

Bed of Roses, Forest of Thorns

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Bed of Roses, Forest of Thorns

by [longdeadking](#)

Summary

"The train rolled along with surprising speed over the countryside, which was bathed in sunset oranges and brilliant golds. The dark red interior walls of the car were freshly painted. The light fixtures buzzed with white fluorescent bulbs. There was silence in the compartment, aside from the ever-present whirring and grinding of the locomotive, wheels spinning away as it led Pearl away from her previous life forever."

or:

Pearl, on the run from her old life in the big city, moves to Hermitcraft to reconnect with an old friend. There, she encounters strange people, terrifying dreams, and a years-old mystery that she takes it upon herself to solve. Will she survive the strangeness of this tiny town? Only time will tell.

or:

my piece for the multidimensional big bang, beta'd by the amazing ace and illustrated by the beautiful b!!

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Day One

The train rolled along with surprising speed over the countryside, which was bathed in sunset oranges and brilliant golds. The dark red interior walls of the car were freshly painted. The light fixtures buzzed with white fluorescent bulbs. There was silence in the compartment, aside from the ever-present whirring and grinding of the locomotive, wheels spinning away as it led Pearl away from her previous life forever.

She was almost alone. All of the staff were up near the front of the vehicle, making sure they didn't crash horribly, which Pearl certainly appreciated, even if it did make the trip seem a whole lot lonelier than she'd been expecting. Although, she wasn't completely isolated. Sitting opposite her, about as far away as a person could manage, was another young woman with ginger hair pulled into a casual braid. She had on a green tunic and dark pants, and her almost golden green eyes stood out on her freckled face. She was interesting to look at in the way a painter might study their figure. She wasn't looking at Pearl. In fact, she seemed insistent on spending the entire five-hour journey that awaited them staring out of the window, watching green hills and yellow farms roll by. Pearl decided that it would not stand. She would get bored too fast to pass up on the opportunity to make a new friend - or, at least, bother someone in a way that was entertaining.

"Hey! I'm Pearl. Who are you?" she asked, smiling brightly at the stranger.

The woman looked startled and turned to face her. "I'm Gem. Are you heading to Hermitcraft?"

"Sure am!"

And that's where the conversation ended, for a minute. Until,

"So, where are you from? I'm coming from The Empires, myself," Gem commented, gesturing vaguely behind them to show that she meant, "back where we came from."

"I'm from Evo," Pearl replied. "What made you want to move away from The Empires? A few of my friends live there, and they only have good things to say."

"It wasn't working for me. Also, I sort of lost this super important artifact from the local museum, so I'm looking for a fresh start. You know, without a ban on entering any civic facilities without supervision." Gem rambled on a bit more about her reasons for leaving, then turned to Pearl. "How about you? I mean, I've heard Evo got sort of torn up, but it sounded livable on the news."

"It really isn't, not anymore." Pearl winced, remembering her own run-ins with the Watchers, a local gang that got ridiculously out of hand. She continued, "Also, a friend that moved away right before Evo became a mess sent me a letter. He moved to Hermitcraft a couple years ago, and he's been pretty happy. Apparently, it's full of excitement."

Gem hummed, politely disbelieving. "I hope it's not too full of excitement, I'm trying to move away from any craziness," she lamented.

"I don't know," Pearl argued, "I don't think I could live in a small town like Hermitcraft without anything interesting happening. I'd go crazy!"

"As long as you don't drag me into it," Gem laughed.

They both turned back to their windows then, and enjoyed the scenery for another several minutes. Until, of course, Pearl got horribly bored again, and asked another question.

“What do you plan to do once you get there? Do you have a house set up?”

“I do,” Gem said. “I’ve only seen it online so far, but it looks great, and the realtor seems reputable enough. It’s completely in the woods, so I hope I see lots of weird animals and things. Birdwatching is one of my hobbies, actually. I can’t do it much in the city, though.”

Pearl nodded along. “That must be nice. I’m staying in Boatem Apartments for now, but it’s a nice place, so I might just stick around. That’s where my friend lives, anyway, and I want to see him as much as I can. I should be able to do that more if I literally live two doors down.”

“For sure,” Gem replied. “Do you have a job set up too, or are you going to wait?”

“I’m going to work for the Padllama Co. branch there. It won’t be glamorous, but it should pay the bills,” Pearl replied, with some distaste. She knew that Padllama wasn’t exactly the most high-caliber work, and she’d probably be spending her days working grueling shifts, putting heavy boxes on high shelves for hours, but, like she said, it paid. Not well, but it paid.

“I’m going to have to use up some savings while I get on my feet,” Gem admitted. “I seriously didn’t think that far ahead. You seem pretty prepared.”

“Well, I’ve been meaning to move for nearly a year at this point, it was just a matter of where,” Pearl said.

“Right, because Evo’s been bad.”

“Yep.”

And then the conversation was over, back to the relative silence of a train inhabited by two strangers. While she had been talking, Pearl hadn’t noticed the terrain shift, going from green hills to rocky mountains and sheer granite cliffsides. It was like they were riding through a stab wound in the Earth’s crust. It made Pearl feel breathless. Heights always fascinated her, and mountains were no exception. She stared at them for a long while.

Nearly half an hour passed before Pearl started talking again. Only once they had officially left the mountain range did she come out of her mind, realizing just how dull the past few minutes had been. She rummaged in her carry-on bag, pulling out a deck of playing cards. She grinned and tried getting Gem’s attention.

“Hey,” she started, making her fellow passenger jump. “Do you know any card games?”

“I can play solitaire, and I know a bit of Kings in a Corner,” Gem offered.

“That works!” Pearl said. She began setting up a game on the card table in the car, thankful for its carefully engineered surface that made the cards a little less likely to go flying everywhere. Once two hands had been dealt and the board was prepared, she and Gem settled in for a long couple of hours spent beating each other at cards. What a riveting experience.

H

Far ahead, at the end of the line, the town of Hermitcraft stood, quiet and still, a cat about to pounce on its prey. Forest foliage loomed over strange houses and reached at the ankles of humanoid figures as they dashed through the misty, otherworldly darkness. A fog seeped into the air despite the heat of the summer evening, making the horizon seem impossibly far away. A train track wound through the plains, making its way to the rickety station in the center of town. The fog

seemed thicker on the tracks, as if it planned on swallowing the vehicle whole. A single light burned in the town, just over the door to the town hall. In a flash, it was snuffed out, and the town was dark once again.

The train rattled on.

¶

Word traveled fast in a small, sleepy town like Hermitcraft, and the appearance of an arrival date on the train station's only monitor was no exception. Grian, the conductor with very little to do during any hour, much less the boring midnight shifts, saw the screen flicker with the text; in minutes, all of Boatem Apartments knew. The landlord, Mumbo Jumbo, then told his old coworker, Iskall, who told his roommate Etho, who murmured the news to Zombie Cleo, and so on and so forth, until every member of the patented Hermitcraft Gossip Network knew what was happening. There were newcomers. Fresh faces.

(Fresh meat, some of them thought.)

It was only a question of how long they would last.

The train would arrive at 11pm, the monitor said. The lights stayed off, and blackout curtains hung heavy in the windows of those poor souls that made their homes in the forest. But no one slept that night. Few did, most of the time, but there was a quiet anticipation in the air now, like if the whole town wasn't awake to welcome the strangers, they would never arrive. That may well have been the case. Clocks ticked away on the walls of the watchmaker's shop (Bdubs, that was what he told people his name was. They all politely ignored the fact that it was a lie), bringing the hour closer and closer. The world seemed to spin slower as the train approached. An archway made from sprawling tree canopies was jostled by the rumbling of the vehicle, and something shifted.

There was electricity in the air now, along with the knowledge that the passengers of the train, whoever they were, had officially become residents of Hermitcraft.

It's the sort of bond you can't break easily.

Night One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The train slowed to a stop inside of a red-brick building that Pearl recognized as the train station, and she felt a wave of exhaustion crash over her. Glancing at Gem, she knew she'd felt it too, since the woman was blinking decidedly much slower than she had been before. The doors creaked open without much fanfare or even a word from the engineer, and Pearl and Gem stepped into Hermitcraft.

Whatever Pearl had been expecting, the face of Grian, clad in a bright red conductor's hat and a similarly garish red sweater, was not it. He was standing at attention by the doors, Pearl and Gem's luggage strewn around his feet. The moment Pearl recognized it was him, he lept toward her and pulled her into a tight hug.

"Pearl! You didn't tell me you were coming!" he greeted, still not letting Pearl free from his arm prison.

"I tried calling you," Pearl wheezed.

At that, Grian let her go and backed up a couple of steps, staring at her with an amused smile. "Phones don't actually work out here, so I got rid of mine pretty early on. You should've sent a letter! We have the postal service for a reason."

Pearl almost pointed out the dozens of texts she'd been getting from his number since he left (a small amount considering he'd been gone for a few years, but not none), but she thought better of it, and just shrugged. "You should have told me to send you one. I'm here now, aren't I?"

Grian grinned again. "You certainly are. And with a friend, I see! Hello, stranger, can I have your name?" he asked, turning to Gem with a hand outstretched, although it was at a slightly odd angle for a handshake.

Gem eyed him warily, not taking his hand. "Call me Gem," she said finally. Grian nodded once, firm, and put his hand down.

"Welcome to Hermitcraft, you two! Your luggage is right here. Do you mind if I tell you a bit about this place?" he asked, already walking to a nearby map of the town that was framed on the

station's walls. Pearl hurried after him, Gem not far behind.

“Hermitcraft was founded in 18XX as a trading post, although it didn't become truly residential until only a decade ago, with our first permanent resident, Xisuma Void. Between those times, it had fallen into disrepair, as train-carried goods became less and less common, in favor of ships and planes, which could carry more goods more quickly. In fact, only two or three buildings remain from the town's original founding- those being town hall, this station, and Moss Boss, the watch shop.” As Grian talked, he pointed to the buildings on the map. “The rest of these buildings were created in the first two to three years of Hermitcraft becoming a residential town, meaning that all of them are in extremely good condition. Despite this, it has remained a somewhat unpopular place to live, and no families have ever moved in. Rumors of hauntings, cryptids, and other urban legends spring up here almost constantly, but really,” he glanced behind at his two listeners, “I find them rather unbelievable. After all, we're just a small town in the woods. No paranormal creatures would give us a second glance, right?”

Pearl was enraptured by his tale. The way Grian carried himself was so different to how he had in Evo, where he was always hunched over, hiding in his signature green hoodie with mischief in his eyes. Now, his back was straight and his eyes were glittering, and he spoke about Hermitcraft with a familiarity and appreciation that he never had for his hometown. He felt like a different person, but every so often, Pearl would catch a flash of his old self; the teen who put bike locks around convenience store doors appeared as he mentioned the watch shop, the environmentalist that made a face whenever someone brought up anything coal-powered, the little bits of his personality that remained unchanged by two years in this strange, tiny village.

Gem seemed wary, even now. Her posture was curled and guarded, and she regarded every shadow with the mistrust of someone dealing with a rabid animal. Pearl chalked it up to being alone with two strangers in an unfamiliar place, and sympathized a bit. Pearl was extremely lucky to have a friend in Hermitcraft.

Grian kept up on his tour, spouting facts about buildings that they saw through the windows and about the exact age of specific bricks in the station, until the trio was already at the front entrance. Once they were there, Grian blushed and said, “Sorry for rambling. Be safe getting to where you need to go, stay vigilant, all that nonsense. Pearl, you're staying in Boatem, right?” Pearl nodded. “Great. I don't get off until ridiculously late, but I'll stop by if you're not asleep. Gem, you have a nice night as well. Make sure you use a flashlight, because the woods can be tricky to navigate at night, even if you stick to the main road. Goodnight, then!”

He shoed them out of the building before Pearl could register that Gem had never told him where she would be staying. Pearl turned to her and mumbled, “Have a nice night, Gem.”

Gem hummed, eyes already locked on the treeline. Pearl was, for a second, convinced that it was that same fear she had shown in the train station, but that wasn't right. Gem's posture now looked

tense, but in the way a runner does before a race starts, or the way a cat tenses to pounce. She looked more gaunt in the moonlight, and taller, somehow. Pearl turned her gaze towards the, thankfully, streetlamp-lit road. Gem's form turned back to normal in her peripheral vision. Pearl started walking down the street, attempting to remember Grian's map in order to figure out where to go. Gem waved goodbye only once she had turned her back.

H

Boatem Apartments were just about what Pearl had been expecting, hearing that they were the only apartments available in the entire town. It was a red brick building two stories tall, with buzzing yellow lights over each door, illuminating their address numbers. Lights were on in the windows of apartment 1, 2, and 4, while 3 and 5 were dark. Pearl pulled out her phone to check which apartment the landlord lived in, only to remember Grian's advice from earlier. Phones didn't work in Hermitcraft, and that was made clear when Pearl couldn't even get past her lockscreen. She grit her teeth, hoping her memory was right, and knocked on Apartment 2.

Sure enough, it opened with a creak, revealing a stick-thin and sickly pale man with dark hair and a bushy moustache. He seemed extremely nervous. Pearl gave a small smile and explained, "I'm the new tenant, I'm supposed to move into apartment 5? I need the keys."

The man, Mumbo Jumbo if Pearl was remembering right, stammered out, "Proof of- of identity?"

Pearl pulled out her drivers license and the printed copy of the lease agreement (thank God she'd made one) and handed them to Mumbo. He looked them over, nodded, and said, "Keys will be under the address sign, it lifts up. If they aren't there let me know. Goodnight."

He then shut his door in Pearl's face, leaving her standing in front of the now silent apartment block, holding her license and a sheet of paper and feeling ultimately very confused. Still, she needed to sleep some time, so she shrugged and made her way to apartment 5. Sure enough, the little plaque reading "112" swung upwards on hidden hinges, revealing an empty space with a small brass key sitting inside. Pearl took it, tried the lock, and breathed a sigh of relief to see that it actually opened her door. Perhaps she should have made a bigger deal about entering her new home for the first time, but it was late, and the fatigue she'd felt on the train hadn't simply vanished. She stepped inside, feeling the prickling of eyes on her back as she did.

Before even turning the lights on, she made a beeline for the bedroom, at which point she dumped her suitcases on the ground, made the bed quickly and sloppily, and collapsed into sleep. She could explore in the morning, when she wasn't bone-tired. For now, all she needed was rest.

It's dark. Pearl is in the woods, off the main road that leads to the cluster of houses there, off of even any man- or animal-made trails. She's stumbling blindly through the bushes, feeling thorn bushes and insects claw at her legs, and her breath is heavy and fast in her throat, not ever quite seeming to fill her lungs. Her eyes, normally good in the dark, are betraying her, telling her that there's movement where there isn't and only revealing branches and trees in her path when she's inches from them. Pearl's heart is pounding. She can't tell if her physical feelings are from exertion or panic, but she has reason to believe it's both. She is only certain of one thing: she is being chased.

The thing is making no noise, it doesn't rustle the trees as it moves, it isn't glowing or particularly dark or reflective or anything that might make Pearl reasonably aware of its presence, but regardless, she can feel it. It's gaining ground on her, getting faster and faster as she slows down. Pearl can't escape. She has to try anyway, because dying on her feet will always be better than dying a coward.

The next step she takes lands her in a clearing, well-lit by the fluorescent glow of lights from inside houses. She's made it to the street, and people are here, which means she should be safe. There's light, and people, and she isn't in the woods anymore, so she must be safe.

She isn't.

The thing is still behind her, so close it would be breathing down her neck if it had lungs with which to breathe, and Pearl knows that even if she is in a neighborhood, she is still in the forest, and this is the thing's domain. She has to get out, but every direction is more forest. But she can't stop running.

Pearl sees Grian next to her. His eyes are wide, and his sweater is ripped into ratty red shreds. He looks washed-out, skin almost gray in the light. He grabs her by the shoulders. His fingers dig into her skin like talons.

Use a flashlight, he says, in an echo of his words from the station. Pearl digs into her pocket, and she finds it. A tiny kids flashlight that she got years ago at some booth or something, that she's never thought about until this moment. She points it at the woods, and she thinks that if she had only been a second quicker, it would have illuminated the beast chasing her.

As it was, it was already on top of her when she finally saw its face.

Pearl gasped awake.

Chapter End Notes

should I tag gratuitous use of tense changes in an intentional way

Day Two

Chapter Notes

that dream sure was weird huh? anyway uts time for a silly little shopping montage :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Pearl woke up from her nightmare, it was early morning. Sunlight filtered into her room through her small window, although the north-facing angle meant that she was getting more of a residual glow than any direct sunrise. For once, Pearl didn't lament the lack of light. Her head was still foggy from her nightmare, after all, and her lack of restful sleep had given her a pounding headache. She debated rolling back over and going back to sleep, but when she closed her eyes, the feeling of that monster looming over her flashed in her mind again, and she snapped awake. Eventually, she accepted that she would have to get up and pulled herself out of bed.

Looking at her apartment now in daylight, she could tell why it was so cheap. It seemed very bare-bones, with matte white primer on the walls with no paint or wallpaper and fake wooden panels on the floors. However, it did seem to be in good condition, which Pearl was happy about, if unsurprised. Grian had said that most of the buildings hadn't been here for more than eight or so years, after all. There wouldn't be enough time to have any damage.

Pearl dug through her suitcase full of clothes to find a relatively presentable outfit and shambled slowly to her bathroom to start her morning routine. Only, it was moments after she changed that a knock came at her door, before she could even pick up a hairbrush.

She walked to her front door and opened it slowly. Standing there, looking utterly exhausted but surprisingly chipper, was Grian. He was wearing the same sweater from the night before, or maybe a different, identical sweater, but his conductor's hat had been removed. Thank God. Pearl couldn't really take him seriously with it on. Grian smiled wide at her, despite her disheveled appearance, and said, "Morning! I'm taking you to see the mayor today. He'll introduce you to the town and all that! Be ready in ten minutes!"

Then he closed the door in Pearl's face before, presumably, running back to his own apartment to clean up as well. Pearl sighed deeply. She hoped this wasn't going to be a common occurrence.

Sure enough though, in ten minutes, Pearl was standing outside of Boatem Apartments with her laptop bag and barely-controlled hairstyle, waiting for Grian. He stumbled out of apartment Grians number and smiled when he saw Pearl standing there.

He shouted, “Great! Glad you could finish up in time. Ready to meet our illustrious mayor?”

“Is it Xisuma, the person you said before?” Pearl asked.

Grian just shook his head with a schadenfreude grin. He started walking down the street, expecting Pearl to follow. Perhaps against her better judgement, she did.

The town hall was as impressive as Pearl had expected it to be, for better or worse. It was an old building, made of faded bricks and marble columns, like a person had put stick-on brick wallpaper over a Greek temple. It looked about that dilapidated, too. Whole bricks were missing from the facade, ivy and weeds ran rampant in the flower beds, and in the quick glance Pearl got before Grian shoved her along, she thought she spotted a window that was boarded up, shattered glass still hanging on around the edges.

When Grian pulled Pearl inside, she was met with a huge, immaculate room with blue-tiled floors that were shiny enough to Gemstones, and a ridiculously tall wooden desk looming in the back of the foyer. At the desk was a man wearing a maroon top hat and old-timey suit, complete with a green corset over a flowy white dress shirt. Pearl had to do a double-take. The man looked like he'd be more at home in a renaissance faire than a civic building, not to mention the jagged, branching scar over the bottom-right of his face. Despite his strange attire, he smiled brightly when Grian came inside, and made his way down the room towards the duo.

He was sitting in a wheelchair, another strange juxtaposition with his old-timey clothes. Grian called out, “Hey Scar! I've got a new resident for you!” He gestured to Pearl, who gave a small wave.

Scar, who apparently either had some very mean friends or a very good sense of humor, considering the nickname, wheeled over to Pearl and stuck his hand out for a handshake. “My name's Scar Goodtimes, you can call me Mayor Scar! Yours?”

So that was his legal name. Pearl wondered if he'd had the scar on his face forever. Pearl felt a weird feeling in the back of her mind, like someone else's anxiety being pushed into her brain. She remembered how wary Gem had been about handshakes and decided to take her lead. “Call me Pearl,” she said slowly, not taking mayor Scar's hand, “Pearl Moon.”

Scar nodded, although his eyebrows knit together in an expression Pearl couldn't read. Scar continued, "I'm the mayor of this town, for now at least. My assistant, Cub, should be here soon. He'll get you a map and all that. I assume Grian's filled you in on the history of this place?" He asked the last bit with a forced smile, like he was angry at Grian for being a tour-guide-meets-conductor.

Before Pearl could answer, Grian cut in, "Not everything. Mostly architectural history, y'know?"

Scar narrowed his eyes like he was trying to see without glasses. He kept the expression for just long enough to make Pearl squirm, then his expression snapped back to the jovial smile he'd had before. "Well then, enjoy your stay on Hermitcraft!" he said, turning on a dime and wheeling back around to his desk. Pearl stood there, staring at the place where Scar had been with confusion.

"Sorry," Grian said. "Scar can be a little eccentric at times. I got your map from Cub already, so no need to meet with him. I assume you have things to do today. I wouldn't want to keep you waiting."

Pearl nodded slowly, mind still trying to catch up to the whirlwind interaction that had just occurred. One thing did stick out to her, though. "You said you didn't tell me all of the history of Hermitcraft. What did you leave out?"

Grian paled, then tried to recover. He wasn't very good at it. Still, he explained, "Scar believes in a lot of the myths about this place, and he thinks that the more people that know about them, the more that they can hurt the people in the town. I think it's ridiculous, but he's insistent that newcomers either investigate on their own, or live in ignorance, so we're not allowed to mention it. Sorry."

Pearl nodded. "So, you investigated when you got here?" she asked, already sure of the answer.

Sure enough, Grian nodded. "I regret it."

And the conversation ended there. Grian shooed Pearl out of the town hall, with a paper map securely in her hands. Padllama Co. was one of the buildings that was actually labeled, which meant that Pearl didn't have to worry about getting lost on her first day. For now though, she went back to her apartment and began the grueling process of unpacking.

H

Grian sighed, bracing himself for the lecture of a lifetime. Scar wheeled back over to him, leveling the sweater-clad man with a vicious glare.

“You didn’t tell her, and yet she already knew what to do?” Scar asked, voice deathly quiet and sharp.

“I think she got it from the other resident. I didn’t recognize her, she said her name was Gem,” Grian explained.

Scar raised one eyebrow. “And you didn’t have anything at all to do with it?” he asked, voice clearly unbelieving.

“I didn’t tell her to do anything,” Grian said after a pause. He had to think over his words carefully while around Scar.

Grian held his breath while Scar pondered that statement. After several tense, silent seconds, Scar nodded once. “Fine. And for the record, you do still owe me. You know what happens if you mess this up.”

“She’s not doomed yet,” Grian said. “I still think we can keep her out of it.”

Scar shrugged and turned away, indicating that the conversation was over. Grian let out a deep sigh. Talking with Scar was normally a fun occasion, but when there was business on the line, Grian was reminded of exactly what the eccentric mayor was capable of.

H

Pearl’s unpacking process was interrupted by the arrival of what she had to assume was the welcome party. It included Impulse, the only resident of Boatem she hadn’t met yet, along with two strangers, Joe Hills and Cleo. Joe had introduced the group by knocking on her door, letting himself in (she was sure she’d locked it), and saying, “Howdy, I’m Joe Hills, from Nashville, Tennessee. My companions here are Cleo and Impulse. We wanted to stop by and check that you were settling in well!”

Pearl was not ashamed to admit that it took her a few seconds to register Joe's words. When she did, she responded, "I am, thanks. Grian took me to see the mayor a bit earlier, and right now I'm trying to unpack and decorate." She gestured to the pitifully small amount of stuff that was currently scattered around her feet. "I didn't think to come with a lot of decor."

Joe nodded thoughtfully. "Well, I think Mumbo is fine with you painting the walls, if you want. The Starter Egg should have all the paint you could want, along with plenty of knick knacks and houseplants to fill the space!" Then, noticing Pearl's puzzled look, he explained, "The Starter Egg is my home decor shop. It's in the shopping district, you can't miss it."

"It looks like an egg," Cleo added, the first time she'd spoken since the group had arrived. This spurred Pearl to look at her a bit more closely, at which point she noticed the bandages barely hidden by her fashionably distressed t-shirt, as well as the piece of gauze taped to her jaw. Apparently, Cleo caught her investigating the bandages, because she then said, "It's rude to stare."

Pearl asked, "Are you alright?"

"It's more rude to ask questions," Cleo replied simply. Her tone was anything but threatening - in fact, it almost sounded like she was about to laugh - but Pearl was intimidated nonetheless. She turned back to Joe.

"Thanks for the advice, Joe. I'll stop by sometime today, after I get all of this cleaned up."

Joe nodded enthusiastically, then turned and started walking away, Cleo following, and Impulse turning to head back into his own apartment. As he left, he shouted, "Good luck, Pearl!"

He was gone before Pearl could reply.

H

When they got back to the house, Joe glared at Cleo with all his might. "You shouldn't be so rude. She's new."

Cleo hummed, so low it was nearly a growl. "I don't trust her."

“You don’t trust anybody. You know, a great poet once said-”

“Hang the poet,” Cloe interrupted. “There’s something off about her. I know it.”

Joe sighed. “You’re never going to give it up, are you?”

“Hey, being suspicious kept me alive this long,” Cleo defended.

Joe raised one eyebrow. Cleo smacked him on the side of the head. “Go to your shop. You can wait for this oh-so-trustworthy newcomer there. I’m going to redo my bandages.”

Joe grinned. He turned and started walking towards the shopping district.

H

Pearl did end up going to The Starter Egg, like she’d promised. After setting up the handful of mementos she’d brought over from Evo, she realized just how little she had. Joe had said that Mumbo wouldn’t care if she painted the walls, and Pearl was going to take full advantage of that. With a design in mind, she marched over to what was labeled on the map as “Aquetown,” presumably the shopping district.

While she waked, Pearl thought about just how small the town really was. She could walk from one end to the other in only a couple of hours, and there didn’t seem to be a school, a huge box store (even the Padllama was tiny in comparison to some of the ones she’d seen before), or any sign that there were more than a handful of people living here. In fact, walking into the shopping district, she could not see a store that had more than two employees.

What she could see was a tall building painted eggshell white, with a sign saying “The Starter Egg Home Decor and Renovation” above the door. The roof was rounded, and there was a distinct lack of windows that did, indeed, give it an egg-like appearance. Pearl pushed open the door and was greeted with Joe, standing behind the register.

“Welcome, Pearl!” Joe said, then he went back to whatever he’d just been doing, allowing Pearl to wander through the small store. Sure enough, while half of one wall was covered floor-to-ceiling in paint cans, the rest was full of ceramic statues, scented candles, paintings, and anything else that could be classified as a decoration. Pearl found the paint colors she wanted (A sunny yellow-orange and a dark turquoise), then started looking at the animal figurines. Among them, she found two or three cats, several dogs, and, much to her delight, a series of upside-down llamas and horses. She checked the price for them, expecting to only be able to afford one or two, and was shocked to only see them listed as two-fifty each. She could afford all of them! She set several dogs back down, though, because in the corner of the shop dedicated to plants, she saw a beautiful flowering vine that had yellow buds already nearly bursting on it. She checked the price, and sure enough, it fell right within her budget. Satisfied, Pearl triumphantly took her haul to Joe.

The man smiled at her, eyes the ceramics. “You know,” he said, “Cleo will be real upset you didn’t buy any busts. She makes most of those herself.”

“I don’t like having statues in my house,” Pearl admitted. “I feel like they’re always watching me.”

“And these little guys don’t?” Joe asked.

Pearl shrugged. Her paranoia was hard enough to explain to herself, she was sure Joe didn’t want the entire story.

Joe continued, “Well, I gave you care instructions for that glowberry vine you got, so make sure you don’t kill it. Good luck with your decorating!”

Pearl nodded at Joe as she walked out, arms full of paint and plants. She made the short trip to her house, dumped the stuff onto the couch, and promptly decided that redecoration could wait, because she had exploring to do.

H

Pearl didn’t have much money to spend at the shops she went in, but that didn’t dissuade her from checking out every single one. There weren’t a crazy amount of them, only just over a dozen, but each one was so unique and interesting that Pearl was captivated. She assumed that they’d all been built with the specific shop in mind, because all of their aesthetics were completely different. One was a towering Victorian-style building built from dark wood, but all of the walls and a lot of the ceiling was made out of glass, making it look like an old mansion had been converted into a greenhouse. Inside was a convenience store with lots of grocery goods, hobby and art supplies, and anything else Pearl might want. The cashier introduced herself as Stress, and when Pearl came over

with a bag of candy she'd never seen before, she noticed the smell of earth and mushrooms around the woman. Pearl could have sworn she saw a flash of lilac webbing in Stress' dark hair.

Another store was a pale violet concrete box with a line of glass cutting it in half horizontally, which sold storage equipment, of all things. Bins, boxes, shelves, cupboards, all kinds of things, all contained in the bizarre-looking shop. It was unstaffed, with strange self-checkouts that only opened once your cart was scanned and proven to be empty. Pearl was sure that it would be relatively easy to trick, but it looked so imposing that she wasn't willing to try. She supposed that was the point. The sign above it read "The Chest Monster."

A couple of areas seemed to have loose themes, with a couple of bakeries and a tea shop in one corner of the district, and a few very high-tech looking shops. Pearl didn't bother going into those. She was sure that she wouldn't be able to afford anything they were selling.

All of the shops were quaint and crowded with items on every shelf, like they were scale models of normal stores that had regular-sized items in them. They were charming, in a way, but Pearl was feeling a bit claustrophobic as she left the shopping district. The only place she had yet to visit was the Padllama Co., mostly because it was closed. Pearl really hoped she wasn't going to be the only employee like the case seemed to be for the rest of the shops, but considering that it wasn't open on the day she was out, she had a feeling that it wasn't exactly well-staffed.

Pearl was starting to get the feeling that this place wasn't as idyllic as it seemed. For starters, she'd so far only seen about a dozen people total. She couldn't believe that a town was that small, and yet, it seemed to be running fine. All of the houses were built in older styles, like it was a historical village, but she knew that they were brand new, and they looked the part. There was no damage on any of them, nothing that gave them an old, haunted look, and despite that as she walked, she couldn't shake the feeling that the streets were full of ghosts. As she passed a pale yellow stone house that looked like a small chunk of a castle, she thought she saw a flicker of humanoid movement in one of the windows. It shambled across, trailing something that she couldn't see.

Other houses were strange, too. At least two looked like they'd been built straight out of old trees, with branches and leaves still hanging onto the log walls. On top of a hill, a gray and orange modern-looking house loomed, water features cascading down every wall. She glanced at the door, and could see at least five deadbolt locks peeking through the crack. Pearl didn't want to know what scared the person living there so much that they had to have that many locks. The house's windows were dark.

The treeline was thick and still, leaves barely rustling in the lack of a breeze. No animals rustled the bushes. Pearl remembered her nightmare the night before. She'd been chased by something in those woods, something that had caught her. It was irrational, wasn't it? A stress dream caused by moving and staying up later than she normally would. Call it an omen would be stupid. And yet...

As Pearl looked into those woods, she was sure that she saw eyes staring back at her.

H

Pear had one final stop that she made before she went home, and she lamented not making it earlier, now that her mood had been taken down a bit by the weird vibes of the shopping district. Grian had told her that phone didn't work, and only now, Pearl remembered one very important thing:

That meant she needed a watch.

The watch shop, named Moss Boss for reasons that Pearl couldn't begin to fathom, was separated from the rest of the shopping district by several streets of houses. She assumed that this was because it was historic, and so belonged with the train station and the town hall. Sure enough, the shop sat small and cozy compared to the grand structures framing it. Upon really looking at it, Pearl got the impression of two burly bodyguards protecting a frail, but vitally important royal. The shop had that sort of self-important air. She pushed open the old oak door, expecting it to squeal in protest. To her surprise, it opened smoothly.

Inside, the shop looked like it was straight off of the set of a fantasy movie. Watches and gears ticked away, filling the one-room shop with a pleasant metronome of white noise. Gold chains and medallions caught the flickering light of an oil lantern hanging from the ceiling, while digital watches and wall clocks gave off their own white glow, although they were quarantined to one corner of the store. In the few stretches of wall not obscured by clocks or hidden in the dim light, exposed red brick could be seen. Pearl was amazed by the place. It felt like she was about to discover an enchanted clock that allowed her to teleport, or stop time, or something. Perhaps she was, if Grain's talk of urban legends was to be believed. Then again, Grian usually wasn't big on honesty.

As Pearl pondered this, a small commotion drew her attention to the desk which had previously been well-disguised as simply another display table. Now, a short man in a soft-looking green cloak stood at attention. He shouted, "Welcome to the moss boss watch shop! I am Bdubs, the time king! What are you in the market for? We have timekeepers of all types here! I'm sure you'll leave satisfied!"

Pearl was stunned by the man's voice. She'd expected the owner of the store to be just as mystical as they tore itself apart, but it seemed that Bdubs was uninterested in maintaining the ambiance. After a second, she replied, "I need a watch. I just moved here and I didn't know phones don't work, so I need something to keep time with."

“A day to day necessity!” Bdubs agreed. “Digital or analog?”

“Analog,” Pearl decided after a moment. She might as well. If phones refused to work, then she didn’t want to place her trust in something that she couldn’t see working on its own.

Bdubs grinned, and Parl noticed that his eyes were wide and sparkling, like they were full of stars. “An old soul like myself,” Bdubs commented. “Oh, that’s very good. You’re smart. Don’t trust these new-fangled technologies, right?”

“They’re not that new, are they?” Pearl asked.

“Don’t ask questions!” Bdubs snapped, suddenly much less wistful and much more angry. His cloak swept around his body as he turned on a dime and rummaged through the pocket watches on the wall behind him. The cloak looked almost exactly like soft moss, and Pearl wondered if that was where the shop’s name came from. It must be a very nice cloak.

After several minutes, Bdubs popped back up, a pocket watch dangling in his triumphant fist. It was small and made of silver, with a delicate chain attaching it to a tiny white Gemstone. A Pearl, Pearl realized. It was inlaid into a small moon-shaped silver charm. The watch itself was decorated with an illustration of a spooky deer-headed creature looming over a house, tiny in comparison to the beast. Bdubs clicked the watch open to reveal a white watch face with purple arms, ticking away in time with the rest of the clocks. He said, “this watch seems perfect for you. What do you say?”

“How much is it?” Pearl asked, fully ready to not be able to afford it. She seemed to be expecting not to afford things a lot. She should really start heading to work.

“I’ll give it to you for free this time. You need one!” Bdubs exclaimed. “You’ll owe me, though. I’ll let you know when I want to cash in the favor!”

Pearl stared. “Thank you,” she breathed.

“No problem! The time king is a generous ruler!” Bdubs replied. He ushered her out of the store with a wave, and as Pearl stared at her new watch she realized that she’d never actually told Bdubs her name. There was no reason for him to choose the watch he did. It must have just been fate.

H

Chapter End Notes

cleo and joe are such guys <3 the most dudes of all time

Night Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Pearl didn't have the energy to do any decorating after her excursion, which was fine by her, since the sun was already going down by the time she stepped out of Moss Boss. Apparently she'd been in there longer than she'd thought.

Her walk back to her apartment took up the rest of the sunset, and by the time she closed her eyes to sleep, it was pitch dark outside. For such a small town, there was enough light pollution and cloud cover that Pearl could barely even see the moon, which made the whole world seem shrouded in dark mist, making sight difficult, even with a flashlight. It infected Pearl's bedroom, creeping in from windows and poorly-lit corners, to form puddles of shadow that moved like syrup, spreading closer and closer to her. Pearl decided to close her eyes.

H

And Pearl is standing in those woods again, out of breath and heart pounding like she'd sprinted a mile. She can feel the creature on her back, getting closer and closer every moment she isn't running away. She remembers the advice of Grian from the night before, and pulls a battered flashlight from her pocket. She recognizes it as the one she always carried in her purse back in evo, when she was never sure if her street would still have lights when she got back from work. She clicks on the flashlight and lets it illuminate the woods in front of her. It seems like the light doesn't reach as far as it should, like the battery's running low. Still, Pearl is glad for its presence. She can still feel the creeping shadows at her back, like a pack of wolves swarming around whatever is chasing her.

And it is still chasing her. Pearl starts running again, crashing through branches that she was sure she'd destroyed the night before. Or was this an entirely new stretch of woods? The shadows made it impossible to tell where she was, and she didn't know if she'd gotten turned around, or if she never knew where she'd been going in the first place and she was always lost. Maybe she's meant to stay lost forever, always the prey of this horrible beast that she can't remember the face of. Pearl pushes those thoughts out of her mind, attempting to clear it of anything except the determination to escape. Her footfalls pound along the soft mossy ground of the forest floor. She can hear the monster too, although its padded feet and intangible body make little noise compared to her clumsy crashing.

She's made good progress, she thinks, although she has no way to tell. She could be running deeper into the woods, farther from civilization, and she would have no way of knowing. She feels like it wouldn't be after her so fervently if she was, though. She felt like she was escaping something. She just didn't know if it was the beast she was escaping, or something much, much worse. She hoped it was only the monster. If she was running from something even worse than that she wouldn't be able to do it. She would freeze up, unable to move as it eyed her like meat in a deli, looking for the best place to take the first bite.

And she clears her head again, focusing on the flashlight's beam and the sound of her breathing. It doesn't matter what I'm running from, she decides, only that I keep moving. And that's exactly what she does.

But now she's sure that she is running farther into the woods than ever. Every time light flashes through the treeline, it's the red glow of the beast's eyes, or the oilslick reflections of the shadows,

or the flashes of wild animals' eyes as they catch her flashlight. Never streetlamps. Ever houses. Only the quick reveal that she is falling behind, that she is so much more surrounded than she thinks she is.

And eventually, she can't run anymore. She feels like she's about to throw up, her heart is beating so fast it might burst, and her legs are moments from collapsing under her. In a desperate act, she points the flashlight up, through the trees, and she sees the moon.

Her final thought is that the moon is much bigger than it should be, and then the monster is on top of her.

¶

Pearl shot up out of bed, head pounding with the violence of the act. That nightmare had rattled her a lot. The shadows looked less like they were creeping in on her, at least, but her panic and paranoia didn't wane. She stumbled out of bed, deciding that she had to move, even if it was just pacing around her house. It felt like the monster was still chasing her, she had only gotten farther away by waking up. And it hadn't failed to catch her yet, only failed to kill her.

Pacing didn't help. She needed to run. So Pearl put on her shoes, grabbed a thin jacket to cover up her short-sleeved pajamas, and left Boatem Apartments to burn off some of her anxiety.

¶

"Dreams and time, dreams and time," a figure muttered from a rooftop. "So similar, and yet so distinct. I can't keep saving you forever, Pearl Moon. You have to face your fear eventually."

They turned, their silhouetted form becoming obscured by a cape, and they disappeared.

¶

Pearl's walk started strangely. For one thing, apparently two other Boatem residents were out on their own late-night strolls, although they appeared to be returning as Pearl left. Pearl didn't think much of it, but as her back turned to the duo, she heard a tremendous flapping noise, and when she turned around, the two were gone. She didn't let that stop her, though.

What did almost stop her was the next thing she witnessed. As Pearl walked through the residential area, she glanced at a few of the houses she'd seen during the day. Most were dark, their residents likely fast asleep, but a clicking sound like a lock being closed caught her attention. She looked towards the house with lots of water features, and saw just a flash of a person with white hair and a mask, with a staff held in one hand. They were leaning on it heavily, like it was the only thing keeping them standing. Pearl couldn't make out more, because the figure made eye contact with Pearl, ran away from the window, and the house went totally still. It wasn't anything particularly weird, certainly not anything scarier than the idea of having to face that nightmare again, but something about the encounter left Pearl rattled. Still, she had to keep moving.

She almost turned back again the first time she heard rustling in the forest. She hadn't even noticed that her walk had taken her so close to the treeline, but now it loomed over her like the bars of a jail cell. And the sounds coming from it were as frightening as the sight itself. There was crashing and rustling deep in the forest, like something huge coming towards her. Owls and crickets would suddenly stop making noise to allow one solitary, feral howl echo through the trees. Bushes and ivy would shift randomly. All of the noise and motion disoriented Pearl, and certainly didn't help calm her down. She decided to veer away from the woods, in hopes that the sounds would stop.

They didn't. As she moved away, the crashing and howls moved with her, until it sounded like the creature was pressed right against the treeline, just out of sight. And it kept pace with Pearl, even when she started running back to her apartment. She could see flashes of ink-black fur that shone like the oilspill shadows in her nightmare. When she finally got back to her apartment, her breathing was heavy, and she pushed her back up against the door like she could barricade it against the monster. She hugged her knees, eyes wild.

"This isn't normal," she finally decided, her voice barely above a whisper. "Something is very wrong with those woods. But what?"

She thought about that question until the sun came up.

H

Chapter End Notes

the mystery continues...

Day Three

That position was where Grian found her in the morning. Pearl hadn't moved a muscle all night, and as she stood to greet her friend, she could feel her back and joints protesting. She felt awful, her mind still racing and her body in immense discomfort. Grian must have noticed, because when Pearl opened the door, he grimaced.

He couldn't get a word out before Pearl declared, "There's something in the woods. You're going to help me find out what it is." He just nodded, looking a little dazed and apprehensive, and followed Pearl deeper into her apartment.

"Have you decorated at all?" he asked, staring at the untouched pile of stuff from the Starter Egg on Pearl's only couch. She didn't respond. Instead, she went digging through her pile of things to find what she was looking for - an old corkboard that she had intended to use as a sort of notice board, about a foot and a half square. She set it on the coffee table in front of the couch and sat on the floor opposite it. Grian followed suit.

His next question was, "Did you get any sleep last night?" At this, Pearl shook her head.

"I got a couple hours, maybe. I had a nightmare. That's what I want to talk to you about," she replied. "Something about those woods, maybe the entire town, isn't normal. I'm not going to be able to sleep until I find out what it is."

"I don't know how much I can help you," Grian warned.

"That's fine," Pearl said. "Just, hear me out, okay?"

"Okay," Grian said.

"I had this nightmare the first night I slept here. I was being chased through the woods by something I couldn't see. It chased me all the way into the neighborhood in the forest, where you, or a dream-you, told me to shine my flashlight at it, which I did. But I didn't do it fast enough, or it didn't work on its own, because the monster... I think it killed me. I woke up right as it happened.

"Then, last night, I had the dream again. It wasn't the same, though. This time, I was in a different part of the woods. I used the flashlight right away, but the thing never got close enough for me to

be able to tell where it was, it just kept chasing me. I actually never left the woods that time. It jumped on me and killed me again, but before I woke up, I noticed that the moon was huge and full. Then it killed me, and I woke up.”

Grian looked pale. “It sounds like a stress dream,” he lied. “I mean, moving must be pretty stressful, right?”

“No, it’s actually been quite lovely. Aside from the terrifying thing living in the forest and stalking me,” Pearl argued.

“But it was just those nightmares, right?” Grian asked, and again, it sounded like he was trying not to reveal a secret.

“Nope. Last night, after my nightmare, I was restless. I decided to go on a midnight walk to burn off some energy. It might have even worked, in another world, but there was too much weird nonsense going on for me to feel any less anxious.”

“Like what?” Grian wondered cautiously.

“First, two Boatem people- I couldn't tell which two- were coming back from their own walks, and suddenly disappeared when my back was turned,” Pearl began.

Grian interrupted, “But you were really tired, you probably just missed them going back inside!”

“Sure, and I hallucinated the sound of two massive bats talking off as well,” Pearl argued.

“I mean, probably,” Grian muttered.

“Anyway, that wasn’t all that happened. You know that one house, with loads of waterfalls?” Pearl asked.

“Yeah, Iskall and Etho live there, I think.”

“Well, I saw one of them go into the house, lock the door, and- call me crazy, but I think they were injured. Like, seriously, hospital-worthy injuries.” Pearl tried to put as much certainty into her words as possible. The last thing she wanted was for Grian to decide that she was going crazy.

“Did they have a mask on?” Grian asked.

Pearl nodded, and Grian hummed like that explained everything. “What else happened?” he asked.

“The thing from my nightmares was still chasing me.

“I never saw it, not fully, so I don’t know for sure. But it felt the same, if that makes any sense. It gave me that same feeling of pressure, almost, and the flashes that I did see looked the same. Anyway, it was chasing me along the treeline, as if it couldn’t actually get through. I don’t know what was stopping it, but I’m glad it couldn’t reach me. I don’t think it would have left me alive if it had the chance to kill me.”

Grian was silent for a long time. His brow was furrowed and his hands were still at his sides, a rare occurrence that Pearl hadn’t seen in a very long time.

“I’ll be right back,” he said suddenly, striding out of Pearl’s apartment. Pearl couldn’t do anything except trust his word.

H

“Scar.”

Grian burst into Scar’s apartment without knocking, as he normally did. The man nearly fell out of his wheelchair in shock.

“Oh! Grian, you scared me so bad. Stop doing that, I thought I told you-”

“Pearl is being hunted,” Grian said, cutting Scar off.

“Are you sure?” Scar asked, suddenly serious. Grian nodded.

“Then take me to her.”

H

“So you’re being chased by a monster in the woods, it’s killed you twice in a dream so far, and you’re seeing shadows in your room when you try to sleep. Maybe you should be talking to Doc, not me,” Scar said, staring at Pearl with a look of worried pity in his eyes.

“I’m not going crazy. I swear. Come out with me tonight if you don’t believe me. It’ll be there, I know it will,” Pearl pleaded.

“No, no, Pearl, I believe you. Doc just knows how to deal with this way better than me! He’s a big conspiracy theorist, too. He could donate you a better board,” Scar pointed out. “However, I don’t think I’ll take you up on that nighttime journey. A mayor has to get his beauty sleep, after all.”

Grian rolled his eyes at Scar, like this was an old inside joke between the two of them.

“You should talk to Doc,” Grian said. “He won’t let me in his house because apparently I’m a *threat to his delicate workings* and *constantly breaking expensive equipment*, whatever that means, but he really should be able to help you.”

Pearl looked at the duo determinedly. “Alright. Where’s his house?”

“On the edge of town, it’s the one that looks sort of like a military compound. He lives right by the industrial district,” Grian explained, pulling a map from his pocket and pointing it out.

“Ask him about the hermatrix!” Scar called as Pearl got up to leave.

“I don’t think I will,” she replied.

Pearl didn't know what she was expecting to find in Doc's house. Maybe a tinfoil-hat wearing lunatic, maybe a dark computer room with a huge, wall-spanning conspiracy board lit up by floor-mounted floodlights, pretty much anything except for a relatively normal-looking guy, minus the prosthetic arm on his left side and his one fully-red eye, wearing a lab coat and a low cut shirt with a mug of strong-smelling coffee in his hand.

"Hi, I'm Pearl," she introduced. Doc stared at her for a second, like he was trying to process her words, before asking,

"Did Grian send you?"

"And the mayor," Pearl jumped to explain, remembering Grian's warning that he had been banned from Doc's house.

"I don't know how much better that makes this," Doc said with distaste.

"Sorry?" Pearl said.

Doc shrugged. "It's not your fault they're idiots. Do you want coffee? You look like you need it."

"Uh, sure, thank you," Pearl agreed, following Doc further inside. "So, are you actually a doctor, or is Doc just your name?"

"I'm not a doctor anymore, I got my license revoked. Now it's just my nickname because the people in this town think that they can come to me for free medical advice."

"That must be stressful."

"It really is," Doc grumbled. As he did, he led Pearl to a dimly lit kitchen where a coffee pot lay abandoned and half empty. He poured some into a mug that presumably had some kind of heat-sensitive design on it, but the lukewarm coffee did not reveal it. "Sorry, it's a little cold," Doc apologized as he handed the mug over.

“No worries!” Pearl assured him, even though she was, in fact, worried. Cold coffee was not exactly her favorite drink.

“So, you need my help. You were sent by Grian and Scar. Surely that means you have a medical issue that needs to be taken care of, right?”

“Well, not really? I do have a problem, but I think it's more a part of your... conspiracy-aligned work than your medical work.”

“Say no more.”

Immediately, Doc stood up and started walking deeper into the house. Pearl really had no choice but to follow.

The rooms after the kitchen were just as dark, with the lights tinged a soft yellow and barely reaching the corners of the hallway that they were walking down. It made Pearl a little nervous as she remembered how the shadows had looked the night before, creeping and hungry.

Still, she followed behind Doc, sure that if there was another person nearby, at least she might have a better chance at... fighting? Surviving? She didn't know, she just hoped that company would make things a little easier.

The hallway went on for a very long time, with the occasional industrial-looking door on either side, all of which Doc ignored. Instead, he kept walking until he reached the very end of the hallway, where a set of double doors stood imposingly. A keypad on the opposite wall blinked green in the dim light. Doc cursed.

“Need my trident,” he muttered. He turned back and kept walking, calling, “Stay there!” to Pearl as he backtracked.

Eventually, he came back, leaning on a forearm crutch painted aquamarine blue and designed to look like a three-pronged spear. Pearl briefly wondered how Doc didn't impale himself in the arm every time he walked, but that thought was quickly shoved away when Doc used the prongs to perfectly press the right buttons at the same time. Pearl was soundly impressed.

As the double doors slid open with a squeal, Doc turned back to Pearl, mouth stretched into a mad grin, and said, “Pearl, welcome to area 77.”

The place was unlike anything Pearl had ever seen. Across every wall, computer monitors mingled with newspaper scraps, all connected by projected red lines coming from a central projector, like a laser room from an unrealistic heist movie. The room itself was massive and almost pitch dark aside from the glow of the devices. Doc looked right at home, his white coat glowing in what Pearl suddenly realized to be a slight blacklight effect. Sure enough, the white stitching on her hoodie was glowing faintly blue. It gave the doctor an ethereal look. Doc moved to a desk pushed into one corner of the cavernous room and pulled up two comfortable-looking chairs.

“Sit. You need my help, then? Is it the hermatrix, or is it another mystery altogether?”

“I think it's something else,” Pearl admitted. “Basically, I'm being stalked. By a monster.”

“I see.”

“I would have said it was just a recurring nightmare, but last night, I went for a walk and it followed me. It kept inside the forest, but it was like watching a hungry wolf in a zoo exhibit. Like, I knew I was safe, reasonably, but I still felt like prey.”

Doc nodded and pulled something up on his computer. The screen showed an article from a kitschy-looking website for some podcast. The site was in dark mode, with a stock image of a spooky forest as the header. The title of the article read, “Strange animal sighting in town of Hermitcraft!”

“This-” Doc gestured to the screen- “could be your guy. It's a wolf-like animal, confined to our forest, that will occasionally pick a target. It then torments the target with nightmares, visions of the target's violent death, thoughts of murder and bloodshed, and a constant hunting, until the victim goes insane and runs into the woods, where they are devoured.”

“And how credible is this article?” Pearl asked.

“Not much,” Doc admitted, “but we can use this as a base. First of all, how accurate are your experiences to these symptoms?”

“Well, “ Pearl started, “I’m definitely being chased, and the nightmares sound right, but all this stuff about violence doesn’t sit right with me. And I definitely am not feeling *more* inclined to enter the spooky wolf-infested woods.”

Doc furrowed his brow and turned back to the computer, this time pulling up a newspaper article from a couple of years ago. “This is probably why Grian told you to come to me,” he said, and Pearl saw that the headline was “Hermitcraft resident stalked by mysterious animal, forced to commit acts of violence until saved by local doctor!” The picture was clearly of Grian, although he looked much different than he had in Evo, and even more different to his current self.

He looked tired, with a sort of crazed look in his eyes that gave Pearl the same feeling that the thing had in her nightmare. She felt hunted, and the look was so foreign on her old friend that she would have been convinced that the picture was photoshopped if it wasn't for the deathly serious look on Doc's face.

“If you couldn’t guess, I was the one that helped Grian. It was really scary for a little while. He almost killed Scar, I think.”

“Oh my god,” Pearl breathed. “No wonder he looked so nervous when I told him about this.”

“Yeah, probably not good,” Doc winced.

“But I don't know if that’s what my problem is. Besides, there’s other weird stuff I want to talk about, too. Not as weird as my monster, but still noteworthy.”

“One thing at a time, that's what I always say,” Doc interrupted.

Pearl looked at his spiderwebbed conspiracy board. “And this is all one thing, is it?”

“It’s the hermatrix,” Doc said. His expression was absolutely serious. Pearl almost laughed. She thought about asking him what that meant, but considering Scar’s tone when he'd given her that particular bit of advice, she decided against it.

“So if I were to come back to you tomorrow with entirely unrelated evidence that had nothing to do with my monster, you’d...” Pearl started.

“Probably help you anyway. Curse my good heart,” Doc finished.

“Great.”

“So, back to your monster. The essence of any good theory is evidence, right? What do you have?”

“None yet, except my word. I didn’t really think about it until now. Well, sort of. I have this.”

Pearl pulled out the old flashlight that she’d been carrying in her dream. It had been at the bottom of a box, and it was sheer dumb luck that she’d pulled it out while unpacking. Doc studied it closely.

“During my dream, the first one, Grian appeared to me and told me to use a flashlight. I did, and the one I pulled out was this one. I can’t remember when I got it. I think it might have been a gift.”

Doc nodded. “And you think this has something to do with your monster?”

“It’s all I have right now. If it helps, the second night I had the dream, I used it, and it definitely helped me. I still got taken down, but it took longer, I think.”

Doc hummed, clicking around a second monitor for a while, before seemingly settling on something

“Now, I am a medical doctor so I really shouldn’t be suggesting that you don’t sleep-”

“Didn’t you get your license taken away?”

“-but if you’re pretty sure that you’ll see this thing whether you sleep or not, I will request that you get some more evidence for your monster. Pictures, if you’re able. Anything else can work too, as long as it’s related.”

And with that, Doc snapped a photo of Pearl's flashlight and shooed her away, saying "See me tomorrow! In the meantime, ask Grian and Scar more. They would probably know!"

Pearl just found herself nodding all the way to Doc's front door.

"This was a lovely visit. Welcome to Hermitcraft, Pearl."

And with that, Doc was gone.

H

Pearl went back to her apartment after that. Unsurprisingly, Grian and Scar were long gone, although she did notice her ceramic figures arranged in a scene of what she assumed to be a wedding between one of the upside down llamas and a dog. She had a goal, now. She would find Doc some evidence, and then the case would be solved.

Here's hoping she didn't kill anyone, or get herself killed, along the way.

Night Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The night was quiet again. Pearl was thankful for that.

In the autumn air, no cicadas buzzed, and cricket chirps were far enough away that it felt like the entire town was holding its breath.

In truth, Pearl was too.

She had with her all the equipment needed for hunting the thing that was hunting her: a camera, her flashlight, a box of gallon Ziploc bags, a backpack, and rubber gloves. With this, she would surely be able to get something to prove that her nightmare really was a reality.

As Pearl walked closer to the edge of the forest, she heard it. The not-rustling of the bushes, the stillness in the air, like all of the creatures in the woods had been frozen in fear. The feather-light steps of paw pads on moss. It was here.

In an instant its pelt flashed through a gap in the trees. Pearl had her camera ready, and yet, she couldn't get an image in time. All she had was a flash of darker-than-normal space and a couple of coarse black hairs that she picked up off of the ground. She was certain that a chunk had been ripped off during the beast's attempt to menace her, but Pearl valued her hands, thank you very much. She would be staying a healthy ten feet from the forest at all times. Who knew what the creature was limited to, after all.

Her next encounter was more fruitful. As she walked along the edge of the woods shadows started to warp around her again.

For the first time in the night, Pearl was really, truly scared.

Somehow, Doc's identification of the beast made it less scary, because now she had a goal. She had a name for it in her mind and it wasn't so unknown anymore.

The shadows, though? They were just as strange as always.

Once again, they dripped into her line of sight like honey from a bottle, slow and steady and shining in the moonlight. When Pearl went to get a picture, though, they lost that glow. Instead, they simply looked like dark shadows.

Pearl stared so deeply that she thought she might fall into the shadows and be eaten alive by the things that were not the monster, because they couldn't be anything.

Maybe that was a better fate than her monster, she thought. Maybe if she gave herself up, she would die peacefully, quietly, not taking out as many people on her way down as she could.

That sounded nice. She could die quietly.

And then she reached out to touch the shadow with its shifting colors that couldn't exist, and she was startled by the flashlight in her hand. Panicked, she shined it at the darkness, and it evaporated, fleeing to the edges of the beam like a cat shooed away from chickens. Pearl's hands were shaking. She felt cold.

As she looked, she could see one leaf that looked like it still had the residue of the shadow on it. It gleamed a strange hue, more purple than green, in the light. Pearl put it into a bag and continued on her walk.

The moon was waxing, about three-quarters full. Pearl didn't know why she noted that in her mind, but she did. She had the feeling it was going to be important. The shadows left her rattled and bone-tired, and she wanted nothing more than to go home and rest. But her home was across the town, and she knew that the moment she slept, she would be in those woods again, being chased. Just the thought of it made Pearl's heart race.

Finally, she took out her secret weapon. The rest of Doc's coffee, transferred into a thermos and kept in the bottom of her bag. The thermos was one of her favorites, a soup container with the phrase "eat in case of emergencies" printed on it in black block letters on a yellow background. Every time she saw it, it made her laugh. Not tonight. Tonight, she didn't even bother to read the thing, just cracking it open and gulping down the now-ice-cold coffee inside. It did almost nothing to pick her up, but her hands stopped shaking, at least.

Just as she was screwing the lid back on, there was a tremendous crashing sound from behind her. The beast was only inches from her now, all whirling fur and gnashing teeth and saliva that stung like acid and stained like liquid shadow. Pearl screamed, the loudest she'd ever screamed in her

life, and ran stumbling away from the woods. The feeling of that thing being so close to her stayed on her back as she ran back to Boatem, the hairs on her neck rising, because she could hear it furiously scratching at the tree trunks. It felt like a million years before Pearl made it back to the warm, brilliant lights of Boatem Apartments.

Her monster was still after her, though. She could hear it, howling and screaming into the night. She wasn't afraid to admit that she hid under her covers, eyes wide open and unblinking in terror.

Pearl made a vow that she would never go back out to those woods again.

Never.

¶

Until she realized that her camera could take video, and that could catch the beast so much better than a still frame.

Her body shaking in fear and exhaustion, Pearl ventured back into the town, bracing herself for the monster to attack.

It did, eventually. The tar-colored fur scraped against the trees again, and this time, Pearl was prepared. She held the camera out, already rolling, and caught the beast's attack firmly on camera. So, that was it. Her search was done. She had the evidence she needed for Doc, and she could go back home.

But this was also an opportunity to find out some more about the other strangeness about the town. She couldn't just leave it as a mystery, or else she would never be able to sleep.

So Pearl started back into town, the shadows at her heels going entirely unnoticed in their absence.

¶

As she walked, her camera still held out in front of her like a lifeline, she started talking to it. Somehow, it made her feel safer in the dark.

“So, we’re on a hunt for any weirdness. Last night, I saw a bunch of stuff that I couldn't get on camera, so now I'm just going to record my whole night, and we'll see how that works out. How's that sound, camera?”

The camera didn't respond, obviously. Pearl pointed it to a rock that she hadn't seen before - a huge boulder sitting a few feet away from the forest, adorned with moss and vines, like it had always been there. The thing was, Pearl had never seen it before. It hadn't been there last night, nor had it been there her first day in Hermitcraft. It had just... appeared.

And as soon as Pearl noticed that, she watched it grow spindly spider legs, lift off of the ground, and skitter into the woods, leaving only a small patch of purple mold on reddish dirt behind. When Pearl checked back the footage, she realized that the rock had never been there in the first place, and instead, Pearl had been pointing a camera at a completely innocuous stretch of trees for several minutes.

She did not notice the deep shadows picked up by the camera, nor how they dissipated at exactly the moment that the rock had run away.

H

“We’ve been walking for a while, and so far, nothing strange has been going on. Not since that boulder, anyway. Right now, we’re about to head deep into the village, so I won't be able to talk as much. Keep your eyes peeled, camera! Three lenses is better than two, right?” Pearl rambled, trying to take her mind off of the fact that she would be going into a very public place in the middle of the night, holding a camera, with her hood pulled up. She smiled as she said the last line, turning the camera round so that she could point at the small, half-moon reading glasses perched on her nose. Then, she focused it back on the ground in front of her, and went quiet.

Here, deep into the town, sounds of wildlife were few and far between. They were deep enough in the wilderness that no pigeons roosted on rooftops, but at the same time, there was only the quietest of cricket chirps and bat squeaks. And actually, there shouldn't have been any bats, right? Bats came out at dusk and normally didn't stay awake more than a few hours. They should all be hiding right now, or at least deeper in the woods, looking for food.

Pearl turned her camera skyward, trying to catch the flights of the animals. Instead, she saw a black blur the size of a human swoop overhead, far too low for Pearl's comfort. Was it an owl? Surely owls weren't actually *that* big, right? And wouldn't they be flying way higher than that?

Pearl elected to ignore it for now, but filed it away as something strange.

¶

“I circled back to where I saw that rock, I just couldn’t resist. And look at that! Mold! It’s purple, too, not like anything I’ve ever seen. Did an unlucky animal die under this rock? If so, why aren’t there any bones? Or, for that matter, why is the ground all around it so barren? Surely, a dead creature rotting would make this soil more fertile. Weird, isn’t it, camera?”

Pearl was so focused on this patch of rot that really should not have been bothering so much, she completely missed how the shadows wrapped around her again, blacking out the camera lens and slowly pulling her away from the outside world. She only noticed it happening when the monster howled an unearthly note and charged at her, and by then she was far deeper in the woods than she ever should have been. All she could do was turn on her heels and run in the blinding nothingness of the shadows, hoping that she was going the right way.

Her flashlight led the way, dimly flickering, but cutting through the unnatural darkness like butter. She tried her best to retrace her steps, falling into her own footsteps as they led back the way she came.

The monster is after her, and Pearl is armed only with her camera and her flashlight, her bag long since dropped. That means that the physical samples she had were gone, but that thought is pushed out of her mind before she can even think about its conclusion. Shadows lap at her feet like the tide. Pearl feels herself sinking into the soft lichen on the ground. Her monster is closer than it’s ever been, and Pearl can’t help but let it happen this time.

Her mind is filled with a sudden peace, an acceptance of death, and the monster is farther away now. She can hear it still, in the woods, stalking her, but it feels like it can’t quite find her now. She is filled with vigor and hope, and in an instant, the beast is on her again, and Pearl is filled with so much fear that she has no way to clear her mind again. When she dies, it is not quick. The monster draws it out, letting her consciousness fade to black.

When Pearl woke up, it was to the face of Bdubs staring down at her with distaste.

¶

“Doc M, I’m disappointed in you.”

That was the first thing Pearl heard after waking up from her nightmare once again. Doc and Bdubs were staring at her, and Pearl knew in a second that she was laying down in Moss Boss, although it was in a part of the shop Pearl hadn't seen before.

Doc turned to the watchmaker. "She was being hunted by the boogeyman! I couldn't just-"

"Couldn't just let the expert take care of it?" Bdubs interrupted.

"She came to me," Doc argued weakly.

Bdubs shook his head and sighed dramatically. "I had it under control, Doc. At the very least, you could have told her that staying inside would have protected her, which, by the way, *it would have*."

"I am awake, you know," Pearl finally said.

"OH! *Goodness*, Pearl, you scared the pants offa' me!" Bdubs squealed. "How are you feeling?"

"Exhausted," Pearl said.

"I wonder why," Bdubs said, glaring at Doc, who withered under his gaze.

"Come on Bdubs, don't be too harsh," said a new voice from the shadows. It sounded remarkably friendly, chastising the man with a joking tone. Out stepped a tall man, with white hair and a black mask covering the lower half of his face. He had on a mossy green vest that looked remarkably similar to Bdubs' cloak. One of his eyes was cloudy and crossed by a massive scar. His undershirt had a Canadian flag patch sewn onto the arm.

"Very funny Etho. Our new hermit almost died, and I'm the one in the wrong. When will it ever be, "oh, Bdubs, your decision making skills are so amazing! Bdubs, you're so good at protecting the town!"

"Bdubs grumbled.

“In your dreams,” Doc replied, earning another withering glare from Bdubs.

“So is all of the NHO here to bother me tonight, or just my two least favorites?” Bdubs asked.
“Doc, at least help me patch her up.”

“Hold on, patch me up? When did I get injured?” Pearl asked, holding her hands up defensively. As she made that movement, though, she could feel scratches and bruises getting aggravated, and she winced.

“You fell asleep about two feet from my house and I decided to help you out,” Bdubs shrugged. “You look like you picked a fight with a wolf. I'm surprised you didn't notice until now. You're seriously beat up.”

“Rude,” Pearl complained.

“He is right. I mean, who knows what would've happened if Bdubs hadn't found you,” Etho commented.

Pearl managed to push Bdubs off of her and sat up fully, trying not to whine more at the pain she was in.

“Alright, alright, I have a lot of questions. First things first, Doc, what do you mean, “boogeyman?””

Chapter End Notes

Pearl wears little glasses btw. which is the only important thing in this chapter ^__^

Day Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The room went silent.

“Etho, can you take Pearl outside for a moment? Me and Doc have to chat,” Bdubs said, his blinding smile betraying his obvious rage.

“Oh snappers...” Etho whispered. “Yeah, I can get Pearl. Just don’t kill anybody, alright?”

Bdubs didn’t look amused. His eye was twitching violently. Pearl tried to give a tiny smile as she stood up, leaning heavily on Etho, but the pain made it come out as more of a grimace. Etho led her to the front step, where Pearl realized that it was the early morning. She realized how uncomfortable Etho looked standing outside with her, also.

“You can go back inside, I should be good now,” she said.

“You sure you won’t get attacked by any more wolves?” Etho joked.

“Yeah, I hope so.”

H

“You mean you told Pearl to go and *hunt for the boogeyman* , without telling her *what she was hunting?* Doc, she nearly died! She would have died, if she had been anywhere except practically on my doorstep! I know you don’t have experience with this, but rally, a little common sense can’t be that hard! You’re an analyst for goodness sake!”

Bdubs continued ripping into his companion, pointing out exactly where Doc could have made a different, better decision that would have caused Pearl less pain, until Doc was completely done with his shouting.

“If you wanted Pearl to be informed so much, why didn't you just explain it to her when she woke up?”

Bdubs paused. “It’s... hard. I guess that’s it. You’ve never experienced it. Me and Etho have, and now Pearl has too, and to be honest, I’m a little worried. Knowing didn’t exactly make Etho any safer, did it?”

“I’d say it kind of did,” Doc argued.

“*Anyway*, Pearl's already in more danger than any of us, and I'm worried that her knowing will make her more of a target,” Bdubs continued.

“Don’t you think that’s exactly what I was worried about?” Doc sighed.

“No, I don't, because I think you’d rather have another conspiracy to chew on than have a resident of Hermitcraft be safe. More than not telling Pearl about the boogeyman, not telling any of us was an irresponsible, unsafe thing to do,” Bdubs said.

“Well, you know now,” Doc shrugged.

“And soon, Pearl will too.”

Unknown to them, Pearl already knew. She backed away from the door she’d just been pressed against, a hand over her mouth as she tried to understand the danger she was in.

H

At that moment, a whisper caught the wind. From Etho, it spread outwards in a spiderweb, taking moments to reach to the far edges of Hermitcraft. Moss Boss was centrally located for this reason, after all. The message was telephoned through a dozen people before it hit the edges of its boundaries.

What was the message, you ask?

All those on their last life, meet in town hall. There are things to discuss.

And so a group gathered.

Scar, Grian, Mumbo, and Impulse arrived as a group, though Scar was split off the moment they arrived.

Tango Tek sat waiting for his companions, knowing that they would be coming in late.

Cleo arrived fashionably on time, Joe arm-in-arm with her, because they were two halves of a whole, even though the poet didn't really belong here. Ren Dog met up with her at the door, but the conversation was short and bitter, and they were alone once more.

The last to arrive were Bdubs, adorned in his moss cloak, with Etho on his arm, and trailing behind them, the woman of the hour, Pearl Moon.

Her face was white and her expression was grim. As the eight other people saw her, they knew that she was one of them, now.

They knew that she was on her last life as well.

"Well, we're all here! Grian, would you do the honors and start the meeting?" Bdubs asked, seating himself next to Tango (a blond man with red sunglasses and an outfit that looked straight out of an anime, fitting right in with Etho's attire, Pearl supposed).

"Sure, I can do that," Grian agreed, although he was staring at Pearl with intense worry. "Welcome to last life, a supernatural support group for those of us that have been affected by the paranormal happenings in this town - specifically, the entity known as the boogeyman. Etho, you called the meeting, do you mind explaining why?"

Instead of talking, Etho looked at Bdubs, who happily took Etho's role. "Last night, I found Pearl Moon passed out a few yards away from my house, looking like she'd been clawed by some sort of monster. I took her to my shop to clean her up, at which point I called Doc to help, since some of her injuries seemed severe. After talking to Doc, I was made aware that he had told Pearl to look

for the boogeyman, without telling any of us. Pearl was, obviously, attacked by it. As soon as I was made aware, I got Etho to call a meeting.”

Grian nodded, looking at Pearl. “So, Pearl, welcome to our little club! What happened from your perspective?”

“Well, to start, I’ve been chased by this thing for several days. Grian, Mayor, I told you about this yesterday, and you told me to see Doc. I did, and he told me to go investigate more, so I went out last night, hoping to get some video of my monster. I did manage to, but I lost my camera,” Pearl explained. After the silence in the room got too unbearable, she continued, “I then passed out or something, and woke up in Bdubs’ shop. Doc and him argued while Etho took me outside, then Bdubs escorted me here.”

“You said you got a video?” one of the others asked, although Pearl was too busy staring at the ground panicking to tell who.

“I did, but I lost-”

“I got her camera from the woods,” Etho cut her off suddenly, putting a busted-up black digital camera on the huge table they were sitting around. “I got the memory card out, too, and it appears undamaged.”

At that, Tango stood up and took the camera, inspecting the damage. “This thing isn’t broken beyond repair, but it’s close. Pearl, do you mind us showing the video you took?”

Pearl stood and walked to Tango, putting a hand on the camera as he held it. “I’d rather sort through the footage myself before showing everyone,” she requested. Tango just nodded and let go of the camera, letting Pearl sit back down.

“I have some questions,” Pearl began. “Firstly, what actually is the boogeyman?”

“A nature spirit, as far as we can tell,” Ren piped up.

“I thought it was a ghost,” Bdubs argued.

“No, it was more like... A sickness,” Cleo replied, at which Grian nodded.

“I heard it described as a red fog,” Joe piped up.

“Or a pack of hungry wolves,” Scar added.

“Or one very big wolf,” Mumbo shuddered.

“So, basically,” Grian said, cutting off the commotion, “we don’t really know. There’s half a dozen conflicting stories about what it actually is, but we can tell you what it does.”

“It hunts you down,” Bdubs began.

“It takes your sleep first,” Scar continued, as if it were a practiced line.

“Then your sanity,” Ren said next.

“Until violence is all you can think about,” Etho added.

“It gets in your head,” Mumbo said.

“And then that’s it,” Cleo said, leaning further into Joe.

“Suddenly, there’s blood on your hands and your mind is clear again,” Grian finished. “We’ve all felt it, one way or another, and we don’t want it to happen to you.”

Pearl sat there, shocked, for a long time. “So, all of you have...”

Grian nodded gravely. “And not just us. We’re only the survivors. There were others, ones that didn’t live here, and they... well, they don’t really live anywhere now.”

Pearl swallowed thickly. She felt a little bit like throwing up. Clearly Grian could tell, because he said, “alright, that’s enough for today. Pearl, get some sleep and stay away from the woods. The rest of you stay safe, and-”

“No,” Pearl insisted. “No, I know there’s more to explain. Keep going.”

Grian took a breath. “Okay. You’re right.

“We all got left with something strange after being attacked by the boogeyman. Well, most of us. There are some people that got out unscathed, or just haven’t told us what happened to them. I, for example, didn’t have anything happen to me. I don’t know why, it’s just how it happened.”

“I died, and now I’m sort of a zombie,” Cleo offered, peeling one bandage away to reveal a grisly-looking stitch job where her forearm connected to the rest of her body. “At least I have a higher pain tolerance now.”

“Me and Mumbo both got turned into bat-creatures, which is fun most of the time, but really annoying when you forget to use your normal eyes and not echolocation,” Impulse shrugged, revealing a set of tiny bat wings that Pearl had completely failed to notice. Mumbo grinned, showing a mouth full of pointy teeth. Pearl shuddered.

“And lots of others got affected as well, but we don’t have time for that. The point is, there were lasting consequences, and we don’t want the boogeyman to come after any more people than it already has. We’ve lost a lot already,” Grian said.

“Sure, but.. You said that the casualties were all people that didn’t live in Hermitcraft. Why is that the distinction? What is keeping you all, or us all, safe?” Pearl asked, breaching the biggest mystery so far.

“Me, I think,” said a new voice from behind Pearl. Standing in the doorway, a man wearing a full astronaut helmet and jumpsuit was standing in the doorway, voice amplified by a small speaker on the outside of the helmet.

“Yeah, X has been the one protecting us. Something about him makes the place safer, and defends against the paranormal,” Grian shrugged. “That’s why he was able to found Hermitcraft. This place had been written off as cursed for years.”

“Really, it’s not that hard to understand! When I was born, I got dipped Achilles-style into some sort of anti-supernatural liquid, leaving me invulnerable to spirits and supernatural occurrences. Since then, I’ve been able to find the source of this liquid, allowing me to form a sort of barrier to be made around the town of Hermitcraft, keeping it mostly safe from attacks of the boogeyman. Of course, the woods around us are still haunted by the beast, but by using the liquid, I’m able to keep it out of the town’s limits,” X explained, with a tone that suggested he’d been trying to explain himself for a very long time, and as aware that no one understood what he was talking about.

“...Yeah. That,” Grian agreed.

“So you can’t do anything about the boogeyman except keep it out of the city?” Pearl asked.

“If I could keep it away forever, I would. But I can’t, and I can’t kill it, either, so don’t try,” X warned.

“But, having information like a video could help us a ton with figuring out how to combat it more effectively, and also maybe kill it. Eventually,” Grian shrugged. “So, now that you know our mission, Pearl, welcome to the last lifers. If you want to move away, we completely understand.”

“No,” Pearl decided. “I think I want to help.”

“That’s what they all say...” sighed Etho, as the meeting seemed to be dismissed.

As Pearl walked out, she caught Grian’s eye. He still looked worried.

Maybe he had the right to be.

H

Pearl spent the rest of her day sitting in her house, mind rolling over the information she’d learned. She knew the truth about the town now. Everything was laid out in front of her. The answers were all there.

So why was she so certain that they hadn't really figured out anything?

No matter how many lines and connections she drew in her mind, there was always a missing piece. A thread that didn't connect to anything. She didn't know what it was, or where it led, but it was there, getting tangled in the web of facts and myths and half-truths. Her pain didn't make it any easier to focus. Her wounds were mostly closed up, but the humming pain remained, forcing her to expend energy on keeping her thoughts on the actual task at hand and not just how much her body *hurt*.

Pearl felt restless as well. The itch to move and explore and run wormed its way into her mind, until she was shaking her leg and had her shoulders hunched to her ears, eyes darting from corner to corner as she tried looking for an escape. She felt like a caged animal, cornered and ready to strike. She breathed, manually relaxing her body, and pulled her shoes back on. She wasn't getting anywhere cooped up in her room, obviously. A walk would do her good.

(She ignored the small part of her mind that told her how her last few walks went, and she pointedly did not take its advice to talk to - *warn* - Grian about how she was feeling. She was fine.)

It ended up being Impulse that spotted Pearl on her way out, not Grian. The man was already on his porch, sipping a glass of water serenely. He almost looked like he was meditating. Still, Pearl leaving caught his attention, and he walked over to her with a politely worried look on his face.

"Pearl, how are you feeling? That last meeting was a lot, huh?" he asked, carefully staring at Pearl. Now, Pearl knew that she looked rough. But that was just rude.

"I'm alright, thanks Impulse. Just restless, that's all," she replied.

"Are you sure? I could chat for a bit, if you want. I'm not busy," Impulse offered.

Pearl shook her head. "Thanks again, but really, I'm just trying to clear my head."

"If you're sure," Impulse shrugged, walking back to his porch.

Pearl nodded one more time to herself, and kept walking.

H

“G? Pearl’s on a walk, I’m going to keep an eye on her. I can’t quite tell, but she seems a little boogeyed.”

“Thanks, Impulse. You know the drill, call Scar if she goes into the forest, call Doc if she gets bloodthirsty. You’re a lifesaver.”

“Literally. It’s no problem, man.”

“Alright, get to it, then.”

“Will do. Bye, G!”

H

The sun was hot and burning. Pearl stared at it with distaste, shielding her eyes from the noon light. Despite the brightness, the shadows of the woods seemed to remain, as black and shimmery as always. The sight made Pearl want to touch them, sure that their absence of light and heat would be a welcome relief from the sunlight. The sun felt horrible, like it was filling Pearl with a restless, red-hot energy that was doing nothing to help clear her mind. She was consumed by the discomfort. Everything was just *too much*, the light and heat and pain and noise making the outside world seem uninhabitable. Pearl decided to duck into a store to escape it.

The store ended up being The Barge, with its airy feel and blessedly air-conditioned interior. Stress was behind the register, like before, and Pearl could see more of that purple fungus in her hair. She smiled at Pearl, who gave a small wave back. She was too distracted to talk, and instead decided to get some basic shopping done. She still hadn’t actually decorated, and her paycheck from Padllama came in. Despite her never having shown up for work. Pearl had a sneaking suspicion it was Scar’s doing.

Still, the bright, cool air of The Barge didn’t really help with Pearl’s nerves. She still felt edgy and anxious, and wandered around the shop ringing her hands. Stress was looking at her with more and more concern as she paced around, and Pearl couldn’t help but notice that she was utterly defenseless.

Wait, that's not right. Why would Pearl think something like that? Stress was just a cashier, she hadn't done anything wrong, and Pearl had no reason to attack her. But the thought didn't leave her mind. She was sure that one good blow to the head would knock Stress out cold, and then Pearl could- what? What was the next step?

Stress looked scared now, after so long of Pearl just staring at her. Pearl reveled in it. It made her skin crawl. Stress was still unguarded, although she was tense. It would be a little harder, but the chase was a part of the fun, and Pearl would have so much more enthusiasm killing prey that fought back- no. that wasn't right. Just the idea of Pearl's thoughts just now made her feel ill and dizzy, and she leant against a shelf for support. Killing? Prey?? This wasn't right, Pearl wasn't a murderer. So why did she feel the need to hunt someone down and rip the head from their body?

Pearl tried to take a deep breath. She needed to leave. She needed to get far, far away from any people, because she clearly couldn't trust herself. She walked unsteadily through the doors of the barge, back into the blazing, horrible sun.

She caught a glimpse of the forest. There, she would have shade and solitude. She would be safe and comfortable there. Surely the sun was already going down, after all. Pearl could sit in the cool dark grass and clear her mind, and she wouldn't have to worry about any uncontrollable urges.

She felt herself walk to the edge of the woods, putting a hand against one of the tree trunks. She was right, it was cool. Pleasantly so, like a fresh hotel pillow, or a chilly lake on a hot summer day. Pearl slipped between two trees and entered the woods.

Chapter End Notes

they practice that speech weekly btw

Night Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Impulse was panicking. He was out to keep an eye on Pearl, sure, but he didn't expect her to actually go into the woods! It was so early, too, and Impulse had no way of stopping her, not if he wanted to keep himself in one piece. So he flew to Scar.

He slammed down in the foyer of city hall, making panicked eye contact with the mayor. Thankfully Scar didn't need words to know what had gone wrong, and he was wheeling out of the building in an instant. As he did, vines and tree roots parted around him, making it a smooth ride all the way into the woods. Impulse led him to where Pearl had disappeared.

There was nothing but a couple inhuman footprints to prove that it had ever been disturbed at all.

Scar plowed into the woods.

H

Pearl is running.

She feels free, and unafraid, and power surges through her body. Her feet make no sound as she sprints through the underbrush, her breath is quick, yet even, she is a hunter on the chase. There are shadows beside her, moving and shifting to help push her along. Cool air enters her lungs. Fire exits. Pearl has never felt more alive.

But under it all, there is an undercurrent of fear. She doesn't know if it's her own, or if she's smelling it on the thing she's hunting, but it fuels her more than the power does, keeping her pace fast. She can't get caught, but she is the one doing the catching. She is a predator, but the apex is still out there, and she can't let herself get complacent. She cannot let herself lose control.

She keeps running. Light bends around her body in inky waves that coil off of her like smoke. She feels her heart pound harder and harder until she's sure it will burst. The fear is stronger now, stronger than ever. She's close to her prey, she knows it.

Pearl bursts through the treeline, feeling her shadows leave her behind, but she can still run. There are houses here, although her brain barely registers them. It is focused on the figure outside one house, sitting on the porch with a book in her hands. Pearl can't focus on the face, on who her prey is. It doesn't matter. All that matters is killing her.

H

Gem's been having a pretty great time since moving to Hermitcraft.

Her house was cozy (and came furnished!), her neighbors, False and Stress, were lovely, and the forest was full of interesting sights. She even caught a few coyotes once! Not to mention the interesting architecture of the town. All kinds of buildings, ranging from the warm and rustic to the futuristic, made their appearance throughout the village. Gem had an amazing time just exploring and meeting new people.

Tonight, she was enjoying the evening by reading her book outside. The weather was perfect, with a breeze breaking up the dry warmth of the day. There had been some strange noises from the woods, but she assured herself that it was just a wild animal getting a bit closer to the treeline than usual. Sure, it put her a bit on edge, but not enough for her to actually go back inside.

Maybe she should've gone back inside.

She watched as Pearl, the other newcomer that she'd met on the train, burst out of the woods, her eyes focused with an animalistic intensity on Gem. She was sprinting and breathing hard, like she'd been running for a long time. She just kept getting closer and closer to Gem, who stood, a deer in headlights, on her porch.

Pearl was only feet away from Gem's stairs when a massive bat-like creature swooped down in front of her, dropping the mayor (wheelchair and all) and a man with a prosthetic arm and a lab coat on her lawn in between her and Pearl. Pearl scrambled to stop, still panting and tensed like a cornered animal. The trio that had just arrived shouted something that Gem didn't understand, and Pearl's eyes went unfocused. The bat-thing then pinned her down, allowing the mayor and what Gem assumed to be a doctor to approach.

H

Impulse was having a hard time holding Pearl down. She was clawing at his wings with every ounce of supernatural strength she had, trying to force him to move in a way that could let her escape. The movements were inhuman and twisted, like an animal was trying to pilot a body it wasn't meant for. Impulse supposed that was actually pretty accurate. Still, Pearl was making it extremely difficult to help her.

Impulse pulled his monstrous features back into himself briefly to shout, "Can you help me out here?" and had to quickly transform again to stop Pearl from overpowering him. Thankfully, Doc and Scar approached cautiously, Doc's face a mask of concentration.

"I can knock her out, but she'll have to keep fighting it on her own. Putting her to sleep would make it a bit easier, though," Doc finally said.

Impulse changed his face back to his human one to say, "Well, you could've asked sooner!" And slammed one wing-hand into a pressure point, making Pearl go limp and unresponsive. Doc stared at him. Scar tried not to laugh.

Impulse fully transformed again, stretching a bit to get reacclimated to his body. While he did he caught a glimpse of Gem, the poor newcomer that had almost been Pearl's victim. She looked pale and distant, eyes staring at the strange group, unfocused. Impulse gave her a smile full of sharp teeth.

"Sorry about that, Gem! I promise we won't make a habit of tackling rabid people in your front yard," he said, gesturing vaguely to Pearl's slumped body.

"Sure," Gem agreed faintly.

H

Pearl is in the woods. She is neither hunting, nor hunted. Instead, her monster is right in front of her, at the other end of the small clearing. The forest is lit only by the moon, in the washed-out grayscale of midnight. Finally, Pearl sees the boogeyman for what it really is.

The boogeyman is a sheer cliff face that Pearl is on top of, and it's a mugger hiding in the shadows of an alleyway, and it's a last goodbye and a thrown glass that shatters on the ground and a moon too big to be natural. The boogeyman is a knife in her hands, pointed inwards at her own heart. It's a thousand twisting shapes and ideas that scare Pearl until she's on her knees, shivering and crying.

The nightmare approaches.

And then Pearl remembers something.

“Use a flashlight,” echoes Grian’s voice from a time that seems so long ago. Pearl is suddenly holding the flashlight like a lifeline, pointing it straight into the beast. It hits the whirling thing like a firehose, and peels away shadows that gleam like silent laughter as they retreat back into the forest.

Now, in the flickering white glow, there stands the true form of the beast. A five-foot-tall black wolf with glowing embers for eyes stands where the nightmare once stood. Its mouth hangs open, revealing more teeth than there should have been in its jaws. They climb and twist like brambles in the thing’s face, and Pearl feels her fear returning. But now, it’s laced with an adrenaline that makes her tense her muscles, ready to fight. Pearl has the will to survive, to fight the thing that makes her so afraid. The beast lunges at her, and Pearl leaps to one side, like a matador, her hoodie the red cape that lures her bull. She flings it out to one side, fluttering the now-tattered fabric in the still air. The boogeyman moves silently as it pounces again, and Pearl jumps away once more.

They keep up this dance for some time, wearing each other down, and for a moment where both woman and monster are standing still, Pearl hears a strange sound.

The ticking of a pocketwatch coming from her hoodie’s pocket.

Pearl pulls out the watch she’d gotten from Bdubs, the silver moon charm dangling from her hand as she holds the face. She clicks it open, and it’s ticking away, although the numbers have disappeared. Pearl stares at the purple hands, confused, until she realizes that she can’t hear the monster’s panting anymore. She looks up from the watch to see the boogeyman standing at attention, eyes locked onto the watch. Pearl experimentally waves the clock around, amazed to see the east follow it intently. Pearl slowly approaches, letting the watch swing like a pendulum in her hand.

The boogeyman stays focused on it. Pearl reaches a hand out to touch the wolf.

Chapter End Notes

Gem interlude plus dogy!!!

Day Five

“She’s been out for almost 12 hours, dude. Impulse, what did you do?”

The last lifers were gathered in the town hall, staring at Pearl, who was still asleep, having been laid on a cot to save her some back pain when she finally woke up.

(If she woke up.)

“I didn’t do anything! I knocked her out because Doc said it would help!” Impulse defended himself from Ren, who had been the one to call him out.

“Right, because Doc is so experienced with this stuff,” Bdubs grumbled, still bitter.

“He did help me,” Grian shrugged.

Scar spoke up. “I think I know what Doc was trying to do. The boogeyman is mostly a mental thing, right? So, maybe he was trying to get Pearl to enter her own mind and fight it off, gravity-falls-finale style.”

“There’s no way that would work,” Cleo argued.

“You don’t know that.”

Just then, there was movement from Pearl’s cot. She woke up slowly, rubbing her eyes and stretching with a wince. Impulse and Bdubs did their best to stop everyone from crowding her.

“Hey, Pearl, how are you feeling?” Impulse asked nervously.

Pearl stared at him, still half asleep, for a moment. Suddenly, she shot out of the cot, stumbling as she stood. Grian rushed to catch her, waving for someone to find Doc to see if he could help again.

Instead of trying harder to bolt, though, Pearl shook her head. “I have to find it, I’ll be back soon,” she insisted.

“You just got back to consciousness!” Grian argued.

“I know, but Grian, trust me. I promise I’ll be right back,” Pearl said. She stared at Grian with a strange sort of intensity, enough so that Grian let her go, allowing Pearl to steady herself quickly.

“Thank you. I’ll be right back, I swear,” Pearl said, leaving the town hall. Grian just nodded and let her leave.

¶

Pearl was in the woods. They were less scary without the shadows creeping at her vision. Trees filtered light through their canopies, allowing spatters of yellow light to illuminate the untouched ground under her feet. Birds sang in the bushes and the sounds of cicadas made the forest sound like an orchestra of woodland noise. No longer was the unnatural, deafening silence choking out these creatures. It felt like any other woods.

Pearl followed the trail of carnage she’d ripped in the woods the night before, wincing at how destroyed the flora was. Footprints mingled with wolf tracks as she retraced the wild hunt she’d gone on. Pearl knew what was at the end of the trail. She was looking forward to it.

¶

The town hall was tense.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t send a search party?” Scar asked for the tenth time.

“Pearl knows what she’s doing,” Grian reassured him. Scar didn’t look convinced.

“I trust her,” Etho said. “She seemed pretty sure of herself.”

Somehow, the masked man's words let some tension out of the air. Grian pouted.

“Oh, so you all listen to Etho, and not to me. I see how it is.”

¶

Pearl was at the edge of that clearing, the one she'd seen in her mind. It was brighter now, and she could admire the soft-looking moss on the ground, the way the different greens and browns mixed together in the sunlight. And at the center of it, a black dog was curled up, asleep.

It lifted its head as Pearl approached, its tail wagging lazily on the ground. Pearl cooed at it, because what else was she supposed to do?

“Oh, who's a good girl? You are! Yes you are!”

“I'm gonna name you Tilly.”

¶

It took a very long time to get the rest of Boatem to agree to having the former monstrous cryptid live in the building, but Pearl wore them down eventually. Mumbo was, surprisingly, the most on board, and since the landlord's word is law, Grian, Scar, and Impulse had to let Pearl keep her.

(Maybe Grian also caved because of just how happy Pearl looked.)

That night, Pearl went to bed with Tilly curled up at her feet, and she slept soundly for the first time in five days.

¶

Grian woke Pearl up with a knock late enough in the night to be considered early morning. Pearl grudgingly got up, Tilly following dutifully behind.

“So, there’s an outbound train stopping here tomorrow,” Grian started. “You could buy a ticket, get out of here, restart your life back in Evo. I’d probably be able to get Mumbo to fund it. If you want.”

“Are you kidding? I love Hermitcraft! Everyone’s been so nice, and with Tilly taken care of, there’s nothing to worry about, right?” Pearl laughed, watching Grian's face morph from wildly uncomfortable to relieved.

“Yeah,” Grian said. “Nothing to worry about.”

End Notes

The links to my teams tumblr blogs:

[theenbywithnotalent \(ace\)](#)

[b-creative](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!