

Black Dragon

By Robert Ki

Contents

Part 1: The Dragon	3
Chapter 1: Small Adventure	4
Chapter 2: The Swordsman	13
Chapter 3: Astrologist and Sandy Beaches	21
Chapter 4: The Giant	36
Chapter 5: Enchanted Sword	40
Chapter 6: Ghillie Suit.....	54
Chapter 7: Fafnir	55
Interlude: Free Time.....	86
Chapter 8: Everything Explained	87
Chapter 9: A New Kind of Evil	96
Chapter 10: Used to be Friends	104
Part 2: The Black	116
Chapter 11: Like Shrapnel.....	117
Chapter 12: Tangle	126
Chapter 13: Angel Dust.....	140
Chapter 14: Nova.....	151
Chapter 15: This Time, You Will Break	160
Chapter 16: Heaven	167
Chapter 17: Earth.....	168

Copyright © July 17th, 2017 by Robert Ki. All rights reserved.

Part 1:
The Dragon

Chapter 1: Small Adventure

Louis Baumgartner sat in his car at a red light, looking down at the pills that would kill him soon. He wore a maroon sweatshirt that day, which was, to him, more noteworthy than the bottle of LithoXXXXXocaine in his hand. Maroon had been his favorite color since he was a kid. The pills, being part of an experimental trial, were void of color: every one in the bottle was white with two black stripes around the middle.

When a car honked behind him, Louis looked up and saw that the light had turned green. He stuffed the pills into his sweatshirt pocket and sped ahead through the intersection. Halfway down the next block, Louis parallel-parked between two cars much nicer than his—his white Volkswagen out of the 1980s was like an Oreo between the shiny black BMWs. Louis did lock the driver's-side door before heading inside, in case somebody robbed his car by mistake, and not either of the nicer black ones. He turned the key manually in the car door, since the remote key had been busted for about a month. He zipped his sweatshirt up as he crossed the street and headed inside.

In Louis' apartment, the carpet was brown. The walls were tan, or some off-white. In the dim lighting, the color of the walls was honestly difficult to judge. The domed light-fixture overhead was supposed to have two lightbulbs in it, but when one went out, Louis had never taken the glass dome apart to do anything about it. One light was plenty to see all of the fast-food wrappers and discarded soda cans that lived on the floor.

Connected to the living room was a kitchen, with a counter between the two rooms where Louis ate Froot Loops most mornings, pouring the bowl while standing on the kitchen side, and eating the bowl while sitting on the living room side on a bar stool. It started as a joke to himself about being a chef, and with no one around to tell him to be less depressed, the joke kept on. Behind a door in the living room was his bedroom, which was overall pretty unremarkable.

Louis put his key ring in the bowl on the entryway table. It was much warmer in the apartment than it had been outside. He kept his sweatshirt on though. It was a light sweatshirt, and it fit him pretty nice. It went well with his jeans with the tattered knees. He walked to the kitchen counter, leaned back against it, and set the LithoXXXXXocaine bottle down for later.

“Sup?” he asked Sophie.

She was laid out on the couch with Bob. Bob was Louis’ cat. Sophie was a friend.

Sophie stretched, reached down for her beer she’d left on the floor, and finished it. “Nicht viel,” she said.

Mentally, Louis still translated things into English: *not much*.

Sophie started petting Bob. “Sup with you?” she asked in German.

“Nothing,” Louis said back. “How’d the date go?”

“Meh.”

“Meh,” Louis echoed. “I won’t have to kick any pretty girls out of my bed then?”

“If it was going *that* well we’d still be out,” Sophie said. She toyed with Bob’s ear. He purred and leaned into her. His hair looked a lot like hers. He was a tabby. She had short hair, which that week, was very light brown. “I wanna go somewhere,” she said, laying back down. She pulled a cushion down off the back of the couch and rested it over her head.

“Don’t believe you,” Louis said.

He glanced back at the short stack of mail on the counter. It hadn’t taken her long at all to figure out his apartment key and his mail key were the same.

“Is it a felony in Germany to open other people’s mail?” he asked, flipping through billing statements.

“Didn’t open, just handled.”

“Mm, fair point.”

He set the stack back down, then walked around the counter into the kitchen to change Bob’s litter. By the time he finished, Sophie had been consumed by the couch cushions. Bob rested on the back of the couch, licking a paw.

“Ready to go?” she asked. Again, Louis was translating. Under the cushions it was, “Mhhh-mhh mh mh?”

“Ready,” he said. He picked his keys and a bag of weed out of the bowl by the door, and the two of them headed out to his car.

They got in—Louis had to unlock Sophie’s door from the inside—and they headed off through Berlin. Sophie gave directions with “Turn here” and “Go straight for a while.” Louis knew better than to ask where they were going. She knew the way turn-by-turn. Not holistically. “Pull in here,” she said.

Their final destination was a mini parking lot in an alley, with signs posted plentifully saying that the lot was for local shopping only.

“Your phone waterproof?” she asked.

“No?” Louis guessed.

“You should leave it in the car,” she said. Louis took her word for it.

When they got out, she led them farther into the alley, where there was an open manhole. She stood in front of it, staring up at Louis. Louis crossed his arms, peering down into the dark. “Sure about this Sophie?”

“Relax,” she said, “it’s clean. Just a storm drain.”

Louis inhaled deeply through his nose. He was shortly unconvinced.

“Sorry,” she said, “are those your good clothes?”

As a sign of good will, she climbed in first. Louis followed after her. She used her phone—apparently waterproof—as a flashlight. Down in the main tunnel, water flowed through a rut in the ground, while Sophie and Louis got a generous concrete walkway to shuffle along. They slouched through the tunnel, around bend after bend, until they arrived at a wall with a green X spray-painted on it.

“Give me a hand up,” Sophie said.

Louis looked ‘up.’ Above the X, the ceiling was cracked. The crack was big enough to fit into.

Louis linked his fingers together and stood under the fissure, giving Sophie an extra step. “Do you know why I gave you a key to my apartment?” he asked her as she climbed.

“No,” she said, and reached around for a handhold in the crack. She put her phone in her mouth so that the light shined up. When she got her handhold, she shuffled her way up into the

crack, then shone the light back down for Louis. She held out her free hand for him to grab. “Why did you give me a key?” she asked.

Because I wanted to get a dog, but the apartment doesn't allow them.

“Because I wanted to keep you *out* of places like this,” he said out loud. Both were true.

Louis pulled himself up to Sophie. The crack they were in ran for a ways, very narrow. Sophie led the way, phone-light proving to be pretty weak for spelunking.

Eventually, the crack stopped. Not in the sense that Louis and Sophie had reached a wall, but in the sense that they had reached a void: the concrete surfaces of the crack ended and a vast black space hung in place beyond it. The light from Sophie's phone didn't come close to illuminating anything inside of the dark space. Louis got up next to her, and looked down over the edge. She shone the light down. Pretty far down, the more he looked, Louis did think that he saw some kind of surface. Maybe a hazy red.

The opening smelled like incense and rotten meat.

Sophie screamed and pushed Louis down. Didn't really push him—caught him by the shirt collar before she'd even pushed him half an inch—but his mind had raced ahead and had already fallen, and when it hit the bottom, there was no fucking doubt that it was a crime scene down there. Very bad vibes.

“Been any farther than this?” Louis asked.

“Nah,” Sophie said. She found a seat just inside the edge of the crack to settle in on.

“Do you know what's down there?”

She shook her head. She'd set her phone on top of her left shoe, and the light shined up at her face like she was telling a ghost story. “Spooky shit,” she said. “I heard something moving in there yesterday.”

“Jesus.”

Louis took the bag of dope out of his pocket and started rolling a joint. Being a gentleman, he lit it and took the first puff himself, to make sure it was kosher.

Sophie leaned forward, elbows propped up on her knees,

hands cupping the back of her neck. “You been seeing anyone lately?” she asked.

Louis leaned back against the concrete, which felt cool through his sweatshirt. He shook his head.

“Bummer,” she said.

He shrugged.

“Oh don’t play it so fucking cool,” she said, and took the joint from him. She sank back into the concrete. Kind of melted. “You know none of my girlfriends ever would have come down here?” she asked, or said.

“Chelsea?”

Sophie inhaled for a while, and then breathed out. “Maybe Chelsea,” she admitted, and passed the joint back. “Fuck, man.”

Louis took a drag, and looked out to the open space next to them. “Any idea how big that—”

“Are you gay?” Sophie asked.

“Pardon? And *no*, but *what*?”

“You haven’t tried to make a move on me, ever. Even the entire time we’ve been down here: I talk about not liking any of the girls I’ve been dating and how you’re more fun, and *nothing*. How bad did you get burned before you left America, man?”

The void next to them suddenly, mysteriously, gave Louis a pit in his stomach. He passed the joint back.

“Pretty bad, man,” he told her.

He found a place to grab on the concrete with his hands. It seemed like the crack they sat in had tilted, and gravity was nudging them towards the black. Not demanding they go down there. Not yet, anyways. Just making a little suggestion. *Hey. Check it out.*

“But I did date *girls* in America,” Louis asserted.

“Good choice,” Sophie said.

“Choice?”

“Sure. Girls are prettier.” She passed the joint back.

He took it, puffed wrong, and then coughed. “Bisexual?” he asked, and coughed again.

She nodded.

“But you tell everyone you’re a lesbian because it’s easier.”

A smaller nod.

Louis looked back out to the space beside them. The little bit of red that he thought he'd seen at the bottom had gotten bigger: all around in the space was red. It was like looking out from the inside of a bloodshot eyeball. "Fuuuck, dude."

"Cool, ain't it?"

Louis knew Sophie would never use a word like "ain't." They were still speaking in German, and mentally, Louis still translated. He just couldn't reach for any other English word that more-closely matched what she'd said.

"You find some crazy shit Soph," he told her. "How'd you end up down here?"

"LSD. I thought a man was following me, so I jumped down the sewer, but he kept coming. And eventually, I ended up here."

"You were *here*? On *acid*?"

"What, you think I was gonna jump?" she asked. She put the joint down.

"You were on *acid*, Soph. What if he chased you up into here too?"

"He did," she said. She'd brought a knee up to her chest, and was hugging it. "He stood right over there"—she pointed—"and I sat right here until he went away. Do you *honestly* think I'd feel better jumping to my death than fighting him? He was big, and mean, but he wasn't death, Louis."

"Alright. I'm sorry," he said. He put his hands up. "You just worry me."

"Well don't let me." She brought her other knee up to her chest. Her phone, formerly sitting on her foot, dropped down the void. Louis reached out to catch it, but Sophie grabbed him by the shirt collar and held him back firmly.

They both leaned out over the edge. The phone had landed light-up, so on the bright side, they did know definitively where the bottom of the pit was.

"Motherfucker."

"I have a lighter. It's not that bright, but it'll get us out."

"I'm not leaving my phone."

But the phone was a long way down. Twenty feet, and the wall below them was completely smooth. No chance in hell of climbing down it.

A shadow jumped at the edge of the light. Then the light stood up: it faced the wall, and some of the light bounced back at a creature of solid black, and then the light was snuffed and Louis had never been left in any place blacker in his entire life. No sense of where the edge of the crack was anymore—he'd forgotten. Completely. But the gravity was worse and he felt he was being pulled very aggressively towards the pit. He swore he heard the creature down at the bottom of the pit trying to climb up the wall's smooth surface.

"Fuck the phone," Sophie said then, "it's locked. Let's go."

Louis flicked his lighter, and they shuffled back through the crack, the lighter-light even worse for spelunking than the phone had been. They each climbed down into the water tunnel, and fast-walked it back to the daylight. Sophie went up the ladder ahead of Louis, which was his penance for taking the first puff of the joint. As Louis climbed, he was pretty aware of the fact that he couldn't see that well down around his legs: anything could be just below them, getting ready to grab him back into the dark.

On the surface, even the parking lot in the alley felt sketchy. They left the car and went to wander around the city in the sunlight.

Later on, Louis dropped Sophie off at her apartment. He offered to let her crash at his place, but she said she was fine. He told her it was a fun adventure. She thanked him for saying so, and he drove off.

When Louis arrived back at his place, he opened the door to find Otto standing by the kitchen counter, holding the pill bottle from PGP up to his face with one hand and petting Bob with the other. Bob—Louis' slut cat who was not supposed to be on the counter—rubbed his head into Otto's hand, so all Otto had to do was hold it there. Otto, unlike Sophie, had not been given a key. Otto was just a fucking ninja at breaking into Louis' apartment.

"*LithoXXXXXocaine*," Otto said, turning the bottle around slightly to finish reading the name. "Take one daily. What's this for?"

"No idea," Louis said. "It's something new from Practiceorient Gesundestand Pharmaseutischen."

"Surely you mean Praxisorientiert Gesundheitszustand

Pharmazeutischen?” Otto asked.

“Yeah, what’d I say?”

“Your German’s getting worse dude.” Otto set the bottle on the counter. Louis and Otto spoke in English, since Louis was from America originally, and Otto from New Zealand.

“Wanna bum one?” Louis asked.

“No no no,” Otto said. “Prescriptions don’t agree with me. Bad history. I’m au naturel.”

Au naturel did not mean clean, as Louis was well aware of from the time he and Otto had met.

Louis tossed his keys into the bowl by the entryway table. “You looking for a place to crash tonight?”

“Just wanted to pet your cat,” Otto said. He walked to the open window by the couch. “Bye Louis. Bye Bob.”

And then he stepped out the window and was gone.

Louis—who lived in a second-story apartment—shook his head.

He closed the window after Otto—latched it—and fixed the cushions Sophie had knocked down. Then he sat back and flipped through his phone. Photos, games, texts. After exhausting every worthwhile thing a phone could do, Louis ended up in his contacts. He scrolled through the list of everyone he could call to hang with that night. Then he looked over at Bob on the counter, and the bottle of LithoXXXXXocaine. Mystery meat times a million. Maybe it’s fun, or maybe it kills you. Most likely, it does nothing that’s particularly noticeable.

Louis set his phone on the floor and stood up to get the pills. In the dim apartment light, he read the orange bottle one more time. *LithoXXXXXocaine*. Otto wasn’t wrong. It did sound fun. Louis played with the word, singing a little made-up song to himself as he opened the child-safety top. A Louis-safety top would’ve saved a lot more trouble, but as it was, no such thing had been invented in time. One pill in hand, Louis closed the bottle and set it back on the counter, then swallowed his first dose of Litho.

When he took the pill, his brain sizzled. His tendons exploded out of his wrists, his hands falling limp and useless at his sides. His heart stopped immediately but time did not slow down: he

continued to breathe many dozens of times as his mind was wrenched from his apartment in Berlin.

Chapter 2: The Swordsman

The medium Louis fell through was tremendously black and had a feeling of unconquerable largeness: like he could run, drive, or hell, fly a rocket in one direction for millennia and be no fraction closer to reaching an edge. But this was no mostly-empty space like the universe. There was energy, in particles and avalanches, throbbing and sweeping everywhere. Louis believed he fell through the mind of God, out of modern-day Berlin and into a darker memory: The Plague. He'd heard about the smell, but it was worse in person.

Louis had fallen out of time about ten feet above the ground, and the landing knocked the air out of him. When he inhaled, his body rejected the oxygen. "This is Not Air," his lungs said, coughing it back out. There was the smell of animal shit in it. Human shit. Human body odor too, but that was a very distant third in Louis' mind to the two kinds of shit.

From years of being a vessel through which marijuana smoke passed, Louis was pretty damn good at breathing whatever. He'd spent time in friends' basements that were almost as bad as the square that he'd landed in. But in those cases, he'd usually known what he was getting into.

As Louis weened himself onto the new, worse atmosphere, he looked at where he had come to. Around the square were homes made of sticks and stones, and roofs made of straw. A Three Little Pigs type of thing. There were people who saw him fall. There were a lot of people around, in fact. Most of them were ragged. Coughing, shambling. Louis felt like he was in a zombie movie. He had nearly landed on a man with a long beard and exhausted eyes. The man didn't even act startled by Louis' appearance. He just looked through the time traveler with a distant, fixed expression.

In a few moments, Louis' nausea passed.

Something had happened as he'd been falling. He was hundreds of years displaced, sure. But there were also things

altered inside of him. The tendons that had exploded from his wrists had grazed the mind of God as he fell, and they curled like prehensile tentacles through the astral plane. He could grab his hands from the outside and move them that way, like a marionette. He reached out to the bearded man he'd almost fallen on, not even thinking, and touched his rough, dirty face with these astral tendons—all the while never raising an arm or extending a finger.

Louis had tripped before. Shit, he had tripped a *lot*, on everything the average person could name off the top of their head. This was not that. He was usually pretty damn good at telling what was in his head and then guessing where the real world was at, to the point where some drugs had become less fun. But this time he was blindfolded and spun around with a baseball bat in his hand, while the other people at the party rearranged the furniture around him: good luck hitting the piñata this time fucker.

Soon, Louis looked like the rest of them. He shambled, thoughtless—kind of not up to the level of thinking yet. He went around the city trying to find anything indicating whether this was still Berlin, or even Germany. It certainly wasn't the year he had come from. He hoped very much that it wasn't some year in the future.

Louis, in addition to his own astral tendons, saw similar appendages sticking out of the others. It was like everybody had strings on them, sprouting out all over their bodies. Most people's strings laid limp, pooled at their feet if they were stationary, or else dragging on the ground behind them and catching on things if they walked. Most people's strings were snarled, knotted and tangled, all wrapped up around their limbs. Dead bodies littered the street, their threads rotted all the way through.

Louis turned a corner into another square. At one end of it was a church, cobbled from stone, roofed in straw, and crowned with a wooden cross. At the other end of the square was The Swordsman.

The Swordsman was ripped: Louis imagined the body of his favorite 80s action hero, but grizzlier. Scarred everywhere from slashes and punctures. Long pants, light shoes, no shirt, and a scabbard strapped to his back. Longsword in his left hand, unsheathed: a weapon most people would need both arms just to

lift, but which he bore one-handed like a monk with a quill pen. His head was shaven, and his brow pulled his expression down into something furious. His strings were taut, pulling him into the front doors of the church across the square.

Louis followed after him. His own strings had latched onto The Swordsman immediately.

The inside of the church was dim, lit only by a few candles and the daylight that came in through the door. There was a center aisle between rows of pews, with men and women on both sides praying. A priest at the front stood behind a pulpit and read Latin aloud from a book. The Swordsman marched down the aisle. The priest looked up, and his reading stopped. He switched to something Germanic—something very old—and pleaded with The Swordsman, clasping his hands together in front of himself, but still, The Swordsman walked forth. The Swordsman raised his blade high above his head and dropped it down through the priest, eviscerating the holy man. Everyone who had been praying fled, as fast as they were able. The Swordsman wiped his blade on the priest's white robes, and then returned his weapon to the scabbard on his back. After wiping his hands, again on the priest, he picked up the bible from the pulpit and began to leaf through it. Upon reaching a certain page he smiled, and ripped that page out of the book. He walked back down the aisle.

“Coming?” he asked as he passed Louis.

Louis did tag along. The Swordsman's strings had realigned themselves, now taut in another direction, far out of the town.

There were a lot questions Louis could ask him. About language, about these tendons and strings. About those scars, and about the priest. Eventually Louis started with, “Where are we going?”

“To get a sword,” said The Swordsman.

Made sense.

“My name is Frix,” The Swordsman continued. “You're going to help me on my journey.”

“Am I?” Louis asked. He was a little amused by the friendly demeanor. He hadn't forgotten about the priest so quickly.

“You are,” Frix said, grinning big. “The seer said I would cross paths with someone dressed in strange garb who would help

me on my quest. That's you."

Louis mulled over The Swordsman's wording. 'Strange garb.' With his reddish sweatshirt and deep blue jeans, Louis was the most vibrantly dressed in the square if nothing else. Ten points to the seer.

"The sword is to slay a dragon," Frix continued. "The dragon is the cause of this plague."

And Louis could see in the universe that Frix was probably right. All of these stringed people around, diseased and dying, were tied in little threads that all lead in the same direction: towards the beast.

"The Black Dragon. The Black Death."

Louis nodded at the smart man.

On the paper Frix had ripped from the bible, there was a map. Louis and Frix left the town heading South. They travelled all day, and then set up camp at night. It was to be a basic camp: just a fire. No tent or marshmallows.

They collected wood—Frix got the bigger pieces, and instructed Louis to get tiny dry twigs. After they had enough to last the night, Frix arranged everything into a pile, with the smaller sticks in the middle and the logs surrounding them like a cabin. He crouched down and whispered something to the twigs. Louis waited for the punchline.

Frix glanced up at Louis, grinning, and it was then that Louis noticed a crackling. Louis got closer to the wood, and saw that the little twigs had caught fire—they were already singeing the logs around them.

"Surprised?" Frix asked.

"A little," Louis said. "Usually it's a muscle man *or* a magician."

"Ha *ha!*" The Swordsman bellowed.

They sat down. Frix handed Louis a stick to poke the fire with. It was already as big as Louis expect a campfire to look, and as soon as it reached that size, it had stopped growing. Louis figured the stick handed to him was a challenge issued by The Swordsman: just *try* to topple that blaze.

"What's your name?" Frix asked. "And where are you from? I can usually tell that about people, but I can't place you."

“Louis. I’m American. Lived in Germany for the last year.”

“American?”

“Yeah. That’s about what I expected.” Louis explained everything to him.

“Ah,” Frix said. “Right on.”

“What the hell language are we speaking anyways, Frix?”

Frix explained everything to Louis, to the best of his knowledge.

“Ah,” Louis said. “Cool. So where are *you* from?”

#

Frix was born to two blacksmiths in a farming village, many weeks east of where he would later slay a priest for a map. His mother Helena and his father Emrich toiled by the forge all through every day, hammering shears, spades, pitchforks, and any other manner of tool that the village’s farms had broken. Every day, as an infant, Frix heard the sound of metal striking metal. When he was able to walk, his many brothers would sometimes take him on their adventures outside of the village. During these times, they said that Frix acted restless. Unhappy. It was only when they got back to the village and he heard the sound of metal on metal that Frix would giggle, and walk ahead of the group to his mother and father, who would pat him on the head in passing as they worked. Very early in life, Frix became an apprentice.

As soon as he could hold a pair of tongs steady, he was helping his father re-straighten the tines of a pitchfork, listening to his tales of how the farm hands had managed to bend it *this* time: *Those dummies, they had a contest to see who could poke themselves in the head the hardest, and none of them stopped until the fork was bent!; Those halfwits, they were trying to get an ox to do their work for them, and the ox was lazy and stepped on it so it wouldn’t have to!; Those doofuses, Those goofballs, Those boneheads, they were play-fighting with these tools and forgot that we, Frix, are wonderful craftsmen, and that if we make a tool, it won’t just fall apart when you get whacked by it!*

As soon as Frix was tall enough to pump a bellow, he was listening to his mother’s passing words as she moved things in and

out of the forge: *Never use your hands to touch a piece of metal that might be hot; always be aware of where others are while you're swinging a hammer; keep the floor clear of hazards, you wouldn't want to trip; a man's most vulnerable areas are his crotch and his head and he only protects one of them at a time; sometimes fewer words are better than more; sometimes more words are needed, so practice them well; put that down; hand me that; go grab that from over there; work on this spade while I see what your sisters are yelling about; you're a good son Frix; if you ever left, the village would be short a blacksmith.*

Into his teenage years, Frix grew to fixing and forging tools on-pace with his learned parents. A natural, they called him: born for this. Then while going to collect a day's broken tools from a nearby farm, Frix's father died. No foul play and no accident: "Just slumped over in the carriage," the farmhand who found him had said. Frix would have rather heard his father tell the story of how he'd died. It would have been better than that twit dunce ignoramus farmhand's version, who didn't even know how to tell a goddamned story right.

Helena worked twice as hard after Emrich's passing. She no longer had time to speak to Frix while she worked. She was in too much of a rush: hammer hammer forge pick this up remember that's hot move this there set this here hammer hammer done aside next forge... This was not the same work they had done before. The same steps were done in the same order, and at the end of the day, the tools were fixed. But his mother was not. She was broken now, and Frix didn't know how to mend her.

One day he tried. He saw her struggling with a pair of shears, and he said, "Let me take those. You can't—"

She whipped around and threw the shears through his shoulder: *Fury* had never been so cleanly shown than in the face of his mother in that second.

Soon she was tending to the wound. He had pulled the shears out himself and began to walk away, but she took him, and set him down. She didn't apologize, Frix seemed to remember. Just worked to fix the skin she had broken. "I have to," she said. "Whatever you were about to say I couldn't do, I have to. The village needs us. Without us, there's no one to fix it when it

breaks. Can you move your arm?"

"Yes."

"Does it hurt?"

"I don't care."

"Fine," she said.

Helena and Frix got back to work.

He no longer enjoyed blacksmithing. It exhausted him and it hurt. At the end of the day he went to sleep empty and didn't wake up much different. He shared no words with his mother. Years went by.

And then, one of Frix's brothers got sick. And he died. And then a sister, and then another, and soon Frix was the only one of his brothers and sisters left alive in the village. He tended to them when he was able. No matter how often he cared for them, he did not get sick himself. He was, by whatever act of God, immune. But his mother was not. And the village, by the time she passed, had fallen completely to pieces.

Frix pumped the bellow, alone, the last person in sight in the village proper. Many died, or were inside their dwellings dying. Others had fled west. His older brother Heinrich was among them. Heinrich was the only family Frix might have had left.

Frix crafted a weapon. A mighty, **mighty** longsword. Truly it would destroy any Black Death in front of him. He turned his back on the village: it was broken beyond even his skill to repair. He set out to put a sword through the forehead of the shit-for-brains that had broken his home. The fuckhead that had taken away the only people who might have been able to repair everything. That day, Frix began his quest to repair the world.

In his journey, three years now in progress, he had sought to answer only two questions: where is the monster, and how do I kill it?

By the time Louis joined him in his quest, Frix had knowledge of both. The monster was a dragon, living in a hole in the mountainside that was pinpointed on Frix's new map from the priest. He was to kill the monster with an enchanted sword, and with the aid of one dressed in strange garb. He had found the one in strange garb. He could scale any mountain. Now, there was only the matter of getting the sword that he needed.

That, in short, was Frix.

#

“And what about you?” Frix asked.

With his stick, Louis pushed the campfire over. “My little brother died of cancer last year, and that really got to me.”

Frix put a hand on Louis’ shoulder. “Tomorrow we see The Astrologist,” The Swordsman said. “He can tell us where to get the enchanted sword. I have a sword already, and I could never trust a blade that I hadn’t made myself. You may hold the new one.”

“Hoo-ah,” Louis said, raising a fist to the air like Hersh would’ve—but quiet now, because it was late. “Let’s kill a fucking dragon, Frix.”

—&—

Sophie sat on the beanbag chair in the corner of her apartment, hunched deep over an old notebook she’d held onto from school. A poem had been carved in pen onto the center of a page. Sophie stroked it, feeling how far the letters still dug into the paper.

What was her name again?

I feign to not know

But together we drank gasoline for hours

*A hard taste, it dissolved our stomachs and turned my
mechanical parts*

*I speak ill of her insomuch as I make myself sick when I think of
the crash*

Spinning in circles 1, and 2, and 3, and 4, and 5...

Chapter 3: **Astrologist and Sandy Beaches**

That night Louis dreamt of his brother. Clad in the deep-purple sweatshirt that he used to own, Louis was standing outside in the crisp summer air of his hometown. Fucking dream nostalgia. Breathe it in. It was the dead of night. Quiet. Through a window Louis could see that Hersh was inside on the couch, smoking and reading a book. Louis couldn't see the cover well, but he knew it was *A Farewell to Arms*. That knowledge wasn't magical. Just dream logic: Louis had been placed in a scenario where the name of the book his brother was reading was already in his head.

Hersh flipped through pages, slowly, and Louis watched from outside the window. Hersh would get to the end eventually, and Louis spent the entire dream trying to think of how he should interrupt his brother's reading to tell him that. It was hard, because he didn't want to ruin any of the good parts by telling him they would stop.

When Louis woke up in Medieval Europe, the fire was still going. Frix was roasting rodents—"Squirrels," he said—over the last of the logs. They tasted amazing. Louis and Frix snuffed out the fire and got back to walking along the trail.

Louis did consider the idea that he was tripping major balls. Being able to see people's strings had worn off somewhat: he still had his own astral tendons, curling out absently through the air from his wrists, but Frix appeared to be bare. And all considered, walking with Frix still felt pretty real. Maybe possibly, Frix was a bodybuilder, also on drugs, and they were having a moment in the woods, and would come upon a highway or some train tracks soon, and they'd continue their dragon-slaying adventure in the urban realm. But Louis didn't think that was the case. He really believed he and Frix were going to see The Astrologist, and that The Astrologist wasn't Frix's dealer, and that he and Frix would be the reason the Black Death ended when it did. Louis honestly didn't know history well enough to say either way. He was 50/50, the more he thought about it, on whether dragons were fictional

or extinct.

Louis raised a hand near his face, and took turns moving each finger. They moved just like they were his, but he didn't have quite the same feeling of controlling them, now that he was moving them from the outside with his astral appendages. It was like he was using a hand to move his toes: the controller and controlled were both still him, but they were different parts *of* him. Case in point, he could move his middle and ring fingers completely independently of one another: he could touch just his middle finger to his wrist on the same hand, while keeping the other fingers pointed straight out. Not a feat for mortal men. He had very little problem rustling the leaves on the trees as they walked. To himself, Louis sang as much as he could remember from Master of Puppets. This occupied him enough that it was Frix who noticed it first: a man in glinting armor, leaning against a tree by the trail, holding his spear out towards the two travelers.

"Come no nearer!" the knight called. His visor was closed, and his voice rang metallic. "Pass around me through the wood!"

Nonplussed, Frix began cutting a path through the woods, and Louis followed, keeping an eye on the knight. The knight traced Louis back, keeping his spear pointed on the man in strange garb at all times. The knight stayed against the tree, as the focal point around which Frix and Louis walked. It took the knight a lot of labor to turn in the armor. He grunted. He kept all his weight on one leg.

Louis put a hand on Frix. Frix stopped walking, and Louis leaned in close. "He's hurt," Louis whispered.

Frix looked back at Louis, raising an eyebrow. "You want his armor?"

#

Hersh ran through the fucking valley, bullets popping up puffs of sand near his toes and knuckles. He goddamn ran on all fours like a gorilla, strapped under the pack filled with his company's ammo. It was like the nightmare where you're being chased by a monster and you can't run fast enough. He would never visit a sandy beach ever again when he got home. Never go

fucking anywhere where he couldn't get enough traction to run—
“AH!”

—Clipped through the gut and he went down under his pack, the weight of it crushing him like a spider into the sand. He prayed to God.

Prayer answered, the weight was pushed off him. “Let’s *fucking move* Baumgartner!” his commanding officer said, and ripped him out of the pack’s straps. He was free now, but the fucking sand made him a man trying to run on the moon. Massey pushed him along, shooting back at the shooters, yelling at Herschel to shoot too you fucking moron. Hersh fumbled for his sidearm as he ran, then pulled off shots behind himself. The bunker was just ahead of them: safe zone.

If you get gutshot, you have to go home. Was that what the Nam novels said? WWII? Hersh felt cold, but he didn’t feel like he had to go fucking anywhere. Dawson asked Massey some pussy shit about going home once. What did Massey say black. How did Massey say it track. What did—how...

“If you get shot you fucking moron, it doesn’t matter where you’re going, because it’ll be a fucking body bag.”

Massey pulled Hersh into the bunker. Hersh tried to get up and go back out, but Massey held him against the floor, telling him, Stay down Baumgartner, we’ve got it from here. Walsh touched Hersh’s wound and Hersh kicked back, and Dawson and Massey scrambled to get Hersh restrained. Get this S.O.B. doped. Hear me Herschel? You’re about to feel better, promise.

Am I gonna die, Nick?

Never. And Nick Massey, commanding officer, kissed Hersh on the forehead. Hersh swore that part. Hand to God. And then things faded out for a while, and the ammo was in the bunker, and there was white gauze over Hersh’s stomach. He was sitting upright against a concrete wall. The ass of his pants was wet, and when he scooped out of what he sat in, he streaked blood across the floor of the bunker. He looked down, wondering had that come from him. Must’ve. Damn. God. Nowhere else made sense.

There was damp soil at the knight's feet. Looking very closely, Louis could see a streak of red glinting off the knight's armored leg in the sunlight.

"You two keep walking!" the knight yelled, spear still poised to kill. "My platoon is coming, just behind me a hill or two!"

Frix resumed walking along the trail, but Louis lingered. He looked back at the knight. How far would the knight make it? Louis and Frix hadn't passed a settlement in a day of walking, and that was at a very healthy pace.

Louis approached the knight.

The knight readied his spear.

Louis noticed, and kept a small distance. "My brother was a soldier," Louis said. "I want to help—"

"A soldier in whose army?" the knight asked. His gauntlets tightened around his weapon.

"It's a land far away from here. You wouldn't have heard—"

"Try me," the knight said.

"United States."

The soldier stood his ground, spear still poised. Frix stood beside Louis now, also facing the knight.

"What army are *you* in?" the knight asked Frix.

The Swordsman responded: "*Ha.*"

"Alright, both of you, go—" the knight took a step forward and his leg buckled, pulling him to the ground. Frix stepped forward. The knight pointed his spear upwards, but Frix struck it down with his blade, not breaking stride. He pinned the knight—sat on him—and worked at unfastening the plating on the injured leg. The knight tried to grapple with Frix, but to little effect. The knight tried negotiating, which worked just as well. Finally, the plating was on the ground, and the soldier's leg was shown. There was a cut on the shin, surrounded by a colorful bruise.

"Broken," Frix declared, and he got off the knight.

The knight got back against his tree, using it to stand himself up again. "Yeah, fucker," he said. "You got me. Attacked by a bear with my pants down. Fucked me up real good before I could get him running. You *sure* you're not in an army?"

The Swordsman again: "*Ha.*"

"Come on," Louis said. He got beside the knight, and took his

gauntlet. The knight's head turned towards Louis, in what Louis suspected was a glare. Louis lifted the knight's arm over his shoulder, taking weight off the injured leg. "Let's go."

"Leave him," Frix said.

"Aren't you supposed to be a hero?" Louis asked.

The knight chimed in, "You do look like one."

"For a bigger cause, yes, I am a hero," Frix said. He reached out to the knight's visor, and flipped it up. "I am a hero to humanity. This is only a man."

"No," Louis said, "you're wrong. *This is* humanity." And he started walking, helping the knight along.

The three of them travelled miles. The knight first spoke about the military climate of Europe. Then they all sang marching songs. He hi ho, off to war we go, if we'll come back the same, Lord, I don't know. The knight left his visor up. He didn't look much like Hersh at all. The knight was blonde, and kept a short beard. Hersh had a brown jewfro and could never grow facial hair for shit, so he kept his face clean. The knight was not Louis' brother. He seemed like the kind of guy Hersh would've loved to know though. They could've spent goddamn *years* going over the battles and tactics and armies and movements of each other's times.

When the three came upon the clearing, all of them were smiling. Frix had warmed up to the knight, much like a warden might warm up to a polite enough inmate on death row. The knight, in turn, was *very* polite.

The grassy field extended a long ways. Almost to the horizon looking forward, though on the very edge of the horizon, there were silhouettes of pine trees. At the center of the field, a stone tower. Cylindrical. Three or four stories tall, standing perfectly straight, and perfectly smooth—like a grey object from a math textbook had fallen off the page and into the grounds of this field in the forest. The only thing to break up the surface was an occasional window and a single oak door, facing the party. Only the windows on the first floor were lit.

The tower loomed far ahead of them, shadowy in the twilight.

They pressed forward towards it. The grass reached out for Louis' pant legs, thin fingers caressing hairy calves in the night.

Louis wanted to stoop down and kiss them. He didn't think he could've explained it to the knight well enough to justify making him stand on his own though. The knight still leaned on Louis, heavy in his armor. One leg still missing its plating, where Frix had taken it off and nobody had put it back on again. No doubt the knight could feel the cool wet grass too, massaging his freed foot. Louis hoped it was soothing. He thought the knight deserved for it to be.

The three of them stood then at the door, centered in the grassy sea.

Frix knocked. Inside there was a shuffling, the sound of papers and footsteps. The door opened. Around it stepped a man dressed in black from head to toe, holding a candle in a candleholder. The flame was astoundingly calm: it didn't waver. Even Frix, who could conjure fire, and Louis, who had spent a lot of time holding lighters, were impressed. The Astrologist smiled, and welcomed them inside. Even as he walked the candlelight was still, as though the flame was plastic.

The Astrologist had pure white hair like wisps, and was bald at the center. The room they stood in was dimly lit: the only candle was held by The Astrologist himself. Louis could see—though in no great detail in the dark—the maps of stars that covered this floor of the tower. Put up on the walls, splayed on desks, and sitting in stacks, was a collage of papers and dots. “The Swordsman,” The Astrologist said, resting his free hand on Frix's arm and smiling into the man. He then shifted his gaze to Louis, and rested his hand upon the smaller visitor's arm. “The Chemist,” he whispered, like he was telling a friend an exciting secret. The knight looked hopeful for a moment. The Astrologist regarded him kindly, but gave no title. Rather, he turned and beckoned the party to a map, laid out on a table at the center of the room.

“I've been following you for a long time,” The Astrologist said. His voice was as calm as the flame he set at the map's side.

The map was white, with dots of ink frozen in clusters all over it. A photo-negative of the night sky. The Astrologist pointed to two stars—*The Swordsman*, *The Chemist*—and then to a much larger body—*The Dragon*.

“You two want to kill it.”

They nodded.

The Astrologist shook his head, and sighed. “The Minstrel,” he said, “The Baker, The Cooper, The Goldsmith”—he gestured to each speck of ink—“The Viking, The Horseman, The *Prince*, The *Magus*, The Scholar”—

the list went on.

“All of them snuffed,” The Astrologist said. He snapped his fingers by his flame and it vanished.

Frix whispered some kind words, and the fire was relit.

“Ah,” The Astrologist said. He looked down at The Swordsman’s fire carefully. “I was wondering if you’d talked with The Magus.”

The Astrologist led the party up the stairs of the tower, at his own pace. Louis helped lift the knight up each step. Louis and Frix had both suggested, in jest, leaving the knight’s armor behind. It’d be no good to do such a thing as that, the knight had said in return: he’d stay with it over them. When the four reached the top of the tower, Louis looked out over the field. It reminded him of Lake Bennett at night. The same uniform darkness, and the same idea stuck in his head: *What if I fell in?* The knight eased himself off of Louis, and went to lean against the parapet which rimmed the tower.

On a tripod at the center of the tower was a telescope. The Astrologist walked up to it. The eye piece already stood perfectly at his level, so that he neither had to stoop nor stand taller. He adjusted a brass knob on the side of the telescope, to the sound of tiny clicks. Then he stepped back, and invited The Chemist to look.

Louis stooped down to peer through the aperture. He didn’t expect... well, he *did* expect a star. But what he saw was something beyond that: this was a mega star consuming the dwarves. Its tendrils reached through the cosmos, a net of energy draining all into one: The Dragon. It was supermassive. Galactic.

“Why are we doing this?” Louis asked out loud. The mega star throbbed. It could reach them at the tower from across the sky if it really wanted to. “Are we better than the others who tried, Astrologist?”

“No,” The Astrologist said. He stood somewhere beside

Louis as The Chemist continued to look through the telescope. "You're not better. But you're last."

Louis heard the smile on The Astrologist's voice. In the face of evil, what was this man in the tower? A kindly old stargazer entertaining his visitors? Or a kindly old mortician dressed in black.

Louis stepped back, and let Frix look. Frix did look, far longer than Louis had. He uttered no word for some time.

"Say," the knight said, facing The Astrologist in the meantime. "Did a platoon of knights pass through here earlier today?"

The Astrologist nodded. "They came through outfitted just as you. They didn't stop to visit."

"Hm," the knight said. He removed his helmet, and rested it on the parapet. He pushed his fingers through the mat of blonde hair above his eyes.

"Something wrong?" Louis asked.

"Mm," the knight said.

Louis inferred a definite Yes.

"Please, come with me," The Astrologist said, smiling at Louis and the knight. He led the way back down the stairs.

Louis helped the knight back down, until they were on the floor just below the roof. The room seemed to be The Astrologist's bedroom. He gestured to a chair for the knight to sit in, and the knight did sit, making the wood creak under his armor. The Astrologist got down on a knee, slow from age, and had a look at the wound.

"Is the bone broken?" The Astrologist asked.

"Seems to be the consensus," the knight nodded. Didn't even grit his fucking teeth. It was like he and his leg had mentally separated: like to him it might as well have been The Astrologist's leg that was broken, or Louis'.

"I used to live in close quarters with an army medic," The Astrologist said—the knight asked which army, and The Astrologist gave satisfactory answer. The Astrologist continued. "I learned many things, from proximity to him, and from helping him when was needed. Do you mind?" The Astrologist asked, placing both hands on opposite ends of the knight's leg.

The knight did grit his teeth then, and nodded.

In a snap The Astrologist had set the bone in place, and was reaching into a nearby trunk for a roll of bandages. Louis heard the click of bone-to-bone louder than he'd heard the knight grunt or whimper.

"You're all welcome to stay until morning," The Astrologist said, pushing an oil onto the knight's wound in quick rubs. "And in your case, knight, I will insist. But if restless wanderers you are, then Port Town is just down the south trail from here, not much beyond the horizon."

The knight tousled his blonde hair once more, and looked to the room's window. It was very dark outside. Louis could hear the Herschelisms in his head—sage quotes about the merit of X, versus the idiotic dangers of Y in the dark.

The knight decided travel at this hour was reckless, and thanked The Astrologist for his hospitality.

The Astrologist nodded, and said that he was going to go prepare a space for them. They were welcome to wander his tower as they pleased. He had nothing to hide, and only things to share. Anything he feared to lose would only be of value to another astrologist. Louis wandered back up to the rooftop to see how Frix was doing.

Frix stood still at the telescope.

Louis let The Swordsman have his time. In waiting, The Chemist looked out from the tower, palms resting on the cold parapet stone. He inhaled through his nose, and the night smelled just like earth and water. So Louis guessed he leaned over Lake Bennett.

#

Louis and Hersh stood on the beach at night, lit by moonlight from overhead, and from where the moonlight reflected off the water. The lake beach wasn't like an ocean beach. The sand was grittier. Coarser. There were bits of stuff in it: little twigs, stones, and lots of tiny broken shells called zebra mussels. Worse than stepping on Legos, somehow. Kind of more like stepping on a pile of metal scraps. So Louis and Hersh wore shoes. Hersh looked

across the lake and smoked a cigarette, while Louis looked up at the stars and smoked a joint. Brothers. Louis would've been a freshman, which put Hersh in his last year of middle school. It was Sunday. They'd both had the day off.

"I'm gonna swim across," Hersh said, transfixed on the lake water.

Louis had been midway through an exhale and that made him laugh, so the smoke all pooled up in front of his face for a second. "Don't do it Hersh."

Hersh sat down and started unlacing his shoes. "Wasn't asking. Just telling you." He took off his left shoe and sock, tucked the sock into the shoe, and started working on his right foot. The ember on his cigarette bounced while he talked. "You can come if you want," he said.

"Put your shoe back on Hersh."

"Other side isn't even that far away. I looked it up in the library yesterday. One mile. One point one."

His other shoe was off. He stood up, flicking his cigarette towards the lake. It landed on the sand, and then disappeared as it got caught up in a wave and extinguished. He took off his shirt, then his jeans. Louis grabbed his arm and he jerked it away, and Louis tried to grab him again but he was gone, splashed into the water and already swimming away. Louis yelled after him. Hersh kept swimming. Louis dropped his joint, kicked his shoes off next to his brother's, and started swimming too.

The water was fucking freezing, and Louis' limbs seized: *we don't fucking work like this, moron*. But he kept going fast to get his brother. Hersh was just ahead of Louis, and just as good a swimmer, but holy god was Hersh unfazed by the cold. The water had sobered Louis immediately.

Louis slowed, or Hersh got fucking faster, but either way Louis lost pace. Hersh slowed down too soon after that, then started treading water. He looked back, and Louis looked ahead. A long way from shore, and not even halfway to the other side. Maybe a third. Louis swam up to his younger brother. He heard Hersh's teeth chattering, and then hell, he felt his own jaw shaking too.

"Get the f-fuck back-k here," Louis said, treading right in

front of Hersh.

They were face to face, made the same height by the water. Hersh wasn't smiley, or mad. He had a look of intense realization: horror. He looked Louis in the eyes. Louis blinked and then Hersh's head was gone; only ripples in the water.

"HERSH!"

Louis dove too. He darted down through the black lake. He had no breath. Didn't need it. Not important enough to register. Hersh had *fucked* the scale up on that one. Louis went down and down, no sight, no fucking clue if he was even close or going the right way.

Then Louis kicked his brother: fucker was above him. Louis wrenched around and grabbed Hersh. Hersh fought, pushing Louis away. Tried to punch, Louis could feel, but the dipshit was underwater so good luck. Louis was bigger than him. If they were the same age Louis would never stand a fucking chance, but they weren't. Louis hugged Hersh, tight, and started kicking to swim up. When they got to the surface Louis breathed and Hersh tried not to, he tried to go back down into the water, but Louis held him up the best he could. Louis cradled his brother's head. Hersh fought until he was exhausted. Louis thought he was exhausted too, but shit, it was the soberest he'd been in a while, and apparently that counted for something. He had more energy than he knew. Like fucking superpowers.

Louis dragged Hersh back to shore. Louis dressed him, put on his shoes, and started walking him back home. Hersh didn't want to go back home—"anywhere else. Don't make me."—but they had to. Louis was freezing, and Hersh was too, obviously. Louis had a vice grip on Hersh's goose-bumped bicep the whole way.

When they got inside, they changed out of their wet clothes and into dry ones. Hersh called Louis a pedophile for watching him change, and Louis took it. No chance he was giving Hersh a second unwatched. Not for tonight. Shit, maybe not ever. They lit a fire in the fireplace in the living room. Louis couldn't remember the last time they'd used the fireplace before that. They got the blankets off of their beds, and they each wrapped up next to the heat.

"So Hersh, something you want to tell me?" Louis asked—

being pointedly sarcastic, to be very clear.

Hersh didn't say anything back at first. The younger brother looked into the fire while his brain unthawed. Louis watched him work his way from anger to regret.

"Don't tell mom or dad," Hersh finally said, and buried his face in the blankets. Louis scooped closer to him, and put a hand on his back. He thought Hersh was still shivering, but no. Deep sobs. *Let it all out man. I'll figure out what to do in the morning.*

Louis didn't figure it out ever. He did work on it. A lot. But that was a tough nut to crack. God bless, Hersh must've figured it out before Louis did, because he never tried something like that again.

And yet, years later, Louis would still mourn his younger brother. So nobody had the *right* to tell Louis that karma existed, or any other form of universal justice. Universal irony, maybe, but he didn't even think it was that. Just black humor. Nothing more frivolous.

#

Louis turned around and looked at Frix, who was still looking through the telescope at The Dragon's mega star.

"I'm going out for a smoke," Louis said.

Frix opened his mouth like he was saying something, but no real words came out.

Louis went down the tower, and left through the oak door. He started heading down the south trail towards Port Town. As he walked through the sheet of black that was the night, his tendrils swept out in all directions, feeling for dangers. He ducked out of the way of low hanging branches that with his eyes, he couldn't have seen. He felt a lot of movement in the woods. A lot more than he would guess even if he'd been paranoid. But no waking bears. He kept his footsteps quiet. It was something Hersh had taught him, and had probably learned from one of his war books: walk on the outsides of the feet, distributing the weight over the course of the footstep instead of stomping down all at once. Smart, man.

When Louis arrived in Port Town, it was like instinct. He

wouldn't be able to describe to someone *how* he ended up finding a guy selling, or how he bought from him without the local currency. Or if there even was currency back then, in that part of the world. Louis gave him the change he had in his pocket. Probably a great trade from the dealer's point of view, actually, and pretty good from Louis'. Amazing to the archeologist who'd end up finding it.

Deal done and off on his way, Louis smoked what he'd been given. It felt very much like an opioid. He walked out to the end of an empty dock in Port Town—dark, with no lanterns lit outside, and no lights in the homes—and looked up at the stars. He had hallucinations of Bob—his cat—brushing against his face. He had stubble for Bob to rub against now.

Having stubble was unusual for Louis. Not more unusual than... well, frankly anything else. But it was the little things. He had a funny feeling of being ahead of the times. Being able to shave without risking an infection that would kill him. Knowing more about the stars he looked up at than The Astrologist, and not even being that interested in space. Ever since his arrival, his displacement had been obvious in huge ways. But sitting on the dock, the details were what got him. Small enough to slip under the skin; the point in a hypodermic needle.

Louis headed back to The Astrologist's tower in the moonlit lake-like field. He could see the telescope on the rooftop, silhouetted against the starry night sky, and he could see that Frix was no longer standing there. Louis wondered if it was Frix's own choice, or if The Astrologist had urged The Swordsman inside to rest.

When Louis walked into the tower, he was faced with six men with shining armor and blazing torches, and Frix at the center of them with his longsword, fending them off. All six knights were bleeding. They attacked Frix with spears, but The Swordsman was direct with his blade, and could parry on an improbable level.

Silently, The Astrologist nudged Louis' hand, and passed The Chemist a dagger.

Louis went to move forward: to shout at the knights, and help The Swordsman. But he was paralyzed. He could feel Bob over his face now, smothering him. He saw his apartment—the knights

in his apartment, then Bob, then no knights, and then he was in his modern-day apartment completely and utterly alone.

Louis shuddered. His whole body was dead, like when an arm fell asleep, but *everywhere*.

Louis remembered how that leap into cold water felt when he went after Hersh. Sober as fuck.

The Chemist jerked his body in half, folding upwards so he sat upright. He felt like a tower, a **giant**, ready to fall onto his coffee table.

He got to his hands and feet, then stood, like Alice with her head poking above the clouds. He couldn't remember if that had been before she took the mushrooms, or after. Louis scanned the room for the bottle of LithoXXXXXocaine. It was on the counter between the living room and the kitchen, 3,500 miles away across a dirty ocean of off-brown carpet. Louis took one step—**THUD**.—and marveled at how the bones in his feet hadn't burst apart under his own weight. He took another step—**THUD**.—and he was at the bottle of pills. He could hear Frix yelling somewhere in the distance. He unfastened the child-safety cap on the container and dug inside, the rattling of pills an earthquake. He hooked a pill under a dirty fingernail that was miles below his head, below clouds, so far away that he couldn't see it. He brought the pill upwards, his hand racing through atmospheres, and then he was knocked over the counter by a knight and he was tiny again. The knight was not tiny. The knight was still pretty fucking big.

The LithoXXXXXocaine pills had fallen and bounced all over the linoleum kitchen floor. The nearest was a foot away: insurmountable. Louis reached with a tendril, but the knight pushed him and he fell back, crashing through an apartment wall. The Chemist stood up, sore and normal sized, and dove for a pill. The knight took him in his grasp, but Louis had grabbed what he needed: he swallowed the drug and was back in The Astrologist's tower.

But the knights had vanished. The room was ablaze no longer.

The Astrologist sat in a chair, a single candle lit on the table beside him. It flickered wildly. The old man wore a very deep frown.

“Louis,” he said, looking up. “The knight’s comrades have taken Frix. It took their entire party, five of them plus the injured one, to subdue him, but they’ve taken him. I believe... I believe I’m a fool, Chemist! I believe it was always their intention to entrap you. I should have seen this coming.” He looked down at his map, spread over the table, caressing the space between two dots. “I should have seen this coming far, far in advance.

“These knights intend to kill The Dragon. They know of the failures of your predecessors, and have not garnered faith in you and The Swordsman as I have. I don’t know what their direct intentions are with Frix. My records are perfect, but my instruments, limited. They took the trail to the south, towards Port Town. You must rescue him, Chemist. I’m so sorry I’ve failed to warn you.”

Chapter 4: The Giant

Louis ran to Port Town with The Astrologist's dagger tucked into his belt. When he came upon the town, he saw all of them in the central square: every villager gathered to see the spectacle; twenty knights, wielding spears and swords, and forming a ring to keep the villagers at a distance; Frix tied to a stake atop an unlit pyre at the center of the ring, his sword nowhere to be seen; a bishop before him, reading Latin from a bible. One knight beside the pyre held a torch. None among them were the injured knight Louis and Frix had encountered on the trail: all of their armor was intact.

Louis' instinct was to charge them. If he was meant to slay a dragon, then these people would be nothing. But he heard Hersh in his head calling him a fucking idiot for that. One man—who doesn't even know the fucking rules of his own powers, and worse, is fine with that—against twenty professional killers with metal armor and weapons. Smart move, Lou. Go for it. See how that works.

So Louis didn't charge. Instead, he tried very hard to emulate his brother.

The knights hadn't spotted Louis yet—there were many people gathered, moving around restlessly. Louis put himself among the crowd. He got a better view of what was happening. He found himself twitching a bit, the further into the crowd he got. He looked around, until his eyes landed on the bishop. He started walking to the man in elegant robes.

The closer he got to the bishop, the more he felt coked up. The bishop fed energy into him: a constant chattering. Do shit, it said. Act. Something. Anything. Go up there and join Frix on the—

He's fucking with you, Lou. Right. So right now, it'd be better think fast and be alive than think smart and get tricked.

Louis reached for the bishop's book with a tendril, but there was a searing pain when he got close. He tried to touch the bishop or the knights, or to untie Frix from his stake, but any time he got

close it was like pushing his tendril into a lit stove: the longer he held it there, the more it fucking burned.

The burning was in the shape of the bishop's words.

Louis leapt through the knights' perimeter, and thrust The Astrologist's blade through the bishop's heart. As soon as the words were silenced, Louis' tendrils exploded from him and pushed every knight away. The crowd fled, and Louis leapt up the pyre to untie The Swordsman.

"Ha ha!" Frix roared. He leapt down, and the ground shook under his muscular weight. A knight had dropped his sword. Frix picked it up. It looked like a child's toy in his hand.

Two knights charged Louis and Frix, one each. Frix's toy sword lodged deep into his aggressor's chest. With tendrils, Louis pushed the other knight back. But Louis slipped. The tendrils passed through the knight, and Louis saw the knight shudder at that, but all the same the knight charged, and his spear grazed Louis' ribs.

Grazed sounded too nice.

Louis was bleeding from the left side of his chest, bad. Grazed did not mean missed. Louis was never a fucking medical person. He didn't know what the way to handle a ripped open side was.

Frix yanked the knight's spear away, still coated in Louis' blood, and knocked the knight down with it. "Your dagger!" Frix called. "Use it, Chemist!"

Right. The Chemist. A dragon slayer. One half of a dragon slayer.

Three knights came at The Chemist and The Swordsman.

And Louis ran. As soon as he saw those *monsters* charging for him, he turned tail and fled. He heard a loud *clash* as Frix took them alone. And then, Frix joined his friend in running.

But the knights were smart, and Louis, being scared, was dumber than fucking cattle. They chased the dragon slayers on both sides, making them afraid to run in the smart way, and so they ended up being pushed back onto a dock that jutted out into the ocean. No vessels were tied to it. No way out. Frix and Louis stood at the very end of the platform over the ocean, sea to their backs, and a party of knights on the dock ahead of them. The dragon slayers had every right to die then. But the world would

not have that quite yet.

Behind them, a giant emerged from the sea. Waves crashed forward, destroying the dock ahead of them, and cutting Louis and Frix onto an island away from the knights. Water slid off the giant's fleshy back as he stood, six stories high. His naked skin was a collage of purple, blue, and pink. He had a gut and a fierce expression. And Louis almost had a heart attack and fucking died at the surprise of this.

The giant reached forward and grabbed a piece of driftwood from the beach. He squeezed it in his closed fist and it exploded, and when he opened his hand again, a sword rested in his upturned palm. He leaned down and held it in front of Louis between two fingers. Louis took it in both hands. Then the giant boomed a word into The Chemist. It was a word so powerful that Louis would not be able to repeat it himself, even if he had wanted to. But the word told Louis that this was the dragon-killing sword, and that he had to enchant it with a chemical compound from PGP called NovaXXXXXsol. Then the word sent Louis hundreds of years into the future, where he sat on his couch in his apartment, bottle of LithoXXXXXocaine pills in one hand, giant's sword in the other, metaphysical tendrils emerging from his back, a beard, a rip in his sweatshirt, a grazed chest, and a thousand-yard stare. And he had shit himself.

—&—

Sophie had sunk farther into her beanbag chair. She was years further along into her papers now, well past the notebook from school, and onto a diary she had tried to start only a year ago.

I'm going to start this diary with a statement of purpose. First, there will never, ever be any of this "Dear Diary" bullshit. That is the last time I will ever write those words back-to-back in this little brown book. But my reason for keeping a diary is very simple: I'm afraid of losing myself if I don't. I was staring at myself in the mirror for an hour yesterday. I shed clothes, spread

my hair apart, and shined a light in my mouth to look over and under my tongue, and still I could find no proof that the woman in the mirror was me. This book is going to be my study guide.

My name is Sophie Edward Gallo. My natural hair color is blonde. I am 5'5". My eyes are blue. Sometimes I tell people my name is Mary. My hair is always dyed. Often I stoop, so I look shorter than I should be by a variable amount. I own novelty color contacts that make my eyes rainbows and I put them in to amaze high friends. Sometimes I tell people my name is Genevieve.

The diary quickly evolved into a collection of poems after that. Still a personal log, but with more line breaks that made everything harder to hold. Sophie let the book slip through her fingers onto the pile with all of her other papers. She closed her eyes, and was devoured whole by the beanbag chair.

Chapter 5: Enchanted Sword

Louis glanced around his apartment. He was fully there that time, the right size, and pretty normal feeling, all things considered. No comedown. Just... back in the world. Willkommen. The LithoXXXXXocaine pills were still scattered all over the kitchen floor. The bottle said there were thirty pills in total, so minus the two he'd taken, he needed to find twenty eight. It took a long time to get them all—under the oven, scattered under dirty dishes, right in front of his blind face—but he wasn't letting any of them go missing.

Second to *that*, he grabbed his phone off the floor and looked up what to do about spear wounds. The basic answer was to clean it and wrap it up tight, so he did, cutting up his least-favorite shirt from his room for bandaging. He took codeine for the pain—he also took codeine because he'd been without it for a couple of days, and that had made him really uncomfortable.

Third, he changed his pants.

Fourth, Bob. Louis found him on the bed. All was good there. There was still food in the dish in the kitchen, and water in the bowl.

So. Clean pants, dressed wound, new sweatshirt—blue—, and... a driftwood sword. Right. Louis looked around for where he'd set that. He found it sitting on the couch, and had a look. Only the handle could still be called driftwood, it seemed. The blade, slim and sharpened on both sides, was made of a silvery material. The hilt had a swirling design, like waves on the sea.

Knock knock knock!

Louis jumped and look to the door. He held his sword tight as he soft-stepped it over the brown carpet.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

“Mr. Baumgartner, you have ten seconds to open this door or it will be breached!”

Louis looked at the sword, the pills on the counter, and his cat Bob who had moved to the couch. Louis quick-stepped it back to

the counter to grab the drugs. He stuffed the bottle in his back pocket and then grabbed Bob off the couch, and leapt out of his open living room window.

Bob yowled and jumped away midair. Louis outstretched his hands and knees, bracing for the landing on asphalt.

His tendrils caught him and he touched the ground like he was stepping down a stair. Bob was fine—he ran off. Louis ran too, and bumped into Otto on his way out of the alley.

Staggering back, Otto asked Louis what the fuck he was doing. Louis asked Otto the same, and then at Louis' recommendation, the friends started running out of the alleyway and down the street.

"The fuck's going on with you?" Otto asked.

Louis sprinted down the sidewalk, dodging around the people out walking. Otto, who did freerunning in his free time, had no problem keeping pace.

"I need to get to PGP," Louis said. "It's like, two miles. Drive me?"

"Yeah, fuckin', sure man," Otto said.

Otto's apartment was a block away. Louis kept glancing over his shoulder as they ran.

Otto's car was parallel parked out front between a truck and a van. They scrambled inside.

"Are you gonna buckle or what?" Otto asked as he worked his way out from between the two other vehicles.

"I'm fine."

"Is that... motherfucker, is that a *sword*? Where did you get a *sword*?"

"Someone gave it to me. Look man, I'll explain, just drive."

Otto drove, so Louis tried to uphold his end of the bargain.

"Two days ago, when you came to my apartment to pet Bob—"

"Nope," Otto interrupted.

"Nope?"

"I *just left* your apartment after petting Bob," Otto said. "I was in Italy two days ago."

"Well shit."

"I told you about prescriptions, man."

“Yeah, you did Otto. Thank you.”

“Sure you want to walk into PGP with a sword right now?”

“I’m good man.”

“Alright dude. Catch you later. Hey, want me to pick you up?”

“Nah, I’ll be alright.”

“Cool cool. Buenas tardes, amgio!”

“Guten Tag, my man.”

Otto drove off, and Louis started walking through the Praxisorientiert Gesundheitszustand Pharmazeutischen campus. Green courtyards with fountains, and black-glass towers of office buildings shooting up into the sky. Where was he to find NovaXXXXXsol? He consulted a map of the campus posted on a kiosk that had all of the office buildings named and colored in, with a helpful red dot that said YOU ARE HERE in German.

Am I here?

One of the buildings was labeled *Research Center*. Praxisorientiert Gesundheitszustand Pharmazeutischen were bad with small, easy-to-understand words, but Louis was pretty sure he had that right, and that the research center *would be* the place to look for an experimental substance. Lucky Louis, the research center was the building straight across the courtyard from him: a sidewalk lead right to it. He started sidewalking. A man walking opposite him stopped and jumped into the mowed grass when he saw Louis’ sword.

Louis couldn’t have been sent back to the present at the exact time he’d left it, he figured. He’d waited a while after Otto left to take the LithoXXXXXocaine for the first time, and yet he’d caught Otto as he was still leaving the alley. So Louis had been transported into himself, but the ‘himself’ of a few minutes *before* he’d taken the pills? Behind him, the man and a woman discussed something in German between themselves loudly. Louis didn’t know if the timeline made sense. If it was like Back to the Future then it’d be important for him to keep track of, but he didn’t feel like Marty McFly. He felt like a man with a sword in a blue sweatshirt, walking into the massive lobby of a research center with a tingling pain in his side.

The receptionist looked startled and ducked behind the

counter. Seconds later, an alarm sounded.

No, the timeline didn't make sense, because he'd had to dress his spear wound, change his pants, and gather together the LithoXXXXXocaine pills that rattled in his back pocket as he walked into the elevator—bottom floor seemed right. And he'd still had time to catch Otto as he was leaving his apartment? Otto would've had to have been very slow climbing down from the window. Too slow. Didn't add up.

The elevator doors opened, and a security guard with a white uniform and a badge sat in a chair by a reinforced door. He yelled at Louis and drew a firearm but Louis cut into him, and the guard fell down onto the floor as Louis removed his sword. That one, Louis should've cared more about. He admitted that to himself. His rationale was pretty sound though, he thought. He was working to stop The Black Death from killing all of humanity in the 1300s. If that worked, then *any* contemporary life-toll short of ten billion was worth it. If he failed to get the NovaXXXXXsol, the security guard was dead anyways. If the guard was going to defend the NovaXXXXXsol with his life, Louis was saving time by getting it done with.

Was he saving time? He would have to ruminate on that.

He felt high. He wondered if he could have gone into a body of Louis Baumgartner at a time when Louis Baumgartner was on drugs. His eyes glazed over as he wrestled the guard's ID tag off and fixed it to his own sweatshirt, then scanned it to get in the door.

On the other side of the door was a long hallway. Large glass windows lined each side of the hall, along with doors, one door to one large window. Modular research rooms. Some held animal cages, others had machines that looked like computers out of the 1960s. Many were operating tables. Each room was the size of a classroom.

Shit. He had a beard. He hadn't had a full beard since he lived in the United States. He scratched it, and leaned against a window, peaking down at the space in the room under normal view, right up close under the window. Sure enough, men in lab coats crouched down there. It was like the high school safety drills. *Turn off the lights, and everyone hide.* It never occurred to Louis that

the one they were all hiding from would be him someday.

All of the lights in the Research Center were still on though, so C+ at best for safety to PGP. They'd want to work on that for the future, if they were going to send a man back in time and let him come back with a sword that a giant had instructed him to enchant with their chemicals.

Next to each door was a slot where a placard could be inserted or removed. Labels for the exhibits inside. Long compound German words and long Latin words of compounds. Eventually, halfway down the hall—the door Louis had come through was tiny now, like Alice looking at the door after falling down the rabbit hole—Louis saw the room labeled NovaXXXXXsol. He wondered if it would be worth his time to keep walking down the hall to find more LithoXXXXXocaine.

Footsteps. Men in white were running down the hall for him, and had already made it halfway. Louis sank into the NovaXXXXXsol room, holding his breath.

Inside were two women in lab coats. They stood back against the far corner of the room, their hands up. When Louis walked farther into the room they ran out behind him, down the hall towards the men in white who were coming to get him.

There were machines lining the walls of the room, whirring and blinking little soft lights. The lights fused together forming words, but Louis ignored them. Against the wall farthest from the door was a series of square shelves—cubbies?—in which were corked beakers of a transparent liquid. Louis approached them. *NovaXXXXXsol*, the little paper labels on the necks of the bottles read. He grabbed one, uncorked it, and poured it along the length of the driftwood sword while the *NovaXXXXXsol* hissed and steamed. It fell into the blade like it was magnetic, curving into the air to meet the surface of the weapon evenly. It mutated from clear to green as it attached. Seafoam green for a driftwood sword. It was beautiful, actually. Louis saw the men pass by the window and he took a LithoXXXXXocaine.

He expected to be back in Port Town on the bridge island with Frix, a giant standing behind them, and a platoon of knights ahead. Instead, he found himself in the dark.

In the *very* dark.

Louis stepped around in a circle, his tendrils reaching out as far as they could through the black. On either side of him, his tendrils swept over pews, then cold walls, leading up to what he presumed were stained-glass windows. He stood in the aisle of a temple. His shoes munched down into a rotting carpet. All around under the pews were used needles. If he stuck one of his tendrils, would he get AIDS?

“LOU.”

Louis spun and faced the front of the room, sword held in both hands, the tip pointing outward. He moved his tendrils forward to feel what had spoken to him, but had to pull them back: whatever was ahead of him was trying to pull him in.

Louis squared his stance like Frix might’ve, if Frix had held his sword in two hands. Louis found his footing against The Dragon.

Louis heard a wind, and felt The Dragon’s warm breath waft against his face. It smelled like sulfur. Like rotting meat. Like Hersh’s room in the hospital, those times he went. Like everything bad in the world. Louis sucked in his stomach to keep it still.

“JOIN ME.”

The stained-glass windows shot into light, as though the sun had come up—no. Not as though the sun had come up fast. It was as though this were a church in Nagasaki, and the bomb had just gone off. Three stained glass windows stood between Louis and the explosion: a bishop, a security guard, and a knight.

Louis turned and faced The Dragon. The front of the building was torn off. The landscape was fields of grain, lit hazy orange from the bomb, the stars out because the sky was only side-lit. The Dragon stood atop the grain, black like a black hole was black: absorbing every particle of the nuclear bomblight that came into it. An existential shadow. It was big. It wouldn’t have fit in a dozen temples as big as the one Louis stood in.

Louis moved the sword to one hand, keeping it pointed at The Dragon like a crucifix. With the other hand, Louis pointed to the stained-glass knight. “That’s not fair,” he explained. “I didn’t kill that one.”

The Dragon huffed, and a gust of wind came forth. The Dragon’s scaled muzzle was far from Louis, well outside the

building, but Louis could smell the plague on The Dragon's breath.

“I’VE WATCHED THE ASTROLOGIST: YOU HAVEN’T KILLED THAT ONE YET.”

When the dragon spoke, he didn't move his mouth. The words went straight into Louis' head, passing through no filter of biology or linguistics.

Louis spoke back to The Dragon likewise.

“I’m not a killer. I don’t kill.”

Grains of The Dragon fell apart, like he was made of wet sand that had just dried. The Inferno of the Bomb came closer. There was no Time—

Louis closed his eyes and raised his forearm before his face, and when he opened his eyes again he was back in the dark. Still in the temple. But when he felt out the room this time, there was a presence far above him. He looked up. His tendrils had found himself and Sophie, sitting in a crack high on the temple wall, Sophie's face lit from beneath as though she was telling a ghost story. Louis reached out and touched them.

“You were *here*? On *acid*?”

It was like hearing a recording of his own voice. Far out.

“What, you think I was gonna jump?” she asked. The ember of the joint disappeared behind her.

“You were on *acid*, Soph. What if he chased you up into here too?”

“He did. He stood right over there and I sat right here until he went away. Do you *honestly* think I'd feel better jumping to my death than fighting him? He was big, and mean, but he wasn't death, Louis.”

“Alright. I'm sorry,” Louis said, putting his hands up. “You just worry me.”

Sophie kicked the phone down into the black. Louis started walking up the temple aisle to pick it up.

“Motherfucker,” he heard Sophie say again, and he felt warm.

When he got to the phone, he leaned over it and grabbed it, then switched the light off out of a habit—when he used his own phone as a flashlight and set it somewhere, turning it off was just the reflexive thing to do when picking up back up again. But in

the dark, he felt the Louis and Sophie above him get colder.
“Fuck the phone, it’s locked. Let’s go.”
And then the two were escaping.

—&—

The first time Louis smoked weed, he knew he would never do acid, cocaine, or heroin.
But he was wrong of course.

—&—

*I slept on my bed and the blankets were cold
I slept on the couch and the dogs bit me
I slept on the rooftop and was kept awake by the stars
My friend slept outside too and was kept awake by streetlights
I went to her and we shared a blanket
Then, we fell asleep*

Sophie was buried deep in her old papers. It was encouraging to know that she had gotten better at poetry, at least, but she cringed the entire time she was reading that one in particular. She couldn’t remember why she wrote it in the first place. It was stuck between notes about past-tense English conjugations, so she supposed she wrote it when she was bored in class. A peak into her psyche? She didn’t think so. That poem would’ve been before Josie. She got a *lot* better at writing poems after.

Sophie wanted to be a mother. That was not some childish whim that she had just remembered. *Right then*, present tense in the beanbag chair, she wants to be the mother of a child who she can take care of. She thinks she would be really, truly amazing at it. She still doesn’t know for sure what she would name him or her. She would love them whether they were a him or her with all her heart. Not to discredit thoughts she’s had seconds ago, but it

always has been her fantasy to raise a family. Spend the days at home taking care of the house, cleaning and baking, the smells of counter-cleaner and rising bread mixing in the air like something she could huff if it came in a can. She would pick the kid, or kids, up from school, and they would tell her everything that had happened that day. She would listen with attentive fascination. If they were having a good day, she would feel good because of them. If they were having a bad day, she would try to make it better. If they were older, an angsty teenager, she would inwardly find it adorable. But usually they were much younger. When the husband came home from work—or when the wife came home from work, depending on her inclinations at the time of dreaming—she would kiss them. They would all sit down to dinner, and the kid—or one of the kids, the youngest—would secretly take their scraps to the dog in the backyard when they had finished eating. The house was in the woods or the suburbs. They had nice neighbors who had their own families, and their kids often came to her house, and she cooked for them too. All of the neighbor kids loved their dog, who was friendly, and who loved to play with them, loved to roughhouse, but was gentle, and never, ever bit. It was a friendly breed, like a lab or a husky. Sophie's kid—at least one of her kids—had her blonde hair, and boy or girl, looked very much like the photos of her as a child, only they were really smiling in theirs. They would scrape their knee and she would kiss it better. They would cut their palm trying to cook and she would bandage it. They would one night be out with friends, thinking they were all grown up, but they wouldn't be, and she would come and take them away. They would go somewhere safe from drugs and sex with strangers. They would hate her, but she would hate herself more for being a hypocrite. She would cry. They wouldn't know she had cried in her life. She would give everything to them. The husband or wife faded from the picture. There was a divorce very soon after the kids were born, or there had never been a spouse to begin with. Eventually there was only one kid. Eventually there weren't neighbors, or friends. Eventually she was waking up in the morning on someone's living room floor feeling like she needed to vomit, and the morning breath of the person snoring next to her half naked made her feel

like killing herself.

For a minute there she lost herself. Sophie, drowning in the beanbag chair in her apartment, had forgotten how vivid it used to be. She remembered how she believed, at points, that her children were already real, and that anyone she dated would be a step-parent to the children already alive in her fantasy. It was like they were auditioning for a role that was too ethereal to be properly cast. Some nights she got honest-to-god sick of all the shitty, uncaring actors. Some nights she would rather masturbate alone in her bed, pillows over her head, trying to zone out the sound of her mother yelling at the dogs to stop barking downstairs.

—&—

When Louis crawled up the temple wall and out into the underground tunnel, some time had passed. The other Louis and Sophie would be well out of the manhole by then, and out around Berlin. The Chemist made a beeline for his apartment. Then when he got to his neighborhood, he changed his mind and went to Otto's. He walked into Otto's apartment building, went up the stairs to the third floor, and knocked on the door.

While waiting for an answer, Louis leaned back against the opposite wall, and inspected his pockets. LithoXXXXXocaine in the back pants. Lighter in left sweatshirt. The lighter worked—he flicked it a few times. Sophie's phone sat in sweatshirt right.

Still had his sword, enchanted now.

Still had his beard.

The door handle turned, and the door opened. Otto stepped out into the hall.

“What's going on, Louis?”

“Hey Otto.”

“That a sword? And... beard?”

“Yeah man,” Louis said, and smiled a little. He held the sword up for Otto to see. “Pretty cool?”

“Yeah, very cool.”

“How was Italy?”

“It was nice, man. Wanna come in? I have some pictures.”

“Nah. Some other time for sure, but I gotta give Sophie’s phone back,” Louis said, pulling it out of his pocket as evidence. “Hey can you do me a favor?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Check on Bob?” Louis asked. “I don’t know if he’s in my apartment or out or just...”

“Yeah, I’ll look for him man,” Otto said. “You alright?”

Louis nodded. He explained everything that was going on, phrasing it as a joke, but one that would probably have one hell of a punchline when Otto was in the apartment later with Bob, and Louis walked in clean-shaven wearing a different sweatshirt, having no idea he’d invited Otto in. Otto wouldn’t know for sure that they weren’t still joking, but, them joking would seem a lot more unlikely when Louis tackled him in the alley a minute later, wearing the blue sweatshirt again, with sword and fully-grown facial hair.

“Thanks man. Really.”

Louis headed out for Sophie’s apartment next, about a mile away.

On the walk, he contemplated his and Frix’s odds of slaying The Dragon. Frix was good, and when Louis stood face to face with The Dragon, the beast did seem to have some reluctance towards the seafoam sword. But other men had come before them.

Louis hoped that when he got back to Frix, it wouldn’t matter that he had taken the time to return a phone to Sophie. He didn’t think it would, but, he was still learning. Man was he learning.

Sophie’s door was up a set of stairs, facing the street. Louis went up and knocked with his non-sword hand. He prepped a pill, hiding it between the sword-handle and a finger. When she answered, he pushed the door open farther, stepped into her doorway, and kissed her, slipping her phone into her back pocket as they embraced. She tasted like strawberry lemonade. Then he stepped back, looked her in the eyes while he swallowed Litho-XXXXXocaine, and was gone.

Had he left a Louis there to deal with the fallout of that? Did he and Sophie get together, or did she never go to his apartment again? Was there a version of Louis in the research center

basement of PGP coked up and wielding a sword, trying to deflect bullets and getting shot? Louis didn't know. He was still kind of in the middle of things.

He'd figure it out for sure though.

For sure.

—&—

From: Michael.McCaskill@[PGP]

To: [Multiple at PGP]

Subject: Research Facility Breach

[Translated from German.]

There was a breach today of Basement 4 in the Hanne Weber Research Facility. At XX:XX one black male and one white male drove to the drop-off area near the Richter Center. The passenger (white male) left the vehicle and the driver drove away. The driver has not been identified. The passenger, a participant in a recent drug study, walked through the campus brandishing a sword, alerting several employees. Employees close to the man believed him to be under the influence of mind-altering substances. Security forces were alerted.

At XX:XX the man entered the Hanne Weber Research Facility and proceeded directly to Basement 4. There, he took the life of security officer XXXXX. A candlelight vigil will be held on XX/XX, at XX:XX on the South Courtyard. Using Officer XXXXX's ID badge, the man entered the locked experimentation area. Inside, he poured a chemical compound onto his sword. By the time security forces arrived, the man had left the premises. His route of escape is yet unknown.

ANYONE WITH INFORMATION REGARDING THIS EVENT OR THE WEREABOUTS OF LOUIS BAUMGARTNER IS ADVISED TO EMAIL MICHAEL.MCCASKILL@[PGP], OR SUBMIT TO THE ANONYMOUS FORM ON OUR SECURITY

PAGE.

We value the safety of our employees at PGP, and will be taking extra precautions following this event.

Sincerely,

—Michael McCaskill

*Director of Security at Praxisorientiert Gesundheitszustand
Pharmazeutischen*

—&—

After kissing Sophie, Louis ended up back in Port Town. He stood on the dock island with Frix, enchanted sword in hand. Giant behind them. Knights ahead.

“Is that...” Frix began to ask, but was lost for words.

Louis offered Frix the blade. Frix dropped the arms he’d stolen from a knight and took the enchanted sword, giddy laughter erupting from him as he twirled it around.

He handed it back to Louis, and Louis took it, trembling a little with excitement. Frix knelt down, grabbed his stolen swords again, and stood back up.

“Friend,” Frix said. He put an arm tight around Louis shoulders. “*Friend*. Thank you.”

The Swordsman sprinted forwards and leapt, landing on the other side of the dock with the knights. The Chemist ran and jumped too. The enchanted sword sliced armor like a knife through seafoam.

Shortly, no knight stood in their way.

No knight but one. He stood on the land before the dock, gripping Frix’s longsword in both hands, the armor-plating missing from his calve. His visor was down, so Louis couldn’t see his touse of blonde hair or his beard.

“HEATHENS!” the knight yelled, and charged, paying no mind to his broken leg.

When he reached Louis Louis pushed the longsword away

with a tendril, and in one movement of his blade, the knight was fallen.

#

Hersh sat cross-legged in the back yard, smoking a cigarette, facing a pine tree. He sat under the bows and he wore gym shorts, so the blanket of dead and yellowed pine needles dug up into his hairy legs and ass. He did weird shit like that after coming home from war. Probably did weird shit like that before the war too, but was more open about it now.

Louis went out to bring him supper. They were visiting home for a holiday. Easter. The family was Jewish, but they celebrated some Christian holidays too.

“One thing about active duty that I miss,” Hersh said, mouth full of hamburger, “is the humanity. You find it in surprising places. Even in the ‘bad guys’. At the intelligence outpost, where you *really* got to know the others, all I learned was that the others looked, sounded, joked, shat, prayed, and fought exactly like my brothers in arms. I called them my cousins in arms once, and Massey beat the shit out of me. At dinner he shared his dessert.

“I never killed anyone Lou. I always, always thought I probably would. But I didn’t. Couldn’t. And however that makes you feel about me, that’s the fact of it.”

#

Louis sat on the dock with the knight’s body in his lap, cradling the head. He didn’t lift the visor. He couldn’t risk looking inside and seeing any trace of Hersh.

Chapter 6: Ghillie Suit

Father,

I have to confess first that I'm not a man of your religion, but that as an enlisted man I've found some utility in many spiritualities.

In the line of duty, I shot and killed an enemy soldier. I could see him but he couldn't see me. Ever since, I've seen monsters in the shadows on faraway hills, and so, for the first time in my life, I seek forgiveness from a higher power for the things I can't mend on my own.

Sorry if this comes across disingenuous. I don't know what kind of language is appropriate when writing holy men. My discourse for it begins and ends with priest/rabbi jokes. Write me back if you want to hear a good one.

HB

Chapter 7:

Fafnir

Sophie stood in her apartment's kitchen, touching her lips where Louis had kissed her.

She thought about her final year of school—about Josie. Josie had been a year younger. An exchange student from Finland. Sophie found her in the library hyperventilating while pouring over the notes from her chemistry class. Others were giving the exchange student looks, but the girl was too occupied to notice them. Sophie stood Josie up and led her to the girls' room, where she could have the privacy to let everything out while Sophie listened.

Josie was worried she would know everything from her chem book, but not know how to show it on a test. She had learned chemistry in Finnish.

Sophie had already taken the same chemistry course Josie was in, and she still had her papers at home, tests included. After school, they both rode the bus to Sophie's house.

The drive was a lot of time for Sophie to spend with someone she had just meet, but Josie was very pleasant, and she showed Sophie pictures of her month in Germany so far. Josie had the window seat, and cupped her hand against the phone to block the sun's glare. Her nails were painted soft pink: barely noticeable until looking closely. There were lots of pictures of herself in front of buildings and monuments. In many of them was another girl, who Sophie asked about. Josie said the girl was her host sister.

"I don't like her," Josie said.

Across the aisle, a boy named Tommy made a crude remark about Sophie bringing (yet another) person home. Sophie turned and kicked his seat hard, which made him red and quiet.

Sophie and Josie got off the bus. On the walk up to the house, Sophie ran Josie down the list of things she always mentioned to new visitors. "The dogs are going to bark. I don't like that the neighbors' houses are so close to ours. My parents won't be home for another few hours, and when they come back they'll probably

be suspicious of you.”

“Because you like girls,” Josie said to the last one.

Sophie shrugged. “I mean, yeah.”

Josie fist-bumped Sophie, and the two went inside. The dogs did bark, and Sophie hurried Josie through the living room and up the stairs to her room on the second floor. It was an incredibly hot day, and the bedroom was stuffed up and humid. Sophie opened the window to let in a breeze.

Sophie had a sort of ritual every morning. After getting up she would make her bed. The bed took up an entire side of her room: the room was long, but narrow, like at some point in the architecture it had been a wide hallway; because of this, the bed pressed against not one, not two, but three walls, and was very difficult to make. But she wrestled with the mattress every morning, preparing for the chance that someone might be coming home with her after school. Because the bed was at the very end of the hall-like room, she had little choice but to keep the path from door to sheets tidy as well. The papers on her little desk were kept orderly, the trinkets on her window sill were kept dust-free, and the stuffed animals on top of her dresser were positioned just right.

Josie took a particular interest in the stuffed animals.

“May I hold one?” she asked.

And of course she could: Sophie insisted.

Josie hugged the elephant against her chest and looked around the room while Sophie went through the cabinet by her desk. Years and years of papers, all distributed into folders and partitioned by dividers. In a minute Sophie had every chemistry test she’d ever taken. She and Josie laid out side-by-side on the warm carpet like cats, and went over how chemistry tests looked in German. Josie learned quickly that the German and Finnish tests were quite similar after all.

“Thank you so, so much,” Josie said, working her way down a page and holding her place with a painted nail. She had Sophie’s blonde hair: it flowed and then pooled on the ground the exact same way as Sophie’s did. This was months before Sophie had shaved her hair down to a buzz cut.

“It’s nothing,” Sophie said.

“No, it’s really...” Josie flipped through all of the papers. “Oh my god. Sophie, how smart are you?”

None of the tests were marked below 90%. Sophie would still remember if any of them had been, because she would have cried. Standing in the kitchen, touching her lips where Louis had kissed her, Sophie didn’t know a single person who would still believe, without proof, that she had been a model student. But she’d had As across the board at a school that passed around the word ‘prestigious’ more often than ‘hello’. How far she’d come since then; o harken, it is something to behold.

Sophie helped Josie study for her test until Josie got a call from her host family, asking her when in the world she was planning on coming back. As she left, they agreed to do this again sometime.

They did it again nearly every day, the two of them lying in the sun on Sophie’s floor, pouring over notes, worksheets, or essays. Eventually talking about more than school work: things Josie missed about Finland, and things she did not miss as much. Every time Josie spoke, Sophie wanted to sit her on her lap and pet her, the same way that Josie often pet one of the room’s stuffed animals. The dogs had stopped barking at Josie when she came in, and instead only watched with suspicion, as they still did to Sophie. Tommy no longer made remarks. “I’m sorry,” he even went so far as to say once, looking down at his feet. Sophie held Josie’s hand when they walked from the bus to the house. One day Sophie’s mother was home early, and she saw them holding hands through the front window.

“She seems like a nice girl,” Mrs. Gallo said the next morning.

“She is,” Sophie said, and that was the end of the discussion.

After some time, Josie had convinced her host family to let her spend the night. On the first sleepover, when it was late, she finally did ask Sophie about kissing girls. The two of them talked about it in hushed tones, as though either of their parents would care enough to be eavesdropping.

“Do you like it better than kissing boys? Have you ever had sex? Is it true you skipped math to make out with Brent and Anna at the same time?” Josie asked.

Sometimes, yes, and no, were the answers respectively. “Boys and girls are all people, and some people are really good at kissing and others just aren’t. I’ve had sex and it’s great, but it’s important to be safe, you know. I would never skip math class; I skipped *lunch* to make out with Brent and Anna because they’re testing the waters in an open relationship, and I just happened to know that both of them are *very* good at kissing.”

Josie nodded, the information being partitioned and neatly subdivided into compartments in her sleepy head. A strand of blonde hair was down across her face, drawing a line over a smiling, rosy cheek. Sophie told her that it was probably time for bed. The girl agreed, and they set up an inflatable mattress for her on the floor by the window.

“I saw you blow a kiss in the hall to John,” Josie said as they were setting up her bed.

“I like John,” Sophie said, absent-minded as she pulled at the corner of a sheet.

Josie didn’t say anything further, and crawled onto the air mattress. Sophie went to lay in her own bed, halfway across the hall-like bedroom. When she laid in bed alone at night, imagining her future family helped her sleep. When she laid in bed with someone else, she tried to imagine them as her spouse. If the image didn’t fit, which it never did, then she would go to sleep sad, and in the morning she would be out of bed long before her failed partner, ready to see them out.

That night Sophie had considered herself alone, and imagined she was cleaning up construction paper and glue. Then she heard Josie getting off of the air mattress, and it was no longer a sunny afternoon, but a dark night in a long bedroom, with a cool breeze coming in through the window. Josie walked through the room, past the stuffed animals on the dresser, past the papers on the desk, and crawled into bed where a week ago Sophie had slept with John. Sophie asked, “What are you—” but was met with a curt “*Shh*,” which was the same sound Josie had made to stop the dogs from barking at her. She slipped over Sophie and secured herself onto her back, both of her lean arms wrapped tight around Sophie’s chest, her legs burrowing up into Sophie’s, her hips locked firmly against Sophie’s ass and the front of her head

nuzzling softly at the back of Sophie's neck.

Sophie jumped, and moved to get away from Josie: in her head she scolded the girl, *No!*

Josie just held on tighter, still nuzzling the back of Sophie's head, softly now, back, and forth, and back. She whispered to Sophie, her voice something different in the dark. "How fucking old do you think I am?" Josie asked.

Sophie could feel Josie's heart pounding against her back, just as she was very sure that Josie could feel hers. But eventually Josie's heartbeat mellowed as she drifted off, her nuzzling becoming less and less until she was out. Sophie's heart kept going. This was *not* what things had been.

Josie was sixteen. Sophie was seventeen, almost eighteen. Sophie would be a liar if she said she hadn't started younger than sixteen, with people much older than almost eighteen.

This was Sophie's first major failing as a mother. She shed tears that night, trying not to sob so that the girl clinging to her back wouldn't wake. When the girl had loosened her grip, her unconscious-self contented that Sophie wouldn't leave, Sophie rolled around to face her. To see Josie's mature face for herself. Sophie's heart was still beating like a heavy metal drummer. Josie breathed calm, in, and out, and in. Sophie reached out and brushed a strand of hair off of Josie's face. Josie was a child who wouldn't think to brush it away herself. Sophie continued to stroke her hair, staring in the pale moonlight at her closed eyes, wondering what she was dreaming about. Josie was Sophie's wife, and the first wife who she could undelusionally imagine in the role. When Josie opened her eyes in the morning Sophie kissed her, and they explored each other.

I drove into Eden,

*aggressively aware that the fruit I had come to eat of was sacred
That it would not taste good to me*

*That I would spit it out, while making a twisted face,
and apologize for taking knowledge that did not belong to me*

*But oh, how eager the tree was to give its labors away
And harken all, how the taste meant nothing to me*

I ate only to know of the tree of knowledge's seeds

And they were good.

They dated for two months, and against Sophie's will, she loved Josie with every romantic capacity in her body. The girl's host family had given up on expecting her home after school, or ever. Sophie had a suspicion that everyone knew: everyone in the school halls, everyone on the bus, every one of Josie's relatives and every one of her own, knew that she had originally thought of Josie as her daughter. Sophie loved the girl anyways, until the day Josie accidentally broke Sophie's heart. The girl had brought the family of stuffed cats from the top of the dresser down onto the floor. Two parent cats and a baby. Absently twisting the baby's arm around, Josie said, "I never understood kids. I don't think I'd ever want any, to be honest."

*First you gave me a single fish,
So that I could eat for a day
Then you gave me a fishing rod
And then you took it away*

—&—

Louis and Frix walked to the mountain. It was three day's travel.

Along the way, they spoke of many things. Louis spoke about the journey to enchant the sword, and while doing so, also spoke about his time. There was a lot to cover. Frix got the idea by the end of day one—convenience and health care—but still, The Swordsman prodded for details.

"Would you want to come with me to the future?" Louis asked at one point.

Frix was unsure.

When the dragon slayers arrived at the mountain, there was an encampment at the base. Many white tents, large and small, formed their own village. It was cold, though at the base of the

mountain there was no snow. Only frost in the dirt and on tents.

The day was coming to a close, and the dragon slayers decided to spend the night in the camp and make their climb in the morning. They sat before a bonfire, alongside men and women who spoke between themselves, and Louis and Frix listened until they understood these people. They were, indeed, here for The Dragon as well. Some for holy reasons, seeking health for themselves or loved ones. Others were at the camp to form a militia. Some, it seemed, had only come because the world was ending, and they wanted to be there at the epicenter to see it out.

Louis and Frix drank and ate heavily.

The Chemist felt an itch as the night went on. While Frix was helping roast a pig, Louis ducked away from the outdoor festivities and found his way to a quieter tent. The people inside were standing around passing a pipe. Someone with badass face tattoos recognized Louis from the party outside, and passed the pipe to him. Louis hit it, and waited to see if he would be back home, with Bob on his face trying to suffocate him.

Instead, he found the rest of the night to be a blissful blur.

He woke up after a few hours' sleep feeling extraordinarily cold, and went to find his friend.

That morning, before any trace of the sun had shown over the horizon, Louis and Frix ascended the mountain.

The dragon slayers approached the cavern as the sun was rising over the cliffs behind them. The sun cast their shadows out in front of their feet, leading their shady doppelgangers headlong into the hole in the mountainside. Frix's shadow, stretched, felt like the first accurate picture Louis had seen of The Swordsman: taller than a mirror would show; black all the way through, but facing something *much* blacker; sword in left hand, torch in right. An unlit torch, since they hadn't yet entered the cave. Frix stood there—the real, meaty him, in 3D space—inhaling air through his nose and over his tongue, and his nostrils flared. Louis smelled with him. They smelled something sour. Rotten. **Black.**

“Monster,” Frix said, expelling the air. “Fah ha ha! MY only dread is the thought that my sword may finally break before the fight is finished, and then what? Shall I fight with my hands, or will you lend me your arms, friend?”

Louis chuckled meekly, and reached for his lighter. The dragon slayers lit their torches, and their shadows scattered away. Into the cave they went.

They walked side-by-side through a long cavern that curved downwards, and very soon they found themselves in the dark, save their torchlight. The cave walls were charred black. Sure enough, it smelled of death. Louis' tendrils reached out ahead of the torchlight, probing for danger, and certain to find it. There was no trace of light behind them, none of the sounds of wind, none of the mountain cold. The black walls of the tunnel were hot to the touch. Heatwaves permeated the air.

The tunnel opened up into an amphitheater of Black. Steam rose from cracks in the ground. The walls of the room opened up to infinity, and behind the dragon slayers, the tunnel had gone. Fair enough. At that point, no turning back.

The Dragon stepped forth, unseen, but heard and felt, as his footsteps resonated through the ground.

Frix found his footing, dropped his torch, and held his sword in both hands. Louis stood beside him, enchanted sword held in front of himself with one hand like a shield, and a torch in the other hand like a totem that kept away badness.

Frix bared his teeth, yelled up at the darkened heavens, and sprinted into the black.

Louis stood on the balls of his feet and breathed fast, mimicking the action of running after The Swordsman. But he didn't, and in a gust of wind, both torches were blown out. Behind Louis, no matter where he turned, was The Dragon with its razor's-edge teeth.

“LOUIS.”

He could feel The Dragon coming but was powerless: the scaled muzzle was over his head and then The Dragon bit down on Louis, snapping his spine and ripping open every piece of his stomach. The Dragon dropped Louis and The Chemist's guts spilled onto the floor, then The Dragon picked him up by the astral tendons and jerked him to the side, ripping every tendril out of his body by the spiritual root.

Louis had *never* felt pain until then. Anything he'd thought was pain, he'd been mistaken.

The Dragon picked Louis up again and threw him. He hit the ground and slid, slicked by blood, into the feet of some other creature in the darkness.

The creature, giant in the dark, loomed over him. "Friend?" Frix asked. With some kind words whispered, the creature—The Swordsman—created a flame that lit the air between them.

"Frix," Louis mouthed. Louis grabbed at Frix's ankles, looking up at The Swordsman as best he could. "Help me."

The muscular, scarred man looked down at Louis. He dropped his longsword: it crashed to the ground with a weighty *BANG*, ruining the edge of the blade against the black stone. The Swordsman knelt, picked Louis' seafoam sword from off the ground beside him, and ran back into the dark to slay a dragon.

Around Louis the ground melted just a little bit, like he imagined molten lava felt when it was sliding down the side of a volcano. He sank into it and was swimming, half a man, everything below his ribcage dead weight. All around in the black he heard the clash of sword on teeth and talon and bone, the mortal screams of man and Evil, and he saw hellish fires screamed from the mouths of Frix and The Dragon. And in the end, he heard Frix victorious. He heard him cry out the names of his father and mother between sobs.

"Emrich! Helena!" Frix said, sparks spitting out of his mouth. He was on his hands and knees, face down, head bowed. "I've finally done this for you. I fixed it. Dad, I don't know how it got broken, but it's mended now. Mom, I'm sorry I couldn't fix it sooner. But I did it.

"I did it for both of you."

When Frix stood to leave, he left the enchanted sword on the ground. It was a tool too great to trust the dunderhead farmhands of the outside world with. Louis heard fading footsteps, and saw the smoking glow of Frix's breath fall more and more distant until he was gone. Louis was powerless to call out to him. He had a mouth, but no lungs. He rested his head on the melting ground, content to be swallowed by the earth. Ever since Hersh died, Louis

had thought a lot about drowning.

“Louis...”

Louis pulled his head out of the stone and looked up at the annoying fucker trying to keep him awake.

“Lou...”

Lou couldn't see shit, but he heard that the voice was close. The voice, maybe two feet away, echoed off the cavern walls, which had moved back together. The floor was no longer melted, but Lou was still broken.

“Fuck off,” he told the dragon.

He reached into his pocket for his lighter. It felt like reaching into someone else's pocket: his leg, dead, couldn't feel his hand. He tried to spark a light, missed, tried again, missed. He dropped his arm to the ground and concentrated on how lighters worked. He pressed his thumb down against the sparking part and held it down hard on the lighter fluid button, and a flame was lit, wicking up from the cavern floor. Over the flame, Lou saw a man with a blank face. Not blank like he didn't have eyes. Blank like his eyes, mouth, nose, every other feature of his composition, was completely unremarkable.

Lou started crawling for the sword. It stood just ahead of him, sticking up out of what had moments ago been melted stone.

“You should be in remarkable pain,” the human said, and he coughed for a long time while Lou tried to pull himself forward.

“The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places,” Lou said. His open stomach was caught on a rock sticking up out of the cavern ground. He tried to lift himself off of it. “But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry. My brother Herschel said that. He was very good, and very gentle, and very brave. He wouldn't break so the world killed him. I do break, dragon. And I'm pretty fucking used to the feeling of it. I don't think the world knows just how to kill

me anymore.”

Lou rolled off of the rock onto his side, and kept crawling. The human, when Lou saw him in the lighter light, had been sitting with his back against a cavern wall, his arms limp at his sides, mouth bleeding with teeth scattered across the ground, and a black hole in his chest where Frix had ripped his heart out. Lou was going to behead him.

“You killed the knight,” the human mentioned.

“I’m ignoring you.”

“Would Herschel have killed the knight?”

“No.”

“But you did.”

“I’m not Herschel,” Lou said.

He got to the seafoam sword. He reached high for the handle and yanked and yanked, but the blade was firmly planted in the stone.

“Try wiggling it side-to-side,” the human said.

Lou gave it a shot, but still, it was stuck. “Won’t budge. Thanks though.”

“Let me try.”

“Fuck you.”

Lou grabbed the top of the sword with both hands and pulled himself up. He laid on top of the handle, wobbly, pushing all of his living weight onto it.

“What in God’s name are you doing now?”

“I’m trying to break the sword so I can use the part that’s above the stone.”

“You’re going through a lot of effort to murder me, Louis.”

Lou fell off of the handle and hit the ground hard. The seafoam sword stayed in the ground, unbroken. Lou wondered how long it would take to drag the human over to the sword. He wondered if the human could resist being dragged. He wondered if the world really had given up on killing him. He wondered if the world had given up on killing both of them.

“Do me a favor?” the human asked.

“Go to hell.”

“Touch the sword once. The broad side of the blade, not the edge. Tell me if it’s sticky.”

Lou reached out and pressed his fingers into the NovaXXXXXsol-coated metal. He pulled his fingers back and rubbed them together. It felt clunky to control his fingers with his tendons on the inside again, instead of puppeting them from the outside. “Sticky,” Lou reported.

“That’s my blood,” the human said. He coughed again, for longer this time.

When he was finished coughing, he continued. “If you mix it into your blood, you’ll have a piece of the power I once did. It won’t be nearly the same. It would be enough to fix even you, though. Enough for you to leave this cave.”

“I’ll think about that. I’m going to kill you first though.”

The human coughed, and coughed, and Lou could hear the shape of the human’s mouth smiling, and it wasn’t a cough at all. It was laughter. “Louis, Louis,” the human said. “The blood in me right now is spent. It’s useless. Less than useless. If you get it on the blood on the sword, it will make that blood less than useless too. So think first.”

Lou thought about what it had been like his first time taking acid. How little he’d thought about it. On the tongue, and then the world was never exactly the same again. He’d seen that reality was only a layer on top of another thing.

He licked the blade.

The feeling you get when a limb that’s been asleep wakes up: that was the feeling of the lower half of his body, all condensed into a matter of seconds. He stood. He could stand again, just like that. He ripped the sword from the ground, and if the seafoam sword had been light before, it was even lighter.

Louis walked to the human and his head was on the ground before he could make another remark. Louis lit his lighter so he could see, and with his other hand he held up the human’s head. He looked it in the eyes closely, and for a very long time. He would not leave the cave until convinced that The Black Death was over.

The human’s head did not stir, and neither did his body. Louis dropped him. He thrust the sword down through the head back into the ground, so hard that the impact left cracks in the stone.

Louis’ lighter felt cold in his hand. The whole cave had gone

frigid. That was fine. He was leaving anyways. From a back pocket, he pulled out a drug he'd gotten at the basecamp for exactly this purpose: if he took LithoXXXXXocaine in the future he went to the past, and if he did any drugs in the past, the LithoXXXXXocaine was cancelled and he was back in the present. Was that the mechanic? There was some wavering to it—it wasn't a hard-and-fast rule—but that seemed to be the gist. Louis held the rolled-whatever in his lips, lifted the lighter to the end, and breathed in very, very deeply.

Then he was in his kitchen, like he had just snapped himself out of a daydream. Bottle of pills on the counter. He counted them. Twenty seven. That number made no sense, frankly. He had started with thirty and taken three: one when he first went back in time, one when fighting off the knight in his kitchen, and one after kissing Sophie. The number was right, actually, but only for a point in time *after* he had done all of that, *and* come back to his apartment to put the pills on the counter again. He didn't like it.

He went to check on the others who had been in the drug trial with him.

When emailing him about the drug study, PGP hadn't bothered to BCC the emails they sent to all of the participants: they were all in the same recipients area, all very visible to each other. All of their emails were traceable. Louis sat at his laptop in his living room, doing his cyber stalking, making a list of names and addresses, and petting Bob when he brushed against his leg—Louis did think to look down and make sure Bob was really there, and he was.

List made, Louis took the pills off the counter, took his keys out of the bowl by the door, and almost went out into the world with his own blood saturating the lower half of his body. He'd been in such pain when it got there that he hadn't even noticed the discomfort of wet clothes afterwards. He went to the shower, tracking stains into the carpet along the way that would most likely be there forever.

He turned the shower much hotter than normal and he stood there, watching the blood water wash down and fall into the drain. He looked at his chest where he'd been bitten in half. Scar tissue formed a jagged ring all around his torso, as far as he was flexible

enough to turn and see. Not remotely the smooth skin that he had kind of hoped would be there. Looking in the mirror after the shower—it was a very long shower—he couldn't honestly convince himself that it was a good-looking scar either. He felt kind of hideous, and probably was. But he'd worry about it another time.

He walked to his bedroom and got dressed. Black sweatshirt. Very big, very baggy. The only sweatshirt he had left, and it worked, because he was still shivering and that sweatshirt had also been his warmest anyways. Now presentable, He grabbed the pills and keys and went to find the people who had been on the drug trial with him.

In total, he went to fifteen homes. Of them, ten seemed fine. They were the placebo group, probably. The control of the experiment. The other four were all dead: everyone in the real LithoXXXXXocaine group besides him.

Louis had... theories, about why he lived and they hadn't. Most of it came down to the idea that he was ready, and they weren't: he'd already opened his third eye. He tripped at least once a week or he started to feel pretty fucking uncomfortable, so really, he was ready to treat falling back in time as a standard thing. It went back to what Hersh had said too: *Those that will not break it kills*. Maybe the others in the real LithoXXXXXocaine group were the gentle, the kind, the brave. Those who didn't want to get broken.

Louis did know that Hersh had been quoting Hemingway on breaking. If memory served, Louis remembered Hersh reading the paragraph straight from the paperback. Even so, Louis couldn't attribute the line to Hemingway fully, because Louis didn't read it from Hemingway. He heard it from his brother and that meant more.

Louis kept all of the LithoXXXXXocaine he could find. It was better in his hands. He vowed never to take more of it. He vowed that if he could ever find a cave deeper than the cave with the Seafoam Sword, that was where he'd put the rest of the drug. Until then, people who wanted it would have to come through him.

He went back to his apartment and packed a suitcase. He

grabbed all of the cash he had stashed upon coming to Germany. He checked that his phone had a charge, and it did. He looked in his drug box—nice little wooden thing he'd found at a thrift store—and took out the weed. Nothing else. He closed the box with the codeine, MDMA, and six tabs of acid still inside. After the adventure he'd had, real drugs were off the table for a while. Maybe they were off the table forever. He had a feeling that they would send him somewhere he didn't want to be.

With suitcase, cash, phone, weed, and Bob, Louis went out to his car and threw everything in the back, except for Bob, who rode up front. Louis drove to Sophie's apartment, wondering along the way how she felt about him. He parked in front of her place, and reached over to pet Bob while he looked out the window at her door.

Was she better off not involved?

He sat a long time deciding.

When her front door opened, she didn't come to the car to say hello. She stood in the doorway with her arms crossed, looking down at him as he sank into his seat.

She turned and went back inside. He stayed in the car.

A little later, he got a text from her. "Leave Bob in the car. My landlord is a psycho bitch."

Louis went in, and closed the door behind himself. Sophie tackled him back into the door knocking the breath out of him, kissing him and squeezing his head in her hands. Then she took a hard step back, pushed him, and demanded in English, "What the *fuck*, Louis?"

"I'm sorry," he told her. "How long was I gone?"

"Were you even *here*?" she asked. In more pointed German she asked again, "Were you *here* on my doorstep ten minutes ago or not?" Her arms were crossed, her shoulders huddled close together, chin down. She stared at him like... like he was Louis. Like she had seen everything Louis had done, and she was *not* on his side of things.

He reached out and touched her shoulder. She was tense, but she let him.

"I was here," he said. "And I like you Sophie. A lot. I've made some decisions and I'm leaving Berlin forever. I'm going back

home. I want you to come with me.”

She put a hand on top of his hand that was touching her. She felt him.

“Okay?”

She decided he didn’t feel half bad. “Let’s go.”

She packed a bag, and they went. As they left town they listened to the radio so loud that they had to yell over it to talk to each other.

—&—

McCaskill paused the surveillance video. It was the best face shot they’d found of the intruder—right as he was walking into the research center. On the other monitor, he pulled up their best photo of Patient A7.

Dr. Orna, leaning over the back of McCaskill’s swivel chair, shook his head. “I see it, but...”

“But nothing,” McCaskill said. “Same man. *Exact* same man, and I know you know, because you were hiding him from me. Who is he?”

“The one on the *right* is—”

“And the other one, on account of them being the exact same man. Don’t fuck with me Orna,” McCaskill said. On the surveillance video, McCaskill switched to another camera, in the basement, where a security guard stood. He had watched the man get slain a hundred times now. This was Dr. Orna’s first.

It was violent.

“Well.” Dr. Orna crossed his arms, and breathed out. “I can’t speak to that. But the man on the right is Patient A7—”

“I’m aware of that. I read about your study. Give me a name.”

“Louis Dean Baumgartner.”

“Pastimes? Hobbies? Kendo classes on the weekends?”

“Director McCaskill, if I may be frank—”

Director McCaskill grinned.

Dr. Orna shuffled, and continued. “By far and away, the most astounding fact about that man is that he should be dead.”

“No shit, he should be dead in a prison cell with a million dollar fine hanging over his—”

“No, McCaskill, I mean... the pill we gave him wouldn't have put him in... this state. After getting calls from horrified family members, I personally reviewed the pills we gave out earlier today, and the men in the lab made a horrible, horrible mistake when putting the batch together. Louis Baumgartner, and all other participants in his group, would be unquestionably... deceased. We tried to get in contact ASAP with everyone who we gave the pills to—”

The director waved his hand in a dismissive gesture, and Doctor Orna slowed to a halt.

McCaskill turned back in his swivel chair, and the two looked at Louis Baumgartner on both monitors: one of him smiling for the trial's 'before' photo, and the other a grainy still of him slicing open a security guard in the research center's subbasement. McCaskill watched the clip for the hundred-and-second time. There was a hint of flashiness behind Patient A7's slash, like he was imitating how he'd seen swords used in movies. That was probably exactly it. This man was very obviously not trained, but he had gotten through McCaskill's security force all the same, with a weapon that was dated by thousands of years. That was really the unacceptable thing. McCaskill watched the video for the hundred-and-third time, keen for any tell that there was another factor at play.

Elevator opened. Patient walked out. Guard issued a verbal warning. Patient killed the guard, took the guard's ID badge, and used it to enter the most highly restricted area on the company's campus.

McCaskill switched to the next camera, inside of the developmental labs. Patient A7 continued down the hall until reaching a particular door, where he walked inside and poured the contents of a beaker onto his blade. In the next frame, the man had completely vanished, killing-sword and all.

Doctor Orna leaned closer into the monitor and adjusted his glasses. “Is that... Oh God.”

“Talk to me Orna.”

“That was NovaXXXXXsol. He just emptied... holy *Christ*,

he shouldn't be able to survive in a room with an exposed *teaspoon* of that!"

Director McCaskill leaned forward onto his desk, propping his chin in his hands, stroking the stubble he'd grown while staying late that day. He continued the video, past where Patient A7 disappeared. The scientists who had been in the room had fled, and sealed the room shut behind themselves. McCaskill watched the grainy images of his security force about to open the door, and having one of the scientists push them away.

Doctor Orna rubbed at his temple. "Doctor Mats just saved your guards' lives," Orna said. "They were about to turn that entire floor into a gas chamber."

"That deadly?"

"Mm."

"I want all of it off the premises in the next thirty minutes. Next time you decide to play with wonder weapons, ask an adult first."

"It's not a weapon—"

McCaskill wheeled around in his chair and decked Orna in the bridge of the nose. The doctor fell to the ground while McCaskill stood, first clenched, knuckles throbbing. The director barked down at the doctor: "It would be banned from wars by the United Nations, that is a *goddamn* weapon you psychopath! Four lives on your hands from bad pills: that's more than Louis Dean Goddamn Baumgartner, whose life you have, *apparently*, tried to end *twice* now! Get out of my sight you miserable and pathetic danger to the human race, and do not come back *in-to* my sight until you have put together a *very* compelling argument as to why I should not imprison you myself for the greater good of all mankind!"

The doctor scrambled out of the office, slamming the door shut behind himself.

The director took five deep breaths, which made him gorilla-like in his combative stance. He sat back down, and turned back to the monitor. He rewound the video, back to when Patient A7—Louis—poured the chemical onto the sword. He watched the disappearing act, while the thoughts of his colleague's reckless endangerment to human life played in the back of his mind. He

watched, and under his breath, he muttered. “How’d you do it, Louis? How did you escape my facility? How did you manage not to get killed by... oh.”

Director McCaskill had his excuse now: choice of weaponry aside, no security force in the world could be expected to subdue an intruder who had supernatural powers triggered upon their own death.

McCaskill pulled up PGP’s file on Louis Baumgartner. He printed it out, and while it printed, he grabbed his go-bag from under his desk. He was going to go conduct his own experiment. His death toll would be zero, though he was quite convinced that the number of times he killed some—a particular someone—may be well more than once.

He removed the pistol from his go-bag, and looked it over, to be absolutely sure that it was in proper working order. He had designed it himself, from the depth and pattern of the cross-hatching on the handle, to the beautifully lettered engraving on the slide action: *Fafnir*. Every moving piece in the weapon checked out, though as McCaskill left his office, he did wonder if he could find a place that would sell him silver bullets at such a late hour. It seemed unlikely. He would see if he could get by without.

—&—

Herschel Philip Baumgartner rode in the back of a jeep like he was riding in a spaceship, which was to say, he regarded his captors as aliens.

He had been ejected from his native unit after sustaining a serious injury that did not befit a soldier on the move—shot through the chest unglamorously while getting the unit’s ammo from a sandy valley. Intestinal problems. His unit’s medic Walsh gave him horrifying dosages of things, which kept him distant, like he was a million miles behind his eyes. The driver had commented on this to the passenger while walking to the vehicle as though Herschel wasn’t in earshot. Before even getting in the

jeep Herschel tried to lay out all three members of this transport unit, but found his arms were made of stone pillows; sandbags; ballasts that kept his hands weighed down at his sides as he walked to the back of the jeep, and got in beside a man with a gun. The gunman's knees were high up on the back of the next seat up. Herschel himself had plenty of leg room. As they hummed through the desert, Baumgartner was only able to stare forward at the back of the driver's bobbing head.

"We stopping to eat on the way?" the passenger asked.

"Yeah," the driver said, with a tone that indicated he was grabbing his crotch.

"Man I miss fast food."

"Sure it misses you too, buddy."

And then the road exploded: shrapnel went through the driver and hit Herschel through the eye and into the cerebral cortex. Herschel Philip Baumgartner was killed.

This was not the first time this had happened.

This time when he jumped, he found himself in London, apparently in some year in the past before the implementation of a sewage system. He cursed himself. He'd gotten good—scary good—at controlling where he went when this happened. But admittedly, the landmine had caught him off guard. He looked down and saw a long piece of metal frame sticking out of his leg. He yanked it out, letting it clang to the ground after he'd dropped it, and he started walking. There were tall buildings to jump off of, or carriages to crash, or if he waited in the city long enough, he could almost certainly die of some horrific disease. He considered that briefly, as he'd actually never died from disease: it had always been something much, much more violent, go figure. But death by dysentery was not on his to-do list. Not anytime soon.

As he floated through London on twenty-first century pain killers, he formulated his real to-do list. One, kill himself, so he could get back to the war. Two, win the war, so the future he had glimpsed once would not happen. Three... no. There was no step three. Until the world was safe, Herschel was a one-two beat.

After a few blocks, Herschel had a realization: he reached down to his leg, and sure enough, there in his holster was his

sidearm. He felt silly for not recalling that sooner, but he really did feel displaced after the last jump: disoriented. There was a reason he made an effort not to ever jump too far from his natural time and place. He got queasy whenever he thought of his first time.

He had been swimming across Lake Bennett. Sink or swim, Herschel was leaving his hometown for good. *Kiss my ass*, he thought as he went. *Might come back later, but it's pretty fucking doubtful, because I hate every single one of you motherfuckers.*

Right then, at that point on that night, he hated his brother Louis the most. Not because Louis was an idiot like everyone else, or because Louis was a jackass on purpose. Louis was really the only reason Hersh might come back someday. But Louis, fucking clueless and stoned, was swimming out after Hersh, trying to rescue him from drowning. Louis honestly didn't think that it was the town that was drowning Hersh in the first place. Louis was trying to rescue his brother from a lake by throwing him back into an ocean.

Not quite halfway across Lake Bennett, Hersh felt a cramp in his thigh. He kicked through it and it got worse immediately, paralyzing his leg. So that was it then. Hersh wasn't making it to the other side. He was drowning. *Good Riddance.*

Kicking with one leg while the other was seized up, Hersh stopped swimming forward, and turned around in the water to see his brother. He wanted Louis to understand that he had chosen this, and that he wasn't drowning by accident.

When he turned, he squinted into the dark. His vision was blurred: there were two heads above the water, swimming closer. Hersh looked harder, and...

There were two Louis. What the actual—

A hand grasped Hersh's ankle and pulled him under before he even had time to gasp for air. He kicked, pressing his free foot hard against the hand around his ankle, but it was like the hand belonged to a cinder block that was pulling him down, and down, and down. His lungs burned. Had he wanted this? He'd fantasized about it for a long-ass time.

The darkness around him congealed: first there had been dark air on the beach, and then there was dark water as he swam; now

there was dark gelatin embalming the body of Herschel Baumgartner, preparing him for the next thing. He had figured, incorrectly, that the next thing would be nothing, eternally.

The reality was worse.

Herschel found himself on an airplane, sitting between two sleeping passengers, a man and a woman. The lights were dimmed, and looking out the window over the man, Hersh saw that the sky was dark. Not the same dark that he had been congealed in. A normal dark. Regular night time. Hersh needed to vomit.

He worked his way over the woman, waking her as he got by. He didn't apologize. He thought to, but he also thought that if he said anything at all he might vomit on the spot, and he needed to find the bathroom. He was near the back of the plane already. He walked briskly by a few more rows of sleeping people, entered the lavatory, and knelt down in front of the toilet to puke.

He puked for an hour, or at least did the action of puking: he dry-heaved when his stomach was empty, which was worse, actually, but not in an existential way. He was nauseous. It was a feeling that he hadn't had in a long time, and it reminded him that there were other feelings out there than the hellish gruesome monotony of his hometown. Puking for an hour in an airplane in the sky made Herschel feel alive. He never had flown before.

There was a knock on the lavatory door, and a concerned, nice voice asked Hersh if he was okay.

"Amazing," Hersh said, head still bowed, speaking into the toilet. And he really was smiling. "I might be a... while, though..."

The voice said something else and went away. Hersh didn't catch the last thing she had said. It was his own voice that resonated inside of himself. Deeper than it had been before. Was that what being on an airplane was like? Maybe something about the altitude, or the air pressure. Between dry heaves Hersh played with his voice, *hming* quietly, until he felt good enough to get off his knees. He closed the toilet seat and sat down on top of it, and he thought. As much as he needed to think—as much as he thrived on it—he hadn't had much time to think while puking.

He played with the cuff of his pants while he pondered. Surely

he was supposed to be dead, but if this was an afterlife, then Hersh didn't understand the 'after' part, unless maybe there was a series of lives, an endless series, or at least a very large one, that he was going forward through and that would justify one being an *afterlife*, inasmuch as drowning in his hometown had been his *beforelife*. But was it right that he was joining this one *en medias res*? What specifically had happened, in the lake? It was like going to sleep: he didn't remember the moment that actually mattered. Just the things leading up to it. Standing on the beach smoking with Louis; running into the water and swimming; seeing... seeing two heads, one of which might have been Louis, but Hersh didn't know anymore; and then being grabbed and pulled under and encased in gelatin-black carbonite. Then he was nauseous on an airplane, feeling like he had been jolted awake. Maybe he *had* been jolted awake. Maybe he'd been asleep like the others until his mind snapped into this place.

Was he still him? Hershel pulled harder at his pantleg. Black dress pants. Not quite his style unless he was forced to dress up. His hand looked right, but wrong—he smiled when he thought about how, by that logic, his other hand must look left, right, and wrong. The hands were *correct* in that they were his: he could move them just fine, like he always had. White skin, pinker on the knuckles, blue on the veins. Too big though. Little hairs he'd certainly never had before on the backs of some fingers. He stood up and looked in the lavatory's tiny mirror. Looking back at him was an adult: Herschel Philip Baumgartner, but aged, with a strand of vomit trailing down his lip and over his chin.

First Hersh doubled over the lavatory sink, dry heaving all over again. But his dry-heaving muscles were too exhausted for much more of that, so he forced himself out of it, stood back upright, and looked at himself. He made faces, funny and angry ones, and he laughed a little bit louder than he probably should've been laughing in an airplane bathroom. He took off his suit coat, hung it on the door's tiny hangar, unbuttoned his dress shirt, and hung that up too. Sure enough, tattooed on his sternum, was a tattoo of a solid black circle. *Yin*. This was the same body that—he thought—had drowned.

He'd tattooed Yin on himself in sixth grade after reading a

book on Eastern philosophy, and being critical of the idea that there was anything good balancing out the dark. A friend's dad ran a small tattoo operation. Left alone, Hersh got a mirror and some directions off the internet. Tattooing himself was nerve-racking as hell, and he later found out that the sternum was among the more painful places where a tattoo could be put. But in his head at the time, this was something important: if there really was balance in the universe, then someday, somewhere, he would find someone who had tattooed themselves with a Yang. He'd yet to run into that person. He felt smug every time he saw his handiwork. Even seeing it in the lavatory mirror, he smiled. He didn't look like a drowned man. If anything, Herschel thought he looked pretty fucking handsome. He wadded up some toilet paper and wiped the puke off his chin. He got dressed again, and stepped out of the lavatory. His adult body had made a horrible first impression, but as he broke it in, he did take a liking to it.

On the way back to his seat, Herschel passed by the same sleeping people, although one had woken up, and was talking in hushed tones into a phone. Farther up the plane, two stewardesses were talking to one another. Mostly though, this was a plane of the asleep. Even the woman who he'd woken up on his way out of his seat had nodded off again. He tried to gauge whether he could get back into his seat without waking her a second time. Not liking his odds, he decided to continue down the plane instead to talk to a stewardess.

"Feeling better sir?" one of them asked—her voice was the same voice that had spoken to him through the door. The other stewardess smiled as she walked away to tend to business at the head of the plane. "I hope—"

~Bing, bong.

The stewardess was interrupted by the intercom.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for the hour, but I've been informed we will be experiencing some very rough turbulence. Please buckle your seatbelts and—"

—**CRACK!**—

The wind howled as the plane was ripped in half, mere feet

from Hershel: he grabbed at things but was vacuumed out of the plane, and then he was freefalling, in tandem with other passengers and luggage and fuselage. The night was dark: Herschel was falling once again into blackness, and for the few seconds he was able to think as he fell, he wondered if this was all to teach him some kind of lesson.

He remembered one of the war books he'd read had a section on night jumping. One of the soldiers had hit the ground without opening their chute because they hadn't seen the ground coming. Hersh felt jealous: he didn't *have* a parachute. He had a death wish that was just fucking toying with him now.

He remembered one of the other soldiers remarking on the shape of the earth: how they were able to see its round curve from so high up. Hersh looked at the horizon, and contrasted against the glow of the night sky, Hersh was able to see something strange. There wasn't one curve: there were many, arcing over each other, undulating, moving farther into the sky. The ground was a tangled mess of strands like a horrific ball of yarn. Hersh looked straight down, and saw lava: the crust of the earth was a crisscrossing mesh of land strips, exposing more and more lava underneath as the mesh came apart. Soon as Hersh fell closer and closer, the lava moved apart too, and through the entire earth, Herschel saw a fierce white circle: The Sun: *Yang*.

He only saw it for a moment before the world closed back up again. When he struck the stony ground, he felt his skull cracking open unevenly down the front.

Then, he found himself in the really bad place. He was a kid again—not a terribly young kid, but certainly around the age he'd been when he tried to swim across Lake Bennett. He wasn't at Lake Bennett, though. He was in the middle of a blazing earthly hell. The city rubble around him was ablaze, and there were many, many people dead inside of it. The noonday sun hung too-large over him, and from that and the fire, he could feel himself baking. The sky was a Salvador Dalí painting, or M.C. Escher: strands of the earth hung in a tangled mess overhead, strips of grassland and town and mountain all cross-sectioned apart and thrown into a mess, and he was among it, like he had been trapped inside a madman's wicker prison cell.

He was only there for moments before a building collapse killed him again, and he did end up back in the lake, where this time, he was able to make it out alive, with his brother, and the two of them went back home. But Herschel avowed then. He no longer cared in the slightest about escaping his hometown for the sake of saving himself. He was going to read, and study everything he could, to figure out what could possibly cause the world to fall apart in the way he'd seen it. And then he was going to go stop it. For any price in the entire world, Herschel Baumgartner would not drown.

Back on the road in the desert warzone, Herschel pushed the dead gunman off of himself, and surveyed the Humvee. Unsalvageable. Probably unsalvageable even to someone who was good with machines. Herschel picked up the gunman's rifle, collected everyone's dog tags, and started walking back in the direction of his old unit. He still didn't think any of them understood what this war was truly about. But Herschel had seen the past, and the future, and he was very convinced that a pivotal moment was in the midst of this hellish desert somewhere. Herschel Baumgartner, well-armed, walked back into the fray.

—&—

Allan stood on his lawn, bare toes sinking into the uncut grass. The soft grass-blades rose all the way up to the cuffs of his khaki shorts, like a tide. He breathed in deep through the nose, and pushed the breath out through the mouth, tasting the fabric of space and time as it passed him through. His eyes were closed, but indeed, his mind's eye saw much. He took a step a little to the left, barred his arms, and waited.

—&—

A knight's black boots crunched through the gravel and frost.

After the death of the rest of his unit, he had tarred his shiny armor. He alone would stand as the shadowy remains of his brothers. As he took each heavy, sluggish step, a new memory of the event filled his lowered visor. Two men—a strong one with a big sword and a normal one with a magic sword—had slain every member of his party. The two men were boldly foolish: the knights had been dragon slayers too. There had been no need to fight about it.

The black knight continued trudging up the frosty mountainside. If the dragon had truly been slain as the rumors said, then he would at least see its lair. En memorium or in morbid curiosity, the knight wasn't sure.

The knight felt a heat about his face: he was burning inside of his tarred armor. He removed his helmet and held it at his side as he continued hiking upwards, feeling like steam was rising off of his head. The wind blew his fro, and his beard as well. The beard was a testament to just how long he had spent with this unit: he had never been one to keep facial hair before. But in these places and times, he didn't want to risk any open cuts, and he wasn't quite perfect with a straight razor. So, upon following the war back to this point in time, he accepted his fate as a bearded man. Making weekly trips through time for disposable razors would be—in addition to the vanity—horribly dangerous to the black knight's cause. He ran a hand through his dark beard, feeling the coarse hair rub against his fingers. Really not bad. He might keep it for the next war.

The black knight arrived at the mouth of the cave. He inhaled deeply, hoping to smell dragon—he figured he would know the smell quite distinctly if such a smell came to him. But the black knight only got a nose full of cold, mountain air. He sniffled. When he put his helmet back on, he smelled tar, and figured that that was dragon-like enough for the time being. He rested his left hand—the one with the gauntlet—on his scabbard. His right hand, which was bare, rested on his holster. Herschel Baumgartner, once again, walked diligently into the black.

He followed the darkness down for quite some time.

By the time he arrived at the bottom, he had lit a torch, and was holding it in his gauntlet hand. With the torchlight, he saw the sword in the stone. The sword was also thrust through a human

head, the body of which laid nearby. Herschel knelt down and examined the head. It checked out: this was The Dragon after all. Herschel had heard stories of how people wicked enough to become monsters often looked too unremarkable when returning to humans. Herschel, at least, still sported distinct hair, even if some of his other features had blurred through the years. He turned to leave the cave. But as he did, he felt a tugging at his back. It was like a magnet attracting to the shiny armor underneath the coat of tar. Herschel turned back into the dark. He walked past the dragon. There, hanging in the air like a tattered flag in the wind, was a wormhole. Son of a bitch. He'd almost fucking missed it.

Herschel stepped through, and found himself in a park in twenty-first century Berlin, Germany. Children and parents looked at the black knight who had just appeared from nowhere. Herschel waved, turned around, sealed the wormhole, and went to a public washroom to remove his armor in some privacy. His next objective, certainly, was to kill the person who had so carelessly opened that hole in spacetime.

—&—

Sophie looked out the windshield while Louis barreled down the autobahn. Specifically, she looked at a particular point on the road ahead: the horizon. It was glimmering. Or shaking, or some other thing. Moving just a little. And as she kept looking, it moved more and more, until it shifted. The movement looked so small from so far away, but by a single degree, the land ahead of her rotated out of place, and stayed that way.

But she knew that her eyes were playing tricks on her.

Louis and Sophie stopped at a rest area to eat and stretch. There was a parking lot, a pavilion, and a very nice footpath that lead right by a small river.

Louis and Sophie walked along the footpath by the river. Sophie reached right down and touched the water: it was cool. Nice.

They held hands while they walked, and it felt weirdly safe.

Normally hand-holding for her wasn't an explicit statement of being lesbian—straight girls held hands sometimes—but it was certainly a suggestion. As far as danger went, holding Louis' hand felt safe to the point of being boring. She held his hand with the hand she'd put in the river, because it was cold, and he was warm. Unusually warm. Maybe she would write a poem about it. *I love the way / You hold my hand / So warm on mine...*

No. But anyways. She and Louis walked until they had come back to the pavilion, where a few benches and tables sat in the shade. They sat down with the whole park to themselves. Slow day for the rest area.

“Sophie?”

“Yes, dear.”

“I need to tell you why I'm leaving Berlin.”

“Writing a memoir?”

“No,” he said, and then laughed a little. “But I did a *lot* today.”

“I'll say.”

“Yeah you will,” he said, and they kissed again. His lips were feverish. He put his head down, so his forehead blocked them from kissing again. Then he reached into his sweatshirt pocket and pulled out a joint and Sophie damn near fucking slapped him. But with both of them huddled over the rolled paper, forehead-to-forehead like a little tent in the pavilion, Louis breathed fire and lit the end. He looked up at her, just with his eyes, still keeping his head down like he knew he'd done something she might not like, and needed to shield himself.

“I don't know if you're real, Louis.”

And Sophie was afraid she had realized something in saying that. A man came along who she had a romantic interest in: already she was dealing with a unicorn. Then he showed no interest for the year they knew each other, until one day he kissed her, disappeared in front of her eyes, returned to take her away to a rest stop with crystal cool water, and then breathed fire, there was no denying that he just breathed fire, she was *staring at* the ember of the joint and she smelled the smoke, and his free hand was holding both of hers, neither of them could possibly hold a lighter, and he was warm and she was afraid of him being a figment of some shitty poem she read once and forgot about.

He flicked the joint away and hugged her, and she hugged him back hard, digging her fingers into him, poking for any spot where her fingers might pass through, but he was solid.

“I’m real,” he said. “I love you. I’m real.”

They went over everything. It was a much longer story than Sophie could deal with in one sitting, but big-picture, she learned that she was dating a time-travelling dragon slayer. If he hadn’t breathed fire then she wouldn’t have believed a word of it. She did ask him to demonstrate this talent a few more times. She looked for anything that might give it away as some magic trick he’d picked up, but no, she was very sure it was real. They stepped out of the pavilion so he could breathe fire into the sky as hard as he could. The flame lasted all of a second, but it was as tall as he was. He fell to the ground. She was speechless. He opened his eyes a couple seconds later, seemed confused for a moment, and then joked about how maybe he wouldn’t try showing off anymore. He needed a few minutes to lay down in the field. She laid with him. He was not warm; all of his warmth had gone up into the air. He got it back little by little over time. As they waited, Sophie noticed the table and benches in the pavilion rattling a little.

Lying in the grass, face-up towards the sky, Louis confided something in Sophie.

“I’m going to go see my brother.”

“Isn’t he...”

“Dead. But...” Louis took a bottle of LithoXXXXXocaine out of his pocket, and rattled it. “I’m going to go see him.”

“Louis, think about...”

But Sophie was already alone in the field.

Louis rocketed through the fabric of the universe until he was caught, like running face-first into a steel beam. He laid on the ground coughing, trying to get the air back into his lungs. When he gathered his bearings, he saw that he was on the lawn of a mansion. A familiar mansion. Standing above Louis, hairy arms crossed, was the man who had intercepted him from his jump to Herschel.

Allan Baumgartner interlocked his fingers and pushed his palms out forward, cracking his knuckles. “Nice of you to visit, Lou. Long time no see. We need to have a very severe talk about

using time travel responsibly.”

“...Dad?”

Allan took a flask from his back pocket, opened it, finished it, and put it back. He ran a rough hand down his moustache, and then told his son the truth. “Some people used to call me The Magus.”

**Interlude:
Free Time**

Chapter 8: Everything Explained

Allan took Louis to the backyard. Louis had always thought it looked like a golf course minus the flags and carts. Right behind the house—taller than the house—was a tree.

“This is the universe,” Allan said, pointing up at it.

Louis leaned back, trying to see the top. “Metaphorically, or...”

“Just an analogy,” Allan nodded. “Good question though.”

“Thanks.”

“So,” Allan continued. He waved his hand, and the tree was gone. Louis turned around, and the house he had grown up in was gone too. But they were still in the same field. Louis felt a tinge of loss.

Allan pointed up, and Louis squinted into the bright blue sky. A white bird was flying. Bit by bit Allan pointed lower and lower, tracing something that the bird had dropped. When it hit the ground, Louis walked up to it, and had a look.

“Bird shit,” Allan said, walking up to stand beside his son. “And one seed in it.”

“What year is it?” Louis asked.

“1602,” Allan said. “So in a sense, we shouldn’t be here. But we’ll get to that.”

Allan waved his hand, and time sped ahead until the seed was a sapling.

“Continuing with the tree-universe metaphor,” Allan said, “that bird shit hitting the ground would be Genesis. Or the Big Bang. Whichever makes you happier.”

“Well you’re a time traveler,” Louis interrupted. “Which is it?”

“Sorry?”

“Genesis or Big Bang? I know you would’ve gone back to watch it.”

Allan made a little exploding gesture with his hands.

Louis nodded, unable to help himself from smirking.

“Don’t tell your mom.”

Louis zipped his lips.

“So after the start, the universe grew,” Allan said, gesturing to the tree. He reached out to a branch, and pointed to the leaf buds all along it. “Eventually, life. And to the tree, these leaves are basically everything. Without them nothing grows, and the universe is stagnant. Dead.”

Allan took a few steps back from the tree. Louis stepped back with him. Allan pointed into the nearby woods, where a deer was approaching. The deer wandered over to the tree, and bit some of the buds off of it. Louis cringed.

“Life is always coming and going,” Allan said. “There’s not much we can do about that. A vast, vast majority of the human race is just plain mortal: buds grow, buds fall. But sometimes, an event comes along that threatens all life at once, stopping the entire universe’s growth.” Allan smiled. “That’s where we come in.”

Allan ran up to the deer, shouting and chasing it away, back into the woods. The Magus was grinning as he came back to the tree. He examined the missing buds where the deer had eaten. “We can’t ever do a perfect job,” Allan said. “Even with unlimited time, you and I are still of finite influence. But still. Saved most of the branches, eh?”

Louis nodded.

“So the only trouble with this analogy is the scale of it,” Allan said. He put his hands on his hips, and looked up at all of the tree’s branches. “Really, we shouldn’t be standing *outside* of the tree right now. We’re in it as much as everyone else is. The only difference is that we, unlike everyone else, can move from branch to branch—teleportation—and up and down the trunk—time travel. Most people are more... restricted, than that. Buds stuck in place. But you and I are among the few that aren’t. Got it?”

Louis gave a thumbs-up.

Allan waved his hand, and he and Louis stood next to each other, watching the tree grow. Each time a threat would come, Allan would hop into time, thwart it, and return to watching with Louis. This kept on until Allan and Louis stood in the present once more, with the mansion behind them, and the tree all grown.

Louis looked around for the next danger, but there didn't appear to be one. "Why stop here?" he asked.

"Well, that's the thing. We can go a little farther if you want. One week, in fact. But in one week, a catastrophic event will happen, stopping the real universe's growth. The Unravelling. And we can't go farther than that until we've resolved it."

"So let's resolve it."

Allan waved his hand—this time dismissively—and lead Louis to the back porch. The two each laid back in a lawn chair, looking straight up at Yggdrasil—the universe tree.

"We've been working on this one for a long, long time. Biggest block the human race has ever faced, actually. Second biggest was The Black Death."

"Didn't seem that hard."

"There was more leading up to that than you know," Allan said. "Anyways. Last thing, then I'll let you go. A few times per century, someone is born with supernatural powers. We call ourselves The Named. In your adventure, you met The Astrologist, The Swordsman, The Giant, and The Dragon. I knew all of them personally. The Astrologist could see the entire tree with greater clarity than anyone else, though was still not able to move around it like you and I: it was him who gave us all our names. The Swordsman had a knack for mending the world like he would mend a tool: heating it with fire, and smashing into it with metal. The Giant... well, self-explanatory, I think. As for The Dragon..."

Louis felt like the day had just gotten hotter, or more humid. He shuffled in his lawn chair.

"I shouldn't speak ill of him," Allan said, closing his eyes. "He used to be a friend, before he was a monster. But eventually he was consumed by a powerful sense of greed, and you know the rest. So anyways. So far, me, you, and Hersch are the only Named to figure out time travel. And I really, *really* don't want you going back in time, ever again. Building the tree up this far has been a more delicate thing than you realize. Any questions?"

"Why specifically can't I go see Herschel?"

Allan breathed out pointedly. "You can. He just appeared in Berlin—"

Louis stood up, threw his lawn chair over the porch's railing, and started marching.

“Wait,” Allan dictated, straight into Louis' head.

Louis didn't wait for a goddamn thing. He popped a pill and jumped into a public washroom in Berlin, standing behind a man half-clad in black armor. Louis leapt onto Hersch's back, knocking both of them forward, smashing the door open, and falling onto the concrete outside. The park was beside a lake. Louis started dragging Herschel to it so that he could drown him. But then Hersh pulled some judo shit and flipped out of Louis' grip, standing in a crouch, bare-chested but with plate-mail pants. Hersh had drawn a sword. Behind the blade that shone in the sun, Louis could see the black-circle tattoo on Hersh's sternum.

“Calm down, Lou.” Hersh cocked his head to the side, indicating the parkgoers who were watching.

Louis turned to look at them. “I'm going to kill him,” Louis told them, pointing at his little brother. Turning back to Hersh, he reiterated, “I'm going to kill you.”

“Lou—”

“No! No, you don't get to be here—be *fine*—after I *mourned* you for the last year. You need to be dead right now.”

Hersh squinted, and lowered his blade a little. “How did you get here Lou?”

“I took a pill and showed up behind you,” Louis said, then sniffled and wiped his nose. He looked down at the back of his wrist. Bloody. He touched under his nose with his fingertips, which came back *very* bloody.

Hersh sheathed his sword and turned back to the washroom. He muttered curse words under his breath on the way there. Louis followed Hersh back inside. The world tipped around a little as they walked. In the washroom, Hersh pointed to the far wall and asked, “Can you not see these?”

Louis saw a wall.

“Jesus fucking Christ, you can't. Hold on.” Herschel grabbed Louis' head in both hands, and looked into his older brother's eyes. For a split second, Louis thought Hersh was going to kiss him. Instead, Hersh rearranged something inside Louis' head. When Louis looked back at the wall, he saw the wormhole.

“Holy...”

“Yeah. You made that. How many times have you jumped?”

“Probably like twenty.”

“Mother... okay. Okay.” Hersh reached out and closed the wormhole like he was shutting a pair of drapes. Louis approached the wall for a closer look, but the hole in spacetime was gone. Hersh pointed to where the wormhole had been. “Stop making those. Let me see those pills.”

Louis tossed Hersh the bottle.

Hersh swallowed a pill and flickered once in place, like Louis’ eyes had skipped a frame. “Stop taking these,” Hersh said. “They’re killing you.”

“Funny.”

“I mean it,” Hersh said, looking down at the bottle. While he read the name of the pills, he drew his gun and shot Louis in the head. Louis found himself lying in the snow in a barren tundra. A wormhole was in the air, about seven feet off the ground. Hersh fell through it after him, and landed in the snow beside Louis. Smiling, Hersh blew the smoke out of his pistol’s chamber. “Feel familiar?”

Louis felt his head where he’d been shot. His nose was still bleeding, but mostly, he was intact. He was also fucking freezing. A sweatshirt didn’t cut it in Antarctica. Louis wondered if what century it was even really mattered here.

“The world doesn’t know how to kill us Lou,” Hersh said, shrugging with a sword in one hand and a pistol in the other. “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong in the broken places. But those that will not break it kills.”

“It kills the very good,” Louis continued, speaking as a ghost in cadence with his dead brother. Together, they finished the saying: “and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”

Herschel nodded.

“So what are we?” Louis asked.

“We’re ‘none of these’, Louis,” Herschel said. He put an arm around his brother’s shoulder. “And the world can’t really kill us. We’re like comic book heroes in that way, or Greek gods. When

we die, we don't die. We just... get moved. And I'm sorry for moving without telling you. I was working on something important. But that was dickish."

"Yeah," Lou said, and sniffled. At the south pole of the planet, Louis and Herschel hugged.

#

Herschel and Louis sat at a campfire by a lake. They both tended the fire with sticks. "So basically, I saw the end of the world," Herschel continued. "And it was bad. And I had to go stop it, and my journey led me far, far, far away from where we grew up."

"So you never actually lost to brain cancer," Louis said.

"Technically," Herschel said, and tapped his head. "Still fighting. The headaches get worse each time I jump. I don't know if it's connected, but... hey, it's a reason to be more responsible, anyways."

Louis hugged his brother again. Herschel hugged back.

"Sorry for trying to kill you earlier."

"Nah. I was going to kill you too for opening the wormhole, before I recognized you. It's cool."

Herschel turned back to the fire. "So here's everything I know: in one week from today, the world comes unraveled. I remember the date because I've watched it happen a lot now. This unravelling has something to do with another Named. I haven't tracked them down yet, but they're a new kind of evil. One that doesn't just eat like The Dragon did. This one is a kind of evil that gets joy out of breaking things."

#

At the pavilion in the park, Sophie wished she had brought her phone, or a watch. She wasn't quite sure how a time traveler could take so long, unless something had gone wrong, which was possible. Likely, even. But Sophie waited nonetheless. She looked at the trees as the wind blew the bows. The sunlight shimmered off the leaves like mirrors, making Sophie squint. Hm. She dug

into her purse for a pair of shades.

The rest stop really was beautiful. They had picked a good place to stretch their legs. Across a small field from the pavilion was the rest stop's proper building, with restrooms and vending machines inside. In the parking lot beside the building, there was only one vehicle. A white Volkswagen. Louis'. For some undefined amount of time, Sophie had the whole place to herself. She reached under her shirt, and adjusted her bra. A part of it had been on wrong and it had been bothering her for the last half hour, but there had been more pressing things on her mind, obviously. Obviously. Sophie looked at the building once again. Through a glass door, she saw a child standing and looking back at her. She looked at the parking lot, which still only had Louis' car in it. When she looked back at the building, the child was gone. She stood and walked briskly a few strides, before remembering her purse on the pavilion's table. She turned and walked back to get it. When she turned back to the building again, one corner had sunk a little into the ground. Sophie blinked. She tried looking with and without the shades, but either way, she was very sure of what she'd seen.

No, she wasn't. She was sure of what she thought she'd seen, but she'd heard of LSD flashbacks, and she'd certainly given herself plenty of opportunity to earn one of them. Sophie walked to the building, semi-confident that the building was not going to eat and swallow her, and she pushed open the glass door, which was cool to the touch. Inside, the building was air-conditioned. It was not warm and humid like she imagined the stomach of a monster would be like. The child she'd come inside to check on was nowhere in sight. Sophie looked at the ground, which didn't appear to be slanted. She wished she'd brought one of those things construction men used: the thing with the bubble in the yellow liquid, that checked if things were level. A leveler. She checked both bathrooms and walked around the building, but she was very, very, very alone. There were trees between the rest stop and the road, preventing her from seeing if anyone was out driving. Sophie wondered if somehow, instead of Louis teleporting himself away from her, he had accidentally teleported her away from everyone. She wondered if she had Earth to herself. She

wondered if she did have Earth to herself, what she would do with it: how long she could exist, pretending that there was a point in living for herself alone. Sophie went back to the pavilion. She took a small notebook from her purse, and a pen, and started writing down stanzas about ennui.

Two lines in, she put the notebook back. She hadn't realized until this moment, alone, that her poems had never been for her.

*When you were gone, I needed to tell you something so goddamn
urgently
But now*

Sophie kept staring at the building. She kept willing it to sink into the ground farther, until, one corner at a time, it did. The earth fell back over the sunken roof, and over time, grass grew, until there was no longer a bare spot of dirt.

#

Allan stayed in the lawn chair, watching the tree. It shuddered once, and then twice, and then the hundred-foot thing fell over, away from the house. Gnarled black roots had been snapped and unearthed, and they stood in the air now, horrifically out of place. Allan had seen the tree after it had fallen, but this was his first time watching the thing tip over for himself. He wasn't sure why. It was, after all, among the earlier signs of things falling apart.

#

Sophie Gallo sat in the shade at a rest stop that had a parking lot, a pavilion, a footpath by a river, and no real buildings to speak of. Where one had been, there was a dog now, and its brother: Louis and Herschel Baumgartner stood in the center of a negative space. Both brothers wore blue jeans. Louis had his hands buried in his black sweatshirt's pockets. Cleanshaven, short hair. Herschel had a dark-brown fro that blew in the wind, and a lengthy beard that came halfway down his grey tank top. He wore a scabbard on one side and a holster on the other. He was more

ragged than Sophie had imagined. In her head, she'd pictured Hersh as an anal-retentive tightass. Maybe he used to be.

She heard them talking as they approached.

"...And anyways, that's why your powers are dangerous to use too often. Like dad would say it, 'Jumping from branch to branch weakens the bows, and makes the tree weaker,' or something."

Louis laughed. "Sounds pretty right."

"Plus we have kind of a rule of thumb: the more naturally the world is allowed to unfold, the more structural integrity it has. Aside from some outliers, the world's honestly pretty good at doing what it does. We just worry about those odd events."

Louis nodded.

The two brothers finished walking to the pavilion.

"I thought you were the younger brother," Sophie said to Herschel.

"Used to be," Herschel nodded. "Technically I'm older now."

Louis looked over at Herschel. "Huh."

Herschel patted Louis on the back with his sword hand. "Sneaks up on you, doesn't it?"

#

As they drove away from the rest stop, Herschel sat in the back seat. He had volunteered to take it, saying the nice couple should have the front. He had really taken the back seat so that he could wince and not be noticed. In the front-left corner of his brain, ever since the last jump to the pavilion, Herschel had started feeling a pinching, twisting pain. A cerebral toothache. He shuddered, and around him, the hills shuddered too.

Chapter 9:

A New Kind of Evil

McCaskill crept through the woods in a black car, over a very well-paved road. His eyes had been glazed over for quite some time; his brain, autopiloted. He might have been on a plane at some point. He wasn't sure whose car he was driving. These kinds of things happened to him with some regularity. The first time was when he'd gone out hunting with a friend as a teenager. He didn't remember anything until the deer had been killed. He only remembered it by proxy, through what his friend had told him. "It was like you could see the buck all the way across the forest, man: you just went straight to it. I didn't even see the damn thing until you shot it. It was righteous."

In some circles, Michael McCaskill was known as The Tracker. Over the years, he'd found tracking people to be much more lucrative game than woodland animals.

He parked the car at the forest line of a mansion's lawn, got out of his vehicle, and stalked around the perimeter at the edge of the woods. When he came to the backyard, he found a fallen tree. It called out to him. He went towards it, over the yard, looking up at the windows to see if he was being seen. He didn't believe he was, and anyways, he had yet to spot any cameras on the property.

He looked at the black, uprooted tendrils of the great tree. It put a pit in his stomach. Something about the scale: a giant fallen, and now, McCaskill standing beside its body. But what had befallen the giant? McCaskill had a look around. He spotted it in seconds: up on the porch, contrasted on the white lawn chair: blood. Blood smeared around viciously, a clear sign of a struggle. In drops and smudges on the ground, the blood continued into the building which, in this room at least, had been trashed. Broken things laid everywhere. McCaskill turned around and around, tracing the combatants through the struggle, seeing them like beings made of crystals in his mind's eye. He followed the fight from the kitchen to the living room and up the stairs to the master bedroom where, at the center of a large floor, a man lay dead. The

man had been brutalized: deep cuts through hairy arms, broken bones under a flannel shirt, burns blistering calloused hands, and the killing blow: a skull that had been shattered on every side. McCaskill hovered over the corpse, investigating all of this. He glanced around the room and deemed that this man had been the mansion's owner.

McCaskill could not, in spite of decades of tracking, identify what weapon had been used in this murder. For the cuts against the man's body, it had been a blade. But for a skull crushed like this, McCaskill had never even heard of such a tool.

In another room, McCaskill heard a crash. He pulled his go-bag off of his back, and from it drew his pistol Fafnir, as well as a spare clip which he placed in his back pocket. He crouched low as he walked, soundless, to the edge of the master bedroom's open door. Outside, there was more crashing. The seconds were punctuated with the sound of shattering glass. McCaskill held his breath until his eyes went blurry. Then, The Tracker crept around the corner, out of the master bedroom and into the hall, towards the sound of the crashes. They came from behind a closed door at the end of the hall. The Tracker sprinted to the door, clearing the ground as fast as a bounding tiger, matching his footsteps to the sound of the crashes—hiding his sound under the louder sounds.

The Tracker pressed an ear against the door. Now on the other side, there was metal clanging against wood, and the flutter of stacks of paper falling to the ground. The Tracker heard distraught grunts with every clatter. He chambered a round and pushed open the door.

On the other side was a library in ruins: The Tracker watched a tall man with a flaming sword swing at the last of the standing bookshelves, grunting as the metal splintered the wood. The books fell to the ground ablaze.

The Tracker looked keenly at the man. The man was dressed in red robes, and wore a white mask. The mask had no human features: no mouth, no nose, and only two tiny holes for eyes. Painted on the mask, in place of a face, was a single, bold character:

大

[Big.]

The Tracker watched the tall man huff once more, and then place the sword on his back, still aflame. The tall man looked over his destruction, turning his head as he scanned. The Tracker ducked out of the room.

He went back to the master bedroom and began riffling through the dead man's possessions, keeping an ear out for approaching mystics. The dead man's burns—and to an extent, the crushed skull—seemed much easier to explain, suddenly. The Tracker added these types of wounds to his catalogue. Through papers found on the master bedroom's desk, The Tracker identified the dead man as Allan Baumgartner—no doubt the father of Louis.

The Tracker went looking for Louis' room. He found it on the third floor. When he entered, he closed the door behind himself. Inside, the walls were lined with posters. Posters of animals, posters of bands, posters of art. Posters of anything at all that looked trippy. A guitar sat on a stand in one corner of the room. The strings hadn't been changed in years: the tracker could, in fact, smell them when he had entered the room, though his senses were keener than most. There was a king bed, unmade. A computer with a nice monitor. A window through which The Tracker could see a vast expanse of forest, and skyscrapers in the distance. The Tracker found it intriguing that this room belonged to a participant in Dr. Orna's drug trial. PGP's volunteers very rarely came from money.

Through the closed bedroom door, The Tracker heard the tall man with the flaming sword walking up the stairs. Big Thuds. The Tracker hurried. He was extraordinarily interested in the computer, but there would be no time to boot it. He went to Louis' nightstand. On it was a framed photograph of Louis with another man. The Tracker could tell, in his expertise, that the other man was dying. The other man looked like Louis and Allan, but was

more or less the same age as Louis. A brother, then.

The tall man made it to the top of the stairs.

The Tracker left through the window, scaled down the mansion, and sprinted for his vehicle. He waited nearby in the woods, watching the mansion, and listening to the sounds of a single man gutting the place.

The tall man, late into the evening, stepped outside. He had finished his work. The Tracker watched, unblinking, as the tall man strode through the lawn's tall grass. He watched the tall man, without breaking stride, shrink into the ground, and then emerge into the sky as a hawk.

The Tracker followed. Louis Baumgartner could wait.

—&—

Louis whispered fire onto his fingertip, and held it up for Herschel to see.

“Man,” Herschel said from the back seat. He put his own hand over the flame to make sure that it wasn't a trick. But it was hot: Louis could definitely breathe fire. “Where'd you learn that one?”

“Learned it by watching The Swordsman,” Louis said. “Fire spreads, I guess.”

“Mm,” Herschel said. He was still furious with The Swordsman for slaughtering his unit back in Port Town. He wasn't entirely happy with Louis, either, but with Louis he could make an exception. Louis was new to this. And anyways, he was family. But The Swordsman was learned. The muscular dope knew better.

Herschel did find it interesting how he hadn't recognized Louis at first. He had a hard time keeping track of things, from one time-period to another, but forgetting the face of his own brother did seem a step further. The more Herschel ran this over in his mind, the worse his headache got. He shifted gears to something else.

“Can we stop to eat anytime soon? I haven't had twenty-first century food in a long, long time.”

Louis agreed to this enthusiastically. They got off at the next exit. The town they ended up in was smallish, and had a Japanese restaurant that the three could agree on. Herschel, Louis, and Sophie got out of the car and walked inside. Herschel brought his sword and pistol into the building, as well as his gauntlet. He had a presence that often made people not question why he was armed.

Once seated, Herschel looked over the menu carefully. Finding vegetarian options was harder when the menu was in a language that he didn't speak. Mostly he looked at the foods that had pictures. When the waiter came by, Herschel did his best. "Vegetable tempura und miso soup, bitte."

Louis The Dragon Slayer held up his menu and pointed, saying the wrong conjugation of "I'd like this, please," in half-German.

Sophie, who Herschel hadn't gotten to know terribly well, ordered the shrimp teriyaki in what appeared to be good Japanese. The waiter spoke a bit with her before he returned to the kitchen.

"Know many languages?" Herschel asked her.

"A few," Sophie said. Then she looked down at the salt shaker on the table that she'd been fiddling with, and shrugged. "I used to be pretty educated. You?"

"Nein," Herschel said. "I mostly say 'yes', 'no', 'this', and 'I'm sorry about that ma'am.' Actually, I can say that last one in fifteen languages."

"Must come in handy."

"Would've come in more handy if it was *sixteen* languages," Herschel admitted, and shrugged as well. "Fucking Polish."

Sophie snickered. "Przepraszam bardzo. I'm very sorry."

"Danke."

"Bitte."

The waiter returned with their drinks. When he left, Herschel excused himself to use the restroom.

Sophie, alone at the table with Louis, sighed. She glanced around. There was an older couple seated across the restaurant, obscured by hanging decorations with foreign symbols on them. The couple ate from the same dish. Sophie leaned to her left, right up close to Louis, and whispered in his ear.

"Teach me how to breathe fire."

Louis blinked. “I would,” he whispered back, and Sophie sank. “I’ll *try*,” Louis clarified. “I just don’t know if it works like that.”

“Not knowing ‘how it works’ doesn’t sound like it’s stopped you before.”

Louis fist-bumped Sophie, and then kissed her on the side of the mouth. Sophie pretended that the kiss had left a charge on her lips, like a draconic STD. But it was very unlikely indeed that it worked *that* way, she hoped. She decided that when the waiter came back, she would ask for a drink menu. Something hard. Something that would burn.

#

In the bathroom, Herschel stood hunched over the sink in front of the mirror. He glared up at his forehead, trying to stare a hole into his brain. His knuckles as he grabbed at the porcelain were a ghostly-white.

#

Sophie looked once again at the older couple. She hardly considered it staring. The couple was entirely oblivious to her: they lived in a world made up of the other’s eyes and expressions. Sophie was a non-interventionist observer, watching through a jungle of faux-lanterns and red ribbon.

Black characters were printed on the ribbons between her and the couple. She scanned over them, looking for characters that she knew the meaning of. It took her a long time to realize that all of them were in Korean, not Japanese. Close-ish, but off. Through the ribbons, she watched the same waiter who had taken her order check up on the couple.

#

There was a bar at the restaurant, which Louis, Sophie, and Herschel took up residency in after dinner. Louis spent a long time running time-paradox problems by Herschel. “Why did/didn’t I

have a beard at X time?" was raised ad nauseum. To most questions of details, Herschel answered Louis' question with another question: "What hallucinogens were you on?"

Eventually Louis shrugged, and accepted that 'The Chemist' might not have been given to him by mistake.

"What's *your* title, anyways?" Louis asked his brother.

"Oh," Herschel said. He took a long drink. "The Alchemist."

"Fuck off."

Louis and Herschel clinked glasses.

"What are you really man?"

"I'm The Soldier," Herschel said, and looked deep down into his glass. "Hoo-ah."

Louis and Herschel clinked glasses one more time.

"Sometimes I wonder," Hersh said into his drink. He swirled around what was left at the bottom. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm the reincarnation of every soldier in every war. Both sides."

Lou patted Hersh on the shoulder, took his brother's drink, and placed it far away from both of them.

—&—

The Tracker sprinted through the woods, breathing heavily. He was not The Runner—if there ever was a Runner, then McCaskill envied him greatly. But as it was, McCaskill would not be able to follow the hawk forever. It was a wonder he had kept track of it for as long as he had. He dashed between trees with reckless abandon, and looked ahead for the next clearing. It was coming up soon. Within sight. McCaskill dropped his pack, snatching his pistol from it as it fell.

He looked up at the hawk in the sky as he broke into the clearing. Once in the grass he dove prone, and propped his elbows on the ground to steady his sights. He took aim at the sky and squeezed off two rounds.

The bird began to fall, spiraling downwards. McCaskill ran to where it was to land.

There in the woods sat a man in red robes against a fallen tree,

bleeding from the right bicep. The tall man was still masked. In his left hand he still gripped his flaming sword, though it was resting against the ground. McCaskill smelled smoke. Foliage nearby the sword was already catching.

McCaskill stood at a distance from the tall man, pointing his pistol with command in his stance. "Where did you come from?" McCaskill shouted.

The tall man stood up. At his feet, the forest floor was on fire. He didn't seem to mind.

"Come closer and I'll shoot again."

The tall man took a step, and McCaskill pulled the trigger. A bullet went through the tall man's abdomen.

The tall man, though, was even taller than McCaskill had realized. And in that one step, the tall man had cleared the distance between them. An eye for an eye: a gut wound for a gut wound. McCaskill was impaled against an oak. Pinned like a butterfly on a display board. The tall man reached into his robes and retrieved a knife.

In the woods where no one could hear, the tall man took McCaskill apart.

When finished, the tall man removed his sword from the tree, and returned it to his scabbard. He picked up McCaskill's firearm, and found a place for that too. Finally, he picked up the totem he had created from The Tracker.

The Tracker's totem was a long cylinder, made of blue wood. Glowing white runes all around. When the tall man held it, he saw a deer eating grass over the next hill; he saw a network of birds calling out to each other, and as he dialed in, he also saw a much vaster network of insects; he saw McCaskill's pack across the clearing, sitting beside a fallen, rotting tree. The tall man liked this new power. He liked it very, very much.

He thought about the brothers. Across the world, he could already see them in his mind's eye, barreling down a German highway. His eyes glazed over as he set out for them. Along the way, to speed up his journey, he pulled from his robe the totem that he had made out of The Shapeshifter, and transformed into an eagle, holding one totem in each set of talons.

Chapter 10: Used to be Friends

In Egypt, during the construction of the pyramids, a painter named Daru stole through the night. During the day, he had done work with the other painters on the great pyramid's many limestone walls, crafting scene upon scene of pharaoh's upcoming journey through the afterlife. He had laughed and drank with the other painters, and copied down every detail he was told to put upon the limestone. But Daru the painter was not contented to merely copy the instructions of others, and so at the end of the working day, he had stashed his paints in a secluded chamber with the intention of returning that night.

That night, when he arrived at the dark mouth of the tomb, it reminded him of the mouth of Ammit—the devourer of the dead. Daru had stashed an oil lamp with his paints inside the tomb, but had not brought such a lamp with himself, for fear of giving himself away with its light. It was no matter. He had memorized the halls meticulously.

He held a hand against a wall, and walked into the tomb with his eyes closed. He fancied that under his fingertips, he could feel his paintings of pharaoh and the other gods. In the paintings, pharaoh navigated his way through the afterlife, using his book of the dead—an elaborate scroll—as a map from challenge to challenge, with the ultimate destination being the perfect afterlife: a fertile green field where pharaoh would spend eternity. Daru was saving for his own book of the dead. It was why he took the job painting pharaoh's tomb. When he had saved enough, he would purchase his precious scroll, and return to farming, where in his free time he could paint anything he wished. He would never again be asked to paint the same man in the same flat style, over and over.

Deep within the pyramid, Daru arrived at his paints and his lamp. He lit the lamp, illuminating quite a large room. It was intended for the pharaoh's eldest son. So far, it was blank. Unwatched, Daru began to paint, mixing greens and whites, reds

and blues. Blue especially was an expensive color: Daru had never been able to afford any blue powders himself, but when painting for the pharaoh's tomb, he had been given a breathtaking supply of it, and told to use as much as he could in honor of pharaoh. Daru did indeed use the blues as he worked at night, but he was a skilled painter, and used no more than he needed to: he was honoring the pharaoh's son in another way. Not with a display of riches, but with an offering of art. Upon the wall of the pharaoh's son's tomb, Daru painted in perfect detail the pharaoh's son's face. No feature was idealized. The painting was masterfully shaded, with the pharaoh's son lit by a magnificent—if unseen—sun overhead. The painting took up the entire wall, and by the time Daru had finished, it was morning. Daru stealthily left the chamber, and met with the other painters outside of the pyramid, who had just arrived for their day's work. Daru painted beside them that day, deathly tired, but fed with satisfaction. He might never again in his life get the chance to use paints so fine, or a smooth canvas so large.

Then, there was a commotion which began with a worker screaming—the sound echoed all through the stone walls. The foreman was alerted, and soon, guards were sent to gather all of the painters and bring them to the pharaoh's son's tomb. The foreman stood between them and the painted wall, trembling, and red in the face.

“Which of you was it?” the foreman asked, pointing.

Daru and the other painters remained still.

“Tell me now who committed this sacrilege, or—”

“*Sacrilege?*” Daru asked. He was brought forward, and the other painters scurried back.

“You will wash every trace of this *monstrosity* from the wall,” the foreman said. “Use a chisel if you must. Once the wall has been cleared, you will personally repaint it, *as it should have been*. Do you think this is what the pharaoh's son wishes to look like for all eternity? All of your possessions will be sold to make up for the cost of these paints. If you commit a crime even a thousandth as horrendous as this ever again, you will be killed.”

Daru resisted, but was powerless to argue. His mind boiled from the moment he touched his masterpiece with a wet cloth, and

watched streaks of tan, blue, and green stream down to the limestone floor. It took him all day to make the wall spotless. That night he considered leaving the job, but a guard had been placed in the painter's hut. None of the artists were to be trusted anymore. Dangerous folks. Highly disrespectful.

The next day, Daru began the meticulous process of painting hieroglyphs and murals. It was painfully slow work. Were it a work of passion, he could speed through it in a single heartbeat. But it was a work of tedium, to be very sure. Where his perfect painting of the pharaoh's son had taken a night, he found that this idealized lie of the pharaoh's son took many, many weeks. A guard was stationed over his shoulder every day.

By the time Daru finished, he had saved enough for his book of the dead. He purchased it on his way back to the farmlands. He painted there, in his free time, but he spent his nights getting only restless sleep, thinking of his legacy in this world. Flat lies, painted on a wall that would last forever.

Daru began saving once again. It was slow work, as farmhands made far, far less than royal tomb painters. But Daru saved nonetheless, for years and years, until he had amassed a collection of greens and whites, reds and blues.

Daru returned to the valley of the kings. He stole across the desert carrying a satchel of paints. He entered the mouth of the tomb, and was swallowed by darkness. He had no promise of a lantern this time, and that didn't matter in the slightest. He had seen his route every night in his sleep for the last year. He had seen his canvas. He had seen what he would paint. All of this was ingrained in him as he traversed the tomb, not even touching a wall along the way, stepping perfectly through the halls until he arrived in the tomb of the pharaoh's son.

He opened his satchel to paint. No sooner than he had started did a light flicker on behind him. He wheeled around to see what was the source. It was the foreman, and two guards.

One of the guards stepped forward with a rope. He tied Daru's arms behind his back.

"I was told to expect you again," the foreman said. The foreman looked somewhat older than when Daru had last seen him. Only by a matter of degrees, but it was these types of degrees

that a painter such as Daru would be keen to notice.

“Let me tell you why I believe this to be a great honor to the pharaoh’s son,” Daru asked. “It is not an act of sacrilege. I can promise that that is the furthest thing from my intent.”

The foreman shrugged. Behind him, the other guard had started laying bricks in the hall that lead out of the chamber. “You can paint anything your heart desires,” the foreman said. Daru’s arms had been secured behind his back, and the guard was at work on Daru’s legs. “This tomb is now yours.”

Daru’s eye’s deepened. He’d aged ten years just hearing that. “But the pharaoh’s son—”

The foreman raised a hand, cutting Daru off. “Word has changed: The Prince intends to live forever now. He’s asked us to seal his tomb empty.”

The scraping of the clay bricks being laid in the hall was all too crisp in Daru’s ears. The painter’s arms and legs were bound together in rope, a damningly crude mummification. He tried to lash out, but only fell to the ground in his restraints. In minutes, the guards and the foreman had left, having sealed Daru in The Prince’s tomb.

Daru wept. He had never feared death: death was only another stage of life, after all. What Daru feared, more than being ridiculed for his art, more than being chastised over a misunderstanding, more than losing his hands or his heart, what Daru feared far more than anything else, was being lost.

Had the pharaoh’s son been sealed in the same tomb, the pharaoh’s son would be fine: he had every direction painted for him, every incantation prepared, every route through the afterlife plotted on his walls. Daru had none of this. He’d only had his one book of the dead—one map—and now he had nothing at all. He had left it behind at the farmlands. He had not expected to die here. Daru screamed at the wall where the hallway used to be, but nobody came for him. He attacked the bricks, but the mortar had hardened.

After time had passed, Daru felt his stomach gurgling. He tried to sleep. By the time he gave up on sleep, he wasn’t sure whether he had taken a nap or had not slept at all. Time was very hard to tell in the tomb.

He toyed with his paints. They were all he had now. He had a rope as well, but nowhere to hang himself from, so there was little good the rope did. Not that he would hang himself anyways. He would eat the rope to stay full and alive in the tomb rather than hang himself and get lost in the next world. It was the smallest of comforts, but at least Daru did know where the tomb was. He was not lost in here yet, thank the gods.

Daru painted. He could not see with his eyes, but his mind's eye, at least, was crisp. He painted a lush landscape, where fruits and vegetables overflowed from the ground, and he painted himself there. He painted himself with claws to dig the earth and get at the vegetables; he painted himself with horns that could ram down any limestone wall in front of him; he painted himself whispering fire that would light his path, and it was a fire he would always have in his chest, not one that he could forget so easily. Every detail of his painting was utterly, minutely, meticulously, perfect. He felt a breeze, and opened his eyes. He was in the field he had painted. He stood there with claws at the ends of his fingers, and horns above his head. He whispered, and in front of him was a fire that lit his way.

The Dragon ate of the vegetables in the earth, and then started walking. He was giddy to meet with The Prince as an equal.

#

After the construction of the pyramids, a council was held in a tavern. The Magus, whose name was Ghest then, and The Dragon, who sometimes still went by Daru, sat at the bar. They spoke under the other lively conversations.

"He isn't immortal," Ghest eventually said, and drank.

Daru cocked his head. "Positive?" he asked. He had held council with The Prince many times, and had seen that The Prince did indeed look idealized, as if he had walked straight off of the pyramid walls. If anyone *looked* immortal, it was the new pharaoh.

Ghest, who was still drinking, nodded his head, bobbing his beer stein in tandem. When he finished his drink, he set the stein down on the bar between them. "He doesn't age," Ghest

conceded. "He could live a thousand years and look the same as he does today, I'm sure. But that is not the same thing as immortality. If you stabbed him, he would die."

The Dragon felt on pins and needles. "How do you know?" he asked.

"We had dinner last night," Ghest said. "In his palace. Very fancy fare, as we discussed my latest research. While cutting his steak, he nicked his index finger. There was a very small cut. He covered the bleeding quickly, sent for gloves discretely, and kept his hand under the table until those gloves arrived. But an immortal does not bleed."

"Hm," Daru nodded, and drank.

Daru, The Dragon, had lusted over The Prince's immortality. The entire nation had. But if what The Magus said was true, then perhaps there was less to it than he had previously believed. Perhaps immortality was something that could be imitated, or taken. In the corner of the tavern, The Dragon and The Magus continued their dialogue in less grave matters.

#

The Dragon stood at a canvas in the palace library, amid rows and rows of scrolls. He painted a room with a woman in it. The woman was beautiful, though not impossible: a believable human being. The Dragon would make her his wife if she accepted, and of course, if he could make her real. He'd tried painting all manner of things into existence since his success in escaping the tomb, but nothing came to him. He'd had the tomb re-opened, and found every wall in it blank. It was curious, though ultimately unuseful.

Ghest was in the library as well, sitting at a table, examining a scroll and muttering to himself. Daru listened to Ghest's absent mutterings. It sounded like Ghest was reading from a rather violent text.

"Any thoughts?" Daru interrupted, stepping back from his canvas.

Ghest turned in his chair and looked. Then he stood up, and looked much closer. "She's impressive," Ghest said. "Very impressive. But she isn't real."

The Dragon huffed, and incinerated the painting in a billow of fire. The Magus went back to his reading while The Dragon set up another canvas.

The Dragon didn't like to consider that perhaps, he had only really had one magical act of painting at his disposal. It worried him to think that the painting in the tomb would be his only work that was inspired enough to alter reality. So he thought deeply about the other factors that might have been at play. Hunger? No, not hunger. The Dragon had been hungry since then, postponing food in days-long painting binges. Hunger had no weight. Fear? The Dragon was always afraid.

The Dragon closed his eyes, and tried to pull *very* deep from his memory. And in a few moments of contemplation, something occurred to him. He left his eyes closed. He took a nearby cloth, wet with paints, and tied it over his eyelids. Blindfolded, The Dragon painted a loaf of bread. Because he could not cheat with his vision, he was forced to keep every detail crystal clear, all at once, in his mind. It was by this way that when he finished the bread, it fell off the canvas and into his hands. He also found himself suddenly famished, and so he ate.

Over weeks spent in practice and in discussion with The Magus, The Dragon learned that the paint, while a crucial stepping-stone, ultimately had nothing to do with his abilities. If he envisioned it in perfect, complete detail, so it became—but at a cost. When he brought a loaf of bread into existence, the equivalence of a loaf of bread was removed from himself. When he had first given himself horns and claws, he had indeed found his muscles atrophied afterwards, and had spent quite a while regaining his strength. If he had succeeded in bringing the beautiful woman into existence, it would have killed him: he did not have in himself enough energy for a second person. Safely, he could only create something that took as much energy as a meal. Anything larger had longer-lasting effects.

One day while painting in the library—for leisure, as Daru did still enjoy his painting—he overheard The Magus discussing a new type of magic with one of his pupils. More notably, The Dragon heard The Magus discouraging it.

“I'm very impressed that you've worked this much of it out,”

The Magus said, “but you must work no further. There is only one destination it can lead to.”

The pupil voiced his agreement, and turned to leave, apologizing, and saying he would destroy all records of his discovery.

“Do not apologize for figuring it out,” The Magus said as the pupil left. “I’m proud of you for that much. But this is knowledge you must take extreme care with.”

Later that day Daru raised the subject with Ghest. Ghest looked to Daru with suspicion, but as friends, The Magus did reveal the nature of the pupil’s discovery to The Dragon.

“When you wish to use energy in casting magic,” The Magus explained, “you take it from within yourself. You got that energy in the first place by natural means: standing in the sunlight, or eating plants or beasts. What my pupil—and worryingly, many pupils before him—have discovered, is a means of vampirism: spiritual theft. Stealing energy from another thing by unnatural means. Taking more than you should be able to at a time. There are too many dangers for it to be pursued any further.”

“Dangers such as what?” The dragon prodded.

The Magus stared The Dragon dead in the eyes. “You would be taking things that are not yours. You would not be the only one taking. You would take too much into yourself at once and it would kill you.”

“I would dream of none of these things,” The Dragon said, but already, he was planning to murder The Prince.

#

In a forest in the heart of Europe, far from most of the population. The Dragon sapped energy straight from a deer, lost control of it, and burned a nearby tree to a crisp in seconds. The Horseman—a more recent addition to The Named—observed from a distance, so-far unspotted. From atop her shire steed, The Horseman watched The Dragon eat. She had followed a trail of curiosities to this spot: a tall column of ice on a hot summer day; a limestone statue of a woman, discarded in the woods; and most damningly, the lifeless body of that same woman, lying nearby.

The Dragon, while examining the incinerated tree, spotted The Horseman. The Horseman fidgeted with her reins, and decided to spur her mount forward. She dismounted upon reaching The Dragon, and the two stood face to face.

The Dragon sighed. "I've been trying, Horseman. I can make beautiful, *beautiful* things now—you saw the statue, I'm sure. But if I try to make something living..."

The Horseman recalled the lifeless woman.

"You made her yourself?" The Horseman asked.

"Yes."

"How?"

Silenced lingered in the air for seconds too long. The Horseman leapt onto her steed and snapped her reigns, speeding through the forest to alert The Magus. She was not fast enough: The Dragon wrenched energy from nearby trees and hurled a ball of fire at her, killing her upon her mount. Daru went to see just what he could do with the energy of another Named at his disposal.

#

When The Dragon returned to the palace library to speak with The Magus, he was quite larger than he had been before. In fact, he had reimagined himself twice as large since consuming The Horseman: exactly large enough to contain the energy of two people within himself. It was a crude solution, and one which Daru hoped to find an alternative to, as there was little elegance—little beauty—in equations so simple as $2 = 1 + 1$.

The Magus was just leaving the library for the day when he saw The Dragon approaching at the other end of the courtyard. Men and women cleared the area when they saw the creature. The Magus saw the mana-greedy tentacles emanating out of The Dragon's back, reaching out and caressing anybody who came close.

Ghest and Daru met at the center of the courtyard, which was cobbled in limestone. At one end, far behind Ghest, was the library. Some distance in all other directions were palace walls, atop which, The Prince had quite recently stationed marksmen—

the newest addition to his forces.

“Daru,” The Magus said, shaking his head. “Justify this.”

The Dragon smiled at The Magus, and his teeth were white skewers.

“Oh,” The Magus said, and found his footing. “I see.”

The Dragon leapt at The Magus with gnashing teeth, and The Magus leapt forward as well, conjuring a spear of fire in midair. The Magus thrust the spear into The Dragon’s stomach as The Dragon bit down on The Magus’ shoulder, tearing off a piece of neck. The Magus stepped back—blood poured down from his wound.

The Magus swore, then, that this monster of greed would be slain. Without opening his mouth to speak, The Magus forced one cruel thought into the monster’s head: **“You will die for this.”**

The Dragon, when faced with this statement of mortality, envisioned the pure, empty void of death—he imagined it in perfect detail. And so, it was that which he became.

The Dragon grew to be gigantic, sapping the life from the marksmen upon the palace walls. He stood upon four strong legs, and a massive tail swept out behind him; he had membranous wings the length of his back; his talons and teeth were enormous and deathly sharpened; he had taken the shape of a beast.

The Black Death had begun.

#

Many campaigns to slay The Dragon were launched. In the course of these campaigns, only one true hero emerged: The Swordsman. The Swordsman had spoken with The Magus, and gained knowledge of magic and The Dragon. The Swordsman had the help of The Chemist, who supplied him the killing sword. When The Swordsman slayed The Dragon, The Black Death was finally put to an end.

But The Dragon, of course, was crafty, and feared death far too much to allow it to come by being stabbed.

Otto approached Louis' old apartment. He'd received a text from Louis, offering all of the hallucinogens in the man's collection. Otto worried greatly for Louis at that, but free acid *was* free acid. Otto wasn't about to pass that one up. As promised, the front door was unlocked.

When Otto saw the inside of the apartment, he breathed out heavily through pursed lips. There was a *lot* of blood. Bloody footprints on the carpet, and smears on the couch. It looked like a full-on medieval battle had taken place in the kitchen. Otto pushed forward to Louis' bedroom, careful not to step on any blood. He had a strong hunch that all of the blood was Louis'.

Otto reached under Louis' bed and retrieved the wooden drug box. He opened the top, had a look inside, nodded, and closed it shut. He held it in both hands while he walked out. On his way by the couch in the living room, Otto stumbled through a wormhole. He was very suddenly *not* in Berlin.

Otto was in complete darkness. His lighter light failed to touch any corner of the room he was in. The ground was frigid stone. Otto stepped slowly along the ground, until, as if drawn to it, he arrived at the artifact in the center of the chamber: The Sword in the Stone. It stood tall, splattered with ancient blood, and thrust through a human skull. Massive fissures in the ground emanated from the blade. The fissures were deep: in the hundreds of years that they had been growing since Louis created them, they had very nearly reached the other side of the Earth. But Otto, being unaware of this, grabbed the sword by the handle. The Dragon's spirit boomed off of the blade and into Otto's soul, which corroded into nothing in an instant. The Dragon, once more, had a body. And again, as always, he was starving.

The Black Death began once more.

#

Sophie, in the passenger seat of the car, thought she was the only one in the vehicle to notice the mountain collapse in the distance. But Herschel felt the earth rattle apart, and Louis, of

course, felt the dark presence of an old, old enemy.

The earth shook like a dog shaking water off of its back violently, like it was a dog that was big and abused and *hated* being wet. A gust of wind came and ripped trees out of the ground and they went away so fast that Sophie didn't know where they ended up, but just that all around her were these dark brown craters in the earth. Was she screaming? She had to be. She saw Louis screaming, and so she thought she must have been screaming too. But she wasn't *aware* of herself. She was aware of the planet she'd loved getting threads ripped out of it like it had been gouged by a nail. Fissures opened. The road ahead of them fell in, as did large tracts of forest, and buildings, and surely people. Surely many, many people fell into the ground.

Louis, Sophie, and Herschel were out of the car and gathered together on the side of the road, lying prone on their chests, arms covering their heads, waiting for the earthquake to stop.

The earthquake might have taken an hour. It might have taken a lot, lot longer.

When it was over, Herschel looked at Louis and Sophie gravely.

And then something in Herschel's brain blinked off, and he was out.

Part 2:
The Black

Chapter 11: Like Shrapnel

Lou knelt in the grass before his brother. Sophie stood nearby, surveying the earth.

Seeing his brother's dead body in person gave Lou a morbid sense of conclusion. He had imagined the sight often. In his head, quite vividly, he had seen something like this before. It hadn't been *real* before. Even this though, real and definite and tangible as it was, felt almost as insubstantial. Maybe *less* substantial than his old imagination. He already knew he could undo this.

He stood up. He took the LithoXXXXXocaine out of his pocket, and looked at Sophie, asking.

Her arms were crossed tight over her stomach. She shook her head.

"Come back soon," she told him.

And Louis nodded, and took a pill out of the bottle. As he brought it to his mouth, there was a blur, and the pills slipped out of his hands. Louis jumped. Flying away from him was an eagle, clutching two sticks and a bottle of LithoXXXXXocaine. It flew over the fissure that had opened in the road ahead of them, then swooped back, and landed on the fissure's edge. Louis took a few steps towards the bird.

But then the eagle changed. It stretched and grew and soon, there was a tall man in red robes standing at the edge of the fissure, holding the same things the eagle had been, with a flaming sword strapped to his back.

Louis hoped really hard that the tall man was on his side.

The tall man stowed the pills in his robes, and the sticks as well. Then he drew his blade, held it in both hands, and squared off against Louis.

Louis somewhat regretted leaving his own enchanted sword in a mountain.

The tall man charged Louis, and struck a blow through the chest, pinning Louis down against the earth. Louis was stunned, left gaping up at the sky. He heard Sophie yelling at the tall man. Then he saw the tall man loom overheard, grab the sword, and

twist it. Louis died immediately, and ended up somewhere else.

He stood in a city park at night. A concrete field, with a fountain at the center, currently turned off. Louis touched his face and chest, making sure he wasn't dead for real. Figuring he would feel different if he was. It was cold in this place. He could see his own breath.

The world didn't look broken here. It was likely, then, that Louis had jumped back in time again.

Herschel had said that jumping was accomplished by killing one's self. But Louis was *fairly* sure he'd jumped in other ways before. And he was getting extremely burned out on dying.

Suddenly, there was a clang: metal boots on concrete as the tall man exited Louis' wormhole and stepped into the square too. Louis cursed himself for forgetting about those.

Louis ran away. The tall man clanged after him, and Louis could hear without looking back that the tall man was extremely close behind. A searing line was drawn across Louis' back as the tall man slashed. Louis breathed heavy, looked behind himself, looked to where the wormhole was. He was looping back to it. That was the plan. If he could just make it a little...

Louis leapt into the wormhole. But the tall man grabbed him when he was halfway through, and pulled him back into the cold concrete square.

This time, the tall man pinned Louis down by holding the sword broadside against Louis' chest. The flaming metal was scalding. The tall man held his blade down with a single hand. With the other hand, he retrieved a knife.

Louis sat up, pressing against the fiery blade. The swordsman pressed him down harder: Louis tried not to think about the pain as he pushed into it, letting the sword burn him to death. Instead he thought about the Japanese restaurant. What it had looked like. What it had been like just a few hours ago there with Sophie and Herschel.

And then he was there. He stood in the men's room, facing Herschel, who was looking deeply into the mirror.

"Hersh."

Herschel turned. "Lou? When did you... oh."

Behind Louis, the tall man emerged from the wormhole.

Herschel sprinted past Louis and tackled the monster back from whence it came, out of the men's room, into the cold concrete square. Louis followed, this time remembering to close the portal behind himself.

Louis and Herschel faced off against the tall man, all weapons drawn. The tall man held his flaming blade. Herschel had drawn his pistol and his sword, and tossed the sword to his brother, who held it tight in front of himself.

The tall man ran forward, taking a swing at the both of them. Herschel fired three rounds at the tall man's head, and the tall man was knocked to his back.

But he stood again, with three black craters burned into his mask. He threw his flaming blade at The Soldier. As the searing tip of the metal flew through Herschel's sternum, the tall man took something from his robe. A small pillar of wood, with glowing glyphs all around it: another totem. The tall man's sword turned from fire to ice. The blade hung improbably in the air in front of Herschel. Herschel hung there too, unable to move.

The tall man dropped the totem. It clattered to the stone ground. He turned and faced Louis, picking another totem out of his robes. Louis yelled fire at the totem, hoping to incinerate it. But he found his voice bare: there was no fire in him anymore.

The tall man's totem glowed a furious red as he approached.

Fire failed, Louis tried to teleport. To stop fucking time. To save his brother. But the tall man grabbed Louis, and froze him too, and piece by piece, the tall man took Louis apart. He took Louis's teleportation, and put it in a new totem. He took Louis' time travel, and put it in another. He took Louis' fire, and added it into the fiery totem that he already had.

It occurred to Louis then, that fire breathing was not a special talent: in-and-of-itself, it was not unique at all. Fire was just the basest manifestation of power. So of course The Swordsman had had it, and of course The Dragon had, and of course Louis had after licking The Dragon's blood, and of course the tall man had *more* of it now that he was wrenching Louis apart. Transfer of energy. Simple.

When the tall man had harvested Louis, he turned to Herschel. Louis concentrated every fiber of hate in his being at the tall man's

frontal lobe: if there was *anything* left in Louis, the tall man's brain would be burnt, and he would fall dead before taking another step towards Herschel.

But of course, there *was* nothing left in Louis. He had broken again. God *fucking* damn it.

He watched the tall man get to work on his brother.

And then, Louis saw Sophie fall into the square through the wormhole, which was still left open to Germany. She saw what was happening—Louis and Herschel suspended in place, with the tall man tinkering with them. The tall man was so involved in his work that he hadn't yet noticed Sophie at all.

Louis looks deeply at Sophie. He tried moving his jaw, to say one simple message. **Smash the totem on the ground.** The one that was holding Louis and Herschel in place. The one that, if *that* one wasn't there, they would stand a chance.

Sophie looked down at the totem. Then she looked down at her feet, where Herschel's sword laid. She nodded at Louis.

Quietly, Sophie knelt down, and picked the sword off of the ground, careful not to let the metal grate on the stone. Then she centered herself on the totem, and brought all of her weight down on it: there was a gut-wrenching *pop!* as it shattered.

Louis and Herschel dropped back onto the ground, and found their footing. The tall man took two steps back, and looked to where his totem was. There Sophie stood, facing him, blade pointed his way.

While the tall man was looking at Sophie, Herschel shot him in the neck.

The tall man blinked out of existence, and in his place was a ripple: a new wormhole.

Herschel turned to Louis, and grabbed his brother by the shoulders. "This is important," Herschel prefaced. "That man just stole our powers Lou. So we *really* need to go get them back."

Louis nodded.

Herschel, Louis, and Sophie ran through the wormhole after the tall man.

The place they came out at was ungodly hot: so hot that it made it hard to breathe. Louis was sweating immediately, and panting like a dog. His girlfriend and his brother stood nearby him.

They were all at the cliff-like lip of a volcano. Further down the lip stood the tall man, facing the three of them.

The tall man held his flaming blade, and Louis wondered just how hot it was for *him* in this place, under those red robes and the mask.

But then Louis remembered that he didn't care.

"Don't kill him," Herschel said. He stood beside Louis, aiming his pistol. "It'll only move him somewhere else, like we used to do. Just..."

At this point, the tall man began walking towards them, the clangs of his boots almost visible in the radiating heat. The tall man removed a totem from his robes.

Louis pointed at that. "He keeps all of his things in there. If we get the cloak off of him, boom."

Herschel aimed at the tall man's legs and shot twice. When the bullets reached their target, the tall man's totem glowed green, and the bullets disappeared. The wormholes they left were small enough that they closed in on themselves. Herschel sneered. He had hoped that the tall man would take longer to figure out how it worked.

The tall man raised his flaming blade, and took a swing at Sophie.

But while the tall man's blade was raised, Louis ran forward and dove at the tall man's chest.

Louis learned that under his robes, the tall man wore hard metal armor: Louis felt like he had tackled a truck. Still, it knocked them both to the ground. Louis grabbed the totem that the tall man was holding. The two of them both pulled at it, until eventually it flew out of both of their hands, and over the volcano's lip.

Louis watched it fall. When it hit, there was a shockwave of red; when it passed over Louis, he found himself moved to another place along the lip of the volcano. He saw that everyone else had been moved too. On a distant part of the volcano's rim, Louis saw the outlines of the tall man and Herschel, who were about to fight. Louis started running for them.

Herschel crouched slightly as he faced the tall man, and paced slowly to the right. Herschel had lost his gun, and the tall man's sword sat a dozen feet away, still burning against the ground. So Herschel was in a wrestling stance, because at Fort Benning, Herschel had learned to kick *ass* at wrestling when all else failed. And right at that moment, all else was sure as hell failing.

Herschel had an intuition. He felt *anxious* about how much he was baking in the heat of the volcano. And that was strange, because Herschel, as a person, had grown very comfortable with death. 'Death' in the temporary sense that he'd come to know it in, at least. But standing beside a pit of lava, and facing a man who had just stolen his ability to time travel, Herschel was having doubts about his immortality. Just how much had the tall man taken?

Whether it was Louis' or Herschel's, the tall man had certainly taken immortality from one of them. Otherwise, when the tall man was shot by Sophie, he would have been killed. So optimistically, Hersch's odds were fifty fifty.

The tall man stuck a hand in his robe, and came out with another totem. Herschel watched as, right before his eyes, the tall man transformed into a leopard.

Herschel swallowed, cracked his neck, and doubled-down on his wrestling stance.

The leopard crouched too, and then sprang forward: it was a cannonball of claws and teeth, and it knocked Herschel onto his ass, scraping him back against the lava rocks. Herschel grabbed the shapeshifter back: he grabbed and twisted, trying to find a hold that would work on a leopard. He hugged its chest hard, staying close to it, trying to squeeze the air out of it, but also keeping a pocket where it couldn't bite him. The thing hugged back: its claws pierced the skin on Herschel's back. Herschel's head was pressed into the creature's neck, and he yelled the worst swears he knew at the cat's throat.

And then Herschel realized he was at the cat's throat. He squirmed forward and bit down, getting a mouthful of hair and blood, and a hideous yowl. The leopard disappeared from around Herschel, as the tall man transformed into a bird and flew. Unafraid, Herschel grabbed it by the talons before it could fly

away. He strangled the squawking bird until it turned back into a tall man in armor and robes. Herschel continued to strangle him, banging a knee into the robes until they furled open, and all of the tall man's totems clattered out.

There had to be twenty. Slowly, as Herschel and the tall man fought, two of the totems rolled off the volcano's lip. The first hit the lava, and in a shockwave of purple, Herschel found his and his combatants' positions rearranged. Then, in a shockwave of white, the ground shook. The lava inside the volcano rose with alarming speed.

#

In a purple and white flash, Sophie found herself at the center of a very crucial thing. To one side of her stood two brothers who fought for cohesion. To the other side of her stood a tall man in armor and red robes who, Sophie was realizing more and more, may bring about the end of the world. Scattered around her feet were magic totems that, in seconds, all parties present would be grabbing for.

What was she to do?

Wide-eyed, Sophie placed her hands on the ground. She pushed every totem over the edge.

As the totems fell, Louis looked once between his girlfriend and his brother. There was very little time. He took his brother and wrapped one around him tight. He reached for Sophie too. He did. And she reached for him. And at the last moment, they slipped through each other's fingertips. But they did both see that the other had tried.

All of them were flung like shrapnel through time. Every instinct in Louis' body told him to duck and cover: to squeeze himself closed. But he managed to keep his eyes open, because he knew that the details here mattered a lot. He saw the tall man going far, far back into history. He saw Sophie was heading for the same time as Louis and Herschel, more or less, which was good. But as they rocketed through the decades, Sophie drifted from Louis and Herschel. She *was* going to land in the same time. She was not going to land in the same place. When Louis saw where she was

heading, he felt like his heart was being clenched by an icy hand. She was going to land where a mountain had once stood, and where now, there stood a castle. She was going to land with The Dragon.

Lou and Hersh were crashing towards a place a long, long way from the castle.

#

Flung through time like a gunshot, Maria crashed at the outskirts of a village in Eastern Europe. She stood, and examined her red robes, which were tattered. The armor underneath was scratched. In that regard, at least, nothing was out of the ordinary.

A crop was growing in the fields, with young farmhands tending to it. The sun shone bright overhead. Maria began to walk. She walked a dirt path past the fields and into the village outskirts, where merriment was heard in many bars, with hearty conversation and laughter and music. She walked a dirt path past the village outskirts and into the village proper, following the metronome-like clang of metal on metal. In an open-front shop with a forge and an anvil, The Swordsman stood with no sword in sight. He worked a pickaxe that had been bent.

When Maria approached him, he smiled up at her deeply. "Welcome!" The Swordsman bellowed.

Maria removed her mask, and The Swordsman's expression dropped, as did his pickaxe and hammer. Frix looked upon the feminine image of Louis Dean Baumgartner. The woman who was, unmistakably, Louis' mother.

Maria told Frix about the return of The Dragon. How, all thanks to Louis' carelessness with his powers, The Dragon was able to rise again, breaking the world apart more than ever.

"I think you can see already," she said, "That you and I are different. You're a fixer: I'm a breaker. You could fight me, and win, but it would do no good. For the futures we want to see, either one of us would need The Chemist dead."

The Swordsman agreed. He kept conversation with The Breaker while forging his next blade. In his eyes he saw giants, dragons, and men slain at its razor edges. The Swordsman took a

final look around the village. Tradesmen spoke with farmers, and some children played a game in the square. He was leaving his home in a much better condition than he had last time. Perhaps it would still be like this when he returned.

The Swordsman dug in a trunk for his old scabbard, and strapped it about his muscular chest. He fixed the new sword upon his back. After offering some prayer to his mother and father, The Swordsman followed the tall woman out of the village proper—now silent without his smithing—, out of the village outskirts where the merriment had calmed some, out past the fields where the young farmhands toiled, out of Medieval Europe through the last of the world's closing wormholes, and onto the side of a highway, spinning atop a thread of the unraveled earth.

Frix's nose wrinkled at the familiar smells of death.

#

Louis and Herschel landed in a town outside of Berlin. The buildings were on fire, and the land all around them was split into deep, deep chasms. Above the two, the sky was a madman's wicker prison cell.

The brothers shambled to a park bench, and sat for a while, watching.

Herschel sighed, and hung his head. "Okay," he said. "Okay. No more time travel. And I'm like... ninety-eight percent sure we can die now. Last shot."

Louis had never seen the real world like this before. He had seen worse on drugs, but on those, he could always reach deep down and comfort himself, if he tried hard enough, remembering that at worst, it was a temporary horror. One that would get better if he waited.

Louis missed when that was the same of the real world. He really, really did.

Chapter 12: Tangle

The air was the wrong temperature in the park that Louis and Herschel sat in. It wasn't too cold: Herschel was sweating. His grey tank top had dark spots forming under his arms and on his chest. But the temperature wasn't too hot either: Louis actually felt pretty fucking frigid. The temperature was not too cold, and it was not too hot: it was just wrong.

Around them, buildings had collapsed. Some of them all the way, leaving a heap of rubble. But others only partially collapsed: they stayed standing, part of what they were before, looking desperate to fall that last little bit. The ground shook every minute, causing more pieces of buildings to dislodge. Sometimes the ground only shook a little. Most times though, it made the cement park bench that the brothers sat on rattle.

Herschel missed having a gun. Usually it was to kill himself with, but still.

"I want another magic sword," Louis said.

"Didn't you get your old one back during the plague?"

"Yeah, but I came back to this time to enchant it, which I think was the important part."

"Solid point," Herschel conceded.

The brothers stood up, and went to find a second-hand store. Herschel stroked his beard as they walked.

"Something on your mind?" Louis asked.

Herschel gestured to the apocalypse.

"Oh," Louis said. He put his hands in his pockets. "Same."

The road they walked down was all cracked apart. Some cracks were small, like the cracks in dry mud. Others, the brothers could have walked into.

There were no clouds out, which made it uncomfortable that the sky was dimmer. A hazy purple. Louis swore he could see stars, much earlier in the day than was reasonable for stars. The sun was still up, but it looked smaller.

A wind blew, and the temperature got worse. Louis pulled up

his hood.

Then, Louis was conscientious of his steps for a few paces. He tested gravity, and made sure that that, at least, was the same. As far as he could tell, it seemed to be. Nothing around them was falling up.

The brothers weren't alone on the street. As they moved from the residential area to downtown, they found that a great many had come out to witness the world. Some walked aimlessly. Others ran. Some looked into the sky, mouths hanging open, as though they hoped that words would fall into them that would somehow explain everything.

"Nobody rioting," Herschel mentioned. "Nice town."

Louis agreed. Still, the brothers walked down the center of the street, keeping as much distance as they could from those on the sidewalks. No cars would run them over. Even if cars had wanted to, the roads were too cracked.

Louis pointed at the sign for a pawn shop. The sign was sitting in the street, face-up, in front of a storefront with a broken window. A man outside was sweeping the glass. When the wind blew, all of the glass slid over the cement, chiming like the ambient soundtrack to a horror film.

The brothers approached the man. He stopped sweeping and faced them.

"Guten abend," Herschel greeted.

"Gut?" the man asked, raising an eyebrow. He leaned forward, resting his chin on his broom.

Herschel glanced around, and shrugged. "Some kind of abend. Was ist 'terrifying' auf deutsch?"

"Schrecklich," the man answered. "Or furchtbar, or huurend. Many words." The man ginned.

Herschel grinned back. "Good to know. Do you sell swords?"

The man nodded, and began walking into his shop. "Follow me."

Inside, there was a yellow caution sign, with an icon of a man slipping. The floors were strewn with the odds and ends that had, presumably, been on the shelves beforehand. The three picked their way towards a glass counter, trying not to step on anything.

The glass counter had cracked, but not shattered. On display

inside were knives, throwing stars, and three swords, each in a different style.

Herschel put his hand on his beard, and considered whether or not he'd ever thrown a throwing star before. He couldn't remember ever throwing a *real* shuriken. Growing up, he'd thrown plenty of shurikens made from taped-together popsicle sticks at Louis.

One of the swords in the display case was straight, symmetrical, double-edged. A 'default' sword. The next sword was a sabre: thin, with a fancy guard. Herschel wouldn't mind using that one whatsoever. But the easy choice for Louis, hands down, was the katana. Louis had looked into the glass case for all of five seconds before making up his mind.

Louis reached for his wallet. He found all of his pockets to be empty. Probably they had been emptied when fighting the tall man.

Herschel, being recently back from the medieval times, had no wallet to speak of.

The man behind the counter sighed. "Perhaps it is a bad idea to be selling swords at this time regardless."

Herschel looked back, out of the shattered window of the shop. Outside, still, there was nobody acting disorderly. He had seen the world unravel many, many times. Always, it came with looting and riots. If this town was a haven from that, then Herschel had no desire whatsoever to disturb the peace.

Louis leaned forward on the counter. The glass creaked. "The sword is important."

"Ja?" the shopkeeper asked.

"Ja," Louis nodded. "I need it so I can go kill a dragon."

The shopkeeper laughed.

Louis stepped back. He resolved to prove his point in the same way he'd proven it to Sophie: breathing fire. He turned his head up towards the ceiling, and exhaled all of the air in his lungs ferociously.

His breath wasn't even particularly warm.

"Look, friends. I need to ask you to leave. You can see that I have a lot to take care of right now."

Louis sighed. Herschel led them out of the store.

On the sidewalk, Louis pulled a joint out of his pocket. His pockets hadn't been *entirely* empty. From another pocket, he took out his lighter. He put the joint in the corner of his mouth, and as he lit it, he nodded sideways to an alley. He and Herschel stood there while Louis smoked. Herschel stood upright. Louis leaned back against the brick wall.

Herschel looked up at the brick wall behind Louis. In it, just above their heads, there was a pretty significant crack, running horizontally across the entire building.

"Careful." Herschel pointed.

Louis looked. "Oh, shit." The two of them moved to the opposite side of the alley, and Louis leaned against that wall instead. Herschel still opted to stand.

Louis took an extremely long drag. Long even to Herschel, who in this century and others, had spent time around very heavy smokers.

"So we really do have like, nothing now?" Louis asked.

"Hey, between your wit and my cunning good looks—"

Louis snickered. He offered the joint to Herschel. Herschel declined. Louis took another puff.

"Can't even get a sword from a pawn shop," Louis said. "It's fucking *bullshit*."

On bullshit, sparks flew from Louis' mouth. The brothers looked at each other.

"I just—"

"Yeah."

"Was it because I was angry?"

"Yeah Bruce Banner, I bet that was exactly it."

Louis told Herschel to fuck off, but that didn't ignite any fires. Louis scratched his head.

Herschel sighed. "Oh my fucking god."

"What?"

"You're The *Chemist*."

"Yeah?"

Herschel took the joint out of Louis' hand and held it in front of his face.

As Louis' brain put the pieces together, a look of excitement spread across his face. "Oh. *Wicked*."

“We are, one-hundred percent, fucked,” Herschel said. He handed the joint back to his brother. Louis took it, inhaled deeply, and exhaled like a shotgun blast. *Tried* to exhale like a shotgun blast. What he got was more sparks. *Just* sparks. But sparks.

“Think the shopkeeper would be impressed?”

“I don’t think it would be the weirdest thing he saw today,” Herschel pointed out. He looked up at the purple, starry sky.

Louis put his joint out against the brick wall behind him, and pocketed the roach. “Let’s go find a dealer. Dealer would be impressed, and clearly we need more of this.”

“You’re gonna sparkle The Dragon to death?”

“Well first I’m gonna see what kind of fire I can breathe on codeine.”

“Oh,” Herschel said. “Man. After you.”

Herschel followed Louis out of the alleyway. Louis had ways with certain things that Herschel had never fully understood. It was as though Louis had radar that could locate three things in any city: parties, bass players, and drugs—Herschel would be *amazed* if Sophie hadn’t fit into one or more of those scenes. Herschel wanted to think that Louis was like a dog sniffing them out, but that wasn’t even quite right: Louis wasn’t *figuring out* where anything was. It was more like The Chemist became a local of whatever city he entered. He’d probably had friends in Germany before his plane even landed.

“Hey,” Herschel said as they walked.

Louis cocked his head.

“Why did you move to Germany man? What was wrong with Ohio?”

Louis didn’t laugh. “You hated Ohio,” he said.

The brothers still walked down the center of the road. At the intersection, Louis looked both ways. To the right, rubble spilled all the way across the street. People stood on top of it, picking through the pieces. The brothers walked down the opposite street, which was clear by comparison.

“Alright, I hated Ohio a lot,” Herschel conceded. “You did too?”

“Psh.”

“That’s not... yes or no, Lou? Did you like it at home?”

Louis stopped walking. Herschel did too, and the brothers faced each other. Each of them stood over one side of the solid yellow line painted on the asphalt.

“I loved home,” Louis said. He ran a hand back through his short hair—it was a habit he’d picked up back when his hair was long. “I loved mom, dad, you, the house, my friends... all of it. And then you started dying man. And I do *not* blame you for that. Okay? That was a fault of nature or God that was beyond you. I get it. But you handled it like it was *just* you who was dying. I don’t think you knew that you were also taking pieces of everyone who loved you as you went. There was one time when you were...”

Louis sniffled, and then cracked a smile.

“Heh, *fuck*: you were *bad*, man! You agreed to be hospitalized without even arguing about it that time. You were there for fourteen days with migraines and no sense of balance: you couldn’t even drink a glass of water without a straw, much less stand or, god forbid, walk. And so one morning when you were *gone*? No phone call, no note, just gone from your hospital bed? I assumed you went somewhere to die.”

“Louis—”

“No, *fuck* off,” Lou said. He’d stopped smiling a while ago. “So I went somewhere to die too. I went on a bender fit for a rock star: you should’ve seen it, because it was a work of fucking *art*. My mind was an explosion of PCP and alcohol and heroin. It was really, really, really supposed to kill me. I was... I was out of it, of course. Blacked out. When I came-to I was in the hospital being resuscitated. I’m only realizing now that I probably really did kill myself because of you. Somewhere in Ohio, I OD’d. It just didn’t stick because of the whole... breakable thing that you and I had. But yeah. I wasn’t sticking around after that. So I got a plane ticket and I left.”

Herschel stepped forward onto the yellow line in the road and hugged Louis. Louis thought about pushing Herschel away. Thought about doing heroin again, just so that he could breathe it out as an inferno that would kill The Solider gruesomely. He thought about walking away and going to get Sophie back on his own. But in the end, everything that Louis ever did was for the

love of his brother. So he embraced it. In the street that was falling even further apart in the midst of another tremor, Louis clung to Hersh.

The two of them got back to looking for a dealer.

—&—

Years ago, Maria had been powerless and contented. But as she watched her two immortal sons doing everything within their power to stop living, she decided that the world was a terrible place after all. So she set about breaking it at every joint, like the brittle twigs of a tree in fall. And with the twigs, all broken apart in her hand, she would one day make a nest.

—&—

Louis and Herschel stood outside of a dealer's house. More precisely, they stood on the shore of a lake of rubble, and at the center was the half-sunken island of a rooftop. A man with long hair and a moustache did laps around the island, picking through the pieces of his life. Louis and Herschel walked out onto the wreckage to join him.

Louis and the dealer shook hands.

“Was geht?” the dealer asked. He stood on a fallen wooden beam. In one arm he held a laundry basket, which he had filled with some of the things important to him that he'd been able to recover.

Louis kept his hands buried in his jean pockets. “Nicht viel,” he said. He looked around at the carnage. “Bad trip for Earth, huh?”

The dealer smiled. He set down the laundry basket. “What is your name?”

“Louis. And this is my brother, Herschel.”

Herschel, a few steps back from the conversation, nodded.

“Geoffrey,” the dealer said. “Have we met?”

“Think so.” Louis buried his hands deeper in his pockets. “We were both a little...” Louis made a drinking gesture.

“Smashed,” Geoffrey grinned. “Perhaps we *have* met. What can I help you with friend?”

Louis took the roach out of his pocket, as well as the lighter. He demonstrated his talent to the dealer, who was floored. Louis dropped the roach before he burnt his fingers.

“Find me a Judas Priest CD and a bottle of painkillers, and I’ll show you something *really* dope.”

The dealer laughed. He nodded over to his home sunken in the rubble. “Mi casa su casa, ja? Good luck.”

Louis and Geoffrey did another handshake. “Appreciate it man,” Louis said, and then he and Herschel walked past the dealer to the island.

Louis and Herschel stooped into a window. The carpeted floor in the room was buckled, and rose and fell like succinct hills. At the center of the room was a coffee table surrounded by gamer chairs. On the walls were bare spots where framed movie posters used to hang, but instead laid shattered on the floor. All of the broken glass back at the home bar was a travesty: the room wreaked of whisky.

Herschel walked across the room to the bar, over the carpet hills. He spotted an uncracked bottle of bourbon. He took it, and opened it. He had a drink of it and tried spitting sparks. No luck. He had another drink anyways before putting it back.

By the time Herschel was done with this, Louis was standing behind him with a water bottle filled with pills. The Chemist looked to Herschel like a bored kid waiting for his mom to be done shopping so they could go.

“How the hell, Lou.”

“Look man, I have talents too, alright?”

“Fair enough. Is that one what you need?”

Louis looked down at the green bottle, and gave it a shake. “Codeine, MDMA, PCP—”

“PCP?”

Louis nodded.

“Just mixed in there with all the other ones?”

Louis nodded again.

Herschel shook his head, and patted the bar. “C’mon, dump those out right here. Let’s sort through them.”

Louis stood in place.

“Lou, I’m serious.”

Feet cemented in place to the floor, Louis fiddled with the top of the bottle until it was opened. He looked down at the mixed bottle. He’d taken every single thing in there before. “Look, I know it’s not *your* thing, but this isn’t exactly uncharted water for me.”

“No, clearly, because you’ve fucking overdosed on this before. But you have limits now. C’mon. Onto the counter.”

Louis sighed, walked forward, and dumped the pills onto the dealer’s home bar.

“Good man,” Herschel said. He picked through the pills, dividing them into piles, and asking Louis what each pile was along the way. They were mostly hallucinogens, which Louis considered himself a champion of. But there were also painkillers in the mix—Louis had tried to quit those once or twice. They weren’t even as fun as the hallucinogens. The good ones packed a punch though.

“Okay, how’s this,” Herschel said. He slid the piles of pills around on the counter, until they were in three groups. “Painkiller bottle, hallucinogen bottle, goddamn PCP bottle. Fair?”

Louis leaned over the pills on the counter, propping himself over them with his elbows. “I don’t know man. I like the simpleness of having one container I can reach into in a pinch. You know?”

“Good,” Herschel said. “I’m with you.” In two motions he dashed the hallucinogen and PCP piles off of the counter, leaving only the painkillers.

Louis went to slap Herschel, fucking hard. He stopped himself part way.

Herschel slammed a fist on the counter, and leaned forward to glare face-to-face at his brother. “WE’RE FIGHTING A WAR, LOU!” The Soldier roared. “You think it’s *remotely* acceptable to be getting high right now?! I need you sharp and alive, Chemist!”

Louis, never breaking eye contact with his brother, took one

of the painkillers off the counter. He put it his mouth and he chewed on it, openly, so that Herschel could see. When the pill was nothing but a horrifically bitter mush on his tongue, The Chemist swallowed. And he felt like a crucible.

“I. Can *handle*. My shit.”

“*Can you?*”

“The hell you think I’ve been doing since you left?”

Herschel put his hands up, and backed away from the bar. Louis slid the painkillers into the bottle, keeping eye contact with The Soldier while he did.

“No hallucinogens,” Herschel said.

“Bite my ass.”

“*Nonnegotiable*,” The Soldier pressed. “You’re an adult. You can handle the real world until we’ve completed the mission, and the mission isn’t in fucking Wonderland: it’s here, right now, on a very broken Earth.” Herschel leaned back against the home bar’s display of broken glass bottles. “If you want to leave me to fight this war by myself,” he said, “then I will. I’ll do it again in a heartbeat, and when it’s over, I’ll come back to you feeling like the worst person in the world even if I won. But I’ll do it.”

Louis leaned over the counter on his fists, gauging The Soldier up and down. “Christ,” Louis said. He hung his head. “You really would.”

Herschel didn’t flinch at that, even if the truth was that he wouldn’t. If this was the last apocalypse—*especially* if this was the last apocalypse—then Herschel would rather end it right than have one more shot at stopping it. He would spend the end of days reconciling with his brother. But for the moment, both doors were open. He could reconcile *and* carry on the mission. Hoo-ah.

Louis spun the top onto the green water bottle, sealing it tight with only the painkillers inside. “Let’s get out of here man. I need to scream fire and burn down something *big*.”

The brothers left the sunken island.

Outside, the dealer had stopped picking through the rubble. He laid back on his island rooftop, hands behind his head, face pointed up at the sun. His long hair was radiant in its light.

“Hey, Geoffrey!” Louis called up to him.

Geoffrey sat up, and looked down at the brothers. He waved.

“Find what you needed?”

Louis nodded. “Check this out, man!”

Geoffrey gave a thumbs-up, and leaned forward for the show.

The Chemist turned his head upwards, and shouted a fireball at the sun. It disappeared into the glare. Louis liked to think that the fireball made it all the way home.

On the rooftop, Geoffrey gave a standing ovation. He hopped down onto a tall pile of rubble, and slid down that to join the firebreather. Louis and the drug dealer hugged.

“You making peace or war, friend?”

“War with the motherfucker who broke all of this good good peace.”

“Hell yeah,” the dealer said. “Righteous.” He gave them the horns. As the brothers left, he told them to rock on supremely.

Back at the pawn shop downtown, the shopkeeper was still inside. He was sorting through his undamaged inventory when the brothers arrived.

He crossed his arms. “One of you two find a piggy bank?”

Louis reached into the water bottle, and took another pill. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and honed himself—he did not want to burn the shop down. He breathed his fire out slowly, so that only the air in front of his face was ablaze.

Louis spoke to the shopkeeper. As he did, sparks dripped from his lips. “We could *really* use that sword,” The Chemist stated.

The shopkeeper swallowed, and nodded. “Take two if you need them.”

Louis pranced to the cracked display case, and reached inside for his katana. He put his hands in the air, holding the scabbard in one hand and the sword in the other. Of the two remaining swords, Herschel picked out the sabre, with the thin blade and the fancy guard. He thanked the shopkeeper as they left.

The brothers walked out of the shop with swords secured to their hips. They set out for the next stop of the journey: PGP campus in Berlin, where they would make their swords fit for slaying a dragon.

As they walked, Louis kept two secrets. The first was that breathing fire had not stopped the effect of the painkillers. The

buzz still filled him, even after the last of the fire had been used. The second secret was that, as they were leaving the dealer's house, Louis had snuck eight tablets of PCP into his back pocket. He didn't intend to use them yet. But he did, very much, intend to have them ready.



The Swordsman and The Breaker walked together down the highway long into the night. Frix had seen civilization in ruins before, but that was his own civilization, and so it had given him a personal twinge of hurt. This civilization belonged to the future, and for all Frix cared, perhaps this one deserved to be the end of times: this time, seeing the world in ruins made sense. He knew things depreciated, breaking worse and worse the older they got.

The earth had been young before, when Frix was young. Now The Swordsman was seeing a world that felt ancient.

He marveled at the architecture: the dark-grey road stretched on ahead of them for what may have been forever. All over the road, there were machines that The Swordsman found fascinating. Horseless carriages. The ones that were running hummed so vocally that Frix wondered, to himself, whether the things were alive.

By the road, down long offshoots of it, were buildings the size of cathedrals.

In addition to all of this, Frix saw the strands of earth above him—three strands, one just on the horizon—and he bit his lip. This was beyond the wearing that the world had been through before, the last time he fixed it. Even The Swordsman's mother had thrown away tools that were obliterated.

The Swordsman and The Breaker shared very few words as they walked. Maria had put her mask back on anyways. Their conversation on the road before then had been little more than the question, "Where is The Chemist?" and the answer, "Berlin."

In the daylight, The Breaker had traced their path, pointing up the concave strand of Earth that they stood upon. She and The

Swordsman could see the entire road to Berlin winding up the strip of earth until it was straight above them. The concept was dizzying, but convenient.

The Swordsman had no problem walking late into the night because to him, it didn't feel like night at all. Though the land was dark, there was still a glow to the sky above him. No matter how far the sun set past his strand of the world, it still felt like a late twilight. The sky was purple. The stars were mixed up. The Swordsman didn't know if time had done that, or The Chemist, or The Dragon, but all the same it made him feel disoriented. In his own time, the stars had been a fantastic map to those who could understand them. Here and now, there didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to how they were arranged.

As The Swordsman walked, he reflected on the many things he had learned from The Magus—Louis' father—in their brief time together. It had been in Spain, and although The Magus had been quite busy with his own preparations for confronting The Dragon, The Magus had still spared some evenings to teach The Swordsman two very useful tricks. The first trick was speaking the All Language—Babel—which the The Magus had learned from The Prince, who in his later years with such a large kingdom, had needed some way to hear all of his people. The second trick was conjuring fire, which the Magus and The Dragon had figured out together.

As The Swordsman walked along the strand of broken earth, he whispered a faint flame onto his fingertips, to make sure his tricks hadn't lost their power in this strange, foreign land. The fire at The Swordsman's fingertip was steady. Contented with this, The Swordsman looked upwards, and blew the fire off his finger and into the sky. He watched the missile fly up and up, until it hit something and was snuffed. The Swordsman froze in his footsteps. The Breaker froze with him.

The sky right above The Swordsman was totally black: no stars, no purple. In confusion The Swordsman shouted, conjuring a massive fireball which he hurled up into the air. It exploded against grassy land only meters above him, and closing in fast: The Swordsman braced himself to be crushed.

The impact was like none he had felt in his lifetime. Even The

Dragon had not dealt a blow as powerful as two strands of earth crashing into each other. What saved The Swordsman's life was not his own resilience—he would have been entirely flattened. But in the spur of the moment The Swordsman drew his sword and held it between the two lands so that they would crash against it, and not him. The sword buckled and shattered under the immense weight, but it stopped the strands' momentum: soon after crashing into each other, the strands were floating apart. The Swordsman laid on his back in the grass beside the shards of his broken blade, more disoriented than ever. He prodded his body and found bruises, but no fractures. His head throbbed, and his heartbeat may never before have gone from so calm to so fast. The Swordsman sat up, and glanced around for the road he had been walking along, but he could not see it. He realized, only then as he looked up into the sky and saw the road floating away from him, that he had fallen onto the other strand of earth.

The Swordsman vomited. He had never been sick in his life without drinking, but as The Chemist might have said, this was one hell of a day for firsts.

The Swordsman stood, and collected his bearings. He was alone: The Breaker had stayed on the original strand. Some distance away—but on his own thread of the world, at least—he saw the glow of a city on fire. All other directions promised only the dark, so The Swordsman walked to the light, unarmed, unprepared, unrested, unable to comprehend how the world had come to this, and unbelievably ready to strangle The Chemist if he saw him.

Chapter 13:

Angel Dust

Louis and Herschel walked past a road sign telling them they were fifteen miles out of Berlin. The road was intraversable by car. Fissures in the ground had opened up, swallowing many of the cars that had tried driving. But the road still ran straight down the thread of Earth, all the way to Berlin; the road was not cut in two by the Earth unraveling.

As the brothers walked, it had gotten late. The nighttime wasn't like nighttime had been before. The sun *had* gone away, but Louis could still see just fine. Optimistically, Louis thought of it as though the sky had become a nightlight. Probably though, it was something more dire. Louis was a little bit glad that he had never learned too much about the atmosphere. There were *probably* more immediate problems, and he preferred to concern himself with those.

He willed Sophie to still be alive. It was clear to see that many people weren't.

"So you've seen all of this before," Louis mentioned to Herschel as they walked.

Herschel nodded. "Yeah. I mean, more or less, but yeah."

"What's our time-frame here? Like, how long before it's... how long before it's bad."

"It's what, around midnight now? Bad started six hours ago."

They walked on in silence for a while. It struck Louis as incredibly strange, suddenly, that it *was* so quiet. It wasn't just the lack of cars. It was the lack of *anyone*.

Herschel ran a hand down his face. "Let me give you the rundown. Six hours ago, the world cracked apart into threads. And *most* of the world died right then: over half of the population gone immediately."

Louis felt *very* alone then. Not just on a personal level, but cosmically.

Herschel continued. "And since the Earth cracked, as it's been spinning around and around, those threads have been coming

looser and looser, and farther and farther apart. Spreading people and places thin. The last sign that said we were fifteen miles out of Berlin? *Used to* be true. Now, it looks like..." Herschel squinted up at the horizon—if it still was a horizon. The mesh of crossing threads wavered, and often, entire threads were hidden behind others, only to poke out for a few moments before wavering back. Looking deep into the snare, Louis noticed a cluster of lights in the dark. It must have been the city. "Fifty miles or more," Herschel guessed. "And those aren't city lights, either. Not most of them. That city is on fire."

Louis looked at Berlin again, and it seemed a completely different image.

The green water bottle, which Louis had fixed onto his belt opposite his katana, rattled with pills that made him fiery. He wondered if they made him *fireproof* as well. They made him feel like he was fireproof, at least.

"As the strands stretch more and more, a lot of them will snap. Some parts will break off into space. Other parts will crash back into earth, and damage other strands, making them break too. It's already started a little bit: look." Herschel pointed ahead, where one strand collided with another.

Louis nodded solemnly.

"So basically, there's no exact clock we're against here. But the longer we wait... well, I'd want to be at The Dragon's doorstep by tomorrow."

Louis nodded. "Didn't really feel like I'd be able to sleep anyways, man."

And then Louis stopped walking to marvel at something. The impossibly long right-side horizon of the strip that they walked along lit up: a brilliant line like a thousand-mile sunset. Louis blinked hard, trying to focus on if he'd taken anything besides the painkillers.

And then it occurred to Louis why the night was not so dark. The molten core of the planet had come uncovered. And it just so happened that the strand the brothers walked on had been, until just then, facing away from it. But as the thread rotated, the line of magma grew taller and taller, until it was no longer a lining on the horizon, but a quarter of the sky. Louis sweat. He squinted no

matter which way he faced: everything reflected the radiance as the brothers walked onwards.

“So if we’re a hundred miles out of Berlin,” Louis said—he began in a loud voice, because the light was so overwhelming. But then he realized that, even illuminated, the road was still hauntingly quiet. He lowered his tone. “If we’re a hundred miles out of Berlin, we’re not going to get there by walking.”

Herschel shook his head. “Of course not. That’d be ridiculous.”

The two brothers stopped talking as they approached a particularly deep crack in the road. They slid down one side, and shuffled up the other—Herschel climbed it first, and gave Louis a hand up.

“Thanks.” Louis dusted his hands off.

“Any time.”

“So you were saying about why we’re walking there?”

“Oh, yeah.” Herschel nodded. “I know something you don’t know. For at least the first twelve or so hours of this, I’ve got the collisions memorized.”

Louis blinked.

Herschel pointed to a gas station about a mile down the road ahead of them. “That gets crushed,” The Soldier said. “And it gets crushed right into Berlin’s last standing skyscraper.”

Louis’ stomach turned. He reached for his pill bottle, but Herschel pushed him as they walked, and so Louis resisted.

“Hersh. Actual number: how many times have you lived this day?”

It did seem like day, anyways. There was no sun out. But half of the sky was a sea of lava now, and that was plenty more than daylight.

Herschel racked his mind for the number of times he’d watched the world end. He stroked his beard. He recalled his first few times in horrifying detail, because those times, he had not jumped to the apocalypse on purpose, and those time, he had still feared for his life. Eventually though, when Herschel was learning about his powers, and trying to trace back the origins of just why the world had come apart, he made trips to the apocalypse deliberately. Perhaps every other week, interlaced with periods of

recovery. Then Herschel left home and joined the military, and at first that was a dark period. In the midst of battle, desperately, maybe as often as Louis did drugs, Herschel visited Armageddon. Daily, easily. Sometimes two or three times daily, or five, or ten. It tapered over time, but only after The Soldier had become damn familiar with the end of the world. He fought in dozens of wars then, contemporary and otherwise, and through that experience he had grown far more cautious with his powers: he only checked in once or twice during the course of each war. Sometimes only at the end. Always, it stayed the same. The Earth split, The Dragon returned, and humanity was eaten by both.

A hair came loose from Herschel's beard as he stroked it. He looked down, and saw that the hair was grey.

How many times have you lived this day?

Herschel did the mental math, and answered as honestly as he was able.

"Ten thousand," he said. He nodded to himself. "Ten thousand at least."

Herschel looked into the distance at the inverted skyscraper in Berlin, which was headed for the gas station, and would crash into it in an hour's time.

"Let's hurry up."

Louis nodded, and kept pace with his brother's relentless march.

—&—

Maria stood in a small gas-station parking lot, smashing a car to pieces with a tire iron. She shattered its windows first. Each broken pane caved onto the upholstery in a wave of twinkling crumbs. After that, she used the tire iron as it was intended, and removed the bolts of the tires. She took the tires off of the car, and one by one, ripped them apart—her sword had been lost, but her gauntlets posed incredibly sharp claws, which she often used for opening things, from locked doors to chest cavities. She knelt at the side of the road, popping each tire and meticulously shredding

the pieces. She did not eat the car like a lion would eat a gazelle. There was no nutrition here. Ostensibly, nothing gained. But in another sense, she digested the car all the same. She dug her claws into the car and scraped down it, tearing jagged lines into the blue body. She ripped off the hood and trunk. She dug into the engine, punctured tubes, ripped out belts, tore into fluid containers, until the front of the car was an empty box. She ripped out the seats and tore them open, gutting the cushions onto the same pile of shredded rubber from the tires. She broke off the steering wheel and took out the radio. By the time she was done with all of this, the sun had set.

She took the scraps—glass shards, metal shavings, rubber strips, fabric tatters, tufts of cushioning—and piled them all together. It reminded her of raking leaves with Herschel and Louis in the Fall.

When she had the pile—the pile of a car—she then started the process of smoothing it out. She patted down the top. She picked out the sharp ends, of which there were a great many, and she rounded each one off with a sharpened claw, shaving by shaving, until the metal and glass were soft to the touch—she had removed one gauntlet for this process, so she could check. As she worked, she molded the shape of the scraps from pile to bowl. And in the center of the bowl she sat, and watched the road with rapt attention, waiting for her sons to arrive. She ran her bare hand over the nest, and with her gauntlet hand, she scratched at her armor. The scraping sound was a heavenly ringing in her ears.

Down the strip of earth, she saw two boys walking up the road, towards the gas station that she sat in front of. They were looking for the express route into Berlin, no doubt. But Berlin was a dangerous place, with a great many edges that were still too sharp for the boys. She would protect them from that, even if she was not happy with them at that particular moment. In stealing away all of her totems, they had made things *very* difficult for her. But, behind her mask, she couldn't blame them. They didn't know better. And in some ways, she didn't mind the difficulty. It was unbelievably satisfying to toy with difficult things to break.

Maria put her gauntlet back on.

She thought about which son was her favorite.

It was Herschel. But she thought about it.

—&—

Above The Chemist and The Soldier, the sky was a sea of lava. Louis was baking in his sweatshirt. Herschel had noticed. He'd spent a lot of time marching with privates who wore their equipment wrong. Usually, he corrected them. But he liked to hope Louis had a good reason for wearing the sweatshirt in the heat.

And Louis did have *a* reason. Maybe not the good one Herschel hoped for. But something. Louis' head buzzed for another hit. He'd rarely smoked nicotine, but under the stress of everything, he would accept any cigarette handed to him. Louis felt it better to save himself on the real stuff though. If he really did have a limit to how many drugs he could humanly take, then he would save the uses for when it mattered. In the meantime, he would sweat out the urges. The inside of his black sweatshirt was the inside of a car that had been sitting in the summer sun for hours, and for Louis, right then, that was perfect.

The brothers were close upon the parking lot. A minute's walk. Herschel surveyed the location. The building, from the outside, looked intact. Herschel knew that on the inside, though, the center of the roof had collapsed, killing the store clerks. The gas station that scraped Berlin was vacant. Except for...

As the brothers stepped up to the edge of the parking lot, Herschel stopped walking and held his arm out, stopping Louis too. At the center of the parking lot, a few feet from them in a nest of strange rubble, sat the tall man. Behind his mask, he looked up at the brothers. He remained seated.

Herschel craned his neck to look at the sky past the gas station. Berlin *was* still coming. The skyscraper would crash in a matter of minutes. Fewer than ten. More than five.

The tall man stood. He had no sword, Herschel noticed. His hands were empty. His red robes were tattered, to the point where they would be difficult to conceal anything in; the cloth hung on

his armor in ripped, loose triangles.

Herschel drew his rapier, and Louis, his katana.

Herschel pointed the tip of his blade at the tall man. “You stay there.”

The brothers began walking around, towards the ladder on the side of the gas station that led up to the rooftop. They tried to give the tall man a wide berth. But he walked into their path. The brothers stopped trying to walk around, and faced the tall man directly.

Then, the tall man took off the mask, and dropped it.

Neither brother had seen their mother in a long time. Louis put away his sword. Herschel did not. Maria smiled at that.

Louis grabbed for words, or thoughts. But in the meantime, Herschel had his arranged very, very neatly.

“Step aside.”

Maria stood her ground. “We can survive this,” she told them. “It’s too late for—”

Herschel yelled and took a vicious slash at the air between them.

Maria bit her tongue, and hung her head. She looked at her mask, sitting on the ground. 大. *Big*. It was a curious persona she had put on. It had worked, certainly. Nobody had ever suspected her real identity until she revealed it to them.

The same had been true when she’d met people face-to-face, though. The title of ‘Mother’ had subsumed her. Nobody suspected a personality outside of it, until they were shown one. Even her own son Louis had been a little blind to that. He had no idea that she’d been a *lot* like him growing up.

“I won’t let you past here,” she said, as though it hadn’t been clear. Sometimes there was no harm in being clearer.

She stood between the brothers and the ladder to the rooftop. Herschel squeezed the handle of his sword. The skyscraper was coming, and time was running short.

If Louis hadn’t been present, the situation would have already been resolved.

Maria looked at Louis. He had grown up. Herschel had grown older, but he had already been an adult when he left home. Louis had not been. And it looked like he’d finally figured it out.

Maria raised a clawed gauntlet. And she held it at her throat. She scraped her skin tentatively, as Louis' eyes grew wide.

Maria tried to keep her composure, but she was choked up when she said it: "You boys will be killing me either way if you go again."

Herschel ghosted her, and ascended the ladder. On the gas station's roof, he saw that the skyscraper was imminent: the inverted metropolis of Berlin was drifting in the sky towards them, the two strands of earth crisscrossing. Soon, the Berlin strand would block out the sky. Beyond Berlin was The Dragon's castle.

On the ground, Maria had taken her free hand—the one not still wrapped around her own throat—and she was holding it out to Louis, palm facing upward, hand open. He looked at her. He looked up at Herschel, whose back was turned.

Louis looked—*really* looked—at his mother for the first time since leaving home. She was the same mom, but just barely older. Only a tiny amount of hair greyer. Her small wrinkles by her eyes only a tiny bit more pronounced. But through these small gaps in the familiar, Louis saw his mother in a new, more complete way. He saw for the first time that on the inside, she was broken too. She hid it masterfully: her own face, a mask unto itself. But he saw himself in her. And with his mother undeified, Louis opened his pill bottle and drew his blade.

The Breaker's jaw fell open, slightly. She removed her hand from her throat, and balled it in a fist. He heard the metal scraping as the tips of the claws punctured her armor. Blood from her palm dripped onto the parking lot. Louis watched her as she hurt.

He took two painkillers from the bottle and swallowed them, and his mind receded. Where The Chemist and Louis Baumgartner had stood as a single entity, there was now only one. Louis had gone away. The Chemist had places to get to.

"move."

Maria shook her head.

Inside of his shell, though his limbs were in other hands now, Louis winced at the scrapes on her neck where she had grabbed herself.

In the distance, The Chemist heard the sound of a landslide. Berlin was almost upon them. He took a step forward. The

Breaker leapt at him then. And it was nothing at all like the fight they had had before, when The Breaker was armed with sword and sorcery; this time, The Chemist was not knocked back, or anything close to it. He kept his footing, and pushed her away to the side, and she, the tall man, fell. She fell back into the nest she had made, and the pieces scattered behind her.

When she got up, The Chemist had already proceeded to the ladder. She took a step towards him. He got down off the ladder and looked down at her, and shouted at her to stand back. She walked forward anyways, and he ignited the air: Maria shielded her face from the blast, and ran full-force into the fire.

Her face was seared against the metal cuffs of her armor, and she cried out as she fell to the ground, mutilated.

The Chemist turned away, and took a step up the ladder's first rung.

Defying her scorched body, Maria stood up, grabbed Louis by the hips, and ripped him down.

The ground rumbled. The sound of a skyscraper being crushed into the ground was fully in The Chemist's ears now. He could see blood smeared on his waist from where The Breaker's claws had latched onto him, but he hardly felt a thing. He tried to stand back up, but The Breaker anchored him.

He reached into his back pocket, and took out a tablet of PCP. The Breaker tried to wrestle it away from him, but this was not her first time trying, in vain, to get him to quit doing drugs. He swallowed it.

The Chemist processed things unnaturally quickly. In no seconds he was a pyre, aflame from head to toe. He spun around and watched as the hallucinogenic flames licked at his mother until she was ashes. *Past* ashes. Until she was a billow of smoke and dust in the parking lot. Until The Chemist had nothing at all in his body left to burn.

If Louis had been there to see it, he would have been mortified. But inside the shell of The Chemist, Louis Dean Baumgartner—an orphan now—had already closed off his eyes and his ears. As he climbed the ladder, he wasn't sure that anything had happened. He stood side-by-side with The Soldier. The Soldier put an arm around The Chemist's shoulder, and The

Chemist recoiled, and stood farther away.

The Chemist watched the skyscraper come at him like a tidal wave. Berlin, not unlike the rest of the Earth, was a sea of fire. The Chemist became weightless as gravity shifted around from his thread to the new one. He reached down into his pill bottle, and took out a painkiller to bite down on. When the skyscraper hit, he was cradled in a shield of fire. He crashed down into the tall building and singed through it, gravity flipped around, and then he stood, breathing quickly, in the lobby on the ground floor. Outside the lobby, past the invisible barrier of broken glass windows, Berlin was a nightmare.

And then, partially, Louis woke up. He screamed out of himself and through vessel of The Chemist, into the world. He forced The Chemist to draw his sword. It was like marionetting a puppet with handcuffs on: The Chemist resisted him. The Chemist stood with his hands flat against his sides, eyeing the lobby's front door, *daring* somebody to seek shelter inside with a demon.

Louis battered against the walls of The Chemist's mind, but it was an impossible fortress to break. And still, he tried. He willed the hand to the blade. It was like trying to write with a hand that was asleep: the thing was dead; no reaction.

Louis scorned The Chemist, calling him a worthless motherkilling junkie piece of shit.

The Chemist gave one sting of laughter, and dared Lou to say it again.

Lou tried to make The Chemist gouge his own eyes out.

The Chemist's hands shook, but stayed down. He started pacing the lobby, talking to himself. "You can't make me. Fuck you. *Fuck* you. You can't **FUCKING MAKE—AAAAGH!**"

Louis had drawn The Chemist's katana, and drug it right down the wrist. The Chemist gripped at the wound clumsily, and on the first grab, his thumb slipped into the skin. He reeled and stomped on the ground, before grabbing it right the second time.

"Well," The Chemist said. "It's your body too, dipshit."

"I can break my body all I want, so go right to Hell and hang out for a while."

"Only if your mom is there to—"

Louis made The Chemist's hand slip on the wound, tearing it

open farther.

The two of them knelt in silence for a while, head bowed, until they fizzled back into one.

“Just don’t forget that you started this. You chose to take the pill. And you could choose to throw the others in your back pocket away, right now. But you’re probably not going to. Are you?”

Lou stayed quiet and still. Outside, the nightmare of Berlin raged on.

An hour passed before Lou heard footsteps behind him. He stood, turned, and saw Herschel.

Herschel, upon seeing his brother’s bleeding, swore and ran the rest of the distance to him. The Soldier examined the wound, ran for the lobby’s first aid kit, and ran back. He tended to the wound as best he could. With all the time he’d spent in war, Herschel had learned his share of surgical MacGyvering. The end result of his work was not elegant. But it would hold Lou’s insides in for a day. And a day was all The Soldier asked.

Bandaged, Lou faced the outside world with Herschel. An urban hell: buildings on fire, the streets venetian rivers of rubble, the people crushed or hiding—the living scurried at the edges of things.

The brothers stepped forward into the nightmare.

Chapter 14:

Nova

PGP Campus was three city blocks away from the skyscraper that Herschel and Lou had arrived through. The brothers, much like the rest of Berlin, walked through the recesses and shadows. Herschel, who was a master of guerilla tactics, led the way through a crumbled, warped, rotting version of the city. The brothers were unseen as they went, which did not come without effort. Many times, after finding a path through a collapsed building, they heard others ahead, and doubled back to find another route. Slowly, quietly, they moved heavy fallen furniture out of the way of passages, or moved heavy things into the paths behind themselves, to make it less convenient for anyone to follow them.

Through it all, Lou was not deaf to the sound of disaster. There was screaming. Worse was when there was a screaming that stopped. Once, Lou thought he heard his old neighbor shouting. It was difficult or impossible to be sure. He turned his head away from it, and continued to follow The Soldier.

Lou completely trusted Herschel to lead the way forward. Though Lou had lived in the city for a year, the place had become completely foreign to him. He was a stranger to this labyrinth.

The brothers had both become somewhat numb to the sight of dead bodies. Even The Soldier, though, had to admit that there were a lot. An above-ground catacombs.

Lou began to wonder how long they had been going for. At one point, they hunkered down behind a sofa on the sidewalk that had fallen out of the building above. Herschel had determined it impossible to cross any other way than over the open road, and so they had paused behind the sofa to scan that the coast was clear.

There, Lou whispered a question to Herschel. “Does the city stretch too?”

“What?”

“Like how the strips of land stretch. When the sign said Berlin was fifteen miles away, but it was actually—”

“No.” Herschel shook his head. “The cities are tied together tighter. They twist, but they don’t stretch like the rest of the land.”

“Then why have we crossed ten streets to go three blocks?”

Herschel stewed on that for a moment. “Shit.”

Searching for his bearings, The Soldier poked his head higher above the couch that they hid behind. A bullet rushed by his head. With the adrenaline that shot through him, he pulled Lou back into the building behind them, which was a clothing store. The two of them crouched down behind racks of coats.

Bootsteps stomped into the building after them. At least three people, possibly more. Herschel cursed himself for not taking the time to find a firearm. He suspected such a thing would be worthless against The Dragon. But it wouldn’t have hurt to have on the way.

Rapier drawn, Herschel peeked through the coat racks. Lou crept up with him. Surreptitiously, Lou took some amount of painkillers.

There were three men exactly. All of them armed with rifles. All of them scanning around the store, looking for the brothers. One wore a black cap, which hid his eyes in a shadow. One was bald. Another was a Jesus-looking motherfucker with long blonde hair and a green bandana. The three of them walked in a line, close together, the black-cap man leading the way.

In a flash and a storm of bullets, all three men’s brains exploded out of their skulls. Lou suppressed a scream. Herschel turned to the door to see who had shot.

The shooter stood in the doorway, shirtless, ripped, scarred, and holding one motherfucker of a Gatling gun at his hip, the barrels spinning down after the shots. Lou, before feeling anything else, felt amazement that Frix had upgraded.

Lou stood up from behind the coat rack.

Frix noticed The Chemist. “Hello, friend!” he yelled. “I thought it was you!” He threw the gun away like a discus, and it crashed against the far wall of the shop as The Swordsman regained his balance. “Your weapons are amazing, but they empty so fast!”

He walked past Lou a dozen paces, and picked the gun off the bald dead man. He turned around, examining it, and then he fired

at The Chemist, grazing his neck. Lou's eyes grew wide as he clenched his teeth. Frix pulled the trigger again, but found that gun out of ammo too. He threw that one away as well, and turned both of his palms up in a shrug.

Lou pressed a palm to his neck to stop the bleeding. "I was hoping we'd be on the same side again," The Chemist admitted.

"You don't have a side, Louis," The Swordsman said, as if he was about to cut The Chemist in half down the middle. Frix took a step closer: eleven steps away. Sparks fizzed at The Swordsman's fingertips. He held one index finger up for Lou to see a flame. "I learned fire from your father, a long, long time ago," he said. Then he closed his hand into a fist, and the fire went out. He took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. "I learned something from your mother yesterday. She told me it would help me kill you." Black tendrils emerged from The Swordsman's back.

Fuck.

Fire gathered in Frix's hand, a huge amount of it getting pulled inward, and it made Lou feel like he had gone back into the landscape where the entire sky was aflame—The Chemist's own furnace paled in comparison. Soon in both hands, Frix held a sword made of fire as dense as the sun, from the tip of the blade to the base of the hilt. He ran at Lou. Lou put up a wall of flames that Frix crashed through, stumbling to catch his balance—as he did that, his tendrils were on The Chemist, draining out every trace of chemical from his bloodstream. Taking away his fire. The comedown made Lou more immediately tired than he'd been before in his life: he fought to stand upright in the store. Frix exhaled Lou's excess fire into the air.

The Chemist tried to make a knife out of fire, but he might as well have been ten years old with Hersh again, playfighting with pretend weapons. Frix took a lunging stab and Lou fell out of the way, hands and face knocking into the ground. Lou rolled onto his back to see The Swordsman lifting his blade for another swing, and The Chemist closed his eyes.

There was a gunshot. Mist sprinkled onto Lou's face, over his closed eyes.

When he opened his eyes, Frix laid dead on the ground.

Herschel stood over him, holding a shotgun limp at his side.

Lou got to his feet, then shambled over to hug Herschel. Herschel hugged his brother back with one arm, but kept the other hand on the gun, and an eye on the dead men on the floor, waiting for any goddamn tricks.

“Come on,” The Soldier said. “We have to get going.”

Lou nodded. They went back into the city. Herschel checked the shotgun, found it to be empty, and left it. Lou was a husk free of nerve endings.

They arrived on the campus of PGP. It had not fared better than the rest of the city. Its green lawns were charred, and its tall buildings were strewn onto the ground. The brothers walked through all of this, towards the remains of the research center. They burrowed in the rubble like animals until finding a chasm that opened into a staircase that lead downwards, and they descended that. The lights in the stairwell were out. Lou, on another pill, kept a flame lit to guide their way down.

As they quick-stepped down the stairs, Herschel’s eyes were on Louis’ fire. Herschel had conjured fire before too. It was a talent that never came easy to him though. Like most things in his life, Herschel fought for it. And, like most things in his life, he eventually lost it. Herschel tried every trick and technique he’d heard of as they went down the steps, but as was typical, he was empty. He eyed Lou’s pill bottle, which rattled as it bounced against his leg.

“How many of those have you had?” Herschel asked.

Lou was quiet for a bit.

“Louis—”

“Like five,” Lou said. “It’s fine.”

“Is it?”

Lou nodded.

So Herschel did too.

Then Herschel pushed The Chemist down the stairs. The fire went out as he tumbled down to the next bend and crashed against a wall. Lying on the ground down there, Lou moaned. The air in front of his mouth glowed red on the exhale. In that light, Herschel could see Lou turn his head back up to him.

“What the hell, man!?”

Eight stories underground, Herschel picked Lou up by the sweatshirt and slammed him against the wall. He ripped Lou's pill bottle away from him, tearing the beltloop it had been kept on. Herschel dropped the bottle on the ground for the moment. The plastic thud and the rattle inside were the only sounds. In a bunker this deep, it was easy to ignore that there was a war happening overhead. And it was much easier for the war overhead to ignore what happened underground.

With The Chemist's back pinned to the wall, Herschel pushed his forehead against Lou's like a hydraulic press. Herschel spoke to Lou with his lips so close that he was almost kissing the junkie. "If you could feel any amount of pain right now," Herschel said, "you would be trying to murder me."

Lou held his breath. He didn't want to hold his breath. But he didn't know that Herschel was pinning an elbow deep against his stomach, taking away the choice.

Herschel let go of The Chemist, and turned away. As Lou gasped for air, The Soldier attached the pill bottle to his own belt. "You need another fix, you come through me from now on. Is that understood?"

In the dark, Herschel felt a tugging on the pill bottle. He reached down to it, grabbed Lou by the wrist, and dropped him to the ground. He restricted The Chemist in a full nelson.

Lou jerked back and forth, trying to break an arm free. "Hey fuckhead, can we talk about this after we kill a dragon?"

"Negatory," Herschel said. "You need to make it *to* the dragon first, hombre. *Alive.*"

"So what, I'm a weapon to you? Is that it? Just another gun for The Soldier—"

"Yes."

It was a small blessing that in the dark, Herschel didn't have to put on a good poker face.

"Wow," Lou said. "You mean that?"

For his own sake, Herschel did put on a poker face then. "*Yes. I mean that.* You are my gun, and right now you are deteriorating. *Stop it.* We can talk about our precious feelings when this is over—"

Lou ignited, and Herschel leapt off of him. By the time

Herschel regained his wits, The Chemist was already booking it down the stairs, pill bottle rattling in his hands. Herschel booked it down after him, crashing into the wall at each turn, and pushing himself off of it to fly down the next flight faster.

As Lou ran, he worked at unscrewing the top of the bottle. It was on tight as hell: his hand kept slipping off of it before he could get it to turn at all. He gripped and yanked, but the thing didn't budge. In the glow from his heavy panting, Lou looked down at the bottle to see what the hell was up. And it was difficult to tell in the red glow, what it was that coated the top of the bottle where he was trying to grab it. But then Lou noticed that it was on his hand too, and up his arm. Blood. His own. He looked at his forearm: the bandage Herschel had put on him after their mom died had come off, and was hanging loose by a couple of strips of gauze, and the wound was wide open again.

Lou missed a step on the stairs and fell, skidding to a stop halfway down the flight.

Herschel almost tripped over Lou in the dark, but he caught himself. He stood over The Chemist. In the dim glow of Lou's breath, Herschel saw that Lou's bandage had come open, and that the addict was cradling the bottle of painkillers.

Herschel yanked the bottle away and threw it down the stairs, hard. He heard the scattering of capsules as the bottle burst open from the impact. He saw Lou wince. And then he saw Lou relax, just a little.

The Chemist closed his eyes. "Fuck," he said, expelling the last of his fire. The stairwell got dark. "I'm sorry."

Herschel took Lou's arm, and rewrapped the bandage. He crouched down against the steps, picked his brother up, and cradle-carried Lou down the stairs. It was slow work, moving down the stairs in the dark while encumbered. The Soldier could have cut the journey into a quarter if he'd left Lou where he laid. But he didn't.

At the bottom of the stairwell, there was a door. Herschel set Lou on his feet—The Chemist *was* able to stand, barely. Herschel opened the door, and was blinded by the fluorescent light. As his eyes adjusted, a small waiting room unveiled itself. To one side was a closed set of elevator doors, and to the other side, a heavy-

duty door with a badge reader beside it. The heavy-duty door was propped open with a shoe. The brothers walked over to it, pulled open the door, and walked into the hall. It was a strikingly long hall. On either side at regular intervals were doors and wide windows, through which Herschel could see industrial equipment he had no guess at the exact purpose of. Given that PGP was a pharmaceutical company, he supposed it all likely had to do with chemistry.

Every door had a placard on it, most of them with obscenely long names of chemical compounds. Eventually, the brothers arrived at the door marked NovaXXXXXsol. It, too, was propped open. Herschel peered into the window. There, a man in a lab coat sat. He waved at The Soldier. The Soldier waved back through the window, and then opened the door. The brothers walked into the room.

“Hello,” the man in the lab coat said. His gaze was immediately on The Chemist. “Louis Baumgartner. I expected you to return. My name is Doctor Orna. I was in charge of the LithoXXXXXocaine trial.”

Herschel scanned the room for the NovaXXXXXsol they had come for. Louis avoided eye contact with the doctor. He buried his bloodied hands in his sweatshirt pockets.

“You know,” the doctor continued, “we found a grave mistake in the batch of Litho that we gave you. It’s a good thing *you* didn’t take any, or I wouldn’t be able to speak to you now.” The doctor glared at The Chemist.

Herschel spotted vials of chemicals on the shelves behind the doctor. He took a step forward.

Before he could take another step, the doctor held out his hand, signaling for The Soldier to stop. In the other hand, high above his head, he held one of the chemical vials. His thumb was positioned such that it was ready to push the seal off the top of it at any moment. “Come no closer. If I open this, the entire room becomes the gas chamber that we die in.”

Herschel was keenly aware that doctor was within striking distance of either one of the brothers’ swords. But Herschel had never been especially quick on the draw. Perhaps he would be quick enough to kill the doctor before he opened the vial. Perhaps

not. And perhaps the doctor was lying.

“Why stop us?” Herschel asked. “We’re here to fix the world, not break it. I could hardly fathom a way to break it more.”

The doctor’s wooden chair creaked as he leaned back.

“I have two daughters,” the doctor said. He continued to glare at Lou. “And some hours ago, before all the phone lines went down, I got a call from my ex-wife. You know what she told me?”

“I’m sorr—”

“You will be,” the doctor said. His thumb was pale white against the vial’s seal. “If you don’t undo this, you will be extremely sorry. You can’t die—”

“I can now.”

“I don’t believe you. You can’t die. But my daughters did. And perhaps your friend—”

“Brother.”

The doctor shot up, kicking his chair out behind himself. He shouted, “Perhaps your *brother* can die too! I have *nothing* more to live for. Had you not come, I was going to kill myself regardless.” The doctor paused a moment. He slowed his breathing back down. “Their names were Emma and Laura. If I let you live, you will promise me that you’ll bring them back.”

Louis nodded.

“Say it!”

“I promise, I will bring Emma and Laura back.”

“Good.” The doctor lowered the vial. He still held it ready to remove the top, but he stepped to the side of the room, allowing the brothers access to the shelves of NovaXXXXXsol.

They stepped forward.

“If you *can* die now,” the doctor mentioned, “I could hardly recommend you repeat the approach you used the last time. Opening just one of these vials would kill an elephant.”

Herschel and Louis looked at each other. The Dragon was magnitudes bigger than an elephant. But more ammo would hardly hurt the cause. Louis filled his sweatshirt pockets with clinking vials as Dr. Orna looked on in horror.

~*Bing, bong.*

Just as the brothers were leaving, the speakers overhead came to life. The brothers paused to listen. The woman giving the

announcement was difficult to hear through crackling and distortion.

“Mayday mayday, everyone seek shelter immediately. Mayday mayday, seek shelter as far underground as you can go. The sky is... the sky is a sea of lava, and it is falling.”

Under his breath, Herschel swore.

Louis looked at him.

Herschel rubbed a hand against his temple. “I forgot Berlin falls down into the molten earth.”

The PA cut out. And then, the fluorescent lights cut out too.

But the hall was not unlit.

The brothers stepped out of the room. The hall, which had been long before, had become impossibly longer. It was lit by a uniform, sourceless red haze. With a weighty crash, the hall in the way they’d come from collapsed. In the other direction, which was still open, they could not see the end of the passage. But in that direction, Herschel smelled dragon.

The doctor stayed behind, and wished the brothers well. Herschel and Lou walked down the long hall, swords at their sides, and Lou’s sweatshirt clanking with the deadliest chemical substance ever manufactured. PCP burned a hole in The Chemist’s back pocket.

“Are we able to save his daughters?” Lou asked.

“Louis. I’ve lived this day ten thousand times. And I don’t know what happens next, because I’ve never made it this far before. This is the one that counts. So we are going to try our very damndest to save *everyone*.”

Chapter 15:

This Time, You Will Break

Years ago at their home in Ohio, Herschel sat at his desk in his room reading the last pages of a paperback novel. Louis was laying on Herschel's bed with headphones on, listening to Dark Side of the Moon. Herschel's novel that day was Things Fall Apart. He devoured books: flipped through them so fast that most people who watched him didn't think he was really reading. But Herschel slowed down for the last pages of this one, to make sure he wasn't missing anything: he had never been more infuriated by the ending of a good book before.

When he did finish, he slid the closed book off to the side of his desk. He sat still for a minute. Then he exhaled, shook his head, and spun around in his swivel chair to face Louis. Herschel was pretty sure Louis had fallen asleep on his bed. If it had been almost anyone else, Herschel would not have been fine with that. At that age, Herschel was very protective of his room. The list of people who were allowed to fall asleep in it was very short: himself, his brother, *maybe* a member of Paramore, and Emma Watson.

Herschel got up out of his chair quietly, and left his room to go to Louis', which was the next door down from his.

Louis' room was a mess, as per always. Herschel traversed a minefield of empty soda cans, open CD cases, and dirty laundry. He made his way to the rack of instruments against the wall. He turned on Louis' amp, unplugged the bass, and plugged in the yellow electric guitar with black lightning bolt decals.

Herschel didn't really know how to play guitar. He slammed on it anyways, striking the strings with his knuckles like they had wronged him. He winced as he did this, but he kept going, scraping his knuckles raw with his eyes closed. With his chord hand, he kind of just made shit up. There was almost no rhythm to it. Nothing that was trying to sound good, or even like music. It was an expulsion. And when Herschel had expelled what he needed to, he opened his eyes, and saw Louis standing in front of

him, staring.

“You alright dude?”

Herschel looked down, and shrugged.

That night, Louis and Herschel smoked pot together on the couch in the entertaining room in the basement. It was the first time, and one of the only times, that Herschel had smoked pot in his life. The brothers laid back deep into the couch, passing the joint back and forth.

“What do you wanna do, Lou?”

“Nothin’.”

“No like, when you grow up. What do you wanna do in life?”

Louis reached for his bass, which sat next to him on the couch. “Start a band. Get famous. Be a rock star.”

Herschel nodded.

“You?” Louis asked.

Herschel filled his lungs with smoke, held it in for the count of ten, and then coughed it out. “I wanna get the *fuck* out of Ohio,” Herschel said, and then passed the joint back to Louis.

—&—

Herschel and Lou, well beyond broken, walked down the long hall. They walked by more windows and doors, with placards that had long Latin names. The machines inside of the rooms looked robust. As they walked, the brothers kept looking in the windows. In one of them, the machine rattled back and forth like an unbalanced washing machine. In another farther along, all of the machine’s parts were disassembled and laid out on the floor in an evenly-spaced, organized fashion, as if every piece was on display. At the next window there was a reassembled machine, but it had been reassembled poorly, and was bursting out of its casing from the parts not fitting right together. It clicked loudly as it ran. Outside of that window, Lou noticed an electric lantern, and picked it up. At the next room down the hall—the rooms had grown to be very far apart—the brothers looked in the window and saw themselves. Two bodies, looking exactly like Louis Dean

Baumgartner and Herschel Philip Baumgartner, were hung from the ceiling. Herschel was held in chains that pulled his limbs away from each other, as though he were about to be drawn and quartered. Lou's body hung from hooks: some of them only pierced into his skin and went back out again, but others hooked around a rib, or through his shoulder joints, or into the center of his forehead and out the other side of his skull. Lou stopped walking in front of that window to look longer, but Herschel, not breaking stride, grabbed Lou by the shoulder and pulled him along. "Don't look," Herschel said as they neared the next window. Lou kept his head straight ahead. He didn't look at all until there was a gentle tap at the window, and then he did turn, and saw himself once again. The Lou in this mirror was alive and correct to every detail: the dead eyes; the post-apocalyptic stubble; the bandage around the forearm, messy from being unwrapped and rewrapped again. Lou looked at his doppelganger with the same expression that his doppelganger used to look at him: malice. The doppelganger drew its katana, pointed at the door by the window, and shouted through the glass at the real Lou to open it. The real Lou kept walking. Herschel gave him knuckles. The next window was obscenely far away. As they went to it, the ground swayed under their feet like they were on a rope bridge above a chasm. The glare from the window ahead shined in Lou's eyes the entire way up to it. There was something bright inside, but Lou didn't care what. He locked his eyes forward. When they did walk by the window, Lou noticed that Herschel held his breath and kept his eyes shut. Lou was very curious about what could make his brother so plainly uncomfortable. But he was not curious enough to give in to looking. The next window after that, if there was one, was so far away as to be completely out of sight. Lou had a grave thought then. He imagined looking behind himself, and seeing that they had gone less than a foot from the doctor in the room with the NovaXXXXXsol. And Lou, as a seasoned tripper, spotted that immediately as a Terrible Thought. Because if he pursued it, it would be true. So Lou didn't turn around. He forgot what he had seen in the prior windows. Thought only of the destination ahead. And in that way, the brothers reached the end of the long hall. There was no door at the end, nor trap, nor grand

reception. There was a veil of inalterable darkness. The brothers continued towards it, not pausing for even a moment at the threshold.

“I love you Herschel.”

Herschel hadn't heard those words in decades. Possibly hadn't heard them ever.

“I love you too, Louis.”

The brothers drew their swords, and entered the lair of The Dragon.

Behind them the hall disappeared, and they stood in an amphitheater of black. Ahead of them, they heard the heavy scraping of claws on stone, and felt the ground shake under The Dragon's footsteps. The brothers smelled sulfur. Lou reached into his sweatshirt pocket, and gave a handful of NovaXXXXXsol vials to Herschel. Then, Lou switched on the electric lantern.

Towering in front of them was The Dragon's black muzzle—the light of the lantern did not even cut far enough to see The Dragon's eyes. The Dragon huffed, and hot air fell over the brothers.

The Dragon opened its muzzle to speak, and Herschel hurled a vial of NovaXXXXXsol into its mouth. Lou heard it crack against a tooth, and then The Dragon withdrew its muzzle from the lantern's light. It stomped hastily away, and somewhere in the dark, Lou heard The Dragon coughing. Herschel bared his teeth, and screamed as he charged into the darkness.

Lou ran beside his brother, carrying the light as they chased The Dragon through the black amphitheater. At the edge of the lantern's light, Lou saw the tip of The Dragon's tail dragging on the ground. Herschel dove for it, sabre outstretched, and skewered through the scales. The Dragon roared hideously, and through the dark, Lou saw its plume of fire breath rocket up into the air like a tower. The Dragon began to swing its head around: the tower of fire was falling, and headed for Herschel, who was lying prone on the ground.

Lou reached into his back pocket and, with no time to pick or count, took every PCP tablet he had left. The Chemist shot off the ground—the amphitheater was lit from wall to wall in his fiery glow—and he crashed at the side of The Dragon's head, knocking

the tower of fire away from The Soldier. Fire licked The Chemist's body from head to toe, and his bones had been replaced with forged steel. As he crashed into The Dragon, he felt bones in its jaw break against him. He kept pushing, rocketing against The Dragon's head, trying to singe his way into its motherfucking skull. He pushed his hands into its flesh and ripped and dug until he had exposed bone. And then he felt the claws around himself. He was flung powerfully away: he crashed down against one of the cracks in the amphitheater's floor, causing half of the room to go askew on the impact.

Lou stood up, jumped out of the crack, and looked at The Dragon, which was eyeing Herschel. Lou screamed beams of Hades at The Dragon. The Dragon turned its head towards Lou. From some distance away, The Chemist and The Dragon stared at each other.

“THIS TIME, YOU *WILL* BREAK,”

Lou said.

And in a leap, The Chemist was flying at The Dragon once more. Again he leapt for its head, and as he was about to crash, he hurled a vial of NovaXXXXXsol into the beast's eye. As it writhed, Lou tore the monster limb from limb, biting off scales and smashing tendons apart, separating bones and burning every trace of flesh, until The Dragon was slain: an ashen wreckage strewn out upon the floor.

“Lou.”

The demon Louis Baumgartner turned to his brother, claws spread out in each hand.

“Listen Lou. Amazing work. And now it's time to fix this.”

Distantly, inside of himself, Louis Baumgartner nodded. He stepped up to his brother, and took the human's hand. Herschel's arm tensed as Lou gave him fire; The Soldier seized up like he was being tazed. But when it was done, both brothers were aflame. They each went to a side of the biggest chasm in the Earth, and in their might, they pushed the planet back together, thread by thread.

At the end of it, the brothers ascended the castle's tallest tower. Herschel, Lou, and Sophie stood at the parapet, and looked out at a world that had been stretched and shrunk; fast-forwarded and reversed; fractured and crumpled back together. Nearly everyone on Earth had already died. Herschel knew this for fact, and the other two had convincingly guessed it.

"So what now?" Lou asked Herschel. The Chemist's claws had turned back to fingers. Though some of his features were less distinct than before, he looked mostly the same as he had. "Does this... does this work?"

Herschel bowed his head. "It might have to."

Lou nodded.

The three of them left.

—&—

That night, they stayed at an otherwise empty hotel in a small German village. Lou laid in bed with Sophie, arm wrapped around her, staring up at the ceiling.

"Hey," Sophie said.

Lou rolled his head to the side, and looked at her.

"You did a good job."

Lou had done an *amazing* job. But in the process, he had lost a part of himself. He broke many times in his journey. And often, though he had never realized it at the time, he left pieces of himself behind. Lou could never, no matter what, return to being Louis. That was lost. And it wasn't the only thing. The world had lost a lot that it would never get back too.

Lou reached down off the edge of the bed for his black sweatshirt, which laid on the floor bloodied and tattered and ashen. From inside a front pocket, he took out a vial of NovaXXXXXsol. He held Sophie tightly for a while. And then he said that he would be back in a few.

The Chemist went to find a pharmacy, which in the wake of the apocalypse, was empty. He took a syringe. There, sitting on the tiled floor, The Chemist poked a hole into the seal of the vial,

and drew out the NovaXXXXXsol. He dropped the glass vial to the tiled floor, where it let out a sharp, hollow clatter.

Lou looked close at his arm. As he searched for a vein, he tried to think about good things, in case this was suicide. He thought about starting a family. He imagined marrying Sophie, and having kids, and settling in in a nice home outside of a city. He imagined Herschel as an uncle. He imagined the kids playing with a dog in the back yard, as he and Sophie watched quietly. He imagined his kids never knowing that either of them had ever been an addict. He imagined a life where he was absolutely free of that. Lou pushed down the syringe, and as his arm and the rest of him evaporated into a heavenly light, he smiled at the thought of what it would be like to live life as a part of an unbroken family.

Chapter 16:

Heaven

Lou arrived at his own version of heaven, and walked away from it to a higher calling.

Chapter 17:

Earth

Lou, in the negative areas between Time, stitched things together. He sewed shut wormholes, and guided past versions of himself to where they needed to go. When Frix first slayed The Dragon, Lou assured, this time, that the beast was honestly dead. Lou dropped back into Time somewhere near where he had left it in the beginning, in his apartment in Berlin. He threw his box of hallucinogens out the window, and swore off drugs forever, lest he lose what little blur of himself was left. A prisoner to time and space like everyone else, Lou went to his mother, father, and brother in turn, and made right, which was not easy for him. He went to Sophie and, in time, married. Louis Gallo-Baumgartner was a name that was not unfitting for the former chemist. To his daughter and son, Lou gave every piece of himself that he had not already passed out to the others.

Given to the mercy of the hands of these loving people, Lou lived a fantastic life.

Two weeks after his fortieth birthday, there was a knock at Lou's front door. Lou went to the door and opened it, to see his brother Herschel standing on the doorstep. Hersh was dressed in a black jacket with a popped collar. The jacket was open, revealing a Killers t-shirt. He'd shaved down to a buzzcut and a goatee, and had one hand in his pocket. Having given up his human features a long time ago, The Soldier at least had an eye for style.

"Walk with me?" Herschel asked, cocking a smile.

Lou looked back over his shoulder, listening. He heard his wife in the kitchen cooking dinner, and the shouts of his kids in the backyard playing games. All was good.

"Short walk," Lou said.

Herschel fist-bumped his brother. The two left the house, and Herschel walked them back into the decade they had grown up in. They arrived backstage at a venue in Ohio where Lou used to score acid. They talked to the stage manager, like they had

hundreds of times on this night, and said they could sub in for the band that hadn't shown. The brothers, who in this secret of theirs felt like rock stars, stood together front-and-center on stage with a bass and a guitar, and played covers of songs that hadn't come out yet. In the crowd, a young Louis watched, enraptured. He had no recognition of this older, featureless person: the man on stage did not register as himself, nor as a father, time traveler, or dragon slayer. But Louis would go home that night, having forgotten all about buying acid, to tell his brother about the show he'd seen. Louis would tell Herschel that he had to come to the next show, and so the two brothers would go. While they were still mostly-whole people, unbroken by age and duty and circumstance, the brothers would go out to spend a night together. It would be the night that turned Louis and Herschel from brothers that fought into brothers that fought and loved one another. And to Lou, that, above everything else in the world, was a victory.