free shots until ten!”

“Free shots...”

“What the hell else would it be? I’m not sending you into a S&M mosh pit or anything. Honestly, you think the worst of me.”

“I can’t.” Mars tried to interject, but Natassia refused to hear her. She headed for the shower, the water running full force to drown out any other protest her sister would try to impose. Sure, she could go to The Underground on her own, but there was little fun to be had when she knew her sister would be home, alone as usual, shoved deep inside of a medical book instead of living her new life. She was determined that Mars would have one, even if it meant dragging her into a dive of a night club kicking and screaming.

## episode fourteen: skatelites



The Underground was a sweaty, poorly lit fire trap that served watered down beer and stale nacho chips. It was the former Nathan’s favourite hang-out. Mars sipped at her lukewarm tequila sunrise with mixed emotions. Disgust, yes, that was certainly lurking within her consciousness, but the music wasn’t half bad, if not too loud for her tastes. She sipped at the drink again, getting only the barest hint of alcohol from every mouthful.

She had to give Charlie credit. He wasn’t keen on The Underground either. He sat at their table, hands nervously clasped and pumping on the surface in a rhythm that didn’t quite jibe with the music blaring out of the massive stereo speakers. He had come here straight after work, his rumpled blue polyester suit and his striped tie weirdly acceptable among the geek grunge crowd that collected here. Mars poked at the tiny paper umbrella with her thumb, a bright red cherry speared through its heart thanks to the toothpick handle. She took another sip of her drink, and could have sworn the lingering aftertaste of rum molecules.

“So,” she said, nodding in near mute conversation with Charlie. “Where’s my sister?”

“I don’t know,” Charlie said, anxiously scanning the thick crowd that bobbed up and down on the dance floor, strobe lights obscuring all faces and distinguishing characteristics, revealing only lean

silhouettes in the dark. “She said she was getting another shot.”

“That was half an hour ago,” Mars shouted to him.

She wasn’t worried. She knew her brother Nathan well enough, and figured as a sister, Natassia had the same predilection for wild, attention seeking outbursts set to ignite the place ablaze with chaos. What was strange was that Charlie Weiss, only having known her sister for a brief amount of time, also understood this facet of her personality, and it clearly disturbed him. He punched lightly at the table with his clasped hands, a praying fist matched with anxious greyish blue eyes helplessly scanning the crowd once again, disappointment shadowing them when his search came up empty. “Maybe I should look for her,” he offered.

Mars shrugged. “She’ll turn up.”

A riotous scream of glee suddenly erupted near their table, and Natassia flopped onto her back on top of it, an unknown male with a shaved head and a tattoo of a monster tearing out of his skull nuzzling her stomach. She giggled and pushed him off, her tank top pushed to the limit of obscene, her bare midriff offered to Charlie like an evening pub meal. “Jell-O shot!” she shouted at him, and collapsed in giggling madness at the very concept.

“Friend of yours?” Charlie asked, too quietly, the sweet green goo melting on Natassia’s stomach pointedly ignored.

“The bartender’s cousin,” she said, as though this should have been obvious. Charlie refused the offering of her belly button, a fact that irked her. Natassia turned on her sister, who was not at all happy to be dragged into the conflict. “Oh, what a trip, he’s jealous! No one has ever been *jealous* before!” Natassia’s giggles were as irritating as Meister’s demands for food. She turned on her side, her wide grin for Charlie alone. “Would you beat him up for me if you had to? A mano et mano, full out, machismo brawl all Carmenesque and fatal?”

“That depends,” Charlie coldly replied.

“On what?”

“On whether you’re worth fighting for.”

Mars was liking Charlie more and more. She swallowed back her approving smile with a long sip from her drink. Grenadine. Definitely a hint of it lurking there, beside the ice cube.

Natassia sat up, her scowling face betraying the sudden change in her party mood. Behind them, the dance floor continued to pump, ignorant of Natassia and her sticky green goop stomach and her clenched fists and furrowed brow. “That’s a shitty thing to say,” she said to Charlie.

“You were the one who invited me here,” Charlie said, his voice even. Cold. “I suppose it was foolish of me to think you were a woman with a set of values, especially after what happened in the storeroom, but still... You possess such a raw, unique intelligence, and it was this that I hoped was going to bring us together tonight. The bump and grind of flesh is simple enough, but to really delve into human understanding, there has to be that soul connective that doesn’t come about through physical contact alone.” He placed his hand on her knees, which were straddled before him as she sat on the edge of the table. “The woman I met today always has a clear vision of why she makes every decision. She is observant of the details of her environment.”

“She’s sitting right here,” Natassia said, her pose sultry and provocative.

“How can I be sure?” Charlie asked, his voice more thoughtful than flirting. “You could be an imposter. A shuffled side-track of who she is supposed to be at this moment. I’ll need proof. Tell me, you beautiful woman, what is the appeal of this place for you?”

“It’s filthy,” Natassia said, without hesitation. “It’s nasty and sweaty and full of the piss of human life. It’s a distiller, isn’t it, all that pounding music and garbage booze, and cheap thrift store clothes. What’s left after you mop all that up is the pure expression of human desire. Pulsing. Wanting. Needing.”

“Finally, I’ve found her,” Charlie said, Natassia’s lips just inches from his own, teasing attraction preventing her from taking exactly what it was she wanted. “It’s good to meet you again, Natassia.”

“Oh, I get it,” Natassia purred. She rolled her eyes and slightly pulled away. “You don’t want to have a go. You just want a fucking chat.”

She peered over her shoulder at her sister. Mars gave her bored wave. “He wants to talk,” Natassia repeated.

“Seems a reasonable request.”

“It’s not,” Natassia pouted. “I thought I was through with that shit forever! All those years, wasting my time talking some piece into lowering their standards enough to come home with me, or at least make them pity me enough to offer a discount.” Frustrated with what she’d perceived as a lack of progress, she gave Charlie a pinched frown and resigned herself to romantic defeat. “Look, do you want to get in my pants or don’t you?”

“Of course I do, but I’m afraid I’m not an easy lay,” Charlie evenly replied.

“Aw, come on,” Natassia whined. “This isn’t fair.”

“What isn’t fair is me being stuck babysitting your new ‘boyfriend’ while you go and discover your brand new horizons.” Mars took another long sip of her drink, surprised by how the weak mixture made her voice slur. “Frankly, Charlie, if I were you, I’d run for the nearest exit. When it comes to finding trouble, Natassia has a damned good track record.”

“You are such a jealous bitch!” Natassia hissed.

“Did she tell you about her dead neighbour?”

“Oh no you don’t, you vicious slag!”

“I heard about it,” Charlie said, oddly unconcerned. “I can’t say I’m surprised. You’re both still new to Crescent Manor. I’ve been there for five years now, and I can tell you that events like that are pretty common. You have to understand, the building has a resonance. It’s like a fine tuner for repairing notes that have gone awry.”

He was making no sense. Leave it to her sister to pick up some schizotypal freak and call him her soul mate. Mars raised a brow and finished off the last of her tequila sunrise. A perverse need to be cruel was coursing through her, an emotion she hadn’t explored before and which served a strangely vengeful satisfaction. “So, Charlie Who Isn’t Store Manager—Tell us a bit about yourself. I’m sure it will be a revelation to my sister as well, since the only coherent thing she’s managed to say about you is that you have a talented touch. That might be enough for her, but I’m not into a surface understanding. I’ve had the unfortunate experience of taking that path before, and it resulted in a ruined Bunsen burner and a dead mathematics professor. Thus, you can understand my prodding inquiry.”

“I hate it when you’re hammered,” Natassia quipped.

“I could really use another one of these,” Mars admitted, pushing her empty drink away. She waved over a gloomy looking server, two fingers held up. “Two more tequila sunrises! One for me, and one for Charlie—Who isn’t the manager of Boxworth Electronics.”

“I don’t drink,” Charlie tried to protest, but the happy beverage was plunked in front of him, a tiny blue umbrella broken in half and clinging to life on the dew of the glass. He pushed it towards Natassia who

eagerly accepted the offer. The blue umbrella was tucked into the breast pocket of Charlie's ugly, school boy store uniform. "You're not alike at all for twins," he observed. "It's like you weren't born in the same family, let alone the same womb. Managing these vast differences in personality between you must be very challenging. It's amazing how close you are...I would have suspected you'd have drifted apart by now, only experiencing each other's lives as obligations rather than empathy."

Both Mars and Natassia were shocked into silence at this, the unspoken spookiness of how he'd figured out their life before the Event casting an eerie pall over the evening. Second guessing his choice not to drink, Charlie took Natassia's tequila sunrise in his hand and downed a good mouthful. "Watered down to homeopathy," he said, shaking his head. "You'd need at least four of these to get properly drunk."

"I've had five," Mars clarified.

"Believe it or not, my goal in life was not to become a sales clerk at Boxworth Electronics," Charlie said, his innate pride shaming Mars for her blatant judgement. "I wanted to fly planes, like my father did. He was a commercial airline pilot." He poked at the umbrella stuck on the side of his glass, the blue tissue paper tearing. "My father died of heart disease when I was very young, and I was raised by my mother and my aunt. I had good grades in school, but the public education system was more a hindrance than a help to my extra-curricular learning. I was kicked out of my final year of high school when I fashioned a car that could be run on urine. The principal refused to see my evidence, choosing instead to focus on the method of how I obtained the fuel, which had become a far more disturbing story by the time it trickled through the adolescent grapevine and met him. I had to obtain my GED through correspondence after that. "

"High school sucks," Natassia agreed.

"After getting expelled, I didn't feel the need to pursue my education through the usual angles. I've continued my studies independently, my knowledge not funded by conventional means, but it is necessary nonetheless." He played with the tiny blue umbrella at his breast pocket, opening and closing it reflectively. "Mr. Boxworth is very careless over his purchases for the store. Every now and again, there's an accidental bomb shipment. I've diffused several, each one resulting in an ample hush money cheque from Homeland Security. Being a sales clerk for Boxworth Electronics may not be a glamorous career, but it does have its lucrative side."

Through her inebriated haze, Mars couldn't help but wonder if Charlie was playing with a full deck. Mental health issues notwithstanding, he did have a bizarre hold on her sister's expectations, Natassia perched on the table in front of him, balanced with her fingers lightly teasing the circumference of his shoulders. The unspoken intimacy of attraction was unrepentant between them, and Mars couldn't help the slight sensation of jealousy that shot through her at this. As her male self, navigating relationships had been a haphazard, half-formed affair. Passion had never been a part of it, even with the injection of murder.

A rousing rendition of Happy Marriage by The Specials erupted from the speakers, but the crowd was aloof from its reggae inspired social commentary, a fact that scandalized Natassia. "I love this song!" she exclaimed, frowning at the crowd that dispersed from the dance floor to gather in groups over drinks. "What the hell is wrong with these people?"

"At least they're finally playing something worth listening to," Charlie added.

"You like The Specials?"

"Actually, Bad Manners are my favourite, but yes. I'm Old Skool Ska all the way."

"Hardcore," Natassia teased and punched him playfully on the shoulder. She plucked the blue toothpick umbrella he was still playing with and placed it between her teeth. It was a happy blue starburst against



her grin. "I wore out the grooves to my Madness albums when I was eighteen."

"Another true believer. I knew there was a reason we found each other like we did. The resonance of the universe is finally coming back into alignment, and how telling it is that the simple chords of a ska song is the mechanism that makes it happen."

Mars took this opportunity to grab her coat and slip it on. Natassia and Charlie were now fully engulfed in their own universe, one which all outsiders, and presently Mars was one. She mouthed to her sister that she was heading home, and got the barest nod of acknowledgement as a reply. Charlie gave her a friendly wave good-bye, and quickly turned his focus back on Natassia.

It was rather touching to note that despite his hard to get stance earlier he was obviously captivated. Her bohemian sensibilities no doubt melded well with his own independent pursuits of knowledge. How much truth to his claims remained to be seen, but considering how their lives had been affected these past two weeks, Mars would have believed him if he'd told her he was a secret KGB operative working under Elvis Presley's instruction. The universe had already proven itself to be that fluidly random.

The cold air bit into her as she stepped outside, the encroaching threat of winter letting itself be known. She pulled her beige trenchcoat tight around her, the lapels held high around her neck. The cold crept into every facet of her being, through to the marrow of her bones and with a damp, icy touch upon her soul. Her shivering wore off any remnants of inebriation, sobering her in more ways than one. As she quickly crossed the street and approached the front steps of Crescent Manor, she had the sudden, inexplicable urge to knock on Paul Nash's door and request admittance. It was only nine-thirty in the evening, an hour that most normal adults would consider early enough to allow company. Surely there could be no harm in walking in, avoiding the main stairs and giving his imposing, closed door a steady rap or two to alert him to her presence. The worst that could happen would be his anger at her imposition. Then again, he was unpredictable, and the altercation could quickly turn physical. He could grab her, by the shoulders. He could press her against the hallway wall, his face inches from her own, ice blue eyes melting in fury. He might dig those strong hands of his forcefully against her hips and...

Better to stop right there, Mars reasoned, the winter chill officially banished with lusty embarrassment.

She stepped into the building, her steps quick and determined, her folly pushed aside as she headed for the main staircase which she would tiredly ascend to her fourth floor apartment. She paused, however, near the broken elevator, a glance over her shoulder at Paul Nash's door. A sliver of light leaked out from beneath it, like an invitation. He was still awake, it beckoned. He'll answer the door if you knock on it. Mars steadied her nerves and took two steps towards his door, her mind full of Natassia's insistence over how she should take full advantage of her new form, how she should throw away her former cold resistance to human contact. She felt a rush of heat creep up her neck, reddening her resolve. Foolish, really, for what shame was there in just knocking on someone's door? She nervously clenched her hand into a fist, and raised it to knock.

"Good evening, dearie. Just the person I was wanting to see!"

The elderly Bonnie MacDonald smiled sweetly at Mars, oblivious to how she'd ruined the moment. Her lipstick was a foul shade of bluish purple, one more common for corpses than human beings. She grinned, her tea stained dentures giving her a further zombie appearance. "To be honest, dearie, I was expecting you. I have a sense about these things, you see."

Did she sense that she'd prevented Mars from forging an extremely unhealthy but possibly fascinating, passionate new relationship? Mars tried to refrain from feeling bitter about the setback, and the smile she gave Bonnie was strained. Bonnie, being the perceptive, nosey soul she was, instinctively caught on to Mars' discomfort, and used it to her full advantage. "He paces about at all hours of night," she

said, nodding at the shadows going back and forth through the shaft of light beneath Paul Nash's door. "A real restless spirit, that one. Take it from me, you don't want some haunted man in your life. They'll cause you no end of trouble."

It was on Mars' lips to tell Bonnie she didn't need unasked for advice, either, but the old woman was so sweet and harmless in her concern that her initial annoyance ebbed. Bonnie wrung her hands, her sweet, cookie-baking, granny face beaming with unspoken news. "You were wanting to talk to me?" Mars gently reminded her.

"Oh!" Bonnie said, throwing up her hands. She tutted herself, shaking her head from side to side. "Not the sort of thing I should be forgetting, either, but as it always is in this place, it only reveals those secrets it's willing to let go. Now, rumour has it, you have an interest in apartment #220..."

"How did that rumour get started?" Mars asked, shooting a dirty look at Paul Nash's door.

"Don't you mind how, the only thing of import, dearie, is that it's true." Bonnie's original friendly manner was now stern. She reached into the deep pocket of her bright purple sweater and dangled a set of keys before her. "A personal favour from Mr. Gain," she proudly proclaimed. Then, with more anger than she perhaps intended. "I offered to waive him fixing that leaking tap in my shower for these keys. Grave sacrifices have been made." She handed them to Mars, eyeing them longingly. "I only have them until the morrow."

"What are you suggesting?" Mars asked, mildly scandalized. "That we break and enter into that poor dead man's apartment?"

"Oh pish!" Bonnie MacDonald exclaimed. She ushered Mars towards the stairs, her round, stout body a surprisingly strong force of will. "It ain't break and enter if you've got a bloody key!"

## **episode fifteen: reflective surfaces**



Natassia never returned to her flat since that fated night, as evidenced by the yellow shards of police tape that had drifted in front of her door. She would have preferred to be alone in this adventure, but the plucky Bonnie MacDonald was not one to be left out of the loop, and she toddled behind Mars, chatting cheerfully and dispelling any remaining eerie feelings. At least, that was the hope. Even with Bonnie's animated speech, the hallway seemed to increase in darkness as they approached apartment #220, the

horror that had happened within fresh on both their memories.

“I heard he was beat to a bloody pulp,” Bonnie MacDonald said, tsking over the shame of it. “A right mess to clean up, I’ll bet it was. Never did see a cleaning crew go in. I’m suspecting the place still be right ripe.”

“A pleasant thought,” Mars sardonically replied. She hesitated as she poised the skeleton key at the lock, remembering the uncomfortable feeling she’d had during that first encounter with the apartment and its owner. Bonnie stood expectant beside her, and Mars had to wonder how good the elderly woman’s health was, and if she could stand the shock of what they might encounter when the door was flung open. “Are you sure you can handle this?” Mars asked.

“Give over and give us that key, we be waiting until Doomsday if ye don’t get cracking!” Bonnie tore the key from Mars’ reluctant grip and quickly opened the lock without effort, her fat foot shoving the door wide open. “At my age, death is as ordinary as the common cold. If I get a fright fit to kill me, what does it matter? ‘Least I’m going onward with a bang.”

The inside of the apartment was opaque, the grey area at the front door receding quickly into an inky black darkness that sucked in all light, absorbing it within its muffled expanse. Bonnie didn’t hesitate, her shuffling steps going in ahead of Mars, shaming the younger woman’s feeling of fear. “Dark as a grave in here,” Bonnie cheerfully observed. A bright shaft of light erupted throughout the apartment, the round, spotlight glow finding the wall of mirrors, their reflective surfaces shooting the light back on itself in a violent ricochet. “Will you look at that. Even with a flashlight you can’t see a thing.”

Mars flicked on the living room switch, bathing the gloomy contents of the apartment in light. “They don’t shut off the power to an apartment just because it sits empty,” Mars reminded Bonnie. Bonnie grumbled a Gaelic expletive and pocketed her flashlight in the deep cavern of a pocket in her knitted purple sweater.

“Never you mind me,” she said, patting the lump the flashlight created in her pocket with her pudgy palm. “Just a curious old lady, is all.”

Mars suspected there was far more to this, but she didn’t press the point. Instead, she walked around the circumference of the apartment, doing her best to appear nonchalant in the proximity of the strange wall of mirrors. Cleaning crews had managed to get in, for the place was spotlessly clean, with a faint scent of lemon household cleaner permeating the air. Bonnie’s easy going attitude was a feat Mars herself hadn’t yet cultivated, especially since the odd, reflective wall had taken on such sinister implications due to the events that took place here. Two men dead, one mangled beyond recognition and the other sprouting organs like an inward lawn overtaken by parasitic weeds. She couldn’t help the small shudder of disgust that coursed through her at the memory, the sickening image of mutated cells as seen through her microscope reminiscent of a virus. A feeling of alarm suddenly erupted through her, and she had to wonder if she had hit upon an important discovery. Both herself and her former brother had been affected by the Event that had started here, and had grown into an outright transformation of their realities. Bonnie, sweet and irritating as she was, couldn’t possibly be immune to the effects still malingering here.

“We should leave,” Mars said. But Bonnie was busy.

“In all my years, have you ever seen such a thing?” she said, staring at the mirrored wall in rapt wonder. She dared to touch one of the frames, and Mars leaned forward, her hand firmly on Bonnie’s fat wrist.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she said. “You shouldn’t touch anything in this place, we don’t know if the police are finished with it yet.”

“Oh, they’re done with it, dearie, that I know to be fact. Wouldn’t have had a cleaning crew in otherwise. I don’t know what they figured out, but I’ve never seen the lot of them so hush-hush and nervous. Simple murder makes a copper right confident, it does, even if it’s ghastly. Those kinds of crimes are easy to place in the right category. Awful as it is, murder is simple. But what happened here—Ach, there be a whole torment of devils behind it, to be sure, and no copper likes dealing with the likes of the Unknowable.”

Mars was only half listening. Her mind finally caught up with what she was seeing, and its silent cry of horror reverberated thick throughout her soul, an echoing shudder that she forced down with a swallow, making her throat hurt at the constrained effort. “The mirrors,” she whispered, her voice harsh in the empty space between herself and Bonnie MacDonald.

“Yes. Some sap’s version of art, I ken. Myself, I like my landscapes and pleasant scenery. A bit of the Thomas Kincaide, you can’t go wrong with that. I got a lamp at that big store just down the road from here—Boxer’s Something Or Other. Nice little picture of a cottage on the shade, though I’d think any normal gardener would have given it a proper pruning. It nae be good for a house to have vines choking the life out of it, and no one in their right mind keeps unattended candles burning, especially with all that wood laying about. Still, lovely bit of work. The man knows how to move a brush.”

Natassia would profoundly disagree with that statement, but right now her sister and her views on modern commercially mass produced art were muted by the vast impression before her. For while the mirrors had retained their original shapes, they had a far different arrangement. Every single mirror, from the smallest handheld vanity to the large window sized example was cracked. Some were so shattered the glass jutted out of the walls in spiky points, as though something had been thrown from within them, pushing the glass outward. Fearfully, Mars approached the wall, her hip grazing the coffee table in the middle of the room and sending the ancient Geiger counter crashing to the floor. The action turned the machine on, the readings it spontaneously emitted being higher than the numbers Mars had seen the first time she’d been shown them. She picked the Geiger counter up, its yellow surface flaking off bits of what at first glance was iron coloured paint, but Mars knew their real origin.

“Cleaned up the place quite a bit,” Bonnie said, cheerfully inspecting the outward jabs of glass that pierced the wall. She tested one with her fingertip and tapped on it with her nail. It remained rigid, as though this was how it was originally created, with the plaster surrounding it, and the red and black paint haphazardly covering the porous globs of white. She picked at a spot on the mirror next to it, more of that familiar iron red flaking onto her fingers and beneath her nail. “Didn’t get it all, though, did they? Shame. It can be a tough battle to find a proper housekeeper these days. Most don’t know what deep cleaning really means.”

Knowing the scene was described as a ‘bloodbath’, Mars figured the cleaning staff had done an exemplary job of bringing the apartment back into order, regardless of Bonnie’s unfair criticism. She carefully turned the Geiger counter off and placed it on the coffee table situated in front of the wall. The couch had long since been trashed, as had most of the other furnishings. There were some stains that bleach alone couldn’t cope with.

“A real nasty turn of events. Couldn’t be helped, I suppose,” Bonnie added. She tsked, and shook her grey head, her purple painted lips pressed into a firm line of disapproval. “A trapped spirit is a terrible thing. It’s a damn shame, it is. A real damned shame.”

Mars regarded Bonnie with a cool sense of detachment. Spirits? Her scientific outlook scoffed at the very thought, for though the actions that had happened here were certainly unexplained, there was no reason to instantly take on the influence of spooks and ghouls as being the answer. She crossed her arms and headed for the entrance to the apartment, the skeleton key dangling harmlessly in her grip. “I don’t think it’s that simple,” she ventured to say. Bonnie remained standing in front of the mirrors,

assessing them as if they were a newly found Picasso. “We need to leave,” Mars said.

“They pushed out, there’s no question of that,” Bonnie said, tutting over the issue. “Poor, blighted souls. But they got no business being here, and the bloody aftermath is enough to prove that.” She carefully inspected one of the mirrors, its circumference about as wide as her splayed, liver spotted hand. Chubby fingers ringed its edges, her palm sinking inward. “This one. It saw how it couldn’t live out here properly and so it dove back in. Left a real mess in its wake, though, poor soul.”

Mars frowned. She crept closer to Bonnie until she stood at the elderly woman’s side. Bonnie glanced questioningly at Mars and then removed her hand from the mirror she had just described. To Mars’ shock, Bonnie was right. Unlike the rest of the mirrors on the wall, whose cracked surfaces and broken shards jutted out, this small mirror’s injuries were strictly concave. She dared to touch its edges, and then the small dip within it. She pulled away, alarmed at the sudden resistance she felt on her fingertips. A cool breeze, sucking inward.

“What the hell is this?” she harshly whispered.

Bonnie stood beside her. She patted Mars’ hand in grandmotherly assurance. “It’s a hell that belongs to someone other than you and me, dearie,” she sweetly said. She smiled, purple lipstick giving her a corpse-like presence in the unsettling atmosphere of the apartment. “Mr. Paul Nash is a man full of trouble, and it’s a bad sort to go bringing it on innocent people like he is. Much as he tries to contain it, it’s leaking out. It’s going to take an intervention at some point, but right now the stupid sap thinks he can manage on his own. But we know better, don’t we, dearie?” She patted Mars’ hand again, cool, dry skin meeting Mars’ clammy fear. “Don’t worry. He’s got his eye on you, and that’s a start. We’ll find a way to get him to listen to reason, we will. There’s far more at stake here than his silly embarrassment.”

## **episode sixteen: fellow man**



The knock on her door wasn’t out of the ordinary. Natassia had made a point to let her know of her most recent progress with Charlie, most of which involved long, one-sided conversations about one thing: Charlie’s prowess as a self-educated genius.

“He showed me this program he developed on the internet that is designed to educate the average masses on the specific workings of quantum theory,” Natassia excitedly told Mars the night before. “It’s amazing!”

“Really?” Mars said. “Okay, I’ll bite. What do you now know about quantum physics?”

“Nothing. But that’s not the point. The point is, he made an amazing attempt to describe it, and the website really is mind-blowing. All these cool whirls and circles and amazing clicks and informative pop-ups, all accompanied by relevant, acid jazz in the background.” Natassia sighed, her mind lost in dreamier, loftier ideals than the annoying details of actually learning from the information presented to her. “I need a laptop.”

“You don’t even have a phone,” Mars reminded her.

“Charlie said he can custom design one for me,” Natassia said, ignoring her sister’s criticism. “Runs on a Debian base, with a his own personal spin on its construction. A fiercely independent platform so that I don’t have the risk of snooping IBM and Apple eyes peeking at my virtual fingerprints.”

“You’re just repeating what he said,” Mars observed. “You have no idea what he’s talking about.”

“That may be true, but I still need a computer,” Natassia pouted.

“Why? Your sign painting business seems to be taking off well without it. You’re the last of the oral traditionalists. Come on, Natassia, you have no desire to email or create some asinine profile of yourself on Facebook, which would leave you open to peer criticism, which by the way was one of the main reasons you left your position in New York in the first place.”

“Short sighted, apathetic automatons of spirit. Can you believe Shawna Goldstein—remember her? The art history professor who slept with her final year class as an art experiment?—She traded in her avante guard thigh high nudist nympho chic for two point five kids and a marriage to a financial consultant.”

“I’ve always been a fan of [Sister Wendy Beckett](#), myself,” Mars said. “Sex may sell, but there’s something to be said for quiet intelligence and unadorned expertise.”

“You are impossible to talk to,” Natassia whined.

That conversation clearly hadn’t deterred her, however, from knocking on Mars’ apartment door at ten o’clock in the evening, the familiar rat-a-tat-ratta rhythm sending Mars’ nerves on edge. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy her sister’s company, it’s that this every night business was becoming unbearably draining, especially since every conversation involved issues that revolved solely around Natassia, Charlie and the pervasive threat of Cold War paraphernalia and Charlie’s bravery in the face of its dismantlement. Exciting as it was the first time, the thrill of secreting away highly radioactive radon rods in Mr. Boxworth’s swimming pool was losing its subculture lustre. Mars’ continued issues of her invisibility at the hospital held no interest for Natassia, who reasoned that such powers had to be enviable since it cured Mars of the usual catty interaction with fellow female co-workers. “Make no mistake, women are bitches,” Natassia confidently told her, the proud judgement of her own words proving the point. “The Weekly Weird was chock full of them. That cow Dottie had no trouble at all chopping my balls off at first opportunity, and the rest of the office wasn’t much better. There was more gossip going on in that place than TMZ getting unshakable, exclusive proof that Tom Cruise is not only gay, but he’s also a furry.”

Discussion that most of Mars’ peers were male didn’t shake Natassia’s stance on the matter. She eventually gave up, realizing her own issues were as transparent to her sister as the looks she gained from fellow doctors and surgeons, whose only attention was for the magical discoveries on clipboards which emitted either shocked surprise or sage acknowledgement.

So, with this knocking on her door, Mars was resigned to spending yet another evening of cheerful exposition while she patiently drank herself into oblivion with a well masked highball of gin over ice. A special treat, one which she usually reserved solely for Thursday nights since she was off on Fridays. The last vestiges of her patience, however, had moved the cocktail hour up an extended couple of days.

She opened the door, plastering on a yawn which she knew would offer no hint to her excited, wide-awake sister. She paused in her pantomime of exhaustion, her mouth hanging open in a decidedly different expression.

“Ta-da!” Nathan, her brother said.

Nathan.

Her brother.

It couldn't be helped, in retrospect. Considering all that had gone on before, Nathan shouldn't have been surprised by his sister falling to the floor in a dead faint.

~\*~

Two highballs of gin and a spiked round of chamomile tea later, Mars was finally regaining her sense of reality. “So, if you're to be believed, which I seriously doubt, save for the obvious, physical proof, you have the ability to make a choice at will that no other human being on the planet is privy to.”

“Not without serious surgical intervention, no,” Nathan agreed. “Although, you could argue, and I sure as hell would, that simply making the choice itself is enough to sway the gendering of the mind one way over the other.”

“Complex sexual politics aside, the very fact you can choose when you never had an inkling to do so before and do so out of simple ability says a lot more about the irrelevancy of gender than its importance.” Mars' words were slightly slurred, and she poured herself another soothing cup of hot chamomile tea cut with a generous portion of grenadine. Nathan took it from her before she could take another sip.

“I'm not sure how I feel about all of this,” he admitted. “It's certainly put a whole new level of complicated onto my relationship with Charlie.”

“It's amazing,” Mars said, shaking her head in drunken wonder. “Even as a man you're an unbearable, smitten bore.”

“There's nothing boring about hitting a home run three times in a row, if you get my meaning.” He smiled in remembrance, the wistful look on his face rather creepy to Mars since she knew how, in painful unasked for detail, it got there. “Being a bird in the sack rocks the socks off of being a guy, especially when you get to know yourself, if you get my meaning.”

“I really don't want a translation,” Mars said.

“Doesn't matter. Right now, I'm a man, and Charlie's a man and... Well. The whole mood of the night is changed, because hot as I am for the guy when I'm sporting some knockers, I'm not feeling as deeply passionate for him with the trouser hose.” Nathan ran his palms through his short, black hair, his confusion evident. “It kind of sucks that I'm not at least bisexual. I've always thought of myself as open minded, and there's no reason why all the doors in there shouldn't be wide open after being on the opposite team as it were. It's weird. It's like my psyche is taking an evolutionary step backward.”

“Your predicament does give both the liberal and conservative populace an aneurysm.” She braced her palms on the kitchen counter, the apartment swaying slightly as she fought to remain standing. “What does Charlie make of all this shifting of ideals?”

“He doesn't think anything of it because he doesn't know about it,” Nathan quickly replied. He

collapsed in a defeated heap on Mars' couch, Meister giving him a yawn which morphed slowly into an ear-flattened hiss. He gave Nathan a confused swat and then ran off the couch to hide in the bathroom, no doubt marking the bathmat with yet another frustrated opinion on this matter of his humans changing into different humans without his permission.

"Charlie's an open minded sort," Nathan said, but it was clear he was unsure of his own words as he spoke them, his fingers digging into the holes Meister had plucked into the couch. "I'm going to test the waters with him tonight, when I pick up my laptop at Boxworth Electronics."

"Are you mad?" Mars exclaimed.

Nathan was instantly on the defensive. "I'm not going to plant a big wet one on him, if that's what you think. I'm introducing myself as Natassia's brother, is all. Back from a rollicking good time in Dubai, where I managed a casino and hobnobbed with the filthiest of the filthy rich. As far as Charlie is going to know, I've had Madonna more than once, and Brad Pitt was seething with jealousy."

"And yet you live with your sister because you can't afford the rent on a single room bachelor pad priced well below market value." Mars raised a brow. "I wasn't talking about how you're going to introduce your male self to Charlie, which has already, in my opinion, become a vehicle for your egotistical fantasizing. No, Nathan, my brother, I think it's insane that you're buying a computer from Boxworth Electronics."

Nathan remained still on the couch, his mind twitching in sync with Meister's tail, the tip of which flicked back and forth in irritation at this familiar interloper. He pulled his fat, round tabby body onto the couch with effort and regarded the return of Nathan with nothing less than open contempt. There was now a bathmat in the shower room with a new yellow stain on it, expressing his displeasure.

"Charlie custom built it for me," Nathan said, trying not to let his stewing anger bubble to the surface. "I told you before, he programmed a special operating system for it, customized to what I need."

"Your ignorance of the medium says a lot about how you're going to use it," Mars observed. "You can't just make a new operating system like you're mixing a whiskey sour. It's a difficult process, it took Windows and Apple years to develop sustainable operating systems." Mars paused, suddenly thoughtful. "Unless he's using a Debian/Linux base. You said something about that before."

"Nope," Nathan cheerfully said. "Charlie figured it was best to start from the atoms up. It's all 100% Weiss Warp. That's what he's calling it. Blocks all incoming snooping from ad sites, parasitic satellite receivers and spy agency hackers."

"And Charlie knows how to do this?"

"Of course he does! How the hell else could he have hacked his way through a dozen or so Soviet Elektronika PCs and turn them into cable descramblers?"

Mars gave Nathan a level glare. "Isn't stealing cable illegal?"

"Not if it's cable from India. Xenophobic providers are opening up a whole new niche."

"You realize, of course, that you're deflecting the issue."

"What issue?"

"The miracle of gender reassignment at will." Mars leaned against the kitchen counter, all fight drained out of her. Meister curled around her legs, purring loudly. He was hungry. As always, the cat considered his own needs first. "You're a wonder of science, Nathan. There is nothing more for it at present than to get your blood onto a slide and see what kind of party your DNA is having."

"It's not just my DNA we're talking about," Nathan said. He shrugged inwardly on the couch, his wiry



body tense with a fear he wasn't sure he wanted to relate. "Facts are, you're in the same boat as me. You just haven't flexed that muscle."

Mars frowned. "What muscle?"

"*The* muscle," Nathan said, his cheeks reddening in embarrassment, the explanation more pornographic than the reality. "You know, the secret one in that...area."

"What the hell are you talking about? I don't have any secret muscles!"

"Yes, you do," Nathan evenly replied. He leaned his head slightly to one side, not at all pleased to have to relay this information to his sister. "It's that, little muscle..You know...The one that's supposed to improve performance?"

Mars shrugged, not seeing the issue of why this was so difficult for Nathan to express. "Keigels?" she asked.

"Yeah. Those."

"If you knew what the muscle is called, why did you have such a hard time telling me about it? For God's sake, Nathan, I'm a doctor, it's not like I would be surprised by a human body part. Granted, at this point, if you walked in my door sporting horns and a fox tail I wouldn't be surprised by that either." The affects of alcohol were quickly evaporating, leaving her reflective and sober. "What exactly are you telling me?"

"You're the damned pathologist," an annoyed Nathan replied, his hands gesturing to his former, yet present, formation. "You tell me what this body of evidence suggests."

"Flexing a Keigel muscle did this?"

"Want to see it in action?" Nathan didn't wait for his sister's reply. In seconds he transformed in liquid ripples into the curvy lines of his female self, bones, muscle and sinews slipping easily into place like a three dimensional jigsaw. "It doesn't hurt," Natassia assured her. "Kind of like swimming, actually. Gives you this weird, rubbery feeling." She regarded Mars' reticence with impatience. "Look, I found out about it when Charlie and I were fooling around. It doesn't happen when you're in the middle of courting paradise, thankfully, but afterwards, in the shower, I was flexing the muscle a little, just to keep it in tune, and then voila—outie instead of an innie. Freaked me out, of course, because there's Charlie waiting for the big finish, and there I am in the shower not exactly being what he's in the mood for. So I flex it again, out of panic, and just like that, all the male is washed away and it's my gorgeous girl self left in his place."

Mars' mouth was dry with fear and curiosity. She crossed her arms, thinking on the situation with careful consideration. Changing genders couldn't possibly be as easy as Nathan was suggesting, as if she could just toss off this flesh she'd gotten used to for the past two and a half weeks and slip back into the old mould. It was like putting on a shirt that was inside out. The same structure was there, but the meaning was obscured. What she feared most, she realized, was not the random rearrangement of her gender, but the belief that slipping back into her old self would mean all progress they'd made in becoming whole would be eradicated.

"I don't feel any different," Nathan said, as though reading her thoughts. Perhaps he did, she mused. After all, that's what being a twin meant, having a closeness that others couldn't possibly understand or share.

"Okay," Mars said, standing tall in her kitchen, her hands braced on the dark marble counters on either side of her. "I'll give it a go."

Flexing the hidden muscle, as Nathan had called it, was not as difficult as Mars thought. The first time

nothing happened save a strange ripple of flesh across her back, but the second, more forceful pull brought her body into a rippling cascade of muscle and bone. As promised, the transformation wasn't painful, but it wasn't exactly pleasant, either, especially with the way the bones slid along her joints, clicking like well oiled hinges into place.

Mark pumped his hands open and closed, splayed fingers and fists, the knuckles popping with every effort. Meister, who had been curling around Mark's legs, swatted his shin, leaving an unpleasant scratch. He pressed his ears flat against his head, his serpent eyes regarding Mark with a furious glare of betrayal. Meister was a cat who liked his life uncomplicated. This whole business was set to drown the bathmat in feline ammonia.

"Sorry," Mark said, shrugging helplessly at the feline, who took off, once again, to give an example of his displeasure in the shower room. Mark rubbed at his arms, not at all sure of how solid he felt at present. The good news was that he didn't feel any different on an emotional level. The sensation of wholeness hadn't ebbed. The bad news was the realization that this new skill wasn't going to make one difference in his or her life. In either realm, Mark and Mars were both invisible entities in the world at large, which perhaps wasn't as bad as it seemed on the surface, since the experiences as of late had become so intensely complicated.

"I suppose Bonnie will be happy to see I'm back, seeing as how she's the only other person who remembers me," Mark said. Natassia gave her brother an understanding sigh.

"I wish you wouldn't keep switching back and forth like that. I'm only just getting used to this, you don't have to show off."

"Have you been back to that apartment since that night with Bonnie?" Natassia asked.

"No," Mark said, disturbed further by the subject that was, through some unexplainable mechanism, responsible for their current new set of skills. "I haven't seen her around, but I've been working twelve hour shifts for the past three days. She's a tenacious grey lady, though, so I doubt that's the last I'll see of her, or that damned apartment."

"Leave it to crazy old grans to get to the bottom of things," Nathan sagely observed. Moments stretched long between them, two brothers who had more connections now than they knew what to do with forcing their relationship into a compressed fusion of emotional atoms. "You never did tell me what you saw when you went in."

Mark could feel the blood drain from his face at the memory, his brother picking up on the unspoken, lingering terror.

"Never mind," Nathan said.

"The wall of mirrors," Mark said, unwilling to talk but knowing he had to. "Every mirror was smashed, but it wasn't like they were vandalized. There were shards sticking out of the plaster, like they'd been embedded there as part of the design." He chewed the side of his thumb, terror creeping on the periphery of his consciousness. "Bonnie says it's because of some spirit, smashing its way out, only to be forced back in. There was one mirror, a very small one, that had a concave shape. When I put my hand over it..." He held his breath. He bit down hard on his thumb, letting out a small cry as he accidentally drew blood. "There was this breeze. Cold, moving inward. A suction."

"Spirits, huh?" Natassia said. She stood up, smoothing down the wrinkles in her black jeans, her figure curvaceous and barely fitting properly into the unisex garb. "Creepy."

"Understatement," Mark added.

"I have to go," Natassia said, grabbing her sweater off the arm of the couch, its white surface littered

with black cat hairs. “I left Charlie sleeping back at the flat, and I don’t want him waking up without me there.” She paused, her arms halfway through the hairy white cardigan. “For the first time since I moved in, that flat’s been church quiet. Not a peep from next door, not even so much as a creak of the beams. I want to be relieved, but somehow the silence makes it horrible eerie.” She slid her cardigan on completely, the buttons loosely done up as she headed for the door. “You’re coming with me tomorrow,” she announced. “Charlie gets off at nine.”

“Why do I need to tag along?” Mark complained.

“I just need some back-up support,” Natassia quietly said, smothering Mark’s ill feelings on the matter with a layer of expected sibling kindness. “I know you don’t think much of him, but Charlie has become very special to me. I want to make sure all sides of myself are on the same page, do you get my meaning?”

Mark didn’t, but he shrugged an affirmative anyway. As the apartment door closed behind his sometime sister’s back, he could only wonder at the vast complications that had arisen in the expanse of an hour. On the ground floor, Bonnie had more than hinted that Paul Nash had some pretty big layers of his own.

To hell with Bonnie’s suggestion that his alternate, female self get closer. Right now, seeking more answers would only serve to drown them all in chaos. Mark, with his ordered sense of the universe, couldn’t bear another ripple on the smooth, placid lake that he fought to keep as his reality.

He took a sip of his chamomile tea, only to toss it in disgust. The grenadine was too strong, the tea too cold. Who was he kidding, he thought as he rinsed the mug in the steel sink. Even the smallest of details had turned against him.

## episode seventeen: Boxworth Electronics



The evening was uncomfortably chilly, and both Nathan and Mark entered Boxworth Electronics with shivering gratitude. Nathan had already scoured the grounds for Art Boxworth’s black Acura, and after finding nothing save Charlie’s beat up Toyota Corolla, a rusted motorcycle and an ancient Chevy in the store’s parking lot, he’d ushered himself and his brother into the store with near military purpose.

“Just act casual,” Nathan whispered to Mark.

Mark sighed, and rolled his eyes at the pointless attempt at subterfuge. “This isn’t a scene from *The Spy Who Loved Me*, Nathan. Although one could make an argument for *Kiss Of The Spider Woman* with that get up.”

“Black t-shirt, black jeans, black boots. What’s the problem? I’ve been wearing this for years.”

“You look like you’re part of a bomb squad. All you’re missing is the protective gear.”

“How would you know? Do you have some secrets that involve national interests that you haven’t discussed at length with me? I didn’t think so.” Nathan gave his brother’s uncomfortable slouch towards the counter a shove, nearly sending him into the discount 128MB flash drive display case. “It’s a fashion non-statement, you idiot.”

Mark shoved back. “You are so 1989, you emo minimalist.”

“Shut up.”

“*You* shut up.”

They were silenced, however, by the odd sensation that all was not well within Boxworth Electronics. Christmas carol musak sang through the speakers, coating the interior ambiance with a candy cane sweetness that made Nathan gag. While this in itself was disturbing enough, the music was only one layer of holiday cheer, which was, thanks to Hallowe’en being only a few days away, layered with a thick coating of nightmare inducing juxtapositions. Above the CD section, a large Santa Claus was sporting an axe through his head, his wound bleeding red tinsel. A huge stuffed Grinch was puking candy corn lights. In the distance, Rudolph was being picked apart by a hungry zombie wearing hunting gear. The piece de la resistance, however, was the massive cauldron situated in the centre of the store, the iron pot cooking up a half dozen or so elves as a green lit mist curled out of its confines. A large, hungry looking witch stirred them mechanically with a wooden ladle, the shocked elf arms and legs held high as they simmered in a merry green and red soup.

“Cool,” Nathan said.

“Interesting interpretation of the holidays,” Mark agreed. “A little something to piss off everyone. Well done.”

Charlie, who was at the sales counter, saw them both come in and he seized upon the opportunity to eagerly greet them since they were the sole customers of Boxworth Electronics.

“We close at nine,” he said, his expression one of pushy boredom. He crossed his arms over his chest and was instantly flanked on either side by sullen adolescent clerks who were in no mood to add customer service to their very small list of skills.

Mark was oblivious, his inner irony fairy still enamoured with the store’s decor. “Is that reindeer holding up an inverted cross?”

“We talked on the phone. I’m Natassia’s brother, I’m here to pick up her laptop.” Nathan gave Charlie’s quiet acknowledgement of this a forced edge. “Just got back from Dubai. Long trip. By plane. Couldn’t walk it of course, ha! Can’t rightly swim, either. Man, that Madonna can *snore!*” He pointed to an invisible seat beside him. “See, she was on the plane with me and she dozed off and, you know, slobber and snoring and snot. The woman’s a mess. Hasn’t been the same since she made nice with Lady GaGa.”

“So I hear,” Charlie said, his mouth a grim line. “Amazing, how you can be two places at the same time and yet never fully materialize in both.”

“Shit, he’s on to me!” Nathan hissed at his brother.

“I had better not see any marks on my car. Your penny pinging days are over.” The cold vibrations he sent in Nathan’s direction were downright unpleasant, and Nathan actually found himself fidgeting against the scrutiny.

“It was just a bit of fun,” Nathan tried to defend.

Charlie, for all his nerdy tendencies, was not willing to back down, as evidenced by the threatening finger he poked hard in the centre of Nathan’s chest. “No spare change. Bad enough you tried to come on to me—”

“I never!” Nathan shouted, and gave Mark’s amused raised brow a scathing glare. “You took me all wrong!”

“It doesn’t matter. As you’ve been made aware, I am now in a relationship with your sister. And since I already know you are an unbelievably trite jackass, I’m setting the ground rules before we even say more than a sentence fragment to each other. One—You are not to use Natassia’s flat for your metrosexual whoring.”

“I am not ‘trite’,” Nathan whined.

“Two—It would be nice if you cleaned up after yourself once in a while. Natassia never said anything about it, but I know you’re the reason the place looks like an episode of Hoarders Lite. Wash a dish once in a while and toss the trash. She’s a hard worker, and you’re just a layabout acting like she’s the dole queue. Which brings me to point three...”

“I’m enjoying this,” Mark admitted.

“Point three is—No money lending. You’re not bleeding Natassia dry. Don’t even bother trying me on with another stupid story about your plane trips from Dubai. If you ever bothered watching the news, you’d have realized the city is in serious economic trouble at present. A messy burst bubble if you ask me.”

“I certainly didn’t,” Nathan mumbled.

“Even if you had managed to scrounge together the funds to get on a plane and go halfway around the world, it seems to me you picked a very unprofitable time to do it. That says a lot about your ideas on financing.” He ignored Nathan’s silent glowering, leaving no room for an argument to arise. “Are we clear, then?” Charlie held out his hand, but Nathan stubbornly refused to shake it and Charlie was disappointed in his lack of sibling sportsmanship. “I’m dating your beautiful sister, like it or not, so you might as well get used to being civil to me.”

“I don’t know what she sees in you,” Nathan grumbled. He shook Charlie’s hand a little too long for his liking. “Beautiful, huh?”

“So what, exactly, are we picking up for her this evening?” Mark asked. His hands were deep in the pockets of his beige trenchcoat as he took in the merchandise on the shelves of the store. Low end netbooks and suspicious Kindle-esque knock-offs were the highest priced items, none of which broke the \$250 mark. Mark poked at one of the netbooks, expecting a Windows interface to hum back at him. He was surprised to find a very different screen light up, with odd, spherical icons in day-glo colours and swirling rings of alchemical numbers and lines.

Charlie motioned for Nathan to follow him, and he did so gleefully, casting a goofy grin over his shoulder at Mark, who was still soberly investigating the custom built computers on display. “I’ve got it all set up, all she has to do is turn it on. I’ll help her get an email account later, one that’s on my personal web server. Tell her not to go on any sites with Icelandic extensions, I’ve programmed all the security protocols for every country but that one. Volcanic ash wreaks havoc on sensors.”

“No Bjork. Got it.”

“Also, this computer is for her hands and eyes only. Don’t try to hack into it or use it without her specifically entering in the security over-rides. If you try to guess her password at log in, the computer

is programmed to eject a steady stream of flashing images guaranteed to give you a grand mal seizure.”

Mark was poised to press a button on one of the displayed netbooks and Charlie stopped him with a fierce grip on his wrist. “I wouldn’t do that,” he said, softly closing the netbook with a gentle click. “The last customer who tried to enter some gibberish into the log in page collapsed into a twitching foetal position for ten minutes and then crapped himself.”

Mark gave the store a serious once over. He turned back to Charlie as he finished his inspection. “You sell Hello Kitty dildos and dusty Beta players. I hate to sound like a killjoy in regards to your efforts at security, but I think even a moron would agree they are a tad excessive.”

“They sure are,” a pale Nathan agreed.

“There’s a few glitches I’ve yet to work out,” Charlie cheerfully replied. “Just don’t touch her computer,” Charlie reiterated. “Tell Natassia I’ll be by after I’ve finished my shift to help her get acquainted with the new technology. I want it to be a smooth integration.”

“I bet it will be,” Nathan said, his eyes following Charlie’s every move as he made his way to the back of the store. “Grand mal seizure. You don’t meet a guy with that kind of crazy passion every day—Hot damn, I can’t wait to get back into the girlsuit and get him back into my clutches.”

“Nathan,” Mark whispered to his brother when Charlie was well out of earshot. “I thought you said your interests when in this bodily format meant you didn’t have those kinds of leanings?”

“I don’t,” Nathan said, shrugging Mark’s observations off. “It’s the conceptual knowledge that’s turning me on.” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his tight black jeans, an uncomfortable posture betraying his inward battle. “It’s like waking up from a dream where you’re doing your best friend. It’s not your fault your subconscious decided to viciously rape you, but the imagery is hovering around in there, causing a serious case of the mentally awkward.”

Charlie had left them alone in the store as he entered the storage area where he’d kept Natassia’s laptop. Nathan wasn’t sure what to make of his inward ‘leanings’ as Mark had called them, and was doing his best to keep the feelings buried deep. Not closeted, he wasn’t that far gone, but damn, he had to wonder what it would be like if he dared to brush his lips on Charlie’s shoulder. His palm still itched with the imprint of Charlie’s hand in his, and it had taken effort not to pull him closer. There was no way he was telling his brother about this sudden, unexpected proclivity, and it was not one he was comfortable in exploring, either. What it did signify was a new problem he had to navigate, that being how he was going to keep his paws off of Charlie when his girlfriend Natassia couldn’t be around.

The low end plasma TVs on display were turned on by the two pimple-faced youths who now merely occupied space in the store while a third quietly locked the front doors to prevent any further unwelcome customers from invading their now private arena. A familiar scene from Nathan’s favourite movie lit up on all five of the fifty inch screens, displaying a very young Margot Kidder spelling out the word fellatio with amused accuracy.

“Black Christmas!” Nathan exclaimed. One of the youths turned and gave him a bored eye before turning back to the screen. Charlie emerged from the storage room, the laptop carried in his arms and brought to the cash desk. “This is my favourite movie!” Nathan shouted to him. “Mine and Natassia’s too. Margot Kidder is the hottest chick on the planet.”

“This movie was made in the seventies. I think she’s a little old for you now. Not to mention that psychotic break she had a while back. Not exactly girlfriend material.”

“Mark, you are such a literal jerk,” Nathan said, shaking his head at his brother’s narrow mindedness. “You know as well as I do that Margot Kidder was being pursued by CIA operatives who understood

that the implanted microchips they put in her fillings back in the early eighties were malfunctioning. They had helicopters scouting her out and everything. She escaped a sanatorium and her friends detoxed her with homeopathic solutions that rendered the government's monitoring systems useless." Nathan watched a few more scenes of the film with a sense of celebrity pride. "Even if you don't believe what I just said, you have to admit she's ballsy for taking care of her own issues, no matter how terrifying it must have been. You can't box that kind of crazy kick ass."

Nathan grabbed the remote and fast forwarded the film to the infamous turtle sex scene. Behind him, the cash register rattled with change. "That'll be \$450," Charlie said.

"Pay the man," Nathan said to Mark.

"What?"

"Pay him. Look, you can't expect poor Charlie to get a laptop for me for completely \*free\*. He's only making ten fifty an hour."

Mark pulled out his wallet with an angry huff. "I get it," he furiously replied. "This is the only reason you wanted me to tag along."

"Starving artist with fledgling sign painting company, remember? Funds are a little low at present, but don't worry, I'm good for it." He laughed and pointed to the large plasma screen. "Man, it's hard to watch Andrea Martin without remembering her SCTV days. And look at how hunky Art Hinkle is. Oh, check it out! Obligatory hockey rink scene, and yet this sucker's supposed to be set in America. In case you didn't get the hint, there's the American flag in the police station."

"Is there a warranty?" a helpless Mark asked Charlie.

"Considering the sensitive nature of the operating system, I wouldn't recommend taking it anywhere for repairs."

"Understood." Mark carefully placed the receipt in his wallet. Nathan could hear small snippets of their conversation, though he was heavily distracted by the scenes of mayhem on the screen before him.

"You've lived at Crescent Manor for a while, from what I understand," Mark said. There was a snap of yellow tape as Charlie reinforced the box holding the laptop securely within it.

"A little under a year, actually," Charlie said. He opened the cash register with a loud rustling of keys and began counting the small stack of bills in its tray. "Fourth floor. My apartment has a nice view of the downtown." He slammed the register shut and shoved the bills into a manila envelope, the amount scribbled on it in red pen. "It hasn't changed all that much since my grandfather's time, save for Boxworth's, of course."

Nathan's attention was pulled away from the film, and he listened more intently to the conversation between Charlie and Mark. He could feel Mark's tense response.

"What do you mean?"

"My grandfather once resided in the apartment I currently rent," Charlie said. "There's lots of pictures of it in old family photos, and I've always had a fascination with the place. When it miraculously came up for let I was the first person to see it and secure it." He paused over the collection of change, fingers methodically counting out the coins in pairs and dumping them into another envelope. "My mother and aunt were naturally upset, considering what had happened to my grandfather, but I felt a family duty was in order. It's been close to a year and they still haven't come over for a visit to see what I've done with the old place. Still, I suppose some memories can't be glossed over with a coat of paint."

The change jangled loudly in the envelope. Mark's interest was piqued, but Nathan felt a cold chill of

caution well within him at the conversation. “What kind of memories would those be?”

“A rather personal question,” Charlie said. The envelopes were placed into a locked, blue rubber bank deposit bag. “An inquisitive nature is a good trait for a doctor. It’s no wonder Natassia admires you.”

There was a pregnant pause at this. “Really.”

“Yes. She often talks about her ‘doctor cousin’. If you ask me, she’s closer to you than she is to her own brother. I’ll try not be jealous.”

“Interesting...” Then, as he was brought back from the strange distraction. “I’m sorry if I appeared rude.”

“Not at all. I did open the door for questions, and it would be rude on my part not to answer them. The apartment has a great significance for my family, because it is the place where my grandfather disappeared.”

“How so?”

There was a long pause at this, as though Charlie suddenly realized he’d opened up a door he’d had firmly shut for a very long time. The crack of light it revealed was not welcoming. “They, meaning my mother and my aunt, claimed he vanished due to running off with the building’s chambermaid. High brow places such as Crescent Manor still had cleaning staff back in the forties. Since my grandfather was an investment banker, he was used to a certain level of service.” He tossed the bag of secured money to one of the pimple-faced adolescents hovering at the door. “Drop that off at the deposit box on your way home, Gary. \$45.78 in cash. Hard to believe it’s worth the bank fee.”

“They ‘claimed’ that’s why he left,” Mark quietly repeated. He chewed on the side of his thumb in nervous thought. “Your wording suggests you believe otherwise.”

“I don’t believe otherwise, I \*know\* otherwise,” Charlie firmly asserted. “I had a fascinating discussion with my grandmother when I was ten years old. She had just suffered through her third massive stroke and was on her deathbed, which happened to be in the bedroom of my aunt’s bungalow sixteen blocks from here. My childhood home.” He cleared his throat, his fist held to his lips before continuing. “My grandmother was a stern and humourless woman who had no love of superstitious notions. She took a great deal of comfort in the exploratory realm of science, and was a great influence on me as a child. When she was on her deathbed, and I was at her side, she told me what she saw with great reluctance. But, I guess with death being imminent, she felt the need to confess to someone, and I happened to be there at the time.” Charlie sighed, his hands braced on the metal sales counter before him. His ugly, striped blue tie grazed the corner of the cash register. “According to my grandmother, my grandfather was swallowed up by a wall, and that is why he went missing.”

Nathan had completely forgotten about Margot Kidder now. He ignored her death scene as she was murdered, her muffled screams hidden by the chorus of carollers at the dorm house entrance. One of the employees flicked the movie off, sending the five plasma screens into blank, hissing darkness.

“I’ve done a lot of research over the years to determine what phenomenon may have caused it,” Charlie further explained. “As I’ve said, my grandmother was a very no-nonsense person, not given to exaggerations or making up stories. If she said this happened, I am forced to believe her.” He frowned, fingers tapping the sales counter. “As it is, I think I’ve come closer this year than at any other time. Experiential investigation has proved to be successful because there are times when I swear I can feel him trying to get out.” He glanced up at the stoic, shocked expressions of both Nathan and Mark, hesitating slightly before continuing. “The tips of my grandfather’s fingers, you understand. I can sometimes see them travelling along the inside of the kitchen wall.”



## episode eighteen: decisions, decisions



“I’m giving him the key to my flat.”

Nathan’s happiness over the joyful purchase of his laptop coupled with lingering memories of his feminine form’s pleasures were all combining into an ugly vat of expectation versus reality, an unappetizing emotional soup to be sure. At least, this was Mark’s opinion on the matter, and it wasn’t one he was about to back down from. Nathan’s reckless nature had come to the fore once again, his unthinking delight bringing him not only on the precipice of ruin, but on a full out tumble over that massive cliff-face named Rocky Relationships, where he was sure to fall onto the jagged boulders below in a messy, bloodied heap, his exploded heart eaten by the violent crash of waves.

Not that Mark had any real insight into this type of heartbreak himself, but from his outsider view of the relationship Nathan was cultivating with his rumpled version of Dr. Strangelove, extreme imagery felt appropriate. “Nathan,” he said, treading the circumference of the issue with trepidations caution. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

In a move of relationship solidarity, Nathan instantly morphed into Natassia and turned on Mark with harpy fury. “Why?” Her green eyes flashed with unspoken anger, the mere suggestion that there was a ripple of unpleasantness in her believed paradise cementing Mark into the unfortunate role of turncoat. “Charlie really gets me,” Natassia firmly asserted. “Nobody understands me like Charlie.”

“So you’ve told yourself.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Mark sighed, his breath turning to mist in the cool, damp evening air. The walk home was a simple enough journey, but tonight every step was leaden with the weight of unspoken feelings, doubts and worries, the cloud of negativity hovering around Mark in a depressing aura. He wanted his sibling to find happiness, especially since this meant he—and she—would forge a wonderful life separated from himself, and thus, wouldn’t be knocking on his door at all hours of the day or night seeking advice he couldn’t give, or borrowing sums of cash at odd intervals, upsetting his own strict monetary balance. The careless grip Natassia had on the laptop irked his inner sense of finances, especially since it was purchased with such whimsical lack of appreciation for his own involvement. Charlie was well to have her, Mark bitterly thought. She’d be his central focus, and considering his odd hobbies, this wasn’t entirely a bad thing. Charlie and Natassia, focused, enamoured, uninterested in Mark Connor’s quiet, blissful life without them.

Still, even with this carrot of freedom poised before him, Mark couldn't help but feel a certain sense of responsible caution, especially considering both his brother and sister's reckless nature. The potential for disaster was painfully real, and it was this that made Mark say, in language so plain it felt naked: "I think he might be trouble."

Natassia paused, the laptop hugged tight against her body as she turned on her brother. He was expecting the usual tirade, one filled with accusations of how he didn't understand her, how his closed mind was so riveted on facts that he couldn't see the heart in anything, how his one past relationship ending in the crazy disaster it did had no bearing on her own interests. Mark was a meddling big brother. A pain in her ass. Mark just didn't understand anything that didn't get pasted onto a microscope slide.

But she surprised him. Instead of these usual reprisals, Mark was slapped full force across the face with the nastiest retort he'd ever heard from his twin yet.

"You jealous cow."

Jealous? Was she serious? The very thought was preposterous, and Mark actually bit down on a laugh at the suggestion. "I have absolutely no interest in Charlie..." Mark began.

"It's not about Charlie alone, you idiot, it's about me and Charlie. You're jealous that I'm in a half decent relationship and you're not."

Mark scoffed openly at this. "Please, the man is one step away from being a schizophrenic mess. A brilliant one, mind you, but destined for madness. You heard him back there, or was I the only one who had ears? He designed a program with a security feature that renders its victim in the throes of a grand mal seizure. He believes his grandfather is trapped in the walls of his kitchen. The only common sense aspect of him is that he believes your brother—One Nathan Connor—is an absolute layabout, an opinion with which I wholeheartedly concur."

"He is not crazy!" Natassia shouted at him. She let out a frustrated growl as she stomped ahead of her brother, the streetlights bringing her small, dark figure into silhouette relief as she marched on. "You are such an ass. All because you're jealous, you want to ruin things for me. I finally get someone halfway decent in my life and all you can do is criticize. I haven't said I want to marry the poor bastard, have I? Jerk. You just wait until it's your turn, I'll be merciless. That's if you'll get that ice pick out of your heart long enough to let anyone touch it."

A tiny shred of his soul said that Natassia had a point. Perhaps he was being too judgemental, especially when it came to the strange life they led thanks to the discomfiting, as yet undetermined influence of Crescent Manor. For certainly, if the Event had given them the ability to physically change genders at will, it only stood to reason that it also could have had a profound influence on Charlie's experience. His grandfather's strange presence within the walls was almost banal in comparison to their own drama. "He's just too intense for my liking, that's all," Mark said, knowing his excuse sounded hollow. "I mean, his obsession with that apartment predates the issues we've had, and that belies a certain unhealthy predilection for fixations. I feel uncomfortable with you becoming one of them."

"I see. So now my relationship is nothing but a symptom of obsessive compulsive disorder, not actual feeling. Point taken, little brother."

"I'm the one who's older," Mark reminded her. "By a whole three minutes."

Natassia suddenly stopped short in front of him, green eyes flashing with a matron wisdom that Mark never knew she possessed. The laptop box was pressed tight against her chest, her chin resting uncomfortably on the sharp corner. "You are not ruining this," she insisted. "You have no right to say one word about what is and isn't crazy. These, here? These sized D pillows of fantastic proportions?"

These are crazy. This computer, with its tiny insides that bring the whole world inside of it into focus, that's crazy. Our apartment building and its walls that talk and murals that change colours at will—That is totally mental. So when you go trying to convince me that Charlie is some off the mark nutter because he somehow has managed to find a balance within that madness, you're the one I'm calling bonkers. Come off it, Mark. The whole world is quickly unravelling and taking us with it. You've been too sure of yourself to properly notice."

Mark wanted to rail that this assessment was ignorant, even a little unfair. But as his sister furiously ran ahead and left him alone beneath the cold lamplights and the damp mist, the nagging suspicion that she might have a point began poking its way at his resolve. There was little Mark could do about the laws of attraction, and while his brother Nathan had been woefully unpleasant concerning his trysts in the past, as Natassia there was a new emotional maturity added that Mark wasn't sure how to understand. There were definitely worse examples of the males of the species out there, and Natassia hadn't done too badly in choosing Charlie Weiss. He had a job, a terrible one, but still a job. He was clearly markedly intelligent. He appreciated her artistic leanings. He was even protective of her against the more base aspects of her personality which he hadn't yet uncovered.

As Mark slowly turned the matter over in his analytical mind, he could discern hints that his twin had suffered for too long in an emotionally unsatisfying void, one which he tried to fill over and over again with faceless liaisons and a pathological need to push aside responsibility. He was guilty of the same crime, in the form of his psychotic ex-girlfriend and her murderous intentions with a Bunsen burner, an unfortunate side effect of being so aloof within their near non-existent relationship. Thus, one hoarded sexual conquests, while the other avoided them altogether, the two extremes finding the exact same conclusion: A reign of loneliness that cut so deeply it dulled all feeling, rendering them emotional automatons.

Mark stepped into a deep puddle, his argyle socks soaked with mud. Cursing, he tried to brush the mess off with his hands, only to smear the mud further along the sleeve of his beige trenchcoat. Muck clung beneath his nails, and he shook the excess water off, droplets spinning from his fingertips like misfired neurons. With the hem of his pants trailing a wet line on his left side, he walked up the steps and into the front foyer of the building. It was nearly nine-thirty, and Charlie would be finishing up his shift and making his way here, keen to bound up to the second floor and nestle into the ample welcome of Natassia's bosom as he configured her laptop, her fingers messily curling through his hair. The image was sickly sweet in its domestic bliss, but Mark couldn't help but find it enviable.

He paused in the hallway, the broken elevator with its faded yellow 'out of order' sign staring at him, the elevator itself seeming to mock him in his impotence. How terrible, dark and depressing this place is, Mark thought. His now deeply sombre mood was brought into further sadness thanks to the very reluctant realization that Natassia, in her furious emotional histrionics, was right.

He was jealous. On a deep, primal, utterly unnecessary level, Mark Connor was insanely jealous of his sister and the happy new life she'd managed to forge while he wallowed not only in obscurity, but outright invisibility to everyone around him. Male or female had made no difference. Mark and Mars Connor were entities made of smoke to their peers, spirits that dissipated the second they left the hospital lab. Even Dr. Horihito couldn't keep his gender eyes uncrossed, and was constantly mixing up Mark and Mars' names as though they were interchangeable. Which, of course, they were. He was answering more and more to 'Hey you' rather than his actual name. There was significantly less conflict with this arrangement.

A key jangled somewhere on the second floor, the sound echoing down the main stairs and into the front lobby. Signs of life within the dead gloom. Unwittingly, Mark's attention was now riveted to the thin sliver of light beneath Paul Nash's door. The occasional swath of shadow signified he was home.

There was the nagging understanding that she wasn't invisible to Paul Nash. He found her irritating. Maybe even threatening with her unasked for questions and her unwanted scrutiny. He'd remained male for the last few days, but as Natassia proved, one needn't be cemented to convention. With a smooth brush of his palm against her hair, Mars was easily swayed into female form, her long limbs slid perfectly into her neutral ensemble. She brushed at the dried layer of mud at the hem of her black pants, a thin layer of grey dirt spun around her ankles in a dust cloud. Her shoes were slightly different, she realized. Patent leather, with a slightly raised heel. She didn't remember buying them.

She stood poised before his door, all courage siphoned from her at the prospect of how easy it would be to just curl her hand into a fist and knock on his door. Surely this process wasn't how to find success, not this ordinary interaction that held no romance or fanfare within it. Knuckles on wood. That couldn't possibly be how great romances began.

Romance. What nonsense was she telling herself? She brought her thumb to her lips and bit on the nail, her expression souring at the bitter taste of dirt beneath it.

"Just knock, you idiot," she said to herself.

Her thumb was still at her lips, the bitterness endured.

## **episode nineteen: Paul's perspective**



The hole in his ceiling had grown.

While this shouldn't surprise him, he couldn't help but inspect its enlarged circumference with an increasing sense of alarm. Fear crawled along the back of his neck with spider legs, his skin raised in shivering gooseflesh as the understanding that the world without was creeping its way in with sneaky chisels at its cage. The circular hole could no longer be mistaken for a spot of mold, not now that it had grown into a larger, oval shaped grey and black sore. Standing beneath it, he could feel a small breeze ooze out, carrying with it the stench of rotted decay. He shook the pink can of air freshener in his grip and sprayed the air around the hole liberally, mixing the sour smell of putrescence with Tropical Holiday Citrus Splash.

The can sputtered the last of its hope, and Paul Nash stood beneath the rotted hole, feeling anxious and overwhelmed. This wasn't an issue he could relate to anyone, least of all his old buddy Jim, who would merely believe his former partner had finally gone over the edge and lost it completely. Any attempt to

explain that Hell was leaking into his apartment would send any psychotherapist worth their degree reaching for the prescription pad and scribbling heavy doses of anti-psychotics as a solution. He'd often wondered if a priest would be a worthy ally, but then most of the ones he'd known growing up were secretive teetotalers, and the new breed were on the side of science more than the supernatural, an irritating trend for people such as Paul and his unique problem. The evidence staring at them would be dismissed as mere wear and tear on the building, the smell caused by a burst pipe and the resulting mold, or a dead raccoon. Mundane explanations that didn't explain how it could all crumble around him at any moment, and leave him vulnerable to its elements and to Her.

Best not to think about Her, his consciousness darkly warned him.

He paced in front of his door as he tossed the empty can of air freshener into the garbage bin, his senses on high alert as they took in the too quiet aura that had suddenly fallen over his apartment in a thin veil. He remained motionless, his jaw set, knowing that any disturbance would make Her aware of him, bringing that place and its awful partial life crashing on top of the one he was presently living. He held his breath, worried even this small evidence of his presence would render this tense world he held tight into rusted ripples that bled chaos.

A knock loudly rapped his front door, and he released his breath in shocked surprise.

"Don't answer that, lover."

She wasn't physically present, which was a great relief, but the threat of her becoming corporeal hovered around him in the putrid sigh of her phantom lips against his forehead. He was so sick of this, of Carol and her relentless need to poison his life and render it unbearable. "I'll do what I want," he said, a rare moment of defiance against her. There would be repercussions later, he knew. But damn, he was finished with her persistent needs, so tired of her rot and her hate and her clawing, putrid talons at his throat.

"It's your little girlfriend. Your spindly stalker. You'd better warn her off, lover man. I'm getting sick of her hanging around."

"You're one to talk," Paul said. The stench of her breath told him she was close at his ear. He had to remain still, otherwise she could very well bite it clean off. That wasn't a source of pain he wished to revisit.

"It's just you and me, baby," she hissed, her tongue slimy in its ethereal touch upon the side of his neck. He fought the urge to push her off, knowing it was a trap, meant to force his acknowledgement and bring her world crumbling into the apartment, plunging him helpless in her grip. "No room for anyone else."

"Fuck off, Carol," Paul snarled.

"It's...Um. I'm not Carol," a familiar voice on the other side of the door said. "It's Mars Connor. We've talked before."

Behind him, the hole in the kitchen ceiling fizzled as its edges began to rot. A thick, slimy glob of pus hit the floor of the kitchen, a gangrenous reminder that its world was about to fall into his own at any second. In a moment of decision that had Carol's sharp nails claw at his shoulder, he opened the apartment door and closed it quickly behind him, effectively locking her and what he called the Garage inside. He could hear the echo of her hatred clinging to the periphery of his consciousness, but he was he was able to ignore her now that he was outside of the apartment, and there was someone else for him to focus on instead.

"What do you want?" Paul sharply asked.

Mars Connor. Not for the first time Paul thought on how inappropriately she'd been named, especially when he was the one far more fitted to having hints of another world as his roots. He stared blankly at her, taking the way the dim hallway lights played with the hollows of her cheeks, her brown eyes nearly hidden beneath a messy shag of matching brown bangs. He raised his hand, as though tempted to brush them out of the way so he could get a proper look at her, only to let his hand fall, impotent, at his side.

She brought her thumb to her lips, biting at the nail in a nervous gesture that never failed to melt him. He wondered what it would be like, to pull her hand away, to cure her of the bad habit by gently nibbling on the digit himself.

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "I was wondering..." She glanced over her shoulder in the direction of the main staircase, her willowy body sleek and graceful with every movement. She sighed, as though she were being forced to give him terrible news. "I'm very sorry, but, I felt like knocking on your door and asking you to come up to my place for a cup of coffee. I know it's forward of me, and I understand completely if you consider it an imposition." She shrugged, her uncertainty strangely erotic. "I won't bother you anymore. Sorry."

"Okay," Paul said, shocking himself with his own reply.

"Okay meaning what, exactly?" Mars replied.

"Okay. Coffee. Let's go."

"Now?"

"You're asking me now aren't you?"

"I don't know."

"How can you not know? You just asked me if I wanted to go up to your place for a cup of coffee and I just said 'okay'. How is this rocket science?"

"You are very rude."

"You know that already too. So what's the story—Are we okay or not?"

"Okay for coffee. Right now."

"Okay."

"Okay, then."

No, it wasn't exactly a pleasant start to a possible romance, if that was even what this was supposed to become. Paul followed behind Mars, his apartment eagerly left behind him as he approached the main stairs. He glanced once over his shoulder, and saw the sliver of light beneath his door collapse at intervals in pacing shadows. Carol would be waiting when he got back, but to Hell with her. She could drag him to her lair at any time in that apartment. For once, he had the opportunity to shake off her decapitating leash and explore the boundaries of his existence beyond her. An admittedly small space, he was forced to admit. Freedom, for Paul Nash, came with a bitter price. Carol would be sure to remind him of her influence on his life later, her sharp teeth ripping into his flesh, her talons tearing out his heart and furiously squeezing its bloody pulp in a demonic parody of CPR.

"Watch your step," Mars said, her feet neatly stepping over the loose board, thirteen steps up from the bottom of the stairs. "Rumour has it someone once tripped on it and died."

"Who?" Paul asked. He took a long stride over it, a malingering feeling of responsibility hovering over the not so harmless plank of wood.

“I don’t know. It happened a long time, I think. Well before our time.”

This should have made him feel better, but it didn’t. Anxiety welled up inside of him, and he fought to keep it down, his palm rubbing at his chest, the action doing little to ease the tension building up within him. “You have to step over that every day,” he observed. “Good thing you’re the vigilant type.”

“Maybe,” Mars said, pausing to allow him to catch up with her on the stairs. Dark brown eyes, the same colour as the trunk of the massive, art nouveau stained glass tree beside them surveyed Paul with analytical precision. “But even the most vigilant have their foolish moments.”

~\*~

“Cream and sugar?”

“Neither. Just black.”

The neat, cozy apartment spoke a great deal about the person entertaining him, and Paul gave the interior a quick sweep of scrutiny, taking in the plain, unadorned surfaces and the oddly masculine, earthy colour scheme. She was not a person who enjoyed being bogged down in details, he thought. Everything had to be precise and in the open or she had difficulty in navigating it. No bric-a-brac, no photographs of family, no imprint of her soul upon her own living space. Just passing through, the soft, warm colours of the apartment seemed to say. A hint of something growing, and then it’s overturned with a spade as she packs up and leaves.

“You work at the hospital down the street. Saint Benedict.”

“I’m a doctor of pathology there, as I’ve told you,” Mars said. She handed him his steaming cup of coffee and he watched her intently as she pushed past him, her shoulder coming into electric, uncomfortable contact with his own as she glided to the couch. He declined the unspoken offer of a seat next to her, preferring to stand at the kitchen breakfast counter, his elbow resting in false casual ease on the speckled black marble surface.

“Must be interesting work,” Paul said, taking a sip of his coffee. It tasted strong, with an undercurrent of bitterness.

“It can be,” she quietly said. “Most of the time it’s just determining shapes on a slide.”

“I’ve worked with a few pathologists in my time. I know they spend a good chunk of their days with the dead.” He could feel a rush of mischief wind its way through him as he looked on her, wanting desperately to crack that cool facade and make her red faced and flustered at his crude attention. “Seen a few on the slabs myself. Never could stomach the inside-out massage, though. You must have guts of steel.”

“Some pathologists work closely with law enforcement,” Mars corrected him. She took another careful sip of her coffee, her eyes downcast into the small whorls of cream that floated inside of it. “My speciality is blood pathology. It’s very rare that I see a corpse let alone give it a massage, as you’ve so politely put it.” She blew on the surface of her coffee, her brown eyes taking on an inwardly reflective focus. “It would be so much easier for me to deal with the dead. You don’t have to think about what happens when you tell a patient’s attending doctor that their blood tests confirm septicaemia or an advanced stage of disseminated intravascular clotting. It all sounds so clinical, I know, and I do try to keep it that way, compartmentalized within my mind, because at times it is very difficult, especially when you see a patient’s age, such as an eight year old girl, and she has chronic leukemia and her only hope is to find a bone marrow match. It can be very difficult not to think about the long, ongoing

suffering that the treatment of their diseases will generate. The dead have it easy. All they suffer is the ravages of decay, which they have no emotional or intellectual knowledge of.”

“Lucky stiff,” Paul said, but he was unconvinced. There was plenty of evidence to the contrary lurking in that festering boil of a hole in his kitchen ceiling.

A fat tabby padded his way lazily out of the hallway and into the living room, where he fixed an unwelcome glare on Paul, his questioning meow an unrepeatably expletive. With his ears pinned back flat against his head, the fat cat’s stomach grazed the floor as he approached Paul and gave him a preemptive strike against his shin with his paw before hobbling back down the hall, and into what was, presumably, the bathroom.

“He’s not fond of change,” Mars explained. She cupped her mug in her palms, seeming to melt inside of its cozy offer of warmth. “He’s going to piss on the shower mat again. I suppose you could say your visit has officially been christened.”

“The fact you put up with it says a lot more about you,” Paul observed.

“How so?”

“You don’t give up on people easily. Those you do make a connection with, you have a hard time letting go even if it’s in your best interests.”

“I can always buy another shower mat at the dollar store.”

“Justification of bad behaviour, if you ask me.” He felt bolder now, and he left the breakfast counter to sit beside her, his coffee sloshing hotly over its rim and splashing a dark brown stain on her oak floor. She ignored it, her feet curled comfortable beneath her hips, her no nonsense shoes discarded beneath the coffee table. A thick text on blood pathology lay open, a cross section of a human heart and its various ill components illustrated in dizzyingly close detail. One of the couch springs poked Paul in the back, and he pulled the sheet covering it to one side, revealing several fist sized holes bleeding straw and rubber foam.

“Meister,” Mars explained, gesturing to the cat, who had finished offering his opinion and was now heading back into the bedroom to sulk. “He has an artistic streak.”

“No wonder he rules the place, with a name like that. Meister means ‘Master’ in German, doesn’t it?”

“I have no idea,” Mars replied. “My brother Nathan was the one who named him.”

“Your brother,” Paul said, reflective. “You have a sister too. Named Natassia.” He looked at her coyly over the rim of his coffee mug. “She lives next door to that poor bastard from apartment #220.” He took a sip of his coffee before continuing. “Big tits, as I remember.”

“I suppose you would,” Mars sharply replied.

Paul couldn’t help but grin over his mug. “Of course, any jackass worth his salt knows that more than a handful is a waste.” The coffee had lost its bitter edge. “Then there’s Mark, your cousin.” Paul narrowed his eyes playfully at Mars. “He goes to the desert and studies shit.”

“There is nothing ignoble in pursuing a higher education,” Mars haughtily replied.

“No. He studies shit. That’s exactly what you told me. Dung beetles and their effects on Kilimanjaro or something like that.”

Mars paused over her coffee, her expression one of caught surprise. “Oh. Right.”

“Your cousin’s a prick,” Paul frankly said. “Pompous jackass, highest order. It’s no wonder he’s odd man out in your quartet. Hey, you don’t have to give me *that* look, I know he’s a relation but he’s not a



damned sibling, is he? If he was your brother I wouldn't say shit, but he's not, so as far as I'm concerned he's removed enough from the gene pool to be open for criticism." He took a hot gulp of coffee, wincing as it burned down his throat. "Besides, I don't have the best family connections myself, so I could be projecting all my frustration. At least that's what my shit therapist said I do. Pill popping cow that she was." He put his mug down on the coffee table, careful to use a coaster, even though there was plenty of evidence that someone came here on a regular basis and never bothered. "So, the deal with the cat."

"There is no deal with my cat."

"He pisses up your bathroom and he's destroyed your couch and you grudgingly put up with it. That tells me one true thing about you."

"And what would that be?"

Paul gave her a crooked smile. Damn, but it had been a long time since he spent some company with a real, living, breathing woman who didn't want to bash his skull on broken up blocks of concrete and rip his flesh off with her incisors. "You like the bad boys," he said, grinning.

"Is that what you think you are?"

"I could be."

Instead of being impressed, Mars was clearly annoyed, and somehow this pleased Paul no end. She was getting her colour up, her flustered annoyance revealing a vulnerability she hadn't shown at first, and he rather liked poking at it if only to get a reaction from her. But she was not so helpless in her fury that she didn't know where to shove a barb of her own where need be. "What about you?" she said, her birdlike features sharp, her brown eyes flashing with intelligence beneath her shaggy bangs. "Your lifestyle says a lot about you, too. I have to wonder why a man would pick a place to live that held so much tragedy in it for him. Rumour has it you shot two people there, and I'm starting to believe the gossip is far milder than the truth. If it were me, I'd never be able to set foot in that place again. What does this say about you, I wonder, that you make that kind of memory your roost?"

Paul's grin subsided into a forced smile. He coughed into his fist, and tried to appear nonchalant at her question. "I like to keep my mistakes close to me. That way they can't haunt me elsewhere."

"But they've trapped you," Mars astutely observed, and Paul's smile really was slipping now, a familiar anger coursing through him at her piercing understanding. "You're so wrapped up in what happened there, you couldn't leave it if you tried. You can't even make it to the newspaper stand without hyperventilating. The only reason you've made it to my apartment is because you've mentally forged the entire building as an extension of that horrible memory, an artery through which you can move, like a viral cell."

"I should go," Paul said.

"No," Mars said. She was confident now. Horribly certain of herself. "You're going to stay here and talk."

"I don't give a shit about conversation."

"Then we'll make it one-sided. I just want one answer to one question—What happened to you?"

His surface anger lurked between them, but there was a deeper emotion brewing beneath it, a reaching need to nestle close to this woman, to tease her lips against his and spread them apart forcefully with his tongue. It was there, this physical understanding between them, a ghost of touch and sex that was held back by the barrier of memory. "You won't believe me," he told her.

She cocked her head to one side, revealing the soft, white length of her neck, the graceful cusp delicious in its offering. “I did something that defies reason,” Paul continued. “I’m not proud of what happened, but I’d do it again because it was necessary, regardless of what the courts said, or the goddamned psychotherapist. This isn’t about post-traumatic stress bullshit or shell shocked whatever.” He reached out and pushed her brown bangs to one side, plastering them close behind her ear with his fingertips, her brown eyes reaching into his in thawing amber hues. “I need you to promise you won’t judge me. You need to be open minded.”

She let out a small chuckle at this, the unexpected mirth at his dark suggestion confusing him. “Open minded? You have absolutely no idea just how open this cranium can be.”

## **episode twenty: the wayback machine**



*December 23, 2006. 5:15 a.m.*

It was an overcast morning, but this did nothing to hamper Jim’s long shadow as it crawled along the squad car, his meaty hands occupied with two extra large cream and sugar coffees. He silently handed one to Paul, who took it with grimacing criticism. “I always have mine black,” he complained.

Jim shrugged, massive shoulders tugging on the cut of his tailored coat. “You still owe me four bucks for the last time,” Jim said. “I even threw in a Boston creme doughnut, remember?”

“I hate Boston creme,” Paul growled. He sipped at the coffee he didn’t want and felt hungry for the doughnut he also held enmity for. At least the sticky sweetness would have eased the emptiness in his gut. He checked his watch. They’d been on this stretch for the past three hours, having been pulled out of bed with a frantic call from headquarters.

“Get your ass down here,” Jim had said, his voice grim and unwavering. “The bastard’s calling for you by name.”

“Which bastard would that be?” Paul asked.

“Dirk the Jerk.”

That was at two a. m., his memory taking him back to that ungodly hour earlier this morning. If he closed his eyes, he could still feel the soft coolness of her sheets, and the welcome warmth of her body beside him. He sighed, enjoying the memory, allowing it to pull him back in time.

Paul stared at the blue light of his digital clock, amazed that such an hour even existed. “Dirk the Jerk can wait until noon,” he’d said. “That two-bit punk can call his lawyer first, like he always does. I’m not wasting my time coming in there to interrogate a prick who just wants to whack my time off.”

“I don’t think so, partner,” Jim’s deep baritone voice boomed through the receiver. “This time he’s got a gun to go with that big mouth of his. And a hostage.”

Paul held the phone in his hand away from him, as though disbelieving it had actual, physical form.

“Paul, you there?” he could hear Jim’s voice bellow through the receiver.

“Yeah, I’m still here,” Paul said.

“314 Crescent Manor. It’s downtown. You can’t miss it, it’s the place with the goddamned upside down tree.”

“Upside-down tree?”

“Never mind, just get your ass here.”

He rolled out of bed, the contours of an unfamiliar mattress leaving his muscles bruised. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

He hung up and sat on the edge of the bed, his palm scraping across the ghost of a beard roughening his cheeks. A similar rustling moved behind him, and he could feel her as she slid up against his back, her arms draped casually around his shoulders as her lips sighed into the back of his neck. “Let me guess, the Batman logo is shining over Gotham City.”

“It’s a hostage situation,” Paul said, shaking her off gently. Her hair was splayed across her white pillow in an angelic blonde halo, her soft lips still holding the blush of their lingering, earlier passion. He pressed his thumb against her kiss, and she bit it, lightly, her teeth grazing the nail as her tongue hotly teased the tip. “I’m sorry. You know I can’t stay.”

She broke away and curled lazily onto her side, the pillow he had rested his head on reclaimed as her own. “It’s just as well. George will be home in a few hours. I can use the time to clean up and make sure there’s no trace of you left.”

Guiltily, he glanced at the photograph at her bedside table, where she was draped in another set of arms, ones that were far weaker but held a lot more stability in them than he could ever offer her. Her wedding ring lay significant before it, a plain gold band that rendered Paul’s place in her world a crowded complication, one that at any time she was free to break off. He sighed, and slipped on his trousers, followed by socks and the wrinkled confines of his cotton shirt. No tie, no time, no wasted minutes. He slipped on his shoes, and without a backward glance he left her behind, his holster folded and clasped tight in his grip.

It’s shocking the amount of information the human mind can mull over in only a few minutes. The images revolve in a dream state as they are investigated, prodded, argued over and ripped apart. He’d been seeing Carol for well over a year now, but he still couldn’t openly call her his girlfriend, not with her bank manager husband George still in the picture. Sure, she played at leaving him, giving promises to Paul that it was long over, that the marriage had no love left in it, that he was the One, and when the time was right she’d pack her bags and show up on his doorstep. But Paul wasn’t a stupid man, and

while that fantasy was nice to indulge in during the moment, when it was over he was left with the bitter knowledge that she was happy in her big house on the outskirts of the city, and her rich vacations to Fiji and her wealthy friends. She wasn't about to give all that up for the thankless job that was a cop's wife. Long hours alone. Lots of worry if he'd make it home or not. Not to mention the public fallout of her affair that would hurt further promotions. The current Chief of Police was a 'family values' rule book thumper. He'd be lucky if he remained a beat cop, let alone a homicide Inspector.

This arrangement he had going with Carol, it had to end. A year and a half of stringing him along, it really should have made him angry, but all Paul could honestly feel was a sense of encroaching hopelessness. She'd never made a question of the fact she was married. He was easy enough to convict as an accomplice in the whole mess.

They'd met at a bank hold-up, one arranged by the hapless Dirk the Jerk, who was now in the centre of the city, holding a not-so-innocent person hostage. He knew Dirk well enough that this was another one of his elaborate scams, although the addition of a gun was a nice touch. The bank hold-up had been performed like an indie coffee house play, complete with black eye-liner and forgotten lines. The teller screaming in terror was a terrible over-actor. When she feigned fainting, Dirk had to remind her she was supposed to be conscious enough to stuff the burlap bag full of cash first. The 'corpse' he'd dragged in to instill terror, and which has resulted in Paul being called to the scene, ended up being nothing more than a mangled foam rubber dummy, the bullet wounds accented with corn syrup and ketchup. Carol had been in the bank when the whole thing went down. He caught her eye as soon as he walked in to take account of the inanimate victim, and she stood above it, her arms crossed, her blonde hair cascading in soft ringlets down her shoulders. She was wearing a beige jacket and matching, form fitting skirt and a set of shining pearls at her throat. "I guess he's not even fit for worm food," she said, bravely nudging the polyfoam corpse with the toe of her brown leather pumps.

"Maybe not, but take him for a picnic and the ants will have a field day."

"Poor guy," she said, soft pink lips curling into a half smile. "Our date would have been a bust. I'm not the outdoorsy type."

"Really?" Paul said, enjoying the tease. "And just what type are you?"

"The type not to answer questions."

"But you just did."

She'd licked her pink lips with the tip of her hungry pink tongue. Blue eyes matched his own. He knew even then that he was sunk before he could swim.

~\*~

"Dirk the Jerk," Paul muttered over his coffee. His mental rewind had been brought to flashforward as he now stood next to his partner Jim, bad coffee growing cold in his grip while a supposed hostage situation happened silently in the background. "We've been waiting here for two and a half hours, what the hell is going on?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Jim said. His tall slouch beside Paul dwarfed the smaller man in his shadow. "We got a call in early this morning, gunshots been fired. He popped his head out once and demanded that the officers on the scene get you down here to hear him out. He had a blonde woman in his grip, with the barrel of the gun at her temple."

"Another one of his elaborate plays?" Paul asked.

“Nah, not this time,” Jim said, shaking his head sadly. “According to report, Dirk was spewing real tears and was all wide-eyed and shaking like he was set to have a seizure. You and I both know he ain’t a good enough actor to pull that kind of panic off.” He studied the front entrance, Paul’s ice blue gaze already riveted to the slight shadows that moved within. “This quiet ain’t like him neither. I got half a mind to think he’s already blown his brains out and his hostage is passed out cold or plain murdered at his side.”

“I’m sick of waiting,” Paul said. He crumpled his coffee cup and began making his way to the entrance of Crescent Manor, ignoring the fury of the SWAT standing at the ready. He gave his Chief the finger as he boldly walked up the steps and opened the front door.

Just as he thought. Paul braced his palms on his hips, ignoring the torrent of curses behind him as several cops rushed to his aid, only to stop short at what was waiting for them. Nothing. No Dirk the Jerk, no hostage. Just an empty foyer, and some flyers fluttering around on the ground, caught up in a breeze that drifted down from the dark, red hallway the bled out from it.

“You’re getting a write-up for this, Nash! You follow procedure, you dumb fuck, you don’t go waltzing in like you’re goddamned Dirty Harry! You can bet your ass you’re getting disciplinary action!”

“So what were we supposed to do, sit here for three days until we figured out the lobby was empty? I don’t know about you, but I don’t have that kind of time to piss away.”

One of the SWAT members gave Paul a tiny shrug of understanding before giving the all clear. Guns were placed back in holsters, megaphones and equipment packed away. The whole scene was like something from an elaborate production, unreal in its delivery and woefully anticlimactic in scope. Paul stood aloof in the lobby of the building, taking in the sombre, amber hued fixtures illuminating the hall, the broken elevator with its yellowed ‘Out of Order’ sign, and the well worn oriental carpet that spread past it and upwards onto a grand, poorly lit main staircase that was the passage home for the tenants of the building. He was alone in the building now, the tenants all still safely enclosed in their apartments, the SWAT team and the rest of the crew trickling away from the scene with reluctance, as though convinced they were wrong, that a gun wielding maniac was about to turn every cleared corner and start firing. It didn’t happen. The sirens were kept silent as the cop cars left, the front door of the lobby leaned on by a tall, imposing shadow.

“You’re up shit’s creek for this stunt, partner,” Jim reminded him.

Paul waved him off. “I’ll see you back at the precinct,” he said.

Jim raised a brow and gave the murky hallway a suspicious glance. “You sure you don’t want me sticking around? I don’t know what Dirk’s deal is, but it can’t be to sell you girl guide cookies.”

“Get lost,” Paul said, his hand roughly brushing the stubble at his chin. “Something tells me we’ll be hearing about a robbery on the other side of the city. Maybe Dirk got the distraction bug.”

“Maybe,” Jim said. He gave his friend and the sombre, quiet setting a doubtful frown before heading back out, the door to the lobby closing behind his giant shape. “See you soon.”

The door closed with an audible click that echoed into the emptiness of the hallway. Paul stood in the centre, hands deep in his pockets, his mind reeling in confused thought. He’d been asked for specifically by Dirk the Jerk, and while this wasn’t odd in and of itself—the guy did have an arrest history with him—Paul never felt he’d made much of an impression on the con man, certainly not enough of one to involve him in his petty crime scheme. Their last meeting had consisted of sneers and a cry for a lawyer, which Paul happily obliged. There’d been no murder, so there was no reason for an interrogation. The motive was transparent: simple greed. Whatever Dirk was presently up to, it no doubt held that exact want behind it.

A few flyers drifted out of the lobby and into the hallway, driven by a sudden breeze that coursed up from the bottom of the elevator shaft and sent a deep chill into the place. The papers skidded past him, curled, yellowed edges scraping against the wallpaper as they made their journey. They must have been there a long time, since the ink was faded, the papers chewed by the wear and tear of the elements. But there was nothing here to disturb them, and why would they be lurking here like this, the ads so old they lost their glossy finish, the words so bleached by time they were nothing but a near whitewash of blue and pink hues. He frowned, picking one of the flyers up, the ad practically crumbling to dust with his touch.

“Friday afternoon special. Beat the Winter Blahs with a taste of the African Continent! Visit Henri’s and get a free bowl of mulligatawny soup with every naan purchase! Offer valid December 21-28, 2006.”

A sudden chill coursed through him as he read it and realized the flyers weren’t ancient history, but had been printed up only days before. He tossed it to the ground and hunched his shoulders, the cold wind whipping up from the elevator shaft and hitting him in an icy slap. How could the people who lived here stand this? It was one thing to live in a dump, but to suffer through it crumbling to pieces while you lived in it had to be against the building code. Damn place ought to be torn down.

The apartment door nearest the entrance slightly creaked open, shadows within the sliver of grey hinting that someone was inside. Paul cocked his head to the left and tried to get a better view, discerning nothing but pale grey walls and the blank space of an empty bachelor apartment. He dared to nudge the door open with the toe of his black shoe, the door’s groan at the effort suggesting this was not a place used to having company.

“Hello?” he called as he stepped into the gloom. The apartment was empty of all furnishings. An echo crept out of the kitchen, a leaking tap sending tinny droplets into the sink. It sounded like fingers drumming against steel. Clip-clip. Clip-clip.

He pulled out his gun, keeping it steady in his grip. There was a familiar tension in the air, and he had to keep his wits about him. He tried the light, but there were no bulbs in the fixtures. He swung his pistol back and forth before him, sweeping the area clear with hinted violence.

“Who’s here?” he called out. “Dirk, where are you?”

The apartment door slammed shut.

Dirk the Jerk was snivelling against it, his usual clean suit tattered, his knees torn apart, bone and blood leaking out of the rendered fabric. “I’m sorry, man,” he gasped between choked, mucous lined sobs. His face was a wreck, like someone had used a brick on him. Nose smashed in, blood pouring from an injured eye socket. He spit onto the floor and something hard hit the wooden floorboards at Paul’s feet. He bent down to investigate, and picked up a broken molar.

“She made me do it,” Dirk’s strangled voice said. His breath wheezed in the darkness, the stench of sour blood making Paul gag. Dirk was damn ripe, and Paul had to wonder how it was that a man still alive could stink like a week old corpse. “You gotta forgive me, man. I don’t have no beef with you, I swear. I was just squatting, that’s all, needed a free place between jobs. This place, it’s so damn—it’s fucked. And She lives here. I didn’t know. It was Her. It was all Her.”

Dirk slid his head against the wall to one side, revealing the exposed tendons of his neck and the base outline of his tongue in his thorax. Paul bit down on bile. There was no way this guy could still breathe let alone be alive.

“What the fuck?” Paul said.

A sound not unlike a rusty hinge screamed through the grey confines of the room. The apartment rumbled, and Dirk let out a howl of pain as the building crumbled around them, the ceiling tearing away, the world outside reduced to dusty rubble and shreds of moldy drywall. Paul stood in the midst of this sudden destruction, disoriented and confused as to what had just happened. He stepped over the crumbled remains of Dirk, and gave the con man's body a nudge. A small groan was his answer and then...Nothing.

"Hey there, lover."

The chill crept into him before the full horror of it hit. He turned to see Carol standing behind him, her hand outstretched toward him, her blue eyes muted by the milky white sheen of the newly dead. Her nimble steps easily picked their way over the rubble, the coarse sand that whipped between them on the violent wind cutting across her flesh. Carol opened her mouth wide, a black maw of rot coursing through her as she added her violence to the dust devil between them. The air around her felt rusted. Unfit to breathe in.

He recoiled from her, but she grabbed his wrist, her strength so powerful she snapped it. Paul howled in pain, but he kept his gun gripped in his other hand, ready to use it at first opportunity.

"I been waiting for you, lover. I know you think it's still on, but you know, and I know, it's all over. It's dead between us. You just had a hard time admitting it, that's all. But it's all right now. I'm here, and so are you, and we can help each other understand."

She pulled him close, this woman who he had just left that morning sleeping peacefully in her matrimonial bed, her smooth skin perfect, her body gently perfumed with the scent of his cologne and clean sweat. Not this parody of opposites whose skin sloughed off in wet chunks to the rotted floor.

"Don't you fucking touch me! What the fuck!"

She refused to let go. She pulled herself close to him, her putrid lips teasing against his ear, sharp, broken, blackened teeth nibbling at it. "It's too late, baby," she whispered. "I'm inside of you now. All this beautiful decay...It's all yours. Come on into our little Kingdom, baby. Come on in."

She bit down hard. Pain seared the side of his skull with a horror he never knew was possible. His stomach lurched at the shock, and gave up the coffee he'd downed not half an hour before. His broken wrist met the spot where his ear had been, blood seeping over his knuckles.

"Damn...Bitch..." he managed to say through clenched, violently chattering teeth.

He didn't wait. He aimed his gun and fired. When Dirk the Jerk began moaning, he laid into him too. Might as well kill two goddamned nightmares in one sweep. He kept aiming and firing until the chamber was empty, and afterwards, his gun spitting out air as it clicked and clicked in impotent terror.

The rubble collapsed in on itself. The stench of rot began to ebb as the dust and rust retreated backwards, the ceiling magically restored, the bricks realigning themselves, the cables of steel becoming taut and covered over with fresh concrete. It took only seconds, and Paul was standing in the apartment as it was when he first walked in. He tested his wrist, which was no longer broken. The unimaginable pain at the side of his skull was gone. He checked his ear, relieved to find it was still there after all.

"The hell...?" he said, surveying the grey innards of the apartment.

He found Dirk the Jerk where he'd been slumped at the door. He was a real mess, but not of the kind he'd seen when he revealed himself. His neck was intact, his face blemish free. The six or seven bullet holes in him, however, spoke of one hell of a sacrifice. It was self defence, Paul thought, already unsure of the issue himself. There was no way they could blame him for taking the guy out, not when he'd

trapped him the way he did.

There was an added complication, however, one that was splayed spread eagled on the floor of the living room, her dark skirt stained black with blood, hands outstretched in shock. Despite the vast amount of blood, the halo of her blonde hair was still visible. That and the familiar design of her wedding band were the only things Paul could use to identify her. His bullets had obliterated her face.

He choked on his tongue. He couldn't breathe.

"Carol?" he whispered to the dark.

~\*~

"They put me in a psych ward for a month." He wouldn't look at Mars, his gaze riveted instead to something safer, like the shining surface of her black shoes. "Pulled me off the force due to 'extenuating circumstances', which is code for 'He's lost his mind'. Psychiatrist said the pressure of the situation was too much and that's why I shot the both of them like I did. They bought the self defence bullshit in regards to Dirk, but the other victim was harder to pull off." He rubbed furiously at his jaw, contemplating if he should even bother continuing. She was set to toss him out at any second, he was sure of it. Hell, he'd do her the favour and toss himself out and save her the trouble. "I never told anyone what I saw. I made up a story about panicking and getting trigger happy and they bought it. You got to understand how this place haunted me. I kept coming back for weeks after I was released from the nuthouse. Then, one day, I run into the landlord, and he's handing over a lease to me, telling me I'm here often enough to live here so why not just move in?" He could feel her shift her position beside him, and he sighed angrily at himself for being so open. Still, once started, he might as well keep spewing it out. Might as well kill this thing before it even started.

"So I took him up on the offer. I know, crazy, right? But it was like, I don't know, like it was my duty to be here. Because it was my fault, for being such a pigheaded ass and going it alone in there when I should have been a lot more cautious. I let it out, and I have to pay for that. It's why I have so much trouble leaving it and going further than this building. I'm scared—no, you don't understand, I'm terrified it's going to follow me out there. It's like an infection, you know? Like a cancer I alone have to keep contained."

He could feel the warm touch her hip against his. He sat with his hands clasped before him, elbows balanced on his knees.

"You must think I'm totally crazy," he said.

Her warm hand met the curve of his chin and pulled him toward her.

The soft heat of her mouth on his own was a pleasant, unexpected surprise.

## **episode twenty-one: infrared technology**





She lay in bed with her arms draped casually over her breasts as a gentle nudge beside her brought her into proper wakefulness. She opened one eye and gave him a playful half-smile, hoping the suggestion of further romantic antics would be dutifully pounced upon. But the eyes that gazed down on her were shadowed in concern, his bottom lip bit fiercely between the even rows of his teeth.

“There’s something going on next door,” Charlie said.

Natassia let out a frustrated, angry groan and grabbed her t-shirt off of the pile of several others at her bedside and slid it on in one fluid motion. Against the head of her bed, which was actually the back of her pull-out couch, a noisy, banging ruckus had begun its usual routine of ruining what would otherwise be a highly erotic moment. Charlie reached down to the floor and pulled up her laptop, bringing it into bed with them. He began furiously typing on the keypad. “I reconfigured the infrared modules in the program,” he said, rows of indecipherable numbers and symbols swimming across the screen in alchemical 3-D imagery. “Dependent upon the waste generated by degrading radioactive flow, we should be able to gain a better visual this time.”

Natassia grabbed his wrist and checked Charlie’s rather complex digital watch. “I’m not sure but it’s either six a.m. here, or possibly in Zurich. I don’t know about you, but I tend to count this hour of the morning as ‘me’ time.” She rolled onto her side and teased Charlie’s nude stomach with a series of tickling swirls with her fingertips. “Come on, it’s not that loud, and you know you don’t get good readings when it’s just a low grumble. Turn off your NASA satellite thingy and go back to sleep.”

But Charlie was aghast at Natassia’s reluctance to investigate further, and he brushed her fingers off of him with a quick shove from his hand. “I’ll have you know it’s my own personal reverb system that has nothing at all to do with the low calibre of NASA’s latest efforts. I’ve sent them the specs for this particular program, but they absolutely refuse to respond to my suggestions. I am severely disappointed in them, and their lack of forward thinking in Investigative Radiation Kryptographical Stations.”

Natassia yawned, her arms outstretched like a cat’s behind her. “Is this why you’re forbidden by law to have a cell phone?” she lazily asked.

“Among other things,” Charlie guiltily replied. “AT&T was very upset when I retraced their telemarketer to a specific home address and spammed his line with Boxworth Electronics ads. I don’t understand the issue—He was permitted to call my family home without permission, I can’t see why I needed it to call his.”

“Is that the automatic recall that lasted two hours? With the volume on full and that terrible static feedback that gave him permanent damage to his left ear? Honestly, Charlie, you’re lucky all they did was ban you from cell phones for life, you could have gone to jail for virtual assault.”

“He’d called three times during our family dinner hour,” Charlie primly stated. “My mother was very upset.”

The growling thumps and whumps within the wall grew in fury, and a very exhausted Natassia pulled

her pillow over her face in a vain attempt to drown the violence out. “I wish that thing would shut up once and for all. I don’t suppose you have any earsplitting reverb that can finish it off. I mean, it’s not fair, here I was just starting to get used to being back in my flat and enjoying the quiet, and then that stupid, whatever it is, mirrorball thing keeps bashing its guts against the drywall.” Natassia pounded her fist against the wall in vain, the effort only serving to aggravate the fury further. A series of pounding knocks punched at the wall directly behind Natassia’s head, the tense beginning of a migraine brought to the surface of her skull. “Oh shut up and get back into your own dimensional construct, you noisy bastard twat!”

“Taunting it will only make it worse,” Charlie reminded her. A muffled beeping sound disturbed the tense atmosphere further, especially when Charlie pulled up a small box on the laptop screen, the text message adding to his worry. “According to the GPS tracking system I put in his morning coffee, Mr. Boxworth is presently in the store.” He gave Natassia’s blank glare a hapless shrug. “Nanotechnology, secretly used by the CIA in 1989. We got a shipment of the chips a couple of years ago, and instead of calling the authorities, as would be the usual route, Mrs. Boxworth insisted I use them for keeping track of her husband. As you know, he has had a stroke, and his mind isn’t properly connected. He tends to wander.” The laptop uttered a soft chime and a window on the screen opened to show a detailed map of the Boxworth Electronics store. It blipped with every movement of the minuscule red dot that was Art Boxworth. “The tracking system only lasts for a couple of days before the digestive process flushes it out of his system. It’s a good thing we have about ten thousand of the chips, especially since there’s no way we can order more.”

Natassia eyed the two empty coffee mugs on her kitchen table with increasing suspicion. “You wouldn’t do anything like that to me, would you?” she asked.

“I don’t imagine so,” Charlie said, his answer not as solid as Natassia would have liked. He placed his arm possessively around her shoulders. “Is there any reason for me to?”

Natassia hesitated, which was definitely not the answer Charlie was wanting. He slid his arm off of her shoulders, to place it primly at his side as he continued to monitor Mr. Boxworth’s erratic in-store movements. “It’s not that you shouldn’t trust me,” Natassia said, quickly absolving herself. “It’s my brother. You know how he is. He’d find some way to screw things up for me, I’m sure of it.” She bit down on her bottom lip, hoping that Charlie would buy the excuse. Using herself as an alibi against possible surveillance was unusual even by Cold War gadgetry standards, and she was sure Charlie didn’t suspect anything. Why would he, especially when all the parts were in the right place and Charlie’s steadfast love was blind to the blatant similarities in personality.

“Your brother is a lot like you,” Charlie said, destroying Natassia’s illusions. “You have very deep family traits.”

“How so?” Natassia cautiously asked.

“Such as the way you tilt your head to the left, at an awkward angle. Your brother does the same thing.” Charlie shook his head at the screen, angling it to take off the glare. “He’s in the back room, no doubt messing with the inventory cataloguing. We’ll have one hell of a mess to clean up in the morning.” He typed in a series of commands on the keyboard, the din behind the wall pounding out a headache inducing rhythm that pulsed in time with Natassia’s worry. Thump-whump. Thump-whump.

“I suppose it’s understandable. You are twins, after all.”

“Yes,” Natassia said, bright eyed and eager to latch onto this reasoning, which wasn’t wholly incorrect. She slid closer to him, her arms draped around Charlie’s waist, her chin dipped at his navel. “Fraternal twins. Bad habits formed in the womb. It was a cramped space, you know. It was only supposed to be a bachelor apartment.” She gave him a grinning wink at her own clever assessment only to see that

Charlie was frowning down at her. He pressed his thumb against her chin, gently rubbing it.

“It’s so strange,” he said, his dark eyes hooded in Deep Thoughts as he traced along the outside of her jaw with his fingertips. “You even have the same ink stain on her your chin as he does. It’s very, very odd.”

Natassia suddenly pulled away, her palm rubbing at her chin in a near panic. She took it down a notch when it was clear Charlie was confused by the abrupt action. “We are both in the same line of work,” she curtly said, her chin rubbed red and raw with her palm. “That twin thing again, right? We both paint signs, we both do illustrations and artwork on the side. Only stands to reason we get similar work related messes.”

“It’s so exact,” Charlie said, frowning further. He glanced around the flat, a piece of whitewashed brick crumbling to the floor thanks to the pounding going on behind the wall. “I don’t how you and your brother can live here.”

“I’ve gotten used to the noise,” Natassia replied.

“No, I mean the space itself. It’s so small, barely enough room for a mouse to live in let alone a human being. A cockroach would be claustrophobic. I can’t imagine how the two of you manage to share it.”

“He’s not here all the time,” Natassia quickly explained. “Nathan spends most of his days and nights at his girlfriend’s house. She lives all the way on the other side of the city. She has a penthouse—A big one, with a flowering corpse plant plunked right in the centre of her living room.”

“Corpse flowers? Aren’t they rare?” Charlie gave Natassia a knowing look. “You need to stop believing everything your brother tells you. Ninety percent of what seeps out of his mouth makes about much sense as a nun arguing for Darwinism.”

“That’s a highly incendiary remark,” Natassia snapped. She crossed her arms tight across her chest and pressed her back against the cushions of her couch, the pounding violence behind her slamming an unknown foe around with destructive glee. “I should think there are quite a few nuns out there on the side of Darwin. Evolution doesn’t necessarily cancel out the very heart of intelligent design.”

“I’m sure you think so,” Charlie said. He frowned as Mr. Boxworth began mulling about the cash registers on his map, like a hungry Pac Man. “I’m not comfortable with him being able to drop in whenever he wants. I wish he didn’t have a key.”

“He can’t afford his own flat,” Natassia argued.

“No. I mean Boxworth. He might trigger the alarm and if he does that there’s going to be a hell of a mess in the morning. And possibly police involvement and jail time. Smart bombs, even on a small scale, aren’t all that clever.” He grudgingly called up a program and typed in a series of numbers on the keypad and waited patiently. “Mrs. Boxworth?” he said, smiling as though she were standing in front of him. His voice was deferential, sweetly polite and wanting to please. Keeping the call confidential, he pulled out an embedded set of earphones and placed one of the receivers into his ear, hiding Mrs. Boxworth’s replies. It felt unnecessarily covert, and Charlie gave Natassia an understanding sigh.

“She likes me to be focused,” he assured her.

Natassia didn’t like this virtual form of flirting, and so she rolled over on her side, her arms encircled around Charlie’s waist in a sign of possessive want. Her tongue dove into his navel, causing Charlie to let out a small yelp.

“What? Oh, nothing, Mrs. Boxworth. I’m just concerned because Mr. Boxworth is at the store and... Ah!” He squirmed beneath Natassia’s expert touch, his cheeks the colour of polished apples. “Oh... OH... Yes, you’re welcome Mrs. Boxworth—Oh yes. Mmm. Yes.—What’s that? No, nothing. Yes. Of

course, that's an excellent idea. Good-bye." He clicked the laptop shut with a slap and gave a playful one to Natassia's backside. "She's going to go and get him."

Deft fingers traced the small cleft at his abdomen. "I thought you weren't allowed to own a phone," she reminded him.

"I'm not. I built this calling program myself."

"But don't you need a phone company or something to connect you to others?"

"I make my own connections."

The wall rumbled behind them, and Natassia pulled away reluctantly, her face buried deep into her pillow as morning sunlight threatened to take away their pleasant lazing. The howls and thumps behind the wall had long since stopped holding any real terror for her since, when it had its way and came crumbling down into her personal space, it had left what became more positive repercussions in its wake than negative. She lightly kissed the crook of Charlie's neck, accentuating this point.

"I thought you said apartment #220 is empty?"

"It is," Natassia yawned. Her pillow was warm and soft thanks to the additional body heat at her side. "Poor bastard was ripped to bloody shreds by the Something crawling around in there."

Charlie was tense at this. "And yet you continue to live here?"

Natassia shrugged against her heated pillow. "Doesn't have a hate-on for me, whatever it is."

Charlie reached up and placed his palm on the white bricks, stroking the wall as though he were petting it. The violence reverberated back against his hands, making his arm shake with every deadly blow. "How long has this being going on?"

Natassia was growing impatient with the conversation, a defence mechanism she'd developed in regards to the apartment next door and the possible bloody carnage it could wreak upon them. In many ways, it was like owning an untrained lion, and hoping that feeding it enough meat and teasing it with tentative admiration would be enough to keep it tamed. After a while, despite the dangers, complacency creeps in, and this was where Natassia was in her mind at present, ignoring the roar of the lion as he paced before her, his tempered anger set to erupt in a weighty, sharp clawed strike.

"This is connected," Charlie said, his brow furrowed in deep concentrated Thought.

"To what?" Natassia asked.

"My grandfather."

Natassia rolled onto her back and stared at her ceiling. It was crisp and white, with no hint of an invisible, dangerous force clomping inside of it. If anything, her worry had diminished because the Something behind her wall had also shrunk. No longer did it storm along the underside of her floorboards or crawl beneath her windowsill in a vain attempt at escape. It seemed cowed, as if the Event had beaten it into near submission, reducing it to the confines of the shared wall and denying it further access. Still, with every pounding blow this false domesticity was challenged, with Natassia on its opposing side, her lazy acknowledgement of its terrors a dangerous waiting game.

"Has your grandfather ever ripped anyone to shreds?" she calmly asked.

Charlie frowned. "Not that I know of."

"Hm. Does he pound the walls until the bricks start cracking? Does he blast apart the building and rebuild it seconds later?" She opened one eye to look over his concentrated expression, Charlie's dark hair an unkempt halo, his mouth a grim line in determined Thought, his cheeks and jaw outlined softly

in black stubble that made him look as though he were an illustration brought to life from magical ink. “He doesn’t crawl out of haunted mirrors and he doesn’t mess with your understanding of reality. Which can only mean one thing.”

“Which is?”

“There’s no connection whatsoever.”

Charlie’s impatient sigh at this explanation told Natassia he didn’t believe her. “But there is,” he insisted, and he reached across the sofa-bed to get dressed at her side, his white t-shirt pulled out from behind a cushion and shook of its wrinkles. His Boxworth Electronics uniform waited in carefully draped folds on the back of her kitchen chair, its dark blue polyester fabric a plastic attempt at importance. It spoke as much about Mr. Boxworth’s latent vanity as Charlie’s utter lack of it. His palm scraped against the black stubble on his chin and he yawned, his day properly beginning with the usual cryptic dilemma. “The very fact it lives, in some weird way, between the walls is indicative of a similarity. This cannot be ignored.”

Natassia made a face and scrunched her pillow in a fierce hug. “I can’t stand it,” she said. “You sound too much like Mark.”

“He has a highly analytical mind,” Charlie agreed.

“Anal is the right word,” Natassia groaned. “I’ve never met a person who could compartmentalize as effectively as my bro—as my dear cousin Mark. His sister, Mars...”

“I thought she was his cousin as well?” Charlie asked.

Natassia bit down on that tidbit of information, not at all clear on how they had managed their familial arrangements. There was a considerable amount of backtracked fact checking done, and not for the first time Natassia wondered if it would be a good idea to start keeping notes on how they were all apparently interrelated. “Mars is my sister, and Mark’s cousin, of course,” she said, picking her words carefully. “She’s older than Nathan and I by a whole year.” Then, in a vain attempt to round out the slight lie, “Our family is fond of alliteration.”

“Makes for confusing family reunions,” Charlie observed.

“Does it ever,” Natassia replied.

“Mars is an equally analytical person, from what I have gathered about her,” Charlie said. He was out of bed and dressing now, his ugly striped blue tie stretched around his neck and brought through to a neat, slightly introverted rectangle at his throat. “She’s more approachable than Mark, in my opinion. Not as prone to confrontation.”

“Maybe,” Natassia said, not sure how being the exact same person could somehow shift their personalities so drastically when only a few physical pieces were rearranged. “She’s got more courage than me, though, I’ll give her that. She’s been in that apartment twice, you know. Me, I wouldn’t step one foot in there if you chopped it off and brought it in yourself.”

Charlie shrugged his jacket on, its navy blue shade too bright to make it fashionable. He eyed the wall behind Natassia with predatory understanding. “I need to get in there,” he said to her. His socks were half on, half off. “No matter what angle you try to look at it from, it all boils down to things being inside of walls that aren’t supposed to be there—Be one of them my grandfather or otherwise this chaotic noise. I don’t think we’ve come close to understanding even a fraction of how weird this place arranges itself.”

You could say that again, Natassia thought, but she bit down on her words.

“If we could get a key I know I could figure a few things out. I could set up a web cam with infrared, along with a few other extras. I’d be really interested in the kind of radioactive Geiger readings a phenomenon like this gives off.”

“Mrs. MacDonald was the one who went in with Mars the last time,” Natassia said. The wall shook behind her, and she clasped her arms around herself protectively, not liking the concept of having to face its fury outright. “She got the key off the building manager. Far as I know, she still has it.”

Charlie tightly laced up his shining black loafers. You could tell a lot about a man by the kind of shoes he wore, and while everything else about him was cheap and out of fashion, his shoes were expensive European leather, a dark burgundy hue without a scratch marring the heel. Mark would be envious.

“It is imperative that we get into that apartment,” Charlie said, his voice clipped in military determination.

“I don’t know if she’ll go for it, though,” Natassia said, trying to put in a seed of doubt into Charlie’s dangerous hopes. She’d long convinced herself that as long as the noise simmered down to a low rumble she didn’t need to know anything further about it. But the facts were painfully intruding on the fiction she had wrapped so tightly around herself. The cold fingertips of resentment were starting to creep into her resolve, making her inexplicably angry at her sister/brother and their stupid, nosey nature.

“I get off work at ten thirty tonight,” Charlie reminded her. “We’ll just have to ask her then.”

## **episode twenty-two: no spinsters here**



Natassia didn’t want to do this. Though there wasn’t any open animosity brewing between Charlie and Mars, she enjoyed keeping the two of them separated from each other if only to reinforce her own, created mythology that she had wrought in her romantic relationship with Charlie. It was so irritating the way Mars’s eyes would glaze over as Natassia described her love life, her sister’s attention rooted solely in facts and cold interactions rather than any sense of romantic idealism. And it was this cold attitude that would, against her own better judgement, spring Natassia into long diatribes of the perfection of her and Charlie’s relationship, a litany that had, after a couple of weeks, expanded into a metaphysical epic that had a shallow root in reality.

This problem was all her sister’s fault. The more Natassia became excited over her new romance, the more Mars would raise her brow in an unspoken sarcastic question. Frustrated with the lack of enthusiasm from her sibling, Natassia would in turn expand upon her romantic saga until the little

white lies became outright untruths. Charlie had been on NASA's radar, but in Natassia's descriptions he'd built the rockets himself using nothing but crazy glue and a couple of rolls of chicken wire. His musical taste was impeccable, the epitome of a man of class—Though she failed to mention that seeing as how she was a die hard ska fan, knowing all the words to Monkey Man by The Specials easily placed him into this category.

Charlie was intelligent. True. Charlie single-handedly stopped a nuclear invasion. False. Charlie can disarm bombs. True. Charlie builds them regularly and is stockpiling them for defence against the insane bloodbath hovering on the tense edge our century's periphery. False, though some may wish it weren't.

The need to embellish Charlie's already surreal existence was overkill, and Natassia understood this. The problem at present, however, was that Charlie had no idea she'd made him out to be a superhuman bastion of knowledge and power, secretly paid by enemies of the Kremlin all the while subverting criminal elements. Sure, he was freakishly intelligent, that was true, and also true was the fact that Boxworth Electronics had Homeland Security on speed-dial, but there was nothing secretive to Charlie's work. If anything, he was annoyingly open about his various, strange projects.

Charlie checked his watch for the hundredth time. "Go on," he encouraged her.

"This really isn't a good idea. Mars likes her beauty rest."

"We planned this yesterday, why didn't you tell her we were stopping by after my shift?" Charlie sighed, but it was clear he wasn't letting Natassia off the hook. "If you won't do this, I will." He clenched his hand into a fist and raised it in the air.

Natassia's knuckles instantly hit her sister's apartment door. "She's not going to appreciate this," she said, her heart hammering in uncertainty. Ten thirty at night, when she had to get up at an ungodly early hour in the morning. No, her sister, or worse still, her brother was not going to be happy at this intrusion, which would make the revelation that she'd been grossly exaggerating Charlie's finer points all the more bitter. After all, neither Mars nor Mark was succeeding in the romance department, with not even a whisper of interest anywhere on that hormonal horizon, so there would be no doubt that he or she would love to rub Natassia's nose in her own folly and...

The door opened. A stocky, stubble headed man with the fiercest ice blue eyes she had ever seen stood in its frame. He wore a pair of black boxer shorts and nothing else. His muscles were well defined, even if his skin was a little on the pale side. He rubbed at his frosty eyes with the heel of his hand, forcing winter somnolence into a spring thaw.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"I..." Natassia checked the apartment number on the door again. Yes, this was her sister's apartment, no question. She narrowed her eyes at this interloper. "You're that weird guy," she said, accusingly. She pointed a furious finger at his chest. "You're that weirdo who can't get a newspaper! You're Paul Nash!"

"I stand accused," he said, shrugging. "What do you want?"

"What the hell are you doing here?" Natassia shot at him and pushed past him into the apartment, Charlie meekly following suit. She slammed the door behind her with an angry kick. "Where's my sister?"

"Mars is in bed," Paul said. His calm was infuriating in its nonchalance. Natassia stormed into the living room, fighting the urge to swear at Meister who gave her presence his usual hissing greeting.

"What's all the commotion?" A yawning, bedhead version of her sister toddled out of her bedroom and

into the living room, her tall, thin body hidden neatly beneath a fuzzy pink bathrobe with matching fuzzy pink slippers. Meister pounced on her right foot, his tail twitching as his teeth happily gnawed on stuffing and faux fur. Mars' eyes widened when she saw it was her sister who had disturbed them, an embarrassment furthered by the appearance of Charlie at her elbow. "Oh, hi," she said. Then, frowning, "It's kind of late for you to just be dropping by, isn't it? I've had this conversation with you before."

"I didn't know you were keeping strange company," Natassia said, her voice dripping with all manner of nasty accusation.

"No stranger than anything you've dragged home," Mars replied with equal venom. "Honestly, do you think I'm supposed to live like a nun just because I had a bad experience once? Not likely." She stormed into her kitchen. "I'll put on a pot of coffee. Charlie, how do you take it?"

"I don't drink coffee," Charlie said. "If you have an herbal tea, I'll accept that instead."

"Well, that's the second strike against you. I can't relate to a person who doesn't drink coffee. The first one is that you're dating my sister. Not exactly a good show of judgement."

"You really are a bitch," Natassia reminded her.

"It wasn't always that way. You've made me a good study," Mars replied. She filled the kettle and rummaged through her cupboards until she found a crinkled box of chamomile tea. "I'll have to wrap up the teabag, or else Meister gets into the garbage and digs it out. He seems to think chamomile is the same as catnip. Do you take it with honey, Charlie, or just plain?"

"Just plain," Charlie said, and confidently sat on her worn couch. Meister gave him an evil glare, but unlike most other guests, Charlie didn't get the usual injurious swat. "This meeting was my idea. I'm hoping you don't mind the intrusion." He smoothed down his ugly blue striped tie with the palm of his hand, Paul Nash glaring at him in equal question as the fat tabby who sat at his feet. "I don't like small talk, so I will just say outright why I wanted us to meet this evening. Natassia says you've been in apartment #220. Twice."

Various mugs were arranged neatly on the black and gold flecked surface of the kitchen countertop. Mars swirled a spoon in one of them, the clinking echoing through the small space. "Yes, I was," she said, her back to them.

Natassia intruded on the question, crowding her sister in the small galley kitchen as she leaned against the refrigerator, preventing her from opening it to gather cream. "How long has this being going on?" she harshly whispered.

Mars cast a guilty look at Paul over her shoulder. He was now sitting beside Charlie, with Meister on his lap, both the tabby and the human being with similar expressions of distrust. "About a week," Mars said.

"A week? And you never told me!"

"I didn't realize I was required to send out a memo to you detailing my love life."

"Don't be a cow. You know I want to have all the gory details."

"Exactly. Which is why I didn't tell you." Mars pushed the fridge door open, forcing Natassia to stand back. She was relentless in her need for knowledge.

"What was it like for you?" she asked. She gave her sister a knowing nod. "Better, right? I mean, as a guy it's just one shot, but wow, being a girl means you can hit a home run as many times as you like, am I right?"

Mars made a face. "You are disgusting," she said, and closed the fridge door, and the matter of her sex



life, shut.

“This better be the hazelnut stuff,” Natassia pouted when Mars wordlessly handed her a cup of coffee.

“I think the less we know about apartment #220, the better,” Natassia caught Paul saying to Charlie as she walked back into the living room. She scooted Meister out of his favourite chair, and he growled at the intrusion, his ears flattened as he ran into the bathroom to make sure his opinion on having all these people in his private home was known.

“It’s not a safe place to be,” Paul finished.

“Safety is my primary concern, especially since the strange Event that let it free has resulted in two deaths. Its prison within the wall between Natassia’s flat and apartment #220 has not been fully breached, however, since it is still pounding away, at all hours of the day and night.” He frowned over his cup of chamomile, and picked out a solitary cat hair that was floating on its surface. “As your cousin has been made aware and no doubt as your sister has told you, my grandfather, George Weiss, after coming home from his job at the local bank, disappeared into the walls of what is now my apartment.” He took a sip of his tea and nodded over it, enjoying the slightly citrus taste. “I have to believe that the thing living between the walls of your sister’s flat and apartment #220 is directly related to what happened to my grandfather.”

“He lives in the wall?” Paul asked, his mouth a twisted sneer of disbelief. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Absolutely not,” Charlie said, shaking his head with solemn sincerity. “As I have told Mark, Natassia’s cousin and Mars’s brother, there are many times that I myself have seen his fingers trace along the walls of my kitchen.”

The four people now gathered in the living room glanced warily at the kitchen counter and its breakfast nook, the clean, dark cupboards taking on an eerie significance that Natassia was sure Ikea had never intended. “He’s designed an infra-red program to help track the thing in #220’s movements,” Natassia added. Mars stayed close to Paul, her thigh touching his in an intimacy that made Natassia gag. She forced herself to concentrate on Charlie’s more urgent matter. “The trouble is, my stone wall keeps getting in the way of the readings. He can’t get an accurate overview of what’s going on. The signal is too faint, even on the most violent days.”

“The only solution is, of course, to get into apartment #220,” Charlie said, his voice animated with the excitement of discovery. “If I can get the computer in there and point it at the offending wall, I can get all kinds of information. The movements of this thing, what its three dimensional form is, Geiger readings and its magnetic field properties...”

“Geiger readings,” Mars quietly repeated over her hot cup of coffee. Her eyes were downcast, her body tensed at the suggestion. Paul rubbed her shoulders, but the small act of intimacy did nothing to ease her unsettled mood. She sipped quietly at her coffee. “So why are you knocking on my door if you have this all figured out already?”

“You’re our go-to girl,” Natassia explained. “You said it yourself, Bonnie MacDonald has a key to the place. She seems to have a soft spot for you, so you can easily ask her for it.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” Mars replied, frowning. “Trust me, Mrs. MacDonald is not a lady you just demand things from. She may be elderly, but she’s got all her wits about her, and she won’t let those keys out of her grip so easily. She’ll insist on being a part of this.”

“Then let her be,” Charlie said, surprising them all. He cupped his hands tight around the warmth of his chamomile tea. “She clearly has something at stake in this, otherwise she wouldn’t have such a vested

interest in it.”

“She’s just a nosey old lady,” Natassia said.

“Not so,” Charlie said. “All events in this building have a strange attraction, from the process of moving in to all that happens once one gets an apartment key. This Bonnie MacDonald you speak of—How long has she lived here?”

“I don’t know,” Mars replied, thinking on her elderly friend’s rotund form and her habit of wearing ugly shades of lipstick. “Seems to be a long time.”

“Maybe your mother knew her,” Natassia said to Charlie.

“No matter from what angle we look at it, it’s a solid dichotomy that has formed,” Charlie said. “Each of us has come to this building for a purpose, and each of us has a side effect of that purpose that has come into being since living here. For myself, it’s the image of my grandfather moving behind the walls of my apartment.” He eagerly fixed the others with a eureka grin. “What about all of you? What strange things have you experienced since you’ve arrived here?” He turned to Natassia, who shrank from his intense scrutiny as though by this study alone he’d know her highly guarded secret. “I know what yours is,” he said, and she felt faint.

“Meaning?” Mars said, her eyes wide, her body tense and unmoving.

“Her unwanted neighbour, of course. The loud banging and the thing crawling along the wall.” He glanced from Mars to Natassia and back with confused concern. “Unless there’s something else.”

“Nothing else,” Natassia quickly answered.

“Paul has agoraphobia,” Mars said, more than happy to continue to deflect detection.

“Thanks. Nice to know the freak here gets to have a ringside seat into my inner torment,” Paul growled at her. “Since we’ve gotten to know each other so well in the last few seconds, I guess I ought to introduce myself. Paul Nash.” He held out his hand to Charlie, who took it and shook it eagerly.

“Charlie Weiss,” he answered.

Paul raised a brow at this, his hand slid out of Charlie’s with cool understanding. “You work for Boxworth Electronics,” he said. Then, in a much darker tone, “You’re the guy who installed the security system for the City Bank.”

Charlie was quiet a long moment. The steam from his chamomile tea did nothing to ease the sudden tension in the room.

“If you are referring to the First City Bank off Main Street, then yes. I did install the security system there.”

Charlie quietly sipped his tea. Paul continued to glare.

Both Natassia and Mars gave the spring loaded exchange between the two men a confused frown.

“And?” Natassia said, frustrated with this revelation’s lack of progress. “I’m sure Charlie has installed lots of crap in lots of places, what’s the big deal?”

“It’s not what he installed. It’s who was working with him at the time.” Paul leaned forward, his elbows on his knees as his icy blue eyes put Charlie in his sights. “A little bastard me and the boys at the precinct knew as Dirk the Jerk.”

Mars flinched as though something sharp had stuck her. Natassia, used to her sister’s nervous nature, thought nothing of it.

“I had no idea he had bank robbing on his mind,” Charlie asserted. “It was the bank manager who hired us.” He narrowed his eyes at Paul. “I suspected the security protocols he wanted put in place. I warned the manager against using a rolling timer, with blackouts at half hour intervals that lasted in upwards of five minutes. He outright refused to see the weight of such a breach in security.” Charlie sipped his tea. “I never implemented them, of course.”

“Which led to his arrest not a week later when the camera caught him skimming funds out of the safe,” Paul finished. He chewed his bottom lip thoughtfully. “That was quite a take-down. Lot of cops based their future careers on that bust.” There should have been a compliment lurking in there, Natassia thought, but only tension hovered in its place.

Charlie sipped his tea before replying. “All in a day’s work.”

If he hoped this was the end of the matter, he was sadly mistaken. Paul’s neck suddenly erupted into an ugly, hot red hue, his ice blue eyes frosting over with an inward blizzard. “There’s only one thing I hate worse than a criminal and that’s a criminal who doesn’t back up his team. You let those bastards take the fall and you laughed while it happened. It doesn’t look good on you, that kind of selfishness.”

“And how was I being selfish?” Charlie asked. He was careful not to meet Paul’s gaze. “From where I was sitting, I saw a crime being committed and I did something about it. You said it yourself, quite a few policemen had their careers made by my actions. Which is more than I can say for all of us here, who are sitting on this couch, knowing there are terrible things happening in apartment #220 and doing nothing to stop it.”

“As if we could...” Mars began.

He fixed his gaze on her, the tension in the room pushed to dangerous levels. Paul’s fists pumped open and closed, and Natassia couldn’t help but wonder how she had never noticed both her sister and brother’s propensity to fall in love with madness. “You have to get that key from Mrs. MacDonald,” Charlie said to Mars.

“Impossible,” Mars said, shaking her head. “She’ll insist on joining us.”

“Does this cause a problem?” Charlie replied. He placed his mug carefully onto the clear glass coaster in front of him on the coffee table. Meister dug his paw into the mug, flicking the liquid out of it in tiny droplets from his paw before licking it off in purring glee. “She has proven herself resilient enough, from what you have told Natassia. Perhaps she is even an asset.”

“I doubt that,” Mars said, and she eyed Paul warily. “She can be a bit, how can I put it? Abrasive concerning people she doesn’t care for.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem,” Charlie cheerfully replied, a sense of pride exuding from him as he leaned back in confidence on the couch. “I have a way with geriatrics.”

## **episode twenty-three: sasquatch**



Charlie had greatly underestimated the stubborn nature of Mrs. Bonnie MacDonald, who openly scoffed at his suggestion she stay at home and have a nice rest while they took the key to further investigate apartment #220. “I haven’t had a day in all my years that I wasn’t busy doing something,” she said. Her pudgy hand was wrapped tight around the skeleton key, as though sensing any one of them could make a sudden move to pry it out of her grip. And they certainly looked the part, Mars observed, the four of them lined before the elderly woman, Paul with his arms crossed and his expression hostile, Natassia stealing quick, guilty glances in her direction and Charlie—whose ways with geriatrics fizzled and burnt out—tapped his foot, his hands on his hips, a frustrated sigh escaping him.

“You are such a nice young woman,” Bonnie said, patting Mars’ hand in patronizing understanding. She eyed Charlie’s ugly blue suit with obvious disdain. “I never trust a man who wears polyester. And that t-shirt is too tight to be respectable. Honestly, dearie, I don’t know why you hang out with such riff-raff.”

“Natassia is my sister,” Mars reminded her.

“Ah, yes. Tch. Can’t pick our relatives, can we?” She picked up a plate of delicious pastries and offered it to Mars. “Go on, dearie, have another one. You’re all skin and bone, you are. Wasting away. Ach, it’s no wonder.” She gave Paul a tight lipped study from her comfortable Laz-Y-Boy chair. “Some men are nothing but trouble. They just eat a woman’s life away, mark my words, dearie, a rotten man is as corrosive as lye.” She gave Mars a disappointed smile when she refused the offering, and put the plate down before Natassia could take a biscuit. “Not you,” she said, and Natassia’s fingers curled over the plate of lovely pastries like a hawk’s claw poised over a mouse. “You’ve already had three.”

“But they’re from Henri’s!” Natassia whined.

“No, they are from my kitchen. They don’t get to Henri’s until tomorrow morning.” Her pudgy fingers hovered over the plate, and in a moment of happy decision she picked one for herself. “I don’t understand you young people,” she admitted as she slathered a mouth-watering scone with clotted cream and strawberry jam. “Always taking more than your share and rushing through what you already have.”

“It’s ten o’clock,” Charlie said, making a big, impatient show of checking his watch, complete with yet another exasperated sigh. “Mrs. MacDonald, we have been here for over an hour. We could be in that apartment right now if you would simply stop stalling.”

Bonnie MacDonald fixed him sharp in her sight. “You mind your manners,” she said to him, her voice dropping an octave or two. Charlie flinched at her tone, as though expecting her to wield a wooden spoon to smack him with at any second.

Bonnie MacDonald’s apartment was, as seemed to be the case for so many in this odd building, a wholly original configuration. It was at least twice the size of Mars’ already roomy flat, with high

ceilings and plaster rococo designs adorning the walls, the baroque outline painted a dull gold, with a pale blue base. With her burgundy Lay-Z-Boy and matching chesterfield and brocade lamps complete with dangling glass beads, Mars felt more in the presence of Elizabeth Taylor circa 1957 than a rotund Scottish lady whose lipstick was right now a weird combination of Pepto Bismal pink and street sign orange. She smiled as she took another bite of her pastry, her dentures slightly unhinged.

“I do have to get up early in the morning,” Mars quietly said.

Bonnie’s head snapped up as though she had been struck. “What’s that, dearie? You need to be up early? Oh, heavens, why didn’t you say so? Here we all are, nattering away, getting nothing at all done while you’re so patiently waiting.” She patted the back of Mars’ hand, and then fiercely gripped it as she used it as leverage to ease herself off the chair. “Oh, my old bones! Listen to me crack and creak! I should be getting some oil for these old knicker-knacker joints of mine.” For all her show, once she was out of the comfortable chair she moved perfectly, her body in rolling balance as she clutched the skeleton key and headed for her front door, her small train of hostages following suit. “A machine that reads people’s shadows,” she said, pausing at the door to fix her attention on a very twitchy Charlie. “I been wondering of that since you told me. Tell me, is it like it was in the Hiroshima’s? When those poor sods got their souls burnt onto the ground after the Bomb gone and exploded?”

“Mars did tell me there were odd Geiger readings,” Charlie replied. He opened her door, and leaned on it, preventing it from being closed again. “Please, after you.”

She paused, and concentrated on his pinched face. “You’re a very stressful young man, did you know that? I suppose that’s what happens when you have all those thoughts rolling about in your head non-stop. A shame, really, I doubt you ever know how to relax.” She shook a small kink out of her right arm. “Not the cuddly type, I can tell. I bet you keep your tie on when you’re at the naughty business, too busy to take it off.”

Natassia reddened at this, and caught Charlie’s guilty shrinking from Bonnie MacDonald’s uncomfortable assessment. Bonnie patted him sweetly on the arm and made her way out of the apartment into the hall. Charlie audibly groaned, relieved that she was finally in motion.

“Oh my,” Bonnie said, toddling back in again, leaving Charlie aghast and Paul snickering in response. “I left it in the kitchen.”

“I can get it,” Charlie offered. Then, in further annoyance, “Whatever it is.”

“No, no,” she shouted from her apartment’s vast confines. Mars jealousy over the elderly woman’s flat rose inside of her, for it was far bigger and grander than her own, the kitchen a separate room complete with dining area, island, and every manner of modern culinary gadgetry. There was a considerable rumble of drawers and cutlery, which muffled Charlie’s curses.

“I told you this was a mistake,” Mars reminded him.

“Why is she insisting on coming?” he asked her through clenched teeth. “She barely understands what I’m doing.”

“Because she believes she discovered it first,” Paul evenly said. He balanced back and forth on his heels, a stance of authority that Charlie clearly didn’t appreciate. “She’s an old lady having an adventure. Cut her some slack. She’s not helpless and there’s nothing in her mind that hasn’t been sharpened to a deadly point.” Paul chewed his cheek. “She’s lived in this place the longest and knows it better than anyone. No offence, Charlie, but right now I feel a whole lot better knowing there’s someone with some real experience behind her tagging along.”

Charlie was about to offer his counter-argument, only to be stopped short by Bonnie’s excited “Found

it!”

She wobbled to the front door like the uneven marble she was, her loose dentures stained with the garish, ugly lipstick she wore. Mars stood behind Paul, not understanding how this elderly woman fit into their relationship, especially with the way she had tried to warn her off. “Here you are,” she said to Paul, and to Mars’ surprise the elderly woman handed him a small porcelain bird, painted in garish reds and blues.

He took it from her in genuine thankfulness. “I’ll take care of it,” he said, and Bonnie nodded appreciatively.

“You had to go back just to get a piece of bric-a-brac?” Charlie asked.

“No,” Bonnie said, and rummaged in her large purse. She pulled out something square and black and before Charlie could protest she lit up the hallway with a brilliant flash of light. Charlie was stunned and blinking as he fell against her door. He staggered away from it, momentarily blinded.

“My camera,” she said, plopping it back into her big, loose handbag. “I always keep a visual record of my adventures. This way that old bitty Mrs. Cox doesn’t go shaking her head and talking at me like I’m simple. I’m no liar, and after I get a few shots in and catch that spirit on film we’ll see who is a know-all then. She can be a right snot all she wants, that old cow can’t argue with a photograph!”

~\*~

Bonnie hovered over Charlie, who was trying to set up his equipment without her interference and finding it impossible. “What does this do?” she asked, pointing at something on the laptop screen and leaving a smudge of oil along with her fingerprint.

“Mrs. MacDonald, please do not touch anything. This is a very delicate piece of equipment and as you have been warned, I will not be responsible for any medical repercussions...”

“What’s that wee kitty in the corner there? Aw, it’s winking at me. Surely something so sweet can’t do a body harm.”

“Mrs. Macdonald, I beg of you, don’t...”

His words were, as usual, ignored by a pushy Scot who felt she had not only the right to invade his personal space, but the expertise as well. “There, see? I knew it. Nothing but a stream of little pink boxes and piccies and text.” Mrs. MacDonald pursed her lips in disapproval as she began reading. “What is this crap?”

“It’s my Twitter feed,” Charlie said.

Bonnie poked at an icon. A blurry photo of a dazed and confused b-list celebrity popped up. “So this tracks the spirits?”

“No, it tracks inanity. Please, Mrs. MacDonald, don’t touch the laptop!”

“@hooters4you seems to have a lot to say. My, my, that’s a lot of profanity!” Bonnie placed a fat hand over her shocked mouth. “That statement there would make a seasoned pornographer blush, it would! What kind of low slattern as that would put such a thing out for the world to see?”

“It’s my account,” Natassia admitted.

“You’re @hooters4you?” Paul asked. He gave her an odd look. “I blocked and reported you for spam. I

thought you were one of those Brit.ney bots.”

“Is this going to take much longer?” Natassia barked at Charlie.

“The bloody nasty words out of you,” Bonnie said as she read more of @hooters4you’s twitter feed. “My, my dearie, you should have that hard drive scrubbed out with soap.”

“Her keyboard,” Charlie offered. “That’s how she ‘talks’ on it, after all.”

“You are so not getting any for the next week,” Natassia counter-attacked. “And next time, when you’re primed and properly starving, you’re going to take off that damn ugly tie.”

Charlie shifted at the coffee table where the laptop and the various other bits of equipment had been set up. “My mother gave me this tie,” he muttered.

For Mars, being in these uncomfortable and yet familiar surroundings gave her a conflicted outlook. She stood apart from the group, her alliance more with Paul who was likewise separated, his shoulder leaning on the doorframe of the apartment, as though eager to make a quick escape. She gave him a small smile, but he offered none in encouragement, and her feeling of kinship with him grew.

“This isn’t a good idea,” he said to her in a low whisper.

“Why?” Mars asked. But she needn’t have. She felt the uneasiness that swelled and ebbed within the apartment, the odd mirrors seeping out anguished emotions that prickled against her better judgement. “Tell me something... What’s with the porcelain bird?”

“The thing in this wall isn’t something we should get to know,” he said, ignoring one question and loosely answering the other.

The depressed darkness with which he said this gave her goosebumps.

Charlie had regained control of his laptop and Bonnie MacDonald wistfully inspected the wall of mirrors, pointed shards of glass tapped by well manicured fingernails. “They haven’t loosened a fraction,” she observed. “That’s encouraging.”

“I don’t understand the significance,” Charlie said.

She turned on him with a forced cheerfulness that Mars knew could erupt into fury on a dime. “The spirits are still contained. They aren’t pushing back out into this world because something has gained strength enough to keep them back. Still...” She tapped at the mirror shards, a deep, concerned frown furrowing her brow. “They got out once before. They could be just burrowing in and sleeping for a while. Building up their strength to hit back with even more force.”

“What would happen then?” Mars asked.

Bonnie sighed and shook her head, her cheerful voice vanquished into solemnity. “They’ll break through and make a right mess of things. Far more than a few broken mirrors.”

Charlie scoffed at this as he read the readings on his computer screen. “Spirits. I’m not about to discount the possibility, but there is a danger in blaming it all on the supernatural. Science has its place here, not spook-talk.”

“Bah,” Bonnie replied, waving off his concern with her fat, liver spotted hand. “Science is just the same old magic with numbers attached. Just because you’ve a map doesn’t mean the location isn’t any less a miracle.”

Charlie raised a brow, unsure of her strange logic, his attention riveted to his screen and the information being relayed onto it. The laptop had been set up on the coffee table directly in front of the wall of mirrors, a custom designed web camera pointed at the wall and bringing it into immediate sepia

focus on the laptop screen. A bright green grid meshed the image, and a series of coloured lines measured not only radioactive frequencies, but also hot and cold spots beneath the wall's surface. Cold was represented in shades of blue and heat was relayed through grey and white pixelations. Charlie brought the warm spots into tighter resolution and bid those around him to remain still.

"In order to get proper readings we have to be very quiet," he told them, his voice a thin whisper in the gloomy living room. Mars had no problem with this request, nor did Paul, who remained posted at the door, ready to take flight at first opportunity. Natassia was stoic behind Charlie, her hands on his shoulders, and even Bonnie was touched by the seriousness of the mood, her hands clasped before her, her back ramrod straight as though ready to march into battle. Considering what both Natassia and Mars knew of what was hiding within the wall, Bonnie's stance took on grave significance.

After fifteen minutes of this, however, Natassia began to get fidgety.

"I need to pee," she whined. She sighed and pouted, and rolled her eyes at Charlie's unspoken insistence she remain still. "Oh come on, nothing is happening. Your little grid thing is just sitting there, and there's no blobs. You promised me grey and blue blobs."

"Spirits, dearie," Bonnie insisted.

"Not spirits, phenomenon, there is a difference," Charlie curtly replied.

"You're all so wrong," Paul muttered.

Perhaps it was the disappointment in his experiment that provoked Charlie, a sense of unaccustomed failure filling him with projected resentment. "Well, since you've appointed yourself an expert, what do you propose we call it, then?"

"Nothing," Paul said, shrugging. "Because that's what's on the screen."

"I'm going to the damned bathroom," Natassia said, her heels clomping on the parquet floor as she angrily made her way down the hall.

"Every scientific discovery is a by-product of patience," Charlie said. He pounded his fingers on the keyboard as he entered in a few commands, the screen slightly tilting to give them another barren view of the wall's jagged landscape. "It's too early for you to be passing judgement on my methods."

"I'm not passing judgement, I'm coming right out and saying it's not working." Paul Nash worked his jaw, his tongue rolling across his teeth. He gave Mars a tired once over. "It's nearly eleven p.m.. I'd rather be in bed right now."

Natassia paused in her journey to the bathroom, fixing a disgusted glare at her sister. "You are so gross."

"I didn't say anything!" Mars protested.

"Your layman analysis of my research is amusing, to say the least, Mr. Nash. Tell me, how many spectrographical radiographs have you developed in the last ten hours?" Charlie's fingers were harsh on the keys, hitting them with pinging blows.

"Layman, huh? You trying to suggest I'm not smart enough to figure out what you're doing, Mr. Evil Genius?" Paul flexed his arm muscles as he crossed them over his chest, his ice blue eyes piercing through the back of Charlie's skull. "I'm not all brawn, if that's what you're thinking, asshole."

"No, I'm sure the circumference of your cranium holds a significant amount of crap," Charlie shot back.

"What is so gross about me wanting to go to bed?" Mars asked Natassia.



Natassia's face withered as though she'd just eaten a lemon. "You just can't stop once you start, can you?"

"So what are you saying, I'm full of shit?"

"For God's sake, Natassia, I can't see the issue. It's not like you didn't surrender every unwanted detail of your own exploits, in gory technicolour. You've got a lot of nerve getting annoyed with what you've interpreted was a rude suggestion by me—Which it wasn't, by the way."

"The inference is yours, not mine."

"Watch it. This shoe has gone up tighter asses than yours."

"Threatening me doesn't make you any less ignorant."

"There it is!"

Bonnie MacDonald's excited voice broke into the various arguments spiralled around her, her hands clenched tight into white fists as she viewed the laptop screen. The fighting instantly stopped and all eyes were riveted on the blue and white shapes that moved across it. There was an audible gasp as a white hand became plainly visible as it brushed past the webcam. "Amazing," Charlie said, a slow smile surrendering his former ire into calm. "According to these readings there's a definite rise in environmental radioactive signatures. These numbers here indicate the rise in heat for this co-ordinate on the grid." He frowned as he pulled the view on the webcam back, bringing the entire wall and the ethereal shapes moving within it into a panoramic focus. "That's strange," he said, his excitement morphing quickly into confusion. "There appears to be two distinct dichotomies here. This shape, though more human, has a cold charge, the deep blue signifying it is comprised of mostly negative energy. Whereas this one..." He pointed at the pacing form that rolled back and forth across the screen, ill-defined shapes only slightly humanoid, its lumbering bulk ape-like in a blinding white cameo. "This one is made up of positive energy."

Natassia watched the white blob move back and forth. It pounded a meaty club onto the wall, sending a shudder through the eerie apartment. A shard of mirror came slightly dislodged and the white being pounded on the wall again, loosening it further. At this moment, the ill-defined blue figure moved in and roughly shoved it out of the way, dark fingers pulling on the shard of glass. With this, it was cemented firmly back into place.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Charlie observed.

But it was Natassia who said it best, her arms folded over her ample breasts, her green eyes flickering in criticism at the thing that had been tormenting her peace since she'd moved in.

"Looks like a damned Sasquatch," she said, her eyes following the blinding white blob.

## **episode twenty-four: workplace hazards**



Mark's eyes were pressed hard against the microscope, making him appear as though he were studying the slide beneath it with grim concentration. A highly observant person, however, would notice there was something amiss in his posture. It would perhaps be the slackened jaw, or the lengthy, laboured breaths that would sound the alarm. A likely hint was the relaxed state of his limbs which lay akimbo around him, his wrist only tentatively holding him upright. The slight snoring was a dead giveaway if these other clues weren't evidence enough. Mark Connor was fast asleep.

As Mars, she'd been up until two a.m., and hadn't slept well afterwards thanks to Paul's insomniac ardour. Sure, it had been pleasant, but it certainly made morphing back into the male format a little awkward since he'd had to do it on the walk in to work, and morphing and walking made Mark's limbs feel uneven for about ten minutes, and thus render his gait unsteady. There was no particular reason as to why he was male at the moment, since neither sex made any difference to his co-workers, who barely acknowledged either Mark or Mars' existence. He'd experimented with this fact several times since the Event, going so far as to change sex halfway through the day, even in the middle of conversations when Dr. Horihito's head was turned. There would be a momentary frown, as though some tiny detail was amiss, and then, inexplicably, the conversation would continue on as per usual, the sporting of a pair of mammories doing nothing more than making Horihito smile with increased frequency, a habit that Mark found to be rather creepy. So, when possible, he remained male at the workplace, not due to any sense of sexism or malingering misogyny, but solely because of Horihito's biologically induced smile and the unpleasant feeling that others in his peer group would likewise find his female self subconsciously attractive.

Gender predicaments aside, it was still bad form to fall asleep on top of a microscope, as the harsh poke on his shoulder asserted. "Hey, sleeping ugly. Wake up, naptime was an hour ago."

Mark groaned and leaned up, a nasty crack echoing through his office as his neck slid back into alignment. His eyes ached from the pressure of using a microscope as a pillow, and he touched the bruised shadows beneath his eyes gingerly with his fingertips.

A set of fingers angrily snapped in front of his vision. "Hey! Jackass. Oh, sorry, I guess it's Doctor Jackass, right? Wouldn't want to step on the toes of our Oh-So-Special in house pathologist, would we? Not if we want our lab work done on time, and we do, yes, we do, as on time as can be humanly possible, and when that effort is comprised we can assume that the in house pathologist—that's you, by the way—will actually bend the quantum forces that bind this reality together to ensure the results are in my hand well before I even ask for them. Unfortunately, it appears there's been a rift in the space/time continuum, because I was supposed to have my results two hours ago, and well, I guess the black hole of incompetence has just swallowed them up."

"No," Mark replied, wincing as his eyes came into groggy focus. He picked up a manila envelope to the left of his microscope. "I have your results here, Dr. Nash." He paused as he handed them to the wiry, blue eyed man who fidgeted beside him, his stature short and stocky, his eyes a brilliant blue and

full of a fiery, uncompromising temperament. “Dr. Nigel Nash,” Mark repeated. “You must be related to Paul Nash. He lives in my building.”

“Hey, you really know how to get on a guy’s bad side, don’t you?” Dr. Nash shot back with a smile that wasn’t at all friendly. He snatched the manila folder from Mark’s hand. “Whatever he’s said about me, he’s a liar.”

“He hasn’t said a word,” Mark said, frowning. Then, realizing his current gender opened a pathway to conversation, added: “He’s dating my cousin. She works here as a pathologist as well. You might have met her, her name is Mars. Mars Connor.”

“Never heard of her,” Dr. Nigel said, ignoring Mark and concentrating instead on the results that were hidden within the manila folder. Of course he hadn’t heard of her. He’d only been talking to her over coffee every single morning for the past two weeks. The last time they’d met, Mars suffered through a flirtatious introduction that left a nasty slap across Dr. Nash’s cheek. He’d forgotten this, of course, but Mars had made a point to refrain from wearing bust enhancing sweaters as a result. Dating his son was one thing, but having to fend off his father’s advances was a bit much to bear. Yet another reason to remain male at work. Mark sighed and sank into his chair, an action that Dr. Nigel Nash took to mean offence. “My son and I don’t have a close relationship,” he explained. He snapped the manila folder shut and fixed a very familiar icy blue concentration on Mark. “If your cousin has half a brain in her head, she should run as fast as she can from him in the opposite direction. My son isn’t what you would call stable.”

“He seemed confident enough to me when I met him,” Mark said, remembering their first confrontation.

Dr. Nigel Nash fidgeted where he stood, the manila envelope with the lab results tapped in his palm. He seemed to mentally weigh his options, and then go for broke as he closed the office door and snatched a wheeled office chair to sit in and practically run Mark down with. “He’s not right in his head,” he said, his voice a harsh whisper in the close confines of the Mark’s office. “He sees things that aren’t there, he has these weird ideations. Delusions.”

“Such as?” Mark pressed.

Dr. Nigel Nash worked his jaw, a habit that was clearly genetic since Paul also did this when forced to relay information he didn’t want to reveal. “He’s actually got a girlfriend? You’re not shitting me?”

“Not at all,” Mark replied.

Dr. Nigel Nash worked his jaw again, the man’s stocky appearance and rough demeanour making him appear like a cowed boxer more than a doctor. “My son...I always wanted him to follow in my footsteps. It’s not like he didn’t have the smarts to do it, and it’s not like he’s squeamish over blood and guts. I’m a gynaecologist, I have every straight man’s dream job, and frankly, when he didn’t want to follow in the family business, I got a little worried...” He rolled back and forth in the office chair, a nervous action that irritated Mark, but he wisely said nothing. Dr. Nash was feeling chatty, and if he wanted to reveal some details about his son, Mark was more than willing to listen. “He joined the police force, trying to be a tough guy and prove he didn’t have to be what I wanted him to be. But he wasn’t good at it, despite what he might have told you, or your cousin. He was a terrible cop. He felt bad for people when he shouldn’t have, got too involved with the victims. Sometimes they were more criminal than the criminals, if you get what I’m saying. That last girlfriend he had did a real number on him.”

“Carol,” Mark said, and Dr. Nash nodded.

“I never trusted her,” he confided in Mark. “She was married, for one, and while Paul did his best to be

discreet, she blabbed to everyone she knew that they were having an affair. That's how I found out about it, from a routine check-up with a patient." His voice heightened into a sing-song falsetto reminiscent of Julia Child: "How's your son, Dr. Nash? I hear he has a thing going with Carol Whatsername. He'd better watch it, her husband George just about owns that bank.' Bitch. It wasn't just her, either, I had a whole gaggle of them with a few words to say. Not much stays a secret in this hospital, I can tell you that. There were a couple of RNs who thought they were being helpful in letting me know. I told them it was none of their business what my son did and it certainly wasn't any of mine. Didn't shut the henhouse up, though." He sighed and rolled back and forth on the wheels of his chair, the creaking increasing with every motion. Creak-crick. Creak-crick. "He's not a bad guy, my son. But you must know by now what happened at that apartment. Your cousin has to understand that it isn't normal for him to decide to move in like he did, that this whole inability for him to leave that godforsaken dump is just plain nuts. He killed two people in there for God's sake. Why would he want to hold onto that kind of awful memory?"

Mark couldn't give him an answer, at least nothing that Dr. Nash would understand as rational. Mark himself knew there was a huge piece of the puzzle missing, especially considering the images he'd witnessed the night before, the strange white shape that tried to overpower the darker one, and continuously failed in an endless loop of conflict. Instead, he opted for a tangible line of enquiry, and one that would tug on any estranged parent's heart.

"When was the last time you talked to Paul?"

The wheels sighed in creaking hurt as Dr. Nash continued to roll the chair back and forth. "Three years ago," he admitted. He fixed his own icy gaze on Mark's judgement. "He's not an easy guy to talk to. You must know that already. How the heck he managed to get a girlfriend, I'll never know."

"My cousin was especially tenacious," Mark admitted.

"He never had those tendencies before that stuff happened. The crazy little rituals, I mean. The obsessive-compulsive behaviours. When I think back, I can remember an outgoing kid, never at home, always on the move. Now he doesn't leave that apartment and spends most of his time cleaning all these weird little ornaments that he's cluttered up the place with. Says he has to, says maintaining them and keeping them clean keeps his head occupied in those tiny moments between tasks like eating, or using his computer or reading or exercising or taking a piss. He's obsessed with always looking like he's doing something, like he's distracted, but from what? I don't think the guy sleeps, or if he does it's with one eye open." He held open his hands, imploring Mark to understand. "So he's dating this cousin of yours. She must be something to put with all that crap, because even I had enough of it when I had to practically break the door down to get him to open it and force him to let me into the apartment four years ago. It was one hell of a scene. I haven't been back since." He rubbed the back of his neck, his chair still roving back and forth. "Think I could meet her sometime? Maybe she could tell me how Paul's doing, you know?"

Mark didn't have the heart to tell him he'd already met her every single morning for the past couple of weeks and that the likelihood of him even remembering she'd been in his presence was dim. "I'm sure I can arrange it," Mark said instead.

Dr. Nash pushed his chair back one last time and got up, the lab results clutched tight in his hand. He wouldn't remember they'd had this conversation, Mark knew, for even Dr. Horihito had this same strange veil of short term memory loss when it came to their interaction. Frustrating, yes, but no longer frightening as Mark came to understand the phenomenon as an intractable disability, one that had no cure nor any real explanation. That it was tied in intricate knots with the Event at 314 Crescent Manor was obvious, but he didn't understand why this manifested itself solely at his workplace. He watched in tired understanding as the stocky form of Dr. Nash brushed the wrinkles from his lab coat and made his

way to the office door.

“You have twin daughters,” Mark said, halting him where he stood. “Doctors Monica and Mona Nash.”

Dr. Nash hesitated at this, and slowly turned to face Mark, a feeling of confusion drifting from him, as though his memory was already slowly being erased, leaving only a chalky imprint in its wake. “Twins. Yes, I think so,” he said, his icy eyes freezing over at their mention. “I know they lived with us. I know they exist.” He frowned, looking over Mark as though seeing him for the first time. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

“Monica and Mona Nash,” Mark pressed.

“Why do you want to know about my daughters?” Dr. Nigel Nash replied. Then, more stiffly and with more venom than a parent should exhibit, “I don’t know anything about them. Not since the damned day they were born. They’ve never been a part of our family, there was always this weird...How can I explain it? Distance. This huge, insurmountable distance. It wasn’t like that with my son, you understand. Even if he did become a disappointment in the end.” He glowered down at Mark. “Why are you asking me this? Who the hell are you?”

“I’m Mark Connor, the pathologist,” Mark explained with an exasperated sigh. “Dr. Nash, please, it’s important. Why do you feel your daughters were, as you say, detached from the rest of your family?”

But Dr. Nash was no longer forthcoming. He blinked in confusion at Mark’s question, as though uncertain how to proceed. “My twin daughters,” he said, his voice low, speaking only to himself. Without answering Mark he turned and walked out of the office, the manila envelope tucked tight beneath his arm, his steps gaining in confidence the further he was from Mark’s proximity.

Mark’s frustration was at its peak, and he roughly shoved the microscope in front of him to the edge of his desk. He was tired of being invisible to everyone around him, save for when he was home and when he was morphed into feminine shapes, her body laying against the warm masculine strength that was Paul Nash. How could it be that both Mark and Mars Connor were only visible to those connected to 314 Crescent Manor? It wasn’t right that their tangible reality was dependent upon the bricks and mortar of a physical building which, by any definition of religion, did not contain a godlike soul. A building was like a body, a physical construction with a heart and arteries and a nervous system that worked in conjunction with the living thing that resided within it. It was a vessel. A machine. But like all machines, it needed someone to power it up and drive it first.

So, perhaps the real question was, just who the hell was at the wheel?

Mark leaned back in his chair, knees knocked against the edge of his desk. As he thought about his conversation with Dr. Nash, it became clear that there was a strange detail, a congruity which he hadn’t known before. Dr. Nash has an odd relationship with his twin daughters, Doctors Monica and Mona Nash. He’d called his distance from them emotionally as a vast chasm, but it went further than this, wherein he had a mental block on the fact they were any part of his family. As though his life didn’t run in tandem with their existence.

Mark felt a shudder creep along his spine. He cricked his neck in an effort to relieve the tension but the uneasy feeling remained. Dr. Nash felt like his own daughters were displaced entities. People who had randomly dropped into his life and for whom he had no real feeling or understanding, and only the vaguest empathy for.

A connection that was unnaturally severed.

Just like those other twins, Mark and Nathan Connor, long before the Event had brought them crashing into a normal emotional connection, while sending the physical into chaos.

Mark sat silently at his desk for a long while, figuring his best plan of action. In the end, he opted for the direct approach, but not before morphing into his female form. After all, Mars thought as she shrugged into the new fit of her grey sweater and bland black pumps, if she was going to demand answers from such imposing creatures as Doctors Monica and Mona Nash, being part of the sorority of women was one barrier she didn't have to breach.

## episode twenty-five: Charlie Weiss's War



Charlie Weiss was not concentrating on his job, which while not unusual, his blatant disregard for the shy customer before him attempting to return a used Hello Kitty nightlight/vibrator was especially pronounced.

"I noticed this smell, like burning plastic?" the spindle thin young woman at the counter said, her voice tremulous and questioning even in her assertion. Her hands were shaking when she pushed the box towards him. "Before it went on fire, the little pink kitty face kind of...um...Melted? I mean, it's a good thing I didn't use it, right? Can I get a refund?"

Charlie's attention was solely for the data he had collected at apartment #220 the night before, the laptop before him replaying the recorded struggle between light and dark over and over. With his gaze still riveted on the laptop, he opened the drawer to the cash register and took out a handful of bills and shoved them at the customer. She counted the bills with increasing, frightened agitation.

"Um...The...uh...The Kitty Thing--It was only \$1.99?"

"Have a nice day," Charlie said.

"But you gave me two hundred and forty-five dollars?"

Charlie typed a complex series of data into the laptop, the screen's grid bringing components of the struggle into a tighter focus. "I have a feeling you are asking me questions that I have no intention of answering. Please go away."

"But it went on fire? And it was \$1.99? And you gave me too much? I'm trying to be honest?"

Her proximity was getting on Charlie's nerves, and he was frazzled enough with all the disturbing theories that were swirling through his mind, the data he had compiled creating more questions, ones that were far less inane than the constant inquiries of the tiny woman in front of him. "Get the hell out of this store before I sell you something that will not only kill you but destroy your entire neighbourhood block." There. One irritating variable solved.

“Okay? But I’d have to buy it first?”

Or not. “Get out.”

The tiny birdlike woman fixed him with a large smile that ate up most of her face. “Your customer service? It sucks and it’s awesome at the same time? I’m telling all my friends about this place? Thanks?”

“Thank you for shopping at Boxworth Electronics,” he answered automatically, his eyes never leaving his laptop. The front entrance to the store chimed as she left, leaving Charlie alone with his thoughts and now mostly empty cash register.

Charlie, alone with his Thoughts, is an imposing figure of will, as those who work with him would testify. His deeply philosophical concentration has aided him in his life in ways that simple monetary rewards could never properly justify. Among his co-workers he is revered as a good man to talk to when faced with a personal crisis, for Charlie always seems to have just the right amount of insight in how to get out of a bad relationship or what new career path to take or even what lottery numbers to play in order to win a tidy sum. They had lost three store managers due to this last skill alone, a fact which gave his young sales clerk peers incentive to pursue the Boxworth corporate ladder.

Still, there does come a time when an employee, no matter how valuable, leaves his own suffering imprint on his work and is thus required to take a break. The nervous, spindly manager of Boxworth Electronics merely glanced at the empty till and knew that Charlie was in serious personal trouble and thus it would be best to take him off of cash until the poor soul properly Thought his way through things. After all, the man had been more than helpful concerning his own troubles. If it weren’t for Charlie and his insistence Bill get help for his anxiety disorder the store manager would have been dead long ago, a disgruntled employee leaping from the store’s roof to his pulpy demise on the pavement of the Boxworth Electronics parking lot.

“You’d know I’d never criticize your work, Charlie,” Bill nervously said. His entire body was shaking at this perceived confrontation, his skin clammy, his eyes darting and filled with panic. He popped a Zantac for good measure. “It’s just not a good idea to have you on the floor right now. Why don’t you go head into the stockroom, do up some of that paperwork Homeland Security said they were needing? Might help take your mind off things that are bothering you.” Bill took a deep breath before he hung his head. “I know it helps me.”

Charlie gave him a warm smile and patted him on the back. “Thanks, Bill, I appreciate this. How’s the new anti-anxiety medication working for you?”

“The homeopathic stuff Jimmy’s been giving me has worked wonders,” Bill admitted. “I don’t wake up every morning convinced the universe is going to collapse in on my skull.”

“From my understanding this is a purely geographical phenomenon and since you live on the other side of town, you’ve got nothing to fear.” Charlie patted him firmly on the shoulder again. “I’ll be hunched near the boxes of inert radon rods if you need me.”

Charlie snapped his laptop shut and was halfway to the stockroom when Bill shouted to him, his voice quivering against his forced confidence. “I hear you have a girlfriend.”

Charlie turned on his heel, his laptop tucked snug under his arm. He gave Bill and the small group of clerks gathered around him in a semi-circle a tight nod. “I do,” he said.

“I can’t believe it, man,” a pimply faced nineteen year old named Carl said. His blond bangs hung messily before his eyes. “Dude, is she hot?”

“If she’s the chick that was in here last week, she’s kryptonite,” Brad from the microwave department

said, his forefinger pushing up the pair of Buddy Holly glasses along the length of his aquiline nose.

“Whoa,” Carl said, and smiled as he shook his bangs from side to side. “You mean the one with the bazookas?” His hands made a motion that suggested he was holding two of them, and they were too heavy for him to handle. “Dude, how did you meet a hot piece of bacon like that?”

“Please don’t refer to Natassia as ‘bacon’,” Charlie said, offended. He did his best to instill the small moment with some modicum of class. “She lives in my building.”

“Dude, you *live* together?”

“I didn’t say that,” Charlie said. “She lives in my building, Carl, that’s not the same as living in my apartment. She has family living there too, a twin sister and a cousin...”

“You’re doing them too?” Brad asked, eyes wide, incredulous.

“No. They just happen to live in my building. I’m not dating anyone but Natassia.”

“Natassia,” Carl said, dreamily, his messy blonde hair and surfer dude physique giving his experience with girls named Natassia some credence. “I dated a Natassia once. She was everything a guy could hope for. She drove this wicked hot rod, painted red to match her nails. When she smiled, the world just stopped for me, man, and like, when I rode in that car, with her, it was like we melted into the seats and the chrome and just became one with the universe, man. When she broke my heart, it shattered into nineteen pieces.”

Charlie frowned at this. “Why nineteen pieces?”

“Because, dude,” Carl said, his meaty fist pounding on his chest. “A broken piece for every year of my life.”

Charlie blinked. “That’s surprisingly poetic.”

“I know, dude.” Carl’s hand left his heart to clasp Charlie firmly on the shoulder. “Watch it, man. Girls named Natassia are EPIC.”

~\*~

He couldn’t help but admit that Carl had a point. As he tried to focus on the two opposing figures on his computer screen, it became evident to Charlie that he was constantly being distracted by thoughts of Natassia. His palms felt hot at the memory of her shape beneath them as he touched her, his lips burning in remembrance of how passionate the night before had been. And yes, even Brad in his own geeky, awkward way had a point—As boyfriend and girlfriend they saw each other every day, they didn’t have to go far to take each other home, and home was becoming an increasingly collaborative effort. 314 Crescent Manor was taking on the spiritual shape of a complex sorority rather than a mere apartment building, and thus Brad’s assertion that Charlie and Natassia were living together wasn’t totally off the mark.

He nestled in between an alley of worn boxes full of broken televisions and ancient stereo systems that were far too decrepit and out of date for even Boxworth Electronics to sell. They were discounted goods purchased from a warehouse fire at a distribution plant. The blaze had rendered the materials useless, but Charlie was able to salvage some of the intact TV tubes for those rare customers who still owned such relics. He never failed to remind them that cathode ray tubes were the reason the original warehouse had burned down in the first place. Enthusiasts, however, were always keen to take risks.



What risk was he taking, he wondered as he powered up his laptop and opened it again, the uneven shapes of light and dark assailing him with their hidden meaning. The white blob that encompassed the screen did indeed look like a Sasquatch as Natassia had observed, but while its movements seemed at first glance to be random, Charlie's sharp mind quickly calculated that this was not the case. In fact, the creature seemed to be gaining in size with every pounding blow of its fist on an invisible barrier, a hindrance that was loosely connected to the wall between Natassia's apartment and apartment #220.

The dark shape on the screen was definitely humanoid in origin, a fact that nagged at Charlie, the ramifications of his suspicions making him uncomfortable. It seemed to be male, from the breadth of its shoulders, and it was clothed in what appeared to be a suit. He pressed a few commands onto his keyboard and brought this particular shadow to the fore, the dark colours replaced with a brighter resolution that brought the figure into better focus. Male. Wearing a suit and tie, and by the slender look of his feet a pair of sleek loafers. Charlie pressed his palm firmly against his jaw, hating the thoughts that were currently running through his head.

He'd worn a suit, too. After all, he had been a bank manager.

Charlie Weiss's grandfather. George Weiss.

He didn't want to believe it was him, but hadn't he seen with his own eyes those fingertips along the walls of his kitchen, the circular pattern as they traced beneath the drywall poking through it as though the plaster was a stretching fabric? Thus, the real question wasn't so much the identity of this shadowy figure, but what purpose it served in conjunction with the large, Sasquatch-like blob that pummelled against Natassia's wall with increasing violent strength.

The numbers and data before him meant nothing. The analytical portion of his reasoning was rejected in favour of thinking on that ancestral enigma known as his grandfather, a man whom destiny had shaped into an ethereal being who guided the pattern of his only grandson's life. Charlie had no cousins, no uncles, no father figure of his own since the sperm donor who had brought Charlie into being had taken off before he was born. The story he'd concocted about his father being a pilot was a cover for this abandonment, a childhood fantasy which his mother and aunt had encouraged, but the truth always nipped at Charlie's consciousness. He knew the real story, how his mother was in her ninth month of pregnancy, how his father never came home from work the week before Charlie had been born. No one ever heard from him again. He had disappeared into the universe in much the same way that George Weiss had been absorbed into the walls of Crescent Manor—Only in his father's case it had been by his own efforts and not something to do with the quicksand properties of space and time.

His mother had never remarried, nor did his grandmother and his aunt remained a spinster, the effect of this cumulative rejection of testosterone being that Charlie had a very real lack of male influence in his life and had retreated into his thoughts as a method of proving his manhood. He'd latched onto the legend of his grandfather with the zeal of hero worship, the mystery overshadowing the man's personality, causing Charlie to raise him far above himself onto a metaphysical pedestal usually reserved for philosophical gods and martyrs.

The events of his grandfather's disappearance were a common discussion at the dinner table. The meal would be noisy and boisterous, his mother, his aunt and his now late grandmother regaling him with stories of their youth, of his grandfather and his incredible family name and wealth. "It was a cold night, just like this one," he grandmother told them, her voice cracked on the edges, a worn antique full of charming wrinkles. "He was supposed to close the vault and come straight home, which he did. I had a cup of coffee waiting for him. He was a quiet man, your grandfather, a real thinker. He didn't love money, though he worked for it and it paid him handsomely. He loved his family first, he did. That night was like any other, just a little bit colder, a chill in it that crept into the bones." She'd tap her plate with her fork, the sound pinging like tiny balls of hail on glass. Then, she would fix her dark eyes on

Charlie, their wisdom sparking as she pointed her fork at him in accusation. “As I am sitting before you here, I tell you this is true. He was standing beside the wall, cup of coffee in hand. And just like that, it swelled out and swallowed him in. The kitchen wall.”

She pushed her potatoes around on her plate. “Mother, please,” his mother said. “Stop filling his head with such nonsense.”

“We were wealthy people, back then,” his grandmother would sagely insist. She pushed her fork around her plate, the tips scraping against it noisily. “He was a good man. He never would have left us. That wall swallowed him up. I made them remove it, to look for him, but they never found him. He’s still there. I’m sure of it. Oh, my poor, poor George. He was a good, solid, quiet man.”

“Mother! Stop this nonsense, you’re filling the poor boy’s head with nightmares.”

His grandmother would then dab daintily at her lips with the corner of her napkin, the table set up formally with good china at her insistence, the food wafting over them from the kitchen betraying a consummate skill that spoke of fine culinary tastes, the sum of which was imposed onto an illusion of them being upper middle class. Without his grandfather’s wealth or the security of a spousal income, they barely made it month by month. The tiny bungalow where they all lived was comprised of one floor with a living room, three bedrooms, a partially finished basement down a half flight of stairs and used primarily for storage, one bathroom and a minuscule galley kitchen that was an effort to turn sideways in.

Still, the house was bright and cheerful thanks to the white walls and plethora of silk flowers that adorned the interior with feminine confidence. His own room was painted a baby blue, the only injection of masculine influence allowed, and even here his mother had managed to shove a black vase full of fake red roses, her need for fake flowers pathological in scope. This obsession was patiently tolerated, even as he grew into his teens, for Charlie understood it was his mother’s own way of controlling her environment, her obsessive love for flowers overriding her ability to properly take care of them.

Perhaps this was why he was so attracted to Natassia, for while she did have a nice figure as Brad had so succinctly put it, she was also not overly feminine in that endearing way that would remind him too much of his mother, aunt and grandmother—A triad of caring that was at times suffocating. There was a separation of that mystique in Natassia, and he had come to love the way her apartment was so messily arranged, such little care taken to its appearance, with function being the primary ideal. She was bold and fearless, so very unlike his mother who was timid in his presence, her wan smile always suggesting to him that while she was infinitely proud of him, she was worried, too, as though convinced there was some unspoken calamity destined to happen to him. Considering her history with men, this was an understandable condition. As it was also understandable that Charlie had no intention of being with a woman just like his mother. Natassia was so opposite in personality it was as though she had been designed in this way for the very purpose of their meeting and subsequent union.

He wondered what his mother would think of her. Do opposites really attract in these situations? No, Charlie with his extensive experience among women understood that their friendships were all about commonalities. He frowned, realizing his choice of partner may have placed him into serious conflict with his family. He would have to tread carefully around the subject of Natassia around his mother.

He glanced back at the computer screen, watching the struggle as it played in an endless loop before him, the white creature gaining in strength while the darker one seemed to shrink beneath it. He frowned, his hands clutched tight on either side of his laptop, a sudden realization hitting him.

Conflict.

They had been arguing before the creature and its companion arrived. The scenario had, since its very inception when he had first met Natassia at her window, been forged from an Event created by a disagreement. A violent confrontation. And, if he thought on it, this confrontation had ebbed after the Event that had killed the tenant and his friend in apartment #220, an Event that Natassia claimed had been the dismantling and rebuilding of itself in seconds. The only puzzle was why her neighbour had been so violently affected and Natassia was unharmed. Something additional had happened in apartment #220 where the only possible outcome to the Event was a violent death. The question was, what catalyst had driven this to happen?

That particular enquiry was not impossible to answer, for the recorded struggle between the light and dark figures showed one very serious fact. The Sasquatch blob was winning. And if this thing, this creature was gaining in strength, then the opposing force that may or may not be Charlie's own grandfather had been weakened by the Event and was losing the protracted battle. Which, by Charlie's calculations, could only mean one thing:

The Event was going to happen again. This time, Natassia was the one set to be ripped to shreds.

He slapped the laptop shut and bolted out of the storeroom, hopping over the steel lip of the loading dock and running with all his might to the parking lot where his car was waiting. The keys were shaking in his grip as he got into his vehicle and started up the engine. He had to get to the Manor. He had to make sure that Natassia was safe because everything in his gut screamed that she wasn't.

## **episode twenty-six: singularities**



Doctor Mars Connor made her way down the winding, white corridor that led to the office of Doctors Mona and Monica Nash. She had to retrace her steps twice to properly find it, the hospital's hallway so disorienting she'd ended up at the cafeteria and then at a side entrance through what she had thought was the identical route. She was now faced with the steel door bearing their insignia, its cold facade hindering her assertiveness. She wrung her hands in anxious expectation. She curled one hand into a half fist and lightly rapped her knuckles onto the hollow metal entrance. Her knock echoed down the winding corridor like a steel drum.

She checked her watch, noting that it was twelve-thirty p.m. and there was a good chance the twin scientists were on lunch. A shame, really. Or a relief. Yes, definitely a relief, especially since the last

time she'd dared to cross their paths it had felt like she'd stumbled into the lair of a mad scientist. Even now the sensation she was about to be placed into a specimen jar refused to abate. She wondered if it was possible to pickle a six foot two female specimen. A jar like that would have to be special ordered, she was sure. There was no law, other than the obvious ones against murder, that said she couldn't be labelled and jarred, especially since there was plenty about her that would be of interest to a twin set of unscrupulous mad scientists.

She was about to make her leave when the steel door infuriatingly opened, granting her access. She stepped into the octagon-shaped office, the two transparent resin desks free of all clutter, a single file placed in the centre of each with mathematical precision. Feeling especially bold, she picked one of the folders up and opened it, her eyes blandly scanning the contents. The circles and swirls and accompanying numbers felt familiar to her, but she couldn't fathom how. The work Doctors Mona and Monica were doing had little to do with biology, and yet they had been given a grant to pursue their efforts at the hospital, had in fact specifically requested this. Curious, Mars opened the second folder. It contained the exact same information save for one tiny variable. The page numbering was slightly different, with a set of brackets around the numbers instead of being left plain. Mars had experience creating reports and academic papers of her own, and she was puzzled by the time such a small detail must have consumed. It was an odd focus when surely the content was what represented their body of work, not the archaic notions of page numbering.

"Do you think she understands?"

"Unlikely."

"I bet she could, if she put her mind to it."

"One wonders."

"One does."

Mars' thumb went to her bottom lip as she gingerly closed the manila folder. She turned slowly, the flesh of her thumb bit down on hard as she regarded the stiff figures of Doctors Monica and Mona Nash standing before her. Their appearance was no less rigid and eerie than the last time she had met them, only now they were a duo of severe discontent, the sharp edges of their stiffly ironed lab coats a layer of white armour. There was a certain griminess of self felt when faced with such paradigms of perfection, and Mars, while no slouch herself when it came to be exacting, could only munch on her thumb in nervous apology. "Sorry," she managed to mutter. "I was just talking to your father and, well, you might as well know that I'm also dating your brother."

"And."

"Yes," Monica or Mona agreed. "And."

"I didn't mean to pry," Mars said, fixing them both with what she hoped was a disarming grin. Her reflection on the steel door beside her told her that her attempt at lightheartedness made her appear manic instead of endearing. Her smile slipped as she placed a flustered hand over her heart. "I'm a scientist myself. I have to say though, this stuff is way over my head. Zooming, actually. I mean, while it's true that being a doctor of pathology is no simple career choice, I'm all about bone marrow and blood platelets. Tangible, medical things. Not complicated mathematical theorizing."

"Physics," Doctor Monica or Mona corrected Mars.

"Right," Mars said, her tone careful. "Not the physical. Like I said."

One of the twin sisters cocked her head to the side, her long, black hair a sharp contrast to the shining white of her lab coat. Not one strand was out of place. "Our brother."

“A girlfriend.”

“Strange.”

“Impossible.”

“An unexpected variable.”

“Not what we expected.”

“You can’t map these sorts of things,” Mars said, feeling defensive.

They regarded her like a slide beneath a microscope, a feeling Mars was sure they engineered in others. She felt a sudden well of pity for Paul, who had suffered so long beneath their combined scrutiny, an issue she was sure had led to all sorts of hidden hang-ups that he hadn’t quite revealed yet. She narrowed her eyes as she looked on the sisters, waiting for the inevitable amnesia to overtake them as the conversation lengthened. They didn’t seem to be under the same fog Mars had learned to recognize. One of the twins tapped her foot, her mouth pursed in inward question.

“I’m a twin, too,” Mars said. “My broth...My sister and I live in the same building as your brother. Not in the same apartment, of course.”

“Of course,” they chimed.

They were trying to fake lightheartedness too. And equally failing the attempt. Mars shrank from their grins, a shudder creeping through her.

What had it been like, Mars had to wonder, to have these two people living under one’s roof, to claim them as relatives. As they stood before her like lab-coated mannequins, their expressions shadowing each other in an eerie mirroring, Mars had the distinct impression that they weren’t supposed to be two people at all. That they were a marked singularity that had been rendered unnaturally in two. Mars was a twin herself, albeit a fraternal one, and she had never experienced this kind of exacting closeness with Nathan, and she had never wanted to. If anything, Monica and Mona Nash’s relationship was one that polarized Mark and Nathan’s. Where they came together into a blurred line of where one person begins and ends, Nathan and Mark were fierce opposites, born of the same womb and yet feeling as though they weren’t supposed to be part of the same family. Which, paradoxically, was the same result for Doctors Monica and Mona Nash.

“Paul, myself, my sister, her boyfriend, Charlie—we all live at 314 Crescent Manor,” Mars said, choosing her words carefully.

“We know.”

“Yes, I think you do,” Mars said, her thumb trailing down her chin as an uncomfortable knowledge assailed her. Her mouth felt dry as her lips formed the question. “What can you tell me about it?”

Monica? Mona? It didn’t matter which one. She fixed Mars in her sights with unblinking study. The air around her didn’t move, there was no sensation of energy around her body, no pulse of blood, no push of oxygen through lungs. They really were mannequins, Mars realized. Objects rendered immovable.

“Everything,” she replied.

Mars’ thumb immediately went back to her teeth. Her voice felt small as she spoke. “About a month ago or so there was, I think, some sort of Event that happened. You could say it had an impact on my life, and also on my sister’s life.” She forced her lungs to take in a deep breath of stale air. Doctors Monica and Mona remained unmoved. “What I’m saying is, I don’t think my taking that apartment, or my brother—my sister—following me and getting one himself—herself—I don’t think it’s a coincidence. Everything that has happened since I’ve moved here over a month ago has to do with 314 Crescent

Manor. I'm sorry, Doctors, if I appear rude, but if you would kindly spill your guts about this vast knowledge you've just claimed to possess it would be greatly appreciated."

Doctors Monica and Mona Nash gave Mars a set of creepy, identical smiles.

"It's a repair."

"A repair. Of a wrong."

"A small wrong."

"But enough of one."

"Like a pulled muscle."

"Or a loose thread."

"It's not noticed."

"Not usually."

"Except this time."

They turned their heads to face one another with sad expressions. "Unfortunately," they chimed.

"I don't understand," Mars said, confusion mingling with frustration and making her more angry than inquisitive. Then, in a vain hope of connecting with them on an emotional level to gain clearer answers, she added, "I just wanted to let you know that I'm dating your brother. If there's anything you wish to add, such as continued happiness, or caution, or threats of bodily harm..."

"Poor Paul."

"So sad."

"She isn't Carol."

"No. Thankfully."

"Can't be helped."

"Side effects."

"An unfortunate casualty."

"Of what?" Mars asked.

The twins regarded her with stone assertion. "Of the Event," Monica or Mona said.

"Alignment is paramount."

"Yes. Alignment."

"Our poor brother."

"Good luck."

And with this cryptic answer, they grabbed Mars by the shoulders and ushered her out of their office, the steel door softly closing behind her in a parody of force. Mars was left alone in the white corridor, her confusion now tempered with anger at their rude dismissal of her concerns. "You can't do this!" she shouted at the closed door, her voice echoing down the corridor. She banged on it with the side of her fist, the steel slightly vibrating against the assault. "Who the hell do you two think you are? He's your brother, dammit, that has to count for something!"

Evidently, however, it didn't. Mars remained helpless in front of the closed door, her curses carried

along the white corridor in ever increasing volume. She finally gave up and turned her back on the door, resting against it as she sighed in hopeless defeat.

“Excuse me, is there a problem?”

Dr. Horihito, with his maddeningly gory bullet-hole laden surgical cap gave her a concerned once over, clearly not able to decide if her banging on the creepy Nash twins’ office door was a sign of madness or equally eerie complicity. “Do you need some help?” He frowned as he looked her over, not in a way that suggested attraction, but rather its opposite. As though Mars herself was part of that 314 Crescent Manor conspiracy that had so destroyed his own illusions of a happy, linear life. How terrible for him, Mars thought, bitterness snapping at her mood. Dr. Horihito was right.

“I just took a wrong turn,” Mars said, and smiled sweetly at him. She watched with distracted interest as that familiar fog began to roll over his features, an amnesia that seemed to be getting worse by the hour. There was barely an acknowledgement that could be made in the hospital now that wasn’t instantly erased mere seconds later. Dr. Horihito frowned. He scratched at a bullet hole just above his left ear.

“I’m sorry...I...” He half-turned, the corridor stretching into hidden crevices before him. “I don’t remember coming down here.”

“You must have taken a wrong turn,” Mars cheerfully informed him.

“Yes,” Dr. Horihito said, not at all convinced this was the case. He gave her a puzzled, questioning look. “I guess that’s it. You know, you look familiar. Have we met before?”

Hundreds of times, Mars wanted to say, but she wisely kept mum on the subject.

“No,” Mars lied, and she gave him her most forced smile yet. “I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

## **episode twenty-seven: watch your step**



Charlie Weiss is usually a man of cool headed action, a fact that has resulted in dozens of disarmed bombs, making explosive monkey dung inert and removing potentially lethal lipstick cases from the shelves of the local drug store. His vigilance in taking note of Mr. Boxworth’s stocking of the company warehouse with out-dated Cold War spy equipment was greatly appreciated by Mrs. Boxworth, who gave him a weekly stipend for his continued efforts at national security. He did not acquire this comfortable hidden salary easily, and there were a few times he had to diplomatically rebuff Mrs. Boxworth’s romantic advances, the result being a cut in pay and a severing of his Christmas bonus. But

after he had explained to her that it would be a disastrous union, one that would hinder his work at Boxworth Electronics and render the free world vulnerable, Mrs. Boxworth had come to understand the delicacy of Charlie's emotional attachments and had backed down from her cougar stalking of his person. Not that she didn't try once in a while, of course, and Charlie would oblige her with a sweet smile, and a pleasant, flirting manner in their exchanges.

Natassia had completely destroyed this careful equilibrium Charlie had created between his professional responsibilities and the passion of his heart. He had abandoned his post at Boxworth Electronics, which at this moment could be receiving a shipment of vials containing the e bola virus wrapped in stained bubble wrap and labeled Funky Goo! Fun For the Whole Family! But with Natassia in the immediate danger he feared, his passion was ignited to put her needs above all else, including the fate of the universe. Though, if he was philosophical about the issue, which he was prone to be, it was possible to reason that his leaving the store unattended for this protracted period of time to run to his sexy new girlfriend's flat was a definite necessity in keeping his own universe glued together. Since the universe he understands is seen solely through his own experience, then surely any destruction of it would have a ripple effect outside of himself.

He frowned as he bounded up the steps to the front of the Manor to dive past Mrs. Macdonald into the lobby and then tear up the flight of stairs to the second floor, being careful to avoid the loose thirteenth step up from the bottom. It was possible his assumption was a form of quantum narcissism. But then, we were all locked into our own perceptions of the universe, billions plus worlds created with every fleeting, personal thought.

He was about to crash into the door of her flat, when it opened, revealing the scruffy surprise of her brother, Nathan. He had several rolled, poster sized papers in his hands, no doubt illustrations for a new graphical project. "Charlie," Nathan said, closing and locking the apartment door behind him with a quick, furtive movement. "What are you doing here?"

"Is Natassia at home?" Charlie asked, his breath leaving him in gasps.

"No...Uh...She's working on a project." Nathan set the rolls of paper against the tight corner on the left side of the flat. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm certain something is," Charlie said. He placed his hands on his hips, his shoulders spread wide in an attempt to ebb the rising sense of panic within him. "I was at the store, thinking about apartment #220 and I suddenly had a theory spring into focus and..." He ducked his head, annoyed with the way Nathan was looking at him, as though he'd just escaped an institution and was way off his meds.

"Look, I don't know what she's told you about me, or what's going on in this building, but when you see her you have to tell her to stay at my apartment tonight. I'm not comfortable with her living here so close to the chaos inside of her wall. I think it's gearing up to explode again and I don't know what ramifications are going to come with it this time." He gave Nathan's silent form an imploring look.

"You would be wise to find somewhere else to stay as well. Preferably away from this building, at that girlfriend's condo that Natassia says you frequent. It's not safe here. In fact, I feel nervous just standing in front of this door."

"That bad?" Nathan said, worried.

"Worse, actually," Charlie said.

He expected Nathan to treat him as though he was a crazy boyfriend, one of many that Natassia had dragged home over the years, for she certainly was a woman who influenced a man's mental confusion to great degrees. After all, just the whisper of danger in her direction had sent Charlie barrelling back here, abandoning his post at Boxworth Electronics, an act that was no doubt fraught with unpleasant repercussions. The world really was at stake, after all. So, it was with great surprise that he regarded



Nathan's smile, one that was warm and identical to the one his twin had so often given him. The simple gesture was imbued with memories of Natassia's special kiss, one that would leave Charlie's heart hammering and his tongue numb with want. When Nathan pulled his ugly blue striped tie into his hands and fixed it at his throat, Charlie felt a surge of sickened panic. Which, oddly enough, was the same reaction he'd had when Mrs. Boxworth had first made her advances.

"It was crooked," Nathan said. Charlie didn't miss the fact he was blushing. He snatched the cylinders he'd balanced in the corner and tucked them into the crook of his arm. "I'll let her know about your concerns for her safety. I'm sure she'll think it's sweet."

"This is no joking matter," Charlie said, annoyed. "You are both under serious threat."

"I know," Nathan said, and he gave Charlie a coy smile. "It's just sweet that she matters so much to you."

Infuriating, self-indulgent jerk. This was not the time for private in-jokes between twins. Nathan left Charlie alone in the hallway, his steps taking him down the one flight of stairs that lead to the main floor. Charlie wasn't convinced the man was responsible enough to relay the message to his sister, and there was no way he was going to leave an issue of this much importance to chance. He had to find her and warn her well before she ever set foot in Crescent Manor again, let alone her flat. Charlie dug his fingers through his messily chopped hair, sweat creeping along his forehead. Seconds held more danger in them than hours, he knew this, and yet here he was, standing indecisive and stupid before the door of Natassia's flat. Come on, Charlie, he inwardly chided himself, this isn't some dull afternoon, you didn't just fob off of work. The whole damned world is at stake.

Probably.

He would have to find her. Nathan whistled as he made his way into the front lobby, his voice slightly muffled as it cheerfully clipped up the main staircase to where Charlie was standing. "Finally, a happy face!"

"Good morning, dearie," he heard Mrs. McDonald say to him, her voice a sing-song of irritating good feeling. "I supposed I've missed your sister today, have I? Saw that lovely young man she's seeing, but he just barrelled past me in such a rush, not even a nod in greeting. I don't take kindly to rudeness, I most certainly do not—But he's got a lot on his mind, the poor fellow. He looks stressed, if you ask me. Like the weight of a nuclear bomb is on his shoulders, poor dear."

Its timer was certainly ticking, Charlie thought as he hurried to the top of the staircase. He heard the main entrance to the building creak open, and he shouted down the flight of stairs, "Wait!"

He took the steps two at a time. He had to warn Natassia personally and the only way he was going to do this was by circumventing the middle man and getting an exact fix on her current location. Which he surmised was part of Nathan's lazy knowledge.

"I have to ask you!" Charlie shouted, his hands flailing in front of him, ugly striped blue tie tossed over his shoulder as he descended the stairs. The red paisley carpet was especially disorienting this afternoon. He should have asked Nathan when he had the chance. It was a stupid omission. How did Natassia spend her time from noon until the end of Charlie's shift at nine-thirty? He'd always assumed she'd been working on her artistic endeavours, but with Nathan being the only one home, and seeming to be comfortable enough with her absence, he had to wonder if there were other things keeping her occupied. Like that humourless cousin. Now, he really was being unfair, because the guy was logical enough and had a good sense of responsible citizenry about him. Bit squeamish, though. Very much like Natassia's older sister, Mars.

Strange how nervous people can put you on edge.

The front door of the lobby swung shut.

“Dammit! I said wait! Are you deaf or a moron?”

But it was Charlie who was destined to answer that question. For, in his busy, disorganized thoughts he hadn't left room for a tiny nag to remain. With his whole weight on the thirteenth step up from the bottom, the exact loose step that had proved fatal in the past, he was left with no other recourse than to utter a one syllable word, the like of which his mother and aunt would mutually frown upon. As he flew through the air he swore he tasted soap. (His grandmother had no illusions about polite diction, however. She was known to have a frequent enjoyment of the word after one too many brandies.)

The plank of the thirteenth step slid loose and sent Charlie soaring through the air where he hit the far wall and then tumbled back to the steps to roll heavily down them to the base of the stairs, his head smacking against the railing despite him curling halfway into a ball. He heard the decisive crack against his wrist, and an unpleasant crunch at his left shoulder and upper rib. When he stopped flying and rolling he lay still at the bottom of the stairs, the red carpet soaking up the blood that seeped in thick streams from his broken nose, his shocked lungs struggling to suck in air. The pain in one rib spread along his side to several more. He tried to take in a deeper breath, his tongue thick with the metallic iron taste of blood, and his side exploded into a searing rip of pain. His eyes were open, but all he could see was red, which was understandable considering he was at this moment face down into the ugly paisley shag.

“Charlie!”

Her beautiful voice. Her softness and her sweet smile. How good it was to know it.

He coughed a thick phlegmy chunk of blood out of his lungs and closed his eyes.

~\*~

“Wake up. Wake up, baby, come on.”

Of course she was here. His wonderful, beautiful Natassia whom he had risked not only life and limb but the very fate of the universe for. Now was definitely the time to be nestled at her bosom, and an ample bosom it is. Being a breast man was nothing to be ashamed of. He was proud. Inspired, in fact. But while it was pleasant to think on them and their glorious perfection, being in her arms was at present secondary to the embarrassment he felt in frightening her like this. He took a personal inventory of his perceived injuries. The broken nose was not a big deal. The left lung was probably perforated, his lungs cracked, surely. Not something he'd get over quickly. Broken clavicle... Right. Not much of a bother at all. He'd just have to watch it when he slid into his car at just the right angle to prevent his screaming out in agony. Which he definitely wanted to do. Other than piss himself, that is.

He didn't want to worry her, which was a sickeningly sweet moment, even for him, because the fact she was actually worried about him, about Charlie Weiss, spoke of her inward soul and its finely tuned understanding in complete harmony with his own. He would have sighed in happy satisfaction about this if the pain didn't make him pass out. Considering how much of a mess he was in, being dragged out in a coffin would kill the romantic mood, so he wisely remained still.

Besides, he thought as clarity slowly shaped his world into better focus. That wasn't Natassia fussing over him, eyes brimming with tears and convinced of his imminent demise. Charlie stared blankly at Nathan who had him in his arms, his blubbering loud and miserable over what he was sure was a corpse.

"I'm not gay," Charlie managed to croak.

"Oh, damn!" Nathan said, his despair instantly replaced with sighing relief. "I was so sure you'd never wake up again! You're conscious! Oh, my poor Charlie!" Nathan plastered his face and lips with passionate, relieved kisses. "I thought you were done for! Oh, man, you were lying so still at the bottom of those stairs... Really, Charlie, the least you could have done was groan a little bit and let me know you were still alive. Imagine, tripping on the thirteenth stair. That was really stupid. You'd have to have half a brain missing to forget that. It's not like you didn't know it was there."

"There were other things on my mind," Charlie croaked. Nathan dotted kisses along his bloodied neck.

"We'll get you to the hospital. My sister, or my brother, not sure what Mark is at the moment, will get you patched up. Good as new."

"Sure." He groaned as he attempted to sit up, only to fail when the pain shot through him like a thousand knives stabbing his side. "I think you'd better stop."

"Stop what?" Nathan asked as he nuzzled into Charlie's neck. "Oh man, I thought you were a goner for a second there. You still might be, we have to get those injuries taken care of. Aw, fuck, Charlie, your arm looks nasty. I'm sure you've broken something. You still have feelings in your toes, don't you? Mrs. McDonald is calling the ambulance. You must have hit your head on the way down, that's a big gash. Mrs. McDonald told me to ask you if you feel confused."

"Very much so," Charlie said to Nathan's worried face. His proximity was too close for Charlie's liking, his creepy intimacy almost as disturbing as the various injuries he'd suffered. He would have preferred to shove Natassia's brother off, but the pain of the effort was too much at present. "Look, Nathan, I know you think that my going out with your sister makes us close, but as I've told you many times, I'm very much a breast man."

"What?" Nathan asked, confused. Then, as though an uncomfortable light bulb had suddenly exploded in his head. "Oh, right! This is about Natassia. Got it." He frowned, the bloodied mess that was Charlie's broken body at the foot of the stairs leaving him at some hidden impasse. "Charlie, I'm so sorry. This probably isn't the right time, but I'm not going to be able to keep it together much longer, and I've never been the kind of person who enjoyed keeping secrets anyway. Not that I'm very good at it. Maybe it's best you find out now, rather than some awkward morning when I'm having a shower and you walk in thinking you're being romantic or you're just horny or you want to use the soap or whatever nonsense might make it happen. Best to just out and show you now, you know, so I can properly be a mess over this. Is that all right?"

He had no clue what the idiot was talking about, so Charlie gave him a very painful nod to shut him up.

"I can hear the ambulance," Nathan assured him. He gave him a weak smile. "They'll let me ride with you, I'm sure of it."

Charlie wanted to protest, because the last thing he wanted was to have Natassia's dimwitted twin doing a life and death ride-along with him as he was whisked away to the emergency room. But the only communication he could relay was a blood crusted blink.

"Okay," Nathan said, shrugging. His uncomfortable, overly intense gaze was pained. Uncertain. "As long as you're all right with it."

No. No he wasn't. Definitely not.

Though his sight was tinged with blood, he could see how Nathan's skin rippled, like a low frequency submerged beneath water. Hard, masculine edges softened. Bony body contours became curvaceous. Nathan, as Natassia, had effortlessly become female.

There was a sense of horror at this.

And relief.

And horror.

And considerable relief. Because much as he had protested, there was something very similar in the way Nathan had touched him, and it did awaken certain feelings that he had solely ascribed to Natassia's influence. So, yes, relief.

And horror.

"How is this possible?" Charlie croaked, eyes wide, determined to feel terror.

Natassia shrugged. She seemed so cute and harmless even though he now knew better.

"I don't know. How does your grandfather stay trapped in the drywall of your kitchen?"

Touche.

She sniffed loudly and wiped at his forehead with the sleeve of her black t-shirt. "I think the EMTs are here. Just stay still and they'll take care of everything. I'll come with you, I promise."

"Natassia." He formed her name around the taste of blood.

"I'm so sorry, Charlie. I wish I could have told you, but it's obvious why I couldn't, right? It's not like this is my usual state, you know. It was that night, the one where everything went so weird. We had a chat from my window, and your papers were blowing everywhere. Then the Event happened, and after it did, well... You got an eyeful to prove I was seeing them too."

"The Event," Charlie whispered.

"He's in there!"

Two men rushed with a gurney to the base of the stairs. One shone a fierce light into Charlie's eyes while the other affixed a neck brace tightly around his throat. They were shouting orders at him to answer questions but he was too confused by the sudden chaos, too overwhelmed by the threading pattern of his thoughts. He was too busy to give them what they wanted, and he lay passive and in pain as they shifted him to the gurney and strapped him in. He had a vague sensation of an IV needle going into the back of his hand. He closed his eyes, the image of Nathan—No, she was Natassia now—following alongside him.

"You'll have to meet him at the hospital ma'am."

"No! I'm his girlfriend!"

That was only half the story, Charlie wanted to say to them.

"It's for his safety, ma'am. Rules are rules."

"But I promised!"

Lines. Ripples. Frequencies in deep water.

"Natassia," Charlie whispered. She clasped his hand quickly. "I know. I know what happened. I know what the Event was."

"Charlie?"

Her hand was wrenched from his as they rushed him outside, a blast of cold air hitting him. He made out the fuzzy outline of a blinking red light, and could discern a sudden darkness when it was shut out from him, a slam of doors behind him. He closed his eyes, and every universe everywhere was pulled

into a deep, grey sea of nothing.

## episode twenty-eight: head on



Mars could care less about Paul's morose attitude, which he exuded like sweat. "This is bullshit," he said.

Mars primly spread her hands on her knees, her body tense as she sat on the edge of the winged back chair in Paul's living room. She'd left work early and hadn't gone home, making a beeline instead for his door, which she'd rattled on with firm, white-knuckled tension. He hadn't wanted her to come in, of course, and was ready to insist they go to her apartment instead, going so far as to nearly shove her towards the main stairs. But she had shoved back with more force than he expected and was now stubborn in her resolve to whittle away at her own fears until the true cause leaked to the surface and she wasn't above using him as a tool to do it. "I'm tired of being invisible," she said to him, her mouth a thin, angry line. "No one hears me outside of this place, no one knows who I am or takes my expertise seriously, and what little I do manage to influence gets mucked up in the process."

Paul paced in front of her, his eyes darting every now and then to the corner of the ceiling in his kitchen. A gaping, black hole oozed grey slime. A glob of it hit the edge of the kitchen counter, to slide wetly off and onto the green tiled floor. "What happens outside of this place has nothing to do with me," he assured her.

There was nothing sexy about his cheeky arrogance now, Mars thought as she watched his continuous pacing. He was a bear of a man, trapped in a tiny, circular cage, with only his equally circular thoughts to keep him company. Physically, he was strong and good looking, his head cleanly shaved, his eyes a burning icy blue that penetrated deep into the souls of liars and forced them to confess. But that person he had once been, the homicide detective of six years ago, he had long since eroded away. This paranoid, suspicious man who flinched at every shadow was left in his place. Mars pushed aside the feeling of pity that welled up within her. Paul wrung his hands and then picked up a tiny ceramic bird, his fingers wiping away imaginary dust from its orange beak.

"Does it comfort you," Mars said, changing her tactic, "keeping all these ceramic bits and pieces around you?" He didn't answer her, so she continued, her voice solid in the room. "I wondered why Bonnie gave them to you, but I think I understand. When you pick at these things, and concentrate on them you can forget about everything else. You can be distracted by counting them or dusting them or even arranging them. They're small and fragile. Just like how you're feeling."

“So you’re a goddamned psychiatrist now,” Paul said. He placed the tiny bird back onto the crowded side table to roost with the other ceramic figurines.

“No, as I’ve told you before, I’m a pathologist. I’ve learned over the years that it’s wise to bring human behaviour into the equation when determining the risks and rates of disease. If a patient is a known alcoholic, for example, who claims he’s going to stop drinking because of the cancer cells I found in his liver, I can determine whether or not he’s telling the truth when he comes in for future testing. His behaviour can be the difference between ending up on a liver transplant list, or not. Since such donors are so rare, I’m not comfortable with giving a man irresponsible enough with his life the option to end someone else’s hope.”

“Playing God,” Paul said, frowning.

“We do that every day,” Mars countered. “With every decision we make. There’s this unfortunate dictatorship that humanity lives under. It’s called the law of cause and effect.” She brought her thumb to her lips, her nail nervously chewed as she garnered up the courage to reveal the real purpose of her visit. “I met your family today,” she muttered. “Your father, Dr. Nigel Nash, and your sisters, Doctors Monica and Mona Nash. They send their regards.”

Paul stiffened where he stood. It was clear from the pulsing vein in his thick neck that he was absolutely livid. “What the hell? You talked to my father? What the fuck, Mars!”

“He works at the hospital, of course I talk to him,” Mars replied. “He’s a gynecologist, how else is he going to get the cervical biopsy results unless he comes to my office? Really, Paul, you’re being overly dramatic. It’s not like he’ll even remember me. Four minutes into any conversation and he’s forgotten who I am. I told him you and I are seeing each other, but he forgot my name and why he’d come to see me and by the time he left my office he was in a proper fog.”

He frowned at this, his anger instantly tempered with worry. “I don’t understand,” he said. “What do you mean my father left in a fog?”

Mars sighed, wondering if her particular ailment was starting to creep into her home. “I have that affect on people.”

“My father is too young to be losing his memory. He’s 65 years old. Are you telling me he’s sick?”

“No. I’m just telling you he misses you and he wanted to send along a hello. That’s all.” She eyed him as he continued his nervous pacing, his ice blue gaze occasionally glancing over his shoulder at the black, oozing corner in his kitchen. “There is a problem, Paul, and it’s mine. I don’t know how to explain it to you. I doubt you’ll believe me.”

“I’ll believe anything,” Paul said, shuddering when a loud, hollow plop of slime hit his sink.

His apartment was so clean, she noted, save for that strange rot whose infection caused him so much nervous concern. She took a deep breath, sucking in competing mixtures of bleach and ammonia, their lingering corrosive molecules sending a tingling burning inside her throat. Mars splayed her fingers on her knees, her palms sweating against her plain black trousers. Everything felt diseased.

“I’m disappearing,” she said.

“Can’t say I noticed that,” Paul said, his arms crossed as he stared down at her. “You seem solid enough to me.”

“It’s outside of the Manor that it’s happening,” Mars said. “Especially at work, at the hospital. When it first happened, I could still make acquaintances, even if they couldn’t remember what I was only a few minutes before—“ She hesitated here, and decided against revealing what would be, to Paul, a more disturbing secret. “But the transitions were fluid, and what I said was remembered, and I could still do

my job. But lately, it's like there's this ongoing amnesia where not even a minute can go by without the person in front of me forgetting who I am and why they had come to see me. At first, I admit, it was kind of useful because I'm not a people person anyway, and it was nice to be left alone to do my work. But now it's a real disability. The worsening of it concerns me. I can't help but wonder if one day I'll go to my office at the hospital and I won't be there at all." She cleared her throat. It felt raw. "I hate to say this, Paul, but I have a very real concern that whatever is infecting you has also transferred onto me. Pretty soon, I won't exist anywhere save in this building, and like you, I'll be trapped here because the minute I walk out the main entrance I'll be nothing more than a ghost."

Paul stood very still. As though he was being hunted by a hungry predator. His voice was a low whisper, hoarse and clean as it carried towards her. "What do my sisters say?"

Mars couldn't meet his gaze. "They say they're sorry."

"Of course they would."

"Paul, your sisters..." She paused, unsure of how to proceed. How much confession was good in this case, and how much would merely exacerbate the situation? The bitter note in his voice when he mentioned his twin siblings wasn't lost on Mars, who understood the strange connection all too well. She had shared it with Nathan, when she was Mark and he was her fraternal twin brother and they were two complete strangers who had just happened to meet in the womb. It was like having a puzzle with a factory defect, with a piece that was supposed to fit and make the image whole only for it to be warped, and imperfectly wedged together with the other fragments. "They said something about righting a wrong. Do you know what that is?"

"My sisters are freaks." Paul ran nervous fingers over the heads of his ceramic figurines. He was mentally counting them. "Even when they were born. It was weird. It was like they weren't even part of my family." He tapped on the foreheads of garishly painted bunnies, birds and cats. Ten. Eleven. Twelve. Mars mentally counted for him. "It was liking having a stranger move into your home. An unfriendly boarder, you know what I'm saying?"

"Very much so," Mars admitted.

"I gave up trying to connect to my family ages ago," Paul said. He sighed, and paused over the tiny blue bird Bonnie had given him. "Is my dad really okay?"

"He's fine."

Paul nodded at this and softened slightly. "Thanks." He gave her a worried frown, the ice blue of his attention freezing her to the core. "What are we going to do about you? There's no way in hell I want you becoming like me, and if you think this relationship is, I don't know, 'infecting' you in some way..."

"That's not what's happening," Mars said. "This is about what's going on behind that wall of mirrors, and I think it's a lot more complicated than spooks and poltergeists, like Bonnie thinks. I think we need to have a meeting with her, and with Charlie, because if there's one thing my expertise has taught me is that a sudden barrage of symptoms means a dormant disease is now active. If this is the case, then immediate, aggressive intervention is the only recourse."

"So, we have to go back to apartment #220? Why bother, we hardly learned anything the last time. All Charlie found were moving blobs, and they could be anything—rats in the walls, dust, you name it. And what 'aggressive treatment' is going to cure all of this? Believe me, I've been searching for four years, and I've come up empty." He gave her a sidelong glance, pain evident in the tight sinews of his thick neck. "Maybe we need to cool off for a while. Not see each other. I don't want to be responsible for you disappearing or whatever the hell is going on." He turned away from her. "I tried to warn you

off. I told you to get lost. You were too damn stubborn.”

“Bonnie tried to warn me, too,” Mars said. She narrowed her eyes at Paul, her gaze drifting to the collection of figurines that had kept him sane and centered. “But that wasn’t for my sake, Paul. Bonnie knows a lot more about this situation than she’s let on. She was trying to protect you from me.”

She leaned forward, feeling more confident now that Paul’s fearful silence overshadowed the gloom of his apartment. “We’re not going back into apartment #220, because it’s only a symptom of the disease. We are going to attack the cancer itself, and Paul you know damned well where it lives.”

“This is bullshit,” Paul repeated.

“I’m going to contact Bonnie, and my sister, and Charlie, and we are all going to sit down and have a pleasant little chat about our next course of action. I don’t care how you feel about it, Paul. This is about survival, and if we are to continue in any kind of relevance in this existence, we have to confront those things that scare us most.” She paused, not wanting to hurt him with this, but knowing she had to. “We have to bring everyone here, into this apartment. Because you know as well as I do that this is where it all started for you, that every anomaly gets sucked into its gravity.”

She checked her watch.

“6:30,” she said to him. It was an order, not a request. “You open that door at 6:30 tonight, and you let us in because if you don’t, I’m going to get an axe and smash the door in myself. You may struggle every day to survive in your own private hell, in your own terrible universe, but dammit, Paul, I finally found my passion to live. I won’t give that up without a fight of my own.”

## **episode twenty-nine: tea and scones**



Bonnie MacDonald’s home was scented with the mouth-watering aroma of good old fashioned baking. A basket of steaming scones were set on the coffee table before them, and Natassia eyed them hungrily, the large mug of tea in her grip practically begging her to take a morsel and enjoy the two perfect flavours of orange pekoe and warm, sugary bread together. Her hand instinctively reached toward the basket, fingers ready to snatch.

“Don’t you touch those!” Bonnie shouted from her massive kitchen. A cupboard door slammed, and the curly grey back of her head came into view. “The others haven’t arrived yet. It would be a right shame if they were gobbled up before they got here.”



'How did she see me with her back turned?' Natassia wondered. Still, she withdrew her hand, and reluctantly returned to the comfort of a now lukewarm tea. "It's not like I'd eat the whole basket," Natassia muttered.

"You told me earlier that you're ravenous," Charlie said with effort. He winced as he adjusted himself on the couch, his palm going to his side in a helpless bid to ease the pain of movement. "I've seen you eat. Bonnie has reason to worry."

She thought about whipping a biting retort at him in response, but the obvious pain he continued to suffer gave her pause, and she refrained. They'd spent the better part of the day at the hospital emergency, where after several hours of poking, prodding and waiting, Charlie was told he had three broken ribs, a nasty cut on his forehead with an accompanying concussion and a broken leg. He'd been splintered, drugged and sent home under Natassia's care, an issue Charlie had inexplicably wanted to protest but was rushed out so quickly he had no time to properly articulate his concerns.

Bonnie ducked underneath her counter to rummage for a bowl, and Natassia instantly morphed into Nathan. "Look, Charlie, we have to talk about this." He grabbed a scone and stuffed it whole into his mouth, cutting off conversation from his side for a moment. Realizing his mistake, he took a big gulp of tea and swallowed the tasty mixture with effort. He placed his free hand on Charlie's knee, only for Charlie to painfully shrink from him.

"It's not that big a deal," Nathan said, angry. "You're being a big baby about this."

Bonnie popped up from beneath the counter and Nathan instantly reverted back to Natassia, her fingertips quickly darting to her mouth to eliminate any evidence of scone-scoffing. Bonnie presented her with a scowl that suggested she knew damned well that some covert thieving had just happened.

"I'm just heading into my spare room for an extra set of coasters," she said to Natassia and Charlie. She fixed Natassia with a warning finger, the garish purple nail poking at them with psychic suggestion. "Keep your hands to yourselves, now. I'm not some flophouse for you lot, and I don't take to people having a grope in my home when the privacy of their own would suffice." She stormed off with her usual half wobble down the long hallway that must have housed at least three other large bedrooms. How had she scored such a large apartment, Natassia wondered. Even Charlie's was less than a quarter of the size of this one. It was a constant source of puzzlement, this strange layout of the Manor, and how every apartment seemed to have its own original design. Considering how tiny, cramped and decrepit her own flat was compared to Bonnie's opulence, the cheap rent she paid suddenly didn't appear to be much of a bargain. She flipped into her Nathan skin and turned on Charlie. "How much are you paying per month compared to her, do you think? She's a pensioner, and she makes ends meet cooking up scones for Henri so I know she's not rolling in the green. She can't be paying much more than Mark is for his apartment—or, as would be more accurate, this penthouse. We ought to have a meeting with that damned landlord. There's some serious disparity going on around here."

But Charlie was concentrating on more pressing matters. "I wish you wouldn't do this all the time."

"Doing what?"

"Flipping back and forth like that. It's very disconcerting."

"I told you, it's no big deal. Female, male, whatever. It's just a tiny pinch of DNA anyway, nothing all that important."

"Not to you, it isn't," Charlie corrected a now female Natassia, who cocked her head to one side and became Nathan. Charlie let out a frustrated sigh that left his side aching. "I'm just...I'm in too much pain right now to be properly horrified, so have some pity on me and pick a gender for the next ten minutes. Please."

“Horried?” Natassia said. Nathan pressed his lips in a thin, angry line. “Here I was, terrified that I’d lost you when I saw you lying there stock still at the base of the stairs. You were as grey as death, blood pouring everywhere.” Emotion crept onto the edges of Nathan’s words, his voice shaking as he harshly whispered to Charlie. “I was so scared. I’d never seen anyone dead before, let alone someone I cared about. And I still cared about you, Charlie, it’s not like I can just shut off my feelings just because of an outie instead of an innie. I wouldn’t be a human being if I did that, now would I?”

“Nathan,” Charlie said, his voice terse. “Stop it with the constant switching!”

“I’ll switch as much as I damned well want,” Natassia pouted.

“You can’t just go back and forth like you’re cracking a knuckle!”

“It’s not like I’m going to break anything.”

“How do you know?” Charlie asked, incensed. “If you keep popping it in and out like that you could get yourself pregnant.”

Nathan scoffed at this. “Pregnant. Yeah, right, like that can happen...”

“It’s amazing how you can just so conveniently forget about the facts of life as it pertains to you. I’m not saying you’re completely wrong, but you have to understand, you don’t know the long term effects of this condition.” Charlie winced as he shifted on the couch, his palm pressed tight against his side. He let out a low curse as Nathan placed a hand on his knee. “There’s probably side effects you aren’t even aware of yet. Presumably severe ones, and in your case, I believe they’re related to the level of noise in your flat.” He gave his girlfriend, Natassia, an uncomfortable smile. “I still have feelings for you, of course. I’m not able to turn off a switch, either. But you have to understand that this whole The Crying Game thing was not what I signed up for.”

“Get over it,” Nathan sneered. “One look at my girls and you didn’t give a damn about anything else. Admit it.”

Charlie shrugged, and let out a small cry of pain at the action. Natassia smoothed her hand along his back, and he was grateful for the pleasant warmth it provided. “I told you then,” he said to her. “I’ve always been a breast man.”

There was a knock at Bonnie’s door, and Natassia sprinted up to answer it. Mark barged in, his hands on his hips as he gave the room a quick survey. His brown eyes rested for a moment on Charlie, and widened as he took in the extent of the battered man’s injuries. “Good Lord,” he said, bringing the back of his hand to his mouth in whispered horror. “What the hell happened?”

“He tripped on the thirteenth stair and lived,” Nathan said, his voice equally hushed. He gave Mark’s confused understanding of his sudden gender change a question of his own. “Listen, if I bop back and forth between being male and female, is there any risk of my impregnating myself? Charlie and I have been having a debate about this, and I think it’s impossible, but you’re the doctor, so I figure if anyone has an answer to that it’s got to be you.”

“Who’s pregnant?” Mark asked. His eyes flashed from what was now a curvy Natassia and the bruised and bandaged Charlie who looked wanly on. “What have you done?”

“He knows, okay? And it’s all cool, so don’t worry about it. Kind of happened when I thought he was dying at the bottom of the stairs—and he wasn’t—and I kind of forgot myself, so to speak.”

“Actually, I’m not cool with it,” Charlie clarified. “But I am on a significant amount of morphine for pain and thus I can’t quite properly articulate my feelings of abject horror and distress.”

“Well... That’s good,” Mark said, doubtful.

“No one is pregnant. Charlie isn’t half as horrified as he thinks and Bonnie is taking a dog’s age to get a set of coasters for the antiques she bought off of her good friend Elizabeth Taylor. Honestly, this place is so 1957 baroque I half expect Dean Martin to start pouring me drinks.”

Bonnie descended upon them from the hallway, her wobbly gait made uneven by the thick handful of coasters in her pudgy hand. She paused, her breath wheezing slightly as she held the decorative corked rounds at her ample chest. “Dear me, you’ve gone and snuck in. You gave me a right fright, you did! Now, dearie, sit down and have yourself a cuppa. You must be tired after that long day at the hospital. Where’s that man of yours, that Paul?” She tsked and checked her watch. “He’s a half hour late, he is.”

Mars settled into the plump seat across from her sister and Charlie and took the cup of tea with gracious thankfulness. Charlie had witnessed Mark’s quick transformation, but he offered no reaction. Natassia’s constant yo-yo-ing for the past forty minutes had cured him of shock. Natassia eyed her sister disparagingly, and was especially piqued when Mars took up a scone and was not only allowed as many as she wished, but was given some homemade jam and organic butter to slather it with.

“Isn’t this lovely, how everything is coming together,” Bonnie crooned. She rubbed her hands together in glee, bits of white flour puffing around her in a baker’s halo. “I’ve always said this place has that affect on people. Brings those who need to be realigned back to their proper place. Like you there, with your skewered tie and your bruises—Did a number on you, that step, but then, it brought with it all the answers you were seeking. Nothing happens without a reason, especially within these old walls. No pain, no gain. Isn’t that what they say, Mr. Nash?”

Her back to was to Paul as he stood in the doorway of her apartment. The raised red velvet pattern on the hallway walls behind him seemed to move thanks to the flickering gaslight that was still used on this, the fifth floor. The illusion of movement gave Natassia the eerie sensation that Paul was stepping out of a nest of active veins, his pallor a foreign body within an otherwise healthy organism.

“You should tell him,” Natassia whispered to Mars, but her sister gave her a murderous glare that ended all discussion of the subject. Paul stepped into Bonnie’s apartment, his icy eyes more limpid than their usual threatening, cold hue. He looked sick. Like he was just getting over a nasty flu. He took the seat next to Mars and sat down with care, as though fearful he was about to faint out of it.

“You’re right about alignment,” Charlie said to Bonnie. “Your simplistic understanding is not so far from what I have surmised. Crescent Manor is like a magnet for certain frequencies within people, and they are drawn to this place as a method of, as you’ve said, bringing their incompleteness into a whole.”

Natassia shifted uncomfortably beside him. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“What’s with the cast and the bruises?” Paul glanced at Natassia and then back at Charlie. “You two have some kind of fight?”

“He fell down the stairs,” Natassia said, incredulous. She curled her upper lip in disdain at Paul. “And no, before you ask, I didn’t push him. Geez, what is wrong with you?”

“I didn’t say anything,” Paul reminded her.

“We’ve never fought like that,” Natassia said, still offended. “I wouldn’t do that to my Charlie.”

“He just looks uncomfortable next to you, that’s all,” Paul said. He hungrily took the scone that was offered to him and ate it with two large bites. He brushed his hands free of crumbs and let them fall onto Bonnie’s royal blue shag carpet. “I had to investigate a lot of domestic disturbances when I was a beat cop. You two got the body language of a feuding couple, that’s all.”

“We’re not feuding,” Natassia darkly said

“Tea?” Bonnie offered.

"I'm trying to make a very relevant, important point if anyone would care to listen," Charlie added. His tea was topped up without his asking for it. He tried to block Bonnie's continued pouring, only to have hot tea scald his knuckles.

"Oh my," Bonnie tutted. "You are a bit of a calamity today. Stands to reason, considering all that's happened lately. You can't just ride out a mistake. Reparations have to be made. Compromises." She gave Charlie's scorched silence a cheeky wink. "Sometimes there's casualties, and that can't be helped. Like you, Paul." She handed him a delicate, flowered teacup steaming with darjeeling warmth. "Poor fellow. It can't be pleasant spending one's life in a garage."

Paul was silent at this, the rest of the room following his lead as all attention was suddenly riveted on the cheerful, round Bonnie MacDonald, who now plunked into her sitting chair with a large mug of tea and an equally large scone. "Don't know why you're looking at me with such surprise." She sipped her hot tea and blew onto its surface to cool it. Ripples formed across it like currents. "That's what a place is that just houses things that you don't have much use for. A garage. Like you, Paul, and that life you lead in there with all those little ceramic creations you distract yourself with. I suppose one needs a hobby, but I should think you could do better, especially as now you have a girlfriend what needs a worthy man to come home to." She winked at Mars, who blushed despite herself. She sat back, the hot mug of tea nestled against her chest, her lips unadorned and oddly pretty in their natural state. "You can't be hiding in there any more, dearie. It's served its purpose and it's high time you started fixing it up before it goes and explodes again."

"It's like a deck, shuffled, with an extra card shoved in," Charlie explained, but no one was really listening to him. "There's this whole other world, this place that's superimposed on this one. It took a while to get to this, thousands if not millions of universes transposed on each other until this, a complete metamorphosis." He placed his cup of tea down on the coaster with care, his fingers drawn to his chin, which he traced in careful thought. He had a few days stubble lurking along his jaw and he scraped his nails across it, the rasping sound settling like crumbs over the coffee table. "Of course. Paul has been the imperfect solution, the central hub. Everyone else involved in the mistake has been pulled in already and this entire scenario, here, is orchestrated by the Manor itself to right a wrong." He glanced up from his concentration, eyes wild with complex reasoning. "The Garage was only a temporary solution. There is another world lurking between the walls, where it was kept in check before it is growing again. It's going to explode and this time, our world will get blown to bits and that other world, the shuffled one with that extra, alien card from another deck, it's going to take its place."

"Damn bullshit," Paul muttered. Mars gently kicked his shin.

"It is," Paul insisted. He didn't like being in the spotlight like this, Natassia noticed. He looked claustrophobic. Anxious. Ready to take off running. "You're saying that what I go through, in that apartment, that it has something to do with the noise in Natassia's flat?"

"You've been there," Charlie stated.

Paul sighed, hating to be found out. "Yeah. I have."

"And you never told us."

"Confessing your apartment turns into a version of Hell once in a while isn't something that comes up in idle conversation." Paul eyed Charlie cautiously. "So you're saying my little piece of Hades has something to do with what happened in apartment #220."

"Absolutely," Charlie said, his voice and gaze intense. "It is the noise in Natassia's flat."

Paul let out a choked laugh at this. "Right. And I'm the damn keeper of the keys or some bullshit. I'm not some science fiction freak show. I don't know what Natassia told you, but when I talked to Mars

and told her all that stuff..." He gave Mars a disparaging glare. "I thought I told you that stuff was confidential. I wouldn't have said a word if I'd known you were going to send out a memo to everyone in the building."

"She didn't need to," Bonnie cheerfully said. "I already knew, dearie. Known what you've been going through for years. I may be in my eighties, but I'm a perceptive old duck. Not much gets past this sharp noggin." She gave the side of her head a quick rap of her knuckles. "You been haunted, my son, and to be sure I felt the pain of it every time I laid my eyes on you. Poor devil. I suppose it would have gone on forever, you being the imperfect solution. But then, things went and exploded and everything changed. As it does."

"It was when I looked over the recordings again that I realized it," Charlie added. They all slowly turned their heads, and he felt a sudden nervous relief that all attention was finally gathered on what he had to say. "What we were looking at was a locked battle between two powerful entities, but the power struggle was uneven. On the one side was the humanoid shape, one which I should have instantly recognized seeing as how I am so familiar with it."

"What is it?" Natassia asked. She reached for a scone and had her hand smacked away by a hawk-like Bonnie.

"Not a what, but a who," Charlie said. A note of pride edged into his voice, and he sat up a little straighter, though the expression of pride caused him pain. "It's my grandfather, of course. George Weiss. Locked in battle." His confidence fell away as a sudden pain erupted along his left side. "I don't know his opponent. It would make all the difference to the state of the universe if I did." Charlie let out a suffering sigh. "I hate to tell you this, Natassia, but you and your sister's arrival to the Manor was the catalyst that upset this imperfect balance. Before you arrived, our worlds were separated, yes, but it was like finding a screw missing and replacing it with one of the wrong size. A patch job. With your arrival, it finally snapped, leaving room for a proper realignment to occur. The Event will happen again. My grandfather is getting weaker by the hour. Pretty soon that Sasquatch shaped thing is going to get the upper hand and take over. Then the whole thing collapses in on itself as its forced to realign the state of the universe, and who we are right now will forever cease to exist."

"That's awful," Natassia whispered. "It's like you're saying we're going to die."

"Worse than that," Charlie assured her. "We won't ever be born."

Paul Nash leaned forward in his chair, his elbows resting on his knees. He hung his head as his anxiety increased, his eyes closed against the onslaught of memory that assailed him. "I don't get half of what you're saying," he admitted.

"You don't have to," Charlie said. "But unfortunately, you're right in the middle of our problem."

"That thing you keep talking about, the one you say is fighting with your grandfather or whatever the hell he or it is. I know who it is." Paul's voice was weak, a hoarse, dark whisper over the cheery tea setting before him. Bonnie sat up, her bearing regal as she listened to him. "It's Carol," he said, admitting defeat before the battle had even begun. "My demonic ex-girlfriend. She's been trying to kill me for a long time." He picked up the tiny, steaming cup of tea and took a tongue scalding sip. He placed it back on its saucer with delicate care. "The sake of our universe as we know it. So, it's one of two things, either she gets her wish..." He trailed off, no one in the room wanting to think on what that might mean. "Or I go ahead and kill her. Again."

He took another gulp of his too hot tea.

"Don't feel sorry for me," he said to Mars, who now had her hand on his arm. "Believe me, this time I'll enjoy doing it."

"I don't think this is wise," Mars said. "There has to be another way."

"Nah," Paul said, and he gave her a rueful smile as he took her hand in his and softly kissed the heel of her palm. "I know Carol. Nothing gets past her control."

His thumb circled the thin lines on Mars' wrist.

"She can't give me another option."

### **episode thirty: tinkering in the garage**



Goblins giggled and ran past Mark as he entered the building, a pitchfork brushing against his thigh as they escaped through the front door and onto the darkening street. It took him a few moments to fully comprehend that it was October 31<sup>st</sup>. Hallowe'en. The echoed pleas of 'trick or treat' drifted towards him from the main staircase. Promises of candy and not terror were offered to the witch and devil who swooped into the lobby and out the front door to join their goblin peers. Mark checked his watch. 6:30. He had an hour before they were all supposed to meet at Paul's apartment. He gave his appearance a quick shrug, and a delicate, female hand rapped on Paul's door.

"Go away, I don't have any fucking candy," Paul grumbled.

"It's Mars."

There was a scattered shuffling in the apartment and Paul swung open the door. He was pale, with a clammy sheen to his skin, as though he had been working out. His strong, muscular arms pulled her in without effort. "Then you'd better be the one with the candy," he whispered with sultry intent against the kiss he placed on Mars' mouth. "We got an hour before they get here. I want to gorge myself on you."

He pulled the hem of her cotton shirt out of her black trousers and Mars placed her hands on his wrists, stopping him. "I don't know if you should," she said.

Paul frowned, his thumbs still embedded beneath the waistband of her pants, the tiny strokes they made on the flesh of her hips signalling a hot warmth between her legs. "I don't know what's going to happen," he confessed to her. "Carol has become so strong, and when she rips me apart in there, it's hard to remember I come back whole. Thing is, I don't think I do. There's bits of me still kept in that Garage of hers. She hates me, and she clings to me like an obsessed lover, because that kind of hate is

meant to disintegrate me.”

“It hasn’t,” Mars reminded him. She took her hand off his wrist and caressed his neck. He gave her a rough kiss and she sighed, his hands diving deeper along the inside of her trousers. “Paul...I have to tell you something. About me. It’s...it might be disturbing to you and...”

Paul gave a low chuckle at this. His lips grazed her teeth. “I may not make it out of there tonight,” he warned her. “Carol might get her wish and I might be stuck there with her, existing there and not here. If I fuck up, we’re all gone.” His hand slid between her legs, and Mars felt her knees buckle. “Whatever it is, don’t bother worrying about it. We got an hour left before it all smashes like a broken mirror. Let’s not waste it.”

~\*~

Natassia was curled up beside Charlie on his bed, his uneven snores keeping her awake. He still hadn’t shaved, but at least he was no longer wearing the bloodstained Boxworth Electronics uniform he’d had on when he took his nearly deadly tumble down the stairs. He looked strange in his simple grey track shorts and black and white English Beat t-shirt. Without his ugly blue uniform he seemed so ordinary, even harmless. Natassia adjusted a pillow beneath Charlie’s broken leg, and he groaned in muted pain before drifting back into snoring bliss.

She carefully laid beside him, this man who had been so keen to come to her rescue only to be battered to bits himself. No one had ever cared about her like that before, certainly not their mother with her cold, distant ennui, and not their father with his crazed ramblings and disconnection from reality. Sure, Mark had bailed Nathan out when he’d run low on funds, and he’d probably have gained assistance when he needed it from his twin. But the fact remained that before this strange entanglement of male and female within them, Mark and Nathan had been so emotionally disconnected from each other whatever tragedy they suffered wasn’t a shared experience. What offerings of help were given out of familial duty and not any real sense of understanding. A stranger receiving alms.

It was a sensation that had leaked into other relationships, what few they had made. Mark’s insane girlfriend, killing her professor. Any other person would have beat themselves up with recriminations, asked themselves why they didn’t see this coming. But Mark had taken it in with quiet stride. That incident had nothing to do with him. He had a cold, remote detachment from both his girlfriend and her terrible actions.

What about now? Natassia had to wonder. When Mark thought about that time, did he feel a sense of surviving guilt, a remorse for not being able to feel enough empathy to see what was happening? She frowned, thinking on her own feelings about her past before the Event. Nathan Connor had been the love ‘em and leave ‘em type. The skankier and more prone to STDs the better. He’d never felt this well of caring that had erupted into her heart like it now did, every beat in conjunction with the person laying next to her. There was a depth to her soul that hadn’t been there before, and if she looked too closely at it, it frightened her with its blind, furious intensity.

Natassia flopped over onto her back, her aching head comfortable as she began to slowly doze. Her half open eyes lazily chased the shadows on the ceiling from passing cars as they sped down the busy street. She closed her eyes, listening to the hum of traffic. There was a great sense of peace associated with being in a densely populated area. A sense of comradeship, of loneliness banished.

She heard a tiny ping, and she opened her eyes, the ceiling brought back into gloomy focus. There were tiny pinpricks of shadow that tapped along the surface, and they travelled with purpose to the far wall.

Like the fingertips of a blind man seeking a way out of a labyrinth, they pushed against the drywall and it gave beneath its touch like a stretchy cotton sheet. A hand became visible, and just as suddenly, a cameo of a face. It paused as it stared down at Natassia before slowly retreating, fingertips crawling along the wall, the ceiling and through the heavy oak door as they left Charlie and his unexpected guest alone.

“Charlie?” Natassia whispered, so terrified she could barely find her voice. She touched his shoulder and he groaned. “Charlie, I think I just met your grandfather.”

Charlie was lost in the deep embrace of sleep and painkillers, and he couldn’t answer her. She tucked him in on her side and padded out of the bed, her bare feet cold on the oak flooring as she headed out of the bedroom, down the thin hallway and into the living room. As usual, the apartment had its own design, only slightly similar to Mark’s, but without a kitchen island. The entire living room/dining room/kitchen area was stubbornly open concept, a large rectangular space that was divided solely by function. A large, bare expanse of wall was on the left side of the fridge, a low shelf made up of bricks and pine planks holding an array of scientific journals and texts. The coffee table was an old crate taken from the storeroom of Boxworth Electronics. Charlie’s laptop was sitting on top of it, a cup of cold coffee that had sat there for days molding beside it.

A movement on the wall above the books snatched her attention, and Natassia watched, wide-eyed as not only fingers and a face came into view from beneath the drywall, but an entire, beige profile. An etched relief of what looked to be a businessman, one who was tall, and wearing a smartly cut suit. His lips were moving, and Natassia strained to hear. No sound was audible.

“You got nothing to worry about,” Natassia said, her knees quaking in terror at Charlie’s ancestral apparition. “I’ll be good to him. I promise you.”

The figure gave her a respectful nod before retreating back into the wall. Natassia swallowed, morphing into her male form as he stared in fear at the wall where Charlie’s grandfather had appeared. He’d gotten a promise out of him, the bastard.

He listened to the quiet of the apartment, its peace disturbed only by Charlie’s quiet snores. The laptop hummed on the coffee table, and Nathan pressed the enter button. The images Charlie had recorded several days ago replayed over and over.

“Charlie,” Nathan whispered to it. “What the hell have you gotten us into?”

~\*~

She felt bruised and sore, but it was worth it. Paul’s hot hands were still on her naked waist, the pressure increased as he lifted her off of the kitchen counter to stand naked in front of him. Her body was slick with sweat, and she shivered, her arousal well sated, her nudity now simply leaving her cold.

Paul kissed her, the heat from his body as he pressed against her a welcome comfort. “I should take a shower,” she said. He trailed biting kisses along the underside of her neck. One hand pressed against the small of her back. The other cupped her bare breast.

“Your skin feels so, I don’t know, different,” he said. His opened her mouth with the determined strength of his kiss, his tongue diving deep, refusing to release her. He pulled away with reluctance. “So soft, and strong too. Like you’ve got all these extra muscles.”

He kissed her again. Lightly, on her lips. “How much time do we have?”



“Five minutes,” Mars warned. She eyed him up and down and gave him a small smile. “We’d better get dressed.”

“Get started on the shower,” he said, grinning. He gave her ass a small slap. “It doesn’t matter how long they knock.”

~\*~

“We’ve been standing here for half an hour!”

Natassia stormed into Paul’s apartment, ignoring the flushed hue of her twin’s skin and the lingering scent of Maximum Body Wash, which both Mars and Paul were mutually sporting. Charlie hobbled in on crutches behind her, his laptop tucked snugly under his arm. He was definitely the most ruffled Mars had ever seen him, his five o’clock shadow now moved well past seven, his t-shirt sloppily hanging askew. He took a seat on the couch closest to the door and opened up the laptop, complex symbols and commands keyed in the moment he laid his crutches to one side and sat down. Natassia curled up next to him, her arms stuffed with an antique cushion.

She put her feet up on one of Paul’s coffee tables and he shoved them off, his sleeve angrily rubbing at the spot of dirt she’d left on the cherry wood surface. “This is my home,” he tersely reminded her. “I don’t go into your place and start stomping all over it.”

“That would probably be an improvement,” Charlie said, his eyes riveted on the laptop screen before him. Lines of bright greens on black were reflected in his pupils. “I suppose we could have performed this there instead of here, but this is the easiest portal, and Paul must be involved.” His eyes were rimmed in dark circles as he peered over the top of his laptop at Paul. “In any case, you are the person the entity has hand picked. No one else has had actual contact save for you.”

“How lucky for me,” Paul replied.

“Being on familiar turf will help you,” Charlie added by way of encouragement. “But I’m not going to pretend this will be easy. In a way, there’s a potential for quantum suicide, and you could end up trapped there as easily as my grandfather had been.” His gaze sharpened, the darkness in them reflecting the sudden swirls of colour on his laptop screen. “If it is my grandfather, of course.”

“Of course,” Mars repeated.

“I have to wonder,” Charlie said, his words solely for Paul. “Do you think you could pass him a message? Tell him his grandson Charlie is doing what he can?”

“I’m not sure that’s possible,” Paul tried to explain. “The Garage isn’t a place where normal conversations can exist. The thing in there might look like your grandfather, but there’s no guarantee I can actually talk to him.” He narrowed his ice blue eyes at Charlie, assessing the man’s determined judgement. “It’s not like I can walk in and buy the guy a beer. Things are wrong in there. Violent, rotten. You may not even exist if and when I manage to get back.”

“You will,” Charlie said, his voice taking on an angry edge, unwavering in his resolve. “And you will tell him Charlie Weiss was the one who sent you.”

“This whole thing is wrong,” Mars said. She leaned against the corner leading into the hallway, her arms crossed as she watched Charlie and Paul quietly stand off against each other. Natassia was equally tense, and she gave her sister an understanding shrug. The rivalry between the two men had a strange undercurrent of will beneath it. Like they were on opposing sides of a serious issue. But they were here

for the same reason, weren't they, with Paul as the equinox for some quantum shuffle that had taken place. The world had to be realigned, brought into better focus.

If it didn't, she would disappear from it completely regardless of whether Paul defeated his monster or not.

Bonnie MacDonald didn't bother to knock. She ambled in, arms laden with baskets of freshly baked goods, candles, incense packets, matches and John Tesh CDs. "Clear off that table," she ordered Paul as she forced her way into his ordered but cluttered space. "Oh, me arms is aching!"

It all landed with thud on the table Charlie was using, nearly knocking over his computer into his lap. She ignored his warning glare and began setting up the candles and ordering Natassia and Mars in how to best arrange the room. "I think a chair in the corner will do. And grab from the one from that side. We'll put Paul's here, that winged back chair near the window, that one goes in the centre. That's it, now this little table here, to make it a proper circle. I'll arrange the candles proper, in accordance to karmic colour. I brought sage incense with me—Nothing cures the air of cruelty better."

"I see your candles, but where's your bell and book?" Charlie asked, scornful of the intrusion. "A copy of the Necromonicon, or The Collected Works of Emily Dickenson should do."

"Insult my methods all ye like, but I know a thing or two about conducting a proper séance," Bonnie said, tutting him. Natassia reached for an oatmeal cookie, and Bonnie snatched the basket away. "This is for afterwards. When we celebrate victory."

"With oatmeal?" Charlie asked, skeptical.

"Only because they don't sell haggis at the Scottish store anymore. They used to use the best quality sheep intestine and stomach, imported right from the Skye it were. Imagine, there not being enough demand for it!"

"I'm shocked," Natassia said.

"This isn't a séance," Charlie said, his patience sorely tested. "There is no need for candles and incense or any other superstitious nonsense. What's happening here is of a purely scientific persuasion. These trimmings will prove to be a distraction."

"They worked well enough for my ancestors in the past," Bonnie assured him. She wagged a fat finger at his reticence. "They knew me as a seer back home, just as my mother and my grandmother before me, and those who went long before them. You see no purpose because you don't properly understand what is happening here. To send a person to that other side, no matter where it is on the many layered plane, you need these distractions, these little lights along the way." She snatched up several handfuls of Paul's ceramic figurines and arranged them in three circles around the winged back chair he was to sit in. "Simple things that are easy to recognize, that's what will get him home. Not complicated equations and directions that he can't properly follow." She gave Paul's pale understanding a harsh nod. "Memorize this and look for them," she said. "You know when you see them that you're close to coming back." She lit the candles and bid Mars to dim the lights, which she did with grave trepidation.

"It still feels wrong," Mars said. The apartment was now bathed in an eerie gloom. The flames from the candles lit the apartment with a predatory glow, the tiny figurines arranged around the winged back chair with alchemical precision. She gave Paul a worried frown. "I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

"Can't be helped," he said. He gave her a wan smile. "It has to be this way."

Bonnie grabbed Paul's hand and gave it a tight squeeze. "Go on then, dearie," she said to him and inclined her head to the chair.

Paul said nothing. He gave one last, lingering look to Mars and then stepped gingerly over the circular arrangement of figurines, two steps taking him to the chair. He settled into it, and placed his palms on the arms. Ice blue eyes bore into Mars, and she turned away, fearful of what was about to happen next.

She had every reason to worry. The change was slow at first, only to gain in strength the more she witnessed it. Paul, bathed in a strange green and blue glow, his body separated into three phases. His mouth was open in a silent scream of torment, but there was nothing to hear, his mouth slack and open, his icy eyes twisted shut his scream echoed into a dimension far flung from the one they resided in beside him.

“He’s having a seizure!” Mars said, rushing for him. “We have to call an ambulance!”

Bonnie’s strong arm held her back, but Mars managed to touch Paul’s shoulder. A massive current coursed through her and she was flung from him, her back pushed against the far wall. She stared in shock at her hand, now stained with a slimy layer of rust from when she’d touched Paul’s shoulder.

“There’s nothing you can do for him now, dearie,” Bonnie sadly informed her. “All that’s left now is to sit tight and wait it out.”

## **episode thirty-one: psycho ex-girlfriends**



He'd never managed to get this far in before. He breathed deeply, the corrosive air burning the inside of his throat and leaving a metallic taste on his tongue. He'd stepped out of the chair and it had disappeared behind him, the last remnants of his world blown away by a thick layer of sand and rusted flakes of debris. Still, he could feel the connection to that other place as a gentle tug on the back of his head, an elastic line that hadn't yet been severed. If he turned his head at an awkward angle he could actually see it seeping out from his skull, a line of silvery viscous liquid that shimmered in the overly bright landscape. It journeyed far into the horizon, to a point where his feet alone couldn't take him.

Rusted rubble crunched beneath his steps as he moved forward, deeper into the decrepit remains of 314 Crescent Manor, the building's innards exposed like the bones of a decayed corpse. Steel beams rubbed raw from the roaring sandy wind creaked as they swung precariously from the open wound of the second and third floors. They rocked with every assault, ready to crash to the tangled mess of cables

and crumbled bricks below as the sand whispered destruction across it. The dry husk of the remnants of his own apartment were far behind him as he made his way up the collapsing main staircase, the steps held together by the lingering threads of the paisley red carpet, now reduced to a worn rag.

Pieces of the carpet drifted across his legs, a rust coloured fluff that resembled clotted blood moving upstream through a massive organism's veins.

He braced his hand against the one remaining outside corner on the second floor, his palm slick with a disgusting ooze that seeped out from the exposed pipes. The Garage was a vile mixture of damp and acrid dryness, so one had the choice of desiccating or liquefying if they were trapped in its thrall. Paul wasn't keen on either option. He wiped his palm clean on his black jeans and continued onwards.

What might have once been the bones of a previous occupant lay in a heap at the top of the stairwell, a thick pyramid of white powder with delicate, undisturbed molars laying in a semi-circle on top of it. He carefully stepped over the pile, unsure if the person was still living or dead in that uneven universe he had left behind. The Garage had repercussions. He didn't want to think too long on what might happen if he was careless.

The pull at the back of his head hit a snag and he managed to instinctively unwind it with deliberate, circular motions of his neck. When he was sure he had a enough slack he continued his journey to the second floor, stepping into the dark hollow that still remained. He braced his hand along the wall, feeling the pattern of the wallpaper beneath a thick layer of sticky ooze. He stumbled as he approached Natassia's flat, a hole suddenly ripping through the floor as his foot dangled above it. He regained his balance with effort, and pressed his back against the relative solidity of the wall to his left. Rusted steel pipes, wooden planks and shreds of carpet sank down in slow motion to the vast depths of the Manor's basement. They landed with a distant, roaring crash as they joined the debris below.

Paul's eyes were wide as he watched the fall, and held his breath when he heard the landing. That could have been his body among the Garage's rot. It was a subtle reminder, he knew. He was begrudgingly thankful for it.

He moved forward, only to trip on a loose piece of drywall and fly headfirst towards the gaping wound in the hallway floor. He managed to clutch onto the handle of Natassia's apartment door, preventing him from hurtling down into that crowded abyss. His hand slid off the doorknob, and he rolled to one side, his shoulder still partially resting on the edge of the hole's precipice.

Her pale knees were what faced him first. She stood on firmer ground on the other side of the hole. Paul was on his side, pressed tight against Natassia's door. A thin line of putrid blood and pus seeped down the grey inside of Carol's thigh. "You made me wait too long," she said, her voice a mockery of caring. He dropped his gaze, preferring the dark threat of the abyss to her scrutiny.

"You shouldn't have bothered," he said. "This little visit isn't about us as a couple. All any of us want is for you to get lost."

Carol wasn't about to let him off so easy.

She grabbed him by the scruff of his t-shirt and hauled him effortlessly over the hole, to force him to stand in front of her. He kept his eyes shut, the stench of her putrid breath like maggot riddled meat. The sharp tips of her bony fingertips dug into his mandible, and his face was forced upward, close to hers. The smell was burning the inside of his throat, acid bile rising in his stomach. He was going to have to play her game, if only for a little while until he managed to find a way to escape. He opened his eyes with effort, the acid burn of her breath stinging them. Her face came into focus, her gaze the milky white of the week long dead, her smile full of cracked chunks of falling flesh. "Hey there, lover," she said, her teeth green with slime. An equally vile tongue touched his lips and he could feel them burn,

could hear the sizzle. “Oh come on, baby. I couldn’t just let you waltz in here without saying a proper hello.”

She pressed her cheek against his, the sticky stink of it giving him a good idea of the rot going on inside of her. “Come on, baby. Now that you’re here, we can have a proper party.” She dug her fingers into his back, the bones poking deep beneath his flesh. Paul howled out in pain, her broken grin sliding alongside his cheek. “That’s it, baby. Feel the burn. You and me, just you and me. Forever.”

He pushed her off of him with all his strength and ran running down the hall, heedless of the risk the open gaps in the floor presented. He ran into the last apartment on the right, only to be presented with another series of openings that led backwards through the missing walls and holes to an apartment close to the front of the building. Carol’s shrieking screams pierced his ear, and he figured he had a head start if he began running now. He pushed his way through the debris into and out of the various apartments, past kitchens with sinks smashed in half, past the tangle of decayed vines and their dead flowers, past cracked concrete and shredded vintage wallpaper. A rusted tricycle lay on its side. A partially melted doll’s head lay sightless at his feet.

Carol’s laughter bellowed above him and he stopped, a massive wall getting in the way of his escape. He frowned as he inspected it, his hands gliding across the rough surface. Mirrored glass lay embedded in red plaster, the broken pieces a haphazard pattern that, if he stood back and took stock of it all, had a strangely circular influence upon it. One small mirror in particular jutted outwards, a tiny hole in its centre, and he could feel a breeze, cold and clean pushing delicately into the rotted environment.

“It’s you and me forever, baby,” Carol’s vile promise echoed across the chasm of apartments towards him. “Never mind your little slut back home. It’s no big loss. She’s not half the girl you think she is.”

“I killed you because you left me no choice,” Paul said. He turned, facing her and the wrath her rotted corpse presented. “I’m not going to apologize for that. You mean nothing to me. You’re not why I’m here.”

“You left me to rot,” she said, her voice hissing out of a gaping, green and black wound at her throat.

“That happened long before you were banished here,” he said to her. “It was over, Carol. That day, I knew. Our relationship was dead.”

She howled in fury at him, her acidic breath burning the air before her and choking Paul as he tried to fill his lungs. He collapsed to the floor, his punctured back torn by the shards of mirror embedded in the wall. “I don’t care what you do to me, but I’m sick of you trying to get out of here. This is where you belong, Carol. You aren’t killing anyone else, I won’t let you.”

Her footfalls as she slowly approached him echoed with nightmare finality. She would destroy him, he knew, he’d be dead back in that universe that was so far removed from this one. Quantum bullshit, that’s what Charlie believed, maybe Mars too. Personally, he figured Bonnie and her spiritualist approach made the most sense. Paul had theories of his own, but of course no one had asked his authority, not the poor slob who’d actually been here, who kept trying to keep this rusted Hell from leaking out into their world.

The Garage, Paul figured, whatever it was, it didn’t exist past a thought-form. The slow rot that sluiced away bits of Carol was a lie as were the puddles of slime and mold. No bacteria would grow here, there was no such thing as life in this dead space. This was its opposite, the complete obliteration of existence. Any suggestion otherwise was an intrusion and dealt with accordingly. From the amount of black spots and slimy mold that had found a home in the crevices of this version of Crescent Manor there were plenty of these things, these bits like Carol, slowly finding death within it.

He couldn’t see her. The bright atmosphere outside of the Garage suddenly darkened into an ink black

nothingness. Sandstorms whipped outside the building, tearing into the bricks and scraping against the metal framework that still remained.

Her slimy tongue met his neck. He felt helpless, knowing what he had to do, but he had no clue how to go about it. He wasn't armed, and she was far stronger than he was. Physically, there was nothing that could be done.

Still, there was always that nagging hope. A terrible thing, hope. It kept clinging on long after that second last breath of life.

"What are you doing here, Carol?" Paul's voice felt gritty, his words eked out of his burned throat with effort. "Why are you here?"

She licked his neck again. Her saliva burnt his skin, sizzling it like acid. "You brought me here, lover. I'd feel sorry for you, if I could. It's sad, very sad to think that you're just a card in a deck that was supposed to be an ace of spades instead of a two of clubs. But someone put too many cards in the deck, Paul, and now we have this little problem." She grinned, and a front tooth fell out onto the brittle, cracked hardwood floor. It rolled against Paul's shoe. "You should ask your little girlfriend about it. She knows what it's like to shuffle back and forth. Cousin, brother, sister, twin—You'd be surprised how many hats she and he wear."

"You don't make any sense," Paul said. He tensed against her touch along his chest, bony fingers digging around his heart. "Shuffle. Deck. What the hell is it all supposed to mean?"

"We're just a deck with an extra card, baby, that's all. One of those things, a complete accident, but oh boy, did it ever fuck it all up, am I right, lover? Poor you, caught in the middle of it all—But one by one, we're going to get back into the proper alignment, you'll see, baby. When it catches up with us, we'll be together again. Forever. Like it's supposed to be."

"I never wanted to spend forever with you," Paul spat.

She hit him, full force along the side of his head, the violence of it leaving him dizzy and sick. The thread holding him home felt dangerously thin at the back of his head as it twanged from the impact. One more smash like that and she'd sever him from that universe completely. He took a deep breath and faced her, figuring if his destiny was about to implode he might as well give it a proper taunting.

"I love her," he said, narrowing his eyes at Carol's intense fury. "No matter what you do to me, you can't change that."

"She's got secrets. That slut is nothing like me."

"No, she isn't. For one, she has a pulse. Regardless of any other fault she might have, that's one plus that's big in her favour."

Carol's fingers dug into the flesh of his chest, encircling his heart. He collapsed from the searing pain, blood gurgling into his mouth as her fingers found his heart and began to squeeze. "She's a whore. A liar. She swings all ways, baby. She can slip into the girl skin or the boy skin as quick as she pleases. That cousin, Mark, is just another version of her. If you don't believe me, just ask her twin sister and brother, Nathan and Natassia. You just go ahead and try to believe I'm lying. Facts are, baby, you aren't the only one caught in the shuffle. Some worlds are just a little closer in appearance than others. Just because you wandered a little farther doesn't make you so damn special." She released her grip and he collapsed against the wall of broken mirrors, his hands pressed tight against his the hole she'd ripped in his chest. Streams of blood seeped through them. He couldn't breathe.

*"We need to call an ambulance!"*

Mars' voice, echoing across the atmosphere. She was in a panic, her concern eclipsing his injuries.

Memories of her welled inside of him, her gentle nature, her perseverance in helping him despite his stubborn rebuffs. Her calm empathy coupled with a shy vulnerability that made him want to protect her. But it had always been the other way around. Mars was so much stronger than he was.

Carol had never been like this. She'd spent her life selfishly, gaining her pleasures at the expense of others. He'd been a plaything to her during their relationship, a distraction from the boredom of her marriage to George. Her need to cling to him was about her obsessive need for control. Paul Nash never mattered. This facet of her in the Garage was what her soul looked like, Paul reasoned.

"You've always been an apathetic bitch," Paul whispered.

Carol howled, her bony arms raised high. She flexed her fingers like claws, poised to deliver the fatal blow that would sever the thin line that connected him to that other world where Mars and her variations lived. The gendered kaleidoscope Carol forced him to see meant nothing. All he wanted was for Mars to live, but it was clear he'd failed her.

Sorrow bit the back of his throat, burned his eyes.

He waited for Carol to deliver his death.

## **episode thirty-two—old timer**



He was knocked backwards against the wall of mirrors, his spine painfully stabbed by the shards of glass before he tumbled forward, hitting his chin on the splintering floor. It took a few moments for him to realize he wasn't dead after all, the droplets of blood seeping from his lower lip indicative it was still flowing freely in his veins. No mortal wound, then. He blearily glanced up from his prone position on the floor to see Carol's midsection swiped with the edge of a shining, silvery piece of glass. Her black guts seeped out from the wound, and she howled in fury at her attacker before making her full retreat.

The shadow of Paul's redeemer seeped over him, and Paul rolled to his side, a complex amalgamation of pain from his various wounds surrendering him into a state of shock. This was no monster standing above him, but a simple flesh and blood man. Paul squinted against the bright shaft of light that crept in from the rendered slats of wood that comprised the remainder of the outside wall. He couldn't quite make out the stranger's face, but the suit and tie were a dead giveaway. "You look just like him," Paul managed to gasp. "Right down to that ugly god damned blue striped tie."

Paul was roughly pulled to his feet thanks to a firm hand on his shoulder, the man's strength superhuman in scope. Paul felt like a rag doll in his grip, and his limp body was pressed against the

wall of mirrors. His back sure as hell was getting its unfair share of piercing.

George Weiss, Charlie Weiss's grandfather, circled his palm tight around Paul's throat, the pressure against his adam's apple no idle threat. "Are you one of them?"

The room was spinning, overly bright. Paul blinked against it, the back of his head aching from the thin silvery line that vibrated back to the universe he had journeyed from. George Weiss's face was suddenly in focus before him, cheeks rigid lines, his mouth fixed in a permanent grim expression. He turned his head and Paul fought the gasp of disgust that welled within his throat, bile rising and burning the back of his tongue. There was a hole in George Weiss's skull, a bleeding, pulsing fresh sore about the size of Paul's fist. Instinctively, Paul put his hand to the back of his own head, checking that silvery line. It felt slightly rubbery to the touch, and ever so fragile.

George Weiss proved how easily that lifeline could sever.

"Charlie sent me," Paul said.

The pressure on Paul's throat slowly eased off. He stood up with effort, the pain in his back keeping him partially hunched as he faced his rescuer and attacker. "Paul Nash," he said and held out his hand. George Weiss ignored the gesture.

"She'll be back soon," he warned. He nodded into the dark depths of Crescent Manor's hallway. "She'll slide in from that direction. She always does."

Paul pressed the back of his hand against his bottom lip, a fairly large puddle of blood seeping onto his knuckles. He was hurt, badly, in this particular universe and he wasn't sure how that translated back home. He thought about Mars, her voice stretching across the horizon of this sand blasted, decaying landscape. It was painful enough having to leave her behind, but to be taunted by her sorrow was unbearable. Regardless of what Carol and this cruel benefactor tormented him with, it was the simple understanding that Mars was back There, suffering with worry over him that made his need to succeed here paramount. He glanced over at George Weiss, who was busy pulling loose shards of glass out of the wall and shoving them behind his belt, making himself a mirrorwall Rambo. He'd been plunged in here against his will just as Paul had been. George Weiss, he had a wife, once. A child. He'd left them behind when he'd seeped into the walls, and Paul had to wonder what it had done to him, all those years of listening to his family's suffering sorrow only a thin layer of drywall, yet an entire universe, away.

"Head office knows about this, then," Weiss said, nodding to himself. "Good. Better them than that commie scum." He glanced sideways at Paul, and then continued his work on the wall, mumbling a conversation to himself. "Damn commies. Damn Charlie, too, the lying bastards. Can't trust no one. They got their money, and I know how they used it. Bastards." He stood up and wiped Paul's blood onto the thighs of his black slacks. "You got a lot of nerve, coming here on Charlie's orders. Those bastards got their test site, they don't need to be interfering any more than they have."

Paul felt weak, his senses on high alert for Carol's return. Weiss paced the remnants of the room, his black leather shoes kicking debris out of his way as he made a clear space in front of the wall. 'It's like he's a fighter in a ring,' Paul thought. 'He's psyching up for the next round.'

"I don't know what you're talking about," Paul said. He swallowed back a mouthful of blood with effort and straightened up despite the shooting pain this ripped through his torn back. It was just plain weird how George Weiss, after all these years trapped, still wore a perfectly pressed suit, looking the very picture of the bank manager he once was.

"You said you came here on Charlie's orders," Weiss spat at him. "We closed the deal, I signed the papers. It's over. I don't know why they bothered sending you here, not when the damage is already



done.” Weiss sneered down at Paul, his comrade’s blood still staining his hands. He scraped at the rust coloured flakes on his palm with disdain, as though hating Paul for staining him with his injuries. “You people mean nothing to me,” Weiss growled.

“Look, pal, I don’t know who you think you’re talking to, but I’m here thanks to Charlie. Your grandson Charlie Weiss. Not whatever the hell you’re talking about.” Paul watched as Weiss paced before him, his brow twitching, his mouth working in a swallowed conversation between himself and his inner, uneasy soul.

“You disappeared into the wall,” Paul reminded him. “Sucked into 314 Crescent Manor like water into a sponge. Charlie says he sees you sometimes, your fingers trailing along the wall in his kitchen.” He watched Weiss’s pacing, carefully trying to ascertain if there was any understanding of what he said. “I got no reason to be here, either, except for Carol and her bullshit. She won’t let it go. I don’t love her, I never did, I don’t want her in my life. The bitch can’t understand that, and somehow that frustrated hate of hers has turned into all of this.”

George Weiss paced. His steps were wide and quick, a pathway kicked large as he walked back and forth in front of Paul, his waist gleaming with sharp edges waiting to meet pliant flesh. He shook his index finger in the air, his own hypothesis smouldering around him in a halo of accountability. “It was them. Those Charlies. They came into my bank and they bought that land. I wasn’t supposed to sell it to them, it wasn’t supposed to be used for that purpose. Too close to the town, the experts said. Too many bad things could happen. But they were giving us good returns and the bank was set to make a record profit. I couldn’t let the deal go sour, we had to have a hand in it, you understand this, you get it. We need to make money. That’s what banks do. They grow money, take it from seed and bring it to fruition. And this deal, this sealed it. All of it was a win. I signed up the Charlies, gave them their piece of land, right up there...”

He pointed to the open space outside, to a point on the horizon where nothing but sand and the dry husks of buildings remained. Paul narrowed his eyes into the bright onslaught, and was surprised to see that Weiss was pointing to the space where a very familiar building used to reside. A place called Boxworth Electronics, as Paul recalled. Charlie Weiss was the manager, wasn’t he? All Paul knew was that it used to be one hell of an eyesore until they finally got that weird, colourful mural painted on its side. At certain times of day, the nuclear bomb painted in the corner turned different shades of orange and red. It was a cool effect, Paul thought. It seemed set to ignite.

He watched George Weiss pace. He thought about Charlie and his unfortunate, misplaced adoration for this ethereal mentor. He kept his senses alert for the return of Carol and the sharp, rendering tips of her fingers, but she seemed to be giving them a reprieve. He allowed himself a cautious, cleansing sigh of relief.

“The Charlies,” Paul said, puzzling over this strange clue. “You sold them land, you said.” He glanced back up at Weiss, his pacing making Paul dizzy. “What for?”

“Tests,” Weiss grumbled.

“What kind of tests?”

“The only ones that ever matter,” Weiss replied.

“I don’t understand.”

Weiss suddenly railed on him, his mouth a twisted grimace, his face pressed so close to Paul he could taste the bitter sulfur of his spit. “You don’t understand! What a dunce you are! What an utter ignorant fool! Charlies, you asshole—The corporations. The government officials, the big business interests. Think about Hiroshima! Nevada! Across the globe in a wide band, a big yellow and black ribbon of

death tied tight around the earth.” He pressed his index finger hard against the side of Paul’s skull. “Think, for once, you small minded jackass! They set them off in your own backyard—What the hell did you think was going to happen?”

Paul took this in slowly, the information George Weiss presenting him with an angle he hadn’t yet thought on. “There were nuclear tests done on that site?” Paul asked. George Weiss scoffed at him.

“You’re a god-damned fool, boy.”

“Why? Tests happened all the time, nothing changed far as we can see. What happened here?”

“Tests happen all the time. Listen to the ignorant fool.” George Weiss sighed, his pacing slowing to an uneven trot. “Can’t you see it with your own stupid, apathetic eyes?”

Weiss gestured to the vast wasteland both within and without the building, and suddenly Paul had a sickening understanding. Worlds upon worlds, that’s what Charlie had been getting at back in his home universe. Every action a cause and effect, a whole world created over whether or not you decided to have cream in your coffee that morning. How much more devastating the possibilities were when coupled with the threat of a massive act of destruction. There had been an accident, perhaps millions of them. Not only devastation, how many billions of universes were accidentally created with the splitting of a single deadly atom? So much could go wrong, and while his own world hadn’t felt it, so many others did. A ripple effect upon the creation of the world. An accident. A card injected, unwanted, shuffled deep into an uneven deck.

“I can’t fix this,” Paul said, shaking his head at the enormity of it, the chasm dug far deeper than the basement recess of Crescent Manor. “I thought it was about me. About Carol.” He shook his head, feeling crushed, minuscule, the responsibility he’d felt heaped upon him a con job he’d too readily fallen for. In a way, it was the same as his relationship with Carol. A selfish desire to pull someone else into her bored misery. “You’re right. I’m a jackass,” Paul said. He felt a stabbing pain in his abdomen, and he hugged his arm close around his stomach in a vague attempt to ease the ache with pressure. He turned to George Weiss. “What the hell do we do about it?”

George Weiss paced. His shoes were worn on the bottom, though they were spotlessly polished to a shining black. His steps were deliberate and alchemical. Eight paces to the door, ten paces to the window. Back and forth. “We kill her,” Weiss said, pointing to his mirror shards tucked behind his belt, his preferred form of ammunition. “It’s not easy. I’ve been trying for a long time, using a loose plank I picked up from the main staircase. She doesn’t go down easy. But with two of us, the balance in her favour changes.”

Paul nodded, but he was doubtful of Weiss’s plan. Carol was rotting away on her own and still managed to hold sway here. But George Weiss was an unstable man and Paul knew his life and the universe he’d left behind depended on whether or not he was trusted. Paul wrenched a shard of mirror out from the wall and cradled its strange, heavy weight in his palm.

“This better work,” George Weiss said, tearing one of the glass shards out of his belt and pointing it dangerously close to Paul’s vibrating silver string. “Or so help me, I’ll cut it off. And then I’ll cut you to ribbons.”

Unstable was the wrong word, Paul thought. George Weiss, pacing for decades in this small space had lost his mind. It was as fractured and dangerous as the broken mirrors behind Paul, his reasoning a scattered remnant of the power he once felt he wielded.

Charlie would be disappointed. George Weiss had never been a good man.

Her scream suddenly cut across the cavern of opened apartments in front of him, and before he could

get a good grip on his weapon Carol was at him, her fingers dug deep in a circle around his heart. The pain shot through his chest and he clutched at her arm, ripping off her flesh, slimy globs of what had once been muscle falling in clumps to the floor. She kept him pinned, her bony fingers digging deeper, poking through his ribcage and centring on his heart. He could feel the silver line behind his skull pulling and twitching, the line dangerously close to snapping.

*"No, this has to stop—I'm a doctor, damn you! I know what a dying man looks like!"*

Mark Connor's voice. One and the same as Mars, Carol had told Paul. The concern was still there, the longing, the sorrow. You couldn't just turn off giving a damn. To feel love for someone you bridged canyons, you swung past the abyss to meet them.

"When I'm done with you, lover, you'll see how much you missed giving me up," Carol spat at him, her saliva green and stinking as it hit his lap with a sizzle. "That girl of yours is a real tomboy, isn't she? I'm going to make you suffer for leaving me, and when I'm done with you, I'm going to drag her in here, and we'll have some real fun then..."

"No," Paul said, a surge of adrenaline shooting through him. "No, you don't touch her!"

"I do what I want here, baby," she said, her rotted lower lip quivering in mock pout. "That's just how it is."

Even with her fingers buried deep in his chest, Paul managed to find the shard of mirror he'd dropped. With one strong swing he brought it hard across her neck, severing her head almost completely off. Her mouth gaped open in a silent howl and she and pulled out of him, leaving five holes in a ring around his heart. They poured blood, and he placed his weak, shaking hands over the wounds, trying his best to stem the flow. Carol's head dangled to the left of her shoulder, held on by a purple string of tendon. Her mouth was still moving, but her throat was missing. No words were able to come out.

Still, she was standing there, in her undead life. He'd failed. Dammit, he'd failed and there was no way he was going to get the hell home.

Shards of glass shot through her, sluicing bullets that rendered her flesh, cutting her at joints through muscles, through rotted clots and shattered bones. By the time he was done with her, Carol was nothing but a quivering mass of slimy, rotted tissue. Paul watched as the little pieces of her fingers twitched for one last time before finally becoming still. The pile rotted quickly, bubbling into a foul smelling carcass before turning black, and then brown, and then a bone white as the last remaining remnants of her turned to a fine, white powder. Only the mottled black ring of her teeth remained, sitting in half circles on the chalky substance that was her remains. An unseen mouth, open in a silent scream of fury. Paul kicked at the pile, scattering the teeth and hopefully the lingering ghost of Carol's putrid soul.

He turned to thank George Weiss for being his rescuer yet again, but a sharp pain in Paul's shoulder gave him pause. He stared wide eyed at Weiss, the shard of glass embedded deep in Paul's shoulder.

"What the hell?"

Weiss ran at him again, his suit and tie and well polished shoes doing nothing to ease the sense that this man was completely mad and bent on destruction at any cost. Paul grabbed the shard of mirror he'd used to slice off Carol's head and dove it deep into the charging Weiss's chest. Unlike Carol, the understanding of mortality was instant. Weiss lunged for him still, his grip weak as the glass fell from his hand to shatter on the floor. Blood gurgled up from his punctured heart into his throat and out of his mouth. He collapsed to the floor, his eyes never leaving the steady glare of Paul's icy blue judgement.

George Weiss quickly decayed into ashes. Bits of blue striped silk fibres carried on the sandy wind. They collected in the corners of the room, floating with featherweight purpose into the hall and down

the hole, down to the depths of Crescent Manor's basement in a gentle, quiet free-fall.

Paul's legs were shaking as he forced himself to standing. He'd be dead anywhere else, but something worse was waiting for him here and he shuffled as quickly as he could to the main staircase. His body wracked with pain, he managed to pull himself down, the effort slow going. He could hear Mark and then Mars, the two voices that were one and the same echoing in worry and terror across the horizon. It seemed to come from every direction. He couldn't count on it to guide him out.

He made it to the main floor after falling down half the steps and tumbling to the ground. He lay there for a few moments before forcing himself up, to hobble towards the front lobby, back outside from where he'd arrived.

A flickering movement caught his eye, and he turned.

The door to his own apartment was open. It was black and uninviting, and every now and then a light would flash back and forth along the inside walls. He took a few tentative steps towards it, and was blinded by a sudden shaft of brilliant light that invaded the apartment, bathing its contents into clarity.

There was nothing there save rubble and torn up walls and an empty space where his kitchen was supposed to be. But there, in the middle of what used to be his living room, a series of dusty, cracked figurines lay in a haphazard circle. A pink rabbit lay on its side, its ears snapped off. So much had been rendered into death, and yet, a large, clean square on the floor within this circle of broken ceramics was untouched by rot, the wooden slats polished clean.

Paul smiled despite his pain.

He'd found his way home.

### **episode thirty-three: imbalanced balance**



“He's coming back,” Bonnie said. She clapped her fat hands together in eager glee. “Oh, that's wonderful, he's coming back! Now, there, dearie, no use making more of a fuss than needs to be, you let him get in there, in that chair, and you stop your fighting.”

Mars wouldn't listen to her, the anger she felt towards Bonnie so complete she pushed the elderly

woman out of the way, nearly shoving her to the floor. “Paul!” Mars shouted to his slumped figure in the winged back chair. She kicked aside the various figurines to gain access to him, her index fingers quickly checking his pulse at his neck. “He’s not breathing!” she shouted. She pulled him out of the chair and onto the floor and onto his back, the broken ceramic pieces cutting into Paul’s flesh. “I’m starting CPR. Call 911!”

But Mars hadn’t done two of the thirty-two compressions before Paul’s eyes fluttered open, a hoarse cough sputtering out of him as he slowly regained his place in their universe. He cursed as he sat up, bits of a broken pink ceramic rabbit embedded in his shoulder blade. “I’m getting a little sick of getting stabbed by whatever’s handy,” he said. He brushed the bits of ceramic off of him and got to standing with help from Mars. Mars held her breath as Paul surveyed his living room and the crowd of people currently focused on him within it. He shook his head at Bonnie’s expectant gaze. “I guess I did the right thing. We’re still here.” He faltered as he stepped away from his chair, Mars clutching his arm and steadying him as he made his way to the kitchen. “At least in this universe. Who knows what we made along the way.” He glanced towards the couch, his icy gaze refusing to meet Charlie’s eager expression. “Anyone want a beer?”

His nonchalant attitude annoyed Mars, especially since she’d witnessed how close he was to death only minutes before. She followed on his heels into the tiny kitchen, her lips close to his ear. “You aren’t fooling me. We all saw what happened in there, how you were phased in and out when you sat in that chair. For God’s sake, Paul, I checked your pulse. You were dead.”

“It’s over now,” Paul gently said. He opened the fridge door and pulled out two cold ones, dangling the necks of the bottles in the crooks of his fingers. “I’m doing fine and now so are you. We’re all happy, we’re all back where we’re supposed to be.” He rested the selection of beers on the kitchen counter and opened one with a twist of his palm on the cap. “Now we can celebrate.”

“What happened in there?” Mars pressed, refusing to let the subject drop no matter how much Paul’s skin turned every shade of red. “You don’t understand, I need to know.”

Paul took a long swig of his beer, his hip resting on the edge of the kitchen counter. He tossed the bottle cap into the sink where it spun with a loud clatter in a haphazard spiral before settling against the drain.

“I heard your cousin’s voice,” he said, and there was something in his icy gaze that gave Mars a dangerous chill. He took another swig from his bottle of beer. “Mark Connor, isn’t it?”

“Paul...”

“I thought he was studying beetle crap in Africa.”

“It’s complicated.”

“You could say that.” Paul gave her a studied once over, and Mars waited for it, the cold rebuke, the unforgiving silence that signified this was too much for him to handle. That this phasing in and out between genders wasn’t what he’d signed up for, that this gave him nothing but a feeling of inward disgust. That he knew was obvious to Mars, simply because of the way he was studying her, like she was a frozen section on a slide beneath her microscope.

“You’re one and the same, isn’t that right?” Paul said, eliminating all doubt.

Reluctantly, she slid into her male skin. Mark crossed his arms and leaned against the kitchen counter, guilty looks cast around the corner into the living room where Bonnie, Charlie and Natassia remained. “I thought you were dead. I had to do something drastic to get Bonnie’s attention, to make her stop this whole experiment so I could get you the hell out of here and into a hospital.”

“Didn’t work,” Paul observed.

“No. Bonnie shrugged it off. Said it only stood to reason that there would be slight differences in worlds, especially considering how many we were dealing with at present. I tried to argue this wasn’t what I would call a slight difference, but she’s a savvy one. She brought up the fact that only thing making a person male or female is a half shred of DNA.” He brought his thumb to his bottom lip and lightly chewed the nail. “Charlie says everything has changed now that you’re back. We won’t have a clue about how deep those changes are until we start going about our daily lives again. Regardless, it looks like some things are still the same warped shape.”

“I won’t pretend it’s easy,” Paul said. He gave Mark a sly, crooked smile. “But then, complicated relationships are just business as usual for me.” He pulled Mark into an unexpected embrace and kissed him, deeply, his tongue searching, refusing to let Mark up for air until he broke away himself.

Unexpected. Downright bizarre, actually, especially with the way Paul’s lips seemed to linger on his own.

“I’m not like that,” Mark said. He frowned, his thumb stubbornly back at his lower lip as Paul grinned back at his breathless state. “Paul, I’m sorry, but this isn’t my, I don’t know, my ‘thing’?” He quickly morphed back into Mars mode as Paul made a move to go for seconds. “This isn’t what I expected,” she said, eyeing Paul cautiously. “You’re being freaky.”

“Freaky isn’t the half of it,” Paul assured her. “I just got back from being brutally molested by a rotted, psychotic corpse. You, sweetheart, are a much easier puzzle to manage.”

He ushered her back into the living room, where he handed out beers all round, the brew eagerly taken by Charlie and Natassia. Bonnie glanced at the offering with consternation and then shrugged as she took it. “It’s no Glenfiddich,” she tsked. “But it’ll have to do.”

“The rot in the corner of your kitchen is gone,” Natassia said, and both Mars and Paul searched for the festering wound that had infected his apartment, but there was none. There would be changes, Mars thought, feeling uncomfortable with this. Small at first, barely noticeable. But they would grow, eventually, and they could show up decades later, long after they were gone. She could feel it in her soul, how the balance was still uneven, and even without this sensation both her own and Natassia’s gender issues confirmed this.

Terrible things could still happen. In future.

Bonnie took a deep swig of her ale and then placed it carefully on a coaster positioned on Paul’s antique coffee table. She clapped her fat hands together with animated glee. “We need to go to apartment #220 immediately,” she said. Mars noted Bonnie had put on a highly vile shade of orange on her lips, a hue that would make a pumpkin envious. “Gather up all, we need to see what our work has wrought.”

There was a collective hesitation at this. Paul certainly had no wish to revisit the place of his torment, a fact Mars could easily empathize with. Charlie was the only one with the same eager wish as Bonnie, his laptop tucked tight under his arm as he struggled with his cast and the crutches as he got up from the sofa. “I definitely need to get those data readings,” he said. “If my calculations are correct, there will be vast differences in frequencies.” He patted Paul amicably on the back, nearly toppling himself over as he did so. “Good job,” he said.

“Thanks,” Paul replied.

Bonnie and Natassia were already out the door, but Mars hung back, listening in on Paul and Charlie’s exchange. “I’m sure it was hell in there, but it had to be done,” Charlie said. He gave Paul a wide grin. “I imagine you got a lot of help, if you know what I mean.”

“No,” Paul said with dark finality. “I don’t.”

Charlie was confused. “My grandfather, of course. He was in there, wasn’t he? Did you give him my message? Does he know it was his grandson who freed him?”

Paul was visibly shaken by Charlie’s bright optimism. “I’m sorry,” he said, turning away from Charlie’s happiness. “Your grandfather, George Weiss, he didn’t make it.”

Charlie faltered. The laptop was loose beneath his arm and Mars rescued it, hugging it close against her stomach as the tense conversation continued. “What are you talking about?” Charlie asked.

“You picked the wrong guy for your father figure,” Paul said, heedless of how cruel his words must have felt. “He was an asshole to start with. This whole mess was pretty much his fault, he sold the land on Boxworth Electronics to some government or big business faction who used it for testing nuclear weapons.” He ignored the pulsing vein that suddenly sprung up on Charlie’s neck. “You said it yourself, 314 Crescent Manor is one big realignment engine. Even tiny decisions create whole new universes, isn’t that how it works? Well, how about the big stuff, the man made destruction? Plenty of scenarios there, Charlie. Your grandfather said that day made billions of universes just on the event of a single test bomb alone. This building has been the epicentre of that disaster, and has been trying to bring everything back into the proper shape ever since.”

Charlie’s voice was thin. “You’re a liar.”

“George Weiss gave them his stamp of approval for the sake of his bank account. He spent the rest of his existence stuck in a nuclear winter killing every ghost that crossed his path.” He gave Charlie a sympathetic sigh, but it wasn’t appreciated. “He went mad in the Garage, Charlie. Starkers. He tried to kill me in there, and I did what I had to do.”

“You son of a bitch,” Charlie spat.

Paul ignored him. He pushed past Mars and made his way to the main staircase leaving both her and Charlie far behind. Above them, apartment #220 waited for their inspection. Mars could feel Charlie’s fury behind her, and she wisely didn’t tempt it with words. In silence, they walked out of Paul’s apartment and up the stairs. There was still a bloodstain at the base, where Charlie had tempted fate.

The vast stained glass window coloured them in shades of red, orange and yellow from the streaming streetlights outside. The massive art deco tree dwarfed their ascent, its leaves crawling fingertips that pressed against the ceiling of the stairwell, its black roots teeming outwards towards the lobby.

Realigned. Reborn.

Reset.

~\*~

“Who the hell are you people?”

They stood shocked in front of apartment #220, the hollow eyed tenant who by all indication for the past month had been good and dead was staring back at them with a mixture of annoyance and fear.

“We’re doing a survey,” Natassia quickly said, her brows raised at the rest of the crew as she nodded for their agreement. Yes. Yes. A survey. “We’re a historical group hired by the landlord and we’ve been checking on the various apartments to see which ones have possible cultural heritage features, which we are sure you agree should be preserved.” She snatched the laptop out from Mars’ grip and pretended

to look over her files on it. “Ah yes, apartment #220. A wall of mirrors constructed by an as yet unknown artist.” She slapped the laptop shut. “Well, with our team of experts, you can be sure that question will be answered soon enough when you let us in to take a look.”

But the tenant’s suspicions were now on high alert. “What the hell are you talking about?” He glanced over his shoulder, his singular bushy black brow twitching. “There’s no mirrors here.”

Confusion reigned. “But surely you’re mistaken,” Bonnie said, and managed to peer around the tenant’s shoulder to get a good look inside. “Good Heavens, what a mess!”

“You made a mistake,” the tenant said.

“I should think not,” Charlie said. “This apartment is supposed to be empty and you’re supposed to be dead.”

That quip decided it. “Get the fuck away from my door, all of you, before I call the police.” And with this the lacquered door was slammed nastily in their shocked faces.

“Bonnie,” Natassia said to their round, elderly charge. “What did you see?”

“A hell of a mess,” Bonnie tutted. “Bachelors. Have none of them ever heard of garbage cans or laundry bins? Tch. I pity that poor boy’s mother.”

“The mirrors, Bonnie,” Charlie said, his voice edged in impatience.

“Not a one to be seen,” Bonnie replied, equally puzzled. “Truth be told, it’s like a whole other apartment. Nothing like I remember. The walls are painted blue, not red. Very odd.”

“The fact the tenant is alive and not brutally murdered is a bit larger an issue,” Natassia said.

“Not really,” Charlie said. He turned to Paul, who had his hands on his hips, his jaw set in determined fight. “He may have come back, but Paul Nash did make a mistake in that place he called the Garage. No one was supposed to die but the creature that was battling my grandfather, but Mr. Nash took it upon himself to go on a homicidal killing spree and take out my grandfather as well.”

“That’s not what happened,” Paul said between clenched teeth.

“It doesn’t matter now, the damage is done.” Charlie hobbled close to Natassia on his crutches. “You didn’t destroy this universe, but you upset the balance further with your actions. Everything is shuffled again.”

Paul worked his jaw. He wouldn’t look at Charlie. “Is this a bad thing?” he asked.

“There’s no way to know,” Charlie said. “You’re the one who made the mistake.”

“An accident,” Paul clarified. “I’d call it an accident.”

“I’m sure you would.”

“Your sisters warned me about this,” Mars interjected. She placed a warm palm on Paul’s shoulder, the hard strength of his muscles tense granite to the touch. “Monica and Mona, they said they felt sorry for you, that it couldn’t be helped, you were caught in the middle.” Mars squeezed his shoulder, the tension refusing to ebb. “It’s not your fault, Paul, regardless of Charlie’s theory. Your sisters knew about this, I saw their notes. I’m putting my belief in their expertise.”

Paul turned to her, his hand reaching out to caress her cheek with soft tenderness. Mars melted into his touch, and closed her eyes as he twined his fingers into her thick hair.

“Sisters,” he repeated. He pressed his forehead against Mars own, his lips touching her nose. “Baby, I don’t have any sisters.”



Mars pulled away. Her thumb went to her mouth, her nail viciously chewed. “Twin sisters,” she said, nodding at her own memory. “Doctors Monica and Mona Nash, they are doing research at the hospital...”

“I don’t have any sisters,” Paul reiterated. He shrugged, not knowing how else to explain to her what he knew to be fact. “I have a brother. His name is Jim. But no twins, no sisters.” He frowned, worry etching into the air between them. “Who told you I did?”

“You, Paul. You told me about them,” Mars said. She blinked back tears. This was too confusing, too variable. This labyrinthine nest of possibilities crushed her. “They disappeared,” she said. She wiped away her tears with the back of her hand, dampening her knuckles. “They made the sacrifice. They were responsible for the realignment.” She took a deep breath, doing her best to keep the emotion in her voice even.

“They disappeared instead of me.”

## **episode thirty-four : what should have been**

Henri’s cafe was crowded with doctors and nurses from the hospital next door. The sea of white coats and surgical scrubs melted into one another, making it difficult to discern where one doctor ended and a surgeon began. Among this group was Mark Connor, who was sipping the last of his apricot and wheat germ smoothie, a concoction Nathan wholly disagreed with.

“It’s chock full of anti-oxidants and vitamin C,” Mark argued.

“It’s pabulum,” Nathan scoffed. He glowered over his cup of coffee, and poked at the day old scone he’d been served, its edges crumbly instead of soft. “Bonnie didn’t make her shipment today, I see. The old girl is slacking.”

“She’s been busy with that spiritualist club of hers. Which reminds me, she says you owe her ten dollars in duty fees.”

“Ten dollars!” Nathan exclaimed. He tore into the crumbly scone with scowling fury. “As if I’m made of money, especially on rent day.” He cast his brother a knowing glance. “You did pay the rent, right?”

“Fourth of the month!” Mark exclaimed, imitating their superintendent. His happiness was cut short by a very familiar expression on his brother’s face. “Nathan, you did pay the rent for your flat, didn’t you?”

“I was kind of holding off,” Nathan said, and Mark sighed, his head in his hands in benign resignation. “You see, Charlie and I were thinking on moving in together and sharing a space, but then the flat is ideal for the new sign painting business I got going. And, you know, starting up a new enterprise takes money and I kind of fell a little short, especially seeing as how I wasn’t sure I wanted to keep the flat or not...”

“How much?”

“Two hundred bucks and I’m even,” Nathan quickly said.

“I swear, Nathan, I’m about to put you on my tax forms as a dependent. You can’t keep doing this, you need a steady job.” The usual lecture was cut short by the tinny ring of Mark’s cell phone, and he answered it cautiously after noting who was calling. “Hello, Paul.”

“Is that the new cell phone Charlie got you?”

Mark put his hand over the receiver. “Yes, it works fabulously. Tell him thank you.” He frowned at his twin, a thought suddenly occurring to him. “It won’t give me brain cancer or an impromptu lobotomy will it?”

Nathan thought for a moment. The crumbs from the scone were swiped from his lap. “I’m not sure,” he answered, truthful.

“Shit,” Mark said, only to apologize to Paul. “No, sorry. I’m just thinking about a few safety issues with the phone, is all. Yes, the one I got from Charlie. I know you got me an iPhone, but I have no clue how to work it and we can’t operate it on hospital grounds.” His tone went down a level, into secrecy as Nathan looked on, hot sips from his coffee only mildly distracting him. “Yes, I miss you, too. Uh huh. Wow. Um. Paul, really, I don’t think you should say things like that when I’m, you know, still a guy. No, no, I’m not saying that, it’s just, you know. It’s... Wow, Paul, that’s unexpectedly open minded of you, I have to say. Didn’t know you knew about stuff like that and... Oh. The internet. Yeah, amazing what you can find on Google.” He clapped his hand over the receiver and kicked the shin of his giggling twin. “Look, Paul, I have to go. I’ll see you tonight.” He clapped the phone shut and smacked his brother on the side of the head with it.

“No trouble in your paradise, I see.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Any of it.” Mark stuffed his cell phone into the large pocket of his white lab coat. He nodded at Dr. Horihito who gave him a shooting gun salute in greeting before walking out of Henri’s, a steaming cup of cafe au lait in his hand. Mark watched as his peer crossed the street and entered the hospital, his bullet hole laden surgical cap tied tight on his head.

“We probably should,” Nathan said, his coffee soberly contemplated. He tapped the sides of his mug, uneasy glances passed between his brother and himself. “Anything else different?”

“Meister pees on the living room rug now instead of the bathmat.”

“My Solidarnosc poster is intact. And my fridge is clean.”

“That’s a miracle, not a quantum mistake.”

“I guess you’re a visible entity now,” Nathan said, nodding in the direction of Dr. Horihito’s steps. Mark nodded, but his relief was uneasy.

“I tried going into Mars mode halfway through a conversation to see what would happen,” he said. “Dr. Horihito carried on as if nothing had changed, but he did make a few remarks about my co-worker Mark and then made a blatant pass at me when I told him Mark and I were related.”

“I thought Dr. Horihito was married?” Nathan asked.

“He is. It’s his way of flirting. I’m not worried, he quit it the second I told him I was living at 314 Crescent Manor.”

“Good save,” Nathan said, and burnt his tongue. “Damn, Henri has to turn down the heat on his coffeemaker. This is the second time I’ve done this.” He paused, watching his twin sip at the molecules of his apricot smoothie, the straw bent at an odd angle.

“What about Paul’s sisters?” Nathan asked. “Have you seen them?”

Mark was quiet a long moment.

“No.” He placed his clear plastic cup down on the table before them, the straw spilling bits of orange. “No one has ever heard of them.” He glanced up at Nathan, a tired sense of understanding welling within him. “I feel responsible, somehow. They were once alive, they studied at that hospital, they were a relevant piece of this universe.”

“No,” Nathan said, firm in his belief. “No they weren’t. Remember how you told me what they were like? Emotionless, disconnected, not part of their families and not part of the world either?” Nathan narrowed his green eyes as he looked on his brother. “Who does that sound like, Mark?”

“We weren’t that bad.”

“You’re right. We were worse. We had no connection, not to each other and not to anything around us. We were just like them.” Nathan twirled his coffee cup around, swirls created in crumbs.

“Which one of us do you think it was?” he finally asked.

Mark let out an exasperated gasp at this. “For God’s sake, Nathan, not this shit again.”

“We talked about this before, it’s not like it hasn’t been on your mind.”

“I’m not playing this game.”

“It’s no game, Mark,” Nathan insisted. His eyes shifted and he leaned close to his twin, ensuring no one would over hear them. “Which one of us was supposed to be the girl? Which one the sister? You said they had dark hair, maybe it was me.”

Mark shook his head. “Monica and Mona Nash had nothing to do with us.”

“Makes sense though. Disconnected twins in one family meet up with the disconnected twins of another and everything falls into quantum alignment when the quad meets and mingles into two.” Nathan watched as Mark brought his thumb to his mouth, his nail bitten near to the quick. “Not a perfect solution, this gender flip-flopping of ours, but it’ll do, right?”

Mark gathered up the finished drink and napkins and stood up, nearly spilling Nathan’s coffee in his haste to leave. “I have to go,” he said.

“We have to talk about this at length some time. Maybe Charlie could help us figure it out.”

“I don’t want to figure anything out,” Mark said, a little too loudly. He tossed out his trash in the bin as he made his way to the front of the cafe. “See you later, Nathan.”

“Bring dinner home,” Nathan shouted back.

He watched as his brother crossed the street to the hospital, too distracted in his thoughts to even look for traffic. The road was unusually quiet for this time of day. Nathan doodled on a napkin with a ball point blue pen, the figure of a hungry Sasquatch coming into view. He was standing over a tiny earth, his big clawed hands ready to rip it to shreds.

An attractive blonde woman stepped into the cafe, and Nathan watched her, wondering where he knew her from. She smiled at Henri who was flattered by her attention, her bright red lips curled over gleaming white teeth. “Here you go, Carol,” Henri said, his voice thick with an accent that was a mixture of Albanian and French. “Eat all those scones at once. Bonnie told me, you need to gain a few pounds.”

She smiled prettily and waved good-bye as she left the cafe.

Carol. He’d called her Carol.

Was he sure? No, Nathan couldn't be certain because right now, people could be male and female at the same time. They could be both alive and dead. This world existed and so did countless others, each one only slightly different from the other. A coffee cup with cream and sugar, or left black. It was that simple, that easy to create a whole new universe. Somewhere in there, horrible things could happen, and once in a while people—people like Nathan and Mark and Paul and Charlie and Bonnie and Carol and who knew how many others—they got caught up in the middle of it like a fat Chinese fingertrap.

He finished his coffee. It left a lingering sweetness on his tongue.

Tomorrow he would drink it black.

END