

Winfield and Cronus

By Dan Krause

Chapter 1: Start All Over

Winfield Pendergast & Pull-Trex

“Winfield Marconi Pendergast,” Pull-Trex said with a note of exasperation. “Will you please focus, and pass me the antenna duplexers so I can fix this blasted radio?” “Sorry.” Winfield’s pewter-colored eyes snapped into focus. He pushed a brown, dust-colored curl from his forehead, and said, “I was just thinking.”

“About?” Pull-Trex’s hand curled around the afore-mentioned parts. He turned to the Ham radio illuminated by a desk lamp and resumed tinkering.

“The Night,” Winfield replied, without having to specify which night. Four years ago. When Winfield was eleven, Pull-Trex, fifteen. The night the Hydra-Pretzel consumed his mother and Norman Roberts with its salt-encrusted teeth. The Night Winfield destroyed The Prism, Roberts’ anthropomorphic paint monsters. The Night Felix, his mother’s co-worker at the Metropolitan Museum, picked Winfield and Pull-Trex up at the end of the block as police sirens painted the neighborhood red.

The Night everything changed.

Pull-Trex sighed. “What about it?” Lately, he was getting increasingly annoyed with Winfield’s forays down memory lane. Perhaps it was partly due to the fact that his friend used to be a robot. Or, maybe because he was used to cutting ties and starting over, when his body used to go by the name “Pull-Tab.” Either way: the past was the past. Let it go.

The boys were in the living room of Felix’s rural home. Dust motes swam in the air of a large, cluttered living room. The room bore the unmistakable appearance of being well-tended once. Artifacts of domesticity. Decorative plates and figurines of animals carefully arranged on shelves. Hanging from walls. A curio cabinet tucked into one of the corners, filled with blank, staring porcelain dolls. A wooden box of cork-covered coasters sitting on a glass-topped coffee table. But now, it was hard to ignore the rings of liquid dotting the table’s surface like a leopard’s rosettes. The figurines and plates, the porcelain dolls, were covered in a patina of dust. And there was the smell. A scent of staleness. Gym socks. Crescent-moons of moisture beneath armpits sprouting hair. Hormones souring. The smell of teenagers.

Winfield continued. “When the Metropolitan Zoo came to collect the Hydra-Pretzel from the tar pit, the monster had two heads.”

“So?”

“Soooo,” Winfield said, irritably. “When it ate mom and Roberts, it only had the one head. Which means, someone got out.”

Twin rectangles of light stared back at Winfield. He yanked the sunglasses from his friend’s face. “Whenever the Hydra-Pretzel loses a head, it grows back two more. Something cut it open!”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“No, but— “

“But,” Pull-Trex snatched back his sunglasses. Put them on. “But, but, but! It’s been four years, Winfield. Four years. And we haven’t seen hide nor hare of Roberts. He’s dead, and,” he paused. His tone softening. “Your mom is gone, man. When my mom died—“

“Shy Anne was different and you know it,” Winfield snorted. “She was mortal. Not machine. Like my mother.”

Pull-Trex shook his head. “It makes you sort of wish she took the easy way out. Like your dad. At least you would know she was decommissioned somewhere. Being used for parts.”

“Dude.” Winfield widened his eyes. “Not cool. How is that easier?”

“Hey, what do you get when you cross an elephant and a rhino?” Pull-Trex waited a few beats before he answered, “Elephino.”

Winfield pulled a pin from an imaginary grenade and lobbed it at Pull-Trex’s workspace.

Pull-Trex tossed a handful of HAM radio parts into the air to simulate the explosion his bombed joke caused. But, at least it eased the tension.

“At any rate,” Pull-Trex smiled. “It was a good information dump for the readers to get up to speed on the story thus far. Roberts dead. Your mom—de,” he paused. “Decommissioned. Your father: decommissioned.”

“That’s meta.”

“Heartbreakingly so,” Pull-Trex laughed. It sounded like the chirrup of a bird.

Winfield picked up a copy of the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* from the coffee table. Tried to act casual. “When is Sophie’s flight getting in?”

Sophie was seventeen. Felix’s granddaughter. And, Winfield was in love with her.

Pull-Trex grinned, ruefully. “Felix said she’ll be in by five.”

“For the whole summer?”

“Just like every year.”

A smile crept across Winfield’s face. “Well, barring natural disasters—

“Or any other Winfield-related catastrophes.

“Nice,” Winfield replied quickly, without slowing. I’ve got big plans for us this year, buddy. It’s going to be our best summer yet.”

“And that, ladies and gentlemen,” Pull-Trex spoke into an imaginary microphone. “Were Winfield Marconi Pendergast’s famous last words.”

The kitchen table was set with the usual accoutrements that heralded Sophie's first visit at Felix's house. Tabasco sauce. Ketchup. Boysenberry syrup. Eggs a la Golden Rod. Bacon. Sourdough French toast. Regular toast. A halo of blue smoke hung in the air around the stove top. A skillet with congealing oil and carbonized egg yolk was the culprit.

Pull-Trex removed his sunglasses. Rubbed his eyes. Plucked a piece of bacon from a pile atop a grease-laden paper towel on a chipped green plate. "Bacon is no longer bacon if it shatters on touch, Felix," he quipped. He placed the bacon in his mouth with a smile.

"Bacon is bacon," Felix emerged from the smoke with plates of food in his hand. His graying tufts of hair stood out on both sides of his head.

"Ah, tautologically sound, but as propositionally meaningless as this bacon ash in my mouth, good sir."

"Pull-Trex," Felix sighed good-naturedly. "Let's leave Wittgenstein and his philosophical treatises on breakfast foods until my after-dinner cigar and brandy, okay?"

"You're playing pretty fast and loose with the doctor's orders," Pull-Trex shook his head. He grabbed a plate as Winfield and Sophie sat down on either side of Felix. "Processed animal fat elevates the risk of cancer by three percent. Alcohol consumption has been linked to six different kinds of cancer, and—"

"Pull-Trex," Winfield interrupted. He poured syrup over his French toast. "Can we please just eat?"

Felix clucked his tongue. "Not until we say grace, we can't." He held out his large hands to Sophie and Winfield. Winfield took the man's right. Sophie his left.

Felix raised an eyebrow in response to Sophie's cold, metallic fingers in his hand. He lifted her wrist. Pushed his bifocals up the bridge of his Roman nose. "Hmm," he said with slight disapproval. He looked at Winfield for a fraction of a second before closing his eyes and bowing his head.

Sophie copied Felix's posture. Safe from the inspection, Winfield and Pull-Trex stared at each other over the kitchen table. Winfield rolled his eyes. Pull-Trex shrugged. Bowed his head. Winfield stared at his food during the prayer.

Felix continued. "Thank you for this food, oh Lord. And for the company sitting around the table. For family. For friends. For your blessing. Amen."

The group began to eat.

"So, Sophie," Pull-Trex took a drink of water. "Did you get any of your college applications sent off yet?"

"Not yet. I'm still deciding," Sophie blushed, unaccountably. "Besides, I have an entire year to decide."

"A few months," Felix corrected. He sprinkled powdered egg yolk over his gravy-laden toast. "Have you thought about a major yet?"

Sophie mumbled a reply.

Felix tipped his good right ear towards his granddaughter. "What was that?"

“Creative Writing,” she said in a louder voice. “I’ve been writing a lot of flash fiction this year with my English teacher. Since the beginning of the semester.” Sophie’s green eyes sparkled. “She thinks I have the knack. It began with two others,” she explained. “Students. But, both of them dropped out within the first month. Now it’s just me and Mrs. Behnke.”

“Your teacher shares stories with you?” The note of pride in Felix’s voice was unmistakable.

“Sophie’s stuff is really good,” Pull-Trex interjected. “Robotic dinosaurs. Zombie cyborgs. Paint Monsters.”

Sophie’s eyes widened. Darted towards Winfield. He held his fork frozen near his mouth as he listened quietly.

“You’ve written about me?” he said with evident surprise. “My life?” His tone was enigmatic.

“I’ve changed all the names,” Sophie said, quickly. “Locations. No one would know it’s you.”

Silence fell around the table. They made a show of eating while Winfield processed the information

“That’s—” Winfield paused. They waited nervously for his reaction.

“Before you say anything,” Pull-Trex interrupted. “I know you can only display your super-strength when you’re angry and near a kitchen table full of food, but really, Win. Her stories—”

“Oh, shut up, Pull-Trex. I was just going to say that it was amazing.” Winfield’s pewter-colored eyes regarded Sophie. “Can I—Do you think I could read any of them?”

“Of course!” Sophie’s shoulders relaxed. Her rigid posture loosened.

Felix looked at his granddaughter in quiet wonder. “A real writer. In our family. I’m impressed.”

“You don’t think it’s stupid, Papa?”

“Absolutely not,” he replied firmly. “I’ve always thought you should chase your dreams, no matter how lowly or ambitious they seem to anyone else. What do I always say, Win?”

“If you want to be a knight,” Winfield began. The Sophie and Pull-Trex finished with him, “Act like a knight.”

“That’s right,” Felix nodded. “When Winfield’s mother was just a bit older than you, Sophie, she was given a choice by her mother: School or Her Art. Tuition or the opportunity to ‘Go it alone.’ Claudia would tell you she took the easy way out, but I believe it was the hardest thing she ever had to do. It broke her just a little bit, not to speak poorly of your mother,” Felix paused. Looked at Winfield apologetically. He reached over and gently flicked the tip of Winfield’s nose. “You know I loved her like one of my own,” he said in a voice cushioned by tender kindness. “But, I think it’s telling that despite her abandonment of artistic creation, she picked a job that ensured the preservation of others’. It’s like her entire professional career was a course correction by incremental degrees. An apology.”

“What do you mean? Winfield asked. Pull-Trex observed his friend, while Sophie’s eyes remained riveted on her grandfather’s.

“She was able to learn the methods, the brush strokes of the masters. If I had to venture a guess, had your mother survived, she would have picked up a paintbrush before too long. You can’t forget your passions. While you believe you’ve extinguished the blaze, it smolders on inside of you.” Felix wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

“Believe it or not, Sophie, when your father was younger, he wanted to sing.”

“Whu—really?”

“Indeed,” Felix nodded. “He had a beautiful voice. But, his mother—” he looked at a framed photo hanging from the wall. “Well, her parents were immigrants. They always had to scrimp and scrape. Squeeze every last dollar from a withered potato. Worn shoes. Patched trousers. She wanted Michael to be financially secure. And, she didn’t think he could do that artistically. As a singer. Don’t get me wrong,” he held up a hand. “Your grandmother recognized his god-given talent, but she wanted him to have what she never did.”

“Which was?” Sophie asked.

“A career. Places to move up. A family. She wanted him to be able to provide more than—” He stopped suddenly. Took a bite of toast.

“More than what, Papa?”

“More than the living wage of a security guard,” Felix concluded somewhat sadly.

“But you were doing what you loved, right?” Pull-Trex replied, diplomatically. “Before they made you retire?”

“They didn’t make me retire,” Felix said. He cleared his throat. Let’s eat. Before everything is cold and spoiled.”

The rest of the meal passed in tense silence.

After dinner, Felix soon fell asleep with a half-finger of brandy consumed, and an unlit cigar in a bluish-purple ashtray on the small table beside his favorite recliner. The young trio passed a yawn like a secret. It started with a partial yawn from Winfield. One he was quick squelch with his fist, but it was already too late. Pull-Trex picked it up, muttering, “Non-verbal evolutionary human reflex,” disdainfully, and Sophie finished it.

She stood from the sofa. “I’m beat, guys. Jet-lag and all that.”

“Of course,” Pull-Trex stood. “It’s getting late.”

Sophie looked at Felix. “Do you just—”

“He sleeps out here, now,” Winfield said. He touched the back of the recliner, gently. “Since Delores—” he faltered, as Sophie adjusted her weight. Her eyes fell to the floor.

Winfield continued. “He gets up at about midnight. Pretends she’s leading him to bed.”

Winfield sighed. Wrapped an arm around his waist in much the same way his mother used to when mulling over a problem. “I’ve offered to tailor an Apparent Apparition for him. It’s a sensory hologram you can see, hear and feel. But, he dismissed it outright.”

“Oh,” Sophie replied.

“If you ask me,” Winfield said, “It’s downright—”

“Sweet,” Pull-Trex said firmly. “It’s sweet. You don’t have to create an invention for every perceived deficit, Win,” he said, with a cursory glance at Sophie’s metallic arm.

“Okay.” Sophie leaned down and kissed Felix’s forehead. She straightened. “I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

Winfield and Pull-Trex watched her creep up the stairs. They followed her footsteps until they settled in her bedroom. The one Felix maintained year-round, in case of visits.

“She’s shown you her stories?” Winfield asked.

Pull-Trex nodded without taking his eyes from the ceiling. Winfield regarded his friend’s profile. The beaked nose. The bulging eyes behind the sunglasses.

“Why?” Winfield asked.

Pull-Trex turned his head slowly. A ripple pulsed through his voice. “Why not?”

Winfield shrugged. Retreated to the steps leading to his bedroom/laboratory in the basement. “I guess I didn’t know you were that close. That you talked when she was away during the year.”

“Yes,” Pull-Trex said. He walked to the stairs leading to the second story. The stairs Sophie just took to bed. His arm rested on the bannister. “The stories are really good. It’s cool she’s going to let you read them.”

Both started ascending and descending their respective stair cases. They traded ‘goodnights.’

As Winfield slipped into bed. The house settled. Made its noises. The air conditioner kicked on. Floorboards creaked. Where the noises came from, he couldn’t be sure.

“As he drifted to sleep, an ethereal blue light crept across the room. A faint smell of parchment filled Winfield’s nose as a ghostly hand pushed away a curl from his forehead. It’s something Pull-Trex never understood about the Apparent Apparition. The play on words (A Parent Apparition). Or, if he understood, he was too polite to point it out. The ‘imagined deficit’ that predicated the hologram’s creation. A physical yearning for connectivity. A link to the past. An imitation of Claudia Pendergast’s voice echoed in Winfield’s room. “Good night, son. My little bird.” The image flickered. Disappeared from sight.

“Good night, mom,” Winfield said. He turned and faced the fall, wishing it was more than just a computer simulation.

—

Winfield woke the next morning to a text message from Sophie on his cell phone.

I emailed you some of the stories. They might be difficult for you to read since they're about you. If so, I understand. At any rate, tell me what you think!

P.S. This arm is so rad! I love it! See you upstairs!!!

Winfield smiled. Stared at his phone. Went over Sophie's words until he had them memorized.

Winfield was careful not to disturb Wilhelm II from the foot of his bed as he slipped from beneath the covers. In a pair of royal blue pajama bottoms and a sleeveless t-shirt, he went to his computer desk. He turned it on. Opened Sophie's email. Read another message:

I'm nervous for you to read these, Win. This is your life, you know? Just—promise you won't hate me over anything you read, okay? I talked with Pull about the sequence of events. How everything played out. What he remembers (which, is everything since part of him used to be a robot).

There were some things I took creative liberties with. I hope you don't mind.

Anyway, enjoy!

*Love,
Sophie.*

P.S. You're the best.

There were ten to fifteen files attached to her email. Winfield clicked on the one labeled "The Night Robert Norman Fell."

Winfield's pewter-colored eyes read:

Long after the police cars left the neighborhood restoring the quiet block back to its peaceful, default setting, the tar pit continued to buzzle. It rippled. It belched.

Hours before, it had been the scene of a terrible crime. Logan Gasket watched in horror as his failed creation, the one he'd made at his mother's request, the Hydra Pretzel, swallowed his arch nemesis, Robert Norman, and his mother, whole.

But now, something was happening. The tar roiled and seethed. The golden-brown leviathan burst from the molten surface. Its roar filled the backyard with the scent of freshly baked bread and a miasma of spicy brown mustard.

From the shoreline, a glob of forgotten paint hovered in the air. It sharpened itself into a blade. A small scimitar. Guided by unseen hands, it whistled through the air and sank itself into the beast's gullet with the sound of a loaf of freshly-baked bread being cracked in two.

The Hydra-Pretzel screamed in rage. The blade made a circuit around the monster's

neck, until its head fell cleanly from the body and disappeared beneath the bubbling surface of the tar.

The decapitated neck fell to the ground, creating a bridge from the tar to solid ground. Robert Norman emerged in a daze. The fallen painter stumbled from the beast, as he clung to the bear claw around his neck, hanging from a cord of leather.

He walked through the Hydra-Pretzel's spicy-brown mustard blood. He took no mind as two new heads were beginning to form. Their color, a maggoty white. Like uncooked dough.

Norman only had eyes for the robotic head of his old nanny, Cordelia.

Gasket designed it to destroy Norman. But, first, to pacify. To trick. Before transforming into the thing Norman feared the most. The animal that attacked him when he was stationed in Alaska for the Air Force: A Bear.

Norman picked up Cordelia's head. Tucked it beneath his arm. Only then did he turn, sadly, towards the Hydra-Pretzel. Crystalline, salt-encrusted teeth were emerging along the jaws of the beast's heads.

The moonlight revealed tear tracks down the painter's face. Disappeared into his poofy beard.

"Margo," he whispered the name of Gasket's mother. "I'm sorry."

His gaze hardened as the monster gathered its twin heads and roared. With that, it disappeared beneath the bubbling tar.

Norman thought about his Happy Little Tree. He could forgive the boy for ruining his life and cursing him with these powers. This Paint Chromatic Stress Disorder. Norman was as much to blame as the boy. But now, the boy had taken away the woman he loved.

He would pay. Oh yes, he would pay dearly for that.

Winfield exed out of the document. His heartbeat drummed a tattoo against his chest. Is this what actually happened? Could Norman Roberts still be alive?

Chapter 2: Bruin's Repose

Norman Roberts

Within the walls of Bruin's Repose, there is a house that is steadfastly ignored by everyone in the community. Even though the grass is overgrown, and the wrought iron gates are plastered with warnings from the city to 'Mow or be Fined,' nothing is ever done to correct the oversight. Occasionally, the city will send a representative, the co-operative, a spokesman, but all meet with the same end: a few polite words on the front steps, where the representative will nod politely, check an item on their clipboard. They scrawl a quick note to their loved ones and slit their throats just outside of the property. The cement near the gates is brown with the blood that has seeped into the porous pavement and cannot be hosed off. So, they leave it alone. Ignore the unmarked envelopes detailing how the occupant of the house will expose their darkest secrets should they ever feel inclined to snoop around the property. The landscaped hedges in the shape of the man's trademark, 'Happy Little Trees.' For all intents and purposes, Norman Roberts was dead.

The only time his neighbors saw him was when their channel-surfing brought them to the National Broadcasting Network. While a new episode of Light and Darkness hadn't aired in five years, the show did quite well in syndication.

Of course, his neighbors knew he wasn't dead. Lights burned in the house until all hours of the night. He was alive. And he was biding his time.

Unbeknownst to Sophie, her account of The Night was spot on, except for one troubling detail: Claudia Pendergast almost survived. Roberts had her by the arm when the Hydra-Pretzel's head was removed. But, when he tried to pull her from the doughy morass, an unknaded pocket of dough opened beneath her, and she slipped from his grip.

He blamed Winfield for ever creating that monster. In fact, he blamed Winfield for everything now. So filled with hate, Roberts couldn't even thank the boy for reuniting him with Imogen, his former housekeeper.

Roberts salvaged the robotic head. Crafted a body using Van Dyke brown and a mixture of clay, replicating Imogen's warm skin tone. He'd even bought her a period cotton print dress from a vintage boutique downtown.

She was perfect.

Alive.

Well, she was far from perfect.

There were times when her head would randomly transform into a bear. During these outbursts, Roberts would disassemble her body, leaving her immobile on the floor. Her ferocious jaws, snapping uselessly.

But, outside of the debilitating, all-consuming rage, Norman Roberts was doing well.

Royalty checks from Light and Darkness kept him funded. Imogen was back. He lost the

fifteen ‘rage pounds’ he’d gained during his first failed attempt at ruthlessly murdering Winfield (pints of Ben & Jerry’s at three in the morning after particularly nasty dreams). Also, since The Night, Roberts avoided carbohydrates at all costs. Imogen humored the diet, though she didn’t agree.

“First bears, now bread?” she’d laugh. “What’s next—” she’d snarl and try to rip off Roberts’ face.

He’d also engineered another Prism henchman. But, only one. He didn’t think his heart could take it if they were destroyed again. His withered heart broke into six pieces with the discharge of The Happy Little Tree’s Plaster Blaster.

Like always, Roberts needed to find Winfield to ‘make him pay.’ For Claudia. Blinded by love, Roberts conveniently forgot his orders to The Prism to kill anyone who got in his way. Love was like that. It erased the glaring deficits in your character. At least, Roberts thought that’s how the saying—

A noise from upstairs stopped him dead in his tracks.

“Qu’est-ce que c’est?” Imogen asked. She sat on a stool next to one of Roberts’ blank easels.

“Stay here,” he replied. Roberts grabbed tubes of paint from his work desk in case he needed to defend himself. It could be another meddlesome neighbor. If so, he would use his newly mutated power of hypnotic suggestion. Quietly dispatch them like the others. But, the chances of it being someone from the cooperative at two o’clock? Unlikely.

He took the stairs two at a time. His vinyl suit, creaking with every step. Once upstairs, his eyes adjusted to the darkness. The covered furniture. The shadows on the living room floor seemed to ripple. He turned on the lights and gasped involuntarily.

An army of mottled gray hands waited, patiently. Severed cleanly at the wrist, each were in varying stages of decomposition. They looked like spiders, with thick black hair (or were they cables and wires) sprouting from their knuckles and the backs of their...hands.

Before Roberts could speak, or summon a paint weapon, the hands (there were at least one hundred of them) tapped on the floor in unison. Roberts’ code-breaking background recognized the Morse Code instantly.

“.- / .- .- .- / - / -.- - -- -.-. .-.-.....”
(We are the Hekatonkeires.)

“.- / -.- --- / .- .. - / .- / --.-. / ..- .- --- / -.-. .- --- - ... -.-.-.”
(We come with a message from Cronos.)

“Who—” Roberts said, momentarily stunned.
“.- / ..- .- .- .- .- ..-.”
(A friend.)

Ninety-nine of the hands snapped in unison. Pointed to the hundredth, waiting patiently at Roberts' feet. The handheld an enveloped, sealed with red wax, emblazoned with the letter "C." Within the 'C' two clocks hands signaled the time. The hour hand pointed to twelve, while the longer of the two, was three minutes to midnight. Doomsday.

“— .- .- / — .- ... - .- .- / -.. — / - . — — / .- . . . - .- .- / — — / .- .- .. - .- .- .-”
(Our master does not like to wait.)

The hands tapped.

“.- . . . - .- .- / .- .- .- .- / - .- .- — — .- .- — / .- / .- - .- .- .- .- / .- .- / .- - .- .- .- .- / - .- .- - .- .- .- .- / — — / .- - .- .- .- .- / .- .- / .- - .- .- .- .- / - .- — .- .- / .- - .- —- .- .- .- .-”
(Read, and compose a reply. We will not leave until we receive your response.)

Roberts grunted his agreement. He opened the letter from 'Cronos' and read:

Dear Norman Roberts,

I hope this letter find you in good health, and diabolical, per usual.

I'm sure you have questions. The answers will come in due time.

I'm writing about a mutual acquaintance of ours. Your Happy Little Tree: Winfield Marconi Pendergast. I know his location has beguiled you now for half a decade, as his continued longevity speaks of your singular failure to act.

But, take heart: I know where you can find him. He, along with Felix (his guardian), Pull-Tree (his best friend), and Sophie (his unrequited love interest) will be at the Metropolitan Municipal Cemetery this Thursday at five o'clock. It is the anniversary of your epic (and failed) showdown.

They'll be laying flowers on the graves of Paul and Claudia Pendergast. Empty Boxes. Useless Plot Devices. The ritual is important to Mr. McGillicuddy (Felix). The three adolescents humor him. Plus, his wife is buried there as well. This 'Sophie' was close to her. Viewed the woman as a mother, or the very least, a best friend. With her own parents abandoning her every summer to travel internationally, the bond isn't surprising.

If you agree to follow-up on my lead, doodle a response and attach it to any hand you choose. I trust you haven't forgotten how to doodle, Mr. Roberts.

Yours,
C

Roberts paused. Read the scratchy handwriting a second time. He moved to the kitchen table. Pulled out a pen and wrote on the back of the letter:

I'm in.

*Your tentative friend,
Norman Roberts*

Who are you?

He speared his note on one of the sharp, black hairs of a reanimated hand. He watched them move, en masse through the pried, balcony door, and disappeared into the night.

“Well,” he smiled, pouring himself a finger of bourbon. “That was an interest plot development. Chin-chin,” he raised his glass and downed their good fortunes in a hasty swallow.

“Imogen!” he yelled, running down the basement stairs. “You’re never going to believe this!”

Chapter 3: Odd Ducks

Sophie McGillicuddy & Pull-Trex

Despite Sophie McGillicuddy's insistence of being exhausted as a result of jet lag, she stayed up that night until 2 o'clock. Talking. To Pull-Trex.

They'd been exchanging text messages and emails since last summer without Winfield's knowledge. They weren't trying to be underhanded. They withheld the information to spare their young friend's feelings: it was a well-known secret he was absolutely smitten with Sophie.

Besides, what was there to tell? She hadn't even kissed Pull-Trex. Held his hand. They closest they've come to exchanging body fluids of any kind is when Sophie bought him a new pair of Oakley Sunglasses for Christmas (black, the undersides trimmed with neon blue). They rested in a nearish sort of way to the watery film coating Pull-Trex's brown eyes. It might seem insane to count that, but when splitting hairs, one had to look closely to measure one's success.

Their correspondence began innocuously enough. Pull-Trex called her last summer (her parents vacationed in Zakynthos Island, Greece) to inform her she'd left a pair of turquoise tube socks and her copy of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

"Are you kidding me?" she moaned. "I had three chapters left 'til the end."

"How'd you manage to leave it behind?" Pull-Trex asked, his voice light. Tinged with amusement.

"I set it on my nightstand so I wouldn't forget it."

"Well," Pull-Trex chuckled. "You've failed, admirably."

"Thanks, Trex. You're a real pal," she sighed. "I'm going to have to go to the bookstore tomorrow to find another copy. Hopefully my parents will give me a ride." She threw herself on her bed. Stared at the ceiling fan, oscillating on its lowest setting. "Then again, I can always take the bus if they pitch a fit about taking me."

Pull-Trex cleared his throat over the phone. "What're you doing now?"

"Why?" Sophie propped herself up on her left elbow. Glanced out the window. Rain lashed the window.

"I could read the last chapters for you. If you want," he added hastily. "Save you a bus trip to the bookstore. Never know who you'll meet on the bus," he laughed. "I once met a homeless man who told me about how he wrestled his rotisserie chicken from a bobcat."

"You'd do that?"

"Wrestle a bobcat? No, I—"

"That's not what I meant," she smiled, tentatively. "You'd read the rest of the book to me?"

“Sure. Get comfortable.”

She settled onto her bed. Pages rustled over the phone.

“Chapter Thirty-Five,” Pull-Trex began. “King’s Cross...”

Sophie kept an ear towards the hallway while she lay in bed. Her eyes surveyed the room Felix painstakingly maintained during her absence. A waist high bookshelf propped beneath the window facing the front yard. Titles like Edith Hamilton’s *Mythologies*, Joseph Campbell’s *The Power of Myth*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* trilogy, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, assorted titles from Neil Gaiman (*American Gods* being her favorite). Above the bookshelf, a framed quote by Ray Bradbury: “You don’t have to burn books to destroy a culture: just get people to stop reading them.” In the corner, near the window, a Japanese Peace Lily sat in a cerulean blue pot. It’s three flowers, filled the room with a friendly airiness. Above the plant, she’d hung origami swans her grandmother had given her when she was a girl. Sophie had cut geometric shapes through the wings and applied colored tissue paper with glue. When the sun streamed in, the wings would flare with color.

She wore a faded maroon t-shirt, ringed with gold around the collar and sleeves. It read “Weasley is our King” in yellow, silkscreened letter. A green blanket was tucked up to her waist. In the soft buttery glow of an imitation Tiffany bedside lamp, she heard cautious footsteps moving through the hallway. An errant floorboard, creaking. The muffled whisper of Pull-Trex’s “Damn!” Above all, Sophie heard Felix’s sonorous snoring from across the landing. Even with his door shut, the sound could wake the dead.

Pull-Trex’s bedroom was catty corner to Felix’s, facing the south. His stealth was largely unneeded given the sonic cover provided by Felix’s nocturnal trumpeting, but it added a layer of excitement. Made her feel decidedly tingly.

“Hiya!” Pull-Trex whispered, as he slipped into her bedroom and closed the door behind him.

“Hey,” she smiled, waving with the metallic fingers of her chrome-plated right hand.

“Pretty nifty, huh?” he offered. He took a seat at the corner of her bed. “Felix didn’t seem too impressed with it, did he?”

“I think it’s a matter of perception,” she admitted. “He doesn’t want Winfield to think he’s doing me any favors. Like you said, he doesn’t have to create an invention for every perceived deficit. Because, I’ve done just fine without the aid of a second, fully developed arm.” She felt the invention with the delicate fingers of her left hand. Sophie’s clear coat of nail polish flashed small ellipses as it caught the soft light. “Still,” she paused. “I love it.”

“Is it comfortable?”

“Not really. Well, it was at first,” she corrected herself. “But now it’s starting to irritate my skin a bit.”

“Take it off,” Pull-Trex shrugged.

“But—”

“Soph—” Pull-Trex accurately judged her hesitation. “You know I don’t care about that kind of stuff.” He removed his sunglasses. “I mean, look at me.”

“A pair of odd ducks,” Sophie replied, removing the sensor from the top of her shoulder. The metallic coils retracted with a snick-snick-snick!

“Or dinosaurs,” Pull-Trex supplied. “Technically, ducks fall under the evolutionary, avian umbrella so I’ll allow it. What are you reading now?” Pull-Trex asked. He extended his hand towards Sophie. She passed him her book.

“Cujo, huh?” he rifled through the pages, drawing facts imbedded in his BrainFrame. “Copyright 1981, Hardcover edition, published by Viking Penguin—”

“Winfield got it for me,” she admitted.

“Ah! Our intrepid wunderkind is evolving from the brightly colored panels and inked dialogue of the comics and graphic novels he loves so much?”

Sophie scrunched her freckled nose. “I don’t think he knew what he was buying. I like science fiction and fantasy. This is—”

“A cautionary tale of a boy and his dog.”

She balled her fists and gently tapped her lap. “I simply have to read it. It was thoughtful. He tried, at least.”

“That’s Winfield,” Pull-Trex agreed without cynicism. “As thoughtful as the day is long.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Felix’s snores punctuated the night air like a diuretic whoopie cushion.

Sophie shifted her weight. Felt the pressure of Pull-Trex’s body against her legs like an electrical current.

“I sent him my stories,” she blurted.

Pull-Trex nodded. Picked up his sunglasses from the bed. Replaced them to his beaked nose. “Yeah?” His tone was guarded. “Do you think that’s wise?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “But, it didn’t feel right keeping them from him anymore.”

He reached over and cradled Sophie’s foot. Squeezed gently. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Pull-Trex stood. Circled the bed. Lay atop the covers beside Sophie.

“What’re you—” she stopped short as Pull-Trex made grabbing gestures towards Cujo.

She handed him the book with a smile.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“Haven’t started yet.”

Pull-Trex opened to the first page.

“Once upon a time,” Pull-Trex said in a whisper. “Not so long ago, a monster came to the small town of Castle Rock, Maine...”

At four o'clock in the morning, Pull-Trex woke with a start. Cujo lay open on his chest. Sophie's head rest on his shoulder. He quietly extricated himself from the bed without waking her. Smoothed the blankets he'd fallen asleep on somewhere near Chapter Four and crept out of Sophie's room.

On the way back to his bedroom, the only sounds were Pull-Trex's quiet, padding feet, the creaking floorboards, and the soft whisper of the central air, breathing through the house. But, not a peep from Felix.

Chapter 4: My Left Leg

Felix McGillicuddy

As sunlight turned the sky a pale shade of pink the following morning, Felix busied himself in the kitchen. After the heavier food the night before, he reverted to Sophie's preferred breakfast.

Sliced tomatoes with a dash of Penzey's Sandwich Sprinkle. An assortment of fresh fruit (Cantaloupe, Honeydew melon, green and purple grapes, and cubed apples). Poached eggs.

The selection of food was more in keeping with his physician's orders and would keep Pull-Trex from spewing medical facts at him while he tried to enjoy his breakfast.

Pull-Trex.

Felix wished it was his imagination that placed the boy outside of granddaughter's bedroom. Felix's weak bladder had ratted the boy out. Boy. Pull-Trex was hardly a boy anymore: Nineteen.

Before he jumped to unfair conclusions, he was determined to find a moment to discuss...precautions if they needed to be taken. Above all, Felix wanted to avoid the "Not Under My Roof" spiel and keep the words "Nip this in the bud" from ever passing his lips.

Sophie would be eighteen within a month's time. It was her life, after all. She didn't need an aging octogenarian futzing around with it.

"Mor-mor-mor—" Winfield stumbled into the room, yawning. "Morning," he tried a second time.

"Morning, Winfield. How'd you sleep?"

"Fine," Winfield mumbled. He retrieved his Watchmen coffee cup from the dish rack beside the sink. Filled it with black coffee. Took a couple of tomato slices from the cutting board and plucked a handful of purple grapes from the bowl of fruit salad and settled into his spot at the kitchen table. "How about you?" he countered, after taking his first sip of coffee.

"Can't complain." Felix sat beside Winfield and opened the Metro section of the morning paper.

They sat in companionable silence while Winfield emptied his first cup of coffee.

"Did you pick the flowers yet?" he asked, filling his mug a second time.

"After breakfast."

Stargazer lilies from the garden in the backyard. Next to the sedums, jade, and Dixie Chicadees. It served as a continued testament to Delores' green thumb and Pull-Trex's obsessive compulsive watering on a specific, regimented schedule.

"Felix," Pull-Trex would warn him whenever he caught the old man near the verdant

plants. “Put down the hose, and step away from the garden.”

“I’m trying to help.”

“If you water them while the sun is at its zenith, you’ll scorch the roots. It’s the middle of summer!” Pull-Trex would counter, with his arm outstretched, as if he were trying to diffuse a hostage situation. “Put. down. the. hose and go watch Labradoodle’s Day Court, Not Without My Left Leg, or whatever god awful daytime soap you pass the time with.”

Pull-Trex walked into the kitchen dressed in a pair of dark trousers and a black button-up. Felix could tell by the spring in his step that he’d been up for awhile.

Maybe since four a.m....

“Pull-Trex,” Felix greeted the boy in an enigmatic tone. Equal parts accusation and warning perfected after years of being a father to a precocious teenager.

“Fee-lix,” Pull-Trex replied in an identical tone. A smile tucked into the corners of his mouth.

“How was your evening?”

“Good. How was your evening?”

“Tip. Top.”

“Well, okay, I’m glad that’s settled.” He poured himself a glass of grapefruit juice from the fridge. Sophie walked in as he tapped the fridge door closed with his sneaker.

“So-phie,” Pull-Trex greeted her. “Take note of my suspicious tone. It’s how we’re welcoming each other on this anniversarial morning.”

“Duly noted,” she smiled. Tousled Winfield’s exploded-clockwork curls. Leaned into Felix for a hug. She gently nudged a mauradering CompsognathSix aside from the fridge (Winfield’s dinosaurs mostly stayed in the basement, but occasionally made fridge raids during meals) and self-consciously asked Pull-Trex to move so she could get a plate from the cabinet.

Felix watched with inquisitorial eyes until Sophie was seated beside him at the table with a full plate.

“When are we leaving for the cemetery, Papa?”

Chapter 5: Reunions

Winfield Pendergast

The Metropolitan Municipal Cemetery gleamed in the morning sun. Some of the quartz gravestones glittered. Others sagged with age and crumbled with decay. It put Winfield in mind of a mouth given selective dental work. A bedazzling of the grill.

Beneath an aged oak tree, a groundskeeper tended a nearby plot. He was hunched with age after spending years keeping his nose towards the ground. Wrapped in a tattered cloak, he leaned against a cane that seemed the fan out towards the bottom. A wide-brimmed hat shrouded the man's face in shadows.

Winfield thrust a bouquet of lilies towards Sophie. She was dressed in a black blouse and dark jeans. Her shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair was clipped in an intricate system of braids and bobby-pins.

"Thanks, Win," she smiled. Sophie tucked the bouquet beneath her metallic arm. Slid her left in Felix's and made their way to the fence line along the north side of the graveyard. There, they found Delores McGillicuddy's headstone.

Winfield and Pull-Trex waited dutifully as Felix and Sophie stood at her grave.

From the corner of his eye, Winfield thought he saw a pair of spiders as big as hands scale the weathered exterior of a vestibule mausoleum. When he turned, Winfield realized they were they were the outstretched hands of an angel, carved in marble.

Winfield tugged the hem of Pull-Trex's button-up. "Did you—"

Pull-Trex knocked his hand away. Shushed him, without taking his eyes from the back of Sophie's head.

Winfield turned again and noticed the groundskeeper standing beside the granite structure. The man leaned on his cane, and while his face was hidden, Winfield knew he was being watched.

Sophie watched Winfield thread through the gravestones towards the center of the city of the dead. The plots Felix purchased after Winfield explained what happened to his parents all those years ago.

Felix called Sophie after Winfield confided the details of his story. Her Papa's voice sounded troubled. Plagued with grief.

"I can't imagine what that boy's gone through, Sofa. It's unthinkable," he said over the phone. "The charade he put himself through... He needs to mourn their loss, properly. Heck. I need to mourn. Claudia was like my daughter—"

He had to hang up after that.

She walked beside Pull-Trex. Both were careful to bump into each other as they walked. Their fingertips grazed repeatedly.

As they approached Mr. and Mrs. Pendergast's graves, Pull-Trex saw a man and woman, standing with their backs to the approaching group.

Pull-Trex searched his BrainFrame. Matched the man's height. The silhouette. When the man turned towards them, Trex bypassed negligible differences in the man's appearance: The buzzed hair. The closely-cropped beard. The loss of weight (fifteen pounds, by his calculations).

Norman Roberts. He was alive.

"Winfield Pendergast," Roberts beamed a luminescent smile, staring at the boy. "It's been a long time."

Pull-Trex clenched his fists. Shook his head. Offered the only fact his BrainFrame deemed relevant: "Asshole."

Chapter 6: Sophie's Flash Fiction

Winfield Pendergast

To: Behnke760@Geezmail.com

Subject: Daily Flash Fiction

The Cemetery

Robert Norman turned. Grinned at Logan Gasket, Mike Trike, Mr. Boots, and Seamus. "It's been a long time," Norman smiled at his nemesis. "You remember Cordelia, I'm sure. Don't be rude. Say hell-oh, hell!" he screamed, as Cordelia's face transformed to the snapping muzzle of a bear. She clawed at his face with her warm, beer-bottled colored fingers. Despite her rage, and evident wish to claw Norman to ribbons, he dropped his arms. Took a step back from Cordelia.

She remained frozen in place, swinging at the painter, snapping her jaws, but without being able to move an inch. Logan's pewter-colored eyes were focused on her. His brow knit with concentration.

Norman nodded with understanding. "I see your powers have mutated as well," he chuckled. "Glad I'm not the only one." He pointed to Cordelia. "You'll fix her, of course."

"Why the hell would I help you?" Logan wondered, incredulously. "You tried to kill me."

"Yes, I tried to kill you. Ages ago. And you just saved my life. Had I wanted to, I could have collapsed her body into dust, but, regardless," he paused. "Light and Darkness. Darkness and Light. You can't have one without the other. But, you will fix her."

Logan's eyes went cloudy. His arms dropped. "I will fix her." He removed a tool kit from his trousers.

Norman looked at Trike, Mr. Boots, and Seamus. "Stay where you are."

Though Trike and Seamus struggled against his words, they were stuck. Norman said, "See...my powers have evolved as well. Add hypnotic suggestion to Paint Chromatic Stress Disorder."

"I'm sorry, Robert," Cordelia's head returned. She smoothed out her dress. Nodded her thanks to Logan and whispered, "You're bothering this handsome, young man? Disgraceful."

Logan returned to the group after his final adjustments to Cordelia's circuitry. Once free from Norman's orders, he focused his gaze on an oak tree in the distance and twitched his head out of frustration. The oak snapped in two. He then tore the roots from the ground, disinterring two ancient corpses in the process.

Amusement danced in Norman's blue eyes. "Shall I get to the point?"

"Please do," Logan replied. "Yesterday."

“We’re going to have a dinner party.”

“Because the last one went so well?” Trike managed. Seamus guessed his BrainFrame might be interfering with Norman’s hypnotic suggestions.

“If memory serves,” Norman pointed towards the grave directly behind him. “Your father is dead.”

“Robert!” Cordelia gasped.

“Asshole,” Trike agreed with the housekeeper’s sentiment.

Norman continued. “There won’t be anyone there to trigger a warning about the shade of evil in my heart, is all I meant. We both know what the other is.

“So, what?” Logan asked. “You’ll come over and reminisce about old times?”

“No. This time, I’ll kill you. But, first,” he wagged the index finger of his left hand. “First, you’ll bring back Margo.”

“My mother is dead. You should know that better than anyone.”

“Yes, but you’re a—” Norman swallowed back bile. “A genius. You’ll figure something out.” He slipped his hands in his pocket, and said: “Now, turn around and go. All of you.”

The quartet turned. Seamus rushed to Mr. Boots’ side. Being the oldest, eighty-four in January, he seemed to be the most affected by Norman’s hypnosis. His face was pale. His breathing, uneven.

“Are you okay, Papa?” Seamus asked, touching his elbow with her metallic hand. Gently leading him towards their car. She placed her cold fingers against his feverish forehead.

“I’m fine. Fine!” Mr. Boots waved her off. “Logan, are you okay?”

“Yes,” Logan replied, shortly. His silver eyes were lost in thought.

“Your mom actually had feelings for that guy?” Trike asked in disbelief.

“What? No. What’re you talking about? Who told you that?” Logan slipped into the back seat of their car without awaiting a reply. He didn’t notice the look that passed between Trike and Seamus. The whispered, “That was close, yeah?”

Seamus ducked her head towards the Driver’s side window. “You’re sure you’re okay to drive, Papa? Because, I have my permit.”

“I’m fine, Sam. Just...Please, get in, okay?”

She nodded. Got in the passenger seat. As their car pulled away, Seamus looked towards the center of the graveyard. She watched Norman approach his black suburban. A murder of crows flocked at his feet. Did she see dactyl feathers...or fingers? Grabbing at Norman’s pant legs. Pulling at his arms. Hands or birds?

Their vehicle rounded a corner, and the painter was obscured by a granite obelisk.

When he returned to Imogen, she was watching the retreating the Hekatonkeires.

“Tu fais quoi?”

“Something sneaky,” he replied, smiling in that special sociopathic way of his.

“The usual, then?” she grimaced. “What’s it going to get you?”

“Hopefully, the upper hand.”

Chapter 8: The Plan

Winfield Pendergast

When they got back to the house, Felix laid down to take a nap upon Sophie's dogged insistence. The three teenagers waited until he was snoring soundly before they made their plans.

"How are you feeling?" Sophie wondered aloud. Her head was tilted. Her eyes, warm. "It must have been quite a shock."

"Surprisingly, no" Winfield replied. "I read a couple of your stories last night," he added to address the confusion in Sophie's eyes, and Fred's spectacled face. "I imagine he survived just like you said he did. At least, that's what I'm going to say for the sake of the story. Plus, it's hard to be incredulous when you're talking about cyborgs, paint monsters, and monsters comprised of baked goods."

"He has a point," Pull-Trex grinned.

"It still begs the question," Sophie sighed.

"What am I going to do?"

"What are *we* going to do," Tree corrected.

"I suppose what I should have done five years ago, but held off until this precise moment now that it's become intrinsic to the plot development."

"Which is?" Pull-Trex wondered.

Winfield ran a hand through his exploded clockwork curls. "Go to the zoo."

"Of course," Pull-Trex looked to Sophie. "I knew he was going to say something insane. It's hard to ever predict what that's going to *be*, but you can guarantee it will be bonkers." He looked back to Winfield. "Can I say something without you getting upset."

Winfield shook his head ruefully. "It seems almost impossible, but you can try."

"Okay, I know Roberts is an asshole," Trex began slowly. "But, he looked pretty good, *right?* Fit."

Winfield slapped Pull-Trex in the back of the head, knocking off his glasses.

Winfield, Pull-Trex, and Sophie snuck out of the house after Felix had consumed his finger of bourbon, and was interred in his recliner, snoring contentedly. "Borrowing" the keys was simply a matter of taking them from a hook by the back door. She slipped into the driver seat of Felix's forest green Volvo 240. Adhering to the strict rules of "Shotgun," Pull-Trex claimed the passenger seat, with Winfield in back.

"You know," Pull-Trex said. "The Volvo 240 series of cars was produced between 1974 to 1993. They sold nearly three million units worldwide, and--"

"And, Jan Wilsgaard designed them," Winfield interrupted with exasperation. "That might be more interesting if you didn't say it every time we rode in this car."

"Would it?" Sophie smiled, putting the car in reverse.

"Et tu, Brute?" Pull-Trex shook his head, mournfully. "Can't help it," he tapped the side of his head. "The BrainFrame has to do it's BrainFrame thing."

"Maybe I can develop a filter, or something."

"And tinker with greatness?" Pull-Trex replied.

"Girls, girls," Sophie interjected. "You're both pretty. Now, can someone explain to me why we're breaking into the zoo?"

Winfield leaned forward. "On the night Roberts attacked me, one of my neighbors called the police..."

"Plaster blasters and paint monsters tend to draw the eye." Pull-Trex nodded.

"Right, well, the authorities also found my Hydra-Pretzel."

"The monster you created," Sophie said.

"Right. Helpful exposition there. Anyway, the government claimed some of my inventions--"

"Read 'dangerous weapons,'" Pull-Trex added.

"Right, and the zoo claimed the Hydra-Pretzel. They deemed it an endangered species, and put it on display for the public. What *we're* going to do is break into the zoo, cut open the Hydra-Pretzels stomach, and pull out what my remains of my mother's tech."

"Can't imagine PETA's going to like that," Sophie turned towards Pull-Trex, momentarily. "Go ahead. I know you want to say it."

Winfield waited, expectantly, already shaking his head. "It's a bread monster. Say it."

"PITA wouldn't like it either," Pull-Trex blurted out. "I mean, how can you not make the joke?"

It was quiet for a moment, punctuated only by the steady thrum of the tires against the road.

"How are we going to break into the zoo?" Pull-Trex wondered aloud. "It's not like we have any tools. Sure you have super strength, intelligence, and telekinesis now, but you wouldn't want to rely on those things *all* the time. It would make for a boring story. You've got to shake things up a bit."

Winfield muttered something.

"What was that?" Sophie's eyes found Winfield's in the rearview mirror. "It sounded like you said my name."

"I did," Winfield replied. "Your hand."

"What about it?"

"It's...more than just a hand."

"What else can it do?"

"It depends on what the plot needs," Winfield shrugged. "It comes equipped with a laser, for starters. That's how we'll get through the fences and into the Hydra-pretzel enclosure."

"So, when you said, "We" would be cutting open the monster, you meant 'Me.'"

Winfield nodded grimly. "You'll be fine."

"Swiss-Army Sophie," Pull-Trex chuckled.

Chapter 9: Know Me Better

Cronus

They slipped through the night like a clutter of spiders, nearing a ramshackle boathouse on a secluded, overgrown beach. The place looked haunted, or dangerous, or both, which were precisely two of the things their master was looking for when scouting real estate for his lair. It simply wouldn't do to have a place bathed in sunlight; blonde wood gleaming like honey and open floor plans. Every villain worth their salt looks for a property that mirrors their twisted, crabbed heart. Cronus was no different; he was the kind of mastermind you could rely on in a pinch, even *if* his plan was still obscured at the moment. Its Endgame concluded with the death of Winfield Marconi Pendergast so, rest assured, you're in good, malevolent hands.

Multitudinous, as well, which brings us neatly back to the Hekatonkeires.

As he watched them gather in formation, he wore a voluminous black cloak, which he kept snugly wrapped against his skeletal body. His face was wreathed in shadows cast by his wide-brimmed black sun hat. Don't let that give you the impression that he enjoyed trivialities like sunlight, or the hazards of malignant skin cancers. It was to obscure his wrecked visage from the world. The weight of that same world, seemed to rest on his stopped shoulders, which is why he leaned on well-worn, shepherd's crook, made of Hawthorne. The only flesh visible in the darkness of the boathouse were his birch-like fingers: ghostly white, and wickedly chapped. Being something of a criminal, and something more we won't discuss yet, he failed to see the virtues of hand lotions. They were for lesser mortals; and he had gone beyond them all, save perhaps one.

He cleared his throat. "Well?" he addressed his army. "What did Roberts have to say of himself?"

The largest of the Hekatonkeires, a heavily calloused claw of a hand, with coils of black wire encircling their palms, orchestrated the response of his lesser brethren:

"..... / .-. .-.- .- .-. .-. .-. / .-.- .- .-. .-.- .-."

(He requires time.)

"Time?" Cronus croaked. "Does he realize who he's talking to?"

"--- .-. / .-. --- .-. .-. .-. / -. --- -"

(Of course, not) Their fingers fumbled awkwardly like a teenage boy unbuckling their first bra

"-.--- --- .-. / .-. .-. / .- .-.--- .-. --- / .---- --- .-. / ..-. .-. .-.--- / .- /-.-.-.-.---"

(You are keeping your identity a secret)

Just as Roberts discovered once discovered about his Prism, Cronus often rued his henchmen's inability to perceive sarcasm. "Nevermind," he drew a hand against his sandpaper chin. "When will he be ready to act?"

"..- .-. .-. .-. .- .-."

(Unknown)

"What are his plans for Claudia?" he asked about Winfield's defunct mother.

"..- .-. .-. .-. .- .-."

(Unknown)

"Stand by," he paced the weathered boards of the dock, until he waved his hand as if swatting a fly. "I need a minute to think.

The sound of shuffling and clicking filled the small space as his army found a partner. The Hekatonkeires sleep grasping a twin's hand. Fifty pairs in blinking red-eyed slumber, giving the appearance of fervent worship or supplication. The faint whir of machinery, like the gentle susurrant of breath. Cronus drew his cracked, bony fingers against the thick cables, imagining himself in a small sea of grass, warm from the sun, bathing his face in its golden rays. Those days were long past. Instead, he was in this damp creaking coffin of a boat house, listening to the incessant waves against the salt-stained dock, and the gentle beat of motorboats against the pylons

He drew his weathered cloak against his withered frame. His crooked staff dug into his armpit as he limped into the open to feel...something. The spray of the Atlantic against his face. The salt spray against his tongue. But the years have driven him past the sensory word. The sun, replaced with the angry red of his machines. If anything passed his tongue, it tasted simply of ash. His singular hunger having burned all others away:

Revenge.

Well...not, revenge. In truth, there was little malice behind snuffing out Pendergast. It was a leveling of the scales. A return to balance.

Cronus hobbled onto his dilapidated houseboat and collapsed wearily into one the chairs on deck. He noticed a flicker of movement amongst his paired henchmen. While he narrowed his eyes for closer inspection, a small whine of a miniscule motor accompanied the movement. He remembered the movement from his distant past.

Fingers bristled as Phthalo Green snuck furtively amongst their ranks, until it reached the entrance, and disappeared back into the darkness. Back to Roberts.

"... .. / ... / ... / ... / ...?"

(Should we go after it) one of his wakened Hekatonkeires tapped.

Cronus cleared the dust from his throat and shook his head. "Let him come."

"- ... / ... / ... / ...?"

(To what purpose)?"

Cronus' cracked lips parted into a ghoulish approximation of a smile. "So, he can know me better. First, though, `` he reconsidered. "Half of you go to the zoo to see what Winfield is up to."

"... .. / ... / ... / ... / ... / ... / ... / ... / ...?"

(How do you know the boy will be there) his favorite asked, while half of the

A group of the Hekatonkeires were already abandoning their partners and crawling out of the boathouse.

"Because," Cronus pulled his hat down to obscure his sad smile. "He wants his mother."

Chapter 10: In My Heart

Winfield, Pull-Trex & Sophie

The trio disembarked from Felix's car in a darkened car lot a few blocks from the zoo. As their shoes slapped against the recently rainswept pavement, despite their best attempts to "creep" in the darkness, the sound of six pairs of light footsteps echoed behind them. Winfield turned as the CompsognathSix, his cybernetic dinosaurs, gathered at his feet. Their reptilian faces were as hopeful as Christmas morning; wide-eyed optimism and curiosity. Heads, tilted, awaiting command, a morsel of food, or a mere word from their devoted friend.

"What're you guys doing here?" Winfield's voice was creased with surprise. "I left you back home."

One of the small lizards chirped brightly.

"But I don't need your help, he replied.

Taking full advantage of Winfield's divided attention, Pull-Trex sidled next to Sophie and clandestinely squeezed her hand. He smiled at her briefly before releasing his grip. He adjusted his glasses and said, "You know they feel a bit protective of you ever since Roberts."

Winfield turned. "This isn't anything like that, though. We need smaller numbers if we're going to break into the zoo."

"They're small," Sophie offered. "I didn't spot them in the rearview at all the entire way here."

"No," He drew a hand to his forehead, and through his clockwork curls. "This isn't going to work." He redirected his mounting frustration at his erstwhile creations. "You guys have to go home," He reasoned. "Someone should be there for Felix. I don't know what Roberts is going to do. He might attack while we're away. He'd be defenseless."

The leader of the CompsognathSix chirped again; a Jurassic edge to its birdsong.

"I *know* his chair turns into a Panic room if there's an intruder."

"Wait, *what?*" Sophie stepped forward. "Does Papa know that?"

Pull-Trex touched her shoulder, careful not to disrupt her Swiss Army Hand chip. He shook his head. Touched an index finger to his lips.

Winfield took a breath. He could feel his anger mounting; his strength doubling. One of his CompsognathSix threaded itself between his legs, hopefully. Before he could stop himself, Winfield gave it a harmless kick, sending the other back several paces.

"You need to go home!" Winfield shouted. He picked up a stick from the parking lot and wielded it as ferociously as his words. "Get outta here!" he continued; spittle flying from his mouth. "Go on!" he stepped forward, threateningly. "Git!"

Confused, the CompsognathSix stood their ground until Winfield's stick flattered against the side of one of their bodies. After contact, they hopped back, uncertain, chattering their

confusion. They put more distance from their creator when he ran towards them. When rocks were thrown at them by the way, they slipped away, casting mournful glances, filling the parking lot with the echoes of their sad confusion.

Winfield steadied his breathing.

Sophie looked around to make sure their stealth was still intact.

Pull-Trex evaluated Winfield's emotional state, made a mental calculation, and itched his BrainFrame scratching at the insides of his skull:

"Classic 'Shoo the Dog' trope right there, Win," he smiled, despite his anxiety. The information the BrainFrame triggered felt like something akin to a panic attack. Heart palpitations and chest cave-ins. "Almost a *perfect* reproduction of that scene from *White Fang*," he enthused. "There's also that scene from *Fox and the Hound* when the Widow Tweed releases Tod back into the wilderness because he would never be safe as a pet." He grimaced at Sophie in lieu of apology for what he was about to do, cleared his throat, and in a haunting tenor, began to sing:

*We met, it seems, such a short time ago
You looked at me - needing me so
Yet from your sadness
Our happiness grew
And I found out I needed you too
I remember how we used to play*

*I recall those rainy days
The fire's glow
That kept us warm
And now I find - we're both alone*

*Goodbye may seem forever
Farewell is like the end
But in my heart's the memory
And there you'll always be*

Throughout the song, doubled over, with his hands on his knees trying to regain his calm, Winfield listened to Pull-Trex. First reluctantly, then intensely. He felt the long dead fingers of his mother's hands ruffling his hair. The way she called him 'her little bird.' He thought about the ghostly protection of her in his bedroom; the hologram that wished him a goodnight each evening. Felt the chasm in his chest the first his parents died. Then the second. His father chose his own destruction. His mother was taken.

When Pull-Trex finished singing, Winfield stood, walked between the pair, and said:
"C'mon. We have to go resurrect my mother."

Pull-Trex turned to Sophie and said, "That's not even the weirdest thing he's said today."

"Let's go," she jogged ahead. Pull-Trex followed.

From the shadows, something watched them leave.

After hours, the zoo's inhabitants paced their cages as the trio made their way towards the Hydra-Pretzel paddock. The Gorillas watched with stern curiosity. Grizzlies growled their low-throated recriminations, aware of the darkness, and the unusual time for visitors. Plus, they were not a fan of the beak-nosed, hoodie-clad youngster, who couldn't seem to stop talking; his fear wafted off of the teen, and it made them anxious.

"A girl with a robotic hand, a homeless dinosaur-human hybrid, and a telekinetic wunderkind walk into a zoo," Pull-Trex continued, helplessly.

"For the last time," Winfield interrupted, irritably. "Will you *can* it?" The pair walked shoulder-to-shoulder, with Sophie lagging behind.

"Is that all I am to you? A can?"

"Jim-inny, you're starting to sound like Triceratops," Winfield shook his head in exasperation. "Of *course*, I don't think of you as a can, but there's bound to be security guards around here. I might have been able to disable the cameras, but someone will fix the glitch eventually. Just shut up with the jokes. Sophie," he turned, "how're you doing?"

"I'm good," she smiled weakly, brushing a strand of her hair from her face. "A little nervous, but good."

"You'll be great," he smiled. "You got us in here, no problem."

"Yeah," she examined her metallic arm in the glow of an overhead security light. "This isn't exactly doing a lot to calm my nerves, Win. I feel like you should've told me this was a deadly weapon when you gave it to me. What if I'd accidentally shot Papa or--"

"I was going to tell you," he replied. "I was just waiting for a minute alone. Felix wouldn't have liked it, at all. I get the impression he doesn't, anyway."

"Grown-ups are weird about giving teenagers super-powered lasers, and whatnot," Pull-Trex rolled his eyes behind his sunglasses. "Go figure." his BrainFrame interrupted, "*Armed and dangerous, Hand is the trigger, Trigger warn--*"

In the distance, the Hydra-Pretzel's unearthly roars rent the night air. Whereas the animals they'd passed before roamed their enclosures, enjoying the breezy evening, the cages they passed as they neared the Hydra-Pretzel remained inside, huddled amongst each other, aware of the abomination so close to their living space. The smell of sulphuric tar mingled with the scent of earth and summer rain.

Unconsciously, Winfield lowered his voice. "Once you get us inside, Sophie, I'll use my powers to lift the Hydra-Pretzel out of its tar pit and move it over the ground. Once its stomach is exposed, you'll use your laser to open it up."

"Won't it die?" her voice was tinged with remorse.

"No. It'll regenerate the same way it does when it loses a head."

"How do you know your mom is even *in* there anymore, let alone alive?" Pull-Trex asked. "It's been five years. Wouldn't the Hydra-Pretzel--you know-- have ...gone to the bathroom by now?"

"Dude," Winfield punched Pull-Trex's shoulder. "You had to go there?"

"What?" he rubbed his arm. "It's a legitimate question! I don't know the first thing about a pretzel monster's biology. I missed that day in school."

Winfield sighed. "She's in there. I can't explain it. I just know."

"Well, that's helpful," Pull-Trex muttered.

Winfield, Pull-Trex, and Sophie stopped at the Hydra-Pretzels perimeter fence. As Sophie cocked her thumb, and pointed her index finger at the chain link, Winfield held out his arm. "Wait," he hissed.

"What is it?" She whispered, following Winfield's eyes to a spot behind them.

Brow furrowed in confusion, Winfield said, "I thought I saw something. Red lights." He blinked.

"There's nothing there," Pull-Trex offered, resetting his sunglasses on his face.

"Okay," he stepped back. "Go ahead, Sophie."

A laser bolt shot from the top of her index finger, painting their skin a bright red, while the metal liquefied. She cut a hole large enough to allow them entry. During the process, the Hydra-Pretzels screamed brown mustardy-murder. The trio crept cautiously towards the bubbling tar pit. When they were close to the shore, the monster emerged from beneath the roiling tar. A look of recognition flirted across its golden-brown face, which was quite a feat, given that it didn't have eyes. It was more of a pause; its pale tongue inspecting its jagged salt-crystal teeth, testing the group's scent.

"I think it recognizes us," Pull-Trex offered.

The Hydra-Pretzel gathered a breath and emitted an ear-splitting roar.

"Oh, I don't think that's a good thing," Sophie offered. She steadied her left arm with her right hand and cocked her thumb and index finger. "NOW, WINFIELD!"

Winfield extended his arms and lifted them into the air towards the fast-approaching monster. Immediately, the Hydra-Pretzel was writhing and thrashing in the air. It's two mouths snapping, uselessly. With sweat beading his brow, arms shaking with nerves, and the effort of holding his creation aloft, through clenched teeth, Winfield said, "Now."

The laser beam.

A scent of burnt toast.

The wet splash of the startled, wounded Hydra-Pretzel being redeposited into its boiling environs.

Sophie was in Pull-Trex's arms, her back to the mustard-drenched slop disgorged from the pretzel monster. Pull-Trex rubbed her back as Winfield crouched for a closer look. Random automobile tires, discarded prototypes of early dinosaurs that were foolish enough to get too close to the tar pit when it was in the backyard of Winfield's old house. Small tubes of paint from when Roberts was partially ingested, and...

A ragged form shifted amongst the detritus. It may flat on its stomach. Copper tubes and wires exposed, pale flesh hanging in ribbons from arms and legs. It sat up, cautiously, skipping against the mustard. It drew a hand across its face to remove the mustard from its eyes. Before it could speak, however, a commotion broke out amongst the trees bordering the Hydra-Pretzel's paddock.

Countless red light numbered the swaying branches, as they scattered towards the ground, trying to escape Winfield's CompsognathSix, who refused to abandon their master. Their sharp teeth and claws made short work of the Hekatonkeires. They snapped through mottled flesh and wire, leaping on their spidery likeness, as they scrambled to report back to Cronus. Despite their best efforts, several managed to escape.

"What the hell was all that about?" Pull-Trex marveled. He turned and was rendered speechless.

Winfield was hugging the mustard-coated form. It rubbed its hands through his hair, at the base of his neck.

"My little bird," Claudia murmured.

"Hi, mom," he smiled.

Chapter 11: Find a Way

Roberts and Imogen

Roberts paced the kitchen at Bruin's Repose while Imogen stood at the stove; her battered Coleman recipe box close at hand. The smell of simmering vegetable oil and fried dough relaxed Roberts in ways only his depraved machinations could. Imogen coated her steaming beignets with powdered sugar and handed a small plate to Norman. An enigmatic smile was tucked into the corners of her warm face. "Be careful," she wiped her hands on her apron, removed her cast iron skillet from the hob, as clicked off the blue flames. "They're hot."

Roberts sat on a stool opposite her. After one bite, he let out a euphoric sigh, tinged with nostalgia of the real Imogen back when she was alive. "These are perfect?" he smiled, accepting the large glass of whole milk she placed in his hand.

She regarded him as he wolfed down the fried dough. Her look, skeptical and measuring.

"What?" he asked when the last beignet was finished. He drained his milk. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm just trying to figure out why you're trying so desperately hard to ruin that boy's life again." Her voice was musical in its skepticism. "I know I was only around in spirit last time, until he recreated me, but it nearly killed you in the process. Why keep batting the beehive?"

"Because he took something from me. We've been through this before."

"Non, mais allô quoi? Life is constantly taking things from us, Norman. Those rabbit men in white sheets took my life years ago; you don't see me on some sort of vendetta, though. What's done is done. Life takes, but sometimes it gives back."

Norman stood and resumed pacing. He fingered the near claw dangling from his neck; the puckered skin across his chest left by the same claw. "What has it given me lately, huh?"

"Well, for one," she folded her arms, "What about your crazy ass powers? That's something. What about a successful television show? What about me?" the last, was given added emphasis. "You're so blinded by hate these days, and a special kind of crazy that you can't see the forest from your 'Happy Little Tree.' And, now you want to drag the boy's mother into this? You're going to take that peace away from him, too? On top of everything else?"

"She loved me," he replied, irritably. "I know it. We were going to run away together."

"N'importe quoi," she scoffed. "Listen to yourself. You don't sound like an evil genius; you sound like a lovesick teenager on summer vacation. You honestly believe she would leave her son, and go with *you*? His arch nemesis hell-bent on killing him?" Imogen chuckled, quietly. "C'est n'importe quoi. Maybe you are crazy, sweetie." She closed her recipe box and started cleaning up her mess.

"It's not crazy," he slammed the counter with his fist.

With her back to him, Imogen, unruffled as ever, voice tinged with amusement, replied: "What have I always told you, Norman? Occupe-toi de tes oignons: Mind your onions. Mind your business. Clandestine meetings. Robotic hands. Paint monsters. Do you really want to go through with this again? It almost killed you last time."

"If I could convince Claudia to go with me..."

"You'd never be happy without killing her boy. How could she ever allow that?"

"I don't know, yet."

"You better find a way, if you have any chance with her."

Sloppy footsteps were heard on the stairs, as Roberts Prism slopped across the floor, trailing a skid of paint in its wake.

Imogen grabbed at a broom and squeezed the handle menacingly. "How many times have I told that thing to stay off the hardwood? It takes ages to clean."

The Prism shrugged helplessly, leaving a Jackson Pollock apology on the floor. He extended his arm towards Roberts and opened his hand. Phthalo Green stood, waiting.

"Do you have news?"

His small soldier nodded vigorously.

Norman left the room and came back with a sketch pad of heavy vellum paper. He ripped off a couple sheets and places them on the counter.

Phthalo wasted little time. He leapt from the Prism's palm and landed gracefully on the blank landscapes of paper. He skated across their surfaces, leaving detailed instructions of the path the Hekatonkeires had taken, as well as exterior and interior pictures of the boathouse. He finished by writing Cronus taunting invitation for Roberts to 'Come and know him better.'

When the pictures were complete, Norman Roberts smiled, delightedly. "I think it's time I know who I'm dealing with."

Chapter 12: Just Another Tuesday

Winfield Pendergast & Claudia Pendergast

The ride to Felix's house was an uncomfortably quiet affair. It wasn't that the resurrected, or more appropriately, reclaimed personage of Claudia Pendergast wreaked of spicy brown mustard and something unquestionably industrial, it had more to do with all the extra passengers. One, Claudia, as well as the CompsognathSix crammed happily into the backseat. Their reptilian faces frozen in a perpetual grin as they nuzzled Winfield, and took turns hanging their heads from the backseat windows, into the breezy summer air. Throughout the trip, Claudia held tightly to Winfield's leg, as if he might disappear from her side. For his part, he held her hand to reassure himself, as well. Cloaked and shivering, she was *actually* there. Beside him. After five years of remaining in place, he wondered if light would gain a forward momentum again.

Back at the house, Wilhelm II threatened to wake Felix, still passed out in his recliner. The dog's tail wagged rapturously, seeming on its own. His pink tongue cleaned the mustard from between Claudia's grimy toes. Her feet and ankles. Any part uncovered by the scratchy blanket they'd found in the trunk was bathed. Sophie finally dragged the dog away by its collar and locked it in her bedroom. She came back as Winfield was following Claudia downstairs to his converted laboratory bedroom.

"Can I talk to you a second?" she called from the top step.

Winfield told his mother, "I'll down in a minute?" and come back up the stairs. "What's up?"

Leaning against the wall, Sophie's eyes were filled with worry. "How are you doing with all this?"

"All of what?"

"Your mom suddenly being back after all this time? It's a lot to take in."

"My whole life is a lot to take in," he shrugged. "This is just another Tuesday on the weirdness scale." He reached out and touched her metallic arm. "How are *you* doing with *this*?"

She took a step back, afraid to give him a false impression of her feelings, which lay firmly with Pull-Trex. Their conversation punctuated with Felix's sonorous call. "Oh, who cares about me, Win. I'll get used to this. I can't imagine what you're going through."

He smiled. "I'll be fine. Really."

She took a breath. "I also wanted to talk about Papa. You need to let me talk to him in the morning before you bring her up. The surprise might kill him. She's supposed to be dead."

"That's fine. She'll probably be down for a couple days while I get her cleaned up and repaired. Fill her in on the last few years. You and Pull-Trex can tell Felix whatever you need to. But I should get down there," he turned.

"You're sure you're alright with this?"

"I'm fine," he smiled once more. "Get some sleep."

"Goodnight."

Claudia Pendergast sat on a cold, metallic table; the blanket gathered at her shoulders. She offered a weak smile when Winfield entered the room, rubbing his hands together, mentally calculating the steps it would take to restore her to full functionality. To see him like this again. Grown. His face sharpening. Body, filling out with muscle and a recent growth spurt. Her little bird was still in those features; trace elements, but he had become something else in her absence, a far cry from the royal-blue infant that almost didn't survive his birth: he'd become a young man, all while she wasn't looking. She brushed small drop from her tear and mustard stained face and smiled.

"What?" Her fragile smile was transferred to Winfield's face.

"It's good to see you," she replied.

His form somehow got smaller as he released a breath, and the tension along his broadening shoulders. "It's really good to see you, too, mom. I've missed you."

Claudia pulled the blanket closer to her body against the room's chill. She paused, and asked, "What happened, though? Why are at Felix's house? Where have I been for five years?"

Winfield's face fell. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Claudia's eyes went distant. Her face slackened as she cast through her recent access memory. "Dinner," she answered after a moment. "Norman Roberts came over to our house to eat, for some reason. That's it," she stopped in frustration.

"A lot has happened since then," he sat beside her on the table. "A lot of years."

"Tell me everything," She answered quietly. "Tell me where your father is."

It would be a long night.

"... .."

(Again, with all due respect properly accorded to you, we are only hands. The fact that we can even communicate this way seems pretty amazing.)

Cronus rolled his red-rimmed eyes. "Get on with it, then. His dinosaurs destroyed some of your number," he paused impatiently. "What else? What did the zoo have to do with the boy's mother.

The remaining hands explained how to Hydra-Pretzel was summoned from the tar. How the girl cut it open with a red beam of light. How the boy knelt down and helped his weary mother stand.

"Wait a minute," Cronus started. "What do you mean 'helped her stand.' Where was she the entire time?"

"... .."
(Inside the twisty bread monster.)

"Alive, though?" Cronus gasped which sent him into a sudden fit of wracking coughs. He thought once more of what he has seen at the cemetery. The making Pendergast tombstones. He remembered Roberts' strange demand of the youngest Pendergast concerning the boy's deceased mother, but he thought the request was a product of a twisted, turpentine-soaked mind. As far from reality as this twisted soap opera they were in.

"... .."

(She seemed alive. She greeted her offspring. They squeezed each other for an inordinate amount of time with wet faces. Then the chicken lizards started ripping us apart, finger by finger. We cannot be sure.)

"Claudia is alive," Cronus muttered to himself. He limped across the dock and onto his houseboat, deep in tormented thought. His Hekatonkeires found partners where they could, and promptly fell into an exhausted slumber. One was left to shiver on its own. Its singular red eye, blinking sadly.

Cronus removed his hat and rested his head against his cracked fists. Wisps of white hair fell across his knuckles. Consumed with these revelations, he didn't hear the shifting sand on his abandoned beach. The hard-heeled step of Roberts, or the gloppy lurch of The Prism, until they stood amongst the slumbering Hekatonkeires.

Roberts looked at Cronus. A smile of recognition painted itself across his face. "Well, well, well," he said, with an air of triumph.

Cronus sighed. He replaced his wide-brimmed hat and stood, "Hello, Norman," he sighed.

"Hello, Cronus," Roberts replied. "Or would you prefer that I call you by your real name Paul, right? Paul Pendergast?"

"Whichever is fine."

"Oh," Roberts chuckled. "You have quite a bit of explaining to do."

Chapter 13: Origins

Paul Pendergast (“Cronus”)

Excerpt from an abandoned Sophie McGillicuddy Draft:

The world went black for Logan Gasket's father, Silas Gasket. The void was nothing new for him. He had experienced it years before on a solitary rural road. At least, they thought it was empty at the time. Him, his wife, and his young son in the backseat. Then, their car was transformed into a crumpled ball of aluminum foil. Broken glass. Melted rubber. Toxic waste spilled across the gravel, burning the grass. But Silas only remembers the grill of the olive green military vehicle coming head on towards their station wagon; the rest of the details were furnished by his now super-powered son when he woke from the dead.

For years, the thought would haunt him: his son pulling him and his wife's mangled corpse from the wreckage of the car. Dressing their bodies at the mortuary in their basement; Silas's trade. Logan, marrying his knowledge of robotics with the information he gleaned from observing his father working. The thought should bring some comfort to Silas; that the blood and viscera his son experienced wasn't completely foreign to the boy. When he woke however, Silas had difficulty feeling anything.

It was if a sneeze was lodged somewhere in the back of his throat, and nothing he could do could draw it out. He had become a tourist, or whichever cliché you would like to draw from. He remembered how to feel, but couldn't arrive at the steps to get from point A to B. His wife had an easier time with the transition, from life to after-life, or second life, or damned life. Yes. That's what it felt like if he were honest: that he was damned. His son needed him though. He was only ----- at the time. What kind of father would he be if he abandoned him now? What kind of husband? Man?

He still tried, though; expectations, seemingly like his soul, be damned.

Hand in the toaster...

A knife in the toaster...

Poisoned toast....

The toaster in the tub...

He was fixated on toasters, for whatever reason. He couldn't explain it.

After each mishap, Logan restored him. The attempts became so numerous, eventually, his son installed a Prime Directive component to his programming. No self harm, keep Logan safe. He doomed Simon.

He went through the difficult process of learning to live again with half of his internal organs, and formaldehyde coursing through his veins. There were good and bad days. When his son was ironing out the kinks of the Domestic Probability drive that predicted him and Mario's response to each other's actions. Knock down drag out fights. Literally. Demolished furniture. Plaster in their hair and the crevices of their bruised knuckles.

Years later, Silas regained some sense of happiness, or he had gotten so good at faking it that it was hard to tell the difference. His family seemed to be thriving. Things were good. Then Robert Norman entered the picture. That paint-crazed maniac. All of that hard work, their carefully constructed facade began to slip. His wife might have thought she was being sneaky, but Silas could tell. After years of pretending to be alive, had the audacity to live again; for real, with the man who was trying to kill their son. Small changes are easy to detect in a marriage. Especially one between two cyborgs. Heart palpitations. Flushed cheeks. Dilation of the pupils. Silas knew.

He finally had a chance to make his escape. He did what most wavering husbands did when his home life left him unfulfilled: he called the Russians...or the Romanians...he wasn't sure; he found the number in his son's ROLODEX...an ethnically ambiguous eastern European country that vaguely reminded him of the drills from his childhood, when a flimsy desktop was enough to save them from the horrors of an atomic bomb's fallout. Of course, this was before he realized that all one needed to survive a horrific, life-snuffing incident was a quick dip in radioactive chemicals. The Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts! Serbians!! That was it.

Anyway, like the Serbians came for Doc Brown in Back to the Future and--wait, no, that was the Libyans. Nevermind. The Serbians came for Silas Gasket:

"Margo. Logan. I'm tired," he shrugged. "My heart aches. My body aches. My mind--" He crouched to his knees and stood in front of Logan. "It's been the greatest privilege of my life watching you grow up, son. What you're capable of. Your intelligence. It's astounding. You surprise me every day, or you would," a shadow passed through his eyes. "If I still had that ability anymore. But, when you brought me back--It's like I didn't come back the whole way. Not like your mother," Silas lifted his chin and met his wife's eyes. Smiled. "Not like you, Pers. Something got snagged. And--I know with Norman Roberts lurking around the corner, it's a bad time to go--Maybe it's a horrible time to go--but, I can't wait anymore. I can't live in this," he pointed to the area above his heart. "This shell." He stood. "So, I took the easy way out. If you consider abandoning you easy," he shook his head, helplessly. "I just hope you can forgive me, in time."

"Silas..." Margo managed. Her chin quivered. Her black hair, in beautiful disarray.

"I've loved our life together, Margo. I have. I wish it was longer. But, I suppose even Persephone had to leave the Underworld from time to time." He stepped towards her and encircled her quivering frame. "I love you, I love you, I love you. I always will. Watch out for him, yeah?"

She nodded.

Silas stepped into the living room. Logan and Margo followed.

"Ready?" Fyodor asked. His ample bottom was nestled in the forgiving depths of the sofa.

"Yes."

"Okay," Fyodor stood, rubbing his hands. "Mr. Logan Gasket," he said, standing behind Silas. "Thank you for your contribution to Serbia. This will prompt our technology forward with leaps and bounds."

"Wait, Dad." Logan cried. "Please don't do this."

Silas looked on, levelly. His eyes were flat. His face pulled into a grimace. "I love you, Logan. Look after--"

Fyodor pulled the BrainFrame free from the back of Silas's head. His body went slack, his face plate fell open, and his chest swung wide like a tipped cabinet. A spool of brown ribbon tape skipped across the floor and stopped at Logan's feet.

They watched as the men carried Silas Gasket's lifeless body from the living room, into a waiting van, and out of their lives forever.

But, there is no forever when sequels were involved. Things didn't go as planned. Of course, they didn't. Even with oceans between them, Silas woke up. The Serbians were having trouble recreating the neurological processes associated with his son's BrainFrame; it was too expertly constructed. They needed further observations on a working model, which meant Silas Gasket.

He woke with a gasp, returned from the Underworld.

It had been months since he had abandoned his family, but his son's Prime Directive Programming remained in place, linked to his son's heartbeat. He felt it across the miles, alive and well. Hauntingly so.

As long as Logan lived, Silas must as well. As a result, after a quick calculation, Silas reasoned that his son couldn't live any longer. Whether it was the months his neural network was inactive, or the stagnating nanobots in his bloodstream, responsible for keeping his blood oxygen-rich, Silas awoke warped in both mind and body. Believing him a failed prototype, the Serbians did not maintain the Silas's fragile body. They'd also conveniently kept him in a room with minimal security, with access to a door that exited their facility; In truth, it was only a duplex with a crudely drawn sign. The funding for their new facility was tangled in bureaucracy; the government wanted to construct a state-sponsored waterpark first. All to Silas' benefit who limped free and clear without anyone noticing, until it was much too late.

The next several months were devoted to making it back to the States and gathering an army. Just as Winfield once learned how to divine the art of mortuary sciences, so too had Paul picked up a thing or two about robotics. Armed with this knowledge, he snuck into medical schools, and robbed their cadavers of their hands. After trial and error, he automated

a small army, and gave himself the moniker of Cronus. Anonymity was now a blanket he wrapped himself in.

After arriving back home, he found an abandoned property, and went to work. The first part of his plan involved enlisting Robert Norman, which proved easier than expected. Now, all Cronus had to do was sit back and wait for his son's destruction. The time would allow him ample time to get comfortable with the idea.

Chapter 14: The Past (and pending)

Claudia Pendergast

Claudia felt her heart, or what serves as her heart these days, constrict in her chest like a clenched fist. Her breath came in spasmodic bursts, while her skin felt like a bonfire, smoldering tennis shoes on cast iron grates and burning the eyes with insulation scratchiness. The last five years flashed through her mind. The suffocating blackness of her yeasty prison, the muffled rage of the Hydra-Pretzels through its golden-brown skin, and the residual heat from the bubbling tar. Pull-Trex--yes, she remembered the boy they adopted before the nightmare blackness of a white page--called it 'purgadoughry' before Winfield casually slapped his beak-nosed face.

During their courtship, and into well into their marriage, Paul used to call her Persephone. Whether he was her Hades, who could say? The reasoning behind nicknames were often lost to time and reason, but the moniker never felt so apt. She had been kidnapped and forced through hell. What had been the pomegranate seed that doomed her to that existence? Was it Norman Roberts? There was a vague flicker of recognition; a buried shame, like the morning after a night of heavy drinking. Or, was it Winfield that fated her to that existence? Resurrecting her from the dead only for her to suffer in that doughy stasis for half a decade. If true, what did the Future hold? What fresh horrors.

Paul...

How could you? she wanted to ask. After they cheated death together to be abandoned so completely. If what her son said was true, if Sophie's short stories, which Winfield reluctantly allowed her to read, hinted at that same truth, their love wasn't enough to sustain him. Was there something she could have said, did, to soothe her husband's mind? We're there signs she missed along the way while she cared solely for her son's well-being as he dealt with the utter surreality of this life. Claudia didn't know.

But, Felix. Sweet, kind-hearted Felix.

His face, milk-white the first time she walked into the kitchen supported by Winfield. Even after Sophie and Pull-Grex cushioned him against the shock, a fistfull of bourbon and the softest voices. His warm brown eyes swam with tears. His embrace and quiet tears made the last five seem less awful. "You're alive," he whispered, gently hugging her. "You're alive, you're alive, you're alive." And her hydrogen peroxide words into a freshly opened wound: "I don't know what I am, Felix."

"You're here," he said with finality. "That's all that matters."

Winfield...

That little royal-blue stranger, All grown up. The cardinal against the glass of my heart. So cautious, still. Five years hasn't changed that. If anything, it was more pronounced; still hanging in the corners of the room under that mop of curls. Still questioning every decision, every action, before he's even arrived there.

"You like that girl," Claudia told him.

His cheeks went crimson. "I don't," he wiped his mother's face with a damp rag to free it of mustard.

She smiled a mother's smile. "It wasn't a question."

"Sophie," he replied, simply. "Her name is Sophie."

"And?"

He met her eyes and looked away quickly with a flick of his head. "Pull-Trex," he muttered. "They don't think I know."

Claudia nodded. "There will be others."

"Sure," he nodded.

But will there? Can there be *others* for her son? Reclaimed twice now from the dead, Claudia realized that the task before her, no matter how much time she had left with him, was to help ease the white-knuckled grip her son held on to things that were best left alone. All of them could stand to face the lesson:

Roberts with Imogen...

Winfield with me, Paul...

All of them holding onto a past that should have been left firmly in days gone by. Yet, all of them, still moving, still breathing, because of her little bird beating against the glass.

Chapter 15: Real Life

Sophie McGillicuddy, Pull-Trex

Sophie lay in bed staring at the ceiling. Panic surged like bile in her throat as she checked off the bizarre occurrences of the day. One day. Just *one* day.

Telekinetic Boy Genius

Runaway Tyrannosaur Hybrid

Hypnotic Sociopathic Painters

Bear-Headed Housekeepers

Reanimated Hands

Cybernetic Reptiles

Half-Baked Monsters

Resurrected Mothers

Sophie looked down at her metallic palm and flexed her fingers. An involuntary shudder goosed its way through her limbs. Without thinking, she plucked the sensor from her shoulder and tossed it across her bedroom, disrupting Pull-Trex, who slept soundly beside her on top of her quilt.

Cujo slipped like a paper bird from his chest onto the floor. "What's wrong?" he sat up with a start, panic flooding his voice. "Is it Roberts?" he replaced his sunglasses setting on Sophie's nightstand. "Did something happen to Winfield?"

Sophie shook her head, unable to formulate the thought.

"Did the book keep you up?" Pull-Trex offered, his calm returning in the form of a yawn.

"Nightmares?"

"Winfield is downstairs with his mother. Right now."

"Yes..." the word was drawn lazily. Two syllables.

"She's been dead for five years."

"Not dead," he corrected, quietly. "Waylaid, maybe. But, not dead. The distinction is important."

Sophie rolled her green eyes. "How can you be so nonchalant about this? It's--"

"Weird?"

"Yes," she grabbed at the word like a Golden Ticket from a Wonka Bar. "It's *really* weird. You and Winfield are acting like--"

"It's just another Tuesday?"

Sophie rolled her eyes once more. Three o'clock in the morning was a great time for rolling eyes. "Winfield said the exact same thing."

Pull-Trex adjusted his body to face Sophie while retaining his chaste position above the sheets. "I hate to beat a dead horse here--"

"Don't worry?" Sophie interrupted. "Win would just pump it full of computer parts, start riding it around the backyard, and call it Robo-Hooves, or something!"

Pull-Trex lowered his glasses from the bridge of his nose and eye Sophie patiently with his bulging askew eyes. "Are you done?"

"Yes, I'm done." Another set of eye rolls. A huff of breath.

Pull-Trex pushed the laughter that threatened to pin itself to the corners of his mouth. He continued: "I hate to...beleaguer the point, but this is Winfield's life. It's been a relatively quiet few years while you've been a part of it, but the Crazy Train is back in the station. Like it or not, our boy downstairs has a tendency to attract cadavers. His parents, his dog, me. Besides, this should be right up your alley," he gestured towards the shelves of fantasy books. The *Weasley is Our King* poster."

"This isn't a story?," she scoffed. "This is our life."

"How very Meta," he smirked. "Winfield's life *is* science fiction. I mean, it can be weird at times, but Winfield is enough of a genius to actually *do* something about it. And with that gift comes its fair share of...obstacles."

"You mean people trying to kill us."

"Him, primarily," he replied, lightly. "We're just collateral damage."

Sophie turned to face Pull-Trex until they were parenthesis bookending her twin-bed. "His parents. His dog. You," she stopped. "It seems like everyone in his life are collateral damage. Sooner or later."

Pull-Trex reached out and touched her shoulder. "I won't let you become collateral damage."

"Yeah?" She smiled, while her eyes itched with oncoming sleep.

"Yeah," Trex nodded.

Chapter 16: Soup

Paul Pendergast, Norman Roberts

It was nice to have friends.

Check that, not friends in the traditional sense. Knocking back microbrews in a well-designed mancave, replete with sports memorabilia, the singular Marx Brothers poster from Duck Soup, indie music playing in the background as you stumble through an assortment of jokes and putdowns until the alcohol loosens the tongue enough for grown men to talk about anything of substance; those kind of relationships were impossible for Norman Roberts and Paul 'aka Cronus' Pendergast. But when Paul overcame the moral repugnance of spending his social hours with a known murderer and sociopath, he found it nice. Extremely nice. No damp environs or decomposing hands. No darkness and salt-stained docks. Just conversation of the most intimate and endearing: how to murder his son so he could successfully commit suicide.

Friendships were built on less. But again, this wasn't a friendship.

You would do well not to mention the fact to Norman Roberts. Platonically speaking, he was smitten with Cronus. Some would go so far as to call it a 'man crush.' He admired the wasted man's choice of henchmen, the resourcefulness required to create them, as Cronus singular goal: to take an ax to the 'Happy Little Tree.' A tree he himself planted! Cronus was the lumberjack to Norman Roberts' own felled heart. In short, Roberts thought Cronus was 'so damn cool.'

The pair sat at Roberts' kitchen counter at Bruins Repose. The painter dragged the reluctant mastermind there after their meeting at the boathouse. A voice in the back of Roberts' head, which once was a stand-in for Imogen before his beloved housekeeper was resurrected by Winfield, noted Cronus' depleted frame and revolted against it.

"You'll come to my place," he offered bashfully. "If Imogen found out how skinny you were, and knew I didn't invite you over for dinner, she'd chase me around the house with a wooden spoon."

"I'm beyond food, Roberts," Cronus replied, eyeing his Hekatonkeires for an excuse to decline the invitation. When they remained sleeping in their skeins of black-wired slumber, he added, "I'm beyond all things but revenge," in a lame enigmatic whisper." Even he knew it sounded pathetic.

"Pish," Roberts batted the reason away. "You might as well tell me you have to brush your hair." He scratched the brown stubble atop his head. "I've heard that excuse before," His voice dropped ominously. "Oh, yes I have. Believe me," he continued, "there wasn't much hair left when I-"

"Norman," Cronus interrupted. He shifted his weight to his staff. The Prism took a step from his master in embarrassment.

"Apologies," Roberts chuckled, self-consciously. "Lost myself for a second. "At any rate, I won't take no for an answer. Besides, if you force me to, I can make my argument persuasive." He turned to his hulking Prism and said, I might need you."

The Prism's morphing, gloppy, mud-brown face pursed its lips, and shook its head in distaste. Using it's lexicon of colors to speak, it replied in an acrostic to express its judgement of his master's violation of the evil genius code: Namely, don't threaten a colleague.

DENIM
UMBER
DESERT
EGGPLANT

NICKEL
ORANGE
TEAL

CADMIUM
OCHRE
OLIVE
LAVENDER

Roberts held his paint-stained hands to Cronus in apology. "It's been ages since I've had a meal with anyone outside of Imogen," he explained. "My manners are rusty."

Cronus sighed. "It seems as though you leave me little choice. I'll take a handful of my Hekatonkheires with me for protection."

"Handful," Roberts laughed. "I get it. Evil genius puns are the best, aren't they?"

So against his better judgment, and long dormant moral superiority, Cronus and Roberts sat around the kitchen counter like old fiends (forgive the pun, but it is of the variety that Roberts so cunningly enjoys). In the shadows of the kitchen The Prism and twenty Hekatonkheires hovered protectively. Bowls of Imogen's seafood jambalaya threw off ribbons of steam into both of their faces. Roberts shifted the contents of the boiling stew around his scalding tongue, chugging smoke from his mouth like a locomotive.

(Your master eats like an animal with holes in his nose) the Hekatonkeires telegraphed to the Prism)

INDIGO

KHAKI

NAVY

ORANGE

WHITE

The Prism replied in embarrassment.

.....
.....

(How can you understand us?) They tap danced (How can we understand you?)

"Quit bonding over there!" Roberts replied after spitting out a mouthful of scalding soup back into his bowl.

"Will you slow *down*," Cronus curled his cracked lips with disgust and impatience. "She said it was hot, fergodsakes."

Roberts gulped down a mouthful of milk to put out the fire. Quenched, he replied, "I'm hungry. Attempted murder works up an appetite."

Cronus rolled his eyes. "Enough with the melodramatic solipsisms, or I'm leaving."

"Someone's grouchy," Norman blew on a spoonful of stew.

"*Someone* is impatient. You have yet to try to kill my son. Instead, you have him running around the city bringing my wife back from the dead."

"About that..." Roberts trailed off, uncomfortably

"Don't mention it," Cronus wheezed. "When this is over, I plan to be dead. My wife has always been her own woman, and she can choose what she wants for herself." Before Roberts could respond, Cronus hobbled to the freezer, removed two ice cubes, and plopped them into the painter's bowl.

"I just don't want there to be any hard feelings in this partnership at the outset."

"No worries," Paul replied, dismissively. Furthest thing from my mind. At the forefront are your plans to kill my son."

The pair leaned towards each other.

"....."

(They are whispering.)

MAUVE
ALIZARIN
SAFFRON
TURQUOISE
EMERALD
RED

LILAC
INDEPENDENCE
KOBICHA
EMINENCE
STRAW

TIMBERWOLF
OXBLOOD

WISTERIA
HARLEQUIN
ISABELINE
SUNSET
PRUSSIAN BLUE
EGGSHELL
ROSE

.....

(And soup.)

"I said quiet over there!" Roberts bellowed, chucking one of Imogen's wooden spoons for good measure.

Chapter 18: Deus Ex Machinations

'Margo Gasket' & 'Logan Gasket'

Excerpt from Sophie McGillicuddy's upcoming Short Story, Gasket & Charon:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental...except when it isn't

Margo Gasket sat in her son's room. She quietly perused a book she found upstairs on her dear mentor, and father figure's bookshelf entitled *The Lost Children Archive*. It detailed the story of a family driving cross country from New York to Mexico.

She fills in the space in the car with the warmth of her cub breath and talks to us from the backseat--long, incomprehensible stories that remind me of Bob Dylan's later song lyrics, post Christian conversion. Then, quite suddenly she tires of being in the world, becomes quiet, looks out the window, and says nothing. Perhaps it is in these stretched-out moments of silence that our children grow unfathomable. Don't stop being a little girl, I think, but don't say it. She looks out the window and yawns. I don't know what she's thinking, what she knows and doesn't know. I don't know if she sees the same world as we see...

"Logan," stirs from her chair in the corner, holding her place in the book with her index finger.

"Yeah?" he turned from the machine he was tinkering with. That fixed expression on his face that hitched his tongue into the corner of his mouth. He pushed the curls from his face, and for a moment, somewhere in the depths of his brown eyes, she recognizes her son. Despite the lengthening bones in his face, the broadening shoulders, the deepening voice, there is her boy. She wants him to be able to stand the harshness of the world without her, because her return to it seems ephemeral. Transitory. Yet, beneath that maturing exterior, she wants her little bird to approach it with his preternatural wonder and gentility. That vulnerability that makes it impossible for him to let go. "What *is* it, mom?"

She hides her smile at his exasperation; also a fixture from childhood. "Will you be ready to face Norman?"

"If I can get this thing done in time." He turned and sat cross-legged on the floor in front of his machine, facing his mother.

"You think Robert will be fooled?" she wondered.

"I do," he nodded. "He's always too busy in the third act trying to kill me to pay close attention to *my* machinations."

She chuckled.

"What?" his eyes widened.

"I remember when you solved the Millenium Problems when you were three," her eyes cobwebbed with gossamer strands of memory, "Now, here you are, thirteen years later with 'machinations.'"

"Maaa," he stretched the word out, inviting her to stop.

She held up her free hand, palm out. "Apologies," she shifted. "Why don't you just clone me like you did with Imogen? Robert wins. You live. Everyone's happy."

"I've already done *that*," he replied incredulously. "People expect *more* from me. Besides, if you think I'm going to let *any* version of you go with Norman, you're bonkers." His shoulders stiffened, "You don't *want* to go with him, *right*?"

"Of *course* not, Logan," she sighed. "I just got back."

"You just keep calling him 'Norman' and are pretty insistent that I try not to kill him..."

"I'm not sure I'd be holding up my end of the 'Maternal Membership Card', reanimated or otherwise, if I encouraged my son to go out and commit premeditated murder. I feel like someone would notify the council; my privileges will be revoked."

He eyed her warily through the curtain of curls that fell across his forehead once more. "This is the only way, mom. I don't do reunions. You know this. I didn't go to my ten-year at MIT last year, even though the alumni association practically stalked me for months. I sure as hell won't have Norman popping up every five years trying to destroy everything I care about," he paused. "It's annoying."

The pair stared each other down before eventually relented with a marionette tug of her shoulders. Her eyes shifted to her book. "Fine. Just...be careful."

"I am. The CompsognathSix are patrolling the perimeter of the house--"

"I noticed that Felix's dog is peeing on everything outside," she said. "Is that some sort of security measure you designed? Is Wilhelm II like Tesla?"

Logan shook his head. "Felix forgot to pick up his medicine at the vets," he replied, offhandedly. "My point is, the sooner I can get this done, the sooner we can finish this."

She turned an imaginary key and pretended to throw it away.

Logan turned back towards his machine resumed recalibrations.

's eyes returns to the same line, unable to stop thinking. Unable to move on. From Logan. From her deceased husband. From Norman.

Then, quite suddenly she tires of being in the world, becomes quiet, looks out the window, and says nothing.

Chapter 19: Choices

Winfield Pendergast & Pull-Trex

Winfield and Trex came running from the house after the head CompsognathSix let out an eagle-shriek alarm. When they rounded the corner to the backyard, his six dinosaurs were circling a small contingent of the Hekantonkeires and The Prism. The henchmen were huddled together, nervously, while the Prism merely looked confused. Winfield called them off.

Reluctantly, they circled behind Winfield and Trex.

“Well?” Pull-Trex began. “Let’s hear it.”

PUMPKIN

AEGEAN

ROSEWOOD

LAGUNA

ECRU

RUST

The Prism paused as it cast about its pudding brain.

"It paused," Trex replied lazily, "as his mental machinery ground to an audible halt."

PUMPKIN

AEGEAN

ROSEWOOD

LAGUNA

ECRU

RUST

FANDANGO

ROYAL

ARTICHOKE

NAVY

CORAL

AMBER

ICCOR

STEEL

(We are not with him) The Hekatonkeires tapped in exasperation while two of the wired hands on the fringe of the ground put the last two codes words in air quotes.

(Technically speaking we are) they added, (But, only through a mutual work associate). One of them leapt up and slapped the Prism in the face.

(What is your problem? It is not Parler it is PARLAY.)

Winfield and Pull-Trex exchanged a look, translated loosely into: "What the hell is this?" Winfield cleared his throat to interrupt the fingerprint scuffle. "Can we get to the point, fellas? First off: who are you?" he asked, directing his attention towards the decomposing hands, who the CompsognathSix eyed greedily.

(We are the--)

"Enough of this!" Pull-Trex rolled his eyes and blew a raspberry. "Hang on a second," he ran towards the house. "Don't start without me."

Left alone, Winfield stuffed his hands into his jean pockets and rocked on the balls of his feet. The Hekatonkeires split their numbers; half joining partners to twiddle their thumbs, while the other group drummed their mottled fingertips against the dusty ground.

NYANZA

IVORY

CADMIUM

EMERALD

NICKEL

INDIGO

GRANITE

HELIOTROPE

TELEMAGENTA

The Prism offered as the sound of Pull-Trex's pounding sneakers sounded behind Winfield. He turned as Pull-Trex tossed a notebook and black marker at the largest of the Hekontkeires. "Of all the ridiculous affections," he panted, holding a stitch at the his. "Write down your answers instead of tap dancing, huh? A group of hands, and you land on Morse code? Of all the things to choose from: Semaphore, Aldis Lamp, ASL. Criminy," he caught his wheezing breath. "I really need to get in better shape! I used to outrun security guards all the time." he arched his back and exchanged a bewildered glance at Winfield. "What? What are you smiling at?"

Winfield shook his head. "You heard the man," he said to the Hekontkeires. "Who are you?"

WE ARE THE HEKATONKHEIRES...

The leader of the group scratched away, while two of the underlings held he notebook in place on the ground.

YES WE WORK ROBERTS AND OUR OTHER UNNAMED BENEFACOR...

YOUR FRIEND ARGUABLY WASTED MORE TIME THAN HE SAVED SINCE YOU BOTH CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD US.

"All right, cool it Zechariah; just give us a name," Trex interjected after reading the hastily scrawled note. "Which clown do *you* work for?"

A piece of paper was ripped from the notebook.

WE WILL GIVE YOU THE TIME AND PLACE:

STEEL MILL, 9:00 PM

EVERYTHING WILL BE REVEALED THERE

Without preamble, the Hekontkeires fled in unison leaving the notebook, and The Prism behind.

"Yeah, you better run you walking circle-jerk!" Trex shouted.

"Circle-jerk?" Winfield's shoulders were hitched in an incredulous question mark.

"I don't know," Pull-Trex laughed. "How do you insult a hand?"

Before Winfield could respond, The Prism took a step forward, causing an immediate reaction from the CompsognathSix; a trill bird-cry warning. It held up its palms, defenselessly. "Was there anything else?" Winfield asked.

DARK
ORCHID
NICKEL
TANGERINE

HYACINTH
UMBER
RUFOUS
TANGERINE

MARIGOLD
AZURE
SAPPHIRE
TAUPE
EGGPLANT
RUBER

"He's not really leaving me much of a choice," Winfield scoffed.

HICKORY
EARNSTEAD

INDIGO
SIENA

BLACK
ASH
DENIM

The Prism paused.

YELLOW
OCHRE
ULTRAMARINE

ALIZARIN
RED
EMBERIEA

NEON
ORANGE
TEAL

With that, The Prism turned, and followed the decomposing path of the Hekantonkeires. After it was gone from view, Pull-Trex looked at Winfield in quiet astonishment. "Huh."
"Yeah," Winfield agreed in bemusement. "Did you--"
"Yeah, I heard. Just--"
"Huh."
"Huh."

Chapter 20: The Last Stand

Everyone

Winfield, Pull-Trex, and Sophie approached the Steel Mill under the cover of night. As Winfield effortlessly lifted the machine he was working on, Sophie melted the lock and chain affixed to the door with her metallic hand. Pull-Trex held the door, while adding, “Armed and dangerous, armed robbery, and breaking and arm-tering” under his breath.

“That one was pretty weak,” Winfield muttered. “Even by your standards.”

“I make puns when I’m nervous,” his reptilian friend admitted.

“What’s there to be nervous about?” Pendergast replied. “We’ve arrived hours before Roberts so I can set up my equipment; my mom promised to stay at home and babysit Felix to make sure he’s not attacked by those creepy hands, and we’ve been through this before. We’re pros at this point.”

“The last time we faced off with Roberts,” Trex stumbled on his feet in the darkness of the factory, “You lost both of your parents, your dog, our house, our lives, and most of your inventions. I’d hardly say we’re *pros* at this.”

Winfield readjusted his grip on the machine. “Look at it this way: what else could *possibly* go wrong?”

“Will both of you shut up?” Sophie interjected; her face cast in the pale light of the index finger she illuminated on her mechanical hand. “We don’t even know if this is a trap, and both of you are being loud enough to wake the dead.”

“Winfield’s specialty,” Pull-Trex grumbled.

“I heard that,” Winfield retorted.

“I didn’t say it quietly.”

Winfield found a place in the shadows, crowded with twisted rebar, old chains, and various scrap metal. He positioned the machine to face towards a ledge, at the bottom of which, liquid steel bubbled an angry red.

“Why would they keep the steel heated in an abandoned factory?” Pull-Trex asked.

“Maybe it’s the trap I was talking about,” Sophie replied nervously.

“It’s probably a plot device,” Winfield suggested.

“It reminds me of the Terminator,” Pull-Trex hissed.

“No sweat,” Winfield pushed back his explosion of curls, a slight smile curling his lips. “If I know anything, it’s robots.”

“Not the futuristic assassin kind,” Trex countered.

“Those don’t even exist.”

“Yeah, because *that* would be insane.”

“For the love of Pete!” Sophie stomped her foot. “Will you two get a room, already? Or a sitcom. Quit your bickering. We don’t have much time before Roberts is supposed to be here.”

"She's right," Winfield brushed dust from his hands and stood. "And, kidding aside; this *could* get dangerous. There's no telling what Roberts has up his sleeve," he shot a stern look at Trex, which left a joke about the Hekatonkeires unspoken. "After we get things into position, I want you guys to hide, and not move a muscle until all this is over. The last thing I need, or want, is for you both to be used against me." He cleared his throat. "Stay hidden. Stay quiet. Until I give the command."

Sophie face was pale with determination and fright. Trex took her by the metallic hand and disappeared into the gloom of the factory. Chains rattled behind them like Marley's ghost.

Despite pooling their resources and malevolent intentions, Roberts and the elder Pendergast arrived separately. Roberts exited the driver side, while Imogen elegantly stepped from the passenger seat. The Prism slid out of the back, and reformed at Norman's side.

"Promise me one thing," Roberts scratched at his salt and pepper stubble. His fingers traced the puckered scars on his chest. The leather cord.

"What's that?" Imogen asked across the roof of the car.

"Whatever happens, try to avoid transforming into a bear, yeah? It would help things run smoothly if you didn't rip me to shreds.

She scoffed at the back of her throat. "You're having a devil of a time doing that to yourself."

"What is going on with you lately?" Roberts demanded. "I remember you being a lot more supportive of me."

"You mean when I was simply a voice in your head, Norman? I'm real now, or at least that boy's version of it, and I have a voice of my own. Two eyes, too and all I see happenin' tonight are chickens coming home to roost. Don't ask me to root against a child. Not going to happen," she concluded, quietly.

"Why did you even come?"

"Il capte rien," she whispered to the night. "To bear witness, Norman. To see if you change your mind."

"Unbelievable," Roberts stalked off towards the factory.

The Prism lingered behind as Imogen watched Norman regretfully.

CORAL

HYACINTH

AZURE

NEON

GREEN

EMERALD

MAGENTA

INDIGO

NICKEL

DUST

The Prism gurgled.

She smiled. "I suppose it's never too late.

Paul Pendergast waited in the shadows with his remaining Hekontkeires. He had dulled their glowing eyes in shoe polish and watched Winfield and his friend's arrive with something akin to a smile beneath the wide brim of his hat.

He silenced the shuffling of his hench-hands with a movement. A slight shake of his head. He observed as his son set up his machine, and watched what it did. "That's it, Winfield," He croaked. "That's it."

"Dad?" Winfield turned abruptly towards the sound of Paul Pendergast's voice in the darkness.

"Oh, damn," Paul's clouded eyes widened. "Damn, damn, damn." He shifted in his position hoping the Hekatonkheires would provide cover, but with their blackened red eyes, they merely served to further expose Cronus' big reveal.

"Dad, I can *hear* you," Winfield stepped away from his machine. His eyes scanning the darkness with the acuity of an owl. "Hey, I can see you, too," he pointed directly at Cronus. His voice became one of command. "Get down here."

Cronus complied. He sulked from his spot, and came trailing into the light, leaning heavily on his crooked staff; his hat trailed along the dusty floor. "Winfield," he sighed with resignation.

Winfield's brown eyes widened. "What in the actual hell, Dad? I thought you were dead. I thought the Serbians had you."

"They did," he admitted. "I escaped."

"What're you doing here?"

Before Paul could answer, Roberts strolled into the platform with Imogen and The Prism trailing behind. "He's helping me, Happy Little Tree," Roberts chuckled. "You could say we went into business together," he paused, dramatically. "The lumber business."

"No," Winfield shook his head. "I couldn't say that. I *wouldn't* say that," he added in a pale imitation of Pull-Trex. "That sounds ridiculous."

"All the same," Roberts shrugged his denim-shirted shoulders. "Cronus and I will finally be able to answer the philosophical question: *If a Happy Little Tree falls in a Steel Mill when no one is around to hear it, does it still make a sound?*"

"Except that doesn't work, does it?" Pull-Trex joined the growing number of guests on the platform. "Because *all* of us are around to hear him fall." He folded his arms and satisfaction.

The assembled party pulled identical faces of confusion and amusement.

"Quality support there, buddy," Winfield stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Glad you blew your hiding spot so you could come watch me die."

"Not what I meant," Trex blushed. He turned to Winfield's father. "Mr. Pendergast."

"Trex."

"*Cronus*?" Trex added, derisively. "What not The Puppetmaster. Or the Marionette?"

"Seemed appropriate, at the time?" Paul shrugged his decrepit shoulders.

"Enough with the introductions," Roberts demanded. "Where's Claudia? I trust you've brought her?"

"She's at home," Winfield gritted his teeth. "You'll never even get close--"

"Hello?" Her voice called from somewhere within the factory. "Winfield? Are you in here?"

"You've got to be kidding me," the young Pendergast whispered. "I told you to stay at home, Mah."

"Perfect," Roberts rubbed his hands together excitedly with familiar maniacal relish. "The gang's all here." When the laughter died in Roberts throat, he called to Claudia, "Come out of the shadows. Join us."

On cue, she stepped forward into the large circle of light that framed the disparate group. Tonight, her footsteps were ethereal, as if only grazing the ground. "Norman," she smiled, somewhat coquettishly, her eyes shifting quickly to her son.

"I told you to stay home," Winfield furrowed his brow. "What about Felix?"

"He's asleep," she nodded reassuringly to Sophie.

"He's still in danger," Sophie replied, angrily.

"I should have been more clear. He's asleep in his Panic Room Recliner. Once you told me how to activate it, I took the liberty." She turned her eyes towards Roberts, once more. "It's been a long time," Claudia left Winfield's side, and walked towards his Nemesis, completely oblivious to Paul Pendergast's heartbreakingly hopeful presence, hungry for just a glance, a breadcrumb of a word from his fallen Persephone.

Roberts beckoned her with an outstretched, paint-smearred hand. "Of all the Hydra-Pretzels in all the towns in all the world, she walks out of mine," he said dreamily as them embraced. He looked over Claudia's shoulder, and added; "I'll always thank you for that Winfield, long after your dead."

Sweat beaded on Winfield's brow. His hands were clenched into quivering fists. Yet, he smiled.

Roberts was lost in reverie as he stroked Claudia's hair and whispered future schemes of destruction into her porcelain seashell whorled ears.

"Dad," he met his father's red-rimmed eyes.

Paul Pendergast had been watching in mute horror as his wife fell willingly into another man's arms.

"I'm going to go out on a limb here, and say Prime Directive is still in place."

Paul Pendergast hesitated. Then nodded.

"You can't hurt me?"

Another nod.

"So, you got Norman to try to do it?"

Another nod.

"Here's the question: Did you ever plan to hurt me for real, or Did you engineer all of this to put an end to things for you?"

Pull-Trex, Imogen, and The Prism waited for the answer. Instead, it was telegraphed between father and son's eyes.

"I'm going to need your help then, yeah?" He broke eye contact with his father, and screamed, "Sophie! Now!"

A small blast of compressed nitrogen hissed as two electrodes flew from the darkness, through the projected image of Claudia Pendergast, generated by Winfield's Corporeal Hologram Machine (patent, nonsensical), and into Roberts chest. As the conductive wires delivered their charge, leaving the painter quivering on the floor, the Hekontkeires worked in tandem to wrap Roberts in chains, but not so tight that he won't be able to escape later on when it's convenient.

"Well," Trex smiled as he stepped beside the Young Pendergast. "That went off without a hitch."

"Win?" The real Claudia Pendergast stepped onto the platform. Her eyes went from her son, to Roberts writhing on the floor to--"Paul?" she whispered as he attempted to straighten his crooked back. "You're alive?"

"Aw, shit," Trex muttered.

A series of things happened all at once.

After an off page reunion, the protagonists looked to the pile of chains to realize Roberts had slipped free.

Roberts whispered a few choice words into Sophie's ear. Namely: *Push The Prism and Imogen from the platform, and then jump off yourself.*

While Trex ran after Sophie, Roberts pushed a bulky chain into Winfield's head.

Dazed, and as Trex screamed, "Just like in Terminator!" as he flew past, Winfield leveled his telekinetic powers and tossed Roberts over the precipice, but not before he grabbed hold of Paul Pendergast's ankle. A smile creased the man's weathered face, as he uttered a single word in farewell: "Persephone."

Claudia's robotic enhanced reflexes sprang into action as she leapt across the platform, and slid over the bubbling metal, one hand grasping Winfield's, who had recovered enough to save his dangling parents.

"Whew," Trex groaned from beside Winfield, struggling to hold Sophie. "That was intense."

Winfield held onto Claudia, who held onto Paul.

Imogen and The Prism were hovering inches above the bubbling steel, held by Winfield's telekinesis.

“You have to let go, sweetie,” Claudia said, above the roar of the newly reactivated factory.

“I’m strong,” he replied, effortlessly. “I can hold all of you.”

“You can’t,” Paul yelled from below. “Roberts probably gave you a concussion. Your attention’s divided. You aren’t at your full powers.”

“There’s a lot of assuming going on in that logic,” Pull-Trex grimaced. Sophie slipped a fraction in his grip. “You sure you’re not just trying to check out early again, Paul?”

Winfield’s eyes slid to Roberts’ companions, and back to his parents. “Why should I let his people live, and sacrifice you?” Winfield’s voice broke with anger and frustration. Tears mixed with the rivulets of perspiration streaming down his cheeks. “*Again?*”

“Because we’ve had our chance, Little Bird,” Claudia replied. “*Twice*. It’s time--”

“Time to give up!” Roberts cackled. Winfield twisted to look beyond his parents. Roberts had somehow managed to maintain his grasp on Paul’s ankle before falling into the molten metal.

“Dad!” the young Pendergast screamed. “Why didn’t you *tell* me he was still there?”

“Dead legs,” Paul grimaced, trying to shake off the villain. “Sorry!”

“You’ll never destroy me!” Roberts screamed, clawing at Paul’s cloak, pulling it free. It fluttered into the bubbling steal and caught fire.

For the first time Winfield saw his father’s ravaged, reanimated corpse. The pale, cracked flesh. His sparrow rib cage. “Dad,” he forced himself to look away. “Shake him off, and hang on.

The Prime Directive made the emphatic suggestion a command. But, Winfield wasn’t the only one with that power.

“Sophie!” Roberts wild eyes gleamed. “Aren’t you getting tired?” His voice rippled the air like the heat wafting from the pit.

“No, Trex screamed, gripping Sophie’s sweating, slippery palms tighter. “No, no, no! You will *not* become collateral!” As his glasses slipped from his face, Trex leveled a fierce, albeit bug-eyed, reptilian glare at the young Pendergast, that roared with his ancestral programming. “Do something!”

Claudia squeezed Winfield’s hand. With a glance to the Prism and Imogen suspended in the air, and then at Trex and Sophie, whose eyes had lost focus, and metallic fingers were unwinding, “Let go.”

Winfield face was ravaged with tear stains and soot, as he screamed a primal, gut-wrenching goodbye. He opened his hand, and let his mother, father, and Roberts fall into the fire. Still sobbing, he floated The Prism and Imogen back onto the platform as Trex pulled Sophie back onto the platform.

The Prism lumbered to the edge of the platform and looked at the bubbling stew. As it gazed into the abyss, the remainder of Paul’s Hekontkeires crawled up beside the sentient paint monster.

.....
(He did it) they tapped.

HELIOTROPE
EXHAUST

LAVENDER
EGGPLANT
TURQUOISE

GREEN
OLIVE

The Prism burbled in response.

"I opened my hand," Winfield wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "There's a difference."

Imogen stepped forward and laid a gentle bottle-brown hand on his back. "Not at first, there's not," she replied as gentle as her touch. "C'mon," she turned to Sophie and Pull-Trex. "Let's get you kids home."

Chapter 20: Windmills

Winfield & Felix

Felix put a cup of coffee in front of Winfield and harrumphed into his own chair across from the boy. The man's fistful of bourbon left an oily sheen on the glass as he put it to his lips and sipped.

"She knew she wouldn't be back?" Winfield stated into the steam, trying to divine the message slipping into the darkened kitchen.

Felix nodded. "Before she tripped the Safe-Room lever on my chair, which we need to talk about later, Claudia said she had to leave. Something about how she needed to join Odysseus."

"That's what my mom and dad called each other."

The old man smiled sadly. Took another sip. "I know."

"He was alive. My dad." Winfield took a drink of his heavily sugared and creamed coffee. "Came back to kill me," he chuckled. "Well, not to kill me; to engineer a scenario in which he could heroically save me, leading to his own tragic death."

The wrinkles gathered on Felix's liver-spotted brow. "I guess if you want to be a knight..." he trailed off.

"I don't think Don Quixote ever built a windmill to fall on he when he tilted with it."

"No," Felix swirled the golden contents of his glass. "But, I wouldn't put it past Sancho Panz."

Winfield ran a hand through his curls. "I'm tired, Felix."

"Go to bed," the man's knees popped as he stood.

As they crept through the darkened living room, the blue tarpaulin Felix has thrown over the couch as a makeshift bed sheet for The Prism crinkled with the creature's movement. Its silhouette, along with the remaining Hekontkeires, draped over the it's hulking paint body was only just distinguishable. At the foot of the couch, Wilhelm II was curled happily.

"I guess you're going to have to get used to a bed again," Winfield whispered at the top of the basement stairs.

"My chair has suited me just fine for years. I just need to make sure I don't trigger the panic function; defeats the purpose of a Lazy-Boy. Besides, Imogen is sleeping up there now." He paused a moment, considering. "How long do you think they'll last now that Roberts is gone? They were his creations."

"I'm not sure," Winfield leaned against the wall. "Sometimes the things we create take a life of their own long after we're gone."

Felix touched his shoulder. "Go on, now. You're dead on your feet."

"Thank you," Winfield said softly, in lieu of goodnight. "For me. Trex. Imogen, everything. You didn't have to take us in."

"I didn't have to basically adopt your mother years back either, but it's been my pleasure. Even windmills can be formidable from time to time."

"Too much bourbon for you," Windfield teased. "See you tomorrow."

In his bedroom, the ghostly image of Claudia Pendergast flickered on Winfield's corner chair, projected from his reinstalled Corporeal Hologram. "It's done?" her voice was a willowwisp.

"Yeah, Mah," he leaned against the door jam. "It's done."

"I don't know if your mom would have actually gone with Roberts."

"It doesn't matter now?" he shrugged. "She didn't. She chose us."

"She chose *you*."

"This time."

"Every time," the projected image of Claudia flickered.

A half smile hitched itself into the corner of his mouth. "Maybe."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Listen to my mother," his voice was warm. Matter of fact. "Start letting go." He flicked off the machine, and the image disappeared.