

BOOKBURNERS

SEASON ONE: EPISODE 1

Badge, Book, and Candle



Max Gladstone



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By

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Bookburners

Episode 1

Badge, Book, and Candle

1.

Sal Brooks would have described herself in a police report as early thirties, female, brown hair, five nine, exhausted, borderline breakdown case, shaking hands, haunted eyes. Then she'd have deleted everything after "nine" and continued with the details of the incident. In this case: Forensic analysis of the museum theft yielded an Astoria address. Arriving on the scene with warrant in hand, Detective Collins and I were fired upon from the window by a white male, late forties. After a brief exchange of fire, Detective Collins forced the door. Behind the door—

Sal set her badge and gun on her bureau and gripped the first two fingers of her left hand. Her stomach ran a floor routine even the Russian judge would give full marks.

She'd seen blood before, and bodies. The severed fingers in the ashtray on the coffee table in Astoria that afternoon . . . those were worse.

They'd yield prints, at least. Which would not help her sleep tonight.

Her cell phone rang. Perry. She didn't pick up. The ringing stopped before the call forwarded to voice mail, then started again. Still him.

"Perry, this isn't a good time," was what she started to say, but she didn't get halfway through her brother's name before Hurricane Perry struck shore.

"Sal, thank you, thank you, thank you for picking up. I'm so glad, it's wonderful to hear your voice, I missed you, how're things, how long has it been anyway, can I come over, like, now?"

"It's been a month." She thumbed a gap in her blinds. The sidewalk under her window was bare, and the street almost empty. Red Toyota pickup, Honda Civic, garbage, two young guys staggering home after drinking off a Thursday night. Thank God. The last time she'd heard Perry talk like this, he was on the run from some crazy scenester drama and hadn't waited for her permission to come over, just called her from the sidewalk in the rain and looked up, dripping, with that hangdog John Cusack look she knew he practiced in the mirror. "Since the last time you were in trouble."

"It's nothing big, Sal, I promise, nothing you should worry about, just, you know, internet stuff, and then I started arguing with my roommates and you know people can get crazy sometimes, like, crazy. It's not the same thing as last month, I swear, I just need a place to be, you know. I'd get a hotel if I could." If he had money for a hotel.

She peeked out her corner window just to be sure. He wasn't down there either. "I've had a very long day, Perry."

"I know, I know, every day's a long day for you, I'm so sorry, but I just kind of need a place to rest for a little while, and I *did* apologize for last month, and I sent you flowers."

"David still isn't returning my calls."

“You deserve better than a guy like that, a guy who doesn’t understand the importance of family.”

“David has a huge family. He’s a good guy. He just doesn’t like being kicked out of bed because my kid brother’s locked himself out of his apartment. That was a good thing, emphasis on the *was*. And the flowers you sent were fake.”

“Better that way, they don’t die, right? And it wasn’t just that I locked myself out. And anyway I’m improving, I mean, you don’t have anyone over now. Do you?”

Her eyes narrowed. She glanced out each window again. “Where are you?”

“What do you mean?”

She realized she could hear his voice twice: once through the phone, and once from the hall.

Sal marched from her bedroom past kitchen and living room to the door. She unbolted the bolt, unchained the chain, and pulled the door open.

Perry was less wet than she’d last seen him, at least. One hand pressed an oversized Star Trek phone to his ear. He wore a dirty tan trench coat, open, over a ratty black T-shirt with three pixelated hearts on the front and a fourth half-full, and jeans torn at the knee—from his nervous habit of clawing them while he worked on his computer, rather than from wear. His other hand held a large rectangular parcel wrapped in more T-shirts and duct tape, which he waved at her, then stuck under his arm, and waved again with an empty hand.

He deployed John Cusack version 1.2.

She clicked her phone shut.

He started warming up John Cusack version 1.7.

She sighed, and smiled, and hugged him. “Come in, doofus.”

• • •

He set up in the living room, and she put water in the kettle. “Do I want to know why you’re here?”

“Thank you so, so, so much.” He set the parcel on her living room table and undid the duct tape. “It’s not dangerous, I mean, I’d tell you if it were, you know, but I got into a fight with the roomies over a project we’re working on together, sort of, and I want to make sure I’m right before I go home. Just need some time to work on this thing myself. Bunch of posers. Don’t know Altaic from Aramaic.” He unwrapped the T-shirts layer by layer, each silk-screened video game reference worse than the last.

“I get that one,” she said. “It’s the, what, the game with the dysentery. Why all the T-shirts?”

“Sal, do you have any idea how old this thing is?” He folded a Mario shirt back to reveal a thick tome bound in pale leather, with gold wire on the spine. The pages’ ragged edges were dyed blood-red. Sal remembered severed fingers in an Astoria ashtray, and her stomach made a second pass at the floor routine.

“No?”

“Old, and I mean *old*. I shouldn’t be handling it without gloves.”

The kettle cried, and Sal followed its protest to the kitchen. “You should get new roommates. You fight more with those guys than I ever have with an ex. Even Jeremy.” She returned with two mugs of coffee.

“It’s just professional differences, I mean, we’re working on big problems, borderline intractable, arguments get heated. There are different strategies about how to approach the artifact. Aiden, you know, roommate Aiden with the crush on you, he wants to scan the whole thing for word frequency analysis, which just seems patently silly, the codex form factor suggests it’s supposed to be read, like by people, and anyway Aiden’s security protocols are hella lax, which matters when you’re under surveillance.” He took a sip, made a face. “Is this instant?”

“Wait. Surveillance?”

“Todd says it’s the Bookburners, that’s why they wanted the book out of the house, which is just so dumb—if the Bookburners were after me, how would I have even made it here?”

He set his hand on the book’s cover. Sal hadn’t noticed before how the leather was discolored: most of it matched Perry’s skin, but a crimson bloom spread beneath his fingers. She heard a sound she couldn’t name: a footfall, maybe, or a whisper, very soft. Goose bumps chased goose bumps up her arms.

“Perry, who are the Bookburners? Do you think someone’s following you?”

“I thought you didn’t want to know.”

She leaned over the couch, over his shoulder, and checked through the blinds. Street still bare. Red Toyota pickup. Honda Civic. Garbage. E-Z Carpet Cleaner van.

“Please, Sal. They would have nabbed me on the way. They did not. Ergo, I wasn’t followed.”

“What the hell is going on?”

Someone knocked on her door.

“Shit,” Perry said.

“Jesus Christ, Perry.” She grabbed her phone off the living room table. “Who is that?”

“Aiden. Probably.”

“Mister Brooks?” The man on the other side of the door was unquestionably not Aiden—too old, too sure, too calm. An accent Sal couldn’t place twined through his words. “Mister Brooks, we’re not here to hurt you. We want to talk.”

“Shit,” Perry repeated, for emphasis.

Sal ran to her bedroom and returned with her gun. “Who are you?”

“I’m looking for Mister Brooks. I know he’s in there.”

“If he is, I doubt he’d want to see you.”

“I must talk with him.”

“Sir, I’m a police officer, and I’m armed. Please step away from the door.”

“Has he opened the book?”

“What?” She looked into the living room. Perry was standing now, holding the book, fingers clenched around the cover like she’d seen men at bay clutch the handles of knives. “Sir, please leave. I’m calling 9-1-1 now.” She pressed the autodial. The line clicked.

“Stop him from opening the book,” the man said. “Please. If he means anything to you, stop him.”

“Hello. This is Detective Sally Brooks,” and she rattled off her badge number and address. “I have a man outside my apartment who is refusing to leave—”

Something heavy struck the door. Doorjamb timbers splintered. Sally stumbled back, dropped the phone, both hands on the pistol. She took aim.

The door burst free of the jamb and struck the wall. A human wind blew through.

Later, Sal remembered slivers: a stinging blow to her wrist, her gun knocked back against the wall. A woman’s face—Chinese, she thought. Bob haircut. Her knee slammed into Sal’s solar plexus and she fell, gasping, to the splinter-strewn carpet. The woman turned, in slow-motion almost, to the living room where Perry stood.

He held the open book.

His eyes wept tears of blood, and his smile bared sharp teeth.

He spoke a word that was too big for her mind. She heard the woman roar, and glass break. Then darkness closed around her like a mouth.

• • •

Summer sun baked her skin. Sal lay, fourteen years old, on a raft atop the pond out back of her grandparents’ Carolina homestead, while Perry read aloud on shore. Her hand trailed into the still water. The water was still, but moving too, the raft rocked her head back and forth, and her body wasn’t fourteen anymore, and dammit she was dreaming, wasn’t she?

If she strained, she could hear voices on the other side of the dream.

“You lost him.” A man’s voice, lilting, close—a different voice from before. “How did that happen?”

“He opened the book, is how.” A woman’s voice. “Do you need a picture?”

“I have crayons in the truck if you’d like to draw one.”

“He tried to hit me,” she replied. “Got her instead. I pulled her out, but he made the window before I could catch him.”

“So the boy’s off-grid with a rider in his head, in a city of eight million people. *Wonderful*, I think we’ll call that. A-double-plus effort.”

Sirens.

“Christ,” the man said, “they answer calls quickly here. Come on. Is she—”

“Fine.”

“Are you sure?”

Don’t open your eyes when lying on your back. Bad for them. You’ll see too much of the sun.

She forced them open. The man kneeling over her was red-haired and beautiful. “Sorry. Have to run. Have a nice rest. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

He pulled away, and the ceiling grew new shadows which fell to crush her again.

2.

Sal, in the department clinic, with whatever she had to hand, was how the Clue solution would read if someone didn't start making sense soon. She glared over the doctor's head at Collins, her partner, who leaned against the wall, arms crossed, looking like he'd rather be anywhere but here, carrying anything but the news he carried. Her head swam. "I've told you three times," she said. "My brother came to my apartment. Two people followed him. I gave you their descriptions. They broke down my door. There was a fight, and I woke up when the officers arrived. It's not that complicated a story."

"You're sure you saw your brother?"

"Of course I'm sure. It was Perry. He had some kind of fight with his roommates."

"Breathe," the doctor said.

She breathed. The stethoscope chilled her skin. "So what's the problem?"

Collins shifted, but if he'd been trying to get comfortable, his expression suggested that he'd failed. "Who says there's a problem?"

"Come on, Collins."

"Here." He passed her a tablet. "Hit play."

Security camera footage rendered her apartment building hallway in ghoulish greens and whites. She saw herself open her door and peer out into the hall, smile, step back, swing the door wide and close it again. "This is the wrong footage."

"It's not, though. Check the time stamp."

"Perry's not there."

Collins lowered his chin toward his chest. It didn't touch due to the extra chin in the way. "Scratch one theory."

"You thought I was seeing things."

"Who knows? We got your testimony, we got a living room with broken glass and two cups of instant coffee, we got a tape that doesn't match your story, and falls apart ten minutes later."

"Stare up at the ceiling," the doctor said, "just with your eyes. Keep them wide, please."

The doctor's flashlight burned the world. Sal forced herself not to blink. "So you don't have the intruders, either."

"Tape falls apart, like I said."

"Shit."

"Sal, come on. Chinese woman, white guy with red hair, unnamed third guy with—quote—old, accented—unquote—voice, doesn't give us a lot to go on."

"Irish," she said. "The white guy had an Irish accent."

"Great, Sal. In New York, that sure narrows it down."

"Someone must have doctored the tapes."

"First responders pulled them. If someone messed with the footage, they did it fast."

The doctor released her eyelid, and she blinked pink bloodwebbed blotches from her vision. "The other eye, please." And again the world was light.

"They planned this," Sal said. "Whoever they were. It couldn't have been random."

They were after Perry. They hacked into building security.”

“Which would make sense—I mean, it’d be possible, if paranoid—except those cameras don’t talk to the internet. They’re not even digital. There’s an actual, honest-to-God tape system in the building basement, looks like it was installed back when I was hunting *Playboys* under my big brother’s mattress.”

“Gross, Collins.”

“There was a rat nest on top of the cabinet. Good thing we still have a VCR. Nobody got to that tape before our boys did, trust me. And you should find a new landlord. That building’s a dump.”

“My brother’s out there. Somewhere. I saw him.”

The doctor finished with the flashlight and stepped back. “She’s good to go. If anything’s wrong, I can’t see it.” Sal squeezed both her eyes shut until the pink went away.

“Thanks, Doc. Can you give us a minute?”

When the door closed and left them alone, Collins sank into the doctor’s chair with a long hiss, as if he was under such pressure he had to let out steam to bend. He looked at the back of his knuckles rather than at her.

“You know none of this makes sense,” he said.

“I know what I saw.”

“And the more you say that, the weirder it sounds. Nothing on the cameras. I mean, nothing. No blood.”

“What, do people think I just snapped, imagined my brother being kidnapped, beat myself up, broke my own damn living room window?”

“You were upset when you left yesterday.”

“Of course I was upset. We found fingers in an ashtray! I freaked out, but that doesn’t mean I’m nuts.”

“We went to your brother’s apartment. His roommates say they saw him this morning.”

“Did you see him?” she asked. Collins shook his head. “Then they’re lying. Or he escaped. Either way, he’s into something big. He needs help.”

“We told the boys to call us when he shows up again. For now, you should take a day or two, calm down, rest.”

“And if I don’t?”

He shifted his weight back on the chair, which creaked. “The Lieutenant asked me to tell you all this, so it doesn’t have to get formal.”

“I have to find my brother.”

“Sal—”

She pushed herself off the table and grabbed her jacket from the hook by the door. “If you won’t do it, someone has to.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” he said. “Stay out of trouble, okay?”

She laughed, opened the door, and walked fast until she hit the street.

• • •

Theories were for people with more patience than Sal Brooks, but the Brooklyn-bound Q train stopped over the Manhattan bridge, so she had time to make up a few. “I’m crazy,” the nuclear option, didn’t compel. The doctor said she was fine, physically. People snapped all the time, zero to nuts in sixty seconds, but this kind of snap didn’t match her experience. If she were cracking, her story would make more sense, or less, or both. She’d met people on this very train who told her with overwhelming conviction that they were the product of genetic experimentation by the United States government using alien DNA, and they’d built a prototype transport beam to take them home, which they’d show her if she visited the compound in Jersey they shared with their four lovers chosen to embody the classical Chinese elements. As if she’d trust someone who asked her to go to Jersey.

So far she wasn’t ranting about conspiracies or screaming obscenities at passersby. Count crazy out, for now, though crazy people probably did that too. Once you reject the possibility you’re mad, anything you do, no matter how strange, must be sane. Keep going in that direction and you’re one step away from the creep with the chopped-off index fingers in his ashtray.

The train crossed the river.

But assume you’re not crazy, she thought. Perry didn’t come to you because of an argument with his roommates; he didn’t drop by to say hello. He was afraid. Maybe he thought they wouldn’t follow him into someone else’s apartment. Or maybe he knew he could escape somehow, if he just had time to—

To read that book. Which made no sense.

She rose out of the subway onto a long, wide Brooklyn street with three-story brick houses on both sides, blank dark windows, Italian bakery, convenience store. Newly opened coffee shops indicated these blocks were a hairsbreadth from hip. When the neighborhood crossed over, Perry and his friends would have to move. Providing, of course, whatever mudhole they’d stumbled into didn’t swallow them first.

Perry’s roommates knew *something*. If they had seen him this morning, they could tell her how he looked, where he said he was going when he left. If not, they had lied to cops, which gave her leverage.

Not that she’d need much with Aiden and Todd. The boys scared easy.

She took a quick turn around the block. Dead for ten o’clock in the morning, most of the locals at work somewhere else. Cold November air tossed a *Sun* front page down the sidewalk, and Sal shouldered deeper into her jacket. She walked past the boys’ townhouse, which was the only one on the block still decorated for Halloween. A big rain-soaked felt-and-wire spider clung crookedly outside Perry’s window.

Parked cars lined the street, mostly foreign-made. One finned pink Cadillac belonged in a Mary Kay reward brochure or a museum. And an E-Z Carpet Cleaner van.

Every instinct in her screamed, keep walking. Call backup at least. Only idiots and martyrs throw themselves into situations they don’t understand without cavalry waiting.

She didn’t know it was the same van. She was already on shaky ground back at the office. And the people who’d broken into her house seemed to have no personal feelings about their intrusion. If she remembered the conversation she’d overheard correctly, they even thought they had saved her from—*something*.

Still, though.

If Sal really wanted to rule out any chance she was crazy, she shouldn't have walked straight to the van, drawn her gun, thrown open the rear doors, and told the two monitor-lit figures inside, "Hands where I can see them."

The Chinese woman rolled her eyes, then raised her hands to the level of her shoulders. "I told you we should have switched vans."

The redhead backed away from the keyboard and swiveled in his chair. "She was out cold. How was I supposed to know—"

"Where the hell is my brother?"

"That's an interesting philosophical question, really," the guy said. Nice accent. That was the concussion talking. Focus.

The Chinese woman shifted forward in her chair.

"Don't move," Sal shouted.

"Excuse me, Detective Brooks," said a voice from the sidewalk behind her—a man's, deep, older, and studiously calm. The voice from the door. Sal drew back from the van and turned to include him in her field of vision. "I think there's been a misunderstanding."

He was tall, Hispanic, and wore a priest's black shirt and collar. He held a tray with three coffees in one hand, but the other was raised, palm up, between blessing and surrender.

"Who are you? What the hell is going on here?"

"I'm Father Arturo Menchú," accent on the second syllable, "and as for your other question: I can explain, if you'll let me."

• • •

They stood on the sidewalk beside the van. Menchú had wanted to talk inside, but Sal gave him a what-kind-of-idiot-do-you-take-me-for look, which ended that line of conversation fast. Red looked uncomfortable out in the open—he kept shifting from foot to foot and glancing over his shoulder, hands deep in his pockets. The woman just watched, arms crossed. A bandage wrapped the knuckles of her right hand, and there was a lot of lean muscle hiding beneath her black jacket. Sal liked her. After a confusing day, straightforward hostility felt refreshing.

"You're priests," Sal said, skeptical.

The woman laughed, once.

"I'm a priest," Menchú said. "Grace, of course, is not. Liam's a lay brother."

"Why did you break into my apartment last night?" She considered adding *how*, in reference to everything: the broken door, the book, the corrupted tape. Decided against it. One problem at a time.

Menchú set the tray of coffees atop the van. "Your brother's in possession of a rare manuscript that does not belong to him. It used to belong to the people we work for. It was stolen seventy years ago. Turns out the volume spent the last seven decades in the Metropolitan Museum's sealed collection. Two weeks ago, someone broke into that collection and made off with a number of books, including this one."

“You’re saying Perry was part of the museum heist.” She remembered Astoria, yesterday: severed fingers and an ashtray full of blood. White male, mid-forties. Shots fired. Hope of recovering—Christ—fingerprints. “No way.”

“Not directly. Your brother and his friends were one of many parties looking to buy the stolen texts.” Father Menchú kept his voice calm, maintained eye contact, presented himself to her at an angle. He was good at seeming non-threatening; part of the job, Sal guessed. Her attention drifted back to Grace, who grinned, baring teeth. “There were others, willing to pay more. Your brother stole the book from the original thief, and left a copy in its place. We reached out to your brother, hoping to resolve the issue without violence, but he ran to you. And then he ran from you. The book is valuable, if only to a collector, and the people he stole it from don’t like to lose. We can keep him safe, if he works with us.”

The fingers had been wedged into the gaps in the ashtray meant to hold cigarettes. Their nails pointed out: sunrays of flesh and bone.

“He should go to the police.”

“We are the police,” Menchú said.

“Bullshit.”

“We’re special consultants to the police department on this matter. If you’ll permit me.” He reached, slowly, for his breast pocket. She nodded. From within he produced a business card with a cell phone number Sal recognized. “This is Chief Gallagher’s card. She’ll confirm my story. We were overzealous last night, for which I offer my apologies. Perry is in great danger.”

And there it was, beneath the professional polish, beneath the professional assurance Sal had heard too many times from priests and lawyers—Menchú cared.

“I’m sorry,” he continued. “I know this has been a huge shock. I know you’re worried about your brother. So are we. We need to find him.”

“One man,” Liam said, “off the grid, in a city like this. Paying with cash. No problem. Anyone else you’d like me to find while I’m at it? Elvis? Amelia Earhart?”

Father Menchú ignored him. “It’s possible his friends know something. But they’re scared. They won’t talk to anyone they don’t know.”

“We’re wasting time,” Grace said. “We should just knock down the door.”

Liam nodded. “Great idea. Worked so well last night.”

There were a thousand procedural reasons Sal should leave. But Perry was in danger, and if these people had the chief’s blessing, she could help them without breaking orders. Technically. “I can help.”

“No,” Menchú said. “I’m sorry. We can’t involve you.”

“I’m involved already. This is my brother we’re talking about. Every second counts. If you go in there without me, you’ll learn less than the cops did this morning.”

“We know what we’re doing.”

“So do I.”

Menchú’s eyes were deep, and sad.

Liam cleared his throat. “Let her in, Father. We’re shorthanded anyway.”

The priest sighed. “Very well.”

“One question,” Sal said, to break the silence as much as anything else. “You said you’re consultants. Where from?”

The old man raised one finger to his collar. “Isn’t it obvious?”

3.

“Jesus Christ,” Sal said when Liam handed her the bug. It was barely visible against the cosmetic tape. When she set it against her skin she didn’t feel the slightest chill of metal. “This is good gear.”

“My specialty. And this one.” Liam offered her a thin silver cross on a chain.

“What’s this for?”

“Stuff,” he said. “Just put it on, okay?”

“I don’t believe in God.”

“He believes in you.” He laughed as if he’d made a joke. “Think of it as a temporary deputization.”

Grace checked her watch. “We could have been inside twenty minutes ago.”

“Talk normally,” Liam said. “And we’ll hear. If there’s trouble, use the cross.”

“Panic button?”

“More like a mood ring, only in reverse. If you see something strange, try touching it with the cross. There are,” he wiggled his fingers, “circuits and stuff.”

“You’re joking.”

“Oh, ye of little faith.”

“Thanks,” she said, and left the van.

• • •

A skull knocker stared out at Sal from the boys’ front door, a half-inch left of center. Drill holes covered with duct tape pocked the door to the knocker’s either side—they’d tried to screw the knocker in three times without measuring the door’s actual midpoint, and after the third attempt agreed to celebrate their success.

The mailman had given up on the overstuffed mailbox, its contents congealed by rain into a sodden block of wood pulp and ink. Layers of junk mail formed a newsprint marsh on the front step, sporting an impressive array of greenish molds.

Sal stared into the skull’s glass-chip eyes, squeezed her own eyes closed, opened them again, and reached for the hinged lower jaw.

Before she could touch it, the door jerked open to reveal Aiden, tall and gangly, wearing pajama bottoms and a dirty flannel shirt. He stopped the door with his foot, but he was too skinny to quite fill the small gap. “Sal, this is a really bad time.”

She shoved the door. He stumbled back, upsetting a pile of mud-caked boots, and she pushed through into the narrow musty hall. The door slammed behind her. “Where’s Perry? What the hell have you gotten him into?”

“Perry’s fine, Sal. Come on. This is, like, illegal search or whatever. I know my rights.”

“I don’t give a shit about the weed you have in your desk, Aiden. Perry’s in trouble. True or false?”

“Perry’s, um . . .” Aiden spread his arms to span the hall and block her path, between a rack of mud-splattered coats and a cross-stitch Perry’d made of Darth Vader’s mask. “Perry’s fine. We’re fine. We had, a, you know, small disagreement last

night, but we've taken care of everything. Maybe we could go out for coffee and talk about it?"

"Let's talk here. Unless there's something you're trying to hide."

"Hide? No, of course not. What would we try to hide from you?"

She jerked forward as if to duck under his left arm; when he braced to grab her she jugged right and he fell into the coats while she swept past into the living room, a sea of pizza boxes and USB cables. A rust-dotted Ren-faire sword hung on the wall. Something green bubbled in a beaker on a Bunsen burner atop a claw-foot table she'd rescued from curbside recycling for them. Stairs rose from the mess to the second floor, where the boys slept when they slept at all. Todd—black, older than Perry and Aiden, though he didn't act it—sat at the couch flanked by two monitors, with a heavy leather-bound book open on a stand on the coffee table. He looked up and blinked at Sal through goggles. Aiden's coat-muffled cursing from the hall mixed with music from upstairs, or something like music: a stream of bleeps and blips she remembered from sitting cross-legged on the carpet, eight years old, playing Nintendo.

"Sally! Great to see you. Didn't expect you to drop by. Perry didn't say anything." The prescription goggles warped Todd's eyes to silver dollar size. "But this is a really bad time."

"Aiden said. The bad time wouldn't happen to have anything to do with my brother's disappearance, would it? Or the museum theft?"

Todd let go of the book, too fast. His blue latex gloves left a trace of powder on the brown leather, which was embossed with a vine-and-knot pattern. Or were those vines, after all? "I really don't know what you're talking about, Sal. Like we told the cops, Perry came by this morning. He was fine. He looked scared, but that's it." He swallowed hard. "Theft, though? You think Perry was mixed up in something—"

"I haven't seen that book around here before, Todd."

"Look." He raised his hands, fingers spread. "Perry's the one who gets the books. We analyze, translate. Upload. It's all aboveboard, as far as I know. Maybe Perry got himself in deep with the wrong people, but I don't know who or why."

"You just read the books."

"That's it," he said.

"So if I came back here with a warrant, what would I find?"

"You don't want to do that, Sal. I mean, really."

"I want to know where my brother is."

"He doesn't want to see you."

"He came to my house last night, terrified. Nothing's changed between now and then."

Behind her, in the hall, Aiden recovered.

"Sal." Sweat ran down Todd's temple to his cheek. "Maybe we can talk this over somewhere outside?" His eyes jerked up and left.

She turned. Three bedroom doors upstairs—one for Aiden, one for Todd, one for Perry. Perry's, the one with the Japanese cartoon scroll, was slightly ajar. "That sounds like a good idea," she said, then ran up the stairs and burst through the door into Perry's room.

Monitors illuminated the unmade bed, the bare bookshelves, the piled clothing.

There should have been sunlight, but the Halloween-store spider hung outside Perry's window blocked the sun.

And Perry himself sat in ripped jeans and bloodstained shirt, curled like a shrimp over his keyboard, unblinking eyes inches from his central monitor. Barefoot. Hair tousled. One-day growth of beard. Jaw muscles snaked, relaxed, snaked again as he rocked in his chair, typing.

“Perry!”

Except.

Detective Brooks, a lawyer might ask someday, *how did you know the person sitting in the chair was not your brother?*

And she'd open her mouth before the courtroom but no words would come out. An audience would stare at her. The judge would drum her fingers. The lawyer would lean forward. *Any time, Detective Brooks.*

The clothes were Perry's, the body language ditto.

But still, when she said, “Perry?” the second time, her voice was uncertain.

He stopped typing, uncurled himself vertebra by vertebra from the keyboard, and turned to her. His eyes focused on the wall behind her. He smiled woodenly. “Sal. Sister. I'm sorry you had to come here.”

“Perry.” She'd imagined hugging him when she saw him again, imagined hitting him too. Neither seemed possible now. “Perry, you're here.” As if saying that would make it true.

“I am. And you should go, Sal.” What a reasonable suggestion. “I have work to finish, if you don't mind.”

She didn't. But her not-minding was strange. Wasn't it? “Perry, what happened last night?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I was pushed, you see. The Bookburners chased me, and I took help where I could find it. I'm perfectly fine. Better than I've been in a long, long while. You're a . . . police officer,” he said, as if he'd just looked the fact up in a large and fine-print list. His words didn't match the movements of his mouth. She focused through the fear—and why fear? He was her brother.

But maybe he wasn't, right now.

His mouth was not moving in time with his words, because the words he spoke were not English, even though that was the language she heard. “It must feel like this when you solve a case. When the whole world makes sense at once. I've been working on a puzzle for a long time, and I just needed the right push.”

He reached for her.

There seemed to be a great deal of space between them all of a sudden, but his arm grew longer to bridge the gap. A finger of ice pressed against her skin above her heart, so cold it burned. As the hand approached it no longer looked like a hand at all, not like a hand of flesh. Torn corrugated tin twisted around paper and woven plastic bones, forming fingers. Black oil dripped from ragged joints. The arm was a length of rebar wound with trashbags and shredded cloth. Bottleglass eyes reflected the monitors' blue glow. Thin lips parted to reveal metal teeth, wet with more oil.

But some traitor impulse still insisted this was Perry, her brother, there was no

reason to pull back from him, there was no reason to run, she should let this thing touch her, that the oil on its metal skin was not oil in fact but a whisper, a voice that might help her if it only got inside—

The cold fire against her chest was real. Her skin seared, froze, cracked. She followed the pain back to her body and retreated, unsteady, as if her legs belonged to someone else. She staggered out into the hall. The arm stretched toward her, impossibly long.

She slammed the door shut on the thing's hand.

The Perry-thing didn't seem to care. It kicked the door open. Mangled fingers clicked back into place. Its smile split as it widened. It didn't need a face anymore. Just teeth.

From the bedroom she heard a window shatter.

Bottleglass eyes widened. A black blur knocked the thing that was not her brother into the wall. Sal blinked, and the blur resolved into Grace. Slivers of window glinted from the insteps of her boots. She raised one of Perry's monitors overhead and slammed it into the fallen creature's face.

Sally thought—*Help*. Her hand went to her shoulder holster, but Grace and the creature were too close, moving too fast. It threw Grace back, wriggled to its feet without concern for any principles of anatomy, and ran at her. Grace jumped back onto the bed, out of reach, dodged a tin claw, then jumped onto the creature before it could recover, toppled it to the ground, and struck it in the face four times with her forehead. A ceramic plate on the thing's face broke—Grace clawed inside it for something Sal couldn't see.

"Take it easy! That's my brother!"

"It's not," Grace said. "It never was." The creature threw her into the desk. Grace roared, dodged left; a claw shattered one of the remaining monitors. Grace grabbed the broken flat-panel from the floor and hit the arm, which snapped.

"Grace, get back! Give me a shot."

"I have this. You worry about the guys downstairs."

"What?"

"Go!"

She went. Behind her more screaming, more broken glass. Downstairs, Todd sat in front of the book. His blue-gloved hands stroked its paper. He looked up and over at her.

"Todd, Jesus Christ, there's something up there."

But his goggle-swollen eyes were black from pupil out to edge. He turned a page of his book.

The sword on the wall was missing.

Footsteps in the hall beside her. Sal ducked back into the staircase. The sword rang off the wall—no edge on that blade, which made it marginally less dangerous, but a four-foot-long steel bar would break her bones just fine. The sword tore a deep gouge in wallpaper and drywall, and fell from Aiden's hand. Before he could recover, Sal kicked the back of his knee, hit him a few times in the face, and he fell.

Todd still sat, watching her, turning pages.

Like Perry last night, staring at her as if from the bottom of a deep well.

A heavy weight struck the front door, and the latch groaned. A man swore—Liam's voice—and Aiden's body began to move, more like a marionette than a person, a structure

manipulated by contracting individual muscles.

“Todd, close the book.”

He blinked, slowly.

She reached for the cover, thought better of touching the leather with her bare hands, and tried with the sword instead. When its tip touched, an electric shock seized her. The apartment squeezed around her like a fist, and again the cold fire flared against her breastbone. She opened her eyes—she’d fallen back onto the stairs, and Aiden was crawling toward her. She kicked him back, and pushed herself upright. Unclenched her hand from the sword.

Crashing sounds from upstairs—a cry of pain, a frustrated roar.

If there’s trouble, use the cross. . . . Like a mood ring, only in reverse.

Dammit. None of this made sense. But—connections—the cross had burned her free of the Perry-thing’s influence. It hurt her, and she followed that pain back to her own mind. Maybe it could protect her from the book.

She undid her top shirt button. The cross lay heavy against her skin, as if stuck by magnets. She pried it free; it left a red welt. *Think about that later. Think about all this later. Just do.* The closer she brought the cross to the book, the heavier it seemed. Her arm shook. What the hell were all those gym hours good for, if not for this?

She hooked the book’s cover with the cross, and swung it closed.

Sometimes in the winter, after twenty minutes’ walk down long avenues against a vicious wind, she’d take shelter in a subway stop and feel her body expand without anything to fight against. She felt like that now. Silence unfurled. The closed book vibrated like a plucked string. The cross had lost its sheen—all tarnished save where her fingers touched the silver.

Aiden lay still, breathing heavy. Todd collapsed, trembling, to the sofa.

She shook him by his shoulders. Pinched him. Struck him across the face. Tried the cross. The tarnished bit yielded no reaction. When she touched the part that was still shiny to his cheek, she heard a hiss. His eyes snapped open, and he screamed at a higher pitch than she’d thought his voice could make.

“Todd. Dammit, Todd, are you okay?”

“Sally,” he said. “Sorry.”

“What the hell’s going on? Where’s Perry? What was that thing?”

“Came this morning. Got into our heads. Left the dummy in his room, and the book—the pages talked to us. Told us what to do.”

“It’s done. I closed the book.”

“It got inside.” He touched his chest. “Still there. Whispers.”

“Where’s Perry? The real Perry?”

“Storage.” He coughed. “Took the other books, told us to stay here, distract people. He’s—”

Black tendrils wormed across Todd’s eyes, through sclera and iris toward the pupil. Cords of muscle stood out on his throat.

“Shit.” She tried the cross again, but he didn’t react. Covered in tarnish. She looked around, unsure. Maybe something here could help. But the house was a mess, except for

the claw-foot table where the burner was no longer burning. She heard a hiss and smelled—

The door burst open. She was already halfway down the hall, pulling Todd by the collar of his shirt. Dude weighed like a billion pounds, not to mention Aiden, who was at least out too cold to fight. Her back hurt like hell, and her legs were rubber, were jelly, were really fucking tired. Liam stood in the door, blinking like an idiot. “Gas,” she shouted, and saw him wince—earpiece, linked to her mic. “Help me!”

He ran up the hall and grabbed Aiden. They left a wet trail through pulped newspapers and fallen leaves. Sal looked back and saw Grace slip out Perry’s bedroom window to the fire escape. She made it to the neighboring building before a hammer of air struck Sal in the chest and she fell.

• • •

Fire painted Liam’s face orange and green. Sirens wailed, too close for comfort. Grace dropped from fire escape to sidewalk. Sal stood; Aiden and Todd sprawled, unconscious but breathing, at her feet. “We have to get out of here,” Liam said.

Understatement of the millennium, candidate number one. And yet.

“What the hell was that?” She was shouting, and she didn’t care. “Any of that? No single piece of anything that just happened makes sense.”

“Unless you want to be an accessory to arson,” Grace said, “can we talk about this later?”

“Why am I an accessory to anything? I went in to help my brother and his friends. Now their house is on fire, they’re I don’t even know what—”

“Unconscious,” Liam supplied.

“Hypnotized, or something!”

“That too.” The sirens were close now. An old man in a bathrobe stood a short distance up the street, staring. A crowd gathered in front of a coffee shop to watch the smoke. “Look, can we have this conversation anywhere else?”

“I’m not leaving without an answer.”

Liam stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I don’t—there’s no—it’s fucking complicated, okay?”

“Then un-complicate it!”

An iron cuff closed around Sal’s arm, only it wasn’t a cuff at all, but Grace’s hand. There was blood on the woman’s face, but no open wounds Sal could see—a few cuts which, dammit, could not be scabbing over already. Could they? Grace’s eyes were stars around which the world wheeled.

“Magic,” Grace said.

“Magic?”

“Magic.”

“Grace,” Liam said, “she’s a civilian. I mean, are you really sure we should be talking about—”

“You want to waste time keeping her out of the loop, waste your own.” Grace hadn’t turned from Sal. “We deal with magic. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said. “Magic. Christ.”
“We can tell you more. Not here.”

4.

“Start with that thing in my brother’s room,” Sal said when they stopped the van near Prospect Park. “What was it? Is Perry dead? What did it do with him?”

“Homunculus,” Father Menchú said. He sat on an upended milk crate in the back of the van, working his keychain like a rosary. “He’s not dead, and the homunculus didn’t do anything with him—Perry was driving it from a distance.”

“Homunculus?”

“They’re not so bad once you get to know them,” Liam said. He was running a property records search, half-paying attention, as if this whole damn situation was normal, which made Sal even angrier. “Well, no, scratch that. They stay bad. Just an understandable kind of bad. You get used to it.”

“You do this all the time.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say *all* the time.” He swore at the monitor.

Menchú offered coffee. “Grace didn’t drink hers.”

Sal glared at him over the cup, and he withdrew it. “Tell me everything.”

“Get out of here,” Grace said. “You’ve done enough.”

“You tell me magic’s real, and then you want to kick me out?”

“You were frozen on that sidewalk. Bad place to talk. You can leave now. I would.”

“But you didn’t,” Sal said, “obviously.”

Grace’s eyes were sharp as broken glass.

Sal spoke fast to cover her discomfort. “Perry was not controlling that thing.

Whatever spoke to me, it was not my brother. I want the truth.”

“I didn’t lie to you,” Menchú said. “Not as such.”

“You said my brother was in trouble because he stole a book. You didn’t mention magic or homunculuses or whatever.”

“I said your brother was in possession of a stolen book.”

She blinked. “Oh.”

“This isn’t easy for anyone to hear the first time. The three of us are . . .” Menchú hesitated, searching for the right word.

“Monster hunters?”

“Archivists.”

“Okay,” Sal said. “Now I’m confused.”

“The three of us are part of a society responsible for stocking and tending the Vatican’s Black Archives.”

Sal frowned. “I saw a Discovery Channel thing about that. Forbidden books. Heresies.”

“That’s what people know,” Menchú said.

Grace stood, squeezed past the priest into the van’s passenger seat, pulled a dog-eared copy of *Pride and Prejudice* from the glove compartment, kicked her feet up on the dash, and started reading.

“The world’s bigger than most people know,” Menchú said. “Imagine we live on an island in an ocean full of monsters. Most of the time we’re safe from the monsters. But sometimes the tide rises. Sometimes the monsters cause big waves. Sometimes people dig

channels that run out into the deep ocean, and hungry things come in. Sometimes they mean to; more often it's an accident. These channels take the form of—artifacts. Books, often. Anything that connects one mind to another. For the last two thousand years, artifacts in Europe and the Americas have wound up in the Vatican's Black Archives. The book your brother brought to your apartment is the *Liber Manus*, "the Book of the Hand," which we assume is the name for the monster the book contains, a charismatic world-eater type with a taste for human minds. It surfaced for the first time in the nineteenth century, in London, shipped for America on the *Titanic*, and arrived in the care of a half-drowned baronet. The *Liber Manus* was unharmed by the crash, of course. If it could be damaged by such conventional means, we'd be out of a job. Before the book could do serious damage in the States, local officials killed its bearer and locked the volume away. The book's been quiet for generations, and the warnings became department gossip. Precautions slipped. Traces of the *Liber Manus*'s existence reached the internet, and your brother found them."

"So Perry's, what, he's been taken over by a sea monster?"

Grace, in the passenger seat, turned a page loudly. "He opened the book," she called back. "The Hand jumped into his mind."

Liam clicked his mouse, swore, clicked again.

"Demons," Sal said. "You're talking about demons."

"It's not clear what they are, theologically speaking," Menchú said. "Some present themselves as fallen angels, but they may be lying. Some don't speak with us. Some can't."

"Demons," Grace said, and turned a page.

"How did Perry even get this book?"

"There are communities—" Menchú said.

"Idiots," Liam added.

"—communities, loose associations of amateur scholars and technical experts who believe information wants to be free. Your brother and his friends belong to one. He and his friends, and their friends, know enough of the picture I've just outlined to believe the metaphor is literal. They're mostly harmless, but your brother found a book with real power. He stole the merchandise from the initial thieves, who then turned on one another."

Fingers in an ashtray. Sal shuddered.

"He brought the book home. His friends kicked him out because they were afraid of reprisals from the surviving criminals. "

"And us, " Grace said.

"So he went to your apartment. When we followed him there, the book offered him escape. He opened it. Ordinarily the, ah, demon's control over your brother would have been limited in its first hours. We underestimated the depth of his study. He had the necessary languages, the right frame of mind, and no tools to resist possession. The Hand jumped into him. He must have left the homunculus at his apartment to keep watch, and to retrieve needed materials and information. He controlled it through the book in the townhouse."

"Was that the, whatsit, the *Liber Manus*? Did I close it?"

"Hardly," Liam said. "The book you closed back there was just a chump text."

"What?"

“A poor copy,” Menchú explained. “The Hand recorded a piece of its name there, and projected its power through the name. That book will have burned up in the fire—unlike a true work, an imperfect copy has no special properties beyond its content. Find Perry, and we find the *Liber Manus*.”

“Which is turning out to be terrifically easy, just for the record,” Liam said. “Perry’s cell phone’s dead. No property records on file. Traffic cameras follow him from the house at nine this morning, but lose him in a tunnel.”

“And now the demon is free, riding your brother’s mind, somewhere in New York. It will cement its control, and once that’s done, it will gather acolytes.”

“Cement,” Sal said. “So you can still save him.”

“If we’re lucky, we can close the book without hurting him. Cut off the demon’s control.”

“And if you’re not lucky?”

Menchú’s lips pressed together. He returned the van keys to his pocket. They rang like bells. “When we close the book, he might be too far gone to come back. Your brother’s friends, in the house—they were, let’s say, wading in the surf. Perry’s swimming in a riptide.”

“No.”

“You don’t know what these things do when they get out of hand.”

“How bad can it be? I’ve never seen a demon attack on the news.”

“People disappear all the time. All over the world.”

“Murders. Accidents. Shit happens.”

“And sometimes the world swallows people, and those left behind forget. A corner of an island falls into the sea. How can you tell it was ever there? Not even bones remain. If you know how to look, you can see the cracks where land once was. Lost legions. Lost cities. Have you ever heard of the town of Colebridge, New York?”

“No.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s impossible. A whole town can’t just disappear.”

“Information decays. Paper lasts, but people are good at disbelieving evidence. Those who don’t know how to feel around the edges of a gap might never notice gaps at all. The mind closes to cover even the largest wound. When was the last time you thought about the place where you were born?”

“You’re saying it might eat New York.”

“The more time we spend here, the longer the demon in your brother has to shore up his control. If you know how to find him, you could save lives. Including his.”

“If I know anything, and I tell you, you’ll go in there, guns out, and hurt him.”

“We want to close that book. We want to save these people.”

“Go to the cops, if he’s so dangerous.”

“What would you tell them? How could you explain the situation so they would intervene knowing what they faced?”

“The Chief—”

“Knows us. She calls us when your people are out of their depth.”

“We could show them evidence.”

“By the time the fire department’s done, the homunculus will be a pile of melted garbage. Magic leaves no traces for forensics.”

“You guys can’t be it. It’s just the three of you in a rented van?”

“Hey,” Liam said. “I like this van.”

“This is a job for the government. The Men in Black. Some, like, I don’t know, some Library of Congress thing. The CIA.”

“The problem,” Menchú said, “is older than your government. Its solutions are older, too.”

Liam leaned back in his chair and looked at her upside down. “Besides, if you think we’re low-budget, imagine the team a library would field.”

“This is what we do. These are the calls we make.”

“Not today,” Sal said. “Not if I go after him myself.”

Before Menchú could respond, she burst from the van into the cold gray morning and ran through the hedge into the park.

• • •

Rain soaked through her sneakers and the ankles of her jeans. She smelled ripe mulch and pulping leaves. Bare branches clawed the sky. Hands forced deep in pockets, head down, she marched through the park. Once she was out the other side she could hail a cab south, reach Perry’s storage unit before Menchú and his team. If they were telling the truth.

Of course they were, or thought they were. She’d seen that garbage thing wearing her brother’s face—or had she seen it after all?

She had. But—

The mind closes to cover even the largest wound.

If she kept walking, would she forget her brother? Or was this just the usual serving of post-traumatic stress, as memory chopped weird meat into chewable chunks? There had been a lot of weird in that house.

Either way, she had to get to Newark, fast.

“Detective Brooks!”

Liam’s voice.

“Sal,” he repeated, closer, desperate.

Keep walking, she told herself. But she’d never been good at listening to herself, especially when she made sense.

His arms were out, palms down, his eyes wide. He looked paler than usual.

“You want to tell me to trust Menchú,” she said. “That you guys know what you’re doing. You’re talking about my brother’s life.”

“I know how it feels,” he said. “I’ve been there.”

She had a good few sentences of tirade left, but that stopped her.

“I walked his road. I was a punk. I knew the truth was out there. I looked. And what I found, Sal, it got inside my head.” He took a step toward her. She didn’t retreat. Gray clouds shifted against a backdrop of gray clouds. “I lost two years to a baby version

of the thing that's in your brother now. One minute it's February 2011, I'm using a three-year-old library management system exploit to get a sealed manuscript out of the vaults at Trinity, and then it's October 2013, I've missed the World Cup, and Grace and Father M. wake me in a warehouse basement in Prague. There's blood all over the walls, and I have wires coming out of my arms." He pushed up the sleeve of his windbreaker and the flannel beneath. Red scars pierced his corded muscle and textured his tattoos. "I don't know what I was doing for those two years. Nobody knows. But Grace and the Father found me, and brought me back."

She reached for his forearm, for the scars. He pushed his sleeve back down before she could touch him.

"We care. We know what we're doing. And your brother is in danger. If you know where he is—dealing with this yourself is crazy. Give us the information. We'll help him. I'll help him. But, trust me, it's a bad idea to tackle this world alone."

His eyes were blue, and very bright.

"He's my brother," she said. "I'll save him. You can help, if you want. But he's mine."

"We can work with that."

"Let's go, then. We have a drive ahead of us."

5.

“Newark,” Liam said, without further comment, as they crossed the Goethals Bridge.

“Perry and his friends needed cheap storage. They go through a lot of equipment, buy books by the foot at estate sales, on eBay. I didn’t know why,” Sal said, “until now.”

“You never wondered why your kid brother was laying in a lifetime supply of dead men’s books?”

“He’s done weird shit since he was a kid. Before this it was five years of collecting old gears and selling them at steampunk conventions, which was, you know, also a weird way to use his history degree. I have my life and he has his. Or did, I guess.” She counted the rounds she had left, checked that her weapon hadn’t been damaged in the fight in the house. She didn’t plan to fire it, but then, she never went in planning to fire. If she did, she’d have to.

“See, Grace? We never would have found him without her help.”

Grace shrugged and turned a page.

Menchú passed Sal a manila envelope containing another silver cross.

“I have one of those already.”

“They don’t work when they’re tarnished. Swap it out. Drop the used one in the envelope.”

She pulled the chain over her head. It felt much heavier than when she’d put it on. “It’s the cross that matters?”

“The cross guides us in our faith,” Menchú said.

“But the silver’s the pertinent bit,” Liam added. “Worked silver, the older the better. It soaks up magic, which is where the tarnish comes from. We’re still working on the why. Stings like a— Well, it stings, but that’s better than letting some bastard root around in your skull. And the Church has a lot of crosses lying around, turns out. Seal the envelope.”

The glue tasted of wood pulp and horse hooves. “Any of that coffee left?” It was cold, and never had been any good, but at least it tasted like coffee. The new cross hurt when it touched the seared skin on her chest, but it felt lighter than the old one.

“Thank you for coming with us,” Menchú said. “Grace speaks highly of your courage.”

“Does she? Thanks.”

Grace didn’t look up from her book. “Just don’t get us all killed.”

“Not my plan,” Sal said. “Take the next exit.”

• • •

The storage locker complex sprawled over asphalt acres, and still they drove past it on the first try. “He’s turning us away,” Menchú said.

“At least we know he’s here.” Liam pulled a U-turn.

Sal’s cross burned. She saw, with her mind’s eye as much as with her physical ones, the We-Stor-It sign, remembered driving Perry here the first time, before he and the boys got their beater Olds. *Those who don’t know how to feel around the edges of a gap might never notice gaps at all.* “Now. Left.” Liam yanked the wheel and they slid down a driveway into an empty

storage parking lot.

Liam parked at the end of a row of vacant spaces, and they hit pavement. Easier to say what wasn't different about this space than what was. The character of light hadn't changed. The colors weren't dimmer or more vibrant. There wasn't much noise of any sort save their footsteps, but she could still hear trucks roll down the highway in the middle distance. Nor was there any of that spatial oddness she remembered from the boys' house. The storage units lay in long rows, all right angles and closed garage doors.

It just felt . . . less, somehow. She'd heard that cats and dogs freaked out before earthquakes and tidal waves, before sinkholes opened to swallow houses. They knew when the ground was going wrong. Maybe people had the same sense, less keen—maybe they only felt this way when the collapse was bigger, deeper, more fundamental. The world, Menchú said, was an island eaten by an ocean from beneath.

Maybe he was wrong.

It didn't feel that way.

This was bigger than she felt, walking away from the E-Z Carpet Cleaner van in the storage parking lot beside three people she barely knew. This was bigger than any of them, but it was damn sure bigger than Detective Sally Brooks. Something that could eat the world like this, she couldn't fight it, she couldn't arrest it. Liam, Grace, Menchú, they all seemed to have some kind of angle on—magic. Call it by name. She'd brought them here. She could stay in the van, tell them the locker number, let them take it from here. Stay safe.

Sal laughed.

They looked at her, uncertain. Menchú especially. "Detective Brooks. If you want to wait—"

"Can't you feel it?" she said.

He shook his head.

"Perry, or whatever's inside him. It's strutting. Putting on a front. Trying to scare us off. Me in particular."

"The Hand is dangerous," he said. "It will eat us if we give it a chance."

"Yeah. But now, more than anything, it wants us to leave." She bared her teeth. "Third row, fifth locker on the left. Let's go."

• • •

Menchú, on the approach, didn't share her optimism. "Its hold on your brother lasts as long as the book's open. Close it—"

"With the cross. I know."

"Don't use the cross if it's tarnished, and don't touch the book with your bare hand. I'll try first. Grace and Liam will deal with any guards."

"It's been awake in our world for less than a day. You think it has goons?"

"It may have turned people, like the boys in the townhouse. There must have been others here when it arrived."

She looked back at Grace and Liam. Grace's novel had vanished into a pocket; Liam

pulled a fingerless glove onto his left hand and snapped it closed at his wrist. Grace rolled her eyes at the sound, at the glove, at Liam in general.

“Cross,” Sal said. “Don’t touch the book. Anything else?”

“It may tempt you, as you get closer, offering bargains. Don’t trust it.”

“I figured. I mean, it’s a demon.”

The door to Perry’s storage locker door was rolled down, its padlock locked. She glanced back for ideas.

Grace struck the padlock with a cinderblock, and it broke. She shrugged.

Liam closed the snap on his second glove.

Then someone tackled him from the right.

“Shit!” A large man lay on top of him, meaty fingers pushing toward his throat.

Before Sal could react Grace was there—she grabbed the man’s We-Stor-It uniform polo shirt and threw him back with a twist of her hips. The uniformed puppet pushed himself upright—eyes wide and black from edge to edge—a foot taller than Grace, easy. She kicked him in the knee, struck him in the temple with an elbow, and he went down. Black tears left dark lines down his cheeks.

“Shit,” Sal said in a different tone of voice than Liam had used.

Other figures emerged from the alleys between the storage units—men and women in uniform, a family of three with the daughter in pigtails. Sal felt that she should have seen them approaching. Of course, Menchú should have seen the driveway before it was time to turn. Grace spun, trying to face all directions at once. Liam pushed himself to his feet.

Menchú turned to her. “Still think it’s scared?”

Sal could have answered. Instead, she opened the door.

Candlelight flickered behind layers of fake Victorian furniture and chemical glassware, disused futons and piles of books—leather bindings and paperbacks, journals and diaries and dime-store lesbian detective novels. And there, at the far end of a narrow path through junky cast-off dreams of mystic grandeur, behind a semicircle of open books, stood Perry.

Well. Not stood. Floated.

“Sal,” he said, or the thing inside him said, and smiled, and his teeth were points and there was no tongue in the pit of his mouth. “An unexpected pleasure.”

She should have waited for Menchú. He’d done this before. But this was her brother. So she ran into the gap.

Which turned out to be for the best, because when a puppet jumped her from a gap in the boxes, Menchú was there to pull it (*her*, she corrected herself, these things could wake up, probably) off her back. Of course, the puppet then grabbed a chair and struck him in the head, but he seemed more staggered than hurt.

Sal marched toward the thing that wore her brother. “I bet,” she said. “That’s why you tried to keep me away. Perry, if you’re still in there, I’m trying to help you.”

That smile didn’t waver. The books’ pages turned of their own accord. He raised one hand and a shadowy headwind blasted her. The soles of her shoes left black streaks on the concrete floor. “What did they tell you, Sal? That this wasn’t me? Is that the lie they spun?”

“My brother wouldn’t do this.”

“Are you sure? If your brother had the power we have now—”

“We?” she said.

“Oh, fine. Spoil my fun. How can you tell the difference, anyway?”

“My brother has a tongue.”

“I can make a tongue, if you’d rather.” Fire licked his teeth. “This is your brother’s body, and I have his brain right here—who’s to say I’m not him, just with the power he always wanted? I can rifle through his memories, every dirty thought, desire, each terror and suppressed impulse. Delicious and nutritious. Would you like to know how many times he wanted to kill you? How many times he hated you?” He turned ten pages of the leftmost book forward, then flipped three pages back, an unpracticed chef working an unfamiliar recipe.

She forced herself toward him, step by step. The cross froze and tore her skin. Burn victims flashed through her memory: charcoaled edges of flesh and white bone showing. “He didn’t do any of that. Those thoughts don’t matter.”

“But they do! You feared an unjust world, and so you became a cop. That’s what he thinks. He feared being powerless, so he sought power, which led him to me. That’s your lovely little weakness, you humans—you’re so blissfully susceptible to destiny.”

The shadow-wind reached gale force. Somewhere behind her Grace and Liam and Father Menchú fought for their lives, for her, for Perry.

“What do you want with this?”

“What does anyone want?” Perry said. “A future. Futures taste grand. And you people have built so many of them for yourselves, like ice cream flavors. A hundred years back you expected more of the same forever, until maybe some god scooped his favorites off to play in a cut-rate Heaven. Bland. Tasteless. But now—starscapes and apocalypses, gray goo and futuristic despotism, oil crises and pandemic collapses, floods and robots and monsters, oh my! Fresh universes of fear. Your brother’s spinning them by the billions inside me. You could join him. Suffer through a few million hells for me and I’ll give you a paradise none can match.”

“Perry,” she said. So close now, but with every step the wind grew twice as strong. And she heard whispers, too, whispers that were colors, voices like claws in her belly. The cross wormed into her, the cross pierced her, the cross wriggled into her heart. “Perry, wake up. This thing needs you afraid. Listen to me. It’s your sister, it’s Sal, I’m outside your fucking door and I need you and you better open up right now or so help me God—”

Perry’s eyes opened. The real ones, the brown that matched her own. John Cusack version 1.7. Real tears ran down his cheeks. Then he crumpled, clutching his face. The voice that wasn’t his screamed words she couldn’t hear. The shadow-wind stopped. She knelt before the books, before the Book, the *Liber Manus*. Seconds, maybe, no more. She pulled the cross from around her neck. She’d lifted bodies that weighed less. Her arms trembled.

The cross was black. A smooth tarnish covered every surface, even the chain. She scraped it frantically with her fingernail but couldn’t mar the matte.

Fuck.

No silver around. Nothing *like* silver. Battered paperbacks, that was all.

And Perry was recovering. No. She recognized that body language—the straighter

shoulders, the deeper breathing, that was the Hand reasserting control.

Behind her, Menchú fell.

It took the Hand time to learn her brother. If it jumped into her, Menchú and Grace and Liam—and, hell, Perry—would have a few critical seconds to close the book. And if it jumped into her, it would let Perry go.

Perry wanted to kill her, the Hand said. Well, fine. She'd wanted to kill him, too.

What else were siblings for?

The Hand-in-Perry straightened and smiled its sharp-toothed smile with the tongue of flame behind. She tackled the *Liber Manus*, slammed it shut, and flung it from her like a poisonous snake she'd caught by the neck.

The sinkhole feeling, the brink of catastrophe, the incipient collapse—stopped.

The world blinked.

Sal was still Sal. She was so shocked she almost didn't notice when Perry began to fall.

She caught him before he hit the floor. "Perry. Come on, Perry, wake up."

No answer. He breathed deep, and his teeth were back to normal, and there was a tongue in his mouth again, but his eyes were closed. She slapped him. No answer. Shook him. "Perry!" Nothing.

Menchú set his hand on her shoulder. He looked blurred. She blinked, and he grew edges.

"It's okay," she said. "We won."

6.

Emotions take up space, which is why all priests, from bearskin-kilted Wotanites down to modern Xenophiles, make such a fuss over architecture. Rooms shape the feelings within. Parallax crushes impressions of size: high ceilings and pointed arches hold more heaven than the sky itself. Close chambers fit cozy emotions, or stifling ones. A dense nest will accommodate sweaty sex and a mushroom-assisted voyage to the outer spheres. But don't whisper to your lover in a cathedral. Don't look for Wotan in a closet.

Don't hope to feel any way but forlorn by a hospital bed.

Sal stood by Perry's side, and listened to heartbeat beeps through a cruddy speaker.

"This is the first time I've seen him in anything but a T-shirt," she said. "The first time since we were kids."

"I'm sorry," Menchú said from the door.

She turned from the bedside. She hadn't when she'd heard him approach. Only knew it was him from reflections. "He could wake up any day."

"Yes."

"Or the Hand might have dragged him along with it. Back out there. Into the ocean."

"Maybe."

"We could open the book."

"And the Hand would come out again. Now we have the *Liber Manus* in custody, we can keep it closed. Keep the world safe. That storage locker was a treasure trove—Perry and his friends collected several copies of dangerous texts. We have those, too, now. And the world's safe for the moment. That's what winning looks like."

"We can't fight these things at all?"

"We can keep them out," Menchú said. "But there are more all the time. More this year than last. More this century than the one before."

"Are all of them that bad?"

"Not all that . . . hungry. We found a pair of wings that would let you fly if you put them on. A well that answers questions."

"Have you found one that brings back souls?"

"Not yet," he said. "Before you ask—"

"You don't know what I'm going to say yet."

He looked at her over the rims of his glasses.

"Fine," she said. "Go ahead."

"It gets worse. You wanted to keep your brother safe. Look what happened."

"I'll save him. These sea monsters of yours—I want to learn their names. And you need me. Liam has the tech side down, and Grace can fight, and you know the secrets. But none of you are cops."

"You wouldn't be, either," he said, "if you join us. Not in practice. You'd keep your badge—technically you'd be seconded to the Vatican—but we don't work like cops work. I've seen men and women end up like Perry. I have friends the world forgot, as if they were never born. When I was your age I thought I could get to the bottom of all this. But there's no bottom. It just keeps going down."

"I'm ready for that."

He laughed. "You have no idea what you're saying." But he held out his hand, and she took it. "Welcome to the team."

Up next:

**Welcome to the Bookburners, Sal.
Hope you survive the experience.**



Visit us at serialbox.com to never miss an episode!

Writer Team

Max Gladstone (lead writer) has been thrown from a horse in Mongolia, drunk almond milk with monks on Wudang Shan, and wrecked a bicycle in Angkor Wat. Max is also the author of the Craft Sequence of books about undead gods and skeletal law wizards—*Full Fathom Five*, *Three Parts Dead*, *Two Serpents Rise*, with *Last First Snow*.

Max fools everyone by *actually* writing novels in the coffee shops of Davis Square in Somerville, MA. His dreams are much nicer than you'd expect.

Brian Francis Slattery is the author of *Spaceman Blues*, *Liberation*, *Lost Everything*, and *The Family Hightower*. *Lost Everything* won the Philip K. Dick Award in 2012. He's the arts and culture editor for the *New Haven Independent*, an editor for the *New Haven Review*, and a freelance editor for a few not-so-secret public policy think tanks. He also plays music constantly with a few different groups in several different genres.

He lives with his family just outside of New Haven CT, and admits that elevation above sea level was one of the factors he took into account. For one week out of every year, he enjoys living completely without electricity.

Mur Lafferty is the author of *The Shambling Guides* series from Orbit, including *The Shambling Guide to New York City* and *Ghost Train to New Orleans*. She has been a podcaster for more than ten years, running award-winning shows such as *I Should Be Writing* and novellas published via podcast. She has written for RPGs, video games, and short animation. She lives in Durham, NC, where she attends Durham Bulls baseball games and regularly pets two dogs. Her family regrets her Dragon Age addiction and wishes she would get help.

Before joining the Bookburners team, **Margaret Dunlap** wrote for *Eureka* (SyFy) as well as ABC Family's cult-hit *The Middleman*. Most recently, she was a writer and co-executive producer of the Emmy-winning transmedia series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, and co-created its sequel *Welcome to Sanditon*. Her short fiction has previously appeared in the online magazine *Shimmer*. She tweets as @spyscribe.

Margaret lives in Los Angeles, CA, where she taunts the rest of the writing team with local weather reports and waits for the earthquake that will finally turn Burbank into oceanfront property.

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