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THE
HOLE
BEHIND
MIDNIGHT



A STORY OF THE 25TH HOUR

CLINTON J. BOOMER



THE HOLE BEHIND MIDNIGHT

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For my Mom.

(despite her very specific request that I not dedicate this book to her)

*This work was deeply inspired by,
and is deeply indebted to,
the writings of Uri Kurlianchik.*

“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
“To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—”

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

A BRIEF & INCOMPLETE DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Royden Poole, the King of Jangladesh: our erstwhile (anti-)hero.

Cleon Quiet, the King of Urartu: his estranged mentor.

Ethan Milsborough: apprentice to, and employee of, Cleon Quiet.

Garrick Heldane, the King of Cahokia: a fellow sorcerer.

Tamaka Yun, the Queen of Cahokia: ex-girlfriend of Royden.

Chuck Dawg the Second, Exiled Prince of Minos: also a sorcerer.

Detective Ladislav: a police detective with some history behind the 25th.

Lieutenant Krabowski: an asshole. A fat asshole, specifically. Also, a cop.

Officer Merrick: his young but somehow still long-suffering partner.

Fadey Bohdan: a wealthy and influential Ukrainian crime-lord.

Canio de Pogo AKA Slappy the Sideways Clown: a demon.

Gug, Son of Gog, Prince of Majooj: demonic royalty.

Bastard Greg, the King of Majooj: a powerful evil sorcerer.

Simon Humbert Cockalorum, the King of Cocaine: likewise.

The Free Candey Van: a magical van. Yes, spelled that way on purpose.

Kynan & Noel: professional leg breakers.

Frieda Baghaamrita: an ancient spirit who owns an eponymous bar.

Koloksai, Lady of the Sun, Forgotten Queen of Scythia: an elder.

Danya Nedilya: her soft-spoken, gun-toting manservant.

Wendy Tiger-Lily, the Queen of Cocagne: immortal royalty.

Magic-Eatin' Jim, Duke of the Big Rock Candy Mountain: likewise.

Urukagina of Lagash: a feared inquisitor & enforcer of the Forgotten.

Corporate-Owned Christ: his partner. They fight crime.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Yosef the Nazarene: his twin brother, a comedian.

The Nameless Forgotten King of Gurankalia: their boss.

“Bartender”: an employee of “Bar.”

The Devil at the Four Way: an ancient trickster-spirit with many masks.

Rick, who is called Chaz: a Boy-Goat Brigadier in service to King Humbert.

... and a cast of **Thousands More.**

PROLOGUE

Fuck prologues.

I hate them and refuse to include one.

My name is Royden Poole, and this is my side of the story.



CHAPTER 1

I didn't want to answer my phone.

That should be clearly understood right up front.

And I certainly didn't want to do any of the things that answering my phone at this time of night would inevitably and invariably lead to, like leaving my apartment or getting shot in the face.

What I wanted to do, it should be noted, was roll over and go back to sleep. Failing that, I wanted to get onto the Internet and look at pornography, jerk off, and then go back to sleep. Failing that, I wanted to get very drunk, strongly consider calling Tamaka to tell her that I wasn't dead and to come over, hate myself very much, browse the Internet for porn instead, then jerk off, and finally go back to sleep.

That all of my plans involved going back to sleep is my point.

That was the universal end goal.

Also, I had just found a slick website online with a girl who looks a lot like Tama if you squirt just right while either crying or drunk.

Or both.

My phone kept ringing.

Christ.

This whole "being dead" thing was killing me.

I stared at the phone and tried to make it stop ringing by hating it enough, but the call said *Ladislav*, and he's the sort of person who will keep calling until you pick up or, failing that, come over to your apartment and pick you up himself. One of the major flaws of passing for dead in this town is that if someone knows that you're alive and where you're hiding yourself, they pretty much have twenty-four-hour access to you.

Otherwise, I never would have picked up, is my point. It's not like I'm so starved for human attention that I actually wanted to talk to Detective Ladislav.

I sat up, shook out a cigarette, lit up, sighed, and picked up.

"This is Royden, and I hate you for calling me right now."

"I've got a nut for you to crack, Poole."

"I don't do that anymore. I'm playing dead, remember?"

"I have a contract killer here who won't stop crying and a missing persons on two of the richest men in the metro area. There's a busted floor safe here: looks like it was burned open with acid, but forensics can't tell me shit. Half a million in unmarked cash is sitting on my desk untouched, but my guys can't account for a ceramic vase. I have a shooting and no body. There's something brewing here, and I don't know what it is. You know how I get when I don't have answers, Poole. I want you to come down to the station and find out what the fuck my one and only eyewitness knows."

Jesus. Even dead, my life is a mess.

"That's gonna be really tough for me, detective. I can't, you know, leave my apartment right now. Heck, you were the guy who told me to stay dead and all, remember? And then later, you called me? And then I hung up on you? Right now? Okay, so, bye!"

"There's going to be a goddamn squad car in front of your apartment in about four minutes, Poole. If you're not out front to meet it, I'm sending a pair of officers up to your fucking coffin to bring you down in handcuffs. And I will tell them that you are to be considered both armed and dangerous."

"Christ. Why not tell them that I have a kilo of coke in my ass, too? I haven't had a date in months. Can't this wait until morning, Ladislav?"

"It's twenty 'til midnight, Poole. I want you to use your little witching-hour bullshit on my perp."

Christ. You pull the curtains back and show a guy the secret behind the universe, and he still calls it bullshit.

"Alright. Let me just slip into my coat full of doves and hidden handkerchiefs.

But I'll tell you, it's nights like these that make me wonder why I even bothered faking my death in the first place."

"Be downstairs in three minutes, you little wiseass."

Oh, of course.

He saves the short jokes until right before he hangs up on me.

What a dick.

Two and a half minutes later, a squad car pulled up in front of my stoop, lights rolling. The alleyway hookers and my crack-head neighbors gazed at me with newfound suspicion as I stood up, grunting, and flicked the last orange-glow embers of my cigarette butt into the street.

"Don't worry, everyone. This is just a matter of some unpaid parking tickets."

The passenger-side door opened up, and a young-looking cop stared at me, like I was about to do a trick. I tried to make all three-foot-ten of me seem as simultaneously intimidating and disinterested as possible while also pretending that walking down a whole two flights of stairs for the first time in several months hadn't hurt my knees, like I'd whacked them both with a hammer, and made my hip cramp up like it always does.

Here's to hoping that it worked.

"Real subtle there, guys. You know, I have to live around here."

The driver's side opened, and a fat, hatefully familiar face poked over the car's roof. "That's not what I heard, Poole. In fact, I was just telling Officer Merrick here about how we're on county coroner's detail tonight. Heh."

Fucking Krabowski. The only guy I know who can look rumped and smelly even in freshly pressed dress blues.

"Oh, right. Picking up a dead guy. Oh-ho-ho. Yeah, very fucking funny, lieutenant."

He grinned and flicked a toothpick back and forth with his tongue in that way that makes me want to punch him right in his goddamn balls. "Help the nice, sawed-off sideshow magician into the car, Officer Merrick," he said. "There's a big birthday party downtown, and I guess the balloon-animal guy canceled."

I could almost swear the kid mumbled something about a clown, and then he shut up when I glared at him.

Smart move on his part.

I stormed toward him, and the still-dumbstruck young cop popped the back door open but hesitated on trying to push me in. I took the opportunity to wave

at my adoring audience of whores and bums before slipping into the car under my own power, refusing to give the kid the satisfaction of watching me struggle up onto the seat.

My eyes immediately started stinging; someone had puked back here—and recently. I tried to get comfortable.

“So, Lieutenant, is there any use in me pointing out that *you’re* the ones who called *me*?”

Three doors slammed, one after another. “Nope.”

“Just checking.”

I sat back and tried to think while the car took off at about eighty miles an hour, lurching through one gut-wrenching turn after another.

I pulled out my cellphone to check the time, trying not to dislodge the large knife I had hidden in my coat.

If grinning, infuriating old Krabowski didn’t get us killed first, we’d be at the station just about on time.

Okay. The detective thought I was going to rabbit. That much was clear. Why else send a squad car or call me mere moments before they got there? That meant something, but I was too groggy to put it together. Also, this was a last-minute panic decision. They would have exhausted every last possibility they had before they called me. Again, that meant something.

What, though, I had no idea.

Also, who the fuck puked back here? And what the fuck had they been eating? Infected sewer runoff?

We pulled right up to the station, and I checked my cellphone. Six minutes ‘til. Great. Lieutenant Douchebag hustled me through a sea of blue uniforms and confused looks. Half the force was here tonight.

“Hi. Hi. How you doin’? Special Investigator Magic-Midget Hindu Dead Guy, here. Just passing through. I’ll be out of your hair in, like, five minutes, tops.”

I was taken directly to interrogation.

Boy, that brought back some memories.

Ladislav was waiting for me, his perpetual scowl cranked up to just past eleven and reminding me of pretty much every other time I had ever seen him.

Even wearing the same ugly yellow tie.

“Poole.”

“Evening to you, too. Where’s my guy?”

“In there. I’m going to have a camera on you the whole time.”

“Not gonna do you much good, but knock yourself out. Well, see you in about,” I glanced at my cellphone, “two minutes. Your time.”

I reached for the door, then thought better of it. “Hey, you got a cup of coffee?”

Without a word, the detective pushed a steaming styrofoam cup into my hand.

What a guy.

Glad to have him on my team.

The door shut behind me, and I was faced with a horrible little off-white room decorated entirely in a style I like to call Late-Period State Institutional. One metal table, two metal chairs, one over-flowing ashtray, one softly sobbing leg breaker, a half-empty cup of coffee, and a big-ass mirror. One hundred and four thousand seven hundred twenty-nine holes in the ceiling tiles.

I got bored and counted one time. Interestingly, that’s also the ten thousandth smallest prime number.

Not sure what that means, but I’m working on it.

I considered the question of the leg breaker. I weigh in at about seventy-eight pounds, so I would put this guy at about five times my total mass. How much did I really want to press this, considering that my best bet was probably to say something along the lines of “Wait! This isn’t where I parked my car!” and walk back out?

Dammit, I could be sleeping *right now*.

On the other side of that big-ass mirror, a video camera was watching us. In about ten seconds, it was going to start spitting static at itself, and everything it saw was going to break up into a fuzzy, gray-white wash, rolling up and down, that wouldn’t be admissible as evidence on Judge Judy. Those missing frames would last a little less than a quarter of a minute, consolidate themselves back into a semblance of reality, and then I would theoretically go walking right back out of here.

Between now and that moment, there stretched an infinite ocean of potential time. Time enough to walk around the world. Time enough to fall in love, get married on a white beach under purple stars, write a book of poems about truest passion, have a few good and bloody screaming matches, get divorced in a court of autumn elves and gypsy moths, then set the ink-stained, tear-streaked pages of your text ablaze. Time enough to dance around the bonfire naked and cry with a group of friends and finally fall asleep drunk with all of your teeth

punched out. Time enough to go insane, just waiting for the thinnest hand of the clock to go *click* again.

Time enough to get killed in any number of horrible ways.

I tried not to focus on that.

The things you do to avoid federal prison.

I set my cellphone down on the table and glanced at the time.

11:59 pm.

I looked at the heavily tattooed leg breaker, and I wondered if I maybe shouldn't have brought a much larger knife.

"Hey, man. You doing all right?"

Red-rimmed eyes, deep and black and not used to crying, glared at me. Well, his first instinct wasn't to assume that he was hallucinating.

That was a start.

"Look. I'm not a cop, but you knew that already. I'm just a guy. I don't know anybody, I don't know anything. I'm here to talk. I have no idea why you're here, and there is literally nothing that you can say to me that will get you in any trouble."

I hopped up onto the chair across from the big bastard and stole another look at my cellphone.

11:60 qm.

Showtime.

Gods dammit, I hate this fucking time of night.

I put my cellphone back in my pocket and fished out a smoke.

"Right now, the guys on the other side of that mirror are watching absolutely fuck all. They can't see us, they can't hear us. Their camera is malfunctioning even as we speak. We're pretty much alone right now, on our own little island in forever."

His eye twitched a little. It meant he was thinking, trying to suss out if I was bullshitting him. Most folks would figure a son of a bitch as big as him wasn't smart, but this guy was cagey. I lit my cigarette and pointed at the door.

"You know what? I say that we go for a walk. You and me, nobody else. I'll take your cuffs off and everything. We'll walk right the fuck out of here, and we can talk."

His eyes flicked to the door. He didn't believe me. But at least he wasn't crying anymore. And he was listening.

"But first, I wanna show you a magic trick."

That caught his attention. I wasn't reading everything, not yet. That was going to take some time because this guy was good at not showing people what he was thinking. But my guess was that he had already seen some magic in the last twenty-four hours.

"Now, most people think that magic is a bunch of bullshit. And most of it is—all misdirection and stage theatrics. But some magic, just a *wee* itty-bitty little bit of it, is as serious as a heart attack. It's killer hard to pull off correctly, but it can be done. And right now, during the witching hour, it's as easy as falling off a log."

I put my cigarette in my mouth, then pulled the right sleeve of my jacket back and up and showed him my arm from hand to elbow. I spread my fingers wide, and turned my forearm back and forth. Simple magician stuff. Nothing up this sleeve, folks.

"Watch. Now, I'm going to pour my drink into my hand, and it's going to vanish."

I curved my right hand, picked up the coffee with my left, and I poured the contents of my coffee cup into my right palm. Sixteen ounces vanished into that space.

"Neat, huh?"

I pulled my cig out of my mouth with my right hand, turned it back and forth. My whole arm still showing.

"Here's where it gets weird."

I showed him the empty cup. Banged it against the table, flipped it end over end, and caught it like one of those fancy flair bartenders. Then I put the cup next to my hand and poured the still-steaming coffee back into it. Then I took a sip and grimaced.

Bad coffee, and now with little grains of sand floating in it.

"Ta-fucking-da."

He looked at me, and a corner of his mouth flickered up. Not a smile although a stupid person might have mistaken it for one and gotten his ass killed for it. This was his angry look. His grimace of frustration and disdain. The classic "I'm about to hit you" look.

He finally spoke. "Fuck off."

Damn. Deep voice, too. This guy was built to be a leg breaker the same way I was built to use step stools and buy children's clothing.

"I'm not fucking with you here, man. I'm serious, as I say, as a heart attack—"

there's nothing you can say right now that can get you in more trouble, and there's nothing you can say that's going to freak me out. I've seen people walk through walls, I've seen dead people get up and order room service, and I've seen people peel off their own faces like a mask."

I raised my eyebrows and didn't finish the thought about what was underneath some of those faces.

He looked at me, and I saw something give.

"Yeah."

"Yeah. So, you saw something today. Something that freaked you out. Something bad."

He moved his head a little on the end of a giant neck like you see in action movies and mixed martial arts fights.

Didn't nod but almost.

I was on the money, but there was more than that. Guys like him don't cry because they get freaked out. Something bigger than that. What could make this guy shut down entirely?

"So, we're gonna talk about it. What you say to me here, it's not about you going to jail or you giving me the details of your relationship with your boss or anything like that. I don't want your money, I don't want your confession, and I don't want you to tell me anything except about what weird shit happened to you today."

He nodded. Just a little bit, but he nodded.

"This is gonna suck, kinda, because my guess is that something pretty nasty happened. So I'm not gonna push it, and we don't have to do this here. Believe it or not, I've been on the other side of this. Only worse, even, maybe. You tell me what's going on, and we'll go for a walk. You and I have got all the time in the world."

Just then, the door behind me opened up, and a screaming clown with hollow eye sockets grabbed me by the back of the head.

In one quick motion, it wrapped its fingers around my skull, picked me up with one arm, and pitched me across the room.

It moved faster than anything I'd ever seen.

Especially since I could only see it out of the corner of my in-motion and rapidly watering eye for the half-second it took for the rotting clown to flash across the room. When I landed, I realized that I didn't have my knife anymore.

The leg breaker screamed, and the clown punched my blade into the poor guy's throat a couple dozen times.

Fuck. There went all my good vibes and sexy investigative groundwork with Ladislav.

Lacking anything better to do, I scrambled up, grabbed my chair off the floor, and smashed it across the thing's lower body.

I called upon my crown. The dust of my empire surged inside me, and for one moment, I wielded the strength of millions.

I might as well have whacked the chair into the side of a building.

An explosion of wooden shrapnel filled the air, and now I had two handfuls of kindling. The clown turned to me and started shaking all over. Blood jetted out my perp. The little green poof-balls down the front of the clown's torso jiggled, and its screams went up an octave.

Didn't say it was a plan, or even a good plan.

I said I lacked anything better to do.

It rushed at me, pulling the knife back. I scrambled to the side, but it was on me in an instant. I realized as it crouched onto me that it wasn't really wearing clothes, technically: it was, in reality, a grotesquely deformed naked man painted like a clown with wet little tufts of brightly colored organic fuzz, like flopping sea anemones, jabbing out of puckered bullet-wound-like holes.

Something hard dropped into my hand as the thing tackled me to the floor, and I was too afraid *not* to look. The handle of my knife. The clown suddenly stopped screaming, and I noticed that, despite the otherwise overwhelming amount of nudity my assailant was displaying, he was wearing white circus gloves. I closed my hand around my knife, waiting for the clown to do something—anything.

My cellphone rang. I fished it out of my pocket as the clown hopped up and sprinted out the door. As it fled, I saw that the clown's back was rotten with sores and covered in wet, black stains, like it had been lying in a half inch of water in someone's basement for a month.

If it had wanted to kill me, it probably could have.

But it didn't.

And, at the moment, I couldn't think for the life of me *why*.

My phone kept ringing as I shook there, in shock.

The caller ID said *unlisted*.

"Hi, there. You've reached Royden Poole, Secret King of Jangladesh. I'm not in right now."

“It seems that you’ve just been framed for murder, Mr. Poole. My advice is to leave town before midnight. This case is closed for you.”

“Damn.”

“Indeed.”

I could hear him. He was just about to hang up. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“... so real quick, where are you the king of?”

There was a pause, and I heard him start hating me, right there in the silence.

But he had to answer.

Had to. Or forfeit his throne.

“I am the King of Majooj.”

“Never heard of you. So, quite a nasty kiddy-scare you called up, Your Highness. You dabble quite a bit in summoning from the Sideways Realms, I take it.”

“I have many servants. You’ve been warned.”

Click.

Well, fuck.

I walked out the now-broken door, letting the perp’s body cool in the interrogation room. Forensics was going to have a field day with this one: four-foot-tall guy walks into a room, kills a three-hundred-pound guy by stabbing him in the neck until his head nearly comes off, lets the body sit for a few hours, breaks open a battering-ram-proof door, and then just teleports out of a police station all in the space of about thirty seconds.

I kept my knife out, in case you were wondering.

The hallway was deserted, as I expected it to be. In the distance, I could hear the sound of the killer clown’s enormous bare feet slapping down the stairs at about seventy miles an hour. Heading for the sub-basement sub-archives, which was probably where his slippy-hole to the Sideways was hidden. Otherwise, I was alone: not a cop to be found in the cop shop tonight.

Well, nothing to do now but raid the evidence locker.



CHAPTER 2

As I went through the evidence locker, trying to find something that might clue me in to what my ill-fated leg breaker was about to tell me before his stabbing or perhaps score myself a sweet new pimp cane, I considered the inherent problems with the 25th Hour and Tama's old love affair with it.

In short, the witching hour is a pain in the ass.

I hadn't used the damn thing in months, of course. Living in that little rat hole pretending at death, there were already too many goddamn hours in the day—it didn't seem like much of a bargain to score myself a little extra time *just for myself* when I was already living alone too much as it was. And sure, I could leave the apartment when the clocks got funny and go wander around for a bit, but the streets were, for the most part, just as empty as my apartment.

And the very few people you do meet in the Nether Time are universally such shit that it's better to be alone.

Come to think of it, that applies to the waking world, too.

The mysteries of stepping between the ticks of almost-midnight and behind the curtain of the real world were joyous to Tamaka, of course. She couldn't believe that I would ever get bored with such a place—couldn't believe that I didn't have scads of magician friends and Sideways Realm pets, a big throne for my kingdom and an amazing new life every night. She wanted to know all about

the Totem Empires, and why the most potent magicians choose noble titles of ancient and fallen kingdoms. She drug me out night after night to find misty places a few blocks from our apartment where reality becomes un-anchored and the dreamtime re-writes its own rules—where the streets drift off into forever-after land.

God, I miss that girl.

The truth is that once you stumble into the knowledge of the Other Interval, your best bet is to ignore it and hope that it goes away. There are treasures to be had there only for the sorrowful and the insane. Everything fades to dust except the scars.

Shit.

Look at me here, getting all teary-eyed and morose. Pretty soon, people are going to start mistaking me for Detective Ladislav's weepy contract killer.

Fuck my life.

My one and only real regret, upon further consideration and introspection, is that I didn't burn Frieda Baghaamrita's fucking bar to the ground the last time I was on this side of the Hour.

That bitch.

I kept going through the bins.

Finally, I found the tape of my big buddy's earlier interrogation. It was labeled with this morning's date and a name I didn't recognize: Kynan. It wasn't rewind, but I figured what the fuck, right?

Let's jump right to the good parts.

I tossed it in, rewind a minute or so, and started it up. There in glorious, extra-scratchy black and white was my old friend the detective, and there was my lovable leg breaker:

Ladislav: Tell me again what happened.

Tattooed-Guy: We were supposed to snag this guy named Alexandros. We were told to grab him as he came out of this deli on Clark Street and then bring him to Mr. Bohdan's penthouse.

Fuck. Back when Ladislav said that he had missing persons' reports on rich people, I didn't realize that he meant Fadey Bohdan, the head of Ukrainian crime in the tri-state area. Jesus.

Why do I answer my phone at night?

L: But you weren't supposed to rough him up?

TG: No. He was real clear, the guy on the phone. He said that Alexandros had

this nervous condition, where he would freak out if we beat on him and maybe have a heart attack or something.

I could tell that my leg breaker was lying, but I wasn't sure if Ladislav knew yet. And it wasn't a big lie—just a little bit of an omission, with some embroidery on top of the truth. Playing dumb, and he was good at it. Oh, my stars and garters, how I would love to find out what the guy on the phone had actually said.

L: So your job was to take this guy to Fadey Bohdan's penthouse. Then what?

My honed bullshit detectors went off, catching something on the leg breaker. Just a twitch. Something weird. But what?

TG: Just... nothing. He said to take him there. Me and Noel were just supposed to take him to the penthouse. The guy on the phone told us the code for the elevator and everything. Said to make sure the 'package' was unharmed.

L: And this didn't strike you as strange?

TG: No, I... I just figured that maybe this Bohdan guy wanted to have a meeting with Alexandros personally, and he didn't trust any of his guys to do it. We were outside muscle, you know?

Bullshit. This guy Kynan was too smart to have fallen for that. He knew that part of this was weird from the get-go. The money had to have been something amazing.

About that time, I started getting paranoid.

L: So the two of you picked up this Alexandros as he was leaving the deli. And he went quietly?

TG: Yeah. He was real calm about it, just like the guy on the phone said he would be. Put his hands where we could see them, didn't make a fuss or anything. Got in the back of the car with Noel, and basically stared at the gun a lot.

L: And you drove him to the hotel?

TG: It was all real simple. We got there, and Noel takes his coat off and puts it over his arm, covering the gun. The three of us get out and walk to the lobby. There's only this one elevator that goes all the way up to the one penthouse where Bohdan lives, so we go to it and we hit the button and we wait.

Now I could see that Ladislav was getting serious: his frown intensified and it looked like those big bushy eyebrows of his were trying to meet in the middle and then make a run south toward his chin and a new life together. Ladislav had heard this part before. He knew this whole story like the back of his hand.

It was what was coming next that was important.

L: Then what happened?

TG: We fucking get in the elevator, like I told you. And we press the right buttons in the right order, like the guy on the phone said to, and we're heading up to the penthouse. That's all.

L: And then?

TG: And then, I think... I don't know. I guess I got a call on my cellphone, I think.

L: You think?

TG: Yeah. And we're in the elevator, and we're going up, and the guy on the phone, I remember: He said to shoot Bohdan when I get there, block the elevator doors from closing and then leave through the emergency fire exit. It seemed... I don't know. It made sense.

L: Bullshit, Kynan.

This was not bullshit, but Ladislav couldn't believe it. This was, honest to god, a very competent guy trying very hard to piece together something very confusing.

TG: But it made sense! When I got out of the elevator, I remember thinking why else would I be here?

L: Bullshit. So where were Noel and Alexandros during this?

TG: Like I told you before, they just... weren't there anymore. I didn't even remember that they had been there. Christ, I didn't remember that... that either of them even existed until this morning!

He burst into tears. That was the sound of somebody breaking.

Ladislav had that disgusted look on his face that meant he was confused or catching a whiff of rank body odor. Or both.

I had been responsible for giving him that look in a variety of ways over the years.

L: I'm fucking done here.

The detective stormed out of the room, and the tape ended.

I could have rewound it, and checked the tape to see what hotel they had been talking about, but I had a different plan.

If I had to guess, I'd say that the good detective had, by this point, already pieced together that our leg breaker Kynan was in love with his partner, Noel. Or, if it wasn't romantic, he at least loved Noel like a brother. That much was obvious, just seeing the tears. What the detective couldn't believe was that a professional killer and all-around-dangerous criminal like our tattooed guy

could get into an elevator with a hostage and his best friend or lover, ride fifty-two stories straight up and then forget that either of them existed or why he was on the goddamn elevator to begin with.

And then, several hours later, have that knowledge come back and hit him hard enough to break him.

Which brought me to my next question: Had this all gone down at around, oh, say... midnight last night? That would make a certain sense—I had assumed that Ladislav wanted me to interview Kynan during the witching hour to save himself some time. I mean, I could spend days with him if I needed to, and it would all collapse back to a tenth-of-a-second burp in time-space as far as Ladislav was concerned. But if someone was using the Enigma Hour to commit clever breaking-and-entering, then it made sense that Ladislav needed me here, now...

Speaking of questions, where were Alexandros and Noel now?

Also: How had my tattooed guy gotten caught? Was the legendary Fadey Bohdan dead, or just missing? And, since Ladislav had mentioned it, what *other* wealthy man-about-town was missing in action at the moment? And what about the vanished vase? And who was the King of Majooj, and why was he framing a dead man for murder?

I glanced at my cellphone.

11:79J3 qm.

Stupid goddamn secret time. Always trickling by when you weren't watching. If I wanted to keep from slipping back into reality, I needed to put some distance between me and all the human anchor points in this building, which meant taking a long walk into the deeper sections of the Epoch In-Between. That meant going someplace unaccounted-for by the masses: abandoned steam tunnels, back alleys without names, all the little places where people don't go in crowds.

Hm. What to do, what to do?

I looked around the evidence locker, scanning for anything else worth slipping into my coat. There wasn't a gun in here that I could trust, and there were no other tapes marked with Kynan's name. There wasn't anything else that I... holy shit! My old hat!

I popped my battered old Yankees cap back onto my head with a smile on my face. Alright, so this wasn't a complete waste of an evening.

I pulled out another cigarette and pondered.

What I really needed to do was retrace Kynan's steps, find out where he had been.

Simple enough. I just needed his shoes.

Fifteen minutes later, I was standing on the front steps of the police station drawing a complex diagram with chalk, waving Kynan's stolen steel-toed Brahmas back and forth like a pendulum and muttering a few magic words. I smudged the diagram with the bottoms of the boots, stained the soles a whitish-yellow with chalk dust and smoke, and then watched a series of faded footprints appear, stretching into the station and backward a full twenty-four hours. He walked into the station, huh? Interesting.

Well, let's hope that he didn't walk too far off the beaten path today. Didn't want to meet any more Sideways horrors tonight.

Actually, I didn't want to meet *anyone* else tonight.

CHAPTER 3

I walked and smoked and muttered to myself and kept waving Kynan's shoes in front of me, dangling by their laces, like a priest in some bad movie about Catholics. *In nomine parti-favor*, or whatever. The footprints were a jumbled, horrible nightmare on the darkened empty streets, compounded by the weird, winding smudge-skate streaks of him getting into, out of, and riding around in cars, making weird striations across the road and out into the distance.

It looked like Kynan had been involved with a busy, shitty day.

Well, at least it had ended with getting murdered. If you're gonna do *bad day*, I mean, you might as well do it right.

Finally, I brought myself to an intersection where the footprints ran every which way: back, forth, around and around. Kynan had done some serious pacing, driving, and general fucking about at this location today. At least three sets of prints headed left, down a street toward the legendary penthouse where I was pretty sure Fadey Bohdan was usually sleeping at this time of night on top of a huge pile of cocaine, money, and Eastern European sex-slaves.

Goody for him, the evil fuck.

I hope his day was worse than mine, for once.

Another set, pointed toward me, kicked backward across the road and out toward the parts of town where three-hundred-pound guys covered in tattoos don't get bothered while they're eating soup.

Here was the real question: was it worth more to me at the moment to see the spot where the magic happened and the mysterious deed was done, or was it better to see where Kynan had spent the earlier part of his day before he suddenly came here and skipped at least halfway to and from one of the nicest hotels in the city a few times before going to the cops?

Oh, yeah, and how was I going to explain a dead suspect to the cops? Also, who the fuck was the King of Majooj, again, and why was he framing me for murder using a monster clown? Also, why had Ladislav kept my hat so long? What kind of jerk does that?

I flicked my cigarette into the street, considered, and then walked toward the hotel, my all-too-stubby legs already starting to cramp. If it had pulled Kynan toward it a half-dozen times today, it had to be the most interesting part of the puzzle.

Across the street, a homeless guy on the other side of the road about a half block down waved at me. Dammit, why do you think I want to talk to you?

“Hail, hail, thou Secret King! A farthing, thee, for an exiled Prince of Minos?”

“Fresh out both of farthings and of giving-a-fucks, guy. I’m just passing through.”

He started across a street filled with little more than wind, pausing to look both ways. Yeah, like this town is real well-known for heavy traffic between the hour of 11:8888 and 11:#W2OIJ in the qm.

What an idiot.

“I do know of thee! Thou art the Child Emperor!”

“Look, thou doesn’t know jack nor shit. I’m no kid. I’m armed, and I’m off to see the wizard right now, so don’t bother me.”

“I didst hear that thou wast dead!”

Crap. I turned.

“Alright, buddy. Yeah, I’m dead. How much to keep it that way?”

“Ah, well, mine followers and I do seek some treasures with which to, unto ourselves, raise a mighty army, with which we shall claim back all the dust of Minos from my upstart, usurper brother! And cousins. And also mine nieces and nephews. I do have many enemies which claim my throne.”

“Oh, very noble. A good old succession-struggle for the whole family. Glad to help the war effort. So let me guess—minimum donation to the cause is \$20?”

“If thou wouldst be so kind.”

He grinned at me with a mouth full of black teeth-stumps as I pulled out a crumpled pair of tens. Fuck.

There went my rent money for the week. Being dead is not as cheap as the liberal media likes to make it out to be.

“There. You can probably recruit a strong young warrior by the name of Jack Daniels to your cause now.”

“Verily.”

Taking a look at the haggard old guy as he bowed to me, I dug into my pocket for a second and fished out another ten.

“Since I’ve got you here, prince, you wanna tell me a little bit about the local weather? Sports scores, anything?”

“Oh, it would be an honor! Perhaps my guest, this short and traveling king, would care to share with me some of his fine and flavored smoking tobaccos?”

“Yeah. It’s real fancy hand-picked Samsun and Izmir Turkish with domestic blend.”

He palmed a Camel and lit it with an Elizabethan flair, stuffing my thirty dollars into his back pocket. He exhaled with gusto, and his eyes somehow got more bloodshot. Then the theatrics began in earnest.

“Mine nameless king, there are dark tidings afoot in this land! I warn thee, thou must travel warily and forearmed against the dangers in the All-Night Hour! Formless Magistrates of the Farthest Sideways have set their many eyes upon these very streets! A shadow comes, and the lords of many Emptied Empires shall fall!”

“Great. You hear anything about clowns?”

“Nope.”

“Awesome. You know anything about a guy skimming the pocketbooks of the waking world using the Nether Time?”

“Such things are dark, damnable, and dangerous, my miniature and wandering king!”

“And deadly, too. Just wondering. Keep an ear out, will you?”

I passed him another ten. Now, I was all-but-officially broke.

“Of course, ye goodly king! How shalt I find thee if some word cometh mine way? By your sign or another?”

“Please don’t. I’ll find you.”

I stomped off, heading toward Fadey Bohdan’s hotel. My amateur medievalist hobo stared at my back, and I hoped to god that I hadn’t just gotten fucked by fate

yet again. Last thing I needed tonight was word that my death had been slightly exaggerated to filter through what passes for a community in these parts.

And now I was worried that forty bucks in the hand of this asshole wouldn't be enough to guarantee that.

Stupid dire warnings of imminent doom.

They always put me in a bad mood.

Ten minutes later—a bit give or take, considering where and *when* I was—I stood across the street from the gorgeous, opulent, white Le Palace Resplendent, cake-like structure made of glitter and glass and light and fuck-off-you-filthy-stinking-foreign-midget, you.

The tracks had dwindled to a single loop: Kynan had walked in there this afternoon and walked right back out along the same path, right toward his date with the cops and me and destiny and a neck-stabbing clown. Inside that building, I could follow his footsteps and gauge where he went and what he had looked at today. Maybe work out what he had been thinking, roll his motives around in my head a little bit.

Only one problem: That building was made of almost nothing but human anchor points. Overflowing with them. Every damned square inch of carpet in that damned place is accounted for. People have lived and died obsessing over every scrap of fabric and stone and grout on the premises. They host five proms, a debutante's ball, some douchebag's re-election rally, three art shows, a half-hundred-some weddings and the Policeman's Benevolent Dinner here every year, for gods' sake. The picture of the mayor that the chief of police keeps on his desk was taken on the front steps, right there.

Something tells me that there are a few unaccounted-for spots in there, though. Probably up toward the penthouse. But if I cross this street, I'm getting yanked back into the waking world's time stream whether I like it or not. Dammit.

Using the 25th, as I had tried to teach Tamaka, is like walking a tightrope. If you saunter out onto it drunk and without a care in the world, you're not going to be there very long, one way or the other. Probably break something, too. You panic and freak out and lie down and grab onto it and try to keep from slipping, well... you could be hanging out there to dry for a lot longer than is entirely healthy.

You have to keep moving, and you have to keep between the anchor points and the slippery holes—the yin and the yang of mankind's oh-so-tenacious and yet oh-so-tenuous hold on the reality of the waking world. The places where

people gather in numbers every day, those places will drag you home. And the places where not even rats hide, where maybe one lone human bothers to check in on once a month? Those slippery fuckers gape open into the Sideways.

Of course, she just wanted to talk about the metaphysics of it all. How the face of the clock each day is really just the curve of rainwater hanging off an infinite leaf of possibility in a haunted forest of the unreal. How you could escape up the bridge of the drop into a true ocean of quantum time between the big hand and the little hand as they squeezed together at the midnight hour and defined, in defiance, another plane.

Fuck damn shit, I miss that girl.

As I turned back toward downtown, I checked my cellphone just to see how much time I had lost for even daring to impugn the dignity of Le Palace Resplendent with my gaze.

11:9F1 qm.

Great.

Unless I headed toward the shittiest parts of town or out to one of the unpleasantly enthusiastic Long Hour holds in the next couple of minutes, I was going to run out of the Unknown Interval pretty shortly.

As in, too soon for comfort.

Well, the best place to re-enter the waking would definitely not be my apartment, what with me being wanted for murder and all.

So I headed there.

CHAPTER 4

So, as I was breaking into my apartment, my emergency backup screwdriver in hand, I considered further the nature of the fractured semi-reality we call 13 Past and the Nether Time and the Secret Epoch and a bunch of other equally bullshit names for a thing that simply shouldn't be.

Point is, there's this weird thing about the Nether Hour that makes using it so damnably frustrating to casual users of the free time and that separates the hardcore addicts who eventually get around to claiming an Emptied Empire as their own from the so-called "hourists"—tourists of the hour. The fact of it is, there's a lot of stuff that you simply can't do during the 25th, and there really aren't a lot of hard and fast rules as to *why*—at least, not that either me or crazy old Cleon could ever quite make heads or tails of.

Oh, hell.

Now *there* was a guy I hadn't thought of in a couple months, minimum. My manic mentor, the esteemed Mr. Cleon Quiet. Just thinking his name and playing it across my lips made me smile. Taught me everything I know, or at least everything worth me knowing, and only asked that I help him sweep up around his miserable little VCR repair shop at nights and not poke at any of the old Betamax cassettes that sometimes shook, howled, and ran blood out of their single, cyclopean spindles.

And then I actually started giggling out loud, remembering the time that I

used the term *cyclopean* in front of him. Cleon asked me what, precisely, the cassettes had to do with brick or masonry constructions made without mortar; I, of course, quickly countered that the word also means “suggestive of the cyclops.” And he told me to watch my smart mouth while trying not to let me see him smile and be proud.

Anyway, the venerable old King of Urartu had a trick against the Sideways horrors, which he liked to call a black tape exorcism, and kings back in the day used to travel tens of thousands of miles loaded down with tribute in gold and silk to have him perform it on them.

Of course, he also had that weird lop-sided haircut which always reminded me of Sam Jackson from *Unbreakable*, and he always wore 3D glasses for no particularly explicable reason I could fathom. And he still owns a damn VCR repair shop in the third millennium CE, so I feel justified in calling him just the slightest bit bat-shit insane.

Anyway, the point that Cleon impressed upon me about the Hole behind Midnight was this: it all sounds great on paper, but the fine print is a real motherfucker, and nobody can quite make out what it says. Sure, here’s this magical extra hunk of time space, tucked away right there at the top of the clock where anybody with an ounce of sense in their head can tell that three hands converging to mark the death of the day has some mystic significance. Yeah, you can squeeze through that crack with a little practice—and you can go walking around in the backstage of reality for hours or even days in the hiccup of time that it takes the audience to blink twice and then go back to the show.

But the place behind the curtain ain’t the same as the place lit by the footlights and the spot. There’s a whole new set of rules back here, and the farther you step away from the crowd, the weirder it gets. Everything keeps turning, too; that’s important to remember. Just because you’ve slipped further afield from the warm little center of home where all the nice boys and girls have been tucked away into bed by their mommies who love them, all to go creeping around in the ghost lights doesn’t mean that the outer rim of the universe is holding still.

If you head around the stage flats behind the curtains and walk past the props table where the old relics from previous scenes are gathering dust in the dim half light, where the kohl-caked characters from old, half-forgotten dance routines are playing at improv and flirting with each other, and skirt the twitching, fraying ropes which hold the stars in the heavens, and sneak past reality’s dressing room

back to the iron emergency fire doors pressed into the scene shop wall, you can head down forever into the wet sub-basements below everything.

Don't be surprised if whatever you find down there doesn't particularly want to help you sing out the chorus of "Oklahoma," though. If the things that lurch around muttering in the winding boiler room or those that scuttle across the damp, broken-tile floors of the rotting nurseries in the darkness underneath the playhouse even know about the big bright show going on upstairs, they don't much care if you miss your next cue.

In all your lipstick and stage jewelry and big panicked eyes rimmed in mascara, you're just as pretty and sweet as a little doll made of sausage to the boogiemán in the bathroom under the basement stairs. And don't forget that if you never come back out on stage for your big number, well, the show must go on.

The crowd probably won't even notice.

Point is, some things from the waking world work just fine during the 25th. And some things don't. And some things that *don't* work during the daylight hours—or at least, aren't *supposed* to work—are the norm during the Unknown Interval rather than the exception. And the real screaming hell of it is that a whole bunch of stuff is in-between. There are scads of cases in the *maybe* category—the *either/or*. The miserable *kinda-sorta, it really depends* factor that drives 21st-century consumers nuts.

Like cash, for one. If you bring it with you into the Nether Time, it's there—but if you walk up to an unattended cash register and pop the bastard open, assuming that you can get it to open in the first place, the till is invariably empty.

You can write things down while in the 25th, but they fade out into nothing sooner or later. You can move certain objects around, at least the ones that *translate* into the Secret Time, but mundane things have a nasty habit of becoming heavier, more stubborn, or just altogether nonfunctional. Some doors are locked and won't budge. Some windows just won't break. Cars simply won't start. A television roots itself to reality, immovable, and plays nothing but static.

Well, if you're lucky, it's just static. Sometimes, it's faces.

A cellphone works, and don't ask me why. Cleon still has this crazy-ass theory about the totemic significance of the clock and the mystic *eye*—that being the little camera—held within the modern mobile phone, along with the quantum

nature of a missing cell, which cannot call itself, and the pocket's connection to the root chakra, but whatever.

In his defense, he did once successfully make a long-distance call from a pack of Camels after he wrote *fone* on it in marker, drew in a rough Eye of Providence on top of the pyramid next to the camel's ass, taped a wrist-watch to it and stuck it in his jeans for a week, so I guess he might be on to something.

Also, some people have figured out a trick for using an old-fashioned pocket watch as a compass in the 25th, but I've never gotten it to work. Supposedly, the hands twist around and point things out if you hold it right and concentrate correctly, and it will swing on its chain in the direction of home, but it all looks like a lot of Ouija board mumbo-jumbo to me.

The upshot is this, at least in general:

1) Things that belong to no one, things that most people don't pay close attention to, like dust or magazines in a waiting room or individual pens in a cup or napkins in their dispensers, are all fair game. They show up in the 25th, they can be pocketed, moved around, or whatever. The mass consensus just keeps putting along like nothing ever happened.

2) Things that belong to you, that no one but you is paying attention to, are yours. They click and whir along just fine on either side of the curtain: for instance, a car that you're driving at the moment the clocks get funny keeps going. At least, in theory. The scary part comes when you look over at the guy asleep next to you and realize that he's not there anymore, that the sky has changed color, and then your battery dies along the side of a highway without a name or a spot on the map.

3) Things that belong to someone else or that someone else is paying attention to are either missing or damn near impossible to move on the other side. You can't snatch a food processor or stereo system out of someone's apartment using the Unknown Interval, even if you could get the door open. If someone is watching that TV at the time, same goes—that is, if it shows up at all. More valuable things, like bars of silver, nude photos of exes and celebrities, and paintings by people whose names you recognize only translate to the Nether if they come with you.

4) Things with an intrinsically mysterious technical operation, like a computer (try explaining how one works to the average guy on the street in a single sentence) or a vending machine (same thing) act, for lack of a better term, wonky. Things with a lot of emotional significance invested in them, like teddy

bears and photo albums, also behave really strangely during the 25th. And the more something looks like a person or a part of a person, like a mannequin or a set of false teeth, the worse it gets.

5) Things that everyone knows about sometimes simply don't pop over, or do, but twisted. There's a Statue of Liberty in the 25th Hour, but she looks really fucked-up. I don't know why.

And for every rule, there are two dozen exceptions. Guns are the worst offenders because they straddle several lines of ownership and focus of attention, with the added bonuses of being generally mysterious in their operation (try building one at home!), being emotionally significant to pretty much everyone who has ever seen one, owned one, or had one pointed at them, and being vaguely shaped like a phallus with a part specifically designed for a human hand to hold onto.

A gun that shows up in the Nether Hour either won't work, will work forever without needing to be reloaded but fire hunks of stiff cartilage and super-sonic semen, will fire bullets that fly at about thirty miles an hour making wasp noises and hunting people down, will do nothing but yell "BANG!" in a high-pitched voice just loud enough to wake people up, or will maybe just yank the guy who pulls the trigger through the grip and spit him in a bloody, nine-millimeter-wide spray out the barrel.

Or, quite possibly, something even weirder.

And the other thing to remember is this: I've been doing this for years, and I'm still surprised 99% of the time I step through.

The worst part, of course, is that there are a dozen or more fail-safes in place to prevent things like teleporting televisions and sudden mysterious deaths and vanishing cash-register contents from peeling the curtain back and exposing the average dude to the eternal mysteries of the Eternity Hour, but things happen anyway.

You smell someone close, but they aren't there and never were.

The lights dim for a second and only you seem to notice it.

Someone sets their keys down on their chest of drawers at 11:59 pm, and at 12:01 am, the keys are sitting on the floor.

About half a million people in the US vanish each year and are never found or heard from again.

A cash register rings at exactly midnight, even though no one is touching it—and the drawer stays closed.

Your cat freaks out in the middle of the night, and when you look up, you realize that you apparently didn't close your apartment door all the way. Nothing is missing from your room, but a month later, you can't find that snow globe your grandmother gave you that you put in the back of your closet because you never liked it.

A large man named Kynan gets punched several times in the neck with a knife belonging to yours truly, while everyone in the observation room of interrogation pulls a booger out of the corner of their eye and the camera burps twice and misses sixteen-dozen frames.

All of this is, interestingly enough, what led me to breaking into my apartment. Neither the door nor the hallway of the apartment building technically belongs to me. The whole shebang belongs to some douchebag slumlord somewhere in Idaho, and my key does not turn in the lock when applied during the times of 11:60 and 11:99.

So here I am, as alone in the universe as I could ever hope to be.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I finally busted in and found the King of Cahokia standing in my living room with Tamaka.



CHAPTER 5

Well, hot-diggity shit. I've got the door handle and deadbolt to my front door ripped out of their sockets, a screwdriver in one hand, and a very startled expression on my face.

I did my best to raise an eyebrow ironically.

"Is this a bad time? I wanted to talk to you about Vampire Jesus, but I can just leave some literature downstairs, if that would be better.."

"Royden Poole, King of Jangladesh, I seek an audience with you."

Fuck. Of all the guys in the world for Tamaka to have hooked up with after I died, why did she have to pick the goddamn King of Cahokia? I stared at his perfect, chiseled jaw and his perfect, chiseled physique all wrapped up in perfect, chiseled denim, leather, and raven feathers, trying to decide all over again if he looks more like a blond Aragorn or a manlier, taller Legolas.

I kicked a glance to Tama. She looked pissed and nervous and sad and guilty and disappointed and ten thousand other emotions that made me want to stab myself right in the face with the screwdriver.

Tearing my gaze from Tam, which took actual effort, I watched the King of Cahokia slip his hand into his pocket, putting away a phone so much fancier than mine that I wanted to puke.

Yes, he was standing in my apartment texting somebody.

I somehow actually hated him even more, now.

“Your Majesty. Tamaka. Hope I’m not interrupting. For some reason, I was pretty sure that I had left the stove on, but now that I’m here, I remember that I don’t even have a stove. Well, see you later.”

“This is not a social call, Royden. My Queen and I require, with you, a word.”

Oh, of course, they’re married now.

Or “symbolically bonded” or whatever the hippie magicians say nowadays when they’re fucking your ex. What, did I think she would wait until my stubby little brown body was cold before she hopped into bed with the first seven-foot Viking Injun chief to pull a coin out from behind her ear and call her *milady*?

“A word. Got it. And so you broke into my apartment?”

“No, it is you who broke in. We merely walked through the walls.”

Shit damn, I have to learn that trick one of these days. As soon as Jangladesh gets a shot at the World Series and I’ve got a pool of power to the name of my throne, I’m going to hunt down one of the old school kings and get him to teach me a trick or two.

“Great. Well, thanks for not busting up the place. I’m really looking forward to getting my security deposit back.”

I stepped inside and kicked the door handle and deadbolt so recently removed from my door under the couch. Glancing at the two of them as I pulled the door closed and walked to the couch, I lit a smoke. The perfect blond bastard wrinkled his nose in slight disgust.

“I have entered your imperial territory without your leave, and for that I apologize.”

I look at Tama. “Is that what they’re calling it now?”

She suddenly hated me very much.

Fine. I’d go ahead and settle for one solid emotion.

“I have traveled many miles and incurred great expense to meet with you, Royden.”

“You know, and this is so embarrassing—since we’re on a first-name basis and all and you’re standing in my office-slash-bedroom-slash-kitchen-slash-television-room, could you please remind me what the hell your name is?”

Tamaka spoke, “Royden, stop it.”

“I am called Garrick Heldane.”

“Are you, now? Sounds made up. Let’s see some ID.”

Tama turned and stormed out. She used the door I had just stripped of a

handle rather than walking out through the wall, which I considered a personal victory.

“Royden, I have come at the insistence of my queen to warn you of a great danger.”

“Yeah, probably the same great danger that a certain very smelly Prince of Minos just warned me off of. You know the one I’m talking about—the homeless jack-off who never misses an opportunity to flap his yap for a few bucks.”

“I do not know the prince of whom you speak, Royden. My court has been contacted in this hour by a potent oracle from the Keeps of Cerro Lampay, allied of old with me and mine, who spoke to us of grave tidings—of a foul darkness which now surrounds you. I merely impart my queen’s wishes for your safety.”

Bullshit. I believe nothing he says. I pulled my knife.

“I have a grave tidings for you, Your Majesty. You get the fuck out of my apartment right now or I’m going to stab you in the cock.”

He opened his mouth to say something, so I popped my neck in the most detached way I know how.

“It would be an obvious case of self-defense, Garrick. Big guy like you, little guy like me, in my own apartment in the middle of the night? Hell, there was a break-in, and I have the keys to the door on me. No court on the planet would convict me. Hope you don’t have any priors.”

“Please heed my warning, King of Jangladesh.”

“Please eat shit and die.”

He walked backward through the wall of my apartment.

Then I sat down on the floor, threw my knife at the wall where he had vanished, and idly wondered what Tama did first when she found out I was still alive. What was her first thought?

I mean, she hated me now, and with good reason, but... what was her first reaction?

Did she miss me? Did she hate me? Did she want to throw her arms around me?

Then I cried for a little while.



CHAPTER 6

Later, I found myself walking back toward the seedier part of town carrying a backpack and a duffel bag with every one of my worldly possessions stuffed inside, including the last stash of my cash, which I keep hidden from my drunk-self in my otherwise-empty sock drawer. I was following Kynan's other set of footprints, pretty much at this point just to piss off Tama, Ladislav, the King of Majooj, Garrick fucking Heldane and whoever else had tried to tell me what to do tonight.

Oh, yeah, and the Prince of Minos. Him too.

Fuck that guy for calling my ex.

I checked my watch. 11:9@4 qm.

Shit. Here in a little bit, the clocks stop going funny, and we're back to life, back to reality. When it all collapses in on itself like the madman's quantum wave-state that it is and all the monsters take their ball and go home until tomorrow night. On the far side of the curtain, the really degenerate fuckers who live too close to the Sideways are about to experience the reverse of what everyone in the waking world has been enduring for the last Hour That Isn't—they'll blink, and the universe will cram twenty-four hours of good, solid real-people time into the mix.

I should know. I once lost half a month chasing a bastard named Lowell

through the mists. I stepped out on a Friday night and came back down on a Thursday almost two weeks later to find that my utilities had been shut off.

But here's the really sticky part, the thing that mucks with the heads of the kids who took a lot of economics and law enforcement instead of philosophy and theoretical particle physics in college: there was still time, even now, to walk to Alaska if you kept to the right roads. There's an infinite series of numbers between 0.9 and 0.91, just like the infinite series of numbers between 0.91 and 0.910001; the trick is just to squeeze them right. I could go back to my apartment and kick the walls for another 16 weeks, if I wanted to. Or I could walk across the street right now and sit down in the bar where Kynan was hanging out this afternoon when he suddenly felt the urge to panic and walk most of the way over to Le Palace Resplendent a couple times.

But walk it wrong, and I won't see another 12:01 until 2021.

Either way, my one eyewitness is still dead by homicidal Sideways clown, and my neighbors are going to notice a busted-open apartment at the end of the hall pretty soon.

Balls.

Halfway across the road to a bar marked simply as *BAR*, things started getting more solid. The sky cleared up from that awful, off-gray ghost-light lunar eclipse color, and I could hear honking and footsteps echo off the pavement. Bars are good places to get out of the 25th because they're full of crowds and open in the dead of night. Establishments like *BAR* are also good places to get *in*, because there's invariably one stall in every women's restroom that nobody has bothered to look at closely for a few days, weeks, or possibly months.

I sank back into the waking world on the sidewalk, already a part of the crowd. The first reaction of the few midnight pedestrians directly in front of me was that they hadn't noticed the homeless, dark-skinned midget with a Yankees cap standing there just now, but I pretty obviously had been there for at least a moment or two.

They walked around me and forgot me about six seconds later.

I watched a guy glance at his wrist as he subconsciously avoided me and I had to bite back a bitter laugh.

No need to check my clock.

12:00 am, same as it was a second ago.

I leaned up against the wall and dialed Detective Ladislav. He was going to want to hear from me.

No answer. Probably shitting himself at the moment.

Today had been a real downer for him so far.

My fucking heart went out to him.

Beep. Time to leave a message. What to say?

“Hey there, Detective Ladislav. Sorry to bother you because I know you’re really busy right now. Call me back any time, and we can talk about the Yankees.”

I popped open the door to the bar called BAR, looked at the guy sitting on a stool, and decided that his name was BOUNCER.

He was surprised to see me, and he didn’t bother to cover it well. The true test of civilization in the modern age is to stand there talking with someone with a booger hanging out of his nose, a different skin color, a physical deformity or a stutter and to not mention it.

This guy did not see the need to play at civilization tonight.

“You looking for someone, kid?”

“Not a kid, dickless. I’ve got fucking sideburns. I’m here to wait for Kynan and Noel. Said they’d be here some time after midnight.”

“And who are you?”

“I’m the guy with the duffel bag and the attitude, genius. You want to talk about what’s inside the duffel bag, or do I guess correctly that Kynan’s business is above your pay grade?”

That made BOUNCER want to have me come inside. I walked to the bar and heaved myself up onto the stool. Fucking barstools. Who makes these fucking things so tall? Glancing up and down the bar at a scattered collection of bikers and boozers, now that I was slightly more at their height, I pulled the largest bill I had been able to scrounge from the emergency stash in my apartment out of my pocket and slapped it on the bar: a twenty.

“I’ll take a Coca-Cola Classic.”

The bartender walked over with a slight smirk on his face. Looked like a snake oil salesman, dressed like a pimp. Here was my guy.

“You say a Coke?”

“Well, I’d prefer a cold can of Kickapoo Joy Juice, but I assume you’re fresh out.”

He blinked. I continued, suddenly trying to sound serious.

“Plus, I’m driving. Got my Big Wheel double-parked outside.”

He smiled wider, grabbed a plastic cup, jammed it full of ice, and started

filling it with something dark off the gun. I looked up and down at all of the other patrons: glassware. This guy was an asshole.

“One coke, then.”

Trying not to let my irritation show, “And one of whatever you’re having. On me. Keep the change.”

I slid him the twenty, took my drink, and looked away. Out of my peripheral, I saw him pocket the bill and begin to mix himself a strong drink of Jack with a twist of Jack. Good, an alcoholic with no one but me to talk to. He looked at the side of my head as I scanned the crowd.

“Hey. What’s your name, man?”

“I’m called Big Jimmy Jangladesh.”

“Heh. That some kind of Arab name?”

“Nah, I’m Hindu, by way of England. Parents moved to the states when I was a kid.”

Now, I’m about as Hindu as Ronald McFucking Donald.

And *Poole*, for the record, is a mis-transliteration from *Pulaj* or something from about three generations back, but this guy doesn’t need any *part* of the truth, and it beats the alternative where I say Indian and then have to waste time qualifying “dot-on-forehead-for-holiness Indian” as opposed to “woo-woo, come-to-our-casino Little-Bighorn Indian” since this guy didn’t seem like he could find New Delhi on a map of the National Capital Territory of Delhi.

So, I guess, Hindu it is.

“You making a delivery?”

“Yep. Why, am I doing it wrong?”

“No, you just seem. I don’t know. You do this sort of thing a lot?”

“What, sit in bars and talk to bartenders? Yeah. But if you mean deliver duffel bags, no. Our regular guy got sick, and I got pulled off my usual job to come here and be a pain in your ass.”

I had him, now. He grinned wider, leaning over and putting elbows on the counter: “And what’s your usual job?”

“I’m a pit-fighter, duh.”

A laugh. I took a long draw of soda and glanced around, gauging my audience. No black guys in here tonight.

I spoke a silent advance-apology to Cleon under my breath.

“No, no, man, I’m just fucking with you. Actually, I do porn. A stunt cock, basically—they shoot some big old black dude about to fuck some chick, and

then they switch angles, and it's really me plowing her. I'm half the big black dicks you've ever seen rail a little Midwestern white girl."

That got another grin out of him, the racist asshole. "Is that so?"

"Oh, yeah. I may have an arm the size of a dude's dick, but I've got a dick like a dude's arm."

I let him process that as he sipped his drink. A little drunk. Good.

"No, no, man, I'm just fucking with you. I'm in accounting. Real good at math, which means that I'm real good at cooking the books. Plus, I make the boss laugh."

I finished my soda. Fuck, I had been thirsty.

I started calculating how many blocks I had walked today, and suddenly, my leg-cramps spoke up. Ow.

"So your boss has got you making a delivery?"

"Yeah. Buy me another Coke, and I'll tell you all about when I used to play for the Yankees."

He filled my drink, then set it down in front of me. With a coaster this time, I noticed. International bartender sign language for "hang out, man." I dug into my pocket and produced a fiver. Just about my last. It killed me to do it, but I put it on the bar anyway.

"On the house, man. Who did you say you were delivering for?"

"I didn't say, actually. And if my Coke is free, let me buy you another drink. I insist."

He nodded and filled his glass out of the well, stashing my five in his pocket.

"Who you waiting for, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Some guy called Kydan or something. Supposed to be a big fucker, like a head and a half taller than me, minimum. Did a job last night and is supposed to get paid today. I heard he was in this afternoon and took off, but he's supposed to be here any minute."

The bartender's eye twitched. Shit, this guy was better than I expected him to be. I could barely read fuck all off him except that he knew the name Kynan.

"Haven't seen him tonight. Sorry."

That meant, specifically, that my bartender had seen my leg breaker this afternoon.

"He seem a little off, to you?"

My bartender wasn't expecting that. He looked at the door and at the bouncer.

I continued, “Because I’ve heard that he was acting weird today. All kinds of freaking out. Saying something about Noel.”

My greasy pimp-bartender leaned in and looked at me like he was trying to stare me down over his sunglasses. I realized that this guy probably wore shades a lot during the day. I gave him my most innocent look, with a little bit of a not-too-inquisitive quizzical expression—like I was wondering where Kynan was, both psychologically and physically, instead of trying to figure out the series of thoughts and steps that led him to getting neck-knifed by Slappy, the Sideways Clown.

“I wouldn’t fuck with Kynan if I was you, man.”

“Shit. Do I look like the kind of guy who fucks with anybody? I mean, except little Midwestern white girls?”

“You just be real careful. Kynan hurts people for a living, but I’ve never seen him like he was today.”

I went for it. “I heard that he ran out of here like he was on fire after somebody mentioned Noel.”

He actually paused. Something in his head that hadn’t turned over yet clicked for him.

“Yeah. He did. Just be cool, is all I’m saying.”

“No worries, man. Cool is my middle name.”

My cellphone rang. Ladislav.

“Oooh, I gotta take this. It’s my mom.”

I got up and walked out of the bar, and I wish to god that I could say that I then went down to the bus station, gave the nice lady with the mustache behind the glass my life savings, and went on a tour of all fifty state capitals.

The end.

Instead, I walked outside, slipped into the traffic of the sidewalk, and answered the phone.

“This is Royden ‘Cool’ Poole, and I’m a little pissed at you right now, Detective.”

“Where the fuck are you, you little fuck?”

“In the beautiful Hawa Mahal in Rajasthan, India, sir. After your perp got perforated, I hopped the quickest flight to Jaipur. Oh, look, a tiger playing a sitar.”

“What the fuck happened in there, Poole?”

“If I told you that it had to do with a demon clown from the basement of the universe called into service by the King of Majooj, would you believe me?”

“Fuck you.”

“Ah-ha. But you *do* believe that I killed your eyewitness for no reason and then teleported out of a crowded police station? I’m just checking, is all.”

“I want your scrawny ass in my office right goddamn now.”

“There are people who want me dead, detective. Or at the very least violently inconvenienced. People willing to break a few laws of physics to get that done. So I think I’m going to stick this one out on my own.”

“I’m going to find you, Poole.”

I glanced over my shoulder just to make sure that nobody from BAR was following me, especially not BOUNCER.

I was clear.

“Yeah, waste all of our time with that. Instead, you should be on the lookout for Noel, Bohdan, and this Alexandros guy. Do you have a physical description on him, or have we narrowed it down to guys who hang out in delis at around midnight waiting for leg breakers?”

He hung up on me. I considered for a moment and then dialed him right back.

“Your little brown ass had better be telling me that you’re outside my office, or I’m going to strangle you to death when I find you.”

“Alexandros did it. I just don’t know how yet. Or, I guess, *what*. But he did it. From you, I need a list of every person who has access to Fadey Bohdan’s private elevator code at Le Palace Resplendent but who doesn’t have access to the combination of his safe. In exchange, I’ll find you Noel.”

“I already have Noel—he was found dead at the bottom of the elevator shaft.”

Then he hung up. Good. I was getting sick of him, anyway.

Oh, and fuck.

Poor guy. Falling down an elevator shaft is no way to die.

Also, poor me. There went one more person who might have been willing to help me solve this stupid case.

I desperately needed somewhere to think, somewhere to sleep, and somewhere to not get arrested. I flattered myself thinking that there was an all-points bulletin about me going out over the radios right now, but either way, a guy like me isn’t too hard for Johnny Law to spot.

I considered calling Tama, realized I couldn't do that, and then hated myself the most of any time that I had ever hated myself before.

I went to Cleon's.