

THE ONCE AND FUTURE NERD  
Book 1 - PRINCES OF IORDEN

Chapter 9  
"Darkness on the Edge of Town"

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Based on a teleplay by  
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NARRATOR

As you may recall, three Templars of Discord had just entered the inn where Billy, Jen, and Nelson were awaiting the return of their friends from the Cairn of Evil Untold. As you may also recall, Billy and Jen had retreated to a back room to pursue a private conversation, before the Templars had arrived. If you will forgive my brief anachronism, I would like to return our narrative to their conversation, just prior to the arrival of the Templars.

JEN

Billy, hey! Listen.

BILLY

I'll put the food back, okay? I only ate like two pieces.

JEN

I don't care about stealing the food.

BILLY

Ten pieces.

JEN

I think we've gotta run an audible with these college kids.

BILLY

Fifteen. What audible?

JEN

The one in back, the cranky one? I think you've gotta hit on him.

BILLY

Hit to hurt him or just scare him a bit?

JEN

No, hit on him, I said.

BILLY

What? Why?

JEN

Because he's only into guys.

BILLY

I'm not doing that.

JEN  
I do it all the time, you can do it once.

BILLY  
That's different.

JEN  
How?

BILLY  
What do you mean how? I'm not gay.

JEN  
Well I don't wanna sleep with any of the snobby  
douchebros I hit on either.

BILLY  
Yeah but you like the attention.

JEN  
Oh like fucking hell I do.

BILLY  
Come on.

JEN  
Hey don't be a jerk.

BILLY  
Come on, you like it.

JEN  
Oh knock it the hell off.

BILLY  
Am I right or not?

JEN  
Why can't you do this for me? What's the big deal?

BILLY  
What's the big rush all of a sudden?

JEN  
Oh my God you'd think I was asking you to blow him. You  
just have to flirt a little.

BILLY  
I don't know how to flirt with a guy.

JEN  
Just do what you always do, maybe it'll work.

BILLY

This feels weird.

JEN

Do you not understand the stakes here?

BILLY

Yeah, Jenny, I'm not a moron.

JEN

We need to go home and we need to do it soon.

BILLY

Yeah, totally, just...you know.

NARRATOR

Billy skuffed his shoes into the dirt floor of the inn, avoiding Jen's eyes. It took a moment for Jen to understand Billy's hesitation.

JEN

Hang on, you do wanna go home, right?

BILLY

Well I sure as hell don't wanna be here. But I don't really wanna go back to Pennsylvania.

JEN

What do you mean? Of course you do.

BILLY

Why? What do you think my future looks like back home? I'll finish high school - barely - realize I'm no good at football when no colleges recruit me, get a shitty, broke-ass job in a factory, and listen to my dad tell me I'm worthless for doing the same fucking thing he did.

JEN

I don't believe this.

BILLY

You think I never knew any of that before?

JEN

Why are you telling me this now?

BILLY

It's easy for you, you've got a shot at a future. You're smart, you can go to college.

JEN

On my single mother's crappy salary?

BILLY

You'll get scholarships and financial aid and shit.

JEN

No, back up. *Easy* for me? What the fuck, Billy? You don't know anything about what I've been through.

BILLY

Then why are you in such a rush to get back?

JEN

Because if I wait any longer I won't want to go back either.

A Beat.

JEN

I could be powerful here, Billy. Nia's, like, actually scared of how good I am with magic already. I can walk anywhere in this world and be the smartest person in the room. Instead of Pennsylvania, where I can't do shit about shit and have to pretend to be stupid for people to like me.

BILLY

*(Slowly getting it. Pained.)*  
Are you talking about me?

JEN

Sometimes. Look I know you don't like feeling like I was smarter than--like I was too smart for my own good. But I wasn't trying to show you up, I just had stuff I thought was worth saying.

BILLY

I think I can get better.

JEN

It's not just that, Billy, it's everything.

BILLY

What do you mean everything?

JEN

Not just you, our whole world. I don't know how else to say it. The whole way that I, like, understand myself. If I stay here much longer, I'm just gonna be rid of all of that. Any maybe that's a good thing, but there's no going back. Even if we go back to Pennsylvania, I'll be a different person.

NARRATOR

Jen took both of Billy's hands in her own, her eyes locked with his.

JEN

The girl I grew up with, she'll be gone. The girl who fell in love with you, gone.

BILLY

Are you trying to tell me you don't love me anymore?

JEN

No, Billy, I'll always love you. I just don't know who I'll be or what it'll mean for us.

BILLY

You'll be Jen, what are you talking about?

JEN

I mean there might not be much worth saving between us.

BILLY

No, you need to promise me you're not going anywhere.

JEN

I can't promise that. I'm sorry. I love you.

BILLY

This is stupid, imagining all this future whatever. You're not gonna suddenly change into a different person.

JEN

I've already started, Billy.

BILLY

Oh so what, so we're just done? Is that it?

JEN

No, that's not what I'm--

BILLY

--What are you gonna do here without me, go blow Nelson?

JEN

Don't be gross.

BILLY

Don't dump me out of the blue!

JEN

I'm not dumping you! This is the problem, Billy. I'm trying to talk to you about something hard and you're just attacking me instead of listening.

BILLY

I heard all I needed to.

JEN

Yeah, you always do.

BILLY

Oh screw that.

JEN

No! Bad things. Really bad things that I can't tell you 'cause I'm scared.

BILLY

Wait, like what?

JEN

(woozy)  
Like, just, okay, I've wanted to tell you.

NARRATOR

Quite suddenly, Jen's balance deserted her. The girl nearly fell, only just managing to grab the nearby doorframe to maintain upright.

JEN

(slurring)  
Fuck I don't feel so good.

BILLY

You need to hurl?

JEN

No, isst nolllike that, I'usst...

NARRATOR

Just as suddenly, Billy stumbled as well, falling to his knees

BILLY

I sink mayb I votta hurl.

JEN

I don't fink is just ethanol in 'at ale we drank.

NARRATOR

The door to the inn's common room slammed open, and the sounds of the commotion reached Billy and Jen.

*SOUNDS OF PANIC FROM DOWN THE HALL.*

VOICE (O.S.)

Galadon save us!

NARRATOR

Leaning heavily on each other for balance, Jen and Billy stumbled back down the hall towards the noise.

2 INT. HORSE'S HEAD INN - CONTINUOUS

2

NARRATOR

They reached the common room to see three Templars of Discord looming in the tavern's entrance, their black cloaks flapping in an unnatural wind.

Nelson's unconscious body slumped on the table where Jen had left him. All the patrons of the inn cowered under benches and behind doorways.

The Templars glided into the room, a thick black fog accompanying them.

TEMPLAR

*NOW YOU SHALL SEE THE TRUE FACE OF GOD AND WEEP. THE STORMBRINGER IS NIGH.*

3 EXT. PATH THROUGH FOOTHILLS - LATE NIGHT

3

NARRATOR

Bryce Riverfell, the esteemed lord of the keep known as Freehold, was escorting a convoy of supplies through southern Iorden, back towards his home. As you'll recall, this convoy had recently obtained a pair of stowaways just outside of Castle Guernatal.

These stowaways were now seated before Bryce himself in one of the covered wagons, explaining their presence. Bryce Riverfell himself sat in silence until Arlene reached the end of her tale.

BRYCE

Gods help you. Your own brother. Well, no one I like ever liked the son of a bitch. No offense to your lady mother.

GWEN

We don't take it lightly what we're asking you, General.

ARLENE

Are you certain some gold would not make the burden somewhat easier to bear?

NARRATOR

Bryce shook his head.

BRYCE

If I'm doing this, I need to at least be able to convince *myself* I'm doing this for the right reasons.

OUTRIDER (O.S.)

General Riverfell!

NARRATOR

One of Riverfell's outriders approached the convoy at a dead gallop, his horse frothing from the exertion.

BRYCE

(to Arlene & Gwen)  
Stay as low as you can.

4 EXT. NEARBY HILL - NEARLY CONTINUOUS

4

NARRATOR

Bryce followed the scout to the crest of a nearby hill, pausing only to gather two lieutenants, the large dark-skinned man by the name of Clarence, and a smaller, bespectacled man known to his companions as The Professor.

Together, they peered cautiously over the hill. What they saw troubled them deeply, although should come as no surprise to an astute audience such as yourself. After all, the tale of the three children has not crossed the tale of Arlene and Gwen in AGES. They were bound to come together again eventually. What sort of terrible storyteller would I be if they hadn't?

BRYCE

Well fuck me. Dark days indeed. Templars of gods damn discord. At Bailey's.

CLARENCE

How well do you really know that woman?

PROFESSOR

Don't be an arse, Clarence. She's not one of them if that's what you're implying.

CLARENCE

I'm just saying I can't think of one good reason they'd come all the way the shit out here.

BRYCE

I know her well enough. And she, and everyone in her inn, are in some serious fucking trouble.

CLARENCE

You ever fought one before? A Templar?

BRYCE

Nope. Professor has though.

CLARENCE

We brought bows, right?

BRYCE

Ayup.

NARRATOR

Riverfell licked his finger and held it to the wind, judging the distance to the Templars

BRYCE

Wind's with us. Should be in range for Stephen, Gareth, and Niels.

PROFESSOR

Range isn't the problem. Look closely.

NARRATOR

As the three looked on, the forms of the three Templars flickered and blurred. No Templar appeared to stand in the same place for more than a second.

PROFESSOR

They're protecting themselves from just such an ambush. Using very powerful magics to mask their positions.

BRYCE

You don't know a counterspell or anything like that?

PROFESSOR

Not from here. But their spells require intense concentration. If they were distracted, we might get a decent shot and have time to charge them with lances.

BRYCE

Maybe someone down there's smart enough to know that.

CLARENCE

Or fool enough not to care.

5 INT. HORSE'S HEAD INN - SIMULTANEOUS

5

NARRATOR

Within the inn, Billy and Jen hid from the Templars, although truth be told they barely clung to consciousness themselves. The lead Templar took the opportunity, as many in his position are wont to do, to deliver a sort of sermon.

TEMPLAR

*YOU KNOW NOTHING OF TRUE POWER. IT IS NOT OF THIS SULLIED WORLD. THE IORDIC IS PUNY AND INSIGNIFICANT, COMPARED TO--*

BILLY

*(slurred through a haze)*  
--Man your dick is puny and insignificant.

TEMPLAR

Huh?

NARRATOR

The Templar's body snapped into focus for just a moment, the obscuring spell broken.

TEMPLAR

What does that even--

*--A SOFT WHISTLE FOR A BRIEF SECOND AND THEN AN ARROW SKEWERS HIM.*

NARRATOR

The Templar fell, an arrow protruding from his back. Two more arrows skimmed the air, just past the other two cloaked forms. The remaining Templars quickly slammed the door of the inn.

The unnatural smoke had vanished, and the Templar stood without a single intimidation spell to protect themselves. They leaned heavily against the stout oaken door.

The wooden door of the inn, however, proved to be no match for Clarence, the big man, who charged his steed as if in a jousting tilt. The door frame erupted in a shower of splinters. The lance also managed to squarely skewer the cowering Templars.

The sight of a horse standing where the door had just previously been proved too much for Billy's poisoned mind.

BILLY

Whafuck is gone on?

JEN

You fucked up his thing he was doing.

BILLY

Why am I so cold and dizzy?

JEN

I dunno.

BILLY

Are we gonna be okay?

JEN

I dunno. Olive oo.

NARRATOR

The two of them collapsed, unconscious on the floor.

NARRATOR

Clarence dismounted, and casually shoved at the remains of the door frame, opening the way for Bryce Riverfell to stride calmly into the inn, trailed closely by the Professor and a number of his men.

BRYCE

There any more of them?

BAILEY

I gods damn hope not.

NARRATOR

Madame Bailey, the proprietor of the establishment, peeked over the edge of the bar. Deeming the threat passed, she dusted her apron and walked to greet Bryce. Riverfell himself favored Madame Bailey with a very familiar grin.

BRYCE

Ms. Bailey.

BAILEY

Ain't you a sight for sore eyes, General Riverfell?

BRYCE

Can't we ever meet when you're not deep in some shit?

BAILEY

D'ya ever marry that red-haired lass you was always singing about?

NARRATOR

The two stood in silence for just a moment, appraising each other, before Bryce turned to the destruction surrounding them.

BRYCE

Anyone here hurt?

TRAVELER 3

These three here. Took ill suddenly, just before the Templars arrived.

BRYCE

Professor, check on them.

PROFESSOR

These three need help, and soon. I think they've been poisoned.

BAILEY

Gods. I keep a few of the common antidotes in me pantry.

NARRATOR

As Bailey rummaged underneath the bar, the Professor brought his nose close to Billy's mouth, and sniffed deeply.

PROFESSOR

This is no cheap alchemist's trick. There's a fern that grows on the border of the southern tundra. Eat a leaf and you die instantly. But the root can be made into a tea which will *only* cause hours of unconsciousness, high fever and vivid hallucinations.

BRYCE

Wonder who was the first guy dumb enough to eat the root after the leaf killed somebody.

PROFESSOR

The only people known to use it are the Templars.

BAILEY

You're saying these three are Templars too?

PROFESSOR

Doubtful. They use the root for their initiation rites, which would be done in seclusion and surrounded by elder Templars. The visions are meant to shatter the mind, and thus allow it to be rebuilt as the Templars desire.

BRYCE

So these three probably aren't Templars, but the Templars wanted them to be?

PROFESSOR

It's deeply odd. The Templars don't recruit. They usually want hopefuls to find them. They must think these three are extraordinarily important. Galadon only knows why.

BRYCE

Guess that means they're important to us.

PROFESSOR

In any case, they need medical attention. If the fever isn't controlled they may never wake.

BRYCE

You got your potions with you?

PROFESSOR

Not the ones I need for this. We need to get them back to Freehold. I need to tell you that if I treat them it will require all of my attention. If the siege you predict arrives before they wake...

CLARENCE

What else are we gonna do, Royne? Leave 'em here to die?

BAILEY

You damned sure won't, not in my inn.

BRYCE

No, we won't. Get the men ready to leave just as fast as you can. And send for those other two.

NARRATOR

As Bryce's men carefully lifted the three children to carry them back to the convoy, a pair of young serving boys emerged from underneath the bar. The two boys each ripped off their aprons and threw them at Madame Bailey's feet.

SERVING BOY

Sorry, Ms. Bailey. Think we gotta quit.

BAILEY

You're joking.

SERVING BOY

If Templars are here then we won't be. Thanks for everything, but we're not paid enough for that.

BAILEY

Oh fine, begone then, ye cowardly bastards.

*FOOTSTEPS AND A DOOR CLOSING.*

BRYCE

I'm gathering you're short-handed around here now?

BAILEY

Aye and who am I gonna hire? "Oh I can't pay much but don't worry. If you're lucky, ye'll get killed by a Templar and not have to worry about money."

BRYCE

As it happens, I know some folks looking for work. I can vouch for 'em, but they'll be happy not to ask too many questions of you if you don't ask many of them.

BAILEY

How soon can they get here?

BRYCE

Very soon.

BAILEY

I take it very soon is also when you'll be leaving?

BRYCE

As always.

BAILEY

There aren't always Templars at my inn.

BRYCE

Traft's army is riding on Freehold with the Templars out in front.

NARRATOR

This was news to Bailey, as well as all the patrons of her inn. A shocked murmur rose from the crowd.

BAILEY

Oh, Bryce.

BRYCE

Point is, if they get past us, this inn is the last of your worries. You see a bunch of people running from the west, follow them as fast as you can and as far as you can. And pray along the way.

BAILEY

So, I'll see ye again soon then?

## NARRATOR

Bryce Riverfell gave the woman a sad half-smile, and then turned wordlessly to leave. Madame Bailey's gaze followed the retreating General for a long time.

As her attention was elsewhere, Madame Bailey failed to notice a small vial, faintly glowing with a golden luminescence, roll under a table. This vial, which you will recall was covertly given to Jen by Queen Regan, had fallen out of the girl's handbag as she collapsed. In the commotion, nobody noticed its loss.

15A.

END OF PART ONE.

\*

## PART TWO:

6 EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS - DAWN

6

NARRATOR

A cold sun rose over the volcanic plains of southern Iorden. Small flowers dotted the grassy expanse, stems bent under frozen dew.

A roar of hoofbeats shook the ground. From behind a hill, a single rider appeared. Her night-black cloak fell over the horse's rump and brushed the ground. As each hoof struck earth, the grass and flowers wilted and died. A dozen riders crested the hill, followed by another dozen, and another, countless more, all black-cloaked.

All at once, the riders raised their arms directly towards the sky and began to **chant**. Above this eldritch chant, the sky darkened. Tremendous black clouds arose as if from nowhere, plunging the plains into total darkness. Under the cover of this darkness, General Traft marched his army onwards, towards Freehold.

7 EXT. FREEHOLD BATTLEMENTS - SIMULTANEOUS

7

NARRATOR

Bryce Riverfell stood along the tallest ramparts of Freehold. The day was bright all around him--save for the western horizon. There, the unnatural darkness loomed larger by the moment, roiling unerringly towards Riverfell's keep.

Far below Bryce's post, the last of the local peasants hurried into the protection of the fort, before the large metal gate creaked and slammed shut.

Bryce surveyed the darkness for a moment longer, before retreating back inside his keep.

8 INT. FREEHOLD INFIRMARY - NEARLY CONTINUOUS

8

NARRATOR

Within the keep's infirmary, the three children lay in cots, while the Professor and a host of medics buzzed around them. Bryce looked over the children.

BRYCE

You have everything you need, Professor?

PROFESSOR

I need twice as many men and no looming siege.

BRYCE

You have everything I can give you?

PROFESSOR

You'd have heard by now if I didn't.

BRYCE

They gonna make it?

PROFESSOR

We'll do all we can. A lot depends on them. Takes a strong mind to beat this poison.

BRYCE

What are the visions like?

PROFESSOR

Well, the consensus is that you face the one thing you're not ready to.

BRYCE

What did you see?

PROFESSOR

You know my love for you, Bryce. But no one needs to know what I saw except me.

BRYCE

You sure about that? We'll be fighting for our lives before the next sunrise.

PROFESSOR

All you need to know is that I'm still here.

NARRATOR

This was, in fact, all Bryce Riverfell needed to hear. His trust in his men unimpeachable, the commander left the healing to the medics, and returned to preparing his keep for the upcoming battle.

On his own cot, Nelson twitched and convulsed wordlessly. In his drug-induced coma, the boy dreamed.

DISSOLVE TO:

10 INT. CAR ON LOUISIANA ROAD - CONTINUOUS

10

NELSON (V.O.)

Dark fog everywhere. I'm in a car, back seat of an old Chevy. I know this car. Out the window, a sign says "Baton Rouge, 50 miles". Fog clears just enough for me to see into the front seat. Is that...?

NELSON

Mom? Pop? Is that really you??

POP

Maybe in the Lacanian sense.

NELSON

The what?

POP

I'm real in the sense of the *nom du pere* and the *non du pere*.

NELSON

What does that mean?

MOM

Oh stop playing with him George. Nelson, baby, what your dad is trying to explain - in a way I can not get on board with - is that yes, the biological organisms that made you are gone. But you're more than biology. There are thoughts in your head. Some of them came from us. And in that sense we'll always be with you. Okay with that synopsis, George?

POP

It'll do for now. I still think you're too quick to dismiss psychoanalysis, Sharon.

MOM

Imperialist bullshit. You're gonna let the Austrians and the French tell you the stories of your mind?

POP

Institutional issues aside, the notion of the unconscious is too important for decolonization movements to ignore.

MOM

Institutional issues aside? *All* the issues are institutional, that's the point.

NELSON

It has to be like this already?

*(Sarcastic)*

Hi Mom, Hi Pop. So nice to see you alive. Hi Nelson, we've missed you too.

POP

Watch it, now. We don't like having to get so heavy on you either, but there isn't time for much else.

NELSON

What do you mean there isn't time?

MOM

Nelson, you're probably the most educated person in that nowhere town we left you in. And it's like you're trying to forget all the education we gave you.

NELSON

I'm not trying to forget anything.

POP

Then what's up with your grades?

MOM

You know you could've studied more, Nelson.

NELSON

It's boring.

POP

Being bored won't kill you. Being broke will. Trust me on that.

NELSON

I'm not gonna be broke.

POP

Oh you're not, huh? What are you gonna do without a college degree?

NELSON

Something. I dunno, I'll figure it out. I won't be broke.

MOM

This isn't a Tolkien book, Nelson. Eagles aren't coming to save you.

POP

Don't get me started on Tolkien. Let me ask you something Nelson. Can tobacco grow in England?

NELSON

I dunno.

POP

Well it can't. So where the hell in the magical prehistory of England does Gandalf get it from? You think that was fair trade tobacco? You better think again.

NELSON

You're overthinking it, it's magic. Tolkien liked smoking a pipe. He made that Gandalf's thing to represent his affinity for fire magic.

POP

Exactly. He made it his thing without considering for a second that it was a natural resource from someone else's land.

NELSON

Can't I just have this one thing? One diversion I can just enjoy without analyzing it to death?

MOM

One thing? You have so much compared to some people.

NELSON

I don't have my parents! I wanted you to stay home that weekend. I remember. I wanted to go to Hershey park. And you'd still be around if you'd just blown off one of a million talks to spend time with...Wait, this is that weekend, isn't it? This is the car ride that k-- that did it? But...I wasn't in the car with you.

MOM

This is in your head anyway, honey. You are high as a kite right now. Your brain's piecing together things you already know.

NELSON

Can I stop the accident?

POP

No, but you know that.

MOM

One more time, Nelson. This is your own head.

POP

We don't have time for this Nelson. We were discussing you hiding in those stories of yours

NELSON

What was I supposed to do, huh? Just sit around and think about how much I missed you? Books distracted me. Don't you get that I needed those books?

MOM

But you shut off the world, Nelson.

POP

There are brothers and sisters out there who need your help. You can't have your head buried in a story all the time.

NELSON

What about me? I needed help. You expect me to be the one Black nationalist in Lackawanna? Get grandma's house burned down? Get the crap kicked out of me every day?

MOM

No one said anything about nationalism.

POP

Borders are the enemy. The master's tools will never dismantle the--

NELSON

--Would you stop being so academic for a second and talk to your son?

POP

We're not talking?

NELSON

Don't I get to be safe every once in a while? I don't want to start trouble. I've had twice enough martyrdom for one lifetime already.

MOM

You will never be safe until you dismantle the system that makes you frightened to speak the truth.

NELSON

What truth? I'm a sixteen-year-old orphan. I don't know the truth.

POP

That's an excuse 'cause you're scared.

NELSON

Of course I'm scared. I'm scared and I don't know anything.

MOM

That attitude I will not tolerate.

NELSON

What do you know about what I know? You've been out of my life almost longer than you've been in it. It's been seven years...

He trails off with another realization.

POP

Been a while hasn't it?

MOM

I think he's getting it.

NELSON

The Audre Lorde essay you were quoting. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." I read that online. I found it myself.

MOM

We owned a book it was in.

NELSON

Yeah but I read it online. I remember because I was reading it the day I hit level 85 in *WoW*. I was reading it on the other monitor while I waited for the raid to start.

POP

That internet's something, boy. Malcolm woulda been *dangerous* on Twitter.

NELSON

They still have ways to shut us down.

MOM

This tangent is important but we're short on time.

NELSON

What do you mean?

11 INTERCUT - CAR / FREEHOLD INFIRMARY

11

NARRATOR

In the Freehold infirmary, Nelson's body spasmed violently. The Professor dabbed cool water on the boy's brow, while medics held the shaking form onto the table.

*VOICES FROM THE INFIRMARY CUT THROUGH, FAINT AND  
ETHEREAL*

PROFESSOR (V.O.)

His fever's rising!

MEDIC (V.O.)

These ones too.

MOM

This car ride'll be ending soon.

NELSON

What? No. Already? That's all I get to see you?

MOM

You're not seeing us. You're just remembering us more clearly than you have. We're in your head, you know that.

POP

But the danger coming is very real. You need to get out of this car.

NELSON

But Pop, I--

MOM

--No time to argue, baby.

NELSON

Pop, the seat belt's tightening! I can't move. What's happening?

POP

They won't let you out yet.

NELSON

Who?

MOM

You haven't figured out what they need you to yet.

NELSON

Too tight, I can't breathe. Mom, dad, help!

NARRATOR

The boy on the infirmary cot began gasping, **quick ragged breaths** wrenching from his lips.

PROFESSOR (V.O.)

Get me the feverfew and the leeches!

NELSON

I can't breathe.

POP

Don't panic, son. You're almost there. Think a little harder.

NELSON

I can't breathe!

MOM

Nelson you have been learning since we left. You found scholarly writing on your own.

POP

Are you gonna be done with your stories after this?

NELSON

*(gasping)*

I mean, I guess, I don't...

Suddenly, he gets it.

NELSON

No.

POP

You're not done with your stories?

NELSON

No, and I won't ever be.

POP

Why not?

NELSON

Because stories matter.

NARRATOR

In the dream, the belt disappeared. In Freehold, the boy took a sudden, deep clear breath.

NELSON

You're anthropologists. You know that. Stories matter. You wanna understand people, understand their stories. You wanna change people, change their stories. People are the stories they tell. Power is who gets to tell the stories.

POP

That's good son. We told you you knew more than you were letting on.

MOM

You need to get out of the car now, Nelson.

NELSON

Can I at least--

MOM

--No. Tuck and roll. We love you, baby.

POP

And we're always with you.

*NELSON STAMMERS HELPLESSLY .*

POP

Nelson Malcolm Contee! Go!

12 EXT. CAR ON LOUISIANA ROAD - CONTINUOUS

12

NARRATOR

In his vision, Nelson leapt from the speeding vehicle. As he sprawled into a nearby ditch, he saw another such vehicle speeding towards his parents. The sound of the impact was deafening.

In the manner of dreams, Nelson's parents' vehicle was utterly destroyed in a cloud of metal and glass shards, while the other vehicle remained intact. A man, obviously inebriated, climbed out from the second vehicle. He inspected the wreckage, vomited, and then returned to his own car and sped away.

NELSON

Hey! Get the hell back here!

*SPRINTING FOOTSTEPS.*

NELSON

Get back here you redneck son of a bitch!

*NELSON FALLS TO HIS KNEES AND BREAKS INTO UNINTELLIGIBLE SOBS .*

NARRATOR

Nelson's anguish was interrupted by the arrival of a young girl. She was the very picture of innocence, save for the gaping puncture wound in her chest. Around Nelson and the girl, the world went still. The smoke from the wreckage stood still, and the rain of shattered glass froze mid-air.

NELSON

Who are you? What's happening.

YOUNG GIRL

There are seven things you must know to save me. The sixth thing is: Order is a story made flesh through power.

NELSON

Huh?

YOUNG GIRL

I am with you, Nelson.

13 INT. FREEHOLD INFIRMARY - NIGHT

13

NARRATOR

In a cot in the Freehold infirmary, Nelson's eyes shot open.

NELSON

Cold! Where am I? Why am I so cold?

PROFESSOR

Your fever's breaking. And this is Freehold.

NELSON

What about Billy and Jen?

PROFESSOR

That what they're called? You're the first to wake, Young...

NELSON

I'm Nelson. Nelson Malcolm Contee. Who are you?

PROFESSOR

My name's Royne.

NELSON

You a knight?

PROFESSOR

Ha! Was almost a doctor, but it's just Royne now.

MEDIC

Professor!

NARRATOR

On the adjacent cot, Billy's entire body began siezing up, his arms and legs flailing wildly.

MEDIC

This one's having a fit!

NARRATOR

A group of medics rushed to restrain his limbs and keep him on the bed.

NELSON

Is he gonna be okay?

PROFESSOR

I don't know.

END OF PART TWO.

\*

## PART THREE:

14 EXT. RUST BELT BACKYARD - AFTERNOON

14

BILLY (V.O.)

So bright. Where am I? Is that...my Dad's piece of shit old Firebird?

SENIOR

Heads up!

BILLY

Huh? Oof!

*A FOOTBALL STRIKES BILLY.*

BILLY

Dad?

SENIOR

What do you think, every throw's gonna come right to your hands? You gotta hustle for those, Junior.

BILLY

Yeah I know I just couldn't see.

SENIOR

No excuses, and watch your tone. All right, now throw it back.

BILLY

How's your leg today?

SENIOR

*(defensive)*  
It's fine. Now throw it back.

BILLY

Kay.

SENIOR

That was a pansy throw. You know how quick weak shit like that'll get picked off in the Big Ten?

*BILLY DIVES FOR AN OFF-BALANCE THROW AND CATCHES IT.*

SENIOR

Now throw it like a man.

BILLY

*Hut!*

THE BALL KNOCKS HIM OVER.

SENIOR

Oh, you think you're fucking funny? You like to goof off?

BILLY

No, Dad, I was just--

SENIOR

--Maybe if you quit goofing off you'd be something. Maybe you guys woulda won a fucking game this season.

BILLY

I haven't been goofing off.

SENIOR

Shut up. Why do you think the scouts aren't at your games?

BILLY

Because there's no scouts in NEPA, nobody cares.

SENIOR

Like hell they don't. They were there when I was playing.

BILLY

*(under his breath)*  
Then why'd you never get recruited?

SENIOR

What the hell did you just say to me? I know I didn't raise you to be a disrespectful, ungrateful little shit. And I know you don't want your ass beat.

BILLY

Why don't you back off, Dad?

SENIOR

Make me. Go ahead hardass, take a swing.

SENIOR

Too chickenshit? Come on, pussy, show me what a man you are.

MA (O.S.)

Hey, Bill?

SENIOR

Yeah?

BILLY

Yeah?

MA (O.S.)

Can you come in here and help me with this?

SENIOR

With what?

MA (O.S.)

With this stove, I've been asking for your help all week.

SENIOR

I'll do it later. I'm with my boy.

MA (O.S.)

It is later.

SENIOR

I'm with my boy, dammit! Now throw me the ball, Junior, and no fucking around.

*DOOR OPENS. FOOTSTEPS WALK OUT OF THE HOUSE.*

SENIOR

What? I told you I'd do it later.

MA

I don't need your help. Just putting the laundry out.

*LAUNDRY LINE GETS STRUNG OUT*

SENIOR

You need to do that right now?

MA

Gotta get done.

SENIOR

Well do it during the week when you're just watching TV instead of the one day I get to spend with my boy.

BILLY

Dad, it's still early, we can--

SENIOR

--You keep quiet.

MA

*(under her breath)*  
Oh screw you, Bill.

SENIOR

Screw me? I told you don't EVER disrespect me in front of my son.

MA

I'll respect you when you act respectable.

SENIOR

You don't even know what respectable means. Look at you, you're a goddamn mess.

MA

Respectable means 'worthy of respect,' which is something you'll never be. I'd be respectable if I hadn't married a good-for-nothing loser.

SENIOR

I swear to God, Mary, if you don't crawl out from up my ass for ten goddamn minutes--

MA

--Why don't you spend ten goddamn minutes teaching your son something useful?

*A LOUD SLAP. MA GASPS.*

MA

You fucking--

*ANOTHER SLAP. MA FALLS DOWN.*

SENIOR

Come on, Junior.

*MA GETS HER WIND BACK IN A SOB.*

SENIOR

Hey. I said let's go. I'm going to watch the game with Frankie and them.

A beat.

SENIOR

What are you, deaf?

BILLY

I'm staying here.

SENIOR

You don't need to be around your Ma when she gets like this.

MA

*(through tears)*  
Fuck you, Bill.

BILLY

Yeah I do. This time I do.

SENIOR

Junior, get in the car.

BILLY

No.

SENIOR

Get in the fucking car.

BILLY

Mom needs help.

SENIOR

You're just gonna drop everything for her every time she goes into her fucking hysterics?

BILLY

I'm staying here, Dad.

SENIOR

Junior, I'm gonna give you this choice exactly once. Her or me.

BILLY

She needs help.

*FOOTSTEPS APPROACH BILLY.*

BILLY

Ow! Dad! What are you doing? Get off me!

SENIOR

Don't be a pussy.

*SOUNDS OF A STRUGGLE.*

15 INT. FREEHOLD INFIRMARY - NIGHT

15

NARRATOR

In the Freehold infirmary, the medics rushed to restrain Billy as he flailed his arms wildly.

MEDIC (V.O.)

This one's having a fit!

NELSON (V.O.)

Is he gonna be okay?

PROFESSOR (V.O.)  
I don't know.

16 EXT. RUST BELT BACKYARD - DAY

16

A HIT AND A NOSE CRUNCHING.

A terrible beat of silence.

SENIOR  
I'm bleeding you ungrateful little shit.

*BILLY'S DAD LETS OUT AN UNNATURAL ROAR. HIS VOICE  
PITCHES FRIGHTENINGLY DOWNWARD AS THE SCENE CONTINUES.*

BILLY  
Holy shit, Dad, what's happening to you?

SENIOR  
I gave up so much for you! I coulda kept playing ball.  
Instead I stayed around to bring you up, and this is  
how you repay me? Now I'm a work-a-day loser with a  
loser fucking son. Who can't even be bothered to watch  
a ball game with his Dad.

BILLY  
You *didn't* raise me!

SENIOR  
(*animal roar*)  
WHAT?!

BILLY  
You taught me to throw a ball and treat people like  
shit. That's not raising me.

SENIOR  
I tried to teach you how to be a man. Sounds like I  
failed!

BILLY  
That's not the kinda man I wanna be.

SENIOR  
You sound like a damn tree-hugging faggot! This is your  
fault for coddling the boy, Mary. You stupid bitch.

*ELEPHANTINE FOOTSTOPS PLOD ALONG.*

BILLY  
Dad, stop! Leave Ma alone.

SENIOR

I'm gonna crush the weakness out of you.

BILLY

Dad, don't step on me!

SENIOR

Say it!

BILLY

This hurts! You're gonna kill me. Please stop!

SENIOR

I raised you! You'd be nothing without me!

BILLY

And now I'm half a person! I'm broken and you are too.

SENIOR

It's you and your Ma who broke me.

BILLY

No Dad! You've gotta learn how to be this mean. I don't know who taught you, but you taught me.

*BILLY STRAINS AND SENIOR ROARS.*

BILLY

Jen's hurting! I love her so much and she's hurting all the time. Everyone I love is hurting and I don't know what to do. Sometimes I'm funny and they feel better but most of the time I just get angry at people for hurting because I don't know what else to do.

SENIOR

You're weak! You're weak!

BILLY

I'm done! I'm done not being a human. I wanna feel feelings. I'm tired of hurting everyone else 'cause I'm scared. Yaah!

*BILLY'S DAD ROARS AND STAGGERS AS HE FALLS BACKWARDS. HE CRASHES THROUGH THE HOUSE AND EXPLODES IN A MASS OF SCAR TISSUE AND CAR PARTS.*

NARRATOR

Suddenly, the monster that Billy's father had become was gone. In his place stood a young boy, who looked very much like Billy's father from his own childhood portraits.

\*  
\*  
\*  
\*  
\*

*DUST SETTLES FOR A LONG BEAT.*

*A YOUNGER BILL SENIOR CRIES HELPLESSLY .*

YOUNG BILL

*(through tears)*

I'm so sorry, Billy. I'm so sorry, Mary.

BILLY

It's not just easy like that, Dad. You hurt us a lot.

MA

Billy, this is all in your head. He's explaining so that you can know. Not so you can forgive him.

BILLY

I'm not gonna live my life just hurting everyone who cares about me.

YOUNG BILL

It's not like that's what I wanted to do.

BILLY

I wanna be the kind of strong that can help people, not tear them down. If you need to tear people down to feel strong then you're not strong. Caring about people's hard and scary. That's what takes real strength.

*THE ENGINE OF THE MUSCLE CAR REVS AND IDLES.*

YOUNG BILL

I'll be damned. That thing hasn't run since '79.

*THE CAR DOOR UNLOCKS AND SWINGS OPEN.*

MA

I think it's for you, Billy.

BILLY

*(awed)*

Dude. Bitchin'

*(catches himself)*

I need to work on my vocabulary too, don't I?

MA

Yeah, Billy. It's okay. One thing at a time.

BILLY

Cool, Ma. Love you. Payce!

*BILLY CLOSSES THE CAR DOOR. THE CAR ROARS AND PEELS OUT.*

17 INT. FREEHOLD INFIRMARY - NIGHT

17

NARRATOR

In the Freehold infirmary, Billy suddenly awoke from his coma. He leapt off his cot, much to the surprise of the Professor, who had been tending to the recently-unconscious boy.

BILLY

Hey man, I'm Billy. Thanks for your help, sorry if I puked or anything on you, that was a pretty gnarly trip. Nelson, how's it hanging?

NARRATOR

Pleasantries aside, Billy went straight for Jen's cot.

BILLY

Jenny, I love you. I'm sorry. Come back to me, okay?

NARRATOR

Billy grasped Jen's unconscious hand in his own. The girl twitched lightly, but remained unconscious, submerged in her own hallucination.

DISSOLVE TO:

18 INT. SCHOOL LOCKER ROOM - TIME UNCLEAR

18

*A CRAPPY FLUORESCENT LIGHT BUZZES.*

JEN

Oh..oh no. Anywhere but here. Not the locker room. I'm in Iorden, I'm not here. This can't be.

*SHE TRIES A LOCKED DOOR. NO LUCK.*

JEN

No, no, no, c'mon. Let me out!

*SHE SLAMS HER BODY INTO THE DOOR WITH A YELP OF PAIN AND EXERTION. AND AGAIN, AND AGAIN, MORE FRANTICALLY EACH TIME.*

*SHE COLLAPSES, CRYING.*

REGAN

Hey girly.

JEN

Regan? What are you doing here?

REGAN

What'sa matter badass?

JEN

This is the locker room. Coach McCreary.

REGAN

So gut the sonofabitch. Here's your knife. Same one you did McShane with.

JEN  
I can't do this. I'm not ready to see him again.

REGAN  
You're okay. You're stronger than you look, remember?

JEN  
This is a dream, its not real. I just gotta wake up.  
Wake up, Jenny! Wake up!

REGAN  
Sorry girly, not that kinda dream. Open your eyes. Look  
at me. Hey! Look at me. Now stand up. You remember what  
I showed you?

JEN  
Knife fighter's stance.

REGAN  
Keep moving, keep your knees and hips all loose-like.  
And that trick you did with Frieshelm would probably be  
a good idea.

*MAGIC NOISE AS SOME STATIC STARTS TO CRACKLE.*

REGAN  
You've got this.

JEN  
Don't leave.

REGAN  
You know as well as I do this is your fight.

JEN  
Wait, hang on, don't--Fuck.

*JEN TAKES A DEEP BREATH AND WALKS ACROSS THE LOCKER  
ROOM.*

\*  
\*

JEN  
Okay McCreary,. If this has to happen now then get your  
scumbag ass out here and let's do this.

*A DOOR OPENS.*

JEN  
Wait. You're not McCreary. You're...

END OF PART THREE.

\*

## PART FOUR:

19 INT. ANTONIN'S SLEEPING QUARTERS - EVENING

19

NARRATOR

Antonin Mooncrest, the one-time fiancée of the now-missing Arlene Redmoor, was taking a late supper in his tent on the fields outside Castle Guernatal, when he heard one of his pages call to him.

PAGE

(O.S.)  
Lord Antonin?

ANTONIN

Enter.

NARRATOR

Two boys in Mooncrest's colors entered the tent.

ANTONIN

What news?

PAGE

Lord Redmoor has chosen the terms of your duel, my Lord. You shall fight with daggers, my Lord.

ANTONIN

Daggers? Only a brave man fights with daggers. I take this to mean Redmoor has appointed a champion to fight in his stead?

PAGE

That is true, my Lord.

ANTONIN

As I figured. Who will be Redmoor's champion?

PAGE

That has not been publicly announced yet, my Lord.

ANTONIN

Of course not. And when is combat to commence?

PAGE

Now, my Lord.

NARRATOR

Antonin Mooncrest understood after a short moment, but that was one moment too many. The first page drew a dagger and jabbed it under Antonin's ribs. The second page thrust his blade towards Antonin's throat. With no  
(MORE)

NARRATOR (cont'd)

time to draw his own knife, Mooncrest lifted his left hand into the path of the blade. The dagger plunged into the flesh of Antonin's hand, but at least his throat was intact.

*ANTONIN CRIES OUT IN PAIN.*

NARRATOR

With his right hand, Antonin threw a blow at the first page's face, instantly breaking the boy's nose. He searched for a weapon, and found his teapot, boiling on some coals. He grabbed the pot and smashed it over the head of the page. With the boys stunned and reeling, Antonin Mooncrest took the opportunity to draw his own dagger. He just managed to dispatch his two assailants, before collapsing to the ground.

20 INT. HORSE'S HEAD INN - EVENING

20

NARRATOR

At the Horse's Head Inn, Madame Bailey's fine establishment on the southern plains, Arlene and Gwen were working their first shift. In the interest of secrecy, they were operating under the pseudonyms of Anna and Gayle, respectively. Gwen--that is, Gayle, had been serving food all her life, and took to her new job instantaneously.

GWEN

All right, then. Four ales. Mutton, mutton, pheasant, minced pie. And rice for the table.

NARRATOR

I could describe to you the food served by Madame Bailey's chefs, but quite frankly, that would be terribly boring. Honestly, I'm sure you've all eaten before, you understand the concept. There's absolutely no need to describe every dish being served.

As Gwen distributed the food, a patron slid a handful of coins her way. These she crisply pocketed.

GWEN

Thank you my good man.

NARRATOR

As Gwen turned to leave, a glowing from underneath the table caught her eye. Just as quick, she covertly slid her coins back out of her pocket, and dropped them onto the floor below the table.

GWEN  
Oh curse my hands! Pardon me.

NARRATOR  
In an instant the coins--and the small vial of glowing golden liquid -- were back in Gwen's pocket. As she stood up, she heard a **commotion** coming from the other side of the tavern.

ARLENE  
Oh dear, are you all right?

NARRATOR  
Gwen rushed across the room to where Arlene was standing, helpless and confused, next to a portly pub patron whose face had gone beet-red, and was clutching at his own throat.

GWEN  
What's happened?

RAWLS  
*(through coughs)*  
I told her no pepper. You all heard me say no pepper!

GWEN  
Oh a little spice won't kill you.

RAWLS  
It gives me hives, you imbecile!

BAILEY  
What ever is the matter, Mr. Rawls?

PATRON  
Your moron of a wench brought me food with pepper!

GWEN  
Oi! What gives you the bloody right to--

BAILEY  
--Quiet, Gayle  
*(to the patron)*  
Terribly sorry, Mr. Rawls. Your supper's on the house tonight, of course, as are your drinks.

RAWLS  
Hmph. Service hasn't been this bad in years.

BAILEY

Gentlemen, we'll have your food to you just as soon as we can. And we'll fill your cups even sooner.

*(pointed)*

Anna. Gayle. Won't you help me in the kitchen? Now?

21 INT. HORSE'S HEAD INN KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

21

BAILEY

Anna, what in Garedian's gaping arsehole are you doing out there?

ARLENE

I'm sorry, Ms. Bailey, there were just so many orders and--

GWEN

--She's trying so hard Ms. Bailey.

BAILEY

I don't doubt it. But Mr. Rawls is me most loyal customer and now he's covered in hives. How am I supposed to keep you on after that?

GWEN

What? No, please.

BAILEY

I like ya, dearie. And I was happy to do Bryce a favor. But at the end of the day we're talking about me livelihood.

GWEN

She just needs some more time.

ARLENE

It's all right Gayle.

GWEN

No it isn't. Can't you have a heart, Ms. Bailey?

BAILEY

Don't ye dare presume to know me heart, lass. Think I'm all golds and silvers do ye? Well I got kin I'm thinking about. I got one sister makes the finest ladies' armor in Armstrungard. Can't move a piece of it lately, 'cause suddenly everyone's up in arms if a lady's armor shows a little leg.

GWEN

Wait, why would armor need to show any leg?

BAILEY

I got another sister, thrown out of house and home 'cause some mad little tart killed a Sergeant of the Guard right on her bloody doorstep. Everywhere I look, me kith and blood are falling on hard times and they're all counting on me to keep things together. D'ye expect me to do any less for me sisters than you're doing for each other?

GWEN

No, of course not, but--

BAILEY

--Then I need to stay in business.

NARRATOR

The two women hung their heads, defeated, until Gwen came upon an idea.

GWEN

Anna can sing, Ms. Bailey.

ARLENE

Gayle, please be serious.

GWEN

You can! She has the most beautiful voice I've ever heard. I bet it's been a while since you had music in here.

BAILEY

And is your singing supposed to cure Mr. Rawls of his hives? I can see you gals are young. Not too wise in the ways of the world.

GWEN

We're plenty wise, don't you worry.

BAILEY

I don't think so. If you were, you'd be asking yourself how it is an old maid stays safe out here all by herself. I can't afford any armed men and I surely can't count on Bryce to be here. I stay safe because everyone who comes through likes being here and they like me. Someone has a few too many and acts a fool, someone else'll sort him out for me. But if the crowd ever sours on me, things could get wery ugly. And I'm too old for any of that.

NARRATOR

This tale had the appropriate effect on Arlene and Gwen, as neither of them could meet Madame Bailey's

(MORE)

NARRATOR (cont'd)

eyes. Arlene began to silently cry, tears streaming down her cheeks.

BAILEY

Agh. Gods curse me soft heart. I'll give ye one more chance. And I'm mad for doing that. But one more incident like tonight and you're done. And I'll tear ye down in front of everyone out there to save face. Because I'll have to. Understand?

GWEN

Thank you.

ARLENE

Yes, thank you so much, Ms. Bailey. You won't regret it.

BAILEY

Yes I will. Now bring Mr. Rawls and his friends their drinks.

GWEN

Yes, Ms. Bailey.

ARLENE

Yes, Ms. Bailey.

22 INT. ANTONIN'S SLEEPING QUARTERS - MORNING

22

NARRATOR

Back outside Castle Guernatal, Julius Mooncrest, uncle to Antonin, was sitting in council with his lieutenants. Antonin himself was hours late, extremely unusual for the man. Concerned, Julius and his men sought out Antonin's tent.

They drew back the flap, and discovered the gruesome remains of the earlier combat. The bodies of the two pages remained where they fell on the floor. However, each one's pockets were turned out, and their bloodstained coin purses spilled in front of the former owners.

Julius bent down to to inspect a coin, and found the cruel visage of Ardel Redmoor staring up at him from the silver. Enraged, he hurled the coin at the far wall of the tent. It was then that he noticed the smear of blood, leading from the desk to the back of the tent, and out underneath the far wall.

23 INT. HORSE'S HEAD INN - NIGHT

23

NARRATOR

Back at Bailey's Inn, the atmosphere was once again jovial, as it often does when alcohol is served to mortals. The room was full of conversation.

\*

DINER

So then she says, "What do you think I am? The fucking Queen?"

*THIS EARNS UPROARIOUS LAUGHTER .*

DINER

Wait, wait. Have you heard about this Orc, this priestess, and this big fat--

NARRATOR

--The tavern patron, gesturing wildly to demonstrate this joke, knocked an entire tray of food and drink out of Arlene's hands.

ARLENE

Oh, goodness, I'm so terribly sorry.

DINER

Why don't you watch where you're going?

ARLENE

Yes, of course. I will.

GWEN

*(to herself)*  
Oh gods.

NARRATOR

Gwen rushed from across the room to intervene.

ARLENE

Gayle, I don't know what happened, I was just--

GWEN

--It's all right, I'll clean this up. You go and--

RAWLS

--Oi! I've been waiting on me sweets for near to half an hour.

GWEN

They'll be right out, Mr. Rawls. Anna, could you please go to the kitchen and fetch--

DINER

--Wait a bloody, ruddy minute. It's my food what you dropped on the floor. I should get mine first.

RAWLS

I ordered mine first.

GWEN

We'll serve you both very soon.

NARRATOR

This patron's issue, however, was less with the quality of service, and more with the aforementioned Mr. Rawls. The two were up from their seats and shouting at each other's faces in a flash.

DINER

Listen, you rich bastard. I been coming here as long as you have.

RAWLS

'Cept I order more than grog and rice, you common whoreswhelp.

GWEN

Gentlemen, let's all cool our tongues.

DINER

Common! And what are you? He thinks just because he owns a lumber mill he's a lord or something.

*MUMBLED ASSENT THROUGHOUT THE DINING ROOM.*

DINER

Your blood's as common as mine, you up-jumped cock pox!

RAWLS

I'll show you common blood.

NARRATOR

In the blink of an eye, Bailey's common room went from jovial dining to an all-out tavern brawl. Fists were flying, flagons of ale were smashed over skulls, and chaos generally raged. In a clever tactic, someone tossed a bowl of pepper at Mr. Rawls' face.

*RAWLS COUGHS LOUDLY.*

RAWLS

Ach! I'll eat your spleen you scum!

BAILEY

Oh Galadon's good grace.

A FLAGON WHISTLES PAST BAILEY AND SMASHES AGAINST THE WALL BEHIND HER.

BAILEY

Anna, gods dammit. I should have had more sense than to trust yer worthless hide.

BAILEY CONTINUES TO HARANGUE ARLENE, AD LIB.

ARLENE

*There were two sisters by the sea.\ Maidens fair as fair can be.\ The elder's voice was the pure'st but none.\ The elder's bright as candle in the sun.*

NARRATOR

Arlene's eyes were closed tight as she began to sing.

BAILEY

And what in Selbirin are ye singing for, ye mad little tart?

NARRATOR

Had anyone been paying attention, they would have seen the world shift and shimmer, almost imperceptibly, around her as the song began. No one had been paying attention, although as her song gained in strength some heads began to turn.

ARLENE

*To town one day there rode a knight.\Singing here's where I'll find wife.\ The elder said "this much I know."\ "If he hears her sing I'll be yet alone."*

NARRATOR

An eerie stillness coated the room. Patrons were frozen in place, some paused mid-punch, enthralled by some ineffible quality of Arlene's music.

ARLENE

*So she called out "sister come with me."\ "Let's go walking by the sea."\ And the waves did thrash and the wind did churn.\ And only the elder did return.\ Returned alone, returned alone.\ Fa lalala la la doe doe.*

NARRATOR

The room was filled with **applause**, the cause of the brawl all but forgotten. Of course, Mr. Rawls' face was still swelling like an overripe melon from the pepper, it would take more than a song to cure that. Even so, his anger was no longer quite as sharp as it had been.

ARLENE

*One day a dragon came to town.\ Stores devour'd and  
homes burnt down.*

NARRATOR

Gwen looked on with pride, and not a little surprise.

END OF PART FOUR.

\*

## PART FIVE:

24 OMITTED 24

25 INT. SCHOOL LOCKER ROOM - TIME UNCLEAR 25

*BUZZING FLUORESCENTS.*

JEN

Daddy? I coulda sworn it was gonna be McCreary. What are you doing here?

DADDY

In some ways I've always been here.

JEN

*(pointed)*  
No you haven't. You left.

DADDY

Any case, I'm a part of you. See, you know that whatever poison you drank had a bunch of...molecules that bonded to your spinal cord and crawled up your brain and connected all the wrong synapses. So now your brain's combining things you already know just in new ways. Like your Dad knowing words like 'synapse.' You're so much better in school than I ever was. In other words I can't tell you anything that part of you doesn't already know. Which means everything you see of me is part of you. So in that way I never left.

JEN

Yeah, but in the way where I'm supposed to grow up with a Dad, and where mom's supposed to raise me with a husband, you did leave. Are you gonna try to tell me that deep down I was okay without you? Because I wasn't.

DADDY

No, I'm here to talk to you about the decision you've gotta make.

JEN

Why are you the person I need to talk to about that?

DADDY

You'll figure that out.

JEN

And why are we *here*?

DADDY

You'll figure that out.

JEN

Is that gonna be your answer to everything? Am I on my own? Again?

DADDY

I really wanna help you, honey. But first things first. You need to ask the right questions.

JEN

Can we at least go somewhere else?

DADDY

Not yet. I'm sorry.

JEN

Oh come on!

DADDY

I would if I could. It's out of my hands.

JEN

That's convenient.

DADDY

You got every reason to hate me, honey. But we can't leave until you ask the right questions.

JEN

Fine. What's this big decision I've gotta make?

DADDY

You said it yourself to that boy you're seeing. Stay in your new world, see everything you can be and lose who you were. Go back to your old one, stay safe, always know you coulda been more.

JEN

Which one is the opposite of what you woulda done?

DADDY

Your Ma never told you why we split up, did she?

JEN

She said things weren't working out between you and you decided you had to leave.

DADDY

And you were smart enough to know there was more to it than that.

JEN  
I mean, sure. But you still decided that whatever you had to figure out was more important than your wife and daughter.

DADDY  
But part of you remembers that car accident, right?

JEN  
The scar on my knee.

DADDY  
We really got lucky. I think if you got hurt any worse than that I woulda thrown myself off a bridge.

JEN  
The doctors told me I was scared so I blocked it out.

DADDY  
Yeah, you didn't though. You heard people whispering after. You remember the smell in the truck.

JEN  
(*"shit, you're right"*)  
Beer.

DADDY  
Yuh huh.

JEN  
(*denial*)  
But I mean it was probably left over from before, you weren't drinking at 2 in the afternoon before you had to pick me up.

DADDY  
Think about it. You know I was.

JEN  
Jesus Christ are you trying to make me hate you more? Why would you tell me that?

DADDY  
Like I said, I'm trying to make you ready to decide what you want from your life.

JEN  
And why should I take advice from you?

DADDY  
Wrong question.

JEN

This is my coming-of-age hallucination or whatever. I should get to pick the questions. And I think that's a damn good question.

DADDY

It is, but it's not the question that'll help you now. Be more direct. What are you really trying to ask?

JEN

What the hell is wrong with you, getting tanked before you get in a car with your daughter?

DADDY

Well your mom was supposed to pick you up that day, so I thought I had the afternoon to myself. Then she called me from the hospital and said she just found out she had to work a double. I didn't want her to know I'd been drinking. Thought I was okay to drive.

JEN

If that's true then why didn't the police ever come around?

DADDY

You don't think your Ma had friends at the hospital?

A beat.

DADDY

Anyway, I think your Ma always knew my drinking was a problem, but that wreck was when she realized I was a danger to you. So she told me I had to leave.

JEN

Why didn't you just stop drinking instead of leaving?

DADDY

"Why don't you stop" is always the wrong question to ask a drunk.

JEN

Okay. Why'd you start?

DADDY

There you go.

Daddy takes a breath.

DADDY

You know how Lackawanna is. And I'm sure as hell not a very smart man. But I think I was just a little too smart for that place. Not smart enough to get out though.

JEN

Why not?

DADDY

I coulda maybe got into college, worked three jobs to put myself through. But when you're eighteen, marrying your sweetheart seems a lot more pleasant than all that. Your Ma's the only thing I ever loved about that crapsack town. Thought if I just had her I could put up with the rest.

JEN

Did Mommy know you felt that way?

DADDY

I told her often enough. But by the time I realized I couldn't put up with the rest, your Ma'd already got with you.

JEN

So this is my fault?

DADDY

Oh, sweetheart. None of this - none of this is your fault. So when I started feeling like I was too smart for my own good and had to run away, thought I'd make myself just a little dumber, and then I could be there like my family needed me to.

JEN

Oh God. Is that why I get drunk too? So I can let myself be stupid for a while?

DADDY

It's nice isn't it? Started out just Friday nights 'cause screw it, work was over. And Saturdays 'cause that's what everyone did. Then I started having a few more watching the game on Sunday. Then Wednesday to get me over the hump. Then, you understand.

JEN

So you're saying if I stay in NEPA I'll be an alcoholic?

DADDY

I don't know the future. I know the past and I know you.

JEN

Can't one goddamn thing in my life be easy?

DADDY

Yeah, some things can. You could have any fella in Pennsylvania wrapped around your little finger. Thank Christ you got your Ma's legs and not mine.

*JEN CHUCKLES .*

DADDY

Keep that up until you get old and he gets bored. Or until you get bored and run off with some junkie painter from the city or something, just to prove to yourself you can still feel something.

JEN

Jesus, dark much?

DADDY

Hey, this is all coming from your own head, remember?

JEN

It's not even really a choice is it?

DADDY

You can try pretending you're someone someone you're not.

JEN

But not forever. Do I have some time to think about it?

DADDY

Some. Not as much as you'd probably like. We've got a few more minutes though. You want me to buy you some ice cream?

JEN

Wait, really?

26 EXT. FREEHOLD BATTLEMENTS - NIGHT

26

NARRATOR

Outside Freehold, the unnatural darkness had reached the walls of the keep. In the darkness, a squad of Orcs, dressed in black, with skin darkened by war-paint, scaled the thick outer wall. Hidden by the Templar's artificial night, they were entirely undetected, until it was too late. They reached the top of the wall, and without a sound, slew the nearby guards. Inside the keep, Jen still dreamed.

27 EXT. JERSEY SHORE BOARDWALK - DAY

27

JEN

This isn't the locker room anymore. This looks like...  
is this Atlantic City?

DADDY

*(straining)*

Honey I can't give you piggyback rides anymore. You're  
too grown up.

JEN

Yeah it's kinda weird now.

DADDY

*(straining)*

I'm gonna put you down.

JEN

I remember you taking me and mom here for the summer.

DADDY

Thought it'd be nice to go out on a pleasant memory.

JEN

Why'd we have to start in the locker room?

DADDY

Probably 'cause you blame me somewhat for all that.  
Think maybe if I'd been around things woulda been  
different.

JEN

Not as much as I blame myself.

DADDY

Now that's crazy talk.

JEN

I shoulda fought back or put a stop to it sooner or--

DADDY

--For Chrissakes you were a child. Without anyone to  
turn to really. And that last part is my fault. But the  
fault for what that son of a bitch did to you is his  
alone. He picked you out *because* you didn't have  
anyone. Because that's what predators do. You weren't  
the first or last for him.

JEN

That almost makes me feel worse.

DADDY

But that's the truth and you should know it.

*THUNDER.*

DADDY

Storm's coming in.

JEN

Do we need to leave?

DADDY

You do.

*WAVES CRASH AGAINST THE BOARDWALK.*

DADDY

Time for maybe one more question. And before you ask me anything about love or faith, remember - I'm just an unlocked version of your mind. Ask something it's worth hearing from yourself.

Jen thinks about this for a few beats.

JEN

The morning you left, I pretended I was sleeping when you missed me goodbye. If I knew I'd never see you again I would've gotten up. But you left a tape on my dresser. I know it was the one you used to play for me in car, but I can't remember what that was.

*THE WIND PICKS UP.*

They need to raise their voices to be heard.

DADDY

Why didn't you just listen to it?

JEN

Couldn't bring myself to. I put it on CD though. And then on my phone.

DADDY

It was Springsteen. *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. I thought maybe it would explain things better than I could.

JEN

Oh yeah. You liked the last song the best.

DADDY

There's whatever little world you grow up in, and then there's the darkness all around. Outside "normal," outside "supposed to." Point of that song is there's some people who just need to take that step into the darkness.

*THEY'RE SCREAMING OVER THE WIND, SURF, AND THUNDER NOW.*

JEN

It's scary.

DADDY

That's how you know you need to go there. I love you, sweetheart. That don't make it okay what I did, but I'll always love you.

JEN

I know.

*JEN TAKES A DEEP BREATH, AND--*

28 INT. FREEHOLD INFIRMARY - NIGHT

28

*--SPLASH!*

NARRATOR

Jen's face was drenched with water as she sputtered to consciousness in the Freehold infirmary. A medic stood above her, holding a now-empty water bucket.

MEDIC

We've been infiltrated! Find something to fight with or something to hide.

29 INT. CORRIDOR IN FREEHOLD - SIMULTANEOUS

29

NARRATOR

Battle raged in the hallways of Freehold. Small pockets of Riverfell's forces held out against the nimble Orc scouts. But the Orcs, whose fighting skills were honed in the mines of the Black Mountains, were far better in the dark and close quarters.

In a particularly narrow hallway, Billy and Nelson had each found swords and were fighting back-to-back with a handful of guards. To their credit, the childrens' experiences in Iorden had drastically improved their swordsmanship. They were still giving ground, however.

(MORE)

NARRATOR (cont'd)

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning arced through the air of the hallway and struck down an Orc as he was about to swing his axe at Nelson's head. A second bolt of lightning, and another Orc fell. Jen lowered her outstretched hand, and ran to join her friends.

Reinforced by and heartened by Jen's magic, the men turned the tide of the battle, and in short order that precious yard of hallway was secured from the invaders. The guardsmen cheered.

GUARD CAPTAIN

Now man the wall, you sorry sods!

NARRATOR

As the men rushed to their posts, Jen and Billy took a moment to revel in their reunion.

BILLY

I love you.

JEN

I love you too.

NELSON

I'm glad you're okay, Jen.

JEN

Thanks, Nelson. Billy...I think I need to see this out. See what I can be.

BILLY

I know.

NARRATOR

Before charging into the battle, Jen retrieved her iPhone from her handbag. She plugged one end of a wire into the device. The other end, she wrapped around her finger.

Jen closed her eyes, and the world twisted and shimmered. A glow flowed from her fingertip, into the wire, and into the device. The device's screen came to life.

Jen navigated the device to "Dad's Tape", and selected "Track ten". As if conjured from the air, the voice of a bard known in Jen's realm as The Boss came from the device and filled the hallway.

As this man sang about venturing out into the darkness on the edge of town, Billy and Jen ran to rejoin the battle.

30 INT. ROOM IN THE HORSE'S HEAD INN - NIGHT

30

NARRATOR

While battle raged in Freehold, a few hours to the east Arlene and Gwen had retired to their rented room in Bailey's inn, exhausted from the evening's work. Between the two women sat a pile of coins, most of them earned by Arlene's voice.

GWEN

That was...wondrous.

ARLENE

(*incredulous*)  
All I did was sing.

GWEN

No. I don't know what you did, but it wasn't just singing. They was hanging on your every word.

*GWEN LETS SOME COINS FALL THROUGH HER FINGERS.*

ARLENE

What do we do now?

GWEN

We can do what we want.

Arlene absorbs the truth of Gwen's statement. Of their freedom.

ARLENE

Very well. When first I laid eyes on you, it hurt me how beautiful you were. You've only become more beautiful since then. And tonight you look so beautiful I fear it shall drive me mad. What I want is to kiss you. Would you let me?

\*  
\*

NARRATOR

Slowly, tentatively, Gwen lowered her head to Arlene's, and their lips touched.

ARLENE

I love you, Gwen. Every song I'll ever sing will be for you.

NARRATOR

Gwen moved her face close to Arlene's yet again, but as their lips touched Arlene pulled their whole bodies close together.

Gwen cries **tears of joy** as she whispers to her lady.

GWEN  
You know I love you too.

ARLENE  
Do you find me beautiful?

Another kiss, this one very long.

GWEN  
So beautiful.

Every word now is a breath stolen  
between kisses.

ARLENE  
Did it ever hurt you? That feeling?

GWEN  
Every day.

ARLENE  
Did you ever find relief?

GWEN  
Sometimes.

ARLENE  
Show me how.

*SOME FABRIC RUSTLES ASIDE. ARLENE GASPS AT GWEN'S TOUCH.*

31 EXT. FREEHOLD BATTLEMENTS - SIMULTANEOUS

31

NARRATOR  
On the battlements of Freehold, the three children from Northeast Pennsylvania stood alone in the conjured darkness. Before them stood Traft's hordes, a mass that stretched to the horizon.

BILLY  
What do we do about *that* shit, Nelson?

NELSON  
Anyone got a game-breaking super weapon they haven't told us about?

NARRATOR  
Jen lifted her hands in front of her face. Sparks flew between her outstretched fingertips.

JEN  
I'll see what I can do.

*THUNDER ROARS.*

**END OF CHAPTER.**