

Missing Cat Saga: A Metaphorical Ball of Yarn Wound 'Round Three Families for Multiple Generations by a Cat Named Inky

This is a story about the tying up of loose ends. It is a confusing story because the loose ends are many. But the story ties them all together anyway. Even the missing ones. Like Carl's missing cat. A cat on a mission.

Chapter One: Bleeerrgh!

Carl Farthing sat at the bar and sighed. With his heavy belly pressed against the insides of his denim dungarees, he didn't even look up when Margaret the bartender curtly asked for his order. "The usual," he said from under the lid of his trucker's cap. He waited. He hoped the ale would make him feel better.

But Margaret had other plans. She slapped a red and white paper napkin on the bar and then proceeded to not-so-carefully pour his glass of ale. She set the glass down with mock precision, half-on/half-off the landing platform that was his napkin.

Squinting up, he said to the pretty blonde server, whose disheveled appearance and bruised cheek gave him pause, "Er... you know what I'd normally say, Margaret. But I won't this time because I care. All my 'Bleeerrghs' for today are specially reserved for one Heather 'Fussbucket' Winestock, on account of Inky."

"Inky? What's your cat got to do with this?" She cast a critical eye back to where Heather sat.

"He's gone missing. Haven't seen him for five days now. Not since Heather started showing up here on my schedule."

Margaret held up a finger to ask an insistent man at the bar to wait a second while she continued with Carl. "I thought you squared all that away with Heather more than a year ago!"

"I did."

"Well, she's got something up her ass now, that's for sure. She wants a talk."

Carl blinked. His eyes shifted again to the bruise on Margaret's cheek. "Skull treating you right?" Skull was the owner of The Leaky Glass, and consequently Margaret's boss. He was also the leader of the three-person gang called The Stick-Up Crew, who worked for Heather on a strictly off-the-books basis. "I mean, I..."

Margaret turned her attention to the other man at the bar.

Carl looked over his shoulder at Heather. He knew she wasn't to be trifled with, and neither was The Stick-Up Crew. But hitting Margaret and stealing Inky were two lines never to be crossed. Carl would make sure of it. With his wispy gray hair firmly pinned beneath his well-worn trucker's cap, he stood. Then he strode across the room. "You're in for it now, Fussbucket."

He found her sitting alone in the back of a shadowy alcove, her russet hair in a braided twist above her leathern face. She peered with beady eyes through a discolored pair of thick, wide glasses. Due to two front teeth gone missing on account of a disagreement with a dentist a few months back, she whistle-rasped, "Park it, Carl."

He pulled up a chair and sat down. "Inky and me go way back, and neither you nor your crew have any right to tell me nor Inky neither what is and is not proper cat food." Then he flicked his bulbous nose at Heather and coughed. The cough was phlegmy.

"Oh?" she said with a startled snort. "Is that all you got?"

"What's it to you?"

"Life and death, Carl. Life and death."

"Fine. So. What's your beef with me and Inky? And what do I need to do to make it right?" Carl leaned back. He folded his hands over his bulging belly. "Or am I going to have to report the manager of this here establishment on account of Margaret?" This made Heather blanche, confirming in Carl's mind his suspicions.

"Let's not get testy, Carl. My beef with you and Inky has to do with more than your cat eating all the foie gras at Yellipilly's Dinner for Sacrosanct Pets, and you know it."

"Bleearrgh," muttered Carl under his breath.

"Don't go casting spells at me!" With puckered lips and eyes of fire, Heather raised a warding hand.

Carl's face went slack. He stared. "Really? I paid my dues. That University of yours has no reason to mess with me nor Inky neither."

Audibly unpuckering her lips, Heather straightened. Then she tilted her head to the side and whispered into her wrist, "He doesn't know."

Carl raised an eyebrow and sneered. He could see the electronic watch she wore, with its black face and blue sparkle. Probably one of those new ones. Extra pricey.

Returning her attention to Carl, and with a minimum of whistle, Heather clearly stated, "You are no longer welcome here at The Leaky Glass, under any circumstance. Not until the nature of Inky's role in all this has been fully determined. Now, go!"

"What's there to determine? Inky ate the foie gras and made a mess after. That's all Inky did that night, and you know it!" Then he caught a whiff of lighter fluid.

"Stand up," came the voice of a man. It was Mitch, Skull's right hand. Dressed like a cowboy and reeking of lighter fluid, he lifted Carl straight out of his chair. "Come on." Towering almost seven feet tall, Mitch escorted the portly codger across the room. He mumbled something to Margaret as he passed the bar – five staccato syllables worth. Then he shoved Carl out the door.

Staggering, the old man did his best not to fall. As he walked across the parking lot, he saw Heather's copper moped. He had to fight the urge to knock it down. Then he got in what was left of his green mid-duty. It was a Power Wagon missing a windshield and sporting a deep gash along the driver's side of the truck bed. He turned the ignition and placed his hands on the wheel. He paused. What had Mitch said to Margaret? He couldn't figure it out. But then, just as he started to pull away from The Leaky Glass, all five syllables coalesced in his mind. "Ink-y's-a-Spell-cat." That's what Mitch had said to Margaret, and that's why Carl was still alive.

Chapter Two: Spellcat

"Inky's a Spellcat?!!" With both hands on the rim of the white porcelain sink, Margaret quietly screamed into the mirror. The worker's restroom in the back of The Leaky Glass was the best she could afford in terms of privacy. Shutting her mouth and closing her

eyes, she waited for the vision she knew was on its way. It took a few moments at first, but then she saw what Nana chose to reveal. It was a mostly blank page toward the back of Nana's diary – the one she used to call "Secrets" – that had scribbled on it in tiny, tiny print the following triplicate of words: "write/right/ride". Then she heard Nana's gentle voice sing, "It's what Spellcats do in relation to the world, Margaret. One sound, three words, many meanings."

Opening her eyes, she saw the bruise on her cheek, the deepening bruise Skull'd given her that morning before he left The Leaky Glass to do "business" with Diane. He'd told Margaret to organize the inventory before he got back, which meant she'd had to call Mitch in to watch the tavern while she did inventory. At least Mitch wasn't rude about it. In fact, he seemed oddly happy to help. Never mind Skull was probably banging his wife at that very moment. Whatever. Skull. Diane. Mitch. The Stick-Up Crew. No one knew what that name referred to. The only thing anyone knew was that it had something to do with *something* that happened at Yellipilly University ten days before last year's Dinner for Sacrosanct Pets. "I swear this world makes no sense," came Nana's unsummoned comment to Margaret's inner ear.

Pulling the brakes on her racing mind (but only briefly), Margaret ran some water over her hands and dried them with a paper towel. Inventory. That's what she had to do. Count and straighten. And why? Because she couldn't keep her mouth shut, that's why. She'd seen what was written on that napkin Diane had left under the menu, the one Skull picked up and put away. It was Diane's private number, the one Mitch knew nothing about, even though he paid for it through his wife's business account. And when Margaret walked into Skull's office to ask a question, she heard him breathing those numbers quietly to himself, "4-4-7-9-8-3..." and she said, not thinking, "2?" and got smacked for it. As if he had the right.

Grabbing the clipboard with the inventory sheet and a working pen (thank God), she remembered what Heather had said a few weeks back. "Skull's gonna be the end of that crew, I guarantee it." Truer words were never spoke. On one of the shelves she found a broken bottle. Wonderful. Just like the broken bottle Skull had stuck under Carl's right rear tire when Carl came in this afternoon around 2. Weird time to start drinkin', but that's when the old fart liked to come in. She asked him about it once, and Carl said it was the only time Inky liked to let him out, "...for drinkin', that is." Inky. His (missing) cat. The one that liked to slink around town, like all over around town, as in everywhere and anywhere, day and night, because, well...

"Inky's a Spellcat?!!" She shook her head, knowing she needed to talk to Carl about Inky sometime soon. But how could she if he'd been banished from The Leaky Glass? Then she heard a banging on the door, the service door leading to the trash bins out back. "What?" Margaret shouted, feeling impatient.

"Bleearrrgh?"

"Carl? Why are – oh." Now she remembered again what Skull had done with that other broken bottle.

"My tire blew out down the road."

"Fine. What do you need, Carl?"

Looking down at the ground just past his belly, Carl tugged at his trucker's cap and moaned, "Gotta call the shop to get a new tire. My spare's gone missing."

"So, what, Carl? What do you need?"

"To use your phone."

"Oh. I'll call Joe for you. Go around front and wait outside. I'll bring you some water." He looked up. A smile stretched across his face. He did as he was told.

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"You know those satellites up there can read a license plate?"

"Yeah, Carl. That was true back in the '80s, I do believe." Margaret handed him a red plastic cup full of water and ice.

"Oh." His face squinched. "Well, whatever they can do up there now, I know it makes me wonder sometimes about everything. I mean, really, who's to say we don't all live in just one really big sick and twisted movie written and directed by computers or something, you know?"

"You'll have to write that one down, Carl. Sounds like something they'd teach at a Yellipilly symposium on Media Philosophy, if you ask me."

"Well, I'd never ask anyone anything about *that* school. Inky might, though."

"Inky's a curious cat, isn't he?" She sat down on the cement steps in front of the tavern. "He'll come home soon, I'm sure." The parking lot was empty now, except for her own yellow Kia and Mitch and Diane's minivan. Oh. And Heather's moped. Which meant sitting down to have a conversation with Carl about Inky right now might not be the best idea. Heather was known to eavesdrop.

Carl stepped back and turned a little, so his denim-covered paunch wasn't hanging directly in front of Margaret's face. "Inky is curious. He's curious about everything. I think he even reads the newspaper sometimes when I leave it out."

Margaret covered a cough. "That's just strange, Carl. Anyway, tell Inky I said, 'Hi.'"

"I will, if and when I see him. He's never been gone this long."

"Where does he usually go?"

"Wherever he wants." Carl scratched his belly. "He's a cat."

"What do you feed him?"

"I don't."

"Huh." Then she remembered. "Carl? You still go to the creek most mornings?"

"I do."

"Well, one of these days you'll have to tell me more about how you and Inky get along. Maybe I'll see you down at the creek sometime."

"Okay. And thanks for the water. I better go. Don't wanna keep Joe waitin' on the road."

"All right. Sounds good." Then, before she went back inside, she added, "Remember, Carl. Don't come back. Not until Heather says."

"Yeah. Yeah. I know."

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Carl wasn't sure what Heather's beef with him and Inky was these days. Clearly, she still carried a grudge about what happened at last year's Dinner for Sacrosanct Pets. But he figured there was something more. He just couldn't put his finger on it. Shuffling down the road to his truck, Carl took care not to spill his water. When he got to his Power

Wagon, he saw no sign of Joe, so he got in and waited. He thought about his conversation with Margaret and wondered why she was so interested in Inky all of a sudden. It wasn't like her to coddle, either. Something was up. Something fishy. And Inky, for whatever reason, hated seafood. Carl knew this on account of when he first met Inky more than a year ago at Yellipilly's Fish Market. How did that go? Carl tried to remember.

Chapter Three: Paw Prints in Black

Leaning his head back as he sat in the driver's seat of his beat-up Power Wagon, Carl let his belly expand and his eyes close. Breathing lightly through his nose, he quickly slipped into a lucid state of remembering, something he'd learned how to do at a symposium put on by Yellipilly's Scholastic Endeavornment years ago at Yellow Rock Civic Center. "Swallow the Yellow Pill of Memory," echoed the instructor's voice. "Yellow Pill, my ass," thought Carl. "Inky's a black cat with blue eyes. Ain't no yellow anywhere near him at all. The sign at Yellipilly's Fish Market was yellow, though. So were the menus." Ready now to remember, he took another breath and exhaled a sound. "Bleearrrgh..."

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Smelling warm, fresh sourdough and buttery scallops, the first thing Carl heard when he opened his eyes and saw the open newspaper on the red checkered tablecloth next to his food was the sound of a woman's voice. The voice was familiar. "Devon, you need to sit still and listen to your mother." Carl wanted to turn around and see who was speaking, but he could not; he was only remembering his meal from two years before. Still, through the experience of Lucid Remembering, he was able to listen more carefully now than he originally had that late afternoon in May.

The boy, apparently named Devon, replied with the sound of raspberries.

"Do that again, and I'll take your ink away." Who was that talking?

Then came the voice of the waitress. "Mind your mama. I'm bein' nice lettin' you paint here. If you make a mess, it'll be me who gets in trouble."

"BusTED!" said the boy, drawing out that second syllable.

The waitress coughed.

"I'm so sorry! Devon, put your ink away. Put it under the table. And give me that paper."

Now Carl recognized the woman's voice. The woman behind him, having an early dinner with her son, was none other than The Leaky Glass' Margaret! "But Margaret doesn't have a kid, does she? I mean – oh, god." The buttery deliciousness of the scallops interfered with Carl's lucidity. Suddenly, he was simply savoring his remembered meal and staring idly over the railing at the creek that flowed nearby through the woods on the edge of campus. The creek was kinda like everyone living in Yellow Rock: always moving but going nowhere. It had to do with Yellipilly University. How did the saying go? "Graduate or not, you're gonna stick where YU spits!"

Either way, Carl really didn't care. He took another bite. He looked down at the paper and read about the passing of one Ms. Marigold. He didn't recognize the name, even though she'd supposedly lived in Yellow Rock her entire life. Then he looked up and

wondered about the man in army fatigues standing at the far end of the ivy-strewn patio. He held at his side a gray pet carrier. It was open and empty. Carl's thoughts raced. "Wait a minute! You mean to tell me..." Focusing hard now, because Carl knew he only had a few seconds to look, he registered as much as he could regarding this mysterious stranger. The man tilted his head and took off his cap. He rubbed his bald head. He put his cap back on. Then he turned around and left, leaving Carl's mind in a state of shock. The man in fatigues had been Skull! But before Carl could figure out the meaning of this revelation, Margaret screamed.

Carl turned to see what the trouble was, only to catch sight of a mouse scampering under a nearby table, hotly pursued by a young black cat about to earn his name. Carl smiled at the sound of the cat's claws audibly scraping the patio's heavily lacquered floor. And that was just the beginning. There soon followed other sounds. The clatter of silverware. The falling of chairs. The shouts from the cooks yelling loudly for everyone to remain calm. It was a ruckus, and Carl loved ruckuses. How that cat managed to bat that mouse all over that patio for a good five minutes or more – during which time everyone but Carl got up and left – was a wonder to behold. Every meal was ruined. Even the last half of Carl's scallops got turned over, which would have made him sad if he wasn't already overjoyed by the fiasco at hand. It was as if the mouse and the cat were in cahoots to spill every drink on every table, to make sure every last yellow menu was on the floor, and to tear as many holes in as many tablecloths as possible, all within those first few minutes. It happened everywhere at such a speed that Carl didn't know where to look next. Which is why he was so surprised when he heard a hiss and a splash behind him. Then the cat was right in front of him, dangling from his jaws a now half-eaten mouse all covered in blood and black ink.

Carl didn't know whether to feel threatened or elated. "It's okay," he timidly belched. The cat stared.

"Well," looking about the patio, "*it's* not okay. But you're okay, and I'm okay, right?"

The cat dropped the mouse. It landed right next to one of the scallops. The cat sniffed at the scallop. Withdrawing his nose in disgust, he batted the scallop off the table and nudged the dead mouse a little closer to Carl.

"Do you have a name?" Then he saw the paw prints. The cat had left a trail. "Well, you're just as black as this ink, aren't you? Then that's your name. Inky."

The newly named cat trilled a friendly meow and butted his forehead under Carl's chin.

"Aw," said the old codger, petting the newly named cat. He repositioned his trucker's cap as the cooks and customers complained loudly about the mess. Then he caught sight of where Inky's ink trail ran across the newspaper he'd been reading. One black paw print sat right next to Ms. Marigold's obituary. "Huh," he thought. Scooping up in his arms a surprisingly docile cat, he stood and whispered, "We better get the hell out of here, yeah?"

Carrying Inky between his arms and atop his belly, Carl walked across the patio and did his best to shield his new friend from the anger of the cooks, the waitresses, and the customers. Heading home now, he noticed Heather's moped propped up against a tree about 50 yards south of the Fish Market. What was up with that? Did Heather know something about Margaret's Devon? Did she know something about Skull and the military? Worse yet, did she know something about Inky? That little black cat seemed to be at the center of everything. But how? Then, in one mysterious instant, the answer to

that question flashed across Carl's mind. It made no sense, but still he knew it was right. It was the name in that obituary. Ms. Marigold. It had to be.

And that's when the sound of Joe knocking on the window of his Power Wagon broke Carl's concentration. Back in the present, he rolled down his window.

Chapter Four: Card Problems

After Joe got his flat fixed with two new tires – "One for the road and one for the spare" – Carl gave him his credit card and a friendly grin. He waited for it to scan. It did. Then, after a few seconds, there came a rude buzzing of a beep from Joe's cell phone. Carl took his card back and looked down, shaking his head in shame. "Blasted Heather."

"Whaddya mean, Carl?" asked Joe. He wiped the sweat from his balding head with a red/blue handkerchief. He always had a plaid handkerchief on his person. He ordered them through the mail. "I know you're good for the money. Just bring some cash by tomorrow, will ya?"

"Sure thing, Joe."

"Say, Carl. Are you still with Farthing Truckers?" Joe was referring to the trucker's union Carl's grandfather Buster helped put together back in '55.

"A little. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I've got a nephew looking to get into the transport business, and he always liked the cargo van you used to drive around town, so he asked me to ask you."

"About Farthing Truckers? Yeah. I could give you a phone number to call and a name to ask for, I guess."

"That'd be great! Just bring it by tomorrow with the cash, yeah?"

"Okay. And, Joe, you've lived in this town long enough. Ever heard of the Marigold family?"

Joe blew out a long low whistle of a breath. "Now that's a name I haven't heard in forever."

"I guess there was a Ms. Marigold who passed away about two years back, but I have no damn idea who she was."

Joe's face went white. He coughed. He wrung his hands together not once, but twice.

"Care to enlighten me?"

The mechanic, standing outside the Power Wagon's rolled down window, squinted up at Carl with a squinty eye of judgment. "Marigold. That obituary you read was a front."

Now it was Carl's face that went white. "A front for what?"

Joe rolled his eyes. "My nephew, see, he works for the base."

"The military base north of town? The one no one talks about? The one I sometimes do deliveries for?"

"Yeah. That one. Anyway, my nephew, he's been assigned certain informational duties having to do with Yellow Rock and Yellipilly history."

"Huh?"

"He's a sp- a researcher, Carl. And I'm only telling you this because he was told to keep an eye on you in particular."

"But..." said Carl, his voice almost shaking, "why?"

"Well, Marigold is a codename. It has to do with your damn cat."

"Inky?" Images of Skull and the cat carrier flashed across his mind's eye.

"Listen. My nephew Jake told me to tell you to go to Yellipilly Library tonight and look up the Marigolds. What you do with that information is on you. I've got to get."

Carl's head started to spin. Wasn't it he, Carl, who'd brought up the name Marigold? Why would Jake tell Joe to deliver a message about going to the library to research a name Carl had to mention first? It made no sense. But Carl was already making connections. Skull and the military, Inky, Margaret and Devon, and that blasted Heather. If this was all tied to Inky somehow, then it was Carl's obligation, as Inky's human, to do his best to unravel the mystery of Marigold. But how was a trip to that stupid library he'd never been in and had only seen at a distance going to reveal anything worth anything? Unless...

Joe waved a hand in front of Carl's face.

Carl blinked. He smiled stupidly.

With a handshake and a cough, Joe said his goodbyes and got in his truck. He drove away.

Forcing his mind to clear, he waited for Joe's truck to disappear over the hill on the right before eyeing the road on his left. It snaked down through a bunch of trees to the lush green valley below. That's where he lived: down near the outskirts of Yellipilly's Scholastic Endeavorment, in a rickety two-bedroom house on a slice of land marked "unincorporated" on most maps. Not sure whether to go straight to the library or not, Carl held up his credit card. Cut from some sort of extra-sturdy vermilion material, it read in yellow letters, "Carl F. Farthing – YU Credit Union – Stuck on U." The numbers were in code, an uneven line of dots, polygons, and dashes, like something you'd see in a Hollywood spy movie. The card felt heavy in his hand. Knowing he had no choice but to take care of this card business first, he adjusted his tan trucker's cap, sighed what he hoped was his final "Bleearrrgh" for the day, and hit the gas. "Yellipilly Credit Union, here I come!"

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The wrought iron gates just outside campus were emblazoned with the year 1882. That was the year the school's charter was first presented. After Carl drove past the gates, he slowed down. The spaces between buildings were more accommodating to pedestrians than they were to vehicles, what with all the old oak trees and the occasional statue and/or fountain. Only a handful of students were about. The day was ending, the campus quiet. He hoped the credit union wasn't already closed. It wasn't.

Contrary to the more muted colors of the rest of the campus, the credit union was a maze of glass and brilliant yellow stucco. It sparkled in the light of the descending sun. This sparkle hurt Carl's eyes on a number of levels. Then, when he got inside, he had to mince words with a snooty customer service agent on the other side of a transparent barricade who didn't want to deal with any actual customers this close to closing time. Still, Carl insisted. The upshot of his insistence was that the snooty agent had to take the time to explain to Carl why it was his card wasn't working. It had something to do with the "withdrawal of Winestock support," said the agent.

"I know that," said Carl. "It's just Winestock support gets overridden by my contract with Farthing Truckers. It's all tied to the house."

"What house?"

"The one I live in."

"Not anymore."

"What?!" He felt a "Bleearrrgh" coming on.

"Oh. Wait. That hasn't been determined yet. Let me fix this. Here. Now your card should work. Anyway, I suggest you make an appointment to discuss with an advisor all stipulations attached to the Farthing Inheritance and how it relates to the Winestock Family Fortune. Put in a call tomorrow to arrange that appointment. Okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Okay. And I need to make a withdrawal." He took out enough money to pay Joe, plus a little extra. Then, as Carl left the credit union, he realized he had no recollection of the personal particulars of the agent he'd just spoken with. Were they a man or a woman? What color were their clothes? What did their voice sound like? His mind in a daze, Carl wandered, completely unaware of his surroundings until he realized where he now stood, which was just outside the library.

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"The Vermilion Vault of the Yellow Scroll", as Yellipilly Library was colorfully known, sat facing the campus' main quad to the west. Across the quad was "The House of Sacrosanct Pets." The stony exteriors of both buildings were covered in so many ledges, nooks, and crannies that they defied human understanding. The faculty called them the Cat Mews. The students called them an eyesore. Carl called them a ruckus. Looking up and smiling, he wondered if maybe Inky was around. If he was, he was probably up in the building across the quad. Then he remembered he wanted to read up on Spellcats, too. Before today, when Mitch told Margaret Inky was a Spellcat, the only time he'd heard that word used was at Inky's adoption ceremony. It was an unusually long legal ordeal ordained by Yellipilly's House for Sacrosanct Pets. It gave adopted pets civic citizenship. Which meant that if someone were to steal or harm an adopted pet, then legally it would be tantamount to kidnapping or assaulting a human. The certificate did cost a lot of money, though. But there was a discount for cats. When Carl had presented his certificate for stamping, that's when the adoption witness made the following cryptic comments. "That'll be five-hundred dollars. It'd be nothin' if this here cat was a Spellcat. But Spellcats don't exist, and I'm just jokin' anyway." At the time, Carl was more interested in getting the ceremony over with than unraveling the mystery of the man's joke. But now, he wondered. Were Spellcats real? And if so, what were they?

Determined to find out about Spellcats as well as Ms. Marigold, Carl entered the library. It was well-lit, the inside much plainer than the outside. A handful of card catalogues sat in the middle of an otherwise open antechamber. No computer? Carl sighed. Even though his fingers appreciated the feel of the thick paper cards, and his nose enjoyed the dusty dry scent of them, he knew a computer would be faster. Still, resigning himself to the situation, he took a piece of scratch paper from a stack on top of one of the card catalogues and made a list: "Marigold, Spellcat, Farthing, Winestock, Yellow Rock." He repeated this list in his head like a mantra. "Serendipitous Research" was the other topic he'd attended at that symposium at Yellow Rock Civic Center, in addition to "Lucid Remembering." It had to do with intention, chance, and intuition. So, in keeping with his training, he took his time combing through the catalogue. Each drawer stuffed with cards

spoke to him in subtle ways he knew he didn't need to understand, only honor. Slowly but surely, he located some promising titles. Then, when he thought he'd added enough books to his list, he headed for the stacks. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Five: Serendipitous Research

"Whoo-boy," thought Carl, looking at the small pile of books on the study table in the odd little alcove toward the back of the stacks. The alcove wasn't well-lit, but it was lit well enough. At least he could read by it. The chair he sat in was a bare wooden affair he didn't like too much, but that was beside the point. He had Serendipitous Research to attend to. Right here. Right now. It was kinda like dowsing for information. Clearing his mind and exhaling a calming "Bleearrgh" of concentration, he closed his eyes and ran his hands over his pile of books. When it felt right, his hands stopped. Then, with one quick clutch, he grabbed one of the books and opened his eyes. The book was the heaviest of the bunch. Its title, "A Dictionary: By Order of the House of Sacrosanct Pets (1882)," was etched in the wooden cover. Taped to the cover just below the title was a photograph of a gold-framed painting of a regal man riding a horse. He appeared to be from the Civil War era, and rich. His gray frock coat bore the letter "E" in gold stitching just above his heart. "Alrighty, E.," muttered Carl, "tell me about Spellcats!" He flipped the book open toward the back.

Spellcat (n.) – A Spellcat (always one word and capitalized) is the feline manifestation of Corrective Variation, as explored in Hessenbaum's "Outlines of the Universal Mind." As such, a Spellcat is a Technical Writer of Reality tasked with editing the story to which the Spellcat has been assigned. The Spellcat accomplishes this through Spellcasting, which casting checks and channels Words of Power according to their Spellings. This is possible because Spellcats have access to the Secret Sounds of Unspoken Babylon. (See "Unspoken Babylon" for more on this topic).

"No, thank you, E. I'm not interested in Unspoken Babylon just yet. Let's see what else we've got." With that, Carl eyed the other four books. He grabbed the nearest one. "Winestock Family History." A detailed lineage, it covered the time from the founding of Yellipilly University all the way up to the past decade. Carl found it difficult to focus on any of it, though, except for the foldout of the family tree in back. That started with the matriarch of the clan, Alice Winestock. Then it ran down until it stopped at the fifth, current, and last generation. Only three names were listed there. Heather (f - living), Tanner (m - dead), and "Prudence" (f - dead). Carl's eyes went dry. He blinked a lot and rubbed them. When he looked back at the page, Prudence was the only name he could still make out. It rang an odd sort of bell in the back of his mind. Then, suddenly, he was no longer sitting in his chair. Instead, he was lying flat on his back underneath the study table, his belly rising and falling with each controlled breath. It'd never happened like this before, but he recognized the feeling. He was about to enter another episode of Lucid Remembering, whether he wanted to or not. Then there followed the cool sensation of a gentle breeze and the sultry sound of a woman's voice.

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"They call it the House of M. It's where I live," the woman said, smiling.

Carl blushed. They were outside a party just getting started at School Dorm Two. Carl was there on delivery. Four kegs of beer. The woman was there for reasons unknown, but Carl didn't mind. He just thought the yellow carnation pinned to the shoulder of her green dress was almost as pretty as she. Her silver hair, cut in a peek-a-boo bob draped over her round face, was almost as mesmerizing as her sparkling lavender eyes. "Oh?" he asked. "The one east of here? On Goldwine Creek?" He'd heard rumors about that place but thought it best to play dumb.

"Yeah. We could – uh – celebrate your birthday there... if you'd like."

Carl guffawed.

The woman's mouth twisted wide in horrified offense.

"Don't get me wrong." He made honest eye contact. "I'd love to celebrate my fortieth birthday with you in the House of M. I just don't know what I'd do with my truck. I've gotta get it back to the yard in less than an hour." His eyes ran down her figure before they returned to her face to gauge her reaction.

The tip of her tongue touched the top of her bottom lip. Then, self-consciously, she pinched both lips together and looked away with only her eyes.

"Tell you what. How about you come with me to the yard. I promise you'll be home by morning."

She curtsied and offered her hand.

He took it and kissed it. "M'lady, your chariot awaits." Then he slapped her ass.

She slapped his right back.

The rest of that night Carl was not allowed to remember, except for two takeaways. The woman's name was Prudence M., and she was most definitely not a Winestock. Floating on the limn of remembrance, Carl tried to think of what this might mean, but before he could, he got pulled further back in time and into a different memory altogether, one not his own. His training in Lucid Remembering only had to do with his own memories, not the memories of others. This was something new, entirely.

* * *

Eustace Farthing had a job to do. It was simple enough. The Marigolds, to the east, wished to purchase an item of influence from the Winestocks to the west. It was Eustace's task to deliver as payment five great chests filled with gold bullion and loose jewels. Then he was to return to the Marigolds with the item in question. "What is it?" he'd asked Tilly Marigold the day before. "The source of Winestock control," she'd said. This non-answer of an answer made him wonder even more. "What could possibly be worth such a fortune?" he asked himself. Sitting atop the carriage, he surveyed the irregular cavalry conscripted for his protection. Armed with carbines and sabers, they were Confederates who'd survived the war eager to do their job. They'd just broken camp on the hills above the valley to the west.

"Farthing Squadron ready, sir!" shouted the lead man, whose uniform was a lighter brown than his horse's bay.

"Very good." With forefinger and thumb, Eustace smoothed down his bristly black moustache and breathed in deeply the fresh scent of grass on the hill. Looking down at the even lusher valley below, his hazel eyes sparkled with anticipation. Carl, who's awareness sat behind Eustace's remembered eyes, recognized where they were. It was the spot called the Crossroads. The low-terraced hills to the east were eroded enough in some spots to expose the yellow stellerite that gave Yellow Rock its name. And the valley to the west was where Yellipilly University would be built in less than a decade.

How did Carl know these things? It was a fusion of Lucid Remembering and Serendipitous Research, even though he'd never studied such a fusion per se. The information he siphoned came to him through his ancestor Eustace and two of the library books he had yet to open. With a little effort, he remembered their titles. The first was "The Settlement of Yellow Rock: Meeting at the Crossroads." Carl'd always dreamed of learning through osmosis, and here he was, doing just that! He couldn't wait to tell Inky all about it. Then he read the second. "A Tale of Three Families: Marigold Betrayed." Carl didn't like the sound of that one, so he paid extra attention to Eustace's memories from then on.

For Eustace, it took most of the morning to enter the valley below, knock on the gates of the Winestock residence, and be granted audience with Alice. Regally dressed in a vermillion gown that accentuated her long and lustrous pale blond hair, she scowled. Not because she had anything in particular at which to scowl, but because she was, by nature, a scowler. "Oh. I recognize that face," thought Carl. She wasn't as dried up and wrinkled as her great-great-granddaughter Heather, but still, the scowl was unmistakable. In fact, Carl heard nothing she had to say. He was too distracted watching her mouth move. Blasted Winestocks. If he could have forced Eustace to bless her with a hearty "Bleearrrgh," that's exactly what he'd have done. Instead, pleasantries were exchanged, the carriage emptied of its five chests of gold and jewels, and the item Eustace was to deliver to the Marigolds revealed.

A limping man draped in burlap pulled a loudly creaking two-wheeled wooden cart by its long metal handles through the gates and up next to Eustace's carriage. He lowered the handles to the ground, causing the cart to tilt. A small wicker basket rolled out of the cart and onto the ground. The squadron tensed, their weapons at the ready. What was this about? Carl had to know. He watched carefully through Eustace's eyes as the limping man hobbled over to the basket, lifted it up, and carried it over to the carriage door. He opened the door and set the basket inside. Then, taking his noisy cart with him, he left.

Eustace heaved a concerned sigh. He got down from the driver's seat of the carriage and approached the open door. The basket was maybe three feet tall with a wicker lid held shut by five leather cords. The basket jostled. Something in it was moving. Carl heard Eustace's panicked thoughts. "What is this? Alice assures me this is the prize Tilly seeks, but it makes no sense!" Then he drew his blade, cut the cords, and lifted the lid. Peering in, he saw a cat. A black cat. The cat stopped moving and simply waited for Eustace to lift him free of the basket. It was a beautiful cat, and when Eustace reached in and lifted him up, he locked eyes with him and thought, "This is more than a cat," and Carl screamed, "That's because he's Inky, you idiot!" He (Carl) couldn't believe it. That darn cat was eternal. Or something. It seemed impossible, but there he was, looking just as spry in 1873 as he always did. Incredible. Inky let out a chirrup of recognition, as if he sensed Carl behind Eustace's eyes. When Eustace moved to close the carriage door, the

cat leaped out and immediately scabbled up to the driver's seat. Perched there now, he switched his tail with curious impatience. Flabbergasted, Eustace cautiously climbed up next to the cat, took hold of the horses' reins, and thought a moment. Inky nuzzled the man's hip. Then he looked out over the horses to the road ahead. Apparently, it was time to go. Eustace shouted to his squadron that the item purchased was now in their possession, and that they must make haste to deliver it to Tilly Marigold as quickly as possible. With Inky beside him the entire way, Eustace led his men back to The Crossroads where, just at the onset of evening, Marigold was betrayed.

Chapter Six: Crossroads Double-Cross

Driving his carriage out from Winestock land, Eustace kept a close eye on the cat, who did not seem the least bit inclined to scamper. Instead, he sat straight up, his attention on the road. "You're worth a lot of money. You know that, cat?" Inky dipped his head only the slightest bit. He never broke his stare. Eustace sighed. Inside his head, he and Carl thought the same word at the same time. "Incredible." All the gold and jewels Eustace had delivered. For a cat. This cat. What the hell was this cat capable of?

Suddenly, there came the sound of rifle fire. Farthing Squadron was under attack! Eustace whipped around, looking for sign of the enemy. One of the horses ahead and to the right of the carriage startled. The uniformed body of its rider fell backward over the horse's haunches. Eustace heard the horse whinny. He heard the body smack the ground. He looked to the left. He looked to the right. Both paths were clear. In the fading light, he saw no sign of any enemy whatsoever. Two more shots were fired. He arched his back and turned to look behind the carriage. With his pistol in one hand, he reached for the cat with his other. Inky crouched. Three members of the squadron were dead. The remaining five all sat atop their horses on Eustace's side of the carriage, carbines at the ready. Who was in their sights? Eustace was.

"Eustace Farthing!" shouted one of the conscripts, apparently their leader. "Kindly let go of the cat and remove yourself from off the carriage!"

Outgunned and outnumbered, he didn't know what to do. Something swatted his forearm. He looked down. The cat returned his gaze with uncommonly calm blue eyes. They squinched a bit, as if to say, "Trust me." Then the cat jumped up into his lap. Surprised, Eustace holstered his gun and held up his hands.

"I said, let go of the cat!" The leader, his light brown uniform freshly laundered, nudged his horse closer.

"I'm not holding the cat," said Eustace.

"Give it here, then!" Underneath his tan kepi, the leader's face dripped with sweat. He even readjusted his hold on his carbine, probably because his grip was slick. What was he nervous about? That's when Inky dug his nails into the tops of Eustace's thighs, all the way through his woolen pants. Not enough to draw blood, but enough to gain purchase. Was Inky gonna pounce? Carl'd never seen Inky fight. But Inky did not jump. Rather, the cat arched his back and raised his tail. The man's lip curled, his left eye went squinty, and his nostrils flared. Then, he dropped his rifle. Hitting the ground, it discharged loudly upon impact.

The conscript to the man's right yelled and hollered. "Thunderation, Jedediah! You shot me!" But it was water, not blood, that spilled from the man's side; his canteen had taken the bullet in his stead.

Enraged and unarmed, Jedediah leapt from his horse and climbed high enough up the side of the carriage to glare directly at Inky and Eustace both. Eustace tensed. Inky hissed. Jedediah slipped and fell.

The man with the punctured canteen coughed and spit. "Okay! Okay! Jedediah, you get back on your horse. Eustace, you and your damn cat, you're coming with us."

Jedediah rolled to his feet, spluttering obscenities.

"Shut it, Jed. I've seen enough signs in my day to know when a thing is meant to be. Here. Eustace, get on this one." The man nodded toward one of the riderless horses. When the horse was brought near, Eustace got on. He took the reins and scooted forward. Then he motioned for Inky, who jumped to the back of the saddle on which he sat.

Jedediah, regaining his composure, resumed command. "Okay, Higgins. You're probably right. Now, everyone! Leave the bodies and the carriage. Send the horses without riders back." With that, he nodded to someone unseen in a nearby copse of maples. There followed the retort of a rifle, signaling the all-clear. Soon after that, four riderless horses galloped away to the east, in the direction of Camp Marigold. Satisfied, Jedediah spurred his own horse downhill and to the west. Everyone else, Eustace and Inky included, followed him through the night.

* * *

Carl's Lucid Remembering started to slip. Or was it Eustace's Remembering? He wasn't sure anymore. And who was Eustace to Carl, anyway? "Why, he was your great-great-grandfather," Carl's dad once told him when he tucked him into bed. "You see, Eustace Farthing was a trucker even before there were trucks."

"What did Eustace drive?" young Carl asked his father, yawning.

"He drove a carriage with a cat," said his dad.

Carl giggled. His eyes turned sleepy.

"That was the most expensive delivery the Farthings ever made. Because what it cost was more than a cat. It cost gold, and jewels, and an entire family."

"Why?"

"No one really knows, Carl. No one really knows."

As young Carl slipped away into slumber, old Carl thought about Inky and the deal the Marigolds made to purchase Inky from the Winestocks. He wanted to go back in time and yell at Alice Winestock for not honoring that deal. He wanted to yell at her for ordering that ambush. He wanted to let loose a torrent of tears, too, on account of her making Eustace betray Tilly Marigold. Still, he knew the Farthings and the Marigolds were good people. Whatever the Winestocks did to those two families after they'd stolen back their Spellcat after pretending to sell it... well... Carl wanted to make it right. He didn't know how, but he was determined to try.

"Carl?" It was the voice of Prudence. Now he was in another of his own memories, almost like a dream.

"What?" Carl chuckled as he parked his truck outside the House of M. It was the morning after.

"If you had a kid, what would you name it?" Prudence's skin glowed.

"I dunno. Definitely not Tanner, if it was a boy."

"And if it was a girl?"

"Definitely not Heather."

"Okay." She sighed. "I like the name Devon, I think. I like the name Margaret, too."

Not picking up on the hint, Carl nodded.

Prudence smiled and gently kissed his cheek. She smelled faintly of strawberries. She seemed a little sad.

Carl didn't notice.

Alone now under the table in the library with the sound of those two names Devon and Margaret echoing over and over in his slowing waking mind, Carl had no words. No words at all.

Chapter Seven: Money Matters

"Hey, buddy. Long night?" The small man of a janitor pushed his broom past the study nook where Carl lay. Sunlight peeked through the windows facing east. Carl was still under the table, processing. "Margaret is my... which would make Devon my..."

"Ahem." The janitor coughed. "Maybe you should go home. If you've got a home." The man smelled of ammonia.

"Yeah. Yeah." Carl rolled over onto his belly. The rivets of his denim bib overalls clacked against the hardwood floor. Then, with a hearty "Bleearrrgh!" he got up, creaky knees and all.

"You... look... tired. Leave the books. I'll put 'em back where the library lady'll find them." The janitor tugged at his light green beanie and smiled. He looked to be near 40.

Carl thought about those books. Did he need them? No. He did not. Not anymore. "Thanks, my good man. You keep this place sparkly, ya hear?" Carl walked through the stacks. In the library's empty entry hall, he remembered he needed to pay the Credit Union another visit. It was too early for that, though. Then, hearing the names Margaret and Devon echo again in his mind, he jogged to his truck. He wanted to go home. If Inky was there, he'd know what to do. But when he got home, Inky wasn't there. Was Inky ever coming back? Was Inky gone forever? "Oh, Bleearrrgh!!!" he bellowed, interrupting his state of worry. "Just deal with it, Carl. Sit down and have a think."

So, Carl sat and thought. Clearly, Margaret was his daughter by way of Prudence. Prudence Not-Winestock. Prudence... Marigold. The family betrayed. And here he was, Carl, the Farthing who unwittingly got Prudence pregnant with a child he never helped raise. A child who grew up to be the woman bartender at The Leaky Glass who'd served Carl more booze than he could measure and deflected more "Bleearrrghs" than anyone should have to. Carl felt small. He had nothing to offer Margaret. He didn't even know Margaret's story. All he knew was she came into town, maybe ten years back, looking for work. She was at the Leaky Glass for a couple of months. Then she up and disappeared. When she returned, which would have been right around the time Carl first met Inky at

Yellipilly's Fish Market, she started working again at The Leaky Glass. No one asked questions, and if they did, she gave no answer. Why?

Well, for starters, wherever it was she ran off to, she gave birth to Devon. She seemed a good parent at the fish market, so she'd probably spent the last eight or so years raising him right. But if that was the case, where was Devon now? Carl wondered if maybe his Lucid Memory wasn't to be trusted. It felt too real, though, so he thought some more. If Margaret had returned to Yellow Rock with her kid Devon, and they went to Yellipilly's Fish Market for lunch and sat right behind Carl... and if Skull, the owner and operator of The Leaky Glass had shown up in military fatigues with a cat carrier... and Inky, the Spellcat of fantabulous proportions, had made his appearance and bonded with Carl... then, well, maybe it was Skull who stole Devon then and Inky later? A little overwhelmed, Carl felt a wave of tired and took a nap. When he woke, the clock in the living room read 10am. He called Yellipilly Credit Union about the Farthing Inheritance. They said he needed to come in, no appointment necessary. He just had to be there by 11.

* * *

Not even bothering to change his clothes, Carl drove up to Yellow Rock to drop off the money he owed Joe. Then he doubled back down the valley to YU. He parked outside the credit union. It was closer to noon, so at least the sunlight didn't reflect quite as strongly off the silver glass and yellow stucco as it had the day before. Stepping in, Carl muttered, "Fancy-ass moneychangers." The "Bleearrrgh" that followed was silent and deadly. He merely mouthed it as he approached the attendant behind the plexiglass. The attendant was the same one from yesterday. This time, Carl paid attention. He was a man in his early twenties, who, apart from being snooty, seemed otherwise unremarkable. His black suit was neatly tailored, but Carl had a hard time keeping eye contact with the man; his gaze was hollow. "I'm here about the Farthing Inheritance. Apparently, there's something having to do with the Winestock Family Fortune that's tied to it?"

"Oh. Right." He looked down at his watch. "Just in time," he sighed. "Give me a moment." He turned around and exited the vestibule. When he came back, he held two leatherbound books, one large, the other small. He set them down on the counter, behind the plexiglass. Then he placed a binder in the transfer drawer, which he slid under the plexiglass for Carl to open on the other side. "Please turn to page fifteen (that's "xv," by the way), and read what is written there." The man waited.

Carl, unimpressed by the young man's attitude, took his time getting to page fifteen. When he got there, he read aloud an unusual passage.

It is hear-ye stipulated that all family inheritances involved to the Winestock Family Fortune through Article 47.23 be distributed entirely as the authority of the Bank of Yellow Rock. In essence, Winestock control of the moneys of the following nine families is total, unless and unless the presiding officer of the Bank of Yellow Rock be given the appropriate and matching pages from the Ledger of Monetary Sigils as part of honest request for physical relocation outside the bounds of Yellow Rock's geographical estates. The nine families are: Winestock, Farthing, Marigold, Petty, Longcurve, McMartin, Usher, Thattenridge, and Bowerbowl. Et of course, the hiding sigil

of the Winestock Trust must also be presented with both parties. Signed, with dutiful precision, Wool-Beater Winestock the IV.

Carl scratched his head and gave the attendant a questioning look.

"Yes," sighed the attendant. "It's a sad, sad story, really. The intellectual limitations of good ol' Wool-Beater. That's why Alice Winestock dedicated the university to him."

"Bu-" Carl started to say something and stopped. He squinted down at the page before him. "So, you're telling me the Winestocks, on account of this here book, somehow own my family?"

"No. Of course not. The Winestocks don't own anybody. Just their money."

Carl coughed. "So, you're telling me that the Winestocks own all the Farthing money?"

"Yes. Finances only. The same goes for the other families listed, as well. Although, just between you and me, I think good ol' Wool-Beater made up all those other names after Marigold. I mean, I've never even heard of any of those families except right there." He pointed a long finger down at the book, which he then motioned for Carl to return.

As Carl pushed the leather tome back under the plexiglass, he asked, "What about that other book you brought?"

"Oh. This. Yes. You are not allowed to see it. House rules, so to speak. It is the Ledger of Monetary Sigils. It contains all ten sigils, each with ten variations on account of Wool-Beater believing it was important to be confusing. For the sake of secrecy, of course."

"What do they look like?"

"The sigils?"

"Yeah."

"Like cat scratches in ink. Hieroglyphs? Pictograms? I dunno."

Carl squinted. "What about the Bank of Yellow Rock? Where is it and who runs it?"

"No one knows anymore. Which is why the Farthing Inheritance continues to buck the system, so to speak."

"That makes no sense."

"Do you have a Masters in Banking?"

Carl almost burped. "No."

"Then stop asking questions, the answers to which you wouldn't understand even if they were explained to you in crayon."

"Okay, then." Carl remained where he was.

"Anyway. Here's the deal. Yellipilly Credit Union is no longer under Winestock control. But the Winestock Family Fortune is, and it is – how shall we say – humongous. My supervisor, Delilah, she oversees the rulings of the ledger I just showed you. Your money and your possessions are not yours to keep. Unless they are in service to Yellow Rock. So, as long as your delivery contract through the military base remains in effect, you get to keep your money, and your house."

"That base is Yellow Rock?"

"It's more Yellow Rock than anything, I assure you."

"Oh." Carl thought a minute. "So, after I make my last delivery, I'm bankrupt?"

"Yes."

Carl's shoulders sagged.

"Unless you dig up the Farthing Sigil. And the 'hiding' sigil. And bring them here for Delilah to validate. Oh. And bring proof that you are moving out of state. Good day, sir."

With that, Carl was left alone on the other side of the plexiglass. He felt something as close to hopeless as he'd ever felt his entire seventy-plus years of living in Yellow Rock. Still, somewhere in the back of his mind, a plan began to brew.

Chapter Eight: Creekside Chat

A few days later, Margaret sat outside on her new porch. The porch wasn't new, but it was new to her. She had a house now, thanks to Skull. She hated owing the man, but she did. Surprisingly, he was honoring his promises. Which was more than a lot of people would have done in his situation. Correction. Their situation. Still, she knew he was not to be trusted. So. Pretend trust. That's what she owed Skull for now. For the sake of Devon. Who was taken from her the day Inky made a mess at Yellipilly Fish Market. How did that go? It hurt to think about, but she needed to assess.

* * *

"No!" shouted Devon. "Stupid cat!"

Inky had just run underneath the table Margaret and Devon were sitting at and now Devon's bowl of ink was overturned. Margaret held her son by his shoulders. "Don't move," she said. They were huddled under the restaurant's awning, doing their best with all the other diners to stay out of the way of the crazy black cat and the furry gray mouse running amok all over the patio.

Carl Farthing stayed put, watching it all with a smile on his face. When it was finished, the cat leapt on the old man's table. Carl looked unsure of the situation. Then the cat sat down and dropped the dead mouse right there in front of him. Margaret watched as the cat and the old man practically shook hands in agreement over a job well done. Then Carl picked him up and carried him away. Devon stuck out his tongue as they passed, but Carl didn't notice. It got Inky's attention, though. The cat glared.

As soon as Carl and Inky were safely out of sight, Margaret noticed the owner/manager of The Leaky Glass nearby. He was dressed in military fatigues. What was extra disturbing about that was they fit. "Skull?"

He raised a fist to catch a quiet cough. "Yeah. I'm glad you and the kiddo are back from wherever the hell you went, but, uh..."

That's when a second soldier appeared and asked everyone else to clear the patio.

Margaret's face dropped, followed by her head. Looking down at her boy, she sighed quietly.

"Mom?" Devon looked up with strained eyes.

Saying nothing, she gently pushed him forward.

"You mean I have to leave? Really? But you said..."

Skull interrupted him. "What your mother said, Devon, is that you were needed here at Yellow Rock. Not your mom, so much – although she can come back to work at The Leaky Glass for now. You're the important one, Devon."

"But... where are you gonna take me?"

"To the base, for now. Until further orders."

Margaret stood tall. Her teeth tightly clenched, she spat more than spoke, "Fuck you, Skull."

"Now, now. You don't really want another Devon, do you Margaret?"

She slapped him.

He slapped her back.

Devon shouted and began to cry as the other soldier carted him off to the waiting van.

"Why now?" his mother asked.

"Because," said Skull, "we had to prove a thing or two."

"That you're a dick?"

"No. It's classified."

"That's not classified. Everyone knows you're a dick," said Margaret.

Skull loomed over her, causing her to flinch. Then he stepped back. "Sorry. It's just we had to run a test."

"A test?" No sooner had Margaret asked her question than Skull was already marching across the patio to the nearby van. As he passed the table at which Devon and Margaret had recently sat, he slapped down a sealed manila envelope. "It's what I promised. Keep it safe." Later, when Margaret was able to open it in private, she found inside two pieces of paper, both marked CONFIDENTIAL. One bore what Skull said was a sigil. It consisted of a circle with a dash in the middle, one vertical brushstroke on the left, and two horizontal brushstrokes on the right. The other piece of paper listed the address in France where Margaret had given birth to Devon, followed by every single address she and Devon had lived in since. So now she had in her possession one useless sigil and proof she was being tracked.

* * *

"Okay." Margaret sat on her porch and sighed. In the early morning light, things were beginning to make sense. She needed more information though, so she went to the creek to find Carl. It was a short enough walk from her new place, and, sure enough, he was there. He sat in a rusty lawn chair on a little wooden dock too small for much of anything else, sipping coffee from a mug and quietly humming to himself. When Margaret spoke his name, he startled. "Sorry to bother, Carl. Remember. I said I'd stop by the creek sometime and ask you about Inky. So, you free?"

"Sure. I... what do you want to know about Inky?"

"Is he still missing?"

Carl looked down and sighed. "Yeah. He's still missing."

She paused. "Actually, I had a different question to ask you about Inky. Did you know he was a Spellcat?"

Taken aback, the old man widened his eyes and said, "Well, as a matter of fact, I just learned that a little while ago. Why do you ask?"

"Well, if Inky is a Spellcat, and I'm pretty sure he is, then he probably got took."

Carl swung his legs to the side of his lawn chair and sat up. "By who? Heather?"

"No." Margaret stepped out to the edge of the dock and looked down at the water below. "The military."

"What?"

"Yeah. I... I know some things about Skull and I think he might've taken Inky now in relation to... well..."

Carl scrunched his face. "I don't follow."

"Well, Carl, I had a boy – have a boy – just, I lost him. My son. Skull took him."

The old man fell silent. After a beat or two, he sheepishly asked, "You mean Devon?"

Margaret froze. She refused to turn around. She stared into the water, only harder now. "What do you know, Carl?" Her question cut.

"I... well... funny thing is... Joe told me about his nephew, and his nephew, who works at the base, well... he said you had a kid named Devon and that he was important for some reason and he had me go to the library to look up stuff about Spellcats and I learned about my money and the base and some stupid sigils or something that say I can't quit my job or I lose everything."

Hearing "sigils," Margaret took a deep breath and whirled around. "You know something about my sigil?"

Carl raised his hands. "Uh. Maybe. Yeah. I don't mean to say nothin' wrong, Margaret. It's just..."

"Okay. Listen. Let me make you some better coffee than whatever's in that mug of yours and we can talk. I have a place just down the road. Come on." Not even waiting for Carl to get up, she walked across the dock and started down the path to her house. He hurried to follow.

* * *

Over two fresh cups of coffee, they sat on the steps of Margaret's porch and discussed a few things. First off, Margaret revealed that the woman who raised her, Nana, used to tell her stories about Spellcats and that they were real. Nana said one Spellcat in particular was tied to Margaret's family and would show itself only after Margaret had a child. "So Inky is here on account of Devon."

Carl sniffled. "Well, you know when you and Devon were there at Yellipilly Fish Market and Inky showed up? Well, I recently remembered seeing something. You see, Inky was there on account of Skull. Skull had a cat carrier, so he let Inky loose there on purpose. Not sure why, though. And Inky didn't go to you or Devon. He came home with me. Which makes no sense. I mean, it's not like Devon and me are related or nothin'."

Margaret looked down at her last swig of coffee. "Yeah. No. That'd be ridiculous." Then, after Carl asked her where she'd been all those years raising Devon, she said, "Overseas," and changed the subject. "So, what's this about sigils and money?"

Carl went over what he'd learned at the Credit Union about Winestock control of his family's money. He told her about the Farthing sigil and the "hiding" sigil, neither of which he knew where to find. His dad never spoke about stuff like that. Carl said he only knew his dad hated Heather but treated her like royalty anyway. "My dad even paid Heather's brother to teach me the accordion when I was in high school. But that bastard taught me all wrong. Like it was a joke or something. And Diane, Mitch's wife, she caught wind of it somehow and now she moves her hands whenever I talk like she's playing an invisible accordion or something. It's not funny. But she and Heather sure think it is."

"Yeah," said Margaret. "Rude." Then she looked Carl dead in the face. "So, what if I had one of those sigils. What would I do with it?"

Carl swallowed a burp and set his empty cup down on the wooden porch. "If you have a family sigil, all you need is the 'hiding' sigil – whatever that is – and promise to move out of Yellow Rock. Then you get whatever money is attached to the sigil. Why? You have one?"

"Yeah." Her right eye started to itch. "Skull gave it to me. He said there were others, but he had the one we needed. He wants to take the money for himself and move me and Devon out of the area. Once he's finished his work at the base that is... which work I guess has to do with Inky and Devon."

Carl looked at the tree line across the yard.

She thought a moment. "So, if Heather has control over all this sigil money, then she must have all the sigils too. Especially the 'hiding' sigil, right?"

"Makes sense."

"Okay. I'm going to see what I can dig up on Heather. Maybe she has your Farthing sigil."

Carl leaned back with both hands. Then he turned to look down at something near his left hand. "What – uh – what name is your sigil, Margaret?"

"I don't know. Nana said the name was forgotten. Skull said it wasn't. But I don't know. I really don't."

"Oh," said Carl. Etched into the porch was the letter "M," about four inches on each side.

"That mean something to you?"

"What?"

"The thing you're staring at."

"Oh. Yeah. Just a memory. This house. I forgot it was back here. It used to be called "The House of M."

"You're kidding me." Margaret had heard stories about that place. Even her Nana had talked about it a little. She'd said it was a warehouse, and when a much younger Margaret had asked her what that was, Nana'd said it was something unfair the Winestocks did to a relative of theirs named Prudence.

Carl sat up.

"Well," said Margaret. Feeling flush, she wiped a tear from her eye and stood. "That's enough for now. You need to go home. Maybe you should try remembering something more about Inky; and I need to get on Heather." She wanted to give Carl a hug, but it didn't feel right. "Thanks for the chat. Take care." Then she stood and went inside. She went into the kitchen and leaned over the sink. She cried. "Old Fart Farthing," she muttered quietly to herself. Neither he nor she had the courage to admit to it, but she knew it and he knew it. Carl was Margaret's father.

Chapter Nine: Skull's Skeletons

It was another day at The Leaky Glass with Margaret tending bar, Diane waitressing, and Mitch running the office in back. It was Skull's day off. The late morning was extra slow, though, so Margaret spent most of it cleaning behind the bar and scheming. She knew she needed to get dirt on Heather. She also knew she couldn't do it without a little help from Mitch, who was said to be Heather's ears. Margaret suspected Mitch knew more

than he let on about a lot of things. That hulking cuckold of a cowboy wore a poker face like no other. He didn't like Skull, either. So, when Diane got distracted by a customer, Margaret darted into his office and said, quickly and quietly, "Mitch. I don't know how you know what you know about anything – like say how Inky is a Spellcat – but I figure you have ways of keeping tabs on Heather. She's stirring trouble again, I just know it, and I need to know what she knows about some – let's just say – things. She's coming in this afternoon, and I want to hear whatever it is she whispers into that gosh darn watch of hers. Can you help?"

He chuckled and rubbed his square chin. His breath smelled of peppermint. "Sure." He tore off a piece of paper from the notepad on the desk and scribbled on it with a pen. "Download this app. Enter the eight digits I tell you. Memorize them. Have fun." Then he leaned back in the wooden roller chair not designed for anything even remotely resembling comfortable sitting and blew out a long, low whistle. "Ready? 89453271." He said it with a cadence that made it stick in her mind, like a familiar tune.

"Wow." She raised an eyebrow and took the piece of paper, which she folded up and tucked inside her canvas apron. "Thanks." Then she went back to the bar to find Diane pouring a coke for another customer at the bar. It took an hour or two, but things got interesting after that.

* * *

Just past noon, three enlisted men showed up for lunch. They asked to sit in Heather's favorite booth. Margaret's face squinched. She didn't recognize any of the men. "That booth? Back there?" she asked.

"Yeah. Uh. We're here to meet someone named Heather?"

"Oh. Well, in that case... sure. Diane? Menus for our guests, please."

Diane looked askance at all three of them. Dressed in similar khaki clothes more uniform than civvy, they parked themselves at Heather's booth, leaving the back middle bench empty for when Heather would arrive. Diane handed them menus and left them alone to decide. But before they were ready to order, Margaret asked Diane to go in back and ask Mitch if they had any of that plum gose ale from a few weeks back. She knew they did, having done inventory recently, but wanted Diane to feel included. Diane made a face. "I'll ask Mitch." With her long chestnut hair pulled back in a ponytail, the waitress sauntered out of sight. "Don't wait up," she mocked, reminding Margaret who had a husband, and who did not.

"Bitch." Then Margaret straightened her apron and marched over to the men. She noticed one of them seemed surer of himself than the others. The sure man sat with his back to the room in a chair pulled over from a nearby table. When Margaret called, he turned around. He looked young but still legal. "What'll it be?" she asked.

"Jake?" said the man to his left, while the man to his right waited for his answer.

"I got this," said Jake, his crew cut looking fresh. "Something alcoholic, but not too strong. A little sour, maybe?"

Margaret's mouth hung open a full second before she regained control and said, "We've got plum gose ale..."

"Sounds great. Thanks."

Margaret didn't like this one bit. Had Jake read her mind? Her belly did a sharp, slow somersault. "Coming right up! Diane'll take the rest of your orders." Then she said without thinking, "I recommend the roast beef. It goes great with that ale."

All three military men looked up at her. Smiling, they nodded their hatless heads. "Sounds good," said Jake. "A round of gose and three roast beef sandwiches. Thanks."

Margaret raced behind the bar. When Diane returned with a sixpack of ale in her hands and her cherry red lipstick ever so slightly smudged, Margaret got to work. She threw meat in the microwave and poured the gose. Then, when the meat was good and ready, she stuffed it between three paired slices of super thick and salty sourdough. After that, Diane whisked it all away.

About fifteen minutes later, Heather arrived and made a beeline for her booth. That's when Margaret pretended like she was about to vomit. Diane laughed, thinking she was joking, but Margaret insisted. "I'm real sick. Gonna go to my car and get some smelling salts. Watch the place 'til I get back, okay?" Then she skedaddled.

Once she was behind the wheel of her trusty yellow Kia, she downloaded the app named on the paper and entered all eight digits from memory. "Connecting..." read the app. Then her cell phone gave a little beep, followed by a stream of audio. Turning up the volume, Margaret listened in on Heather's conversation with the three men.

"So, tell me, boys." Heather's voice sounded raspier than usual. She coughed. "What's the verdict on that damn cat?"

"In regard to what?" Jake asked.

"Is he a Spellcat or isn't he?"

"We're still determining, but the short answer's yes."

"And The Crew?"

"You mean the Stick-Up?"

"Yes."

"Well, near as we have been able to determine, there never was any kind of stick-up or hold-up or robbery of any kind in the vicinity of Yellow Rock during the time in question. We're pretty sure those two stories going around... well, there's no truth to them."

"So, he made it up."

"You mean Skull?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Yeah. Looks like it. Which means he probably was covering for what happened that night at the actual dinner. Just as you suspected."

"Then the crew has the sigils. My sigils and everyone else's."

Now Jake coughed. "That or they were all successfully burned. Hard to say."

"Except I've heard around town there's at least two sigils didn't get burned. Marigold for one. As for the other, well..."

"Not the *one*."

"God, no. Farthing, probably."

"Well," said Jake, "either way, we can't do much more at this stage. Either the Spellcat remains in control, or we're gonna figure him out before he's through. It's not like Skull can steal your money without a Marigold, and the Marigolds died out two or three generations back. So, no need to worry. The Winestock Family Fortune is secure. We just need your word that you'll continue to humor The Crew – Skull in particular – until we know exactly what happened that night at that dinner party."

"O-kay." Heather's voice creaked as she said those two syllables, drawing them out long and slow. "Just remember. I can have him arrested any time I choose. We'll meet again in one week, understood?"

The men mumbled in the affirmative.

Then, out in the parking lot, Margaret caught sight of something through her Kia's windshield. "Speak of the devil!"

Pulling up close to the entry to The Leaky Glass was Skull's black and green 4x4, with Skull at the wheel. He blared his horn. Not two seconds later, Diane ran out. She pulled off her heels and climbed up into the passenger seat. After she closed her door, the 4x4 peeled out in reverse, kicking up rocks and a cloud of dust. Then it exited the parking lot and drove on down the road. With the afternoon sun beating down, the next to step outside were those other two enlisted men that'd come in with Jake. They got in their jeep and drove away, followed by Heather a few moments later on her moped.

Curious what this was all about, Margaret jumped from her Kia and ran to The Leaky Glass. When she got inside, Mitch stood behind the bar with Jake on the other side. All three of them looked at one another. Then, at the exact same moment, Margaret, Mitch, and Jake all shouted, "We need to talk!"

In the end, Jake did most of the talking. According to Jake, the military had had their eye on Inky for some time now, Inky being a Spellcat and all. A Spellcat, Jake explained, was capable of editing reality, which would be a skill set the military would definitely be interested in. Trouble was, they were having a hard time with the ins and outs of Inky's relationship to the Marigolds, the Winestocks, and the Farthings, especially since Inky's ability to edit reality made it difficult for them to keep tabs on things. "But that," said Jake, "is a story for another time. What matters right now is this. Devon, Margaret's son, needs his mom back. There are at least two factions at the base. Those who want to lock everyone up in a cell and study them like lab rats, and those who would prefer a more humane approach. I'm on the side of the latter, and that's why I'm here. Margaret, Mitch, if we can work together, I think a number of our problems can be solved. Mitch, you can get Skull out of your hair – and Diane's. And Margaret, you can get your kid back. All I need is your cooperation in about one weeks' time..."

Chapter Ten: The Foie Gras Incident

Carl sat alone on his reupholstered couch. Outside, the sun had set on yet another day with no sign of Inky. He sighed. He got up. He went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of milk. He went back to the couch. He sat. After swallowing his milk in two quick swigs, he set the glass down on the rickety table to the side of the couch and positioned himself for transition. Margaret had said he needed to remember something more about his cat, so that's what he aimed to do. It was time for yet another episode of Lucid Remembering.

Not knowing what to remember exactly, Carl decided to focus on Inky alone. He spoke the cat's name three times, each time followed by a plaintively exhaled "Bleearrrgh." After the first "Inky-Bleearrrgh," he felt his belly relax. After the second, he heard the faint tinkling of dinnerware over muffled conversation. And after the third, he caught a whiff of

warmed mulberry wine. It was this that let him know where Inky wanted him to go: last year's Yellipilly's Dinner for Sacrosanct Pets.

* * *

The dining hall was dimly lit and well appointed. Carriers were provided for those pets not on a leash. This meant Inky had to sit in a borrowed carrier, since all Carl had thought to do was carry Inky in his arms. Carl was there to see what the fuss was about, the fuss being the way Inky kept playing with the invitation that'd come in the mail a week ago. The only person there he recognized and wanted to talk to was Joe, his mechanic. Joe was standing next to a younger version of himself dressed in military fatigues who proved to be Joe's nephew Jake. Jake was why he and Joe were there. Jake had some sort of big lizard in a special carrier he'd brought with him. It was a tan, blue-tongued monstrosity that liked to lick at any fingers within reach. Carl had spent most of that evening bonding with Joe and waiting for Inky to get bored. All of this was back story, though. Carl's Lucid Remembering didn't really take off until Heather showed her wrinkled face after everyone had eaten. She raised a wineglass and tapped it with a spoon. Then she made a speech. "Thank you all for coming to this, yet another wonderful dining event at Yellipilly's House for Sacrosanct Pets." Heather's voice sounded less raspy than usual. Plus, because back then all her teeth were intact, there was no whistle to her words. She almost sounded respectable. "It is a privilege and an honor to have a pet with papers, papers that do solemnly declare in no uncertain terms that the pets they designate are blessed and protected with love and law. They are sacrosanct, and as such are to be considered equals among us all, man, woman, and child."

"Hear, hear!" shouted a man wearing a blue blazer and a black top hat.

Heather bowed. Then she waved her hands over the dessert table. "We've got lots of goodies here. All fitting end notes to the repast you have so recently enjoyed. My favorite, however, is this one!" Then she lifted a large silver cover from a flat silver tray and said, "The dessert of desserts... foie gras!" Before her sat an array of small china plates bearing a variety of breads and crackers all slathered in duck liver. She smiled and looked expectantly for everyone's reaction.

"*Pâté de foie gras*," coughed someone else in the crowd, noting how the foie gras had been prepared.

"Yes. Yes. Everyone! Enjoy! I won't be a moment." Then she marched out of the room by way of the main entrance, probably to catch a breath of fresh air or something.

That's when it happened.

Carl felt the borrowed carrier he held shift in his hands. Then, the carrier swung free of his grasp. He watched in startled amazement as it fell to the floor, and out jettisoned his cat. Free now, Inky leap up onto shoulder of a nearby woman. She held in her arms a leashed and shivering chihuahua. This little hairless dog anxiously yipped, and the woman screamed. Everyone froze. As for Carl, he started to smile. Ruckus number two had just begun! But Carl's remembering mind paid attention to more than just the ruckus. He needed to concentrate and look for clues.

The first clue presented itself almost immediately. Inky, having darted down the side of the chihuahua lady and onto the floor, raced over to Jake and ran two circles around his feet. Then, he made eye contact with Carl before looking back up at Jake. Jake,

apparently, was clue number one. After that, Inky hissed and meowed and jumped up on the dessert table. All the other pets were making noises, too. Birds cawed, dogs barked, and a very angry Billy Goat repeatedly bleated his displeasure before kicking over a floor lamp.

While Jake raised his arms and called for everyone to remain calm, Inky got to work on the foie gras. He licked it and shoved it in his mouth with his two front paws. He even rolled around in it until it covered his black coat. Then he attacked it with his rear claws, throwing bits of prepared duck liver all over the chihuahua and a nearby brown pincer. This increased the chihuahua's yipping. The pincer, however, simply enjoyed the snack. As for the Billy Goat, he was not to be outdone. He broke two chairs to pieces with three kicks each. Everyone ran for cover. Everyone except Carl, who scooted closer to the dessert table. That's when he saw Inky hunched over and shaking, his entire torso undulating in a vomitous frenzy. Liquid patê spewed from his mouth and onto the table.

"Dis-gusting!" shouted a young woman.

That's when Carl witnessed clue number two. He'd thought nothing of it at the time, but now he saw clearly what Inky had done. Having scratched at the pool of vomit with his paws, the cat had drawn a sigil. "No way!" thought Carl. Looking long and hard at the its design, Carl committed it to memory. Then, just like that, Inky sat on it and with a swish of his tail wiped it all away.

Heather returned and hollered for order. "Carl!" she bellowed. "Foie gras is not proper cat food! Ever!" She grabbed a silk hand fan from a nearby shelf and beat him with it. "Get out, you! You and your cat! Get out!"

Not needing any more encouragement, Carl grabbed Inky – sticky all over with duck liver patê – and left. As he ran outside to his truck, he saw smoke beginning to billow from an office window on the other side of the building. Days later, Carl would hear around town how the fire department had come to put out a cooking fire. But that made no sense. A cooking fire in an office, with the cafeteria two buildings away? That didn't add up. And with that realization, Carl's Lucid Memory came to a close.

* * *

When Carl awoke, he grabbed a notepad from the kitchen and scribbled down the sigil. Then, he got on the phone and called Joe. "Sorry it's after hours, Joe, but I've got something urgent. I need to speak with your nephew, Jake."

All Joe said was, "Hold on." Then Carl heard a click, followed by the confident sound of another man's voice. "Jake, here."

"Jake, this may sound crazy, but I remembered something from last year's Dinner for Sacrosanct Pets that says maybe you know where Inky is?"

"What do you mean, Carl? Did you Lucid Remember something?"

Carl was taken aback. "Well, yeah. That's exactly what I did. I Lucid Remembered Inky pointing you out at that dinner, and then I remembered something Inky did right after."

"What did Inky do, Carl?"

"He... he drew something with his paw in the foie gras."

There followed a moment of silence. When Jake spoke next, he did so slowly and deliberately. "Did he draw shapes, shapes in the form of a sigil?"

Carl swallowed. "Yeah."

"We need to talk, Carl. We need to talk in person." Then he hung up.

Chapter Eleven: Big Rig Ruckus

Carl met up with Jake at a small coffee shop in Yellow Rock. Carl thought he looked young for a spy, but then he reminded himself that age was no sure sign of anything, considering how young Inky looked but wasn't. He asked Jake, "So is this sigil thing important?"

Jake sipped his coffee. "Yes. I think it is. Do you remember what it looked like?"

"Yeah. I wrote it down right after."

"Good. Then we have something to work with."

Carl sipped his own cup of coffee. Then he looked Jake square in the eyes. "Care to tell me what's really going on?"

Jake nodded. He leaned in just a little. He spoke clearly and quietly. "Margaret thinks you know a lot of this already, but here's the rundown. We think the Marigold family were the original caretakers of Spellcat Inky. Inky can do things. He writes reality, so to speak. It's complicated, but what it boils down to is this. Margaret, your daughter, had a kid by way of Skull. Skull works for the base, and they wanted Skull to father Devon to see if they could maybe tap into Inky's abilities. But, for some reason we couldn't figure out for quite some time, Inky never synced to Devon. Not in a way we understood. Then we learned about you. You, being the father of Margaret and a Farthing, are important to Inky, whose purpose – if he has a purpose – is apparently linked to all three families: the Marigolds, the Winestocks, and the Farthings. There's a number of players interested in controlling Inky. There's the military, for one. They'd like to lock everyone up, you included, and run tests on everyone, like they've already done with Devon... and now with Inky. Then there's Skull and Heather. Heather wants to hold onto her family's fortune, even though she's the only surviving member of the family, which family will die out when she dies. Skull is trying to trick her. He wants to bust Devon out of the base. Then, with the sigils he stole from Heather, and with Margaret in tow, he wants to claim the Marigold inheritance for himself. Now, me and my men, we don't like that idea. We don't like the military's idea, either. So, what we want to do is help Skull free Devon and then help Margaret and Devon get away from Skull. Me and my men, we do work for the military, and we do want to study Inky; but our division wants to give Margaret and Devon a life worth living while we do that. Problem is, we need your help. We need a diversion."

Carl took another sip. "A diversion? Like a ruckus?"

Jake leaned back in his chair. "Yeah. If you're willing to make another delivery to the base, we can arrange something special."

Carl squinted in thought. "Well, if it'll help Margaret and save Inky, then I'm in." He pulled from his pocket the piece of paper with the sigil. He pushed it across the table to Jake. "You hold onto this. It's safer with you."

"Thank you, Carl. You're a good man."

"Now, tell me about this delivery."

* * *

The nameless military base north of Yellow Rock was strategically placed in a multi-level depression carved from the land itself some fifty years ago or more. From the road, it looked like nothing more than one long stretch of twenty-foot-high metal wall made four feet higher by barbed wire fencing. There weren't any lookouts anywhere around the base except for two on either side of the enormous entry gate Carl was already slowly approaching. He slowed his roll sooner than usual for two reasons. The first was the size of the rig he was driving. The second was its cargo. After coming to a full stop about ten yards outside the gates, Carl waited for instructions over the cab radio humming electrical silence into his uneasy ears.

"Delivery Alpha? You're early." It was a man's voice.

"By ten minutes." Carl groaned. "I can wait if you want."

"Please hold." After a brief pause, a woman spoke, "Clearance granted, Delivery Alpha. You have the coordinates? It's not your usual."

"I do," said Carl.

"You're a go, then."

He knew he was expected to pull into a special delivery bay to the left of the entrance. Every other delivery he'd made to the base was with a cargo van to the right of the entrance. Deliveries were always unloaded on the top level of the base. It was dizzying to see how far down it went further in. One time he almost counted the levels, but that was hard to do on account of they weren't even. It was like looking down a mining quarry or something, but with buildings and ramps and elevators all over the place. Damn military. Still, by his best guess he would say there were ten levels, each level dropping an average of thirty feet, for a grand total of three-hundred feet from top to bottom.

Once the gates were fully open, Carl made sure the weighted device under his red vinyl jacket on the seat next to him was easy enough to reach. Then he gently set the rig in motion. It was eighteen wheels of tanker trucker muscle carrying twenty tons of liquid explosive fun. As he pulled around the gate and swung to the left, he politely pulled at his cap and nodded in the direction of the guard station. Once he was fully on the road that curved toward an outlet hung above the first two down-levels, he steeled himself for what he was about to do.

He took in a deep breath as he passed a military jeep headed for the gate. Then he swung the rig to the right. Now headed well past the loading docks on the left, he noticed a line of five jeeps blocking his new route. He blared his horn. The soldiers in the jeeps shouted. A couple of them drew their guns. Mostly, they just tried to get out of the way, but one of them wasn't fast enough. Carl's rig drove straight over its backside. The jeep's occupants survived, but not without one hell of a fright.

Now with nothing but pavement between the rig and the fuel docks, Carl pulled his jacket off the device he was hiding. Grunting and groaning, he lifted the device and, lowering it down past his denim dungaree-ed belly and knees, he set it down on the gas pedal. It attached to the floor of the cabin between Carl's legs and locked into place. The vehicle gained more and more speed as it approached its target. Carl grabbed the door handle. All he needed to do now was jump out of the cab at just... the right... moment.

He yanked the handle and kicked open the door. Then, leaning over to roll free of the cab, he found his booted right foot firmly wedged between the device and the gear shift. That wasn't supposed to happen. He'd been specifically told there'd be enough room to the right of the gas pedal for him to lift his foot. But clearly he'd been lied to. Helplessly

flailing and wailing one final "Bleearrrgh!" Carl drove his truck into the fuel station. The ensuing explosion shook the entire base, and Carl Farthing was no more.

Chapter Twelve: Base Break

Dressed in ill-fitting military fatigues, Margaret set down the binoculars. Her mouth hung wide open as she tried and failed to grasp what she had just witnessed from the window of one of the buildings on the other side of the base. "He – he couldn't jump out! He got stuck!"

"Well, that's Carl for you," said Skull, as a warning alarm sounded throughout the base.

Margaret was in shock. She just stood there in the gray hallway next to the window, doing her best not to get emotional over what she'd just witnessed.

Jake made eye contact. He gently but firmly grabbed her shoulders. He whispered so only she could hear, "Margaret. Be strong. Skull will get his. I've gotta go secure Inky right now, and you've gotta play along. Mitch has your back." Then he raced down the hallway.

Skull slapped the wall. "We gotta move!"

"Margaret?" said Mitch. He wore a tan boonie that didn't match the uniform he'd been given.

She nodded.

Skull opened a metal door opposite the window. "Mitch, get those cuffs on her, now!"

She held out her hands. When the metal cuffs clicked shut around her wrists, she stopped thinking about Carl and got into role. "Okay. I'm ready."

After that, they went through the door and down several sets of stairs. The clarion call of the sirens faded, then stopped altogether. But the base was still on high alert. When they got to the first guard, Margaret kept her head down. Mitch shoved her from behind. Not hard, but just enough to convince those looking through the security cameras he meant business.

"Is that the mother?" asked the guard.

"Yep," said Skull.

The guard widened his eyes. "All clear," he spoke into his earbud. After that, the door behind him unlocked. He grabbed the handle and pulled hard, then held the door open for the three of them to pass.

The series of rooms beyond, called the "Containment Lab," according to Skull, were an antiseptic white and brightly lit. Due to the high alert still in effect, the area had been cleared of all non-essential personnel. This meant Skull's ally in the lab was the only one in charge for the next thirty minutes. So, when Skull asked to see the Devon, he got access.

The first word out of Devon's mouth when they entered his cell was a desperate, "Mom!" He ran to her but stopped when he saw the handcuffs. He turned around and glared at Skull. The young boy was angry and frightened.

Margaret leaned over her son and told him to keep quiet. "It's okay. And listen to Mitch and Skull. They're here to help."

Someone knocked on the open cell door. Another service man in league with Skull stood in the doorway. Motioning for them to follow, he led them up through a series of access tunnels to a garage. He pointed to a jeep in a nearby parking stall. Then he turned

around and stepped back into the access tunnel. "Have fun!" he shouted before disappearing down the tunnel.

"Let's go!" said Skull. He jumped behind the wheel. Mitch took the passenger seat. Margaret and Devon hopped in back. Then Skull drove them from the back of the base to a weed covered road through the woods to the west. Margaret complained the handcuffs were starting to hurt. Mitch turned to reach back and unlock them with his key. Then they broke free of the woods and crossed the creek, which put them right next to the athletic field in the back end of Yellipilly University. The jeep kept going, and before she knew it, Margaret was standing next to her son in front of Yellipilly Credit Union. Was this really happening? Unsure of everything, she looked to Mitch, who was just as inscrutable as always. Could she trust him? Did she have a choice?

"Alright," said Skull. Pulling a briefcase from a compartment in the side of the jeep, he squared his shoulders in the direction of Yellipilly Credit Union. The early morning sun highlighted the yellow stucco and reflected off the glass. "You know, Mitch, just because you arranged for Carl's diversion doesn't mean I couldn't make my own arrangements as well. Mechanical failures have a habit of happening as planned, you know? Anyway, time to get my money."

It was all Margaret could do not to scream at him for what he'd just admitted. Skull, she now realized, had murdered Carl for no reason other than he wanted to.

Chapter Thirteen: Elsewhere Plans

The snooty attendant in his early twenties stood on the other side of the plexiglass barrier that ran from the top of the counter all the way to the ceiling. He seemed displeased in a way Margaret knew was personal and not personal at the same time. She wagered there was nothing in his purview he particularly liked. It was just the feel he gave off through the hollow eyes set in the middle of his surprisingly expressionless face.

Not waiting for introductions, Skull opened the briefcase and removed several sets of documents. "Exhibit A," he said, handing over the first set.

The attendant refiled through the papers. He checked the seals and signatures. "Very good. Margaret Marigold, pleased to meet you. And?"

Skull presented the first sigil in his possession.

The attendant quietly sighed. "Excuse me," he said. Then he walked away from the service desk entirely and disappeared behind a door he closed behind him.

Moments later, a middle-aged woman fastidiously dressed in a blue business skirt and jacket with bronze accents that matched her eyeglasses came through the door holding a book in her hands. "Hi," she said. "My name is Delilah. "This is The Ledger of Monetary Sigils. You have a family sigil?"

Skull pressed the paper with the sigil against the plexiglass.

She looked carefully, flipped open the book to a certain page and compared. "Very good. The Marigold Family Sigil has been successfully submitted. Have you any more sigils?"

Skull grinned. He confidently held up a second sigil.

Delilah adjusted her glasses and pursed her lips. She turned to another page and compared. "False sigil," she said.

Margaret watched as Mitch stepped slightly to the side. He reached in his left pant pocket and pulled out an electric clicker and a folded piece of scratch paper. She saw him press the button on the clicker. "Well, Skull. What now?"

The angry owner of The Leaky Glass turned around and glared. With both hands tightly clenched into white-knuckled fists, he looked ready to explode. That's when four military personnel stepped into the credit union with rifles drawn.

Margaret and Devon ducked to the side, Mitch held his ground, and Skull raised his hands high above his head in surrender. The four uniformed men put Skull in handcuffs and pushed toward the door. Not a word was spoken until Margaret shouted, "I hate you, Skull!" Then, he was gone.

After a few moments, during which Margaret and Devon and Mitch regained their bearings, Delilah said, "So. Do you have any more sigils?"

Mitch coughed. He popped a peppermint breath mint in his mouth and said, "How about this one?"

Delilah checked. Very good. The Hiding Sigil has been successfully submitted. Have you any more sigils?"

"No," said Mitch.

"Very well. All that is now required is proof of change of residency."

Mitch opened the last set of documents Skull had previously taken from the briefcase. "Will this do?" He motioned for Delilah to slide the document drawer over to his side of the plexiglass.

When she received the pages in question, she smiled. "I see all your documents are in order. I like that. I will now initiate the transfer of all Marigold money to the financial institution indicated in the documents presented. Thank you for your patience. If you have any further needs or questions regarding this matter, please do not hesitate to call me. Just call our front desk and ask for Delilah. Good day."

Devon looked up at his mother with excitement and concern. She was quietly crying. Even though she wanted them to stop, the tears refused to listen. So, she bent down and held tightly to her son through the tears. Then, when her emotions started to subside, she looked up. "Thank you, Mitch. Care to tell me what's going on?"

Mitch spent the next twenty minutes – as he drove Margaret and Devon in the jeep to an undisclosed location – explaining to them both how things had been arranged so that they could now live comfortably and under military protection. He spoke on a number of topics, but when Margaret heard his answer to Devon's question, it was so loud she heard hardly anything else.

"How much money?" the kid asked.

"Plenty," said Mitch.

"No," said Devon. "How much?"

The cowboy coughed. "Thirty million."

Chapter Fourteen: Denim Wah!

Devon was doing homework. He had a writing assignment. Half of it was in English, the other half in French. He was supposed to answer questions using foreign loan words. Three French words used in English, three English words used in French, and two other

words from some other language Devon didn't care about any more than he cared about French or English. Especially on a Saturday afternoon with his friends at the park and him stuck home doing homework because his mom said he had to. She also said she'd ordered him a gift and that he had to be there when it arrived. Otherwise, she'd be upset. "Whatever, mom." Still, he did his best to do his homework and help around the house. Mostly because his mom seemed fidgety.

When he got extra tired of words like denouement and le sandwich, he got up from his desk and went into the kitchen. His mom was there putting away the groceries. She seemed sad. "Mom, are you sad?"

"No, honey. I..." She stopped. She closed the refrigerator door and adjusted the blouse she was wearing. It was a pale-yellow sun print of a blouse with white lace trim. Devon always said his mom dressed the best. "Actually, I am a little sad."

"But why? Does it have anything to do with what's coming?"

She tousled Devon's head of shortly trimmed chestnut hair. She sat down in one of two chairs at the kitchen table. "You mean what's being delivered?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Then, yes. Yes, it does. I'm sad because what is being delivered is very important to me and to one of the men who saved you from the base."

"You mean Mitch? Or someone else?"

She grimaced. "Someone else."

"Who?"

"His name was Carl. He was your granddad."

"But I don't have a granddad. Do I?"

"Not anymore."

"What happened to him?"

"You remember hearing all that noise before me and Jake showed up and took you out of your cell?"

"Oh, yeah! It was really loud and the whole building shook!"

"That was on account of Carl."

"What did he do?"

"He saved you is what he did."

"But how?"

"He drove a semi onto the base. He had a delivery to make. It was a shipment of explosives."

"Did he steal the explosives?"

"No. He was on assignment. It was his job."

"So why did they let him in? Did he have to fight someone to get inside?"

"No. Like I said, it was his job. They were expecting him."

"But what about the noise? The explosion?"

"Well, that's because he didn't stop. He kept driving. In fact, he sped up. He drove real fast with those explosives and blew everything up."

"Did he do a karate kick?"

She paused a moment. Then, softening a little, she said, "He did. He opened the cab door of that big old truck as it roared across the yard and kicked at the air as if to say, 'Anybody want some?' Then he held fast until the very end. With one hand on the steering wheel and the other waving out the window of the open door, he drove that semi full of

explosives into the fuel station. That's how he set off the explosion. That's how he got us out of that base."

Serious now, Devon asked, "Was he a hero?"

His mother Margaret choked a little. It was like she was about to laugh. It was like she was about to cry. "Was he a hero?" She looked out the kitchen window at the orange setting sun. "He was."

Just then, there came a knocking at the door.

Devon ran to answer.

Margaret followed.

The delivery man wore a uniform with a military cut. He set down on the cement a gray pet carrier. He saluted. Then he got back into the black jeep waiting for him on the other side of the street.

"He's here."

"Who's here?"

"Inky, Devon. Inky's here."

* * *

Devon spent the rest of the day not even thinking about going to the park to see his friends, he was so happy and excited about his new cat. His mom told him to take good care of him, because he was a special cat. She said Carl, Devon's granddad, didn't just save Devon from that military base. Carl saved Inky from there, too. Holding Inky up with both hands under his front legs and staring into his blue eyes, Devon declared, "I remember YOU! You were the one who spilled my drawing ink at that restaurant in that stupid town we moved to before I got taken away! You," he said, shaking Inky with every word he spoke, "Are. A. Very. Very. Very. Naughty. Cat." Then, hugging Inky to his chest, he whispered, "A very naughty cat who is the coolest cat ever!"

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The day continued. Margaret spent her time in her bedroom remembering Nana and thinking about what it meant to have a Spellcat in the family. Devon spent his time in his bedroom, lying on his stomach with pen and paper. He scribbled and told stories. Important stories he thought Inky needed to hear. The longest story he told was about how Skull took him away from Yellipilly Fish Market to the military base, and about how he didn't get to see or even talk to his mom for days and days and even more days – like months even – and how he had to take all these tests and look at weird pictures projected on the wall in front of him sometimes of cats and angry people's faces and bodies of water and other stuff that never made any sense, like the three words they kept showing him over and over and over: write, right, ride. "Could you write a story, Inky? I mean, if you could get the words right so you and the reader could ride it from beginning to end? I bet you could!"

Inky rolled on his back. He swatted Devon's pen and caught his right index finger between his teeth. Then, he let go.

Devon told other stories about growing up in France, north of where they were now, and about the long plane flights they sometimes had to take. Inky listened to all the stories

with as much patience as any cat could muster. Then, when it was almost time for dinner, and they could smell it, Devon reached over and pulled Inky close. He had one more story to tell.

"Listen, Inky. Here's the story my mom told me about her dad. He had on denim dungarees because he meant business, and he marched onto that military base where I was being held captive, and there was a big nasty guard, and my granddad kicked that guard to death with a special denim karate kick and shouted, "Wah!" all loud and long like they do in those fighting movies, and now me and my mom and you get to live in a nice house in a safe place because my granddad knew how every good story has to end: with the best denim-wah! ever."

Inky sat up. He looked at Devon and slowly closed his eyes. He didn't seem to mind how Devon was taking liberties with his story. When Devon ran to the kitchen for dinner, Inky took a nap.

The End



* * * For Switch, the kindest of cats. * * *