

Alone in the Dark

Anthropomorphic Tales of the Things that go Bump in the Night



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Thank you to both the contributors who shared their ideas and visions with me for this project, and to the readers who have helped support this endeavor. I hope you all will enjoy this book.

Alone in the Dark

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Editor's Notes

I've always enjoyed horror, but I will admit that besides devouring the works of Stephen King in my younger years, my forays into the genre have mostly been through cinema. I love monster movies; I like hearing a good ghost story too.

My interest in horror fiction was rekindled when I discovered Pseudopod, the horror short-fiction podcast (<http://www.pseudopod.org>). They give a wide mix of work across the genre, as well as some wonderfully dark and creepy tales. What really impresses me about Pseudopod though, is that not only do they serve up quality horror; the stories also often contain some strong drama. I'm a sucker for character drama, and it's a real treat to listen to emotionally-affecting zombie stories.

Those stories inspired me to try my hand at a horror production. I'd been thinking of working on anthology books of anthro stories. A book of dramatic horror fiction was a great idea for release at Fur Fright, a regional furry convention with a Halloween theme, held in Connecticut in the middle of October.

My goal for this book was to have stories which not only had horror elements and atmosphere, but also had strong characters and drama. I wanted to use anthropomorphism in a wider sense, both with anthro animals, but also humanizing The Other, including stories with sympathetic monsters. There are a couple of stories with human characters, but I felt they fit the theme and spirit of the anthology and helped round it out.

I'm happy with how this collection turned out and I'm pleased that I was able to get the support from the authors with so much content; this book turned out to be much thicker than I was anticipating. Some of these stories are old favorites I'd read in the past, but the majority of them are new tales.

This anthology provides a nice cross-section of horror. There's dark fantasy and speculative fiction, stories inspired by both Rod Serling and H. P. Lovecraft. There are campfire tales and ghost stories, up through some stronger horror at the darker end of the spectrum, including some visceral work, forced transformation and body horror. There's also psychological horror and some non-traditional tales, which still fit the theme and add their own spooky flavor. Finally, there are some lighter stories and even a bit of comic relief to balance things out.

I know I'm biased with my own creations, but still I think this book contains a lot of wonderful ideas and visions, both macabre and moody, but also inventive and thought-provoking. It should make good reading for dark October nights, or anytime a spooky mood is called for.

Happy Halloween and happy haunting!

– Will A. Sanborn



“Epitaph” by Jason Gillespie

Illustrated by S. M. Bittler (“Synnabar”)

All my thoughts were consumed. That is how it is when you are in love. All your thoughts are consumed by her. That image, that lovely shape, the way she looks at you, the way she greets you in the morning, the way she snores at night — all of it is your greatest joy. Every waking moment you think of the numerous little things that you can do to better serve her and make her realize the extent of your absolute devotion for her. It was this way with me and my beloved Natalia.

Married were we two years ago; a joyous celebration that I can remember in every detail. It was the moment my life finally found meaning. I knew then that my purpose was to serve her. Lifting the veil over her upstanding ears, gazing into her chestnut eyes, I felt as if I were floating through the very ether of space, hovering above the planets like some Roman deity and conducting them on their astral course. Yes, I was indeed in Gilead! The very streets of Kiev cried out with joy at the love we had for each other; the rocks exultant in the purity of our desires; the trees sheltering above us in vegetative glee. It was the same the day I returned from work and found her in bed coughing her last breath into the stale air — the very essence of the earth shook with anguish at our bereavement.

I remember her body lying supine on the bed. Her mouth hung open, tongue too stiff to move and parched a sickly gray. Her frame was thin and her fur dangled from her bones. Her nose dripped some foul ichor which dried into her fur rendering it sticky and wet. Even her once bushy vulpine tail seemed subdued, cathartic.

In all the world I do not imagine that more tears were shed than by me that day and during the week that followed with the merciless precision of a millwheel grinding away stone. Every time I returned home I half expected to see her at work in her gardens where she diligently spent her day. Now when I saw the untouched earth I could only think how small the garden was. I often wondered how such a small thing could take up her day. One time, I had carefully picked up a rose flower and placed it between her ears as I walked by. Seeing her hands rise to feel the gift placed lovingly on her head had filled me with passion. Not the debased kind that so many in today’s culture revelled in, but one that made us whole, completed the empty parts in each of us. Without her I was but an empty cask.

Every day now I wander up to the great church yard where she’s buried. It was an archaic place filled with icons of long dead saints and visages of our Lord the Christ. I bowed my head as I moved past the gravestones and vaulted mausoleums. Leaves covered the ground, wet and undisturbed except for my

fateful footsteps. These paths were mostly untraveled, for few consort with the dead anymore.

I found her tombstone promptly. It was unchanged since yesterday. The fur I'd shaved from my tail and placed at the headstone was damp with dew and the lecherous trails of snails and other necrophagus creatures which dwelled in these silent grounds. I fell to my knees on the not yet grown grass, rested my head against the headstone, and felt it roughly scrape my ears back. My sobbing which I had until now contained came in hideous, racking coughs. I gripped the sides of the headstone with my forepaws and shook it, but it did not move. Still shaking, I gently licked the epitaph that I had engraved upon her stone.

"She loved deeply, loved ever so deeply, and then died."

I slid down to my haunches against the tombstone and wept bitter tears into the ground. My friends and coworkers offered their sympathy, and my counselor assured me that in time the pain would be less. I beg to differ! The pain with each passing day is greater! Even now I feel my heart ready to crumble from the loss. I cannot bear her absence any longer. It pains me more than if all of my limbs were torn from my body. A spear piercing both my eyes would be a balm for me. Her death has torn my heart from my body; all that I feel is the agony of my own death delayed.

It might seem odd to consider, but I did not find the onset of nightfall to be any concern. The pain of hunger did not arrest my weeping. The cold of the air about me, seeping as it did past my coat of fur and dwelling in my very skin, did not discommode me. Truly, I did not even pay it mind, I was too wrapped in my sorrow to notice the evening hour had struck and all was dark about me.

It was only at the call of some wild bird that, startled from my prone position, I noticed it was well into the night. What hour I could not say for I deplored watches. What could a timepiece tell me of the passage of days when I was in love or grief?

My eyes lifted to the night sky and stared at the moon whose bright face watched me, almost accusingly. For the first time since her death I felt that not all of nature accompanied me in my dirge. Gazing at the empty stillness of the graveyard, I noted the almost unearthly cast the moon lent to it. The pale reflections of its light upon the tombstones sent a shiver from my neck to the tip of my tail.

I moved under a copse of trees to escape the febrile light and then tried to thread my way between a cluster of tombstones behind me. I do not imagine that graveyards are a healthy place to be at night when all the imaginings of our bygone youths return to us. The specters of our fears rise up and give light to shapes that are not there and denizens that appear to issue from the rocks but are nothing more than crevices and moss. We know this in our mind, but we cannot help but feel the fabric of reality bend under the weight of our imagined leshii and domovoi or possibly even a rusalka come away from her lake.

I chided myself for my foolishness. Those were just myths, ancient legends concocted by pagans who had no understanding of the natural world. There

was nothing supernatural about a graveyard. There was nothing to be frightened of. Knowledge had always consoled me in my times of fright. However, now, it only made me feel weak and helpless.

I continued to move backward, and stumbling, I fell to the marshy ground. Wet leaves stuck to my fur as I raised myself on forepaws to catch my breath. I tried to move my leg but found it caught fast by the very earth! Surely this was some ancient soul whose skeletal hand had burst from the ground in fury for being so woefully tread upon! If I did not escape it would drag me down into its worm infested abode and consume me in leisure.

I yanked hard on my leg, my forepaws digging wildly into the loam. I could feel the blood trickle against the grasp of the dead hand. I let out a yowl of fright and suddenly fell forward my leg free. I glanced back hoping to see the skeletal hand descend defeated into the earth, but what I saw made me chide myself for being foolish. It was nothing more than a cluster of decayed stones piled in a heap that I'd tripped over. The hand had been my imagination.

I struggled to my hind paws and, wobbling uncertainly on the injured one, walked down the path noting the vines climbing the sides of the untended stones and the moss clinging to the large trees. One particular tree had grown so large that it had dislodged several headstones. The grave markers protruded at odd angles to hover over whatever body lay beneath. I half fancied that the very gnarls of the tree were the faces of the dead pushed aside in its yearning for the more soil.

Recovered from my former fright, I stooped over to investigate the humongous tree that had so casually taken over the plots. Before I was halfway, all the light in the world blinked out. I could not even see the outlines of the tombstones that were once so clear. I glanced at the sky but saw nothing. Hoping that it was only dense clouds which would soon pass blocking the moon's light, I stumbled along the grass embankments with my forepaws in front of me, feeling for the tombstones ahead of me. I stubbed my toes several times on loose rocks, but no matter which direction I went, I could not see the moon.

Suddenly, I found myself stepping into empty air. I tried to grasp behind for anything to prevent my fall into the unknown but I found nothing. With a choked yelp, I tumbled into the dark pit.

It must have been a few hours later when I awoke at the bottom of a steep escarpment, for I could see the moon passing in and out of a layer of clouds much farther along its nightly course. Pain throbbed between my ears, and I felt the beginning of a nasty bruise at the back of my head. Glancing about, I saw that I was now in a secluded portion of the graveyard whose ancestral quality was so intense that I felt I had tumbled back in time as well as down a hillside. The moldering icons of our Lord Jesus were covered by lichen, mosses, and vines, and seemed almost to sag upon the decaying earth below. Most of the tombstones in the area had already crumbled to piles of rubble, except for the

mausoleum at the far corner nestled amidst a copse of unhealthy looking spruce.

Making my way amidst the fallen graves and unkempt foliage, I maneuvered closer to the ancient crypt. Time clearly showed its hand on the marble edifice. Draped in vines and covered in lichen and moss, it reeked of stagnation and seemed the sum whole of the graveyard in mood. Scanning the front, I noticed that the handle to the recessed door was damaged beyond repair. I brushed aside the vines and ran my paws over what remained of the irons bolts that had rusted away over the aeons. I gave the door a shove but it did not move. I leaned my shoulder against it and heaved with all my might. Again it remained where it stood.

With a long sigh I rested my head against the marble monolith. As I looked about my surroundings I came to realize that I was completely lost. Fear again dwelled in my heart. How was I going to find my way out of this seemingly endless expanse of the dead? I glanced at the moon which now began its descent. It would not be long before dawn approached, so I could rest here for the night and find my way back in the morning. As much as the thought of spending the night lying in a graveyard repulsed me, I knew I would not find my way out without light. I was already lost; any more wandering and I might never find my way back.

Lowering myself onto a loose stone, my eyes found the mausoleum again. In the moon's vapid light I could discern something on the door that I hadn't noticed before. Leaning closer, I scrapped away the vines and lichen as best I could. There were words inscribed on the stone face. His epitaph. The first part had worn away, but the rest was still legible.

'...given to this humble man. He was generous to his neighbors, gave assistance to his fellow man, and asked for nothing in return for his kindness. Most of all, he loved his wife and children, and raised them to be good citizens as he was.'

I cannot remember how long I stared at the words but it seems like only a few seconds now. The next thing I remember was the sound of stone grating against stone coming from the very depths of the mausoleum. What thing crawled from its sarcophagus in the dead of night? Before my very eyes, it came forth from the tomb in which it eternally slept.

The floating specter is very hard for me to describe. It seemed like a skeleton shrouded in a pale blue nimbus. I was so frightened that I could not even let loose the whine lodged at the back of my throat. I felt the cut on my ankle sear with heat. I wanted to run, but I was locked in place staring at the beast floating before me.

What the creature did though is something that I did not expect. I cannot say whether it knew that I was there or not for it completely disregarded my presence. It faced the door of its crypt and began with a bony finger to trace out letters that stood in blue highlight against his epitaph.

'Here lies a selfish man. A man who proudly displayed his wealth; who loaned his money to others only to exact a stiff return from them. He beat his wife and children, calling them filthy names, and reared them to be monsters to society as he was. He lies here in wretched agony.'

The finger stopped moving but the figure remained in silent contemplation. I broke free of my paralysis and turned my back on the specter that had crept out of some hell to torment me. Before me, also climbing from their graves, were the skeletal figures of other dead who also wrote ghastly words on their headstones. I felt the blood inside me chill and my tail tucked itself protectively between my legs. I let out a howl of fright and ran into the trees.

As I ran, I ventured past more plots where every soul rose forth to erase the words placed on their stones. I ignored them and they ignored me. However, I finally happened, how I do not know, upon a particular stone and soul with whom I was intimately familiar. It was my beloved Natalia. Sweet Natalia, whose soul had too been wrenched from her grave. Fascinated, I watched her, enchanted by her vulpine beauty. Even in death she enticed me. Curious, my eyes wandered to her finger to see what she wrote.

'She caught a fatal sickness one day while returning home from the house of her adulterous lover.'

I remembered nothing more until the next morning when the authorities found me sprawled across the grass where I'd fallen.



“Faded Celluloid Dreams” by Will A. Sanborn

Illustrated by Sara “Caribou” Palmer

He’d noticed him shortly after entering the diner, watching people as he always did in public places, looking for suitable subjects to capture in his art. He saw him sitting there, alone in the corner of the shabby little establishment, huddled over his meal. His wings drooped wearily behind him; the human-form vampire bat stared listlessly into the empty space before him.

Watching this old exotic, a tinge of familiarity jumped out at the young man. There was a member of a golden age now gone by, lost amongst the back corners of the world. Gazing at him, the human’s memories stirred within him and triggered the light of certainty. Smiling, he got up from his table. After only a moment’s thought, he walked towards the all-but deserted corner of the diner, slowly approaching the bat.

The exotic barely even looked up at him as he approached, the intrusion hardly shattering the isolation he must have felt. “Bela, it’s you, isn’t it?” The human asked eagerly, heedless of the weary bat’s wordless wish to be left alone.

There was a small flicker in the bat’s eyes though, a momentary glimmer of recognition, and that was enough to spur the human on in his intrusions. Even though the bat tried to turn away, he hadn’t been quick enough. That small spark of memory he’d shown had given him away.

“Bela, I knew it was you... You can’t believe how exciting it is for me to meet you here, after all these years... I must tell you I’m very honored.”

Sighing, the bat looked up at him with weary eyes, taking in the visage of this intruder into his lonely solitude. “Yes, it is me,” he replied in a practiced old European accent which had become his own. “Not too many people recognize me these days though... I suppose you’ll want to sit down with me now?”

“If I could please?” the man responded. Not even waiting for an affirmation, he quickly took the other seat to the little booth; if he noticed Bela’s uneasiness, he failed to acknowledge it.

After a moment or two while the human sat there smiling at him, Bela finally broke the silence between them. “So, one of my fans has found me again after all this time?” Pausing, he added, “you don’t look that old though... were you really around for all of my films? It’s been quite some time.” His voice grew a little more weary at that, remembering how long ago it all had been.

“Yes Bela,” the human answered “I was very young at the time, but my parents still took me to the movies.” It had been a long time ago, a good twenty years or more, most of his life for him. Sadly Bela hadn’t fared as well as he had with the passage of time. Looking at him, the signs of age were readily apparent on his body. The dry, gray hair, the fading fur losing its luster, and the wrinkles around his eyes and on his muzzle, showed the toll time had taken on him. The

drooping of his wings and the slight hunch to his back also helped paint the picture of a weary old exotic, his time nearing its end.

Finally really noticing the signs of Bela's age, a small shiver ran through the younger man. As he looked at one of his childhood idols, a sadness washed over him in the knowledge that he soon might be gone, faded from the public eye forever. "I saw all the new exotic movies back then Bela, and they were amazing. I loved them all, the Aztec-Demon Princess, the Mummy, Frankenstein's Monster, the Werewolf, Cat Woman and the even the Gill-Man... You were my favorite though, the dark image of the vampire you portrayed, noble and deadly at the same time."

Hearing that, Bela blinked at him, his eyes watering, if only slightly. Pausing again, looking back at the human sitting in front of him, he finally answered with a simple, but heartfelt "thank-you." Stopping again, he realized he didn't know how to address this surprise visitor and fan.

Picking up on the clue, the human smiled sheepishly, blushing slightly, and then he spoke again. "Oh I'm sorry Bela, my name's Alex... I should've introduced myself earlier. I just forgot my manners at being able to meet you..." Then other thoughts dawning on him, he gasped. "Oh no, I'm not intruding on your privacy am I?" the question already apparent, but asking implicit forgiveness. "If you'd like to be alone I can respect that..."

Half-forcing a laugh, Bela looked back at him, a small fraction of his weariness lifting from his tired face. "No, that's okay Alex... Truth be told I'm alone all the time as it is. It's kind of nice to have someone to talk to, someone who remembers..." his voice trailing off, his eyes glistening with added moisture.

Unsure of how to reply, Alex finally placed one of his hands upon Bela's, feeling the soft coating of fur there. Adding the warmth of his touch to the bat's wrinkled paw, he gazed back upon the crumbling elegance of the aging star before him. "I really loved those movies Bela, getting to see the new exotics in them, eagerly watching and waiting with the rest of the crowd. It was more than just that though, more than just the newness of it all, they seemed so real... I wish they still made films like that today."

Sighing along with him, Bela echoed his sentiments. "I know Alex, for awhile there things were wonderful. The whole world watched as we exotics were unveiled before them, eager to get to know us. For a time it was so strange, constantly being in the public spotlight, but that's what we were created for and with all of my training and knowledge it became old hat to me. For several years there things couldn't have been better. Adored by the public, we all took our jobs with energy and excitement, falling into the roles chosen for us, becoming them with great joy and eagerness. I never thought it would end, I thought it would go on like that forever. How was I supposed to know that the public could get tired of us?"

Alex listened to him silently, giving Bela his full attention, nodding slightly to his words. As Bela continued, he felt tears of his own welling up in his eyes.

“Looking back on it all now, it doesn’t surprise me that things changed. Hollywood had it’s exotics for that golden age, but it grew tired just like everything else. We weren’t new anymore and things moved on without us. I used to have it all, the fame and the money... and no worries about companionship. I always had women who were interested in spending some time with me, beautiful humans, and even an exotic or two... but now it’s all dried up, they’ve turned their backs on us. There’s just no more roles for an old vampire but anymore... especially one that can’t even fly. These wings are just for effect you know.”

“Sure there’s still a calling for an exotic or two here and there, but people aren’t interested in the dark romantic fascination of the old movies anymore. All the new films are a different sort of drama and they’re all looking for younger exotics anyway... the new generation. I knew I wouldn’t live as long as you or any other human, a shortcoming of the genetic code they said, but back then in the prime of my life it didn’t seem to matter. Now, as the end is near, I don’t know what to think... I’m just waiting for things to be over I guess.”

“Please don’t say that Bela,” Alex whispered, choking on his reply, squeezing the bat’s hand desperately.

“Shhh... it’s okay,” he replied, the timbre of his voice cracked by age, but still holding some of the assuring qualities of its past. “It’s just how things worked out.” Listening to him Alex was unsure if his words were sincere, or just spoken for his benefit, to try and ease his mind.

“At least it’s good to have one person still remember me, if only for a little while... It helps me remember those wonderful days myself.” As he finished, he managed to smile at Alex, and once more some of the weariness was lifted from him; at least the sentiments of those words rang true.

They spent an hour or two sitting there in the diner and just talking. Bela reminisced about the good old days he’d known, and Alex soaked it up with rapt attention, and then shared his own dreams and visions with him. They must have been a strange sight, the two of them sitting there at the small booth in the corner, but nobody paid them much attention. Even their waitress was tolerant of their loitering, having long-ago cleaned away their dishes and only having interrupted them briefly to refill their mugs with coffee.

With the afternoon drawing on, their conversation finally wound itself down. Looking at his newfound friend, Bela smiled once again. “Thank you Alex, it was certainly a pleasure talking with you. I cannot tell you how wonderful it was.”

“I need to thank you as well Bela. The stories you’ve given me, remembrances of that golden time, I only wish I could have been there with you to have seen it all.”

Bela chuckled slightly at that, nodding to his human friend. “Yes indeed, I’m sure that would have been fun... but now, I think it’s time to be going. Thank you for taking the time to talk with an old exotic and help him remember the way things used to be...”

As Bela was getting up, Alex stopped him once again. "Wait Bela, can I see you again to talk about things? As I've told you I'm an artist and a photographer and if you'd let me, I'd like to take some shots of you... There's several photo essay contests I'll be entering my work in shortly, and I'd like to do one of you, to help people remember you..."

The bat thought about it silently for several moments, his face unsure, until Alex urged him on with a plaintive request. "Please Bela, it would mean a lot to me..."

"Okay Alex," Bela replied, almost with a sigh, but then considering it another moment or two, he smiled at him once again. "Yes, I think I'd like that."

Rising to his feet and reaching for his cane, Bela began walking away from the table. His gait was slowed by his age, but not without a hint of newfound determination and energy to it. Quickly leaving money to cover the bill and a tip for their waitress, Alex joined up with him, and they walked out of the small diner together. They talked some as they walked down the street, making plans for the photo shoot, and then going their separate ways. Alex turned to watch Bela as he walked away from him, a subtle aura of dignity flowing around him once again, as in days long ago past.



It was the following afternoon when they met again. Bela had come up with the wonderful suggestion of going to one of the local cemeteries to do the photo shoot. It was an older one, secluded from the busy streets that bordered it, and though it wasn't visited too frequently, its grounds were still kept in good condition. As the late-afternoon sun cast shadows upon the landscape of stone monuments, it became the perfect gothic setting for Alex's photo work. Bela's idea was brilliant, the dark romance of the setting, combined with the character of the aging, but still dignified vampire bat, would make for a powerful and moving set of images.

Alex had shown up early to scout the area for a good shooting location and Bela had arrived right on schedule, taking a cab to meet him there at the entrance to the cemetery. He'd even dug out his old costume from the movies. His debonair black suit still held up after all these years and it fit the quiet, haunting mood of the setting perfectly. As soon as the cab had driven away and was clear from the shot, Alex snapped a few quick pictures, capturing Bela's graceful elegance as he walked to meet him. He even caught one shot of him grinning at the camera, perhaps remembering the feel of the limelight once again.

"Thank you for coming Bela, and this was a great idea of yours. The sun is just about perfect now and this is just a beautiful setting for you."

Smiling at him once again, Bela replied. "I've always liked it here, especially in the later years, it's just so quiet and peaceful... Besides, what better place for a

vampire right? You'd best be careful young man, lest I decide to sample the taste of your blood...."

Alex couldn't help but smile, seeing Bela effortlessly fall back into the role he remembered from his childhood. Even now it still moved him with its presence, as the bat affected the familiar and haunting accent of the character with his voice.

They set up at one end of the cemetery where the light was the best, the shadows stretching out behind them in an eerie stillness of the late afternoon. Alex had found a large monument which stood out from the rest and took several shots of Bela posing around it. Bela was amazing, falling back into the old, but not forgotten, routines of his character, displaying the dignity, sadness and dark romance of the role he'd been born to play. He seemed tired a couple of times, and Alex was worried about him, but Bela assured him he was okay; after a short rest he was ready to go again.

It wasn't until the sun was setting and Alex was getting over the excitement of having filled a couple of rolls of film with some absolutely wonderful shots that he truly noticed how bad off Bela was. He'd sat down to take another break, but it was beyond simple tiredness now. He looked very weak and his breathing was slightly labored. Something was very wrong with him.

"Bela, what's the matter, do you feel okay?" Pausing, Alex gave his friend another worried glance as he knelt down beside him. "You don't look too good. I think we should get you to a doctor or something. My car's just over there, can you walk to it?" he asked, feeling his heart pounding faster.

"No Alex... It's going to be all right" Bela replied, looking up at him, a slight smile across his muzzle, even amongst his weariness.

"But you don't look okay. I think we should take you to see someone Bela, please..."

"Shhh... I knew this was coming and I'm ready for it. I took the pills right before coming out here and I was hoping I'd last this long... I'm glad that we're able to get the pictures finished."

"What pills? What did you do?!" Alex asked frantically, his voice cracking in concern and panic.

He grabbed at Bela's arm, even then mindful of not hurting the folds of his wing attached there. He tried to pull him up to a standing position. Bela held fast though, his weight keeping him on the ground. "Bela, we've got to get you to the hospital! You can't die... no, not now," his voice trailed off in a sob as he tried to help his friend and was failing miserably.

"Shhh Alex... This is the perfect time for it. I've known my time was coming for awhile now, and I was afraid, and so lonely... Yesterday, you let me remember again, if only for a little while, and I could feel what it had been like so long ago... but now it's time for me to go."

"No Bela, please..." Alex's tears were flowing steadily now.

"I'm sorry Alex, but this is the time for it. I've been gone from the spotlight for so long, and I missed it so much. You helped me recapture some of that,

but I know I can never have things that way again, and I wanted to end things on this happy note before fading away any more... I'm sorry, but thank you for being such a good friend..." Even as finished, his voice became more strained, his breathing more labored, and he sank a little lower towards the earth below him.

Holding out to him, Alex grabbed onto his exotic friend and pulled him against himself, as he fell to a seating position next to him. Sobbing deeply, he couldn't find the words to say to him, as he struggled to try and help his friend.

"That's it Alex, please let it end like this..." he offered, as his voice was almost gone. Bela was shedding tears of his own to join Alex's, but they seemed to offer him a peaceful release. The bat tried reaching out to put his arm around his human friend, but was too weak to keep it there for very long, his grip failing him.

"No Bela... No. Please don't go like this," Alex coughed out amongst his sobs, but already he could feel the bat's life ebbing away from him.

As he held Bela against him, he heard him offer one last message, barely more than a whisper. "Good-bye Alex, remember me..." and then his voice was silent.

With the darkness of twilight slowly creeping in on the solitude of the cemetery, Alex continued to hold Bela. Pulling him tighter against him, his body was wracked with wrenching sobs. Crying into the growing darkness, he could feel his friend's breathing slowing down.

It wasn't until much later, the full darkness of night almost upon him, when Alex had recovered enough to think clearly. His eyes still stinging slightly and his cheeks damp with drying tears, he looked down upon the body of Bela as he lay on the cool grass beside him. Seeing him there, he looked peaceful in his resting, the end of a weary journey finally reached.

Shivering slightly, Alex realized he needed to take care of his friend for one last duty. He'd need to go for help, but not so quickly that they'd rudely awake him from his final sleep. Choking off another sob, he knew he had to do that much for him, no matter how much it pained him to do so.

He decided he should wait there a little longer. The gloom of the night bathed the surroundings in a morose setting, but he felt compelled, drawn in by the place as well. Looking down at the body of his friend, suppressing another sob, he folded Bela's arms across one another to tuck his wings around him, leaving him resting in peace.

It was when he was finally getting ready to leave that he noticed his forgotten camera. Picking it up, holding it the object gingerly in his hands, new tears found their way to his eyes. His vision watering once again he cradled the camera and its precious film in his grasp. Only then did he begin to understand Bela's decision.



“Carrier” by Watts Martin

Illustrated by Heather Bruton

Joan sat on the front steps of her condo, watching the sun start to crest the western hills, sipping coffee brewed from carefully-hoarded beans and listening to bird song, loud and bright from a dozen trees. One of the few ironic graces these days: you heard more birds now.

Halfway through the mug a troop carrier rolled into view. The rabbit woman watched it pull up to block the driveway; Hellman stepped out of the back, two younger rabbit boys in fatigues following close behind. The mouse wore jeans and a gray turtleneck just like the last time she'd seen him, a year before, questioning her about Rob's whereabouts as if she'd heard from the wolf in the last decade. Now he walked up with his faint smile as if nothing had changed. Yet after yesterday's phone call, a lot had changed. Yet again.

Joan had had enough of change this lifetime.

He stopped a few paces away, hands in pockets, as nonchalant as if they were going out for Sunday brunch. “Morning, Ms. Sanchez.”

“An ironically pleasant one.” Grunting, she took two last gulps of the precious coffee, then set the mug down by the front door and walked to the vehicle.

Two more soldiers waited in the back of the truck; they slid in and sat on narrow green benches, facing one another as the vehicle rumbled forward. Joan felt like an extra in a war movie. She watched houses go by, noting which ones looked newly abandoned.

“We traced the call Corelli made to you and it all checks out,” Hellman said.

She crossed her arms. “It's so nice the Quarantine Authority's looking out for me that way.”

He laughed. “Just a hell of a coincidence if the first guy with antibodies turns out to be your ex, huh?”

“He's got to be somebody's ex. Or is it odd because you're my ex too, Tom?” A couple of the soldiers looked sharply in Hellman's direction, and he smiled more wanly.

The truck hit the highway and picked up speed. Joan hadn't been on this freeway since... February? Eight months. The view past the roadbed looked incongruously serene, the reality of the city—population depleted, services curtailed, goods strictly rationed—hidden from view.

“You really think this wolf's immune, ma'am?” one of the soldiers said. He said wolf with a hint of a sneer, as if it had become an epithet.

“I don't know. Yes. I think so.” She sighed. “He said he had the wilding plague and recovered.”

The young rabbit's eyes widened. “Really? And you believe him?”

“As crazy as it might sound, I do.”

“And I trust Ms. Sanchez’s judgment,” Hellman said, sliding his sunglasses on, off, on again: a nervous fidget she recognized. She patted the back of his hand, and he clasped fingers with her a moment. As the epidemic had spread, they hadn’t as much broken up as admitted that trying to save the world left no time for relationships.

It took another five minutes to reach the city limits. High fences straddled the road, marking the first checkpoint. From here on, the interstate shrank to a two-way street, strictly surveilled. The city had spent the last two years slipping from the first world, but nowhere did it become more stark than the “temporary staging area” around its perimeter, a nightmare combination of martial encampment and third-world slum. Roads spread out like dirt serpents, winding between drab gray tents and industrial trailers. Civilian huts marched to the horizon in tight lines, accommodating refugees whose homes, both inside and outside the metro area, had become unlivable.

And, of course, past those lay the holding pens.

She’d seen video of the pens before, huge bare fields fenced in with high chain link and barbed wire, canvas roofs. News shows used to talk about them, after the hospitals and prisons were overrun but before people lost the energy to be outraged. As far as Joan knew, there’d never been an official media blackout. Instead the city, the country (the world), had slipped into collective denial. No one wanted documentary evidence of friends and spouses sickening, going manic—and, if they were lucky, dying.

What the videos couldn’t depict is how much the pens reeked, even the empty ones, of blood and vomit and fear. The other rabbits, even the mouse, looked stoic, but Joan began to gag, holding a hand over her mouth and nose. The pens that weren’t empty didn’t have the wild, manic occupants she’d been expecting, though; whole families of foxes and cats, wolves and jackals, simply watched the truck roll by, silently, eyes dull and submissive. “None of them look sick,” she managed to get out.

“They aren’t,” the talkative soldier said. “We only keep the at-risk ones here now.”

“Where are the sick ones, then?”

He just looked steadily at her, and she looked down after a moment.

The pens passed by, and the truck slowed, then stopped, waiting at another checkpoint. Joan’s ears folded back. A concrete and steel barrier stretched across the horizon, topped with barbed wire and sentry platforms. She remembered the wall being described in news report as another temporary measure, but this structure looked ominously permanent: the perimeter of a fortress, or the walls of a prison. The transport idled in front of a high chain link gate, red revolving lights indicating its electrification. The driver was filling out a form, which he turned around and passed to Hellman for more signatures and check marks.

Finally, the soldiers milling around the vehicle stepped back and lined up behind it, rifles ready. “Clear!” someone shouted, and the red lights went out. The gate swung up. “Hang on,” the driver called.

Joan hadn’t imagined a truck could accelerate that fast. It lurched forward, jerking hard. The gate slammed down behind it.

Despite the ugly show, the road outside quickly reverted to quiet pastoral countryside. After several minutes the only noise other than the engine was wind whistling through trees; if the stretch of freeway leaving her neighborhood had seemed quiet, out here in the hot zone it had been, simply, abandoned. The roadbed had been resurfaced just four years ago, but the untended edges showed the bites and tears of invasive weeds.

The silence settled in and remained unbroken for about five minutes. Then the driver called, “Ferals at three o’clock.” All of the soldiers suddenly had rifles.

Joan looked out to the right of the vehicle. Three tigers—two women and a man—ran along the side of the road, none dressed. They snarled at the truck as it went by.

“They don’t look sick,” she said doubtfully.

“Once the disease runs its course, if you’ve survived you’re perfectly healthy, other than being a carrier,” Hellman murmured.

“And, you know, stupid and homicidally insane,” the sergeant added dryly. The rest laughed.

She looked back at the receding figures. “Do you ever wonder who they were?”

The soldiers glanced at her, shifting the grips on their weapons uncomfortably. “That’s a bad road to go down, ma’am,” the sergeant replied.

“Sometimes you recognize them,” the talkative one said, very quietly. Nobody spoke again for a full twenty miles, not until the driver turned off at the Hazelton exit. Buildings came into view: first a gas station, then an old hardware store, then the expected series of strip malls, fast food joints and small businesses that spread in organic rings from a city’s center. Now all stood empty and silent, trash piled against shattered windows. Most were dark, although on some blocks, lights flickered unsteadily. “Is all of the hot zone like this?” she murmured.

“Most of it,” Hellman said, voice flat. The terminology had changed in the last two years. At first hot zone was just the district in the city where it started. Then all of that city. Then, as the strategy shifted from trying to contain the disease to just trying to protect the uncontaminated, from quarantining to barricading, hot zone became everything outside the safe metros.

“We hear most of the heartland’s pretty much gone,” the talkative soldier said. “All wild. Eat or be eaten.”

The soldier in the passenger seat cleared his throat, twisting around to face Joan. “Where’s the hotel your friend’s at, ma’am?”

“Corner of Main and Washington.”

"That's where you first met Rob, isn't it?" asked Hellman.

"No, it's where we first screwed," Joan replied, without turning around. A couple soldiers snickered. The mouse readjusted his sunglasses.

The next block was residential, tightly-packed row houses. They were as vandalized as the storefronts, but smelled faintly of blood. Shadows moved behind broken upper floor windows, following the truck's passage. Joan hugged herself tightly, fingers digging into her jacket, curling around a metal-heavy pocket for reassurance.

Another block and they turned left, heading deeper into downtown, approaching a once neatly-manicured urban park. Joan marveled at how far it had already gone to seed; if she hadn't known better, she'd have guessed the park had been abandoned a decade ago. The Washington Square Hotel faced the park's main entrance.

"Our stop, gents," the driver called, swinging the carrier around and parking in the loading zone. Most of the windows remained intact but the sliding-glass front door had been ripped off its rails; trash filled the darkened foyer inside.

"Looks welcoming," the sergeant said as they piled out. "Ain't your friend supposed to be in the lobby?"

"We didn't get to make a rendezvous point before he said he had to go and the line went dead."

"No problem." He stepped inside and waved his rifle barrel at the empty front desk and its dusty, cobwebbed computer terminal. "We'll just ask what room he's registered in."

"Enough, sergeant," Hellman snapped.

The taller rabbit grunted. "First floor hallway. Keep Ms. Sanchez in the middle and protected, because she's the only one who can identify which goddamn pred we're not supposed to shoot before the rest eat our faces."

While the lobby had merely been dark, the hallway quickly became near black, the heat uncomfortable despite the fall weather outside. It stank of musk—mostly wolf—and urine. "Kinda gone downhill since the last time you were here, ma'am, huh?" the talkative soldier murmured.

"It was always pretty crummy," Joan responded.

Stopping about halfway down the hall, the sergeant turned to look at Joan. "We've gotta do a little strategic thinking here, ma'am. We need to let your friend know we're here, without letting the ferals know. Where'd he call you from, anyway?"

"He didn't say."

"A cell phone," Hellman said.

The sergeant rubbed his chin. "I'll be damned. Well, see if you got cell service."

She pulled out her phone, and furrowed her brow. One bar of signal. She exchanged glances with the sergeant, who nodded once, and redialed the last number.

No one answered by the third ring. Instead, on the second floor, a wolf howled, in a way no sapient wolf had howled for the last two thousand years. A dozen other howls, all around the building, joined in.

“Shit,” both the sergeant and Joan said simultaneously. All the soldiers raised their rifles.

A door down the hall opened, and a wolf stepped out. Rifles swung around. “Hold your fire!” the sergeant barked.

The wolf took another step forward, staring at them. He bared his teeth, but didn’t move forward. And didn’t say anything. Foam flecked around his lips, and he breathed raggedly.

“That’s the final stage,” Hellman murmured. “Before they’re completely wild.”

The wolf took a step backward, then fell to his knees with a feral, guttural growl. For a moment, his eyes met Joan’s. She had grown up around carnivores, worked with them, ate with them, slept with them. This was the first time one had ever looked at Joan and clearly seen *prey*.

Then the hallway exploded.

Doors flew open, left and right, shapes hurling themselves toward the group. Rifles fired. Someone threw Joan to the ground. She rolled over, panic-struck, to see one of the soldiers had pulled her down out of the line of fire. She relaxed, for a split second, before a grey hand wrapped around the soldier’s throat, yanking upward. Blood sprayed, and a burst of weapons fire came from close by. She couldn’t tell which came first. The rabbit—and the wolf that had grabbed him—fell on top of her again.

Joan scrambled backward, fumbling at her jacket, then flattened herself against the musty carpet as bullets cracked into the wall behind her. She could see two more soldiers down, one being dragged through a door headfirst, screaming, until the screaming stopped abruptly, wetly. More wolves were down, though, at least half a dozen. She couldn’t see where Hellman had gone.

“Move!” someone shouted. She didn’t realize he was shouting at her until claws sank into her shoulder, spinning her around and up. She saw jaws coming for her, closing on her, and she reacted before she could even think about it. The shot momentarily deafened her, the recoil slamming her back into the wall.

The sergeant—the one who’d shouted—had his rifle pointed at the wolf, but as the body toppled over he reached out to steady her, glancing down in clear shock at the smoking revolver she held. “Marry me,” he said.

“We’ll talk,” she gasped. Other wolves circled, but now stayed back, snarling at the armed rabbits. They outnumbered the soldiers two to one—but they weren’t armed, and now they weren’t close enough to leap, either. The two other fallen rabbits had disappeared, fresh blood smears leading to closed doors.

A groan made Joan glance down and see Hellman, sliding up the wall to steady himself. Blood ran freely from a wound on his shoulder. She reflexively checked her own wounds; blood had been drawn by both tooth and claw, but the gashes were shallow.

"Joan!" a voice yelled from the darkness at the hallway's end. A figure hurried from the shadows, and the wolves encircling the rabbits started growling in a lighter, confused fashion.

"Hold your fire," the sergeant repeated hoarsely.

As Rob approached, he growled back at the other wolves. They crouched, submissively.

"What, you're the goddamn alpha?" Hellman wheezed.

"I'm not the strongest, but I'm the smartest," Rob replied, edging toward the rabbits.

"How big's the pack?"

"Fourteen." He swallowed, gaze sweeping the floor. "I guess eight now." The rabbits started backing down the hallway, with Rob appearing to herd them along. "So what do we do?" Joan said.

"We get out before the pack turns on me."

"What do you guys eat now that you've eaten all the herbivores here?" the talkative one muttered.

"Forest animals."

"And you? You munched any bunny kids?"

He just glared in response.

One of the wolves suddenly leaped forward to snap at Rob. One of the soldiers shoved her with his rifle barrel, and all of the pack bared their teeth, snarling. Rob snarled back, but none of them looked submissive this time.

"This isn't good, isn't it?" Joan murmured.

"Not good," Rob agreed in a hiss, keeping his eyes locked with the closest ferals.

"New plan," the sergeant announced. "Hit the lobby and run like hell." As soon as he finished speaking, he fired off a burst of rounds over the wolves' heads, and the pack fell back, yelping.

Then they ran like hell.

When the wolves ran after them, they leapt for Rob, not the rabbits. He went down under two of them, one of them sinking his teeth into Rob's shoulder before the sergeant blew half his head off. Joan and the talkative one hauled Rob forward as another round of gunfire held off the remaining wolves.

The sergeant slid into the driver's seat as Joan and the soldier lifted Rob up into the truck, the vehicle starting to roll forward even as the last rabbit leapt on. It wasn't until they left the hotel behind that Joan began to shake. Hellman put an arm around her, resting her head on his shoulder as she held to him with blood-streaked hands.

No one spoke on the way back. Rob looked between Joan and Hellman and mostly at the floor; the soldiers looked at Rob with unreadable expressions: wolves, just by being wolves, were part of *the other* now. She wondered how the last two years had undone the thousand before it so easily.

As soon as they rolled to a stop, two doctors and four soldiers whisked Rob away, ignoring his protests, the wolf ignoring Joan's half-hearted reassurance. Hellman gave Joan a hug and hurried after them.

And that quickly it was over, she realized. A nurse gave her a cursory once-over, bandaged her wound and told her to keep it clean, and assigned an intern to drive the rabbit back home with sincere thanks and a polite refusal to commit to keeping her informed about what they found. The mouse would let her know what they found, though. She hoped.



A week passed, long enough for her to settle back into an uneasy routine, the wound healing but continuing to hurt. Then, one evening at sunset, after an afternoon of a severe headache, two men came to her door. She couldn't tell what species they were; they wore orange jumpsuits.

"Joan Sanchez?" one said, voice buzzing slightly through the suit.

She nodded warily. "What's this?"

"Standard protocol, ma'am." He raised a pistol and shot her in the neck. She raised a hand to feel the small dart there, and got out an obscenity before she collapsed.

When Joan woke up the headache was still there. She blinked, disoriented, remembering fragments of dreams: dreams of hospitals and needles, of sickness, blood and pain. Fevers, vomiting, delirium—memories of her small-town childhood and middle-class cosmopolitan life. Of Rob, now distant; of Tom, urgent.

The urgency stayed with her. She rubbed the spot the dart had been, and tried to focus, pushing herself into a sitting position and nearly toppling forward again.

"Easy," a voice said. A hand reached out to steady her. "How do you feel, Ms. Sanchez?"

The hospital room was empty but for monitoring equipment, her bed, and a squirrel woman in a white lab coat, gently lowering her hand as Joan steadied herself. She looked startled to see the rabbit awake.

"Terrible," she said weakly. Her mouth was dry.

"Given your last month, that's miraculously good."

"Month?" She blinked her eyes shut and opened them again, taking a deep breath and staring at the woman incredulously. "I remember being... kidnapped, yesterday."

"I'm sorry for that, but we had reason then to believe—" She stopped, and clasped her hands together. "We've learned how Mr. Corelli survived the wilding plague, Ms. Sanchez. He had a different strain of it."

"A new one? And it's... weaker, then. Because he survived it?"

"As did you."

Joan began to feel dizzy. She closed her eyes, starting to hyperventilate.

“The known version only affects carnivores. Corelli’s strain affects everyone.”

“But it’s not fatal, then!”

The squirrel hesitated, looking away, then held out her hand. “Come with me.”

She led Joan out through what she realized was an airlock, across the hall to an observation window, looking into a room identical to the one the rabbit had been in.

Hellman sat curled up in a corner of that room, nude, eyes dull. Dried foam crusted around his muzzle.

The doctor pressed an intercom button. “Mr. Hellman?”

He twitched wildly, staring at the speaker in fright.

“Ms. Sanchez is here. She’s all right. She made it okay.”

Hellman turned to the window, then past it. Joan stared numbly, touching her hand to the glass. “Tom?” she whispered.

The mouse met Joan’s eyes and stretched out a hand toward hers, pawing at the air, his eyes seeming to light up for a split-second. Then he dropped to all fours, chittering miserably. Joan’s vision blurred with tears.

“One of the soldiers who came back with you is like this, and one of our researchers who came into contact with Mr. Hellman.” She looked down, speaking more softly. “Most of us didn’t agree that Mr. Corelli should be brought in, you know. We figured he’d be another dead end, and to be blunt, we stopped trying to save the carnivores a year ago. But Hellman insisted.” She swallowed. “If—when—this strain becomes widespread...” She trailed off.

Joan’s ears flattened. “No. Look. R-Rob and I *both* have antibodies! We’ve survived! It’s a weaker strain, and we’ve survived!” Her voice became desperate.

“I know. I know.” The squirrel rubbed her temple, sounding very tired. “And we might find a vaccine before we’re all too stupid to use it. If not, at least we won’t understand everything we’ve lost.”

She walked out of the room, leaving Joan staring through the window at the future.



“A Campfire Tale” by Allen Kitchen

Illustrated by Sara “Caribou” Palmer

“Cubs,” Packmaster Rogueston thought to himself good-naturedly as he looked across the campfire at the children huddled together on the other side. *“So full of youth and mischief. But get them away from their homes, and they turn into nervous little mice.”*

The woods were barely lit by the small campfire. The twelve coyote children were used to the dark in their desert home, but this was their first night in the woods, and they kept jumping at shadows caused by the moon and the clouds overhead. They weren’t used to the trees, the moss, and the noises - Rogueston secretly enjoyed watching them fidget and hold onto each other for support.

The elderly coyote reached into a pocket of his knee-length cutoff shorts (they all wore cutoffs, and no shirt. Silly uniform design if you asked his opinion) and pulled out his spiced nibble stick. He twirled the aromatic twig in his lips while he looked at the others.

“You all look scared,” he flatly said. “Hmph. You have every right to be. Do any of you have any idea where we are?”

The youngsters looked back and forth at each other a few times before letting the oldest answer.

“Aren’t we in Yipedese forest, close to the banks of the Calimar River?” he asked, trying to keep his voice from wavering. He failed.

Rogueston sighed expressively, and leaned back on the log that was serving as his recliner for the evening.

“Yes, that’s true. But do any of you know where, exactly, in the Yipedese woods we are?”

Twelve blank expressions stared back at him in the yellow glow of the campfire.

“I guess not. Well cubs, this here is a famous place. See that wall over there?” He raised a black clawed finger toward a ruined wall of rough hewn stone that stood a dozen yards distant.

“You mean that ivy covered ruin?” the oldest said again.

“Yes, that ivy covered ruin.”

“That’s just what’s left of an old abandoned inn, sir. It’s been empty for a century. What’s so special about that?”

“Oh, nothing much. Just that this particular place is haunted.”

The youngest cub grabbed the oldest for protection. All of the cubs suddenly clutched one another with trembling arms.

“Hau... Haunted?” the eldest whispered.

Rogueston nodded.

“Oh, yes. The locals won’t come near this place. Not even during the day. What, none of you have heard about the ghosts that haunt this wall? Not at all?”

Twelve small shaggy heads shook in negation in the gloom. At least, he thought they were in negation. They could have been shaking with fear, although he didn't think he had them scared enough to be trembling yet; emphasis on the "yet" part.

"Well cubs - long, long ago, this inn was still open and alive with the laughter of travelers. People from far and wide would spend their nights here, resting their dragons and exchanging tales and fortunes with their fellow wanderers. The inn was run by a lovely young vixen. A fox, name of Bess. You all know what a fox looks like, don't you?" Twelve shaggy heads nodded in rapt attention. Rogueston smiled and chewed on his stick. "Well forget it. Bess didn't look like that. She had black fur. Yes, you heard right. Bess's fur was as black as midnight on a moonless night. The other foxes took it to be a bad omen, so she and her father moved out here, far from the town folk and their superstitions, and created an inn between two cities.

"Now, living way out here might seem lonely. It was. There were lots of people traveling to and fro, but most of them would just stay the night, then Bess would never see them again. So the poor vixen grew up without a boyfriend or anyone to love. Other than her father of course; and he doesn't count."

"Well, this one fox named Charlemange took a shine to her. And since his business brought him by here practically every other week, he made it a point to stop here as often as he could."

"What did Charlemange do for a living packmaster?" the youngest of the cubs asked while reaching for a fresh marshmallow and stabbing it with a stick. Rogueston smiled at him.

"He sold dragons son. He would move several of the fire-breathing steeds from city to city, buying them cheap in one while selling them high in another. That's what kept him running up and down this road so often.

"Anyway, one day he came by without any dragons except for the one he was riding. He told Bess and her father that he was getting out of the business, and that he had a buyer who was willing to pay handsomely to take it from him. Charlemange proposed to Bess right there, in front of the crowd, her father, everyone in the place. He told her how wealthy he would be when he returned in two nights, and how happy he would be if she would come away with him. Now, how could any lady say no to such a proposal?"

"Yuck," the smallest coyote grumbled. "Mushy stuff."

The cub beside him punched him in the arm and told him to shut up. "But I thought this was gonna be a ghost story!" he complained, looking across the campfire expectantly at Rogueston.

"Patience cub, patience. You know what the book of Guile says about that, don't you?"

The smallest cub closed his eyes, and began to recite. "The early bird gets the worm. But the patient Coyote who waits can have them both." Rogueston nodded to the lad. "Yes, very good. You've been studying, I see."

“Yes sir,” he said, hopping off his log and moving closer to the fire with his marshmallow stick.

“Well, poor Charlemange never heard about the book of Guile. That was too bad for him, because it could have saved his life. Do you all remember what it says about strangers and loose talk? You do? Well, one of the people in the inn that night belonged to a gang of thieves - cutthroats and murderers, the whole lot of them.

“Two nights later, a bit before sundown, all eight of them entered the inn, and put out the shingle saying that the Inn was closed. Bess’s father protested. One of the murderers slit his throat... Slit, just like that!” he said standing up suddenly and making a cutting motion with his finger across his neck. “Killed him plain as day, right there in front of Bess!”

He looked over the cubs to make sure they were properly unnerved before continuing on with his story.

“The leader told Bess that he was gonna rob Charlemange just as soon as he arrived. Then he and his crew tied her upright to the stovepipe in the kitchen. They figured that when the newly rich Charlemange came by looking for his love, they would hear the noise and go out the back door. Then they would come at him from both sides of the house. So they laid their guns next to the doorway, and quietly played cards while waiting for the fox to return.”

“Bess was gagged, bound, and scared. She knew they were going to kill poor Charlemange, and probably her as well. She was terrified about what was about to happen, when all of a sudden, she heard a familiar clicking noise. Click. Clack. Click. Clack.” Rogueston made clawing motions toward the nervous children as he made the noises. “She knew that sound well; it was the sound of Charlemange’s dragon’s claws coming up the road.”

“The thieves were too caught up in their card game to notice it. But the sound kept growing louder and louder in Bess’s ears, and she knew that it wasn’t but a few seconds before they heard him and sprang their trap. She knew she had to do something, anything, to warn him! That’s when she noticed that her feet and legs weren’t tied up. She could reach out with them. And as luck would have it, the guns by the door were just barely in range.”

“She quickly shot her leg out, and smashed it into the guns as hard as she could. The steel barrels made quite a racket as they fell about on the stone floor. The thieves probably jumped out of their pelts at the sudden noise. Her idea was to make such a commotion that Charlemange would notice it, and realize that something was wrong.”

“But alas, she made a mistake. One of the guns hit the edge of the stove, and the weapon fired! Right into her breast and straight through her heart!” All the cubs jumped at his sudden exclamation. Rogueston ignored the youngest roasting a marshmallow as he fervently continued the story.”

“Yes, she had made a racket all right! But at the cost of her own life. Charlemange stopped in his tracks at the sound of the gunshot.”

"All the thieves cursed at their bad luck, grabbed what weapons they could, and poured out the back door of the inn. They left poor Bess there in the kitchen; left her to die all alone."

"When Charlemange saw the cutthroats coming at him from around the corner, he knew that Bess was in trouble. He drew his sword while all the murderers pointed their muskets at him. They fired! And poor Charlemange was mortally wounded. They shot him in the chest, just missing his heart. And they shot his dragon as well, which wasn't too smart a thing to do."

"As you know, dragons flame when they are angry. Well, being shot sure angered this dragon! He reached down into his deepest recesses, and breathed out a fire onto those bastards the likes of which has never been seen! Not even in the deepest hottest parts of hell!"

Rogueston had their full attention now, and they leaned forward, hanging on to every word and syllable. He continued, playing it up and getting more and more animated. "All eight thieves died in an instant, burned beyond belief. But the flames also set the building on fire, and Charlemange knew that Bess was inside. Summoning the last of his dying strength, he forced himself through the burning brush, and into the inn, ignoring the rapidly spreading flames. There, he found Bess, already dead."

"Oh, but the mournful cry he let out my cubs!" he shouted. "He screamed and he cried for Bess, his valiant steed, and for himself. He howled in agony, over and over until the flames finally took him and ended his suffering!" Rogueston looked over all the frightened faces as he relaxed a bit, chewing on his spice stick once more."

"And that," he softly continued settling down onto his log once more. "Is why this ruin is haunted. It is haunted by the spirits of Bess, her lover, and his dragon. It is said, that on quiet nights like this one, you can hear him cry out in the darkness. And that sometimes, if you are really unlucky, the spirit of the dragon will come and spew forth fire again, trying to save its master."

The eldest sat on the end of the log, trembling slightly.

"You... You don't really believe that their ghosts come back to haunt here, do you?" he stammered. But before Rogueston could reply, there was a sudden flash and a whoosh.

A giant fireball had erupted in the middle of the campfire, and sped upwards into the sky! The youngest cub who'd been closest while roasting a marshmallow fell backwards onto the ground.

Sheer panic broke out. The cubs screamed out in terror, jumped off the log, and ran every which way into the woods. The one laying on the ground appeared to have fainted from the fright. Rogueston chuckled as he listened to their panic-stricken voices calling out in the night. Their voices carried their terror for miles as they desperately crashed through the thick brush, trying to escape.

Rogueston waited for their voices to quiet down, then stood up and walked over to the unconscious cub and took the roasted marshmallow off his stick.

“Okay Ruiz,” he called out, popping the gooey treat into his muzzle. “You can come out of hiding now.”

A few seconds later, another coyote came around the edge of the ruined wall, and walked up to the campsite.

“That was the funniest thing I ever did see,” the elderly white-haired coyote laughed as he stepped up to Rogueston. “Did you see their faces? And take a sniff! One of them soiled his britches, I’m sure of it.”

“Yes, it was a good gag all right. But I thought you were just going to start screaming in the dark to scare the cubs. I wasn’t expecting that fireball. I almost peed in my own pants when that thing went off. How’d you do that anyway? “Ruiz’s smile faded from his muzzle.

“I didn’t get to scream,” he quietly said, “because the fireball went off first. I thought... I thought you did the fireball bit...”

Rogueston shook his head, and frowned. “I didn’t make it. I wouldn’t know how.”

“Me neither. So, if you didn’t make the fireball, and I didn’t do it, then who did?”

They stared at each other for exactly one heartbeat before screaming and charging into the woods themselves. The other cubs, now lost in the darkness, began crying again at hearing their packmaster’s terrified voice screaming out that the dragon was real and was out to get them!

Their voices shrieked out in the night, moving around and calling out their mommies for about ten more minutes before the youngest coyote opened his eyes again. He sat up, and stared into the woods behind him. And he smiled.

“Heh. Nice story Packmaster,” he snickered, rising to his feet. “But I read all about it last year in the library. When I heard where we were spending the night, I figured you’d pull something like this. And when Ruiz didn’t join us at the campfire, I knew the game was afoot. Like the book of Guile says; ‘When you know your opponents plan, it becomes a trap for them.’

“As for making the fireball, it’s amazing what happens when you throw one of these cheap, disposable plastic lighters into a campfire. I’m surprised nobody saw me do it; but then, everyone was caught up in your story.”

He stepped purposely to where the packmaster had been sitting, and reached down for the bag of marshmallows.

“Looks like everyone ran away,” he laughed. “Oh well, more marshmallows for me then.”

He then took out a marshmallow, and threw it next to the wall for any spirits who might be living there before reaching in for his own.



“The Stars are Wrong” by Kevin Frane

Illustrated by Sara “Caribou” Palmer

Raccoons had spent thousands of years looking up at the stars. Not only were they one of the species that had, before the dawn of modern civilization, been predominantly active after sunset, but they’d also always felt an instinctual draw to those sparkling bits of attention-grabbing glitter festooning the velvet curtain of night.

On a much smaller scale was Randy Brightfield. Like his ancient raccoon brethren before him, he too had been fascinated with the stars, beginning at age eight and continuing on through college, graduate school and right on to his adult life. And while Randy Brightfield didn’t personally have several thousand years of knowledge bound within his head, he did have plenty of firsthand experience and the acuity to go with it, and there was one thing that he could tell quite readily, now.

The stars were wrong.

Something had been niggling at the back of his mind the night before, as he’d been walking home from the convenience store with some last-minute groceries, but he’d been in such a flustered hurry that he hasn’t noticed just *what* was setting him ill at ease. It wasn’t until tonight that Randy noticed, while sitting out on his back porch to get some fresh air after another microwave dinner, that the sky itself was not as it ought to be.

At first, Randy wanted to blame the beer he’d had with dinner, but one can was not enough to get him so drunk that the night sky—the night sky he’d loved since grade school and knew better than the back of his own paw—would seem as unfamiliar as it did now. He scanned and scanned again for the brighter winter constellations, the ones that even amateur stargazers would be able to spot on a clear night like this: the Heavenly River, the Fox’s Tail, the Spear.

Randy could find none of them. He checked his watch just to make sure that he had the right time, and that it was really evening and not somehow the next morning. Even still, then, a career astronomer like Randy would (should!) be able to recognize the sky he was looking at. To the raccoon’s utter bafflement, though, not a single star appeared to be where it ought to have been.

“No,” Randy muttered to himself. “No, this... this can’t be right.” For the stars to appear as they did now was impossible, plain and simple. The stars did move, of course, but it was a process that took thousands upon thousands of years; even the sky his raccoon ancestors had once gazed up at would have been mostly recognizable in the sky of today—well, if it still looked the way it was supposed to.

The shifting of a star’s relative position in the sky might change due to predictable phenomena like axial precession, or even, given long enough, the star’s own movement through the galaxy. Even then, though, *the entire sky itself*

would not be rearranged as it now was. No cosmological event could explain what Randy was now seeing.

Desperate to prove to himself that he wasn't crazy, Randy went back inside and trotted straight to his bookshelf. He pulled out the first star atlas he came across (he owned several), and flipped to the big spread right at the center.

Sure enough, the star map showed the sky as Randy knew it—the sky as it had always been his entire life and would be on the day he died.

His eyes had to have been playing tricks on him, the raccoon conceded. It was silly to think that the sky would spontaneously rearrange itself, or to think that the physical universe had suddenly begun to disobey its own rules. That thought was enough to make him chuckle, and, without any trepidation, he sauntered back out onto the back porch.

He stopped just outside the door, though, when he saw again that the sky was not the sky he knew.

Randy Brightfield was not the only person who knew the sky. He knew this, and he would not be the only person to notice that the stars were wrong. Thousands of people around the world must be seeing exactly what he was seeing and telling themselves the exact same thing; that this was impossible. Someone, if not countless someones, must have reported this to the news, to government agencies, to churches and to friends and family. There must be an uproar about this already.

Withdrawing back inside once more, Randy turned on the television and switched over to the nightly news. Instead of a carefully-worded announcement asking the people of the world not to panic, though, they were running a societal interest story about a badger who had undergone a ridiculous amount of cosmetic surgery in order to look like a wolf.

Dismayed, Randy changed the channel. Again, the news; again, no news of the stars being wrong.

This couldn't be. It was preposterous to think that neither amateur stargazers, nor other professional astronomers would not have—

Other professional astronomers—of course! Why hadn't Randy thought of it before? Nearly losing his balance as he stuffed his paw into his pocket to fish out his cellular phone, the raccoon quickly worked his fingers over the buttons to dial up Dr. Jennifer Vivaldi, his colleague at the Mt. Carson Observatory and one of his best friends.

The coyote picked up on the third ring. "Hey, Randy. What's going on?" No hint of concern in her voice.

"Jen," Randy said. "You up at the observatory right now?"

"It's Tuesday."

"Right." The raccoon was pacing about his living room now. "Just... go outside. Look outside and tell me what you see."

Vivaldi chuckled. "Shit, am I missing another aurora event?" she asked. Randy could tell from her breathing that she was walking down the stairs.

“Just hurry up and go look,” Randy told the coyote. What would she say, he wondered? What would the world think when—

“All right,” Vivaldi said. “I’m outside. Where am I looking?”

“Anywhere. Look around the sky and just *tell* me what you see.”

There was a long pause. “Okay,” the coyote eventually said. “It’s kind of a nice night, but...”

Randy growled, not caring that the sound would carry through the phone. “Look for the Fox’s Tail,” he told her.

Another pause. “Okay, got it,” Vivaldi replied.

“Seriously?”

The coyote laughed. “Yes, seriously. I think I know where the Fox’s Tail is.”

“You’re looking at it right now?”

“Is there going to be some kind of satellite flare or something?”

“No, I just want to know that you’re looking at it.”

Vivaldi either chuckled or sighed; Randy couldn’t tell which. “I promise you I’m looking at it,” she said.

“Where is it?”

“Randy, are you drunk?”

“Look, just humor me.”

This time, Randy was sure that the coyote sighed. She took another breath before speaking again. “I’m looking south from the mountaintop,” she said. “The Fox’s Tail is in the sky right over the city.”

Exactly where it ought to be. In the sky as Randy saw it, though, there was no Fox’s Tail, either there or anywhere. “Right,” the raccoon replied, biting his lip. “Of course.”

“What’s all this about?” Vivaldi asked. “Is there something you’re trying to see?”

Randy withheld his wry chuckle. “Something like that,” he said. “Look, I...” He cut himself short, though. Telling Dr. Vivaldi that he was seeing the sky differently would only make her think him mad. She was a fellow astronomer, and if anything were amiss, she’d surely have noticed it, too, even with a cursory glance outside. “Just, if you can, keep an eye on that part of the sky tonight, will you?”

“Will do,” Vivaldi replied. “Speaking of which, I should probably get back inside.”

“Thanks, Jen,” Randy said. “Sorry to bother you.”

“You’re never a bother,” the coyote said, and though Randy didn’t quite believe her, he appreciated the sentiment. “Take it easy tonight, though, yeah? See you Thursday?”

“Thursday,” the raccoon confirmed. “Good night.”

After hanging up, Randy tried to reassure himself again that, if something were really wrong, someone else would have noticed by now. Just to be on the safe side, though, the raccoon went to his study, got a pencil and some paper, a

compass and a ruler, and sat outside on his porch for the next few hours, marking down the stars as he saw them in that unfamiliar sky.



Randy had fallen asleep to the sound of television static long after the nightly news had gone off the air. Come morning, neither the newspaper nor a quick check online revealed that anything had been reported amiss the night before—not with the sky, at any rate.

For the remainder of the day, the raccoon had to continually fight off the urge to drive up to Mount Carson and check out the radio telescope for hints that, even in daytime, the sky was out of whack. More than once, he'd caught himself looking in the direction of the mountain and the observatory atop it, only to talk him out of it, telling himself that to give in to that urge would be to admit his own fragile grasp on reality. The stars couldn't just be wrong, and if the various markings on the makeshift star chart he'd drawn up the night before were the result of nothing more than a hallucination, then he could content himself with that.

He thought about what Vivaldi would say when he showed her that chart. Oh, he'd give it at least a few weeks, perhaps even months, before showing her what had bothered him so on that night, but he'd still eventually show her, and he knew the coyote would get a good laugh out of it. Best to let it drift out of mind, though, first, before making a spectacle of it.

Come twilight, though, as the first stars of the evening began to peek out through the darkening purple backdrop, the raccoon's horror was renewed. Not only were the stars still wrong, but Randy wasn't even sure that they were in the same configuration they were the night before.

Racing immediately back home and to his study, Randy grabbed up his hand-drawn star chart and rushed outside with it. As sunset gave way to true dark and more stars became visible, it was quickly clear that the sky had changed once again, into a configuration just as unrecognizable as the previous night's.

Randy rolled up the chart and stormed back into his house. He was already calling up Dr. Vivaldi when he found his car keys in the tray by the front door.

"Jen," he said as soon as the coyote picked up, before she even had the chance to speak, "I need you to meet me at Mount Carson."

"Right now?" the coyote asked. "Randy, what's wrong?"

Randy was already walking down the driveway. He unlocked the car door. "I'll show you when you get there," he said, tossing the star chart into the passenger's seat before climbing in after it.

"Randy, I'm out at dinner right now," Vivaldi said. "What's going on? Is it something that can wait until tomorrow?"

The raccoon's house was shrinking in the rear view mirror now. "At this rate, I don't know if there will *be* a tomorrow," Randy said. He leaned hard on the accelerator. "Please, you need to get there as soon as you can."

The coyote's growl came through the phone as real as if she'd been sitting right next to him. "What's going on, Randy?" she demanded again. "This is the second night in a row that you've called me up all weird, and—"

"Look, there's... there's some kind of... astronomical event going on," the raccoon said, choosing his words as carefully as he could so that his friend wouldn't just decide he was crazy and hang up on him. "And I need your help to explain what I'm seeing. Please, can you just meet me there?"

There was another growl, but this time it was one of frustration that then faded into another sigh. "Give me an hour and a half," the coyote said. "I'll be there."

"Thanks, Jen," Randy said, blowing a red light as he sped toward the highway. Rather than risk losing her trust from further questioning, he hung up and tossed his cell phone onto the seat beside him, atop the star chart, and continued on to the observatory.

It took nearly an hour to reach the Mount Carson Observatory, and it was a full hour past that when Jennifer Vivaldi finally showed up. Though she now wore plain, casual clothes, the lingering scent of perfume and the hints of makeup in the coyote's fur told Randy that she'd stopped home and dressed down before making the trek up to the mountain.

Randy sat on the doorstep to the main observatory building, having not dared embarrass himself in front of his other colleagues without Vivaldi to back him up—or to at least send him on his way before he could make a fool of himself to others. He'd been staring at the alien sky for so long, now, wondering what it all meant, that the headlights of the coyote's car stung his eyes, the pain helping to pull him out of the trance he'd been in.

"All right, where's the fire?" Vivaldi said as she approached. Probably, Randy realized, she was trying to keep an air of levity about her to mask the fact that he'd freaked her out and had mostly likely ruined her evening.

With a deep breath, Randy stiffened and got to his feet, his paws stuffed into his pockets. "Look behind you," he said with a nod past Vivaldi's shoulder. "What do you see?"

Vivaldi turned and looked out into the distance. "I see the sky," she said. "I see the valley and the city. I see a plane getting ready to land at the airport." She turned back around, then, an open lack of understanding on her face.

Jen Vivaldi was a coyote. Coyotes had been creatures of the night for centuries, too, just like raccoons, and a coyote should have known the incongruity that was staring her right in the face. Yet Jen Vivaldi hadn't so much as batted an eyelash.

"Look again," Randy asked. His pulse had started to quicken. "Tell me where the Fox's Tail is."

With an exasperated sigh, Vivaldi turned back around and pointed with her paw to the sky. "Right there," she said, her finger aimed at a section of the sky where no constellation that Randy knew was present.

The stars that Vivaldi pointed it to seemed to burn themselves into Randy's vision, like dazzling bits of forbidden treasure on the other side of the galaxy, taunting him to come closer. The mere sight of them was starting to make him nauseous, years of professional expertise and ages of ancestral memory warring with what his senses were telling him. His paws gripped his head, claws pressing in against his temples as he tried to shake the sensation.

"No," he insisted, tearing his gaze away from the sky. "No, this isn't right. I'll prove it."

"Randy!" Vivaldi shouted as she began to follow him into the observatory, the raccoon not waiting for her to catch up. "What's gotten into you?"

Instead of heading up to telescope or one of the analysis labs, Randy went right for the gift shop, just around the corner from the currently closed visitor information booth. He walked right up to the likewise-unstaffed counter and leaned over it, reaching for one of the many small pocket guides to the constellations that were arranged on the rack. "Here," Randy said, holding it up triumphantly in Vivaldi's face now that she'd caught up to him. "Take a look at this."

Randy flipped open to a random page, finding the constellation of the Spear looking back at him. Much like Vivaldi's own Fox's Tail, however, this Spear was not the Spear as Randy knew it. He looked back and forth between the coyote's face and the book he held in his paws. He turned to the two-page spread in the middle of the guide, which mapped out both the northern and southern constellations.

"Well?" Vivaldi had crossed her arms in front of her chest and was lashing her tail from side to side agitatedly.

The names of the constellations and asterisms on the guide's map were all ones that Randy knew, but the shapes they formed were not, and their relative positions in the sky were all different, as well. "This is really the sky as you know it?" he asked, holding the booklet out to Vivaldi.

When the coyote reached out to take it, a part of her looked scared, in a way that Randy had never seen before. They'd known each other for years, and in all that time, Randy knew that he'd never alarmed her as much as he was doing now. Her fingers closed down around the book, pulled it free of the raccoon's paws, and then she gave it a look.

"There's nothing wrong with this, Randy," she said. "Is this really why you brought me here?"

There was no way for Randy to what he wanted to say without sounding like he was mad. Being mad, though, was preferable to the universe coming to an end, was it not? "That's not," the raccoon indicated with a hesitant nod to the star map, "how the sky is supposed to look."

"Would it rather it look like something else?" Vivaldi asked. "Because unless you've hit your head, this is how the sky has always looked."

“Last night it was different.” Vivaldi looked unfazed and unamused. “And the night before that, it was different, too. It’s not the sky you and I grew up with.”

Vivaldi tossed the booklet onto the gift shop counter. “*Did* you hit your head, Randy?” she asked, and then she peered closer at him. “Or are you on drugs? You know that what you’re saying is impossible, right?”

“I know I must sound crazy,” Randy began, only to have Vivaldi interject.

“Go home, Randy,” the coyote said. “Go home, go to sleep, go see a doctor, whatever. I don’t want to see you like this again.” She then began to leave.

Randy went after her. “Jen, please, I—”

“I’m going to do you a favor,” Vivaldi said without stopping, without turning around, “and I’m not going to tell the boys upstairs about this.” Only when they’d made it outside did she stop for him. “Are you going to be okay to come in tomorrow?”

There was nothing else he could say to her, he knew; from her perspective, nothing was different, nothing was wrong, and so there was nothing that could rationally convince her otherwise. “Yeah,” the raccoon sighed. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

He let Vivaldi leave first, and didn’t get in his own car until a good twenty minutes had passed. On the drive back, he took his time, thinking as best he could without letting his attention drift out the car windows. Upon arriving home, he checked his hand-drawn star chart from the previous night, and saw that it was unchanged, as were his own personal star atlases from his bookshelf.

Knowing that sleep would not come easily anyway, Randy Brightfield stayed up outside again, once more cataloging a sky full of unfamiliar stars. Once more, he fell asleep to the sound of television static, dimly realizing, just before sinking into dreamlessness, that he hadn’t been watching TV before getting into bed.



In the morning, the papers again showed no hint of an astronomical catastrophe taking place, and so Randy left it at that. The only proof or evidence that he had was within his own mind and on the paper on which he’d drawn. The memories *seemed* real enough, and he’d put a lot of detail into what he’d sketched out, but did that mean he’d really seen it?

For the remainder of the morning, Randy debated setting up an appointment with a psychologist. After lunch, he did just that, and mentioned that he may eventually consider a recommendation for some kind of brain scan. When the office had asked what he thought might be wrong with him, he hadn’t hazarded to guess.

When evening rolled around, Randy sat on his porch and waited for the stars to come out. When, as he’d been expecting, they appeared in yet another unfamiliar configuration, he called up Mount Carson to let them know that he wasn’t feeling well and would not, in fact, be coming in that night. He

considered calling Jen Vivaldi directly after he'd hung up, but he decided against it. If the world was going to end, soon, he wanted to at least keep his friends.

Tonight, the stars seemed both dimmer and fewer than they had on previous nights. As he mapped them out, he compared his previous two nights' charts and counted out the number of stars he'd listed for each apparent magnitude. Sure enough, the first night had included more bright stars than the second, which had included more bright stars than tonight.

Fewer stars meant that Randy didn't need to spend at much time charting the night's sky. He tried desperately, with each penciled-in dot, to find some kind of pattern or significance to what he was seeing—something that wasn't merely evidence of his own grip on reality fading.

As he lay in bed, well after midnight, he let his eyes drift closed, and he tried to think about what he'd been seeing, to see if there was even a natural progression in one night's sky to the next, but his concentration wavered.

It wavered until he again heard the sounds of static, and this time, knowing *full well* that he'd not turned on the TV, he willed himself to stay awake and listen.

Upon turning an ear to the sound more closely, it was clear that it wasn't actually television static at all. Rather, it was like a low, hissing growl that undulated and wavered in pitch, eerie and grotesque. It was not the growl of any wolf or other canine that Randy had ever met, though, but rather something else entirely.

There was a peculiar overlap present in the sound, too, and it took the raccoon almost a minute to figure out that he was hearing to *separate* sounds.

Once he'd made sense of that, Randy then realized to his complete horror that he could *understand* the sounds that were ringing in the base of his ears. The hideous snarling contained no words, sounding like no language the raccoon had ever heard, but somewhere, whether in the pitch or the tone or the rasp of that unnatural growling, it *made sense*.

"The flock is not yet right," the first growling voice said. "Though it shall not be much longer."

The next voice rumbled in displeasure before Randy was able to make sense of the meaning in its wordless wavering. "Not all of the flock are yet blinded," it said. "There are some who yet see."

"Some like Randolph Brightfield, yes," the first rejoined. The raccoon wanted to cry out at the mention of his name, but he managed to will his muzzle to remain shut.

"Yes, like Randolph Brightfield," the other agreed. "It is of no matter, though: his kind grow fewer by the day. Soon, none will remember."

"None at all." The first voice seemed pleased, now. "So many peculiar species on this world, all so very different, and yet all so very easily fooled."

The static-like hissing drew quieter, then, as if fading into the darkness itself. Randy did not dare open his eyes, and he lay in bed shivering for what felt like

hours until, unsure whether he'd fallen asleep or not, he was up with the first light of dawn.



As noontime approached that day, Randy realized he hadn't eaten anything since lunch the day before. He couldn't bring himself to eat, though; any attempt to work up an appetite brought back memories of those unnatural voices, along with his mind trying to conjure up an image of what type of hideous maw could possibly produce those sounds. Certainly, nothing of this world could be responsible.

Remaining cloistered at home, the raccoon dug through his closet and pulled some old boxes out of storage. He found some of his old undergraduate textbooks and spent hours reading large sections of them, finding his only solace in the fact that at least these inanimate objects remembered the cosmos the way that he did. His claws traced longingly over the diagrams of classical constellations, and he read and re-read chapters on topics like polar shift, general and special relativity, and time dilation.

From time to time, he would look out the window. The daytime sky looked so normal, so benign. To look at *this* sky, one would not notice anything wrong, anything out of place, anything to indicate that Randy Brightfield wasn't just some crazy astronomer who had lost his mind. Perhaps this daytime sky was safe. Perhaps he could convince himself of this delusion and live out the rest of his days in peace, unsuspecting as the rest of the world.

But it wasn't the rest of the world, was it? Not all of it, at least. Those terrible voices had mentioned others—others who remembered the world as it as supposed to be. Were they like him, convinced of their own perceptions while being trapped in a reality that changed day-to-day? Were *they* afraid of seeming mad, as well?

Maybe that was it: maybe other people *were* noticing what was going on, but their voices were being ignored. Surely, the daily news wouldn't pick up the story of some madman insisting that the stars were wrong, but that didn't mean that those same people were content to silence.

Randy went to his computer and went online. He scoured message boards and forums, trying to find anyone else who might have been having a similar experience over the past few days (but he was reluctant, at least for now, to post anything of his own).

While crackpot theories and talk of conspiracies abounded on these bizarre corners of the web, there was nothing Randy could find that matched what he'd been witnessing. Hell, most of what he was able to find made him feel almost *sane* by comparison. That would have been more reassuring in other circumstances, but in this unfortunate case, he more wished that he could find someone else to share in his view of this broken world.

Hours passed as Randy searched and searched on his computer, eventually breaking down and leaving a number of posts of his own, proclaiming how he

knew that the sky had been changing. He'd come close to mentioning the voices, as well, but it wouldn't help him any if even other paranormal enthusiasts thought he was crazy by their own standards, so he left that part out. Late afternoon gave way to evening, the raccoon's hunger still ignored, and it was only eyestrain that eventually got him to tear himself away from his monitor.

A glance out the window showed that the night sky was particularly clear tonight. He didn't fret any more that, once again, the stars were in different positions, and the night itself was at least quite pretty, almost unusually so. Even through the window glass, the clarity was noticeable, and so Randy opened that window up and stuck his head out to admire the view.

Cloudless nights like these were uncommon around these parts, but not unheard of. Even accounting for that, the contrast of bright against black was remarkable, to the point where Randy knew instinctively that something else was wrong, this time. The raccoon scanned the sky for hints of what it might be, but it wasn't until his gaze drifted lower that he realized what the reason was.

The amount of light pollution in the sky was far lower than it usually was. Staring off in the direction of downtown, Randy could see that the buildings were emanating far less light than they normally did. Not only was the light not as bright, but there was just plain *less of* it. It was possible that there'd been a power outage of some sort, but it didn't look like some parts of town were blacked out and others were still up and running; rather, it looked like the entire urban sprawl was just muted and diminished.

It was nice to think that perhaps the observatory had asked the power company to tone things down so that they could get a better view of the curious sky-changing phenomenon, but Randy was pretty sure that things didn't really work that way, and besides, surely Jen would have called him up to tell him if something that drastic had taken place. No, that probably wasn't the answer, and that meant that there had to be some other reason for the dimmer skyline.

What that reason could be, though, the raccoon couldn't fathom, and he was so mentally exhausted from the last few days that no amount of thinking could yield a reasonable theory. In the grand scheme of things, a disordered cosmos was more cause for worry than a decrease in light pollution, anyway, to say nothing of Randy's personal inability to do much to change either.

Surrendering to a combination of exhaustion and hunger, Randy dragged himself to bed before midnight for the first time all week. He tried to stay awake for another hour, to see if the voices would echo in his ears again, but there was nothing but imposing silence that lasted from the minute his head hit the pillow till when he finally fell asleep.



First thing the next morning, Randy went to check the message boards again, to see if anyone had responded to his unusual queries, but his computer's online

access was down. Taking that as a sign to get out and do something else with his day besides stay inside and worry, he decided to go out and get breakfast out, both to get something to eat and to immerse himself in the real world that was still going about its business. Precious normalcy might ease his mind, he thought.

The breakfast crowd was bigger than he'd been expecting, but then, he realized he hadn't been to a restaurant for breakfast in years. As he sat by himself at a tiny corner table, he watched the hustle and bustle of his fellow townspeople, individuals of every species, all seeming happy and eager to meet the morning and start the day. Given the way that his own nights had been going, Randy felt a strange kinship with that.

A fresh cup of coffee got his brain up and running again, letting him think with more clarity than had been possible for days. After he was done eating, he'd drive up to Mount Carson, and see if he could talk to his fellow astronomers, calmly and rationally as he could, with regard to what had been happening. He would bring his books from home, the ones that still showed the universe as he remembered it, and maybe, with a collaboration of brilliant minds, they might be able to work something out.

Randy hadn't made it home from breakfast, though, when he saw something that made him pull his car over to the side of the road. Narrowly avoiding another driver who was trying to pass around him, the raccoon slammed on his brakes and turned off of the pavement, letting his car come to a stop in the dust.

Bracing one paw on the car's frame as he got out, Randy looked out into the distance. Mount Carson was clearly visible, as was the marked absence of Mount Carson Observatory.

Randy pulled out his phone and tried to call Dr. Vivaldi, but he had no signal. Looking around some more in disbelief, he realized that the downtown skyline, the one that had been mysteriously dim last night, had changed as well; most of the buildings that he recognized were smaller and shorter than they were supposed to be, and some, like Mount Carson Observatory, were missing entirely. Reading the 'No Signal' message on his phone, the raccoon then checked to see if the cellular towers were missing, too, but he hadn't ever paid enough attention to where they'd been to spot any obvious vacancies.

Fearing that Dr. Vivaldi might have disappeared along with the observatory, Randy got back in the car and sped off in the direction of her apartment. *This isn't happening*, the raccoon told himself as he resisted the urge to drive right on through every stoplight along the way. *This can't actually be happening*.

Vivaldi's apartment building, at the very least, was still there. It was an older brick building, one that looked unchanged from how Randy remembered it. Anything constant, at this point, was something for him to cling to. His heart skipped a beat as he entered the lobby and found the name 'VIVALDI, J.' on the short list of tenants.

The raccoon mashed the buzzer, urgently and repeatedly. He was okay with annoying her if it meant he got her attention that much faster.

"Hello?" The coyote's voice crackled through the old-style intercom. Another familiar point. Another thing to hold on to.

"Jen," Randy gasped. "Jen, you need to buzz me in."

"What is it, Randy?" Vivaldi asked. "I'm about to leave for work. And speaking of which, what're you doing up this early?"

"It's gone, Jen," the raccoon said. "The observatory. It's gone!"

There was a moment's pause. "What observatory?"

"Mount Carson," Randy said. "You know, where we work."

Again, Vivaldi's response was delayed. "Randy, wait down in the lobby," she said. "I'm coming down. We can drive together." After that, the low-grade buzz of the intercom went dead, and Randy knew that the coyote wasn't listening anymore.

Less than five minutes later, Vivaldi was downstairs, dressed in a blouse, jacket, and long slacks, the fur on her face accented with light purple makeup. A satchel was slung over her shoulder, and she regarded Randy with a curious look as she stepped through the double-doors. "You're going to school dressed like that?" she asked.

"What school?" the raccoon asked. "Jen, we—"

"We're still teaching today," she said. "You didn't forget what day it was again, did you?" As if to hurry him along, she kept walking, pushing through to the outside, her pumps clapping against the pavement.

Randy was dumbfounded for a second before chasing after her. "Teaching?" he said. "Are you serious?"

"Inasmuch as you ever 'teach,'" Vivaldi replied. Her tone was the chiding but friendly tone that Randy knew well, but this version of her—of her life, of *their* life—was just different enough that it scared the raccoon. "Speaking of which," he said as she arrived at her car, the little red hatchback that Randy also knew as hers, "what's this about an observatory? You got some side project going on?"

"Mount Carson Observatory," the raccoon said, putting firm emphasis on each word. "You know, where we've both been working for the last eight years?"

Vivaldi was already in the driver's seat. "Get in the car, Randy," she said. "Tell me what crazy plan you've concocted this time."

"This isn't a joke, Jen," Randy said as he climbed into the passenger's seat. "You and I are—were, I don't even know anymore—astronomers at Mount Carson Observatory. We did our graduate work together."

Vivaldi started the car, the sound of the engine drowning out her chuckle. "We were what, now?"

"Astronomers," Randy said. He was getting impatient, and he knew that she wasn't to blame, but it was hard to keep his temper reeled in. "And looks, I know that sounds crazy, but—"

"What's an 'astronomer?'"

Randy turned and stared back at Vivaldi. She kept one paw on the gear shifter, but kept the car in place for the time being as she looked back at him expectantly.

"You're not serious," the raccoon said.

But Vivaldi's expression didn't change. She looked like she was waiting for the punchline to a joke, but wasn't sure whether she was expecting it to be funny or not. When Randy didn't say anything, she wrinkled up her nose and took a few sniffs. "Well, you don't smell like you've got a hangover," she said. "So what's the deal?"

"Jen, I know you know what an astronomer is." Randy couldn't keep a quick laugh from entering his voice.

"And what if I don't?" Now she sounded almost insulted.

"An astronomer," the raccoon sighed. "Someone who studies the stars and the heavens. Like you and I used to be."

Vivaldi let out a very coyote-like bark of a laugh. "The stars?" she asked. "What, the little dots of light that come out at night? *Those* stars?"

"Yes, *those* stars," Randy retorted. "I'm not talking paparazzi bullshit, here."

"Study the stars?" Vivaldi asked. Her long muzzle hung open like her jaw was ready to drop. "Study *what*? Who's dumb enough to stare out at the night sky on purpose?"

Now it was Randy's turn to laugh. "You sound like all those diurnals back in grade school," he said, reminded of certain individuals, like Ms. Kittredge, the deer who been his teacher in second grade, the one who had mocked his childhood obsession with the stars and had advised him, even at that young age, to shoot for a career that might actually be lucrative.

"Yeah, well, at the diurnals have it easy," Vivaldi snapped. "You think we coyotes don't lose our share to the night? Because I know you raccoons do."

"You used to love the night," Randy said. "We'd lose ourselves in it willingly, you and I."

"Look, don't you think it kills me, to know that we can't go out at night?" Vivaldi said. "To have to go decades, suppressing those instinctual urges to wander out into a darkness that calls to us like some kind of sick trap?"

The twisted truth of what Vivaldi was saying suddenly hit Randy full-on. She knew nothing of astronomers or astronomy because nobody knew the night sky—nobody *dared* to know it. But why? What was so bad about...?

"What's so bad about the night?" the raccoon asked.

Vivaldi scoffed. "Get out of my car, Randy," she said. "Drive yourself to work and get someone else to listen to your sick plan."

"I'm serious, Jen," he insisted. "What's so—"

"*Get. Out.*" She glared at him a moment longer, then sighed and looked away. "Please."

Something about her looked so hurt, so fragile in a way that was so unlike her. As the awkward silence drew on, though, Randy knew that she was far too guarded for him to be able to get at it, and so he opened the car door and got

out. "I'm not crazy, Jen," he said before closing it. "I'll prove it to you. Somehow."

Vivaldi reached over and yanked the door shut for him, then screeched out of the parking lot. As her car rounded the corner and disappeared, Randy walked back to his own. His next stop, now, was the closest public library. He needed to know what was going on with the world, now, and if he couldn't ask anyone straight-out, he'd just have to find out on his own.



Modern civilization, according to the history books, hadn't progressed quite as far as Randy knew it should have. Much of this, he figured, had to stem from the fact that for as long as recorded history could account for, nighttime had been a thing of fear and peril. This was taken so much for granted, in fact, that it was hard to find anything specifically about it.

The library carried no books on astronomy, backing up Vivaldi's earlier claims. There was no concept of the planet orbiting around the sun, no attempts ever made at any kind of space program, no scientific explanation for what the stars even *were*. In a poetic sense, stars were referred to as "the lights of false hope," tiny specks in the night that taunted the world with their superficial twinkle that had no real power to banish the darkness that people even now still feared as much as their prehistoric ancestors had.

Sundown hadn't even come, yet, when the librarians came through and shooed Randy out of the library. He didn't have to ask to know what the hurry was: dark was coming, and the staff needed to make it home before then, too.

Safe back at home, Randy looked at his computer, which might well be the only one of its kind left in the world, now. He looked at his bookshelf and his small compendium of astronomical knowledge, also quite possibly the last repository of information that was now lost. Why, though? Why not *his* things? Why not *his* reality?

Long after the sun had set, true dark set in quickly. Downtown was much smaller than it had been the night before. The sky was clearer, and the stars were again markedly fewer. Even the moon, nearly three-quarters full, seemed sad and pathetic, doing its best to light up the night sky and failing to banish the veil of shadow from the world.

It was quiet, too: there was no sound of traffic, either on the highways or the local streets; no children out playing past curfew; not even insects chirping away. When the sun set, it seemed, the world died, and sensible people stayed in their homes.

Why the terror, though? What was so scary about the dark? The books in the library hadn't ever given a reason; all the raccoon had been able to learn was that going outside after dark simply wasn't done. Ever.

Randy approached his front door. He stood and looked at it for nearly a minute, then opened it. The outside air was cool, a draft bringing that chill on inside. Now, the silence of the world was even more apparent.

Then, the silence broke. Carried on the wind was the distant echo of the static growl that had been haunting Randy at night. It was distant, to start, but it was coming closer, and it was coming fast. Yelping in panic, the raccoon slammed the door shut against the wind, but the infernal sound continued to get louder. Within seconds, it sounded like it was right outside the door, snarling savagely, desperately.

The door held, though. Buffeted by the wind, there was nevertheless no banging or slamming, no physical attempt to tear it open or to smash it in. The growl outside grew angry, frustrated, and then, at last, more distant, until it faded away into nothing.

Huddled up in the corner of his living room, Randy buried his face in his paws and started to cry. Why was he cursed to remember things as they were? Why couldn't he suffer from the same happy delusion of ignorance that Jen Vivaldi and the rest of the world did? Why couldn't he just take it for granted that the real world only got to exist during the daytime, and accept that, once the sun set, it was time for the featureless, indescribable monsters of his childhood to take reign?

The hum of television static returned, but this time, it didn't come rampaging to his front door. This time, it was the pair of ambient voices he'd been hearing before falling asleep. Somehow, he knew that the voices were the same ones, the means just as impossible as his ability to understand them in the first place.

"They grow desperate." The first sounded faintly amused.

"Desperate, yes," the second agreed. "The change lacks subtlety to them. Panic is to be expected."

The first seemed to hum for a few seconds in thought. "But they, too, are beginning to forget, are they not?"

"Some," the second said. "Some do, yes, but others remind some of those who had already forgotten."

"They are desperate," the first repeated. "They try hard, but their best efforts will not be good enough."

"Yet still they strive," the second warned. "Like Randolph Brightfield. There are those who foolishly resist with their whole being."

"Then let the name of Randolph Brightfield be cursed!" Pure anger resonated from that first voice. "Soon, things will have changed enough that no one will have the *capacity* to believe that the world could ever have been different."

"And the flock shall be harvested."

The voices echoed away in hideous laughter, then fell silent, leaving Randy to his isolation, curled up on his floor, unable to sleep, unable to believe the falsehood he so deeply wanted to, now.



It was just before dawn when Randy finally fell asleep, and it was well past noon when he woke up again. With winter approaching, there would be fewer than six hours of daylight remaining before the insidious night returned again,

which left the raccoon with little time to do what he could to learn about what might be going on.

He knew that he had to learn for the simple reason that he couldn't think of any other explanation why he would be made to remember in the first place. He wasn't alone, either, if those voices were to be believed. Whatever was happening, the owners of those voices had expressed, if not fear, then at least concern of the notion that people might remember. Randy Brightfield remembered, and if he was ever going to jog the memories of the people, he had to know where they were coming from.

The first obvious fact dismayed the raccoon greatly, however: this was now a world without electricity. A quick check of his own home showed that none of his appliances were getting power, save for those that ran on battery and not off of an outlet. Looking outside, he saw that there were no telephone poles nor power lines, and the streets were lined with gaslight poles.

Downtown, from this distance, was all but invisible. The spire of an old church poked up from the hilly waves of town between here and there, and a few other taller brick buildings loomed as well, but nothing resembling a skyscraper or even a tall office building remained.

The raccoon's game plan was twofold: mingle with the townsfolk as if he were one of them, sharing in their delusion, and then, come nightfall, return home and try to find a way to convince these poor souls of the true nature of their warped reality. Finding a baseline to accomplish that second point required knowledge that would come from the first, and so there was no time to waste.

His automobile having disappeared overnight, Randy walked into town, ignoring the stares from other townsfolk as they took in the sight of his unusual manner of dress. Inspecting the buildings and the gas-fueled light fixtures along his route, Randy guessed that technology was nearly two centuries behind where it should have been, now; caution, then, needed to be taken to avoid spooking folks.

A late lunch in an old-style pub (which had, in Randy's world, been a business hotel) yielded little in the way of an explanation for why things were the way they were, but it confirmed for him that none of these people were any the wiser, and that they were content to live out their primitive lives. A good number of individuals, it seemed, were planning to pass the night in the pub's common area. Interesting, the raccoon thought, how society still got along despite the changing rules of the world.

After eating, Randy went in search of the library again, hoping to bring some books home with him, to compare their notions of science against his own tomes. Society might regress again between now and tomorrow, he knew, so he'd need to work quickly in order to establish a grip on what it was that these people "knew" while it was within his power to find out.

The town library, to Randy's relief, did still exist. When he entered, he went immediately for the 'Sciences' section, noting with some surprise (and relief) that the concept of printed, mass-produced books had not been lost in this new

world. That implied, by extension, that people were still educated, and educated people could be taught, could be made to learn.

He'd only just begun to scan the rows of shelved when an overjoyed voice called out to him. "Randy!"

Standing there, wearing a long dress so unlike anything she ever would have worn in the past, was Jennifer Vivaldi, her tail wagging at the sight of the raccoon. "Back for more on the sciences, I see," she said.

"Jen," Randy mumbled, wringing his paws together; best not to spring reality on her too soon. "Yes, I... I am."

"Need my help again, do you?" the coyote asked with a coy smile. She approached with what was an awkwardly feminine gait for what he knew of her, but there were hints of her roguish, boyish streak that Randy knew hid underneath the surface.

It dawned on Randy that, here between the stacks, they were out of sight from the other library patrons, and that Vivaldi's forwardness might have been a precious thing. "If you'd be so kind," the raccoon replied, dipping his head in a not-quite-formal bow.

By now, the coyote had sidled up right next to him. "And what can I help you find today, Randy Brightfield?" she asked, muzzle close to his cheek.

"I was wondering—hoping," he corrected, "you might be able to direct me to books about... the night."

"Living dangerous, as we?" Vivaldi teased, brushing her paw along his arm before disengaging and turning her eyes toward the bookshelves. "And what might you like to know about the night, other than the fact that it's deadly?"

Randy smiled, not because he wanted to, but because he felt he ought to. "Whatever else is to be known, I suppose," he said. "Surely, it's got to be something other than a deathtrap."

"Or so it's been theorized," Vivaldi replied without looking back at him. She plucked two books off of the shelf. "But yes, I suppose there are things to be gleaned from these esteemed tomes of lore."

"Thank you," the raccoon said, holding out his paws to take the book from her.

Vivaldi waved him off, though. "It's okay. I'll take them up for you," she said. "Come on." And so, Randy followed her, trailing after her long dress and her still-wagging tail, all the way up to the checkout desk.

To the raccoon's surprise, Vivaldi walked around behind it. Stumbling as he quickly stopped following her, Randy shuffled back over to the visitor's side, paws clasped in anticipation as the coyote pulled out a logbook and a rubber stamp.

"You still have *Primer on the Physical Sciences* out," Vivaldi noted as she stamped both the logbook and the two volumes she'd fetched for Randy. "So *technically* I shouldn't let you take these." She just winked as she slid them over to him.

He smiled. "Thanks, Jen," he said. "You're a lifesaver."

"I should hope it's not *that* urgent," the coyote said with a chuckle. "But then, you've always been full of surprises."

"I'd hate to start disappointing you now, then."

As Randy turned to leave, Vivaldi interrupted him again. "Oh, Randy," she said. "One last quick thing?"

"Yes?"

The coyote looked concerned, now. "I looked into the printing press, like you asked me to."

"The printing press?" the raccoon asked.

Vivaldi nodded slowly. "Yes. The Carson press, the one in the basement?" she said. "You said you thought there were some parts missing, so I checked it out, and it looks like it's working fine to me."

Continuity, it seemed, needed to be maintained somehow, Randy thought. A necessity, to maintain the illusion? "Oh. That's... that's good to hear," he replied with a smile of his own. "Sorry to have worried you."

"You wouldn't be you if you didn't," Vivaldi said.

"You can always count on me for that." Randy gave a more formal bow, then, and started to walk home, books cradled preciously in his arms.



That night, Randy stayed up reading by candlelight, learning what he could about the night. Much like he'd found out the day before, the concept of night being this deadly *thing* was an accepted facet of life. There was hardly any mention of the stars in these books, and indeed, there seemed to be only a handful of them that could be seen from the raccoon's window. There was even less on the moon, and as Randy thought about—

Wait. Had there been *anything* about the moon?

A sudden sense of panic overcame the raccoon. He pressed his face up against his window and looked out at the sky.

No moon. There was no moon.

"Tomorrow," hissed one of the static voices, scaring Randy into yelping like a child. "Tomorrow," it repeated, "the light will be gone from the night, and the night will be ours."

"And then the flock will be ready?" asked the second.

"Things will be too far changed for them. Remembering will be all but impossible."

The voices contented to converse, but Randy was no longer listening. He had gathered up his books, his papers, the star charts he'd drawn and the notes he'd written down. He hefted them up in a messy bundle, and stepped up to his front door.

A lantern still burned by the window in the house across the way. At a full clip, it would take less than thirty seconds to reach. Randy could make it.

The raccoon pulled his front door open, and he ran.

At once, the howl on the wind picked up, but Randy didn't dare look back. He kept a tight hold on his armful of books and papers and sped across the road. As he approached the yard, he started to shout, "Open up! Let me in!"

He ran full-speed into the door, slamming into it. Inside, a woman shrieked. "Please, my name is Randy Brightfield!" the raccoon shouted at the door. "Please, I need you to—"

The door flung open, and an angry wolf brought a musket up to bear right in the raccoon's face. "What are you doing, you fool?" the wolf growled at him. "Get inside!" He ordered Randy in at gunpoint, and the raccoon was all too happy to comply.

The wolf shut and then bolted the door behind him. "What are you thinking, you idiot?" he asked, checking the windows as the sound on the wind faded. "You trying to get us all killed, or just yourself?"

"Jen Vivaldi," Randy gasped. "I need to know where Jen Vivaldi lives."

The wolf blinked in disbelief. "Next to the library. Where else?"

"I need to get there."

"Now?"

"Now." Randy had caught his breath, and he took a few seconds to repackage his notes in between the covers of the books he held.

The wolf set down his musket and laughed. From the hallway, Randy could see a woman he imaged to be the missus watching, guarding her child. "You're lucky you even made it across the street," the male said, slapping the raccoon on the shoulder. "No way you'll ever make it all the way to the library. Here, let me pour you a drink and set up the couch for you, you poor sap."

Randy shook his head. "I'll go door-to-door," he said. "From one house to the next."

"A strong drink, then," the wolf said, already rummaging through his cabinet. "You've got nerves, lad, but you need to stay put until morning."

"No can do," the raccoon said. "Might not be a morning, at this rate." Then, sucking up his breath again, he unbolted the door and broke into another run.

The wolf was shouting after him, but Randy couldn't make out any words as the wind rushed past his ears, and a static snarl drowned out all other sound.



It had taken him the better part of an hour, hopping from one house to the next, dodging certain death and alarming the neighborhoods he passed, but Randy had made it within eyeshot of the library and of Jen Vivaldi's house, a tiny brick hovel that looked more suited for a schoolmarm than a scientist. Along the way, the raccoon had caused quite the commotion, and by the fifth or sixth house in the chain, the noise had caused so much of a stir that people had been expecting his mad dashes across the street, zigzagging back and forth on his hell-bent quest.

Now, with the static in his ears one more time, Randy broke into a spring over the cobblestone street and up to Jen Vivaldi's front door. "Jen!" he yelled. "It's Randy! Wake up! You need to let me in!"

A light was on, so he knew she was home and that she was awake, but the door was still closed as he came up the front steps. "Jen!" he shouted again. "Please, open the door."

"Randy? Randy, is that really you?" came the coyote's voice, muffled by the seemingly-impenetrable barrier between them.

"Jen, there's no time!" Randy could sense the *thing* coming for him, could feel its gaze, somehow, on the back of his head as it sped inexorably closer. "Jen, *open the door!*"

The raccoon nearly fell as he door opened under his weight as he tried to bang on it again, and Vivaldi had to catch him in her arms before kicking the door shut with her bare foot. "Oh, Randy, Randy," she gasped. "You little fool. What are you doing here?"

"Jen, I... we... we need to sit down," Randy panted. He nodded toward her coffee table and held up his books. "I need to tell you something."

"Well, sit, of course," the coyote insisted. "I'll put on some tea, but—oh, god, Randy, what are you *doing* here?"

"Forget the tea," the raccoon said. "There's no time. I need you to look at this."

Vivaldi eased Randy down onto the couch carefully. "Look at what? Randy, what's so important that you'd risk coming here in the middle of the night?"

Randy pushed the top book off of his stack after setting it onto the coffee table, revealing the cover of the college astronomy textbook he'd brought. "That," he said. "Look at that. Tell me what you think."

The coyote picked up the textbook like it was an object demanding reverence. Her paw caressed the smooth, full-color cover, her fingers stroking along the glossy inner pages. "Randy, this is... this is beautiful," she said. "And the quality of this paper. I've never seen anything like it!"

"Never?" Randy asked. "Never ever? Think *really* hard about this, Jen."

"Randy, I'm a librarian; books are my livelihood, and I've never seen anything even *close* to this. Where on earth did you *get* this?"

Randy grabbed one of Vivaldi's paws and squeezed it. She started to protest, but he cut her off. "Think *really* hard, Jen," he told her. "This life of yours, this whole... this whole reality isn't real. You're Dr. Jennifer Vivaldi, and the two of us work at a place called Mount Carson Observ—"

Vivaldi yanked her paw away. "Randy, please, you're scaring me," she whined. "You come banging on my door in the middle of the night like a... like a crazy person, and now you're—"

"I'm not crazy, Jen," he said. "None of this is supposed to be like this. And I can..." *I can prove it*, he wanted to say. But how? "I can prove it," he said defiantly, and then he reached into his pocket.

The coyote jumped away, as if expecting him to draw a knife or a gun, but what the raccoon pulled out was his cell phone. “Does *this* look familiar to you at all?” he asked, flipping the phone open. The battery was still operational, and the colored screen lit up when he pressed a button.

“Good heavens, what *is* that?” Vivaldi squeaked. “Randy, are you... are you dabbling in... w-witchcraft?”

The raccoon shook his head. “It’s not witchcraft, Jen,” he said. “It’s a phone. Where we come from, everyone has these.” He extended his paw, offering it to her, but she shied further away. “*Damn it*, Jen, it’s just a fucking *phone*!”

“I don’t care what it is! You keep it the hell away from me!” She was chewing her lower lip now, her solid canine frame shaking underneath her nightgown.

“Dr. Jennifer Vivaldi,” the raccoon repeated. “You were an astronomer at Mount Carson Observatory with me.”

“I don’t know what an ‘astronomer’ is. I’m a librarian.”

“You have to remember, Jen,” Randy begged. “It was your passion. You loved the night sky just as much as me.”

“Why would I ever love the night?” Vivaldi cried. “It’s terrifying, and it’s—”

“The moon!” Randy blurted, shocking the coyote into recoiling again. “The moon! You missed the moon!”

She blinked and shook her head. “I don’t... I don’t know what you’re—”

“It was this... this great big glowing ball in the sky,” the raccoon explained. “Like the sun, only at night, and not as bright.”

He could see the consternation on Vivaldi’s face, now, and she was no longer just denying his accusations outright. “Yesterday, you told me you had been longing for the night sky, that it was killing you that you couldn’t experience it,” he said. “It’s in your blood, isn’t it? You have this... this *urge* to go outside at night and look up and—”

“—and howl!” Vivaldi finished for him, her voice escaping as a gasp. “I want to howl at a moon that isn’t there! The moon and the stars and... oh my god, Randy, what’s happening?”

Randy leapt to his feet and grabbed Vivaldi by the paws. “You believe me?” His pulse was racing. “You remember?”

“Randy, what’s wrong?” the coyote asked in a panic. “What’s wrong with the sky? What’s wrong with the world?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know, but I need to help people remember. And I need your help for that.”

“Mine?” she asked. “But what can I do? God, Randy, I... good lord, why am I wearing this?”

The coyote’s sudden look of revulsion at her girlish nightgown made the raccoon smile. “We can fix this, Jen,” he said. “You and me. But I need you to let me into the library. I need to get to the printing press.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Vivaldi said. Even her tone of voice made her sound like the Vivaldi that Randy had always known, and it was enough to make him

want to hug her and never let her go, if only the situation weren't so urgent. "We can go in the morning, together, you and me."

Randy shook his head. "Tomorrow might be different again," he explained. "But for some reason, my things don't seem to change, so if I can get to the printing press, maybe the things I make with that won't change, either."

The coyote was clutching her head. "Sorry," she said. "It's like there's still two sets of memories inside my head, and it's making it hard to think." She tried to shake it off, and though she still looked visibly uncomfortable, she started reading through Randy's notes. "All right, so you get to the printing press. What for, though?"

"Those... those *things* out there in the night," the raccoon said. "They're afraid of people remembering. If I can get enough people to remember—I don't even think it has to be *everyone*, just *enough* people—then maybe..."

"Then maybe what?" Vivaldi asked.

Randy looked out the window at the dark, moonless sky. "Then maybe things will go back to being the way they were," he said. "Or maybe if enough people remember, people can start fighting back against whatever's caused this. I don't know."

Vivaldi sat and scratched her chin. "Well, I can't say that I have any better ideas," she admitted. Then she stood up and dusted herself off. "So then, shall we?"

"No," Randy said, shaking his head. "No, you need to stay here."

"What? Why?"

"Because," Randy said, "in case I don't make it, then you might well be the only other person who remembers the truth. You'll be the last shot at setting all of this right."

The coyote clutched her paws together. "Come on, Randy," she said. "Don't talk like that."

"We've got to account for the possibility," the raccoon said, standing up and gathering up his books. "The scientist in you knows that."

For several seconds, Vivaldi neither spoke nor moved. Then, she sighed, and said, "Let me get you the keys." With that, she disappeared into the other room.

Randy waited by the front door. He was glad that he'd gotten a few minutes to rest and catch his breath; the run from here to the library wasn't a short one, but he had to chance it. Once he was inside, he should be safe, and from there... well, he'd figure that out when he got there.

The jingling of keys made Randy perk his ears at Vivaldi's return. In her outstretched paw she dangled a ring with two keys. "This one's for the front door," she said, taking momentary hold of one, "and this one is for the basement."

The raccoon looped his fingers through the key ring and braced himself by the door. "Wish me luck," he said, his other paw grasping the doorknob.

"Good luck," Vivaldi whispered, and she patted him on the back as he took off and ran.

As his legs carried him as fast as they could, Randy felt like he would never make it. The library might as well have been an entire football field away, so daunting was the distance. Whatever the things that chased him in the night were, they were faster than a raccoon, and they could be lurking just about anywhere out there the dark, ready to take him down.

Vivaldi's house was built on top of a small excuse for a hill, so Randy at least got the benefit of running along a downward slant for part of the distance. Maybe gravity and inertia would make a difference. Maybe they'd carry him fast enough to reach the door in time.

In the open air, the way the howling echoed made it more difficult to determine just how far away the things were, as well as how many of them were actually out there. He had definitely caught their attention, though, and there were coming for him, just like he knew they would. There was no turning back: he either made it to the door in time, or he didn't.

After what felt like an eternity of pure panic, the door was within arm's reach. Part of Randy wanted to look back over his shoulder, to see if he could spot one of these things with his eyes, but the other part of him—the rational part—ordered him to fish out that key and get the door unlocked right that very moment. He fumbled and fidgeted and nearly dropped some of his books in the process, but over the static in the air, the raccoon soon heard the telltale click of the lock disengaging, and he shoved the door open with a triumphant kick.

He jiggled the key free and held it in his teeth as he shut the door behind him with his back. He'd made it inside. Now he just needed to get to the printing press and needed to get it working.

The library was almost completely dark, only the faintest light creeping in through the dusty windows, coming from the neighborhood houses and what few stars still remained in the sky. There was enough light to grope and fumble about by, though, and after just a few minutes of clumsy searching, the raccoon found the door to the basement.

Unlike the rest of the library, though, the basement was pitch black. It wasn't like he could just flick a switch and turn the light on, either. Those things couldn't get inside—could they?—but even so, Randy was reluctant to descend into total darkness. Besides, how was he going to work a printing press that he couldn't see?

A lantern hung on the nearby wall, but it was out of oil, and Randy had nothing with which to light it, anyway. He was about to go off in search of another when a better idea popped into his head.

Randy reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. It wasn't the brightest thing in the world, but as a makeshift flashlight, it should suffice. He flipped it open and held it up to the darkened staircase. Sure enough, even though the field of light didn't emanate very far, it was enough to see by.

Step by careful step, Randy descended into the basement. He could only see a step or two in front of him on the way, and certainly couldn't see how far the

stairwell went or where the printing press might be. He'd just need to take his time. He just had to stay calm, take his time, and he'd find it.

He breathed out a sigh of relief as he reached the bottom of the stairs. That just left him to case the basement to find his goal. The printing press had to be huge, didn't it? It couldn't be *that* hard to miss, even in near total darkness. Also, his natural eyesight was beginning to adjust to the dark now, too, making it a little easier to see past the dim haze lit up by his phone.

A sudden, loud pitched beep made the raccoon drop his phone with a cry of shock. It landed face-up, thankfully, and so he could still see, but his heart was still racing. Carefully, he bent down to pick it up. The words 'LOW BATTERY' flashed on the screen.

"Oh, no. No, no, no," the raccoon groaned. How much longer did that leave him? A few minutes? Fine. He'd find the press, he'd figure out how to get it started, and then he'd—

A strong draft blew down the staircase as the door at the top slammed shut, making Randy cry out again. *Just the wind*, he told himself. *It's just the wind. Just find the printing press and get out of here.*

Randy took a few long strides forward, and then he saw it: the printing press, the name 'Carson' written on it in big, block letters. This was it.

With another beep, the cell phone went dead.

The basement was plunged into total darkness.

For three heartbeats, Randy stood there, breathing deeply, trying to will himself back into a state of calm.

Then, there was a rush of air, and the raccoon's next breath stuck in his throat.

"Ah, Randolph Brightfield," a static voice whispered into his ear. "How delightful to meet you at last."

The raccoon whimpered in both fear and pain; it felt like a knife had just been driven into his back, only it was far larger than that. It felt like it was moving around inside of him, like it was at once both a hand covered in bony protrusions and a tentacle sheathed in dripping slime. It poked and probed around inside of his torso from behind as it wormed about.

"Your hope is quite delicious, Randolph Brightfield," the voice said. "Aged right to its prime, to perfect ripeness. *Delectable.*" Again, the phantasmal appendage writhed, matter occupying multiple points in space at the same time. It reached in, teased at his very essence, holding him paralyzed and helpless.

Perhaps not completely helpless, though. Randy gave up the struggle for just a moment, enough to let his arms go slack, to let his stack of books fall to the floor. As the *thing* seized him again, wrenching out a scream from him, the raccoon then kicked the heavy stack along the floor. His ears pricked when he heard the thump against the base of the printing press.

"Giving us one last ray of hope, Randolph Brightfield? How very, very generous of you."

And with that, Randolph Brightfield's world went dark forever.

Jennifer Vivaldi clicked her tongue, chastising herself for not having locked up the basement the night before. There wasn't anything to fear of a break-in overnight, but what if some library patron had wandered down there in the morning before she'd had a chance to check things out?

Oh, well. No harm done this time, at any rate. She needed to check the printing press anyway, and this would save her the time of searching for wherever she'd misplaced the key in the first place.

When she got downstairs, she felt a strange niggling feeling in the back of her brain as she came across a disheveled stack of books and papers on the floor next to the press itself. Had she forgotten to shelve them the night before? She felt for sure that she'd forgotten *something* about them.

Bending over to pick them up, she also found a curious, plastic device, about the size of her palm. She picked that up first and inspected it, but it didn't seem to do anything. No, the books were the more pressing concern. What were they even doing down here, again?

The coyote gathered up the mess and carried it over to the table. She flipped through the topmost book for a moment, noting the beautiful, glossy paper. This certainly wasn't a book from *her* library. Had this been a special order she'd put in? Why couldn't she remember?

"Miss Vivaldi?" called a child's voice from upstairs. "Miss Vivaldi, are you down there?"

"Up in just a sec," the coyote called back.

Oh, no matter. She'd figure it out later. She picked up the books again and set them on one of the old, dusty shelves behind the staircase. It was *right* there, she felt. She just couldn't put her finger on it.

Ah, well, she thought to herself as she climbed back up the stairs to help her eager young visitor find what he needed to find. It would come to her eventually, she was sure, probably later that night, when she was least expecting it.