

This Saint Found Light  
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*I Hate to Write About Myself, so I Put it in A Book and Called it Fiction*

A Preface by Jaimie Gaskell

Dysfunction was so present in my childhood home that I grew up blind to it. I slept with mold on my wall for years. Of course, no one at school knew. Hi. Hello. Not one to start with small talk, unfortunately. So, while I was sleeping with mold on my wall and clothes no fancier than faded tees, I got straight A's. I never had any behavioral issues. In fact, I was told by more than one adult in my family that I possessed a, "gift for finding the magic in the world," or something like that. I can't remember and I don't want to make it a big deal because it sounds corny now. The point is: I'm well-versed in making it through situations that most would consider "neglectful" or "traumatic" or "seriously, Jaimie, stop deflecting with humor and schedule another therapy appointment." Anyway, all I know is I wanted to write a book about it.

Specifically, I wanted to write a book on truth, choice, and trauma.

Growing up in a family full of unreliable narrators, I could never exactly trust what I was told. The only real truth was how I used what I observed to decipher the present, and how those intentions influenced my actions. I spent a lot of time alone with my thoughts, and my thoughts became engaged with my surroundings. I started to interpret the world. After a few years of practice, I channeled that into a distinct writing voice.

That voice is *certainly* geared toward fiction. I'm trying not to be brusque with this introductory statement, but, truthfully, I've learned to hate writing about myself ever since discovering that I get dramatic and overshare. (Every. Time.)

I have always reserved my most poetic thoughts and ideals for the page, and to me, my writing is almost a separate entity from my everyday life. It's hard to talk about the person who wakes up at 12:30PM every day when even *she* wants to be talking about writing, about stories, about what life lessons we learn from the characters we love, about how worlds reflect the people inside them, about how to tell a compelling narrative, about what makes *bad* narratives fail and how they could be improved—seriously, I can't shut up about the craft, but if you ask me who I am as a person who chooses every day to write? Sorry. She overthinks.

[Grizzled tavern patron voice:] Therefore, suffice it to say that I am most comfortable when sharing myself from behind the screen of a character, and let us speak now of the story you are about to read. It is called *This Saint Found Light*.

Peter Saint is a seventeen-year-old boy with a splintered family and a knack for loving deeply, even if he's doing it all on his own. And he is alone. Often. He prefers it that way. (Oh no, I just realized I forgot to tell you to stop reading in the tavern patron's voice.) What no one knows is that Peter secretly sees creatures and monsters completely alien to those from Earth. They come by in ones or twos—fortunately, never more than what he can handle at a time. Sometimes, the monsters are harmless strangers who wear scarves to cover the second nose on their necks and have found themselves a bit lost as they passed through upstate New York. Other times, the monsters are oozing mud creatures that have sunk into their beastly nature and pose a real danger if left unchecked. Peter stops them. He keeps tabs on the things that no one else sees because... well, I'll spend enough time in the next 60-something pages unraveling Peter's psyche.

Monstrosity has always fascinated me as a device in fiction. As a child, the only Junie B. Jones book I ever read was *Junie B. Jones Has A Monster Under Her Bed*, and I read it over and

over again. At the end of every *Scooby-Doo* episode, I hoped the mask would not pull off. I loved *Goosebumps* and *Ben 10*. Always, always, monsters drew me in. I think that some of the allure has to do with the fantasy element a monster introduces, but more than that, a monster is complex. A monster comes with rules, depth, and tragedy. What has to happen in order to make a monster? There are so many ways to use a monster in a story—monstrous body, human mind/human body, monstrous mind/monstrous body and mind/monstrous transformations/humanizations—and there is never a way to avoid using monsters to reflect humanity. Even fully monstrous monsters reveal the anxieties we bond over as a species, the creature we do not want to meet, the fear we wish to avoid.

Alllllll of this is to say, it was only natural that a boy I wrote to be a vessel for teenage me's problems would have monsters tied to him. At first, they were simply monsters for monsters' sake, before everything I just mentioned instinctively kicked in. Why *do* those creatures hide their second noses under scarves? Because they're embarrassed, of course, at not being human. What about the Incubus whose skin shines in the moonlight? He's not bothered by that at all, actually. He likes to be pretty. In a world of monsters, you truly get a *world* of monsters. Each character has the opportunity to offer perspective on what it is to be saddled in a life full of unnatural rules. They can teach Peter something. They help him fall in love with the dark spots—because *that*, ultimately, is what I am putting into this novel. Feeling love during hard times is what saved me from hardships I've faced. Even heartbroken and lonely, every moment is a chance to marvel at the miracle that we exist. So it goes with this plucky seventeen-year-old.

I began writing Peter Saint at a time when I was confused by my place in the world. I

needed someone to heal with, but I had nobody I trusted. Year after year, I poured the lion's share of my faith into shaping *This Saint Found Light*. Now, through it, I am able to speak to those kids who do not want the situation they're in to be all that they are. That's why Peter's story is about getting the sad beginning and the happy ending. There is no return to normal at the end of the series. There is a climb to self-realization and new peace. There is victory. There is hope. There is unconditional love. *This* is the story I always wanted to read while growing up, and I am writing it now in case anyone else out there needs it.

It is at this point that I would like to thank two people who really taught me what I needed to know in order to succeed. Of course, so many more have helped me along the way in this journey—as they say, it takes a village to write a novel—but these two in particular broke through my walls again and again, at all the right times.

The first is my best friend, Arthur Davis, a salad barista in Seattle. He has spent countless—*countless*—hours talking through this series with me, which I hope is a statement that becomes all the more surreal when I tell you that we've only ever met in person once. He has seen the evolution of this book from its very first draft and has loved every piece of it. I think any artist would tell you that nothing kills creative energy quicker than feeling unimportant. Arthur made Peter feel wanted. For that, I will always be grateful, and I will sing his praises every chance I get (but don't tell him that, and also, if you see us fist-fighting the next time he and I are in the same town, leave us be).

The second person I have to give credit to is my favorite author, Maggie Stiefvater. I hate to act like I know her personally by lavishing such praises upon her, but her career truly has inspired me so much, and besides, every good author deserves to be lavished upon. I think she

would enjoy it. Come my junior year of high school, I was giving up on writing. I was disheartened by the fact that I never saw my own voice (or, at least, the voice I aspired toward) reflected in works that were already published. Then, I picked up *The Raven Boys*, and it quite literally changed the way I thought about not just writing, but life. It showed me that there was an adult out there who had *never* lost their—how did I phrase it?—“gift for finding the magic in the world.” Here was a mentor, however distant she was from my life, who showed me that everything I wanted, everything I *thought*, was not only possible, but sustainable.

Ugh, yes, it was really ground-breaking for me emotionally, but do you see what I mean about overdramatic and overthinking? (If not, then welcome, you are my perfect audience member.) Let me remind you that we are talking about an *influence on my writing* and *not* about me and let us *wrap this up*.

There is, truthfully, plenty more that I could speak about with my experiences behind writing this book, and I’m sure that someday I will. Furthermore, what you are about to read is still far from what the final version of this story will look like. *This Saint Found Light* is necessarily complicated, when you consider the themes it deals with and its expansive (five book!) timeline. There is plenty that I’ll have to tighten and tweak and seed before this book sees the general light of day—but it’s enough for now, I think, to introduce a small pool of readers to Parchdack, to Peter, and to the greater world beyond. I hope you will pardon the squeaky wheel in some places, but sincerely enjoy the promises made in others. Thank you for reading.

## PROLOGUE

July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Stars are large.

That is one of the first unlikely truths a child learns. They just *look* small, ardently burning themselves to death billions of miles out of reach.

And seven-year-old Peter looked small, too, in the wide backyard of his uncle's house, his skinny body jammed into an ancient, juddering tire swing. The tire swing was reason to hope that living away from home for a while might have some small perks. With his mother, he was accustomed to little more than stick-swords and tree stump obstacle races. A real toy was a novelty. He almost didn't feel he was allowed.

"We're just going to give the clothes you packed a little wash," Grandma Hazel had said. Technically, it was her house (and no one in Parchdack could have ever predicted, between her two children, that it would be Miller to inherit and Lydia to become estranged.) "Why don't you play out back, and Uncle Miller will get your bedroom ready for you?"

It would be wrong for Peter to spurn his family's kindness without first trying to adjust to his new situation. Therefore, he put his own feelings aside and borrowed the childhood to which this tire swing belonged.



Once sitting, he toddled back until the rope creaked. His young, green muscles thirsted for that rare zing of energy. He hoped his mother knew he was doing okay. They would see each other again on Friday night, when she would come for a visit. He could talk to her on the phone, too. He could tell her all about how he was having fun, but not too much fun, and that he missed her a lot and she was very important to him. She'd like that, Peter thought, as he took a deep breath, and as his knees sprang forward, he hoped she would not cry.

Disjointed.

That was what the world became.

Its sky pitched back and forth, like there existed a giant up there by the moon, rhythmically breathing everything in, out, in, out. White stars streaked by in perfect lines. Peter, transfixed, relaxed against his tether. He felt cold wind. Heard insect calls. The windows of the house spilled washed-out yellow light down the hill. It was nice.

Eventually, Peter stopped the swing, dragging heel marks into dirt dry as cocoa powder. He withdrew and flopped backward into bony summer grass, where he fought the impulse to rip fistfuls out. They'd learned in science class that grass was alive. It would make him feel guilty to kill it. It was much more rewarding to allow it sop the sweat from his fingers and imagine that the water helped.

He could not call back the emotions he had stowed. His feelings were confused at the unfamiliar dinner, the fun swing, and the thought of his lonely mother just a few streets away. He did not want her to feel apart from him. He wanted her to feel that he was thinking of her.

At the end of lawn stood all the trees of Parchdack. They, too, hummed with hidden life, as separate, but loving, as a parent. Peter daydreamed that perhaps they could feel sympathy for a

little boy in need. The same ones here lined countless other areas of the town. They bound the distance between homes, parks, and sports fields; they married crumbling fast food restaurants to the iron-gated cemetery. More than anything, he imagined them as a family impartial to the goings on of the town they observed. Perfectly neutral, but still connecting. On a map of of Parchdack, there would be a path of trees somehow connecting his and his mother's positions, and that was like there being only a single wall between them.

Peter didn't really mean to cry, but he figured it was okay when he was alone. He wiped his eyes and tried to distract himself. Above, the heavy blues of summer evening were calming. A few stars were out, blocked by occasional passing clouds. But one star... one star was *wrong*. It was *below* the cloud line.

Peter cocked his head to one side, coarse dirt grating painfully against his scalp.

The strange star, pretty and yellow and bright, wandered through the sky without aim, a toy boat swimming choppily over the glittering sea. A shooting star? No, more like a flake of star. A little, forgotten, excess thing. It was dipping down. Coming closer. It was not very large at all.

Peter scrambled to his feet and ran underneath it, craning his neck all the way back to keep the thing in sight.

The starflake bobbed like a bug, like something sentient. It seemed to want to stay within sight of the yard and would even change its course when it floated too near to a tree. It didn't seem able to keep itself from falling, though, and drew nearer every moment.

"Don't be afraid," Peter whispered, trying to gain its trust.

*"Don't... be... afraid..."*

At first, he thought it was some sort of weird echo, but then he realized with a jolt that the starflake had somehow *spoken back*. It had *copied* him. Its voice was rasping, feeble, sad.

Goosebumps shivered to life up and down Peter's body. He could suddenly feel the very straightness of his spine. Whether from fear, or excitement, or simply not blinking, his eyes welled to blindness with fresh, gold tears. His hands darted up to clear them again before sticking right back out. He wanted to catch this thing before it hit the ground—to help it, if he could.

Truthfully, the idea of calling for his uncle or grandmother did not occur. The regular world had fallen away. It was just Peter out here.

Besides, he had always been one to try solving a problem on his own before disturbing an adult. Independent. His mother appreciated that about him. When her shoes clicked sharp on the floor after a bad day at work, he knew to get her a glass of her favorite juice with four ice cubes. When she gave one-word answers and passed the hours smoking cigarettes in her bedroom, he knew to casually drop into conversation that he loved her. He could determine when she needed him to be quiet, or comfort her, or crack a cheerful joke. No matter what he did, she never quite lost the anger, but she'd eventually cover it and spare him a smile.

He could be what the starflake needed, too.

Suddenly, though, Peter was worried. What if it wasn't safe—for his sake, or for *its*? Like how you shouldn't touch moths' wings. He was running out of time to decide what to do.

The starflake whispered again.

*“Stay... with... me...”*

Peter's breath caught. He *wanted* it to need him. He wanted a miracle of his very own. “I will,” he answered.

And then the starflake was in his hand.

The second that light touched skin, it seared. A blistering pain unlike anything Peter had ever endured erupted along his arm. He tried to fling the starflake away, but it did not let go. It clung to his palm as though it sought to fester there. He tried to pry it off with the fingers of his other hand, to no use. The starflake remained—though its light pulsed weaker and weaker, a sickly chest weathering its final lungfuls of air.

And then, finally, it went out.

Peter realized he was on the ground, curled over the inflamed tips of his fingers. He gasped and wheezed until he managed to keep some air down. An angry red welt had already bubbled up in the space where his thumb jutted out.

Fear and guilt seeped into the deepest corners of his chest, heavy like nausea. He did not know what to do. He was never supposed to need help. He was supposed to be a good child.

In reality, he was only a good liar.

Peter pushed to his feet, breathing hard. He'd go turn on the stove. He'd stage an accident—now, quickly, while the tears and the burns were still fresh. He couldn't explain the panic that rose in him, that screamed at him to cover it all up, to stuff down his *real* fear and go *fake* a fear that would get him sympathy before anyone had a chance to turn angry. That was the only way out.

He took a second to prepare, then went up the hill, promising himself with every step that no one would ever see the messy side of him.

In some ways it was true. No one *human* ever did.

## ONE

### Secrets and Saints

#### **NEW YORK WOODS HAUNTED?**

PARCHDACK, NY.—For years, locals in the upstate region of Parchdack have guarded legends of a woodland curse, passing tales down from father to son.

“We warn our kids,” Madeline van Campen, 75, says with a very serious look in her eye, sipping on her lemonade. “They know not to go beyond the fenceline. And at night, they know not to go out there at all.”

Evidence gathered by families over generations apparently alludes to the existence of some supernatural entity lurking in the town’s backyard. Not many outsiders chance by the town boasting less than two thousand residents, but those who do are staunchly advised against using the area’s old hiking trails. When pressed, most members of the town would only speculate on what they thought may be hiding out beyond the town borders, not on what such an entity may find so special about open farmland and four-room churches.

“I’m thinkin’ it may be, uh, breeding ground, or otherwise general abduction ground,” says Artie Park, 37, a resident of Parchdack since birth. “You get them UFOs flying overhead, they find a spot they like, they hang around. Keep their lights all invisible so no one ain’t see ‘em. Come in all fast-like, gone in a flash.”

“Cannibals,” says another resident, who asked to remain anonymous. “There’s the human form of the devil in that woods. Prey on idiots what wander too close.”

And what about the children? What do kids being raised in such a paranoid town believe? Well, according to Philip Green, age 8, the answer is: just about anything. “You got to keep an open heart, otherwise you won’t find nothing. I think it’s fairies, but my nana says it’s meaner than that.”

The single common thread? As Elon Saint, 41, and, fittingly, a revered pastor in the town, puts it, “Parchdack makes a believer out of folks. We’re a small community, but I wager that we’ve seen our fair share of the inexplicable. That said, we also don’t give away our secrets

easily.”

A week’s stay in Parchdack, however, proved for an uneventful time. Much of the population is older and spends more time re-telling the glory days than living them. As far as woodland devils go, the truth may never be revealed to those outside the town’s inner circle of devoted believers—and even to them, the real story sounds hazy at best.

Peter refolded the yellow clipping with contempt, as if it had spit on him. The thing had been tucked away inside an end table drawer, laughing at him, his whole life. Considering its careless burial among decade-old receipts and other useless documents, it was likely his mother had stuffed it out of sight one day and never thought about it again—and every day, the irony of it all grew more poignant.

The article was accompanied by a handwritten thank-you letter addressed to Elon Saint, acknowledging the use of his interview. The letterhead, barely more than an ink blot at this point, read: *Small Country Travel*, which Peter’s phone revealed to be a magazine specializing in rural tourism, out of print since 1971. There was no telling where the rest of the magazine had gone, nor why this portion of it hadn’t found its way into some sort of family scrapbook. Elon was Peter’s late grandfather, after all, though Peter had never met him. All he knew about the man was that it was his fault the kids in middle school had loudly hummed “When The Saints Go Marching In,” every time Peter passed.

There was no time to find anywhere permanent (or at least permanently honorific) for the clipping, so Peter stuck it awkwardly back in the drawer. He felt bad to see it re-buried, but then again, if things from their past weren’t crammed into all the cracks of the house, it probably wouldn’t feel like they lived there at all.

He checked the bureau. No batteries. It would bother him to leave the house without a fully charged flashlight, even on a seemingly harmless occasion. Usually, he relied on his own

supply, but he had forgotten to buy more and hadn't counted on there being none in the house.

He was making more noise than he usually did, clattering stiff drawers and stirring up long-settled dust. His mother's voice floated in from the other room.

"Petey? You still here?"

He abandoned the bureau. The natural stillness of the house restored itself effortlessly, and with some relief.

Peter wandered over to his mother's bedroom and poked his head in. Lydia Saint was propped up on her bed, book in one hand and cigarette in the other, with a cheap, dusty ashtray half-full on her nightstand. As his mother, she naturally resembled him, but she had deep lines in her forehead and her hair was curlier, more yellow, like old straw. Though it was only seven o' clock, she was already settled comfortably into her pajamas.

"Going now," Peter told her, not broaching the line of her privacy beyond hovering in the doorway. He made no mention of finding the clipping. It was as his grandfather had said: secrets were not to be shared easily. Not even among your proverbial Saints.

She closed the book around her finger. "No costume? Isn't that the whole point of a Halloween dance?"

"I'm going as an undercover monster hunter," Peter said wryly. "Can't outrun a sludge creature with cardboard legs slowing you down—or dance the funky chicken."

Lydia laughed. It was easy to make her laugh. She liked Peter very much. She often called him her "oddball son" when she was talking to anyone else. Mostly, he assumed, the people she worked with, as they did not often entertain guests or friends. They had settled into a comfortable routine in the four years since their reunion, and not much had changed since then,

except perhaps that Peter had gotten taller.

“Alright, well, make sure you bring a coat.”

“Mhmm, I will.”

“And... have *fun*?” She said it with a shrug, yet meaningfully, like she wanted to support his decision to pursue such a thing, despite being unfamiliar with the concept herself.

Peter cracked a knowing smile and said, “I, too, am unfamiliar with the concept.”

She laughed again. Peter released a small breath and left her to her book, feeling as though he had just successfully skirted around something big and explosive. It helped that Lydia was too preoccupied with her own things to look properly at what her son was doing. She was in cozy pants. She enjoyed her book. She would not want to catch her son acting strangely, and maybe that was why she didn't. Or maybe his strangeness simply wasn't strange to her anymore.

Since Peter had told her he was leaving, he reluctantly abandoned the idea of the flashlight. She needed to hear the door open and shut. There was no room for secrets or delays in an honest child, and Lydia Saint appreciated her honest, strange, oddball son. (There was a flashlight built into his phone, anyway.)

Upon exiting the house, Peter dodged nimbly around the bowl of candy he'd left on the front step earlier that evening. The world outside was gray with dusk and chill, the streetlamps doing little at the moment beyond attracting bugs. As groups of kids in costumes migrated up and down the street, Peter huddled into his orange hoodie. He always wore the same one—hideously bright as it was, it had saved him from getting clipped by a hunting rifle on more than one occasion. If nothing else, at least he could pretend to have dressed in Halloween colors.

He walked the way he always did: head down but ears perked up, waiting for any sign



that something was amiss. He glanced at the mask line of every trick-or-treater he passed, checked down shadowy driveways for lurking figures, and even detoured past the big FOR SALE lot to make sure no leering men with cow's eyes sat chanting up at the moon. He was *trying* not to, since it was Halloween, and he technically considered Halloween to be his night off—but habit won out, and Peter would always be safe rather than sorry.

He double-checked his shadow, as well as the shadows of several others he passed, knowing that some bugs could grow a foot wide and blend in with dark spots. They'd be stalkers with pincers, and, when underfed, became all too happy to bite a chunk out of creatures bigger than them.

If anyone had their neck exposed, Peter glanced at the back, just to be sure an extra nose was not growing there. Once, on a field trip, he'd met a woman whose second nose could predict when it was about to rain. She was one of the rare strangers he'd met who hadn't been difficult or dangerous. In fact, sometimes Peter only bothered to check for second noses because he wanted to remember the lovely winter chat they'd shared. He hoped she was doing well, wherever she had ended up.

He checked for other things too, like vines that dangled in shapes similar to limbs, or for people who might be hiding cloven hooves under their pants, or...

Or for lights that fell from the sky, burning hands and upsetting the status quo of a young boy's life so that occasionally, every once in awhile, something *else* that was not in any way natural showed up and tried to mutilate him.

Nobody else in Parchdack seemed to know that any creatures existed behind the normal ones. Or, if they did, they were terrible at showing it. It was what had gotten Peter so upset about

that travel article! The idea that the same town that habitually mocked him with its ignorance had, apparently, once touted its superstitions to the heavens was a slap in the face. Thankfully, the scars on Peter's hand told him everything he needed to know about the truth.

It was all well and good to see monsters—to be the *only* one who ever saw them—but even he had to admit there was a reason he did not turn a blind eye. He could have. He certainly *could* have let it all be someone else's problem, let someone *else* learn the hard way that an entire supernatural realm existed beyond the sphere of everyday life, or even let it all go unattended. But that wouldn't explain *why* it was always and only Peter. He didn't know if other people even *could* see what he saw.

What he did know was that it made blending in during normal circumstances just a little bit harder.

Parchdack High School was a long, slim, brick building. Most of the trees surrounding it were off limits, but occasionally a science classe would trek out to collect plant samples or check the temperature of the stream. Peter had been known to emerge, late for class and a little mucky, from that general direction. Besides the forest, there was not much to the grounds. The sports fields were dark. The parking lot was empty. All traffic flowed to and from the building's gym entrance, where students with bulky silhouettes hurried inside to escape the cold. The sight managed to get Peter a little excited (not that he intended on doing any dancing). He wasn't the type, but if he didn't make time for functions like these, he imagined his social skills would fall behind. Besides, it was nice to get out of the house—to be a free teenager on the one night of the year that the rest of the town saw what he saw every day.

He took the walkway up past the cars and joined the bottleneck of arriving students. All

around him, his classmates laughed and shouted to each other.

“Eeeee! You look so great!”

“Oh my God, so do you!”

“...seen what Jenny is *wearing*?”

“Dude! You’re stepping on my tail!”

They paid him no mind, which Peter preferred. He did some of his best work when he was invisible.

Music blared at the entrance, painful as walking into a wall, but there was no chance to escape it. Not two feet across the threshold, Roux Marcelin, with his candle-bright red hair, came barreling up to Peter. He and pushed something into his hand then sped away yelling, “A gift from the gay agenda!”

Peter looked down. It was a glow stick necklace. Neat. He put it on his head like a crown.

And no wonder Roux had so much energy. The dance was... a spectacle. Peter got a good look at it all as he headed over to the bleachers.

Spotlights swiveled hectically over the floor, as well as green and purple laser lights that drew out illustrations of bats and HAPPY HALLOWEENS. A disco ball (mildly scuffed) hung from the rafters. Multicolored patterns of streamers lined the steps of the bleachers, and Peter winced with sympathy for whomever’s hard work was going to end up carelessly trampled within the hour. On the other side of the room, there was a bake sale and buckets of free glow sticks, which had leached out and created a positively radioactive dance floor. He didn’t want to speak too quickly, but he imagined it would be a fun night indeed.

+ + +

For a half hour or so, Peter barely shifted in his corner of the bleachers, periodically checking his phone (though there were never any notifications). He considered texting his mother to let her know how he was doing, but she wouldn't wonder, and he didn't quite think a hollow *Glad to hear it! Have fun!* would satisfy him. Still, he wasn't bored yet. He'd done hours-long stakeouts before that had required—

“You've disgraced me. You've desecrated the meaning of Halloween.”

Peter took his chin off his hand and looked over.

On the other side of the metal hand rail was Ramona Lopez, a fellow junior. She and Peter managed to rest at perfect eye-level, with her standing and him sitting a few rows off the ground. Her costume appeared... well, dangerous. She wore a dark indigo dress, the hem of which glittered as though it hid winking eyes.

“Is that glass?” Peter asked mock-warily.

He was being difficult on purpose to counter-balance the fact that their friendship was always surprisingly easy—if you could call occasionally speaking to each other at school a friendship. They'd had a chance at real bond, once, of course, but too much time had passed since then to try digging any of that up again.

Ramona twirled her dress innocently. “It's Perseus's shield.”

Only then did Peter notice the tiny snakes woven into her kinky hair. Their hissing mouths and thin tongues emerged cleverly in new ways every time she moved her head.

“Because you're Medusa.” Peter tried and failed to withhold a smile.

“Medusa if she won,” Ramona stressed, chin high. Then, just like Medusa, she turned menacing. “And you’re ruining my dance.”

“I’m adding layers to your dance. It’s great, by the way.”

“Thank you.”

“How did you bribe the other class officers into letting you be in charge?”

Ramona sucked her cheek, pointedly neutral. “Eventually, my fellows came to understand that a ‘matter of debate’ means something different to me... Filibuster. It means filibuster.”

Peter snorted. Ramona certainly had a reputation for getting things done. Nothing held her back for long, not when she really wanted something (and rumor said she was already gunning for valedictorian). She, like Peter, had moved to Parchdack early in childhood, but had not been born there. Unlike Peter, Ramona was Afro-Latina and heavily scrutinized for it. She was the only teenager to ever serve on an official town committee and the poster child for All County Band, but she was also the only student of Parchdack High School who had ever had parents petition against her. As a rule, Peter did not care to have friends. Ramona seemed to see something in him, though, and he never wanted her to think he was just another idiot who didn’t respect her—so they occasionally sent each other flares not to call for help, but to signal that they were making it through.

“But anyway, I *am* genuinely offended you aren’t in costume,” she said, steering the conversation back around. She was the only person Peter could never successfully distract. He shuffled a little closer to the end of the bleacher to combat the sudden change to a roaring rock song.

“If I had known it would make people this mad, I would have invested in a nice pirate hat.”

Her eyes lit up. “I could go to the drama closet right now. Don’t tempt me.”

“But then you’d cover up this lovely glowstick—it was a present.”

“Roux’s been tossing them into the air like confetti. You’re not that special. I’m going to find you a hat.”

Peter rolled his eyes amiably. “I thought I wasn’t that special.”

Ramona walked off to find him a hat, flipping him the middle finger as she did. Peter dropped his jaw, hand on his chest, and watched her melt into the crowd. His eye had just landed on the line to sign up for the costume contest when a disturbance rang out in the far corner of the gym. There was a collective moment where everyone over there turned in sharp reaction to something. If he sat up straight, Peter became perfectly positioned to observe.

There was a bright, glittery boy trying to clean some off of a six-foot-tall cereal box’s costume—the spill looked to be a drink or a cupcake, maybe. The cereal box, looking none too pleased, allowed the silver boy to help only until realizing he was simply spreading the damage around, at which point the cereal box snarled something mean and stalked away. After a tense moment, everyone turned back to their dance partners, and Peter was left tracking the wanderings of the (honestly, rather unrepentant) silver boy.

Something scratched at the back of Peter’s mind. The boy was slightly too far away to tell, but his skin was... off. It didn’t look like paint. It looked *strange*. Peter felt it. Human strange and real strange sat different on the spine.

Before he could lose track of the boy, Peter surged to his feet.

## TWO

### And Stranger

*Clang! Clang! Clang!* The bleachers reverberated with each footfall as Peter clambered down them. He noticed a strand of streamers at the bottom, flattened and dusty with shoe prints.

Also at the bottom was Roux Marcelin. The glowsticks had eaten him up to the elbow by that point, but somehow he still managed to affect disdain when he glanced sidelong at Peter. Peter did not begrudge him this; Roux was fifteen, after all. All fifteen-year-olds glared and felt the need to ridicule.

“Thanks for this,” Peter said, indicating his own pink crown. Roux looked at it, then at Peter, and shrugged without recognition. Peter nodded, smiling tightly, and pressed on into the crowd. He had lost sight of the silver boy but remembered the correct general direction. How hard could it be to find... one boy... in a... sea of costumes...

Peter sped up.

He didn't realize Roux was following right behind until something cold jabbed the back of his neck. Peter jolted in place, skin crawling, and whipped around. Half a dozen glowsticks of various colors clattered out of the hood of his sweatshirt. Roux blinked up at him, holding another one in perfect sticking pose.

“What the...?” Peter swatted at the back of his hood in case there were any stragglers lodged there. There were.

Roux blinked. “Want another?”

“No!”

The irritating little sophomore could not have looked more apathetic if he’d popped a bubble of chewing gum in Peter’s face. Peter was about to tell him to go away when a second scene broke out just a few feet away, drawing their attention.

The silver boy was back, now riding the shoulders of JV baseball player Daniel Pullocky, who had unwittingly managed an accurate, if flashy, depiction of a werewolf mid-transformation (right down to the incessant howling). The silver boy hooted and hollered like he was at the top of a roller coaster. He was close enough now that Peter could see in detail how strangely his clothes were fashioned. They looked handmade, dark blacks cut squarely from alien fabric.

“Do you know who that guy is?” Peter asked Roux.

Roux tilted his head to one side, considering. “No. Don’t think he goes here. Probably someone’s date. Or cousin. Or both.”

“Right,” said Peter. If anything about Roux could possibly make him more uncomfortable, he wasn’t going to stick around to find out. He had to find out—well, first if the silver boy was *strange*, and then if he was dangerous. More often than not, strange creatures were just following their base impulses. Hunters hunted and scarers scared, drifters drifted, and partyers partied. It was fine for them to do that away from regular people, but it became an issue when it got too close to Parchdack.

Peter slid up to Daniel, as if in alliance.



“Watch out—eight o’clock.”

A severe-looking Ms. Hunner was speeding over from her chaperone’s post. She was the oldest teacher at their school, and, despite the dainty clips in her hair, was anything but indulgent. Daniel went pale at the sight of her and began trying to shrug the silver boy off. “Get down, man! Now!”

“Wha—? Aw, okay.” The boy reluctantly slid down. “Did I do something wrong? Do you wanna punch me?”

Daniel waved him off and disappeared into the first gap he could find. Ms. Hunner, still on the prowl, disappeared after him, but she definitely sent a calculating glance their way as she did. She wasn’t through with them yet.

Up close, the silver was much shorter than expected. He only came up to Peter’s chin. His bone structure, too, was extraordinarily unique. It was as though a careless blacksmith had hammered out a metal skeleton and stuffed the result inside of a person, all sharp angles and—and pointy ears! How had everyone at this dance failed to question the utter lack of seams to this boy’s costume?

Peter seized the boy’s arm, before he could get away—only to find that the boy was already looking at him with his mouth hung partly open. There was no time to consider why he was doing that.

“Come with me,” Peter said, and he pulled him over to the wall.

+ + +

There was no easy way to say, *You're not human*. Time and time again, no matter how often monsters proved themselves real, there was always that lingering doubt that maybe this one was the catch. *Especially* on Halloween. It could have been that this boy was just a world-renowned cosplayer about to get more than he bargained for—but it was Peter's job to make a fool of himself checking.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Colin!” the boy shouted over the music, head swaying in a way that indicated he hadn't caught a word of what Peter had said. He stuck out a shimmery, silver hand. “What's yours?”

Peter fought the urge to roll his eyes. It was useful to know, at least, even if the name was entirely too human for his liking. Ignoring the handshake, he said a little louder, “I'm Peter. Look, I have questions to ask you.”

“Eh? Okay, quickly then!” Colin nodded for him to go ahead.

Perfect! That was the world Peter had been struggling to come up with! This boy was too perfect. Nothing about him should have made sense. He should have clashed with—with *himself*, all brightly colored and sharply cut. There was too much to take in, too many unpleasant, gaudy things. His eyes were acid green—or at least contact-lens green. His platinum-white hair sparkled with copious amounts of disco glitter, too, and yet Peter found himself taken in by it rather than wincing at the *loudness* of it all. Colin was charming in too literal of a sense. Peter actually had to snap himself out of it and remember to speak.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

Colin leaned forward to hear him, *heard* him, and then blanched.

“A, uh, small town.” One silver hand sneaked up to scratch at his neck. He looked all

around the dance. “It’s a small, you know, mountain town. You wouldn’t have heard of it.”

Peter crossed his arms mock-casually, feigning interest. “Oh? How’d you end up in Parchdack?”

“Myyyyyyyyyy date... invited me?”

If Peter was not mistaken, Colin had begun to blush a distinct shade of green—the sort of thing that could be neither faked nor explained away. So Colin *was* strange, definitely.

“Really!” Peter exclaimed. “It’s a small school. I must know them. Who are they?”

“Listen,” said Colin, cutting a level hand toward Peter as if trying to slide him an invisible deal, “I’m not a big fan of, uh, minds games, or riddles, or tricks, or *whatever* it is you’re doing, but—”

And then he slapped his forehead with both hands, rambling off several thoughts in a completely foreign language. He perked back up and said, “Right?”

Peter blinked at him, wide-eyed, until Colin made a strained face at himself in further realization. He seemed to have lost all capacity for speech, fumbling between English consonants and other, sharper sounds that Peter could not have replicated. At last, Colin managed to ask, “Are you human?”

*That* surprised Peter, even if just for a second. No one had ever asked *him* that before.

“Obviously,” said Peter. “And obviously *you’re* not.”

Colin’s pointed ears wiggled in dissatisfaction. “Not *obviously*. Plenty of people haven’t caught on so far, you’re just weirdly—weirdly—”

“Weird,” Peter finished with a knowing sigh. He couldn’t explain it. It was as though a wall dropped between them. Suddenly, they were the only two people at the party who had any

business speaking to each other.

“But if you’re human, and you *know*, then that makes you a straggler!”

Then he said it again in that other language he spoke. It sounded kind of like, *chlonek*, but also not at all like that.

“What? What does that mean?” asked Peter. He’d never felt the urge to grab someone and shake them before, but if that would get him answers, he would do it. His eyes were glued to Colin’s face. Was this a dream? Had he been right, all this time? There really *was* something else beyond all this, and finally—*finally*—someone had let him into the inner circle.

“It means,” Colin said importantly, not reading the utterly serious look on Peter’s face, “you know the big secret, but you’re stuck on a sleeping planet! Hey, it happens. Don’t feel bad!”

Now, Peter did grab hold of him. “Big secret? Sleeping planet?”

Colin’s eyes darted over Peter’s shoulder. He made an exaggerated angry face, shouted, “Whoa! Hey!” and then tackled Peter to the floor.

It was a hard, cold impact. Peter groaned. He managed to absorb most of it instinctively, and didn’t lash out in return. He couldn’t. Not with all these people around. Everyone in the vicinity backed quickly away, inadvertently creating a decent circle for the fight. Which... Colin didn’t seem to be very good *at*. Fighting, that was. For as much as Peter was *trying* not to hurt him, he was also not hurting Peter. A handful of pebbles sprinkled out of one of his weird pockets, clattering off like little landmines just waiting to dig into their spines.

Unable to help himself, Peter huffed, “You carry rocks in your pockets?”

“For the slingshot,” Colin said, so flippantly that Peter couldn’t tell whether or not he was

being serious. He grabbed two fistfuls of Peter's hoodie—

“ABSOLUTELY NOT! SEPARATE!”

It was Ms. Hunner, back and angrier than ever. Peter tried to do as she asked, but Colin twisted them around so that Peter was still trapped, unable to do anything but listen to him.

“Make a big fuss,” Colin instructed, all bravado dropped. Then he hopped to his feet, easy as he pleased, and broke off into the crowd. Peter didn't know what made him play along. Perhaps it was too overwhelming to make a different decision with so little information. Perhaps he knew his only way out was, indeed, to play innocent. He needed everybody's eyes off him as fast as possible so he could get to investigating what was really going on. So, he clutched his gut, hammed it up, and only stood when Mr. Braughan arrived and offered him a hand.

Once upright, Peter surreptitiously looked around. Colin was almost to the door where Ms. Hunner had once stood guard. She hadn't spotted him yet, and rounded on the nearby kids who stood by watching. “Where did that young man go? Who saw him? Is he a student?”

She was met with only scared shrugs and confused head shakes.

Meanwhile, Mr. Braughan's eyes had shrewdly followed Peter's. His brow pinched at the sight of Colin disappearing into the dark hallway.

“I'll get him,” he told Ms. Hunner. She nodded gratefully and stayed with Peter, shaking her head in near-sympathy.

“Are you alright?”

If there was one thing Parchdack students could agree on, it was that no one liked Ms. Hunner. She had been Peter's math teacher last year, and he had witnessed firsthand her unflinching discipline and frequent tests—but still he had to disagree. She was kind when you

showed her common decency, which he had, sitting quietly in class and never missing a homework assignment. In return, if he unexpectedly missed a lesson due to a pond-creature emergency, she welcomed him back the next day, said she hoped he was feeling better, and provided a stapled packet of notes. In other words, she liked him.

“I’m alright.” He stretched out his elbow and faked a slight wince.

“What happened?”

“I saw him horsing around with Daniel. Someone could have gotten hurt. I just wanted to talk to the guy. Ramona worked so hard on this dance for everybody, and, I don’t know...”

Ms. Hunner’s lips were pursed, wrinkly like a spider-web in her advanced age. He could tell she was not immediately sold on his innocence, so he gave a small sigh, but a noble one, as though he were emotionally beleaguered at the idea that anyone would ever hit him. Internally, he was stifling a fury born of frustration at having to play stupid before he could get any real work done.

“It’s a kind thing to look out for a friend, but you could have been hurt,” said Ms. Hunner. “Let a teacher handle it next time, okay?”

“Yeah.” Peter played with his lower lip as if disappointed in himself and looked down at his feet. He had to get *out* of here. “I think I just want to go home, if that’s okay. I have a jacket in my locker. Can I go get it?”

Ms. Hunner nodded. She escorted him to the same door Colin had slipped through, even held it open for him. Just before allowing Peter to go, though, she asked, “Did you happen to learn that young man’s name?”

“No, sorry.”

“Not your fault, but I expect you’ll hear something about this on Monday. Take care if you’re walking home.”

Peter nodded and slouched away. As soon as the door shut, his expression broke and the tightness in his shoulders melted. He could even laugh a little, now that he had gotten what he wanted, at just how useful a good reputation could be—which was lucky. It was just about the only thing he had at his command, besides a depleted stash of batteries.

+ + +

Colin could not have gotten far, so Peter began his sweep on the main floor. He passed several hallways, the cafeteria, and the main doors without seeing anyone. It was only when he rounded the corner toward the auditorium that Peter nearly slammed straight into Ramona. He’d forgotten she’d even left the dance. She was holding a cowboy hat.

“Oh, you’re right here!” she said, wasting no time to pop the costume piece onto his head. “It’s not a pirate hat, but, it’s something. You know, I never realized how many westerns this school puts on. We have enough of these things to kick off the Adirondack Gold Rush. Anyway, what are you doing outside of the gym?”

“I was looking for you,” Peter answered, rattling off the first answer that came into his head. “There was a fight.”

Ramona’s eyes blew wide. “A *fight*?”

“Kind of. It’s not really my place to say, but Ms. Hunner thought you should be filled in on it. She told me to find you.”

Ramona started to go, but stopped when Peter didn't follow. He quickly threw out another cover. "She knows I'm not there. I'll meet you in a minute."

Ramona traced a skeptical eye over him, but apparently chose not argue. She headed off around the corner. He had not taken two steps in the other direction before she screamed.

The cowboy hat went flying off as he ran after her. He didn't know if her scream would be loud enough to echo all the way to the gym. He didn't know if help was coming, or whether he wanted it to be. His limbs were moving too slowly. *I should have walked her back.* He could have looped back around. It would have cost him time, but at least she would have been safe.

She was not safe.

In the eternity it took for Peter to catch up with her beyond the corner of red-tiled wall, several worlds had collided. There was Ramona, pressed flat against the wall and gaping in disbelief. There was Colin being chased up the hallway, headed straight for Peter and moving too fast to stop. There was the man chasing Colin, who looked like Mr. Braughan apart from the sharp teeth in his mouth. He had the same forgettable face, same gelled black hair, same meek figure—but he was moving faster than any human could.

"Watch out! Vampire!"

That was all Colin had time to screech before knocking Peter to the floor for the second time that night. It was mere luck that Peter's head landed on the soft flesh of his arm rather than cracking against the ground.

"Fuck," said Peter, because he was not used to other people being around to hear what he said when things got dangerous.

They had lost Mr. Braughan's attention without realizing. When Peter looked up, the man



was upon Ramona, who tried to fight him off with no weapon. He was faster than her, and stronger, and kept her stuck against the wall.

“No!” Colin shouted. He was trying, but failing, to get to his feet in time.

As for Peter, it wasn't that he was frozen. It was just that he, too, was powerless to get to her in time.

Mr. Braughan's lips peeled themselves back even as Ramona struggled to push him away. Her eyes bulged with fear and revulsion, and all Peter could think was that it was an expression he had never wanted to see on the face of someone innocent. Mr. Braughan caught her arm and lifted it to the place where a pair of white fangs gleamed in his mouth. Then, he bit her.

## THREE

## The Nightmare

The next thing he knew, Peter slammed his leg as hard as he could into the back of Mr Braughan's knees. It did almost nothing. Mr. Braughan did not release Ramona, and, even worse, her eyelids had gone weak and fluttery.

Then, something small whizzed past Peter's ear, straight into Mr. Braughan's cheekbone. It struck with an awful *crack*. A rock.

He looked over to see Colin with another already loaded into a wooden slingshot. Mr. Braughan recoiled with a hiss, forfeiting Ramona to gravity. Peter just managed to catch her and sink with her to the ground. He could hear himself apologizing over and over, and another rock hitting its target. He dared to look.

Mr. Braughan's expression had gone nightmarishly calm. Satisfied. He looked utterly serene, despite that fact that his face was broken in two places—and, more than that, his face was changing. The eye Colin had wounded was no longer dark brown, but icy blue. There was also a spot on his forehead where the hair sprouting out became longer, greasier, matted. He was shapeshifting before their very eyes.

“I thought you said he was a *vampire*,” said Peter, who had never seen a vampire being capable of such things. Then again, the only vampires he'd ever encountered had been lazy and

overfed from stealing an American Red Cross van.

Colin nodded, most of his focus still centered on making sure the man who was not Mr. Braughan did not move. The man seemed almost as dazed as Ramona. He sunk to his knees of his own accord. Perhaps that was the only reason they were all still alive.

“A powerful one,” Colin finally answered. “Here.”

He dropped something small out of the fist that held the slingshot. The object was as brightly silver as he was. Its little chain tinkled like music as it slipped through the air and fell in a pile at his feet. He was far from a goofy, glittery, bumbling stranger now. He seemed almost... *smart*.

Peter felt guilty leaving Ramona, but hastened to the object. He found it was a small pocket watch with a button on top to release it. He clicked the button and the mouth sprang open. As soon as it did, a curling tendril of pure black smoke rose from the little compartment and disappeared into the air.

At first, it appeared as though nothing else happened. Mr. Braughan, who had all but succumbed to his gluttonous stupor, slowly began to take in his surroundings once more. His face was now entirely different than that of the Parchdack High School teacher Peter had thought he was. The vampire before them stood pallid and addled with grime. He was not bleeding from any of his injuries.

Without turning to Colin, Peter began to ask, “Where’s the real—?”

That was when he noticed that something *had* changed. A cloud of shadow shifted in the darkest part of the room. Within its black depths stood... a monster. Something out of a horrible nightmare. At an outline, she was mostly woman-shaped, but... wrong. A woman drawn blind. A

woman as told by someone who had never seen one and could only pass on legends. Her shoulders, wide and sharp, kept her hunched forward like a shriveled hag. Black hair hung in shredded curtains over her face, disguising sunken skin. Instead of feet, a pair of bristly deer hooves peeked out from beneath long, black skirts, where grass and mud stuck as sickeningly as bones and blood.

She stared out upon the scene with eyes that were mostly black except for a gleam of red. Dark veins crept like ink marks up and down her neck, her skinny arms, her face. She moved her neck and there was the sound of splintering. Her posture was that of a predator.

She lunged for the vampire as if she knew exactly what sort of danger he was. There was no evisceration, though, which Peter joltingly realized he had expected from the rabid state of her. She simply twisted the vampire's head, so that he would have to look her in the eye as she placed her hands over his temples. She stared murderously into him, the silence deafening, until liquid darkness flooded his eyes, pooling in like an injection. She did not release him until they were entirely, blindingly black.

The vampire crumpled in a heap.

Colin lowered his slingshot, sighing with relief. "That went way too far."

"What just happened?" Peter asked. Even now, he was hamming it up a little, trying to project a small, human defenselessness that might make the two of them lower their guard.

The scary woman strode forward, seeming to notice Peter and Ramona for the first time. Ramona was not coming out of her fugue state as quickly as the vampire who'd bitten her had. She was making little confused noises by herself. Peter's heart seized with guilty panic. He all but forgot the monster until she was steering his gaze the same as she had steered the vampire's.

She brought with her a revolting stench of rotten meat. Peter tried to gag, to squirm, but she held his head in place.

“It is better that you have no idea what happened tonight,” said the woman, too sharp to be truly comforting.

Peter’s limbs froze, comfortably numb. There was no longer any impulse in him to fight. It was like being pushed out of his own skull, so gently that he didn’t even object. He had just begun to feel a syrupy draining inside his mind when a loud voice shook all that away.

“Annie, wait! He’s a straggler! He knows already!”

Colin appeared at the woman’s side, hanging off her arm. Peter dimly registered this as comical. Colin was quite short, comparatively. Ha, Colin was quite short. And a little garbled.

“He can help us,” Colin insisted after a long moment where nothing changed.

Peter hoped that his own nod came through, even if he couldn’t quite recall what he was agreeing with.

All the pressure dropped away from his face. Reality slammed back into him like a gust of cold air. The monstrous woman stepped back, and Peter had to crouch with his hands on his knees for a second and just breathe. Again, Colin did not seem to consider that this all might be taking a toll on Peter. He began making introductions.

“So, this is Annie—”

The woman glared fiercely. Colin cringed.

“Oops! Sorry. This is *Antoinette*. Only I can call her Annie. And Annie, this is... um... oh no.”

Peter rolled his eyes scathingly. “Peter.”

He did not care about being forgotten. He was too busy trying to figure out whether he truly needed a moment to recover, or whether what he needed was to keep moving. He took one look at Ramona and knew it was the latter.

He dropped back down beside her. Her skin was turning ashen and clammy. How had this happened? No one else was ever supposed to *see*. That was the rule. The weird things only came for *Peter*. “Can you hear me? Ramona? Please tell me you can hear me.”

“Mmp?” Her head lolled left and right like it was trying to hone in on something.

Peter did his best to inspect her bite mark without touching her very much. The strange thing was, it hadn’t bled at all. He could see from the smears on the floor, though, that the glass in her Medusa dress had scratched up her legs. Someone would find this, sooner or later. It was all ending tonight. He was going to be caught.

Antoinette knelt beside him and asked, “Do you have any idea what you’re doing?”

Pushing down a sudden territorial feeling, Peter made room for Antoinette to see for herself. “No,” he admitted freely, sniffing despite his lack of tears. “Why? Is she—?”

She was probably dying. Peter had better prepare himself for that. Ramona was probably dying. It didn’t help that no one had answered him.

Antoinette took Ramona’s arm in hand, easy in a way that almost got Peter upset, got him jealous. He was pretty much never able to handle touch with another person—not even when the situation desperately called for it. He *wanted* to help. A rude voice in the back of his mind even told him to ask Antoinette whether this was the best thing. Someone who smelled like rotting meat couldn’t be very hygienic to have around open wounds.

Heedless of the way he eyed her, Antoinette gently shifted Ramona’s skin around a bit

before sighing in disappointment.

“Fangs,” she reported, seeming to intend only for Colin to hear it since she did not explain further. Colin made a small noise of grief.

Peter sat up straighter, desperate. “What does that mean?”

“He left the fangs in. It means she will definitely have to turn now if she is to survive the night.”

The information clicked despite the fact that Peter did not want it to. It was a horrifying thought. Ramona, changing permanently? Drinking blood to survive? She had never asked for any of this.

“She can’t,” he found himself saying, pleading. “She has a whole life here. I may be a, a *straggler*, or whatever, but she doesn’t know anything about this. Isn’t there some way we or you or whoever can make sure she doesn’t change?”

“Yes,” Antoinette said, gazing hollowly into him. “We can take the fangs out. They’re stopping her from bleeding as a way to keep the contagion in her bloodstream. If they are removed before the transformation is complete, her body will reject what has already entered her as poison. The fangs are keeping her alive, but they are also killing her. Is that how you want to save her? By keeping her unchanged?”

Peter could hardly breathe at the news, but no, Antoinette actually wanted him to answer.

“Of course not,” he practically spat. “I don’t know what to do, though!”

There was a rustling from a few feet away, the place where the man—the vampire, the evil thing that had just killed the closest thing Peter had to a friend—lay, belly-down and stiff-limbed... but still breathing. Antoinette had not killed him.

And now, his fingers were twitching.

“Annie!” said Colin, also staring.

Antoinette’s head whipped around. She cursed venomously and strode over to the vampire, her features hard. With a flick of her wrist, thick darkness began to crawl over the vampire like a suffocant, pouring from all around her as she said, “Get her outside. Somewhere we can bury her. Since I highly doubt *he’s* going to complete the ritual to transform her, we’ll have to do it ourselves. Where’s the pocket watch?”

Peter held up his hand to show that he had not yet let go of it.

“Good.” Antoinette nodded. “You’ll take that with you. It holds a piece of darkness inside, *my* darkness. When it’s opened, I sense it, and I can make my way to it. I’ll meet you there with the rest of—”

“*I* know all this, Annie,” Colin interrupted impatiently. “Why are you telling *him*? I can do it.”

“—*what we need*,” she finished, glaring, before turning right back to her prey. “If you can handle so much, then you better not get caught.”

Colin put his hands on his hips. “And obviously *you’re*—”

“Taking care of him. Keep an eye on the moon.”

The pool of darkness closed around her, and she vanished, ghost-like, into it, taking the unnamed vampire with her.



## FOUR

### Up In The Window

Once, Peter had found himself lost outside on the night of a full moon.

There had been howling coming from the woods late at night. Only once or twice a month, but animals had been found dead around the neighborhood. Chickens and beavers and such. Parchdack was growing concerned.

For Peter, it was an easy leap.

Within the town, there was a well-known community of seasoned hunters who pledged to put a stop to whatever was going on. They had been more than surprised when Peter Saint, estranged grandson of their late great pastor, asked to help. But, eventually, they agreed that any young man deserved a chance to better himself by embracing his culture. It was, frankly, a situation where everyone's hopes ran far too high.

A neighbor who was tall, gray-bearded, and hardly ever wore anything other than gray sweats donated one of his afternoons to the cause of instructing Peter on the art of shooting. Peter practiced with bottles on fold-out tables, but felt no rush of satisfaction when he caused one to shatter. He was more worried about the bullets skewing into the tree line beyond, which irritated the neighbor. In the end, they both walked away feeling that the time had been wasted.

And so, as the next month went on, Peter gathered up all the silver in the house, which wasn't much, and tried to research contingency plans for dealing with werewolves based on various human myths. It was always hit-or-miss. Most legends had been so strung out by now that any true advice had been distorted beyond any one person's ability to parse. By the night of the next full moon, the town was getting impatient. He felt that he was running out of time to intervene before someone innocent was hurt. So, he tried his luck.

He got more than he was prepared for.

Even hunters who had been living in Parchdack for fifty years did not try to navigate the woods after sundown. It meant that Peter did not have to worry about them discovering him this late at night, but he also should have heeded their caution. The woods made terror at night. However, he was not as alone as he'd thought. It turned out that a film crew had been camping out without hearing of the dangers that had nestled deep in the belly of back country. Peter did not see the werewolf that night, but he saw the man the wolf attacked.

The victim was frenzied. He must have been at wit's end, running for his life and having no ally other than a strange boy who knew too much and had too little time to explain. According to the man, the wolf had rampaged their set, had slaughtered indiscriminately. He alone escaped after pinning the beast under toppled equipment.

Peter did his best to lead them both out of the woods, but all the familiar landmarks seemed to have departed with the sun, and the wolf's victim was slow-moving. He had been injured—scratched, practically gouged, through the shoulder. Eventually, he began to lose his breath. After that came the spasming. And soon enough, the man's pained groans gave way to animalistic howls. His spine buckled and his face elongated. His teeth grew long as fingers and

deadly sharp. Before Peter could decide whether to save himself or try to help, the man's wound surmounted him. He dropped dead halfway between forms, a grotesque half-monster, and Peter covered him with leaves before stumbling home by the path of the stream.

He was fourteen.

He never knew what became of the body of the man or the wolf, or of both wolves, or both men. Someone must have found them at some point, with hunters combing the woods—and yet, Peter had heard nothing since. He was also a child. It was possible he had been shielded from it. If he had known how to dig graves back then, perhaps he would have stayed out all night.

He would be staying out all night tonight.

He had never really thought of life in terms of fair and unfair. Up to a certain point, it was wasted energy. Fair, for Peter, was all in his own actions. If he didn't check the lock on his window at night, and a sprite busted in, that was fair. If he was the one who broke curfew, unprepared, ran into a dangerous situation, and came out scarred, it wasn't *not* fair. But it *wasn't* fair when someone *else* was punished. Ramona had no business being a vehicle for his lessons. Was this really his fault? Was he even important enough to take responsibility for what she was now going through, to claim this tragedy as though it were his own?

"S'warm," she was saying, her head bowed forward, eyes closed. Peter tried very hard not to think about the fact that he was listening to the end of her humanity. "Where's my Mom...? I c... Can't see..."

"Try opening your eyes, girlie," Colin said helpfully.

Ramona did. She looked at Colin, then Peter, every movement so heavy that it required

her whole head. She lingered in palpable confusion on Peter once she found him. “Oh. ‘M sick.”

She continued to let them guide her over the dark, dewy lawn at the back of the school. They were far out of sight of the dance by now, a little more than halfway to the cover of woods. The guilt of where he was taking his only friend consumed Peter more and more with every step. The only reason he could bear to keep hold of her was because there was no one else to do it—she needed someone’s help.

He just hoped that he was making the right call by going along with this. Antoinette had propositioned this transformation with no time to consider the ramifications. It was... inconceivably extreme, the crossroads tonight had brought. Either way, there was no going back. Only one person could decide which path to take.

Peter juggled Ramona into a slightly more secure position. She might have been listening, might not have, but he asked anyway. “Ramona, are you...? Er, you don’t have to go through with this. It’s really scary.”

Ramona snorted. “*Scaaary...*”

Peter glanced past her at Colin, who shrugged. “Dunno about you, but I’m always for saving people.”

“*Is* this saving her, though? If she’s going to become like—like *him*? If she’ll attack people...”

Colin vehemently shook his head. “She doesn’t have to turn out like him. Walden was a bad berry on the bush. Vampirism is just—it’s just a condition. Plenty of vampires never hurt anybody like that. Walden is—*was*—already dangerous. And then I think tonight he was just too hungry.”

“So his name was Walden? You knew him?”

“Yeah. Annie and I followed him here. She sort of—well, he—there’s no short way to explain it except to basically say he was in prison, but he escaped, and we were trying to get him back in prison before he hurt anybody.”

The note of defeat in his voice kept Peter from passing any blame onto him. Colin already knew. They both did.

But something else had been bothering him about Colin. Now seemed like the best (or, perhaps, only) time to bring it up. “You totally pretended not to know what you were doing back there.”

“Huh?” Colin went suddenly rigid, eyes darting around nervously. His face once again flushed green, and before Peter really even tried to press him, he crumpled. “Alright, fine. Maybe I kiiiind of sort of usedyoubackthere to get past those adults and draw Walden out. But it worked! He totally went for me when he saw me, and—please just don’t tell Annie. She stuck me on ‘watching the innocents’ duty because she thought it would be safest, but she didn’t even listen when I tried to tell her the vampire was *inside* the room! He might have hurt more people, or revealed himself in front of everybody, and, and, and Annie would never let me do anything like this again if she thought my, uh, ‘happy accidents’ were not so on-accident.”

Peter happily let Colin ramble, though he had already made up his mind not to rat him out. It was atonement. He had underestimated Colin; therefore, Peter owed him.

But also, it wasn’t like Peter had any stake in how their bizarre friendship operated. He would only know them until they disappeared back to wherever they have come from. Morning, maybe.

“Sure,” he said easily.

Colin looked relieved. “Really? You mean it?”

“I never say anything I don’t mean.”

“Anything, ‘nything...” Ramona rambled, likely just latching onto random words at this point. She dipped significantly onto Colin’s much shorter frame. He didn’t seem to be growing weary, though. Certainly not on the scale Peter was. Peter tried to guess at how far they might have to go before they could—

“We don’t have shovels,” he realized aloud, forcing them to stop right at the tree line.

“We—we need those, right?”

“Let’s just worry about getting her out of sight. Then we can figure out shovels.”

“My uncle’s house is that way,” Peter said, pointing in a slightly different direction. Ramona slapped at his hand and mumbled something in Spanish. “Maybe a little over a quarter-mile. He has yard tools. We could b-bury her near there.”

“What if he asks you what you need the tools for?”

“I’m not going to ask. Come on.”

They set off again, cutting into the woods, where the darkness enveloped Peter’s senses immediately. It was like walking between towers. He knew he was slowing them down, working against them from behind this mental block. Colin carried Ramona all but single-handedly once the terrain turned unruly. Peter’s legs were shaking. He could not acknowledge his panic. If he acknowledged it, he knew he would succumb to it. He was *fine*. He just wished they had more light.

And then the clouds rolled back.

If the tree branches had not all been bare, it probably would not have made a difference—but they were bare, and so the moonlight had an unobstructed path to their meandering trek. Immediately, every inch of Colin not covered by dark blacks magnified the light back tenfold, so radiantly reflective that the area became arguably well-illuminated.

Peter was so stunned he failed to keep an eye on the pond he'd been minding. His shoe sunk right in. Cursing, he yanked it out of freezing water. "Why didn't you say you—?!"

"You never asked!" Colin said hotly. "It hardly seemed like the most important thing to mention when I thought the sky wasn't going to change. 'Oh, sorry Peter, I *would* be able to help, except my Incubus ancestors are all laughing at us because their biology got outsmarted by floating dusty water.' How would that have made you feel? Look, it's relevant now, so here. I glow."

"Alright, alright," Peter muttered. "...Incubus?"

Colin sighed laboriously.

Not only had the tension broken, but Peter could *see*. He could feel the weight lifting from his gut. (But then, of course, in answer, all the anxieties of somehow getting noticed now spilled in.)

They made better time after that, which was good news for all the burning muscles screaming at Peter to let Ramona down. It was only another few minutes before he, Colin, and Ramona reached the far edge of the woods, where they were able to set her gently on a level patch of ground. She curled up on one side, staring at the gently curved fingers of one hand, as Colin rubbed his hands up and down his arms. His teeth were chattering.

"If we go any farther, my uncle might see you," Peter said apologetically.

Colin waved him away. "I'll stay here with Ramona."

Surprisingly, Peter found that he trusted him to do that. He prayed he wasn't being tricked and tossed over the pocket watch. Then he made himself move, grateful that they were too close to the edge of the woods to get lost before he reached the yard.

It was strange to be back at Uncle Miller's house after not having spoken in years. The sibling relationship between Miller and Lydia had crumbled for good after the death of Peter's grandmother, and the court case still made most folks in Parchdack too uncomfortable to speak about. It had, however, been another matter of petition. Most people disliked and distrusted Miller—probably just as much as they *wanted* to like Lydia—and wanted to see young Peter returned to his mother. When case was brought before judge, it was ruled that exactly that would happen. No sooner had Lydia snatched Peter back than she shut her brother out. She claimed it was because Miller was responsible for the worst injury Peter had ever suffered, but there were other reasons, too, and Peter hated to get her angry, so he, too, pretended he had never had an uncle.

Except for when he needed to dig a grave.

There were some lights on in the house, though Uncle Miller had his shades drawn. He lived on a state route, where neighbors were few and far between, and passersby came only with the flash of headlights. He had probably spent Halloween completely alone.

It was odd; his yard seemed smaller now.

Peter was so focused on deciphering the feelings of the strange moment that he almost missed it. It was a small thing.

There, in a dark window on the second floor, shone a single light. An innocuous,



forgotten thing. It was golden. Just hovering there. Not very large at all.

Peter's heart thundered.

He looked all around—it had to be a reflection, something with the moon maybe. It *couldn't* be...

The light flickered out. Peter swore he felt the burn on his palm twinge with phantom pain. *It couldn't be.*

For a moment, he forgot what he was doing. His mouth had gone dry from sitting open. All at once, he remembered Ramona, the shovels, the dire urgency of the night. He forced himself to move while his mind raced with thoughts.

After all this time? Tonight? Could it be coincidence? Was it *fate*? A trick? Oh, but it *would* happen when he had something far more important to be concerned with. What did it all mean? *Finally...*

Peter was hardly self-aware enough to be careful as he lifted the heavy, wooden bar laying over the basement doors—they were the slanted kind that seemed to emerge from the earth like a face. He quickly set the bar aside, eased one door open on its rusty hinge, and descended into the dark basement. (*Finally*, his brain chanted. *Finally.*) Several yard-keeping and house-maintaining tools hung on the walls or sat perched on shelves. Peter's phone had enough battery left to produce a flashlight, so he selected three shovels at random and snuck back out across the yard, making sure to replace the door and the bar in case his uncle happened to glance outside.

At the edge of the yard, he risked one final glance up at the dark window.

"I'll be back," he whispered, but went.

## FIVE

## Grave Stocking

The moon was still out, so back in the trees, Colin still shone like a beacon. Antoinette had arrived in Peter's absence, but Ramona, it seemed, had fallen unconscious, which brought a suffocating solemnity upon the forest. Peter tried not to buzz with new revelations. *One thing at a time. Besides, you don't know that it's not a very, very bad sign.*

"Where's Walden?" he asked Antoinette, thinking that perhaps she would be impressed by what else he had learned while she was gone. The stench of rotting meat grew distinctly more pungent as she cracked a knuckle.

"I found an unreachable dark and left him there to rot."

"Oh. Good." Whatever that meant.

He offered her and Colin each a shovel. Antoinette sized him up with calculating eyes, then shook her head. "Not yet. She needs one more thing first. A token to be buried with. What have you both got on you?"

Peter let the shovels thunk to the ground, hastening alongside Colin to turn out his pockets. He had his phone, keys, wallet, and a useless little good-luck token. Colin had mountains of pebbles spilling out between his fingers.

Antoinette dismissed Colin offhand and plucked the token from Peter. It was shaped like a little metal butterfly. “What’s this?” she asked.

“Nothing. I got it at a stupid rock shop in Poughkeepsie.”

“So you won’t miss it?”

“No.”

Antoinette leaned down and made Ramona’s fingers clasp it.

Then they all dug a grave together, and the strangest thing was understanding from the quiet, deliberate way they went about it, that they had all done this before. Something ached in Peter’s bones, at the roots of him, a place where only he had ever been. He tried not to think about it. Once the grave was sufficiently deep, Antoinette roused Ramona long enough to guide her down. Then they buried her. Only when the last square of dirt was tamped down was there finally a moment to breathe.

Peter dug his spade in at the base of a tree and used its handle to ease himself into a sitting position. He checked the time. It was well after two. It was November first. Even if he had gotten that night off, he’d be back on the clock by now anyway.

Colin also sat somberly in the area of the grave. He was shivering something fierce by now, though the work had done its best to keep them all sweating. Antoinette was the only one still at work. She stood over the grave with some kind of vial, which she un-stoppered and upended over the fresh dirt. It was an unsurprisingly red and viscous fluid that dripped out.

“What is that?” Peter asked anyway.

Antoinette shook the vial out to the last drop before answering. “Walden’s blood. It’ll seep through, seeking her out. Then, when she’s ready, she’ll emerge. Too much for you yet?”

“Annie, d-d-don’t be nasty right now,” Colin chided.

“Are you alright?” Peter asked him at the same time Antoinette snarled, “I told you to bring a coat.”

Colin rolled his eyes as Antoinette finally went and sat against another tree, the third solitary point of their grim triangle. To Peter, he explained, “Cold just, uh, isn’t always super fun for an Incubus.”

Peter wordlessly unzipped and proffered his hoodie. It was the least he could do to repay them for tonight. He was still feeling warm, anyway.

“Oh, you don’t have to—!”

Peter threw it at him. The second it was in his lap, Colin bundled gratefully inside. Antoinette glanced between the two of them and said, quite neutrally, “It’s more than I would have done.”

Peter ignored the comment. He picked up a nearby rock and began turning it over in his hands, clearing his throat to ease into his voice.

“I might be saying this too early... but thank you.”

No one said anything.

“What aren’t you telling me?” he asked Antoinette specifically.

She leveled him with a heavy stare across Ramona’s fresh grave. “I don’t know in what way you care for her, but she’s going to be different now. She might be unrecognizable. She might not come back at all.”

Peter felt the rock trembling in his hands, unable to bear the thought. She was *Ramona*. She had her whole life ahead of her, and she didn’t deserve this pain. It would hurt her worse

than it had hurt him, knowing about all this stuff. He had basically never had a childhood, so there was nothing for him to lose—but hers was getting stolen out from under. It was already not fair that she couldn't come back human. To not come back at all? After even bothering to get his hopes up? He set the rock down by his feet, soothed his palms up and down his mud-crusting jeans, and, when that did nothing, ducked his head down to breathe better. The silence of the forest reigned until he picked himself back up. He had questions.

“Were you lying to me? Did we just bury her permanently?”

Antoinette shook her head. “No. But she died tonight. That’s not the kind of thing someone compartmentalizes easily. She’ll never be the same again. She’s going to need time and guidance.”

Oh. *That* kind of come back. The news just kept getting sadder and sadder.

“What kind of guidance?” he asked.

Antoinette raised an eyebrow, though her face still came across as a very flat, tired thing. For once, she did not look so monstrous. She looked... like a young woman. “You’re asking for a tale, not an answer.”

Peter indicated that they had nowhere else to go. It was a shrug so frustrated, so angry, that it reminded him of his mother asleep at home, blissfully ignorant to all this. He’d somehow have to sneak in and hide—*everything*—from her. He might be lucky to get an hour or two of sleep before having to rise and put on a cheerful act.

It was good, though, that he was making plans to go home and sleep, recover. It meant that the world wasn't ending.

“Alright,” said Antoinette, getting comfortable against her tree trunk. “Picture a girl like

Ramona. She went through a similar thing. It was a different place, a different time, and her attacker was some mortal man she once loved. Once. Hardly. He thought that flowers were all it would take to keep her, but they drifted apart, as people do, and she met someone else. Her once-lover, riddled with jealousy, brought her bouquet after bouquet, because it was all he knew how to do, and when he finally realized that it would never work, he killed her.

“The girl’s family found first a pile of pink petals on the doorstep, and next the remains of their daughter. Afterwards, that particular flower came to be known colloquially as the dead daughter—to even bring it into your home was bad luck. It meant that this girl’s fate would befall *your* child, your partner, you. It became a symbol. Once the legend grew, dead daughters were even left intentionally. An angry man marking with pride where he had been, and what he was capable of when he was not given what he wanted. It’s a tradition that has been around even longer than me.”

“And she’s four hundred,” Colin supplied. He didn’t seem to be joking, and she didn’t deny it. Peter stayed quiet, unsure where this was all going.

“Most of those years, I have spent recruiting for an organization,” Antoinette went on. “The Dead Daughters. We adopted the name and we protect survivors... as well as those in danger of needing to survive something.”

She gave him a meaningful look at that. Peter’s mouth twisted in distaste. He focused his gaze instead on the lines of disturbed earth, tracing them, wondering if, when, and how Ramona would truly emerge from that cold space. How he was going to control what came after, and, if it ended up going badly, how he could possibly come out of it safely. There were so many more variables tonight than he was used to.

“Um, Peter?” Colin said timidly. He would have been miserable without that sweatshirt. The night was well and truly cold by now. It had felt nice when they’d first sat down, but had quickly become oppressive and isolating. “I think it’s a bad idea to cram a million answers into one night, especially when we’ve had to... you know...”

“I don’t have much choice,” said Peter, laughing, scrubbing his hands very fast through his hair, “considering I don’t know when I’ll meet someone else who knows as much as you two seem to, and would be willing to actually talk to me about whatever the hell bigger picture this is all part of.”

Colin sent a confused look Antoinette’s way. “Well, we’re gonna be back with Ramona tomorrow morning, right? So we can talk about it after we’ve all gotten some sleep.”

“*Back* with Ramona?” Peter repeated, thrown.

“I was getting to that,” Antoinette said airily. “I need to take Ramona to The Dead Daughters. There’s no way she can adjust to her new needs on Earth.”

“But it’s already almost morning. What difference does it make? And—wait—*Earth*?”

Antoinette’s reply was maddeningly stone-faced, as though Peter were talking to a particularly cold brick wall. “For one thing, it takes at least a month to regulate the blood cravings. She’ll be actively dangerous before that’s settled.”

“A *mon*—?”

“But I understand that a month is too long to wait. We have something called a time cell that I can probably persuade the organization to put her in. It’s like a little pocket in the ground where time slows. We’ve furnished it, it’s livable... and it will expedite the process. As far as everyone who knows her will be concerned, only one night will have passed.”

“That’s... probably our best bet,” Peter admitted, trying not to trace the shape of Ramona’s phone in his pocket. Before he had shut it off, it had received two text messages from her mother—but the texts were entirely in Spanish, and Peter didn’t trust his high school lessons to convince a native speaker, so he didn’t try faking any responses. “Is there any way I can help?”

“No. If you’re able to maintain your normal life, it’s best that you do.”

“But if I’m also able to help her somehow, shouldn’t I do that instead?”

“Would you want to be there during the aggressive stages—you, full of fresh and tasty blood?”

“You say that like *you’re* not.”

Antoinette shook her head, raising an arm and pinching it. The skin held form for a moment before gradually sliding back into its original flat, sagging form. “No blood. Dead meat.”

“Uch!” Colin exclaimed unhappily. “Don’t talk about yourself like that, Annie, it’s creepy. You’re beautiful!”

Antoinette ignored the obvious lie. “If you want what’s best for Ramona,” she told Peter, “then you want her to come with me, where she can receive proper care.”

“Why don’t we just ask her what she wants when she, you know, comes out?”

“Because she won’t be in much of a talking mood. And I’m sure, when I’m busy holding her down and transporting her through a vacuum of infinite darkness, I won’t either. Any other stupid questions?”

“Oh, you bet,” said Peter, getting ready to take up the rock again on principle. “Why



don't you let me come wherever you're taking her—to the... organization?"

Antoinette was taken aback. "You think you want that?"

"Sure! You said she'd be back by morning anyway. Take us together."

"Well, I'm flattered you think so highly of my abilities," she said, resuming her apathy as she shut her eyes and leaned back against the tree, "but even I have my limits. I won't even have the energy to bring Colin back with me. Oh! Colin. You're walking home."

Colin threw out his oversized sleeves and whined in disbelief. The side of Antoinette's mouth quirked upward. Conversation seemed to wear itself out after that. They sat in silence, waiting for a moment that could have been hours away yet, and all the while the night grew darker, and the morning grew closer.

+ + +

The first clue that Ramona was emerging did not come with the stirring of the earth, but with the taste of blood in the air. Peter, who had been fairly close to dreaming by that point, jerked awake, wiping his shirtsleeve raggedly across the freezing tip of his nose. He was on his feet in an instant, shovel in hand, as though there had not been a moment where he was doing something else.

Colin *had* fallen asleep, and remained asleep until Antoinette kicked him. The clouds had rolled back in and he was no longer shining. They all circled the grave, waiting for it to tremble.

"Once she's free, you'll both need to get back," Antoinette reminded them. "She won't be in control of herself. I'll probably have to leave as soon as I get a good hold on her."

“Got it.” Colin nodded. He was dutiful underneath his yawn. “And I’ll meet you at the sanctuary.”

“Yes.”

Suddenly, a split appeared in the grave like an opening mouth. Out shot a hand, reaching wildly. Thankfully, the grave needed not be very deep. Antoinette grabbed Ramona’s forearm and began to hoist as Colin and Peter dropped to their knees to help dig her out by hand. Now Peter regretted not staying awake for more answers. It was real now. Ramona was really... and, well, if he was going to be able to help her recover from this, which he fully intended to do, then he needed to know as much as they did. Or, at the very least, more than he did now.

All at once, Ramona sat up out of the grave, great clumps of dirt spilling away like rain. She gasped for breath. She did not even manage to get her eyes open before Antoinette took a protective pose over her, almost like a hug, and for the second time that night, Antoinette carried someone away into darkness—though this time, she left in her wake a scattering of pink petals on the breeze.

Peter watched the petals fall over the remnants of the grave. He could feel Colin watching him, perhaps trying to read whether or not Peter was okay. Peter wiped a bit of sweat off his upper lip and said, all but bluntly, “You know what I’m gonna ask you, right?”

Colin gave no answer. Perhaps he truly could not guess. Perhaps he could and didn’t want to be right.

“Take me with you,” said Peter, finally meeting his eye. “You’re going somewhere close enough to walk, she said? I need to make sure that Ramona is okay, and if she isn’t okay—I need time to figure out how the hell I’m going to explain... *everything*. More than I’ve ever had to

explain before. Please. I have to put these shovels back where I found them, but after that... take me with you.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea...”

“What do you need me to do?”

The corners of Colin’s mouth pulled into an exaggerated frown. He took a hesitant step backward, hands digging into the pockets of Peter’s hoodie, before he seemed to realize the irony of doing that. He hesitated. And hesitated. Peter didn’t make a move one way or the other for fear of swaying him incorrectly.

At last, Colin groaned and said, “Alright, Straggler, it’s not like this night can get much weirder for you. But you have to listen to what I say when I’m leading the way, keep all questions orderly, and let me do the talking when we explain this to Annie.”

He ticked everything off on his fingers, not looking quite happy with what he was doing. Peter found himself smiling with perhaps the least amount of fabricated joy that he had ever managed in his life. He dusted himself off, for all the good it would do, and showed that he was ready to follow.

“Alright, well, prepare yourself,” Colin rattled on as they left the clearing behind. “You’re definitely not expecting what’s about to happen next.”

## SIX

### The New Dead Daughter

Miss Grown was the name of the teacher who had single-handedly enabled Ramona's reading frenzy in the fourth grade. This was, incidentally, the same year the Lopezes had moved to Parchdack. It was also the year Ramona's class had been assigned the vision project.

"This project," Miss Grown explained, "is to help you see that you can be exactly what you want to be when you grow up. Your job is to think of something that makes you happy. Then, interview an adult you know who has made that interest a part of their life. For example, if you really like baseball, I can help you get an interview with Coach Ford from the high school. It can be anything you want, and if you don't know where to start, talk to me, and I can help you."

Ramona's hand shot up. Miss Grown smiled.

"Yes, Ramona?"

Ramona said, "I want to interview a girl like me."

Miss Grown's warmth vanished first with panic, then with heartbreak. She masked it. Smiled again. The classroom remained silent for a moment longer than was normal.

By age eleven, Ramona's rules were already complicated. She was told to always be herself and to never, ever feel bad for it. She was also told to pay careful attention to the people

around her and always make sure she was safe. If she couldn't be herself safely, she should sit quietly and try not to be noticed. Miss Grown's support had removed any hesitation Ramona might have felt about the safety of her classroom.

Miss Grown nodded very deliberately. "Let's work together on that. We'll talk more before lunch."

The next day, before recess, Miss Grown pulled Ramona out into the hallway.

"I wanted to let you know that I'm trying my best," she said, kneeling down to Ramona's level. Miss Grown had short, particularly curly hair. It bobbed when she changed altitudes. "I sent out a few e-mails asking around. Not all the girls like you are as... open about themselves, because I'm sure you know it can be hard sometimes, but I believe that someone nearby will be willing to help you. Okay?"

Ramona nodded.

The weekend passed. On Monday, Miss Grown did not volunteer any new information. When Ramona asked, Miss Grown nodded hopefully and said she had sent out a few more e-mails.

By Tuesday, some of Ramona's classmates were already talking to each other about having completed their interviews. Ramona's mother had suggested that maybe it was time to start looking at other options for interviewing someone. Didn't Ramona like music? They could ask her piano teacher. It was after the next morning's art class, when all the students were filing in from the hall, that Miss Grown called Ramona over to her desk. A classmate, a quiet boy named Peter with sandy hair and mole-like freckles, stood at Miss Grown's side. Ramona went over.

“Ramona,” the teacher said, looking reinvigorated, “it’s up to you, but we found someone who is close to what you wanted for your interview. Peter’s, um...”

She looked to Peter, who picked at his finger and supplied, “Uncle.”

“Peter’s uncle lives here in town, and he says he would be happy to meet with you,” she continued. “I know it isn’t exactly what you wanted, but it might be the best we can do for right now.”

Ramona’s chin dropped into her chest as she processed this, thinking hard. It was not a sad gesture. Simply contemplative. “And he’s...?”

“He’s like you, except he’s a boy,” Miss Grown explained, but didn’t seem to want to risk going into much deeper detail.

Ramona looked at Peter to see what he could tell her. He said nothing else and wouldn’t make eye contact. His right hand was curled into a fist—except it wasn’t. When she watched closely, she saw that he was actually just brushing his finger across his inner palm over and over again. The small, repetitive motion reminded her of an inch worm. She’d always liked watching bugs.

“Okay,” Ramona said, finally letting herself smile as the trill of triumph xylophoned up her rib cage. “Works for me.”

Miss Grown let out a sigh, her shoulders falling loose and relaxed, her round cheeks decidedly glowing. She sent Peter and Ramona back to their desks with instructions to let her know if they needed any more help setting up the interview.

That Friday, Peter’s uncle picked them up at the curb once school let out. He hardly looked like Peter at all. He had black hair and blue eyes, and any facial similarities they might

have shared were covered up by a pair of glasses and a beard that crackled when he scratched it. He wore slightly over-sized clothes, including several layers of shirts and jackets. If Miss Grown's smiles were kind, this man's smiles were happy. He stepped out of the car to meet Ramona formally and, as he did, beamed down at her.

“Hi, Ramona,” he said brightly. “I’m Peter’s Uncle Miller. It’s nice to meet you. Your parents know where you’re going to be?”

As she nodded, Peter went around to the far side of the car and silently got in. He was already buckled by the time Miller and Ramona joined him. The inside of Miller’s car was different from her family’s van. Cleaner. There were magazines kept in seat pouches and nothing on the floor, no cracker crumbs or applesauce stains on the seats. Everything smelled like warm leather. The sun shone in through wide, clear windows, which Peter stared out of while Ramona divided her time between answering friendly pleasantries from Miller and wondering what could be so interesting outside.

They pulled into a short, gravel driveway at the edge of town, just off the state route. Miller’s house was a blue-gray Victorian style guarding a hill so long that you could barely see the tops of the trees on the other side of it. Ramona’s backyard was big, but not that big.

Inside, Miller offered them snacks, which Ramona accepted but Peter refused, preferring instead to head into the living room. He reached up onto a shelf, took down a fully-constructed LEGO model, and sat with it on the floor to begin disassembling it. The occasional loud sift of plastic pieces shuffling over each other was present all throughout Ramona’s interview, but they did not interfere with her diligent note-taking. Miller sat across the table with his arms folded on the very edge of it, his chair pushed comfortably back. He did not look any less layered with the

shedding of his coat. Ramona's legs swung without touching the floor as she readied her pencil over her questions. She had left plenty of spaces in between for thorough answers.

“When did you know you were a boy?” she asked.

Miller took his time answering. He hadn't stopped looking happy since she'd met him. “Much later than you. I don't think I knew until I was about to go to college. But, once I was there, almost everybody I met was okay with it, and I made sure to surround myself with friends who were open-minded enough to listen when I asked them to treat me a certain way. They were really nice. They didn't mind if I was still making up my mind about what I wanted to be called or trying out new things.”

“What were you called before you were Miller?”

This question was not on Ramona's paper. She asked it simply because she was curious. This time, Miller shifted a little in his seat, his lips pinching slightly. He hadn't liked that.

“Let me answer that question with another question—would you want me to know what your name was before you changed it to Ramona?”

“I got mine from my *abuela*. Papa said I could have it.”

“So, it's a special name, right?”

Ramona nodded.

“So,” Miller went on patiently, “you only want to go by that name from now on, right? So do you think your friends and the people you meet necessarily need to know the name you *had* to know the real you? Some people might ask, but they're probably asking for the wrong reasons. The thing I'm trying to get at here is that transgender person has different comfort levels with what they want to share, okay?”



“Some people didn’t even want to be interviewed.”

“And you shouldn’t be mad at them for that. It can be really hard sometimes, right?”

Again, Ramona nodded, though this one was slower and more thoughtful. “So...” She pointed at herself. “I shouldn’t...?”

“It’s all up to you. You’ll figure out how to do it your way with time. Always pick what makes you comfortable, okay?”

A final nod. Ramona went back to the paper and read out loud, “What does your family do to help you be who you are?”

A knock came on the front door, interrupting Miller’s answer. He excused himself, at which point Ramona busied herself annihilating the fruit snacks he had given her. When he came back in through the living room, there was a woman with him. She was thin, dressed in work clothes, and had hair almost the same color as Peter’s. She didn’t say much to Miller, just went to sit beside Peter on the couch. He began chattering away to her immediately, hugged her, even smiled. It was a difference like night and day. For a moment, Ramona couldn’t help but stare, wondering which version of him was supposed to be the real one. The woman—his mother, of course, surely—set her purse down and retrieved some papers, markers, and crayons from within. They began to draw together, chatting quietly, the LEGO project forgotten in the corner.

Miller sat back in his seat. Ramona did not let herself get further distracted. They finished the interview long before dinner, though the winter sun was already set. With an idle twirl of his key ring around his finger, Miller told Peter it was time to come along and drop Ramona off. He and his mom both looked up.

“Oh... could I take them?” asked Peter’s mom. She followed Peter around to the

entryway, where Ramona was already ready to go. Peter reached around her to pull his jacket off the wall and zipped it on.

Miller gently pushed his glasses up. “You can’t, Lydia. Don’t make me the bad guy for saying no.”

Lydia wiped under her eyes and turned her face away, trying to maintain some dignity. Peter hugged her soothingly around the hips. She returned the hug with very tight arms, which was about all Ramona could stand to watch before feeling too uncomfortable. She shifted her hands in her pockets, and the swishing noise of her coat broke the spell of the room. Peter’s face was sympathetic as he looked to his mother, but then went neutral and blank as he was allowed to pull away and put his shoes on.

Miller said something low to Lydia as he shuffled out the door with the two kids. All Ramona caught was, “...the rest of the visit tomorrow. Just stay with Mom until I get back.” She remained inside as they left, watching out the window.

They took the car in the same seating orientation as before, only Peter had given up staring out the window, as he wouldn’t be able to see much. Miller made no mention of what words might have been exchanged between the two adults. When the car stopped at Ramona’s house, she said thank you and went inside to show her mom the fruits of her interview. It was years before Peter finally spoke to her again, but she always wondered whether he was doing well.

Now, though, Ramona wasn’t thinking about Peter.

Ramona was buried.

The dirt was not warm, and neither was she. Her fingers curled into soft, disturbed soil

before she remembered how it was to think, to be. There was a single moment of peace before her lungs burned with the urgency of what it was to require air. She pushed her way through the cloud of dirt and felt the sting subsiding within her, felt mud clinging to her eyes, and between the mud none of what she saw made sense. *Seeing*, seeing did not make sense. There were the figures carrying her her. There were the taller figures beyond them standing still and whispering in the frigid wind. There was the horizon of earth rolling off into darkness. None of it affected her. *Her* didn't exist. She was only... seeing.

Until she wasn't. The darkness flooded in quickly, further distancing her from herself. On the other side of the darkness, she was in a box. A room. A room that felt like a box. She saw her own skin and hardly recognized it, hands and wrists and arms curled around knees and legs. She was a statue in a room that felt like a box. Things did not blur together if she held very still. Things did not blur together if she focused hard on remembering what it was to think. To hold very still and just remember and not to blur.

She might have stayed there forever if not for the dull realization that she had needs. The back of her throat seared, like it had been gouged by claws. Almost simultaneously, her ears twitched alert at a distant *drip, drip* of leaking water. It was coming from somewhere near her.

Her hands shot to the edge of a thin bed, and though she understood that they were *her* hands, that she had asked them to move, it was still as though she was watching something apart from her. It was as though another girl's fingers were the ones to become ensnared in a thin, wrinkly sheet. There was the part of her that took in every detail, and there was the part of her that comprehended nothing of the world before her.

*Drip, drip* and her throat seared again. The pain triggered a bone-deep memory: *Ramona*.

Her name.

And with that key, the two separate girls fell into the physical space that was her head, and she felt them becoming a bit more stitched together. She took her first intentional breath. As acrid as it was, it destroyed the feeling that she was *not* Ramona.

She had herself. She was alive. She was not dreaming.

“I...” Ramona said, just to prove to herself that she could still speak. She did not know what to say. “I.”

Ramona’s body attempted its first coordinated movement, fighting to break free from the sheet. She was buried from her legs to her stomach, but sat up and pushed the mess away, and understood that she was in a room now. The wall in the direction of her feet had a symbol carved into it: an oval with five lines protruding from the lower half. Even she could recognize the artistic intention. A closed eye.

Ramona was not afraid of fear. In fact, she rather hated it. She picked her head up, trying to remember what she *had* been afraid of. It lingered out of reach like a tucked-away dream.

There was still water dripping. It came from a crack in the rock ceiling and splashed into a small, dirty puddle. The burn in her throat was urgent enough that she didn’t think about any of the things that water might be carrying. She just commanded her body to move, getting her mouth under it as fast as possible, and waited for the water to fall one aching drop at a time. It did not help.

It must have been that her throat was raw from screaming, or she had gotten sick from the cold. As soon as she realized, her legs buckled beneath her. She sank back to the ground, where all she could feel was her heart hammering with new terror.

All at once, she remembered what she had been afraid of: death.

Ever since she could remember, the thought had terrified her, but the concept had always mostly been hypothetical to her. And then, all at once, it had become very real. Somehow, after all that dread, she had actually managed to get a choice in it. There was no reason, even as she looked back on memories she did not have, to question what she had chosen. She was alive. This cold skin, this burning throat, these feelings of her heart seizing with terror—none of this would be happening if she were dead, and it was better than feeling nothing and not even knowing it.

But she should not have been in a rock room if she were alive.

This place did not look like... *anything*. It was *nothing* that she knew, and she could not explain it.

The bed she had lain in was protruded from the wall and held fast to the ceiling with chains. Underneath it, purple crystals pushed out of the ground like flower buds, like a mold infestation, faintly glowing and completely. Ramona crawled closer to inspect them. They were far back enough to make the journey awkward. Still, she peered as closely as the sharp edge of the bed would allow (its frame appeared to be welded), trying to find some answers, or at least some proof that this was real or unreal.

At first, looking did nothing but sting her tired, sensitive eyes. Then, one of the crystals clouded and something within it stirred like an image on a screen. An eye opened and peered out at Ramona. She screamed.

There was pain as she scabbled back, scraping her hands on the uneven floor and slamming her head against the bed plank—but perhaps less pain than normal.

When she looked again, the eye was gone, but even as she rubbed her scalp soothingly

she could not forget its unnatural appearance. The deep red and black of it. The age, which perhaps could only be felt and not seen.

Had she really died? Was this Hell? What had she done to be sent to Hell?

The... room? Cave? that she was in had no door, which did not make sense, since she had to have gotten inside somehow. It was just... a hole inside a rock. A place forgotten by the earth itself. Ramona was still buried.

But she was no longer alone. A woman—if she could be called that—stood in the darkest corner of the room. A horrifying, awful, ugly woman, more likely to be a demon than anything else.

“You’re safe here,” she said as soon as they met eyes. She held out a hand as if to coax Ramona from running away—but where would Ramona go? “You’re okay, Ramona. You’ve found sanctuary.”