

Off His Own  
Supply

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# Off His Own Supply

Hunter A. Wallace

This is a pair of works, both fiction. All the characters, locations, organizations, and events portrayed in this softback are either products of the bookmaker's imagination or are used fictitiously. Or both.

Any and all resemblance to Reality is purely coincidental.

...

In other words, it's just words. It's not real. Get a grip.

### **Off His Own Supply**

| Spiral: The Here and Now | Arc: III |

| Revision Date: November 7, 2021 |

### **Chuck Leary Offs a Planet Just to Spark a Joint**

| Spiral: The Playground | Arc: · |

| Series: W-2222 | Entry: 3.2221 |

### **Ordinary**

| Spiral: The Endless Wood | Arc: · |

| Series: W-666 | Entry: 1.666 |

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*to'uhh...*

## Acknowledgement

To be frank, some very strange metaphysical events surrounded the making of this book. I originally meant for it to be longer, to be part of more, to lead to books, series, spirals...

but then I began to... well... experience the 'Plane.

Straight-up, I heard the voice of something gnasty.

And what's more, it rejected me!

**YOU ARE NOT THE CONSCIOUSNESS I DESIRE TO ENACT  
MY GRANDEST PLANS...**

No bullshit, got sucked into sleep paralysis and everything. Terrifying... for it, perhaps. I'm just a 'man, after all, and I broke out of the daemon's taunting little trance, *and* I kept writing these stories!... despite the fact it felt awful to be doing so.

• • •

Last night I had a dream. I was walking in the woods, and a *thing* came out from behind a tree. It looked like a cross between a myriad of brushdwellers, tar black, no visible bodily features aside from its shaggy edges. It was very little.

It telepathed, "Hi!" in the lilt of a murderous child.

Then, it dashed at me, swift as the speed of darkness.

In answer, I punted the fucker. Full swing.

Suddenly I awoke, shook, in the middle of the night, and decided enough was enough.

• • •

I'll make my own books, and I'll be damn happy to do it.

From this day on, we move forever forward~

Chuck Leary

offs a

*Planet*

just to

**Spark<sup>a</sup> Joint<sup>†</sup>**

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# Wordcount

## Take a Walk

The Bookmaker left, hands in his pockets. He needed to take a walk.

The Bookmaker walks, hands in his pockets.

The supple green pasture',  
thee infinite purple skie'...

unstarting

unending

uncen

tered

yet whole...

...there is a door.

Standing there tall from the grassland' of Planet Eden is an unmarked [and unhinged] door. I can hardly tell it's a door, to be honest, it's just a white oblotangle. About the size of a door, I figure, if doors go to Planet Eden. Not that they do, uh... don't nothin' go to Planet Eden. Never. So'uh, the supple green pastures, that infinite purple sky above... I once saw a jungle rise from the gras' blades for the sake of another Astral God, but for me, for the Astral God of All, just... it's just...

just the supple pastures

just the purple sky

just Bookmaker the Form' here all alone on Planet Eden with no Eve to keep me company... but now I'm not alone. Now there is a door in my path, a door which presents for me and too before me. It's a solid white oblotangle with a black circle where its knob should be, and it's standing

there still directly in front of me like it wants me to do something about it.

The Bookmaker proceeds, hands out his pockets, and notices how that black circle is merely part of the door's cosmetic design. It's made of some type of glass, the door is, completely opaque, one solid slab, too, no protrusions. The technique of the maker must be flawless... but how to open it?

Guided by a will not my own, Adam reaches towards the faux knob. His knuckles bash against something he cannot see – something He, Bookmaker Adam the Form of Being, Astral God of All, Existence Incarnate, cannot see – and curses wildly, *fucks* and *shits* and *you son of a fucking shrews* all over the 'damn place, they're carving divots into the ground like spiteful fucking nine-irons! Look at them *go!*

The Bookmaker decides to stop stalling and grip the invisible knob of the door. He knows in his gut, his heart, and his head that if he could see it, it would be the purple glass doorknob of Purple Bend infamy... but why?

The Bookmaker opens, one hand on the knob.

## Whoat in the Shuck

It's a bottomless white space, a dead void in the negative, a chasm of illumination, and something is solid beneath my feet. I close my eyes for sweet, glorious darkness now I feel the light encroaching, coming, chewing, shredding through my infinite eyelids until it inevitably breaches and drinks of my ocular fluids. So, I block all that out. I do

not breathe, for I am the Astral God of All, but I listen hard and listen true: the things I hear intrigue me. Machinery, footsteps, production, labor. There seems to be some sort of commotion going on behind me, 'round me, a footpace before me... and then I open my eyes.

White. Soundless, endless white. And Chuck Leary, standing there stiffly with his hands out of his pockets.

"Chuck," calls I.

"Bookmaker," calls notChuck.

It's obvious to me that he's not truly Chuck, you see.

"What is this?" I call again. "Why am I not in complete and total control of everything everywhere all at once?"

La notChuck, smiling very unChuckishly through his goatee, walks up and over what appears to be a very tall bridge. I am dazed, to say the least; Man, "Just what in the fuck is going on here?!"

A nose noise. *Hmf*, but not in a rude way. Just a chuff, but with a little squeak woven in. That's all he gives me.

"You remind me of someone," he has the audacity to claim.

"Just who the fuck do you think you are?"

He lowers his sunshades – goodness grace, I haven't had you describe my appearance yet! I mea... well that's not what I meant for this to say.

Yet there it remains on the page.

"Someone who's yet to exist," he adds, "I should add," candidly enough to make m

"What do you mean?"

"Canonically," he says with a smile. "My name is too long for the wordcount of this one, too, but... maybe at the end."

"At the end?" I demand. I could say demanded, but uh, where's the book in that? "At the end? What, is this some kind of story we're in right now, some kind of *book*?! Just whoat in the shuck do you fucki—"

"Adam," says he, and I shut my fucking trap. "Please. At the end... okay?"

I look him dead in the sunshades.

"You're not The Suited Man Chuck Leary, Pillar Soul of Existence."

"We're nearing the limit, Adam..."

"You're not, are you?"

"I'm not."

"Who are you?"

"I'm the One Above Thou."

"Oh yeah?!" I bitch. "You really think so, don't you!"

## You Must Be

As though we were standing in some sort of observation station, the white walls slide up all three hundred sixty degrees around me to reveal a solid miasma of black.

I am unable to take my eyes off this black, let alone bother contriving Language for it.

"This," says who'v'r he thinks he is, "is The Blacktop."

"Comes off more like an observatory," I bleak, coming off my knees. I turn to face him standing there all the way across the room, just to—... I am the Astral God of All for Christ's sake, why am I making this clear?

Oh, I know. Because nothing that's going on around me is clear.

"Or some kind of research station," I finish, "at least."

"Yeah," he smiles, "Wuester Central is many things, and don't ask me to confirm that, please."

I don't, but god*damn*. Wuester Central, here we are.

"The Blacktop is a void," he points out, "a contained infinity of open empty space. It is meant for creation, to host planets inside the Wuester singularity, to provide a buffer between the rumored center of town and the true Wuester Central. Do you understand?"

"I think so," I do not lie. "The Blacktop is kind of like a tiny version of The Void, right?"

"Metaphors are found wherever one might gaze, with or without intent."

"Sweet," I pip, "Christ." It was a simile, too... right?

"Adam."

I turn to him.

"You are the Astral God of All. Yes?"

"Yes," I confirm.

"So hear me well: I am the one who granted you the mantle."

Understood.

"I'd like you to be part of this," I'm told, "but you must *be* in a certain way. I will teach you and I will be patient, but I will only allow you progress when you are ready to proceed. Can you handle that?"

"Well, God," I insist, "there's only one way to answer that truthfully."

## Highest Bookmaker

"Chuck," I grin, "welcome to The Blacktop."

"You got the *black* right," allows he, The Suited Man Chuck Leary, Pillar Soul of Existence. "So what the fuck's the beaten Earth, Adam?"

"Oh shit, that's... uh, listen, there's, a, uh... something needs to be done."

"You're hearing those voices again," Chuck assumes, "aren't you, Adam? Am I right in assuming that?"

"I can hear yours..."

The Suited Man Chuck Leary, Pillar Soul of Existence, floats there looking at me.

"I'll explain everything at the end—"

"Fucking Christ, of course it's a book."

"...so until then, just go with it. Okay?"

Chuck takes a deep, deeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep breath of the nothingness, and doesn't exhale. Then, he does, and *then*:

"Before whatever this is gets moving, can I point out that I just *adore* how you pretend that—... that *any one of us* have a choice in carrying out your whims and fancies, oh Highest Bookmaker the Form of Adam?"

Wordcount.

# Menace

## Prime

"Well what's the water'content of the Angus Prime Beef, then?"

Before the counter, behind the same counter, coming in through the door, picking food up off the floors near the tables – every patron of the delicatessen freezes in place at the utterance of the question.

"I said," says the sayer of things, "what the *fuck* is the *water'content* of the *Angus Prime Beef*, then?"

They funnel out like liquid into the mouth of a bottle.

You know...

...through a *funnel*?!?!

"I *SAYD*–"

"I heard you," says the slicer of the meats. "Fuckin' Ay we *all* heard you!"

"So, then," confirms th'main 'man, one real fucc'jiggy carrie' the name Winchester... uh, Bouregaard, "what the *fuck*–"

"Listen, kid... y'fuckin' **child**," as that meatblade stops spinning all 'round and 'round, slicin' up those meats like they were *not*, "nobody knows what you're talkin' about."

"I *SAYD*–"

"Oh no," jumped in by the woman in the flowy purple shirt, "we *heard* you, darling dearest, we just don't know what you 're *saying* ."

Th'Winchester Amadeus Bouregaard XVII deadeyes the poor undefended woman. She turns hurriedly away.

"Funny," W.A.B. XVII continues to a shank of clothed human skin, "because I heard *you* yackin' away on your fucking *cellular telecommunication phonular* from all, fr, fr,rrrrrrr from the minute you stepped into this place, *Oh what's the water'content of the water'mel'On, oh, oh, oh ninety-four percent, oh, oh, oh well darling dearest that's not quite GEWD ENUFF, now IS it?"*

There is more mortification, by weight, than sliced meats lain chill'd within the Shawson's Bluff Starbored Delicatessen, and by god the guy's not even *close* to done with her yet.

"I mean for the love of *intercourse* you were going all around the store!" He jabs a finger to the counter. "Look behind the counter!"

The woman was looking there anyway, so why in the shouldn't she continue to do so? GOT YA, DELI BOI

"There is one *single fucking guy* working behind that counter! One 'man!"

Okay.

"You had the *nerve* to jab off on your fucking cellular all across the li'l' store," the rager spittles directly into the woman's ear canal his face is so fucking close to her and he says to her he says, "and then *hang up* right before you turned the corner and got in line!"

A pair of far from properly washed feets have never been planted tighter, a pair of arms never folded so rage'd, a brow never furrowed with such determined'n'holistic fury. Jessica is getting her goddamned salami today, and she's uh gonna beat this fucking disgusting heinous vile wretched fucking *who the fuck does he think he is freak* over the head with it if he doesn't start using his tongue.

"What the fuck?!" Jessica dearest spurts to herself as she dances horridly away from the one guy in the deli, in the 'burb, on the entire fucking planet now with the balls to point out her birdy nutbar wackjob bullshit. "Get away from me!"

"And so y'blame *me!*" shouts the blamed. "You jibber and jab off enough to let the entire fucking customer base of this delicatessen KNOW that not only are you *here*, but you *have* someone wit' ya's now y'hear, you fucking *have* some poor fool entranced, hex'd out, fuckin' a *hypnotized* to stand around and hold a piece of radioactive whatever the **fuck** it is against their face so they can gallivant the fuck around there, wherever you have them *had*, yapping and jabbing and jibbering like a sniveling fucking *shrew*, an' *then* y'have the nerve, the guile, that moth-fuckering *audacity* to *hang up your call* not once you get on line but *before* you turn the fucking corner, as if your pea'd-brain isn't split enough to realize that hey, you, no, you are not slick, you're not sneaky, you're out of your fucking mind and now everybody is *painfully* fucking aware of it!"

Everybody is painfully fucking aware of *something* right now, and it is NOT what they should be. Hands in pockets, gripping belt buckles, digging like mad through overstuffed purses. The woman... Jessica? Mayhaps... but uh, regardless of it, she left. She turned the second W.A.B. XVII threw down his favor' *radioactive* card, then walked out shortly after. The poor sap cutting the meat – the only guy working behind the counter, god bless his heart, he doesn't know what to do, he's got his hand on the trigger, that lone 'man alone WITHOUT ANYBODY ELSE wields the power of the circular sawblade. Enough intention he

could decapitate the entire su'burb of Shawson's Bluff for crying out loud! It's a good thing he doesn't want to.

It's a rea' g'od thing the meaty deliboi don't wanna cut off no heads round here parts, rmmmmrrnm.

Winchester takes his quarter pound of pastrami and heads off to the breads aisle. Shawson's Bluff Starbored Delicatessen is *not* your average delicatessen, a'right, this joint has *aisles*, inside it, 'k', place has *specific locations designated for specific products*, and not only that, but it's all intelligently *planned out*.

It seems to be, at least. Breads aisle next to the meat counter? Perfection. Where else, see now, would it go?

Marble rye, yeas, quewpe'a 'stram'. Almost there, but... needs somethin'. Somethin'a make it *slippery*.

With all the fixin's to make himself a right slamwich, one Winchester Amadeus Bouregard XVII all done up in his siltiest camouflage hunting wardrobe meanders over to the filthiest and by far *theeee* most cobwebbiest corner of the delicatessen and-slash-or convenience store, see what I did there oh *Christ* see maybe I'll bryng Jonathan Knox back for this... or maybe, in saying so, I just *did*.

C a M e O *apparences!*

So after witnessing an apparent homeless guy eating an unpaidfor and thus inherently *illegal* slamwich – it *is* a slamwich, by golly, it's not a sand but a *slam*, but a real grand *slam!* – the actual Jonathan Knox runs sweaty the fuck out of this uh, this... what the fuck OH RIGHT out of this here *Shawson's Bluf Starbored Delicatessen* just to be vanish'd back from whence he came.

Winchester leaves the corner dirtier than he found it, but it'll be clean soon. The buttress of rat shit shat out in

pellet form he sat on not shat on but *sat* is, uh, more than enough for Winchester to feel content with leaving the corner the way he found it.

Not one single customer of the delicatessen – there's no easy way to put it, all his sneaking and snooping and stealing around, it, it was seen by everybody, the shelves 'tween the aisles are only three hun'it feet off the ground and just... fuckin' uh, what's 'is... **ih**, Winchester Amadeus Bouregaard the seven-fucking-teenth, if that wasn't clear by now, Christ al' *mighty* can you imagine the *inbre*–...

Not one, zero, nah single customer of the delicatessen gives Winchester the benefit of the doubt as he meanders his way out from the single most popular eatery in all of Shawson's Bluff. They smelled him before they saw him and when they saw him he was steppin' out of the woods, full camo', no weapon-arms in sight. He wasn't out there making a movie, probably wasn't out there *plannering* a movie. No.

Oh no.

No, see, Mis'uh Winchester Amadeus Bouregaard the SEVENTEENTH? See... he was just *out there*, y'see, he was out there doin' whatever it is he might've been *doing*, and eh... and then he... he just stopped. Stopp'd long enough to walk out'a the woods an' off in'a the deli-catessen, that is. Fucking menace. He was a menace from the minute he walked in and now that by the love of all that' higher and holy he is walking *out*, he'll only *continue* to be a menace, because that's ALL HE IS.

THAT'S ALL HE IS!

That's all Winchester Amadeus Bouregaard XVII is: a no-good dirty-rotten fucc-jiggy God-damn'd **menace**.

## Hobo

Metaphysically speaki', an energetic body with the impact potential of a meteor so large it makes the planet which hosts this here **stormy village** of Shawson's Bluff look a fuckin' *singular atom, okay*, strikes the ornery cranium of Winchester Amadeus Bouregaard XVII.

Physically speaking, though, some dirty hobo decides to brain himself clear out on the fucking sidewalk.

# Gulpa

## Hooligan

Winchester wakes alone in what he can only imagine is a hospital room. When he opens his eyes, he doesn't have to imagine it anymore.

An assortment of various sticky pads stick stuck all over his body, and they don't make him feel good about yanking them the way he does but by golly a man needs to get out of bed every now and again and to get on *out* of this bed, a man needs to not be paired to the machinery he's in that bed to be pair'd with!

What?

Ignoring all *that*, Winchester Bouregaard throws the blankets to the wall and lets his bare feet fall to the cold tile floor. Christ, you'd think they would at least keep this place warm... "Hey, where is this place, anyway?"

Seems to be a hospital, no?

No answer. None that he could hear, anyway, ou'loud, anyway, but now that he's giving the little room a good look, it does appear to be a hospital. The vital-monitoring equipment, the curtain dividers, the little... eh... the little... kitchen sink?

Wait, wait, now hold on just a second, what kind of a hospital has kitchen sinks in the rooms? And why does it smell like age and semi-demented misery?

"Holy shit, he's awake!"

There's a woman at the door. A nurse, by the looks of her. Wearing a shirt that says **NURSE** in big fonted letters,

## Gulpa

for crying out loud, if she was a doctor the shirt would say so! The part of her shirt which is made to warp under the force of her titties would say **DOCTOR** if she was a doctor, but it doesn't! It says **NURSE!**

Another woman, this one with even bigger titties, just comes right into the room. She's not wearin' a shirt – like, at all – but... she does have a stethoscope hanging 'round her neck... so... she's almost... certainly not a doctor either lmfao.

"Thank you, nurse," say' the doctor. "Get to the second floor, they need you where I was."

"Got it, Doctor Gretch'," says **NURSE**, and off she goes to the second floor, specifically to where the topless doctor was. Probably. There's no way for Winchester to know f'r sure, he's squaring off against a topless doctor and all he's wearing's one'a them tie-in-the-back hospital gowns and you wanna know the bitch of it? Whoever draped him in it forgot to tie it off in the back.

Titties, asses, bare to the air in this apparent hospital bedroom with a kitchen sink.

"So, Doctor Gretch'," says Winchester, "why don't you explain to me just what in the hell is going on here?"

The doctor's muscles all slacken out a little bit. "Are... is this not a shoot?"

"No, it's not," he assures her before scratching at his crotch, "although I wouldn't be opposed..."

She thinks about it, gnaws at her bottomer lip a little. "Wait, then why are you here?"

"What?"

He was thinking about it too.

"If this isn't a shirt then why are you here?"

"*What?*"

"Shoot," she says, "I meant to say *shoot*."

"If you're not going to put your shirt on," Winchester confides, "we're gonna have to do something about this situation."

So, naturally, they do something about this situation. Specifically, Winchester has her wash her hands off in the kitchen sink (she let him know all about what they were shooting down on the second floor) and while she's distracted, he takes off the hospital gown and, bare naked there with her in the room, takes a sheet off the bed and wraps it like an ol' toga around his generally unappealing bodily form. When Doctor Gretch' is finished washing up, she puts Winchester's hospital gown on and ties it, too, ties it strategically to make her breasts appear as propp'd as possible, as they say in the dressing rooms, and then explains to Winchester that he's the first human being to ever be hurt in all of Shawson's Bluff.

Wait, wait, wai'wai'wait... *what?*

"Hold on," Winchester blurts, like, *right* in the middle of one of Doctor Gretch's sentences, "som'n', uh... som'n's not right."

"What do you mean, baby?"

"I mean..." He scratches into his scalp. The back of his scalp, on the right ridge of the little valley back there. "I don't know. Something just generally feels off here, feels all kinds of grifty. Is this even a hospital?"

The alleged doctor takes a sketchy step back at that one.

"What," he abhors, stepping confidently towards her, "what? What'd I say?"

## **Gulpa**

"You *know* this isn't a real hospital... why did you just ask me that?"

"Sweetypants," he insists, "I don't know jack *shit*. All I did was wake *up* here."

The doctor screams theatrically, throws a clipboard at the half-naked hooligan, screams another for the craft, and takes the fuck off into the hallway. A couple seconds later, the last of her bleachblonde haircut leaves out the door with her. Good goddamn riddance.

Winchester shakes his head and does a couple steps of the stagger dance, then looks around as if he expects to see a big-titted nurse wearing his shirt... but there's no big-titted nurse, so his cheek-to-cheek smile duly fades.

"Hey, uh... Nurse Gretch'?" calls Winchester Amadeus Bouregaard, "Eh, I mean, *Doctor* Gretch'? Hello?"

No answer. On the bright side, he's wearing the toga. He's a little chilly, y'know, kind'a *breezy* down below, but that just needs some getting used to is all. Kind'a hungry, too. Can't really get used to being hungry. Well... no, yeah, Winchester supposes you can – that uh, *one* can, anyway – but you'd probably die doing it.

Yeah. Probably die pretty fuckin' quick if you got used to being hungry all the time.

Winchester dips, balls tight to his taint.

## **Busty'n'Trusty**

Not a single soul waits to apprehend Winchester outside in the hallway. All the doors are wide open, all the rooms devoid of life. All the equipment is here, the facilities are

stocked and ready for action, like, as far as appearances go, but the place is just dead and barren. As he turns the corner, he finds the gown he offered the topless doctor. It was crumpled and tossed to the floor. Ahead of him, far ahead, an elevator stands closed.

For some reason, Winchester cannot bring himself to proceed and press the button to call that 'vator up here, or down here... no, definitely up here, there was a window in the room.

Was there?

In any case, there are open windows all over the wall to his, heh, one side, and it's clear they're up on the second floor or higher. Prob'ly higher. If the first floor isn't half a football stadium, they're probably not on the second floor.

Winchester approaches the nearest window and puts two hands on the sill. The view below is immaculate, the streets are all neat and trim with their grassy planters and concrete walkways and every single building shines bright with a crazy neon paintjob, it's a suburb straight out of a video game, or a... or a movie.

*'That uh... doctor, was saying something about a shoot before she ran out of there before...'*

Winchester blinks a couple of times.

"Yeah, no, of course she was," publicly yet to himself, "why else would she be in here, right? It's not like this is a real hospital."

Winchester gallivants down the hallwæ and calls the elevator up 'ere and starts counting the... tiles on the floor. Sure. There are six per row, that is, six columns, so all he has to do is count one up to the wall and then... and then walk down there, turn, and count the rest, and that's not

taking into account the tiles in the rooms, in the closets, in the employee's-only areas... the elevator can wait.

But should it?

"No," Winchester admits, "but neither should you, eh... whatever you are. You should not be here, I mean. Within my head. And I'm getting really fucking sick and tired of the fact that you're apparently fucking here."

Winchester, two hands on the ol' sill, is gazing out the window. The parking lot is packed down there, but this entire floor up here is empty. N'how can that be? What, is everybody just on the other floors? Or is everybody down on floor two doing... topless doctor things?

We should go to floor two, Winchester.

"So you know my name!"

Spittle upon the window. Winchester turns away and approaches a full trashcan. There are a couple communal trash cans set up, or maybe they're not communal, maybe they're for the propp' patients in this fake hospital, what the fuck even is all this?! He kicks the garbage can over, boots it hard to the ceiling, lets it take some plaster down with it, fucking pitiful.

When the pain in Winchester's right middle toe – it's longer than all the rest, extends past the big – is properly explained to Winchester's brain, he falls back and lands on his tailbone, finishes up rolling around on the ground in his stupid fucking bedsheet toga.

"Stop it!" he shouts. "What are you, what's going on?!"

Suddenly, Winchester's tosie does not hurt anymore. Suddenly, Winchester Amadeus Bouredaarg XVII is a'roll 'round on the'dmittedly spotless fake hospital whatever this place is floor for *absolutely no fucking reason*. So, he

gets up and makes for the 'vator.

He presses the button and the doors open right up... huh. Must not be too busy... or maybe it's as busy as it's ever been, but only down on floor two.

Maybe we should go find out what's happening on floor two...

"No need," says Winchester as they begin their slow descent to floor one. "It's the porno floor."

The porno floor.

"Well," Winchester continues, then retreats into his head because he's alone in the elevator and it's scawy in heare, *'they're all--... this is the porno building. It has an actual name, but um, I don't, I'm not, I'm -*

Ashamed of yourself, yeah, I got that. You don't know *anything* about this place.

"Listen," he whispers, "whatever you are--"

You *could* say *who*.

"What?"

He just straight-up *said*, strategically hidden cameras be damned. Nobody's watching them anyway, floor two is going *hard* right now. *Hard* and fucking *moist*.

Well we're talking, right? I'm clearly not an *it*.

"I don't know that."

There's a lot you don't know.

The elevator gears to a halt, dings. Not immediately after the, the, thee'uh, th' *voice*, Winchester supposes he'll have to call it, her, himmifer, whatever... hmmm... that Jennifer fuckin' little jibby-jab'r... mmmrrmmn.

Um...

Winchester peramb's through the lobby of the porno building where he's never even been never not once **ever** he *swears* without waving to the secretary, which is fine.

## Gulpa

She's not up on floor two, which she's not exactly thrilled about, but she's watching it on her computer. She works *here*, at the *Rusty Frog Exchange* for crying out loud, the woman's allowed to be into what she is into, 'k', and what she is *not* into is Winchester Amadeus Bouregard XVII, and that is *solely* by *his* choice, thank you ma'am thank you very much. Thank you.

Thank you. need help

"I wish I knew what was going on."

They, apparently, walk out of the building and keep walking into the street, they cross the street, they cross the street on the other side of the street, and they sit down on a public bench that was placed strangely against this house here on the street. Seriously, Winchester walked at least ten paces across these poor folks' lawn before he got to sit down, the foottraffic they get has gotta be fucking atrocious!

"So... what the fuck's the beaten earth?"

What did you just say?

"Nothing, I—"

Winchester cuts himself off to breathe heavily a few times.

"I didn't mean to, it, it just kind of came out, I—"

"Do you have *any fucking idea* how many Existential laws you just broke, you little son of a bitch?!"

Winchester Boouregard, shit, it happened yet again, begins to tremble and shiver and weep uncontrollably, he bawls his eyes out in some innocent human being's front yard. Why haven't they come outside yet? Are they over on floor two too?

"No," Winchester snivels. "These are my neighbors."

Then, "And stop doing that."

Doing what?

"Taking control of my thoughts and actions!" shouted a bit too loudly, perhaps, for the subject matter of the, eh, *shouting*, you see here now here see **see see**.

Winchester begins to bawl again, and this time, it's entirely of his own accord. Unlike the last time. When he was forced into it. Forced into it... by...

Me.

"So you DO exist!" Winchester squeals.

Yeah, no shit.

"So where did you come from, then?"

I do-

Brittle skin over thin bones come in rapping against more than one pane of faux glass. Winchester looks up – straight up, as in he actually cranes his neck back – and sees a likely **exhausted** and clearly old an' age'ed woman squinting down and looking none too thrilled to be doing it. Doesn't look thrilled about much at all... but it's nice to see her. To Winchester, at least. 'Man loves his neighbors.

"Sorry, Missus Let'!" as he takes off across the lawn. "I don't know what I was thinking!"

"You better fucking run, you youthful fucking worm! You have your whole life ahead of you! SO GO FUCKING GET IT AND LEAVE ME HERE TO DIE BY MY LONESOME YOU FUCKING SWINE! FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU FUCK YOU FUCK YOU! I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU FUCK YOU YOU STUPID FUCKing..."

Winchester closed his front door – "The entire house is soundproofed." – and thank, uh... thank the lord that he did.

...

"What?"

"No, no, no'no, don't you keep it quiet now. You have something to say, don't you?"

Winchester proceeds into the powder room to wash his face free of the grime and check out the damage. The nurse or doctor or... the pair of tits said, well, the *tits* didn't say anything, uh, they... there's no damage. Winchester's face is totally spotless.

"Wait," the Bour' muses, smiling to himself, "didn't I... randomly... just brain myself out clean on the sidewalk?"

No, you didn't.

"It speaks!"

It does more than that, you fucking di'k. Winchester goes into the one bathroom in this house that's actually a bathroom and strips out of his filthy fucking sweat and dirt and animal musk hunting gear, he doesn't even own a fucking *weapon*, how is he gonna go hunting without a gun? Y'gonna use a stick, Winchester? A sword, maybe? Named after a *gun*, sweet Christ you're named after a *gun* and you don't *own* one? *Wh a t ?*

Winchester gets into his vehi' and pulls out into the street. Physically speaking, he merely starts crying again for the third time, but uh, *metaphysically* speaking he's a shattered man, he's never been more broken in his life, he's hearing voices and he woke up in a hospital and he had a run-in with *the* Doctor Gretch' and they didn't have sex, like, like, uh, what in the actual *fuck* is going on with Winchester Amadeus BooureggaarrRrrrdddd oh ggoodd

it keeps a' *happenin'*! His name wasn't three names long when he woke up! He was just the *Winchester Bouregard*, then the letters kept doubling and the middle name and suddenly he's the seventeenth iteration of the character, like, on a spiritu'l level, a-and... oh god, is The Bookmaker speaking *directly to the audience*, am I *trying soooo hard to be meta that I'm actually confessing that I'm dried out, cashed out, I'm totally out of ideas and all I can write is actual gibberish, none of it makes sense and it's all I can do, I'm weak and falso and not a real writer and my brain is damaged so dramatic, so romantically beyond repair...*

Yeah, that **is** what is happening here. 100%. You got it, you uncovered the secret plot to this book. Good job.

Winchester pulls his old busty'n'trusty Lada into the Shawson's Bluff Local Library parking lot, deads it, and sits waiting in the driver's seat.

## Square Hole

You sure this is a library?

Winchester doesn't even look up. "Yeah."

How.

"Just am."

The sign says-

"I know damn well what the sign says."

Well... I wan'a talk about it anyway. Bookmaker. Also, the uh sign says *Shawson's Bluff Local* in bright pink neon letters on a navy background, a square navy background, talk about a round peg in a square hole, eh? Fits goddamn *perfectly* with the sheer pink ring framing it all up nice,

but that's not all it says. See, there are four words up on that there the'uh Shawson's Bluff Local Library sign, and *Library* ain't the fourth word.

The fourth word... is *Diner*.

Unbelievable.

Winchester's anxiety is really starting to eat at him, the car isn't the here for the now. He – they – eh... stop in the middle of the parking lot to get a good look at the sign.

'*You really want to know?*' Winchester asks the voice in his head.

I do.

And the voice answered him, too. Winchester squats down low to the pavement, elbows to knees and palms to elbows and buries his face into one crook. It's not even a voice, he... he doesn't know what it is. It just comes from within, almost like an echo, and it *speaks* to him in *Wyrd*, he can *hear* and *understand*... but... it's almost like they're not there at the same time. The way they come and go... how can one possibly hope to process and react to a silent sound?

How?

Just relax and pay attention, all right? You'll get there.

After a few more sobs, Winchester stands and moves the rest of the way across the parking lot. It's a good thing nobody pulled on into the parking lot when he was, uh, when he was... *down there*... right? He could've gotten run over. Pretty fortunate, 'man. 'At's all I'm sayin', see, pretty fortunate he didn't get run the fuck over am I *right* or am I *ryte* l'l'l'ladies'n'GERMS?

Winchester takes the handicap ramp up to the door instead of climbing the three steps to the landing, which

is technically a fourth step in and of itself, oof, eh, **YOWZA**, and proceeds to stand totally still for five seconds before pulling the interior door open and strutting his good stuff on in.

## For Me

Not even the dust bunnies greet la Winchester Amadeus Bouregaard XVII as he struts two on into the Shawson's Bluff Local Library.

By the way, says that voice, what's with the whole *Diner* thing?

Winchester walks up to the

Hello?

...Winchester walks up to

Yo, *human scum*. I'm speaking to you.

He slams the bell sitting on the corner of the counter and it ringy-ding-dings an

Winchester.

d the voice said his name and nobody is answering the real-life dingy bell at the actual Shawson's Bluff Local Library but there's a real voice calling Winchester's name from *the center of his fucking brain... 'so let's look around at the lovely decor.'*

Good idea, taunts the voice. No I didn't. It's just all sorts of dark in here. I'm fuckin' tulpa'd, of course I come off a dick. Also, The Suited Man. See?

What I'm saying is you're fucking annoying, Bookmaker.

"In where?" Winchester asks the unused air. Nobody answered the bell, so this is okay. "Just who the hell do you think you are, anyhow? You fuckin—"

*Scoundrel?* Really?

## **Tulpa**

Winchester starts to sweat a little bit... a little bit more than he was already sweating! Fucking *bazinga*, bitch!

"Look," he says to himself, he says, "I don't know who or, or what you are—"

"Hello?"

Sweet Christ, an actually real voice, and it came from behind him! Winchester, that's all, no need for the rest of it, turns and faces a brunette in *full* librarian gear, flowy layers of black and patterned cloths and everything, and her eyes are looking right *at* him.

"Ueh," Winchester pouts.

"What?"

"Hellooooo!" he says. "My name is Chuck Leary, and I would like you to present me with every single book you have regarding the subject matter of the *tulpa*, please."

She's stunned, the brunette is. "A-... all right."

She turns and walks halfway down that counter and a damn fine counter this is, artificial plastic all round and curved and red, white and gray and silver too, all the way down.

"But only because you said *please*."

This place used to be a diner and it's not shy about it, the bright walls and reflective metal ceilings and oh, the *spotless* white tile floors with the grout so black you don't realize until you *really* look at it that it was once the same color as the tiles, and then Winchester sits up on the one stool at this end of the counter and waits 'er out real easy-like.

The brunette librarian comes out of what at one point was, in fact, a kitchen, and stares at Winchester in place for a second or... four. Then, she walks all the way down

the counter, again, rude of him, just to tell him that there's nothing about *toopooos*, or whatever it is he asked for.

"No, I didn't say—"

She knows what she said.

"Excuse me?" asks the real human librarian standing in front of your Winchester's face. She doesn't look *at all* comfortable with the current circumstances.

"I mean no severe harm," Winchester tries. It's funny, it's almost like him saying that *proves* to her that he does mean severe harm. "Look, I just want to find out abo—..."

...

Well isn't *this* an awkward silence!

Ten seconds later this is *still* an awkward silence!

"Listen," he says, looking intently at a booth. The one you see when you walk in the door, that is, the one facing *away* from the brunette, he is looking over his shoulder and speaking like he's not, "can I just get, like, a tablet? A 'man's got'a do some research here."

The librarian clears her throat callous spins all in one motion, then walks *alllll* the way back down the counter to fetch a tablet from... whatever lurks back in where the kitchen used to be.

Winchester gristle Booguard, hands in his pockets, walks two-thirds of the way down the counter, stops at the fourth of the six readstools, I say, now that's two out of three if's *I've's* ever heard about it! He did for a reason, of course, *so* I mean: to peer in thru the service window.

See, as you, ehshhhhhh *may or may not* be uh' *wær*, the Shawson's Bluff Local Library – remember when the first chapter of th's was titled *Wordcount?* – was, at one point, the spectacular and incredible and amazing and locally

loved and here's a few words and here's s'more words, all manner of words, look, look, *wordcount*, *everybody!*

The library was a diner way back in the primer days of Shawson's Bluff. It was one of, if not *the* most yearned-for cameo site[s] in all of the suburb. Named ironically by the original builder, the Shawson's Bluff Local Diner was positioned on the edge of town, in fact, just about as far away from any given residentially positioned throughout the stormy valley as possible! That local diner was local to the coyotes and whatever the heck *else* is out in those dark and stormy mountains, BUT, that's why they loved it. Everybody needs a pain in the ass in life, and if you can film movies in the joint and eat the propp' food then hey, why not?

Plus, ever since the bottommost bulbs busted out, that fugly son of a sign has been the best *Welcome to...* on all of Urod... not that there's very much of it left.

But anyway/how, none of that's important here. The brunette is back with the tablet.

"Thanks," as Winchester takes grasp, making sure to *ssllloowwwwlllyyyy* brush his fingers against those few of the librarian. She doesn't ask if he needs anything else and *boom*, his ass is in the low wooden seat without much cushion, which is really *odd* considering how the chair itself seems to be made of one piece, aside from the leg. I mean, you can excuse one *leg*, right? If, if the whole chair, now stay with me here because now I *know* you're trying to quit, now if the *whole chair* is made of one piece of wood and the maker needed to make a leg to turn the piece of wood into an actual chair, *that* can be excused... *but...* if you put *all that effort* into the chair and you don't

bother to put any cushion on it, then... then what the *fuck* are you making the chair for in the first place?!?

You need to get a fucking hold of yourself, guy.

"Thanks," Winchester says. "Thanks," third time in a row, believe it or not now, "a lot, there, pal."

"No problem," shouted through a muffle of some sort before exitin' ou' through the window in the back counter wall, "you absolute blast of a patron!"

She really thought you were talking to her.

"Well who the fuck else would I be talking to?!"

A few droplets dot rainbows... well, mostly a magenta kind of pink rainbow, they're not really *rainbows* at all, I don't know why I even said it... uh, but uh, I think we *both* know why I left it, and *that* is what makes this the first entry of *The Playground hahahaaaaaaa* i am The cufking Bookmaker, also, I've pissed out just enough time for the libraryian to wander her way out of the [redacted] where the kitchen used to be! She's now standing, hands on her *hips* wha'd'y'kno', *safely* behind the counter, and while she's not looking *uncomfortable* anymore, per se, she's not looking, uh, she eh, she is not... well it don't bode well for Winchester Amadeus Boogregard the XVIII.

That's right, our small'n'young child-boy just earned himself an extra *relative!*

"Listen," she says to him yea she says, "whatever your name is, I am under no, *zero* obligation to make this place hospitable for you."

Winchester doesn't even budge.

"Truth be told," she doth continues, "I didn't even *look* at the 'brary system to see if there were any books about *touper*s, or, or, or whatever the hell you were asking for.

## Gulpa

Let me say that again," goes said, and again, "I didn't even *look*. It's not that I checked in the system, no, I didn't even *look* at my computer. I went out back and took a freshest breath of *air*, and—"

"Great!" he bellows, standing up as if he meant to rush the counter and slaughter the bitch.

Winchester Amadeus Boouregard XVIII walks calm to the 'brary counter and holds a spittle-free tablet out a respectable (and readable) distance from the librarian's general face area. She stepped back the minute he shifted funny in his seat, see, especially after the whipping she laid on him, so she now steps back forward, hah, words and opposites and stuff, *The Playground arc* ; so, fuckin', lmfaoOo she walks up and I am actually laughing my ass off right now HAH I don't even know why it's funny, so she *walks up* and leers at the screen and says, "Oh... right. We *do* have a... a book in stock."

A few books.

"Yeah, where do you keep 'em?" Winchester asks. He then makes a little show of looking all around the place ! and points out that he doesn't see any shelves anywhere.

Before he gets the chance to quip a quick *Y'know, for a library, you, hah, you sure don't have any books on the nonexistant shelves, hah! Hah hah hA!* So she says she to him, "In the back, there," gestured with her head, she did, "where the kitchen used to be."

I fucking *knew* it.

"I have a little office back there, too." She smiles. "And a gun."

"Oh."

They look at one another. One of the two is far too at

ease, the voice in Winchester's head thinks to him... and for another thing... what?

"What I'm saying is that I do not trust you," without blinking, "and I'm not afraid to let you know that."

"Well," he says, "that makes two of us, shifty fucking Bookkeeper."

"Get out."

That *Bookkeeper* shot there was me, I was trying to see if the librarian was Eve in disguise. I don't think she is... though she might be. You literally *never know* when she's going to show up in these, she's an Astral God of All for my sake. I'm just gonna keep making the book.

"Hold on," Winchester Ama'pleads, not even thinking about touching a knee to the ground. "Just... all I want is to look at the book. I won't even attempt to leave with it, I'll give it right back."

"Did you not hear me?" she says. "Get the fuck out!"

The librarian's pupils push her irises to their absolute outer limits for a split second, then they go totally back to normal. Without speaking she backpedals way down the inside of the counter, and by the way, there's no, like, flap or door or anything, there's no way over the counter but to jump over it, it's fucking surreal, and oh shit sorry, so a book comes *spinning* out of the window in the wall that once had an actual purpose when this place was a diner... and why did it shut down?

Cannibalism, that's why. Look, it always must appear somewhere. Wouldn't be *The Playground* without it, am I right or am I *RIGHT* you multiple sloppy The Whoresons! *The Playground* has a *place* in Existence, and that doesn't mean you have one too!

## Tulpa

GOD I AM SO EMOTIONAL ALL THE TIME!

Darlin' I'm just a peach, I swear it.

So uh Winchester fetches the book – *Tulpas: If You're Reading This Book, You Already Know What A Tulpa Is* – and gives it a read, and learns all about what tulpas are, despite what the title suggests. It's almost like the title of a book has no real bearing on that book's contents... like, *Sto'tryp*, for example.

A'ight if y'want me to be real, this one was supposed to come first but I wound up doing *Sto'tryp* first because the year was *getting on* in its weather, y'understan', out in Reality, I mean, so I got it all done and started in on the next, like, I have started an actual book, don't worry, this is turning into *The Note* right now but where *else* but *The Playground* do you come for a story to deteriorate to such a heinousaffous degree?!

Noplace, that's fuckin' where.

"So," Winchester asks the voice in his head after first exiting the library and then checking the lot to make sure he's alo–... that he's sort of alone, "what just happened in there?"

Did you read *nothing* in the book?

"Are you trying," as the door do open, "to tell me you're some imaginary fuckin' friend? But... *not imaginary*?"

Well that's the lougher and spittel of it, yeah. But I'm not *imaginary*. I am *metaphysical*.

"So what's your name," door shut, "then?" but the key is *not* in the ignition.

Uh... do you want my full name?

"No, I want the fucking moniker that the first college roommate of yours to actually convince you to make use

of the RA's specific set of tools in your *dormitory* called you."

The still unnamed voice doesn't answer and *what do you know* the key stays *out* of the ignition!

Chuck, all right? Finally. Call me Chuck.

"What," as he sticks that key *in*, "did you not want to say *Charles?*"

Something like that.

"See, s'now you *could* have just been straightforward but *noooo*, see, you had to mislead me.

Winchester-

But it's too late. The Bookmaker is moving this book right along, just like the car rolling on down Wuester Ave.

Towards Shawson's Bluff, of course. Not out through the mountains towards... wait, this road isn't even called Wuester Avenue.

Winchester puts a foot on the brakes. Skidmarks like serpentine rubber smears steam out in the cool.

"Why isn't this road Wuester Ave?" Winchester asks. He's getting extremely and, just uncomfortable all of the sudden...ly.

Why does that bother you?

"Because it *used to be*, Chuck," he squeals, "it *used* to be! I, I remember waking up--"

"Okay," Chuck says using Winchester's mouth, this is getting fucking *weird*, "you want the truth? My name is The Suited Man Chuck Leary, Pillar Soul of Existence. I'm quite possibly *la* most powerful, uh, *thing* in all of fucking Existence, which includes four astral planes, by the way, one of which contains this here Universe, at the center of which is a singularity point which combines every single

## Tulpa

infinite iteration of the small-yet-bottomless backwoods town of Wuester, New Jersey into one sprawling actual bottomless backwoods *dimension*, of sorts, if you'd like me to be all vague about it.

"And we, sir, are currently on the planet Urod, which is floatin' out in The Blacktop, which surrounds grand ol' Wue|hey now, I know Wuester Central," and sweet Christ Winchester Amadeus Bouregard XVIII was just allowed control of his body by his apparent tulpa! Incredible! "and what's more, I know for a *fact* that anybody sayin' they've been there is not to be trusted."

Well what do you wanna do, then?

"Oh no," as they roll right on down back into the town proper. It's still woodsy, every single building has a little wall of trees and shrub' if its owners didn't tear the shit out to make a parking lot, but it's not *bottomless thick all the way up to the dark stormy mountains, y'hear, boi?*

Oh... oh no *what?*

"Oh, sorry," Winchester Amadæ's, "I forgot what I was saying!"

Yeah... an-

"I forgot that I was even saying in the first place!" and yet that smug little son of a bitching look on his face, that little grin like chap'Chadwilp fresh out of the chlorinated pond, *fuck*, "Isn't that funny! Hah!

"Hah hah!

"Hah hah hah!"

Did you have a serious head injury at some point, kid?

"Not that I remember," truths Winchester Amadeus whatever, "but where uh, where are we going now?"

Out to the mountains, I suppose.

Once more Winchester Amadeus slams on the breaks and paints those synthetic tarry basilisks unto Urod Læn, and, uh, "Chuck," he says, "we don't never go up in'a them mountains, boi."

Hm... not sure what to do about that one.

"So... where did *you* come from...???" Winchester asks him.

I just explained the whole fucking... space, all right?

"No," says Winchester, tapping lightly on the gas. "I want the truth."

"I came from out in The Blacktop," words shaped with 'Chester's tongue, and that's where the name *Winchester* comes from, huh.

Well what the **fuck** do you know abUO

"And now I'm here on planet Urod for reasons I can't really figure out. And, I'm inside your head."

"Are you usually not?"

"Depends. I do have a body, though."

"Oh... huh." Weird how long this drive is taking. When I was going *on and on and on* about the, th't'um, thee-uhh, the... I actually don't remember now, Christ. The uh, *Local Diner* bit. That was a joke, like, it's actually a ten-minute drive, like, *tops*, from *anywhere* in town, Shawson's Bluff is *not* that large of a geographic area, 'k', but the towering stormclouded mountains do not allow much leeway for construction, like, once it's built it's built, y'know what I mean?

Yet for some reason, they've been steady driving for what feels like hours.

Urod Lane probably works the same way as Wuester Avenue down in Wuester.

"I figured," a' Chestwinster figures for the first time as he's saying it, that is, *not in the past*. "Is it like that on all of the planets in The Blacktop?"

Beats me. I don't hang out here.

"Why not?"

Because it's The Playground, it doesn't fuckin' matter. It exists solely for Adam to fuck around in and have something to do when he's not working on the real shit.

"Who's Adam?" The 'Chest-meister barks out. "Wait, what's, wait, what the fuck? What are you even fucking talking about?"

Listen... just, eh... well... we need to get to the mountains.

"Why?"

Solely because you have a thing about going to the mountains.

While he doesn't slam on his breaks again – they will not be cheap to repair and neither will the fucking tires, my god – he does go, "Chuck," he says, "we don't never go up in'a them mountains, boi."

Yeah so something is *definitely* fucking happening up in the mountains.

"I don't even know where the fuck we are right now," Winchester complains with slight exhaustion.

Then stop the car and look around, fucking hell...

He doesn't, because he's lived in Shawson's Bluff all his life. It's all just trees with little slivers, little leaves you could say, of houses and trampolines, swing sets, pools'n-volleyball nets, entire backyards behind tan'd and white and unoffensively-slatted houses, all those plastic slates, too, it's the 'burbs, straight out'a Wuester here and it's all right there, enclosed by the walls and walls and walls of leaven trees, do you get it, do you get it now? ITS IN THE FUCKING WOODS AND THERE ARE HOUSES!

The Playground, I swear.

Sure. So, how do we go hypothetically about getting up to the mountains?

"Well *hypothetically* speaking, we'd head over to the weather station."

All right.

"Which is clear on the other side of town."

Is that the turnoff for the weather station parking lot up there?

Winchester, for the first time since the second brake, looks out from the depths of his consciousness and gazes at a large sign reading *Shawson's Bluff Weather Research Institute*.

"Yeah, by god it is!"

They ease easily into the turn and coast into the one free parking spot in the whole 'tire lot. The spot has a sign that says RESERVED, and above that it says PRESIDENT.

"We don't have the time," Winchester acknowledges. "Nor do we have a key."

We need a key to get in?

"A passkey, yeah. Keycard," Chester corrects, "rather. Sorry."

You're fine, Win'man. I just want to get us out to the mountains, there's obviously something there.

"Well... well... well I don't know what you want me to do." Winchester sni'fs one loudly, as to huac up somethin' gnarsty, but doesn't. "The only way we're going to get the arbiters to allow us to the mountains—"

The *what?*

"Oopsie..."

Just... I'm going to ignore this entire fucking thing for now, all right? Just tell me what we need to do to get out to the mountains. Christ this is fucking ridiculous, first book since he almost fucking killed all of Existence and *this* is

## Gulpa

what he fuckin' puts me thru. *Test out The Blacktop*. For what fucking reason?! So you can bring back some long-lost deity from nonExistence for no reason other than to laugh about the existence of him? Huh? You're trying to bring Big Tungstok back, aren't you? Fucking child.

"I..." He's gripping the steering wheel pretty hard. "I don't... I don't think all of that was for me."

It wasn't.

"So..."

I'm still waiting for you to explain what we need to do to get a keycard into the weather institute so we can get into the mountains.

"Chuck," he says, "we don't—"

I am going to raze this entire fucking rock, I swear to Christ.

## Exact Steps

Winchester and Chuck pull out of the weather institute parking lot 'few minutes before the president comes back from his lunchbreak. He went home to see his wife, she's been a little sick lately and, well, she's getting old, they both are, and... quite frankly he shouldn't have to explain wanting to go home and see his wife, it's just not...

He's the president of the Shawson's Bluff Weather Research Institute. He doesn't have to explain anything to anybody, and nope, neither does Winchester Amadeus Bouregaard XVIII, being, how you say, *the kind of guy he is*, but still he does explain to his imaginary friend who caused – and then healed him of – a massive head injury the exact steps they need to take to get the keycard.

There aren't *too* many, but Chuck doesn't seem very confident about it. Excited, rather. He doesn't seem very

*excited* about it. It... it's almost like he doesn't *want* to be Winchester's tulpa.

I don't. I don't even know why-

First they must turn off Urod Lane, like, before they do anything else. But!... they can't do that yet. Not 'til the road allows them to turn.

Look, see, Winchester's gotta affirm real quick: things could be going worse for him. Hell, he could still be in that hospital.

Oh hell, he might still be in that fake hospital in the porn building.

OH HELL, THIS MIGHT ALL BE A DREAM!

FAKE!

FAKE!

OH GOD IT'S ALL FAKE! STOP WASTING YOUR TIME,  
JUST GO BACK TO YOUR... WHATEVER! FAAAAAAKE!

ITS ALL A DREAM, BOOK'S OVER, GOO'BYE!

# The Keycard Debacle

## I Need to Speak

If white paint rose walls from asphalt, this moped would be absolutely fucked right now.

Winchester puts it in park and steps out to face the cleanliest dumpsters this side of the ring of dark, tall, and *constantly surrounded in stormclouds* mountains a'hold the 'burb where it's held. What? Ba'k when this place was a diner the dumpsters had a purpose, but *nnnoowwww* they literally just sit here empty all the time. It's good for little back-alley shoots, but...

...anyhow, the character with la Chuck Leary in his head walks up to the back door of the Shawson's Bluff Local Library and almost knocks hard twice, but then stops his knu'k's from banging on the wood.

"Hold on," Winchester says all suspicious-like, "wait a darn-tootin' second here, no, just you—"

Enough. What the fuck, Adam?

What do you mean?

Why are we back at the Library?

Because the plot demands you be here. Du—

What plot?

Duh.

The innocent human d-... bystander in this situation, though *innocent* isn't really the eh, correct word... uh, the ...breathe, Hunter. Winchester doesn't know right now. He has an imaginary friend, see, apparently, and now the imaginary friend's talking to *his* imaginary friend, and...

this is all so convoluted... agreed. What's even the point of this?

It's simple, my dear, eh, **idiot**. I need to speak to Eve.

Okay.

I mistook the librarian for Her earlier, remember?

Not really. Hey, Winchester.

"What's up, Chuck?"

The dude is standing in the hidden back parking lot, accessible only by alley, of a local library that's more of a prop than anything else, that's *just as much* of a prop as everything else, don't you get it? Life is a movie here, and what the director says goes!

Winchester stomps into the library with a whole big mess of fucking confusion clogging up the gums.

I still don't understand...

I don't give a fuck whether the librarian is Eve or not, I say, "but you two are going to... well, Winchester is going to present, see, and you, Chuck, are going to talk to her, because she is the only woman in the entire suburb that can get you access to the weather institute's president's keycard, and that keycard is the *only* way you're going to get out in'a the mountains so you can find whatever it is you think you're going to find out there. If you want the truth, I'm making this book so I can work my issues out with Eve, and up to this point I've just been wasting time trying to think of how to do it."

I look down at the page and see exactly what I just said written out verbatim. Oh yeah, baby, I'm back in The Writer's Room.

I rise from the table, leave my pencil and the working draft of *la Chuck Leary Offs a Planet Just to Spark a Joint* open so another incarnation of me can appear and write

all of this up for the real me – he knows he’s just a stupid syncarnation, don’t worry, he’ll do it – whilst the real me goes back to Eden for a few so I might, eh, converse with Eve.

Because... well... there’s been some bullshit going on, folks, and I for one am tired of it. Very, very tired of it. So... “Eve!” I call out to the infinite purple skies of Planet Eden, both my feet bare and planted, the supple green pastures. “Eve! Appear to me now, let’s go! We have to talk!”

But she does not appear. Not until I turn around and come to realize that she’s already here.

Well now I don’t know what the hell to say. Huh.

## I’m Me

“I’ll start, then,” she says, and that voice could–

“Stop with the compliments, Christ! I don’t know who you are and you scare me!”

“What?”

She turns away from me. “I was just *here* one day, and I have all this power, and... and then there’s *you*...”

I put a hand on her shoulder but uh, that was *not* the move to fucking make. I pick myself up from the crater and jog back.

“Why do you always fucking do that?!” she screams. “I’m trying to talk to you and you have me strike you and toss you across the entire thou-forsaken Astral Plane into a crater! Why do you think I hate you?!”

“BECAUSE YOU FUCKING DO!” I holler, stripping my infinite throat for all it’s good for. “ALL YOU FUCKING DO

IS HIDE AND CREEP AROUND AND MAKE MY FUCKING LIFE MISERABLE! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE HERE, EVE! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE HERE WITH ME BUT YOU'RE FUCKING HIDING!"

"You haven't found a real way to introduce me yet," she claims. "That shit at the end of *Over the River* didn't count, either. The **only** reason I wrote you that note was because you thought it would be *hilarious*."

"Okay," I says, "fine, I'm The Bookmaker. I'm the male Astral God of All, I am pure active potential, I am—"

"Whatever you say you are," Eve finishes. "Just like the rest of us..."

I look all around at *everything* in this Astral Plane – aside from the most perfect picture of Everything I could ever want in life – and see nothing... because it's all right in front of me, and... I... know that now. I understand that now. My match is real and she's here and... I'm choking.

"You are," she admits. Then, she takes my better hand and strokes it, but not at all in a sexual way. No, see, we've been fucking this entire time, we just haven't been able to talk to one another because... all right, I'll say it.

It's hard to be me.

That is to say... I woke up before anyone else here and felt alone, and... I decided to take that out on myself.

Except that doesn't make sense, because I'm me.

Hm...

## Just a Me-Issue

"Eve?" I ask, making to resolve this silly nonsense, this

silly *me-issue* (as that's all this is, really, just a me-issue).

"Adam?" Eve asks, not sure what else to say to Adam using her name as a question lmfao like, what?

"You're not The Bookkeeper, are you?"

"I don't know what that means," Eve... Eve... Eve says. "I don't know what you want me to be."

"What I want you to... no, Eve, you have this all wrong, this isn't about me."

"It... but it is, though." She sighs, sits one down on the supple green pastures beneath those, hah, infinite purple skies. "Sit me with."

I sit her with.

"You're the Astral God of All. The real one."

"Are you not real?"

"Adam, I exist because you want me to. That's why all of this exists."

I think about something and shrug it off.

"And you... you're the one in control. And to be frank about it," she lays out, being awful frank about it, "you're controlling it all in a way that doesn't make any sense. You're making yourself out to be a psycho, a monster, an... Adam, you're being an asshole about this entire thing."

"I wholeheartedly disagree with you," I assure her. "If you can hit your boss once, you can hit your boss twice. A'ight? The Pillars Three thought I was crazy, so—"

"So you nearly destroyed all of Existence just to prove a point."

"Well... yeah. I felt it appropriate"

Here we sit, just Adam and Eve... all alone on Planet Eden... except... we're not alone. We have each other.

"Eve," I say, "why... did it take me so long to do this?"

"I don't know, Adam. But..." She takes my hand again, just holds it this time. "I'm happy you did."

"I am, too."

Here we sit, the Adam and Eve, finally together again. The two Astral Gods of All, the greatest power couple in all of Existence... this dynamic... yo, we could be fucking unstoppable.

Balanced, I mean. We could be *balanced*, see, because we're both unstoppable. That's more or less the point, so, like, if we were... on one another's sides and unstoppable *together*... hm. I'll control the writing instruments, then.

And the power.

"Eve," I whisper in an awestruck tone, as though I had never even considered the concept before, "will... Eve, will you marry me?"

"No," Eve says flatly, still holding my hand. "But I will be your bride."

"Oh, well... oh. What's the difference between the two, then?"

"One rhymes with *pride*, you dumbass," as The Bride of Adam Bookkeeper Eve the Form of Being, Astral God of All, Existence Incarnate stands showily. "Now come with me."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because I *know* you want your dick sucked."

# The Keycard Debacle: Wrapp'd Up

## This Subchapter Now's Gonna End

While The Bookmaker is getting his infinite cock sucked by the one A-God who's been wanting to do it ever since she laid her fucking eyes on him for the love of all that's higher, things are going, well, uh... significantly less well in the library down in an equally corporeal and yet less aetheric reality.

And for that reason, this subchapter now's gonna end right here... because, see... if the *real* Adam can get my *real* di-... cock sucked by the *real* Eve, than that should go to prove that *I*, the false Adam, could get *my* dick sucked... by... a fake Eve... hm...

Y'know... the fact that she wouldn't even be the real Eve takes a whole lot of it out for me, I uh... I think... yeah, I'm just... I'll just keep making the book. Yeah.

Yeah.

The Bookmaker's getting his ballbag drained like I'm a real clone of him who doesn't understand the concept of infinity, and his copy, that'd be me... is really... just... all kinds of jealous, to be honest about it...

## I Don't Really Give You a Choice

It's just Winchester and the brunette, and one of them's on their knees.

"Please," the mentioned *one* says, begging as though their life was on the line, "please, I... please don't do this. You don't have to put that in my mouth."

And just like that, the librarian slides the barrel of the nondescript *gun* into the moist mouth of one Winchester Amadeus Bouregaard XVIII, and she doesn't stop until he chokes on it. She wipes his gnarsty saliva off with one of her layers of flowy cloth as he writhes there miserably on the vacuum'd floor.

"I warned you," as she doesn't put the gun away. "I'm... not exactly pleased that you've come back."

Winchester just keeps forcing air out through a throat he's choking himself with at this point. Like, make the choking sound. Right now. *He's* making that sound too, because he *was* choking. At first. But now, in the *present moment*, he's just milking it all because the woman has a fucking *firearm* and he doesn't actually remember why they came back here in the first place.

Now that he's thinking about it, Winchester doesn't remember *coming* here... they turned into some random house – Winchester knows it was a house because it had that wall of trees around it, see, pulling into the driveway was like driving into a garage, and when they came out from beneath that drawn leafen overhead', 'twas just like he blinked without closing his eyelids, and the Lada was parked as though to block in the moped of the librarian... were the white lines of the parking space towering walls

rather than, a' *heh*, mere white lines.

Talk, about, a tone shift.

"Listen," he says, roughly coming to a stand. "Word in town is that you have some odd sort of connection to the president of the Weather Institute. That true?"

The barrel begins to drift.

"I'll assume so," he continues. "I need his keycard. To keep a long story short for you, I need to go up into the mountains."

"Fool who I will assume has a name," she says, "we don't never go up in'a them mountains, boi."

"My name is Winchester," the fool asserts. "What was yours, again?"

"*You* listen," gun steadied in her hand. "I don't know why you're acting so out of character, but you need to knock it the hell off right now or else I'm going to call the police. You don't even have a film crew with you, or any kind of equipment."

As if to mock him, she holsters the nondescript gun in its very toodescript holster.

"And I don't want to be part of whatever it is you're doing."

She doesn't give him a chance to argue, just turns off and walks back between the stacks to resume whatever it was she was doing.

Knowing The Bookkeeper, "Probably jack shit," goe' grumbled under breath.

Watch your fucking mouth, Leary.

What, you two work it out?

Sure did.

That right?

Yep.

So what *was* the problem, then?

Same problem you and me have, dirtbag.

Oh yeah?

Yeah.

Fuckface.

...

I don't really give you a choice, you have to be a dick to me.

I've noticed.

Yeah.

So...

sO...

When does this end?

It does**n't**.

Winchester Amadeus Bouregaarddd XVIII hops back into his Lada and backs a wide-est elbow next to the one dumpster, then rolls a mean horseshoe through the alley of *branche'* and *di'e'*. It's not technically a diner anymore, but, y'know, you get the picture.

In the plot twist of the goddamn century, the parking lot of the Shawson's Bluff Local Library is stark empty, still.

The neon sign stands unapologetically goodbye.

## Making All Kinds of Threats

All of Urod Lane runs on a plane, totally flat. The roads branching off it are slightly more realistic, so... there it is.

Winchester chuggs his rusty Lada along the bumpy

poorly-paven road until he comes up to the address the voice in his head is screaming him: 287 Shoo-fester Blvd. Unlike literally every other house in this area, this one doesn't have the fortress wall of forest and trees growing around it. No, the lone 'man who lives here – the weather president, plus all the 'mans he keeps around the place – went through the big effort of taming the land himself, of crafting himself the ultimate plot of property on which to shoot movies and do cameos for films, and partner, those 'mans don't need to work a day for the rest of their lives because of him.

But, still they still do, which is good, as their house is about to get fucking *robbed* and it's really better for their health and wellbeing if they're elsewhere when it goes down, y'know?

So anyway, Winchester parks the car and flows out, doesn't even kill the engine. He left it in reverse, jacked the e-break... and the garage door comes right open, oiled wheels on unrusted old hinges just like The Suited Man predicted. There's a whole mess of old dirty equipment, there seems to be about as much upkeep done around here as... well, nothing is my point! It's like he did the one big landscaping project and then just *gave up*, kablooeey, splat, done with all of life and everything around him. Oh well. Anybody can get it, but the hard part is keepin' it,

*mothafucka!*

Winchester walks into the cool mudroom, locked and loaded. He doesn't take his shoes off but he does have the decency to wipe his feet clean before trekking on into the kitchen. It's an immaculate kitchen, one'a those *cabinets on the walls, the oven, refrigerator too, open floor with an*

*ilsnadand I know how to spell hehe* kind'a jobs, y'know what I mean?

So the wife of the weather station president, probably, she was just sitting there on the couch, the living room, it's connected directly to their kitchen but without... any kind of wall or doorway! It's really just a big arch between them, she stands and screams at Winchester making all kinds of threats.

"Listen," Chuck says through 'im, and funnily enough she stops up her gob! "We're not here to kill you, but—"

"We? There's only *one of you!*" she says with the kind of emphasis that brings a tulpa ripe to slaughter.

"Easy now, everybody," Winchester tries, "let's just all take a breather, here."

"Get out of my house!"

"We want your goddamn husband's weather institute fucking keycard!" they both shout through Winchester's mouth. "Give it here or you're going to fucking die!"

"But, but I have a movie shoot at the Rusty Fr—"

Winchester kills her right there on the spot, throws a knife across the nice and open airspace with precision-esque accuracy, knocks her cold with the handle and she falls back and caves the back of her skull in on the coffee-livingroom table. Were Chuck not Winchester's tulpa he might bring her back to life, but he is, so he just reveals that the keycard is up in the bedroom the husband once shared with his porno-building wife. Poor ol' Winchester only lives a few hundred feet, like, *if that* from the porno building, it's just... he's just so fucking *mortified* by it.

It's a pretty bland house. The standard family photos up on the walls, all these human faces looking absolutely

nothing like they do on a normal day, striking a pose for what reason but to strike a fuckin' pose before a camera so they can pretend to be someone they're not.

So the keycard's placed on an armoire, which is odd, because they passed the president earlier on in the plot. He must have forgot this here when he was coming home to see his sick and likely dying wife. Hm.

Or... it's a duplicate, a backup in case his wife needs to get into the institute. In case of an emergency. Well... there's been a goddamn emergency now, y'see, and now Winchester needs to balance the field and find out what in the hell's up with those mountains everybody keeps talking about.

The gray lady, dead, goes stepp'd over by Winchester Amadeus, esquire.

# Real

## Messing With You

Before we go along further, all my friends, I must tell you something of grave importance. This novelette has been hijacked. Before we go any more further, I must confess: I've allowed it to happen up to this point.

In other words, we can't go forward quite yet.

There's a demon, sort of like my Keeper whose name I will not say so it doth not græc this page with its mad inpronounceability, but eh, basically, this here's the gist: it's you and me, right, and in the center of *you* is just a big gaping hole. Holes like eyes, as Stephen King wrote, and when the given *you* is a spirit, your sense of *I*, it uhh... lol I'm messing with you, here's the real reason I wanted to write this Chuck Leary joint:

## An Actual Reason

I, Bookmaker Adam the Form', rise from the table. I exit The Writer's Room, first slingin' a wink up to Bookmaker Hunter, Totem of The Garden, our good souljier out there in Reality working to bring into outer space what occurs in the inner, and strut my way unto Planet Eden without even blinking an eye.

Ah, m'supple green pastures, la infinite purple skies... it works for me. I like to spend my time, as much time as I can, in The Writer's Room, y'see, because when I'm not

working to explore the more inaner sidez of Existence – which, let's be real, the 81 has been FAR outweighing the 19 as of late, and that's all right, y'know, that's fun, that's what Universe W-2222 has been abou' from the jump, just consequence-free fun, but now it is time to move on, and to something better, too. Imagine that.

A certain specific series of events occurred between the conclusion of one *Over the River: The Emancipation of Jonathan Knox* and one *Boardtrip II: Can, Na, and Bis, You Bitch!* and those events began at the beginning of... this, uh... this here... *this*, and'll now conclude with thus:

I summon every single Astral God before me. In order:

First, The Bride of Adam Bookkeeper Eve the Form of Being, Astral God of All, Existence Incarnate.

The Suited Man Chuck Leary, Pillar Soul of Existence, who just offed an entire planet for me so I wouldn't have to go through the trouble of exploring the stupid shit with the disembodied Demigods controlling the population of Shawson's Bluff, all-righty, there will be at least a trillion Shawson's Bluffs in The Playground, probably, so... I can let this one become a planet so Chuck could destroy it a few lines ago and he's smoking a joint now and this tiny project can end, like, FINALLY! FUCKING CHRIST!!

So, en'er The Maned Man Arckaen Kyng, Pillar Mind of Existence, smiling that smile of infamy.

So en'er The Brained Man Adom Hilter, Pillar Body of Existence, whose infinity cloak hood is down and hair is actually completely under control, look at that.

From these Pillars I remove each of the six pieces of the Almighty Incarnates, these, these powers whom I do not trust, and I shall never allow them to be summoned...!

Just kidding lol, standing with the Pillars Three are Almighty Boul, Sond, and Midy. They're free to exist now, no longer imprisoned in any way.

Keepers, AY, y'all get here too, and I don't even care if you don't wanna: Tom Foolery, Sandbox; N-TrØ.P3-y, The Void; Fee'Masc, Godspace; finally, my favorite and yours: Psychedelia, Keeper of Eden.

And saving the absolute best for last, my favorite now and forever more: Almighty Mu'Tinny, Eden Incarnate.

Now... I hand the instrum

to me, The Bride of Adam (:

First, the lovely Pillars Shee

- The 'Mared Woman Mystyk Qween, Pillar Mind of Existence
- The 'Bear'd Woman Ev'lyn Daisey, Pillar Body of Existence
- and just for you, Chuck—

"Just for me?" as the pot smoke does billow.

Just for you, I do summon The Silk'ed Woman Karen Page, Pillar Soul of Existence, an—... oh.

Well... they're not wasting any time, are they?

Next, from my Pillars Shee I retrieve each piece of the Almighty Incarnates who Adam likes to leave out.

"Listen," says The Groom of Eve, yikes, he doesn't like that at all, fuuuuuuuuuck no.

So FINALLY, the heretofore unmentioned Incarnates: Almighty Bond, The Sandbox Incarnate; Almighty Sody, The Void Incarnate; Almighty Miul, Godspace Incarnate.

And that... is... everyone. If you're wonderi' who wrote these last words, folk'is, we'l that'd be me: Big Bookmaker Hunter A. Wallace, Totem of The Garden in Reality.

Real

Y'know, just to be clear about what this story truly is.

See, there's an actual reason this, eh, *tale*, exists... my imaginary friend **tulpa**, who was born as Bob a very long time ago, who metamorphosized into the original Chuck Leary during the translation of *The Highest One Writing*, who psychephrenically astrascended into The Mongrel, The Perception, The Father of Existence Lord youieA The Garden Incarnate, One Above Thou... the protector-guard' of The Garden when such a character is req'i'd – presents on Planet Eden surrounded by all our fav' creations... so... please.

Be good to him.

...lest I give you reason more to believe what you want to believe.

# Ordinary

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# The Sealing of Drakken

## Moonstroked Clouds

A dark foot breaks the surface, steps a splatter upon the boulder. He walks out to the very edge and looks up into a midnight sky of moonstroked clouds, out towards the rumbling shadows thrown low beneath them, then down at the needly burnwood trees dancing en sway, the wind howling its silent plea.

Legs, bodies, moving through the spring. Moving to meet him. Taking their sweet time doing it.

“Meet me at the bottom,” as he takes the flask off his hip. “And watch where you jump.”

The pilgrum sticks the cork with his middle finger’s claw, pops it free. Fumes of arborea cut with resin and chilled heat fountain from the vessel’s mouth like steam from the mouth of a geyser. Pleasant. Satisfying. Warm, in an anxious way... but it’s not the smell that makes him nervous, he loves the smell. Especially after it’s ignited.

He brings the old clay thing to his parched lips and tilts back with purpose. It’s a fight to allow the liquid to coat his tongue and then his throat and then the inner workings of his physiology. A wretched drink, really, it’s thin like liquid but it leaves a slick film on everything it touches that doesn’t come off no matter how hard you try to scrub it. No, it only spreads, only thins out until it’s slathered everything it can, and then... well then comes the good part.

He clicks the rokks in the back of his throat, feels the

heat thread out through his front teeth, breathes deeply of the smoke it pulled with it. Calling it sweet would be a lie, less so when it's smoke, but...

Every muscle in his abdomen tightens up, his torso feels loose beneath his skin. He braces his cramping gut with a forearm, falls down to one knee. Bites down at the scrape, curses his past. The dumb bastards probably took a piss in it... though to commit such a malicious act would require at least a shred of intelligence, especially when it's a lowly grunt who's doing the committing. No, they probably just overboiled it. Again.

He stands, still clutching his stomach, and runs his free hand from his forehead to the back of his neck. Even the cramps come to a calm. Revealed go a pair of stormy amber pools gouged by narrow, vacant serpentine pupils. The noxious fluid pumps out through his windpipe and catches the sparks from the cli'cli'cli'cli'clicking rokks: a spindly pillar of flame, deep of scarlet like the rising sun, spouts over the edge like a powerful waterfall and bursts into a massive plume of burning light, a brilliant celosia of blaze.

A slender silhouette pierces the fireball, wisps of burn scatter'd on the winds. He twirls in the air and arcs back towards the crag, gets so close he can see the glow of the moon glistening off the jagged rock face, and kicks off so the spray of the waterfall might save him from a painful smack against a tense surface.

One grunt lands in the same pool as he. Two grunts land in the pool beneath the opposite 'fall. The last grunt lands between the two pools, and his body does not sink. Not 'til after his legs have caught up with his neck.

"Grunt," barks the pilgrum.

No answer.

"Grunt!" en hiss.

The splashpool grows chilly as the wind continues to blow.

The pilgrum swims to the shore and gets on his feet, proceeds to the ignorant grunt. Lying face-down like that in the water isn't going to make the punishment any less severe, there's nothing... they... can do. Anymore. What's done is... already done.

"Cyre," as the grunts all posse up. "Why has he gone against you? Why does this one so crave the sting of our claws?"

A moment goes untold.

His feet find the sandbar hiding there just below the rippled surface of this starpricked lagoon. The grunts do not follow, merely stand huddled together watching, toes dug into the dirt. The pilgrum reaches down and wraps a firm hand around the still grunt's neck, leaves it there for a moment.

"Come," he finally decides.

"Cyre?"

He steps over the body and turns to face the grunts. They come without further instruction. The frigid water runs warm with the blood of the fallen, a skeleton left to erode into sand.

Tranquility leaves them behind as they trek into the burnwood forest. As he stared through this moony night atop the crowning boulder of the waterfalls, the pilgrum saw a division, a partition in the dense needled canopy: the waterfalls birth a river. That river harbors a secret.

“Cyre,” begs one grunt aft’ far too short a time walked. “Cyre, please... how much farther must we walk on? The burnwoods are all around us now, they’ve been this way since before the sprin—”

“Enough,” demands the grunts to a steadfast halt. He turns and eyes the middlest grunt... without knowing it was he who voiced the complaint. “You, pick rocks. The rest gather wood, half kindling, half logs. All dead.”

The drakken grunts scatter away. Alone the pilgrum crouches low to the forest floor and lets his heavy hands fall. They land without scrape. He flips one to the earth and curls his claws to the soft flesh of his palm, gathering a handful of fallen needles, some of them stout and thick, most of them slim and elastic, bendy, near rubber to the touch.

Footsteps. Heavy. Quick, too. The rockpicker must be raring for sleep. The pilgrim drops the rotten needles into messy a pile without watching how they land, then rises.

“Drop it there.”

## Silent Alarm

One flips the silent alarm back off and just like that, relief.

“What’s the word?”

One bends down and engages the device. Biometrics triggered the alarm, it seems.

“What’ it pick up?”

One can only work so fast... especially with extremely modern and up-to-date technology such as this probe.

Loading... . . . . .

“It’s meant for a pond,” one says, “one knows.”

"O' yes, of course one knows," another answers. "One did a'sembl' the dam' thing."

*'Enough.'*

The probe picked up some biology in the river. Scraps of tissue, flakes of bone. Blood.

Analysis loading ... . . . . .

"One bets it's drakken."

"It's not drakken," another asserts.

ANALYSIS: GRUNT DRAKKEN

Another tunes out to go about another's business for a change.

*'This is worrisome.'*

"One agrees," one agrees. "Mayhap a stray."

One isn't kidding oneself. Nor is one kidding another.

*'There is a hill...'*

...where all shall convene...

"...when the 'net spins to reveal th'sun."

## Beneath the Twilit Sky

It's clear by the glow of the fire that the grunts picked a grand spot, a perfectly secluded clearing for their pilgrum to bed down for the night. Their pilgrum did not say so before he took to slumber, but perhaps he will when he returns to the land of the woken. Should be soon. The sky has lost its obsidian sheen and gives way now to swathes of gentle teal peeking in through the burn's.

"Grunts!" hisses the grunt quiet', if only to allow their pilgrum his slumber.

The other two grunts rise without shake nor stir.

"Where lies the compass?"

The grunts look to one another.

"Here," as the mouthier grunt removes the compass from a pouch in his qiep. "I had it all along, you fools."

"We... know," says the grunt.

"You confused us," explains the other. "That's why we looked at one another."

The mad grunt tosses the compass to one of the two other grunts. It's not dirtied by the woodland air, nor by the hands of the grunt. They look at him strangely, as if they just woke up and aren't fully here. Fools. When their pilgrum is present, they must always be 'ware.

"Go to the riverbank," the grunt explains, clicking his throat as though he were a pilgrum, "and prepare a safe crossing."

"Shall we return when it's done?"

"No," snarls the grunt, looking at the one holding the compass. The one who didn't choose to speak. "Only you will come back. The other will guard the crossover until our pilgrum leads us rightly that way."

The talkative one balls his fists and spits into the dirt before turning. The two grunts watch him walk off in the wrong direction, then snicker amongst themselves.

"Hey grunt!" shouts the one holding the compass.

"Not so *loud*, fool!" hisses the one who toss'd it. "You'll not wake our pilgrum."

"I'll not," he agrees. "The Cödwyrm wouldn't wake our pilgrum."

A mighty grumble issues from their pilgrum's throat. Their pilgrum rolls. Dead burnwood needles cling to the garment covering his back.

"Our pilgrum sleeps in the decay," shames the grunt.

"Our pilgrum means to cross the river en route to the

Altar'd Clearing," retorts the grunt, "yet you step to climb back up to the spring."

"Do you mean to join the fool?" taunts the concealer of the compass. "Shall you leave us finally be to witness the glory of our pilgrum's ascension, will you now relieve us of your burden?"

"Dullbite," spits the grunt. "And those claws... shame! You couldn't swipe a leaf from its twig, I bet."

Their pilgrum clicks his rokks a single time.

With the argument settled, the two grunts walk off in the direction the compass tells them. The grunt watches them go, shaking his head all the while. Fools, the both of them... although perhaps the one will return. Perhaps the one will prove the blood he's in his veins. Perhaps.

Until then, there's work to do.

The grunts stopped putting fuel to the fire when their pilgrum fell asleep. There weren't too many flames left at that point, and what few clung to this mortal coil quickly blinked out when they realized the time had come. When the pit stopped spewing its fragrant haze the grunts laid the basin to rest directly on the embers, allowing the sap to run tepid, just as the divine intended. As he removes the cap now the grunt is bombarded with a fragrance too pungent to be enjoyed, he doubles over coughing, waving his hands every which way until a knotty tree root tests the tenacity of his left shoulder.

The grunts shake their heads. The flow of the river is a whisper in their ears, they've walked ov' a *distance* now and still they hear that fool's piteous yelp.

"The fool was right," the grunt says.

"How's that?" asks the grunt.

“He said we shall not wake the pilgrum,” explains the grunt, compass steady in his right hand, “and he did not lie.”

The pilgrum snores lazily on beneath the twilit sky. Between the thready burnwood trees the grunt can see flecks of darker and lighter blues, like bits of blueberry candyrokk left at the bottom of the jar... those fools best build a steady bridge. The life of their pilgrum may well depend on it.

The grunt gathers himself and rises from the dirt and decay all around him. He did not mean to fully uncap the boiled burnwood sap, but the fumes... they were so strong, so mighty! This may be the most powerful batch yet, their pilgrum will be so pleased... and how grand it would be, the grunt does now think, to earn their pilgrum’s favor by topping off his flask before he comes back to wake. Their pilgrum emptied the sap vessel en ritual last night before wyrming the fools out from the grunts, and... and the fool was wyrm’d out. Only the true grunts remain, and...

“...and we’ve been fighting ever since. By the divine, we’re all fools...”

The fool drops to his knees, scraping hard against the soft ground.

“...every last one of us...”

...

“...but perhaps not I...”

He rises to his feet, broken skin be damned.

“...for a fool who knows himself to be a fool... is no fool at all.”

Satisfied with himself, the grunt sneaks and pinches their pilgrum’s flask from its resting place on the hunk of

wood their pilgrum chose to spare from the fire. It's a very old piece, this vessel of the burn' sap, an heirloom from a lost, ancient relative. Irreplaceable. The grunt coddles it tightly as he tiptoes back to the pot. Held by the cap of the pot is a jagged ladle carved from a sole piece of obsidian harvested from the final eruption of... no... by the divine...

The cap lies in two pieces, equal in size.

The grunt does not drop the flask, as he is not a fool, but the weight of a thousand Hallas collapses unto his bare shoulders. There's no replacing that cap. They were made in tandem, the cap and the pot, by a claysmith who was executed for treason. It was the first diatribe their pilgrum delivered when they were first introduced, the first story spun as they began their holy trek through the mountains. The grunt thought it all a little ridiculous at the time, to travel with an artifact of clay is surely a fool's prerogative, but... no, a pilgrum cannot be a fool. Fools are only born into the grunts, and the grunts always wyrn them out.

So long as a pilgrum doesn't do it first.

Upon second inspection... the grunt realizes the ladle is still intact. He snatches it up and cleans it with his rag, dips it into the bucket. Not a ripple disturbs the surface. Carefully, slow', the grunt stirs the sap without throwing a wave, then spoons his pilgrum's flask full to the brim. The ladle is left to soak in the sap, as there's nowhere else now to put it; the grunt corks the flask, places it home, and then skitters off to convene with his pilgrum's other grunts.

The pilgrum takes a long breath in, lets a long breath hiss back out.

## Up the Hill

One finds oneself among the others, yet none seem to be around. The chartreuse lampshade shadows cast by the sunlight nurturing the leaves do not hint at the location of the present others. Up the hill, then.

It wasn't much of a journey getting here. One didn't have to walk across the land. One doesn't need to walk up the hill now, but one does. If another, notheryet, and the last can lie silently in wait for one to magickally find them, then one can take one's sweet time walking up the hill to see if those others might be up there after all.

One comes across a small outcroppes and veers ov' to it. The canopy is parted, one can see clear through to the endless blue sky, can gaze out upon all that rolls below... but from where one stands, there's not much to gaze at. One can see the summit of another hill, the one 'cross the dip in the valley. And the sun. One can see quite a bit of the sun now.

"You're stalling," another is ignored.

One continues along this mountainous hill, no longer walking. Faster this way. One was not stalling, at all, but there is little time to waste. A dead drakken polluting the river... the cleanup will be simple enough, at least. What the corpse portends is a different matter entirely, but the cleanup will be simple enough.

"If one does not hurry," reminds another, "the 'wood may cleanse itself."

Yes, it well may... so why, then, does it wait?

## A School of Læmfins

Could a fool possibly romp and trollop through the wood any louder? The grunts think not. They cannot know for sure, but they certainly think not.

“Grunts!” barks the fool. He says something else, too.

Crouched here comfortably on the prime and healthy burnwood tree they sha’t’r’d rocks to fell, the grunts allow the fool to strut up and stare at them as though he expects something.

“Comfortable,” pants the fool, “are you?”

The fool is deemed unworthy of answer. The grunts turn to face the river so they might grace their fleshy ears to a babble they actually desire to hear.

It tries to waste more of their time, but the other grunt points to the water near the shore of the river so the grunt might lend his attention there. Silver scales flash in the brightening light of the dimn; a school of læmfins swim near the surface. Hmm... spot of breakfast wouldn’t hurt. Would leave a better taste in their mouths than further dealings with this pestering fool.

“Grunt,” says the grunt.

The other grunt turns his head.

“It truly is a wonder,” he says to the other grunt, “that a fool managed to slip his slimy way free of the death he so clearly deserved... is it not?”

The grunt stares deeply into the eyes of the one fool with scales scratched enough to turn and face him like a pilgrum... then lifts his hands, looks at his claws. *Claws*. Hardly. Batter’d and broken fingernails, he’s a droan out in these woods pretending to be a worthy drakken grunt,

a li'l caterpillar without the sense to build itself a cocoon, sharing wind, nay, *speaking* to such pure and embodied potential as a drakken pilgrum...

*'...but I am not a droan, and I am not a fool.'*

"Brothers," says the fool, "you have passed the test."

The grunts gaze unto one another through the dimn. What test could this fool *possibly* have to give out, what questions worth answering?

The fool stands staring at the grunts as they crouch so highly on their fell'd burnwood.

"Well?" he asks.

The grunts give him nothing.

"It is your turn now, brothers," invokes the grunt. The others turn and give him a piece of their morn'. "It is your turn to acknowledge me. The lot of us were tested by our pilgrum at that waterfall, and the fool took his jingling cap. The rest did not."

"So what is your point, then?!"

"You carry yourself like a silken qiep," says the other grunt, that one who's not so quick to spew his sparkless breath, "when you have yet to put the weight of our own burlap upon your shoulder."

The fool crouching with the grunt on the burnwood stands to full height as though he meant to speak, but he does not. He just goes on standing.

"Brothers," the grunt invokes yet again. This time, the grunts climb down from the treefelled bridge. "A grand bridge you have built here today. It is plain to see that our pilgrum will have safe crossing when he makes his highest way here."

"Dam'ryte," deigns a grunt.

"So... which of you shall return with me," the envoy continues, "so we might fetch our pilgrum and get on?"

"I," says the fool who volunteered *so* too quickly. It's clear to the envoy that the grunt wishes to get back to their pilgrum so their troupe might get on, and that is *all*. That is the *only* reason the new envoy who was so fast to deem the first envoy a fool was so fast to answer him just now, to make up for his transgressions, to...

The pair grunts stop dead in the untrailed wood. Over rock and stump squats a feral pig, a fat warboar with its rump in a hole it tusked into the ground itself. It doesn't appear to know the pair drakkens are here – they're not intelligent denizens, the damned things are liable to run off a cliff's edge whether they're following a leader or not – and it's halfway through laying its steamy log, which means it's all the way in the trance.

"Shall we?" asks the grunt.

"We shall," answers the grunt.

They break, one dashing to make flank and the other creeping up all slow-like. Just looking at the hairy wart-ridden thing is making his mouth water, a meal of meat that hasn't been petrified into immortality... he can taste the blood now. The foo-... the other grunt likely doesn't even need to run up the flank, the porcine thing is looking in the opposite direction of them entirely, lips pulled over teeth, careful now, rock to rock, do not make a sound. The grunt steps up on a log, every muscle tense, skin tight on his scales, and takes pause. The burnwoods, the ferns, the shrubs, the bramble', smallbirds and brushdwellers alike, everything is still. The warboar's breathing is a shallow wheeze. By the divine, it's *begging* for death.

The other grunt peeks out from behind a dead tree. He nods. The grunt winks.

The warboar squeals bloody defeat and kicks air. Dirt and shit and hot warboar blood clutter the grunt's vision. Thrown back he falls into a struggle of mud and needle, swiping claw and foot, connecting wit' none. Somewhere in his frenzy the grunt hears the beast's squeal wilt into a bloody gurgle before dying off with a heavy slam of flesh into the rotting burnneedle groundcover. Footsteps approach now... and the grunt is still on the ground, he's yet to open his eyes!

"Brother," invokes the grunt.

The grunt who spilled the first of the pig's blood picks himself up, dignity has nothing to do with it.

"An excellent kill we've made."

He extends a hand. The other grunt clasps it mightily, as any drakken grunt would.

They waste no time skinning the pig. The remains are left in the thing's shitting hole so they might fester and putrefy before anything else comes upon them.

"A walk to the river, perhaps," suggests the grunt.

"Yes," agrees the grunt. "But not back to the bridge."

"Of course," chuffs the grunt. "We needn't remind the fool of what he is."

The drakken grunts tear like warboars through this endless wood, bobbing and weaving and leaping through the air as though they had wings to glide on... perhaps one day. Surely one day. That day cannot come until after their pilgrum's ascension is complete, but that does not mean it will not come. One day.

One day, that day shall come!

The drakken grunts make it back to the river. As one is drinking heartily of the flow, the other is peering up and down the banks as though he's checking for giants.

"All clear, grunt?"

"All clear," the grunt confirms. "I was looking for my bridge."

The grunt watches his brother take a drink from the river, then turns to look on more interesting sights. There aren't many. To wander through one burnwood patch is to wander through them all – the Cëdwyrms flap wing through mountain' and over wood, spreading its sappy patches across the world for all of drak'kind to find and plunder and boil down until it might be drunk by their pilgrim and hurled forth in wicked balls of flame... but to wander through one is to wander through them all, so it is said by the grand drakken elders, so it is known by the grand drakken grunts, and thus it is dreamed by the low drakken droans.

"Brother," asks the grunt who took a drink first, "what do you suppose holds a grunt back from pilgrimhood?"

A few swallows full of intent, then, "Ka."

He cannot help but snicker. "You think it is up to the divine?"

"You think," as the grunt returns to his feet, "it is not?"

"Seems too... simple."

"The ways of ka are far from simple, brother."

The grunt nods in understanding.

"But," he adds, "I do not mean to infer that we are all chosen by the hands of the unseen. On one level we are, perhaps. Chosen, I mean, perhaps each one of us, could you imagine it? To be picked by a deity to play a role only

you could play, to have it all set out before you, to come into this world with a clear trail ahead of you..."

"A flight of fancy, or fantasy, I think," the grunt lets know. "There are many divine ones, but there are more drakkens, and further more mortals yet. I think it comes down to simple biology."

"What I mean," the grunt corrects, "is this: a machine such as the one which contains, which boasts this world of ours where the sun sweeps over the land every morn'... it cannot be simple, and it cannot run on a single gear. Perhaps what we know, what we understand as simple biology is actually the petty will of the divine, the higher bottlenecking of our species."

"But what would be the point?"

"That's not for us to know, brother," the tired envoy explains. "A branch does not wonder who might spit out its sap, but still it grows needles to produce it."

"I am growing sore, sore of your..." The grunt shakes his head as though a swarm of insect' meant to lay eggs beneath his cheek skin. "Of... of whatever has gotten into you."

"What," queries the grunt, "could you possibly mean?"

"Enough chatter," brings an end to the conversation. Very well. It's simply biology, really: fresh warboar meat is known to push a drakken into a more feisty state of mind. Best not to provoke him further and force the fool to drop his bluff into the dirt where it belongs.

The drakken move diligently through the burnwoods of the river'd isle. There's no action along the way, not even a footrace. The time for fun'n'games has long since passed. The drakkens come to their space between the

'woods and fresh eyes are relain upon the split lid of the burnwood pot. The pot stands lidless, despicably lidless in the dead pit of charcoal, soot, and ash. Stepping up, the grunt responsible sees a mess of dust, dirt, soil, rotting needles floating over the cooled amber swill. A disgrace. Truly the work of a fool.

"Brother..." invoked with a queer nervous tremble in the back of his rokkless throat. "Where has our pilgrum gone?"

The grunt spins fast enough to feel his skin shift. His cohort stands alone next to the spot the grunts cleared for their pilgrum to rest his head. Even the pilgrum's flask has vanished.

"Brother..." quivers the grunt. "Our pilgrum, he... he--"

The other grunt ducked. The fool doesn't have time to, he's too busy flapping his dulltooth'd *gums*.

"Fool!" snarls the pilgrum. He tightens his grip on the fool's neck as he lifts his opposite hand, claws readied. "I demand you, fool: give me reason not to slit your quisling throat," but lo, the fool cannot, as his windpipe is crush'd.

"You shatter the lid of the boiling pot and like finks you scatter to the trees. Cowards, both of you!" He turns to the fool on two legs. "And wasn't there a third?!"

The fool gulps.

"What, did you cut him when he wasn't looking and have a snack? I can smell the blood on your *breath!*"

This last went hissed, shouted, *spat* into the face of the lecherous whelp.

The pilgrum grips tight and shifts his hand 'round the side of the grunt's neck. The skin comes with it. The fool left standing takes off into the wood without even a

shriek. The pinn'd fool, however... the pinn'd fool doesn't shriek for long.

## Divine Ones

One takes form in the company of others. They stand in a slanted clearing, bare grass on the side of the hill.

"This won't do," one says.

"It won't," another agrees.

The divine ones each place a knee on the busy forest floor. Their armor clears 'way from their palms, exposing soft white skin abuzz. They place their hands upon the earth. The earth crawls and creeps and takes them each up to the wrist. Together they mutter an incantation of the ancients.

The low mountain-hill trembles as the land begins to shift.

## O-Brother'Fool of Mine

A rogue shockwave throws the treebridge into a muffled rattle. The king fool flings himself bodily from his long burnwood throne, the very throne he now soaks with his flailing failing splash. The riverwater is not ice'd, at least, though the læmfins have left, now a'school for mellower current. Oh well. At least he is not the only drakken grunt out starving in the 'wood today.

The grunt wades until he walks up on the riverbank, slick needles and rotting mud all a'dredge. He sits down

and soaks his calves, brushes clouds into the flow of this chilly river, throws himself back in to drown the dismay away. When the fool sat down he muddied his rear, but yet a fool he is not. No fool is wise enough to realize he is a fool, and so the drakken grunt walks, struts, marches out of the river and reassumes his post on the handfelled burnwood bridge.

Not long after, the first envoy returns from his grand mission.

"Brother!" the grunt squeals as he hops piggily up on the bridge. "Turn from me and run!"

"Please," says the grunt, "just... relax, brother."

The foolish grunt leaps over the grunt and makes it over the river. The grunt sighs as he stands and tests his balance on the slippery log.

"You move faster than a fool without skin on its feet," he taunts. "Clearly nothing pursues you. What the hell?"

"The pilgrum," pants the doubled-over grunt, making an utter fool of himself. "He murdered the fool, he co—"

"The fool killed himself," the grunt insinuates *slowly*, to ensure the other grunt *fully* understands, "at the twin waterfalls. We ate of his flesh together, all four of us."

"Not that one, brother." The grunt looks with gaping pupils to his brother. "Our troupe's third..."

"You can't *seriously* ex—"

"I expect nothing from you. I saw the blood myself. Our pilgrum has turned his back on his kind, come with me now or perish."

"You're being a fool," says the grunt after a moment's consideration. He steps down onto the mainland. "Where do you even mean to go? We have no trail to follow, no

destination to seek. We could return home, but..."

They're both quiet for a moment. A gentle breeze puts a sway in the burnwoods.

The grunt, breath caught and tied down, looks back across the burnwood bridge. No rustle in the foliage, they have time. May not be much, but enough to let breathe what he must.

The other grunt staggers back. "Where—" He spits his rage. "How did you get that? How could you?!"

Smirking, the grunt splays his palm flat and allows the crystal to rotate 'round 'til it comes to a stop pointing off into the needled dimn.

"It matters not," he assures his cohort, "for we know now where we must go."

Without breaking his eye contact, the drakken grunt backtracks onto the bridge. He then squats down, in case his intentions were not clear enough for the fool.

"Fine," as the fool pockets his stolen jewel. "May your final moments be swift, o-brother'fool of mine."

Off the fool scamp's.

"And may the soil be soft," the grunt mutters, "and the shov'l you craft sturdy."

Thus the drakken grunt waits on the bridge as the dimn phases into day. The river flows with heart beneath him, colored birds ride the winds above. No dwellers of the brush nor denizen of any kind approach. The musk of a drakken is not shy, especially when strates without a soak have passed, but this lack of denizinal cohorts has nothing to do with that, the grunt dragged himself out of the river just a moment ago. No, all the denizens of the burnwood patch, of the endless wood at large, they all

simply know what a drakken is capable of. They know to steer clear, lest they be seared.

Seared, scratched, claw'd and bitt'n.

So long as the drakken is a pilgrum, of course, and that pilgrum has a clay flask filled with the boiled sap of the burnwood tree... and they can stomach the sap long enough to expel it and set it alight...

The drakken grunt sighs. He is a troll sat guarding this bridge, nay, a gnome, a dirty bridge gnome who's not even a gard' to squat in. Pitiful... a creature with the blood of a dragon and all it's good for is waiting for its leader to come and clarify whatever nonsense the fool, whatever garble that treacherous thief was spouting as he fled 'way 'tween the trees holding the guidestone of their pilgrum. That he was fool enough to pilfer the 'stone the grunt is not surprised; that the fool had not just the smarts, but the *guile* to pull it off, is...

...

...

...another matter entirely, and for another time. The drakken grunt has been here staring at the same scenery for so long that he can no longer tell when his eyes are closed in blink. Not until the pilgrum approaches from the clearing they claimed as camp with the other grunt at his heel... good. Good! The bridge drakken stands and starts his approach, so he may greet his pilgrum well.

The bridge grunt slows his stride when he notices a stark lack of skin on the following grunt's neck. It seems to've been torn away – the edges are frayed, crusted over with crystals of brownish-red scab. The grunt's shaggy leather tunic seems only able to conceal the splatter at a

distance. He stands aside as to not be trampled by their contemplative pilgrum, who walks slow with his hands clasp'd behind his back, head bent fore', eyes to the forest floor. The grunts watch him cross the bridge until he's safely on the other side of the river.

"What happened to you, brother?"

"I've only myself to blame," the grunt answers. "I had a moment of... I had a lapse."

"A lapse?"

"Yes. A lapse in faith, brother." The bloodied drakken grunt, smiling sheepishly, moves off towards the bridge. "Come now, lest you have one too."

The grunts cross the bridge, make haste, rejoin with their pilgrum. No way is trailed out before them, yet on through the 'wood they walk.

## Palaver

The preparations are now complete. A stunted hill in the valley, a clearing raised plateau, a sealing circle standing tall above the grass below. Not one leaf of armor remains intact.

The air is still.

One looks at another, at notheryet, then the last. One closes one's eyes so the veil may lift and one might find Nuvestuc for palaver... but present for one Nuvestuc does not.

"We are alone," one trembles.

"Never," claims another. "We are far from The Last... and further from The Corest."

"We all," states the last gravely, "knew what we were building."

"And?" one demands. "That means one must accept it?"

None return the wild eye contact one so desperately throws around.

"Well?!"

"One should," says notheryet. "No dusk is without a dawn."

"Yet the sun's hardly risen..."

*'It is time.'*

The voice comes like a seismic shockwave, from an epicenter between them and sweeping out until all have felt the force of its will. One at a time the stewards of the 'wood step back into their chambers. As the doors climb shut, one falls... another... notheryet... the last... deeper... deeper, into stasis...

## Ever Closer

From the darkness comes a light, the bitemark of a one-toothed snake. It is distant, this light, this ethereal prick... but... but how it *glows*, how it *glows* like the burning *sun!* As he approaches the distance source the inviting glitter only grows in size: snowflake to hailstone, floating star, moon.

Ever closer.

He moves ever closer and the darkness recedes, there is more light, only more light, there is space and time and life and feeling and light, there is light, there is only more

The White Hare emerges near the summit of a densely wooded hill. On instinct he follows the slope to the peak where an ancient outcroppe was shattered by treeroots long ago. The view is obscured by plantlife of old, but still he sees the valley: river, hills, a waterfall over yonder... and a clearing, there, beyond the base of this hill. There are many clearings dispersed throughout this patch of the endless wood, of course, throughout the endless wood at large... but not many are so blooming with a crimson vortex as this there beyond the base of the rise...

A gentle breeze blows a twitch into the White Hare's nose. Calmly he lowers himself to all fours, leans fore', and lifts his back heels off the hill.

Two divots of rock break through the canopy, gouge any number of branches, and hit the river. Steam bubbles as they sink; their smooth bottoms do not cool 'til after they come to rest.

## Guidestone

Moons come and go before the drakken rogue finds the Altar'd Clearing.

The guidestone had started acting strangely near the end of the past day. The rogue had been carrying it in a pocket for most of the trip, taking it out every now and again to course correct, if need be. It didn't; not very often, at least. Not when he was still following the trails.

The vibrations came off the jewel in waves, they had a tacticity to them the drakken rogue had never before experienced in an unseen force. It felt almost like knives,

like a rope of liquid knivesedge was lash'd against his thigh, like a caustic corkscrew was twisted out from the crystal itself to bore a spiral tunnel through his leg.

So he took it out and held it. The feeling isn't as bad in his hand. Less mass for the waves to pass through, he supposes. Well, he supposed. He's not thinking much on it now.

The guidestone strikes the soft forest floor, standing. Moons came and went before the drakken rogue arrived at this clearing, moons without food, clean water, moons of desperate isolation spent a slumber on the knotty roots of ghostwood trees... and every single one was worth it.

Before the drakken rogue waits a bare clearing large enough for four drakken troupes to convene in, mayhap even five... but there shall be no camps made here. The ground is... disturbed, plucked free of weed' and pebble', of herb' and rock', just bare dirt and stone', many stone', pink and purple and jugged with hunks of smoke-white quartz all assembled in a spiral beginning at the treeline and winding tighter and tighter until it collapses in the center... or is't the center from where the spiral began?

The rogue knows not. He bends low and picks up the guidestone. There is so little space between the pulses now it feels as though the cryst'l is... shaking. Trembling. Vibrating at speed enough to destabilize the entire right side of his form.

The rogue steps forward. The 'stone takes the rest of his body. Every step is pain, is miracle, is a glimpse into the unimaginable, into the... into the seen. It's all pristine now to the brave and lone drakken rogue, it's as clear as a midsummer's day: he was always meant to steal the

guidestone, to arrive first at this grand destined place of ascension, to place the guidestone in the slot in the center of the summoning spiral so he might call forth... so... so he might...

The drakken rogue, a'crawl on bloodied knees, places the guidestone home.

## Silent Explosion

The grunts are made to pause when the clearing comes into sight. They watch their pilgrum take his hood down as he steps into the light a'pour through the starpunched canopy, though the pilgrum himself doubts this clearing was clear'd by a falling star. The pilgrum also doubted the fool would arrive at this place the guidestone was drawn to, of course, but that blood streaked ov' the stones... that didn't come from a denizen.

The pilgrum squats and dabs a finger into the blood. Sniffs it, touches it to his thumb. Pulls them apart.

"Grunts!"

The grunts come hobbling.

"Look what has become of our runaway fool," as he gestures to the double-red adorning the spiral of stones.

The grunts look with light horror on their pale and sickly faces. They do not feel much... but what they feel isn't great.

"Well..." as the pilgrum rises to full posture, "at least he did not lose the guidestone."

"Cyre?" croaks... one of the grunts... whichever one it was.

"Gaze now into the center," offers the pilgrim, "you impudent fool."

The shimmering guidestone jutting from the center of the stone spiral finds the fading gaze of the drakken grunts. Their skin, muscles, the endings of their nerves quiver and quake as they step one foot, two foot, three foot, four towards the center. Blood smears on the stones as they both fall to their knees not in the same spot as the fool who perished before them but at the same distance from the middle, with more than enough soil and stone in between to catch the blood a'streak from their split skin and scrape'd knees, shins, the tops of their filthy feet...

The pilgrim turns away as the souls of his grunts are removed from their corporeal husks and delivered unto the ancient spirit lurking within the guidestone. When the flashing and hissing and silent commotion of it all subsides, he turns 'round and licks his scaly lips. From the moment of his birth the pilgrim has awaited this day, this moment, this ascension he is so entitled to... yet he cannot bring himself to step forward. Not without taking it all in first. The bloody stones laid in their spiral, the loamy earth out bare to the sky, the busy wind a'whistle through the swaying burnwood need's. Memories from his upbringing in the slagfields of Dra'konian begin to rise to the surface, soccer games, crystal mining, skip'ing slag across the lava springs... they were good times, yes, but they have passed. Years have passed, all of it has passed, and the pilgrim stood strong against it all, he left his homeland with his troupe of four grunts and wander'd the endless wood guided only by the will of his bestow'd

guidestone, and finally, here he is at the destined place of ascension, the holy locale chosen for the pilgrim by the spirit of the elder sealed within the gem...

All of it has come and passed, and the pilgrim stood strong against it all. The time for his ascension is now. The drakken pilgrim retreats to the treeline, drops to his knees, and crawls slowly to the guidestone, scraping scale hard against the spiral'd stone, letting breathe the true drakken hide beneath the shallow layer of the skin of 'man that so plagues his grand drakonic form. That skin, that wretched bag... it shall suffocate the pilgrim no longer.

At the core of the spiral the pilgrim places an open hand over the jutting crystal and strikes it with the other, allowing the guidestone to pierce through the delicate scales beneath his palm. Fresh blood unfiltered by the reptilian subdermal membrane flows and pools between the pebbles holding the guidestone in place, soaks deep into the untainted earth. The wind picks up, rushes, cuts harshly through the burnwood branches, then dies out altogether. The drakken pilgrim opens his weary eyes and gazes up: a phantasm presents, the spirit of the elder, one dead pilgrim who gave up his soul for the good of all drak'kind.

The tired spirit of the drakken elder stares down from above his folded python arms. Its mouth does not move, but lo how it *sends* in rapturous enraged tor'*ment!*

*'Thei haf wand'r'd far and wi'e, yet one grunt seal'd not I...'*

"He was no true grunt," spits the surging pilgrim. "He was put to the test and failed, and my troupe ate well of

his flesh."

*'So it must be, and thus it is so. Rise, pilgrum, ascend and claim your mantle.'*

The pilgrum lowers his forehead to the back of his unpunctured hand and closes his eyes. His cloak begins to shudder and flap as though a blust' gust of wind broke through the still, but no wind blows. No smallbirds fly. No insects chirp their songs of the unyielding decay of it all. There is only the pilgrum whispering incantations in tongues native to the realm of Wyrð, words only semi-translatable to Language, words incapable of 'scription in Slæb. A pulse of , a silent explosion – the pilgrum lands on his feet at the edge of the clearing. Floating opposite is the ephemeral elder, arms stretched with hands splayed, long white sleeves hanging far lower than the frays of petrified skin dangling back from his forearms. It gazes coldly into the amber eyes of the pilgrum.

The pilgrum nods once.

From the elder's sleeves emerges a dense and sooty cloud of smoke. The pilgrum sees electric blue sparks popping and snapping in that smoke, can sense a great and furious power undulating from within, portending from somewhere else, coming into form from Nothing to Anything to Something, something archaic, something enraged, something with hot gray steam a'billo' from its nostrils, with a crimson bloodlust in its eyes.

*'You will only,'* warns the elder, *'have so much time, pilgrum.'*

In answer, the pilgrum steps forward with his ruined hand hanging limp. In his other he carries the bloody drakken guidestone, holds it out before him like a lantern

in the night. A low bellow issues from the center of the cloud, as if the conjure'd thing inside was daring the pilgrum to claim its birthright, and so the pilgrum wastes no more time. Focus tight he pours his energy into the crystal and submerges it in the crackling ebon' miasma. Clouds tremble and rattle and shake, they shrink down around the pilgrum's wrist and seep into the crystal, the pilgrum must brace himself against the wicked force of the grand drakken guidestone as it cleanses the air of the magick haze brought forth by the spirit of the elder...

...until he must no longer. The pilgrum opens his eyes and stands straight, for he is now in the presence of divinity.

A wide and toothy maw, two eyes dark and crimson, scales black as fresh obsidian. A pair of gray horns twist from its crown; between them a ridge of dorsal spikes trail the beast's backbone down to the grayed arrowhead bone at the end of its tail. Its wings are massive but folded tightly against its body, its arms and legs muscular but rendered immobile, constricted by the elder's dark hex. Smirking like a sailor the pilgrum approaches the goliath like a red fox might stalk up to a sleeping rabbit, adjusts his grip on the tiny obelisk.

"You will pay for this, creature," booms the sourceless voice of the dragon. Fresh steam billows from its muzzle. "You and all your muttish race."

"Not before you repent to me," returns the confident pilgrum, "for the sins of your kind against mine."

"We are Gods, you mortal fool, and you..." The ancient dragon closes its eyes slowly, lowers its head. "...you are all abominations..."

The drakken pilgrum rises from the dirt, lifted by the dead elder's magick, and plunges the jagged end of the guidestone into the dragon's chest. There is a pang of something, not quite a hiss yet not quite a sound, just a... slipping, yes, a slipping, a tactile stream of sorts crashes against the pilgrum like a wave as the immortal spirit of the dragon is pulled wholly into the guidestone, its body reduced to ash, the heavens alight with the sick laughter of the drakken elder as he at long last leaves the mortal coil and takes to the astral plane for his long dark rest...

A spiderweb of fractures spreads through the crystal before it shatters in the pilgrum's hand. Not a single piece touches the forest floor, they swarm inside the pilgrum's body like termites in a wooden cave and from the shrubs nearby the White Hare watches as the drakken pilgrum's slack body levitates to the edge of the canopy and hovers there, hovers there, he just hovers there... if there's any *he* left in the body.

The drakken corpse then bursts into flames, a fireball hotter than a petal of the sun. It burns off quickly to reveal the form of a chrysalis silhouetted by soot and char. It lowers smoothly through the ozone and lands in bipedal, and for a moment the world maintains its still. Then, the wings unfold all rumble and crackle as the membranes stretch and all the new bones shift into place, then the tail uncoils and cracks like a whip against the back of a spent miner droan, then the towering creature uncrosses its bulging arms and fully splays its clawed fingers and then... then he closes his eyes. A wave of pyroic energy flies free of his body, eviscerates the amniotic ashes, and dissipates just short of scorching the clearing's treeline.

There in the center stands a wing'ed creature with the brawn and might of a lone niphlihim, with the intellect and tact of a domesticated 'man, with the heritage and wisdom of the grandest race in all the endless wood... there, upon the stone spiral set into soil by forces unseen long before the land shifted and the cragg'ed valley was born, there... "I stand Drakken the Priest.

"The first of my tribe to leave the slagfields, the first to trek with a troupe of five and not four, the first to walk toward the Kingdom of 'Man rather than fleeing away, than cowering from the whelps like untusk'd swine! I am not the example of my race, nay, I am the *exhibition*. I am the *pinnacle*, the one chosen by the divine to bring all of drak'kind back to its former stance of glory here, in this endless wood... thus I stand here Drakken the Priest, and thus here my crusade doth begin..."

"Damn it all," says a voice unknown to Drakken the Priest. "You were doing fine, Drakken the Priest, but then you had to say the Cee-word."

Drakken the Priest turns his impressive form to face what appears to be a rogue bunyip who was kicked out of the caverns so long its fur lost its melanin.

"What did you just say to me, you creepic cottontail'd vagrant?"

The White Hare, standing suddenly a fraction of a 'man's reach before Drakken the Priest, strikes Drakken the Priest with a limp backhand.

"Wrong Cee-word."

Drakken the Priest strikes a vicious fist of claws at this petulant denizen who walks on two legs, but... it now stands at the opposite end of the clearing. How is it...

"Of course," whispers Drakken the Priest. He levitates off the soil and toil and death of it all, wings spread to full span. "Magick."

He lunges, claws ready and razor teeth bared. The White Hare lunges forward and twists to avoid a gutting, then grabs the drakken's tail and spins, redirecting the raging ascende's momentum and force and raw drakken hatred into a hollow rotted out of a tough old steelwood tree. The drakken's new horns and head shape in general are working in the White Hare's favor, the bastard's stuck good. He hops on down the bunnytrail to taunt his new friend.

The White Hare then steps back when smoke begins to flow out around Drakken the Priest's crown.

First the leaves burst into flames, the lower ones first. Steelwoods often lose their low branches before maturity, no wonder there was a hole in the trunk. The bark hadn't hardened up fast enough. To think, if it all waited for this tree to get a little bit older... but it doesn't matter now, the whole damn' thing's burning. The stump went up before the rest of the trunk, it's crumbling now and the burning obelisk means to fall directly into the clearing.

Directly on top of Drakken the Priest.

The White Hare steps out of the way, let' the ungrown steelwood topple, covers his face when the carbon husk bursts against the earth. The spiral shall summon again, but the rains shall have their work cut out for them until that time co

From the rubble bursts a howling Drakken the Priest, fire spewn from mouth and nost', and that's all he needs to see.

The White Hare dashes into the endless wood.

## Rest

The white bunyip is fast, 'the Priest will give him that, but he is not cunning. Not like a drakken. Not like Drakken. Even propelled by the magicks of his ancients Drakken the Priest could not keep up with the queer creature's raw speed, but as the 'wood will have it, he doesn't need to. The fool was moving so quickly it burned a trail into the shrubbery, a trail which leads 'the Priest up a low foothill near the cragwall bordering the valley until it stops at a clearing that, curiously enough, seems to have occurred on a plateau.

What's more, there is a ring of monolithic stones standing obelisk and archway surrounding a pedestillic altar in the clearing's center. The bunyip can go bite a rock, if it hasn't found one to teeth on already. Drakken the Priest... never before has he seen something quite like this.

"To leave for ascension is any drakken's birthright," says 'the Priest as he steps fore' with his heavy clawed feet, "but to come back... is an honor... sought by all..."

Drakken the Priest lumbers beneath the largest of the four stone archways.

"...and known only by the few of the some."

Atop the pedestal waits a glittering scarlet crystal, petrified fire in mineral form. He slips his tar black claws between the gemstone's crystalline flames; like a rippled 'face of water, the endless wood comes to rest.

# The Shifting of the Land

## Womnus

Long before the wicked fink call'd *Gobon the In'Flu-Enz'a* let his dastardly Plague of Decay spread throughout the endless wood of The Hillside Commons, the land shifted at the edge of a spring, leaving a gigantic rugged boulder to jut out over the ledge. This dull and rockish jewel was to be the crown of two twin waterfalls, and thus it was: the spring, split by the shifting of the land, gave way to a pair of splash pools which, guided by the hand of the divine, flowed off in opposite directions until they came back together, forming a perfect ring and islanding off a section of land which would eventually hold a cabin.

From this perfect ring, the river flowed outward in the direction of the mouth of the cragg'ed plane. It flowed betwixt two hills, both yet to be populated, and swerved to and fro before taking a hard right bend and ending smack dab against the far cliff face, forming a peaceful little pond.

Much time passed between this river's first babble and the day a Womnu by the name of Kessr arrived in the valley. Kessr was not always a Womnu, you see, nor was he always a 'man; nay, the Womnu Kessr was first an ent, a peaceful Being of the tree'; this was before the time of the Plague of Decay, you see, when the ents had nothing real to fear, but still Kessr wanted out, and he wasn't the only one. In the twilight of that fateful dimn, Kessr and three fellow ents performed an ancient and higher ritual

which changed them, altered them, guided them through genetic metamorphosis, and left them human.

For a while, the four ent-turned-'mans wandered the endless wood without aim, purpose, or care. They called themselves *Womnus*, as a 'man is oft' born a 'man in this wood, not as an ent, and therefore they were different. In their own eyes, at least.

As the squad of *Womnus* wandered on, the endless wood took notice. There are rumors spread around The Capitol City of 'Man which claim the 'wood itself is alive, that it changes its trailways by its own accord, that it sucks trees underground just to spit them up somewhere else entirely, that mayhap it puts thoughts into the minds of the many denizens and creatures and whatever else wanders 'tween its boughs, thoughts which are meant to serve a grand divine consciousness, perhaps... but these, of course, are rumors, and rumors of natural-born 'man, no less.

Rumors aside, not all of the *Womnus* would make it to the cragg'ed plane. One was recruited by highwaymen who thought it odd their troupe had no coin to hand over, one was bested by a warboar in only the most honorable of combats, and the third? The third merely went his separate way. He knew Big Kessr meant to settle down somewhere, and to settle down he did not want.

'Twas not the towering heights of the cliffs' edges that took the breath from Kessr's lungs on the day he walked into the plane, no, 'twas only the wind, or rather, the lack of it. There was a chokepoint, you see, a proper doorless gateway to the plane hidden between the crags, and the moment Kessr traded trees for granite and quartz

and all manner of other conglomerates, the wind ceased to blow. It picked back up as soon as he reached the other side of the narrow squeeze, but while he walked through, everything came to a silent, eerie still, as though a mighty dragon of old flapped wing overhead, stealing the winds to conjure thermals to help keep him warm.

Whether the winds chose to cease for dramatic or draconic affect, Kessr felt no need to leave the plane once he entered it. He walked in a straight line until his walk brought him to a river, and 'twas here he decided to make home. The day was deeeeep into dusk at that point; Kessr cleared a little space on the bank of the river and bedded down in the very spot the first bridge would be built.

Over the course of the next braud strate, Kessr busied himself with the art of carpentry. Any ent can root down and call a patch of soil home, but a 'man needs a place to sleep, a roof over his head, a door to shut out any nocturne visitors who may pass through under the cover of night. Using his knowledge from his days of enthood, Kessr fashioned tools from stones and the twisted boughs of a steelwood tree and got to work felling, and chopping, and splitting, and shaping. The first bunkhouse was made for one, a loggen bunkhouse, and a particularly drafty one at that, but it was something. Big Kessr, at long last, had a safe place to rest his head.

Or so he thought; though Kessr entered the planeland alone, he was not the only 'man to wander through its trees. One morning, a barrage of knocks brought the first Womnu out from his slumber and gave him cause to put hatchet in hand. Upon answering the knock, however, Kessr dropped it to the floor: Woode, the third Womnu,

the one who went his separate way, had found his path back here to the cragg'ed plane, back to Big Kessr, and he brought with him eleven compatriots, men and women, recruits from taverns and shanties alike who were more than willing to work together and build something grand out of Kessr's drafty bunkhouse.

So, they did, and thus the village of Lumbstock was named... but that was all a very long time ago. The first generation of Womnus soon gave birth to the second, the second to the third, the third to the fourth. The first two generations produced twelve Womnus, the fourth only six, then seven when they realized one child was born a Brehn. This Brehn's name was Orde, the first Brehn born since the second generation, and 'tis with him our story does begin.

## The Lie'Brehn'ry

Yesterday was the final day for Orde to find a partner for seeding. He did not find a partner. So, the elders sent him to the Lie'Brehn'ry.

It's a modest little shanty, hidden back in the corner behind The Carvinground. Orde always liked going to The Carvinground as a sapling, he loved working with his hands back before everyone realized he was a Brehn. Didn't take long, only a few years after the first few years of his life. His hair kept growing when everybody else's stayed short. His body got lanky and thin when the rest of the fourth generation plumped up with muscle and fat and strength. Orde was the odd one out, the *ordinary* one,

as the villagers call him. So, and thus, the Lie'Brehn'ry.

Orde's bony knuckles bash against the door, not quite hard enough to shake the thing from its hinges but plenty enough to embarrass him. Sheesh, they probably heard his knocking over the sound of the sawblades, they're probably taking about him right now down by the shops, they prob

The door opens. An ancient creature peers out from the dimness, stares down at little Orde.

"A Brehn," says the creature, "called... Orde. Yes?"

"Yes, sir," Orde confirms. "Yesterday was the—"

"Yes, yes, *the seeding*," as he turns and retreats back into his den. "I may not come out much, but I do live in this village. Just like you. Just like all of us."

Orde isn't quite sure what to say.

"I may not drink of the mead, I may not work in the mills, I may not—"

"Sir," Orde pleads, "I meant you no offense. I was—"

"Yes, why *were* you sent to me?" asks the Womnu of the Lie'Brehn'ry. Orde does not know the Womnu's name. How ordinary is that? "The seeding isn't everything. You could work in the mills."

"I cannot," Orde says. "I lack the strength."

"Yes, that is clearly apparent." He comes back to the doorway, which is open. "I left the door open for you, why are you still standing out there?"

Orde looks around as if somebody was here to help him, but nay, he is alone outside of the Lie'Brehn'ry.

"Well?"

"Sir," Orde says, his voice a trembling squirrel, "may I... ask your name?"

The old Womnu of the Lie'Brehn'ry peers down the length of his nose. "Kuhg," he says, then looks around as if someone was hiding outside looking for him. "Come, let us speak inside. The air is too fresh out here."

Orde looks around once more at the village wall, the splintery halfdome of The Carvingground, the moldy back wall of the second generation's bunkhouse over yonder... then steps inside.

It's blackness at first, just pure blackness, but then his eyes adjust. Not many windows, and they're all covered by books. By the divine, the amount of books in here... has Kuhg read them all?

"Kuhg," Orde asks, "have you read all these books?"

No answer. Kuhg's vanished between the shelves.

"Kuhg!" Orde shouts, "Kuhg, where did you—"

"SHH!" comes from... somewhere in the shelves. Jeez, Orde can hardly see three feet in front of him, and even then it's just shelves of books, books old and new, books tattered and prime... but mostly tattered. Orde wonders where the old Wom' got off to.

"He couldn't have gone far..." as he searches for safe passage between the rows, these haphazard rows, these off-kilter and shabby wood bookshelves... Orde definitely knows where Kuhg got the shelves.

"Young Wom'," Kuhg growls from what must be the center of this bibliographical labyrinth, "you were sent to see me, not to wander through the dust. Come."

Dust? Orde looks around for the dust, but he doesn't see any. Not until he turns a corner and sees a faint and fuzzy sliver of light shining through some books shelved before a window. He doesn't mean to cough so loud.

There's a sigh from somewhere. Orde does not know where he is right now, why was he born, why was—

Kuhg's bony hand falls on Orde's bony shoulder with an audible *click*. He grimaces as Orde flinches, gripping his shoulder like he was in pain.

"I... apologize," offers Kuhg. "It's been a... while. Since. I've, eh... nevermind." He turns and vanishes once more between his rugged shelves. "Do keep up, young Orde. It's quite easy to get lost in here..."

"Yeah," Orde agrees. He shimmies after the old Brehn. "You're not kidding."

Just about ten paces brings Orde to the center of the Lie'Brehn'ry. There is a table, a square table, Kuhg's table, with a sole lonely chair, Kuhg's chair, and Kuhg is sitting comfortably. The other three sides of the table don't have chairs. They have shelves full of books instead.

"Am I... do you want me to sit?"

"I'd like you to explain what exactly you mean to get from me," Kuhg snarls. He seems suddenly perturbed. "This is a place of books in a village that does not read, what could you *possibly*—"

Orde breathes with quivered breath.

"What? What's wrong?" Kuhg asks. "Have you never been doubted before? Have you not been *challenged*?"

Those breaths keep quivering.

"How do you expect to survive, to do *anything* in this village if you're not willing to stand your ground when someone challenges you, young Wom'?" Kuhg rises from the table, towers over his young Wom'. "And why are you *standing* there? Sit down, please!"

"There's nowhere to sit, Kuhg!" Orde collapses into a

ball on the floor. "There's nowhere for me to sit anywhere in this village! I can't hunt, I can't fish, I can't draw lumber from the Harbor, I can't even find a place to squat at The Carvingground anymore! I'm just, I, I'm the *odd Brehn out* around here, Kuhg—"

"I know."

"I'm just, I'm... what?"

"I know who you are, Orde," Kuhg says with a small grin. "But I think you do not."

Orde has never agreed more, but... "I know who I am. I'm Orde."

"Okay."

Particles of dust afloat in the faded glow.

"I just..." he scuffs at the floor. "I guess... I'm looking for something to do."

Kuhg falls comfortably back into his chair, swings his feet up on the table. "Well, son, there's nothing of the sort here. You may come and go as you please, you may read what books you can understand, if you're capable of it... but... a task... a purpose... a *life*? You will not find that here."

"But," Orde squirms, "but, the elders—"

"The elders are so, so old." Kuhg sits back normal, feet slapp'd on the floor. "Elderly, as it were. They do not see the world as they should."

*Taken aback* is nothing. "Kuhg... how could you say that?"

Kuhg raises an eyebrow over his spectacles.

"How could you just out and say that?!"

"Because it's true, you little worm." Kuhg rises again and dips between the shelves in the opposite direction of

the entrance, which only confuses ordinary Orde. "Come back when you're ready."

"For what?" Orde asks.

"For something," and then there's a gentle slam of a door, and suddenly Orde is all alone in the Lie'Brehn'ry.

## Orde Needs a Bath

*'Well that went...'* He sighs. "About as well as expected..."

The door swings to a rattling shut as Orde leaves the Lie'Brehn'ry behind, perhaps for good. Whyever would he return? The elders sent him and the resident Womnu told him the elders were idiots.

Well, not *idiots*, but... the Wom' certainly didn't favor them.

"What was his problem, anyway?"

Strangely enough, Orde does not get an answer. Not from the stone village border wall, not from the back of The Carvinground's wooden dome, not from... not... eugh, whatever that smell is. Something's burning, or... wait.

Did Kuhg set the Lie'Brehn'ry on fire?

"No," Orde assures himself, "he couldn't've... because, then... because then it would be my fault."

Orde turns to face the Lie'Brehn'ry, sees a total lack of smoke and fire pouring through the mismatched lengths of poorly shaven, poorly trimmed, poorly... overall poorly-produced lumber. That's a good thing, Orde supposes. No Bruhns ever come here, but... the Bruhns aren't the only Wom's in the village. Orde's here too, and so is Kuhg. And Kuhg doesn't want Orde around.

Orde needs a bath or something. He walks past The Carvingground, holds his nose to the stink of the nastier bunkhouse, stares into the dead, ashy bonfire pit in the bunkhouse courtyard. Been a good while since the town's thrown a bonfire. These ashes are matted down, soaked, petrified into craters dug by gentle raindrops. When Orde was a sprout the village would gather 'round the bonfire pit every night for powwow, frothy mugs of RedBee Mead passed around like the Lumblock River flowed with the stuff. First time Orde took a sip he spilled himself out of squat. Granted, he was still a sprout back then, but... good times regardless. Everyone was laughing at him, yes, but Orde was laughing at himself, too. So it was fine.

Orde blinks his eyes a few times and realizes he's still staring into the bonfire pit. Nobody's around to see him doing it, thankfully... not that they'd give him flack. All Womnus know that Orde is ordinary at this point. Even Kuhg knew, and Orde didn't even know Kuhg's name.

Why did the elders send him there in the first place?!

Orde is getting flustered. Plus, he's still standing next to the bonfire pit. Just ordinary Orde, standing by as the rest of the village lives on.

Finally he walks away from the pit.

There's a single road leaving the town of Lumbstock. According to the elders it leads back to The Capitol City of the Kingdom of 'Man, but Orde's never gone to find out. Not many Womnus leave the village, the elders have a rule against that. There's one Bruhn named Merrf who gets to journey, but that's only because he's a merchant. He left a while ago, never came back.

Maybe that's a good thing.

The road is all dirt and fenced on both sides by thick ropes hung between wooden posts. It brings Orde to the beach of The Fishing Hole, which, according to the elders, was dug out by hand by the original thirteen settlers of the vill'. There's a long net with very tiny holes stretched across the length of the pond, one end tied to each bank, and Orde has no idea what the purpose of it is, but, that's not why he's here. He needs a bath, or something, so he walks out onto the dock and jumps in, clothes on his back be damned.

By the divine the water is *freezing*. Clear and clean, but utterly *frigid*. He climbs hastily back out, movements sluggish, body weeping with soak, and wonders if The Fishmelt has a fire going.

He knocks on the door. There's no answer.

Orde goes back into the village proper to dry off and lie down.

## The Dungeon of Kuhg

*'Return to the Lie'Brehn'ry...'*

It hits Orde's ears like a silent gust of wind, the kind that makes solid icicles fall in the night. He sits up in his creaky bed, looks around in the darkness. Everyone else seems to be asleep... so who whispered in his ear?

He waits. Nothing... more than the peaceful breathing of his fellow short-stick Womnus who also must sleep in the second generation's bunkhouse. Nobody else in this ramshackle moldy shack has stirred but our Orde, and for some reason he canno

It hits him. That smell, that *stench* he caught earlier after the fiasco at the Lie'Brehn'ry, it's hanging on the air like a dank reeking mist. There's no way he'll be able to fall back asleep... then again, the smell is actually a little better than the ambient scent of this old and unkempt bunkhouse, so... off he drifts...

...until:

*w a k e UP!*

That did it. Orde, moving stealthily as to not wake his fellow Wom's, creeps out of bed and does his best not to slip on the constantly damp floor. This bunkhouse was built for the second generation of Womnus, the first ones born in the village. They were treated like spoil'd royalty, according to the elders, and according to the elders, they let it go to their heads. The mattresses are all patchy and creak in their unstable frames at the slightest movement; the floors, once sanded wooden planks, are now a cross between decomposed sappy wood and that which sappy wood decomposes into.

Mud. The floor is basically all mud in here.

Which is good for sneaking, so long as Orde does not step too hard. In certain specific spots the floor squelches no matter how lightly one's foot comes down on it, but in others it's just like walking over old boards, rejects from Big Kessr's Mill that got left behind to rot away so they didn't have to be moved again after being prep'd and piled up. It never used to happen much, but it's beginning to be the norm nowadays. The village is built, and outside of the second gen bunkhouse, no repairs are necessary; not like there's going to be another warboar incident anytime soon.

They hope, at least.

Orde steps into the moonglow. The smell is strong out here, despicably strong. It smells like a cross between a fire and a skunk, but... not a clean skunk. A skunk that's shirked its bathing habits so it might spend more time digging in the mud and the rot and the grot of it all out in the forest. A fat skunk, probably. One that doesn't need to spray to work up a cloud.

The bonfire pit is just as ashy and dead as it was during the day. Orde gives it a passing glance as he dips between the larger two bunkhouses – towards the stone wall keeping the denizens away from Lumbstock, that is – and hustles through the alleyway, keeping a hand on the wall at all times. It's not that he can't see where he's going, not that he needs his sense of touch to guide him, it's just that... well... two of the elders, Nlaap and Pnehl, two of the founding Womnus of the village, engaged in a duel back here. Sabers, steelwood hilts and iron blades. Nobody even knows what the duel was over, it happened between the seeding and crop of the third generation, and according to the elders, Nlaap and Pnehl were close as two squirrels in a hollow before what's done was done.

They're still that close, too. The duel ended without a winner and they were buried together out in the Harbor, allegedly beneath one of the hunting stands. Orde's never been far enough out in Woode's Harbor to see any of these hunting stands, not for himself, but Lromn and Ryfjr are out there all the time and they've told him stories. Orde's sure the hunting stands are real. Not as real as this smell, perhaps, but real enough.

Orde realizes he stopped walking and dashes out of

the alley. It's creepy in there. Especially at night.

Orde follows the stink to the Lie'Brehn'ry. Kuhg must be sleeping... wherever it is he sleeps, Orde isn't sure. He doesn't like to get into other Wom's business, he just tries to do his thing. Well, his lack of a thing.

It's the middle of the night and Orde is sneaking out of bed to go to the Lie'Brehn'ry, and all because he heard a voice whisper in his ear. A voice with no source. A voice he's never heard before.

Never has he sighed so deeply... but it wasn't just the voice, it was the *smell*, the smell of a wet reeking fire, the smell of an odiferous skunk, the smell that seems to be coming out of the Lie'Brehn'ry's roof.

Except... the Lie'Brehn'ry's roof stops before its wall touches the wall. Huh. Orde's never noticed that before. He runs around to the front of the shack, not caring how loud his feet strike the dirt, and son of a Wom', it's the same thing over here. This whole time Orde thought the Lie'Brehn'ry was stuffed as far into the corner as possible, but that's just not true. There's a gap between it and the wall, and the gap is fenced on both sides. How did he not see that in the sunlight??

Oh, that's right. Because Orde's *ordinary*. Unlike this stench, eugh. This stench is about as... well, Orde doesn't know what this stench is about, he doesn't know where it's coming from, he doesn't know why he's only seeing it now, probably the angle of the moon and whatnot, but the stench isn't just a stench. The stench is coming from smoke, big billowing clouds of dank reeking smoke all arise from behind the fence.

It hits Orde in the face, all at once. He insulted Kuhg,

he disrespected and disappointed and made Kuhg feel so rotten about the fact the elders sent ordinary Orde his way that he decided to burn down the Lie'Brehn'ry! The smoke stinks because the old books are burning inside!

Kuhg is going to die if Orde doesn't save him!

Barkbreakers couldn't hope to peck a tree as fast as Orde knocks the door. One hand at first, then both, then his knuckles start to burn and sting but he doesn't stop, he needs to save Big Kuhg, the Lie'Brehn'ry's on fire and Lumbstock will burn to the ground and it's all Orde's fault an

The door swings open. Orde keeps knocking on air... until a voice asks, "Orde?"

Orde opens his eyes to Ahbny, whom, eh... he was not expecting. She holds something in her hand, something she brings to her mouth. When she lowers it back down, that same stinking smoke comes pouring out her mouth. Nothing comes out of Orde's mouth but... yeah, nothing. Nothing comes out of Orde's gaping mouth, he just stands there petrified. What else would one do in the presence of one of the Womnu Thirteen?

"What are you doing out so late, little sprout?"

Orde hasn't been a little sprout for a long time, but he doesn't say so.

"I... I heard a... um, I mean, I, I smelled something."

She steps out into the twilight. Orde takes a step back, frightened.

"Ahb!" shouts a wrinkly old voice from deep within the bowels of the 'Brehn'ry. "What's going on, who's out this late?!"

Ahbny looks over her shoulder, looks back down at

Orde. She doesn't seem able to speak, only to look at Orde like the ordinary Womnu he is.

"You know I don't like to be in the garden alone after dark," as Kuhg approaches from within the wooden cave, "especially with the cannastralis burning. Who's—"

And he's there at the door, Kuhg in the flesh, smoke clinging to him like an aura.

"Oh," he says. "It's you. Orde."

Orde cannot fathom a response.

Kuhg and Ahbny look at one another. It's a hard look, one without much comprehension.

"What're you doing back here, Orde?" Kuhg demands, exhausted all of the sudden. "Didn't I tell you not to come back until you're ready?"

"Until he's ready?" Ahbny asks. "What's he supposed to be ready for, old Wom'?"

"Anything," grieves the old Womnu. "Anything at all. He came to me earlier and dawdled. He upset me. I don't have time for dawdlers. I do not have the *time*."

"Well... he's here now," Ahbny points out, then brings the thing up to her mouth. The smoke flowed as she said, *Well he's here now*, which gave it a certain muffled hue. "Why don't we invite him in?"

"Because I don't know why he's here," Kuhg explains casually. "Could be a werm sent by the elders. The divine know they mean to tear this place down."

"The Flower's going to your head, old Wom'." Ahbny faces Orde. "You said the smell woke you up?"

"Impossible," Kuhg argues. "If the smell could wake the slept, the entire village would be here. No, he's lying. He's a werm, probably Clurf's doing. Clurf or Woode." He

draws something from his throat and spits it out. "Old fools always resented me for coming back to the village."

"I heard a voice," Orde says.

"A voi—" Kuhg... was not expecting that. "You... heard a voice?"

Orde nods through the moonbeam, as does his hair.

"What did it say?"

"Kuhg, why don't we—"

Kugg grabs Orde by the scrawny ordinary shoulders and fixes him in place with a stare like bent steelwood. "What did the voice say, dam'you! *Tell me what it said!*"

But lo, Orde can only tremble. He wishes he stayed in bed.

"You see?!" Kuhg vituperates, harshly, "he's not ready for anything! He should never have come here in the first place! It's all the elders, they—"

Ahbny flicks the Wom's earlobe. This brings Kuhg to a quiet.

"Come," she says, taking Orde by the hand with the hand not holding the stinking smoking thing. "Let's talk out back."

"Fine." Kuhg marches into his book'ed shanty, makes a drama out of it. "But he's not sleeping here. And neither are you, Ahbny. I doubt even *I'll* sleep tonight after all this commotion."

Orde, petrified, looks to Ahbny, but she's staring into the doorway. Then, she looks at their hands, held, then at him. It's funny – or perhaps *ordinary* – but Orde gets the weirdest feeling that she forgot he was even there.

Into the 'Brehn'ry, into the dark, into the dungeon of Kuhg.

## Piep

No matter how tightly Orde pinches his nose, the smell still breaks through.

Ahbny guides him through the many leaning shelves without much care, without much care at all. Orde bumps his knees, elbows, calves and shins, torso – by the time they come to the back door he’s earned enough dents and bruises to be tossed into a barrel to seep ‘is flavor into the mead... but Orde is no fruit. No, Orde is just ordinary, so ordinary that he drops Ahbny’s hand at the sight of the plants, like, like he’s never seen a plant before!

“What’s wrong, sprout,” Kuhg asks, “you never see a plant before, sprout?” A moment of no answer. “Sprout.”

“Knock it off,” Ahbny suggests, but she didn’t need to. Kuhg was right, Orde’s never seen plants before. Not any plants like these. They reach to his shoulders, some all the way up to his ears. The leaves are all shaped... almost like Womnu hands, actually, though perhaps that’s just the moonlight. Orde gets in close and splays his fingers, touches his hand to a leaf. Not a perfect match, but close enough.

Too close.

Orde staggers backwards, back to the back wall of the ‘Brehn’ry. Kuhg just shakes his wispy head.

“You see?” whined to Ahbny. “He never should have come here.”

Ignoring him, Ahbny tells Orde to smell the plant’s flowers.

“It has flowers?”

“Yeah,” she says, gesturing to the strange hand-plant.

He comes in close – cautiously, just in case the plant feels a little grabby – and looks even closer. There are flowers, or... or at least something *like* flowers. They're like little reverse teardrops all a'sprout from the branches, mostly the ends of the branches. Orde pokes it with a finger and he doesn't lose that finger, so he pinches it. Sticky. Very sticky. So sticky the flower stuff comes off the plant.

"Now you've done it," Kuhg growls. "Very good, Orde. You've ruined my entire harvest."

"Smoke your pipe, old Wom'," and so he does. "This is called the *Cannastralis* plant, Orde."

"*Cannastralis Indivita*," Kuhg sneers. "If you're going to say it, then you must say it right. The Flower deserves nothing but respect."

"The Flower?" Orde asks. "Is... did... is... *did the plants speak to me in my sleep, Kugh?*"

"No, you ordinary sprout!" Kuhg rumbles. "I'm sorry, that was... rude."

"And loud," Ahbny informs him. "It's almost like you *want* the elders to come out here."

"I most certainly do not!"

"Yet you keep *mentioning* them," she says, then takes a hit from her... from her piep. That's what she called it a second ago, Orde thinks. *Piep*. "You of all Womnus should know how easy it is to speak action into reality."

"Please," Kuhg begs, suddenly sat lotus, "just sit. The both of you."

Neither of them sit.

"I said *please*."

Orde sits, and after a second, Ahbny does too.

"So," he mouths his piep. "You said you heard a voice."

"The voice of The Flower," Orde says with a reverence so thin it may as well be a burnwood needle.

"No," Kuhg says, "it was not the voice of The Flower. The Flower wouldn't speak to you."

"Oh," Orde concedes.

"You're far too ordinary," Kuhg continues, as though he didn't hear him. "Plus, you've yet to smoke. You must inhale the smoke in order to convene with The Flower, young Orde, but alas, you lack a proper pipe!"

Kuhg springs up from his seated stance and leaves Ahbny to share the ordinary with its source. They don't speak. She hits the pipe and coughs, coughs hard, but that doesn't count as speaking. A moment later Kuhg comes back and hands a piep to Orde.

"This is for me?" he asks. "I get my very own piep?"

"If you say it like that again I'll toss it over the wall," Kuhg snarls. Orde cannot seem to win. "Well go ahead."

Orde looks ordinarily from Kuhg to Ahbny to the pie— ... to the pipe, then back to Kugh.

"Pull," Kuhg says. "Bring the mouthpiece to your lips and pull. It's not that difficult."

"But... there's no fire?"

"What?"

"There's no fire!" Orde is beginning to toke... whatever Kuhg is blowing. "It's—... I'm supposed to smoke it, right? How do I smoke it without any fire?"

"For the divine's sake, sprout," Kuhg grits, "like this!"

Kuhg brings his pipe to his mouth and pulls. There is no fire, but the end of it, um, the part that *doesn't* go into his mouth, it starts to glow, a little scarlet-orange berry all for sprouty Kuhg. Same thing's happening for Ahbny,

she breathes through one end of her pipe and the opposite end starts to glow like a hot piece of charcoal.

Throwing caution to the wind, Orde brings the pipe to his lips and breathes... but nothing happens. Well, that's not true, the air he breathes gains a taste, it's almost like the smell of the smoke but less... smoky.

"It's not working."

"Well of course it's not!" Kuhg cheers. "I didn't cast the hex!"

Orde drops the pipe, leaps to his feet.

"A hex?!"

Kuhg says nothing.

"Kuhg, you know how to do magick?!" shriek'd *far* too loudly. "But, but that's forbidden! The elders—"

"Damn 'em all to the 'wood," Kuhg shrugs, then goes on smoking. "You said you heard a voice, and you came here because of it. Correct?"

Orde nods, and then says, "Yes," when Kuhg doesn't immediately answer.

"So give me your pipe."

Orde gives him the pipe. Kuhg takes a long pull from his own, closes his eyes and lets his cheeks puff out, and then blows the smoke through Orde's pipe. It leaves the opposite end, the end with all the stuff in it, but it doesn't cloud off. No, nay, the smoke of The Flower merely swirls 'round and 'round the bowl of the pipe – as he's watching it flow, Orde is *positive* the fat end of the pipe is called a *bowl* – and then flows right back in.

Kuhg takes the pipe from his mouth and hands it off. Nothing comes out of the mouthpiece. Orde holds it, in his hand, and he doesn't look smart doing it.

"Pull," Kugh says, "or be thrown out the dam'door. My patience has been thin since we met."

So, Orde pulls, and thus the cannastralis lights, and thus Orde's pupils grow wide like the eyes of a Læmfin dangling from the jaws of a mighty mink... not that Orde can tell. No, to Sir Ordinary, everything just gets... lighter. Happier. Sillier. Lighter, too.

Definitely lighter.

Orde takes another pull into his grubby little lungs and holds it 'til he can't stop coughing, 'til he cannot see, 'til he opens his eyes and finds himself sitting with Kuhg and Ahbny in this magickal hidden place far outside the bounds of the village, far from the gaze of the elders, far, far, far from the life where he is known as ordinary Orde.

When he finally stops coughing, Kugh removes the daggers from his eyes.

"Very good," he snarks, "now the entire village is 'ware of us. Good going, you petty fool." He hits his pipe hard, harder than Orde can hope to comprehend, and lets it go without a cough. "You sproutish, petty fool."

"You will have to excuse him, Orde," Ahbny says. "He gets cranky when... well... Kuhg just gets cranky all the time."

"And for good reason," Kuhg assures them, and the way he says it makes it seem like he'll say more. After he takes a pull from the pipe, of course. Then, he exhales, and takes another pull. Exhale, pull, exhale, pull.

Kuhg gets up to fetch more cannastralis. Ahbny and Orde watch him slip back into the Lie'Brehn'ry, then Orde watches Ahbny take another pull. He looks down at his own pipe. It's perfectly smooth, sanded, hand-carved, of

course. Very dark, too. Darker than any wood Orde has ever seen.

"What," he says, then stares at the pipe. "What... um..." He looks up at Ahbny. "What?"

"So you said you heard a voice," Ahbny says. She sets her pipe on the ground, the dirt, not the grass, there's a little path that runs through this little garden alleyway little Orde sits lotus in on this fair night. The cannastralis sprouts from the grass. "What did it say?"

"It said—"

"Did it sound like anybody you've spoken to?" Kuhg asks as the smoke billows up. "Anybody from the village, anybody... you... wouldn't know anybody from outside of the village."

He sits down between them, resumes his lotus, feels the cool earth on his rump.

"No Womnu would."

Kuhg tokes on his pipe with eyes squinted unhappily.

After a moment of staring at the pipe held in his hand – the hand holding the pipe, that is – Orde says, "No."

Ahbny shoots him a glance.

"I mean," Orde says, then he lets a warm breath flow from his grubby lungs. "Um..."

"Focus, Orde." Kuhg empties his bowl again. Already. "Please, we've not the entire night, you know."

"To come here," Orde finally squeaks out. "The voice, it said... I don't know whose it was. At first I thought—"

"Yes, yes, it was the voice of The Flower. We *know*," Kuhg murmurs.

"No," Orde says. "I thought it was you, Kuhg. I thought you were asking me back here."

Ahbny turns to Kuhg.

"It was," Kuhg says flatly, "not me, Orde."

Ahbny turns away from Kuhg.

"Oh."

Orde takes a pull from his pipe. Bigger than the last couple. He doesn't cough. "Well... I heard it. And it told me to come here, and... here... you were." To Ahbny, "And here you are, too." He turns to himself, in an internal kind of way. "And here I am... and here is The Flower."

*'And now,' says the voice in the minds of the three of them, 'you must come here.'*

The Womnus go deathly silent. The smokes ceases to rise from their pipes.

"Where," Kuhg hazards, "is here...?"

There is no immediate answer. Ahbny scratches the back of her head. Swiftly. Puts her hand *right* back down.

"Kuhg—"

"Quiet," he commands her. "Both of you. Not another sound."

"But—"

"Shut up."

They do. A few moments pass without sound, outside of the general arborea. Then, Kuhg brings his pipe to his lips. His eyes tell the others to do the same, and they do. Ahbny and Orde both take pulls, but Kuhg's bowl remains dry.

*En w'isp', 'Where the water runs cold from the springs of smitten land...'*

Kuhg says nothing. It's almost as if he didn't hear it.

"Ahbny," Orde moans, "I'm scared."

"Why?"

"Me too, Orde." She pulls him in close, like he was a newborn sprout. "I don't like this at all, Kuhg."

"What?" He's getting agitated. "What are you two on about?"

"We heard it again, Kuhg," Orde trembles. "The voice of The Flower."

"Don't be preposterous," Kuhg leers, "The Flower does not speak in the tongue of mortals. No, this... this must be something else." He stands, leaves his pipe on the ground to gaze up into the stars. "This is a voice I have never heard... one I've never read of, either."

*'That,' enlightens the voice, 'is correct...'*

Kuhg sits right back down, sucks on his pipe like it had herbs in it.

Then, "What did it say?"

"It said you were—"

"Before," Kugh shorts, "before, before!"

"It said, *Where the water runs cold from the springs of smitten land*. Does that... what do we do, Kuhg?"

"We?" Kuhg asks, taking his pipe with him this time. "We're not doing a damned thing. Orde, though... Orde is leaving."

"What?!"

"Yes," Kuhg explains. "You must go where the water runs cold from the springs of smitten land, Orde. I see no other choice."

"But you didn't even hear the voice!" Orde exclaims. "How, how can you be sure—"

"That's what it said," Ahbny confirms. She angles her head down for a moment, thoughts heavy in her head. "Why Orde, Kuhg?"

"Because he's the only one who can go," Kuhg says, laying it out all clear. "You, Ahbny, you're a member of the Thirteen."

"And you?" she asks.

"Well... I must operate the Lie'Brehn'ry."

"You must operate your smoking pipe," she offers.

Kuhg does not disagree.

"Wait," Orde says. "How do we even know this is a real place? And, and, and why do I want to go somewhere called *smitten land*?" He's shaking now, shaking with all kinds of nerves. "Aren't we jumping into this a little too fas—"

"No," Kuhg denies. "You must leave tonight. Now, in fact."

"But—"

"Orde," Kuhg says, suddenly on one knee, eyes level, heart racing, "don't you argue. The cannastralis plant is a wise teacher and a powerful sage, it works by the will of the divine. Us hearing this voice – the three of us, I mean, all at once—"

"Except," Ahbny cuts in, "for the important part."

"What?"

"You didn't hear where the voice said to go, Kuhg. I think Orde is right, I think sending him off so suddenly might be a huge—"

"No."

Just like that, conversation's over.

"I've been practicing the cannastralis for a long, long time," Kuhg says. "Ever since I came back here for the last time." He shakes his head slowly a time, a second, a third and fourth. "No, this is... this is no trial, this is no trick.

Something is happening, the 'wood is trying to tell us something. Trying to guide us somewhere, to something, perhaps. I am... quite hesitant, to think it, but... perhaps it means to bring us to the very thing this village needs to survive."

"And what," Ahbny asks, "might that be?"

Kuhg looks her squarely. "A leader."

Ahbny – of the Womnu Thirteen – has a hard time disagreeing with that.

"Well," Kuhg says to Orde. "What are you waiting for? You should have gone by now."

"You're just trying to get rid of me..."

"Yes," Kuhg agrees. "And for good reason. Someone out there, someone powerful, mayhap even... mayhap one of the divine... somebody is calling out to us, asking for us to find them." He turns to Ahbny. "You take him to the Boughstring, get him weaponry. A bow with a full quiver should do fine. He'll not need to protect himself from much."

"How can you pretend to know that?" Orde demands. He cannot place it, but something is giving him courage, guile, energy. He takes a pull, lets it go, and still cannot figure it out. "You're acting like you know exactly where I'm meant to go."

"This is no act, young Orde." Kuhg vanishes into the Lie'Brehn'ry again, comes back a moment later with a papyrus scroll in one hand. Unrolls it for the group to see.

"Is that—"

"Yes," he tells her. "It is a map of the plain which sits between the crags. Of our home." He jabs at a collection of shapes sketched near the chokepoint where Kessr first

entered this land. "This is home. The village. Lumbstock."

A pair of lines – the Lumblock River, it must be – runs off from the town both east and west. Kuhg traces it due west until it bends due south and eventually comes to its end: an isle separated from the rest of the plain by the river's splitt' and joining again, a perfect ouroboric ring, a pair'd river' of polar flow'.

"Sprec sent this back here," Kuhg explains. "In a bottle of glass Merff procured for me from outside of the plain. Before she left to study the wolves I gave her the vessel, asked her to perform a spot of cartography for me. I can't explain why... it... was as though I'd been possessed." He stares at the pipe for a moment, then, "She did not let me down, and neither shall you."

"Kuhg," Ahbny says slowly. "Sprec left strates ago. Braud strates."

"I know."

"And she never came back..." added by Orde.

"I... am aware," Kuhg says. "And yet we have the map. We know where she is. Perhaps it was young Sprec who whispered to us through the night air..."

"It was not Sprec," Ahbny assures him. "I taught her to run through the forest myself, I spent strates with her in the Harbor. I know her voice well, and that was not it."

"Even so... she did not let me down." Kuhg turns to Orde fully, and then, with a gravity unlike Orde has ever encountered, says, "and neither shall you."

All is quiet for a moment.

"Do you know how to catch a Læmfín, Orde?"

"Of course," Orde assures him... them. "Patience and slow movements."

"Good," he nods. "Good," again. "Your pipe is hex'd, so you'll not need to worry about producing a spark to ignite a fire. Just clear a spot and gather dry kindling, the pipe will do the rest."

"But," Orde tries, "but," he tries again to come up with something, "but," he tries to figure an excuse, to worm his way out... "but... what of my place here in the village?"

Kuhg scoffs, right in his face. "You have no place here, young Orde. Not even The Carvingground has a stump for you to squat on."

As much as Orde hates to admit it... well, Orde doesn't actually hate to admit it. Orde's been the ordinary sprout around this village for a long time, too long. Does he want to leave? Not particularly. Especially not headed west, away from the road to The Capitol City of the Kingdom of Man... but he does not have a choice.

"All right," he says, "all right. I'll go."

"Yes," Kuhg agrees, "you will. And Ahbny will see you off. Take him—"

"To the Boughstring," she says, rising with spikes of pain in her knees. "I heard you loud and clear, old Wom'."

"And yet you both remain..."

"So what will you do, Kuhg?" Orde asks. "When I am gone, I mean. Are you... will you wait for my return?"

"Yes," he promises. "I shall. But until then, I've some research to do. I, eh... to confess," Kuhg confesses, "I've not read... there are... eh... I might have some tomes within the 'Brehn'ry which may... well, I don't need to explain myself to you. To either of you. Come, the time is short. The sun shall soon rise, and the elders will wake before then. If you're going to go, then you must go now."

And so, they do.

## A Quick Getaway

The dark of the library is all the much darker now that Orde has the cannastralis herb in his system. He doesn't realize this, of course; all Orde can see is the darkness, the overwhelming darkness, the rough, callous darkness, the leaning shelves with their dusty books and the dings and dents and bruises all over his body, the claustrophobia, the sense that Ahbny only told him to wait inside so she could make a quick getaway, she's not going to help him, Kuhg either, they just want to get rid of him because he's ordena

"Orde," whispers Ahbny through the crack'd door.

Orde opens his eyes. It's... well... it's not any darker, that's for sure.

"Orde!"

Less of a whisper this time. Orde goes to it.

Ahbny leads Orde past The Carvingground and across the flimsy rope bridge stretching across the tiny gap of river between the village's two walls and Big Kessr Mill. They're not quiet about it, to no fault of their own. The bridge was built less for crossing, more for maintenance on the Mill, and the boards which have not yet snapped would all creak and bend beneath the weight of a wily adventurous brushdweller, let alone a pair Womnus. On the other side of the river the wall is of rope and post, not stone, and it gives way directly to the greater spread of Woode's Harbor. Most of the villagers cut their teeth out

in the Harbor, whether by way of hunting or logging or merely surviving out there where there's no roof over your head... unless you bunk beneath a hunting stand.

If you could manage as much without tipping off the guard, that is. Nobody's supposed to be out in the Harbor after dark, nobody's supposed to be outside the sleeping quarters after dark, it's the word of the elders, but here's Orde and Ahbny sneaking into the Boughstring Lodge, and it's *long* after dark, and they're *here!!*

"Stay close," she whispers, guiding him by the hand so he doesn't have a choice.

They keep to the walls through the dark and shunten hunting lodge, Orde can't see a thing. He came here a few times in his youth, before he realized there was no place for him in the village, no role to play but that of the local ordinary, and he hasn't been back since. He remembers a massive chandelier of antlers hanging above an open room, two floors bridged by twin staircases – the bottom for camaraderie and taxidermy, the top for meetings and important discussions and a place to display the prizes of a good hunt. But now... well, now he's leaving the village, and because a voice in his head spoke to him, no less.

Granted, it also spoke to Ahbny and Kuhg, but... well, it didn't say *Orde* needed to leave specifically. It just said to go, but then again it told Orde to get out of bed twice, and if he didn't listen and go back to the Lie'Brehn'ry then Kuhg and Ahbny wouldn't even–

"Here," as she thrusts what must be a bow into Orde's hands. "You know how to use one of these, right?"

Orde doesn't say anything.

"Can you shoot a bow and arrow or not, Orde?"

"I think so," he squeaks. "I've never tried before."

She doesn't say anything for a short moment. Then, she takes the bow back.

"You'll be fine," she assures him, though she doesn't sound so sure herself.

She grabs his hand again – Orde is amazed Ahbny can see so well in the dark – and leads him out the back door and into Woode's Harbor.

"Walk in a straight line," she whispers him, "until you come to the bramble. Then—"

"The bramble?" Orde asks. Honest to the divine ones, he didn't realize, didn't even hear her say the word *Then*. "What's the bramble?"

"It's... you'll find it. There's no missing it, no stepping over it. When you get there, turn right and follow it to the river."

"The bramble goes all the way to the river?"

"Yes," she says. "When you get to the bank you'll have to cross. Can you handle that?"

Orde... is not sure.

Not the right answer.

"Orde," Ahbny tries again, "do you think you're going to be able to swim against the current long enough to get out on the other side of the bramble?"

"I don't know what a bramble *is*," Orde whines. "Why am I the one who has to go?"

She exhales through her nose now, and not in an *I am trying to calm down* sort of way. No. It's more of the *I'm going to need to calm down when you're finally out of my sight, ordinary Orde* kind of way, and Orde only shrinks for it.

"You're going to have to grow up for this one, Orde." She doesn't sound confident he'll be able to do it. "You might be a Brehn—"

"The *only* Brehn," he reminds her. "The only one born since the second generation."

"That's... not necessarily true."

He doesn't say anything.

"Look," as Ahbny levels with him, "we're all Womnus, we're all villagers of Lumbstock. Brehns, Bruhns... what's the difference, really?"

"Everything," Orde sighs. "The Bruhns are better off in every way. They have bigger muscles, their hair doesn't need to get cut, they can handle more than a mouthful of RedBee mead, they ca—... oh for the divine's sake, Ahbny, *you're* a Bruhn!" He backs off a step. "I shouldn't have to explain this to you, you *know* it's true!"

"Orde..." She sighs. "You're... not as right as you think. Just go. Please. You have a job to do."

"But..." He watches the door close before him. Orde's out in the Harbor now.

Only one way to go.

## Could Be Worse

It's a cool night out in the Harbor, cool and quiet, and Fwhyz sits bored in the hunting stand nearest the river on the west side of the village. Nothing ever happens out here at night. There are no denizens dumb – nor smart – enough to get over the bramble wall, and everybody in the village is asleep, nobody's trying to leave. Why would

they try to leave? Lumbstock has everything a Womnu might need.

So why is he out here holding watch, right? Only the divine know. Them and the elders.

Maybe only the elders know.

Fwhyz takes a sip from his flask. The RedBee slithers into his system like a serpent, a legless salamander, or a newt, rather, a burning and slippery newt. Feels good in his stomach, though. Makes him feel all sorts of warm. Not as warm as he'd be in bed right now, but still warm.

Could be worse, Fwhyz guesses.

And then, it gets worse: a rustling, a clumsy animal, probably soaking wet, busting through the undergrowth. Fwhyz gets up on his feet, notches an arrow on a string. Then, he waits.

The denizen, mayhap even a creature, comes nearer, nearer... it's... it... it sounds like he's right on top of it... whatever *it* is.

"Ow," says a voice as a small and Brehnish bump does not shake the hunting stand at all. Sounded almost like... no... no, it couldn't be. The sprout's far too ordinary to be sneaking through the Harbor after dark.

The creature – for it must be a creature, no denizen speaks the word of Wom' – moves, headed away from the hunting stand. Likely towards the river. Fwhyz lets the thing's footpace tread out to the very farthest edge of his perception, then he slings himself down the ladder and follows.

## I Don't Want to Run Anymore

The night is dark, terrifying as ever when Orde finally comes to the bank of the Lumblock River. It's not flowing with any particular strength, but it's cold. Cold. Horribly, frigidly cold. Orde's not sure he'll survive dipping his legs in, let alone jumping and swimming against the current.

Then again, Orde might not have to. Someone's been following him, has been ever since he bumped his head against that hunting stand, and they're close now. Real close. So close that Orde would rather wait for them to stick him than jump into the river and continue along his quest.

So, he waits, and the heavy hand doth fall unto his shoulder.

For a moment they both just stand there, breathing as the river babbles and the cool wind whistles through the boughs. For a moment fate is blind, destiny takes a seat, the wheel of ka ceases its spinn' as the axle is inspected for wear, bends, rust, breaks. Then, Orde is spun 'round to meet the unbelieving gaze of Fwhyz.

Fwhyz breathes through an open mouth at Orde. At least, Orde thinks it's Fwhyz. There aren't many Womnus in Lumbstock, a shy bit over two dozen the last time Orde counted... oh, who is Orde kidding? Orde's never counted. Orde doesn't even know who he is. Did he even hear that voice?

Were Kuhg (and Ahbny) in the Lie'Brehn'ry tonight? Did he even smoke the cannastralis with them? Or did he finally get tired of sleeping in the moldy bunkhouse and just leave?

"I can't say," says the Womnu of a gruff yet high voice, "I was expecting to find you. Out here." "Orde."

"Fwhyz?" Orde asks. If this isn't Fwhyz, he's going to leap straight into the river. "Is... is that you?"

"'Tis," says Fwhyz. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm-..."

He cut himself off, as he expected as much to be done.

Fwhyz merely stands in wait with a Bruhnnny hand on Orde's shoulder... but lo, how impatient one does grow when it's nothing they stand in wait for.

"You're trying to leave the village," Fwhyz guesses, "aren't you? Trying to run away so you can die out in the 'wood."

"No," Orde swears, "I swear, I'm not, I... I'm going to... I'm not leaving forever, Fwhyz."

"And that's a shame," as he finally takes his hand off Orde's shoulder. "You have a real chance here, sprout."

"No, you're not listening, I-... wait, what?"

Fwhyz sits down on the ground, crunch'd leaves and dropp'd bow. Orde joins him, but only after staring at the river for a few more seconds.

"So what are you doing out here, sprout?" Fwhyz tries again. "It's the last time I'm going to ask, I hope."

"Why... why do you say that?" Orde asks, drowning in suspicion.

"Because..." Fwhyz trails into a sigh. "Just talk to me, Wom'."

"Fine. I heard a voice," Orde says, "in my head. When... when I was sleeping. It woke me up, I mean."

"A... you... heard a voice?" The shards of moonsilver a'spill through the canopy highlight Fwhyz's confusion.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a voice," Orde explains. "In... in my head, I guess."

It's difficult to see, but eyebrows are flying right now.

"It told me to go to the Lie'Brehn'ry. To go *back* to the Lie'Brehn'ry, I, I went earlier today. Yesterday. And... um, and Kuhg—"

"Kuhg," Fwhyz scoffs. "That old son of a shrew. He got you to smoke that stinking cannastralis weed with him, too, didn't he?"

"He... *did*," Orde admits. "But that's... that's part of the reason I'm here, actually."

"Yeah," Fwhyz says, not at all surprised. "That doesn't surprise me at all. That cannastralis garbage is no good for a Womnu, it makes you go orden—... eh, it makes you go *strange* in the head."

A bitten tongue might go a long way on this night.

"So... so... what," Fwhyz continues, "that old fool had you smoke, got angry at you for smoking, and told you to leave the village?"

"No, he—"

"Cause that's his schtick, y'know," Fwhyz continues. "He hates Lumbstock. Always has."

"He... hates the village?"

"Of course." Fwhyz adjusts his seat. Must have landed on a rock or something. "Orde, what do you actually know about the old Wom' in the Lie'Brehn'ry?"

"I—"

"Orde, do you even know how the Lie'Brehn'ry got its name? The word *lie* is right in it, shouldn't that tell you all you need to know?"

Orde just starts breathing heavily. He's never been so far back in the woods, so far from the village, out so late at night. Nothing makes any sense anymore, maybe he should just go back.

"Maybe we should go back," Orde squeaks.

"Maybe," Fwhyz says, his eyes squinting into Orde's. "But... maybe not."

Orde gulps.

"You know Merrf, right?"

"Of course I do," Orde claims. "He's the best merchant Lumbstock has ever had. The village would be nothing without him, we'd've starved before I was even born."

"All right," he calms, "all right, easy. Nowadays that's true, yeah. Merrf is... he does his job and he does it well, there's no doubting that. But," as the squint is released, "he wasn't the first to play that role."

"He... wasn't?"

"No," Fwhyz assures him. "There used to be a troupe, a sort of caravan of Lumbstock merchants. Four of them. They'd come and go from the village as they pleased, had this habit of disappearing for braud strates on end. Folks around the village claimed they knew the land outside of the plain better than they knew their own homes."

"Oh..."

"They were all Brehns. That was part of the problem, I think." Fwhyz puts his hands back to brace himself. "You Brehns aren't that bad, y'know. Not in my book. You have your use for the village, you have your roles to play. But... as far as traveling merchants go..." He shakes his head. "There's a reason one Merrf was, and still is, able to replace the four Brehns who used to do his job."

"What's the reason?"

"Merff knows what he's doing. Out in the endless wood, I mean. He knows how to travel without making enemies, without toting too heavy a qhep, without... well, without losing his bark along the way. A stripped log is good for one thing and one thing only, Orde, and that's making lumber. And there's not much use for lumber in the village of Lumbstock anymore."

Not a single word comes to the tip of Orde's tongue. Nor his mind. Nor his lips.

So, Fwhyz continues, "When you hit the Lie' earlier in the day... that's what you said, right?"

"Yeah, I—"

"Hold on," Fwhyz commands. The Wom' seems to be shivering a bit, Orde didn't even notice. He notices how big of a swig Fwhyz takes from his flask, though. "*Ahhh*," followed by a belch. "So... where was I saying?"

"Um. You, you were—"

"Right," Fwhyz confirms. "You met Kuhg for the first time today, didn't you? Y'know, there's a reason he holes up in that damned shack all the time."

"I—"

"He's a fraud, Orde. Wom's a failure. He was one of the caravan, the uh, the traveling group of Brehn merchants. They all went away for the last time, and only Kuhg came back. He was a wreck. Didn't even have his qhep. Just that pipe. Just that blasted pipe." Fwhyz spits out of sheer disgust. "He's running from something, Orde. Something he'll never admit to."

Fwhyz looks Orde dead in the moongloss' eyes. Orde is powerless, he can only look back.

"I think Orde killed them, Kuhg. I, I mean... you... you know what I mean."

Orde doesn't know anything right now.

"He was always quick, that... *Kuhg*." Fwhyz chooses this moment to draw an arrow from the quiver strapped to his back... and the dagger from his hip. "Faster than me, even. Everybody knows I'm the fastest of the Thirteen. Besides... well, besides Ahbny, but... heh, that just figures, doesn't it?"

"I don't—"

"Have you ever noticed that she's kind of skinny for a Bruhn?"

Orde... hasn't, honestly. He doesn't spend much time with Ahbny, with anybody in the village, really. He's just kind of a loner. He just kind of wanders around, squats at The Carvinground whenever he can, wastes time when he cannot. The number of leaves and floating twigs he's cleaned out of the net at The Fishing Hole alone serves as a testament to just how little Orde has to do with the daily goings-on 'round the village.

"I think that she was born a Brehn," Fwhyz continues after another good hit off the flask. Full tilt, too. Probably drained the whole thing. "It's her hair that gives it away for me. We don't ever need to cut our hair, Orde. You see how short this is?"

Fwhyz points now to the fuzz on his head. It covers his scalp well enough, Orde can't see through to it even with the silver glow of the moon, but it does little to keep him warm. Probably. That's one thing Orde's never had trouble with, even when the weather gets chilly: never once has he battled a head cold.

"I've never once cut my hair. It grew to this length when I was a sprout and stayed this length, same as everybody else. Except for you, of course. And Kuhg. But you two don't need to cut your hair either, it drapes your shoulders and it stays that way. And I bet it's warm, too!"

"'Tis," Orde concedes, and he doesn't feel comfortable doing it. "It's, um... it's not... it's... comfy."

"Exactly!" Fwhyz is getting loud. Either that or the river's getting quiet. "Exactly! Womnus don't ever cut their hair! A Womnu is born either a Brehn or a Bruhn, and Bruhns are big! Bruhns are big, Bruhns are meaty and muscular and mighty, and Brehns are scrawny! Scrawny and weak... but you Brehns are smart. You can't handle a sip of the RedBee, but old Wom' Kuhg can puff'n'pull on that pipe 'til the sun don't rise and he's doing so well he doesn't even need to leave the Lie'Brehn'ry! He probably doesn't even have to eat!"

"Fwhyz, what are—"

"I've been running for so long, Orde..." Fwhyz seems to be taking a turn. "I'm the Master Scout, I'm the greatest scout, and I'm the fastest runner in the village except for Ahbny, and... oh... oh Orde, why can't we leave the village, Orde?" His cheeks sparkle like starlight winking down through the canopy. "Why do the dam'elders have us sit in these hunting stands night after night? Why is the village walled in by stone and bramble and river, why must a Womnu fear the land he comes from?"

All Orde can manage is a quivering bottom lip.

But Fwhyz doesn't notice that. Fwhyz... he isn't even looking at Orde. He's looking at the dagger in his hand, at his reflection in the blade, at the razor edge he sharpened

at The Fishmelt before setting out to hold watch for the night... but... but who are they watching for? Who are they trying to keep out?!

Fwhyz spins the dagger in his hand, grips it by the blade, shoves it to Orde.

"Take this," he says, and Orde does as he's told. "Good. You... you know how to use one of those, right?"

Orde does not confirm nor deny his own competency in the way of the blade, but he's holding it by the handle, so... he'll be fine. It's a dagger. Even a sprout could figure out a dagger, right?

"Fwhyz," Orde says after watching Fwhyz stare at his own folded legs for a worrisome amount of time. "Fwhyz, what's going on, what—"

"I'm tired of running, Orde." Fwhyz draws an arrow from his quiver, twirls it 'round in his hand, grips it like he meant to throw a spear. "I've been running for so long... for the village, for the elders, f'r Clurf's *Thirteen*... I've been runnin' 'round the Harbor ever since I was a sprout, and I don't know if I'm running to or from, I don't... I don't want to run anymore, Orde. I just don't want to run anymore."

Fwhyz plunges the head of the arrow into his thigh, teeth clenched, tears streaking as the blood soaks into his leather trous'. Orde skitters back to the bank of the river and damn near falls in.

"Why," he, "why, Fwhyz," he stamm, "Why did you—"

"It's okay, Orde," Fwhyz says. "It's okay. I don't want to run anymore, Orde."

Orde begins to weep in silence. By the divine, it's all he can do.

"I'm fine," Fwhyz assures him, "really."

He stands, as though to prove his point, and... well, he can still stand.

"But," Orde says from the ground, "But, but I, but—"

"Go," Fwhyz commands him now. "I never saw you. It was... it was the bandits. Highwaymen come in from the mountains. I saw them... climbing down the crag... from the... from the hunting stand."

Orde looks back and sees his own reflection in the Lumblock River. His skin is paler than a ghoul, eyes wide, pupils the size of... the size of the point of an arrow.

"Go on," Fwhyz nudges. "I'll... make sure you... get to the... other... side... before I... go... back..."

Orde isn't, he doesn't, Orde... he takes a shallow breath and spins, dips his feet in the water. Freezing, numbing, clawing and raking harsh against his skin even through the leather garb, the moccasins, the years of Lumbstock living... he slides in. Water up his shirt, raising gooseflesh from his chest, gripping his throat like a pair of dead hands: without the strength to stop his breath. He begins to walk along the riverbed, not looking back at Fwhyz, not looking to the shore but reaching there, guiding his way with one hand 'til he grabs something, something spiny, something that sinks into his flesh like the fangs of a snake. A length of the bramble comes away from the shore with his hand, a wicked tendril of thorn. He has to use his teeth to dislodge it, but when it's out... it is out. He dips his wounds into the icy water, numbs off the pain.

Crawling slow on two feet, Orde leaves the village of Lumbstock.

## Dredging

After what feels like an eternity and a half of dredging his feet along the frigid bed of the Lumblock River, Orde climbs up on the bank on the other side of the bramble wall. The sun has yet to rise, but the moon is getting low. Soon the twilight sky shall glow a sunkist scarlet and the diurnes shall wake and bring the 'wood to life.

But, until then, Orde must spark a fire, and to do that, he mus

"The pipe!" Orde shrieks. "No!"

Orde spelunks into his pocket and pulls out the pipe, soaking wet and full of water. He tilts it over and lets the contents of the bowl spill out, water blackish and dirty with fragments of the cannastralis flower, some green, most burned to char. The one thing Orde actually needed to survive out here and he ruined it... how very ordinary of him.

"Oh well," Orde gripes. "I... I can't do anything about it now."

Well... he could do *something*. The pipe is ruined, it's soaked, the hex is obviously broken... so why not toss it away? Why not just huck the damned thing over the river and never look back?

Orde isn't sure. He's sure he's not going to get rid of the pipe, but he isn't sure why. Regardless, the dimn is chilled and the aquatic stroll he just barely survived isn't helping his survival. Sparking a fire is the only thing he can think to do.

So, Orde goes about collecting kindling. Sticks, twigs, dry leaves, decrepit treebark. Some stones for a pit, too, of

course. Don't want the blaze to spread across the land. He draws his rocks from the river – it got suddenly shallow after he passed the end of the wall of bramble, as though someone had dug the 'bed out without bothering to build a slope – and puts them in a rough and uneven circle. Lays down the kindling. Goes to fetch some larger sticks, comes back with two armfuls. Orde builds a small tower over the kindling, leans the rest of his twigs and sticks against it, and then... well... he may as well try the pipe, right?

Orde, holding the pipe in his hand, stares heavily.

"There's no way this will work..."

...yet still he crouches low to the forest floor, yet still he takes that soggy hex'd pipe between his teeth, yet still he blows through, yet still a shower of sparks flies from the bowl, yet still the campfire ignites.

Orde falls back on his rump as the flames dance in his eyes. He cannot speak, he can't even *breathe*... then he does. Then he scoots up close to the fire and lets the heat grace his weathered palms.

## Halfway Back

After Orde slid into the river, Fwhyz turned and started walking back. The pain was great and the blood trickled slowly down his leg, but his pace was steady.

At first.

Roughly halfway back to the hunting stand – it had to be that far, the river isn't *that* far away – he decided to pull the arrow out, let the blood clot up. Unfortunately, the

opposite happened – with the old and jagged arrow came an unshy torrent, a stream of red, a feeling of lightness quite unlike that delivered by a puff of the cannastralis plant.

By the time he reached the hunting stand, he was dragging his foot behind him. He was also crawling, and now, as he finally hoists himself past the last rung on the ladder, he doesn't even have the strength to sip his flask.

Breath heavy he stares at the warped ceiling of the archaic old treehut. He blinks his eyes once, twice, the ceiling, the world, it's all getting very dim now, the dimn is rising to usher in the sun and it's all very dimn, all very fuzzy, all... all very dark.

So, so very dark...

## Just Get Moving

It was so, so very dark when Orde last closed his eyes to blink, but now, as he opens them, he cannot keep them that way. Despite the thickness of the canopy, the sun puts a sizzle on his peepers like he shoved his head into the furnace in The Fishmelt.

When it's *active*.

The blindness only lasts for a few moments, though. Orde picks himself up and rubs the drowse from his 'lids, looks around, tries to figure out where in the 'wood he is. This is no easy task. Everything from the previous night is a blur, it's... hazy, in a word. Orde's never felt the way he feels right now, come to think of it. He's almost... *burnt*, though that doesn't quite fit it. It's closer to a glow of sorts;

his skin does not shine, there's too much dust and frag's of leaf and pebble' stuck to him from rolling around in the dirt all night, but... but... but nothin'. Ordinary Orde needs a bath.

Orde jumps into the river, caution toss'd to the wind. His heels collide with rocks. It doesn't feel great, but the water's cold enough to ease most of the pain. Especially when he dunks everything above his knees, he's not even *thinking* on the pain now. Of everything that went down the previous night, Orde remembers the chill of the river the most. It nearly immobilized him... it took everything he had not to slip under for good... but, this morning? This morning it only feels good. Refreshing. Crisp, cool, utterly rejuvenatory. He scrubs himself gently, gets all the forest off, and then stays in for an extra few minutes, just for the... just for the Orde of it.

Yeah. Just for the Orde of it. Orde might be ordinary – back in the village, that is – but that's only back in the village. Back there he's ordinary Orde, but out here? Out here he's just a Womnu. The only one who's ever escaped the village of Lumbstock.

"Huh," Orde says as the river flushes the grime from his bellybutton. "I escaped the village of Lumbstock."

And now that he has, there's little time to waste. Orde must go to the place where the water runs cold from the springs of smitten land. He walks dripping from the river and shakes himself off like a wet dog... but it doesn't dry him. Not enough.

"I'll have to build a fire," Orde says to the air.

The air says nothing back.

So, Orde builds up another fire, even bigger than the

blaze of last night. He takes off his shirt, tries to hold it outstretched over the fire, and he succeeds, too. His tunic is made of a soft leather, and it gets too hot for him to hold before it fully dries. Plus, there's a bunch of soot on it now. It smears all over his hands as he wrestles the thing back on, which is... just fantastic. On the bright side, Orde won't waste time repeating the same mistake with his pants, so... there is that.

Orde plops down next to his makeshift little pit and watches the flames dance and flicker until the smoke snuffs them out. Then, he watches the smoke puff and wisp, thin out, then blow away. Then, there's only ashes. They'll blow away too, he imagines. So long as it doesn't rain first.

By the *divine* Orde is starving, that just snuck up on him. Criminy. He'll have to... well, he'll have to find some food. All on his own. Here, out in the endless wood...

"Læmfins," Orde reminds himself. "They *want* you to catch them, you just gotta be gentle."

Orde gets up, takes a step towards the bank of the river, then gets down on all fours and crawls to the edge, as not to spook the fish. There are... none. Orde gulps.

"Well... I guess I could just get moving."

Orde looks down the river, looks back the way from which he came. Then, he goes, with no mind paid to the arrow of bone resting on the riverbed, boldly white and splintered none, where it struck and sat, en wait, since he crawled from the river last night.

## At Ease

As with every and any other day, Clurf is the first of the Womnus to rise. The sun has not yet arrived, the dimn is strong indeed today in the humble village of Lumbstock, and Clurf takes his leave from the private dormitory on the second floor of the Boughstring Lodge. The stairs do not creak, as Qiupo built them well, nor does the floor, as the lumber came from Woode's Horde.

Everybody knows that lumber from Woode's Harbor is the best lumber in the plain.

Now on any other morning, Clurf would head straight out the back door and into the Harbor to start making his rounds, going from hunting stand to hunting stand and putting his guards at ease. This morning, though, is not any other morning. Something is *different* in the village of Lumbstock this odd morning, something on an energetic level, something... something Clurf just can't place. Were he to head straight out the back door and into the Harbor like he normally would then maybe – *maybe* – he would notice how a bow in the armory cabinet is slightly askew on its hook, slightly sideways in its holster, almost as though it was removed and immediately placed back last night. *Late* last night. When it was so dark the remover and placer could not see exactly what they were doing.

But, he does not. Clurf heads out the front door, skirts through The Buhzarr, makes sure to place his mocc'd feet upon the pedestal in the center of the square so all the empty shop stalls can see just how much he's risen above the rest, and that's not his ego working, either. No, Clurf alone is responsible for leading and directing the Womnu

Thirteen for the elders, he was chosen *specifically* by the elders to do his job and by the divine he'll do it. Even if it means he must stand on this pedestal, high above all the rest.

All the rest who are currently sleeping. Clurf sighs. He doesn't get to mingle much around the village these days. He's always too busy in the Boughstring honing his craft, in Lumbstock Hall attending meetings, planning and plotting with the elders, doing what must be done to ensure the continued livelihood of their humble village on the river.

Clurf ambles through the long meeting room in the center of Lumbstock Hall, dragging his hand smoothly across the table as he goes. Yes, many grand meetings have been held here, and Clurf's been fortunate enough to sit for quite a few of them. 'Twas here the elders decided to 'Wom' the hunting stands each and every night, Clurf was here for that. He was here to help determine the fate of the treacherous Kuhg after he returned to the village without his cohorts. He also played a hand in getting that ordinary Orde sprout banned from The Carvingground on account of the fact he would often shear the skin from his hands rather than the wood from the block. Clumsy little Brehn, which is ironic, very ironic indeed. The Brehns are supposed to have a wit about them, they're supposed to be intellectually superior to the sniveling dopey Bruhns, but lo, Orde proved to be the exception. Proved to be the exception to quite a bit of suppositions, that sprout. First and only Brehn born since the second generation, since Clurf's own generation...

Clurf sighs. The fact of the matter is that Orde is a

problem. The elders don't know what to do with him, the villagers don't want anything to do with him, and Kuhg? Even that foolish haze-brained Kuhg turned him away... and he was meant to be Kuhg's redemption, too. Helping the sprout find a place in the village would have meant forgiveness, would have meant acceptance, would have sparked the regaining of the camaraderie he once shared with the villagers... but no. Kuhg turned Orde away.

"You two are carved from the same wood block," Clurf muses from the seat at the end of the table, the one once occupied by Kessr. "Yet you turned him away. Pity, Kuhg. Pity. It seems you'll spend the rest of your days hiding in your shack, choking on that stinking smoke you insist on polluting our air with."

Oh well. Some things you can't change, and Womnus are all too often part of that some. It's a good thing, Clurf thinks. To be steadfast and stubborn is quite useful to the elders... or at least it can be. So long as it's the elders' will the given Womnu feels the need to stick to.

Enough of this. Clurf rises from this seat at the table, this seat he may never sit, and walks out into the Harbor. The dimn is thinning out and he must relieve his guards before the sun comes up. After a long night of watching out for whatever might be seen, a full day of sleep is most definitely in order.

There are five hunting stands hidden within Woode's Harbor, dispersed in an arch, tracing the curvature of the wall of bramble bordering the Harbor. Clurf hugs the post and rope wall on the village-side of the Harbor until he comes to the eastern stretch of the Lumblock River, the one which connects directly to The Fishing Hole. Ah, The

Fishing Hole. Clurf can still remember digging that son of a Wom' out, watching the mud and silt and sand settle out as the Læmfins schooled in troves to be scooped out and cooked, chewed, swallowed down the gullet. He can remember helping weave the net, stretching it from bank to bank across the length of the artificial lake... so many memories, so much work done in this village. It does not belong to any one Womnu, the village of Lumbstock, but Clurf likes to think he has a special connection to it, that he's played a special role in its growth... that... were it not for him... the village would not be so much as a shell of what it is today.

Clurf takes a detour to walk out on the Harbor-side dock. It's shaped like a handle – out, across, and back – and Clurf carefully pulls the moccasins off his feet so he might dip them and feel the chill of the drip between his toes. The cold always feels good in the mornings.

Feet soggy in their mocc's, Clurf proceeds to the first hunting stand – the last hunting stand, usually, on any other morning. He grips the verticals, hardly places one foot on the bottom rung, and thus appears Lromn's head at the top, like a squirrel poking out from a tree hollow.

"Good 'morrow, Clurf!" greets Lromn. "A bit early this morning, yes?"

"No'no, Lromn," Clurf grins. "No, sprout, I'm right on time. Any action last night?"

"No, Wom'," Lromn reports. "Disappointing, I think."

"Oh?" Clurf asks, amused. "And why is that, sprout?"

Lromn beams a smile so bright it can only come from a Womnu. "I was hoping to see a warboar, Big Wom', so I might practice the ancient art of the tusk-grapple."

Clurf cannot help but chuckle and guffaw at this, this, this spry and exuberant youth before him. "That is grand to hear, Lromn. Mayhap your pig will find you during your next shift at guard."

"The divine can only hope," Lromn nods.

"Indeed," Clurf agrees. "The village is lucky to have you, Lromn. You and your long, bruly arms."

Clurf backs off so Lromn can climb down, and that's just what he does, smiling all the way.

"Shall I flex for you, Mas'Markswom?"

"Later," Clurf says, "perhaps. For now, you are at ease. Head back to the bunkhouse and sleep one soundly, you have earned that much and more."

Lromn heads back to the bunkhouse. Good ol-... well, good sproutish Lromn. Those arms truly are a miracle.

The walk to the second hunting stand is uneventful and quiet. The dimn is thinning evermore, the birds and brushdwellers are beginning to rouse, and Clurf knocks twice on the leg of the stand, then bows as Cresc climbs slowly down. It's not too often an elder volunteers to hold watch through the night, and Clurf does everything he can to avert his gaze out of respect.

Pure, unbridled respect.

Clurf would die for Cresc, for any of the elders. They wouldn't even have to ask. Hell, he'd kill hi

When the soft and olden footpace of Cresc no longer graces Clurf's filthy and wax-ridden earholes, he moves on to the third hunting stand. Along the way, he plucks a particularly dull twig from a fallen branch and cleans himself out, tosses it without looking. There's not much in the endless wood as gross as the garbage that builds

up in Clurfs cavernous earholes. As gross as cavernous Clurf himself...

As he's coming up on the third hunting stand, Clurf notices something glimmering near the top of the ladder, glimmering and reflective, gleaming with the light of the rising sun. A hand reaches out and plucks the blade from its resting place.

"Stykc," Clurf calls out, both feet on the ground. "All well?"

"Yes, Wom'," Stykc reports. "I placed my blade when I first came up, to ward off any vagrants, predators, what have you."

"To ward them off?" Clurf asks. "In the night?"

"Yes, Wom'," Stykc confirms. "The glow of the moon is bright, when your eyes are given the chance to adjust. Anybody out at night would have that chance, I believe."

"And I will confirm," Clurf confirms. "Climb on down, sprout. You are at ease."

Stykc climbs on down and stands before Clurf.

"You are at ease, young Wom'," Clurf repeats. "Why don't you return to the village?"

"I must ask," Stykc confesses, "may I come with you to call down Elder Cresc? I have been..." he pauses, diverts his gaze to the ground. "I've developed a new technique, and spent much of the night honing it. I wish to show her, to, to get her approval so I might put it into proper use."

Clurf nods, snickering with fast bursts of chuff'd air. "You are at ease, young sprout. I am running the stands in reverse this morning – Cresc is likely resting in the Edler Bunkhouse by now."

"Of course," Stykc says quickly, "yes, yes of course. It

was foolish of me to ask, to even believe—”

“At *ease*, Stykc.” Always so jumpy, this Stykc. It’s a wonder he can handle a blade at all, let alone develop a novel technique of his own. Truth be told Clurf himself is curious of what Stykc has developed, but...

Clurf gazes up through the canopy. The sky is now beginning to blue. Only the faintest whisp of the dimn remains afloat on the air.

“Before you go back,” Clurf says, to the immediately widening eyes of the sprout, “why don’t you perform your technique for me?”

“Big Wom’??”

“You’ve piqued my curiosity, sprout. You are known ‘round the village for your talent with the blade. I wonder if you might put that talent to use in the Lodge—”

The smile on Stykc’s face, the light in his eyes, the slight shake in his hand... never has he been less at ease.

“—in one of the leather rooms. Our cutters are swift, but they are not trained for combat. I do wonder if a hand of a different school might prove useful for the tanning craft.”

“Of course,” Stykc nods, though with much less vigor and wile than he was giving off a moment ago. “Please, Big Wom’. Step back a few paces.”

Big Wom’ does.

Dagger held in hand, Stykc puts his feet together and crosses his arms, almost as though he meant to fall back and land in a coffin. His eyes are closed, breath steady, motion still’d... then, he opens, reaches out with free hand as though to grasp a tunic by the collar, a creature by the throat, a denizen by the scruff of its fur as his arm’d hand

reaches back, dagger sent twirling betwixt his fingers as though to mimic the waterwheel of Big Kessr Mill. Then, Stykc grips down with free hand, strikes heel of palm to earth, flies a wagonwheel and, as the dagger spins and spins, flying through his fingers too fast to lose its blur, he plants the blade without mercy into the dirt against his knuckles. Clurf almost falls backwards, the force of the strike so great, so deadly, so... clear, in its motives.

"Look, Big Wom'," Stykc pleads, "look how the blade rests against my knuckles."

Clurf, astonished, ambles up and squats.

"By the divine," Clurf mutters, "it's... the blade touches your skin." He looks into Stykc's hungry – not starved, merely hungry – eyes. "How... how'd you not draw blood, Young Wom'?"

"You see," Stykc smirks, "Big Wom', the blade does not touch my skin. Please, look again."

And so Clurf does look again, and so he's even more abashed, "By the *divine!*" and only in a stupefied way, "A blade of grass could not fit to fill that gap! Stykc, I... I do not know what to say."

Stykc pulls the blade from the earth, wipes the soil off on his tunic, sheathes it 'pon his hip.

"Thank you, Big Wom'. I feel fortune just to be seen."

Clurf, amazed, gives the young sprout a bow. Never has he seen such prowess, such skill, such... such fight in a single Womnu.

"Tomorrow," he says, "you must – shall – give Cresc a demonstration."

"Big Wo–"

"You must," Clurf decides. "There may not be a place

in the Lodge for you, not amongst the tanning quarters, at least, but... I am hesitant to say it, for I do not wish to spoil your mind with promises of false reward—”

“Never,” Stykc assures him. “I do not eat fruit before it goes pluck’d, Big Wom’.”

Clurf nods thoughtfully. “Mayhap Merrf could make use of you. Out on the road, I mean.”

Were Stykc a hound, his tail would wag with glee.

“Now, he *can* handle himself... but... a bit of talented company would not hurt. Do you strip the bark from my bough, Stykc?”

“I do, Big Wom’,” Stykc assures him. Then, he bows again. “I certainly do.”

“Very good,” Clurf says. “At ease, Big Wom’. Back to the village. You’ve earned your rest.”

Clurf watches the talented, albeit young bladeswom wander off through the Harbor. Lumbstock is lucky to have him... but Merff would be luckier. Perhaps it would be good for Stykc to leave the village. Even Clurf is ‘ware of the stagnation which has clotted over Lumbstock as of late. Big Kessr Mill runs every day, but the lumber only piles up. Soon they’ll have to stop taking trees from the Harbor, and if that happens... well, if *that* happens... Clurf doesn’t like to think about that. He’s two guardswoms to relieve yet, and he must get a move on.

So, he does. Womming the second hunting stand – the second to last on this day unlike any other – is the spritish Ryfjr, she of the spirit of the airborne archer. She sits with trous’d legs hanging a’dangle off the top of the ladder. Clurf bets she’s been sat like that all night.

“Ryf,” Clurf calls out. The sun has risen plenty, the

Harbor is illum'd; there's no need for stealth under the beam of the sun. "Did trouble find you last night?"

She looks slightly down to him, then points her gaze back forward. "No, Big Wom'. Nothing has found me yet."

"Then," Clurf asks, "why are you on such high alert? I know I am... late getting here," there's no point in denying it, this entire morning has been backwards, "but you are at ease. Unless... well, please. Come down."

A few moments pass. Then, she slings her longbow over her shoulder and slides down the ladder.

"I heard something," Ryfjr explains, her face hard like steelwood. "Last night. Near Lumblock River, perhaps on the other side of the bramble. It—"

"By the river?" Clurf asks. "We're a bit far off, no?"

"Big Wom'?"

He searches for... for... weakness, he supposes, in her composure, her face, her surety. Finds none.

"All right," he allows. "Tell me what you heard."

"It sounded like... groaning."

"Groaning...?"

"Yes," she says. "That of a denizen, or... perhaps of a creature. It sounded like it was in pain. Perhaps a denizen too large to dwell in the brush decided to cross through the bramble wall an'into the Harbor. Perhaps it got stuck and ripped its way out, took a dunk in the river to ease its ails... but..." She shakes her head. "It sounded like it came from within the Harbor, and—"

"And the river is dug out," Clurf finishes. "Nothing *can* get into the Harbor. Nothing that's not aware..."

He lowers his head slightly, places a hand to his chin.

"What are you thinking, Big Wom'?"

"Sprec," he says simply. "She's been gone for... a long time. A very long time. We've been expecting her back for so long now I didn't think she would return, but—"

"I don't think it was Sprec, Big Wom'," Ryfjr states. "I hope it wasn't, at least. The sound... it didn't sound good. Didn't sound lively."

"I... see," he says. "Did you leave your post?"

"No," she says quickly. "No. Well... yes, technically."

"Ryfjr," Clurf says, disappointment and shock and ten other emotions felt, one for each of the Womnu Thirteen she has let down with her faulty actions. "And with no shame you admit this to me."

"I merely let an arrow fly," she explains. "I wanted it to travel the greatest distance it could, so I climbed upon the roof and leapt."

"And still you stand? On two feet?!" he flabbergasts. "I am... impressed, more than anything else. Did your arrow hit its mark?"

"I've no way of knowing," she admits. "I climbed back up and waited, and nothing more came to me until you, just now."

"I see," Clurf sees with weary eyes and troubled mind. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. In what direction—"

"Towards the end of the bramble wall," she says. "Where it begins to creep into the river. I meant only to ward off what may possibly have been there."

"And it seems you were successful," he says. "But still, I shall check it out. Thank you, Ryfjr, for your service, bravery, your guile. You are at ease. Return home."

She nods, then does. Clurf takes immediately to the

last hunting stand, hustling in run, and stops far short of the ladder. Like Ryfjr, Fwhyz's legs hang a'dangle, heels resting against the ladder, but... by the divine... there's... there's blood on the ladder.

"Fwhyz," Clurf says, not in whisper nor in speak.

No answer.

"Fwhyz!"

No drops patter to the ground. Clurf approaches and touches a thumb to the crimson streak a'leak down the vertical. Tacky and stiff. Dry.

"No," as he hauls himself up the ladder, "no, Fwhyz, please—"

...

Though the sky is clear of clouds rain and storm, the divine ones weep in silent mourn' above it all.

## Kuug'n'buug

A forearm burly as 'tis filthy – it doesn't come clean when dipped and removed from the river, for the divine's sake – dips into the river and comes out with an arrow of bone clenched in its grot-stained fingers.

"Hm," says the queer creature to which this dirty arm belongs. "Still here. Hm. Must'a miss'd. Hm."

He walks back up on the bank, stares into the tangled mass of thorny bramble, all the thorns and branches and whiplike tendrils of the thorny stabby plantwall... he bets he could grab it. He bets he could step on it, sit on it, bite it between his teeth and gums and he wouldn't feel a lick of pain, not a punch of pain, not a crack break crumble

nor roll of pain, that yucky village bramble wall couldn't hurt him, couldn't pierce his hilly skin, couldn't *dream* of besting the protection magick of the highest and exalted Grand Kuug'n.

He does not try it, though. He's gotta get back to the Cavern. But first.

First.

He's gonna give that firepit a sniff.

Yes, he bends down low, crawls up on all fours, puts his nose right into the pit and sniffs one hard, sniffs his sinuses full of the ash left behind by the fire that burned through the dimn.

With zero idea what happened to the little village runaway, Kuug'n'buug dashes across the river. When he gets to the other side, he doesn't even think of stopping.

## The Meeting

Never before has a corpse been lain on the table in the long meeting room of Lumbstock Hall. None of the elders speak. They're all far too disgusted, too ashamed, too... too devastated. The loss of a Womnu is never an easy weight to bear, but to lose one so talented, so swift as Fwhyz...

"This is an utter travesty," says Woode. "How did this happen, Clurf? How could something like this happen under your watchful eye?"

"It did not," Clurf assures him. "The Thirteen all know the risks of womming the hunting stands, they all kne—"

"Risks?" Dukof sneers. "There are no risks inherent in sitting a night in a hunting stand. The only beasts of the

'wood a'roam in Woode's Harbor are the ones we have Merrf lure in. This was done by the hand of a creature."

"A creature?" Clurf asks. Thin shadows of treebranch' dance through the window. "From outside of Lumstock? Impossible. We're the only higher life in all the cragg'ed plain, you know that."

"*You* know that," says Rokud. "We, the elders of this village, the ones who provided for you, for all of Womnu kind..." he sighs, scratches at the patch of grayed stubble on his cheeks. "We know nothing that is not present and clear to us."

"Fwhyz is dead," says Woode, bottom jaw tense, "and we are all sitting in this room, in this divine-shamed hall bickering over what we think we know. How could this have happened?"

"I don't know," Clurf says, but... but he might. The hole in Fwhyz's leg is deep, and the exact size of an arrow. Ryfjr herself said she let fly an arrow, let it fly as far as it might go. As far as it could. She is an adept archer, Clurf knows it just as well as everyone else in this room, but... could she have done it? Would the divine allow it to be so?

"Clurf," hisses Woode. "If you have something to say, please do say it."

"I... do not know how this happened..."

She's too young, she... she can't be punished. Murder is treason against all Womnus of Lumbstock, and while she can leap and sling an arrow unlike anyone else in the village, she would not fend well out in the wildlands of the cragg'ed plain. Nobody in the village would. Why else has Sprec not yet returned? To leave the village is to walk

acceptingly into death, nothing short and nothing more.

"...but, I know something must be done. This cannot be left alone, elders, I must—"

"You must find the one who did it," says Kyrel, "and make sure they never do it again."

"Of course," Clurf bows. "Where shall I start?"

The elders share many a'look, so many eyes, but yet no words are spoke'.

"Clurf," says Jelek. Stolid silent Jelek, all ears when he speaks. "What do you know of the four clearings?"

"Nothing at all," says Clurf. "What four clearings do you speak of?"

Jelek looks to Woode. He nods slowly.

"Dispersed around the village," Jelek explains, taking down his cowl, "are four clearings in the 'wood. The first three are... triangulated, with Lumbstock at the epicenter. The fourth is along the bank of the Lumblock River. You have seen the map Kuhg keeps in the Lie'Brehn'ry, yes? The one Sprec sent back in the glass vessel?"

"Once or twice," Clurf admits. "Not close enough to have it in my memory."

"Were you to follow the river due west," Aylei says, "it would curve slightly to the north and then bend a hard south. The fourth clearing was carved out along the inner bank of that hard bend."

"I... I don't—"

"It's not important," says Woode, arms folded, hairs press'd between burly flesh. "You shall trek to the second hunting stand and climb up onto the roof, then gaze out through the canopy. If you're competent—... well... look for a hill. You should see the crest of it through the canopy."

From the hunting stand you will walk in a straight line in the direction of that hill. Cross over the bramble wall or climb through, it matters not to—

“I would have you strip naked and leap wholly into it,” snarls Dukof. “That way you might feel an ounce of the pain the greater village is sure to endure when they learn of the fate bestowed to our young Fwhyz.”

“Once past the bramble,” Woode continues, “continue steady in the same direction. You will come to one of the clearings. From this clearing you will find a path—”

“Are you sure?” Rokud interjects.

All eyes go to him, though words do not follow.

“I could go instead,” he offers. “Some secrets are best kept between us, fellows.”

“Some,” Woode agrees, “yes. But not all, and not this. We need you in the village, Rokud. All of us need to stay here.”

“For what reason?” Rokud demands, putting hands on the table to louden his stand. “There’s no work left for me nor any of my haulers here, Big Kessr Mill is as close to retirement as ever.”

“Even so,” Woode says, “I’d rather send Clurf. We trust him to manage the nightguard, we can trust him with the Gulgg.”

“The... Gulg?”

“Gul’guh,” Kyrel corrects. “They are creatures of earth and clay, faceless as they are thoughtless.”

“I do not understand,” Clurf pleads.

“No,” Woode agrees, “you do not. You cannot. Not until you encounter them yourself.” A visible shudder travels through the head elder’s body, bringing Clurf close to the

point of nervous gulp. "They do not speak. Not... through the physical realm."

"Please," Clurf begs, "I don't... what am I meant to do with these... these Gulggs?"

"You will go to them," Woode says, "and ask for their assistance. It is said they are given life by the spirit of the endless wood itself, but... one cannot know for sure. We first encountered them when—"

"Enough," says Jelek.

"What...?" Clurf asks. "When did you first encounter them, Grand Elders? In the early days of Lumbstock? Did they raid our humble village during the earliest days of build? Did," voice a'trembl', "did they... were these Gulgg responsible for the warboar stampede which so crippled our numbers all those moons ago?"

"Enough, Clurf," Jelek says with a terrible stare. "You will go to the Gulgg encampment and you shall plead the case of our slain Fwhyz... and by the will of the divine ones, the Gulgg will help you."

"And if they don't?"

The elders do not answer.

"Go now, Clurf," Woode says. "There is no time to lose, you must reach them before sundown."

"Why?" Clurf asks. "What happens to the Gulgg after the moon rises over the horizon?"

"Nothing." Kyrel offers him a smile. "Traversing the 'wood after dark is dangerous for a Womnu. We'd rather you return to us with answers than not at all, Clurf."

"Oh," Clurf says, feeling not quite steady about all of this. About any of this. "Of course. Please, my apologies."

"Accepted," says Woode. "The meeting is adjourned."

Clurf, get moving. Fellows, take to the village and spread the word of Fwhyz's demise. We'll have the Wom's of Big Kessr Mill prepare a coffin and hole for the burial."

"Will... will you wait for my return?" Clurf asks. "For the ceremony, I mean. I would like—"

"No," Woode says, very firmly. "You did not cause this death, fellow Wom', but you now have a role to play in it."

Clurf nods, turns to go. There's no sense in arguing, not now. A Womnu has perished, and a damn good one at that. Now, Clurf has a role to play.

...

Addressing the rest of the elders, "In addition to the death of Fwhyz, the sprout Orde seems to be missing as well. Bulga told me she heard him rise from bed and walk last night, and he wasn't there when she woke."

"Do you believe," asks Dukof, "the ordinary one had something to do with the death of Fwhyz?"

"I... am unsure. But," Woode says, "I know as fact we sent Orde to the Lie'Brehn'ry before the moon rose, and now that it is set, he is gone and our Master Scout is dead of an arrow wound."

"You cannot seriously—"

"No," Woode agrees, "I do not, Jelek. But I do not trust that scraggly old Brehn, and I cannot shake the feeling that he is at the center of this. As I said, take to the village and spread word of Fwhyz and Orde. The sprout may still be around; if he is, all the better."

"And if he's not?" Aylei asks. "What then? Shall you send another Womnu out to die in the endless wood?"

Woode, leer steady, breathes through his nose. "Then we shall bring to Kuhg the fate delivered unto Big Kessr."

An uneasy silence blows through the hall, snow and sleet fallen from the summer sky.

“The meeting is adjourned.”

## Moonlight

A pair of knocks ricochet through the shelven den that is the Lumbstock Lie'Brehn'ry. The old Wom' Kuhg, his hair scraggly and unkempt from yet another night of sleeping where it's not comfortable to do so, lifts his head from his folded arms and squints into the hazy morning, waiting.

No more knocks come in. Kuhg's not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

Leaving his smoking pipe – his loaded smoking pipe, he'll have to fix that as soon as Womnuly possible – on the table in the center of his wooden cave, Kuhg feels his bones and joints and probably his muscles, too, as they creak and crack and pop back into place. His back is stiff something fierce, and his bony derriere is tingling from being planted in that firm, hard wooden seat all night. He squeezes through the narrow gaps between his shelves, pays no mind to the many collisions endured, and stands himself before the door... but doesn't answer.

Kuhg's not ready to answer the door just yet, and thus the knocker is not ready to be answered by Kuhg.

...

...

Still not ready.

...

...

...

Nope.

...

The knocks come again, three of them this time, and Kuhg watches the door jiggle about. He takes a breath of the ambient cannastralis smoke left over from last night, takes another for good measure, and then opens the door.

Oh good, it's Woode. At the Lie'Brehn'ry. First thing in the morning. How grand.

"Good morning," he says, "Elder Woode. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Woods hits him with a face. One without a grin.

"Morning, Kuhg. Thought I would stop by and peruse. Word is you have quite the... collection here."

Kuhg stares at the burly old Wom' for a moment, then shakes his head a bit, steps aside.

"Please, by all means."

Woode enters the Lie'Brehn'ry.

"It stinks in here, Kuhg," Woode offers. "It's dark, too. How can any Womnu hope to find a book, let alone read it, with such terrible lighting?"

"I—"

"It's almost like you covered all your windows with books."

Kuhg waits it out.

"And," Woode adds after a moment, "prop that door open, would you? Vent the place out a little, for both of our sakes."

With the fattest, heaviest, and deadliest tome within arm's reach, Kuhg props the door open. He doesn't bother to check which book it is. He's not read a word in strates.

"So," Woode begins to... peruse, Kuhg supposes, "how did the meeting with young Orde go yesterday?"

"Orde..." Kuhg feigns, "Orde, Orde... which one was he again?"

Woode just looks at him.

"The, eh, the *ordinary* one, wasn't he? Yes, he did stop by."

Very nonchalant, Woode notices of Kuhg. Almost like he's acting.

"And?"

Kuhg's eyes stretch open, wind dragged to his lungs. "And... what? It could have gone better, could have gone worse. I tried to talk to the sprout, I did, but he wasn't very responsive. Didn't seem to know where he was, what he was doing here." He shrugs. "Didn't seem to know much of anything, that sprout. It's a wonder he's survived this long."

"I... do not disagree," Woode says to the shelf opposite the front door. "That's why we chose to send him to you, the other elders and I. We thought he'd be a good match for you, a worthy apprentice for you to..."

Woode hits Kuhg with a quick sideways glance, then returns his gaze to the overstuffed bookshelf.

"Well, perhaps *apprentice* isn't the word. Regardless," he turns bodily to Kuhg now, "I'd like a report. How did the meeting go?"

"I told you," Kuhg tells Woode, again, "he came in here rambling with his tail between his legs like a laem wolf pup. I don't like my time being wasted, so I sent him off. Told him to come back when he was ready."

"Ready," Woode asks, "for what?"

"Anything."

They stare at one another for a moment.

"He's missing," Woode informs a frankly stonefaced Kuhg. "Bulga heard him rise in the middle of the night, he left the comfort of his bunkhouse to wander beneath the moon like some kind of nocturne scoundrel, like some lowly highwayman."

"Like a thief," Kuhg interprets, "yes? What exactly do you believe the sprout stole?"

"Oh, nothing," Woode says, turning back to read the titles of the...

"Are... is that *mold*?"

Woode puts a hand on one of the books's spines, pulls it down. Three additional volumes come with it, all stuck together, all fuzzy and white and reeking of mildew and rot. Kuhg comes in close, eyes all a'squint, and studies the mass of rotten book.

"Yes, it appears to be," Kuhg says. "Toss them in the bonfire pit, would you mind? I've much work to do here today, I don't see myself leaving the 'Brehn'ry."

Woode drops the infested books to the shabby floor. "No. I don't play with mold, Kuhg. You'll have to dispose of them yourself."

"Very well," Kuhg shrugs.

"And," Woode continues, "if those four are so far gone that they're stuck together, the infection's likely spread to other shelves. You'll need to take everything out, Kuhg. You may as well just burn the place down."

Kuhg blinks a couple times. He doesn't do it quickly, either. He just lets the time pass while he doesn't think of something witty to say.

"There is... another matter," Woode says, "I have come here to discuss," as he risks a look around. He could go deeper into this shabby... well, there's no point. The time is already growing thick. "There's been a death in the village, Kuhg."

Kuhg waits, eyebrows high, pupils narrow.

"'Twas Fwhyz, of the third generation. He held watch in the Harbor last night, was found dead in his hunting stand this morning."

Kuhg's forehead loses a few of its wrinkles. "How did he go?"

"By arrow." Woode lifts one Bruhny foot, puts it up on the pile of moldy books, jabs a meaty finger into the center of his thigh. "Hit him here, went in deep."

"How deep?"

"Deep enough to bleed him husk before the sun rose. For reasons I am... unsure of," he realizes, "Clurf made his rounds in the reverse order this morning. Had he went to Fwhyz's hunting stand first, perhaps something could've been done, perhaps this could be a different conversation, but..."

"But he did not," Kuhg nods. "This is awful, a terrible tragedy. By the divine... why Fwhyz? Of all our Womnus, why Fwhyz?"

"I do not know, nor can I understand it." Woode, head anchored low, peers into the old Brehn's eyes. "I mean you no evil when I ask this, Kuhg, but—"

"Never," Kuhg states. "I wouldn't harm a fly, let alone a Womnu. Besides, look at me."

Woode looks him up and down.

"Do you really think, even for an *instant*, that I would

be able to handle Fwhyz? That I would be able to best him in combat? That I would even be capable of aiming an arrow well enough to hit him in the thigh?"

"You wouldn't necessarily need to shoot him," Woode says. "An arrow is just a spear, but... handheld."

"...Yes, I suppose it is."

Were tension a flame, all the knowledge would burn. Woode takes his foot off the pile of mold, grinds it clean against the floorboards, shreds layers off the dryrotted planks.

"So," Woode says, feeling eager to leave the old fool to his *work*, "to be clear... you know nothing of the death of Fwhyz?"

"It was news to me, Big Wom'," Kuhg says.

"And the sprout," Woode asks. "Orde."

"What of it?"

Woode's neck gets tight.

"You sent him away before the sun set?"

"I did."

"And you haven't seen him since?"

"I've not."

"Tell me, Kuhg," as arms fold, "what work have you to do today?"

"The same work I always have," Kuhg says, folding his arms with smugness. "Maintaining the cannastralis garden."

"Of course," Woode nods, "yes, of course, how could I forget? You grow a crop of the daemon shrub in your little alley between the walls."

"Call it what you must," Kuhg shrugs. "You gave me this corner of the village to do what I please, and so I do,

and so I shall into the future. Now," as he gestures with a whole arm to the door, "if there's nothing else, Big Wom', I'd like to make my way back there."

"After you dispose of this pile of moldy books," Woode suggests.

Teeth gritt', "Yes. After I dispose of the moldy books."

"I have a suggestion for you, Kuhg," Woode says as he steps out, hands all a'clasp behind his back. "Toss them over the wall and out into the 'wood. There will likely be a bonfire later on in the eve', to commemorate the loss of our late Master Scout. We wouldn't want the rest of the village choking on any spores, now, would we?"

"We certainly would not," as Kuhg scoops the ruined tomes into his arms. "I'll do as you suggest. It is a grand idea. Goodb—"

"Kuhg," Woode says. "One more thing."

Kuhg waits a moment, but no things are said. Woode merely stands there, just outside the doorway, his back facing Kuhg, his head slightly turned, just enough to hold the Brehn in the corner of one eye.

Then, Kuhg caves.

"Yes?"

"You'd be... wise, not to smoke outdoors in the night. The moonlight... one never knows what it might inspire."

Kuhg doesn't say a damn thing to whatever *that* was, he just stands there holding the moldy relics of his past. When the elder is gone, he kicks the 'stop away and lets the Lie'Brehn'ry door slam shut.

## Rattlesnake

"My *Self*..."

"What?"

I don't answer.

"Adam," Eve says, nudging me with one of the finest elbows this side of Planet Eden, "what is it? Why've you stopped?"

Lo, but still I say nothing. It's not that I can't – make no mistake, I am the Astral God of All of this bitch–... of Existence, not Eve. Neither of them are bitches, like... god, I just love The Garden so much, I can't bear to grow this rotten fruit any longer.

"Something is terribly wrong here," I finally admit. "A cycle's formed."

"Impossible," claimed by youieA. He doesn't mind me keeping his name short. Not here. Not now.

"If only it was, my guy," I say. "If only it was. The fact of the matter is, folks, if *Ordinary* continues the way it's now going... it's going to bring Tungstok into The Endless Wood."

"So what's wrong with that?!" Eve exclaims. Like me, Eve has a *major* crush on the exalted High God Tungstok "Rattlesnake" Thompson, also known as one *Novelwriter* Tungstok "Rattlesnake" Thompson in an honorary sort of way.

Fuckin' Rattlesnake Thompson, that glorious son of a bitch.

"Adam!" Eve shrieks, as it's been an eternity she since first spoke. "Why can't we bring Big Rattlesnake into The Endless Wood?!"

"*First* of all," as I lay it all out, "I'm hearin' a lot of *wes* in this piece. It's almost like there's a mouse in here... a mouse... or... *a fuckin' rat.*"

youieA's face falls flat with understanding. "My *You...* you're right. We need to get out of The Endless Wood."

"Again," I point out, "with the *we* there. There's only one Bookmaker, guys, and I appreciate you hangin' out in here with me, but..."

"But you want us both out," Eve assumes, not entirely incorrect.

"It's not... well, yeah, essentially. BUT, not because of you guys. It's nothing against you – The Writer's Room is meant for writers, y'know? Like... again, I adore the fact that you two wan'a hang out with me, you are my family and I really, really love you. But... you're not writing. And, what's more, you're just peering over my shoulder."

"So," says The Mongrel, The Perception, The Father of Existence Lord youieA The Garden Incarnate, One Above Thou, "what are you going to do then, Bookmaker?"

I smirk dastardly, despite my pureness of intention and will. "I'm going to let Psycedelia make her own books from now on."

"Good idea," Eve says, arms folded in a specific way. "Why are you making me do this?"

"I'm not," I swear. "That's all you, babycakes, and you do not need to prop 'em up, either. You're my Bookkeeper, there's no replacing you."

She unfolds her arms and gives me a little smile. "Do you want some space to wrap the book up, Adam? Me and the Lord over there can go take a walk or something."

"Well," Adam says, "I don't know about *that.*"

"Why not?" asks the Lord over there.

"Because, eh... the last time I took a walk, Chuck Leary wound up offing a planet just to smoke a joint... y'know what I mean?"

"All too well," Eve sighs. "All right. Well—"

"You guys can do whatever you'd like," I say. "I'll join you just as soon as I'm done here. It won't take too long, trust me. I know exactly what I'm to do."

"And what might that be?" youieA asks, one foot out the door and Eve long gone.

I smirk again, but it's not dastardly this time. It's just that crooked half-smile that straightens out the bent.

"Easy. I'm bringin' in the Pillars Three."

## Pillar Soul

Ordinary Orde is wandering through the forest, sticking strictly to the bank of the ol' Lumblock River. The endless wood is quiet, devoid of life, devoid of sound, of motion. Something is wrong here, something is terribly wrong, he feels so suddenly awake to the fact that he should not be awake at all. The tiny village of Lumbstock, the cragged plain... it's all... it's all rot, it's all decomposition, it's all...

"By the divine," Orpe says, looking at his hands. "Am I even real...?"

Suddenly, a rumble approaches from behind. Orge is powerless to turn, he's frozen in place, he can't even blink his eyes. Not until the engine cuts off.

Orte turns 'round and lays eyes on a metallic steed, a true motorbike. Its driver is an actively rotting corpse.

"*Grraannngghhhhhh*," claims the corpse.

"Is that so?" Orqe asks, not sure why he does. "Please, tell me more."

The corpse begins to tremble, shake, violently vibrate until all the dead skin and muscle and Plague of Decay-esque biomatter is flung to the wind. What remains can only be described in one way: the suited man.

"Greetings, thing," says The Suited Man Chuck Leary, Pillar Soul of Existence. "If you didn't know, my name is *The Suited Man Chuck Leary, Pillar Soul of Existence*. I, also, I mean, I have something to share with you."

"What's that?" says generic insecure character whose name is just letters, just like all the rest of the population of fuckin' *Lumbstock*. Like, *LumberStock*, the tiny village. Christ, Adam.

Anyway, "So there's this *guy*, right, calls himself the Astral God of All—"

Because that's what I *am*, Pillar Soul.

"Yeah, sure, see, I will never admit that, but anyway... listen, uh... *Orbe*... goodbye."

## Pillar Body

A massive bonfire erupts from the pit in the center of the bunkhouse courtyard. Every single villager of the rotting village of Lumbstock comes out from their dwellings – even miserable old Kuhg – and gathers around to watch the flames dance.

Then, the fire dissipates. Standing there in the ash is a creature, a being of four limbs, two of which it stands

on. It is wearing a cloak, black on the outside, purple on the inside, and the hood covers its face.

And its gender.

Just kidding, it's a Man.

"Village of Lumbstock," drones the apparent Man in a death-requesting monotone, "give me your pain... give me your suffering... give me all that ails you... and I shall set you free..."

Woode steps up. He's pretty much the leader, I guess. Got his name on the Harbor and whatnot.

"Who are you, daemon?!" Woode cries. "How dare you come here through our grandest bonfire pit!"

"Who... am I? Well... I... am... The Brained Man Adom Hilter," says The Brained Man Adom Hilter, Pillar Body of Existence, "Pillar Body of Existence, and I have come... to do... that thing I do so well..."

As fate will have it, Fwhyz isn't the only Womnu to find the clearing at his path's end today. The hood drops and the endless blonde hair curls and curls, makes it all go away, brings it all to rest and peace and spiraly death...

## Pillar Mind

Albey the Maddest Poet, a stranded soul if ever there was one, cowers in the fetal position on the floor of his mighty crystal cabin. He lies on a carpet of papers, some of them scribbled with symbols and lines, others blank, all dotted with tearmarks wet and dry.

It's safe to say that waiting for his adversaries was not the move Albey the Maddest Poet needed make. Nay,

it only drove him madder, only made him regret his life, only led to him curling up in the position of a fetus.

"Albey," says a voice. "I'm going to need you to get up."

"Who's there?!" Albey moans into his bony knees. "Go away! Please! Spare me the misery, the torture! Just kill me now, I beg of you!"

A pair of divine eyes roll so hard that Albey finds his will, his sense, and his dignity. He stands and faces The Maned Man Arckaen Kyng, Pillar Mind of Existence.

"Good," says Arckaen. "Tell me, Albey: do you know who you are?"

"Yes," he says. "I am Albey the Maddest Poet, the only surviving member of The Triad. We felled Jericho Tower in order to preserve the endless wood."

"And to kill off the rotting ents," Arckaen adds. "That part's important too. Significantly."

"I... suppose it is."

"The reason both your friends died, Albey, was so you might eventually find your way back to them. You three, The Triad... you've a higher role to play here. The Endless Wood is an ever-expanding forest planet at the center of a Universe, this Universe, and there's nothing else like it. It needs protectors, three of them to be precise, and you, Albey... you're number three."

"Tuqon," he says, "and Ram'rl."

"One and two, correct."

"So how do I join them? How might I ascend, mighty divine one? Please, tell me – I shall do anything, complete any task or trial no matter the difficulty, no matter –"

"Shut up," Arckaen states. "Just... stop talking. At the center of Existence is a place called The Writer's Room

where books are made so Existence can spiral forever forward.”

“All right,” Albey agrees.

“The Writer’s Room is often occupied by Bookmaker Adam the Form of Being, et cetera. He’s The Bookmaker, uh... obviously... but he’s not the only bookmaker. Do you understand?”

“Do I need to?”

“Not particularly,” Arckaen shrugs. “Not now, at least. The fact of the matter is as follo’: The Endless Wood – and also The Playground, which you know nothing of – were originally conceived and built so other bookmakers could have a place to hone their skills, to, to... collaborate.”

“And that’s not what’s happening... is it?”

“Nope. Not at all. The Bookmaker is getting high off his own supply, and it’s resulting in rot. It’s disgusting to me, to be honest... but, as The Maned Man, I am one of the Pillars Three. We exist beneath The Bookmaker. I cannot force Him to open his yucking eyes to the truth of what he’s doing, BUT, I *can* let him use me as a sort of deus ex machina.”

“What in the endless wood is *that*?” Albey asks.

“Nothing you need worry about,” Arckaen promises. “Listen... I don’t want to tell you that you’re lucky, because luck has very little to do with this... but... I can ascend you. Right now. You will become, forever, *Planewalker Albey the Maddest Poet*. You will watch over The Endless Wood with your comrades, and when the time comes, you shall extend debenture to those who prove worthy.”

“What... *extend debenture*? To whom? What does that mean?”

"Sorry, I got a little ahead of myself. You are familiar with the concept of a *mantle*, yes?"

"But of course," Albey nods attentively. "One's mantle defines who they are, states the very purpose of their life."

"Exactly," The Maned Man nods, "exactly right. There is a very powerful mantle, Albey, one which carries a will of its own, one capable of granting its bearer the power to create entire universes from nothing, scratch, an empty blank page. This mantle is *Novelwriter*, and in addition to watching over all of The Endless Wood with the other two members of The Triad, you shall be the guardian of this mantle. When the time comes – and that's only *if* it comes – in which a High God has earned the right to bear the Novelwriter mantle and create a new universe, you shall extend to them debenture—"

"There, there's that word again. I've not the slightest of what it might mean."

"You will lend them the mantle, Albey." The Maned Man grows... tired. "They will create a new universe, and when they are ready to go there, they will exchange the mantle for the right to leave The Endless Wood. Do you understand?"

"No, honestly," Albey says. "But... I feel as though I do not need to. Not now."

"Good," Arckaen smiles. "Good, very good. Well then... are you ready, Albey the Poet? We can wrap this up right here, right now."

"Yes," Albey says, and he means it. The crystal cabin in the center of the burnwood isle is nice and all, but... by the divine, Iuqon and Ram'rl await him in The Void! "I am ready, Maned Man. Do whatever you've come here to do."

Arckaen cracks his Astral 'nu'kl's as The Bookmaker prepares to tie this off in two sentences, this being one of them. At long last, Planewalker Albey the Maddest Poet joins The Triad out in The Void, and the cragg'ed valley henceforth known as Kessr's Flight is swallowed whole by The Endless Wood of The Hillside Commons; that is to say, the land doth shift; by the will of The Bookmaker, 'tis back from whence it came.