

Matthew Seven

by DeadManSeven

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Not yet, anyway.

The Strait Gate

Chapter 1 of 5

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Part One: The Strait Gate

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat.

Matthew 7:13

Exactly twenty-four hours before the whole ordeal ended, two things were happening in Yvonne Brzezicki's apartment: the first flickering pearl of sunlight was visible over the horizon, and her electric kettle was reaching the boil, making the little lever at the base pop up. If there was any significance to this synchronicity, only God - or one of His peers - could know.

Yvonne tapped her fingers on the kitchen island as she waited for her toast, then stole a sip of her morning coffee. Still too hot. However, it woke up her stomach, that tiny hint of taste and shadow of food rallying up feelings of hunger and memories of eating. *Breakfast, break fast*, she thought. She might have read that somewhere, some book that made use of the random trivia that 'breakfast' was a combination of two words and signified breaking the fast people created for themselves after they had their evening meal and went to sleep.

Might have to get a new toaster. How old is this one anyway? Break fast, break down. She could maybe try fixing it herself, but she didn't really know all that much about how a toaster worked, and how expensive were they, really?

Chunk! came the toast, and she grabbed the two slices (barely changed in appearance from when they had entered the toaster) and buttered them, tossed the knife in the

sink, put the butter back on its shelf in the refrigerator, scooped up the plate and her coffee, rounded the island and headed for the tiny couch in front of her television, and forgot about fixing or replacing her toaster for another morning. She sat down and, slice of toast (if you could call it that) in hand, grabbed the remote and thumbed on the television. One of the many morning programs - the kind that ran the current headlines, then the weather and traffic reports every fifteen minutes for a few hours - came on, which saved her hunting for a channel. The world hadn't pulled itself apart while she slept, it seemed - there were riots abroad and a local stabbing and worldwide economic problems, so the planet was in much the same state as she had left it before going to bed last night. Then came the time to cheer everyone up by saying how pleasant the weather would be today, which was when the owl flew into Yvonne's apartment.

It perched itself on her coffee table and dropped a rolled-up copy of the *Daily Prophet*, neatly landing it between her now-empty plate and still-full mug of coffee. A little dish full of coins - some Muggle, some wizard, mostly small change - sat on a table next to the couch, and it was from here that Yvonne fished out some Knuts to pay the owl for delivery. She fancied this might have been the Wednesday owl, since it seemed a little familiar. Maybe it serviced around her area; maybe it made deliveries to outside of magically-settled areas.

The owl grabbed the Knuts in its beak and took off. Maybe she just imagined recognising it; owls looked pretty similar for the most part, anyway. She unfolded the paper and sipped her coffee - more bearable after some time and some toast. **Potter Chosen Head Auror**, the headline read. That was not surprising, so she just skimmed over what was written about it on the front page and didn't turn to page five to read on. She did, however, make her way to page sixteen to find out if the daughter of the bagpiper in the Weird Sisters was indeed dating a werewolf - the article was inconclusive, but Yvonne could have bet it would have been closer to the front page if it turned out she had been. Maybe not *on* the front page, at least for the *Prophet*, but close.

She browsed a couple of other articles as she finished her coffee: the motion to lift the ban on flying carpets was back again, one of the national Quidditch teams had an almost-completely new line-up, and the *Prophet* was once again insinuating that the Ministry of Magic had research information coming out of the Department of Mysteries that was 'a matter of grave public interest' to release - but she didn't really give them too much consideration. The Wizarding world, like the Muggle world, had gone mostly unchanged overnight. She folded the *Prophet* and put it with the rest of the things to be recycled, rinsed out her mug and left it with the plate and knife in the sink, then did a quick tour of the apartment to fetch up her keys, bag, wand, and charged iPod before leaving for work.

Not many people were ever on the bus at this time of the morning, but Yvonne usually recognised at least half of them. There was no acknowledgement that passed between any of them, no recognition - they were all Serious Commuters, and to be a Serious Commuter, you couldn't be talking to other people. You came equipped with a bag or briefcase, armed with a paperback or ear-buds (Yvonne's weapon of choice), or an unfocused stare out the window. You flashed your monthly card to the driver when you got on - Serious Commuters never exchanged money with the driver directly, and they certainly never asked foolish questions about where the bus was going or where it would stop. Serious Commuters were a part of society nobody recognised until they became one of them: the woman with her business dress and tennis shoes, the man in a suit with the earpiece in one ear, drumming on his knee, the kid with a handful of paperwork pulled from a satchel covered in patches; they and many more carried this secret with them, never vocalising it, but maybe, sometimes, thinking of it in a subconscious way whenever they recognised one of their own kind.

Yvonne took her seat and watched out the window as the bus headed into the city. She alternated what she listened to during bus rides - some days it was music set to shuffle, others were for recorded books. She read - or would that be listened to? She never could decide on the right word - anything and everything, flitting between the established classics to frenetic modern works of pure style, deep thought and philosophy to cheap pulp; horror to sci-fi to crime to romance to fantasy (especially ones about hidden magic worlds, which held a special kind of irony). Today was the beginning of a crime thriller that pledged to stick pretty close to formula: a talented young forensics investigator finding out she was being targeted and taunted by a serial killer that had some connection to her suppressed past. A bit pulpy, maybe, but about right for the bus. She saved any serious literature she read for a physical book, at home in her armchair. She smiled a little at the idea that Serious Commuters avoided serious literature and focused on listening to her book.

Yvonne got off at her stop alone and started walking down the main street. She made sure to switch off her iPod and lock it before arriving at work - any attempts at listening to it there had produced a weird, staticky pulse, and one time everything had been erased and replaced with what sounded like a chorus of voices all singing a single note that lasted for (according to the iPod) twenty-seven hours. Provided it wasn't turned on, though, there were no abnormalities.

She glanced over her shoulder upon arriving at Purge and Dowse, Ltd. She was convinced that one day someone - likely a police officer - would stop her and ask what it was she was doing poking around in that place. It was a stupid fear - police officers, like any other Muggle, didn't give a second glance to the empty shop-front, but when was any fear not stupid, really? She saw no one on the street aside from another woman hurrying off in the opposite direction, and neither the quick pace she kept nor the way she flicked at her hair that hung about her shoulders seemed much like she was with the police. She was probably trying to be at work early.

Yvonne muttered that Healer Brzezicki was arriving, gave another quick glance back to the mostly-empty street, and stepped through the glass into the pale green waiting room of St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. An old wizard with a bushy beard sat in the waiting room, pretending he wasn't reading one of the ancient magazines. He glanced up at Yvonne and went back to the magazine without a second thought. She was unable to predict with any accuracy when she would receive a response like this, or when she would receive the one that first started with the widening of the eyes and then recognition and comprehension - Muggle dress among wizard professionals had become more common after that famous photograph of Minister Shackbolt shaking hands with the Prime Minister, both of them wearing smiles and dour suits, but it was still far from the norm.

"Morning, Yvonne," the Welcome Witch greeted her.

"Morning, Angelica," she replied.

"You just missed some excitement," Angelica told her. Yvonne raised her eyebrows in that universal, 'Oh? Go on,' gesture, but Angelica was already continuing. "A witch just brought a man in with her, and he was unconscious, and when I asked her what his name was, to check him in, she insisted she didn't know, so then when I asked what *her* name was, she said she couldn't remember that either! I was still trying to convince her she might want to see someone on the third floor, when..."

"Weren't a potion that done it, that were a memory charm gone wrong, mark my words," the old wizard with the beard interjected.

"Thank you, Mr Gardener," Angelica said, trying not to let her exasperation show to Mr Gardener, then tried to remember what she had been saying.

"When..." Yvonne offered.

"Oh! Yes, when Healer Archer came to take him off for examination. She left just now, and she was in a bit of a hurry." Angelica lowered her voice a shade, as if imparting a secret. "I think she was a bit insulted, really."

"Well, people can get touchy when they're told they don't remember something they should," Yvonne said and then remembered something she and Angelica had spoken about the last time she had seen her. "Hey, how were your sister's kids?"

"Great! They're such little monsters," Angelica said with a smile as Yvonne started to walk towards the stairs.

"Tell me about it at lunch, okay?" Yvonne said, walking backwards for a moment without breaking stride. Angelica nodded and waved, and Yvonne smiled and waved back as she continued on her way.

"I said it weren't no potion that done that girl's memory!" called Mr Gardener from the waiting room, evidently not feeling the matter had been thoroughly explored. Yvonne smiled to herself as the argument between Angelica and Mr Gardener started anew.

She climbed the stairs and made a line straight for the break room on the third floor, which was, as she suspected it would be, empty. To the left of the door, mounted on the wall, was what Yvonne thought of as the Healer Costumes - clipboards that held scrolls of parchment (enchanted to provide a constant roll of information about patients, schedule, people being admitted, and who was needed where and what they had to do in case of emergencies) and a row of pale-green robes hung on hooks. Healer

robes were lightweight and designed to sit over regular robes, but they worked fine over Muggle clothing also. She slipped them on, took her schedule for the day from one of the racks in the wall, and was checking her rounds when the pop of Apparition came and another figure appeared in the room. Yvonne didn't have to turn to see who it was; the exaggerated groan of exasperation was enough to tell her.

"It's not fair, you know," the new arrival said. "You shouldn't be able to be here before me when you insist on taking the bloody Muggle bus." The new arrival gathered her own robes and clipboard, and attempted to level Yvonne with a severe stare. "It shouldn't be possible."

"Good morning, Elizabeth," Yvonne said, her voice completely flat. She almost considered calling her Lizzie or even Liz. Elizabeth detested any alteration of her name but decided (as always) that playing the straight man would be better than starting off with nettling back.

"Mor-ho-horning," Elizabeth replied, attempting to mimic the lack of concern and failing due to an ill-timed yawn.

Yvonne folded her arms and smirked. "Perhaps there's a reason why I'm always a little earlier to work than you. It could be some element in my life that you don't have, or vice versa. I could do a study on the differences, maybe there's a paper in it."

"Yeah, yeah," Elizabeth said, managing to fit a wave of dismissal into the task of putting on her Healer robes.

"Perhaps there's something in that wine I like that improves my internal sense of time. Do you drink much wine? Maybe... maybe it's the direction I face when I sleep; it's about fifteen degrees off of north..." She pretended to illustrate with her hands.

"Maybe you're here early to catch Healer Archer before he vanishes into his office for the day. He's back in today, you know."

"I did know, and that's not it." The two of them had left the break room and were walking side by side to the fourth floor.

"I can't imagine what it's like on shifts with just you two. I wonder how you could see to any patients that come in, since you'd both be so busy not talking about yourselves."

"Speaking of not talking about myself, how late were you out last night that you couldn't Apparate in faster than the woman with the forty-minute bus ride?"

"Nice change in topic; it was a skilful deflection that deserves high technical marks." A smile that, given a little encouragement, might have become a laugh passed between them before Elizabeth answered. "I met a boy."

"Would I know him?" Yvonne asked, which was one of many stock phrases of her father's that had found its way into her patterns of speech. This particular one had come up enough with Elizabeth that she might have been able to anticipate it; it certainly seemed that way in her reply.

"No, nobody does. Him and some mates came from... oh, one of those cold countries where everyone is blonde and two meters tall, I can't remember which one it was. They were here for a week or two and were out on the town. You know, lad's night out, that kind of thing. Boy stuff."

"Boy stuff," Yvonne half-agreed, half-mused. She only had a very vague idea of what Elizabeth classified under the broad umbrella of 'boy stuff'.

"Anyway, it was really interesting to be out with people who couldn't say, 'Oh, right, wasn't my brother in your year or something?' That's the absolute worst. 'I remember you from Hogwarts, and what you were like when you were sixteen!'" Her voice dropped down to a gruff parody of a man's voice. The kind of voice that might belong to a man who would make you late for work the next morning, perhaps.

"Well, there's always Muggles," Yvonne said, aware of the kind of response this would bring forth.

"For you, maybe - having to explain myself every time I wanted to tell them something is not my scene." She sighed. "I was thinking I'd Portkey to the Land of the Tall Blonde Pretty People next time I went out, actually."

"You speak... Tall-Blonde-Pretty-People-ese?"

This made Elizabeth snort laughter. "No, but they all speak better English than some people I've met here who have never left the country. There was this one bloke from Bristol..."

And so their small talk continued (though it never truly grew to the size of a full-fledged conversation) as they moved through the wards in Spell Damage. Yvonne liked Elizabeth as much as a person could like another while remaining colleagues, not real friends. She listened to the retellings of her weekend activities with genuine enthusiasm, although she never felt the need to join Elizabeth in them, even when the offer to do so came up periodically. She wasn't judgemental of Elizabeth, or intimidated by her; she simply reasoned that they were fundamentally different people. Elizabeth was welcome to go to the clubs and have a different man every week and think it a good time. Yvonne's version of a good night out was more of a good night in, sitting in her comfortable armchair reading, sipping a glass of wine, playing a favoured album - often Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*, a favourite of her mother's that came with many happy associations with home and family, but she was also partial to Dido's first album and, when reading something that didn't require heavy thought, Muse's *Absolution*. Yvonne had no idea what Elizabeth considered good music (although she suspected it might be criteria like 'has a good beat' and 'you can dance to it'); it was one of the many barriers to their friendship.

Elizabeth was checking on Mrs Brightman. What little there was to check, anyway. She had been admitted to Spell Damage by her overwrought husband, who had managed to explain after several frenetic attempts that his wife had been experimenting with Stunning Charms, and he had found her frozen in the centre of an elaborate array of full-length mirrors. The Healers assigned to her had managed to stop the bright red glow and, from what Yvonne understood, would be able to unfreeze her once the potion they had devised was ready, but this wasn't good enough information for Mr Brightman, who had appeared regularly at the front desk every day for nearly a month demanding to know what was happening with his wife and why nothing was happening faster. Yvonne couldn't blame him for being... excited was the best word for it, since it was a queer mix of anger, hysteria, and complete bewilderment, but she sometimes wished he would take at least a day to consider what the Healers kept telling him.

Yvonne herself was looking through the schedule on her clipboard. It showed Healer Archer's name, location (Spell Damage), and current activities ("emergency examination") in red text that crowded out his ascribed duties and bulged out the sides of the roster table a little. Had he flagged what he was doing as an emergency, or did the roster just... default to that? She wondered what he was doing.

"What's with the two of you?" Elizabeth asked, her voice sudden and shocking to Yvonne in the quiet room.

She lowered her clipboard, realising Elizabeth must have seen what she was checking. Yvonne turned to face her and began to ask, "The two of...," without much hope it would dissuade Elizabeth, but she cut her off before she could continue any rebuttal.

"You and Archer. Is he into you? Are *you* into *him*?"

"Nobody is *into* any..."

"It's okay if you are," Elizabeth assured her, "I mean, he's not *my* type, but if you're into that whole brooding economy-of-words thing, then go ahead." This was Elizabeth's playful revenge for Yvonne's jabs about how she slept late, and she was trying to get a rise from her. Yvonne rose.

"Oh, for God's sake." She threw up a hand. "We talk work, okay? Just because you're scared of him and I'm not, it doesn't mean there's some kind of... some kind of..."

"Sexual tension?" said Elizabeth with a smirk.

"Automatic chemistry," Yvonne countered, a little louder than was needed. "Healer Archer and I are just friends."

"They all say that."

It was at this time that Healer-in-Charge of the Janus Thickey Ward, Jean Paul Archer, entered the room. If he had heard any of their conversation, he didn't let it be known. He was not a broad man, though somehow his frame managed to dominate the doorway where he stood. His presence had a kind of physicality that extended a little beyond himself: it quelled noisy rooms, silenced idle conversation, and (perhaps rightly) intimidated Elizabeth a little. Jean Paul Archer entering a room was a little like floating at sea in a little sailboat and watching the massive, inky shape of a whale pass underneath. People tended to act as if he was harbouring a terrible rage that was in danger of coming to the surface at any moment, but Yvonne thought Archer, if he had any rage in him, had so much control over himself that nobody would ever see it: it was the control they responded to, the control that silenced rooms, the control that made him seem seven feet tall, with steel bones and an iron heart.

"Healer Brzezicki, I require your assistance in an examination. I assume you will have the time to spare." He glanced in Elizabeth's direction. "Healer Pickering."

"Healer Archer," she acknowledged, barely looking away from the bed, her voice not betraying she had been speaking about him a moment ago. There was no coldness in this dismissal; Archer held little patience for what Yvonne had heard him once call 'repetitive social rituals', and Elizabeth had long since stopped trying to engage him in them.

Yvonne was not as lucky. She could feel embarrassment prickling its way across the back of her neck as she turned to face Archer in the doorway.

"I've just got to go through Janus Thickey," she said, hoping that if there was indeed a flush creeping across her cheeks, it wasn't visible.

Archer nodded curtly. "I'm aware. I'll expect you in my office when you're done," he said and vanished from the doorway, evidently pressed for time.

Yvonne turned to Elizabeth. "Could you..." she began.

"Not a problem. You owe me something minor."

"I'll buy you an alarm clock."

Elizabeth pulled a face at Yvonne, who was moving to the door to head to the long-term spell damage ward. She caught Elizabeth smirking at her, her thoughts about Healer Archer calling on her specifically so obvious that it was quite possible Mrs Brightman might remember something about it when she was Unstunned. Yvonne rolled her eyes at Elizabeth and left the room.

The Mote In Thy Brother's Eye

Chapter 2 of 5

If asked, Yvonne would have admitted that she was caught in-between two worlds. She was a witch - a Healer working at St. Mungo's, in fact - who used Muggle methods to help her patients. She had no connection to the Department of Mysteries and could not have thought she was trapped between the present and the past, reality and nightmare, truth and lie, the living and the dead... Not yet, anyway.

Part Two: The Mote In Thy Brother's Eye

And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?

Matthew 7:3

The Janus Thickey ward was almost always quiet now that Mr Lockhart had been discharged. Yvonne had not realised how active he made the ward seem until he had left. On that day, she and Archer had watched him stride away like he owned the world, after shaking both their hands vigorously and flashing his perfect teeth at them. He had been particularly positive towards Archer, as he had been told it was Archer who brought a new order to his mind through his expertise in Legilimency and memory-altering magic; Archer had regarded him with the same distance he put between himself and every other person, although he didn't refuse Mr Lockhart's handshake.

"It's a little sad to see him go, isn't it?" Yvonne had said in the following quiet. Archer remained still for a moment, as if searching for the right way to begin, before he gave an answer.

"My wife once told me about something that happened to her." It was Yvonne's turn to be still and quiet; Archer very rarely spoke of his wife. She knew only that she had been an Auror and that she had died in the War.

"She had followed a wizard when he broke into a Muggle house that must have been temporarily empty, and she followed him inside. A duel ensued in the dark, destroying many of the Muggle family's objects in the process, and the wizard ran. My wife, who had many collections of things - animated figures, china plates - chose to repair the ruined room before following the man. He managed to escape, and she blamed herself, and told me it was only because she had thought a collection of beautiful things like hers had been ruined that she stayed to repair everything. She was furious that she had remained to repair a room full of what was, in reality, tacky and cheap. She told me in anger that she wanted to go back to that house and destroy the room again herself, since it had looked better that way. Mr Lockhart's mind was like that room. Full of broken objects, it was fascinating and full of possibility. When restored to its original state, he is just a greedy and dislikeable man. I do not feel sad for him."

"He's whole now, though. You fixed him. That's got to be good, right?" Yvonne had not been sure if she was explaining her own viewpoint to Archer, or arguing with him.

"Good for him, perhaps," Archer had responded. "But not so good for a world already filled with men who are greedy and dislikeable."

This insight into Archer's mind had fascinated her, rather than make her dislike him completely, although she had made an effort to avoid him a little for the rest of that day. It was so unlike the way she thought of people, yet it interested her in the way it was so absolute. Surgical, almost, if one could use that word in a context like this. Yvonne had become a Healer because she wanted to help people; she got the impression Archer could have been something like a watchmaker, if his interests lay in physical things like clocks and not the mind. She could no more see him having an attachment to an individual gear in a dismantled clock than to a person's thoughts - he only cared about the way in which they all fitted together.

While working together, it seemed he had developed a deep well of respect for her. Like Elizabeth had joked, they rarely spoke about their personal lives, but they

discussed their work often. Archer had long been developing a magical technique of memory extraction similar to siphoning memories for viewing in a Pensieve, but much more powerful: it ensured the mind would not eventually reconstruct the memory after enough time. His explanations about the mechanics of memory re-growth, on the workings of memory charms and how they left the original memories in the mind, still hidden, had been interesting, and he in turn had seemed similarly intrigued by her explanations of how what he was attempting was similar to deleting a file on a computer almost any piece of data could be recovered, even to the point of physical destruction of the drive, unless it was removed in a very specific way that left behind no traces of the file. His understanding of how magic and the mind related to one another had prompted her to do a little amateur research into psychology, to discuss with Archer ways around the mind that didn't involve magic. At first, he had compared Muggle psychological principles to well-established magical theory of the mind, but after a few separate discussions, he mentioned less and less the magical theory that corresponded to Freud or Jung or whoever and instead did a lot of listening, only interrupting to ask for clarification about something Yvonne was saying. She couldn't be sure, but she thought her information, clumsy and second-hand though it might have been, was a missing, integral piece to Archer perfecting his memory extraction technique. He had not told her this outright, but he had made it a point to tell her personally how he would be presenting his research on the charm to an international panel of Healers and would be away from St. Mungo's for a couple of days, and she understood this to be Archer's way of thanking her for her help.

Yvonne had hoped his technique was approved for use by Healers. All the time she and Archer had discussed it, she had been thinking on some level of her mind about the Longbottoms. They were St. Mungo's longest residents, and she knew that even Archer would be happy to see them discharged. She had put her foray into Muggle psychology to some use by trying to use some of the techniques she had read about: creating a very regimented structure for Frank and Alice to follow each day, for example, and making sure there was something more mentally stimulating than an old chess set in the Janus Thickey ward. Although they had shown some small degree of improvement, and she had been fiercely embraced by their son who, almost at the point of tears, had sought her out to tell her his mother had recognised him, had called him by his name, even, Yvonne still felt somewhat like a fraud, an actor only pretending to understand the lines she was saying. The Longbottoms had been tortured to the point their minds had shut off, and while a real psychologist might have been able to repair the damage, Yvonne knew it was out of her power to do so. Archer, however... she had thought that perhaps if he was able to extract from their minds all the pain that had come from the *Cruciatus* Curse, maybe they could begin to heal and be whole again.

Her ritual in the mornings with the Longbottoms consisted of making sure they were awake when she came on the ward, reminding Frank to Charm his stubble away and helping Alice select a hat from the stand that stood empty in the corner until someone approached and directed it to put an array of brightly-coloured hats on display, telling them about the book she was currently reading, asking them about their breakfast if they had eaten or their dreams if they hadn't, and then playing several hands of Go Fish (a simple game, but heavily reliant on memory) until one of the Healers-in-Training took over. This morning was nothing out of the ordinary Alice selected a broad yellow straw sunhat that had its own internal light so her face wouldn't be in shadow, and Frank managed to steal away the collections of twos and sevens Yvonne had been building in her hand.

Before leaving the ward, Yvonne checked on the other occupant of Janus Thickey, hidden behind a curtain and lying motionless on her bed. The young woman looked to be around Yvonne's age, but acted as if she were in a trance, barely blinking and breathing shallow. She could eat if given food and could move about, although she had to be led by the hand, but seemed incapable of initiating any sort of action on her own. Yvonne did not like to think of this patient of hers of what might be in her mind, of what she might see through her fixed, glazed eyes as it tended to make her terribly upset if she dwelled on it too long. She vanished the plain bowl of porridge that sat on her lap and the spoon she held limply in one hand, checked that none of the porridge was left on the sheets, then stood for a moment at the foot of the bed, her back lightly touching the curtain. It was always drawn shut, that curtain, and its meaning couldn't have been more clear: out there was the place for the living. The Longbottoms, broken as they were, were still whole in some way this figure in the bed was not.

Here, behind the curtain, was a place to visit with the dead.

Yvonne turned and pushed these thoughts deep into her mind, refusing to let them surface. Thoughts like these were like weeds, she thought, in that you couldn't allow them for a second to put down roots, or they would spread and take over the whole garden before you knew what was happening. She started for the door. She was done with the Janus Thickey ward for today.

Archer's office was much like the man himself: well-ordered and highly impersonal. It had two desks (one for paperwork and one against the side-wall with an array of magical instruments laid out on it), and a large, old cabinet in the corner that looked like a poorly-Transfigured turn-of-the-century boiler, and while these might have been mistaken for personal affections by another person, Yvonne knew both the boiler-cabinet and the second desk had been in this office while Healer Strout was head of the ward, and both had been covered with a constant rotation of notes, letters and little animated doodads that tended to make noise whenever a person got too close to them. Under Archer's command, however, it seemed nothing in the room would make noise unless Archer permitted it to.

He was not sitting at his desk like Yvonne had expected him to be; he was instead standing and inspecting the Pensieve that sat on his desk. He looked up from it as soon as Yvonne entered his office. He had obviously been waiting for her.

"Sit," he said, indicating the chair in front of his desk. "Please." He moved around his desk and sat as Yvonne shut the door behind her and went to take her chair. They were now sitting at almost the same eye level, which was rare, as Archer was so much taller than Yvonne.

"This morning a man has been admitted to Spell Damage in a fugue state. He was dressed in robes and carried a wand on his person. The person who brought him here left before being questioned about his condition, so further information about his injuries must come from our investigation. He appears unresponsive to traditional, simple methods of waking a person from a trance." Archer paused and rested his fingers lightly around the rim of the Pensieve. Yvonne remembered the two people Angelica mentioned had been there just before she came in and was about to ask if this was the same man, but Archer spoke first.

"I have been granted a trial basis for my memory extraction technique, over a..."

"Really? That's fantastic." Yvonne couldn't help interrupting; this had been his focus for months, and she was almost as eager as she knew he was to see it get a proper trial.

Rather than look irritated, Archer merely continued with his thought, as if he had anticipated Yvonne's response. "...over a three-month period and have judged this patient, fortuitous as his arrival is notwithstanding, to be an ideal test candidate. I performed the memory extraction at roughly 7:08 AM, and at 7:45 AM the patient began to show signs of responding to outside stimulus."

That confirmed what the emergency was this morning, at least. "So it worked, right? Or is there more that needs to be done?"

"The patient has yet to emerge from the fugue state, although it is my prediction he will be ready for waking within an hour or two. What I require of you is an analysis of the extracted memory."

This Yvonne had not been expecting. She was about to ask why her, when Archer explained.

"You have told me about your studies into non-magical Healing methods for the mind, and I believe your knowledge will be invaluable here. The extracted memory is likely to be disorganised, corrupt, or subject to any number of stresses to which the ordered mind is not receptive. I have done what I can to remove the abnormal thoughts from this man's mind, but I cannot be sure his mind will be whole again until I wake him. Should I need to remove further abnormal thoughts, I must be familiar with their cause and what they may relate to, and time will be of the essence. I must watch over the patient while he leaves the fugue; you must examine his memories to find the cause of the injury to his mind."

"I'm not sure I can do that," said Yvonne, suddenly worried that her lack of proper psychological knowledge since most of what she had relayed to Archer had been pieced together from crime thrillers built around serial killers and an Introduction to Psychology textbook she had picked up second-hand would fail her.

"My faith is in you," Archer said. He stood and made to move towards the door.

Yvonne looked from Archer to the Pensieve then back to Archer. "Alright," she said.

"There is something further," Archer said, his hand on the door's handle. "This man is a Ministry representative whose memories may be subject to high levels of confidentiality."

"An Unspeakable?" Yvonne asked.

"A Ministry representative," Archer repeated, but Yvonne knew she had guessed correctly. "What is in his mind is for discussion between us only."

"I understand," Yvonne said, feeling slightly more anxious than before. Making a mistake at work would be bad, but making one that involved the Ministry the Unspeakables, of all things would be the worst.

Then Archer told her something she could not have imagined him saying before that moment. "Good luck, Healer Brzezicki," he said, and left his office.

Yvonne watched the closed door for a moment before she was sure she had heard him correctly. Archer was a constant source of surprises for someone so regimented. If he believed she was capable, then Yvonne had to believe it. She turned to the desk, feeling somewhat farther from anxious and closer to confident.

The Pensieve sat in the centre of Archer's desk. The desk, like the rest of Archer's office, could be described as 'clean' but the word that came to Yvonne's mind first was 'sterile'. Not a single personal item besides the Pensieve was visible anywhere, and how personal was that, when you got down to it? She knew Archer didn't use it to keep his own memories in. His own mind was probably alphabetically sorted.

She sat at his desk and inspected the Pensieve. There was just a single memory container with it, although there were places for several others. Pulling out the little vial, she saw it wasn't rounded as she imagined it would be, like a test tube, but tapered to a flat point so it could slide into the slots around the edge of the Pensieve in only one direction. A bit like a blade fitting into a scabbard. This suited Archer perfectly; there were times she thought he wasn't really human at all, but something sharp and steel like a sword that had somehow figured out how to masquerade as one.

She pulled the stopper from the vial and emptied the not-gas-not-liquid of memory into the mists of the Pensieve, which spun and swirled a little more vigorously now that they were filled with something. For no reason she could explain, she suddenly felt nervous. Felt watched. It was like the feeling she got in the mornings outside of Purge and Dowse, except it came with the absolute certainty that this time there was someone behind her, some ominous figure that only appeared as a pursuer and persecutor in nightmares, and that this figure would lay its hand on her shoulder, and that if she did feel that hand there, she would start screaming and not be able to stop.

She spun around in the chair. Nothing. The room remained empty. That's what was doing it to her, this room and its weird echoing emptiness. She took a moment to centre herself and breathe in deep, telling herself she was being foolish, when she heard something bang behind her. She spun around again, her heart rate spiking and one hand grabbing for her wand, ready to hex whatever it was that was there, when she realised it was the door to Archer's office, which had been open an inch or two, blowing shut as a breeze went through the building. She laughed a little, then realised she may have actually screamed a little too when the door shut maybe you couldn't call it a *real* scream, but it was some kind of vocalisation and she laughed harder. This was ridiculous! She was going to tell Elizabeth how Healer Archer's office was at least a dozen times more intimidating than Archer could be at his best. Thinking about that about treating Archer's office like it was some sort of fire-side boogeyman, the kind that had a hook for a hand and killed teenagers that sat around campfires took away most of the ominous presence the office had, and with that she placed her face into the brewing clouds in the Pensieve and fell down, down, deep into the mist.

She was expecting to see a scene maybe at the Ministry, maybe somewhere else form out of the smoky haze, but when the smoke cleared, there was nothing. Just an endless white plane. She turned a full revolution. Nothing but white. Looked down at her feet, and while they seemed like they were resting on some kind of ground, it too was a pure white. She clapped her hands together and didn't hear any echo come back; the sound just meandered off into the endless white nothing. She had begun to wonder if perhaps Archer's Pensieve was broken, when she turned to see a figure off in the distance that had not been there before. She went to approach it and found she closed the distance quicker than she had anticipated it had looked like a speck in the horizon (if you could call it that) to begin with, but came visibly closer with each passing step. The figure wore pale green robes. It had its hair pulled back in a sensible ponytail. It stood at her height, had her broad shoulders, her thick nose and thick eyebrows that came from her father, her sun-freckled skin from her mother. The figure was her.

"What in God's name..." she said to herself. The figure the other her copied her.

"What...?" she said, and the figure mimicked her again. To make certain, she stood facing her doppelganger and asked it, "Am I the only one speaking?" and heard, clearly, that she was. The other her, despite copying her exact movements, was silent.

Was this in the John Doe's memory? Couldn't possibly be, she thought, and then reconsidered. Maybe he'd had an accident with some kind of time-based magic. But that wouldn't explain how this event what she was doing had ended up in his memory. Maybe there was some clue in the doppelganger, since it wasn't a perfect version of her; she could speak and it could not.

Yvonne raised her left hand. The copy did the same, which was slightly off-putting since what seemed natural would have been for it to raise the opposite hand like a reflection would. She circled around the copy and it circled around her in turn.

"Doppelganger..." she mused aloud and immediately wished she hadn't. The word put a chill up the back of her neck. That word, loaned from the Germans: didn't it also have something to do with death omens? Were you supposed to be saved from death from seeing your body double, or was it supposed to foreshadow it? Jesus, what *was* this?

She moved her head this way and that, studying the copy and trying to push the word *doppelganger* as far from her mind as she could, looking for any difference between it and what she knew herself to look like. She made a face at it, and it made one back, but it was... wrong somehow. She stepped in closer to inspect the copy's face as she screwed it up into a grimace, but still couldn't quite place what it was that was wrong. She leaned in closer, face-to-face, almost nose-to-nose, and stretched her mouth and childishly furrowed her brow, looking for what was missing from this thing that wasn't a reflection.

The eyes. It was the eyes that were wrong. They weren't... right. They weren't the eyes that looked back at her when she brushed her teeth or combed her hair or checked if what she was wearing looked right. They weren't similar to eyes that looked back when she looked at any other person, either. They were glassy, waxy, vacant. They were dead, mannequin's eyes. Corpse-eyes.

Window to the soul, Yvonne thought, unable to stop herself. *Guess this thing, whatever it is, doesn't have much of one.*

But there was something in those eyes, wasn't there? Some little flickering flame, almost a physical thing that she could barely make out while she was inches away from the copy's face. She thought she might be able to see if she got closer and manoeuvred her head so that her right eye and its were exactly level, close enough that she should have had to concentrate to keep it in focus. She found she didn't, though she could see perfectly into what looked like endless, black space inside an iris the size of a golf ball.

Something else borrowed from a German dredged itself from her memory: *When you gaze into the abyss, beware that the abyss also gazes into you*

Yvonne leaned in closer, trying to see what it was that flickered in what seemed like an infinity of space in the copy's eye. It felt like looking down a street where the streetlights had failed, and ground, surroundings, and sky blended together into formless ink. The iris looked the size of a dinner plate now. She could sink her entire hand into that black, blank space and grab that little dancing light that sat in there, that little taunting hobgoblin that was just *itching* to be caught. She reached into the darkness. Pain exploded in her own eye, but that was distant and irrelevant information. She plunged her hand in farther and farther; her arm followed, sinking in more, up to the elbow and now her shoulder...and it was then Yvonne lost her balance and fell into the blackness as the blackness fell into her.

She stood now not in pure white but in pure black, except it wasn't exactly pure...was it?...there were tiny points of light here, there, everywhere, all around. The lights were stars, the galaxies, and she could see them *all* of them all at once. Infinity a concept beyond what a simple eight-letter word could ever convey entered her. Time slowed and sped. The end and beginning of the universe touched. Her scream was eternal.

The House Built Upon Sand

Chapter 3 of 5

Summary: If asked, Yvonne would have admitted that she was caught in-between two worlds. She was a witch – a Healer working at St. Mungo's, in fact – who used Muggle methods to help her patients. She had no connection to the Department of Mysteries and could not have thought she was trapped between the present and the past, reality and nightmare, truth and lie, the living and the dead... Not yet, anyway.

Part Three: The House Built Upon Sand

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

Matthew 7:27

This old man came undone...

Yvonne floated in what was a dream and was also a memory. She was herself, but she was also someone else a her that was younger and so deathly frightened.

He swayed Knick-Knack to have fun...

She was in the room where she had first gone to school as a child, but it was also Hogwarts. It was her own apartment, it was Archer's empty office, it was deep in the Ministry of Magic. It was everywhere that ever had four walls.

Bric-a-brac, bivouac, give the dogs Capone...

Someone stood at the end of the room and cast an endless shadow over her. It was Mrs Hamilton, her teacher when she had been only eight or nine, who she was convinced hated her even though that wasn't right *adults* didn't hate *children* but Mrs Hamilton hated her all the same. It was Professor Moody with his wild electric-blue eye that had given her a nightmare or two her first year at Hogwarts.

This cold man came rolling bones...

The Hamilton-Moody-thing summoned her to the edge of its desk, and she went. Since this was a dream, she couldn't escape. Since this was a memory, it had already happened. A spectral black bird, the size of an aeroplane and covered in feathers made of liquid coal, sat on the figure's shoulder and glared at her.

Itsy-bitsy spider could hear the water shout...

The Moody-Hamilton pulled its insane eye from its head and offered it to her. She saw its other eye was black and featureless. She tried to draw back, but because this was a dream and because this was a memory, she couldn't.

Down came the pain and made the spider doubt...

The eye in its hand was an apple. The apple in its hand was an eye. The bird was a snake, colossal enough to circle the planet and bite into its own obsidian tail.

Out came the moonshine and cried up all the rain...

She bit down into the eye, because it was what she had to do. The bird spread its wings that became the endless nothing sky, and feathers that were scales rained down over her, turning everything, everything, everything black.

The itsy-bitsy sniper was in the tower again...

She woke up in the darkness and said a quiet little prayer of thanks when she was able to reach to the side of the bed she was in and find her wand. Lighting up the tip, she saw she was in one of the wards. Spell Damage, most likely. She sat up, swung her feet over the side of the bed and realised two things: one, someone had taken her shoes before putting her in one of the ward beds, and two, she was *hungry*. Ravenous. It was dark, so had she been here the *wholeday*? ... *Longer* than a day? She stood up, intending to make her way to the break room to find someone who could tell her what had happened, find some food, and hopefully find her shoes, when she saw something that made her feel as if all the blood in her head was draining out of her, pooling in her bare feet and possibly seeping out onto the cold floor.

Mrs Brightman, who Yvonne had been checking on this morning, had hanged herself. A rope descended from the dark ceiling and coiled around her neck in a noose, cutting at the pallid flesh of her neck. Her eyes, which had been open while she was Stunned but were still essentially human, now had an alien cast about them in the faint light from Yvonne's wand. Her body swayed back and forth slightly, as if Yvonne's waking was the thing that had propelled her to end her life.

"Yvonne, is that you? You awake?" It was Elizabeth. Oh, thank God, Elizabeth could take over, take charge of the situation, because there was no way Yvonne felt she possibly could. Her knees felt like they were in serious danger of buckling.

"Sorry about the lights being off, but... what?" She trailed off. Concern was written on her face. "You look like you've seen a Boggart."

"Her," Yvonne managed. "Bed Three."

Elizabeth turned and regarded the corpse for a second, then asked, "What about her?"

That draining feeling came back worse than before. Had Elizabeth gone mad? "She's... she's dead!"

"What? No." Elizabeth put her hand on the woman's forehead the woman that was in bed three, Stunned, and not hanged and said, "She feels warm. Mrs Brightman's fine." Elizabeth's eyebrows knitted together, and she asked in a wary tone, "Do you want something to eat, maybe?"

Yvonne was about to reply, yes, yes I want something to eat, and I want to know what the hell happened to me, when she saw Mrs Brightman's blankets turn from crisp green to dark red in two wicked pools right where her arms would be. She darted past Elizabeth and snatched the sheets away, ready to heal up the massive cuts that she was prepared to see running up the inside of the woman's forearms, but revealed nothing more than unmarked skin. She was whole. The sheets were still their crisp green, not stained with blood.

"Do you want to stop before you wake up the whole goddamn ward and I have to call for the men with butterfly nets?" Elizabeth asked in a tone of such concern that Yvonne failed to register for a moment what she had said.

She turned to face Elizabeth and realised Elizabeth's hand was on her shoulder. She shrugged it away and asked, "What did you say?"

Elizabeth looked puzzled, but more than that, she looked a little nervous. "I didn't say anything, Yvonne." Then she screwed up her face in a violent, childish gesture crossing her eyes, shaking her head from side to side, and winding a finger around her ear it might have been funny if it wasn't so hurtful. "You're hearing things, Yvonne," taunted Elizabeth. "You should be in one of these beds instead of in those robes. You should be in a padded room." Yvonne took a step away and backed into Bed Three, and a cold but horribly strong hand grabbed her wrist.

"Help me," said Mrs Brightman in the bed. Her voice was everything cheap pulp horror said the voices of the dead were hoarse, raspy, gravelly. But, it was also more than those things: her words sounded like they were spoken from inside Yvonne's head, inky-black waves that dug through her brain and left stains. "Aren't you a Healer? Aren't you a doctor?" she demanded, her grip intensifying as her voice rose, and Yvonne realised Mrs Brightman couldn't have physically been speaking these words: her lips had been sewn shut with a coarse black thread. "Help me," the dead woman commanded. "Kill me. Help me!"

Yvonne pulled away from her, pulled with whatever reserve of strength she had left, and escaped the corpse-woman's grip. She ran, past Elizabeth and away from Bed Three, from Spell Damage, from St. Mungo's. She ran like hell and never once looked back. It was only when she reached the bus stop and rested against the pole with the barely-readable timetable sealed behind a pane of broken plastic, clung to it like an anchor of reality, that she realized her feet were bare, she had cut them in several places while running, and that what sounded like the breath of some hungry beast stalking her, tongue lolling out of its mouth as it prepared to lunge for the kill, was not a beast at all, but the sound of her own laboured, ragged breathing.

She looked around, telling herself she was checking for people watching but was really making sure *no Twilight Zone* horror had followed her out of St. Mungo's, before she inspected her feet. She rested her free hand on the bus timetable and found she had been clutching something in it since... since she had looked into the Pensieve, it must have been, since the object in her hand was one of Archer's Pensieve vials. In the grimy light at the bus stop, empty and with marks from her hand all over it, it was almost unrecognisable. She rubbed it down a little on the side of her robes, which brought firmly into focus that she had just bolted through the streets in green robes, was still wearing them, and would probably not be admitted on the last bus out of town if she were wearing robes and no shoes. She shucked the robes, an action she was still able to perform quickly despite her shaking hands, and dropped them in a heap on the ground. One thing solved. She slipped the empty vial into her pocket and found something else in there. A piece of paper. Plastic? She pulled it out. It was her bus pass. Well, thank God for small favours she must have put it in her pocket instead of in her bag this morning, so now she wouldn't have to go through the rigmarole of Confunding the bus driver.

She glanced about, making sure she was still alone, and readied her wand at the robes, fixing in her mind an image of shoes. Simple as possible no laces, no straps, just something that would fit on her feet. Shoes. The heap of green robes melted into a pair of simple, pale-green, slipper-looking shoes.

"Little Wizard of Oz, isn't it?" Yvonne said aloud, not meaning to until she was speaking. She started laughing a little, an image in her head of her skipping off towards home (painted on a terribly obvious film-set background) in not ruby slippers but emerald ones, chanting *follow-follow-follow-follow*. Then several other thoughts invaded her head the Scarecrow with his cloth mouth stitched shut, the Tin Man with a noose around his neck reaching for the oil can, Oz the Great and Terrible telling her she was crazy, over the rainbow, bars in the window and she fell silent again.

Taking a deep breath and forcing it not to hitch or shudder or do anything else untoward, Yvonne placed a hand firmly on the timetable to steady herself and lifted one foot up to the light. A couple of nicks and scratches, but mostly it was just dirty, not damaged. She cleaned and repaired her foot with her wand and slipped on one of the green shoes. It felt like her foot was covered in cloth, not like it was inside a shoe at all, but she reasoned that beggars couldn't be choosers, least of all about shoes. She took a look at her other foot, and while this one had a deeper cut along the heel, it too was repaired, cleaned, and in a green cloth shoe before the headlights of the last bus swung around the corner.

She flashed her pass at the driver without looking at him and moved quickly to sit as close as possible to the side door. The only other person on the bus was a teenage girl: rail-thin and hiding half her face behind her hair, she was engrossed in chewing on her nails. No Serious Commuters here. Yvonne closed her eyes and took several long breaths to centre herself. She was getting the hell home, away from people, and then she would figure out what to do next.

I'm not going crazy. Crazy people don't know they're going crazy. I know that wasn't real.

But that was a complete Catch-22, wasn't it? If what she saw at St. Mungo's wasn't real, then she was seeing things nobody else could, and that was a pretty good definition of going crazy.

It was that memory. Whatever Archer Jean Paul took out of the John Doe's mind. I need to find Jean Paul.

Could she contact him from her apartment? Yvonne briefly considered a message with her Patronus, but couldn't imagine a thought happy enough to get it to materialise for more than a few brief seconds. Maybe there was a charm for sending a letter to someone... no, that's what owls were for. Owls! An owl would be by in the morning to deliver her paper; she'd just pay it extra to get a letter to Jean Paul. Then he could fix her. Undo whatever it was that had happened. That was mildly reassuring.

I'm okay. It's okay. I'm okay.

She opened her eyes back up, half-expecting to see the featureless, white blankness when she did, and felt the winding coil of fear start to loosen inside her head. The bus was slowing to take on a new passenger, an old man in a scruffy jacket and tweed cap, and nothing was unusual about him except the impressive tufts of hair protruding from his ears. He moved past the young girl and past Yvonne to somewhere up the back of the bus. The girl was still biting her nails she had moved on to the last finger on one hand, and as Yvonne watched her indulge her bad habit, she very clearly saw the girl put the tip of her finger well past the nail into her mouth and bite down, hard. She drew her hand away, and there was a brief flash of red where the tip of the finger should have been. The girl's jaw began to work as if she was chewing a piece of gum.

This isn't real. I'm not seeing this.

But the blood coming from the girl's hand seemed to say otherwise. It was perfectly visible under the lights inside the bus. It flowed freely onto the leg of her jeans, rapidly pooling in a dark blot and then dripping to the floor. Yvonne could hear each droplet as it hit, and that was the thing making this hallucination seem hellishly real.

It's not real.

The girl noticed Yvonne staring at her and gave her a look understandable to anyone, but only truly mastered by sullen teenagers: *What the hell are you looking at?* She then bit into the fleshy part of her palm, her teeth sinking in just at the base of her thumb. The teeth in that mouth were not human: they were jagged, yellowing fangs that looked both rotten and vital at the same time. They were the teeth of an animal that would kill you not with its own poison, but rather some insidious bacteria thriving in its mouth. They were teeth that only the soulless victims of a Dementor's Kiss could recognise.

Yvonne forced herself to stare at a piece of gum on the floor. It was a pale-green colour almost the same as her Healer robes and had an intricate lined pattern running across it that could have only come from a sneaker pressing down on it. The lines made Yvonne think of those gardens of sand the Chinese ran rakes through to meditate. Zen meditation. You were meant to shut out the world and become nothing. Or everything. Something like that. Yvonne's form of Zen meditation of shutting out the world involved a pair of ear-buds and an iPod Shuffle, but that was in her bag, left somewhere at St. Mungo's.

A sound was coming from the other side of the bus – a liquid squelching punctuated by sharp cracks. It was oddly clear over the sound of the engine. It sounded a little like what you heard in your head while eating a piece of fruit – perhaps a peach that was still a bit too stiff and crunched when you bit into it.

Yvonne started singing to herself under her breath, trying to imagine herself as a Serious Commuter again, someone just riding the bus home trying not to look bored. She kept her attention focused on the piece of pale-green gum on the floor and tried to imagine the exact sequence of what she was going to do when she reached her apartment: look left, look right, *Alohamora* the door, make sure to lock it again from the inside, cast a silencing charm, drop *Rumours* into the CD player and turn the volume to eleven, sit in the armchair, summon a bottle of wine from the kitchen and think for a moment about summoning a glass to go with it.

"And if you don't love me now, you will never love me again..." she whispered, trying to picture those Chinese men with their shaved heads.

The bus came to a stop. She saw the girl's feet exit the bus and chanced a glance back up, noticing the button nearest to the girl's seat, the one to press to make the bus wait at the next stop. It was smeared with blood. Yvonne went back to staring at the gum.

"I can still hear you sayin' we would never break the chain, never break the chain..."

The Good Tree

Chapter 4 of 5

If asked, Yvonne would have admitted that she was caught in-between two worlds. She was a witch – a Healer working at St. Mungo's, in fact – who used Muggle methods to help her patients. She had no connection to the Department of Mysteries and could not have thought she was trapped between the present and the past, reality and nightmare, truth and lie, the living and the dead... Not yet, anyway.

Part Four: The Good Tree

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.

Matthew 7:6

There are things you don't realise how much you take for granted until they're missing, Yvonne was thinking. Little things, for the most part. Her iPod was one thing she was painfully aware of being absent – Yvonne could have counted the number of times she was without it on her bus trips to and from work and wouldn't have needed to start using the fingers on her second hand. Not being able to focus on the music or the words only she could hear forced her to focus on other things around her.

Things that only I can hear anyway, so how much different is it really? She tried to think in humour, but it just made her breath hitch and feel short. Assurance of sanity was another of those little things you only missed when it was missing.

"Do you know the way to San José? I've been away so long, I may go wrong and lose my way."

She finally arrived at the stairwell of her apartment building, deeply thankful for having her wand and further thankful that the unlocking spell was one she was able to perform without speaking. Where other wizards had to rely on brute magical force to unlock doors, she understood how a lock worked, how a key lined up tumblers, so she only needed a small nudge in comparison. A little Muggle knowledge, applied the right way, could go a long way.

"Don't stand, don't stand so, don't stand so close to me..."

Yvonne was still singing to herself, a little louder now that she was alone. She had exhausted her supply of well-known songs through the bus ride home and had filled the rest of the trip with advertising jingles, theme songs to TV shows from back when TV shows still had theme songs, nursery rhymes and other scraps of schoolyard doggerel. Between the bus station and the stairs to her apartment, she had been reduced to recalling pieces of songs that were little more than the title and a couple of lines for buffering.

"With or without you, with or *with*-out you, oh, I can't liii-ive... with or without you."

It was a small measure of comfort – it kept away the silence which was always eerie in the small hours of empty places, and it gave her something to occupy her mind, since otherwise she might have realised that a lone, trembling voice singing just above a whisper in the night sounded eerie in itself.

"Jeremiah was a bullfrog," she breathed without tone, almost a croak, ha ha ha, "was a good friend of mine..." She looked over her shoulder just before she reached her door. Still alone. "I never understood a single word he said, but I helped him a-drink his wine..." She pulled her wand from her pocket, ready to open the door, ready to seal herself in her apartment, ready to shower and pour a drink and whatever else she had to do to fall asleep.

"And he always had some mighty fine..."

Her door was open.

Not open in a way that you could see into her apartment. Not even in a way that a person walking past might notice it was open. Yet ~~it~~ was open, just the smallest of fractions. It was her habit to wrench the door shut in the mornings when she left – something in the frame had expanded somewhere and prevented it from shutting smoothly, and without that little extra tug to pull it into place, it wouldn't shut and certainly wouldn't lock. She was certain she had locked her door this morning – it was part of her morning ritual, and every time she remembered she hadn't fixed it yet and really should get around to doing it, the thought that maybe she wouldn't actually get the door fixed and instead have it stay as a reminder to lock up before leaving went through her mind.

It occurred to Yvonne that she wasn't the only person in the world who could open doors without keys, and a chill went up the back of her neck. If the door wasn't shut properly, she could shoulder it open, not even have to fumble around with the handle. If there was someone in her apartment – a *physical* someone, and not some hallucination that somehow began with her unlocked door – she might catch them off-guard and be able to... well, Stun them, she supposed, before they got a chance to Stun her. She hadn't been especially good at Defence in school and hadn't had any cause to use any of the practical techniques since she graduated, and despite all the fiction she read about violent murders, she considered herself a pretty non-violent person, yet here she was readying herself to storm her apartment like some hard-boiled private eye.

If I don't do it now, I never will.

She took a deep breath, held her wand ready at her side, and rammed her door open, dropping her shoulder in a way she had read described but never once considered performing herself until tonight. The door flew open and hit the wall with a loud bang, and Yvonne would think later that she couldn't judge who had looked more startled at that moment: she or the young woman in her living room. The woman took a step back when Yvonne made her entrance, then looked at the wand and froze. For a long moment there was silence between them. Yvonne groped for the door with her free hand, found it, and slammed it shut with such force it produced a louder bang than it had when it was opened, all without taking her eyes off the stranger. She held an object in her hands a little framed picture taken from the shelf above her television and Yvonne vowed to Stun her if the mystery woman's hands did anything out of the ordinary. She wore robes of an indistinct charcoal colour and had a look on her face that Yvonne had seen only in films the kind where child ghosts moved in jerky ways and haunted single women in apartment blocks. This woman had that look of completely unguarded fear on her face that Hollywood actresses were somehow unable to quite manage.

Yvonne's first question to the mystery woman wasn't a normal one "Who are you?", for example, or "What are you doing here?" It was, "What are you doing with my picture?"

"Muggle photography is interesting," she replied, like it was normal for her to be standing in Yvonne's apartment. Like it was normal that people surprised her by bursting doors open all the time, for that matter. "I know the pictures won't move, but I keep thinking sometimes they might anyway. Silly, isn't it?"

She said all this in a cheerful, conversational tone, and Yvonne was suddenly completely convinced that this was another hallucination that was only seconds away from turning and becoming another nightmare. She aimed her wand squarely at the woman and asked her, "Can you prove to me that you're real?"

"No," said the woman, "but I can answer the questions I'm sure you have."

"You know what's happening to me?"

"Not all of it, but I can tell you what I know."

"Do it."

"It's long."

"I've got time."

"Would you like to sit down? Please."

Yvonne realised her whole body was wound tight like a coiled spring. She saw the other woman was acting in a perfectly civil way and remembered she was still aiming her wand at her. She lowered it to her side, feeling foolish. The woman hadn't hidden herself in any way, although she easily could have if she were planning some kind of surprise attack, and she had been waiting inside her apartment instead of outside, because how was she supposed to know that Yvonne wouldn't just Apparate home? This woman wasn't an apparition she probably was, or had been, in the same situation Yvonne was, and she had almost attacked her. Of course. Jesus.

"Sorry," she said, feeling a little ashamed of the person this... whatever was happening was making her, and sat in her armchair.

The woman sat on her couch and offered a smile, although it seemed incapable of reaching her wide eyes. She placed the picture frame she had been gripping in her hands on the coffee table face down. "It's understandable," she said. "Well... I understand. I don't know what's been happening to you, but I can guess. And maybe I can help. Moss and I can fix it. I think." She put her hands to her temples and closed her eyes, visibly frustrated. "I'm sorry. Can I start from the beginning?"

"Please do," Yvonne said. She could feel her body wanting to tense up again and willed herself to relax. She wanted to trust this woman. She wanted to believe that she knew what was going on and, more importantly, that she could help.

"Alright." She took a deep breath. "My name is Christine, and I work for the Unspeakables. I was a curse-breaker full-time until about six months ago when I was transferred to the Unspeakable Department. If you've ever dealt with them, you know they don't exactly tell you all about what you're going to be doing until you're doing it." She paused, perhaps to let Yvonne give some input on dealing with the Unspeakables. Yvonne had none to offer.

"Moss is an Unspeakable proper," she continued. "We were working on a translation project there were maybe four or five other teams doing similar work, but we didn't get to talk with them much, just got some notes every so often from higher up in the Department. I guess we were the first ones to make any headway in the translation."

"What were you translating?"

"Stones. Tablets. No modern methods of translation worked on them, so the Unspeakable Division scouted out people who specialised in deciphering long-dead languages, and there're a lot of experts in curse-breaking, so... Anyway, the stones the ones we were working with, at least were ancient. Egyptian, or Sumerian, or maybe older. We're still not sure about that." She paused and then said, more to herself than Yvonne, "But, I don't think you care so much about where they came from, do you? I'm sorry, I just..." She stopped and began a new thought.

"We managed to translate most of our stone, and Moss was reading from it sort of like to himself, you know how you do when he collapsed. It was like he fainted. I started to get worried after three days and that's when I took him to St. Mungo's..."

"That was you?" Yvonne couldn't hide the shock in her voice. Things were starting to line up and come together, like the gears of a huge clock pushing the mechanisms into place to chime the hour.

"I thought a Healer might be able to help him, keep him safe. I didn't think I could do it on my own." Christine still looked fearful, but she also sounded a little ashamed at this admission. "He was supposed to wake up on his own, but he told me when he did it didn't seem right. Do you know what happened to him?"

"Healer Archer extracted his memories," said Yvonne, not giving this much thought. She was more interested in other information. "What was..."

"Extracted? What do you mean 'extracted'?"

"Healer Archer has been working on a new technique for dealing with patients with significant mental trauma, one that's similar to the removal of memories for use in a Pensieve and the suppression caused by memory charms, but more permanent so there's no risk of the memory ever resurfacing. Just the other day he had the technique approved. I guess that Moss was his first official patient."

"Did he look at the memories? This Healer Archer?"

"No," said Yvonne, feeling that Christine's fear was beginning to spread, "but I did." She was about to ask what was on the tablet, what it was that she saw in Archer's Pensieve, but saw that Christine was not paying attention to her.

"Moss was right about it being something to do with memories." She turned her focus back to Yvonne. "Do you know much about how the extraction works? What specifically happens? Did you work on any of the..."

"What was on the tablet?" Yvonne asked, a little shocked at the hysteria in her voice but finding she didn't really care. Technicalities could come after she had the big picture.

Christine stopped talking and avoided Yvonne's eyes. "Of course, I'm sorry. I'll try to keep... It's just a difficult thing to explain; I've been working on this non-stop for so

long." She took another deep breath, and Yvonne unconsciously leaned forward in her seat.

"The tablet described God."

For a moment, Yvonne couldn't think. Was that an answer? What did that *mean*?

"Described God." She wasn't sure if she was asking or confirming.

"It's... There aren't proper words for it. Not ones that exist any more, I don't think. The tablet, if a person reads from it, they're supposed to gain knowledge of... everything."

"But that's..." began Yvonne, confused and struggling for something to grasp onto for stability in the turn this conversation had taken. "...Not what God is," she finished somewhat lamely.

"What is God, then?"

Love, she thought immediately, her knowledge of the Bible limited to what she had seen in films and heard in Johnny Cash songs. "I don't know. All-knowing and all-powerful, I suppose."

"So if a person knew everything there ever possibly was to know the thoughts of every living thing, the number of stars in the sky, and the true form of a Boggart wouldn't that person be like God?"

Yvonne remained silent, considering this. Christine continued with her explanation.

"God is just a label people give to something bigger than themselves. The formula on the tablet won't make a person Jehovah, or Zeus, or Odin, or Gaia, or anything people have ever called a god, because that's not what God is. God is infinite a concept that's beyond human understanding so the idea of some infinite power that binds the universe together gets filtered down into things a person *can* understand."

"Like an old man with a beard who lives in the clouds," Yvonne said, "or a Viking riding an eight-legged horse."

"That's right. Those things aren't God, they're more like... people's reflections of God."

"But what happens to a person when they read from the tablet? They turn infinite and... what? Disappear or something?"

"They're supposed to fall into a trance, where all the understanding of the universe fills their mind, and at the end, they're supposed to emerge from the trance 'perfected', so the tablet said."

"So if they were interrupted from this trance..." Yvonne began.

"There's no real knowing what would happen, but I suppose they wouldn't be perfect yet. When I spoke to Moss at St. Mungo's, he seemed... different. Distracted. He was still himself, but I didn't have to say a whole sentence before he understood what I meant."

"When was this?"

"Earlier tonight. I felt him wake up, if you can believe that. Maybe he sent me a message somehow. He told me about you and told me to come find you, make sure you were okay."

"Am I okay? Do you know what's going to happen to me?"

"No," she said, "but I can make a guess. You saw Moss's memory of the perfecting, God-becoming process, and it... touched you a little. But since his trance wasn't complete, you gained a kind of imperfect understanding of the universe, and since it was from a second-hand source of sorts, it was reduced in strength. Something like that. This is all educated guesswork, you see. This isn't magic that's meant to be enacted halfway even if it's incomplete, the effects are going to be powerful."

"Maybe it's something nobody should be invoking, if it's so uncontrollable."

Christine glanced to the side, reflecting. "Perhaps so," she mused to herself.

"Do you think I'll go into a trance, like Moss?" Yvonne asked.

"I don't think so. I hope not. I think perhaps your Healer Archer could extract the memory from you and destroy it, and you would be fixed."

"You've no idea how much I want that to be true."

"What's been happening to you?" Christine asked, her voice oddly void of concern. "I'd be interested in documenting the... Oh, that's terrible of me, isn't it? You look like hell and I want to study you. I'm really sorry; it's just that I've been around the tablet so long, it's so loaded up with magical strength, that it keeps finding ways to crawl into your head even when you're not..."

It was at this point that Yvonne's stomach, which had been relatively well-behaved all through the bus ride home, made its presence felt with a loud rumble that made Christine trail off mid-sentence. Both women glanced at each other, and after a moment, Yvonne said, "I'm going to make myself something to eat."

"Of course. I'm sorry about running on."

Yvonne stood and headed for the kitchen. "It's not a problem. I'd actually rather not, you know, be in silence. Tell me about your work. Tell me about Moss, what's he like? Is that name short for something? Amos."

"I don't think so," Christine said, "it's just Moss. Moss Browning, if you can believe that." She sounded like she was smiling, as if the name was a joke of some kind Yvonne didn't get the joke, but she gave some acknowledgement as she fumbled a loaf of bread from the breadbox, and Christine continued.

From the kitchen, Yvonne could feel Christine's whole demeanour change. She heard about how Moss was brilliant, and focused, and driven, and a host of other wonderful attributes as she fumbled with the stupid little plastic thing that sealed bags of bread. Yvonne picked up a knife and found her hand was shaking terribly, not out of fear but out of hunger. Low blood sugar? Something like that. She took a slice of bread and finished it off in two bites, not bothering to put anything on it. Feeling more confident in her ability to hold the knife steady now, she buttered two pieces of bread (which was about as complex a food as she felt her stomach could handle at the moment) and put away the butter but left the bread and the dirty knife sitting on the counter. Christine was still talking about Moss his hair, specifically when Yvonne came back into the lounge. It was like Christine had forgotten momentarily that she was speaking to someone else, not herself; she continued on for a moment before she seemed to realize that Yvonne was watching her, studying her.

"What?" Christine asked, looking defensive.

"Nothing, nothing. I was going to take a shower when I got home would you mind terribly if I went and did that?" She was about to explain about her feet, thinking that actually all of her felt dirty in a similar way, but Christine waved her on.

"Are you sure?" Yvonne continued. "I could turn on the television, or put on a..." She stopped herself, seeing Christine's blank stare. "Sorry, I don't have guests very often."

"If you're gone for long, I'll look at your bookshelf," Christine said, then smiled, but Yvonne got the feeling this was just for reassurance. She would probably just sit, drum her fingers and bite her lip. This woman looked like a lip-biter.

"If you're sure," Yvonne said, and again Christine waved her on.

Getting clean being clean was one of life's simple pleasures, Yvonne thought, running her hands along her head and slicking down her hair. A shower had a lot of elements in it that created a calming atmosphere it was warm, came with a nice noise-warping effect that both allowed room for thinking and provided a veil of distortion to enhance the illusion that one had a good singing voice, and it was a deeply personalised place. Other people's showers were almost like foreign countries, with their own topography and customs that would constantly surprise you you could only be really at home in your own shower of origin. Just how far was too far in changing the temperature, what the right pressure of the water was, where important things like soap and razors and shampoo sat were all individual customisations that people were incapable of communicating to each other.

This was the flow of Yvonne's thoughts as she showered. Her mind needed a break and had decided to take it now: she would think about contacting Archer, what to make of Christine and Moss, and the nature of Man and God, later. Right now, she was going to wash as much of this horrible nightmare of a day off her and down into the drain as she could.

She was lathering her face when she felt it something had brushed up against her ankle. She reflexively pulled back and suddenly realised that she was temporarily blind. Panic and paranoia rushed in and held fast. She opened her eyes for a moment and couldn't see anything worthwhile through squinting and the soapy foam. She turned her face into the stream of water and pawed furiously at her face, ready to open her eyes and see that something stupid like the soap or the loofah had brushed against her, when she felt it again. It was not the soap, nor the loofah.

It was a hand.

The shower had expanded somehow, its proportions blown out enough to house a giant. Nothing seemed to be in her reach, although the water still played on her back. At her feet was a figure in pale-green robes, face down on the tiles, the water matting down its hair and darkening its robes around the shoulders. It raised its head, revealing a face that was slick on one side with a substance other than water.

"Help me," pleaded the figure, and then it seemed to lose all breath and grow slack and rubbery. Its grip loosened on Yvonne's ankle. She saw the spreading, red stain on the back of the figure's robes and knew without doubt that Healer Jean Paul Archer had just been murdered.

The Ravening Wolf

Chapter 5 of 5

If asked, Yvonne would have admitted that she was caught in-between two worlds. She was a witch – a Healer working at St. Mungo's, in fact – who used Muggle methods to help her patients. She had no connection to the Department of Mysteries and could not have thought she was trapped between the present and the past, reality and nightmare, truth and lie, the living and the dead... Not yet, anyway.

Part Five: The Ravening Wolf

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?

And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

Matthew 7:22-23

Yvonne re-entered her lounge in what felt like a daze. She had read descriptions of people in books being 'ashy', but she had never really understood exactly what made a person look ashy until she had examined her reflection in the mirror a moment ago. 'Ashy' described it perfectly: pale to the point of turning slightly grey. Ashy was how she felt like a fire had run through her, and all that was left behind was crumbling wisps of carbon.

Christine started to ask her something and then stopped. Yvonne knew on some level that she must look a complete mess she hadn't had the courage to towel her hair dry, because that would have meant looking away from the shower for just a second, and she was pretty sure she had misaligned the buttons on her blouse but this was as far from her mind as reassuring Christine was. She wasn't sure she could have reassured her, anyway; someone had just lain at her feet and died in her shower. That was a thing that should have ordinarily been physically impossible, but what was that thing you called acts of impossibility becoming possible? Could you call it a miracle?

Yvonne sank into her armchair and fixed her gaze on nothing in particular. Christine asked her what had happened and, then after a moment, asked again. Another long moment passed, and then Yvonne told her.

"Archer is dead."

"How... how do you know?" Yvonne could hear the wide eyes in her voice, even though she was watching the blinking light of a plane flit across the sky through her window. What a question.

"How else would I know? I saw it! It makes me see things! I don't want to keep seeing them!" Yvonne leapt to her feet and seized Christine by the shoulders. She didn't resist, just continued to look more afraid than Yvonne herself felt. It was as if the only place this woman could show she was scared was in her expression. Or maybe she was trying to hide her fear, but her face betrayed her. Something about this suddenly infuriated Yvonne she wanted to either see some proper panic or get some goddamn answers.

"What happened to me?" she shouted at Christine. "Why were you studying the stone? Didn't either of you know it was dangerous?"

"Yes," said Christine, her voice barely above a whisper. "But that's what the Department of Mysteries is for."

"Playing God?"

"Mysteries," she said simply, as if this was final. Yvonne relaxed her grip but did not let her hands drop from Christine's shoulders. Not yet. Christine was watching her if

she seemed uncomfortable about Yvonne being on edge so close to her, she was doing a better job of hiding it than whatever it was that worried her so much.

"He said this might happen," Christine said. Her voice was flat, but the unnatural fear on her face gave the statement an ominous overtone.

Yvonne finally let her hands drop. She took a step back, unsure of what was going to happen next, unsure of herself, the feeling of dropping down the rabbit-hole rising higher and higher. "That I might get angry with cryptic answers?" she asked, trying to be snide and failing, knowing this wasn't what Christine had meant. The comment didn't seem to faze her.

"What we were doing was dangerous, yes. Is dangerous. Not everyone in the world is honest, like Moss and I. He told me at St. Mungo's that someone inside the Ministry might want to terminate the translation project after they found out what had happened. He told me they might have been using the whole project as a way to become godlike themselves. He didn't know this for sure, but..."

"He saw things," Yvonne said, her arms folded across her chest. "While he slept."

"He may have. He said he knew so much more than he did before."

"And why should I believe you?" There was still something that felt like it was missing to Yvonne, some itching, nagging thought that couldn't materialise properly. Maybe it was Christine's attitude that seemed off.

Christine paused a moment and then started to laugh. "You would know if I lied," she said, still smiling a little. "What do you think has been happening to you when you've seen things?"

Yvonne faltered a little. The conversation seemed to have taken a savage turn to the left. "Thoughts," she attempted, "or nightmares, something like..."

"You've revealed what has been concealed, brought to light truth that was in darkness. That's a rough translation of some of the tablet. People... can't lie to you. Look." She held a hand behind her back. "Ask me how many fingers I'm holding up."

Can't lie? But Mrs Brightman... the girl on the bus... what the hell kind of truths were those? "I don't see..."

"Just ask me: how many fingers am I holding up behind my back?"

"Well, how many are you?"

"Two."

Not a second had passed after Christine had spoken before images began to assault Yvonne's mind. She remembered a dozen, a hundred, a thousand things all at once: dancing a waltz with her grandfather at her aunt's wedding; being taught how to hear the right beat of the music to sway to; sitting at a school desk and marking the numbers next to the little curved lines that indicated angles, 60-60-60, thinking this question was such an easy one; chanting in unison with the rest of her class back at the teacher, memorising by rote that one three was three, two threes were six, three threes were nine, four threes were twelve; juggling balls flying through the air; stacks of Toblerone chocolates...

She held a hand to her temple and took a sharp breath, aware that she was acting just how everyone in a bad movie that involved psychics or mental superpowers acted whenever a particularly bad thing happened to their thoughts.

Stupid movies got it right, after all, she thought without much humour.

"So how many fingers did I *really* hold up?" asked Christine.

"Three," said Yvonne, "it was three fingers." Christine said nothing to this, but had a kind of 'well, there you go' tilt to her head.

"Moss said that if he was right about this, he was in a lot of danger and so was anyone that had been in contact with him. He told me to find you..."

"Me specifically?"

"He called you 'the girl who saw the memory', but he knew who you were, yes. He told me to come here and that he would try to find the Healer that took his thoughts before whoever might have been coming to kill him did."

Some good being almost God does, if you can't save a simple life, Yvonne thought in a flash of bitterness, but held her tongue.

"And you say your Archer is dead, and that has to be horrible for you, but I don't know what happened to Moss, and I'm supposed to wait... here with you and hope he... hope he comes." Tears were rolling down her cheeks, and in that instant Yvonne understood perfectly what it was she had been missing: Christine and Moss were lovers.

Yvonne rose from her seat and, after a moment of internal deliberation, put her arms around the crying woman. Christine heaved against her shoulder, taking deep, greedy breaths. Yvonne didn't offer any words of comfort, because she knew those would very likely set her off in a crying jag of her own, and what good would that serve? She swept her eyes over the row of pictures and knick-knacks above her television set to keep her mind distracted and felt a stab of panic in her stomach when she saw a gap, a missing frame, but then remembered it was lying on her coffee table. Christine had moved it; she had been holding it when she, Yvonne, had come home.

Eventually, Christine's sobs quietened, and she pulled herself away from Yvonne and buried her face in her hands for a moment in an effort to clear her face. "I'm sorry," she said, her face red and wet. "I'm sorry."

"I understand," Yvonne said.

"Do you mind if I...?" Christine began and gestured vaguely in the direction of the bathroom.

"No, go. It's alright."

"Thank you. I'm sorry," she said once more and disappeared through the door.

Yvonne took a deep breath and closed her eyes. This night...Jesus. Letting out her breath through her nose, she turned and picked up the picture frame that lay on the coffee table. It housed a picture of two girls of about twelve or thirteen. One had plain, brown hair; the other had a curly blonde mane. Both girls had their arms around each other's shoulder and broad identical smiles, although the blonde girl's smile was somewhat diminished by a set of braces. Yvonne put the picture back where it belonged between a wizard photograph of her parents, who kept looking about and marvelling at how they were moving inside a picture, and a weighty glass duck that Yvonne thought equal parts cute and ridiculous. She sat down in her chair again and cradled her head in her hands, wondering if there was anything else today was going to throw at her. She heard sniffing coming from the bathroom, and for a few moments it was all she could focus on, her mind otherwise completely blank.

"Alright. Okay. Alright," she said, looking at a decorative wrinkle in her carpet. She sprung to her feet, walked past her CD player and tapped the big ON/OFF button in a practised gesture. She flicked through the albums standing in neat rows in the case next to the television. It often took her several minutes to find something to listen to, if it was going to be listened to and not just play in the background as she read, but not this time she pulled *Rumours* from the shelf, knowing instinctively where it was despite the poor organisation of her CDs, and put the disc in the CD tray. The opening lines of '*Second Hand News*' playing, she Summoned a wine bottle and two glasses to her coffee table and went to her armchair. After a moment of thought, she Summoned a corkscrew, set her wand on the table and opened the bottle. This was not going to be

an escape, and this was not going to be a wake, but it might be something that lay in between those two things. One of the reasons she loved *Rumours* so much, beyond having heard it many, many times as a child, was Fleetwood Mac's story about the time it was being recorded all the members of the band had ended relationships and were writing songs about it on some level, and it made the recording session uncomfortable and tense, but the album came out so strong, it lifted the whole band out of their collective depression. That, in Yvonne's opinion, was the best kind of art the taking of pain and channelling it into something beautiful.

Just as Yvonne was popping the cork from the neck of the wine bottle, Christine emerged from the bathroom looking much more composed than she had when she had entered. She spied the pair of glasses on the coffee table and began to decline. "Oh, no, I don't normally..."

"If this was a normal situation, I would listen," Yvonne said, holding Christine's eyes with her own as she sat on the couch, "but this hardly counts as normal, and God help me, I'm going to try and make it as normal as I can." She poured two glasses and slid one over to Christine, who regarded it with some curiosity before taking it in her hand.

"I suppose we should drink to something," she said at last.

"Dreams," Yvonne said without hesitation.

"To dreams, then."

"To dreams." Yvonne touched her glass to Christine's and then took a long sip while Stevie Nicks noted that thunder only happens when it's raining, the players only love you when they're playing.

They talked with very few pauses about inconsequential things cocktail party chatter, almost. Yvonne talked about the mundane aspects of being a Healer and recounted all the patients she had had a hand in curing in the Janus Thickey ward, and Christine talked about what curse-breaking was like, as if they had agreed with each other that they would refrain from any heavy subject until the sun had risen. At some point, Yvonne Summoned the loaf of bread from the kitchen plain food to go with plain conversation. It was almost sunrise when Yvonne realised she was seeing by more than the few lights in the lounge, and she had not noticed the CD had stopped playing. She stood up to put some music back on, unsure if she would find a new disc or just repeat the one in the machine, when the knock came at the door three quick taps, followed by a male voice.

"Christine?"

"Moss!" Christine called and jumped from her spot on the couch. She rushed to open the door, flicking open the lock and opening it before Yvonne had a chance to react. A man stood in the doorway, hair unkempt and wearing the darker green robes reserved for patients at St. Mungo's. Christine threw her arms around him, and Moss embraced her firmly with one arm. Yvonne watched as Christine seemed to melt into his embrace, and then a cold feeling came over her, one that began in the depths of her stomach and spread all over, the same feeling that followed climbing up thirteen steps when there were only twelve. She watched Christine's head slump to the side, slack and lifeless, watched her sink to her knees then fall to the side, watched her land on the floor in a heap. Yvonne saw what would have been impossible for anyone else to have seen how Moss had effortlessly slid the knife into her, how his face had looked as he had lied to her at St. Mungo's, how he had come upon Archer in the dark and cut his throat, how anything in him that had once been human now cared only for preserving its power, turned to an enlightenment-seeking banzai soldier by the ancient ritual inscribed millennia past on a slab of stone. The thing that stood in Yvonne's doorway had been a man named Moss, but now was also a rabid wolf with its muzzle drawn back in a snarl that encapsulated hate in the same way Christine's face had encapsulated fear, a shark with eyes black from the scent of blood, a vulture flying out of the sun, these and ten thousand other beasts. The knife in its hand was a claw, was a fang, was a jagged tooth.

"No gods," said the beast, levelling its paw, brandishing its knife, baring its fangs at Yvonne. She suddenly realised her wand still lay on the coffee table, and a chair separated it from her.

"No gods," repeated the impossible figure in a voice that was the grunting of pigs, the yowling of wildcats, the spectral laughter of a hyena. "No gods but me!" it roared and ran at her, loped at her, charged at her across the lounge.

Yvonne would think later that if the presence of God was in her apartment that morning, He was not present in Moss, or in her, but in Archer's empty vial. Without thought, without realising what she was doing, Yvonne pulled the empty vial from her pocket and swung her arm in a single smooth motion, her fingers nimble in turning what was essentially a little glass dagger so the point faced the right way. The smooth, clear path of her hand ended at Moss's head, the glass vial driving through his right eye and shattering into uncountable tiny fragments. The thing that had been Moss dropped its knife and held its head with one hand, then gave an inhuman scream that was more like the howling of a dog. It staggered backwards, its other flailing arm sweeping over the shelf above Yvonne's television and sending the objects it held crashing to the floor, before it fell to the ground.

Had Yvonne been the hero of a novel a hard-bitten private eye, or a rookie cop with something to prove Moss would likely have been killed by a single lucky hit. But as Yvonne was only a Healer whose purpose in life was to restore the sick to health, she was granted no such good fortune. Moss writhed on the floor, one hand still held over his eye; the moans that came from the back of his throat, although clearly human, were still horrible and unsettling. Yvonne was frozen, partly hunched over and staring. She knew she had to do something, anything call for help, try and fix wounds, shut her goddamn door before one of her neighbours called the police but she was fixed to the spot. She watched Moss roll to his side, give a deep groan, and then something began to happen to the hand covering his eye. It was like it was changing colour somehow, growing lighter, then Yvonne realised it wasn't getting lighter but *brighter*, illuminated by a light burning deep in his head. He pulled his hand away, and a substance that was not light and was not liquid flowed from his ruined eye, impervious to gravity and sending erratic waves of bright white light all over the apartment. One of these beams shone right in her eyes, and she saw...

...herself in school, tears in her eyes, sad because she had no friends, sad because the other girls had said she had no friends, and she hated them hated them hated them so much...

Yvonne fell to her knees, driven down by the force of the memory. Had the light done that? She closed her eyes and turned her head away, but that was no good because she was...

...looking at a mound of dirt in her backyard, her father holding a spade and her mother holding her hand, saying it was going to be okay, Buster was getting old for a dog and he'd had a happy life, but it wasn't helping because she didn't get to tell Buster goodbye...

She crawled towards Moss's body, not knowing what she was going to do not knowing if there was anything she *should* do. She only understood that this was the knowledge Moss had been consumed by; the thoughts of a dying god were pouring from his head, and the ones that were hers were finding her, somehow, but she knew they were only going to be memories of pain, fear and loss, because what she had seen in the Pensieve was imperfect. *She* was an imperfect god, capable of only glimpsing hidden truths. She was flawed. She was...

...called upon by Mrs Hamilton when she didn't know the answer, when Mrs Hamilton knew she didn't know the answer, and the other children in the class were waiting for her to fail, waiting so they could laugh, snigger, point...

...in a room with a nice man with a soft voice, and shouldn't she be lying down on the couch, and he asked her questions she couldn't answer because she was a witch and he was a Muggle, a doctor, a psychologist, and all she did was stay silent, and he kept asking, asking, asking...

...being stopped on the train and taken to a carriage at the back...

...sitting in the room when another student was brought in...

...asked for her wand...

...led away from the school, away, away to the Ministry, underground. The two men that took her were tall and broad and spoke in official tones and acted like she had done something wrong, but she knew she hadn't, so she was okay. She would be okay because Mary was here with her, Mary her friend, Mary who had also had two normal parents and also had been so scared on her first day instead of excited, Mary who was her best best friend despite being a year younger and in a different House. Yvonne loved her curly hair and said she wanted hair like hers, and Mary said she hated her hair and wanted straight hair she could do pretty things with, like Yvonne's. Mary, her best best friend.

They were both in the room together underground with the thing in the rags in the corner, and the tall broad men were asking them impossible questions. Where had they found the wands they were carrying, who had they stolen them from, how had they found how to do magic? And Yvonne and Mary had not known the answers, could not have known the answers, because they weren't Muggles like the men thought, they were witches, they had been told so, but the men wouldn't hear it. The thing in the corner in rags was growing restless with each question that went without an answer. It was hungry, the thing in rags, the Dementor. It didn't care for blood purity, for Dark Lords or Chosen Ones, it only cared to eat, and it knew it had been promised food.

The men would question. Yvonne and Mary could not answer. The thing in the corner in rags would stir and drive the men to more questions. This circle turned faster and faster and faster, whirring, blurring. Then came the question. The last question. The final question.

Mary could not answer. Mary did not answer. She began to cry instead. Crying was not an answer. It was an invitation to the thing in rags in the corner. It flew across the room and brought with it cold and fear and loneliness and made the men step back, and Yvonne screamed, and Mary kept crying and crying until she fell silent, and the men drove the thing in rags back into the corner with horrible blank white light.

Oh great, what do we do now? said one man. We? This was your bloody fault, said the other. They argued over blame, because something had not gone according to procedure. Yvonne stared at where Mary had been. She wasn't Mary any more. She was like the thing in rags, cold and lonely. She didn't dare to cry, because then the thing in the rags would come for her, and she couldn't speak another word to the official men, and they would soon take her to a room she couldn't leave, and she would be with other people who said they weren't Muggles, said they should be let out, but nobody would listen to them either. Yvonne wouldn't speak, wouldn't tell anyone there what had happened, why two girls went in to be questioned and only one came back. She would think of her parents and would not allow herself to ever cry.

But because this was a memory, she knew what was going to happen. Because this was a dream, she could do something else.

Yvonne rose to her feet, not the little girl but herself now, able to tower over the two official men, and she took the chair she had been sitting on and broke it over the head of one of the official men. He fell to his knees, and then slumped over on his side. Yvonne took one of the broken legs of the chair in her hand and tackled the other man to the ground, now on top of him and pounding the lump of wood against his head over and over and over, punctuating each blow with a no! no! no!, striking again and again and again with wood that felt heavy, felt more like glass, more like a...

...heavy glass ornament in the shape of a duck, equal parts cute and ridiculous, and Yvonne was not in the Ministry but her apartment, not on top of the body of a Ministry official in the employ of the Dark Lord, rounding up Muggle-borns and blood traitors and depriving them of their wands, but over Moss Browning, failed god. She was striking him over and over and over, with each blow driving the horrible white light away, and she was crying, crying, crying.

Epilogue: The Way Which Leadeth Unto Life

Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

Matthew 7:14

Yvonne sat in a folding chair in the Janus Thickey ward, even more quiet than usual since the Longbottoms were out on their weekly trip with their son. The early morning sun coming through the window illuminated the only occupied bed. In the light, the girl's curly, golden hair looked magnificent. The curtain that normally surrounded the bed was bunched against the wall.

"They're holding a funeral for Archer tomorrow," Yvonne told her patient. "I'm going to say something. I haven't got anything written down; it's not something I think I could plan for. I know I can get him across. Not many people knew Jean Paul, really. They should know him." She looked at the floor for a moment before continuing.

"I don't know what's happening with Christine and Moss. I don't think I'd go, even if I knew. I know someone will ask me how I knew one of them, and I can't answer that. I didn't know them. I was just... there, at the end. I'm sorry for them, they're not to blame. They were just... I told the Aurors what happened, if anyone needs to know." She sighed and paused again to brush away a tear in her eye.

"I'm going to discharge you after I get back from the funeral. You'll be going somewhere with others that... with other people like you. I can't fix you. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, but I can't. Maybe someone will, one day, but... not me." She stood, leaned over the motionless body lying on the bed and kissed her on the forehead. Yvonne was mindful to wipe away any tears that fell down onto the girl in the bed, not caring to wipe away any from her own face until she was leaving the ward.

"Goodbye, Mary," Yvonne whispered.

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