



ia" (2024) C. Castelline

*An excerpt from
"Persedonia"
by C.A. Castelline*

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The Conspiracy of the Widower

A very grungy Rob DeSpirito entered the office of Temperance Gardens Cemetery. As cemetery groundskeeper, the grunge kind of came with the territory.

There was a time, not long ago, when Rob would joke to his fiancé that he kept the grounds so well that they stayed with him permanently. Then he would point to his fingernails, and she would scrunch up her nose, grin, and smack his butt over and over until she had successfully herded him into the shower. The steam that often came after wasn't just from the hot water.

Times were different now. The jokes didn't really come naturally anymore. Showers didn't either. Rob had reached a new level of grunge.

He forced a grin as he tapped the desk of the cemetery's sexton. "Hey Chelle, I just finished up with section 24...what else you got for me?"

Michelle's bespectacled eyes followed the dirt that flaked off Rob as he smacked the desk with his grubby hand. She did her best not to scowl at him, choosing instead to re-focus her eyes on the gossip magazine she had been thumbing through. The corner of her mouth curled slightly, but she managed to mostly maintain a blank demeanor. She didn't want to be mean to him, but his grime was really icking her out.

"Plot 484."

Rob's face fell and he gave his scruffy chin a rub. "Damn...she was just here planning a few weeks ago..."

When you work in the field of death for a while, the concept of it loses its punch, and the knowledge of yet another one begins to feel like any other boring fact one might learn about work. Regardless, there was still something particularly gutting to Rob about a fairly young person losing their life.

Michelle looked up with pity and found herself studying him. Tall, dark, Rob would have been pretty handsome if it weren't for the layer of dirt shielding him from human contact. That dirt made her fairly certain he had been wearing the same black t-shirt and jeans for days. The bags under his eyes weren't doing him any service either. They aged him to a point where if she didn't know he was 28 from his paperwork, she would have guessed that maybe he was pushing 40.

Rob caught her look. He hated being pitied, so he forced another grin, slicked his greasy black hair away from his forehead, and gave her desk another slap. "Alright then. I'm gonna grab some lunch first. He began to spin away, but the sexton stopped him.

"Rob?"

"Yeah?"

We have a funeral today, so you can't use the backhoe".

"Got it." He finger-gunned at her and turned away once more. As he made his exit out the rear door, he grabbed his hanging laptop bag.

He lit a cigarette as he dragged himself towards Deborah's Diner, laptop bag slung over his shoulder. Deborah's was a local staple that had stood at the corner for as long as he could remember. He hadn't been there in a while and was surprised to see the building was twice the size it was when he left it.

Oh. They've expanded. Good for her.

Rob took a final drag, put his cigarette out in the ashtray atop the garbage can outside the restaurant, then walked in and eyed the newly renovated interior. There were no more dark, quiet booths he could slip into. Every table was bathed in fluorescent light.

He peered around the corner behind the front counter. The karaoke room which had been the source of many memories was still there, and they kept the old jukebox; not that he was in the mood to experience either of those things. He chose a quiet booth away from everyone else and began to set up his laptop as he waited for someone to take his order.

When Rob wasn't working, he busied himself with deconstructing and debunking conspiracy theories and paranormal phenomena. He had started it as a way to escape and never expected anyone to actually read what he wrote, but somehow, only about four months into writing, he was receiving submissions from all over the world, asking him to weigh in on the unexplained.

Doppelgangers:

German folklore or government conspiracy?

Rob clicked around and began updating his blog with photos of twins and laboratories which he tweaked just enough to give the feeling of "uncanny valley". This part was all for show of course. Rob didn't consider himself dramatic, but he did enjoy being able to add a little theater to his articles.

"Ooo, conspiracy theories!" a woman's voice came from behind him.

Rob looked back towards the voice. He hadn't seen Melanie since he had last gone to karaoke...*before...*

Before he could respond, she had moved to the other side of the booth and plopped down. Her tattooed hands grabbed the computer and spun it towards her. Her silky black hair fell forward as she began scrolling, her pierced eyebrows furrowing through her thick bangs as she scrolled though.

She looked up at him and squinted. "Do you really believe in this stuff?"

"Not usually, but the digging is interesting." He replied.

Melanie nodded and reclined back in the booth. "So where have you been? It's been months since I've seen you around."

Rob opened his mouth and sighed before deciding he didn't want to talk about it with her. "I've been busy".

"I notice your *girlfriend* hasn't been around anymore here either...did she finally dump you?" Melanie was leaning in now, beaming at him, head in hands on the table.

Rob got quiet and looked away from her.

"I'll take that as a yes." Melanie reached into the breast pocket of her jean jacket, pulled out a pen and started writing on Rob's napkin.

She slid the napkin back across the table. "When you're ready to take a shot with a *real* woman, you should give me a call..."

Rob glared at her, then stood up and began packing up his laptop. He turned to leave and then looked back at her and growled, "Liv is a million times the woman you will ever be".

He could feel Melanie gawking at him as he stomped off to order his lunch to-go at the register. Deborah was the one manning it and he was trying his best not to be short with her, but all he wanted to do was get his lunch and leave, and all *she* wanted to do was tell him about everything that had ever crossed her mind. She was tiny and she peered up at him through cat-eye glasses, flicking her bracelet-covered wrist as she gestured around the diner and blabbed. Rob heard her, but her voice was distant and sounded like excitedly squawking seagulls to him.

"-- you know, he's such a good kid, he's just always been a little different, you know? I told him he should try talking to the girl at the bank, but he just ignores me...I wonder if he might be gay. You know, I'd still love him no matter what...I mean, gosh I might even be a little gay sometimes, that ElectraPop singer is a real stunner..."

Rob could feel the last rope in his head begin to fray and his tongue was loading up to snap at her to be quiet. Instead, he took a breath and just nodded. Thankfully, his lunch was soon placed in front of him, and he could feel himself relax as his way out approached.

"Ah, anyway", Deborah handed him the paper bag and winked. "you got a lot of chutzpah coming in here and ordering ham and cheese from us."

Rob feigned a chuckle. "You know it".

He raised the bag up to her as if he were giving her a toast and then slunk out the door and meandered away, sandwich in hand.

He tried not to, but he couldn't help stewing over Melanie's bullshit. *The fucking nerve...* He took a deep breath and gave his head a shake, attempting to fling the ick out of his brain. *Its fine, though.* He had planned to finally visit Liv today anyways, and now he could just see her a little earlier.

Rob approached his destination and took a deep breath.

"Hey Liv..."

Without warning, a cacophony of screaming and shouting from behind grabbed Rob's attention. He froze for a moment, his lunch and laptop bag hitting the ground. Adrenaline kicked in before his brain could and Rob found himself running towards the screaming.

Rob stopped behind a tree to catch his breath and then peeked at the commotion ahead of him. He was looking at a plot that he had prepared the other day. It was a funeral. *Why was everyone screaming?*

At the epicenter of the noise stood a gruff looking man with thick eyebrows furrowed and a crowbar in hand. His striking blue eyes nearly pierced the casket. He released the tension in his face, then coolly walked over to the casket. His audience stopped screaming and everyone seemed to hold their breath. He slammed his crowbar under the lid and with an enormous grunt, pried the lid open. He frowned at the person inside and then hocked a spit into the casket. The gathering stood, quiet and stunned, and then erupted into a frenzied chatter as their heads bobbed to look up at the man and then back down to the casket.

Rob crept closer to get a look at the victim of expiration and expectoration. Inside lay a man who was *identical* to the man who had done the breaking and spitting. Same olive complexion, same beard, down to the trim, same thick eyebrows. They even wore similar clothes. The only difference as far as he could see was the

dead man had fewer wrinkles, a slightly shorter beard, and probably several more months of good sleep.

Rob squinted as he considered the possibilities. *They must be brothers...but what pissed this man off so much that he'd rip open his own brother's grave and spit in it?*

Hissss. Rob's puzzling was interrupted by a gaseous release coming from the casket.

The crowd gasped.

Rob refocused on the dead man just in time to watch his body deflate and then...*mist away?* Rob couldn't possibly describe what he had just seen, nor could he make sense of it. Whatever had just happened, there was not much left of the guy. Just some bloody looking goo, a pair of dice, a photograph, and a giant stick.

How did he do that? It occurred to Rob that some classes on "magic" and illusion might come in handy for his investigations.

"YOU THINK THIS IS FUNNY?" A woman in a black dress interrupted his thought. She lunged at the remaining man and began shrieking and pelting him with flailing hands. "HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?".

The beating continued and her target stood firmly, taking it all, but his face held a deep sadness. She eventually stopped, breathless, collapsed at his feet, and started howling, and an older man scurried to her, with as much speed as his hobble could allow.

The old man crouched down to hold the woman, and he looked up at the man with fury. "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

The crowd started humming in agreement and Rob watched his face turn to realization and fear as he began backing away from an angrily approaching horde.

The man turned and booked it, as they threatened to swell over him. They were a fast group, but he had the advantage of running alone. Rob watched with astonishment as he ran through a thorny, overgrown hedge and a giant fence, fleeing in the direction of the old mausoleum.

How the hell did he do that? That mausoleum is fenced off, and hedged off...

Nobody had been able to enter that part of the cemetery for decades, not even Rob; and having near total cemetery access was *his job*.

The angry throng halted and began to mutter amongst themselves in confusion. Rob took their distraction as his cue to duck away and try to find the man. Maybe it was just his recent investigation into "doppelgangers", but something about this situation was tugging at him.

Rob approached the brush and examined where he watched the man slip in. *Yep. This is definitely a hedge*. He peered at the tall wooden fence directly behind it. *That is also definitely a fence*.

Rob looked around with a slight bit of embarrassment. He wanted to make sure nobody was going to see him make an ass out of himself as he tried to run headfirst into a fence. The funeral procession had begun walking in the other direction. Many were busy coddling the inconsolable woman. *The coast is clear*.

Rob backed up and braced for impact as he made a run for the hedge.

"AGH!"

He certainly did make an impact.

Tangled in twigs and thorns, Rob moved his head slightly and realized he had only just missed having his eye impaled. *Why am I so fucking stupid sometimes?*

He wrenched himself a few times, and with his last freeing tug, his foot hit the wood behind the hedge, releasing a creaking sound. *Ah there it is*.

To the right of him was a bush *without* thorns. Rob sulked a little as he shuffled over to the other bush and lifted the branches. The door was only just visible, but it opened with ease.

Once through, Rob took a moment to behold the stained stone monument in front of him. It was far larger than he had imagined, and it was covered in moss and ivy from years of neglect. As he approached the doors, he couldn't help but notice the giant

butterfly winged statue that sat upon the roof, looking down at him as though she were judging whether he could enter.

Rob advanced toward the door and could hear the man inside talking to another man on speaker phone.

"I told you not to do it, Brian. We have rules about these things for reasons. It never goes well." The voice on the phone was breathy and melodious.

"I know, Moody, I know." The man began sobbing. "I just thought, ya know...I just thought Jenny and I had something different." His rough voice cracked. "I thought she would know I was the real one as soon as she saw me."

The voice on the other end let out a deep sigh. "She hasn't seen the things we've seen. You can't expect her to put stuff together like that."

"Yeah..."

The two grew mostly quiet, save for a few sniffs and sobs, but the silence was soon broken by the man on the phone. "Listen, I'm sorry, but I have to get going. I'll see you at the next meeting though..."

Brian took a deep breath. "Yeah...ok".

"You're sure no one followed you, right?"

"Yeah, I'm alone."

"Alright. Get home safely. Bye for now."

"Talk to you soon, Moods."

Rob had more questions than answers at this point, but he stood at the door with hesitation. He was burning to know what the hell was going on, but he didn't want to burst in on this guy while he was in such a vulnerable place. Maybe he could just knock? He lifted his knuckles to the door, but before they could touch the metal, it came flying open and Rob was standing face to face with the crying man.

"Who the hell are you?"

The question was rhetorical. Rob was met with an immediate fist to the face and then everything went black.

It was dusk when Rob came to. As he lay in the grass, he struggled to make sense of his situation. His face hurt a lot and he wasn't quite sure which way was up. He slowly sat up and squinted as he looked around. He was still outside, but he was no longer near the mausoleum.

Oh... the mausoleum...that dude must have decked me real good.

As his clarity returned, Rob realized he was sitting instead in the middle of the cemetery.

"My laptop!" Rob leapt to his feet and began sprinting towards where he had dropped his things.

When he arrived, he was relieved to see that everything was still exactly where he had dropped it. He exhaled and let himself collapse to a seated position on the ground, then focused on the headstone in front of him:

Olivia (almost) DeSpirito

Rob sat quietly for some time and then hoisted himself up to approach the headstone. He gave it a little finger kiss and then tapped the blank space where his name would eventually go. "I think I almost joined you today."

Rob retrieved his laptop bag and lunch and then plopped down in front of the stone again. He opened the paper bag and gave the sandwich a sniff. *Smells fine.*

"I'd say you would have killed me, but I guess that's a bit moot," he chuckled.

Rob began tearing pieces off his sandwich and plopping them in his mouth.

"You want some?"

He gently placed a chunk of sandwich on the dirt in front of him. The grass was still very fine. "I snuck some beer in too, if you want it."

He grinned like sneaky teenager and pulled a can out of his laptop bag, popped it open, and poured a little bit in the dirt before taking a swig. He sloshed it around for a while as he fell deep into thought.

Several minutes passed and the sky became dark before Rob began to speak again.

"Everyone who knows tells me I should come here and talk to you...that it would make me feel better..."

Rob put down the beer and patted around his pants for a pack of cigarettes. When he found them, he pulled one out, lit it, then took a deep drag.

"I'm sorry I haven't come sooner. I know I work here, I just...well, it's been really hard, ok?"

Rob's breathing intensified as he tried to hold back tears, but not crying just made him angry.

"Agh, this is so stupid. It's not like you can hear me!" He angrily jumped up and chucked his cigarette at the headstone, gave the beer can a kick, then dropped his head into his hand, and placed the other hand on the headstone.

"I'm sorry Liv. I'm trying so hard, but, honestly, the only thing keeping me here is knowing what the clean-up is like. I don't want to do that to someone, but I really wish I was dead sometimes."

It may have been the concussion, or the beer, or perhaps the unwise mixing of both, but Rob was certain he noticed the air around him was beginning to smell floral and boozy.

He could hear fabric ruffling behind him. Someone was very close, and *very* drunk. He spun around towards the sound.

"Hello? Who's here?"

There was no response.

THWUNK! Rob felt a sharp pain on the back of his head. In slow motion he felt his knees buckle, and he began to fall forward. His body tensed as he prepared to hit the ground above his beloved, but he never did.

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Hitting the Ground

Rob had the worst headache of his life, but it didn't matter. He was in his happy place, cooking with Liv. He was dicing tomatoes, and she was grating cheddar.

He turned to look at her. She had curled her long brown hair and was wearing her yellow apron. He loved when she wore it because it brought out the golden ring in the center of her blue eyes. He reached out and brushed her lightly freckled cheek with the back of his hand.

"What?" She grinned at him.

What he wanted to do was say was "I love you, Liv" for the very first time, but she met his eyes and he panicked.

"OLIVE LIV," he stammered out.

Liv raised an eyebrow at him. "Olive?"

"Yes... I love olives... Annd I think we should put them on the nachos".

Rob did not love olives. Rob wholeheartedly believed that olives tainted every food they touched.

Liv smirked at him and rummaged through her cabinets for a jar. "Ok, well, I love olives too".

A warm feeling rushed over Rob, and the room began to pulsate with white light which grew brighter and brighter, until...

"What are you thinking about?" Liv smiled as she peeked at him over her sunglasses. She was sitting on a picnic blanket across from him, sipping from a bottle of beer.

"I'm not really thinking of anything." Rob took a swig of his own beer. "When I'm with you, it's actually the only time my mind seems to quiet down."

Liv crept over to him and put her head in his lap. He looked down at her and gently pushed her hair behind her ear.

"Thank you for being my happy place," he said softly and leaned in to kiss her cheek.

HUAGH! Rob took a deep gulp of air.

Instead of landing his lips softly on Liv's cheek, Rob found himself tumbling forward in the dark.

The fall felt eternal. Deeper and deeper into the darkness. And he had the worst headache of his life.

What's happening? Am I... dead?

"Of course I'm not dead." Rob spoke out loud to reassure himself, but something in his gut was screaming at him that he *had* just experienced death.

Rob hoped if there was an afterlife, it wasn't just falling in the dark. *This sucks.*

It occurred to him that maybe he was supposed to head towards light, but there was no light to be seen.

Fuck. What if I'm going Hell? I'll never see Liv there--

THUMP! *Light!*

Rob hit the grass. The sparkling grass. *Interesting. Heaven has sparkling grass.*

As he began to stand, he felt a sharp pain on the back of his head and instinctively placed his hand on it. It was wet. He looked at his hand. Blood.

Isn't Heaven supposed to be painless? Bloodless even?

How did he even get here? He couldn't remember anymore.

Once on his feet, he surveyed the area. He was in a clearing, but the world around him was more vivid than he had ever seen before. He was surrounded on three sides by densely populated foliage. There were giant leaves in every color imaginable, vibrantly colored dewy mushrooms growing up the widest tree trunks he had ever seen, and in front of him, a glowing city that shimmered as though it were made of silver and gold, scaling a hill beside a swirling green mountain, with a castle centered at the highest point.

Rob squinted. He couldn't quite make out what was atop the castle...*some sort of...large birdcage?*

He shifted his view to the right. In contrast to this spectacular sight sat the ruins of an old stone town. Weathered old foundations, fallen beams, and scorched bricks littered the ground. The forest began filling in past the ruins, but Rob could just about make out a round hut made of mud and sticks before the density of the woods became too thick to see through. The hut's chimney, which was placed right in the middle, let out thick smoke.

Rob knew he should ask for help, but his hatred of cities made him hesitant. The smell of old hot piss, crowded streets, people trying to sell you scams... *No thank you.* Plus, Rob was fond of eccentric people. It was part of what made his conspiracy hunting fun.

You can't get more eccentric than living in a smoking mud hut away from civilization.

Speaking of smoke... Rob slapped around his pockets to feel for his cigarettes. Nothing.

Fuck. Maybe there's no smoking in Heaven.

It didn't stop the cravings though.

Oh...maybe this is Hell after all.

Rob groaned and made off toward the mud hut. His wound throbbed and burned as his pace quickened, and he debated stopping to rest, but nevertheless, he pushed through.

As he approached the hut, the smell of smoked herbs, meat, incense, and sulfur wafted towards him. It was a strange combination. Not something that he would consider tempting, despite his now grumbling stomach.

Squelch. His feet hit thick, slimy mud.

"Ugh". The hut was only a few meters away, but Rob was suddenly feeling a lot less enthusiastic about his visit. His enthusiasm continued to decline as he found himself wading through calf-deep muck in his jeans.

When he finally made it to the round wooden door, he hesitated. It was growing moss. No, it was *decorated in* moss.

This is gonna be a weird one.

Rob took a breath and gave the door a knock. A gruff female voice answered from inside. "Mercurius, you better have a good excu--".

The door flew open, and her voice softened. "--oh...you're not Mercurius".

Rob gasped at the small woman before him, who seemed to him to be easily 500 years old. Giant, goat-like horns twisted over

her head, poking from her thick, frizzy, white hair. Her skin was like thrice crumpled paper. The longer he looked at her, the more terrifying she became. The woman had no eyes, only leathery stitches where her eyes should be. Well, "no eyes" wasn't entirely accurate. She had a sharp, glimmering, purple one in her raised palm staring right at him.

Those are probably just some really good prosthetics. He told himself this, but he had a feeling in the pit of his stomach that told him otherwise.

The woman raised her other hand to Rob's face and to his shock, a tongue extended from the center and gave his face a slow lick.

"Ah, you are Osidora's child".

The tongue withdrew and her mismatched fingers, stitched to their palms at the bottom, tapped his forehead. "If only I could claim you for myself...you are destined to be incredibly powerful".

Rob had no response. Things were beginning to creep into a territory that was even a little weird for him. He studied her face looking for any clue of a wig, glue, silicon, rubber... *something*.

"Oh...yes...you must find my appearance unsettling, but I assure you, I don't mean you any harm."

Her assurance didn't make Rob feel any better. It was far more than her appearance that was unsettling.

The old woman hobbled back from the door. As she did, she drew in a deep sniff. "Quite the nasty wound you've got there...let me help you with that".

Rob stayed frozen as he debated running. He could definitely outrun this old woman, or at least, he could in a better state, but everything was beginning to spin, and he was suddenly feeling weak.

His legs buckled and he hit the floor.

"YETTA?!" The women shrieked. "Yetta, come, quickly! I think our guest has fallen!"

Rob's vision fuzzed back in, and he found himself lying on a straw mat in the center of the hut. In front of him was a large stone chimney, hanging over an equally large iron pot with a giant wooden spoon sitting on top of it.

The horned woman was standing at a counter behind the pot, accompanied by someone else now.

He took note of their strange attire. The old horned woman wore what appeared to be a burlap sack with seedlings growing between the weaves, and tendrils of vining plants over her shoulders, which coiled and unfurled like snakes. At the base of her neck, she wore a thick golden ring, which glimmered through the leaves. The other person was veiled and wore a similar sack, although it was entirely plantless. Both of them wore brown, knee-high boots, which were surprisingly mud-free.

Rob looked down at his own muddy limbs and grimaced. While it was nothing compared to how his head felt, his feet and legs were *uncomfy*. He removed his wet socks and sneakers and hoped the warmth of the fire would give him some relief.

"Yetta, I require einselfongue and shinglewort".

The veiled figure bowed and spoke with a young, feminine voice. "Yes, Which-Witch."

Yetta departed and the witch approached the iron pot and gave its contents a whiff. She frowned, then hobbled over to a shelf on the curved wall behind her, which was filled with bottles and jars. She took a moment to choose the ingredient she wanted, sniffing the contents of each vessel deeply and giving them a shake. When she arrived at her preferred ingredient, a slimy looking turquoise leaf, she pulled it out, popped the leaf into her mouth and began to loudly smack her lips as she grabbed two bottles and made her way back to the pungent preparation.

She spat the turquoise cud into the giant pot and Rob recoiled, his face wrinkled in disgust. The old woman then began to dump the entire contents of the two bottles into the pot: The first, yellow and sand-like, and the second, something black that slowly glooped out and then hit the liquid with a hard splash.

Yetta reappeared with a writhing hunk of green meat and a wad of brown moss on a wooden tray.

Rob watched in fascinated horror as the Which-Witch slammed the squirming green meat on the back counter and began slowly pulling a sleeve of skin off it. The meat fought back as she pulled, but it was no match for her. Once removed, she put the sleeve aside and diced the meat, then hobbled over to the cauldron with it sandwiched between her hands as though she were holding struggling bugs. She dropped the meat in, grabbed the spoon, and began to stir her concoction counterclockwise as she hummed over the brew. Rob did a double take as the brew began to hum back, deeper and deeper until it emitted a low growl and a brilliant blue light.

Satisfied with the result, the Which-Witch made her way back to the counter for the shinglewort. When she returned to the pot, she plopped the plant on the wooden spoon and gave it a dip. Rob jumped as the moss let out a terrible shriek. It throbbed, pulsed, and glowed as she pulled it out of the mixture.

"Come here" she beckoned to Rob.

Rob looked up at her, looked at the stew, then at the throbbing wad of moss. "Ah, no, I'm good."

The Which-Witch clicked her tongue in annoyance and shook her head. "She always picks the rudest ones."

The witch hobbled back to the counter and slapped the moss into the skin sleeve. "That wasn't a request."

He reluctantly stood up and inched towards her as she scraped a stool out from under the counter. She grunted as she climbed it to reach his wound. He felt a wet squish against the back of his head. "Hold this here," the Which-Witch cawed.

Rob did as he was told, but the slimy squirming moss made his skin crawl, and he had to fight the urge not to shiver and throw it across the room. He had to admit, his headache was starting to fade though, and it wasn't long before the Which-Witch was climbing the stool once more to examine his head.

"Wonderful! Good as new!" The witch clapped her hands together with a gleeful cackle and beckoned to Yetta once more.

"Yetta, dispose of that and get our guest ready for midmeal!"

"Yes, Which-Witch." Yetta bowed once more and grabbed the shinglewort, which let out a little shriek, then turned to Rob. "Follow me, please".

Rob went back for his socks and shoes, but Yetta stopped him. "You will not need those".

He followed the veiled woman to the back door, where she removed her boots.

"Bare footing it then?" He asked.

"Yes." She replied.

Rob felt the squish of mud between his toes as he left the hut. He looked down at his feet in disgust.

When he looked back up, he was surprised to see a couple dozen veiled people, many of them carrying baskets with strange foods and linens, bustling barefoot towards and then disappearing into a large vine-covered hut in the distance.

"A'Tyr and favorable fortunes", they each whispered as they came close, and Yetta responded to each with a quiet echo and a small bow.

Yetta stepped off to the side for a moment to put the shinglewort into a woven bin; and it occurred to him that if Yetta were to disappear from his line of vision, he would never be able to tell her from any of the other veiled people. Thankfully she returned to his side quickly.

The mud shallowed as they reached the new hut, and Rob realized that the vines over the opening were hard and taut. He was about to ask how they get in, but Yetta whispered something under her breath and stroked a tendril, and they moved to reveal an entryway.

They entered and Rob was greeted with the smell of something savory and fragrantly spiced. His stomach groaned. It was dim inside, but hundreds of tiny candle flames piled together in darkness flickered and illuminated rows of clothed tables, which surrounded a vined pulpit and a flame-licked cauldron. Each place was set with a golden chalice and golden cutlery. Behind the

cauldron was a small table, also set with gold, and a chair. Rob could just about see all the veiled people who had already been seated. They were among the last to file into the room, and it was very close to capacity.

Yetta stopped him before he proceeded fully inside and pointed to a towel and a set of boots lined neatly along the wall.

"How do I find my size?"

"Your size?"

"Ah... nevermind, I'll just try them on".

Rob removed the mud from his feet with a towel and examined the closest pair of boots. They looked small. So did the next pair. And the one after that.

"Yetta, um, I'm not trying to brag or anything, but I think my feet are too big for all the boots here."

"Just put them on, no boot is too large or too small".

"That's not..." Rob sighed and stared at the tiny boots. What could he do besides try slip a foot in?

"I'll be damned."

The boots fit him perfectly.

Yetta motioned for him to come along and he followed her to a table right in front of the pulpit.

"You are our guest of honor," she said, as she pulled out a chair.

Rob took the offered seat and his stomach let out a growl. He hoped that food would be coming soon, and that it wouldn't be shrieking or writhing.

Everyone in the room began to hum. The humming mass then raised their palms toward the cauldron and Rob puzzled over whether he should join in. Drums began to beat slowly and deeply and the pot on the pulpit began to glow. Rob wasn't entirely certain whether the group's noises were the reason for the pot's incandescence. His common sense told him that was not how things worked, but nothing he had encountered so far today seemed to align with his common sense.

The pot began to boil, and the room burst into cries and applause as the Which-Witch entered the room and approached the pulpit. She stood behind the table solemnly and raised her eyed palm to the crowd. She nearly took her seat but stopped when she scanned an empty chair next to Rob. Her face darkened and the room hushed.

"Where is Mercurius?" She growled.

The room erupted into murmurs, and Yetta rushed away from Rob's side.

The witch waited impatiently for a few moments and then heaved a sigh and shuffled over to an empty space on the pulpit. Yetta scurried up the pulpit stairs with a giant, knobby wooden staff. She bowed as she presented it to the Which-Witch and then scurried off-stage once it was in the witch's grasp.

The room was so silent that Rob could hear the tiny taps and shuffles of the witch's feet, and the scraping of the staff as she dragged it in a circle on the floor around her. She grunted as she lowered herself to the floor to sit crisscrossed. The circle began to glow as she hissed and murmured in a language Rob had never heard.

She picked a leaf off of her attire and began to rub it between the tips of her palms. The vines around her shoulders began to flail wildly, and her hair began to raise, but the display was interrupted by a black hooded figure frantically running and nearly tripping into the room.

"No! Please! I'm here!"

The glow around the witch ceased and her vines and hair relaxed, but she glowered toward the hooded figure in a way that made Rob wonder if she could disintegrate people.

The witch grunted as she used the staff to pull herself up. "You're late."

"Yes...yes...but I have foreseen a change in alignments!"
There was something manic brewing in the hooded man's voice as he spoke.

Yetta disappeared once more as Mercurius made his way to the pulpit and jumped into the invisible circle the witch had traced. He squatted and promptly crossed his legs beneath him, then he held out his hand, his bony fingers wiggling.

"Amethyst, please!"

Yetta hurried to the pulpit and placed a basket of crystals and a mortar and pestle in front of him. He searched through the basket and began throwing stones behind him.

"NO! No... absolutely not...YES!"

He grabbed the mortar and pestle and began rocking back and forth as he ground his perfect stone inside it. As he did this, the circle around him began to glow once more. Rob was almost positive he could see a glow coming from beneath the hood as well.

Mercurius removed a deck of cards from inside his cloak. He shuffled it and placed the deck on the floor in front of him, sprinkled the powdered amethyst on top and then pulled a card. He looked down at it, then dramatically showed it to the crowd. Rob wondered why he bothered to hold up the card, as it was too dark to see what was even on it.

"We have new residents." Mercurius looked toward Rob, and even though he couldn't see his face, Rob could feel the hooded man's eyes intensely gazing upon him.

Mercurius grabbed another card, blew a handful of powder onto it, then began to make circles with his body. He looked down at the card. "Big changes are coming soon."

The hooded man took a deep breath and pulled another card. "A woman with hair of gold will set the changes in motion".

He stopped circling and pulled another card. He looked down at the card and began to giggle with fervor. "And the biggest change of all? DEATH!"

Mercurius threw up the mortar, and the remaining powder inside flew into the air, revealing a glowing Grim Reaper as it fell.

The crowd gasped and began to murmur.

Mercurius looked back at the Which-Witch with excitement as he waited to see her reaction, but she pish-poshed him and stood up from her chair.

"Mercurius," she tisked, "you have talent and understanding of arcana beyond your years, and yet you still take your readings at face value."

The witch grabbed her staff and shuffled over to Mercurius. She offered her hand to him and pulled him up with a grunt, then waddled to the front of the pulpit to address her audience.

"Fear not, my children," she wheezed. She raised her hands in the air and continued. "Death is only a myth in our wonderful land. The Reaper card symbolizes a transition from the old. No actual death will come."

The witch continued on, but Rob found himself observing Yetta, who was leaning back in her chair with her arms folded and looked wholly unimpressed by the show.

Rob leaned over to her. "Not a fan?"

She gave her head a hard shake and began to whisper in his ear. "Mercurius is meant to be her most promising and established underling. The others choose someone new almost every year, but she hasn't transitioned to another underling since he joined many years ago. I was supposed to be next in line, but I doubt I'll ever receive my training at this rate... I really don't understand it... she often has to correct his readings..."

Rob looked at her inquisitively. "The others? What others? Who are they choosing and for what?"

Yetta leaned toward his ear to answer, but a giant swooshing flame from the pot signaled the drums and humming to begin again.

Rob's stomach made a terrible noise and he hoped this interruption meant food would be coming soon. Sure enough, the veiled commune filed out of their seats, and formed a line behind the pot.

Rob and Yetta took their places in line and he began to dream of how delicious whatever was in there would taste. As he came closer to the large iron pot, however, he noticed people seemed to be adding something to the pot before taking their portion. He squinted and tried to see if there were ingredients somewhere he should have grabbed, but the only thing he could make out was the empty baskets that had held the ingredients, and a table full of golden plates and crusty looking bread that each person took from as they left with their portion.

It was Yetta's turn at now. As she approached the pot, Rob felt someone brush against his shoulder. Mercurius.

"Don't do it," he cautioned with a whisper as he took his place in line behind Rob.

Rob turned to ask what he meant, but Mercurius merely pointed a finger toward Yetta, who was reaching for something at her waist. Rob watched in shock as she pulled out a knife, sliced open her hand to spill blood into the pot, and then took a helping.

Rob felt the color drain from his face and his stomach turned inside out. *Blood. Of course it's blood. It couldn't be a pinch of rosemary, or a weird glowing rock.*

His knees wobbled as he backed away. Things were already dark, but he fought as his vision got even darker. *Don't pass out again. Don't pass out again.*

Rob clamored towards the exit. He could just about make it out with the slivers of light shining through the vines. *The vines.* How would he get out of here? He didn't know what Yetta had whispered to them.

He tried to part them, but they were too heavy to try to untangle... or maybe he was too close to passing out to manage it. He held onto a vine to steady himself. Mercurius approached and whispered something as he poked a vine which relaxed just enough to let Rob out.

"Good luck, friend," he whispered.

Rob nodded at him and crept out of the vines into the daylight. Once he was had exited, Rob took a moment to try to compose himself, but instead he heard the familiar squelch of mud and gave a dry heave that felt like it pulled every muscle in his body and just made him dizzier. Being unable to purge was an unfortunate reminder of how empty his stomach was. He hoped he would be able to find something to eat that wasn't full of human blood, wiggling meat, or shrieking moss.

He looked around at the compound outside. It was empty and silent as stone, save for a few rustling leaves that danced in the dirt. Everyone who lived there must have been busy eating the blood stew inside the hut he had just escaped. There were more huts across

the area, hiding behind trees, with security vines of their own, and for a moment, he considered that if he could find a way to break into one, he might find something he actually wanted to eat.

Those vines were like steel bars, though.

It felt like a bad idea to try.

Rob looked into the distance at the shimmering city and grimaced. *Well, it's not like I have any other options.*

He looked towards the woods. *Nope. I'm done making bad decisions today.*

Or so he hoped.

He made his way toward the collapsed stone wall that marked the border between the ruins and the Which-Witch's wetlands, and then passed through a partially standing stone archway. It wasn't long before he came to the city center...*or what used to be anyway.*

What the hell happened here?

A large half moon-shaped crater stood in place of whatever was once there. Everything at the rounded side seemed to have been blown away, evidenced by scorched piles of stone that formed their own semi-circle several yards away. On the flat side, a couple of half-crumbled buildings formed an alley.

Rob's stomach growled and he pressed forward through the alley.

SMASH!

A champagne bottle slammed onto the wall over Rob's head and shattered, spraying champagne and glass all over.

"WHAT THE FUCK?!" Rob jumped back with a spin and found himself facing a giant woman.

“persedonia” (2024) C. Castelline

The First Communion

"You're supposed to say thank you when someone welcomes you!" The tall, slender, young woman looked down at him with irritation. Despite her displeasure, and her enormous size, her voice was airy and small.

"What? How was that a welcome? I'm wet now and you could have shredded my ass!" Although this woman was nearly twice Rob's size, adrenaline had him ready to try to take her down.

The woman's voice faltered. "You-you hit things... with champagne bottles when you are celebrating... don't you?" She began to tug nervously at the sheer part of her green, empire waisted dress.

Rob's furrowed brow faded into a confused squint. "Huh?"

The woman pushed her long, silky blonde hair behind her ear and smiled awkwardly. "You know!"

She mimed hitting something with a bottle. Rob shook his head and gave her a little shrug.

"Oh, dear... Maybe that's just when someone's leaving... " She bit the nail on her index finger and tried to think. "Or-or maybe it's just for saying good-bye to boats?" She grew more flustered with every word.

Rob cackled. "Wait, do you mean like christening a ship?"

The woman's pale cheeks flushed. "I suppose so... "

She gave a frustrated stomp and began to pace. She was graceful even in her stormy behavior, as though her feet barely touched the paving stones.

"OH!" She stopped pacing and looked at him with excitement. "Was this supposed to be the one where you smash guitars in a hotel room?"

"N--no?" Rob gawked at her for a moment.

She gawked back and frowned.

Rob figured he should elaborate for her. "...Guitars get smashed by rockstars during concerts.... then the rockstars drink and trash the hotel afterwards".

"Hmm, ok... Is a greeting the one where you drink, flip a car and climb a telephone pole?"

"That's a sports riot..."

"Is it the one where you light the bottle on fire on and throw it?"

"That's a political riot..."

Her eyes narrowed. "What about the one where you put the loud sky fire in the bottles and try to hit each other?"

"That's the Fourth of July...or possibly New Year's in Germany..."

The woman smashed her hand against her forehead. "Ohh! You humans have so many traditions with alcohol and destruction, it's hard to keep them all straight!"

"Wait a second... us humans?" Rob peered up at her. For some reason, he hadn't considered that he was encountering non-human people.

"Oh, sorry, do you prefer I call you something else?"

Rob raised an eyebrow without response, so she continued on, "*We* prefer being called The Gentry, but for some reason we keep getting called fairies, so maybe there has been a mutual misunderstanding?"

Rob burst into laughter. "FAIRIES? What, are you telling me I'm in Fairyland?"

"You're in Persedonia," she corrected him, "but I guess you could call this Fairyland. Many humans do."

"And you're a fairy?"

"I am part of The Gentry, yes".

"You're pretty tall for a fa--gentry... person... shouldn't you have wings, or something?"

The woman laughed. "Well, we come in all shapes and sizes, and we don't all have wings, but..."

She spun around to reveal the unfolding of a shimmering green pair of butterfly wings. They were nice looking but seemed far too small to carry a woman of such proportions.

Rob looked at her quizzically. "You can fly with those little things?"

She looked sad for a moment. "They are rather small, aren't they?"

Feeling bad, Rob tried to catch himself. "I mean, they are very nice!"

Her smile returned and she gave them a playful tug. "Aren't they? I think I grew them during a very long nap."

Rob internally questioned this logic, but didn't see the point in examining it further, so he just gave her an awkward grin.

"So, I'm in Persedonia... I'm not dead, then?" Rob squinted up at her.

The woman hesitated and seemed to choose her words carefully. "Well... death is... complicated here. You might have been dead for a minute... or ten... but you are very much alive now!"

Rob grew quiet as his hand reached for the wound on his head. There was no longer a wound to touch. There wasn't even a scab.

"Oh! I've realized that I have not yet introduced myself. My name is Osidora." She gave him a curtsy. "A'Tyr!"

"Rob." He gave her a weak smile as he continued to rub his head.

Osidora began walking and signaled to Rob to follow her. "Are you hungry?"

"That depends on if the food has blood or spit in it".

"Oh good, so you are already a vegetarian!"

"I'm *not* a vegetarian."

"Hmm, well, you may wish to change your eating habits soon."

Rob was going to ask why, but then he remembered his earlier meat encounter. Maybe it wiggled *after* it was cooked too.

Shit. What if the vegetables here scream and throb like the moss did?

His stomach hurt with hunger, but the longer he thought about what his next meals would be like, the less interested in food he felt.

"Tell me, Rob, what were things like for you before you came here?"

Rob sighed and instinctively patted for his cigarettes. He was, of course, left empty handed.

"Lonely. I lost someone I loved and every day since has just been me trying to fill my day so I could get to the next one."

Osidora nodded thoughtfully.

"And what did you do to fill your days?" She sounded like she was quizzing him rather than engaging in curious conversation.

They had begun to make their way through a vast botanical garden. Rob recognized sunflowers, and he thought he recognized bamboo as well, but everything else was foreign to him. Some plants were fuzzy, some neon colored, some towered far over Rob's head. In the center of the garden stood a giant glowing tree, with branches that hung towards the ground. As they neared the tree, Rob could see gemmy, transparent, grape-like fruits weighing the branches down.

"I spend my free time debunking conspiracy theories and paranormal experiences, but mostly I just work in a cemetery."

Osidora's eyes narrowed at him, and she took a moment to respond. "Well, if cemetery work is what you know, you will feel right at home, then."

Rob was about to question her reasoning, but as soon as he opened his mouth to do so, they turned a corner, and he was immediately greeted by a little green cottage surrounded by sunflowers and pink roses, nestled behind a several rows of headstones.

"Oh, okay. So, you have a family cemetery."

"Not exactly," Osidora responded, "but family can be found."

The way Osidora smiled at him, Rob couldn't help but feel like he was missing a joke. He smiled back and gave an awkward chuckle. "Yeah."

"Come along!" She waved him forward, and together, they walked up the cobblestone path and into the little cottage.

Once inside, Rob was immediately greeted with the heavenly aroma of baking bread and something savory and well spiced. His stomach grumbled, and for the first time in however long it had been since he started his journey, he was finally ready to acknowledge it.

"That's a cool trick!" Rob was momentarily distracted from his hunger by an iron pot stirring itself with a wooden spoon in the fireplace.

He walked over to it and swatted his hands above the spoon to check for wires, but there weren't any. He looked below the pot for a motor, or a magnet, but there was nothing except for the bottom of the pot and flaming logs. He looked inside. It was completely empty.

"There's nothing inside? How are you doing this?" He inquired.

Osidora looked thoughtful and appeared to ignore his question.

"Why not take a seat?" She said with a smile as she gestured towards two giant, fluffy, pastel green armchairs. She then scurried off towards the back of the cottage and shouted "I'll return shortly," behind her.

The chairs sat kitty-corner with a small wooden table topped with a vase of sunflowers between them. Each seat had its own intricately quilted pink, green, purple, and yellow pastel blanket hanging over the back, and matching pastel pillows. As Rob looked around, he realized nearly everything in the cottage was pastel, even the pink shag carpet, which ended just in front of the fireplace across the way.

It's kind of like the Easter Bunny's grandma threw up after-dinner mints in here. Rob chuckled to himself.

Rob approached one of the armchairs and realized he was going to have to climb into it. He looked down at his boots and

wondered if the armchair would change sizes like they did. Perhaps he would only need to touch it. He gave the chair a poke. *Nope*. He put his hand on the armrest. *Still giant. Maybe I just need to put my butt on it.* That too, yielded no results, so Rob did his best to clamber into the seat of the armchair. Once seated, he felt ridiculous, like a small child visiting grandma's house, but the coziness was beginning to make him nod off.

"Well, sugar, Lydia! I don't know what to do right now! He's not far enough along!" Rob's drowsiness was interrupted by Osidora venting to someone in the back room.

"No! I don't know what has happened."

Rob couldn't hear the other person. *She must be on the phone.*

"He is? Oh! That meddling tansy!"

Osidora stomped back into the room. Rob tried not to laugh at her. Her stomping was so light and airy that he half expected glitter to fly off of her every step.

"Where did you get those boots?" She pointed at Rob's feet.

"These? Uh-- I got them at the culty old lady's house"

Osidora exchanged a glance with the air and bent down to look Rob in the eyes.

She spoke slowly and precisely. "Did she do anything to you?"

"She put some kind of medicinal sludge on my head."

"She healed you." Osidora sighed and began gripping the sides of her face.

Her eye contact with Rob intensified. "Did she do anything else? Did she feed you anything?"

"Well, I almost ate some blood stew, but Mercurius stopped me just in time".

"Oh!" Osidora nearly sang her relief. "This is not good, but it is doable".

"Why isn't it good? I had a gaping wound on the back of my head and it's better now." Rob responded.

"Let's eat!" Osidora once again dodged acknowledging Rob as she clapped her hands together, but his hunger was far more motivating than his questions were, so he followed as she lead him towards the back, through a kitchen, and onto a porch with a banquet table as long as the porch was wide and curiously, set for 12, with several empty serving dishes and utensils laid out in the center.

"Everyone, this is Rob," she exclaimed to the empty room. "You can introduce yourselves accordingly. Rob, you may sit there."

She pointed to the chair at the far end of the table, and then made her way to the much larger one opposite it and took her seat.

"Petronella! So wonderful to see you have finally joined us!" Osidora exclaimed to the empty space to the left of her.

Ah shit, this one too? Rob was making an awful lot of bad decisions today, and somehow, they were all ending with him starving.

"Will you please pass me the butter?" She continued, to nobody in the seat to her right.

Rob watched furiously, head-in-hand on the table, as whatever parlor tricks Osidora was up to took place. A small knife clinked, hands free, on top of a small, empty dish, and made its way into her hands. Serving dishes passed themselves through the air, knives, forks, and spoons cut and lifted imaginary food on plates. Osidora nodded as she intently took in the conversations of literally no one around her. It was maddening watching her cut, fork, and chew the air, and what was worse was Rob could smell whatever real food was actually hiding in the room.

"ENOUGH!" Rob jumped out of his seat, grabbed his plate, and smashed it on the ground.

Utensils dropped from the air over every plate and Osidora stared at him in shock.

"Rob, you are being very rude. Is the food not up to your tastes?"

"What food, Osidora? The food on the table that doesn't exist? The food I can smell that you are hiding somewhere? This isn't funny!"

"You don't see any food?" Osidora studied him.

"Of course I don't see any food! THERE IS. NO. FOOD."

Osidora stared at Rob as though she were expecting him to say something else, and when he didn't, she leaned to the chair on her right, nodded, and then whispered something.

"Lydia wants to know if you can see her," she said, sheepishly.

"Of course I can't see Lydia! Lydia doesn't exist! Jesus Christ!" Rob threw his hands up and stormed out of the room.

Once in the kitchen, he rummaged around the cabinets, slamming them open and closed. *Empty. Empty. Empty. What that hell is going on?*

Osidora ran out to him. "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I didn't think you would be this far behind!"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, usually by now you should have... um... certain abilities?" Osidora nervously tapped her fingers together.

"Like what?" Rob shouted as he continued angrily scavenging through her kitchen.

Osidora mumbled. "...Well, you should be able to see Lydia... for starters... she's the strongest one."

"You're fucking with me."

Success! He found a packet of jam cookies in a drawer and began stuffing them into his mouth.

"It is understandable why you believe that, but I am not, I promise, I am not."

Rob glared at her and continued chewing. "Prove it."

"You said you can smell food. What can you smell?"

"I don't know fresh bread and some kind of mushrooms, maybe."

"And have you found bread, or mushrooms?"

Rob looked around at the empty drawers and cabinets, then down at his cookies. "...No... But I haven't checked the porch yet."

Osidora gestured to the doorway behind her. "Well then, search it."

"I will." Rob defiantly shoved another cookie in his mouth and then headed through."

"Please clear the way for Rob to start searching the room". Osidora clapped as she instructed the non-existent people occupying the banquet table.

Every chair, save for the ones Rob and Osidora sat in, scuffed backwards and then pushed themselves back in. Rob's eyes narrowed and he looked under the table. *Nothing*. No pullies, no mechanisms. He was even able to lift the chairs and move them around without any resistance. Aside from the table and chairs, there wasn't much room for anything else. There were a few potted plants on a stand in one corner. Those didn't seem suspect, but Rob stuck his finger in their dirt anyways. It was normal dirt, inside normal pots, holding normal plants.

On the other side stood a vase of wildflowers atop a pedestal. Rob began to make his way to the vase when it jumped off as though the pedestal had been bonked. The vase crashed, sending flowers and shards of ceramic bouncing, and water splashing to the floor. Osidora ran after the vase.

"Not to worry. Milton. It happens to everyone sometimes," she said as she began cleaning up the mess.

Rob inspected the pedestal. It was just a normal pedestal. "Ok, I give up. What's happening here?"

"Oh well, Milton is just a little clumsy sometimes," she responded with a smile.

"No, I mean what is going on in general?"

Osidora hesitated. "I do not think you will believe me."

"Let's hear it," Rob said with a tinge of annoyance in his voice.

Osidora sighed. "Our meal was meant to be a communion with the departed."

"You mean ghosts?"

"That is one way to refer to them, yes."

"So, you're a fairy, with a house full of ghosts?"

"...Sometimes," she answered, "but they mostly prefer to do their own thing".

"Their own thing?"

"Of course. They have a lot to do before they cross over."

"Sure they do." Rob chuckled in disbelief and then continued. "So why did you expect *me* to see these 'ghosts'?"

"Well, I expected it because that is what happens when people die."

Worth Dying For

"I thought you said I wasn't dead?" Rob interrogated her.

"No, but you *were* dead. Unfortunately, it seems you were not dead enough." Osidora said with some disappointment.

"So why am I not dead then? Because of the Which-Witch?"

"Oh no. You still wouldn't be dead now; your healing would have just been far slower."

Rob frowned at her. "That doesn't make any sense. You don't heal from death."

"Perhaps in your world, but here..." Osidora shrugged then finished wiping up the rest of the vase water.

Rob stared at her, expecting more to come, but nothing did. "Would you like to finish that thought?"

"I suppose you deserve a good explanation, but it is complicated. Perhaps we should have our discussion over a nice pot of tea?"

"Sure." Rob followed her back into the kitchen. He was looking forward to snagging some more cookies, and to his surprise, he found the package had somehow been refilled. He glanced

around the room for hints that someone else was with them and then smirked and said in jest, "thank you, ghost person".

Osidora laughed. "That wasn't done by a ghost, it just refills itself."

"Oh right, of course." Rob said with a hint of snark as he scrutinized the package.

Osidora lit the stovetop by murmuring something to it and then began to fill a kettle with a pitcher pump which sat beside a stone basin at the back of the kitchen. As she did this, she began to explain.

"Are you familiar with the concept of a soul?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah-- a person dies, their body rots and then their soul supposedly goes to some kind of afterlife," he responded.

"Mmm, no, that's wrong."

"Ok...go on, then" Rob leaned over the island and listened to her with interest.

"How would you describe what makes you who you are?" She asked. "You can take a moment to think."

Rob stood for a bit and thought about it. Osidora pattered around the kitchen looking for tea supplies as she awaited his response.

"My brain, I guess," he began. "--Or what's in it. Trauma, happiness, parts of my life that have stuck with me. The way I have reacted to or and deal with those things now... my sense of humor...", he chuckled. "Ah, what else... hopes, dreams, disappointments... mmm and I guess my base stats too".

"Your base stats?" Osidora placed two tea bags into a flowery teapot just as the kettle began to whistle.

"Yeah, you know, like what you start off with, talents and stuff."

Osidora nodded with a smile and poured the hot water into the pot. "I'm impressed. All of those things *are* a part of one's soul, but so is your brain, and your other flesh too, for that matter. A soul is the full make-up of a being, inside, outside, and attached"

"Attached? Like your clothes?"

"Ah, no, although clothes can be indicator of one's soul." She pointed to his dirty shirt and smiled pityingly.

Rob looked down at his clothes with shame. Osidora slid a giant teacup towards him and booped his nose.

"It is nothing to be ashamed of," she said gently and then took a big sip of warm tea before continuing. "What I mean by attached is more like your shadow, and your breath, and the metaphysical satchel that holds much of your soul."

Rob raised an eyebrow at her. "My soul is inside a bag?"

Osidora snorted her tea and quickly covered her mouth. "Sort of," she said through her hands with a cough, "hold on, maybe I can draw it for you." She scurried for a drawer, pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed her mouth and nose, and then rummaged for a quill and paper. When she found it, she returned and began to doodle, labeling each part as she spoke.

First, she drew a little figurine. It wasn't a terribly detailed drawing, but she did make sure to give it a shadow. "This is 'the body'. It is the most tangible part of your soul. It is also the easiest to damage and change."

Rob rubbed his chin. "Change?"

"Scars, changes of form, changes of colors... those sorts of things." She responded.

"I see."

She continued her doodle by drawing a little compartment in the head space. "All of those things you mentioned, well, save for the brain itself, go here, in "the mind". This takes quite a bit more to damage than your body, but it can still be harmed. For example, if the body is damaged, it can harm the mind, but of course the mind can be damaged through emotional experiences as well.

"Makes sense." Rob responded.

"Good. It's also important to know that likewise, a damaged mind can hurt the body."

"Got it."

Next, she drew what looked like a trash bag around the figurine. The resulting shape looked somewhat like a vintage depiction of a ghost, with a little tail where the legs should be and a wiggly point at the top where the bag would be tied shut. "The mind is actually the sum of several soul parts and they are held together with this. It's called 'the satchel'. It is mostly intangible, except to people who can see auras, and it holds all the intangible parts of the soul that exist in your mind together. People who can astral project are moving with their satchel and leaving their body behind, and those who have departed also move within their satchel. Do you know what makes the two different?"

Rob thought for a moment and shook his head.

"What do you think keeps the body alive?"

"Your heart?"

Osidora gestured for him to think a bit further.

"Your blood?"

"Close! But what is your blood carrying?"

"Oh! Oxygen?"

"Yes! Exactly. The difference between the two is 'the breath of life'. She gave the figure a face and drew wind coming from its mouth filling into the satchel. "The breath of life is the tether that keeps the satchel and its content connected to the body. When one loses the breath of life, the two go their separate ways."

Osidora gave her doodle a satisfied nod and then seemed to change her mind as she scrunched her face. "Let's give our friend some clothes," she said and then added a pair of pants. "As I said before clothes are like a reflection of the soul. Happy people may prefer bright colors, introverts may prefer cozy sweaters, sad people wear the same clothes many times over. It's different for everyone and may not actually mean anything, so I'll just write 'optional'"

Rob laughed as she placed her final label.

"Why do you laugh?" She asked.

"'Clothing optional' means a person can be naked if they want to in a certain setting."

"Oh I see," she responded, and then thought for a moment, "we have a place like that in the city. It is run by Electra."

"What is Electra?"

"She is another member of The Gentry. I can bring you there if you want to visit, but it is not really my teacup."

Rob grinned at her malaprop. "Nah, I'm good. That's not really my teacup either." He gave the drawing another look, and then pointed at it. "What about 'the shadow'? How is that part of your soul?"

"Oh, right! Have you ever heard of ones 'shadow self'?"

"Yeah, but I've only heard it from people who believe in silly crystal stuff--wait...is that stuff real?"

Osidora chuckled. "It is here. I do not think it can work in your world unless there is some stray magic getting around somehow, however. The 'shadow self' thing is real, in a way, in both our worlds, however. The shadow is merely a bag in which we hide the things we do not want to acknowledge with the mind."

Rob glanced down at his own shadow. It sure didn't look like a bag.

"Oh! Fun fact, because of its structure, the shadow can serve as a replacement for the satchel in a pinch and the Gentry often use it to make pseudo-creatures!" Osidora's eyes sparkled as she relayed the information.

"Pseudo-creatures?" Rob asked.

"That is a talk for a different day," she said. "Trivia aside, the shadow is mostly associated with impulsiveness and selfishness, and all the bad feelings that come from them. At death, the shadow stays behind with the body, or it is supposed to, at least. I actually

have a theory that when departed beings are malevolent, their shadows may still be attached, but I have never met any to investigate."

"Why would their shadows still be attached?"

"My guess is they are still harboring their unresolved bad feelings." she paused for more tea and then continued. "Technically what hides in the shadow are emotions and experiences that are meant to be a part of the mind but may need some resolving first. Perhaps if the mind can't fully come together, they get stuck?"

"How are your guests still here if they aren't slinging around a shadow sack?"

"They all just have some unfinished business, or they simply do not want to go. The mind *is* incredibly powerful, even after death."

They each poured another cup of tea, and then Rob prodded for her to continue. "While we are on the topic of death, I still don't understand what this has to do with me, or why me dying should have meant I could see ghosts."

Osidora nodded as she took a sip, and then proceeded. "Do you remember how I said that your soul can be damaged and changed via bodily or mental harm?"

"Yes."

"Well, naturally, your soul can heal too, whether it be via means of medicine, therapy, or nature just taking its course."

Rob nodded.

"The thing is, in your realm, mental and physical are the only axes of change. Here, there is a third, and with careful manipulation, the lack of the third axis in your realm and the souls of your realm can make for very interesting and even powerful changes in non-magical beings if timed correctly."

"Ok, now I don't follow."

"Our third axis is magic, Rob. If you break a mortal soul and heal it in a magic realm, it will introduce magic to the soul!" Osidora clapped her hands together and beamed at him.

Rob's face twisted in thought. "But why would I have to die?"

"The injury influences the way magic affects a creature, so if you were to die, and we timed it just right, the impact of the magic would mean that your soul would become communicative with souls who have passed on."

"So, there is a chance we time it wrong? Then what happens?"

"Well, worst case scenario? You die permanently. The slightly less bad scenario would be that we have to kill you several times." Osidora cringed and gave Rob an awkward smile.

"So, either I'm dead, or I'm alive and I can see and talk to the dead?"

"Pretty much. You can even touch them and eat their food too!" She gestured towards the back room.

Rob straightened himself for a moment and began to think. *I really have nothing to lose with this. If I die, I'm doing whatever Liv is doing, if I survive, maybe we can pick back up where we left.*

"Osidora? Can I summon dead people of my choice, or do they just kind of show up?"

"Hmm, well there are different circumstances, but many times you can have some control. Did you have something or someone in mind?"

"No, I was just wondering."

Rob's decision was sealed. A chance to resume things with Liv, in whatever way he could, was worth dying for, even if he had to do it over and over again.