



The Flood

Before

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The Flood Before

2nd Edition

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Chapter 1: Bremen

When I was eleven years old, my dad and I spent a weekend in a town that wasn't long for this world. Two years later it would be completely swept away by the Great Flood of '93. This isn't a story about that flood. It's about a much smaller one. Like many stories, it's also about a girl. I met Jori that Friday in Bremen, and she left this world the following Sunday, long before the rest of her town, and twenty years before my own departure.

My dad was a ranger at Joliet Bluffs State Park, at the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. The Illini Confederacy once lived atop the cliffs and in the fertile riverbanks and adjacent wetlands, making the region

one of the most populated areas of pre-Colombian North America. Then the French came, and the Germans shortly after, and you know how the rest went.

The park became a popular regional tourist destination each winter when hundreds of bald eagles come down from the North to spend the colder months fishing and nesting in this mostly ice-free section of the Mississippi. One of my earliest memories is my mom and dad excitedly placing binoculars to my eyes, showing me how to adjust the aperture in time to see a massive eagle grab a fish in its talons.

The modern centerpiece of Jolliet is the large lodge set squarely atop the tallest bluff, originally constructed by Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation

Corps in the 1930s. The lodge was built of granite, limestone and oak, and it looked more like a castle than a hotel. I once read the entirety of *The Indian in the Cupboard* in the armchair beneath the mammoth 50-foot stone fireplace while Dad worked.

This story doesn't start there though, because on that long May weekend in 1991 Dad was stationed at Joliet's auxiliary branch, about ten miles away from the lodge and three or four miles inland from the rivers. Before I launch fully into the story, I need to orient myself, to attach an anchor to a place I know for sure still exists, whose history is traceable by reliable means. Because soon I will head back into the town once called Bremen which no longer exists and

whose history was shrouded in myth and mystery even before it was swept away by the Great Flood.

Jolliet's auxiliary branch consisted of a small visitor center, a fire tower, and a few miles of intersecting horse, bike, and foot trails among the hills and creeks that drained into the Illinois.

I suppose the weekend took its first turn when I burst into the visitor center, flush with the excitement of discovery and acquisition of treasure.

I pushed the flimsy screen door open with one hand while gripping the bottom of my shirt with the other. My T-shirt stretched and bulged down to my thighs, weighed down by over a dozen round stones.

“Dad! Look!”

He was behind the desk talking to a heavysset old man in worn jeans, boots, and flannel. This was the only visitor I'd seen all day. I'd run right past the pickup and horse trailer in the parking lot without thinking twice. Dad looked up when I entered, and he glanced at my bulging shirt. He held up his finger for me to wait while he continued listening to his visitor.

“My horse was getting antsy. She's not liking this weather. I thought I'd take her out in case we get hemmed in a while. I heard they closed the River Road about twenty miles north of Grafton. There's enough water on the road that they've started sandbagging.”

“Did you come in through Bremen, or do you live up around here?”

“No, my place is right outside of

Alton.”

“Dad!” I stood just inside the doorway. I wasn’t expecting an intruder. I needed to tell him *now*.

“Wait a minute, Connor. How’s the road in Bremen?”

The man turned to glance at me. He shook his head slightly. “Mmm, I think it could get bad. I was eyein’ it pretty close when I came up here. Water was an inch or two at most from the concrete. I figured I had a few hours before it got impassible. I’d say it’s been about a few hours now.” He laughed. “How long till you get done here?”

“Not long. We’re fixin’ to close up shop in a couple minutes, actually. You don’t think this is gonna be the big one, do you?”

“Nah,” the man said. “It may be a big one, not *the* Big One. It’s been raining up north for weeks, but they say it’s gonna taper off soon.”

“Not a drop here,” Dad said.

“It’ll come soon enough. When it does, that means the worst is over.”

“A funny thing.”

“I’ve got geodes!” I blurted out, unable to contain myself any longer.

“Look!”

I stretched out my shirt even further, shook the stones together. My arms trembled with excitement.

Dad snapped his neck around to glare at me. Not what I was expecting.

He said, “This is a state park. You know you can’t take those with you.”

“But Dad, come on, look!”

“Connor-”

The man chuckled. “Well, I better skedaddle. Looks like you’ve got yourself enough trouble and I don’t want to keep you. Best hurry if you wanna beat the flood. “

“Good luck,” Dad said.

The visitor walked toward the door. When he neared me, he peered down to examine my now endangered treasure.

“Mighty fine-lookin’ geodes you got there, son. You pull em up from the creek?”

My eyes widened. “Yeah they were everywhere! Sticking out of the banks, like the Earth burped them up. My mom showed me what they look like. Some of these even rattle when you shake them. Listen.”

“Connor!” Dad barked from across

the road.

The old man smiled. “You better listen to your father...” He dropped his voice so only I could hear. “...But don’t give em up easy.”

He patted me on the shoulder and walked outside. When the door closed, Dad rounded the desk. He wore his khaki ranger’s uniform. He’d left his hat on the desk.

“You know the rules,” he said angrily.

“Dad, look at them.”

He softened as he looked down at what I held out to him and back up to my face.

“You have to put them back,” he said quietly.

“Why?”

“Because I work here and those are

the rules. If everyone took one, there'd be none left. And you've taken twenty of them."

"Only thirteen. I thought we could take them home and you could crack them open and we could bring them to Mom next time we visit."

"Go put them back," he repeated, even softer. "I have to go up to the tower once more and then we can leave. Hurry up. You heard the man. We don't have much time."

I said nothing for a few seconds. I stared down at the stones. The treasure was gone. Now they were simply rocks I'd have to throw back.

"Okay," I said, and turned toward the door. Dad sighed.

"Pick out one to keep," he said. "For your mom."

I lit up again. “Really?”

“Here,” he said. He gestured to the table by the door that held maps and brochures. “Lay them out here.”

He helped me dump the contents of my shirt onto the table. The rocks tumbled out onto the wood. Dad poked at them, picked up a couple, turned them over in his hands.

“You don’t want the biggest one,” he said. “You want a nice round one, and light. It has to be hollow inside. How about this one?”

He handed me an almost perfectly round one, about three inches in diameter. He was right; it was the lightest one. I shook it gently and mimicked his motion of turning it over and over in my hands.

“Feels good,” I said.

“All right then. We’ll crack it open tonight. And if you want, next time you come up here I’ll take you to a spot I know outside the park. I saw a bunch there one time.”

“Cool!” I said. “Where?”

“Just outside Bremen. Now go take the rest back. Hurry up. I want to get out of here in half an hour.”

“Okay,” I said. I slipped the keeper into my pocket and scooped the rest back into my shirt. Dad opened the door and held it open for me.

“When can we take it up to her?” I asked as I stepped outside.

“Soon,” he said. “I promise. Now hurry up, and be careful you don’t trip carrying those all like that.”

“I will.”

I headed off across the parking lot

to the trailhead. Dad rounded the corner of the building toward the fire tower. Though we were worried about a flood, Dad still had to do a fire scan up in the tower twice a day. He complained about it but it was his favorite part of the job. He came out of college with an Ecology degree and he dreamed of days in parks leading visitors around and showing them the wonders of the natural world. In reality he spent most of his time telling tourists what time the lodge restaurant closed. Sometimes he wrote parking tickets. I think he liked his time up in the tower out here at the auxiliary branch.

It was Friday afternoon. My school's summer vacation would start in less than a month. I was here with

Dad because my fifth grade class had the day off. We sold more fundraising calendars than any of the other classes and this was our reward. We'd won every year for the past five. I can't take credit; I only sold four this year. We had a handful of consistently industrious girls and a weird kid named Toby who kept track of everything he bought, consumed, or sold in little blue notebooks. In the past, Mom would stay home with me over the summer, but she got sick and had been away for the past two years, upstate in a hospital outside of Chicago. We used to visit her every week, but I hadn't seen her in over three months.

The creek bed where I found the geodes wasn't too far from the

trailhead. The sky was overcast, as it had been for the past several days. It hadn't rained yet here. I was having a hard time taking seriously the flood warnings everyone kept talking about.

I walked down the steep wooded hillside, careful to heed Dad's advice to mind my footing. When it leveled out, I veered off-trail through the woods for a few yards until I came to the creek. On the way down, I started feeling bad about taking the stones. I didn't want to get Dad in trouble. So I didn't toss them haphazardly. I did my best to space them properly. Sometimes I even saw the holes in the clay where I had pulled them out, and I was able to fit them exactly back where I found them.

On the way back up I stopped in my tracks when a red-tailed hawk

fluttered in and settled on a tree branch right above me. Instinctively, I dropped to my knees, mesmerized. I watched it scan the forest floor for an easy target, paying me little mind. I stayed there motionless watching it until it took off in search of better hunting grounds.

By the time I made it to the top of the hill I knew I was late, so I jogged back to the visitor center. Dad was waiting for me in the parking lot, leaning against his Blazer with his arms crossed.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out before he could say anything. “I wanted to put them back just right and then there was a hawk and I-”

“It’s all right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

I climbed into the passenger seat.

It had only been within the past year that Dad said I'd gotten tall enough to ride up front.

“Buckle up,” he said, knowing that I would probably forget, or think it unnecessary on these rural roads.

We drove a few hundred yards to the park entrance. Dad got out and locked up the gate behind us. I'd been up here with him at least ten times over the past two years so I knew the way well. We drove through a couple miles of farmers' fields and pastures before the woods closed in around us as we descended toward the river and Bremen.

“So we can visit Mom soon?” I asked as we began our descent.

“Sure,” he said. Then, unconvinced by the sincerity of his first attempt,

added, “Definitely.”

“When?”

“You have that soccer tournament next weekend so probably the week after that.”

“Okay,” I said. “Can we see Nick sooner than that then?”

Dad nodded. He was silent for a few seconds before saying, “We can go tomorrow if you want.”

Four years ago, my younger brother had been out playing soccer with me in our front yard when he ran out to the street to chase down the ball. We lived on a four-way intersection with a big lilac bush on the corner and the driver couldn’t see him in time. After he died, my mom started an initiative in our town that she named Project Nicholas. She and some other

volunteers trim down the shrubbery around dangerous intersections. It got a bit of press in our local newspaper and started to expand into St. Louis. That was around the time she started getting sick so the project petered out.

We came in to town from the forest road to the East, but I think Bremen can be best visualized when approaching from the opposite direction.

The village was nearly invisible from the Great River Road, guarded by two large, wind-sculpted bluffs towering over its north and south borders, surrounded by an expanse of forest. When you turn off onto Bremen Road, you wind around through thick patches of woods until the River Road and its steady whir of traffic

disappears, replaced by a long, narrow valley. It's then you notice the village.

We used to drive through Bremen a lot when we were four instead of two. Dad knew a back road that emptied out in a wide lot near the top of Mt. Radiance, the southern bluff, which was the best, most secret vantage point for watching the eagles. We had binoculars, spotting scopes, my mom's high-end Canon camera, thermoses full of hot chocolate and a box of graham crackers. First we'd climb through Bremen, and on later trips Mom or Dad would alert me when to take my nose out of whatever book I was reading to take in the town. Depending on the theme of the book, sometimes it was as if the words jumped off the page and reconstituted

themselves into the actual fantastical scene they had moments ago been merely signifying.

That's a long and probably ineffective way of saying that Bremen looked like a crazy storybook village. A tight network of narrow, tree-shaded streets bisected the main part of town where dozens of houses of dozens of mismatched styles clustered together, interspersed with intimate yards and tidy gardens. Many of them were nestled so closely together that you could believe they shared common walls, if it weren't for the almost obscene clash of design, size, and even basic building materials.

Entering town through our back way, three church steeples competed for my eyes' attention with ancient,

ornate structures atop private homes of which I'd learn their names years later in much more boring books—cupolas, widow's watches, bracketed cornices, and so on. Naming them dampens the mystery, but I can't help myself.

My eyes fixed upon a random cluster of four houses each time we drove through. That day, the first house I studied was made of limestone dug up 150 years ago from the nearby quarry, which had been the catalyst for the founding of Bremen. Its walls were not made of expensive cut stone but gloriously irregular, discarded pieces which appeared to float within ancient mortar. The second house in the cluster was constructed of local timber—sycamore and oak—cut down by the

town butcher in the early 1900s from the surrounding hills. The third's walls were lined with neatly layered bricks dug out of the Mississippi mud a few miles downriver and molded and burnt in a kiln at the brickworks in Grafton. The fourth was a mishmash of all three.

I got dizzy as I saw others made of stucco, mortar, imported marble, and even more exotic materials. For as many different materials and sizes, there were twice as many styles—Greek & French Revival, Saltbox, Folk Victorian, Italianate, Gambrel, Carpenter Gothic, and yes, and so on. I would later choose my college major in part to ensure that the structures I saw indeed had names and precedents in the wider world. If the basic structure

of the town could be explained in texts, so too might everything else that happened there.

To some degree, the schizophrenic nature of the town's architecture reflected the alternating periods of boom and isolation in Bremen's history. But back then, and in the years before, the jumble of disparate styles all bundled so closely together in a hidden wooded valley made me feel safe and warm, and that anything was possible.

We drove down Main Street until Dad hit the brakes. He cursed under his breath.

"Sorry," he said.

I'd been entranced by the passing buildings. I twisted around to see why he'd stopped.

The edge of Main Street disappeared beneath a swirling torrent of brown water thirty feet wide. On the other side, water trickled down from the twenty-foot-high ridge atop which ran the Great River Road. But the bulk of the water was coming from the South. The creek, which should have been fifty feet back in the woods to our left, had swelled exponentially so that the woods were now a swamp. The creek joined the water leaking over the top of the makeshift levee to form a frothy, surging lake in front of us.

A red Ford pickup sat abandoned in its center, turned ninety degrees the wrong way. The driver's door was ajar. The water was a few inches above the top of the wheel wells.

“Let's take a look,” Dad said.

He opened his door and I opened mine. He crossed the front of the Blazer.

“Be careful.” He glanced over his shoulder at the bubbly water. “Here,” he said, and held out his hand.

I closed the door behind me and reluctantly grabbed hold of his hand. A small group of people had gathered at the water’s edge. In all my trips through Bremen, this was the closest I’d ever gotten to its inhabitants.

An old woman wearing a purple floral dress and a big silver perm pivoted to face us. She looked first at Dad, nodded, and then smiled at me. Her teeth were enormous and perfectly white.

“A bit excitin’, ain’t it?” she said. Her words came out hoarse and

throaty. She was kind of hunched over in the way that old people always seemed to be to me.

I nodded politely, and moved in closer to Dad. We stepped a few feet from the water's edge. I stared down at it for a few seconds. I could actually see its mass grow.

“They get out okay?” Dad asked, pointing at the pickup.

“He did,” the old woman said. She procured a cigarette and lighter, though I didn't see from where.

“I did,” the man on the other side of her said. He leaned forward and nodded at Dad. He was old, too. He wore a mesh John Deere hat, a flannel shirt, and jeans that were still soaking wet.

“Bad luck,” Dad said.

“No,” the man said. “Plain ole stupid. Had it in my head I wanted to make a beer run to Grafton and no flood was gonna stop me.” He chuckled. “It did.”

The old woman lit her cigarette. Her voice sounded about right for the old smokers I’d met, but I couldn’t believe her teeth. Coach Sanders had told us in Health class that smoking makes your teeth yellow. Hers were whiter and bigger than any I’d seen.

“I’m John Dee,” the man said. He stuck out his hand. The woman stepped back half a step so Dad could take it. “I own the ice cream parlor up the street.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Dad said. “I’m Jim.”

Dad faced the woman. She turned

her head to blow smoke away from him, and then patted his hand gently.

“People call me Hollie,” she said. “Pleased to meet you.”

A slightly younger couple in their late forties stood about ten feet on the other side of John, deep in their own conversation.

“I seen you ‘round town sometimes. You work up at Jolliet, right?” John asked, nodding at Dad’s uniform.

“Yep. They had me up at the Auxiliary today.”

“Ah.” He let out long whistle. “Bad timing.”

Dad nodded. “How long ago’d you make your run at it?”

“Oh, about fifteen minutes ago. Saw Doc Gardner splash through just

fine a few minutes earlier so I thought I'd be good."

I shrank. I did some math in my head. We would have been here thirty minutes ago if I hadn't gotten those geodes. I thrust my free hand in my pocket and wrapped my fingers tightly around what remained of my treasure.

"What'd ya think?" Dad asked. "How much higher's it gonna get?"

"Mmm," John said. "It gets like this every few years when it rains up north. I'd say it'll top off after another six inches or so and start drainin' to the ditch down that way." He pointed vaguely north. "If the rain moves down here tomorrow like they say it's supposed to, then it should be clear enough by Sunday."

I saw Dad's shoulders drop. He bit

his lip. “You don’t think this’ll be the big one then?”

“Naw,” Hollie said. “That won’t be for another two years. ’93.”

John lifted his chin in agreement.

Dad sighed. His eyes were still filled with worry, but he smiled. He said to me, “Well it looks like we’re staying here for a bit.”

I nodded. His eyes told me I should be worried too, but I was beginning to fill up with excitement. I’d finally get to explore Bremen.

Dad turned back to John and Hollie. “There’s a motel in town, right?”

“Two of em,” John said. “My buddy Dick Cooper owns one. Honestly you’re probably better off at The Maker, though. It’s the big

building a few blocks up. Can't miss it."

"Oh I don't think he wants to stay there," Hollie said, flashing Dad a sly grin.

He looked quickly away.

"No, that'll be great," he said.

"Come on, Connor."

Chapter 2: The Weird Sisters

The Bremen streets were too narrow to park on the sides. Dad found a grassy pull-off a block up from The Maker Inn. It was about six o'clock but the overcast sky gave the impression twilight had already begun.

We'd passed a few people on the way up the street. No one was too alarmed by the flood. They went about their business as usual. Two men chatted and spat tobacco on a porch. A woman checked her mailbox. Dad and I—and maybe John and his aborted beer run—were the only ones put off by the rising waters at all.

I climbed out of the Blazer to look for grasshoppers in the nearby patch of cattails while Dad waited through a

block of commercials on the Alton oldies station to hear the weather report.

“Let’s go,” he said as he shut the door.

I trotted over to him. “What’d they say?”

“Pretty much what Mr. Dee said.”

The hotel’s large exterior reflected decades of architectural tinkering. Its western, nearest side was ranch-style, constructed of white wood with big faux- Greek columns supporting a wide porch, all enclosed within a white picket fence. Its eastern half was made of limestone, two stories tall with large windows and stately shutters.

We had almost made it to the front gate when a voice called out behind us.

“Jim! Hi, Jim!”

Dad stopped dead in his tracks. I looked up at him. His face was frozen for half a second before he spun around.

“Hi there,” he said.

I turned, too. A woman walked up the sidewalk toward us. She was waving.

Her hair was red and she wore a bright sundress. As she got closer, I could see that she was about Dad’s age, maybe a little younger. She was quite pretty and became even more so as she neared. Pale skin dotted with freckles, soft blue eyes, thin, with full lips and an even fuller chest. She smiled at me.

“I didn’t know you were up here this weekend,” she said. Her smile lingered.

“Well I... Connor had the day off so

he came up here with me. Connor, this is Rosemary.”

“I’m pleased to meet you,” she said to me.

“You too,” I said softly. I lowered my gaze.

“I heard the road’s flooded,” she said.

“Yeah it is,” Dad said.

“You can’t make it out?”

“Doesn’t look like it.”

“What’s your plan?”

“We were gonna see what the rooms were like here.”

She stood there with silver bracelets on her wrists and a flower in her hair. I caught a glimpse of it when she cocked her head. She said, “Don’t be ridiculous. Stay with us.”

“Oh, well, we couldn’t. We’ll be

fine here. We couldn't—"

"Hancock's probably not even in. He won't be expecting travelers this time of day. This time of year."

"We should at least check—"

"Save the money. Our house is way too big for the three of us. It's been a while since we had proper company. We've always got rooms made up. I insist."

Dad bit his lip, and she bit hers as if unconsciously echoing him.

"Come on," she said. She looked at me again. "I know Jori would love the company."

Dad sighed. "Well... okay. If it's all right with Connor. What do you think?" He nudged my shoulder.

I nodded. Could be an adventure.

"Great," Rosemary said. "There's

not too many places to park around our place so you can leave your car here if you want. I can help you carry your stuff.”

Dad shook his head. “What you see is what we’ve got. We weren’t expecting to stay.”

“Alrighty then. Let’s get to it. You remem—it’s this way.” She addressed me. “I’ll show you the shortcut.”

She led us down the street. She took a right on Palmer. Three guys stood drinking beers on the porch of a stone home on the corner. One of them held his hands out to the others, palms up. I could see a large, roundish red mark about the size of a fifty-cent piece on each of his wrists. The other two guys peered briefly at the marks and took swigs of their beers.

“Guys,” Rosemary said as we passed. They waved and nodded back.

She was a few steps ahead of us.

Dad, in a low voice, said,

“Rosemary lives here in town with her sister Hannah and Jori, who’s about your age, I think. Rosemary owns a coffee shop up in Grafton. I stop by there most mornings when I’m at the main park.”

We followed her off the sidewalk into a narrow alleyway that twisted between rows of tightly packed houses. We passed stone walls crawling with vines, pristine picket fences, and gardens both well-tended and neglected.

Rosemary stopped in front of a wrought iron gate about four feet high. She held out her arm. “Here we are,”

she said.

I gazed at the back of the house. It was constructed mostly of dark red brick, technically two stories high, but above the second floor the roof was steeply pitched and covered in neatly carved wooden shingles. The attic looked like it could be a full third floor. I could make out a bit of a familiar structure at the very top—this was one of the houses with a widow’s watch. There were only two windows on the back side with large awnings and freshly painted shutters. The screen door was out of place with the rest of the vaguely gothic adornments.

Rosemary unlatched the gate and it creaked open.

“Welcome,” she said.

She shut the gate behind us and we

walked up the sidewalk and a wooden porch to the door. We stepped into a kitchen.

A woman sat at the table with her back to us, her legs crossed, barefoot, leaning back into the chair. The receiver of a yellow wall-mounted telephone was pressed to her ear. She exhaled smoke from what I suppose was a clove cigarette. A large glass of iced, amber-colored liquid sat in front of her.

Rosemary said to Dad, “I keep telling her not to smoke in here. Of course she doesn’t listen.” Then, louder, she said, “I’ve brought guests.”

The woman swiveled in her chair to face us. I must have done a literal double take. She looked exactly like Rosemary. Red hair, pale skin, big lips,

everything. She even wore a similar sundress, but a slightly darker shade. She smiled at us and put her hand over the receiver.

“Hi Jim,” she said. “Gimme a minute.” She uncovered the receiver.

Rosemary grinned knowingly at me, amused at my confusion. She let me off the hook quickly. “My twin sister Hannah,” she said.

She left us standing by the doorway and crossed the kitchen to the counter and fridge.

“You guys want something to drink? We’ve got plenty.”

She swept her arm across the counter, which was filled with a dozen different bottles of liquor, trays, glasses, and an ice bucket. “I think Jori has a pitcher of Kool-Aid in the fridge,

too.” She opened it up, allowing a bit of soft yellow light to blend with the otherwise gray kitchen.

“Connor?” Dad said.

I nodded. “Sure,” I said. “Thank you. What flavor?”

She pulled out a pitcher and examined it. “I’d imagine Black Cherry,” she said.

“In that case, I’ll have some of that, too,” Dad said.

“And I’ll join you,” Rosemary said. “I wonder if Jori’s in. I’ll go check. Have a seat. Make yourself at home.”

She stepped through the doorway to the hall and called out. “Jori, are you here? Come down.”

“That’s not the right attitude, darlin’,” Hannah said into the phone. Her accent was much more Southern

genteel than her sister's. "When someone gives you a beautiful feather, you should thank them, and mean it. Don't ask for the whole bird."

Dad and I sat down at the table across from Hannah. She smiled at me, pointed at the phone, rolled her eyes, and made a talking motion with her hands.

She said, "We're idiots, babe. It's a wonder we can even feed ourselves. That we remember how to breathe."

Rosemary returned. "Jori's upstairs," she said. "She'll be down in a minute."

She opened a cabinet, pulled out some plastic cups and then took an ice cube tray from the freezer. Her sister tapped some ashes into an ashtray. Next to the ashtray was a battered deck

of tarot cards.

Hannah was a bit agitated. She said into the phone, “You really have to listen to me if you want to get over this. You brag about the things that would make other people miserable. You like to live dangerously. Some people are afraid of everything. You’ve got the opposite problem. You’ve got an unhealthy lack of fear. You need to go forth into the world and learn how to shudder.... Yes, shudder, that’s what I said.”

Rosemary caught me listening. She crossed the kitchen and handed me the cup of Kool-Aid.

She said, “She works for one of those 900 psychic hotlines. Honestly, it gets on my nerves. The phone rings all day, sometimes through the night.

I'm sorry about that.”

“It's okay,” I said. I took a sip.

Hannah stubbed out her cigarette.

“Beyond here lies nothing,” she said.

“The emptiness is endless, cold as the clay. You can always come back, but you can't come back all the way. And that's it. Time's up. You heard the buzzer. Good luck. We'll talk next week. Remember what I said.”

She removed the receiver from her ear and handed it across the table to Dad. “Be a doll, Jim, and hang this up for me. That one talks on and on. It's exhausting.”

Dad leaned back and placed the phone back in its cradle. Rosemary stood uncomfortably close, between him and me.

“Good to see you again,” Hannah

said to Dad. “It’s been a while.”

“Likewise.”

I frowned into my cup.

“And who’s this?” she said, looking at me.

“This is my son, Connor.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said. She held out her hand to me, sort of limp and palm-down, not the sideways way I could deal with. I didn’t know what to do. I grabbed hold of three of her fingers and shook them lightly, awkwardly.

Hannah laughed and stood up. She crossed to the kitchen and began making some marks on a pad of paper. To everyone and no one in particular, she said, “I have to keep track of my calls myself, otherwise those...people... at Corporate will do their best to

shortchange me.”

She took a sip from her glass and then said, “So what brings you by?”

Rosemary answered for us. “Main Street’s washed out down by the ramp.”

“Ah. Then we’ve got you for a while then. Probably till Sunday if memory serves me. Welcome. Our home is your home.”

“Thank you,” Dad said. “Hopefully it’ll be clear enough tomorrow morning.”

“Mmm,” Hannah murmured skeptically. “I wouldn’t hold my breath, honey. Hey, at least it’s not ’93 yet.”

She laughed. I frowned again, not getting the joke.

Rosemary asked, “When’s the last time you two ate? Are you hungry?”

Her hand rested on the back of Dad's chair.

"We're getting there," Dad said, twisting around a bit to address her. "What's open in town? We can take you out, our treat, for your hospitality."

Rosemary shook her head.

"Probably won't have much luck there. There's John's ice cream place and a kitchen at The Maker, but I already swept you away from there. That's all that's open this time of year outside of eagle season. I bet Connor here would love ice cream for dinner. *You* might object, though."

Dad laughed. "Maybe after," he said.

"Well let's see what I can whip up for us then," Rosemary said. "You know I'm not exactly the best cook in

the world. I bet we'll make do. We went shopping on Wednesday so we've got plenty. Hannah's better in the kitchen than I am, but I'm guessing she's not quite up to it."

"I'm expecting another call," Hannah said. "But I'll help."

"I'd be happy to lend a hand, too," Dad said.

I heard a soft noise and the creak of the wooden floorboards behind me.

"Hi Jori," Rosemary said. "This is Mr. Billiken, and his son Connor. They'll be staying with us for a couple days. Connor, this is Jori."

A girl leaned against the kitchen doorway. She appeared to be about my age, maybe a little older. Her hair was blonde, not red like Hannah and Rosemary. It was as curly as theirs

though, and it tumbled down past her shoulders. She wore jean shorts rolled up above her knees, a lime green T-shirt and flip-flops. She twirled her finger in her curls.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” I said.

Jori stared at me for a few long seconds, sizing me up. Then, apparently satisfied, she smiled and said, “This house used to be haunted, but that was a long time ago. It’s not anymore.”

“What’s that?” I said, unsure of what I’d heard.

“Jori,” Hannah scolded. “Come on now.”

“Well...” Jori said.

Rosemary cut in. “Jori, why don’t you show Connor around the house

while we start up some dinner.”

I looked to Dad. He nodded. Jori motioned for me to follow. She started down the hall. The phone rang, startling me. I leaped up, and then tried to play it off. Hannah crossed the room to grab the phone. I followed Jori down the hall.

Behind me I heard Hannah say, “If you guess my name then your first ten minutes are free.”

The hallway was long and unlit. A large grandfather clock ticked to my right. Jori paused at the foyer, waiting for me to catch up. She stepped into the big room to the right and pointed. I peered inside.

“So here’s the living room, I guess,” she said. “There’s a chair, there’s some couches, a fireplace. The

TV doesn't work too well.”

I nodded solemnly, nervously.

“And that's Nana,” she said, gesturing in the direction of the big easy chair.

The oldest woman I'd ever seen sat in the chair. She was so tiny and sunken so far into the chair's fabric that I didn't even notice her upon my first look around the room. She opened her cataract-clouded eyes at the sound of her name and smiled weakly in our direction.

“Let's go upstairs,” Jori said.

I followed her up the wide wooden staircase. At the top, faced with the prospect of another dark hallway, I asked, “What were you saying about the house being haunted? This house?”

Jori grinned devilishly. She must

have seen the worry in my eyes, so she humored me and flipped on the light switch. The hallway filled with comforting soft yellow light.

“I said it used to be. An old man and his wife lived here before us. The basement wasn’t finished then, and they never went down there. After his wife died, the man—Mr. Belmont—he couldn’t stand to be in the rest of the house because it held to many memories of her. So he moved down to the basement. He spent his last few years fixing it up. He almost never went into the rest of the house. That’s where he died. We found his ghost down there. Well, *he* found *us*. He scared us at first, but he was just confused and lonely and frightened and lashing out. We’d seen and heard

some strange things upstairs, too, so we put two and two together. We found his wife wandering around the second floor. The basement wasn't there when she died so she didn't know where to look for him, and he couldn't bear to go upstairs. We reunited them. It was beautiful. We never saw them after that."

Now it was my turn to size her up. She waited for me to get on with it. Her face betrayed nothing. She didn't crack a smile or give any other indication that she was anything but sincere. I decided to believe what she told me, and that I would follow her and believe anything else she told me until she gave me reason not to. Maybe she'd make me a fool at the end, but I doubted it. I felt a tingling, tantalizing

possibility that Jori could show me the kind of wonders of which I'd only dreamed.

Her story didn't leave me chilled. As she led me down the hall, I recalled Hannah telling her caller that to not be afraid was as wrong as being afraid of everything. One day I may learn how to shudder. Not today.

“Which one's your mom?” I asked.

She giggled and ignored my question. “There's a bathroom here, and three bedrooms. You'll be sleeping in one of them I'm sure. They're boring. Nothing interesting here since Mrs. Belmont left.”

Near the end of the hallway was a door and another set of stairs. She flipped a light switch inside the doorway.

“The whole third floor is mine,” Jori said proudly. “And the bit up top, too.”

Upstairs, her room did indeed fill the entire expanse. My mouth fell open. Every earthly possession I’d ever loved, she had, too. One corner of the “room” was filled with an entire Lego civilization—fully constructed castles, starships, pirate boats, and thousands of scattered blocks, figures, and half-created ideas. I glanced at the bookshelf right behind me and immediately counted at least twelve of my favorite books, along with an entire shelf dedicated to VHS copies of the best movies in the world. She had another area partitioned off with cardboard bricks that was clearly meant to be a replica of Noah’s ark,

populated by the plastic animals my Mom used to buy me at the St. Louis Zoo, tended to by a variety of action figures—Jem, a pack of Ewoks, E.T., and She-Ra and Indiana Jones holding hands.

She did have other trappings that held little interest to me. A gaudy, pink, four-post bed whose canopy was wedged against the low ceiling. A row of dolls and stuffed animals lined up neatly on top of a wooden toy box. A dress-up closet with clothes and plastic heels strewn about its entrance. A dollhouse that looked like a duplicate of the house in which I was standing.

“Here it is,” Jori said, spreading her arms and twirling around. I had to clench my teeth and curl my toes to stop myself from bounding into the

Legos and putting my marks on her world.

“Cool,” I managed to eek out.

“I’ve had to play catch-up,” she said.

“What do you mean? What kind of game is that?”

She ignored me again. She said, “My TV works better than the one downstairs, at least for movies. We can watch one later if you want.”

“Sure,” I said. I wanted to jump right out of my skin.

“Where does that go?” I asked, pointing at the ladder in the center of the room. I knew, but I wanted to see.

“The tower of course. Wanna see?”

I nodded.

“After you.”

I climbed the ladder and my head

popped up in the middle of the widow's watch, which I had stared at as I passed through town a dozen times before. I now wondered if she was ever looking back at me.

The room was six-feet square. It was carpeted, like her room. I doubt I would have been able to stand up completely straight. There was a two-foot wide border of wood paneling around the perimeter, a roof, and then nothing but four walls of glass from which to gaze upon the world.

Darkness was beginning to fall outside. The first thing I noticed when I scooted up close to the glass was a light coming on in the house directly across the street. Then I looked out further, to the river. A giant barge surged south. It was the wrong time of

year for eagles, but I spotted a massive bird—probably an osprey—soaring across the water. Off in the distance, I saw more lights switch on. It wasn't the opposite side of the river, but a large island. I knew there was a town on the island full of Hoosiers—as my dad called them—who often caused trouble when they came into Jolliet. The river was grand and peaceful from up here. I could see no evidence of the chaos it was causing at the entrance to town except for occasional glimpse of distant red and blue emergency lights through the trees to the North.

“You're looking at the wrong things,” Jori said, sliding up on her knees beside me.

“What should I be looking at?”

“Closer in,” she said. “This world.”

“Where?”

“Right around us. Right down there, look.”

I think she pointed at a stone cottage two streets over.

“That’s where the Grants live. They’re quite old now, but many years ago they had a daughter who decided to go out swimming in the river one night. She drowned. When they found her body it was still full of color and it looked like she was only sleeping. At her wake, there was an overpowering smell of flowers even after they removed all the actual ones from the room. The smell spread through their house and the whole town. They kept her body on display for days and it never decayed. They finally buried her a year later after officials from the

Catholic Church in Rome visited and made an official record.”

“How long ago did you say that was?”

“When we walk past it later, I bet you’ll still smell the flowers.”

“What’s in there? I asked, pointing to the large, white, wooden building a hundred yards west.

“That’s the music hall,” she said. “There’s a party there tomorrow, I think. A fish fry. See that orange-ish building right next door to it?”

I nodded.

“That’s where, oh what’s his real name, um, Howard I think, Howard Featherton, that’s right, that’s where his dad’s workshop used to be. People call him Bandy-Legs now. Hannah says he was born without any legs. His dad

was a carpenter or inventor or something, or both. He made Howard this pair of wooden legs that used to work so well that if he was wearing long pants and was walking down the street, you wouldn't even know anything was wrong. He even went off to war; Rosemary said it was the Philippines or Korea I think, with those legs. He's still around, and you'd probably notice now, only because he's so old and his legs are still so straight and the rest of him is so crooked and bent over."

"Whoa," I said, "what's going on there?" This time I pointed at a light blue wooden house with a tin roof and a stone chimney. More importantly, the wall of the house facing us had about a dozen objects randomly,

haphazardly attached to its outer walls. Even from this distance, I could make out a small ladder, a couple rakes, a hoe, and a handsaw. They were attached directly to its surface, almost how someone might display artwork.

Jori laughed. “Yeah, lots of people here like to nail their tools to the sides of the house. You’ll see more of those. Saves on storage space I guess.”

“That’s weird,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said, “it is, right?” She said it as if she’d been thinking it for a while but never uttered it aloud.

“There’s a funny story about the people who live there.”

I’m sure there was.

“The Robertsons. They’re nice people, but some kind of religious where they go to church outside of

town. Mennonite maybe? I dunno. Anyway, they don't believe in technology. Like, they have electric lights and a stove, but that's it. See that little shack there, to the right of the house?"

"Yeah."

"That's supposed to be Mr. Robertson's work shed. He spent a ton of time out there. About a year ago, they went on some church mission to Louisiana for a couple weeks and they paid me a few bucks to feed their bobcats. And so—"

"Wait, did you say bobcats?"

"Um, yeah," she said matter-of-factly before moving on. "So one day when I was over there and something came over me. I decided I had to find out what was in that shed, what Mr.

Robertson was working on all the time in there. I walked up to it and I found the key in about the most obvious place you could think of—right under the rock by the steps. I opened it up. All that was in there was a worn armchair and a TV. Mr. Robertson had been going out there every night to sit down and watch hours and hours of secret TV.”

“Wow,” I said, laughing. “Do you think his wife knows?”

She shrugged.

“How many people live here?” I asked.

“Oh, I’d guess two hundred or so these days. More or less.”

“I’ve only seen Bremen from the road passing by. Does it stretch much further that way?” I pointed west and

scooted over to that window. A lot of pointing today.

“Not too much further from where you can see.”

I could see thirty or so houses in that direction. The further east, the further apart the houses became. After that, the forest began.

Jori said, “A few people live out there toward the edge. Crookshanks’ shack is there. The biggest house that way is Doctor Gardner’s. Mother Hollie hangs around there these days. The only place you can’t see from here is the Cahokian’s mound. It’s around the bend.”

“The who?”

“The Cahokian.”

Cahokia. I knew the place, and I had fond memories of it. Or at least its

remnants.

Over the course of the past ten minutes, she'd told me stories of a man with wooden legs, a girl whose body never decomposed, and a man who went by the name of a long-dead empire, but I had only one real, urgent question for her.

“Can we play Legos?” I asked.

She smiled widely and nodded.

We rushed down the ladder and for the next twenty minutes we created, destroyed, rebuilt, and wrecked again entire civilizations until Rosemary called up to us for supper.

“One more question,” I asked before we went down. “The ice cream place here, is it good?”

She smiled. “The best.”

Chapter 3: Animals

The three grown-ups had managed to cook up some fairly delicious sloppy joes. When we were finished, Dad reminded me to thank the sisters. I reminded him about the ice cream shop.

“Ooh, that’s right.” Rosemary said, setting down her glass of wine. She glanced up at the wall clock. “He’ll close up in about twenty minutes, but it’s right up the street. Should be time. We can clean up when we get back....If it’s okay with your dad of course.”

Dad smiled and took a sip from his own wine glass. “Let’s go. Finally, I can treat you all to something.”

“Put a jacket on, Jori,” Rosemary said. “It might get cold. See if you have

one that'll fit Connor.”

“I'm okay,” I said. “I don't get cold easily. I like the breeze.”

Jori slipped a faded red, oversized Cardinals hoodie over her head.

Rosemary put on a sweet jeans jacket.

Hannah said to me, “I'm with you, kid. I like the goose bumps.”

The phone rang as we were about to leave. Rosemary groaned; Hannah glared at her and picked up the receiver.

“Hi, darlin’,” she said. “I'm sorry but I don't have the time. I've got nothing for you. I had nothing before. I don't even have anything for myself anymore. Call back in half an hour and I might have something new in store. Bye-bye now.”

We piled out the front door.

Clouds still hung above us.

“Why are the street signs like that, Dad?” I asked when we got to the corner. The signs weren’t the traditional metal pole-mounted green kind. They were thin rectangular, black-stained, wooden stakes with the street names hand-carved vertically into the wood.

“Because Bremen,” he sighed sleepily. “Because it’s nice.”

We turned onto Alba Street, and then after half a block we found ourselves on Main Street. A few people milled about in front of Mr. Dee’s ice cream parlor.

“I think this is one of the oldest buildings in town,” Rosemary said. “One of the originals. Most of it at least.”

The walls of the first floor of the ice cream parlor were limestone, with a wooden second story porch above it and a mansard roof thrown on top for good measure, punctured by two dormer windows. At the time I just thought it kind of odd. I didn't know the names.

We stepped inside, under the bright fluorescent lights. Mr. Dee was behind the counter, a white apron over the clothes he was wearing earlier. He looked up as we entered.

“Looks like you found your place,” he said to Dad.” He grinned.

“Looks like,” Dad said. “Let me know when the water lowers if you need a tow to get your truck out.”

“That's kind of you. She's been through worse. I think I'll be all right

though. What can I get for you all? Hi, ladies.”

I wanted a mint chip cone but Jori insisted that I taste Mr. Dee’s special Birthday Cake flavor. I caved to her demands. She couldn’t have been more right. It tasted like when you smash your cake and melted ice cream together. Amazing. I devoured it on the iron bench outside the shop.

As I got to my first bite of cone, my eyes fixed upon something strange across the street. At first I didn’t consciously register what was so strange about it. Two people approaching each other from different directions, walking their cats.

Wait, cats? Not only were they both holding leashed cats, but they were also massive. Bobcats.

I turned to Jori, wide-eyed.

“I told you,” she said.

“Why do they have bobcats?”

Rosemary and Hannah and Dad all laughed. I didn’t particularly like that.

“It’s a long story,” Hannah said.

“Well, what is it?” I asked, exasperated.

The sisters took turns telling parts of the story. Apparently, twenty-five years or so ago there was a veterinarian in town named Doctor Hooper. He treated the livestock and pets around the whole county. When he was in his seventies, he suddenly decided that what he wanted to do with his remaining years was to set up a private zoo. He began buying exotic animals, most of them rescues—animals abandoned by owners who

hadn't fully anticipated the extent of their wildness.

Hooper had a special predilection for big cats. He bought up property on the west end of Bremen, up on the hill. He built enclosures, pens, and running grounds. He hired some of the villagers to help care for them. He began preparations for a grand opening.

Then he got sick. Cancer. Things slowed down. There was barely enough money to keep the animals fed. Once, he came home from a major surgery—a last ditch effort to remove the tumors. He found that his assistants had been raising a tiger cub in his house. Hooper was a kind man, and he didn't want to displace the cub. So he had the assistants build a wire cage around the section of the living room where his

couch was. He stayed in there, caged in while the tiger was given reign over the rest of the house. He died there on that couch a couple months later with the tiger, not a cub anymore, outside the bars looking in.

A few weeks after Hooper died, a team from the St. Louis Zoo came in to inspect the animals and to see what could be done with them. Most of the animals were gone. Everyone claimed not to know where they went. One of the zookeepers swore he saw a lion watching him from the woods. No one else could confirm it.

Over the next few months and then years, it wouldn't be unusual to see someone from town walking their pet deer, antelope, badger, or anteater down the street.

Most of the animals had been neutered or spayed either after they arrived at the veterinarian's property, or had been already. But during his final days, Hooper had accepted a group of bobcats, of which two were already pregnant when they arrived. The bobcats' disposition wouldn't allow themselves to become pets at first, but they liked being near the people of Bremen, so they began to grow and multiply in town. Eventually the cats came to understand that their situation could be simplified if they showed a small degree of affection and obedience.

Hooper had a flock of sheep and a herd of goats (also not spayed or neutered) whose main purpose was food for the big cats. Those, too, were

soon found roaming around the hills surrounding Bremen. Strangely, their numbers didn't multiply as much as one might expect. Rumors of big cat sightings in the hills around Bremen persisted through the decades.

I had expected Dad to interrupt the story and interject his doubt, yet he remained silent through most of it. I caught him nodding along a couple times.

It wasn't till the end when he finally said, "That was twenty-five years ago. The cats were neutered, and most of them—except for that tiger—were already old when they arrived. They're long gone by now."

I got the distinct feeling though, that he was saying this only to allay the rising nervousness within me.

“I’m sure they are,” Hannah added. Her tone was unconvincing.

Jori rolled her eyes, said nothing.

“We should probably be getting back,” Rosemary said. “I should check on Nana.”

“Can I show Connor around town a bit?” Jori asked. She addressed Dad directly.

“Yeah,” I added, hoping to be helpful.

“I don’t know,” Dad said. He glanced at Rosemary for support. “It’s dark.”

“It’s still fairly early,” Rosemary said. “Jori knows this town better than anyone. He’ll be in good hands. It’s perfectly safe. Well, except for the lions and tigers and bears oh my.” She laughed.

Dad did, too. “All right,” he said. “But don’t stay out too long. Be back in an hour.”

Jori and I both nodded our assent. The three of them tossed their napkins in the trashcan. Hannah squeezed Jori’s shoulder, and then they headed back to the house.

“Let’s go,” Jori said. “Where to?”
“You’ll see.”

We started traipsing up the street. She was an inch taller than me but her strides had at least a foot on mine. I struggled to keep up. No matter how hard I struggled to make it to her side, her yellow jacket always floated in front of me.

“Are any of those stories true?” I asked, panting a bit.

She stopped. I bumped into her

shoulder.

“What stories?” she demanded.

“Everything you’ve told me about this place, I guess,” I said.

“Why would I lie to you? Especially about such boring, silly things?”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“And what makes you think I’d tell and not show?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Come on,” she said tersely. Somehow I’d hurt her. I didn’t know what to say.

She walked even faster than before. The silence was too heavy. I needed to say something. I needed her to answer. I needed words. This town was too quiet and strange without them.

“Is... Nana your grandmother?”

was what I came up with.

Jori shook her head.

“Who is she then? Great-grandma?”

“Add two more greats on and then you’re there,” she said.

I frowned, attempting to do the math in my head. I failed. So I said, “My grandma lives down the street from us. I go over to her house after school till my dad gets home.”

We crossed the street.

“Where’s your mom?” Jori asked, marking the first time she’d asked anything about me.

I decided it was my turn to not answer her question. Anyway, there was a more immediately pressing question that needed asking.

“What’s that smell?” I asked.

Jori lifted her chin toward the house to our right. “That’s the Grants’ house,” she said.

The air smelled of flowers.

“I told you,” she said for the second time that evening, her faint whiff of smugness mixing with the other scents.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She faced me again. This time I avoided running into her.

“How about this,” she said. “You stop apologizing for every little thing you ask, and I’ll *try* to stop getting annoyed at every little thing you ask.”

That sounded oddly reasonable.

“Okay,” I said.

Her face broke and she smiled.

“Friends?”

I nodded matter-of-factly. “Yes,” I

said, and meant it.

“Good. Don’t be stupid and I won’t be mean.” She giggled again.

“Deal,” I said.

We kept walking.

The air smelled of flowers. It really did.

I inhaled deeply through my nostrils several times in a row, almost forgetting to exhale, until the aroma slowly dissipated behind us.

“Where are we going?” I asked, somewhat confident that wouldn’t qualify as a stupid question.

“You’ll see.”

Jori veered off the sidewalk across a patch of grass mowed recently enough that its pleasing odor seamlessly replaced the Grants’ flowers. A peculiar wave of nostalgia

washed over me—peculiar not simply because I was feeling nostalgia at eleven years old, but because it's the kind where you feel nostalgic for the current moment. So pleasant that you start to ache. You also feel a bit like you're being watched. I assume it has something to do with *déjà vu*, and that one day in the far future, you'll remember this day. Watching your past self nervously, waiting for the evening empire to return into sand.

The grass yielded to a stone courtyard twenty yards square, surrounded by homes. This was for the Bremen villagers only, hidden from view of passersby on the road. There were several marble and limestone monuments engraved with lists of names. Jori barely slowed as we passed

through, but I managed to make out that these were memorials to fallen Bremen citizens from the Civil War onward.

A statue of a saint, probably Francis of Assisi, stood guard at the far corner of the courtyard. As we passed, I noticed something that would be out of place anywhere but here. I blinked twice and squinted in the darkness. Thin streams of a dark liquid streamed down the holy man's cheeks. It looked like blood.

“What is that?” I asked, pointing.

Jori glanced over her shoulder.

“Oh,” she said casually. “It does that sometimes.”

She didn't slow down.

We cut across someone's garden and squeezed through the narrow

space between two houses. Some of the houses we passed had strange symbols scribbled on their walls by different colored markers. We emerged on a road bordering and paralleling the edge of the woods. We crossed the road and Jori bounded into the trees. I hesitated briefly, thinking of the escaped wildcats, before following.

My mom worked at the St. Louis Zoo as a keeper. On some summer evenings Dad and Nicholas and I would come by and meet her when she got off. She'd teach me the Latin names of the animals. I tended to remember only the big predators, since they were the coolest. *Canis Lupis. Panthera Leo. Ursus arctos* and *maritimus. Felis confolur, rufus, and tigrina.*

“She got sick,” I said.

“Who?”

“My mom.”

Jori paused. Trees now surrounded us, the road about twenty feet to my left. “What kind of sick?” Her tone had softened.

“In her head, I guess. She started getting confused a lot. She’d repeat herself and she’d say things that wouldn’t make any sense. She wore the same clothes for weeks at a time. She got fired from her job. Sometimes she wouldn’t come home for days and my dad would go out looking for her. She’d bring weird people home and they’d sit around and sleep or watch TV. One time the cops came when my dad got home and kicked them all out. He made me go up to my room so I didn’t see most of it.”

“Where is she now?”

“In a hospital, near Chicago. She dropped me off at the science fair in Millstadt one Saturday and then she didn’t come back to pick me up. I waited on the front steps for a long time until I got embarrassed by all the people asking if I needed help. I hid out by one of the back doors until midnight when she finally came. When I got in the car, she was all sweaty and shaking and saying things that didn’t make sense, repeating words over and over. She couldn’t remember how to get home so we drove back and forth for hours until I saw police lights behind us. She freaked out and screamed and tried to get away for a few minutes before running us into the ditch. My head got cut against the

dashboard. She told me to run. I wouldn't. She gave me a kiss on my cut forehead and ran off into the woods. My dad showed up, and the next day he told me that she was sick, that she had been for a long time, and that they'd taken her to the hospital. I was relieved. The hospital meant she could be fixed."

Jori reached out through the darkness and touched my arm. I shivered and attempted to hide it. "I'm sorry," she said.

"I found this for her today," I said.

I dug around in my pocket for the geode. I showed it to her. She took it from my hand, turned it over in hers. She shook it lightly and handed it back.

"Perfect," she said. "It'll be a good one. She'll love it. We can open it up

back at my house if you want.”

“That would be great,” I said.

Darkness closed in. The trees swayed menacingly far above us in the night wind. The lack of moon or stars. The rising waters. I started trembling. Hannah would say that was a good thing.

“Shhh, little roe” she said, slipping her hand in mine, calming me. “I won’t leave you out here. You’re safe with me. This is my forest. This is my town. Nothing can hurt us here.”

And I can’t even remember the best things she said.

Either her words or her touch worked. I stopped shaking. I knew then that she was of the type of person who can find things even before they’re lost.

“Where are we going?” I asked

when we resumed walking.

“It’s up ahead by the big juniper tree. Look.”

She bent down and picked up a small white stone. I saw several more on the forest floor ahead, set in a relatively straight line. “I’ve marked the path with these,” she said. “They’re so bright we can see them even without the moon. Here.”

She placed one in my hand. “Take this to your mom. There’s plenty. Maybe it will help her find her way back, too.”

I slipped it in my pocket with the geode. We strolled up the path. Soon we came to a glen, through which trickled a small stream. It may have actually been the same stream that was flooded down by the river. Up here it

was barely a trickle.

As promised, there was a juniper tree about three feet from the left bank. Clearly out of place in this lowland river basin, its grey, knotty, twisted trunk was a harbinger of even greater marvels.

“There,” Jori said.

She pointed upstream. The water flowed beneath a stone tunnel made of neatly carved limestone.

“What am I looking at?”

The tunnel was pleasant enough, but hardly seemed worth a nighttime hike—especially after passing a statue that had cried blood. As I peered closer, I started to see incongruities.

The tunnel was set beneath a long, narrow ridge that stretched as far as I could see in either direction. The ridge

looked like it should hold a road or railroad tracks, but even in the darkness I could see that it was lined with trees. It was more like a border, or wall. There was no real reason why this tunnel should exist, or where the stream had flowed before it did.

“Come closer,” Jori said. She skipped along the stream bank to near the edge of the tunnel. Then she got down on her hands and knees. “Take a look,” she said. “It’s brighter on the other side. Look at the sky.”

I mimicked her movements, kneeled down, and lowered my cheek almost all the way down to the mud. She was right. It was brighter over there. I could see the stream emerge on the other side. When I twisted my head a bit more, I could see a sky full of stars

through the tops of the trees.

“*What?*” I said aloud.

I looked straight up at the sky above me. It was completely clouded over. I checked on the other side. Starlight. Dangling my head out over the water, I caught sight of the moon. It was almost full, seventy degrees in the sky from the ground. I specifically remembered seeing the moon last night before I went to sleep. It had been a tiny crescent.

I snapped my neck back around. I could see brighter clouds on the other side of the sky behind me—from the direction of town--where the moon I knew was.

I peered back through the tunnel.

“Can you see that hill ahead and to the right?” Jori asked.

“Yeah.”

“Look at what’s coming up there.”

A bright sliver of light. For all the world it looked like another moon beginning to rise.

“Cool, huh?”

“Um. Yeah. It is.” Then, “Can we go through it?”

Jori sat up straight. She shook her head. “Not now.”

“Why not?”

“Watch,” she said. She reached behind her and pulled a clump of clovers from the soft earth. She tossed the clump in the water. I watched it float down the little stream. Some of the clovers began to float away from the mass. The whole lot disappeared in the darkness beneath the tunnel. After a few more seconds, I faced her

expectantly. Nothing emerged on the other side.

And wait. If this was the same stream that went down to the river, shouldn't it be flowing in the opposite direction? Weren't we facing uphill?

Before I could dwell too long on that series of questions, Jori picked up a stone and side-armed it through the tunnel. Her aim was perfect. It sailed through the air down the center of the tunnel.

It didn't land on the other side. I heard no sound—no plop, no thud.

“Where'd it go?”

“It went through,” she said. “It just takes a while to get there.”

“What do you mean? What's over there?”

“Somewhere else,” she said. “I'll

show you later if you want. We can go through together if you decide you want to. Not tonight. We should get back. Your dad will be getting worried.”

“Okay,” I said. I was in no position anymore to argue with her or question her. I was new here.

Back on the front porch of her house, Jori reached beneath the rosebush in a large ceramic pot, removed a small stone, and retrieved the key to the front door. We slipped inside. Hannah was in Nana’s chair in the living room, on a cordless phone with a client. She leaned forward on the edge of her seat, her leg tapping against the floorboards.

She whispered hoarsely with a touch of urgency, “Forget the dead

you've left. They won't follow you. You must leave now, take what you need that you think will last. Whatever you want to keep, you better grab it fast. Cut off your hair and head straightaway for the wild unknown country where you can't go wrong. Quick, go now before your next ten minutes kick in."

I recognized some of the words. I couldn't quite place the source. Maybe a hymn from Mass, maybe a song I'd heard on the radio, maybe a line from a fairy tale my mom read to me when I was little, maybe a bit of all three. Jori tugged on my arm.

"Don't listen to her too much," she said. "You could go crazy."

She laughed. It was hard to tell if she'd made a joke, or if the thought of

going crazy was a legitimate and hilarious possibility.

Hannah noticed us and flicked us a tight smile. Her eyes flicked toward the kitchen, and then she concentrated on her caller's words.

“Is she for real?” I asked as we started down the hall.

Jori shrugged. “Sometimes. When she wants to be. Sometimes she says it's easier to fake it. Depends on who she's talking to, I guess.”

The lights were on in the kitchen. I heard laughter. I stepped through the doorway right behind Jori. Dad and Rosemary sat on one side of the table, their chairs pushed close together. A half-full bottle of whiskey sat between and before them. Dad had one hand wrapped around a glass drained of

everything except a couple ice cubes. His other hand rested on the table, and Rosemary's hand rested on top of it.

They both jerked their heads when they saw us. Rosemary slipped her hand under the table.

“How was the tour?” Rosemary asked.

Jori crossed the room, stood on her tiptoes, opened a cabinet, and began rummaging around.

“It was good,” I mumbled. Dad wouldn't meet my eyes.

“Glad you didn't get gobbled up,” Rosemary said brightly.

Jori said, “We're gonna go upstairs and watch a movie.” She had a bag of Cheetos and a few Fruit Roll-Ups tucked in the crook of her arm.

“Which one?” Rosemary asked.

Dad took a drink, though there was nothing left in his glass.

“The Rocketeer.”

“Oh I didn’t know you had that one. I didn’t think it was out yet.”

“Mr. Hooper brought it by the other day,” Jori said.

Still avoiding eye contact, Dad said, “Make sure you’re in bed by midnight. We may have to leave early tomorrow if the road’s clear. I’ll come up to check on you in a bit. You can have the free bedroom. I’ll sleep on the couch down here.”

“Okay,” I said, and followed Jori out and upstairs.

We plopped ourselves on her twin beanbag chairs in front of her little Sony TV. She loaded the movie in the VCR. We immediately began gorging

ourselves on junk food. After the movie was over, we started back up with her Legos. A little while later, Dad called up from the bottom of the chairs.

“Connor, it’s time for bed.”

“Fine,” I called back.

I said goodnight to Jori, and dutifully traipsed down the stairs. Dad was waiting at the bottom. He braced himself against the doorframe. He made a conscious an effort to look at me. I averted my eyes this time. He patted my shoulder as I passed him.

“Which room is it?” I asked.

“Here,” he said, crossing the hall and pushing the door open.

The room was small and modestly furnished. A double-size bed, a dresser, a mirror, and a closet. Nothing hanging on the walls. I slipped out of my shoes.

The bed was neatly made, with a quilt on top of the sheets. I pulled it back and slipped under the covers.

“Goodnight,” I said flatly.

Dad stood in the doorway, bracing against its frame, too.

“Thanks for being a good sport about being stuck here,” he said.

His words were slurred a bit. I couldn’t tell if he was looking at me, because I stared at the ceiling.

“I had fun,” I said. I’m not sure *fun* was the right word.

“Good,” he said. “I thought you might like it here.”

He stood there for a few seconds in silence. He took a deep breath.

“Rosemary’s been a good friend,” he said. “She’s kind... It was good of her to take us in.”

I nodded, unsure of whether he could see me. “Goodnight, Dad.”

“Goodnight,” he sighed. “I’ll wake you up in the morning if the road’s clear. Otherwise I’ll let you sleep in.”

He flipped the light switch and gently closed the door. I waited to hear his footsteps head toward the stairs and his couch down in the living room. I heard nothing for a few seconds. Then the floorboards outside my door creaked, and I heard him walk in the opposite direction. I heard another door in the hall squeak open and then click shut.

Chapter 4: Into The Mystic

In the morning I climbed out of bed, still fully clothed. There was no clock in the room. I looked out the window to see if I could gain any information from the position of the sun. The sky was grayer than yesterday. A light mist had rolled in.

I wriggled my feet into my shoes and listened at the door for the sounds of anything worth knowing before exiting. Hearing nothing, I opened the door. I walked down the hall and down the stairs.

I heard clattering dishes. I tentatively stepped into the kitchen. I smelled sweetness. Hannah stood at the stove, her back to me.

I stepped extra heavy and said,

“Hi.”

She glanced at me over her shoulder. She smiled. “Mornin’,” she said.

“Where’s my dad?” I asked.

She scraped her spatula across the griddle and set it aside. She whirled around.

“Oh, he went up to the park about half an hour ago. Rosemary went with him. He left you a note.” She pointed the spatula at a piece of paper on the table. “The road’s still washed out. I guess the ranger who’s supposed to be up there at the park today couldn’t get in, so your dad called said he’d go up there for a few hours to cover.”

So Dad got up, checked out the road, called into work, and decided to go up there with Rosemary without

waking me up. If I would have added those facts up at the time, they may have bothered me more. Instead, I realized that it meant I had the whole day to explore the town with Jori.

I walked over to the table and glanced at the note he'd left. It was brief, saying more or less what Hannah had repeated. Next to the note was a blue binder, and about a dozen glossy photos of Hannah in various poses, ranging from provocative to solemn.

“Oh don't pay any attention to that nonsense, honey,” she said. “It's my portfolio.”

“What's it for?”

“For Hollywood, darlin.” She laughed gently. I saw what she was cooking when she flipped a pancake high into the air. “I've been pitching

my story to them for a few years now. I think I should get my own TV show, don't you?"

"Like what kind of show?"

"That's not as important. A talk show, maybe a mystery show about a psychic detective. Or maybe I'll be an evil sorceress, I don't care. I've done some acting in plays in St. Louis, you know. Once I get their attention properly they can use my talents however they choose. I'm talking to a new agent. He's a client, too. That's what I have that out for. Have to update it and get it ready to send."

"Cool," I said. After a pause, I asked, "Is Jori here?"

Hannah flashed another smile, and then turned back to the stove.

"Breakfast's almost ready," she

said. “Jori should be up by now. You could do me a favor and go wake her up for me.”

“Okay.”

“Do you like nutmeg pancakes?”

“I... think so,” I said. “Probably. Never had them.”

“You will,” she said. “They’re delicious. About to throw some bacon on. And Rosemary says I won’t cook. *Pishaw*. Should be ready in ten minutes. Tell Jori it’s already on the table, otherwise she won’t get up.”

The phone rang as I left. I heard Hannah say, “You’ve lost yourself, but you’ll soon reappear...”

I went back upstairs. I opened the door that led up to Jori’s room. I waited there a few seconds before calling out her name. No response.

I thought I heard the sound of waves crashing on the beach. I climbed a few steps, paused. Yes, definitely waves. And seagulls crying out. I called to her again. Nothing. I moved almost to the top of the landing. The waves grew louder and I heard whale-song, and the clicks and whistles of dolphins.

I ascended the last couple steps. There she was, still sleeping soundly beneath her canopy. The waves were almost deafening up here. I spotted their source—a small white Brookstone sound machine on her nightstand.

I crept up to her sleeping beautiful form. A single strand of her golden hair caught my eye, curled against the white pillow. I couldn't resist. I reached for it and plucked it. She stirred, slowly, not violently. She yawned and stretched.

The princess opened her eyes and woke from her slumber.

She smiled when she saw me. “What would you like to see today?” she asked brightly, as if she’d been awake for hours.

After breakfast we set out to town together. Hannah said that if we got hungry she’d fix us some lunch later on. She said to make sure we got back by six o’clock because the adults had made plans to go to the fish fry at the music hall this evening—assuming the road was still impassible. Agreeing was easier said than done since I still had no idea what time it was.

The air was wet, but it wasn’t raining yet. Jori wore her yellow hoodie again. Hannah had found me

an old windbreaker hidden in the deepest recesses of the hall closet.

When Jori asked what I wanted to see today, I'd asked her about the Cahokian. She got excited when I brought him up. She said she hadn't seen him in a while and was overdue for a visit. I asked his name. She said he didn't have one as far as she knew. She said he's an old Indian who lives on the outskirts of Bremen. People say he wandered into town thirty years ago, and was taken under the wing of a kindly old woman people called Mother Hollie. When he was younger, he used to tell people he was from Cahokia.

He had a skill for creating beautiful pottery and jewelry. A couple years after his arrival in Bremen, he began

selling his wares to tourists beneath the Piasa Bird—a replica of a massive painting of a thunderbird high up on a bluff overlooking the river originally painted by the Cahokian civilization about 800 years ago. The Piasa Bird was a terrifying draconic amalgamation of several creatures. Deer antlers, red eyes, something close to a man's face and beard, a scaly reptilian body with a tail that began as a lion's and ended as a fish. Eyewitness accounts of the original painting claimed it was fifty feet across and seventy-five feet up the cliff side. No one could figure out how the Cahokians had painted it. It likely served as a dire warning to strangers traveling down the Mississippi that they were entering Cahokian territory.

I knew most of that already because the previous year I'd done a project for my social studies class on Piasa. The original was about three miles from Bremen. It had been blasted away by the founder of Bremen's limestone company in the 1870s. The replica had been moved to a different bluff a bit further upriver. But in 1967, the replica, too, was blasted away to make room for the Great River Road. It was then that the Cahokian decided to move his base of operations closer to his real home. He set up shop in the parking lot of Cahokia Mounds State Park visitor center twenty miles away. The park administrators eventually offered for him to run the gift shop. He'd never bothered to obtain any official ID, so he opted to

stay out in the parking lot. No one even knew for sure how he got to the park every day from Bremen forty miles upriver.

I thought I might have remembered seeing him there. At least once a year my class took a field trip to Cahokia Mounds. I loved the place. I told Jori that's why I wanted to meet him. My imagination could run wild there.

We followed a similar ritual every year we went. We'd pile off the bus and into the movie theater in the visitor's center. They'd show us a mesmerizing twenty-minute movie about the ancient wonders of the Cahokian civilization, and then the screen would retract to reveal a replica of a Cahokian village, complete with mannequins,

taxidermic animals, and sound effects. We'd wind through the village before heading out to the actual mounds.

From what I remember, Cahokia was settled around 600 AD. At its peak in the 1200s, its population was comparable to London and Paris during the same period—and it was the largest city in the United States all the way until Philadelphia's population jumped around 1800. The archaeological evidence uncovered left the impression that the city was elaborately planned by a complex and sophisticated society. It controlled trade along the Mississippi and pottery. Tools and weapons made in Cahokia were found as far away as the Gulf of Mexico and Canada.

The main city contained 120

earthen mounds spread out across six square miles, all centered around massive Monks Mound—more than ten stories high and the largest man-made structure north of Mexico. The Cahokians' chief lived atop it in a massive temple-palace. I also remember Woodhenge, a large circle of posts used both to mark the passing seasons and to make astronomical sightings.

It wasn't for almost two decades after my weekend in Bremen that they discovered a massive burial pit. The contents of the pit revealed that the Cahokians shared a large-scale practice of human sacrifice with their sister civilizations to the South.

The night my mom was sent to the hospital, the ditch we ended up in was

about a hundred yards from the base of Monks Mound.

“Did you say Mother Hollie?” I asked. “Did she happen to have really big teeth?”

Jori cocked her head curiously at me. “I’ve heard people say that,” she said. “And you say she died?”

“Oh yeah, a long time ago.”

“Hmm,” I said, and left it there for now.

“But that doesn’t mean as much here as it does in other places,” she added.

We cut through gardens, and weaved in and out of alleys on our way to the northeast end of town where the Cahokian lived.

“So you know him pretty well?”

She nodded. “He’s one of my

favorites. He can be grumpy with a lot of people, but he likes me.”

“What are we gonna talk to him about?”

“Well,” she said. “You seem to like stories. He’s got a great one. He doesn’t like talking much about it anymore. I bet I can convince him.”

“I’m sure you can.”

We left the main part of town behind us. The houses became increasingly spread out, yet no less unique. We passed a stone cottage, and a massive Gothic brick home, and walked along a road for a bit till we came to a farmhouse, bordered by a long wooden fence.

“That’s Doc Gardner’s place,” she said. “He’s nice, too. You’ll probably meet him tonight if he made it back to

town.”

The farmhouse was set back a hundred yards or so from the road. A barn was wedged up close to the fence. A group of pigs rooted around in an enclosure by the entrance. I could see a dozen or so chickens scattered about, and a rooster overseeing from a perch on the fence. He eyed us suspiciously as we approached.

Something else caught my eye. A large spider web stretched across the upper part of the barn's doorway. I noticed it only because of the drops of dewy mist collected on its strands. I was pretty sure there was a word spelled out in the web. I blinked. Looked a second time. *Yes.*

It said *B-R-A-M-B-E-L-S* in loopy cursive letters stretched across the

center of the web.

Brambels? I almost tapped Jori's shoulder to show her, but then I considered it for a second. Was it supposed to read *brambles*? Even I knew how that was supposed to be spelled. And what a random, meaningless word to appear miraculously in a spider web. If it was the spider that had done it, it must be a savant. It couldn't even spell correctly. It had no wisdom to impart. Jori wouldn't be impressed. So I kept silent and jogged a few paces to catch up with her.

The gravel road had turned to dirt beneath our feet. It curved around the edge of the forest up ahead.

“Why does he live out here?” I asked.

“You’ll see in a minute,” she said. “By the time Mother Hollie died he’d made enough money to buy a lot out here.”

When we rounded the bend, I saw it. A small house about one hundred feet square sat atop a large mound of earth. The mound was probably twenty-five feet high, and it sloped upward at about a 45-degree angle. Its sides were covered with neatly trimmed grass except for a dirt path leading straight up the center. Planks of woods were embedded in the earth every couple feet to serve as stairs.

The house had short walls and an exceptionally tall roof. The walls were made of logs five or six feet long standing straight on their ends, bound together with some kind of plaster. The

roof was thatched—I couldn't tell exactly what type of reed or weed had been woven together. The roof's pitch was much steeper than the mound's, maybe 75 degrees. A chimney, tall and narrow enough to expunge its smoky heat far away from the thatch, was situated in the rear of the roof. I imagine stone below the chimney broke up the log walls.

Jori said, "He lived in Mother Hollie's house for a couple years while he built this. He made it all by hand. He carried the dirt from the stream banks in baskets he also made, the way his ancestors did."

A flat wooden porch stretched around the perimeter of the cabin. An old man sat there in one of two rocking chairs. He wore jeans and a flannel

shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He smoked a pipe and wore a red bandanna. As we neared, I recognized dark Native American facial features, which broke into an expression I didn't often see in Cowboys and Indians movies—a broad smile.

“Jori!” he called out.

“Good morning,” she answered, returning his smile. “Can we come up?”

“Certainly,” he said. He shifted his gaze to me. I fell a few steps behind Jori as we began the ascent.

“I didn't know if you'd be home,” Jori said.

“You could have called.”

I glanced up at the house for another look. Yes, there were indeed

telephone lines running to his house. I thought that was strangest part. Nothing else was much of a surprise in Bremen, even out here on the perimeter.

“We wanted to have a walk anyway,” Jori said, reaching the top. “I didn’t think you’d be at work because the road’s flooded.”

“I would have,” he said, “but if they know the road to Bremen’s flooded they might start wondering how I got there.”

She stepped onto the porch. With a bit of effort, the Cahokian pushed himself off his chair and embraced her.

“It’s been a while,” he said.

“I know. I’ve been meaning to visit.”

“Are you staying out of trouble?”

She shrugged. “I think so,” she said. “It’s hard to tell.”

He chuckled, and then pivoted to me. I maneuvered awkwardly around Jori so that I could step fully on the porch.

“You’ve found yourself a friend,” he said.

“This is Connor,” she said. “He wanted to meet you.”

“Hello sir,” I said, and stuck out my hand. I was never raised to say “sir” so I’m not entirely sure where that came from. I made eye contact for a brief moment. The way he was sizing me up made me nervous. I looked down at the floorboards.

“Did he now?” he said, leaving my hand suspended in the air. “Why would that be?”

The truth was out of the question. Announcing that I'd enjoyed walking through the life-size plaster-of-Paris diorama of his ancestors' village would be beyond silly.

“Jori said some nice things about you,” I mumbled to the floor.

Jori giggled. “Don't lie,” she said. “Before I even told you anything you said you wanted to meet him.”

I'm sure I was bright red. My hand, still stupidly hanging there, felt like it weighed a ton.

She addressed him. “He wants to hear your story. He really likes Cahokia Mounds. He's gone there a dozen times on field trips at school and with his parents. A couple years ago, his mom abandoned him by Monks in the middle of the night and now she's in a

hospital in Chicago.”

My embarrassment changed to a flash of anger. Jori was the first person to whom I'd ever told that story, and she repeated it to this man without a second thought.

Wait. Did I even tell her all of that? I couldn't remember for sure. I pried my eyes away from the floor to glare at Jori. She was nonplussed. When she saw my anger, she put her hands on her hips and scolded me.

“If you want him to be honest with you, you need to be honest with him.”

Then the Cahokian spared me. He took my hand into his. He shook it firmly. “It's a pleasure to meet you, Connor,” he said in a warm tone.

I relaxed. My shoulders dropped. I managed to look at him. “Same to

you,” I said. I definitely recognized him. “I’ve seen you out at the park,” I said, feeling a bit braver. He released my hand.

“I’m sure I’ve seen you, too,” he said, “but I’m afraid you’re a bit less memorable to me than I am to you. Unless you bought something from me. If you did, I’m embarrassed that I don’t remember you and I offer my humblest apologies.”

I shook my head. “No, but it’s all quite pretty,” I said, indicating the row of pots, bowls, and vases in varying stages of completion lined up against the wall.

“Pretty’s one word for it,” he said, his tone once more impenetrable. “So why are you here? In Bremen, I mean?”

Much to my relief, Jori spoke for me, “He and his dad are visiting for the weekend.”

“Is that so,” he said. He didn’t form the words as a question, so I didn’t answer.

“Well, I’m glad you found yourself a friend your age,” he said to Jori. “It’s a rare thing these days.”

I hadn’t seen another kid since I’d gotten here.

“He’s not quite a friend yet. But he’s under serious consideration,” Jori said.

“Are you going to the fish fry tonight?” he asked.

“I think so,” Jori said. “Are you?”

“Of course,” he said.

Suddenly, The Cahokian clapped his hands and rubbed them together.

“I’ve got a real treat for you two,” he said. “The best oranges I’ve ever had. I picked them up in Alton last week. Shipped in from Argentina. Imagine that. I’ll be right back.”

He opened the door—the out of place screen kind—and stepped inside.

Jori whispered, “Don’t worry, he likes you, I can tell. Every time I come he has the best oranges he’s ever tasted. It’s good to see someone who’s still amazed at what the world can offer them.”

You’re twelve, I wanted to say, why aren’t you still amazed at the world? Or maybe it’s only now, with a couple decades between us, that I feel like saying it. The Cahokian returned with six big oranges in the crook of his arm. He bent down to offer them first

to Jori, and then to me.

“You’ll want at least two,” he said, “even if you’ve already eaten breakfast.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He settled back down in his chair. Jori took the one next to him. I sat down on the floor and began peeling one of the oranges. Somehow, he’d already peeled his. He pulled a slice free and slipped it in his mouth. He puckered his lips and closed his eyes as he chewed.

“Mishgata lambdi chai, data common pristine,” he mumbled, or something to that effect.

He swallowed and said in English, “So you want to hear my story. *The* story, I suppose. I could tell you a lot of stories, but I bet there’s one in

particular you want to hear.”

I nodded tentatively. Jori hadn't quite filled me in on the details.

“Very well,” he said. “I suppose I can fulfill my role. The old Indian imparting ancient wisdom to the precious white children.” He chuckled. “Or utter rambling nonsense. You can decide.”

I slipped an orange slice into my own mouth and bit down. He was right. It was the most delicious piece of fruit I'd ever tasted. He began to speak.

Chapter 5: The Cahokian's Tale

My father was King. We lived in a palace atop the Great Mound. My mother had died in childbirth. When I was a small child he used to tell me stories of our ancestors' magnificent civilization far South. He told me tales of golden cities and great pyramids high in the mountains. But when hardship fell, the rulers turned against each other and their own people. The great cities fell. My father's ancestors traveled north and eventually settled in this fertile river valley. They founded our city and oversaw the erection of massive mounds of earth to remind us of the mountains from which we came.

In those days of my youth the Earth was bountiful. My people were many. The glow of five thousand fires warmed us. We planted maize and prayed for blessings from the rain and the sun. We traveled far and returned with many fine things. We saw fine houses and great temples. Yet wherever we walked, we sang proud songs about the greatness of our home because none we saw throughout the land could match the splendor and majesty of this place. This place, where the maize grew tallest, where the runners were most swift, the warriors strongest, where the builders reached the sky, and where the noble sun shined most brightly.

Until it didn't.

Disease entered our city and

twisted through our paths and fields and homes like a serpent. Our enemies, jealous of our strength and riches, sensed our weakness. They attacked. Our warriors fought bravely, but the bodies began to multiply. In desperation, my father consulted with his shaman, who reminded him of the ancient myths of the people of the South. The shaman persuaded my father to order sacrifices to win back the favor of our gods who lived behind the sun.

We burned the bodies at night. Hundreds of them. The fires that used to warm us glowed brighter but provided us no comfort. They made us colder, reminding us of the indifference of our gods to our suffering and of the many ways we had

begun betraying ourselves.

But one night, bright blue lightning flashed across the sky for hours, lighting it as brightly as the noonday sun. There was no thunder. We could plainly see the stars behind the jagged flashes of light. Few of us slept that night.

In the morning, our gods finally returned. They entered our city not on the back of the Piasa Thunderbirds of legend. They marched through our city on foot. There were perhaps two-dozen of them. They were tall, with pale flat faces and large almond-shaped eyes. They wore white robes. They greeted my father and his platoon of warriors at the base of his mound. They demonstrated their powerful magic. They lifted little black boxes to their

throats and spoke in our language. They promised we too could live as gods if we accompanied them to their home behind the sun.

They were our gods, so we of course believed them. We rejoiced. Our troubles were over. They had answered our prayers. My father ordered a feast to be prepared for our guests, and a celebration across the whole city so loud and joyous that our ancestors woke from their slumber, climbed out of the earth, and joined the celebration.

In the morning, we gathered only our most precious belongings and abandoned our city. All of us. We marched north with them for two days until we came to the edge of a forest. My people were asked to wait in the

meadow. Exhausted from the long march, they obliged. Many of them fell asleep as soon as they hit the ground.

Our gods invited my father and his entourage into the woods with them for one more demonstration of their magic. One of them removed a flat rectangular object from his robes and knelt down. His fingers danced across its surface for a few seconds. Shapes began to materialize in the woods around us, one after another. A dozen at least. Perfect circles large enough for a man to step through, hovering a few inches off the ground. I gazed into the one nearest me.

The border of the circle wavered and shimmered in the shafts of light breaking through the trees. When I looked through it, I saw a vast expanse

of water. I shivered and clutched my father's arm. I was well into my sixteenth year and far too old for such an action, but he didn't seem to mind. He held me tight to his side. His arm shook, too.

The gods conferred for a few seconds in a language I couldn't understand. The one with the rectangular object pointed to the circle twenty feet to his right. The others nodded their assent. He turned to us, put his rectangle to his mouth and said that this was the way back to their home behind the sun. They said that the rest of our people should go first, and my father and his men could accompany them through at the end.

I watched with my father as our people walked through the tunnel to

their new home behind the sun, one by one. The process took several hours. It was twilight by the time we went through. I held my father's hand as we stood in front of the circle. On the other side, I could see dry cracked earth and two red suns in the sky. My father's eyes were full of worry. We stepped through.

Once on the other side, I walked forward a few steps and then bumped into something solid and invisible that I now know to be glass. I reached my hand up to touch its cool surface. One of our gods yanked me roughly back. I looked to my right and saw what must have been their city—hundreds of towers that stretched impossibly high into the sky.

Our gods changed. They roughly

pushed us toward some stairs. We descended into a dark corridor. We marched. We passed more gods who gazed upon us greedily, lustfully, hungrily. We knew something was wrong. This was not the Promised Land our legends had foretold.

We passed rooms where we could see them binding my people to the wall. My father and his warriors rebelled. They had allowed us to bring our weapons because they did not fear our inferior technology. They underestimated our fortitude and resolve. We all fought bravely, even me. I could see the pride in my father's eyes. By the grace of the True Gods I still do not know, we prevailed.

Twenty of us made it back to that glass room. We saw that there were

dozens of tunnels, and they had all gone black. We couldn't see our forest anywhere. My father's shaman led the first group through the tunnel he believed was the right one. He said he wanted to make sure the journey was safe. My father and six of his best warriors went through the tunnel next to that one a few seconds later. In a moment of unusual bravery, I declared that I would stay behind with my friend Tamil to wait for any of our fallen comrades who could make it back. My father nodded and kissed me on the cheek. He was finally proud of me.

Tamil and I waited about fifteen minutes more until a squadron of gods appeared, firing their weapons at us. We chose a third tunnel. We emerged

on a rocky mountaintop in the middle of a fierce gale. This was wrong. There were more black circles so we chose another and rushed through it. We stepped into a large stone room. Several creatures, two feet tall with light blue skin, naked, standing on tiny goat-like legs looked at us in surprise, and then rage. We dove through another circle. The next one was a swamp. In the one after that, a beautiful dark-skinned woman wearing a crown and little else beckoned for us to come to her. Although tempted, we were desperate for home. We jumped through at least a dozen more, some wondrous, some terrifying, until we stepped into a forest.

It was nighttime, and the trees were a bit different, but we could see

the edge of the field. *This must be home*, we thought. Tamil and I took note of the position of the stars, and began to run through the darkness toward our home.

We ran until we came to a long, narrow strip that tore across the surface of the Earth. It was a road, but unlike any which we'd seen. Its surface was made of smooth, solid stone. A bright light approached. I dove back into the trees. Tamil froze. I cried out to him, but he wouldn't move. The light slammed into him, and I saw his broken body get tossed onto the opposite side of the road. My newfound courage disappeared. I ran.

I kept running until morning when I came to Bremen. The structures here were strange—too tall, and with too

many angles—yet still more familiar than what I had seen in the land behind the sun. I spotted an old woman tending her garden. She was pale like the false gods, but the rest of her features were human. She smiled at me and spoke in a language I couldn't understand. Her tone was gentle and I knew she wished me no harm. Eventually I learned Mother Hollie's name, and soon a great many other things. She taught me how much time had passed, how much the world had changed, and what I needed to know to survive in it.

Eventually I was able to piece together, or at least make good guesses as to what happened to my father and the rest of my people who escaped. I believe the shaman's group stepped

into Mexico around the year 1350. My father's tunnel opened somewhere near Cuzco, Peru around 1400. Great civilizations arose around each of them. They built pyramids of stone instead of mounds of earth, but when I learned about each civilization in a dusty old history book Mother Hollie gave me, I recognized the traditions and customs of my people.

My father's Incas created an enormous, mostly peaceful civilization among the mountains and jungles of South America. They amplified the glory of my people. My tears welled with pride as I read of their accomplishments.

The shaman's Aztecs repeated and amplified the practice of human sacrifice. I imagine the shaman

decided he had made a mistake in fleeing from the gods and wished to attract their attention again. They never returned, but both civilizations met their end at the hands of pale but this time decidedly human invaders.

Though the son of a king, my father knew early on I did not have the disposition of a warrior, so he had our most masterful artisans teach me their trades. I make a decent living selling my pottery. Perhaps in some small way I'm helping my people's memory live on.

So it goes. I may be the last of my people. If I am, I can accept that. But I still hope others may have made it through. If they left just after me, perhaps I'll be able to see my people again. I can welcome them into this

new world before I depart it, and teach them what they need to survive. I may still be King, for a little while.

Chapter 6: The Book Of Enoch

“Was any of that true?” I asked, when the dirt road changed to gravel, far out of the Cahokian’s earshot. I asked as if Jori was the authority on what was real and what wasn’t here, because why shouldn’t she be.

“He believes it,” she said. “That’s all that matters here.”

“Here?”

“Uh, Bremen,” she said in that tone that made me feel like I stood two feet tall on goat legs.

“Wasn’t it a good story?” she said more gently.

I shrugged. “It was weird,” I admitted. “Did it have a point? What was the moral?”

“Moral? What does that even

mean? Why should there be a moral?”

“Because,” I said, “if you tell a story as strange as that it has to at least have some kind of lesson.”

“Anyone can make up a weird story and staple on a moral at the end like an amen.”

I gather now that her implication was that it's better to leave it a coiled secret, hidden and encoded between what's said and what's left unsaid.

“Let's hear you do it then,” I said impudently. Hearing an old Indian on top of a mound of dirt tell me that he was abducted by aliens 800 years ago left me a little testy.

Jori sighed and picked up her pace. She said, almost sarcastically, “Fine. Once upon a time, a mouse, a bird, and a sausage, entered into

partnership and set up house together. The bird's work was to fly every day into the forest and bring back wood. The mouse had to carry water, light the fire, and lay the table, and the sausage had to cook. They lived in harmony until the bird decided he no longer wanted to be the one who went out and get the wood. So the sausage ventured out one morning. A dog came across the sausage. The sausage presented the dog with false credentials so the dog considered him legitimate booty, and ate him up. The End.”

“That’s the most ridiculous story I’ve ever heard,” I said.

“Oh well, I almost forgot. The mouse burned alive while trying to cook, and the bird drowned in the well. The End.”

“The End? What kind of moral am I supposed to learn from that?”

She shrugged. “Know your place, I guess.”

“Seriously?”

“I suppose I could put it more sweetly if you like. When people are too well off they always long for something new.”

I snorted. “That still doesn’t tell me what the Cahokian’s moral is.”

“Dragons exist,” she said immediately. “Monsters. Gods. Thunderbirds.” Then after a pause, “And they can be beaten.”

“Hmmm,” I said. I ran that over in my head. “Okay.”

“Anyway,” she sighed. “We’re at a crossroads.”

Indeed we were.

“What do you want me to show you next?” she asked.

“Everything.”

So she did.

We were hungry, but we didn't want to go back to her house yet, and we still had a taste for fruit after the Cahokian's oranges. We hopped Doc Gardner's fence. Jori said he wouldn't mind. We came to his orchard and found an apple tree whose fruits were already ripe, despite the earliness of the season. It seemed to call out to us, “Oh shake me! Shake me! We're all so ripe and we need to be shook!” We obliged, and shook the branches till the apples fell like rain. We sat beneath it and gorged ourselves.

She asked if I'd like to see a giant next. I said of course I would. “Fine,

but don't stare," she said.

We headed back to town. She made sure to design our path so that we'd cross through Mr. Neville Ogias Wadlow's backyard. She nodded in the direction of the big bay window. I peered through it as casually as I could. The casualness didn't last, because I could only see Mr. Wadlow's lower half without twisting my head around. He stood, probably eight feet tall, behind a piano. It so happened that at that moment he was giving piano lessons to a four-foot dwarf. The dwarf was quite frustrated as he poked at the keys.

Next she showed me where the town vampire lived. The tiny square house was wedged in between two bigger ones. Its windows were all

boarded up with plywood, but the front porch was tidy, with well-kept flowers and today's mail sticking out of the box.

“The basement's deep,” Jori said as she tried the door handle. It was locked. “He never bites anyone from town, so we leave him to his business.” She turned to me. “I could probably break in, but you're not from around here, so we probably shouldn't.”

I nodded in agreement.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” she asked when we made it back out to Main Street. She was deciding what to do next.

I said I didn't have a watch.

An old woman walked down the street crying, “Good jams, cheap! Good jams, cheap!”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Gothel,” Jori said in her best polite voice. “Do you know what time it is?”

“I’ll tell you if you buy some jam,” she said.

Jori pursed her lips. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I have no money.”

“That’s all right, dearie, I had to try.” She reached into the folds of her skirt and produced a gold pocket watch.

“4:30,” she said.

“Exactly?”

“4:24 to be precise.”

“Thank you,” Jori said. Then she grabbed my hand. “Let’s go. We can make it if we run.”

“Where?”

“To see a fight.”

She pulled me along behind her

through the twisting alleys. After a couple minutes of this, she skidded to a stop and pressed against a white plaster wall. She indicated I do the same. She peered around the corner.

“They’re not out yet,” she said.

“Who?”

“Ouros and Boros,” she whispered.

“That’s what they call each other anyway. Their real names are unpronounceable.”

She said Ouros was an angel, and Boros was a demon. Or at least they used to be. They lived together now. They’d given up their wings and pitchforks long ago.

There weren’t any official taverns in Bremen. Mr. Crowder turned his living room into a bar and charged people for drinks. Every day at noon,

Ouros and Boros would come in and drink until precisely 4:30 when they'd come out to the alley and fight for old time's sake. Then they'd go home together and attend to each other's wounds.

A screen door slammed open. Two men stumbled out. Both had impressive beer bellies and looked nearly identical. Pale skin, short brown hair. They were clearly quite drunk. Jori and I peeked around the corner.

“It's no more than an attic!” one of them shouted, or slurred. “You're all lined up there like some kid's forgotten toys. Go back there!”

“The attic's still better than the cellar!” the other shouted, and raised his arm.

They charged at each other. Fists

flew. And feet. They fell to the ground. One pulled the other's hair. One bit the other's shoulder. One accused the other of cheating. They tumbled around in the gravel.

“Aldon, allar!” one cried out.

“Hal huseh faboan!” the other shouted angrily.

Jori pulled me back.

“That's it?” I said.

“More or less. They need to get it out of their system every day so it doesn't build up into something much worse.”

“What language was that?”

“Enochian, I'd assume,” she said.

“Those are the symbols you've seen on the walls around here. They also try to out-graffiti each other.”

We crossed to the other side of

town. We passed by the war memorial and the statue that had been crying blood last night. It was dry as a bone. We walked a block north and came to a well. Its base was circular and made of stone with a wooden roof above it. A spindle held a bucket in place. Jori said it used to be a powerful wishing well. It had been dormant for a long time. She said it wouldn't hurt to make a wish. She handed me a nickel. She'd lied to the old woman. I thought of my mother and tossed it in.

She asked if I wanted to skip some rocks. I really did.

We crossed Main Street and dipped into the woods. This time we followed a well-worn path, not one made of white stones. We walked it for maybe a quarter mile until we came to

a small wooden footbridge over a stream. The stream was wide and flat here. Its banks held plenty of good rocks.

I was thirsty. The water in the stream was clear and cool. I bent down and made a scoop of my hand.

“Don’t!” Jori cried out.

I froze.

She said, “Please, don’t drink from here, or you’ll become a wild tiger, and tear me to pieces.”

She looked genuinely afraid. I thought that was a strange way of telling me that I’d get sick from parasites. But it was enough to make me reconsider. I started searching for suitable skipping stones.

After flinging about twenty rocks across the surface, it became

abundantly clear that Jori was far better at this than me. I grew frustrated. I decided to finally ask what had been on my mind since last night, which her demeanor had until now forced me to keep to myself.

“Where does that tunnel go?” I asked.

Her arm was bent, cocked, and ready to fling another stone. She lowered it, reconsidered, and flung it expertly. At least eight skips.

“Somewhere far away,” she said.

“You can’t keep being vague forever,” I said. “How do you know that?”

“Because I went through it,” she said. She rooted around looking for another acceptable stone.

“When?” I asked.

“About twenty-one years ago.”

“Shut up.”

She glared at me. “All right,” she said.

She flung another stone. Eleven skips.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “What do you mean, twenty-one years ago? How old are you?”

“I’m twelve,” she said.

“Then how is that possible?”

“I found it twenty-one years ago, when I was almost eleven. The morning I found it, when I looked through it, it was nighttime on the other side, and I could see three moons. You saw two of them last night.”

I pretended to look for another stone.

She continued, “I went back the next day. It was cloudy and cold here, but when I looked through, it was bright and sunny. So I went through.”

“What did it feel like?”

“Like nothing,” she said. “Maybe a bit chilly. I stepped through and then I was on the other side. Just like that. I got a bit scared when I looked back and it was nighttime on this side. I decided to explore a bit anyway. I walked to the edge of the forest. When I stepped out of the trees, I could see a wide valley below. What I saw in that valley, oh my God. It was beautiful. I knew I’d seen it in my dreams. A lazy, winding river flowed through it. Further down, a village was built around it. Beyond the village, atop a hill was an enormous castle. Stone walls, ramparts, banners,

towers, everything you could imagine. The kind you read about in fairy tales. Closer down, I spotted a deer with great big antlers, but it was walking on two legs. Gigantic purple birds circled the sky high above me. Griffins, maybe. I could see people in the village, and also other creatures that looked almost like people but not quite—elves, gnomes, who knows. Probably none of those words are quite right for what I saw.

“I shook with excitement. I knew if I was going to explore, I’d need some supplies. I went back through the tunnel. I gathered up a bunch of stones from near the entrance and held them in my shirt. It was nighttime on this side before I stepped through, and it was morning again when I returned,

even though I'd been gone for less than half an hour. As I made my way back to town, I dropped the stones behind me so I wouldn't forget the way.

“I didn't notice anything immediately different when I first got to town. As you can imagine, Bremen doesn't change too much. But when I got to my house, a stranger opened the door. He claimed to have been living there for ten years. I panicked and ran around looking for someone I knew. Everyone was a stranger. I finally collapsed in that park with the statues in the center of town. I started crying. Then someone touched my shoulder.

“It was Rosemary. I didn't recognize her. She recognized me, though. I saw it in her face. Her eyes grew wide. Her jaw dropped. That's the

only time I've ever seen someone's jaw literally drop. Then she hugged me for a long time and took me to the house. That was a little over a year ago."

"Wait," I said. *Wait*. I attempted to work it out in my head. "So Rosemary..."

"When I left, I had two younger twin sisters. When I came back, they were grown up."

"What about your parents?"

"They died a long time ago, while I was gone, for those twenty minutes. Twenty years. My sisters do their best to care for me. They're not parents. They still don't know what to make of me. I told them what happened. I'm not sure they believed it. How could they?"

"So what happened? How do you

know it was far away? Couldn't it be that time moves differently over there?"

She beamed. I'd finally started asking the right kind of question.

"I did some tests," she said. "Like what we did last night. I threw a bunch of things through. None of them ever came out on the other side. So it must be that it's far away, and it takes a long time to get there, even if it feels like an instant."

The Cahokian's tale suddenly had a lot more weight of truth about it.

"So that was a year ago?"

"More or less. Fifteen months, I think."

"You've been living with your sisters since then?"

"Yeah. Like I said, they do their

best. I'm an unexpected burden to them."

"Don't say that. It must be like a miracle for them."

"At first, maybe," she said softly. I didn't know what to say. I'd reached the end of natural questions. There were still bigger questions, but I didn't yet know how to form them. I dug around the mud and rocks. I knew I wasn't fooling her anymore.

"I'm going to go back through," she announced.

"When?"

"Whenever I find someone to go with me. I want an adventure, but I don't want to go alone."

I looked up from the earth. She was staring at me. Then she smiled a smile that was nearly impossible to

resist.

“I like you,” she said. “I do. I’m sorry if I’ve been rough on you. I’ve kind of forgotten how to talk to other kids. You’re a good person, I can tell. I think maybe you should come with me.”

I’m fairly certain my cheeks burned bright red. I returned my gaze to the earth. My heart pounded. I knew the gravity of the opportunity she was offering me. I believed every word. I’d seen the rocks disappear into thin air. I’d seen the two moons.

Then I thought of my mom. I knew if I stepped through that tunnel with Jori I’d never see my mom again. If I stepped through, the big flood that everyone said was coming would wash away the town and the tunnel, and I’d

never be able to come back. I thought of my dad. He'd spend years looking for me. He'd already lost his wife and his other son. He'd break completely if I disappeared, too.

As unlikely as it sounds, I remember thinking, *Is this what growing up's like?* My stomach sank at the thought.

I didn't want to say no. I couldn't. Her eyes were so full and eager.

I thought about everything I'd seen in Bremen since arriving. I understood the way this little insular world worked, but I knew it wasn't how the rest of the world was. Hannah was right. This town wouldn't survive. Once the cruel machinations of the larger world took notice, it wouldn't tolerate such a beautiful aberration. It would be

washed away. Maybe not this flood, maybe not the next one, but soon.

No one was truly crazy in Bremen because the town would adapt to their peculiarities. No one was sent away to a hospital because of dangerous delusions. Bremen would bend its rules, expand its ontology to wrap itself warmly around even the most lost, the most in need of comfort. Everyone here was home. Except me. I knew even Dad wished to stay here. But I knew my mom was out there, and that the bigger world was stronger and crueler and that if I didn't join it, I would be swept away with all the rest.

There were two hundred characters here. A thousand stories. A million possibilities. None of them were mine. I knew none of these

thoughts would be anything but cold comfort to Jori.

“I can’t,” was all I managed to say. “I’m sorry. I can’t go with you.”

She attempted to hide her disappointment, and it broke my heart.

I tried again. “You shouldn’t wait for someone to take you through,” I said. “You should go on your own. You’ll become Queen there, I know it.”

“We should get back,” she said softly. “It’s almost time for the fish fry. They’ll be waiting for us.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeated, desperately.

“It’s okay,” she said. She smiled at me and squeezed my arm. It really wasn’t.

Chapter 7: Shelter From The Storm

Dad was sitting out on the front porch. As we climbed the steps, he said, “Did you guys have fun today?”

I nodded.

Jori said, “Yes we did.”

“Thanks for getting home in time,” he said. “Hannah and Rosemary are getting ready.”

Jori opened the front door. I started to follow.

“Wait a minute, Connor,” he said. “Can I talk to you?”

Jori glanced over her shoulder at me. I managed a tight smile. She went inside. I leaned against the brick, my

back to the street, facing him.

“I wanted to make sure you’re doing okay,” he said. He picked up a bottle of beer from the ground, took a sip. “Are you?”

I nodded. “Yeah,” I said. “I’m having fun.”

“Are you sure? You don’t look it right now. What’s wrong? Tell me.”

“Nothing,” I lied. I could have told him part of what was bothering me, the part that was his fault. I could have shouted at him, accused him of betrayal. I could have cried. It was easier not to get into it. I certainly wasn’t about to attempt to explain what else had gone wrong.

Dad studied my face.

“Jori took me around town,” I said. “We saw all sorts of cool stuff.”

“Like what?” he asked, trying his best.

“Um, a cool little well downtown. A guy’s house built on a hill he made. We hiked through the woods.” I insisted, “It was fun.”

“Okay,” he said, somewhat satisfied. “Are you sure there’s nothing else you want to talk about?”

I shook my head. It was clear he wanted me to talk about it, but now I sensed that besides being easier, this way was frustrating him more than if I just came out with it. He deserved the frustration.

He wasn’t ready to let it go yet. “Rosemary’s a good friend,” he said. “I know Hannah can be a bit much. She means well. I’m glad you’re getting along so well with Jori.”

“She’s great,” I mumbled. Better than me, that’s for sure.

Dad took a drawn out taste of his beer. He gazed out over the town. “This place is great,” he said. “I’m kind of glad we got stuck here. Sometimes I think I could stay here forever. Something about this town. Know what I mean?”

“Sort of yeah,” I said.

He aimed to gauge the level of sincerity of my agreement.

He nodded. “I know you don’t have any fresh clothes, but you should probably jump in the shower before we go out to dinner.”

He wasn’t wearing his ranger’s uniform. He was wearing jeans and a faded Cardinals T-shirt I knew was his own. I hadn’t seen him wear it in

months.

“Okay,” I said, and took my leave.

The Knights of Pythias Music Hall was a long narrow, two-story building in the middle of town. Like many of the other structures, its upper half didn't match its lower half. The lower section was covered in yellowish, vertical siding, added on recently to cover up weather damage. The upper part had been built fifty years after the lower half, and it was made of white-painted, horizontal wood paneling.

The mist had dissipated. The clouds became thick and dark and heavy. There was a near-constant rumble of distant thunder.

“It's coming,” Hannah said, stealing a quick glance up at the sky.

We'd had to wait for her to get off

the phone with a client. We all stood there somewhat uncomfortably, listening to her.

“I see a black branch with blood dripping from it,” she’d said, her accent nearly gone. She spoke in harsh whispers. “And I see your babies with a wild wolf circling around. Be on your guard against the wolf; if he comes in, he will devour your children, and everyone you love—skin, hair, and all. The wretch often disguises himself, but you will know him at once by his rough voice and his black feet... No matter what you do, the wolf will find you all. Without great ceremony, he will swallow all of them down his throat. You’re going to have to cut your children out of his belly. That’s what you’ll have to do. “

“It’s not dark yet,” she said as we neared the hall. “But it’s getting there.”

Before we even opened the doors of the hall, the pleasant Midwestern smell of deep-frying cod and catfish met my nostrils. I inhaled deeply and licked my lips. I was starving. I heard music.

The hall was packed full of people. Practically the whole town was already here. More than a few of them watched us as we entered. After a couple seconds, most broke into welcoming smiles.

Chairs were lined up along the two long walls. At one end, a group of card tables had been set up, most of them filled with people eating cod and corn and beans and coleslaw and rampion salad. The food was set up along one

wall, in large aluminum foil trays, heated by little burners. Three kegs of beer sat next to a dessert table.

On the other end, a third of the hardwood floor was cleared to serve as a dance floor. Only a handful of people were dancing to the bluegrass music played by five musicians on a small stage against the far wall. There was a guitar player/singer, an upright bassist, a mandolin and banjo player, and a drummer. The singer was wiry with brown hair to his shoulders and a thick mustache. I thought I recognized the tune they were playing, but I often think that about bluegrass.

For the first unbearable half-hour, Dad and I were introduced to dozens of townspeople. They asked the right amount and depth of questions—how

we got stuck here, how long we were staying, how the park was doing, if Dad knew so and so. No one dug much deeper. I was grateful; I'm sure Dad was, too.

Finally, when we had a few seconds alone, I tugged on Dad's arm and told him I was going to go get some food. Jori and I filled our plates, found an empty table, and began scarfing it down. It was delicious.

We didn't have long. The people who talked to Dad weren't satisfied until they said a few words to me. They came up to our table and asked me what grade I was in, what my favorite class was; all the normal boring things adults like to ask kids. They asked with an intensity and eagerness that made me nervous.

I looked around. There were definitely no other kids here besides Jori and me.

“There aren’t any other kids here,” I said, having learned not to phrase it as a question.

“Nope,” she said, swallowing a forkful of coleslaw.

I shoved a big piece of fish into my mouth and realized I couldn’t stop myself from forming a follow-up. Maybe if I mumbled it with a mouthful of cod, that would help. “They go through the tunnel, too?”

“Or maybe they got gobbled up by the escaped animals,” she said, deadpan. That wasn’t helpful, of course. What did I expect?

“Have you ever seen any of them? The animals, I mean?” Trying a

different tactic.

“Not for a while,” she said. “Well, besides the sheep and goats, of course, and the bobcats.” A couple collared bobcats had been prowling around the dance hall. “Before I left, I saw two of them once. They were a ways away, but I could definitely make out what they were. A lion and a tiger, walking together. I could see the tiger nuzzle the lion.”

I savored the image for a bit. I forgot about my first question she hadn't answered.

The band switched from bluegrass to straight-up country twang. I definitely recognized a couple of these songs. Dad sometimes played country records in the living room when he thought I was asleep. Woes of broken

pickups and broken hearts squeaked up through the floorboards some nights.

After we finished eating there was at least another hour of smothering attention. I stood there and answered their questions and swallowed my medicine until all those who cared to meet us had been satisfied.

By that time, the band had switched to yet another musical style. It sounded like gypsy music of some sort. The dance floor was getting crowded. A trio of men, drunk and laughing, folded their arms across their chests and kicked their bent legs up in the air, traditional Russian-dance style. They were the same men we passed on the way to Jori's house yesterday. I attempted to catch a glimpse of the

nearest man's wrist, to see if his case of stigmata had persisted.

At some point, the singer had shed his shirt. He had a tattoo across his stomach. I squinted to make it out.
Seven In One Stroke.

Between songs, the singer spoke. His words were cloaked in a thick Eastern European accent that I was sure had been a rural drawl when they were playing bluegrass and country.

He said, "Bremen! Many years ago, you took us in when we were old and sick and broken, and all you asked in return that we entertain you every once in a while. Well...are you entertained?"

The crowd cheered.

"This is a song about the Baba Yaga," he said. "The Arch-Crone! The Bone Mother! You all know her, so sing

along!”

His fingers danced up and down the neck of his guitar, letting loose a mournful intro. Then he shouted, “Raz, Dva, Tri, Chet!” The rest of the band came crashing in. The violinist and singer writhed and twisted around each other, the drummer pounded on his toms, and the banjo player had traded it in for an accordion. When the singer turned his back, I could see a massive tattoo of a rooster covering the entirety of his back.

Another twenty people rushed the dance floor. They roared and all began shout-singing in what I assume was Russian.

“That’s weird,” I said to Jori at our table.

“*That’s* what you think’s weird?”

she asked, rolling her eyes. “*You’re* weird.” Then she smiled and once more all was forgiven.

I spotted the Cahokian on the other side of the room. He nodded at me. Ouros and Boros sat at a table together. Two plates of food sat untouched before them. One of them—I still didn’t know who was who—had a black eye. The other had a swollen lip, and he rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his hand. Both nursed coffees. They tried their best to be sociable.

Another man, taller and paler than either of them, approached their table. His black collared shirt was tucked into his black jeans and his black hair was slicked back. Ouros and Boros lifted their heads to greet him.

“Let me guess who that is,” I said

to Jori.

“You’d do well not to stare,” she said. “Seriously.”

Too late. His eyes met mine. I couldn’t hear him from across the room. I saw him mouth *Who’s That?* Boros and Ouros glanced at me too, and then turned back to him. One of them shook his head solemnly and the other nodded his head eagerly.

I couldn’t look away. Believe me, I tried. You know by now how little I liked making eye contact. I couldn’t break it. I found myself waiting with bated breath for him to speak to me.

Out of the corner of my vision, I saw Jori pick up a dinner roll and throw it at the man in black. It hit him square in the chest and he snapped his head over to her. I blinked and gasped

to catch my breath.

“He’s with me!” Jori shouted.

He smiled, showing sharp teeth, and bowed an apology to her.

The band finished a song. I couldn’t tell if they’d only been playing the one or if it had been an hour since I last paid attention. The crowd on the dance floor had once more doubled in size. Someone within the mass of people shouted out, “Play it again!”

“No,” the singer said, breathlessly. “I don’t sing twice for nothing. Give me that gold chain, and I’ll sing it to you again... That’s what I thought.”

The crowd roared in laughter. Someone else shouted something else I couldn’t quite make out. A few others shouted their assent.

“Fine,” the singer said, his voice

twisting into a German accent. “We will play a polka. But only one. Since they’re all the same anyway.”

The accordion breathed.

“Ugh,” Jori said phonetically.

“Wanna go upstairs and play Ping-Pong?”

Of course I did. I would have agreed to sneak into the vampire’s lair or steal Mr. Wadlow’s gold if it meant spending more time alone with her.

We got up and squeezed along the wall. The stairs were behind the stage. The second floor clearly used to be some sort of kids’ playroom. It technically still was, but the entire room lay under a thick layer of dust, except for the Ping-Pong table in the center of the room that Jori had recently used. One corner held one of

those plastic play castles and shelves and laundry baskets full of toys for toddlers. A bookshelf lined another wall. Only one of the overhead florescent lights managed to flicker on when Jori flipped the switch.

We didn't speak much. Best of three shifted into best of five after I lost two in a row, then to best in seven. She beat me soundly four games in a row. I suspected she aimed to let me win the last game, but her heart wasn't in it, and neither was my head.

After she flipped off the light switch, she suddenly wrapped her arms around me in the doorway. "Thank you for coming this weekend," she said. "Thank you for restoring my courage."

"No problem," I said, confused.

We went back downstairs. The band had shifted to Irish dance music. The fiddler's bow was about to catch fire. Three villagers were up on stage with the band, shouting along into the singer's microphone. We squeezed through the dancers. When we emerged in the dining area, she spotted the Cahokian motioning to her. She excused herself and went to talk to him.

I found an empty seat. Across the room, I watched the Cahokian hand Jori a small white flute, or bone, or both. She stretched to her tiptoes and pecked him lightly on the cheek. A group of people stumbled toward the dance floor. When they passed from view, she was gone, too.

The singer bent over and spoke to

someone in the crowd. I slipped off to the bathroom. When I came back, Dad was standing on the center of the stage. Rosemary stood off to the left side. He gripped a beer bottle in each hand.

“You’re gonna have to set one of those down if you want to sing,” the singer said to Dad in a sharp Minnesotan accent.

Dad threw his head back and drained one of the bottles and set it on the edge of the stage. He had a wild look in his eyes. I had frozen completely, watching with a growing sense of dread.

“Careful now,” the singer said solemnly. “You don’t want to sink the boat you built to keep afloat.”

Then the singer faced the crowd. “We’ve got ourselves a guest,” he said,

“in every sense of the word. He wants to do a song with us. Is that all right with you all?”

The crowd clapped and cheered. The upright bass and banjo were back. I'd never heard Dad sing in my life. I'd also never seen him so obviously drunk, or with that look in his eyes before.

“All right then,” the singer said. “I think you might know this one, too. And remember, you can find something better than death anywhere. You can always become a Bremen town musician.”

He handed the mike over to Dad and began strumming at a quick pace. He started at D, followed by the inevitable G. The bass dropped in, followed by the drums, and then the

fiddle and banjo together.

My dad bobbed his head for a few seconds and then opened his mouth and in a gravelly, half-shouting voice, he began to sing, *“Twas in another lifetime, one of toil and blood. Blackness was a virtue, the road was full of mud. I came in from the wilderness, a creature void of form. Come in, she said, I’ll give you shelter from the storm!”*

The band kicked it up a notch. My dad started thrashing around in an approximation of dancing. He looked at Rosemary, laughing giddily. She laughed, too.

“Not a word was spoke between us. There was no risk involved. Everything up to that point had been left unresolved. Try imagining a place

that's always safe and warm. Come in, she said, I'll give you shelter from the storm!"

If I wasn't so sure that half the people were staring at me, I would have clamped my hands over my ears.

Rosemary danced across the stage, and threw her arm around his shoulder. He removed it and twirled her around. They danced as the fiddle soloed.

"I was burned out from exhaustion, buried in the hail, poisoned in the bushes, blown out on the trail, hunted like a crocodile ravaged in the corn..."

He drew her in close to the mike, and they sang together, *"Come in, she said, I'll give you shelter from the storm!"*

They were both smiling so widely.

That was all I could take. I spun around and pushed through the crowd toward the door.

“Suddenly I turned around and she was standing there, with silver bracelets on her wrists and flowers in her hair. She walked up to me so gracefully, and took my crown of thorns. Come in, she said, I’ll give you shelter from the storm!”

It wasn’t till many years later when I was locked up in my condo in a deep alcoholic stupor all my own that I heard how the song ended—with impregnable walls, crossed signals, and crucifixion.

I bolted across the lawn, slipped into an alley and found myself in the memorial park.

The thunder was getting louder. The clouds lit up every few seconds. It would come soon.

The statue was bleeding again.

What was that?

Was that performance his ill-conceived way of telling me what was going on between him and Rosemary? Did he think a song would soften the blow? Or, more likely, was it much worse than that? Was I not even considered at all?

I caught a dark flash of movement on my other side. Ouros or Boros had squatted down on his haunches next to me. The other one hovered close behind.

“Hey, kid,” he said.

“Hi?” I ventured nervously.

“Let me give you some advice,” he

said. He wasn't slurring, but he clearly wasn't all there. "Don't let either of us fool you."

"Okay," I said. "I won't."

"We're real, or at least we used to be. There are whole armies of us. But none of it has anything to do with you. Our generals are long absent and you're all pawns on the board. That's all. Don't fall for either of us. We'd be every bit as lost as all of you if we didn't have our battles to keep us busy."

"Thanks?" I asked.

"There's always an escape. Through the roof or underground. Whichever's most convenient."

He wobbled as he stood, and had to push down on my knee to steady himself. The other one roughly helped

him to his feet. He'd heard the whole speech. It was one thing when you didn't know if it was an angel or a demon giving you advice. It was quite another when the neither of them objected to that advice.

I watched them walk off into the night. I needed to find Jori. I cupped my hands around my mouth and called out to her. No answer. I'd try inside. I headed back to the hall.

Rosemary sat on the steps outside the front door, smoking a long cigarette. She flashed a tight smile at me as I approached. Lightning also flashed above the river, slightly to the north.

“Your dad's looking for you,” she said.

She took a long swig from her

plastic cup. She drained it. The ice rattled around. She tapped the bottom of the cup with her finger till an ice cube slid into her mouth. She crushed it between her teeth.

“I think he wants to apologize to you. Frankly, I don’t know what for,” she said between chews. “When two people lie in bed together, they warm each other.”

“Where’s Jori? I asked, doing my best to ignore her sudden antagonism. “Is she inside?”

“Oh, I think she’s gone,” she said. A more peculiar smile slipped out. She slid another ice cube into her mouth.

“Where? Home?”

“Oh no,” she said. “Somewhere far far away.” She split a large ice cube right in half.

“Wait, do you mean-”

“Of course I do.”

“And you’re not stopping her?”

“She’s better off,” she said flatly.

She stole a glance at the door to make sure no one was listening. The way she rolled her head back around to me told me she was quite drunk. But even back then, I knew that it was in this state that the biggest hidden truths came pouring out of grown-ups.

“Maybe you should go with her,” she whispered. “I think everyone involved might be a bit happier, you know what I mean?”

I stared at her, not quite believing what I’d heard.

She helpfully cleared it up. “Your father and I can be free. Jori’ll have someone to explore with.”

My stare morphed to a glare. “How long ago did she leave?”

“You better run if you have any hope of catching her. Like the wind.”

I did. I took off.

“Don’t let the vampires bite!” she cried out after me. “Don’t let the ghosts catch you! Don’t let the giants stomp you! Don’t let the witches cook you!”

I tore across town, ran several yards up the road and then burst into the woods where I thought I spotted a white stone a few yards in. I sprinted past that first one and my eyes darted around until I saw another white-ish stone. I should have slowed down. I was panicking. I needed to find her before she went. I didn’t know what I’d do, or what I’d say. I needed to get to her. I’d think of something to say to

make her stay.

After passing a few more rocks, I realized this part of the forest didn't look familiar at all. I bent down and examined the next stone I came upon. It wasn't really round and it wasn't fully white. It was not one of Jori's. I'd been following a false path. Tears began to well up in my eyes. I attempted to wipe them away before they rolled down my cheeks. They came too many and too fast. My heart raced. Instead of turning back, I decided to attempt a new direction. I sprinted again.

The forest became thicker. The tops of the trees whipped violently above me and closed in so tightly that the sky was completely hidden. Not even the lighting could get through to

guide my way. I stumbled through the underbrush, tripping over roots and brambles several times. On the last fall, thorns tore into my palm. The trees were so close together and the night so dark that I held my hands out in front of me.

I came then to a long, narrow clearing. I could see sky above me, and it was no more pleasant than the ghostly treetops. Monstrous clouds towered miles high, their entire forms illuminated by the nearly constant flashes of lighting behind them.

At the far end of the clearing was a house. I could see lights on inside, and smoke curling out of the chimney. I breathed a faint sigh of relief and slowed my pace so as not to alarm whoever lived there. As I neared the

cottage, its shape began to reveal itself more clearly to me. I didn't like what I saw.

The cottage appeared to be mounted on crooked stilts. Its two round windows looked like unblinking eyes. It was surrounded by a fence that made me stop and blink; the fence looked like it was made of bones.

Suddenly, the wild wind, which had been relegated to the treetops, descended sharply. The trees behind and around me creaked and groaned. Leaves whirled through the air. The gale blew harder and almost pitched me backwards. I covered my face for a moment to protect myself from flying debris.

The wind stopped as abruptly as it had started. I removed my arm from

my eyes. An old woman stood before me. My eyes and brain needed a few seconds to properly process the situation. She sipped calmly from a mug and waited for me to pull myself together. She wore a kerchief in her hair and rags over the rest of her body. Her nose was long and pointy. I knew what she was before she even opened her mouth to reveal teeth made of iron. I decided I should run. But when I endeavored to move, I was paralyzed. I stood fixed as a stone, and could neither weep, nor speak, nor stir hand or foot.

“What are you doing here?” she asked flatly. Her voice did not sound like an old woman’s.

I tested out my mouth. It was the only part of me that could move. “I’m

looking for my friend.”

She sipped from her mug. Then she said, “You’ve strayed from the path. You disobeyed the rules.”

“Wh-what rules?” I stuttered.

“Forgot or were never told, it doesn’t matter,” she said. “You’re breaking another one now—ask no questions.”

“I’m sorry if I trespassed,” I said. “I’m lost.”

“Quite clearly, completely, and hopelessly,” she agreed.

The clearing was not silent. The distant din of a multitude of screeching birds carried all the way from the house.

“Are those your birds?” I asked absurdly.

“Those are the children. My

children. They're better off here with me where they can be looked after properly.”

A realization set in. Well, not particularly a realization in any other context—more like the surfacing of a wildly paranoid, impossible fear. The children of Bremen had either been eaten by wild animals, disappeared through a tunnel, or turned to birds by an old woman in a forest.

“What have you done with Jori?” I demanded. I had no problem this time maintaining eye contact because I wasn't able to look anywhere else no matter how much I may have wanted to.

She sighed and her whole body slumped with it. She said, “I'll tell you what. If you prove yourself strong

enough to bring me the hair of a lion and a tiger, then I'll bring you to her.”

“Take me to her now! This is Illinois. It would take-”

Oh. I stopped.

She let loose a long cackle in the way that only old crones who appear out of nowhere in the middle of a dark forest can. “Bring me the hair and I'll return you to her.”

Even if lions and tigers still roamed these woods, I had no idea where to look, or how to get the hair if I did. I didn't admit this aloud, and I didn't know how to convey despair while 98% paralyzed, but apparently I did. The old woman's face strangely softened. Granted, her softening somehow was much more disturbing and grotesque than the expressions

she'd shown so far.

This time her sigh was lighter. "I'm not entirely who they say I am, if you look closely enough. All you need to accomplish the task is to find a Solving Stone."

She reached into her rags. Her hand came out holding an apple. She held it out to me.

"Want this?" she asked. "You'll need a full belly for your journey."

"Are you kidding me," I said.

She shrugged. Her bones creaked. "It's my job to try."

With that, the wind whipped back up. Vast torrents of leaves tore free from their branches and swept around the clearing. I was able to raise my arms to shield myself. When the maelstrom ended, she was gone and I

found my legs worked. I ran.

I ran until I came to a small brook, whereupon I wasn't sure my legs were strong enough to carry me across it in a leap. I skidded to a stop. I leaned against a sycamore tree to catch my breath. The forest had thinned out a bit, yet I still had no idea where I was. I knew only that I should stop racing blindly and consider my situation.

I was thirsty. The brook babbled beside me. I kneeled down on its bank and scooped my hand in the cold water. I paused. Jori's words earlier today at the other brook—though it could have been this same one—came to me.

“Please, don't drink from here, or you'll become a wild tiger, and tear me to pieces.”

I plunged both hands into the water and swallowed mouthful after mouthful. Then I stood, and waited for The Change.

I stood there like a fool for a long time. I heard nothing except the brook, the rolling thunder, and the other night sounds of the forest. Once, the hairs on my arm rose, but I quickly realized that was merely fear and anticipation.

I was an idiot. Did I think I'd turn into a tiger like in one of those old werewolf movies I used to watch at Grandma's house? That the water would change my entire genetic structure? I'd fall to all fours, my clothes rip from my body as I grew to ten times my normal size, and roar at the moon?

Instead of growing, I fell apart. I

collapsed into a heap and began bawling, quite un-tiger-like.

Jori was lost or already gone, Dad had betrayed me and Mom, and I was lost in the middle of the woods believing I would turn into a tiger. I rocked back and forth and then rolled over to my side in the fetal position.

Something hard in my pocket pressed against my thigh. The geode.

I remembered being down in Dad's basement workshop with my mom. I was young; couldn't have been any older than five or six, because Nick was there, too, distracted by the dog at the other end of the room. We had a bunch of geodes we were getting ready to crack open with Dad's claw hammer. She was telling me what she knew of them.

“Some people believe in the healing power of crystals. Those people are probably crazy. But they believe geodes are particularly powerful. Their outer shell is plain and boring. Inside, dozens of crystals hide. The crystals point inward and they are able to hold and amplify energy, which can then be diffused, softened, and directed. They’re believed to aid in decision-making, and problem solving. Because of this, they call them Solving Stones...”

I pulled the stone from my pocket and squeezed it in my fist. This was a Solving Stone. *So what?* What was I to do with it? I squeezed it even tighter and thought hard about my predicament. Nothing.

Maybe it was a riddle. Maybe the

answer had to do with the geode's design. Its shell is boring and plain, but it holds hidden treasures inside. *Don't judge a book by its cover?* No. That's ridiculous. You can judge a geode by its outer appearance and know the degree of treasures it contains. You have to find one with the right weight and shape, that's all. You can even hear the loose crystals rattling around inside. So that wasn't it.

It must be more literal than that. The crystals themselves must be the key. They needed to be released. My heart sunk at the thought of what I needed to do next. I would not be bringing this to my mother.

I whispered, "I'm sorry" under my breath as I set the geode on a flat stone. I reached down into the brook

and retrieved a suitably sized rock. I raised it high and brought it down on the geode. Remarkably, it split open on the first strike. Its outer shell broke apart completely into more than twenty pieces. The crystals spilled out.

I tossed the smashing rock aside and leaned back on my haunches. I studied the pattern of the scattered crystals, searching for a sign.

A bolt of lightning flared brighter than any other, illuminating the whole forest for an instant.

After the accompanying thunderclap, I heard a loud screech and saw movement in the air above me to my left. A great bird swept down toward me. I let out a yelp and tried to scamper backwards away from it. It headed right for the crystals. It must

have caught the reflection from the lightning, and thought it was some sort of new, delicious prey.

The owl swooped down. To my surprise, it fluttered to a landing on top of the amethyst crystals. Then it remained motionless, watching me. It was about two feet tall, mostly white with brown streaks across its feathers. Thanks to my mom's zoo knowledge, I could identify it as a barred owl. Its beak was yellow and its eyes big and round and brown.

Its eyes appeared almost human, and then... actually human. I recognized them. They were my mother's eyes. A wave of certainty swept over me. My tears changed in constitution. This owl was my mother. I knew it.

“Tu-woo,” she said softly. “Tu-woo.”

All day long she remained trapped in her broken mind. At night when she slept she was free to fly.

She bobbed her round head at me, clutched some of the crystals in her talons, and took flight. She didn't go far. She stopped on a branch of a pine tree a dozen yards across the brook. She rotated her head ninety degrees and stared at me, expectantly.

I pushed myself off the ground, bounded across the brook, and followed. She led me deeper into the woods, toward a mysterious destination I trusted she knew well. If she flew too far ahead, white feathers would rain down to show me the way—or I would catch a glimpse of the

crystals she still managed to clutch in her talons even when landing on branches.

As I ran, I saw visions of her. Happier times and not so happy times. I saw her making my brother and I salami and cheese sandwiches on a picnic on a Missouri lakeshore. I saw her reading *The Wind in the Willows* to me by flashlight under the tent-fort I'd made next to my bed. I saw our last midnight drive together, and her frantic face as she kissed me for the last time before fleeing. I saw her hospital room, sedated and a million-mile look in her eyes, and the notebook on her nightstand in which she'd written in large letters, *Hold onto the strings that are better left to fray.*

I held tight as we ran the forest

together. She led me up a slope. The forest opened up. I stood near the edge of the bluffs. I stepped closer to the edge.

I could see the river, and the lights in the towns on the other side, and even the glow of St. Louis to the south. The real world wasn't too far away.

She was perched on an oak branch. She waited for me to focus on her and when she did, she looked down at the rocks below. I saw a cave. She nodded. I shivered. She flapped her wings and took to the air. She circled above me. She released the crystals and they rained down upon me. She called out, and it sounded like, "*Be brave, be brave, be brave...*"

Then she found a strong enough updraft and took off straight up into

the sky, up into the still-gathering clouds. I watched until she disappeared from view.

I wiped the remaining tears from my eyes. No more flowed.

The cave. I shifted my attention back to it. It was set back twenty yards from the edge of the bluffs. Its entrance was maybe eight feet wide and barely taller than me. I heard a rustling of movement from within.

I clenched my fists. I steeled myself for what I knew I had to do. There wasn't any question about it anymore. Doubt was no longer an issue. I took a deep breath, and then a step forward.

Only one step, because something was moving in the cave.

Toward me.

I saw two glowing eyes floating in the darkness, getting bigger and closer. I heard a growl. And then it came.

The great beast emerged from its den. It was bigger than any lion or tiger I'd ever seen at the zoo. As the lightning illuminated its body, I saw why. Its body was painted with tiger stripes, and its head was adorned with a lion's mane.

“They were a ways away, but I could definitely make out what they were. A lion and a tiger, walking together. I could see the tiger nuzzle the lion.”

It walked toward me. I remained completely motionless, whether from paralyzing fear or steely resolve, I still don't know.

It growled louder this time. It

padding across the rocky surface and stopped only a few feet in front of me. I was unable to maintain eye contact with anyone—not my dad, the Cahokian, Rosemary, anyone—so I shouldn't have expected to do so with this beast. I stared right into its eyes.

It growled yet again and shook its head back and forth. Then it closed the gap between us. It sniffed me thoroughly, up and down, from my head to my toes.

The growl continued, low in its throat. It returned to my head. It sniffed again. I saw its nostrils flare. Then the growl changed frequency. It demurred to a purr. It lowered its head and nuzzled my arm.

“...you'll become a wild tiger...”

I raised my other arm, reached

above its head and plucked a few hairs from its mane. Then I pulled a few from its back.

It opened its jaws wide. I prepared to be swallowed whole. Its tongue emerged and flapped sloppily against my cheek. Then it backed away, shaking its head slowly back and forth. I did the same. It slipped back into its cave and I into the woods from whence I came.

When I was out of its sight, I began to run once again. My heart pounded. I was ecstatic. I'd done it, impossible as it had seemed. My mom had shown me the way. I sensed like I knew the way back, and whenever I got confused, I would spot a white feather or a stray crystal to lead me back to the path.

I came to the brook. I leapt across

it. I ran by the remaining amethyst. It wasn't far now. Up ahead, I saw break in the trees. I knew that's where the clearing was. I picked up my pace.

The clearing was gone. The house on its stilts was nowhere to be found. In its place, I saw the juniper tree and the tunnel. Jori stood near its entrance.

I called out to her.

She turned.

Lightning flashed, thunder roared, and the sky finally broke. It began to pour.

The storm was here, finally. The flood would be over soon.

I approached the tunnel's entrance. She had stepped inside. She motioned for me to join her.

"It's okay," she said, "it's not till

the middle.”

I ducked inside, too. I was already soaking wet. My teeth began to chatter. I clenched down to stop them. The rain poured outside. She was dry. It was warm in here.

“Don’t go,” I said. “I didn’t mean what I said before.”

“Yes, you did,” she said softly. “And you were right.”

“Don’t go.”

“Bremen will be gone soon, anyway,” she said. “Almost everyone I used to know is already gone or unrecognizable. I’m a burden to my sisters. They don’t know what to do with me.”

“Come stay with us,” I attempted. She shook her head. “I shouldn’t wait for someone to go with me. I

should be brave. I want to see the other side. I should have stayed when I went before. I want to have an adventure. I'm tired of playing at it. I'm tired of hearing of other people's adventures. I want one of my own. It's high time."

I lowered my head. My mouth moved, but I didn't speak. I wanted to say that I would go with her. I couldn't bring myself to utter the words aloud. I couldn't go. It wasn't right. I belonged in this world, the world outside of Bremen. I couldn't leave Dad. I couldn't abandon Mom, especially after seeing her in the woods tonight. She was still there, trapped inside her mind.

Jori reached across the space between us. She touched my chin.

"Take care of your dad," she said.

“Visit your mom. You’re right. There are hundreds of people here in Bremen and thousands of stories, and none of them are yours. None of them are mine, either. You need to find yours out in the world beyond Bremen. Even that world’s passed me by. I have to find another one.”

I’d never her told her that.

I said, “If you can read my mind, why do I have to speak?”

“You’re the best person I’ve met,” she said. “I’m sorry I gave you a hard time. I wanted to make sure you were made of what I thought you were. Don’t let the world change you. I’m afraid it’s about to change me, and that’s why I have to go.”

She moved her hand from my chin to my cheek to my neck to my back and

then wrapped herself around me. I held her tight.

“Don’t let it break you,” she whispered, “or change or rearrange you. Stay strong.”

She pulled away. She slid her hand down my shoulder, my arm, and held my fingers in hers for a moment more.

“If you ever do decide to leave this world alive, I’ll be over there.” She pointed through the tunnel. “I’ll be waiting. I mean it.”

And I still can’t remember the best things she said.

She released my fingers, leaned in and kissed me lightly on the cheek. Then she began walking down the tunnel, stepping on the exposed rocks so as not to get her feet wet in the brook. She had a backpack slung over

her shoulder.

She paused about five feet from the other side. She cocked her head. She saw something. She smiled over her shoulder at me.

Then she stepped through. She disappeared. I waited for a few minutes, and then stepped back into the storm. I followed her stones back toward Bremen.

Chapter 8: After The Flood

All things considered, I made it back to town fairly easily. I reached downtown shortly after what I assumed to be dawn. The storm made it hard to tell.

I ran into Dad by the post office. He was drenched and no longer drunk. He'd spent the past five hours searching for me. He pulled me tight to his chest and said he was sorry over and over. By then I wasn't even sure if he needed to be sorry about anything. I told him it was okay anyway.

He pointed down Main Street. I could see through the rain that only a few inches of water were left on the road. They'd all been right. The storm arrived and the flood receded. Some other poor town downriver would be

getting the brunt of this storm.

He asked if I was ready to go home. I nodded. Rosemary and Hannah came to see us off. The two sisters shared an oversized umbrella. Dad thanked them for their hospitality. He hugged both of them. Rosemary whispered something in his ear as he pulled away. Dad asked if Jori was home, too. Rosemary stared at me and said yes, and she'd been sent up to her room. I said nothing. What was there to say?

We climbed into the Blazer. I got in the backseat. Dad studied me in the rearview mirror for a moment. He said nothing. We effortlessly crossed the Rubicon and left Bremen without anymore fanfare.

We barely spoke on the drive back.

Dad didn't ask me where I went and I didn't question him on the nature of his relationship with Rosemary. As far as we were both concerned, we knew all we cared to know. That's how it stayed. We never again discussed our time in Bremen.

As far as I knew, Dad stopped seeing Rosemary, but there were a few nights over the next several months when he sent me to spend the night at Grandma's without any explanation. Even that stopped within the year.

He fulfilled his promise from the beginning of the weekend; we visited Mom the next week. On the drive up to Chicago, Dad warned me that she wasn't doing well. Apparently he'd visited her without me at some point. He was right. The faraway look in her

eyes was a dozen miles more distant. There were red marks on her wrists. I overheard her doctor tell Dad that she had to be restrained to her bed a couple weeks ago.

She was highly medicated and she barely spoke. But when I hugged her goodbye, she whispered in my ear, “Thank you for the stone. It was beautiful.”

I buried my face deep in her neck and savored the rare moment when she was my own mother again.

I whispered, “Thank you for leading me. I’m sorry you’re trapped here.”

I pulled away and kissed her cheek. Her hands dropped limply to her side and she stared into space.

Dad took me out in Chicago the

next day. We spent the morning at the aquarium, the afternoon in the Field Museum, and had dinner at a pizza place on Navy Pier. He told me the doctors said there was little hope she'd get better, so there was no longer any point in her staying much longer at that facility, considering its cost and distance. He planned to move her to a long-term hospice much closer, next to Forest Park in St. Louis. We'd be able to visit much more often if I wanted.

I shut my eyes and attempted to picture her flapping her wings against the stormy sky. But only a week out, my memories of Bremen were beginning to fade. They became fuzzy, lost their sharpness, and began to take on the qualities of a dream; as such I knew they would lose even more of

their potency. I resolved to never let Jori's memory disappear. Everyone else in Bremen had probably already forgotten her. I was determined to remember her long after every other part of that weekend left my memory. I succeeded for a long time.

Two years later, the river swelled and surged for 144 days during the Great Flood of 1993. As the prophets of Bremen predicted, the entire village was swept away, along with half a dozen other unlucky towns, \$20 billion dollars, and 47 lives.

A few years after that real flood, I came across a curious article in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. The article was brief. It posed a question to which its author was unable to find a satisfactory answer. The latest census info, from

1990, had Bremen's population at 247. Only 36 people were rescued and relocated—and no one was officially reported missing.

The world did its very best to shape me in its image. I picked my battles carefully at first. I went to Mizzou and studied architecture. I met a girl named Sarah there and the month before graduation I proposed to her. We moved to Chicago together and got married a year later. The timing of my graduation was fortuitous. After The Disappearance in '01, architects were in high demand—people began appreciating buildings a lot more. I got a good job at a firm in The Loop.

I really started dropping my guard soon after that. Sarah and I tried for a

couple years to have kids, and by the time we finally went to a doctor and he told us it wasn't possible, we were both secretly relieved. She'd been having an affair for the better part of a year, and I found out about it a couple months later. "Finding out" gives myself too much credit. I came home from work one evening and a moving truck was out front. She stood in the foyer of our condo. He was there, too. I knew him well. She told me what was happening in a flat tone. I knew she'd nervously rehearsed the speech for weeks. Or maybe not. Maybe she hadn't put much thought into leaving me. When she walked out, he stayed behind and offered to let me hit him. I declined. He asked again, a bit more desperately this time. He tugged on my arm. I

pulled free and went to the kitchen to pour myself a whiskey.

I didn't stop drinking. I knew I was a walking cliché. I didn't care. Clichés are clichés for a reason. It got bad enough that I lost my job seven months later. I began dreaming of Bremen. I sequestered myself in the condo until my savings ran out and the bank told me it was time to leave.

I headed back south. I moved in with Dad in a small house far across the river in St. Genevieve, Missouri. After returning from a five year stint at a national park in Colorado several months ago, he'd taken a job at Hawn State Park. He'd taken to drinking as well. We spent most evenings together drinking and watching baseball, hockey, or whatever else was on to

keep us from speaking. I lived there with him for a year until he got cancer. It moved fast and he was gone within three months.

Mom was still technically alive, but had been catatonic for the past decade. I visited her a couple times. She was too far gone to even take her nightly flights.

After Dad died, the Bremen dreams increased, but their focus changed. I saw Jori most nights, but not in Bremen. I saw her in her other world. I saw how happy she was. I saw she found the adventures she sought. I saw that she had become Queen. Sometimes in the dreams she'd look at me with such sadness. She was disappointed in me.

I began pulling myself together. I

stopped drinking and began looking for work. It was relatively easy to blame the past eighteen months of unemployment on the economy.

A small architecture firm out of St. Louis had won a contract to build on the land where Bremen once stood. A new levy had been constructed and the area was deemed flood-proof. The firm's partners had seen photos of the old Bremen and they had dreams of recreating its strange beauty. Although they didn't know I'd ever been there, they'd seen my portfolio of the work I'd done in Chicago and they thought it was a good match. They offered me a job. I considered it.

One Sunday morning in March of 2011, I decided to drive out to the construction site. I was supposed to

give them an answer the next afternoon. When I turned off the Great River Road, I barely recognized anything. The valley had been completely cleared of the remains of the houses, roads, and even trees. The land was sectioned off with wooden stakes and orange tape to mark the borders of potential lots. A half dozen construction trucks were scattered about. I drove up the makeshift dirt road where Main Street used to be, past the bulk of the former and future town. I pulled over by the woods, parked, and climbed out.

I walked along the forest's edge, searching for something I was convinced couldn't still be there. Then I spotted something small and white. The first of Jori's white stones, a few

yards into the trees. I bent down and examined it. It was still white as snow. I looked ahead. I could see another and another.

The sun was bright and it was early spring. I had no trouble following Jori's path. And then I saw it. Unbelievably, it was still there. The brook, the juniper tree, the tunnel.

And something else. A whole lot of somethings.

The banks of the brook were lined with at least a dozen objects. As I neared them, I saw they were little boxes, made of iron, in varying stages of rust.

I picked up the nearest—and rustiest one. There was a simple latch. I unfastened it and opened the lid. It was filled with papers. I kneeled down

and pulled out the top piece.
Instinctively, I recognized Jori's
handwriting even before I spotted her
name at the bottom.

Connor-

*I hope this finds you well, if it
finds you at all. I realize you won't get
this for a long time after I send it
through—ten years at best—but I think
of you often. When I decided to start
writing, I amused myself thinking
about what you'd be like ten years
older. It makes my head spin a bit,
especially when I think I'll still be a
year older than you no matter what.*

*I've been here a few short months
and I've already had many wonderful
adventures. This world is pure magic.
It's what I've always dreamed of, and
I know you dream of similar things*

whether or not you admit it. The only thing that's missing is someone from my world to share them with. The people and creatures here have lived with this magic their whole lives, so they can't appreciate its wonder as much as I do—or you would.

I've included some drawings I've made that show some of the things I've seen. I've written a bit about each picture, too, but I think the pictures are more effective than words could be. I practice drawing every day so that with time maybe you'll be able to see them in almost the exact same way I did. So yes, you can expect many more like this.

P.S. - I've also included a few trinkets I thought you might like.

P.P.S. - I hope your mom is doing

better.

-Jori

I began flipping through her drawings. She was right. Much was indescribable with words, or at least with my still feeble grasp of them. At the bottom of the box was a large bright purple feather, and a large jewel with a hundred sides, all of which reflected a different color.

Many hours passed as I seated myself on the bank and opened the boxes one by one, in order of obvious age. I read the details of her first ten years in the magical kingdom of three moons. I read and saw pictures of her exploits as first an unlikely dragon slayer, and then a sort of dragon whisperer. It turns out she did share

some of the same talents as her sister Hannah, and she learned to amplify and focus them. She spoke of the arrival of some of the other residents of Bremen. By her sixth year there, when she was 18 and I was 27, she had indeed become Queen. I accumulated a pile of her treasures, among them a dragon's tooth, a griffin's scale, eight gems containing eight different impossible features, a heavy round stone which she said was the most magical of all, and a silver tiara she thought would be funny to imagine me wearing.

The letters in the second-to-last box had taken a different, somewhat more nervous tone. She spoke of peaceful villages taking up arms against each other, an entire county

whose citizens had been turned to stone, rumors of strange creatures more vicious than any dragon amassing along the borders. There were no pictures.

The final box, the newest one, was completely free of rust. It looked as if it had just arrived. I thought about the physics for a moment. Could she still be there on the other side, watching me open it?

Her handwriting in the final letter was messier, hurried. Its message was dire. She said that a powerful witch thought long dead had teamed with a sorcerer from across the sea and they had cast a curse over the land that would last for a thousand years. She admitted for the first time in any of her letters to being frightened. The capital

had been overrun. She would have to go into battle soon. The witch had proclaimed that she would capture Jori and keep her prisoner on display for the entire thousand-year curse. Jori had seen it happen in her dreams, but she was determined to fight.

She said she knew I hadn't yet gotten any of her messages yet. Each time when she sent a new one, she saw the oldest ones still untouched in the brook. But her dreams told her I would get them before it was too late, and her dreams had never lied before.

Beneath the letter was a dagger with a golden hilt. She sent it away to keep it safe, and because she knew I would know how to wield it. I trembled when I read her description of the circumstances of its intended use.

Suddenly I wasn't alone. Someone had emerged from the tunnel. I heard them splashing through. I looked up.

The Cahokian stood before me. His face appeared many years older than when I saw him last, but his body was younger, leaner, stronger. He was naked from the waist up, war paint streaked across his face, wearing a necklace of purple feathers, leather pants and moccasins.

At first he was as shocked to see me as I to see him. Then he recognized the man the boy he had once met had become. His face relaxed to an expression of relief.

“I didn't believe her,” he said. “I thought she was grasping at air. I thought it was a fool's errand. But here you are.”

I learned later that he had gone through the tunnel a week after her when he was finally able to wrest the truth from her sisters. He didn't know what kind of world was through this particular tunnel, but he had been through others and he wanted to make sure she was safe. He believed that to be more important than waiting hopelessly for the last of his people to find their way to a home that didn't exist anymore.

On the eve of the great battle she spoke of in her last letter, she asked him to go back and bring me across. He'd asked what made her think he could find me, that I'd want to come, and why it was so important that I do. She said that I would be standing right where he found me. He protested,

saying he'd be much more use to her on the battlefield. She told him it was already lost, and that this was the only hope. She gave him one more letter, which he was to give to me once I crossed over.

I learned that later. He explained nothing in those moments by the tunnel's entrance. The next thing he actually said was, "Well? Are you ready?"

"Yep," I said, without hesitation.

"Let's go then," he said. "I've already lost ten years, and we're about to lose another ten. Let's hope not all her dreams were true, and that it's all happily ever after by the time we get there."

I insisted on gathering up all the boxes and pushing them through

ahead of us before we left. He grumpily helped. I held on to the dagger.

When we were finished, he said, “You’re green. I’ll go through and make sure it’s safe. I learned my lesson the last time about being the last one through.”

He stepped toward the tunnel. He pointed to the other side and said, “You’ll be happy to know she’s become a great, powerful, and beautiful woman. So let’s go save her.”

As he stepped through, I saw what he had been pointing at. I saw Jori standing on the other side. She had left twenty years ago, arrived ten years ago, and I saw her arrival now. She stepped gingerly into the forest and looked around in wide-eyed wonder. Then she twirled round and round and bounded

through the trees. She paused at the edge of the forest. I imagined the wonders she saw.

She disappeared from view as she descended. I wondered what she looked like now, or when I would arrive. I was sure I would recognize her.

I took a deep breath. I recalled the beast's cave from so long ago. As I began to step through, I felt a cool, buzzing sensation. I thought I could see the outlines of a group of people watching me from the other side. I thought I saw them smile.

I was right. Jori had performed the calculations and we'd come back to the sacred forest to see this. Our two young children were with us. Wildflower buds surrounded our feet on that fine spring

day. Jori cast a quick little spell to speed them up to enhance the scene. The buds opened and bloomed in full bright blues and pinks and purples before our eyes. We pulled our children close. We'd shaken off our attendants this morning and the duties of the court. It had been Jori's idea and I'd gladly agreed. We came here to show our children how our second adventure together began, and how our family had been born. We watched and smiled silently as I stepped through.

Afterwards, we had a picnic by Satyr Falls. Jori and I told the next chapters of our story to our children for the forty-second time. We returned to the capitol at dusk and I decided I should start writing. It's taken longer than I thought. Ensuring peace and

happiness in a world as vast and strange and wonderful as this requires only a bit more effort than recalling the tiny details of the distant past.

I suppose there's another story that begins where this one ends. The tone of that one is quite different, and its scale much greater, the stakes infinitely higher. But over here, every detail of those adventures –and Jori's before then—is well-known and repeated and turned to plays and songs and nursery rhymes and if we're very lucky it will turn to legend. I'm quite sure we'll live as happily as we can, until we die.

Snip snip snover, this story's over.

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About The Author

Tyler Taylor is a member of the indie rock band [The Amends](#). His short stories have appeared in *Syntax*, *Bellowing Ark*, and other journals. He co-wrote and edited *The Ruins of Tropicalia*, which resides at <http://theruinsoftropicalia.com>. Much like *TROT*, he found this manuscript and claimed authorship. Tyler lives in Colorado but was born and raised 47 miles from Bremen.