

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

Honors College

Spring 5-2018

To Speak in the Cave

Stephen Thomas Krichels
University of Maine

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Krichels, Stephen Thomas, "To Speak in the Cave" (2018). *Honors College*. 341.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors/341>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

TO SPEAK IN THE CAVE

by

Stephen Thomas Krichels

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(English and Political Science)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2018

Advisory Committee:

Dr. Kristin Vekasi, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Advisor
Joseph Miller, Assistant Professor of Military History
Dr. David Kress, Associate Professor of English
Dr. James Warhola, Professor of Political Science
Dr. Michael Palmer, Professor of Political Science

ABSTRACT

The aim of *To Speak In The Cave* is to provide some insight regarding how the Chinese government allows its citizens to voice their opinions, while simultaneously alienating the audience from existing bias.

To this end the narrative avoids any Chinese characteristics that are not fundamental to China's treatment of its citizens as it pertains to their public voice. All names are Western, as are job titles and any cultural aspects of the narrative world that are not related to the allegory being created throughout the story.

The protagonist of the story, Jerg, is a dissociated and down on his luck reporter, who inadvertently becomes involved with the production and distribution of books that have been banned by the government. The two illegal texts that enter the story are the *Qaran*, and an entirely fictional work geared towards effectively inciting public dissent. The mannerisms and decisions of the characters are designed to give the clearest representation possible of how real world China functions regarding freedom of speech while still maintaining the separation from bias and the entertainment value of a standard novella.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks and recognition must be given to Professor Kristin Vekasi.

Professor Vekasi taught the Chinese Politics course I took during my undergraduate years at the University of Maine, and accepted the position as the head of my thesis committee. Without her direction and insight this text never would have fruition.

Other thanks should go to all the friends who proofread segments of this work and expressed interest in the finished product. On some days your enthusiasm for the story was greater than my own, and the expectation of its delivery was an ample motivator.

Finally thanks to every professor to edit any of my writing throughout college, your criticism not only shaped my writing, but my ability to self-critique. The latter is as valuable a skill as any I have come across.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
CHAPTER I.....	1
The Cave	1
CHAPTER II.....	16
Incitement	16
CHAPTER III.....	29
CHAPTER IV	35
A Hand On The Shoulder	35
CHAPTER V.....	48
The Guide.....	48
CHAPTER VI	53
First Steps.....	53
CHAPTER VII.....	59
An Ascent Arrested.....	59
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	62
AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY	63

CHAPER I

The Cave

There is something uniquely comforting about libraries. Since a young age I found myself possessed by an inexorable draw to them. They are a sanctuary to a young mind in love with literature. I guess it only makes sense that I became a writer after such a childhood. Only to call myself a writer is something of an exaggeration, and to stop my explanation of my love for libraries there is to leave out that free access to books was the only way I could manage to muddle through an education. Nevertheless, here I am, in a library, writing for money.

The tap tap tap of the public access computer keyboard pierces the silence surrounding it. In any other library the sound would have been disruptive, but not here, because here it is near constant whenever I am present, which is often. The staccato rhythm beating between the shelves of books at eighty words per minute for six to eight of the libraries ten open hours a day. It would occasionally be interrupted by the need for a restroom, or a brief lunch, but that is all. Whoever said that the wicked don't rest got it wrong, it's the writer that doesn't rest, not when deadlines are ever closing, not when they have rent to pay.

The beam of light which enters the room from the buildings tall window concludes its trek across the escape key, falling from the edge of the cheap plastic to the scratched pine of the table it rests on. Within moments the tapping peters away and the silence settles back onto the dusty books around the room. Placing my palms against the table's edge I push back from the computer screen, popping my neck to the side, and

stand. The sun through the window is as reliable a timepiece as that in the corner of the computer screen, and it's abandonment of the keyboard means the closing of deadlines for the day was nearing and I have to get moving. I snag a stack of warm pages from the printer on my way out of the library. Brisk air rushes past and I step down to the uneven bricks of the front walkway. Several copies of yesterday's newspaper sit in a bin to the side of the door, a dollar new, free the day after. I slip one into my coats oversized pocket and hustle down the street. Wind blows my collar up around my neck and I don't try to force it back down, some fights aren't worth losing and it is short walk besides. Buildings loom around me, blocking the sun that had been warming my back as I sat at the computer for most of the day. With a cursory glance I cross the street, few cars about at this time of day. Once on the streets other side I enter a plain door secluded in an alley between two more audacious entryways.

The other side of the door holds a short hallway leading to another door which leads to my sort-of boss's office. I traverse down the hall and through that threshold as well. Joseph Grint, my sort-of boss, is hunched over his desk, no doubt editing whatever is going into tomorrow's piece.

"Evening Jerg'," he says without looking up.

"Evening Joe," I reply, falling into the chair opposite his desk. The worn cushions of the chair are a welcome relief after hours seated in the libraries austere furnishings.

"Got stuff for me?"

"I always do, Joe."

"Let's see it then," I hand him the pages I printed and he spends several minutes perusing their contents. Joe doesn't indicate what he's thinking when he reads, no grunts,

no expressions, his brain just seems to churn through whatever is in front of him with all the emotional investment of a high schooler doing calculus. He can also read at a speed that leaves me deeply envious. Me and every other editor, publisher, or writer in the city. That is why it takes him ten minutes to go through what would have taken most people the better part of half an hour.

“I’ll take the stuff on the park renovations, and the the one about the concert being held downtown next month,” he says when he finishes.

“What about the new restrictions on window tint, and the demolition of that building on 18th street?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“You know why not.” Joe spins his chair to face an old coffee machine in the corner of the room and starts filling two cups

“Come on, the two you picked are fluff pieces.”

“Which is how you knew I’d pick them. I only have so much space in my paper, Jerg,” he passes me the second cup, which I take.

“You should want to fill that space with actual news then. Everybody either knows about the park and the concert or doesn’t care enough to know.”

“And yet people will read those pieces and be interested, because you have a gift, Jerg, you can make even the most mundane of stories seem interesting,” smile lines tighten around his eyes and his forehead creases, but his mouth is hidden behind the coffee cup clasped in front of his face. I scowl at him despite the compliment. I know

he's sincere, despite the false levity in his voice, he wouldn't buy my stories otherwise..
He also won't hire me on as permanent staff.

“Then imagine how many more will want to read your paper if the content is as good as the writing.”

“Lots, I'm sure, until I can't print anymore because my paper ticks off some big wig whose name I don't even know,” the smile lines have faded from his face at this point. I'm pushing my luck, I know it, and I do it at least twice a month.

“You're a small local paper in the corner of a city, who cares if you discuss window tint and changes to the city's skyline?”

“Let's stop pretending both of us don't know what those stories are actually about. The window tint restrictions are going through because it'll be easier for statesmen to see into cars and houses.”

“Fine but the buildin-” I tried to interrupt but he kept going over me.

“The building just happened to have the same thirty people go into it with mats at the same three to five times a day, everyday, for the last month. None of those people ever walked out with so much as a speck on their hands, Jerg, they weren't even trying to be subtle.” I open my mouth one more time, but Joe cuts me off with a look that told me I'm pushing my luck too much today. “You're one of the best writers I've seen, Jerg, but you have to learn to choose your battles. I'll forward your pay this evening.”

Biting back the next ten things that try to come out of my mouth I manage a polite inclination of my head to Joe before downing half the coffee he'd handed me and setting the cup with its remaining contents on a shelf next to the door as I exit. The cold air raises bumps across my neck during my trudge home, and the sun has vanished behind thick

grey clouds. Walking the opposite direction, the wind no longer blows my collar up, instead it berates my face with chill gusts and snakes around my neck to find a way down the back of my coat. By the time I am making my way past the library once more a cold rain is pattering against my face with every step. Ten minutes after that I'm walking up the steps to my building, soaked, shivering, and not altogether pleased with the day.

Ignoring my mailbox as I'd done every one of the last three days I ascend the cracked and creaking staircase that sits at the back of the lobby. Thirty feet and a right turn later I'm shouldering my way through the door to my apartment. Though not posh by any means my apartment does have the distinct advantage of being perfectly placed in relation to the buildings boiler room so that heat always finds its way into its walls during the cold months of the year. I revel in that warmth now, a small comfort found at the end of a long day bent over a keyboard, followed by the ever colder winds that wind through my city this time of the year.

I sigh. Then, seeing the stack of bills already on my table, I sigh again. I move to clear a space so that I can eat dinner at the table tonight for a change, and stop halfway through when I notice a note folded to stand up in a space that was covered in envelopes before I departed that morning. It simply read:

Jerg, payment due the end of next week
-Leich

I feel the muscles tightening across my back as I try to remember first if I had locked the door when I left that morning, and second if I had locked the door when I had returned just moments ago. I had, both times, yet here the note is. After considering for a moment I tear the note in half and drop it in the waste bin, nothing to be done about it in the moment.

Dinner is a brief affair, as always. Pasta and frozen peas, less frozen after a stint in the microwave. Setting my dishes aside for later I sit down and shuffle through the stack of bills that has been my only company throughout dinner. Accounting for what the two articles I was paid for today will make me, I sort the bills into new stacks, computing in my head which I can pay, and which need to be paid first. I push down the thought of my neglected mailbox. I was short anyway. Sighing, I push back from the table and head out the door, shrugging into my coat on the way.

It is full dark when I step out of my building and head south along sparsely populated streets. I'm not worried about crime. While muggings aren't unheard of the chill means most would-be trouble makers should keep indoors. Well, it will keep that sort of trouble maker indoors anyway. Glancing up at the sky reveals nothing but the same clouds which had rolled in earlier. No moonlit strolls tonight, and that suits me just fine. A few minutes more at a quick pace brings me to the footbridge that leads to the warehouse district. Stepping out onto the bridge leaves me open for the stronger breezes coming in from the sea beyond the port. Cold air bites at my lungs, making me realize my breath has become labored from the quick pace I've been maintaining. Too many hours writing and too little exercise. I pat my stomach, self conscious of the softness there.

I can recall a time in my life when I thought being a reporter would be an exciting job, filled with intrigue and story chasing. Well, I can recall that time, but I don't. My own juvenile ignorance makes me wince whenever I dredge up such memories. No, no chasing for me. I sit, I research, I ask questions, and sometimes I even get answers that matter, but there is little excitement in what I do. Even the thrill I feel at seeing my name in print has ebbed away after a while, eventually being replaced by ennui. Despite his

opinion of my writing, Joe only ever puts my worst pieces into circulation, the pieces I write because I knew he'll take them, but still can't quite put my full effort into. I can try taking them to other papers, some are more liberal with what they'll print; more liberal, but less respected. Joe is good to me, despite his refusal to bring me on permanently, and he is the one who printed my first story. That had been a puff piece too, something about a minor celebrity in a parade. The details are hazy to the point of indistinction. So much for never forgetting your first.

The footbridge ends, stretching back behind in a straight, uninteresting line. Too close to metaphor for my liking. I huff. Too much writing, it's making me melodramatic. Well, that'll be fixed soon. My pace has lapsed while I crossed the bridge, but I pick it up again, passing two warehouses before making a right to pass three more and arriving at my destination. Another nondescript warehouse.

I knock.

The door opens allowing a maelstrom of noise to assail me. Men's shouts drown out whatever is said by the man who was now standing just in my sight to the side of the doorway. I pull out a bill and press it into his palm as I walk inside. While not heat, the interior of the building is warm enough to be comfortable with my coat on due to the press of bodies in the middle of the vast space. That same press is the source of the shouts. Hunching my shoulders I make my way up to the mass and shove my way through it. The further I force myself into the throng of people the more apparent a secondary sound becomes, dogs are barking and growling somewhere on the other side of the men in front of me.

Managing to slip between the last line of men I get a view of the ring they are spectating. A pair of dogs circles one another on the grimy concrete floor, bloody saliva drips from both mouths. One dog, a dark mutt with a single white paw, limps on his left foreleg. The other dogs stride is smooth, low, lethal, but betrayed by the bite in its shoulder only a handbreadth from its neck. It is a mutt too, but with strong shepard characteristics and tawny fur. Both dogs ignore the crowd and the racket surrounding them. A slow half minute of this transpires before the tawny dog lunges, bowling into its opponent and merging the two into a snarling mass of fur. It looked like the tawny is winning once it gets the other dogs injured leg in its mouth, eliciting a yelp, but the other dog twists down and got its teeth in the tawny's neck. There is an abrupt end to the tawny's growling, cut off without so much as a keen. The victor releases the limp tawny, hobbling away on three legs, the fourth too injured to even take part of its weight now, the single white foot stained red. A big man with a leash appears at the edge of the ring, and the dog stands still, allowing the loop of a chain to be slid around its neck, meek in the aftermath of ferocity.

Two more dogs are brought out, still chained to their owners, on opposite sides of the ring. Two men with reams of tickets walk a circuit around the rings periphery, taking money and tearing tickets off the ream. One comes close to me and I pull a small stack of bills from my pocket, not looking at the man, but at the two dogs that have just been brought out. Both are of comparable size, both dark furred, but one has short fur and the other long. I motion at the long haired one. The man, who is wearing a shirt that said "I'm Non'" across the chest, nods to me, writes down which dog and the amount of money on the ticket, tore the ticket in half, hands me one half, keeps the other, and spirits

my money away to a pouch on his belt before continuing down the line of hands outstretched with money. Glancing over a moment later reveals the back of his shirt, which reads “Non’ of your business.”

I endure several more minutes of standing in the crowd waiting while Non’ and his compatriot finish collecting bets. The warehouse stinks. Not of body odor, though stuffed within the mass of people as I am that stench is present. No, the stench that burns my nose is bleach. It permeates the air, wafting up from the concrete floor where men have scrubbed away evidence of their business. I look again at the long-haired dog and wonder at how it tolerates the smell with a nose so much more acute than my own. The dogs brown eyes find mine, then flick away without recognition or interest. The muscles of the dogs legs, while concealed by fur, don’t seem tense. In fact the dog looks relaxed, while the other dog is straining at the chain around its neck, overwhelmed by the raucous humans surrounding it. The tension which has been building in my shoulders eases with the observation. No dog would be so relaxed under such conditions unless it had been made accustomed to them. I bet on the dog with the hope its longer fur would give it some natural armor against teeth, but now I’d be willing to bet its master allows the fur to grow out to cover the scars from other fights and keep the odds level so that he’ll get a larger payout. Clever, in a way that many here aren’t.

Finally, the men finish taking bets and disappear into the crowd at opposite ends of the ring. Another man appears now, striding to the center without a word, hood pulled low over his face. He points with both hands to opposing ends of the makeshift arena and the dog masters lead their charges to the allotted locations. The man puts one hand in the air, backtracking to the edge of the crowd as he does so, letting the crowd rile both itself

and the dogs. The moment is pregnant with suspense, and my chest tightens as if it's me in the ring. No sooner does the hand chop downwards than the dog masters let slip their charges, and the two creatures fly at each other. There is no circling of one another with these dogs, but there is no competition either. The dog with short hair powers into the dog I've placed my hope in. It's clear that the oppositions dog is larger now that the two are atop one another, and it uses the slight advantage in height to bear down on its prey, forcing it to the ground and biting into the back of its neck. It's over in seconds, my chosen dogs fur matted with blood, drips on the floor as it removes its teeth from the underside of the larger animals neck, left exposed when it had bitten not into my champions spine as I had thought, but into its raised shoulder-blade. The more experienced dog had lured in its prey and twisted its neck at a bizarre angle at the last moment, ending to the fight. Unbidden memories threaten to rise the longer I look towards the ring that now contains the corpse of the defeated dog. I shove them back down, turning away and concentrating on my breathing.

The crowd is manic within the confines of the sheet metal walls of the warehouse. I am not. I feel my lungs deflate, and I fade back from the edge of the ring. Only glancing once more towards the victorious animal and finding that same set of brown eyes looking at me from the creature that has saved me from financial ruin for the week. His gaze holds mine for only a moment, then a spectator steps between us and I resume my exitus from the massed bodies around me. Breaking free, I direct myself towards Non' who now stands behind a desk off to the side of the warehouse, adjacent the other ticket collector. I display my ticket once I'm close enough, and Non's compatriot reads off the number while Non' digs through the pile of tickets on the table that are all in favor of the winning

dog. Minutes tick by and I wonder to myself if there isn't a better way which this could be done. I feel the tightness in my chest again before he finds the other half of my ticket and grunts affirmation before reading off the amount of the bet I placed. The other man gives a low whistle, I'd wagered the maximum amount allowed for the fight.

"Not bad, most people don't give Scruff enough credit, but he's been around here awhile." He hands me back half again the amount I'd bet. I walk away, only giving a slight inclination of my head in response. I wonder if Scruff is the dog that won, or its master, but not enough to speak to these men.

The walk back feels far shorter than the walk there. I barely recognize my surroundings until I'm inside my apartment building again, pushing myself up the stairs with one arm on the banister the whole way. Re-entering my home I double lock the door, and fall into a chair at the table. I resort my bills into new stacks, more in the payable column now, not many, but enough. I lean back, sighing, to stare at the cracked surface of my ceiling. I close my eyes. When I next open them the room is brighter, sunlight has found its way through my windows to flood my apartment. My immediate attempt to get up is met with severe protests from my neck, which is irate at the absence of support from the stiff wooden chair I fell asleep in. I opt to roll sideways out of the chair rather than making a more vertical egress from my position. Thumping to the floor frees me from some of the discomfort in my cervical spine, only to have it replaced by a dull ache in the lumbar region of my back. Deciding the level of pain is something that can be worked with I pull myself up on the table corner and stumble into the cool embrace of my shower. Cool turns out to mean frigid when I forget to let the water warm up to its usual lukewarm state before stepping in. The ice water is a blessing in disguise,

it numbs my cramped body and then soothes it as the water warms to a temperature that doesn't make my teeth chatter while I stand in it. All the same, it's a brief affair. I haven't checked the time since I awoke in my kitchen, but with so much sunlight in my apartment it must be later than I'd like. Stepping out of the bathroom in my towel and passing the clock on the microwave reveals the accuracy of my assumption. Swearing, I shrug into something clean and hustle out the door, grabbing some of the previous night's income as I do so.

The air is not so frigid, nor the wind so cutting as it was the day before, and with the cloud cover gone my walk is almost pleasant. My enjoyment is marred only by my destination. It is not the library with its comfortably clicky keyboards to which I'm headed. No, where I go today lacks any such subtle charm. As with all journeys towards the undesirable, mine takes all too little time. It's not as last night, ghosting home from the dog fight, barely aware of myself, but more that my awareness is heightened. The unease building in my spine making moments feel slower, but distance disappear as all the sensory information being sent to my brain is forgotten as soon as it's no longer relevant to make room for more.

The sign reads "Quaint Place." It does not loom over the sidewalk, a foreboding omen, but instead sits recessed in an alcove. There is not other information than the flaky gold letters on the faded black wood. Nothing to indicate the establishment's status as a pub. Considering who frequents the business, I imagine the owner prefers it that way.

It's still hours too early for most bars to be active, but Quaint's is never closed. That isn't to say you're always allowed to walk in and have drink. Right now is such a time, the entrance before me locked. I've never come by this early, but I wanted it over

with today. Unsure how to proceed I raise my hand to rap on the shaded glass panes set in the wooden door, hesitate. Maybe it would be better to come back later, but do I really want to let this place impose on my day twice? Before I can decide the door swings inward. David Quaint, owner and bartender stands on the other side, face impassive under hi lanky brown hair and rimless glasses.

“Well get in here then,” he says, stepping back from the opening to let me through. It makes me uneasy to expose my back to anyone here, but I’ve little choice. David Quaint is not the man I came to see.

“Is a regular here?” I ask, stepping sideways once I’m through the doorway, allowing him to close the door, but also bringing him back into my field of view.

“A regular is always here, that’s why they’re called regulars you twit.” I don’t respond to the derogatory tone, or point out that a thing does not need to be constant to be regular. Instead, I bob my head once, and wait for him to pass by on his way back to whatever he was doing before following him further inside.

The pub is dim, with few lights, and fewer windows. The wood of the bar is not rich, or glossy, it is a muted brown with ring stains from the bottoms of a dozen or more beers slobbered about by patrons who didn’t care. Chairs are strewn about the room, tables haphazard in their placement., and when I walk sawdust clings to the bottoms of my shoes. There are only four people in the bar, Quaint and myself included. The other two sit at tables in opposite corners of the room. The man I came here to see notices my arrival and gives me a smile that doesn’t touch his eyes. He doesn’t bother to wave me over. When I reach him he pushes the seat across the table from him out with a foot, the

only indication that I may sit. I don't, instead pulling the money out of my jacket and dropping it on the table in front of him. His doesn't move to take it.

“Have a seat,” his voice is amicable, like we're friends getting a drink

“I can't stay, I have work,” the voice that comes out of my throat isn't my own, it's quieter, reedy even.

“Oh, have a seat, we can chat for a min, then you can be on your way,” I sit on the edge of the seat. The smile again, wider this time with a hint of yellowed teeth showing between his lips. “That's better, in't it?” I don't respond. “Now, you've only been paying your minimum, which has been fine, that's why it's a minimum after all,” a chuckle for his own perceived wit, “but circumstances are changing, and rates are going up as of next week,” the muscles in my jaw contract, I still say nothing. “You're being quiet, should I take this to mean you're not going to protest like some of our more troublesome clients?”

“Should I?” My voice is less reedy, but sounds like it's coming from another room.

“No, you shouldn't. You're my favorite client, you know, because you get it. You get how this works. I make the rules, and you play the game. Some of the others, they don't get it, they mouth off. Some mouth off too much, and I pass them off to our counselor,” a finger twitches towards the man in the other corner of the room, “to talk through their problems. But not you, you get it.” He leans back in his chair, slinging an arm over the stiff back and tipping it onto two legs, casual as could be, “So, next week, ten percent more. The rest of the deal stands, you can pay more to reduce what you owe, but the interest is locked until the termination of your debt to us,” I nod, he nods back,

“Right, see you next week then,” The chair tips forward and the legs thump against the sawdust covered wood beneath them.

CHAPTER II

Incitement

Ten percent. One Tenth. Decimal point one. It sounds so small but there's no way I can afford it every week. Maybe for one or two before I start to go under on my bills. I think of the dog pits, the brown eyes of the dog that saved me this week. I think of the less distinct forms of the dogs all the weeks before him. I've been lucky, I've lost some but always won when it mattered. If I lost even once now, or even if I won but didn't win enough, I was done. Chance was a fickle mistress, and now she was being tempted. I need something more, something real that I can count on. Joe taking me on as a full-time employee would be ideal if I could convince him, but he's always be reticent about his reasons for not doing so. Still, there isn't much of an option for me. Starting from scratch at an alternate press is even less likely to bring in what I need, even if I could convince them to take me on.

Course set by necessity I head towards Joe's. If I'm lucky he'll be getting ready to take his lunch when I get there and I'll be able to discuss working for him today, rather than finding time for an extended conversation later in the week. Joe was always good for a little banter when I was seeing him about work, but pinning him down for more than a few minutes had proved to be difficult during my tenure as his freelance writer. Though his press was smaller than most of the others around he seemed to have twice the meetings. Perhaps a byproduct of both owning and editing, but whatever the reason it usually meant planning a week in advance if I needed his undivided attention. I can't afford a week now, I'm not sure I can afford a day.

I'm in luck, and when I get to his office Joe is just stepping out of it, locking the door behind him. It occurs to me that I've never seen him leave his office unlocked, even to use the restroom. I don't know him that well, despite our chats and good humor with each other, so if he has trust issues I really wouldn't know. He looks up when he hears my footsteps on the carpeted floor of the hallway.

"Jerg, no way you have more for me already, we just spoke yesterday."

"No, Joe, I'm actually here to talk about a job."

"You find a permanent one, finishing up with my little operation here?" His eyebrows raise, but his tone is hopeful not offended.

"No, actually I was hoping to talk again about me coming on in a full time capacity," I start, but he's already waving a hand to cut me off.

"Jerg, we've talked about this, I don't have the means to bring on another full time employee. Maeka and Paul are already bleeding me dry as it is."

"Come on, we both know you're doing better than that. You do well enough to have triple the number of writers you do right now"

"What's this about? You haven't been so vehement about me hiring you before." This isn't going how I wanted it to. We never made it to lunch, we never even made it away from his office door, and I don't want to tell him about my debt, I can't. A sliver of Maeka, one of Joe's permanent writers, shows through a cracked door as she leans from her seat at a desk to see what's going on. I take a breath, making an effort to keep my voice level.

"It's not like that, it's not about...look I need this, I need something. I've been coasting since I started working for you, getting by but not looking ahead. I need to start

something for myself, Joe. Please, you know this is what I'm good at, you know it." He gives me a long look. I try to see the gears spinning behind his eyes, understand what thoughts are going through his head, but I can't, his face is a study of impassivity. Finally his mouth begins to move.

"You're right, Jerg. You deserve more than what you're getting here, I've been holding you back," before a smile can even touch the corners of my lips he keeps going, "I think you should stop writing for me, at least for now. Strike out into the world, find a press that can do better by you than I have."

"What-" I stammer, "Joe, no, I like it here, I want to work for you," he's shaking his head, but something's wrong with my vision, the edges are off, out of focus.

"Jerg, maybe you do like it here, but this is all I can offer you other than a shining recommendation to wherever you'd like to apply. I've kept you content for too long, it's past time you moved on," although his tone is regretful there is no infirmity in him.

"Joe, I need this, please," I know it won't change his mind, but I have to try.

"You don't see it now, but this is what you need, Jerg, a push," and his hand falls on my shoulder, guiding me to the door and ushering me outside. I look back and see Maeka over his shoulder, her usually expressive face dispassionate except for the thin line of her lips as her gaze settles on me. I mumble something that might be a thank you at Joe for the time I worked for him, but I can't be sure. Turning, I depart. There is no destination in my mind, no point to one. I have nothing. I consider, just for a moment, returning to Quaint's to explain my situation, but there will be no reprieve there. I knew who I was getting in bed with when I went to them for money, but I had no options then either. No options, but also no debt. I have a week to find work, better work than what I

was doing for Joe. Better paying work, I correct myself, the quality of what I do doesn't matter as long as it gets me what I need. I have no skills outside of writing, though, nothing to fall back to. Unskilled labor jobs wouldn't get me the money I needed if I worked twice the hours I had been. Other journals or papers would be unlikely to take me on right away. There is another dog fight in two days. If I bet as much as I am allowed again, it might be enough. It's risking a lot, if I lose I'll be done. A flicker of something passes through my blood. A memory of a feeling, electricity in my spine and fire on my skin, the sound of the ocean in my ears. It's gone and the world goes back to normal, dimming with oncoming clouds again. With nothing better to do, I trudge home.

In the absence of a job, of research and writing for Joe's paper, I awake the next day to a curious situation. I have nothing to do that day. I try cleaning, but my sparse belongings are seldom out of place to begin with, aside from the stacks of mail on my table. I have no shopping to do, and even if I did all the money I can spare is what I need for food. There is nobody for me to call on, my only associates being Joe, his staff, and the regulars at the library with whom I share a tacit bond, but have never spoken to.

With nothing to do I find the stress of my situation begins to overwhelm me. My apartment becomes ever smaller and more cramped with every moment that passes. The walls, always dull, feel darker, the ceiling lower, the floor grubbier. I want to go out but I can't bring myself to, there is still nowhere to go. I pace one moment, mania ruling my legs, then crash into a chair at my table the next, robbed of the will to stand. Hours pass this way, alternating between the two. At some point a pencil finds its way into my hand, twirling around my fingers in a familiar pattern my brother taught me when we were in school together. Deran was always better with his hands than me though, and I soon

fumble the pencil, dropping it onto a pad of paper on my table. Without thinking, my hand takes the pencil and presses it against the paper.

Pause.

What to write? There is little time for pursuits of passion in the real world, the working world. One may find, as I have, that even their most precious hobbies are put out of their mind for so long they don't even remember forgetting them. I write a word.

Once

Stop, keep going.

Once upon a time

Stop again. Begin to scratch it out, reconsider, more words.

Once upon a time is such an odd phrase in literature. Nobody thinks of its literal meaning, that there was a specific point in the greater timeline of this world at which things happened. No, I doubt many think at all, they just expect. They expect a story, entertainment, what a world this is. What a world we live in where four words that mean one thing create the universal expectation that the writer will proceed to entertain you...

I keep on in this way, words coming in a way that is impossible when writing in journalistic fashion. No need to fact check, cite sources, or research, just write. There is no rhyme or reason to what I write, the words come, and I forget myself in them, scribbling whatever thoughts pass through my mind. At some point a gnawing hunger worms its way into my consciousness, and I stop. A soreness in my eyes makes me realize that the room has grown dim and I've been squinting. Flipping on the light lends a particular warmth to the little apartment that had been missing for some time. The

feelings that cascaded over me earlier were settled, not gone, but receded. The next two days pass more smoothly. Writing is my escape, and through it I manage to escape the torrent of stress and negative emotion that lurks, ever present on the edges of my mind.

An entire notebook of pages filled with nonsense writing later the night of the dogfight arrives. My writing hand is cramped. The pain of writing through it, yet another distraction I had been using, is only just starting to abate as I reach the same warehouse, and am admitted to the same overwhelming tide of sound. There is tension in my shoulders. Amidst so many people, with so much riding on the evening, how could there not be. The warehouse seems brighter than before. New bulbs in the overhead strip-lights, or my own mind playing tricks on me. The effect is that colors seem washed out. A man's jacket less green than it should be, another's blonde hair seems more like straw than gold. All except for the bills I place in Non's outstretched hand. Those seem darker, somehow more tangible than they were just scant days ago. The weight of them leaving me is more pronounced than I remember. I bet the maximum allowed in a night, just as I did for the previous fight. I could disperse my wagers across multiple fights, and for most that's a wiser decision. Betting less on more fights mitigates any losses I might suffer, but it also reduces my odds of leaving with the maximum payout. I needed to win big, as big as I could, anything less was the same as losing. The hosts placed the bet limit to cut down on so-called customers accusing them of rigged fights, trying to get back money they couldn't afford to lose. None of them ever got their losses back, but the aggravation of dealing with them became strenuous enough that the extra payout wasn't worth it.

One of the dogs is the same long-haired one that saved me last week, or at least it felt like it saved me then. If it did it again, it really would be saving me this time. Scruff,

the name mentioned by the ticket-taker, seems as good a name to refer to him by as any, though I'm still not sure if that was in reference to the dog or its master. The other dog this time is about the same size, something they must do on purpose to make the betting margins closer. As usual there is little preamble after the betting is done, there is no reason for it. The hosts gain nothing from a rowdy crowd after the money has already changed hands, and can only stand to lose if quarrels erupt amongst the spectators.

Once the dogs are released, there can be no louder group of people than those in the warehouse. The noise seems amplified this time, and it takes me whole seconds to realize it is because I am screaming too. Egging on my champion, yelling advice like he would need it even if he could understand it through the dozens of other voices doing the same thing. I know nothing about the minutiae of dog fights, I'm just a lucky better. Perhaps there is a subconscious reason for my luck, an understanding so ingrained I'm not aware of it. Deran tried to explain the sport to me on many occasions, but I had no patience for it then, I was just caught up in the excitement then, as I am now for the first time in two years. If there is such an understanding for me, it is him that I have to thank for it.

The fight goes very similarly to the last one, the other dog bullying Scruff back. I know it's a ploy now though, any moment Scruff will turn things around at a decisive point he is aware of on an instinctual level. Moments drag, the fight is going longer than any I've been to. My nerves fray with each passing second, each scratch or bit that appears on Scruff's body, just visible through his fur. Then I see it, the moment as apparent to me as it is to Scruff. The opposition comes in hard, sure of his victory, and Scruff does that same maneuver, ducking his head so the bit will go into his shoulder

instead of his neck. Relief washes through me with the knowledge that it's over. The other dog's teeth bit down into the vertebrae at the base of Scruff's skull, powerful jaw muscles contracting. It shouldn't be possible but I swear I can hear the crunch of bone beneath canine teeth over the exuberance of the crowd. The fight is over, and the feeling of relief vanishes, replaced by nothing.

I wander the streets, not quite aware of where it is I'm going or where I've been. The buildings around me aren't tall by the standards of most cities, but they are tall enough to block out moonlight. There are few streetlights in this neighborhood, and fewer business signs to cast illumination onto the sidewalks. It does not bother me. I find something comforting about the darkness, an unreality brought on by the inability to discern my surroundings as any more than silhouettes. Coupled with the absence of light is a similar amount of sound. No cars pass, and no pedestrians walk the streets with me. Once, I hear a cat yowling. It is cold. I know this because I can't feel the tips of my fingers, despite their residence in my coat pockets. I should go home, should at least figure out where I am. I keep walking. The world is still out of focus, fuzzy around the edges and swaying a little more than it should whenever I step. This part of the city is unfamiliar. It seems residential, but residential areas should have people about even at this late hour. A park appears ahead to the right. It is diminutive in size, its vegetation is limited to a single tree with its roots rimmed in grass. Really more of an afterthought crammed between a trio of buildings the park contains a swing set and a slide sized for young children.

Without any conscious input my legs carry me to the swings, and I crumble into the highest of them. I feel as though I should be doing something. Crying, perhaps,

though I haven't done that since I started freelancing for Joe. Now that I wasn't doing that anymore, why not give it another shot? The tears don't come. I am empty, not just of sadness, but of anything. Any ambition I had, any drive to fix my situation has fled. I don't feel hopeless, I just feel less. Less than sadness, less than regret for how I ended up here, less than anger or ambition. Just less.

The swing sways back and forth, back and forth. No wind reaches into the park, surrounded as it is on three sides. The tree does not rustle, the grass does not bend. The swing's hinges creak, the noise somehow crass in the otherwise quiet space. I think about making my legs stop rocking that causes the swaying, and therefore the creaking, of the swing. They do not stop. Air leaves my lungs in a heavy breath, my back arching forward just a little more, shoulders falling. It was a defeated gesture, but the new position actually causes the rocking to stop. Victory in defeat? The notion sparks a wryness in a distant corner of my heart, far removed from my thinking mind, and draws a smirk from my numb lips, then a chuckle. In a moment I am laughing. A cracked laugh, it does not come from my stomach, nor does it denote humor. I stop. The silence rushes into the void left by my sudden outburst, but is quickly chased back out by another sound. A yell. The call for help is muffled, but can't be too far. Leaving my swing I slow jog towards the direction I believe it came from. I'm not really sure what to expect, or how I'll help, but I can't *not* react.

I do not move with haste, even if I wanted to it would only increase the chances that I'd miss finding the source of the cry for help in the deep shadows of the alleys. Seconds lengthen to a minute and work towards two before I hear another sound. The

thump of a sack hitting pavement is so quiet that I would have missed it if I hadn't been at the mouth of the alley it came from. Peering into the black I call out,

“Hello? Is someone there?” There is no response, yet the silence is more severe now. Not just quiet, but a deliberate absence of sound. The longer I stare the more adjusted my eyes become to the level of blackness in the alley, I start to see shapes moving along the walls.

“My friend, he's gone for help, just hang on and he'll be back any minute,” I try again. The movement ceases. Then all at once two shapes distinguish themselves as they rush towards me. Throwing myself to the side I manage to avoid the two men who come hurtling past. There is no point trying to follow them, even were I stupid enough to, they've already vanished into another alley across the street. Instead, I creep down the alley they fled, hand guiding me along one wall. It's not a wide alley, perhaps two meters, so I can't miss the body even in the dark. I find it by catching my foot on its leg. I go down hard on my knee. Swearing I try to push myself up only to place my hand on an arm. My body freezes. My mind races.

I place a tentative hand atop the torso connected to the arm, holding my breath. After a moment the chest rises, inflating as its lungs draw in air. Still alive. My own breathing returns to something approaching normal. The attackers are unlikely to return, but it's still a possibility. What to do though? The person on the ground is a male, judging by the feel of him. He's too big for me to carry. It's too dark to tell what they did to him, but he doesn't wake to gentler shaking. Slapping his face seems foolish, like the sort of thing that only happens in stories. I could leave him to go for help, but it's cold and I might not make it back in time with help to prevent hypothermia or worse. I still don't

recognize where I am in the city, more lost than ever for the confusion of searching out his cries for help.

Waiting will only make things worse. The more time that passes the colder we'll both get, the more likely the assailants are to return. Wrapping my arms around his shoulders from beneath his armpits I drag the unconscious man back out to the street and towards the nearest working street light. Leaning him against the lamp post I get my first good look at him. He's average in the most severe sense of the word. Brown hair falls to his eyebrows, not unkempt but also not an expensive haircut. I can see blood matting the side of his head, maybe from being hit with a club of some sort, or maybe from hitting it on the ground when he fell, I don't know. His skin is pale in the same way mine is, so probably a desk job then. The clothes on him are plain, just a brown jacket and simple tan slacks. Not dressed to be outside for long, he has no hat or gloves and the jacket is only of medium weight. He does have boots on, but they are hiking boots not winter boots, better for walking but not as warm. I shake him by the shoulders again, making his head wobble until it lolls to the left. He still does not wake.

I pat his pockets. If he has identification I can at least know who I'm helping, and there is a chance hearing his name will accomplish what my gentle shaking cannot. His wallet rests in a thigh pocket of his pants until I fish it out. No drivers license, but he has a general identification card. It tells me his name is Mikael Torte, also that he's 37 years old and lives locally. A quick search of the wallet reveals nothing other than an unusual amount of cash and a card to a library that's only a few blocks from my apartment in the opposite direction as the one I usually do my work in. The two attackers must not have

gotten to search him before my intrusion caused their retreat else they certainly would have relieved the man of his money.

I search the man further, it's unlikely but he might have a mobile phone. They aren't common around the city, expensive enough I didn't even think to look until I discovered how much cash the man was carrying around. I hesitate before opening his jacket to the cold when I feel a lump under his arm. An interior pocket hold a package wrapped in matte blue paper, and, to my surprise, he does indeed have a mobile phone. It's odd that he didn't try to call for help with it, his attackers must have been quick to prevent him from even trying for it. Or else, he didn't want to risk them seeing such a valuable item in the hopes that he could just give them the wallet and leave. It doesn't matter. I activate the phone to call for help, relieved that I don't have to risk leaving him or wait out in the cold hoping for someone to see us. I pause before I enter the final command to call the authorities. His wallet is still in my hand, the cash inside won't come close to covering my needs, but after the loss tonight I'm almost destitute. It is a small thing for him to lose the cash *I* saved to begin with. It is only right that I get something for the risk I took, those men could have harmed me too had they realized I was alone. After just a few seconds more consideration I strip his wallet of the money and place it back in his pocket, then take the blue package too. Really, I was saving his life, he'd be grateful when he woke up in the warm hospital instead of frozen in that alley. Before I finish calling the emergency line I dash to the nearest street sign so that I have a location to give.

When I have the name I press the I call button. Heightening my voice I wail into the mobile phone about a man bleeding on the street, then I end the call and hustle away in the direction that feels like home, head bowed against more than just the wind now.

CHAPTER III

Shadows On The Wall

It takes me almost an hour to find a street I recognise, and half that much time more to make my way back to my apartment. By the time I get there my hands are shaking, my lips blue in the lobby mirror. I'm drained from the day, but the first thing I do when I get into my apartment isn't fall into bed as I wish to so badly. It's not even to coax my shower to the hottest temperature it can manage and allow it to bring feeling back to my extremities. No, my first act is to secret the items I took away in the pipes beneath my kitchen sink. It is not an ideal hiding place, and they would likely be found by anyone looking for them. However, there is no reason for people to look. I remember the note I found on my table the other day, left to give me notice both of my impending payment and that those I owe to can reach me. Even should they come calling, they have no reason to believe I own anything of value. Anyone who walks in can't help but note the sparse furnishings and rough edges of my home. The hiding place is not safe, but it is safe *enough*. My dim hope for the future secured I walk into my bedroom, fell on my bed fully clothed, and slept, dreaming of nothing for the next twelve hours.

When I wake, it's to silence. Consciousness is surreal, and for a moment I lie still, eyes remaining shut. Did last night really happen? It seems to *deus ex machina*, too coincidental, and yet... I slip from my bed, surprised at the lightness in my body. I don't feel as though I fell into bed half frozen and fully dressed just the night before. It takes me only seconds to cross my small abode and check the pipes beneath my kitchen sink. My bounty is remains secured in the tangle of pipes, more ordinary in the light reflecting

through the unshaded windows of my apartment. I'm leaning away to stand when I notice the corner of the package is damp, a leaky pipes work, no doubt. The contents may not be waterproof, and the cellular phone certainly is not. I rummage through my cupboards until I find a plastic bag to wrap the items in, the cell phone first, then the package. Stopping before I finish securing the latter back beneath the sink I remove it once more. It's senseless to hide a thing when I don't even know what it is, but I can't shake the feeling that opening it is an invasion of privacy. It could be a gift for the man's daughter, or a loved one. It's not as though it will ever reach its intended destination. Nevertheless the feeling lingers, and unwelcome niggling in my mind. The silence that's permeated the air since I awoke stretches, becoming uncomfortable. I grunt to break it, tearing open the blue paper before I can think further.

Without the wrapping binding them together, one of the two revealed objects slides from its place atop the other, flopping onto the floor. Both are books. The volume that fell is slim, a mere centimeter in width, but that's as much as I notice of it as I take in the book still in my hand. It is a plain thing, cardboard brown and thicker than the other one, with simple gold print spelling out the title: *The Quran*.

My numb fingers place the scripture on my table. I had hoped for something of value, something I could sell if not trade directly to my would-be owners, instead I came across something complicated. It is a banned text that sits in my kitchen. I cannot sell it. While there are some who may pay for it I don't know who. I should turn it in, but I have no explanation for possessing it. Throwing it away is the most reasonable choice, however I can still feel the sharp angles of the corner I'm backed into. I need this to work for me in some way.

In the hopes of giving my addled mind something else to focus on my eyes slide towards the book resting on the floor at my feet. It's fallen upside down, but appears to be bound similarly to the first. It is plain brown, with no synopsis on the rear cover. Bending to pick it up leaves me feeling foolish when I notice how my hands tremble. They are only books, banned or otherwise. Still, were it not a hardcover the pages would quiver from the infirmity of my fingers as they wrest it from the floorboards. I almost drop it again when I turn it in my hands to read the title. *The Art of the Dissenter*. I have never heard of it, but it's title coupled with it's compatriot leave little doubt that it is something I should not have, and most certainly don't want to be found with. I remind myself that no one could know that I have them, even if they were searching for them following their proper owners mugging.

Shuffling backwards a few steps I sink into the chair at my table. The stiff back and plain wood uncomfortable for my sagging posture, but still preferable to sorting out my spinning head while standing. Dexterity returning to them, my fingers rotate the hitherto unheard of book, flipping it from cover to cover, cover to cover. There must be some way to turn the texts into a profit. Anything banned is valued by someone. The trouble would be seeking out that someone without drawing attention. Such underhanded and covert actions were things I had no experience with. The only contacts that might be useful would be linked to the dog fights, but even then it seems long odds that any such base men would have an interest in literature. Perhaps that is unfair to believe, after all, I was such a man. Still, anyone I know there is not someone I know well, not anymore.

The books continues to spin, cover to cover, back to front to back again. A finger slips and the book clatters to the floor for the second time that night, striking with the

spine towards the ceiling and forcing the covers apart with the sounds of shuffling paper. Curious despite myself, I pick the book up letting it remain open, and flip to the first page. It is absent any of the usual copyrights or print references that would be found there on text that was produced through regular means. It hadn't been smuggled then, it had been produced inside the nation. If this were the case, than it means there is an organization producing books illegally. The quality of the binding and materials is higher than an individual should be able to manufacture. For all intents and purposes, this book has been professionally created, minus the regulations and copyrights. It's impossible that someone keep something such as that hidden, though. The resources it would take to procure the machinery mandate that numerous people were involved just to set up the operation, moving the equipment in, operating it, distributing the product quietly.

The more I think about it the more obvious it becomes that the books must have come from a professional company. It's the only way that a printing operation with the kind of machinery to produce books that appear so professionally manufactured could go unnoticed. If it were privately done, and one of the illicit books were to find its way to the authorities it would be a simple matter for them to acquire a list of all individuals that had the capability necessary, and there was no way that a book would never be found. Last night was a clear indication of that.

A thought occurs to me; what if no other books had been given to the authorities yet, what if the ones in my apartment were the first? Surely that would mean the books producers would be even more inclined to prevent them from doing just that. If I can find out who made the books than I may have more leverage over them than I initially assumed. So long as I keep the books hidden than they will have to be cautious in their

treatment of me as well. I reconsider the last, these are book makers, while it is illegal that does not guarantee that they are violent people. My perception of criminals has been formed by my interactions with those I owe, and those at the dog fights. The muggers from the other night, too, I suppose. This does not imply all criminals would do me harm, there must be some that are gentle compared to the rest.

I'm getting ahead of myself. I have no idea who made the books or how to find them. I sit in contemplation for long minutes, unstimulating. There are only two people I know who might be able to aid in a search, if I am to pursue this: Leich, and Joe. Leich is the only point of contact I have with any sort of organized crime outside of the dog fights, and I'm not certain he isn't involved with those too. However, going to him means deepening my involvement with those I am indebted to, it's a gamble. A big one. The alternative, Joe, might have enough of an idea about the printing capabilities of other presses and text producing companies to point me in the right direction.

I force my mind to stop. I need to decide if I want to go down this road before I waste more time on it. Every moment I spend on this is one which I won't be finding a new job, or paying off Leich in some other way. That in itself is a gamble worth a second thought.

I just can't see any other way I'll have even half a hope of coming up with the money in time, though. There is only one other course I can think to take, and that's to bring the books to the authorities and make a plea for immunity, and also providing the names of Leich and all the information I have about his operation. That is the greatest risk of all. If they find out it was me, or even one of them gets away... I think of the note left on my table. In my home. No, that is not an option I'll choose unless all others are

exhausted. The more I think about it the more it makes me feel boxed in, but the reality of my situation seems to be that I don't have a choice. I need to track down whoever made the books.

CHAPTER IV

A Hand On The Shoulder

Showing up in Joe's office once more may stretch whatever good will I have with the man thin. Our banter, the back-and-forth he allowed between us over which articles I wrote he printed had lulled me into a sense of security, into thinking him my friend instead of my boss. When he cut me loose I lost much of that feeling, and whatever was left has dissipated in the time since. I need him to help me, the alternative is Leich, and that is ten steps further into the lion's den. So I do not show up at his office unannounced as I would have before, but instead I call ahead, using the payphone from my building's lobby. Joe answers on the third ring.

"Hello, this is Mid-street printing, how may I help you?" I have never heard his customer service voice before, he sounds a different man. I wasn't even aware that he got enough calls to have a customer service voice. My surprise causes a delay in my response, one evidently noticeable when he repeats his greeting, albeit as more of a question than an offer of assistance. "Hello? How may I help you?"

"Joe, it's Jerg. You're probably busy today, but I had some professional questions and I was hoping we could schedule a meeting?" My voice rises towards the end of my sentence, making it more of a question than a statement. It feels like I'm pleading and I hate that.

"Jerg? I was starting to wonder why I wasn't getting calls for other employers checking about you. I'm leaving town tomorrow on business, but if you have time this evening I'll answer whatever I can. It'll have to be late though," his tone has shifted from

customer service to something lighter, like it used to be when I worked for him. The change sets me at ease, yet I remember how coldly he cut me away and hold on to some of my reservations.

“Of course, this evening would be great,” I reply. We set up a time to meet for drinks and a light dinner at a pub not far from his workplace. It’s a quiet place I’ve been to twice before, once when Joe took everyone out for a round after a particularly successful period, and another time when the permanent employees, my would-be co-workers, invited me for a birthday party. It’s a pleasant enough place with warm lighting, passable food, and an excellent dark beer than I recall Joe being fond of, though I’ve never acquired much of a taste for the stuff.

I exchange cordial fair-wells with my former boss and hang the phone back on its hook. I start to turn back towards the staircase, to my apartment, but the thought of spending the day cooped up inside makes my legs twitch. Sunlight cascades in through the dirty windows around the buildings main entrance, promising nice weather and reasonably warm winds. It is one of the rare nice days this time of the year and to spend it in the confines of my living room feels a waste.

Without evening taking the time to retrieve my coat I turn and set off out of my building and down the street. It is not as warm as the sunlight suggested it might be, but it is not so cold as to make me consider going back for more than a moment. The light sweater I wear repels the worst of the brisk air, letting only the occasional gust of wind bite at my core. There is a park several blocks from the library I do most of my writing at, and it is there my feet carry me. Though it is small and there are no leaves on its trees, the sight of it is still a balm on my eyes that have only seen concrete and metal in the time its

been since I last visited. There is no dry place for me to sit out of the wind, so I stroll along the perimeter, my solitude interrupted only infrequently by others who are taking similar advantage of the weather. Every such person who passes me offers a smile that must be the product of finally being able to enjoy the outside air. One young boy even sends a cheery wave my way. I make brief eye contact and manage to twitch my lips upward in return, but even the sun and fresh air can't completely dispel the weight in my mind. Still, by the time cold finds its way into the deeper parts of my bones my mood is much lightened, and my stride has lengthened until my breath is labored and my lungs have found a forgotten ache. The dichotomy of light sweat and goosebumps confuses my neglected body, and lets me know it's time for a break. I manage to finish the lap around the park I was on before slowing down to shuffle towards the familiarity of the library.

When I arrive at the library I make towards my usual desk that holds the computer and keyboard I spent my time working at for Joe, but there is nothing there for me now. There is no reason for me to toil away today, so instead I veer off course, selecting a book at random and collapsing into one of the old seats near a window. The cushion of the chair does its utmost to swallow my backside when I sit, and I have to spend a moment fighting for dominance with the inanimate object. When I finally prevail and crack the covers of the book I selected I manage fall into its pages. It is no great work, some amusing fantasy about a boy who dances with the wind, but it has been a long time since I read for pleasure, so caught up was I with the tedium of everyday life.

Hours later, I jerk awake. The light that finds its way through the window where I sit is no longer so bright, but it is not yet so dark that I worry I've missed my meeting with Joe. The small of my back aches from bending to fit the tired cushion of the chair on

which I sit, a slow subtle revenge it has taken on me for subjugating it in the first place. Standing only reveals new pains, byproducts of exerting myself even enough to maintain the pace I kept around the park earlier. I stretch out each complaining part of my body, disappointed that I've let myself come to this point. Sore from a walk in the park, it's horrifying at my age. I pick up the book about the dancing boy which had managed to get itself wedged halfway under the cushion of the chair at some point during my nap. I consider returning to its pages for the remainder of the time I have before my meeting with Joe, but decide there are better uses of my time. The waltz with the wind will have to wait for someone else to enjoy its literary spectacle.

One of the benefits to writing for Joe was that I was always up to date with the latest news. I had to be so that I wouldn't make the mistake of writing on a topic that had already been covered. Some other papers didn't mind printing news that had already been released in other papers, sometimes with a twist or new facts to steal the readers who had already read the first story in another paper, but Joe had always found the practice deplorable. He insisted anything he printed be novel. This led to his papers having a great deal of pieces regarding subjects few other presses would care about, which further led to Joe's readership being a singularly eccentric group that sought such news, each of them doubtless thinking that Joe's paper was a diamond in the rough, and that's how Joe liked it. Only major news that wouldn't be right to leave out was shared between Joe's paper and the rest of the city's papers, and that would come out as close to the same day as possible.

Now that I was no longer working for Joe, I'd allowed myself to fall out of the habit of reading the daily news. Now seemed as good a time as ever to start again. I made

my way passed the shelves of books to the computer I always used, and found it free as usual. It hadn't even been turned on yet today. Pressing the power button I sit down and watch the screen cycle through its boot menu, flashing several lines of code across the monitor that might as well have been in greek for how well I can decipher their meaning before settling on the blue loading screen. I rub a sore spot in my lumbar region and yawn while I waited for the computer to finish booting up. It feels as though it takes longer than usual, but perhaps that is the result of breaking my schedule. When the computer signals its readiness by bringing up the desktop background I click on the internet browser and start my slog through all the major news pages. Another pet peeve of Joe's was getting your information from only one source, if you couldn't produce multiple sources or a primary source then he wouldn't even read your piece. His feelings on the matter rooted themselves in me, and so I now read every article on any subject that catches my interest. In reality this wasn't full proof, as relying on other news writers meant relying on their sources, which were frequently the same sources as every other writer on a topic, but beggars can't be choosers. Little of note has transpired in the days of my relative lethargy since I stopped working. The only news that stands out is the disappearance of a bookshop owner. It's only mentioned by one of the smaller news producers I read, and the article mentions that the man was on poor terms with his wife. In all likelihood the man simply left his family. It wouldn't be noteworthy at all if I hadn't read about another book seller going missing in another city in the week before I stopped working for Joe. He was rumored to be on an unplanned trip overseas. Coincidence does happen, even if the events proximity to one another will tickle at my mind for the next month, and I do my best to dismiss it and move on. I skim several more articles that could have substance,

but turn out to just be fluff like most everything else printed, before deciding that it's close enough to the meeting time with Joe to be moving on.

The sun is low in the sky as I depart the library, and for the first time that day I bemoan leaving my jacket behind at home. I'm shivering by the time I reach the pub, and when I see a sign saying seat yourself I take advantage of it by taking the table closest to the kitchen. Heat and the smell of cooking food wafts out of the two-way doors going a long way to sooth my chilled body and set me at ease. I've arrived plenty early to the meeting, Joe is still nowhere to be seen. I ask for water, explaining to the plump waitress that I'm meeting someone. She offers me a smile and assurance that it's no problem so long as they don't get busy. She says the last part as though it were a joke, it probably is. The pub is named *PUBlic*, which most people take as an ironic name since it's never crowded, or so I was told by Joe's staff.

Joe arrives ten minutes before the appointed time, which is still at least ten minutes after me. I wave him over to my table. I've had time to warm up now, but the tables proximity to the kitchen and the correlated scents of food emanating from it have taken over as my primary reason for enjoying its position. Joe raises an eyebrow at my choice of seating, tucked away in a corner of the room, the least decorated corner at that, with the kitchen doors right behind me.

"Jerg," he says by way of greeting, "You're looking well." I'm surprised by comment. The events of the past week have left me feeling anything but well. Still, I suppose the walk earlier coupled with the upturn in the weather may have returned some of the color to my face than had been leached away by the cold and cloudy months of the year.

“Likewise, Joe,” though I say it, it does not ring true. From the pained expression on his face it seems like he can hear the truth behind the hollow compliment. Joe looks leaner than he did only last week, the lines of his face more pronounced and the circles under his eyes are shades darker than before. In all, he looks like he might not have slept or ate since the last time we stood adjacent one another.

“Yes, well I appreciate you saying so,” Joe shifts from foot to foot, looking uncomfortable, maybe for the first time I’ve ever seen. He’s always appeared a confident man, and the uncharacteristic display nags at parts of my brain I wasn’t aware of until then. Seeming to catch himself in the act Joe arrests the nervous tick and slides into the seat across from me, his old demeanor returning as though it were never gone.

No sooner has his backside hit the chair than the waitress is back, smiling and placing a menu in-front of Joe. Without looking at it Joe orders some sort of coffee beer and a number three. Not having even looked at the menu that was sitting on the table when I arrived, but also not wanting to make the waitress wait, I order the same. The waitress shares an amused look with Joe leaving me to feel somehow like a child out to eat with his father, trying to look grown-up.

“So, you mentioned on the phone you had questions about other printing firms in the city. Any in particular?”

“Actually, yes and no. I’m looking for a particular kind of firm, but not by name.”

“Oh,” he leans forward now, interested, “What sort are you looking for?”

“I’m interested in finding ones that can produce books,” I realize as soon as I say it that I may have made a mistake. I have never considered writing books, and if I was to do so I’d be looking for a publisher not a printing firm. The question must seem out of

place. Joe shouldn't have any reason to be suspicious of my motives, but I would still prefer to leave as little evidence of my search as possible.

There is a short silence before he answers me, short but noticeable, "I can think of a few, but I'll be honest, they don't really seem to be hiring people with your kind of experience right now."

"I'm looking to branch out. All those arguments we had about which stories of mine you'd print, I've been thinking about them. I'd already written those stories, invested time on them, but never got any return. I don't blame you, the timing wasn't right, but I still have the work and if I can get something out of it I'd like to," I don't trail off when I reach the end of the lie. Up to that point it felt like a good cover, but if I trail off it'll be as obvious as the sun shining today. I am not experience at this, at lying, I've never had need of it.

"So you're hoping to make a book of things unprinted? A publisher might be the first place to go for that, Jerg." He fills in the gap as I hoped he would, but I've fallen into the same trap I was trying to avoid in the first place, and it leaves me scrambling to get out of it.

"I just think it might be better to go to a publisher with a whole book, sort of a proof of concept," it's weak and I know it, but it's the best I can do on the fly. The silence that follows is longer this time, and when Joe does break it, his words come slowly,

"Well, I'm not sure how much luck you'll have with that, but you seem pretty set on this. I can ask around if you like, I know a few people in other firms that might be able

to give you an idea of where to go.” Relief washes through me, prompting me to push my luck just a little.

“You know some of what I cover isn’t always the most,” I pause searching for the right word, “palatable of things, so firms that are more experimental in their printing might be best.”

“Of course, I’ve read more than a few things that you’ve brought to me that another firm may have printed that I didn’t, that’s part of why I let you go, so that you could pursue what you wanted,” he says the words with a light tone, eliciting only a slight pang of bitterness in me. I can feel the muscles in my face tighten and know he must of seen it. Trying to undercut the tension before it can settle in I reply,

“Of course. We both know there are firms in this city willing to publish more liberally than that.” I said it as a joke, but there is a shadow of something that flits over Joe’s features, before disappearing again as though it were never there.

“Of course,” he repeats my words. The silence is preempted by the arrival of our food, the next minutes filled with the clattering of our silverware. The number three turns out to be a beef and potato dish, filled in by roast vegetables. The beer is not to my liking, but I drink it anyway.

After we’ve tucked in, and we’re just mopping up the last of the food on our plates, I think to inquire about Joe’s trip out of town. It seems a safe subject to me. While he does not travel frequently it is not the first time Joe has left town for a few days since I’ve known him. When I ask, however, Joe stiffens, and his eyes harden.

“It’s just business, renewing contracts and such,” his answer is vague, and it annoys me. I had been thinking that maybe we could have some sort of friendship outside

of work. Despite my reasons for asking him out tonight, and tense undercurrent of our conversation, I find that I've been enjoying the evening. If I were not seeking the printers of the two illegal books that reside under the sink of my apartment I think the evening would have been wholly pleasant. As such when he evades the first innocent question I've asked since he walked in it raises my proverbial hackles more than it should.

“Come on, Joe, I worked for you longer than a week. You always don't need to go anywhere to renew contracts. What's got you running off, a lady friend? A man friend? Dark and mysterious forces beyond my comprehension?” I mean it as a joke but it he does not take it as such. He flags the waitress over and asks for the bill. While he insists on paying for my meal too, pointing out rather unnecessarily that I'm between jobs at the moment, the abruptness of his departure lets me know I've crossed some line.

The speed at which Joe makes his departure is startling to say that least. I can't remember ever seeing him move that fast for anything. With little better to do I drop a few small bills on the table as an extra tip to the waitress and take my leave of the quiet pub. I worry that Joe won't hold up to his promise of seeking out the printing firms with the capabilities I asked about now, given his odd departure. There is nothing I can do about it at the moment though, so I return to my apartment and spend an hour scribbling down aimless thoughts in a notebook.

While it was a lie at the time I said it to Joe, I entertain the idea of putting all of my rejected articles into a compendium of sorts. I kept all of them for reasons I can't explain, and they sit in boxes beneath my bed. I generated about two rejected pieces a week when I worked with Joe. They were always the last things I worked on since I knew the odds of getting them printed were low. I produce articles faster than most writers or

reporters, but still only get an average number published because of my tendency to pursue topics my once-editor/employer found undesirable. In spite of that, and the tightening noose of debt about my neck, I could never bring myself to stop. The very thought of ceasing my extra-curricular writing made my jaw clench.

I spend some time in the late evening leafing through the box of rejected articles. Still without work there is little reason for me to any sleep schedule, and I don't feel tired at all after I finish penning my thoughts on a would-be compendium. The articles are printed on standard paper, stapled together and stacked in a cardboard box, but the longer I leaf through them the more they spill out across my bedroom floor. What began as a nostalgic trip through headlines that never were became the pursuit of perfection as I edit and note down weaknesses in my writing. It comforts me to know that I came away from my last job a better writer, if nothing else.

Even if I escape from Leiche and the debt I owe to him I'm not sure what I'll do afterwards. I had a routine when I was employed with Joe. More than that, I had a rhythm. I'd find a topic that interested me, or that I thought Joe would approve of, sometimes I'd research for them, or an acquaintance would mention it to me, but more often it would start as an overheard comment, or an advertisement I passed. Then I'd spend hours finding everything I could on the subject, sometimes I'd interview people, but I disliked that and avoided it as much as I could even when I was chided for it and told good reporters have to be good at asking questions. Actually writing the article once I had all the information I need seldom took me longer than half an hour, self-editing included. Without the sequence to follow I can feel myself beginning to drift into uncertainty.

I'm torn from my thoughts as I notice something in the article in front of me, or rather the lack of something in the article.. The article is about a missing person, an artist from a different part of the city. That in itself is not remarkable, though important enough that I wrote an article about it at the time, what catches my attention is the fact that I don't remember why Joe wouldn't publish this one. I reread the article twice but can't see anything that would have caused Joe to dismiss it. He did dismiss it, even though it was months ago I remember that much, but he wouldn't give me a clear answer as to why.

I'm still puzzling through this when there's an odd sound at my door. It is similar to the scratching of a dog wanting to be let in, but since my building doesn't allow pets that seems unlikely. I creep towards the entrance to my apartment, picking a pan up from my kitchen counter on the way. It makes me feel like a walking stereotype, but the weight of it in my clenched fist is comforting.

The volume of the noise escalates in the time it takes me to draw near the door. I'm sure whoever is on the other side has not heard me over their own movements. Neither of us, myself or the soon-to-be intruder makes enough noise that the ticking of the clock becomes inaudible. Hearing the clock brings home to me that were I asleep as I normally am at this hour the chances of me waking up would be slim indeed.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Click.

The lock disengages and the noises from the other side of the door cease. The knob turns, taking four full seconds to reach the point where the door can be opened. Without warning or indication my door flies inward, almost striking me as the intruder lunges inside my apartment. Neither of us are prepared for the suddenness of being face to face. The intruder is a male of average stature, masked and holding a black sack in one

hand, the other having just stopped the door from slamming into the wall and creating enough noise to wake the entire building. For less time than it takes to draw breath we lock eyes, him paused mid-stride, not expecting me to be at the door, me crouched with my pan, having just been disillusioned that he would continue his glacial pace into my home. He recovers first, diving towards me and sending both of us tumbling further into my apartment. Absent his hand holding it, the door swings shut, but doesn't make enough noise to draw the attention of my neighbors in the night.

He lost his momentum when he stopped in surprise at seeing me so his dive isn't as fast as it might have been. I swing the pan while he's in the air and connect with his outstretched arm hard enough to create a dull thud. He lands on top of me, managing to pin the arm with the pan to the floor and cover my mouth to muffle any shouts I make. The fall knocked the breath out of me so shouting isn't an option anyway. Instead, I strike with my free left hand. The first punch clips the corner of a wall and does nothing but send lances of pain through the small fingers of my hand, but the second finds his gut and I can feel the air billow out of his mouth through the mask. I try for another punch only to being crippled as agony ripples up my body. The man kneed me in the groin, the effects of which take away any breath I'd just started to regain and making me gag. I open my mouth to vomit and he shoves something into it, then forces the sack he was holding over my head, leaving me in utter darkness. The cloth covering my face isn't thick, I should be able to see through it at least a little bit with the light spilling out of my bedroom, but there is nothing. Nothing except a pungent chemical smell that permeates my mouth, forcing me to taste it as well as breath it. Between the pain and the struggle I can't even hold my breath while I lose consciousness.

CHAPTER V

The Guide

When I come to I still have the bag over my head. The gag is gone, having left a foul taste in my mouth, and I can see silhouettes in the space around me. There are two people in front of me, but when I try to turn to look behind me I find my limbs bound to a chair.

“Who are you people,” I shout, “What do you want?” The man on my right steps forward and slaps me across the face despite the bag. As blows go I suppose it could have been much worse, the bag kept the worst of the sting from my cheek and he didn’t hit me hard enough to snap my head around. It is apparent that he only wanted my attention. He has it. I don’t speak again.

“The question is not who we are, Mr. Richter, but who you are.” A man’s voice, not deep or menacing either, but rather soft. It does nothing to quell my fear. “You’ve been quite a quandary so far, always toeing the line of suspicion until now.”

“What are you talking about,” I risk the question not seeing anyway to provide a satisfactory answer to them. They know my last name, at least, so why they’re asking who I am leaves me confused.

“Don’t be obstinate, Mr. Richter, you’ve pushed boundaries and asked questions regarding our...enterprise since we ran across you. Always pushing to bring up events that were better left settled and draw attention to one of our best fronts.” I don’t have the slightest idea what they’re talking about. It doesn’t sound like they are associated with

Leich, or that they know about the book. Best not to give them more information than they have, in that case.

“I’m just a reporter. Anything I’ve written that is associated with you is coincidence,” I’m trying to sound placating, it’s much harder when my heart is about to bruise itself against my ribs from the speed at which it beats.

“We know you’re a reporter, Jerg, or at least that you were one,” Joe’s familiar voice stops my pounding heart cold in my chest.

“Joe? What the f-”

“No need to be crass, I had hoped I ground such base speech out of your vocabulary by now. Then again, I had hoped a lot of things about you. Namely that the fact that you kept pushing me to publish stories that would draw attention to me, let alone the ones about our members being kidnapped, were just the youthful passions of a reporter. You tipped your hand when you came asking specifically about printing firms. Now, why don’t we just skip the playing dumb, which of us do you know about?”

“What? Which of who? Joe, come one, it’s me,” this is all too sideways for me. Joe can’t be involved with my kidnapping, I’d known him too long. Yet, here he is, and here I am. It makes less sense the more they speak. If it seemed like I was investigating whatever it is he’s doing Joe could have fired me at any time. Then again, maybe he’s hoping to find out how many of his cohorts have been found out by whoever he suspects I work for. A chilling realization comes over me when I realize that they can’t be planning on letting me go now that I’ve heard Joe’s voice. Up to that point they could have dumped me somewhere with little risk. With nothing to lose honesty seems my best tactic. Given my abismal ability to lie, it is my only tactic.

“Joe, the other night had nothing to do with you. I’m just trying to track down the maker of some books I found.”

“You could have gone a lot of places to find a book press, Jerg. Like the inside of the cover.”

“They were banned books. I came across them the other day,” I leave off there, deciding whether or not I want to tell them my motives. The pause prompts another slap, not so gentle this time.

“Go on,” it’s the soft spoken man again. As far as I can tell through the sack on my head he’s the one hitting me. I don’t know why, but it brings me small comfort to know that Joe isn’t my abuser. Perhaps there was some friendship between us after all. If there is, it’s my only shot for getting out of this.

“Fine, fine, I took them off a guy who got mugged. It wasn’t me who mugged him, I swear, but I’m desperate for cash and when I found the package on him it seemed like it might be worth something so I took it, okay? When I opened it I figured the people who were making illegal books might be willing to pay to keep it quiet,” a lengthy pause follows my hurried explanation.

“What do you think?” It takes me a moment to realize the soft voice isn’t directed at me.

“Well,” says Joe, drawing out the word, “I can’t say I’ve ever heard of someone incriminating themselves in a mugging in the hopes of saving themselves before. What were the books anyway, Jerg?” The last is directed at me, but something is wrong. He sounds too friendly, too much like I’m not still tied to a chair, blind. Why would he care about the books anyway? He shouldn’t, unless he’s connected to them. Now that they know

about them if they search my apartment they'll find them. Revealing my possession of the texts might have been a mistake. Then again, a hostage nobody knows about does little good.

“They’re *safe*,” I emphasize the word making it rich with implication. I can’t think of a convincing lie, so I hope that their fear of being found out will create a better narrative than I can, or at the very least that their caution will keep me safe for the moment. It seems to since I am not struck for my vague answer. A pause, perhaps the two share a significant look I can’t make out through the fabric of the bag. I’m considering pushing my luck by being more direct, threats instead of implication, when Joe speaks again,

“Alright, message received. What do you want?” The shift is so sudden I’m caught off guard. It could be a game, a ploy to lure me into giving them more information they can use. Deceit or honesty, it makes little difference. It’s the only path before me right now.

“Standing would be nice,” I try, “seeing the people I’m talking to as well.”

“No,” interjects the other man, “you have not seen my face. It is better for everyone that way.” He has a point. While it makes me feel vulnerable and at a disadvantage to be so restricted, seeing his face makes me a bigger threat to whatever group of people he and Joe represent, but gives me no more leverage than I already have with the books. At least it seems my earlier hope that they were confident none of their illegal books had been found yet is accurate. That, or they have some idea of which books in particular I have, and some aspect of those books could lead the authorities back to them.

“Fine,” I begin again, “I want money, for my silence. I mentioned that I needed it earlier. My safety too, though that should go without saying.”

“Cash and your relative freedom in exchange for the books? This is doable, depending on the amount you’re asking for?”

“No, not in exchange for the books,” I can’t give up the books, not when they know who I am and where I live. If I do they lose any incentive to leave me be, I’ll have nothing on them. It was different when I thought the makers of the books were strangers, people I could just be a nameless face to, with Joe involved that ship has sailed.

“You can’t expect us to just take your word that you won’t turn them in to the authorities once you’re free and paid,” his tone implies I’m a moron for suggesting it, even though I haven’t actually done so yet.

“You can’t expect me to take your word I won’t find myself back here after returning them to you,” I retort. It’s hard to sound condescending tied to a chair, but I try anyway. The fear and panic that roiled in my gut and forced my heart to batter against my ribs has disappeared, bringing an unanticipated irritation at my situation. It’s ludicrous, but at least I’m thinking clearly.

“Perhaps we can come to some compromise here,” Joe cuts in before the conversation can deteriorate further. There is a suggestion concealed within the lilt of his voice that makes me uneasy.

CHAPTER VI

First Steps

It is with severe trepidation that I sit next to Joe, tucked away in a corner of the library I spend so much time in. For his part, Joe looks almost smug.

“Relax,” he says to me, “this way is best for everyone.” The spell of good weather disappeared with the same abruptness with which it came, and the light that works its way into the library from outside is muted by dense cloud cover, leaving us at the mercy of the library’s fluorescent bulbs.

“I feel that this offers little guarantee of my wellbeing,” my voice rings petulant in my ears. The deal we cut was the most realistic I could have hoped for, better really, once I found myself abducted by Joe and his mysterious colleague. The very same colleague we now wait for in the library’s lumbar-destroying cushioned chairs.

“This offers you the best guarantee of safety, and you know that. You just don’t like it,” I have never known my once-and-now-again boss to be such a mocking man, but he now needles me with an impish glee.

Any response I might have had is interrupted by the arrival of the soft spoken man that beat me while I was tied to a chair just twelve hours ago, the man I now know simply as “Biff.” He is also, as I’ve since discovered, the man who broke into my apartment and kidnapped me. We do not care for each other, and we never will. He shares my displeasure with the so-called compromise Joe proposed.

“Do you have the gift?” He inquires without preamble.

“Payment first,” I say. He inhales, chest expanding, but lets the air escape in a sigh at a look from Joe. Reaching into an interior pocket of his Jacket he produces a thin stack of bills, but waits to give them to me until Joe holds up the stack of pages on the bench between our seats. Contained within that stack are months of forged correspondence between Joe and myself, all of it linking me to the creation and dissemination of illegal texts, as well as a number of disparaging discussions on the state of our country. In all, it’s enough to ensure I can no more turn him or his group into the authorities than I can cut my own head off.

Joe’s colleague, and mine now too since Joe has rehired me to write for him in a permanent capacity, grunts and hands over the money. Wary, but with little choice, I lead the pair down the aisles of bookshelves until I reach the one I’m looking for, then retrieve the rewrapped illegal books from beneath it where I stashed them hours prior to Joe’s arrival.

“You can open them here if you want, to make sure, but I have no reason to hold on to them now that you have those,” I gesture to the papers in Joe’s hand. The library is empty except for us, and the librarian who is in a separate room going about her business. Regardless, Biff takes the package and secrets it away in his coat without inspecting it, unwilling to risk even the slightest chance it will be seen. Without another word the unpleasant man turns on his heel and departs, leaving me alone with Joe as though he’d never arrived just moments earlier.

“Try not to take that personally, he’s been like that since his brother was take...er-disappeared a few months ago. Actually, you tried to write about him. That article about

the artist. I had quite the time keeping a straight face when you put that on my desk,” he chuckles, but there is no humor in it.

“His brother??

“Yes, you popped up at an interesting juncture in my business,” he doesn’t seem as concerned with being overheard as Biff was. Joe leads us back to the seats we’d vacated and falls back into his as though it were the most comfortable place in the city. “See, I’m fairly new to all this, but since it’s my press that’s being used to produce all the pages for the books I was brought into the loop by necessity.”

“What loop? What have you dragged me into?”

“Dragged you into? Don’t kid yourself, you brought this about more than we did. To answer your question though, we’re just a group of people politely refusing to adhere to some of the more questionable legislation of a flawed government. We’d never harmed a soul until you came poking around. Please understand that three of us have gone missing in just the last few months. Then one of us got mugged on the way to deliver a gift. Tensions are high.”

“What were all those questions you were asking last night then? You mentioned articles I was pushing that would draw attention.”

“Ah, well you kept stumbling over things linked to the group, or pushing articles that would draw more scrutiny than would be wise. At first we thought of bringing you in, you have a gift for writing, but after a while it seemed to be coincidental. Then you asked to meet, started asking questions about the press. You were almost right, by the way. Where you went wrong was that we don’t put all our eggs in one basket. You might as well know that I print the pages for the books, they’re bound elsewhere, but better you

not know specifics. Anyway, it was an unfortunate misunderstanding.” I stare at the man I thought I knew until a day ago. His misunderstanding lead to my kidnap, and could have lead to more.

“How do you choose?” I ask.

“Choose what?” He replies.

“The books, how do you choose which ones to make?”

“That is not on the list of questions I expected. Also please call them gifts, in public. It sounds silly given all we’re talking about, but it’s one point Biff is absolutely stalwart about.”

“Fine, how do you choose your gits then?”

“Well, the two you found are half of our variety right now. The more religious of them we make to fill a demand that arose once they became illegal. We may do this for political motives but we still need to finance our gift making. We have donors that take care of that in exchange for the production of that gift. The others we make to help people organise. In a nation where information is restricted and rallying is banned, the methods of disseminating knowledge and effective produce are forgotten.” I take my time absorbing what he’s told me. What they’re doing is more troublesome than making hard to come by books for a profit, it’s exactly the sort of activity that will draw significant investigation if the authorities hear even a whisper of it.

I talk with Joe a while longer, but my attention is elsewhere. I wonder just what the future holds now that I’m linked to such a group. I was told my role would be minimal, to occasionally write an article that would never see an official newspaper, only meant for the eyes of those already looking for such things where they shouldn’t be. My

name would never be attached. Other than that I could return to my duties for Joe's paper, writing as I had been.

The stack of money handed to me by Biff contained enough to pay back Leich, which I do after parting ways with Joe for the day. Leich isn't happy that I've managed to pay him off in a lump sum, robbing him of the rest of the interest he expected to make off me, but he accepts it, I assume because it would be bad for business to build a reputation as someone who won't let those he lends to ever escape their debt.

Being free of the debt lifts a greater weight from my shoulders than I could have imagined. Every time I thought of the money I owed it reminded me of why I borrowed it in the first place. It made me revisit my brother's funeral over and over again. Whenever I was forced back to the dog fights my subconscious re-lived his death, even while I consciously tried so hard to focus on anything else, to let the noise of the crowd blot it out. Without that constant reminder I feel lighter than I have in a long time. I start running again as the weather makes the slow transition into the steady warmth of late spring.

Despite these things I cannot say that I am happy, or even content. Working with Joe is having an odd effect on me now that I'm aware of his other activities. It is not my involvement that troubles me, it is that I am becoming more aware of the flaws in my home country. Things that never bothered me before now nettle my mind when I perceive them. My inability to report on anything I feel is important and relevant becomes almost intolerable.

I discuss these things with Joe, and I feel the conversations that come from those discussions drawing me deeper into his group. I don't know that I want to be more

involved with the people that almost ended my life. As months pass I begin to do other jobs for them than just the writing. I deliver gifts, or meet with other members of the group. What started as an assurance of mutual destruction if I turned them in has become an integration of myself into the organization.

One day while I'm in Joe's office I think to ask him, "Where do you think this is all going?" He gives me a blank look for half a moment before answer,

"To change."

That is the summation of any answer I get from him on the subject. It fills me with a wary dread that there is no clear destination for their group. It seems to me that if we do this without end someone will make a mistake eventually, or bad luck will intervene as it did when one man's mugging almost exposed them all, instead resulting in my insertion into the group. Such are the thoughts that plague my mind as I continue further down the rabbit hole.

CHAPTER VII

An Ascent Arrested

Fourteen months. That is the amount of time after I asked Joe in his office where he thought his group was going for my fears to be realized. Nineteen months after I “found” the book that incited my involvement with his group. Almost to the day.

In fairness, it is the culmination of the group’s hopes that is its downfall. I write on each of the events that are stepping stones towards this end. Rallies start to organize, becoming more frequent and better at projecting their message. Each was shut down in short order by the authorities, but the changes in them can’t go unnoticed. I sit in my space at the library, having hushed phone calls with the cellular phone I was told to keep after I remembered to tell Joe that I had it. Phone interviews, I find, are far more tolerable than their live counterparts, though admittedly less effective. In spite of the reduced efficacy listening to no less than three dozen protesters turned temporary detainees of the authorities gives me more than enough material to produce an article so fine that Joe even prints it, with the admonishment that if he never printed anything questionable he might start to look too clean and draw attention that way.

Other changes are taking place concurrent to those. There is an inexplicable surge in pro-government activists and media. Fliers and posters appear around the city proclaiming the effectiveness of the congress, and public speakers praise the upsurge in arrests made by authorities, citing increased numbers of incarcerated criminals. None mention that those being arrested are those found in possession of copies of the very

same book I came across over a year ago, the *Quran*. Joe does not print my articles on these subjects, though they do find their way into the hands of certain interested parties.

It is when a group protests such a public speaker that things come to a head. There are both pro-government and government-critical crowds at the event. The speaker himself says little that is not mundane. He expounding on the successes of government contracted companies over private ones. I do not write on this event, Joe tells me not to, though he gives me no reasoning. I do read in the news later that it was an “anti-government protester” that threw the first bottle, but I maintain my skepticism on that point. Authorities were already on the way to break up the crowds when things turned violent. It is no surprise where the blame falls, and a dozen are arrested.

It is a week after this that I’m sitting in Joe’s office when two men knock on the door wearing suits.

“Pardon us, sirs, but would you two be Joseph Grint and Jergin,” the one who spoke pauses trying to pronounce my last name.

“Jerg is fine,” I reply, “but yes that’s us.”

“How can we help you, gentlemen?” Joe adds.

“We’ve come to see if you’d mind accompanying us for a cup of coffee, would you?” Joe goes very still, though I can’t tell why. It’s unusual to be invited out by strangers in such manner, but I can only assume it’s for business.

“Another day would be better, gentlemen, we’re rather busy right now,” Joe’s tone is almost pleading, it worries me.

“It really would be best to do it now,” the speaker casts a meaningful look back out of the office to where Joe’s other employees can be heard just a short way down the

hall. Joe's face is drawn, but he stands and I follow suit. Together we follow the two men outside to their car. It is a black nondescript model with four doors, the back two of which Joe and I slide through into a backseat segregated from the drivers portion of the car by a thick mesh of wire. The men shut each door behind us before I can question the caged rear of the car revealing no means of opening them from the inside. I shoot Joe a concerned look, only now registering the illegal book sitting between us on the seat. The illegal book we printed. The one that explains how best to go about organizing protests against the government. Before I can open my mouth the men climb into the front and pull the car away from the curb. It's unremarkable appearance soon losing itself among the busier streets of the city.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Plato. *The Republic of Plato*. Translated by Alan Bloom. 2nd ed. Basic Books, 1991. Kindle.

FlroCruz, Michelle. "Dogfighting In China: A Tradition That's Hard To Stop." International Business Times. August 01, 2013. Accessed June 1, 2018. <http://www.ibtimes.com/dogfighting-china-tradition-thats-hard-stop-1000614>.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Stephen Thomas N. Krichels was born in Blue Hill, Maine on May 3rd, 1996. Raised in Surry, Maine he graduated from George Stevens Academy before going on to earn his double major degree in Political Science and English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Stephen is a member of the International Affairs Association and a ROTC cadet.

Following his graduation Stephen will be pursuing his Master's Degree in Creative Writing at the University of Maine, while also finishing his Officer Training through the affiliated ROTC program. Upon completion of these he will enter the U.S. Army as a 2nd Lieutenant.