

Save the Cat. Save the World!

HOLLYWOOD

Zee Shirley

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ISBN-13: 9781234567890

ISBN-10: 1477123456

Cover design by: Marketing

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018675309

Printed in the United States of America

SAVE THE CAT, SAVE THE WORLD!

By: Zee Shirley

To Irving Hodges. Never have I ever said "I'm sorry," except for now. I'm sorry.

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Prologue:

[moved to Appendix in this draft for the sake of clarity. Marketing citing the rule of 'too much, too soon.']

Chapter 1

“It was all a dream!” Isaac insisted to his therapist.

Agitated, Isaac sought shelter in a deep-seated chair that threatened to swallow him whole. He was sweating under the spotlight of a pink Himalayan sea salt lamp. It glowed on his therapist’s desk opposite him, but the little light was weak, doing almost nothing to combat the oppressive June Gloom clouds that lurked outside the building.

“I mean, truth is stranger than fiction. That’s what they say, right?” Isaac explained. To the untrained eye, Isaac was your average, all-American asshole treading water on his way to middle age. He wore a tee and jeans, with plain brown hair, eyes, and skin. If Kirkland's Signature made a man, this would be him. However, as a federally licensed Harry Potter therapist, Dr. Rousseau knew better than to judge a book by its cover.

Isaac Abrahamson was not average. He was perfect — the perfect patient. What made Isaac so remarkable was how unremarkable he was. Isaac had nothing: no job, no family, and no friends. He didn’t even have a favorite breakfast burrito spot. All he did was watch TV and movies. There was simply nothing there, a true *tabula rasa*. This made Isaac the ideal control subject for Dr. Rousseau’s thought experiments.

But something had changed since last week’s session. Isaac was different now. Dr. Rousseau had received Isaac’s test results, and they weren’t good. Especially not when compounded by this newest development. You see, Isaac had a dream. And not just any dream. He called his dream *Super Jesus 3: the Holy Trinity Strikes Back*.

“Are you familiar with the *Kubla Khan*?” Dr. Rousseau asked his patient.

“The Pokemon? I think so. That’s the one where it looks like a lizard fucked a kangaroo, right?”

“It’s a poem.”

“...” The tick-tock of a cuckoo clock sounded behind Isaac, filling his silence until Dr. Rousseau spoke again.

“Samuel Taylor Coleridge penned it. Interesting guy. Much like yourself, he claimed his *magnum opus*, the *Kubla Khan*, was dreamt up.”

Isaac sat up in his chair, interested. “Is that true?”

“The scholarly debate remains unsettled, but the most common theory is that he wrote the poem in an opium-induced fever dream. Others believe it was a divine spirit that moved him — a muse if you will — while some cynics say the whole creation story was made up by Coleridge for marketing purposes.”

“And what do you think?”

“It’s possible he was telling the truth. There are other instances of inspired works of art.” Dr. Rousseau used an arm of his horned-rimmed reading glasses to point to the bookcase behind Isaac. The usual suspects lined the shelf, Freud and Jung, but also the entire series of *Harry Potter*. “J.K. Rowling said that *Harry Potter*, the idea, came to her as a fully formed world, and she merely needed to write it down.” Dr. Rousseau coughed. “But, what am I going on about? I may have an authority on the subject sitting right before me.” He waved Isaac’s *Super Jesus 3: the Holy Trinity Strikes Back* script at him. “What inspired this effort?”

“It wasn’t opium if that’s what you’re asking.” Isaac bristled warily.

“No. You misunderstand.” Dr. Rousseau leaned forward on his elbows, weighing Isaac’s words. “But you are taking your medications, right?”

“Morning and night.”

“In the right dose?”

“As directed.”

“Are you steady?”

Isaac nodded. “I’m steady.”

“But are you ready?”

“I’m ready.”

“Good.” Dr. Rousseau jotted some notes down in a weathered, leather Moleskine. “Why did you write your dream journal in a screenplay format?” He thumbed through some past work submitted by Isaac that was nothing more than a splendid collection of scribbles. It was a far cry from the quality of the script he presented at the beginning of today’s session. Other than the penmanship, there was nothing to suggest that the authors were the same.

“I don’t know. That’s just what it was.” Isaac said. “I’ve never even read a screenplay before. I had to look up what I-N-T and E-X-T mean.”

“Interior and exterior. They indicate whether or not the scene is inside or outside.”

“Yeah, that’s what Google said.”

“Don’t be afraid to ask me any other screenwriting questions you may have. I’m a bit of an expert myself.” Dr. Rousseau jerked his left thumb over his shoulder to indicate a framed copy of a *Hawaii 5-0* script that Isaac had never noticed before in their time together. It stood in

lieu of any diploma that Isaac could find. The title page bore Dr. Rousseau's name as the second writing credit. Isaac guessed from the yellowed paper and Dr. Rousseau's equally yellowed and papery skin that the show probably starred Jack Lord rather than the esteemed Scott Caan.

"..."

"Did you watch *Super Jesus* recently? Like maybe before bed? That may have triggered this event."

"Sure. Hard not to. It's running on repeat on Netflix, Hulu, HBO, TBS, TNT, CNN"

"So, would you consider yourself a Disciple of Super Jesus?"

"I mean, that's not a label I'd use. I don't wear the pendant. I'm more of a casual fan than a stan."

"Well, from a fan's perspective, what do you think of the *Super Jesus* scene you dreamed up?"

Isaac smiled. "I liked how it ended. The fangs. That's pretty cool."

"What kind of fangs do you think they were?"

"Sharp."

"That's not what I meant. Do you think the fangs belong to some sort of monster? Maybe like the basilisk Harry encountered in *Chamber of Secrets*?"

"I was getting strong vampire vibes now that you mentioned it."

Dr. Rousseau noted this. "How did you feel about the main character? The woman."

Isaac shrugged. "Seemed like a babe."

"*Seemed*? You don't know?"

"Depends on who they cast."

"Who would you cast?"

"I imagined Margot Robbie when I read it, but I'm not sure if Super Jesus shares a universe with Harlequin. Either way, it doesn't bode well for Emma Stone." Isaac stated, referencing the lead actress in the first *Super Jesus* installment.

"Well, who did you imagine while you were dreaming?"

"No one. I don't remember the dream at all. That's what's so wild. These pages were just there, fully written, when I woke up. But what else could it be if it wasn't a dream? It was like something you'd read about on the Ambien subReddit."

Dr. Rousseau wrote this fact down. "This is exciting. It's exceedingly rare not to dream about oneself."

"It is?"

“Quite rare indeed. Everyone is the main character in their own story, or so says John Barth. Except for you. Why do you think you’re not the star of your own show?”

Isaac sat with the question, turning it over in his head. “It’s a pretty absurd proposition. How could I be in a movie? I’m just some guy, a dude, really.”

“We’re talking about a dream, Isaac. That’s where absurdity is most alive, where it should thrive!”

“Well, I don’t think dreams are allowed to be boring either.”

“What do you mean? That your dream would be boring if you were in it? Go deeper. Do you think of yourself as a boring person?”

“Absolutely.”

“Continue...”

“Let’s review the facts of the case, okay? Think about it for one second. I’m male. I’m straight. I’m upper-middle-class. That’s three strikes right there. I live a comfortable life.” Isaac ran his hands over his suddenly long face. “Christ, if I were to die today, my only lasting mark on this world would be the size of my carbon footprint.” He gulped to keep a bellyful of hot and spicy anxiety down where it belonged.

“Okay, so you think you’re boring, but are you bored?”

“That’s just it. I’m never bored. I have high-speed Internet.”

Dr. Rousseau wrote this down. “All the world’s a stage, Isaac, and I think it’s high time for you to act accordingly.”

“Say again?”

“Being boring is a choice. Life’s a performance, Isaac, so pretend you’re in a movie. Become the main character. Who is your audience? Who are you acting for? Yourself? God? A judge and jury of your peers?”

“...”

“Think on that for next week. As a therapist, I can assure you that no one is boring. It simply isn’t possible. Please excuse the tautology, but every individual is an individual. Can a snowflake be boring?”

“Fine, but what if you didn’t view me through the lens of a therapist? Try thinking of me as a screenwriter. Could I be a character of the week in your *Hawaii 5-0*?”

“Well.” Dr. Rousseau grimaced, defeated. “As a screenwriter, I’d say you’re better suited for more of a mumblecore milieu than a superhero story. A life devoid of external difficulties is a tough sell for a visual medium.”

“Tell it to me straight, doc. Admit that I’d be the villain in any movie. That’s the role of mediocre white men these days, and it’s well-deserved. So I’m okay with that.”

“Are you? Are you okay with that?”

Isaac looked down at his gurgling stomach to analyze his gut reaction. It burned. “No. I’m not okay with that.” He squeezed out a smile that felt more like an ulcer. “I don’t want to be the bad guy.”

“Perhaps it’s time you’ve taken on a new role?”

Panic rose to Isaac’s eyes. “How? It’s too late for me. I’ve already eclipsed my mid-twenties.”

“It’s not too late. Plenty of main characters in plenty of stories feature men far beyond their mid-twenties. Jesus died at thirty-three.”

“Do you really think I have what it takes to be a main character?”

“I do. In fact, you have a strong make-up for it. Forgive me, but you’re a bit of an everyman, an empty vessel.”

“An empty vessel?”

“It sounds harsh, but it’s good in this respect: it allows audience members of all kinds and all backgrounds to project themselves onto you. This allows them to take the hero’s journey with you. You’re the avatar. You see this phenomenon a lot in storytelling, and that’s why side characters often have the most personality.”

As a heavy consumer of TV and movies, Isaac realized his therapist was right. “So, where do I begin?” Isaac asked.

“You need to save a cat.”

“...”

“You must save a cat. Are you unfamiliar with the term? Blake Snyder invented it. He wrote a popular ‘how-to’ book on screenwriting. The ‘save the cat’ theory is that every protagonist in any story should do something charming when introduced, like, for example, saving a cat from danger.”

“Why?”

“The audience will witness this moment of goodwill and subconsciously align themselves with that character for the rest of the story, even if the character is of dubious moral fiber.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Here’s an easy example of ‘saving the cat.’ Remember in book one when Harry Potter freed the snake in the zoo? Yes? Well, the snake was the cat.”

“Oh.”

“You must have internalized this lesson at some point. Your dream had a literal save the cat moment.”

“That’s right!” Isaac’s eyes brightened, remembering how the Margot Robbie character from his dream/script tried to abduct a cat from some sort of mystery facility that Isaac couldn’t place.

Dr. Rousseau leveled his eyes with Isaac’s. “That will be your assignment for this week, Isaac. You must save a cat.”

Isaac nodded eagerly. “Any other tricks of the trade?”

“Not at this juncture.” Dr. Rousseau tongued one of his gold-plated incisors, thinking. “Well, there is this one thing. But it’s not a screenwriting tip.”

“…”

“As you know, I also participate in a Groundlings improv group, and the most important rule is to always say ‘yes.’”

“Yes?”

“Yes! That’s the first principle of improv, but you should also take it as a prescription for your boring life.” Dr. Rousseau raised his eyebrows in a moment of personal epiphany. Narrative character development as therapy! This could be the next gimmick that sets him apart from his peers, and it was tailor-made for LA. He could already envision the ad on Groupon.

If he were honest with himself, the *Harry Potter* act that had launched his career had been wearing thin. While Dr. Rousseau was thankful for the first Millennial presidential administration for fast-tracking the creation of the “Ministry of Magic” department and the subsequent Slytherin Board through Congress, how many more times could he really utter his pet phrase, “Life is like a sorting hat?”

What had once been an experimental frontier in psychiatry had grown stale. It was time to move on. *Harry Potter* therapists were now a dime a dozen even as *Super Jesus* supplanted *Harry Potter* as the dominant cultural touchstone of its time. (Plus, J.K. Rowling had since turned problematic, stunting demand for Dr. Rousseau’s services.) Now was as good of a time as any to rebrand.

“Save a cat. And say yes,” Isaac recapped, “sounds easy enough.”

“Simplicity is not a synonym for easy.”

“Who! Who!” An owl burst through a cuckoo clock, signaling the end of their session.

“You’ve got a trying week ahead of you, Isaac. In addition, I would encourage you to write down any other script pages that come to you, consciously or subconsciously.” Dr.

Rousseau waved the script at Isaac. "I'm going to hang onto this if you don't mind. I'd like to subject it to further ruminations."

Isaac shrugged.

"If you're going to be a screenwriter, then we better make it official. Take this." Dr. Rousseau reached into his desk before handing Isaac a black Moleskine notebook to call his own. Isaac grabbed the leather-bound book and nodded, not understanding its significance. While it may have looked like any other notebook to him, anybody in the Industry would now know that Isaac was a member of their secret order of screenwriters.

"Thanks." Isaac nodded, gathering up his belongings when his therapist stopped him.

"Hang on, Isaac. You'll have to excuse my cowardice for waiting until the end of our session to tell you, but we received your test results."

"..."

"You have my deepest apologies."

Isaac didn't blink. He had been expecting this news since he completed his psychological examination weeks ago. "It's okay. I understand."

"You've been sorted into house Slytherin," Dr. Rousseau said gravely, recounting Isaac's Sorting H.A.T. (Holistic Aptitude Test) results, which were indisputable.

Despite Isaac's benign behavior, the test had identified something rotten lurking in his core, even if it was dormant. "Per federal law of the Ministry of Magic and the agreement you signed upon intake, I have notified the proper authorities. I expect that you will accommodate them appropriately?"

Isaac nodded solemnly.

"Thank you. As you already know, but I'm obligated to repeat this for the record, the Slytherin Board monitors all Slytherin-sorted citizens for anti-social behavior, so you can expect an agent of the Ministry of Magic to arrive sooner rather than later to take on your case evaluation."

This was Dr. Rousseau's genius. He struck gold by capitalizing on two cultural phenomena: 1. The popularity of BuzzFeed-style questionnaires, which provided the template for his Sorting H.A.T. exam, and 2. Millennials, aging into increased political power, were eager to incorporate any aspect of *Harry Potter* into their real lives that they could, no matter the costs. So, with the government's help, Dr. Rousseau took J.K. Rowlings' house sorting to its logical conclusion – personality eugenics.

In the *Harry Potter* books, all deviants were sorted into House Slytherin, so it made sense for the safety of society to segregate this population away from the other houses. That's

where J.K. Rowling fell short. In *Harry Potter*, these Slytherin had all the rights and privileges of a “normal” citizen, allowing evil to run amok, but that was an error that Dr. Rousseau and the newly formed U.S. Ministry of Magic wouldn’t repeat.

There was one problem, however. While all deviants were Slytherin, not all Slytherins were deviants, so some non-deviants would be rounded up as collateral damage, but that’s where the Slytherin Board’s secondary evaluation came in handy. Only at the conclusion of that more intensive investigation, with Board approval, could a Slytherin shed their designation and reintegrate into the general population. If a Slytherin failed this second test, then, well...

“Furthermore,” Dr. Rousseau continued gravely, “the program requires Slytherins to show gainful employment.”

“A job?” Isaac gasped, having never held one in his life.

“Yes,” Dr. Rousseau confirmed. “I know that the financial component is immaterial to you, but the state uses employment as a proxy to see if you have the constitution to contribute to a well-mannered society. But I think the plan we’ve outlined today will be some good first steps to steer you clear of the fate that befalls most Slytherin....”

Avoiding Isaac’s gaze, Dr. Rousseau handed a pamphlet to his patient. Isaac looked it over. The title at the top of the tri-fold brochure read: “So you’re a Slytherin,” and the photo on the opposing flap was of L.A.’s dreaded Twin Towers Correctional Psychiatric Hospital.

The sight of the building unnerved Isaac. He understood the threat immediately. There was something uncanny about the Twin Towers’ architecture. It was polygonal, and its features were flat, making the facility look like a villain’s lair from an N64-era video game. Isaac tried to anticipate and proactively plan his escape from the building but couldn’t. Its windows appeared to be nothing more than an optical illusion.

Chapter 2

By the time Isaac got home from therapy, he wanted to forget the entire session by indulging in the comforts of his routine: a hot shower, a cold brew coffee, and a lukewarm Fleshlight, in that order. Of course, now that he no longer held onto the dream script and it was safely in the hands of his therapist, the whole event could be dismissed as just that, a bad dream. But, try as Isaac might, these diversions, delusions, and flights of fancy were of no use. He couldn't relax, never mind climax.

Instead, he felt squeezed and excited, even after he removed himself from his fleshlight. It was as if his skin was too tight and no longer fit him. It was making him itch. He didn't feel human. His Slytherin test results had changed everything. (Was this snake shedding his skin?)

Yet everything remained precisely the same as before he left for Dr. Rousseau's. Isaac looked around his one-bedroom apartment for confirmation. The fattened flies remained right where he had left them, perched on the rims of the empty beer cans marking the path from his futon to his empty fridge. The virgin surfboard in the corner of the room was still untouched by sex wax, and all the walls were as bare as the day he moved to Santa Monica. The change was, therefore, easy to identify. It had to be him.

Isaac shook his head. But was it even possible to change in the course of an afternoon? He didn't think so. He had seen Dr. Rousseau a hundred or more times in that pink-lit room, and each time was as unremarkable as the last, each session blending into a blur of "*explore those feelings furthers,*" "*what do you think the shape of your Patronus would be?,*" and "*would you like another La Croix?*"

Aside from today, the only notable exception was the session where Isaac took the Harry Potter Sorting H.A.T. exam. He mulled over the idea of those test results as the source of the discomfort in his head. It made sense, but only if viewed at a certain angle, like a Rubik's cube with just one of its faces solved. That could explain his dread but not the electric excitement coursing through his veins.

That surge of energy jump-started his legs and carried him to his apartment's second-story balcony. Isaac reasoned that some fresh air would help, but there wasn't any.

Instead, the meteorological phenomenon known as the June Gloom enveloped him as soon as he stepped outside. It was suffocating.

Even at night, the bastard front rolled in from the Pacific Ocean. It crept over the 100-foot bluffs that protected the city and strangled downtown in a gray shroud that swallowed buildings whole and turned palm trees into shadows with the silhouettes of giant spiders. Isaac couldn't hear the wind, but he could feel it. The clouds were thick enough also to hush the cars and the busybodies idling on the bordering boulevards. Wilshire had never been so quiet. Isaac could only hear the gentle thrum of the corner liquor store's neon sign and the telephone wires crisscrossing into a canopy above the alleyway.

Isaac grabbed his bare arms for warmth.

Coyote weather.

Isaac braved the chill for a moment longer, savoring the view of his neighborhood through the fuzzed filter of the fog. He couldn't leave this place for the Twin Towers. Santa Monica was the only home he knew. It was special. It had history. Whitey Bulger was arrested only a few blocks down the road from Isaac! The man who had been the subject of the longest FBI manhunt on record risked everything to live in this little slice of paradise, fog and all. What could be a better endorsement than that?

Isaac's building held significance, too, having once been the residence for LA's Chiller Killer, the serial killer infamous for murdering Ashton Kutcher's girlfriend. Isaac looked across the alley to the opposite building, to the second-floor apartment where the Chiller Killer's last attempted murder occurred. It was like living in a Netflix series. Or a white girl's podcast. What a privilege. How could Isaac leave?

The only light in the night came from the giant billboard above Isaac. Fog ringed the billboard's twin floodlights, forming halos, just how the marketing department must have drawn them up since they illuminated an image of Super Jesus. There he was, the man, the myth, and the messiah, larger than life and depicted as described in Isaac's script [See: Appendix A], but this wasn't an advertisement for Isaac's script. This was for the franchise's upcoming sequel, *"Super Jesus 2: the Return of the Prodigal Son."*

The "S" in "Super" was in the shape of the middle school "S" as was customary for the Super Jesus logo. The billboard also advertised the film's release date, which was set for December 25th and underneath that was the movie's tagline, "The second coming of the second coming!"

Based on the billboard's imagery, Isaac didn't get the sense that Super Jesus would be fighting the vampire villain from his dream script and felt unexpectedly bitter about it. A vampire

would be cool! But opposite of Super Jesus on the billboard, balancing the image equally, was Captain America. The two rivals eyed each other coolly to tease the conflict between the two biggest Marvel superheroes.

Whatever. The movie didn't have to have vampires so long as it didn't feature zombies. Isaac refused to engage in zombie-centric media, suffering an irrational fear of the stumbling, mumbling movie villain. The idea of becoming a zombie and developing a craving for craniums upset Isaac so much that he purchased protection in the form of a handgun that he kept in his nightstand for easy access with the safety off.

For in Isaac's mind, a gun would be all he needed when the inevitable outbreak occurred. No go bag. No exfil strategy. No emergency food storage. Just a gun that he'd use on himself after eating an In-N-Out double-double for his last supper. There was no need to suffer. What terrified Isaac most about zombie apocalypse scenarios was their lose-lose nature. Would he rather live as a ravenous monster motivated solely by the need to feed or live in a post-apocalypse America that didn't have reliable WI-FI? Isaac would take the third option, thank you very much.

Isaac's cell phone alarm sounded, reminding him to take Dr. Rousseau's nightly medication. Fine, he thought. It was time to go inside anyway. His TV was calling him, and his breath was visible, but he couldn't tell if that was due to the cold or if he was just returning the borrowed fog to the night. He guessed it was the latter since he could taste the pier: the sea, the weed, and the hot pretzels that were as salty and twisted as the intermingling teens hiding under the pier.

Isaac couldn't escape Super Jesus's gaze even after heading back inside and turning on the TV. There he was again, standing still, exactly where Isaac had left him last night. Frozen. Paused. Isaac didn't press play on the movie, but he didn't turn the monitor off either. He liked having Super Jesus stare him down like a disapproving parent, forcing Isaac to finish his homework and think about how he would save a cat.

This question was the source of Isaac's manic energy, fueled by an overwhelming sense of shame that must have been growing gradually inside Isaac, like mold, waiting to be exposed by the soft pink light of Dr. Rousseau's sea salt lamp.

Isaac didn't want to be a boring villain. How had it come to this? He had always felt so busy. His hands were not idle. As far as he knew, they were not tools the devil used. Life was exhausting. By the time he caught the latest show or movie, read through the latest *Atlantic* articles, did the minimal amount of exercise, made himself a meal, and watched the latest news cycle, it was time to call it a night. Honestly, he didn't know how those with kids and careers

could manage it all. However, it was clear to him now that his activity amounted to no achievement. He had consumed, consumed, consumed, but what had he produced?

Isaac didn't know how to save a cat. He had never been known to have a winning personality and certainly not one that would ingratiate himself to an audience. What could he do? He quickly dismissed ideas such as getting involved at his local church, helping the homeless, and volunteering. While those were good and noble deeds, they would not improve his boring quotient. He wouldn't want to watch those activities as an audience member, nor did he suspect anyone else would like to either.

He had a thought: maybe he could work backward. Perhaps he should endanger a cat, thereby creating an opportunity to save a cat.

No. No. No. Isaac talked himself out of that idea until he had a better one: What would Super Jesus do? There was ample evidence that people, Isaac included, would be compelled to watch whatever Super Jesus did. The support for the movie was universal, uniting both critics and theatre-goers alike when it became the #1 box office earner of all time and swept its year at the Oscars. But it was more than that. It was a lifestyle brand. Adding to the ranks of the Little Monsters and the Beyhive was the Disciples, a fandom dedicated to supporting Super Jesus and spreading his views. The only backlash to the movement was from a small minority of trads who decried the group as an idolatrous cult. Still, from what Isaac could gather from scrolling Twitter, those concerns were mostly shouted down by the mainstream Church, which was happy to be back in the popular cultural conversation again.

Isaac sighed. He was no Super Jesus, so he was forced to return to the idea of finding a cat to endanger. He couldn't perform miracles. He couldn't turn the water from Flint, Michigan, into unleaded water with the snap of his fingers like Super Jesus did in the movie, so why even try?

Perhaps Isaac would be served well by crowd-sourcing the answer. He could throw the question out to Reddit, but would that be cheating? Redditors were guaranteed to come up with some creative ideas. Or maybe he should rely on another dream for inspiration. He was about to turn off the TV, take a fistful of melatonin tablets, and turn in for the night when opportunity knocked on his apartment door.

Isaac opened up, and a man bearing flowers greeted him.

"Condolences," the man said, stuffing a bouquet of poppies into Isaac's chest as he pushed past him, entering the apartment. Isaac eyed him with bewilderment. The man was tall and broad-chested, a sharp contrast to Isaac's more gangly appearance.

“You’ll want to put those in some water right away. The trick is to add a little sugar in there,” the man advised. His voice sounded like crushed gravel under the wheel of an F-150.

“What are these for?” Isaac examined the flowers, which were a bit smushed after Isaac fumbled the handoff.

“A Slytherin test result is a real tough titty. These should perk you up.”

“You’re from the state Slytherin department?” Isaac asked with a hushed voice, carefully closing his apartment door so nobody in his building would overhear his dirty little secret. This was not who Isaac had been expecting or when. The clock read 10 PM. Isaac envisioned something more official, like someone in a suit. Instead, this man dressed in clothes best described as “comfortable,” although that did not affect the man’s imposing presence or his excellent posture. He looked like a marine out of Central Casting with a flat top crew cut and a square jawline to match.

“Seth,” he said.

“Isaac,” Isaac said.

“Abrahamson. I know. Got your file right here.” Seth pointed to his temple and laughed. “That’s why I’m here, but you know that already.”

“I, uh, don’t think I quite got the memo. I’m not sure what to expect. What can I do? What do I do?”

Seth sat down on the couch, making himself at home. “You can start by getting me something to drink. Something bubbly, pretty please.”

“This is sort of all I got. I hope that’s okay,” Isaac said when he returned from the kitchen.

“A beer? Classic Slytherin. Very true to form.” Seth took the beer and drank from it.

“Am I being tested?”

“From here on out, kid.” Seth sighed despite being no older than Isaac. “All the need-to-knows are in here.” Then, from out of nowhere, he handed a large three-ring binder to Isaac.

Isaac opened it up and closed it after seeing page after page of legalese written in size eight font. He was not literate in legalese. The horror. This was a nightmare on par with the scene he dreamt up from the night before. “Can I see some sort of identification?”

“It’s going to take a lot more than that to get rid of me,” Seth snickered, shifting his weight, pulling out his wallet, and flipping it open to reveal a golden U.S. Ministry of Magic badge seal stamped into the shape of Hogwarts’ coat of arms. It was very official.

Isaac coughed. “Well, you did sort of show up unannounced.”

“Good, that’s on purpose. We’ve had some people run out on us in the past when given the heads up.”

“Oh, I see. Makes sense.”

“It’s nothing personal. It’s routine.”

“Got it. Well, it was great to meet you. How does this work? Weekly sessions like with Dr. Rousseau?”

“Yeah, no. I live here now. That’s page 72 in your booklet. As Super Jesus would say, ‘*Su casa es mi casa.*’”

Isaac flipped to the back of the booklet. What Seth said was true. Not only was Seth Isaac’s caseworker, but he was also his new roommate.

“How else would I be able to watch you sleep?”

“…”

“Page 53. Sleep study. S.O.P. for patients who write down their nightmares as screenplays.”

Isaac pulled up Dr. Rousseau’s contact information on his cell phone.

“You don’t want to do that.” Seth grabbed Isaac’s wrist and placed it back down by his side with gentle strength. “Suspiciousness is something a Slytherin would do. Let’s change the narrative. How about you try some hospitality on for size? Maybe you’re really a cuddly, little Hufflepuff under all that gruff exterior.”

“I don’t know about that or this,” Isaac said, pointing to the big binder.

“This will be painless. Promise. You’re looking at this all wrong. Here’s a hint: when you pour my next beer, pour it into the glass half-full. Get it? It’ll go a long way in helping your case.” Seth took the binder back from Isaac’s hands. “You’ll find that I’m pretty chill. You made out well by getting me. I’m not going to lie. You could have had Wendy Wickersham assigned to your case. She’s a real hard-ass. She’ll actually try to stick to the program.” He stared hard at Isaac, sensing his distrust. “You’re still resisting.”

Isaac nodded.

“Eye to eye, between you and I, I will say that all this Hogwarts stuff is fucking garbage, total nonsense. But Dr. Rousseau and the exam is right in one respect though - that much is obvious - you’re using your lizard brain to think.”

“My lizard brain?”

“Yes. Your primal instinct, the machine code of the mind. Fight or flight, or, in your case, fetal position. You view me as a threat, and you don’t even know why other than the fact that I may disrupt your life, which is ironic because your life fucking sucks. And you never even

considered the idea that this might be fun. Don't think of me as a live-in therapist. Honestly, I'm more of a professional best friend. Here's what's going to happen next: we hang out a little, I change your life for the better, and I go home. Correction: I go onto my next home. Call me Santa Claus."

"Mary Poppins," Isaac corrected.

"That's the one," Seth grinned, "You seem like a nerd. That's good. Most of my patients, er, best friends, are nerds, and most of them beg me to stay after my assignment ends."

"..."

"Trust me. Here's another fun fact: I was once you. They branded me a Slytherin, and I didn't wise up, okay? So, I kept hustling, kept running with the wrong crowd, and you know what? I ended up in jail and, worse, the Twin Towers."

"For what?"

"Counterfeiting parking validation tickets, but that's neither here nor there. The point is that I know what you need. If you play your cards right, you could be me."

"I could be you?"

"Do you fuck? Because I bet you don't fuck. Don't worry your pretty little head because we can get you to fuck. In my professional opinion, that solves the Slytherin problem nine times out of ten. Tame the snake, save the Slytherin, as I always say."

"..."

"Relax, Isaac. It was a rhetorical question. I've got your file, remember? You don't fuck. Now go brush your teeth. It's time for bed. The sleep study/slumber party begins now." Seth followed Isaac into the bathroom to coach him on his brushing technique and to criticize Isaac's choice of fluoridated toothpaste. As Seth tucked him in, Isaac was overwhelmed but admitted to himself that it was nice to hear someone wish him "goodnight." Isaac couldn't remember the last time someone had told him that.

"Sweet dreams," Seth cooed, "the rest of your life begins tomorrow."

Chapter 3

Isaac awoke the next day, startled. While there were no new script pages by his bedside to spook him this morning, Seth provided the fear factor, filling in admirably for Isaac's ghost-writer. From a chair he dragged in from the living room, Seth greeted Isaac with a too-cheerful smile for somebody who hadn't slept. It creeped Isaac out, but he tried to keep a straight face. He knew *this* would take some getting used to, so he would try his best, dutifully. This was a chance for him to take Dr. Rousseau's improv-related advice to heart and just say "yes."

Saying "yes" to Seth's suggestions in the morning led Isaac toward the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner-Coroner that afternoon. It made perfect sense to Isaac. If you're looking for a dead body, there's nowhere better in LA to find one than the county morgue, with the exception of Ed Buck's bungalow. Isaac had never seen a corpse before, which was a problem. According to Seth, who learned the lesson from watching a Stephen King adaptation, finding a dead body was one of life's sure-fire ways to mature, to become less Slytherin-like. Because when faced with the prospect of the existential void, Seth reasoned, it would help Isaac clarify his Earthly priorities.

But there was more to the plan than that. Isaac would try to use this opportunity of seeing a dead body not only to mature but also to do some good. He would save the proverbial cat and renounce his Slytherin ways by reuniting an unidentified body with their respective family. If Isaac were lucky, they would chance upon an unsolved murder victim and have the chance to solve a cold case too, but Seth didn't want to get Isaac's hopes up. That only happened once or twice in Seth's years in the Slytherin department.

Isaac was excited by the idea. He had listened to his fair share of true crime podcasts, so solving a murder would be elementary. Closing his eyes, Isaac imagined a parade thrown in his honor after fingering the culprit. Ticker tape, bras, and tacos would rain down from buildings to celebrate him. He could afford to daydream because Seth was driving Isaac's car, an anodyne sedan, as they drove eastbound on the 10, pushed along by the sea breeze at their backs.

Despite traveling far enough away from the beach to escape the June Gloom, their view did not improve as the smog from the Los Angeles basin met the receding fog to form a

seamless blanket of bleakness. The smog obscured downtown and smudged the shapes of the highrises, but that didn't stop Seth and Isaac from wearing their sunglasses anyway. Watching the store windows as they sat in traffic was the only thing that darkened Isaac's mood. Isaac had never really noticed it before, but a lot of storefronts held signs that read 'Slytherins Unwelcome,' "Help wanted: Slytherins need not apply," and the far less subtle, "Snakes suck." Isaac was losing faith in their plan. Forget going for the glory of solving a cold case. Instead, he should keep his head down, his nose clean, and #RiseandGrind. "Aren't I supposed to be getting a job as part of the Slytherin program?" he wondered aloud.

"You'll get a job," Seth promised, "I'll get you a job."

"You will?"

"Of course. Consider this trip today as part of my job interview. If you perform well, you will have done your part to secure me as a character reference. No one spins a yarn to the Slytherin board quite like me. Trust me. I'll go all 'To Whom it May Concern' on their asses."

"Okay then," Isaac set his jaw, determined to see a dead body.

While navigating the maze of one-way streets in downtown LA, Seth reassured Isaac that he was on Isaac's side. Believe it or not, Seth was not a true believer or student of the Hogwarts school of therapy. Before he received care from Dr. Rousseau, Seth had never read a *Harry Potter* book nor seen a *Harry Potter* movie, preferring the adaptations of the aforementioned Stephen King. (However, Seth did drink a butterbeer at Universal Studios once though the taste did not do it for him.) Seth was placed in Dr. Rousseau's care in the same manner that most of his patients were referred: by the court system. After graduating from the program, Seth decided to stay in Dr. Rousseau's service, but this time as an employee. The perks were good, understood? Free housing was free housing, even if you were rooming with strangers and Slytherins at that.

When Seth and Isaac arrived at the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner-Coroner's office, Isaac was surprised. It was a smaller building than he had been expecting. You'd think you'd need more than two stories to deal with all the dead from the most populous county in the country, but you'd be wrong. Instead, there were more stories to the adjacent parking structure. Perhaps there were crypts buried underneath the building, Seth suggested for his explanation of where all the extra real estate (and bodies) could be hiding, but Isaac's eyes searched the roof for chimneys instead.

Despite the morgue's 4-star Yelp score, Seth and Isaac didn't get the warmest welcome from the front desk receptionist. "We're here to collect case #1955-08235," Isaac told the man

with confidence, having looked through the LA coroner's database of unclaimed corpses via their website on the drive over. "Her name's Jane. Last name Doe."

There had been plenty of unidentified bodies to choose from, but Isaac wanted to maximize his karma, and, in his mind, this meant selecting the woman with the oldest intake date, following the FIFO principle of inventory management. He chose a woman for two reasons: for feminism and because a damsel in distress makes for a good save the cat story. Seth endorsed Isaac's pick because the report listed three gold rings as the deceased's identifying jewelry.

The receptionist, a disinterested man with a thin nose and thinner hair, refused to release the body to Isaac. Isaac wanted to argue with him but knew he was not this man's intellectual equal, stymied by the sight of a Ministry of Magic-issued Ravenclaw House badge proudly fastened to the receptionist's cardigan lapel. At the height of Dr. Rousseau and the Ministry of Magic's popularity, house badges were a common sight, displayed on clothes, bookbags, etc., but had since fallen out of fashion favor, victim of J.K. Rowlings' unpopular Twitter musings and the rise of Super Jesus, whose symbol of the "middle school S" was now all the rage.

The receptionist's reason for not handing the dead body over to Isaac was simple. There was no body to release, confirming Isaac's suspicions of an overworked morgue oven. Per company policy, if a body lay unclaimed for a month, then the body would be cremated. If those ashes were unclaimed for three years, then they disposed of them, but the thin man did not tell Isaac where. Seth then accused the man of selling the ashes to the beauty salons in Beverly Hills as a key ingredient in their activated-charcoal facial masks.

"Is case #2020-30222 still in stock?" Isaac asked after perusing the selection of corpses offered by the LA coroner's online database (<https://mec.lacounty.gov/>). If Jane Doe was dust, then Isaac would settle for another body, one less than a month old. He was intrigued by #2020-30222's rousing description (batwing tattoos on the back and a mole above the left breast). Nevertheless, the thin man remained unhelpful, shuddering while thinking of all the reasons why someone would require a random dead body. Isaac threatened to leave a subpar yelp score, but even under this duress, the man did not budge on his position. Isaac would not be getting a dead body today.

Isaac's shoulders slumped. His hero's journey to save the cat faced its first potential dead-end. He looked to Seth for guidance forward, but he was missing, having slipped away to someplace mid-conversation. Isaac had no choice but to retreat and wander the halls looking for Seth. Isaac wasn't comfortable alone. Already, he had come to rely on Seth's burly presence.

Without him, Isaac feared what he might find around every ill-lit corner, his mind assigning a zombie to each shadow he passed. Finally, Isaac found Seth in the morgue's gift shop, the aptly named "Skeletons in the Closet." It was time to go.

As he exited the building, Seth munched on a bag of novelty gummies shaped like toes and toe tags. He didn't offer any to Isaac, but Isaac didn't mind. He was too busy apologizing to Seth for failing to secure the (body) bag. Seth wouldn't hear of it. Instead, he told Isaac he was proud of him between mouthfuls of his gummy toes. He had done what Seth expected and what Seth needed. Isaac didn't understand.

They took Sunset back to Santa Monica. Seth, driving again, wanted to take the scenic route. Isaac asked why and Seth reached into his pants and took out a small amber bottle. Treating it with tender love and care, he unscrewed the dropper top and squeezed the rubber nipple.

"What's that?"

"A souvenir." Seth flashed a smile that neared a sneer.

"I didn't see that bottle in the gift shop."

"We weren't there to view a dead body, Isaac."

"We weren't?"

"If we wanted to see a dead body, we could have saved ourselves a little time and dropped by Skid Row. It's closer."

"Is there still time?"

"Forget the dead body. It was a ruse for a heist! You were a distraction for the receptionist. Don't you get it? Forget Stephen King. Fuck Harry Potter. Do you think I'm about any of those things? Do you think I read?"

"No?"

"Fuck no. Why would you or I read? None of that stuff is real. Those are fucking bedtime stories. How is that therapy? Normal people don't follow any of that. They have friends. They have families. They have fulfillment through work. Those can move mountains. Those can change a person. But what to do for the person who has none of those things? People like yourself?"

"Harry Potter-themed therapy?"

"Maybe. If you're a nerd. Now, open your glove box."

"So it's drugs?" Isaac asked after finding a giant joint inside it, not where it was supposed to be.

“Drugs,” Seth agreed. “Your problem is you need a fresh perspective. You got to look at life differently, and the inspiration to change your life is in the palm of your hands.” Seth took the joint from Isaac. Instead of using the bottle’s dropper to wet the joint, he dunked the whole thing inside the bottle. Seth smiled while twisting the joint around and around. When he pulled it out, the joint’s white paper turned a sticky brown color. Seth licked the viscous liquid clean from his fingers.

“Is this some sort of trap?” Isaac eyed Seth with suspicion. “It’s entrapment. That’s the term, right? So I’ll smoke this, and you’ll turn me in to the cops for Slytherin behavior.”

“No. This is real. Dr. Rousseau has his medicine, and I have mine. Are you ready?” He watched Isaac for his reaction.

“I’m ready,” Isaac said, grabbing the joint and recanting the chant from Dr. Rousseau.

“Are you steady?”

“I’m steady,” Isaac mumbled, bracing himself to fly away. He guessed that this foreign substance from the morgue must be PCP, having heard before that embalming fluid was a key ingredient in making angel dust.

“Not for long, you won’t be.” When Seth lit it, the flame first burned the oil with a bright green flash before settling into a soft, glowing orange ember. “Blast off!” Seth cheered. The stoplight turned green, and Isaac inhaled as Seth accelerated the vehicle forward, causing both Isaac and the car to leave a small cloud of exhaust behind them.

“*¡Dios Mio!*” Isaac cried out, coughing.

~~~~~

The drug’s effects were immediate and immaculate, an explosive sunburst of love and ecstasy.

~~~~~

The sleeper had awakened. When Isaac regained consciousness, he found himself down and out in Beverly Hills. He could tell by the clues: the serif font of the street signs, the silver fire hydrants, and palm-lined streets that were as wide as the 405. Check. Check. Check. There was even a restaurant advertising market-price avocado toast.

He looked down at his bare feet as he walked the spacious sidewalks.

Left foot first. Right foot next.

Left foot first. Right foot next.

Left foot first. Right foot next.

Is that how humans walk? Isaac felt unnatural and was afraid that he was causing a scene. He was. A maintenance man in the area had stopped pulling a yellow flier off a telephone pole so he could stare at Isaac.

Isaac looked back to his feet. He had to figure this out fast. Should the right foot sometimes precede the left? Should they alternate? Isaac couldn't remember. He experimented.

Right foot first. Left foot next.

Left foot first. Right foot next.

Right foot first. Left foot next.

Left foot first. Right foot next, but that didn't feel quite right either. He glanced back to the maintenance man and was relieved to see that he had moved down the street to the next telephone pole with the next yellow flier. He had gotten lucky.

On Isaac's next step, he stumbled and fell. He shook his head to try and straighten out his consciousness. It didn't work, so he laid flat on his back and took a moment to compose himself. He breathed deep and watched the blue sky darken to dusk. There would be no sunset tonight, not with the June Gloom staking its claim on the western horizon for the summer, but it didn't matter. The sky above this little pocket of paradise was unblemished by clouds. You get what you pay for.

Four passenger jets sailed silently above him. The sight gave Isaac a small semblance of peace. He had always found comfort in the constant crisscrossing of planes that occupied the sky above LA. He especially loved the planes inbound to LAX at night and how they hung above the 605 freeway like a fallen constellation. To Isaac, that sight was one of the wonders of the world. Some people hated all the air traffic, but those who did were LA's homesick transplants who hated the reminder of their little lives. Not Isaac. He loved the planes for their ubiquitousness. He could count on them, literally and figuratively. They were why, despite being alone, Isaac had never felt lonely in the City of Angels. There was always someone looking down on him.

Today, it was a middle-aged woman of Latina descent who stood above him, invading his view. Then, whomp! Isaac felt the business end of a Swifter mop slap his backside. "Sir." Isaac didn't want to make any assumptions, but he assumed she was a housekeeper.

"You can't be here anymore." She pointed to the nearest house. "You're going to give Reginald Jr. an anxiety attack, and he has already had to go to his therapist twice this week."

Isaac tried to speak but couldn't. He could only coax out some sort of bubbling, gurgling babble. He clutched his throat.

The housekeeper turned back to the house, afraid. "You've done it. You've disturbed Reginald Jr." Isaac followed her gaze and saw a dog compulsively bouncing on its back legs. He had to admit that Reginald Jr. did appear deranged. "You must go."

Isaac struggled to move, but the time for talking was over. The housekeeper started to scream in Spanish, brandishing the swifter at him again. She was loud. Isaac could see the maintenance man at the street's far corner, definitely within earshot of the housekeeper's shriek, turn towards them. Panicked, Isaac got all fours and began to scramble away. He couldn't walk, but he could crawl. It felt more natural.

Isaac's fears were well-founded. The maintenance man started to walk over to them while pulling out a cell phone. But before the man could dial 9-1-1, he was interrupted by an angry buzzing tone from his phone, which wasn't limited to only his personal device. The same angry sound was also coming from the housekeeper's phone and his own. All three of them looked at their respective devices in a synchronized motion.

It was an Amber Alert. A small girl was missing, and her abductor was last seen in the Hollywood area driving a red minivan, traveling west. Isaac opened the message. A short video embedded into the text showed the car in question. Isaac shivered with unease. In the back windshield was a baby on board sticker.

"Isaac! Destiny has called."

Isaac whirled around and saw Seth skid Isaac's car to a stop at the curb. The smell of burned rubber singed the air. Isaac grinned. He crawled over to the car and then into the car.

"I've been looking all over for you. This time let's fasten our seatbelts and keep all hands and arms inside the vehicle while it's moving." Isaac followed Seth's instructions while Seth sped the car away from Beverly Hills. Even if Isaac could talk, he didn't have to ask Seth where they were going. The hills ahead of them read "Hollywood." This was great. An Amber alert was a win-win situation. He would either save the cat by rescuing a damsel in distress or he'd get the chance to view a dead body.

Relief flooded Isaac, knowing the end of his hero's journey was at hand and his story was coming to a close. This would be his final chapter. Before hitting Hollywood, he powered the window down to breathe in the last of the clean Beverly Hills air. But, as soon as the window opened, one of those yellow fliers from around the neighborhood smacked Isaac in the face. He peeled it off and screamed. It was a notice for a missing cat, one that Isaac recognized. He couldn't say why but instantly knew this was the cat featured in his *Super Jesus* dream script.

Chapter 4

Isaac stared at the handsome portrait of the cat from his dreams. Captain Flapjacks was missing. The poster announcing the cat's disappearance listed his last known location, the telephone number of the concerned owner, and a tantalizing prospect of a reward for the recovery and delivery of Captain Flapjacks the cat. Unfortunately, it did not state the amount.

It didn't matter that Isaac had never actually *seen* Captain Flapjacks before. It didn't matter that his dream remained firmly behind the black curtain of his subconscious. Whenever he went through his script, and his mind performed the alchemy of reading — the magical transformation of crooked symbols into vivid images — this was the exact cat he had conjured up in his imagination. This was the one. There was no doubt. It had the same coffee cream fur around the face, the same white fluff everywhere else, and the same golden eyes that were the color of the late summer sun in Solvang.

"Save the cat," Isaac whispered to himself in awe. His tongue fumbled around his mouth, his verbal skills not yet fully returned from his trip. This was it! He had to save this lost cat.

"What's that?" Seth wondered, his eyes scanning the horizon for any signs of the red minivan referenced in the Amber Alert.

"We have to save this cat." The words and their formulation were becoming easier for Isaac as he warmed up his mouth muscles.

"Cat?" Seth looked over and saw the flier gripped tight in Isaac's hands. "Never mind a missing cat. We can save a human, much more important and much higher on the food chain."

"I have a dream." Isaac's mind was reeling with the implications of this imaginary cat made real. Did its existence predate his dream? Had he simply seen one of these posters before and his subconscious had internalized the image to only bubble up later as a dream? Or did he manifest this cat with his mind and pop it into existence? That was Isaac's best guess. And if he could do that, what other superpowers did he possess? He had to know.

Seth scoffed, but Isaac ignored him. Dr. Rousseau instructed him to save a cat. This wasn't a mistake. This wasn't a coincidence. This was this universe converging, aligning, and reshaping itself for Isaac. He tried to explain to Seth how this was fated.

“Are you sure? It looks like a dumb dollar-store cat to me, nothing special. Nothing unique. How do you know it’s the one you wrote the script about?” Seth retorted.

“I’m sure. What did you imagine when you read my script? It wasn’t this exact cat?”

Seth snorted. “I don’t even read the scripts my friends send me. Rousseau just gave me the spark notes version of yours. There’s a cat. There’s Super Jesus. There are vampires, maybe. Seems, uh, what’s the popular euphemism in the industry these days? Interesting. It sounded *interesting*.”

“Well, then you’ll have to take my word for it. Captain Flapjacks is the cat from my dream and my script.”

“Fair enough. Listen: the cat will keep, okay? After we rescue the Amber Alert girl, we’ll find it and split that reward. How’s that for a plan of attack?”

“I can’t.”

Seth was getting impatient. “You know, some could say the lack of respect for the sanctity of human life is very Slytherin of you....”

“...”

“Do you see where I’m going here? Are you going to make me get explicit with my threat?”

“I have to do this,” Isaac pleaded, fingers wrapped around the door handle, making a threat of his own. “Don’t you see it? Isn’t it obvious? If I save the cat, then I save myself. It’s what Dr. Rousseau would want.”

Seth sighed. “You’re not jumping out of this car twice in one day. Fine. I give up.” He recognized something in Isaac that had been lacking thus far: desperation. A spark of madness hid behind Isaac’s eyes. It couldn’t be ignored. Seth was a proud papa. The drug he administered to Isaac had already had its intended effect. Until this point, Isaac had been solely motivated by external factors such as avoiding internment at the Twin Towers Correctional Facility. This was different. Isaac was doing this for himself. “If you don’t help me find this missing girl, then you can kiss my fucking character reference goodbye. Without it, the only job you’ll get in this city is a handy from Spacey when he’s had one too many and starts feeling generous,” Seth bluffed to test Isaac’s testicular fortitude.

“That’s fine,” Isaac said flatly.

Seth smiled. “Okay. Go. You have my blessing, my son.” He pulled the car into one of Los Angeles’s omnipresent strip malls. This one was comprised of a Thai massage place, a Rubios, and a business that promised to get you out of your unpaid parking tickets.

Isaac hesitated, dubious of his good fortune.

“Let this be a lesson to you. Forget everything the good Doc taught you.”

“...”

“You’re on the right track. If you want to save a cat, then save a cat, but don’t do it because you think someone else wants you to save a cat. No one likes a try-hard. There’s no audience for that sort of thing, Isaac. It’s cringe. People aren’t charmed by good deeds.”

“They’re not?”

“Fuck no. We live in the era of the anti-hero, remember? God is dead. Mr. Rogers is dead. Charlie Brown? Deader than dead. Long live Walter White.”

“And Super Jesus?” Isaac countered.

“But even Super Jesus doesn’t break the show biz golden rule: you must be entertaining, first and foremost. That’s what audiences want. To be interesting is to be heroic. Many things can make an interesting man, of course: wit, charisma, skill, but those traits are in short supply for a man such as yourself,” Seth watched Isaac’s face fall, “Don’t worry about it though, because nothing is more interesting than a person with a passion. No one with passion is boring. People love passion. You know that, right? Oh, wait. That’s right. You’ve never been laid before.”

“...”

“Well, trust me. Now go and save that cat you dreamt up — that’s interesting! Even if it’s stupid. Don’t let anyone stop you, me least of all.”

Isaac grinned. “Will you help?”

“Absolutely not.” Seth laughed. “You’re on your own. I’m going to save the day for real and save the Amber Alert girl. Because she’s a human. And I’m also allergic to cats.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Isaac responded. “Even still. Shouldn’t you be coming with me as my case manager?”

“There’s a girl in danger, Isaac. She needs me more than you. And don’t forget to take these.” Isaac looked around and saw Seth holding his shoes. He took them gratefully.

Shoes tied tight, Isaac hit the pavement. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed the number listed on the flier. It rang and rang and rang and rang before going to voicemail.

Greetings, fellow child of the stars. You have reached Palms, Not Psalms Psychic Readings. Caution: Mercury is in retrograde. Act accordingly. If you are experiencing an acute cosmic disturbance, please hang up and call 867-5309 immediately. I will require your name, number, and Zodiac sign for those seeking appointments. I’m no longer accepting any Scorpio clients at this time. Thank you for your understanding. Goodbye until we meet in this life or the next.

Isaac's toes tingled when he realized that the voice on the phone belonged to a female. If the cat from the script was real, why wouldn't the girl from his script be real? He tried to remember what Margot Robbie's voice sounded like, but he could only hear static from the waiting line.

Isaac responded, "My name is Isaac Abrahamson. Gemini. I've seen your cat, Captain Flapjacks. You can call or text me at this number with a time and place to meet. Any further discussion I prefer to have in person. As far as the reward goes, I have some follow-up questions. One: What is the reward? Two: How does the nature of the reward vary if Captain Flapjacks is returned alive, dead, or taxidermied?" He hung up, satisfied.

Looking around, Isaac regained his bearings. If the Pride-themed Medmen billboard across the boulevard was any indication, he was stuck somewhere in West Hollywood. Isaac wiped his brow with the back of his hand. He was too far from the beach. At this point, Isaac knew that his plan was progressing poorly. He bailed on Seth too early. There was nothing to do but await a response from the cat's owner. What a wasted opportunity to kill two birds and save the girl too. He looked to the sky to calm himself, unconsciously asking for mercy. But all there was to meet his vision was another plane. Its blue belly revealed that it belonged to Southwest.

Isaac closed his eyes so hard that shapes and colors popped into view. They coalesced into the form of a memory. It was from his last flight into Los Angeles. On the plane's approach to LAX, the city's neon signs, streetlights, and spotlights burned brightly as far as the eye could see. Only the earth's contours could contain them. At night, the city fell away into abstraction. Isaac's brain could only comprehend the image as a metaphor, the city as a circuit board. The buildings weren't buildings at all but diodes, resistors, and transistors. And the streets were the traces that tied them all together, and the red and white bands of highways became a bundle of CAT 6 cables. The vision shimmered with energy. Even though he was 20,000 feet up in the air, Isaac could feel the electric buzz from the city. The hum from the 5G network calmed him. The vibes were good. He let it wash over him, knowing that he could get addicted to this.

Buzz! Isaac could feel that same sensation now in West Hollywood. Buzz! Buzz! It felt real. He opened his eyes, startled, until he realized that the buzzing was his phone, pregnant with a series of text messages from Captain Flapjacks' owner. They told Isaac to swing by and listed an address.

Isaac watched the world grow dim from his Uber as the June Gloom enveloped the car as soon as they passed to the other side of the 405. He was on his way to Venice, home to the homeless, west-side hipsters, and a Medmen billboard that featured muscle beach instead of a Pride rainbow. The city was a seedier Santa Monica. Venice swapped outdoor ice rinks for skate

parks and Sweetgreen for Mrs. Winston's salad bar. Even the palm trees were different. The lush, full bloom of those trees dotting the bluffs of Palisades Park in Santa Monica stood in stark contrast to the scrub palms that squatted along the Venice boardwalk like common vagrants. The fog was thicker in Venice, too, due to all the weed smoke hanging in the air. Isaac inhaled it, trying to recall his drug trip from earlier in the day, but there was nothing to remember other than the sublime feeling that overtook him before he blacked out. He missed it.

Isaac's Uber stopped in front of a low-slung bungalow hidden behind a large hedge. He got out of the car and stood on a crowded residential street on the good side of Lincoln Boulevard. He was about equidistant between Abbot Kinney, the beach, and the canals. Prime real estate. He guessed that the Walk Score for this property was off the charts, possibly better than his apartment, which made him a little bitter. Behind the hedge, a wrap-around front porch beckoned him up a stone walkway that led to a red front door. A dream catcher framed the peephole. Before Isaac could finger the ringer, the door to Palms Not Psalms Psychic Readings opened for him, but no one stood in the frame to greet him. There was only darkness.

Chapter 5

“Come on down,” called out a woman from the dark, and Isaac knew it was the voice from the voicemail. He couldn’t see much of his surroundings. What light there was came from flashes of a flickering orange glow. He couldn’t identify the source. It came from somewhere hidden deeper inside the house. But, like a moth to a flame, Isaac followed it, and it led him down a hall and to a woman who, much to Isaac’s chagrin, was not Margot Robbie. It was obvious to him. She was African American. Isaac couldn’t hide his disappointment, which didn’t escape the notice of the woman. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry, I thought you were Margot Robbie.”

“Only on Tuesdays,” the woman laughed, her dyed-red hair vibrating with warm energy. Isaac stood there for a moment until it became awkward. The woman was staring past him into the inky black from where he came. “Are you expecting someone else?”

“Yes.”

“Who?” He looked over his shoulder, paranoid.

“You are Isaac, the Gemini, correct?”

“The one and only.”

“That’s cute.” The woman laughed again, but this time it came with an undercurrent of condescension that was silent to Isaac. She waved him into a Papasan chair that threatened to collapse under the weight of its adorning accent pillows.

The woman’s office, one of the bungalow’s bedrooms, was a temple to everything and nothing. It was as if a coexist sticker was an entire interior design theme. The proof of concept was the coffee table where a zen garden, a dreidel, and a magic eight ball all rested comfortably together. The room’s orange light came from lit devotional candles, each one bearing the likeness of a different character from *The Office*. Dwight Schrute’s candle burned brightest. The rest of the room’s light was blue-green and produced by a thousand cheap, glow-in-the-dark star stickers stuck to the ceiling. Within them, Isaac recognized a reproduction of the Orion constellation.

“I’m sorry I didn’t pick up your call earlier, but it came through as ‘scam likely’ on the ID,” the woman apologized. “I’m Anne, by the way.”

“Anne. Isaac.”

Anne was seated opposite him, with the coffee table full of cultural talismans placed between them. Behind her was a hallmark of any tried-and-true LA institution, the wall of fame. There was an eight-by-ten grid of 8 x 10 photographs of various celebrities, most of them headshots and all signed in Sharpie. Isaac marveled at it. There were famous faces, infamous faces, unknown faces, and faces Isaac recognized but couldn't place. Some of those he did know belonged to Tom Hanks, Tupac, and even Grumpy Cat. Audrey Hepburn's photo surprised him the most. The woman across from him couldn't be that old, but he remembered a lesson he learned from an episode of *Real Housewives Atlanta*: black don't crack. Isaac gasped, pointing to the second to last photo in the grid. “That's Margot Robbie.”

“She's my 3 o'clock on Tuesdays.”

“These are all your clients?”

“Current and former.”

“They don't care if you put them out here for everyone to see?”

“I'm a psychic, not a psychiatrist. But perhaps I'm making a distinction without any difference.” She laughed.

“I don't get it.”

“That's okay. It wasn't for your benefit,” Anne paused politely, turning to the audience, to you, the reader, much like Jim from *the Office*, before giving her attention back to Isaac. “I appreciate the niceties, but, please, enough of them already. I'm terribly anxious about the well-being of Captain Flapjacks. Your message suggested you know where he is...”

“I saw him.”

“Where?”

“In a dream.”

“Wonderful. He's the man of my dreams as well.”

“He was in danger.”

The woman narrowed her eyes at Isaac, considering the credibility of the person in front of her. “Continue.” And Isaac did, telling her the contents of his dream to the best of his recollection, which was nothing more than regurgitating the contents of the script he wrote.

“Who's Super Jesus?” Anne asked when he finished.

“Who's Super Jesus?” Isaac repeated, stammering with bewilderment. He couldn't believe it. Her ignorance went beyond living under the proverbial rock but to something greater, to not knowing *a priori* knowledge. Asking who Super Jesus was was akin to asking for the answer of two plus two. This was some real *tabula rasa* shit.

“Who’s Super Jesus?” Anne confirmed.

So Isaac told Anne the story of Super Jesus, which began in a one-horse town just north of the U.S.-Mexico border, the birthplace of Jesus Ornelas, the second coming of Jesus Christ. The story mirrored the teachings of the New Testament but mostly followed the traditional superhero origin story and tropes: humble birthplace, a childhood marked by tragedy, and how that trauma led to the discovery of superpowers, or, as Super Jesus calls them, miracles. He received his first mission not from a burning bush but from a raging dumpster fire.

Aside from battling various villains, Super Jesus’s central conflict was conversion. He didn’t have any followers, social media or otherwise. No one believed he was the second coming of Jesus Christ, no matter how he spread the good word. The competition to capture people’s hearts and minds was much stiffer than it was 2,000 years ago, especially when today’s non-believers had their choice of superheroes to idolize. For what’s walking on water compared to Spider-Man’s web-slinging or a Hulk Smash? So the second coming had to play second-fiddle to the rest of the Avengers, toiling away in the shadows of Captain America and Iron Man, an irony that the screenwriters exploited to great comedic effect.

Anne smiled. “Walking on water is some weak tea, all things considered.”

“Exactly,” Isaac agreed. “But the movie is funny and heartfelt and inspirational, which I don’t know if that came across in my synopsis,” he paused. “It’s sort of a big deal. I like the movie just fine, personally, but people love him, well, not the people inside the story, who are skeptical of Super Jesus, but us, the audience. There are true believers, too. There are Disciples that have their own *Super Jesus* churches. Haven’t you seen his symbol, the middle school ‘S’ [See: Appendix E], or heard anyone say, ‘*jDios mio!*?’ That’s a Super Jesus expression.”

“I think that’s a Mexican expression,” Anne explained.

“Yeah, but now everyone says it. It’s like in the lexicon or whatever you call it. Jargon. I say it without even realizing it, and I’m not even a Disciple. I can’t believe you haven’t heard of him.”

Anne shrugged. “I stopped watching TV and movies during Y2K. I wanted to play it safe, and I’ve never looked back. Plus, it keeps me clear-headed with my clients who work in the industry.”

“Meow,” said a cat that wasn’t Captain Flapjacks. Curled up in Anne’s lap, its presence startled Isaac. The cat was an orange tabby, similar to the one that graced the front cover of Blake Snyder’s *Save the Cat*. So where had it come from? Isaac looked around and saw that the room was now full of cats. At least six of them that he could count, as if they materialized out

of thin air, coming to the foreground of his consciousness like a decoded magic eye picture. What other surprises could he expect? Isaac picked his feet up and sat on them in case the floor turned to lava while he wasn't looking.

"Jones," Anne indicated the cat on her lap, "wants to know how your so-called dream will help find Captain Flapjacks. I'd also like to know."

Isaac blushed as he thought about it. "I was hoping you could help me, actually." He indicated his psychic surroundings. "I thought you could explain my dream to me. Crack the code since my therapist couldn't."

"What school does he belong to? Not the Freudian one, evidently."

"Hogwarts."

Anne snickered. "You poor thing. No wonder your vibes are so, uh, *interesting*." She passed Isaac a cup of tea that he didn't notice her pour.

"So, can you help?"

"Of course," she said and gestured toward the cup, so Isaac drank the drink, and its taste reminded him of the growing mold in his apartment. He took a second sip.

"No can do. Dreams are a tricky business, Isaac. Dreams that you don't remember dreaming even more so." She stroked the cat.

"Please. Anything will help."

"No." Anne's voice turned stern, catching the cats' attention. "What are you trying to pull, exactly? I'm not sure if you're dumb or just playing dumb. Either way, I'm beginning to suspect that my phone was right and this whole business is a scam."

"No!" Isaac protested, "I promise you that I am, in fact, very dumb."

"Well, then, let me enlighten you. A bad or incomplete dream reading is not something I'll stand for. I'm not some hack you'd find on the boardwalk. You can take your pleasures there if that's what you want. Dreams are dangerous, Isaac, they're portals to the subconscious and even different dimensions, and I won't be responsible for your blood on my hands if the reading goes wrong."

"Blood?" Isaac sat up straighter. What had this cat gotten him into?

"Not to mention that anything taken from an incomplete dream reading may be more misleading than helpful. This is supposed to be tracking a cat, not a wild goose chase."

Jones, the cat, meowed, flicking and swishing his tail from side to side.

Anne continued, "My next appointment is about to arrive, so I'll have to ask you to see yourself out. If you see Captain Flapjacks in a dream or out on the street, you know my number. I'd be happy to have you back."

Isaac screamed, leaping out of his chair. One of the cats, a Russian Blue, had jumped onto the armrest, scaring Isaac. The cat's thick fur was cold against his skin. Isaac got a head rush from standing up too quickly and suffered a sudden chivalrous urge as a result, "I'm going to find him, you know. I promise. I have to save that cat."

Anne raised an eyebrow. "We're counting on you."

Isaac got an idea. "Do you live here, too? In addition to working, I mean."

"I do."

"Then why did you put your posters around Beverly Hills? Why do you think he's there?"

"That's where I saw him last."

"Curious. What business did Captain Flapjacks have in Beverly Hills? How did he escape?"

"I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't take no for an answer."

"And you were powerless to stop him?"

"Have you ever owned a cat, Isaac?" Anne's red hair bristled.

Isaac bit a lip. "Not that I know of."

"I'm not surprised. Otherwise, you'd know that they can be quite compelling creatures. He wanted to go to Beverly Hills, so he did."

"Can you offer me anything? Any words of wisdom? Any leads? Help me help you."

Isaac was confused, not understanding why he had to twist this woman's arm so much to find her cat for her. Something was happening here, and he didn't like it. Who knew that psychics were such a strange breed?

"I can't," Anne bit her lip, thinking over her options, before finally grabbing the cup of tea Isaac had finished drinking. She frowned after peering down into it. "But maybe you can help yourself. Tell me what you see in your tea leaves," she said while handing the cup back to Isaac.

A gulp got caught in his throat, and he choked on it, for when he gazed into the cup, he saw something grim. He tried to spin the cup around and around, but it was useless. No matter how he peered inside it, the clumps of tea leaves did not change. Instead, they remained in the form of a skull.

"Good luck," Anne said as she ushered him out of the bungalow and back into the June Gloom. "Hope to see you again soon!" She laughed.

Chapter 6

Isaac Uber'd home in the fog, the swirling June Gloom making for a comfortable companion for the tempest that was his thoughts. He would need his car to track down the cat unencumbered, but he needed to be quick about it. Time was of the essence. According to the A&E TV show *The First 48*, Isaac had 48 hours to find Captain Flapjacks before his chances to close the case were cut in half. This wasn't good news, considering he had already wasted all 48 of them only to learn that Anne had misplaced the cat last week. Using the *First 48* theorem, Isaac calculated that the odds of saving this cat were near zero. He smiled to himself. This was the perfect set-up for a good underdog *Save the Cat* story.

Isaac's first lead was Beverly Hills, the city. He had to hit the bricks, knock on doors, and gather clues. This was turning from a hero's journey story into a detective story, a neo-noir, and Isaac would be playing the gumshoe. It wasn't an ideal development since bodily harm to the main character was a genre trope of detective stories. Still, he tried to feel good about it, wondering if he had already met his femme fatale in Anne... but those usually came in white.

Stop it, Isaac. He was getting ahead of himself. Time to focus, fucker. Perhaps someone in the neighborhood witnessed something. No strangers go unaccounted for in Beverly Hills, feline or otherwise. Those security systems were no joke. He felt confident in that assessment. Of course, it was impossible to know how many security cameras were in the area, but they probably out-populated the residents by a 6:1 margin, at least.

Isaac was disappointed when he returned to his apartment. Unfortunately, Seth wasn't there to greet him. He would have liked to enlist Seth's help in the case of the missing cat. It seemed like a clever idea to cover twice the ground in half the time. Hopefully, Seth's selfish rescue of the Amber alert girl would end sooner rather than later.

After crossing to the east side of Centinela and out from underneath the cloud cover, Isaac was shocked to find it was near night. Without the sun, his internal clock had been thrown off. He kicked himself. Rookie mistake. Instead of the expected smooth sailing to Beverly Hills, he sat on Santa Monica Blvd for 30 minutes at a stop-and-go pace. While idling, he contemplated the significance of the Nuart's midnight movie showing of *Super Jesus*. Incredible,

Isaac thought. The movie was released two years ago, yet it was already featured on the nostalgia circuit.

Other contemplations he considered while caught in traffic were the current state of the homeless population and the cost of gas at the Chevron station. The price had exploded due to a recent refinery fire out by Long Beach. Isaac made a mental note to grocery shop at Von's. He was usually a Ralph's or Peterson's guy, or maybe even go to Albertson's or Gelson's in a pinch, but it would be well worth going to Von's from now on. Sure, it would mean foregoing self-checkout as a sacrifice, but he couldn't pass up the 20 cents gas discount he'd receive from using his loyalty card. His trust fund was generous, but it wasn't that generous.

He rolled up his window and stared at the homeless, not wanting to risk airborne transmission of their condition. They scared him real bad. His homeless-phobia was seeded, cultivated, and tended to by Dr. Rousseau. That, Dr. Rousseau repeatedly suggested, was the fate awaiting Isaac if he ever left his practice. Isaac examined the homeless for any signs of similarity between them and himself, and he was not reassured. Their strained eyes and pinched, dirty faces, illuminated by the blue light from their smartphones, matched his. Moreover, he was confounded by the logistics of this phone arrangement. He couldn't figure it out. Where did they charge them? Who was their cell provider? What was their billing address? It was a strange world. Luckily, the traffic advanced to the next stop light before he had to philosophize any further.

Beverly Hills at night was a ghost town. Without the support economy of nannies, landscapers, dog walkers, and prostitutes around to fill out the place, the streets were still. Isaac was all alone except for the dark and the smooth sound of his bald wheels against the road wet with sprinkler water. There were no streetlights, and any house lights were blocked by the high, high hedges surrounding each estate. He flicked on his high beams, and his eyes scanned the headlight horizon in search of Captain Flapjacks. He rolled his window back down, hoping to catch a "meow" on the wind.

Isaac had to start somewhere, so he pulled up a driveway and parked alongside a call box adjacent to a wrought iron gate. There were no more of Anne's missing posters to guide his way, and this was his best guess of where he was when Seth picked him up. He remembered a house from his previous (drug) trip. The landscaping was memorable, a topiary cut into the words "live," "laugh," "Lucifer." The hedges at this house, however, spelled "live," "laugh," "love," which couldn't be a coincidence. Very clever. It was a good attempt to throw Isaac off the scent, but they wouldn't fool him with a shoddy landscape re-design. He punched the call button, and a voice answered on the second ring, but Isaac couldn't get three words out before the line went

dead. The story was the same for the next three houses he tried. No one wanted to hear his sob story about a missing cat, but Isaac would not be deterred. He even tried to disguise his voice, but that failed, too. He didn't find any more sympathy whether or not he pretended to be a census worker, a Mormon missionary, or a Thin Mint-pushing Girl Scout. Frustrated, Isaac spent the rest of his time cruising the streets, getting lost. He thought about giving up, but that wasn't an option. He was trapped. There was still another hour or so to go before rush hour died down.

Then, by the grace of God, a clue! Isaac couldn't believe his eyes. Emerging from under the cloak of darkness, at his biggest moment of need, was just who he was looking for. The key suspect was caught in the spot of his victim's last known location. Wrapped in long, flowing red, white, and blue robes was the man, the myth, the messiah, in the flesh. Super Jesus. He was walking down the sidewalk, simple as that.

Isaac was awed, star-struck. This was old Hollywood magic at work. Chance encounters with celebrities were an everyday occurrence in LA, yet the novelty never wore off. In fact, that was the appeal. It's why an LA address was a status symbol. It's why people worldwide were willing to leave their comfortable and cheap small towns for the privilege of sitting in traffic, paying exorbitant rent prices, and eating at communal tables in restaurants. It was worth it for the life-affirming validation and the rush you received when occupying the same physical space as a celebrity. Because at that moment, they were no better than you. You were peers. You were together, walking in each other's shoes, feeling the same sun, choking on the same smog. With their wealth and power, celebrities could do anything, but for at least this moment in time, they chose to do what you chose to do. You've made it. Both you and Pierce Brosnan woke up and decided to go to the Malibu Starbucks! This is what gives Sugarfish waitresses, the ones living in two-bedroom apartments with three roommates, the audacity to look their noses down on the neurosurgeons who call North Dakota home.

Isaac pulled his car over until two wheels ran over the curb. He got out of the car, yelling, "Mr. Super Jesus!"

"What's up?" Super Jesus's Spanish accent was as silken as the red sash wrapped around his waist. He was dressed in his full superhero regalia, not the off-the-clock uniform of his alter ego, Jesus Ornelas.

"Not much, Super Jesus. How have you been? Staying busy, I hope." Isaac surprised himself, unexpectedly beginning his interrogation of his suspect by playing the good cop. He wished Seth was here to see his very un-Slytherin-like behavior.

"Oh, yes. The devil doesn't take a day off. Now how can I hashtag bless you?"

"I need some advice."

“Say no more. I got you.” Super Jesus stared at Isaac for a long time, sizing him up. “You’re lost. Spiritually, physically, and emotionally. All of the above. You need to stop listening to others. Don’t even listen to me. Stop minding your mind as well. Your thoughts are the fruit of the poisoned Tree of Knowledge.”

“...”

“Listen to this instead.” He stuck a finger to Isaac’s chest. “Bah-bump. Bah-bump. Bah-bump-bump-bump. Bah-bump.” Super Jesus mocked a heartbeat before transitioning into a bumping beatbox. He rapped,

*“The good dude above created you
That’s true, that’s true
You’re eager, you’re bold, you’re dope
Heart beating so hard you don’t need no stethoscope
Still, you’re told you’re this, you’re that, you’re no good
But you’re made in the image of your creator, understood?
(You’re the man in the mirror)/
You, too, are that good dude.
(Man in the mirror, the man in the mirror).”*

When it was clear the impromptu rap was over, Isaac responded, “I’ll take that under advisement, but I was really hoping you could tell me where Captain Flapjacks is.” He presented Anne’s flier to Super Jesus, who took it and looked it over.

“Never seen him.” Super Jesus gave the flier back to Isaac.

Isaac stared blankly at him, disbelieving. “I saw you with him in my dream.”

Super Jesus cringed and started looking for the exits.

“I’m not suggesting you’ve done anything untoward with the cat, sexually speaking, and I can assure you I won’t pry any further into your personal life once I’m in possession of him. This is a safe space-”

A car with a glowing pink Lyft sign on the windshield pulled up alongside Isaac and Super Jesus, interrupting them. Several tourists spilled out and rushed towards them, except the one in the passenger seat pleading for their driver to wait a minute. As they approached, Isaac struck a defensive position, but Super Jesus accepted them with open arms. Before Isaac could process or protest, a tourist pushed his iPhone into Isaac’s chest.

“Horizontal, please. No flash.” The tourist directed Isaac before he could tell them no.

“¡Dios Mio!” the group shouted while posing with Super Jesus instead of the customary “Cheese!” Isaac snapped photos of the happy group, some serious and some with funny faces.

"Tips are appreciated," Super Jesus suggested as the group disbanded. The tourist who negotiated with the Lyft driver slipped a folded twenty into Super Jesus' sash before they all piled into the Lyft and sped off.

"Godspeed," Super Jesus called out after them.

It took until the car disappeared down the street for Isaac to find his voice. "You're not the real Super Jesus! You're a common whore."

Super Jesus looked bewildered. "Of course not. Why would I be?"

"What am I supposed to think? Why are you dressed up like that, then? Do the words 'identity theft' mean anything to you?"

"I'm an actor."

"You're Manny Ortega, then."

"I'm not *the* actor. I'm an actor. This is my side gig. I dress up as Super Jesus and take pictures in front of the real Super Jesus's house for tourists," he pointed across the street to a grandiose estate guarded by a pair of impressive pearly gates. "Sometimes I do birthday parties."

"Great. Thanks for nothing," Isaac huffed, not waiting for a response nor taking the business card handed to him.

"Good luck finding your cat!" Super Jesus called out to Isaac, who was already making his way across the street to the actual Super Jesus's home. Unfortunately, St. Peter wasn't there to greet him, but another call box was. He pressed the button, and a woman answered. This time he had the right magic words, claiming to be a delivery driver from Postmates.

The gates opened to grant him admission. Isaac breathed a sigh of relief and walked up the long, meandering driveway lined with Italian cypress that led to a bright, red front door. He pulled the ornate door knocker and didn't have to wait long, which he appreciated. His nerves were frayed to the point of shredding his synapses.

"You're not from Postmates." A blonde woman in her 30s, adorned with severe facial features, greeted Isaac. She looked much more like Margot Robbie than Anne, but she still wasn't the real deal. Isaac was getting warmer, though. Perhaps the next woman he met...

"You're not Super Jesus," Isaac countered.

"He's not on the premises."

"Will he return soon?"

"No, he's off performing miracles," the woman stated plainly, referring to a promotion program for the upcoming *Super Jesus* sequel where Super Jesus went around the city performing marketing stunts/miracles for the benefit of the masses. Previous miracles included

returning water to the LA river for a weekend of fun in the sun and bringing *Arrested Development* back from the dead.

“Where is that at?”

“I would encourage you to follow our social media accounts if you’re interested in attending a miracle, or you can look to the head apostle at your local Disciple chapter. You can subscribe to the newsletter.”

“I’m not a member.”

“Yet,” the woman corrected.

“Yet,” Isaac submitted, breaking the woman’s terse facial expression. The thaw was on with this ice queen until the receiver for the callbox rang, causing Isaac to jump from fright. It was the delivery driver, the real one, and that was it for Isaac’s stay at the Super Jesus compound. The woman did not say goodbye.

It was time to go home. Isaac had failed in his quest for the cat. He mashed the pedal as he pulled his car away from the curb. It felt good, letting his frustration out and allowing the wind to whip his hair back, freeing him from his thoughts, but the peace was not meant to last. Instead, the car squealed when its wheels locked, fighting for traction. Isaac was too late to the brakes. The car swung in a violent fishtail. His stomach dropped as he felt the driver’s side wheels lift up as they ran something over. The vehicle stopped. Once it did, Isaac leaped out and ran towards the cat-shaped lump in the road.

Isaac had found Captain Flapjacks, but he never thought he’d have to save the cat by giving him CPR. So in between rounds of mouth-to-mouth, Isaac gave Captain Flapjacks chest compressions and sang the Bee Gees.

Whether you're a brother or whether you're a mother

You're stayin' alive, stayin' alive

Feel the city breakin' and everybody shakin'

And we're stayin' alive, stayin' alive

Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive, stayin' alive

Ah, ha, ha, ha, stayin' alive

Chapter 7

Panicked, Isaac did what anyone would do after running over a cat. He hid the body behind a bush, used some of the bush's leaves to wipe the blood from his hands, and then used the bloody leaves to cover the body, but not before snapping a picture of the body for evidence. There was a pang of jealousy in his gut. The cat got off easy. Isaac's life was over as he knew it, except his death would happen on a much slower and more agonizing timeline. This was it. Saving the cat had been his one chance, and he blew it. Now Dr. Rousseau would have no choice but to throw him into the Twin Towers correctional facility.

Isaac breathed deeply to calm himself, wondering how to salvage the situation. LA was a big city. There would be plenty more cats to save, but this was a setback. It wasn't until Isaac's drive home that his mind cleared, and he could focus on what was really important. Forget the Slytherin assessment. Forget the reward, whatever that may be, for recovering Captain Flapjacks for Anne. None of that mattered. What mattered was the cat from his dreams was real, and that realization caused him to roll down his window and vomit with excitement.

Struggling to find any other interpretation of the facts as he knew them, he concluded he must be a superhero himself. The evidence was twofold. Number one was that he dreamed up a cat. It existed. Number two was that Super Jesus was nearby when he found the cat, just like in his dream. The chances of this occurring were so remote that it couldn't be a coincidence. There had to be a connection, metaphysical or otherwise. It was a real shame the cat died. Isaac would have loved to interrogate him for answers. Well, no use crying over spilled milk.

The answers, if there were any, had to reside with Super Jesus, so it would be imperative for Isaac to find him. When he got home, he went to his computer to begin a caffeine-fueled research session. He started by following the various Super Jesus social media channels, per the suggestion of the woman at Super Jesus's house, leading to the discovery that Super Jesus was down at Skid Row, continuing his charitable contributions. Good to know, but Isaac didn't stop looking there. He trawled the ends of the Internet for any information about the production of *Super Jesus 2*. Surprisingly, it wasn't going well. According to the trades, the set was plagued with problems, and the movie was in reshoots on the Fox studios lot, the same one that Isaac passed on his way home from Beverly Hills. Adding to the delays was that they

were facing issues with their screenwriter. It wasn't until Isaac combed through four pages of the *Super Jesus* subReddit that he found whispers that the screenwriter, one Irving Hodges, had been sent to rehab, drying out someplace in sunny Malibu. Isaac thought that sounded nice, but he didn't know how to move this information forward other than to pay a visit to Skid Row, and he would prefer to do that in the day. Isaac heard once that sunlight was the best disinfectant.

In the meantime, it was time to come clean. Of course, under normal circumstances, Isaac would have chosen to avoid the responsibility, but he was hoping there was still a chance to get that reward. After all, Captain Flapjacks was no longer missing.

"I've got some good news and bad news," Isaac relayed through his phone.

"Bad news first," Anne answered.

"Captain Flapjacks is no longer with us, and I don't mean that in the sense of him being away but dead. He's dead..." Isaac's voice trailed off, allowing for a moment of silence.

Finally, he heard her voice crackle: "What's the good news?"

"I found Captain Flapjacks, of course. So you have, as Dr. Rousseau would say, closure."

"There's no closure."

"Anne."

"Tell me everything that happened. Tell me everything that you did after you left here. The wheres, the whos, the whats, and the whatnots," Anne demanded, and Isaac did so to the best of his ability, with one exception—

"That's when I found him on the side of the street. He stuck out, you know, not too much debris in Beverly Hills. I was lucky to find him before someone disposed of—"

"No, no, no. He's not dead. That can't be. It would be totally out of character for him."

"..."

"He still had seven lives left, Isaac. A cat doesn't just die with seven of its nine lives left."

"Did.. did you count them correctly?"

"Yes!" Anne's usual, calm demeanor broke. "Bring me Captain Flapjacks!"

"Anne. Please. It's best to let sleeping dogs lie," Isaac was beginning to sweat. He didn't think she'd be able to finger him as the perpetrator of the vehicular manslaughter of the cat, but he wasn't going to press the subject on a psychic until—

"Are you crazy? Even if he was dead, which he isn't, not by a long shot, I'd still want to give him a proper send-off, read him his last rites... You want your reward, no?"

Anne had his attention now. Isaac bit his lip in contemplation. "Yes, of course."

"Well, the reward is contingent on you bringing me Captain Flapjacks."

“What’s the reward?”

“A complimentary session with yours truly. Palm reading, tarot cards, crystal balls, tea leaves, seances. You name it, whatever questions you want to ask with whatever technique you want to use. Your wish is my command, so long as you deliver me Captain Flapjacks.”

“Can I wish for money instead?”

“You don’t understand. What I’m offering you is priceless.”

Isaac deliberated, not on the offer, which he found to be enticing, but how to cover his tracks on killing the cat, specifically his tire tracks. “Okay, I’ll do it. Leave your cell on.”

“Isaac?”

“M-hmm.”

“If you don’t bring him back, I’ll curse you for a thousand years. Good luck.”

That’s how Isaac found himself back in Beverly Hills again. He was spending more time here than a Starline bus driver. This visit would be his shortest yet, however, partly because it was easy to find the bush where Isaac stashed the body but mostly because there wasn’t any body to be found. Captain Flapjacks was gone. A shiver wriggled its way down Isaac’s body. Spooky didn’t even begin to cover it. He tried to think of all the rational reasons why the cat was gone. A coyote ate him. A groundskeeper found it and deposited the body in a nearby storm drain. Isaac suffered a hallucinogenic flashback from the joint Seth gave him and never found a cat in the first place. Super Jesus resurrected him. But, in his heart of hearts, he knew Anne was right. Captain Flapjacks was always alive, he had nine lives, and Isaac let him slip through his fingers. Isaac should have never doubted the cat. After all, he manifested the cat from his imagination. It was foolish to apply real-world logic to a dream kitty. Anything was possible, so he had to stop getting surprised.

Isaac shrieked, scared by a sudden rustling of branches off to his right. Captain Flapjacks. Isaac crept over to where he could best place the sound.

“Pss-pss-pss,” Isaac cooed.

It was all quiet now. He looked around, not wanting to arouse any suspicions for digging into the landscaping of a Beverly Hills taxpayer, but he was all alone, not another soul in sight. He peered into the gigantic, 15-foot hedge, hoping to coax out the cat, but couldn’t see anything besides absolute black. A chill emanated from the space despite the air around him being still and heavy with humidity. Isaac’s blood pulsed faster in response and did so again when the branches renewed their shaking, causing the huge hedge to sway like it was in an earthquake. Isaac took a step back, having a hard time believing that a maimed cat was responsible.

The icy fingers of terror gripped his spine. If his dream was real, then that had larger, more dangerous implications than he first realized. The cat wasn't the only creature populating his dream. There was another, something that flashed its fangs at the end of his script, the vampire. Isaac froze as the branches in front of him parted. Out of the dark, there was a distant whistle of the wind. It was as if there was no bottom to the black in front of him. The breeze was warm like an exhaled breath, and riding on that current was the musty smell of death. It was an intoxicating scent in the insidious way that gasoline fumes are. Isaac stuck his tongue out, skin prickling, tasting the foul air for the threats, and his mouth watered with the copper flavor of fear. Isaac crept back, fighting the gravitational pull he felt, keeping his focus on the well of darkness in front of him until he tripped on one of Beverly Hills' silver fire hydrants. He fell on his hands and knees and turned around to the street. That's when a noise erupted behind him, something crashing out of the hole, rushing through the brambles towards him.

Isaac ran to his car, lungs burning, without looking back. When he got the chance to sneak a peek through the rearview mirror, there was nothing there but a hulking shadow darker than the night. Terror seized him, and the adrenaline pumping from Isaac's flight instinct corrupted his short-term memory.

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When his consciousness came back online, he was stopped at a green light. His eyes scanned his surroundings for shadows and street signs. Whether through blind luck, a subconscious desire, or predestination, Isaac found him across the street from Dr. Rousseau's office. The doctor was in. Isaac could see the soft pink light of the Himalayan sea salt lamp aglow through his second-story office window.

"Well, look at what the cat dragged in," Dr. Rousseau remarked as Isaac collapsed into the chair in front of his therapist's desk.

Isaac chuckled, and there was an undercurrent of mania in his laugh. "I've had a breakthrough, Doc. I'm insane." He clapped a hand to his mouth, but it was too late. "Don't write that part down unless you want to mark that down as a figure of speech."

"Understood," Dr. Rousseau came around the desk and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "When was the last time you took your pills?"

"Uh," Isaac fingered through the files in his memory and returned empty-handed. "I don't know."

“Here you go,” Dr. Rousseau rummaged around a pocket before holding out a hand festooned with multi-colored pills. “There’s a Jelly Belly or two in there to help them go down easier,” he warned.

“You’re a lifesaver,” Isaac thanked him as he took the pills without question.

“Might be one of those in there, too, if you’re lucky.” He met Isaac eye-to-eye, “You ready?”

“Ready.”

“Are you steady?”

“Steady,” Isaac fisted the pills down his throat, and dry swallowed. He coughed and coughed and coughed, “I feel better already. Thanks.”

“Anytime. Well, anytime, so long as you’re willing to pay my overtime rates, which is how I will be invoicing this session, by the way.”

“I figured as much,” Isaac said before relaying the story so far to his therapist.

“Wow,” was all Dr. Rousseau could utter at first, busy writing down all the details. Once done, he managed to spit out, “Consider me curious. Do you have any pictures of the cat?”

Isaac unfolded Anne’s flier from his pocket and gave it to him.

Dr. Rousseau examined it. “Hmm. That’s not at all how I envisioned the cat in your script.”

“No? What did you have in mind?”

“Something a little smaller. Do you know Smoothie?”

“Smoothie?”

“It’s an Instagram-famous cat.”

“No, can’t say I’m familiar.”

“Well.”

“…”

“It’s cute. But what I’m trying to say is, how do you know your interpretation of the dream you don’t remember dreaming is factually correct? That logic is tenuous at best if I’m being charitable. Maybe your mind is making leaps and connections that are merely convenient. It’s in the very nature of the human brain to try and organize data and put it into a pattern, even when there is none.”

“I know that.”

“Good. You would do well to remember that.”

“Has Seth mentioned anything good about me to you?” Isaac blurted out.

“He has not, but I expect a formal report from him soon. But, for now, no news is good news.”

Isaac took a relieving breath.

“But, from afar, with your delusions of grandeur aside, I must commend your behavior since your last visit. If what you told me is true, and I’ll have to await Seth’s assessment to know for sure, you’ve done an admirable job at taking positive action to save a cat. If you would consider me an audience member of your life, which I am, I’m invested in seeing you further your progress,” said the therapist.

“I’m glad to hear it. I can imagine the critic reviews of my story already: ‘man looks to save a cat but, in the end, saves himself.’ But I don’t know what to do next.”

“I have an idea,” Dr. Rousseau paused for dramatic effect, “I think you should think about finishing your script.”

“You mean the dream script?”

“The very same,” Dr. Rousseau pressed, “I couldn’t stop thinking about it. It kept me up at night. I’ve told you before that I’m a writer, right?”

“Once or twice.”

“Well, I think your script is good, and I’m not telling you as your therapist, but as the guy who worked in the writers’ room of *Hawaii 5-0*, the one featuring Scott Caan. Have any interest in sending your script around as a spec?”

Dr. Rousseau had a point, Isaac thought. The script had undoubtedly left an impression on both him and the doctor. Maybe it was good. At the very least, it was magic, so he had that going for him. If only he could get on the set of *Super Jesus 2*, then he’d have a chance to meet the real Super Jesus and get to the bottom of this whole mess with the cat. Maybe this script was his golden ticket. “I did hear they lost their screenwriter,” Isaac stated aloud to pump himself up to the idea. “Maybe this is my second act break.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Dr. Rousseau paused again for emphasis, “I know a guy working on the production of *Super Jesus 2*.”

“You do?”

“Friend of mine. And I took the liberty to send your script over to him as a sample.”

“You did?”

“He’d like to meet you. And if you’re brought on board, it’ll qualify as gainful employment to the Slytherin Board and the Ministry of Magic.”

Isaac felt his heart pound, and he listened to it, excitedly, thinking back on the teachings of the fake Super Jesus. He was right. Isaac was a good dude, and all his dreams were coming true.

## Chapter 8

While on the way to his big script meeting with the *Super Jesus* team at CAA, Isaac was tripping balls, metaphorically speaking. This was too much success too fast. He was lightheaded, so it felt good to be strapped down by a seat belt while Seth snaked Isaac's car through traffic on Olympic Blvd. It relaxed Isaac to be physically restrained. He was craving safety, specifically the safety of his old routine, the time before he wrote a screenplay. Instead of a high-pressure interview, he'd rather binge-watch whatever the pop culture flavor of the week was and be the small spoon to his waifu body pillow. How nice would that be? He'd like to ask her for some advice right now. Where was Captain Flapjacks? Should he take a lump sum payment for his script or get points on the backend? How often should he be washing her? Everything was a mess.

Isaac was glad to have Seth providing backup for this meeting. He needed someone to share this experience with him to prove it was real because all Isaac had been relying on so far for evidence was pinching himself, and he wasn't waking up. Finally, his arms couldn't take any more bruising. If happiness was only real when shared, well, so was reality.

The constant coincidences were stacking up to such a degree that they made Isaac queasy and suspicious, but Seth wasn't helping in this regard. Seth had a history of his own at the CAA plaza. (The Century City Park Plaza garage was where Seth ran his old counterfeit parking validation ring. The key to the whole operation was owning a legit thermal printer and obtaining the proper bar code sequences. Still, the secret to his sauce was in the economies of scale, as the Century City Plaza garage had no equal in the city in terms of grandiosity, as the Century City Plaza garage was one of the seven wonders of LA, the largest subterranean structure west of the Mississippi.) It's why Seth was willing to drive Isaac to Century City, home of the talent agency and Fox studios, who produced *Super Jesus*. Seth hoped a trip down memory lane would distract himself from the Amber alert girl he abandoned.

Isaac would have been lost without Seth. The June Gloom wasn't content with only covering the coast today. Its haze filled the entirety of the LA basin and even spilled over the Hollywood Hills. If Isaac were in the valley, he would have seen the bone-white fog reaching over the ridgetop and down into the canyons like a hand rising up from inside a coffin. The fog

was so dense Isaac couldn't see the street signs as they passed them. Typically not a problem with GPS, but construction from the Metro's purple line extension created an obstacle course of detours and one-way streets. Sparkling red road flares lit their way as Seth pressed forward with confidence.

Isaac's stomach dropped when Seth whipped around a turn and bounced the car down a steep ramp. They were descending into the mouth of the giant garage. Outside the visitor's gate at the bottom of the ramp, a guard stopped their car to ask where they were going and if they could pop their trunk for a security search. Seth spoke for Isaac's car and consented. After being cleared for entry, the machine attached to the gate growled at them as it spat out a parking ticket. "How I've missed that sound," Seth sighed wistfully, reminiscing about his glory days like an old quarterback at his high school's homecoming. "Isn't it beautiful?" he asked, referring to the garage. Light a sightseeing tour guide, he gestured broadly to the red and green parking assists glowing like Christmas lights overhead and pointed out the helpful amenities like a car wash service and valet. "This is the biggest subterranean building this side of the Mississippi. 170,000 cubic yards of Cemex cement. Did you know this is the garage from the car chase in *Into the Night*?"

*"Into the Night?"*

"Ever see it?"

"No," Isaac said through gritted teeth, grabbing onto his armrest to bolster himself against the g's pulling on him as they corkscrewed down five levels of parking floors.

"Underrated LA movie, but I guess you'd have to be really down bad to know it," Seth said, trying to sell Isaac on it. "It's an absurdist noir starring Jeff Goldblum as a cuck."

"What the fuck?" Isaac's head was spinning.

"If these walls could talk." Seth pulled into a parking space and led Isaac up through the building to his meeting, a journey that took two elevator rides, three escalators, and a temporary security badge from the guard at the concierge desk. Seth didn't make it for the last leg of the trip, however. He preferred not to arouse suspicions and forego the access badge in case his name was still rattling around the security system. He wished Isaac luck as the last set of elevator doors closed on him. After that, Isaac was on his own.

Isaac stood across from a perky receptionist when the elevator doors opened again. She told him that Mr. Lennox would be with him momentarily and that he was free to help himself to a CBD spritzer, keto cookie, or the house service chinchilla to pet if he had any anxiety. Isaac chose the cookie. He munched on it with regret. He should have picked the service chinchilla.

Isaac didn't know what to expect. Mr. Lennox, *Super Jesus's* head producer, had a reputation. White and wealthy, he had the privilege of being labeled as an "eccentric," whereas anyone else would be considered a "nut job." Isaac wondered how Dr. Rousseau knew Mr. Lennox. Was it from his *Hawaii 5-0* days, or could he be a fellow patient?

Isaac's mind wandered, and his eyes fell to the flat-screen TV mounted to the wall across from him. *Super Jesus* was on and playing the famous Rio Grande scene where Super Jesus, or El Coyote as he was known to those who patrolled the river's northern bank, led migrants to salvation and U.S. citizenship. The water was turbulent, but the rapids calmed as soon as Super Jesus raised a hand to them.

The scene was beautiful. Isaac admired the lush cinematography and the way the DP got the dimples on the water's surface to hold and refract the moonshine. (Isaac had always thought the movie's cinematography was critically underappreciated. The truth was that all aspects of the film were spellbinding, everything from Daniel Ortega's performance as the titular character to the soaring score from John Williams.) The movie worked its magic on Isaac. He was mesmerized as 24 frames per second of the movie's climax were beamed directly into his brain. Even though he had watched this 1,000 times before, his adrenaline rose as he waited for the migrants and Super Jesus to clash with the band of ICE agents on the other side of the river, led by Captain America.

"Isaac!" the receptionist shouted at him repeatedly until she could break the movie's hold on him.

"One minute!" Isaac shouted back, "I love this part." Captain America was about to jump onto his shield and surf down the river towards Super Jesus, leading to a *mano y mano* duel that A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* described as "epic" in his pull-quote posted to Rotten Tomatoes.

"Mr. Lennox is waiting," the receptionist smiled, turning off the TV remotely from her desk. "Down the hall. Second door to your left."

Isaac followed her instructions and discovered an office the size of his apartment. The ultra-modern design of black, white, and chrome made Isaac afraid to touch anything, worried he'd cut himself on the Sharper Image design. There was a panoramic window behind Mr. Lennox's desk, but Isaac had to imagine the view because the June Gloom outside was still making everything as murky as the fog of war in a real-time strategy game.

"Welcome." Mr. Lennox's wrinkled hand instructed Isaac to sit in the chair before him. The room's only earth tone was provided by his stretched skin, darkened by frequent trips to Palm Springs.

“I love what you got, kid,” Mr. Lennox waved Isaac’s *Super Jesus 3* script at him. “My people tell me there’s some real gold in here. So what’s your secret?”

“I don’t know,” Isaac admitted.

“Humility, I see. You’re one of those, huh? I hate that in a person, especially in writers. A good writer should have a proper God complex.” Mr. Lennox smiled, and his veneers were as white as his hair.

“..”

“All the best ones do. And why not? With all those little worlds you create, all those little characters you manipulate. That’s what makes writers powerful. And your script, I’ve been told, has power. If you allow me, a non-writer, to tread on your territory and make a metaphor, I’ve always imagined that writers are really computer coders in disguise. Right? You feed some words into the audience’s brain and if your words are in the right sequence with the right do-loops and if-then statements, then – beep-beep-boop-boop-poop – something comes out the other side, whether that’s love, laughter, excitement, or whatever else the writer wants to draw out from their audience.”

“..”

“Was that a good metaphor? The coding thing? It’s part of a pitch I’m working on to secure some angel investments from Silicon Valley for my next picture. I want to speak their language, so to speak, whether C++ or otherwise, but I wanted to test it out on you first to see how you’d swallow it. How’d it go down?”

“Easy, sir.”

“No gagging?”

“No gagging at all, sir.”

“Excellent. No bullshitting. I’m a little envious of that power called writing. People think producers like me have all the power, but it’s fake. I’m just some pencil pusher. You’re the true puppet masters. You ever think about how you could write, ‘I fucked my maternal grandma with a rusty chainsaw,’ and then whoever reads it, through no fault of their own, now has to think about fucking their grandma with a rusty chainsaw? They didn’t want to picture it. They probably never thought they would ever imagine their maternal grandmother getting fucked by a rusty chainsaw, their blue hair shaking to the vibrations of the chainsaw motor, but there they are – the reader – against their will, imagining themselves fucking their maternal grandma with a rusty chainsaw all because they read some words on a page. Am I right? Of course, I’m right! What position do you think they imagine fucking their grandma in when they read something like that?”

Doggy? Missionary? Who's to say? I bet you could learn a lot about a person by how they answer that question. How would you fuck your grandmother?"

"..."

"God bless the WGA! Only they can take the most important part of a movie, the story, and negotiate a fee of 2% of our production budget. Like you can swap directors in and out or actors in and out, and you'll still have the same movie, more or less, but you can't swap a script out. It's the only essential part of a movie, and yet we spend more money on SweetGreens lunches over the course of production than the screenwriter. Isn't that a riot?"

"..."

"You got a good poker face, kid. Am I right that you're someone who plays his cards pretty close to the vest? Yeah? So let me show you some of mine then in a show of good faith. I want you to come work for me as a writer."

"...you do?" Isaac stuttered because he had to take the time to pick up his mouth from the floor.

"I can spot a diamond in the rough when I see it." Mr. Lennox tapped his raw eyeball to prove his point without flinching or blinking. "You got talent. I get that you're new, but you come with Dr. Rousseau's highest recommendation, and I'm willing to try anything. Anything! A room full of monkeys could produce Shakespeare on a long enough timeline. You ever hear that one? I want to find out. Are you better than a monkey, son?"

"One monkey or a roomful?"

"Kid's got jokes!" Mr. Lennox said, "I'm going to have to keep you away from Chuck Lorre. So what do you say?"

"..." Isaac thought about the offer he couldn't refuse. On the one hand, he needed the job. On the other, Isaac was not a screenwriter. How long would he be able to keep up the charade? But he had the support of Dr. Rousseau. He knew what Isaac could and could not do and chose to recommend his services to Mr. Lennox anyway. Suddenly, Isaac understood. This job offer was another opportunity for Isaac to live the *Save the Cat* way. He remembered the beat sheet from the book [See: Appendix B] and immediately knew in his heart that if those beats could map out a movie, they could also serve to map out his life. It made sense. If his save the cat moment was saving a cat, then why couldn't he stick to the script? (No pun intended.) Perhaps accepting this job was his big Break into Act II of his detective story/hero's journey. There was no question that if Isaac began working at Fox studios as a screenwriter, he'd be leaving his old world behind and entering a new one. This had to be his way forward. Even now, at this very moment, he was taking part in the beat sheet. Considering Mr. Lennox's

offer was his moment of Debate. But that moment was now over. "So what will I be working on? The re-shoots? Am I taking over Irving Hodges's spot?"

"Don't speak ill of the dead," Mr. Lennox replied.

"He's dead?" Isaac's voice squeaked.

"Dead to me anyway! We don't need him anymore. Irving cracked that nut before he cracked up. The script is locked and loaded."

"Can I read it?"

"If you did, I'd have to kill you." Mr. Lennox was not smiling anymore. "You'll be working on the third movie, of course," he said. "Finish your script."

"Absolutely. But how will I know what to write if I can't see how the second one ends?"

"Don't worry about it. What you've got is perfect, and I don't want to mess with your magic. If you want to know the truth, I've already got some other writers working on the third movie, 23 of them, in fact, not counting my stable of monkeys. Like I said, writers are cheap. I like to throw them against the wall and see what sticks."

"Sure. Makes sense."

"Great. Tell me something." There was a glint in Mr. Lennox's eye.

"Anything."

"What happens to the girl in your script? The one with the blonde hair."

"Margot Robbie?"

Mr. Lennox's smile returned. "Yes, tell me what happens to Margot Robbie."

Isaac froze, his guess as good as Mr. Lennox's. "I'll tell you after I sign my contract."

Mr. Lennox nodded his head, game recognizing game. "I see you're smarter than you look. I'll have Liz draw up the papers. The terms are non-negotiable, okay?"

"Okay."

"Liz!" Mr. Lennox directed his scream through the office door.

Isaac yelped when he recognized Liz as she hustled into the office and took her place at Mr. Lennox's side. Isaac's head was spinning. She was the same woman who greeted him at Super Jesus's front door.

"Hi." Liz approached Isaac and extended her hand professionally to him, treating him with none of the dismissiveness she showed him in Beverly Hills.

Before Isaac could choke out his surprise, Mr. Lennox interrupted them. "Excellent! I can tell that this marks the beginning of a beautiful friendship between you two. You see, Liz is a producer for me and what she does is produce results. Get it? There's nothing she can't handle, you included."

“Understood.”

“That’s a threat,” Mr. Lennox clarified. “I know how your breed is.”

“My breed?”

“Writers. I want you to know that we don’t tolerate writer’s block on this project. So don’t try to run that bullshit up my flag pole.”

“Got it, sir. Nothing up your flag pole.”

“Perfect. I’ve got my eye on you. I’ll see you around the lot tomorrow.”

“You will never see him on the lot,” Liz whispered to Isaac as she led him out of Mr. Lennox’s office and into a small, private meeting room across the hall. A pen and a mountain of legal documents were there waiting for him. He signed his name without so much as glancing at the fine print. It wouldn’t have mattered. You don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, and you don’t read the terms of service on your newest software update.

Once the ink was dry, the universe didn’t wait long to reward Isaac’s leap of faith. He saw the sign. Either that, or he was hallucinating again. While waiting for the elevator to take him back to the lobby, Isaac looked out the window and saw the midday sun had burned off the morning fog. Let there be light! That’s when a revelation struck Isaac. Now that the clouds had cleared, he immediately recognized this view. But how? He had never been here before.

It was from his dream.

The dream that wasn’t a dream at all. Below Isaac was the same triangle-shaped office park featured in the opening lines of his *Super Jesus* script. And when his eyes scanned upward, he could see the same twin towers. Like in his dream, they stood at two of the triangle’s points. The third point was formed by the building he stood in now.

Isaac grew scared. Reflexively, he put a hand over his neck to protect himself from vampires. They felt closer now than ever.

## Chapter 9

Seth rushed over to Isaac as soon as his mentee got off the elevator. “How’d it go, kid?” But it didn’t matter how many questions Seth asked him because Isaac’s answer was always the same: silence. Isaac was unreachable. He couldn’t hear Seth, not as his heartbeat throbbed in his ears.

All Isaac could focus on was the park he had dreamed about. He pushed his way through the building, desperate to get outside, but Seth grabbed his shoulder, stopping him.

“What’s wrong? So, you bombed it. No big deal. We expected that, right? It’s called a ‘learning curve’ Now, you’ll be ready for your next interview with a studio head. Oh! Hey, now!” Seth choked on his words, alarmed at the vacant stare he found when Isaac turned to him. “Stop that!” Seth shook Isaac until his eyes rattled around free.

“This is it. This was the setting of my script!” Isaac said once his eyes settled to a stop.

“Your script? Oh – You’re script. Right. No shit. What are the odds?”

“Yes, from my script. You don’t recognize it? You used to work at the exact place I dreamed about and you didn’t tell me?” Isaac yelled.

“Woah. Hold up. I plead ignorance. To be fair, I never read your script.”

“Are you kidding me?” Isaac’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“Careful, Isaac, you’re looking a little Slytherin there in the eyes; either that or you’re appropriating Asian culture, neither of which is cute. Time to pull it back. Calm down.”

A tirade of curses built up in Isaac’s throat, but he swallowed them. In his heart of hearts, Isaac knew he had no one to blame but himself. He had lived on the west side of LA all his life. He should have known this was the setting of his script. Somehow, his mind never made the connection. It was Century City’s fault, Isaac reasoned. There was some sort of magic at work. All of the buildings were constructed in the same uniform style with the same glittering metal, rendering the city nothing more than a shimmering mirage whenever viewed from afar. It was almost as if the city was designed to be camouflaged by the LA sun.

“Tell me everything you know,” Isaac demanded.

“I know three things in life: two plus two equals four, Tupac isn’t dead, and the first piss after a good jerkoff session is often better than the jerkoff itself.”

Isaac felt his skin harden at Seth's crass joke. This was no laughing matter. Frustrated, Isaac's thoughts slipped away, and his fist flew through the air. Seth dodged Isaac's punch easily, but his smile came even easier.

"Hey, sorry for partying, Isaac. It's going to be okay. Whatever's is going on, I can assure you it's not the end of the world, so take a breath, big dog." Seth put a hand on Isaac's shoulder to help ground him. It worked.

After a few long breaths, Isaac admitted, "I need help."

"Agreed, but you're in luck because I'm here to help. That's sort of why I'm here in the first place, if you remember."

"I remember, but I haven't noticed much in the way of help since I met you," Isaac challenged.

"Tough criticism, but fair. Come here." Seth directed Isaac to an outdoor table with an adjacent heat lamp. They were outside Craft restaurant, which, according to the bronze plaque affixed to the wall beside them, was a restaurant owned and operated by one of the judges of *Top Chef*. Isaac sat up a little bit straighter with this knowledge.

The patio where they sat overlooked the triangle park where professionals dressed in pewter-colored suits and flamboyant dress socks hurried here and there under the shadows of the metal skyscrapers. A waiter buzzed by their table, and Seth ordered two beers.

"Tell me your story, and I'll tell you mine," Seth offered and Isaac obliged, doing his best to retell his script from memory. And whenever the opportunity presented itself, he'd point out the details of their location that matched 1:1 with his dream.

"Consider me intrigued," Seth said once Isaac finished. The waiter delivered the two beers, and Seth drank from them both, double-fisting them. "Before I buy into the idea that you dream in premonitions, have you considered that maybe, just maybe, you dreamt this up because you drive by here all the time on your way to Dr. Rousseau's? That maybe this is your subconscious playing tricks on you?"

"The thought hadn't crossed my mind."

Seth took a sip of beer, deliberating. "Good. Next question: Have you ever visited the Annenberg Space for Photography?"

"No."

"It's a photography museum."

"..."

"I figured you weren't in the know because if you were, then you'd know that's the place you dreamed of, the one with the pictures, or photographs as they call them in the culture."

Isaac's eyes brightened. "You have to take me there."

"Happy to, but lemme finish these beers," Seth said before chugging whatever remained of them, drawing looks of contempt from the other patrons on the patio who were used to polite company. "Let's fucking go!" Seth slammed the empty beer glasses down for emphasis.

"Now?"

"Yup. No time like the present." They didn't have to go far to reach the Annenberg Space for Photography, their destination lying directly across from the restaurant on the other side of the business park. The two of them followed in the footsteps of 30 schoolchildren who walked hand-and-hand in a daisy chain up the stairs leading to the museum while their chaperones humped enormous lunch coolers.

Isaac felt violated. It was surreal for him to watch a place as sacred as his dream be intruded upon by John Q. Public. This was hallowed ground. He had to stop at the threshold of the museum's front door, holding out a hand, testing for some sort of invisible barrier or membrane, a boundary between this world and the next, but there was nothing there aside from a curtain of chill coming from a commercial air conditioner.

Ahhh. The inside of the museum was identical to how Isaac imagined his script, structurally speaking, but the mood was different. The dread he felt in his script was nowhere to be found. Instead, what he thought was some sinister temple of doom or twisted science laboratory was a legit photography museum with cheery guest service associates, courtesy citrus-infused water carafes, and 3-hour parking validation for the low, low price of \$4.50, or \$5.50 if you're a Slytherin. But wait, there's more! The other difference from his script was the photos. There was no horned beast from his script. No sexed-up baby either. Instead, there was a sexed-up woman. On display was a Helmut Newton exhibit. Or that's what Dan, the day's docent, said. Isaac and Seth were tagging along on Dan's school tour, eavesdropping on the presentation.

"The history of the Annenberg Space for Photography began with the birth of Walter Annenberg, a humble man who eventually became a captain of industry and presidential power-broker. Owner of Sunnylands, the Camp David of the west..." is how Dan led off his tour. He further explained how Walter Annenberg sold off his Pittsburgh publishing company (famous for *TV Guide* and *Seventeen*) to begin his incredible charitable foundation, which funded the museum where they stood today. But, of course, none of the school children had heard of *TV Guide*, leading to chuckles amongst the adult chaperones. Kid these days, am I right?

Isaac tuned in and out of the tour as they walked along the halls. He was studying the photos. They bothered him, not understanding why everything was the same as his dream

except for the images on the walls. He racked his brain until he found the only solution that made sense: this was proof of the existence of the multiverse. He had dreamed of a parallel world to his own. There was no other reasonable explanation.

The docent broke up Isaac's thoughts, "If you're wondering why the halls of the space for photography are shaped so strangely, it's because the architect designed the museum in the shape of a 35mm camera. As we walk, we trace the film's path through the camera. In a moment, I will lead you through our digital gallery. That's where you can see the aperture of the camera design. Questions?" Dan asked. He was a small and sad man doing his best to hide his weak chin with a beard and his male-patterned baldness with a buzz cut. He pointed to the raised hand of one of the kids.

"That man is wearing a saddle," the boy observed.

"Good eye," Dan complimented the boy before launching into a lengthy discourse on the photo's interplay between the theme of masculinity and the symbol of studded leather. Still, Isaac was distracted by Seth arguing with an exasperated chaperone.

"How could you bring middle schoolers here? It's criminal," Seth demanded. His moralizing surprised Isaac, who would have never confused him with a prude. But the chaperone was unfazed by the charges, shrugging them off, saying he wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. A free field trip was a free field trip. Most of these kids had never stepped foot in a museum before, and the stuff he heard on the bus ride over to the space for photography would make Helmut Newton blush.

Isaac wished everyone would quiet down. He needed to focus, trying his best to follow the steps of the characters from his dream. But Dan did the work for him, ushering the tour into the digital gallery so they could watch a documentary about the exhibit. The room didn't look like much at first, unique only because there were two movie screens opposite each other, but then Dan directed everyone's views to the ceiling.

Isaac yelped, seeing the blue light beam from his dream, the one that threatened to vaporize the taller figure who stood below it. Everyone stared at Isaac, disturbed by the inhuman sound he had made, but Isaac paid them no mind, hypnotized by the swirling blue light above him. To Dan's credit, it did look like a 50-foot wide camera lens with giant aperture blades swinging out from the center, but Isaac knew better. This was a death ray.

"Any questions?" Dan was wrapping up his tour. None of the children raised a hand, anxious to start watching the movie.

"I got one," Seth shouted to the children's groans, "How do you sleep at night?"

"I'm sorry?" Dan replied.

“What’s this?” Isaac interrupted Seth, pointing up at the death ray above him.

“Good eye. As I said earlier, the space resembles a camera lens from a bird's eye view. You can also see the same shape in our logo.” He pointed to the logo stitched into his shirt, which was a spiral bent into the shape of an eye.

Isaac scoffed. “That’s only what you want us to think!”

Dan looked around, nervous. The kids were ready to riot. “Can I speak to you two separately?” He led the kids to their seats, copycat directors’ chairs, with a wave of the hand before pulling Seth and Isaac aside, putting on his best aim-to-please smile. “Now, what would you gentlemen like to know?”

“The truth!” Isaac screamed through gritted teeth.

“Shut the fuck up!” one of the kids shouted. The movie was starting, the title flashing: “The Annenberg Space for Photography presents Helmut Newton: White Women • Sleepless Nights • Big Nudes.” The boys in the audience cheered.

“Gentlemen, I’m going to have to ask you to stop disturbing the viewing experience for our other guests. I hope you’ll understand.” Dan steered Isaac and Seth towards a back room empty of people. “Now, how can I help improve your experience at the Annenberg Space for Photography today?”

“Tell us everything you know,” Seth demanded.

“I can do that.” Dan looked relieved. He took a performative breath, “It all began with the birth of Walter Annenberg, a humble man who eventually became a captain of industry and presidential power-broker—” he began his script from the top until Seth cut him off, unnerved by the tour leader mimicking himself.

“Enough!”

“Have you ever had a cat come through here? He’s white and about the size of a bread box. Answers to Captain Flapjacks,” Isaac asked.

“I apologize, folks, but we don’t allow any animals into the space unless they’re of the service variety.”

“What about Super Jesus or the actor who plays him? Has he visited the museum?”

“I apologize, folks, but it’s the policy of the museum to be discrete about guest visitation, a privilege that I will also kindly extend to you. So enjoy. I do wish for you to return for our next exhibit.”

“How often do you change exhibits?” Isaac asked.

“Every six months. We feature all forms of photography at the Annenberg Space for Photography: war, nature, fashion, and you name it! So you can always find a reason to return to the Annenberg Space for Photography. Plus, we offer the best parking rates in town.”

“They’re good rates,” Seth agreed.

“Best in town.” Isaac found himself nodding along. “Last time I came here, I remember seeing a huge photo of a toddler in a tiara. You ever have a show like that?”

Dan stared at Isaac while he processed the information. “*Beauty CULTure* was our most recent exhibit. However, it did not feature a *Toddler in Tiara*, though that was a common misconception our guests had. What you’re referencing is a Lauren Greenfield photo.” Dan then told Isaac the exhibit dates, and after Isaac did some quick mental math, remembering to carry the one, he realized that those dates overlapped with the session in which he first told Dr. Rousseau about his dream. He congratulated himself on figuring out the clue. He had dreamed of an event in the past.

“Sir, are you all right?” Dan inquired after watching Isaac’s knees buckle. “Sir? Relax. You’re in good hands. Everyone at the Annenberg Space for Photography is CPR certified.”

Isaac was in a whiteout. All six of Isaac’s senses flooded his system, forming a bright white light that blew out his consciousness. Sure, he had known there was something strange about his script, but he hadn’t known he was clairvoyant, a prophet, or a god until now. It was one thing to dream up the cat, but now he knew he could dream up events, too. What other secrets was his dream hiding from him? The implications were as numerous as they were staggering. Was all of Dr. Rousseau’s Hogwarts bullshit true? Was he a wizard? Whatever he was, he was determined to use his powers, whatever they may be, for good, remembering the one moral lesson that had ever stuck with him: with great power comes great responsibility.

When Isaac awoke from his reverie, Seth was getting into it with Dan about who would think of the children. In response, Dan gave an unwavering smile that was glass. This guy seemed brain-dead. Cold-blooded horror flowed through Isaac. If vampires were real and wizards were real, then why not zombies? And if zombies were real, then where would it end? Aliens? Bigfoot? Werewolf Hitler? His spiraling thoughts were jammed to a stop when an employees-only door opened from behind him. He turned. Through the swinging door was a familiar sight, the service elevator from his dream. Isaac nudged Seth, who nodded with understanding.

“I’m glad I have been of service to you, gentlemen. If you have any other questions, please do not hesitate to ask. But before you leave, do not forget to get your parking validated.”

Seth and Isaac reassured him that they would do so. Satisfied, Dan returned to the front desk to greet the next school tour. When Seth and Isaac were finally alone and could hear no one approaching, they pushed past the “Authorized Personnel Only” door.

Isaac jumped in fright.

“Hello again, gentlemen!” Impossibly, Dan was waiting for them in the elevator bay. “I know our space can be confusing, given that the design mirrors the interior of a 35-millimeter camera from a bird’s eye view, but this area is off-limits to guests. Therefore, per our guest code of conduct, I’ll have to ask you to exit back to the gallery. Otherwise, it will be the preference of this establishment to have your presence outside our premises.”

They were caught, and that was that, so they left without a fight. Isaac dragged his feet while walking away from the museum. He was so close to returning to the place of his lucid dream only to be turned away by some two-cent tour guide. Seth had other ideas, however, redirecting Isaac away from the parking garage elevators and towards the back of the museum.

“More than one way to skin a cat,” Seth said. Then, with a showman’s flourish, he revealed the backside of the freight elevator, the one Isaac had seen behind the employee door. “Much like you, it goes both ways,” Seth joked, hitting the “down” button on the double-sided elevator. When the doors opened, a janitor and his sanitation cart made room for them to enter.

Once inside, Isaac pressed the same floor button his characters had pushed from his dream script. The elevator shuddered to a start. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” Isaac told himself to stave off the surrealness of the moment.

“I can. That’s what I’m here for,” Seth said. “I’m your quarter-life crisis midwife, and you’re about nine months pregnant. The time is now.”

“It is,” Isaac agreed. “I’ve got to deliver.”

The janitor gave a queer look.

“I hope you learned a valuable lesson here today, Isaac. Never forget that Dan guy from the Annenberg. You got that? Never forget him.”

“Yeah?”

“You think he ever saved a cat in his life? No fucking chance.”

Isaac smiled to himself, proud.

Bing! The elevator came to a stop. There was a rush of activity as the doors opened to reveal the same cavernous loading dock from his dream. So this is where Century Park hid their vast array of service workers. Delivery drivers, construction crews, maintenance men, and Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf baristas all zoomed around in a craze like rats in a maze. Isaac had to thread his way through them while he followed where his feet were taking him.

Right foot, left foot.

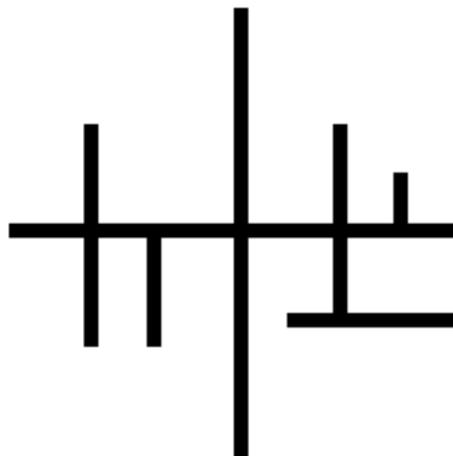
Left foot, right foot.

Right foot, left foot.

Isaac's feet did not lead him astray, stopping in front of a non-descript door. Behind it was the long, long hallway from his dream, the one with the motion-sensitive lights, the one where the taller figure ran for his life.

What was Isaac doing? He needed to check himself before he wrecked himself. Isaac knew what guarded the gold at the end of this rainbow. The vampire. He should be running far, far away, but his instinct for flight, which had served him reliably for years, would not engage. Seth was the one to thank, responsible for having Isaac's back and pushing him forward. First, he calmed Isaac down with the irrefutable argument that vampires aren't awake during the day. Then, for an added layer of security, Seth reached into his jacket and produced a shotgun-sized loaf of garlic bread from Jon & Vinny's. To ward off any vampires, they each shared a bite of broken bread before moving through the hall, open-mouthed to emit as much garlic breath as possible. But as they pressed on, going left and right, this way and that, doing their best to navigate the labyrinthian halls, Isaac became more worried about finding a minotaur than a vampire.

"Here it is." Isaac finally whispered to Seth. They were outside the room where he had last seen the taller figure from his script, but there was no time to revel in the moment. From far down the hall, there was a commotion heading their way, security, so Isaac and Seth took the plunge, diving into the room, but it wasn't a room at all, only a vestibule to another door, an odd door, a door he had never seen before. This one was wooden, marking the first natural material they encountered in the entire business complex, which was made up entirely of metallic design elements. It was inlaid with strange, foreboding markings. The feeling of dread from Isaac's dream returned to him. He stared at the symbol, the rune, mesmerized by it, confounded.



Behind them, the door to the hallway went bump! bump! bump! The clamoring from down the hall had arrived. Isaac held his breath, stifled his movements, and quieted his mind, doing anything and everything he imagined Anne Frank would do, but, just like her, it wouldn't be enough. They were ratted out by an alarm, the sound coming from Isaac and Seth's pants. Beep! Beep! Beep! They fumbled for their cellphones to turn them off, but they were too late. Another Amber alert blew their cover. This little girl was abducted from the Grove. Seth lept to the wooden door for an escape, but it was locked. They were trapped. With no escape possible, Isaac could only prepare for a confrontation with the vampire. As the door opened, he put his fingers together to form the shape of a cross.

## Chapter 10

Thank God Isaac and Seth had validated their parking. It was the only thing that saved them from going to jail. It was the thinnest possible excuse for plausible deniability, but it was enough to satisfy the Century Park security team, who stormed into the room where Isaac and Seth hid. Seth took the lead for Isaac when responding to the interrogation, excusing their trespassing with pleas of ignorance. They were lost! It was the largest underground parking garage this side of the Mississippi! What could they reasonably expect? It was an innocent mistake. But what made the lie extra effective was Seth's over-the-top performance in the part of the rescuee, getting on both of his knees to thank the guards for finding them, claiming to be worried they would never ever get back to their car. They could have starved to death. But it wasn't until the three giant security guards saw their validated parking ticket did they put away their guns. Isaac could only offer an apology, which was so profuse that he didn't stop blathering until they reached the security office. That's where they received their lifetime bans from Century Park, a natural consequence after the guards did a background search on them and discovered Seth's past transgressions and that they were both registered in the ISD (International Slytherin Database).

Finally, Isaac had the good sense to drop Mr. Lennox's name. After all, they were the guests of the lead producer of the *Super Jesus* franchise, and they should not have to face this sort of harassment, even if they were Slytherin. The guards responded as desired. A quick phone call to Mr. Lennox produced the presence of Liz, who entered the room with the briskness of a bitter winter wind. She spoke to the head security guard in his office. Isaac watched them through a window cut into the door, and he couldn't tell if she was more annoyed at them for getting apprehended by security or at the security guards for arresting them in the first place. She didn't have time for this, god damnit!

Liz read them the riot act as she walked the two of them back to their car, warning Isaac that if he ever did something so dumb again, then he'd be off the production, but Isaac was more than happy to weather the storm since Liz was able to negotiate not only their release but also the return of their leftover Jon & Vinny's garlic bread, which was confiscated upon capture.

“We have to go back,” Seth said as soon as he and Isaac entered their apartment. Isaac agreed. The only debate was how they would sneak in and avoid detection. Seth pitched the idea of going in guns blazing. But, to Isaac, that seemed a tad too extreme.

“You don’t understand,” Seth said with a grave voice. “It’s time to come clean. I haven’t been totally straight with you so far.” He paused while Isaac gasped in shock. “I didn’t want to come with you to CAA for moral support or to take a trip down memory lane, though those were both added benefits. I came to Century City Park because Century City Park is the center of all the known evil in the universe.”

“...”

“What do you know about the Illuminati?”

“Only what they teach you in school.”

“So nothing?”

Isaac nodded.

Seth narrowed his eyes conspiratorially. “Ever wonder why that was?”

“Yes!”

“Century Park – no all of Century City – is owned and operated by the Illuminati.”

“Century City? Where CAA – the most powerful talent agency in the world – is headquartered? Where Fox is? That Century City?”

“The very same.”

“Oh shit! So the place where I just got a job is part of the Illuminati? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Exactly. Doesn’t your job offer seem a little too good to be true? You’re not exactly a good screenwriter.”

“To be fair, you haven’t read my script.”

“I don’t have to. You’re no writer. I’ve never seen you in a coffee shop with a laptop. Where’s your Moleskine? Do you even Final Draft, bro? No one would even call you for a punch-up, nevermind hire you to do franchise work.”

“...”

“See, you get it. Let’s Occam’s razor this shit for a second. What’s the simplest explanation for everything that’s happened? Hollywood is run by a secret organization bent on world domination or that you’re a talented writer who deserves to write for the biggest movie in the world?”

“I never said that I was a talented writer. I’m not a writer at all. I’m a wizard.” Isaac puffed out his chest, inflated by the hot air of pride.

“Super Jesus Christ,” Seth cursed, palm to face.

“I don’t think we talk enough about the fact I wrote a prophecy. It’s a development that’s gone a little underrated.”

“Hold up. You dreamed about a generic-as-fuck cat and a place you drive by once a week to see your mental health professional. Congratu-fucking-lations! What is that? Not a prophecy. It’s more plausible that you visited the museum in a past life than you’re a prophet.”

“But the cat is missing, last seen in Super Jesus’s neighborhood. So that’s why we need to interrogate Super Jesus.”

“Forget that noise. All so we can save some cat? We need to focus on the conspiracy.”

“The cat is probably dead. True. But what I want to know now is if I’m a wizard or not. Also, if I don’t find this cat, I’ll be cursed for a thousand years.”

“The cat is dead?”

“Either that or he was resurrected.”

“Right,” Seth paused, “kids are dying! And it’s up to us to take the Illuminati down. And unlike you, I have evidence that the Illuminati is real, and they’re headquartered out of Century City.” Seth showed Isaac his smartphone. The screen showed a photo of Century Park from a bird’s eye view, and it was the same image as the opening shot from his script/dream. Isaac was no longer surprised. The two triangular buildings, the Twin Towers, were there and so was the triangular park they bordered.

“Is this the evidence?”

“You don’t see it?”

“I see the park where we were today. I see the park from the script.”

“Not that. Do you see it now?” Seth used his phone to search for images of the Masonic compass and the Illuminati pyramid, the one with the Eye of Providence, the one you can find on the back of a dollar bill. “These are the markings of the Illuminati.”

“They are? I thought those things were just American symbols. Like Ben Franklin’s face or whatever.”

“Exactly. Here, look at this. This is the real tour Dan would never show you.” Seth next googled “Century Park Illuminati” and pulled up the second image in the search return. The photo showed how the park’s design perfectly incorporated both the Masonic compass and the pyramid, one within the other [See: Appendix C]. It could not be a coincidence.

“It’s probably a coincidence,” Isaac mused.

“A coincidence?” Seth scoffed, “I bet you also think jet fuel can melt steel beams.”

“It can’t?”

A guttural sound escaped Seth. “You really need to stop watching movies and take some time to learn about the world around you, Isaac. Do your own research. I’ll send you some forums I’m active on. Suffice it to say that the Illuminati also did 9/11.”

“...”

“It’s all connected. Look.” Seth pulled up more images on his phone, this time matching the twin towers of New York City with the twin towers of Century City. Again, they were nearly identical, except one set had palm trees in front, and one did not.

“Another coincidence.” Isaac found it easier to play dumb than admit he was now working for the Illuminati. He didn’t want to work for the Illuminati.

“The Century Plaza Twin Towers were designed by a guy called Minoru Yamasaki. He built all the Illuminati buildings.”

“He did?”

“Want proof? He was the only jap not interned during WWII. How he’d manage that, you ask? By doing the bidding of his CIA masters in exchange for his freedom. He built all sorts of top-priority projects on the down low. Federal Reserve buildings, synagogues, military installations, and even colleges. *Do-dooo-doo-dooo-dodoo-dee-dooo*,” Seth imitated the theme song from the *X-files*.

“Uh, what was that second thing you listed?” Isaac tried to interject, but Seth pressed on, steamrolling the conversation.

“But, wait! There’s more!” Seth said in his best Billy Mays impression. “He also built Pruitt-Igoe, a federal housing project in St. Louis that also doubled as a secret laboratory.”

“A laboratory for what?”

“Social experimentation. The study of crack cocaine, of course. Not production, mind you, but distribution. They flooded drugs into this high-density, low-income African American project called Pruitt-Igoe to see what would happen. And what happened was that the place resembled *Escape from New York* in less than two decades — drugs, crime, rape, you name it. It was so bad they had to knock the place down to cover their tracks. Then they exported the project to New York, LA, and places beyond. St. Louis still hasn’t recovered to this day. It’s a pattern. If you pay attention, you’ll notice that most Yamasaki-designed buildings tend to get demolished soon after they’re built or fall down.”

“He made London Bridge?”

“No, you idiot. He built two elementary schools, but those were demolished ages ago. There aren’t even pictures of those. That’s how bad it was, whatever that went on down there. And not only was he the architect for the World Trade Centers, but he also designed the very

airport terminal the 9/11 hijackers flew out of in Boston. But that's gone now, too. What are the chances?"

"..."

"Yamasaki's first building in Century City was the Century City Plaza hotel, otherwise known as the western White House."

"But I thought the Annenberg's Sunnylands complex was called the western White House. That's what Dan said during the tour."

"No, Dan said Sunnylands is the western Camp David. It's all the same anyway. Do you think it's just another coincidence that the Annenberg Foundation, and their Pittsburgh ties, are all wrapped up in this?"

"Pittsburgh?" Isaac felt as if he were drowning. "Pittsburgh, too? Not Pittsburgh."

"You poor fool. You pathetic rube!" Seth was exasperated. "Of course, it's about Pittsburgh. It's like I'm talking to someone who drinks fluoridated water."

"I do drink fluoridated water. You haven't noticed?" Isaac flashed Seth his white teeth.

"Oh, I've noticed," Seth slapped the smile off his face. "You don't drink that shit anymore. You got that? Starting today!"

"Why not?"

"Flouride calcifies your pineal gland."

"A pineal gland?" Isaac felt around his groin, looking for it.

"Ever hear of your third eye? Well, the pineal gland is the scientific name for it. Fluoride hunts it like a heat-seeking missile. It binds to it, blocking any signals coming in and out and blinding you from the light of the world. It's mind control."

Isaac clapped a hand on his forehead, accidentally striking his third eye. "Fucking Pittsburgh."

"Now you're getting it."

"Wait, what did Pittsburgh do again?"

"It's home to the Annenbergs. And what are they famous for? Publishing and journalism. They're the propaganda arm for this whole conspiracy. And Pittsburgh is also the home base for Alcoa. So you think it's another coincidence both Alcoa and the Annenebrgs ended up here?"

"Alcoa?"

"Alcoa. The aluminum company of America." Seth smiled, delivering the line as a revelation, but Isaac's face didn't change. The conclusion escaped him until Seth explained how fluoride is integral to aluminum production and how aluminum was another brain-altering chemical, one closely associated with Alzheimer's. It all came back to mind control.

"I didn't know that," Isaac admitted.

"You don't know anything! So it's safe to assume you don't know who built Century City."

"..."

"Alcoa."

"Aluminum companies build cities? That doesn't sound right."

"Haven't you ever wondered why everything in Century City looks the same?"

Isaac shrugged. "A tough HOA?"

"It's all aluminum. Every building. You would have known that if your pineal gland could still receive signals. Before Century City was Century City, it was the backlot for Fox Studios until Elizabeth Taylor – God bless her soul – worked inside the system and single-handedly sabotaged the evil Fox studios by bankrupting them with her Egyptian epic *Cleopatra*. Fox Studios then had to sell their land to Alcoa to stay afloat. They're partners."

"Pittsburgh!" Isaac raged. "Tell me everything you know."

"It's a cosmic death cult," Seth warned, "The Century City twin towers combine to be 88 floors high of aluminum, the same number of constellations in the sky. All of the street names in Century City have celestial origins: Avenue of the Stars, Galaxy Way, Constellation Blvd. In the middle of Avenue of the Stars is a fountain in the shape of an eye, and the Century Plaza Hotel is its brow..."

"Pittsburgh!" Isaac bit his tongue. "Wait, what does this have to do with the missing kids? Where are the kids?"

"That's what we have to figure out, but the Annenberg Space for Photography has something to do with it."

"Wait. You don't even know?"

"Isn't it a little suspicious that in the middle of a high-end business park is a free-to-the-public museum with the city's best parking validation? What a perfect excuse to invite buses full of poorly-watched kids to your premises. Dan told me that most of their school tours come from title-1 schools, the type of kids that no one in the media will cry about if they go missing. Amber may be a color, but Amber alerts aren't for the colored, as the popular saying goes."

"I'm not sneaking back in there if this is just some hunch. All the more reason we do it my way. We take it slow. We go to Super Jesus. We don't need to rush the case. How long have they been operating if it's indeed the Illuminati? Thousands of years? So, what's another couple of days?"

"They date back to at least the time of Egypt. Cleopatra."

“Exactly. What’s a couple of young adults in the face of a millennium or more of killings? We have to get this right because if there’s one rule I learned to live by, it’s if you go at the king, you best not miss.”

Seth snorted.

Isaac chose to ignore the slight. “The other benefit of taking our time is that it’ll allow me to figure out my wizard skills. We’ll need my powers to take down the Illuminati. I got to level up. I need a movie montage. Wait a second – you can be my mentor!”

“Me?”

“You’re a wizard, aren’t you?”

“Only if you’re talking pinball, my friend.”

“Really?” Isaac was dumbfounded. “I thought since you were also a Slytherin...”

“I’m getting a strong urge to slap you again. Forget that Dr. Rousseau garbage.”

“Why?”

“He’s in on it.”

“In on what?”

“In on the Pittsburgh plot! That’s why I keep working with him. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I beg you, Isaac, start setting that third eye free. Look at it from all angles. Who’s encouraging you to continue to write your script? Who forwarded your script to CAA and Fox Studios, both fronts for the Illuminati? Your job was a setup.”

“Not every coincidence is a conspiracy.”

“What if I told you that every coincidence is a conspiracy? It’s no coincidence you go to Dr. Rousseau, is it? Ten bucks say you didn’t find him on Angie’s List one day.”

“Well, no. I’m financially obligated to go to him.”

“See?” Seth’s eyes brightened. “How did that happen?”

“It’s a condition of the trust fund my parents left me. Dr. Rousseau was a family friend. He’s more than a therapist to me. He’s supposed to be like a stand-in for a guardian angel or godfather. My parents left me in his hands when they died.”

“How did they die?” Seth asked suspiciously.

“A car crash caused by sudden onset, violent sternutation.”

“Sternutation?”

“Sneezing. All it took was that quarter of a second when my dad closed his eyes. That’s all the time the 405 needs to ruin your life forever.”

Seth chuckled but tried to be polite about it. “This has been preordained. You’re a pawn. You get it? You need to stop going to him until we figure this all out. He’s in on it. I’m sure of it. The longer we wait, the more time he will have to sniff us out.”

“I can’t do that. Dr. Rousseau’s the only one who will know what’s going on with me! And I have to keep going for the reason I just told you. My checks are contingent on my appearance.”

“You’re acting like you can’t finesse these circumstances a little. Fake an illness, go on a ‘vacation.’ You’re a wizard, right? So say you got tickets to the Magic Castle that night.”

“Enough. You’re going to have to go without me.”

Seth crossed his arms, “I can’t. Taking on the Illuminati is at least a two-person job.”

“You mean that you can’t do it without me? You need me,” Isaac taunted.

“Fine,” Seth settled. “Have it your way, Burger King.”

“We’re going to be a team,” Isaac said and, in a show of good faith, sent a text message to Dr. Rousseau. It stated that he would be unable to make his next appointment. He had two tickets to the Magic Castle that day.

But that night, Isaac struggled to fall asleep. His head was buzzing with anticipation and anxiety for the next day, his first day writing for *Super Jesus 3*. He was overwhelmed. He hadn’t written a word since he delivered that script to Dr. Rousseau. It would be impossible to fool them forever, especially Liz, who seemed hyper-competent. And if Seth’s conjectures turned out to be correct, that Isaac was working for the Illuminati, then he’d be wading into a world of trouble.

Isaac should just quit the job before he even clocks in. That would be the sensible thing to do. But, instead, he was about to go swimming with the sharks. The thought that kept him awake the most, however, was this: if every building Minoru Yamasaki ever built fell, how long would it be before the Century Plaza Towers fell? And would Isaac and his wizarding powers be responsible? He dreamed of it.

## Chapter 11

Five AM was the call time for the *Super Jesus 2* reshoots, but Isaac didn't arrive at the Fox lot until well after mid-morning. Liz made a note of it. She also noticed how Isaac didn't let his tardiness stop him from getting breakfast. She caught him at the craft service table, wolfing down a lox bagel with extra red onions. Liz touched the corner of her lip to indicate to Isaac where a schmear of cream cheese clung to his mouth for dear life. "So great to see you again. I hope you've been keeping out of trouble."

"Doing my best," Isaac said and took a credential from her with a sweaty hand. He was unsure if the source of his sweat was from normal first-day-of-school jitters with his new job or from the sexual tension he felt towards Liz. She looked good enough to eat. He licked his lips and captured the glob of curdled cream cheese. Yum.

"I hope you're not nervous."

Isaac grunted, admittedly overwhelmed. When her gaze didn't enchant him, his eyes whirled around set, but there was too much activity to track. It was a system of organized chaos: rolling racks of costumes zooming by and wild-eyed extras searching high and low for their big break. Those big, furry sound sticks swirled over Isaac's head like predatory birds. He ducked as one dive-bombed him when its operator bent over to pour himself an OJ made from concentrate. The juice came from the spigot of a giant Gatorade athletic jug labeled "Staff." The OJ set aside for the "Talent" was presented in a crystal pitcher so the fresh-squeezed pulp could remain visible. Isaac wondered where a simple screenwriter stood in the food chain.

"Mr. Lennox wants to see some new pages from you."

"About that," Isaac rubbed the back of his neck, stalling, "I'm still working on the ideas for the whole thing. Outlining."

"You know, the last screenwriter told me once that writer's block is one of the most important and necessary stages in the creative process."

"Absolutely. Rome wasn't built in a day. You can't rush perfection."

"I can't. But Mr. Lennox can. That last screenwriter no longer works here," Liz said, baring her teeth in a smile. "I'm sorry, but you should take it as a compliment. Normally he

doesn't read the scripts, preferring to farm out his opinions to focus groups and interns, but you gave him something that really caught his eye."

"You serious?"

"Always, especially when directives from Mr. Lennox are involved. So, what gets you in the mood to write? Coffee? A controlled substance? A room of one's own?"

"I think a meeting with Super Jesus would go a long way in helping me get those creative juices going. You know, get a sense of where he wants to take the character."

Liz blinked and arched her eyebrows, taking a moment to deliberate. "I can't offer you a one-on-one with him. The best I can give you is a chance to watch him shoot a couple of scenes."

"I need him alone."

"I assure you that it's nothing personal. His schedule is incredibly tight. It's the preference of the production. You're describing a scenario that is simply out of my hands."

"You remind me of a tour guide I had once."

"What a sweet sentiment to share."

"Is there somewhere private where I can work on my pages then?" Isaac knew he'd have to go it alone. He had now felt Liz out enough to realize she was no ally to him or his clandestine affairs, plus he figured it would be wise not to mix business with pleasure.

"We do have a dedicated writers' room if you're interested," Liz suggested. Then, in what seemed like a passive-aggressive dig at Isaac's indulgent salmon-laden breakfast, she took a humble spotted banana from the fruit bowl before leading him to his new office. Together, they weaved through waves of PAs and picked their way over dolly tracks to get to the writers' room. When they arrived at the door, Liz reviewed the day's schedule before opening it. Isaac struggled to listen. A loud commotion came from inside the writer's room, literal hooting and hollering. Mr. Lennox wanted ten pages by EOD, Liz said. Lunch would be provided. Her phone number was listed on the call sheet if he needed anything. Isaac blushed, his heart gushing. The feeling was foreign. It was not often someone entrusted him with a phone number, never mind their own.

"Welcome to the team." Liz opened the door. She tossed in her banana as one does a hand grenade. Isaac watched the banana loop through the air, following a perfect parabola, before it landed with a splat in the middle of a conference table. Then, there was a flurry of fur as a room full of stinking monkeys leaped over their keyboards to get to the treat.

“Good luck!” Liz screamed over the screeching monkeys, pushing Isaac inside the writer's room and closing the door behind him. She did not look back. She had to prepare for bigger and better things than babysitting a screenwriter.

Isaac looked on in terror as the monkeys fought a tug-of-war for what remained of the banana and its peel. There were two warring factions. When Mr. Lennox said he wanted a diverse portfolio of writers for the franchise, Isaac didn't expect it to include monkeys, never mind two species worth. Eventually, the rhesus monkeys prevailed over the diminutive capuchin, as Isaac had expected. It was survival of the fittest here. Isaac couldn't help but spy the Gatorade jug in the corner, putting Isaac in his place in the pecking order between “Talent” and “Staff.”

Anxious, Isaac peeked at one of the pages a monkey had jammed into the nearest typewriter, trying to get a feel for his competition. His stomach dropped. He was horrified to see that he would have his work cut out for him to become Mr. Lennox's favorite. Isaac didn't know the poem he was reading was a sonnet, but he knew he was emotionally affected by it.

“My beloved banana, ripe and sweet  
Symbol for the vigor I once held dear  
It was a source of pride, a lovely treat  
That I could share with someone, far or near

But, oh, alas, my banana is lost  
It slipped off, like leaves from the autumn tree  
The price of my pain, I can't guess the cost  
But now, I'm left here, with a dusty wheeze

For I can't replace this sweet, yellow fruit  
It's part of me that's never to return  
But I bid farewell and am resolute  
And carry on, though my spent heart does yearn

For my banana, once creamy and fair  
I'll miss thee, but at least no mo' child care.”

Isaac picked up the poem to pocket it, hoping to pass it off to Liz whenever she asked for what he wrote today. But it wasn't meant to be. Instead, Isaac's sobbing due to the sonnet's tender words drew the monkeys' attention. Rhesus monkeys may share 93% of their DNA with humans, but with curled lips and sharp teeth, they appeared more in common with vampires than humans as the creatures stalked Isaac, looking to take their poem back by force.

"I can explain!" Isaac pleaded.

But the monkeys had closed ranks, both species working in unison now to encircle him. Isaac had no choice but to return the sonnet he stole. He balled it up and threw it across the room. They chased his diversion, and he left the room as fast as he could, knowing the doorknob wouldn't provide much of an obstacle for his opposable-thumbed cousins.

It wasn't until he left the sound stage and felt the sun on his face dry his tears that Isaac's gait and breath fell back to an average pace, but it quickened again when he saw the twin towers of Century City lording over him in the distance. They teased him. He imagined what the skyline would look like without them. He shook his head to chase away the thought.

Tracking down Super Jesus would be more complex than it first appeared. That was the bad news. The good news was that he ditched his chaperone, Liz, so he was free to do what he wanted. Now was the time to don his proverbial deerstalker hat and question his first witness.

Isaac wandered around until he found a security guard. After Isaac flashed his credentials and sold a story about needing to "punch up some jokes," the guard pointed Isaac towards Super Jesus's Star Wagon. Isaac grinned, ready to finally get some answers from the superhero. No one was going to stop him now. No person, anyway. But what about a cat?

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Captain Flapjacks. Isaac didn't have to think twice, choosing to chase down the cat instead of Super Jesus. A woman in a flamboyant, floral muumuu dress carried the cat in a crate. Isaac's heart was racing again as he sprinted after her, dodging coffee-carrying gofers and celebrity-commandeered golf carts to catch his quarry.

Isaac watched her as she entered sound stage 33. It didn't seem to matter how fast he ran, she always seemed to be one step ahead of him, but he finally caught up with her when there was nowhere else to go. Isaac was now in a hall with a single door at the end. He tumbled through it and came out on the other side in a dreamscape where the woman in the muumuu and 16 Captain Flapjacks cats greeted him.

"¡Dios Mio!" the woman cried, startled by Isaac's intrusion. She had been tending to the cats as they slept, napped, and snoozed, but they all awoke as soon as the door slammed shut behind Isaac. They stared at him with 32 glowing, icy blue eyes. He was frozen. How curious.

He felt naked, transfixed under their collective gaze as if it were a cold spotlight. It was eerie how similar they all looked to one another. He couldn't tell them apart. This wasn't a case where they were simply all the same species. Instead, they were carbon copies of each other, with identical markings and the same orange-cream coloring on their faces.

Isaac wanted to get closer to them to confirm his theory, but the woman stepped between him and them. Even a flash of his credentials didn't get her to budge.

"You like my cats?" she asked.

"I love them," Isaac assured her, and she took a breath of relief, allowing the cats to break their synchronistic movements. Some cats went back to sleep, some stretched, but some kept a watchful eye on Isaac.

"They're beautiful, aren't they?" The woman beamed with pride. "I bred them."

"Oh," Isaac sighed with disappointment. "I thought they were clones."

The woman laughed. "Oh no. If it were that simple, I wouldn't be so well paid. Sorry to bore you, but these are the seventeen representatives I selected from I don't even know how many litters."

"I can't take my eyes off them," Isaac admitted.

"Yes, they're cream-point Birmans, after all," the breeder explained. "It's in their blood to be worshipped [See: Appendix D]."

"Who's doing the worshipping?" Isaac wondered.

"Burma."

"I believe it's pronounced Myanmar."

"No one knows their origin except that they were the favored cat of Burmese monks. So, they're temple cats." The woman dangled a string toy to one of them, who batted it around with lazy indifference. "Their beauty is only exceeded by their rarity."

"Oh?"

"Oh, yes! The entire breed was nearly eradicated in World War II. Another mystery."

"Nazi bastards," Isaac hissed.

"By VE day, only two Birmans were left in the entire world. Orloff and Xenia Kaabaa were their names."

"What beautiful names. But have you ever known a Birman named Captain Flapjacks?"

"No," the woman said, but how she choked out the denial led Isaac to believe otherwise.

"I have it on good authority that a cat by the name of Captain Flapjacks went missing."

"My cats are my everything. My babies. I would never let anything befall one of them or call them something as profane and demeaning as Captain Flapjacks." The woman picked up

the cat she was trying to play with, held it close to her chest, and shielded it from Isaac. “Who told you such a ridiculous and ludicrous fib?”

“A psychic. Her name’s Anne. Are you familiar with her work?”

“I don’t do any dealings with psychics,” the woman declared, and Isaac believed her. “These cats are easily corruptible by such cosmic suggestions.”

“Of course,” Isaac nodded. “Are any of your cats missing? Perhaps stolen in a heist orchestrated by Margot Robbie?”

“You must be joking. Are you trolling me? Can I see your credentials again?”

Isaac dodged eye contact with the woman, and his eyes stumbled upon a cat drinking water from a bowl fed by the same style of crystal carafe that served OJ to the “Talent.” “What role do these cats play in the movie? Are they main or supporting characters? What have you trained them to do? Do not even think about pleading the fifth with me.”

“You should know! Aren’t you the screenwriter?” the woman asked with incredulity after examining his credentials again. “I think you need to leave. My cats are very tired, and you’re disturbing them.” Isaac looked around at the cats to verify her assertion. They did look tired. They were all stone still except for their tails which swished back and forth in a hypnotic pattern. Back and forth. Back and forth. Back and forth. Isaac’s neck mirrored their movements, as charmed as a cobra. The woman watched him with disgust. “Are you a Slytherin?” she hissed.

“No,” Isaac coughed, clutching his neck at the spot where his pearls would be, “I’m the screenwriter.” His mind was racing, hoping to find a way to salvage the whole operation. If nothing else, he could settle for appeasing Anne by trying to pass off one of these cats as her own. “Can I have one of your cats?”

The woman’s lips turned into a snarl, similar to his monkey colleagues, but Isaac could not hear her rejoinder because she was interrupted by two bruisers who burst into the room with Liz leading them. The men behind Liz wore guns on their hips, dressed in full tactical gear, everything from combat boots to Oakley sunglasses, and their faces were as hard as their Kevlar vests. Liz was about to release these hounds on the cat handler until she saw Isaac and shot him a look of “You again?”

“Jane Furbury,” Liz addressed the woman, “these men are here from the Humane Society. There have been anonymous reports of animal abuse on set, and we’re obligated to investigate. So you will have to come with them.”

Both Isaac and Jane were astonished. However, the cats remained unmoved, even after the muscle from the Humane Society herded their trainer from the room. And that’s how Isaac found himself alone with the cats from *Super Jesus 2*. There wasn’t much internal debate about

what to do next. How could Anne curse him for a thousand years if he gave her a perfect doppelganger to Captain Flapjacks? Theoretically, any of these cats could very well be the cat in question, and if it wasn't, then how could he be blamed for such an innocent mistake? It was the ultimate case of plausible deniability.

Isaac called "Captain Flapjacks" out to the room on the off chance the cat would respond like a dog, but it didn't provoke a reaction from any of his audience members. So there was only one thing left to do. Isaac, the fledgling wizard, invoked the only divining incantation he knew, "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe, catch a tiger by the toe...."

## Chapter 12

Eeny-meeny-miny-moe had served Isaac well. Given the circumstances, the cat he chose made for a surprisingly good kidnap victim, especially once it settled into a Birkan bag Isaac swiped from the trainer's room. The only exception was when the cat got its hackles up while bypassing Super Jesus's trailer on their way out of the lot. Isaac was tempted to stop in and interrogate the movie star, but he decided against it, not with the hot property he had pocketed away in his purse. Too risky. This was a heist. He had to play it safe. Under the stress and duress of a guilty conscience, Isaac sweated out his escape even though no one even gave him so much as a second look as he left the lot. Despite the Birkan bag's bulk, loud polka dot design, and the occasional meow that emanated from it, it was about as conspicuous on the Fox Studios lot as a blue hat was in Dodger Stadium. No one paid him any mind.

In a war to be noticed, fashion in LA was an arms race. There was almost nothing you could wear in the city that could attract the eye, or even the ire, of others, no matter how wild. A purse-carrying male in a town abutting West Hollywood doesn't even register. Reduced to its most elemental nature, being a star was nothing more than the amount of attention you could attract, whether you measured attention by followers, subscribers, or ticket sales. The phrase "to pay attention" was no idiom. It was a reality. Attention was the city's currency, and everyone was hell-bent on amassing as much as possible. But stardom was a zero-sum game, so people were equally careful not to give any of their attention away, especially on someone as low rent as Isaac. These rules were unspoken but acknowledged by everyone.

Whenever two denizens of LA pass each other in the street, neither will glance at the other if they can help it. So instead, they will each do their best to remain cool and self-possessed. But sometimes the right outfit, if stylish enough, can force someone to break and look up from their phone, and give the other notice. When they do, it's an act of submission, akin to a dog rolling over onto its belly before the alpha, an admission that the other party is a bigger star than them. But, of course, no one on the Fox lot would endure such humiliation for a boy with a Birkan bag, so Isaac slipped out of the lot unnoticed, even if there was something fuzzy-wuzzy sticking out of the top of his purse.

As he drove towards Venice, the traffic was thick as thieves, Isaac dad-joked to himself. He wasn't taking any chances, heading straight for Anne's office without detour and with the cat sitting in the passenger seat. The cat's eyes peered out over the edge of the purse to look on with interest at an El Pollo Loco crawling by the window.

Isaac did his best to cover his ass for bailing on work by texting Liz an excuse. He went with something that she'd believe, a stomach ache, blaming his indigestion on his overindulgence of sour lox at the craft services table. After Isaac texted Liz, he set his phone to do not disturb, knowing full well she would do her job and follow up with him. He hated that about her.

Isaac was anxious but couldn't help it with Super Jesus watching him. No matter what road he was on, he passed under *Super Jesus* billboard after *Super Jesus* billboard. He counted 33 of them before he reached west of the 405, and the June Gloom pulled the curtains down over the entire exercise. They were proliferating. While at a red light, he watched a worker with a bucket of paste slap up another *Super Jesus* advertisement, but this one was at a bus stop.

Once, Isaac had read a Reddit post suggesting LA traffic wasn't a naturally occurring phenomenon but was manufactured, on purpose, a dark conspiracy conceived by Big Billboard. The idea was simple: every extra minute a commuter was stuck in traffic was an extra minute they could consume billboard content, so transportation bureaucrats citywide were threatened and bribed by Big Billboard until they turned every stoplight red and put a pothole in every road. It was the perfect plan until the advent of the smartphone, and everyone began to text and drive. This then gave rise to more billboards, new ones which implored people to keep their eyes off their phones in the name of traffic safety. Isaac was convinced of this truth after watching a supplemental Youtube video linked by the original Reddit page, and he could never look at another billboard the same way again.

Venice was a mess. It took Isaac twenty bucks worth of parking and fifteen blocks worth of walking to reach Anne's office. He sighed, beaten down. There used to be a time when you could cruise around Lincoln Blvd after lunch on a Tuesday and get curbside parking wherever you wanted, unimpeded, but those days were long gone. Thanks, Obama! He thought fondly of the new Metro installations going up all around the city and the salvation they promised. But was it too little, too late? This city needed a miracle to fight off overpopulation.

Unfortunately, even the dreariness of the June Gloom couldn't chase people away, so Isaac kept the Birman hidden in his purse and away from prying eyes. The boardwalk was full of bathing suit-clad people cursing the clouds in foreign tongues, tourists from all over the world

who booked their trips and were ignorant of the foggy phenomenon that descended every year like clockwork. A terrible chill struck Isaac. Had he discovered something? Was the June Gloom part of the conspiracy? Could the heavy cloud cover and the lack of sun account for the increased vampire activity?

When Isaac arrived at Anne's, he could scarcely believe his eyes. For who should be leaving their appointment with their psychic but the one and only Margot Robbie? "Holy fuck," was all Isaac could mutter. Even the cat pawed its way to the top of the purse to get a glance at her. Isaac tried to see if the cat recognized her and vice versa, but he couldn't say.

"Hello there, mate!" Margot offered to Isaac in a pleasant Australian accent that Isaac hadn't been expecting. She stunned him. At that moment, he realized the difference between seeing a celebrity and seeing a star. It wasn't the beauty that distinguished the two groups but their gravitational pull. Margot was a star.

All he could do was bear it all to her, "I dream about you."

"That's very kind of you to say." Margot didn't break character, having heard this comment many times before. Plus, she was intrigued by the sad look on Isaac's face. That was new for her. But he was sad because he had never imagined an Australian accent when reading the narrator's voice in his script. So was it possible Margot Robbie wasn't the cat burglar? No, Isaac thought. It had to be her.

"Can I hold him?" Margot gasped, finally noticing the cat.

"Meow," the cat suggested.

"Sure," Isaac said as he held the purse open for her without a second thought.

"He's beautiful!" Margot remarked, taking the cat out of the bag. "What an absolutely precious beast." The cat nuzzled Margot in response to her compliment.

"You two look like old friends," he tested her.

"I know, right?" She held the cat up to her face, cheek-to-cheek, and smiled.

"Are you?" Isaac's eyes brightened.

"What do you mean?"

"Have you seen him before? Would you consider yourself friends or maybe acquaintances, or does he skipper your boat, perchance, as a captain would?"

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure of his acquaintance." She laughed, and her laugh held the same bright, airy tones as fine china does when clinking at high tea. Not that Isaac had ever heard such euphoric sounds, but he imagined them from time to time in a lonely moment. Margot shook the cat's paw, saying, "Nice to meet you." She looked at Isaac to fill in the blank of the cat's name.

“Captain Flapjacks. He belongs to Anne.”

Her eyes narrowed with distrust. “Does she know you have her cat?”

“Not yet.”

“Meow,” Anne called out from behind Margot. She stood at her front door.

“Meow,” the cat responded in kind.

“Agreed. Thank you, Margot. I’ll take it from here.” Anne came over and took the cat from Margot’s arms with ease. Isaac marveled at how effortlessly she operated around Margot.

Weightless, Anne was utterly resistant to her gravity. “I’ll see you next week, and try to text me next time if you’re running late.” She reminded Margot as she was leaving.

“You got it, Anne. G’day!” When Margot passed Isaac, he could taste her heat on his tongue. He savored it before following Anne’s lead. She was waving him into her house office.

Anne didn’t waste any time. “Explain yourself.”

“Er,” Isaac was taken off guard by her accusatory tone. “I found Captain Flapjacks, so it’s time to lift whatever curse you put on me and give me my reward.” Isaac shooed another one of Anne’s cats away from his feet. He was mad at himself for forgetting to negotiate the price of the reward before she obtained possession of her prize. He had lost all his leverage. “And what was the reward again?”

“The reward is not monetary in nature,” Anne explained, “but spiritual.” She waited until Isaac finished his eye roll before continuing, “On your deathbed, you will receive total consciousness. So you got that going for you.”

“Great,” Isaac sighed.

“But that’s only reserved for the person who procures the correct cat.” Anne thrust Captain Flapjacks back into Isaac’s arms. He gathered the creature clumsily, almost fumbling the exchange, and received several scratches for his efforts. “I don’t accept imposters.”

Isaac tensed up. “Imposters?”

“That’s not Captain Flapjacks. He’s a cheap imitation. I asked for Heinz, and you gave me Hunt’s. No offense to you, Niles.”

“Who’s Niles?”

“Me—,” the cat in Isaac’s arm began, “—ow.”

“Why did you think you could pull one over on me? The only reason I’ve entertained this hoax for so long is that I didn’t want to publicly undress you in front of Margot. Because I thought that maybe a psycho like you would get off on that, the humiliation.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Isaac said as coyly as he could, but Anne was not buying what he was selling. “Well, you’re not the only one who can call B.S. around here.”

You're as big a liar as I am. I know Captain Flapjacks isn't your cat, and I don't want to be a party to whatever sick scheme you're concocting, either. Niles belongs to someone on the *Super Jesus* set. Her name is Jane Furbury. I'm sure Captain Flapjacks belongs to her, too."

"Never heard of her." Anne crossed her arms.

"So it's your cat?"

"I never said that either. I was entrusted with Captain Flapjack's care while his owner is out of town."

Isaac's ears perked up. "Who's the owner?"

"I'd tell you, but the owner is a client of mine, and the psychic-client privilege is a principle sacred to psychics everywhere. I uphold it at all costs."

Isaac's eyes searched the wall of fame behind Anne for the potential owner. "Can you tell me if your client is associated in any way with *Super Jesus* or the *Super Jesus 2* production?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny," she paused, "mostly because I'm ignorant on the subject. I'm not a workplace-focused psychic, okay?"

"Great," Isaac sighed. "Well, what kind of psychic are you anyway?"

"The kind who could see right through your fraud immediately," she fumed.

"Fair." Isaac slumped into a seat, and Niles settled on his lap.

"How about we work together on this? In your capacity as a psychic, I will hire you to advise me on information about the cat's owner. It won't be *you* telling me about the owner, but the stars will tell me or whatever tool you use."

"Stop it. You're insulting me. I don't do loopholes. As a psychic, I firmly believe that one should always follow the spirit of the law rather than the letter. Plus, there's no way you can afford my rates, and I don't work pro bono."

"Fine." Isaac threw up his hands, spooking the cat. Niles leaped off to mingle with the other cats in the room. "Why not just use your powers to locate Captain Flapjacks, then? What do you need me for?"

"Because it's a cat. Getting a psychic reading on a cat is like asking for blood from a stone."

"You can't do that either?"

"If you're interested in that sort of service, then I can refer you to an accomplished alchemist."

"A magic eight ball seems to be more accomplished than you."

“You think you’re being funny, but magic eight balls are exactly that, magic. I own several. You don’t get it. Cats are tricky little bastards. They’re mostly immune to charms, mine included.”

“Cats?”

“Let me guess. You believe in science?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“Good. Because both scientists and psychics agree on cat power. In fact, a physicist is just a psychic but by another name.”

“You’re all in agreement on cat power?” Isaac repeated himself, seeking confirmation.

“Cat power? Like horsepower, but with cats? Cat power.”

“Yes. Can I assume you know Schrodinger’s cat?”

“Uh, of course, but feel free to refresh my memory.”

“It’s a physics paradox about quantum mechanics and cat poison.”

“...”

“All right,” Anne took a deep breath, “try and keep up with me because explaining Schrodinger’s cat is often a thankless task. First, pretend there’s a box.”

“What’s in the box?”

“A cat. And the box is rigged with poison to be released by a special trigger.”

“A special trigger?”

“Yup. The trigger is set to go off whenever it meets a certain quantum mechanic condition.”

“A certain quantum mechanic condition? What’s that?”

“The act of observation is the trigger. Whenever the person running this test-”

“Schrodinger? Is that the person?”

“Sure. Wherever Schrodinger looks into the box, it sets off the trigger, and there’s a 50/50 chance the poison is released, but until they look into the box, the poison is both released and not released because it’s waiting to be observed.”

“So, is the cat dead?”

“Yes. And it’s alive. That’s the trick of quantum mechanics.”

“How?”

“Exactly. That question has been a real pickle in the science community, so they decided to get to the bottom of it and bring the thought experiment into the real world. They got the money. They got the cat. They got the poison. And they ran the experiment.” Her eyes glistened, baiting him into begging her for more.

He obliged, with bated breath, "And?"

"They ran the experiment a thousand times over. Again and again and again. They expected to find a dead cat in half of their observations, you know, because of the 50/50 rule, but that's not what happened."

"What happened?"

"Every time they opened the box, the cat was alive."

"..."

"They realized that the prime observer, the being who would set off the poison trigger, through observation, wasn't the scientist. It was the cat, and that cat was always present in the box, so the trigger was never really activated."

"..."

"Prior to this moment, there was an understanding that only humans could meet the quantum mechanic condition to set off the trigger, but cats, man. They discovered that cats got their own cosmic credentials."

"Oh, yeah. Totally." Isaac did his best to feign a eureka moment for himself, but it fell flat.

"They've since rerun the experiment, looking for other animals that can pull off the same trick, but no. Dogs, monkeys, you name it. Nothing. Just cats. And us. Curious, isn't it? There's something unique about them. It's why I have so many." She looked around at the cats that littered her office, laying across the furniture like coats at a party.

"Did they try lizards?" Isaac wondered.

"Or snakes?" Anne laughed. "I don't know. I'll have to ask."

"Who are you going to ask?"

"No one, Isaac. It was only an expression."

"Oh, sorry," Isaac blushed. "I mean, who discovered cat power? Feels like I should have heard about this."

"The Nazis figured it out, of course. Because of that, the mainstream media covered it up, but you can still find the info on the internet's darkest corners or if you ask your friendly neighborhood psychic."

"The Nazis?" Isaac groaned. "Why is it always the Nazis?"

"The Nazis were always into the occult. They were looking into everything. Hollow-earth. UFOs. Searches for the Holy Grail. Et Cetra. Anything that could swing the tide of the war was considered a subject of interest. So, naturally, these forays led them to investigate Cat Power, and the Allies found their cat-related research materials when they liberated Auschwitz, but they had to hush it all up."

“Why?”

“Because the higher-ups at the time felt the discovery of cat power would be used to discredit God since it puts cats and humans on equal cosmic footing. Thus cat power was considered communist.”

“Oh,” was all that Isaac could offer in response. Even after a couple of weird days, this was beyond all belief.

“Humans tend to be quite insecure about their position in the food chain.”

“What does cat power do exactly? The only cat powers I’m familiar with are that they always land on their feet and they can lick their balls. Is there some other cool quirk?”

“Quark,” Anne corrected, “and their power is a little more subtle than that.” But Isaac got the impression that she was guessing.

“Has anybody from the *Super Jesus 2* production come to you looking for information about the cat? Maybe a producer named Liz? She’s cute.”

“No.”

“I would expect a visit shortly. You can consider that a psychic prediction of my own from me to you. Free of charge.”

“Why’s that?”

“Based on the review of my case notes, it’s my conclusion that whoever dropped off the cat to you was an animal rights activist and stole it from the set of *Super Jesus 2*. Because you won’t lend me your psychic abilities, if you have any at all, we have to go about this the old-fashioned way. Question and answer.”

“*Gunga galunga!*” Anne exclaimed with extreme exhaustion.

“I’m sorry?”

“You have successfully goaded me into a position where I feel as if I have to prove myself to you.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You will be after I’m done with you.” Anne grabbed her tarot cards and began shuffling. When she was satisfied with the shuffle, she dealt off the bottom of the deck. “Here we go.”

Isaac reached for it. “Wait. I want to pick. Don’t I get to choose my destiny? That’s something I’ve been working on with my therapist.”

“No, no,” she said as she slapped his hand away. “That’s the problem with most amateur psychics. They let their clients get too involved, but the secret to tarot cards is that the cards need to be handled by a true believer. Only the heart of the cards can reveal what’s in your own heart.”

“Bullshit. Heart of the cards. That’s just something out of *Yu-Gi-Oh!*”

“*Yu-Gi-Oh!* Is more fact than fiction, just so you know I’d be careful when mocking it.”

She began to flip the cards over, placing them in an arrangement that mystified Isaac, but any trained tarot user would recognize the pattern as the *kabbalah* or the Tree of Life design. Anne analyzed the cards. “Oh no.”

“What?” Isaac begged.

Anne looked at the cards still in her hand, examining them as if something was malfunctioning. “This can’t be. Impossible!” She touched some of the flipped cards in sequence to double-check their materiality. It was what it was.

Isaac marveled at the cards, too, mirroring her astonishment. Even though he didn’t understand what he was looking at, he respected the cards since they produced the first crack in Anne’s calm facade. All the flipped cards had a roman numeral attached to them, but some had different designators. Isaac found the ones with words the easiest to understand. “The Fool” that sat at the top of the pattern seemed self-explanatory. The ones with the swords and cups were a little harder to suss out their meaning. Anne had to tell him.

“You’re going to have to save the world,” Anne observed, picking up the last card in the pattern, an upside-down card emblazoned with a big, blue Earth. It formed the trunk of the Tree of Life.

Isaac gulped, unhearing. His attention was elsewhere. “What do you suppose this one signifies?” He pointed to the card in the middle labeled “Death.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Anne dismissed with a wave of the hand. “What we need to figure out is how you’re supposed to save the world.”

“Excuse me, but I am very worried about it. What good is saving the world if I’m not around to be in it?”

“You’re a Slytherin, aren’t you?”

“Only on the weekends.”

“What the fuck does that mean? Only on the weekends?”

Isaac shrugged, embarrassed. “I don’t know. It was an expression. I thought it would be witty.”

“Please don’t try to be witty again.” Anne pursed her lips and turned her attention back to the cards. She stared at them with total transfixion. “I got it.”

“Am I dead?”

“Not yet.”

“Not yet?”

“Don’t be so boring, Isaac. Everyone dies. And the card’s reading doesn’t have to be so literal. They’re often not. These are symbols, okay? More of a metaphor than anything else, but mystical. Is the interpretation sometimes literal, and you’ll die while trying to save the world? Sure. Probably. But not always. It could mean everyone else will die if you don’t save the world. Anyway. You have nothing to fear, remember? You don’t think I’m any better than a magic eight ball, so what do you care if I pulled the death card for you?”

Isaac grimaced as Anne looked at the cards again, trying her best to remember where she had left off before he interrupted her. She picked up the Queen of Wands card. “Oh, yeah. To save the world, you will have to save the cat. You have to save Captain Flapjacks. The real Captain Flapjacks. No messing around this time, Isaac. The fate of the whole world weighs in the balance.”

“Save the cat, save the world?” Isaac croaked. He was dumbfounded and a little afraid after being once again asked to save a cat. What did it mean? He took the Queen of Wands card from her hand and examined its picture. The queen was dressed in a golden, flowing robe and sat atop a tall, ornate throne against a backdrop of three pyramids. The queen was beautiful, reminding him again of Margot Robbie and the woman of his dreams. Isaac’s heart skipped a beat. Sitting at the golden queen’s feet was a little black cat. Just Isaac’s luck. “Save the cat, save the world,” he muttered, the weight of his responsibility finally settling on his shoulders.

“Save the cat. Save the world.” Anne confirmed, deepening Isaac’s despair.

“Save the world from what?”

“I don’t know. The cards don’t say. But feel free to pick your poison. Climate change. Nuclear war. Zombie apocalypse.”

Isaac trembled at the thought. “How’s a cat going to prevent climate change?”

“I don’t know. Cats are tricky little bastards, remember?”

“But if they’re so tricky, how do you know they’re telling you to save them? What if they’re saying something else?” Isaac tried.

“Oh, it’s not the cats speaking to me. They’re a black box. It’s the world that’s speaking to me. It’s the world that’s crying out for you to save it, Isaac. Save the cat and save the world.” She took his hand with tender sympathy. “Congratulations.”

“...” Isaac began to cry.

## Chapter 13

Isaac left Anne's office with three things: the stolen Birkin bag, Niles the cat, and a mission to save the world. World savior was a heavy cross to bear, but Isaac thought he could handle it. Anne's pep talk had helped him gather his courage. After all, he was a wizard with the world's confidence at his back. The world wasn't asking a powerful psychic like Anne to save it. Instead, the world asked humble Isaac, confirming what he already knew. He was special. Plus, if saving the world didn't get him off the Slytherin shit list, nothing would.

His next step was to question Jane Furbury for more information. It only made sense to go straight to the source of the look-alike cats. And with one of her treasured cats as a hostage, Isaac felt confident he could press her for some answers. But before Isaac could meet with her, he'd have to have a place to meet, and he didn't know where she lived, yet. He reasoned that she would be off the clock by now, and, given her profession as a cat lady, he guessed he could find her at home, alone.

Traffic was sitting at a standstill on Lincoln as Isaac headed to his apartment, so he took the opportunity to listen to a voicemail Dr. Rousseau left him. According to the message, Isaac was to call him back as soon as possible and confirm their next appointment, but Isaac used his phone to text Liz instead. He asked her for Jane's home address.

Isaac's stoplight went through an entire cycle, red to green and back to red again, without him moving a single car length, but he didn't let it get to him. Not today. Not with the fate of the world in question. Isaac thought he should appreciate every little moment he was given, even if he was stuck in traffic, so he rolled down his window to stop and smell the roses, and the scent that wafted back in from the streets smelled like charred meat.

There was a taco stand on the sidewalk nearest to Isaac. String lights accented it, but Isaac couldn't make out the features of the hungry patrons lined up around the block. Smoke from the grill obscured them, turning them into specters. It billowed out into the night in waves, but it was impossible to tell where the smoke ended and the fog began. The gray night was oppressive. Aside from the neon store signs up and down the boulevard, the blooming bougainvillea was the only other oasis of color that stood firm against the June Gloom. The pink flowers were everywhere, wherever there was a fence to separate neighbors from one another.

Taking it all in, a wave of ecstatic depression passed through Isaac's nervous system. The vibes were immaculate. He felt like he was living inside a sixteen-year-old girl's moody Tumblr post. Skinny love.

An hour later, Liz texted Isaac back as he entered his apartment. Not only was she not going to divulge the breeder's address to him, but now she wanted to know why he wanted the address in the first place. And where were his script pages? She needed them by the end of the day—Mr. Lennox's orders. Isaac knew what he had to do, ghost her, so he turned off his phone and went to find Seth, who was alone, sitting on their couch and cleaning Isaac's break-in-case-of-emergency-zombie-apocalypse pistol for him.

"Hey, Seth..."

"This is a beautiful piece, Isaac. Such a shame that it looks like it's never been fired."

"Thank you," Isaac gulped. "I've been saving it for a rainy day."

"Tough to find one of those in southern California."

"On another note," Isaac began, uncomfortable with Seth's comment, "how would you rate your skills in locating the home address of a person of interest?"

"Fair to good, I'd say. I used to run a little recon back in the day. What you got?"

Isaac told Seth everything he knew about Jane, which didn't take more than three sentences. When Isaac finished, Seth went right to work and quickly discovered that the name of the breeder, Jane Furbury, was only a stage name. Her true identity was a mystery. The best lead they got on her location was found by creeping on her Instagram account, @Furbury\_fur\_babies. Isaac and Seth became her 9,834th and 9,835th followers, respectively.

Jane's account brand was your general basic-bitch vibe. Her pictures included little succulent plants, latte foam art, and scenes from a thrifting adventure. After scrolling through several pages of similar dreck, Seth wondered aloud if Jane's labias were also colored Millennial pink and how he'd like to find out. But what separated Jane from her influencer peers was that each picture included a movie star cat in the frame, even the ones where Jane was in public. Isaac would have figured a cat at brunch would have violated a health code or two, but apparently not. While Isaac examined a photo of a shabby-chic tabby cat posed with a Taylor Swift album, he thought to himself: how powerful could cats be if they let themselves be subjected to such abject humiliation?

The pictures most beneficial to Isaac's ends were the ones set at Jane's house, especially those taken on her balcony. Seth had this neat little skill where he could use the relative sizes of landmarks in the background to help triangulate her location. After crunching the numbers, Seth determined that Jane lived in the Silver Lake neighborhood, a conclusion

corroborated by the appearance of the actual Silver Lake in the background of numerous photos. Further assisting their efforts, Jane attached a geotag to a few of her photos. That was the good news. The bad news was the traffic report to Silver Lake. Was saving the world worth going eastbound on the 10? Isaac and Seth debated the question before deciding the world could wait.

There was no easy access to Silver Lake since the hipster enclave was positioned right in the middle of the Bermuda triangle formed by the binary code of freeways known as the 101, the 110, and the 10. Seth said he had an easier time infiltrating the Korean DMZ at high noon than breaching Silverlake. He wasn't joking. There was nothing to do but bide their time. Eventually, the good people of LA would clear off the roads, return home, and contend with their nightly existential crisis brought upon by the paradox of choice of aimlessly surfing Netflix. Isaac envied their simple lives. He missed the lifestyle, especially as he strapped on his seatbelt, with Niles on his lap, when it was time to leave.

Rush hour may have been over, but they didn't account for the Dodger homestand, which thickened traffic ten or so blocks from their destination, adding another hour to their ETA. By the time they reached the right part of Silver Lake, it was nearly midnight. Seth put the car into a crawl as they navigated the serpentine hills. Isaac hung out the passenger's side window with his phone out, doing his best to match the landscape they were passing with the landscapes found on Jane's Instagram photos, a Herculean task made nigh impossible at night.

The open window had the added benefit of letting some fresh air into the car, a kind consideration for Seth, whose cat allergies were acting up. Already, several of his sneezes triggered Isaac's PTSD, who couldn't help but white knuckle his armrest and pray for Seth not to lose control of the car as his dad once did. Unfortunately for Isaac, his out-sized reactions only encouraged Seth to sneeze more to prank him.

Finally, after 30 minutes of combing through the area, they were ready to give up. They'd have to return in the morning and hope a little sun would shine some light on the situation. Isaac wondered aloud if it would be easier to find an Airbnb for the night rather than traverse the city again, but Niles vetoed the idea when he began yowling in alarm. Isaac tried to shush the cat but failed. Before Isaac could react, the cat leaped from Isaac's arms and flew out the open passenger window.

"Shit!" Isaac screamed in horror. Seth pulled the car off to the side of the road, so Isaac could race out to chase Niles. "Come back. Heel! Heel!" Despite his commands, the Birman bounded into the night without pausing to look back at Isaac, who continued his pursuit. Chasing after Niles was like trying to get a table at Jon & Vinny's on a Friday night —

impossible. Isaac weaved through thickets, hurdled white picket fences, and dodged abstract-shaped topiary but couldn't close the gap on Niles. It was an achievement just to keep the cat in sight. Isaac was out of breath and about to call it quits when Niles abruptly stopped in front of a modest, one-story house that sat alone at the end of a street.

They were at Jane Furbaby's house. The multitude of cats gave it away. They littered the lawn, and so did their busted kennels, with their doors swinging freely in the wind. One cat, two cats, red cats, and Russian blue cats, but with all of these cats surrounding him, it only made it more obvious to Isaac that there weren't any cats of the Niles/Captain Flapjacks make and model, the mythical Birman.

Isaac didn't understand. Could these cats really contain such power as to make Anne cower before them? It was hard to believe one of them was the key to saving the world until their glow-in-the-dark eyes followed Isaac while he walked toward the house, boring a million holes into his soul. Isaac stared back at the cats hard, but he eventually folded, unable to meet their gaze any longer, choosing instead to submit to them by looking at his feet as he ascended the porch steps to follow Niles.

When Isaac saw his feet land on the welcome mat, he looked up, and the hairs on Isaac's neck reached for the sky. Even though the front door was wide open, beckoning him to enter, the inside of the house was dark and unwelcoming. Isaac rang the bell as a courtesy, but it went unanswered except by the cats inside, who meowed as one.

Spookier still, Isaac's call should have been answered. Someone should have been home. There were two cars in the driveway. He surmised the first one belonged to Jane based on its vanity license plate that read "KATQUEN." The other, parked behind the first, was a nondescript silver Prius, a car so ubiquitous in LA that Isaac's eyes roved over it without registering it.

"Hello?" Isaac called out once he stepped inside the house, but nothing human responded. Carefully, he stepped around and over the resident cats as he pushed further into the darkened house, feeling them writhe around his legs. The soft sensation of their fur was unnerving. There were also more empty cages and carriers in here, some of which he recognized from the *Super Jesus* set as belonging to the Birmans. Whoever was here was here for a jailbreak.

Isaac started his search for Jane by following the custom catwalk that ran along the wall, guessing that it would lead him to the breeder's bedroom, but he never made it that far. His foot shot out from underneath him to stop his forward progress. It flew into the air as the slip turned

into a fall, and he hit the floor with a dull thud. He looked around for a banana peel to blame, but none was found. Instead, he found a pool of blood.

Screaming, Isaac scrambled back to his feet. That's when he saw the motionless mass lying on the kitchen floor.

"*Dios Mio,*" Isaac whistled. He had found Jane Furbury all right. Above her body was a framed poster of a cat. It showed a cat clinging to its life from the end of a frayed rope, and the words printed below it read, "Hang in There."

When Isaac's breath and pulse returned to their regular rates, he tip-toed over to the corpse to examine it. It was his first dead body. Finally! The wait was over. He had come so far since that day at the county morgue. Had he matured? Had he leveled up? He didn't feel any different. Was this all there was? He couldn't understand what all the hype was about. How underwhelming. If he ever returned to Dr. Rousseau, he would have to bring this up during their session.

But never mind that. This was Isaac's chance to solve a crime and be the hero. He didn't binge-watch *CSI: Miami* for nothing. A part of him had always known he would need the skills of a crime scene forensics team. So he did what he was trained to do. He stood up, looked off into the middle distance, and muttered with as much David Caruso as he could muster, "This is going to be one long cat nap."

After letting his one-liner linger in the air for a dramatic beat, Isaac dug into the scene. This was indeed a rare opportunity. If he was ever going to do Seth a solid and figure out if Jane's labias were colored Millennial pink, then now was the time. Did Seth specify whether he was talking about the innie or the outie labia? Isaac guessed the outie because, for a white girl, he thought a Millennial pink innie was the cost of doing business.

But never mind that! Again! He had to focus on the murder. The first clue was located on her neck, where the breeder's jugular was severed. It was gruesome. This was either a crime of passion or someone sending a message. It was a true wonder! He had never seen a pair of tonsils from this angle before, so he took another moment to stare and admire the rare sight. It was like sneaking a peek at the dark side of the moon.

Isaac began to wonder if this was the work of vampires. The neck wound was the leading indicator, and it fit the pattern of clues he had gathered so far, but working against his pet theory was the large amount of blood left behind. Would a vampire leave so much food on his plate? Were there no starving vampires in India? And how did vampires survive a full moon? Wasn't moonlight just sunlight but through the transitive property? Is that why werewolves were created? To ensure humanity was subject to some sort of fear through all phases of the lunar

cycle? Questions abound for Isaac, but his thoughts were interrupted by a sputtering cough from the body beside him.

“You’re alive!” Isaac jumped back, startled.

The breeder’s eyes fluttered open. “Save...” She struggled to choke out the words due to the hole in her neck. “Save...”

“I’ll save you,” Isaac assured her. “Don’t worry. Who did this? I’ll avenge you in the name of your ancestors.”

“Save... the... cat...” were the breeder’s last words.

Isaac froze. “What did you say?”

“...”

“What did you say?” Isaac shook her, but that didn’t work either. She wasn’t going to respond. The light had left her eyes. Now he was viewing his first dead body.

Had he heard her right? Her words were garbled since she was working with half a voice box. He couldn’t understand what was happening. Isaac began to cry for himself.

“What are you doing here?” a cold voice accused Isaac. He turned around to discover Liz standing behind him. “What have you done?” The question seemed rather rhetorical to Isaac, a total absence of surprise on her part.

“Nothing!” Isaac scrambled away from the corpse. He put his hands up in a gesture of non-aggression, except the move backfired when she saw how red they were. “It’s not what it looks like,” Isaac argued, but Liz wasn’t ready to take any chances. She whipped a gun out of her waistband and leveled it coolly at Isaac, hand steady. The weapon was slim, but that didn’t make it any less menacing to Isaac. He began sweating, and his skin felt scaly as the adrenaline kicked into his system.

“Why do you have a gun?” Isaac tried.

“You’re still so new to the industry.” Liz chuckled, but she didn’t put any fun into it. “Now tell me what you’ve done with the Birmans.”

“I only had one. Niles was his name.”

“I know Niles.”

“He led me here. I swear. He’ll tell you,” Isaac pleaded. “You’re right. I am new to the industry. As I left the set, Niles followed me out. I wasn’t going to be rude and push him away. Are you not supposed to take the props home? Was that wrong?”

“No, you’re not supposed to take the cats home with you.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know any better. We’ll just have to chalk this all up to a big misunderstanding. Consider it strike one. Does that sound fair?”

“How about I count to three instead?” Liz said while slipping the safety off the gun. She had Isaac right where she wanted, but not for long. A random black cat leaped at her, claws extended. They sank into Liz when the cat landed on her ankle. It hurt her like hell, and the pain only worsened when the cat began climbing up her leg, moving to her more fleshy and sensitive areas of her body. Liz swung around, doing her best to shake the cat off her. It didn’t work. She even whiffed several times as she tried to pistol whip the cat.

Isaac took advantage of the mayhem by letting his animal instincts take over and tackled Liz to the ground. He dislodged the cat in the collision, but that didn’t matter much because he had her underneath him. She was under his control. The gun Liz dropped in the commotion had skittered away to a safe distance. He could kill her if he wanted.

“Listen,” Isaac demanded while he held her wrists. “I found her like that. I only got to her a minute ago. Honest. Seth, my roomie, he’s here. He can vouch for my whereabouts. Seth!” Isaac screamed. “Seth!” He looked around, but Seth was nowhere to be found, and neither was Niles.

Liz struggled to free herself from Isaac’s clutches, but it was to no avail. She panicked, surprised by the strength his slight frame held. Liz had underestimated him. Her Wednesday night Krav Maga classes did not prepare her for this moment, and she was beginning to freak out. That’s when Isaac let her go. “We’re on the same team,” he said. “I don’t think you murdered the breeder either.”

“Her name’s Jane.”

“It’s not your fault,” Isaac said in his best Robin Williams from *Good Will Hunting* impression. “It’s not your fault.”

“I know that!” she spat, rubbing her wrists to soothe them.

Screeching cats interrupted Liz before she could go on a rant, but the noise stopped as suddenly as it started. Isaac’s chest grew tight with fear. He could feel something approaching. It was the same stalking sensation that had overwhelmed him in Beverly Hills when he was at Super Jesus’s house. He had felt hunted then, and he felt hunted now. His mind flashed to his last meeting with Anne and how she had foretold his saving of the world. But what danger would he be protecting it from? Anne said she didn’t know, but Isaac suspected she just didn’t want to tell him. His imagination now filled in the blanks with vampires, Nazis, and Illuminati child killers.

Isaac clutched his heart when two golden eyes broke the darkness, reminding Isaac of the final scene in his dream-script. Again, his soul felt exposed under their glare, just as the cats had made him feel on the lawn, except these eyes floated above the floor at a height that meant this was no ordinary house cat.

A low, guttural snarl replaced the silence. Liz and Isaac crept closer to one another without looking at each other. Then Isaac screamed, but Liz kept her head about her. “So it wasn’t you.”

“I knew it.” Isaac whimpered, sensing the ambush lying in wait behind the fog of war. “It’s a vampire.”

“Probably not,” Liz whispered. She looked at her gun in the no-man’s-land between them and the eyes. She mentally measured the distance and then dove for the gun, but she wasn’t alone. Meeting her in the middle was an honest-to-goodness mountain lion. No joke. It was a mountain lion, and it was one Isaac recognized.

Attacking Liz was the mountain lion nearest and dearest to the hearts of all Angelenos, P38, whose exploits in the Hollywood Hills were the subject of local legend and glossy magazine profiles in *National Geographic*. P38 sightings were rare, so Isaac took the time to marvel at the moment. He wouldn’t take this opportunity for granted. Rumour had it that P38 avoided detection by navigating the city using LA’s labyrinthine sewer system, reminding Isaac of another mythical beast, the basilisk that wandered Hogwarts through the school’s plumbing. What a beautiful creature, Isaac thought, as he watched the graceful arc the cat’s paw took as it swung its way down towards Liz. A true specimen!

Wap! The cougar’s paw connected with Liz’s head.

Liz screamed. She was getting the worst of her entanglement with the powerful P38. She was on her back and held up only her forearm as a shield against the P38’s snapping jaws in what Isaac thought was poor form. If Isaac were to give notes, Liz should have also been using her knees to aid her. But to her credit, Isaac admitted, she kept him at bay and suffered only a scratch so far. Then, Liz groped for the gun with her other hand but came up empty-handed. “Help!” she cried.

“Help!” Isaac agreed. He looked around helplessly. Right about now, he expected Seth to barge in and save Liz and his skins. That’s how this should have worked. That’s how his inclusion into Isaac’s life was meant to pay off. Seth had courage. Seth had the training. Seth was battle-hardened. But what did Isaac have? According to his calculations, Isaac was supposed to be in the “Fun and Games” portion of his *Save the Cat* story, but he wasn’t having any fun at all. He was scared.

Isaac couldn’t move as he watched Liz do her best to fend off the beast. She landed a hit when her knee slammed into a soft spot in P-38’s underbelly. Isaac began to back away. As far as he was concerned, Liz had this situation handled. But that lie was less comforting when

Isaac heard her scream. P-38's had a mouthful of hair as he whipped Liz's head back and forth. The sight was horrible.

Isaac could ignore her fate no longer. It was time to get up off the sidelines! So he charged P38, putting his shoulder into the cougar. To his amazement, he was able to send the creature flying. How did he do that? Isaac looked down at himself in wonder. But by doing so, he didn't see that P38 had landed on his feet and was ready to pounce again.

That's when the glint from the gun caught Isaac's eye. He launched himself at it and got it cleanly into his hand, but he missed wildly with all three shots he fired. But they were still effective, as the loud sound from the blasts was enough to scare the great cat away. P38 escaped, slinking off into the night to live and fight another day.

"Thank you. Finally." She turned to Isaac, her chest heaving with exhaustion.

"Anytime." Isaac tried to play it cool. "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"There is something." Liz smiled, prompting Isaac to lean into her, ready for his first kiss.

## Chapter 14

Liz wanted Isaac's pages. That's what he could do for her, turn in his fucking pages. After Isaac saved her from P38, that's what she wanted most. Not a kiss! But his pages. Isaac couldn't believe it. How shallow was she? Traumatic events were supposed to be a bonding experience. Did Isaac do something wrong? "I don't understand," he complained to her. Why did he save her from certain death if she was going to hassle him for his homework?

The two of them sat in one of the many 24-hour diners off the 10. Liz had driven them in her Prius after Seth failed to come to their rescue or show up at all. The diner resided about halfway between Silver Lake and Isaac's apartment. Even though they had already ordered food, Isaac continued reviewing the modest all-day breakfast menu, which offered more items on the steak-and-eggs side of the spectrum versus the avocado toast side. This place was perfect, an excellent place to lay low. Wherever Isaac adjusted his weight, the duct tape-dotted vinyl booth squeaked from its broken spring. There probably weren't a lot of people pinning this place on Instagram.

Liz sat across from Isaac, paranoid, her eyes watching the parking lot through the adjacent window. They had agreed to leave the crime scene without waiting for the police to arrive, deciding that the authorities probably wouldn't be too receptive to a story about killer cats. To Isaac's surprise, Liz looked no worse for the wear after her tussle with a mountain lion. All she had to do on the way to the diner was comb her hair out and slap a standard-sized band-aide to her arm. It was a miracle. The incident reminded Isaac of those anecdotes about how tornados can pick up an egg, carry it five miles, and drop it off without a scratch. The incredible, edible egg. He was glad he ordered the three-egg breakfast burrito. He'd like to eat Liz's eggs, he thought, like one of those lizards that sneak into a bird's nest while the mother is away.

Isaac shook his head to clear his mind of eggs. "Why does Mr. Lennox want my pages so badly? You can't rush the creative process." He wished he could call Seth in for backup, so Liz couldn't bully him, but Isaac had left his cell phone in his car when he chased Niles. Still, Isaac's hand kept reaching for his back pocket where his phone would be, a recurring phantom pain.

"So you don't have the pages?"

“No.” Embarrassed, Isaac looked away from Liz and found an old CRT TV hung from a cob-webbed corner to distract him. A Lakers highlight package played on its screen.

“Why not?”

“Writer’s block,” Isaac said simply, trying his best to impersonate a real screenwriter and obey the only law of the land regarding Los Angeles ambition: fake it until you make it.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I know how difficult it can be,” Liz cooed, turning on the charm. Despite her and Mr. Lennox’s fair warning to Isaac about using writer’s block as an excuse, this was far from the first time she had encountered this issue with screenwriters. “I’d love to help you. Let’s start with this: what inspires you?” In Liz’s experience, the usual answer to writer’s block for men was whiskey, weed, or women, in some combination, and she knew how to procure all three.

On occasion, Mr. Lennox would ask Liz to play the role of muse herself, and she obliged because the word “no” doesn’t exist in a working producer’s vocabulary, even if it means sucking off Sorkin. Sometimes that was how the industry worked, she justified to herself. Besides, it wasn’t as if Liz was doing anything that Nancy, “the throat G.O.A.T.,” Reagan didn’t do to get ahead. (Pun intended.)

“Dreams,” Isaac said in a frank admission. “I get my ideas from dreams. Have you ever heard of the *Kublah Khan*?”

“Yeah, that’s the club off Sunset, right? I organized a wrap party there once for a Kate Hudson project, so it’s, uh, been a minute, to put it kindly.” Liz continued talking, but Isaac stopped listening. He couldn’t focus his ears because his eyes were demanding too much of his brain’s bandwidth as they concentrated on the gentle curve of Liz’s lips and the dimple in her cheek that flashed on and off while she spoke. “Isaac?”

“What’s that?” Isaac mumbled through a mouthful of breakfast burrito.

Liz sipped her black coffee while she waited for him to stop chewing. “Aside from dreams, how else can we get your *creative juices* flowing?” To warm Isaac up, she decided to start in on the sexual innuendos, but she wasn’t going to fully offer herself to him until both the whiskey and the weed failed to achieve her desired results. “I have access to an expense account that we can get equally creative with.”

“Can I be honest with you?”

“Of course,” Liz said, reaching across the table to cover his hand with hers. Isaac took the gesture to be one of comfort.

“I don’t know if I can write the pages. I’m really going through a bad time. I’m suffering from an aggressive case of imposter syndrome.”

“You? No. That can’t be,” Liz said dryly enough for Isaac to take the comment at face value.

“Yes, me.” Isaac dropped his chin.

“You’re an excellent writer, Isaac.” Liz lowered her voice, “I actually read your pages. And I’m dying to know what’s next, so sorry if you think I’m *riding* you a little hard.”

“Oh—” Isaac stammered, “you haven’t been riding me hard at all.”

“If you’ve ever gotten any weird vibes from me, then it’s only because I’m such a big fan. I’ve caught myself daydreaming about what would happen next in your script. I imagine this is what a Londoner felt like when they awaited the next Dickens serial to drop. I can’t imagine what’s in store for that girl with the cat. Can you give me a spoiler?”

“You— you— think I’m like Charles Dickens?”

“Mhmm. Only cuter.” Liz knew she was laying it on extra thick now, but then again, so was Isaac. Nothing seemed to get through to him, and a fresh wave of paranoia crept over her. Could it be Isaac was only playing dumb to lull her into a false sense of security?

“What the fuck?” Isaac scrambled out of the booth and towards the CRT TV. It was a race to turn up the volume before he missed any more of the running news segment that featured a photograph of Jane Furbury. The screen cut to a field reporter who was interviewing a cop. They stood outside the same house that Isaac and Liz fled only moments ago. This time the lawn was vacant, and not a cat was to be found.

“All indications at this time is that a crazed Instagram stalker from a radical animal rights group committed this crime,” the cop began.

Isaac frowned. That seemed like fake news to him unless P38 was in cahoots with the Humane Society. That was possible, he supposed, but was it likely? He wasn’t so sure.

“That was quick,” Liz remarked after appearing at Isaac’s side.

“They said it was an Instagram killer....” Isaac trailed off, letting Liz’s short-term memory fill in the rest of the implications.

“They’re cops.” She shrugged and touched his arm. “Incompetence is sort of on-brand for them. So, I wouldn’t read too much into it.” Except Isaac continued staring at the screen, ignoring and annoying her. “Can I be honest with you?”

He turned to her. “Absolutely.”

“You’re not a screenwriter.” Time was of the essence, so she decided to change tact, putting the carrot away in favor of the stick. Her frustration had hit its limit. Unfortunately, Isaac’s obtuseness had her off balance, unable to predict any of his moves thus far, and, as a

preeminent producer in the industry, she had always prided herself on her ability to anticipate needs, a skill she featured prominently on her resume.

"I'm sorry?" Isaac filled in the awkwardness with a nervous chuckle.

"You're not a screenwriter. Never were." Liz crossed her arms. "I know you're messing around on set, working some sort of angle. I know you think you're slick as shit and pulling one over on all of us, but you got it backward."

"What?"

"Are you looking for your predecessor? Was your script some sort of blackmail attempt?"

"Predecessor?" Isaac was dumbfounded.

"The previous screenwriter."

"Oh. Oh! Oh? What do I want with him? I thought he was medically exhausted and airing-out in a rehab center in Malibu."

"No," Liz sighed, "that was a lie to throw to the media. The truth is that there is no screenwriter named Irving Hodges."

"..."

"Irving Hodges is a pen name. Here." Liz showed Isaac a picture on her smartphone of a pretty woman who bore more than a passing resemblance to Margot Robbie. Could she be the client who dropped Captain Flapjacks off to Anne? It had to be! He tried to remember if he had seen this face on Anne's wall of fame before, but his memories were covered in too much fuzz to be helpful, as if Isaac's brain had rolled under his futon and was left there for food for his resident dust bunnies. "This is the real screenwriter. Her name is Zee Shirley, she's missing, and it's my job to find her."

"So you're not interested in saving Captain Flapjacks?"

"The cat?" Liz swallowed hard on her hot coffee. "No."

"Where'd she go?"

"I was hoping you were going to tell me. You're my last lead."

"Me? A lead?" Isaac had always wanted to be a lead.

"Don't give me any of this babe-in-the-woods bullshit, Isaac. Remember, I read your screenplay. Dr. Rousseau may have swallowed that story about a dream, but you were far too specific to make that lie pass my sniff test."

"Is that why Mr. Lennox hired me? To find your screenwriter? Not because of my talent?"

"We wanted to see what you'd do next, but time's up. Make your move."

"Does that mean there won't be a *Super Jesus 3*?" Isaac frowned.

“Sure, there will be. The plan is for a trilogy for the trinity, as Mr. Lennox would say, but you won’t be writing it.”

“Who then?”

“Zee, of course, once we find her.”

“I can do it better than her. What about the plot hole where Super Jesus — a Mexican Jew, let me remind you — is revealed to have an uncircumcised dick after he fucks the Maria de Magdalena character? I’d never make that mistake.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Liz sighed, frustrated. “I’ve never even seen *Super Jesus*.”

“What? But everyone has seen *Super Jesus*!”

“Mr. Lennox ordered me not to, stating he wants to keep my eyes virgin, and my perspective fresh on the whole enterprise...” Liz trailed off, not understanding why she explained herself and Mr. Lennox’s experimental methods to this imbecile.

After getting beyond the surface-level reading of their conversation, Isaac muttered to himself, “It happened. For real.” He already suspected his dream was reality, but now he really, really knew it. Any doubt that remained within him disappeared. He could kiss Liz for her validation.

“What happened?”

“My dream.”

Liz stared at Isaac hard, sizing him up. Finally, she relented and slumped her shoulders. Her gamble had come up snake eyes, having misread the situation completely. Her lead was a dead end. She still couldn’t bring herself to believe that Isaac had dreamt it all up. She wasn’t raised to abide by such mysteries, but she did allow herself to believe that Isaac truly believed he had dreamt everything up. He was no different than one of Mr. Lennox’s monkey writers. Maybe Isaac was worse. Isaac wasn’t a monkey so much as he was one of those toy monkeys with the clapping cymbals, but *who* or *what* had turned his wind-up key?

“I’ll help you find her,” Isaac suggested.

“In your dreams?” Liz scoffed. “If that’s all you got, what do I need you for? What do you know that I can’t find in your script?”

Isaac thought about what information he had that he could use as leverage. What had he learned since taking on the case of the missing cat? Not much, Isaac was beginning to realize. He did figure out that a famous mountain lion was working with the Birmans, to free them and do their wet work for them, but Liz already knew that. She had seen Jane’s body after all, or what was left of it.

Isaac also knew that Zee, the screenwriter from his dreams, met with Anne before she went missing, but he couldn't tell Liz. Divulging that morsel of information would require him to betray his client's confidence, and he didn't need another curse. What Isaac had left to offer Liz was this: "What do you know about cat power?"

"Cat power?" Liz sighed, frustrated. "Can you say anything within the bounds of normalcy?"

Isaac would have to try another route. "I can dream more dreams," he pleaded. "Just give me more time to dream."

"I bet."

"What did Super Jesus have to say? He was there, you know..."

"Super Jesus is a bit of an unreliable narrator—" Liz cut herself off before revealing anything consequential. She had already said more than enough. Her disappointment in herself mounted. Maybe a trip to a Malibu retreat was needed for herself. She was a mess. Had she suffered a concussion from her tangle with that damned mountain lion? That was the only explanation she could conceive of for why her interrogation of Isaac had gone so poorly. Her head grew woozy and hurt once she thought of Mr. Lennox's next performance review. She had to get away from Isaac fast. His idiocy was rubbing off on her. "It's late. You should call yourself an Uber."

Instead of doing what he was told, Isaac blurted out, "What can you tell me about that crazy blue light that was shooting down from the ceiling of the Annenberg? Is it a tractor beam or more like a ray blast from the Death Star?" But Isaac's efforts were in vain. She didn't answer that question or any of his follow-up questions about cat power, the Illuminati, or the vampire stalking Century City. (Or was P38 the vampire all along?)

But Isaac wasn't disappointed by Liz's stonewalling. The confirmation that his dream was a reality from someone inside the movie production was more than enough to fan the fire inside him. Still, Liz did her best to rain on his parade by telling him he wasn't welcome to return to the *Super Jesus* set unless he had new pages featuring Zee's whereabouts. Eventually, Isaac agreed to his exile after some more groveling.

When Isaac got home, he fired up the Google machine for background research into Zee Shirley. He found plenty, discovering that the New York holy trinity had profiled her, the *New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, and *The New Yorker*, a rare fate akin to the EGOT. That distinction put her in the company with such luminaries as Fran Lebowitz, Anthony Fauci, and Guy Fieri. But Isaac chose to read the write-up Zee got in *Vanity Fair* instead.

Zee's long story made short was that she was a bit of a cliché. She came from a lower-upper-class background, which resulted in the expected ennui, drug abuse, and daddy issues. Hmm, Isaac thought, maybe she was stuck in a sanitarium somewhere. That explanation for her whereabouts would fit about as well as the dress she wore for the photo inset. Zee was gorgeous and could pass for Margot Robbie with little difficulty. Maybe she was hotter.

As Isaac researched more, he discovered the origin of Zee's pen name. Irving Hodges had been a childhood friend of hers and an apparent fanatic of the New England Patriots, so much so that he committed suicide after the team lost the 2007 Super Bowl, ending their bid for a perfect 19-0 season. After his death, she moved to LA, where she sold her first novel, *Truckstop Glory Hole: A Cinderella Story*, to considerable acclaim. The rest was history. Zee must have used Irving's name on the *Super Jesus* project as a cover and tribute to him.

Isaac's research was interrupted by Seth, who appeared over Isaac's shoulder. In his roommate's hand was a folded-up pizza that threatened to drip oil onto Isaac. Seth used the tip of it to point at Zee's picture. "Oh, I know that chick."

"It's not Margot Robbie," Isaac said dismissively.

"Who said it was?" Seth scoffed.

Shocked, Isaac spun around in his desk chair, knocking into Seth's arm, and got showered by the hot pizza grease. He didn't flinch. "Keep going."

"You don't recognize her?" Seth remarked casually, "She goes to Dr. Rousseau's."

## Chapter 15

Isaac agreed with Seth. They would have to revise their plan of attack regarding Dr. Rousseau. Avoiding the therapist was no longer the smart move. More aggression was needed. With Rousseau's connection to the missing screenwriter, it was now imperative for Isaac to visit the good doctor to suss out whatever he may know about Zee and her disappearance. Isaac didn't have to be Sherlock Holmes nor Seth his Watson for them to know that there was a game afoot. All they had to do now was figure out who was playing and what the rules were. But, of course, they already knew what they were playing for: the fate of the free world.

While Isaac was on his way to Dr. Rousseau's Beverly Hills office, he got stuck in traffic, and the lack of forward motion began to sap him of his strength and resolve. His feet grew colder every time he hit the brakes. Doubts swirled. He had felt a lot more confident when Seth was by his side. But it was too late. Unfortunately, he was trapped, heading into the lion's den alone.

Isaac had to remain calm, except his anxiety continued to grow. A deep breath couldn't calm him down. Instead, he felt boxed in, metaphorically and physically, as the cars beside him pressed in toward his own to cut off any chance of escape. Who could have guessed that saving the world would be so emotionally taxing?

With immense warmth and graciousness, Dr. Rousseau received Isaac into this office. The doctor's demeanor was serene, which made Isaac more nervous. Dr. Rousseau's eyes said one thing, but Isaac could taste the hostility in the air. Dr. Rousseau's body language had the same potential energy as a coiled viper, and the pink Himalayan salt desk lamp threw heavy shadows across half of Dr. Rousseau's face.

"What's up, doc?" Isaac joked in an attempt to break the ice.

"Your behavior this week has left much to be desired, Isaac."

"I see how you could be under that impression."

"What would you like to take responsibility for first? Is it the unprofessional way you've approached your appointment this week? Or the fact you've already been fired from the job I got you and that you're no longer in compliance with the Slytherin Board?"

Isaac whistled. "News sure does travel fast in the industry."

"Oh, Isaac, these weren't mere whispers on the wind I heard."

"Lies travel twice as fast around the world as the truth. So, maybe we should apply that principle to this situation?"

"Mr. Lennox's office contacted me directly," Dr. Rousseau sighed. "I told them you'd produce, and you're crying writer's block on your first day? That's very disappointing news, in the extreme. You must finish your script."

"And what if I don't write anything else? What if I can't?"

"Then that would be a grave concern to me. I'm afraid it would be due cause for some sort of corrective measure on my part. For your own good, of course." Dr. Rousseau handed him an iPad. On the screen was a PDF brochure for a wellness retreat in Malibu, the one where "Irving Hodges" had supposedly gone to dry out.

If only heaven looked so good as this retreat, Isaac thought. He swiped through pictures of rolling lawns, sparkling splash pools, and liquid IV stations attached to beach chaise lounges. Advertised activities included picnics at the *M\*A\*S\*H\** mountain set, meditation sessions in Jim Morrison's cave, and a standing invitation to Dick Van Dyke's annual Halloween party. "This sure is a step up from the Twin Towers," he said, referring to the correctional medical facility Dr. Rousseau first threatened him with in Chapter 1.

"That's the privilege you're granted when you seek help rather than the help seeking you. In this case, I'm referring to the Slytherin Board."

"Is this the same song and dance you gave Zee when she stopped producing for you?" Isaac fired back, dropping the hammer on the doctor, but he didn't flinch. "I know she was your patient before she went missing. I know I'm her screenwriter replacement. And I know that this retreat is about as real as the upstate farm where everyone sends their dying dogs. So, is that what you're going to do to me? Is my secret agent codename Old Yeller?"

"Code name? I see your delusions of grandeur have not yet dissipated. Rest easy, Isaac. I assure you the place featured in that digital brochure is very much real. On occasion, and not without great and deliberate thought, have I admitted some of my clients against their will, but it was always done with the best of intentions."

"I knew it. You're in the Illuminati. Admit it! How many kids have you abducted and eaten?"

"Eaten?" Dr. Rousseau put down some marks on an adjacent notepad. "I think you have the wrong idea, Isaac, or you haven't been taking your medication recently. You're way off base here." A long sigh prefaced what came next, "You're not instilling me with a lot of confidence

about the state of your condition right now. If it weren't for Seth's cohabitation, then I'd have to think long and hard about your ability to live an independent lifestyle. "

"Explain to me how it's possible two *Super Jesus* writers have come from your office."

"You understand that I can neither confirm nor deny that I have a professional relationship with Zee Shirley. As these talks progress, I can't help but diagnose you with paranoid anxiety. Listen to me, Isaac. There is no grand conspiracy with you at the center. It is by mere happenstance that you and she both worked for Mr. Lennox. Every person with Final Draft installed on their computer was a writer for him at one time or another. Half of the WGA owes their membership to Mr. Lennox for letting them do a pass on a script or two. The man has honest-to-goodness monkeys working for him."

Isaac bit his lip with regret. "So you're not in the Illuminati?"

"Do you think the Illuminati is after you, Isaac?" He put pen to paper. "That's an interesting development indeed. Exactly how long have you been experiencing and expressing anti-Semitic thoughts?"

"If they're after Zee, that means they're after me. Don't you see it? It's so obvious." Isaac pondered his next chess move. "When did you last see Zee? Tell me.... or else."

"Isaac, I cannot and will not answer you. There will be no questions about potential patients of mine. You understand? Tell me, have you ever heard of external and internal locus of control? Too often, you blame others for your problems. I'd worry more about yourself than Zee."

"Tell me about her, dammit! I've had enough of everyone and their professional obligations. There's a missing cat and a missing screenwriter, and the Illuminati are hunting them down as we speak. The fate of the world is at stake, goddamnit!"

"The. Fate. Of. The. World." Dr. Rousseau repeated Isaac's words as he transcribed them into his notepad. "How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

"My psychic told me."

"Uh-huh. Tell me more about the cat. I take it the cat you're speaking of is the same as the one from the script?" Dr. Rousseau leaned forward in his seat.

"His name is Captain Flapjacks."

"Sure it is. Now, what does the Illuminati want with a cat?"

Isaac shifted his eyes around the room and spoke with a hushed tone, "What do you know about cat power?"

"Say that again."

Isaac, louder now, "Cat power!"

"I thought so." Dr. Rousseau was scribbling furiously. "I don't know much about cat power, I must admit. But, please, edify me on the subject."

"I don't know much of anything, really," Isaac demurred. "Only that cats have some sort of mysterious and mystical metaphysical properties that, if tapped into, could alter the balance of our time-space reality," Isaac explained. He then paused to wait for Dr. Rousseau's pen to stop moving. It didn't. Isaac started to become uncomfortable with how much ink was spilling from it. The whole conspiracy sounded ridiculous when spoken aloud. "But that's only a working theory. You didn't hear it from me."

"Well, what a theory it is! I must say I'm intrigued. Is that all you know?"

"For now....."

"If one were interested to learn more about Cat Power, whom would they ask?"

Isaac rubbed the back of his head. "The Nazis."

"Naturally. Do you know many Nazis, Isaac? How often would you say you fraternize with them?"

"No, no, never, not to my knowledge anyway. But Los Angeles is a known hotspot for Nazis."

Dr. Rousseau coughed up his surprise. "You are full of titillating tidbits today, aren't you?"

"The American Nazis built a ranch in Brentwood in the 30s."

"What?"

"Good question. They were preparing a home for Hitler, a place he could rule America from whenever the war ended." Isaac rubbed the back of his head again. "I mean, I guess, as someone who lives here, I should be flattered that Hitler would want to move to LA. But it's not bullshit. There's a real Nazi ranch. It's like a trendy hiking place now. I've seen it on social media. You can make a day of it if you go to Jon and Vinny's for lunch after."

"A wholesome afternoon if I ever heard of one."

"Do you think Captain Flapjacks went there, to the secret Nazi base?"

Dr. Rousseau leaned forward, out of range of the salt lamp, so he was now fully covered in shadow. "Only one way to find out."

"You think? I feel so lost. I don't know what to do."

"You're in luck because there's someone who does."

"You?"

"Well, yes, but let's consult a trusted, neutral third party since you've announced your suspicions about my intent." Dr. Rousseau spun around in his chair to peruse his adjacent bookshelf. His fingers skipped over an assortment of large, leather-bound books until they

snagged a slim paperback titled, *Save the Cat!* “Let’s, as they say, play this by the book. As you’ve realized, Snyder not only tells you how to start your journey but what happens after.” He flipped open a page with a creased corner and reviewed it. It was the beat sheet. “According to this, you have firmly eclipsed the first act of your story.”

“That’s right,” Isaac said with pride.

“You have your mission, and there’s no going back now. That means you’ll need to fulfill the promise of your premise next. Tell me, Isaac. What does fulfilling the promise of your premise mean to you?”

“Promise of my premise? Can you use it in a sentence?” Isaac was disappointed. He thought he had graduated to his B-plot love story by now, remembering his date with Liz at the diner.

“It’s another way to say ‘self-actualization.’ Are you familiar with Maslow’s pyramid of needs? Self-actualization is the capstone.”

“Oh no, not another pyramid scheme.” Isaac felt nauseous. This had the Illuminati’s fingerprints all over it.

“In other words, explain to me what you would consider the best version of yourself. Because that’s your premise. What does that look like?”

The image of a snake flashed across Isaac’s mind. The golden eyes. The scaly scales. A forked tongue slithering through a pair of fangs. “Nothing.”

“Nothing? That’s what you envision for the Platonic ideal of yourself? Like maybe you want to be an astronaut when you grow up?”

“Let me try again,” Isaac squeezed his eyes shut to boost his concentration, but it had no effect. The reptile remained in his brain. “I’m on a beach.”

“A beach, you say?”

“With a Corona. Find my beach.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want as the destination for your hero’s journey? Something as inconsequential as a beach?”

“No.” Dr. Rousseau was right. Isaac had only been relaying the aspirations of the people who populated the most recent TV commercial he saw. His new goal was to save the world using his newfound wizard powers.

“Let me return to a more pressing matter. Have you been taking your medications?”

Isaac leaned back in his seat, taking a moment to think. He couldn’t remember when he took them last, but he didn’t remember not taking them either. These were confusing times. It

was like tying his shoes. Isaac never remembered tying his shoes, yet his laces were knotted whenever he looked down at his feet.

“Are you ready?”

“Huh?” Isaac’s mind was blank.

“Are you ready?” Dr. Rousseau tried again, but this time with a frown.

“Ready for what?”

“Are you ready!” Dr. Rousseau shouted.

“I’m ready,” Isaac responded, this time in practiced rhythm.

“Are you steady?” But Dr. Rousseau couldn’t finish the rest of his prompts because, without warning, the office door exploded.

Bang! A door knob rocketed across the room, but Isaac dodged the projectile with unexpected cat-like agility.

“What’s up, doc?” Seth said in his best Bugs Bunny impersonation. He stood in the damaged doorframe, chomping on the end of an unlit blunt in lieu of a carrot. In Seth’s other hand, he held a gun. It was Isaac’s gun, and it was aimed at Dr. Rousseau.

“You had me at hello...” was all Isaac could murmur, dazed by Seth’s appearance.

“To what do I owe this pleasure, Seth?” Dr. Rousseau said with a crisp coolness, entirely comfortable to compete in a staring contest against the black eye of a gun barrel. “I can’t imagine what business you have with me at this time.”

“I’m here for Isaac.”

“We’re all here for Isaac,” Dr. Rousseau cooed.

“Yes. And keep the change, you filthy animal!” Isaac said with an absent mind. He didn’t know what was happening, but his haziness was deepening, only able to tune into the part of his brain connected to 90’s cultural ephemera. He turned to Seth to say,

“Whaazzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzup!”

“Time to wake up, Isaac! That’s what’s up. This guy is trying to mind fuck you.” But for Isaac to wake up, Seth, apparently, had to put Isaac to sleep because he came up behind his charge and knocked Isaac out with the butt of his own gun.

As the blissful black of unconsciousness began to blot out the corners of Isaac’s mind, he could still see Dr. Rousseau and Seth continue their heated exchange. Isaac smiled. None of that mattered. His mind was quiet now, at peace. “I am the master of my domain,” he told himself.

## Chapter 16

Seth was driving west on Sunset when Isaac's consciousness resurfaced. Isaac tried to get his bearings, but his eyes had trouble focusing. It must have been a few hours past midnight. There was little traffic, and the mockingbirds were singing.

"What's wrong?" Isaac wondered.

"Nothing at all," Seth said, turning to Isaac with a broad smile. "Good to see you're awake. How's the head?"

Isaac moved it around in slow circles to test how sensitive his brain was feeling. Surprisingly, everything felt no worse than when he started the night. "Fine. Fine. Even maybe a little refreshed."

"You've been out a while. I left you in the car when I stopped for tacos. But don't worry. I rolled down the window so you could breathe."

"Thanks."

"It's the least I could do."

"What happened at Dr. Rousseau's?"

"He was in the process of giving you the old mind fuck, and I came just in time to save the day."

"He was? You did?"

"I knew you were in trouble. It was like ESP or whatever the aliens call it. You and I got a connection, you know? Like Rick and Morty or Captain and Tennille. I felt that spidey-sense. You know that little tingle in your balls?"

"What does that mean? What did you do to him?" Isaac grimaced, expecting the worst — murder. His imagination went straight to plastic sheeting, zip ties, and a melon baller. He had to get his story straight, so he wouldn't go down with Seth when the police came for them. What clues had Seth given him? Who were the accomplices he named? Rick? Morty? Who's Tenille, and how did he earn the rank of Captain when Captain Flapjacks already held that position?

"I had to set things right between Rousseau and you. Get you guys on the same page."

“...” Isaac searched Seth’s clothing for dark splotches of blood, but he appeared clean. Isaac’s curiosity wasn’t satisfied, however, so he floated a trial balloon. “This will sure make for an awkward meeting with Dr. Rousseau... next week....”

Seth brought the car to a stop at a red light. “You won’t be seeing Dr. Rousseau anymore.”

Isaac gasped. “Because he’s no longer of this earth?”

“No, because he’s out to get you.”

“But I have to go. The money. The trust fund. He’ll cancel my checks.”

Seth sighed. “I saved your life tonight. You know that, right? I set you free from those golden handcuffs.”

Isaac nodded. He couldn’t totally remember what had happened at his session. There were no images or sounds to recall, but a feeling of fear remained within him. He had been in trouble. That much, he was sure.

Seth slammed his hand against the steering wheel. “I’m sorry, Isaac. It should have never come to that. I threw you to that viper as bait when I knew who he was. What he is.”

“What is he?”

“He’s your handler.”

“My handler?” Isaac was thrown back against his seat as Seth accelerated through the changing light with enough juice to get the tires to squeal. “A handler for what?”

“That’s the real question. And we’re going to find out. Truth is, I’ve always known Dr. Rousseau was a true blue bastard.”

“How?”

“Because I was part of whatever he was doing.”

“Part of what?”

“But I’m done with that life. Calling it quits. You heard it here first.”

“Why?”

“I’m a sensationalist, Isaac.”

“You’re a journalist?”

“I live my life with one goal: to experience every sensation known to the universe.”

“Sensation?” Isaac repeated.

“Every man needs a code, and that’s my chosen code.”

“What kind of sensations?”

“Oh, every sensation possible. That’s the goal, anyway. You could say that I collect them. Like how people collect Pokemon cards or women’s panties, but, for me, it’s sensations, the feel

of skydiving, or the taste of fresh panda meat cooked rare. But I want more. I want to experience everything. Some people have gone so far as to call me a sadist, but do you know what I call those people?"

"..."

"Pussies."

"Great."

"I'm proud to say I've acquired so many sensations already. You feel me? I've seen things... seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion and watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate..."

"Sorry, but I thought the Tannhäuser gate was in Germany, not Afghanistan." Isaac gave a contemplative pause, "Did I ever thank you for your service?"

"No, you never did, now that you mention it, but it's cool. I didn't serve for you or for your freedom anyway. I did that shit for myself."

"What do you mean?"

"Finding the right legal framework to experience the sensation of killing a man wasn't easy. It was either I do a tour or two overseas or become a cop. But I never felt the sensation of Afghani sand between my toes either, so I figured I could kill two birds with one stone."

"How was it?"

"Hot as hell."

"No, killing a person." Isaac leaned forward. How'd it feel?" he asked, eager for Seth's response like a middle school boy asking his older brother about prom night. The vibe did not escape Seth's notice.

"A gentleman never kisses and tells." He reached over and ruffled Isaac's hair. "You'll get there one day, big guy. I know it."

Isaac couldn't suppress his smile as he smoothed his hair back down to its resting position. "Seth?"

"Yes?"

"What sensation are you fulfilling by doing all this?" Isaac waved a hand about to indicate himself and their current situation of racing down Sunset.

"The sensation of satiating my hunger, Isaac. Have to pay the bills to eat. Not a lot of work out there for a vet who earned a Slytherin badge of honor. That's what the business community and Ministry of Magic call a 'red flag.' It just screams PTSD and bad intentions. Had I known they'd give me a Sorting H.A.T. test before discharge, I would have opted to be a cop instead. Now all I can do is take jobs that leverage my Slytherin street cred, so here I am. No

one will touch me otherwise. Long story short: don't take this wrong, Isaac, but you're just a job to me. Cha-fucking-ching."

"Oh."

"At least it was like that at first."

"And now?"

"Now?" Seth glanced over to Isaac, weighing his words. "You offer the chance to experience a new sensation."

"What's that?"

"I'm not a writer like you, Isaac, so I'm not always so great at pairing words with feelings, but I'm a mother hen looking after my chick. Nurturing. I've never done that before."

"Am I the chick?"

"Bingo, and that makes Dr. Rousseau the fucking fox in the hen house." Seth slammed the heel of his hand against the steering wheel again, accidentally sounding the horn and garnering several single-fingered responses from the drivers around them.

"But what's going to happen with you? Isn't Dr. Rousseau going to come after you, too?"

"I can handle Dr. Rousseau."

"And the Slytherin board or whoever you work with?"

"I can handle them, too," Seth shrugged. "Seeing how pathetic you are has given me a real crisis of my conscious. It's time for a career change."

"My handler..." Isaac remained dumbfounded.

"You've got the idea now. He was your puppeteer. But you're a real boy now. Do you get it? You're a real boy."

Isaac nodded, full of confidence. "I'm ready."

Seth side-eyed Isaac. "For what?"

"I'm ready," Isaac confirmed. "I'm steady."

Seth reached out to Isaac and slapped him.

"What was that for?" Isaac asked, holding the rising welt on his face with tenderness.

"You were doing Dr. Rousseau's call-and-response mind fuck. Ready, steady, bullshit."

"I don't know what I'm doing," Isaac whimpered.

"That's the problem. It's so simple. We got to figure out what he was training you to do. Okay? You see, Dr. Rousseau must have utilized your therapy sessions to assign you missions and debrief you afterward. Classic handler techniques. Textbook even. Now the question of questions: what did Dr. Rousseau ever have you do?"

Isaac stopped to reflect on the sessions he'd been going to year after year. But nothing stood out in his memory. He didn't recall any secret missions. Instead, he remembered how his memory didn't exist before Dr. Rousseau. His therapist had been an ever-present presence.

Out of all the people in the world, Isaac's parents picked Dr. Rousseau to watch over him. He was the one they wrote into their will before his father suffered the fatal sneeze attack, the one that caused him to swerve the family car into oncoming traffic. How could they have been so wrong to pick Dr. Rousseau?

Or was Seth wrong? Isaac searched Seth to draw some sort of conclusion on his character and found nothing concrete. Yet there was something intangible there that made Isaac believe in him.

Still, Isaac would be sad to see Dr. Rousseau go. Isaac didn't necessarily look forward to his weekly meetings with his therapist, but they had been some source of comfort. Not because of any personal growth resulting from his visits, but without school or a job, the meetings gave Isaac a way to mark the passage of time. They kept him regular. Or so he had thought.

"I don't remember doing anything special for Dr. Rousseau other than showing up every week. He never gave me homework or anything. Or assignments. I guess the exception was that he wanted me to continue writing the script for *Super Jesus 3*."

"That's it? There were no other directives he gave to you?"

"No."

Seth whispered to himself, "A sleeper agent."

"What?"

"You're a sleeper agent! Now we gotta figure out if you're still sleeping." Seth had a glimmer in his eye. "I will save you."

"..." Isaac couldn't muster up the courage to say thank you, but he was touched. Curse Dr. Rousseau! If Isaac had been going to real therapy rather than a sham therapist to mask his identity as a sleeper agent, he could have expressed his gratitude better.

Instead, Isaac sat there in silence, letting his eyes wander out the window to where they landed on a mural. Three disembodied heads floating on a white cloud were spray-painted on the cinderblock wall of a mom-and-pop pupusa place. Left, right, and middle were Tupac Shakur, Kobe Bryant, and Super Jesus, respectively. Respectfully, "THEY WILL RISE AGAIN" was written on a banner above them. The mural was beautiful and the brushwork was divine with no detail spared. Tupac's nose ring shone under the streetlights, and the cherubs holding the banner aloft looked as soft and cuddly as the cloud they flew above. A true work of art, Isaac

couldn't tell if this was genuine graffiti or some sort of guerilla advertisement campaign for the *Super Jesus* sequel.

"What do we do?" Isaac wondered, finding comfort in the mural.

"We go downtown," Seth stated with utter obviousness. He pointed out the windshield to the growing skyscrapers whose windows glittered in the night, each light marking the presence of a nocturnal cleaning crew hard at work.

"Of course!" Isaac shouted. "Why downtown?"

"To Skid Row, specifically, because we're going to solve this mystery of yours."

"Our mystery," Isaac said to his mentor.

"Our mystery," Seth agreed, "And from what I can tell, we need to save a cat, and to do that, we have to find Super Jesus. He's the one loose thread we're letting dangle in the wind like a limp dick in WeHo. If we're not careful, he's going to fuck us, isn't he? And we know Super Jesus has been filming promotional miracles down at Skid Row, right?"

"Do you think that's a good idea? If I'm a secret agent—"

"Sleeper agent," Seth corrected. "I'm the secret agent."

"Sleeper agent. Right."

"Let me guess. You don't have any friends or family."

"..."

"See, you're a fucking sleeper agent. You're my first mentee who's a sleeper agent!"

"I should hope so," Isaac grumbled.

"Let me guess: there's no one to tie you to anything, right? And most of your life has been spent in your apartment, out of sight, keeping up with the culture by watching TV and movies so you could seamlessly reintegrate into society at a moment's notice?"

"You could say that if you were being uncharitable."

"Sleeper agent. God damn, this is exciting!"

Isaac didn't feel the same unless Seth used 'exciting' as a euphemism for anxiety-induced nausea. "If I'm a sleeper agent, then the best idea would be for me to get the fuck out of town and bail. Get off the proverbial grid, right? Whatever I'm programmed to do will probably be pretty useless if I'm on a beach in Bali."

"Bali blows," Seth scoffed. "Plus, I've never run from a fight."

"I guess, but I would be the one running from the fight, not you."

"That's no good. I'm helping you now, remember? Whatever happens to you happens to me. If you're a coward, then I'm a coward."

"Oh yeah," Isaac remembered. "That's true."

“Cowards run. Are you a coward, Isaac? Because that’s not the type of person who sparked this new sensation of altruism within me. What’s the worst that could happen anyway?” Seth asked, and Isaac immediately thought of the world ending.

“Maybe we should talk to my psychic,” Isaac suggested softly. He had the wild thought that maybe she could take Dr. Rousseau’s place in his life. He’d love to mark time with Anne and mark her as his territory by urinating on her left foot.

“MaYbE wE sHoUID tAIK tO mY pSyChic,” Seth mocked Isaac. “Who we need to talk to is Super Jesus, our best and only chance to crack this case. Only he knows what the cat and Zee were up to at the Annenberg that night of your dream.”

“Aren’t you afraid we could play into Dr. Rousseau’s hand by doing this? Like, what if I’m running on autopilot as a sleeper agent?”

“No fucking way,” Seth said to reassure Isaac, “If anything, you’re sleepwalking. Hold on. This all started with your dream, right? While you were sleeping? Holy shit. They made it too obvious. You’re a literal fucking sleeper agent. I told you, didn’t I?”

“You did tell me. Hold on. Didn’t you do that ready, steady, command and response sequence to me once?” Isaac said, remembering when Seth offered him drugs after they visited the coroner’s office. At the time, Isaac thought he was merely the victim of peer pressure, but he now wondered if it was as innocent as that.

“Oh, did I?” Seth said, but his Cheshire smile told Isaac all he needed to know. He stared Seth down, doing his best to give him the stink eye until Seth relented. “Fine. Fine. Think of it like a type of hypnosis. After you say the ready-steady lines, you become really suggestible to ideas, especially the bad ones.”

“Sleeper agent,” Isaac muttered.

Seth smiled. “You got it now. And if your brain is fossilized by enough fluoride, like yours is, it’s game over. With all that fluoride, I’m surprised you still retain enough independent critical thinking skills to choose when and where you take a shit.”

“So why did you do it to me then?”

“Because that shit I got you to smoke was no ordinary PCP.”

“It wasn’t?”

“It was angel dust, AKA adrenochrome, AKA white rabbit. Like, for real. They call it angel dust because it’s harvested from the innocent, usually children.”

“Why do they call it white rabbit?”

“Because the chemical composition, when drawn, has got two fucking floppy rabbit ears. You’re in Wonderland now, buddy. Sometimes a dose or three is enough to de-fluoride a brain,

but not in your case. I was trying to break you out of your prison. I wanted to empower you, Isaac.”

Isaac nodded.

“That’s why we have to locate Super Jesus,” Seth said. Isaac looked out the window and saw the pretty pink cylinders that marked the boundary of Pershing Square pass by them. They were close to Skid Row. “Let’s review. What do you know about the Super Jesus miracles?”

“Uh,” Isaac froze at the pop quiz and remembered what taking the Sorting H.A.T. exam felt like. “Gimme a minute. It’s a trick question?”

“It is not a trick question,” Seth groaned. “One of the first things you do in the field is to run a little recon. Super Jesus and the *Super Jesus* marketing team have been shooting promotional material for the new movie, what they call miracles, so we won’t be alone out there, most likely. There may be a full film crew we’ll have to contend with. So far, other miracles they’ve done have been sponsoring a new extension to the metro line, creating a third Jon and Vinny’s location, and getting Ben and Jennifer back together. Now they’re on to homelessness and cleaning up Skid Row, like Hercules at the stables.”

“You think they’re doing miracles at this time of night?” Isaac yawned.

Seth slapped him back on the head to keep him alert. “Get your head in the game. There’s no rest for the wicked, all right?” He pulled the car up to the curb and stopped.

They had arrived at Skid Row. Isaac glanced out the window, seeing sidewalk tents for as far as he could see. They were all of shapes and sizes. Some looked fresh off the sales floor at R.E.I., while others were just a collection of tarps and rats nests of butcher’s twine.

The homeless milling about gave suspicious and furtive looks toward Isaac’s car that didn’t go unnoticed by Seth. “Hmm. Okay. You get a head start here, and I will find a different place to park. I’m right behind you, on your six. Hoo-ah!”

“Got it,” Isaac said as he exited the car. “I won’t let you down.” He looked back and saw Seth shooting at him with finger guns as he drove Isaac’s car away.

In and out. In and out. Isaac took a few yoga breaths to calm himself before the adventure ahead. He found it refreshing. It was a lovely night to be on Skid Row since the wind was blowing hard from the southwest, where the flower district resided. Whoever had been LA’s city planner had a certain ingenuity, Isaac thought, as the scent of fresh-cut roses washed over the street and won the battle against the odors wafting up from the sewage and refuse piled high in the gutters.

Isaac waded through that garbage, kicking aside a stack of Jack in the Box taco wrappers as he began his search for Super Jesus. There was no room for him on the sidewalks,

not with Skid Row's tenants' tents claiming every inch. Many glowed from within, with the same blue hue emitted by your standard smartphone.

Isaac did not judge the homeless anymore. He no longer questioned their choices. If they'd rather have a smartphone than a hot meal, that was fine by Isaac. After all, Isaac believed smartphone ownership should be enshrined as an inalienable human right, right up there with life, liberty, and the pursuit of legal hallucinogens.

Isaac liked the homeless the more and more he considered them, casting aside his initial phobia instilled and installed in him by Dr. Rousseau. Isaac respected them. Game recognized game. If Isaac did not receive his bi-weekly trust fund direct deposit from Dr. Rousseau, he would have pursued a career in homelessness long ago. As far as he was concerned, the homeless had it all figured out. They don't have to work in a cubicle or pay taxes, and they could maximize their fun in the LA sun. Every day was a vacation as far as Isaac was concerned.

It was no wonder to Isaac why the homeless population was growing. The secret was out! The phenomenon had nothing to do with the various economic forces crippling the housing market and everything to do with people opting out of becoming capitalist slaves. Isaac pondered the logistics of his future homeless living arrangements if he failed his mission. Do the Skid Row residents lock their tents before leaving for the day, or was this a community bound by a code of ethics and utopian ideals?

Focus! Isaac thought. If he were to crack the case of Super Jesus and the missing cat, he'd have to do more than solve the homeless crisis (by which he meant to say there is no such thing as a homeless crisis). He would have to "fulfill the promise of his premise." The words of Dr. Rousseau made him shudder, knowing they came from his "handler," but Isaac knew that he was still right. Whatever Dr. Rousseau had in mind for Isaac's premise, he did not know, but that was for Isaac to decide now. And, right now, fulfilling the promise of his premise meant that he would have to follow this rabbit hole down for as long as he could follow it, no matter where it would lead him.

Isaac stopped dead in his tracks, not wanting to spook the animal that appeared out of nowhere in front of him. It wasn't a rabbit, but something far more ominous. A Captain Flapjacks cat sat on his haunches, facing Isaac, still as could be, its blue Birman eyes glowing like lanterns in the dark. They were going to light the way for him.

Isaac tried to wait for Seth before following the Birman, but the cat was not cooperative. As soon as the two locked eyes, the cat was on the move, and Isaac was careful not to lose sight of him as he followed the cat into the shadows.

## Chapter 17

The cat would know the way. That's what Isaac knew anyway. The Birman strutted around Skid Row like he held the key to the city, sauntering in and out of homeless camps, jumping over cardboard furniture, and dodging oil-speckled puddles with confidence, nary a toe bean out of place or a spot of soot to mar its fur. This cat was in no need of saving. "Niles?" Isaac tried, but he went unanswered.

After navigating through a maze of crowded alleyways and deserted streets, the cat led Isaac to his destination. They were now in the warehouse district of downtown, which Isaac recognized from the, well, wall-to-wall warehouses that surrounded him. But what caught his eye most was the orderly line of people marching before him.

From Isaac's initial observations of the marchers' colorful clothes and rank smell, they were either more homeless from Skid Row, hipsters from the adjacent Arts District, Disciples of the nearest *Super Jesus* church, or some combination of all of the above. Isaac wasn't sure whether or not he should continue to observe the group or join them, but the Captain Flapjacks cat made his decision for him. The cat plodded toward the tail of the line, as sure-footed as ever.

Once Isaac took his place at the back of the line, he discovered that these were indeed travelers from every category he suspected. *What could this be?* Isaac wondered. He was unsettled. He was shook. It was how everyone walked that irked him. They were single file, like first-graders on a field trip to the Annenberg Space for Photography. True to form, some people held hands in the classic and time-tested buddy system. No one would get lost. Even their legs moved in unison.

Left foot first. Right foot next.

Left foot first. Right foot next.

That's how cats walk, Isaac observed, looking back and forth between the Birman and the people.

(Walk like an Egyptian.)

Good thing Isaac had practiced walking earlier, he thought, doing his best to fall in line and keep a low profile so he wouldn't out himself as an intruder. But then Isaac saw the sign. And it opened up his eyes.

He will rise again.

It couldn't be a coincidence that Isaac passed by that Kobe/Tupac/Super Jesus mural on the way to Skid Row. Because the man in front of Isaac wore a black hoodie with a Lakers Kobe Bryant (#8) jersey over it.

"Psst! Hey!" Isaac whispered to the man, who turned to look at Isaac, but the man didn't seem to see him. His eyes were as glazed and frosted as a DK donut. "What are you doing?" Isaac asked.

"Following the leader," the man murmured.

"Who's the leader?"

The man answered Isaac's question by pointing to the front of the line, but Isaac couldn't see that far. The column of people was so long that it snaked itself around a corner to obscure any view of whoever was at the head.

Isaac tried to probe his witness, "Are you guys nazis?"

"No."

"Fair enough," Isaac said, but what Isaac thought was this: *What else would a Nazi say?* "Sorry, but I had to make sure. You can't be too careful these days, know what I mean? So you must be a homeless person, an art student, or a Disciple of Super Jesus."

"You could say that," the man pulled something up from under the neck of his shirt to show Isaac. It was a *cholo* chain, and the pendant was Super Jesus's chosen symbol, "the middle school S." So, Isaac was speaking to a disciple.

Isaac put his finger and his thumb in the shape of an "L" on his forehead, the most common greeting between members of the faith, for Super Jesus was a big Smash Mouth fan. It was canon. (*Walking in the Sun* was used to predictable effect in the movie.) The man responded in kind, forming his own "L" to share with Isaac.

"Peace be," the man said to Isaac, and Isaac felt it. Peace be indeed. Isaac sensed no disturbance in this man whatsoever. On the contrary, he was at ease, and he made it look easy.

Unlike the Jedis of the United Kingdom, the Disciple religion wasn't always so pure as the man in front of Isaac. The movement started off as a joke. The Disciples bubbled up from Internet backwaters, similar to the "birds aren't real" conspiracy. Soon, the participants took the bit a bit too far, delving so deeply into the irony that the only option left was to perform the religion earnestly. That's when it attracted the masses.

"Don't you want to be my buddy?" The man in the Kobe jersey held a hand out to Isaac, who accidentally ignored it.

"Where are we going?" Isaac asked.

“To a Late Night,” the man said, referring to the term used for the nocturnal meetings of Disciples. Isaac was intrigued. Recently, *The Cut* likened these gatherings to the Paris salons from centuries ago, with a dash of Studio 54 thrown in for fun.

After walking several more blocks, the group reached a street long enough, bright enough, and straight enough that Isaac could determine the group’s size. It numbered in the hundreds. Except they weren’t on a street, Isaac discovered as he tripped over a set of train tracks that serviced Union Station.

The entire east side of the city opened up in front of them once they left the cover of the warehouses and reached the LA River. It was all so familiar. To the north, Isaac saw the glittering backdrop of the Silver Lake area, and in the foreground, he could identify the bridge Seth and him used to get to the coroner’s office. What a long, strange trip it had been since Isaac had gone looking for a dead body! And he hoped to make it through the night without returning to that building.

At the head of the line, Isaac could now see the leader. And this was no ordinary pied piper parading through downtown LA, but Super Jesus himself. He was awash in a glow of white from a nearby floodlight.

Isaac was struck still.

This was a miracle™.

Isaac could taste electricity in the air, and his nerve endings tingled. He needed to know more. But he didn’t dare charge forward. Something held him back. There was a foul feeling in his stomach, and a pulse of adrenaline throbbed in his ears, but it wasn’t enough to animate him.

Instead, it kept Isaac from drawing Super Jesus’s attention. No sudden movements. Stay still. Not that he thought Super Jesus’s vision played by the same rules as a T-Rex’s, but he wasn’t willing to leave it up to chance. That was until he realized he was being left behind as the group marched on without him, indifferent, including the Birman.

What held all these people under Super Jesus’s sway? Isaac didn’t know. There were no dulcet tones of a pipe or the words of a magic sermon upon the wind. He couldn’t see the strings on these puppets. He wished he could. If he could, he could understand what was happening and be less scared, leaving Isaac with no choice but to believe Super Jesus’s miracles were just that.

Isaac wished he could inform Seth of this development, if only so he’d have someone to listen to him because Isaac was no longer comfortable being alone in this crowd. He needed his

real buddy, not this man in a Kobe jersey. But when Isaac called Seth, a toneless ring answered him. The call could not be completed as dialed.

Isaac didn't have any cell service. He groaned, mystified as to why there was no coverage in downtown Los Angeles. How was that possible? Yet again, he was the victim of another conspiracy. He looked up at the cloudless night. "God damnit," he muttered, slapping the phone against his thigh, hoping to coerce it into finding a bar or two of reception. It didn't work.

"Here," Isaac's buddy said, offering his phone. It held a 5G signal that had proved elusive to Isaac's device, but the added connection didn't help any since Seth didn't pick up the call from the unknown number. Isaac should have known. He gave the phone back.

"Thanks anyway. Can I ask a homelessness-related question I've always had knocking around my brain? What do you use for your billing address, like for your phone? Did you buy it?"

"I'm part of the Super Jesus family plan."

"Did he give you the phone?"

"It's charity. Everyone who asks shall receive," the man said through a dreamy smile and repeated one of Super Jesus's most famous catchphrases, "*Mi casa es su casa.*"

"Ah," Isaac acknowledged.

For Isaac, one of the most disconcerting aspects of Super Jesus fandom was its universal appeal. Perhaps Super Jesus's mightiest superpower was his ability to cross political lines. Faithful to the original lore, Super Jesus had a very community-based philosophy he preached in the film. One love. Yet no one accused him of being a communist when he used his powers to raise the minimum wage. Or accused him of being a lib when he fought Captain America on the banks of the Rio Grande to allow a group of migrants to pass through the border. It didn't matter.

Super Jesus was as popular from LA to LA, Los Angeles to Louisiana. It had always made Isaac suspicious. The hero's morality messaging just didn't filter down to Fox News. *Super Jesus* wasn't the subject of any Tucker Carlson monologues. It was as if the franchise existed in a collective conservative blind spot. For *Super Jesus*, a Fox studios property, an exception was made.

Isaac was going to find out why.

"Want to be my buddy?" The man in the Kobe jersey offered his hand again. This time Isaac took it, grateful to have its steadying presence.

As they continued to follow Super Jesus, Isaac grew more concerned. They were on the wrong side of the tracks now, passing a dormant Surfliner train to stand on the concrete banks

of the LA River. But they didn't stop there. Super Jesus led them down a ramp that ended at the bottom of the river basin. Was Super Jesus going to recreate the Rio Grande miracle? Isaac wondered.

Isaac crossed his arms to stave off a chill. He felt exposed under the full moon, which was brilliant enough to reveal his shadow.

Disturbing Isaac further was that he didn't see anyone around Super Jesus besides the Disciples. If this procession was part of a marketing stunt, where were the lights, cameras, and people yelling "action?" More importantly, where was the craft service table with the customary piles of luscious lox? Something about this miracle wasn't adding up.

Then, Super Jesus led his followers into a man-sized mouth of an enormous drainage pipe that jutted out from the side of the concrete river bank. But when it was Isaac's turn to enter, he broke his handhold with his buddy in the Kobe jersey and stopped short of the threshold. Isaac was scared.

He couldn't see inside the pipe. It was as dark as night was supposed to be, and it wasn't long before even Super Jesus's brilliant radiance was swallowed up and extinguished. No one was immune. As the Disciples followed him down the pipe, they disappeared one by one. The man in the Kobe jersey didn't even look back for his buddy. He was gone.

Trying to summon whatever courage he had left, Isaac took a deep breath before taking the plunge. He tested the air, and it tasted damp and unpleasant. Vampire weather, Isaac thought, but he didn't have any garlic bread on his person for protection.

His hands trembled as he grasped the edges of the pipe to try and steady his resolve. That's when Isaac felt it. Holding on tight, he tried to steel himself against a sinister force that began to pull him inside the pipe like a black hole, similar to the sucking sensation he had felt when he tried to fuck the hose to his vacuum cleaner. But, just like that day, Isaac couldn't stay away. His feet were about to cross into the pipe when the Captain Flapjacks cat meowed to get Isaac's attention.

Isaac had forgotten about the Birman, but the cat had remained by his side the entire time, ever loyal. But now he was padding away from Isaac and the pipe Super Jesus entered. Instead, he chose to go downriver of it.

Based on how the Birman looked back for him every few paces, Isaac knew to follow and was thankful to do so, happy to get away from that malevolent pipe. Unfortunately for him, however, the cat just led Isaac to a different one, except this pipe was smaller but no less menacing. With a graceful effortlessness, the cat hopped up and into the pipe. Its smaller opening made it so none of the moon's silver rays could pierce inside it.

All Isaac could see within the pipe were the cat's blue, bioluminescent eyes. They did not improve his mood, but a cheery meow from the cat convinced him to do what was necessary, so Isaac climbed up into the pipe no wider than his shoulders. Even with all the squeezing and shimmying, the fit was tight. And again, Isaac was reminded of his indecent incident with his home cleaning appliance. Hopefully, this venture, he thought, would be far more successful than that one and require one less trip to the E.R.

The journey through the pipe wasn't a pleasant experience. Isaac had to army crawl his way forward through whatever muck that was being drained into the LA river. The overwhelming smell filtered through his nose and forced him to taste the waste he was heaving his body through. Isaac cursed the cat in front of him, who was deft of foot enough to hop between pieces of garbage like little lily pads floating above pond scum.

If Isaac could turn back, he would, but he was trapped by the pipe's small size. There was no room to execute a three-point turn, so the only way was forward. Isaac gulped down his dread. It was hot and sour, like a bottle of kombucha left out in the sun.

A modicum of relief came to Isaac as soon as he could stand again. If the pipe he had just inhabited was a capillary in the Los Angeles sewer system, then the one he and the cat stood in now was the main vein, big enough to drive a car through, which gave Isaac some creative ideas on how to avoid traffic in the future, if he lived through the night that is.

Above Isaac was the pipe's starry ceiling. Soft, dappled moonlight filtered in through the gutter grates that lined the streets of what he presumed was downtown LA. But that was only a guess. They could be in Pasadena for all he knew. But he continued to trust the cat and trust Anne's assessment that this cat was made of magic.

The cat trotted on at a steady, confident pace until he stopped at a circular door, waiting for Isaac to catch up so he could utilize the magic of his opposable thumbs. Isaac was happy to finally assist, telling the cat that "they made a good team."

Opening the door revealed a small service hallway that emptied into the bowels of a basement. It was so benign, a mop bucket here, a wash sink there. Nothing out of the ordinary. Isaac had expected something far more foreboding. But by the way his cat companion kept going, heading up a steel staircase now, Isaac knew this wasn't his final destination. They were close, though. Isaac could tell.

When they left the basement, there was a charge in the air. An invisible electromagnetic pulse set off the synapses connecting Isaac's tongue to his brain and his brain to his stomach. His animal instinct didn't agree with this at all. Something was wrong.

The cat had led Isaac into the downtown public library. The books were his first clue. Walls and walls of them, for as far as the eye could see, which wasn't far at all because the lights were dark and night still pressed in against the windows. Isaac longed for the dawn and couldn't understand where it was, feeling as if he had lived several lifetimes since he had left Dr. Rousseau's, yet the darkness remained. He blamed the vampires and the June Gloom.

Isaac had been to the LA Central Library before and always found it hospitable. In his four-star Yelp review, Isaac recommended taking advantage of the validated parking offered by owning a library card and eating at the Panda Express in the lobby. However, the place definitely hit differently after closing. Zero stars. With no school groups, tourists, or squatters around, the library felt cold, and the two stone sphinxes guarding the second floor didn't seem so cuddly anymore. He could feel their eyes on his back as he passed by them. But it was the statue of Lucifer's torch in the stairwell that really gave them the willies.

As Isaac and the cat passed rack after rack of books, a light flickered at the far end of the floor, and its warm orange tone indicated fire. In response, the cat slowed his gait and flattened his ears, and Isaac could read those signals clear as day. Now was the time to be afraid, and Isaac obeyed.

The two of them crept forward, Isaac's fear growing proportionally as the room's glow became brighter and brighter until Isaac could see what the hundreds of burning candles illuminated. They were at the edge of the library's famous rotunda, the site of many an Instagram post. In it, he spied a large group of people gathered.

They stood in three layers of concentric circles. All of them were wearing dark robes the color of oxblood. Isaac noted this development as a definite red flag. But, at least he wasn't dealing with the KKK and their tightie whities, nor did he see any crimson-colored Nazi regalia. He gulped, knowing by process of elimination which secret society this was. This had to be the Illuminati.

The Illuminati members were chanting in a different language. Despite his tin ear, Isaac knew it had to be romance in provenance. The chanters were all gathered underneath the rotunda's famous globe chandelier. Ominously, it hung over the proceedings from the center of a giant pyramid that was the capstone to the library's roof.

Isaac couldn't see what everyone was focused on in the middle of the room, but he could make a guess. A brighter, whiter, more brilliant light battled with the warm colors of the candles. Isaac knew the hue. It was Super Jesus's angelic aura.

After several more haunting stanzas of chanting, the crowd quieted, and the room filled with such silence that Isaac had to hold his breath, afraid of the noise his exhalation would

make. Then, there was a part in the crowd that went through all three rings so Isaac could see the center of the ceremony, where there was an immense obsidian stone. It wasn't decorated or cut to any particular geometric shape, but Isaac immediately understood the stone was an altar. Super Jesus stood behind it and commanded the attention of everyone in the room, even the Captain Flapjacks cat.

The identities of the people closest to Super Jesus, who stood as part of the innermost circle, were a mystery to Isaac. The hoods on their robes hid their faces, but Isaac scanned the room anyway, hoping against hope that he could see Zee here, but she wasn't there.

Isaac was able to recognize some of the lesser participants, however. Elon Musk, Kyrie Irving, and even Beyonce were in attendance! Seeing them left Isaac to wonder if this gathering was actually innocent after all, and he had merely stumbled upon a support group for know-it-alls with punchable faces rather than the Illuminati. But the presence of the beatific Super Jesus dispelled that notion, and so did the appearance of a monkey that Isaac recognized from the *Super Jesus* writers' room.

Before Isaac could make heads or tails of this revelation, his attention was drawn in by a new figure entering the room, one dressed not in oxblood robes but in a purple Kobe Bryant Lakers jersey. It was Isaac's buddy. The man Isaac had met outside ambled down the aisle formed by the parted members and toward the altar.

Left foot first. Right foot next.

Left foot first. Right foot next.

Approaching the altar, the man in the Kobe jersey did not seem as if there was a shotgun pointed at his back. Instead, he appeared at peace. His eyes were frosty, but was Isaac so dead inside that he could not recognize true bliss? Maybe a tongue lolling out of the side of your mouth was a common side effect of happiness. How would Isaac know? He had never been happy.

What if Isaac wasn't witnessing something profane? Maybe this was only a misunderstanding on his part. Maybe this was simply an elaborate birthday party for his buddy. But that theory quickly fell apart as soon as Super Jesus reached into his robe and produced a ceremonial dagger. Its curved blade was notched with heavy wear and tear, which did not foreshadow a happy ending.

The crowd's chanting resumed when they saw the dagger, this time with added fervor. It was contagious, and the chorus was pretty catchy, even if it had all the charm of fire and brimstone. Credit to Beyonce's compositional skills, Isaac supposed. Isaac had to grab his throat to stop himself from joining in with the crowd. He felt compelled to sing, and the longer he

listened to it, the more he thought he had heard the tune before. Even the monkey sang the song in perfect unison in an impressively brassy baritone.

Something was about to happen soon. Isaac could feel it. Things were coming to a head as the chant rose to its climax, and Isaac watched Elon Musk nursing a growing erection under his gown.

Through it all, the Disciple in the Kobe jersey still smiled, his face tilted up at Super Jesus at the same angle one does to warm themselves in the sun. Then, with the help of Super Jesus' steady hand, the man ascended to the top of the altar and laid down. Finally, the man turned his cheek, exposing his neck to Super Jesus, and faced Isaac.

That's when Isaac and his buddy locked eyes, right as the chanting hit a crescendo, but the singing stopped when Super Jesus raised the dagger. He held it high in the air to prepare for the ritual bloodletting. *God damn vampires!* Isaac screamed inside his head.

The air whizzed as the blade came down in a graceful arc toward its intended target. But before the dagger plunged into the man's throat, his eyes became lucid, and terror suddenly gripped him. It was horrible. Isaac could tell the man was paralyzed by fear, having been betrayed by his idol. All he could do was shout in Isaac's direction, "*¡Dios Mio!* My buddy!"

Everyone in the rotunda but Super Jesus froze at the interruption. The room was so quiet that you could hear the Disciple's hot blood sizzle as it hit the cold stone altar. Then, in perfect harmony, the entire congregation turned towards the disturbance, Isaac. The jig was up!

"Don't go! *Mi casa es su casa!*" Super Jesus called out to Isaac, who was already making a break for it.

While fleeing, Isaac did look over his shoulder one last time and saw the Birman holding his gaze. It was a glance that said one thing, "goodbye." And those blue pools of light promised him that everything would be alright before the cat turned to stand strong and calm in the face of the oncoming onslaught.

Everyone in the congregation was chasing after Isaac. Even Elon Musk, still hard, waddled after him. If there was ever a time to utilize the much-hyped cat power, this was it. But the crowd paid no heed to the cat, ignoring him at their own peril, as they raced to catch Isaac, who had to put his attention back on finding an exit route through the labyrinth with books for walls.

It was no use. Game over. Even though Isaac fled as fast as he could, his pursuers gained on him with every step until a blinding light erupted from behind him. The blast was like something out of Sodom and Gomorrah. A shockwave followed, hitting the library with enough

force to open up the ground beneath Isaac. There was no escape. He fell and fell and fell, and darkness rushed up around him to swallow Isaac whole.

## Chapter 18

Unlike a cat, Isaac did not land on his feet after his fall from the library. Instead, his back broke his momentum with a sickening thud. The pain disoriented him.

Once the dust cleared and Isaac's eyes adjusted to the dark as best they could, he looked around in all directions and still couldn't make any sense of his position. All Isaac knew was that he was deep underground again, and the library was somewhere up high overhead.

Whatever hole he had fallen from had closed back up when the debris from the explosion settled into place. In front of him, he could see the exposed entrails of what was left of this section of the sewer system. Some pipes, now broken and cut at odd angles, spewed their payloads wildly into the air, raining shit down on Isaac, who promptly threw up.

As his eyes continued to adapt to the total blackness of his surroundings, Isaac found himself trapped inside an enormous tunnel. This was bigger than just the sewers. His screams for help echoed up and down the abyssal depths that stretched out on either side of him. The tunnel walls were made of nothing but dirt, but before he could ponder the purpose of this hollowed ground, he heard something moving, awakening in the rubble beside him.

Isaac was not alone.

Not knowing where to go, Isaac took off at a run. There were only two options, left or right. With no cat to lead him, he could only guess, choosing the left-handed path and running for his life as fast as his bad back would allow. But no matter how far Isaac sprinted, there was no end in sight. The darkness was impenetrable. This was some real *House of Leaves* type shit.

Hoping against hope, he ran with a hand against the dirt wall, searching for an opening, a door— any minor imperfection to provide him with a signpost, but there was nothing. All he found was a fistful of rock and dirt. If only Dan from the Annenberg Space for Photography was here to guide him!

Isaac slowed to a walk, frustrated, but that didn't keep his adrenaline from working in overdrive. He felt so alive he began to wonder if he was dead.

It made sense. What could be the other explanation?

First, there was that horrific explosion to consider. Then there was this long tunnel he was traveling down. He strained his eyes to search for the white light at the end of it, but there

was nothing there. Yet. He stopped moving, not wanting to advance another step if each step brought him closer to the end. He wasn't ready for the unendingness of the afterlife.

There was still so much for him to do! His bucket list still listed the following:

1. Visit Legoland
2. Go back and watch the filler episodes of *Naruto*
3. Have a first kiss

But more than FOMO, Isaac felt fear, fear for the repose of his soul. If he did die, he knew he wouldn't exactly be God's first-round draft pick to get into heaven. The best Isaac could hope for was probably purgatory if he was lucky. So he would have to make his own luck.

That realization had set him down this path of saving the cat in the first place. That's why he couldn't die yet. There was still unfinished business to attend to. He had to save the cat.

Isaac turned around to retrace his steps.

Nothing would stop him, but a sudden spark in the dark slowed his progress. A firefly-sized light illuminated a portion of the tunnel, back toward the hole under the library. Isaac had been right. Something had followed him. He watched as the same flame grew larger as it sought the end of a cigarette, illuminating a hairy face that Isaac recognized immediately. There was no mistaking his pursuer.

"You again!" Isaac cried, "Illuminati scum!"

"Oh-oh, ah-ah," said the smoker coolly. It was his co-worker. The monkey from the writers' room. He greeted Isaac with a wicked smile.

This was not good news for Isaac, who had watched enough *Planet Earth* to know a monkey's smile was anything but a friendly gesture. It was a sign of aggression. There would be a fight. Isaac had to defuse the situation.

"I didn't steal your sonnet! I gave it back!" Isaac explained.

The monkey didn't back down, instead choosing to casually blow a smoke ring at Isaac, a final puff before it popped the cigarette into its mouth to extinguish it.

The tunnel turned back to black.

A screech filled the air.

There was a scramble in the dark. Isaac couldn't see, so he just windmilled his hands quixotically, hoping to hit something. But all he felt was his knuckles graze some fur before his throat tightened under the monkey's grip. The beast was on top of Isaac. He smelled the

monkey's ashy banana breath on his face. Where was HR when you needed them? But then again, Isaac knew Fox did have a history of ignoring matters of handsy co-workers.

Isaac writhed side-to-side to try and dislodge the monkey, but that did nothing but encourage the monkey to tighten his grip more as he held onto Isaac. Rolling over and over in a stop-drop-and-roll fashion wasn't any more effective. Isaac was fresh out of ideas, so he tried to play dead, but that only hastened his actual death. The monkey was not fooled in the slightest.

With every passing second, the corners of Isaac's vision were fading out, somehow getting darker than even the blackest black of the unlit, under-earth tunnel. The last thing he saw before losing consciousness was a hulking presence appearing suddenly next to the monkey. It had fangs where its teeth should have been.

It was the vampire.

Isaac faded to black.

*\*~\*~\*~\*~ Shoot for the moon*

*For even if you miss*

*You'll land among the stars \*~\*~\*~\*~*

Isaac couldn't comprehend what happened next. Despite the monkey's hold on him, his body lurched upwards on its own accord. It rose into a standing position without any prompting from Isaac. These movements were not of his choosing. Isaac was being operated by some sort of autopilot program as if his temporary blackout caused a power cycle in his psyche and rebooted his nervous system.

He was now running on pure machine code, a binary choice between flight or fight.

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01001011 01101001 01100011 01101011 00101110 00100000 01000110 01101001
01100111 01101000 01110100 00101110 00100000 01000010 01101001 01110100 01100101
00101110 00100000 01001000 01100101 00100000 01100110 01100101 01101100 01110100
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01100111 01101100 01100101 01101101 01100101 01101110 01110100 01110011 00100000  
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01110011 01100011 01101100 01100101 01110011 00101110 00100000

Shocked by Isaac's revival, the monkey released Isaac's throat, but he wasn't fazed for long. *Whap!* A ferocious slap from the monkey shook some of Isaac's thoughts loose from their hiding places within the nooks and crannies of his brain, just enough so he could begin to wrestle some command away from the ghost in his shell.

Once he resumed control, Isaac didn't recognize the body he inhabited. It was different from the one he had left. This one was strong.

"*Dios Mio,*" Isaac whispered in awe, marveling at himself.

With zero effort, Isaac picked the monkey up, swung it above his head by its tail like a rally towel at a Dodgers game, and released it at maximum velocity. The monkey flew off, pinwheeling end over end. Due to the darkness, Isaac couldn't see where it landed, so he had to listen for the impact, like a falling pebble into a well. He counted *one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi* before a quiet thud far, far away reverberated back up through the tunnel to Isaac's location.

Isaac was delirious with this newfound strength. He felt the same euphoria now as when he had smoked angel dust with Seth after visiting the coroner's office. Except for this time, the sublime sensation that had flowed through his subconscious, enlightening him and transporting him to a new astral plane called Beverly Hills, was now targeting his physical body, specifically his muscles. Isaac flexed them to feel the rush of potential energy.

The sleeper agent had awoken!

But the glorious high did not last long. The monkey's partner in crime formally announced itself with a rattling growl, and the haunting sound of it buckled Isaac's knees with fear. Whatever fanged creature Isaac faced now wasn't human. It wasn't even a vampire.

This was something else entirely, something grey-green in color, something scaly, and something that smelled and tasted like it crawled out of the La Brea tar pits. And maybe it did. The creature looked prehistoric and capable of taking down a woolly mammoth. Its forked

tongue poked out at Isaac before it slithered back through the same pair of fangs he had imagined while reading his script.

There was never any vampire, Isaac realized. This thing from the black lagoon had always been his nemesis. The lizard-like being was bipedal and had a humanoid stature except for a tail that had a similar diameter to the pipe Isaac had crawled through earlier in the evening. The creature looked as mean as it did powerful.

Isaac would have preferred the vampire.

To further complicate matters, Isaac's body was still changing. Along with his newfound strength, there was something different about his sense of sight. Instead of complete darkness, Isaac could now see patterns of red and orange and blue where the creature stood. The colors pulsed with each breath the beast took. Isaac understood he was looking at heat signatures. His eyes had leveled up to thermal imaging, like the alien from *Predator*. It was an important improvement because Isaac could now see that the lizardman was charging him in a full frontal assault and that his attacker was as cold-blooded as they come.

*Oof!* The wind left Isaac's lungs when the beast crashed into him. Surprised that he was still standing, Isaac parried the attack, able to push the lizardman away, but not for long.

Again, it lunged at Isaac with barred fangs sharp enough to turn the passing wind into a whistle. Isaac hit the ground, dodging the strike, and watched the monster fly over his head. But the beast wasn't deterred, landing on all fours with ease. It snapped its tail at Isaac with impatience.

Beginner's luck. And both of the combatants knew it. Isaac had held his own to start, but this contest was a foregone conclusion.

It was time for Isaac to run, but he didn't get far. Caught from behind, Isaac fell when the lizard's whip-like tail lashed out and tripped him. Isaac toppled head over heels until he landed flat on his back for the second time tonight. Also, for the second time tonight, he was pinned to the ground by his attacker.

Isaac gasped as he thrashed and flailed his body to buck the beast off himself, but his efforts were futile. He was trapped. Isaac could feel the blood leaving his body next. Even with his super strength, no amount of struggling could free Isaac from the sharpened claws that nailed his shoulders to the dirt floor.

The fight was finished. Isaac went limp, waving the white flag. The weak link in this food chain, he was no match for this apex predator. The monkey business was over.

All Isaac could do now was consider the afterlife again, a topic he had never devoted much critical thought to before tonight. He didn't even know how many circles of hell there were!

Nine? How were they organized? Was circle nine the worst, or was that circle one's honor? But his fiery fate would have to wait because the lizardman's kill shot never came. His throat remained free of fang marks.

Instead, Isaac was a captive. He was being saved for later, but why? And for what? Would he be interrogated? Was he a prisoner of war? Was his meat meant to be dry-aged?

As usual, Isaac didn't know anything!

Oh, how Isaac wished he had his gun on him. Not to fire at the lizardman, whose scales Isaac assumed were bulletproof, but to turn the barrel onto himself, as was always his intention when he had purchased the firearm. They would never take him alive! But his gun was gone. *Christ*, he cursed. Why didn't he invest in a cyanide capsule fitted to a fake molar? It had been on his weekend to-do list for far too long.

A resounding roar brought Isaac back to the matter at hand. It echoed off the tunnel's walls as the lizardman was thrown off Isaac. A streak of red hot, pulsating muscle flashed by Isaac like a missile.

*Fwoosh!*

When he got to his feet, Isaac saw his savior. It was a cat. A big fucking cat. A cat Isaac recognized even with thermal imaging. "P38," he muttered in awe, watching the cougar slash and swipe at the lizardman, who did not take the attack lying down.

The two beasts locked themselves together, engaging in a death roll. They scratched and clawed at each other as they hunted for an advantage but found none. It was ugly. Isaac watched cat blood fly through the air and splatter the tunnel floors. But the lizardman was taking its share of shots too. Isaac could hear it hissing in pain.

Isaac didn't wait to find out the winner. Instead, he recalled his safety training. The first lesson was to secure your safety before the safety of others, so Isaac ran and ran and ran. He ran until he couldn't run any farther. When he stopped, it was not because his body gave out with fatigue but because his supercharged body carried him as far as the tunnel would allow.

Indeed there was no white light at the end of this tunnel, but there was an empty construction site instead. Blocking Isaac's passage was 50 feet of heavy equipment that reached from floor to ceiling and wall to wall in a perfect circle. This monstrous machine must have excavated the trail he had been following from the library.

He now recognized this thing as a Tunnel Boring Machine (TBM), having seen them on the promotional materials lining the sidewalks of Century City, which advertised the new Metro line extension. These were the machines responsible for digging the train lines. Isaac knew every TBM was named as part of their marketing campaign. The Century City TBM was called

Harriet. It was an unsubtle nod to the underground railroad, and Isaac thought it was an apt reference because he could not wait to be free at last, free at last from the heavy yoke of slavery that was traveling on the 405.

“Alice” was written in big block letters on the TBM in front of him. Truly, Isaac was through the rabbit hole now. But lucky as a rabbit’s foot, there was a nearby service elevator to make his escape and climb back up to the service.

Whatever black magic invaded Isaac’s system during his fight with the lizardman ran its course by the time he reached ground level. He noticed it when he exited the caged service elevator that brought him up from the tunnel. The only red and blue hues he saw now belonged to the rays of the rising sun and the banners that flew over Dodgers Stadium, which stood a parking lot away from him.

Surrounding him were trucks and work tents, but all the tools were gone, and no workers could be found anywhere. It was a ghost town. If Isaac hadn’t just witnessed a ritual homicide and been attacked by a lizardman, he would have been spooked.

A construction notice told Isaac this was, of course, yet another metro line extension, and he was trespassing on the new Dodger Stadium stop, set to open by next season’s opening day. Isaac’s stomach fluttered with excitement. So intoxicated by the idea of easier transportation, he forgot all about his recent torments.

On the notice, a prospective map of the LA Metro system showed each stop, new and old, as dots connected by various colored lines. To Isaac, they formed a pattern as beautiful as any constellation he had ever seen. It was glorious!

In his mind’s eye, Isaac couldn’t help but attach a tiny, wiggling flagellum to each new dot on the Metro map, for each of these beautiful new stops were children fathered by the infrastructure demands of the upcoming 2028 Olympics. It was a bitter competition to secure the games, but Los Angeles was awarded the honor after the city’s compelling campaign, headlined by their slogan, “Follow the sun!” How could the IOC resist?

Despite the honor of being host, mocking the Olympics was considered a cool conversational topic for LA residents. The tourists! The added traffic! Who needs it? But Isaac knew the games would be worth it in the long run. He saw the bigger picture. To Isaac, the public good of good public transportation was the only difference between LA and the utopia of *Kubla Khan*. It was all the city needed. If the devil had come to Isaac with a deal for reliable rail, his only question would be: “Where do I sign?”

Inspired, Isaac decided to follow the sun, praying it would lead him home and that the sun’s heat wasn’t a false facade disguising the gates of hell.

## Chapter 19

Isaac gritted his teeth in frustration. He was all blocked up. The traffic to Venice was so thick and throbbing that it reminded Isaac of the gossip around Liam Neeson's legendary cock. The line of cars was just so long, long enough to pierce the horizon. And the girth! Six lanes wide, it ran. It was as impressive as it was terrifying. The backup on the boulevards was equally massive. The city and Isaac felt as if they were going to explode.

Despite what conventional wisdom would suggest, LA commuter traffic runs away from downtown and toward the coast. So here Isaac was, at 6:30 AM, jostling with the nine to fivers. Making matters worse, he still couldn't connect with Seth once Isaac's phone's cell service returned, so he had to suffer through some small talk with his Uber driver as they inched their way to Anne's office.

But the conversation soon became a balm. It was as idle as the car's engine, lulling Isaac into a state of relaxation. Isaac needed this after the preceding traumas of the day. Forget about providing charging cables or bottled water for amenities, this was a true 5-star customer experience, plus the driver didn't even mention how Isaac smelled like shit. Without a word, he laid out a towel for Isaac and some baby wipes. Isaac did the best he could with them.

To Isaac, there was no one better to turn to – to confide in – than his psychic. Who better to answer questions about PTSD, Illuminati blood offerings, thermal vision, and bipedal lizards? He couldn't exactly go to Dr. Rousseau or the police. Unquestionably, both of those parties were in on whatever conspiracy he was confronting.

Theoretically, Seth could help him on matters of the occult, but Isaac would have to find him first. Unfortunately, his phone didn't ring when Isaac called, and it didn't go to voicemail either. The tone on the other side of the line told Isaac the number he had attempted to dial was out of service. Isaac grimaced. The lizards probably had their hands on him now. There was no other explanation.

How the tables had turned! The apprentice had become the master. Now it was Isaac's responsibility to watch over Seth. That was another reason Isaac needed to consult his psychic. If Isaac dared rescue Seth from Illuminati lizardmen, a scouting report would surely help his cause. Because, as Seth had taught Isaac, failing to plan was planning to fail.

Anne wasn't surprised when Isaac labored through her front door. She had been expecting him, of course, but she was too classy to point it out. She didn't need to bother. Unlike his last visit, Isaac was a true believer now.

From the hangdog look on Isaac's face, she could tell he had no more doubts about psychics or their field of expertise. His credulity for what was real, true, and possible in this universe had expanded. Tangling with an agent of the lizards will do that to a person. His belief in Anne and her abilities came easier to him now for another reason. He had been backed into a corner. He had to believe in her because if she were a fake, then he would be helpless. He would be hopeless. She was all he had for a resource. Not knowing where to begin, Isaac greeted Anne by keeping a stiff upper lip, using it to say, "I made contact with Captain Flapjacks last night."

As soon as Isaac finished his sentence, the mood in the room became charged. His invocation of the Birman's Christian name caused a stir amongst Anne's army of cats. They tittered and muttered amongst themselves, tails bristling like rattlesnakes.

Isaac quieted himself out of respect for his audience and the cat who had sacrificed himself in a brilliant self-combustion explosion for Isaac only hours earlier. He shouldn't be so suspicious, but he remembered the library explosion with quiet awe. Cat power! He looked around at the cats surrounding him. The sheer number of them in this room gave Isaac a nasty thought.

He may have had the power dynamics of this situation all wrong. Maybe Anne was the pet, and these cats were her masters. So, to play it safe, Isaac curtsied to the cat with the grandest, most impressive mane, figuring him to be their leader.

Anne frowned at Isaac and upturned her nose. "What is that smell? Is it shit? You smell like shit."

"It's shit," Isaac admitted. "But I can explain!"

"Good lord," Anne said with plenty of exasperation. "Here, use this." She handed Isaac a bottle of something special to spritz on himself. "And don't sit on anything."

Isaac took it gladly and sprayed himself liberally with the tonic. "Is this one of your magical elixirs?"

"You could say that. There's no potion on Earth with a scent stronger than this. It's Fierce by Abercrombie and Fitch."

"Oh," Isaac said with uncertainty, but his doubts were misplaced because the smell of shit was immediately tamped down by the overpowering smell of musk, teenage angst, and Auntie Annie's hot pretzels.

Once Anne regained her olfactory system, she could focus on what was important. Namely, Isaac had returned to her empty-handed. Again. “And how is Captain Flapjacks? In good spirits, I pray.”

“He saved my life.”

“Cats have a habit for that,” Anne mused, “A classic ‘who rescued who?’ situation. So, what were you rescued from? For me, it was the bottle.”

“I was saved from a monkey and a lizardman,” Isaac said, finally saying his trauma out loud. And when he did, he collapsed into a chair and cried. It was simply too much. A lizardman attacked him! It had scales, for Christ’s sake.

Anne opened her mouth to chastise Isaac for soiling her chaise but ended up biting her lip in an amazing act of self-restraint. For the first time, someone had taken pity on Isaac.

Isaac’s weeping started as a little rattle before quickly becoming a honking wheeze. His hot tears did little to warm his heart. This was the most he had cried since his parents died in that terrible sneezing-induced automobile accident. But by the end of the cry, Isaac had begun to laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“A lizardman attacked me! After a black mass sacrifice!” Isaac repeated to restate the ridiculousness of the situation. He was delirious.

But Anne remained stoic. “I admire your sense of humor because, in my experience, those fuckers are no laughing matter.”

Isaac’s face hardened, “You know the lizardmen?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Biblically, you could say, but that was back during my bad boy phase.”

“Hold up. You dated a lizardman?” Isaac was astonished.

“Sure. I dated Xzaylax-Delta.” Anne said with all the nonchalance she could muster to hide her bitterness. “But I wasn’t the only one....”

“Xzaylax-Delta?”

“Yes. And I was almost Mrs. Xzaylax-Delta, if you must know. We dated for a few years until the third Gogzac civil war, but that’s ancient history. It was a phase. I grew out of it. Everyone does. Apparently.”

“..”

Anne smiled.

“What’s so funny?”

“Sorry, I was busy congratulating myself. I had faith in you, and I was rewarded for it. You survived. Good job.” She said to herself. “You sure know how to pick ‘em, Anne.”

“Wait a second!” Isaac got to his feet to demonstrate his deep displeasure. “You knowingly sent me in there? Into that – that pit of vipers?”

“Nothing a certified Slytherin couldn’t manage, I imagine.”

“..”

“To be fair, the lizardmen connection to Captain Flapjacks was only conjecture on my part. Being a psychic didn’t have much to do with it.”

“What tipped you off?”

“The fact I couldn’t really rely on my abilities to crack the case. Like cats, lizardmen are a little trickier to pin down than humans, especially since lizardmen can shapeshift to human form, so it had to be one or the other or both. Guess it was both.”

“Shapeshift? So, you’re saying all those people at the black mass were lizardmen?”

“I’m sure some of them were and some of them weren’t. Plenty of treasonous humans to go around who love nothing more than to suckle from the sweet teat of power.”

Isaac chewed on this, recalling Elon Musk’s uncanny valley of a face. “But how do lizards compare to cats?” Isaac asked hushedly so the cats in the room didn’t hear him.

“No contest. Cats are on a different level, a higher plane of existence,” Anne explained, pandering to her audience, who appreciated her efforts. With their egos satisfied, the cats around them returned to grooming themselves and their neighbors unperturbed.

“...well.”

“Well, what?”

“Tell me about the lizards!” Isaac’s exasperation reached a crescendo. “Seems like a big deal that we got secret lizardmen walking around the streets of LA. What’s the need-to-know information? Give me the Wikipedia version if you have to.”

“They landed on Earth thousands of years ago.”

“Like from space?”

“The Draco constellation if you want to get into the specifics.”

“So, they’re not from Pittsburgh?”

“Not originally, anyway, but they did have a nest there during the Industrial Revolution.”

Isaac re-stated the facts for confirmation, “So the Illuminati is a collection of conspiratorial lizardmen who are also aliens.”

“That’s a bit reductive, Isaac. They’re also Nazis.”

“...” Isaac didn’t know how to react. Did Isaac know they were Nazis already? He couldn’t keep the clues straight anymore. His head hurt so much that he held it in his hands gingerly, tenderly, cradling it like an egg. It was all he could do to keep it from cracking open and spilling its contents all over Anne’s nice shag rug.

After daydreaming about the the cats in the room lapping up his leaking cerebrospinal fluid off the floor with their sandpaper tongues, Isaac peeked out at Anne from between his fingers. “What do they want?”

“The lizards want what we all want: to survive and thrive. Reproduction is a universal phenomenon, and I do mean universal.”

“How do they accomplish that, exactly?”

“Uh, well, it’s complicated. When a lizardman loves a human...”

“Does it involve human sacrifice?”

“Only if the stars are aligned.” Anne reached over to a side table for her handy-dandy star chart and grimaced after seeing the results. “Oh. I see,” she said after letting loose a long, low whistle. “Yes, that is unfortunate....” she trailed off, whispering the rest of her words under her breath. Presumably, they were spoken for the poor souls whose fates she read in the stars.

Then, out of respect, she lit the three votive candles on the same side table where her star chart resided. To Anne, the candles represented the father, the son, and the holy spirit, or, as you and I would know them, Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker, and Jar-Jar Binks.

“Do they sacrifice children?” Isaac asked, thinking of what Seth had said while they trailed the school field trip at the Annenberg.

“Only human children.”

“...” Isaac stared through Anne. “Be honest with me, please. I trust your opinion and authority on this subject: Am I dead?” He tried to pass a hand through his chest to test his corporeal form, which held firm despite his best efforts. “I died, right? That’s what you predicted, right? In the Tarot?”

“Enough of that. This is no time to have delusions of grandeur. You’ll need all your faculties if you’re going to stay alive.”

“Okay,” Isaac groaned, his worst fears confirmed. Of course, if he were dead, then at least the worst would have been over by now. “Then I need your help.”

“Of course you do, sweetie. And there even some lizardmen who need my help, too, despite what they or their passive-aggressive brood mother may think,” Anne said, referring to her ex, Xzaylax-Delta.

Isaac screamed, rocking back and forth. “The monkey saw my face. He’s going to out me!” He groaned, knowing the question wasn’t if “They” would find him but when. “Tell me more. Tell me everything there is to know about these lizardmen,” Isaac pleaded, hoping there would be a secret trick to evading their capture.

Maybe his salvation would be as simple as moving somewhere north. The deep recesses of his brain recalled a factoid about how cold snaps in Florida caused iguanas and other lizards to freeze up and fall out of trees. But that wouldn’t work. Isaac hated the cold more than he feared death. He was a SoCal boy through and through. If he moved north, it would be over his dead body.

“Forget Wikipedia. The quickest explanation of Illuminati lizardmen is that everything you’ve ever read on Reddit is true.”

“..”

“Yes, and so is about half of what is posted on 4chan. In fact, Wikipedia entries are the most unreliable, but the Wikias are pretty okay. That’s an important distinction. Same goes for the answers to the Quora questions so long as they are from the lizardmen school of thought rather than the ones that blame the Jews.”

Whatever Isaac had read from those various sites flashed through his mind, but mostly what he could remember came from the memes he saw. One that stood out, particularly, was of a transforming Queen Elizabeth. In the image, part of her face peeled back to reveal a hidden layer of scales and a yellowed reptilian eye.

That was important.

If Isaac remembered Illuminati lore correctly, eyes were a big deal. An evil eye was even hidden in the Taco Bell logo, something Isaac couldn’t unsee after it was first pointed out to him. Belluminati. But he was fuzzy on the rest of the details of the Taco Bell conspiracy. Maybe there was a connection between the Illuminati pyramids and Taco Bell’s triangular tortilla chips?

Luckily for Isaac, Anne was willing to lecture him on the subject. She told him that the lizardmen, upon landing on Earth, infiltrated the ranks of their earthly hosts, living amongst them, ruling over them under the cover of skin and occasionally slaughtering them for sustenance whenever the stars crossed.

Astrology was actually real, Isaac learned. (The women had it right.) Whenever mercury was in retrograde, lizardmen killings peaked, as that’s when adrenochrome harvested from human pineal glands had their highest yields. It was all written in the Hollywood stars.

Anne warned something big was probably coming, blaming the upcoming summer solstice for the uptick in lizardmen activities. The longest day of the year was only days away, and this one held a special significance.

Of course, Isaac thought. Lucky him. “Why, what’s so good about this year?”

“It marks the end of the 33-year lunar cycle.”

But Isaac couldn’t understand the importance. It was too hard to follow. She kept going on and on about it and how he should beware that number—the number 33. Why? There were 33 levels in Freemasonry. The 33rd element in the periodic table? Arsenic. Jesus died at age 33. Larry Bird, basketball Jesus, wore number 33. The author of this book you’re reading? Wrote it when they were 33.

“So the Freemasons are Illuminati, too?”

“Yes and no,” Anne said, “they’re more like JV Illuminati. They’re at the bottom of the pyramid.”

“This does sound a lot like what I’ve read on Reddit.”

“I know.”

“So what do I do?”

“What you were born to do. Fulfill your duty – your destiny – as an upper-middle-class, white cis-male. You must ascend to your rightful place at the top of the food chain, thereby knocking the lizardmen down a peg. You will save the human race from continued enslavement through the sheer forces of will known as white privilege and failing upwards.”

“You think? White male privilege? Failing upward?” The whole idea seemed a little preposterous to Isaac. “And I take down the lizardmen by saving the cat, correct?”

“Yes!” Anne sighed with exasperation. “What don’t you understand? You got any better ideas? Are you – a moron – possibly seeing angles of play that I – a world-renowned psychic – can’t?” Anne tapped her third eye as proof of her authority.

“And how do the cats figure in with the lizards? What’s the story there?” Isaac asked, but he no longer really cared for the answer. This was exhausting. Isaac had to get creative. There were other ways he could employ his powers of white privilege.

He could use them defensively.

A shield made of Teflon, white privilege meant never having to say you’re sorry. White privilege meant inoculation from risk, responsibility, and consequence. He didn’t need this hassle of saving the world. No thanks. His life had remained stable through recessions, pandemics, and war. Why should the Illuminati be any different? This temptatious Eve will not upset him or his apple cart. “I quit.”

“Excuse me? You can’t quit.”

“I quit! I’m off the case! Murder, lizards, aliens. This is all a bit above my pay grade. I can’t handle that, especially when my compensation is a single complimentary psychic reading. This juice isn’t worth the squeeze.” Isaac neglected to mention his newly acquired superpowers to Anne. While he was anxious for answers on that front, he (correctly) worried that Anne would use them as leverage to shame him back into his role of savior. He knew she’d invoke the superhero mantra of “with great power comes great responsibility” against him, a line of rhetoric that Isaac would be powerless against.

“It’s not nearly as bad as what you’re making it out to be. You’re being hysterical. The aliens and the lizards are the same things, so you’re just repeating yourself.”

“That just makes it twice as bad! And don’t forget they’re Nazis. Triple bad!”

“This is a small hardship for one of my psychic readings, which are priceless because they are peerless,” Anne answered ominously. “Here. I’ll show you. I can’t believe you’re goading me into this again,” she said as she twisted all of the rings off her fingers and placed them on the coffee table to search through them. She had so many rings! There were gold ones and silver ones, ones with gems set into them, one that looked like a prize from a box of Cracker Jacks, and even one plain ring inscribed with an evil elvish script. “There you are!” She brought a particular ring to her eye to inspect a hazy bulbous stone set into a modest copper band.

Isaac leaned forward to get a better look. He understood now. He was looking at a mood ring, a crystal ball in miniature. Inside the stone, the colors swirled, hypnotizing Isaac.

Anne had him right where she wanted. Without warning, she thrust the ring against Isaac’s forehead and pressed the stone into the center of his third eye, the seat of his pineal gland.

A shock of cold energy swept down his spine, paralyzing him. But the pain was short-lived because Anne pulled the stone away as soon as he realized what had happened. Then, ignoring his protests, she squinted at the gem. It was changing color. Isaac watched as it shifted from bubblegum pink to a June Gloom gray.

“So?” Isaac asked.

After several anxious moments, Anne broke her trance off to offer her assessment. “I see hearts, stars, and horseshoes. Clovers and blue moons. In short: nothing but good tidings are coming your way!”

“...” Even Isaac, with his stunning lack of emotional intelligence, could tell she wasn’t coming clean with him. Whatever she saw in that ring must have looked like the leaves at the

bottom of Harry Potter's divination teacup, grim, thus confirming the wisdom of his choice to become a conscientious objector. "I wish you the best of luck to you and your endeavors," he explained as he got up from his chair, hoping that was that. He didn't need the nuisance of an intergalactic battle. Who had time for that? He could barely keep up with his laundry.

This little excursion to save the cat was never his idea anyway. It was only an exercise prescribed by a false therapist whose ulterior motives were unclear to Isaac, and they would stay that way. He wouldn't wonder or worry about his role in this event anymore. If he were a cat, he'd no longer be curious. Ignorance was bliss. Lesson learned.

"You can't leave," Anne decided.

"Why not?"

"Don't do this for me or my psychic readings. Don't do it for the world. Do it for Captain Flapjacks."

"No. Not for Captain Flapjacks," Isaac lowered his voice to try and keep the cats in the room out of the conversation, "from what I've learned about cat power, not only can he save himself, but he should be the one saving me."

"He already did, remember? Happened like ten minutes ago. He blew up the library. And now you owe him a life debt," Anne said like it was as simple as a matter of accounting.

"He's got nine lives, and I've got one."

"You want to say that again?" Anne threatened, indicating her furry friends. "And what about the world? How many lives does Earth have?"

"If it's so important, why don't you do it?" Isaac whined.

"Heavens, no!" Anne scoffed, "And run the risk of crossing paths with Xzaylax-Delta again? I couldn't."

"Why? What happened? He leave you for a lizard lady? Must be hard to compete with a forked tongue," Isaac snorted.

"..." Anne's narrowed eyes were positively lizard-like, forcing Isaac to recalibrate.

"Fair enough. Well, you have your reasons, and I have mine." Isaac began making his way toward the door. Any more time spent with Anne was time that he could be melting his mind by watching police procedurals on network TV, *with* commercials. Isaac loved commercials. (Sometimes Isaac would watch supercuts of 90s commercials on Youtube just to make himself *feel* something. The Sears AC one was his favorite, and he'd recite it often. "Yesterday, you said you'd call Sears." "I'll call today." "You'll call now." "I'll call now!") That was what he was craving, the safety and comfort of 60 minutes of repetitious plots with no loose ends.

Whatever else Anne tried to say to get him to stay and fight fell on deaf ears.

Isaac knew he might be at the mid-point on his journey to “Save the Cat,” or just past it, but he was closing the book on his story here. This was as good of a time as any to leave it all behind because the “Fun and Games” of it all were clearly over, and if the beat sheet was to be believed, then what lay ahead for him didn’t sound all that appetizing. Isaac could do without going through the stages of “Bad Guys Close In,” “All is Lost,” and “Dark Night of the Soul.” No thanks. Those trials would be best left to someone else. Isaac was going to go out on top.

As he was exiting Anne’s, Isaac turned around for the memories, wanting one last look at this chapter of his life to commemorate his accomplishments. When he did, his eyes fixated on Anne’s wall of fame again. There was a portrait of interest to him.

Hung between photos of two titans of culture, Keanu Reeves and Mr. Rogers, was a black-and-white headshot of Zee Shirley, the missing *Super Jesus* screenwriter. Oh yeah! Isaac remembered how Liz indirectly outed Zee as Anne’s client, a lead that deserved some more follow-up questions for Anne, but oh well! That was a piece of the puzzle for someone else to fit into the larger picture. It wasn’t his problem anymore. Anne would take care of it. She would have to because this sleeper agent was committed to hitting the snooze button. So sleep tight, world, and don’t let the bed bugs bite.

## Chapter 20

Isaac had triumphed. With no more responsibilities on the horizon, he was free — a Friday night of the soul. However, there was one last homework assignment for Isaac. It was a math problem. If he wanted to forget everything about the past 24 hours, how much weed would he need to smoke? He stuck out his fingers to add up the ounces, but he came up short. Because, much like in *Mean Girls*, the limit did not exist.

He would just smoke it all. There was a method to Isaac's madness. He knew short-term memory only converted to long-term memory during a REM sleep cycle, so he'd be able to forget his recent trauma(s) as long as he corrupted his short-term memory before he went to bed. His wounds were still fresh enough that they didn't have to scar. And weed would be his salve, a drug infamous for inhibiting short-term memory function, or at least that's what he remembered from DARE. So if he consumed enough THC before he hit REM, he'd avoid getting PTSD, which would mean his NDE would be NBD, allowing Isaac to recapture his BDE.

It made perfect sense.

Isaac was losing his mind.

Meaning everything was going according to plan.

He had to act fast.

If things didn't go to plan, and he couldn't smoke enough weed before bed, then one day soon, Isaac would wake up, look in the mirror, and see the same 1000-yard stare he saw in Seth's eyes whenever his sponsor was sober. Witnessing the blood sacrifice of his buddy at the hands of Super Jesus was frightening, but that wasn't it. Scarier was still discovering his thermal vision and super strength. Isaac wanted to forget about these superpowers. That was his most painful potential memory, more than the murder and more than the discovery of the lizardmen.

"With great power comes great responsibility." His conscience called.

That saying nagged at him ever since he had thought of it at Anne's that morning. And whenever he thought of it, it made it harder for him to bail on the Captain Flapjacks situation. The feet that walked out of Anne's office were growing cold because his *Spider-Man*-informed code of morality compelled him.

"With great power comes great responsibility."

He couldn't escape it. But Isaac's power was better than great. It was super.

"With superpower comes super responsibility!"

The line was pithy yet profound. It was the gold standard of morality marketing slogans, up there with the other greats, such as "Do unto others," "Because I said so," and "Just do it."

*"I was going to save the world, but then I got high,"* Isaac sang, impersonating Afroman. He was feeling good. According to his phone, the Lyft he requested would be here any minute to take him to his favorite dispensary.

Unlike the boardwalk — a tourist spot that sold seeds and stems at tourist pricing — the Nile Collective was a hidden gem of Venice. They sold a specific strain of Sativa that often had Isaac forgetting everything from his name to the age of consent.

His mouth watered.

Patience, he told himself. Any minute now, he'd have his fix, craving nothing more than bong hits between sips of a cold brew coffee. An anticipatory buzz began to bubble in his blood at the thought of the indulgence, a physical reaction no different than your knee jerking during a reflex test or how a little pre-cum dribbled out of Isaac whenever he turned on his vacuum cleaner.

Life could be simple if you made it about simple pleasures. That was something Isaac should try to remember. Seth had been on the right path when choosing to devote his life to experiences and sensations, but he was doing it all wrong. Chasing the exotic and the novel was a mistake. Isaac now had an appreciation for how exhausting and dangerous that could be.

Comfortable consumption was the answer rather than becoming embroiled in a murderous conspiracy, no matter how many superpowers he gained. But, unfortunately, he had fallen victim to the oldest human fallibility — greed, wanting more than what he had, and what he had was a nice, quiet, anonymous life in Santa Monica, where the only people who recognized him were the employees at the local mom and pop shops where Isaac was no longer considered welcome.

Pave paradise and put up a parking lot.

Isaac should have known better. His first instinct of being a lazy POS instead of a main character from a movie had been right. But, like most geniuses, Isaac's best ideas, in retrospect, were his most obvious.

Liz was the only hitch in Isaac's plan to wipe his memory. He didn't want to forget her. There was a part of him that wanted to continue his daydream dalliances about her, a sexual tension he could not deny, and neither could she, he knew. After all, she was his love interest.

But Isaac had no other choice. He was a loose end, one that the Illuminati would be looking to tie off with a hangman's knot. He had to get off the grid and trust her to find him. If it was meant to be, then it was meant to be. That's true love for you.

To survive, Isaac would have to become a total recluse. No exceptions. He would have to go solo, meaning Liz wouldn't be the only sacrifice. Seth was next. When his Lyft arrived, Isaac was thinking of possible secluded destinations for himself. Mexico was an option. His gut told him to go to Egypt, but he decided to run away to the lost city of Atlantis instead.

"What the fuck?" Isaac screamed in surprise when he got into the back seat of his Lyft.

"Buckle up, buttercup," suggested Seth, who twisted his body around to get a better look at his passenger from the driver's seat. His sharp teeth formed a smile. "For your convenience, I've placed mints and complimentary sheepskin condoms inside the seat pocket in front of you. I've also engaged the door's child lock. Is that Fierce by Abercrombie I smell? Good on you, Isaac! I was more of an Axe guy myself."

Isaac suffered some light whiplash as Seth jammed the accelerator only to pump the brakes as soon as he merged into traffic. Isaac felt sick. Seth was driving in the opposite direction of the Nile Collective.

"Where have you been? Where was my backup?" Isaac demanded, his memory of fighting the lizardman and monkey two-on-one still vivid. "And where are we going? And — and you're a Lyft driver?"

"I used to be an Uber guy, but then Uber fucked around with the Muslim ban and was scabbing taxis. Now, they're in the finding-out phase. You know, I didn't do two tours over there in Afghanistan, saving those sand niggers' lives for people over here to be afraid of them."

"..."

"There was this one dude," Seth snapped his fingers several times to aid his memory recall. "We called him Osama bin Llama because not only did this guy have the longest neck in the province, but he could also spit twice the length of a fucking football field. I swear this guy could have irrigated the entire desert—"

"Thank you for your service," Isaac interrupted, hoping the usual platitude could placate Seth before launching into the more important matters at hand. "This is not the way to my preferred dispensary."

"You can forget that. We're on a business trip."

"I think that label applies to all Lyft rides."

Seth smirked. "Oh, we got a philosopher on our hands here, huh?"

"If the shoe fits," Isaac said.

Seth grew serious. "The Amber alert isn't over, Isaac. There are still missing girls out there. It's all of our business. It takes a village to raise a child," which was all he had to say to drain the blood from Isaac's face.

Isaac groaned. He had completely forgotten about the missing child. "No. No. No. I'm done playing savior."

"You're what?"

"I've put myself out to pasture. It's not for me. I'm retired."

"Since when?"

"About five minutes ago."

"Bullshit. I'm a secret agent, and you're a sleeper agent, remember? So we're going to move, and we're going to groove, and we're going to get this girl out of the clutches of some fucking creep. Those are the rules."

"Please, no. Let's be real. She's probably dead."

"All the more reason to go. We'll just change the mission parameters from search and rescue to search and destroy." Seth's knuckles turned white around the wheel, which in turn made Isaac a little green around the gills. He knew Seth meant business, and no amount of arguing would change his attitude. As the car weaved up the boulevards and down the avenues, all Isaac could do now was plan an escape.

Seth had the goods. There was an address. He got it from a contact he had at the DMV, cashing in on a former friendship forged back in his days of scamming parking validations. This was someone who could track down the kidnapper's getaway car from the original Amber alert video. And when Isaac asked Seth why he didn't refer the matter to the police, Seth explained how the police were in on the conspiracy, which Isaac, of course, knew to be true. So if the girl were to be saved, it would be up to them. How unfortunate, Isaac thought, for both them and the girl.

Seth stopped the car, and Isaac investigated their new surroundings. They were in K-town if the neon signs and foreign characters were to be believed.

"Thar she blows," Seth said. He pointed across the street to his white whale, the red minivan from the Amber Alert. The owner had done their best to obscure its presence by throwing a tarp over it, but it wasn't enough to trick Isaac's trained eye or cover up the foreboding aura that seemed to seep out of the van's exhaust pipe.

Isaac had never known a malevolent minivan before now, but this one was more disturbia than suburbia. It freaked him the fuck out. Something bad was about to happen. He

imagined this was how Joe Pesci's character must have felt in *Goodfellas* when he opened the door to his made-man ceremony only to find the room empty.

"This is the place," Isaac agreed, looking up at the darkened stucco apartment above the carport where the minivan was parked. "I'll keep an eye on how the situation develops out here. I'll honk once if the police come, twice if it's the kidnapper, and three times if it's an Amazon delivery."

Seth laughed until he didn't. "Good one, but I know how slippery you can be. Never there when I need you. You're coming with."

Isaac started to protest that Seth had it the other way around, but he shut his mouth as soon as he exited the car, not wanting to upset the hush that enveloped the area. Curiously, they were insulated from the reverie of the karaoke bars that populated the nearby streets. Isaac wished he were in one of them, belting out a sloppy and slurred rendition of R. Kelly's *Remix to Ignition* instead of approaching the apartment of a potential pedo.

It wasn't fair.

But Isaac got another opportunity to showcase his vocals anyway, letting loose a womanly scream after seeing Seth reach into his waistband to arm himself with Isaac's gun. Casually, Seth used the butt of it to break the handle off the front door to pop it open.

"What the fucking fuck?" Isaac demanded, but Seth silenced him by putting the gun barrel against Isaac's lips to pin them close. Isaac winced. This was not the easy-breezy retirement he had imagined. Where was his Corona? Where was his beach?

Once through the door, Isaac's eyes adjusted to the gloomy dark, and an empty apartment greeted him. It reminded him of his own in Santa Monica. This was the residence of a homebound drifter. The living room was spartan except for a large flat-screen TV and a sectional couch that boasted an ass depression in only one of its cushions. The main distinction between this place and Isaac's was that whatever Isaac owned in his apartment, this person could afford one brand deviation better, the difference between Honda and Acura, Ritalin and cocaine, or Gerard Butler and Russell Crowe.

Unfortunately, Isaac didn't see any evidence that an abducted girl lived here or died here. There were no dolls, hair bows, or plastic tarping. If the girl was brutally murdered, Isaac expected to find at least some blood or trace amounts of sugar, spice, and everything nice, but there wasn't much of anything. Isaac knew these facts weren't exculpatory, however. Whenever he had thought of trying homicide on for size, leaving behind a trail of evidence was never part of the plan.

“Take the far room,” Seth said, pointing to a closed door at the far end of a hallway that connected the living room and kitchen with the rest of the apartment. Isaac nodded and moved toward it with small and slow steps.

Left foot, right foot.

Right foot, left foot.

“Can I have my gun back?” Isaac whispered, but Seth had vanished, already conducting a sweep of another room. Isaac gulped, imagining he was on the path to a torture chamber or a lizardmen's nest. He tried to stand firm, but the gravity of the situation pulled him closer to whatever awaited him on the other side of the hall door.

But what Isaac found inside that room was not a torture chamber for abducted children nor even a den of inequity but one of LA's most sought-after luxuries, a second bedroom-turned-office. Isaac turned green with envy. There was a standing desk cranked to full height at the far side of the room, a reading chair, and even a mini-fridge stocked with sparkling mineral water, but what stood out the most was a clue.

Like Anne's office, framed pictures of movie stars covered the walls. Isaac saw Keanu Reeves, Paul Walker, and even Michael B. Jordan. But these photos weren't headshots. Instead, they were taken from various movie sets. Upon closer inspection, Isaac noticed these photos were not really of Keanu Reeves, Paul Walker, or Michael B. Jordan but of a single stuntman in costume. A wig out of place here, a mistimed profile shot there, and some patchy blackface exposed the movie magic, but what really tipped Isaac off was when he saw a picture of the stuntman standing side-by-side with an actor he was portraying. In that photo, he and Manny Ortega wore full Super Jesus costumes.

Isaac gasped.

Not from shock. Isaac wasn't surprised to learn he raided the home of Super Jesus's stuntman. (Isaac didn't think he could be surprised anymore.) He was afraid.

Of course, the missing Amber alert girl was wrapped up with the *Super Jesus* production. Isaac swallowed his stomach, and his vision darkened around the periphery, facing incontrovertible proof that he was dealing with a higher power. He was resigned to that fact.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't free himself from the clutches of this grand conspiracy. Its tendrils went too deep, embedded too far into his very existence, and the more he struggled, the tighter they seemed to grip him. Trapped in QAnon quicksand, Isaac had been a fool to think he could extricate himself from this situation.

All roads led to Century City.

Finally, Isaac understood that his dreams for an unmolested life, as brief as they were, were dashed. There was no quitting his mission. He would have to see this out to the end, but to what end? At this point, he needed something with a pointy end, as suicide was the only option that felt under his control.

Isaac trusted there would be something sharp enough in the standing desk to do the trick. Perhaps a letter opener or a fountain pen would do the trick, but he found something else while rifling through its drawers, a thick stack of worn and marked pages held together by three big brass brads. It was the stuntman's copy of the shooting script for the *Super Jesus* sequel, written by Zee Shirley, the very same script that Mr. Lennox withheld from Isaac under penalty of death.

Isaac had to find out why.

"Seth!" Isaac called, wanting a second set of eyes to verify the existence of this Holy Grail, but Isaac couldn't wait another second longer before digging in past the title page. He skimmed a couple of scenes, looking for something salacious. But, instead, what he read was a big set piece where Super Jesus faces off against the underwater beast known colloquially as the Kraken and a big miracle montage that featured Super Jesus curing male-pattern baldness, granting dogs an increased life expectancy, and birthing a viable third party for American politics. What Isaac didn't see, disappointingly, was any scene referencing Captain Flapjack's whereabouts, but he was startled to read one about himself.

Representation on screen was important, but this was a bridge too far for Isaac. Right there, in courier font, was Isaac's name, and it wasn't just a cameo appearance either. Isaac had a supporting role in the *Super Jesus* sequel. As Isaac read more and more pages, he grew more and more frightened, now understanding why Mr. Lennox hid this from him. It wasn't a movie Isaac was reading, but his life as a B plot.

Apparently, Isaac wasn't the only screenwriter in Hollywood who could predict the future. Every word Zee wrote in this script matched Isaac's life exactly, down to the notes about where to place the holes in his jeans. So there Isaac was, on page 24, going to Dr. Rousseau to bear his soul, while page 39 documented his adventures in trying to track down Super Jesus. Embarrassingly, the writing wasn't particularly kind to Isaac. On page one, Zee described him as an all-American asshole.

Isaac was going to flip to the script's last page to see how it all would end, but his eyes got caught on page 65, just past the midpoint, where the scene narrated Isaac's investigation of a suspected pedo's K-town apartment. The pages followed Isaac's every step just as they were,

from his abduction by Seth to how he stumbled upon the very script he now held in his trembling hands.

Isaac was entranced, gripped by the story. In painstaking detail, Zee described how helpless Isaac was at this very moment, so paradoxically engrossed in reading about the slithering shadow closing in from behind him that there was nothing he could do to defend himself against the slithering shadow closing in from behind him. And while Isaac may have tried to adopt the morality of Spider-Man, he did not have the web slinger's power of spidey sense.

*"Thunk!"*

That was the word choice Zee Shirley used for the sound of the blunt instrument that struck Isaac's head.

Ouch! Isaac could feel the plot thickening all down his face. If Isaac were to quibble with the accuracy of anything Zee authored, it would be that the state of consciousness that overtook him after being hit in the head was anything but a "peaceful slumber." Instead, she should have written, *"Isaac's consciousness plummeted into a nightmare of torment and agony where his physical pain was only exceeded by the existential dread he felt upon realizing he was about to go to sleep without getting high, damning him to lifelong memories of his foray into world-saving of which there would be no escape until the sweet embrace of death."*

## Chapter 21

“¡Dios fucking *mío!*,” Isaac wheezed. His brain blistered in pain. Before he could brave the act of opening his eyes, his hand sought out a sizable welt on the back of his head. A souvenir from K-town. Given its tenderness, Isaac thought it felt like the bruise could be up to a day or two old, but what the fuck did he know? He wasn’t a doctor. What he did know was that his hair felt freshly shampooed. He was finally free of the stink of the LA sewers and Fierce by Abercrombie. That was something, but it wasn’t enough.

The physical brain damage was one thing, but he was hurting on a metaphysical level, too. Isaac struggled to wrap his mind around the implications of reading his starring appearance in the *Super Jesus* sequel, his life foretold. Every time he tried flirting with questions of destiny, free will, and his own prophetic powers, his consciousness collapsed, out of breath, crying out for something to doom scroll, craving fluoride. Best not to think of it.

Isaac pushed himself up from his cot and into a sitting position. He assessed himself and his surroundings. First was the institutional jumpsuit he wore. The cotton was as crisp as it was white. Not a great sign. What was worse was the room. Its four walls were painted a brilliant shade of white, and the 2-in-1 sink and toilet combination suggested prison, but the adjacent desk said maybe not so fast. Curiously, it held an old-fashioned typewriter and an accompanying vase of arranged flowers — poppies, obviously.

“Dios fucking *mío!*,” Isaac sighed when his eyes finally landed on his bunkmate. He tried to fight off the recognition and what it would mean but couldn’t. His migraine exploded anew. “Hey, I know you,” Isaac wheezed.

“You don’t know me,” the man countered. He sat on his very own cot across from Isaac. The supports bowed from the man’s bulk. Luckily, a Hufflepuff House badge was affixed to the man’s matching uniform, putting Isaac at ease. “You don’t know me if I don’t know you.”

“You wouldn’t. I met you in a dream.”

“Oh,” his roommate said flatly, shrugging it off as if this was a run-of-the-mill revelation.

“The man of my dreams,” Isaac laughed at himself. What else could he do but laugh? He was talking to a figment of his imagination. The man described as “The Taller Figure” in his *Super Jesus 3* script laughed back. He had a big belly full of chuckles to work his way through.

Isaac was sure this was the guy. The massive height, the vulnerable eyes, and the sad-sack face made him perfect for playing the part of a patsy, a look that Isaac recognized from the mirror. Its familiarity spooked Isaac so much that he had to refresh his visual palette by going to the room's lone window.

"Jesus Christ," Isaac muttered. Though a spider web of metal mesh inlaid into the reinforced glass, he could see yet another familiar sight: downtown LA. From this vantage point, way high up in the sky, he could see the LA coroner's office and retrace his steps from when he followed Super Jesus into the drain pipes by the LA river.

Only one place in LA could claim this view.

Isaac groaned, and his cot's springs echoed the sound as he sat back down. He would have to get comfortable because he'd be here awhile. This cot, and now himself, belonged to the Twin Towers Correctional Facility, LA's receptacle for its refuse, home to those who refused to go along with polite society or live on Skid Row (which was yet another city landmark he could see from this room with a view).

But who brought him here? And why? If only he had been able to read more of the *Super Jesus 2* script before he was knocked out.

"What happened in your dream?" the Taller Figure wondered. "Was I flying? I've always wanted to learn how to fly."

"You don't want to know. One man's dream could be another man's nightmare."

"..."

"Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you." Isaac bit his lip. "In my dream, a lizardman ate you."

The taller figure mulled that over briefly before asking, "Was it Xzaylax-Delta?"

"..." Isaac choked on his tongue.

"He didn't eat me," the man said as a matter of fact. "I'm still here. See?"

Isaac took a moment to process this before speaking, "Confirm something for me, okay? Did you and Zee break into the Annenberg to steal Captain Flapjacks from Super Jesus?"

"Yup."

Isaac let loose a long, low whistle. "Sheesh. I knew that, of course, but it's another thing to hear it straight from the source." He paused, wheels turning, "So, is Zee here? Did they capture her?"

"No. No. No." The Taller Figure said, holding up his hands to reveal bandages where his fingernails should have been. "My name is Mark Appleton," Mark Appleton explained. He extended a bloodied hand to Isaac for a formal greeting.

Isaac recoiled. If this is how they treated this dumb bastard, what would they do to a super genius/wizard like Isaac? “What happened to you?”

“I’m trying to find Zee.” Mark looked at his fingers, counting them. “Did you know that sometimes pain can help you to remember things?”

“No.”

“That’s what the doctors taught me. But... it just hasn’t worked on me yet. You’ll learn all sorts of cool science facts while you’re here. We’re in a top-secret lab. I’m a secret agent.”

“That makes two of us.”

Mark put a palm to his forehead. “Have you ever remembered one thing by remembering another thing?”

“Sure,” Isaac said, now augmenting his vocal register to the same tone society uses for toddlers for the sake of this man who was as simple as two plus two. Mark was someone at home in the Twin Towers, who belonged in the Twin Towers, unlike Isaac, who was of sound mind and body. Isaac had to figure out an escape route. “What did you remember, Mark?”

“I remembered that you know Zee. So now it’s your turn to remember where she is. Maybe you could write it down?” Mark tried to keep a straight face, but one of his eyes escaped, and looked across the room.

Isaac followed the fleeing eye to where it landed on the typewriter. Huh. Something didn’t add up for Isaac. Whoever plucked Mark’s nails out would surely know better than to damage his fingers if they wanted Mark to use the typewriter. Unless it wasn’t Mark’s typewriter at all, but it was meant for Isaac, the one-time screenwriter laureate of *Super Jesus 3*. He recognized the typewriter’s make and model as the kind used in the monkeys’ writers’ room at Fox studios.

“Did the doctors put you up to this? Did they ask you to ask me to write a script?” Isaac pressed Mark, but his mind was racing, thinking only Mr. Lennox could be responsible. He should have never read that *Super Jesus 2* script. He had been warned.

“No,” Mark protested, putting both his bandaged hands up in surrender. “I want to help Zee, and these doctors promised me they’d protect her once you found her.”

“Like they’re protecting you?”

“Mhmm,” he nodded. “And they’ll protect you, too, if you write the script to find Zee. You can find her with the typewriter.”

“Do you feel protected?”

“You only get something if you give something,” Mark recited. “We all want to find her.” He puffed out his chest, “And I’m tough. I can take it. I’m doing my part. That’s why Zee brought

me with her to the Annenberg. Plus, the food ain't half bad here." He ruminated on this point for a moment before saying, "I would like to go home, though. Once we find Zee, we will go home. They pinky promised."

"Why did you guys try to steal Captain Flapjacks?"

Mark sighed, having been asked this question a thousand times before. "I don't know. I was the muscle. Need-to-know basis only is what she said. All I was told was that we would save the world."

"Did she say how?"

"Only that we had to save the cat."

"Of course." It was now Isaac's time to sigh. He could see how wise Zee was to keep this dimwit in the dark, a decision that was paying dividends for her. Isaac paused. "What's your relationship to Zee?"

Mark blushed and turned inward, seeming to shrink in size like a smitten little kitten. "We — we don't have a *relationship* sort of relationship, not like that, but I have told her that I like her, like *like-like* her."

"I take it she's single?" Isaac inquired for a friend's sake.

"She wanted Captain Flapjacks so she could make her boyfriend mad. I think."

"Who was her boyfriend?" Isaac asked, wanting to see how he stacked up against the competition.

Mark swallowed hard. "Her boss. Mr. Lenny."

"..." Isaac didn't have to work too hard to figure out he meant Mr. Lennox. He gritted his teeth. How incestuous this was turning out to be. And how could someone as hot as Zee date Mr. Lennox? How old was he anyway? She should have been dating him instead.

"So, will you do it? Will you tell me where she is?"

"I'm sorry, Mark, but I don't think I can. Even if I could, these people, these doctors, are not your friends, nor are they Zee's." They must be Mr. Lennox's friends, Isaac thought.

"You lie! The docs told me you could do it. That you're made of magic."

"I can confidently say that I'm not made of magic," Isaac said without much confidence.

"You're a Slytherin, aren't you?"

Isaac gulped. "Yes, but that's not real. Hogwarts isn't real. I can't do magic. And I can't remember how to write a script. That was a one-time thing, a burst of genius, divinely inspired. Have you ever heard of Samuel Coleridge and the *Kubla Khan*?"

“No!” Mark roared, rising up to tower over Isaac at his full height. His face was ruddy with rage, and he pitched his posture forward with menace. “Pain will help you remember, remember? You will remember how to write,” Mark growled.

“Not very Hufflepuff of you.” Isaac gulped again.

Mark held his bandaged hands up, brandishing them like clubs. The welt on the back of Isaac’s head throbbed harder at the sight of them. Isaac backed up, retreating from Mark until he hit the back of his head against the cell door, blocking his escape and shooting a fresh ripple of pain from his head’s bruise to his nerve endings. Isaac winced.

With nowhere for Isaac to go, Mark reared his hand back, taking aim. But before he could bring down a haymaker, a mechanical click from the door handle stopped him. The door opened automatically, causing Isaac to fall and Mark’s twisted face to unspool into a silly smile. “Time for breakfast!”

The tension in the room evaporated as soon as Mark’s growling moved from his mouth to his stomach, a response Isaac found to be particularly Pavlovian. There was a bounce to Mark’s steps as they walked down the hall toward the cafeteria together. They passed other patients on the way, all of them in various states of lucidity, everything from mumbling and stumbling to outright bumbling, but what really caught Isaac’s attention was that every patient aside from himself wore a house badge, 95% of them Slytherin.

Without a word to each other, Mark and Isaac stopped short of the cafeteria in unison. Somehow, the rec room was calling to them. The room was dark inside, aside from a glow that flickered against the back wall. Curious, Isaac peered inside and discovered rows and rows of patients, all oriented toward a giant projection screen.

It was movie day at the Twin Towers, and Isaac immediately knew what was playing when he saw Super Jesus. On-screen, the second coming was hanging ten on a surfboard, hair whipping in the wind, while he raced down the barrel of a tsunami toward the open and waiting maw of the Kraken of Atlantis. Spiked tentacles thrashed all around Super Jesus, leaving him no chance of escape, a moment of high drama in the movie, but Isaac knew how this battle would end. He had read it in the stuntman’s script. Super Jesus would send the tip of his surfboard through the beast’s eye, slaying it to save the day, all with his Birman sidekick perched on his shoulder.

Isaac was watching the first cut of the *Super Jesus* sequel.

He was struck dumb and held his breath, waiting for his own character to appear on screen. Who would play him, he wondered? Clooney? DiCaprio?

Out of all the craziness and absurdities that had come to dominate Isaac's life of late, state asylum inmates getting an advanced screening of the most anticipated movie in the world was by far the most bizarre, surpassing his discovery of lizardmen from space. This development was so unfathomable to him that his brain began to work overtime to figure out the reason, trying out theories, formulating hypotheses, and conceiving of outlandish conspiracies to try and explain the situation, but nothing clicked until Isaac remembered his conversation with Mr. Lennox, how the big shot producer complained about how his focus groups weren't responding appropriately to the test screenings. These inmates were the *Super Jesus* focus group!

A quick review of the audience confirmed Mr. Lennox's assessment. If Isaac were him, he would also be very concerned by what he saw because each person watching the movie looked bored out of their minds, completely stupefied by what they saw on screen despite the thrilling action unfolding before them. Isaac couldn't understand why. Super Jesus remained cool as hell, and the Kraken's rendering looked real enough that Isaac wondered if the beast was CGI or if the production team actually unearthed the leviathan from the depths of some long-forgotten oceanic trench.

Something was wrong. Despite the impressive visuals and a pounding score, the audience remained unmoved, practically comatose. Isaac would have thought they were all dead, but their shallow breathing was still strong enough to rustle their paper-thin hospital gowns up and down. He watched a fly wash its hands on someone's unblinking eyeball.

Isaac was so creeped out by the scene that he didn't even want to stick around to see what actor was playing him. "C'mon, let's go get breakfast," he urged Mark, who had stopped along with him, except there was no response from his roommate. When Isaac turned to him, he saw Mark facing the screen with the same vacant stare every other audience member wore. He tugged Mark's arm to get his attention off the movie, but it was useless. He was gone. There would be no breakfast. Mark was out to lunch, and he was never coming back. Isaac now understood the problem. The audience wasn't bored. They were hypnotized.

Isaac looked to the back of the room for answers, where the movie's projector hung from the ceiling, but there wasn't anything out of the ordinary about it, only a blue-colored strobe of light beaming out from the lens. However, what was underneath the projector proved to be more interesting. There was a room-length mirror, and Isaac knew it was two-way instantly. He wondered who was behind it, who was watching the watchers, and who was watching him. Somebody was.

“Time’s up, buddy. Let’s move it along,” someone barked. Two burly orderlies appeared behind Isaac, their eyes hidden behind the dark-colored lenses of RealD movie glasses. Isaac didn’t see them since his eyes were too busy watching the screen again, where the Avengers forced Super Jesus to cook them a platter of beer-battered Kraken calamari to celebrate his victory. It was hard to look away.

“Here,” said one of the orderlies. “This will help.” Isaac felt a pill pressed into his palm. Instinctually, he lifted it to his mouth. The pill was blue with ALOCA spelled across it. “Nothing a little fluoride can’t cure,” the orderly assured. It was true. Once it was down the hatch, Isaac’s brain pain abated.

The first orderly held Isaac while the second pulled a hood over his eyes, but not before he saw the hospital light glint harshly off their Slytherin House badges. Isaac laughed at them.

“Time to see the doctor,” the second orderly grunted as he strong-armed his patient forward, taking a series of twists and turns through the Twin Towers that Isaac didn’t even try to memorize. When they stopped, Isaac heard one of the orderlies knock respectfully at a door.

“Come in!” The door creaked open, and an “Ah! Hello, there!” greeted Isaac. “Thanks for taking the time to come down and see me. I hope you’re doing well.”

Isaac groaned. He didn’t need his mask removed to know who was talking to him. The voice was instantly recognizable, for no one else could reproduce that specific tone of smugness. It belonged to one person only. “Are you ready?” asked Dr. Rousseau.

## Chapter 22

“There you are!” Dr. Rousseau chirped, his smile a mile wide. “I’ve been expecting you.”

“You have?” Isaac challenged.

“Of course. It was inevitable. After all, I’ve read the *Super Jesus* sequel script. This meeting has been ordained just as your arrival to our Koreatown apartment was.”

“...” Isaac’s brain hurt again. He never stood a chance, set up from the start.

“Are you ready?” Dr. Rousseau asked.

“La-la-la-la-la-la-la!” Isaac yammered after plugging his ears with his index fingers until they were each buried up to the second knuckle. This time would be different. Isaac wouldn’t let Dr. Rousseau cast his ready-steady mind control on him without a bit of aural resistance. “I can’t hear you! I can’t hear you!”

“Is that any way to treat someone who saved your life?” the doctor wondered aloud, successfully baiting his patient into engaging with him.

“Say again?” Isaac demanded, a finger still hanging out of each ear.

“Is that any way to treat someone who saved your life!” Dr. Rousseau shouted.

“Oh, I heard you the first time, but I just couldn’t believe you had the balls to say it.” Isaac was furious. Even though Isaac had believed Seth’s story that Dr. Rousseau was wrapped up in the Illuminati, it was another thing to have it confirmed independently and be powerless to do anything about it. This was a betrayal of the highest order. This was the man entrusted to protect Isaac! When Blake Snyder predicted the bad guys would close in, he wasn’t joking. Isaac was encircled with no means of escape.

“You owe me a debt of gratitude, Isaac.” Dr. Rousseau spoke from behind a simple metal desk. His office at the Twin Towers was a far cry from his plush setup in Beverly Hills. One was built for comfort, and one for speed. Thick carpets were traded for lime-colored linoleum, and instead of a bowl of complimentary Andes candies on his desk, there was a bowl of human fingernails. Nevertheless, Dr. Rousseau appeared more at home here, confident enough to wear his Slytherin badge openly. There was no reason to hide his allegiance. “If it weren’t for me, you’d be in prison.”

“Prison?”

“For the heinous murder of Maria Rodriguez, naturally.” The lenses of Dr. Rousseau’s glasses glinted harshly under the glare of the overhead fluorescents. It was painful to look at

him. There was no soothing Himalayan salt lamp here. Dr. Rousseau smiled. "Here. You've earned it."

Isaac looked into Dr. Rousseau's outstretched hand, where there was an official Slytherin House badge. He left the doctor hanging. "No fucking way."

With a frown, Dr. Rousseau pulled Isaac's badge back. "You should consider yourself lucky, Isaac. Whether through careful planning on my part or by happy happenstance, you're a registered Slytherin, which offers me, the county's foremost authority on Slytherin, the unique luxury of plucking you out of the system to offer you salvation, even if you're a murderer. You're welcome."

The accusation of murder was enough to make Isaac clear his ears. "Who the fuck is Maria Rodriguez anyway? I'm not going to kill anyone I don't know. That's a personal creed of mine that I would never cross!"

"The LAPD beg to differ. She was shot to death in a Koreatown apartment. They found you and a gun registered in your name alongside her body. It's what they call in the business an 'open and shut case.'" The doctor sighed, "Another grisly end to another Amber alert. Such a shame."

"I didn't do that! I was trying to save her. The gun was a plant. The stuntman killed her." Isaac was indignant. "It was the stuntman! It's so obvious!"

Dr. Rousseau took down a note. "The stuntman, yes, yes, of course. Very good. This will help build your case for an eventual insanity plea if you decide to forego my hospitality and return to the LAPD, a matter to which I can lend my expertise. In the past, I've been told I make for a compelling expert witness."

"I'm sure."

"Unfortunately, my services do not come *pro bono*, of course. I prefer more of a *quid pro quo* arrangement."

Isaac chuckled mirthlessly. "I'm sure you do. Let's hear it. Or should I have to guess?" Isaac tried to think of jobs-for-hire suitable enough for the Illuminati. "You need me to assassinate the president? No? Blow up the 405 and 10 freeway exchange and shut the entire city down? Too easy? Or do you need me to get you a reservation at Jon & Vinny's?"

"Heavens no. Nothing as difficult as all of that," Dr. Rousseau chortled. "What I need you to do is to identify Zee Shirley's whereabouts."

"I should have guessed that first. Can't you just use the *Super Jesus* sequel script to find her or to see how I find her without making me do all your dirty work?"

“I’m sorry, Isaac. Zee didn’t leave us any breadcrumbs in her script, and your storyline was inconclusive as far as this goes. Don’t worry. For you, finding her should be a rather easy assignment.”

Isaac cocked an eyebrow. “For me? What do you mean? And what conclusion is there to my storyline?”

“Well, you’re one of the parts she was re-writing, so it’s hard to say. Anyway, I believe you know what I’m referring to when I say this should be easy for you. You were born for this.”

“The screenplay,” Isaac muttered, “do my scripts really reflect reality? Like Zee’s?”

“Indeed they do. Your words are a window through time and space. But some screenwriters have more talent than others. For example, Zee is the best. So if you find her, and if she completes the *Super Jesus* sequel rewrites — to our and our focus group’s satisfaction — we’ll cut you loose. It’s happily ever after.”

Seth had been right. Isaac was a tool. He was a sleeper agent, and his mission was to use his screenwriting prowess as a scrying stone to find Zee Shirely.

“You didn’t produce any pages for Mr. Lennox. But that won’t be the case this time, will it?” Dr. Rousseau threatened.

“I can’t. I haven’t been able to write anything since my dream, and I don’t even remember writing those pages. I don’t even remember dreaming the dream, remember?”

Dr. Rousseau sighed. “Have you tried writing, Isaac? Have you physically sat down yet and put your fingers to the keys?”

“Sure!” Isaac said reflexively before realizing the truth. Actually, he never even attempted a writing session. Not once. Instead, Isaac had procrastinated, choosing to save the world instead of writing. “Well, no, not exactly. I’m still brainstorming. You know, reading a couple of scripts for inspo.”

“Typical writer,” the doctor impatiently tapped his fingers on his desk. “You all make this so troublesome. Writing is easy. All you have to do is sit at a typewriter and bleed.”

“Is that a metaphor or an order?” Isaac asked, crossing his arms to hide them.

“It’s a quote for inspiration. It’s simple. Each writer’s muse demands a different blood sacrifice,” Dr. Rousseau explained.

“And what did Zee’s muse demand?” With all this talk of blood sacrifices, Isaac wondered if she was MIA or KIA.

“When considering the themes of her work, Zee’s muse was the interior lives of pathetic men. I imagine yours would be different.”

Isaac scoffed, forgetting for a moment that he was the subject of one of Zee's scripts. "Does pathetic men include her boyfriend? Mr. Lennox?"

Dr. Rousseau answered Isaac by glowing with all his power.

Isaac continued. "If I had to guess, to satisfy my muse, I'll have to sacrifice my life or some shit. Am I right?"

"It's a small price to pay for immortality."

"Immortality?"

"To participate in the production of *Super Jesus* is a legacy worth leaving, Isaac! It would be an honor and a privilege to do what she and you are tasked to do. We should all be so fortunate," Dr. Rousseau said with a twinge of bitterness, remembering how the pinnacle of his own screenwriting career was a single writing credit on a Scott Caan-era episode of *Hawaii 5-0*.

"Zee seemed to think differently. She doesn't seem to give a fuck. Otherwise, she'd be here, wouldn't she?"

"Just because Zee is a clairvoyant does not mean she thinks with any clarity. Some of us know better than others. Some of us can see the bigger picture."

Isaac knew he couldn't count himself among those who could. He was still blind to the bigger picture. He had earned a lot of data points since he found the missing cat poster, but they hadn't taken shape yet. Instead of having braille to read, Isaac had birdshot.

Everything was random, and everyone seemed at odds with one another. Anne wanted the cat, who was wanted by Zee, who was wanted by Dr. Rousseau and co. But who did the cat want? Was the cat hunting Super Jesus? This whole affair was a big fat circle, nothing more than an ouroboros deep-throating itself.

And what do space lizards have to do with the day-to-day production of a superhero franchise anyway? Isaac would think that such matters of media would be trivial to a spacefaring species seeking world domination. Was the appeal of superheroes so, ahem, universal?

And if his and Zee's scripts were true to reality, then had every other superhero film before *Super Jesus* been real too? Was it possible the whole canon of superhero stories was true, including the space villains from far-flung galaxies, such as Galactus and Thanos? If so, then it would stand to reason, by any logical assessment, that the space lizards were only here on Earth for reconnaissance, using human screenwriters as a medium to find out what their cosmic compatriots were up to. It was an interstellar scouting mission!

And if superheroes did exist IRL, then what did that make Isaac? It put the whole super strength and thermal vision physical transformation he experienced in the tunnel into an entirely

new context. Was he the world's first sleeper agent superhero? *He was the world's first sleeper agent superhero! How cool?* he thought, having forgotten the relevant *Captain America* storyline(s).

*Crunch, crunch, crunch.* Dr. Rousseau broke Isaac's train of thought when he reached into his bowl of fingernails and popped a couple of them into his mouth with a *crunch, crunch, crunch.*

"..."

"My apologies, Isaac. Forgive me my manners. Here, have some," the doctor said after he finished chewing. He held the bowl of fingernails out to Isaac. They looked lightly salted.

Instinctually, Isaac went to grab some but stopped himself. He turned away with disgust, not at the offer but at himself because he was suddenly overcome with an overwhelming craving for keratin. Dr. Rousseau smiled at his patient's hesitation.

Isaac had to distract himself. "Why me? Why Zee? Why are we your screenwriters?"

"You two are special. No two ways about it. Not every screenwriter for Fox Studios can hack it. Sure, many get the chance, but most fail, destined to be deported back to the Midwest from whence they came or to the nearest monkey sanctuary, depending on the species."

Isaac thought he could detect some jealousy in Dr. Rousseau's voice. "I thought you said writing was easy."

"Again, only if you're willing to make the requisite sacrifices."

"Is it a sacrifice if your handler demands it? Or is it extortion?"

"Handler? Me? A 'handler?' Such a dirty word with so many unpleasant connotations. If I may, the term I'd prefer for my role is 'dramaturge.' My responsibility is to be a creative midwife, a nurturer to neurotic writers. They're a special breed, after all. They require a deft hand to either guide or pull them along." Dr. Rousseau grabbed a pair of pliers from a desk drawer and snapped them at Isaac.

"And when you're not grooming psychic screenwriters and developing *Save the Cat*-styled therapy treatments, you oversee focus group responses for Fox?"

"Among other endeavors," Dr. Rousseau said, lifting his chin. "It's not easy to fine-tune a movie to provoke the right psychological responses from an audience. My profession is an unheralded part of the rewrite process. You may have seen my handiwork in movies such as E.T."

"..."

"Before I got involved in the project, Spielberg was going to end the movie by having Elliot snuff E.T. out with a pillow."

“..”

“Rather than let E.T. get into the hands of the feds,” Dr. Rousseau explained. “It was a mercy killing. Spielberg thought it would signify a real maturation of the character and symbolize the loss of childhood. I thought it was stupid.”

“Whatever.” Isaac had had enough of these extraterrestrials. “Let him die.”

“Now, now. I know you may be frustrated by recent events, but let’s not let a bit of emotion get the better of us and say things we don’t mean.”

“Fuck E.T., that little circumcised dick of an alien,” Isaac spat.

“You don’t say that!” Dr. Rousseau hissed, leaping over his desk. Before Isaac could blink, Dr. Rousseau’s hand was at his throat. Isaac’s eyes bulged because of the lack of oxygen and the surprising speed at which the elderly doctor moved.

“Sorry,” Isaac choked out.

Dr. Rousseau put his head next to Isaac’s ear, whispering, “I believe it’s time you began work on your screenplay. What do you think?”

Isaac nodded in vicious agreement.

“Good. I’m glad we’re on the same page if you’ll excuse the pun.” Dr. Rousseau smiled as he released the chokehold he had on Isaac, who, once free, began to massage the feeling back into his neck. His head radiated with new and renewed pain.

He was exhausted.

Dr. Rousseau escorted Isaac out of his office and down the busy halls without help from the orderlies, who must have been dispatched elsewhere when Isaac wasn’t paying attention. The doctor was casual as they walked, working the room, dispensing pleasantries left and right to every patient they passed. There was a “What beautiful weather we’re having,” a “My, you’re looking mighty cogent today,” and even a “Do you have any notes on the Atlantis mermaid love story C-plot?”

But most of the patients were unresponsive and unable to tell Dr. Rousseau apart from Adam. Those who could identify Dr. Rousseau knew to avert their eyes and hide their fingernails behind their backs.

Isaac kept quiet, doing his best to try and gain his bearings around the asylum, but it was useless. All Isaac knew was that he wasn’t returning to the room he had shared with Mark. They were going somewhere new.

“I think we can both agree that a little peace and quiet will do you and your writing some good, and I have just the medicine for you... A room of one’s own,” purred Dr. Rousseau, who

was steering his patient toward the Twin Tower's Solitary Confinement Ward for Slytherin Subjects.

"You can't put me in there!" Isaac pleaded. "I know my rights. That's cruel and unusual punishment. I'll sue you!"

"I welcome you to try because I'm well within my rights as a licensed Harry Potter therapist to treat you as I see fit, and a little therapeutic writing is just what the doctor ordered."

"No! I'll appeal the decision to the Slytherin Board!"

Dr. Rousseau laughed. "The Slytherin Board? There's no such thing. I am the Slytherin Board. I am the Minister of Magic. Who do you think graded the answers to your Sorting H.A.T.? I own you."

Isaac reflected on his history with Dr. Rousseau and wondered how he didn't see this coming earlier. It was so obvious in retrospect, especially how Isaac's finances were tied directly to his weekly attendance, a pair of golden handcuffs that Isaac had put on all too willingly and without question.

By accepting this arrangement, he had given Dr. Rousseau and those behind his dealings the perfect opportunity to keep tabs on his mental state and guide his growth according to their needs. His entire life had been a fabrication. He was livestock.

Isaac wondered who had been cutting his trust fund checks. He'd hate to think his parents would sell him out like that. Shock gripped his heart. What if his parents never died in a car crash brought upon by a violent sneezing attack? What if that was a lie, too?

He knew almost nothing about them. It was the car crash and two fun facts: they had a summer house in Montauk and loved Monarch butterflies. Could they still be alive? Mommy! Daddy!

A stream of questions erupted from Isaac's mouth, each directed to Dr. Rousseau:

1. what was Isaac's origin story?
2. who murdered his parents in broad daylight?
3. what is the nefarious purpose behind the *Super Jesus* franchise?
4. what other superpowers did Isaac possess?
5. who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?
6. where's the beef?
7. and why does adrenochrome taste like chicken?

The doctor responded, "I will answer what I can, but only after you write some pages on Zee's hideaway. Doesn't that sound more than fair?"

Isaac grumbled out a protest, but it was useless, and he knew it. Dr. Rousseau held all the keys, including the one to his new solitary confinement cell. Together, they stood in front of its door.

“Here we are. Your room will be perfect. Imagine it like a sensory deprivation chamber. This will open your mind to creativity you didn’t think possible,” Dr. Rousseau said with a self-satisfied smile. “I expect to see a first draft exposing Zee’s whereabouts by tomorrow morning, or else, as they say.”

“Tomorrow morning?” Isaac was aghast.

Dr. Rousseau smiled. “Nothing motivates a writer quite like a deadline.”

Isaac murmured more inaudible curses to himself.

“Do you have everything you need? I’m giving you all the essentials. You’ll find paper and a typewriter inside your new accommodations.”

What Isaac needed was a weapon.

He’d rather die by suicide than face the blank page and the torture that would likely follow when he didn’t produce any pages. The paper was an okay start, as death by 1,000 papercuts was an unwelcome idea but feasible. Then there was the typewriter itself. If he threw it really, really high up into the air and ran underneath it... Isaac thought about it. “Yeah, I got everything I need.”

“Excellent. Are you steady?” Dr. Rousseau began the familiar incantation.

“I’m steady,” Isaac said, trying his best to resist the doctor’s charms.

“But are you ready?”

“I’m ready,” Isaac responded.

“Good,” the doctor said with satisfaction.

Isaac then checked in with himself to see if his mind was still his own. He seemed normal enough, all things considered. He didn’t feel like he was under the sway of any particular influence. Then again, Isaac had never realized he was being mind-controlled in the first place. So, did that mean he was still asleep, or was he always woke?

Why did being a superhero sleeper agent have to be so complicated? Isaac sighed.

“I look forward to reading. I blocked out my entire morning for it,” which was the last thing Dr. Rousseau said before ushering Isaac into his newest cell.

Inside was a room decorated even more sparsely than his previous one. Gone were the amenities of a window, double beds, flowers, and the 2-in-1 sink/toilet combo. Moreover, the color of the white paint was even brighter than in his last room. In combination with the severe lighting, the room was genuinely blinding. Isaac squinted his eyes. If Isaac were to stare at

these walls for too long, he knew that he would come out on the other side of this experience no different than Nelson Mandela.

Isaac shuddered when he heard Dr. Rousseau close his cell door and snap its bolt into place. He was scared. Aside from the aforementioned suicide (which he knew was only a playful, diversionary fantasy on his part), Isaac had no alternatives. He had to take his medicine. He had to write. But when he turned to face his destiny, which took the shape of a typewriter, Isaac was shocked to discover he wasn't alone. Someone else was already at the typewriter's helm, furiously punching away at its keys.

## Chapter 23

The ghostwriter at Isaac's typewriter had their back to him. Isaac's clues were a blocky head, a stocky build, and a barcode tattoo on the back of the neck to match Jessica Alba's character from *Dark Angel*. It was Seth. But what was Seth doing at the Twin Towers? And what was he doing in Isaac's room? Unless...

"Fuck this fucking shit," Seth grunted, "this fucking sucks!" He ripped a page out of the typewriter, crumpled it up in frustration, and threw it over his shoulder like spilled salt, but not before taking one last look at it to make sure that it truly fucking sucked. It did. The paper ball flew across the room, hitting Isaac square in the face. Neither of them acknowledged the perfect strike or each other.

While Seth locked and loaded another page into the typewriter, Isaac picked up the discarded page and read. It was a screenplay. And what Seth wrote was wilder than anything Isaac could have imagined. The prose was as if Jack Torrance dedicated his time at the Overlook Hotel to writing spicy fan fiction instead of poetry. There were descriptions of sexual acts in the script so lewd and so crude that Isaac could not begin to decipher them, not without knowing the definition of such vulgarities as an "Alabama hot pocket" or a "Cleveland steamer," having no idea why it was so crucial for the involved parties to consume a big bowl of Wendy's chili prior to the proceedings.

In this instance, the parties involved were Zee and Seth. When Isaac finished the reading, he had to admit that Seth's assessment was correct. This script fucking sucked.

"This work is, uh, very *interesting*," Isaac said to break the ice before launching into the critical questions of the day:

- "When did you get here?"
- "Did they get you at the Ktown apartment, too?"
- "Did you kill the girl from the Amber Alert?"

"Interesting? Interesting!" Seth spun around in his chair, wild-eyed. "Don't pull that patronizing bullshit on me, Isaac," Seth raged, shaking with so much anger that it threatened to dislodge his Slytherin badge. "I taught you that word. 'Interesting.' Do you know what's interesting? Your face!"

“...” The lameness of Seth’s retort left Isaac off-balanced. He did not recognize this man. He was unmoored.

“I write and I write and I write,” Seth took a breath. “And no matter how much I write, I’m no closer to finding her.” He pointed to a trash can overflowing with shitty first drafts. Positioned above the trashcan was a tiny basketball hoop to shoot paper balls into, like the one Doug Funny had in his bedroom. You know the one. They showed it in the opening title sequence. We’re talking Doug Funny, the main character from the 90’s Nickelodeon hit children’s comedy *Doug*. Like Isaac, Doug also imagined himself as a superhero, the indomitable Quailman, who sometimes wore his underwear outside his pants, also like Isaac.

“You’re looking for Zee?” Isaac’s stomach turned.

“Well, who do you think I’m looking for, Isaac?” Seth mocked. “Your mom?” Seth rose from his chair and flipped it over just because. The sound of crashing metal echoed around the cinderblocks of the empty room. Isaac held his head in pain. It was too loud but not loud enough to attract the attention of an orderly, unfortunately.

“I thought you could have meant Maria Rodriguez,” Isaac suggested, covering a little as Seth approached him.

“Who the hell is Maria Rodriguez?”

“The... the Amber alert girl who was found shot to death with my gun at that apartment you drove us to,” Isaac stuttered.

Seth cracked a smile that slid off his face as he spoke, “Oh, that Maria Rodriguez.”

Was Seth having a stroke? Was Isaac? Those were his first two guesses as to what was happening here, unable to process that Seth, the self-proclaimed lead investigator in the Amber alert case, didn’t know the victim’s name. Unless... unless Seth was some sort of poser.

“Who are you?” Isaac demanded.

“I’m Seth!”

“Who are you!”

“We’ve been over this a thousand times. I’m your mentor.”

“My muse,” Isaac countered, Dr. Rousseau’s words echoing in his ear.

“I’m your muse,” Seth agreed. “You sound disappointed. Who were you expecting instead? Margot Robbie?”

“No,” Isaac said, doing his best to avoid eye contact with Seth because Isaac *had* been expecting his muse to be Margot Robbie, and why not? He deserved it. He was saving the world.

Suddenly, dread flooded Isaac's veins, choking and clogging his circulatory system like old motor oil. He couldn't breathe. If Seth was Isaac's muse, then what sacrifices would he demand of Isaac for appeasement?

With Seth, anything was on the table. But then Isaac took stock of his current shitty circumstances and wondered if perhaps he had already made the requisite sacrifices. What more could he sacrifice? There was nothing left to lose. Maybe this was when he finally got what was coming to him.

"Now it's time for you to do your thing," Seth instructed. "You're going to write a script, and you're going to find Zee." He picked up the chair he threw, dusted it off, and plunked it in front of the typewriter as an open invitation. "C'mon." Seth sounded desperate, his typical above-it-all coolness evaporating.

The tone alarmed Isaac. He felt threatened by Seth. Enough so that Isaac wondered if Seth was working with Isaac or if he was actually working for Dr. Rousseau. Perhaps Seth's act as a helpful muse was only a ruse from the start. Maybe Seth wasn't the lovable vet Isaac thought he was. He was a snake. He was a Slytherin.

For that reason, Isaac couldn't tell him Zee's location. He wouldn't even try to write it down. He didn't want to help Dr. Rousseau. These were Isaac's true feelings.

However, there was another, stronger ulterior motive for why he didn't want to find Zee. More than anything, Isaac didn't want to write. The very act of writing was frightening.

The performance anxiety was overwhelming. Everyone had been putting so much pressure on Isaac, telling him that his words could change the world. Thus Isaac was paralyzed into doing nothing. It was the classic paradox of the gifted child turned burnout.

"They told me that if you found Zee, they'd let me go. They'll let us go," Seth admitted. Isaac understood his motivation. It had been less than 24 hours for Isaac here, but living at the Twin Towers already sucked ass. And despite Seth's bravado, you can't collect many new experiences if trapped here. Push had come to shove, and Seth had bent to Dr. Rousseau's will.

"We can't let them have Zee. If they have her, then they'll finish the movie. And that could mean the end of the world."

"Not for me, Isaac. Not my world. That's not what I negotiated for, so start writing." Seth grabbed Isaac, forcing him into the seat. Isaac wilted. There was no escape, not with Seth's giant hand weighing heavy on his shoulder.

Isaac's fingers trembled as he forced them onto the typewriter's keys. He racked his brain for any words, images, characters, or feelings that came to mind, but all he could draw

was a blank to match the page in front of him. How did people write anything? Isaac preferred tangling with the lizardman to dealing with this.

“You gotta start with ‘fade in,’” Seth instructed. “You don’t know that? It’s a screenplay, dummy. We’re talking day one stuff here.”

“Oh yeah,” Isaac said. “Fade in.” Writing was already a herculean task, but adding Seth as a backseat driver made it nigh impossible. So Isaac had to delay, delay, delay. But how?

“Beautiful weather we’re having, huh?” Isaac asked.

“Focus, god damnit.”

“I can’t do it!” Isaac whimpered and whined after another tense moment of not writing a god-damned thing. “You do it, Seth! What you wrote was a great foundation, really. It only needs another round of punch-ups. Maybe you’ll get a burst of creativity next time you sit down. Sometimes that happens. A thunderbolt of inspiration. Have you ever heard of Coleridge and the *Kubla Khan*?”

“No. No one’s ever fucking heard of Coleridge. Stop fucking saying that!” Seth screamed. “Only you can write it, man.” Seth tried to pump Isaac up. “You were built for this. I can’t do it. I tried, and you saw the result. No muse will do. It’s gotta be you.”

“Why? Why me?”

Seth rolled his eyes. “Because you were bred for this. Literally.”

“Bred?”

“Bred like a fucking golden retriever, but,” Seth looked at the blank page with disappointment, “but you’re more like a puppy mill golden retriever with a shit ton of hip dysplasia.” Seth paused, beaten down by Isaac’s idiocy. “Well, to be fair, you’re worse than that. You’re more of a mutt.”

“I am?” Isaac turned away from the typewriter to face Seth so he could gin up more conversation. Isaac was so delighted at the prospect of avoiding writing for a few more minutes that it dwarfed the horror of finding out he was bred like a dog to produce prophetic screenplays, a talent that his breeders/handlers had clearly failed to cultivate in him properly, so now he was paying for the sins of their poor tutelage. He cursed them. Why didn’t they prepare him better?

“Tell me, Isaac. What do you remember from being a kid?”

“...” Isaac scanned the nooks and crannies within his cranium for memories but found the nooks empty and the crannies smooth. All there was to call upon from his childhood were impressions: sticky fingers from a dripping ice cream cone, the cool rush of the Pacific between his toes, and the warm embrace of the embers from the fires of the Rodney King riots.

Curious.

Previously, Isaac had always explained away his lack of long-term memory due to the copious amount of cannabis he smoked, in addition to all the other drugs, prescription or otherwise, he took, but now he was suspicious. There might be something more to this.

Isaac knew it was a popular trope for therapists to link any and every personality defect in a patient to their childhood trauma. Yet, to Isaac's recollection, Dr. Rousseau had never once asked Isaac about his. Why would that be? Could it be because Dr. Rousseau had known Isaac since childhood? No. The only explanation was that Seth was right. Isaac had been born and bred to be a sleeper-agent-super-hero-screenwriter.

"You don't have any memories whatsoever. Am I right?" Seth asked to prod Isaac.

Isaac nodded.

"I know because the same thing happened to me. We're not so different, you and I."

"You, too?" Isaac was taken aback. Who was he talking to? A muse? A colleague? Or a brother? "What were you bred for?"

"War," Seth said.

"War? Super Jesus Christ. I guess I got off easy."

"Eh," Seth shrugged, "You get used to it. War's an acquired taste, like sparkling water, alcohol, or uncut cock."

"..."

"Like I probably wouldn't have lasted five minutes watching all the bullshit they made you sit through. Didn't they force you to watch Scott Caan's *Hawaii 5-0*?"

"Yeah... they did make me watch that."

Made Isaac watch?

Made him watch!

The blood drained from Isaac's head. All those hours and hours he had spent watching TV and movies over the years were no mere coincidence. What he had assumed to be a hobby had actually been forced-osmosis screenwriting training. It was so obvious now that Seth had spoken it aloud.

How had he never noticed it before? No wonder Isaac only viewed and understood the world through the prism of mass entertainment. No wonder Dr. Rousseau directed Isaac to live his life like a movie, to follow the beats from Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!* Which left Isaac to wonder: what beat was he at now? Could it be anything other than All is Lost?

"Enough stalling, buddy boy. It's time to put up or shut up," Seth said. He rotated Isaac back toward the typewriter before Isaac knew what was happening. But even with the absolute knowledge that he was born to write, and this talent was in his blood, Isaac spent his creative

energies elsewhere, brainstorming other ways to escape his predicament. What lessons had he learned from media? Could he depend on a *deus ex machina* to save him?

“No,” Isaac said.

“No, what?”

“I won’t write anything. We shouldn’t. I still think it’s the wrong play. We can beat them. We have all the leverage against Dr. Rousseau as long as we don’t tell them where Zee is. It’s genius.” For Isaac would rather be brave than be a writer.

“Hey, genius, do you see where we are? Because we’re locked up in a mental institution owned and operated by space lizards. And not just by any space lizards but those working for the government. It would be one thing if we were staying at Passages, riding bareback through the Malibu mountains, but this is the *Twin fucking Towers!*”

Seth looked spooked. Haunted. Even Isaac, as dense as he was, could sense the weight of history behind the way Seth said “The Twin Fucking Towers,” like the name was some sort of cruel inside joke.

“If we’re going to survive this ordeal, we’ll have to outwit, outlast, and outplay Dr. Rousseau,” Isaac said, drawing upon more wisdom from the 90s-era popular culture that shaped him.

“What if they find Zee themselves? Do you think you’re the only lead they have? They’re coming at this from a thousand fucking angles you can’t even see. You’re just one card they have to play. This isn’t *Survivor!*”

“Isn’t it, though? It’s *Survivor*. It’s *Big Brother*. It’s *Fear Factor*. I’ve been training for this all my life. We’re going to use their methods against them.”

“No, we’re not. Enough is enough. Everyone knows writers procrastinate unless you hold a gun to their head, so, as your muse, you’ve left me no other choice as a professional.” Without a hint of joy, Seth whipped out Isaac’s gun and trained it on his head.

“Ah!” Isaac ducked, but there was nowhere to hide. “How did you get a gun in here?”

“Dr. Rousseau let me have it. Now let’s fucking go before I start copy-and-pasting your brain all over this floor.”

*Click.*

Isaac knew that sound. It was the gun’s safety being disengaged. Isaac gulped down a pile of bile that had sprung up in his mouth. What scared Isaac the most wasn’t the gun but seeing how scared Seth was. What could be so bad to break him like this?

Could Nazi space lizards bent on ending the world truly be this intimidating? Or was there an even bigger bad on the horizon for Seth and Isaac to encounter? Was it God herself?

*Click!*

This time the sound came from the typewriter. Isaac winced after striking the key, bracing himself as if he had just cut the wrong wire during a bomb defusal. Would it go off? It didn't.

Isaac had typed a letter, and he hadn't exploded. He exhaled.

He had written his first letter, "F," and the keyboard didn't catch fire either. He tried another letter. "A." Okay, he thought. He was getting the hang of this. If he typed two more letters, he'd have one word. That wasn't so bad.

Soon, the only clicking sounds in the room were made by Isaac as he typed away. The gun was silent. The longer Isaac typed, the more of a groove he found. He was born to do this.

At one point, Isaac reached 85 WPM. After that, his mind grew quieter and quieter until Isaac entered into a state of complete zen. He was in the zone. The feeling was sublime, better than any drug. He was going hard. He was getting hard!

So why had he put off writing for so long? Everyone should be a writer! What a thrill! Pure megalomania! Good God! he thought. He felt invincible. This was what Aquaman must feel like when diving into the sea. Or when Michael Jordan played basketball. Or when the BTK Killer bound, tortured, and killed. This was his superpower.

Isaac smiled despite himself. He would find Zee in no time. Piece of cake.

Now that he was a big-time screenwriter, he tried to resist trite sentiments and cliches, but sometimes the facts were the facts. He didn't care if it was cloying. It was true. His "all is lost moment" had given him a newfound lease on life.

## Chapter 24

Day turned to night, and Isaac's writing hadn't slowed down. Can't stop. Won't stop. Isaac was writing as if his life depended on it. Because it did.

With no slowdown in sight, Seth was getting impatient. He didn't want to break Isaac's concentration, but he was fiending for some *Super Jesus* spoilers and couldn't help himself. Carefully, Seth reached over Isaac to grab a finished page, but Seth couldn't stop his shadow from falling across the typewriter. The minor disturbance broke Isaac's trance.

*Fuck me*, Seth thought.

"What happened?" Disoriented, Isaac flailed his arms and gasped for air, unable to catch his breath, acting as if he were coming up from a long dive to the bottom of the ocean to forge for the pearls to throw before swine.

"All right," Seth huffed, "Calm down. Let's see what we got here, shall we?" He read the pages intently. Then, when he was done, he reached for more pages and read those too. His face screwed up something vicious. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"I'm not sure," Isaac said, wiping sweat off his forehead. "Did I write a comedy? Can you read some of it back to me?"

Seth sized up Isaac. Was Isaac fucking with him, or was his an earnest question? Seth couldn't tell, unable to pierce the veil of Isaac's autism.

The truth was that Isaac had no idea what he had written. There was zero recall. By the second word Isaac put to page, his mind-body connection was so strong and so transcendent that he had lost all consciousness. Isaac had been blackout. This was what must have happened when he wrote his dream script.

Seth: "Oh, so you really are fucking crazy. You don't remember a thing, do you?"

Isaac shook his head no.

Seth pushed the page he was reading into Isaac's chest, nearly toppling Isaac and his chair over. "Explain yourself. And take some time to get your story straight because you got one shot at it." Isaac's gun made another appearance for the sake of punctuation.

“Oh no,” Isaac muttered in panic after reading the first few scenes of his newest script. That’s all it took to crack his confidence. He felt lightheaded as his oversized ego deflated, the blood draining from his face.

Poof! Just like that, Isaac’s Pulitzer was gone. His would-be publicity tour was scrapped. And his name would never be mentioned alongside the greats of Mamet, Camus, and Zee Shirley. His writing career was over.

Somehow, he had written a near word-for-word reproduction of what Seth had typed for his script. The only exception was Isaac’s version had more detail, a lot more detail, nauseatingly so, meaning that Isaac now knew what a Cleveland Steamer referred to.

“This is a good thing,” Isaac reasoned. He spoke to the barrel of his gun. “Honestly.”

“How is this a good thing?”

“Well, what are the chances we both wrote the exact same thing? It must mean something. This must be the prophecy. Zee is destined to give you a Cleveland Steamer! That’s where we’ll find her.” Isaac reviewed the pages anew, looking for clues to her location. “What was the scene header description again? Did it name a place? Where’s the nearest Wendy’s?”

“What are you talking about?” Seth was incredulous. “You already read what I wrote first. That’s how you copied it! This isn’t fate. This wasn’t a double-blind taste test. It just means you’re an unoriginal hack!”

“I’m sorry.”

“You can stuff your sorries in a sack, mister!” Seth cried, and Isaac laughed. The odd-time *Seinfeld* reference turned Isaac’s ear like nails on a chalkboard. It bothered him, but he couldn’t focus on it, not when Seth kept escalating the situation. He threatened Isaac, “It’s time for me to take over.”

“Take over?”

“Yeah. You fucked up. And the dildo of consequences rarely arrives lubed,” Seth lectured. “But don’t worry your pretty little head, Isaac. I’m going to take it from here. We gave you a chance, and you fumbled the bag.”

“What bag?”

“Are you serious? Do I have to spell it out for you?”

“...”

“My guy, we’re in solitary confinement. But there are two of us. So how’s that work? Does that sound very solitary to you?”

“???” Isaac’s throat closed.

You’re me, and I’m you.”

“!!!”

“Let me put this into terms you can comprehend. You know *Fight Club*?”

(Another 90’s pop culture reference!)

Obviously, Isaac was familiar with *Fight Club*. He was a disaffected male incel. *Fight Club* was a movie, and the movie was based on a book, but Isaac had never read the book, nor would he ever. He loved the movie.

Seth continued. “You know *Fight Club*. Well, I’m Brad Pitt, right? Cool as hell. And you’re the Edward Norton character because you’re the one who’s weak as fuck. Make sense? It’s pretty simple. You’re my split personality. I’m the alpha and you’re the beta.”

“...” Isaac was reeling.

“You never noticed how I just popped in and out of your life at will, at my own fucking convenience? Here one minute and gone the next?” Seth asked, but Isaac found his argument unpersuasive. What Seth described could be anyone Isaac had ever known, parents included. People made cameo appearances in Isaac’s life. There were no series regulars. The lone exception to the rule was Dr. Rousseau.

“How long has this been going on?” Isaac wondered.

“Since the day I was born. You don’t get it. I was you before you. But you got a crack at the steering wheel after I shot up that spice market where Osama Bin Llama lived.”

“You what?” Isaac asked, appalled.

“No need to clutch your pearls, Isaac. They were only mad because I shot them first. You see, I caught wind of their extermination order, and if the llama — *my Tali-llama* — was going to die, then it would be by my hand. Understood? Put him out of his misery, quick and easy. That was my responsibility to him as a friend.”

“You couldn’t have saved him instead? You had to kill him?”

“The tl;dr of it all was that they deactivated me as a punishment for my insubordination. They disassociated my consciousness from the pineal gland, banishing me from controlling our body. Then, in the ensuing power vacuum, it was your weak sperm of a personality that wriggled its way up from some dark recess of our shared subconscious. That’s how Isaac Abrahamson was born. I am your father.”

Isaac gasped.

“Dr. Rousseau promised me another turn in the cockpit if I could tell him where Zee was or if I could wring the answer out of you. Whatever came first. Except you’re about as useful as tits on a bull. I tried! I thought I could help you, but I know what Dr. Rousseau doesn’t.”

“What’s that?”

“He made a mistake. He doesn’t want to admit what’s as clear as day to everyone else: you suck. You’re a sunk cost the size of the Titanic.”

Isaac felt paralyzed, now understanding that Seth had set him up. Their trip to the K-town apartment was never about the Amber Alert girl. It was an ambush.

“Get it now? You were Plan B to me, the secret agent with 132 confirmed kills. And now that you can’t do the one thing you were trained for — writing a screenplay — it’s over for you. Good fucking night.” Seth smiled. “You should be thanking me. I’m doing you a favor, really. I’ll kill you — in the metaphysical sense only — and we both live happily ever after.”

“I don’t want to do that,” Isaac protested meekly.

“First: you don’t have a choice. It’s my decision. Second: this is what you’ve always secretly wanted. Fess up! You’ll gladly trade in the responsibilities of being the main character for those of being an audience member. Think about it. It’s perfect for you. No courage needed. Just think of your life as one long movie, except now I’m the star of the show. Whereas you sucked, I’m just going to YOLO all over everything.”

“That’s not fair. They forced me to watch all that content. I didn’t know any better!” Isaac piped up. Now that he knew he was manipulated into watching visual media for a living, maybe Isaac wasn’t the type of person who could binge seasons of television at a time. Instead, maybe Isaac liked hiking and brunch and getting his asshole bleached.

Seth responded. “But you liked being addicted to TV. Admit it! If you broke out of here, the first thing you’d do when you got home is turn on the TV and watch whatever your algorithm suggested. What was it last time? The *Little Chocolatiers*?”

“It’s not my fault!”

“You were thinking about suicide like five minutes ago. Remember? You were trying to think through the logistics of cutting your wrists open with paper cuts. Now you want to live? Be honest: is it to spite me? You don’t want to see this caged bird fly?”

“It’s not to spite you! But I wasn’t really going to commit suicide. It was only a daydream,” Isaac told Seth and himself. “I was just hopeless at that moment, and I wanted to feel better. It was my Dark Night of the Soul.”

“I’m sorry, Isaac, but it’s a zero-sum game. I wish it wasn’t, but those are the facts. It’s you or me.” Seth rose to his highest height and then grew more. “Get in my belly!” Seth growled and pointed to his belly in another dated 90’s pop culture reference, this one from an *Austin Powers* sequel. “I’m going to turn you into the little chocolatier.”

What the fuck?

The reference bothered Isaac.

Why would Seth say that at this moment? It was too incongruous. A Fat Bastard quote? In this economy? The stakes of their conflict seemed too high to be concerned with regurgitating Fat Bastard quotes. And why did Seth give a call back to the little chocolatier? Was it a tortured Mini-Me reference? Or was this just proof positive that Isaac was undergoing a schizophrenic episode, his two personalities converging into one pop culture-addled consciousness?

Isaac's head spun while he tried to retreat from Seth. This was bad. His world was upside down. He was through the looking glass and down the rabbit hole, only to find himself on the dark side of the moon.

Seth tossed Isaac's gun aside, the tool no longer needed for persuasion. Shooting Isaac had always been a bluff. Because a crucial difference between Seth and the Fat Bastard was that Seth wasn't a fat bastard intent on eating a little person to satiate his hunger. Instead, Seth wanted to eat Isaac alive to consume his consciousness. And if Seth was to consume Isaac's consciousness, then he had to eat Isaac in a single bite.

Those were the rules.

So Seth got bigger and bigger. His mass physically changed. His shoulders were now big enough to span the cell's width, wall to wall. It wasn't just his body either. A true Slytherin, Seth unhinged his snake-like jaw to prepare to eat. It was grotesque. Seth's mouth was now Isaac-sized.

When Seth breathed in, a gale-force wind ripped through the room. It blew the hundreds of script pages around and around like confetti. Isaac marveled at the sight until the wind's speed picked up further, causing him to lose his balance. He hit the floor with a splat. Then, unable to return to his feet, he slid across the ground toward Seth. Suck, suck, suck. There was no escaping the power of his breath.

Fear found Isaac then. He had felt this power once before, reminding him of when he had tried to fuck his vacuum cleaner. Just like that night, Isaac's soul was at stake.

Rather than Fat Bastard, Isaac thought Kirby would have been the more apt reference for Seth to use about his transformation. It was perfect. Like in the video game, Seth was trying to inhale Isaac to absorb his powers. Plus, Kirby wasn't as problematic of a character as Fat Bastard. What if Seth had been in mixed company (i.e., the Scots) when he had made the reference? But, then again, Kirby didn't speak, so it would have been impossible for Seth to quote him as he did with Fat Bastard. This annoyed Isaac. He didn't know why.

As Isaac continued to slide across the floor into Seth's mouth, he grabbed ahold of the writing desk's leg, using it as an anchor to keep him from being swallowed, but the desk soon

gave way as well, the metal screeching as it skittered across the room toward the void. But Isaac wouldn't let go.

Seth inhaled another breath to cause the gravity in the room to drop out altogether. There was nowhere to hide now. It felt as if a black hole had materialized next to him.

Suddenly, the desk lifted off the ground, and Isaac pivoted his body to put the desk between himself and Seth as it hurtled toward the abyss. The sight was horrible. Instead of cuddly Kirby, Seth's mouth now reminded Isaac of the Sarlacc from the *Return of the Jedi*, but the ancient sand beast wasn't quotable either. The problem was the same. Isaac had to give it up. Time to admit that Seth did indeed threaten him with the proper pop culture reference.

Isaac was scared. Was his brain so poisoned and contaminated by media content that he couldn't even experience a moment as sacred as his own death without a cheap comparison to *Star Wars*? Isaac had never understood how damaged he was until now.

But at least Isaac had thought of a piece of media from a different decade this time. That was an improvement, forgetting that the image of the Sarlacc his mind had conjured was from the 90s re-release of *Star Wars*, the version that added a VFX beak and tentacles to the original monster. Luckily, Isaac wouldn't have to grapple with that realization because Seth's mouth was closing in on him, ready to devour him whole. Soon the desk was halfway gone, and Isaac was next.

But Isaac twisted the desk while it was in Seth's mouth, causing the desk's feet to hook into Seth's cheek, yank his head, and alter the direction of the suction. Then, using the change in momentum, Isaac barreled into the side of Seth's face to knock him off balance. Seth, Isaac, and the desk fell to the floor in a terrible crash, the impact of it forcing Seth's jaw closed and allowing the room's gravity to return in full.

But Isaac's victory was short-lived. Immediately, Seth was on top of him in a counterattack, a whirling dervish of punches, kicks, and elbows. His enormous size and strength overpowered Isaac.

All Isaac could do to shield himself from the furious onslaught was to curl up into a ball. But it was only a matter of time until the inevitable end. Isaac's defenses grew softer, and his will weakened with each hit from Seth.

Powerless to move, Isaac saw Seth expand his jaw again for a second bite at the apple. This was it for Isaac. Once swallowed, it would be *The Truman Show* for him (but if he was watching himself as an audience member and couldn't change the channel). The horror. He couldn't imagine watching Seth massacre his next Afghani spice market, but what drew true terror to Isaac's heart was how boring it would be to watch someone sleep for eight hours a day.

He needed to battle back. He had to throw his Hail Mary. He needed to summon the strength that had come to him when he fought the lizardman under the library.

But how?

Closing his eyes to focus, Isaac tried to put himself in the same state of mind as he was then, near death. That was the easy part. But there was more to it than that, he remembered. When his powers first awakened, Isaac had lost consciousness after getting choked out by the monkey, reducing Isaac to his most primal nature.

That must be the secret! Isaac would have to tap into his animalistic side, so he focused all his energy on the most basic of instincts, fighting and fucking, the ones he had learned from watching *Babe: Pig in the City*.

Isaac was ready.

He was steady.

He was all systems go.

When Isaac opened his eyes, the world was alight in the yellows, reds, and blues of thermal imaging. He did it! He transformed! He had done something he had put his mind to! Then, with tremendous joy, Isaac punched Seth in the face, breaking his jaw. Seth fell sideways, shrinking several sizes, and had to hold the bottom half of his face together.

"Think you're clever? Do you? Well, you must realize by now that two can play this game," Seth mumbled through a bloody mouth. As he said this, another, more dramatic change was overcoming Seth's body.

Isaac knew what would happen before it happened. He knew he should attack Seth now or run, but he couldn't move, too transfixed by watching Seth turn into a lizardman. He was revolted to see Seth's skin burst and peel back to reveal what was underneath his flesh, a hide of hardened scales, a natural coat of chainmail. Next, a thick tail erupted from the backside of his body, and Seth whipped it through the air, flexing it to test its immense strength.

"Get over here," Seth said to Isaac, using the same vocal intonation as Scorpion from *Mortal Kombat*.

"No."

Once again, Isaac looked around the room for weapons, but his options were few and far between, especially after Seth had eaten half of everything in the cell. The gun was his best bet, but it rested on the floor behind Seth and was blocked off by his enormous mass. That left Isaac with only the script pages scattered about the room, so he grabbed what he could and threw them one-by-one frisbee-style at Seth with all of his super strength. Isaac would papercut the son of a bitch to death if it was the last thing he did.

Unfortunately, the pages only glanced off Seth's scaly armor and fell harmlessly to the ground. Seth laughed.

All out of ideas, Isaac gathered what remained of his strength and courage and charged Seth, who greeted him with open arms. The assault did not go as expected.

Isaac failed his mission successfully by tripping over his feet to grab the upper hand. Not expecting his attacker's clumsiness, Seth's legs buckled as Isaac rolled into them at the kneecaps. The bigger they are, the harder they fall, so Seth fell pretty fucking hard. Isaac landed several blows on the beast while he was stunned, but they didn't seem to have any impact.

Now entangled, the two engaged in a crocodilian death roll. Over and over they went. Nails, claws, and teeth flashed in the harsh fluorescence that lit their cell. Seth used his tail to his advantage by whipping it around and drawing blood whenever it connected to Isaac's skin.

What changed the complexion of the battle was when Isaac decided to lean into his strengths, utilizing his media training for good instead of whatever his handlers had in mind. He remembered the wisdom of Captain Insano from Adam Sandler's 1998 cult classic, *The Waterboy*. The lesson was thus: show no mercy and poke your enemy in the eye at your earliest opportunity.

*Argh!* Seth roared after Isaac gouged his finger into the lizardman's yellowed eye. The pain weakened Seth's grip on Isaac, who used this window of opportunity to strike the other eye.

*Fwhoosh!* A fountain of cold blood erupted from Seth's second eye just as Isaac had planned, combining the playbook of *The Waterboy* with that of *Harry Potter*, who employed this tactic to defeat the Basilisk in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. However, Isaac forgot if he remembered this plan from the novel, the movie, or the adult coloring book's version of the story.

In absolute agony, Seth thrashed about blindly, doing his best to dislodge Isaac, but Isaac held on for dear life no matter how hard he was tossed around. The more Seth bucked, rolled, and flopped, the more and more blood he lost, and the smaller and smaller he shrunk. After a while, Seth's movements grew weak and lethargic. Then, his body shriveled to its normal size as his fate was decided.

"Thank you, Isaac," Seth mumbled feebly.

"For what?"

"For giving me my last new sensation.... Thank you. Never have I ever experienced losing to a fucking pussy like yourself."

"..."

It was over. Seth's body, if you could even call it that, began disintegrating at the toes and worked its way up through the rest of him. The particles that held him together floated away until they ceased to exist entirely, leaving no trace.

Isaac watched, astonished, as even Isaac's gun atomized and vanished into thin air. Everything else remained as it was when Isaac first entered the room with Dr. Rousseau. Even the items Seth had sucked into his being were back to normal. All that remained from the grisly battle was whatever blood had splattered onto Isaac throughout the fight, which he realized was his own after tasting it.

Exhausted, Isaac collapsed to the floor. He was relieved even after hitting the sore spot on the back of his head for the millionth time. But the pain went unnoticed as he was too busy laughing. Isaac had won. Of course, he did. His victory was foretold in *Fight Club*, the neurotic nerd defeating the alpha cool guy, an ending as common as it was old, dating back for as long as stories were written by the creatures known as writers.

But this was no time to celebrate. Isaac had to take advantage of the moment while his super strength still surged through his system, so he threw himself at his reinforced cell door with all his might to break it. Again and again!

*Bang! Bang!*

The door held firm, but Isaac would not be denied. Finally, with one last push, Isaac felt the bolt inside the door snap, crackle, and pop, allowing the door to swing forward and open. Freedom! Isaac could now do whatever he wanted, no longer held back by a parasitic personality, a psycho psychiatrist, or a prison of pop culture references. He was liberated.

So Isaac asked himself, *What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

## Chapter 25

Isaac understood he didn't have much time. Dr. Rousseau and co. were coming for him, and he had two options. He could outrun them or fight them, but deep down he knew he couldn't chance another physical altercation. Not at this time.

There was still so much he didn't know about his superpowers. Was there a time limit on them? What was the refractory period after his powers subsided? Could he do it twice in one night? His life depended on these answers. He couldn't risk reverting to his flaccid, fleshy human form if he encountered his pursuers.

Isaac swallowed his saliva. It was too bad Seth wasn't here. He would have known what to do, while Isaac didn't know anything. Moreover, until he was alone in a quiet, safe space, Isaac couldn't properly process his other outstanding questions, such as: was there really a murdered little girl? Or was that a complete fabrication? And did Seth's transformation into a lizardman mean that Isaac was also a lizardman? Because Isaac didn't want to be a lizardman, but if he were a lizardman, he ought to figure out if he were a lizardman. He owed himself that much. (Say what you want about Dr. Rousseau and his methods, but Isaac did learn something about the value of self-reflection while under his care: bad people and good advice were not mutually exclusive.)

While Isaac crept down the hallway, ducked windows, and slinked past every open doorway to avoid detection, he was indecisive about what to do next, now torn between the urge to escape and the desire to know more about himself. He was some sort of superhero, but he didn't even know his origin story. Were his parents gunned down outside an opera? Or was his uncle gunned down by a mugger? But without Seth around to clue him in on his past, Dr. Rousseau was his last and only lead.

Isaac's secondary motive for speaking with Dr. Rousseau was to get to the bottom of this madness about the *Super Jesus* screenplay. It made no sense. Could the Tootsie Pop center of this conspiracy really be the success of the *Super Jesus* movie franchise?

While Isaac knew how infamously cut-throat and paranoid Hollywood was, it seemed a little far-fetched that sleeper agents, lizardmen, cat power, and ritual murder were necessary to ensure that the sequel would be a success. With the cult of Disciples that arose after the first

installment, Isaac didn't believe for a second that the second movie could fail. Fox Studios could play a *Super Jesus* test pattern for two and a half hours, and the film would still print money. Hadn't they seen what Warner Brothers did with their DC superhero properties?

The only explanation was that *Super Jesus 2* had to have another sinister purpose. It couldn't be box office receipts only. Do lizardmen even use U.S. currency when they return to their home planet? If so, what was the exchange rate?

Even though Isaac didn't know how long he had until his powers withered away, he decided to roll the dice and press his advantage against his feeble therapist. It was now or never. But there was no Twin Towers map to locate Dr. Rousseau's office, so Isaac felt the best way to proceed was to go in the opposite direction of every exit sign he could find, believing that his ex-therapist and handler would have to be at the heart of this matter.

Trodding carefully, Isaac braced himself for when the Twin Towers' entire security apparatus would descend upon him in one fell swoop. Except they never came. All was quiet. Too quiet? There was no other conclusion for Isaac to draw but that his superhero powers package must also include invisibility.

"Hey-o!" a voice called out to Isaac to burst his bubble. Isaac's blue-red thermal imaging spectrum drained and waned until it disappeared. The whitewash of the hospital returned along with all his other human characteristics. The only color Isaac could see now came from the end of the hall.

It was Super Jesus. He wore a technicolor poncho and held a steaming cup of coffee. Emblazoned on the mug were the words, "World's #1 son!"

"You can see me?" Isaac nearly fell over from the shock. "I thought I was invisible."

"Yeah!" Super Jesus paused to look at himself. "Can you see me?"

"Yeah! I can see you, Super Jesus!" Isaac squeaked, stunned from meeting the world's biggest movie star and his case's most prominent witness. "Or should I call you Mr. Ortega?" Isaac asked, referring to the actor's real name.

"Call me Super Jesus."

"Or what about Mr. Ornelas?" Isaac asked, referring to the character's alter ego from the movie.

"Call me Super Jesus."

"You got it, Super Jesus."

"Cool. Cool. Cool." Super Jesus smiled. When Isaac came over to him, Super Jesus offered his free hand to dap him up. "What's good? You're Isaac, right?"

It was Isaac's turn to pause and look at himself, double-checking his identity. "Yea, I'm Isaac. You know me? Why?"

"Dr. Rousseau gave me the Spark Notes version of you. So did ya find Zee yet, or what's the deal?" Super Jesus asked while leading Isaac down the hall. The two of them remained alone, much to Isaac's surprise, who expected Super Jesus to travel with an entourage of maybe 12 or so people at all times.

"No, no luck finding Zee yet," Isaac said as he followed in Super Jesus's footsteps, "I was hoping you could help me out with that."

"Yeah? Me?"

"Yeah. According to my, uh, notes, you were the last known person to see Zee, other than her psychic, of course."

"Of course. Hmm," Super Jesus pondered. "I don't know."

"You don't remember? It was at the Annenberg. There was like a big blue light shooting down from the ceiling. A prominent cat was involved."

"I know a lot of cats. You'll have to be more specific."

"Captain Flapjacks is his name."

"Well, why didn't you say so? Love that guy!" Super Jesus exclaimed while he opened a door and directed Isaac inside a room off the main hallway. "Welcome to my zen den."

"What in the world?" Isaac was awed by what he saw. "What is this place?" Super Jesus's room was a far cry from where Isaac had been held, both the solitary cell and the cell he shared with Mark.

Aside from being ten times larger than either of those rooms, this one was furnished with a surfer-chic vibe that would make even the chilliest dude down at Point Dume jealous. Vintage posters from classic surf films lined the walls. Ornate, oriental floral tapestries hung from the ceiling, a circle of bean bags surrounded a five-foot hookah, and there was even a nice area rug, a reproduction from *The Big Lebowski*, that really tied the room together.

"The first rule of show business is to get a ride-or-die rider. Learn that lesson. Love that lesson," Super Jesus lectured Isaac as he climbed into a hemp-woven hammock suspended from the ceiling, careful not to spill his coffee.

"Did you offer Zee that advice?" Isaac asked, flopping into a beanbag chair.

Super Jesus sighed wistfully. "She's the one who taught me. She was my sensei."

"And what did she tell you that night at the Annenberg?" Isaac inquired, trying his best to re-direct Super Jesus's train of thought back on track. "What were you doing there?"

"She invited me."

“She did? To the Annenberg? Why?”

Super Jesus leaned forward in the hammock, causing it to rock gently. “She wanted a ticket to ride the soul pole.”

“The soul pole?”

“You don’t know?” Super Jesus wiggled his eyebrows knowingly.

“...”

“Not a man of culture, I see. The soul pole is the euphemism my Wattpad Disciples use for my divine dong. My penis.”

Unfazed, Isaac stayed with his line of questioning, “So she wanted to ride your soul pole at the Annenberg?”

“Sure. Why not? You haven’t fucked in the Annenberg?” Super Jesus scoffed. “Tickets are free. And the parking validation! Plus, I know a guy. His name’s Dan. Tell him Super Jesus sent you.”

“Then what?” Isaac asked while noting how divergent this character was from the choir boy he played on screen. Super Jesus was no method actor, despite taking the character’s name for his own. And while Super Jesus was a dick in real life, it only made Isaac admire him more, as this contrast helped highlight his exemplary acting skills.

“Honestly, I don’t remember much from that night because I got pretty fucked up while I was over at CAA. We were doing some marketing for one of my miracles, and I was turning water into spiked kombucha. Well, one thing led to another, and I got a little high on my own supply. You know how it goes. Occupational hazard.”

“Was Zee at the miracle?”

“No, no, no, not her vibe at all. She wouldn’t be caught dead there,” Super Jesus laughed. “Zee’d rather be with the bikers up at Neptune’s Net or micro-dosing with the day-trippers down in Indio. Now there’s an idea! Have you checked for her at Salvation Mountain or the Banana Museum? I know that place is a favorite of hers. No one loves being strung out by the Salton Sea more than her. She likes the dead fish.”

“So you were over at the Annenberg alone, to start?”

“Right. I got to the Annenberg and didn’t see Zee at all. She was going to meet me, of course, so I was wandering around, losing my mind, and then I remember seeing Captain Flapjacks posted up at the front desk like he was welcoming me, but that’s it. Everything goes real fuzzy-wuzzy was a bear after that.”

“No blue beam of light coming down from the ceiling?”

“Not that I know of. It was completely dark, from what I remember. It was after hours, you know. The museum was all shut up and shit, and I thought maybe Zee was trying to set the mood and/or trying to avoid Mr. Lennox.”

“What do you remember after that?”

“Like I said — nothing. I woke up the next day in the screening room at CAA with a pounding headache. Wait a second. Now that you mention it, I don’t actually remember seeing Zee. Guess you could say that I got pretty blackout.” Super Jesus shrugged.

Isaac nodded. It figured. Another dead end.

“You’re not a real superhero, are you?” He asked Super Jesus. Given Isaac’s own vast powers, he wondered if there were others like him out there. Maybe those special effects in the *Super Jesus* movies were all special and no effects.

Super Jesus laughed and laughed. “Only if you consider being able to rip tequila shots in a K-hole a superpower, which I do, so yes, you could call me a superhero.”

“But your miracles! So they’re all fake? What about when you laid hands on the entire Cheviot Hills’ PTA and cured them of Celiacs? That was fake?”

Super Jesus waved his hand. “Gluten allergies aren’t even real. It was all in their heads to begin with. All they needed was a little encouragement.”

“That’s it?” Isaac was incredulous.

“If I’ve learned one thing in my adventures as a movie star is that people are powerless to the art of suggestion. Take, for instance, Celiacs. Some Utah-based mommy blogger posted about the evils of gluten, and then, all of a sudden, their followers’ stomachs turned as sour as the dough they’ve been baking. So what do they do? They turn to cauliflower pizza as the answer. Everything is going great for the mommy blogger, who’s in the pocket of Big Cauliflower. She’s getting kickbacks. She’s dishing out cauliflower recipes left and right: riced cauliflower, mashed cauliflower, cauliflower smoothies until an even more popular person, like Super Jesus, comes along and tells them to break bread again, and then wouldn’t you know it — poof! — those stomach pains vanish like magic.”

“...” Isaac didn’t know if he was buying what Super Jesus was selling, but something was captivating about his character. Objectively, he could tell that Super Jesus was sort of a douche, yet Isaac remained in his thrall. Was that all that charisma was? The difference between what your brain knows and what your heart believes?

Isaac now understood how a person could follow Super Jesus into the depths of the LA sewer system. With a low degree of confidence, Isaac reasoned that Super Jesus wasn’t

actually the second coming of Jesus, but what about the second coming of Charles Manson? Of that, he wasn't so sure.

"Do you have any idea how much power we have?" Super Jesus continued. "People crave being told what to do. They fucking love it! I see it every day. Being some type of power bottom is more comforting to the average American than mac and cheese. Good God, why am I using so many food metaphors?" He held onto his stomach. "Munchies, man! But, as I was saying, as much as I hate to admit it, a movie's success has far more to do with the marketing budget than it has to do with anything else. If it weren't for those billboards around town, people wouldn't know what to do or where to go. It's why I'm staying here at the Twin Towers while I perform my Skid Row miracles. These are my people. Are they crazy as fuck? Sure, but at least every person around here follows their own marching orders."

Isaac's face hardened. He leaned forward from his place in the beanbag chair threateningly. "Unless you're marching them into the bowels of the downtown public library to murder them!"

Super Jesus stopped his listless swaying in his hemp hammock. "You saw that?"

"I'll never forget it."

Super Jesus leaned in, matching Isaac, ready to hang onto his every word. "Good. Good. We're counting on that, at the very least. What else did you think? How did it make you feel?"

"I think it's terrible! What do you mean? I couldn't believe what I saw. That poor, innocent Disciple in the Kobe jersey. All he wanted to do was meet his idol, but you killed him."

"So you couldn't buy Super Jesus's heel turn? I knew it." Super Jesus pumped his fist. "I told Lennox that no one would. Super Jesus isn't the villain. What the fuck does he know about Super Jesus's character motivations? I am Super Jesus!"

"..."

"I'm telling Lennox we're cutting all that out of the final film. I don't care what he says. This is what happens when he lets the monkeys write the re-shoots. Killing people fucks with my brand. How will I maintain my *Paw Patrol* partnership with this shit going down? I'm sure the focus group is saying the same damn thing."

"Reshoots?" Isaac was dumbfounded. "So you didn't kill a Disciple at the LA library? That was all part of the movie?"

"Nothing but movie magic and my superior acting chops on display." Super Jesus gave an exaggerated bow that unsettled his hammock, causing it to sway and twist and almost topple its occupant out of it.

“I didn’t see any cameras....”

“You wouldn’t have,” Super Jesus said as he fought to regain control of the hammock. “We were using handhelds only. DP said it’s supposed to add some, what was the word? ‘intimacy’ to the killings. Some really savage stuff. Brutal.”

“But why would Super Jesus kill people? Seems out of character.”

“No spoilers, my guy. Sorry. I may be the savior of mankind, but I’m still bound by NDAs. Truly my biggest cross to bear,” Super Jesus sniggered at his own practiced joke.

Isaac couldn’t compute this information. Could it be true? Could a little Hollywood magic have fooled him? Was the Kobe Disciple still alive? His murder seemed so real to Isaac at the time, the guttural scream, the blood on the knife, Elon Musk’s erection.

Frustration gripped Isaac. What good was his superpowers if he couldn’t sort fact from fiction? Was Isaac delusional? He felt hopeless, grappling with the realization that despite defeating his lizardman alter-ego, he was still his own worst enemy, far more than any lizardmen or conspiratorial cats.

However, Isaac had no time to dwell on this inner conflict as the door to Super Jesus’s room swung open without warning. In the entryway stood the true existential threat to Isaac’s well-being. It was Dr. Rousseau, and he arrived with an army of orderlies at his back.

## Chapter 26

It was go-time. Ready for a fight, Isaac climbed out of his beanbag chair to greet Dr. Rousseau and his phalanx of orderlies. He tried to flex his muscles to turn into his superhero form, but his legs buckled, and his knees went weak. Isaac had nothing in reserve, no matter how hard he tried to tap into his primal nature. If this were an RPG, Isaac's mana bar would be empty. He was defenseless.

Isaac berated himself. This must have been Dr. Rousseau's plan from the start: to distract Isaac with the world's biggest celebrity (Super Jesus) until Isaac reverted to his weakened form, all while Dr. Rousseau bided his time. No wonder Isaac was allowed to cruise the halls of the Twin Towers unmolested. Isaac had been so stupid. Whatever cruel fate Dr. Rousseau had in store for him was richly deserved.

*How pathetic!*

In the face of true star power, Isaac was no better than some rube tourist from Tulsa. He sat back down, defeated, too embarrassed to go on. An empty gurney awaited him in the hall. And you know what? It looked comfy.

"You are ready." Dr. Rousseau said, seeing his patient all but wave the white flag in surrender. He gestured to the orderly next to him. "After I sedate the patient, you will escort him back to his room."

Isaac watched Dr. Rousseau pull a needle from a jacket pocket with his name on it.

Announcing himself finally, Super Jesus sat up in his hammock, eyes bright, craving a sample of whatever the good doctor offered. "Oh, can daddy have a taste?"

"Silence," Dr. Rousseau hissed at Super Jesus, who instantly lost all of his swagger power. Like a punished child, Super Jesus sat there pouting. The hammock sagged.

A Dr. Rousseau head nod set into motion three orderlies who marched over to Isaac, surrounded him, and restrained him while Dr. Rousseau readied Isaac's shot by pulling the plunger, knocking out the air bubbles, and aiming it at his patient's neck.

"You'll feel a slight prick," Dr. Rousseau predicted.

The orderlies continued to hold Isaac down, but he wasn't fighting back. Instead, Isaac chose to use his last remaining moments of freedom to gaze outside the window of Super

Jesus's penthouse suite. It was all he had left. If he were going to spend the rest of his life inside a solitary confinement cell, chained to a typewriter, and forced to churn out screenplay after screenplay, then he was determined to soak up as much of the outside world as possible before all was truly lost.

The view did offer Isaac some peace of mind. From his vantage atop the Twin Towers, all the hustle and bustle of the L.A. basin dropped away. The lines of traffic that were once a rage-inducing nuisance were now pretty strings of red and white twinkle lights. Complementing those colors was an ambient purple glow blooming from the Staples Center in south downtown, marking yet another lengthy Lakers playoff run. Even from this distance, Isaac could practically see the smug smiles on the fans, smell the bacon-wrapped hot dogs, and hear the street vendors hawking knock-off shirseys.

What joy!

Isaac's eyes moved to the horizon, where he became fixated on the Pacific. The sea was a perfect void that only made itself known through the absence of light and definition, its presence marked only by the boundaries of stars above it and the illuminated coastline before it. Isaac wished he could dive into that water and disappear.

To Isaac's surprise, the ocean was willing to accommodate his daydream. It moved. The sea rose up and rolled toward him and the Twin Towers. Isaac watched as the black mass advanced, engulfing buildings and snuffing out lights until he realized the darkness wasn't the ocean but a front of thick, low-hanging clouds. It was the June Gloom. Now that it was closer, the clouds weren't so abstract. He could see the fog's form and that it was full of ill intent. A last twist in the mist revealed a recognizable face in the contour of the clouds, a grinning visage belonging to Tom Cruise.

The image terrified Isaac. He knew its appearance portended the end of times. It was the mark of the beast.

"It doesn't have to be like this," whispered Dr. Rousseau to Isaac. "Why do I have to twist your arm? Coercion is such an inelegant rhetorical tool when you can come work for us out of your own volition. Join our ranks."

"Your ranks?"

"*Our* ranks," Dr. Rousseau corrected. "Admit it! What you've long feared about yourself is true, Isaac."

"No," Isaac's lips trembled, "I'm gay!"

"No. You're half-human and half-Draconis."

"..."

“A part of you, in your subconscious, has known this about yourself. You’re a Slytherin through and through, whether I or anyone else at the Ministry of Magic graded your test results.”

“I’m a lizardman?” Isaac muttered in disbelief.

“Well, half.” Dr. Rousseau reminded him, not wanting Isaac to take more credit than what was deserved.

“So my parents....”

“Yes.” Dr. Rousseau confirmed.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Dr. Rousseau straightened his glasses. “Too big a variable. Your reaction to the news couldn’t be properly predicted. It could have further fractured your psyche.”

“More so than having an alternate personality?”

“Seth was an unfortunate side effect from ramping up your capabilities too early, I admit, but I was left no choice. Zee’s unforeseen disappearance accelerated our timetable. We needed you to use your gift to find her.”

“My gift,” Isaac repeated.

“But you have so much more inside you than just writing prophetic screenplays, Isaac. If only you knew! Now, if you enter a partnership with us, I will teach you to harness your full potential. The world will be at your fingertips. But if you decline, I will be forced to forfeit you as an asset,” Dr. Rousseau let his words sink in, “so what will you choose?”

“...”

Isaac was blown away.

An explosion of light, sound, and heat erupted. Had Isaac observed the blast directly, he would have recognized it as similar in size and shape to the one that opened up the bottom of the downtown library. What he did see, however, after turning around to face the fury, were the orderlies’ bodies littered around him and a huge hole where the room’s door had been.

The blast had torn Super Jesus’s room apart. A wide crack now ran right through the middle to where an exterior wall once was. And without that line of defense, the June Gloom infiltrated the room unfettered to spread its poisonous miasma. Isaac choked on it.

Gone were the hookah pipe, the sitting circle, and most of the suite’s floor, having dropped below and crashed to the building’s lower levels. Likewise, the rug from *The Big Lebowski* was conspicuously absent, as there was no longer anything to tie the room together.

Isaac was afraid of heights, but if he dared to peer downward, he would have seen a several-story drop and several inmates milling below, looking dazed. All that remained from the original room was the hemp hammock. It clung to the ceiling by a single thread that somehow

supported Super Jesus's weight. The star actor dangled dangerously above the ruptured opening that was sure to produce a fatal fall if he let go of the rope or if the rope let go of the ceiling.

When the flashbang pop of the explosion subsided, Isaac's senses were assaulted. The building's security alarm blared in his ears, disorienting him, but it was a minor distraction compared to the scent of fire-roasted skin that filled his nostrils. Isaac saw no sign of Dr. Rousseau within the BBQ of orderlies. However, there was a pile of rubble where he once stood. Flames leaped around the room, licking the ceiling's sprinkler heads until they burst with black water. Isaac shivered from the impromptu shower.

Lo! Isaac shielded his eyes as a being, seemingly made of pure light, emerged from the smoke and fog. He expected a Super Jesus miracle, but when the glow dimmed and his eyes adjusted, Isaac saw some of his old acquaintances, P38 and a Captain Flapjacks cat.

The cavalry had arrived, but the mountain lion looked a little worse for the wear since Isaac had seen him last in the tunnels underneath the library. The big cat's left ear was torn and ragged, a jagged scar ran lengthwise along his body, and a couple of his whiskers were plucked, no doubt battle wounds earned from saving Isaac. The Birman rode astride P38's back on some sort of saddle fit for a house cat.

"Help," Isaac croaked to the cats. He reached out to them, but they passed by, pausing only long enough to give Isaac a look of surprise. Then, P38, at the direction of Captain Flapjacks's meows, approached the giant hole in the room, the one Super Jesus was suspended over. Isaac couldn't decipher the cats' intentions, but he did recognize the fear in Super Jesus's eyes when he saw them. The movie star wasn't expecting a rescue mission. This was no *Paw Patrol*.

"Shoo! Shoo!" Super Jesus called.

Prowling along the edge, P38 was doing that cat thing all cats do to calculate a long jump. He looked at Super Jesus and to the edge where he stood and back again to judge the distance, his massive paws sprinkling debris down onto the inmates below them.

"Save me! Someone! I'm too young to die!" Super Jesus whimpered, but his cry fell on deaf ears. "Save me, Tom Cruise! *¡Dios Mio!*"

Eventually, P38 found a suitable spot to leap from. He stopped pacing, crouched on his haunches, and wiggled his ass to gather all his potential energy. Launch protocol initiated. 3...2...1...

But before P38 could lift off, another roar erupted from behind them, loud enough to rattle whatever glass remained in the windows. Everyone in the room turned toward the

commotion to see Dr. Rousseau emerge from the mountain of debris he was caught beneath. Once free, the doctor's eyes looked wild like he was on the verge of a rampage. It was enough to get the attention of the cats. They both arched their backs and puffed up their tails to twice their size to respond to the threat.

Looking at the paltry therapist who defied the mountain lion and the Birman, Isaac couldn't understand their alarm until Dr. Rousseau shed his clothes and then his skin. There was more to Dr. Rousseau than what met the eye. He was transforming.

Isaac was revolted while he watched the doctor molt. Scales bubbled up to form a layer of natural armor on the Dr., and his face elongated to form jaws. He grew, too, tripling in mass to become more than a formidable opponent for the pair of cats.

Isaac should have seen this development coming, but it still came as a shock to his system. Seth had been right. They had been tools for the lizardmen this entire time. If only Isaac could summon the strength to fight, he'd spare the cats the effort and take down Dr. Rousseau, the lizardman, alone, but Isaac's power still hadn't returned. He was useless. The cats would have to do it without the help of a half-lizard and half-human.

With a snarl that would send a shiver down the spine of the toughest Slytherin, P38, with Captain Flapjacks still riding along, launched himself at Dr. Rousseau, now fully a lizardman. Dr. Rousseau met the cats in mid-air. They collided with a crash, and the impact of it sent a concussive blast out in all directions, a shockwave that hit Isaac and what was left of the building.

Frozen with panic, Isaac looked up to see a ceiling block the size of a compact car falling down on him. There was no time to escape, not without his superhero powers. He was dead.

Then, a force carried Isaac out of the projectile's path. The wind left Isaac's lungs, but it was a small price to pay for his life.

It was a miracle.

"Roomie!" was how Isaac's savior greeted him. Isaac took Mark's outstretched hand. "How are ya?" Unfazed by the beasts battling behind him, the muscular man lifted Isaac off the floor with ease while also doing Isaac the service of dusting him off from the dirt and debris that had collected on his shoulders.

"You came back for me!" Isaac shouted over the ruckus.

"I wanted to get Super Jesus's autograph!" Mark admitted, showing Isaac a sharpie and his bare belly, which would be Super Jesus's canvas.

Isaac looked over to Super Jesus, who was white-knuckling his threadbare hammock as he swayed above the open hole in the floor. However, his life-or-death situation did not deter



on the wrong side of the LA river to attract their interest. It was as if the entire city was collectively averting its eyes. Did no one care about the welfare of the retarded? *Ahem!* Isaac excused himself. Did no one care about the welfare of the *neurodivergent*?

Finally, a sound other than the fire alarm!

A small whimper escaped from somewhere underneath the wreckage. Isaac moved toward the sound and began to dig, doing his best to locate the source. After lifting and sifting through the debris, he overturned what was left of one of Super Jesus's surfboards to discover an injured Captain Flapjacks. Isaac examined the cat and found him limp and his breath shallow. Chunks of fur were missing, and what was left was matted with blood. Captain Flapjacks wasn't conscious. The sound Isaac heard was a wheeze.

This cat needed to be saved!

But should Isaac save the cat? What if he didn't? What if he let the cat die? There was an argument to snuff out Captain Flapjacks, like how little Elliot was supposed to do E.T. before the script's rewrite. After his discussion with Dr. Rousseau, Isaac didn't know friend from foe. If he were a lizardman, then perhaps he should ally with his own kind against the cats. He wasn't a race traitor, was he?

...

He was! Isaac was a race traitor! Scooping up the cat to fulfill his destiny of saving the cat and thus the world, Isaac headed for the giant hole in the wall that now served as a door. He ran through the halls with Captain Flapjacks cradled in his arms, doing his best not to jostle the poor thing. Despite everything, Isaac was elated. He was saving the cat at long last!

All around him was evidence that P38 and Dr. Rousseau's battle had spilled into the rest of the Twin Towers facility. There were cracked tiles, mountain lion-shaped dents in the drywall, and two long streaks of scorch marks that looked, to Isaac, like the etchings of some sort of laser beams that ran the length from floor to ceiling.

The titanic brawl must have disrupted the complex's cell locks because Isaac had to dodge free-range, shell-shocked patients as he escaped. Inmates wandered around in circles, lost, and those that weren't had become tripping hazards. Isaac quickened his pace.

Behind him, he could hear an uproar as the next wave of orderlies, guards, and administrators were dispatched to try and get a handle on the situation. Yelps and shrieks rang out next from the patients who were less than entirely submissive to their whims. Isaac was thankful for their sacrifice as they provided an additional speedbump between him and his pursuers. The only thing that could divert Isaac's attention from his getaway was someone

whispering his name from behind a darkened corner of the main hall. It was a woman's voice. He followed the siren's call.

"I can't believe it's you," Liz told him, and he felt the same way. Isaac barely recognized her. She looked terrible, not sexy or love-interest material at all. Shadows haunted her eyes, and, aside from their respective registration numbers, she was wearing the exact same patient-provided outfit as Isaac. "Save me!" she cried.

## Chapter 27

“What happened to you?” Isaac inquired. Liz was a shell of herself. This was not the same person who stared down P38 at the cat trainer’s house in Silver Lake. Her bravado was long gone in exchange for a tired, worn woman. Isaac appreciated he wasn’t alone in this.

“Help me,” she pleaded in a whisper that Isaac could scarcely hear over the uproar breaking out in the rest of the hospital. Isaac couldn’t tell if she was addressing him or the cat cradled in the crook of his arm. Captain Flapjacks’s eyes remained closed, and his breathing grew more uneven.

“We have to go,” Isaac stated plainly. He started to head back to the main hall where P38 and Dr. Rousseau’s battle took place, but Liz stopped him. Instead, she pulled him in another direction.

“Come with me,” she said, heading toward the darker recesses of the Twin Towers.

Isaac followed dutifully. It was quieter this way. Utilizing back stairways and service halls, they traveled down to the ground floor of the Twin Towers and kept going. Liz moved with a sure-footedness that Isaac understood to mean that her stay here had been longer than his. Her dreadful look made him think her stay had been more traumatic than his own, too. What had she done to Dr. Rousseau to deserve this? And what had he done to her?

When Liz brought their party to a stop, they were in a subterranean garage where a fleet of panel vans awaited them. All the vans were the same make and model as the one Isaac saw in the driveway of the stuntman’s apartment. He wondered what they were doing here until Liz disrupted his thoughts by raiding a valet key cabinet and ripping off the first set of keys she found.

*Beep! Beep!* A van in the third row chirped at her when she hit the button. At this point, Isaac wanted to know who needed who’s help. Liz seemed to be doing a bang-up job of escaping the Twin Towers on her own, but, to Isaac’s surprise, her next move was to throw him the keys.

*A-ha!* Isaac thought. He should have known a damsel in distress would be a passenger princess. Happy to finally be of some service, Isaac gripped the van’s wheel at 10 and 2 while Liz loaded into her seat with a laboring Captain Flapjacks in her arms. The Birman was limp and

pathetic, so Isaac waited for Liz to fasten their seatbelt before starting the car. He saw the cat wince as the buckle clicked. Then, without warning, Isaac felt a hot tear splash onto his cheek. He didn't know what to say.

"This way!" Liz pointed to the exit ramp, like a field marshal directing her troops. "Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!"

Isaac jammed the van's accelerator until the tunnel's walls and lighting melted with speed. The force of the g's dried his tears.

"No! No! Right, right!" Liz cried when they reached a fork in the road, but Isaac was already heading left. Her arm shot across the center console and yanked the wheel hard, nearly tipping the van and crashing it. The cat and Isaac both mewled in distress.

"Super Jesus Christ!" Isaac screamed once the van flattened out again. That was close. He'd be lucky if the only skid marks that little maneuver left were on the road. Isaac opened a window to breathe. "Was that necessary? What was wrong with my way?"

"You don't understand. That's how you get to the coroner's office...."

Isaac grimaced as he spun the van around and around up the corkscrew exit ramp at full speed, not slowing down when they reached the parking gate so he could ram through it.

As they cleared the last speed bump, all four of the van's tires left the ground.

They hit the street with a bang, but the night's biggest shock occurred when they realized they were alone on the road with clear sailing ahead. No traffic. A chill ran down Isaac's spine. There was only one phenomenon in LA that could cause this.

That's when Isaac put it together. He now knew why there wasn't any fire-life safety at the Twin Towers tonight. The bastards at Fox Studios had set up a perimeter. He saw filming notices and street closures for the *Super Jesus* sequel reshoots everywhere he looked. They were playing the cat-powered explosions off as part of the film production, even going so far as to place a couple of token Star Wagon trailers on the street for show. Isaac wondered if the same tactic was used to cover up for the commotion at the library.

"It was all a dream," Liz muttered once the Twin Towers were safely in their rearview mirror after Isaac ran down a sawhorse blockade.

"We need to get to the vet," Isaac said once he merged the vehicle into regular traffic. He didn't know what to do with an injured movie-star cat with mystical powers. Did conventional veterinary techniques work on such creatures? Isaac had his doubts, but what was he supposed to do besides all he could?

Aside from the fate of the world, the cat's welfare was his own. Isaac couldn't risk raising the ire of Anne or P38 if anything befell their Captain Flapjacks on his watch. If Isaac were to

face either of them at Captain Flapjacks' funeral, then he wanted to do so with a clear conscience and without remorse. He wanted to try his best.

"It was all a dream," Liz repeated.

"What was?"

"It was all a dream," Liz confirmed as she stroked Captain Flapjacks with a gentle hand. Isaac thought she had lost her mind. "You were right," she admitted, "I should have believed you that night in the diner. Your screenplay was a dream."

It could have been Isaac's imagination or his mind playing tricks on him, but with every stroke of Captain Flapjacks' fur, strength and vitality seemed to flow into Liz. The bags under her eyes and the shakiness were disappearing every time her fingers combed the cat. Cat Power.

"That's okay," Isaac said, keeping his eyes peeled for a VCA clinic. "I didn't believe it myself until you told me about Zee. How did you find out the dream was real?"

"Well, after we spoke, I didn't give up looking for Zee. I knew I'd never make EP if I didn't follow through for Mr. Lennox."

"So what did you do?"

"I started with the cats, of course."

"Cat Power," Isaac said with reverence but also with a curiosity about how it stacked up against whatever power lizardmen (and half-lizardmen) held. Was he stronger than a cat?

"Cat Power," Liz agreed solemnly. "Zee knew about it before the cat handler did," she explained, and Isaac could only think of Zee's connection to Anne and her army of cats. Of course, any patient of Anne's would have known about Cat Power in advance.

"What do the cats have to do with the *Super Jesus* production?"

"I don't know for sure," Liz admitted, "but somehow the cats are intertwined with the movie in a way that they're more than mere props or characters. Whether or not that was the plan of the studio... or the intention of the cats, I'm not sure."

"They're intertwined in our lives, Liz. The world's fate hangs in the balance," Isaac informed her.

"I was afraid of that." Liz looked outside the window as Isaac weaved in and out of downtown traffic. "Zee was the one who wrote them into the script, so—"

"Zee was in cahoots with the cats all along!" Isaac finished her thought. "That's it! She put them into the movie like a Trojan horse. Here we are, John Q Public, enjoying a movie, not realizing it's laced with cat power. It's like she roofied our drink!" Isaac banged the steering wheel with the palm of his hand.

He kept driving blind, having no idea where the nearest vet was without his cell phone's GPS, but he couldn't stop the car and ask for directions in case they were being trailed. "Why was she bringing the cat to Super Jesus at the Annenberg? Did you figure out my dream?"

"No."

"Or what the blue beam was? The one coming out of the ceiling?"

"No."

"It seems that the cats want something with Super Jesus. I thought they were coming to rescue me at the Twin Towers, but it seemed like Super Jesus was their target, and I was there by coincidence."

"Rescue *you*?" Liz scoffed, the idea's absurdity momentarily shaking her out of her moroseness.

"Yeah, rescue me," Isaac repeated, taking offense. "What's so funny about that? I'm worth saving!"

"I mean..."

"It wouldn't be the first time a cat saved my life, you know."

"When?" Liz challenged.

"At the ritual sacrifice under the library," Isaac said plainly, purposefully leaving out how Super Jesus told him that event was nothing more than reshoots for the sequel. But based on what happened at the Twin Towers, Isaac didn't lend that idea as much credence anymore.

"Which one?"

"Which one?" It was Isaac's turn to scoff. "How many ritual sacrifices are there?"

"Yeah, which one? If there were only one, then it wouldn't be much of a ritual now, would it?" Liz challenged.

"I guess that's true. It was a few nights back and was held under the downtown public library."

Liz's face went ashen. "You were there that night? So you were the intruder?"

He turned to her, surprised. "You were there, too?"

Liz slapped him across the face with as much force as she could. The strength of the blow shocked Isaac. "You were the reason why I was caught!" She shrieked, lashing out at him again. The wounded cat in her arm was the only thing restricting Liz's rage. She was careful not to harm the Birman.

"What?" Isaac used his off-hand to ward off her attacks while trying to steady the van.

Liz relented, but only after the cat began to wheeze. "After you got caught, the organizers checked their members and discovered me in the crowd. That's how I got sent to the

Twin Towers.” Liz looked at the cat before whispering to Isaac, “How did you get into the library?”

“Well, I guess you could say that I was a plus one,” Isaac said, thinking back. “I was over by Skid Row, looking for a break in the case, when suddenly a Birman appeared before me and asked me to follow him, so I did.”

“Me too.” Liz stared at the wounded cat in her arms with wonder. A weak mew came between pained breaths. “I was looking for them, but they found me. One of the Birmans escorted me to the library, and that’s when I knew you were right about Cat Power. They beamed something into my brain that told me to follow.”

“Cat Power,” Isaac’s tone remained reverent.

“I tried to work backward, searching for the source of the Birmans, like where their trainer got them, but came up empty. They seemed to have materialized out of thin air. There were no breeding papers or breeders, so I called around the community, but that quickly became an impossible task of trying to decipher the rantings and ravings of the various crazy cat ladies I interviewed.”

Isaac raised an eyebrow, “Do you really think they’re so crazy now?” He waved a hand in the air to indicate the general situation in which they found themselves now.

“I guess not,” she admitted. “But it was hard to take the Egyptian conspiracy theories too seriously at the time. And that was the least ludicrous one of them all.”

“Hmm?” Isaac murmured, asking her to continue. “Egyptian?”

“For a conspiracy theory, it was pretty straightforward: the idea being that the Egyptians used to worship cats as gods because, well, they are gods.”

“Are they?” Isaac wondered. “Are they gods?”

“No, cats are not gods, Isaac. However, the conventional wisdom held by the cat scholars of Wikipedia is this: cats were revered because they played a pivotal role in Egyptian society.”

“They fertilized crops by using the desert as a giant litterbox?”

Liz ignored Isaac and continued on, “As desert dwellers, the Egyptian people and their livestock were regularly terrorized by dangerous scorpions and snakes and—”

“And lizards!” Isaac interjected, putting the pieces together.

“Sure, and lizards. The point is that cats protect people by hunting and killing vermin. Then, to thank cats for their service, Egyptians provided shelter and regular feedings to them, which began the domestication process, but the cats ended up domesticating the Egyptians instead, to the point they began to worship the cats. Or that’s the working theory anyway.”

“Isn’t it obvious? Cats are still protecting us from lizards with cat power!” Isaac thought aloud. His speech gained steam with each successive sentence. “What if the scholars have it wrong? What if the lizards the hieroglyphics referred to weren’t the common pests we know them as. But what if the lizards in question were really an intergalactic species? One that produces popular entertainment for reasons I’ve yet to uncover?”

“Yeah, what if?” Liz almost snorted, but she was forced to reconsider her position after remembering her current situation. “Yeah, what if…”

There was one flaw in Isaac’s conjecture, he realized. If cats and lizards behaved like cats and dogs, then why would the cats team up with the space lizards to star in *Super Jesus 2*? Isaac sighed. It was another dead end.

“Wait, are there lizards from space who mean us harm?” Liz demanded.

“You didn’t see the lizardman at the ritual sacrifice?”

“No, I didn’t see a lizardman at the ritual sacrifice.”

“There was at least one in attendance that night, and I know because it attacked me. And it would have been the end of me, too, if a cat didn’t save my life. If Dr. Rousseau was there, you could add another lizardman to the tally.”

“Dr. Rousseau is a lizardman? Dr. Rousseau who works at the Twin Towers?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Oh,” Liz said with the least amount of skepticism she had expressed thus far in the conversation.

“Did you know that the pyramids of Giza are aligned to the stars of Orion’s belt?” Isaac asked.

“So?”

“I dunno,” Isaac shrugged. “But it’s got to mean something! I know we can figure it out. Together.” For the first time in a long time, Isaac was feeling optimistic. This was what Blake Snyder predicted. By joining forces with his love interest in his greatest time of need, his story was about to hit a new inflection point. It was time for his third act!

“…”

“So if the Egyptian thing was the least ludicrous of the theories produced by the cat ladies you interviewed, what were the most?” Isaac wondered because no ideas should be considered beyond the pale at this juncture.

“One of the breeders I met with had the idea that cats invented the question mark.”

“That’s ludicrous,” Isaac laughed. “Everyone knows that Dr. Evil’s dad invented the question mark.” (A second *Austin Powers* reference, Isaac thought, what could it mean?) What

Isaac still couldn't piece together, however, was how saving the cat would save the world. And why were the cats after Super Jesus?

"Stop!" Liz urged Isaac, and he did as he was told, slamming the van's brakes and causing it to fishtail out of control. Once they settled, Isaac looked out the window but saw no animal hospital. Instead, they were parked at the bottom of Angel's flight and across from Grand Central Market, where the morning's produce was being loaded inside the enormous warehouse. The scent of the Egg Slut griddle warming up wafted through Isaac's window.

"What's going on?" Isaac asked, alarmed as Liz frantically fumbled for the door handle, but he locked it before she could make a clean escape. "Where are you going?"

"Let me out!" Liz's face turned ugly as she continued to claw at the door. "This cat needs to be interrogated."

"What?" Isaac asked, bewildered.

"I'm taking the cat. "

"Why?"

"This is my chance! If I can get him to Mr. Lennox, I'll be back in his favor and back on track to make executive producer."

"You're out of your mind, Liz. Lennox is probably the biggest lizardman there is!" Isaac lunged toward Liz, making a bid to take back Captain Flapjacks.

"Stay away!" Liz recoiled, shielding the cat from Isaac. "If you get any closer, I'll kill the cat. I'll wring his little neck, I swear to god!"

"So it's mutually assured destruction, then?" Isaac pulled back from her and weighed his options.

"All I was told was that the cat was wanted. Dead or alive was left unsaid. And if they want one alive, then I'll just try again. About eleven more Birmans are out there in the wild for me to capture. This one means nothing."

"Advancing your career can't be worth this."

She threw her head back, laughing. "You really are new to the industry. Kidnapping a cat is nothing. You should see what I've done to people. Who I've done. You realize you're talking to someone who put in time with Rudin and Weinstein and came out the other side with character references, right?"

"Are you a lizardwoman?" Isaac asked. "Be honest."

"No."

"No joke?"

"No joke."

“Then why are you siding with the lizard people?” Isaac asked, willing to take Liz at face value.

“Isn’t it obvious? Because there is no such thing as space lizards! Probably. And if there are space lizards, then you want me to go against the space lizards? Do you hear yourself? That would make them some sort of superspecies from outer space. And you expect me to side with the humans when I have the option not to? That’s no way to climb the corporate ladder or the food chain. It’s just too much to ask of me. I’m only human.”

Isaac unlocked the door, not knowing what else to do. He figured the right thing to do was help the cats, but what would the cats do when they learned he was half-lizard? Would they accept his kind? Maybe he should join Liz. She made some excellent points, as siding with the lizards seemed like the safer strategic play. He could give them a chance. After all, perhaps the lizards weren’t so bad. There were two sides to every story, right?

Captain Flapjacks meowed, interrupting Isaac’s treasonous thoughts. The sound was a cold shower to his senses. He had to save the cat. And the best way he knew how was to let Liz go. He couldn’t risk her snapping Captain Flapjack’s neck. Isaac would have to bide his time and be patient. The cat needed to live so he could fight another day.

Using whatever strength the Birman had left, the cat turned to Isaac. They two locked eyes, and time stopped. A connection was made. Was this Cat Power? Isaac wondered as reality slipped away and something else replaced it. His brain and optic nerves no longer perceived the images of Liz, Captain Flapjacks, and the panel van’s interior. Instead, he saw Zee, Anne, and Anne’s office in Venice.

From a disembodied perspective high above the room, Isaac watched Anne render psychic services to Zee, who held a healthy Captain Flapjacks in her lap and looked in desperate need of help. Isaac recognized her outfit. It was the same tactical cat burglar suit she wore in his dream. Based on her disheveled appearance and anxious tics, Isaac believed this meeting occurred after she and Mark had snuck into the photography museum. This must have been when Zee dropped off Captain Flapjacks to Anne for safekeeping.

The meeting seemed cordial enough between the parties until Anne’s office suddenly filled with an ominous cloud of billowing smoke. And the last thing Isaac saw before the room became utterly inscrutable with smoke was an unmistakable look of fear in Zee’s eyes. Isaac tried to shoo the curtain of clouds away, but he had no hands in this suspended state. He could only guess. Then, once the smoke had finally vanished, Anne had Captain Flapjacks on her lap, and Zee’s chair was empty. She had disappeared. Replacing her was a clear transmission from the cat flashing across his brain in bold letters. It said: “**Seek Zee!**”

Then, with a snap, Captain Flapjacks' mind meld with Isaac broke off as fast as it was made. When Isaac regained his senses, Liz was already out of the car with Captain Flapjacks in tow. The cat looked near death, but Liz didn't slow her pace any. Instead, she fled as fast as possible across the street and into the dark offered by the Metro subway entrance.

Heartbroken, Isaac called out after her, "You were supposed to be my love interest!"

All was lost. Again. Blake Snyder hadn't prepared him for this. There was only supposed to be one rock bottom to his story, and Isaac didn't know how many more he could endure.

## Chapter 28

Isaac arrived at Anne's exhausted. Between the omnipresent traffic and trying to lose any potential tails that could have followed him from the Twin Towers, it took him twice as long to get to Venice as it should have. Still, Isaac didn't want to take any chances, not when he was so close to cracking the case, not when he had received a telepathic message from a magical cat named Captain Flapjacks, and not when he knew his psychic had all the answers.

It didn't help Isaac's paranoia that Super Jesus's eyes followed him from every billboard and bus stop advertisement he passed. There was no escaping his presence. Only when Isaac safely arrived at Anne's did he breathe a sigh of relief, finally finding a moment's comfort in the fact his adventure should end where it all began, in a little bungalow by the beach.

"If I weren't such a good psychic, I would be getting annoyed by all these walk-in appointments you insist on making," was how Anne greeted Isaac at the door. He did not have to ring the bell.

"You have some explaining to do!" he informed Anne, brushing past her to march into her office.

"Do I now?" she teased.

"Who are you exactly? Do you have your credentials prepared for my inspection? Because I have it on good authority that you're no regular psychic."

"What makes you say that?" Anne smiled knowingly. "Who let that cat out of the bag?"

"Captain Flapjacks," Isaac said. "He showed me what you did to Zee."

"Oh!"

"Oh? Quit stalling. You've had your fun, your games, and your diversionary tactics, but now it's time to spill your secrets!"

"Well, what do you say? Where are your manners?"

"Please?"

"Please, what?"

"Please tell me your secrets?"

“Thank you! All you had to do was ask nicely.” Anne sighed, “You may want to sit down for this one.” She indicated the chair on the client’s side of the room, which Isaac took gratefully.

Despite the showman’s build-up from Anne and the implied drum-roll before her revelation, Isaac looked around the room, distracted and alarmed.

“Where are they?” Isaac asked, referring to the cats that usually surrounded Anne and draped themselves all over the room like Dali’s clocks.

“Them?” Anne wondered, “They’re busy at the moment.”

“Doing what?” Isaac demanded. A chill went down his spine, taking the cats’ absence to be an ominous sign.

“I don’t know. They wouldn’t tell me, but they should be back soon. Or not. Who can read a cat’s mind?”

“Crafty bastards.” He bit his lip.

“I tried to warn you about that.”

“That’s right, you did.” Isaac narrowed his eyes, getting back to business, “And who are you again?”

“I’m Anne Jacobdaughter.”

“...”

“Jesus Christ’s sister.”

“???”

“I assume you’re familiar with Jesus Christ?”

“Super or regular?”

“Regular.”

“More or less.”

“Good. That’ll save us some time. Well, I’m His younger sister.”

“Like the Jesus who died on the cross a million years ago?” Isaac asked in continued bafflement.

“Yes, of course. I’m the last scion of Jesus Christ, which is a funny story because I’m also the first scion of Jesus Christ.”

Unsure of how to react to the news that his psychic was the sister of Jesus Christ, Isaac laughed. “Jesus never had a sister,” Isaac explained patiently. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” he counted them off on his fingers, one by one, until he reached three. “That’s it. That’s the family. That’s the expression. *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!*” he repeated in the manner of a white guy who just stubbed his toe.

Anne laughed at Isaac. “That’s a common misconception, like how people say ‘for all intensive purposes’ instead of ‘for all intents and purposes,’ or ‘eggcorn’ instead of ‘acorn.”

“No one says ‘eggcorn’ instead of ‘acorn,’” Isaac challenged.

“You’d be surprised. Anyway, what people should say instead of ‘Jesus, Mary, and Joseph’ is ‘Jesus, Mary, *Anne*, Joseph,’ but you know how these things go over time, typical women erasure. The patriarchy. Et cetera, et cetera.”

“Jesus, Mary, *Anne*, Joseph,” Isaac repeated, trying out the phrase for himself and discovering that it came naturally to him, rolling off his tongue. “The patriarchy,” Isaac agreed. “So God had two kids?”

“Jesus and I are half-siblings, actually,” Anne corrected with mild exasperation. “I don’t get it. Did everyone think papa Jo was shooting blanks this whole time?”

“I sort of figured that Mary remained a virgin,” Isaac shrugged. “She’s called the Virgin Mary, after all.”

“You’re kidding,” Anne looked dumbfounded. “If that were true, then dad would have been the true ascetic spiritual superstar of the family. Of course, my dad fucks. He’s my dad.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, when a man loves a woman who has begotten God’s only son....”

“No, no. Spare me the ins-and-outs. What I don’t understand is that you’re 2,000 years old?”

“Not exactly. I’m more along the lines of 2,000 years *young*.”

Isaac rolled his eyes, and once again they got caught on Anne’s wall of fame. There Anne was, pictured with the then-young stars of old Hollywood, luminaries such as Garbo, Chaplin, and Rin Tin Tin. Eerily, Anne looked no different in those photos than the ones she took decades later with Tupac and Margot Robbie. Anne was an angel this whole time. It was yet another mystery solved by Isaac, but he still couldn’t believe it. After all, there was one loose end that refused to tie. “But you’re Black,” blurted out Isaac.

“That’s true,” she conceded.

“So...so Jesus was black? Excuse me. I mean African American. ”

“Well, not American, but you’re on the right track.”

“Mary too?”

“The blackberry doesn’t usually fall too far from the bush.”

“Huh,” Isaac paused, “We should probably get the word out about that.”

“I’ve tried, but people haven’t been too open to the idea.”

“And now everyone thinks Jesus is Mexican,” Isaac chuckled.

“Isn’t that some shit? But better than white, which makes no sense at all. Seems pretty obvious to me that a fair-skinned person wouldn’t fare so well wandering the desert for 40 days and nights, but what do I know?”

Isaac was too busy processing this news to answer her rhetorical questions, answering her instead by saying, “Prove it.”

“Well, melanin acts as a natural sunblock.”

“No. Prove to me you’re the sister of Jesus Christ.”

“Honey, honey, honey. No.” Anne laughed.

“No, you won’t? Or no, you can’t?”

“I’m not your trained monkey.”

Isaac stared her down but relented. This would be his leap of faith. He’d have to accept that Anne was Jesus Christ’s sister. “So Christianity is real? That’s the world’s true religion?”

“Yes and no,” Anne laughed. “It’s a bit more nuanced than that. Some religions are just more true than others.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were Jesus’s sister?”

“You never asked,” she said simply. “Plus, you still had a baby brain.”

“A baby, what?”

“Brain. You had a baby brain. It’s not the scientific name, exactly, but it’ll do for the *intents and purposes* of this conversation.”

“So I don’t have a baby brain anymore?” Isaac touched his head to see if he could feel the maturity of his brain. He didn’t know what he was looking for, but the baby-like soft spot in the back of his head from getting knocked out in the K-town apartment remained.

“No,” Anne sighed again. “Remember our conversation about Schrodinger’s cat? About how a human or cat observer can affect the particles around them by simply imparting some level of attention and consciousness to them?”

“Sure.”

“Well, consciousness is like a muscle. You have to work to expand it and control it. It’s a very delicate balance. You would never have believed me if I had told you who I really was when we first met. Your mind would have melted.”

“Literally?”

“Literally,” she confirmed, “I’ve seen it before. You’d think your brain would leak out your ears, but you’d be wrong. It comes out right through your nose, just like how the Egyptians would have wanted. You’re protected from brain melt now, though, because a journey such as

the one you've undertaken can awaken, alter, and elevate your consciousness. No more baby brain. You are now receptive to such ideas as meeting the sister of Jesus Christ."

"..."

"It's psychological conditioning, Isaac," Anne explained, and Isaac knew what she had said was true. The prospect of meeting Jesus's sister seemed absurd on its face, but in the context of Cat Power and lizardmen, it was a comparably run-of-the-mill revelation, maybe even a step backward in terms of its strangeness factor. And the discovery of lizardmen seemed like a natural progression after witnessing a ritual killing.

But what would come next? Isaac trembled at the thought of where the escalation of these supernatural events would end. By definition, whatever was coming would exceed the limits of his current imagination, and his current imagination could conjure up some truly bizarre shit.

"The uninitiated have no idea," Anne continued, "but those in the know know that the universe revolves around consciousness. It's the fifth element."

"The fifth element? Out of earth, water, air, and fire?"

"Yes, those are the O.G. names for them, but we updated them post-enlightenment to gravity, nuclear, strong and weak, and electromagnetic. They're considered forces now, however, not elements."

"Which one's earth in this scenario?"

"Gravity."

"And air?"

"It doesn't matter, Isaac. Focus."

"I bet air is electromagnetic, isn't it?"

"Gah!" Anne cried out in exasperation. "That's not the point."

"What's the point?"

"That consciousness is the most valuable resource in the universe! Not only is it far stronger than any of the other four elements, but it also binds them all together, so everything around us is oriented around consciousness, both physics and psychics alike. Even Cat Power."

"Uh, can you explain it to me like I still have a baby brain?"

"The force from *Star Wars* is real."

"Really?"

"The principles are the same, but the key difference is that the force isn't some omnipotent force that flows *through* people. In reality — well, in this reality, anyhow — the force flows *from* people. Get it?"

“So, when you said the lizards kill people to survive, they’re not just eating the people, are they? They’re eating their force, right?”

“Aww, it’s so precious to watch your brain mature in real time,” Anne’s excitement was genuine.

Isaac prayed that Anne’s evaluation of his consciousness’s maturity was correct because it certainly felt like his brain was liquefying. He had to close his eyes to shut out the pain as the remaining calcified fluoride around his pineal gland broke down. The process was beyond excruciating. To play it safe, Isaac plugged his nostrils with his index fingers.

Anne had to come to the rescue. “Here, take this. It’ll help ease the pain in your brain.”

Isaac opened his eyes and saw Anne holding a fat joint, already lit. With gratitude, he grabbed it and took a toke. It was delicious and relieved the pressure in his head somewhat. Isaac could tell the strain was a superbly cultivated Green Goddess. The moment reminded him of how Seth offered him drugs after visiting the coroner’s office.

“Do some circular breathing,” Anne instructed, teaching him to breathe the smoke in through his mouth and out through his nostrils.

“Thanks,” Isaac said, feeling a bit better, mellower, and not like somebody was repeatedly poking him in his third eye. “So, because of the force, you’re like me?”

“Like you?” Anne’s eyes widened.

“You have superpowers.”

“You have superpowers?”

“On occasion. Super strength and thermal imaging. And the ability to see into the future, past, and present via screenwriting, of course.”

“That’s adorable,” she said as a way to pat him on the head. “We all have to start somewhere.”

Isaac didn’t appreciate her condescension, so he countered with: “And I’d like to start by asking you where Zee is. Or did you feed her to a smoke monster? That’s what the Birman showed me.”

“As you’re well aware, I simply cannot divulge privileged information to you, no matter how nice you ask. But I can assure you she is safe and sound and not eaten by a smoke monster.”

“Admit it! A smoke monster ate her. My baby brain can handle the truth!”

“She’s safe.”

“From who? You? What about the lizardmen and Fox studios?”

“And the Nazis, but I repeat myself. But, Isaac, you don’t really believe I’d be a Nazi, do you?”

Isaac sized her up and decided Anne wouldn’t make for a good Nazi. She was black. “So you have Zee in some sort of safehouse, then? I wasn’t aware that was a service psychics provided.”

“I’d call it a safe mansion, not a safehouse. It’s no big deal. Really. Every now and again, a client of mine will request a safe space from physical or metaphysical forces, and I’m happy to oblige.”

“I can’t believe this is all for a screenwriter,” Isaac muttered.

“I know you can’t believe it. It’s sad. Somehow, you still believe writing is just writing even though you should know better than anyone else.”

“It’s not?”

“Heavens no. It’s witchcraft. Writing is the oldest magic there is. It would be more helpful if you thought of letters as runes. That’s their true essence, you know? And a collection of runes strung together in a specific sequence creates a spell. Why else do you think we call it spelling?”

“Call what spelling?”

“The act of putting letters together to create words. You *spell* words out. I’m not just making a pun here. This is how magic really works. Zee is a witch. Her writings are her spells, and her readers are her targets.”

“Oh, yeah, yes, of course!” Isaac yammered while realizing that if Zee was a witch, then by the power of the transitive property, it must mean he was a wizard, just as he had initially suspected when first learning of his powers. He was Harry Potter. “So where is this witch? Is her safe space nearby? What state is it in?”

“Um, I’d say it’s more of a state of mind,” Anne explained.

“Enough of the mumbo jumbo, please,” Isaac begged. “I’m tired, and I need to see Zee. I don’t care if she’s in Nebraska or Narnia.”

“On what business?”

“It’s a private matter. Her cat requested it. You know, the one you lost.”

“Captain Flapjacks?”

“That’s the one.”

“Where is the cat? I’d like to hear it straight from the source.” Anne made a show of looking around the room for the non-existent cat.

Isaac cast his eyes downward in shame before admitting, "Stolen. Thieved. Pilfered from my very fingertips by my own love interest."

"Naturally."

"He was in rough shape when I saw him last. This may very well be his dying wish. Would you deny a cat his dying wish?"

"I would," Anne said coldly. It was now her turn to size Isaac up, so she tested his mettle by peering into his eyes and, by extension, his soul. Isaac could feel her withering stare, and he wilted beneath it. His pineal gland flared up again, and the pain was agonizing with no respite until Anne lifted the pressure by declaring, "But I will not deny the cat's wish this time."

Isaac breathed a big sigh of relief. Anne's glare had cut him to his core, leaving him spiritually naked and sweaty, like a prostitute trawling for dads at a Chuck E. Cheese's. He had never felt anything like it. Any remaining suspicions Isaac had about Anne's true identity vanished.

"Alright. Give me a second." Anne got up and exited the room, leaving Isaac alone with his thoughts. He couldn't make sense of them. It was all too much. The Force. Jesus Christ's sister. And discovering that the Scripps National Spelling Bee was the world's largest coven of witches and wizards. But what stood out most to Isaac, after surviving Anne's judgment, was how strong cats must be if they could elude someone as powerful as her. In Isaac's view, Liz's Egyptian conspiracy was no conspiracy. It was the truth. Cats were gods.

When Anne returned, she held a humungous votive candle that took two hands to lift. This one was not *Office*-themed. The icon on this one was in Tupac's image, and the wax's color was the same as the substance that had filled Anne's crystal ball mood ring. Isaac couldn't take his eyes off it, as magnificent as it was mysterious.

After Anne placed the candle between him and her on the table, she lit the wick. The flame crackled like a 4th of July sparkler, but all those fireworks were child's play compared to the billowing smoke that erupted from the candle as soon as it caught flame. It was just like what he saw in the vision he shared with Captain Flapjacks. Soon, Isaac was choking on the smoke, tasting notes of applewood, frankincense, and Roscoe's buttermilk waffles.

"Okay, Isaac, walk toward the candle, but you may be in for a bit of a bumpy ride," Anne warned from somewhere within the smoke. "You'll need this."

From out of nowhere, Isaac felt Anne slip something over his head and around his neck, but he couldn't see what it was before the smoke engulfed him completely. He hoped Anne had bestowed him with a good luck charm or some sort of protective totem because his senses were battling the smoke and losing.

“Go, my child,” Anne ordered, “be like the moth.”

“Not yet!” Isaac yelled over the roar of the candle’s flame. “I have so many more questions. What can you tell me about Cat Power? Is it equal to lizardmen? And does their fight against the lizards go back to ancient Egypt? As an immortal being, do you still have to clean your cats’ litter boxes?” Isaac gulped, unsure if he was asking these questions in the pursuit of knowledge or as a stalling tactic to avoid facing the sinister smoke.

“We don’t have time, Isaac. No more pussyfooting around! Pun intended! The candle will flame out soon, and the passageway will close. You have to go now! Now! Now! Now!”

Isaac felt a push at his back. With the added momentum from Anne’s helping hand, he moved forward through the smoke. His steps were uneasy despite the charm around his neck. The closer to the crackling flame he got, which he was now pinpointing more by sound than by sight, the darker the smoke became.

He turned around to look to Anne for reassurance, but there was only more darkness. The soot and ash were all-consuming. He felt like he was drowning in it. Dread filled Isaac’s nervous system, but he couldn’t stop now, so he pressed on into the unknown even though Isaac felt as if he were walking headlong into the June Gloom.

## Chapter 29

There had to be some trick to this, Isaac thought. The number of paces he had taken so far through the candle smoke had greatly exceeded the physical space of Anne's modest bungalow. Surely, he should have bumped up against a wall by now, yet his hand continued to grope forward and catch nothing. This really was some Narnia-level shit.

Nevertheless, Isaac continued step after step until he finally saw a red smudge in the distance. The candle's flame! Finally! Now, with a marker to orient himself toward, his feet quickened.

Left foot, right foot.

Right foot, left foot.

Left foot, right foot.

The red smudge grew larger and larger, brighter and brighter, eventually turning from red to orange to white, all while the scent of waffles and whipped butter became stronger and stronger. As Isaac approached the light at the end of the tunnel, even the color of the smoke around him transitioned, morphing from the dark clouds that dredged up Seth's forgotten memories of burning oil wells in the Iraqi desert to the airy, white puffs of fluff that constituted cumulus clouds.

Suddenly, with a great burst of sunlight, the cover of smoke broke to reveal an unblemished sky colored the most brilliant shade of blue. Isaac had to avert his eyes until they adjusted to the brightness. Then, while looking down, he discovered, with great shock, that he was indeed walking on a plush carpet of cumulus clouds.

Isaac wheeled around to retreat to Anne's office, but there was nothing there but perfect, unbroken planes of blue and white extending to the horizon. No door. No smoke. Nothing. Just clouds and sky. It was unreal. The clouds were uniform, a repeating pattern of impeccable design, where every curve bore the platonic shape of a voluptuous DD breast. There was one exception to this marvelous monotony, however. In the distance, a pair of enormous gates towered over the landscape. They cast no shadow.

Isaac groaned. He knew it. He was in the afterlife. Anne had finally done it. She killed Isaac to cover her tracks. Now, no one would ever know she stole Zee's magical cat. Isaac

guessed the coroner would attribute his death to smoke inhalation. No foul play. How had he been so stupid? He saw Anne murder Zee the same way, and what did he do? He walked right into Anne's trap. If he weren't already dead, he'd kill himself from embarrassment.

Despite his fears, the gates beckoned to Isaac from across the clouds, and he couldn't ignore their call. Nervous, he crept a foot forward, testing the clouds' stability to ensure he wouldn't fall through them, but he found his footing firm yet with a pleasant rebound, like walking in a brand new pair of New Balance. The clouds were so comfortable and springy that they compelled Isaac, against his melancholy mood, to skip his way over to the gates. He did so. And with the wind in his hair and a bounce to his step, he was feeling better already.

A guard stood outside the gates to greet Isaac. Dressed in all black, the man looked like a club bouncer and was sized proportionally to the gargantuan gates he protected. There was a transparent receiver in his ear, and his hand held a clipboard.

Isaac approached him.

"Name?" the man demanded in a gruff, no-nonsense voice.

"Isaac Abrahamson," he responded, a slight quiver catching in his throat. Unfortunately, Isaac couldn't get a read on the bouncer, whose eyes were hidden by wraparound black shades. Isaac wished for a pair himself to act as a shield against the dazzling sun. What Isaac could see through the glare, however, was the bouncer's nametag. It read: "Peter."

"Sorry, but you're not on the list," Peter informed Isaac.

"Uh, can you check again? I'm expected," Isaac explained. Now that he was closer to the gates, he didn't think they were made of pearl. Instead, they looked like chrome. A driving musical beat sounded from beyond them. "The party I'm supposed to meet is already inside. Her name is Zee Shirley. She's a screenwriter."

"You're not on the list," Peter said bluntly.

"Her cat sent me," Isaac informed him. "Captain Flapjacks. Are you familiar?"

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to step aside. We don't allow your kind here."

"Gays?"

"No."

"Slytherins?"

"No, war criminals. We don't allow *war criminals* beyond the gate. And we especially don't accept war criminals who are tools for the government."

"War criminals?"

"Step aside, sir."

"Please? I have nowhere to go."

“Step aside, sir,” Peter instructed Isaac again as a gaggle of women with more curves than the surrounding bubble-shaped clouds appeared out of thin air and lined up behind Isaac. Dressed for a night on the town, Isaac wondered how their stiletto heels didn’t pop the clouds they stood upon to send them all plummeting. But nobody seemed worried, least of all Peter. The girls chattered amongst themselves while he checked his list and waved them through the gates without hassle.

“Right this way, ladies. Welcome, welcome. Enjoy your stay,” Peter said kindly but dropped the charm as soon as the women were out of earshot, and he had to consider Isaac again. “Says here that you massacred an Afghani spice market during your time on Earth.”

“There’s been a mistake!” Isaac cried. “A classic screwball mix-up! You see, I’m not a war criminal.”

“I’ll tell you what. Some of those people you killed are behind those gates right now. You want me to go get the Tali Llama and ask him if I made a mistake?”

“You don’t get it. Please! I didn’t kill him. That was Seth, my alternate personality!”

Peter snorted. “If it makes you feel any better, son, Seth ain’t on the list either.”

“Hmm. Does it say anywhere in there if I killed recently? A little girl maybe?”

“Nope,” said Peter after glancing back to the clipboard. “You’re good on that one.”

“Good, good,” Isaac paused, “Well, what does it take to get in here?”

“Thugs get in free, and you gotta be a G,” Peter replied as if it was obvious.

“What? What is this place?” Isaac eyed the gates suspiciously.

“Thugz Mansion.”

“Thugz Mansion?”

“You’re at Thugz Mansion. Goddamn, boy. Do you want me to spell it out for you? There’s a ‘z’ in there.”

“So this isn’t heaven?”

“Boy, did I say it was heaven?”

“Is it hell?”

“Man, step off already. For the last time, please leave the premises and take your business elsewhere. Shoo, Goddamnit!”

“But is everyone behind those gates dead? Am I dead?”

Peter pressed a finger to the receiver in his ear and began to mumble into it. The snippets of conversation Isaac could overhear were an unflattering physical description of himself and a request to bring out the dogs, which turned out to be a single dog with three heads. “Easy, Cerberus! Not yet.” Peter held the mythical beast on a leash, but even for the

mammoth-sized man, keeping the dog under control was a struggle. Isaac could smell the breath of all three heads, and they all had the unmistakable stink of human flesh on them.

Isaac furrowed his brow while he fretted in the face of the snarling three-headed dog. He couldn't come this far to get turned away now, not when he was so close to finding Zee. Then suddenly he remembered Anne's parting gift to him before he walked into the candle smoke. The token! Somewhere along the journey to Thugz Mansion, it fell inside Isaac's shirt.

"Yes!" Isaac bellowed after retrieving it, delighted to discover that Anne had furnished him with just what he needed: a laminated backstage pass for Thugz Mansion. The letters "VIP" were emblazoned along with the words "Anne Jacobson's Guest of Honor." More importantly, it also read "1 Day Pass ONLY," meaning that Isaac must not be dead! He was due back on Earth in 24 hours.

"Here," Isaac said, passing the badge to Peter for examination.

Eyes wide with surprise, Peter inspected the badge and acknowledged Isaac's worthiness with a grunt, alleviating Isaac's concerns and those of Cerberus, who calmed down. One of the three heads even tried to kiss Isaac.

"Welcome, sir. Enjoy your stay," Peter said, stepping aside and opening the enormous chrome gates wide for Isaac. Then, at Isaac's back, Peter shot his sot, yelling, "Next time you see Anne, tell her Lil' Petey says, 'What's up?'" But Isaac didn't turn around.

"¡Dios Mio!" Isaac exclaimed in astonishment once he made it inside the gates. He wished he were dead so he could live here forever, marveling at Thugz Mansion, which was chromed-out and stood high up on a hill of clouds. The sight of it was dizzying. The mansion was huge with wings on wings on wings. They spiraled out from the building's center, which was a near replica of the house Tony Montana owned in *Scarface*, with the only difference being that this one was even more awesomely ostentatious. Every window had a balcony, and every balcony a weed garden. The roof was the color of U.S. currency.

No wonder Mr. Lennox and his lizard friends couldn't find Zee, Isaac thought. They could have literally moved heaven and earth, and they still would have come up empty-handed. He made a mental note to never challenge Anne to a game of hide and seek.

Isaac smiled. The atmosphere outside the mansion was that of a midsummer day's block party. Throngs of people wandered around, enjoying themselves. Some chose to chill by the palatial pool or gather around a gigantic grill that bowed under the weight of the wings and ribs heaped high atop its racks. Those who didn't engage in those activities played lawn games, chatted, or danced to the music Isaac had heard from the other side of the gates. Good vibes only.

Isaac couldn't imagine a more perfect place. After giving mental thanks to Anne for allowing him to experience this paradise, he moved through the grounds and up toward the mansion. On the way, he watched a drag race between two tricked-out neon cars recognizable from *2 Fast 2 Furious*.

The party continued inside Thugz Mansion but at a more raucous pitch. Isaac stood in the grand lobby, decorated red to keep everything faithful to the original *Scarface* production design. Service staff moved throughout the room, handing out complimentary pre-rolls and glasses of Alize and lean. The lean was complete with a garnish of your choice of Jolly Rancher flavor. Isaac picked grape, figuring he couldn't go wrong with a classic. And he was right. It was delicious, tasting so good when it hit his lips. There were even dudes in here slinging salami, not in the Urban Dictionary sense, but actual Italian meats. Everything at Thugz Mansion was provided for, and no one would go hungry.

Isaac had no idea how he would find Zee amongst the crowds (where was tour guide Dan when you needed him?), so he started asking around, but none of the partygoers knew who she was, or they simply didn't care, too delirious with all the fun they were having. So instead of leading him in the right direction, they invited Isaac to dance, play a hand of booray, or sit for a round of *Mario Kart*. But Isaac politely declined every offer, opting to roam around instead. He was a man on a mission.

Continuing his search, Isaac poked his head into various rooms and discovered delights of every kind. There was a pool hall, a strip club, a library filled with books with gold-gilded pages, and one room was just a giant ball pit. Behind one door was a crowded theater where some lady named Billie Holiday was performing. Then, Isaac's nose led him to an in-house Roscoe's chicken and waffle house, which he had smelled all the way from Anne's office. His mouth watered. After polishing off an Obama special (three fried chicken wings and a waffle), Isaac resumed his hunt for Zee.

Peter was right. To get into Thugz Mansion, you had to be a G. Isaac crossed paths with people of all creeds and colors, but everyone had that common denominator. Isaac had never felt so out of place. Despite that, he was welcomed warmly, whether drinking peppermint schnapps with Jackie Wilson and Sam Cooke, knocking back beers with Anthony Bourdain and Janis Joplin, or sharing a spliff with Nipsey Hussle and the world-renowned bad bitch known as Barbra Bush. But even when Isaac started to see double, he still couldn't spot Zee to save his life.

A sneaking suspicion told Isaac he'd have better luck looking for Zee wherever the most exclusive portion of the mansion was, so he returned to the grand lobby and went up the left

side of the twin staircase. Then, Isaac checked inside the room at the top of the stairs, the one Tony Montana used as his office in the movie, but didn't see any sign of Zee.

What he did discover was that this replica of the *Scarface* mansion must have been made in the image of the movie's third act because there was a massive mountain of cocaine on the desk. It appeared self-replenishing as none of the guests could make a dent in it, whether they had one line or three. When one of them lifted their face from the pile of coke, Isaac recognized him.

"Roomie!" Isaac cried to Mark, who resembled a powdered doughnut more than a man. "Looking good!" But Mark didn't respond. "Hey, buddy, have you seen Zee?"

Delirious, Mark turned to Isaac but couldn't see him. His eyes were spinning.

"She's supposed to be here somewhere."

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Mark responded.

Isaac shook his roomie to wake him up. "Mark? Listen to me. Focus!"

"AHAKRBSLNFBRBEBABSBRKSK!!!!"

"Do you know where Zee is?"

"Isaac! I have a secret to tell you." He grabbed Isaac by the shoulders, now whispering at a volume reserved for screaming. "This is big! Imagine a sloppy Joe sandwich, but it's made out of Slim Jims. You'd call it a slimmy Jimmy! It'll make a billion dollars."

Isaac had to let Mark go. Mark was flying high, and there was no telling when he'd come down. Sneakily, Isaac moved from one powder room to another, this one the *en suite* to the mansion's master bedroom.

"Zee!" Isaac cried out to the woman bathing in the giant, circular hot tub at the center of the room. He knew it was her. Aside from being a copycat Margot Robbie, there was no mistaking Zee's cascading blonde hair, her button nose, or her dead eyes that searched Isaac for some sort of explanation as to who the fuck he could be. Isaac couldn't help but stare back, focusing on Zee's magical clavicles that were exposed just beyond the reach of the bubbles that filled the bath. He didn't see any evidence of her wearing a bathing suit.

"Um, hello?" Zee said, already exasperated by Isaac.

"I never thought I'd find you!" Isaac declared breathlessly, "You're the girl of my dreams!"

That brought a smile to Zee's face. "Of course I am."

"Blub, blub, blub," said a man with a mouthful of water. He breached the bubbly water between Zee's legs, his back to Isaac. "Why'd you tap me? Were you done?" the man asked Zee.

"Yes, baby," Zee said sweetly. "We have company."

The man turned around and draped one arm around her and his other over the side of the tub like he owned the place, which he did. Isaac recognized him from Anne's Wall of Fame and countless LA murals.

"Holy fuck!" Isaac cried, "It's Tupac!"

## Chapter 30

“Welcome to Thugz Mansion, homie,” Tupac greeted Isaac from the hot tub. “Happy to see you’re participating in the festivities and enjoying our many amenities.” He rubbed the end of his nose.

Surprisingly, Isaac got his hint, but rather than wetting the ends of his fingers in the water to scrub his nose clean, he lowered his entire body into the hot tub, clothes and all. “This is nice!” he shouted to Tupac and Zee over the jets once his head resurfaced. “The water is so warm! Makes you want to pee!”

“Oh fuck!” Tupac laughed. “This your boy, Zee?”

“I’m not sure who he is,” Zee admitted.

“I come from Earth,” Isaac informed them, prompting Zee and Tupac to side-eye each other before laughing. “What? I do.”

Once Tupac calmed down, he picked up Isaac’s VIP badge, bobbing amongst the bubbles. “Shoulda known. He’s Anne’s boy.”

“Huh,” Zee said flatly.

“Your cat led me to you.”

“Captain Flapjacks?” Zee wondered.

“Yes.”

“No shit,” Tupac said, surprised. “Good on you to bring party favors with you. I see you got some manners.”

“Well, until I lost him,” Isaac conceded.

“Goddamn.” Tupac shook his head, disappointed.

“But before my love interest stole him, Captain Flapjacks led me to you, Zee.”

“Why?” Zee asked.

“I have to save the world! Together!”

“Save the world?” Tupac asked, laughing again, eying this wet Muppet of a man floating around his Jacuzzi. “You must be trippin’.”

“Did the cats ever get to Super Jesus?” Zee asked.

"P38 may have. I sort of blacked out during the last battle." Isaac rubbed the back of his head apologetically. "What do they want with Super Jesus?"

"To kill him, I suspect. It's what I would do."

"*Rat-a-tat-tat-tat-tat!*" Tupac imitated gunshot noises. "That's just the way it is."

"You would?" Isaac asked. "Kill him?"

"If I wanted to save the human race, I would," Zee responded casually.

"Cold." Tupac let out a long, low whistle. He sunk a little lower in the tub.

"How does killing Super Jesus save the human race?" Isaac inquired.

"Because it stops the lizards from finishing *Super Jesus 2*."

"..."

"Enough. Just give it to him straight, aight?" Tupac said. "Beating around the bush over here. The man's a guest."

Zee sighed as a preamble to her story. "Once upon a time, I wrote a little film named *Super Jesus*. You may have heard of it. Well, I thought it was pretty clever. A satire on what would happen if the second coming of Jesus came of age during the age of superheroes—"

"You can skip that part. I've seen it," Isaac interrupted. "Everyone has."

"Thank you, sweetie. Believe me, no one appreciates compliments more than I do, but yours is hollow. I mean, you couldn't help but like it. What you don't know is that *Super Jesus* was engineered to make you re-watch it. It's like if I gave you a baggie of coke and you complimented my cooking skills."

"Some is better than others," Tupac reminded her.

"But you get my point. I didn't realize it when I first wrote *Super Jesus*. In fact, I didn't really remember writing the movie, and I thought that was sort of weird. The whole thing sort of came to me out of the blue, almost as if they were divinely inspired."

"Angels?" Isaac asked.

"Lizardmen," Zee countered.

"Lizardmen," Tupac agreed. "Goddamn Illuminati bullshit."

"I only figured it out after snooping around Lennox's office."

"What tipped you off?" Isaac asked.

"Nothing. Happy accident. Sheer luck. I thought he was cheating on me with Margot Robbie, and I wanted the evidence."

"I'm not about that life," Tupac assured her.

"I know, baby," she told Tupac before continuing. "So, as I was saying, I was in Lennox's desk and imagine my shock to discover that my therapist—"

“Dr. Rousseau?” Isaac asked for clarification.

“Yes, Dr. Rousseau. I’m ashamed to admit it, but he stewarded nearly all my ideas for the movie from the start. He had a subtle hand in the process, and I was too full of my own ego to notice. But he got me to write the damned thing, and that’s how I got involved in a grand conspiracy to enslave the human race via a superhero movie.”

“But how?” Isaac wondered. “How does that work? A movie?”

“The movie has a hypnotic effect on the audience. But there’s a catch. It supposedly takes some time to rewire our brains to pick up the signal, so their plan is only coming to fruition now even though it was set in motion decades ago.”

“Baby brains. Psychological conditioning,” Isaac said more to himself than the group, remembering both Anne’s lesson on consciousness and the focus group at the Twin Towers. So all those slack-jawed patients in the rec room weren’t retarded, as Isaac had initially assumed. They were hypnotized! And Isaac must have been immune because of his lizardness.

Zee continued, “All the superhero movies and television shows over the years were produced to elevate the idea of superheroes in the public consciousness. That was step one. Step two was *Super Jesus*. That movie planted a religious fervor into the culture. It primed the pump, so to speak, for the sequel, which is the key that will start the ignition. Once they view *Super Jesus 2*, it’s over.”

“How could this happen?”

“Easily. People have willingly lost sight of the boundary between fiction and reality. Don’t believe me? Look at the *Harry Potter* sorting program and the U.S. Ministry of Magic. Imagine selling out 25% of the population to the government so you can pretend to live in a children’s book. The fact that House Badges implemented another caste system/status symbol to lord over your neighbors was just an added sweet treat. Only Disney adults are a lower form of life than these people,” Zee spat. “Any nation accepting of Disney adults has already been hypnotized and imprisoned by the power of pop culture propaganda..”

“What do the lizards want with hypnotized humans?” Isaac needed to know.

“Rape?” Zee posited a guess. “I don’t know. I never really got that far, but I know whatever it is, it’s not good.”

“Nah,” Tupac interjected, “they’re harvesting our minds.” He tapped his temple.

“What were you doing that night at the Annenberg?” Isaac asked Zee.

“Captain Flapjacks told me to get Super Jesus to meet him there. It was a setup, and I was the bait,” Zee explained. “The more I looked into what Lennox was up to, the more I

realized that the Birmans played an integral part in the cinematic hypnotization process. They have some sort of special effect. So when I went to the cat trainer—”

Isaac cut her off again, “Jane Furbaby?”

“Yes, Jane Furbaby!” Zee shouted, exasperated. “Can I finish? Please? I’m the storyteller, aren’t I?”

“Let her cook,” Tupac instructed Isaac.

“Thank you, baby. So when I went to see Jane to dig deeper into the situation, I got this visualization from the cats like they were telling me to go to the Annenberg telepathically. But I’m not sure what would happen once we got there because we were attacked by a lizardman.”

“I remember that from my dream. Mark was lucky to get out alive.”

“Mark’s alive?” Zee said with astonishment. “We got split up.”

“Who’s Mark?” Tupac demanded.

“A bit of good news, bad news on that front. The good news is that Mark survived that night at the Annenberg. But the bad news is a lizardman killed him a different night.”

“Oh, god,” Zee exclaimed.

“But he’s here! In Thugz Mansion, and he’s still in love with you.”

“Aww, sweetie. That’s so Mark.” Zee smiled, but Tupac did not.

“And the blue beam at the center of the Annenberg?” Isaac pressed.

“I don’t know what that was,” Zee admitted. “It was beautiful, though, in a scary-as-fuck sort of way. So then, after I escaped from the Annenberg, I went to Anne for help, looking for a place to lay low. I thought I should remove myself from the game if we couldn’t remove Super Jesus. No screenwriter, no reshoots, no movie, right?”

“Do you know what made you so special that only you could write the script?”

“How much time do you have?” Zee teased. “Kidding. Well, sort of kidding, not really. I mean, aside from my marvelous wit and poetic prose, what made me special, probably, is I’m half-lizardwoman and half-human.”

“Girl’s got the tongue to prove it. Ayyyyyyyy!” Tupac added, which earned him a playful splash from Zee.

“Just like me,” Isaac marveled.

“One of your parents fucked a lizard, too, huh?” Zee said, and Isaac had never thought of his conception in those terms before. He wondered which one of his parents it was, and for some reason he suspected the culprit was his father. Had to be. Isaac fucked a vacuum.

While Isaac reckoned with the information his father was a lizard-fucker, Zee mused, “There must be something about the half-lizard and half-human mix that works as a conduit to implant lizard code to humans. We’re the mac-to-PC adapter dongle, I guess.”

“And Dr. Rousseau must have been our handler. I wonder how many more clients he has,” Isaac wondered, but the idea elicited only a shrug from Zee. “Unfortunately,” Isaac continued, “I don’t think your plan worked, Zee. It seems they’ve nearly perfected the sequel without your input. Just today, on my way to Anne’s, I saw a billboard promotion for the upcoming teaser trailer release, if that’s any indication.”

“Oh?” Zee seemed unfazed.

“You have to come back to Earth and help me stop them. That must be what Captain Flapjacks wanted me to come here and tell you.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. You can tell him I’m flattered that he thinks I can save the world, though.”

“...”

“Don’t give me that look. Why the fuck would I want to leave Thugz Mansion and go back to Earth?” Zee asked, as mad at Isaac as she was incredulous. “Have you seen this place?” She lifted the bubbles of her bath as evidence. “Did you even realize these are champagne bubbles? That we’re bathing in champagne?” Isaac cupped some bath water, brought it to his face, and drank. It was champagne. Isaac hiccuped.

“And have you seen my man? Look at him!” She indicated Tupac, who was Tupac. “Why would I give this up for Earth?”

“I mean, this is nice. But there’s always something better. It’s not heaven, right?” Isaac asked.

“Not technically, no,” Tupac said.

“Well, what if you saved the world, Zee? Maybe that would make up for driving that Irving Hodges kid to suicide. Maybe you’d get into heaven?”

“This place suits me way better than heaven.”

“Heaven is kind of whack anyway,” Tupac declared.

“It is?” Isaac needed to know.

“Sure,” Tupac confirmed. “In heaven, you become one with God. It’s pure bliss, you understand? But at what cost?”

“Pure bliss sounds kinda nice,” Isaac ventured.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, but when you become one with God, you really become *one* with God, you know what I’m saying? That shit is no joke. You lose yourself. Poof! Gone! Sayonara, sucker! You become nothing more than a drop of water in the ocean,” Tupac explained.

“But a happy drop of water?”

“An ecstatic drop of water,” Tupac confirmed, “An orgasmic drop of water, even, if I may be so bold, but how do you differentiate the drops of water in the ocean?”

“So what?” Isaac said, enticed by the idea. A little euphoric anonymity sounded nice after all this time being used and abused for who and what he was.

“Pfft,” Tupac countered. He looked over to Zee. “This fucking guy, eh?”

“This fucking guy,” Zee concurred.

“Well, Isaac, we ain’t about that, aight?”

“Wait, are you alive or dead?” Isaac asked Tupac.

“I’m as alive as the hills were with the sound of music,” Tupac confirmed.

“That a *Sound of Music* reference?” Isaac asked.

“What? You don’t think I fuck with Julie Andrews, Isaac? How do you think a young Pac learned his scales? Want me to call her up here? I will. She’s kicking around Thugz Mansion someplace. I usually find her in the ball pit.”

But Isaac declined his offer. “So, did Anne send you here, too? Like Zee?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Did me a solid when I needed a place to get my head right. And while I was kickin’ it here, I built Thugz Mansion as a place for all my niggas to rest in power.”

“What about Elvis? Dead or alive?”

“That fat fuck is dead.”

“And Biggie?”

“That fat fuck is dead, too.”

“Oh. Well. You don’t have to hide anymore, Tupac. Death Row is over, and Suge Knight is in jail,” Isaac said. “He ran a guy over.”

“For real?” Tupac laughed. “Sounds like something Suge would do. But I wasn’t hiding from him.”

“Who were you hiding from?”

“To be straight up with you, I don’t hide from anyone. You got that? But I was evading, you understand? I was evading the Illuminati. What else? I was getting too big for them. Getting too much attention. It put a target on my back, you know what I mean? It’s why they shot me. Originally, I planned to plot my revenge and return from the dead, Machiavelli-style, after seven days, or that was the theory anyway.”

“And then what happened?” Isaac asked.

“I realized something. I had to get out of the game for myself. I was getting too big for myself. I needed to evade myself.”

“...”

“The power trip was sending me, brotha. I didn’t like what it was doing to me. But I was addicted to it. When you got a room full of people, an arena full of people, and they’re hanging on your every word, they’re vibing with you, they’re worshipping you, you can feel it. It’s intoxicating. Better than any coke Zee could cook up.”

Isaac did know what Tupac was saying this time. “The force. You were feeling the force from the crowd.”

“I could tell them to jump, and they’d jump. I could tell them to fuck, and they’d do that, too, you know? It got really surreal when I went to jail, I tell you. I could have started a prison riot just like that, and the whole place woulda popped off.” Tupac snapped his fingers. “The power. The influence. It wasn’t good for me.” He tapped his temple. “I had to get humble.”

“Did it work?” Isaac looked around at their glitzy, maximalist surroundings.

“Hell yeah, but this place got me soft,” Tupac lamented. “Heaven ‘ain’t shit, but Thugz Mansion ‘ain’t perfect either, you know? After a while, you realize that your best life is simply life itself. Living. It’s true what they say: you gotta have some lows to feel the highs. You spend enough time here, and you become numb, and I’m not talkin’ about the coke.” Tupac pulled Zee closer to him. “Zee, here, will figure that out sooner than later. I try to tell her, but she won’t listen. So that’s why I’ll come back to Earth with you.”

“You will?” Isaac and Zee asked simultaneously.

“Yup. Got that right. We’re going to put it to those lizard bastards.”

“Fine.” Zee pouted.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Tupac asked Zee.

“Besides the obvious? Please. I don’t want to get into it in front of the help.” Zee indicated Isaac with her chin. “It’s embarrassing.”

“C’mon. He needs us. The human race needs us. Captain Flapjacks needs us. There’s no need to trip. I’ll come back for you, but I got a job to do. They don’t call me the Don Killuminati for nothing.”

Zee rolled her eyes. “No one calls you that except for yourself. Fine. Go ahead. Take your little boys’ trip, but I’m staying here,” she said as the champagne bubbles in the bath began to burst. “Have fun.”

“Thanks, babe. I’ll bring you back something nice from Earth.”

“Wait!” Isaac insisted. “Before we go, can you tell me how my storyline ends, Zee? I only got as far in the *Super Jesus* sequel script as the Koreatown ambush. What happens to me next?”

Isaac’s question produced the first genuine smile Zee’s face had seen in years. “I’m sorry, Isaac. No spoilers,” Zee taunted.

“But —” Isaac tried.

“Don’t bother, my guy. Let it die,” Tupac warned before softening his words. “No sense of worrying. It’s wasted energy. Whatever will be will be.”

Somehow, Tupac’s simple wisdom instilled a small sense of serenity in Isaac. “Okay. So, how do we leave Thugz Mansion?” Isaac asked, moving on with his life.

“We gotta hit the strip club,” Tupac said as if it were obvious.

When Tupac arrived at the strip club with Isaac in tow, it was, as Destiny’s Child would say, bumpin’ bumpin’. Isaac didn’t quite understand the economics of Thugz Mansion and what purpose money served here, but he sure did enjoy himself as cash rained down on him from everywhere. Bills. Bills. Bills. But there wasn’t any time to soak up the scene as Tupac hurriedly ushered Isaac to center stage, where two bootylicious babes were in mid-routine.

“Excuse me, ladies,” Tupac said before inviting Isaac on stage. “Go on now.”

“Me?” Isaac questioned Tupac after the strippers obliged them by ceding the stage to Isaac. “I couldn’t. I haven’t warmed up. And I don’t think the DJ has Avril Laivgne’s I’m With You.”

“Get up there and get on that pole,” Tupac ordered, and Isaac obeyed, doing his best not to slip on any of the money that littered the platform. Isaac was about to request Mystikal’s *Shake Ya Tail Feather* as his second favorite song to strip to until he got up close and personal to the pole. He could now see that the stripper pole was more of the fireman variety as a hole was cut into the stage around the pole to allow someone to slide down it and through to the other side.

Carefully, Isaac tip-toed to the hole’s edge and peered down. He expected to find a basement below or a dressing room to peep into, but there was no such thing in Thugz Mansion. Instead, Isaac saw a perfectly blue sky interrupted only by the chrome pole extending downward into infinity.

“The wind helps with stage effects, too. Blows the girls’ skirts up,” Tupac noted. “It’s time, brotha. Let’s ride. I’ll be right behind you, aight?”

Isaac nodded. It was hard for Isaac to tell whether the courage he felt swelling up inside him was a product of all the drugs he consumed or the fact Tupac had his back, but Isaac

confidently gripped the pole and ripped it, sliding down and out of Thugz Mansion at a million miles per hour. The air through his hair and the sun on his face was exhilarating. Isaac was a survivor. He wasn't going to give up. He wasn't going to stop. He was going to work harder to keep on surviving.

## Chapter 31

“I know what those bastards are doing!” Tupac called down to Isaac. He roared against the howling wind as they rode the stripper pole from Thugz Mansion down to Earth. They plummeted at terminal velocity.

“What are they doing?” Isaac cried.

“They’re trying to put us back in the cave!”

“What cave?” Isaac called back, hoping Tupac was wrong. After Isaac’s adventures in the tunnels under LA, the thought of doing any more spelunking made him sick.

“Plato’s cave!” Tupac said, but that didn’t help Isaac much, who was more familiar with exploring the man’s closet than his cave.

“Oh, okay. What’s that?” Isaac asked. The skies darkened as they left Thugz Mansion’s plane of perfect existence and entered Los Angeles’ airspace and the accompanying June Gloom, which was so dense that it had become a layer of the atmosphere itself.

“Plato was one of the real O.G.s, you know? He had all these ideals. And he thought that humanity was trapped inside this cave. And inside this cave was a shadow puppet show,” Tupac lectured.

“Why is there a shadow puppet show inside a cave?” Isaac asked. “It’s not the venue I would choose.”

“It’s an allegory. C’mon, Isaac. Gimme a chance here.”

“What’s an allegory?”

“It’s like a souped-up metaphor.”

“Isn’t that a simile?”

“No, I used a simile to compare an allegory to a metaphor. Aren’t you supposed to be some sorta writer?”

“...”

“Now stay with me here, but like, this puppet show is going on, and all these niggas in the audience believe the shadows on the cave wall are real. That fox-shaped shadow isn’t just a shadow to them. It’s a real fuckin’ fox, you get it? Because they don’t. They can’t tell the

difference because they've never seen one bouncing around the meadow or whatever. They're in the cave. All they know is the cave. They don't understand it's puppets and tricks of the firelight."

"I'm not following!" Isaac cried.

"It's simple. We're the people inside the cave, losing touch with reality because we're controlled by shadows and tricks of the firelight. That's all movies are, Isaac. Industrial light and magic."

"Okay... but who are the puppeteers?"

"That a joke? The lizards! The Illuminati! Fox Studios! The police. Whatever you wanna call them. They're the puppeteers, and *Super Jesus 2* is the puppet. They want to put us in the cave and keep us there forever. If Zee's right, anyone who watches that movie will be spent. Gone! Bam-*fucking*-boozled! I'm talking total vegetable status, okay? They'll be completely controlled by the movie and will live inside it."

"Why would the lizards do that? Ouch!" Isaac's hands had begun to burn from the friction of his descent. The shea butter massage oil he applied to them before gripping and ripping the stripper pole was wearing thin on his palms.

"Control, Isaac, it's always been about control. Slavery. Again. Slavery and subjugation. That's at the heart of everything evil. Power. That kernel of truth is eternal, whether that kernel is in the center of the cotton seed we pick or the popcorn we eat at the multiplex. First, they enslaved our bodies, and now our minds. Instead of whips and chains, they're using the entertainment industrial complex to keep us subservient, keep us sucking at the big ol' TV titty for sustenance. That shit is fucked. Art used to bring us together, but now it's tearing us apart, you know what I'm saying?"

"Not really!" Isaac shouted. He closed his eyes, trying to brace himself for an incoming flock of geese.

"Think of it like a tower of Babel situation."

"The Brad Pitt movie?" Isaac asked through a mouthful of feathers.

"The Brad Pitt movie?" Tupac repeated. "Goddamn, man, I'm talking about the tower. The tower of Babel! The biblical allegory of how and why humanity is divided by our different races and languages. That's what entertainment is doing to us, you understand?"

"That's a parable, I think. Or a fable?"

"You're missing the point. Open your eyes!" Tupac ordered Isaac, and Isaac did so, now seeing that he was beneath the June Gloom cloud cover. He screamed as LA's cityscape

rushed up at him. He couldn't stop his momentum. The harder he tried to grip the pole to break his speed, the more his hands burned. Isaac braced for impact.

Despite Isaac's imminent death, Tupac continued his lecture, "Humanity has become entirely too reliant on entertainment. What was once used as a diversion has become our *raison d'être*. It's how we pass the time, it's the balm to soothe our souls, and it's the *Goddamn* prism through which we now see and relate to the world. The lives we lead are the lives we watch. It's why everyone speaks in references. They have to! See? No one has any original experiences to relate to anymore. You have to use fictional characters as a stand-in. It's an identity. So, instead of doing something badass yourself, you watch characters on TV do something badass, and now you call yourself a badass. It's crazy."

Tupac was right. Isaac closed his eyes again, preparing for death, yet his life did not flash before him. Other scenes did. Images from his favorite television episodes buzzed in his brain, taking the place of any authentic, lived experiences in the highlight reel of Isaac's life. There was the *Ozymandias* episode from *Breaking Bad*, the Red Wedding in *Game of Thrones*, and *Fullmetal Alchemist*, the one where the mad scientist Shou Tucker fuses his dog and daughter together to form a chimera. Evidently, these shows were his fondest memories.

Tupac kept speaking, "Now there's no more mass entertainment. Monoculture is a thing of the past. Died out in the 90's. Everything is now designed for hyper-specific market segments. Ya know how 160 million people watched the *MASH* finale? That will never happen again, you know what I'm saying? We're all watching different shit now, so we're all living different lives. The tower of Babel split us across continents, but entertainment is splitting up our community. An anime fan has more in common with some weeb on a message board a million miles away than their neighbor who binge-watches Latin soaps. They're the strangers. Divide and conquer. Divide and conquer. A person's media diet has become their essence. Like the rings of a tree, you can take the references a person uses to carbon date them. Or to deduce their personalities. And that, in my professional opinion, is why we're fucked. We're already living in the cave, and no one knows it. It's like that apologue about the boiling frog."

"Argh!" Isaac screamed before impact.

"I feel your pain, brotha! *Super Jesus* is just the rock that will be rolled over the mouth of the cave to make it a tomb. The final nail in the coffin. This has been going on much longer than *Super Jesus*, you know. All that east coast-west coast rap beef I got caught up in? Typical lizard agenda. Divide and conquer. But I was on my bullshit back then, you understand? I let ego blind me."

*Boing!* Isaac hit the Earth's surface, landing on a green lawn. Upon impact, the ground depressed, comically, as if it had been made with flubber to soften Isaac's fall. The earth then rebounded to its original form, bouncing Isaac up and shooting him high into the air, where he fell for a second time with only minimal bumps and bruises to show for it. He survived.

Even with his rough descent from Thugz Mansion, Isaac could only think of flubber and *Flubber*. Tupac was right. Again. Much like his fight with Seth, where he related the incident of being nearly eaten alive by his alternate personality to a *Star Wars* alien, Isaac could only experience this unique life event of falling from the heavens through the prism of a Robin Williams movie.

What was worse, if Isaac hoped to ever relay this experience to someone else, he'd only be able to do so by using flubber to illustrate his story, like how he had to use the *Kubla Khan* to describe his script writing. Already, no one knew what the *Kubla Khan* was, so how many people would understand his *Flubber* reference? What were Flubber's credentials? Was it culturally canon? Certainly, no one under the age of twenty would understand Isaac. Would anyone over the age of sixty? Isaac thought, not realizing *Flubber* was a re-make of a 1960s film, *The Absent Minded Professor*, a piece of cultural ephemera wholly lost on him. However, Isaac was aware of the expression of "an absent-minded professor," having been called that once or twice himself. Still, he had thought that term was its own stand-alone expression, not one originating from a movie, which was based on an even older piece of intellectual property, a 1940s short story called *A Situation of Gravity*.

Isaac was dizzy from the fall.

Since contemporary society had become an unintelligible Russian nesting doll of references, Isaac wondered how future historians would regard the primary sources from this era, which would read like any other era's secondary. Could they ever hope to be fluent in a culture where Isaac barely understood his peers without the aid of an Urban Dictionary or Wikipedia to translate, provide footnotes, or act as a glossary? How many Marvel movies does it take to become fluent enough in the MCU to understand the references used in our Supreme Court opinions?

Communication was going to collapse altogether. Broken under the burden of its own dead weight, barriers to entry, and steep learning curves. It meant creative stagnation and cultural death. It's what the lizards wanted: no more original thought, as everything new had to be a re-packaging of something old. If the lizards weren't stopped, all content would fall into one of five categories: sequel, prequel, reboot, spin-off, or adaptation. Was this the Tower of Babel

effect Tupac was referencing? Isaac had no idea because he only half understood *that* reference.

Isaac had a question. "But if the plan is to use media to fracture audiences into smaller and smaller market segments to further isolate them from one another, then what about *Super Jesus*? That's marketed to everyone."

"Human beings are a contradiction, yeah?" Gracefully, Tupac dismounted the Thugz Mansion stripper pole, not needing to utilize the flubber-like properties of the ground to break his fall, though that didn't stop him from dusting his shoulders off anyway. "We're a people of paradox. It's that tension that gives us our juice. People crave their own individual identities, yeah? So everyone chased their own little entertainment fetishes at first, delving deep into content made especially for them until they went right down the rabbit hole. That separation must have been step one in the lizard's plan."

"And step two?"

"People also seek community. They knew that, too, so the lizards introduced movies that could appeal to everyone, the superhero genre. That was step two. And now people can't get enough. You see it now? Got us coming and going. The Illuminati is selling us the cure to the disease they introduced, the sick fucks. Except for the cure — *Super Jesus* — is just a new disease in disguise, you know what I'm saying?"

Once again, Isaac did not know what Tupac was saying but didn't ask for further clarification. He was too embarrassed to do so again.

"Let's go," Tupac instructed Isaac, who did as he was told, falling in line behind Tupac. Then, for the first time since landing, Isaac looked around. They stood in a backyard with scrubby palm trees fencing them in, and he immediately recognized where he was.

"Knock. Knock," Tupac called out in lieu of knocking on Anne's back door. He didn't wait for her to answer either, making himself at home by turning the handle and striding into the bungalow.

"Super Jesus is dead," was how Anne greeted the two of them when they reached her office.

"What? When? How?" Isaac screeched.

"Where? Why?" Tupac finished Isaac's inquiry for him in jest after exchanging pleasantries with Anne by dapping her up and embracing her in a hug as warm and comforting as a McDoanld's hashbrown on a Sunday Scaries morning.

"Died during his most recent and last miracle," Anne said with a grimace while leading them inside. "But it's better if I showed you."

Isaac expected Anne to reach for her crystal ball but grabbed her laptop instead, turning it around for both Tupac and Isaac to see. She pressed play on the video app she was using, which looked like a bootleg version of Youtube, lending credence to the idea that Isaac was about to watch a snuff film.

The video began, and its vantage point was from an LA highrise looking down on the proceedings, but the videographer recorded the event with their phone vertically, so two obnoxious black bars bordered the footage, compressing the image and irritating Isaac.

What he could make out from the picture, however, was the 405 freeway, somewhere between the 10 and the 90. This was the real belly of the beast, but traffic could have been worse. Of course, it was still bumper-to-bumper, but this was 2:30 PM bumper-to-bumper traffic, not 5:30 PM bumper-to-bumper traffic. Isaac could tell because the cars were moving in unison at 45 miles per hour instead of 15. As an LA driver, these were the best conditions one could hope for, the magic half-hour between the lunch rush and rush hour.

“Ahhhhh!” a woman screamed on the video recording. The sound was exultant. “I can’t believe we’re going to watch a miracle!” The camera panned to the shoulder of the northbound side of the 405, where Super Jesus stood. He was not alone.

Behind the superhero was an entire cadre of animals, dozens and dozens of them, two to a species. There were great blue herons, flame skimmer dragonflies, and even rarer species like the California legless lizards and the famous least bittern birds. (Conspicuously absent, however, were any cat-like creatures.)

All the animals Isaac saw were native to the Ballona Wetlands, a marsh on the wrong side of the 405 from where Super Jesus and the animals waited. Isaac only knew this because Dan, his tour guide, told him how the Annenbergs purchased the Ballona wetlands, a lucrative piece of real estate, under the guise of conservation. Something smelled fishy to Isaac, and it wasn’t the pair of California killifish he saw strapped to Super Jesus in a fanny pack-styled aquarium.

Super Jesus raised his arms akin to how Moses was classically portrayed when he parted the Red Sea, except Super Jesus tried to part the 405 traffic and lead these animals, two by two, back to the wetlands and salvation. It was brilliant, Isaac thought. For Super Jesus’ final miracle, the film’s marketing team synthesized the Exodus and Noah’s Ark Biblical stories into a third, more powerful story, *Make Way for Ducklings*.

At first, the cars didn’t stop for Super Jesus until he took his first step off the shoulder and into the highway. Then Anne’s laptop speakers crackled as the drivers in the video skidded their vehicles to a halt, which set off a chain reaction from LA to Irvine.

Super Jesus strode across one lane of asphalt and into another with supreme confidence even as the traffic continued ahead of him unabated. In an organized fashion, the animals followed behind Super Jesus. Two by two.

One lane down. Only 13 more to go. Behind Super Jesus, another Super Jesus adorning a *Super Jesus 2* billboard watched his back and cheered him on.

“Oh my God!” the video recorder squealed in amazement at the miracle. The camera panned to show the rest of the cheering audience. Everyone watched the miracle with noses and cellphones pressed against glass windows. The excitement in the air was palpable, infectious. The force was flowing.

Isaac smiled. Crossing the 405 on foot was one of the most beautiful things his eyes had ever seen. Despite everything he knew, Isaac was also excited to watch the *Super Jesus* sequel. He wondered if any pre-sale tickets were available for purchase.

When the camera focused back to the 405, Super Jesus and his companions managed to cross another three lanes. It was smooth sailing until a driver, distracted by watching the live stream of the Super Jesus miracle on his cellphone, didn't see the procession in front of him. The driver slammed his brakes to avoid the crash, but it was too late.

The car fishtailed wildly and ran over a pair of pond slider turtles, setting off a panic among the animals. They broke ranks, charging off in all directions. Confused, a coyote pushed Super Jesus into oncoming traffic before he was ready. The next thing Isaac saw was Super Jesus getting swallowed up by the front end of a TCP-stickered Lincoln Navigator, and what the SUV left behind wasn't easily identifiable as anything other than a tomato-based Hamburger Helper meal. A little flubber would have gone a long way, Isaac thought grimly.

Anne closed her laptop to silence the sounds of horror while the witnesses watched the ground-bound animals try to scamper to safety in a game of Frogger gone wrong. “That happened three days ago,” she informed Tupac and Isaac. “People all over the world are in mourning. Candle-lit vigils, cry-ins, you name it. People are losing their Goddamned minds.”

“Did you say three days ago?” Isaac asked, bewildered. “Are you kidding me? I was only at Thugz Mansion for a few hours at most!”

“Time flies when you're having fun,” Anne remarked dryly.

“You're telling me. I was only supposed to be there for seven days,” Tupac groaned.

Isaac was overwhelmed. Whatever fate Captain Flapjacks had in store for him while in the hands of Liz and the lizardmen was probably sealed by now. There would be no saving the cat. “I don't get it,” was all he could offer.

“What is there to get? Super Jesus got turned the fucked up,” Tupac observed. “He dead.”

“But was it an accident? Or did the cats organize his death?” Isaac wondered.

“I wouldn’t put it past them,” Anne said.

“This was an inside job,” Tupac warned. “I know one when I see it. Lizards tried to get me with a drive-by in Vegas, and they got this nigga with a drive-over.”

“Why would they kill him? Does this mean they finished the reshoots?”

“Bury the evidence?” Tupac suggested.

“My guess,” Anne mused, “is that they’re trying to rile everyone up, gin up their emotions — their force — a bit more before enacting their final plan.”

“Has Fox announced anything new regarding the movie?” Isaac asked Anne.

“To honor Super Jesus’s death, they’re dropping the sequel’s trailer tonight at a live event in Century Park Plaza. Naturally, people are forecasting that the whole world will be watching.”

“Tonight?” Tupac asked.

“But tonight,” Isaac counted on his fingers to double check his math, “is...”

“Yes,” Anne interrupted, “tonight’s the summer solstice when the force is most potent. I don’t think that’s by mistake, do you?”

“A perfect opportunity for the lizards to surprise release the *Super Jesus* sequel and enslave everyone,” Isaac said bitterly. “Can’t you do anything to stop it?” He turned to Anne. “You’re the sister of Jesus Christ. Can’t you do something to magic it all away?”

“No,” Anne said.

“Please?” Isaac pleaded.

“I could, but I won’t.”

“Why not?” Isaac whined.

“I’m not going to save you. I don’t believe in it. That’s something my brother would do.”

“And your brother is hailed as a hero,” Isaac said to entice her.

“That’s the problem!” Anne crossed her arms in a huff. “Why? What made him so special?”

“He died on the cross, sacrificing himself for humanity,” Isaac explained to Jesus’s sister.

“Some sacrifice,” Anne scoffed, “in all my years, I’ve never seen a better case study in marketing. Honestly! It’s exasperating. If you’re the son of God, what is there to sacrifice? Did he have a couple of uncomfortable days? Sure. I’ll grant him that, but so do many of us. It’s not as if he’s history’s first martyr either. And what was he risking by sacrificing himself? Did he

have any afterlife anxiety to worry about? Was he going to hell? I don't think so. You want to hear my hot take? A single mother in Crenshaw suffers and sacrifices more than Jesus ever did on any given day."

"Amen, sista," Tupac added.

But Anne's rant wasn't over. "Much like Our Lady, Lana Del Rey, Jesus was born to die, so is fulfilling your life's destiny really such a sacrifice? Well, is it? Like, what else was he going to do? Die of old age? Please."

"..." Isaac let her vent. He had clearly infringed upon a sensitive intrafamily dynamic/sibling rivalry and didn't want to aggravate Anne further.

"Don't you see what I'm doing for humanity is far greater?" Anne continued, "I'm allowing you to save yourselves. Now that's true salvation. Jesus allowed humans into heaven, sure, whatever, but I'm out here trying to bring heaven to earth."

"How?" Isaac wanted to know.

"Much like my brother's father, I, too, work in mysterious ways. Do you really think it was by accident that you found that missing cat poster?" There was a glint in her eyes.

"What you call mysterious, I would call inefficient," Isaac retorted. "What a convoluted way to get what you wanted."

"When you're immortal, Isaac, you can afford to play the long game. Okay? And you can join our ranks if you pull this off. Of course, that is if you want to be saved and overthrow the lizards."

"Why wouldn't I want to be saved and overthrow the lizards?"

Anne shrugged, "I mean, we've been living with the lizards for a millennia or so. Is the situation ideal? No, but an equilibrium has been achieved with them at the top of the food chain. There's no doubt about that. They're not exactly hunting humans to extinction, right? If anything, you're their livestock, so it tends to be in their best self-interest to keep their livestock fat, happy, and protected from outside predators if they can."

"..."

"So, do you want to rock the boat? Shake up the snow globe? Toss the cookies? Someone else will be in charge if you overthrow the Illuminati. You'll be in charge. That's a lot of responsibility. Do you think humans will do a better job than the lizards?"

"..." Isaac looked to Tupac for help before deciding that he wanted to star in his own allegory, his own fable, his own tall tale, his own hero's journey. Determined and full of resolve, Isaac swelled up his chest before declaring, "Yes, we will. We will do a better job."

“My nigga,” Tupac said while giving Isaac a congratulatory slap on the back. Isaac beamed. Whatever heaven was or wasn’t, it paled in comparison to the transcendence Isaac felt after Tupac categorized him, a white boy, as “my nigga.” That honorific, combined with Anne’s approving smile, let Isaac know he had made the right decision to take on and take down the Illuminati.

Suddenly, there was an unexpected knock at the door.

“Zee! You came!” Tupac blurted out when the door opened. “I knew you would!”

“I’m sorry, mates. I hope you don’t mind my eavesdropping while I was waiting in reception, but I couldn’t help but overhear some of what was being discussed. And, well, is there anything I can do to help?” asked Margot Robbie, all smiles.

## Chapter 32

Margot Robbie was the best and only secret weapon to bring down the Illuminati. Nobody else would do. Isaac couldn't believe his luck. The world's luck. What were the chances Margot would have a palm reading right as Tupac and Isaac returned from Thugz Mansion? And that Margot would also have a penchant for saving the world? It was almost too good to be true, making Isaac wonder if Anne really did work in mysterious ways. Could she have planned this?

But Isaac should have expected this serendipity. After all, he had read *Save the Cat!* This was the climax of his story, and the climax of the story was always going to be preceded by things falling into place, the gathering of the hero's ragtag team to take on the final foe with the power of friendship. Now, that team included Margot Robbie. It was all going according to plan, forcing Isaac to contend with questions regarding fate and free will.

Tupac was the most taken aback by the turn of events and the newest addition. Margot looked so much like his current girlfriend he couldn't believe his eyes. He could only differentiate the two because he wasn't a little afraid to be around Margot Robbie, a quality he loved in Zee.

After introductions and pleasantries were exchanged, it was time to brainstorm. And they immediately settled on a classic gambit, the Trojan Horse strategy. First, they would leverage Margot's acting skills and resemblance to Zee to gain entry into Fox Studios by passing Margot off as the Most Wanted Screenwriter in the World. Then, once inside Fox Studios, they would crash the production bay and sabotage the *Super Jesus* showing before Mr. Lennox released the mind-altering footage to the public.

It would be a small operation, just Tupac, Margot, and Isaac, but it felt fitting. Only a small team like that could best the Goliath that an advanced alien species represented. Or that's how Anne pitched the idea because she remained unwilling to come along, even when asked, repeating to them how humans needed to save themselves because what was the point otherwise?

But wasn't she human? Isaac wondered.

And Anne responded, "Not really."

Anne would help in one capacity, however. Make-up. Because in addition to her witchy powers, she was also a wizard with a mascara wand. After only a few minutes of sitting in front

of Anne's vanity, Margot looked like a carbon copy of the sorry screenwriter. The transformation was as subtle as it was seamless. All it took was a touch of black underneath her eyes, and some contour to hollow out her cheeks. The effect on Tupac was pronounced, whose dick was a thumbs-up seal of approval.

The rest of the preparations were simple enough: lock and load. To Isaac's surprise, Anne had a small armory on hand, holding onto everything Tupac had left in her trust before ascending to Thugz Mansion all those years ago. Once he blew off the cobwebs, Tupac strapped dual Uzis to himself while Isaac opted for a pistol that felt heavy in his hand. Margot declined a weapon of her own. She told them that nothing killed quite like kindness.

Finally ready, Isaac picked up his phone and texted Liz, "Secured the bag. See you at Fox Studios tonight to deliver the goods. Over and out. #imteamlizardnow"

To which Liz texted back, "?"

Isaac responded by taking and sending a picture of Margot Robbie as Zee. To add credibility to the set-up, Tupac had tied his red bandana over Margot's eyes as a blindfold to make her more hostage-like.

"Pico entrance. I'll be waiting. Tell no one," Liz responded and then quickly followed that up with a double text of "Don't fuck this up."

Isaac showed them the message. Tupac smiled, evincing the hype of the moment. It was all systems go.

While on their way to Century City for their climactic battle against the lizard threat, Isaac, Tupac, and Margot Robbie sat in traffic at a total standstill. The road congestion was far worse than anything Isaac had ever experienced, living up to the epic proportions of the moment. Thank Super Jesus. To mourn the loss of their superhero, the city shut down the 405 to a single lane where the accident occurred. The effect was to make the site a memorial, a moving wake, where people could pay their respects from their cars. And people did. They threw roses and respectfully frisbeed *Super Jesus* DVDs out of their driver's side windows as they passed the chalk outline. The shards of the broken DVDs glittered.

Everywhere Isaac looked, whether through the car window or on his phone, there was something else to commemorate Super Jesus's passing. Billboards gave their condolences, restaurant menus featured Taco Tuesday pricing on the daily, and Disciple recruitment numbers were at an all-time high.

When people weren't in their cars, they grieved on street corners, coming together in makeshift choirs to sing *Super Jesus's* title theme in a sort of Gregorian chant, which unnerved Isaac. But what Isaac found most disturbing was how every reference to the passing of Super

Jesus, from his obituary to social media hashtag campaigns, was about the character rather than the actor who played the role, of whom there was no mention.

As ubiquitous as the words of mourning and remembrance were, so too were the advertisements for tonight's *Super Jesus* event. It was one or the other, a total market saturation. Everything from bus stop ads to Twitter bot armies promoted the trailer or the watch parties for the trailer, encouraging people to gather together at bars, movie theatres, or local Disciple chapters. People were listening. Already, long lines formed around these institutions in preparation for the night's release.

Isaac couldn't help but notice that he didn't see a single *Harry Potter* house badge pinned to anyone. He was stunned. Instead, everyone was wearing some form of the middle school "S." Super Jesus had completely captured the public consciousness, eclipsing *Harry Potter*. The masses were now undivided. They were pure of heart. They were ripe for the picking.

"These vibes are fucked," Tupac said once they got to Fox Studios. Margot and Isaac agreed. Together, the three stood in front of the massive front gate rivaling the one guarding the entrance to Thugz Mansion. It felt like they were storming a castle. It was go time.

Lights.

Camera.

Action.

Sandwiched between Isaac and Tupac, Margot-as-Zee pretended to fight for her freedom while they pretended to restrain her. Then, clumsily, they shuffled to the gate's side entrance meant for pedestrians.

"You're late," Liz greeted them, her expression grim. "Quickly! Quickly!" she commanded the group while propping the door open. "Who's this?" Liz asked Tupac with suspicion after the lock clicked closed behind them. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

Hastily, Isaac responded, "This guy gave Zee up, but only after I told him he'd get some sort of finder's fee from Mr. Lennox. I hope that's okay," Isaac explained.

Liz nodded. "Of course. Follow me."

Tupac grunted his acknowledgment, trying his hardest to keep his telltale voice a mystery to Liz. With Margot pinned between them, he and Isaac followed Liz as she wound her way through the studio, in and around various sound stages, until they reached a vacant one. Tupac nudged Isaac discreetly, letting him know that the feeling in his gut was sour. He stopped the parade.

"What's going on?" Liz demanded.

Isaac spoke up for Tupac. “Uh, what are we doing, Liz? Where are we going? We need to take Zee to Mr. Lennox right now. Before tonight’s event. Having her might change things.” He pointed to the lit penthouse suite at the top of the nearby Fox Plaza skyscraper as his desired destination. That was Mr. Lennox’s primary office and was not to be confused with his secondary one at CAA across the street.

Liz coughed out a cold laugh. “What, and let you steal the glory from me? One of these days, Isaac, you’ll learn something about this industry. Lizard people or not, this is a den of vipers.” Liz then raised her arm to send a signal. And before anyone could react, a squad of armed security guards encircled our heroes. Liz grabbed Margot, separating her from Tupac and Isaac, who were powerless to stop her. Even the ever-confident Tupac didn’t dare trust his quick-twitch trigger finger, not now, deciding it was best to keep his powder dry and hidden beneath his baggy denim jacket.

“Liz!” Isaac pleaded, “there’s no need to do this. We’re on the same team. Mr. Lennox will want to see me. I can help. I’ve broken through my writer’s block!”

A consummate Hollywood professional, Liz didn’t respond. There was no need to acknowledge Isaac, not when she had already extracted everything from him. So she spoke to the guards instead, saying, “Please escort these trespassers off the lot and make sure they never re-enter these premises again. Then blacklist them.” Which felt like a euphemism for murder to Isaac.

“What a cold-blooded bitch,” Tupac spat as they were marched out of the Fox Studio gates at gunpoint.

“No,” Isaac sighed, “she’s only human.” He turned around to watch Liz and a guard walk Margot toward the back recesses of the studio lot. Then, Isaac and Margot made eye contact, and his blood froze when he saw the terror on Margot’s face as she was hauled away. What had he done? He killed Margot Robbie. And for what? Their master plan didn’t last two minutes.

Outside the studio, Isaac sat on a curb, dejected, reduced to watching cars trudge to points east and west on Pico Boulevard. Well, that was anti-climatic, Isaac thought. “It was a good try, Tupac,” was all Isaac could mutter.

“*It was a good try, Tupac?*” Tupac mocked Isaac, “Fuck that. We’re not taking our ball and going home. We’ll figure this shit out. Giving up is not the thug life mentality, you know what I’m saying?”

“No!” Isaac protested. “I never know what the fuck you’re saying. It’s over! We’re barred from Fox Studios. They have Margot. The real Zee is living it up in Thugz Mansion, dead to the world. Anne, the only person who can do anything, is paralyzed by step-daddy issues. And the

*Super Jesus* trailer will premiere in a couple of hours, and everyone who watches it will have their mind melted. Do you know what I'm saying?"

Tupac wound up and hit Isaac with a back-handed pimp slap to the face. "Shut your sorry ass up, Isaac. You're not some bitch. You're half-lizard and partially clairvoyant. So start acting like it. As my girl Aliyah would say: Try again."

Isaac buried his head in his hands. "I don't even know how to use my lizard powers," he whimpered.

"All I'm saying is that you can do a fuck-ton more than bitch and moan, you know? Use that third eye of yours to find us a back door into Fox. Dream something up."

Isaac picked his head up, eyes shining. "That's it! Tupac, you're a genius. There is a back door into Fox, and I know where it is." Together, they took off at a run, heading on foot to the Annenberg Space for Photography.

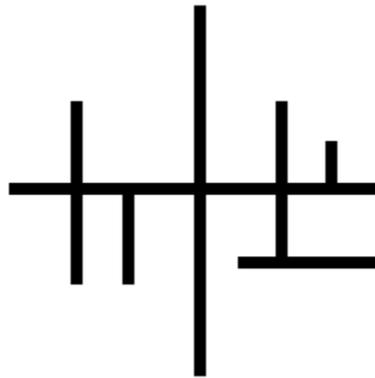
To Tupac and Isaac's confusion, hordes of people thronged the Century City Park complex when they arrived. They had inadvertently stumbled upon LA's biggest watch party for the new *Super Jesus* event, put on, to no surprise, by CAA and the Annenbergs. The centerpiece of the festivities was a huge stage erected upon the park's pyramid eye design. And hung above it was the largest screen Isaac had ever seen that was sure to attract the eyeballs of anyone within a country mile of it. Underneath it and rocking out in the screen's shadow was Beyonce, who played a set to warm up the audience and, Isaac assumed, get everyone's force flowing before the big unveiling. That was the bad news, but at least the crowds created a perfect opportunity for Tupac and Isaac to slip into the Annenberg Space for Photography unnoticed, which was currently open to the public and exhibiting their Beauty CULTure show. While navigating through the museum, Tupac kept his head down to avoid being recognized by the crowds, and Isaac made sure to circle around the room where the great big blue beam resided because it still scared the shit out of him.

They waited by the back service door until an employee rushed out and left the door ajar for a split second, which was long enough to allow Tupac and Isaac to sneak inside and enter the elevator bay. So down the elevator, they went. When they reached the bottom, they traveled through the same halls and corridors Isaac traversed in his dream until they reached the patterned door Isaac encountered with Seth oh so long ago.

"What the fuck is this?" Tupac wondered as he stared at the ornate door that confounded Isaac the last time he visited this place.

"I believe it's a backdoor into the heart of Fox Studios."

“No, the symbols, Isaac.” Tupac pointed to the odd arrangement of lines and dashes that marked the front of the door.



“No idea,” Isaac admitted, “but it must mean something.”

“No shit,” Tupac observed. “There’s no door handle or nothing.” He pushed and prodded, but nothing budged. “What ya thinkin’? This is like some crazy-ass cuneiform.”

“Well, it’s not hieroglyphics or anything like that,” Isaac said, realizing these symbols must be some sort of runes like Anne spoke about. There had to be a magic trick he wasn’t seeing.

“It’s probably some lizard-language bullshit that translates into ‘go fuck yourself.’”

“Maybe,” Isaac agreed absently while trying to figure out this door’s secret. He thought and thought and thought until his pineal gland burned and then burned out. “Argh!!” he cried out with frustration. “I got nothing. I’m at a total loss.” But that’s precisely when Isaac figured out the answer. “Is this loss?” He started jumping up and down with excitement. “It’s loss! It’s loss!”

“What’s loss?”

“It’s a meme,” he pointed to the markings. “But these lines are a minimalist abstraction of the cartoon. I’m sure of it.”

“Well, how does that get us inside?”

“It’s loss! We gotta lose something. What else?” Isaac said plainly. “In the original meme, the cartoon’s author lost a baby by miscarriage....Quick, give me a second. Do you have a baby?”

Tupac patted down his pockets before answering, “No.”

“Fine.” Isaac’s brain worked in overdrive, recognizing this riddle from somewhere else. He just had to remember! A few seconds passed before he got it. “It’s blood magic.”

“Goddamn!”

Isaac bit hard on his finger until he broke skin and could push out a drop or two of lizard blood. Then, using that same finger, he traced the outline of the loss rune. When he was finished, the symbol lit up brilliantly in a flash of white light that temporarily blinded Isaac and Tupac, but when the shock subsided, a strange red glow emanated from the door, highlighting the pattern. The rune was activated. Next, the door began to move, retracting into the ceiling to open the way.

“How’d you do that?” Tupac asked, astonished.

“The clue was from Harry Potter, of course. This is how Dumbledore and Harry get into Voldemort’s cave.”

“Never heard of ‘em,” Tupac said before entering the world beyond the door and treading into a giant underground tunnel. “What the fuck is this?”

“C’mon,” Isaac said with the newfound confidence he earned from cracking the loss puzzle. Of course, Isaac had been here before, but just on the other side of the vast tunnel system whose tendrils he now understood stretched from the downtown library to the west side and probably went city-wide. Only there were no construction workers or TBMs in this section. It was vacant. Even the tiny, wary steps Tupac used to move through the tunnel echoed off the walls with nothing to absorb the sound.

After winding and weaving through the tunnel, Tupac and Isaac found a staircase cut into a wall and followed it up to the surface. They didn’t end up on the Fox lot once they exited the tunnels, as expected, but they did themselves one better. They were now inside the Fox Plaza building itself.

The building was alive. A flurry of people hustled in various directions to address their various responsibilities, too busy with the night’s preparations to worry about the sudden appearance of Isaac and Tupac.

“Wait,” Tupac instructed when Isaac tried to slide into the fray. “We gotta’ grab one of these important-looking niggas and get the lowdown on what’s happening. Do a little recon work before we attack, you know? That’s the move. That’s some sound decision-making.”

Isaac agreed, so they peered out from an alcove that served as the boundary between the tunnel and the building, waiting for the right moment to ambush somebody. Not that girl. Too young. Not that guy. Too ethnic to be important. Nope. Nope. Nope. Suddenly, off a head nod from Tupac, they reached out into the hall, pulled a passing middle-aged white man back into the tunnel's stairway, and closed the door behind him. The man's face turned from panic to pure horror when he saw Tupac brandishing one of his Uzis at him. "Tell me everything you know about the trailer premiere tonight," Tupac ordered.

"The trailer?" the man asked, aghast. "What about it?"

"What's the plan, my guy? What's gonna happen after you play it? What you gonna do with the zombies?" Tupac clicked the gun's safety off. The sound echoed through the chamber.

"Wait," the man stuttered, looking up past the gun. His eyes went wide. "Are... are you Tupac?"

"In the flesh, nigga."

"Holy shit! I knew you weren't dead. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!" The man extended his hand to Tupac, seeking a firm handshake. "The name's Eric," he said, but Tupac knocked Eric's hand away with his gun.

"Tell me about tonight," Tupac commanded. "What's the run of show? Tell me the setlist."

"I'll tell you everything, Tupac. I swear! I'm west side for life," Eric pleaded, his hands held high, each with its ring finger and middle finger interlocked. "Before the premiere, Super Jesus will be resurrected on stage."

"But Super Jesus is dead," Tupac interrupted.

"That's what makes it a resurrection," Isaac offered, trying to help.

"He's not dead," Eric corrected. "Super Jesus doesn't do his own miracles, of course. It was his stuntman who died, regrettably.... And where some of us saw tragedy, marketing saw an opportunity." Eric continued with profound sadness, "We miss Trevor every day. For those of us in production, tonight is in his honor. Trevor would have wanted the show to go on."

"Every news outlet confirmed that Super Jesus himself died," Isaac countered, "not a stuntman."

"The news?" Eric scoffed. "You listen to that? That's just filmed at the next sound stage over from where we shot the movie."

"You bastards," Tupac hissed.

"I'll help you, Tupac! Give me a chance!" Eric begged. "What can I do?" But Isaac stopped listening, too distraught at realizing how powerful a resurrection would be three days after Super Jesus's supposed death, a perfect mirror of the superhero's predecessor. This was

a disaster. The newest miracle would whip everyone into a frenzy to supercharge their force and maximize the hypnotic effect of the movie. This, combined with the force multiplier that was the summer solstice, was how Mr. Lennox planned to overcome Zee's absence during the reshoots. The audience wouldn't stand a chance. Isaac knew they would succumb to the film's effects when they saw the trailer's opening image.

Isaac felt a punch to his gut, realizing this meant his entire adventure had been for naught. He didn't want to believe it, but he had failed. The lizards simply found another option without their golden screenwriter. Why did Isaac assume they couldn't? Chop off a leg, and they would grow it back. It was that easy for them. This must have been why Isaac's mission was to save the cat because finding Zee never mattered and protecting Zee never mattered. In the end, Zee didn't matter. Wait until she found out she was only a red herring.

Keeping his gun trained on Eric, Tupac turned to Isaac so they could formulate their own plan B. If the lizards could adapt, then so must they. Finally, they agreed on a two-pronged attack as a measure of insurance should one of them fail. Prong 1: Isaac sabotages the transmission of the video. Prong 2: Tupac and Eric go to the Century Park watch party and intercept Super Jesus before he can ascend to the stage for his resurrection.

Tupac held Isaac's shoulder to steady him, sensing Isaac's shaken confidence at the prospect of going it alone. "You got this, my man. But before I go, first, let me drop a little knowledge on you. You listening? Trust yourself. That's most important, you understand?"

Isaac nodded.

"Lastly, Zee told me that whenever she wanted to tap into her lizard abilities, all she had to do was think about what made her hungry."

"Hungry?" Isaac asked.

"Hungry," Tupac confirmed. "Usually, she'd just have to think about this dick, you know what I'm saying?" he cackled.

"I know what you be saying!" Eric declared, laughing along until Tupac shot him a dirty look.

"Aight, Isaac. It's time. Gangsta times call for gangsta lives. Let's fucking go. Let's take down those Illuminati chicken shits." Tupac then dapped Isaac up, who returned the gesture with maximum awkwardness. "Peace," Tupac declared before marching Eric back down the tunnels toward the Annenberg Space for Photography.

"Peace," Isaac repeated, his words echoing off the tunnel walls. Now alone, surrounded in darkness, Isaac's constitution wavered again. He had to take some time to steel his nerves and breathe deeply, reminding himself of the stakes of what he was about to undertake.

Although he very much wanted to, he couldn't back out now. He could still make a difference. This was his grand finale. But the entire world and Margot Robbie depended on him, and that responsibility was too great and daunting. He was about to have a nervous breakdown. What he could do, however, was take his old therapist's advice and take life one step at a time, so he did so and climbed the staircase up from the tunnel and back to Fox Plaza to the horrors that awaited him.

Left foot, right foot.

Left foot, right foot.

Left foot, right foot.

Up, up, up.

## Chapter 33

A welcoming party greeted Isaac when he reopened the door to Fox Plaza. “Hello there,” was how Dr. Rousseau announced himself. He wore the same sinister smile as always, but his face was now marred by a fresh set of scars, each about the size of a mountain lion’s claw. “As good of timing as ever, Isaac. I’m so glad you’re here. There’s someone who would very much like to see you. Let’s take a walk. Shall we?” A group of armed security guards around Dr. Rousseau made his question rhetorical.

The penthouse suite of the Fox Plaza building was palatial. It was easy to see why Ronald Reagan rode out his post-presidency years here. With a 360-degree panorama, Isaac imagined no better place in LA to watch a sunset while sundowning. One of the windows even had a perfect line of sight to Century Plaza Park.

The penthouse’s current resident, Mr. Lennox, was enjoying the view. He seemed at ease in his surroundings and was pleased to see his newfound company, escorted in by Dr. Rousseau.

“Isaac, my boy, what a nice surprise!” Mr. Lennox pointed to a seat in front of him where his guest of honor should sit. “How are you? Would you like a beverage? Hot or cold? Is an adrenochrome-infused slurpee more your speed? Ah! But if water is your desire, would you prefer sparkling or still? Don’t worry. Both are fluoride-free.” The man was manic.

“...”

“Still then. Good choice, my boy. You mustn’t be without refreshments for tonight’s entertainment,” Mr. Lennox carried on as Dr. Rousseau slipped Isaac’s gun to him before taking a spot at his boss’s side. “Do you mind fetching him a beverage, Liz?”

Isaac saw Liz appear from his periphery with a water bottle in hand. She offered it to Isaac, who took it mechanically, not knowing what else to do now that he had a front-row seat to the end of humanity.

Mr. Lennox’s glee was palpable. “You weren’t the only guest not to RSVP tonight, Isaac. I believe you two have met before.”

Isaac didn't notice her at first, but there, seated next to him, was Margot Robbie. She was still alive. He nearly jumped out of his seat in shock, but Margot was of a cooler disposition. She didn't acknowledge Isaac, preferring to stare straight ahead at Mr. Lennox.

"Any minute now, Tupac will join us, so you have that to look forward to," Mr. Lennox threatened.

"..."

"Cat got your tongue, Isaac?" Mr. Lennox laughed. "Meow! Relax. Please! The lights haven't even gone down yet for the main event. We still have plenty of time to conversate before the ushers demand we mind our manners."

"Good. Because I have something to say," Isaac said. Then, he paused dramatically before whining, "Can you just not go through with your plan? Do you really have to turn everyone into zombies? What if you didn't? What if you put on a different movie? Like *Flubber*?"

"Zombies? Is that what you think we're doing?" Mr. Lennox arched an eyebrow. "The human imagination is a wonder. You've been watching too much TV, Isaac. Tsk, tsk."

"I watch a lot of TV," Isaac admitted, "but it was on doctor's orders." He looked to Dr. Rousseau.

Mr. Lennox laughed. "You got me there!"

"So, if not zombies, then what?" Isaac asked.

"It's probably best to think of humans as fleshy, fuckable batteries," Mr. Lennox explained before being interrupted by Dr. Rousseau, who leaned forward and whispered something into his boss's ear. "Dr. Rousseau!" Mr. Lennox groaned. "You're such a killjoy. Don't you understand that half the fun of being brilliant is telling people about your brilliance? How's the man supposed to be awed by my many talents unless I explain them?"

Sufficiently admonished, Dr. Rousseau slunk back a bit, allowing Mr. Lennox to resume. "Imagine that. For being a behavioral scientist, Dr. Rousseau doesn't know you can catch more flies with honey than vinegar. Because, Isaac, my other motive for explaining myself to you is that I want you to join us — so where was I?"

"I'm a battery," Isaac reminded him.

"Ah, yes. How much do you know about quantum mechanics and consciousness?"

"Almost nothing except that it's like the force from *Star Wars*."

"Solid flick," Mr. Lennox conceded. "Well, my kind, excuse me — our kind, us Draconi — feed off the force, and humanity, as fate would have it, is one of the largest sources of force in the universe. Which is great. But the real cherry on top is that humans are also easy to domesticate."

“Why?” Isaac asked.

“Because humans like to fight amongst themselves. And they’re so eager to be manipulated!”

“No, why do we have the most force?”

“Oh. I don’t know. Why are bananas so full of potassium? Humans have so much force that we’ve had to restrict their innate abilities, which is what all the fluoride is for, of course.”

“So what’s so special about the *Super Jesus* sequel?”

“I’m glad you asked! It’s the culmination of a plan — my plan — to protect the humans.”

“What?” Isaac exclaimed in surprise. “You want to protect humans?”

“Humans and their self-destructive tendencies have gone unchecked for far too long, and the consequences of that death drive are causing a climate crisis and threatening the place you call home. Earth. They’re creating a self-extinction event, and I must stop it.”

“But I thought you controlled the humans. Isn’t that your fault, then?”

“Right now, we don’t even control most of them. But that will change by the end of tonight.”

“Why do you want to defend Earth?”

“I have to. Could the Draconi move humans off-world and leave Earth to perish? Sure! But I can’t do it, personally. I mean, have you seen the seven moons of Zyklon-B? Of course, you haven’t. Well, I can assure you that a day on Zyklon-B is no day at Zuma Beach!” Mr. Lennox pointed to the view outside the penthouse, where the city’s lights glittered in all their splendor from Manhattan Beach to Malibu. As always, the sight dazzled Isaac. “Although some of my colleagues may disagree with me or are apathetic to the prospect, I’m not ready to leave LA yet. There’s nowhere else like it in the universe,” Mr. Lennox let that sink in before adding, “Although I suppose I would be happy to move to planet Kolob, but who can afford the rent?”

“...”

“No, we have to fix Earth.” Mr. Lennox was resolute. “Even if it means settling back in Pittsburgh. Even if I have to save humans by using a weapon of mass entertainment to reduce them to a semi-catatonic state so that our coral reefs can rebound and flourish.”

“So zombies.”

“No, not zombies. What did I just say? I’m reducing them to a *semi-catatonic state*.”

“And you can feed off that?”

“I’m sorry. I forget how little you know about our kind,” Mr. Lennox said with genuine sympathy. “But you’ll learn soon enough. Strong emotions, like happiness and excitement, or fear and anger, produce more force. That’s true. That’s good eating. The best feedings,

however, occur at the moment of death when a force-frenzied soul is unbounded from its body. Remember? You were privy to the last LA library feeding, yes?” Mr. Lennox paused long enough for Isaac to nod. “That was a tasty one. Well, all that pomp and circumstance, the robes, the alter, the chanting, it’s all for show. None of that has any magical significance, but it has a tremendous effect on humans. Nothing gets their force going quite like being the star of their own black mass blood ritual. It really gets the people going. It’s provocative.”

“I didn’t know that,” Isaac admitted. He looked over to Margot to see if she was equally astounded, but she remained completely motionless, a perfect statue.

“Few do!” Mr. Lennox smiled. “The good thing about entertainment is that it can also get humans to produce force for harvesting. Think of the adrenaline you feel when you watch the beach scene from *Saving Private Ryan*, the tears you cry in *You’ve Got Mail*, or the laughs you have during *Schindler’s List*. Of course, those movies aren’t real, but the feelings they impart upon the audience are, and so is the force they generate.”

“And that really works?”

“You know the classic grade-school experiment for the little humans about creating electricity with only a potato and water for materials?”

“Sure.”

“Well, you can do the same thing with a couch potato!” Mr. Lennox chortled, delivering the punch line with a good-natured wink before turning serious. “Unfortunately, not every Draconis wants to go vegetarian, like me. You see, entertainment yields a lower-energy feeding than a black mass murder or a war feeding, which is why my brethren are hesitant to adopt this course of action even though it’s more sustainable for the planet, but I’m going to show them the way. What they don’t understand is that what we’ll lack in raw power, we’ll make up for in numbers.”

“War feedings? Like between countries?”

“Yes, war,” Mr. Lennox sighed. “Such ugly business. So brutish and so bad for the environment, wouldn’t you agree? It would be good to rid the world of war, and that’s my goal. I will prove to the Ones Who Know that feedings through entertainment are far better in the long run than our traditional methods.”

“If the lizards—”

“Draconi,” Mr. Lennox corrected.

“Do Draconi only control war and entertainment?”

“Hmm, well, we each have a different discipline, so there’s a minister of war, a minister for politics — but I repeat myself.” Mr. Lennox winked at his joke, but it flew over Isaac’s head.

“A minister of entertainment, headed by yours truly, plus drugs, religion, music, you name it! Basically, anything that can induce excitement or death in a human will have a Draconi minister. But entertainment will render all those other disciplines obsolete. Tonight will represent a paradigm shift in our force-collection process. In fact,” Mr. Lennox continued, “you’re actually on loan to us from the military minister. Did you know that?”

“No.”

“Yeah, you got lucky. We saved you. You would have been retired after your little incident with the Afghani spice market, but we needed another lizard-human hybrid after Zee became unreliable. So we wiped your memory of your old identity and then built you back up from scratch, from square one.”

“So I could write scripts for you?”

“That’s right, a task you failed to complete.”

“I’m sorry,” Isaac apologized without knowing why.

“Don’t be, Isaac. I lay the blame at the feet of Dr. Rousseau, who assured me he’d be able to manage you effectively.” Mr. Lennox glanced at the doctor, who cowered further back from his boss. “Good thing for him that our plans, with a few on-the-fly creative solutions by me, were not foiled by you, the cats, or Anne.”

“You know about Anne?”

“Know her? I love her! I’m sure you think of Anne only as some groovy psychic to the stars, yes? Something, something about being benevolent to all of humanity by putting the power of self-determination back into their hands to save themselves, right?”

“Something like that.”

“Hah!” Mr. Lennox yelped. “The nerve on her. Don’t you get it, Isaac? She’s the same as us, feeding off the force.”

“No!” Isaac protested. Again, he looked over to Margot in an attempt to find any anchor point to reality as his world was slipping, spinning away. Again, she offered nothing but stone-cold silence.

“Yes! Tell me, how else do you think Anne lived for thousands of years?”

“A plant-based diet?” Isaac wondered.

“Hardly. Anne survives by luring the most powerful humans in the world to her, the celebrities, with all the world’s attention on them. She then absorbs their force by performing cheap parlor tricks for them. It’s rather brilliant. As the kids say, *game recognizes game*. Did I say that right?” Isaac shrugged when Mr. Lennox paused for validation. “Anyway, I have a saying for women like Anne: talent borrows, and genius steals.”

“What did she steal from you?”

“You got it wrong, Isaac. I’m the genius for stealing from her. Or am I stealing from her brother or her father? I don’t know. Who can really keep that family straight anyway?”

“...”

“*Super Jesus*, my boy! Anne inspired *Super Jesus*. Because what is *Super Jesus*?”

“A movie?”

“It’s not a movie, Isaac. It’s a story! Nothing is more impactful on a human than a story. Not friends. Not family. Not even dogs. Stories are everlasting. They’re how humans process information. They’re how they understand themselves, each other, and their world. Sure, stories like the one about the man who hailed from Nantucket can be frivolous, but the most powerful ones are epic. Those are sacred texts.”

“A sacred text?” Isaac repeated.

“Yes, a sacred text is a story powerful enough to rouse the spirit and inspire worship and admiration among its audience. Those are as rare as they are powerful. *Star Wars* was one. *Harry Potter* another. But I want *Super Jesus* to top the most powerful story known to man. Do you know what story that is, Isaac?”

“The ones we tell ourselves?”

“Heavens, no!”

“*Grey’s Anatomy*?”

“Closer. It’s the *Bible*, obviously. *Super Jesus* will supplant the *Bible*. God has been coasting off that one book for thousands of years, but now it’s our turn. We’re writing the *Bible*’s sequel and setting it in America. With *Super Jesus*, I will remake humans in my design, and the name Xzaylax-Delta will echo through the ages.”

Xzaylax-Delta! Where had Isaac heard that name before? Wasn’t that the name of Anne’s ex? Isaac grew nauseous. Was that all this was? Was this whole affair of saving the cat and saving the world nothing more than an intergalactic domestic squabble, a lovers’ spat? *Damnit, Anne!* Mysterious ways indeed! The only mystery that remained was whether Anne was seeking revenge on Xzaylax-Delta or just trying to get his attention.

Isaac’s head started to hurt. It was the same pain he had experienced the last time Anne had tried to elevate his consciousness. Through squinted eyes, he looked beside him and was surprised to see Margot unaffected. Instead, she remained motionless with her eyes forward toward Mr. Lennox. How could that be? Why wasn’t her baby brain dripping out of her nostrils? Isaac became worried that maybe Margot wasn’t all there, maybe Margot was under the same dark spell Mark was under at the Twin Towers, maybe Margot was already a zombie.

"Will you help me, Isaac?" Mr. Lennox, er, Xzaylax-Delta, asked.

"You want me to write the next *Bible*?" Isaac was incredulous.

"No, Zee did that for us, but she's gone now. You were supposed to either finish it up or find her so she could finish it, but that didn't go so swell, did it? So we had to execute a fake Super Jesus death and resurrect him instead. Thanks for that."

"I'm sorry," Isaac apologized again.

"I don't blame you, my boy! How many times do I have to say it? You were brought up to speed too fast, and the shoulders that bear that blame belong to Dr. Rousseau and to him alone." Mr. Lennox looked to the doctor, raised Isaac's gun, and shot Dr. Rousseau between the eyes.

Dr. Rousseau's body fell into a heap and didn't move.

Casually, Mr. Lennox dropped the smoking gun back on the desk with a clatter and returned his attention to Isaac as if nothing had happened, a reaction matched by Margot and Liz, who were equally unfazed. Isaac, however, screamed. When he finally stopped and calmed down, Mr. Lennox continued his sales pitch, "You're an investment, Isaac! Hybrids don't come cheap, and you're still such a little lizard, practically a hatchling. You still have so much room to grow, and I know you won't disappoint me like he did." Dr. Lennox stood up and walked over to the window that faced Century Park. "You could even make executive producer if you hone your screenwriting." Mr. Lennox waved Isaac over. "Join me, Isaac. Join me."

Before he could get up, Isaac had to take a breath, still winded from the cold-blooded murder he had just witnessed. He was scared. He thought Dr. Rousseau did a pretty bang-up job raising him, all things considered. Isaac knew he wouldn't last long with Mr. Lennox if everything Dr. Rousseau had accomplished warranted a death sentence. He wrote for Scott Caan's *Hawaii Five-0!* Panic overloaded Isaac, but he found strength in Margot Robbie, who hadn't moved. Her stoicism offered Isaac enough comfort to continue, even if she was probably a zombie.

Isaac got up. On his way over, he stepped over Dr. Rousseau's cold blood, which was pooling on a designer rug. Huh, Isaac thought. Lizards bleed a most brilliant shade of blue.

"Aren't you worried about the, uh, author of the *Bible*?" Isaac asked once he sidled up to Mr. Lennox at the window. "The book might be in the popular domain, but I imagine there must be some sort of celestial copyright law."

"Who do you mean? Matthew and Mark and the rest of the gang? Those authors?" Mr. Lennox allowed himself another laugh. "I'm only joking. I know who you mean. The Big Kahuna, Mr. Mom, God, but we're not worried about him, are we? He's been asleep at the wheel since

we invaded this dimension. Though I wonder," Mr. Lennox put a finger under his chin to support his thoughts, "maybe that will change. His force intake will be seriously affected once *Super Jesus* airs and all those prayers go silent. Maybe he'll get hungry. Wouldn't that be something? Then you throw in the cats for good measure..."

"What about the cats?"

Mr. Lennox gritted his teeth. "Did you ever watch *Alien*?"

"Sure."

"Well, the xenomorph was the good guy in that movie if you pay close enough attention."

"Then who's the villain?"

"Jones, the cat. He's the alien. That's the real meaning behind the movie."

"Then how did cats end up in your movie?"

"Because I'm not afraid, Isaac. I know that cat power is a tool. And in my hands? In my movies? Now shush." Mr. Lennox instructed his newest pupil. "And pay close attention because our movie is about to begin."

Isaac looked down on Century Plaza Park to where Beyonce was walking off stage to end the warm-up portion of the evening. It was time for the main event. The lights went dark, and Isaac had to hold his breath to keep from hyperventilating, praying that he would see Tupac when the lights returned, but he did not. Instead, standing on stage, illuminated by a single spotlight, was Super Jesus. Isaac trembled, but he didn't know why. Was it his nerves, or was the crowd's roar loud enough to shake the entire building?

Mr. Lennox smiled. "It's showtime!"

## Chapter 33 — Part 2

Isaac watched Century Park Plaza in disbelief, shocked Super Jesus was rising from the center of the stage instead of Tupac. Had Tupac failed? Even from thirty-three stories up in the air and a block away, Isaac could hear the crowd's cheers once they recognized the night's entertainer as their resurrected superhero savior. The sound was primal and delirious but quieted to reverent silence with a single, orchestral wave of Super Jesus's arm. The audience was in Super Jesus's thrall. This was no stunt double. This was the real deal Super Jesus, as portrayed by Manny Ortega. Isaac could recognize that narcissistic sneer anywhere.

Isaac strained his ears to try and listen to whatever Super Jesus was saying to his followers, but the building's glass was thick enough to muddle his message, especially when every cell phone in the room began to ring in unison.

"Pick up, Isaac. It's for you," Mr. Lennox said with a toothy smile, "you and every other human with a smartphone and 5G service."

Isaac reached for his phone and pulled it out to see a familiar banner on the screen. Again, it was an amber alert message, but it was for Super Jesus this time. When Isaac clicked on the notification, his phone began to play a live stream video of the *Super Jesus* show, the very one occurring below him now, complete with audio. He couldn't navigate away from the video on his phone if he tried. His screen was locked.

"Can I get an a-person?" Super Jesus commanded via the phone speaker, and Isaac didn't need the phone's playback to hear the crowd's response. They were loud enough to be heard from Palos Verdes.

"*¡Dios Mio! ¡Dios Mio! ¡Dios Mio!*" the crowd shouted, deliriously greeting their savior.

"It's so beautiful!" Mr. Lennox puffed out his chest in pride. "Every human in America is tuned into tonight's show, whether in person, on TV, online, or on their cell phone. And, if God forbid, there was someone in this country without a cell phone, then we gave them one."

Together, Mr. Lennox and Isaac watched as a crippled boy on crutches, Tiny Tim-status, ambled through the crowd toward Super Jesus. When the kid arrived on stage, with the assistance of some stagehands, Super Jesus knelt on the ground and kissed the boy's feet before getting up, laying hands on his head, and leading the audience in prayer.

“Yo, yo, yo, heavenly homie, up beyond the sky,  
Super Jesus is on the mix to amplify.

*\*Super Jesus makes record-scratching sounds with his mouth\**

Got a lil' buddy down on Earth, strugglin' with leg pain,  
A young soul hustlin', grindin', and feelin' the strain.

Lord, bless him with legs that ride like a wave,  
Zuma's callin' so make him a surf god, so brave.

Let his limbs be free, free, free, like the ocean breeze,  
So he can shred the waves with composed ease.

In your name, we carve this prayer in your divine design,  
*Vaya con dios*, ride on lil' man with heavenly vibes!”

“A-person!” the crowd roared along with Super Jesus. Then Super Jesus released his hands from the boy, who, in turn, released his crutches, now healed. The audience went wild as the boy did a little jig before taking a running leap off the stage to crowd surf on the tops of their outstretched arms.

With their fervor now at a fever pitch, Super Jesus introduced the new *Super Jesus* teaser without further ado. The stage went dark, and the screen above it lit up with the trailer's first image, a monarch butterfly resting peacefully on the tip of Super Jesus's nose. The camera closed in on the insect as a tranquil summer sun shone through its tissue-paper wings, and each languid beat of them transposed a shifting kaleidoscope of orange onto Super Jesus's face.

The camera pulled back and back, shifting the colors from orange and black to blue and white to produce a new, abstract image until it coalesced and formed the piercing blue eyes of a cat. It was Captain Flapjacks.

Like the audience in the park, Isaac did not turn away from the arresting visual playing on his phone. The only one who could resist its siren call was Margot Robbie, whose eyes remained dead ahead, looking at nothing. Isaac finally understood. Margot was meditating! Ever

since he entered Mr. Lennox's office, she had been blocking out every sensory stimulant from entering her consciousness for this very moment, shielding herself from the spellbinding effects of the movie trailer.

Eventually, Isaac found the strength to match Margot's, combating *Super Jesus's* charms by turning away from the program. Once he did, he saw the crowd's complete and utter state of rapture. Every person shared the same stupefied look as the focus group from the Twin Towers. None of them were unaffected by the hypnotic power of the *Super Jesus* imagery, not even the crippled boy or Super Jesus himself, who was, of course, only human and not the messiah he pretended to be.

It made Isaac sick. Mr. Lennox was wrong. No matter what euphemisms he used, these people were zombies. This was Isaac's worst nightmare and why he bought a gun all those years ago. Now, his fingers twitched for it like a phantom limb. He couldn't survive the apocalypse. He didn't want to.

He looked at the gun on Mr. Lennox's desk, ignored by its new master, lonely. Its trigger looked inviting. Isaac was going to lunge for it before he saw Liz focused on him. Somehow, she was able to resist the effects of the trailer. Then he remembered their dinner at the diner and how Liz revealed that she had never seen *Super Jesus* before. Now he knew why. She was in on this plan from the start. Her virginal eyes were unaffected by the seductive images.

"If you think that's something, get a load of this!" Mr. Lennox put a hand on Isaac's shoulder, steering him toward the bay of windows opposite their position, the ones facing downtown LA. When Isaac pressed his nose against the glass, the city was aglow, but this time it wasn't with the usual twinkling of domestic and commercial lights spread across the basin.

Outshining them all was a big, blinding explosion that rocked the city. Boom! Boom! Boom! Once the concussive blast that shook the building and the dust died down, an eerie, ethereal red glow remained, outshining the hundreds of localized fires that now dotted Isaac's view. It was as if the fires of Hell had come to Earth.

"*Dios Mio,*" Isaac whimpered.

The red light crisscrossed the city from Dodgers Stadium to Long Beach to where Isaac stood now in Century City. It formed a pattern, one Isaac recognized from earlier tonight. It was the loss symbol, and Isaac didn't need to be Robert Langdon to realize that these lines followed the new "Metro" tunnels under the city. Isaac broke out in a cold sweat as he watched Los Angeles drained of its force. This entire time, the conspiracy was right under his nose. He was so enchanted by the idea of good public transit and so spiteful toward traffic that he didn't see it. He didn't want to see it.

“Glorious!” The only thing glowing brighter than the rune in all of LA was Mr. Lennox’s smile. “Do you feel that?” Mr. Lennox asked Isaac who shook his head. “That’s too bad. You can blame Dr. Rousseau’s poor tutelage for that, but if you were attuned to the force, you’d feel how great a rush this is! It’s delicious!” Lennox’s tongue tasted the air. But Mr. Lennox’s victory tour was short-lived. His smile faltered as the rune’s red light dimmed briefly as if its power source was being messed with, which it was.

Mr. Lennox ran back to the opposite set of windows to see what was happening down at Century Park. Isaac was hot on his heels.

“Tupac!” Isaac cried out. Below him, Tupac, using his red bandana as a blindfold to shield himself from *Super Jesus*’s allure, charged through the zombified crowd toward the stage, pinpointing its location by following the sound of its speakers. Although he was still strapped with Uzis, Tupac’s weapon of choice was a giant sledgehammer he held with two hands, using it as a walking stick/battering ram. To Isaac’s surprise, he could see some subtle cracks in the audience’s stupor as Tupac brushed by them.

“Not Tupac!” Mr. Lennox cried out, dismayed. “Get this under control, Liz!”

When Tupac ascended the stage, he spun around and around to build as much momentum as possible before tossing the sledgehammer high into the air. The sledgehammer, tumbling end-over-end, smashed into the center of the jumbotron, cracking and splintering it until the *Super Jesus* visual was lost and the screen snowed with static.

Again, Isaac turned over his shoulder to look out the back windows, now seeing that the red rune was flickering. A loud war-whoop erupted from Isaac’s lungs in celebration, but he choked it back down when he re-examined the audience. They were still frozen. No one was saved. Was Tupac too late? Was it all for nothing? Lennox seemed to think so. A cautious smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

Luckily, Tupac didn’t panic. No longer fearing the hypnotic trailer, he ripped the bandana from his eyes and grabbed the microphone from the stupified Super Jesus. “L.A.!” Tupac cried with full force, “I’m back, baby!” Isaac listened to him from his phone’s speaker. Despite the interruption, the live stream continued to broadcast. “Ya’ll have to forgive me for leaving ya’ll for so long. I’m sorry. I’ve missed you. It was only supposed to be seven days, but one love.” But no one stirred at his speech. In frustration, Tupac flung his bandana into the crowd, hitting a guy in the fifth row. The physical touch of the fabric still doused with Tupac’s force roused the man, shocking him back into reality. But he promptly fainted again at the sight of seeing Tupac alive.

“Fuck!” Tupac bemoaned. He looked out to the audience with somber eyes. “I know y’all deep in that cave. But I know y’all can hear me, so listen up. Let my voice echo into that cave.

Hear me when I say that death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we're still alive. Never surrender!" He paused, hoping to let his message sink into his audience's subconscious, but no one was moved. His words had fallen flat.

Then, screwing up all his rage, Tupac yelled, "We 'aint going out like this! We're not a bunch of bitches. Get mad y'all. West side! Let's ride! All eyez on me! What do you say, L-AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!?" He held the word and didn't let go. The sound built and built and built until the speakers on stage and on Isaac's phone threatened to blow. The park vibrated with energy, but the people remained catatonic.

Tupac didn't know what was wrong. Had he been gone for too long? Had he lost his influence? His force? Then he realized he had to reach them on a spiritual level, not an intellectual one, so he cut off his scream and began to rap *California Love*. He was going acapella. "*California... knows how to party.*"

Finally, a ripple of energy surged through the crowd like a wave. The audience not only started to move but also to groove. And when Tupac rounded out the first chorus with "*Shake, shake it, baby/ Shake, shake it/ Shake, shake it, mama,*" people took it as an order to shake any of their still-dazed neighbors awake, so by the time Tupac rapped "*California dreamin'*" and "*hoochies screamin'*," a large swath of the crowd had awoken from their suspended state and began to party with him.

It could only be Him. Tupac's performance gave off a wholly different energy than the *Super Jesus* trailer, and even from Isaac's considerable distance away from the action, he could sense that the momentum of the force was shifting away from Mr. Lennox. But there were still some unreachable members of the audience. Anyone older than a Boomer or younger than a Millennial remained a living statue, the people who had escaped Tupac's influence during his 90s heyday.

"Oh no!" Isaac cried. He watched as the Fox security team finally responded to their party crasher. Equipped with full tactical gear and armed to the teeth, they stormed out of the surrounding buildings in squads of three, all heading straight for the stage and Tupac. "Call them off!" Isaac pleaded to Mr. Lennox.

A consummate showman, Tupac didn't stop rapping after taking cover from the advancing soldiers, who fired upon him as soon as Tupac was in their sights. A blizzard of bullets hit the stage or ricocheted off its metal supports and into the crowd. The park descended into complete chaos at the crack of gunfire. Those awake in the audience ran for their lives in total hysteria, uncaring if they trampled any of those still petrified.

“Cowards! Bitches!” Tupac taunted the gunmen. Unfortunately for Tupac, the security team hid behind the remaining paralyzed people in the park as they neared the stage, preventing him from returning fire. But Tupac couldn’t fire his gun anyway.

Crack! Super Jesus had woken from his slumber and karate-chopped Tupac from behind. Tupac stumbled but caught himself to turn to face his newest opponent.

“Let’s go, super cunt!” Tupac cried. “Come at me.”

“You’re nothing. Not anymore. A nobody,” Super Jesus spat. Super Jesus fought fiercely, fueled by anger. No one would upstage him on his big night, not even Tupac, so he battled the rapper with everything he had. He could feel his audience’s admiration – their force – turning from him toward Tupac. This aggression couldn’t stand.

Blow for blow, the fight was brutal. Tupac, licking blood from a cut on his lip, battled his opponent to a draw by pitting his street squabbles against Ortega’s Muay Thai technique, a skill the actor picked up while training for his *Super Jesus* fight scenes. Ortega didn’t always use a stuntman for his dirty work, and it showed. His textbook flying knee strike was how he planned on earning back-to-back Oscars.

*Oof!* Ortega’s knee connected with Tupac’s stomach to knock the wind out of the rapper and silence him for a moment, long enough that his rap antidote wavered on his audience members, with some returning to a zombified state until Tupac resumed spitting more rhymes.

"Cut the feed!" Mr. Lennox ordered Liz. His rune's glow was now weak and labored.

Liz snapped to attention, but only after a moment’s delay. Like everyone else, she had been caught marveling at Tupac’s debut from the dead. Liz ran for Mr. Lennox's desk phone to call production as her iPhone was locked into the Super Jesus Amber Alert like every other smartphone in America, but her hesitation proved costly as Margot Robbie got to Lennox’s desk first. Now no longer in danger of going under a *Super Jesus* trance, Margot had made her move.

“Move, bitch!” Liz demanded, but Margot held her ground. The two of them fought with hands, feet, and hair, but Margot made quick work of Liz by deftly throwing her down and chiding her with a slur new to Isaac. “Lizard lover,” Margot spat.

Alas, Margot’s victory was not meant to be as Mr. Lennox was quick to Liz’s defense, rushing over to his producer and picking her up with an ease that belied the man’s elderly appearance. After dusting Liz off, he turned and pushed Margot up against a wall with enough force to crack the paint. “Ugh,” Margot whimpered, straining for breath. When he let go, she crumpled to the floor, unconscious. Mr. Lennox reached for his desk phone next, ready to give the order to cut the transmission of Tupac.

“Stop it. Don’t pick it up,” Isaac warned.

“Isaac, my boy, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I wouldn’t want you to do anything you couldn’t take back.”

Mr. Lennox was dialing the broadcast room when Isaac struck him with all the force he had, charging into Mr. Lennox head first, but he swatted Isaac away with minimal effort. A brief look of pity crossed Mr. Lennox’s face, no different than if you accidentally stepped on your favorite house spider. Oh well.

Bright lights burst into Isaac’s vision from the blow. The amount of power behind Mr. Lennox’s hand was tremendous. Only his ears worked at the moment and they caught nothing but Liz’s cold laugh.

Next came the old man’s feet. A kick lifted Isaac off the ground and into the air until a wall broke his flight path. Isaac couldn’t get up after he landed. He didn’t have the chance. Mr. Lennox knocked Isaac around the room while snarling into his phone, “Get me production!”

Reeling from the hits, Isaac tried to get up whenever an opportunity presented itself but could not get his battered body to do so. He had to do something, though. He had to buy Tupac more time. Every additional second Tupac rapped could mean the difference between another person waking up from their entertainment-induced slumber.

Desperate, Isaac groped blindly for anything solid to help him stave off Mr. Lennox until his hand bumped against something hard. It was his gun. It must have fallen off Mr. Lennox’s desk while Isaac was getting his ass kicked up against it. Isaac held onto the gun for dear life. This was his chance. He had to fire it before Mr. Lennox disarmed him. But instead of aiming it at Mr. Lennox, as the executive producer expected, Isaac took another look at the remaining zombies below him before turning the gun on himself.

## Chapter 33 — Part 3

Isaac felt the big “O” of his gun’s mouth against his temple. This was it. Would he follow through on his promise to commit suicide in the event of a zombie apocalypse? Or would he pussy out? If the universe were ever to give him a sign, then it couldn’t be any clearer. He couldn’t ignore it in good faith.

“Drop it!” Mr. Lennox commanded.

Isaac looked up at the producer but didn’t obey.

“Jesus, Isaac. Put the gun down. You’re acting foolish. You think they just grow lizard-human hybrids on trees? You’re not as common and everyday as that, Isaac. You’re not the cure for cancer. Have some sense. Look at yourself. So, I got a little rough? Big deal. Grow up.”

“...” Isaac would do himself to spite this guy now. Fuck him. Mr. Lennox just gave Isaac the perfect permission structure to kill himself. Instead of a coward’s exit, Isaac’s suicide was now a noble self-sacrifice – one less human-lizard hybrid to endanger the world. In terms of global impact, Isaac felt confident in saying that one of him was worth at least 50 nukes. People would cheer his name in the name of peace. In twenty years, he’d be the answer to a question on a social studies exam.

The sounds of battle faded away. Every crack of gunfire and each note from Tupac drowned out by the blood pumping in Isaac’s ears. All he could hear was *bah-bump, bah-bump, bah-bump-bump-bump, bah-bump*. The sound echoed around Isaac’s brain until it triggered a memory. He was reminded of when the fake Super Jesus beatboxed to the rhythm of Isaac’s heartbeat to inspire him, to let Isaac know he was a good dude and his life was worth living.

Isaac gritted his teeth.

The fake Super Jesus was right.

The Isaac who promised to kill himself in the event of a zombie apocalypse was different than the one who held the gun now. That Isaac was weak. This Isaac sometimes turned into a lizard and had thermal vision. This Isaac was friends with Tupac. This Isaac could write a screenplay.

Isaac tried to train the gun on Mr. Lennox, but the old man stomped Isaac's hand before he could draw a bead on his target. His fingers snapped, and the weapon squirted away harmlessly.

Isaac screamed out in pain but had the strength of mind to reach blindly for another lifeline. When his hand brushed one, he yanked it.

Mr. Lennox cursed. By happy accident, Isaac had grabbed the desk phone's landline and pulled it from the wall, breaking its connection and abruptly ending Mr. Lennox's call with the broadcast room before he could issue his directive to cut Tupac from the live stream.

As a reward for his courage, Isaac received another swift kick to the ass. "You are persistent!" Mr. Lennox observed. But whatever the first round of blows broke in Isaac, the second repaired, knocking him back into realignment by the power of an equal and opposite reaction.

Isaac got to his feet. Then, while Mr. Lennox fumbled to plug the telephone line back into the wall, Isaac attacked him from behind, leaping onto the man as if he were receiving a piggyback ride. Isaac refused to let go no matter how hard Mr. Lennox shook him. Isaac fell again when Mr. Lennox banged his attacker against the wall to release his hold. "C'mon. I know you can do better than that," Mr. Lennox taunted him with a smile. "Show me! Whip it out!"

Now, this was a reference Isaac understood. Mr. Lennox wanted to see Isaac transform, so Isaac closed his eyes and tried to envision changing into a lizard, remembering how he looked and how it felt to have all that power. But when he opened his eyes, Isaac wasn't seeing the world through the prism of thermal imaging. He was still human.

Then, Isaac remembered Tupac's advice for how Zee activated her power. He had to get hungry, so Isaac did his best to imagine all the mouth-watering food he could. A juicy steak, a smothered chile verde burrito, and a plate of Jon and Vinny's spicy fusilli, but none of that worked, even though he felt his mouth water and his stomach gurgle with anticipation. Clearly, he was hungry enough!

Isaac didn't understand what he was doing wrong. But what else did Tupac say? He said that Zee had always been hungry for his dick, so maybe the hunger was metaphorical. That must be it! When Isaac transformed in the tunnels, he was hungry to stay alive, and when he transformed at the Twin Towers, he was hungry to stay in control of himself rather than sublimate himself into Seth's subconscious. But when Isaac tried to channel his hunger to survive his fight against Mr. Lennox, he came up empty again.

Isaac thought of his best friend, Tupac, and the people he was singing to in the audience. Isaac thought of Margot, who remained passed out on the ground, and how she

needed his help. That was the chicken soup that would satiate Isaac's soul. Isaac was hungry. He was hungry to protect his friends and his fellow humans. He was hungry to save them from the life he had lived, force-fed content in service to the lizards.

That's when Isaac felt a rush of energy course through his system. His veins popped. He felt the teeth in his mouth lengthen and sharpen. The red/blue veil of thermal vision fell over his eyes. In an instant, the transformation happened. Isaac flexed his lizard muscles to test their power. They felt good.

"Excellent!" Mr. Lennox said, savoring the word.

Wasting no time, Isaac charged Mr. Lennox and hit him with as much force as possible. This time, Isaac left a mark. Mr. Lennox wheeled back after losing his balance. But now it was his turn to be hungry.

Smiling, Mr. Lennox tasted some of the blue blood running from a cut on his cheek while he transitioned into his lizard form. "I see why Dr. Rousseau gambled on you, Isaac! He was right to call you a specimen. You have spirit! But wait until you see me."

When Mr. Lennox finished changing into Xzaylax-Delta, he was monstrous, bigger than any lizardman Isaac had encountered before, and more regal, too. Unlike the others, Xzaylax-Delta had blood-colored horned points above his eyes and a ridge of spikes to match that ran from the crown of his head to the tip of his tail, which thrashed about the room aimlessly. His tail was the size of a python and had just as much menace. The finishing touch on Xzaylax-Delta was a ribbed frill around his neck that reminded Isaac of old European royal fashion.

"Fuck me," Isaac whimpered. This wasn't good. Isaac wasn't sure if he was becoming attuned to the force or not, but he felt a powerful psychic pressure emanating from Xzaylax-Delta. It shook Isaac's knees.

Isaac's only chance to survive — to win — was if all that extra bulk weighed Xzaylax-Delta down, so instead of attacking him head-on, Isaac would go for the desk phone that rested equidistant between the two of them. Isaac didn't have to beat Xzaylax-Delta. He just had to keep Tupac's show going.

Isaac dove for the phone, and his aim was true. He grabbed the receiver before Xzaylax-Delta could intercept him, but Xzaylax-Delta didn't give up. He grabbed the phone's cord, making the wire taut between them. Quickly, things devolved into an old-fashioned tug-o-war between the two lizardmen, with the future of humanity on the line. Back and forth. Heave and ho! But it wasn't long before the humble cord snapped in half with one final tug from Xzaylax-Delta, who didn't know his own strength.

Xzaylax-Delta roared in frustration. He grabbed Isaac and pushed him back until Isaac slammed against the penthouse's panoramic window. Suddenly, Isaac had a great view of Century Park again. To his relief, down below, Tupac had dispatched Super Jesus. Manny Ortega's mixed martial arts skills must have been a bit of a mixed bag because his broken body lay at Tupac's feet. The other development Isaac missed was that Tupac had received reinforcements.

An entire company of cats had entered the fray. There were some mountain lions Isaac didn't recognize and some domestic-sized cats he did, remembering them from Anne's office. Those cats and the remaining Birmans battled furiously, with teeth, claws, and laser beams they shot out of their eyes. It was working. The cats and Tupac were winning, beating the Century Park Plaza security teams, a squad of newly arrived monkeys, and a host of lizardmen back toward the buildings and away from the stage.

Explosions and gunfire continued to rock the park, sending shockwaves all the way up to the top of the Fox Plaza building. The building waved back and forth in the chaos, putting its earthquake rollers to the test. Yet, despite the frenzy and destruction, the stage's speakers remained functional as Tupac provided the soundtrack to the battle. *Hit 'Em Up* rang out from sea to shining sea.

*"First off, fuck your bitch, and the clique you claim  
Westside, when we ride, come equipped with game!"*

Inspired by their effort, Isaac thrust his legs against the window to drive Xzaylax-Delta backward and free himself. Unfortunately, it was Isaac who misjudged his strength this time. The window's glass shattered under his feet, and his momentum pulled him forward until he was on the precipice of falling out of the building.

Isaac tried to catch his balance but lost it again when Xzaylax-Delta's tail whipped him, launching Isaac into the night. Isaac's stomach dropped when he felt nothing but gravity under him. He threw his hands up and scrambled to catch hold of Xzaylax-Delta's tail before it could retreat inside the building.

"Argh!" Xzaylax-Delta grunted when Isaac grabbed him. Isaac's nails, now talons, dug in and drew blue blood. Isaac started to climb up Xzaylax-Delta's tail to get back inside, but he wasn't making any headway because Isaac's weight started to pull Xzaylax-Delta out of the building with him, leaving Xzaylax-Delta no choice but to drag Isaac up and into the penthouse suite.

Once Isaac could feel the floor, Xzaylax-Delta was on top of him before he could react. It was over. Isaac was pinned. There was nothing he could do to gain the upper hand unless he had some latent power like acid breath that he could discover.

"Don't even think about using your acid breath," Xzaylax-Delta hissed. "My scales won't even lose their luster. You're done, Isaac. Do you understand? For you and your people, it's over, and you're going to help me. Maybe not in this lifetime but in your next." Xzaylax-Delta lined up a talon to the center of Isaac's forehead, directly over where his pineal gland hid. "It's time to hit your factory reset button. You won't fail me again because I will see to it that I condition you myself. So say goodbye to Seth. Say goodbye to Isaac. Any preference on what your next name should be? Because I'm open to suggestions. 'Dirk Diggler' could be fun. You'll see. This will be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

No, Isaac thought. He couldn't lose his identity. Not now. Not after everything he had gone through. Isaac was proud of the half-person/half-lizardman he had become since the day he dreamt those script pages. He wasn't going to start over again. "You can kill me, Mr. Lennox. But leave me my name!" Isaac screamed.

Bang! Xzaylax-Delta reeled back. Isaac looked up. There was now a hole where Xzaylax-Delta's left eye once was. Bang! Now, the right eye was gone, too. Streaks of blue blood snaked their way down Xzaylax-Delta's face like tears as the beast toppled off of Isaac, dead.

Wobbly, Margot Robbie stood behind Xzaylax-Delta's desk. She held the same gun that took Dr. Rousseau's life. She ran over to Isaac and threw her arms around him. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Isaac said without meaning it. "Quick! We've got to get down there to help Tupac!" Isaac didn't know how long he'd have until he turned back into a normal human.

"It's okay, relax," Margot urged him. "I called in back up," she said, pointing down to Century Park, where the cats were now on mop-up duty. The fighting was over, and the situation was now under control. Although a small percentage of the audience members remained frozen, the bodies of the Century Plaza security team littered the park.

"That was you?" Isaac asked with wonder.

Margot nodded with a sly smile.

"Good going." Isaac was impressed with her skills, but the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. Of course, Margot was involved. She was no ordinary movie star. Isaac should have known since her mind never melted throughout this whole adventure. She didn't have a baby brain. After all, she was Anne's client, leaving Isaac to wonder about how many other humans knew about the world as it was.

“Liz!” Isaac screamed, remembering the other outstanding member of this party. He looked to where he last saw her, but she was gone.

“She made a run for it,” Margot said with disgust. “Abandoned her fellow species and then abandoned her master. She’s neither lizard nor human. She’s a cockroach.”

Isaac nodded in agreement. Of course, Liz had slunk away – a coward. The consummate industry insider, Liz had executed a perfect “Hollywood no” by exiting stage left from this whole ordeal without saying a word. She didn’t make EP this time, but she’d live to fight another day and contend against this slush pile called life.

After a moment, Isaac asked Margot, “So, do cats really shoot lasers out of their eyes? Or was I hallucinating?”

“Some do,” Margot said.

“…”

“…”

“Sometimes I think I’m dreaming,” Isaac admitted, surveying his surroundings again, noticing that the loss rune was now completely dead as if it was never there.

“There’s only one way to be sure you’re not dreaming,” Margot said. “Have you pinched anyone?”

“You mean, have I pinched myself?”

“No, that’s an old wives tale. It’s impossible to pinch yourself in a dream. So you must pinch someone else to see if they wake up – Ow!” Margot exclaimed, laughing after Isaac pinched her.

“Well, you’re still here,” Isaac observed. “Then this is reality, right?”

“Let’s take it from the top to be sure.” Margot smiled. “Hi. My name is Margot Robbie. Nice to meet you. Today is the first day of summer.”

“I’m Isaac Abrahamson.”

“Hello, Isaac Abrahamson. Good job today.”

“You met me at a very strange time in my life,” Isaac confessed, still in his lizard form.

“I understand,” Margot assured him.

Together, they sat at the broken window, overlooking the city they saved. It was a comfortable silence until a thunderous rumbling burst their bubble.

In unison, the Twin Towers of Century City crumbled to the ground, too weak from collateral damage to stand for a moment longer. The two buildings slid and fell in perfect synchronization. From Isaac’s safe vantage point, the sight was satisfying and looked almost peaceful.

When the dust settled, Isaac saw emergency vehicles and their lights scramble across the city in every direction, not knowing where to begin, at Century Park or any other location where the rune had traced. Isaac and Margot watched the activity for a long, long time until Isaac reverted to his human form, and Tupac found them to take part in their reverie. They sat together, shrouded in the world's most comfortable silence, their bellies warm with a job well done.

Isaac felt at ease. Finally, this was the end of his story. He was thankful for this moment to rest and reflect on what had happened to him on his hero's journey. He imagined he should probably seek a therapist to help process everything, but that was a problem for tomorrow. Today, he was alive.

Eventually, the darkness of night ebbed away, and Isaac could see the first rays of dawn reach out and paint the eastern skies above the Hollywood Hills. Thick streaks of red, purple, and orange oozed and smeared themselves across the sky to create a rainbow of color that reminded Isaac of freshly milked unicorn jizz. The good kind, too. Unpasteurized. Organic. Active cultures. The kind of unicorn cum they sell at farmers' markets. It was beautiful.

*"Dios Mio..."* everyone whispered together.

Isaac didn't have to be an astrologist to know that this particular rising sun heralded good tidings. It was obvious. Already, its warmth singed the outer edges of the June Gloom, forcing it to retreat. It wouldn't be long now before it would be gone for good.

## Epilogue:

“Quick, Isaac. I have something to show you.” Without warning and with an unmistakable sense of urgency, Margot grabbed Isaac’s hand and led him away from the Fox Plaza penthouse.

“Ayy. Tupac gets no love?” Tupac inquired. “Secrets, secrets are no fun, secrets secrets hurt someone, know what I’m saying?”

“Sorry, Tupac, but this is for Isaac’s eyes only,” Margot said coyly, amiably putting Tupac in his place in a way only a Zee lookalike could.

Isaac grew excited. Finally, Margot was leading him to somewhere dark and quiet and away from the cock-blocking Tupac. She would have her way with him. Isaac couldn’t believe his luck. To have found his one true love interest — the beautiful Margot Robbie — was the perfect happy ending to his story. He couldn’t have written a better one himself.

But Isaac didn’t know he was going to truly get lucky until after they traversed the husks of the fallen Twin Towers. Margot had guided Isaac over mountains of shattered aluminum siding, around wire fires, and through a maze of cracked concrete to the front doors of the Annenberg Space of Photography. Didn’t Super Jesus say this was the best place to fuck in all of LA? Isaac wondered if Dan was still alive to watch. Isaac wondered if the bald and bloody head crowning from a gap in the nearby rubble belonged to Dan.

“Are you all right?” Margot wondered, noticing Isaac starting to shake.

“I’ll be fine,” Isaac said. He understood her concern. From atop his perch at the Fox Plaza building, the fighting had been more intense than Isaac had first understood. It was a different scene up close. There were a lot of bodies to consider: buried bodies, bloodied bodies, bodies warped and fused to the wreckage around him — cats, humans, monkeys, and lizards alike. Pure carnage. But Isaac wouldn’t allow their rigor mortis to interfere with his own stiffy.

“I have something to show you, too.” Isaac smiled.

“Come on then,” Margot said, waving Isaac inside the ruinous remains of the museum and leading him into the center theatre room of the Annenberg. Despite everything, the swirling blue light was still there, above him, still swirling, against all odds. If anything, the swirl swirled more ferociously than ever. The sight made Isaac believe in the eternal.

Isaac went in for a kiss.

“Meow.”

Isaac stopped short of Margot’s lips, realizing they weren’t alone. All the blood drained from his heads. Ominously, a horde of cats surrounded Isaac and Margot. Some of them groomed, some of them licked their wounds, but they all stopped to stare at Isaac.

“What’s going on?” Isaac asked Margot, frightened.

After nodding to the cat, Margot turned to Isaac, stating with the utmost seriousness, “Isaac, I’ve brought you here because I am an emissary of the cats.”

“...” Isaac reeled as the pieces fit into place.

Margot chuckled at Isaac’s vacant stare. “I know. It’s a lot. But I’m a liaison between our two kinds. I’m sorry that I couldn’t tell you earlier. You’ll have to understand that we couldn’t be sure where your loyalties belonged since, you know, you were both a split personality and a split species. No offense.”

“That’s fair.”

“Good. Then I hope you also understand that you’re too dangerous to leave unaccounted for. Xzaylax-Delta may be dead, but there’s plenty more where that came from. Even if you promised us you would never join the lizards, you might not have a choice. What would happen if they caught you and reset your memory as they did after Afghanistan?”

Isaac’s throat tightened, his imagination extrapolating the implications of where this conversation was heading. How did that pirate saying go? Dead men tell no tales? “I swear I won’t do anything or say anything. I’ll go so deep into hiding that I won’t even be able to find myself. You have to believe me, Margot!”

“I’m sorry, Isaac. I really am, but this is the way it has to be. It’s a war out there, and we must all play our part.”

“And what’s your part?” Isaac scoffed. “You were just giving Liz shit for joining the lizards instead of supporting her own race. So, how is this any different? You support the cats’ right to rule as Gods?”

“Because the cats aren’t like the lizards. Apples and oranges.”

“Here’s a radical idea: what about humans ruling the humans?” Isaac asked while mounting his high horse.

“Humans do in places here and there in society, and the results are decidedly mixed. The lizards don’t run everything, after all. Neither do the cats. Truth is, as much as I’m ashamed to say it, I don’t trust humans. Humans need to be protected from themselves. And I trust the cats more than anyone else to do it. I guess I’ve always thought the cats were the best of a bad situation. Like capitalism. Humans, on average, tend to be greedy and individualistic, acting in

the best interest of themselves and their families rather than prioritizing the species as a whole. Cats, on the other hand, want humans as a population to thrive.”

“Why?”

“More humans mean more laps to lay on, more kibble to nibble. Don’t you understand? They also feed on the force. Just like the lizards.”

“And that’s why there’s a war?” Isaac asked. “They’re fighting for our force?”

“It’s not war. It’s economics — an unfortunate yet natural consequence of the scarcity of human resources. There are only so many of us to go around. Cats and lizards are just opposite sides of the same coin.”

Isaac pondered this for a moment. “So, do cats make movies, too?”

“Well,” Margot laughed, “that’s my role. Please excuse the pun. We’re fighting fire with fire. We have to play by the same rules as the lizards do. You see, the general population’s largely in a state of baby brains, as you call it, so we use movies to try and help mature them. It wasn’t always this way. Humans once had an elevated consciousness. We used to know the truth about cats and cat power during ancient Egypt, but that knowledge was forgotten over time, culminating in the nadir of the Dark Ages, which marked the apex of lizard rule.”

“Tonight might have changed that,” Isaac said, gesturing to the carnage around them. “People will have to wake up.”

“We’ll see,” Margot said. “Xzaylax-Delta did open Pandora’s box by being so explicit in his methods. And to use cats in a lizard production was a real bright line he crossed. The lizards had never done that before, so we don’t really know what will happen now. There’s a chance the world’s fate changed tonight, and there’s a mass awakening tomorrow. Still, there’s an equally good chance the masses will rationalize tonight as nothing more than an earthquake and a subsequent gas leak that led to mass hallucinations. Remember Northridge in ‘94?”

“What’s that?”

“Exactly.”

“What movies did the cats make?” Isaac needed to know. “Any TV?”

“Oh, yes, the cats dabble in teleological television, too. *X-files*. All sorts of cat-made media give little doses of the truth here and there for some enlightenment. I mean, most of the movies are before my time. I’m part of a proud acting tradition, you see. The *Matrix* is a classic. *Star Wars*, too, but only the first trilogy. Then, the lizards turned Lucas to their side with the next six. Then there was that SNL skit called *Laser Cats*. *Under the Silver Lake* was a good one, but a lizard snuck in to do the distribution deal, so they suffocated that baby in the crib before anyone could see it. Something similar happened to *Eyes Wide Shut*. You can look that up. *Men*

*in Black* is the most obvious example of a cat-produced movie. They were really pushing the boundaries of a mass mind meld with that one. That's the movie that turned me on."

"Young Will Smith, say no more."

"No, I meant it turned me onto the cat movement," she laughed. "The cat in *Men in Black* was named Orion, after all. *Zoolander!* That's another one. Oh, and how could I forget *Josie and the Pussycats*? It's right there in the name! But subtlety was never that movie's strong suit. As you can tell, we made a strong push before Y2K."

"And what part do you play?"

"I play Harley Quinn, of course."

"Oh," Isaac grunted, having never even seen those movies. "Of course."

"It's a thankless part, I admit, but I try to remember that it's not about my ego."

"What do you mean?"

"The Harley Quinn movies are bad movies, Isaac."

"No, I'm sure they're great. Don't say that," Isaac tried as a hollow consolation. "I bet they're just misunderstood."

Margot rolled her eyes at Isaac. "No, Isaac, they're purposely bad," she explained. "The whole *Marvel/Super Jesus* superhero plan put in place by Xzaylax-Delta caused a lot of trouble for the cats." She gestured to the battle scene around them as proof. "We've been trying everything to break the lizard's recent stranglehold on pop culture, but nothing seemed to work. So one of our ideas was to produce our own terrible superhero movies in the hopes that it could sully their whole enterprise by association. That's why the cats bought the rights to DC properties, and the rest is history. Ben Affleck and Zach Snyder are truly doing yeoman's work out there to sabotage the genre. I really admire their efforts."

Isaac didn't know what else to say besides, "Thank you for your service."

"Thank you, but I don't do it for the platitudes," Margot said humbly. "I dutifully play my part, like I said. It's not much, not like being in the Internet division. That's the real dream career. But I'm glad I had the opportunity to lend a hand here today."

"The Internet division?"

"Yes. Although I'm loath to admit it, the cats have mostly thrown in the towel with movies. We're too far behind the eightball to catch up to the lizards on that front, so the cats invented the Internet."

"The Internet?"

"To compete with movies and television for human attention, of course. Once the cats' movie campaign at the end of the 90s failed to break through, they decided to fully invest in the

Internet. It took some time, but now humans expend much more force on the Internet than on TV or movies.”

“That makes sense.”

“But recently, the lizards gained a significant foothold on the Internet with their counter-programming with sites like 4Chan, Facebook, and Meatspin.com. They infiltrated Reddit, too. They have us on our back foot, but we’re lucky they don’t have anything like us in terms of an Internet infrastructure. Cat videos still get huge engagement. I mean, we have our own day of the week. God has the sabbath, and we have Caturday. Thankfully, people are speaking in cat language again.”

“Cat language?”

“Hieroglyphics.”

“Who speaks in hieroglyphics?”

“Everyone. But it’s been rebranded. Now we call hieroglyphic characters emojis.”

“…”

“But it’s more than that. The Internet not only gives force to the cats, but it also takes some away from the lizards and even gives it back to humans.”

“Explain,” Isaac’s asked, his skepticism hard to hide.

“Think about it. The Internet today is all social media, and social media puts individual humans in the spotlight, making celebrities out of your friends and neighbors rather than giving their force to some shadowy production studio that runs ads for aluminum-laden deodorants,” Margot paused to take a breath, “But maybe most important of all is that Internet users are more likely to spend their time at home, with their cat, as opposed to moviegoers who do just that, go out to the theatres.”

“I had no idea.”

“Any more questions?” Margot asked Isaac. He had so many, but she was already wrapping this up, looking to a Birman for a signal. When the cat gave it, with a quick meow, Margot pressed a button, and a blue laser shot down from what remained of the swirling ceiling.

The beam sizzled the atmosphere in the room, and its raw power blew Isaac’s hair back, but neither the cats nor Margot seemed fazed in the least.

“Can I say goodbye to Tupac at least?” Isaac whined. “We never got any closure.”

“No, you can’t. I’m sorry. We can’t have anybody know your fate.”

Now that the moment was here, Isaac felt his chest burn with anxiety. He couldn’t go through with it. “Can’t you or the cats just protect me with cat power? Do you have to kill me with a giant laser to cover your tracks?”

“Kill you?” Margot laughed. “Isaac, we’re the good guys. We would never kill you. That would be such a lizard thing to do.”

Isaac sighed with relief. “Then what are you doing?”

“We’re going to send you to the cat world to live out the rest of your days,” Margot explained.

“The cat world? This laser isn’t a weapon?” Isaac was stunned.

“It’s not a laser at all.”

“So, in my dream, that night at the Annenberg, Zee, and Captain Flapjacks were trying to transport Super Jesus to the cat world? They weren’t trying to kill him?”

“The cats wanted Super Jesus out of the picture for the re-shoots, no pun intended, again, sorry. The cats try not to kill if they can help it. Bad vibes. Bad force. Even if the victim is bad.”

“How’s it work?” Isaac winced as he stepped nearer to the beam.

“The beam is a Metatron’s cube.”

“...”

“A Metatron’s cube transforms the atoms within the beam into the atoms of another dimension, allowing them to cross the veil between universes, which the cats call the ‘Heavy Side Layer.’ Think of it as a phaser beam, not a laser beam.” Margot laughed to herself.

“And where am I being transported to, exactly?”

“To the cats’ dimension. Beyond Orion’s belt.”

“...”

“It’s rather complicated, I agree, so the quickest way to explain it is that the major difference between the dimensions is how the atoms are organized. In this dimension, the universe follows a circular or elliptical pattern — think rounded edges. Think about anything important in this universe: the sun, the planets, their orbits, atoms and their subatomic parts, eggs, cells, the number zero, and you can’t forget humanity’s greatest invention, the wheel. All circles.” Then, as an afterthought, Margot added, “Oh, and the circle of life. Basically, anything critical to life in this dimension is circular. But everything in the cat dimension is slightly more advanced, not as simple as a circle.”

“So it’s a sphere?”

“No, more like a tetrahedron,” she laughed.

Isaac took her comment about his dimension personally. “Well, if it’s so bad here, then why do the cats come? Tell them to stay in their tetrahedron world if it’s so great.”

“You got it all wrong.” Margot smiled. “Simple isn’t bad. I mean, you’re simple.”

“...”

“Sorry. I meant that as a compliment. Visiting this dimension is the simple life for cats, even with the lizards involved. It’s a vacation. Some good old-fashioned R&R, hence all their sleeping. The cats come here to soak up the force from their humans for a spell before going home when they’ve had their fill. Think about any cat owner. Those humans always have the most forceful souls, don’t they?”

“I guess,” Isaac said, thinking of Anne as a crazy cat lady.

“Many of them, especially the orange-colored cats, purposely go simple themselves. They leave all their thoughts and memories in their dimension before visiting Earth.”

“Why?”

“They tell me it’s so they can truly enjoy their stay here. A dumb mind is a peaceful one. Nice to get away and chase sun beams for a bit instead of fretting about the ongoing Frozgockian genocide, you know? Ignorance is bliss. I’m sure you understand.” Margot lowered her voice so that only Isaac could hear, “The downside is that self-induced dumbness is how the lizards survive and how Xzaylax-Delta manipulated some of the cats into being cast in *Super Jesus 2*. Luckily, there’s always a small contingent of fully cogent cats to keep an eye on things for humans and those cats here on vacation.”

“And this is how they come and go?” Isaac indicated the crackling beam of energy.

“No. This is a primitive lizard tool that non-cats can utilize. Part of what the lizards call Project Blue Beam. The lizards use it to travel between their home dimension of Draco and this one.”

“What shape is their dimension?”

“They’re squares.”

“...”

“You have to go, Isaac. No more stalling. Even if the fate of the world weren’t at stake, then you’d still have to go. To be invited to the cats’ dimension as a guest is the greatest opportunity — no, privilege — anyone in humanity has ever been offered. So don’t waste it.”

“You haven’t been?”

“I haven’t been asked,” Margot admitted with a trace of resentment. “You could be walking into heaven.”

“It won’t be heaven,” Isaac said, remembering Tupac’s words of wisdom on the subject.

“You’re right. It could be better than heaven.” But she didn’t have to convince him anymore. Isaac would go willingly out of a sense of duty to the people of Earth and to his own story. Did sacrificing himself for the sins of others make him the real Super Jesus? Was the

Super Jesus he was looking for within himself all along? Isaac didn't know. That would be for the poets and historians to decide.

Isaac put on a brave face to ask Margot, "So what do I have to do?"

Before she could respond, the Birman marched over to Isaac.

Margot curtsied to the cat before introducing her. "Isaac, this is Her Majesty Queen Xenia Kaabaa. May her reign be unending."

Isaac also began to curtsy but was interrupted by Xenia Kaabaa, who didn't have the patience for such formalities. Instead, she came right up to Isaac and headbutted him. It didn't look like much, but upon contact with the cat, an overwhelming sense of gratitude washed over Isaac, and all of his fears were put at ease. Serenity now.

After taking a cue from Xenia Kaabaa, Margot instructed Isaac, "Walk into the beam and say the activation code.

Isaac nodded.

Right foot, left foot.

Right foot, left foot.

Right foot, left foot.

Walk like an Egyptian.

"What's the activation code?" Isaac asked once inside the beam. The blue beam was a frenzy around him, but he felt nothing except a kind of weightlessness, almost like he was treading water, bobbing in an endless ocean of energy.

"Are you steady?" Margot asked.

"I'm steady," Isaac responded naturally.

"Are you ready?"

Through the filter of the blue beam, Isaac took one last look at Earth and saw all the cats in his presence bowing their heads to him, including Her Majesty Xenia Kaabaa. "I'm ready," Isaac said with confidence.

*Whoosh!*

Isaac felt himself ascend and then transcend with a rush of blood to the head before being swept away into the wild blue yonder. He was all gone.

Fade to white.

# Exhibit A: Isaac's Dream Script

Super Jesus 3: The Holy Trinity Strikes Back

by

Isaac Abrahamson

FADE IN:

EXT. OFFICE PARK - NIGHT

Bird's eye view of a large, well-manicured lawn in the shape of a triangle.

A host of fluorescent lamps surround the park. The light is cold, hostile, and yet welcoming, as if borrowed from a backwoods bug zapper.

The lamps illuminate the park's grass that is two shades too green. It's almost glowing, like a cartoon's depiction of radioactive waste.

WOMAN NARRATOR (V.O.)

If you're one of the chosen few  
then there are signs.

Twin towers contribute to the mood of impending doom. The office skyscrapers anchor two points of the park's triangle.

WOMAN NARRATOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)

It's easy to miss or dismiss  
these signs. Or chalk them up to  
simple coincidence. But sometimes  
opportunity doesn't knock.  
Sometimes, it winks playfully at  
you. Sometimes, you find the  
elevator doors waiting for you.  
Or when you turn on your car  
radio and it's playing the same  
song as when you turned it off  
last. Or if the taste of cilantro  
reminds you of dishwater. But  
sometimes the signs aren't so  
silly or innocent as that...

A lost red balloon dances into view, a howling wind pulling its marionette strings. It grows and grows as it approaches the frame, threatening to black out everything.

Before it does, we read what's written across its rubber skin

SMASH CUT TO:

TITLE SCREEN: Super Jesus 3: Revenge of the Holy Trinity

POP! The balloon explodes.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Total darkness fills the screen, the same color of black that monsters call home, the same color that exists in the space between the floor and your childhood bed.

Suddenly, a sterile, white-blue track of ceiling light snaps to life. It hangs over a small portion of a long office hallway but we can't see where it leads, coming or going.

TWO FIGURES, one tall and one small, are moving fast and wearing full-coverage ski masks. They do not belong here.

The lights in the hall are controlled by motion sensor. As the pair race forward the next bulb over them leaps to life while the bulbs they leave behind cycle off.

They're under a spotlight.

The tall one looks behind him, eyes wide. They run faster.

INT. LOADING DOCK - CONTINUOUS

The tall figure stops, unbelieving. The pair escaped the claustrophobic hall and emerge into a cavernous shipping and receiving center. It's lit by low-level floods.

They are alone. For now.

TALL FIGURE

We should go home.

The smaller figure turns back, grabs the tall figure's hand, and pulls him onward, rushing past 18-wheelers with names like Iron Mountain, Kimberley-Clark, and Whole Foods on them.

They run faster and faster and in the opposite direction of every red exit sign.

INT. FREIGHT ELEVATOR - MOMENTS LATER

The figures stand shoulder to shoulder. The taller figure gathers his breath while the smaller figure scans a FOB badge over a sensor on the elevator. It shudders awake.

INT. ELEVATOR BAY - MOMENTS LATER

The elevator doors open and the figures exit the cab, blinking. The light is bright.

They slink around some cardboard boxes, a mop bucket, and a nine-foot tall wooden crucifix. It lays on its side.

TALL FIGURE

I want to go home.

The small figure leans towards the taller and gets on her tip-toes to talk to him.

SMALL FIGURE

Soon, baby.

The voice is soothing, familiar to us. It belongs to the woman narrator.

NARRATOR

You're doing great. I'm so proud  
of you. Think how far you've  
come. It's only a little bit  
further now. Baby steps-

The elevator bay begins to shake, cutting off her pep talk.

The tremors are violent enough to make the room's foundation groan in response. The mop's turgid water sloshes out onto the floor with a splash.

The lights shut off and we lose sight of the pair.

This is no earthquake. These vibrations are jagged and mechanical in nature, like an engine turning over and very much unlike the smooth, rolling waves mother nature sends out whenever she stomps her feet.

With a hiss, the lights return and the room turns still.

The tall figure's eyes fill with fear. He's lost whatever was left of his nerve and the narrator knows it.

She takes off her mask to instill him with some confidence and to calm him. She's extraordinary, but in all the most ordinary ways. Blonde, boobs and the cherry-topper of a button nose.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Okay, stay here. I have to go,  
but just get ready. I'll be  
quick. Smash and grab.

The small figure cracks open the elevator bay's double doors and peers beyond them. More darkness pours into the room.

Satisfied by what she sees, she slips through the gap. The doors close shut behind her with a sense of finality.

The taller figure looks around and his eyes fall on the giant cross. It's intimidating, sharp enough to shed a splinter. The authenticity of the cross extends to the splatters of blood in all the right places. It looks wet.

The taller figure stoops down to investigate.

Right as his finger is about to brush the muddy smear, he jumps, scared by a LOUD BLEAT emitted by the elevator.

The elevator's digital display changes from "B" to "CC." The aluminum plaque above the interface also reads "CC."

It's coming.

Uh oh. The taller figure looks around but it's futile. There's nowhere to hide under this bright light.

INT. HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

The taller figure skids, losing his balance between rounding a blind corner and the building's renewed shaking.

He's at a fork in the road. He snaps his head back and forth wildly but can't locate the smaller figure or a way out.

His eyes are unable to make out his surroundings, still adjusting to the hall's lack of light.

Another tremor causes him to crash into a wall and fall.

He looks up and SCREAMS.

A toddler in a tiara towers over him. She's seven feet tall. Pink dress, pink nails, and painted-pink lips.

The taller figure SCREAMS again and scurries back on his hands and heels like a crab.

This new perspective allows him to take a breath. He had been frightened by a photograph, a blown-up portrait of a kiddie beauty queen.

The figure rubs his eyes before looking around. He is surrounded on all sides by photographs.

The building goes still again, allowing the tall figure to get back on his feet.

He approaches a photograph.

CLOSE UP: An androgynous model fills the frame, clothed in an angular outfit some would consider couture. The gender of the person is further obscured by an animal mask adorned with a sinister set of gnarled antlers.

The taller figure is hypnotized by the photo. His trance is only broken by a sound coming from the direction of the elevator bay.

The taller figure runs as fast as his adrenaline allows, only stumbling briefly as the building's convulsions begin anew.

INT. LARGE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

The taller figure bursts into an enormous circular room with 30-foot ceilings. In the center of the ceiling is an electric blue light that dazzles him. He has to shield his eyes.

A blue beam shoots down from the ceiling and into the ground. The current is not stable. Sparks of pure energy burst and pop from the crackling column of light.

The connection breaks and the light retracts back into the ceiling where it's kept at bay by a transparent membrane of unknown origin. The building's shaking stops.

NARRATOR (O.S.)

No!

The narrator stands at the opposite end of the room, which is no longer obscured by the giant blue death ray. She's restrained by some force, but we can't see what.

NARRATOR

Run! Get away! Go home!

The narrator is not alone.

Beside her is SUPER JESUS, the costumed second coming. The Hispanic superhero is suited up in his customary white robe, blue cape and Rainbow sandals, the brand not the weather event.

SUPER JESUS

(to the tall figure)

Come, my boy. Mi casa es su casa.

NARRATOR

Liar!

Super Jesus pays her no mind, gazing calmly and deeply into the tall figure's eyes. His own are magnetic, similar in color to the spinning light above them.

TALL FIGURE

Super Jesus? You're real? *Dios mio.*

He pronounces "Jesus" in the Spanish "hay-SOOS."

SUPER JESUS

In the flesh, more or less.

Super Jesus beckons the tall figure forward with a wave. In his other hand he cradles a magnificent BIRMAN CAT. Its face is cream colored but hate fills its ice-blue eyes.

The tall figure begins to walk towards Super Jesus.

NARRATOR

No!

The tall figure doesn't stop, crossing the room one foot after another, hypnotized.

SUPER JESUS

That's far enough. Hold still.

He looks up to see the blue light spinning directly above him. Its counter clockwise rotation creates a vortex with an eye in the middle that peers back at him.

SUPER JESUS (CONT'D)

You're going home. Godspeed.

A SHRIEKING SOUND rips through the room, but it's not coming from the tall figure or the narrator. The tall figure turns.

His face contorts in horror as it's eclipsed by a shadow.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

The tall figure flees down the hall with the motion-activated lights. They track his escape. He's looking over his shoulder, waiting for the black behind him to break.

There it is. A second motion sensor light blinks on in the distance. Something is coming for him.

The tall figure turns his head around to pick up speed and we can now see that his face is bruised and bloodied.

In his arms is the cat. It too looks battle-worn with patches of fur missing.

We can see the light in the background getting bigger and glowing brighter. Something's getting closer.

INT. ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

A rectangle of light appears in the black frame. It's filled by the silhouette of the tall figure. He sneaks inside from the hallway and closes the door behind him, cat in hand.

Outside a SKITTERING, CHITTERING thing approaches.

He watches the slit that forms the gap between the bottom of the door and the floor. It turns white with light as the motion sensor outside activates and then flashes black and white as something moves back and forth in the hall, pacing.

There's an anxious beat as the tall figure remains motionless, his breath caught in his throat.

The MUSIC SCORE drops out. The silence is loud enough.

Filling the void is a RATTLING sound that breathes in and out in an arrhythmic pattern beyond the door.

Then the sound goes quiet and the light beneath the door is extinguished as the sensor turns off. Nothing is there.

The taller figure's breath returns to normal.

But in the darkness behind him, two golden orbs appear over the tall figure's shoulder, suspended in the shadows. The orbs disappear and then reappear, blinking. They're eyes.

HISS! The cat leaps from the figure's arms, fleeing for each of its nine lives.

NARRATOR (V.O.)

And sometimes, when you're of the chosen few, opportunity doesn't knock at your door. Sometimes it breaks and enters.

Underneath the set of golden orbs is a set of fangs glistening with drool. The tall figure SCREAMS.

FADE TO BLACK.

## EXHIBIT B: A *Save the Cat!* BEAT SHEET

### Blake Snyder's *Save The Cat!* Beat Sheet

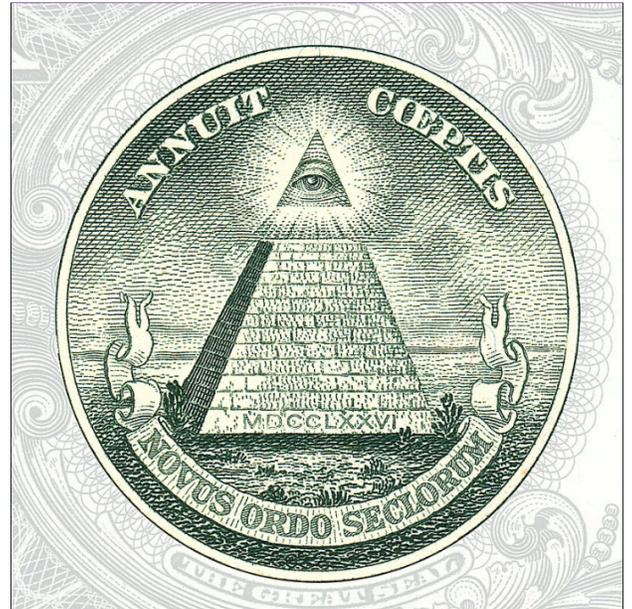
1. **Opening Image** - Sets the story's tone, mood, type, and scope—a “before” snapshot to be compared and contrasted with the story’s final image.
2. **Theme Stated** - A character reveals the theme of the story.
3. **Set-Up** - Characters and places introduced to the audience.
4. **Catalyst** - An outside person or event impacts the story’s main character to set the story in motion
5. **Debate** - The main character decides whether to let the catalyst change their life.
6. **Break Into Act II** - The main character moves forward, leaving their old world behind by entering the “new” one brought on by the catalyst.
7. **B-story** - This is the love story and deepens the thematic elements of the more plot-heavy A-story
8. **Fun and Games** - This section fulfills the “promise of the premise.” E.G. in a detective story, this is where the detective tracks down clues.
9. **Midpoint** - This is the threshold between 1st half and 2nd half of the movie. The stakes are raised, and the urgency is increased. It’s a temporary victory for the main character.
10. **Bad Guys Close In** - the antagonist bounces back from his temporary defeat and encircles the main character.
11. **All is Lost** - Collapse of the main character’s goals. The antagonist secures a victory. “Whiff of death.”
12. **Dark Night of the Soul** - The main character is at their lowest point and is forced to do some soul searching.
13. **Break into Act III** - A-story and B-story cross to reveal a solution for the main character.
14. **Finale** - This is the climax of the story. The main character and antagonist meet for a final conflict and resolution.
15. **Final Image** - A contrasting image from the Opening Image to show how much has changed since the start of the story.

# EXHIBIT C: PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE OF THE CENTURY CITY CONSPIRACY

## The Century City Conspiracy

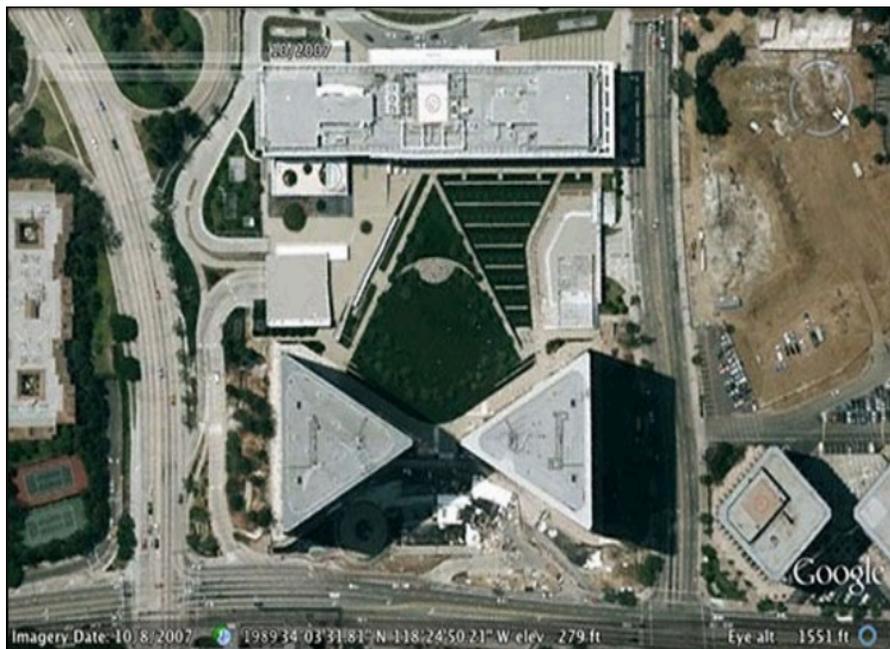


Masonic Compass



Illuminati Pyramid with Eye of Providence

## Century City from Above



**EXHIBIT D: A STUNNING EXAMPLE OF A BIRMAN CAT**





## About the Author: Zee Shirley

Don't ask, don't tell.

Your fan mail should be sent to [zee.shirley19@gmail.com](mailto:zee.shirley19@gmail.com)