

Basic Setting Outline

Though Drowned Quest Redux was written with the intent of allowing new readers to jump on, it skips over some basic setting details that were elaborated on in the original Drowned Quest. The following short guide is composed of things the MC already knows at the start of Redux.

You've learned a fair few things about the world.

[ABOVEWATER]

Not much is above water these days. There's just 16 Pillars— massive, isolated island-cities built on and around structures that jut from the waves. And possibly the summits of some tall mountains, though nobody knows for sure.

It doesn't matter much, though, because...

[UNDERWATER]

You haven't been above the surface for three years (and several months, but who's counting). Drowning doesn't kill a body, as it turns out-- all it does is alter, like a particularly indiscriminate tailor. It becomes normal to breathe water (though talking remains difficult), to not eat or drink, to hardly age— though death is rampant, despite rapid healing. Most conspicuously, you lose buoyancy. There's no swimming back up. Subtler effects are still under study. Common folklore is more blunt: "if you weren't weird before, you're weird now."

BLOOD - Reacts with saltwater, producing a gooey pink substance. Also contains the totality of your* being. Lose enough blood and while cognition may be perfect, there's nobody behind the eyes. Injecting saltwater directly into the bloodstream causes a sort of "high", you've heard, but you tend to stay away from the sort of dregs of society that do that. *Well, not -your- being. Richard's assured you that he's dealt with it. The totality of /your/ being is in your head, where it really ought to be, in your sincere opinion.

REALITY - Is a lot more flexible than you'd gotten used to. You've made a business of ignoring Richard's tangents on "laws" and such forth, but the gist of it seems to be that seawater is a lot more accommodating than harsh air and soil. If something is thought about hard enough, and in the correct

manner, it can be realized. But the result generally only exists as long as it's being perceived, and even then has a habit of shifting in disconcerting ways.

Comes in four kinds: normal, semi-, un-, and anti-. Abovewater is reality. Underwater is semireality. Mindscapes are unreality. Antireality is outside everything.

GLASS - The knowledge and trade of this substance is strictly prohibited, thought that rarely stops anybody. Skientists weave it.

CRYSTAL - The naturally-occurring form of glass, being concentrated deposits of reality. Safer and more pleasant than glass, though long exposure is not recommended. Considered to be lucky, small, impure crystals known as "chit" are used as currency.

LETHALITY - Despite the theoretical immortality life underwater brings, in practice it's rare to survive much longer than a few months or years. There's the native fauna: generally large angry crabs, large angry sharks, etc. There's the sorta-native kinda-fauna: the teeth of nightmare beasts aren't real, but do feel it. There's the people-- nearly all armed and often tetchy (or worse, bored). Survive all that and you'll contend with madness and the very real tendency to disappear for no reason.

SOCIETY - How many people are underwater? It's impossible to say: maybe a thousand, maybe ten or fifty times that. But they do tend to stick together. Tiny, mobile camps pockmark the more desolate areas, while towns and villages spring up near drop sites or defensible areas. There's only a handful of large cities— the biggest and most coveted is Wind City to the northwest, and most 'civilization' lies in that direction. You live in a Base Camp with 30 or so others, though the number changes often. The town of Lindews' Landing is a 10-minute hike east.

Thread 1

Charlotte Fawkins completes her quest.

It is a beautiful day underwater.

Really, it is, even according to your high standards. The sun through the mangrove canopy casts delicate, quavery shadows onto the soft sand underfoot. Little ghost shrimp scuttle between newly-flowering clumps of seagrass. An eastern current ruffles your hair. You step over protruding roots and duck under branches, and it'd almost be a pleasant walk if not for...

If not for everything, really. If not for the crushing weight of anticipation. If not for the eye. If not for the thing coiled languorously around your neck. If not for three years, wasted. If not for the man *tromping* along behind you—

“Ellery,” you say, sweetly.

Ellery gives you a look somewhere between “what is it *now*” and “what have I done *this time*”. You take this as an invitation to continue. “Whoever taught you to walk so loudly? Honestly, were you raised in a *barn*? It's not—”

He rubs the corner of his eye with one hand and signs with the other. “Are we going the right way?”

“What?”

“Are we going the right way? I mean—I don't think, uh, I don't think this looks right. But you're the one with the map, so...”

Okay, so maybe you've been a little more focused on the scenery than the navigation. Does it matter on such a beautiful day? You're not *rushing* this.

«Charlotte.» The thing around your neck stirs, flicks its forked tongue, speaks directly into your head. You will never get used to it. «I said it an hour ago. I said, ‘this is the wrong way’. What you said in response, verbatim, was—»

You frown.

«'Shut up, Richard, don't be stupid'. I think the irony rather speaks for itself, there, so I won't—»

His impression of you is terrible. Is that the point?

«Just, well, look at the map.»

You cast another glance back at Ellery (who has begun to whistle, off-key), stop, and unfold the map. “THE COMPLEET MAP OF THE KNOWN REGIONS OF THE OCEAN,” it says pompously across the top in thick wax crayon. You squint at the southeast corner.

...Well, it's actually a simple mistake to make. You're heading north. It's just that you want to be heading...

>[1] East, towards town... a 15-minute walk from camp. You're looking for Tom's Cave, rumored to be haunted. Also rumored to be gator-infested. These traits may be connected.

>[2] West, towards the dreary mud flats. You're looking for the third sinkhole to open up in as many weeks. Something about skeletons? Cannibals? Or was that a joke? It's so difficult to tell with these locals.

>[3] South, towards—you peer down to make sure you've read it correctly—Hell. Ellery shrugs. “It's hot. They're very straightforward around here.” You're looking for a cave named “Hell's Jaws”.

> Tom's Cave

Ellery leans over your shoulder and swears out loud, surprisingly clearly. “Son of a bitch.”

You clasp the map to your chest and whip around, primed to chastise. He takes this as an opportunity to switch to emphatic handsign. “Tom's Cave?! Seriously? It's right there—how could you possibly have—”

«He's right, you know. Your incompetence is mind-boggling.»

You scowl at the both of them. Of course you knew this was the wrong direction. You took the opportunity to walk, because it's a nice day (not that they'd appreciate that), and because... this is your whole life, right here, about to begin. After years of searching. After years of dreaming.

And it's in some ratty little gator-infested hole next to a podunk town, 15 minutes from where you live.

This fact crept up upon you slowly, like a burglar on creaky floorboards. It has just begun hitting you in the face. It's over, and it was pointless anyways, and bereft of even a satisfying climax. Tom's Cave. It might be only be decent if one of the gators got Ellery, and you arrived just too late to save him, and wept over his bloodied corpse, but the tears hardened to steely resolve as the weight of nobility pressed upon your neck, and you forged ahead, the fire of grief in your belly—

“Lottie?” Bless his heart, but concern does nothing for his features. You smile benignly up at Ellery.

“Yes?”

"Oh! Oh, sorry. I just thought you looked a little—"

«Maniacal. We've talked about this.»

"—I don't know, really. But, uh, I was saying- you need to tell me what you're looking for. I mean it. If I'm going to be risking getting mauled by gators— hell, if I'm going to risk getting mauled by Margo!—"

"You wanted to come," you say evenly. He does. You made sure of it.

"Without knowing what I was looking for."

He slouches forward a little. "Also without knowing our destination. What is there to find in Tom's Cave? Algae?"

The Second Crown. Gold and glittering crystal. Relic of an ancient age. Marker of the right to rule. Your family's lost heirloom. You will cradle it in your hands, and place it on your head, and the ranks of sneering nobles—Birdwells and Harrisons and Falks—will fall to their knees before you.

«He won't understand, if you tell him.» Richard slips off your neck and onto your shoulder. «He'll only ask questions. He has the *look* of someone who asks questions.»

There is, you have to admit, an inquisitive jut to Ellery's chin.

>[1] Parry Ellery's question with one of your own. He might not be pleased, but that's something you can live with.

>[2] **Lie. If he buys it, that's him off your back. If not... you can cross that bridge when you come to it, surely.**

>[3] Just tell him. You'll have to swear him to secrecy, of course, and the follow-up questions may be too much to bear. But it's simplest.

>[4] Write-in.

>Lie.

"Yes," you say.

"Huh?"

"There's algae in Tom's Cave. It's, uh, it's..."

You're not a good liar for how often you do it.

«It's rare and valuable. You think it can be used to reverse dissolution. It's for a scavenger hunt. Make something up already.»

"...I don't know what they want it for, but I'm getting paid, so. Ahaha."

"You're getting paid? Is someone... shit." He makes as if to take the map, but thinks better of it. "Uh, who... was it one person hiring you, or a representative of— I don't know, a sort of organization? Sorry, did you say what kind of algae?"

"Green?"

"Green... goddammit." He kicks at a passing minnow, who darts away from his boot. "Well. Guess we ought to get a move on."

«Congratulations. You've managed, somehow, to tell a truth. Too bad it's not the right one.»

You refold the COMPLETE MAP bemusedly and set off after Ellery, now tromping along ahead of you. You'll have to mark "green algae" down on your list of buttons to push.

Tom's Cave. You've passed by it, briefly, but have never been inside. Supposedly, most people who enter never return. This sounds like melodramatic crap to you...

>[1] But you still came prepared. Not only did you pack an entire rucksack of supplies, you asked around about what's supposedly inside. (You have supplies and knowledge, but people are aware of and might ask about your expedition.)

>[2] **So you brought a positive attitude. If there are massive gators, you'll deal with it as it comes! A little surprise is good for the soul. (You have a +10 Positive Thinking bonus to most actions, and your expedition remains a secret. But you don't know what's ahead, or have any supplies excepting what Ellery may have brought.)**

>A positive attitude!

Your back is as light as your step. Nothing can go wrong when your purpose is so noble! The universe wouldn't allow it! Surely!

It takes another thirty minutes to make it out of the depths of the Fen, and ten more before the foliage is recognizably Landing-ish. You know you've arrived when Margo Lindew's strident voice breaks through the water.

"—I don't care what kind of...my town!...feathered floozies—"

In front of you, Ellery stops and ducks abruptly behind a tree. "Get down!" he signs furiously. "She's looking this way!"

You sidle off the path and into the brush, which does little to hide your searing peacoat. You're going to have to deal with Margo, anyways. She's guarded the mouth of her husband's cave every day for 50 years (they say, and "they" are less than unreliable).

"You there! Girl! You'll come out and help with these cretins."

It's not a question when Margo has fixed you with a gimlet eye. You cast a self-satisfied glance towards Ellery and sidle back out past him. He groans and follows you.

Margo is in her usual rocking chair, surrounded by two people you don't recognize. One, a woman, has a few tasteful feathers in her hair. The other, a man, is positively shaggy with them. Both are up in Margo's face. "We have a *decree*," the woman hisses, before following Margo's gaze to you.

Courtiers. Right rat-bastards, if you'll be so vulgar.

"Come down," Margo says. "You both. You've been around here, haven't you? Why don't you explain to these poor confused folks that the cave is off-limits—"

"—A decree from the Apogee!—"

"I've said, I don't give a damn about no Apple Gee!"

You look at Ellery, who raises his hands in futility.

«We could,» Richard says, «just walk past them. They couldn't stop us.»

No, but they might follow you. You don't relish the idea of dealing with either Margo or a tag-team of Courtiers, though, either. Decisions.

>[1] Come down and help Margo against the Courtiers. She might be grateful enough to let you in with minimal fuss.

>[2] If the Courtiers have a decree, or whatnot, you're going to take advantage of that. Argue on their side and see if they'll let you enter with them.

>[3] Get a better idea of the situation. What does the Wind Court want with a bunch of alligators in a hole? Surely they aren't looking for your crown?

>[4] Just walk right in past them all. There's no barriers to the entrance, and you're sure good fortune is smiling upon you.

>[5] Write-in.

>Get a better idea of the situation.

"Pardon," you start to sign, but Margo points an accusatory finger. "I don't brook with that hand-sign, girl. Use your words."

"Pardon," you say, muffled through the water. You are out of practice. "What sort of—"

"Come here, girl. And speak up. Bring your tall friend, too."

You clamber past mussel-encrusted outcroppings down to the clearing where Margo sits.

«You look silly and you're going to tear your coat.»

Ellery takes the path down and arrives first. "A decree?" he's already asking.

"Yes," you jump in over him. "The Wind Court doesn't have jurisdiction here. That's all to the northwest..."

Wind City lies to the northwest. You've been there once. You made certain there was no Court presence here.

"Oh, okay." The woman tucks a red curl behind her ear dismissively. "It's more hicks, Molina. Ignore them. Mrs. Lindew, I'm afraid we're going to have to..."

Your cheeks flush. "Excuse me?!"

"You're excused," the man (Molina?) says, and pats you on the shoulder.

You slap his hand away. "There's no Wind Court outpost! This is virgin territory! You can't—"

«You're making a fool of yourself, Charlotte.»

You fume.

Ellery steps bodily in front of you. "Sorry," he says. "Sorry. She doesn't— you guys just moved in, right? A few weeks ago? You have to understand, uh, she doesn't get out much. Doesn't hear the news. Uh, welcome to the Corcass..."

"We'd be more welcome," says the woman, "if this— if *Mrs. Lindew* would give us our rightful passage. As we are due."

"Okay," Ellery says. "And why won't she?"

"You should know, boy." Margo clenches the arms of the rocking chair. "I've seen you about. This here is my Tom's cave..."

"And you're protecting his bones, whatever, yada yada." You don't want to hear this all over again. "But these people aren't looking for his bones, right? They just want..."

"That's classified."

"Okay, uh, something. So why not let them in? Or anybody in? Why not just take the bones out and give them a sensible burial? You're not some sort of heathen, surely."

Margo looks sideways at you. "Gators."

"And," says Molina. "We're not going in. We're waiting for Lucky."

"Before we got *sidetracked*," the woman adds.

They stare at you with barely-concealed disdain. Margo stares at you with ordinary disdain.

>[1] Okay, so great. You'll go in and get Tom's bones, and also the crown, and get out. Problem solved. The Courtiers can wait until after you're all done. Boom.

>[2] Margo won't go in because of the gators, and the Courtiers are waiting anyways, so you can just stroll right in. Excellent.

>[3] Why not kill two birds with one stone? You go in and get the crown, the Courtiers get whatever they're getting, done. Margo can't stop four of you.

>[4] Write-in.

>You'll get the bones and the crown!

It's absurdly simple. Margo will let you in to retrieve the bones, and you can snag the crown in the meantime. And then get out of here, never to see any of these people again. Thank the good lord.

«That's not a good attitude to have, Charlie. It's actually important to have connections. You never know when you'll need to use someone.»

"Oh, I'm not worried about the gators," you say. (Ellery mouths 'excuse me?') "We'll head in and get the bones pronto, give them to you, have a little sentimental funeral, a little cry... we can discuss compensation later. I'll do it for free right now, how about that?"

«Pro bono.»

"You know, pro bono," you amend. "Pro bone-o retrieval. That's us."

Margo purses her lips. "No."

"So, you know, we'll just head on in... what?"

"I said no, girl. I won't have some out-of-towner mucking in my business. That—" Ellery had started to say something— "goes for you too. You're one of them campers, aren'tcha? Always out in the Fen, never asking for permission. Impolite."

Positive attitude. Positive attitude.

"Don't worry about it!" you say. "We won't... no mucking. Just quick in and out. Do they look any different from normal bones, or..."

"Run along," Margo snaps.

The other woman waves you off.

Positive attitude. You step backwards, as if to leave, and then tug Ellery sideways by the lapel. You dart and he stumbles down into the mouth of the cave. It's deeper than you thought, and you scabble down, clutching onto rocks and roots.

The heads of the Courtiers pop into view above you, open-mouthed in (you assume) awe. You wave cheerily. They say something inaudible in response.

"Fuck," Ellery says, and slumps against the rocky slope. You squat near him. "Fuck," he repeats. "Seriously?"

He falls silent. You pat his knee and stand up to survey the cave. It's dim. There's slick algae lining most of the walls, as promised. You see no sign of alligators, or for that matter ghosts.

You're faintly disappointed.

"You know..." Ellery says. "You know Margo is going to kill us, right? Maybe even literally. Have you ever spoken to her?"

There's a corridor that leads deeper, it looks like. If you know anything about mystical, forgotten relics (and *do* you), they're never in the first room. Your next plan of action should be to head down there—

"Are you listening?"

"Yeah," you say. "It'll be fine. She'll be happy when we get the bones, and then it'll blow over. You know, ends justify means, et-cetera."

«That's my girl.»

"That's a terrible philosophy—"

THUMP

THUMP

THUMP

A-ha! The alligators! You fish around in your pocket for the little switchblade—

"That's not coming from up there, is it?" Ellery hisses. It isn't. But neither, curiously, does it seem to be coming from the corridor.

Is there an alligator in here? Do alligators thump? You've never seen one.

THUMP - scrrtch

scrrtch

No, nevermind. "GO AWAY" being written by an invisible hand in the algae? Must be ghosts, then. You're pleased that at least one rumor is true.

Ellery has gone noticeably pale.

>[1] If you scream a little, it might scare the Courtiers. That'd be fun. And you have to be a good sport for the ghosts.

>[2] **Go write something back in the algae. Maybe something like "no thank you, we're fine."**

>[3] Very spooky and all that, but you do have a crown to find. Just mosey along down the corridor.

>[4] Write-in.

>**Write something back on the wall.**

While the idea of actual ghosts is exciting, you're less than pleased with the contents of the message. "GO AWAY"? It's unimaginative, firstly, and secondly not at all convincing.

You stride over to the haunted wall and scrape "NO" into the algae below the original words. And then, thinking better of it, you write "THANK YOU" below, and draw a little smiley face next to it.

"Oh good," Ellery says. "You're being passive-aggressive to a ghost."

You stare him down with a toothy smile. It reads, you hope, "I will feed you to an alligator." He massages his temples.

THUMP - scrrtch

The algae is regrowing over the first message. In its place reads

"DO NOT TOY WITH US

WE ARE MULTITUDINOUS

WE ARE ETERNAL

WE ARE..."

The writing is getting increasingly tiny as the entity tries to fit it all above your response.

"...HUNGRY

BE GONE

OR BE FOOD"

"Huh," says Ellery, and stands. "Well, I'm ready to go get eaten. Guess we better get a move on."

You squint at the wall. "Really? I thought you were the... you know, the dull type."

"I was joking. It's a moot point, though. You won't let us go anywhere but down."

«He has you dead to rights. You're far too predictable. If anyone's dull, it's you.»

"Yes," you say, but don't move towards the corridor. The scratchy letters are strangely compelling. Do they twist? Do they flicker? If only you could hold your head at the right angle. If only you had two working eyes.

Not that you're blaming anybody.

«We're not getting into this now, Charlie.»

>[1] You feel as if there's something layered under the existing words. If you try hard enough, can you find it? (Roll.)

>[2] Ask another question of the... ghosts? (What?)

>[3] This has crossed a new threshold of spooky. Better to move along and meet the ghosts (or alligators) in person.

>[4] Write-in.

>Is something there?

You gently trace each letter, hoping to find answers. They don't come. You mouth the words— multitudinous, immortal, hungry— but they don't become an incantation. Behind you, Ellery plays with a lump of wood and a knife.

You stop, sigh, and look up. No secret is revealed to you.

«Charlie, I don't like this. We need to get moving.»

The crown can wait. You have greater mysteries to unravel.

«This isn't a greater mystery, I'm telling you. This is sinister. There's too much law in here. Isn't your eye burning?»

You choose to disregard the latter two cryptic remarks, and ignore the former. If you close your eyes, possibly, and touch the wall...

THUMP | THUMP | THUMP

It throbs restlessly under your fingertips, which seem to be growing warmer, stickier, runnier. Your hand drips down the stone in rivulets. You look but have no eye, you scream but have no mouth. You— You— You— You—

YOU ARE WE.

We are comforted by an indescribable sense of closeness. Our brothers and sisters are all around us. We are broken when apart, but together we are more than whole. We gnash our white teeth and whip our green tails in celebration.

But despite all this, we are empty. The circle has run dry. The people have run dry. We are melting, disintegrating, dying. But there is food on the way, and so we gnash our white teeth and whip our green tails. It is worse than the circle. But we will live on together.

We will find the law, and we will consume it, with a thousand thousand teeth in a thousand—

"Charlie."

We hear a man. We do not know the man.

"I know you're there, Charlie. You're not all..." The man waves aimlessly. "...this. You're not a load of alligators stacked on top of each other."

We calculate. This rings true.

"Come on. You're better than this, really. Back to 'I'."

We are... I am...

"Positive thinking."

I am not a load of alligators stacked on top of each other. But maybe I used to be.

Deep breath, from one set of lungs.

"Good. Now wake up."

You wake up. Your hand is intact. Ellery is crouched above you, two fingers on your pulse. "Oh," he says nervously as you open your eye. He stands up. "Sorry, what...?"

"I think," you say diplomatically, "I was a lot of alligators stacked on top of each other."

"Oh." He pauses. "What?"

"And I had, uh..." You didn't tell him about the crown. "Uh, it doesn't matter. But I think it's below... here."

"Oh good," Ellery says.

>[1] Time to get packing. Say nothing more about it.

>[2] Write something further on the wall. (What?)

>[3] There's only one person who calls you Charlie. On one hand, thank goodness. On the other, it's a snake. Interrogate Richard about his presence in your dream-slash-vision.

>[4] Ask about Ellery's whittling.

>[5] Write-in.

>Just get a move on.

It may be best to never speak of this again, you decide.

«I'm not going to say I told you so, but I did tell you so.»

And so what? You don't feel any lingering reptilian urges. All that happened was you frightening Ellery a bit (always a good cause), and you confirming the location of the crown. It was such a success, in fact, that you resolve to investigate any and all mysterious walls you come across in the future.

That being said, you will still never speak of it again.

While the first chamber is simply dim, the corridor is much darker. You are relieved when Ellery pulls a glow-orb out of his pocket, as a quick shake produces sickly blue-green phosphorescence.

By the new light, you discover that you've been brushing past an entire ecosystem of stygofauna. Tiny white snails crowd crevices in the rock, while you have to hop to avoid a pale crawfish in your path. You don't like caves.

Neither do you like the news. "Looks like there's been a cave-in," Ellery announces, and raises the orb to reveal a wall of loosely-packed rubble.

"We could probably clear it, but it could take a while. Are you on a time limit with the... algae? Is that what the collapse was about, by the way?"

You look to the left, where a path continues past the rubble. "Why not there?"

"Well—" Ellery illuminates a plank of wood nailed over the path. "DANGER," it says. "GIANT ALLIGATOR HERE!!!" The "GIANT" is underlined twice.

"There could be alligators behind the cave-in," you say. "We can't know."

"There's still one path with a known giant alligator, though. I think we should consider that."

>[1] Clear the rubble. It could take a while and you're not sure what's behind it, but it does look more direct. And no giant alligator (probably).

>[2] Take the other path. You can deal with a giant alligator! You have a switchblade!

>[1] Let Ellery do the work. You need to save your energy for future endeavors, and you don't want him getting a big head about his role in this. Surely you can deal with a little resentment.

>[2] Pitch in. It'd go faster, and Ellery would like it, but think of the callouses! And imagine if he thought this were an equal partnership!

>Clear the rubble

"...Okay," you say finally. "But only because it looks faster. Not because I'm threatened by some big dumb lizard."

Ellery considers the wall. "Is it faster, though? I mean, we have to get all this out of the way. I'd think it'd be about the same, if not *longer*. We don't have the proper tools..."

"It's FASTER." You're flushing again. The nerve—!

"Okay, okay. Godsdamn."

He kicks experimentally at a rock near the bottom. "I'm not so sure this was a cave-in, actually. These all look deliberately placed. Which is a good thing, actually, because it's easier to un-place them."

He wrenches at a piece of rubble for emphasis.

«I could help with this, Charlie, you realize. It would be done in a quarter of the time. If that.»

"No," you mutter.

«Stubbornness is an ugly trait to have, and you know it. It wouldn't take much. It wouldn't hurt. Just a minor alteration—»

"No!" Ellery turns at your outburst. You wave him off furiously.

«I know you crave independence, but Charlotte: it's an illusion. There's no such thing. I will assist you now or later, and you will be all the happier for it.»

Damn him to hell. You have survived three years with as little "assistance" as you could manage, and yet he continues to bedevil you. You will retrieve the crown, and then you will be rid of him for-ever...

And the faster the wall is down, the faster that will happen.

You tear into it with no thought for safety or health, putting Ellery's relatively sluggish deconstruction to shame. You only motion for help when there's a boulder too large to move alone. Within half an hour, the rubble has diminished to a point where you can clamber over.

It's dark on the other side, and the glow-orb doesn't seem to be as bright as it used to be. Ellery gives it an experimental shake, but nothing changes.

Judging by the feel of the water, this is a much larger space than the last. You step left, clutching onto the stone, and are punished with a nasty CRUNCH.

You leap back, nearly knocking Ellery over. He places a steadying hand on your shoulder and lowers the orb towards the ground.

Bones. Nothing but bones. Far too many to belong to one, or two, or three people— dozens? hundreds? Some are pearly white, others yellow and crumbling into a sort of sludge. All are stripped entirely of flesh. All are in towering piles.

You will admit that you gagged.

Ellery fishes a pair of thick safety goggles out of his pocket and straps them on. "Sorry," he says. "I only have one pair."

You can only see in a short radius around you. You can see where you came in, but not the exit (if there is one).

>[1] Okay, you've had it. Back to the giant alligator.

>[2] Pick your way slowly through the bones to search for an exit. You must be getting fairly close.

>[3] Damn caution. You are not spending more than a minute in this place. Storm straight to the exit.

>[4] Sift through the bones, no matter how disgusted you are. Is there some rhyme or reason to them? Where did they come from? (Are Tom's bones in here?)

>[5] Write-in.

>Pick your way slowly through the bones

>41, 87, 61 vs. DC 60 - Success

There's a sort of translucent worm attached to many of the bones, you note with consternation. Blind cave fish dart between the crevices. Away from the entrance, the wall is once again slick with algae.

If there's something poetic to be said about life in death, you're too nauseated to think of it.

«It does make one wonder-» Another audible crack. The bones are older here. «-well, multiple things. Firstly, who all these bones are from. Secondly, who's putting them in piles. Thirdly...»

The footsteps echo strangely here. Is it really just you and Ellery in here?

«...what is cleaning all the flesh off.»

You have traveled what must be halfway along the wall, but there's been no change in either the smooth, seamless wall or the endless bones. Ellery stops, and motions for you to do the same. He cups his ear.

It's deadly silent. There's no third set of footsteps. There's no ghostly thumping. There's nothing.

Not even the faint lap of the water, you realize. No rush of blood in your ears. Ellery mouths something- says something- but you can't hear it. He can't hear himself, either, by the look on his face.

«Fascinating.»

You turn around. There are four alligators behind you.

They are large but, you suppose, not double-underline-giant. They have the expected scales and teeth and cold dead glinting eyes. They hang in the water, motionless save the swish of their tails.

"There's a passage up there," Ellery signs. The glow-orb in his hand bobs drunkenly up and down. "But—"

How long have there been four alligators behind you? Are they hunting you? Herding you? Can you fight four alligators? You could take one, probably, but— think positive.

You can fight four alligators! Even if their eyes glint in the blue-green light with far too much malicious intelligence. Is this where the bones come from?

"—it slants up. I don't know if it's the right way."

"Tom's bones," you reply half-heartedly.

"Not a chance."

>[1] You don't give a damn about what way the passage goes. You wanted out of this chamber before, and you continue to want out of it now, and you will take the easiest way possible.

>[2] Hold on, you have this handled. Exude a gator-y aura of togetherness, of the type you'd previously experienced. They'll accept you as one of their own. Ignore Ellery.
>[3] Fight four alligators with a switchblade (and win).
>[4] Just keep inching along the wall until you find a more promising entrance. If they haven't eaten you now, they probably won't later.
>[5] Write-in.

>Take the passage.

You discard your more creative solutions and choose instead to follow Ellery, who is already edging back into the new passage. The alligators accompany you single-file.

«The water's absolutely thick with law. I know you're dense, Charlie, but you should be able to feel it.»

The water in the passage is absolutely thick with... something. It's warm and almost waxy. The glow-orb has dimmed to almost nothing.

«It's the right direction. But there shouldn't be so much leakage.»

It's too viscous, is what it is. It's challenging to wade through. But there are four alligators behind you, and your goal presumably ahead, and you are not stopping here. Not in the close-pressing darkness.

The passage widens eventually, though it continues to slope upward, and dozens of dead eyes on either side greet you. The hallway is lined with alligators, and as you pass each one it peels off and follow you. Like you were Queen, and they were your retinue, your cortège— a taste of the near future. You're swelled with optimism.

«A cortège is a funeral procession.»

Well. It could be that, too.

You take a final step and it all shatters: the darkness, the silence, the waxy water. It's difficult to comprehend, at first. There's a large sunny cavern. There is quite a lot of shouting. There are... there are...

There are a *lot* of alligators.

Around you, yes, is an entire flotilla. But before you is something else entirely. Hundreds of them, melted and fused into a writhing, gnashing tower of lizard. Gnashing, mostly, at a man hacking away at its surface.

A crown is tied to the man's belt.

You're too late! It echoes again and again. You're too late! You're too late!

«Charlotte Fawkins. There is never too late.»

>[1] Write-in.

Command the gators to stop. See what the deal is with this guy. (If that works, you can always command the gators to kill him later.)

>Rally the alligators!

>78, 70, 98 vs. DC 70 - Enhanced Success!

Ellery, baffled, follows your gaze to the crown on the belt. His expression clears, then hardens.

"Fuck *you*," he says, too loudly (you cast an anxious glance at the man, who hasn't noticed), and ducks under an alligator to reach you. "Fuck you! You lied!"

«'No, I—'»

"No, I didn't," you say, with your best smile. The one with all the teeth.

"Ah. Ah ha ha. If you haven't noticed, we've been past about a half-mile of algae, and— AND—" You'd cranked the smile up a few more watts— "I see how you look at that thing!"

"Crown," you correct. "It's actually very personal, so actually... none of your business."

"None of my-!! You dragged me here under false pretenses—"

"No pretenses. Again, you wanted to come."

"Did I?? Is that possible? Because I..." He lowers his voice. "...don't recall ever hearing about it beforehand, and then I wake up and there I am! And now here I am, in a cave with two hundred alligators! Maybe if you had told me, for example, where you were going, or what we were doing, I—"

You are in a cave with two hundred alligators. "Oh, *get over it*," you say, and turn away.

Two hundred alligators. This is your chance to lead a battalion to glorious victory. If only you had a sword, or a flag, or some such...

«This is stupid. No, sorry. You're stupid.»

You hate it when he gets very close to your ear. It makes the radio-crackle louder.

«You're not listening to yourself at all. You think this will work.»

«It will NOT work.»

«I don't understand how it's possible to think it will work. Alligators. Just because a little law happened to leak all over these doesn't make them your friends. You don't have friends.»

«At absolute best, you're going to get swept under and I will have to bail you out. Like I do CONSTANTLY. You're absolutely worthless, you know that. The worst possible choice. I don't know what I was thinking. I suppose I wasn't.»

He was desperate. You were desperate. You're still horribly desperate, positively ravenous for—

«I was not desperate. I was...unfortunately...hasty.»

—for... like... the alligators.

«Be serious.»

Oh, you are.

You loose a bloodcurdling shriek of exhaustion and frustration and rage and charge forward, your switchblade in the air. In perfect sync, 80 tons of lizard surge forth with you. The man turns, too late, and is bowled over. The main column bellows.

(Ellery, still by the entrance, looks exasperated. You don't know why.)

>[1] Perfect. Walk over, take the crown, walk away. Leave the alligators to deal with him.

>[2] Take the crown and then perform a little interrogation. Who IS he? What does he want with YOUR crown? Etcetera. Stomp a couple times on his face if you feel it's necessary.

>[3] If the alligators are starving for want of food, who are you to deny these beautiful creatures? Take the crown, and let them eat the man. Yes, you do want to watch. It's what he deserves.

>[4] Take the crown, put it on your head, and gloat like your life depends on it.

>[5] Write-in.

>Interrogate the man.

>And gloat.

The man is breathing heavily. Pink gack encrusts long gashes down his arms and back, while a half-bitten shoulder oozes a mucous cloud of blood. The column, out of reach, snaps at open water. The crown is pinned underneath him.

You grab the bad shoulder and turn him over. He gives you the evil eye (you cross your fingers to ward it off), but does nothing. White-striped feathers are pinned to the collar of his jacket. (Is he the one the Courtiers were waiting for?)

You take the crown. You place it on your head.

You wonder who made it, and why he hated the monarchy so much. Did there have to be little nobbly bits that protrude into the skull? Did it have to be *quite* so heavy? And all the crystals— you know 16 is symbolic, but it just looks tacky.

«Damn.»

The man is fumbling for his fallen tomahawk. Fool. Did he think you wouldn't notice? You tread hard on the offending fingers and are rewarded with a crack and a pained inhale.

"Who are you," you demand, "and what did you want with *my* crown?"

There's a nervous silence.

"Is that a trick question?" the man says. "Please don't step on my fingers."

You step on his fingers. He grits his teeth.

"Lucky—" You aim for the intact hand. "—Duncan Blaine. As you know, Lottie, so I don't know what you're— I know you left on bad terms, but..."

«Damn. Damn.»

You've never seen this man before. He's trying to pull the wool over your eyes, so he can steal your crown. You change tactics.

"Shut up!" you say. "I *won!* It's over! I have the crown! I'm going to go back up, and I'm going to make all the rules! It's my— excuse me, it's my goddamn birthright! You can't have it!"

"I mean, that was the plan. Well, almost. We've changed tack from the whole surface thing. If you come in with enough humility, they might still let you participate. In a low-level position, you have to understand—"

"Duncan" is saying things you don't understand in the slightest. "No!!" you shriek. "This is— 3 years-!!"

"Oh, don't get hysterical. More hysterical. Call off the dogs, let me up, and we'll take this thing back to Central, huh? I won't even report the whole mutie thing. For old time's sake."

"If I don't!"

"Then I'll take it and send the hunters out. There is a bounty, you know. Not a big one, but times are tough—"

You stomp on his face until blood comes out the mouth.

(Distantly, Ellery mutters some pagan B.S. interspersed with a lot of "fucks".)

There's blood on your boot, you realize. You'll have to wash it when you get back. And add some padding to the crown. Bring in a goldsmith. You might have to redo the whole thing entirely, really.

"I won," you say to the entire cavern. "I won! It's over!"

(Duncan moans.)

"I won! It's over! It's the end! I'm the heroine! It's all over now!"

(A rustle. 200 pairs of eyes turn to you.)

"I—"

WE

ARE THE CONGREGATION

The column speaks.

WE
STILL HUNGER

WE
MUST
BE
FED

"Well," you say less jubilantly. "Eat this guy."

You gesture to Duncan.

NO
EMPTY

"Okay. What if I don't... feed you?"

WE
WILL EAT

You are conscious of 15 thousand sharp little teeth around you.

"What... do you eat?"

LAW

«Well,» says Richard bitterly. «Don't have a lot of that laying around. Not anymore.»

OR BODIES

>[1] Well, Ellery. Obviously. It's the whole point of him.

>[2] Negotiate. Is there any way they could eat you, but just, like... a little bit? (They do not like negotiations.)

>[3] «There is a third option. It won't hurt—»

>The third option.

You're silent. The crown is heavy.

VERY WELL

The alligators advance.

«Very well.»

Richard coils around your wrist.

And the tighter he coils around your wrist, the faster and louder your heart seems to flutter in your chest and head— like a beautiful if

moderately panicked butterfly, you think and immediately dismiss as simpering nonsense. Positive thinking. You can fight 200 alligators, and God only knows how many more in the column.

Positive thinking. Deep breaths, Lottie, count backwards from a thousand, 999, 997— god blessed!— fine then, recite— recite— you have the crown! why don't you just leave! but you're hemmed in— recite— recite— knock knock jokes (why do you know so many?). Knock knock—

You don't notice your heartbeat slowing down: to quick, normal, slow, deathly. You do notice when your thoughts stall and sputter out with it, leaving you glassy-eyed and quivering, stripped of a voice— Richard strangles your wrist—

And then it's as if you've clawed your way up through several feet of sand. You gasp for air until you come to some relevant conclusions:

- 1) You are not where you were.
- 2) You don't know where you are.

(You pat your head and come to 3): you still have the crown.)

It is unpleasantly cold and a little musty, wherever this is, and far too quiet for comfort. You scrabble for a handhold on the smooth stone (marble?)-tiled floor and doubtlessly further scratch up your nails. There's no handhold to be found, but there is a hand which you— you stop that line of thinking in its tracks. Someone is here, in front of you, and he— it is a he, or else you file away “massive hands” as a weakness for later— is offering you a hand.

It's dark, but not quite pitch: light must be trickling in from some unseen window, because you can just make out the outline of this gentleman. “Pardon me,” you say, and are pleased with how much quaver you're able to suppress, “who are y...”

“Damn,” the man says. “You were supposed to say ‘who's there’. Can't even accomplish that much.”

“I...” you say, because something isn't quite slotting together right. Your head twinges. “Who's there?”

“Wire.”

“W...” Multiple things aren't quite slotting together right. It's so quiet... “Um, pardon?”

“Charlie,” says the man, condescending and silky-smooth. “Honestly. ‘Wire who’. This is not something that deserves an explanation—”

Oh. You swat away the proffered hand and gather yourself to your feet. “Wire who. Richard, what—”

He is rail-thin and at least half a foot taller than you. “*Fiat lux*,” he says, as if that explains everything, and the light seems to swell even before he flings open a heavy set of curtains.

"Ah-h," you breathe, and nearly fall back over: stained-glass light skewers your eyes. You raise your hand to shield against the glare, but there's little you can do when there's shades of pink bouncing against burnished marble floor and arched marble ceiling and every marble wall. The man stands silhouetted against it all. His arms are crossed, as if *you* are somehow imposing on *him*.

His face is long and impatient, with a straight nose and cold eyes. Grey creeps up the temples into a meticulous blond coif. It's a hairstyle from your mother's generation, which feels apt— he must be 20, 25, 30 years your senior. His clothes...

"Richard," you (extraordinarily calm given the circumstances) say. Positive thinking. "What's wrong with your suit?"

The man looks down. A ripple of confusion disturbs his ocean of self-satisfaction.

It's not the suit in and of itself. It fits perfectly well. But it's light grey and obviously cheap and you are certain Richard would not be caught dead in it... if he had any choice. "This isn't you, is it? It's some poor soul you— you *possessed*—! I do not approve of that! That's not— you can't go around *possessing* people!"

"Oh, Charlie," the man says, and benignly scratches his forehead. "Don't be hysterical. Wire you always saying 'knock knock'?"

"Huh?" You are in no mood for riddles.

"...Oh well. No, I didn't possess anybody. Did you really think I'd settle for—"

"No, that's not what—"

He continues over you. "It's the other way around. Don't open your mouth like that, you'll catch flies. *You've* forced *me* into this frankly shoddy replacement of a body, thanks much."

The words are utter nonsense, but that doesn't stop you from feeling like a fog has lifted. "Like... the first time," you venture. "With the— you know, the alligators. But that wasn't real."

"No," Richard agrees. "It wasn't. It was in your head. Ergo...?"

You look around, and you want to say: that's not right. My head isn't some sort of... grand entrance hall. It is not made of marble and lined with elegant gilded columns. There are no stained glass windows and no frescoes. No row of doors at the back. No font of water quietly burbles in the center. And, if nothing else, it is not run-down: there are absolutely no cobwebs, no peeling paint, certainly no cracks and stains of any kind...

But you suspect this is not the correct thing to say, half because of the look on Richard's face— eyebrows arched, ready to expound on your wrongness— and half because you can suddenly feel this place and its coldness and emptiness and whiteness lodged in your skull like buckshot.

You slump down against a column. "Oh God," you say. "Oh God, it is. Am I dead?"

He laughs. You don't.

"It's a valid question," you say, "given the circumstances."

"...No. Maybe a little, but mostly no."

"Uh." You try to not think about what "maybe a little" means. "So I'm alive, then? Am I unconscious?"

"Don't make guesses!" He gestures broadly. There is a sheen of perspiration on his brow. "...Yes! But not— only for a fraction of a second. It'll... have been as a blink."

"Are you okay?" He doesn't look it.

"Oh, *sorry*. *Sorry* I'm busy keeping this whole thing stable. *Apologies* for straining under your incessant tomfoolery. I'll go right ahead and genuflect, *Queen Charlotte*—"

You idly trace a thin groove between two marble tiles. "You couldn't get to the point if it bit you, Richard."

"Well then. You're going to die."

"No, I— I'm going to... Ellery," you finish lamely.

He's stopped pacing. "You were weak. You hesitated. And it'd be messy, in any case. No, you are going to die."

Something prickles up your spine.

"Well," you say. "Maybe I will."

Richard squats down and fixes his gaze squarely on yours. His eyes are blue. "No," he says, "you won't, Charlie."

"You said—" You are flushing. "—that's what you said about the whole—the whole alligator deal, too. And you were wrong, and I was right, so— so— ha."

He takes you by the chin. "Charlie, we've won. It's over. But you have to live. Even if it means—"

"No." Your voice is rising in pitch. He stands and begins to pace again.

"Charlie, it's nothing. A temporary alteration. It's not going to hurt, you'll be fine—"

"No! I've told you!" He's wormed his way into every other corner of your life. Something has to be sacred! Something has to be yours!

He whips towards you and his irises are a glassy blue-black and his face is a mask of animal ferocity. «You don't have a choice,» he says in a hoarse whisper, a radio crackle back under his voice. «I will not let you fulfill your childish martyr fantasy. You will thank me later.»

“You need my permission.” You refuse to be cowed by a man in a cheap suit. “Honestly, Richard, lose the theatrics.”

«I don't need your permission.»
«It is a courtesy to get your permission.»
«We are past courtesy. We are into necessary.»

That tone of voice is known to you. You nod imperceptibly.

«Good.»

And then, as an afterthought,

«You'll enjoy it.»

That terrifies you most of all.

«Hold on tight.»

Canary fire surges up your spine. You stiffen, as if shocked, then

Your defenses are wet paper and are, one by one, punched through accordingly. Your mental notes are riffled through. Your memories are held upside down and shaken roughly.

Alterations are made. Just enough to tailor you properly. Do up the hems, and so on.

It does have to fit.

Your legs don't bend that way-

Blood, liquid metal—

Piercing sunlight— trees—

You sleep in your clothes.

>[ID: 3/10]

It's a knock that awakens you, not dawn, because from the looks of it it's noon already. You sit upright and sweep a matted mess of curls out of your face.

Ellery is at the doorflap, busy examining the entirety of your (impeccably clean, white) tent. You cough to get his attention, then are forced to cough again at just how dry your throat is.

Damn. How much talking did you— did he—

Damn.

"Oh," Ellery says. "Hi. Lottie. Uh—"

You pick another curl out of your eye to see him properly. He's little worse for wear, excepting a couple of scratches on his face.

He's speaking softly to you, like how one speaks to a rabid dog before putting it down. You scowl, and wince.

"—I was told to tell you that Monty wants to talk. S'posed to be important, you know— official. Also, Maddie..."

He reevaluates.

"...Madrigal, uh, also wants something. Not sure what: heard it secondhand. But you know how she gets."

You don't, in fact, know how she gets. Your interactions with her have been unpleasant but mercifully brief.

"Okay," you say.

You thought this might end things, but Ellery lingers at the entrance. Is he waiting for "thank you"? "Sorry"? "Good thing you lived"? You won't give him the luxury.

"If that's all..." You trail off meaningfully.

"...If you wanted to discuss the events of yesterday, uh, I'll be around."

"Okay."

He leaves. You collapse back onto your cot. There's blood spots, you realize, on your peacoat. Not to mention the boots. You ache everywhere. You— the crown. The Crown. It's not on your head! Where—

«It's somewhere safe.»

Richard sounds slightly different. Like he's coming in at a different angle, or something.

«We ought to talk as well, by the way. There's quite a lot to go over. See if you can't carve out an hour or two out of your busy, busy schedule, huh?»

>[1] Go find Monty. However flimsy the man is, he's still nominally in charge of the Base Camp. Which means his official business is, in fact, official.

>[2] Go find Madrigal. If nothing else, it ought to be more interesting than any other conversation you have today.

>[3] Catch up to Ellery. You need to know what happened, immediately, from an outside perspective.

>[4] Speak to Richard. When are you leaving this hellhole??

>[5] Damn them all. Your head hurts. You need time to yourself. (Regain ID.)

>[6] Write-in.

>Speak to Richard.

"Busy schedule?" you say. "I'm not meeting with anybody. I'm never going to see these people ever again, so why bother?"

«Ah.»

"Right?"

«Right, right, yes. Sound reasoning.»

You scrub fruitlessly at the bloodstains, then give up and unbutton the coat altogether. "Okay, then."

Richard twists diffidently in midair. «I think,» he pursues, «this should be done in... person.»

It takes a second. "What, in my— why? Is that possible? Normally?"

«It's possible. It was a bit of a fad last year, actually.»

You're not sure what to make of that. "Oh."

«There's a guided meditation process, but we can skip most of the steps. Listen...»

He tells you to sit up, to close your eyes, to count, alternately, up and down. You sigh and mutter and begin to wonder if this is an elaborate exercise in driving you insane. That is, until you plummet through the cot,

plunge down an indistinct tunnel, and land in a heap quivering like a plucked string.

It's cold and musty, though considerably cleaner. You pick yourself off the sparkling marble.

Richard, lounging against the font, is in a better suit. You say so.

He arches an eyebrow. "I adjusted a couple of things while I had the chance, since clearly you weren't taking the prerogative. Like the shoes..."

The ellipsis is clearly meaningful. You look down at his shoes.

"They're, uh, snakeskin," you say. Snakeskin-patterned, at least: the material looks like patent leather.

"Yes! Isn't that clever, Charlie?" He's smiling wolfishly. His teeth are too white and too even. "You get it, right?"

You bite your bottom lip. "They're awful tacky."

In retrospect, you could have estimated the impact of this (true) statement, but not its magnitude. His face clouds so wholly over you couldn't begin to imagine what it had just looked like.

"You're not going back up," he snarls. "Not for a long time."

Well—! Your heart is in your throat. Well— he's lying! It wouldn't be the first time. He's just mad you insulted his shoes, so he's trying to scare you. How petulant. How petty.

"Maybe— MAYBE— you could've, if we had the juice. We do not! We do not, because for *twenty years* a pile of lizards has been pissing it away! Sixteen crystals. Do you know how *much* that is?"

"I think I have to sit down," you murmur. You're not going back.

"No-o, of course you don't. Because you're a child! You have no conception of value! Your greatest ambition in life is to make your dead daddy proud! How romantic! How noble!"

You cradle your head. It all seems very distant. You're not going back.

"You said you wanted to help me... I found you in a— a box. And I told you about... you said you wanted to help."

"I—" He softens a fraction. "Yes. Well. You have to understand. If the goal is the same, does the motivation matter?"

You scrub furiously at your welling eyes. You're not going back.

"I never lied, you know," he says, as if it improves anything. "At the start, you know."

"Oh."

"You could've been a god, Charlie. If the crown were full. The sheer concentrated power of it, I mean— it'd melt you from the inside out."

You sob shakily.

"In a good way! A good way. I mean, what would you possibly want to keep?"

You sob harder.

He's beginning to sound uncomfortable. "Look, we can... we have the crown. We can still recharge the whole thing... Godhood's on the table, it's just, you know, a little farther away."

He doesn't understand! White-hot rage sears through your veins. (Has the light from outside dimmed?) He has never understood!

You sniffle furiously and clamber to your feet. "I don't WANT to be a god!" you holler. "I want to LEAVE! I want to be the GOD DAMNED QUEEN!"

Richard stares. And then he says: "Well, Charlotte, beggars can't be choosy."

React with:

>[1] **Blinding fury. Your future is coming around your ears, and the person tearing it down is in front of you. Smirking slightly.**

>[2] Frantic denial. He's wrong. He's not just wrong, he's utterly mistaken. You would've *known* if your family's crown were apothecic. And he hasn't proved anything! He's just saying things! He has to prove it!

>[3] Shellshocked nothing.

>[4] Write-in.

>Frantic denial.

Richard's not smirking, exactly, but the air of satisfaction about him is almost the same. It's like he thinks he's done a good job— or has at least pacified you.

He's lying.

Well, of course. He can't possibly expect you to believe some cockamamie story about ancient artifacts and godhood and whatnot. It's all made up to... scare you, or manipulate you, or so on.

"Okay, then," you challenge (with only a fraction of shakiness), "If my crown is so powerful, why aren't there a hundred gods running around? Why isn't everything just a smoldering crater? Why—"

Richard trails a hand in the water behind him. "Do you want the story, or the answer?"

You freeze. You didn't expect to get this far.

"Let's go with both, then.

"Once upon a time, there was a king, and the king ordered his sixteen fleetest soldiers to bring him the sixteen purest crystals in all the land. And they did. And he ordered the crystals to be made into a crown by the

finest goldsmith in all the land, and they were. And he ordered law to be woven into its prongs by the finest skientists in all the land, and it was.

"And he put the crown on, and the fabric of reality was bent and warped to his will. The king brought absolute order to the land. And all was well."

Your legs are beginning to ache, but there's nowhere to sit. "What, that's it?"

"You're always so impatient, Charlie." He pauses. "And then the waters of chaos rose up around the king, and swept the crown off his head, and drowned him. And he, and it, were lost forever."

You sit on the font anyways, at a decorous distance from Richard. "Was that supposed to answer any of those questions?"

"Not really."

You trace circles in the water, which tingles under your fingertips. "Then..."

"There's only ever been one owner, and he died, and his empire was swallowed up by the ocean. Anyone who discovered it down here was too weak to survive it."

He sees the next question on your lips. "Not you."

You have to admit it, this is more elaborate than you thought. But there's still a big gaping hole in the story. "You've never said— you keep saying 'law'. Like that means something."

A flicker of confusion. "...We've discussed this, Charlie. More than once."

Aha. This you can safely confirm as a lie, because you have not discussed this at all.

"Four kinds of reality? Defined by the malleability of the law? What, are those words too long for you? Went in one ear and out the other, again?"

"No—" but now that he says it, it does sound vaguely familiar. The lectures you didn't listen to, maybe. "Well, I didn't think it would *matter*."

He stands abruptly, back to you. "Everything I say *matters*."

"Your shoes?"

This was, potentially, the wrong course of action. Richard's jaw tenses. "I think," he says, "since you won't *listen*, I'll have to demonstrate."

His tone of voice is frightening.

He pivots. His snakeskin shoes squeak on the marble. A ring of keys clacks in his hand.

(You wonder how they all fit in his pocket. It's an extraordinarily crowded ring of keys, with each key so flush to the next you're not sure how they're usable in a door.)

"What are these?" he says.

You try to think your way around this trick question before giving up.
"Keys?"

"Yes. But *why* are these?"

You squint. They are, to all appearances, normal keys. "Because someone... made them?"

"*Wrong!*" he hisses. "There are two laws dictating its existence, and one dictating its value. The first is the universe, and it says 'KEYS MAY BE'. The second is the key, and it says 'I AM A KEY.' And thus these keys exist. The third is you, and it says "THAT IS A KEY". And thus you know."

You watch in bewilderment as he selects a key and draws it out through the ring. "But you are in the third kind of reality. Laws can be *broken*."

He thrums open air with an outstretched hand. He thrums strings that gleam rosily in the sunlight— but there are no strings there. It's open air.

He seizes on no string with one hand, and wields the key with the other.
"What is this," he asks.

"A key?"

He violently wrenches no string. There is an utter absence of a snap.

Richard holds something small and metal in his hand. You've seen it before. You've seen many of them before. You knew what it was.

"What is this?"

But you don't have an answer.

>[1] Demand he put it back, now. Whatever 'it' is. And however that works.
>[2] Sorry, why does he know this?
>[3] Can *you* do that??
>[4] **Has he done this to you before???**
>[5] **Flip out.**
>[6] Write-in.

>How was Duncan empty of law? >Assume the object is a coin. >Ask how to fix this.

>Assume the object is a coin.
>Ask how to fix this.

>Has he done this before??
>How was Duncan empty of law?
>Other misc. questions

You look sideways at the object. You close your eyes and reopen them. You prowl, tigerish, around Richard, hoping that a different perspective will unearth its mysteries. "You can hold it," he says, amused. "It won't make any difference."

You hold it. You turn it over and over in your hand. You watch it catch the light.

"What do you think it is? Guess."

Small, roundish, metal. "A... coin?"

You don't even need to guess: it's obviously a coin. The heraldic snake is stamped on one side. On the other is— well, it's your face. Isn't that nice?

>[+1 ID]
>[Identity: 4/10]

"Yeah, yeah, very funny. Give it back." Richard takes the coin from your hand, and in his palm it's something you can't identify. "It's a key."

"No it isn't," you protest. "I know what a key looks—"

You don't know what a key looks like.

"Right." He smiles, tight-lipped. "You can't know, Charlie. You have no capacity to know. It's just how the world works."

"No, it's not!" You snatch the "key" back. "It's what you *did*. Are you going to put it back, or will I have to do it—"

"Would you like to *try*?"

The implied answer is 'no, you *moron*, you would not,' but you don't back down from a challenge. "Yes! What do I do?"

"Hm." He touches your shoulder. "You're *independent*. You'll figure it out."

The world goes black. You prod your face anxiously as your eye— the bad eye, the iron eye— grinds against its socket.

"Richard," you say, "don't be a d—"

The paper skin of the world has been made transparent to you. There's nothing but filament underneath.

It arcs overhead, impossibly thin and glowing a steady blue-white. It knots and winds in complex patterns underneath. You have no substance except a fat coruscating knot where your heart should be. It's frayed at the ends.

>[-2 ID: 2/10]

Richard, a few short strands braided together, glows whiter than the rest.

« STOP GIBBERING. IT'S NOT POLITE. »

His voice doesn't seem to come from anywhere. You'd feel sick if there were any of you left to feel.

« NO. YOU'RE TOO WEAK. THIS WAS A MISTAKE. »

There's nothing between the filaments. Not darkness— void. You could fall into it and there'd never be anything of you.

If you slipped, for even a second, your heart would unravel and you would fall.

If you...

« NOW. »

You gasp furiously for air with real lungs. Your real face is dripping with real water. You stare into the shallow depths of the real font.

Richard hauls you up by your collar and sets you on the step. You wring your hair out reproachfully.

"So," he says. "How was that?"

You say nothing. Your throat is dry.

"You don't seem to listen, you understand, so it's more efficient to exhibit it. Let's leave the fixing to—"

"Do you see that all the time?"

He's momentarily stymied. "What, does it matter?"

"No, I guess." You rub the water off your face with your sleeve. You wish you had a handkerchief. "I just wanted to know. It's not a crime to ask questions."

"...No, I don't see that 'all the time'."

"You don't?"

"You know some reptiles see the heat of living beings? They don't have a separate 'heat setting,' it's just part of their natural vision. It's like that."

"Is that biology?"

"I suppose so."

You're tired, you realize. And finished. You're finished with being in a place that doesn't exist, seeing things that don't exist, talking to a man who doesn't exist but tells you horrible things nonetheless. You're getting answers you didn't ask for and don't care about and perspectives you didn't ask for, either (okay, you did, but you didn't *mean* it.) You still don't

know what a key looks like. You're trapped here forever and are never going back home.

And, God-damn it, more questions are bubbling up on your lips. You massage your temples like a madwoman in the hopes they'll maybe disappear. But if you don't ask them now, when? When Monty is throwing the (rules and procedures) book at you? When Madrigal is— you have no idea what the woman could possibly want from you, but surely nothing good?

You're a slave to convenience. "Have you done the... the key thing before? To me?"

"I don't veto full strings, as a rule. Alterations? Of course. Additions? Yes. Only for our betterment, Charlie."

"Yeah, yeah." This can be discussed later. The unchanging light scalds your eyes. "The man in the— Duncan. Why wouldn't the alligators eat him?"

He waves his hand dismissively. "Wind Court. They've probably been mucking around with their blood, or... you know how they are."

You don't, really, but it doesn't matter. Not now. "What *are* you?"

He's picking at his fingernails with a cuticle pusher. "A snake, Charlotte."

There's not much more to say that that, you think. The incessant burbling of the font behind you is going to drive you insane if you stay here a minute longer. If you aren't already insane. It's possible. It's possible.

You close your eyes, and then open them, and then close them again. "How do I *leave*?"

He smiles, broadly, but as always it fails to reach the blank blue eyes. "Wake u—"

(Back through the tunnel.)

«—p. Oh, good.»

The light is no longer an aggressive shade of pink. Raucous laughter filters through the thin canvas walls of your tent.

You collapse back from an aching sitting position onto your cot.

>[1] You never want to talk to anybody ever again. Go do... anything else. Whatever. (Regain ID.)

>[2] Monty won't get *mad* at you if you're horribly late. But he will look vaguely disappointed, and that's exactly the same thing. You need to get it over with.

>[3] Madrigal will get mad at you. Which admittedly might be entertaining, but also won't make your life any easier. Go speak with her quick.

>[4] You still don't know what happened, exactly, last evening. Find wherever Ellery's wandered off to.

>[5] Write-in.

>Get some R&R.

The thought of being condescended to or yelled at right now is too much to bear. All you want to do is place the pillow firmly over your eyes and sleep.

«Networking is a valuable skill, Charlie.»

But that's not going to happen. Fine. Fine. You stand up, instead, feint towards the door—

«Wise choice.»

—and instead turn 90 degrees towards your desk, salvaged from the dumping ground. As distasteful as someone else's garbage is, the thing is actual wood and therefore still higher-quality than any paper imitation. (Or that's what you tell yourself.) It's the only cluttered thing in the entire room, littered with dogeared records and a couple wilting flowers in clay jars.

You kick out the stool and, above Richard's protests, sit down. You know he doesn't approve of this. But then, when does he approve of anything?

>[1] It's your anonymous column in the local ragsheet. The owner's been pressuring you to make the leap to real news, but that would make you, God forbid it, a *journalist*. You, a journalist. Ridiculous.

>[2] It's your stargazing. Well, "star"gazing— stars aren't typically so fast or so hungry. But that only makes it more exciting. Your maps from the other night are still lying incomplete on the desk.

>[3] It's your scale miniatures. They stand in neat, tiny rows against the wall of the tent, hand-molded and painted in the best dyes you can afford. It feels like ages since you had the opportunity to make one, but if you can manage to blow off your summoners long enough...

>[4] Write-in [subject to veto— it has to fit].

>Scale miniatures.

For the most part, they're of buildings and landmarks that caught your eye. You're proudest of a three-inch rendition of your old pillar in clay and bone. You'd caught a dartling just for its delicate ribcage, back— back—

Oh, you can't remember. Years ago, probably. When home was fresh in your mind.

You bite your lip and push the pillar behind a figurine of Richard you're not fond of. It's a good enough likeness, you suppose, but it lacks something subtle in its expression. Or maybe you can't capture the ripple of the iron properly in crushed charcoal.

You turn that away from you too, just in case, and drag the block of clay out from under the desk. It's the refined stuff, not full of sticks and leaves and whatnot, and consequently hugely expensive. You open the drawer, too, and take your molding tools out. But the little toothpicks and scrapers are too spindly to cut the full block, and so it's with your pocketknife you saw a lump off.

You consider the new clay for a moment, turning it this way and that on the desk. This will be a cutaway, you think, not least because you don't know what the exterior of the (did Richard say what it *was*? Did you not ask? Stupid—)

«Manse.»

—the manse looks like. Or if it has an exterior at all, you suppose. But it doesn't matter when all you have is a rough lump..

You spend the next forty minutes meticulously excising the interior of the clay, leaving three perfect walls and an even floor. How will you do the marble? Bone has the color, but it leaves a polish to be desired. Some sort of coating—

>[+6 ID]

>[Identity: 8/10]

The doorflap to your tent scrapes as it's roughly pushed aside. You stand, almost knocking your stool over, and lean protectively over the unfinished miniature. If someone saw—!!

"Charlotte!" It's Madrigal. Of course it is. Who else would disrespect your privacy so severely? "So you've been hiding in your tent, huh. Whatcha so busy with that you can't—" She's *leaning*, trying to see— you hear a miniature topple as you back into the desk. "—spare a minute, huh? Or are you just too prissy to come talk with the commoners?"

You don't like Madrigal, at all. You don't like her gleaming eyes. You don't like her sharkish grin. You don't like her low-cut tank top, either. It's not proper.

"No," you say, "I'm just—" You have to stand on your tiptoes to match her craning neck. "—Sorry I have *obligations*, and can't just loaf around waiting for a *summons* from the quartermaster— you know that's not a real job, right?"

"It's more authority than you have," she says, but finally relents at trying to look past you. "'Spite whatever you think. Come outside."

"I don't have to go outside," you say with the largest smile you can force on. "You can't *make* me."

"Oh, right, because the sun hurts your nice porcelain skin. Sorry, we're going outside— your tent gives me the shivers, honestly. It's so empty."

"*Minimalist*."

"I could give two shits. Out."

She gestures towards the door.

>[1] She does nominally rank higher than you— as in, she has a rank and you don't. And Monty already wants to see you. Exit in as face-saving a way as possible.

>[2] You'll leave, but you're making it clear it's not by any sort of choice. The metaphorical biting and scratching, etc.

>[3] You're actual royalty. You have a crown, for God's sake, even if you're not sure... where. (Damn.) If you must talk, it's happening right here.

>[4] You're actual royalty. She can wait until this miniature is further along, thank you very much.

>[5] Write-in.

>Leave with as much grace as you can manage.

"You first!" you say. "I'll, um, be out in a moment."

Madrigal squints, then, apparently believing this to be a worthy sacrifice, turns heel and strides out. You exhale shakily.

It's just a matter of opening the desk drawer and sweeping everything— the clay shavings, the tools, your papers— in. Except for the unfinished model, which you pick up with a careful hand and place on top.

You wait another minute before stepping outside. She can't be made to feel *important*. When you do, you discover that it's not a beautiful day: the water has a grimy, sulfurous feel to it, and the light from above is dim.

Madrigal waits, hands on hips. "Oh, good," she says. "Look, I don't want to talk right here, either. There's, you know, people."

She jerks a thumb over her shoulder. Indeed, Eloise and... a man you don't recognize are playing cards on a rickety table. Enough people come in and out that you can't be bothered to know their faces. "Why," you say. "Planning to garrote me in private?"

"What? No. I just— shit, it's *personal*, Charlotte. Not that you'd know."

It's personal! It's personal? What could Madrigal possibly want from you with a personal matter? Do you care? Absolutely not. A personal matter!

"Oh," you say, disinterestedly. "Isn't that interesting."

She narrows her eyes. "Yeah huh. You're thrilled to get your nasty little paws all over someone else's business. Let's go."

You follow her down the sandy path out of camp. "I never said that," you comment.

"It's all over your face."

«I keep telling you your poker face is terrible, and you know what you say, right. You say: 'yeah, but the people here are so stupid they never notice'. If you'd like to reflect on—»

You would not.

Madrigal stops, finally, at the intersection to the larger road. She leans against the beat-up signpost. "So."

"So?"

"So, you were with Ellery last night?"

It's *that* kind of personal. "No!" you object. "God, no. No. He was just helping with, uh, with a... personal matter."

"Uh," she says, "okay. He's— you have to get to know him."

You both contemplate this.

"...Uh, but no. No. I meant just, you know, out with him. Did you notice anything weird about him? Did he say any shit about me? For example?"

She grins pathetically at your skeptical look. "I'm just concerned."

>[1] Yes, you did notice something weird about him. Beyond the normal. [Write-in: what?]

>[2] No, you didn't notice anything. (Not that you were paying much attention.)

>[3] You're not answering anything without context. What is there to be concerned about? And why **him**?

>[4] This is not worth your time. Get back to your project.

>[5] Write-in.

"He seemed to have gaps in memory, forgetting that he wanted to come with in the first place."

>Yes, actually, you did notice something.

"Yes," you say heatedly. "He was all ready and raring to go up until the last second, and then he was all 'oh, I don't like this,' 'oh, I don't even remember why I wanted to be here in the first place'—"

"So what, he got cold feet?" Madrigal sighs. "I mean, that's normal. I'm shocked he agreed in the first place, even. That's why—"

You open your mouth to interject, then close it. How are you supposed to explain that you in fact coerced the agreement from him while he was in a "vulnerable state", and therefore it was supposed to *stick*? Cold feet were not possible.

"—so look, I was kind of wondering if—"

"What?" you say.

"I was wondering if..."

"No." You wave your hand airily. "All of it."

She slumps lower on the signpost. "Okay, firstly, fuck you. Secondly, he hasn't been talking."

"Feeling spurned?"

"To *anybody*. I mean, not substantially. He's not mute. But he's been out more and more, he didn't come to *Game Night* last month..."

Game Night. The words send cold prickles down your back. You have never been invited to Game Night. (Not that you want to be!) *Visco's* invited to Game Night. (Not that that matters!)

"I mean, it's just... I'm worried. Monty's worried... we're all worried. And then he leaves with *you*, of all people."

"Excuse me?"

"You, of all people. So, look, I was wondering— since I guess he'll talk to *you*, is there any way you can figure out what's up? Ask him, or do some poking around, or whatever. I don't really care how you find out."

You contemplate this. On one hand, this is about as personal as business gets. On the other...

"Why should I?" you say.

Madrigal looks unsurprised. "I'm guessing the goodness of your heart won't cut it. What, what do you want?"

«She's desperate. Can you see it?»

(Pick as many as you feel prepared to negotiate for.)

>[1] An invitation to Game Night. For... for research purposes.

>[2] A sword. You know about her weapon stockpile. You won't abide questions. You just want a sword. (The shinier the better.)

>[3] Some kind of authority position. You're not going to be pushed around by these people.

>[4] A written promise never to barge into your tent again.

>[5] Money.

>[6] Write-in.

>An invitation to Game Night.

"I want," you say, "an invitation to Game Night."

«No. No. You have to bargain—»

Madrigal guffaws. "Ha, what? You've always been invited."

"No I haven't! I was *banned*." You jab fiercely at her chest. "Completely unjustly, I may add—"

"...That's not what happened," she says, and pushes your finger away. "Like, that's not even in the vicinity of what happened. You *were* invited. And when you were told about it, you said 'fuck off, I don't have time for you'— I'm paraphrasing. So we assumed you weren't interested. But if you are, sure, the door's always open—"

"You're a liar! I was never—"

"Look, did someone *tell* you you were banned? That's not okay. I can have a talk with them."

"You ought to," you say, mollified. "So I'm invited?"

"Yes?"

"Good."

"It's next week," she offers. "Say, what happened to your eye?"

You touch it instinctively. "Nothing." It's cold and polished, as always.

"Let me rephrase that. Why do you just have an empty socket of an eye? Don't get me wrong, it's badass, but I would've expected... I don't know, sunglasses."

"That's private," you say vaguely. You touch it again. It's there.

Madrigal scratches her unsightly scar. "Alright, be that way. Just let me know if you find anything out. You're dismissed, or whatever."

"I don't need to be *dismissed*," you protest.

"Whatever."

>[1] Whatever, indeed. At this point you might as well get Monty out of the way. You'll have to see him sooner or later.

>[2] **Kill two birds with one stone and speak to Ellery. If you can report back to Madrigal, all the better. (And maybe you can extort more out of her.)**

>[3] Back to the miniature. You need to make sure nothing got damaged in your mad rush out the door.

>[4] Write-in.

>**Speak to Ellery.**

You scuff pictures into the mud with the heel of your boot. "Godsdamn," Madrigal says after a full minute of silence. "It's all about the power plays with you, isn't it?"

You are too busy putting the final touches on a rough mud self-portrait to respond.

"And the pettiest possible ones, too."

She hasn't moved, either.

"Ngh," she scoffs (you have moved on to a mud crocodile by this time) and brushes past you.

Satisfied, you smudge out the drawings and leave.

«Wow, you sure showed her. Good work. Good use of time.»

It's not as if you have anywhere pressing to go. Monty doesn't count. What's he going to do, kick you out if you don't show? The thought is risible.

No, it's better to go strip-mine Ellery for information. The more you get now, the less you have to interact with him later, you figure. How's that for a good use of time?

«Don't misunderstand me. I wholly approve of this endeavor, Charlie. I've been saying you need leverage for a long time.»

There's a but. He doesn't say anything nice unqualified.

«But 'conversations' are so misleading. So circuitous. Not at all efficient. No, we'll be going to the source of the matter. Tonight.»

Something about the way he says that makes you nervous. (That's not true. The way he says things is always the same: neutral, uninflected. But you're still nervous.)

«But go on, have fun for now.»

Ellery's tent is, from the outside, exactly the same as it was a week ago. It's considerably cleaner on the inside, in that all the junk formerly on the floor is now shoved in heaps in the corners. You're warmed by the rosy glow of charity.

Ellery himself is in the back, pinning string to a corkboard you don't remember from before. "Lottie," he signs one-handed. "One sec. Go on, sit down."

A velvet chaise longue is shoved up against the wall, but its surface is so papered with books and boxes and notes and mysterious implements that it hardly seems to count as a seat. You see no bed of any kind. You stand.

"Just shove some stuff off," he clarifies after he steps away. Unwillingly, you place the most benign-looking box (full of logs, for some reason) on the ground and sit. No sense in bothering him before the interrogation.

He pulls up an armchair that you're dead certain didn't just exist. "So," he says before you can begin. "How long has someone else been in your head?"

«Hm.»

>[1] **What? Never. Never. You have no idea what he's talking about.**

>[2] Oh yeah? How long has he been a weirdo recluse, huh?

>[3] That's private. And irrelevant. And it's rude to be nosy!

>[4] (inaudibly: three years)

>[5] Write-in.

>UHHH NEVER

>WHY

You gape.

«Come on. You look like a fish.»

Your mouth closes, slowly, and settles into an unconvincing rictus. "Uh," you say thickly. "Never! I— I don't know what you're talking about!"

Ellery rests his chin on one hand. "Really?"

"Never! There has never been, uh, someone else in my head... I don't..." You're already running out of steam. "...Yeah! How would you... why would you... God, you'd have to be real *stupid* to come to that conclusion."

There's a pregnant pause.

"How, uh, did you come to that conclusion?"

He raises his eyebrows. "I wouldn't think it relevant, since it's so obviously wrong."

The rictus is slipping at the edges. You mirror his chin-in-hand position instead. "Well, I mean, it's for the betterment of... maybe it'll help you get less stupid ideas."

"I can't argue with that." Is he making fun of you?? Him?? "Okay, firstly, you were talking to yourself. Out loud. On multiple occasions."

«I've told you to stop doing that.»

"That's normal," you say. "Everybody does that."

"Everyone talks to themselves, yeah. What they don't do is hold one-sided conversations."

It takes you a second, but your heart leaps when you realize. "So... you haven't seen, or, say, heard this someone else personally? It's just guessing?"

"No."

You bury your face in your hands.

"I mean, mostly no. If that were all, yeah, it'd be an educated guess. But at the end— there wasn't a lot of room for debate."

"Why," you ask, muffled. You really don't want to know why.

"Your eyes were gold. Both of them."

God *bless* the King and all the ships at sea.

"Look, Lottie, I'm not trying to— this isn't an interrogation, it's not blackmail. I just thought maybe you'd like to talk to someone who'd, you know, been through the same thing."

You uncover your face. "What?"

"What?" He's perplexed. "Oh, you don't... Uh, for a while it was me and... me in here."

"*What?*"

He hesitates. "Look, I don't exactly know how it varies, you know, between people. But it's worth a shot."

>[1] What? No it isn't. No similarities exist. Because you're all alone here, like a normal person, and not a crazy person.

>[2] What? No it isn't. You're not taking pity handouts like some kind of... person who needs pity. Because you don't. Need pity.

>[3] What? No it isn't. He's talking about something else entirely, like an idiot. He has no help for you.

>[4] This smells like opportunity. Sensitive subjects? Private conversations? You'll be able to pump him like a water screw. Game Night, here you come.

>[5] You don't give a damn if he's totally deluded. It was "for a while". It ended. You have to know how.

>[6] Write-in.

>...How did it stop?

You tug anxiously at a lock of hair. You haven't actually been listening since he said...

"For a while?"

Ellery looks pained. "Yeah."

Obvious social cues haven't stopped you before. "So, it's gone. You got rid of it."

"...Yeah. Well, not—"

"*How?*"

He slumps backwards in the armchair as if deflated. "It's not worth it," he signs dispassionately. "It's not worth it. I promise."

«The man sees sense.»

"Well, that's hardly for you to decide," you say. "You wanted to, you know, lend a helping hand. I'm asking for the helping hand."

«It won't work even if he tells you.»

"It is actually for me to decide." His smile doesn't come anywhere near his muddy eyes. "It's for the best, Lottie."

«Whatever he had was surface. Minimal. You have no idea how deep I'm rooted.»

"Look, no offense, but I'm sure I can handle it much better than you did. What were the symptoms?"

«If you tried, if you even started, you'd be drooling on the floor before you got halfway through. I'm telling you this because I'm not interested in seeing it happen.»

Ellery picks incessantly at his pant leg. It's a long time before he speaks. "I don't think— look, *no offense*, but I don't think you could understand."

You fume. "That's just code for 'you're not telling me.'"

"If you want."

>[1] You have little interest in prying this out right now. Leave.

>[2] **Hold on a minute. Would these unknowable symptoms include "becoming a weirdo"? Because you might be onto something.**

>[3] Hold on a minute. You don't care about the drooling, or whatever. Is Richard saying it is possible?

>[4] Write-in.

>**Is this related to...**

"I don't want, actually," you snipe. "Would one of the symptoms be, say, not talking to anyone? Because—"

«Defenestrating tact, I see.»

Ellery stands with great force, pushing the armchair back— no, there wasn't an armchair after all. "Who *asked* you?"

"Nobody *asked* me. I just knew, okay—"

"No you didn't! No you— for fuck's sake, Lottie, all you ever do is generally look down your nose at people and walk off to talk to yourself. You know approximately jack shit about—"

"I don't talk to *myself*," you say.

"Yeah. Sure. I don't believe you know a single thing about me, or anyone else for that matter, so *who told you?*"

"Nobody!" Madrigal is at least offering you something.

"You know what?" He wipes a hand across his forehead. He's grinning feverishly. "I bet it was Monty. He's all about the— gods, the teambuilding, or whatever. Fix *you* and fix *me*. Hah. You went and saw him, right?"

"Uh," you say. "Not yet."

"Well! Go and tell him to keep out of it! I don't want his idea of help, and I certainly don't want *yours*."

"Uh—"

"*Now!!*"

On one hand, you're not frightened of him. On the other, he looks about to pop an artery, and you don't want his death so easily attributed to you.

You make, you think, a graceful and not-hasty exit.

He's right, though: a dusky greenish tint is beginning to seep into the water as you emerge. Monty is assuredly waiting.

The prospect isn't exciting. The man has the demeanor of a tutor for small children, or possibly an overenthusiastic secretary. His consistent pleasantness is both grating and more than a little suspicious. He must be compensating for something.

His tent (you have only ever heard him refer to it as his "office") is centrally located— one of the perks of being in charge, you suppose. A wooden sign tied neatly to its front reads "Montgomery Gewecke - Please Knock".

You don't knock.

The interior of Monty's tent is divided in two by a white screen. The hidden section must be his personal quarters, because there's only a desk and some unhappy houseplants visible as you walk in. And Monty himself, of course: two feet propped up, reading a book. He's wearing a sweater. Obviously.

He has to set the book down to turn the page with his good hand— his only hand, you're just calling it good to be polite. The left side of the sweater dangles limply. You cough.

He looks up. "Hi, Charlotte. Did you knock? I didn't hear..."

Your look says everything he needs to know. "Right," he continues. "Uh, thank you for coming, though I must say it did take you... quite a while. But you're here now, so I appreciate it."

This is excruciating.

"Firstly, I wanted to say, you know, congratulations on the... I heard it was a successful expedition? You're in one piece, which is what counts. I hope you found what you were looking for."

"Yes," you say.

"Good! There's just— sit down, would you? There's just some minor quibbles we have to mop up, if you don't mind."

What if you did mind?

Monty leans conspiratorially over the desk. "By any chance did you spelunk Tom's Cave?"

You lean back, away from him. "So what if I did?" you demand.

"Nothing, nothing. I've just received a complaint, uh, by Margo— that's Margo Lindew, she charts the camp, see. She says you entered specifically without her permission... does the sound familiar?"

«Oh, dear.»

"Maybe? Well, I've received a request from her to, uh, evict you. Or she'll revoke the charter."

Your face flushes hot. You lean forward, now, into Monty's face. "You can't do that!" He can't— you will not travel again, alone. You couldn't stand it. "And what about Ellery, huh? He went too—"

"Margo says you were the, quote, 'ringleader'. I'll talk to Ellery separately. Please calm down, Charlotte."

His voice is so placid you find yourself, beyond all reason, calming down. "You *can't*," you say, less heatedly. "You can't treat me that way—"

"I can."

You grip the desk. "But—"

"Margo is a bitch, and I don't like her holding things over my head. I don't *want* to evict you. But as of right now, I can't justify not doing so."

"Yes you can! You just said she was a bitch—"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but you haven't made any meaningful interpersonal connections since you moved in?"

Your eyes narrow. "Are you asking if I've made *friends*?"

"That's not what I said. Moving on— so you have little personal motive to stick around. You're a transient. That's fine, we have many of those. But it means I can't explain to Margo why you ought to stay without, well, calling her a bitch."

"Pussy," you growl.

"Now, if you were to *develop* some interpersonal connections in the interim so I had something to point to... Possibly obtain some letters of recommendation... I could do something."

"You could do something... if I *made friends*."

"Again, that's not what I said." He leans back. "But if that's how you'd like to put it, yes. Make friends or you're getting evicted."

You're:

>[1] Outraged.

>[2] Petulant.

>[3] **Embarrassed.**

>[4] **Glad.**

>[5] Write-in

>Embarrassed.

>Relieved?

You stare intently at the grain of Monty's desk to avoid looking him in the eyes. It's low-quality stuff, more like particle board than proper wood. It's more likely paper, though. Is there a signature?

Monty's talking about something that doesn't matter, you hope, because you would rather never speak to him again.

«I did say this would come back to bite you.»

«But think about it this way.»

«You don't actually have to do anything.»

What if you did want to do something? Hypothetically. You wouldn't need to, obviously.

Well, you would need to. But you wouldn't want to. Or, well—

«You wouldn't need to, Charlie. We were going to recharge the crown, in any case, so it would be the proverbial two fish/one hook. Just head in, drain the juice, tweak a couple opinions—»

Either you're not really listening to him, either, or that was gibberish. But it's fine. Richard always makes it work out fine. Positive thinking, and all that.

"—So please stay out of Margo's hair, okay?"

You don't immediately realize he's waiting for an answer. It takes longer to muster up the one he's seeking.

"...Uh, right."

"Good, good. Now, like I said, we'll keep this between us for the time being..."

"Right."

"Don't want to complicate things."

"Yep."

Is he understanding the messages you're sending with every inch of your face? 'Please end this?'

«Don't get all flustered. See this as the opportunity it is.»

You're seeing it just fine, you think. It's— it's *teambuilding*. Never have you more wanted to skewer yourself through the heart and bubble blood out your mouth, a la Vivian Fortescue. But less ignoble. (Maybe the same ignoble, given these circumstances.)

Was Monty hoping for something else? You won't oblige. "...Uh, you're dismissed," he says finally, and you flounce out in hopefully dramatic fashion.

«We'll start tonight, like I said.»

The evening mugginess is just starting to set in, and tents are lighting up in unnatural cyan-green. The Fenpelok wetlands crouch in the distance, shrouded in shadow. If you look in just the right direction, you can barely make out the obelisk of Lindew's Landing.

«But you should sleep, first. You can't be exhausted.»

For what, calisthenics?

«Funny girl. Ellery's our first priority. We're getting into his head.»

...Figuratively.

«Never figuratively.»

>[END THREAD.]

Thread 2

Charlotte Fawkins is a master detective(ss).

Your name is Charlotte Fawkins, and due to a series of calamities you're trapped in Nowhere, Underwater... unless you follow the dubious whims of the snake that lives in your head. It has not been a good day.

You are a poor lurker and a worse skulker, you've discovered. Your boots aren't balanced for stealthy crouches, but you absolutely refuse to ruin your socks. You dislike the idea of taking the long way to your destination. And, moreover, the stress is getting to you.

"Why," you hiss under your breath, "*why* are we doing this!"

«I told you,» Richard hisses back. «Three fish, one hook, etcetera.»

He doesn't *hiss* it. He says it neutrally— how he says everything else. But given the circumstances, you feel entitled to describe it that way.

"Two hooks." You shimmy, perhaps unnecessarily, past a warped limestone outcropping.

«I know you have the memory span of an eyebrow mite, Charlie, but I did say three hooks. We want to extract some unfiltered law, we want to convince him to like you—»

"That's still two."

«—and you promised to dig up dirt on him for the girl. Madrigal. As much as you're keen on renegeing on promises, it's hardly a good look to cultivate.»

There it is! Ellery's tent never seemed so far in the friendly light of day, but you're here and practically perspiring. "I wasn't planning on *renegeing*," you protest. "I just think..."

«That it's strange to 'muck around' inside of other people's heads. Impractical. Improbable. Dangerous. Morally ambiguous, perhaps.»

"Well, yes." You think about it. "Maybe less the last one. But yes. And—"

«You'll get used to it. Regular people do this too, you realize, and only a handful have died. Maybe two handfuls.»

You bite your lip and slide open the tent flap with as little rustle as possible.

«Oh, you know, a medium amount. But you'll be fine. You have me.»

Comforting.

Everything inside is tinted blue in the half-light, including Ellery's unconscious body. You hover above it like a sweat bee on a sticky day, glancing back at the entrance every few seconds. It's empty. Nobody's noticed your trespass.

You, however, are noticing all sorts of things. The tent? Actually rather spacious, now that everything's pushed to the sides, and t— you can't bring yourself to call it tasteful, but the decoration is thought-provoking. Which is the next best thing, anyways. The bizarre little tchotchkes on the hanging shelves to the right could be conversation pieces with the right display case, and the chaise longue pushed off below the shelves is upholstered beautifully in green tufted velvet. You have no idea how that's stayed so pristine. Clear those stacks of boxes off, move it more towards the center— why is he sleeping on the ground, and not the perfectly good chair?— regardless, move it—

Richard drapes about you like a particularly irritated stole. «Prolonging this isn't useful,» he grouses. «Or efficient.»

Hmm, wow, what's this? You're not listening. What *is* in these boxes, anyways? What's on all the papers?

«Irrelevant.»

>[1] You're just gonna look at these boxes. There might be useful information in them, after all. And you won't even need to do anything... weird.

>[2] **That, but papers. Quieter, but you'll have to decipher Ellery's handwriting.**

>[3] Okay, fine. Fine. Fine. It's not like he'll let you leave, anyways. Just do... whatever. You can search his tent later.

>[4] Write-in

>**Rifle through the papers.**

They're everywhere: thumbtacked to the wall, lining the floor, bristling out of folders and notebooks. You make an anxious loop around the far edges of the tent to see if anything looks legible. But it's all the same: blackened with heavy chickenscratch or irregular diagrams, filled with spirals in the margins. And you don't know what any of it says.

«I never would have guessed this is a waste of time.»

In nervy desperation, you slide a big stack off the nearest... surface (is it a table? is it a chair?) and slump down to shuffle through it. Chickenscratch, chickenscratch, chickenscratch— a middling sketch of Madrigal, smiling— chickenscratch— wait.

Though you're surrounded by a small snowdrift of discarded papers, you've finally found something... well, you're not sure you'd call it legible, but it seems to be composed of actual words. "Dear C... I'd be happy to enter a partnership... please contact me..." and so on, whatever. The paper below it is a drawing of an outstretched arm, but labels on it read "Cephalic... Basilic... Median ante-[smudged] BEST". Which aren't words you know, but are words, you think.

You gingerly extract one of the discarded papers to compare. You thought it was just hasty handwriting, but you can't read any of it. What happened?

«Code. Or a different language, I suppose.»

Oh, so now it's not a waste of time. Now it's a valuable clue, huh? Code, or a different language. But why? And why so consistently?

«Hmph.»

You slide the letter to C and one of the chickenscratch papers into your coat.

>[OBTAINED: Letter to C, Coded(?) Paper]

Ellery is out cold. You're not sure you've seen him twitch.

>[1] You're on a roll! You don't even need to do anything weird, surely. What's in these boxes?

>[2] **Richard is giving you the death stare, you're pretty sure (he generally looks like that). And you've already claimed your little victory for the night. Just do what he says.**

>[3] Write-in.

>**Just do it!**

«Well, I hope you're happy with that. My heart is swelling with pride. Wow. Awesome. Way to go.»

" 'Good job' would have been fine," you murmur, and inch back towards the boxes.

«No.»

No?

«I know how you do things, Charlie. You act out in little, petty, childish ways, because it's the only way you feel you can retain your independence. You feel you *have* independence to retain, which is a massive misconception I've been unable to shake you of.»

You cast a look towards the entrance and towards Ellery. You take another step towards the boxes.

«I don't want to stop you, Charlie. It makes me sad when you make me stop you. But we're not looking through those boxes.»

Why? What if there's a smoking revolver in those boxes? What if there's an actual skeleton? Clearly there's useful things to be found in the tent, and you're right here, anyways, so it's not *inefficient*...

«We did not come to look at boxes. Anything other than doing what we came here for is inefficient. You know this.»

You take another step towards the boxes—

«Like I said, I have no desire to do this.»

—and stumble reflexively backwards, towards Ellery. Your leg is stiff and wooden-feeling. Your spine is aflame.

«It's really, frankly, a pain in the ass. You have so many *parts*. I had to add some joints, last time, just to get you remotely manageable...»

Richard walks you jerkily backwards, away from the boxes. You do everything you can to avoid crying out and waking Ellery, who shifts a little.

«There, see, that's better. Right there. Let's just have you bend down.»

You have little choice.

«Good, good. Now, be a darling and open his eyelid. I really can't— there's so many tendons and little muscles, I can't be so precise. Please do.»

His *eyelid*? But he'll wake up. But— you know that tone.

The heat at your spine boils off, though a knot of it remains at the nape of your neck. You scowl, press the papers close to your chest (a petty victory, maybe, but still a victory), and peel open Ellery's eyelid.

It's glassy and unseeing but otherwise ordinary (ily ugly). "Oh good," you snipe. "WOULD you like my other hand down his throat, or..."

«Shh-h-h-h.»

Richard unravels off your neck and swishes towards the open eye. He doesn't say anything at all, but coils himself into a precise spiral, and something indistinct but imperious rattles the back of your head.

Ellery doesn't move, but the pupil of his eye *gapes* open until it's consumed the iris and much of the white. "Oh," you say, with less bravado. "Okay, that's funny, but..."

«Hold on to me.»

You hold on to him. He's cold and slick in your grasp. (You try to let go, which doesn't seem to work.) There is a method to get rid of him, isn't there? You'll find, after this, and then maybe your life can be normal...

Richard slides into the eye. This is fine, you think. This will work out well. I am definitely not going to be dragged behind him into the eye, because that's physically impossible, and also not what I want to do with my life.

Your vision mercifully blurs as you are dragged behind him into the eye.

You are falling. Your surroundings are dark, humid, and smell vaguely of cinnamon. You can't tell if you're still holding the snake; indeed, you can't tell if you still have arms or legs. You are, by and large, nauseated.

The sickening crunch with your landing tells you exactly where your limbs are: under you, probably broken. God-blessed. Good job, Charlotte. Way to go, Charlotte. This is what you get for listening to a snake you found in a box. Why hadn't anyone ever told you never to listen to snakes? In boxes? It's not your fault if nobody told you...

"Wallowing in self-pity never helped anyone. Get up."

You roll over instead, defiantly. Richard still looks like a watch salesman. He has dark sunglasses, now, and a distinct lack of wrinkles. And there's something else, too, that you can't pinpoint.

"Give yourself a facelift?" you say. "And sunglasses? Are they to hide your secret snake eyes, or what?"

He smirks (you don't) and lifts the sunglasses. His eyes are icy blue. "Sorry, Charlie, I can only afford so many liberties. Do get up. You're not injured."

He's right, to your mild disappointment. But your head throbs. Something about *where you are* isn't quite right, like you've developed sudden-onset astigmatism. The sand beneath your feet is black. The sky is olivine green, which tints the placid ocean teal. There is a gentle cliff face behind you, with stairs leading up, and on it— some kind of towering building, or regular tower, but not one built with any structural stability or good sense.

All of it is wrong. "Probably the texture," Richard offers. "Do you want sunglasses? They cut some of it."

"I don't own sunglasses," you say instinctively.

"So?"

You sift a handful of sand through your fingers. "So... what's a texture?"

"Right here—" Richard gestures, broadly. The rings on his fingers glint in the light. "This is a manse, right? We're not actually in Ellery's entire mind, that would be bad. That would shred you up, probably. No, this is a nice, groomed, touristy section, like—"

"Little Sarah?" Desalinated parks and charming boulevards.

"Little Sarah, yeah. This is the Little Sarah of the mind. But it's still permeated with some of the local flavor. The texture. A different worldview."

He's getting quite excited, you notice. He likes explaining. "But *what is it!*" you cut in.

He holds his hand quite close to your face, which only seems to make it blurrier. Are you farsighted? "Look!"

You strain quite hard. You blink a couple times, and then rapidly. You close your eyes one at a time.

"Look!"

And then it snaps, suddenly, into razor focus. Richard's hand is a collage of tiny scraps of paper, varied slightly in size and color but at a distance a cohesive whole. As is your hand. As is the sky, and the sea, and the cliffside.

You sway. Richard grasps fast your arm. "It's not *real*. You're still— well, you're still the *concept* of flesh and blood. The water is still wet. It's just how it *looks*, here."

"Okay," you say shakily. "Okay, that's... fine, then."

"Yes. It is fine. Take my sunglasses."

He presses them upon you, and you're too busy fumbling with their arms to notice the pair still on his face.

They make things darker— which, you will admit, helps. You can pretend things look normal in the dark. "Thanks," you say suspiciously. "Now what?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know." This is even more suspicious. Richard always, always, always has a plan— usually four or five. Is he trying to trick you? Is this his evil (therefore good) twin? Did someone steal *his* body?

He has the decency to dip his head a little. "It's an *art*, Charlie, not a science. We need a way down. Could be a door, could be a ladder, could be, I don't know, falling a long distance. But the next layer is always down, and we extract law on the next layer."

"So we find that," you say. "What about clues? Like, will there be symbolic representations of his trauma, or whatever, floating around?"

"Maybe! Just look around, I don't know. We'll figure it out."

He must be trying to trick you, you decide. What with the whole spiel about no independence. It's a trick. He knows exactly what he's doing.

But if he's not going to *tell* you, then...

>[1] Write-in

>Go up the stairs and explore that tower

>Try to fly in through a window.

>Fly up.

>Or just, you know, walk up.

You stare vigorously at the top of the building and wait. Nothing in particular happens.

Richard scratches his chin in your peripheral vision. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to fly up there." You furrow your brow. "Obviously."

"You look like you're going to pop an artery. Why don't you explain why you think that would work, and I'll explain why you're wrong?"

You thought it was too obvious to have to explain. "I mean, logically, this isn't a place that exists. I haven't... I don't think I've moved, right? I'm-the physical me, uh, is still in the tent."

"How perspicacious," he drawls. "None of that is wrong."

You power onwards. "So that means it's like... what's it called when you know you're dreaming? L-something. It's like that. Which means I can do whatever I want. Right?"

"No." You'd expected that. "You go deeper when you dream, and it's lighter-weight. And that's all in *your* head, too, so the rules are set on the fly. Manses? Very internally consistent, usually very reality-esque. You might not know it if you stumbled in by accident."

You've kept your eyes open so long they're starting to water. Which has enabled you to notice some things. "Then why hasn't the building toppled?"

There's no supports on it, not even an attempt at keeping it vertical. The bulk of it lists inexorably to the left, while an offshoot, like a drooping branch, leans right. The two sides are connected by fading green pennants. It looks unsafe to be within a hundred yards of, let alone inside.

"I don't— it's possible that's a universal exception. Quirk of the strings, you know. Not sure how we'd test that."

A smile creeps over your face. You pivot towards the seashore. "Got a spade?"

"Like a playing card? I suppose, but..."

"Like a shovel. But pointier, you know. Mother had a whole rack of them for her houseplants."

"Isn't that interesting. Give me a second."

"Yes! And I'd—" You wet your lips. "—I'd steal the biggest one, and sneak over to the artificial beach, and I'd make castles. I'd spend hours. It wasn't as if anybody noticed me missing—"

"I really could not care less about your issues with your parents, Charlotte. Catch."

You try and fail to catch the cast-iron hand spade that Richard throws you, though in your defense it was not a good throw. It clanks onto your foot. "Ow," you say, more out of annoyance than anything. "Why'd that hurt?"

"You didn't expect it."

"Oh." You pick it up off the ground and test it in your hands. It's a hand spade, all right. You're hardly an expert. "Okay, uh, I'm going to build a sand castle like that. If it stays up, I guess that's just how things work. If not... I don't know, that's weird. Okay?"

He purses his lips. "Once you have an idea in your head, there's no stopping you."

"Right!"

Before you can build a sand castle, you're met with another challenge: the sand. It's coarse and angular, nothing like the ordinary kind you had at home. Worse, it gets coarser the closer it is to the water. You force Richard to produce a bucket so you can wet some very close to the cliffside.

He shows you a handful of sand. "Does this look crystalline to you?"

"I guess so," you say, one arm on your hips. "Will you give me the bucket? Did you really *have* to make the bucket of iron? I don't suppose you know it's meant to be carried—"

"Shh. Do you see any texture to them?"

"Do they look papery... no. Does it matter?"

"Oh, maybe." He funnels the handful from his palm into a pant pocket, then grasps the bucket with two hands. The sun gleams wickedly off his glasses. "Catch."

"Hey! ...Oh." He didn't throw it, you realize, as you peel yourself off the ground.

Everything else goes smoothly, though you're forced to enlist Richard in hauling the bucket. He does it in one hand, just, you think, to show off.

You build it precisely. To scale, even, though of course you'd need a closer look. Which is why you're surprised when it keeps crumbling to nothing.

"Are we doing something wrong? Maybe it needs to be wetter."

Richard's hands, like yours, are coated in black sand. He stands against the cliffside, out of the way of the latest collapse. "I think, maybe, it's just not supposed to exist. It's a crime against nature."

You tend to agree, having spent 30 minutes trying to build it. "So you think it's *not* universal?"

He smears his hands against the cliff. "Clearly not. Which is more interesting, I think, because it means special effort's been put into *making* it exist. More effort than I'd expect from a casual user. Are you quite done?"

You've been making a proper castle out of the wet sand, a spade in each fist. (You're ambidextrous now. You weren't before last night. You wonder about Richard's definition of 'temporary'.) "Yes," you say.

"Good. We should take the stairs- did you consider why the stairs existed, if it were possible to fly?"

"Not really," you admit.

"Quite."

You leave the spades and bucket behind (assured they'll cease to be if you stop looking at them) and follow Richard up the stairs. "I was expecting, at best, someone quite ordinary in their frequency," he's saying. "Got in during the hype, used it quite a lot when it was popular, gradually tapered off. But that kind of person doesn't painstakingly dive in and alter a structure to make it tenable."

"So what, you're saying he spends a lot of time..."

"Yes. Even with an extended spanner, it still adds up to hours and hours spent- well, spent comatose, effectively. It would explain the isolation."

"But why?"

"Isn't that the question of the hour."

The top of the cliff is furry with red fescue and feathergrass. You push some aside to search. "Could be a trapdoor," you explain. "I doubt we can just go in through the door."

"I'm not sure about that." He taps the half-open door. "No need to chase down rabbits, Charlie."

You abandon the grass, brush your hands off on your coat, and duck into the tower.

Unexpectedly, the room you encounter... isn't bad. The wallpaper is suspect, to be sure, and the light fixture crosses the line from "avant-garde" to "ugly". But the unlit brick fireplace is quite nice, and the two armchairs are tasteful. And familiar. They're the armchair Ellery pulled up out of nowhere in his tent.

Isn't that interesting.

There's some papers pinned to the wall (of course), but it's not as bad as you expected. In the corner lies something vertical, covered by a sheet and tied with cord. A clock? A thin bookshelf?

A wooden door lies to the left, and another to the right.

You touch the top of the doorframe for good luck. Simultaneously, the right door swings open. You jump.

"We've talked about this," says a man. "You can't just drop in on me now, Thea. Not that company isn't appreciated, but..."

You're exactly as surprised to see Ellery as Ellery is to see you. He gapes in raw disbelief. You gape back towards him, then towards Richard, who looks creditably startled. "This isn't supposed to happen," he mutters.

You think it's Ellery, at least. It looks like him, excepting an unbuttoned coat (you were not expecting a teal shirt, but you have to admit it looks good) and a mysterious smidgeon of gravitas. It sounds like him, almost, except you think deeper. He has the same stricken posture.

"Hi, uh..." He searches your face for something. "...Charlotte."

"Lottie," you say. If *you* have the memory of an eyebrow mite...

"Lottie. Uh, I like your sunglasses. And your snake. I didn't know you had a snake."

Is he being ironic? He doesn't sound ironic. He sounds uncomfortable. You look again towards Richard, who shrugs, baffled. "Uh, yeah," you say. "Thanks."

"What are you doing here?"

You chuckle too heartily and lean against the doorframe. "Ah. Ahahaha. Uh—"

"Look, you should... you ought to sit down. Come sit down. I have, uh, chairs..."

It's not worth trying to negotiate. You sit in a chair. You watch as Ellery sits in the other in the oddest manner you've ever seen. It's not the sitting, which is normal— it's the motion, which you can only describe as inhumanly fluid. A praxinoscope with a thousand different images, or something like it. It's wrong.

"Right," he says, and stands again immediately. "Can I get you a drink? Uh, anything. Beer, jujube... water..."

"I'll have some water," you say politely. "Rainwater, please. Not filtered."

He looks incredulous, which makes sense, as he wouldn't know the difference if it hit him across the face. "Rainwater," you say, again, as if he didn't hear.

"Okay, then."

Ellery leaves— fluidly— through the left door. As soon as it closes, there's the unmistakable *chunk-chunk-chunk* of three deadbolts slotting into place. You're locked in.

"Oh, good," you sign to Richard, who leans on the back of your chair. "We're locked in."

"Where's your positivity now, Charlie? I don't know about *you*, but I'm not staying for a water and an interrogation. There's bound to be other ways out."

"And if not?"

"And if not, we'll open the doors. Don't get your panties in a twist. What do you see?"

>[1] Write-in

>We should unwrap the thin vertical thing, see what it is. Check out the papers. And then we'll go check out the unlocked right tower. It should be connected to Ellery's equivalent to Richard, since it fits metaphorically.

>Pound on the door and shout at Ellery through it

>Try all the doors.

>Yell at Ellery through the left door.

>Check the papers.

>Check the covered thing.

>Go through the right door, if possible.

What do you see? Far too much. The room is almost oppressively busy, and even through the tint of the sunglasses the texture is distracting. You try to focus on the obvious.

"I mean, we should probably make sure all the doors are actually locked."

Richard slides into the now-vacant opposite armchair and props his head against one fist. "They are."

You flounce out of your seat. "You haven't even checked! *I'm* going to go try them."

"I don't need to check." He adjusts his glasses. "I know it. But if it makes you happy, go ahead and waste the time."

"Fine, then." You make a clockwise circle to try each gold knob in turn. The right door, despite your best shoving, will not open. The entrance door will not open. The left door will not open.

You bang on its glossy wooden surface with an open palm. "HEY!" you caterwaul. "HEY! WHY'D YOU LOCK US... WHY'D YOU LOCK ME IN?!"

The response comes delayed. "Look, I'll be back in a... in a minute. Just sit tight. It's for your own good."

You pull a face at the door before turning to Richard, who's busy stretching each arm in turn. "Hey!" you say. "He said to wait."

"I could hear, Charlie. Are you just going to stand there?"

No, of course not. You dart, like a moth to moonlight, over to the papers pinned to the wall. You're pleased to find them not only legible, but written in a neater hand than those in the tent.

"8 KITEMAKER," reads one. "SPOKE TO MADDIE AB. HELPING W/ SHIPPING. MORE COLAB. W/ E. TESTED LFISH - NOT SUZIE."

"9 KITEMAKER" is the title for the very next one. "WT. TO FEN 1ST THING - DEEP. HIZ DOS LFISH. SUKSES."

There's two empty spaces before another note. "12 KITEMAKER - DONT DO AGEN."

All of the papers are like that: terse, cryptic, misspelled, and daily. "You think he'd notice if I took one?" you ask.

"Do one with a lot of gaps nearby and it's fine."

You pilfer a note marked 10 STRANGER and tuck it into your pocket. The other papers are gone. Which is fine, you reason. It makes sense. You still have them, probably, *outside*...

"What's the point of covering up something?" Richard rolls a small metal object idly between his fingers. "If you like it, display it. If you don't, destroy it."

You stand, hands on hips, in front of the sheeted thing. It's bound by a daunting amount of complex knots.

"Well," you say, kneeling down to look at the knots. "Maybe you liked it, but it's too painful to look at anymore. Or maybe you're just too lazy to get rid of it. Or maybe you just like bedsheets. There could be lots of reasons."

"So you think Ellery just likes the look of bedsheets? You're not going to need help with that, are you?"

"No, and no, I don't think so." You've had quite a lot of experience untying knots, having... having done something. It was a long time ago. But your fingers were never deft enough to really be good at it.

That has changed. You consider a new career as an escape artist.

The cord falls away, and you pull the sheet off with all the flourish of a stage magician. "Abracadabra!"

"I don't think that's right," Richard says half-heartedly. He's far too fixated on the object under the sheet to come up with a more original retort. You're far too fixated to react.

It's a floor-length mirror, rimmed with a thick coat of gold paint. But not a *legal* mirror, made of polished stone or bronze. The clarity indicates unmistakable glass.

Glass! Should you even be near it? No wonder the thing was covered — the extrareality should punch holes through the room like it were wet paper. (And isn't it, sort of?) How does Ellery have it? How does Ellery *know what it is*? Knowledge of it is strictly banned for the lesser sorts...

You look as you remember, mostly. More disheveled (but that's not your fault, not really). The sunglasses suit your face. You could do with a change of clothes, but your options are limited in that department.

Richard stands behind you— you didn't hear him get up, but his "Interesting" is directly in your ear. "Can you see me?" he asks, and you turn.

"Uh, yes."

He takes your shoulder and turns you back around. "*In the mirror*. Can you see me?"

You squint. "...No."

"*Interesting*. What if I—" and he steps to your right.

You choke on soundless giggles. Mirror-Richard is... a snake, nothing more than that. If you felt generous, you'd call it cute.

"Don't laugh." He sounds put-out. "It's not funny."

"Okay, it's not funny." But you still giggle. "Is this the— is this the 'true self' mirror? So I'm me, and you're a snake."

"There's nothing *wrong* with that." He pauses, huffily. "Take your sunglasses off."

"Why?"

He makes the motion of putting something in his pocket, and the sunglasses vanish. "Hey!" you say, and make the mistake of glancing towards the mirror.

Mirror-Charlotte has no eyes underneath her sunglasses.

You choke, again, but not on laughter. "Not so chipper now," Richard purrs, and twirls your sunglasses between his fingers. "I'm sure it's symbolic, or something."

The spots in your vision subside as you cease prodding at the eye you definitely still have. "You don't *know*?"

"When does it ever matter? It's fripperies and woo. It's trying to read tea leaves, is what it is."

"My tea told me I had *destiny*," you declare. "It had an axe in."

"It told you your tea bag ripped open. In fact, I think I told you your tea bag ripped open. Would you step out of the way? There's more here."

You do, begrudgingly. Richard's face brightens. "Oh," he says. "Yes there *is*."

He pulls you back. "I know it's hard for you to stop looking at yourself, but what do you think of the room?"

You look. And then you turn to look back over your shoulder, then back at the mirror.

"It's different," you say.

"Yes. I'm not sure it's a, what, a 'true self' mirror? Or not exactly. I think it's a door."

You tap skeptically on the surface of the mirror. It clicks. "Nice door you have there."

"Not *now*. But it can be— it just has to be opened. Charlie, I need you to say... I need you to say OPEN."

He says it casually, but a little urge to slice yourself clear from navel to neck and peel yourself open still arises and is dismissed. (You don't even have a knife with you. And it would be so messy.)

"Open? To what— to the mirror?"

"Only to the mirror. And not like that, please, that's atrocious. OPEN. Put muscle behind it."

"Open," you say nervously. Does the surface of the mirror rattle, as to a gentle breeze? It's gone now.

"That's..." Richard crosses his arms. The mirror-snake loops and unloops in midair. "I suppose that's closer. But it's still terrible. Should I just do it, or..."

>[1] No! No. You're not sure what it is, exactly (when do you ever?), but you felt its potency. You want to do that. [Roll.]

>[2] Well, it would be easier. And less dangerous. It would prove Richard right, but then he usually is, anyways. Let him.

>[3] Is this worth the trouble? Really? There's three whole doors and... you don't know, probably a secret exit somewhere. (You hope there's a secret exit. That would be exciting.) All of them seem like less hassle. [Where else?]

>[4] Write-in.

>Do it yourself!

>3, 37, 25 vs. DC 60 - Failure!

"No!" you say brightly. "I'm good! I don't need you!"

"No assistance at all?"

"Nope!"

He returns to the armchair and folds his hands. "All right, then. Show me."

'Open' ceases to sound like a word around try #10. You've tried every way you can think of to pronounce it ('ahhhh-pEN' 'OP-ennn' 'o-PEN') and what seems like a hundred different volumes and intensities. You are getting more than a little frustrated.

"Open. Open. *Open*." The mirror remains still. You turn to Richard, who has switched sunglasses for half-moon reading glasses and is perusing the *Corcass Courier*. The headline: CHARLIE DOESN'T DO ANYTHING RIGHT. There is a black-and-white picture of you.

"That's not a real newspaper," you say.

Richard doesn't look up. "I don't know what you're talking about. Need something?"

You pause. "No."

He flips the page.

"Maybe. A little."

"I'm sorry for the terrible inconvenience," he says. "But I'm busy at the present. Would you like to take a card and we can work this out later?"

You don't say anything.

Maintaining eye contact, with you, Richard folds the newspaper into a square, places it to the side of the armchair, takes a sip from a foul-smelling mug, places the mug onto the ground, rests his reading glasses on his forehead, and finally fishes around in his breast pocket for a good twenty seconds. He pulls out a white card and hands it to you.

"RICHARD," it says, in brassy ink across the top. "Professional." is the entirety of the next line. "Your Head." is the last.

"Turn it over," he says, warmly.

You turn it over. On the back, in flowing cursive, somebody has written "*Know your limits :=)*"

You feel justified in ripping the card into little bits, collecting the bits in your palm, and sprinkling them into the fireplace like confetti.

"It seems to me," Richard continues, "like you're a little upset about something."

"Upset?" You compulsively brush stray curls out of your face. "Sure, let's go with that. Will you just tell me—"

"What's making you upset?"

"Richard! How do I get the damn mirror OPEN—"

The mirror shatters from the inside out, peppering the wall, floor, and furniture with glass shrapnel. Were you not behind an armchair, you'd be cut to ribbons. As it is, you'll be picking shards out of your hair for weeks. Your ears ring.

"Like that," he says. The sunglasses have returned. "Very nice job. It's wide open."

"Oh God," you say. "Did Ellery hear—"

"D'jaknow, I don't think he's actually getting water."

"Oh," you say, and kick some glass dust off your boot. "Well. Now what?"

"I suppose we leave through a door. Unless you have a better idea."

>[A1] Make an attempt to hide the damage.

>[A2] **It's far too obvious. Just leave as-is.**

>[B1] **Try to bust down the left door.**

>[B2] Try to bust down the right door.

>[B3] Search for a different way out. (Where?)

>Bust down the left door.
>Don't clean up the glass.

"I don't suppose you have any method of cleaning all this up, do you?" You kick a pathway through the glass to the left door, whose structural integrity you busy yourself assessing.

There's a withering stare on your back. "Do I look like a maid, Charlie?"

"No, but you can, I don't know, poof up stuff. It's not a stretch." The left door: sturdy. Maybe if you employed something as a battering ram?

"Yes, but I can't 'poof'— I refuse to use that term. I can't arbitrarily vanish anything I want, no matter how convenient that might be."

Nothing in here is battering ram-shaped. You're not strong enough to lift an entire armchair by yourself. "So... we're just going to leave this?"

"It does seem that way, doesn't it."

You squat in place, square your shoulders, and kick sharply up at the door handle with the heel of your boot. The metallic thock it produces is satisfying. You jog in place to get your heart revved up, then go in for another kick.

Richard stands from the armchair to hover behind you. "Open a lot of locked doors?" he asks.

"Oh, sure, when I had to. You know how it goes."

"I don't, actually... whoa." He lurches backwards as you kick a third time. "I'm sure it's a charming neglect anecdote, but there's faster methods of opening doors."

"This is *fast*," you say. "It takes ten kicks, tops."

"And breaks the door. Move, please."

He brushes past you crunchily, having ignored the path you cleared, and puts his hands on his hips. He stares at the door. He cocks his head at the door. He jiggles the handle.

There's a click.

"That should do it," he announces, and pushes the door open.

You duck past him in an effort to not be upstaged. Would you have gotten it open if he'd let you? Absolutely! There was no reason for it not to work. Maybe the deadbolt. But it would've been fine.

The new room is much sparser than the last, though the different wallpaper makes every effort to distract from that fact: splashy gold damask on rich crimson lines all four walls and even, bizarrely, the ceiling. The only thing breaking it up is the velvet curtains that hide most of the right

wall. An unvarnished wooden dining table takes most of the floor space; a pack of playing cards and a ceramic cup rests at the seat closest to the door. A rug softens the hardwood floor.

Ellery is nowhere to be seen.

"There's no water in here," Richard says behind you. "Or a door out. I don't think he expected us to get in here."

You're already checking the cup. "No, here's the water." You taste it. "Eugh, that's filtered. He thought I wouldn't notice the difference!"

"There sure is a lot of underestimation going on." Richard walks past you, towards the curtains, and flings them open. A mirror hangs underneath. "And a lot of patterns. Look at that."

"Is he vain?" You idly deal yourself a hand: blue shell, blue kite, black claw, black knife. You don't actually know how to play card games, but you like the cards. "I wouldn't see why."

"I suppose that's possible. This one's a door, too, by the way."

You're fairly certain this is a bad set of cards. You deal yourself a better one. Shell, shell, shell, king. "So that's where he went? And what's with you and doors, anyways? Speaking of patterns."

"I don't 'have' anything with doors," he huffs. "And maybe, maybe not. I doubt he's bound to the geography like you are."

Do knives beat shells? You're not sure. Maybe knives beat kites, and kites beat claws. Does that even make sense? "You have *something*. Were you a locksmith in a past life and got turned into a lowly snake for your sins?"

"I'm not dignifying that with a response. Are we going to explode this mirror, too, or try the other way?"

- >[1] Explode this mirror. (But not really. You'll let Richard do it.)
- >[2] This room, excepting the wallpaper, is uninteresting. You're not entirely sure why it exists, nor do you entirely care. Try the other door in the entrance room.
- >[3] **Satiate your deep-seated urge to look for hidden passageways where they may or may not exist. (Behind the wallpaper. Under the table. Etc.)**
- >[4] Write-in.

>What's under the wallpaper?

"Uh..." you say. "Neither. How do you do the 'poof' thing?"

Richard turns. "Pardon?"

"Remember? The 'poof' thing." You mime it with your hands. "'Poof', uh, here's a— here's a playing card. Voila." You slip a card off the table for emphasis. "But it didn't exist before."

"Ah." Richard smiles mirthlessly. "Legerdemain."

"Leger... yeah, same thing. How do you do it?"

He sits wearily near you at the table and takes his sunglasses off. He massages the bridge of his nose. "It's not the same thing, because I'll be forced to do things I'll regret if you continue to use the word 'poof'. Why does it matter?"

"Because..." You show him the card: two of knives. "I need a knife. But I want to do it myself."

He slumps back in the chair. "Good. We needed more explosions."

You wave the card in the air. "Nobody got hurt! It was fine. And what am I going to do, explode a knife..."

"It's very much possible, Charlie, with your track record. Anyways, you can't do it. Too complicated."

"It won't hurt if you just tell me," you press. "I can decide that for myself. I'm a grown woman—"

"Hold on," he says, and reaches across the table. You shiver at the expectation of his hand being cold: it is not. He brushes some stray hairs behind your ear and withdraws.

He drops an envelope onto the table. "This was behind your ear."

Is he making a joke? Is he making fun of you? You look from the envelope, to him, back to the envelope. Neither hold any clues. Finally, you open it ("A wax seal? Was that necessary?") and unfold the letter inside— it's written on extremely nice stationary, as you expected, in the same loopy script as before.

"Dear Charlotte,

Now is neither the time nor the place. Do not waste your breath. Do not attempt it unassisted. (I know how much you enjoy that.) Absolutely do not begin with something sharp.

We may discuss this later.

Yours, always,

Richard

P.S. Shake the envelope."

The envelope lies flat and empty on the tabletop. Richard arches his eyebrows. You arch yours back.

He wins. You shake the envelope. A tortoiseshell-handled knife falls out.

*

"Here's the plan," you say. You point exuberantly, knife in fist. "We cut the wallpaper off."

"...Oh." Richard drums the tabletop. "I thought it would be more elaborate than that. What do you expect to find, other than wall?"

"Secrets! That's the only reason for wallpaper to exist, really. Anyone with taste paints."

"Maybe Ellery just doesn't..."

His words are lost amidst your furious slicing.

It looks like a crime scene. Red swathes of paper curl, like dead skin, away from bone-white wall underneath. Also, there's a thin spatter of blood everywhere (you nicked yourself at a difficult juncture).

The only place unpeeled is the ceiling, which you can't reach, and Richard refuses to let you stand on his shoulders. You are certain something must be on the ceiling. Firstly: why would someone wallpaper the ceiling? Secondly: where's all the secret doors? You haven't found a single one, which is *not* how it's supposed to work.

At least there's something to show for all your effort. Strip by strip, you've uncovered messages: by two people, judging by the handwriting, writing back and forth for... months? Years? They circle this room, you know that much: they might extend out into the other.

You just wish they weren't quite so boring.

"WHAT'D YOU HEAR?"

"We're moving, I think. Somewhere less isolated. Less chance of going stir crazy. Speaking of which, how are you?"

"COULD BE BETTER, COULD BE WORSE. STARTED ON A SECOND FLOOR. MIGHT STOP AT THREE OR FOUR. HOW'S THE WEATHER?"

"Chilly. Lots of sharp currents. Is it right to call it weather, with no air? Is there a better word for it?"

"PROBABLY, BUT YOU DON'T KNOW IT. I THINK WEATHER'S FINE..."

And on, and on. You can't make heads or tails of the significance. Are one of these Ellery? But you've seen Ellery's handwriting— far too much of it,

really— and while both of these resemble it, neither are exactly the same. But who else? And why?

>[1] Clearly, the solution to this riddle lies on the ceiling. Figure out a way of getting up there and cut the rest of the wallpaper off.

>[2] Clearly, the solution to this riddle lies... behind the mirror, or something. You're not sure how it works. But it won't be boring.

>[3] Clearly, the solution to this riddle lies behind the other door. That's what you pick to win the game show, or something.

>[4] Write-in.

>Check out the other room.

You briefly consider the logistics of stacking four chairs on top of the table and standing on that to peel wallpaper off the ceiling, but it doesn't seem worth the trouble. Or the possible humiliation.

Instead, you make a final check for anything suspicious— no luck. "It's useless," you declare. "Let's try the other door."

Richard stretches outwards, like a cat. "That's good. The mirror was making me itch."

You touch the doorframe as you exit for good luck. The entrance room is nearly how you left it: a mess. Glass still litters the floor. Only now it's mixed with...

"Eugh!" You hop on one foot to examine the sole of your boot. You've stepped in something nasty. "What— tar?"

It's black and viscous, you know that much. It puddles among the glass and oozes (you follow its trail) from... the broken mirror.

Careful not to cut yourself on the glass, you take a sample with your fingertip. You hold it to your nose: it smells overwhelmingly of burnt toast. You put your tongue to it, just to be thorough.

It tastes, strangely, of nothing at all. But it numbs your tongue. You wipe it back onto the mirror.

"Not my first move, but suit yourself." says Richard, very close to your ear. You yelp. He leans over you to collect some of the liquid in a jar. "I'd be careful."

"You know what it is?"

"I didn't say that. But it's a mysterious black substance, Charlie. I don't know what else you'd expect. Maybe don't touch it... more."

You don't touch it more, but you do watch it drip-drip-drip from absolutely nowhere as Richard does whatever he does to the other door. "You think it's blood? Like, mirror blood?"

He pauses. "I hope not."

The door clicks open. The new room is cavernous, easily twice the size of the others combined, and seems uncannily to bulge outwards. Shiny, waist-high counters ring its perimeter; burbling tanks of water take up most of the center. (They're glass. They make you nervous.) The back of the room is mostly obscured, but you think you see a stairwell.

Bookcases, set into the wall behind the counters, extend all the way to the ceiling. You can't see how that's possibly practical, especially since there appear to be all manner of delicate and pointy implements beneath them. A row of clear dishes, for example, that extends all the way to the back wall. Some kind of tubing. Cunning little knives. Lots and lots of needles. The kinds of things you've seen doctors with... but surely Ellery isn't a doctor?

And that's just the left side. The counters to the right are entirely filled with... junk, as best you can tell. It looks like the set of a hidden object book: there, a sunhat, a croquet mallet, a perfect orb of polished stone. There, a badly-taxidermied seagull, a walking stick, a lace handkerchief. They're laid out neatly, but in no apparent order.

"Oh, dear." Richard is already leaning over an array of vials. "Crystals."

>[1] Write-in.

>Ask what's so bad about crystals

>Check out the bookcases. Since when is Ellery literate? Maybe they're coloring books.

>Crystals?

>Bookshelves?

"Oh yeah?" You sidle up behind him. "Are they pretty?"

"Are they... what? No. Maybe? Charlotte, how am I intended to know?"

They're fine, you suppose, but just that. Lots of inclusions, generally dull... you'd need better lighting to apprise the fire, but you're not expecting anything special. It's the kind that gets ground to pebble for currency.

"Yes!" You pump your fist exuberantly. "Finally! Something!"

"It's something, all right. It's..."

"Forgery!" you say.

"...a terrible omen. Sorry, what? No."

"Forgery! He's..." Your words are wilting under Richard's black look. "...he's, uh, growing— you're not supposed to do that. I didn't know you could do that. I mean, if you did do that it'd crash the whole... the whole economy. And... that's bad."

"Well. That does make sense, doesn't it?"

You weren't expecting that response. You don't like that response. "Uh, yes," you say, and lower your arm.

Richard polishes one lens of his sunglasses. "It's the only logical conclusion, really. As we know, the only value of crystal is monetary. Completely metaphysically inert. Tragic."

Oh, this. You don't know why he does it.

"Certainly isn't the only natural substance that absorbs, stores, and refracts law. You know why that's not!?" He polishes the other lens so thoroughly you fear it'll wear through. "It's not because it's little chunks of distilled reality! That would be silly!"

It would be so much faster if he just told you straight.

"And you know what those crystals don't do? They do not force *everything else in their vicinity* to also become realer, damn the consequences! But that's fine, right, Charlie? Because it doesn't happen!"

"What if I licked it?" you say, more out of spite than anything.

"What if you— nothing. Nothing would happen. It's a passive effect, Charlie. Now, if I licked— if I touched it, that would be entirely different."

"Touch it, then."

He produces a grim little half-smile, slides his sunglasses back on (one lens is merely clean, the other is gleaming), and touches one of the vials of crystal. Except that's wrong: his fingertip disappears first, before it makes contact, and then the finger, and then the entire hand before he pulls away.

"I don't get realer," he says.

You eye the vials with newfound respect. "So why is he growing them? If it's so dangerous, and whatever."

"I understand it's pleasant for people to be around it, if they happen to be ignorant. Maybe it's that. I suppose it could be an accident, somehow. Or it could be a concerted effort to make this place closer to the outside."

"Or maybe he read about it," you offer.

"In here? No, unless he wrote the book first, or memorized it. How could you possibly read a book you've never read?"

You look from Richard to the bookshelves. "What's in there, then?"

It looks like books to you: dozens, with identical black spines. Most are unlabeled. The few that are have titles like "FM 1.1 - 1.25 - Construction," which dangles mockingly just out of your reach.

In fact, you haven't been able to dislodge a single book. All you've gotten for your troubles is a fistful of dust bunnies and a black smudge on your palm. Ink? No— it smells of burnt toast.

Did you track some of the ooze in from the other room? Unlikely. You would have noticed. "Richard," you say, "uh, be a dear— would you mind terribly, uh, to—"

"I'm leagues ahead of you." He deposits a handkerchief onto the counter unceremoniously. It may have been white, once, but it's so sodden with ooze it's impossible to tell. "Third shelf up. I don't suppose you broke another mirror?"

"...No," you say, although you're not quite sure yourself.

The ooze is beginning to leach out from the handkerchief onto the white counter. It has a vaguely malevolent look about it.

"Even a small one?"

"No!"

"Well." Richard prods the handkerchief delicately. "What **did** you do?"

>[1] Nothing! It's probably springing from the wall behind the bookcase. Get Richard to help you up there so you can find out.

>[2] **Nothing! You don't even know what this stuff is. Could you run some tests on it with all this equipment?**

>[3] Nothing! It doesn't matter, anyways: you have something else more pressing to look at. [What?]

>[4] Nothing! You ought to move on entirely. Head up (or down? you can't tell) the stairs.

>[5] Write-in.

Don't just touch it with a crystal, dump crystals on it. Like using sand to put out a fire.

>**Dump all the crystals onto the black stuff!**

"I mean," you say, "I haven't done anything, yet. You said I could pick these up?"

Richard scratches the back of his head. "Uh, yes. I can't go near it. You ought to be fine."

You try to maintain a neutral expression. Does he not realize where this is going? "I wouldn't need gloves, or..."

"You're real, they're real. I wouldn't try prolonged contact, but..."

Triumphantly, you snatch four of the vials out of their holders. "Thanks! I'll just—" You pop the lid off one and tip its glittering contents onto the pool of gunk. "Uh, I'll just go ahead and do that."

Richard has a strangled sort of look. "I... can't stop you," he says only.

"I know!" You tip another vial. The crystals tinkle out. "Look at all this autonomy happening, right before your eyes! Wow!"

You're not paying attention to what's happening with the crystals. (You're on vial #3, now.) All your focus is on Richard, whose hand flexes and unflexes with all the unconscious regularity of a clockwork wind-up. There is a faint sheen of sweat on his face.

"This isn't productive, Charlotte," he says. There are knives in his voice. You don't care.

You finish emptying the fourth and final vial of crystal and finally look down. Much to your disappointment, nothing appears to have happened. The ooze burbles.

"You see? Absolutely nothing of value was—"

And then, from the edges inwards, a thin rocky skin encases the ooze. Just as quickly, fractures split it into plates. The plates bulge and splinter further, spiking upwards in forms that resemble...

"Crystals! Except they're black. Does that matter?"

"Does that... wait." Richard ferrets through his breast pocket again and retrieves a handful of something. Of sand. He deposits it next to the newly-grown black crystal. "I dislike telling you I told it so, but... I did. I did tell you so."

"Twenty seconds ago it was nothing of value," you mutter, but you have to admit: the sand and the black crystal share their color, luster, texture. Texture? The feel, you mean... but if you look at the two closely, they both too lack the visual texture.

Richard's hand is still. "This is crystal, I said, and you ignored me. You're too arrogant, you know— one of your myriad flaws. You're too arrogant, you're reckless, you don't listen..."

"Okay!" you say, a beat too quickly. "But what does it *do*?"

"It... hm." He pokes it. Nothing happens to either subject. "Not what it's supposed to, evidently. Might be inert."

"Oh," you say. (You don't entirely believe that. It looks too ominous.) "What's the black stuff, then, if it shorts out... reality? And why does it make more crystals?"

"Good questions." You recognize this immediately as euphemism for 'I don't know', and frown a little. You don't like not knowing, either, though at least you have the stones to admit it. Richard doesn't say anything else.

The black crystal glistens on the counter like an oil slick.

>[1] Well, alright. Stick it in your pocket, or whatever, and move on. You can't stand at this counter forever. (To do what?)

>[2] Just leave it where it is. It's probably unlucky or cursed or something. Bad aura. And so on.

>[3] Lick it! Or, you don't know, commune with it. Stare at it a lot. If you try hard enough, it's definitely going to divulge its secrets to you.

>[4] Write-in.

>Take the black crystal.

>Look at a book.

>Attempt to drag the bookcase into the wallpaper room.

It's only a moment's hesitation before you pick up the crystal-laden handkerchief. If it's unlucky, you can weather that just fine. (Positive thinking!) If it's cursed, that ought to be excellent motivation. If it has designs on your pure maidenly soul, and aims to corrupt you into a black and midnight hag... you'll simply overpower it. No worry needed.

"Wrap it up." Richard presses a new, clean handkerchief upon you. "You don't want it to stain, Charlie. You need to stay presentable."

"My slacks are dark-colored. It won't *show*." But you nevertheless wrap up the crystal. "Hey, would you like to put those big spindly arms to use? Get a book."

"My arms are in normal proportion to my body," he says seriously. "Yours are stubby. Oh, we'll have to add that to the list."

"The *list*?"

"Of all your subpar attributes. 'Needs improvement', you know. 'U for U-nsatisfactory.' Uh, your upper body strength, your voice, your eyesight..."

You touch your eye instinctively. "My eyesight's just fine."

"Your depth perception? Low-light vision? Quite mediocre. Respectable at distinguishing color, though. You know, I never knew there were so many reds."

"I'm going to see red if you don't get a book," you say tensely. Your face is already hot. "Would you know *why* my depth perception is 'mediocre'?"

"I wouldn't, no." He places a book onto the counter where the handkerchief laid previously.

You hadn't planned anything to say to that. Your mistake, you know. The awkward (on your part) / smug (on his part) silence is broken by the wet splash of the cover being opened.

It's not a book, actually: it's a folder. (You point this out to Richard. He claims they're all like that.) It's black, though you're not sure if it was originally— after all, it's completely soaked in goop.

"/MA" is the only writing still visible on the first handwritten page. You flip soggily to the next. A diagram? All you have is a single pencilled curve and a stray label: "mcr.needle (sutl) →." The next: the top has managed to survive in full. "2MADMAN". A date! If only everything else weren't ruined.

You schlorp from page to page in much the same manner. Dated pages ("5" "11 M" "17MADM") are interspersed with... not-dated pages, all in what looks like Ellery's handwriting. "Looks like," because apparently no sample longer than a couple words survives.

Richard dutifully hands you another couple of binders. A whole laboratory's worth of mirrors must have shattered inside the bookshelf, you're left to assume, because these are somehow stained even worse. It's an outright miracle you're able to find a single corner unblackened: "18," it says, which probably dates it to last Barkeep. Or not. You haven't seen a year on any of them.

You give up about the time your fingertips turn the color of charcoal. It's not as if Richard's been helping at all. "I wonder," he muses, "if we could drag this into the other room..."

Of all the things he's said, this strikes you as one of the very oddest. "Uh," you say carefully. "The bookcase is set into the wall."

"Is it?" he says mildly.

"Huh?" You look up at it. It is very squarely set into the wall. The counter is flush against it. "Yes! Unless you wanted to, what, cut it out of there..."

"Is it?"

"Do you... do you know what set into the wall means? It means it can't be moved. Because it's part of the wall itself, not a freestanding object like, say, a table."

"I know what it means, Charlie." You'd be hard-pressed to describe his expression as anything other than serpentine. "And I really do think you're wrong about this bookcase in particular. Don't you?"

Don't you? You sneak another glance at the bookshelf, which seems as uncertain as you are. It flickers.

But all the other bookcases are clearly set into the wall. So why wouldn't this one be?

"Forget all the others. Ellery's not an interior designer. He must've made a mistake. You know how it goes with him."

That's true. That's all very true. But still... it's *in the wall*. Right now.

"Your eye difficulty, remember. Depth perception. It's all flat to you. You can't see how it's clearly, well, not in the wall. It's freestanding, Charlie."

That would certainly explain it. Damn your eye. "Okay," you say. (The bookcase shuffles bashfully out from the wall, creating a gap in the counter. You fail to notice.) "Don't know why you didn't say that in the first place. How do you plan to *move* it, though? I mean, it's big."

Whatever strange humor Richard was in has evaporated. "Oh, that's no issue, Charlie. It's not *heavy*."

It's built of wood and burnished rivets. It reaches nearly to the concave ceiling. You give a shelf an experimental tug; it fails to budge.

"I suppose my upper body strength isn't quite on the level of *magic*," you snipe.

Richard examines his cufflinks. (They're snakes, because an ounce of discernment would be beyond him.) "I'm hardly athletic, you realize— thanks for that. You just assign a weight that's simply nonexistent. These things aren't *real*."

"Thanks for that," you scoff. That's all? "Next you'll tell me the sky is blue."

"Green. And it's true. This—" he knocks on the side of the shelf— "isn't real wood, exactly how this—" he holds up a hand— "isn't real flesh. The only properties it ever holds are those of convenience."

You try the shelf again. It's as big and woody as ever. "Convenience."

"Nobody ever takes the time to apply the correct laws, I promise. They just let average expectations fill in the blanks. And if you have those expectations, it's a perfectly viable shortcut."

He hefts the entire bookcase under his arm. "I lack them. Be a darling, get the back."

You do. It isn't difficult: the case has the weight and feel of cardboard. You have plenty of time to notice the massive hole where the bookcase used to be.

"God *blessed*. Look at all that!"

The interior of the massive hole is thick with cascading black ooze. It's formed a sort of crust around the sides where the bookcase edges used to be.

"Hm." Richard has unwisely opened the door back into the entrance room, which smells like a lit stove. A full foot of ooze is busy ruining his loafers. "This may prove an issue."

You set your half down and stroll closer. "Having some— oh." The entrance room is thoroughly flooded, coming up almost to your shins. "That was the only way through, right?"

"Yes. ...Well, it depends."

"On?"

"If there's a mirror in this room, and what's behind it."

>[1] Just wade through the ooze to the wallpaper room. It's harmless (to the extent of your knowledge). Even if it will ruin your boots.

>[2] See if you can sort of float the bookcase on top of the ooze and clamber across untouched. It ought to be tall enough, though the efficacy is a little unclear.

>[3] **Through The Looking Glass - And What Lottie Found There, By You**

>[4] Write-in.

>Seek an alternative route.

There's a significant pause.

"Well. Tally ho, then." Richard begins to wade forward.

You almost follow him. You almost do. But then you think: do I want to go in there, really? I'll ruin my boots forever. And I don't like being told what to do. Why is he in the front, anyways? I ought to be in the front. Because I'm an actual person with, with feelings, and so on, and he's a snake. (Probably.)

What did your Aunt Ruby say to do with snakes? 'If you ever see one, don't touch it, don't talk to it, and call me quick?' Damn it. Damn me.

And that's generally why you drop the bookcase with a thunk, stick both hands in your bulging coat pockets, and march off without a word in the opposite direction of the door.

"Don't scowl," Richard calls after you. "It'll stick that way, and then where are you?"

The mirror. Where's the mirror? There wouldn't be a mirror in two rooms and none in the third, that would be ridiculous. There's always an order to things.

You weave around the tanks of water to discover the back half of the room: stairs leading upwards, the back wall shrouded with curtain, framed pictures on the wall...

The back wall. You undo the complex knot of the ribbon tie dexterously, silkily. (Damn it!) You push back the curtain. There's a mirror behind it, the biggest you've ever seen.

"Open! Open. Ohhhphen. God!" You rap on the surface of it impatiently.
"Knock knock. Open up. Open. OpEN."

"You're looking for OPEN," Richard says coolly behind you. There is a snake in the reflection, briefly, before the entire mirror spasms once. When it settles, it's different— wobbly, gelatinous. You could cut it with a spoon, you think. You could push through it easily.

You would, if Richard weren't *right there*. The bookcase sits uncomfortably just behind him. "Do you have to follow me?" you ask, a little hysterically. "I mean, really? Would it be so terrible if I just did this myself?"

He shrugs. "We're a package deal, Charlie. Even if I tried not to follow you, I couldn't."

"Try, then," you spit.

"Sure thing. Are we bringing the bookcase, or..." He flashes a crooked smile.

You flash him a vulgar sign back and step backwards into the mirror.

...nwob llb1 Jon ,Hq̄u01HJ Havg of gniv11J Jusj ɛnɛw uoy Jɛɛɛɛɛ ,bɛɛɛɛɛ uoy JɛHW
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The world flips on itself as you spill out of the mirror and onto the... floor. (You think it's the floor. You have silver in your eyes and try as you might you can't blink it away.) Your head throbs in rhythm with your heartbeat. It's very quiet.

You don't move. You're waiting for something. You're not sure what, though.

It doesn't come. You sit up, instead, and rub your eyes with one sleeve. The silver comes away, a little.

"Very nice," you say, and gather yourself fully off the floor. "Impressive. Very good."

The snake's throat glows faintly pink. It doesn't say anything. It only looks at you.

"Are you mad I wanted you to stay back? Is that what this is?" You point knowingly at it. "You say I'm petty, but the silent treatment, that is..."

It doesn't blink. Are snakes supposed to blink? You're not sure.

"...And, you know, I liked it better when you had a face, actually. Not that you used it for nice things. But it gave me someone to blame, you know."

Silence.

"Because you're an ass."

Nothing! No retort, no rejoinder, not a grain of sprightly repartee. By God, is it really just a snake? Is Richard back behind those eyes, watching, or is all of him past the mirror? You're not sure what to do with yourself. 3 years, and all it took was this?

The bookcase plops out of the mirror with excellent timing. The door across to the entrance room is tightly shut (and attached to the ceiling, but you'll deal with that later).

The world is your crustacean, and you hold the crabhammer!

>[1] Write-in.

Try the stairs.

>Say something to the snake so insulting/wrong that Richard would have no choice but to reply

>Try to rile up Richard.

>Take the stairs.

You are going to seize the metaphorical crabhammer in your fist and use it to...

Use it to...

Well, what? What is there to do? There are a lot of very pretty fish, and so on, but no clear goal and no clear end in sight. And here you are with a snake.

All it does is look at you blankly. You have tried talking to it softly, as if it's shy and needs coaxing. You have tried threats, except they don't seem very effective, somehow. (What stakes are there, for a snake? What does a snake hold dear to its heart? If Richard's there — and if he is, he is doing an excellent job of pretending — well, that doesn't make any difference. You can hardly hold a knife up to your own throat. And he'd laugh, anyway.) You have spat the vilest invectives you can summon up.

But it doesn't respond. There's not even the ghost of a fanged smile on its frankly ugly little po-faced snout.

It mocks you. It glows.

"Did you hear that?" you complain. "I think you're tacky."

("Tacky?" you mimic back in your closest approximation of his even voice. It sounds like you're being choked. You find this adds to the character acting. "*Charlie, tacky isn't a matter of style. It's grace. For example: not blundering, oxenlike, into situations you're unprepared for.*")

Charlie. It's a nickname you've never used and never liked. Is it any wonder Richard latched on?

You pace near the edge of the room, far from the pools. "That's not the point," you say. "The *point* is— you have snake cufflinks. They're not even subtle snake cufflinks, it's just— it's just brass snakes."

("You can't expect me to have any sophistication. I probably—" You cough. This is grating on the throat. "—uh, I probably have no actual sense of what cufflinks are. I'm just a snake. So it's actually 100% your fault I have these, and..." You're losing the plot. "It's all your fault, not mine.")

There we go, back on track. But you don't like that he's right.

("You never like it" you rasp. "But it's always true. You can't do this by yourself. You can't do this without me. For God's sake, the minute I leave you're pretending to be me. Did you consider how pathetic that is? What if somebody sees you?")

You stop walking.

("What are you doing? Honestly? Did you have a plan when you arrived, or were you hoping for the answer to be delivered by courier? Carrier gull? That's not how things work, Charlie. Go down the stairs.")

The stairs are on the ceiling. "I can't," you mutter to the snake, to yourself.

("If you can't..." You don't even attempt the voice anymore. "...what's the point of you?")

That does it. You storm back past the mirror and collect the bookcase as you go. It's featherweight in your grip. The snake follows behind. You drag the case all the way to below the stairs, give yourself a running start, and smack face-first against a row of binders.

Less enthusiastically, you step up onto the first shelf and pick your way up. The wood under your fingers has a new, strange quality: it's waxy, almost slimy. You look down and the floor swims.

But there's nowhere to go but up. By the time you perch precariously at the top, your arms ache.

The stairwell is dark.

That's your first and only impression: it's dark. The stairs are narrow and concrete and lead steeply into darkness.

You cast a regretful glance behind you, at the gentle fish, and the charming pools of blood, and so on. But now there's nowhere to go but down.

So that's where you go. You clutch to the handrail, at first, until there is no more handrail. The snake's throat provides a faint and unsettling light, until it's gone— has been digested (you assume; you do not ask). You're not exactly tired, nor are you scared. All there is to do is walk down.

And then there is a door.

It's large and squareish and oak. There's a keyhole and a peephole. There is a handwritten note tied to the handle in red ribbon.

"GOT HELD UP
SORRY

JUST STAY PUT

-ELLERY"

Ah. The second most ridiculous thing you've heard all day.

>[1] Write-in.

> Acquire Ribbon, Ignore Note, Look Through Keyhole, Open Door

>Try the peephole, and then try the door unless you see scary monsters or something.

>Acquire ribbon

>Look through keyhole / peephole

>Open door (if safe)

The ribbon's the nice kind. It's an aggressive brand of vermillion. It has *wires* in. If you can just finagle it off (it twists once, where the note is attached, and otherwise forms a perfect loop tight to the handle), you'll own it.

(Is this all you are? A petty loiterer and part-time ribbon thief?)

You end up using your pocketknife, which cuts like butter through the ribbon and ribbon wire and part of the handle. (You slipped.) What pocketknife? The one you keep in your pocket, you'd rationalized. It's in the name. And apparently that was just logical enough to get by.

You fidget the newly-amputated ribbon between your thumb and forefinger. You like it when everything just falls into place, but you've never quite worked out what to do afterwards. Tie up your hair, you suppose. Or... you eye the snake with sudden feral malice. It *would* go nicely.

There is a decision to be made.

>[A1] Tie up your hair. Finders keepers!

>[A2] Dress up Richard(?). Carpe diem!

>[A3] This is slander. You didn't collect the ribbon because you liked it, you collected it because... evidence. Right? Pocket it (for now).

As you expected, the snake doesn't appreciate your generous donation of ribbon. After several ill-fated wrangling attempts, both of you are in high dudgeon.

"It's not polite to *bite people!*" you admonish. (You are nursing several pinprick wounds on your hand.) "You ought to know better!"

It hisses from a spot just out of your reach.

"I could die, you know. Your venom could course through my bloodstream and stop my heart, killing me instantly. And how would you like that?"

From the murder in its eyes, it would like that very much.

"Okay, well, I won't die. I'm probably immune. Because if you killed me, where'd you be, huh?"

It doesn't answer. It undulates warily.

"Sent back to eternal torment in the 16 Coils, I wager. Or at least eternal nothing at all. Same thing."

It also doesn't seem to notice the hand at your side inching out steadily.

"So really, we're both stuck with each other. I'm sure there's a word for it— AHA! GOTCHA!"

Once you judged yourself in range, you whipped out, quick as a... well, a snake, and pincerd it in your left hand. It now hisses and wriggles indignantly in your grip.

With your free hand, you loop the ribbon around the snake's neck and tie it in a dashing bow. The amplitude of its wriggles vastly increases, so you do your best to dodge the powerful tail and primp the bow as best you can. You think it looks rather handsome, actually.

You're not certain it agrees, but with the absence of thumbs there's not a whole lot it can do.

Good job! You've successfully set several goals for yourself, and accomplished them, and if there's a little nick in the handle and an imagined scowl on your snake's face that's just how it goes these days. You don't need help, obviously, no matter what *somebody* says. You're good!

(*"There's still a door,"* you say, almost by accident. It's just so *quiet* here. *"All you did was get a ribbon and put it on me."*)

Well, it's— it's one step at a time, right? So there is a door, and nothing else around the door, but that's okay. You just open it, that's all.

Well, you should look first.

Should you knock?

No. No. And you shouldn't try to bust it down, either, because... you don't know. You can only bust down so many doors in a day, else it gets too predictable.

Try the handle first? No, you haven't looked yet. You kneel by the keyhole and stare through it.

It's nothing. It's just darkness, like everything else.

The peephole, instead? It's drilled straight into the wood— there's still shavings around it. You have to squint to see.

It's... it's the entrance room. It's just the entrance room, except a fire crackles in the fireplace behind the empty armchairs. You can't see the mirror, if it's there. There's no sign of hellish mind-beasts, or Richard, or anybody.

You would have perhaps liked to see hellish mind-beasts. This whole business has been lacking some fizz, some pop, some— well, it's been just a little boring. Probably informative. But if not hellish mind-beasts, maybe some alligators?

But regardless. You try the handle.

It clicks unhappily. The door is locked.

>[B1] Just kind of wave the snake at it. That's basically what worked the last times, right?

>[B2] **Well, OPEN it, obviously. If a door shatters... it's not locked anymore, is it?**

>[B3] GOOD THING you have a KEY right HERE, as it can see, RIGHT HERE IN YOUR POCKET (You don't. But you ought to be convincing.)

>[B4] Knock?

>[B5] Bust it down? (Maybe with your shoulder, to keep up the variety.)

>[B6] Write-in.

>**OPEN the door**

>77, 62, 20 vs. DC 55 - Success.

"**[OPEN]**," you say casually, and are greeted with the welcome surprise of the door creaking ajar. You are also greeted with a wave of powerful nausea and an angry prickle up your spine. You slump, pale and wan, onto the ground.

>[-1 ID: 6/10]

The snake is trying to hide in the shadow of the stairs. This was already ineffective when its underbelly was reflective and off-yellow, but the bright scarlet bow makes the effort completely meaningless. It's a nice distraction from the question ransacking your head: damn it, what did you do this time? Because surely something went wrong— the only thing you felt when you **[OPEN]**ed the mirror was mild anxiety. Is this a bad door? A bad pronunciation? Is there just a physical or metaphysical limit on how much you can handle?

And for that matter, what did you do *right*? This was the first (not the last, you hope) time you've ever gotten it on the first try. It had a different mouthfeel, this time— smoother, more natural. Like rainwater versus filtered. Are you just that good, or is there foul play at—

(*"The door is open. It doesn't matter how you feel. Go in it."*)

Fine. Fine. If it wasn't so quiet, you wouldn't be forced to talk to yourself. How does Ellery cope? He should install a gramophone or something.

There's a hallway behind the door, so short and nondescript you wonder why it bothers to exist at all. There is a room behind the hallway.

It's the entrance room near-exactly as you first saw it: fireplace, armchairs, light fixture, two doors, papers littering the walls. But there's no longer a mirror in the corner— instead, spiderwebby hairline cracks center on where it used to be and extend through the wallpaper the length of the room. The whole place smells moderately burnt: there's a fire raging in the fireplace. You close the door to discover another note tied to the handle in red ribbon.

"THOUTSO

DONT THINK YOU LIKE RULES SO I'LL JUST GIVE A GUIDELINE

DONT STAND IN FRONT OF THE DOORS YET!

-ELLERY"

"Why?" you say aloud. The snake twines begrudgingly around your neck. Its bow tickles.

You get your answer two seconds later, when the door hits you in the face. "—chasing rabbits, Charlie," a man says, as he steps into the room. You step in after him.

No, you're here, cradling your swelling cheek. (You didn't realize how hard Richard opened doors.) But *you*— an hours-younger you, a you in sunglasses, with a lighter heart and lighter pockets— are surveying the entrance room. You haven't noticed a thing.

You have, you calculate rapidly, another couple of seconds before Ellery bursts in to the right.

>[1] Write-in

>Uh, hide! Paradox something-or-other, becoming your own grandmother?!

>Ellery probably got called away to talk to you. How neat. You don't like it.

> Avoid Paradox, Hide.

>Hide!!

>70, 10, 98 vs. DC 60 - Success.

God, what'd happen if they saw you? You don't know, but you've read enough pulp novels to guess. Blood'd start coming out of your ears, or you'd wink out of existence, or something. Nothing good.

So rather than stand there like a moron, you half-skid half-roll behind an armchair like a moron. The noise of your desperate tumble was mostly covered, you think, by the sound of the door creaking open.

"We've talked about this," Ellery says. "You can't just drop in on me..."

Boring. Boring. You've heard this once, and once is all the times you want to listen to Ellery. You busy yourself instead with picking at the floorboards. There's a loose one here, right under your legs. He's still talking. How long did this go on?

"...Lottie. Uh, I like your snake. Cute bow."

You freeze. Two of your fingernails may be wedged between a plank and the wall trim, but you still ought to be completely hidden.

"Where'd you get it?" he continues blithely.

He knows! He knows, which— well, there were the notes. But that's different, that's right now. This is **then**. So much for not winking out of existence. You're well and truly skunked, now. You've been overmatched. You might as well stand up right now to save a fraction of your pride—

"I bought it in town," past-you says. "Had it shipped in special from the City. I doubt you could afford it, honestly."

Oh. Most of that was a lie. A good lie— smooth, plausible.

You don't tell good lies. You browbeat and palaver your way past inconvenient truths. You don't buy this for a second. Richard?

"Probably true," Ellery says, after a short pause. "Can I get you a water?"

Rainwater, you mouth. "Rainwater," past-you corrects. "Not filtered. If it's not terribly inconvenient."

This plank is definitely loose. So loose you can pry it up barehanded, as it turns out. There's a square of yellow paper inside.

"It's going to be water. It won't have dirt in it." You can hear Ellery clicking his fingers against the doorframe. "You don't have a lot of bargaining power, Lottie."

"~~WHAT'S THE FUCKING DIFFERENCE? IT'S JUST WATER.~~" says the paper. It's covered with dust. "TELL ME IN THE OTHER ROOM."

Past-you doesn't say anything, but you can feel the heat of her death glare from here.

"Cool. Don't break anything." Ellery strides across the room, less fluidly than you remember. He opens the right door, ducks through it, and shuts it.

There's no chunk-chunk-chunk of deadbolts. The doors are unlocked.

>[1] Follow Ellery to the room on the left, begrudgingly. If you're not being led by the nose one way, you're being led in the other.

>[2] He can (excuse you) go screw himself. Stay right here and keep an eye on past-you. Maybe strike up a conversation, since so far there's been no blood from your ears.

>[3] **Go into the lab instead. What was Ellery doing in there to begin with?**

>[4] Try the door to the stairs / to the outside. Richard isn't even here to explain the whole crown thing. What's the point of staying?

>[5] **Write-in.**

>Show past Richard the snake with attached bow >"This is your future"
--

>**Spook Richard with his Ghost of Fashion Future.**

>Head back into the lab.

You consider the paper, briefly, before tearing it into neat squares and shoving the debris under the armchair. You stand, careful to keep your weight balanced.

Past-you is occupied in examining the space where the mirror used to be. Past-Richard lounges in the opposing armchair— one arm splayed out over the top, one leg bent awkwardly over the other, like he's not quite sure of the point of all these limbs. He is staring into the middle distance, doing nothing in particular.

You tread over to him on the balls of your feet. Which is difficult, given the heels on these boots, and it's not your fault if you creak a little. Or a lot. Oh, he's looking directly at you, isn't he.

"Your collar's flipped up," he says. "Haven't you noticed?"

"Haven't I..." It is. You smooth it down self-consciously.

"Ought to tie up your hair, too. It's getting all frizzy again. We both know that's never a good look, Charlotte."

"...We both know."

"That's what I said, yes. Are you- are you quite finished, or..."

"Am I quite... no!" Why had you ever wanted him to *talk*? What's wrong with you? "There's no 'we'! You're not an authority on- on collars, or hair, or looking good— you're a snake, okay? All you're supposed to do is eat fish and frighten people!"

He scratches his temple. "And how long were you waiting on that?"

"I— it doesn't matter. I'm right. And I'm from- I'm from the future, by the way, if you didn't notice—"

"Aren't you special." He adjusts his... you'd assumed it was his usual tie. You hadn't looked. It's not, it's a scarlet bowtie.

The snake—! But it's still there, behind you, decked to the nines in snake terms. It hovers nonchalantly. You're feeling just the opposite: did you do something wrong? Step on a butterfly? Fire the gun before it got hung on the wall?

"I can't change it," he says, by way of non-explanation. "So thanks for that, really. You've got me looking *foppish*."

"Good!" you say suddenly, and with a great deal more venom than you were expecting. "You're welcome! Can't wait for it to happen to you! You don't know how much I'll enjoy it—"

"I believe you've clarified that."

"Good!" You're being loud. You cast a cautious glance at past-you, who's paid no attention. "Or *she'll* enjoy it, at least. Can she hear this, or..."

Richard smiles, close-lipped, and switches the position of his legs. "Oh, no. She's in the past. It's a different country, they say. Very poor reception."

"Who's they?"

"Why ask me? All *I* know is how to eat fish and scare people, Charlie."

He might be offended! You couldn't be happier. The bowtie, too, is a masterpiece— it's garish in new and interesting ways, and it lacks any and all snake imagery. You walk off without the courtesy of a reply.

There's a note tacked to the right door. "WRONG DOOR," it says. And then, smaller: "PLEASE?"

You try the handle, just to make sure it's unlocked. It is. The door swings open without a whisper of resistance.

There's another note stuck with putty to the top of the doorframe. "WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS?"

A third flutters down from the ceiling, where it was evidently lightly glued. "WHAT IF I WROTE THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT YOU SHOULD DO? WOULD THAT WORK? LOOK AROUND THIS ROOM."

Good idea.

It's the same, almost. Counters, counters, bookshelves (except for one smooth, familiar patch on the left wall), water tanks. The left side still hosts an armory of mysterious doctor-y things. The right still has junk.

So what if the junk is now variously glowing and humming and bobbing gently in the air? It's still junk. There's that, and there's the watery red spackle on the white white tile. Blood or paint. It drifts off behind a tank.

There's a note in your hand. It's not the same one. "I'D REALLY LIKE TO BE REASONABLE. I'M STILL IN THE OTHER ROOM."

>[1] You know veiled threats when you see them, but you refused to be cowed by *Ellery*. It just wouldn't do. Look at something in particular. [Junk? / Blood? / Write-in]

>[2] Blood? You were fine with nonspecific black goop, but blood isn't quite in your paygrade (of a Game Night invitation). You require a detecting partner who speaks. Get Richard from the entrance and see what he thinks.

>[3] **Oh good! You can go ask Ellery about the maybe-blood, and also the crystals, and goop, and mysterious writing, and ugly wallpaper. Find him in the other room.**

>[4] **Write-in.**

>"If you didn't want me wandering around looking at your shit, maybe you shouldn't have locked me in your mind tower. Dummy."

>"If you didn't want me wandering around looking at your shit, maybe you shouldn't have locked me in your mind tower. Dummy."

>Find Ellery, though.

You're not impressed in the slightest.

"Well, ja— moron, maybe you shouldn't've locked me inside your stupid mind tower. What did you want me to do, huh? Just sit there?"

There's an arrow drawn crudely on the bottom of the note, pointing down. You flip the note over. "YES!" is all it says.

"Not very bright, then. Though I suppose that's to be expected."

There's a second note stuck to the first. You peel it up. "YOU'RE A REAL CHARMER. HOW ABOUT YOU TELL ME THIS IN PERSON?"

...He has a point. You'll pop over, wow him with the force of your personality, extract how to get out of here, get back to it. No problem.

Past(?)-Richard watches you coolly from the armchair as you stride back into the entrance room and over to the door on the left. "Have fun," he says.

"What?" He hates fun.

"That's all, Charlotte. Why must you always look for *meaning*?" He spits the word like it offended him personally. "Is there some definition of 'have' and 'fun' I've been made unaware of?"

"Well, it's possible," you say— but you're not paying much attention. The door is ajar. You hesitate. Should you creep in, as to surprise him? He probably knows you're right here, though. Kick the door open? Confidence is

essential. Kick it, yeah. "I am dangerous," the move says. "You can't scare me."

You bob a couple times, to ready yourself, and then the door opens. Via the force of your will alone? No, via Ellery, whose face is set and pensive. One hand is on his hip.

"Hi, Lottie," he says neutrally. "Good to see you again."

"Yeah, okay." You duck past him into the room. It's as you first remember it, wallpaper intact. There's no cards on the table or mirror on the wall. "I hope you have water, at least."

"Uh, yes." He gestures towards the table as he shuts the door behind you. "Would you grab it?"

The cup is undecorated ceramic, the water— you sniff it cautiously— filtered. Damn! You set it back down and turn to Ellery to inform him of this issue.

There's no door.

There's no door. It's a smooth stretch of wallpaper. The edges of Ellery's mouth are quirked upwards. "You have a history with doors," he says in the manner but not the tone of an apology.

(Have fun!)

"If you won't drink that water," he continues, "could you set it down on the table? Makes it easier."

"Could I..." You slam the cup down onto the table. It chips. "How's that, huh? You can't go and— you can't take the door out! That's *cheating!*"

He scratches his eye. "Is it? You're not going to like this much, then, sorry."

The room skews, suddenly and violently, until everything around you is arranged on a single plane— then collapses like a cheaply-built stage set and disappears. You are left standing awkwardly in scorching-white empty space.

"Have to be extra-sure," Ellery says, and this time there's genuine apology. "You're very good at, uh, breaking out of places."

"I wouldn't have *broken out*," you lie indignantly.

"Right. Would you like to sit down?"

He already is, in an armchair that strikes you as extraordinarily familiar. He gestures behind you. There is a metal stool.

(Have fun!)

You weigh your pride against being trapped forever by a vindictive manchild, and your pride comes out the loser.

"Excellent. Now, why don't we chat. Who sent you?"

"What?" No! This is *your* interrogation!

"I have as long as this takes, Lottie. Who sent you?"

>[1] Nobody! Nobody sent you! You came here... for fun, or by accident, maybe. But you don't want that invitation revoked.

>[2] **Madrigal. So you're throwing her under the carriage a little— she's not the one who has to deal with it, okay? It's not **reneging**.**

>[3] It's precisely none of his business, thank you very much.

>[4] **Huh? Who sent **you**? Why is there... [writing on his wall / places in his mirrors / goop on his bookshelf / crystals in his sand / etc— write-in!]**

>[5] Write-in.

>**Madrigal.**

>You? What's wrong with **him**?!

"Madrigal," you say.

The change is profound. His face is ashen, his eyes lightless, his posture slumped. You've let all the air out of him, somehow— or all the blood, it looks more like. There is a long silence, during which you simmer in unexpected victory, and he rubs alternately at his eye, his cheek, his temple.

"...Madrigal," he repeats, finally. And, softly: "Fuck."

You lean forward gleefully. You don't know why this matters, but you'll be damned if you won't milk it for all that's worth. "She asked me to come. Practically *begged* me. I didn't want to, you know— this is a little lowbrow for my sensibilities, you get me? But she was so *desperate*, I mean, my heart broke..."

"Fuck." You can't read Ellery's expression. Is he depressed? Disappointed? Defeated? "Why?"

You'd thought this was pretty straightforward. "Why what?"

"She gave... she gave a reason, right?"

"Oh, yes! Uh, you're not talking to her. Or anybody, really. I think she's *worried about you*."

"She's not," he says.

You give him a look.

"...She shouldn't be. Fuck. That's it? That's all she said?"

"That's right."

He sits up a little, giving you a better view of the crazed little half-smile he's been developing. "Okay, well— okay. Look, uh..." He snaps his fingers.

"Lottie," you provide.

"Lottie. How about you go back to, uh, Madrigal, tell her... I'm fine, no reason to worry, and I'll, uh, talk to her or whoever else. Pretend you wrung it out of me if you want, doesn't matter."

But that's not the *point*, you don't say. I don't give a damn if you talk to people or not. In fact, I wish you didn't. What *I* care about is the juicy stuff.

Instead, you say: "Yeah, uh, I'll do that. So why are there mirrors everywhere?"

Ellery coils back up. His voice is taut. "I like mirrors."

"What's the black goop? It came out of a mirror when I smashed it, it was in your bookshelf..."

"Why'd you *smash my mirror*?!"

"Unfortunate accident. Goop, hm?"

He has the eyes of a caged animal. "Don't know," he says shortly. "It's recent."

"Why are you growing crystals?"

"I'm not," he says, perplexed.

"Well, you are, but... uh, let's see." You run down your mental checklist of 'weird stuff'. "Why do you have a bunch of note with dates on them?"

"It's not relevant."

"Really? Why do you have binders full of notes with dates on them?"

"I like to keep them in order."

"Why is there writing under the wallpaper here? I mean, not here. But when there was a room."

His jaw tenses. "That's personal. Why are you ruining my wallpaper?"

You wave off the question. "Who's Thea?"

"A friend."

"Who's... E?"

"Eloise, probably. You know her?"

"Who's C, then?"

Technically, the half-smile broadens into a smile. It fits the smile requirements— lips go up, teeth (crooked but surprisingly white) visible— but can you call it one when there's no mirth in it? It's a grimace, maybe. The grin of a corpse.

"I really think you should stop," he says. "You have what you need, right? So what's the point?"

"*Why is there blood in the other room?*"

His eyes dart. The grimace stays exactly where it is. "I cut myself," he says. "It happens."

"Hm." You didn't actually look at the blood up close— you can't tell if that's true. "How do I leave?"

"How do you *leave*?" Perplexed again. "How'd you get here?"

"Uh..." Is 'through the eye' the normal way? Should you tell him you're inside his tent? "It's complicated."

"Is this your first... what the fuck? How could you not..." He stands, hands in pockets. "Do you not have an anchor?"

"...No?"

"Maybe it's a— you know, something to keep you grounded to reality? No? Fuck. There's other ways to jury-rig it, but nothing pretty. How do you feel about drowning?"

You stand, too. Your hands are planted on your hips. "Is that a *threat*?"

"...Uh, no. I mean, it won't be fun, it might get, uh, a little weird, but it ought to boot you out. It's that or... you said there were crystals?"

"In vials."

"That's another option, I guess. Dicier but less traumatic. Uh... I don't know. Everybody uses anchors."

"Maybe I have one and I just don't know it," you offer. "What's yours?"

"Uh." The grimace, previously fading, returns in full force. "I don't have one at the moment."

Interesting.

"It doesn't matter, anyways— it's always personal, there's no template. Sorry, did you say what sounded best for you?"

>[A1] Drowning— safer but more traumatic. Weird.

>[A2] Crystals— riskier but easier on you (when it works). Also probably weird.

>[B1] You're planning to get out of here right away.

>[B2] You'll tell Ellery you're planning to get out of here, but actually try to sneak off (once there's a door, and so on). What about the blood?

>[B3] You need to ask Richard before anything else. Didn't he want to do the crown thing? Whatever that is?

>[B4] You have more questions for Ellery first. (What?)

>[B5] Write-in.

Ask if he can just keep Richard trapped in here forever.

>Could he trap Richard here forever?

"Uh, no," you say distractedly. You're trying to remember what you thought earlier. Vindictive... oh, trapped forever. You know somebody who could do with a dose of that. "There's no way to get out of here, right? Unless you put it back?"

"I wouldn't say *no* way, but it'd certainly be difficult— impossible for you, I think, no offense." (Maybe a little offense. Ellery's satisfied, if not smug, with his skill.) "To be technical, though, there's no 'here'— there's no space left. Or time, for that matter. This is all contained at a single point, *in* a single point— it's only 'linear' due to the faulty perception you're shackled to—"

"That's interesting," you interject. You've never been gladder Richard's gone— if he were present, you'd have to sit through hours of this. "It's not the point, though. Any way you can trap, uh, someone else in here? Like, forever?"

Words are beached up in his throat and die floundering. He is foremost disgusted, that much is clear from his expression, but there's little whorls of surprise, anger... shame? That can't be right.

"Uh, he deserves it," you clarify.

It still takes him a minute. He collapses back into the armchair. "Nobody deserves *forever*, Lottie. Nobody. I don't care— shit, I hope he murdered your dad, murdered your mom, kicked your puppy, or something. That'd be understandable. Maybe. But not *forever*. What'd he do?"

"Uh." What has he done? Be a twit? Send you down here, certainly— but that's more your fault for being worthless and all. No critical thinking. You can't come up with anything else. "It's okay, it doesn't matter—"

"No, look." His voice is knapped flint. "I just want to know why you'd consign someone to hell. Worse than hell, really, because at least there there's something to think about. It's a reasonable question. What'd he *do*?"

Where did you go wrong? What mistake did you make? You thought your convictions were true, your reasoning sound and convincing, but here you are being yelled at. Did you skip a step? You wish Richard were here. He knows what to say.

Ellery sees your wilted posture and backs down a little. "...Maybe you don't understand the implications of it."

You don't *care* about the implications, whatever they may be. You want, or wanted, the result. You'll try to find the step you missed. "I'm sure I don't. What if he were, say, a snake?"

You've knocked all the words out again. "What?" is all Ellery says.

"You know... a snake. Sometimes it talks? Does that affect it at all—"

"*Your* snake? The one you put the ribbon on?"

You're not sure Richard would appreciate being "yours", if he were here. You don't even see the dark shoestring of the snake with you. Strange.

"That's the one," you say.

"Why would you... shit, that's... it talks?"

"Frequently."

"And it's a *snake*? Eats fish and so on? Venomous?"

"Not a *real* snake. Real snakes don't *talk*." You levy the last word with all the condescension you can muster in your diminished state. He should know this. "But more or less."

"...No, I'm still not going to trap your talking snake in nothing forever. Is that clear?"

Damn. "If it must be."

"Right. You're leaving now, by the way. Tell me how."

You've drowned once already and it was not the best day of your life. "Crystals, I think."

"Suit yourself," he says.

>[1] You'll leave right now.

>[2] You'll leave... at some point, after you sneak off to look at the blood.

>[3] **You'll leave... after you ask Ellery one more thing. [What?]**

>[4] Write-in.

"If forever is off the table, maybe a couple weeks? Also where'd you learn to do all this?"

>**Gee whiz, how'd you learn all this stuff, mister?**

>What about two weeks or so? That'd be fine, right?

The conversation is clearly at an end, and what have you received for your troubles? Non-answers and an earful to boot. There has to be some way to salvage things.

Ellery seems pleased he has this all handled. "Okay, okay. Just give me a second to reconstruct the room and we'll get you out—"

"Pardon me, reconstruct the room?" You don't care. God, do you not care. But he likes talking, and you like not leaving.

"Oh, it's not... It's less complicated than it sounds, really. It's just slotting everything back where it wants to go. It's deconstruction that's the hard part, because— Nature hates a vacuum? I think that's right. Yeah, Nature hates a vacuum. Or maybe the closer to reality the better, I'm not sure which. Anyways, uh, yes. Reconstruction. It's not as if the original room is *gone*, it's just... elsewhere. The subconscious, I guess you'd say, real deep—"

The content is stupefying, but you're riveted by his speech regardless. It's a great thunderous downpour of words, rapid and jumpy and punctuated with powerful (but unhelpful) hand gestures. It stands in great contrast to the laconic answers of a few minutes ago— he's comfortable talking about this, maybe excited. Does he not discuss the minutiae of this very often? You couldn't fathom why.

"Wow!" you say when he stops for breath (somewhere around "conceptualization"). You have your gigawatt smile on. "That's, um, fascinating. How'd you learn to *do* all this?"

"Oh, uh..." Another misstep. There's the caged-animal look again, along with a glimmer of something deeper-set. Something blue? But that's nonsensical: blue is neither an emotion nor the color of Ellery's eyes, which tend more pukey brownish. And superstition is the nemesis of sense, you're told daily.

But still. It's *blue*.

"...Uh, I don't... it's mostly intuition... and experimenting. Mostly experimenting. Self-taught. That's for me, though, I don't... I'm not sure if that's a good example to follow. Ask someone else."

"Maybe I will." You have also been considering something else. "What if what is just a *temporary* trapping-forever? You know, one week, two weeks. Super ethical and so on."

"For the snake?" Ellery rakes his hand backwards through his hair, which has the net effect of making him look electrically-charged.

"Gods-fucking-damn, what did the thing do to you? Did you step on it and it bit you?"

"It's *he*," you say defensively. "And no, that's not it. But he does deserve it."

"How?!"

You can't tell him. You can't explain it, not to him or to anybody you know or don't know. They don't understand it. They'll mock you. He's already mocking you. Why didn't you sic the alligators on him? Then you wouldn't have to deal with this, and you'd already be home, and everything would've been okay.

You make a mental note to sic alligators on Ellery the next chance you get.

"Nothing, right? Anyways, no. I am not *quarantining* your *snake*— *in my head*— for any period of time. Because I'm not animal control, firstly, and I don't even think it'd work. It's not real, you said."

"What about a day?" you push. "A day. That's not very long. It'd probably be a vacation for him, honestly, it'd be the right thing to do..."

"Lottie! For fuck's sake! You're some friend of my ex who broke into my head and ruined the wallpaper! I don't do *favours* for people I have no reason to trust!"

You'll admit it— you're a little wounded. "I mean, we did a whole expedition? Out of the goodness of my heart? I thought that counted for something."

He doesn't say anything. And then he drops the pose he'd stiffened into (remarkably angular, like a Thallean portrait). "...Yes. Right. The expedition. I don't— I think this, uh, considerably outweighs it."

"I saved your life," you say with nary a tremor. It's true! You decided not to kill him.

"Yes, well." His neck is very tense. All the tendons are bulging out in a deeply unsightly (and surely uncomfortable) fashion. "Then this makes us even, okay?"

>[1] No, it's not okay! He ought to owe you a **life debt**. Which means you get favours, forever. That's how it traditionally works. You've read about this, for God's sake. [Roll.]

>[2] So, uh, who else should you talk to about freaky mind... stuff? Since he's clearly cagey for no good reason whatsoever.

>[3] Muster up the courage to explain your Richard situation and see if it'll convince him. Even if it will be horrible and embarrassing and he's just going to say it's your fault. [Roll.]

>[4] Okay, okay. Yes. (You'll just force him into it later.) Get on with it.

>[5] Write-in.

>"This makes us even because why, I came in here and messed with the wallpaper? Good to know you value your own life about as highly as imaginary wallpaper."

>[TO BE CONTINUED IN THREAD 3]

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Thread 3

Charlotte Fawkins takes one step forward and two steps back.

Your name is Charlotte Fawkins, and you are an excellent modeler, an amateur detective, and the one true regent-in-waiting. You are also trapped in Nowhere, Underwater, where you're forced to listen to the dubious whims of the snake that lives in your head. You've currently been booted out of someone else's head, and are— are— where are you?

THEN

A richly appointed room. A man clad all in white. A man clad all in red. They're lurid against the overriding shadow.

The man in white flicks open a brass lighter and holds its flame to the cigarette clenched between his teeth.

The man in red coughs. "For God's sake," he complains. "Why do you always smoke Shearwaters? They smell like burning asphalt, I'm sure they taste no better..."

"What?" The man in white takes a contemplative drag. "You don't like to flirt with death, Henry?"

"I'd like to offer death a better pack of cigs, is what I'd like to do. Why are we at your house on a weeknight? Aren't you worried about waking—"

"Clara? She's out. And the kid sleeps like a sack of rocks."

"If you say so." The man in red coughs again. "Ugh. How is she?"

"Clara? Or—"

"No, the kid. Haven't seen her in ages. Wish you'd bring her Uncle Henry around a little more often, huh?"

Another drag. "You're a liability, sorry. She's 5. I can't have her knowing."

"Yeah. Too much blood." The man in red kicks mournfully at the tile. He coughs a third time. "What have we ever seen out of this, huh? Decades of heartache and hassle for nothing. Jackshit."

"Please, Henry, there's a child in the house." The man in white considers his cigarette, then strides to a nearby ashtray (full, already, of discarded Shearwaters) and stubs it out. He lights another. "And it's not for us. You know that. It's for... the future."

"Yeah, I know." The man in red sighs and pushes aside the hem of his jacket. A tortoiseshell-handled knife glistens at his belt. "The future. Are you ready?"

"As ever," says the man in white. He has pulled on white silk gloves, so clean and shining there seems nothing else in the room.

NOW

There is almost nothing in the room. The room might be called white, but it would be an acrid, toxic kind of white, the white of bleached paper or drywall with the paint thinned off it. A white that could corrode steel. All there is to break it: an ashen wraith of a woman, and a man in a blue suit with black mist for a face.

The mist, having curled off the man as he walked, lingers in the white air like an afterimage. There are six faint rings of it. He is working briskly on a seventh.

"-so, you see, there is just absolutely no way I can compensate... I mean, what does it look like, I'm made of sterling platinum? It's extortion, is what it is, and any sane man... or broad, any sane, uh, person would agree—"

The woman, trapped in the center of the mist-rings, pushes her bangs aside with emaciated fingers. She whispers something inaudible.

"—prosecute the git—huh? Did you say something?" The man apparently did not expect a dialogue. He wheels towards her.

Her voice crackles like aged paper. "...who.. 'r..you..."

"Aw, criminy." The man turns away and begins again to pace— faster, this time. "It's always the same thing with you, Sophie, isn't it? 'Who're you...' 'Where am I...' 'What am I doing here...' You'd think a broad would

learn a little more conversationing than that, but I guess you're the special type."

"...Sophie...?"

"Aw." The man examines the clipboard kept unconsciously clenched in his left hand. "Are you not... okay, Sophie's next up. Uh, lessee, Cora?"

The woman doesn't say anything.

"Probably right. Not like it makes any difference— none of you conversate worth a godsdamn. Criminy, it's all I do to keep you happy, and all I get is questions... 'ooh, who're you...' Does it matter? It doesn't matter. You oughta be happy I make the effort at all—"

A shrill ringing cuts him off. The man pulls a silver pocketwatch from his back pocket and checks the time, then crosschecks with his clipboard. "See, look, it's Sophie's fifteen now. I'll be seeing you... maybe not next week, lots on the plate, but we'll see about the week after, huh? Cheers."

He vanishes, all at once, except for the mist. It drifts silently upwards until out of sight.

The woman's bangs fall back into her face. She makes no move to correct them.

LATER?

"Energy is neither created nor destroyed, only transferred," Richard says. He sits across the little wrought-iron cafe table, hands folded. His expression is enigmatic. "Would you believe this applies to other things, Charlie?"

"I don't know." You do know, somewhere in the dull pit in your stomach, but you don't want to. "Sorry, why are we—"

"Nevermind the energy, then." He waves it off. "How do I put this... we're dead."

"Oh." You knew that too. "Permanently?"

"Exceedingly so. Would you like to know why?"

His eyes are all wrong. You would know: you've been staring at them for the better part of ten minutes. They're not the clear icy blue you've come to expect— they're aestival blue, more poolwater than meltwater, more like your eyes.

"Bureaucracy," you say.

"Bur... yes." He blinks. "We've been killed by the metaphysical bureaucracy, Lottie, which for my money has to be one of the worst ways to go. Would you care to explain why for us?"

"You've been eating away at me," you say matter-of-factly, "and replacing it with you."

"No hard feelings, I hope."

You can't muster the energy to care. "But you can't destroy me, only transfer me. You have to store it. And you've been storing so much for so long that you're split exactly down the middle. You're half *me*."

"As are you," he says. "We've eaten our own tail."

"So... we're a redundancy. There's no reason for two fundamentally identical people to exist at the same time— it's not efficient. There must be a merger."

"Yes."

"There has been a merger."

"Yes."

"We're... fucked. We're dead."

"Yes." His smile is tinged with regret. "There's no coming back from this one, Lottie. Would you like to toast to it?"

There are two flutes of champagne on the cafe table.

"Sure." You pick one up by the stem. "Oh, I don't know what..."

Richard picks up the other. "That's okay."

The champagne glitters in the sunlight. You swirl it idly about the glass. "I don't blame you," you say. "You were just trying to do your job."

"Thanks," he says. Then: "How's this. To oblivion."

"To oblivion."

You drink.

NOW

You wake up with bubbles in your throat. You're on your cot. You've slept in your clothes again.

«Welcome back, sunshine.»

Richard— snake-Richard, frigid and dead-eyed, ribbon on— hovers lazily above you. «I hope you enjoyed yourself, because you just wasted an extraordinary amount of time.»

"What?" It's too bright in here. Ribbon on?

«Don't be petulant: you heard what I said. All those hours and not a drop of law. Pathetic.»

"But... you weren't..." You feel like you're missing something. It's too bright in here, and all the edges are too sharp. "You didn't even bring that up. You were fine with just- I thought you wanted to know what was going on, too."

«I could not care less about trifling human concerns.»

You brush your hair out of your face. "You did, though. And you were making jokes."

«Prove it.»

It's never worth it.

«You cannot prove it. And even if I *was* committing... frivolities, it was entirely your fault. You are a distraction and, frankly, a menace.»

"Sure." You've been called worse. "So what, you want a do-over? Go back in there?"

Richard twists unhappily. «It can't be done. He's locked down, Charlie, getting back in will be difficult at best. We must occupy ourselves until he becomes distracted.»

Locked down? You didn't think you left on awful terms... sure, you demanded to know if his *precious wallpaper* was more valuable than his life, and that sparked a little argument. You may have called him some names. But not horrible names. You were evicted, you must've dragged yourself back to your tent... But what about the white and the red? And the wrought-iron table?

«Yes, that means you can do your little pet investigation. Just don't draw too much attention to yourself. I know that's difficult for you.»

"Any suggestions where to start?"

«None.»

>[1] Before you start on anything, you ought to figure out what you've already obtained. Sit down and go through the clues so far.

>[2] **Report back to Madrigal. With all the stuff you have already, you might be able to negotiate for a raise.**

>[3] Find someone who can help you with the mysterious coded letter. You didn't see anything like it in the manse, which makes it even stranger.

>[4] Hunt down "C". It might not be related, but Ellery's reaction is too interesting to pass up.

>[5] **Ask Richard where the ribbon came from. You didn't think it was a permanent fixture.**

>[6] **Ask Richard if he's possibly been, uh, "eating away at you"?**

>[7] Write-in.

>Ask questions.

>Report in.

"Oh, okay," you say, and flop back onto the cot.

«No, you're not supposed to do that. You're supposed to...» Richard squirms.
«Do something.»

"Well, gee, what if I don't want to? And it's not like I got any suggestions, so I'm just plumb out of ideas..." You close your eyes. "And besides, I had some real vivid dreams I probably ought to contemplate."

«Don't be stupid; that was likely the crystals. As usual, it's irrelevant nonsense. Get up this instant.»

"Hmm." You stretch your arms, eyes still closed. "One of the dreams was about us, I think."

«It doesn't matter.»

"I don't remember that much. It was outside in the sun, there was a table... You said 'we've eaten our own tail,' and I said, uh... 'you've eaten away at me.'" You open your eyes. "I don't suppose you know what that would mean?"

«How could I possibly, Charlotte.» You prefer to imagine that he sounds annoyed. «It's tommyrot.»

"So you're not doing that?"

«No.»

He might as well have told you to pass the salt, for all the emotion he puts into it. You can't stand it. No emotion in the voice, and certainly none in the snake— it's just an animal. With, to be fair, a ribbon.

A ribbon.

"Hey," you say. (It got a rise out of him before— maybe it will again.) "I was wondering, uh, why the ribbon's still there."

«I don't know what you mean.»

"You know, the..." You mime tying a bow at your throat. "The ribbon."

«You bought it in town. For yourself originally, I believe, but then you got one of your flights of fancy. So here we are.»

Something twinges.

"Oh, right," you say, and sit up. "It's been a long couple of days. I thought it'd come off or something, though."

«Unfortunately, I did too.»

You manage a smile at that. "Look, I'll get up now. How 'bout that." You clamber to your feet, smooth out the front of your coat, and reconsider. You unbutton the coat instead and drape it over the side of the cot. (Maybe it's bad luck?)

Richard settles around your shoulders. «I don't know if I can approve, Charlie. The white makes you look younger. Prettier, you know.»

You stop, halfway out the door. He's right. What were you thinking? You turn on your heel, retrieve the coat, and button it back up.

«Good girl. Now, we were going...»

If you don't hunt down Madrigal fast, she's going to bust through the flap of your tent and ruin your day once again. You emerge, squinting into the sunlight, and march past untidy "art installations" (you know what art looks like, and a pile of differently-sized rocks isn't it), unsteady card tables, and people you barely recognize. "Hey, princess!" hoots a man you don't recognize at all. "Whereya goin?"

You wheel on him, all ready to give him a piece of your mind, when the base of your spine flares white-hot. «You cannot afford to get distracted, Charlotte. You have wasted enough.»

The man's chuckles follow you all the way to Madrigal's tent, easily recognizable by the sign marked "MADRIGAL'S TENT". You try the flap, only to find it tied from the inside. Is she hiding...?

«Maybe it's possible that other people's schedules don't conform to your whims.»

"Mad's not here," says a voice from behind you. "Heard she's in town."

You cease trying to find a way to look inside and turn. It's another man you don't recognize, this one in a battered grey longcoat. He quirks an eyebrow. "You here about the situation, too?"

"Huh?"

He crosses one leg over the other. "Guess not, then. I'd suppose it'll be another 40 minutes before she's back. You're welcome to wait."

>[1] Wait it out for Madrigal.

>>[A] In silence. You're capable of making idle chitchat, but it doesn't mean you want to.

>>[B] Sorry, who is this guy?

>>[C] Sorry, the situation?

>>[D] Sorry, does he know Madrigal?

>>[E] Write-in.

>[2] Head to town to find her first. You might be able to catch her off-guard— even better.

>[3] This is too much work. Do something else first instead. (See prior options.)

>[4] Write-in.

>Find her in town.

"Uh, that's alright," you say. You're not sure you want to be alone with this man, who's sizing you up with hawkish intensity. "Thank you anyways," you add, out of politeness. Old habits urge you to curtsy. You ignore them.

"Oh?" The man rubs his chin. "Do as you will. Delighted to make your acquaintance regardless, Miss..."

Would it look strange if you avoided the question? It would. "Charlotte," you say, and stick your hand out. "But Lottie's better."

He takes your hand, wholly unprepared for the trap you're about to spring. "A pleasurgrk—"

You have him seized in an iron grip— now all the more iron, thanks to Richard's devilry with your hands. You smile broadly and pump once. "You too!"

He withdraws slower than you would've preferred, but you hope that's a new measure of respect in his eyes. "Be seeing you," he says.

Be seeing you? You're striding down the beaten trail to town in a funk. *Be seeing you?* Is it a threat? A flirtation? And why didn't you say anything? How come you've been lacking in comebacks recently? You're losing your touch-

«I'm telling you, it's the peacoat. I don't know what you were thinking, honestly, going out like this.»

Richard is not helping.

You've been down this way so many times in six months that you could probably do it with your eyes closed. You don't, though, for what the Corcass lacks in civility or basic urban amenities it makes up for in a strange sort of charm. This time of year, limp straggles of seagrass bow under the weight of spiked flowers. Tiny crustaceans buzz between them, eels lurk within them. It's not beautiful, but it has interest.

It's when the mud and grass fades to cobblestone that you know you're close to town. Lindew's Landing was built upon the ruins of some ancient city, and as a result is rife with obelisks and catacombs and untranslatable runes. It's not altogether to your taste, but you still enjoy your weekly trips: though scarcely a hundred fifty rustics live there, it's better than the utter backwater of camp. There is a general store, a speakeasy (the accurately named "Better Than Nothing"), a newspaper, and the offices of a half-dozen lapsed professionals. Really, it's practically bustling.

The question is: where is Madrigal? You failed to ask what she was actually doing in town, and you have little knowledge of what she does in general. You suppose you could ask around, but do you want people to know you're looking for her? Maybe you just ought to loiter, but you don't want to miss her, either...

>[1] Ask the locals if they've seen her. Better get to the point.

>[2] Kill time by looking around in a building. You'll either find her there, or you'll catch her when she leaves. (General store, speakeasy, newspaper, offices?)

>[3] Wait by the trailhead out of town. There's technically ways out that don't go past it, but you doubt she'd want to wade through the Fen for no reason.

>[4] Write-in.

>Loiter by the signpost.

You wouldn't know where to begin, really, by asking around. You could try sliding into the Better Than Nothing, but the incident a couple weeks back may or may not have scuttled your good reputation there. And it's not like there's a crowd milling around outside, either— mid-afternoon like this, everyone's out on the mud flats. What *is* Madrigal doing?

It's probably something excruciatingly boring, you rationalize, as you wait by the signpost. Paying a tab. Purchasing a gallon of paint. Meeting a friend. Not worth your time. You'd be better off watching grass grow, really. Why are you even here?

«Remain focused.»

You shouldn't be waiting here. You should be out there, doing anything at all. Whatever other people do to occupy their time. Was it ever about the crown, or was it just something to keep yourself distracted? Why are you overcome with ennui? It'd be the waiting. It prompts introspection, and you've long since decided that introspection is an appalling poison to the noble spirit.

«Charlotte, please.»

How long has it been? Five minutes? Twenty? Too long, in any case. You shift restlessly against the signpost, which presses into your back and neck. It's a fifteen-minute walk to town, the same back, leaving Madrigal just ten minutes to finish and start to leave. If the man was accurate, anyways. *Be seeing you?* God. You hope you broke his fingerbones.

«Highly unlikely, unless he has an exceptionally high tolerance for pain. You would have been able to tell.»

Thanks, Richard, for that. You can never tell if he's being dense or just annoyingly obtuse. You can never tell anything with him, really...

"Hello? Charlotte?"

The world snaps back into focus. Madrigal has her hands on her hips (what ones she has, anyways) in front of you. She is wearing a bomber jacket two sizes too big over her tank top— clearly borrowed, or possibly stolen. She looks more annoyed than concerned.

"Hello? What are you doing here?"

There is a clipboard under her arm. You attempt to arch an eyebrow, fail, and raise both instead. "I could ask the same thing, really—"

"We're not fucking doing this. You're not supposed to be in town, you realize? You're blacklisted? You're way too lucky nobody's *here* right now..."

"Okay," you say, and count on your fingers. "*One*, I was not blacklisted from town... I wasn't even blacklisted from the Nothing, okay? I was greylisted. It's a trial period, not a full ban. Two... that's it, actually."

"You got *banned* from the Nothing?" She guffaws. "Gods, the guy lets fish in there! Did you spike the drinks? Steal someone's gal?"

"No!" You're flushing again. "It was a misunderstanding. And not the point, anyways."

"You're right, the point was that you're blacklisted."

"I'm *not*—"

"From town. Margo doesn't want you anywhere, and she's got everyone in her palm, too. Did Monty leave that out?"

You don't say anything.

"Guess so. So how about we not stay here, and you can— sorry, did you say what you wanted again?"

>[1] Give her the bare minimum. Ellery says he'll stop being freakish. Problem solved. Can you get a raise?

>[2] Tell her everything. You want her perspective on what you found, assuming she believes you.

>[3] Do some kind of balance. (What parts do you want to tell Madrigal?)

>[4] Write-in.

>Tell her the bare minimum.

"Yes," you say. "Ellery said he'd stop being weird."

Madrigal folds her arms. "What?"

"No need to thank me," you add, pointedly. Madrigal does not look like she wants to give you a raise. She looks like she wants to deck you. For once, you're not sure why.

She's considering her words hard. "Did he... say that? What did he say, exactly?"

It's funny— in the harsh light of day, the entire Ellery escapade doesn't quite seem like it actually happened. All your memories of it have a fuzzy, dreamy tinge to them. You think. "Something like... 'she doesn't need to worry about me, I'll talk to her'?"

Did she always look quite so purple?

"So..." She is grinding her foot into the cobblestone. "Either you're lying through your teeth... or you *told him* it was me?"

"Hey," you say. "Hey. You never said it was supposed to be a secret—"

"I thought it was implied! By... everything!"

You refuse to be blamed for this. "Well, that's your fault, isn't it?"

"No, it's not *my fault* that you—" Madrigal realizes she's on the verge of yelling and lowers her voice. "—that your common sense has been rotted away by years of *unremitted hedonism*, you bitch. You have just ruined the entire point, don't you realize?"

You are standing on your tiptoes in a futile attempt to match her height. "Excuse me?! I delivered exactly what you wanted *less than a day* after you asked. Do you want his head on a platter, too? Should I lick your boots?"

She leans towards you. "You don't!" she breathes. "You know what's going to happen? He is going to talk at me."

"Yes!"

"No. At me. For hours, probably, and in all that time he's not going to say a single thing. Do you know how *good* he is at dodging questions? He's a fucking acrobat. And then he will go back to not talking at all."

"He sounded sincere," you protest. "He got all sad-eyed, okay? I know what sad eyes look like."

"Yeah! That's just how he looks! And sounds! He's very good at this!" Madrigal throws up her hands. "You got played, and therefore I got played. Congratulations. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

>[1] In your defense, he was literally openly threatening you, okay? Would she rather you were never seen again?

>[2] Excuse you? Would it have killed her to tell you all this **before** you went to talk to him? Are you supposed to read minds?

>[3] Yeah! Is she aware he has a freaky mind tower full of freaky mind stuff? It seems kind of relevant, doesn't it?

>[4] She never actually said how this ruined everything! What's so bad about him knowing?

>[5] Just how long has this been going on? What has **she** been trying?

>[6] Write-in.

Congratulations, she played herself.

>Congrats, she played herself.

"Hey!" You smile. "Congratulations are due to you, too. From the sounds of it, by not telling me anything... you played yourself? I think that's how it goes?"

Madrigal fumes. "I..."

"Just another in a long string of failures, huh? What's that... fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me... Four, five, six times is still shame on me, I believe."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, it's not like *that*! We can—" Madrigal cranes to look behind you. "Look, let's get out of the open, okay?"

You keep the smile on as you lead the way down the trail and into the underbrush. "Oh, so what is it like?"

She crosses her arms defensively. "I'm not getting yanked around, okay? It's not malice. He's just... I don't know, he's skittish."

"Uh huh," you say.

"You know, you try to sit down and talk about one thing, and he's off rambling about... gods, I don't know. It was blood for a long time, but he's probably onto something else now."

You nod.

"It's cute, you know, until you have something serious. Then it's..." She puts one hand to her cheek. "Why am I *telling* you this? Look at you. You're eating it up."

Just a little bit. You tone your smile down to polite levels. "I wouldn't have to if you'd told me this before, you realize? It's relevant?"

"Yeah, well..." Madrigal gestures with the clipboard. "I didn't expect you to go ask him to his face, okay? I wrongly assumed there would be a little more subterfuge involved. So fuckin' sue me, I guess."

"Oh, that won't be needed. I'd just like to know, uh, anything else you've conveniently omitted? Preferably something interesting."

"You're an awful person, you know that?" Your smile must've widened again. Darn. "Your enjoyment is just radiating off you in, like, waves. Fuck. Do I have to give you the Ellery crash course? *Seriously?*"

"Only if you want an effective investigation!"

"You're despicable. Fine. Fine. Do you want diagrams? A flow chart, maybe?"

You stick your hands in your pockets. "Words ought to be fine."

"Gods, I don't..." She leans back against a tree and plays with the zipper of her jacket. "Look, it's not really that complicated. He's— he was a live wire. Always moving, always talking, always *on*. But gods, good luck getting close."

"Did you get close?"

"I think— I don't know. I think so. But it's like trying to catch an eel barehanded, yeah?"

You nod. You feel like you've been doing a lot of nodding.

"He cares, though. Cared, I guess, I don't know. Way down. I think he cares a lot."

"Oh."

"He's not a bad person."

"Never said he was," you say. "So, you're not together, clearly."

"Hah." It's more of a sharp exhale. "It was mutual."

"Ah."

"I couldn't stand it, in the end. The... everything. I don't know what he thought."

Eureka. There it is. You pounce. "You don't know why he wanted to break up with you? How is that possible?"

She shrugs limply. "You know, it's... Ell. He gets that way. And by the time I really wanted to know, he was already..."

"Shut down?"

"Yeah. So it's still a mystery."

This is the one. "So... you didn't send me because you were worried. You sent me to find out why he broke up with you."

"You're a bitch." Madrigal narrows her eyes, but there's no real joy in it. "I am worried about him."

"But..."

"Okay, a little. You can't blame me, though. *You'd* want to know."

You pump your fist. She scowls. "Be mature."

Ha! So that's 'real motive' crossed off the list. Richard ought to be celebrating this with you, but he's asleep, or something. You can't win them all.

"Just so I don't retread any ground," you continue jovially, "what have you done to investigate this?"

She shrugs again. "I tried asking around, but it was kind of a delicate topic, you know? And then I mostly gave up, except for trying to corner him every so often."

"Okay..." It occurs to you that something may be missing from this picture. "Say, would you happen to know anything about a... a manse? You know, a sort of mind, uh, house—"

"I know what a manse is, goddamn. I don't live under a rock. What of it?"

"Uh..."

>[1] You've well and truly softened her up. Time to dump your entire list of findings on her and see what she thinks.

>[2] **Test the waters first. Does she know if Ellery, say, has one? Has she ever possibly been in it? Maybe seen anything weird?**

>[3] No, nothing, just a question, ha ha. Change the topic. You'd be happy to investigate this stupid breakup thing, but you're going to have to adjust your rate based on new information...

>[4] Write-in.

>**Ease into it.**

>Is she aware of any penpals?

You swiftly recover. "Uh, it's possible it could be relevant. Do you think Ellery might have one?"

"I don't know, probably. Doesn't everyone?"

Richard had said something to that effect. "Uh, yes. But he never talked about one? You never visited?"

"Visited? No, of course not. I've heard it's possible, but..." She sticks her hands in her pockets. "It strikes me as pretty fucking skeevy, yeah?"

Ah, the vulgar patois of the lower classes. You'll try to be polite. "Skeevy?"

"You know. Gross? Creepy? You'd have to be both to want to mess with someone else's head?"

Mmm.

"So yeah, no. I never visited. Now, did he ever talk about... gods, I don't know, maybe? Maybe indirectly, but I didn't take any special note of it if he did. Does that answer the question?"

"Yeah," you hasten on, "sure. Are you aware of his having any communications with anyone? Writing letters... on walls, maybe..."

"On walls? What?" Madrigal squints. "Sorry, did you say how this was relevant? Did Ellery talk about a manse, or..."

God blessed.

>[1] **Yep, that's right, he did. Good guess. About those communications?**

>[2] Yep, that's right, he did. Good guess. About a potential renegotiation?

>[3] She can't get mad at you— she did say she didn't care how you did this, right? Walk her through it. (If you want to leave anything out, specify.)

>[4] Write-in.

>**Hahahahaha yes of course**

>So what I was saying

"Uh, bang on," you say. "Right. Yes. Good job."

(Here Richard is supposed to say something nasty. The absence of this worries you. Sure, the snake's right here around your shoulders— but you're becoming increasingly convinced that *he's* not in it at the moment.)

Madrigal looks confused, and it's transparent why: she likes being right, but she doesn't like you agreeing with her. "...Uh," she says finally. "Yes."

"Excellent. So about potential communications..."

"It's possible? I'm not aware of anything, but I also didn't pry."

You stroke your chin knowingly. "This appears to be a pattern."

"Look, it's his life, okay? I wasn't about to go snoop through his mail for no reason—"

"So he did have mail!"

"...Yes?" Madrigal has given up on holding the clipboard and sets it down by her feet. "I guess so? Just local stuff, though, we're not on any kind of mail route. And I didn't read it." She pauses. "Gods, you're annoying. Has anyone ever bothered to tell you that?"

You're unconcerned. "No."

"Yeah, see, I thought so—"

"No, I'm just thorough, which you don't like. It exposes your complete failure at accomplishing anything yourself!" Your smile had slipped, probably due to your face beginning to ache. You prop it back up. "But it's okay, Maddie, I'm here to *help you out*. Are you aware of any recent moves Ellery may have undertaken? If so, when, and from where to where..."

"Okay, how is this relevant? What the fuck have you been doing today? I can buy Ellery talking about stupid mind stuff, that's one thing, but I don't believe you got him on about his mail. Or moving."

"I," you say haughtily, "have been investigating. Like you asked."

"That doesn't answer the question, though? You're giving me vapor to try and grab onto. If I had some context, I might be able to..."

She sees your face.

"Look, unless you tortured it out of him I really don't give a shit. Spill."

>[1] That might be what she claims, but it sure sounded like she cared. Keep your cards close to your chest about what you did.

>[2] **That might be what she claims, but it sure sounded like she cared. Just tell her you went through his papers, and show her the ones you found for good measure.**

>[3] Okay, now she extra can't blame you. Tell her about last night, and specifically the correspondence you found on the walls.

>[4] Write-in.

>Hell naw.

"I'd rather not," you say primly, and fold your arms. "It's not really any of your business."

Madrigal sputters. "*Not any of my*— Charlotte, I am your fucking client! It's more my business than yours!"

"Okay, well, firstly..." You examine your fingernails in great detail. "You're not my client. You're my *charity* case."

"Yooou bitch—"

"I took this on out of the goodness of my heart, and you want to spit on that with 'transactions?' I simply can't allow it. Besides, my work is practically over, I don't see any reason to string things out..."

"Over? You- you- all you did was make things worse! Can you get that through your dainty fucking ear holes? You made things *worse*."

You're going to have to purchase a nail file. It escapes you how you've gone so long without one. "Hmm?"

"*You made things worse!* He's gonna make an insulting attempt to placate me, yeah, that's normal. But he's gonna do it knowing I asked someone to..." She drags both hands down her face. "Do you know how fucking embarrassing that is?"

"Maybe he'll appreciate it," you say mildly. "You know, it means you care? Doubt you showed too much of that, really..."

Madrigal, shaking, socks you in the jaw.

Is it supposed to hurt? You thought it was supposed to hurt. But it's just gone numb and staticky, like a leg you've sat on for hours. Your heart and head are pounding.

She looks almost as surprised as you are. "Sorry..." she mutters. "Sorry... Sorry..."

You don't say anything, only clutch your jaw.

"Fuck... sorry. Are you going to die? You look like you're going to topple over—"

«Oh, Charlie, Charlie. You're not going to die.»

Richard has shaken himself from his torpor, right on time.

«Punch her back.»

You've never punched anyone before.

«That's not a concern. You will be receiving guidance. If you do not punch her back, you are weak.»

You don't want to be weak, but...

«Then listen to me.»

>[1] **Punch her back, with «guidance.» [Roll.]**

>[2] Punch her back, without «guidance.» [Difficult roll.]

>[3] Shank her. You have a knife. [Roll.]

>[4] What does this make you? This makes you the victim, and she's (or is pretending to be) *guilty*. Milk this for everything it's worth.

>[5] Write-in.

>**Falcon punch!**

>Artificial Success [67, 57, 0 vs. DC 40]!

You know what? You're not going to stand here, gaping like a dead fish, clutching your bruised jaw, powerless while some uppity little harlot lies at you through crooked teeth. You are royalty, God-damnit, and you do not get *punched!*

(You do not *punch*, either, your good breeding cries, but you will not hear of it.)

The obstacle is, and at the moment it appears insurmountable, you really do not know how to go about it. You have never been in a scrap, fistfight, or dustup— never so much as a scuffle. Your knuckles are virgin white and your nose is straight and symmetrical. You have read about it, certainly, but the idea of putting words into action is wholly daunting. Do you go up with your arm? Or down?

«Listen, that's what I'm telling you.» The tinny radio-crackle of Richard's voice is oddly soothing. He is winding up your neck. «You don't have to worry about any of that, Charlotte. It would be my pleasure to take care of it.»

>[-1 ID: 5/10]

God, that's nice of him. He does care about you, even if he doesn't show it sometimes. Well, most of the time. But it just makes you value this kind of thing more, doesn't it?

«I'm glad you've come around, Charlie. Now, do relax. It lessens complications.»

>[-1 ID: 4/10]

Aside from the core of white-hot fury you're reserving solely for Madrigal (she's *talking* right now, like she thinks it will matter), you're already relaxed. Or something. Mostly, your head feels stuffed full of candy floss. Did the blow to your jaw knock something vital loose, something cold, sharp, rational? It doesn't bear thinking about.

>[-1 ID: 3/10]

So you don't. And you don't think about the pinhole-camera black seeping into your vision. And you don't think about the tang of iron in your throat, or the bite of bitter smoke in your sinuses, or the inexplicable crushing sense that everything's just gone flat— though this is admittedly difficult.

>[-1 ID: 2/10]

You just wait, because everything is going to be fine.

«I appreciate your patience.» There is new gravel to Richard's voice. «The time is now.»

Madrigal's still talking! She must have taken your silence as tacit acceptance, which'll make this all the better. Should you say something along with the punch? Something cool? You think that's what's supposed to happen.

«What- no. Don't.»

Maybe. Yes. Just as soon as... are you waiting for something? If this drags on for too long, it'll look weird. Who punches someone back two minutes later? Not you. You're a girl of action.

Which is why you're punching her right now.

Right now.

Right... now.

>[-1 ID: 1/10]

There! You go rigid as invisible fire scorches up your spine and down your arm. Your hand flexes involuntarily. Madrigal sees it, pauses...

It's too late for her. You uncoil in a single languid, liquid motion— so casual an onlooker might believe it was serendipity your fist connected with her face. "SUCK IT!" you scream in extremely cool fashion, immediately disabusing any onlookers of this notion.

«Damn it.»

Madrigal sways for a second— there is startled betrayal in her eyes— and topples sideways, unconscious.

The fire in your arm dies out, and you feel like swaying, too. All of it—the candy floss, the smoke and iron, the pinhole vision— is gone, but you don't have anything to replace it. You just feel woozy and empty.

And Madrigal's out cold in front of you. God— God— God *bless* the King and all the ships at sea! Now what? What are you supposed to do, leave her here? Drag her back? What were you *thinking*? Oh, good job, Charlotte, where's Game Night now! You've gone and done it now, haven't you!

>[1] Write-in!

>Look around to make sure there were no witnesses, then drag her into some shade and wander away guilty

> You really need a fucking drink after that.

Well I've got no idea what to do. Victory dance, then punch out all witnesses

>Check for witnesses

>Punch out all witnesses (if applicable)

>Drag Madrigal into shade

>Victory dance?

>Find a drink

Oh God, look at her! Her mouth hangs agape, her arms and legs are bent at odd angles, her chest rises and falls shallowly. Did you really do this? You didn't mean to hit her so hard. You didn't think you could.

«No, you meant every second of it. It wouldn't have happened if you didn't.»

Richard's lying to you. Like how he lies about everything.

«Not everything. Not when the truth is just as convenient. You wanted to hurt her badly. Maybe even kill her.»

You stare mutely at Madrigal's prone form.

«We'll make something of you yet, Charlie. Now, look, you can't just stand here. Someone could've seen that.»

Oh God, someone could've seen that! You whip around, clutching your jaw in one hand (it is really beginning to throb), and scan the treeline. It is empty. If someone did see it, they're long gone.

«There's nothing that can be done, then. Drag her out of sight.»

You don't see what's wrong with leaving her where she is. You're already off the trail and in the brush.

«It's good practice.»

Fine! You pick up Madrigal by the ankles and drag her behind an obliging tree. Her clothing is now totally smeared with mud and debris, but that's also fine. You don't care anymore.

«Now dance.»

"What?" you mutter. There is a hard limit to what you'll do without question. "Why?"

There is a short pause.

«You are supposed to want to. You're happy.»

You cradle your jaw. Madrigal is limp at your feet.

«Please.»

You don't move.

«We will have to work on this later, Charlotte. Now...»

You want a drink. It's the only idea in your head. You want a drink, preferably pink, preferably with an umbrella, also pink. A drink would fill the empty. A drink would let you forget this even happened. A drink would make Richard shut up.

But you've been (unjustly!) greylisted from the only establishment in town, and Monty is a moralistic prick who keeps alcohol banned from camp. So now what?

>[1] Wheedle your way back into the Better Than Nothing. So what if you're in exile? (And have an unpaid tab a fathom long?) You're also clearly in terrible need.

>[2] The guys out on the mudflats are sure to have a crate of something. It won't have umbrellas, and it's a considerable hike, but it's worth it, right?

>[3] You've heard *Madrigal* keeps a cache hidden somewhere in camp. And she won't even be awake to catch you! Pros: convenient location, extra up-yours. Cons: you don't know where it is, no umbrellas.

>[4] Oh, God, can't you just settle for the fake stuff? It's not like your body will know the difference. Find Eloise back at camp and convince her to

make you a cocktail. She'll ask for something in return, but she won't screw you over too badly, probably.
>[5] Write-in.

>Obtain something pink and umbrella'd at any cost.

You know what? A greylist doesn't mean anything, not really. It's just a suggestion. And you deserve it, anyhow. You've been through a difficult occasion. A trying occasion. And you're royalty! Jacques couldn't ban you if he tried. It'd be illegal, you think.

And anyways, you don't know anywhere else with cocktail umbrellas.

After a final check to ensure that Madrigal's still breathing (she is), you sidle back towards the trail— and nearly trip over the clipboard you failed to pick up earlier. For the sake of completeness, you give it a glance.

The handwriting is large and blocky, characteristic of someone with a thumb tuck grip or something similarly inefficient. "Headspace," it says across the top, then "ask Monty" underneath, underlined four times. "Ethical??" Finally, underneath it all, seven or eight completed tic-tac-toe boards.

You place the clipboard back where you found it.

Though you're a stone's throw from town, the trek back seems much longer than it had taken the first time. When you finally emerge from the underbrush, you're pleased (and concerned) to find nobody around, again. Is something afoot?

Well, whatever it is, it's probably none of your concern. You locate the Nothing immediately— it's one of a scant few buildings with a sign out front, and the only one with a *real* sign. The wood was hand-chopped, sawed, sanded, and painted, Jacques has told you proudly (multiple times), and the chain holding it up was scavenged off an ancient anchor. It shows, you think: the sign has a certain solid, dependable quality to it. It will still be there when everyone is dead and gone. It is Better Than Nothing.

«Remind me to lower the dose next time, please.»

You are brimming with— not confidence, exactly, but definitely something brittle and manic that could be mistaken for confidence in the wrong light. You want a drink, that is pink, and has an umbrella in it, and God save anyone or anything who stands in your path. You might just punch them, or something. (Your jaw really hurts now.)

There is the door to the Nothing standing in your way. You consider punching it, and then just open it, like how you're supposed to.

It's crowded for this hour. You count eight patrons: the fish in the corner, two Courtiers at a table, some body mod freak at the bar (is the glowing truly necessary?), a couple of identical burly types by the entrance, and... a city slicker? It must be. No one else would wear a skirt so high (it's just asking for leeches).

And Jacques behind the counter, glaring at you like you'd just spread some vile rumors about him and/or his wife. (Which you did. But it was an accident, and anyways he did kind of deserve it.) "Out!" he barks, and gestures roughly outside. "Out! Out!"

"Hi Jacques," you sign, in a very moderate and reasonable fashion. "I need a drink."

"Get out!" he says, in a very (you think) non-moderate and non-reasonable fashion. Everybody is looking at you.

"Can we talk about this outside?" you continue, in an admirable show of patience. "It's very important. Do you still have the umbrellas?"

Jacques doesn't say anything.

«I think you broke something.»

After a long, long silence (you feel the heat of nine pairs of eyes on your neck), Jacques slams his towel onto the bar and stomps out to meet you. He looks you up and down with far less sympathy than you consider required.

"Your daddy better have gotten eaten by a shark," he snarls. "And he better have been loaded. You are paying *all* your tab."

(You briefly consider the amount of chit you carry on your person, which is zero, and tally that amount up with the amount of chit you own in general, which is also currently zero. You are flat broke.)

>[1] Don't be unreasonable, man. You don't even need the drink. You'll just take an umbrella and go.

>[2] Come on, Jacques, we're buddies. Buddies-buddies. Buddies-buddies-buddies. He makes a killing, anyways, what's one more drink?

>[3] **Look at your jaw! (There's probably something there, right?) Can't he see you've been through a lot? You're desperate! You're raving!**

>[4] You will trade him some dirty gossip (not about himself) in return for one (one!) drink. Well, a pink drink. With an umbrella. How about that for a deal?

>[5] Write-in.

>Play for sympathy.

>72, 59, 26 vs. DC 80 - Failure!

"Come on, Jacques, we both know that's not going to happen." You prod your jaw gingerly. "Have a heart. Can't you see what kind of day I've been having?"

He purses his lips. "That's a bruise."

"It *is*. And do you know *why* I have a bruise?"

"I don't know," he says. "Maybe you claimed someone else was using their business as a front for an elaborate criminal empire, and they punched you for it? Wouldn't that be funny?"

You hold up both hands placatingly. "I see you have some unresolved resentments—"

He slams the door.

He slammed the door! On you! In your hour of need! Before you even *started* your list of tribulations! Before you could even *ask* for an umbrella! You pound wildly on the door, you holler "JACQUES!!" though it only heightens the pain to eye-popping levels— "JACQUES!! THAT'S NOT- THERE WERE ALLIGATORS TOO—"

The door opens a smidge. "Shut *up!*" Jacques hisses through it. "You are going to get yourself killed! Or worse!" He slams it shut again.

"Jacques..." you moan desperately. You are on the verge of tears, and it's only half because of the jaw. "Jacques... what's worse than... why is that going to..."

«This is a <disgrace>.» Richard, and the staccato burst of feedback that accompanies his words, stuns you into silence. «You are a <disgrace>. You are a <child>.»

He is tight, too tight, around your neck.

«That is all you are, Charlotte, underneath everything. You're not mature enough to tie your own shoes, let alone run a nation, and oh, you know it. You know it, Charlotte. But anything to make your <dead daddy> proud, isn't that right.»

Your father died before you were born.

«Whatever you like, Charlotte. You still know what he <wanted> for you. For the family. You'd do anything at all to live up to it. You'd jump to your death.»

He is pulsing with warmth.

«Too bad you can't do anything alone. You can barely do anything <with> assistance. 3 years to find it, how many more for it to work- a decade, maybe, at your rate. A decade of nothing but crushing water and people who hate you.»

You don't want that at all.

«Good. I don't want that for you, Charlotte. I want you to see the sunshine. I want you to see your family. But there's only so much I can do when you are chasing delusions every time I look away.»

You are crying softly. It's hard to tell, given you're wet, and everything else is wet. But you are.

«Since we're agreed. Give up on the stupid fucking <cocktail umbrella> and do as I say, now.»

If he had said anything else, anything at all, you would have done it. You would have agreed, immediately. But not the umbrella. The thought of the umbrella is probably the only thing keeping you from flying into a million glittery pieces. You WANT one. A PINK one.

But...

Well, he's right.

>[1] Give up on the umbrella. [+1 max Severalty. Richard will be pleased. You'll pull yourself together.]

>[2] **Keep the umbrella. [+1 max Identity. Richard will be MEGA pissed. You'll remain a mess today.]**

>Keep the umbrella.

But nothing.

"No," you mumble.

«Sure, we can do it this way. <Again>. That's fine. That's good, Charlotte. Let us have a dialogue, because that always works. That's always fun and useful and productive. Let us choose to understand why you must cling to an all-consuming cloud of delusion. Let us <converse>. You'd like to start, I'd assume.»

"No," you mumble again. You barely registered any of that. Your jaw is throbbing quite hard. "What?"

«Explain why not.»

This you understand fully. He says "explain," but what he always means is "try to explain"— while he calmly points out every flaw in your reasoning, and all the reasons you're wrong, and also stupid. It never fails to convince you.

But though you may be wrong, and also stupid, it's not something you want to be convinced of right now. You don't want to try to explain. You just want an unbelievably pink umbrella, and maybe a drink to put it in. You just want to have something small and beautiful you didn't make yourself. It's not— it shouldn't be— a crime. Right? It shouldn't be. It's not. You can want things, if you want.

Right?

>[+1 MAX ID: 3/11]

You're crying a little less now.

«Phenomenal. You take what I do— you always do this, you realize— you take what I do, what I try to do for you, and then you twist it so I'm somehow in the wrong.» Richard sounds as if he's leaning very close to the microphone. He might be angry. «*Damnans quod non intellegunt*. Absolutely phenomenal.»

He is angry: the gibberish is the tell.

«It's not about the <umbrella>. I don't know why you're making it about the umbrella. It's about <you>, Charlotte, and the fact that you are sobbing in the middle of the public street <about> an umbrella, for no reason whatsoever.»

You're not *sobbing*. (It has subsided to a low snuffle.) It's not for no reason. And you think maybe people should see you cry in the middle of the street. Maybe they'll feel sorry for you. Maybe they'll give you an umbrella.

«You are completely off the reservation. You have a reputation to consider, Charlotte, despite your own best efforts to shred it. We are <leaving>.»

>[1] No we aren't. We are staying right here, and crying, until somebody notices us and cares about us. And that is that. [Roll.]

>[2] Okay, well, maybe we are leaving. The matter is how:

>>[A] The main trail. It's the least hassle. God forbid you run into Madrigal, though, and if you have attracted attention they'll know exactly where to find you. But that's just your nervous streak, probably. You have a very strong nervous streak, Richard tells you.

>>[B] **The back way, past Tom's Cave. Less dangerous than cutting straight through the Fen, less conspicuous than the main trail. But Margo is probably there. Margo does not like you.**

>>[C] Straight through the Fen. It's adventure! And nobody will follow you. But that might be for good reason.

>[3] Now that you've stood out here and cried rather loudly, maybe Jacques will pity you enough? And he'll get you a free drink? And he won't be mad at you?

>[4] Write-in.

>Take the back way, past Tom's Cave.

Maybe you decided you've pushed things enough for one day. Maybe you were just too worn-out to argue. In any case, you're currently limping out of town; you're not using the main trail you came in on, but the rinky-dink side "trail" (it's little more than trampled mud) that meanders past Tom's Cave. You don't want to risk seeing Madrigal again, mostly.

It may not be worth it. The side "trail" doesn't seem at all designed for human use— its rocky switchbacks and thickets of mangrove roots would suit a persistent crab, maybe. Or a snake. Richard has relaxed his chokehold on

your neck and sits instead in smug silence. You hope you won't find any leeches in your boots after this.

It takes maybe ten minutes to reach Tom's Cave, but it feels considerably longer. The water has turned sticky with warmth, and you keep finding yourself attempting to wipe sweat off your brow. Hell's steam vents must be raging today.

The cave is as nondescript as ever— little more than a drab hole in the ground. It's not important. You've moved on past the cave in your head. No, you're too busy staring at the two people outside it.

The first is Margo Lindew, who of everyone (unjustly) angry at you is possibly the angriest, probably the most powerful, and definitely the most vengeful. The old bag has enough spite in her to power a waterwheel.

The second is unmistakably Ellery. (You don't care what Ellery's last name is.) Why is Ellery here? He's not supposed to be here. He's supposed to be... you don't know, you just assumed he never left base camp. But here he is anyways, towering gawkily over Margo and gesticulating. Handsign.

Are they *plotting against you*? You want to know. You have to know. But imagine the earful if you got caught—!

>[1] Sidle as close as you can to see what they're talking about. Attempt stealth. [Roll.]

>[2] You know what? This is definitely your business! Walk straight up and interrupt them.

>[3] It's not worth the risk. Continue on back to camp.

>Sneak up.

>1, 65, 52 vs. DC 40 - Success!

Well, you have to know, don't you? It's just going to gnaw away at you if you don't. And how hard could just sneaking up be?

Not hard. It's not hard, actually— Margo and Ellery both seem pretty distracted by whatever they're discussing. You just avoid stepping on anything too noisy, slide between the least-dirty trees, and find yourself in comfortable line-of-sight to the conversation.

You were looking straight-on before. You're now at a bit of an angle, which lends you some additional information: Margo has a flechette shotgun to Ellery's chest.

«Looks like a surface brand. Probably Oxeye. It has the little doohickey on the top.»

Margo has an Oxeye flechette shotgun to Ellery's chest. God. The important part is that there's a *shotgun to Ellery's chest*, and Margo's finger lightly on the trigger.

«Safety's off, too, looks like.»

Between the pain and the last wet remnants of tears and the shotgun, you find it difficult to concentrate on what's actually being said. Worse, Ellery is difficult to understand: his signing is the killer combination of rapid and sloppy. (You'd like to criticize this, but don't have the heart for it.)

You try your best. "Uh," he's saying. "I don't think there's— there's really no call for this, uh, all this hostility— Margo—"

Her fingers barely twitch off the grip. "That's Mrs. Lindew or 'ma'am,' to you, *boy*."

"—Mrs. Lindew, if you'd just— please drop the gun, uh, and we can get back to those questions—"

"I didn't hear *questions*—"

"—Okay, well, I did ask them, so, uh— is there any chance you can explain the bones? The big fuck-off massive piles of bones? How many people's worth of bones *is* that? Have you noticed people going missing over the years? Have people been fed to the alligator tower? Did you *know* there's an alligator tower? Why do you sit here every day? Are you hiding something, Mrs. Lindew? Are you—"

"—All I heard was the guilty conscience of a criminal. Do you know what crime in these parts is punishable with, boy? I know you're one of them camp people."

"..Execution? I feel like it's probably execution."

"Hm." Margo narrows her eyes. "I prefer '*justice*'."

>[1] Oh God! You're leaving. You're leaving right now. You can't be complicit in this. This never happened. You were never here.

>[2] Oh God! You can't just let someone else shoot Ellery. That's **your** job. Do- do, uh, do something. [What?]

>[3] **If Ellery gets shot and dies, and you watch, you can blackmail Margo into dropping the whole "eviction" deal later. It's only reasonable.**

>[4] Just wait. Maybe nothing will happen. Maybe this will be fine.

>[5] Write-in.

>Turn this situation to your advantage.

You don't have to do anything.

The thought sends a cold prickle down your back. You don't have to do anything. Nobody's watching you. Nobody's making you. It's entirely between you and your conscience.

«And me.» Richard twitches. «But I have no stake in the matter.»

The question is not what you ought to do. The question is what you ought to get out of it. If Ellery lives: well, he's indebted to you. But is that something you even want? And do you want to be chased by a crazy bint with a shotgun? No and no. If Ellery dies: that's leverage, isn't it? All it requires is a little application.

Ellery is worth more to you dead than alive, you realize dispassionately.

So you watch.

"I, I mean," Ellery is saying, "I guess you can call it anything you want. You can call it, gods, I don't know, 'somersault,' but that doesn't make it tr—"

You clap your hands to your head a fraction too late. The BANG is muffled by the flesh and fabric and the big chunky suppressor at the end of the barrel, but it's still enough to send you reeling backwards, your ears ringing horribly. But it's nothing— nothing— nothing compared to Ellery, who is

BLURRY with motion, clutching and hacking and wiping his stained hands on his front, though it only stains them more, and he has no front to speak of—it is gone, spattered on the ground, you could stick a hand in the hole, you could stick a head—he is waterfall-gushing blood, as could only be expected, but it's the wrong kind of blood, it's neither thin bright scarlet velvet red nor is it gloopy antacid pink, it's silver, a little rusty around the edges, and it's thick like syrup—

>[ID: 2/11]

—He's standing, he's still standing, he's almost steadier on his feet than he was before the shot, like all the jumpiness was contained in his chest, or something, and has now been blown to pieces—he seems amused by some private secret inside joke—his hands are moving—

"Try the head," he says.

Margo, to her credit, is more surprised than shocked, she wasn't expecting this but could've assumed... she mutters something to herself you can't hear and pumps the shotgun once—

You cover your ears this time.

The BANG is less loud, maybe because your hearing's already dulled, but it's accompanied by the unmistakable splintering of broken glass— you don't know, you don't want to know, you hope Ellery's skull isn't made of glass— you shouldn't think in the present tense. Ellery's gone, Ellery's all across the sedge, Ellery's pooling out of the thing toppling to the ground— it doesn't look like a person, it doesn't look like it ever was a person, it looks hard and waxen—

>[ID: 1/11]

You are crying again, and attempting to vomit, though of course you haven't eaten anything in several months, so all it is is sickly acid. Margo

doesn't hear you. Either she can't hear you, from two gunshots, or she has earplugs in. Margo is standing from her rocking chair and taking the body by its feet. Margo is dragging the body into the cave.

«You'd think she'd just go for the head in the first place.»

You don't feel good.

>[1] Sit here for a long time.

>[2] **Limp back to camp.**

>>[A] Tell Madrigal.

>>[B] Tell Monty.

>>[C] **Don't tell anybody.**

>[3] You need a drink about a hundred times more badly than previous.

Jacques might understand.

>[4] Write-in.

>Go straight home, do not pass go, do not collect \$200

It wasn't supposed to be like that. It wasn't. It was supposed to be how they write it in the penny novels: witty repartee, and a tasteful, minimal amount of blood, and only one shot necessary. One shot is civilized. One shot is putting down a lame dog, more or less. Two is—

You don't like to think about it.

Richard needs to do the thinking for you, or the talking, or something. You wish he'd say something, even if it were something mean about your dry-heaving. It makes you feel better to know he's with you. More secure. You're sorry you made him angry before.

«I appreciate it.» He's wrapped around your shoulders. «I'm proud of you.»

He's proud of you? He's never been proud of you before, even in the good old days. You've just never been good enough to be proud of. He's proud of you!

«You made the rational choice, which I understand you've struggled with in the past. Of course I'm proud. Start walking.»

You start walking. It's a little unsteady.

«I wish we could have a look at the body, but you are in no condition to follow that woman. We should consider coming back here tonight to obtain some samples, at least. That's not natural blood.»

You make it back to the side trail, but not before dodging some idiot's pitfall trap. What native game can't swim?

«We'll have to consider how to break the news. It's the faster the better, in my opinion. You look guilty if you sit too long.»

(But you're not guilty! You didn't do anything!)

«Look guilty, Charlie. Look. Of course you're not guilty. Blackmail, however, is an actual crime, so we'll have to be delicate about that.»

You are grateful to find that the trail has leveled out considerably.

«Wouldn't want to jump the gun on it, and all. 'Jump the gun' was not a pun, it was merely a figure of speech. I can't tell if you're listening or not. Charlie. Charlie—»

You've got a dull ache in your jaw, and the sting of stomach acid in your throat, and a ringing in your ears, and you really don't want to start crying for the third time today. So you're not really listening.

Finally: camp. If anyone notices the state you're in, they're polite enough to not say anything. You locate your tent almost solely through muscle memory, reach to untie the knot—

There's no knot. The door is untied.

God, you're stupid, leaving your tent open like this. There's probably crabs and things all over your bed. People have probably been looking inside. But there's nothing to do about it now. You push open the tent flap.

There is a strange man inside.

No, not strange, but very nearly so. It's the man in the grey longcoat. The "be seeing you" one. Be seeing you indeed! He's leaning over your desk, looking at your miniatures. He starts at your entrance— but only very quickly, before covering it up.

"Sorry," he says glibly, and stands up straight. "It was open, and I was so fascinated by these! Be seeing you, Lottie."

You are stunned into silence as he brushes past you and is gone.

«Well. You have to admire his confidence.»

>[1] Be seeing you?! Storm right back out and give the man a piece of your mind.

>[2] **Make sure nothing is displaced or stolen. Your interior is minimalist, it shouldn't take too long.**

>[3] Oh, damn him. Just do something to distract yourself from... everything. Finish the model you were working on.

>[4] Take a catnap. You're not tired, exactly, and it is broad daylight, but unconsciousness sounds very appealing.

>[5] Write-in.

>Scan the tent.

"So fascinated by these?" They're just stupid models you do in your free time, not some kind of art exhibit. His explanation reeks.

You're going to have to do a thorough examination of everything, now. Luckily, you keep things very neat, very decluttered, very minimalist...

«Yes. Because you're in debt, Charlie.»

Because you're *ascetic*. And you like the color white. The amount of time you spend scrubbing mud and sand and bits of algae off everything to keep it white is frankly obscene.

First: the right bookshelf. The top two shelves are knickknacks, most of which you have no memory of ever obtaining. Why is there a key fob in the shape of a starfish? Why is there a— you don't even know what this thing is. It's small and metal and has little grooves along the edge.

«Shoot.»

But they're all in an orderly grid with no gaps between them, meaning they're exactly as you put them there. Both books ("Cross-words for Young Minds" and "Wyzards Munificent") are still there, too, wrapped in cloth in hopes they won't disintegrate totally.

On the next shelf down is your mechanical bank: if you put a coin in, the girl on top is supposed to skip rope. She has not skipped rope in years— not only do you have no coins, but it's rusting practically to pieces.

There's nothing below her in the bookcase. You do not like to stoop.

Above your cot is an aged photograph of yourself, your mother, and your Auntie Ruby. It is torn a bit on the left, and is very water-stained. You look at it for a while.

>[ID: 2/11]

Underneath your cot (sometimes you must stoop, whether you like to or not) is a sharkskin portmanteau containing the rest of your clothing. There's not much left of it— it's mostly been lost or tattered— but nothing seems stolen.

You turn to your desk, where the man had been looking. The clay is still under it. Your research has been moved, but only slightly— was he reading it, or just shoving it aside to look at the models? The models themselves, all twenty or thirty, are still in order.

You slide open the desk drawer. Your tools are all still here. Your unfinished model—

Your unfinished model is gone! Stolen! It was barely sculpted, let alone hardened or painted. Why it, and not anything else? Did he break in to steal it, or was it a crime of opportunity?

Mother of a whore.

He's probably long-gone by now, too. You bite your sleeve in an attempt to keep from crying again. (It tastes like salt.) Now what? Is it even worth trying to get it back?

You nearly jump out of your skin at a knock at the door. Monty pokes his head in.

"Hi, Charlotte," he says, and then takes in your bloodshot eyes and bruise. "Oh. Sorry, ah, the door was open. Should I come back later...?"

You're not in much of a state to talk to Monty. But you'll look weak if you don't. And you might have things to ask him about.

>[1] Write-in.

>"Did you see a guy running away from my tent just now? Know anything about him?"

>Things to ask him about

"Uh," you say. "Did you happen to see a man leaving this tent? Just now?"

You've always found it difficult to get a read on Monty. He only looks a couple of years older than you, but between the patronization and the knit pullovers (dusty orange today) there's no way that can be right. There's middle manager rolling off him in waves.

He steps all the way in. He is carrying a thick stack of folders under one arm, and nothing under his other arm, because he doesn't have another arm. You've gotten very good at not staring. "A man? Any sort of man, or just..."

You sit on the edge of your cot. "I don't know. Grey longcoat, kind of drab... oh, horsey-looking. Very horsey-looking."

"But you don't know his name?" Monty has propped a folder against his leg and is scribbling something down on it.

"Uh, no. Does he stay here?"

"If he is, he isn't authorized to. Sorry, no, I didn't see him leave. You're saying he was in your tent without permission..."

"And he stole something."

"Oh!" Monty underlines something. "Do you know what?"

Telling *Monty* about your hobby? You'd rather die. "It's none of your business."

"Was it something personal?"

"It's none of your business!"

"I'll put it down as personal." He does. "Thanks for the report, Charlotte, I'll look into it. Now, while I'm here, there was something else—"

"You can go now," you say.

"—It shouldn't take very long, it's just... Look, did you punch Madrigal today?"

«Stay calm.»

>[1] Deny it. Deny everything.

>[2] **Okay, look, she punched you first. Surely there's a self-defense provision in the Rules and Procedures.**

>[3] Maybe you did, but it wasn't on camp property, was it? It was out in the woods. There's nothing he can do about it.

>[4] She deserved it.

>[5] To be clear, you didn't just punch her— you knocked her out cold. And it was awesome.

>[6] Write-in.

>**It was self-defense!**

You touch your bruise reflexively. "What's it to you?"

"I don't feel like I need to answer that question, Charlotte."

He doesn't. You capitulate. "Okay. But. But— did you know it was in self-defense? Because it was in self-defense. *She* punched *me* first. I am— in fact, I'm the victim here."

>[ID: 3/11]

Monty raises his eyebrows.

You point vigorously at your jaw. "Look at this! This was Madrigal's weird bony knuckles. Really, I think she should be getting the lecture, not me—"

"She has, actually. I knew all this already." Monty cracks an awkward smile. "I'm also under the impression it was mutually deserved—"

"*She* punched *me*! How is that *mutual*?"

"I'm not saying she didn't deserve it, Charlotte. God knows she needs a whack sometimes."

You fold your hands and let that information simmer.

Monty coughs. "Uh, yes. I was impressed you managed to coldcock her, actually— I didn't take you for a pugilist. No offense."

You don't say anything.

"I have a lot of knuckle tape if you'd like it. It's gone unused ever since... well..." The loose arm of his pullover dangles. "You know."

You tug at your collar.

"Uh, okay, then. The point was, uh, the issue is not exactly you punching Madrigal. That's fine. The issue is that she's *pissed*, and she's on my case about it." He displays the folders. One is very thin. One is not. "And you have not left yourself a lot of wiggle room."

Despite not knowing what this means, you're still offended. "I have— I have lots of wiggle room. I have loads. Scads."

"It would be a lot easier on me if you did. But— look, I trust you're familiar with our three strikes system?"

You are not.

«It's in the Rules and Guidelines handbook you threw away. Disputes are taken to the Overseer— that's him, I understand— and the party found to be in the wrong gets a strike. Three strikes gets you a review, where you're entitled to make a case for yourself as to why you're not an awful person. If you fail, you're evicted.»

"Y...es," you say. You don't want to know how Richard knows this.

«I know many things.»

"Excellent. I keep all records in folders per person. This—" Monty shows you the thin folder. "This is what a normal folder looks like."

You have a horrible feeling about this. "So what's in the giant folder?"

"That's yours, Charlotte. Those are the complaints filed against you."

"No they aren't." The horrible feeling has not dimmed. "I understand I might be controversial with certain..."

Monty flips the giant folder over. "CHARLOTTE FRANCES FAWKINS" is printed in shaky black letters across the top.

"Oh."

"You're on your twelfth review or so, I believe."

You don't like seeing this. It's just the garbage awful capstone to a wholly calamitous day. "Oh."

"You might be asking yourself why you're still here?"

"...No?" you manage, though of course you are.

"I'll tell you anyway. It's because I've kept you around, Charlotte, despite my better judgment. You remind me of—"

The horrible feeling has gained so much mass it collapses in on itself all at once. You are left with a single diamond revelation. "Your *wife*?"

"What?"

"Your wife. The dead one. I bet I have her eyes, or something, so you project all your grief and whatnot on *me*. Which, I mean, I'm flattered, but it's also a little pathetic—"

Monty looks mildly horrified. "No. What? No. Constance had brown eyes—that's not the point. I was going to say 'myself'."

«Wow.»

You search for the right thing to say to this and come up empty. "You?"

He chuckles, which only increases your revulsion. "Younger me. I was a go-getter, you know, and I saw other people as obstacles on my road to success. It didn't win me a lot of friends."

This is so grossly incongruous with the current Monty that you simply choose not to believe it. "Oh yeah? Why'd you stop?"

His smile fades. "I succeeded."

"Oh." You also choose to discard this. "That's nothing like me, though. I have friends."

"Maybe so. In either case, that's why you've gotten off light. But Madrigal, you know— she doesn't exactly agree with that philosophy, and she's interested in doing something about it."

"Like..."

"Like undergoing the review process, which you will fail. I'm not interested in that either. So you are going to agree to a compromise."

This is bad news. "What is it?"

"You're going to help Madrigal with whatever she wants you to help with, until I tell you to stop."

You flop back onto the cot. "Evict me."

"No."

"Evict me!"

"No. I'll stop her if she does anything too humiliating, Charlotte." Monty tucks the folders back under his arm. "That's all."

You're really in no mood to do much of anything, but concentrated spite has sat you down at your desk with a fettling knife and a lump of clay. You're not over the fact that your last attempt at a model got stolen— on top of everything else! Did you break a mirror or something?

Did you... okay, well, it doesn't matter. Superstition is for the feeble-minded, Richard would tell you, were he speaking. (He's draped idly over the legs of your cot.) You are going to make something, and it's not going to be a disaster, you swear.

>[1] Try to remake the model you were beginning before. It'll be difficult— your memory of the cathedral is fuzzy— but it sure will stick it to the man in the grey longcoat.

>[2] Model a different building. Like the weird tower in Ellery's— not like that. But somewhere.

>[3] Do something abstract. It's not in your usual repertoire, but you feel like you should probably be expressing yourself, or something like that.

>[4] Don't aim for anything in particular. Let your tools and fingers do the talking.

>[5] You give up. Put the knife back and take a surrender nap.

>[6] Write-in.

>Do it again. But ABSTRACT.

You start four times, and four times smash the clay against the desk. In theory, this should not be difficult. You're just trying to recreate the model that got stolen.

In practice, it's awful. Your grip on your tools is unsteady, and twice you make a fatal slip and lop off half the nave. Worse, you're finding it difficult to picture the dimensions of the manse: in memory, it has softened into amorphous slush. (Much like your clay, which you've worked too much water into.)

It's not right. Even if you could execute it, it wouldn't be right. Your other models are all of real structures, real places, where the character of them are inherent in how they're constructed. If you reconstruct them properly, the character follows. It's top-down.

You need to go bottom-up. You need to sculpt the character, and the structure will follow. (You are momentarily pleased by your flash of brilliance.)

And then you realize: well, how in the God-damn are you supposed to do that?

Sculpt the character? What does that even mean? You don't know how that works. You can barely sculpt things you can see directly in front of you. Face it: this is a waste of time.

You knock your head against the desk in frustration. Something clatters loose in your skull. Buckshot. Buckshot? No, but that's what it feels like— felt like—

Buckshot? What are you thinking? It's been a long day. You should give up on this. It's late afternoon, almost evening, it's fine if you sleep. You should sleep. By the morning your ears will have stopped ringing.

Buckshot. No, it's there, plain as daylight, plain as the nose on your face, plain as anything you like. It's not literal. (It can't be *literal*.) But it's there anyways, defying all good sense, small and round and foreign. You prod it nervously, and receive WHITE and ROSEWATER and BRASS and GLASS and RAFTERS all in your head at once.

The cathedral. You're sure Richard would be happy to give you a detailed explanation, but without him you're forced to discard your questions of "why" and "how." It is what it is, and what it is is an entire building (a space? a concept?), crammed into something the size of a marble, lodged deep in your brain. But you've got it now— you can roll it between your fingers— (if someone were watching you, they'd see your head still on the desk, your hands clutching at empty water)— you can sculpt it.

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You have the character. You pick your head up. There is clay streaked across your forehead and cheek.

You wipe it off your face and onto the desk, then wipe all the clay off the desk. You take the fettling knife and slice a large chunk of clay off the block underneath. You set down the fettling knife, and pick up a ribbon cutter. You scoop—

«Charlie.»

Damn! Why now!

«Charlie. Listen to me. This is an emergency.»
«Somebody is in your head.»

You drop the ribbon cutter. "What? Who— how do you know?"

«Like how you were in Ellery's. I don't know. I'm also in your head, Charlie, I can tell these things.»

You forget the cathedral. You forget the clay. "Oh God. *Why?*"

«I don't know, and I'm unable to find out. I need you here. Now. I'll walk you through the process.»

Your heart is pounding. "Wouldn't it be better if you just pulled me? Like— like the first time? Faster, I mean."

There is a short, annoyed pause. «It would be faster. But that's a lot of work. I'll do it if you insist.»

>[1] Oh God! Let Richard walk you through it. You probably need to conserve your/his energy, or whatever.

>[2] Oh God! Make Richard pull you in. Time is of the essence.

>[3] Wait! You have another question. [Write-in.]

>[4] Write-in.

>Well, God, just do what he says!

"I don't— if you say so." You tug nervously at a lock of hair. "Will I fight him or her? With, like, a sword? Just as a hypothetical—"

«That remains to be seen, Charlie.»

"Are you *sure*? Because I feel like speed is of the essence, really— what if my memories all get stolen in the meantime? What if I wake up as, I don't know, *evil*?"

«It doesn't work that way.» Richard untwists himself from the cot. «Come on.»

You take the fettling knife in one hand as a precaution and step over. You don't remember what to do. You barely remember what you *did*.

«Then listen.»

You're made to mouth numbers backwards from 400, all the nonsense rhymes you can remember ("one and two / tide is blue / skipjack sets sail / wurm eats its tail"), all the colors of the rainbow backwards. The tent is smearing into watercolor. You can't feel your lips anymore. You don't know if this is good or not.

You can't feel your arms or legs either. Is this good? Or is this the sabotage of your unseen assailant? Should you be panicking? You feel like you should be, but your lizard brain is already insensible.

«Behave, and this won't take so long. I don't understand your ridiculous affection for your material corpse.»

"Richard sure is tetchy," you think, before the last byssal thread between your body and your consciousness is pried away. You collapse.

You're somewhere.

(Well. You're always somewhere. But you don't like semantics— they feel like cheating.)

You're somewhere different. There. You're sitting at a table, in the bright and salty air, and there's a hat on your head. Your chair is uncomfortable.

Richard is perched across the table, looking like the cat that ate the canary. There is a glass of prosecco in his hand and something abnormally slack in his posture. He's unconcerned. He's—

"Are you *drunk*?" you demand. The bottle on the table is near-empty. And he's *smiling*.

"Well, hello to you too, sunshine." He's still smiling. You don't like this. "How are you doing?"

"How am *I*— there's someone in my head, remember?" He's still smiling! It's uncanny. "And you're busy sitting here! Drinking! Shouldn't you be— why do I have a *hat*?"

Richard examines his glass. "For fun? Look, Charlie, you're going to have to loosen up. It's your party."

"My *what?*"

"Your party." He sets the glass down and produces a striped noisemaker from his pocket. "*Phweewwwww*— surprise! There was no invader."

You feel stupid. Of course there was no invader. Of course Richard lied to your face. Of course you fell for it, again, as always. You kick the chair back and stand up in frustration.

Richard, now frowning, stands up with you. "Oh, come on, it's not like that. You're just not good at listening, is all."

This is worse than if you had an honest-to-God cracksman in your head. This is embarrassing. You clutch both hands to your chest and storm away from the table, away from Richard, and down the increasingly indistinct pavement.

"That won't—"

You're sitting at a table, in the bright and salty air, and there's a hat on your head. "—work," Richard finishes. "Sorry. Would you like a drink?"

There is a drink in front of you. It's pink, and has a pink umbrella in it.

Another joke at your expense, even if it does look good. You push it gingerly away from you. "I wouldn't."

"Charlie, it's not poisoned."

It takes a moment before you realize he's serious. Poison is the only reason he can find for you rejecting it. "I said I didn't want a drink. *Richard.*"

All the slackness is gone at once. "Typical," he snarls. (You like this Richard much better. This is known territory.) "I do something nice— I pay attention— and you throw it in my face. Typical, Charlotte. What crime did I commit, huh? I misled you, briefly, so this could be a surprise? Lock me up and throw away the key, huh?"

"I- this isn't even a party! It's just you! What are you even celebrating? Today was awf—"

He's smiling again. Damn. It's like flipping a switch. "Oh! I didn't even tell you. Your first real kill, yes. Congratulations are in order."

Your stomach turns.

"Don't worry about not getting hands-on, there's no shame in that. I thought it was excellent anyway. Top 40% of firsts—"

"Wait," you said. "In the cave, I— I stomped the guy's head in."

Richard waves it away cheerily. "Under duress, doesn't count. Your first *real* kill. How did it feel?"

How did it *feel*? You threw up, twice, and then tried to not think about it at all. You were successful until now. How *did* it feel?

>[A1] Terrible. You didn't think it would be like that. You weren't serious about wanting Ellery dead. Well, you were a little serious. But not dead like that.

>[A2] Terrible. But lie to Richard that it felt good. You don't want to disappoint him.

>[A3] Fine, you guess. You're neither guilt-wracked nor all that happy about it. It is what it is.

>[A4] Satisfying. You've got a glorious, blacklist-free future ahead of you. If you've got to break a couple eggs in the process, what does it matter to you? (You deny having thrown up.)

>[A5] You don't want to think about this. Try to change the subject.

>[A6] Write-in.

>[B1] Sneak a sip of the drink while Richard isn't looking. You need it. [Roll.]

>[B2] Stick to your principles.

>[B3] Write-in.

>It felt terrible.

>Sneak a sip.

Your guts are all knotted up with disgust and fear and guilt. But Richard, bless his nasty shriveled heart, doesn't care how *you* feel. He cares how *it* felt.

"Bad," you say shortly.

The muscles in his neck tense, and you steel yourself for another litany of abuse— you sit up, fold your arms. But it never comes. He just takes a deliberate swallow of wine. "I know."

Your defense triggers on automatic. "Look, it's just... I didn't expect it to be so... huh?"

"I know." Richard leans back. "Charlie, you're a dead duck and a lousy liar, even to yourself. It's patently obvious. Really, would you like a drink?"

The drink is still there. (You would like a drink.) "No," you say.

"Don't be a Goddamned bitch, Charlie."

"No." The stupid drink is the only thing that's getting Richard properly angry, like how he's supposed to be. You're frightened by how decent he's being, moreso because it doesn't entirely feel like an act.

Richard downs the rest of the glass. "Then be a Goddamned bitch, Charlie. I suppose nobody ever raised you differently."

Maybe decent is the wrong word. You don't say anything.

"...I'm not worried by how it felt. You'll come around." He never sets the glass down— it's been replaced by a lighter. "But the act itself is still worth celebrating," he mumbles around a cigarette clenched in his teeth.

"I guess." You unfold your arms a little. "Since when have you smoked?"

"Since I became compelled to, so..." He lights the cigarette before checking his wristwatch. (You didn't think he was wearing a wristwatch.) "Now? It's your fault, by the way."

"I suppose you'll say I made you."

He smirks. "You did. I forgive you, though."

You can't think of anything to say to this. Richard can't either, apparently, because he contents himself with blowing smoke rings in your general direction. You shift restlessly.

"Is this it?" you say.

"Is what it."

"*This*." You wave your hands in circles. "Did you just want to waste my time? What did you expect to happen— that I'd just forget you *lied* to me, and we'd talk and, what, have a good time? I don't believe that's possible—"

He handles the cigarette like he's been doing it for decades, rather than five minutes. "...I did expect a greater level of cooperation—"

"You did! You expected me to be complacent! Ha!" You run your hand through your hair. "How is that even *possible*? Did you not think this through even a little?"

He works his jaw. "Charlie—"

"You just thought 'lie to her about life-threatening danger, that'll do it. Positive atmosphere.'"

"Please stop."

You do, out of surprise. Richard sounds tired. He seems tired, too, and kind of haggard. His neck is rubbed raw from where he's been tugging at the bow tie. He's greying awful bad. There are shaving nicks on his chin, still raw. He's baldly, sweatily human, and so much so that you're having a difficult time seeing anything past it.

Is he drunk? What did you *do* to him?

"I thought this would be nice," he says. "You did something right, for once, so I thought that warranted something nice. Less hostility."

This sounds vaguely wrong. "You just called me a— sorry— a goddamned bitch."

"That's because you were being one, Charlie. That's just a fact. You came in here and you screwed everything up. It was supposed to be nice."

He rubs his eyes. You take the opportunity to lean over the table and suck down a little of the pink drink. It's fruity, but tastes of no fruit of particular; the aftertaste is fiery with unmasked alcohol. It is extraordinarily pink. It's perfect, in other words.

"That's all," Richard says. "That's it."

He's serious (or is doing a good job of pretending to be). He thought this would be nice, for whatever sideways definition of nice he possesses. How about that.

Quite against your will, you are feeling a measure of compassion.

>[1] It's a sorry excuse for a party, but that doesn't mean you can't work to salvage it? You're going to have fun, because you deserve to, and it will be God-damn spectacular.

>[2] Can you actually muster the will to enjoy yourself? Not under these circumstances. But you can fake it, for Richard's sake, and a few of these pink drinks (do they have a name? you're not good at remembering that sort of thing) will probably help.

>[3] Are you out of your ever-loving mind?! Richard shows one drop of something other than concentrated self-interest and you're falling all over yourself to assist?! You're pathetic. Make no concessions. Sit here in awkward, semi-antagonistic silence.

>[4] Write-in.

>Fake it for at least a little while.

>95 - Never mind, you're capable of enjoying yourself quite a lot!

The air smells of smoke and springtime: magnolias, rotting driftwood, the faint citrusy spritz of cleaning fluid. You run your finger over the ridged edge of the table.

You should be happy. You're being thrown a party. So it's a party about you indirectly murdering someone, and so Richard doesn't really understand what a party is... none of that ought to matter. It's selfish of you not to be happy, isn't it? You're being selfish. He's trying so hard not to be a jerk, and you're just stomping all over it.

You should at least fake it for him. It's the right thing to do.

"Okay, I'll try the drink."

Richard brightens. "Really?"

Actually, you've already tried it, but you ignore this fact entirely. Instead, you make a great show of taking a mouthful, swishing it around, thinking hard about it, and swallowing. It burns as it goes down.

Richard stubs out the cigarette on the table's ashtray. "How is it?"

"It's really good," you say honestly, and rub at your watering eyes. "Uh, what's the alcohol content, though—"

He waves off the question. "I don't know these things, Charlie. It's not a *science*."

"A what?" You take another mouthful. You are developing a plan. "Nevermind, it doesn't matter. Does it work? Can I get potted off this?"

If you get drunk, it'll be easier to pretend you're having fun. It'll also be easier to ignore the awful feelings in your gut.

"Sure, if you expect you'll be." Richard pauses. "I'd go slow, though. Altering your mental state when you're *inside* that mental state..."

The rest of the glass goes down easy. Richard seems mollified by your cooperation, and is neither his usual sociopathic nor uncomfortably affable; he has settled into a glossy passive-aggressiveness you much prefer. He has another glass of prosecco in his left hand, a telescopic pointer in his right, and a cigarette clenched between his teeth. He is gesturing at a board with strings on it.

"Look, Charlie," he's saying. "I don't think— I'm telling you, this is still relevant."

"He's *dead!*"

"Okay, look, yes. *Maybe*." He points hard with the pointer. "But this isn't natural! It's worth looking into, if just for closure—"

"He's *dead!* It can't get more closed than that! And anyways—" you rub your face. "—Why do you *care*? You yelled at me today for wasting time investigating!—"

"That's all on you, Charlie," he says airily. "Why do you trust a single thing I say when I'm that way? You'd think you'd have learned, but you're like... I don't know, something that never learns. A poor person."

"I'm not like a *poor person*. What are you talking about? That's your normal way. That's what you're... that's how you are."

Richard tugs at his bow tie. "Yes."

"So why would it be any, uh, any different..."

"You're right, it wouldn't be. Back to this. You realize he wasn't supposed to be there? He couldn't be there. He was sleeping, Charlie, he wasn't vacant like you are now— even if he did wind up in the manse, it wouldn't be lucid. It's all wrong."

This is too many words for you right now. "Okay. So why, uh, do you care about this?"

"It's fascinating. It *breaks the rules*. And anyways, I'm telling you, it's relevant—"

You are two-thirds through your second glass. Your mouth tastes like fruit. Your head feels like nothing. You are giggling uncontrollably. "It- it- it does what?"

"It *penetrates... the... body*." Richard has his hands to his temples. "This is the third time, Charlie. I don't know how much clearer I can make it. It enters the body. It goes into the body."

"What does. What pen— what does that."

"The *shaft*." He blinks. "Of the *key*. *Charlie*."

"Right. Right. The key." You take a sip in an attempt to stifle your giggles. "The shaft of the key."

"The main length, yes. The part that sticks out is the bit, or tooth. The part you hold is the bow. Look, do I need to show you again?"

"Yes, Richard, I'd love to see your dumb key collection again..."

"Excellent." He pulls out his dumb key collection again. It clatters onto the table. "Now, look, there's skeleton keys and there's flat keys. Skeleton keys have a single tooth at the end of the blade. Flat keys have multiple sets of teeth, making the locks that much more secure."

"Ah."

"Unfortunately, also that much less interesting. It's the skeleton keys that get all the sorts of decoration on them, so they comprise most of the collection."

"I, uh, I see that." You're losing grip on reality, probably. "Why do you know so much about keys? I mean, I don't know anything about keys, so..."

"You're not the center of the universe, Charlie. I have interests too."

You scratch the back of your head. "Uh, yeah, I— I just feel like there's a logistics issue? You don't have hands, I mean, in-in real life, so I don't know how you even use these."

He picks up a key. "Look, this one is antediluvian. Nickel silver, looks like, nice detailing on the bow..."

You feel like you've ascended to a dimension where everything is the color pink. You have four paper umbrellas stuck in your hair. Richard has obligingly placed the fifth so it sticks out of his breast pocket. The table has become crowded with wine and cocktail glasses.

"Oh... God," you say blearily. "Oh— oh God. Rich— Ricky. I'm gonna die here."

"You can't die here, Charlie. You're not even real." Richard has one pair of sunglasses sliding off the bridge of his nose and an identical pair on his head. He's drunk and is trying to hide it, you've concluded.

"No. Well... maybe. Maybe. But not, not, uh, not here. I mean... underwater. I'm gonna die underwater."

Richard reaches across the table and clasps your arm. You want to recoil, but his hand is warm and surprisingly reassuring. "We're not going to let that happen."

"I don't... I still think..." You're having trouble putting your thoughts into words. "God, why aren't you calling me stupid?"

"I don't think it's stupid."

"Well, that's... that's..." You stare at his hand on your arm. "That's stu... that's stupid. Why're you touching me?"

He stares at it too. "I don't know. I was also compelled to do that."

"Do you get com— those a lot?"

"Compulsions? Sometimes." Richard pushes his first pair of sunglasses up his nose. "I told you, you're the source. You have a certain idea of how I ought to behave, and it just... ripples out."

"I can make you do things?"

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"You can't do it on *purpose*, Charlie. I know what you're thinking."

You deflate a little. "Oh. So if I wasn't com- if I wasn't doing that, you'd just be... normal. Snake, you know."

He appears conflicted. "Not exactly."

"...No?"

"You have to understand, Charlie. What it's like." There's real, sudden desperation in his voice, enough to cut through your daze. You sit up. "It's like being in a *box*. It's— look, snakes are the most efficient vertebrae to exist. You understand? They're just a head and tail."

"I'm, I'm not, uh, following..."

"Just listen. They're *efficient*, as a fundamental part of their being."

"Of... your being."

"Do I look like a snake now, Charlie? And I mean fundamental— deeper than biology. Any kind of superfluity? Cut out."

You're beginning to twig on. "Like..."

"Empathy. Personality. Certainly a sense of humor. Positive emotion of any kind, really." Underneath the glasses, his eyes are glazed and bloodshot. He *is* drunk. He just doesn't sound it. "It's awful, Charlie. It's so cold in there, being that. I hate it."

You don't know what to say. You're not sober enough for this. "Is that... that's why I shouldn't trust..."

"You can't trust me. I'm *efficient*." He downs the last of the wine. "The only thing I care about is the objective, Charlie, I don't have room for anything else. And I will trample on you again and again and again to get there."

You're really not sober enough for this. "But I can trust *you*."

"That's your decision. But after you come back, ask me if I like being that way. I'll say I like it."

"You'll lie."

"No. No, Charlie, I won't lie. I do like it. *Capacity for dissent* is excised. Charlie— at least I have feelings."

You have steadily grown to hate the taste of fruit. You just want to wake up and not be drunk anymore. You want Richard to get some inhibitions back. You think he needed them. "But you're an... you're an asshole still."

"Mmm. An asshole with *feelings*."

You have to admit, he has a point.

The sun is slipping over the horizon. You are staring off into the misty recesses of the street. Richard is pacing a couple feet away: he claimed he needed to "expel poison build-up." You think this means alcohol. You're not exactly sure how all of this happened.

You did enjoy yourself, a little, you think. Before Richard got all weird.

There's really not that much to look at: the street is uniformly shadowy. You wonder where it came from. You wonder where your nagging sense of déjà vu comes from. You wonder if "expelling poison build-up" just means to puke. (Not so far.)

A glint of gold. It's gone. You're drunk, Lottie. You're imagining things. It's the setting sun off metal, is all.

No, there it is, closer. It's moving. It's— you can see it properly now. It's a gold mask.

It's a person *in* a gold mask. Inside your head. You try to focus. "Richard—there's someone—"

Richard's not a couple feet away. He's gone. «I know,» he says in your ear. «I told you so.»

"That's great," you hiss. "What do I do?"

«You brought a knife in your pocket.»

"A clay knife."

«Pull it out, Charlie. You're not sober enough for it to be a clay knife.»

"Oh, and you are—" Anything else dies in your throat. You've pulled the fettling knife from your pocket. Only it's not.

It's a longsword, orange in the dusk.

«I told you so, again. I know you have a thing for swords.»

You do have a thing for swords. You've always wanted a sword. That being said, you have never actually owned a sword, or swung a sword, so it seems to you like you've just produced a very sharp paperweight from your pocket.

The gold-masked person is rapidly closing the distance.

«Just hold onto that, Charlie. We will see. Now, look, you have some options...»

>[1] Stand your ground. You don't know what he or she wants from you yet.

>[2] Don't know what he or she wants?! They're invading! Rush in and immediately go on the attack.

>[3] You're exposed right here. Find- or create- cover, just in case.

>[4] Bail out. Leave the person in your head. Bad news: he or she might trash it. Good news: he or she can't thrash you.

>[5] **Write-in.**

>[5] Call out. This is your head. No one's allowed to be fiddling around in here without your permission. If they're uppity, you'll teach them how much better swords are than not having a sword.
--

>**Call out.**

You make a couple of test swings. The sword is surprisingly wieldy— you'd kind of always expected it to be much heavier. And you really, really like the swooshing sound it makes. You're giggling again.

«Please, Charlie.»

Reluctantly, you drop the sword to your side and shield your eyes against the setting sun. The person is close enough for you to make out his or her body: they're shrouded in ash-grey gauze from head to toe. Freak.

"Hey!" you call out, a little slurred. "I've got a... sword. A sword." You show the person your sword. "Sho you should... you should not, uh, mess with me."

The person doesn't respond. They keep walking towards you.

"Who're you, anyways? How'd you get in my... in here, you know. You should really not, uh— you should go away? Yes."

«You're terrible at this.»

"Sure," says the person in the mask, in a raspy, androgynous voice. They have stopped ten yards in front of you.

You didn't expect a response, much less one in the affirmative. "Really?"

"Really. I'll go away, Charlotte Fawkins. I just need something from you first."

There's the catch. "I don't really think that will—"

"The *crown*."

The crown? You'd forgotten about it, almost, between everything. You haven't even seen it since the cave. "Oh. Why?"

"*Why*?" The person was evidently not expecting conversation. "Gods, you're really just— are you even doing anything with it?"

"I own it."

"I got that." The person has crossed their arms, you think, beneath their gauze. "But are you going to, like, end all suffering with it? Anything along those lines?"

That possibility had not occurred to you. "Uh..."

"It's for a good cause, okay? Now, look, it's a lot of hassle to beat you up. I'd rather not. Can you just tell me where it is?"

«Don't you dare, you bitch.»

Even if you wanted to, you don't *know*. You finger the grip of the sword. "Sorry, I, uh, I can't—"

"Fair enough." The person extracts two black-gloved hands and holds them, rigid, at their side. "I can't kill you here, you know. But it will *hurt*."

The sun sinks a little lower, and the light shifts. You blink. There is no more person— their ash-grey mantle is the color and consistency of the shadows. Only their mask remains, and it's changed too: it's not reflecting the light, but producing it, and it's such a brilliant gold you can't see anything else.

It hangs in place. It's the *shadows* that move. They're rushing towards you, down the street.

>[1] This is— this is fine. You have the **light of righteousness** burning in your soul. Stand your ground and wait for the person to show back up.

>[2] Ditto, but rush into it, towards the mask. Swing your sword lots.

>[3] **Summon some light to get rid of the shadow. (You can do that, right? Probably.)**

>[4] Retreat backwards, staying out of the shadow. Try to reach some kind of defensible position.

>[5] Write-in.

>**Light up your sword (with righteousness?)**

>105, 61, 118 vs. DC 80 - Success.

>Retreat away from the shadows.

You've never done this, you don't know what to do— what happens if you lose? What if they're lying, and it does kill you? What then? How awful that would be, how awful and pointless—

A shiver down your spine. Your eye twitches.

Ha! (Positive thinking. Positive thinking.) A little darkness means nothing to you! It's all in your head, anyways, all you have to do is imagine it away. You're doing that right now (you're staring it down), you're imagining— it's broad daylight—

«That won't work.»

Of course it will work! You are in *control*. You are the queen of this petty fiefdom, and by God you're going to, uh, bring the hammer of justice, uh...

«Charlie, this is all good, but it won't work. This isn't your petty fiefdom. You need to move.»

(The shadows are twenty feet away.) You're petulant. You don't want to move. You want to *banish the darkness* with your *light of righteousness*.

«I hate every second of being with you. Fine. Fine. Keep it <small scale> and it might be okay. And move while you do it.»

...Yes. Small scale. You won't *banish the darkness*, you'll only, uh, you'll, you know, pierce through it. With your sword... Yes, that's a good one! Glowing sword. That's classic. You just need to do it, infuse it with inner light, or whatnot, or...

«Just take it from the mask. Start walking. Hurry.»

(The shadows are ten feet away.) That's also an option! You point the sword straight at the mask and begin to pace backwards, unsteadily— your balance is shot. *Glowing sword*, you think. *Glowing sword*.

«You need more conviction. You're the one making this true.»

Glowing sword.

«You're useless. Look, just let me—» Your vision goes grey at the edges. You wince.

«—Here. Okay. And let's just—»

>[-1 ID: 7/11]

It's a cold glass of water to the face. Your muscles tense, your heart throbs. You're more stable on your feet.

«Now do it.»

You squint at the mask, now little more than a dot in the distance. (The shadows are five feet away. You can't see most of the street.) It's vaguely mocking. You twist your sword arm 90 degrees, and pull...

The mask winks out. The darkness, like a low tide, retreats. Your sword is glowing.

You say the only rational thing you can. "Awesome."

Is it done? The mask is gone, the street is empty. You release the tension you didn't know you were keeping. God, you're cool—

«<Behind you>.»

The extra burst of radio feedback jolts you back into action. You spin, sword in hand— its light is already flickering, being drawn to— the person, mask on face— they're behind you, over you, both hands on the hilt of a massive matte black axe. They're *swinging*.

>[A1] Dodge! Roll out of the way. [Roll.]

>[A2] Parry! It sure will surprise them. [Roll.]

>[A3] Blind them! Hold the sword up— make it brighter, if you can. They can't hit you if they can't see!

>[A4] Write-in.

If you succeed:

>[B1] Well, God, stab them! In the chest! Isn't it obvious? Give them the ol, you know, stabby stab.

>[B2] Try to knock or grab the mask off their face. It's probably important.

>[B3] Book it! You need to make some space between you and a giant axe.

>[B4] Use OPEN. So it can open doors— but can it do anything else? [What do you use it on, specifically?] [1/1 use remaining]

>[B5] Write-in.

>Dodge!

>38, 9, 6 vs. DC 40 - Failure!

Your feet are rooted to the cobblestone. You may as well have grown here. You watch numbly as the blade whistles down- down- down-

Your left arm explodes.

>[ID: 3/11!]

In pain, in gore. The axe bites down, through your coat, through your skin, your flesh, your bone. Your body offers no resistance.

You scream, and time speeds up.

You are bleeding all over your white coat. And your left arm— not your sword arm, that's the right arm, but you're quivering so badly it's also useless— your left arm is attached to your body. So that's good. It's dangling by a horrible, useless shred of skin. So that's bad.

You can still flex the fingers on it. One, two, three, four times. You giggle shrilly.

«Charlie. It's not real. It's not real. Listen. It's not real. You still have an arm. You have to focus. Charlie.»

You don't have an arm. God, how it bleeds. It's proper velvet red blood, too, none of the silver nonsense.

«You do have an arm. This isn't real, Charlie. Listen. Listen. If you believe you've really lost an arm, than you will have, and then where are we, Charlie—»

The person in the mask seems, you think, surprised. The axe is by their side. "Okay, uh, I think that's pretty good. Would you like to tell me where the crown is? I'll go for the other arm, else."

>[1] God-damnit. Just tell them something. Anything. It doesn't have to be true.

>[2] Surprise attack with one arm. (One arm!) Go for the chest.

>[3] Surprise attack with one arm. (One arm!) Go for the mask.

>[4] **Can you— can you— just shove it back on? It's still attached, that's probably good, right? You don't like having one arm.**

>[5] Write-in.

>Shove your arm back on.

You don't say anything. The person in the mask doesn't say anything. Blood pools under you.

The person in the mask is beginning to rustle uncomfortably. "I don't like this very much either," they start. "If you'd just work with me—"

You can't work with them. They cut off your arm.

«But not for real. I need you to acknowledge that. This is important.»

—But you can put it back on. You can put it back on, surely. Right? Absolutely. It's a clean cut... and anyways, it's still *on* you, it's just loose. You can *fix* this! You just need to put it back on.

«Charlie...»

Your sword clatters to the ground. Delicately, you grip the limp left arm by its wrist. Less delicately, you shove it into your shoulder. It produces the worst squelch you've ever heard.

You release it. It stays in place. You move one, two, three, four fingers on your left arm.

"Awesome," you say.

You reach down to pick up your sword. It's gone.

You look up. The person in the mask grips their axe in their right hand, and your sword in their left. It's dim and silent; their mask is brimming with new stolen sunlight.

They toss your sword in front of you. Then they vanish, almost— their body is lost in the shadows, but the mask still hangs in place, raw and radiant, three feet in front of you. You can't stop looking at it. You want to touch it, to take it, to put it on.

You are surrounded by near-darkness. There's no sound.

>[1] Second verse, same as the first: take the light into your sword. Will it work again? Only one way to find out.

>[2] The mask is right there. Attack it.

>[3] Stay here, and stay vigilant. (Make sure your arm stays on you.) You'll be ready for if the person reappears.

>[4] You have to get out of this. You have to create an OPENing. [1/1]

>[5] Put on the mask.

>[5] Write-in.

>OPEN a path out.

You're able to see, barely, via the light of the mask— but somehow you don't find this all that comforting. You clutch the sword with sweating palms, and look this way and that. Nothing happens.

Are they behind you? Bearing down on your other arm with a whetted axe? There's no way to tell.

You lick your lips.

You have to do *something*— but you don't want to draw the light a second time, not with the mask so close, and trying to attack or run seems like an equally bad idea. You're trapped, it seems. You're so stupid. Why didn't you just swing your sword at them? Why didn't you just dodge it, like was

supposed to happen? Your arm's back on, but there's still blood all down your front. It's never going to come out, is it?

No, positive, positive. It is going to come out! You will use borax and a scrub brush and a lot of water! It will never be white again (you have experience with this), but it will be off-pink, and you can claim it's too advanced a fashion for anyone to understand. There you go. It'll be fine. Yes.

«Reminder: it's not a real coat, and you are surrounded.»

Reminder: he doesn't have *feelings*, so you shouldn't trust anything he says.

«So you believe that, I see.»

You shrug. He did tell you this, like, twenty minutes ago.

Richard does not like this answer.

«It's clear why you would, Charlie, though I don't think you've realized it. It's exactly what you want to hear. I'm not trustworthy. Better, I'm tragic. I'm suffering inside. I'm a dime-novel anti-hero.»

«Tell me, why would this be the case. It's not because it's true. It's because you're telling <yourself> this. You're only forcing me to do the talking.»

«Like me or not, but I'm the genuine article. I am experiencing no hidden depths of suffering. Go ahead and trust me when I've got a face to look at— I know you want to. But you're deluding yourself.»

«Literally.»

You think he put a lot of effort into the dramatic pause. There's still no sign of the person. It's only gotten darker, if anything, and the mask brighter. It's claustrophobic.

You can't stay here a second longer. You need to leave— you need to decipher this urgent memory that's bobbing up, something useful, something important, but you can't quite reach it. You need to— break a mirror. Tap on a doorframe. No. No. You need to...

OPEN your way out. The word is on your lips before you know it's there. There's nowhere to look at, so you just direct it ahead, into the darkness. "OPEN."

From nowhere, the raspy voice: "Oh, god. You're one of *those*."

Something stringlike quivers in response. Something peels open: not a door, but a doorway, a gateway. Inside: a red sky, a dark fortress. Lightning.

Abruptly, the shadows are snatched up, bundled, from under you— you stagger into the dusk of the road. The person has reformed around the mask. They gesture, rudely, at the doorway now lodged in their gauze. "Excuse me?! What the fuck?!"

"Uh," you say. You remain not sober enough for anything. "Good. Suck it."

"I'm just trying to maim you like a normal person, okay? I don't go around sticking *doors* in people's bodies. You lot are lunatics."

You scratch your chin. "Will you, uh, leave now?"

"No! I just want fair play! Would it kill you to follow the standards?"

"...Yes?" you wager.

"God. You are the absolute worst. Take your sword, or whatever, go down there. I'll go to the opposite end. Okay? We can try this again— again, like normal people. No doors."

>[1] This seems like a good time to stab them, right? Chest.

>[2] Stabby stab. Mask.

>[3] You're a normal person, yes? Go down there and follow the standards. Whatever those are.

>[4] (Hey uhuh Richard what did I just do there with the door thing)

>[5] (Hey uhuh mask person what do you mean by "standards" and "those people" and so on)

>[6] Write-in.

>[TO BE CONTINUED IN THREAD 4]

Thread 4

Charlotte Fawkins is a master of social interaction.

Your name is Charlotte Fawkins, and you are an excellent modeler, a sort-of detective, and the one true regent-in-waiting. You are also trapped in Nowhere, Underwater, where you're forced to listen to the dubious whims of the snake that lives in your head. You're currently facing down a masked, axe-wielding stranger who is all-too-casual about having invaded your head and cut your arm off. (It's better now.) You have semi-accidentally opened a portal to somewhere in their chest.

They have ordered you to stand on the opposite end of the road, to better murder you from. Or something. You don't entirely see the wisdom of this.

You fold your arms awkwardly— your left sleeve remains stiff with blood. "I don't listen to people who dismember me. That's— why am I part of the 'you lot'? You're the murderer."

"For the last time," the person rasps, "it's not *murder*, it's sanctioned assault for an excellent cause. And you're a bad sport. Just because you've got a dirty little *shortcut* doesn't entitle you to—"

"To *what*?"

"To cheat!" They throw up their gloved hands. "Damn, you're a thick one. Are you going to move?" They pause. "No, of course not. Goddamn. I guess I'll have to, out of, you know, basic decency..."

You watch in bemusement as the person turns on their heel(?) and begins strolling back down the street.

«Charlotte.»

«Charlotte, now.»

«Charlotte, <move>.»

It takes an insistent jolt to the small of your back before you're kicked into action. You sink into a crouch, fumbling for the hilt of your sword all the while, and begin to trail the person up the street. They have begun to whistle.

You make a studious effort to avoid pools of shadow, sticking instead to the last remnants of sunlight or to the green phosphorescence of the streetlamps beginning to flicker on. It pays off. You have made it within sword-thrust distance with them nary the wiser.

Now it just remains to do it. This is the tricky bit.

«Charlotte, you know how.»

You've never sworded anybody before. You've knifed people, but never sworded.

«Just do it, Charlotte, don't undermine yourself. And kindly never use 'sworded' again.»

If it goes wrong, it's entirely Richard's fault. You drum out a little prayer onto the hilt, fix an eye on the person's indistinct rags, stand—bringing your sword up with you. It makes a neat and satisfying arc as you plunge it into the person's ribs.

Wow! You did know how. Look at that. Only—

Some things happen in rough sequence.

- You keep plunging. There are no ribs. There is nothing underneath the rags but more rags.
- The person's head rotates 180° to watch you attempt to stab them.
- "Damn," they say, blithely. "You *are* a thick one."
- Something shadowy and hand-shaped grips you by the shoulder. Something else shadowy and hand-shaped grips you by the wrist. You squirm, briefly, to no avail.
- You make a sound approximating "agck."
- The person casually produces their double-bladed axe. It is matte black, except for your blood on it.
- «Shit,» Richard says.

And it's the last that jolts you out of your clinical stupor. Richard doesn't curse unless he's feeling homicidal, or unless you're going to die.

All the blood has drained from your cheeks.

The person doesn't seem in any particular rush to cut your limbs off. They have turned slightly away and are wiping down the axe with a black cloth. They figure they have you caught.

You have your left arm free.

[ID: 3/11]

>[1] Flail. Try to escape the grip or, at least, knock the mask off. [Roll.]

>[2] Beg. Plead. Tell them what they want to hear. [Roll.]

>[3] Do the unexpected. Duck directly into the rags. What's in there? Who knows?

>[4] Sit still. Resign yourself. If you know it's coming, it may not hurt so much.

>[5] Write-in. [This is your head. Feel free to get creative.]

»[5] Can't we just phase through his grip? His hands aren't real, they're dream hands, so why not slip through them?
--

>MYSTERY BOX

You fidget. You swallow. You glance around in the hopes you'll light on something to save you. It's to little avail. In the end, you're reduced to glaring at the shadow-hands holding you hostage in the hopes they'll up and vanish.

«Unviable. You can't affect the other person directly like that.»
«Sorry.»

They're polishing the second axe-head.

You scuff at the cobblestones with your boot and half-wonder about the logistics involved. If there's no body, where do the arms come from? What's under the cloak, really? Some kind of shadow dimension? Nothing? Is it just rags all the way down?

What if you went *in* there?

«No.»

Yes. This is exactly the kind of terrible idea you like best. God, wouldn't it be interesting, though? What would you have to lose? Your limbs? You've got that covered. You're liking this better all the time.

«Okay, for starters, your life. Uh, your sanity. Your identity. My signal. Charlie, you have no idea what this might entail—»

Right! You won't know until you try, and you're supposed to try everything once, right? Right. Yes.

«No. No. No.»

The person has finished. The axe is nigh-invisible once again. They cradle it lovingly.

"Just as a formality—" they say.

You don't wait to hear the rest. You duck your head and charge them shoulder-on, like you're breaking down a door. Like before, there's no resistance: the rags part to your assault, and you stumble into them.

It is impossibly dark. The air smells, strangely, of wood polish. The grip on your wrist and shoulder is released.

The gold mask is in front of you, no body attached. "Well," it says. "I suppose this also works."

Two identical masks flank it, then two more, then two more, until they ring you entirely. Something pushes you down onto a chair (hard, uncomfortable), something binds your hands and legs. More shadow-hands? You can't tell. It's too da—

A spotlight flicks onto you. One of the masks have stepped forward. "Like I said, I didn't *want* to maim you— it was just, you know, efficient. But if you're choosing to eschew your home turf privileges..."

There's a different quality to the voice. It's still raspy, still androgynous, but there's something warmer around the edges. You're not sure what it reminds you of.

"—Well, I'd be happy to do the old-fashioned enhanced interrogation."

The mask gleams. There is a radio buzz in the back of your skull, but Richard hasn't quite gotten through yet. You clutch the sword in one sweaty hand, but your wrists are bound.

"Before we get too ahead of ourselves, though, let me ask. Where's the crown?"

>[1] Lie. [Roll.]

>[2] Tell the truth. You do actually have no idea. But you'll have to mention Richard.

>[3] Say nothing. They'll have to enhance this interrogation if they want anything from you.

>[4] Perform some kind of daring escape. [How?]

>[5] Write-in.

>Lie.

>-8, 61, 11 vs. DC 60 - Mitigated Success.

How do you lie? You pluck something out of thin air then say it so confidently you start believing it yourself. That works, sometimes. Occasionally.

You look the principle mask straight in its eyeholes and say "I don't know. Monty took it."

It recoils. "What?"

"M..." Picking a random name is seeming less like a good idea, suddenly. What if this thing shows up in Monty's head? It wouldn't be fair. The man's already missing an arm.

Somehow, though, you don't care enough. "...Monty?"

"Monty as in, uh, Montgomery Gewecke?" The mask bobs nervously.

You haven't the faintest idea what Monty's last name is. "Probably? Yeah, he, uh, he confiscated it. Something about contraband, or, uh, quarantine, or something."

"Montgomery Gewecke? Lost his arm to a squid-type thing? Yea tall?" If it's indicating a height, it's impossible to tell. "That one?"

You nod a little.

"God-fucking-dammit. The two-faced bastard." The mask turns skyward. "The absolute nerve of the bastard. You know what— don't trust him, hear me? Not as far as you can throw him. He can wear as many goddamn sweaters as he wants, it's not gonna hide the nasty— God."

You nod more.

"You know what? Thanks. You're a good kid, even if you're a fucking cheater. Sorry about the arm and such, though it's still kinda your fault, yeah? Why didn't you start off with this?"

It takes you a second before you realize you're being asked a question. "Uh," you say. "You were trying to murder me."

"Assault. Assault. I don't murder people anymore." The mask shakes. "Well, I might Monty."

"Oh," you say.

"What can I say? I don't like liars. Don't worry—" it must notice the sweat glistening on your brow— "I'll talk to him about it first. But he can join Constance in hell after, yeah?"

"Uh," you say.

"Thanks again, kid. I'll get out of your hair."

And with that, the darkness is once again pulled out from under you. You spill out onto the street— your sword clatters out after you. Your wrists are raw, but you're unbound.

The gold-masked person gives you a two-fingered salute and vanishes.

You lay there breathing on the cobblestone for a while. It feels a little dangerous— on a normal day, you'd be overrun by pedestrians and safety-bicyclists— but you're confident none exist, and anyways, it's night. You kind of want to take a nap right here on the street.

"Come on, Charlie, you can't nap on the street." Richard's back. Of course he is. He is standing over you, looking a little out-of-sorts— his bow tie is crooked, his eyes are rheumy. "Stand up. That's a good girl."

He offers you a hand. You hesitate, then take it— there's no chance he'll take no for an answer. He hauls you up.

"So," you say. "They're gone."

"That they are, Charlie! I have to congratulate you—"

("Please don't throw another party," you mutter, too low for him to hear.)

"—on that *very* efficient resolution. Throwing Monty under the idiomatic bus? Brilliant. Wonderful." He claps you on the back. "You're making big steps, Charlie."

You stick your hands in your pockets and don't say anything.

"Now listen, listen. Interrogation? Amazing. Your fighting? That, uh, that could use some fine-tuning." He squeezes your shoulder. "No offense, but you did get your arm cut off. Room for improvement, huh?"

He's not totally wrong. You flash back to the polishing of the axe.

"But that's okay, Charlie! No problem. Just a couple alterations and you'll be patched right up, huh? How about it?"

You'd normally be against this, but in the light of your previous circumstances you're warming up to the idea. "I mean..." you say. "As long as it's not weird, I guess."

"Oh, naturally, Charlie, naturally." Richard gives your shoulder a good-natured rub. "Temporary, too, of course. Excellent choice."

You wait to feel different. It never comes. You swallow. "Uh, did it happen, or..."

"Already done, Charlie! I knew you'd be reasonable, so I went ahead with it. No muss, you know."

Scratch that, you do feel different— now vaguely nauseated. "So I've been altered this whole time? And I didn't know it?"

"More or less! Now, hold on, give me a hot sec—"

"A what?"

He's vanished. You resolve, then and there, to ignore him. He can talk all he wants— you'll sit here until you go home.

You wait.

From behind you, a pop and a vexed rustle. Your jaw is set. You do not turn to look. If you engage with Richard in any way, you lose.

You hate Richard. You hate losing.

If only there were something else to look at. The night air is unwelcoming and sticky, the street— excepting your blood— empty, the buildings sludgy. Everything has an oil-slick look about it. You don't think you were supposed to be here so long. (Or maybe you're still a little drunk.)

From behind you, some kind of infernal caterwaul— like a hobnail on slate, or (you have traumatic memories of biscuit-making) the feeling of cornstarch on dry fingers. It comes in starts and stops, which is far worse than it going all at once. You are ashamed to report you flinch, not once, but multiple times— but you don't turn around, which is the important thing.

Ever since the "eye incident," your peripheral vision has been chopped neatly in half; Richard has been circling around to your left, so you don't see him until he's nearly in front of you. He has been hauling an enormous

standing blackboard across the cobbles. He leans sweatily against it. The telescopic pointer protrudes from his pant pocket.

"Hello, Charlie," he remarks.

"Hello," you respond, out of good breeding. Your face drops.

"I'm back!"

You cross your arms. "So?"

"Welcome back?" He raises his eyebrows. "Did your mommy dearest not teach you how to properly greet someone, Charlie? I know she wasn't around much, but— it goes 'hullo,' or 'salutations,' then 'welcome back,' then 'how are you, how was your day...'"

You drum your fingers against the side of your chest. "I assure you, nobody in the past 20 years has ever said 'salutations.' Or 'hullo.' Who taught *you* to properly greet—"

"Thanks, Charlie, it's good to be back. Not pleasant, though, it's never pleasant!" He makes a motion as if to light a cigarette, but pauses. "I'm doing *fine*, thanks for asking, though if I were properly greeted it certainly would've been better. It may also have been polite to have been asked about this blackboard.."

He reaches for the pointer. You narrow your eye.

He retrieves the pointer, extends it to its full length, and braces it at his chest.

"Fine," you say. "Fine. Gosh, Richard, what's with the blackboard. May I please leave—"

"Charlie! I'm glad you asked." Richard transfers the pointer to his left hand and, with the right, takes hold of the blackboard— you notice, too late, the pivots on either end. With a theatrical sweep, he spins the board to reveal the other side.

"Oh God." You place your hands on your hips. "*This?*"

You should've known from the pointer. It's his investigation board from earlier today, strings and thumbtacks and all, only transferred to a much larger surface. You've already *seen* this. It has already been gone through in exhaustive detail. And you no longer have a drink or three to suffer through it with.

"Yes, Charlie, this. You're probably wondering when I had the time to redo all of it—"

"I guess I am now."

"The answer is multitasking, which you would do well to learn. You can't multitask worth a damn, Charlie."

You dig your hands harder into your hips. "I don't know what that means."

"It's not rocket science, Charlie, it's—"

"Or what that means."

Richard pinches the brow of his nose. "It's— this is a new low, even for you. Multitask. Doing multiple things— tasks— at once."

"Oh." You could have guessed that, but that's not something you'd care to admit. "It could have meant a task that has multiple parts, you know."

"That's not the *point*. The point is you should do it. And I did it. Now, look, I think we should review this..."

"We *did* review it. Also, I was there when it all happened. If you forgot."

"You were paying attention in neither case, Charlotte, and furthermore I've added considerably to it. Come, sit down— I'll stand."

You press anyways. "Do we have to do it *now*?"

"I won't be interested later." He waggles the pointer. "Sit."

You sit begrudgingly in an olive-green settee, made all the more atrocious by its *solidity*— it's a bastion of bad taste against your liquid surroundings. Richard straightens his bow tie, clears his throat, and begins:

"Who is Ellery to you?"

"What?" You are already slumped half-over onto the settee. "He's not anyone to me. He's the local crazy guy, Richard. And now he's dead, so..."

"I don't care to catch your meaning, Charlie," Richard says breezily. With the pointer, he jabs at a loose piece of paper cellu-taped to the blackboard; it takes several tries before the paper flutters to the ground, revealing another beneath it. "CRAZY GUY" is written on it in Richard's distinctive loose cursive.

"I believe this proves my point," you say after a long pause, "of why this isn't necessary..."

"Pish." Richard retrieves the paper from the ground. "It's establishing. So you don't know him?"

"No, he's... Can we skip this? Please? You *know the answers*."

"Charlotte, there's a- there's a process." He sounds agitated.

You bury your face in your hands. "It's a terrible process."

"Do you have a *better* one?"

"Yes." You slide your hands up through your hair and stand up. "Gimme the- may I have the pointer? You can sit."

Richard's eyes flick from you to the blackboard. He pushes the pointer in and out. "Charlotte, I actually put, ah, quite a lot of time into this..."

"What, did you *practice*? Get off your high horse— you've been interested in this for, God, an hour? Hand me the pointer and *I'll* do it."

He silently proffers the pointer. You reach forward and take it: it's cool in your hand, with a surprising amount of heft. It makes you feel very official.

Richard sits, pissily, on the settee.

"Right," you say. "Nine days ago, I was having some limited difficulty obtaining an expedition partner."

"Nobody wants to be around you." He rests his face on one fist. One leg lies across the couch; the other dangles off the side.

You jab the pointer towards him. "Untrue. Now, my last resort was Ellery, because it's not like he had anything else going on. I pay him a visit, and find him..."

"Discombobulated?"

You can't tell if he's making fun of you: he's got his sunglasses back on. "Uh, yes. Didn't remember my name, didn't remember what he was doing, looked appalling— not that's not normal. He was in the middle of the floor, I think. And he was believing anything I told him. So, you know, I thought I'd seize this opportunity, and I told him he was asking *me* to come with."

"Very ethical of you."

"You know very well the ends justify the means. Anyways, success— I also told him to clean up the place, which he did too, so, success— I leave. I prep for a week..."

"Charlie, you didn't prepare at all."

"I *prep for a week*, the day rolls around, and... I don't know, he didn't seem especially strange? No more than usual, I mean. We went in, got the crown, got out somehow. Next day, uh, he comes to the tent midday. Says Monty wants to talk, also heard Madrigal wanted to talk, leaves. Also seemed normal, if a little nervous."

Richard is inspecting his fingernails. "One might imagine."

"One mightn't imagine— all I know is I blacked out, okay? And now I'm ambidextrous." You wave the pointer in your left hand. "I ought to be right-handed, you realize? Yes? What *happened*, Richard?"

"If it were relevant, you would know what happened." He gestures nonchalantly. "Isn't this an improvement, Charlie? One of your petty limitations removed? We shall hope for more to come."

"We shan't! Look. I go talk to Madrigal. She practically begs me to figure out what's wrong with Ellery, on account of me bringing him along. Says he hasn't really talked to anyone in months. Conveniently leaves out the fact they're exes. I accept in return for the invitation I'm owed to Game Night—"

"You accepted because you're nosy."

You put your hands on your hips. "Nosiness isn't ladylike. I have an intellectual curiosity in—"

"Prying."

"—other people's lives. The point is I accept. I check in with Ellery next, to see if *he* knows what happened. But he doesn't talk about that at all, except that I had *gold* eyes..."

"Brass, would've been. I don't brook with gold. You know this."

Of course Ellery gets that wrong. Men. "Brass, either way. What he actually talks about is *you*. Says he thinks I'm talking to someone in my head, says he knows because he used to have someone in his head, too, until he got him out. And he wanted to give me advice on it, except he wouldn't tell me how he got the someone out— so what's the point, then?"

"Oh, Charlie, how you wound me." Richard does not appear wounded. He is fiddling, for some reason, with an expensive-looking fountain pen. "I told you, even if he did say, it wouldn't work. But this is intriguing. What kind of someone, I wonder?"

"Are there kinds?"

"The psyche fractures in fascinating ways when it hits seawater— I'm surprised there aren't more cases around here, in fact. People, animals, uh, abstract representations. Yourself, sometimes. Imagine that— you think I'm bad?"

"Uh," you say.

"Anyway, yes, none of that is relevant. What's relevant is what you left out."

You frown. "I didn't—"

"Charlie, he didn't tell you how because it went *wrong*." Richard tips his pen towards you. "Wasn't it obvious? It was a botch job, he said as much himself. It potentially explains the isolation, uh, the frequenting of the manse..."

"Wait. So you had the answer to all this—" you smack the board— "the *entire time*? It's because his head's gotten all screwy?"

"We'll have to verify the dates, but, yes, potentially. It's not the answer, though, it's— at best— a partial explanation. It doesn't speak to the code, the crystal, uh, the lab equipment, the dated notes... It doesn't even explain your principle question, which is the break-up. The scar one, she—"

"Madrigal," you provide.

"Madrigal, whatever. She seems fairly sharp— if the break-up and the procedure directly coincided, I believe she would have noticed. It's other things."

Your legs are beginning to ache from the standing (curiously, not from all the earlier running). You shift uncomfortably. "Maybe she got too obnoxious."

"We don't know, Charlie, that's the point. Keep up. What was after all this?"

You scratch your head. "I talked to Monty, uh, I broke into his tent— Ellery's tent. Whole lot of paper in there, none of which I could read. Totally illegible. But the weird thing was, some of the things stacked underneath the illegible stuff were totally readable. Not good handwriting, but readable. So..."

Richard stretches like a cat. "So either he's been afflicted with some rapid-onset neurodegenerative disease—"

"What?"

"Or," he says, "he's switched to writing in some kind of code. I suspect the latter. We ought to find some kind of expert on it, see if it's crackable."

"Wait." You tap the board. "What if it's because he got all screwy, like you said? Could that make someone—"

"Possibly. But let's wait on that until we have it deciphered, yes? Move on. The manse." Richard pushes up his sleeve to check a battered wristwatch. "Make it quick, though. We've got about 40 until you start falling apart."

"Uh," you say. "Wh—"

"Oh, you're useless." He stands. A telescopic pointer gleams in his pant pocket— and there is nothing, you realize, in your fist. "I'd have to explain it very slowly to you, anyway. Have a seat."

Lacking real options, you sit primly in the corner of the settee. Richard flips the board back over. It remains blank.

"Charlie," he says, and you know immediately this is some kind of recitation: his voice has settled into a rich narrator-cadence. "Your little halfpenny relationship drama? It's boring."

You rest your chin on your hand.

"It's orderly, it's predictable, it's happened a hundred thousand times over already— and will again. There's no *brio* to it. So let us forget it entirely, and turn instead to what holds genuine intrigue—" he scratches something down with a stick of chalk—

"The *metaphysical anomalies*." (He has written the same on the blackboard.) You open your mouth. "In small words for you, Charlie? Things bad with Ellery. Things wrong. Things broken. Things— look, you've called him weird."

"Uh, yes."

"That doesn't begin to cover it. First thing: he should not have **been** there." He is writing this, too. "You're not in the manse when you're asleep: and certainly he was asleep, not vacant. If you [*i*]did[*/i*] stumble into it by accident, you would not be articulate, and, well— he was. Clearly."

(Blackboard: 1. WAS THERE.)

"Second thing: He should not have been **there**. Did you notice what he said about me?"

You think back. "Nice bow?"

Richard touches his bow tie self-consciously. "Yes, but... no. No. He saw me as a snake, Charlie, when I was otherwise. And this has a fairly rational explanation." He draws a circle and divides it into horizontal thirds. "A manse has three layers, each straying progressively farther from reality. On the first, I look as I am now." He tugs at his lapel. "Because you still wield enough influence to make it so. On the second— it's a snake." "Hold on," you say. "Are you saying he saw through to the second layer?"

"Charlie, I'm saying he was *on* the second layer. Maybe the third. The Ellery you first saw would've been a sort of... mimeograph, projected upwards. You saw how he moved?"

Too fast, too fluid. "Sure."

"Time's different when you get deeper, so it translates strangely. Charlie: if I wasn't clear, this is at best unorthodox. Most people never make it a layer down, let alone stay for extended periods of time— it gets to be dangerous."

(2. TOO DEEP.)

"Third thing: he *jammed my signal*. That's why I wasn't there through the mirror, yes? I couldn't get through to you. It's possible this was accidental, but- still. Still illegal."

"I mean, you couldn't get through just now, either—"

"Interference, not jamming, Charlie. I would've gotten through if you'd given me longer."

You're forced to accept this.

(3. SIGNAL JAMMED.)

"Which brings us around to the fourth and largest anomaly, Charlie: he's too *good*. He's been too good from the start. He pulled up an armchair, no thought, no hesitation—"

You are examining your fingernails. "You do that sort of thing all the time."

"Yes, Charlie, *I* do that sort of thing all the time. Humans don't take to legislature, no matter how much practice you do or god-stuff you ingest—you're just too real for it. If you practice making a chair, and specifically that chair, you can pull it in maybe a couple minutes. Not instantly. And then there's the smarmy little notes he was leaving, which is either precognition or such a casual abuse of power— and the white room, Charlie, the white room!"

"You- you—" You stamp your foot. "You tricked me! You didn't recapitulate anything! I don't— I just wanted to hear about all his weird notes, and weird tools, and the writing under the wallpaper, and so on! Safe, you know, uh, detective-y...this is... I'm not comfortable with this."

Richard is smiling. "I never said I'd recap anything."

"It was implied!"

"It was not. Listen, Charlie, you can still have your notes and your insipid breakup. They haven't gone anywhere— they're probably entirely unrelated. All I'm doing is opening up a far more interesting line of questioning. Don't you like to be nosy?"

He's got you there. "Intellectually curious," you mutter, but there's no heart in it.

"Exactly. Don't you want to know *what* he is? What he's been hiding from everybody? His dark, tragic secret?"

"I..." You suck at your teeth. "Yes."

"Excellent, let us dissect some of the possibilities. One: we have never met the real Ellery, if he ever existed."

You boggle. This had never occurred to you. "What? Really??"

"Certainly. Some foul chaos-being taking the skin of a man is far from unheard of. I admit I'm not sure which would have silver blood— but think about it, Charlie, he didn't even remember your name."

You nod eagerly. "That *is* foul and chaotic."

"Right. Two, uh—"

"He's an *automaton*." You've been thinking very hard about this. "Consider it. Silver blood— it's like metal, right? And it's definitely not human."

"Uh," Richard says. "I suppose so, yes. Automaton. I was going to say that, returning to the botched procedure from earlier, it's possible it forced some kind of merge between, uh, the real and unreal aspects. This'd enable all the fine control of the manse, but I don't know how he'd keep it stable. And it doesn't explain the blood at all."

"Maybe," you say, "he's an automaton, and also there was a merge."

"I... maybe." Richard appears conflicted. "I have one more theory, but I can't tell you it."

You fold your arms. "That's dumb."

>Pick a hypothesis to focus your investigation on. (You can combine #4 and other options.)

>[A1] This is not the real Ellery.

>[A2] Ellery is artificial.

>[A3] Ellery is a hybrid.

>[A4] **Seriously, that's dumb. Wheedle Richard into telling you his secret theory. [Roll.]**

>[A5] **All of these are terrible! You've got all the facts at your fingertips— you should be able to construct a much better hypothesis. Write-in your theory. [Check below for resources.]**

>[B] Optional — Richard's in the best mood you've seen in a while. If you have any unrelated questions for him (about himself, about you, about reality...), now's your best shot to get an answer. [Write-in.]

The black goop as mind drug is interesting, and I think we definitely should keep investigating it. There are a couple more points to keep in mind:

There's a difference between an Ellery who recognizes us, and an Ellery who does not.

Ellery admits he has experience with having someone else in his head.

As Richard explained here, by being able to see Richard as a snake, Ellery is one a higher or more complex plane of mental whatsit than regular people. Richard doesn't need a physical body, so perhaps Ellery doesn't either?

The experiments with making unreality more real could be a means of A) Freeing Ellery's self from physical constraints, B) Exploring further into the metaphysics of this world, and C) ???

The end goal is uncertain, but it's something he both needs assistance from others to achieve and wants to keep shrouded in secrecy. The best next step is to investigate the people around Ellery, E being Eloise is our next lead to decipher Ellery's notes and attempt to uncover what

exactly he's trying to achieve.

Ellery is using the black goop and other experiments to have some sort of effect, or perhaps control, over his psyche. It has currently expanded past regular human consciousness/awareness, and might be striving to something past what Richard is right now. Ellery acted subtly different towards us in the Manse, as if at times he had an entirely different series of memories.

It implies Ellery's psyche is fractured, and the regular and mirror realms of his manse tower supports that there are different versions of Ellery's head.

Ellery is real, or was real, but with experimentation with his psyche and this mirror self, it appears he's attempted to reach beyond reality for... something, and *make* it real. Something he wants no one else to know about, fully. Something he's willing to push away Madrigal for to achieve.

It's not not the real Ellery, but it's also not the real Ellery. It's a reflection of the real Ellery that came from being separated from the real Ellery. Or maybe what was left over after that separation.

>Wheedle Richard's theory out of him.

>7, 29, 25 vs. DC 40 — Failure!

>Propose your own theory.

"Seriously," you say. "What would you have to lose? Just tell me." You are slumped back onto the settee, arms thrown out to either side. Richard has begun to pace again.

He stops in place. "What do I have to lose?"

"Yeah." It seems like a valid question to you. "You're a... you know, a snake, mostly. I don't suppose you've got much in the way of material attachments."

"Hmm." You sit up as Richard meanders over to you. When he squats down in front of you, so his face is level with your own, you fold your hands.

He takes off his sunglasses. He is staring you square in the eyes. "Charlie," he says levelly.

You glance towards your escape: the other side of the couch. "Ye-es?"

"No, Charlie, look me in the eyes." You snap back to his face. It's disconcerting: his eyes are so blue they're almost white. "Good girl. Now listen to me. You have *no concept of object permanence*."

"Of- of what?" What did you say *wrong*?

Richard is smiling. His teeth are straight and a little too white and it creates the general feeling he wants to eat you. "Object permanence. Anything you can't see, to you, doesn't exist. It can't exist, because *you're* the one to make the sun go and the stars shine."

You squirm. "I don't think th—"

"Well, you wouldn't *admit* it, would you? Not to me, not to yourself— but that doesn't make it less true, Charlie. Deep down, *you*—" he jabs a finger into your leg— "consider yourself the *protagonist*."

"I do *not*!"

"But you do. You absolutely do. You're the protagonist of the universe, and you cannot comprehend the idea of *anyone else* having a life outside yours. It's your anathema."

There's something about his voice that's troubling you, too. He's aiming for his implacable snake-tone, but something keeps creeping in around the edges. You think you've just hit upon it. "Hold on," you say. "Are you— are you offended?"

"What?" Richard stands abruptly. "No."

And there goes the implacability altogether. You were bang on. "Ha! You're just pissy I said you didn't have material attachments. Or called you a snake. I'm not sure which."

"Charlotte, I am not—" He's stuffing his sunglasses back on. "I am not *pissy*. I don't know where you picked up that term."

"So *do* you have material attachments?"

"I fail to see how that's relevant."

"Because if you don't, you ought to tell me your theory, right? You've got nothing to lose."

"You are *not* hearing the theory."

That's not good enough for you. "But have you or have you not got attachments?"

"Yes!" It comes out a little too vehemently. He swallows. "I have— I have attachments. That's all you're knowing."

"Nice, nice." You don't actually care: you're just happy to have the upper hand for once. "Now, look, I have a proper theory. Uh, a couple, actually—"

"Well," Richard says. He is seated a decorous distance away from you on the settee. He is massaging his forehead. "The complexity of your theories has certainly, uh, increased."

"You think so?"

"Yes."

You rub a stray curl between your fingers. "So were they any good?"

Richard considers his answer to this in silence for what seems like a full 30 seconds. "Uh..." he says finally. "They were fine."

"Are you still pissy—"

"No."

He's absolutely still pissy, so you translate "fine" to "excellent" in your head. You think they're pretty excellent, too, especially without much practice. You'll consider the "robot" thing a warm-up (but still, the blood!).

Another little silence passes before Richard checks his watch again.

"Charlie, it's time to go—"

"Is it?" You're feeling a little spiteful. "Really? I just loved being dragged here under false pretenses and then listening to you talk about keys for four hours..."

"Yes, it is. Up." He's already standing. You do the same, slowly. "Turn around."

"Why?"

"Just turn around, Charlie." You do. He grips you by the shoulder and brushes the hair from your neck. "Good. Three, two, one—"

He yanks something invisible and cold from your neck. You wake up, gasping, in your desk chair.

"Oh God—" you say. "Oh God— Oh—" You touch your face, your chest, your arms and legs and feet, just to make sure they're there. You feel unshakably it should be dark outside, but it's just barely beginning to dim.

You are not entirely sure what just happened.

«Hello.» Richard gleams in the half-light in front of you. «Give it a minute. The time shift is always difficult.»

What was before this? You were sculpting (the model is still there, quarter-finished, on the desk), when Richard said— he said—

Oh, there it comes. You slump back in the chair. Your mouth tastes like an indiscriminate mix of fruit. "God, how long was that? What time is it?"

«Six hours to the dot. An hour later, to the dot. Early evening.»

The thought of another hour of daylight makes you sick to your stomach. "Oh."

«Far from an optimal spanner, but that will have to be improved—»

You're not listening. You're thinking about all the things you should do, but don't want to. Like going back to the cave. Like going through Ellery's tent while he's... not there.

«All a waste of time, you realize.» The snake is fixing you with a beady eye.

You throw your hands up in defeat. "You're sending me mixed messages, you realize? You just did a whole presentation on—"

If you squint at him from the right angle, Richard has the decency to appear embarrassed. «Yes. That was... ill-considered.»

"God."

>[1] Trudge out back towards Tom's Cave. Bring gloves. Take samples. Try not to vomit.

>[2] Sidle into Ellery's tent. Hope you don't get caught. Steal a lot of papers.

>[3] Go to sleep, for God's sake. Put something over your eyes for the light. Wake up at 4 AM.

>[4] Write-in.

>Trudge out to Tom's Cave.

Given Ellery's track record, they'll give it a week or two before they even think about touching his tent. His remains are a lot more ephemeral. And, whether Richard likes it or not, your interest has been piqued.

You fish the fettling knife out and slide it into the desk drawer. Scooting the chair back, you lean to grab your pocketknife from the shelf instead. Then thinking better of it, you stand, grip the chair in a momentary sway of vertigo— you haven't stood in an hour, or maybe six— and pick up the knife like a sane person. You duck under your cot and grope around in the portmanteau for your gloves (black, leather, expensive), slide them on, then pause. You don't have anything sterile to put samples in, and you are *not* keeping skull fragments in your pockets.

You stifle a gag with a gloved hand at the inadvertent phrase "skull fragments."

«Don't look at me,» Richard grouses. He's been tailing you as you've been digging around in the tent. «This is your cockamamie idea.»

"All I'm doing is opening a more interesting line of questioning," you mimic. *"Oh God, Charlie, I'm soooo smart. I have a blackboard."*

«I don't sound like that.» He pauses. «Surely I don't sound like that.»

He doesn't. You can do the general tone, but you can't begin to approximate all the smug little tics and nuances. "We'll split the difference. Got ideas?"

«No. Sleep. You're going to develop bags, Charlie.»

You slide open the desk drawer again and discover some woven mats you've used to wrap models in. It's good enough. You stick a couple in your pocket.

You're ready as you'll ever be. It's just a matter of slipping out unnoticed...

Easy. You slip out unnoticed. You just had to weave between the tents and dodge the hoots to the north (lizard-racing? sounds like lizard-racing), where you suspect most of the action is. The path to Tom's Cave is unmarked, but easily spotted by its proximity to one of Eloise's "installations"—a table with grass growing out the top, possibly symbolic, entitled "Fen VI." The trail is a tad more dangerous in the growing dusk, but you know it well enough. Still no large wildlife. Has there been a recent hunt?

You draw close to the cave. The water tastes metallic, you think. You round the bend—

Margo's gone, is the first thing you notice. Or still gone. Is she still in the cave? You don't like to think about it. Her rocking chair is empty, in any case.

The second thing you notice is Eloise bent over a patch of grass. You don't have to hesitate on the identification— it could not be more plainly her. She's got the cloak on.

You honestly don't know what to make of the cloak. It's bright blue, it seems well-made enough, if pressed you might call it beautiful. The trouble with it is she *never takes it off*. Six months you've seen her, and not once has she appeared without it. You've heard mentions of a betting pool. Is she grotesquely deformed in one way or another? Is it a political statement? Does she just *really like* the color blue? Nobody knows. (In your opinion, she just likes the attention.)

In any case, Eloise's cloak is here, and thus so is Eloise. And she is inspecting the location of the murder.

Why must things always be *difficult*?

>[1] It's not worth it. Go back to camp. Or... head into town. So you're "blacklisted." So what? You need some civilization. [Where do you go?]

>[2] Be rational, Lottie. There's no way Eloise knows you were involved. Or... not involved. Just walk up like a normal person. Say hello like a normal person. (Or "salutations," apparently.)

>[3] Wait it out in this copse until she leaves. She won't be here forever, surely. But then again, Margo won't be in the cave forever.

>[4] Write-in.

>HELLO COMRADE

It's fine. It's fine. You're just got to act natural. It's not difficult.

«For most people, it isn't.»

Right. And you are most people. Which is why you step out of the trees calm, cool, and collected and not, say, like someone with a guilty conscience. Not that you did anything wrong. Because you didn't.

You use your forefinger and thumb to blow a hailing whistle— it's good courtesy if you're not in shoulder-tap range. Eloise looks up, then behind her, towards you.

"Charlotte?" she signs, unruffled. There's an extra flourish at the end of her words, which to you always makes it sound like she's speaking in cursive. "Out for a walk?"

You hesitate. You don't like answering questions. It feels like you're giving something away.

«Answer yes, you stupid bint.»

Richard's been all over the map today. It's his time of the month, apparently. "Yes," you say, a beat too late. "Say, uh, what have you got there?"

"Crime scene." She points downwards. "Seriously, right here. Check it out."

Skull fragments. You swallow, but trot forward at her request. She has hunched back over.

"Uh," you say out loud, once you're in the range of intelligibility. "A crime scene? Like— a murder— or—"

"Nah, lookit." Eloise's hands are rubber-gloved. She holds a fragment of something shiny. Something... silver. "Someone dropped a *mirror*."

«Interesting.»

"Oh," you say stiffly. Then: "*Oh*. A mirror?"

"Yeah, I came by and saw a glint in the weeds. It's a mirror, clearly, yeah? And it's all over here. Must've been, I don't know, a smuggler. Got spooked by something, dropped his cargo. You hear there's smugglers in the Fen? Whole nest of them. Must be real pissed the Wind Court's moved in, huh?"

You give this story about a twenty-percent chance of truthfulness. Eloise is known for the quantity, not quality, of her rumors. "Real pissed, yes. Incredibly pissed. Sorry, why'd you choose to call this a *crime scene*?"

"Why not? It's more exciting. And it's not *wrong*."

It's not *wrong*. Mirrors were highly illegal on the surface, on account of being made of glass. Glass was highly illegal because it had a tendency to make things so real they exploded, or, well, something like that. (You'd

only heard of it through dedicated eavesdropping via hollow wallspaces.) But it's still a wild exaggeration.

"Maybe if you're histrionic," you mutter. Eloise doesn't blink. "Fine," you say, louder. "What are you doing with it?"

She waves a gloved hand. "Picking up the shards, obviously. Can't just leave them, don't want to mutate the crabs. That was a joke."

"Ah," you say. "Very funny. I laughed."

"Ha." Eloise seems pleased. She always seems vaguely pleased, like a cat with cream. "Hey, Charlotte, want to hear what I heard about you?"

>[A1] Ask for a mirror shard. Be polite. [Write-in why you want one?]

>[A2] Take one off the ground when Eloise isn't looking. [Roll.]

>[A3] Leave it be. You can always burgle one later, should it come to that.

>[A4] Write-in.

Glass that totally doesn't mutate into crabs sounds pretty neat.
--

>[B1] You always want to hear what people say about you. Hopefully it's good. (It's hardly ever good.)

>[B2] You do want to hear something, but not about you. What has she heard about... [Write-in a rumor topic. Could be a person, could be an event, could be general goings-on, etc.]

>[B3] You don't want to hear anything at all, thanks.

>M-maybe

>I just think it's neat

What kind of question is that? You are perpetually, sweatily desperate to know what others say about you, so the answer is clearly "yes." Eloise knows full well it's yes. It's just a formality.

"Well," you say. "I'm not much of a *gossip*..."

«You did it. You topped yourself in the "worst lie ever" department. Astounding.»

Eloise dismisses the implication with a wave of her hand. "Oh, obviously, Charlotte— do I look like a *gossipmonger*?" (She tends to prefer 'quidnunc,' which you are fully convinced is a word she made up. You cannot approve.) "It's nothing like that. I just overheard some talk about you, and I'm passing it along. For, you know, charity."

"Well," you say doubtfully, "if that's all, I suppose it couldn't hurt."

She cocks her head. "Are you sure? You don't sound entirely convinced—"

This has been happening more and more— her dragging on the pantomime at your expense. If you roll over now, though, she'll snicker at you. A grown woman, snickering. It's awful. "Uh, yes. Quite sure."

There's no snickering, but there's still far too much mirth in her eyes. God, you can't stand Eloise. "Alright, alright, look. There's talk you've found something big. You went out two days ago, next thing you've got the boss and the second breathing down your neck— and word's in town you're blackballed. People notice these things."

Richard, wrapped snugly around your forearm, is conspicuously silent. You tug at your suddenly tight-fitting collar. "Well, that's— big how?"

"Valuable? Powerful?" She shrugs. "I don't deal in specifics."

You bob your head, not listening. You're attempting to contrive a way out of this subject of conversation. "Uh," you say, eyes alighting on the mirror shards, "were you planning on cleaning all this up? Is there any way I could grab one—"

"Huh?" Eloise looks down at her gloves, then up at you. "Charlotte, yes, I was cleaning all this up. No, you can't— weren't you taught the risks? You said you were a society type."

You can't help yourself. "Royalty, actually."

"All the same." She shakes her head. "It's restricted for a reason, you know? Why would you *want* any?"

'Because it's the remains(???) of my murder(???) victim(???)' doesn't sound appealing. You go with your next option. "I don't know, it's just... neat."

"Well, god, of course it's neat! It's too neat. It's break-universe neat, if you let it percolate, which is why I'm going to destroy the stuff." She plucks another couple shards out of the mud. "Citizen's duty, all that. So is it true?"

"What?"

"*Did* you find something big?"

>[A1] Maybe. What does she care about it?

>[A2] Maybe. What does everyone else care about it?

>[A3] You found something, but "big" is blowing it out of proportion, as rumors are wont to do. Of course. Haha.

>[A4] **No.**

>[A5] Yes. So what?

>[A6] Write-in.

>[B1] Make another go at convincing Eloise you really need a shard.
(Write-in.)

>[B2] **There's still quite a few on the ground. Stealth one. [Roll.]**

>[B3] Leave it till later. Surely she won't destroy them right away.

Here's what we do. Step on TWO (2) fragments, drag your foot back, be

like oh no I got one in my shoe and pick it out and give it back. But keep the secret second piece.

>No!

>Filch a shard.

"What?" you say, affecting a befuddled expression (it isn't too difficult, given the day so far). "No, I didn't find anything."

Eloise toys with her hoop earrings. "Really? I'm not saying I don't believe you—" she doesn't believe you— "but there's some pretty strong circumstantial evidence, is all I'm saying. It's just a coincidence?"

You wish Richard were here telling you what to say. You're not good at this. "...Yes."

"Hmm." She turns away from you. "Must've gotten a bad source, then. Maybe I'll just check in with Madrigal, verify—"

Eye contact with handsign is vital. Turning away from someone: this conversation is over.

«Nice going.»

Nice going? You're not the one conveniently absent when you're actually necessary. This can't remotely be blamed on you.

You twitch as Richard spirals up your left arm. «I was otherwise occupied. Now, look, you have to provide her something. Charity does not exist. This is a transaction.»

Eloise has busied herself with picking up shards. You pick at your sleeve.

«Eye for an eye. Tit for tat. *Lex talionis. Quid pro quo.* No such thing as a free lunch, Charlie, so pay your-»

God, you get the idea. You can't remember why you wanted him back. "Eloise?" you say aloud.

She tosses her head.

"I didn't find anything, but there was something—"

She turns back. A lock of hair has fallen over her face. "What's that?"

"I don't suppose you keep tabs on relationships?"

A warm smile. "Charlotte, I keep tabs on everything."

Eloise is a dangerous woman to cross. "Yes. Madrigal and Ellery—"

"Quiet relationship, quiet split. I think it's always worse that way, you know? Things simmer instead of boil over, and then they, well, keep simmering. It's never quite done with."

"On that note," you say, straightening your posture, "it's *not* quite done with. Madrigal's been asking me to look into the breakup—"

"*You?*" Eloise is toying with her earrings again.

"Well, yes. I don't see why n— look, the point is she's still simmering, got it? She's all 'oh, Lottie, please find out why he broke up with me, I'm desperate'— practically on her hands and knees. So I say yes, out of the goodness of my h—"

"Aw, you can cut the gullshit, Charlotte." Her smile's broadened. "We both know your heart's black as sin, yeah? So move on with it."

"It's not..." You glance down at your chest. "I have a great heart! Better than yours, any—"

"Move on with it!"

You scowl. "I say yes, out of the *goodness of my heart*. So that's the deal."

Eloise shakes her head knowingly. "I don't know what she sees in the guy."

"You don't say."

"Yeah. Don't get me wrong, he's not- he's smart. Badly-educated, but damn smart. But trying to talk to him? I mean... listen, three years ago, he drops outta the sky, Madrigal drags him into camp, yeah? He walks straight into my tent. I try to go, you know, 'hi, sorry you're stuck here'... I swear to god, he doesn't blink, he just walks straight out."

"No." Your good breeding quavers at the thought.

"Yes. So I think, well, he's probably in shock, right? So a day after, or a couple days, maybe, I go find him, and I'm all, you know, 'hi there'— and he stammers something about starting fires and leaves again. Just walks away."

Your jaw hangs open. "No!"

«It's for the best he's dead, sounds like.»

"I'm telling you, this happened. So that's my dominant impression of him, right there, and I have to say— he's not done a whole lot to shake that. The man can't stay on one topic to save his life, you know that? Even if you get him talking, it's ridiculous. I can't tell if his mouth moves faster than his brain, or his brain than his mouth, but—" Eloise pauses, brushes the hair from her face. "What I'm saying is I wouldn't screw him."

Does she take off the cloak- you wonder, and then suffocate that thought in its infancy.

You compose yourself. "Yes, I— yes, I got that."

She strokes her chin, considers. "I take that back, actually. I might screw him. But I would *not* date him."

This conversation has gone to a strange and uncomfortable place. You busy yourself by squatting down to look at the mud. It's mucked up with bootprints, but no flechettes and no blood— just twinkling mirror shards.

"Would you?"

Eloise would notice if you picked a big one straight up, and you're not sure the tiny slivers would do you much good. "Would I what?"

"Screw him. Or date him, I guess."

You flush an unattractive crimson. "I, uh- I- uh— no."

"Harsh! Why's that?"

His head's blown clean off. He might've been a robot and/or on drugs and/or not real, maybe. You swallow. "Isn't he like... 30?"

Eloise has to think. "Oh, right, you're actually a kid. It gets hard to tell."

"23!" It's practically ancient.

"Well... I dunno. Could work out. But that plus everything... yeah, I gotcha." She chucks you on the shoulder. "Got any last shards?"

You've been working out a plan. You stand, placing your foot on two large pieces, and pour into the baggie Eloise has produced the handful of smaller ones you've collected. "Oh," you say, and pause, "hang on, I think I've stepped on one." You extricate one— and, while hunched over, slide the other into your sleeve.

It works beautifully: Richard's silence is proof enough of that fact.

«Remove it as soon as you can, Charlotte. You don't want your skin turning to paper.»

Good, you jinxed it.

"I think that's most of it," Eloise says. "I'll take this back and neutralize it. Hey, you're not so bad, huh?"

She doesn't seem to mean this as an insult. "No?" you agree.

"Right on."

>[A1] Say, she seems to know things about glass. Will she tell you about it? (What will you tell her in return?)

>[A2] Say, how does she know things about glass? It's secret and illegal, more or less. (What will you tell her in return?)

>[A3] **Say, was she collaborating with Ellery on something at any point? He claimed she was the "E" in his notes.**

>[A4] Say, does she know anything about codes or the decoding thereof? You've got these papers back in your tent...

>[A5] You've got nothing else to say to Eloise.

>[A6] Write-in.

>[B1] Start on back to camp with Eloise.

>[B2] **Keep her here. You have other things in mind for Tom's Cave.**

>[B3] Write-in.

>**Stay here - where's Margo?**

>Was she really the "E" mentioned?

"Wait a tick," you say. "Shouldn't Margo be back by now?"

Eloise glances towards the empty rocking chair. "Uh... maybe? She was gone when I got here. I assumed she stepped out to do... whatever she does."

"Mmm." You can't say Margo's been gone for over an hour. You're smart enough to know that much. "I don't know, it's just odd. She's normally here all day, right?"

"Yeah, I think so." Eloise scratches under her chin. "What's the issue, though? Even if she comes back, she's not gonna do anything about us clearing a biohazard, even if it is in front of her weird cave. Her bark's worse than her bite."

Two shotgun blasts. You bite your lip. "I suppose so."

"That's the spirit! So, c'mon, we should get going—"

"I don't... I'd rather stay. Uh, for a while." Eloise has put you on the back foot from the start of this. You have to gain some ground back somehow.

She raises her eyebrows. "Suit yourself, I guess."

Score. You stand a little straighter. "Right. Did you work with Ellery on something this Kitemaker?"

"Did I..." Eloise cocks her head. "Yes. Why?"

That wasn't a lie, then. "It's for the—" don't stammer!—" investigation."

Eloise's quizzical look increases.

"That Madrigal asked me to do..."

"Right! Right, gotcha. It's cute you're calling it that. I like it." Eloise waves a hand. "Carry on, carry on."

"It's not *cute*," you mutter.

«Pick your battles, Charlotte.»

Fine. "So, yes, the investigation. What was this collaboration about?"

"Oh, funny story." Eloise holds up her baggie of mirror shards. "Mirrors."

"Really!"

"Small world, right? Yeah, no, it was weird. He was convinced mirrors had some kind of special property. I kept telling him, you know, glass is glass, doesn't matter what kind of backing you put on it... but anyways, there was some joint experimentation there."

"What kind of results did you get?"

She smirks. "That's confidential."

>[1] What she means is: she wants reciprocation. Tell her something in exchange. [What?]

>[2] **Try and find out without giving anything up. [Roll.]**

>[3] That's fine, that's all you needed to know. Change the subject. [What?]

>[4] Write-in.

>**Wink wonk**

>85, 57, 53 vs. DC 45 - Enhanced Success.

>Spenny

You're not giving this up so easily. "Eloise, nothing's confidential."

"No, you're right, it's not." She holds your gaze. "But I'm not sure it's entirely related, hmm? Believe me, there wasn't a breakup because of *mirrors*."

"I think you'd be surprised." You place your hands in your pockets. "Trust me."

She glances down at her cloak, adjusts the clasp. You stand stock-still. "Alright, alright," she says finally. "But keep it to yourself, yeah?"

"Who'd I tell?"

"Er..." She scratches her chin. "Good point. Come on, my legs are killing me— let's find somewhere to sit."

Smugly, you trail behind Eloise, who ends up finding a rocky outcropping around the side of the cave entrance. You kick a couple inquisitive crabs off it, then sit.

"How much do you know about glass?" she starts. "I know it has to be some. You're off Pillar 6, and those guys were super into it, you're from way high up, I think your daddy was in politics... you picked up a little, yeah?"

You sidestep the obvious question of 'how do you know all this' (obvious answer: it's Eloise) and play along instead. "It's illegal. You're not supposed to know about it. It's extrareal, which means it does... bad things, uh, to reality."

"About what I expected, then. Alright. Yes, glass is extrareal— as in it's actually realer than reality. It accomplishes this by sort of... sucking out the reality in its surroundings. Which is not great for the surroundings, naturally."

This kind of makes sense. "Right. So what does this have to do with—"

"I'm just making sure you've got the appropriate background. Anyways, he comes to me in a tizz, and he goes 'Eloise, have you got any mirrors.' And I go, 'uhh, yeah, here's my steel one.' And he says 'no, no, a proper mirror, a glass one.'"

"This was three months ago?"

"Yeah, something like that. Anyways, I go 'well, I don't have a glass one, I'm not suicidal, are you crazy?' And he says, and he's got this kind of wild look in his eye— not that he doesn't always, but you know, a wilder one— 'Am I?' Like he doesn't know, himself." Eloise stops to gather the hair out of her cloak, and looks at you sharply. "Exactly like that, I swear. So I go 'uh, are you okay?' And he says— I mean it, exactly like this— 'I don't know. I don't know. I think I might not be.' And he's kind of stalking back and forth, with his coat kind of billowing behind him. I'm just sitting here at my workbench. And I go, 'god, uh, am I the best person to talk to about this?' And he goes—"

It's growing somewhat dark. "Uh," you say, "could you get to the point?"

"I'm telling you a *story*, Charlotte. For *free*. No complaining. He goes, 'I thought you might have a mirror.' And I think, because I'm interested, now, and I say 'I mean, I can probably get one.' So that's how it started."

"Did you get a mirror?"

"Naturally. I have contacts. So a couple days later, I bring him it, and he sort of looks at it, then looks at me, then looks around his tent— it's full of paper, you know, the man writes like a madman. And he plucks a note off the wall and gives it to me, kind of drops it in my hands. And he says 'Can you read this?' I can't read it. And he says 'I can't either.' So I'm thinking, do I know any handwriting tutors? But then he goes 'I woke up the other day and I realized I couldn't read a single godsdamn thing I'd been writing for weeks. But I could when I was writing them, is the thing. Give me the mirror and the note.' So I give him the mirror and the note. He holds the note up to the mirror, and he says 'can you read it now?' And I look in the mirror, and it's totally normal, it looks like a diary page or something."

Trying to keep up with all this is proving difficult. "Wait, so that's not a code? It's... mirror writing?"

Eloise nods. "Backwards and upside down. If you haven't been around a lot of mirrors, I guess you wouldn't recognize it. Anyway, so, I tell him I can read it. And, swear to god, it looks like I just shot his dog. 'Shit. Are you sure?' is I think what he said, and I'm all 'yeah, want me to read it to you?'. And he says 'no,' and just kind of stares at the ground. I'm making to leave when he says 'how could I not notice?' So I stop, and I go, 'that you've been writing mirrored for weeks?' and he nods. And I say

'that's a damn good question.' Just like that. 'That's a damn good question.'

"So?"

"So what?"

You can't help like feel she's avoiding the actual question. "What were the results? Do mirrors have special properties?"

You have extracted from her a fidget. "That's... confidential."

«Charlotte.»

No.

«Charlotte, listen.»

You've been handling this.

«No, you've been suckered into listening to a shaggy dog story. You're trying to untie the Gordian knot, Charlie, she can go on like this all night.»

The what knot?

«The Gordian knot. Once upon a time, there was a king, and he had his servants tie him the greatest knot there had ever been. No man could loosen it— ten men couldn't loosen it. And the king said whoever could untie the knot would be king in his stead.»

«Many try, but none can untie the knot. Until one day, a man with a sword comes along. And he looks at the Gordian knot, and he takes his sword, and he slices the knot in half. And he becomes king.»

Eloise has continued talking, you think. You don't really care. You think the man with the sword was a cheater.

«He was pragmatic. You ought to be pragmatic, Charlie. Let me get to the point.»

Fine, you think, and the instant you do there's fire in your throat and— you blink hard— your eyes. «Good. Try again.»

"Eloise," you say aloud, with a tenor and richness that certainly doesn't belong to you. She pauses mid-sign. "Just tell me the God-damn results like you said you would, okay?"

It's clear she can tell something's different, but can't identify precisely what. She seems to vanish back into her cloak. "Well, you should've just said so."

"I tried—!" You stop yourself short. "Please."

She sighs. "There's no physical difference— it's just glass with a backing. There's probably a psychological difference, depending on the person."

«You're welcome.»

The fire recedes, leaving your throat dry and achy. "Wh— that's it? What kind of psychological—"

She places a finger to her lips.

>[1] Write-in.

>Eloise seems to either have something she wants to say, or something is up. Go quiet. You are hanging out next to the shack of a woman who killed Ellery for sneaking into her dumb crocodile cave, after all.

>Fall silent.

You furrow your brow and turn to look behind you. The cave mouth is empty. You turn back, confused.

"Oh," Eloise says, "oh, sorry, that was a 'I'm not telling you,' not a... aw, don't worry about it. We should go before it gets dark."

You should. Just because you haven't run into any panthers recently doesn't mean they're not out there, as evinced by the maulings people whisper about in town. And you haven't brought a light.

What if Margo left the cave and you didn't even notice? It's a troubling thought, but not one you can give practical voice to. And going with Eloise is likely the best way to avoid panthers *and* Margos— if nothing else, you can hope she trips over the cloak.

>[1] Head back.

»[A] How does she know all these things about glass?

»[B] What kind of "source" provides mirrors?

»[C] What's her opinion on Ellery's behavior?

»[D] Don't converse— just keep an eye out.

»[E] Write-in.

>[2] Stay here until Margo comes out, just to be safe.

»Same options as above.

>[3] Write-in.

>[3] Ask Eloise about the best way to work with Madrigal— you and her don't exactly see eye to eye, and some advice could make working with her easier

>What source?

>How to deal with Madrigal?

>What does she think about Ellery's behavior?

>Head back.

"I don't suppose you have a light?" You dislike relying on her for this, but you have little choice.

She rustles around in her cloak, eventually producing an unassuming paper cube the size of your palm. She tosses it to you. "Shake it."

You do so. It flickers, then begins to glow a hot white. You clutch it gingerly. "Is it safe to hold?"

"Safer and brighter than foxfire. Doesn't last too long, though, so let's get a move on."

You lead the way back to the trail, keeping a wide berth around the mouth of the cave. Margo has yet to reappear. Maybe an alligator got her?

«Wondering is useless. Move.»

Eloise clambers after you, surprisingly agile given the cloak. You turn the cube over in your hand. "Is this real?"

"Why would it be?"

This is a good question. "Well, you pulled it out so fast."

"Paper's the easiest thing in the world to make, and light was already the topic of conversation." Eloise tosses another cube into the air. "It's just quick thinking."

«And practice. But she's not wrong. Paper is the base state of the unreal.»

"Huh." You scratch a fingernail against the side of the cube.

"Interesting."

"Right?"

You walk at a steady clip, but the trail still dissolves into sameness. Haven't you been around this bend before? Didn't you see this mangrove with the X in its bark five, or ten, or fifteen minutes? Or are you remembering dozens of prior trips, is all? You have to trust yourself—the trail doesn't loop, and you'd be able to tell if you were off it by the fact of being waist-deep in sludge. But, by God, the dark makes it difficult to.

Overthinking is the death of the night traveler, it's been said, so you busy yourself instead with badgering Eloise. "Hey," you say. "What kind of source got you a mirror?"

Eloise raises her eyebrows.

"For safety reasons," you hasten on. "I don't want to meet the kind of guy who, uh, who deals in... that."

"Sure, sure." She seems amused. "You know, it'd be fine even if that weren't the case. Not that it isn't, of course."

"Safety reasons," you repeat.

"Gotcha. Uh, Madrigal's a smuggler."

You stop dead in your tracks. "What?"

"Well, middleman— smuggler middleman? Just a middleman? She used to be a smuggler, anyhow, and now she manages a trading business on the side. She knew a guy, I cashed in a favor."

You're aghast. You cup your face with your hand. "She's a... God, does Monty know? Shouldn't she be arrested?"

"By whom?"

"By... the authorities? The Wind Court, I guess. I— seriously, does Monty know? Do I have to tell Monty that the quartermaster's a criminal? She— God, I should've known this the second I saw her. The scar— the sluttish—"

"Hey, hey, it's okay." Eloise takes you by the wrist. "'Course Monty knows— she told him. I mean, she tells everybody. 'Hi, I'm Madrigal, did you know I smuggled things? I got a scar from it, look at my scar, it's so cool...' Did you not get the speech?"

"Uh..." You can't recall. "I don't think she likes me very much."

"Oh, well, shocking." Eloise persists in her benign assessment of your unlikability. "If it helps, I don't think she likes me much either."

It doesn't help. "She probably likes you more, though, right? I mean, she called me a bitch."

"We-ell," Eloise says. "I mean, she's not wrong. You're just not very good at it." She knocks you on the shoulder. "You go for it, then you backpedal. You gotta commit to being a bitch, catch my drift? Nobody'll like you, but at least they'll respect you."

«This is what I've been saying.»

You rub your shoulder. "I'm not a bitch."

"Whatever you say, Charlotte." She's grinning again. God-damnit. "And I'm not a snoop, right?"

You ignore the question. "Now, I *don't* want this. But if I did want to interact with Madrigal, uh, civilly... how might I go about that?"

"Oh, you punched her, right? Nice."

You stick your hands in your pockets. "That may or may not have occurred. Would you answer the—?"

"Oh, no, you're asking the wrong person. Like I said, she doesn't like me." Eloise shifts her posture. "It's some combination of the architecture and the rumors, I think. And I make fun of her scar. Don't make fun of her scar, that's good."

"Okay, don't..."

"Be direct, I guess. She likes it when you get to the point. Don't do the thing where you pretend to care about ethics, she hates that." She thinks. "Oh, uh, because she doesn't care about them either. If she claims she does, that's total gull, got it? It's the results that matter, not how you got them."

"And she'll like me, then?"

"Who said anything about liking you? No, she's still gonna hate your guts. I mean..." Eloise gestures broadly at your clothes. "...you're *prissy*. But she won't punch you, probably."

You smooth down your coat. "I'm not *prissy*. I'm *fastidious*."

"Yeah, don't say that to her."

«I like this woman. She has a good head on her shoulders.»

You walk, and walk, and walk, and walk. It's hotly debated whether distances underwater actually grow in the dark, or whether it's just imagination. Hotly debated between newcomers, usually. Anyone who's been down here any length of time will readily tell you: well, of course it's your imagination. That's what makes the distances grow. Dumbass. And then they set to debating: well, is it the distance that grows, or is it the time? And is it the world that changes, or your perception of it?

Miles (yards) later, or possibly hours (minutes), you pipe up again. "So, about the mirror writing thing. Did you ever figure that out? Like, what could've caused that—"

"It's not really my area of expertise," Eloise says. "I don't like to speculate about people's—"

She's still evasive. You change tack. "Fine, whatever. What'd you think of *him*, though? Like, how he was acting."

"Well, I mean..." She rubs her forehead. "The first and second times I met him, he spun on his heel and walked out on me, so it can't get a ton worse. He was pretty freaked, though."

"How so?"

"Well, I told you, right? Lots and lots of pacing, muttering, uh... he kept picking at his skin. I had to tell him that was gross. But none of that is the weird part, you get me? The weird part is, I go check in on him a week later, and he's absolutely fine."

"So he got over it?"

"I- I guess so? I'm serious, totally fine. He greets me, he thanks me for working with him, he tells me he's doing better. Not a single twitch. I think he trimmed his beard, even. It was *creepy*. Oh, hey, my table!"

Lo, your hiking has brought you back to camp. Eloise's "installation" squats in the reeds to your right. She pats its top.

You swivel your head in an attempt to find meaning in the table-with-grass-on-it. None arises. You go for your second bet. "Uh, does it mean something?"

You're not expecting the answer. "Probably? Yeah, probably, you know, nature overtaking mankind. I just made it because I had a dream about a table, though."

"Is that... art?" That can't be art.

"Why wouldn't it be? Anything's art if you hang a plaque on it." She strokes the table lovingly. "Besides, I like making people wonder."

>[1] That seems like a good place to leave things. Go to sleep.

>[2] **That seems like a good place to leave things. Attempt to sneak into Ellery's tent.**

>[3] Wait! You have more things to say to Eloise! [What?]

>[4] Write-in.

>Ellery's tent.

You rub your sleeve. The mirror shard has lightly embedded itself into your arm, it feels like. "I, uh, I better be going."

"No! Commit! Say 'I'm leaving now, peon,' or whatever it is you're thinking. Come on."

"I, uh, I wasn't—"

"Oh, you're no fun. See you around, Charlotte." She waves you off.

You wander back to your tent in a fugue, untie the knot on the flap, and collapse onto your cot. The mirror shard takes this opportunity to bite into your flesh. "Ow," you say.

«Take your coat off, Charlotte. That exposure was too long for comfort.» You can just barely see Richard by the glint of moonlight off his underbelly.

In response, you lean off your cot and fish around blindly in your portmanteau. Triumphant, you retrieve the portable lantern (easy: it's smooth and round, not clothes-feeling) and knock on its surface. It phosphoresces in response.

Now able to see properly, you unbutton and shrug off your coat. The mirror shard falls onto the mattress. You make to pick it up—

«Priorities. Was it in contact with your skin.»

Was it? You examine your shirt. It's mock-turtleneck style, an interlocking knit, modest black (coal black, they may have called it, not that there was real coal for reference), made of some ungodly synthesized chemical fabric. Though you've worn it since your other shirt got sliced open a couple months ago, it shows no signs of dirt or tatter (though salt is beginning to collect on the neckline).

God, you should really buy a different shirt, shouldn't you? Or at least sew the other one back together. You probably remember how.

«P r i o r i t i e s.»

There's a nick in your left sleeve, right about where the shard would've settled. You consider sticking a finger through it, then discard that thought and pull the shirt over your head.

You run a finger down the lacy strap of your brassiere in reflection, then check your arm. It's quite pale, excepting the rivulet of blood trickling down it. You bite your lip and prod the cut.

It's got an odd look and texture to it, sort of dead matte, with no fine hairs around it.

«Paper, as expected. Oh well. It'll mend.»

You squint up at Richard, who hovers placidly a foot in front of you. "Pardon?"

«It's turned that part of your skin to paper, Charlotte, because that's what glass does. It's not harmful, and it's likely just the first layer—do not pick at it. Treat it like a scab. It'll mend.»

You rub it lightly, but don't pick. This is fine, you think. This is fine. It's fine. It's just the first layer, that's paper. It'll mend. Positive thinking. Yes. Good.

It still gives you the shivers, and it's not just because you're half-undressed.

>[ID: 1/11]

You slide your shirt back on and sit breathing in the green light.

You want to sleep. Oh God, do you want to sleep. But you have obligations, and the bad part about obligations is you have to fulfill them whether you like them or not. You should see Ellery's tent— for completeness, if nothing else. For completeness.

«No.»

Richard gleams. You stare at him. "What?"

«You're not going anywhere. Your mind's on the brink of snapping.»

Oh, he's being cranky. Good. "I am not going to *die*. It's called being *tired*, not that you'd... do you even sleep? I can't tell."

«I— it's complicated. That's not the point.» He loops in figure-eights. «You're not physically exhausted. You slept well, and it's not late. You're mentally exhausted.»

"Same thing, right?" You've wrapped the mirror shard in woven cloth and are sliding it into the desk. "Sounds better, actually. I'm not going to pass out."

«Charlotte, we talked about your issues with object permanance. Against all reason, if you cannot see something, it ceases to exist for you.»

You shut the drawer. "Not following."

«So because you have chosen to ignore your present mental instability—»

"I'm not— I'm stable as a table."

«—you have come under the illusion it's vanished. That you are, quote, 'stable as a table.' Nothing could be further from the truth.»

"I have to say, Richard, I'm not really— I'm not buying this. Are you still pissy? I really think you're— you sound pissy." You are trying and failing to locate some sort of bag or gunnysack to hold evidence in.

«Charlotte, you had a public meltdown today over pink fucking cocktail umbrellas. I'm not joking.»

"You're never joking, though?" You're just going to use your jacket as a makeshift sling, you think. "Unless you're in my head, where you're always joking. It's difficult to keep track of."

«You are on the brink of a cliff, Charlotte, and anything could be the light shove to your back. Reading something you don't like. Finding something you don't like. Getting <caught>. I don't think you understand the strain you're under, the—»

You're walking out the door. Look at you, walking, and he can't do a damn thing about it. Isn't this fun?

«I said <no>.» Your legs lock up exactly midstep, sending you crashing to the ground. You moan. Richard has followed you out, and swims imperiously just over your head. «You're going back inside, and you are going to sleep. This is for your own good, Charlotte.»

You seethe.

«Ellery is <dead.> His tent is going nowhere.»

>[1] Shut up Richard, shut up, you stupid idiot, you (Lottie) are going to drag yourself to Ellery's tent if it's on your hands and knees, for all you care, and you are going to investigate it, God-damnit. So you (Richard) can suck it.

>[2] **Maybe you do sound a little unstable. But only a little. You should sleep, but not because Richard told you to, obviously.**

>[3] **Write-in.**

>[3] "Fuck you."

Fine. If he doesn't want us pursuing Ellery, we'll find a distraction instead. Let's leave some blood on the mirror and go to sleep see what happens in the morning.

"What about the fact that you're fat and stupid?"

>**Fuck you, Richard. You're fat and stupid and I hate you.**

>Put some blood on the mirror shard.

>Go to sleep.

You grip the sodden weeds and glower up at Richard. You're trying your best to express your feelings. "F... fu... fff..."

«You're not capable of telling me to fuck myself, Charlotte. You're too well-bred.» He's drifted so close to your face you have to go cross-eyed to focus on him. «And you wouldn't really mean it, anyhow, so I fail to see the point.»

"Fff...rick you," you conclude. "Frick you. You're... you're fat, and..." You prop yourself up off the ground with your arms. "...stupid, and... ugly. There's mud on my slacks. I hate you."

«I'm sorry you feel that way, but you're wrong.» His eyes are blank and yellow. «You don't hate me, and you know you don't hate me. That's what scares you.»

"Frick you." You prop yourself on one elbow and jab roughly at his abdomen. "Make my legs work."

«My pleasure.»

Your muscles relax. "Frick you," you mumble, as you pull yourself to your feet. "God damn you." The thought of making a break for Ellery's tent crosses your mind, but a stiffening shock up your back puts that to rest. You stagger back inside.

Your eyes flick from the cot to the desk. Triumphantly, you yank open the drawer, retrieve the mirror shard, and drop it into a pant pocket. You shimmy your shirt off (it's wet— it's not as easy as it sounds) and fling it onto your mattress.

«Charlotte, what—»

Your arm has continued to bleed lightly. You fetch the shard, consider it, then smear a little of your blood onto its silver surface. Nothing happens.

«Charlotte, you're lucky your blood's been neutralized.»

Damn. You'd hoped something would happen— preferably something big and explosive, just to stick it to Richard. You'll have to leave it overnight.

Your peacoat is still discarded on the cot, alongside your shirt. You pick up both, shake them out, and drape them over the cot's railing. (You glance towards the door. Good, you did retie the knot.) You sit down on the mattress to slide your boots off, then your socks. You unbuckle your brassiere (and breathe a sigh of relief). You unbutton your slacks. You reach under your bed to find one of the worn blouses you've been using as nightclothes, and slide it on. It's cool against your bare skin.

Richard is coiled decorously in the corner. He used to argue that what did him being there matter — he's in your head already, and, anyway, you've not got a cloaca (this forced you to look up "cloaca" in the dictionary, which you have since regretted). But you insisted, and he hasn't said a word about it since.

You still hate him, though, whatever he says.

Oh, the lantern. You stand from the mattress, grab it, and toss it under the cot. It'll shut off on its own.

In the dark, you sink onto the mattress and stare up at the ceiling. You think: God, I thought things would've gotten less complicated, not more. But they've all gotten more complicated, even the simple things. *Richard* used to be a simple thing. He was a snake, and he called you a bitch sometimes, and that was that. And you liked that. It was familiar. It was normal. And now it's gotten all... not normal, all weird, and now he's a person now, you guess, and somehow it's your fault. How is it your fault? You were fine with him being a snake, but you don't think you should tell him that. He seems so pleased to have a face and body and proper voice. And feelings, you guess, apparently, but that's— that's in the realm of the complicated.

You wonder if you have a sort of hangover. It sure feels that way.

God. You watched a man die today.

God.

Maybe if you shut your eyes, it'll all...

You sleep.

You dream.

A man clad in red. A man clad in white. A lit cigarette and a tortoiseshell knife. Darkness.

The knife is slipped into the man in red's chelsea boot. He holds a shotgun to the chest of the man in white, who smokes quietly.

"I'm sorry," says the man in red. "I'm sorry." He pulls the trigger. His ears are plugged with wool.

There is no bang. The man in white stumbles backwards, a scarlet stab wound at his stomach. His white silk vest is stained. The cigarette collects ash.

The man in red is gone.

The man in white looks at you. Blood trickles from his mouth. "It's okay," he says. "I love you. I forgive you. It's not your fault, Charlie. It's okay."

-

You wake up feeling sick. Someone is whistling as loud as possible outside— you can hear it through the wall of the tent. They are not on-key.

>[ID: 11/11]

So much for a better day. Well.

>[1] **Check on the bloody mirror shard.**

>[2] Attempt to read one or more of your filched papers.

>[3] Attempt to break into Ellery's tent.

>[4] **Go give the whistler a piece of your mind.**

>[5] Find Madrigal. Get your servitude over with. Or whatever Monty called it.

>[6] Write-in.

>**Check on the shard.**

>Check on the whistler.

«Morning, sunshine. I assume you feel better.» Richard drapes loosely over the railing. His bow is gaily askew.

"I— not really." You push a mass of curls off your face. "I think I feel worse. Had a nightmare."

«Tell me about it.»

"No, I'd—" Only one person calls you 'Charlie.' "I'd rather not, thanks. Would you get off my shirt?"

«Certainly.» He unwinds with a flick of his tail. «You do feel better, whether you notice or not.»

You discard the night-blouse, snag your brassiere off the floor, buckle it on backwards (you have to keep stopping to brush your hair away), and slide it around so it's facing the proper way. "You know, I think I'm really a better judge of this than you are."

«You have a stunning lack of self-awareness. You are not.»

"Okay, that's not true." Shirt, then coat, then slacks (on the ground). "You're just saying things."

«Aren't we ever.»

Slacks, then... oh, the shard. You guess it didn't explode overnight— it's still sitting pretty on the desk. You pick it up. Your blood remains smeared across its surface, with no apparent change to either it or the glass underneath.

Damn, you really thought it would do something. What a bust. You wipe it against the side of the desk and set it back on the—

The blood's still on it. But the blood's *not* still on it, it's smeared on the wood. Did some dry on? No— it's perfectly smooth. It's like the blood's sunken into the surface of the shard.

«It's not porous, Charlie, that seems unlikely. I'd wager that's the reflection.»

"The reflection of the blood?"

«Yes.»

"Does it *do* anything?"

«Unclear.»

Better than nothing, but not as good as anything explosive. Oh well. You place the shard in the drawer and walk barefoot to your socks and boots. The socks are simple enough, the boots require a good shake (to remove sand deposits, slugs, etc). Just accoutrements remain: your pocketknife, the portable lantern, the woven baggies. You wish you had sunglasses, or mints, or bobby pins, or anything, but sadly you have committed to minimalism.

«You used all your bobby pins in failed attempts to pick locks, I believe.»

It worked sometimes. Right. Time to face the glorious day, to blaze a trail, to, uhh, something dawn. You'll work on it. You untie the knot, push the door aside—

God, the whistling's louder out here— and you'd almost managed to ignore it. From how it sounds, it's coming from the tent next to yours. This is troubling. Nobody lives in that tent.

Possibly it's haunted? It's as good an explanation as any. You stride over to the whistler's tent, make to bust in unannounced, and hesitate. What if it *is* haunted? You don't want to offend the spirits.

You knock instead.

A man promptly sticks his head out. You recognize him immediately: it's the horse-faced man, the man in the grey longcoat, the man who stole your model. You gasp; he smiles. "Charlotte! Hello."

>[1] What are you doing here, horse-faced man???

>[2] You stole my model, horse-faced man!!!

>[3] Your whistling sucks, horse-faced man!!!

>[4] Get out of here, horse-faced man!!!

>[5] Write-in!!

>All of the above!!!

"You!" You stamp the ground. "What are you doing here!"

"Er," the man says mildly. "I live here?"

"You do *not*."

He pushes open the tent flap. Inside— hand-drawn maps across the walls and ceiling. Crude models of foreign creatures across the floor. A camp-provided cot. Opened boxes, unopened boxes.

"Moving in doesn't— that doesn't count!"

He shrugs. "I don't live here, then."

"I— you—" You ball your fists. "I thought you were visiting Madrigal, or whatever! What are you doing *here*!"

"Ah, it was decided I should stick around for a while. I suppose this tent was empty. Why?"

"Because I live *there*!" You point roughly at your tent. "And you're— *here*!"

His gaze follows your finger. "Oh, lovely!"

"No, not—" You put your hand down. "Not lovely! I don't want to be next to you and your— your horse face!"

He raises his eyebrows. "My what?"

What did Eloise tell you? She told you to commit. "Your *horse face*!"

He doesn't say anything, and for a second you think you've gotten somewhere. Then he chuckles. "That isn't bad. I haven't heard that before."

"Really? Because you— you've got one! You've got horse eyes and a horse nose and horse cheekbones, and— God, just look at you!"

"Horses aren't a major frame of reference for most, it would seem." He scratches his chin. "Is that all you came to say?"

"I— no!" You are discovering your well of hatred for the horse-faced man runs deeper than you expected. "You stole my model!"

"No I didn't," he says.

"Huh?" You were not expecting such a flat answer. "Yes you- yes you did. You were *in my tent*, you were *looking at my models*, and then I come in and my model's missing! It's not— it's not rocket science!"

«Nice.»

"It's not r... It's not difficult, you mean?" He shrugs again. "I don't know what to tell you. I didn't steal anything."

"But you... took something?"

"No? I didn't steal anything or take anything, sorry. Hope you find it."

You stare blankly at his horse face. Here you are, with *facts*, actual incontrovertible facts, and he's just— denying them? That's not how facts work. He's supposed to be tearily confessing. "I— so how do you suppose it went missing, huh? It's just a mysterious coincidence?"

"Someone else took it? You just misplaced it? I'm not a detective. But coincidence does sound about right, sure."

You're already in inch-and-a-half heels, but you stand on your tiptoes to eke out every bit of height you can get. You grab hard at the tent flap. "You stole my model, horse face!"

"Like I said, hope you find it. Is *that* all?"

"No! Your whistling is awful, too!"

He chuckles. "Hey, that's why I'm practicing. Did you catch the tune? It's the theme for *Pickering Hour*— you know, the radio—"

"I know what *Pickering Hour* is!" you spit. "You were just so off-key I couldn't tell!"

He sucks his teeth. "I'll keep working on it. Thanks for letting me know, Charlotte."

"You're welcome, horse face! Could you leave now?"

"Pardon?"

"Could you— could you leave! I don't like seeing..." You are growing aware of how ridiculous your stance may be. "Leave."

"I do live here, sorry." He shrugs. Why does he keep *shrugging*? "Might be a couple months. Would you like to come in?"

"Would I *what*?"

He gestures inside. "I have tea. Do you like tea? It's quite a mess in here, for the present, but—"

>[1] You're— just a little— morbidly curious. And you do like tea. Barge in like he didn't just ask you to. (Tread on his foot with your heel.)

>[2] People don't invite *you* places, you invite *people* places. You'll accept his tea, but you choose the location. (Tread on his foot with your heel.)

>[3] Is he insane? You are not going to have tea with the horse-faced man. You are heading straight back to your tent.

>[4] Write-in. [Questions for the horse-faced man, etc]

>Yes. But on your prerogative, not his, obviously.

This is, admittedly, a convincing offer. You don't have any strong feelings towards tea in specific, but you're baldly desperate for surface amenities. If it is surface amenities, anyways.

"Proper tea?" you probe. "Not made from— kelp, or whatever?"

"...Proper tea, yes."

That does it. Without another word, you elbow past him (treading hard on his foot as you do— he mouths "ow!", you are filled with warm satisfaction) into the tent. It's just as you saw in your brief glimpse: like an eccentric-but-wealthy uncle had begun to decorate it, but was struck down by fits before he could finish. It smells of potpourri.

There are, however, rather more boxes than you expected. They're of dry, dented cardboard, and they're marked with masking-tape labels like "DOSSIERS K-P" and "FALSE MOON ARTIFACTS" and "CARPETS," and they are stacked in shelves to the ceiling. How many piles? You keep count as you weave between them— two, ten, twenty. How many boxes in each shelf? Five or six, at least. How long have you been walking? How *big* is this tent?

You whip back around to the horse-faced man, a few steps away— but he's on the other end of a dark tunnel. He is saying something faintly. "Hold on... you didn't give me a chance to..."

He is fiddling with a device in his palm. He flicks a switch. You are rent clean from your navel to your crown, and twisted in opposite directions.

You are in the tent again, two steps from the entrance. It is half-decorated with maps and large models and what appears to be an alligator-skin ottoman. There are about five cardboard boxes.

The horse-faced man looks discombobulated. "Apologies," he says. "Apologies, you didn't— you came in too fast, I left the auks in— I'll find the tea, alright? Yes?"

He hurries past you, longcoat fluttering. You wet your lips. "Um," you say. "The auks?"

«AUX. Auxil—»

"—iary, ah, space." The man has retrieved a kettle from one of the boxes. "Don't worry about it, it's not important. Do you prefer green or black?"

«Read, pocket dimension. But that's now considered a loaded term.»

"Bergamot?" you try. The man shakes his head. "Fine, black tea. You trapped me in a *pocket dimension*, horse face?"

"Some call it an 'auxiliary space'. It's highly debated."

«It's exactly the same thing.»

"You trapped me in an *auxiliary space*, horse face?" If this is what pushes his buttons, you're not letting up so easily.

"Ah, no, it was attached to the entr— can we move on?" The horse-faced man pads back over to you, a teacup in either hand. He offers you one. "Here's your cup. Watch the tea bag."

Retorts flee your lips as you eye the cup. It's not the hammered tin or rough ceramic you've grown used to— it's white, delicate, fluted. You're reverent. "Bone china?"

"Whalebone." He presses the cup into your hands. "Off a scrivener out west. Careful."

"I'll be *careful*. What do you take me for, some kind of—"

You flinch at the kettle's whistle. The man doesn't— he's already over by it, switching off its heating element. "Here we are," he mutters.

"What do you take me for?" you reiterate. "Some kind of non-careful, uh..."

«Very smooth.»

"Well, I don't really know." Horse face pours the hot water for his tea. You have no idea how it stays in the cup— density? But shouldn't it be less dense? You can only handle so many mysteries at a time. "I can't say I take you for anything, Charlotte. How do you take yourself?"

He pours the hot water for your tea. You perch yourself on the ottoman and stare up at him. "What?"

"Well, I'm curious. How do you see yourself?"

>[A1] Respond to that. [What do you say?]

"I'm great, why do you ask?" Why is this guy so curious about you? See if you can't suss out what he expects from you!
--

>[A2] Give him the silent treatment until he changes the subject.

>[A3] Why is he talking about you? You don't even know this guy's name! Tell him you don't speak to people who haven't introduced themselves. (Not that you'll not call him horse face.)

>[A4] Harp about the auxiliary space.

>[A5] Harp about your stolen model.

>[A6] Write-in.

>[B1] Drink your tea once it's steeped.

>[B2] Don't drink your tea.
>[B3] Write-in.

>uhhhh doing great

>Harp on the AUX space.
>Drink your tea.

You finger the edge of your cup uncomfortably. "Uh, I— fine. Great."

"You see yourself as fine?"

"I—"

«Yes. Ask why. Don't cede ground.»

"—Yes. Yeah." You compulsively pluck a stray hair from your collar. "Uh, why?"

The horse-faced man balances his tea with one hand and retrieves a small spiral-bound notepad from his coat in the other. He flicks the notepad open with his thumb and pauses. "You ever wish you had three arms?" he asks colloquially.

"...No?"

"I do. Excuse me." He sets his tea down next to you and, with the newly free hand, slides a wax crayon out from the binding of the notepad. "How do you see... fine," he murmurs as he scribbles on the paper.

"You're writing this down," you say dryly.

"Yes. Do you believe you are currently in some form of afterlife?"

He has his crayon poised. You fold your arms. "No. Why would I?"

"Prior stated reasons include..." He flips back a couple pages in his notes. "...Logically should've died, loss of biological functions, supernatural phenomena inc. rapid healing factor and responsive environment, inability to leave, quote 'everyone here deserves to go to hell, so'..."

You consider saying something like 'yes, horse face, hell is here with you,' but you don't want that ending up in his list. "I'm not *going* to hell, so it's not that. And it sure isn't heaven, so... that's all the options."

"Have you considered this is an intermediary state? Neither punitive nor rewarding, say, but either a 'waiting room' or simply a permanent plane for mediocre souls—"

Your tea has steeped. Eager for a pause, you sip it. It's— it's tea, all right. Salty tea. You're not as happy as you expected to be.

The man's tea lies forgotten next to you on the ottoman. "—parallels to the beliefs of the people of Xalta, who thought the good were reborn as silver fish, and the bad as brown fish— sorry, did you say you were monotheistic?"

This conversation has gone wildly off-track. You need to steer it back to safe territory. "Horse face."

"Yes?"

"Remember when you trapped me in a parallel dimension?"

«Pocket dimension.»

He picks unconsciously at the end of the crayon. "Pocket— auxiliary space. I thought we were past—"

"Right! Yes." You sit upright. "That was pretty messed up, horse face. Don't you need permits to have that sort of—"

«You do, actually. Sign some kind of contract with the manufacturer.»

He sighs. "I *have* permits, they're just, you know, in a box in the AUX. Do you really need me to show you—"

>[A1] Yes. Absolutely. It's not that you care— you just want to make him do a runaround. And maybe you can poke around while he's gone.

>[A2] **That's going a little too far. You've got questions to ask.**

[A2 ONLY]

>[B1] **Okay, but seriously, why did he ask you the first thing? Why's he so interested in you?**

>[B2] Why's he so interested in the afterlife? What's that got to do with anything?

>[B3] Why's he writing things down like a freak?

>[B4] What's his *name*?

>[B5] Write-in.

>**N-no, that's okay**

>But, like, seriously

"Uh," you say, "that's... I'm not a health and safety inspector, horse face. You dodged the question."

His jaw tenses— and relaxes just as quickly. "Which question?"

"I only asked one— why do you *care* how I see myself? You're not my shrink. You're a guy who broke into my tent and stole—"

"Oh, well, I ask everybody it. It's not very popular, as far as questions go." He flips to yet another page. "Ah, let's see. 'Fuck off,' 'Not answering,' 'Better off not here'... you get the gist, yeah?"

This strikes you as off, but you don't have actual grounds to contest it.
"So it's not me—"

"Oh, no, no. This isn't the only notebook, either. I'm just, ah— call me inquisitive."

"You..." You take another sip of tea. "You *broke into my tent.*"

"It didn't have a sign outside, did it? I didn't know it was yours until you came in. Oh, speaking of—" The horse-faced man grips the crayon between his teeth (this makes him look more like a horse, somehow) and works a small white card out from the middle of the notebook. "I found this in here. I think it's for you."

You take the card. "ANTHEA AVES * PRESIDENT * SPELUNKERS ASSOCIATED * CORCASS CHAPTER," says the front, in clean black typewriter ink. You turn it over. On the back, in tiny, cramped handwriting— "Charlotte F. Fawkins. - You Are Sincerely Invited To. - The 17th Monthly Meeting Of Spelunkers Associated. - By Recommendation. - Thirdsday Evening. - Please Consume Card to R. S. V. P. - Thank You."

"Cellu-taped to the door," the man says, by way of explanation. He's pulled the crayon from his teeth. "Confused the tents, maybe."

"Oh," you say. "Thanks? I—"

"By any chance, are you in need of work?"

>[1] This is getting weird. You should down the rest of your tea and leave.
>[2] Nnnnnnnnnnnno. Of course not. You're very busy.
>[3] Well, you wouldn't say "in need," exactly... you're very wealthy... what work?
>[4] Hey, jerk, what's your name?
>[5] Hey, jerk, seriously? "Inquisitive?" Is he for real? You're inquisitive, but you don't go around asking people weird... well, you don't do it systematically.
>[6] Write-in.

>Name?

>.....maybe

You need money badly, but that's not something you're interested in letting slip. "I don't— I don't take *work* from strangers I don't know the name of—"

"Simple enough. C.M.S. Garvin, at your acquaintance." He picks up his (lukewarm) teacup off the ottoman and raises it. "Pleasure."

"You have *two* middle names?"

C.M.S. Garvin grins. "One must do one's best when one's mother has airs of grandeur. Is that enough?"

"I..." You have no retort. "I guess, horse face. What's the work?"

"Nothing complicated— I just need someone to play courier for me, and you seem spry enough. I have some hip issues—"

«He was walking fine.»

You have a different angle. "You expect me to believe that? Hip issues are for grandmothers. You're physically, what—"

He thinks. He counts on his fingers. He riffles back to the front of his notepad. "25? But it's not— it's hereditary, anyways, so it doesn't matter. Are you interested?"

The little question mark on the "25" irks you to no end. You're not altogether pleased that people tend older than they look— you've been trapped at barely 20 for three years— but it's a fact of life. It's expected, though, that one remembers how old they *were*. "Yeah— maybe. You're paying?"

"Of course." He withdraws a leather pouch from the interior of his coat. You don't need to look inside— you can feel the chit from here. "Per delivery, I was thinking. And a down payment for your services—"

He retrieves a small handful of chit. He looks at you. He— hatefully— winks. "—If you don't ask questions."

The handful would pay off your whole tab, or purchase a small trunkload of bobby pins.

>[1] Yeah, okay, you're fairly desperate. Is C.M.S. Garvin doing something illegal? Possibly? Do you care? No? Accept the down payment.

>[2] You're not getting involved in this. Thank him for the tea (brusquely) and leave.

>[3] Forfeit the down payment and ask questions. [What?]

>[4] Write-in.

>Accept.

"Sure," you say. "Sounds good to me. Courierring things. Excellent."

The horse-faced— Garvin scans your face for sincerity and apparently finds it. "Excellent indeed. Have you got a pouch or container—"

You do, actually. You pull a woven mat from your pocket and fashion it into a sort of cup shape. The chit clatters against the sides as Garvin drops it in.

"I'll be in contact," he says casually, as if he had not just paid you a considerable sum of money for no clear reason. "I don't quite have everything sorted at the moment, Charlotte. Was the tea alright?"

Too salty— but then, it was made with saltwater. "It was fine, uh, thanks."

"Excellent." He smiles for a final time. "I'll be seeing you, yes?"

You're too rich to be mad. "Yeah."

You stumble out of C.M.S. Garvin's tent as if in a dream, clutching the chit in one hand. It's undoubtedly genuine— just holding it makes you feel steadier, more solid. You need it.

Who *is* this guy? You hadn't meant eccentric-but-wealthy uncle as a serious descriptor, but it's seeming more accurate all the time. He was Madrigal's friend, right? You should ask her— but no, she hates you—

And the card! Do you have it? Yes, it's in your pant pocket. Who's Anthea Aves? What's a spelunker? Who *recommended* you? And was it really in the wrong tent, or did Garvin filch that, too—

You make it back to your tent— it's as you left it— and flop onto your cot.

You are in possession of a moderate amount of money.

>[1] Head over to the Nothing and pay off your tab. You don't like Jacques mad at you.

>[2] Aw, screw Jacques. Go on a shopping spree. You haven't bought anything nice for yourself in— too long. (Minimalism? What minimalism?)

>[3] **Hide the chit for now and attempt to translate Ellery's mirror writing. The shard should remain in your desk drawer.**

>[4] **Find Madrigal. She might be more forgiving if you're proactive.**

>[5] Write-in.

>**Attempt to translate your pilfered letter.**

>Find Madrigal.

The issue with life, you decide, is that it just keeps going. There's no break, no respite— just things that need doing. And, horrifically, you've got to do them.

And, quite contrary to your expectations, the list has only vastly multiplied. Pre-crown, your life was keenly simple: Find The Crown. It was a goal, a clear, defined end-point, and you liked it that way. Now you've got— choices. Mess. You hate mess.

«As do I, so I suppose that's a commonality.» You've given up hope trying to track when Richard's paying attention: it appears to be entirely random. He's draped comfortably over your legs. «You still need to blackmail Margo, you realize.»

God, you forgot about the blackmail. That was the point, wasn't it? It seems very distant.

«This is not a tenable situation, Charlotte. Imagine if you forgot an appointment—»

You sit up at the thought. He's right: this is *not* a tenable situation. But you don't have a tenable solution, eit—

«Day planner.»

The answer comes too fast for coincidence. "How long have you been—"

«Irrelevant. You need a day planner.»

You slump back down. "Look, Richard, I don't *have* a day planner. I don't know what to tell you."

A short silence. You scratch your chin.

«Make a list, then.»

That's not something you can actually argue with, so you don't. You kick Richard off your legs (he hisses half-heartedly) and walk the couple steps over to the desk. You sit down at it.

All your research is rather pointless, isn't it? It doesn't matter if you reuse the paper. You find a red crayon stub in the stack (it never ceases to feel childish, but the wax doesn't fade or run) and get to scribbling.

"TO DO

- > investigate ellery's text
- > pay off tab
- > buy new clothes
- > get sword (real)
- > get recommendation letters (???)
- > blackmail margo
- > weird business card? RSVP? tomorrow evening? ?
- > read ellery's backwards letter
- > don't get shot by margo
- > illegal(?) courier thing?
- > get stolen model back
- > finish new model
- > TE&A MONTY MOBE&A TH&EF &S HERE
- > madrigal servant thing
- > ask madrigal a/b horse face
- > solve ellery thing before body is discovered
- > ???"

You feel like you're missing one.

«Charlotte.»

You can't put your finger on it.

«The crown—»

Oh. Yes.

"-> Fill crown (?????)"

17 items. It's daunting, you'll admit, but it does actually make you feel better to look at it all. And one's immediately achievable, even. You've got a mirror. You've got a paper with mirror writing. It's not rocket science.

«Do not overuse the expression.»

Where is the paper, though? You stuck it in your coat, you think, but that was over a day ago. Did it fall out? Out of a hunch, you stoop (slightly) to peek under the cot— and there it is, clear as day.

Returning to the chair, you give the paper a glance-over. Now that you look at it, it does begin to resemble a flipped version of the alphabet— but considering the handwriting, you choose to cut yourself some slack. Anyhow, you've got the key. The mirror shard glints crimson on the desk.

It's difficult to get it to an angle where you can see the text in the mirror, but you just about manage. You mouth the words aloud as you read.

"LOG OF 12 KITEMAKER

WOK UP AGEN. COFFED UP MORE SILVER. NOT A GOOD SINE. NOT SURE WHAT I DID TO ME -

- THOUGHT IT MIGHT BE THE 10TH, BUT WENT AND CHECKED NOTIS BOARD. MADDIE WASNT THERE LIKE LAST TIME. 2 DAYS GONE - ALSO NOT A GOOD SINE, BUT BETTER THAN 3-

- LIONFISH TOXIN GONE FROM SYSTEM. PROBABLY FOR BEST -

- VERDIC: DONT DO AGEN"

The last line seems terribly familiar, as does the date. It's an extended version of one of the notes in the manse.

Curious.

You set the mirror shard down on top of your to-do list and stare down at both. You decisively scratch out "-> read ellery's backwards letter." And then, begrudgingly, you add another line: "-> show madrigal backwards letter?"

Still 17 items. You were right: it never stops. You're going to have to pick something more decisive to make any headway.

Madrigal's in three different items— if you could deal with all three at once, it'd certainly be—

«Efficient.»

Damn. You suppose it would be efficient, as loath you are to admit it. Three fish with one hook, etc. Of course, this is all rather predicated on if she'll even talk to you— but of course she will, right? You only punched her. In self-defense!

It's settled, then: you will find Madrigal, you will show her the letter, and maybe she'll call off the whole servant thing. It's only reasonable.

You wrap the mirror shard back up and drop it in your pocket; you fold the paper and stick it on the inside of your coat. You set off.

"MADRIGAL'S TENT," says the sign for Madrigal's tent. You stand outside its flap, reconsidering your decisions. If you just avoid her, she can't tell her to do anything, right—

«Do it, Charlie.»

Fine. You suppose you must.

>[1] Knock and let Madrigal answer. You're trying to be an upright citizen, right?

>[2] **Barge in. You can't show weakness; she'll pounce. You're already under her thumb.**

>[3] Press your ear to the side of the tent. You ought to check if she's in there.

>[4] Practice what you plan to tell her. So you're prepared. It's not weird.

>[5] Write-in.

>Bust in

Knocking is for idiots. If you get the jump on Madrigal, you've got the advantage. With this in mind, you bob in place a couple times to prepare, then shove open the tent flap— it's tied from the inside, but only very weakly.

Madrigal's tent is about the blandest you've seen— it's vaguely cluttered, but that's all you can find to think about it. You sense she doesn't spend a lot of time here. Madrigal herself is sitting on the very edge of her cot, turned away from the entrance. She's clutching some kind of picture. She's... crying, you think. She still has the oversize bomber jacket on.

«Bad time. Bad time. Get o-»

It's too late: she heard your dramatic entrance! She shoves the picture under her leg and turns around just as you're about to slink out. "What," she says thickly.

Yeah, she was crying. Her eyes are red. The bruise on her cheek is a nasty purple. You don't say anything.

"Well, fuck you too." She's rubbing furiously at her face. "Tell me... tell me what you want, or fuck off, okay? I'm— busy."

"Busy with what?" you say innocently. Your hands are in your pockets. "You're just sitting here."

It's not a question she can answer, and you know it, and she knows it. "Fuck off, Charlotte."

"Are you distressed? Do you—" you have to compose yourself to say this, or else you'll start smiling— "need *help*? Is there something I can do, Madrigal?"

«This is entertaining, but recall you're trying to suck up to her.»

"Fuck off. Like I said."

"Well... I don't..." You pull your hands out of your pockets for the sole purpose of twiddling your thumbs. "...I don't think I *can*. I've got to do what you say, remem..."

Foot: mouth.

"Ah!" Madrigal's eyebrows shoot up. "Yes! You do! I forgot! Now fuck off, and that's an order!"

- >[1] **But Maaaaaaadrigal I decoded this paper for you come look [Roll]**
- >[2] **But Maaaaaaadrigal what about your weirdo smuggler(???) friend Horse Face (do not call him Horse Face) [Roll]**
- >[3] Hey Madrigal watcha crying about? What's the picture? I'm a trustworthy person [Difficult roll]
- >[4] Will you stop being mad at me if I tell you that I broke into your ex-bf's head and found a bunch of stuff
- >[5] Sorry I punched you (don't mean it)
- >[6] Fuck off. (Optional: where to? If not, you'll get a list of possibilities)
- >[7] Write-in.

>But Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaadrigal x2
>41, 104, 16 vs DC 60 – Mitigated Success

You've got a to-do list, God-damnit, and you don't intend to budge until you see it fulfilled. Madrigal's face is locked in a sort of rictus. "You're not fucking off!"

"It does appear that way."

"I swear to god, I will—" She makes a strangling motion. Her tears are forgotten. "You are the worst. The absolute— do you understand why Monty has such an incredible hard-on for you? Because I try, and I try, and I cannot wrap my head around it! You're awful in so many exciting ways!"

"Um," you say thoughtfully. "I reminded him of his younger self, I think."

"Gullshit. That's fucking gullshit. Fuck you." Madrigal looks like she wants to stand, but doesn't— she's got a picture to badly conceal. "That's— fuck you. Monty's a hardass, but he's *nice*. You're—"

"He's the one who said it."

"He's delusional, then!" She throws up her hands. "If it were up to me, you'd never have got a tent, you realize? I take one look, and I think 'this bitch is psycho.' And you know what? I was right!"

You're trying to keep your voice in the safe zone between 'placating' and 'patronizing.' "Is this about the whole—" (you gesture to your cheek) "-situation?"

"Gee, I don't know, is it about the fact you knocked my lights out, dragged me into the woods to die, and wandered off? Maybe?"

«Charlie, I really don't know why you had to go do all that. Look where it got you.»

"I didn't drag you in to *die*, that's just melodramatic. I just—"

"Oh! Sorry, Charlotte! Guess I couldn't come up with any other reasons to drag my unconscious body into the underbrush where it couldn't be seen! Why don't you tell me your fantastic reason why!"

"I'm not sure why you have to take that tone," you say. "It's a little childish, you know what I'm saying? Especially for an aged woman like yourself."

It's a little bit of a stretch (she's 30-ish, you think), but it's effective. The rest of Madrigal's face is turning the color of her bruise.

"Anyhow, I dragged you into the underbrush because—" And this is where you stop, because you don't entirely remember. You've got a vague recollection of 'it's good practice,' but this does not seem plausible or appealing. "...It seemed like a good idea at the time, I suppose."

"Yesterday. At the time I was unconscious."

"That'd be the one, yes."

Madrigal closes her eyes. She doesn't seem to have anything to say to this.

You scratch your neck. You feel like there was perhaps a point to this, but it's been lost in the tussle. "So..."

She cracks one eye open. It's still bloodshot. "Hoped you were fucked off."

You'd hoped you'd remember in the space between the "so" and the rest of the sentence, but this has not come to pass. "Guess not."

"Damn."

Damn indeed. You return your hands to your pockets.

"Are you gonna?"

"Gonna what?"

"Fuck off?"

«This is asinine. It's your to-do list. You forgot the to-do list. I'd say to ask her about the things on your to-do list, but you've gone and shot that well to pieces.»

You tug at the sleeve of your coat. God, he's right. Extracting information from Madrigal now is bound to be excruciating, but what are you going to do— leave? Absurd.

«Just start talking.»

Oh, like it's easy. Fine. Whatever. "No, I'm not going to— look, I did come here for a reason. Two— three— two reasons. Which are, uh, as follows. By any case, do- you—" Your voice hitches (your spine is hot), and when it restarts it's oleaginous. You want to buy whatever you're selling. "-are you friends with C.M.S. Garvin?"

Madrigal looks suspicious. "I... not 'friends.' I've met the guy, like, twice."

"Really? He claims you're good friends."

"That's Garvin for you, I guess. He's very, eh, familiar—" Madrigal stops herself, shakes her head, holds up a hand. "You're supposed to be fucking off."

"I've also made a major discovery regarding the Ellery situation," you(?) continue smoothly. "I thought you might be interested in it."

For a moment, you think Madrigal might cry again. She affects nonchalance instead. "I don't... maybe. It might depend on the type— what discovery?"

The paper and mirror shard are already in your hand. You hand Madrigal the paper. She scans it and looks back up to you. "Is this Ellery's? How'd you—"

"It is, and my methods are immaterial." ('Immaterial' was not a you-word. It fit oddly in your throat.) "Have you any idea what sort of writing this is?"

She returns to the paper. "Oh. Shit. Is this mirror writing?"

You can feel Richard's disappointment compounding your own. "Er... yes."

"God dammit. Where'd he get his grubby fucking hands on a mirror? It wasn't me, I keep that locked down. God, I bet he's been... snorting ground mirror bits, just to see what happens. Or whatever. Because he does that."

"I found no evidence of him owning a mirror..." you attempt.

"It's mirror writing, dumbass, you need a mirror to do it. I bet it's Keith."

"...Pardon?"

"Keith. I bet Keith sold him the mirror. I fucking hate Keith."

>[1] Enough about Keith. Show her the translated version— dated three months ago.

>[2] Try to tactfully bring up Eloise's story of the mirror writing being... unintentional, however that works.

>[3] Inquire about mirrors. She clearly knows of them in a business sense— anything else?

>[4] Madrigal's guard is down, kind of. Luckily, you've got more case questions for her. (Which? Various suggestions can be found throughout the clue bin linked early in the thread.)

>[5] Write-in.

>Translate the letter.

>Relate Eloise's story. (If it's a good time.)

"Er," you say, "yes. So, at considerable personal expense, I managed to translate it into regular—"

"Oh man. Did you go letter by letter? You didn't have to do that, I could've—"

You show her the shard in her palm.

"Oh, shit." Madrigal furrows her brow. "Why's it *red*?"

"...It came that way."

"Huh." She's already slid on thin gloves. You suppose they must've been in the pocket of the jacket. "That's— give me the mirror? No, wait." She slides the mystery picture out from under her leg and tucks it in her waistband, then ducks under the cot. She comes out wielding a loupe in her left eye. "Now give me the mirror."

She takes it from your palm and holds it up to the loupe. "Huh," she says, then "hmm," then "that's interesting." She removes the loupe and waggles the shard. "It's genuine, all right, but it's a weird one. Discounting the whole red thing, even. The edges aren't uniform. It came this way?"

"Y...es."

"You got a hand-cast one, not a mass-produced. Far less valuable. How much did you pay—"

"I didn't ask for an *appraisal*." You'd rather keep 'I picked this up off the ground from a corpse' to yourself. "Just translate it, would you?"

"You got scammed, gotcha. You're welcome. Hold *on*—"

She holds the mirror to the paper. "'Log of 12 Kite—'" She closes her eyes. "*Charlotte*. This is from *12 Kitemaker*."

"I'm glad you can read—"

"That's three months ago, yeah? Three months *after* the Incident? Which was Fifthday, 23 *Netmaker*?"

You're not sure which is more pathetic— 'the Incident' or the precise dating of it. "What time?"

"Mid-morning." You smirk. "But that's not— the point is, how the shit is this *relevant*? Did you just pick a random one from the stack and—"

«As I recall, you did.» Richard's back, loose around your shoulders. You were wondering where your unction had gone. «Excellent work, detective.»

"Just- you haven't even read it!"

"For god's sake." But Madrigal keeps reading. "'Woke up again. Coughed up more silver'— what did I say? He's been snorting the stuff, I'd bet my eye on it. 'Not sure what I did to me'— oh, good. *Cryptic*."

Like it's a bad word.

"'Thought it might be the 10th, but went and checked the notice board. M—'" Madrigal's voice cracks. "'Maddie wasn't there like last time.'"

She covers her eyes with her hands, drops her head to her lap. You don't have the heart to say anything.

Finally, she raises her head, wipes her nose, resumes. "'Two days gone'— what does *that* mean? 'Lionfish toxin'..."

Again, to the lap. Her voice is again thick when she rises. She speaks to the paper. "Fucking moron."

"Uh," you say. "What?"

"Lionfish toxin is fatal." Back to you. "It fucks up your heart. And everything else, but— the heart's the important part."

You hadn't known that. "Oh."

"'Oh.' 'Oh.' *Fuck* you, Charlotte." Madrigal wipes her nose again.

You're not sure how to handle this. "Maybe he didn't know it was..."

"Fucking moron. Of course he *knew*."

"Well..." You tug at your neckline. "I mean, it wasn't fatal, right? He's... still..."

You can't finish the sentence.

"He *knew*, and he did it anyways." It doesn't matter whether you finish. You might as well be wallpaper. "He *knew*. It's not carelessness. It's not— it's recklessness, but it's not— he usually—" Her bottom lip trembles. "It's all my fault."

Every instinct in your body is telling you to get out before a Scene happens— it's only a curdled mix of disgust and pity that keeps you rooted to the spot. "What's all your fault?"

You might as well have asked why things fall down, she says it like it's so obvious. "Everything!"

"Oh. Well, I'm sure that's not, uh, true..."

"He's chugging venom! He's- he's coughing up gunk! He's- do you think this'd be happening if I were—"

"Well," you say apologetically, "I mean, it *is* Ellery—"

"*Fuck* you! He's impulsive, he's not supposed to be sui—"

It's the breaking point. Madrigal takes a great heaving sob-breath. Your lizard brain is telling you to run for the hills.

«I'll give you some credit. You could only have predicted a good 75% of this.»

"I don't think," you say a little desperately, "I don't think he was *suicidal*, was he? That's no kind of suicide— he said not to do it again, I mean."

"Not— he wouldn't- he wouldn't see it that way." She's well and truly crying again. "He'd— ask him. Ask him. He'd be all 'I'm not *shooting* myself, am I?' But that's not— dodging in front of bullets is still—"

"Or not trying to dodge the bullets. Say." Your lips feel very dry. You're not sure what to do with your hands.

"Y- yeah." Madrigal takes another breath/sob.

You would not like to think about the unpleasant thing you just thought about. "Maybe," you say a lot desperately, "maybe you've got it sort of backwards. Maybe he just thought he'd— survive."

"Why would he..." Madrigal wipes tears from her eyes. "That's stupid."

Is it stupid? Maybe it's stupid. It's probably stupid. You expect Richard to tell you how stupid it is any second.

«It's not that stupid.»

"It's not," you protest. "That stupid."

"Fuck you. Yes it— he's not a fucking goo, Charlotte. He's not *immortal*, Charlotte. Fuck you— why did you *give* me this?"

"The... paper?"

"Yes! You knew what was on it, didn't you! You gave it to me so you could—so you could *laugh* at me. Because you're a psycho. Look at you!"

But that's wrong! Is your bemusement reading as amusement? Are you cursed forever to look attractively smug? "I'm—" you fumble, "I'm not—"

"Then why did you *give me this*? Do you possibly expect me to believe it's *relevant*?"

>[1] Tell the embarrassing truth: you didn't think the implications through. No more, no less.

>[2] Is it relevant to the breakup angle? No? But that wasn't the original question. The original question is 'what's wrong with Ellery,' and this provides some excellent answers.

>[3] You think she's being a little ungrateful here, really. Doesn't this capture her attention? Doesn't she want to know **why**? So it doesn't answer everything at once— so what? You're working hard out here.

>[4] To be fair: she's missing quite a lot of context regarding this note... and where you originally found it. You're going to have to tell her about the manse. [Specify how much. Specify if you want to let her in on your various theories.]

>[5] She's focusing way too much on one part of the note. The cryptic "what did I do to me" — that seems to link up with Eloise's story of Ellery's confusion, right? Relate that to her.

>[6] Listen to your lizard brain and GTFO.

>[7] Write-in.

>Wait, compassion is for suckers!

>Relate Eloise's story.

What's wrong with you? Why are you standing here, dethorned, declawed? You should be kicking her when she's down. She's a, she's a peasant, and you're queen! You're queen! You'd forgotten. You should be bossing *her* around, not— isn't it illegal to tell you what to do? You feel like it should be, and if it's not, well— you'll make it illegal. That's right. Because you have that power. Will have that power. Just as soon as you—

"*Well*?" Madrigal demands. "Got an answer? Or are you just gonna have that stupid look on your face—"

Stupid look on your face? She's the one with the puffy eyes, and snot, and, and, tears...

The pity rises again in your throat, like stomach acid. You swallow it down.

«Good girl.»

"Of course it's *related*," you snap. "He dumped you for a reason, didn't he? There's—"

"This is *after that!*"

"Who says it didn't start before! Who says there wasn't something wrong all along, and you just *didn't notice!*"

She's quiet.

"You think he's coughing up gak because of you? You're that *egocentric*? I bet— I bet a hundred to one it's been happening for *months*. Think of him and you on—" You can't picture Ellery in any kind of romantic situation. He's got too much blood on him.

«A walk.»

"—a walk," you continue, relieved. "And you're yammering away. And he's just looking at you, and in his nasty-looking eyes—"

"They're hazel," Madrigal mumbles. "Hazel."

"—he's screaming for help. And it just goes right on past you. And you're wondering why you got *dumped?*"

This is about the point where you got punched, last time, but Madrigal just sits there and cries. It kind of sucks the fun out. It's not sporting.

She says something you don't understand.

"What?"

"...Proof." She wipes her nose with vigor. "Have you got proof."

You have not got proof. That speech was wholly extemporaneous— though it has the whiff of truth about it, you think, or else she wouldn't be crying so much. "For pre-dumping? Not at present, no. For his condition a scant three months ago? A bevy. Not just this note, but Eloise told me—"

"Hah."

"*Eloise told me* that she had Ellery come in three months back, asking for a mirror. He said he'd been writing mirrored."

"Great proof."

"*Without knowing*. Said he'd only just realized it. Said he didn't even own a mirror."

Madrigal puts her face in her hands.

"So there you have it, I suppose. He's sick, or he's gone mad, or someone's messing with him—"

"Not sure what I did to me."

"What?"

She raises her head. "What the note said. You said it was the same timeframe."

"Er, yes—"

"He did it. Maybe— I don't know, maybe on accident. Maybe he *did* snort mirror dust, so he went all— mirror. It said he was coughing up silver."

This is disgustingly plausible. "I... guess."

"Fuck me, I don't— whatever it was, I caused it. Or, or, made it worse. Either way. I—" Face back to hands. "I need to talk to him."

No!

«Ooh. Ouch.»

She sees and misinterprets your look of horror. "It's— it won't be like other times. I have evidence, I have— you're coming with. I'm taking you with."

It just keeps getting worse. "I— that can't be necessary."

"It's not a big deal. He knows you're investigating him— you fucking *told* him. And you've got all the info, so I've got to."

"I told you the—"

"He won't *believe* just me. I've—" She stands shakily. "Come on."

You quaver. "I really— I really— don't—"

"It's an *order*."

>[1] It's fine, right? This is fine. All that will happen is she can't find Ellery, because you killed him. He's gone all the time. She won't *suspect* anything. Just go and promptly return.

>[2] **This could be an opportunity, actually. If Ellery's not in his tent (and he won't be), you can convince Madrigal to help you dig through it. She'll have more of a perspective on what's important.**

>[3] Logically, you should be fine. Emotionally, you're panicking. You can't do this. Convince Madrigal to leave you behind, despite her order. [Roll.]

>[4] Write-in.

>Acquire sidekick.

One does what one must, even if it makes one feel sick. You tip your head in assent.

"Right. Good." Madrigal undoes her bandana and wipes her face and nose with it. She looks up at you. "Do I- do I look okay?"

She looks like she's just been crying. "No."

"Well— maybe he'll pay more attention." She stuffs the bandana into her shorts pocket and slides off her bomber jacket, leaving just the scanty tank top.

"More attention, hm?" you snipe.

It's the first smile she's managed since you got here. "Can't hurt."

And with that, you're off. You attempt to trail far enough behind Madrigal that it doesn't look like you're trailing her at all, but she's walking so fast you have no choice but to hurry. Defiantly, she cuts through the heart of camp. You're lucky it's a sunny day: you suspect the usual crowd is off mudskipping, skylarking, or expeditioning in the Fen, not hanging around watching you.

Not there's nobody watching you. Eloise is there, chatting up some red-haired woman with a jaw like a brick. She gives the both of you a wave. Meaning everyone will know by evening, anyways.

«Start thinking of a spin. I suggest: you've turned over a new leaf and are aiding even those who openly despise you. Voluntarily.»

It'll have to be something like that. But here you are, finally, in front of Ellery's tent. Madrigal rubs one last time at her face, then knocks on the tentpole.

Nobody answers. You release the breath you didn't realize you were holding.

"I guess he's not in," Madrigal mumbles. "Figures."

"Is it tied?"

She tries the flap. It opens. "Oh, huh. Hold on." She pokes her head in, then recoils. "He *cleaned*."

Thanks to you. "I know. So am I free, or—" Inspiration hits. "—would you want to do a quick search of his things? For— evidence, you know. Since you'd know it better—"

Madrigal wavers. "He could come back."

"He won't," you say.

"I—" She screws up her face. "Yes. Sure. Just a— because I'm *worried*, not because I'm some kind of— crazy— you know."

You've already pushed inside. The interior is very close to how you left it the other day, excepting what might be a new layer of papers. And Ellery's brown coat, *intact*, tossed casually over the chaise longue.

Madrigal's followed you in. "Of course he left his coat," she scoffs.

In the late morning light, a great deal more detail is revealed to you. There's a green chaise lounge covered entirely with open boxes— and one coat— to your immediate right, and varied keepsakes on the hanging shelves above it.

To your immediate left, there is a worn wooden coathanger (you spend a moment brooding on the irony) with no coats on it, but one pair of scratched safety goggles. Farther to the left, along the wall, lies what might be a table— it's covered entirely with paper, among other things. Soft-lead pencils. Whale-wax black crayons. A small box of rubber bands and salvaged thumbtacks. A clay bowl of unshelled tapegrass nuts, and another of their shells. An empty nautilus-shell, evidently as a paperweight.

Past the maybe-table is a small upholstered chair, shoved into the far left corner. Unlike every other surface in the room, there is nothing on it.

On the floor: haphazard stacks of paper, everywhere, except in the center. And other things. Stacks of thinner boxes under the maybe-table, each hand-labeled "FRETSAW PZL," then a descriptive term of choice: "LEAFIRE AT DUSK," "PANTHER ATTACK." A broken, discarded knife.

«A jackknife, Charlie. For wood.»

A steadily-rusting iron mirror (none of the properties of glass). A— you turn up your nose— little shrine to one of his dead gods, with wilted flowers. A radio.

A *radio*? Surely not. The expense! The luxury! That sort of thing can't be made, by hand or by architecture: it's too complicated, and there isn't the material for it. It must be salvaged and repaired, or else brought down specially, or else bought or bartered from someone who did either. But the squat wooden box at your feet is a radio, sure as the day you're born, and you are filled with dark and screaming envy.

«Not yet, Charlie.»

On the ceiling: a glow-orb, on a string.

On the walls: paper. Paper paper paper paper. Mostly written on, some drawn on, all illegible, mirrored— that you can see, at least.

Even Madrigal seems daunted. ("A lot of this is new," she says. "Most of the paper.") You've got a lot of work ahead.

>[1] Look at something. (What?)

>[2] Look for something in particular. (What?)

>[3] Just kind of shuffle through until something strikes your interest or fancy.

>[4] Follow Madrigal's lead. She's been in here, you assume, quite a lot.
>[5] Write-in.

> [1] Check his coat and the boxes nearby
» That shrine looks horrendously pagan, let's poke at it
> [5] "Hey Madrigal, does this radio work?" Totally don't ask because you want to sneak off with it later.
Go through the coat's pockets and read some notes

>Coat

Without comment, Madrigal has begun to sift through the things on the maybe-table. You begin instead with the coat. It seems like a bad omen, though of what kind you're unsure. A premonition? A warning? Or Ellery just has two identical coats. But no, that's absurd.

You examine it from a distance, just to be sure. It's a standard men's thigh-length collared topcoat, one-size-fits-all: there's straps on the wrists and shoulders to adjust, currently let out all the way. Not economical to account for different measurements anymore. Fabric: mud-colored cloth, thick, rough, cheap— you'd say hopsack, but you'd need to feel to be sure. Dull black buttons down the front. Overall, beaten up to hell and back: the elbows worn, the sides scraped, the collar nicked and torn.

How your mother would put it, were it one of her good days: "it's seen some love."

You're burying the lede, though, which is: the last time you saw this coat, it was shot to pieces in front of Tom's Cave, along with— well. But excepting the hell-and-back, the coat in front of you is whole.

You purse your lips.

«Bad omens do not exist, Charlie.» Says Richard, the talking snake. You have tried many times to convince him of the irony, but he refuses to acknowledge it (or the bad omens). «It's just a coat, I'm afraid. Albeit an unusual one.»

You purse your lips harder. "Madrigal," you call.

"What?"

"Would you look at this coat?"

She comes over and looks at the coat. "It's his coat."

You look at her expectantly.

"I— it's his coat. He wears it all the time."

You nod towards it.

"For god's sake. Get me if you find anything." Madrigal returns to her sifting.

Damn! Your plot, foiled. Fine. You touch the coat. Yes, hopsack. No, no evil energy (at least the detectable kind).

«See.»

Omen or not, touching the fabric still gives you a quick, jumpy, hare-scared feeling. It's too much of a personal thing, the coat. It's too constant, too present, too— you can't say you've ever seen Ellery without it. Lying here, it seems molted, or shed. Like a cicada shell. Like a snakeskin.

Which is to say you spend about twenty seconds staring at the coat before you work up the courage to go through its pockets. The outside two are busted, which you didn't predict, but could've. Undaunted, you check inside.

You get more than you bargained for. Eight pockets in total, none of which were built into the coat— every one of them was crudely sown in later. You go clockwise.

First pocket: empty.

Second pocket: sand, fine and pale. You run it through your fingers. Nothing else.

Third pocket: empty.

Fourth pocket: empty.

Fifth pocket, guarded with a button: A folded photograph. Madrigal, half-smiling, not looking at the camera.

Sixth pocket: A note. Two notes, one inside the other. Ellery's handwriting, mirrored. You translate.

"YOU'RE FINE. DON'T PANICK. DON'T JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS. LAY LOW. IT HAS BEEN 1 OR 2 DAYS OUT."

"ALSO YOU'VE BEEN TO THE CAVE ALREADY WHICH IS WHAT THIS IS ABOUT. ~~BLONDE CHARL~~ LOTTIE
FUCKED IN THE HEAD. MAYBE OTHER PLACES. BE CAREFUL."

You cannot crumple the notes up fast enough. You stuff them into your own pocket.

Seventh pocket: empty.

Eighth pocket: empty.

It's bathetic, to say the least. Why weren't there eight sets of notes? Or eight things, at least? What's the point of sowing in pockets if you're not going to make use of them—

«Legerdemain, I'm guessing.»

You don't remember what that is, but it sounds stupid.

«It's not stupid, Charlie, it's an elevated art. It's the finding of loopholes and ambiguities in the rules and it's the exploiting of them in such a masterful and silent way that the rules don't notice. It's—»

Wait, you take that back, you do remember. It's what Richard called the poof thing. Poof, there's a glass. Poof, there's a bucket. And so on. Things out of nowhere.

«It's not called the 'poof thing,' Charlie, it's called legerdemain. The more pockets you have, the more probable it is to have any given pocket-sized object. The more probable it is, the more likely you are to pull that object out of a pocket. Even an empty one.»

Briefly, you picture the inside of Richard's suit. Yellow silk. Thirty or so pockets.

He brushes against your neck. «I have no need. And the suit has no inside.»

>[1] Show Madrigal something of what you've found so far. (What?)

The photo of her.

>[2] Check in with her findings.

>[3] Inquire about Ellery and legerdemain. (Or pockets.)

>[4] Just keep searching.

>[5] Write-in.

>Shrine.

>Show Madrigal the picture of herself.

>Boxes.

And Richard's over here claiming bad omens don't exist when his suit's got no inside. It just doesn't follow. You can either believe in neither, or both, and you are going with both. So there.

«You're very witty. Speaking of lies, Charlie, there is a <shrine>.» Did Richard just notice it? He's coiling midair in quite high dander, you think, though of course it's impossible to tell. «Do not go near it. It abounds with foul hematic vibrations.»

Oh? Foul vibrations, huh? Sounds pretty evil to you. Sounds pretty cursed. Sounds pretty omen-y. Forgetting the coat, you march over to the shrine and bend to look.

«Charlie. Charlotte.»

It's kind of small and sad-looking, primarily. Befits the subject. You're not well-versed on the religions of the lower classes, but there's not much to know— their gods are dead, quite verifiably, with filed eyewitness

accounts. There's nowhere and nothing left to worship. Why anyone persists is a mystery.

«Charlotte. Do not examine the pretender-gods.»

There might've been eight, possibly, named Sea this and Sea that. The shrine is certainly themed as such: it centers around a wooden statuette a foot high, hand-carved (by jackknife?) to look like waves, or somesuch. Around the statuette is strewn small shells and stones and some wilted swamp orchids. Everything is salt-crustrated to the floor. This clearly hasn't been touched in a long while.

«Listen to me, Charlotte.» You have no intention of listening to such a blatant hypocrite / possible demon. (Richard has lingered back a couple feet from the shrine. This will be an arrow on your 'what is he actually?' mental list.)

Seeing no other option but to stoop down, you do. The shrine reveals no more of its mysteries, except that the statuette is stained a little orange-reddish at its top.

«Don't touch that.»

You touch it. You get a quick, jumpy, hopscotchy, hare-scared feeling— in your bones, maybe, or bone marrow. Same as the coat, only you can't attribute this to the "too personal" garbage.

«Stop touching that.»

You were going to stop— it's not an unpleasant sensation, but it's not a pleasant one, either, reminding you of a minor electric shock. Now you won't stop. You stare Richard in his dead eyes and continue holding the statuette.

«Charlotte, you sor—» Richard stops himself. You suppose he's been trying to be nice, recently, not insulting you directly. Maybe he feels bad about the incident in town. «Stop.»

Spite keeps you held fast. You ignore the feeling. You ignore the steady tremors in your hands and wrists. You ignore the half-smile you have involuntarily twitched into.

>[ID: 9/11]

"Hey," Madrigal says. She stands above you, looking suspicious. "What are you doing?"

You half-smile up at her. She frowns down at you. Realization dawns. "Oh, shit. Your eye. Stop touching—"

Richard stays wisely silent. Grateful, you release. The feeling stops.

"—Shit. Okay. Okay." Madrigal presses her thumb and forefinger to her face. "Yeah, that thing's got a shit ton of his blood on it, so that's— careful."

«Hematic vibrations. As I said.»

"I would've been fine," you protest. "I'm not scared of—"

"Your eye was turning hazel."

You touch the eye. "Oh."

Blood: it carries the stuff of a person, the *essentia* and *effluvium* (these aren't you-words, again— has Richard left debris behind?) alike. In more radical interpretations, it *is* the person, the brain a dumb and deaf interpreter, the body a plumbing system only. In either case, you just came in contact with a lot of undiluted Ellery.

In what is becoming a recurring theme, you feel sick.

«Coat must've absorbed quite a lot at one point, too. Anyway, Charlotte, I told you you're not to tangle with that. You're falling apart with one influence in your head. You do not need more.»

"Yeah," Madrigal says. "Trust me, it's not worth it. It's not worth trying to dig. Shrine's not even *relevant*. Look, he hasn't touched it in— what, five, six months?" She gestures to the salt buildup.

"Since after he dumped you, then?"

She fidgets. "...Guess so."

"You'd think that'd be even more of a time to turn to your ...cannibal gods, or whatever?"

«Usurpers. Thieves.»

"...He was never that devout, so I don't— he did a lot of bloodletting for other things, so I think the shrine got the extra. Like watering flowers."

"So he didn't do bloodletting after he dumped you?"

Madrigal folds her arms. "You keep insinuating— it was mutual, Charlotte."

"Which is why *he's* crying at the mention of you."

«Keep it civil.»

"I wasn't crying," Madrigal says blithely, and it's really kind of a pain to update your 'worst lies ever' mental list, but you do it anyways. "I don't *know* if he did or not. I didn't see him."

«Actually, back up. You skipped the important part. His blood is normal for some length of time before the split, or else has the same properties as regular blood. Likely the former, from color.»

Not something you can bring up to Madrigal. You scratch your neck.

"Anyways," she says, "did you ever find anything in the coat?"

Notes you're not showing her, ordinary sand, and a photograph. Which you never picked up. You lead Madrigal back to the coat (Richard follows behind) and retrieve the photo. (On the topic of the eight pockets: "Yeah, front two have been busted long as I've known him. Guess he got damn fed up.") You hand her it.

Madrigal tears up again. That's what happens. You should've expected this, but somehow you'd projected a scrap of decorum onto her. It's irritating, and a waste of time besides. You search the boxes while you wait for her to get over it.

They're full of wood. Box one: some variety of wood. Box two: some other variety of wood. Box three: wood, but with the bark scraped off. Box four: some half-carved logs, and some very bad fully carved logs. Box five: some better-carved logs. And so on. You keep opening boxes in the hopes they'll be anything but wood, but you never fail to be disappointed. (Except one, which contains woodcarving tools, but it's too close for you not to count it.)

"Madrigal," you say, in your best withering tone, "these boxes are full of wood."

She snuffles. "He- he picked up a hobby. He likes trees. It got out of hand."

«Why did you bother asking.»

Fourteen boxes, and they're all just wood and wood paraphernalia. Out of sheer desperation, you begin to dig through the boxes in random order. You get a splinter. You stop digging through the boxes to suck on your finger. You begin again.

Box two ("some other variety of wood") is where you hit pay dirt. In the midst of a neat cabin-stack of logs, you retrieve a slim leather-bound book.

"LOG," the front says, and you could've about blasted the tent to pieces with the force of your sheer incandescent unfathomable rage just then.

Madrigal has gotten over the photograph (she has refolded it and tucked it tenderly into its pocket) and is now in an infuriatingly good mood. She laughs, probably at the cover, but it feels like at you. You seethe.

You've basically forgotten that you just found Ellery's— diary? He wouldn't call it that, as a man, but his diary. It's only Richard that brings you down to reality: «Open the book, Charlotte.»

Is he *invested*? You thought you were frittering away your life, or whatever it is.

«You're frittering away your life by not opening the book, Charlotte.»

The LOG is locked with a simple gold latch— evidently Ellery relied more on the hiding spot for security. The first entry is dated to 10 months ago, and reads (in Ellery's handwriting, looking especially shaky): "WAS TOLD IT

MIGHT BE USEFUL TO RECORD OWN THOUGHTS ON THE PROCEDURE, BEFORE AND AFTER, AND THE REASONS BEHIND IT. SO I AM.

REASONS: "A HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF CAN NOT STAND," THAT GUY SAID, AND I DON'T KNOW WHERE HE GOT THAT FROM, BUT I GUESS I'M THE HOUSE. DECIDED AMONG OURSELVES (MYSELVES) IT WOULD BE BEST SHOT AT NORMAL. AND MADDY'S ALWAYS SUPPORTED.

THOUGHTS: KIND OF SECOND GESSING THIS, BUT BACKING OUT IS WORSE, I/WE THINK STILL GOT A COUPLE WEEKS. ITLL BE FOR THE BEST."

Pay dirt indeed. You found the procedure. To stitch his brain back together, or whatever Richard said.

>[A1] Stuff this in your coat pocket (it fits, barely) and read it at a later date. You've got higher priorities.

>[A2] Just skip to the meat of the thing: the procedure and right after. That's all you need.

>[A3] **Read it straight through (it's not all that long). You never know what you'll find, but— well, you may not be frittering your life away, but you have no time limit. Nobody lives here.**

>[A4] Write-in.

>[B1] Have Madrigal read over your shoulder.

>[B2] **Read by yourself. (As possible.)**

>[B3] Write-in.

>**Read the whole thing.**

>Without Madrigal.

Do you want Madrigal to see this? You'd like to avoid more waterworks, if possible, so maybe it's best if not. "I'll take a look at this," you say. "Why don't you get back to— whatever you were doing?"

"Suit yourself," she says, and gets back to whatever she was doing. Looking at the papers, you think.

Satisfied, you seat yourself on the sole uncluttered chair and continue on to the next entry in the LOG. It's a couple days later, still Ellery's handwriting, still shaky.

"FORGOT TO UPDATE THIS, BUT I DON'T THINK IT MATTERS MUCH. GOT MORE INFO ON THE PROCEDURE. DOC SAID IT WON'T HURT & ~~WONT~~ WILL TAKE A SECOND ONLY. 'EXACTLY A SECOND?' I SAID, 'OR JUST A SHORT AMOUNT OF TIME?' NEVER MEASURED, APPARENTLY, BUT IF NOT AN XACT SECOND CLOSE TO IT. NOT SURE HOW TO FEEL ABOUT THIS. FEEL LIKE IF ITS SO SHORT WHY AM I

GETTING SOMEONE ELSE TO DO IT. DOC SAID ITS A LODE OF WORK, ACTUALLY, IT'S JUST THE LOOSE SPANNER, ETC, AND EXPLAINED TO ME LIKE I DIDNT KNOW THE WORD. REGRETING THIS."

Richard's dropped it a couple times, but you continue to not know what "spanner" means.

«Charlotte, it's the ratio of time dilation between depth 1—»

You didn't say you *cared*. You turn the page.

Curiously, the next entry has the same date. More curiously, it's printed quite neatly— maybe even using a proper grip. It's in blue colored pencil.

"Please ignore the previous entry. Was not in right mindset (literally). This has long sense been decided on.

I feel I have been unduely concerned with the prospect of 'death' or 'loss,' despite neither taking place, as in fact I do not exist to die or be lost. Please be aware of this fact."

Same day, again. Back to shaky, back to ordinary pencil.

"I TOLD THAT GUY NOT TO WRITE IN MY FUCKING LOGBOOK, AND LOOK WHAT HE DOES. DON'T ASK ME WHY I WANT TO BE PART OF THIS, BECAUSE I JENUINLY DO NOT KNOW. WAS I A PRICK BEFORE?"

And so on. Over the following three weeks, normal-pencil Ellery goes on to worry about everything he can think to worry about, to wander down dense, spiraling digressions (you skim an entire page about turtles), to write quite awful love poetry for Madrigal, to worry about the poetry, to worry about Madrigal, to worry about the love. ("What if a second passes — and I no longer care?" God, do you not care.) Thrice the blue pencil returns, each time insistent: Calm down. I'm not even real. I don't matter. You're going back to normal, is all. It'll be fine.

You are beginning to think there might be such thing as too personal of a matter.

«Your own fault, Charlotte, for tunneling in on the fripperies. This man is circling around two questions. He will not state the identity of the doctor, and he will not state what the procedure consists of, despite having clear knowledge of both.»

Maybe he doesn't find it relevant. You're interested in the blue writing—you've seen that shade somewhere before, or a glimmer of it, or something. That neat print, too. If only your mind wasn't a sieve...

«That's pathetically simple, Charlotte. That's the—» Richard does a strange jerk of his head— «'me'.»

You stop idly flipping through the pages. "The *what*?"

«I have no obvious way to convey sarcasm. The 'me'. The psyche-fracture. It's doing the blue writing.»

"That guy," Ellery called it, which is about as terrible a name as you could expect. 'Richard' beats the pants off it.

«Yes.»

But look at you— you're the one going down a spiraling digression. You'll be here all day if you discuss instead of reading. (Madrival's already amassed a small mountain of notes off the wall.) You've made it to the day before the procedure, about nine months ago— three before the break-up.

Really, the circumstances deserve a better title than piddly "break-up." Henceforth you'll call it the Incident.

«That's worse.»

Shut up. Three months and change before the Incident. Night before the procedure— sorry. Procedure.

Ellery: "I'VE WRITTEN A HUNDRED TIMES THERE'S NO TURNING BACK NOW BUT THERE'S REALLY NO TURNING BACK NOW, NOT AFTER I'M DOWN A PINT AND A GILL OF BLOOD. THE GILL'S FOR PERSONAL USE— IF I'M LUCKY I WON'T NEED IT, I'LL JUST PRODUCE MORE OF THE SAME— BUT I'M NEVER LUCKY. LOST EVERY GAME OF DICE I'VE EVER PLAYED. REMAINS TO BE SEEN IF I'LL LOSE THIS ONE.

MADDY KISSED ME AND TOLD ME THAT SHE'S PUT UP WITH HALF-CRAZY ME FOR SO LONG SHE'S NOT SURE WHAT SHE'LL DO ABOUT THE SAME ONE. THINK SHE WAS JOKING. STILL ASKED.

I'LL REPORT IN AFTER THAT GUY'S HANDLING THE TALKING

A LITTLE OF THE GILL. "

A bloody thumbprint as signature. You turn the page.

40 KM, it's labeled. (Not the Kitemaker of the lionfish toxin— the one prior.) The Day of Reckoning.

«You have got to stop.»

"It's morning," the entry begins. "I'll be dead in 15 minutes. Which is a selfish way to put it, because of course I've been claiming the opposite: I can't die, I never lived at all. That was either a half-truth or a lie, I'm unsure which— depends on the definition of life at hand. But I feel alive, and I don't want to stop, anyways.

That's all for the pity party. Because the fact of it is that this is for the best, and the whole point of me is for the best. And I'll still be there, somewhere, even if that's cold comfort. We had a good run, Ellery. Keep out of trouble for me. "

The opposing page is undated. It's blank except for a terse line in a heavy hand: "FEEL LIKE SHIT. "

Next page is also undated. "STILL FEEL LIKE SHIT, BUT I CAN WRITE. GOT TWO DOZEN IDEAS NOCKING AROUND LIKE BALL BAZINGS IN HERE. CLICK CLACK CLICK CLACK GOING TO TRY AND GET THEM DOWN BEFORE I FORGET.

- LEGS HURT. TORSO HURTS. PANTS SHOW AN INCH OF ANKLE (WILL NEED TO REHEM). 90% SURE I AM TALLER THAN I USED TO BE. THAT GUY WAS TALLER THAN ME BY A LITTLE.

- IT'S QUIET.

- I HAVE A HEADACHE.

- I DON'T FEEL ANY DIFFERENT & AT THE SAME TIME I FEEL LIKE I'M MISSING SOMETHING & AT THE SAME TIME I FEEL LIKE THERE'S SOMETHING BRAND NEW AND I DON'T KNOW WHAT ANY OF IT IS. I DON'T FEEL NORMAL THOUGH.

- WAS I EVER NORMAL? WAS THAT EVEN AN ACHIEVABLE STATE?

- DAMN IT'S QUIET.

- IT FELT LIKE A SECOND BUT I DON'T BELIEVE FOR A SECOND (HA HA) IT ACTUALLY WAS. YOU DON'T GET THAT KIND OF SPANNER. THINK THEY TINKERED WITH MY SENSE OF TIME WHILE IN THERE. PROBABLY MORE LIKE 10 MIN- SHOULD'VE SET UP SUNDIAL BUT DIDN'T THINK ---

HOLD ON HERE COMES MADDY"

A gap down the page, then: "MADDY CAME TO SEE HOW I WAS DOING & I TOLD HER PRETTY GOOD, COULD BE WORSE. SHE LOOKED WORRIED AND SAID 'YOU SAY THAT WHEN YOU'RE NOT DOING WELL' WHICH I HAD NOT CONSIDERED. ALSO WENT 'GOD FELL WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR EYES.' TOLD HER I DON'T KNOW, I HAVEN'T LOOKED IN A MIRROR OR ANYTHING, ARE THEY OKAY?' SHE BENDS DOWN AND TAKES MY CHIN IN HER HANDS (I'M SITTING) AND LOOKS, AS I LOOK IN HER GREEN EYES, AND GOES 'THEY'RE OKAY, THEY'VE JUST GONE KIND OF DARK AND MUDDY, I GUESS, NOT REALLY HAZEL. CAN YOU SEE OKAY?' ALL WORRIED HOW SHE GETS

AND AT THAT I GO: SHIT. NOT TO HETZ, TO HETZ I SAY I CAN SEE OKAY. BUT SHIT. BECAUSE THAT REALLY WORZIED ME, KIND OF VOICED A FEAR I WAS KNOCKING AROUND WITH THE REST OF EVERYTHING ELSE— THAT THIS WASN'T LIKE FIXING A BROKEN POT, OR FINISHING A FITZSAW PUZZLE. THAT THERE NEVER WAS AN EMPTY SPACE WHERE THAT GUY USED TO BE, OR IF THERE WAS IT'S LONG SINCE HEALED OVER. SO WHAT HAPPENED INSTEAD WAS THEY REDUCED ME TO A SLURZRY, AND HIM TO A SLURZRY, AND COMBINED THE TWO AND PRESSED ALL THE WATER OUT AND CALLED IT A DAY.

OR IN OTHER WORDS INSTEAD OF BEING $90\% + 10\% = 100\%$ OF A PERSON I AM (MIGHT BE) $100\% + 100\% = 200\%$ OF A PERSON AND WHILE THAT SOUNDS FUNNY IT'S NOT AT ALL. IT'D ALSO BE WHY I FEEL LIKE SHIT.

THE REASON I'M THINKING THIS IS THAT I'VE ALWAYS HAD HAZEL EYES. WHOLE LIFE. SO IF I WERE "NORMAL" I'D STILL HAVE HAZEL EYES. BUT I'M THINKING IF YOU TAKE HAZEL EYES, AND BLUE EYES (THAT GUY), AND YOU SLURZRY THOSE, YOU PROBABLY GET SOMETHING WIERD AND MUDDY.

AND SOME OF THIS PROBABLY SHOWS ON MY FACE, SO MADDY HUGS ME AND SAYS IT'LL TAKE SOME GETTING USED TO, WHICH (I'M THINKING) BY THE FUCKING GODS IT WILL, AND SHE UNDERSTANDS IF I NEED A LITTLE TIME / SPACE, JUST COME FIND HETZ. AND SHE LEAVES. SHE DIDN'T NOTICE I WAS TALLER, BUT I WAS SITTING DOWN, SO."

SO I'M BACK NOW TRYING TO REMEMBER WHAT I WAS THINKING THE FIRST TIME.

- EVERYTHING THAT ISN'T A KING FEELS KIND OF NUM AND FLOATY. NOT SURE IF DRUGGED OR IF JUST HOW THIS FEELS.
- SHOULD PROBABLY TEST BLOOD.
- TESTED BLOOD. SEEMS ORDINARY (COAGULATES, ETC). SOME WORST-CASE SENARIOS RULED OUT.
- KIND OF FEELS LIKE I'M DREAMING, HONESTLY. JUST A KIND OF PERVASIVE THIS-ISN'T-REAL TYPE THING, EVEN THOUGH IT VETRY IS (SEE BLOOD).
-
- UPON REFLECTION BEING SLURZRIED WITH SOMEONE/THING TWO RUNGS DOWN ON THE REALNESS LADDER— PROBABLY WHY. FUCK
- NEED TO TAKE A WALK "

And that's where the entry ends, leaving you also numb and floaty, though that may be the result of you sitting in the same position unmoving for 30 minutes. And there's still more! You posit that the diary is slim for the sole reason that Ellery liked to cram all his words close together. At least Madrigal isn't waiting on you: she has busied herself with reading and jotting down the contents of the papers.

Richard, for his part, seems to be enjoying this. «Astounding,» he keeps saying. «Astounding. Astounding.»

"Is it?"

«Yes.»

You sigh and flip the page.

"WALK CLEARED THINGS UP, AS IT DOES USUALLY. I CAN COPE WITH THIS. NO WORSE THAN EXECUTION, AND ABOUT THE SAME LEVEL OF UNEXPECTED, AND I COPE WITH THAT, KIND OF.

WAS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING TO DO WITH TWITCHING HANDS, SO CHECKED PANTS POCKETS FOR STRING. HELD A RESOLUTE HOPE TO FIND STRING DESPITE KNOWING I HAD NO STRING. FOUND ORDINARY WHITE STRING, SEE SAMPLE [THERE IS CELLU-TAPE, BUT NO STRING UNDER IT]. AGAIN, DID NOT ACTUALLY HAVE STRING

THIS WAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE MAGICIANS' UNVANISHING— I HAVE NO STRING BOUND TO ME (OBVIOUSLY). MUST [DOUBLE UNDERLINED] INVESTIGATE.

PLAYED CATCH CRADLE ON WAY BACK "

«Spontaneous legerdemain,» Richard muses over your shoulder. «Fascinating.»

The next pages of the diary are filled with tables and diagrams and tiny, tiny handwriting and you admit it, your eyes are glazing over. You should put it away and read the rest later. You would've put it away and read the rest later, had the tent flap not just then opened.

Ellery walks in.

You're kidding. Ellery doesn't walk in. Ellery's very, very dead. It's only a pale and weedy and mud-eyed man wearing a flannel bathrobe. "...Hello," says Ellery.

You gape.

Madrigal gapes as well, for two seconds, before rising furiously from her mountain and striding over to Ellery like she caught him breaking and entering. "You bastard!"

You gape.

"Maddie—"

"*You bastard!* What the *fuck* do you think you're doing to— to—" The speech Madrigal clearly had in her head is not going as planned. "Why do you have a *bathrobe?*"

"Long story. Just a—" ~~Ellery~~ cranes his head to look directly at you. You stare dumbly back. "That's the— that one's Lottie, right?"

"Look at *me*, you fucking—"

"Hold on just a tic, Maddie, please." ~~Ellery~~ darts past her (she turns in indignation) and, to your utter horror, walks over to you.

"Lottie?" he says nervously, and you fully and completely expect him to take you by the wrist and drag you through the floor into Hell, and/or start spewing blood from all orifices.

«Get a grip, Charlotte. This wasn't all that surprising.»

You nod imperceptibly.

«I mean, really. Given the circumstances of the so-called death—»

~~Ellery~~ casts a quick glance towards Madrigal, then leans in too close to you. "...Is it possible, uh, that we f— we had sex? ...last night? «

He dragged you through the floor and you are in Hell right now.

>[1] Write-in.

>"I can't think of any event or even sequence of events less possible, you perverted freak!"

>What the fuck did you just fucking say about me, you little bitch?

Higher reasoning flees you. All you can do is emit a kind of guttural moan.

~~Ellery~~ raises his hands in deference. "No? That's— no problem. Just thought, uh, you might be able to clarify—"

And with a reverberating snap you're back. *Clarify?* He thinks you can *clarify?* Your life was in perfect order until four days ago until for no apparent reason the entire world lost its collective *marbles* and now snakes are people and people are not people and people are trying to kill you and people are dying and people are *not dying* and you are just about at the end of your rope. He thinks you can *clarify?*

You rise from your chair, clutching the LOG with white trembling knuckles. "'Just thought?' I cannot think of an event— or a sequence of events— or anything— *less possible, you perverted freak!*"

("What the fuck is he saying!" Madrigal signs from across the tent.)

Ellery's posture tightens. "It wasn't a— I just have limited— look, I can't *remember* last night, and I woke up without—"

«Hence the bathrobe.»

"And you think *I'd* willingly participate in some kind of, what, wham- *wham bam thank you ma'am*—?!"

By way of response Ellery raises his left hand. Five words are scrawled *into* the palm:

"DEAL WITH
LOTTY
(BLONDE ONE)"

"Needless to say," he says apologetically, "I don't remember this either."

(Madrigal across the tent: "He's using you to avoid *me*! Get out and let me corner—")

"Uh," you say wisely. "Yes."

"So, sorry, uh, is there something else I should be dealing with?"

>[1] Write-in.

>"Probably your missing memory? Maddy can help you with that, I for one am through with this after your shameful insinuations."

>Probably your missing memory?

You have no earthly idea why your name is carved into his hand. Surely he did it to himself, but before or after the— what, attempted murder? Shooting? Is this a matter of regeneration or of resurrection? Or more esoteric: an Ellery (it is Ellery) from a different time? Different dimension? (Under your bitter fear lies a thrilled little undercurrent. The possibilities!) And 'deal with you?' Are you a threat?

You have no intention of helping him figure this out. "Your broke brain, probably—"

This provokes a stilted laugh. "No, trust me, you've got nothing to do with that."

"Well, whatever." It was a softball. "Can't you ask, uh, Maddie? She's right there—"

"Ask her about you?"

"N..." You cross your arms. "Yeah. Yes. Sure. Just talk to her." (Madrigal gives you two thumbs up.) "I- I, for one, am through with this— this debacle— after your shameful insinuations—"

Success. A smooth passing of the baton. You have little interest in an actual face-to-face with Ellery— he's too tall («More of a face-to-chest, really»), and strange, and alive— so if Madrigal so desperately wants to patch up her sorry relationship you're more than willing to let her. You nod decisively and begin to inch past Ellery, LOG in the crook of your elbow.

Ellery grabs you firmly by the shoulder— you squirm, but he's unexpectedly strong. Maintaining silent eye contact, he grasps and prises the LOG from you.

He nods decisively back.

«Embarrassing. At least make a dignified exit.»

You try your damndest: you hasten towards the entrance like your heels are on fire. You almost made it out, too, only you made the mistake of coming too near to Madrigal. For the second time, you're caught by the shoulder.

"Where do you think you're going?" she hisses. "I need you for this! You're my witness!"

It seems this'll be your problem, whether you like it or not.

>[END THREAD]

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