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# Hollow Kingdom

Kira Jane Buxton





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*For Jpeg,*

*who taught me how to fly*



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It is just like man's vanity and impertinence to call an animal dumb because it is dumb to his dull perceptions.

—Mark Twain

## [CHAPTER 1](#)

S.T.

A SMALL CRAFTSMAN HOME IN RAVENNA, SEATTLE,  
WASHINGTON, USA

I should have known something was dangerously wrong long before I did.

How do you miss something so critical? There were signs, signs that were slow as sap, that amber lava that swallows up a disease-kissed evergreen.

Slow as a rattlesnake as it bleeds toward you, painting the grass with belly scales. But sometimes you only see the signs once you're on the highest branch of realization.

One minute everything was normal. Big Jim and I were playing in the yard. We live together, you see. It's a platonic relationship with a zesty sprinkle of symbiosis. I get the perks of living with an employed electrician

in a decent neighborhood of Seattle, and he gets his own private live-in funnyman. Winner winner chicken dinner, which so happens to be a favorite of mine.

So, Big Jim and I were in the yard. He had a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer in hand—classic Big Jim—and was stooping intermittently to yank out a weed the size of a labradoodle. Things grow heartily in our state of Washington: emerald moss, honey crisp apples, sweet cherries, big dreams, caffeine addiction, and acute passive aggression. We also legalized pot to which Big Jim likes to poignantly screech, “Fuck yeah!”

Where was I? Right. A summer evening glaze of gold varnish coated our yard with the fat frog fountain and that shitty little smug-faced gnome that I’ve been trying to sabotage since I moved in. And then Big Jim’s eyeball fell out. Like, fell the fuck out of his head. It rolled onto the grass, and to be honest, Big Jim and I were both taken aback. Dennis, on the other hand, didn’t skip a beat, hurling himself toward the rogue eyeball. Dennis is a bloodhound and has the IQ of a dead opossum. Honestly, I’ve met turkeys with more brain cells. I’d suggested to Big Jim that we oust Dennis because of his weapons-grade incompetence, but Big Jim never listened, intent on keeping a housemate that has zero impulse control and spends 94 percent of his time licking his balls. Dennis’s fangs were within a foot of the eyeball as

I snatched it, balancing it on the fence for safekeeping. Big Jim and I shared a look, or sort of three-quarters of a look, because now, obviously, he only had a single eyeball. Whilst making a mental note to add this to my petition to get Dennis evicted from our domicile (surely once you've tried to eat your roommate's eyeball, you gotta go) I asked Big Jim if he was alright. He didn't answer.

“What the fuck?” said Big Jim, as he raised a beefy hand to his head, and that was the last thing I heard him say. Big Jim retired indoors and didn't finish his Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. Again—signs. He spent the next few days in the basement of our house where the PBR fridge is and also the freezer with shitloads of meat in it. Then he didn't eat. Not one of the delicious ducks or deer he lovingly shot in the face. Things seemed even more severe when he missed the Monster Truck Show he'd been crowing about for weeks. I tried to reason with him, tried to get him to eat part of a banana—I took care of the moldy bits because he's picky about those—some of the Doritos I'd helped myself to, and even some of idiot Dennis's kibble. Nothing. Then the pacing started. Big Jim started to traverse the periphery of the basement, shaking his head to a melancholy tune like the sloth bear at the Woodland Park Zoo. Initially I assumed Big Jim was trying to wear a circle into the basement for conduit installation, which he is very

proficient in. But his one eye was now staring into oblivion and he had stopped talking to me and his drooling became worse than Dennis's, which is really saying something.

I'd like to note that during this time, a time of great emotional duress and general uncertainty, Dennis did absolutely nothing except whiz all over the La-Z-Boy® and yarf on the carpet. I did my best to clean it up, but really he's not my responsibility.

The earlier signs were more subtle, only seen with the hindsight spectacles that Big Jim yearns for after every Tinder date. Before the eyeball evacuation, Big Jim started to forget things. He forgot a few appointments, then his wallet, and even his house keys, which he blamed me for because he thinks I'm a "giant klepto." Hey, I'm just a fella who likes to build on his hidden collections. Who doesn't enjoy the finer things? He told me that some of his words were stuck, that they had fused to his tongue. When I offered to orally investigate, I was largely ignored. He became lethargic, a subtlety that perhaps only I would have noticed, seeing as Big Jim has the physical motivation of a taxidermic sloth. But I know him well, and I saw the difference. He stopped walking Dennis, which had disastrous consequences for the couch cushions, may they rest in peace. The runaway eyeball signified a turning point in our lives. I cached the



eyeball in the cookie jar in case he could use it later. But Big Jim was never the same again. None of us were.

I hesitate to go on for fear that you will judge me and not want to hear the rest of my story. However, in the interest of full disclosure, I feel a duty to tell you the truth about everything. You deserve it. My name is Shit Turd and I am an American crow. Are you still with me? Crows aren't well liked, you see. We're judged because we are black, because our feathers don't possess the speckled stateliness of a red-tailed hawk's or the bewitching cobalt of a blue jay's, those stupid fuckers. Yeah, yeah, we're not as dainty and whimsical as hummingbirds, not as wise as owls—a total misnomer by the way—and not as “adorable” as the hambeast-bellied egg timer commonly known as a penguin. Crows are harbingers of death and omens, good and bad, according to Big Jim according to Google. Midnight-winged tricksters associated with mystery, the occult, the unknown. The netherworld, wherever that is—Portland? We make people think of the deceased and super angsty poetry. Admittedly we don't help the cause when we happily dine on fish guts in a landfill, but hey ho.

So, the truth—my name is Shit Turd (S.T. for short) and I'm a domesticated crow, raised by Big Jim who taught me the ways of your kind whom he called “MoFos.” He gave me my floral vocabulary and my

indubitably unique name. He taught me to say some MoFo words. Because of the aforementioned Tinder misadventures, Big Jim and I spent quality, or rather quantity, time together and I have an array of tricks under my plume. I know about MoFo things like windows and secrets and blow-up dolls. And I am the rare bird who loves your kind, the ones who walk on two legs and built the things you dreamt of, including the Cheeto®. I owe my life to you. As an honorary MoFo, I'm here to be utterly honest and tell you what happened to your kind. The thing none of us saw coming.

## CHAPTER 2

### WINNIE THE POODLE\*

#### A RESIDENCE IN BELLEVUE, WASHINGTON, USA

\* Winnie was raised to talk about herself in the third poodle

Winnie the Poodle sat on the ledge, allowing the outside tears that streamed down the windowpane to saturate her tiny, broken heart. She pressed her petite muzzle onto her front paws and let out a woeful sigh, thinking of what she had the very most of in this world: wait. She had lots and lots of wait. Wait when she woke up, then wait some more, finding snacks, then more wait. Stay and wait. Good girl.

The skitter of claws on marble pricked up her ears. A side glance across the floor revealed what she suspected—lunch had arrived. She would see to

it later. For now, she followed it briefly with her sad, sad eyes and sniffed it with her sad, sad, perfect poodle nose.

Loneliness itched her skin. Would they ever come back?

The worst of it? The guilt. Guilt that wriggled in her heart like an army of white worms (she never had any of these worms for really, of course, but had seen them in the commercials with the uglier dogs in them). Lunch skittered into the next room. With seventeen rooms, sometimes it was utterly exhausting to track down lunch.

Winnie's guilt came from two things. The one thing was that she hadn't waited the whole time they'd been gone. Because she was Winnie the Mini Poodle, she could squeeze herself through the cat's escape. She had done it a few times to see if they were in the yard, waiting for her. Or by the big fountain. Or by the stables. The big pool. The small pool. The bright yellow ball and net place. By the shiny cars. They weren't there. Only horses were there. Some breathing. Some inside out.

The second guilty thing was that she had spent most of her life with the Walker trying to escape the home. She had done a pretend go-potty and barked at the sliding doors to be let out into the yard and then back in to the home. And then out and in and out and in and out and in and out until she was told to lie down and stop being an insufferable Q-tip. She had even run

away from the Walker several times, sprinting down the never-ending path, confectionary pink tongue tasting the manure-laden flavor of freedom, velvety ears streaming behind her, kicking up gravel in the face of propriety.

“Poodle doodle doo!” she had cried, wild and free and obscenely beautiful, like a moonbeam with teeth. Once, she actually managed to escape her Walker captors and Butler put pictures up of her everywhere followed by signs like this \$\$\$\$\$\$ and many, many, many of these 000000000. She was found within a half hour.

There was a third guilty thing. Her adopted brother. She hadn’t always treated him very nicely, but that was because he was a fat moron who was petrified of his own farts. Guilt nipped at her for this thought, though it was very truthful. Spark Pug had not been able to stand the quiet of the big home when the Walker went away. He had gone wet-cat crazy, barking at the walls, snorting up a storm and nipping at Winnie the Poodle’s exquisite corkscrew coat. It was perhaps Winnie the Poodle who had planted the suggestion of the cat escape and against all odds, with a waist like a Glad bag stuffed with cat litter, Spark Pug squeezed himself through the small flap with bulging eyeballs and a fart you might expect from a Clydesdale. Amidst snorts, Spark Pug, bagpipe of the canine world, barreled down the

pathway to oblivion, no doubt looking for his squeaky lobster, Jean Clawed, whom Winnie had buried in the yard.

Winnie thought of the day that the Walker left. It wasn't a day of picnic and being carried in purse and Veuve Clicquot. It was a day of screaming. The Walker couldn't suck in air fast enough, with sad, red eyes and runny nose, she yelped into her phone. Winnie had tried to comfort her, but was pushed aside. The Walker opened the door, Winnie ran after her, *NO, WINNIE, NO GIRL*, and Winnie barked and the Walker wouldn't let her, *STAY, WINNIE, WAIT! GOOD GIRL!* and she made the door bang hard as she staggered into the big potty world all alone without her Good Girl Winnie.

And then Winnie did her wait.

What had she done wrong? If only she could do it all again. If only the Walker would come back through the door with a new Seahawks jersey for Winnie and she wouldn't even struggle while it got put on or secretly pee under the bed anymore.

Winnie had a lot of wait and a lot of guilt. She stared at the door with what she presumed were perfectly breed-standard eyes that sparkled like the diamond collar around her neck. She was often told that she was very, very beautiful and perfect and asked who the good girl was, which seemed

pathetically rhetorical. Obviously she was the good girl. How she missed those days. If she was honest with herself, she even missed Spark Pug's seizure-inducing snores.

She would wait here. Stay. Be good. Continue to poop in strategic piles all over the home so that, upon her return, the Walker could resume her compulsive collecting of it. Winnie held worry in her tiny pink lungs—she was long overdue for nail shortening and the salon must be wondering where in the potty world she was by now. She missed the Walker's toasty lap, her salty face, and the honeyed sounds she made from soft red lips that were just for Winnie. She missed being a part.

The sadness had her by the neck now like a chew toy and she no longer had the energy to fight it off. Winnie the Poodle laid down her head and said a quiet goodbye to the home and the potty world around her. She would not hunt down lunch again. She had waited long enough. She succumbed to a last tremble-making thought of Spark Pug tearing around the big potty world all on his own. With no Jean Clawed. No friend. And no flea protection.

### [CHAPTER 3](#)

S.T.

THE SMALL CRAFTSMAN HOME IN RAVENNA, SEATTLE,  
WASHINGTON, USA



In the days after Big Jim's eyeball rolled out of his head, it became clear that I was going to have to pick up some of the slack. All of the slack, in fact. Since Big Jim was so busy jabbing his finger at the basement wall and doing a stellar impression of a rabid raccoon, I took on even more of the household chores than I normally do. I put clothes in the laundry machine and dealt with Dennis's not-so-subtle hints at dinnertime when he pummeled his food bowls as if *they* had castrated him. Filling his water bowl proved tricky for me, so I escorted him to the porcelain throne which was fruitful and utterly revolting. Honestly, the toilet wand has more dignity.

In the mornings, I waited for the young MoFo with the red headphones to hurtle past on his bike faster than a toupee in a hurricane, for him to use his black-and-white projectile to decapitate another hydrangea flower head. He never came. Neither did the car dealership mailers or the Amazon packages or our *Big Butts*<sup>TM</sup> magazine subscription. It was curious. Curious enough for me to contemplate tuning into the goat rodeo that is *Aura*. Something you might be unaware of—in the natural world, there is an Internet. In English, it would roughly translate to *Aura* because it is all around us. It's not the same as MoFo Internet with YouTube crabby cat videos and sneezing infant pandas, but it is similar in that it is a network, a

constant flow of information at your disposal, if you can be bothered to tune in and listen. Information streams daily via the winged ones, the judicious rustle of the trees, and the staccato percussion of insects. I can't tell you the number of times I've heard a MoFo claim, "Listen to that bird's mating song!" writing off the feathered kind as licentious horndogs (they are not squirrels for shit sake). In fact, the birds are delivering information through melodic verse, releasing intricate notes much like how the trees whisper their slow secrets into the wind on the wings of leaves. A torrent of warnings, stories, adages, poems, threats, how-tos, real estate info, survival tips and non sequitur jokes are available for those who tap in. Everything talks, you just have to be willing to listen.

There certainly is a social dating service element to it, but not as much as most MoFos believe. Of course, there are those who refuse to tap in. Like yours truly, who had access to the real Internet and didn't feel that there was anything to be gained from all the twitter. You know who else never listened? Roadkill. There has never been an excuse for roadkill. *Aura* sounds with constant stories and statistics about cars and the perils of nearing the great white lines. Warning calls ring through the stratosphere—from green stinkbug to glaucous-winged gull—and still, the idiots who don't heed end up as curbside tortillas. Sometimes I have the thought that a

lot of species are hardwired to refuse to listen to warnings. And that's how they end up extinct.

I braved *Aura*. Silence. An *Aura* silence can be cause for alarm. Either there aren't enough birds or participating trees around to spread the scuttlebutt. Or everyone is hiding from a nearby predator. A flight around the neighborhood confirmed that the roads around our house were eerily still—no cars zipping below like frenetic jewel weevils. It was as if a Sunday morning had flown in and made a permanent nest. This is when I started to get shivers that felt like an army of mites scurrying through my plumage, and dread spread a dull, hollow ache through my bird bones. If I'm honest, I had a feeling that something was happening beyond our russet-brown front door, beyond our sleepy neighborhood. Something big and ominous and probably quite shitty, but I didn't like to leave Big Jim and I needed to lock things down at home and wait until he was feeling better before we decided to face the world together—always together. I checked on Big Jim hourly, bringing him bologna, Funyuns®, and the two Cheetos® I was willing to spare. I even rolled a Monster energy drink down the basement stairs for him. He showed interest in nothing but drooling and scraping his bloody finger across the wall. I brought the keys to his beloved

gunmetal-gray Ford F-150 with the KEEP HONKING, I'M RELOADING bumper

sticker to see if a ride would perk him up. The silver keys caught his attention for a brief moment, but then he snarled, snapped at me (not verbally, with his actual teeth), and resumed dragging a finger at the concrete. Whatever was wrong with him was serious. When, after several days of this basement weirdness, he hadn't masturbated or mentioned the state of the economy, I declared a state of emer-Jim-cy.

Big Jim was in the grips of a medical crisis and it was up to yours truly to make things right again. I felt confident I knew what to do, an innate, natural instinct thrumming inside me. First, I had to make sure that Dennis was preoccupied. After watching him shit into the sound hole of Big Jim's guitar and then run full steam into the kitchen door, I felt reassured.

Exacting his revenge on the doorknob for the attack was taking precedence over anything else. It seemed unlikely that Dennis would venture down to the basement for a while, given his level of focus and typical chokehold on a grudge. Besides, ever since Big Jim's eyeball fell out, Dennis had steered clear of him. Man's best friend indeed. More like man's neediest parasite that would trade you in for a bull-penis dog chewy at the drop of a hat.

I flew out the kitchen window, over the yard, and up into a wolf-gray sky above the evergreen line to spy on the general situation. Though Seattle is a

city thirstier than most, on this day, the rains stayed up high. Usually, Big Jim and I ride all over Seattle in his truck as he works on various houses and their electrical shitstorms, and we spend a lot of time at Home Depot and the feed store, but I never venture far alone. Today, I had to. This was a mission for Big Jim.

From the highest branch of a Douglas fir, everything seemed quiet except for the prattle of squirrels that I tried to block out (much of what they say can't be unheard, which is unfortunate since squirrels are five-star sexual deviants). As I neared my destination, I was distracted by an odd scene. Inquisitiveness grabbed me by the beak and wouldn't let go—if you think cats are curious, try being an enlightened crow. I craned my neck to get a better look and honed in on a topsy-turvy vision. Ten wheels suspended in the air. A rainbow of gasoline, pools of black oil. My mind took its time unraveling the twisted mess in front of me. Green where there should be yellow, yellow where there should be green. I swooped down closer to find an upturned King County Metro bus. The bus had plowed into the side of the Blessed Sacrament Church, smashing right through the red brick ribs of the enormous edifice. When Big Jim has had too much Pabst Blue Ribbon and elects to take an openmouthed snooze, the TV often spits out religious programs, which is how I know about churches and pyramid

schemes. I wait until he's snoring to change the channel to the History Channel, Discovery Channel, CNN, the Food Network, the Travel Channel, and sometimes Bravo TV, which is how I know a great deal about the superlative ways of MoFos. Big Jim claims to be a deeply religious man, maintaining that his religion is primarily whiskey and women. I saw the connection between the two—most of his relationships were on the rocks. I landed on an upside-down wheel and gently rapped my beak against the hubcap for comfort. I needed it—something felt very, very off. I peered below. All the windows of the bus were smashed and smeared with red. If there is something to be learned from Big Jim's horror films, it's that you should never insert yourself into a precarious situation, especially if you're a scantily clad blonde with breast implants or a MoFo with black skin—but again, crow, so on I marched. I entered the bus and a heavy foreboding pressed down on my wings. Sanguine smells held the fetid air captive. There were no MoFos in the bus, but I found two purses, a wallet. The shivers came back. MoFos don't leave their wallets. Up until recently Big Jim went bat-turd bananas without his. A huge clump of hair was stuck to one of the bus seats that hung in rows from the ceiling, and I found a ripped piece of a MoFo's shirt and an intact fingernail lodged between two seats. The wallet had a shiny gold cop badge in it that brought on an urge to cache



that was hard to suppress. I found a paycheck in an envelope, a pacifier, and a book called *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus*. It looked like someone might have done just that. I left the creepy bus, exiting through the glassless front windshield and into the belly of the church.

The house of worship was cavernous, a vast space with a spire and enormous arched doors. Silence. When I hopped, my feet clicked and tapped on wooden floors, the parts that weren't caked in the beginnings of moss or rainwater puddles. I was careful to avoid stepping in rat droppings; that shit spreads disease.

"Hello?" I asked, committing the number one horror film faux pas. "Is anyone there?"

The inside of the church was damp; water had collected in pools on the floor, let in by a hole in the roof. Moss and weeds were elbowing their way through hairline cracks. I could hear the near-silent screams of bustling termites devouring the bones of the place. Peeled plaster had fallen like snow in piles on the damp ground. White poop spackled the cracks, though I couldn't hear the inane gibberish of a single pigeon. They had long since flown the coop.

A fake MoFo in a loin cloth stared down at me from a wooden wall. He had a headband made of barbs that looked fairly uncomfortable. Even

though I knew he wasn't real, I gave him a nod of solidarity, wondering what crime he'd committed to deserve being stapled to plywood.

Then a smell found me. The unmistakable smell of death, acrid and ripe. Tension clouded the air, the kind that follows eruptive violence. The kind that's too heavy to drain itself. I found the source of the smell. Draped across the wooden benches ahead of me was a bull moose. His gargantuan bough of antlers weighed down a blocky brown head that hung over the edge of a seat row, half a tongue lolled from a permanently open mouth. His fur was sticky with red and something had eaten most of his entrails and removed one of his legs. A quick scan confirmed that the missing leg wasn't in the church.

"Hello?" I asked again, before realizing I was literally asking to join ranks with the moose and the hole-punched MoFo. There was a predator nearby. One that hoards moose legs. Fight or flight is sort of a rhetorical question for me. I took to the air, soaring above the benches and unlit candles, whizzing past stained glass windows and through the hole the bus made. MoFos clean up after themselves. They don't leave holes in churches and wallets and baby MoFo stuff in upside-down buses. They don't allow moose (mooses? meese?) in churches. Or predators. If Big Jim knew there was a predator near a house of worship, why, he'd grab Sigourney Weaver

and *track down that sum-bitch*. Sigourney is his Marlin Model 336 lever-action rifle, named for its sexy streamlined appearance and no-nonsense attitude. I steadied my breathing and flapped my wings harder, determination propelling me to finish my mission.

The Yoshino cherry tree I sat on to scope out my destination provided little comfort. I was feeling unnerved, on edge, and a tremble seized my legs. I couldn't shake the shivers as well as they were shaking me.

Walgreens looked much as it always had, but lacking its harried hubbub, the tumult, the purr of automatic doors. And a feeling wouldn't leave—the feeling of a glassy fishbone lodged in my throat. The feeling that I was diving into danger. I was preparing myself to do a flyby of Walgreens when —BAAAAP!—a mighty force smashed into my left wing, punching me from the cherry tree. I cried out. Free falling, I shook my head, spread my wings, and caught a pocket of air, righting myself and launching back upward to face my attacker. He stared at me with beady black eyes and let out a succession of warning calls from the back of his ebony throat. He lunged, snatching at my wings. I darted in the air to avoid him, his horrible screeches clawing at my brain.

*Shit. A college crow.*

Since they never travel alone, I was immediately accosted by this crow's

turd waffle of a wife who dive-bombed me, yanking at my flight feathers. She perched in my cherry tree, unleashing a verbal assault. I won't repeat what was said because, frankly, even Big Jim might have blushed.

"Leave me alone!" I yelled at Bonnie and Clyde. They continued spitting hideous insults at me, calling me a traitor. The male pelted a bottle cap at me before taking off, laughing, into the tree line. At this point, I was feeling for Tippi Hedren and could've really used a beer. Big Jim is always talking about boundaries, about sticking to your own kind and keeping everyone out of your business. I often fantasized about erecting a giant aviary over our house to keep all the pests out.

The college crows are the largest murder of Seattleite crows, and they roost nightly on the east side of the University of Washington's Bothell campus. They are also a giant troupe of swamp donkeys. UW Bothell is essentially an enormous frat house for a bunch of elitist toot cabbages.

Every night from fall to late spring, the sky pulses with blue-tinged midnight wings as thousands of crows head over to meet on the UW buildings and then roost at the campus's neighboring wetlands together.

MoFos find this fascinating and mystical. I think it's rude to take up all that airspace, but there you have it. I've never been to the campus since I'm unwelcome, so I can't tell you what goes on there. My guess? Preening,

bragging, and beer pong. Generally, when I go about my business, I'm ostracized by the local crows—the "real" crows—and called an asshole for my close affiliation with a MoFo. Name-calling happens through *Aura*, sticks and stones are thrown at me and my mother is described in colorful ways. Mostly, I let it slide off my feathers, but when I'm physically attacked for just being who I am? Sometimes that really bothers me. No one seems to understand that your species is an accident of birth. No one understands that I should have been born a MoFo.

With my tormentors out of sight, I focused on plucking up the courage for my mission. I inhaled a deep breath and took wing, levitating over the empty parking lot before lowering down to the automatic doors of the Walgreens. They whirred open. Fluorescent glare illuminated the aisles. I perched on top of a Dos Equis man cardboard cutout to survey the scene. As in the church, everything was far too quiet. Too still. A low growl rumbled, reverberating through my feet. I hopped nervously on one foot, craning to find the source of the growl, thinking of the moose's missing leg. Another low growl sounded out, startling me. I flew up and perched, straddling Lucky Charms and Special K, and from there I could see the culprits. Four MoFos were gathered around a blood pressure machine, swaying and drooling. An ad for the shingles vaccine hung nearby. I

immediately recognized the greenish tinge to their skin, the odd twisting of their joints, the pouring sweat, red raw eyes and bloody drool. They all exhibited the same craned-forward neck, like curious vultures, hunting for satiety. Blackened fingers repeatedly jabbed at the screen. They too had whatever was ailing Big Jim.

I decided to conduct an experiment, fear be damned.

“Hello!” I squawked in perfect English. No response. “Hello there!” A goddamned talking crow and not even a raised eyebrow. Seriously? The world had gone to shit. They continued staring at the glow of the inbuilt screen, which was playing a movie about heart wellness. Obviously, they missed healthier days.

Listening for any change in their actions, I got back to my mission, picking up a plastic grocery bag, swooping behind a ransacked counter under a sign that said “Pharmacy” and filling the bag with the medications I thought sounded helpful to Big Jim. E-Mycin, Keflex, Lasix, Prilosec OTC, Monistat, Sally Hansen Airbrush Legs, and Summer’s Eve all sounded effective and surely a combination of them would cure Big Jim. Walgreens had come through for us before. I felt positive, important—a fella with a purpose.

Lifting the plastic bag proved very difficult, but by flapping in

determined, energetic strokes, I was able to take a low flight. I lifted up over the ailing MoFos, above the red and pink aisle of Valentine's candy, heading toward the automatic doors. Just as I neared the glowing green exit sign, my plastic bag tipped and the Summer's Eve box slipped out, clattering down onto the cashier's scanner with a loud beep. And then all fucking hell broke loose.

The four MoFos by the blood pressure machine let out a skull-shattering scream. I heard them pounding the ground, running at full tilt toward the cash register. Two MoFos I'd missed in white lab coats vaulted from behind the pharmacy, sprinting like racehorses from the flaming hot cheese-hole of hell. Necks craned, fingers pointed, blood drool flying. And I, partly in panic and partly because I have butter claws, dropped the damn plastic bag. My medications—Big Jim's lifeline—exploded across the cash register with a spidery clatter. I dove down, flicking the pill bottles back into the bag. One, two, three, Lasix, Prilosec, No7 Lift & Luminate Triple Action Eye Cream... The MoFos' screams were nearing, their feet hammering the ground; one knocked over a Seahawks display, sending beer sleeves, slippers, Russell Wilson figurines, and mugs airborne. Porcelain flew, shattering against the rows of wine bottles, which burst and bled across white tile. The doors whirled. Two more MoFos wearing green Taco Time

aprons stood in the pharmacy doorway, raising craned necks to the ceiling. They emitted a brain-bursting primal screech, their hands twisted like the branches of winter trees. Keflex, Paxil, Monistat. The two new MoFos started to run. The four blood pressure MoFos rounded the end aisle, seconds away, eyes like a forest on fire...

Gas-X, Dulcolax, stretch mark serum, Summer's Eve. That's it! I hoisted the plastic bag into the air, narrowly missing swipes from the Taco Time MoFos, who lunged, their mouths freeing strings of blood that whiskered the register in sticky crimson threads. I huffed it higher into the air above the commotion, as below eight unhealthy MoFos clamored and writhed over the top of the cashier scanner, jabbing at it with their fingers and saucer eyes. Then, in unison, they raised their gnarled arms to the ceiling. I flinched, almost dropping the bag again. They formed a circle around the scanner that beeped. Simultaneously, they began smashing their heads onto the scanner. *Bash, thump, smack*, harder and harder. Blood and pulp spurted, brain bits flew. The bashing continued.

I battled through the doors and away from the unpredictable MoFos, seeking refuge and a break in a nearby evergreen. With one plastic bag handle safely looped over a branch, I settled and took stock of how close it had been, how I was nearly snatched from the sky. No MoFo had ever



shown any sign of aggression toward me before. What would they have done if they'd caught me?

What was happening to the MoFos? Hopefully, the answer was in my bag of goodies and I'd start with Big Jim, nursing him back to health with all my Cheetos® if necessary, and then we'd jump in his Ford F-150 with the Glock and the weed in the glove compartment and we'd set to fixing the other MoFos in the neighborhood who weren't feeling well. We'd fix it alright, because what would a world without MoFos be? The thought made me nauseous, gave me goose bumps, which is a stupid expression because geese are a crass bunch of douche McGoos.

From my vantage point, I saw someone I recognized at the base of the evergreen. That unmistakable blue rinse of curls and the polka-dotted rolling shopping bag. Thank heavens! It was Nargatha. Nargatha—whose mother must have had acute indecision, christening her after a bonkers blend of Agatha, Margaret, and Narnia—lived three doors down from Big Jim and me. She was eccentric and so old the Seattle Fire Department was once called to put out her birthday candles, but she'd always been good to me. Sure, she talked to me like I had irreversible brain damage, but countered this by always having a sampling of animal crackers on hand. Big Jim liked how she always brought us Fireball whiskey if the Seahawks won.

Looking down at the tiny figure with the pearly blue curls and the tennis ball–yellow trench coat, I felt a pang of relief, my chest filling with warmth. I darted my head side to side to get a better look. Closer inspection revealed that she was eating Triscuits.

Triscuits is her miniature schnauzer.

My stomach did a loop de loop. I watched from the evergreen for a few moments, hardly believing what was happening, until it became too much to stomach. No one deserves to become an hors d'oeuvre! Least of all her loyal and beloved Triscuits! Reeling, I accidentally let out a caw of horror.

Nargatha's searching eyes were the color of a cardinal. Scarlet wet strings hung from her mouth. I watched in horror as her head twisted 180 degrees. Then a bone in her neck cracked like the sharp snap of a branch, and her cranium inched its way around to 360 degrees. She looked up at me, drooling blood and her noggin dialed all the way the fuck around like a goddamned barn owl. Nargatha screeched like a desperate raptor, causing three squirrels to silently scatter to safety. Panic squeezed my trilling heart. Squirrels are never silent, those smutty nut-goblins. They are only quiet when their lives depend on it.

Triscuits. Nargatha was eating Triscuits. The next thought I had made me regurgitate a Cheeto®. Nargatha had what Big Jim had. Nargatha was eating

Triscuits.

*Dennis.* I snatched up the plastic bag, pointed homeward bound, and flapped like hell.

## CHAPTER 4

### GENGHIS CAT

A HOME IN CAPITOL HILL, SEATTLE,  
WASHINGTON, USA

There has been a change in the order of things that I can't quite put my claw on. My observations:

1. It's quieter out there. This makes the game more interesting.
2. There are no sprinting cars to compete with over squirrels.
3. There's a *lot* more to hunt.
4. There are plenty more hunters to fight it for. Hunters of *all* kinds.
5. There's decidedly less cheese available.

Perhaps it's due to a shift in the lunar light, a cosmic spell, or because I have finally mastered my innate feline sorcery. One thing that hasn't changed—my Mediocre Servants still never seem to leave the home. I believe, if it's at all possible, that they have devolved. According to my calculations, they now spend 186 percent of their time growling at the wall. But I have always known them to be a lower life-form, no better than slug-

tongued, alopecia-stricken bears with epically shitty balance. They are eggs on legs with no discernible senses and the reflexes of a bugle stuffed with brine shrimp.

I have watched, with my unparalleled vision and laser-pointer focus, as my Mediocre Servants jab at the wall repeatedly with their fingers (or what's left of them). Up to down, up to down. Both are overdue for a thorough grooming, which their own mothers wouldn't attempt at this point. Today—

WAIT! HOLD EVERYTHING WHILE I GROOM MY INNER THIGH.

Today, my Mediocre Servants—the girl one with the long mane and the girl one with all the skin drawings who both liked to stay at home and talk about chemistry science until the coffee ran out—smell like a microwaved litter box. No longer do they turn on their silver lap boxes, which is characteristically selfish of them because it is a classically renowned nap location. The warm spots—silver lap box; top of tall, cold food house; winter bed blanket; top of their sacred “wine fridge”; Mediocre Servant's thighs while she's on the white seat that roars—have been confiscated.

They appear to be staging some sort of feeble protest by refusing to replenish my dehydrated niblet stash. I have conducted experiments using techniques that used to be fairly effective—knocking over the French press,

unraveling their shoddy knitting, chewing the covers of every book in the library, shitting on pillows, shredding the couch, eating all the Ethernet snakes, and pissing all over bed blanket—but they seem to no longer be concerned. Admittedly, I'm impressed. I respect the negligible number of shits currently being given. Case in point: one of my Mediocre Servants left her arm in the living room, which I believe speaks to their general ineptitude. I played with it momentarily, but found its pungency off-putting and resumed licking my anus. My instincts were always right—they were never to be fully trusted.

For a while, I persisted with this ill-fated relationship by bringing them mice, moles, rats, sparrows, finches, robins, wrens, and chickadees, and something new and exciting: a tuxedo-wearing bastard that called itself a Humboldt penguin before I assassinated it. I presented these offerings to them, as always, to remind them of their inadequacy and rub my hunting prowess in their faces, those dildo-nosed potatoes. But I am not an unreasonable creature; I also share my offerings to ensure the thighs of my Mediocre Servants are adequately padded for my sitting pleasure. When I offered up the black-and-white eggplant of a bird, which was heavy as fuck, by the way, the Mediocre Servant with the skin drawings tried to bite me, ocher nubby fangs narrowly missing my tail. I did what was necessary—bit

her back, severing a finger. Then I attempted to bury it in the carpet by covering it up like a rogue turd.

I will no longer bring them offerings, exotic or otherwise. I will not grace them with my presence. Should have known it was all over when they stopped summoning the requisite number of boxes from the Amazon for me to cavort in. No. I made my decision to leave the home. It's true that I shall miss the toasty laps and the dehydrated fish blobs and ambushing their bulbous toes under the bed blanket and how they used to worship me. Most especially, I will miss the cheese. But not as much as they will miss me. I am incredible.

So once I'd systematically eaten all the contents of Aquarium, I left through the Flap Of Cat to the great outside, never to return to the home. Besides, I'd yarfed on every square inch of the place. There was nothing more to decorate. Before I left, I made sure I'd unrolled all the toilet paper. Life on the outside is unpredictable, requiring vigilance and innate brilliance, both qualities I possess in numbers higher than I can count. I hunt and prowl and observe and fuck with shit. Also, my collection is growing. So far I have infiltrated four hundred homes and pillaged every sock I can find. I cannot explain my fascination with these delightful foot blankets, I can only tell you that it pleases me to carry them around while