

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

[Part I of III] (SAMPLER: Chapters 1-5)

J. S. Norstein



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jnorstein@loreweaverpublications.com

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Book Design by J. S. Norstein



The following is a firsthand account of real-life events in the late summer and fall of 2022 in the village of Rook's Hollow, NY. This account originally appeared in the ***Zephyr World Weekly*** online news report for the weeks of November the 11th, 18th and 25th, 2022.

Not even the names have been changed to protect the innocent.



PART ONE:

Freelance Heroism & Small Appliance Installation

1

If you drive, there's a good chance sooner or later you'll be involved in some kind of collision. If you're lucky, you bump a mailbox while parallel parking. If you're just a little less lucky, you rear-end a pickup with a tow hitch. Things start to shift towards unlucky when whatever you hit simultaneously hits you back.

Still, I doubt many other drivers can say their parked car has been T-boned by a fully grown man hurled fifteen feet through the air at the approximate speed of unbridled imagination.

Oliver Norse clambered from the wreckage of my passenger door, bounced to his feet, and whirled his foam and duct tape sword exuberantly.

"Farraday, do you see that thing?!" he asked, eyes ablaze with caricaturesque ferocity.

Oh, I saw it, alright, and plainly enough that I might have wondered at his enthusiasm.

But I'd known Ollie for the better part of a decade; enthusiasm is his default setting. My more pressing concern: I wasn't sure if I'd opted for collision coverage.

Does collision insurance cover acts of unbridled imagination?

What would the claim even look like?

Oliver charged his assailant with a battle roar, and the ten-foot-tall, quasi-invisible nightmare lizard hissed its reply, and lunged to meet him.

Assuming you read (and hopefully believed) the preface statement, you're probably wondering if that whole "real life events" bit was a red herring, and I'm the sort of unreliable narrator you find in mystery novels. I wish.

No, this is very much what actually happened; my car has the Oliver-shaped dent to prove it.

"But if this is truly a work of nonfiction," you exclaim, "what could lead to such a blatantly fantastical circumstance?"

I think it was Mark Twain who said, "Truth is stranger than fiction."¹

—FOUR HOURS EARLIER—

"So, I've got good news, bad news, and *probably* good news," said Rick from HR.

That didn't bode well, no matter how hard he tried to sell it as a glass half full.

I'd been a temp with Fortier Plastics' manufacturing division for what had to be a record-setting tenure of three years. I could have gone elsewhere after the COVID-related hiring freeze gave way to a materials shortage-related hiring freeze, but I held on for the promise of

1. He was absolutely right.

halfway decent dental insurance. Besides, it wasn't as if I had anything better to do.²

With the ice age finally in thaw, "good news, bad news, *probably* good news" wasn't quite the opener I'd hoped for at my full-time placement interview.

"The good news is, you're *super* qualified for the position you applied for, and completing your BA in materials engineering in the middle of a pandemic?" Here he nodded emphatically. "That shows real *gumption*."

It wasn't as if I had much else going on,³ and better qualifications tend to mean a better rate of pay. Still, I had to wince at anything I did being an indication of "gumption." There are dozens of words in the English language for the quality he'd described. *Gumption*? Who talks like that?

Let's not get off topic; wasn't I waiting on another shoe to drop?

"The bad news is, another internal applicant—with seniority—called dibs on that posting early this morning."

Gumption . . . and dibs.

"—But—the *probably* good news is, the internal hire that filled your position will be leaving a vacancy at our sister location in Avon-on-Hudson, which is just across the New York border."

Now the "*probably*" made sense. I knew the area. I'd grown up in the hamlet of Rook's Hollow, ten minutes south of Avon-on-Hudson—from here, just a scenic hour-and-fifteen-minute drive through the labyrinthine hill country dividing western Connecticut from up-

2. Words to live by.

3. See previous footnote.

state New York. There and back again. Year-round. In my lovingly used 2012 Chervet Cavolair.⁴

"I understand if you need some time to consider," said Rick.

Translation: Time to start apartment hunting in Avon County.

"And you've definitely earned your stripes here as a temp, so I can reserve the position for you until Monday. Take the weekend to think it over."

Translation: You must really want a full-time job with us, and/or spending *this* long as a temp has left you mentally unstable.⁵

Either way, the clock was ticking.

I emerged into the sweltering heat of a Friday afternoon in late August, remembering how cool it was when I'd arrived for work that morning an hour or so before dawn. It had, in fact, been so pleasant out, and so godforsaken early in the morning, that it hadn't occurred to me to flfind a parking spot in the shade. I died a little inside, recalling this.

4. An excellent vintage—all 276,480 miles of it. I know because the odometer stopped working after someone crashed through the passenger side window and left an elbow-shaped crater in the dash . . . but I'm getting ahead of myself.

5. A legitimate possibility; the weekly schedule for temps at Fortier Plastics is the stuff of flex/split-shift nightmare, hence the liberty to book an interview at noon on a Friday.

My car may be old, but the A/C works well enough once it gets running. I managed to get only mildly scalded starting her up, then I sought shelter, and waited with an air of quiet desperation.⁶

At which point, my phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Farraday!"

I'm not fond of four-dollar words, but try as I might for better phrasing, "gregarious bombast incarnate" really is the most accurate description for the voice on the other end of the line.

"Hi, Oliver."

Oliver Norse dragged me into his small circle of friends in the eighth grade, claiming that my name was, in his professional opinion, something straight out of a comic book, and consequently, I was a perfect fit for his "band of stalwart companions." My full name is Victor Farraday, but Oliver has always just called me Farraday, claiming Victor "has more villainous associations than heroic," and he was loath to steer me down the darker path.

For my part, it had been lunchtime, the cafeteria was packed, and he was offering an empty seat with elbow room; I wasn't really in a position to argue.

"So, I know it's been a while since last we spoke," he said apologetically.

I shrugged. Never mind that he wasn't there to see the motion.

6. Farraday and the summer sun don't get along very well, though not because he burns easily. Picture a lettuce, fallen out of someone's shopping cart in the grocery store parking lot on a mid-August afternoon, some three hours before you noticed it. That lettuce is Farraday after ten minutes of sun exposure.

"You always call eventually. If radio silence had lasted another week, I'd have called to check in."

My family had moved to Helmford, CT the summer before our junior year of high school. As adults, our friendship drifted into occasional phone call territory, which might have been where things stayed, but for the COVID epidemic. Fear of exposure drove anybody with more than half a brain into physical isolation, and suddenly, friendships founded on occasional phone calls became an anchor to sanity in a Groundhog Day world.

"I would've called sooner, but it's been . . . *busy*."

"Oh?"

Oliver had never quite gotten the hang of pausing for dramatic effect, and I'd never known him to be able to keep a secret for more than eleven seconds. I was sure to get an earful of elaborate backstory in five, four, three, two . . .

"*Extremely*."

Well, that *was* a surprise.

"Actually," he continued, "I was wondering if I might procure your assistance as my chauffeur this afternoon? Provided, of course, you're free."

"Um, sure."

For some reason, Oliver's eccentric choice of phrasing never bothers me anywhere near as much as similar affectations in the course of my day-to-day life; a testament to the enduring nature of our friendship, I guess. Either that, or our friendship exhausts my daily reserves of tolerance in advance.

"Awesome! I get off work at two so if you can manage it, your first port of call will be the back lot behind my job. I'll text you the address."

I decided not to mention I was already going in that direction anyway, lest he be moved to wax poetic on how “*such kismet is the destiny of heroes*.” The enduring nature of our friendship aside, even I’ve got limits.

With Oliver keeping his own council for what was probably the first time in history, there wasn’t much to say after that. My car had just about cooled off, so we said our farewells, and I set off for new adventures in old, familiar places.⁷

—ONE HOUR, TWENTY MINUTES’ COMMUTE THROUGH A CONVENIENT CELLULAR DEAD ZONE LATER—

Despite the oppressive midday heat, Oliver wasn’t waiting in the shade when I pulled into the back lot of his job.

Instead, he was doing . . . well I don’t want to call it parkour, *per se*. Take parkour, subtract most of the grace, all of the flips and half the agility, then add full-length mechanic’s overalls in 90°F weather. If you

7. F: As Oliver insists I phrase it. \ \ O: What’s wrong with ‘new adventures in old familiar places’? It’s a good line! Has that “there and back again’ sort of feel to it. \ \ F: It’s pretentious. Glaringly pretentious, and do we really have to have this debate in a footnote? \ \ O: If you get to clarify that I insisted on it, I should at least be able to defend my position. \ \ F: . . . fine.

can visualize that, you're about as close to what Oliver was doing as I can hope to describe.

Oliver was the weekday custodian for Avon Renal Care, a dialysis treatment center set up in a strip mall between a big box superstore and a faux-vintage furniture outlet.

Most of the back lot was a veritable jungle of discarded crap from all three businesses, with just enough room along the back of the building for unloading freight. The trash menagerie was a perfect obstacle course to train for one of those ninja elimination game shows, provided you didn't mind your training regimen including a monthly tetanus booster.

Leaping from a chest-high tower of old truck tires, Oliver banked into an upright concrete pylon and ricocheted over a miscellany of rusted grocery shelving. He whirled and veered in one direction or another seemingly at random, always catching himself inches from meeting the pavement in ways that would have absolutely called for a trip to the ER. He must have looked very cool from his own perspective.

As haphazard as his workout (I had to assume that was what it was) appeared, I had to marvel at his single-minded attention to it. Oliver isn't exactly known for his razor-sharp focus. I wouldn't say he has the attention span of a chipmunk; that would just be *rude*. And yet, I'd rolled past him, parked beside the rundown picnic table against which he'd propped his bike and belongings, shut the engine, and honked before he gave any indication he'd noticed my arrival.

"Farraday!" he roared in greeting, and made a beeline straight past me to the row of gallon water jugs he'd set out along the bench.

Not easily distracted *and* planning ahead . . . who was this guy, and what had he done with Oliver? I took a moment to gauge his appearance as he downed the first gallon container in one disturbingly pythonesque swig.⁸

"Ollie, what the hell are you wearing?"

On closer inspection, his outfit was even less weather-appropriate than a mere full-length mechanic's jumpsuit. It might have started its life as one, but he'd customized it with what looked to be ballistics plating from police-issue riot gear and straps and belts from a paratrooper's jump harness.

"Weighted training gear," he said, pausing for breath halfway through gallon number two.

"I repurposed some tungsten carbide scrap metal into weight pouches. Evenly distributes sixty pounds across my upper body, and twenty more on each leg. Got the idea from a MyTube clip."

That was a ridiculous amount of weight to be toting around, let alone while running an obstacle course in the dead of summer. But he didn't look like the routine was injuring him. In fact, judging by the near gravity-defying spring in his step, you'd think his day had just begun.

"Didn't you work today?" I asked, as we loaded his bike into my back seat.

"I'm here aren't I?" he replied, grinning. "My shift is six to two. Thanks again for picking me up, by the way. I'm meeting with a

8. That much is typical Oliver behavior. Oliver keeps hydrated the way most people drown.

prospective client at three-thirty, and I still need to stop off home and shower. I'm fast on the bike, but not *that* fast."

How he managed to move at all on the bike was beyond me; he'd reinforced the frame with zip-tied pieces of scrap metal, and there was this bizarre corrective bend along its length, like when you try to straighten a paperclip. It looked positively post-apocalyptic.

In addition to the bike and its obscenely weighted rider, neatly stacked on the tabletop was a camping backpack definitely not being used for camping, and a black gym bag of the sort used to carry lacrosse or hockey gear—this last all the more conspicuous for Oliver's blatant disinterest in team sports. Everything weighed significantly more than it should, and I had to wonder whether the planks of the picnic table were bowed by time and weather, or by Ollie's regular patronage. I also had to wonder whether my tires would still clear the wheel wells once everything was loaded in.

—TEN MINUTES OF LUGGAGE TETRIS LAT- ER—

We managed. Barely.

"So, meeting with a prospective client?" I asked as we took our seats.

With a showman's grin, Ollie reached into his pocket and produced a business card.⁹

In white text, elegantly arranged over a surrealist depiction of the mad knight Don Quixote tilting at a windmill, read the following:

FREELANCE HEROES INCORPORATED

- *When the dream seems impossible,*
- *When the challenge seems unbeatable,*
- *When the struggle seems unbearable . . .*
- *Help is just a Hero away!*

And on the flip side:

OLIVER NORSE

Freelance Heroism Consultant

- Life Coaching
- Moving and Odd Jobs
- Opposition to the forces of Apathy and Nihilism
- Small Appliance Installation



9. A contortionist's feat; Oliver is a few inches over six foot, and proportionately broad-shouldered enough that my car is a sardine can, even without the seat pulled forward to accommodate the added cargo.

2

"Really? Small appliance installation?"

Oliver looked at me sidelong. "The list includes 'Life Coaching' and 'Opposition to the Forces of Apathy and Nihilism,' and the item that surprises you is 'Small Appliance Installation?'"

"I've seen what happens when you try to install small appliances. Besides, 'Apathy and Nihilism' isn't *that* shocking. You did try to found a cult during our sophomore year."

"That wasn't a cult!" he shot back. " 'The War For Hope' was supposed to be a community of volunteers working to make the world a better place, contributing positive effort and outlook to seemingly impossible challenges."

"So . . . a cult?"

He sighed and shook his head. "You need more than one member to be a cult."

We pulled into Oliver's driveway maybe ten minutes later.

"Two thirty-three," he said, checking his pocket watch. "Cutting it close, but we should be okay."

"I know you've already hired on as my chauffeur, but by chance might you be willing to do double duty as my valet and porter?"

Let the record state I was already halfway through unpacking the back seat by the time he finished the question.

Oliver lived on the upper two floors of a converted single-family home. The building would probably be approaching historic status if it hadn't been divided (badly) into two apartments in the early '80s. I'd visited before, but the narrow staircase leading up from the ground floor foyer is an entirely different experience when carrying half of an armor-plated bicycle.

"I just have to shower and change real quick," he said as we caught our breath on the landing. "Make yourself at home. There's a case of bottled water under the kitchen table, and ice is next to the dismembered hand in the freezer."¹

So saying, Ollie dashed upstairs for a change of clothes, leaving the task of hauling his post-apocalyptic armory out of tripping hazard-range to his duly deputized chauffeur/porter.

I imagine at this point, any sane person in my place would've been questioning their life choices.

I made my way to the kitchen for some ice water.²

Oliver came back downstairs, a towel and change of clothes in the crook of one arm, and looking a bit like he was trying to move in three

1. A Halloween prop which has accompanied Oliver even longer than I have, awaiting the occasion of a prank that's just never arrived. He'd probably have more success with it if he didn't mention it literally every time someone came to visit.

2. The severed hand was absolutely terrifying and completely unexpected. Really. I promise. Gets me every time.

directions at once. He set off for the bathroom, backtracked into the kitchen, halted, turned back around and made for the bathroom again.

"Won't be a moment," he mumbled.

Modern neuroscience tells us that true multitasking is beyond the capabilities of the human brain. While some people can prioritize well enough that they make it look like they're doing the impossible, Oliver is not some people. With his deadline approaching, he was running a marathon of often contradictory checklists in his head, while simultaneously struggling to pay enough attention to his surroundings not to trip over his own feet.

"This wouldn't happen to be your first ever potential client I'm driving you to, would it?"

"Is it that obvious? Time?!"

I checked my wristwatch.³

"Ten to three."

"Fuck."

The bathroom door shut abruptly, and I got no further reply.

With my porter duties concluded, I leaned at the kitchen table, sipped my water, and took stock of my own to-do list for the weekend.

Apartment hunting. Short-notice apartment hunting. Ever take two fairly important things you know you hate to do, combine them

3. The preferred timepiece of sane, boring, ordinary people everywhere. We can't all have a flare for the utterly impractical.

into a third, even *more* odious task, then try to accomplish all three at once while in a time crunch?⁴

That aside, while it's never really a renter's market, at present it *really* wasn't a renter's market. The pandemic had triggered a mass exodus of upper-middle-class city dwellers fleeing Manhattan for the mythic, wide-open frontier thirty minutes north of Westchester county. An unforeseen side-effect saw the pupils of landlords and property managers everywhere turn to dollar signs with a *ka-ching!* noise. Three years later, these tragic souls are still no closer to recovery.

Oliver had been exceedingly lucky in finding this place, and that was more than a year before COVID took off. Technically, it was a two-bedroom apartment; Oliver's attic loft didn't count as a bedroom as far as zoning laws went. With the time crunch I was in, I'd be lucky if I managed to find a one-bedroom, fifth-floor walkup half the size of a broom closet in the ninth circle of Hell for what Ollie paid here.

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4. O: The math there doesn't add up—I only count two awful things about short-notice apartment hunting: apartment hunting, and having to rush to do it. \ \ F: It's not intended to be a direct corollary. More of a metaphor, emphasizing how awful short-notice apartment hunting is by comparing it to the worst two things you can think of combined, added to each other over again, and then rushed. \ \ O: So it's an algebraic metaphor? That's gonna lose people. I mean, I like it, but not everybody's got the attention span for that kind of abstraction. \ \ F: Fine——combine waxing your underarm hair with filing an amendment on your taxes, then add the absolute value of how terrible that activity would be to waiting on hold with the phone company when you've only got ten minutes left on your lunch break. Better? \ \ O: I mean, no need to get pissy about it.

I glanced across the hall to the spare bedroom, presently used to store bags of empty water bottles awaiting a trip to the redemption center.

From his junkyard warrior bike to his recycling habits to the abundance of milk crate modular shelving, anyone could see that Ollie had a talent for managing on a limited budget.⁵ Still, I wouldn't have thought it the most comfortable way to get by.

He'd mentioned on not a few occasions that he had more rooms than he had purpose for. I needed a place to live on extremely short notice. I did not like where this train of thought was headed.

I knew Ollie; if I asked to sublet the guest room, he'd agree in a heartbeat. It would be mutually beneficial to our wallets, and there was adequate space for both of us to function.

But could I tolerate him addressing me as "My dear Watson" for however long it took for the novelty to wear off?⁶

Just when it seemed the looming existential crisis would swallow me whole, Ollie burst from the bathroom fully dressed, with a clarion cry of "To the Freelance Heromobile!"⁷

5. O: Really, though, who needs \$80 worth of Allen wrenches, melamine board, and Scandinavian furniture names, when you can build something just as sturdy with half a dozen milk crates and a bag of zip ties? \ \ F: Not everyone prioritizes sturdiness above all else when furniture shopping. \ \ O: Well, some people are utterly lacking in common sense. So there. \ \ F: I mean, no need to get pissy about it.

6. 'Never' being a very real and deeply disturbing possibility.

7. Translated from half-garblese, as he was still brushing his teeth.

"We are not calling it that."

It might interest some to know that the dress code for Freelance Hero Consultants is blue-collar business casual: work boots, jeans and button-down shirt—100% spandex unitard-free.

We got as far as buckling our seatbelts when Oliver's scatterbrain reengaged, and he had to run back inside.

"Shit—the sword! Er, I mean, Farraday, be right back. I forgot my . . . *briefcase*. Won't be a minute!" He dashed off without waiting for a reply.

Briefcase, huh? Sure—why not? He wasn't paying his chauffeur to ask questions.⁸

I pulled around to the front of the house to wait for him. I didn't have to wait long.

Remember that conspicuous sports equipment bag from earlier? Well, suffice it to say his briefcase was only slightly less incongruous than the contents he was hastily stuffing within.

Picture the triple-wide Wiffle ball bat you might get for a particularly clumsy eight-year-old to encourage hand-eye coordination. Now picture it five feet long, with a crossguard fashioned of PVC pipe coupling, and completely wrapped in duct tape. I guess it might resemble a sword, if you squint really hard and use your imagination.

Oliver's *briefcase*. Yup. That tracks.

Like a toddler with a favorite stuffed animal, the *briefcase* sat up front with him.

8. He wasn't paying me at all.

"So, whatcha think?" He asked as we pulled onto the main road.

"About?"

"It weighs about 14½ pounds, perfectly balanced at the crossguard. I used hex nuts distributed along a threaded rod core, to give it the proper blade-to-hilt weight ratio."

"That's unusual, for a briefcase."

"For structural integrity it's reinforced with two layers of PVC pipe around the core, and then I added the foam padding around the blade just in case. I'm still cautious to avoid direct impact with anything, but even heavy as it is, I can wield it one-handed without difficulty."

"I mean, that's great, but does it keep all your documents and office supplies neatly organized?"

Oliver growled in mild exasperation, but said nothing more. I fought back a smirk. The best staring contests are won without ever making eye contact.

The trip didn't take long. We might have even been early but for the *briefcase* incident. As it stood, we were due to arrive by three-thirty on the nose.

"So, which heading does this client fall under?"

"Opposing the Forces of Apathy and Nihilism," Oliver said. "Possibly some life coaching thrown in, as needed."

"Oh, good. I was worried you went to all the trouble of packing your briefcase for a Small Appliance Installation."

"I'm not gonna live that one down, am I?"

"Nope."

Our destination turned out to be a raised ranch in the suburbs midway between Rook's Hollow and Avon City. As we turned onto the driveway, the front door opened, and a young woman stepped out. Ollie rolled down the window and waved.

"That's our client," he said.

Our client. Probably should've seen that coming.

She might have been an inch or two taller than me—though I'm an inch or two shy of average height, so that's hardly an indication of Amazonian proportions—with dark hair and an olive complexion. I'm also just shy of legally blind without my glasses, so even with them, that was about as much fine detail as I could perceive at a distance.

Returning his greeting, she gestured for us to pull around to the back of the house.

"From what Elena's told me of the situation, this could take a while," Ollie said. "It'd be a waste of gas to leave the engine running in this weather. You should come along."

Behind the house, the driveway opened into a lot wide enough for three cars to park comfortably. There was only one other vehicle, but I didn't want to assume it was the lot's sole occupant. I parked at the far edge, where there was little chance of my being in anybody's way.

What's that old saying about the best laid plans of mice and men?

"Oh, so, now I'm your chauffeur *and* your security blanket? I'll expect a pay raise."

Ollie threw me a lopsided smirk.

"Just put it on my tab."

. . . And we went to meet *our* client. In another astonishing display of forethought and good sense, Oliver's *briefcase* stayed behind.



3

"Good afternoon, Ms. Ortiz," said Oliver.

He had his game face on, which—it was safe to assume—meant he was imagining a cape billowing dramatically behind him while John Williams fanfare played in the background.

"Hi, Oliver," she replied.

She looked tired, and maybe a little unkempt, though not at all in a bad way. No makeup, her sweatpants-and-tee-shirt ensemble sneering defiance at the notion of entertaining guests on a Friday afternoon. Her hair was tied back in a loose ponytail, and beneath her bangs, dark amber eyes sparkled with keen intellect and wry humor.¹

"Ms. Ortiz, this is my associate, Farraday."

1. O: And people call my prose pretentious. "Sparkled with keen intellect and wry humor?"

\\ F: I call them as I see them. \\ O: Really. That must be why I get such dazzling descriptors as 'tall,' 'bald,' and 'goatee.' \\ F: Should I have mentioned your 'fierce, hawk-like brow,' then? Or perhaps the 'steel-spring tension in your prodigious thews?' \\ O: Oh, will you let that die already? I was in my Robert E. Howard phase!

"I actually have a first name, too. I'm Victor," I added, and waved in greeting.

From five feet away.

Abruptly, I remembered why I'd been single for so long: I'm awkward as hell.

She returned my wave, an eyebrow arched sardonically with the hint of a wry smile.²

"Hi Victor, I'm Elena."

"Ms. Ortiz, I hope you won't mind recounting the details of the issue you told me about. I haven't had a chance to bring Farraday up to speed, and it'll also aid in my assessment of the situation, to go over things while on site."

At the mention of "the issue," Elena's attention flickered to the yard behind us. For a moment, she had the sort of look you see in the eyes of a child roused abruptly from a nightmare. The change was there and gone so quickly I might have missed it, if I hadn't been—*abem*—somewhat intent on observing her at the time.

She blinked, shook her head, and it was as if the fog had lifted.

"*Why not?*" she said. "Explaining to complete strangers how I'm pretty sure I'm losing my mind *never* gets old! Come on, let's go talk in the kitchen."

—

2. O: Again with the wryness! \ \ F: Shut up.

It was one of those dine-in open-concept layouts, with a prep island/breakfast table running along the center. Elena took a seat facing the front of the house, and Oliver and I sat down across from her.

"Before we begin," began Oliver, "I'd like to offer you some assurance, in that while you and Farraday are only just acquainted, he has been my most reliable friend and confidante for nigh on a decade. You can trust him to assess your situation with as much open-mindedness, objectivity, and compassion as I've shown.

"That being said, it's probably best if you start from the beginning." ³

Elena closed her eyes, took in a sharp breath, and squared her shoulders. She exhaled slowly, and fixed her gaze on the table in front of her.

I couldn't begin to imagine what had left her so deeply unsettled that my friend the Freelance Heroism Consultant had become her best hope to set things right. Oliver was quite right about one thing, though: I keep an open mind. ⁴

"Okay, about a month ago, my nephew started having this recurring nightmare.

"Xavi—that's Xavier, spelled with an **X** but pronounced like a Latin **J**, so it sounds like an **H**—would sleep walk, and—"

"Wait, I'm sorry, but . . . *what?*" I interjected helplessly.

3. Oliver has a habit of prefacing things. If you have somewhere to be in the next half-hour and he approaches with an "Excuse me, mind if I ask you a quick question?" Run. Don't hesitate—flee while still you can.

4. Except about spiders. Too many legs, too many mandibles. They're the sarcastic assholes of the animal kingdom.

Elena huffed a sigh and gave me a long-suffering glower.⁵

"I didn't name the kid. It's just my job to provide the disclaimer."

*That poor child. No wonder you sought out a Freelance Heroism Consultant, I somehow managed to not say aloud.*⁶

"Xavi's twelve, and he's got an imagination like you wouldn't believe . . .

"Then again, you two might not have so much trouble believing it. He draws his own comic books, and he's got some serious talent. If he keeps up with it, he'd probably qualify for a job in the industry straight out of high school.

"I keep an eye on him evenings and weekends while my sister works. Lucky for me, he hasn't hit his teenage rebellion phase yet, so I get to be the cool, fun aunt.

"When school let out for summer vacation, I had a whole itinerary of stuff planned. I had all thirty-two Excelsior! Cinematic Universe movies lined up for us to watch, contingency plans for day trips into the city when staying home got boring, and of course, half a metric ton of art project ideas. I also might've totally abused my cool, fun aunt junk food privileges, but my cause was just.

"Things started off awesome, as planned, but about a week in, I noticed Xavi wasn't his usual energetic self. He'd gotten pale, and dark circles were starting to form under his eyes.

5. Though, if my eyesight was good for anything at that range (which is to say pretty much the only range it's good for at all), it was the sort of glower that might have concealed a hint of levity.

6. E: Gold star, Farraday!

"The kid fell asleep right in the middle of the final battle in *Exemplars: Retribution*."

"You didn't mention this last time!" Oliver interjected. "Did he at least catch the 'Exemplars, Congregate!' scene?"

Elena shook her head, "Lieutenant Liberty hadn't even summoned StormLord's warhammer yet."

"A travesty," Oliver said grimly.

"Yes. By far the *most* tragic part of my story."

Incensed as he was by the injustice of a kid missing the pivotal moment in a favorite movie, I'm not sure Oliver picked up on the sarcasm there.⁷

"Two-thirty in the afternoon, and he was out cold. It didn't take a brain surgeon to deduce that he hadn't been getting enough sleep, so I shut the movie and let him crash on the couch while I went to get dinner started."

Elena paused, lost in her remembrance, and tears welled in her eyes.

"If I knew then what I know now . . . that he wasn't sleeping *at all*—that he was keeping himself awake, and *why* . . .

" . . . I would never have left him alone."

7. Oliver is an Excelsior! Cinematic Universe fanatic, and if all of this sounds like a foreign dialect of nerdspeech, it's probably because the reader is not.

We relate these events as they unfolded for the sake of historical accuracy, but in fairness to the non-nerd reader: Besides Oliver, I've never met anyone who becomes emotionally overwrought when quoting Lieutenant Liberty or the Avenging Knight-Spider.

So yeah—don't feel too left out.

—A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE: ELENA; BORROWING SOMEBODY ELSE'S NIGHT- MARE—

I can feel the tears welling up in my eyes, and I'm sitting here with a coworker I barely know and his friend who I don't know at all, trying to explain how I'm lost in the remembrance of someone else's bad dream. It sounds trippy as hell, I know, but the rational part of my brain just finds it annoying.

How the hell did I get here?

Until recently, I've never had any trouble differentiating reality from fantasy. I mean, sure, the day-to-day is a dull grind; I work part time as a receptionist at Avon Renal Care, take nursing classes online, and help look after my nephew.

The tightrope walk between dull routine and straight up batshit chaos was business as usual—had been for a few years now. Then COVID-19 escalated to global pandemic status, and being afraid to leave the house, but knowing you had to anyway, honestly wasn't that big a change from where I was sitting.

Now, though? Now I'm sitting here, trying to tell the same story to Oliver's friend that I told Oliver, and the trouble is, I don't remember telling it to him at all.

I remember reliving it. In freaking Technicolor.

It's all there in layers, just below the surface. I'm here with them at the kitchen table, but I'm also going over to the pantry closet a little over a

month ago to grab a stock pot for spaghetti. Xavi just passed out on the couch, and I'm hoping an early dinner and then bed will be the right medicine to get him back to his usual self.

And I'm standing on the patio, and he's barefoot on the lawn, facing the treeline . . . and it shimmers out of the air in front of him, and there's nothing I can do to keep him safe.

All that at once. I know where the top layer is—that's where I am now—where I really am. I'm telling this story to Oliver and Farraday, about how I came out of the pantry and Xavi had gone out back, leaving the patio door wide open.

I go out after him, to remind him about letting the A/C out and ticks in the grass. He's just standing there, looking out at the treeline.

—And the thing that isn't there doesn't shimmer into existence in front of him. That's the nightmare, and I haven't been there yet. I'm telling the story of what happened for Oliver and Farraday—

I call to him, but Xavi doesn't seem to notice I'm there. I walk over. His eyes are open, but they're not seeing the same world I see.

—not yet—

I've heard somewhere that it's unwise to wake a sleepwalker. Not sure where I heard it, but it sounds like good advice. Gently, I take him by the shoulders, and try to turn him around, guide him back into the house.

He doesn't budge. The kid is small for his age, all elbows, knees and feet, like a scarecrow made by hobbits. But it's like he's decided to put down roots, and I can't move him.

His eyes stare at nothing, out by the treeline.

—They don't stare at the blurred figure that isn't materializing a few feet in front of us, neither ten feet tall, nor inhumanly broad in proportion—

But there's terror in that gaze. Whatever he's seeing in his dream, it must be scaring the hell out of him.

—It is. I (don't—not yet) see it, too—

Every muscle in his little body is tensed and trembling, as if he wants to run in all directions at once, but he's paralyzed by fear.

I've heard somewhere that it's unwise to wake a sleepwalker, but screw that. He'll be safer with me in the waking world.

—but he won't—

I go around to face him and take him by the shoulders.

—It is not towering over me. I don't feel its hot breath on the nape of my neck—

I shake him, roughly. I call his name.

Xavi's eyes snap shut. Jaw clenched, he struggles and screams.

Have you ever heard a wail of genuine terror? It doesn't sound like the kind of thing that can come from a human being.

But then he's awake, and I'm holding him, and he's shuddering and crying, and we go inside.

I get him a glass of water. He stands with me in the kitchen, afraid to leave my sight.

We sit down on the couch, and he tells me about the thing in his nightmare.

"I'm looking straight at it, but I never see it. I can't move, and then . . . it . . . gets me."

—and I'm only a few feet away, and I'm powerless to stop it. Frozen just like he is. And then . . . it gets him—

He doesn't have the dream every night, but often enough that he feels safer not going to sleep.

I tell him everything will be fine. We set up a cot at the foot of my bed.

"Everybody gets bad dreams," I tell him.

I don't know if he believes me. I'm not sure if I believe me, either.

That night, we stay up as late as we can watching superhero movies. We have dinner well after sunset and play board games until we're both too tired to see straight. Then I put on a white noise machine, and we sleep.

The nightmare stays away.

It's a week later, and Xavi looks better rested. He's slept on his cot at the foot of my bed every night since, and the nightmare hasn't come back.

A few more days pass, and Xavi says he might try sleeping in his own bed tonight. Being the cool aunt, I tease him appropriately for taking so long.

The nightmare stays away for a few more nights.

It's about two weeks before I'm telling Oliver and Farraday what happened, and a trembling hand nudges my shoulder until I wake up.

"It . . . got me again," says Xavi.

I hold him close until his trembling stops, but I don't know if he falls back asleep. I know I don't.

Two nights later, Xavi has the nightmare again. This time, I join him.

I don't go into the details of the dream with Farraday and Oliver. I can't—that layer is too deep to unearth. They'll have to make do with context from the layers above.

We visit Xavi's nightmare together three more times after that. I try not to let on that I'm dreaming his dream, and Xavi doesn't ask. We don't talk about it.

We're both not sleeping, and moodiness ensues. My sister notices, makes a joke about Xavi and me having synced up our monthly cycles. I

can't tell her everything, so I pull the RN-in-training card. I tell her that the weather's been especially clear this summer, and a small percentage of the population suffers from summer-onset seasonal affective disorder, during which excess sunlight causes insomnia. She brings home a family-sized bottle of over-the-counter melatonin.

I don't know if it helps.

August is almost over, and Xavi started the eighth grade this past Wednesday. We haven't had the dream since Monday night. I'm not sure if Xavi has slept since then, either. I haven't.

Xavi gets up for school around five-thirty. His mom has just gotten home from work, and she takes the morning shift with him on schooldays before she goes to bed. I get dressed and leave for work with the sun just barely on the rise. My shift doesn't start till seven, but I don't want to be by myself in the house. Not with the nightmare getting closer by the day.

—it's late afternoon in the nightmare, and even though you're not supposed to be able to feel temperature or notice smells in dreams, the air is thick with the haze of dying summer, and I can smell just the faintest hint of autumn on the breeze—

Oliver Norse is sweeping the hall when I arrive. He's kind of an odd fit for a full-time janitor. On first impression, the right word to describe him would probably be "garrulous." If you need to look up what it means, then you know what it's usually like talking to him.

Not today, though. Today, he takes one look at me, frowns, and asks if I'm doing okay.

More specifically, he says "Hey, you look terrible. I've seen out-of-print ancient history textbooks that look more alive and present. Everything alright?"

Wordy he may be, but he doesn't sugar coat things when it counts.

We catch some fresh air by the loading dock at the back of the building. It's still early, and the back lot faces westward, so the building's shadow keeps the cool of predawn just a little while longer.

Turns out Oliver is almost as good at listening as he is at using five-dollar words and archaic turns of phrase. When I finish my story and wipe away the tears, his eyes reflect none of the self-doubt or confusion I'm feeling. No skepticism, either—just compassion, and a very clear desire to help.

Weirder still, I get the impression he knows exactly what I'm going through.

"Believe it or not, I think I know exactly what you're going through," he says.

He hands me his business card.

"I suspect I may even be able to be of some assistance. Would you be open to my making a house call this afternoon?"

It's a weird question even if you filter out Ollie's mannerisms and just leave the context, and the business card confuses more than it explains.

But really, is there anything about this situation that makes sense? I'm lost in the remembrance of someone else's bad dream. It sounds trippy as hell, I know, but the rational part of my brain just finds it annoying.

I text our address to the number on the card, and tell him I get home around two-thirty.

He nods, grimly. "Expect me around an hour thence."

Well, it's a crazy circumstance—maybe a Freelance Heroism Consultant who uses the word "thence" conversationally is just the sort of expert we need.

So here I am, at my kitchen table, explaining all of this to Oliver and Farraday. Doing my best to tell them everything without unearthing the nightmare itself, because I'm helpless there, and it . . . gets Xavi.

It gets my nephew, and there's nothing I can do.

*—Xavi is barefoot in the grass, and the thing is looming over him—
. . . No.*

*—It's just a blurry shape; ten feet tall and inhumanly broad—
Just a nightmare. Just a bad dream—that's all . . .*

—And it crouches down in front of him, hissing, jaws unhinging, row upon row of fangs oozing venom like some demonic anaconda-komodo dragon hybrid—

(I'm at the kitchen table, telling Oliver and Farraday how this all started . . .)

And it gets him. And there's nothing I can do to stop it.

"No . . ." I want to cry out, but there's nothing I can do.

I'm at the kitchen table, and Farraday has reached across. His hands are holding mine.

"Elena," he says, says gently, "we're here. We're right here."



—A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE: FARRA- DAY; SURREALITY CHECK—

"Elena," I said, gently, "We're here. We're right here."

I can't say for certain what compelled me to reach across the table and take Elena's hands in mine.

I can't even tell you when during her story I did so. For all my talk of us being "right here," I hadn't been. Until that exact moment, I hadn't been *here* at all.

I'd been standing on the back patio, watching a small, barefoot, dark-haired boy in cargo shorts and a blue Knight-Spider tee shirt, confront a giant *something*—

A something which wasn't quite there yet, but was definitely starting to be.

We stayed that way for a long moment, my arms stretched across the tabletop as if I were demonstrating proper diving posture, while Elena brought herself back to the here and now.

I glanced over at Oliver. His eyes were shut tight, brows furrowed in concentration, jaw clenched like he was bracing for impact.

Had he been *there* too? Had he seen what I'd seen, what Elena had somehow shared with us?

"Thanks," said Elena, giving my hands a gentle squeeze.

"You good?"

She nodded and released my hands. I resumed my awkwardness at a more socially acceptable distance.¹

"So, Ms. Ortiz," said Oliver, "as I understand it, this whole situation has its roots with Xavier."

"*As you understand it*," I exclaimed. "Who *are* you, 1930s pulp noir defense attorney Perry Mason?"

"That's an . . . oddly specific pop culture reference," Oliver replied.

"Huh. Explains why he keeps calling me 'Ms. Ortiz.'"

"I'm trying to be professional!"

"It's an awfully fine line you're treading," I countered, "between professional and ridiculous."

1. O: You guys are just too cute. \ F: Two words: Fuck. You. \ O: I wonder if the readers will ship you as 'Eladay' or 'Farrena'? \ E: So, if I remember correctly, you like to keep your shoulders in their sockets, right? \ O: . . . I'm sorry.

Oliver growled and rolled his eyes, but failed to disguise the smirk hinting at the corners of his mouth.²

"I believe this whole thing has its start with Xavi. Do you think Farraday and I could have a talk with him?"

I'll say this for him: When losing an utterly fruitless and silly argument, Oliver is every bit as dauntless as a Freelance Heroism Consultant should be . . . I assume.

"That's fine by me," said Elena. "He takes the late bus on Fridays, so he should be walking in any minute now."

As if on cue, we heard the click of the front door unlocking.

"I'm home, Aunt El!" came the call from the entryway.

"You know, there's a chance he might be discouraged by your . . . *professional* cadence, Oliver," Elena said ruefully.

"Maybe it's best if *I* make the introductions?"

—OUTSIDE XAVIER'S BEDROOM DOOR, A FEW MINUTES LATER—

"Hey bud, it's Aunt El. Can I come in?"

2. O: Studies have shown that friendly argumentative banter is 76% more effective than bad puns at relieving tension in stressful situations. \ \ E: Can I call bullshit? \ \ F: Call away. \ \ E: I call bullshit. \ \ O: Guys, there's a time and place for everything, and I think we're starting to abuse our footnote privileges. \ \ F: I second the calling of bullshit. \ \ O: Fine—I made it up. Satisfied? \ \ E: I mean, no need to get pissy about it.

"There's no lock on the door, and it's only half shut," Xavi called back. "Also, you don't need to announce yourself—who else would be knocking at my bedroom door?"

"*Such* a charmer," Elena muttered, though whether to herself or to us I couldn't have said.

She went inside while Oliver and I waited in the hall, in a silence as awkward as social etiquette in a crowded elevator.

"Speaking of people knocking on your door, some coworkers of mine stopped by to visit, and they said they'd like to meet you."

"Really? *You, too?* You know my school has a whole guidance department to handle this kind of stuff—you didn't need to go to the bullpen on my account."

At least with the elevator, you don't have to worry about pretending not to eavesdrop on the occupants in the next shaft over.

"*Please*, what kind of cool aunt do you take me for? These guys are professionals. And since when did you start using baseball analogies?"

"So it's *baseball* lingo! I knew it was *some* kinda sports thing. What, did you call the local branch of the Ghost-Busters or something?"

Then again, maybe the people in elevators are missing out. This kid could toss around sarcasm like a pro, and when Elena returned fire, it was abundantly clear that he'd learned from the best.

"*Obviously*. Let's face it, kid: There's something strange in our neighborhood. Who else was I gonna call?"

Xavi put up a good fight, but in the end, the student could not out-snark the master. Introductions were made, and the four of us filed down the hall in another silence awkward enough to boost the self-esteem of crowded elevators everywhere. Then Elena went into

the kitchen to get dinner started, leaving Ollie and me to fend for ourselves against this most formidable of preteens.

A three-piece sectional, coffee table, and adjacent love seat formed the centerpiece of the living room. Still not sure what we were about, Xavi dove for the tactical high ground: dead middle of the sectional. We, in turn, took our seats opposite him on the love seat, and tried not to look ridiculous.

"So . . . cool shirt," said Oliver in a desperate bid to break the ice. "You a Knight-Spider fan?"

"Nah—I'm an influencer. Excelsior! pays me to wear this shirt."

Damn. Kid was sharp, but clearly still too green to know how to read a room. Ollie made that confused, helpless face young children make the first time they get pushed down on the playground, and I had no choice but to intervene.

"Careful where you point that sarcasm, kid—Ollie's a sensitive soul, especially where his favorite superhero is concerned."

Oliver nodded sagaciously. "Knight-Spider is by far the best of us."

Xavi scrutinized us both for a long moment. I couldn't fault his skepticism; here were two fully grown men (on a very small couch) for whom The Avenging Knight-Spider was apparently a subject of grave importance.

"Oh, yeah, um, sorry—I didn't realize," he said in an entertaining blend of remorse and confusion.

"No worries," Ollie replied. "I could tell you were in jest."

"Uh-huh. Sure you could," I said.

Oliver shot me a sidelong look. We were sitting shoulder to shoulder, so he nearly gave himself whiplash to do it, but sidelong it was.

"So Xavi—Farraday and I were wondering if we could ask you a few questions?"

" . . . about my dream."

It wasn't so much a question as the affirmation of a condemned man, resigned to his fate.

"Nope," Ollie replied. "We already got the rundown on that from your aunt. Looping nightmare, invisible giant komodo-anaconda thing, powerless to stop it, gets you.

"But at least half of what makes any dream memorable is creativity run amok. The rest is usually hormones, repressed early childhood memories and day-to-day stress, but something tells me *this* one is nothing less than 100% grade-A organic, free-range imagination."

If you took his words at face value, you might think Oliver was being patronizing, or dismissing the whole thing as silliness. It was his presence and posture that made the difference—pure scholarly fascination, as if the nightmare in question were a first edition printing of a rare manuscript, and Ollie not merely a collector, but *the* collector.

"We want to know more about you, Xavi. Because the same imagination that drives a dreamer to fear can just as easily be what inspires one to courage."

"Has anybody ever told you that you read too many comic books?"

A blind man could have seen through the kid's stoic facade. Practically every twelve-year-old in the last quarter century knows the bitter disappointment of not getting their acceptance letter from the local prestigious secret magic school. Now, here was this strangely mannered, hairy giant, appearing out of nowhere, and talking about the creative power of dreams. I had no idea where Oliver was going with this, but it was surprisingly entertaining to watch him work.

"I get that a lot," Ollie replied. "Though *I* might argue that I've read precisely enough comic books to recognize talent when I see it. Your aunt says you draw. Mind showing us some of your work?"

Xavi put on a good show of bashful disinterest on his way out of the living room, but we could hear the thudding of excited feet down the hall on his way back. He returned carrying a stack of bristol board sketchbooks.

"This one's mostly from this past May, I think," he said, handing Oliver the topmost of the pile. "I haven't done as much . . . since the summer started."

Ollie made no reply, but opened the book and began turning pages with a delicacy that bordered on reverence.

I had never before—nor since, for that matter—known him to keep silent for that long. He finished surveying the first sketchbook and handed it to me while reaching for a second. He was halfway through the second when he must have remembered he wasn't alone in the room.

Grunting like he'd startled himself awake by snoring too loudly, he muttered something to the effect of "kid's got skill."

I didn't have Ollie's quasi-trained eye for the art form,³ but looking over the pages of the book he'd handed me, I had to agree.

Xavi's sketches were more like the early drafts of box office movie posters than the doodles of your average twelve-year-old. His style still had a roughness to it that only practice and experience could remedy, but it was very clearly the work of a prodigy. His characters were diverse, the emotion on their faces relatable, and their actions on the page absolutely dynamic. Sketch after sketch, each page was an entire story unto itself.

"You're self-taught, yes?" Oliver asked.

"Um, yeah, I guess. I watch a lot of MyTube tutorials, plus the ECU movies."

"How's your education in graphic novels?"

"Aunt El has gotten me a few. Mostly Excelsior! titles, but sometimes they're hard to follow because they use a different continuity than the movies."

"Start collecting comics," Oliver didn't so much suggest as demand.

"Um, I'm twelve, and we don't exactly live in the age of corner comic book shops anymore."

3. By middle school, Oliver had gained a reputation amongst his peers as a "real gud drawer." After high school he survived almost two whole semesters at a ridiculously expensive art institute in Georgia. While a cost-benefit analysis of pursuing a BA in starving artistry might serve to explain why he dropped out, I think we can all agree Oliver passed up a career in drawing dudes in capes, for a prospective career in being one.

Oliver looked up from the bristol board. I'd seen his serious look before; he often took things so seriously that he crossed the line into whimsical. This was different.

"Kid, you've got talent. Genuine talent, and burgeoning skill to boot. You need to broaden your horizons. Most people mistake comics for a niche genre, but the truth is they're a storytelling medium all their own. Some of the best names in comics are on par with Pulitzer-winning novelists. Difference is, the comic book medium grants them access to an even more versatile set of tools.

"I'm going to give you a list of graphic novelists you should be reading. Not to overstate it, but if you keep progressing, your name could be on that same list in ten years' time."

Ever seen a kid's eyes go wide as dinner plates? Neither have I—it's a figure of speech, and a pretty poor one at that. But if this kid didn't have an ego before, he sure as hell would now.

There's a reason we adults don't tell kids they can grow up to be president anymore.⁴

"You know, there's a reason why they don't tell kids we can grow up to be president anymore," said Xavi skeptically.

I had to give the kid points for stubbornness—Oliver had given one hell of a psych-up speech.

"True, and you're definitely not going to grow up to be president. But if you hone your craft at narrative as you have your drawing skill, you might grow up to be the next Neil Gaiman."

"I . . . don't know who that is,"

4. Said reason was orange, had abnormally small hands, and served a singularly disastrous term in office from 2016 to 2020.

"Perhaps not. But you should."

And that was when it happened. Abruptly enough that it drew the whole of my attention, Oliver froze in place, head cocked to one side, as if he were listening for some far-off sound, and—I kid you not—a halo of tiny cartoon lightning bolts flashed outwards around one side of his head.

Laws and limitations of objective reality be damned—Ollie's '*Freelance Heroism Consultant Sense*' was tingling.

"On second thought, rain check on that list," he said, nearly knocking me off the couch as he sprang to his feet.

"Farraday, would you mind holding down the fort here for a minute? I have to get something out of my briefcase, which I just remembered I left in the car."

"It's unlocked," I said.

. . . And then there were two.

"So, tough break about that name though," I said. "Spelled with an **X**, but pronounced like a **J** that sounds like an **H**. Cruel *and* unusual."

Xavi shrugged. "You get used to it after a while. We usually only have to make the correction once, and people get it."

"Still . . . have you considered maybe filing a complaint with the management?"

"You're one to talk. Do you even have a first name, or are you, like, Cher?"

Kid hasn't heard of Neil Gaiman, but he knows about *Cher*?

"I told you my first name when your aunt introduced us. It's Vic—"

The living room was open to the kitchen, which in turn afforded me a view of the patio door through which we'd entered. Through the glass, I could see Oliver pacing the far perimeter of the lawn, twirling

the vaguely sword-shaped contents of his briefcase in a series of wide, flourishing arcs.

"Xavi, will you excuse me for a moment?"

It didn't occur to me at the time, but my vision being what it is, there was no way I could have spotted him at that distance.



"Is it Heroism Consultant Patrol time already?" I asked.

Standing there on the patio, looking out to where Oliver had stopped mid-step, facing the tree line, I couldn't shake an eerie sense of déjà vu.

It was late afternoon, and the air was thick with the haze of dying summer. I could smell the faintest hint of autumn on the breeze.

"It's here, Farraday," said Oliver, still scanning the treeline. "The kid's been feeding it for months. Filling the tank with fear and imagination. Then Elena started pouring hers in, further reinforcing its substance. And now you and me . . .

"I think we just topped it off."

"Is that a *mixed* drink metaphor or a mixed *drink* metaphor?"

Oliver turned back towards me, pondering.

"Huh. Bit of both, I suppose."

"So, what exactly are we waiting to—"

Nevermind. The question was redundant.

"Farraday, do you see something?!"

At which point the gigantic heat-mirage that had begun materializing behind Oliver whirled around and swatted him with its not-quite-tail, sending him flying at the approximate speed of unbridled imagination.

And, if I'm not mistaken, that brings us right back around to where we started.



5

Oliver clambered from the wreckage of my passenger door, bounced to his feet, and whirled his foam and duct tape sword exuberantly.

"Farraday, do you see that thing?!" he asked, eyes ablaze with caricaturesque ferocity.

Oh, I saw it, alright. I saw it clearly enough that I might have wondered at his enthusiasm.

Sound familiar?

To be honest, much as I'd said that I *saw* the thing, there's considerable difference between seeing something and *seeing* something.

It was without a doubt a ten-foot-tall, quasi-invisible nightmare lizard, but much of my saying so is that fault in the human brain that causes it to fill in the blanks in visual input. When you watch cartoons, what you're seeing is a series of still images in succession, each one slightly altered from the one before. They're changing too fast for your brain to recognize each individual still, so instead, you interpret what you see as an object in motion.

Looming in front of us was a big, blurry *something*. It was—as aforementioned—sort of like a giant heat mirage, but in the rippling indistinctness of it flickered a presence far more tangible. Glimpses of a fire-orange eye with a slitted reptilian pupil; iridescent veins of red-vi-

olet swirling over a hide of greenish black scales; the menacing swish of a massive, spiny tail. There and then gone, like spots of momentary clarity in a pool of murky water.

Oliver charged his assailant with a battle roar, and the ten-foot-tall, quasi-invisible nightmare lizard hissed its reply, and lunged to meet him.

The clash couldn't have lasted more than half a second, but in that moment of impossible force colliding with implausible object, it felt as though the proper flow of time had gone on its union-mandated lunch break.¹

—A BRIEF ASIDE WHILST THE CHRON- ICLERS DEBATE PROPER NOMENCLA- TURE—

FARRADAY: Really? We're pausing things *here* for this?

1. F: "Its union-mandated lunch break?" Really. That's the best metaphor you can suggest. \\ O: Simile, actually. We're trying to describe something that has no direct comparisons because this is literally the first time in history that anyone's tried to describe it. I doubt the Neanderthals who discovered fire were so eloquent with their unenlightened brethren. Heh. Get it? Unenlightened? \\

F: ... you're exhausting. \\ O: And I make no apologies for it.

OLIVER: Well, I would've suggested it sooner, but this seemed like the most relevant spot. Look, if we don't name the thing now, we're gonna spend the next five chapters, give or take, calling it every primordial sobriquet under the sun: serpent-beast, Gila monster from hell, nightmare lizard-thing, *It*, et cetera. Sure, we were new to the game back then, but we're supposed to be the experts. If we can't give it a name, we look like amateurs.

ELENA: I mean, yeah, but an aside two seconds into a fight scene is going to confuse the hell out of people.

LENORE: I'm sure it'll catch on where it counts. We're not exactly trying to color within the lines of conventional nonfiction here.

FARRADAY: Speaking of confusing the readers, that was Lenore, who hasn't been introduced yet.

LENORE: Salutations, readers!

FARRADAY: So, we were naming it?

OLIVER: Right! So, the name needs to be unique, memorable, yet still draw sufficiently upon the creature's physical traits, so the reader has a conceptual image to relate it to.

FARRADAY: *Gojira's Appalachian Cousin.*

OLIVER: Hmm . . . no, too many syllables.

ELENA: What if we just named it after a mythological creature that nobody has a fixed description of, like El Chupacabra?

OLIVER: Hmm, I think you might be on to something. But there weren't any goats!

FARRADAY: See what I mean about him taking himself too seriously?

ELENA: Did you just have an aside *within* the aside?

FARRADAY: Not every day I get to break the fourth wall *cubed*.

OLIVER: Seriously, you need to quit it with the algebraic analogies! We're gonna lose our audience for sure.

LENORE: Well, if we're trying to be mythologically derivative, there's a number of ravenous reptilian monsters to choose from. The Aztecs had Cipactli, a serpentine sea monster that mixed the characteristics of a crocodile, eel, and toad, with additional mouths on every joint of its body. Then there's Uktena, a Cherokee horned serpent with a vendetta against the sun. There are a number of other iterations of the wrathful snake spirit in Indigenous American tribal mythos, but they pretty much all share those same essential characteristics.

OLIVER: My concern is that these might be *too* derivative. Our monster manifested from an imagination of myriad inspirations. If we get too close to anything with a pre-established physical description, we risk depriving our monster of its inherent originality.

FARRADAY: Right. Because it's such a tender-hearted giant lizard-thing. Last thing we want to do is hurt its feelings.

LENORE: What about "coatilisk"?

OLIVER: . . . You've got our attention.

LENORE: Well, in Nahuatl, an extant language of Aztec origin, "coatl" means serpent. Tack on a "-lisk," as in "basilisk," and you've got an original name that's sure to be an instant classic for your brand new nightmare.

ELENA: So a slightly less clunky and only subtly redundant name for "mythical serpent lizard thing." Works for me.

FARRADAY: Derivative enough to make sense, but brief enough to not be annoying to say.

OLIVER: I like it. All in favor?

FARRADAY: Sure.

ELENA: *[gives a thumbs up]*

LENORE: Aye!

OLIVER: Motion passes, though you guys are terrible at being “all in favor.” And thank you, Lenore. You are—as ever—an invaluable resource to us.

FARRADAY: As our readers will discover . . . *eventually*.

—IN THE INTEREST OF AVOIDING FURTHER CONFUSION, BACK TO OUR SCHEDULED CLIMACTIC STRUGGLE—

The coatilisk bore down on my friend, a set of cruel, raptor-like talons reaching out of ambiguity to rake at his advancing face. Ollie raised his sword in an overhead parry to bat the strike aside as he careened by.

But for an object not possessed of anything remotely resembling a sharp edge, Oliver’s sword stubbornly refused to behave like a bat. The assailing creature-shaped blur snarled in pain and staggered back, the farthest knuckle of each digit on the offending hand just . . . gone.

No blood spouted from the wound, but Ollie had definitely wounded it. While its mostly-visible forearm ended in a ghostly haze of frightening possibility at approximately elbow height, those severed fingertips were as solidly absent as they might have been if it were a real sword, lopping off real fingers in actual reality.

Convolutd enough for you?

Oliver pivoted to face his foe, the outcome of their initial clash having left them standing almost behind each other, like a fight scene out of a Japanese anime.

“That all you got, ugly?” Oliver taunted.

He *had* to ask.

The coatilisk whirled and lunged again, much faster this time. It struck out with both hands, now clearly attached to a pair of scaly, windmilling arms with the proportions of a ten-foot-tall orangutan.

Even as *witty* and *utterly original* as Oliver’s taunt had been, I still had to wonder if it was gaining speed and power not out of sheer fury at the insult, but because it was gaining in realness.

That it treated Ollie more like a chivalrous piñata with each passing second was a fact entirely in support of this hypothesis.

He was lucky the thing hadn’t quite come to terms with its partial declawing. If it had started in with the tail again, I’m not sure he could have kept his footing. As it was, Ollie parried its clawed strikes with the sword, and did his best to shrug off the ineffectual—if jarring—slaps from its alternate hand.

But the frenzied assault kept up, and Oliver was forced to retreat or else be overrun. It seemed it would come down to that age-old question: Do the benefits of regular cardio outweigh the benefits of not quite being real enough to tire out?

Ollie’s retreating steps had him on a collision course with a stand of woods on the outskirts of the property. Given his track record with multitasking, the shift in terrain would be anything but favorable.

Gojira’s Appalachian cousin pressed its advantage, and its presence became more real with each passing moment. Now the hazy space

between the arms solidified into a pair of massive, slouching shoulders, and each clawed step dug trenches into the lawn.

At the last possible second, Oliver dove to the creature's nonlethal side and tumbled away, missing a parting sweep from its tail by a hair's breadth.²

Having put some distance between them, Ollie braced himself for the next exchange. He was breathing too hard to offer any more *brilliant* taunts, but he still wore what I'm sure his inner monologue described as a "warrior's confident smirk."³

"*Jesus Christ*—it's real?!" gasped Elena.

With the parade of impossible happenings starting up pretty much as soon as I'd come outside, I must've forgotten to shut the patio door on my way out. I was a bit too preoccupied to notice at the time, but I'm told Elena had come out after us with intent to lecture, regarding the lack of consideration that was the leaving open of doors in someone else's home in the dead of summer with the A/C running.⁴

"If it wasn't real before," said Oliver, "it is now."

A single blazing lantern eye fixed on Elena, and even more of its possibleness melted away into certainty.

2. This looked nowhere near as cool or graceful in reality as it might seem on paper.

3. O: "Smiling with a warrior's grim resolve," actually. \ \ F: Told you. \ \ E: Urgh, really? \ \ F: Yup—I win. Pay up. \ \ E: Fine. \ \ O: Wait, did you guys place bets on my inner monologue? \ \ E: . . . maybe?

4. Suffice it to say the matter was shelved, but not actually forgotten.

The maw of the coatilisk might well have been described as the stuff of nightmares, though my own nightmares mostly involve spiders and chittering, insectoid things creeping in the shadows where I can't see them. Looming in broad daylight, scaly and glistening and terrible like some giant, ravenous anthropomorphic newt, the coatilisk might not have been the kind of thing *my* sleeping imagination would have rendered, but it was plenty unpleasant-looking.

Arms, claws, and tail were joined by a head combining the worst in mutant iguana, python and emperor penguin,⁵ with eyes that could swivel independently of one another like a chameleon's. With a torso just a bit too reminiscent of a human's, and legs something like an ostrich crossed with a cheetah, it was simultaneously lanky and top-heavy, hunched forward like a baboon balancing on its hind legs. The whole thing might have looked comical, if it hadn't also been freaking enormous and possessed of all the grace and power of an apex prehistoric predator.

It turned, ignoring Oliver completely now, and gave another hissing growl. Bright green spines tipped in poison-apple-red bristled from the base of its skull to the tip of its tail, and then it launched itself at Elena and me.

I don't know how Oliver was able to intercept its charge before it reached us, but there he was, sword raised to cleave it from shoulder to opposite hip. It might even have been enough three seconds earlier, when the thing was still less than halfway to real, but gaining physical solidity evidently came with mental upgrades; no thoughtless fury

5. Look up the inside of a penguin's beak if you don't believe me. 'Disturbing' is just the tip of the Antarctic iceberg.

swipes this time. Using its declawed hand, it caught the sword at the crossguard and tugged violently, as if to prise it from Oliver's grip. Ollie managed to hold on—barely—but lost his footing in the process, and stumbled against the monster's flank.

He didn't get to rest there long. Snarling its annoyance, the monster whirled in the opposite direction, yanking him fully off his feet. Ollie refused to relinquish the sword, gritting his teeth and clutching the hilt with both hands as the monster whirled and thrashed him around like a particularly long-despised ragdoll. Then the tail came down, driving him face-first into the lawn with a resounding *whump!*

Ollie lay still for an uncomfortably long few moments. Then he shuddered, floundered, and struggled to rise, all in complete and utterly uncharacteristic silence; the impact with the ground must have knocked the wind out of him.

The monster loomed over him, hissing in a way that sounded just a little too much like mocking laughter. It drew back its clawed arm, winding up for the kill.

"No," said a small voice from behind Elena and me.

A single word spoken in barely a whisper, but it was enough. Face-down in the grass, Oliver was easy prey.

But Oliver wasn't the one the coatilisk was here for.



THANKS FOR READING!

We hope you enjoyed the first five chapters of **Freelance Heroes Incorporated, Book 1: Some Assembly Required [Part I of III]**

The epic conclusion to this, Oliver and Farraday's first ever case file is available for purchase as a Kindle ebook as of January 1st, 2023.

And, as you may have inferred from the whole "book 1, part I of III" bit, there's plenty more where the coailisk came from.

Stay tuned!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. S. Norstein', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

—J. S. Norstein
Founder, LOREWEAVER PUBLICATIONS