

Minds Touched by Madness by WellTemperedClavier

Chapter 1

With a little more than a month left before college, Daria wondered how many more times she'd walk up the familiar stairs to Jane's room. A needless anxiety, she reflected, the uneven wooden steps creaking under her thick boots. It's not as if we won't both be coming back.

Then again, maybe not in Jane's case. A lot of probably depended on whether or not Trent stayed, and who could really say when it came to him?

Daria paused at the head of the stairs and wiped her brow, the old house torrid in the summer heat. No question that the damn place needed some new insulation. Thoughts of the greasy, spice-scented air of the Pizza King--and more importantly, its air conditioning---made a welcome intrusion.

Seeing Jane's door closed, Daria knocked.

"Hey."

Not getting a response, she tried again. Leaning closer to the door, she listened for any signs of movement. Sleeping, maybe?

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

Still nothing. An odd sense of worry began gnaw at her, exacerbated by the sweltering air.

She probably has heat stroke, at this rate.

Daria opened the door just a crack, relief washing over her when she saw Jane busy at work, still in pajamas, her skinny arms making frenetic cuts across the canvas. A little abashed at her earlier concern, Daria stepped in, not quite prepared for the staggering miasma, a mix of sweat, trapped summer heat, and paint fumes wrapping around her.

Daria blinked; she'd long ago ceased to notice the smell of paint in the Lane house but it never before hit her with so much strength, almost like getting doused with a bucket of the stuff. Already woozy, she found the source of the problem in the closed window.

"Hey," she said.

"Oh, hey, Daria," Jane replied, her tone distracted.

"Um, are you okay?"

She made no reply, lowering her brush to make furious dabs into a palette of bruised and muddy colors. Daria narrowed her eyes and finally took matters into her own hands, marching across the room and unlatching the window, throwing it open into the humid summer air that still felt like a relief compared to the dank little room.

Daria stuck her head outside for a moment, taking in some deep breaths. Going back inside, she turned to see Jane blinking, as if not quite sure what had happened.

“Oh! Thanks. I guess I got kind of distracted.”

“You probably shouldn’t have both the door and the window closed when you do this. Paint fumes can do some very strange things to the mind.”

“Hey, plenty of great artists had psychoactive inspiration.”

“Said psychoactive inspiration usually wasn’t the medium.”

“It’s more efficient this way,” she chirped. “Wow, what time is it? I really did get pretty wrapped up in what I was doing.”

“I’ll say.”

Daria took a closer look at the canvas, an expressionistic hellscape having already consumed most of the paper, distorted figures—equal parts Dix and late--period Goya—breaking themselves under looming monoliths done in a slightly more realistic style. The dizziness from the fumes only enhanced the otherworldly visuals and Daria actually had to look away after a short while.

“So it’s Disneyland, right?”

“If Disneyland looked like that I’d be interested in going. Actually, I dreamed this up all on my own. Literally, I’ve been seeing it in my sleep!”

“How long have you been shut in here with these paint fumes, again?”

“I usually don’t remember my dreams, but these stuck with me. I woke up and just started.”

Only then did Daria see the haggardness in Jane’s eyes, her bobbed hair crooked and her posture just a bit less contorted than the luckless figures she painted. Energy seemed to pour out from her, more akin to the last feverish burst before a collapse than a sign of any real vitality.

“There’s also this local artist showcase next week. What you’re seeing here is my entry. It’s like my dreams just perfectly lined up with reality.”

“If those are what your dreams look like, I can’t wait.”

Daria glanced at the nearly finished painting, still a bit lightheaded. The characters were unmistakably Jane’s though the style seemed different in ways she couldn’t quite decipher.

“Are you mixing styles?”

“Sure, that’s how you make new styles,” yawned Jane.

“I’ll say it’s a shoo-in for winner, though considering the competition that’s probably not saying much.”

“Hey, I’ll take what I can get. Give me a minute to freshen up and we’ll go out. I can’t remember the last time I had something to eat.”

Jane grabbed some clothes, trudging out of her room and into the bathroom farther down the hall. The sound of the shutting door was followed by the splashing of a faucet, some degree of normalcy returning to the scene.

A much-needed breeze from outside stirred the stagnant room, not quite strong enough to dispel the curious sense of oppression. She took yet another look at the painting. Something about it still troubled her, a quality made all the more frustrating for its elusiveness.

Glancing past the closet door she saw a bunch of other canvases in varying states of completion, piled together without much thought. Frowning, Daria got on her knees to examine them in greater detail. Numbering five in total, they displayed contents identical to the piece on the easel, though they had the hasty look of rough drafts.

Way more careless than rough drafts, she mused, quite astonished by the crudity, the images made by an uncertain hand. Then again, Jane had said she’d been trying a new style. Had she done so much in just one night? It didn’t seem possible.

Again the question came to her—how long had Jane been doing this?

Jane returned dressed in her day clothes, some of her exhaustion washed away and her hair back in its severe order, though her drooping shoulders betrayed her lack of sleep. Seeing Daria looking at the rough drafts, her lips turned up in a wry smile.

“I really should throw those out. For an artist, rough drafts are kind of like baby pictures. Not things you’d want anyone to see.”

“Until you’re famous, in which case someone makes a coffee table book out of them.”

“I’ll give you an autographed copy as soon as it’s released.”

“That’ll probably raise its eBay price by a few bucks. You didn’t do this all last night, did you?”

“Huh? Oh, no, over the past few days. I really haven’t been sleeping much. Figure it’s good training for my crazy recluse stage.”

“I never should’ve let you read *We have Always Lived in the Castle*.”

Jane laughed, the sound not quite concealing the tiredness in her voice.

“Come on, let’s get some pizza.”

Even in the reassuring environment of white ceramic tables and red vinyl seats, Jane still didn’t look quite herself, her expression weighted like a traveler’s after a long and difficult journey. Taking the familiar seats opposite of the window, its painted Italian chef still smiling to passerby, Daria acknowledged that the Pizza King would be one aspect of town she’d miss up in Boston.

Standing on the precipice of a new and lonely world, it was becoming tougher each day to hate her surroundings. Their hard edges softened as if to spite her, reminding her that for all its ills, she’d been happier there than anywhere else—a thought only slightly ameliorated by Highland being the only real point of comparison. Even Quinn was starting to become interesting!

She supposed that pepperoni pizza would be her equivalent of the madeleine dipped in tea.

“Wow, I really needed to leave the house. I just hope I can stay awake,” Jane yawned.

“You weren’t kidding about an irregular sleeping schedule.”

“Who can sleep when there’s inspiration? I’ll admit the dreams haven’t been much fun.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you talk about your dreams before.”

“That’s because I’ve never had them like this. They feel real, you know? Experienced with all five senses? I never remember these things when waking up, but here I’m not totally sure that I did wake up—wow, I can’t believe I just said that.”

“If it makes you feel any better—“ about to make a joke about Kevin’s success

in school, she stopped mid-sentence, suddenly remembering that he had to repeat senior year. “Uh, if it makes you feel any better, we’re still in Lawndale.”

“I guess it breaks even,” she said, yawning again.

“So tell me more about this showing.”

“It’s being held by this group called the Foundation for the Promotion of Local Talent. They’re mostly sponsored by charities, and they go around looking to see what people have to offer. Its home office is in Lawndale, but they do work all over the East Coast. All you really get for winning is a pat on the back and a bullet point on your resume, but hey, I’ll take it.”

“Keep reaching for the stars. That is cool, though. Who else is competing?”

“Probably some of the people who presented in Art at the Park. Heh, maybe a Jane Lane original will be hanging on Mr. Taylor’s wall this time.”

“What you’re working on will probably give Brittany nightmares.”

“If she can handle all those creepy dead animal heads, I’m sure she can take the artistic manifestation of my tortured psyche.”

Their conversation turned back to high school, as it so often did, the seemingly eternal figures already starting to slip back into the past. Jane’s attention kept wandering, eyelids settling shut at random moments, her sentences trailing off into silence.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll go for a run—actually, scratch that, it’s too hot. I think I just need to finish that painting. Maybe come up with a title for it other than ‘that painting’.”

“Your obsessive drive is an inspiration to us all.”

“Hey, there are studies showing that creative types are more prone to madness. Though I think writers have it worse than visual artists, so you’re still crazier.”

“Then I hope my madness provides a suitable role model.”

They said little on the way back home, Daria shooting worried glances at her nearly somnambulist friend. Jane waved goodbye as she stepped into the threshold of her decaying house, Daria’s mind turning back to the discarded rough drafts. Thinking on them, it was hard to believe that they’d been made by Jane at all.

Chapter 2

Balancing herself on a crate serving as an ersatz chair, oven-like heat pressing into her from all sides, Daria wondered if this would be the last time she'd ever ride in the Tank.

When a sudden jolt nearly deposited her on the grimy floor, she surmised that might not be such a bad thing.

“Sorry about that, Daria,” came Trent’s smoke-scarred voice. “I didn’t see the pothole until it was too late.”

“That’s okay. I didn’t need all my fillings anyway.”

“Heh.”

Jane had slept right through the impact, her right hand resting on her canvas-wrapped paintings. She somehow managed to look exhausted even while sleeping, an impression exacerbated by her mouth’s faint twitching motions, that of someone trying and failing to speak.

Outside, colorful houses receded into the past as Trent drove them towards Pat’s Easel, the art gallery selected for the show. Daria edged closer to the front, the simple motion conjuring dozens of memories from the past few years, all those times she looked on the driver with adolescent yearning, her soul made raw by the very idea.

A different world, almost.

“Have you seen these paintings?” asked Daria.

“Not yet. I figured I’d wait so I can see them when they look the way Jane wants.”

More likely you just forgot to care, she thought.

“They’re really good.”

“She’s got talent.”

“She’s been working really hard on it too. Has she been, uh, sleeping okay?”

“Huh? I guess. Why?”

“Jane’s just seemed really tired this past week.”

“You know how it is with artists, Daria. We put everything into our work. You won’t ever find me sleeping on a regular schedule—“

“Watch out!” exclaimed Daria, seeing the Tank veer into the incoming lane.

“Oh, right. Sorry,” he said, correcting the path. “Heh, no one ever said it was easy following your dreams.”

“Or safe.”

Retreating to the back of the van, she reflected that her worries were probably needless. It wasn't as if anyone in the Lane family was known for keeping regular schedules.

Daria jogged her friend's shoulder when they arrived, the Tank coming to a sputtering halt in a market plaza just as bland and unremarkable as one could expect from the town. It took her a moment to find Pat's Easel, half-smothered by the storefront displays of its neighbors, a Starbucks and a Verizon outlet. Faded paintings wilted behind dusty windows, not looking as if they'd been replaced for decades.

“On the plus side, I don't think you have to worry about this one being an art theft ring. If they were, they'd put more effort into it,” said Daria, but Jane didn't seem to hear, stumbling out of the Tank with the paintings under her arm. A look of concern crossed Trent's face seeing her.

“You want some help with that?”

“No, I'm okay. Let's go.”

The interior of Pat's Easel lived up to the exterior and then some. A paltry collection of generic paintings languished in stale air intermittently cooled by a noisy air conditioner. All the usual suspects were there—sloppy coastal landscapes, children with faces straight out of the Uncanny Valley, and portraits that had tried to go for realism before making unintentional last-minute turns into abstraction.

A paper taped to the front desk advertised “Local Artist Competition – 7/26 – Courtesy of the Foundation for the Promotion of Local Talent.” A man whom she took to be the proprietor stood at the book, staring at one of the paintings until he noticed the visitors.

Daria almost recoiled when he came into the light, more like some living exhibit in the Museum of Medical Oddities than a resident of Lawndale. Wide flabby lips sagged on a pallid face that would have looked more natural on a slug's underbelly than on a human being. His head seemed to almost taper into a point, and Daria wondered if that was the result of genetics or some gruesome accident. Even the way he walked came across as wrong, his steps not placing weight at the right times, giving a hobbled appearance.

“Welcome to the gallery!” he said, and the normalcy of his voice brought Daria

out of her morbid fascination, feeling a twinge of guilt for staring. Glancing around, she saw Trent also eyeing the man with uncertainty, though Jane seemed unaffected. “I’m Pat Mayhew, the owner.”

“Hi, I’m Jane. I’m here to put some paintings on the showcase.”

“Great! Here, I’ll take those for you,” he offered. Some of the weariness in Jane’s movements lifted the moment she handed them over to him. “Thanks. I’m still setting it up, but you’re all free to take a look.”

With that, the trio followed him towards the back of the gallery, a drab partition placed between it and the front. More of the same sorts of paintings waited on the other side—Jane probably didn’t have much to worry about in the way of competition.

Daria almost did a double-take when she saw a large and dark-colored painting propped up against the back wall. Thick oils swirled in a stagnant sky over a black sea, weed-encrusted obelisks leaning at mad angles from the sharp waves. Figures, smudged as if the artist couldn’t bear to work them into finer detail, twisted and danced in the shadows of a great monolith in the foreground.

It was remarkably similar to Jane’s in terms of content, though done with less skill. The artist had tried for a more realistic style, which only diluted the fantastical quality. At an utter loss at what to say, she turned to Jane, and then back to the nameless image on the wall. This one, at least, didn’t inspire any sense of vertigo, though that probably had more to do with the lack of fumes.

“Um, Jane,” she mumbled.

Jane stepped closer, her bleary eyes startled into wakefulness.

“Yeah, the competition’s pretty fierce,” chuckled Pat. “That one’s from Darren Lansky, he brought it in yesterday. I like it; could be something from a heavy metal album cover.”

“It looks a lot like my submission,” said Jane, as Pat finished unwrapping it. The sickly proprietor looked between the two, his drooping face bemused.

“Huh, that is odd. We actually have another one like that too, I’m still trying to find a place for it.”

“I’d say that’s more than just odd,” said Daria.

“Hey, great minds think alike? They’re not that similar. Especially not yours, Jane; the figures you painted at the bases are really something else, very expressionistic.”

“Thanks, that was the idea.”

“But why are they so similar? Doesn’t that seem strange?” continued Daria.

“As an art dealer, I’ve seen stranger,” said Pat. “I wouldn’t worry too much about—“

He stopped to the sound of heavy feet stomping into the gallery, choked gasps making a struggling crescendo into a full-throated yell.

“I know what you’re doing!” bellowed a woman’s voice, one deep and rough, modulated by a slight Texan drawl.

Pat pressed a pale hand onto his forehead, his irritation clear.

“Excuse me while I go deal with this. Hopefully she won’t damage anything this time.”

“You stop right now!” she shouted again, a wheezy quality creeping into the voice.

Daria, Jane, and Trent hurried to the front, where they were confronted with the sight of Pat, his hands raised in a conciliatory gesture, walking with exaggerated caution towards a livid Mrs. Johanssen, her craggy face red and eyes wide, arms like tree trunks slamming on the front desk.

“Mrs. Johanssen, I don’t want to have to call the police on you, but I did ask you not to come here again.”

If they fight, my money’s on Johanssen, thought Daria. She’d only had the briefest encounters with the woman, but never imagined her possessing such visible anger, each word coming out as an aggrieved snarl.

“You think that’s gonna stop me? I’m not letting it happen!”

Lifting a flabby right arm she tore a painting off its hanger with a single swipe, advancing towards Pat like an ambulatory Mt. Rushmore carving.

“Dammit!” cursed Pat, waddling behind the desk and grabbing the phone, pale and stubby fingers dancing out the pattern for 911.

“No!”

Mrs. Johanssen grabbed the phone and tore it out Pat’s hands, stomping over away to topple a drab landscape painting, crushing the canvas beneath her massive feet. Only then did Daria see the tears streaming from Mrs. Johanssen’s eyes, which even then fixed on her.

“Girls, where is he keeping all them paintings? The bad ones?”

You’ll need to be more specific, she thought, too stunned to voice it.

“Mrs. Johanssen, maybe you should sit down. You don’t want your heart acting up again,” cautioned Jane.

“This is too—“

Mrs. Johanssen leaned against the wall, her cheeks taking an ugly and flushed hue, her breathing rapid.

“That crazy woman is in my gallery again!” Pat shouted into the phone. “Send the police over right away.”

“Girls, I know what he’s doing,” said Mrs. Johanssen, words forced out between sharp gasps. “It can’t happen here.”

A police car must have been nearby, flashing lights and wailing sirens suddenly filling the lot.

“Mrs. Johanssen, you do know that I have a restraining order against you? Jane, I’m sorry that you had to see this. I’m afraid this woman is very ill. I assure you that nothing more will come of this.”

“Please,” gulped Mrs. Johanssen, her entire body trembling and covered in sweat.

They only watched as two officers marched into the gallery. Moments later, the police guided a deflated Mrs. Johanssen out of the store and into the back of the cruiser, the front of the gallery in shambles.

By the weekend, Daria was about ready to write off the whole episode as a series of slightly odd but not at all significant events made more ominous by her own anxiety regarding college. Even the confrontation seemed more absurd than threatening.

“In one corner, with 400 pounds of Texas fury, Mrs. Johanssen! In the other, half-frog and half-man, Pat Mayhew! See who wins the Clash of the Lawndale Titans, next on Sick Sad World!”

A pretty good byline, she figured as she imagined the episode. Pat didn’t really look like a fighter even without his decidedly odd physique, and Mrs. Johanssen would have had a field day with him had the police not arrived.

Fate prevented Daria from attending the showing, called away at the last minute by another battle in the endless war between Aunt Rita and her mother. She and

Quinn mostly sat it out, and she remembered the almost inconceivable pride she felt at seeing Quinn reading *Mansfield Park* entirely of her own volition.

If only you'd done that three years ago, she'd thought to herself, not allowing more than a brief, half-second smile at the scene (Daria herself was working through *Empire of the Sun*).

She'd met Jane the day before the gallery showing, determined to wring the most out of their last summer. Jane seemed more like her old self after submitting the painting: sharp, deadpan, and confident. They'd wiled away the afternoon through witticisms and television, as they'd done so many times in the past.

College can't be that much of an improvement—too many Lawndale alumni matriculated into it, Daria reminded herself.

More of the same, in other words, but without the people who'd made it bearable the first time around. As such, she often lost herself in the blur of her life since moving into Lawndale, drawing out the memories in her downtime, creating something eternal and constant.

Such sentimentality would have sickened her a mere month ago, but she hadn't been quite so close to losing it.

The phone rang, yanking her back to the world of the living. She picked up the receiver and answered.

"Yo," came the familiar voice, quiet and subdued.

"Oh, hey! Sorry I couldn't make it to the show."

"Ah, you didn't miss much."

"How did you do?"

"I won."

"Well, I can buy you a pizza."

"I never turn down a free pizza. Here, come on over and we'll have it delivered. Watch some *Sick Sad World* reruns. You can spend the night, if you'd like."

"Sure, that should be okay. Is, uh, everything all right?"

"Just been a long day. Figured it might be nice to have company."

"I'll be there soon."

Hanging up the phone, she reflected on how Jane's voice somehow recalled all the

strange events of the past week. Alone in her air-conditioned room, Daria shivered and wondered why.

Chapter 3

For the first time since the mess with Tom (a mess that Daria realized was largely her own fault), she found herself regretting going to Jane's house. Jane ushered her in the moment she arrived, her exhaustion back with a vengeance. She walked around the house like a woman possessed, checking the locks over and over again.

Given the situation, Daria would have found it grimly appropriate if Artie had delivered the pizza, but it turned out to be none other than Jeffy, his appearance a brief stab of normalcy in the peculiar environment.

They retired to Jane's room, still torrid with open windows, and watched familiar images flicker across the screen. Their commentary, half-hearted from the start, soon faded into silence. Jane drew her knees up to her chin, red eyes switching between the screen and the dusk sky.

The heat and the almost visible fear in the room finally drove Daria to take action, picking up the remote and pressing the pause button before standing up and facing Jane. Only barely aware of her surroundings, it took Jane a moment to notice.

"Jane, what's going on?"

She didn't say anything at first, her eyes downcast.

"I guess I'm not very good at hiding things. It's something really stupid."

"I don't know if I can help, but I'll try," she said, some of the tension leaving her body.

"Yeah. Okay," she said, taking a deep breath, and turning to her left, away from Daria. "It's these dreams I've been having."

"Like nightmares?"

"Guess so. I really can't believe I'm getting so worked up about this. Just dreams, for God's sake! These are more realistic, though. Way more realistic. It's why I started that project. I'd get up right in the middle of the night, all these images crowding my head. Half the time I didn't even feel like I was the one painting them, if that makes sense."

"Okay," said Daria, not quite sure what to say next. She'd had nightmares before but they'd never disturbed her to such a degree.

“Since you haven’t laughed me out of the room, I guess it doesn’t sound too nutty.”

“Come on, Jane. After everything—well, I’ll take it seriously.”

“Actually, maybe some snark would make it easier. I dunno. Every time I close my eyes I see it again, this really big and old city, or temple, or something. You know HR Giger?”

“The guy who designed the eponymous Alien, right? And who keeps doing it over and over again?”

“Heh, yeah, him. A bit like that, though that’s not doing a good job describing it. There aren’t really any words. Anyway, it’s very old, the buildings look all wrong. Everything’s definitely too big for people.”

“Are you doing anything in this city?”

“I’m not even sure if I’m in the dream. If I am, I’m just standing there. At the end there’s this movement somewhere far away, like the entire sky is alive. That’s when I wake up.”

She shrugged.

“When I say it like that it sounds pretty ridiculous. If you do want to laugh, I won’t hold it against you.”

“Ridiculous or not, it is bothering you.”

“It went away the night after I delivered the painting, and I thought I was free. Then it came back, worse than before. Now here’s where it gets pretty weird. At the showing, I met Darren Lansky and Joanna Porter.”

“Yeah, Pat mentioned Darren. He was the one who made the painting that looked kind of like yours.”

“Uh huh. Joanna did something along those same lines. All three of us had the same dream, and they looked as messed up as me. We talked about it for a while, but didn’t really get anywhere. Joanna kept trying to say it was coincidence, but I could tell she didn’t believe it. The thing with the Foundation isn’t over yet, either. Since I won, they asked me to do another painting for them. Some kind of decoration for their office.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“I said yes.”

“Unless they made you sign a contract, you should still be able to back out.”

“Yeah, I might do that. Probably won’t make the dreams go away though. Part of me’s hoping that finishing this completely will get it out of my system, if that makes sense.”

“Okay, well let’s see what we have here. You and two other artists in the area have been having upsetting dreams of a strange landscape. You’ve all made paintings based on these dreams, and submitted them to the showing; yours won, and despite the mental strain and the lack of any financial recompense, you want to make another painting. On top of this, Mrs. Johanssen tries to disrupt the gallery for no obvious reason.”

“Your conclusion?”

“I have no idea.”

“That’s the thing, isn’t it? Nothing here really makes sense. That’s probably why it doesn’t really matter—it just doesn’t feel that way.”

“Do you feel better having it off your chest?”

“A little. Still seems like there’s something really strange going on that we just can’t see, but I don’t know how to begin looking for it. I’ll probably still have the dreams too; it’s like they’re calling to me. I don’t want to go sleep, but I know I’ll crash sooner or later.”

Daria ran it through her head again. She’d never heard of multiple people having shared dreams. More likely they’d just all had bad dreams that weren’t actually that similar, but ended up taking relatively similar forms when expressed. A hell of a coincidence, but within the realm of possibility. Mrs. Johanssen probably didn’t have anything to do with it.

“If you need help tonight, I’ll be here,” said Daria.

“Thanks.”

It would never have crossed Daria’s mind in a million years just how much help Jane would need that night.

Chapter 4

Daria endured restless dreams of her own, though more prosaic than those described by Jane, populated by the endless tunnels and menacing faces common to nightmares. Waking from the sensation of falling, it took her a few minutes to realize that Jane was not in the room.

Sitting up in her sleeping bag, Daria groped the nightstand before finding the metal frames of her glasses. Putting them on she tried to make sense of her surroundings, elements of dream corroding into reality. A bit of the summer heat still lingered in the room.

“Jane?” she said, her voice not much more than a whisper.

No one slept in the bed, the sheets in disarray. Standing on legs still wobbly from sleep, Daria touched the mattress, finding it cold.

This can't be happening. Wait, stay calm. It's probably nothing.

“Jane?” she called out again, louder, her voice bouncing off the dusty walls.

You're going to walk out of the room, and Jane will be coming back up from the kitchen, or from the bathroom. This is absurd.

Her mind flashed back to Mrs. Johanssen, the desperation in her face, and Pat Mayhew's inhuman appearance.

There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Daria, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

“Thanks for that, Hamlet, I really needed it,” she muttered.

She walked to the doorway and looked both ways, like a child crossing a street for the first time.

“Jane? Are you all right?”

A thud rattled through the roof's aging timber as if in response, Daria flinching at the sound.

On the roof?

Shaking her head, she called out, shouting that time, sure that her voice would carry through the thin walls. Receiving only silence she again thought of the noise on the roof.

Not quite believing her own actions, Daria hurried back to Jane's room and leaned out the window, hoping she was somewhere in the backyard (what she'd be doing there was another question altogether). Streetlights behind the fence cast their sterile yellow glare on the overgrown yard, even the new gazebo succumbing to neglect.

She was about to sound out another call when she heard scuffling noises on the slate roof, and her heart nearly stopped in her chest. Someone was there, Jane or an intruder, and she was all alone.

“Jane, are you up there? Who is it? If you don’t say anything, I’m going to call the police.”

She kept her voice level, calm even in the strangeness of the situation. Some kind of response, even the curse or threat of a discovered burglar (as if anyone would bother burglarizing Casa Lane) would have been welcome. Yet she heard something, garbled words struggling through the stagnant air from up above. Words spoken in Jane’s voice.

“I can hear you. What are you doing up on the roof?” she demanded.

She can’t expect me to go up there.

Never particularly afraid of heights, her circumstances nonetheless seemed to lengthen the drop to the ground below. A survivable fall in all likelihood, but not something she wanted to risk.

“Jane, please come back down here. I’ll, uh, help you back through the window.”

Closing her eyes, Daria took a deep breath, rough words from above on the edge of her hearing. She thought of slipping back into her bedroll and waking back up to the waning days of adolescence, the whole event dismissed as nightmare, Jane back to her normal (albeit unconventional) self.

Anything for Jane, an earlier version of herself said.

Positioning herself to sit on the window sill, her back to the precipice, she inched farther out while keeping her eyes on the edge of the roof, trying hard, so very hard, to not think of all the nothing behind her.

Daria’s bare legs quivered in tension and she tried to steady herself. The longer she thought about it, she knew, the less likely she was to do it. Moving her upper body slightly forward she raised her right leg to plant the foot on the sill, the wood rough against the sole.

You’re doing okay. Stay calm.

Her heart beat as if ready to burst. Keeping a tight grip on the surface she lifted herself in a sudden jerk, Not giving herself time to think twice she shot up with both arms to grab at the edge of the roof, the slate not offering any grip until she lunged again, getting her forearms on the patchy surface.

Upon realizing she hung from a second-story roof, completely unsupported, she almost let go right there. The hesitation cost her; a horrible, drooping exhaustion running down from her wrists and into her shoulders, her body suddenly weighing twice as much as normal. Coated in sweat, she threw everything she had into the last pull, a frantic animal motion dedicated to pure survival.

At last securely on the roof, she let the fear seize her for just a moment and fell on the decaying slate surface, shaking from head to toe with her eyes wide open in shock.

Whispers, heavy and unknown, reminded Daria of her purpose.

Very slowly getting to her feet she felt a brief surge of relief at seeing Jane farther up the roof, seated against the chimney. Her head lowered as if in defeat, a stream of sound spilled from her lips. Daria looked at her for a while, lacking the slightest idea as to what to do. She tried to think back on an abnormal psychology textbook she'd once read, trying to match the babbling to an illness. Daria soon gave up; even if she could put a name to the condition, it wouldn't really help her or Jane.

"Jane, I'm here. We need to get down."

Taking cautious steps up the incline her foot dislodged a rotten shingle, the ruined piece sliding down to the edge. The sight spurred a new understanding about Jane, a lifetime spent in this crumbling edifice, always either too cold or too hot. Daria knew it mostly as a refuge, but how different it might look from another perspective.

Putting her mind back on task she continued, crouching down to Jane's level. Getting closer, she confirmed that Jane spoke nothing from English or Spanish, instead making awful noises more akin to pathology than language.

Should she reach out and grab Jane's shoulder? Or would that just shock her into pushing Daria right off the roof? It occurred to Daria that she ought to have called 911 back in the house; so fearful as to what might be happening, the thought hadn't even crossed her mind, and she cursed her hastiness.

At least Jane's still in one piece. Physically, anyway.

"Jane, I don't know if you can hear me, but everything will be okay," she said, her voice still flat even in an emergency. "I'm going to take your hand, okay? Can you hear me?"

Jane continued making sounds that did not seem designed for any human mouth, and Daria shuddered.

Maybe I should just crawl back in and call emergency services. I don't know how to guide anyone down from this situation. If I leave her up here though...

"On the count of three, okay? One... two... three."

Her hand grasped Jane's. Relief, like she never felt before, flooded her when Jane's eyes sprang open from the contact, looking right at Daria in

uncomprehending shock.

“Stay calm. Are you with me?”

Her face not moving a muscle, Jane’s hand slid out from Daria’s, Jane herself scrambling to her feet, eyes fixed and distant. Daria prepared to offer more calming words, not prepared for Jane to lash out with both hands, seizing her by the shoulders and then shoving.

Too shocked to even cry out, Daria saw the roof fly out from under her feet, her shoulder slamming onto the shingles as she rolled. Her hands scrabbled for some kind of hold, fingers scraping on the edges until at last she began to slow, inches away from the edge.

Her glasses askew, she instinctually tried to fix them, too shocked to even begin figuring out what had happened, but the sound of running footsteps forced her to confront this terror.

“Jane!”

Jane aimed a terrific kick at Daria’s prone body and she lurched to the side just in time to avoid it. Twin fears—of her being pushed off and Jane losing her own balance—gave her an unnatural strength, and she managed to get back up to her feet, running back up to the top of the roof where she’d at least have high ground.

Supporting herself on the chimney with one arm, she looked back to see Jane advancing, devoid of any emotion. Between breaths Jane continued her ragged chant.

“Stop this. You can’t do this,” Daria muttered, her voice weak. She wanted to scream out more than anything, but something held her back, dreams of an ordered world keeping their hold. This too, would pass. It had to.

Daria kept telling Jane to stop, to come to her senses, none of the words having any effect. Only when Jane stood a few feet away did she try to back further down the other side. She never got the time. Jane seized her again, but instead of tossing her aside she kept her grip, pinning Daria against the chimney.

No. No. This can’t be.

“Let me go,” she said, speaking faster than normal, inspiring no recognition from Jane. Her mind struggled even as her body went limp in disbelief. Jane pulled her away from the chimney and to the side, so that her grip alone kept Daria from falling.

Not like this, you’re my friend!

Her vision started to blur, as if trying to spare her the horror of the scene.

This isn't Jane. It's something else, it isn't.

Jane pulled her a hair's breadth closer, as if preparing for the final push.

"No. You aren't doing this," Daria mumbled, barely able to hear her own voice.
"We're friends."

Are you really her friend? asked a still-lucid voice in the back of her brain.

At once, everything changed. Life came back to Jane's face, the chant ending mid-groan, and only moments later her eyes went wide in shock.

"Oh my God!"

In desperation she pulled Daria back from the brink, the two of them collapsing together on the roof.

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," wailed Jane, clutching her friend.

"It's okay," mumbled Daria, her mind still in a fog.

Too afraid to move, they waited for the dawn.

Daria and Jane clambered back through the window on exhausted limbs, the rising sun's prickling heat already warming up the dreary house. Not sure what to say, both stayed silent as they staggered down to the kitchen, the comparatively bright room promising sanctuary.

Daria tried to reorient herself, still feeling as if her heart might burst right through her chest, seeing a threat in every movement.

Something funny might be good now.

"I guess I'll go make us some coffee," she intoned. "If anything can make us forget what almost happened, it's routine."

"How can you say that? I tried to kill you, Daria!"

"I'm still alive," she said, more out of obligation than any real confidence. With shaking hands she turned on the coffee maker, filling it up with water and grinds while Jane watched through tear-stained eyes.

"Okay. We're both okay. Right?"

“Beats me.”

“Neither of us is dead or hurt. Maybe slightly unstable, but that was probably a given.”

A tiny hint of a smile on Jane released some Daria’s tension. Sitting at the table, Daria again described the events from her perspective, at least to the best of her ability. Though her hands still shook when she retrieved the coffee, a rigorous calm settled over her mind.

“The dreams were back again last night. Worse than before. Is this something sleepwalkers do?”

“There are accounts of sleepwalkers getting into cars and driving across town, or of making food in the kitchen. Getting up on the roof doesn’t seem so far-fetched.”

“But the other stuff—“

“There are, uh, a few cases in which a sleepwalker has murdered someone. These are very rare—“

Jane buried her face in her hands, sobbing again.

“No. It wasn’t you, it was some kind of misfiring neuron. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and listen to me.”

Jane’s face shot back up, disbelieving. She made a ragged sound halfway between a laugh and a sob.

“Boy, you always know how to cut straight to the point,” she said, her voice still unsteady.

“It saves time. You have no reason to feel guilty. You do need to see a doctor about this.”

“It’s been a while since anyone here’s seen a doctor. I think I’m still on my parent’s plan, but who knows when they last paid the fees. Daria, I can’t believe that you’re okay with this.”

“I’m not okay with it! However, I can see it for what it is; a medical disorder. Jane you—“ Daria paused, feeling a lump in her throat. “—you’ve always been there for me. Even if I haven’t always returned the favor.”

Jane nodded.

A thought came to Daria: this is probably the part where Quinn would hug Sandi, and they’d all have a big cry before getting makeovers.

“So, anyway, yeah. See a doctor. If you don’t have the money, my mom would probably willing to give you some.”

“Let me see what I can get with my own funds first. Trent’s going to be back in a few days, and maybe he actually earned something this time. One thing’s still bothering me, though: do sleepwalkers get intense dreams?”

“I’m not sure. I read a book about this stuff a few years ago, and I can’t remember if it mentioned that. I’ll look it up for you.”

“Because that seems important. These are really vivid. I still see bits of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Those weird buildings. I see them on the edge of my vision sometimes.”

“That could be part of it.”

“I’ll bring it up with the doc. I’m sure he’ll get a nice bonus for referring me to a psychiatrist.”

“See, everyone wins. How soon do you think you can arrange an appointment?”

“Depends. It’s always hard to say with my family.”

“Don’t wait. This looks pretty serious.”

“This week, for sure.”

“Do you want me to spend the night again? Or you could spend it at my place. That might be better; if you have another episode, I can just wake you up with one of Quinn’s weird perfumes—sorry,” she added, seeing Jane’s flicker of irritation.

“No, it’s okay. I guess it’s better to laugh than to cry, right? Besides, after what happened you’re not the one who should be saying sorry for anything. I think I’ll be okay. Trent will be home in a few days.”

“Call him and tell him it’s an emergency. He’ll go home for you.”

"Yeah, I'll let him know."

"You also need to get some more rest. Sleepwalking is often caused by exhaustion, and you've been working pretty hard."

“Yeah, that’s probably all this is. Besides, I should get more sleep to prep for the Foundation’s special project. It starts this Tuesday.”

“Are you sure you want to do that? All this painting’s been taking a lot out of you.”

“Nah, that’s how we artists recover from bad events, we put it on canvas so the rest of the world can share in our angst. At least, that’s how it used to work. Besides, it's not like they're going to keep me there overnight; I'll get plenty of rest, Dr. Morgendorffer.”

“Just call Trent, at least. He has a right to know.”

“Sure.”

Every inch of her body aching, her legs still covered in scrapes, Daria made her way home just past noon and slipped between the covers after a quick shower. She’d spent the rest of the morning with Jane in a gallant attempt at normalcy, the decaying old house made familiar by sunlight and their shared, quiet joy.

She awoke a few hours later into the grogginess of an idle Sunday afternoon. A vestigial high school sense warned her of school the next day, and she dismissed it with an indulgent smirk.

The near-disaster of the previous night faded into the distance. A terror, to be sure, but one within her power to help solve, though Jane’s future posed more complex questions. Somnambulism to that degree could be a big problem, even in a place like Lawndale. Resigning her to Trent's care struck her as unwise.

They’d still be in close contact, at least, the miracle of technology bridging the geographic gap between Boston and Lawndale. Instant messenger had its limits, however. Worse, the idea that she'd continue her sleepwalking even when she reached BFAC. Who knew if she'd really solve the problem before then? Doctors didn't always prescribe the correct regimens. The idea of Jane stumbling through trash-ridden alleys and crowded streets, unaware and attacking those much stronger and crueler...

Daria forced the thought from her mind.

She's way too gifted to stay here.

Still, Jane definitely needed to be ready for when she went to Boston. The presence of those who cared about her might make a crucial difference in her recovery.

Hell, maybe I can stay here for a little while, get a few classes under my belt at community.

Astonished at her own thoughts, Daria shook her head. Her parents had paid a fortune for Raft. Last-minute nostalgia aside, she had no real desire to stay on in Lawndale.

Her mind already in motion, she began to reexamine the context of Jane's sleepwalking. The dreams remained puzzling, prompting her to turn on the computer and go online, where a brief search indicated that dreams played no real part in sleepwalking.

Not what I wanted to learn, she frowned.

Still, plenty of people had weird dreams. Harder to explain was Mrs. Johanssen's rampage through the gallery. She doubted it bore any meaningful relation, but the very real fear in the woman's voice and the way she referred to the "bad paintings" had made an impression, one growing harder to ignore.

Pushing away from her computer, Daria looked out the window and out to the street, a sight so mundane as to provide relief. There was no reason to assume any connection; the human mind had a way of creating patterns where none existed.

She wished she could talk about the issue to an understanding third party, but so such possibility presented itself. For one, it was a personal matter for Jane. Another, she simply didn't know anyone. She might have considered Tom as little as a month ago, but they'd quickly lost contact after splitting, his last communication an anemic "Hey, how are you doing?" type of conversation via AIM. He'd logged off before her.

Tom's presence disrupted her memories of the past three years, his presence harder to explain in hindsight. She couldn't think badly of him. He'd been a good boyfriend—at least, he'd been good to her.

Daria didn't like thinking back on that night, to the awkward kiss that nearly destroyed everything. Her ethics, every merciless iron rule she'd set in place for herself—all tossed to the wind.

She'd never wanted romance, or at least that's what she told herself, but the idea of marching alone in that regard troubled her on some level. Jane got opportunities all the time—with Tom, part of Daria believed that'd be her only chance. She did what she had to do to survive.

Because in the end, you're just like everyone else. Politicians who lie for votes, execs who pocket money that's not theirs, all the people you hold in contempt. Of course, just because everyone does it, doesn't make it less wrong, less deserving of anger.

Her mood darkened, she forced herself to focus on more immediate problems, and found herself increasingly dwelling on Mrs. Johanssen. With that, an idea came

to her.

Chapter 5

I can't believe I'm actually doing this.

Calling the venture ill-advised barely even began to cover it, but Daria was there all the same, her initial burst of manic curiosity fading into doubt as she drove to the edge of the suburb, specifically to the stretch of modest tract homes where Mrs. Johanssen lived. She couldn't even be sure that the woman wasn't still in police custody.

On the plus side, she reflected, it's not more insane than anything else in the past few days.

Daria stepped out of the car and into the slow-roast heat of the late afternoon, red light bleeding into the sky. A single-story blue home waited at the end of the walkway, its lawn tidy and plain.

Imagining herself with Jane, bags of chocolate in hand like that day so long ago, she marched up to the door and knocked, already hoping that no one was home. The faded blue Civic in the driveway, however, indicated otherwise.

"Just a minute!" wheezed a voice.

The door opened a crack to reveal Mrs. Johanssen's hard face, dark eyes suspicious.

"Oh, it's you. "

"Hi, Mrs. Johanssen. We've met a few times before. My name's Daria," she said, her voice sounding like a pre-recorded message. "Do you have a minute?"

"You here to laugh at me? I'm not gonna put up with that, I'll tell you right now."

"No. I wanted to ask some questions about, uh, Pat's Easel. I want to hear your side of the story."

The door slammed shut. Then she heard the sliding of a bolt, and it opened again, Mrs. Johansen standing to the side and motioning for her to enter.

"I guess you girls did do me a good turn back when I fainted. Always felt sort of bad about complaining for you not selling me the chocolates."

“That’s okay.”

The inside was more or less what Daria remembered, a standard suburban assemblage of simple furniture and bric-a-brac. Mrs. Johanssen guided her to a worn but comfy-looking sofa next to a glass-top coffee table.

“You want anything to drink?”

“No thanks, I probably won’t be here long.”

Nodding, Mrs. Johanssen settled her bulk onto a chair opposite of Daria.

“I’m just going to go ahead and tell you, and if you want to laugh and leave, go ahead, I don’t really care,” she began. “I know what they’re doing at Pat’s Easel. Tell me, what were you doing there?”

“My friend, Jane, was submitting a painting she made.”

“Was it one of the bad ones?”

“How do you mean bad? She’s an excellent artist.”

“I mean it showed dark things, evil things. Things you wouldn’t want on a painting.”

Great, I’m probably dealing with a religious nut.

“Maybe according to some perspectives.”

“You’re not making this easy, Daria,” she growled. “Paintings of some ugly city, right? Like Stonehenge, but in the water, with these monsters dancing around?”

“I guess that’s a fair description.”

“Listen to me, here, Daria. I’m from Galveston. You know where that is?”

“Coastal Texas. I’m actually from Texas myself. Highland.”

“Oh, well a fellow Texan!” she said, brightening up for the first time. “Maybe that means you’ll be tough enough to handle this. Back when I was just a little older than you, a really peculiar sort, Joshua Taylor, came into town and opened an art gallery.”

By peculiar, you mean that football was only his second-favorite sport? Daria didn’t even smirk at the thought.

“He looked just like that Pat fella. Barely human, like his grandma had been a fish or a frog or something. Still, we didn’t make nothing of it. Not his fault,

and he seemed friendly enough.

“Now my little brother, Andy, he was one of them artistic sorts; always making pictures. Drove my folks nuts, but he was good at it. Then one day he starts getting these awful dreams. I remember, I’d hear him wake up in the other room, and then see him turn on the light and start painting like crazy.”

A chill settled on Daria.

This can’t be happening.

“Made my folks mad as hell, but Andy couldn’t stop. They figured it might be some drugs, but I knew that was wrong, not Andy. He was clean as a whistle. What he made was strange, though—the bad paintings I was talking about. I guess he did them well enough, when it came to skill.

“Joshua announced a big showing at his gallery, so Andy jumped at the chance. A couple of other folks made paintings a lot like his; they’d been having dreams too.”

“These paintings: they all showed the same thing?” asked Daria, her voice quiet.

This whole thing is starting to resemble some elaborate Candid Camera prank. Any minute now, some bastard’s going to come out of a hiding place and tell me I’m on TV. It’s the only explanation.

“I just said that, didn’t I? Andy didn’t win, at any rate, but the dreams didn’t stop. Joshua closed shop and left town right after that, we never knew why, but Andy kept getting worse.

“He was waking up every night, crying like a girl most days, painting the same damn thing over and over again! My pop never really liked him very much, always thought he was funny, and they finally took him to one of them asylums.”

Mrs. Johanssen’s voice shook, her face scrunched in a frantic attempt at control.

“They released him a year later, but he wasn’t ever the same. All the life just sucked right out of him. He hung himself a month after coming back.”

Mrs. Johanssen covered her face with her hands, body quivering in silent sobs.

“I’m very sorry to hear that, Mrs. Johanssen.”

“Do you have a brother, Daria?”

“A little sister.”

“You keep her close. Maybe if I’d stood up for him more he’d have been okay.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Daria shifted in her seat, trying to sort through this information, finding that easier than trying to offer more lame condolences. She never knew what to do when tears were involved, other than try to change the subject and ignore the twinge of guilt for not wanting to address it. Tears never seemed to solve anything.

“I left home the day after the funeral, never looked back. I did start asking some questions; I wanted to find Joshua and make him pay! Never did track him down, but I learned a few things. You ever hear of the Innsmouth Raid? Back in the ‘20s?”

“Um, yeah, that was some big anti-bootlegging operation.”

“Nuh uh. Well, maybe there was some of that, but there was a lot more. Y’see, everyone in Innsmouth had some kind of disease, made them look all wrong. Like Joshua looked, and now Pat. They ran some kind of cult too, killed people for these awful sea gods, made others go crazy.”

“Sea gods?”

“You heard me! That’s what they believed, and that was the real reason the Feds stomped them out, but a few survived. That’s what Joshua and Pat are—they’ve got Innsmouth blood, and they’re trying to spread their evil wherever they go!

“Not many folks know about this. One of ‘em who did, an old professor out in Peoria, showed me part of this book he had. Called it the Necronomicon.”

“Necronomicon? Like in The Evil Dead?”

“I don’t know anything about any evil dead, but this sure seemed pretty evil. Talked about some of these sea monsters. He reckoned it was some kind of holy book for these freaks. That’s about all I ever got to learn about it though.”

“I’m sorry for bringing this up again, but did you ever find out why Joshua left so quickly?”

“He had worse up his sleeve. He said he was going to have the winner—Betty, I think her name was—do a special project. Something made him leave before that happened, not that it helped Betty. She got deep into drugs, died a year later from sticking something bad in her arm.”

“A special project?” The words struck like lightning. Whatever occult nonsense Mrs. Johanssen was ranting about, something strange was happening.

“I don’t know anything about it. Probably best that it didn’t happen; poor Betty had enough bad things happen to her.”

Gripped by a new sense of urgency, Daria almost jumped to her feet.

“Thank you for your time, Mrs. Johanssen. I know it must have been painful talking about it. I really have to go.”

“You took me serious, more than my husband ever did,” she sighed. “Now Daria, you need to warn your friend. I don’t want to see this happen to anyone else. Maybe a lot of what I said was crazy, but there’s real evil here, and I know I ran into it. I don’t want you or your friend to end up like my Andy.”

“We’ll be careful. Thanks again for telling all of this to me.”

Turning around to leave, suppressing the urge to bolt out of the house, Daria caught sight of a framed photo on the wall. A young woman, broad and heavyset but exuding an unmistakable confidence, stood on a beach with her left arm draped around a skinny boy a few years younger than her, both dressed in clothes from the late ‘60s.

“That’s me and Andy right there. I keep it as a reminder, even though sometimes I want to take it down.”

“Ah,” said Daria, her mind too busy to formulate a proper response. Offering another hasty thanks, she left the house, breaking into a run halfway down the path. Once at her car, she took the cell phone out of the glove compartment and dialed Jane’s number, terrified of not receiving an answer.

“Hello?”

“Jane? Are you all right?”

“Depends on how you define ‘all right’, though I haven’t had any sleepwalking episodes.”

“Yeah. Listen, I don’t think you should do the Foundation’s special project.”

“Why not?”

Her mind raced for an answer. Honesty probably offered the best policy.

“I just talked to Mrs. Johanssen. Apparently something like this happened to her.”

Daria explained what she’d just been told, fully aware of how ridiculous it all sounded, her confidence faltering by the word so that she spoke faster in hopes of getting through it all without hanging up in sheer embarrassment.

“Wait. Daria, you’re serious about this, aren’t you.”

“Look, I’m sure Mrs. Johanssen has a confused idea as to what actually happened. I know I’m probably overreacting. After all that’s happened though, I think it’s best to avoid this.”

“Jeez, Daria, I’m not made out of glass.”

“That’s not—could you please just not do this?”

“I actually think I’d feel a lot better if I did. I did a little of my own research, and it doesn’t sound like there’s any connection between dreams and sleepwalking.”

“You don’t think it’s odd that Mrs. Johanssen’s story lines up so perfectly with what’s been happening?”

“Sure, I think it’s weird, but so what? Coincidences usually don’t mean anything; you taught me that! I’m really surprised that you’re the one telling me all this.”

Daria paused, trying to think of some way to back out of the ridiculous situation. What on Earth had convinced her to take Mrs. Johanssen at face value? She’d suffered a tragedy, sure, but that didn’t make her credible.

“You know what, Jane? Maybe I’m still a little mixed up. That does sound pretty absurd.”

She recalled Mrs. Johanssen’s weeping face, on the other hand, as being anything but.

“Something strange is going on here, but it’s probably no worse than that one time everybody got freaked out about communist aliens.”

“Good point.”

“All right, you actually woke me up from the middle of a recovery nap, and I’d better get back to it.”

“Still getting the nightmares?”

“No.”

“Hopefully you can forget this conversation ever happened.”

“See you later,” she laughed.

That night, Daria's emotions switched between embarrassment and renewed concern. The former tended to be stronger, yet she could not so easily dismiss Mrs. Johanssen's story and its odd similarities to recent events.

On an impulse she did some research on the Innsmouth Raid and the Necronomicon. Oddly, the former seemed to have completely bypassed the conspiracy radar, with no one thinking it anything other than part of Prohibition. Perhaps Mrs. Johanssen had manufactured that lead on her own.

The Necronomicon turned out to be a ridiculous occult tome of dubious provenance. She found a dozen partial online transcriptions, usually of eye-searing red or yellow text on a black background, flanked by rotating skulls and burning torches.

The only really useful information came from a site debunking the book, which argued that no such person named Abdul Alhazred (not even a real Arabic name, apparently) had ever written such a text, and that it was instead the invention of 18th century English mystics who attributed the translation to John Dee (whose interest in celestial numerology, an entirely different kind of nonsense, made it unlikely for him to deal with the tome).

Daria did have to give some credit to the Necronomicon's authors for at least being a bit more creative—Cthulhu instead of Satan, R'lyeh instead of Mercury being in the right phase—but her research just made the whole thing appear more ridiculous.

With Mrs. Johanssen's bizarre behavior explained (and, she had to admit, the parallels still unexplained), Daria began to think about her own role in the whole mess. The idea of leaving did bother her more than she cared to admit, independence quite terrifying when held so close to her. A few years ago she'd have jumped at the chance, confident that she'd be able to brush off the worst the world had to show, but the episode with Tom demonstrated that she was more corruptible, more malleable, than she cared to admit.

Just because you lapsed in your standards, doesn't mean that you will again.

The lack of sleep catching up to her, she prepared for bed and soon had the lights off, her head on the pillow. About a month remained before school started.

One month without Tom, without Principal Li or Mr. O'Neill. One month with your family less annoying than they used to be. One month when you can spend time with Jane.

Satisfied by that, she slept.

Jane hadn't precisely lied about not getting nightmares. It wasn't as if the otherworldly vistas had gone away or changed in content; merely, they no longer held any terror.

She entered a new world not long after Daria had gone back home, the grand corpse city manifesting in the furniture of her aging home. Walls and frames melted, as pliable as glass in a Dali painting, opening up new vistas into abyssal caverns holding untold glories. Jane stood at the precipice of a new world, one that touched the minds of those worthy.

Drab normalcy returned to the dusty rooms at times, leaving Jane alternating between relief and panic, her mind not yet willing to be severed from her old life yet still craving the alien sights. The idea that this might not be normal hadn't crossed her mind for some time.

Daria's call came as an unwelcome interruption, though she answered all the same, moved by a remnant of the horror she'd felt after the sleepwalking episode. The mere thought turned her cold, the beckoning new world freezing in the cruel angles of her own. Daria didn't need to be involved.

She never feels very comfortable doing new things, and this is pretty new.

Dwelling on the issue only robbed her of time amidst the visions, and she vowed to never do so again. She lived what other artists only dreamed.

Why did this ever frighten me? she wondered, beholding it with new eyes. The last of the rotting house's walls peeled away, her bed transforming into dark stone that possessed the consistency of skin. A great plain of plasticine viscera splashed and coiled for miles all around, and beyond that the mighty temples, black surfaces gilded in suppuration.

No longer a stranger to the place, she felt no fear as something lifted her from the altar, the sea of limp flesh uncoiling fine cilia in tribute at her passing. Blister-capped temples bled and shook, soft metal scales tearing through yielding skin to renew the City, so long lost and buried.

Her guardian carried her farther each time, preparing her for something even more wondrous that lay behind this new world, the truth of all things written in the stars. Bits and pieces of the final pattern shone out through the muck, a clearer picture of it forming in her mind.

Of the world's billions of people, she alone could recreate the pattern. There were plenty of more skilled artists, but none saw what she saw. Once etched on the canvas of reality, His herald would arrive, ushering in a new era.

Jane knew no fear when the vision faded, knowing it would return in greater

detail. Lying on her dank bed, flies crawling on the ceiling, she felt her lips turn up in a weak smile.

“Don’t worry, Daria,” she muttered. “I’ll go to the doctor soon, like you said. I just need to see this thing through to the end. You’ll probably think it’s really cool.”

Her only answer came from the buzzing of the flies.

Monday passed between the pages of books and without incident. Daria called Jane twice, her failure to answer the first call almost prompting Daria to make a visit. Caution won out, and she was rewarded with an answer on the second call.

“You’ll never guess who Quinn saw at the food court.”

“Dr. Shar flipping burgers?”

“If only. She did see Upchuck and Andrea together; they’re apparently still an item.”

“Ha! That’s so weird and unsettling I can’t help but find it kind of sweet. This worries me though; what are we going to talk about in Boston? Everyone we like to make fun of will still be here or in some other college.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. If there’s one thing I learned in moving from Highland to Lawndale, it’s that stupidity is infinite in its variety.”

“Amen to that. Oh! Hey, I gotta run.”

“Okay. Do you want to get together Wednesday? Celebrate the special project they’re giving you?”

“Sounds like a plan, and I’ll try not to go into another sleepwalking frenzy. I really need to go, so adios!”

Jane hung up, and Daria put down the receiver. Her being able to joke about it was probably a good sign, though it still worried Daria. Jane said that she’d called Trent, and that he’d be home a few days earlier than planned. Part of Daria wanted to call Trent herself, just to make extra sure, but decided that would be too intrusive. She had to trust Jane.

In the lonely evening hours, however, the old unease crept back into her brain.

You’ve spent the better part of high school worrying about nothing, so what’s a few more months?

Except it wasn't nothing, not exactly. Mrs. Johanssen's talk of her brother's—and the other artists'—dreams couldn't easily be relegated to coincidence. Then again, plenty of people suffered nightmares. Maybe Andy really did have mental illness of some kind. Betty's death, though tragic, was hardly uncommon.

Jane won't end up like that. She's much too smart. If anything does happen, you'll be nearby.

Telling it to herself until she believed it, Daria fell asleep. Arising late in the next morning, she awoke a sleeping Jane with another phone call and idled away the hours. The air that day, so hot and damp, seemed tensed and she got the curious feeling of something momentous approaching her, the way she used to feel just before one of the big storms back in Highland.

It wasn't until she read the notice tucked in the back of the newspaper describing the suicide by pills of one Mrs. Johanssen that her defenses buckled.

Chapter 6

Jane never heard the phone.

On shivering legs she staggered worn and reeking through the streets, two worlds mingling in her vision. A single thought pounded in her mind: to reach the Foundation's office and begin her work. She stepped past puddles of primordial slime, past rudimentary life dripping in pale fleshy clusters in the gates of ancient temples. Millions lived in the city, and they'd soon arise.

You're onto something big, she told herself. Picasso could have only dreamed of revolutionizing art this way.

Her work hailed as the voice of a generation manifested on canvas, the freedom to do as she wished, following the purity of vision. Great things awaited, for her, Trent, Daria—she just needed to finish it.

Corpse pits yawned in the noxious air, contents green and stinking.

The stars are almost right.

Only the weakness of flesh slowed her, her lungs struggling to process the nearly viscous air, the clammy pressure hindering even the slightest movement. Still she grew stronger, the glorious pattern clearer with each step. At times she lost her lucidity, living citadels shrinking into dead brick and mortar, the sun bright and the air clear. She'd sit down on the curb during such episodes, waiting for them to pass, cradling the box that held her paints and brushes.

She followed the vague memory of city streets, the path clearer to her when seen through the City. A kind of sixth sense, an overlay of the dream world, told her when to stop and when to move. Even dreams can hurt, she reminded herself as she momentarily heard cars speeding past her. They can hurt others too—you still need to see a doctor. After what almost happened with Daria...

Ancient sounds choked through the slime, ponderous forms shifting in lightless caverns.

Jane didn't really see the drab two-story office hosting the Foundation for the Promotion of Local Talent, but she knew she'd arrived all the same. Where else would she find the scaled gatekeepers, their immortal heads crowned with pallid gold?

Almost there.

Mountains high, the great feelers unfurled, the first nerves twitching back to life.

Pick up, pick up, pick up!

“Hey.”

“Trent! Has Jane called you?”

“Daria? Uh, no, she hasn't. What's the matter?”

“She didn't call you earlier this week? What about just now?”

“Slow down! I haven't gotten any calls from her. Is she okay?”

“Um, probably. I think. I don't know. She started sleepwalking,” said Daria, forcing herself to calm down even though every fiber of her being wanted to scream. “I went to your house on Saturday, and spent the night. While asleep, Jane went out onto the roof.”

“On the roof?” For the first time in her life, Daria heard real panic in Trent's voice.

“She didn't fall. I went up—there was some, uh, confusion—but she was okay. The next morning, I told her to call you so that you could make plans to see a doctor. She never called you?”

“No, she didn't. I'm sure she didn't. Where are you now?”

“At my house. She’s not picking up, I called three times. I’ll go over and check on her. I should never have let her alone.”

There was a pause.

“She’s probably okay, Daria. Just because someone isn’t answering doesn’t mean they’re in trouble.”

“There’s more. I think. I don’t know. How soon can you be back?”

“I’ll start heading home now. I guess you can go ahead and check, stay with her until I get there. It’ll be okay.”

Daria didn’t even say goodbye, disconnecting and immediately grabbing the keys to the family SUV. Not bothering to ask permission she practically sprinted to the driver’s seat, gunning the engine and giving only a quick glance in the rearview mirror.

Careful, Daria; last time you drove like this you went off the road, and Jane had to escort you back after listening to your sob story.

Alone in the diner, rain drumming on the roof and feeling the tears behind her eyes, Jane arriving in all that, for her.

I can’t let anything happen to her.

Glory and obscenity merged into one, Pat Mayhew guided Jane towards the sanctum.

“I envy you, Jane,” he said, his tongue freed from the encumbrance of human speech. “Yours is a unique honor.”

Knowing he expected no response, Jane followed him, content to listen. Ancient words shook through the air, interlacing with his croaking voice.

“When the stars are right He will arise, but there is no need to wait. I do not think you will ever see Him, truly—that blessing belongs to others—but his herald should be reward enough.

“Already we can call them up from R’lyeh, but their forms cannot long manifest so far from Him. Now, however, He has granted you the vision to change the geometries of this world—perfect for an artist, yes? The first herald shall rise here, bringing truth to the tottering cities of man. From this first, multitudes will follow, until the world is made ready.”

Her hands itched to start, the pattern glaring in her vision.

“The summoning ritual has already begun. Given what He is telling you, I do not imagine it will take you long to finish your part.”

“I’ll be done before you know it,” she mumbled. Green walls disintegrated, dissolved, leaving only the twisting pattern gleaming before her.

“We have endured many trials. Since the raid, we have had to proceed with caution, stopping our work at even the first sign of interference. That we have invested so much in you is a sign of our faith.”

Seeing only the pattern, Jane felt the cold and scaly hand take her own, guiding her down a flight of stairs. The vision dimmed just a touch, enough to let her see her surroundings, a bare cellar ten feet on each side and lit by pale phosphorescent growths. A great circular stone interrupted the uneven masonry, and she knew that to be her canvas.

Her materials hung, splayed and ruined, from hooks. A small remnant of her shrank back from the sight, the bodies familiar as if from a dream. Rivulets of blood still dripped from great rents in flesh to collect in copper bowls.

“We have invested in the blood of others, and the blood of others can lead to our own. As you see, your competitors have been honored with participation in the final ritual. I trust you will not disappoint.”

“No, I wouldn’t want that.”

“You may start when ready.”

Putting her box on the ground, Jane opened it up, taking out her tools. Understanding that there’d be no need for her usual palette, she dipped her finest brush into the gore.

Chapter 7

Hands resting on the steering wheel, Daria looked out to the office of the Foundation for the Promotion of Local Talent. Similar to its neighbors in the industrial park, only the office’s size made it incongruous. Two stories tall, its stucco walls clothed in a stone façade, the structure was far more than such an organization should need.

A crumpled business card on Jane’s nightstand had led her to the place. She’d driven past it a dozen times in the past, never expecting she’d ever have any reason to visit. Now it filled her vision, impossible to ignore.

Lightheaded and with her heart beating at twice normal speed, Daria stepped out of the SUV and into the soft summer darkness, the night sky blushed with fading light. She paused again, part of her wanting to turn back.

You know this is insane. Mrs. Johanssen killing herself doesn't mean her story was true.

Daria never really knew much about Mrs. Johanssen, and she wasn't going to pretend that her death, however tragic, engendered any particularly great sadness. The finality of it all, however, demanded action.

Even there she wondered if she'd already made some terrible mistake, that perhaps Jane never even went to the office and was lying facedown in a ditch after another episode, life ebbing away while Daria chased delusions.

When she called emergency services, they told her it was too early to begin a search. She'd nearly screamed into the phone, instead stifling the words and then making the short drive to the office without any idea of what to expect. Remembering how Quinn always put her best foot forward, calm and confident, Daria tried to do the same. Marching up to the front door, already feeling the world falling out from beneath her, she tried the door and found it unlocked.

This is either very good, or very bad.

Pat Mayhew sat behind a small wooden desk, his almost monstrous form incongruous amidst the beige carpet and tan walls. Recognition flickered across his flabby visage as he turned his eyes up from the thick blue binder he'd been reading.

"Hello? Oh, I think I remember you: Jane's friend, right?"

"Uh, right," replied Daria, her voice distant in her own ears. "Is she here? Jane said she had some kind of a project with your organization."

"Ah, you just missed her, actually."

"She already finished?"

"Jane hasn't started yet; all we did was brainstorm, figure out how to get word out about the Foundation's work. I can't give you all the details, but it's going to be great!"

"She is very talented. Is your office always open this late?"

Pat's brow furrowed, though his face stayed friendly (or as friendly as it could manage).

"Summer's always pretty busy for the Foundation, what with all the art students on break. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

She paused, her mind racing for a reason to stay, to look for Jane.

"Before I go, may I use your restroom?"

Pat took a quick look at the clock on the wall.

“Sure. It’s down the hall to your right.”

“Thanks.”

Trying to keep her hands from shaking, Daria walked into a corridor dim-lit in burned fluorescence. A musty smell hung in the air past the main desk, a scent of cobwebs and mold. Pausing, Daria opened the door to the ladies’ room only to let it fall shut. Thus committed to her lie, she crept on quiet feet to the door at the end. Holding her breath, she pressed down on the handle until she heard the soft click, and pushed.

Slipping through to the darkness on the other side, she closed the door behind her, the dank odor—like old socks—worse than before. It recalled the rot of half-eaten food in Jane’s room when she’d found the card, and beyond that the neglect of retirement homes and sanitariums.

A ghost of the day’s heat lingered in the room, bare save for some empty and opened cardboard boxes clustered beneath a window. The room ran the width of the building, a single door interrupting the wall opposite of Daria. Her eyes adapting to the darkness, she noticed a sliver of floor beneath the boxes.

On impulse she stepped to the pile, lifting up the nearest box. She could just make out a straight line in the surface beneath; moving a bit more, it took on the pattern of a large square, almost certainly a trap door of some kind.

That’s not suspicious.

Trying not to make too much noise, she sifted through the containers and revealed more of the panel, finding a hinged handle and lock at one side. She gave an experimental pull, hearing a latch underneath thudding against the wood.

Giving up for the moment she turned her attention to the remaining door, her collar already soaked in sweat.

If Pat finds me sneaking around back here... well, there’s no way to know. It might be nothing.

Her ears picked it up first, ragged voices in a low chorus emanating through the thin walls. Details lost themselves in the low susurrations but she still heard the rough pain in each voice, the words torn out from the throat.

The same kinds of sounds Jane had been chanting on the roof.

Quick movements took her through the doorway, the door itself snapping shut despite her care, her hands shaking too much for careful motion. She caught only

brief glimpses of her surroundings as she sought cover, the empty warehouse offering little in the way of shelter, light from the far end bleeding into the air.

Throwing herself on the dusty floor behind a stack of cobwebbed pallets she tried to steady herself, tried not to look at the unearthly glow still dancing at the edge of her vision. Tongues of cold light shimmered up from the cement floor of the warehouse's center. Through the unearthly glow she heard the chant more clearly, a human facsimile of something utterly unknown.

Don't look, just don't look at it.

As her mind screamed in protest, a more logical remnant tried to formulate some explanation. Some kind of uncontrolled chemical reaction, perhaps, or maybe even hallucination. The second idea even offered sanctuary, relieving her of responsibility.

A padded room again, but this time for real. No one will expect anything, you never have to say anything again. No one will judge what you do, not even you.

Still the lights fumed, her eyes watering from the brightness, the hymn rising in pitch. Fragments of repeated sound caught in her ear: khloolo, hrhl, ftach.

This can't be real, she prayed, and bits of what she'd read online the other night surfaced in memory.

Daria's breath caught in her throat, hands rising in instinct to cover her mouth, entire body shaking as age-old reflex took hold. The world blurred at the edges, the distant ceiling seeming to twist, dropping towards her only to pull back up like some viscous strand.

They'll see you if you run! Stay down!

A thin whimper escaped her lips, lost in the deafening groan.

You need to stay calm. No matter how strange the situation, panic never helped anyone. Figure out what's happening. Find Jane and leave.

Daria turned her head, squinting as the full force of the light pierced her eyes, the raised arms of worshippers sharp silhouettes before the glare. In flickering vision the limbs took on monstrous forms, ridges and fins flaring up from the flesh. Theories and explanations fell to pieces the moment she formulated them, and she shut her weeping eyes to block out the light.

At first only the thick-voiced chants broke into her self-imposed darkness, the inhuman calls shaking the very world.

I can ignore this until it goes away. It's just sound.

Still the light intensified, illuminating the capillaries in her eyelids so the world turned red. Her heart beat faster and she clenched her teeth to stifle the scream threatening to explode from her chest.

Without warning the light vanished, alien words transformed into shrill and warbling cries, and a foulness like she'd never known bore down upon her. A smell of opened veins and dried amniotic fluids, of intestinal flora and rotting fish. She gagged, spasms wrenching her body as she tried lift herself up from the floor, the stench crushing all of her senses.

Collapsing on her knees she saw the immense shadow filling up half the warehouse, the slick green flesh and the tendrils cascading down its bulk. Her world turned to ash.

Chapter 8

New vistas unfolded before Jane's very eyes. All of the hours spent studying the brushstrokes and color compositions of masters past had only just prepared her for such wonders. What she explored went far beyond painting, something close to whole new medium at her beck and call.

The set of traditional dimensions now seemed a limitation, lines of blood wrapping around each other in elegant complexity, up and down, forwards and backwards, side to side. Every stroke added new qualities to the pattern, entire worlds flickering in the charnel fog.

This is so beautiful.

No thought of rest crossed her mind, every ounce of her being craving to see more. She at last touched on the impossible, too devoted to even care about explanation, satisfied by the sheer experience.

I can't wait to show this to Daria.

The blade's edge hovered less than an inch in front of her, and Daria remembered that such a sight should cause fear.

"You ought to consider yourself lucky," gloated Pat.

"Just let me go. I won't say anything," mumbled Daria. "This never happened."

Pat had intercepted her in the hall leading to the foyer, pinning her against

the wall with a single heavy arm. She offered no resistance, her mind still crumpling from the sight of what they'd brought into the world.

“Whether you go or stay doesn't matter. It's already begun. You have no idea what you just saw, do you?”

She just stared, her skin alive with an awful crawling sensation. Daria tried to focus on Pat, his malformed features blurring together.

“You know,” he whispered, salt-tinged breath in her ear, “many of my kind would have killed to take part in this moment. To see what we're doing. And you have no idea. So damned typical of humans.”

The knife dropped from sight and Daria felt the sharp edge against her neck, pressing deeper with steady force until skin broke, thick blood trickling down from the wound. Pain registered as dull surprise, her body unable to take any reaction. She looked up at Pat, no longer understanding his actions. The floor shook, primordial feet taking their first steps into reality, the smell of corruption settling into her skin, into the walls and carpet.

“Just let me go.” No panic broke her voice, monotone and distant.

“Whatever I do pales in comparison to what the star spawn will wreak by its very presence. You have family here, girl? They'll see the same thing you did, but they won't have the option of looking away.”

“Excuse me? I want to go home.”

“You won't have a home to go back to pretty soon.”

Shrill cries echoed through the office, not made from any human throat. Pat's scowled, shooting a look down towards the warehouse. He tossed Daria to the floor and ran back into the shadows.

She lay there for a moment, conscious of the blood still welling out from her neck. Probably just a surface wound, she reasoned.

Struggling back up she headed towards the exit, thinking only of her room. She'd go to sleep and wake up the next morning, her books waiting for her. As simple as that.

Jane's ambition increased as impossibility became reality at her hands. The original pattern, once so astonishing, began to promise greater heights. Someone had once told her that artists create the reality beyond the perception. She'd never thought much of it until that night.

The form, she surmised, was perfect. Variation existed in the color as well, the blood taking on different hues depending on when it had been applied, gaining the chromatic complexity of a Rothko. What it lacked, however, was contrast. Her pattern floated in a void, the stone on which she'd started having expanded into an absence.

Hot colors should dominate, that's for sure.

Jane did not look away from the pattern as she put down her first paintbrush, and continued focusing even as she opened up her supply box.

Concentrate—you can't screw this up.

Wrenching her eyes away she just made out the colors of the available paints in the darkened room. Taking a ruddy orange from the pack she poured some of it on her palette. Pausing in thought, she added a dab of yellow, stirring it until it reached the shade she imagined.

Making sure the chosen colors lay thick on the brush, Jane took the vision given to her and made it her own.

Daria ran, her movements stiff and robotic, sprinting past the parking lot and across the empty street, her mind nearly blank. She did not even try to regain balance when her feet slipped on the grass of an office lawn, sending her sprawling.

Prone, she heard only her own breathing. Echoes of fear urged her to keep running, too distant to really heed. Daria crept forward until she reached a nearby oak, the thick roots promising some kind of shelter.

I'll just lie here for a while until I don't have to think about it anymore.

Not even the smell of the leaves and the grass overcame the sense of abomination deep in her skin, tangible even in the earth itself. On some level she knew there was, in the long run, no such thing as escape. Perhaps that didn't matter so much.

As long as I don't see it again.

Movement in the Foundation's parking lot caught her attention and she shrank back, her body trying to embed itself in the soil. Breath caught in her throat as she watched malformed figures hurry to parked cars, too far gone to really appreciate the sight's absurdity.

Engines rumbled to life and headlights turned on as the cars fled the lot. Daria closed her eyes again, not wanting to see the walls break and the beast emerge.

For the first time since starting, a tremor of artistic doubt troubled Jane. She did not second-guess the choice of color; rather, something less tangible seemed to mar the pattern, its complexity and beauty no longer as evident.

Probably just means you're getting used to it.

Still she worked, pursuing the peculiar angles and dimensions known only to her even as they started to flatten out and simplify. Where she once traced paint through a void the rough stone surface of the walls intruded on the immaterial canvas, flickering like an old filmstrip.

You can do this, she thought, biting her lip.

Even as she watched she seemed to fall into a dream, the newfound reality receding away. She just needed to wake up from this and resume work; instead she sank deeper to the mundane world of basic shapes and dimensions.

Wait, stop! God, Buddha, whoever it is that let me see this, I'm not done yet!

Jane redoubled her efforts, hands scraping against stone as she tried to access the strange space she'd so recently seen. Failure only inspired great efforts, tiny fists slamming against the stone.

This isn't fair! I was making it better, and you just take it away?

Faced with the silent masonry, an impossible scrawl of blood and paint spattered across its surface, Jane kept trying to regain what she'd lost.

Daria took a queasy lurch back into the waking world, her mind a hopeless jumble. She lay under the night sky and spreading branches, nearby lampposts illuminating the bland forms of glass and stucco.

All at once the memories crashed into her, mental snapshots of toxic green skin and deformed petitioners, and she doubled over, dry-heaving. The very thought of that thing broke everything she knew of the world. Every assumption of reason and order gone in an instant, laid bare as a vain and feeble attempt to understand the unknowable.

She couldn't even dismiss it as some dream or hallucination either, the recollection too vivid for such attempts. The glistening bulk seemed to spread out, cancer-like, from that single memory to touch on everything else.

I need to talk to someone, to Jane.

That lone thought broke through the corruption, her exhausted body cold with a new fear. She'd fled the moment she saw it. Finding Jane never even crossed her mind, buried under the all-consuming need to escape, to be free of it forever. Worse, she knew she'd do it again if the situation ever repeated.

“Oh my God.”

She'd only wanted a few last months with her best friend, a return to the lazy and interminable summer between sophomore and junior years before splitting ways. A chance to make up for the tumult of the last year, brought on by her own greed and desperation.

You haven't really changed. You're the same as before.

Looking back at the Foundation office, a few lights still on at the front, she noted that it stood whole and untouched. There was no way the monster could have escaped without tearing out a sizable chunk of the place. Pat and his compatriots had also fled. The foulness, once overpowering, remained only a trace smell like a fine layer of filth over the Earth.

It's gone.

Was it? She couldn't be sure, but the signs seemed to indicate as much. Then again, who was to say what indicated anything?

Jane might still be there.

The possibility hovered in her mind. She checked the time on her watch—1:43. It had been hours since the event. Daria didn't even want to speculate as to what such a creature might do—the mere sight of thing would cause a panic. The lack of screaming mobs and burning buildings offered hope, did it not?

She approached the office with halting movements, each step forward met with inner resistance, the instinct to run trying to keep her back, to drive her towards home.

It's probably safe. If a Godzilla-size monster was on the loose, you'd probably notice it.

Forward motion became harder as she neared the door, the creature's smell stronger in that place. The boots on her feet turned to weights, her momentum slowing.

Jane's probably okay. Maybe she just came and left. Maybe she's had another sleepwalking episode and she needs help somewhere else, somewhere away from here.

Eyes blurring, she looked down at the sidewalk as the stench worsened.

At least this way, if it's waiting for me inside, she thought, I won't have to see it. It'll just eat me or squash me or whatever, and I won't have to think about it anymore.

Groping for the handle she opened the front door, feet pressing on the beige carpet. She already knew she probably wouldn't be able to go back into the warehouse. The trap door, however, waited in the office section.

Remembering that it was locked, Daria went behind the reception desk, eyes kept away from the open binder and its papers covered in elaborate diagrams and unknown letters. Making a methodical search of the drawers she only found standard office supplies before at last stumbling across a set of three keys on a ring.

Grabbing it, Daria shut the door and braced herself. Not even able to keep her eyes open she felt her way down the hall, trying not to breathe in too deeply.

This whole place is contaminated now. No one will ever willingly go here again, she thought, without knowing precisely why.

At last reaching the final room before the warehouse she hurried over to the uncovered trap door, opening her eyes right on the latch.

You don't know what's down there.

Blocking all thoughts, she tried the keys, the second one fitting. The lock clicked with a single turn and Daria looked away as she pulled it open, wood and metal scraping together. Nothing lashed out from the darkness, though a rank smell poured up from the pit. She'd smelled it before, the sensation taking her back to summer camp injuries of days long past.

“Jane!”

Daria peered down the steps. A figure knelt at the bottom of the stairs, facing away from her, but even in the shadows she recognized Jane's familiar frame.

It'll be okay now.

“Can you hear me?”

“Daria? I had it. I really wanted to show you,” she replied, sounding like a lost child.

“It's okay,” she said, descending into the basement. “Are you hurt—“

She almost ran back up at the sight of the corpses suspended from the ceiling,

wounds open to the dank air. Blood drenched almost every square inch of the cellar, gathering thick on the floor and on the opposite wall.

“Jane, what happened?”

You didn’t do this, you didn’t do this.

“It was right in front of me, Daria. And then it just went away. I don’t know what happened.”

“What killed these people?”

“Huh? What are you talking about? It was right there!”

Jane finally turned to face Daria, eyes trembling.

“We need to go.”

Taking Jane’s wrist with one hand and picking up her box of paints with the other, Daria guided her friend up the stairs. She protested at first but fell silent, following in numb obedience. Once out of the basement, Daria closed the trap door, locking it again for good measure as a bedraggled Jane watched in confusion.

At once Daria embraced her, heedless of the gore.

Epilogue

“It’s really cool that you’re doing this, Daria. Janie needs all the help she can get right now.”

“Mm.”

Trent drove the Tank past trees dying in the bursts of autumn glory, reds and yellows sharp against the blue sky. Too anxious to really talk she tried to concentrate on the scenery, nature’s palette only offering a weak distraction from her fears.

Daria got out of the Tank before Trent, just able to maintain a façade of outward calm as security waved them through the imposing iron doors and into the sterile hallways. A quick right took them to the waiting room where they took their seats. Daria gripped her knees, not completely sure that she didn’t belong in a cell herself.

A nurse walked Jane onto the waiting room’s linoleum floor, her face sickly in

the florescence. Daria stood up from her chair as Trent hugged his sister. Jane looked mostly the same, a bit pudgier from the bad hospital food. She offered a wan smile.

“Hey,” greeted Daria.

“Well, aren’t you enthusiastic!”

“Sorry. Are you feeling okay?”

“Okay? I’m great! Do you have any idea how much artist’s cred you get by spending some time in an institution? Now I’m up there with Richard Dadd and Van Gogh.”

For the first time in what felt like years, Daria smiled.

The nurse explained the rules regarding the medications to both Jane and Trent, the two of them making noncommittal nods. With that, they signed her out and went back on the road towards home.

“So what was it like in there?” asked Daria, not really sure what approach to take.

“Disappointing. I was hoping for a lobotomy—electroshock at the very least. Instead they just gave me a lot of pills and greasy food.”

“Joking aside, did they treat you all right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” She lowered her voice: “I basically just told them what they wanted to hear.”

“I’m sorry, Jane.”

“Don’t be. There’s no way you could have explained it to them even if you were there. Hell, I can’t even explain it to myself.”

Daria had kept talking to Jane in the days after that horrible night, trying to tie together some semblance of a narrative. Each attempt made things worse. Jane’s scrambled memories had filtered into the waking world as she tried to recreate the pattern in her own blood. She talked of how Pat described the sacrifices of Darren Lansky and Joanna Porter, but feared she’d played some part.

“If they made me do something like that, Daria, I don’t think I’d remember,” she’d sobbed. “I might’ve done it, I just don’t know!”

Daria started her studies at Raft soon after. Her weak protests dismissed as pre-college angst by her parents, she found herself too confused to offer any

real resistance when they drove her up to the dorms. She called Jane every day, until at last the outbursts became too much and, despite Trent's protests, the authorities took her to the hospital.

Sitting with Jane in the back of the Tank, Daria could almost forget the whole nightmare.

"The important thing is that it's over. We're alive, more or less. Right, Daria?"

"Right."

Daria drove back to Raft the next day, hours blurring together. She'd staggered her schedule to have Fridays free, giving her more time for the long trip home.

At college, Daria let the days wash over her. Her courses posed little in the way of difficulty; she'd read pretty much everything on the curriculum back in high school. She spent the daylight hours in class or typing up routine essays, and the nights drifting off into her thoughts, the dorm's jovial chaos flowing around her but never touching.

"Daria, we're going out. You wanna join us?" asked Rochelle, her roommate.

"Thank you. It's been a long day though. I think I'll stay in."

After three months of living there, she still couldn't remember Rochelle's last name.

Her parents sometimes wondered why their daughter's customary As had started to slip into Bs. She first threw them off by talking of a busy social life, but that fiction proved impossible to maintain and she soon had to contend with worried calls about her mental well-being.

She knew she wasn't fine, but no longer especially cared. College made it easy to be a ghost, and that was what she chose.

Most days she kept the fear at the back of her mind but it broke through every few weeks, devouring every sense until all she could do was lie in bed shaking, her breaths quick and shallow, seeing the terror again loosed on the world. She'd stumble out from nightmares and into the painful morning light, unable to move or even think. The dread clutched her for hours, retreating only in inches to leave her past the point of exhaustion.

As people must, Daria developed ways of coping. During the worst episodes she recreated events from her high school days piece by piece in her mind, the old sharp edges blunted by time. Dwelling in fantasy and nostalgia struck her as unwise, but given what she knew of reality, she saw little other choice.

Daria only really came alive when she went back home, which generally translated to spending as much time with Jane as possible. Jane wore a mask of high spirits, belied only by the half-finished paintings in her room. Even so, they both found sanctuary in the same places, reliving better times in idle speculation of classmates long gone.

Despite the inconstant Lane family finances, Jane and Trent were able to get by. Amanda even came over for a few weeks to check on Jane before disappearing just as quickly. His sister's difficult state inspired a long-buried sense of responsibility in Trent and he ended up getting a job at Payday where he showed off surprising ability and dedication. It didn't bring in much, but it was something.

"You're okay with Mystik Spiral not being a thing any longer?" she said to Trent on a blustery afternoon.

"I'm still going to write music, and I have a lot of ideas. This is a good way to recharge my creativity while I help Jane get back on her feet. I think the Spiral was about done anyway."

The rest of Lawndale changed little, though the Foundation for the Promotion of Local Talent had closed its doors without fanfare early in September, Pat's Easel following a week later. Daria initially feared that Pat might try to take revenge but stopped caring as the months wore on.

If he wanted to get back at you, considering the tools at his disposal, he'd have done it by now, she reasoned.

Pat's patience only demonstrated his confidence in eventual victory.

December came, bringing with it the warmth of winter break. Spending so much time back home let her believe that things hadn't really changed, and she was surprised by how easily she fell into the old routines of suburban life. Still, in the quiet moments when she saw the faces of her parents and sister alight with joy, she remembered what might be waiting for all of them.

At Trent's urging, Jane started jogging again in February. She described the first few attempts as agony over IM, but kept at it, regaining her old speed by inches. Daria even joined her one weekend, able to keep up thanks only to her friend's diminished capacity.

Daria dodged the festivities of spring break, predictably opting for a quiet week in the old neighborhood. She walked over to Jane's house early one morning as sheets of rain crashed down from steel-colored clouds. Jane welcomed her in, some of the old creative spark in her eyes.

"So it's been a long time since I've painted anything. I'm thinking it's time I did some new work. Not just start it, but finish it," she said, handing Daria a

cup of coffee.

“I agree.”

“It’s just that, whenever I start, all of that... I dunno, bad stuff starts coming back up and I have to stop. I still don’t know what Pat showed me. Part of me wants to create it again, but I’m scared to death of it at the same time.”

Daria still only had a vague idea as to what Jane experienced.

“I wish I could be of more help.”

“I think I can do it again—my stuff, that is, not Pat’s. Daria, would you mind looking over my shoulder when I work? It’s driving me crazy that I can’t make anything.”

“Sure. I’ve watched you work before.”

“Thanks.”

They went up to Jane’s room, free of the smell of paint for the first time in Daria’s memory. Jane soon set up her workplace, pausing as she stared at the blank canvas, the brush hovering over her palette.

“I know what I want to paint. It’s just that I still see it in front of me,” she whispered, her voice quavering.

Daria leaned in close, hearing the percussion of the rainfall on the roof.

“Well, you always knew how to ignore what you saw, right? When you painted scenes or people, you saw what was really there.”

“But this is what’s really there.”

“Okay, but maybe only in a material sense.” Daria took a deep breath, hoping she didn’t sound too New Age-y. “You have something more.”

“Something more. Okay.”

Slowly, she dipped her brush in the green ink, swirling it around in the pigment before making a few exploratory strokes, like a child painting for the first time.

“This feels ridiculous,” she muttered.

“You’re doing fine. If it looks too messy, just say you were going for Pollock’s style.”

“There’s an idea,” Jane chuckled.

She worked with care, like a craftsman watching out for a basic but hard-to-avoid error. At times she paused, blinking, as if to regain herself. Daria stood by in silent encouragement, watching as a harsh landscape—jagged lines and bold colors—came to life. Influenced by what Jane had seen, perhaps, but still distinct, still her own.

As the rain intensified, the artist returned to work.