

Purple was the sound of the victim's gasps and cries. Violent and bruised behind their crushed windpipe. They thrashed desperately for air as the serpent coiled around their neck. Suffocating the victim clawed at their throat, desperately begging for air. Their sharpened nails peels away flesh but still the grip did not lessen.

Blue was the assailant's attack. Cold and cruel as a glacier, unceasingly moving towards it's end. Their cheeks contracted violently against their will, pulling their lips high into a vicious grin. Teeth exposed and eyes wide their face became a horrendous visage. Yellow was the panic that filled their mind as their victim struggled beneath them. The desperate warning that they should stop, that they *had* to stop. Red was the anger that spurred them forward. Their grip tightened.

A last violent kick was failed to dislodge the assailants grip around their neck.

The purple struggling grew pale and weak. The yellow panic in the assailant's eyes grew green and vile. A twisted, sickening glee filled them as their victim slowly grew still.

The macabre artist crafts their own tale of the victim in deceitful paints.

"Your bag Miss Gale." The officer said sliding a large mail bag across the reception desk. There was a moment of sad contemplation before the officer pushed a small pocket knife across the table as well. "And your knife."

The officer had wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and laugh lines marked his age. His eyes were kind and genuine, but his smile was an obvious deception. A hopeless attempt to lighten the mood. His voice was soft but the disappointment was clear. Dorothy was used to hearing that tone.

Dorothy reached forward slowly, hand trembling as she restrained her anger. Her face contorted from a mix of anxiety and anger. She took the pocket knife first, tucking it snugly in her cropped jean pocket. Her bag followed, slung over one shoulder. The contents rattled against one another in a hideous cacophony of noise that alerted everyone in the police station.

"Hey, hey, in again huh?" A greasy young man in handcuffs called from one of the adjacent offices. "What was it this time? You should've invited me." He said with a laugh, his head rolling from side to side. The stench of alcohol was evident even at this distance. An officer promptly closed the door, but it was too late. The damage was done.

A shadow loomed behind Dorothy, antagonistically invaded her space. Dorothy did her best to ignore the presence but Uncle Henry was a vicious fire raging over her shoulder. His once warm eyes were cold and hollow from many tough years. His bushy salt and pepper eye brows furrowed into a devastating scowl.

Dorothy's breathing was shaky and harsh as anxiety built within her. Her hand reached towards the choker on her neck, but stopped part way. Instead she gripped the collar of the blue varsity jacket she wore and pulled it close around her.

Henry's heavy calloused hand fell on Dorothy's shoulder like a guillotine. His thumb cut into her shoulder painfully causing Dorothy to flinch, her shoulder buckling under the pressure. "Thank you Harvey." He said without breaking his gaze from the young girl in his grip.

“Of course Mr. Gale. You.” The officer started but was cut off.

“Stay out of trouble.” Dorothy finished. She had memorized the routine. They had no reason to believe this time was any different from the last.

The thumb pressed harshly into a pressure point forcing her teeth to grit. She glared up at Henry who remained unmoved, a visage of frustration. The two fumed, raging silently against each other, Neither was willing to make the first move in the police station, lest their quarrel start a scene. This was still holy ground to them both.

Dorothy turned and Henry followed pushing her forward. The two walked mechanically towards the glass doors. She pushed through, stopping suddenly on the other side. The door slammed backwards, but Henry caught it before it could reach its target. He shoved the door open roughly and forced his way forward.

The short dozen meter walk through the parking lot to Henry’s rust coated truck felt like a mile in lead shoes. The vehicle looking like a dying dog in the fading evening light. Its body shot with rust and coated with dirt. Its paint was faded from age and peeled in places.

Henry’s grip lessened as he pushed Dorothy towards the passenger side. He stood next to the driver side for a moment. His hairy knuckled hand scratched at his rough beard in his moment of contemplation.

Dorothy walked towards the passenger door. She tugged on the handle which resisted in her grasp. The door remained locked. She knew better than to rush Henry at this point and waited for him to get in and unlock the door.

Uncle Henry fished through his pocket aggressively. Pulling out a set of keys which jangled in his grasp. Thrusting the key into the keyhole like a knife he twisted it. He threw the door open, which creaked in protest. He took a seat and waited for a moment. His lips curled, tongue lashed across his teeth. Dorothy could tell he was about to say something but was finding the words.

This was insane. It wasn’t her fault she thought. No, she knew it wasn’t her fault. She told the truth. Why was she getting blamed for this. She was trying to make a change. “It wasn’t

mine.” She finally blurted out for the dozenth time today.

There was a loud slam as Henry pulled the door shut. His fists slammed on the steering wheel, the sound muffled within the truck. Henry lowered the window screaming the entire time. “You expect me to believe more of your bullshit?! How many times have been through this?” His voice reverberated and filled Dorothy with rage. Their toxic feud growing in intensity.

“Do you know how much time and money I’ve wasted trying to get you help? But it’s never enough for you. It never has been. It’s just wasted effort on someone who won’t appreciate anything.” He continued to rage as Dorothy walked to his side. Venom spilled from his mouth in a torrent that he couldn’t stop.

“Fuck you! It wasn’t mine. I’m not lying to you! I’ve been trying but you won’t believe me! You never do! Just because you were jealous of my dad doesn’t mean you can take it out on me!” The words poured out of her mouth even as her head screamed for her to stop.

“You selfish little brat! I should’ve never taken you in! I could’ve left to rot in foster care. It’s only because of him that you have a roof over your head! It’s because of him that you were given chance after chance after chance! Do you think anyone else would get off with the shit you pull?!” He couldn’t stop. His anger wouldn’t let him. “You drag his memory through the mud! You’re just like your mother!” He didn’t mean that.

“It should’ve been you that died instead! Instead you cowered on your farm and wasted your half-assed life!” She shouldn’t have said it.

Silence fell between them. Henry began rolling up his window, the crank turning painfully slowly. “You can walk.” He said flatly. There was no emotion left. Just emptiness.

“Henry!” Dorothy slammed on the window as the truck’s wheels began to squeal and turn. “Henry! You fuck! Let me in!” She pounded on the side of the truck running with it as Henry’s foot pressed mechanically on the gas pedal.

Dorothy screamed in frustration as the truck pulled away from her. She lashed one last kick at the tail light. The plastic rattled from the

impact. Smoke billowed out of the exhaust pipe as the truck shrank further and further from view.

The teenager girl was left alone on the street cursing violently. "Asshole!" She screamed kicked at the pavement. Her bag rattled on her back violently. There was no way she could walk all the way home. It would take half a day of just walking. The farm was almost sixty kilometres away through open fields. More if she stuck to the roads.

Heaving several heavy breaths she slumped against a telephone pole. She brought a chipped nail to her lips and began to bite anxiously. Her thumb quickly began to bleed and shot a spark of pain through her hand. Snapping her out of her anger induced trance.

Taking a breath Dorothy swung her bag off her shoulder and began digging through it. Cans of half filled spray paint clattered against one another as she dug through the poorly organized collection. Eventually she found her prize, a small flip phone with a simple question mark shaped charm attached.

With a sigh she flipped the device open revealing a small screen and worn down number pad. The poor thing was beaten but had stuck by Dorothy in her roughest times. It wasn't a particularly sentimental thing but it was a small comfort in dark times.

The small screen flashed five o'clock. It wasn't likely but began to dial some numbers in spite of her hesitance. He always told her to call no matter what. If he didn't answer he'd call back as soon as he could.

A sharp ringing blared out of the speaker. The teeth numbing noise cut into her ear loudly and forced her to hold to phone at a distance. Two rings, a hopefully silence and another piercing ring.

"Hey, this is Julian. I can't come to the phone right now. But you know what to do." A voice spoke happily from the receiver. Dorothy's lips moved in sync with the message she'd heard numerous times now. A long beep followed the message.

"Hey... Julian. I just wanted to call and see how you were doing." He mouth moved on it's own.

"Liar" She thought before continuing.

"Anyways, it's five so you're probably at practice. I hope it's going well. I'll be here." The words continued to fall out against her will.

"Just tell him you need help." She thought.

She paused for a long moment. "Love you." She finally said pressing the call end button.

A frustrated sigh escaped her lungs before she taking a deep breath. Dorothy stared at her phone for a moment, staring at the contact list she considered calling Aunt Em. The thought quickly retracted. Em had always been kind and thoughtful. The last thing she wanted to do was put Em in the middle of her fight with Henry.

She resigned herself to dealing with this on her own. She certainly wasn't calling any of her *friends* who'd caused all this. Closing the phone with a snap she placed it into her jacket pocket.

A chill evening breeze cut between the low buildings and city streets. Dorothy walked with the wind, keeping it at her back. The frigid air was dampened by her thick jacket. Like a warm hug it provided a small sense of comfort in her otherwise dismal situation.

Cars screeched and honked at one another as everyone was rushing to get home. Everyone except Dorothy. No one seemed to notice as she walked aimlessly. Those that did would avoid her, think she was bad news. Another troubled child that should be locked up. Maybe they were right to think that.

Her twin braids waved like serpents in the wind. Blonde and pink hair twisted in unique patterns down the braids. She wore a minimal amount of cheap make-up hastily applied. Chipped nail polish coated on her splintered nails.

She wore jean shorts that she'd cut herself from a pair of skinny jeans that were far too long. A pair of mismatched thigh high socks. Her red shoes covered in sharpie drawings. She wore a blue varsity jacket with a large K over the left chest. A mail bag full of spray paint that jangled unmistakably at anyone who walked by her.

She was the textbook definition of a punk. A troubled child that mothers would warn their children about. The kind of person people see on the street and walk to the other side of the road. Her thoughts were growing darker and self-

deprecating. Part of her knew it wasn't true, but the isolation was letting anxiety run wild.

She desperately wanted a drink, or a hit of anything, to numb the chaotic emotions swirling through her head. Pulling the jacket close she shivered, breathing shakily. What she needed was to breath and go home. She knew this deep down. Anger, frustration and anxiety disagreed however and so she continued to walk away.

A sharp honk caused her to jump, startled by the sudden noise. A long greyhound bus had pulled up next to her. She shot an instinctive glare towards the driver.

The drive was a broad shouldered man in a leather jacket. A short brimmed hat obscured his face. "You look lost little lady. You need a lift somewhere?"

Dorothy's face softened, her shoulders slumping. The thoughts drained from her head as she stepped onto the bus. "Yeah. Anywhere but here."

"Well I think I can do that for ya." The driver said with a nod. His voice was soft but had a thick drawl to it. It was an oddly comforting voice.

Dorothy dug into her bag, the cans rattling embarrassingly. "How much do I owe you?" She said fishing out her wallet.

The drive raised a hairy hand. "Don't you worry about it. I can tell you're having a rough go of it. You can get it on your way back from anywhere."

She wanted to protest but the emotional exhaustion was finally starting to set in so she just nodded. "Thanks."

Walking into the bus she saw an old man slumped against the wind, snoring loudly. A large metal box set on the seat next to him. A fishing rod tucked between his thighs to hold it steady. He had a peg leg which struck her as strange for this day and age.

Another girl sat across from the fisherman. She had a bright dress on and was playing a video game on a small handheld device. She didn't even seem to acknowledge that the bus had stopped.

Dorothy moved carefully to the back of the bus not wanting to be disturbed or near anyone. Taking a seat she placed her bag down. She pulled out her phone and glanced at it for

several minutes. Waiting and hoping for it to ring. The phone remained defiantly silent and eventually she stuffed it back into her bag with a noisy clank.

The bus jerked violently forward, pulling away from the curb. Darkness was beginning to set in. Street lights illuminated the bus in streaks as the metal tub trundled towards it's unknown destination.

The rocking was somehow hypnotic and soothing. She stared out the window, watching the streetlamps fade in the distance. The bus had quickly left the city limits, revealing sprawling fields. Her thoughts calmed as she watched the grasses blow gently in the chill night air. Stars formed along the horizon.

Soon her eyes grew heavy, defiant as she was, the need for sleep soon won. The sleep was unkind however, violent and torment dreams kept Dorothy on the edge of dream and reality for hours into the night.

A sudden noise was flickering white, cutting through the blackness of near sleep. The noise was blinding forcing Dorothy to open her eyes against her will. The metal tube was empty except for her and the source of the noise. The bus driver who was calling out to her. The noise was somehow so distant and simultaneously rattling her eardrums.

"Miss. Last stop I'm afraid." The drive called out from under his hat. His tight leather flexed as he twisted back in his seat.

"Okay." Dorothy called, in an aggressive tone she didn't intend. "Where are we?"

There was an awkward pause before the driver replied, "The last stop Miss." The drive said in his pleasant drawl.

Dorothy was quite good at reading people, she had a knack for picking up on subtle cues and tones. This man however baffled her. She couldn't tell if he was being serious or if that was an attempt at a bad joke.

She gathered her bag, slinging it over her shoulder. The weight was grounding and comforting. It did little to relief the intoxicated groggy feeling of being woken from an unrestful sleep however.

Glancing out the window Dorothy saw tall buildings and flickering streetlamps. It was clear they were in a city somewhere, and a larger one. Given the size of the buildings they were probably somewhere vaguely central. It was also extremely dark, must have been just after midnight sometime. The lamps created harsh shadows and high contrast across the concrete bricks.

Staggering between the cramped seating Dorothy made her way towards the front of the bus. Her legs trembled slightly, numb from sitting awkwardly for so long.

The bus driver lifts his head, nodding at her approach. His face is that of a shaggy mutt. A long snout pokes out from behind the brim of his hat. Long fur drapes from his nose like a moustache. A long wide smile of razor sharp canine teeth greet Dorothy's approach.

Startled Dorothy stumbled back gripping the support rail in surprise. The face is far to real, it's not a mask. This is a large dog man. Driving a bus. She struggled for a moment to grasp the reality before her but **this is his real face**. There was a strange moment where she thought she was dreaming. This couldn't be real, but she somehow knew it was. **This is real and it is irrelevant to question it.**

"You have a good night miss. Try not to be alone to long. Wouldn't want something terrible to happen to ya." He said his voice sounded dark, and the drawl made the words cling like cobwebs. His eyes flickered ominously under the brim of his hat. Small points hidden behind matted fur.

Immediately pulled from her internal thoughts Dorothy snapped back, "Is that a threat?" Her sense on high alert.

Startled and taken aback the driver stammered waving his hands in protest. "No, no Miss. Absolutely not. I'd never wish harm on a lovely young lady like yourself. Just a friendly warning. Not a lot nice things been happening lately. Just want to be sure you'll be careful." He says, his large teeth glinting in the city light. He seemed genuinely distressed by the implication, and sincere in his meaning.

Dorothy frowned, watching him carefully. "Alright." She started.

"Sorry" she thought, but the word refused to leave her mouth.

"Thanks for the warning, Mr..?" She finally managed.

"Toto. Just Toto." He said with a wolfish grin. A hairy clawed hand grabbed the brim of his head which he flourished, bring it to his chest. He leaned forward in his chair, a halfhearted attempt at a bow. His hair now on full display is a tangled mess, like a cluster of fines sprouting in every direction.

"Thanks for the warning, Toto." She says silently laughing to herself as a pang of guilt and homesickness. "Since you're such a friendly guy any chance you can take me back?"

"No can do I'm afraid. Got strict schedules to keep and I need to get back to the station." He says remorsefully. "I'm sure I'll be back around soon enough and we can get you back home Miss..?" He says smoothly, his sentence hanging in waiting.

"Dorothy."

"Well Miss Dorothy, I hope we meet again very soon." He says with another bow. He flourishes his hand, placing his hat back upon his messy hair.

With a halfhearted wave Dorothy turns, descending the stairs. The metal creaks with each step as she exits the bus.

"Stay safe Miss Dorothy and..."

"Keep out of trouble." She replies instinctively, the words simply fall out of her mouth. Turning back to the bus she sees a wide sharp smile cutting through Toto's dark fur. His dark fur and jacket make him appear like a grinning silhouette. A bizarre cryptid of a man.

The bus doors creak closed, smoke billows from the exhaust pipe. The wheels squeal as they begin to turn, forcing the tin can of a vehicle forward. It quickly trundles down the street, shaking and rattling the entire way.

It's only when the bus is out of view that Dorothy curses herself "Shit." The dawning realization hits her like a bag of bricks. "He never did tell me where we are."

Tall buildings rose up around Dorothy like prison walls. Cold brick and concrete broken up by claustrophobic alleyways and narrow streets. It was a stark contrast to the golden fields and bright

skies of Kansas. Looking up between the web of buildings Dorothy could see the sky. An empty void, where the stars refused to shine.

Pulling out her cellphone, Dorothy flicked the screen open with a snap. The screen lit up, the time flickered judgmentally, ten minutes after midnight. There were no missed calls or text messages. An exclamation mark blared in the corner of the screen, alerting Dorothy that no signal could be reached.

“No signal?” She muttered, baffled as she looked at the buildings around her. “In the middle of a city? Maybe the buildings are messing with the signal. There’s no way I should be out of reception range.” She thought, trying to find comfort through reason.

The streets were devoid of people, no cars drove down the narrow streets. No voices cut through the dull whistle of the wind. It was late but to see no people or even signs of life was strange and unnerving.

Hastily Dorothy stuffed her phone into her pocket before hurriedly walking down the street. She reasoned that being higher and away from the buildings might allow a clear signal. Finding an opening building with roof access would provide that. It would also get her off the street until morning.

The task seemed simple, but proved far more difficult in practice. She spent near thirty minutes trying any door she could find, but they were all locked tight. She searched alleyways for fire escapes but all were out of reach. She knocked on windows and doors but no one answered.

As the night ticked on and Dorothy continued to wander she eventually noticed a shift in the landscape. Seemingly random yellow bricks were scattered among the monotonous grey sidewalk. They steadily grew more dense the further she walked. The pattern spreading and growing deliberately leading to some unknown location.

With little else to go on, this appeared as a beacon to the lost young woman. It was along this particularly peculiar path that she spotted a small news stand. The box had a heavy metal grate locking the inventory inside. However the dusty streetlamps provided enough light that you could

read the various newspaper headlines that hung just out of reach.

Peering inside Dorothy read the headlines, searching for any clue as to where she was. A headline or newspaper company name could provide some insight she thought.

The headline was printed in bold sans-serif letters and read ‘THE EMERALD CITY CHRONICLES’ The front page article was titled ‘RIPPER STRIKES AGAIN! CLAIMING 2ND VICTIM! HAS THE CHOPPER RETURNED?’

She pulled on the grate gingerly, testing if it would give, but it held fast. The article was too fine to read at this distance with the poor lighting. With a halfhearted sigh she pulled herself away from the quaint newsstand.

“Emerald City?” Dorothy muttered quietly to herself. “I don’t think I’m in Kansas anymore.” Instinctively she rose a thumb to her lips, biting at the already savaged nail. Toto’s warning blared in her mind like a siren.

A wet drop slapped against her nose, causing her to jump embarrassingly. It was this that made her painfully aware of how tense she was. A second cold drop confirmed the encroaching rain. “Just my luck.” She thought bitterly, as she looked for some kind of shelter.

She was quickly relieved when she spotted an open faced parking garage less than a block away. The building was on the across the street from where she stood. It was tucked somewhat deceptively between two much larger buildings which likely made use of the space.

Pulling the puffy varsity jacket round her she hurried toward the structure. Rain beat against the leather, quickly building in rhythm. Dorothy crossed the threshold of the parking garage just in time as the gentle spitting rain evolved into a torrent.

The cold concrete pillars that held aloft the five storeys of parking space. Had suddenly become a sanctuary in the storm. An ominous reprieve, like the calm before a storm. Unfortunately the storm had already come, leaving Dorothy completely stranded.

Several antique cars were parked at the various levels of the garage. They looked to be from the nineteen thirties or forties by Dorothy’s estimate. They had a sleek but boxy quality to

their designs, a strange juxtaposition that was iconic of the time.

Dorothy spotted an old elevator nestled in the crook of an L shaped staircase. The elevator was closed with an old metal gate fashioned out of geometric patterns. The art deco design was contrasted by a thick chain and lock that bound the gate shut.

The staircase was similarly had a chain pulled across it. A 'no entry' sign dangled from the metal links but did little to stop her intrusion. Pull the chain up she was easily able to duck underneath and begin her ascent. Each floor had a similar sign and chain. The ascent was easy, the chains would only prove a nuisance if someone were in a hurry to leave.

The rain was pouring down in heavy sheets now. Water roared as it splattered against concrete, echoing violently throughout the garage.

Dorothy leaned against the barricade, looking out at the city. The city was a dense maze of buildings and bright lights. Pale yellows and emerald greens painted the grey buildings in sickening colours. The entire city appeared ill, as if some disease was ravaging it. Sucking away the life like a festering wound. That was what Dorothy felt as she looked out through the rain.

Pulling out her phone again she found the same disappointing exclamation mark. Still no signal. She decided then that until the rain stopped she would wait things out here.

She began digging through her bag, pulling out a small lighter. Her brow furrowed as she began pulling out spray paint cans, dumping them onto the concrete floor. Her sketchbook was the next to go, followed by her wallet. She flipped the bag inside out, but only a few pencils joined the pile.

Slamming the bag on the ground in frustration Dorothy cursed under her breath. "Of course they took my smokes. Why would they put those back?" She said angrily stuffing her belongings back into the bag.

Giving the heavy bag a swing, she slung it over her shoulder. A low rattle rang out, but not from the letter bag. It was the distinct sound of a chain rattling against itself.

A tense moment passed as Dorothy watched the stairs carefully. She wasn't sure if she

wanted to run into another person at this point or not. Time seem to stretch unnaturally in the moment, but no one came up or down the stairs.

A sharp whistle of wind caught Dorothy's ear, it sounded so close, impossibly close. Before she could even turn to see what it was, a sickening splat cut through the sound of the rain. A vial crunching and snapping sound as something fell just behind her. Crunching into the pavement.

With some apprehension, Dorothy leaned over the barrier. Looking down she saw a horrific sight. A woman's body was mangled on the street. The body at impossible angles, rain water and blood pooling together.

Her legs moved on their own, rushing to the stairs on adrenaline alone. Her bag rattled and bounced with each step. Stumbling over the chain barriers she nearly tripped several times. Reaching the last chain she took a leap, but the tip of her shoe caught the chain. She stumbled forward slamming into one of the supporting pillars. A crunch and clatter echoes across the parking garage.

A bloody scratch split across her forehead. Dorothy barely registered the pain as she pulled away from the pillar. Her heart pounded in her ears as she looked beyond the pillar at the grisly scene.

A woman's body mangled and broken on the pavement. Her hair was long and tangled. Rainwater was already beginning to soak into her skin. Blood seeped from a wound head wound likely caused by the impact. She was wearing a sequined black dress and silver high heeled shoes lined with clear gemstones.

Dorothy approached hopelessly. "Hey." She called out, knowing she would receive no response. "Hey." Still only silence returned her call. Stepping out into the rain she saw something strange. At first glance she'd assumed the woman had jumped but on close inspection the woman had a clear wound on her chest. What appeared to be a stab wound, it was round and thin. Which would've almost certainly caused her death, and based on the blood this occurred long before the fall.

A hand suddenly grabbed Dorothy's shoulder. "Get away from there!" A shout rang out over the din of the storm.

Dorothy spun around as the hand attempted to pull her back. She looked up at the face with a mix of surprise and anger. Her brow tensed and teeth bared like an angry dog. "Get the fuck off of me." She shouted slapping the burlap hand away.

A man stood before Dorothy, tall and thin with long arms. His face was burlap that looked like it had been pulled across a skull. Sunken sockets in place of eyes gave him a haunting look. A stitched mouth split wide across his jaw. Straw hair poked out from under a wide brimmed hat. The bizarre scarecrow of a man wore a dry, tattered coat made of patchwork cloth. Thick stitching framed the various fabrics in an intricate pattern.

The man took a step back, "You can't tamper with a crime scene." He said insistently, there was a strange sense of urgency in his voice that Dorothy noted.

"Crime scene?" Dorothy asked, suddenly on alert. Something about this felt wrong. The wound is barely visible, how would he have known about it? Even if he'd only seen the body fall it would be a safer assumption that she'd jumped. Shouldn't he be worried.

He seemed taken aback by the accusation. "Am I wrong?" His voice was raspy but had a deceptive charm. He stepped back again. "She's already dead. There's nothing to be done for her now." He explained looking towards the street. "We should call the police. There's a phone booth just around the corner."

Dorothy took a step forward, confidently, her hand slipping into her pocket. The smooth handle of the pocket knife was a comfort. "How did you know she was dead?"

He paused for a moment as if he'd heard something. "I was waiting out the storm here when I heard the impact. I went to check on her but hid when I heard you coming down the stairs. I assumed you were the murderer." He explained hastily. "But you went to check if she was okay and seemed distressed so it's safe to assume you're not the murderer. But that means the murder is still up those stairs."

He seemed genuinely tense and the explanation was reasonable Dorothy thought. She gave him a skeptical look before advancing a few

more steps. Her fingers still dancing carefully along the handle of the knife. It provided a small comfort in this situation. "Alright." She said after a moment.

The man sighed in relief. "Good, I'm Scarecrow. Did you know her?" He asked, his brow curled up as if he was afraid to ask.

"No, I don't recognize her." Dorothy admitted, glancing back for just a moment. "I just got into town." She paused for a moment, debating with herself if she should continue. Eventually she continued "My name's Dorothy"

He seemed relieved "That's good. Her name's East. She's a real nasty piece of work. I didn't do it or anything." He said waving his hands defensively as he realized the negative light that shone on him in the current circumstance. "She's just a bit a tough character... or was."

Scarecrow was suddenly cut off by the sound of an engine squealing overhead. Tires burned on concrete far above in one of the upper levels. A slam echoed as something large impacted, rattling something heavy. A moment of sudden silence, followed by an enormous impact.

Dorothy stumbled forward covering her ears from the deafening slam that had occurred just a few meters behind her. Scarecrow's long burlap hands reached forward pulling Dorothy away from the scene. The two looked back towards the body in horror to find a large black car had somehow fallen directly on the body. The corpse was almost entirely obscured by bent metal and broken machinery. Only the legs stuck out from beneath the morbid wreck.

Scarecrow looked down at Dorothy releasing her from his gentle grip. Dorothy stepped away, brushing her arms instinctively. Her heart raced from the sudden scare, but she felt some comfort and relief knowing that whoever was responsible was up there and not right in front of her.

"Are there any other ways down from there?" Dorothy asked quietly, stepping away from the staircase.

"I don't know, but I'm sure glad the car didn't hit us. What do you think happened?" Scarecrow answered loudly, much to Dorothy's confusion.

Dorothy shot him a baffled look. Now whoever was up there would certainly know someone was here. "What are you doing?" She hissed under her breath.

"Oh boy we should get out of here." Scarecrow yelled again, before whispering "If they know there are people down here they'll probably try to avoid us. Say something loudly, if they know at least two people are here they probably won't come down."

"You're right, good thing that car didn't hit me. We should go get help." Dorothy said loudly in an unconvincing manner. She understood the reasoning but didn't agree with the method. "How far to the payphone?"

Scarecrow hesitated "It's about three buildings down, towards The Yellow Brick Road." He said, his sunken eyes not breaking from the stairs. A tense moment of anticipation passed but no one descended the stairs or the ramp.

Dorothy took a step back, "Well, what are you waiting for. Let's go." She whispered insistently.

Scarecrow's burlap cheeks pulled into an anxious frown. "Go on, I'll make sure they don't follow you." He carefully pulled open his coat, reaching an object tucked within an inner pocket. Just before his cloth fingers wrapped around the device a distant siren echoed through the streets.

Shocked crossed both Dorothy and Scarecrow's faces. Neither had contacted the police, so who had? Had someone heard the crash or was there another person watching?

"Fuck! We gotta go." Scarecrow said abruptly.

Dorothy nodded and turned to rush back the way she'd come, but Scarecrow ran towards the wreck. "Where are you going?" She said following him, he probably knew the streets better than she did.

Scarecrow reached down towards one of the bent legs. Fingers wrapped around the broken ankle and pulled the diamond studded shoe free. "Sorry doll, I can't afford to leave something like this here." He said sharply.

The sirens grew louder rapidly. The fear of being caught at a crime scene pushed him forward. He got up and ran. His long legs

bounding forward in massive strides down the alley way.

Dorothy rushed after him. "What happened to not tampering with a crime scene?" She yelled after the thief as she ran, trying to keep up.

"Judge all you want, but if you don't want to spend the night a cell you'd better keep up. I've got a friend we can hide out with." He called back a bitter frustration in his voice. His jacket soaking through with rain in moments.

Their voices muffled by the rain that beat against their backs as they ran. A soft chime rings out, barely audible as it joins the tapestry of noise.

Maybe she should have stayed. She hadn't done anything wrong. She could just explain the situation and it would all be fine. A car fell from the sky it was too ridiculous for her to have done. The would have to believe her, but she was a labelled liar. No one believed her anymore. Not her family, or friends. No stranger or cop would believe she wasn't involved. She couldn't possibly stay. They'd arrest her for sure. She didn't even know where she was. How could she possibly do the right thing? Why do the right thing if it would inevitably turn out wrong?

So she ran, and ran, and ran, chasing after this bizarre stranger she'd just met. Her feet ached with each painful step. Using every ounce of energy she had to just get away. Just a little further away.

Two smooth cars, painted in black and whit blocked the northern and southern exits. They sported heavy metal grills and bumpers that gave them a stout appearance. Each had a small can shaped light affixed to their roof. The light inside spun in a quick rhythm casting crimson streaks of light across the gruesome crime scene.

Yellow and black tape was being stretched across the concrete pillars of the parking garage. Another warning to be ignored. The Emerald City Police Department had worked quickly to contain the scene and prevent any further tampering.

A broad shouldered man carefully lays out folded tags with bold number emblazoned on them. He wields a strong flashlight in his free hand, casting a hazy light over the scene. While his noisy yellow poncho crinkles in the rain. He

has a bald head, which is buried under the poncho's plastic hood. Rainwater soaks into his exposed green beard which flops wetly with each step. Most striking of all is the green tint of his skin. He has a round head with deep lines and exaggerated features.

As the green man laid out markers, a tall man with a pumpkin for a head made meticulous measurements of the scene. He wore a dark poncho, which bulged sharply beneath his sternum, poorly concealing a large object. His right leg trembles as he walks, prompting him to lean upon a wooden cane with a curved metal head. Seeking shelter beneath the parking garage, he awkwardly tucks the cane beneath an arm. Fishing out a spiral bound notebook he writes the latest measurements before returning to the rainy alleyway.

A pale skinned older woman in a suit jacket and long skirt scrutinizes the scene. Her eyes are thin and calculating, lined with subtle wrinkles. She also wears a yellow poncho which obscures her hourglass form. The hood is pulled back revealing her greying blonde hair, which swoops up into a dramatic pair of pompadours. Her crimson lips press around a cigarette as she inhales.

She has a small creature which sits next to her like a dog. It's torso is like a wooden log, with spindly legs that jut out from it unnaturally. It has a wooden featureless head with two small sticks for ears. A long stick extends from it's back end and wags stiffly back and forth as he looks up at the woman expectantly.

The squealing sound of tires coming to an abrupt halt alerts the group at the scene. A sleek car with a glossy black finish pulled up next to the northern alley entrance. The driver door swung open wide revealing the dark interior. A sharp black umbrella plunged from the darkness like a sword, before erupting open.

A sharply dressed woman stepped out of the car, swinging the umbrella above her head. She marked her arrival with the loud slam of her door. She had long dark hair that was spun into a bun and held in place by a silver hair clip. The ornament stuck out like a three pronged crown giving her a regal appearance. Her jacket was

clean and fitted giving her a broad shouldered appearance.

She had the appearance of a general come to command an army. Her sharp eyes watched looked over the scene with a bitter coolness, but the bags beneath betrayed her exhaustion. Assessing the scene was surgical and she quickly joined the blonde woman under the parking garage.

The blonde woman gives a knowing smile, she could tell what was coming. "Good morning." she said with biting sarcasm, pulling the cigarette away from her mouth.

"Is it Jack?" The police chief said, shaking her umbrella clean of water.

The rainwater splashed across the wooden dog, who gave a grumpy growl in response. He stood up, stretched his front legs forward before rising. His whole body rotated and shook violently, flinging the water from his back.

"You're going to have to be more specific Chief." The blonde replied dryly tossing the butt of her cigarette to the ground. She stepped on it with the heel of her leather boot, leaving a pile of ash and smoke.

The dark skinned woman gave a cold look, mouth half open. Her tongue flicked across her teeth in agitation. "The Ripper, Glinda. It's too early for this shit. You can explain him next." She said with an angry gesture towards the two men working at the scene.

"I can't say for certain yet. Call me crazy but things just feel off. It's flashy like we'd expect but they didn't leave a message. Maybe they ran off before they could finish but it feels wrong." Glinda explained pulling out another cigarette, which she placed in her mouth gingerly. A snap of a lighter ignites the tip in seconds, a finely honed art.

She takes a long drag, breathing a sigh. "The real issue is the victim. Ozma, we have reason to suspect it's East."

"East?" Ozma reached forward, plucking the cigarette from Glinda's slender fingers. She took a long inhale before sighing loudly, smoke billowing from her mouth. "You sure?"

"Fuck no. You saw the car, maniac drove it off the top of the damned building. There's barely anything left but the legs. I don't think even Dr.

Pipt could make an accurate identification. However, and it's not my area of expertise but from her leg length she seems to be the right height. Skin tone and most importantly she was wearing one of East's shoes." Glinda explained while lighting another cigarette.

"So we've got fuck all is what you're telling me." Ozma said clenching her teeth. Her frustration wasn't towards Glinda but the situation. She felt stuck and at a dead end.

"Not nothing. We're short on manpower and I don't want to go tampering with the scene until Jack gets his photos. But we have the car, the license plate, a bit of a body and Bristle is talking with the locals to see if anyone heard or saw anything." Glinda said with some reassurance.

"And why is Pumpkinhead here?" The police chief said, her mouth full of venom. "He's not on the force, he shouldn't be at a crime scene. He could tamper with the evidence or destroy scene."

Glinda's brow furrowed in a pained expression. She reached out a hand but it slumped back to her side as if she thought better of it. "We're short on staff, most are refusing to involve themselves in this case or have quit. They're scared, Ozma. I need good people on this case." She explained, regretting her choice of words. "I need people. Qualified people. Jack's a fully licensed private detective, a former inspector with years of experience and a friend. He's more than capable of getting accurate measurements and photos."

Ozma's face contorted into a series of unpleasant expressions. Frustration and angry twisted to bitter acceptance at the logic of Glinda's argument. "Fine. He can get the photos. I'm sure he can't fuck that up." She conceded. "As soon as he's done I want every inch of this place swept, and have the remains sent to Dr. Pipt. I want to know exactly who was under that car."

The wooden dog trotted out from behind Glinda's leg and pressed its head against Ozma's calf. Its thin front leg pawed at her insistently, clumsily stepping on her toes several times.

The chief's brow furrows, mouth half open she licked her teeth in frustration. Shaking her head she leaned down, raising a hand. She placed her hand gently on the wooden dog's head,

petting him three times. "You stupid mutt." She said quietly, her brow relaxing slightly.

Jack watched the scene from the corner of his eye. Ozma's glare was cool like the rain that struck his pumpkin cheeks. He carefully pulled a large box from beneath his raincoat. A heavy leather strap held it in place along the back of his thin neck. The clicking of dials echoed over the rain, followed by the snap the box opening. A long accordion lens stuttered out, revealing the large camera. Jack heaved the device up, using the small view finder began to take pictures of the scene.

Blinding flashes of light burst from a bulky round flash on the camera's side. The entire scene took on a more defined appearance in the light. The shadows of the rain storm were banished momentarily revealing the severity of the wreck. Over a thousand kilograms of mangled metal and plastic had completely destroyed the victim's upper body. If they were alive on impact death would've been instantaneous. Shattered glass littered the alley, glinting in the glow of the camera flash.

"I-I'm sorry you can't go in there." A desperate voice cried out.

"You're just trying to cover this up. An officer is involved in this case aren't they? Protecting one of your own?" A strange voice shouted back. It sounded as if they were speaking through an old radio.

"N-no." A soft voice protested but was quickly drowned out.

"What's your name boy? What are you hiding? Hm?" The mechanical voice insisted. "Is this the work of the Ripper? How many victims this time? Is it true that Nick the Chopper escaped prison?"

"Eh, no? We don't know. One?" The soft slightly feminine voice replied incoherently.

The sound of the voices was quickly growing closer. Jack glanced towards Ozma who was already fuming but to his surprise the green bearded man stepped forward. He moved towards the street and the voices with a steady determination.

As he reached the street two individuals rounded the corner and entered the alley. The first was a thin young man wearing a police uniform

and yellow rain poncho. His face was covered in a thin layer of velvet white fur. A pair of buck teeth poked out from the end of a short muzzle with a pink button nose. He had a pair of long rabbit ears that were pressed tightly against the back of his head nervously.

The other man loomed over the rabbit with an imposing sense of self importance. He wore a tailored suit with a black raincoat over top. Leather gloves covered his hands which wielded a notepad and a pen which he stabbed forward like a sword. He seemed to lack a head entirely, instead there was simply a phonograph speaker from which chimed his irritating voice.

The strange phonograph man pressed his pen into the officers chest forcing him back. "Ehnoe is a strange name, and what of Nick the Chopper?" He insisted. "Well out with it boy I haven't got all day. There's papers to sell!"

The bald man stepped up behind the rabbit like a guardian angel. He crossed his arms, tapping his foot. "Police only." Gently moving the younger officer to the side. He placed a hand forcefully on the reporter's chest and pushed him back.

"You can't do this to me. I have a right to know. The people have a right to know who controls their city!" The phonograph insisted, his speaker head waved about in an unnaturally animated way.

"Statements can be taken after our initial investigation." The bearded man explained, giving the reporter a rough shove.

The phonograph staggered backwards, his head swivelling to each of the officers as well as Jack. He seemed frustrated, "This is the last you'll be hearing of me! The people will know what you've been doing Ozma! I swear it!" He said threateningly thrusting his pen in Ozma's direction. "This isn't the last you've heard of Phonograph!" He said looking at the bearded officer who simply crossed his arms and gestured with his head for the man to leave.

With a last look at the scene the reporter began to walk away. He pulled his hood up which stretched awkwardly over his bizarrely shaped head. The officers watched him leave for a moment.

"T-thanks Omby. I'm sorry. I tried to keep him away but he just showed up out of no where." The younger officer said sheepishly, looking at his feet.

The bald man named Omby turned to the small rabbit officer with pitying look. "Don't worry about it. They're parasites. Making money off people's pain." He said reassuringly. "You don't need to give them any attention."

"Bristle!" Ozma barked, sending the wooden dog at her feet back to cowering behind Glinda.

Similarly the rabbit jumped, his spine straightening instinctively. He rose a hand to his brow in salute. "Y-yes ma'am!" He said in a shaky but clear voice.

Ozma sighed in a mix of disappointment, pity and frustration. "Go work with Jack. Help him sweep the area and make he doesn't fuck it up."

"Callous as ever." Jack thought nostalgically.

Bristle on the other hand gave a shaky salute and only barely managed to stammer a, "Y-yes Ma'am." He looked about anxiously. "Miss Ozma, Ma'am. I spoke to a man who was working the night shift across the street. He claims to have seen a, uh a young woman enter the parkade shortly before hearing the crash. Apparently she'd been rattling on doors earlier trying to get inside."

"Did he have a description of this woman." Ozma asked firmly.

"O-only that she had twin braids and he described her clothing as odd a-and inappropriate." Bristle stated back, not lowering his hand from his forehead.

Ozma almost hesitated to ask. "Did you get this person's information?"

"Y-yes Ma'am." Bristle said with a hopeful spring in his voice. He hastily dug into a pocket revealing a pink notepad which he flipped open.

Ozma stepped forward, taking the notepad, she examined it carefully. "Good work." She said after a far too long pause.

"Omby, I want you to finish securing the area. See if you can find anyone else who heard this girl and can confirm the story." Ozma said

firmly, handing the notepad to Omby who quickly tucked it into a breast pocket. "And find out who the fuck called the press at three o'clock in the morning." Ozma continued bitterly.

Omby gave a firm salute and nodded. "Yes Ma'am." He glanced towards Jack giving a subtle nod of acknowledgement. He reached to his belt pulling a large flashlight from it. Flipping it around playfully he thrust it towards Bristle. "You'll need this rookie."

"T-thank you" Bristle replied taking the flashlight before hurrying to Jack's side. Flicking on the flashlight. "H-hello. You must be Jack. I-I'm Bristle."

Jack turned his attention to Bristle and smiled. "Jack Pumpkinhead." He said releasing his camera, allowing it to hang from his neck. He extended a thin hand. Bristle quickly extended a hand as well, shaking Jack's loosely. "You're new to the force?"

"Y-yes, just finished training before the first... incident." Bristle's eyes bounced back and forth, his ears folding back.

"You're in good hands. Ozma's not as hard as she seems. Listen to her and you'll be fine." Jack said reassuringly. "Can you hold the flashlight there." He said quickly shifting the subject.

Bristle and Jack worked quickly. To Jack's surprise Bristle was quite competent when given a clear task, and was very attentive of others. Over the next couple of hours they compiled an extremely detailed account of the scene with a large stock of photos for reference.

"W-what do you make of this Mr. Pumpkinhead?" Bristle asked as Jack took his final photo.

Jack relaxed, pressing the lens of his camera back into its case. He thought for a moment, unsure of how much of his thought he should divulge to the rookie. "It's certainly an odd and elaborate way to kill someone." He said starting with the obvious. "The murder set up ramps on the rooftop allowing the car to drive over the barrier and fall over five stories onto the victim. It would be difficult to predict the impact accurately assuming this was the method of murder. So I suspect the victim was already dead at the time of impact, or somehow incapacitated.

Drugs could have been used to render the victim unconscious but why not use a simpler method. A gun, bat, drowning, dozens of other options are available." Jack said only half answer Bristle question and half trying to process his own reasoning.

Bristle listened with consideration. "It does seem extremely flashy. Perhaps they're leaving a message?"

That was a possibility, but it didn't line up with the Ripper's modus operandi. The previous two cases have involved explicit written message, often displayed in a similarly flashy manner. They had discovered an unused can of red paint near the scene. Perhaps they ran out of time, or were interrupted by something unexpected. It's possible the mystery woman saw something. Jack pondered for a few moments in silence.

"It is possible, perhaps the car has some meaning to either the culprit, victim or even a third party." Jack agreed though he remained unconvinced.

The sound of wood tapping on concrete alerted the duo of an approaching pair. Glinda joined them, followed closely by the small dog who quickly bounded over to Jack's side. He barked happily and trotted around him eagerly.

Jack bent over, leaning on his cane for support and pet the dog's back. Giving a few gentle slaps on its side. "He wasn't too much trouble was he?" Jack said looking up at Glinda who had already begun to fish another cigarette from her breast pocket.

"Not at all." She responded with a smile, flicking her lighter which ignited quickly. Lighting the cigarette she quickly held it to her side. Even in this moment of calm she had a compulsion to busy her hands. "What do you two have for me?"

Jack glanced towards Bristle, giving the rookie an opportunity to shine. The young rabbit was unfortunately far too distressed by the wooden dog's presence to notice. "Here are the measurements, Bristle was going to transcribe some copies. I'll head home and get these photos developed. It'll take a few days to get everything but I can get the wide shots to you by noon."

"Do that, I'm having the remains sent to Dr. Pipt and any photos regarding the wreck could

be useful to him, so start with those.” Glinda specified. “Bristle can you have copies of these notes done in an hour?”

“A-ah, Y-yes ma’am!” Bristle said shooting his attention towards Glinda.

Jack gave a nod and handed his notebook to Bristle, who took it shakily before stepping away from the wooden mutt. “No need to worry about Sawhorse. He’d hardly hurt a fly that was biting him.” Jack said heartily.

“I-I have no doubt. I’ve always been a little nervous around dogs.” Bristle admitted looking at the ground sheepishly.

Glinda cut in quickly, “Bristle get to the station and get those notes copied. You can leave Jack’s notebook with Jellia when she gets in.”

The rookie stood straight, giving a shaky salute. “Y-yes ma’am!” He quickly rushed off, heading toward the southern entrance of the alleyway. Glinda and Jack watched him leave, and only continued their conversation once he was well out of earshot.

“You can leave the photos with Jellia when they’re ready, and you get your notebook there too.” Glinda stated but continued before Jack could respond. “Ozma doesn’t want you here. I stuck my neck out for you because honestly I need the help.”

“I take it this is off the books.” Jack said, his right leg tensed with pain. He winced and leaned on his cane for support.

“Let’s go take a seat.” Glinda offered, gesturing with her head towards the police cruiser at the north end of the alleyway.

Glinda lead the way to the car while Jack staggered behind. Sawhorse trotted between them excitedly. Deputy Glinda opened the back door for the wooden dog, who immediately jumped into the back seat. Sawhorse whined as the door was shut. He quickly began pawing at metal bars which prevented him from jumping into the front seat.

Glinda took the drivers side and Jack the front passenger side. Jack’s face visibly relaxed as he sat down. He’d been busy for a few hours now, the task kept his mind away from the growing discomfort in his leg. Now the task was done and he had little to keep his mind from the cramping muscles in his thigh and knee.

The interior reeked of smoke, which cause Jack’s barely perceptible nose to wrinkle. He twisted the window crank which squeaked loudly as the glass descended. Glinda did the same allowing a cool breeze to sweep through the dark interior.

“Leg still bad?” Glinda said, blowing smoke out of her window.

Pumpkinhead rubbed his knee gingerly. “Only when it rains, or when it’s sunny, or I work to hard.” He said with a biting sarcasm. “But enough about me. If you’re going behind Ozma I take it things are serious.”

“Maybe I’m being paranoid but this feels like a set up. If that was East there’s going to be a war and I think a lot of eyes are going to be on the ECPD. Specifically Ozma.” Glinda admitted taking a long drag from her cigarette. “I’m asking a lot of you, I know, but you tell me your rate and I’ll pay you double to find out who’s behind this.”

“You suspect someone on the inside?” Jack asked, his brow curling in surprise.

“I don’t know what I suspect.” Glinda said pressing the cigarette to her lips again. She inhaled deep, before letting a trail of smoke billow out the corner of her ruby lips. “I’m just saying a lot of the ECPD have a reason to want the victims out of the way, and plenty of people wouldn’t mind Ozma taking the fall for it.” Glinda admitted bitterly.

She looked to Jack’s leg for a moment before continuing. “She hasn’t exactly been good at making friends since...” She trailed off, the situation was already understood between them and didn’t need to be restated. “She’s good at her job, I don’t think she’d do it. I’m sure she doesn’t mourn any of them but she’d do things by the book. At least that’s what I think.”

“Why come to me then? I have just as much motivation to frame Ozma as anyone.” Jack confessed curiously.

“Well Jackie.” Glinda said leaning across the stick shift to place an arm around Jack’s neck. “I know, that you know, that if that was true and you were framing Ozma. I’d kill you myself.” There was a playfulness in her tone but there was nothing playful about the statement. She was entirely serious and they both knew it. “Besides I know full well it’s not in your nature.” Glinda

said relaxing her grip. Her tone and demeanor shifted but the dark warning still hung in the air like her smokey breath.

Jack swallowed. "If you want me to find the Ripper I'll need access to the previous case files."

"I'll have them passed to you when you drop off those photos." Glinda said releasing her grip entirely. She returned to leaning out the window. "I'm not saying it's a member of the ECPD, but I want a neutral party in this just in case."

"Neutral is a rather generous term for my position don't you think?" Jack confessed.

"I've always preferred to have as many people in my corner, even if they aren't publicly." She flicked the dying cigarette from the car.

"What do you make of the scene, and that thing?"

"The scene is pretty dry as far as evidence goes. Metal ramps were brought to the roof and used to jump the barrier. They're heavy as hell and based on the minimal scraping on the concrete I'd suspect at least two people were needed. Which rules out our mystery girl." Jack mused, looking off through the rain as he continued. "I suspect the victim was already deceased at the time of impact due to the lack of restraints."

"After dumping the body the car was put into drive and a brick was used to keep the gas pedal down. The brick in question is slightly visible when you look through what's left of the driver's window." Jack explained carefully. "After this the culprits left, possibly encountering our mystery girl."

"Someone was running, or there was a fight. Someone dropped that device. Based on the scratches and the gravel embedded in it I'd say it fell from their pocket." He'd considered the strange device for some time now. "When opened it has a screen and the number pad, almost like a phone. The device doesn't seem to connect to any phone cables though so I don't know how such a thing could function."

"I think we may be dealing with an outsider, it could be worth it to talk with the Captain." The detective explained.

Glinda frowned at the explanation, she hadn't wanted to consider it a possibility.

However she had to confess that his reasoning made sense. "Then I think we need to find this girl. She was closest to the scene and could have seen the culprits if they didn't get to her first."

"That's where I would start."

Glinda pulled out a set of keys and started the car. "Let me get you home." She leaned out the window. "OMBY!" She shouted. "Can you keep the scene cleared for 20 minutes?"

The green bearded man leaned over the barrier on the second floor. "Of course." He shouted back with a wave.

Glinda gave a gentle wave of her hand before pulling herself back into the car. A quick twist of the stick shift and the car jerked forward. The sleek police cruiser rocked as it clipped the edge of the sidewalk. The deputy twisted the steering wheel sharply as she pulled into the empty street.

Grey light of the dawn sun cast dull shadows across the Emerald City. The streetlamps were steadily becoming unlit as morning approached rapidly. Rain still drizzled from dense clouds that still hung in the air. The overcast morning marked a depressing end to a depressing night.

A few minutes passed silently between the two before they reach their destination. The car screeched to a rocky stop in front of a squat office building. The wide three storey building was just dull and forgettable as most of the other buildings in the city.

The two continued to sit in silence for a few moments before Jack finally opened his door. He stepped out, leaning on his cane carefully. He shut the front door firmly before opening the back. The small wooden dog immediately leapt out, landing in a puddle which splashed dirty water everywhere.

"Five hundred." Jack said breaking the silence as he leaned in.

"Five hundred?" Glinda questioned confused.

"My fee. Five hundred, and don't forget to double that per our agreement." He said smugly.

"A thousand?! That's insane!" Glinda twisted awkwardly in her seat so she could look Jack in the eye.

“My danger fee is steep. Have a good night Glinda.” The detective said stepping back he slammed the door shut with a sense of finality.

Jack walked up the small staircase to the front door of the office building. He fumbled around his pocket finding a small key which he used to unlock the set of glass double doors. Sawhorse trotted behind him obediently.

A long hallway extended down the building with a staircase on the right. Several offices lined the left wall and the right beyond the staircase. Jack carefully walked up the stairs, wincing with each step. Sawhorse bounded passed him two steps at a time before sitting at the top of the stairs. He watched Jack struggle, cocking his head to the side in concern.

“I never did get used to this.” Jack confessed to his companion.

He eventually reached the top of the stairs, a similar hallway extended out. Small offices lined the hall, each with a wooden door. Frost glass windows looked inside and each was inscribed with gold lettering. To the right just at the top of the stairs was one such door. The words “Pumpkinhead P.I.” were emblazoned. Jack unlocked the door, Sawhorse dashed inside followed by Jack who stumbled in.

A narrow hallway opened up into the main office. The space was cluttered and small. A desk that was far too large for the room took up most of the space. Two simple chairs for clients faced it while a cracked and worn leather chair sat behind it. Several framed documents lined the walls along with a single bookshelf full of medical textbooks.

A small kitchenette extended off the entrance hallway, with a door leading to a humble bathroom across from it. Door more doors lead out of the office area, the left door opened into a small bedroom with a single bed, chair and wardrobe. The right door had been replaced with a tighter seal and lead into a darkroom for developing photography.

Jack staggered to his desk and collapsed into the leather chair, which squeaked in protest. Sawhorse had already leapt onto one of the simple guest chairs where he watched happily, his tail wagging stiffly behind him. Leaning his cane against the desk, Jack pulled open a small drawer

and removed it. Reaching to the back he placed a small key into a hidden lock. With a twist and a small click a hidden drawer opened beneath the desk. Two vials rolled and clinked together loudly.

With a trembling hand he took one of the vials. He removed the cork quickly, which came free with a pop. There was a moment of hesitation as he watched the liquid swish back and forth in the vial. A sharp twinge of pain and that made his face contort violently pushed him forward. The glass vial pressed to his mouth and he ingested the liquid in a single satisfying gulp.

He slumped back in the chair, eyes closed tight. The liquid stung his tongue and filled his mind with regret. It wouldn't be long before he was free from the pain and memories. Taking a deep breath he knew he had to start quickly.

Taking up his cane he staggered towards the darkroom to begin the development process.

Interlude I

You find yourself sitting on a lavish green couch. Brass fitting accent the dyed leather, while a plush back hugs your body comfortably. The sharp smell of freshly brewed tea fill the warm air. Intricately patterned wallpaper covers the walls and leads up to a curved ivy coloured ceiling. An emerald rug sits under a jade table in front of you. Beyond the table is a semi transparent emerald green curtain. The silhouette of a man is visible on the curtains which obscure his features. A low table with a phonograph is visible next to the man.

“Welcome to the Green Room” The man says you in a smooth voice. “I do hope you enjoyed the first act of my little game. The grisly acts of violence have only just begun, so please take this time to prepare yourself.”

He leans over move the phonograph and winds the cranks which rattles quietly behind the curtain. A spindly hand shifts the needle onto the record. Sound begins to echo out from the conical speaker, filling the green room. The soft sound of a saxophone and piano play in a delicate harmony.

The man twists his hands in time with the music, their silhouettes appear like spiders dancing across the curtain. His long fingers curl in grotesque and unnatural ways. “If you’re still here it’s because you wish to play my game.” He says, body swaying like a ghost. “I’ll do you the kindness of explaining the rules of this game. Your opponent is ‘Jack the Ripper’, discover that and you win. Fail to do so and this world will die and I shall simply move on to the next.”

“I am simply the narrator, here to tell the story. I am not your friend, but I will ensure a fair game. One to entertain me.” He says wistfully. “Allow me to establish the first rule. **When I speak in bold text it is the absolute truth. When I speak in bold it cannot be a lie. You need not question the validity of the statement. It simply is true.**”

The man contemplates for a moment. “Yes I believe this will provide an even playing field for you.”

“I shall establish the second rule now, by invoking Knox’s second commandment. **Knox’s Second Commandment. All supernatural or**

preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course. Magic was not and will not be used as a method of murder. On this line of thought I shall also invoke Knox’s fourth commandment now. **Knox’s Fourth Commandment. No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.**”

“I’ll establish one final rule **Each character regardless of their physical appearance should be considered their natural assumed non-magical analogue. Sawhorse is a dog. Everyone else featured up to this point is human. This is not a deception or trickery. Each character is only capable of what their analogue would be capable. No character possess super natural ability. All characters require the logical requirements for life. Air to breath, food to eat and water to drink.**”

“This should suffice for now.” He says reaching a hand to the needle of the phonograph. He removes it with a screech, followed by silence as the music is cut short. “I believe our second act is just about ready. Now go, watch, struggle, test your wits and put on a good show.”

SECOND TAG - BLACK BOOK

Water bubbled forth from the dingy shower head. The pressure was low and air frequently got caught in the pipes from an unknown source creating an unpredictable flow. The water was miraculously warm, which Dorothy was grateful for as it ran through her hair and down her shoulders.

A knock rang out off the old wooden door that lead into the cramped bathroom. "Dorothy? Is it alright if I pass a towel in? I won't look." A soft feminine voice called from behind the door.

"Uh yeah that's fine Scraps. Thank you."

The door creaked open only wide enough for a patchwork arm to slide through, holding a bundle of cloth. Flapping about blindly, Scraps eventually felt the edge of the sink and vanity. She placed a soft warm towel and a light blue summer dress with a bell skirt on the vanity top. The dress had a white plaid pattern across it and was a stark contrast to Dorothy's preferred dress.

"I'm sorry we don't have a drying machine. You can wear one of my dresses until your clothes are dry." Scraps said, gently closing the door.

"Please don't worry about it. I'm sorry for troubling you so late at night." Dorothy called back, guilt welled up inside her. She'd shown up to a stranger's home in the dead of night. She should be the one apologizing she thought.

"Oh don't you worry yourself. Any friend of Scarecrow's is a friend of mine." She said happily. "I'm usually up this late anyways. I'll let you finish your shower, take your time."

"Thanks Scraps."

Dorothy sat under the water for several more minutes, splashing warm water in her face as if that would wake her from this nightmarish day. She eventually resigned herself to the reality she was living in and exited the shower. She dried off quickly and donned the extremely retro summer dress. The dress reminded Dorothy of picnicking, and was a stark contrast to her usual style.

She spent several minutes quietly braiding her hair in front of a small mirror above that vanity. Thoughts of home filled her, she worried about what Aunt Em was doing and of Julian had

tried to call. She longed for her bed and a warm meal. As she finished twisting the last ribbon into a knot she felt a grounding sense of accomplishment. It was a little thing, entirely irrelevant when compared to the big picture but it provided a sense of stability in a strange way. Now she would just need to wait out the night, get to the bus stop and go home.

Taking a deep breath she stepped out of the bathroom and into the small apartment living room. A worn couch faced a wall dressed in gaudy wallpaper. An old radio sat on a table that had been pressed against the wall. A bulky radiator was currently blocked by a rack of soggy clothes. The radiator hummed pathetically as it tried to dry Dorothy and Scarecrow's drenched clothing.

Rain splattered across the street, visible from two squat high windows that looked out of the basement apartment. The radio chirped soft music which made the rundown apartment feel a little more like home.

A woman made of patchwork cloth quietly humming along with the radio. She draped a colourful knitted blanket across the back of the couch. She had long hair of yarn which was currently bound in a cluster of hair rollers. She wore a simple white nightgown as she prepared to sleep. Her face was soft, and inviting but the slight wrinkles under her eyes betrayed a lingering sadness.

"It's not much but you're welcome to sleep on the couch if you want. I'd offer the bed but I think Scarecrow has already taken it." The patchwork girl admitted regretfully with an apologetic smile.

Dorothy smiled at the generosity she was receiving. Her brow furrowed against her will as she noticed a large bruise along the inside of Scraps' left elbow. "I'm sorry for troubling you so much. I'll get out of your hair soon."

"Oh don't be silly, it's no trouble at all."

"FUCK!" A harsh yell followed by the smashing of something against the wall echoed from the bedroom. Startling Scraps and almost certainly woke others in the apartment complex.

Scraps immediately rushed to the door, throwing it open. A panicked expression caused

her cloth skin to wrinkle along the seams.
“Scarecrow?!”

Scarecrow stood in the humble bedroom, facing away from the door. His shoulders trembled and he raised a hand to his brow. Broken glass lay next to a wall, a wet smear dripped down and pooled on the carpet. “Sorry Scraps. I stubbed my toe. I’m fine.”

If that was true the bang would’ve occurred before his yell. It was a blatant and poorly constructed lie, Dorothy thought.

In spite of the fallacy Scraps walked to the fridge, where she opened the freezer and extracted a small bag of ice. She wrapped in a dish towel slowly, as if rethinking her decision. When she finished she walked to Scarecrow who continued to face away from her. Wrapping her arms around his waist, the two shared a sombre moment.

Dorothy sat on the couch as the uncomfortable third wheel. She quietly pulled the blanket off the back of the couch and laid down. The sound of the rain coupled with the white noise of the radio was calming and quickly she felt her eyes grow heavy. The adrenaline of the day had dissipated and she felt sleep quickly approach.

The last thing Dorothy heard was a whispered voice, “Sorry for getting you involved.”

The edges of the small room were illuminated by a pale red light. A long table covered in chemical filled troughs lined the back wall, while a string of clothes pins hung damp photos.

Jack staggered, his head felt light as air while his limbs dragged like lead in water. The effects of the poppy tears were starting to hit him hard. With the strange high came relief from his pain. He only hadn’t meant to take as much as he did, he’d be unconscious before long. Still he had to work.

His thin arms moved like an unsteady robot. Jerking violently through the process as he moved the photos between various chemical baths with tongs. He leaned on the table for support but his elbow buckled. The room spun and he collapsed on the floor with a crash.

Time passed strangely for Jack, staggered about in a daze barely aware of his actions. He flickered between consciousness for several hours. It was as if he were in a dream, watching himself but unable to take control.

When he finally regained some sensibility he realized how little he’d accomplished. Many of the photos were poorly developed or had failed entirely. His mouth felt dry and he was dizzy from dehydration. He slipped behind a black curtain to the door.

Sawhorse looked at him from a chair, his stiff tail wagged slowly at the sight of Jack. The wooden dog dropped off the chair into a full body stretch. His jaw opened in a wide yawn before he trotted behind Jack, following at his heels.

Jack staggered to the kitchen, leaning on the walls for support. He quickly fumbled through several cupboards for a glass which he filled with icy tap water. The glass touched his lips and he drank quickly. Nausea struck Jack like a tidal wave. Leaning over the sink, he took a long shaky breath, which allowed him to keep his stomach.

The kitchen clock glared at him, the second hand ticking incessantly like a tapping foot. It was already forty minutes passed noon. He was extremely late already. It would take him at least another ninety minutes to develop another batch of photos.

He quickly returned to the dark room and began the process over again. Moving photos through the various chemical baths. The process felt like an eternity as time continued to be dragged away from him.

Almost two hours passed in the small room. He was able to salvage several dozen photos in the time which should suffice for the beginning of the investigation. He gathered them into a yellow envelope and quickly called a taxi. He threw on a long dark trench coat to conceal his underarm gun holsters. Each held a pistol close to his side.

Jack left the office, waving a small goodbye to Sawhorse who looked up at him pitifully. “Sorry buddy, you can come next time.” He promised as he shut and locked the door. Sawhorse whined from behind the door for a moment before trotting back to his chair.

Jack walked carefully down the stairs. An umbrella and cane were tucked beneath one arm. The other held the railing tightly for support.

Just outside the building a dusty yellow taxi waited. He stepped into the back and the cab took off down the street. The overcast skies kept the streets a dull grey. Oppressive buildings rose up all around like the bars of a cage.

It took almost thirty minutes of fighting through traffic for the taxi to arrive at Jack's destination. A squat green building rose up in the northern section of the city. Tall barred windows gave the place a church like quality. A sign displayed the letters 'ECPD' above the door, with small script beneath reading 'Emerald City Police Department'.

A crowd of reporters had gathered just outside a large gate that surrounded the building. Their shrill voices filled the air as they muttered their theories and conspiracies to one another. Photographers flashed their cameras as they waited for the perfect shot. They appeared like a flock of vultures fighting over a fresh corpse.

Jack pushed his way passed them and entered the front gate. He chanced a glance back at the swarming crowd and noticed the phonograph headed man near the front. A flash of the man's camera struck Jack. Clearly the man had recognized him from the scene earlier. Pulling his coat close Jack hurried inside.

The interior of the police station was a stark contrast to the chaos outside. The wide entrance hall was mostly devoid of people. One large officer stood guard by the front door. He interposed himself between Jack and the rest of the office quickly. "What's your business."

"I have photos for Glinda. I'm supposed to leave them at the front desk." Jack explained quickly, hoping his arrival was expected.

"Of course. Right this way." The man said gesturing to a large horseshoe shaped desk in the centre of the entrance hall. Jack nodded and hobbled his way passed the guard.

Several papers sat on the desk in neat piles. A large typewriter poked up over a raised section of the desk. The most striking thing was a large pot from which a large cluster of flowers and leaves sprouted. The arrangement was bright and in full bloom. Paper still clung to the base of

the pot and a small tag poked out from behind some leaves. It was clear the flowers were intended as a gift.

A cluster of green hair poked its way out from behind the large flower arrangement. "Good afternoon Jack." Said a small pretty girl from behind the bouquet. She had soft features, and bright green eyes that didn't match her age. Her light lime coloured skin had a bright shine and she appeared to be positively glowing.

"Good afternoon Jellia. Sorry I'm late." Jack said apologetically.

"No trouble at all." She said happily, her voice had a song like quality that was comforting.

Jack slipped the envelope across the desk. "These are for Glinda." He said before quickly adding, "Her eyes only."

"Of course!" Jellia said growing serious, her brow stiffening and the corners of her mouth drooped. "I'll get these to her as soon as she returns. I believe this is yours." Jellia reached beneath the desk, and retrieved a spiral notebook which she handed to Jack.

Taking the chance to change the subject, Jack leaned against the desk and whispered, "Do you know what all the press is here for?" He asked only mildly curious. After the encounter last night it's no surprise word had gotten around. What he was really curious about were the flowers.

"Oh, Miss Ozma called them here. She had an announcement to make about the Ripper case. She's currently preparing a speech, I believe Miss Glinda is helping as well." Jellia explained. "Just between you and me Miss Ozma was looking real fierce this morning. This Chopper case has everyone on edge, and I hope she doesn't make any rash decisions."

Jack was only half listening as he reached towards the tag on the flowers. Peeling away a few leaves so he could read it. He felt a wave of pathetic relief at the words, 'To my dearest Jellia. You make my heart feel a big as my stomach. T.' A small part of him had worried it was for Ozma. He immediately felt a wave of guilt at his jealousy.

"Do you have any idea what she's going to say?" Jack said pulling himself away from the

flowers, his attention returning to his conversation.

“Not at all. She’s a very private person Miss Ozma.” Jellia confessed, there was a clear sense of disappointment in her voice. Ozma had been distant and rarely opened herself to others ever since her father had passed away. Jellia on the other hand was always a fairly nosy, so it wasn’t a surprise that their personalities clashed. Ozma had that effect on most people, but not Jack.

Before either of them could continue Ozma rounded the corner on the second floor. Her high heeled shoes clicking along the tile floor. She descended the stairs with Glinda just behind her. Ozma held her head high, her chin raised up like a queen looking down on her subjects.

Glinda followed closely, her eyes scanning the room on constant alert. She was like a bear protecting her cub. Her narrow eyes glanced across Jellia and Jack. She nodded a silent greeting but said nothing as she followed behind Ozma quickly.

The doorman pulled the doors open, giving a small bow as Ozma crossed the threshold. An immediate uproar of voices, flashing cameras and stomping of feet echoed from outside.

“Jack, these are for you as well.” Jellia whispered passing a thick envelope to the detective. “I’m sure you know these are extremely confidential.”

Jack nodded taking the envelope. This must contain the previous case files from the Ripper’s previous victims. He glanced to the front doors which were now shut, though the noise of the crowd was only muffled.

“If you wish, you can use the backdoor to avoid the crowd, or I could have an office set aside for you?” Jellia said in a hushed tone.

Jack was curious about the case files as well as Ozma’s speech. It would be difficult getting a cab with the crowd as well. “An office would be wonderful. Thank you Jellia, and congratulations.” He said gesturing to the flowers with a smirk.

Jellia turned beat red and smiled. She quickly got up from her chair which was much too tall for her and hurried through the station. It

only took her a few minutes before she was able to find a suitable office that wasn’t in use. The office had previously belonged to Jack, though he didn’t know who used it now.

Jellia opened the door allow Jack inside. He moved to the desk, sat in a plush leather chair and began to pull out the large stack of papers from the previous cases. His mind however was quickly dragged elsewhere by the cold nostalgia of the room.

Harsh static pierced through Dorothy’s sleep. She squinted, a hazy light filled the room from the high windows. A white noise was slowly increasing and solidifying into sound. “Chopper” More static. “Worry.” Dorothy sat up to find Scarecrow aggressively twisting the knobs of the radio trying to get a proper signal. Static still broke through but the sound soon became understandable.

“The Emerald City will be on a strict curfew over the next few days. All business are to be shut down by ten o’clock and people are to be inside by no later then eleven o’clock.” A woman on the other end of the radio spoke in a clear firm voice. “Exceptions will be made for medical emergencies only. We at the ECPD encourage everyone to remain indoors when possible and travel in groups. We will not allow these attacks to continue but need the cooperation of everyone in the Emerald City to do so. As such travel to and from the Emerald City is also strictly forbidden until further notice.”

“What?!” Dorothy shot up from the couch.

“Looks like you’re stuck here doll.”

Scarecrow said a hint of sympathy in his voice.

The radio continued to chatter, “These regulations will remain until the Ripper is brought to justice. We have our very best people working on this case and are doing everything in our power to ensure your safety. Additionally we at the ECPD would like to confirm that Nick the Chopper is still in custody. Rumours of his escape and nothing more then a fabrication.”

Dorothy sat stunned listening to the radio.

“There you have it folks.” A different voice chimed in over the radio. “The ECPD have declared martial law. Who can you trust? The police are claiming martial law but where is

mayor Diggs in all of this? Does he even care about your lives and futures? Could they simply be covering for one of their own? Stay tuned as we keep you updated with the latest information available at 102.1 Emerald City Radio Hour with your host Phonograph.” Scarecrow twisted one knob which clicked, silencing the radio broadcast.

Dorothy got up shakily and walked to the rack of now dried clothes. She dug through the varsity jacket pocket but quickly discovered her phone missing. “No. No, no, no.” Moving to her mail bag she dug through the various pockets, emptying spray paint cans and her sketch book. She searched every inch of her belongs and found everything except for her cellphone.

“You didn’t see my phone did you?” She asked Scarecrow desperately.

“Cellphone?” He asked curiously. “What’s that? If you need a phone there’s a payphone in the front hall.”

Dorothy gave him a confused look. “No my cellphone. It’s like this big, flips open.” She made a gesture with her hands to show the size.

“Doesn’t sound familiar. I’ve never heard of a cellphone before.” Scarecrow confessed his ignorance, and he didn’t seem to be lying. The statement however was utterly ridiculous to Dorothy so she had difficulty accepting it.

“Are there no cellphones here?” Dorothy asked. “What about computers?”

Scarecrow stared at Dorothy with equal confusion. “You’re speaking in tongues doll. Never heard of them.”

Was this even possible? Dorothy thought about what she had seen up to this point. The strange car designs, the vintage clothing, her cellphone not connecting. It added up to something supernatural or otherworldly or a dream. Did any of that matter though? She couldn’t get home until the Ripper case was solved. That was a fact.

The only person she knew that could tell her what was going on was Toto. If she found him he might be able to help her get back. Though that wouldn’t matter if the police were stopping people from leaving. To get home she needed to find Toto and solve the Ripper case.

Dorothy grabbed Julian’s varsity jacket and slung it over her shoulders. It clashed

strangely with the plaid dress she was wearing, but it provided a sense of comfort. Digging into her bag she pulled out her sketch book and a pencil and began drawing.

It took her a few minutes to have an extremely crude drawing of Toto. A dog faced man with a long moustache and a leather cap. She wasn’t a bad artist, and was actually quite talented at lettering and graffiti. However lettering and graffiti are an entirely different beast from drawing a police sketch of a furry.

She frowned a little disappointed at the drawing but showed it to Scarecrow anyways. “Do you know this guy? Or how I could find him?”

Scarecrow squinted at the drawing, restraining himself from a snide comment. “Can’t say I recognize them.” He hesitated. “If you’re looking for someone though, I know a place you can look. It’s a little close to... the scene. So we should go a little later once things settle down.”

Dorothy didn’t want to wait but she knew he was right. She hadn’t wanted to say it or even think it, but if her phone had fallen while she was running it could have been left at the scene. “What do I do until then?”

“Wait here I guess. Maybe work on that drawing. I gotta run an errand. When I get back I can show you the way to The Yellow Brick Road.” Scarecrow said grabbing his jacket and a small case. He cracked the bedroom door open slightly glancing at a form on the bed. He seemed to wince slightly before shutting the door quietly.

“Scraps is still sleeping so try not to wake her.” He says with a surprising amount of force.

“Alright. I’ll be quiet.”

He seemed to realize his aggressive tone. “There’s a sandwich place down the street if you get hungry.” He opened the front door and left quietly.

Dorothy was alone, again. She spent some time working on her sketch of Toto. Digging up what memories she had of him she managed to produce a half decent depiction. It wasn’t going to win any awards but it was at least recognizable.

Ozma turned away from the shouting members of the press, their cameras flashing and pens scratching hastily. Each ravenous for one

more statement, one more picture, one more story that could give them their break. She would not yield however and stoically walked away. Glinda followed close behind.

Glinda followed close behind. She remained quiet until the station doors closed behind them and the sounds of the crowd ceased. "Are you sure about this?" She finally asked. It was the nicest way for her to say she disagreed with Ozma's decision.

"Yes." Ozma said plainly.

"He's insane, Ma'am. He's not going to tell you anything useful." Glinda insisted.

Ozma turned to abruptly, "Then what should I do?! How long should stand aside while another psychopath terrorizes my city! How many more lives need to be thrown away before they're satisfied?!" Ozma shouted, overcome by emotion. "I am not letting this happen again! He is the only one who could get inside this psycho's mind!"

Several head turned at the sudden outburst but quickly hurried away, not wanting to be dragged into the argument. Jellia unfortunately had no where to run and so she simply buried herself behind her flowers in the hopes she wouldn't be noticed. Similarly the doorman simply turned his back and pretended not to listen.

"Then at least let me come with you." Glinda suggested, her eyes looked to Ozma with a mix of pity and concern.

Ozma hated that look. "No! He'll talk more if I'm alone. Besides I need you to find our mystery girl." Truthfully Ozma wanted Glinda's companionship. She didn't want to see *him* at all, least of all alone, but she couldn't bring herself to ask for help. In fact she had to reject it. She had to keep herself hardened or risk being hurt again.

Glinda winced at the rejection. "Yes Ma'am." She conceded. "I'll talk with some of the usual suspects and see if they've seen her around."

"Good." Ozma said coldly.

The conversation was over as quickly as it had begun. Ozma's stubbornness knew few bounds and Glinda knew better then to push it. Glinda gave a stiff salute and walked up the stairs, returning to her office on the second floor. Ozma was left in the entrance hall.

She walked to the front desk to find Jellia timidly working from behind her potted plant. "Jellia, I'll be out of the station for the next hour. If the press call for a further statement tell them we aren't doing any further statement. If anyone else calls tell them to call back in an hour." Ozma explained, her tone firm.

"Y-yes Ma'am." Jellia responded sheepishly.

Ozma considered thanking Jellia for her work but her tongue failed to move. She simply walked to the back of the station, entered the underground parkade and unlocked her car. Several minutes passed as she sat in the drivers seat, the car remained lifeless as Ozma reconsidered her plans. She saw an old photo stuck to the underside of passenger seat sun visor. She bit her lip and slammed her hand on the steering wheel in frustration. Over and over she slammed the steer wheel until her hand was red and bruised.

Taking an uneasy breath Ozma place the key in the ignition. The car shook to life and the engine began to purr. Rumbling forward Ozma pulled out of the underground parkade into the dreary overcast afternoon light.

The drive was short, only taking a few minutes for Ozma to pull up to immense building at the corner of Nome Street and King Street. Narrow windows lined the building, too small for anyone to fit through. Heavy metal doors lined with locks provided the only entrance to the building. A chain link fence lined with barbed wire surrounded the tower.

Ozma parked across the street and briskly walked towards the fence gate. A small intercom system sat next to a small guard station. She exchanged a brief conversations with a pudgy guard. Flashed her badge she was quickly allowed through the gate, which made an irritating buzzing sound as it opened.

Sweat began to build on Ozma's palms, her fingers trembling as she approached the building. She bit her thumb roughly to try and steady herself before opening the front door. Several guards approached, patting her down as she explained her purpose. "I'm here to speak with Nick." Her voice was cool but her breathing was shaky and betrayed her discomfort.

“Understood.” One of the guards said with a bit of trepidation. “No weapons are allowed on the premises.” He said feeling the gun under Ozma’s jacket.

Ozma nodded and the officer carefully removed the weapon which he placed in a plastic container. “These will be held for you until you return.” He said as he confirmed Ozma had no further weapons or illicit materials.

“Kaliko will take you to see Nick, Miss Ozma.” The officer explained, gesturing to a short hairy man with a twisted conical hat that almost covered his beady eyes.

The short bearded man gave a stiff salute which caused his hat to rock back and forth comically. A small lantern dangled from the tip of the hat currently unlit. He had a round grey blue nose with a particularly pronounced pimple.

“Right this way, Ma’am.” The small man said in a squeaky voice.

Ozma was lead through the narrow concrete hallways which she had travelled several times. They soon arrived to an elevator which had two arm guards next to it. Their gaze was cold and analytical, which Ozma appreciated.

Kaliko opened the elevator grate and gestured for Ozma to enter. Once they had both entered, Kaliko produced a ring of keys. He found a small key which he inserted into the elevator number pad. It turned stiffly as he unlocked access to the basement. The elevator shuttered and descended slowly.

“You are not to provide Nick with any personal information. Do not look him in the eyes and stay away from the bars. You are not to accept anything from him or give him anything. I will remain close to ensure your safety.” Kaliko explained stiffly. “Nick is extremely dangerous, so visits must be kept to only five minutes.”

“I understand.” Ozma said, the frustration in her voice was obvious. She was the last person that needed to be told any of that.

The elevator shook violently as it stopped on the bottom floor. Kaliko pulled open the grate which creaked with age. He stepped out and gestured for Ozma to follow. “Please stay away from the other cells.” He warned leading the way down a poorly lit hallway. Barred cells lined the path, most were thankfully empty, though a few

held manacled prisoners who yelled crude things as the pair passed.

They soon arrived at a far cell which was lit by a flickering bulb. Inside was a vertical stretcher, a man bound in a straitjacket was strapped to it with a dozen thick leather belts. He wore a metal mask that left all but his lower jaw exposed.

“You have a visitor Nick.” Kaliko said loudly so the convict could hear. He then leaned to Ozma. “Five minutes. I’ll be just over there.” He gesture a few meters away and quickly left Ozma to her conversation.

“Oh, a visitor? Has my love finally returned?” A sickly hoarse voice oozed from the mouth of the caged man. His teeth were mangled and sharp like a rapid dog.

“Tip? Is that you? Now this is a surprise.” The man said with an amused smile. A low chuckled filled the room as he spoke.

Ozma flinched at the name but remained silent.

“Oh right, it’s Ozma now isn’t it.” The man corrected himself, feigning sincerity. “It’s been so long since I’ve had an interesting guest. How have you been?”

Ozma stared at him for a long moment, “I don’t have time for your games and bullshit.”

“Oh dear, my apologies. If you need something then please ask away. Time is ticking after all.” His voice was like poison from a snake.

“I assume you’ve heard about the murders.” Ozma started. “Are you involved?”

Nick thought for a moment. “That would be quite the talent. Did you know that twice a day they take off this mask for ten minutes to let me eat? And four times a day they take off that belt touch my dangler and let me piss and shit.” Nick explained grotesquely. “Oh sorry, is that a touchy subject?”

Ozma flinched and for a brief moment was grateful that her gun had been taken. She remained silent.

“No I have nothing to do with your murderer case. I haven’t been doing much since you helped throw me in here thirteen years ago as you can see.” He rocked his head slightly as if to show how little he was capable of.

Ozma crossed her arms. "Do you know who could be involved?"

"If I tell you, then I want you to answer a question for me." Nick said smoothly.

Ozma sighed in irritation. "Deal."

"Good. Well I must say that I'm deeply insulted by whoever decided to copy my methods. They clearly had no appreciation for the purpose of my work." He seemed genuinely insulted and distressed by the action, but he always had a knack for know how and when to lie. "I would think that whoever killed dear Tik-Tok knew something they should not know. Maybe dear Mombi could tell you more."

"Mombi?" Ozma seemed skeptical. "She's been dead as long as you've been in prison."

"Dead? Oh dear. That is a shame. I hear some people have been speaking with the dead lately. Perhaps you should try that Tip."

Ozma was beginning to grow frustrated with Nick's games. He definitely knew something, but he wasn't going to give it up. "Who's responsible?"

"That I don't know for certain. After I've locked in this cage with only a few little birdies to tell me stories of outside." He said sadly. "No for my question. I'm curious, Tip. Did the good doctor take yours or is it still dangling between your legs?"

Ozma winced and began to walk away.

"Answer the question Tip! You gave me your word!" Nick began to scream and thrash in his bindings, his demeanor shifting completely. "Well?! Whether you pissing standing up or sitting won't bring daddy back!" Nick cackled.

The police chief swallowed hard as she approached Kaliko. "I'm done."

Kaliko gave a firm nod but remained silent. He quickly walked back towards the elevator with Ozma following closely behind.

Nick continued to shout hysterically, the loud rattling of his bindings echoed through the hall. As the elevator gate shut there was a loud metallic clattering followed by Nick's maddened cackling. One of the guards stepped away to check on the prisoner as the elevator began its ascent.

Jack leaned across the large desk in an uncomfortable manner, peering at the scattered pages and photos. He stared blankly at the papers, unable to focus, as his former office flooded him with memories of the past. The waves of emotions struck him like a torrential storm.

Sixteen years ago the Winged Monkey gang had taken over a large portion of the Gillikin District in the northern section of the Emerald City. Their leader Mombi had established a protection racket and began drug trafficking. Mombi had gained her success through a monopoly on a street version of morphine called poppy tears which she used to dominate the populace.

Mombi's eldest daughter South and the twins East and West were closely involved with the spreading crime. Charges were pressed frequently on the family but cases continued to fall through due to a lack of evidence. The crime family's hold on the city grew strong and former police chief Tippertarius the First was quickly losing control of the situation.

Four years later a break finally occurred. South, who had begun establishing her own independence had gotten sloppy. Evidence of her involvement surfaced that couldn't be ignored by the courts allow the ECPD to arrest her. The operation for her arrest was lead by Glinda with the help of Jack Pumpkinhead and Tippertarius the Second.

South was imprisoned at the ECPD headquarters to await her trial. While waiting for the court day she committed suicide in her cell. South was found having hung herself with her bed sheet late one night.

In spite of the unfortunate circumstance, Glinda was promoted to deputy for the success of the arrest. South's removal also created a large power gap which the ECPD were able to fill.

Jack thought back to his younger days on the force. It had been a hard time but he missed those long days. Jack looked blankly at the door and chuckled to himself at a distant memory.

Tip had entered his office many years ago, he was handsome with dark skin, hair cut short with a clean shaven face. He had a stern brow and round cheek bones. Their suit accented their firm

shoulders. There was a steaming mug in his hand, he strode towards Jack.

Tip slammed the mug on Jack's desk, the steaming brew sloshed about dangerously. It's smell was warm and comforting. Tip firmly grabbed Jack's tie pulling him up from his chair forcefully. Tip wriggled the fabric several times, tightening the knot. "If you're going to sleep in your office at least try to pretend like you got dressed in the morning."

It may have seemed like a cold gesture to some but to Jack it felt very warm. "Thanks Dad." Jack replied with a tired but satisfyingly snarky smirk.

Tip frowned and left, leaving the mug of coffee behind.

After that Jack had stopped fixing his tie in the morning.

His mind continued to wander, as the scent of hot coffee touched his nose. He remember the day he first kissed Tip. Valentines day sixteen years ago. He had been so late, he was about to leave when Tip came into his office. The repeated their usual ritual. Tip grabbing Jack's tie, but as he pulled Jack close, neither of them stopped. They simply leaned in.

Jack smiled to himself as he thought, curling his lips at the memory. His thoughts danced to a stormy night when the power went out. He and Tip came to this office with candles and for the first time they...

"Jack?"

A voice cut through the memories and wandering thoughts startling Jack to alertness. He shot up from the desk suddenly to find Jellia standing in the door frame with a mug of coffee. She had a puzzled look on her face, which quickly contorted to a look of concern. "I'm sorry I didn't mean to startle you. It's just getting late and I made coffee if you want any." She stammered.

"Sorry. Just got a little lost in thought."

Jack said quickly. "What time is it?"

"Almost six o'clock."

"Six?" Jack said surprised. He must have still been feeling some of the effects of the poppy tears he'd taken this morning. He knew he shouldn't have taken a full dose, but he'd been so desperate for relief he wasn't thinking straight. "Sorry Jellia. I'm going to have to pass on the

coffee, I have an appointment I need to be getting to." Jack stood up and quickly gathered the papers and photos into their envelopes.

"Of course. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Just lost track of time is all. Could you call a cab for me?" Jack asked as he struggled to reorganize the documents.

"My pleasure Jack. I'll call for you when it arrives." Jellia said with a soft smile, before bounding back to the front desk.

Jack struggled for several minutes trying to return everything to it's original order. He'd somehow wasted hours of the day accomplishing almost nothing.

Ten minutes passed as Jack finally got everything back in order. He'd hardly looked over any of the previous case files which would mean a long night of reading. He had to make an important stop first though and he was quickly losing time. Thankfully Jellia called him just as he packed the last photo away. The cab had arrived and was waiting outside.

Grabbing his cane Jack made his way down the stairs. He noticed Omby Amby walk through the front door and offered him a small wave. Omby returned the greeting with a silent nod before he began speaking with Jellia.

Jack gave a silent nod of thanks to Jellia not wanting to interrupt her conversation. He quickly made his way to the dusty yellow cab that was parked just beyond the front gate. It vibrated visibly as it's old motor sputtered to life.

Dorothy had gotten hungry waiting for Scarecrow to return. It wasn't until after Scarecrow had left that she realized she had no way of getting back inside if she left. She'd been warned not to wake Scraps, but she could see no other option as her hunger grew stronger. Gripping the door handle tightly she very slowly turned it, pushing the door open with a delicate precision. Having sneaked out of her house on more then one occasion she was well practice at opening doors silently.

There she saw Scraps laying on a poorly made bed. Her body was sprawled in an unflattering position. An empty vial and recently used needle sat on the night stand. A small drop of blood was dried on the crook of Scrap's left arm.

Dorothy's lips curled instinctively, she felt like the air in her lungs was being sucked out. Like she was being strangled. She pulled Julian's letterman jacket tightly around herself. Fingers digging tightly into the fabric. A part of her brain screamed for a taste, everything was right there in front of her.

Her body acted on its own, stepping deeper into the room. Before she even realized it she was next to the night stand. She hugged herself desperately, the rest of her brain screamed for her to turn back. She could feel herself slipping, the creeping thought started breaking through.

"Just once."

"I've been so good, I deserve a reward."

"It'll be fine if it's just one."

"I've been through a lot, I just need a little to get me through it."

"Julian won't find out here."

A shaky hand fell away from the jacket. Pulling away from the support and affection that had kept her going for the last year. She grabbed the knob on the night stand, pulling it open. A few full vials of some unknown drug sloshed inside.

Her other hand fell from the jacket, reaching forward.

Scraps made a strange noise and shifted on the bed. The sudden noise cut through Dorothy like a gun shot. She jumped back, jerked from her trance. She turned abruptly and rushed out the door and didn't stop. She tore out of the apartment, up the stairs to the front door of the building and out into the street.

In her haste she slammed into a pudgy young man with greasy hair who was just about to enter the building. The collision sent them both tumbling to the ground. The man slowly turned, pulling himself to his feet completely caught off guard. Dorothy lay there stunned for a moment, breathing heavily.

"I-I'm sorry. I was just in a hurry."

Dorothy apologized instinctively.

The young man offered a hand. "It's alright, I wasn't expecting a pretty girl to come running into my arms."

The comment alone was enough to jerk Dorothy back to the present and hesitate to take the offered hand. She got to her feet carefully,

dusting off Scraps' dress. "Sorry, my fault. I shouldn't have been running." Dorothy reiterated.

The man retracted his hand seemingly embarrassed. "Have a nice day." He said sheepishly. "I'm Boq by the way. Are you new here? I just hadn't seen you around and it's been a while since I've seen a new face." He stammered clearly trying to build a conversation.

He was clearly struggling to find the right words. Dorothy knew she needed some companionship right now, at least long enough for her to get control of her impulsive thoughts. "I'm Dorothy and I'm taken, but I feel bad run into you like that. I heard there's a sandwich place around here, can I get you something as an apology?" She offered, not sure if he'd even be interested.

Boq thought for a moment but nodded. "I was just getting hungry."

"Great." Dorothy said feeling a strange mix of discomfort and relief. "You don't happen to know where it is, do you?"

Boq laughed pleasantly, "You're pretty new, huh?"

"That obvious?" Dorothy said with a forced laugh.

"Cayke's is just down the street, this way." Boq said point to the left. He started briskly walking down the sidewalk

The two walked side by side for a for two minutes, where they arrived at a tall office building. The first floor had been made into a small sandwich shop with glass windows on all sides. A warm fresh smell billowed out into the street anytime someone opened the door. One of the windows had beautiful scripted lettering across it, reading "Cayke's Cakes". All surrounded by a flowing ivy pattern in the same glass paint.

"Why is it called Cayke's Cakes?" Dorothy asked confused.

Boq shrugged. "It's a dumb story. The place was a pastry and cake shop but it wasn't doing well so they started offering sandwiches. There's a lot of apartments and small businesses around here so people were a lot more interested in lunch rather than birthday cakes or cookies."

Dorothy laughed. "That is a dumb and lackluster story."

Dorothy and Boq both entered the shop which smelled incredible. Fresh bread and baked goods mixed with the scent of fresh cocoa and coffee. It had a warm and soft atmosphere that was deeply comforting in contrast to the concrete buildings and city streets.

The two ordered food and to Dorothy's disappointment and deep embarrassment found her money was not accepted. Boq paid quickly against Dorothy's protest. They found a quiet spot near one of the windows and began to eat a much needed meal.

"I am so sorry, again." Dorothy insisted, unable to let it go.

"It's really no trouble." Boq insisted back. "You really aren't from around here."

"No, is that bad?" Dorothy said with a wince.

"Not at all." Boq spoke quickly, trying to backtrack. "I think it's really interesting actually. I've never lived anywhere else so it's nice to see someone from out of town."

Boq took a long sip of his coffee. "I think the mayor Oscar Diggs is from out of town actually."

"Really? That seems strange, do you know where from?" Dorothy mused curiously. Maybe this mayor would know a way back, if out of town meant Kansas.

Boq thought for a moment and frowned "I don't, sorry." He seemed genuinely regretful that he didn't know more, if for no other reason than to keep the conversation going.

Dorothy quickly took over and the two shared a quiet conversation, mostly making small talk. Boq was clearly struggling to find the right words at times, but he was charming in awkward sort of way. He was well meaning if nothing else Dorothy thought.

After eating the two made the short walk back towards the apartments. "Thanks again for lunch Boq."

"My pleasure Miss Dorothy." Boq said, his round cheeks curling into a large smile. "Have a good night. Stay safe." He continued giving a small bow before turning to unlock the front apartment door.

He held the door open, but Dorothy hesitated to enter. The door felt like mouth a lion

to her in that moment. "Are you coming?" Boq offered, a confused look on his face.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry." She finally responded with an uncertain tone. She stepped through the threshold with a look of trepidation.

Boq seemed concerned, or at the very least confused but didn't press the issue. Whether out of a respect or an awkward nervousness Dorothy wasn't sure. "Have a good night Miss Dorothy." Boq finally said, waving a small goodbye as he walked up a flight of stairs.

Dorothy gave a small wave back and glanced down the stairs towards the basement. "Goodnight."

With a heavy breath Dorothy descended the stairs into the narrow basement hallway. The walls were lined with peeling and faded green wallpaper. The doors were dull and the worn carpeted floor was covered with dirt and dust. The door to Scraps' apartment was unsurprisingly locked.

Dorothy felt a mixture of frustration and relief at this. Her bag and most of her things were unfortunately locked inside, but this also meant she couldn't access the tantalizing liquids either.

She waited for just under an hour, leaning awkwardly against the wall. A few other residents passed her in the hall, giving her uneasy looks. Just as she was considering leaving the sounds of footsteps filtered down the hall. She glanced towards the stairs to see Scarecrow returning home.

When he met Dorothy's eyes he seemed a little surprised, before it dawned on him as well. "Oh, locked out?" He said fishing a key from his pocket.

Dorothy nodded, happy to finally be getting her things but still felt a sense of dread returning to the apartment. The door creaked open, the sound of the shower burbling could be heard from inside. The bedroom door was cracked open and the crimes had been sloppily packed away. Dorothy walked quickly to her belongings gathering her clothes in her hand.

"Can you wait in the bedroom while I change?" Dorothy asked Scarecrow as he was approaching the bathroom.

Scarecrow sighed, "Sure thing doll." He knocked on the bathroom door quickly. "Scraps,

I'm back. You okay?" He asked loudly through the door.

"I'm great." Scraps replied but her voice dragged strangely. She was clearly still feeling some effects from whatever she'd injected herself with.

Scarecrow's stitched together lips twisted unpleasantly. "Alright, I'm gonna take Dorothy to the Road. You can get there on your own right?"

"Course babe, I'll be out soon." Scraps called back, her voice barely audible over the sound of the shower.

Scarecrow walked to the bedroom door, stopping in the threshold. "Knock whenever you're ready to go." He said over his shoulder before entering the room. He closed the door gently behind himself, it closed with a firm click.

Dorothy quickly changed back into a usual attire and slung her bag over her shoulder. The contents rattled comfortingly against her back. She placed the dress flat along the back of the couch for Scraps, before knocking on the bedroom door. "I'm done."

The door opened and Scarecrow stepped out. A glance inside the room let Dorothy know he had taken the time to finish cleaning up. "With the curfew things might be a little off schedule there. So just stay close and try not to piss anyone off." Scarecrow said leading the way out of the apartment.

Dorothy rolled her eyes and follow. "So what is this place anyways?" Dorothy asked skeptically, she'd been having some doubts but had pushed them to the back of her mind. Now that she was alone with Scarecrow again she got a strange feeling. Something about the scarecrow's story, his sudden outburst, and then leaving her alone while he 'ran an errand'. She tried to think of things from his perspective but things refused to click.

"It's a club, for gentleman... and ladies." Scarecrow said vaguely.

"A strip club?" Dorothy said unimpressed, crossing her arms.

"It's a bar and they do a burlesque show at night." Scarecrow corrected. "They do comedy, skits and have a variety of talented singers."

When put in those terms it actually sounded like a fun place. "Sorry, I just assumed." Dorothy apologized.

"They also have strip shows."

A frown curled across Dorothy's face like fissure. "So you suspect Toto is a client?" Dorothy suggested.

"No idea doll but the ladies keep a close eye on their clients and there's a good chance they've seen him. If they haven't they might know someone who has." Scarecrow continued as he lead Dorothy out the front of the apartment and into the streets.

Dorothy followed behind, keeping a few feet back. She began to consider Scarecrow's motives. If she thought from his perspective perhaps should could gain some further light on the situation.

Scarecrow had been at the scene of the crime, but for what purpose? Blind coincidence like herself was possible but seemed unlikely. He had been incredibly insistent that she not tamper with the crime scene, but he contradicted himself shortly after by taking that diamond studded shoe. This was the issue that struck Dorothy as his strangest behaviour.

If she assumed Scarecrow was the murderer, why wouldn't he have tried to kill her? She was a witness that could direct the police to him, a loose end. Besides that he couldn't have caused the car to fall without an accomplice or a trick of some kind.

This wasn't the right way to think about it. It's better to assume Scarecrow didn't care if the scene was tampered with because he stole the shoe. However, he insisted Dorothy get away from the scene. Why would he want to keep her away from the scene? Dorothy could see several reasons all of which required Scarecrow to have known about the murder or the falling car before hand.

If Scarecrow was an accomplice or the killer there may have been evidence on the body. Evidence or a clue that was destroyed by the car. He called her away to keep her from seeing something. This was a sound start, but it left a nagging why. Why call her away at all? Why not leave her. She likely wouldn't have noticed the car until it was too late, and even if it hadn't

killed her, he could've tried to kill her later. This brought up the nagging worry that *later* was now, and she was being herded like a lamb to the slaughter.

Dorothy touched her pocket, feeling the comforting form of the knife tucked inside. How much further did they have to go? She needed to understand the situation fast. But she had almost no information. She knew nothing about the victim, who released the car or who Scarecrow was. There had to be some clue, something that would let her know who's side Scarecrow was on.

Scraps. Scraps was drugged and unconscious all afternoon. Dorothy herself had slept on the couch. Scarecrow had many chances to silence Dorothy already. If he was involved he was confident that Dorothy wouldn't, or couldn't implicate him in the crime. He'd left her, completely alone. Encouraged her to leave the apartment, which he knew she couldn't get back into. He gave Dorothy every opportunity to leave.

Dorothy grumbled in frustration and began biting her finger nails. This got the attention of Scarecrow who stopped and turned to her. "Not getting tired, are you?" He asked.

"No, just, how much further?" Dorothy said quickly.

"We've barely gone ten minutes." Scarecrow said cocking an eyebrow in her direction. He was clearly aware of her strange behaviour. "Five minutes before we hit the yellow brick road and another five minutes to get to The Yellow Brick Road."

"What?" Dorothy asked baffled by the confusing statement.

"The Yellow Brick Road is the bar and burlesque show. The owner has some connections with the city, it was a little before my time, so I don't know the details. Anyways those connections let them repave several dozen blocks of the city sidewalks. They used yellow bricks to make yellow brick roads and if you follow any of them, they all lead to the Yellow Brick Road." Scarecrow explained, gesturing ahead down the street. "You can see a few of the bricks up there. It was partly thanks to this marketing campaign that the place has become as popular and well known throughout the city."

True to his word, just ahead was a single yellow brick placed in the sidewalk. A few feet ahead of that were a pair of yellow bricks. The pattern steadily repeated, growing in scale until the sidewalk was almost entirely yellow bricks.

Dorothy didn't know much about construction regulations and laws. However, this seemed like something a lot of neighbouring businesses would have a problem with. It was a little surprising that it would get approved at all.

The pair continued to walk, reaching the scattered end of a yellow brick road shortly. The entire sidewalk was soon covered in a dusty yellow colour. Dorothy had only a few minutes to make her decision before it could be too late.

Her mind raced through the many possibilities for his actions and what his final intentions were. There were too many gaps in her theories to narrow down anything concrete. She felt confident that if he didn't intend her any harm. If he had, he wouldn't have encouraged her to leave or given her the freedom he had.

However, she hadn't explicitly said she was going to look for The Ripper. Currently, if he was the killer, he had no real reason to suspect she'd be looking for him. In spite of this, it was only logical that some who witnessed a murder would go to the police eventually.

A tall building with a large neon sign out front loomed ahead of them. The sign depicted a long road with a suggestive female silhouette walking along it. The twisted neon tubes spelled 'The Yellow Brick Road' just beneath the design. Time was running very thin.

Dorothy placed a hand in her pocket, fingers dancing along the folded knife inside. Taking a breath she stepped up behind Scarecrow. Several other people walked along the yellow sidewalks, and several dozen cars drove through the streets. It was a busy day and he would be unlikely to cause a scene. In spite of this, she was still nervous, but the knife gave her a small sense of comfort.

"Why did you save me?" She asked in a hushed tone so only her could hear.

"What do you mean?" He replied with feigned ignorance.

"You knew about the car and called me away so I wouldn't get involved. You said you

didn't want me to tamper with the scene, but tampered with it yourself later." Dorothy suggested, maintaining her hushed tone.

Scarecrow continued to walk calmly as if nothing was wrong. "That's a rather big leap of logic, doll. Maybe I just changed my mind?"

"That's not a very convincing denial."

Dorothy shot back quickly.

"Maybe it wasn't supposed to be."

"Then why save me? I could go to the police and expose you. I could've left at anytime." Dorothy pressed, desperately wanting an answer.

The two large buildings stood like guardians before the gates of hell. Scarecrow turned abruptly to the left, walking into the narrow alleyway between the buildings. He remained silent as he did, maintain his even walking speed.

Dorothy followed, biting her lip. If he got to far from the crowds he could turn hostile.

"Wait up." She called feigning a friendly tone as she walked hurriedly behind the scarecrow.

He walked casually a dozen meters down the alley before stopping. Dorothy remained close behind him, her heart racing. The pair was quickly isolated from the noise and crowds outside the dark alley. It was as if they'd stepped into their own separate world. A world that left Dorothy at a significant disadvantage.

"I just didn't want anyone else getting caught up in my mistakes." Scarecrow said with a shrug.

Dorothy felt skeptical of the answer but continued to another line of questioning. "Did you kill East?" She decided to be direct, if it came down to it, she felt confident she could take him by force.

"I did not kill East, but I wish I had."

Scarecrow said bitterly. "Now let me ask you a question. Do you plan to kill me with that knife?" He turned pointing a small revolver at Dorothy's gut. He hadn't simply shrugged, he'd pulled a pistol from under his trench coat.

"Well doll? What's it going to be?"

Scarecrow said with a wild and demanding look in his sunken eyes. "You're outsider. You have no friends, no home, no one would even look for you if you disappeared right now!"

Dorothy was stunned, she could overpower him in a brawl, but all he had to do was pull the trigger. He must've gone through her stuff while she was in the shower. That was only way he could have known about the knife. "You looked through my things."

Scarecrow laughed. "I did!"

"Then you're going to kill me, like you did East."

"Kill you?" Scarecrow laughed again.

"No. Don't you get it? You're the perfect detective. You have no connections to this rotten city or it's people. You're completely neutral! The police are corrupt, and the gangs are warring over filth and scraps, but you. You're not involved with any of it. And now the police have declared martial law and locked down the city. You can't go home until the Ripper is found and these crime are exposed. Your only chance is to bring the culprit to light!"

He continued raving in cryptic sentences. "I'm just a dead piece walking on this board. I've been in checkmate ever since I involved myself with East. I can't do anything else but you can! You can clear the filth from the city and drag it into the light!" His mad look was becoming twisted with tears. "This game has been rigged against me from the start, but no one could have expected you! You'll be my gambit in this shit game of life!"

He turned the gun, pressing it under his chin. "Tell Scraps I'm sorry." He said with a sad, maddened smile. "See you later, Dorothy." A deafening blast rang out into the darkening sky.

Interlude II

You feel yourself sink into the couch. It's soft leather is pleasant and relaxing against your back. Hot steam billowed from a round olive coffee mug in your hand. The scent of freshly brewed tea filled the small emerald room. A lovely table sits in front of you, just beyond are a set of green curtains. Light pours across the curtains from the other side, exposing dark silhouettes.

A silhouetted man sits on a plush chair next to a gramophone. Soft piano music echoes from the large speaker. His hands dance in the air like snakes to the beat of the music.

The tall boxy silhouette of a man stands to the opposite side of the gramophone. He carefully pours a fresh pot of tea into a mug. The tall man bows and steps away mechanically, leaving you and alone with Man Behind the Curtain.

"That was a rather tense end to our second act wouldn't you say." The man asked rhetorically, knowing you can't respond. "Let's not keep you waiting for our third act too long. There's still many more faces to meet before the game can truly begin."

The man reaches for his mug, and sips from it flamboyantly. He makes a soft kiss sound with his lips. "Lovely."

"I suppose I shall provide one more rule before we continue on to the third act. I'll invoke Knox's seventh commandment. **Knox's Seventh Commandment. The detective must not himself or herself commit the crime. Dorothy Gale and Jack Pumpkinhead are the detectives of this story. The detectives cannot be the murderer or an accomplice.**" The man behind the curtain said in a firm and commanding voice, which filled the room an an unnatural way.

"I believe I've provided plenty of hints for you at this point. Now let us take the time to meet the rest of our players." The Man Behind the Curtain said, clapping his hands twice.

THIRD TAG – GETTING UP

The yellow cab trembled to a stop in front of a dark building not far from the police station. Jack decided to make a very short stop before going to his other engagement. "Keep the meter running, I'll out in a few minutes." Jack offered. The driver quickly agreed, parking the cab.

Jack hobbled out of the car, leaning on his cane for support. He made his way quickly up the wide stone path to the building. A small flight of stairs led to a pair of glass double doors. The lights were on but fading and in need of replacement.

The door opened smoothly, a small bell announced Jack's arrival. The entrance was sterile like a hospital and gave an unpleasant and sickly feeling. Clean tiles floors, drab walls and an L shaped receptionist desk made up the majority of the room. A few simple chairs were pressed against one wall for anyone waiting. A fake plant was shoved in one corner, a perfect metaphor for the for the feigned pleasant atmosphere it was there to create.

No one sat at the receptionist desk which gave the sterile place an unwelcoming air. Jack was no stranger to this however and walked to the door beyond the receptionist desk and rapped on it several times.

A few moments passed before the door clicked as it was unlocked from the other side. It opened just a crack. The shadow of a face peered from the thin break in the door and frame, illuminated by a dull shaft of light. A cool blue eye met Jack's for just a moment before the door was thrown open in haste.

In the doorway was a slightly chubby woman in a blue medical smock. She had a wide inviting smile across her round squirrel like cheeks. She rubbed her gloved hands together. "Jackie, my friend. How are you being?" She said with a charming and thick accent. Her voice deep and booming which didn't suit her soft appearance.

"I'm very well Margolotte. I'm sorry I don't have time to catch up. I'm running a bit late. I was hoping to talk to the doctor about the latest case." Jack explained quickly.

“Of course, of course. Right this way. Good Glinda told us you might be arriving.” Margolotte said pleasantly before stepping aside.

Jack stepped into a well stocked room with several filing cabinets and a few desks lined with more storage. A few hangers held medical smocks next to a box of spare surgical gloves.

“You are to be needing this.” Margolotte said handing Jack a large smock.

Jack quickly tossed the smock over his clothes, before washing his hands in a metal sink. Once properly sanitized Margolotte lead Jack to the autopsy room.

The long room was a dark grey, with dark tiles. The floor slanted dramatically towards a central drain over which a metal table carried a broken a mangled corpse. Only the legs remained recognizable. The overwhelming stench of blood had saturated the room, seeping into every surface.

A bizarre man sat perched on a metal stool like a gargoyle. His legs were far too long for his body, causing his knees to extend over his head in his hunched position. He was bare foot and had long black toenails. His hair was long and licked back into a dramatic bird like curl which emphasized his bird like crooked nose. He appeared more like a vulture picking over a corpse rather than a doctor performing an autopsy.

The man turned, a pair of magnifying spectacles exaggerated his black eyes. “Jackie, you’ve come for a report, yes?” The doctor said spinning on the stool. “I have good news and bad news. Which would you like to be hearing first?”

“Bad news first.” Jack said with a sigh. He hadn’t been expecting a miracle but it was still disappointing that the autopsy wasn’t going to answer everything.

“I am very little to work with, so I cannot confirm the method of murder, or the victim.” Doctor Pipt said with a disappointed shake of his head.

“What’s the good then?”

“Good news is I am finding wonderful Munchkin restaurant for dinner tonight.” The doctor said with a crooked smile. He remained silent waiting for a response, but when he got none he gave and equally crooked frown. “Jackie it is joke.”

“Sorry Doctor Pipt, I’m in a bit of a rush.” Jack said apologetically.

“Jackie.” Doctor Pipt said in a long drawn out breath that was a sure sign he was about to start a lecture. “It is not good to be so dreary in place like this. They are dreary enough for everyone, yes?” He said gesturing at the corpse with a bony crooked finger.

“Should not being rushing either, not with leg like that.” Doctor Pipt continued. “How is leg been doing.”

“Doctor, Jackie is to be going quickly.” Margolotte interjected to Jack’s relief.

“Right, right. Good news is being I have time of death. Time being between seventy two and thirty six hours ago. Much before time of crushing.” Pipt explained. “Also victim is not to be having drugs or alcohol at the time.”

“Without dental records or face to be making certain, from legs height is to be estimated at one hundred and seventy centimetres. Which is same height as proposed victim, East.” Doctor Pipt took a pair of large metal tweezers from a nearby metal stand. He reached over and pulled at some of the flesh which squished grotesquely. “Final good news being, victim is to be having tattoo on back. Can’t be certain what because of damages being, but tattoo being is certain.”

Jack looked as the doctor revealed a colourful patch of skin that didn’t match the rest of the body. It was torn and mangled beyond recognition but there was certainly a tattoo previously. Jack could only look for a moment before he started to feel sick and turned away. He could still hear the wet squelch as the flesh was released.

“Thanks you Doctor. I’m sorry I can’t stay longer but I really must get to my appointment.” Jack said apologetically, if he hadn’t gotten so caught in his own thoughts earlier he would have talked with the doctor longer. Preferably in a different environment.

“Of course Jackie, you are to being safe now and not to be rushing.” Doctor Pipt said firmly.

“I’ll do my best.” Jack promised with a small smile and nod. “Good night Doctor.” He said with a bit of finality and turned.

“Good night Jackie.” Pipt called back, turning back to the corpse.

Margolotte walked with Jack back through the clinic to the office. She took Jack’s smock, tossing it into a large covered laundry basket. “Jackie, you are to not being stranger, yes?” Margolotte questioned.

“I’ll try not to be.” Jack said feeling a pang of guilt at his sudden and short visit.

Margolotte walked with Jack to the front door, a large smile across her face. “Staying safe now, have good night.” She said cheerily.

Jack opened the front door, the bell chimed overhead. “Thanks Margolotte. Have a good night and stay safe. Keep an eye on the doctor for me.” Jack said with a smile before he turned to leave.

“Will be doing.” Margolotte called as the door shut behind him.

Jack quickly made his way down the stairs and towards the dusty coloured cab that lingered in the street. The cab driver sat quietly hunched in the front seat. Jack pulled the passenger door open, jolting the driver awake.

“Sorry for the wait.” Jack said quickly. “To The Yellow Brick Road.”

The smoking revolver lay scattered on the pavement. A hot cartridge bounced across the ground, disappearing behind a set of trash cans. The dying echo of a gunshot bounced between the buildings, before vanishing into the evening sky.

The scarecrow lay limp on the ground, his body pinned beneath Dorothy. She pressed her knees on his shoulders painfully, holding him still.

Dorothy had leapt on top of him before she even had time to process the situation. Fuelled by instinct alone, Dorothy had wrenched the gun from the scarecrow’s hands. The gun had fired, the hot barrel burning the palm of Dorothy’s hand before the gun was tossed to the side. In that moment her defence training kicked in. She wrapped a leg behind Scarecrow’s knee and forced him to the ground. His coat rattled as he hit the ground. A sharp gasped escaped Scarecrow’s lips from the hard impact.

The two stared at each other for a long moment, both breathing heavily. Time seeming to stretch on endlessly between them.

Scarecrow’s eyes narrowed. A small trickle of blood began to pool and drip at the side of his chin. The bullet had still grazed him, but only slightly. Blood ran down his jawline to his neck, and seeped into his tattered scarf.

“Why did you...” Scarecrow was cut off by a hard slap that reverberated through the alleyway. He went completely silent, stunned by the violent outburst.

“You are not leaving all your bullshit on me you fuck! I am not your damned messenger girl! You can tell Scraps your damned self!” Dorothy screamed. “You saved me to keep me from getting involved in your shit?! Now you’re just going to kill yourself and leave me to clean up your mess?! Fuck you!”

“You self centred fuck! I’ve known you less then a day and you want me to get involved in your gang war and drug trafficking?! Why the fuck should I?! Because you used my name once? Fuck off! Never say my name again you asshole!” Dorothy was filled with rage and emotion that poured from her like an erupting volcano.

“You think killing yourself will make things better? Or was just a quick way to get away from your problems?!” She was quickly losing herself in forgotten feelings. “If you really cared about anyone but yourself you wouldn’t have killed yourself! You would’ve stayed here and fought through the bullshit! Instead you left, you stupid bitch! You left without caring about the pain it would cause!”

Scarecrow listened as she screamed, not looking her in the eye. Unable to face the anger and pain he had caused. He wasn’t naive, he could hear the change in her words. This went beyond him. “Doll.” He said quietly, barely audible over Dorothy’s screams. “You don’t know the damage I’ve done.”

Another slap. “You can’t fix it if you’re dead you brainless idiot!” She yelled back without hesitation. In the back of her mind, she knew how pretentious it was to say. She didn’t know how he felt or what he’d been through. Her feels were projected on broken information, yet she had to fight against his selfish actions.

She gripped the sides of Julian’s letterman jacket tightly. Fingers digging into the plush cloth, seeking comfort and advice. Julian had been so

much better at understanding than her. He was empathetic and insightful. He knew just what to say and how to. He would remain calm but it never felt forced or fake. Dorothy wasn't like that. Her emotions spilled from her like a miasma.

Dorothy breathed shakily, rising to her feet. She walked towards the fallen revolver, smoke no longer trailing from the barrel. Bending over she picked it up carefully. She flicked the safety back on before tucking it awkwardly into her jean shorts. It felt awkward but she no better place for it.

The scarecrow remained on the ground unsure if he should get up or just remain still. He felt like he'd been cornered by a wild animal, unsure if it was better to play dead or run. From the ground he looked in Dorothy's direction but continued to avoid her eyes.

The two continued to stare vaguely in each others directions but refusing to make eye contact. An unpleasant silence cut between them like a guillotine. They stood there for a frozen moment, neither able to speak.

"You can tell Scraps you're sorry yourself." Dorothy said her voice full of venom. "I have a dog to find, so either get up or go home."

Scarecrow got to his feet roughly, his knees trembling. He remained quiet, unsure if he should speak. Brushing his long hands against his coat to straighten it. He adjusted his scarf, his hands eventually trailing to the tender wound on his chin. He held it, wincing at the sting.

"I should hold onto that." He said, finally mustering some words. After all, it was his gun.

Dorothy gave him a dirty look. "The first rule of owning a gun is not pointing it at anything you aren't intending to shoot! An idiot that can't even follow that shouldn't have a gun to begin with." It was a simple lesson that had stuck with her for years. Uncle Henry and her father had both been extremely strict about teaching firearm safety and respect. She flinched, startled by how similar she sounded to them. Her father's lesson mixed with Henry's venom in a foul way.

The scarecrow opened his mouth to protest but quickly shut it again saying nothing. He crossed his arms, looking down at the ground. His eyes refused to meet Dorothy's.

Dorothy's brow tightened inward as she struggled with conflicting feelings of sympathy and anger. She said nothing else, pulling her jacket tight to her body. Her footsteps echoed quietly between the concrete buildings as she walked back towards the yellow sidewalk. She didn't check if Scarecrow was following her. She simply walked, quietly and coldly away.

Scarecrow waited quietly as Dorothy left. He wasn't thinking of anything, he just remained frozen. Locked in an endless moment of senseless contemplation. It wasn't until Dorothy had reached the sidewalk that his body made a choice. It wasn't conscious thought that pushed him forward. His feet carried him away on their own, as if possessed. Before he knew it he was walking down the street behind Dorothy, his hands pressed tightly into his coat pockets.

"A brainless guy like me can't help you, my hands are tied." Scarecrow said a combination of shame and discretion kept his voice hushed. "All I can do is be a guide to the Yellow Brick Road."

Dorothy didn't trust him at all, but she needed someone who knew the city. If he was with her, even if he refused to speak directly about last night, he had been giving cryptic clues. She might be able to piece together the situation with a little more information. Speaking with Scraps could give her the last clues she needed.

"Lead the way." Dorothy said dryly, slowing her pace so the scarecrow could walk ahead.

Scarecrow picked up his pace, walking towards the bright neon sign. A tall black door was set in a deep door frame. Several stanchions held gold rope along the side of the building. The line to the bar was empty, but a slender shouldered doorman still guarded the entrance.

A pair of wide windows looked into a small bar lounge. Bizarre patrons of all shapes and sizes sat on tall bar stools with drinks in their hands. A large boxy television with a tiny rounded screen played a blurry television program.

A sign sat in the window, elegant script read 'Burlesque 3 Show Nightly Standard Seats 10¢ World Class Singing and Dancing Star of the Stage China Girl'

The doorman wore a dark velvet suit. A black leopard pattern ran across the jacket and pants. A bright yellow vest was worn beneath it along with a white shirt and mustard coloured tie. The man was tall and elegant with the round face of a leopard. His feline pupils shrank to narrow slits as Scarecrow and Dorothy approached.

Scarecrow stepped up to the bouncer. The two exchanged nods of greeting. The bouncer turned to Dorothy giving her a long look up and down, as if he was appraising a piece of artwork.

"You are quite young to be coming to a place like this, yes?" The leopard said, his voice was buttery smooth with a slight lilt. He turned to Scarecrow cocking an eyebrow suspiciously. "Don't tell me you've..."

Dorothy quickly cut the man off, "No, no. We're not. I'm just here to hear China sing." Dorothy said trying to change the subject.

"Ah, she is a wonderful talent." The leopard says with a purr. "Not to my taste of course but she has a lovely voice."

"Doll here is an aspiring dancer actually. She was hoping to speak with Lion about a job. Is he in today?" Scarecrow cut in, much to Dorothy's shock and frustration.

"Yes he is, he is performing tonight but you can probably speak after the show, Miss Doll." The tall leopard said turning to Dorothy.

"It's Dorothy actually."

"Miss Dorothy, my apologies. I am Gugu the Doorman. This place is my kingdom, please treat it and my family with respect and you shall be given the same." He says with a flamboyant gesture of a hand. "The standard seats are ten cents. The lounge is free but we do not sell alcohol to anyone under eighteen."

Dorothy took a small breath. "I'll stay out of trouble." She promised.

"Scarecrow." Gugu said in a hushed voice leaning in. He attempted to whisper but Dorothy continued to hear every word. "Your client is here I believe, as well as many officers. Do try to keep a low profile if you would."

Scarecrow placed a hand on the back of his neck, rubbing it nervously. "Thanks for the warning Mac." He said in a whisper before continuing in a normal tone. "I'll keep doll out of trouble."

The scarecrow raised a hand in a small wave as he passed the threshold. Dorothy followed behind keep her hands in her pockets. She stayed close to Scarecrow, doing her best to conceal the revolver at her side.

"Your client?" She asked quietly.

Scarecrow paused, "Just another life to ruin."

The interior was beautifully decorated in bright golds and yellows. Patterned wallpaper lines the walls, accented by dark wood wainscoting. The hallway was wide and lavish, it gave the feeling of walking into a palace. The sound of muffled piano music came from behind a wide set of double doors at the end of the hallway. To the right was an open archway that lead to the bar and lounge.

At the end of the hall was an elegant podium. Behind it a tall man with a horse's head stood. He had a golden horn protruding dangerously from his forehead. Narrow eyes and a sharp white suit gave him an intellectual appearance.

Scarecrow approached the unicorn man, placing two coins on the podium. "Two standard seats, Loo."

The unicorn took the coins, placing them in a metal safe box in the back of the podium. He then handed Scarecrow two paper tickets, each with geometric designs and the word 'Admission' in black ink.

Scarecrow passed one ticket to Dorothy. "Head inside, I'll be right in. Just need to talk with a friend first." He turned and walked through the archway into the open bar.

Dorothy considered following or protesting but decided against it. The bar gave her an uneasy feeling and she'd already had a close call earlier that day. She turned towards the double doors. Loo the unicorn extended an arm and opened them. Dorothy walked through, hunching over as if it would make her harder to spot.

The doors swung open into a large room, dimly lit by ornate sconces. Hazy air loomed at the threshold, smelling of alcohol and tobacco. The room was filled by seating. Six round tables, covered in dark table clothes, are surrounded by black wooden chairs. Flickering candles sit in

glass bowls as fine centrepieces. Against several walls are bench seating with small round tables between them, decorated with candle centrepieces. A long couch surrounds a semicircular table near a large stage.

The semicircular stage stands proud as the focal point of the room. Brilliant curtains hang like a golden waterfall behind. Bright round light bulbs run along the walls, framing the stage, filling it with light that draws the eye.

A sleek black piano sits against the left wall. A broad shouldered ape sits hunched over the keys. His large fingers danced across the keys with impressive skill. The soft music that filled the room, attempted to cover up the dirty atmosphere.

Around a dozen patrons sat at various spots throughout the room. Mostly men, dressed in fine suits and well tailored coats. A few women sit, wearing equally refined dresses.

Several waiters and waitresses casually flirt with the patrons while taking drink orders. The waitresses were dressed in sleeveless, sequined bodysuits, that accented their chest with a deep neckline. A series of ruffles create a half skirt that is completely exposed in the front. They wore pointed high-heeled shoes and sleek tan pantyhose. Their hair was done in elaborate curls, pinned in place by eccentric feather hair pieces.

The waiters wore white body suits that imitated a ruffled shirt. They had puffy sleeves that ended in a ring of ruffled fabric around the wrist. The front was split by a deep v-neck collar, framed by ruffled fabric. A white string laced the collar loosely shut, leaving their chests exposed. They wore ridiculous, cropped black suit jackets, accenting their shoulders.

Dorothy suddenly felt extremely exposed and inappropriately dressed in her jean shorts, cropped short sleeve graphic t-shirt and varsity jacket. She hurried to an empty seat and sat down, hugging her jacket tight to herself. No one seemed to have noticed her entrance, much to her relief.

Scanning the room for Toto she was simultaneously relieved and disappointed to not see him. At least she wouldn't have to speak with him in a place like this, but she was still stuck in the same situation.

A particularly large waiter soon noticed the new guest and strode towards her. He had dark orange and black striped fur. His head was that of a tiger, with sloped cheeks and a powerful muzzle. His broad shoulders stretched his shirt and accented his bestial form. The man walked in wide, unnatural steps which dragged attention down to his hips. The slip of fabric from his bodysuit that clung between his thighs did little to provide any decency.

The sight made Dorothy cringe inwardly, forcing her to turn her head uncomfortably to avoid the sight. She did her best to maintain eye contact but the seated position combined with the man's imposing height made it difficult. The closer he got the more difficult it was to meet his eyes. Thankfully as he reached the table he leaned forward to look Dorothy in the eye.

"Welcome to the Yellow Brick Road, Miss. I'm Hungry Tiger. Can I get you anything to drink, or provide some company?" His voice was a sultry rumble. He seemed catch on to Dorothy's unease as he quickly added. "Perhaps you'd prefer one of the ladies?"

Dorothy shook her head. "I am looking for someone actually." She dug a hand into her bag, a wrestled her sketchbook free. Pages rustled as she flipped to the drawing of Toto, turning the book to Hungry. "Have you seen anyone that looks like this around? His name's Toto."

Tiger raised his heavy brow curiously, but remained silent as he examined the drawing. He stood back up, exposing his barely concealed crotch once more. He placed a hand on his hip with a somewhat flamboyant and flirty flair. "Yeah, I've seen him around. Comes by Friday nights to listen to China sing."

"Like tonight?" Dorothy said leaning back to look Hungry in his bright yellow eyes.

"That's right." The large, tiger man seemed to take the hint and gracefully crouched down so he could look Dorothy in the eyes. "I get the feeling you're not here for the sightseeing or drinks."

Dorothy gave a nod, "Yeah, sorry. I've been looking for Toto and got sent here. Didn't really know what to expect. I would've dressed up otherwise." She rambled quickly, forcing a

laugh. She didn't want to offend the imposing beast of a man. "I'm Dorothy by the way."

"Pleasure to meet you Dorothy." He leaned in and began to whisper. "Lot of cops have been poking their noses around here. With the curfew I don't know if your man will show up or not. If not, you talk to China after the show. She usually looks after him and might be able to point you in a direction."

"Now, can I get you anything to eat or drink Miss." He said returning to a normal speaking volume.

Dorothy gave a nervous laugh, sighing. "Anything... complimentary with my admission?" She said with an unsure tone, painfully aware that she had no money to pay or tip.

Hungry seemed to understand and got up with a nod. "There's a free drink if you've got ID."

Dorothy laughed nervously again. She could feel a deep desire for a drink welling up inside her. This whole damned place was just a series of horrible temptations. "Water, or a soda would be great." Dorothy forced the words out, feeling the reassuring weight of the jacket on her shoulders.

Hungry gave a nod. "I'll see what we have." The tiger rumbled, with an understanding nod.

Jack sat on a plush bar stool, leaning over a long sleek bar. The crude static filled noise of the television stung his ears. He waited patiently, only half watching the actors on the screen. The smell of smoke and alcohol filled his nose. He swirled a short glass of bourbon absentmindedly.

A man with a slight gut stood behind the bar. He was dressed in a ruffled white shirt which hugged his belly. A black tie hung sharply around his neck, matching his well tailored suit jacket. He had the round head of a bear, with brown velvety fur. His rugged, square jaw and muzzle contrasted his soft sunken eyes.

"What's on your mind Jack?" The bartender said, pouring a glass of scotch for another patron.

Jack wouldn't know where to begin, even if he could answer. "Same as everyone else." He said vaguely. "How you been Bru?"

"I'm just fine, Jack. Roof over my head, good job and a good lay." Bru responded in a low grumble. "A few monkeys came poking their noses in here earlier but we sent them on their way."

That got Jack's attention, the flying monkeys were West's goons. Expendable drones of the queen bee. Did West already know about East's death? How did she find out? The death hadn't been publicly announced yet. "Did they say anything?" Jack pressed.

"They mostly just scoped the place out. Asked some of the girls if they'd seen East and how she was doing." Bru said, exposing his sharp teeth angrily. "Really freaked some of the girls out, so Gugu and I sent 'em on their way."

"Were they threatening anyone?" Jack asked concerned. A protection racket was West's main source of influence, she wouldn't send her goons into East's territory without a reason. It was extremely unlikely that they just wanted a friendly chat.

"Not directly, but the girls got the feeling they weren't asking out of kindness." Bru said pouring another drink.

"Things get violent?"

"They aren't a talkative bunch." Bru said plainly.

Jack didn't want to push too much more, just in case he let on that something had happened to East. "Hopefully they don't come back."

"They always do." The bartender said bitterly. He went silent, considering his next words carefully. "I was a little hopefully this would have come to a clean resolution."

"Why's that?" Jack asked confused, the feud between East and West had been going on for years, why would it change now?

"I heard they talked a little over a week ago. Thought they might work together to deal with this Ripper business." Bru's voice was filled with disappointment.

Jack considered the implications. "You don't know what they were talking about for sure though?"

Bru shook his large head. "No, just happened so soon after the first murder. Maybe I was just being hopeful." He confessed with a shrug.

Before Jack could continue, a bar stool screeched along the floor as a new figure sat next to him. A tall thin man, with a burlap face and long patchwork trench coat. He had a small fresh cut on his chin and a dirty scarf.

Scarecrow held a hand up. "I'll take a scotch." He said before turning to Jack.

Bru poured a small glass, sliding it to Scarecrow silently. This was a well practised routine at this point. The bear walked to the other side of the bar and began casually chatting with some of the other patrons. Leaving Jack and Scarecrow to their business.

Jack reached into his jacket, exposing the gun holsters under his arms. Digging through an inner pocket he pulled out a wallet and carefully handed Scarecrow a small bundle of paper bills. He remained silent, but his expression was one of deep frustration.

Scarecrow took the money casually, his motions memorized from years of repetition. Reaching into his own coat he pulled several vials of liquid from inside. He handed the vials secretly to Jack, while he sipped scotch with his free hand. The pair barely exchanged eye contact during the exchange, both pretending to watch the television.

There was a loud swallow as Scarecrow drank the scotch rapidly. He went to stand up and leave, having concluded his business but was stopped. Jack grabbed Scarecrow's thin wrist, urging him to remain seated.

"I'm looking for someone." Jack said in a hushed voice, turning to face Scarecrow. "A girl, with twin braids and a blue jacket. You seen anyone like that, Crow?" Jack's eyes locked with Scarecrow's, watching with predatory intent.

Scarecrow felt his voice get caught in his throat like a lump. "Can't say I have." He forced out, swallowing. Jack didn't miss the hesitation and sudden discomfort Scarecrow was experiencing. "I can keep an eye out for her."

"You wouldn't be lying to me would you?" Jack pressed.

"No Jack. Why would I lie about that?" Scarecrow said quickly, but with a forced calmness.

Jack didn't have proof that Scarecrow knew the girl, so he had no way to corner him. He decided to gamble. "Well if you see her, let her

know I found something I think belongs to her." Jack said nonchalantly, backing off entirely.

Scarecrow seemed to tense and relax simultaneously, his face contorted in confusion. "I'll let them know if I see them. That all, Jack?"

Jack released Scarecrow's wrist, grabbed his glass of whisky and drank heartily. "For now." Pumpkinhead replied quietly.

Tiger returned with a tall glass filled with a fizzing clear liquid. He placed the glass down gently. "Sparkling water for the lady." He announced.

Dorothy gave a small smile and took a sip. The liquid burned at her tongue and tasted terrible. She forced a smile through the terrible drink and quickly placed it back down. As the tiger man turned away, Dorothy called to him. "Hungry."

"Yes, Miss?" He turned returning his attention to her.

Dorothy swallowed hesitantly as she chose her words. "Would you give me some company until my friend arrives?"

He smiled surprised but eager. "It would be my pleasure." Grabbing a chair, he sat down gracefully. He had a towering frame that made Dorothy look minuscule by comparison.

"I'm sorry if this isn't the usual conversation you get. I'm just curious if you know anything about the lock down." Dorothy said, not wishing to waste time.

Hungry seemed surprised by the topic and leaned back in his chair. "That's certainly not the romantic conversation we usually get around here." The tiger said, his muzzle twisted into a disappointed frown.

Romantic is far from the word she would use to describe this place or the conversations had here. Still she wasn't surprised by the response. "I'm sorry, I know it's an unpleasant topic. I'm just a little new to town and it came as a real shock this morning."

Hungry thought for a moment, seemingly torn between how much he should say and how much this conversation was worth to him. It was clear the staff survived on tips, and from the clientele the waitress probably did a lot better

then the waiters. Eventually, Hungry conceded and began to explain the situation as he knew it.

“This isn’t a pleasant story. Warning you now.” He said with a much firmer tone than Dorothy had expected.

Dorothy nodded in agreement, but remained quiet.

The tiger took a breath, rolling his eyes slightly as he steadied himself. “About eight years ago there was this guy. People called him Nick the Chopper, cause he chopped the hearts out of his victims. Over ten people went missing or were found dead in just over two months.” He spoke in a hushed tone as if merely telling the tale was taboo.

“Nick was supposedly captured and placed in a maximum security prison. But during his capture the former police chief was killed.” Hungry continued, growing more invested in the gossip. “Last week a police officer was killed and his heart was cut out. Now people are wondering if Nick escaped or maybe he was never caught to begin with. The ECPD are trying to keep things quiet which is real suspicious if you ask me.”

“I never really trusted the ECPD, but after that, it just ain’t right. I wouldn’t be surprised if they were behind all the deaths and Nick was just a fall man.” Hungry continued, his voice growing more and more bitter with each word.

“These are crazy times, and the craziest thing is...”

A thin hand landed on Dorothy’s shoulder abruptly, causing her to yelp and jump in her seat. She turned violently towards the perpetrator, seeing Scarecrow leaning towards her. His lips pressed to her ear. “Don’t make a scene.” He whispered almost inaudibly.

Dorothy frowned as Scarecrow took a seat opposite Hungry. She turned to the tiger apologetically. “Sorry Hungry, thank you for the...Fuck!”

Before she could finish soda water splashed from the table onto your legs. Scarecrow had knocked over the glass clumsily. Dorothy glared at the thin man as he stood up, a look of feigned apology on his face. “Doll, we gotta get you cleaned up. I’m sure Scraps wouldn’t mind sharing a spare dress again.” He said turning to Hungry. “Is that alright tiger?”

Dorothy restrained her anger, biting her tongue. “Let’s go. Thanks for the story Hungry. I’m sure my friend can give you a big tip later.”

“I appreciate it.” Hungry smiled, but his brow furrowed apologetically.

Scarecrow removed his trench coat, slinging it around Dorothy’s shoulders protectively. Scarecrow and Hungry lead Dorothy through a service hallways. The unfinished hall was lined with water pipes and several doors. Cluttered shelves covered in props and dirty clothes made the place feel cramped.

They arrived at a metal door with a small plaque with the words ‘Dressing Room’ etched on the surface. Tiger knocked on the door with a large hand.

“Who is it?” A sharp demanding voice called from the other side.

“Hungry, Miss China. There’s a small accident. Would it be possible for a client to borrow some clothes?”

Scarecrow rolled his eyes, cutting in. “China, it’s Scarecrow. A friend spilled some water, she just needs to borrow one of Scraps’ outfits while it dries.”

The door was thrown open, a slender woman with an hourglass figure stood on the other side. She had porcelain skin and articulated joints like a doll. Her hair was long and beautifully curled. She wore an elegant red dress that flowed brilliantly. A large feather boa ran around her neck and down her sides. Large red feathers formed a peacock like fan on the back of the dress.

She was stunningly beautiful, but her expression was one of ugly contempt. Her arms were crossed and she held her nose up as if the world and it’s inhabitants were all beneath her. She was the picture of a spoiled diva.

“Fine.” Her voice was sultry but there was a harshness to her tone. “Just don’t make a mess of my things.” She snapped, looking down at Dorothy.

Dorothy’s natural desire to fight was silenced by China’s commanding presence. Instead Dorothy simply wrinkled her nose and mouth into a face that screamed a silent ‘fuck you too’. China responded with a similar expression before striding from the room. Her enormous

plumage smacking everyone as she walked passed. Her hips swayed seductively as she walked down the hall and out of sight.

“Not gonna get much about Toto from her am I?” Dorothy thought out loud.

“She can be a little tense before a show.” Hungry said quietly, though it was clear he was restraining himself. “I’ll go fetch a towel.” Hungry then quickly started to walk back down the hall, leaving Dorothy and Scarecrow alone.

“So what the fuck?” Dorothy snapped turning to Scarecrow once the tiger was out of sight.

“There’s a detective looking for you, and probably the police too. Go change, Scraps’ wardrobe is that one there.” He leaned into the dressing room, pointing to a tall oak wardrobe against the far wall. “Change your hair too. They’re looking for a girl in two braids and a blue jacket.”

Dorothy considered protesting but walked into the dressing room, closing the door behind her. The room was filled with several mirrored desks, covered in make-up containers and hair products. Several racks of clothing, both elaborate and revealing lined the room. A few wardrobes lined one wall.

Dorothy walked to the wardrobes, each had a small paper tag on them with a name written on it in marker. ‘Scraps’ was written on the one Scarecrow had pointed out. Opening the double doors revealed a handful of cocktail dresses and bizarre costumes. Feathers and sequins covered almost every inch of fabric.

Digging through the costumes, Dorothy grabbed the least revealing dress she could. She felt a strange sense of unease and sympathy for Scraps. She didn’t know how Scraps felt or what had lead her here. Dorothy immediately felt a sense of guilt for her condescending thoughts. It wasn’t here life to make judgments on.

She carefully closed the wardrobe and walked back towards the door. She began to change quickly.

“How’s it going in there?” Scarecrow asked through the door.

“Fine.” Dorothy said, the frustration clear in her voice.

The door cracked slightly and an arm reached through, holding a thin towel. Dorothy took it and the arm retracted slowly. The door shut with a click.

“Thanks.” Dorothy forced out reluctantly.

“The detective that’s looking for you. I think they found your *cellphone*. He used to be with ECPD but quit a few years ago. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was working with them again. They’re all probably looking for you.” Scarecrow explained.

“Great.” Dorothy said sarcastically, wiping away the sparkling water. “And how do you know this detective?”

“He’s a poppy addict. I supply him once a week.” Scarecrow admitted.

“What’s poppy?” Dorothy asked, though she had her suspicions that it was the same thing Scraps’ had taken.

“A painkiller, officially. A type of morphine, East is... was the main supplier, I just move it.” He explained correcting himself. “It also provides a pretty significant high.”

Dorothy paused. “You supply Scraps too?”

The ensuing silence provided the answer.

“Do you love her?”

“Who knows.” Scarecrow said, not providing anything further. Even without seeing his face, his tone made his conflicting feelings clear.

This topic wasn’t getting Dorothy anywhere useful however, so she decided to try a different topic. “Did East have any enemies?”

“The ECPD. West and her Flying Monkeys. Anyone under her protection racket, or hurt by the drugs she was spreading.” Scarecrow said nonchalantly. “She had a lot enemies. West was probably her biggest enemy though.”

“The Flying Monkeys were a big gang back in the day. About eight years ago East and West stopped playing nice and the gang split into the East’s Munchkin gang and West’s Flying Monkeys.”

Dorothy thought a moment. “Eight years ago, that was the same time as the Chopper case, right?”

“Yeah. Mombi was the original leader of the Flying Monkeys. Her daughters were South, East and West. South was arrested and committed

suicide in her cell a long time ago.” Scarecrow explained with some indifference. “During the Chopper case a lot of people went missing, Mombi was one of his many victims. Without Mombi keeping East and West in line a schism occurred and the gang split in two.”

“East took over the poppy trafficking, while West took over the protection racket. East controlled most of the Munchkin district and had ties with Lion here. West took over the Winkie district.” Scarecrow stopped at that. “Let me ask you something.”

“Shoot.” Dorothy said as she considered the information Scarecrow had provided.

“Who’s R.G.?”

Dorothy stopped. He had gone through her things, so he must have seen the inscription on her pocket knife. “My dad.” She said simply. “What do I do with my clothes?”

“You can hang them in Scraps’ wardrobe if you want, Scraps’ won’t mind. We can grab them before we leave.” He said, but curiosity urged further questions. “He’s not around?”

There was no response, Dorothy froze at the question. She hung her clothes, taking special care to carefully hang Julian’s jacket. She held Scarecrow’s gun awkwardly. The dress had no pockets and was fairly tight, it would be impossible to conceal. She slipped her pocket knife into her shoe, it was uncomfortable but would be fine for a short time.

Biting her fingernails compulsively Dorothy returned to the door. The doorknob turned slowly, with a squeak and she opened it.

“He was killed in the line of duty when I was ten.” The words came out flat and without feeling. It was simply a fact. She held the gun out, holding the barrel, handle towards Scarecrow. “I don’t have pockets.”

Scarecrow took the gun slowly, placing it in the holster at his side. Dorothy returned to the room, retrieved Scarecrow’s trench coat and handed it to him. He slung the coat over his shoulders, the sides dropped to conceal his holster. A long silence passed between them that neither broke.

“Crow, Dorothy?” A voice called from down the hall surprised. Scraps was hurrying

down the hall towards the dressing room. “What are you doing back here?” She asked confused.

“I spilled a drink, and offered doll here a change of clothes. I hope it’s okay.” Scarecrow explained, not entirely lying but sparing a lot of details.

“Of course.” Scraps said with a smile, as if it was ridiculous that he be concerned at all. “Sorry he’s such a klutz.” The patchwork woman said as she turned to Dorothy.

“It’s no problem. I’m sorry I keep taking your clothes.” Dorothy apologized, feeling suddenly uncomfortable.

“It’s really no trouble.” Scraps said reassuringly.

“Actually, I was feeling very under dressed to begin with. Scarecrow didn’t mention how formal everyone was going to be.” Dorothy said a little hesitantly. “Do you think you could help me with my hair?”

Scraps lit up at the prospect. “I’d be happy to!” Scraps said, utterly delighted. She leaned up to Scarecrow, pressing her lips gently on his stitched cheek. “You go sit down, we’ll be out soon.”

Scarecrow’s stitched mouth curled into a guilty smile, he remained quiet and walked down the hall.

Scraps lead Dorothy into the dressing room eagerly. She took Dorothy by the hand and sat her down in front of one of the dressers. A large mirror with several bright lights illuminated the pair’s faces.

Dorothy ran her fingers through her braids, pulling out the hair ties. Her hair flowed in waves from being braided so frequently. She ran her fingers through her curls but they bounced back defiantly.

Scraps grabbed a small box of hair accessories which jingled together. Plastic curlers, hair ties, ribbons and bobby pins filled the box, organized by small cardboard dividers. She placed the box on the desk, then opened a drawer revealing a few brushes and combs.

“What would you like to do?” Scraps said excitedly, she had a bright look to here. It was a stark contrast to how Dorothy had last seen her. “We could do something really elaborate if you

want. I think there are some spare hair clips around somewhere.”

“Maybe just something a little simple. I don’t want to take up all your time.” Dorothy said a little overwhelmed by Scraps sudden energy.

Scraps seemed a little disappointed, but smiled anyways. “Alright. I do need to get ready soon. How about we just a nice ribbon and give your hair a bit more volume?”

“Sure, whatever you think will help me fit in.” Dorothy said as she continued to run her fingers through her hair.

“Is it alright if I get started?” Scraps asked, not wanting to impose herself on Dorothy.

“Alright. Sorry I don’t really do a lot with my hair so I’m a little dense when it comes to all this.” Dorothy apologized.

Scraps grabbed a large brush and began carefully flattening Dorothy’s knotted waves of hair. “Don’t apologize. You’re in good hands!” Scraps said confidently.

The patchwork girl began to expertly style Dorothy’s hair. A whirlwind of hair clips, hair spray and brushes began to refine Dorothy’s hair into a nest of curls. As Scraps finished pinning the right half of Dorothy’s hair in place, a knock at the door interrupted them.

Scraps turned towards the door a little surprised. “How is it?”

A muffled voice cut through the door. “Hungry. That you Scraps?”

“Come in! It’s open.” Scraps said a wide smile cutting across her face.

The door opened slowly, with some hesitation. A large framed man, with a tiger’s head entered. He had a large smile split open his muzzle, revealing his jagged teeth. He walked into the dressing room casually, and quickly made his way towards Dorothy and Scraps.

Dorothy watched in the mirrors reflection and Hungry wrapped his arms around Scraps. She hugged him back, both seemed delighted to be reunited. “I just came to grab the towel. I didn’t realize you were back today Scraps.” His voice had lost it’s characteristic growl and now just sounded like a happy purr.

“Only a half day, I’m back to work properly tomorrow.” Scraps explained returning to running a comb through Dorothy’s hair. She

pinned another wave in place with a metal bobby pin.

“I’m glad to see you back. How are you feeling after everything?” Hungry asked a look of concern spread across his face.

Scraps seemed hesitant for a moment but smiled reluctantly. “I’m doing alright. I can’t say I’m upset, but it was a little scary.” She sounded very guilty at her response.

Hungry squeezed her shoulder gently, attempt to comfort Scraps. Dorothy meanwhile, remained quiet, feeling like an awkward third wheel. She did her best to avoid eavesdropping but it was impossible at this proximity.

“How have you been Tiger? Anything new with your girl?” Scraps said forcing a change of subject. She elbowed Tiger’s well defined stomach playfully.

Hungry seemed flustered by the question and look away, covering his face with a hand. He looked like an embarrassed puppy. The response contrasted absurdly with Hungry’s imposing and powerful appearance. Dorothy chuckled quietly under her breath, trying to restrain herself. Mercifully, Scraps also chuckled.

“Well, you know. It’s been really nice, I don’t want to say it’s serious or anything.” Hungry trailed off a little wistfully. “But maybe someday, I don’t know. She just makes me feel alive again, and even though we aren’t happy with our work we’re making things work.” He rambled almost incoherently.

Scraps just smiled and listened. “I’m glad you finally found someone. After South...” She trailed off realize she may have misspoke.

Tiger got quite, his eyes glanced to Dorothy. “Yeah, but it’s in the past.” He said taking a deep steadying breath. “I’ll always have a place for her in my heart, but I’ve got a whole life ahead of me.” He said forcing a smile.

“I’m happy for you.” Scraps turned and hugged Tiger again, planting her face against his large chest. Tiger wrapped his arms around her and the two shared a quiet moment.

“I shouldn’t keep you.” Tiger finally said, breaking the silence. He pulled away and walked over to where Dorothy had discarded the towel. He grabbed it and headed for the door. “Break a leg, Scraps.” He said with a happy purr.

Scraps gave a small wave. "Thanks. Good luck out there." She called as Tiger gently shut the door behind him.

"Thanks for the towel." Dorothy called back a little too late.

Scraps stood still for a moment, before remembering Dorothy's presence. "Sorry about that." Scraps said quickly returning her attention to Dorothy.

"It's alright." Dorothy said quickly. "Don't apologize. He seems like a nice guy."

"Hungry's very sweet." She said as she began to pin more of Dorothy's hair in place. The simple look growing more and more complex with each gesture of her patchwork hand. "He was in a bad relationship a while back, and it ended even worse. It's good he's getting back on that saddle." She made a confident gesture with her fists.

Dorothy hesitated. "Are you okay?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?" Scraps seemed a little confused or was she hopeful.

Dorothy struggled to find the right way to ask. She didn't want to pry but if Scraps was off work and on painkillers maybe something had happened. Maybe it didn't matter, but Dorothy wanted to help if she could. Scraps had been nothing but kind and generous and had expected nothing in return. If she was in trouble Dorothy wanted to help.

"I just... sorry. I'm prying. Hungry mentioned you were off work for a while and..." She trailed off for a moment, unsure if she should mention the poppy. "Earlier I you were on poppy... right?"

Scraps' hand stopped moving and she hesitated. Dorothy immediately began to regret asking at all. "You... you know what we do here, right?"

Dorothy had suspicions but didn't want to say them herself. "Scarecrow said it's a burlesque show, and bar." She explained, acting dumb.

Scraps began to brush Dorothy's hair again, as if the act gave her some confidence to speak. Something to distract her from the words that came out of her mouth. "I sing... but that's mostly a front. We also provide an evening of company to men and woman." Scraps explained indirectly. "Last week, the Ripper's second victim

was a man named Tik-Tok. He was a regular of mine."

"I'm sorry..." Dorothy said, feeling a little guilty for her assumptions and for bringing up such a strained topic.

"Nothing to be sorry for. I feel bad that someone was killed, but he wasn't a good person." Scraps said with a dark, unexpected bitterness in her voice. "But the poppy. It just makes me feel better. Is that wrong?" Scraps said quickly, her words were twitchy and strung together as if an entirely different person had taken over. "It just helps with the pain! Are you judging me for it? I thought you were going to be different. I thought you might understand."

Scraps' hands pulled at Dorothy's hair painfully. Dorothy yelped and grabbed at Scraps' wrists, trying to resist her violent tugging. "Scraps! That hurts." In her seated position she could only struggle weakly, trying to stand. Scraps continued to rave and rant in wild irritation. "Scraps!"

The patchwork hands released Dorothy's hair. Scraps stepped back, looking at herself in the mirror horrified by her outburst. In an instant she shifted back, like Jekyll and Hyde. She covered her face with her hands, and began to mutter apologies. "I'm so sorry Dorothy. I didn't mean it."

Dorothy stood up quickly, and pressed herself against the desk. Trying to stay away from Scraps. Her brow curled inward, a look of scorn and disgust split across her face. Her hand instinctively reached for her neck. She rubbed the black choker, as if it would calm the growing desire to vomit. She wasn't disgusted by Scraps, but by herself. She was disgusted by the monsters that had resided in both of them.

With some hesitance Dorothy stepped up to Scraps, placing her hands on the patchwork girl's shoulders. "It'll be okay Scraps. I'm not upset." She said quietly, trying her best to be comforting.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you." Scraps cried again, choking on restrained sobs. "Can you just get me my box? In the bottom drawer." Scraps pointed a shaky cloth finger at the vanity desk.

“Sure Scraps.” Dorothy said with a good deal of hesitation in her voice. She released Scraps reluctantly and stepped back to the desk.

She opened the drawer, find a small jewellery box. A small gold key remained in the lock, making the lock irrelevant. Opening the lid she saw several vials of the foggy liquid. Tantalizing and pure.

Scraps’ last dose wore off no more then a couple of hours ago. Dorothy glanced back at her nervously. Dorothy began to count Scraps’ symptoms mechanically. Agitation. Sweating. Dilated pupils. Shaking. Cravings. Anxiety. All these in such a short time meant she was likely dependant on it. She needed a doctor and place away from everything if she was going to get clean. None of which Dorothy could provide now.

“I could take some with her.” A voice pushed at the back of Dorothy’s mind like a demon. “There’s plenty for us both.”

Dorothy flinched at the thought, taking one glass vial from the box before shutting it. “Scraps. Before I give you this, can I tell you a story?”

FOURTH TAG – SLAM

One year earlier at an abandoned warehouse that intoxicating lights and sounds of a secret show called to Dorothy. She had gone with several friends, who gathered around her like clinging shadows. The hiss of spray paint was drowned out by the deafening music that filter through broken windows. Her hands dance like a maestro on stage, as her art began to cover the brick wall.

Letters formed across her canvas, distorted and twisted in a way that made them only recognizable to her. Dorothy left her name, a sign that she had been here and existed. A middle finger to the world that had left her alone. Her defiant message against the empty feelings dawning adulthood.

Her friends slung praise and encouragement at Dorothy while smoking weed. One of her classmates chugged a beer to the delight of her boyfriend. Another lounged on an abandoned forklift, high and embracing the music.

This was how Dorothy spent many of her nights. Find a new club or party, tag some walls, get high or drunk. Rinse, repeat. If her friends couldn’t go or refused she’d find another group and join them. She had a rough personality but was adventurous and people quickly welcomed her into their circles.

After she finished her artwork Dorothy shoved the cans back into her bag. The girl who’d just finished chugging a beer tossed the can and snapped a picture with a Polaroid camera.

A group of college students exited from an open garage door. They walked towards Dorothy’s group staggering slightly, whether from intoxication or exhaustion wasn’t clear. Dorothy recalled little about their faces or names. They were just more empty shells that would soon be gone, but right now they encouraged the group inside.

Dorothy joined eagerly, her mark left. Her friends had hesitated but joined as Dorothy pressured them.

Entering the abandoned building a DJ played violent mash-ups of popular songs. The building shook with the vibrations of the music

and yelling crowd. Lights filled the dusty air like an aurora. The mood was electric and Dorothy felt incredible. She felt the world and its pressure slip away in the night.

Dorothy drank heavily, smoked a joint and felt her inhibitions slip away. With her inhibitions her friends began to disperse, growing bored or uncomfortable they had left. The college students were exciting and alien to her. Their views of the world felt deep and pulled Dorothy in like a spiders web.

When they finally offered her a pair of pills she swallowed them without hesitation. Chasing them with another beer. The lights grew bright and psychedelic rapidly. Dorothy felt her body become light as if she were floating and an incredible high hit her.

It lasted only a short time however, soon the bright colours and fun shapes twisted to violent and revolting depictions. Monsters clawed at her from every corner, the music turned to screams of pain and terror. She had been abandoned to a pit of monsters. Her companions had quickly left to avoid the repercussions of their actions.

Dorothy stumbled through a fleshy twisting maze, stumbling down stairs. She had somehow made her way to a basement, where a dirty bathroom had been abandoned. To her mind it was a horrendous place which had trapped her. Pipes twisted like snakes and shadows leapt at her from every corner.

In desperation she cried and red splattered before her eyes as her sharp, polished nails dug into her neck. She scraped away flesh trying to remove maggots from under her skin. She choked and screamed for help.

Skeletal hands reached out, grabbed her wrists pulling them away from her neck. Dorothy cried a maggots squirmed beneath her skin. She kicked violently as the arms bore down on her, embracing her like a coffin. Darkness filled her eyes as something heavy was wrapped around her. She screamed in pitiful desperation.

Darkness was broken after an unknown passage of time. The screaming of a siren burned her temples. She struggled against a dozen hands that held her down. She gasped for air and darkness consumed her again.

She flickered in and out of consciousness for over a day. When Dorothy finally woke there was rotund nurse with a mousy face.

“Where am I?” Dorothy croaked out, her mouth was impossibly dry and her throat burned as she swallowed.

“The hospital.” The nurse said rushing to Dorothy’s side. She quickly pressed a nearby button calling for a doctor.

“Don’t sit up for now.” She cautioned as Dorothy began to struggle.

Dorothy flopped back against the bed. She had no strength. “Can I get some water?”

“Of course.”

The nurse rushed out, returning shortly with a doctor in toe. They helped Dorothy sit up and drink. The water did little to ease the dryness and discomfort in her neck.

The doctors asked her a few routine questions, her name, date of birth, and what she remembers about the incident. She remember her name and date of birth just fine, but the evening was a jumbled mess of violent flashing images.

The doctor explain that Dorothy had begun to violently claw out her own throat. A young man had been looking for the bathroom when he found Dorothy bleeding heavily. He managed to restrain her and brought her to the hospital. They had purged her stomach and given her fluids to help purge the rest of the intoxicants.

“Who’s jacket is that?” Dorothy asked pointing shakily to a blue letterman jacket folded on the chair along with the rest of her clothes.

“Is it not yours?” The nurse asked surprised.

Dorothy shook her head.

Dorothy pulled her choker down, revealing deep scars on the side of her neck. “I don’t remember a lot of details. I found out later that Julian, the guy who saved me, used that jacket to restrain me.” She explained as she finished her story.

Scraps listen quietly, but her trembling and need was extremely clear.

“I’m going to give you this, because I can see that you’re dependant on it... it’s your life to live. I know it’s hard to stop, but you don’t need this forever.” Dorothy said feeling like a

pretentious hypocrite as her own curiosity and habits continued to scream at her to try it. "Please, don't take a full dose. Whatever you normally take... try to take half."

Dorothy held out the vial which Scraps snatched from her like a snake. The patchwork girl hesitated as she held the vial. Remove the stopper she drank, stopping part way. She replaced the stopper, her hand shaking she handed the vial back to Dorothy.

Taking the vial Dorothy replaced it in the jewellery box gently. Dorothy stood up and stepped towards Scraps, her strides slow. She felt a deep conflict as she reached Scraps'

Scraps trembled and hugged Dorothy tightly. Dorothy wrapped her arms around Scraps, rubbing her back gently. "It'll be okay." Dorothy said trying to be reassuring. "You're going to sing tonight right?"

Scraps pulled away, tears in her eyes. "Yeah. I have to get ready."

An uncomfortable silence passed between the two. Scraps hesitantly moved towards the desk, she continued to tremble as she sat down. She combed her yarn hair, and with an unsteady hand began to pin it bold curls.

Dorothy remained quiet, pulling a few bobby pins from her hair, allowing it to fall down her back. She waited for a while, watching Scraps gather herself. Dorothy wasn't sure if she should leave or stay, speak or remain silent. A sick unpleasant feeling filled her stomach. She wrinkled her nose, trying to resist the discomfort.

Once Scraps had finished doing her hair and make-up, Dorothy spoke. "Did he hurt you?"

Scraps stayed quiet, providing an answer in her silence.

"Will you be okay..?" Dorothy said with a trepidation, afraid of the answer.

"I think so." Scraps said quietly, but her voice cracked. She didn't seem to believe that herself. "You can go Dorothy. You don't need to stay." Scraps said, sensing Dorothy's inner conflict.

Dorothy considered leaving, it would be the easy choice. The room was making her sicker my the minute. "I don't need to." She responded, remaining still. She resolved to remain, even if it

was the harder choice. It was the right thing to do, if Scraps would allow her.

An unpleasant silence fell between them. The scraping of the wooden chair be pushed back pierced their ears. Scraps stood and walked towards the many racks of costumes. She pushed them aside, searching for something suitable. Scraps muttered something under her breath but Dorothy couldn't hear it.

Dorothy turned her back to Scraps, granting her some privacy. "Have the police talked to you at all?"

"No." Scraps said quickly, she paused but continued to explain after a moment. Her mood not improving but her comfort was seeming to return. "What we do isn't exactly legal, so I don't think they even knew he came here. At least not what he did."

"He sounds like he was pretty awful." Dorothy said, trying her best to express her sympathies. "You don't know why he would've been killed? Other then being a jerk."

Scraps paused for a long while. She'd thought about that very question ever since she heard about the incident.

"Sorry... nevermind, that doesn't matter." Dorothy said after a minute of silence passed.

"It's okay. I've thought about it a lot." Scraps cut in. "I don't know, he was as you said, a jerk. He boasted a lot about his wealth, which always seemed strange. The police don't make as much as he seemed to have."

"Maybe it was just a burglary gone wrong?" Dorothy suggested.

"There was no mention of theft on the news, and the message..." Scraps said quietly.

Dorothy was hesitant to push for more information on the incident, while Scraps was still in such a fragile state. "Sorry this is such an awful topic. Let's talk about something else." Dorothy apologized with a forced laugh.

Scraps stayed silent for a few minutes. "You can't go home until the killer is found..." She said directly. She wasn't naive, Dorothy's curiosity wasn't unwarranted. "He used to work for the mayor, a personal assistant when Oscar Diggs was working as a contractor. He said they were close friends. He bragged about it a lot when we were alone."

The patchwork girl scratched her head confused, trying to grasp at any little fragment of information she might have. "Sorry, Dorothy. I don't know much about him. Men aren't very... talkative at work." Scraps said trying to spare Dorothy the details. "He was an older guy, in his fifties. He was with the ECPD for I think fifteen years or so."

"It's okay Scraps. You don't have to push yourself." Dorothy tried to be reassuring.

"Sorry Dorothy." Scraps apologized. "You can turn around now."

Dorothy turned to face Scraps who had put on a beautiful gold dress. It hugged it figure tightly and had a slit revealing her left leg. She would've looked radiant were it not for her tear streaked eyes and trembling. Instead she looked like a scared girl trying to play an adult.

"You look nice." Dorothy said, sincerely.

"Thank you." Scraps said, wiping tears from the corner of her eye. "I hope you can get home."

"Thanks. Break a leg." Dorothy pumped her fist in a confident gesture.

Scraps chuckled genuinely, wiping the tears from her eyes. "You should get back to your seat. I have to redo my make-up I think." She laughed bitterly, glancing at herself in the mirror.

"Alright. See you soon." Dorothy turned and walked to the door. "You're going to be okay." Dorothy said firmly. To her it was a fact not a question.

"Yeah. I think so." Scraps said cracking a sad smile. As the door began to creak open Scraps continued. "This might be nothing, but last time I saw him, he mentioned a missing child... Sorry I was so out of it so maybe I just misheard him. Nothing has been reported about something like that, so I just thought it was weird."

Dorothy turned back to Scraps who was hastily cleaning up her now running make-up. "Thanks Scraps. I'm sure it's nothing you need to worry about. See you after the show?"

Scraps nodded. "Come by with Crow after. I'll be back here."

Dorothy nodded back and exited the dressing room. She carefully shut the heavy door behind her and made her way solemnly through the crowded service hallway. She crept quietly

back into the main theatre room careful not to draw attention to herself.

Jack set himself in a secluded corner of the bar. He sifted through the yellow envelope, pulling out a small stack of documents. His long fingers flipped through the pages, reading the details of the first incident. A few morbid photographs accompanied the documents providing more details.

On March 13th, the body of Ugu the Shoemaker was found stuffed into a dumpster outside of the West Winkie Apartment Building. A resident named Ep-pe discovered the body around 5:45 in the morning. He was taking trash to the dumpster before leaving for work that morning when he saw what he thought was blood on the dumpster. He immediately returned home and called the police.

The ECPD arrived at 6:10 to find the green dumpster splashed with crimson. A picture of the scene shows dripping paint drawn across the outside face of the dumpster. A large circle had been painted along the front, along with bizarre symbols that you might see in an occult ritual. The words 'yellow belly of a coward to reclaim what is mine' were written underneath.

The police carefully opened the dumpster and found the body of Ugu the Shoemaker had been tossed inside. His abdomen had been sliced open vertically, his stomach and intestines were removed. His missing organs have still not been found.

During the autopsy performed by Dr. Pipt a wilted poppy flower was found. It was also determined that death had occurred quickly from a gunshot to the lower chest cavity. The shot itself was not immediately fatal and the victim bled to death shortly there after. The organs were then removed by a sharp blade approximately the size of a kitchen knife.

According to the investigation the symbols painted on the dumpster were being used by an occult group. The group refer to themselves as Wheelers because of the circles they use for magic. They claim to be able to contact the dead, and use these symbols to do so. There is no credibility to these statements, and the use of poppy is likely the cause of these delusions.

Several interviews with this group were conducted. Member insist that human sacrifice is not associated with their practices, and those interviewed have denied any involvement with the incident. A list of people suspected to be involved with the cult was included with the report: Professor Wogglebug, Bungle Cat, Boq, Lion, Frogman.

Jack took a long drink of brandy as he read the file. "Lion, huh?" Jack muttered to himself. It was a good thing he decided to finish reading the files here before going home. Once the show was finished he'd go speak with Lion himself. Maybe the old man would be more willing to talk with him than the police.

The room was alive with the sounds of cheering and smooth music. The large ape continued to pluck the keys of the piano with expert timing. His musically talents resonated throughout the room, but were no accompanied by a seductive female voice. It was this voice that elicited the cheers from the growing crowd.

China stood centre stage, a microphone and stand clasped delicately in her porcelain hands. She swayed her body to the rhythm of the music as she sang. Her siren song had enchanted the room, all eyes watched as she danced her hands along the microphone stand. China oozed sexual energy, her lyrics did little to add subtly or nuance to her performance. Yet it was impossible to deny her talents. He voice was captivating and she had the audience enthralled.

Dorothy spotted Scarecrow sitting at the same table she had sat at previously. Hurrying to his side, Dorothy sat down, on a now dried chair. Scarecrow gave a small nod, barely acknowledging her presence. Dorothy grumbled quietly, rolling her eyes at the lack of greeting. She couldn't fully fault him.

China was enchanting and powerful. She held herself as if she held the entire world in her hand. With a single word she could command this entire room. There was something extremely enviable about her confidence. Dorothy loathed to admit it, but part of her wished she had that same spark that China displayed. The diva's condescending tone aside.

As the song ended there was a brief pause in the performance. Waitresses and waiters brought refreshments and food to their guests. Hungry quickly returned with a fresh soda water for Dorothy and a clear drink in a Collins glass for Scarecrow.

The lights began to dim as sign for the waitresses and waiters to sit with their clients or step aside. Hungry moved to the side of the room. Several other waiters removed themselves, while a few sat with their clients. Patrons arm and fingers danced across scantily clad bodies like snakes.

Darkness was cast over the room, leaving only faint shadows and outlines of form visible. A loud click cut through the quiet as a beaming spotlight illuminated the centre stage.

The curtains burst open in a dramatic flourish, a broad shouldered man stepped out. He had a boxy feline face that was coated in a layer of dusty make-up. He had a full mane that curled up like a crown, fanning itself around his head. He wore a beautiful black dress which gave him a feminine figure.

The man began to sing in a strong deep voice. The sound of gentle piano music accompanied the dulcet tones. The performance started with an odd beauty but was quickly removed along with the lion's dress. Tearing the clothing away revealed a form fitting outfit made of leather and fishnet. Powerful saxophones and trumpets kicked up the tempo and the lion began to belt out a dramatic solo.

The energy in the room rouse, light flashed, following the lion as he strut through the crowd. The audience cheered and clapped, downing various drinks. Smoke billowing from cigarettes, creating a dense atmospheric haze. The place was ablaze with the powerful energy of the lion's performance.

Dorothy watched in surprise at the striking performance. It was unlike anything she'd seen and wouldn't have expect to enjoy it. However, she found herself enthralled by the courage and determination of the act.

The rest of the crowd was a mixed bag. Many of the patrons seemed to enjoy and delight in the performance as the lion walked among them. Others were more wary, and mutter about

when China would return. They drank, laughed, cheered and jeered as lion danced between the tables in a sultry display of bravado.

As he wrapped up his theatrical song and dance, he returned to the stage. "Friend, patrons I wish you all a wonderful evening of delight and pleasure. We have many fine acts to go before the night is concluded, though it pains me to say my time up. I have business I must attend to back stage but I leave my finest dolls to entertain you." The lion said in a sly voice that reminded Dorothy of a snake. "Please do not despair, leave your worries at the door for the Yellow Brick Road welcomes you to stay all night if you desire. Be well and enjoy the rest of your evening, and whatever pleasures it might bring."

The lion turned with an ostentatious flourish of his arms, and vanished behind the thick curtains at the back of the stage. The yellow fabric fluttered closed leaving the stage empty. Soft jazz lingered in the air and the waitstaff returned to their guests sides taking fresh orders.

"That was Lion." Scarecrow whispered to Dorothy between sips of his drink. "He owns the Yellow Brick Road. He's a tough guy to talk to but he knows a lot of people and how to get in contact with them."

Dorothy got the impression Lion was a particularly vain person. She had a good idea of how to talk to him, and get him to talk back. "I think I can handle him."

"Well aren't you courageous. Didn't anyone warn you not to walk into a lion's den?" Scarecrow quipped.

"Unfortunately the lion's den seems to be my only way out. I've never really lived by making the safe choice." Dorothy shrugged.

Hungry returned to their table, unintentionally interrupting their conversation. "Can I get either of you more to drink or eat perhaps?" He spoke in a happy rumble.

"I'll get another gin and a shake for the kid." Scarecrow said placing his empty glass across the table. Dorothy shot him a hard glare but Scarecrow continued. "Some fries for the table too."

"Right away." Hungry said with a toothy smile and slight bow. He left just as quickly as

he'd come, disappearing around a corner near the back of the room.

Dorothy looked at Scarecrow for a while, an irritated expression across her face. She glared, trying to silently get a response but Scarecrow provided none as he looked wistfully at the stage.

"What do you want?" Dorothy finally asked, in a more aggressive tone than she'd intended.

"A drink." Scarecrow said, still facing the stage.

"I'm serious. What are you expecting me to accomplish?"

"That's your first mystery detective." Scarecrow said, continuing to avoid the question.

"Why won't you give me a straight answer?" Dorothy pushed, growing more frustrated.

Scarecrow remained silent, his eyes locked on the stage with anticipation.

"Is it because of Scraps?" Dorothy pressed, his silence and dodged responses were still information. Frustrating and unclear but it could still provide some insight.

Scarecrow remained silent again, but his mouth twitched under the stitching.

"Is someone threatening her?"

"You're asking dangerous questions in a dangerous place doll." Scarecrow said in a whisper under his breath.

"Well it's going to be real hard for me to do anything with a place to start." Dorothy said rolling her eyes and throwing her hands up in frustration.

Scarecrow turned to face her. "Here. Here is where you start." Scarecrow said firmly. "After the show, you're on your own, and you can figure things out."

Dorothy bit her nails and looked away from him. That was such a non-answer it was almost painful. If she was going to find the Ripper she would need information about the previous cases. She'd need information on the victims and why they were killed. Scraps had mentioned the killer leaving messages, and Hungry had told her about a possible suspect Nick the Chopper.

She couldn't go to the police, not only did she not trust them but they certainly wouldn't trust her. She couldn't just get case files from

them. She could try to convince them she wasn't involved. Maybe she would make an exception and let her leave. Unlikely. She'd need an escort since she had no way to travel.

Scraps had gotten information about the message from somewhere. Maybe it was the radio station they had been listening to. It was possible the journalists at the station would have information. It wouldn't be complete but it would be a start. If this Lion person was as connected as Scarecrow seemed to imply he might be able to get Dorothy connected with Phonograph.

The sound of porcelain hitting wood, pulling Dorothy from her thoughts. Hungry had returned and placed a large plate of steaming hot cheese covered fries on the table. The golden delight smelled wonderful. Little green onions lined the side of the oblong plate, creating a tantalizing display. It looked like a yellow road with grass along the sides.

Hungry placed another clear drink in front of Scarecrow and a tall chocolate milkshake in front of Dorothy. The milkshake was dark and topped with whipped cream and a cherry. It looked a little childish and out of place for a burlesque show.

"Thanks Hungry." Dorothy said, glancing skeptically at the milkshake.

"Enjoy the meal and the show." Hungry said with a bow, turning to leave.

"Thanks." Scarecrow said quickly, pushing the plate towards Dorothy. "It's good." He reassured her.

Dorothy cocked an eyebrow, she was feeling particularly perplexed by Scarecrow's actions. Rolling her eyes she scooped up a few fries, the hot cheese pulled leaving thick strands behind. Placing a few green onions on the mix she ate quietly. A comforting warmth spread through her as the delicious flavors touched her tongue.

With a long spoon she chased the fries with her milkshake. The sweet nostalgic flavor brought a tear to her eye. She immediately laughed at herself, wiping it away.

"Something wrong?" Scarecrow asked baffled by her sudden laughter.

Dorothy drummed her fingers across the table. "Who knows." She said mockingly.

"Alright." Scarecrow said with a shrug.

Her teeth grit together in annoyance. "At least try." She insisted. The frustrating rapport they'd developed in such a short time was growing strangely comforting.

Scarecrow chuckled. "It's rude to pry. If you want to tell me, tell me, or don't."

Dorothy decided to keep quiet, only providing a half answer. "The food is really good." She took another handful of fries, stuffing them into her mouth brutishly.

Scarecrow shrugged, smiling quietly to himself. He took a long sip from his gin as the lights dimmed.

The instrumentals began to grow, silencing the crowd. A spotlight struck centre stage illuminating the silhouette of China, who strode out from behind the gold curtains. She wore a new gown, this one simply, slender and gorgeous.

Two more lights illuminated the stage behind China. Scraps stepped into the light on her right and on the left another porcelain skinned woman stepped out. Both were dressed beautifully.

The music came to an abrupt halt. Silence fell over the room. A dark gloom filled the smoky air and for a brief moment everyone held their breath.

China snapped her fingers, getting through the silence like a gunshot. Once, twice, three times. Scraps and the other porcelain woman began to snap in time with China, building a rhythm. The band began to play and the audience began to snap their fingers in time with the growing beat.

Then they sang. China took the lead while Scraps the porcelain woman behind performed back up vocals. It was an incredible sight, but Dorothy could see the cracks in Scraps' performance. Only Dorothy and Scarecrow could see Scraps tremble slightly. They could hear her voice quiver, but only once.

What Dorothy didn't see was the effects of the poppy taking effect. Scraps calmed as the performance dragged on. She began to lose herself in the music and her doubts drifted away. The drug could take up to an hour to set in when taken orally. Scarecrow saw this though, he'd seen its effects so many times.

The act was no less beautiful than any of the others before it, but like a painting, the performance took on a different meaning to Dorothy. She knew that twisted desire that drove Scraps. Even though Dorothy felt a sense of sadness, she also couldn't help but feel awed by the show. She felt a sense of guilt that made her swallow hard. Even though Scraps was suffering because of this place, was it okay to enjoy the show?

Several hours passed as Dorothy and Scarecrow watched the various performances. Different acts were performed, primarily scantily clad singers, though a very enjoyable comedy happened somewhere around ten o'clock. A sword swallowing act occurred afterwards, followed by more music.

Dorothy had finished her milkshake and far more fries than anyone should eat alone. When Hungry returned to fetch the plate Dorothy took the opportunity.

"Hungry, would I be able to talk with Mr. Lion. His performance was incredible and I'd just love to have his autograph." Dorothy said feigning her fandom.

"I'm afraid he's with a client at the moment and likely won't be taking anymore guests tonight." Hungry said regretfully.

"A client?" Dorothy and Scarecrow asked in unison. Dorothy assuming client meant a sexual partner while Scarecrow knew that meant something far more important.

Hungry simply nodded in response, not offering any further explanation. "I can ask for an autograph for you, Ma'am." Hungry offered with a feline grin.

"Thank you Hungry." Dorothy said with false excitement.

"We should get back doll. Scraps' set is done for the night." Scarecrow explained, offering a way out.

"Oh, well we should probably go then." Dorothy said jumping at the chance to get out of the metaphorical grave she'd dug herself. She stood up eagerly and Scarecrow joined her slowly.

The scarecrow tossed a few coins onto the table which clinked noisily over the quiet saxophones. "Thanks of the service Hungry."

Scarecrow nodded in acknowledgement of Tiger's work. "And thanks for looking after the kid."

Dorothy grumbled and bit her tongue as Hungry smiled. "It was my pleasure to be of service." Hungry responded as he gathered the coins.

Scarecrow took the lead, heading to the service hallway. The cluttered path leading back to the dressing rooms. Dorothy followed close behind.

Bang. Red, noise echoed through the hallway. Yellow, panic shot through the audience behind them. Clattering furniture being toppled over. Green, the splat of something soft falling to the ground ahead.

Go.

Scarecrow and Dorothy rushed down the hall driven by a violent wave of courage. They both reached towards the door, Scarecrow grabbing it first. He rattled the handle but the door wouldn't open. The deadbolt on the other side had been set. He slammed his shoulder into the door violently. "SCRAPS!"

No response.

"SCRAPS!"

No response.

Dorothy grabbed Scarecrow's shoulder getting his attention. Wordlessly she knew each other's intentions. Stepping back. "On three." Dorothy said, lining up to kick the door. "Three!"

Simultaneously they both kicked the door with a heavy slam. Wood cracked around the deadbolt and handle but the door held fast, refusing to give.

They stepped back again, lined up another heavy kick. "Three!" Together, they smashed the door with their heels. Wood splintered and broke away from the frame but still the heavy door held firm.

"Three!" A final kick and they were through. The door swung dangerously inward, smashing loudly into the wall. The deadbolt was pulled from the wood leaving a mangled mess behind.

The dressing room looked almost as they'd left it. Except for one clothing rack which had been shoved to the side and another that was toppled over. The bundle of clothing that had fallen almost disguised the slumped patchwork

body of Scraps. Crimson soaked into the clothes from her exposed back.

Scarecrow ran to her side, collapsing next to her. He pressed his hands into the bloody wound on her back, uselessly trying to stop the bleeding. The crimson liquid stained his hands and he wept openly. "Scraps?" He said, his voice a hoarse and pleading.

Dorothy entered apprehensively. "Crow. We need to call the police." It was almost certain someone was already in the process of doing so, but even so. Dorothy hurried to his side, grabbing his shoulder when he didn't respond. "Crow."

Scarecrow remained still, pressing on the wound uselessly. His hands trembled against Scraps' lifeless form. She wasn't breathing. His hand reached into his coat, he retrieved the gun that was nestled there. He stood up slowly, Dorothy took a step back.

The echo of uneven foot steps rang from the hall. They were approaching quick. Tip, tip, tap, tip, tap, tip, tap. Louder and louder. They'd burst through the door any moment.

Crow pulled out his wallet with his free hand, tossing it to Dorothy.

Caught completely off guard, Dorothy fumbled to catch the wallet with her free hand. Her eye completely focused on the soaring object, she didn't see Scarecrow step forward. He reached behind her, opened a wardrobe and shoved Dorothy inside. She stumbled unable to catch herself.

"Crow!" She said in a hushed yell, wide eyed as the door was shut. Closing her inside.

"I told you I'm already a dead piece. Find out who did this. Dorothy." He whispered as he turned away.

"Crow!" Dorothy said whispered desperately, but covered her mouth as someone else entered the room. She could barely see through the crack in the doors but she could hear everything.

Jack leapt up from his seat at the resounding echo of a gunshot. Grabbing his cane he rushed out of the bar into the swarm of fleeing and panicked patrons. He rushed as fast as he could, his leg cried out as he pushed himself forward. The crowd jostled him and he was

nearly swept away by the tide of bodies. Still he forced himself through.

Once he made his way into the theatre and dining area he pulled one of his two pistols out from under his coat. His other hand leaned painfully on his cane. He searched for the source of the gunshot but it was difficult to pinpoint the location from just one shot in the web of rooms and corridors.

The distance sound of banging lead him to the service hallway. The cluttered space gave him some additional objects to lean on as he hobbled forward. He could see the door to the dressing room smashed open. Rounding the corner he aimed at the perpetrator.

Scarecrow stood, blood soaked, gun in hand. The body of a young woman slumped and bleeding as his feet. Scarecrow raised his gun towards Jack. The two stood locked in a deadly game.

"Crow. Put the gun down." Jack warned, his voice was steady but it was a false bravado.

"Detective." Scarecrow said coldly. He never called Jack detective. It was such a strange choice of words that it caught Jack off guard for a moment. "She might still be able to be saved. You just have to step aside and let me go."

"I can't do that." Jack said firmly, shaking his head. He glanced at the woman pitifully, biting his lip. If there was a chance of getting her help he needed to wrap this up quickly. Little did he know Scarecrow was attempting to do the same.

"Unless you want everyone to know about our arrangement you'll let me go." Scarecrow threatened.

Jack bit his lip. "This goes way beyond our deal. This is murder Crow. I can't let you go."

"She could die Jack. You just need to walk away and get an ambulance."

"Put the gun down Scarecrow." Jack insisted.

"You'll let another person die for damned pride?!" Scarecrow yelled.

"Put the gun down!" Jack shouted back.

Another figure rounded the corner, joining Jack's side. A blonde haired police officer, with twin pompadours aimed a gun into the room. She'd removed her shoes, muffling her foot steps.

“ECPD! Drop the weapon.” Glinda announced forcefully.

Scarecrow sighed, a combination of defeat and relief. He tossed the gun and in a matter of moments Glinda was on top of him, handcuffs clamping tightly around Scarecrow’s thin wrists.

Jack rushed to Scraps’ side, but it was too late. “What are you doing here Glinda?”

“I was looking into Lion and the Wheelers.” Glinda explained.

“Has anyone else been contacted?” Jack asked solemnly.

Glinda forced Scarecrow towards the door. “I radioed the station when I heard the shot. Then I came running.”

Jack knew they were too late. The bullet had pierced her upper back. Likely ruptured a lung or her heart. She had no pulse and wasn’t breathing. There had been nothing to be done for her. Jack stood up regretfully.

“Help me get this guy to my car.” Glinda said, pushing the struggling Scarecrow beyond the threshold.

Jack said a quiet prayer for the woman and got up. “Alright.”

“Jack.” Scarecrow said his voice was weak and desperate.

“She’s gone, Scarecrow.” Jack said avoiding eye contact.

“Don’t leave her alone.” He begged, twisting his body to stare at the scene. To get one last look. He was distraught and struggled but the handcuffs held him in place.

Jack placed a hand on Scarecrow’s shoulder forcing him forward. Scarecrow stopped struggling at this, lost in the cruel reality that had fallen upon them. The three walked solemnly and in silence out to the police car. Scarecrow was shoved ruthlessly into the backseat.

“I’ll get him back to the station. Keep the scene clear.” Glinda ordered, stepping into the driver’s seat.

“You know I’m not on the force. Ozma will be upset.” Jack warned.

“This case is pretty clear cut. I think you can handle watching a door.” Glinda plunged her key into the ignition, sparking the car to life. It rumbled and she slammed the door.

Jack limped back through the front door, into the main hallway. From the archway he could see that many of the staff had gathered in the bar. “Bru, is this everyone?” Jack asked as he passed the bar.

The large bear lumbered forward. “No. All the servers are here, and anyone who was in the front rooms. Lion, China, Scraps, Hungry and Loo are missing. What happened Jack?”

Jack hesitated. “The police will be here soon and explain things. Until then for your safety all of you should stay together, and stay here.”

Several patrons and employees stood up and started to protest in confusion. Bru could sense the seriousness in Jack’s voice. With help from Gugu, Bru began convincing the crowd to wait in the bar. Jack was deeply relieved by that and returned to the service corridor as quickly as his weak leg could carry him.

The door was smashed, just as he’d left it only a few minutes earlier. Stepping through the threshold he once again took in the sad scene. The door was broken inward. The victim, Scraps, had likely locked herself in to avoid Scarecrow’s rage. He kicked open the door and approached her. They fought, she ran for the door and he shot her.

Jack picked up the revolver that Scarecrow had dropped. Flipping open the cylinder he found a single shot missing. It was a clear cut case. Nothing more than murder by a jealous lover. What a sad cliché.

The detective took the opportunity to search the scene. He started by opening Scraps’ wardrobe and discovered a suspicious blue jacket. It was possible this belonged to the mystery girl from last night. He made a mental note to ask the staff about it later.

He moved to the next wardrobe, opening it carefully. Clothing fluttered in the breeze created by the door. He couldn’t see anything else of note inside. A large feather boa was curled on an upper shelf like a snake ready to strike.

Moving to the final wardrobe he again opened it carefully. A few dark dresses hung from wooden hangers. A small drawer in the bottom contained jewellery, primarily large necklaces.

Jack opened the dresser drawers and found mostly make-up and hair products. However in the lower drawer he found and open and empty

jewellery box. The key remained in the lock, but scratches along the outside of the keyhole suggested the owner had a very unsteady hand. Perhaps they had grown tired of unlocking it and now just left the key inside.

It didn't take long before the police arrived at the scene. They did a thorough sweep of the scene, and found no evidence of anyone else in the room. The conclusion was clear. Scarecrow had murdered Scraps in a jealous rage.

The scenario seemed wrong to Jack for some reason. He couldn't place why but something about the position of everything felt weird. He found Scarecrow behind Scraps, Scraps had fallen towards the door as if she was fleeing towards it. The gun shot was in her back. So it's only logical that Scarecrow was behind her.

How did he get behind her. If he came through the door wouldn't he simply shoot her. He would've had to chase her in a circle around the clothing racks to get behind her. Surely she could have gotten much closer to the door in that time. She wouldn't have waited for someone to approach her after she kicked the door down so violently.

The ECPD took over the scene quickly and ushered Jack away. He was happy to be away as the police gathered the body unceremoniously. The stench of death was giving him a painful sense of déjà vu.

As he left the hall he overheard Omby Amby speaking with another officer. "I just got off the radio with Glinda. Ask the rest of the staff about Tik-Tok." Omby explained. "Apparently the victim had been sleeping with him."

"Shit. Poor girl." The other officer cringed.

"This isn't the time for jokes." Omby barked coldly.

"S-sorry, Sir."

Jack's thoughts went wild. This girl is killed just before the police find out about her connection with a previous victim. That couldn't be a coincidence. There was something extremely foul about that situation that sent Jack's mind into high alert.

He decided he had to question Lion, while he still had the chance. The Yellow Brick Road was made of three different floors. The first floor

was the bar and theatre area. A kitchen, dressing room and backstage area were also found on this floor. The second floor, was accessed by a flight of stairs to the left of the front door. A hallway lined with several doors lead to small suites for the staff and their clients. On paper these were considered hotel rooms available for clients wishing to stay the night. The third floor contained Lion's private suite. It had a private kitchen, bathroom and office but was primarily occupied by his lavish bedroom.

Jack ascended the stairs weakly, leaning on the banister as he climbed. The third floor had a small hallway line with large portraits and lead to a single door. It was thick and would be extremely difficult to force open.

The tapping of Jack's cane on the bottom of the door cut into the suite.

"Who is it?" A gruff voice called in response.

"Jack Pumpkinhead. I'm a detective working with the ECPD. I'm here to make sure everyone is okay and ask a few questions. If you could open up, I won't take much of your time." Jack explained firmly.

"We aren't taking questions at this time." The voice responded.

"If you aren't aware there has been a murder on these premises. If you refuse to answer you may..." Jack started but was cut off by a flamboyant voice.

"Oh just let him in already so I can be rid of these cretins!"

There were several clicks, followed by the door being opened. A tall tiger headed man opened the door and stepped aside, allowing Jack to enter.

The room was lavishly decorated. White walls with gold accents, lead to a high ceiling. Beautiful crown moulding lined the room. Bold green plants in tall round pots accented the yellows and whites. Fine craftsmanship covered every inch of the room.

All the details were completely overshadowed, by the large circular bed, that spun slowly in the centre of the room. Semi transparent drapery hung above it in beautiful arches. The display was like a twisted reflection of the stage

below. Atop it lay Lion, laying on his stomach, chin resting in his hands, completely nude.

China sat on a small couch, while Hungry shut the door behind Jack. Both were mercifully clothed, if somewhat scantily.

“Well ask your questions detective.” Lion demanded, as the bed rotated slowly.

“Are you all aware of the situation?”

“Yes, there was a gunshot and now my business is crawling with even more police.” Lion said irritated. “That scarecrow was taken away by Miss Glinda. Case closed. So why are you here detective, other then to waste my time?”

Jack felt his eye twitch. He hated this guy but grit his teeth, fighting through the anger. “One of your staff was shot in your establishment. You might want to show a little more concern.” Jack suggested.

“I am concerned detective. Concerned that the ECPD is incapable of keeping the city safe.” Lion shot back.

“Are they okay?” Tiger asked hesitantly cut in.

Jack shook his head slowly. “I’m afraid not.”

“Who was it?” Tiger pressed, the fear in his voice was clear.

“A young woman, with a patchwork skin. I believe her name was Scraps.” Jack explained.

Tiger slumped into one of the chairs, completely deflated. He put his face in his hands and began to tremble. Tiger sobbed quietly, his shoulder shaking. It was clear he was extremely distressed by the news.

“Did Scraps have any enemies?” Jack asked the room.

Lion glanced momentarily at China who seemed greatly offended by the insinuation.

“I didn’t like the little tart but that doesn’t mean I would shoot her.” China snapped sitting upright. She crossed her arms indignantly and pursed her ruby lips in a frown.

“She was a quiet girl. Tried not to rock the boat.” Lion explained, his tone was insensitive, like Scraps’ life was a tedious bore. “I can’t see her having enemies, certainly no one willing to commit murder.”

“I’m sorry this conversation is such an inconvenience for you.” Pumpkinhead bit his

tongue. “What was her relationship with Scarecrow?” He forced the words out painfully, and pulled out his notepad. He began writing down statements in detail.

“He was her dealer.” China said frivolously.

“China!” Hungry snapped at her quietly, tears still at the corner of his eyes.

“What? Everyone knew she was doped up all the time. She was pophead.” China snapped back. “Maybe she missed a payment. She been off work for a week.”

“He loved her too.” Hungry insisted.

The united front was crumbling. They were all hiding things, twisting their stories to suit their own needs. None of which were the full truth. Each would likely implicate one another in some way. Jack just needed to ask the right question and everything would come out.

China seemed the most talkative, and defensive. She was probably worried her tense relationship with Scraps would make her a prime suspect. She also had easy access to the room. “Why did you dislike Scraps, China? You’re the headline act, surely you didn’t feel threatened.” Jack pressed threateningly.

China visibly tensed, and a twinge of anger was clear in Tiger’s eye. “The same reason you don’t like spiders. There isn’t really a reason, they’re just gross.”

“It must have been very difficult to share the stage with a spider.” Jack said sarcastically.

“I think that’s enough detective. Can’t you see you’re distressing the poor girl.” Lion protested, it was clear he was looking for any excuse to keep China from saying any more.

Jack wouldn’t fall for the distraction. “Well China?”

“I didn’t like her, that doesn’t make me a murderer.” China insisted seeming desperate.

“True. It’s perfectly normal not to like someone, there are plenty of reasons. Yet you seem very tight lipped about your reason for not liking Scraps.” Jack explained. “A simple explanation could go a long way.”

“She was jealous.” Hungry said bitterly.

“Hungry!” Lion snapped. “This isn’t the time.”

Jack ignored Lion's attempt to silence the line of questioning. "Why would she be jealous of Scraps?" Jack insisted.

"Scraps used to be the headliner, until she started using poppy to get through her shifts." Hungry explained, avoiding eye contact with Lion and China.

"It is not my fault she could handle the pressure!" China snapped back. "She only needed it because of that creep anyways."

"Enough both of you!" Lion roared in a rage. "Imbeciles, both of you. Get out of my sight."

Jack placed a hand forcefully on the door. "I'm not done yet, Lion. What creep?"

Silence.

"I'm a freelance detective, helping the ECPD. I'm here for the murderer and the Ripper case. If you'd rather have Ozma come and tear this place apart personally that can happen. Or you can tell me what I need to know and your other businesses can stay out of sight."

"Tik-Tok. I gave him a discount on rooms to carry on with business. Scraps had been keeping him company for years." Lion said flopping onto his side, bitterly grinding his sharp teeth.

"Yeah, company." China laughed sarcastically.

"He beat and raped her once a week." Hungry's voice was barely a whisper, the very thought made him gag in revolt.

"After the second time I gave her a hit of poppy to help he get through the night." China admitted guiltily. "It's not my fault she couldn't stop. She couldn't perform as well after that, and I took over as headliner."

"Well wasn't that painless." Jack said with bitter sarcasm, glaring at Lion.

This story added more credibility to Scarecrow being the culprit. If he loved Scraps and Tik-Tok was hurting her he had plenty of motive to kill him. Then once his revenge was carried out kill Scraps who broke his heart.

"So Scarecrow killed Tik-Tok because he'd been beating his girl, then killed Scraps for cheating on him. Case closed?" Jack asked fishing for a response from Hungry who had seemed closest with Scraps.

"Seems you've figured it out detective. Now if you could make sure this doesn't happen again that would be grand." Lion said scratching his exposed pelvis.

"He couldn't do that." Hungry said sheepishly.

"Why not?" Jack mused.

Hungry seemed to struggle to find the right words. "He loved her. I just can't see him killing her. He definitely hated Tik-Tok but he wouldn't hurt Scraps."

"He just fed her drug habit that was slowly killing her." China muttered loudly.

"Fuck you! You started it and you know as well as I do that he couldn't have done it." Hungry snapped angrily.

Silence fell across the room again.

"You keep saying *couldn't*, how do you know he *couldn't* do it?"

An eerie silence fell on the room. Neither China or Hungry wished to say anymore, already knowing they'd said far too much. Lion was growing agitated, fangs bared. He sat up again, ensuring their silence.

Jack was growing annoyed. Lion was being increasingly irritating. His lack of compassion was one thing but he was insisting on silencing China and Hungry. He needed to change tactics if he was going to make progress.

"Lion, I'm not here to play twenty questions. If you want me to go then start talking. What do you know about the Wheelers?"

Lion remained silent, stoic and unfazed. Unexpected, China gasped and shuttered, bringing her knees to her chest.

"If any of you know something that could lead to Scraps' murderer or the Ripper you need to tell me." Jack started, he had some suspicions that the two were one and the same, but he wanted more information before following up. "Hungry I know you have no reason to trust the ECPD or me, but if you can prove Scarecrow isn't guilty you need to tell me. This person could come for any of you next."

"It was a ghost!" China snapped, covering her mouth. She looked horrified, eyes wide in terror that she'd been holding back all this time. "It was after me. I'm sure of it."

Lion stood up and began to walk towards China angrily, faced balled. Jack stepped between them defiantly. Lion growled, glared through Jack at China.

“Well Lion. I’m sure they’ve already questioned you on it, but why don’t you tell me. What are the Wheelers and how are they related to the Ripper.” Jack stared down at Lion firmly.

Lion scoffed and strode back to his bed where he laid down once more. “Hungry take her to the kitchen. She’s being hysterical.” Lion demanded.

Hungry walked over and helped China to her feet, leading her to the small attached kitchen. Still well within sight of Jack and Lion. The change of scenery only provided a mock sense of privacy.

“The Wheelers are not involved with your Ripper case as I’ve already explained to deputy Glinda. We are a group that use magic to speak with the dead. We meet at the old church of Gump Street.” Lion explain with as little care and passion as he’d spoke of Scraps’ murder. “Then we drink wine, partake in a few substances and perform our rituals. No blood sacrifices, just a simple chant, a few humane offerings, and then we wait. On special nights we hear the words of the spirits beyond. Other nights we hear nothing. Just some harmless entertainment. Hardly anything to get upset about.”

“What do these rituals involve specifically? What offerings?” Jack pressed.

“We draw a magic circle for each offering and burn our offerings inside. Something that represents courage, something to represent knowledge, and something to represent passion.” Lion explained. “These can be somewhat abstract, as long as they are important to the person performing the seance.”

“Then you just... hear ghosts?” Jack said skeptically.

“If done correctly and if the spirits wish to speak then yes.” Lion explained. “Just because some psycho decided to pervert our practices doesn’t mean any of us our involved. Besides that, these aren’t hidden or secret rituals known only to a few special individuals. Plenty of people know about it and have spread the information.”

“What happened to her?” Jack said gesturing to China who was shakily drinking a glass of gin to calm her nerves.

“I brought her to one of our meetings and she had a particularly violent experience. She’s convinced an evil spirit threatened to kill her.” Lion said completely exasperated. “She just had too much to drink.”

“And this evil spirit shot Scraps?”

“Like I said, she’s had too much to drink.” Lion declared with finality.

China quieted down at that. It was clear Jack had pushed as much as he could. There was very little chance he’d get anymore information with Lion around.

He pulled out a small card case from his breast pocket. Hopping to the attached kitchen he handed China and Hungry each a business card. “If you want your ghost caught, or if you think of anything that could lead to Scraps’ killer or the Ripper give me a call.” Jack said explicitly ignoring Lion’s glares.

Jack turned and headed for the door, but tossed another card on the ground. “Goes for you too Lion. If the ECPD start to bother you and you want to talk more openly call.” Jack grabbed the door handle, pulling the heavy door open.

He stopped as the door was opened a crack and turned. “None of you know about a blue sports jacket in the dressing room do you?” He asked in a casual tone.

“One of our many costumes I imagine detective.”

Jack noticed that Hungry’s glanced up a brief flash of surprise across his face. He’d have to follow up with Hungry on that later. It was very possible he knew who it belonged too. Hungry was already going to be difficult to speak with, he had a strong dislike for the ECPD. Combine that with Lion’s attempts to silence every question and the conversation was pointless to continue here.

“My mistake.” Jack said with a nonchalant wave as he exited the room. The heavy shut behind him tightly.

Darkness surrounded Dorothy, oppressive but warm like an unwanted embrace. Her chest felt heavy as she realized she wasn’t breathing. Her chest expanded suddenly forcing a loud series

of coughs from her chest. She rolled onto her side, opening her eyes as she retched and gasped for air.

A porcelain floor greeted her as she splattered it with the contents of her stomach. Nausea hit her like a tidal wave as she pushed herself to all fours. She squeezed her eyes shut, welcoming the darkness again.

The weight of a heavy hand pressed against her back and began to rub gently. The attempt at a comforting sensation only caused Dorothy to feel more nauseous. She swatted the hand away rolling to her side, scrambling to lean against a nearby wall.

The room was spinning, she felt no pain but felt terrible. Dorothy was surrounded by tile walls and a tile floor. There was a lavish tub along one wall, along with a shower, sink and toilet. Everything was beautifully maintained and only sullied by the puddle of french fry vomit that painted the floor.

Two men accompanied her. One, a large man with a tiger like face and features. Hungry was still dressed in his revealing butler uniform. The other was a man with a lion's head. He was unfortunately still completely nude. He sat crossed legged on the edge of the tub, providing a modicum of decency.

"Get her another glass of charcoal Hungry." Lion said disgusted by the mess that now stained his bathroom floor.

Hungry quickly took a small glass on the edge of the sink. Black stains lined the inside. He filled it with water and quickly grabbed a small glass bottle. He poured in black charcoal power, mixing it quickly.

Dorothy watched with unfocused attention, her eyes rolling in her sockets against her will. As the glass was handed to her she gagged but held down her stomach. Pinching her nose she drank the liquid charcoal quickly. The liquid tasted terribly and she swallowed hard, lest she vomit again. She breathed hard, shallow breaths. Trying to steady herself again.

"Where am I?" Dorothy croaked, her voice raw from the stomach acid burning her throat.

"My home, and if you're done spoiling it with your vomit, you can explain what the fuck

has happened in my establishment, girl!" The pushy Lion said reversing his legs.

Dorothy was hardly in a place to remember anything let alone speak. Still she forced herself to recall the painful events of the evening.

Several hours earlier, Dorothy curled up in the wardrobe, clinging to her knees. She could hear the pumpkin headed detective and scarecrow shouting just beyond. She covered her ears but could still hear every word. That was the man who had been looking for her. She could see him through the crack in the doors.

A woman joined them and Scarecrow was taken away. Dorothy stepped out of the wardrobe carefully and slowly. Not wanting to make any noise. She shut the doors with equal care.

Dorothy could see the scene clearly again. Scraps lay dead, her body growing cold, tangled in the mass of clothing. Her arms outstretched, right hand curled in a fist. The mass of costumes that had fallen around her looked like a field of flowers cradling her limp body. Like Sleeping Beauty, just waiting for her prince to wake her.

Dorothy's hand clawed at her shoulders, desperate for a sense of security. She trembled, tears welling up in her eyes. Dropping to her knees she whispered an apology. "I'm sorry." As she spoke she could see a small thing clutched in Scraps' hand. A simple emerald green button. "You must've fought really hard." Dorothy thought restraining a sob. On a whim she took the button, placing it in her bag.

Small red lines begun to form along Dorothy's shoulders from her scratching. Her bitten nails prevented her from doing any serious damage to her skin. It didn't prevent the hopeless feeling that was spreading through her body.

"Why fight it anymore?"

"I deserve a break."

"Just a little to get through this."

"It'll be okay."

"Why should I suffer?"

As if possessed by an evil spirit Dorothy staggered to Scraps' desk. She opened the bottom drawer. Her fingers moved by some unseen force. Like a puppet on strings she fished out the vials of

poppy. Her hands trembled as she pressed one to her lips and drank.

She crept out of the room quickly, not wanting to risk being caught by the police. As she passed the broken threshold she heard a voice. "Dorothy?" It was Tiger's voice but she couldn't see him or place the source. It almost sounded like he was right in front of her.

"Hungry?" Dorothy said shakily, looking around confused and disoriented.

"Turn right, take the fire exit upstairs to the third floor." Hungry explained quickly.

"Hurry. Knock three times."

Dorothy couldn't tell if the poppy was already working or if she was going crazy. She listened, heading to the right she passed a bathroom and just beside the emergency exit door was a staircase that went up to the third floor. She followed it quickly, rounding the corner just in time to avoid being spotted by the detective.

The stairs wound in a spiral up to the second floor, and continued up to the third. Quietly Dorothy ascended, leaning on the railing for support. With her free hand she hugged her bag tightly to prevent it from rattling. When she arrived at the third floor she knocked on the heavy metal door three times.

It opened and she was greeted by the unicorn man, Loo, from earlier. It took the man a moment to recognize her. "You were with Scarecrow. How did you get up here?"

"Hungry said to come up here." Dorothy confessed in her rattled state she wasn't thinking clearly. She had simply agreed without thinking about the consequences.

"Boss, there's a woman here at Hungry's request." Loo shouted in a firm voice towards a room behind him.

"That damned idiot." A shrill voice shouted. "Send her in and go get that idiot for me."

Loo shut the door behind Dorothy, locking it. With a gesture of a long arm he motioned Dorothy out of the small landing area. She stepped into a lavish suite with a circular bed in the centre. Lion was sprawled across the bed while China lounged on a nearby chair.

Dorothy stepped in with some trepidation, hugging her bag tightly. Loo stepped through

another door and disappear, the door swinging shut tightly behind him.

"Sit down girl. What's your name?" Lion commanded.

"Dorothy and I'll stand." Dorothy said taking in the room, making mental notes of any potential exits.

"Suit yourself." Lion said

A minute passed and Hungry exited from the door Loo had disappeared down. Loo didn't return.

"Who the fuck is this you imbecile?" Lion snapped at Tiger the moment he entered the room.

"This is Dorothy. She was with Scarecrow and she left the room after the detective. I thought she could tell us what was happening." Hungry stammered quickly, in spite of his size he seemed extremely intimidated.

"And what if she's with the ECPD?" Lion snapped sitting up.

"I don't think she is." Hungry said with a long pause between each of his words. He looked a puppy being scolded for peeing on the carpet.

"You don't think at all!" Lion cursed under his breath.

Dorothy spoke up, feeling extremely guilty that Hungry was being attacked for her sake. "I'm not with the ECPD, Scarecrow helped me hide when the detectives showed up. I only came here to find a guy named Toto." Dorothy said glancing at China.

The porcelain singer seemed to take notice and looked up. "What do you want with him?" She asked baffled.

"I'm just looking for a way home. He brought me to the Emerald City last night and he was supposed to take me back."

"An outsider hmm?" Lion asked, eyes narrowing in a calculating glare. "China call this Toto and confirm her story for me."

China rolled her eyes and pried herself from her seat. She disappeared into the adjoined office and began to make a phone call. Her voice was hushed and prevented anyone from overhearing her conversation.

Hungry and Dorothy stood awkwardly as Lion scrutinized them. Hungry shifted from side to side nervously. Dorothy stayed still but avoided

eye contact. The stare reminded her of her uncle's disapproving gaze. She winced a little at the sight.

China's conversation in the other room dragged painfully long. Eventually she returned and mercifully gave Lion a nod. "He said he recalls bringing a nice girl to the city late last night." She looked at Dorothy with a predatory glare, turning her nose up in the process.

"Alright girl. Let's hear the story. What happened down stairs?" Lion said with a flick of his wrist, as if handing over the stage.

Dorothy was at a bit of a loss, she was still feeling the emotional weight of the events. "I was watching the show with Scarecrow. Hungry was serving us."

"I can confirm that." Hungry interrupted confidently.

"It was getting late and Scraps had finished her set so Scarecrow and I went to see her. We were in the corridor when we heard the gunshot." Dorothy explained, but began to hesitate. She didn't want to relive the events.

"Well out with it."

"We ran to the far dressing room to see if Scraps was okay. The door was locked from the inside. We called for her but no one answered. So we tried to break down the door. It took a few tries but we were able to break through the deadbolt." Dorothy explained.

Before she could continue a gentle tapping echoed through the front door. Everyone turned to the noise, frozen for a moment.

Hungry walked to the door. "Who is it?" he called.

"Jack Pumpkinhead. I'm a detective working with the ECPD. I'm here to make sure everyone is okay and ask a few questions. If you could open up, I won't take much of your time." A voice responded from the other side.

Lion made a quick gesture at Dorothy towards a nearby door. She quickly scrambled towards the door, opening it revealed a large and beautifully decorated bathroom. Stumbling inside she shut the door, hiding herself.

Dorothy could hear the conversation through the door, though it was heavily muffled.

"We aren't taking questions at this time." Tiger said quickly, trying to stall for time.

"If you aren't aware there has been a murder on these premises. If you refuse to answer you may..."

"Oh just let him in already so I can be rid of these cretins!" Lion snapped cutting off the detective.

Dorothy listened huddled by the door. Her hands reached to her neck and she scratched compulsively. Whatever she'd taken wasn't working. Part of her knew she shouldn't take more. She reached for her jacket but her hands caught air.

She dug into her bag, pulled out another vial and swallowed it. The waiting was painful and it dragged but soon the effects of her first dose started to kick in. The second began to follow and the pleasant high started to turn to sickening nausea.

That was all she could remember. Flickering moments of conversation heard through a door came to her but it was indecipherable, like a burnt letter. Words peaked through the blackened canvas but the meaning and intent were all lost.

Dorothy struggled to her feet, still feeling weak and disoriented as she finished her story. She leaned hard on the sink, eyes darting between Lion and Hungry. "And that's what I remember."

"Then I came to check on you and found you unconscious. Your breathing was bad so we force fed you some charcoal to detox you." Hungry said, visibly concerned.

"Yes you stupid girl. Poppy has a slow activation time when ingested." Lion explained pompously.

"Lesson learned." Dorothy coughed. "Where were you Hungry, when I left the dressing room?"

Hungry looked nervously towards Lion, clearly he was already in trouble for saying too much. Lion bit his lip in frustration. "He was using our service corridors to check on security." Lion explained.

"And do these service corridors run through the dressing room?" Dorothy pressed.

"No, it just runs along the wall across from the dressing rooms." Hungry explained.

Dorothy thought for a moment. “Hungry, could Lion have killed Scraps?”

“That’s a dangerous accusation girl.” Lion said baring his fangs. He set up straight, leaning forward, no longer slouched and nonchalant. He was ready to attack.

Hungry looked to Lion. “Technically.” He said with a great deal of hesitation. “But I don’t think he would.” Hungry added quickly.

“I was speaking with the police woman during the incident so it wasn’t possible for me to kill Scraps. Besides why would I?” Lion snapped throw a hand in the air. He twisted his wrist in a frivolous gesture. “Scraps was one of my most important employees, her death harms my business.”

“Why were you talking with the police?” Dorothy pressed.

“You’re asking a lot of questions newcomer. I was a generous host but my patience is limited.” Lion threatened.

“My friend was shot, my only lead to get home is in prison. I broke a near year long sobriety. I was nearly crushed by a car, had a gun shoved in my face. I can’t go home until a murderer is caught. I feel like shit and I’m stuck in a bathroom with a nudist.” Dorothy ranted. “My patience died a long time ago. This fuck could come for you next, so you’d best start talking.”

Lion laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous. This is East’s establishment, no one would risk East’s retaliation if I was killed. Not even West would be so direct.”

“Unfortunately for you, that cheque expired two days ago.”

“What?” Lion growled confused.

“East was killed two days ago.”

“Do you think I’d fall for such a stupid ploy? Honestly, if you’re going to play detective at least come up with a more convincing story.” Lion chuckled, leaning back casually, his threatening posture fading completely.

“Call her.” Dorothy pressed.

“Why would I waste her time with something like that?” Lion countered.

“It’s really easy to prove that she’s alive and I’m lying. All you have to do is call her.”

Dorothy insisted. “She is your boss, I’m sure you could contact her easily.”

Lion chuckled completely amused by the situation. “Fine girl. I’ll humour you.” He stood up and strode to the door.

Hungry helped Dorothy walk, and the two followed Lion into the combination living room and bedroom. Dorothy leaned on Hungry’s tree trunk like arm. They walked to the kitchen where a phone was hung on the wall. China was napping on a small couch in the corner, oblivious to what was happening.

Lion picked up the receiver, glanced at Dorothy and began to dial a number. A few moments passed as the phone rang. When there was no answer Lion pressed the receiver hook down.

His fingers twisted the dial as he tried another number. A few moments passed before the line connected. “Jinjur, it’s Lion. I need to speak with East, it’s rather urgent.” Lion said, his voice remained calm. “Yes I tried that, there was no answer.” Another paused. “When did you last speak with her?” He bit his lip. “Two days? I have to go.”

Lion placed the receiver down on the hook, ending the call. “This doesn’t prove anything.”

“Yeah, it’s devils proof.” Dorothy admitted, knowing her argument was flimsy at best.

Lion scowled and picked up the receiver. He began dialing numbers furiously, repeating similar conversations over and over again.

“What’s devils proof?” Hungry whispered as Lion continued to make calls.

“Probatio Diabolica. If I told you devils don’t exist, you just have to show me a devil to prove it.” Dorothy started trying to think of the best way to explain the meaning. “But just because I say devils don’t exist doesn’t prove that they don’t exist.”

“I don’t have East’s body or any evidence that supports that she’s dead. That doesn’t mean that she isn’t.” Dorothy explained. “So all Lion has to do is talk to her to prove she’s alive. Similarly just because he can’t talk to her doesn’t mean she’s dead. She could be out for a walk, or sleeping.”

Several more phone calls went by, Lion's frustration increasing with each one. No one had seen or heard from East in several days. It was unusual for her to go silent for a short time, though she should have contacted someone in that time. Lion slammed the receiver down loudly. He rubbed the top of his lip nervously, eyes darting back and forth as he thought.

"Let's say I entertain your story for a moment." Lion conceded. "How did you find out and why should I not think you killed her?"

His own devil's proof, but Dorothy had a witness. "Toto. He can confirm when I arrived. I'm not a mortician but I think she was dead at least several hours before I arrived. Besides I just arrived two days ago so I couldn't be the Ripper. The other victims were killed weeks before I arrived."

Dorothy continued to explain the scenario, starting with her arrival in the Emerald City to her finding the parking garage during the storm. She fabricated a few minor details, leaving out mentions of her cellphone as well as Scarecrow's involvement at all.

"That explains the wreck at the parking garage." Lion mused, taking in the story. "How can you be sure that Scraps and East were killed by the Ripper?"

That question stung. Dorothy had no solid evidence that they were even slightly related. "I can't." Dorothy confessed. "I don't know any of the details of the first two cases and Scraps doesn't match any of the other crimes."

"So you have nothing but conjecture." Lion scoffed.

"Whoever killed Scraps either knew East was already dead, or didn't care. If you're as untouchable as you seem to think, then would anyone come into your business and kill one of your most important employees?"

Lion seemed struck by that argument. "Conjecture or not, that is convincing. So what are you proposing?"

"Answer my questions so I can find Scraps' killer." Dorothy proposed. "I didn't know her well. She had problems, that you caused, she didn't deserve to die."

"Why shouldn't I just leave it to the ECPD?" Lion mused, still unconvinced.

"The ECPD are among the few people who know East is dead, which adds them to the small list of people, who might be, willing to cross you." Dorothy was stretching for excuses at this point. "If you don't find the killer yourself soon the ECPD are sure to find what you're hiding in the dressing room."

Lion flinched at the accusation. "Hungry, leave us."

Hungry seemed to hesitate for a moment. "Right, Boss." A glare from Lion sent him scurrying to the bathroom, with his tail between his legs.

"What do you know, girl?" Lion said threateningly. She's hit the mark for better or worse.

"There's a smuggling tunnel out of the dressing room." Dorothy suggested.

"How did you know about that?" Lion growled. "Just got into town my ass. Who the hell are you?"

"I didn't know until just now." Dorothy quipped. "Scarecrow and I were in the hallway when the gun was fired. We could see the door already. No one left the room from that door. We kicked the door in and the deadbolt was set. The murderer and weapon were gone."

Dorothy began explaining her reasoning quickly. "Unless the killer can walk through walls, or ghosts need guns to kill people, the only reasoning is that there's a secret door or hiding space."

"East is the main supplier of poppy, and if she owns this place it stands to reason that she would use it in some way. The smuggling tunnel was mostly a lucky guess. There's no point in hiding or denying it. The police will find it after they get Scarecrow's testimony."

"Well done detective." Lion said clapping his paw like hands together. "Unfortunately that's extremely private information, so I'm beginning to think I can't let you leave."

"Forget about that." Dorothy held up a hand. "The police will be searching this place again after Scarecrow's testimony. Killing me would only increase your problems, and they're certain to find it if you don't catch the killer yourself first."

Lion couldn't deny the situation. He could act brutish and throw his weight around all he wanted. He could pretend it didn't both him, but he couldn't escape the reality that he would get caught somehow. Without East's protection he was a sitting duck.

"And why would you do this for me?" Lion asked skeptically. Help didn't come for free in this town.

"You get me home safely, and I'll catch your killer." Dorothy proposed.

Lion laughed crossing his arms. "That I can do." He leaned against the wall, extending one arm towards Dorothy. "You have a deal detective. Catch this killer, bring them to me and I'll see that you return home safely. I only ask that you use discretion in this matter. My business is sensitive, as I'm sure you already know."

Dorothy looked at the hand and cringed. She got a terrible feeling about this guy. He lacked compassion and his ego was revolting. However she was thin on options, so she took his hand firmly. "Deal."

INTERLUDE III

A sickening green light filled with emerald room. It felt cruel, like a malicious spirit cackling at the misfortune of its victim. The tea before you had grown cold on the table before you. Its warm comforting smell had left the room long ago, leaving only the scent of decay.

The phonograph beyond the curtain began to skip, emitting a terrible screech followed by several repeated notes. Over and over the haunting sound played. The man behind the curtain slipped a spider like finger beneath the phonograph arm, and removed the needle. The silence that fell was almost as unpleasant as the discordant song.

"We're almost at the end of the opening acts. I do hope you've been enjoying our game." The man said, his voice slithered from his throat like a snake.

His long arms reached for a tea cup at his side. He sipped gingerly. His limbs appeared far more spider-like than before. His silhouette looked monstrous and unnatural against the green curtain.

"Perhaps you've begun to concoct some theories." He said placing his cup back down. The small clink of china colliding provided a sharp end to his words.

"Things are only just beginning, piece left to set up, but don't let that stop you from thinking. The why is the most important thing of all in this game." The man said with the snap of his fingers.

The shape of a tall, angular man approached from the side. He knelt next to the phonograph, removed the record and replaced it with a new one. The butler quickly retreated into the shadows, out of sight once more.

"People do nothing in this world without reason. Though for some their reasons may be impossible to understand." The man said slipping the phonograph needle back onto the phonograph. He wound the crack a few times and music began to fill the room once more.

"I do apologize to Knox for so casually using a secret passage. I'm sure he's rolling in his grave. Allow me to take this time to invoke his third commandment. **Knox's Third**

Commandment. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.” The man behind the curtain declared. “This is my one secret passage. I’m sure our detective will investigate it thoroughly in due time.”

“Now let us return to the fifth act.” The man clapped his long hands together twice, with a commanding tone.

FIFTH TAG – DRESS-UP

Jack returned home late that night. He was emotionally and physically exhausted from the day. As he pushed the door open to his live-work space, a wooden form bounded up to him. It’s wooden tail wagged stiffly in a happy greeting.

“Sorry buddy. I’m late.” Jack said patting Sawhorse’s wooden head. “You probably have to pee, if you haven’t already.” Jack said worriedly glancing down the hallway. Nothing immediately looked out of place, so he grabbed the leash and lead Sawhorse downstairs.

The two took a short walk, allowing Sawhorse a brief moment of respite, after the long day trapped inside. Jack hobbled along behind the excited mutt, barely able to focus on anything beyond the case. The fresh air helped to sooth Jack’s mind, and gather his thoughts.

The timing of Scraps’ murder stuck out like a sore thumb in Jack’s mind. It was extremely inconvenient that their lead was killed moments before they learned she was a lead at all. There were several possible explanations. One, it was a coincidence and Scarecrow simply killed her in a jealous rage then quickly regretted his actions. Two someone knew Scraps was a lead and got to her first. In this scenario it was likely that the culprit was related to the ECPD in someway. They used this connection to delay the spread of information, allowing them to get to Scraps first. Three...

Sawhorse tugged at the leash, dragging Jack down the street as he looked for a place to relief himself. Jack stumbled along behind the happy pooch. “Alright, I’m coming.” Jack said wincing as he increased his pace.

Eventually Sawhorse finished his business and the two were able to return to Jack’s apartment. Sawhorse bounded up the stairs, Jack following slowly behind. The typical routine, Sawhorse watched from the top of the stairs obediently.

They soon entered the small space, Jack collapsed on his chair immediately. He sighed, leaning back. “Where do I start?”

Sawhorse trotted happily next to Jack, then squeezed himself awkwardly under the desk. He took up an unnatural amount of space, forcing

Jack to push his chair back. His canine companion let out a yawn and proceeded to nap at Jack's feet.

The detective opened the secret compartment under his desk. He proceeded to resupply it with the vials he'd received from Scarecrow. Scarecrow had been supplying Scraps as well. He felt a twinge of concern for himself, if Scarecrow revealed their dealings he'd be in trouble. It was selfish feeling that he regretted.

With a grunt he stood up, walked to the bathroom and grabbed a bottle of ibuprofen. The doctor told him they would help when he was taken off morphine. It did very little to ease the pain though. Whether out of guilt or a desire to change, Jack took two pills and sat back down at his desk.

"Alright, let's take a look at that other case shall we?" Jack said to Sawhorse under the desk. The dog twitched in his sleep but did nothing else in response.

Taking out the envelope once more Jack began to sift through the pages. Long documents explaining the details of the crimes quickly littered his desk. Graphic photos displaying the grizzly crimes pinned with paper clips.

The Ripper's second victim was Tik-Tok an officer with the ECPD. He had been with the force for around fifteen years. He was respected but didn't strive to rise in the ranks. He was a generally private person, which is why it took so long to find any leads.

Tik-Tok was found on March 23rd, just over a week ago, and six days after Ugu's body was found. He was found in a similar state a Ugu. A magic circle had been painted along with a message. 'heart of a cold man, to learn the secret's of the dead. Tik Tok Tik Tok'. Tik-Tok's heart had been removed and has not been found.

The removal of the victim's heart was a trademark of Nick the Chopper. When the media got wind of this they had a field day spread wild rumours that Nick had escaped. This was entirely false but it did insight a good amount of panic. The ECPD made a statement ensuring that Nick was in prison and the rumours were false.

Tik-Tok was found in his car outside his home by a neighbour. When his home was searched the police discovered a large fire had been made in the fireplace. Documents and papers

were burned and could not be salvaged. It's unclear if the documents were burned by Tik-Tok himself or his assailant.

Glasses had been left out for two people, suggesting he had company that evening. A test on the glasses and the autopsy report revealed sleeping pills had been added to Tik-Tok's glass. He was likely asleep when he was stabbed with a long bladed object, which killed him quickly.

Blood found on the couch and floor determined Tik-Tok's home to be the location of the murder. He was then dragged to the car parked just outside where he was thrown inside.

During the initial search, broken glass and trace remnants of whisky were found under the couch. It appeared to belong to another glass that had shattered, the rest of the glass and it's contents weren't found.

The cold weather caused the body to stiffen, preventing an accurate time of death from being determined. However, Tik-Tok was seen at work the day before, which leaves the time of death somewhere between seventeen hundred, March 22nd and seven hundred March 23rd.

Jack examined the photos of the scene with an analytical eye. It seemed fairly clear that the culprit knew Tik-Tok. That was important, it narrowed down the line of suspects to people Tik-Tok not only knew, but would invite inside for a drink.

"What about this Sawhorse. The culprit came over to Tik-Tok's home, and the two began to drink together. The culprit pretends to knock over their glass which shatters, sending whisky and broken glass under the couch. Tik-Tok goes to the kitchen to get a fresh glass while the culprit cleans the mess. While Tik-Tok is away they use the opportunity to slip sleeping pills into his drink." Jack explained out loud to his canine companion, who yawned and rolled over in response. "Tik-Tok returns, they drink and when Tik-Tok falls asleep the murderer kills him with a kitchen knife. They burn incriminating documents, stuff the body in the car and leave quietly."

Jack paused for a moment. "I'm glad you agree." He chuckled nudging the mutt, who rolled back over. "This helps narrow down our suspect list, but only slightly. Tik-Tok was fairly private

about his personal life. Finding who he was in close contact with could be difficult.”

Jack grabbed the pictures of the messages and place them next to each other.

‘yellow belly of a coward to reclaim what is mine’

‘heart of a cold man, to learn the secret’s of the dead. Tik Tok Tik Tok’

“Based on the circles it’s safe to assume the killer is following the Wheeler’s ritual. Which means there is at least one more victim planned.” Jack pondered nudging Sawhorse with his foot. “Typically a murderer would try to hide their crimes, but the Ripper has been blatant in their actions. Calling them out intentionally. These messages are clearly intended as a threat towards someone, but why go through the trouble?”

The police have been doing their best to keep East’s death quiet and out of the media. The same may go for Scraps to be cautious. If the killer is trying to send messages, displaying them publicly is likely helping and encouraging their actions.

“This is exhausting.” Jack said leaning back in his chair to stare at the ceiling. His leg still ached badly. He pinched the space between his eye sockets and got to his feet.

The detective mad his way to his bedroom and flopped onto the stiff mattress. His eyes closed immediately and within moments sleep sent him into the land of dreams. A restless night lay ahead of Jack as horrendous memories flooded his mind.

Eight years ago, October 5th, outside an apartment complex in the Quadling District. A large group had gathered together, preparing to enter the building. Several police cars surrounded the group, the spinning lights cast a grim glow across the scene.

Rain poured from the dark night sky, soaking into the sharp uniforms of the Emerald City Police. Police Chief Pastoria stood at the head of the group. He had bold features, and an intense look in his eye and he spoke. “We don’t know what we’ll find in there. With any luck he won’t resist and will come quietly.” Pastoria’s dark skin and shave black hair were coated in rain which he wiped away with a hand. The rain had

caught them off guard, appearing suddenly and without warning. An omen of the tragic storm approaching.

“As you’re all aware, Nick isn’t stable. It’s unlikely that he won’t resist or make an attempt at escape. Pumpkinhead, you’ll be with me, we’ll take the front door. Glinda, you’ll watch the hallway while we enter. Pastoria, you’ll guard the front exit, while Tik-Tok you’ll guard the rear. Jamb, you’ll be on radios, keep in contact regularly.” Police chief Pastoria announced firmly, glancing among the crowd.

Tip spoke up immediately, “With all due respect, I should go with Jack. You should watch the front in case we need further orders.”

“This isn’t up for discussion Pastoria.” The police chief snapped quickly. It was apparent to everyone, the police chief was intentionally keeping his son away from the front. If Nick did attempt to flee the front door would be his least likely point of egress.

Tip bit his thumb, a habit he’d formed whenever he was frustrated but couldn’t protest. “Yes sir.” He muttered.

“Everyone clear on their instructions?”

“Yes sir.” Everyone else replied in unison.

The group quickly dispersed into the rain. Jellia Jamb entered a large police car, placing a large pair of headphones over her tiny ears. The rest approached the apartment building. Tip stopped at the entrance and watched pitifully as everyone else continued. Tik-Tok, his rotund form scrambled to the fire exit. Jack, Glinda and Pastoria walked through the glass doors.

Jack glanced back at Tip with an apologetic look. He hadn’t said it, but he agreed that Pastoria leading this charge was reckless. The Chopper had claimed at least half a dozen known victims, with many others missing. Something like this hadn’t happened since Pastoria had become police chief. Jack also knew, it was a blight on Pastoria’s record that he had to clear himself. It was a matter of pride. Keeping Tip safe was secondary to that.

The trio ascended the stairs cautiously. The atmosphere had immediately intensified upon entry. Like the gravity had been increased. Each step felt like lead and Jack’s stomach grew tight.

When they reached the second floor Pastoria and Glinda exchanged a nod. Glinda stopped and gripped his pistol comfortably. She stared down the long hallway towards the final door. Nick's unit.

Jack and Pastoria continued down the hall. The air was still and silent. Only their footsteps could be heard, and each rhythmic beat caused their muscles to tense in anticipation. The door was just ahead.

Pastoria stepped ahead of Jack, he motioned towards the side of the door. Jack nodded in response and pressed himself to the wall. A moment passed and the police chief gripped the radio nestled next to his collar. "Is everyone in position? Over."

"Y-yes." Jellia responded. "On your signal, sir. Over."

"Signal is green. Over." Pastoria responded.

Everyone else heard a static filled voice cut through their radios. "Signal is green. Beginning operation. Over."

Two and a half months of being terrorized by this evil creature had all lead to this moment. They were finally going to put an end to it all. Pastoria knocked twice on the door. Two loud, commanding thumps. "Nick, ECPD, come out with your hands up."

A few moments passed with no response. Two more louder thumps. "Nick. ECPD. Come out with your hands up!"

Still no response. He was definitely inside. They'd been watching his home for two days. They confirmed he entered the apartment. They couldn't risk giving him more time to prepare. Pastoria made a quick hand gesture at Jack, who quickly pulled twin pistols from gun holsters under his arms. Pastoria also drew a pistol, and signalled Glinda down the hall.

Glinda quickly pressed her own radio and began to inform Jellia of the situation. She then drew her own pistol, and nestled herself partially down the stairs for cover. She watched, unblinking at the door and her companions.

Pastoria stepped back, dug his heels into the carpet and rushed forward slamming a heavy boot into the door. A resounding slam echoed through the hall. Wood splintered. With a second

kick the door swung open. Jack rounded the corner, aiming his pistols into the room.

The apartment was small but was well maintained. A small kitchen was immediately visible from the entrance. It had cheap appliances supplied by the cheap landlord, but it was well maintained and clean. The right opened into a living space. A smooth leather couch faced a wall, giving the whole space a staged look. No one occupied the room. Jack and Pastoria both scanned the room carefully before entering. Each step was slow and calculated, like a chess match.

The two knew the layout of the building, they'd studied the blueprints of the building extensively. To their left was a closet, as well as a bathroom. Passed the living room was another pair of doors that led to two bedrooms.

Pastoria inched the closet door open first, scanning the space with his pistol. Only a couple of coats and a small rack with a few pairs of shoes. He slid the door shut quietly and gestured towards the bathroom.

The pair flanked the door, Jack readied himself to enter. Pastoria watched the other doors, with his free hand turned the doorknob. The door didn't open easily, it was as if it was too large for the frame. The police chief made a gesture with his hand, Jack nodded shifting his focus to the doors head. He trained his pistols on the doors.

Pastoria stepped back, raised a foot and shoved it into the door. The door squeaked loudly in protest as it swung open. A rubber seal had been added to the door, which squeaked violently against the tile floor.

The seal broken, a putrid stench spilled out of the bathroom. Agitated flies swarmed into the living space, assaulting the officers. Jack and Pastoria gagged, instinctively burying their noses in their arms.

Jack didn't want to look. He couldn't possibly look. He had strict orders to watch the doors in front of him. He knew what would happen if he looked. Yet his body was not his own, trapped within this memory he turned and looked into the bathroom.

Things moved in slow motion, no more than ten seconds passed. Possibly even less. But Jack saw everything. It burned itself into his mind. The site was horrendous, too horrendous to

describe accurately. The remains of a woman lay in the bathtub. Her body bloated and liquefying in an ice bath. Flies picked at the exposed flesh and bone, swarming, buzzing, biting. The flesh bubbled, popped and sloughed off into the bloody water.

A thread had been pulled taught, strung through a series of eye hooks. It pulled on some contraption that vanished in a blaze. Fire began to engulf the room. Jack tried to move away but his muscles refused to move at the speed his mind urged.

The creak of an old door echoed like a death knell. Jack's memory of the next events were fuzzy at best. Something heavy struck him, Pastoria had shoved him to the ground as fire burst from the bathroom. Red engulfed Pastoria in a flash.

Jack's ears rang from the explosion, everything sounded distant and foggy. His sense of balance was lost. He tried to stand but Pastoria's singed body covered his own.

Red. Red. Red. Red. Red. Pastoria was coated in red gunshots. His body slumped on top of Jack who thrashed like a wild animal. White hot pain shot through Jack's knee. The powerful bullet shattering his kneecap. He howled in pain, but even his own screaming sounded distant, as if it wasn't his own.

A hideous shadow loomed above Jack as he struggled against the searing agony. Nick stood above him, a twisted smile cut across his face. Splitting his cheeks like a gaping wound. He slowly reloaded his revolver.

A seventh shot. This one struck Nick's hand, from the doorway. The revolver and its bullets scattered across the torched ground. An eighth shot rang out. Nick fell to a knee and was quickly toppled to the ground. He laughed distantly, blood pouring from his lip.

Glinda pinned him to the ground, she shouted something incomprehensible into her radio. She slammed handcuffs painful around Nick's wrists, digging her knees into him as she stood. She spoke to Jack, but her golden words could pierce the blinding white. Glinda's hand was soft on Jack's cheek. She continued to shout into the radio.

White. Black. Red. Blue. Black. Green. White. Dazzling pink. Pearlescent blue. Vibrant gold. Colours flashed and danced in Jack's mind. The next few days were a blur of colour, pain and transcendent bliss.

When Jack truly woke for the first time in several days, he was alone, in a hospital bed. White walls and curtains surrounded him. His back was stiff from the uncomfortable bed. His leg ached and was in a thick cast, propped up in a sling. He looked to his side, hoping desperately to see Pastoria in the bed next to him. It was empty.

Woeful tears welled at the corners of his eyes. His suspicions hadn't be confirmed. Pastoria could be in another bed, or perhaps he'd even survived by some miracle. Fear and regret pushed those pitiful thoughts aside. He wept and screamed until a nurse came to his aid. Still he screamed in agony, emotional and physical.

Later that day he was informed, Police Chief Pastoria had been shot. He died on the scene. Nick the Chopper was now in custody and awaiting trial. Glinda was assigned the position of chief of police. Tippertarius Pastoria Junior was to be promoted to deputy, but he refused the position.

A fierce hand pulled the police tape away from the door frame. It ripped away easily and fluttered to the ground. Dorothy strode inside, defiling the crime scene. Lion followed behind, tastelessly clothed in a loosely tied robe.

Police tape had been lined across the floor, outlining the location of Scraps' body which had been removed. Dorothy stood over the outline, staring at it with a wince. "I'm sorry I used you as an excuse..." She muttered, mostly to herself, but she secretly hoped her words would reach Scraps somehow. She stepped towards Scraps' wardrobe, throwing it open. Her actions were filled with anger and frustration.

She grabbed her jacket tightly. "Sorry to you too." She muttered and slung the jacket over her shoulders. The weight and feel was comforting and soft. Like a warm embrace that she missed. She felt a small sense of guilt at how helpless she felt without this small comfort.

"Where is it?" She barked at Lion, who grumbled and stuck up his nose in response.

“Here.” He pointed to one of the wardrobes. “Help me lift it.”

It took a great deal of effort and between the two of them they weren’t able to lift the wardrobe. It also refused to slide, as if it was mounted to the wall. They took a moment and tossed the clothes to the ground. With the clothes removed they still struggled but were able to lift the wardrobe off a pair of hooks and move it out of the way.

Behind the wardrobe was what at first appeared to be more wall. A pair of nearly wall flush hooks had held the wardrobe in place. A thin seam was visible, forming a door. There was a lock as well.

“How would someone get through here alone?” Dorothy asked panting from the effort.

“They wouldn’t. This hasn’t been used in nearly eight years.”

Lion fetched an ornate and strange key from his pocket. Shoving it in the lock, he turned it with a click. Tugging on the key, the door pulled away from the lock and swung open.

“It was primarily accessed from the other side. The wardrobe is attached to the door, so it swings freely when opened from that side. You only need to remove the wardrobe to access it from this side.” Lion explained.

It was an elaborate and inconvenient design. However the sheer difficulty of accessing it, is probably what kept the police from discovering it. They likely assumed they were all wall mounted and didn’t investigate further. Dorothy couldn’t blame them either. She wouldn’t have been able to find it if she hadn’t been told.

“Help me put the wardrobe back.” Lion ordered. With a grunt the two lifted the wardrobe back onto the door. It proved a difficult task while the door was open. It kept trying to swing shut, but eventually they mounted it back. “It won’t shut on its own, but when shut it locks automatically.”

“So you can lock me down there.”

“If you don’t take this.” Lion held the key out in an open palm.

Dorothy hesitated to take it. This arrangement was feeling more and more like a genie’s wish or a deal with a devil. “Is it the same

key for the whole place?” Dorothy asked, not taking the key.

“Yes.”

“How many people have keys?”

Lion frowned and thought a moment.

“There were five keys in total. One for the architect, one for Mombi, and one for each of her daughters, South, East and West.”

“Then how did you get one?” Dorothy pressed.

“South was arrested and committed suicide in her cell. I was given her key after that.” Lion explained bitterly, wagging his hand in front of Dorothy, like you might wave a treat in front of a dog.

“So that’s why you were inclined to believe me. Whoever killed East now has her key.” Dorothy snatched the key with a snarky smirk.

“That’s right. Which puts me and my business at risk. So do try to return alive.” Lion pressed, I’d prefer to not brick this place up.

Dorothy looked down the hidden passage. To her surprise and displeasure it wasn’t a passage at all. It led to an elevator, only big enough for a couple of people.

“Where does it lead?”

“The Yellow Brick Road, my dear.” Lion said with a dramatic wave of his hand.

“You people need to find different names for things.” Dorothy said bitterly.

“You’ve seen the yellow bricks. The passages follow those. Roughly. It’s been some time since I’ve been down there myself.” Lion explained.

Biting her nails Dorothy reached into her shoe, gripping her knife again. She flipped it open in a flash. The culprit had a gun, so this likely wouldn’t do much, but it did provide emotional comfort. She stepped into the elevator, shut the grate and pressed a small button.

Nothing happened. “You need to use the key, on the panel.” Lion gesture just above the buttons. A small keyhole was visible.

Dorothy inserted the key, and pressed the button. It lit up bright and the cage rocked. Slowly it descended with a whine. The old metal protested, gears grinding downward.

The ride was short only a few stories at most. It lead into a dark tunnel. A few lights illuminated the immediate area, but everything beyond was shrouded in darkness. There was a small box next to the elevator with a pair of oil lanterns.

“He could’ve warned me.” Dorothy grumbled, grinding her teeth.

She twisted a small key on each of the lanterns. They sparked and sputtered, the first refused to light, but the second did. A small flame burned weakly in it’s glass prison. She picked up the lantern in her left hand, oil sloshed inside, though how much was unclear.

“Great.” She swallowed hard, staring at the abyss before her. Raising the lantern she cast away the dark, exposing the long series of winding tunnels. Dust and cobwebs filled the dank and musty space. Then she walked. Carefully, sticking close to the walls, which gave a false sense of comfort.

Jack jerk violently in awake. Cold sweat dripping from his cheeks. He breathed hard, muscles aching from a night of tension. Sawhorse leapt from the bed, startled by the abrupt arousal. He clattered along the ground like a baby deer, trying to right himself.

An obnoxious ringing that echoed through the apartment had woken Jack from his nightmares. He staggered out of bed, slamming his shoulder into the door frame as he hobbled towards the office. There the phone continue to rattle, it’s ear piercing call cutting through Jack’s exhaustion. He winced at the light that crept through the window, forcing his eyes shut he felt around blindly for the phone on his desk.

The receiver lifted with a click, Jack pinched the space between his eyes and forced a professional tone. “Good morning, Pumpkinhead P.I. How can I help you?”

“Jack.” It was Lion’s voice that came through the other end. Jack was extremely surprised to hear from him at all. “I hope I didn’t wake you.” He feigned an apology. “I was hoping to speak with you on a private matter. Would you be able to come to the Yellow Brick Road? It’s rather urgent.”

“Is this related to the Scraps case?” Jack asked with hostility. Lion was the last person he’d expect to call, let alone call asking for help. He had to have an ulterior motive, Jack was certain of this.

“I’m not sure, but something occurred last night that I would prefer the ECPD not see.” He explained.

Jack hesitated but conceded. “I can be there in thirty minutes.”

“Excellent. Come to the back exit and knock twice. I’ll let you in there.” Lion explained, hanging up before Jack had a chance to respond.

Jack stared at the receiver, a dull drone emitted from it. “Ass.” He hung up the phone, and stretched.

Sawhorse trotted up next to him, sat down and yawned almost as if it was mimicking the detective. Jack pet the mutt on the head. “I should take you with me this time.” Sawhorse barked in response.

The detective picked up the phone again, twisting the dial as he called for a taxi. While he waited for it’s arrival he got dressed and grabbed his equipment, notepad, pen, revolvers, measuring tape, camera and a few other odds and ends. There was a honk of a car horn from downstairs, signally the cab’s arrival. Leashing Sawhorse, the two hobbled down the stairs, and got into the cab.

The drive was relatively short, allowing Jack to arrive a few minutes before nine o’clock. He led Sawhorse around the back of the building, towards the fire exit. The dog trotted happily behind him. Jack knocked twice.

There was a loud click of the handle being pushed in from the other side. The door slid open smoothly, and there Lion stood, wearing a low cut evening gown. “Detective, please come in.” He grimaced at the sight of Sawhorse, backing away from the canine. “Oh.”

“Is he going to be a problem?”

“No, no. I’ve just never been a... dog person.” Lion confessed, maintaining some distance as Jack entered.

Entering from the fire exit Jack could clearly see the problem. The police tape had been removed from the dressing room door frame. “What happened?” Jack asked, cautiously moving forward.

“Well, you see. Last night as I was trying to sleep. I heard a loud noise from down the stairs.” He gestures to the stairs next to the exit door that lead to the emergency exit to his suite. “When I came down I found the tape removed and well, when I looked inside.” He trailed off.

Jack leaned his head into the room and could clearly see the twisted wardrobe and exposed elevator shaft. “What is it?”

“I don’t know. When I saw it, I called you immediately. This looked very suspicious I know, that’s why I called you instead of the police. If the police discover this place it’ll look terrible for me.” Lion explained quickly, a look of surprise cut across his face.

“You. Never knew there was a hidden elevator.” Jack pressed.

“Detective, if I had known I would’ve mentioned something earlier. There could be a crazy person running around with access not just to the dressing room but who knows where else.” Lion said desperately. “This puts me and my staff at risk.”

“Has anyone else gone in?” Jack asked.

“I don’t believe so. All the staff and patrons were sent home before the ECPD left. I’ve been here with Hungry and China all night, and the doors and windows have all been locked.” Lion seemed genuinely concerned, which was a drastic change in his character from last night.

“Alright, I’ll check it out. Let me make a call before I go down.” Jack explained.

“Of course detective.” Lion gestured down the hallway, leading Jack to a telephone. Lion provided little privacy as Jack contacted the ECPD headquarters.

Jellia answered, with a bright and cheery “Hello, ECPD how can I help you?”

“Jellia, it’s Jack. Is Ozma there?” Jack asked casually.

“I’m sorry Jack. Miss Ozma isn’t available at the moment.” Jellia said regretfully after a moment. “Can I pass on a message for you?”

“Yeah, it’s nothing too important, just if I don’t make it down to the station today, let her know, I left her copy of Yoop by Ruggedo under my desk.” Jack said a little disappointed Ozma wasn’t available. “Anyways, she should still have

a key to my place. Can you make sure she gets that message?”

“Of course Jack, the was Yoop by Ruggedo, under your desk correct?” Jellia repeated. Jack could hear the sound of a pen scratching along with Jellia’s words.

“That’s right. Thanks Jellia. Ozma would kill me if she doesn’t get that book back.”

“I wouldn’t want that. I’ll let her know as soon as she’s back. Can I help with anything else?”

“No that’s all. Have a good day Jellia.” Jack said with a smile.

“Have a good day Jack.”

The two hung up simultaneously and Jack turned to Lion. “Alright, let’s see what’s down there.”

“Thank you detective. I appreciate your discretion.” Lion said, with a relieved sigh, he didn’t seem to pick up on Jack’s message. Though it had been fairly abstract. He hoped Ozma would understand if things went wrong.

The trio returned to the hallway and waited outside the dressing room. Jack was first to cross the threshold, Sawhorse following behind, tail sagging anxiously. Reaching into a pocket, Jack retrieved a long plastic tube. Clicking a button shed bright light across the floor.

He bit his lip, leaning forward to look down the elevator shaft. Aiming the flashlight down to light to top of the elevator. It wasn’t nearly as deep as he’d expected, though it would still be an unpleasant fall. By his guess it dropped about twenty feet.

Lion remained at a distance, not crossing the threshold. “How does it look detective?”

“It’s not too deep.” Jack said with a wave, searching for a ladder. There was a narrow set of rungs, along with a service hatch on the top of the elevator carriage.

Glancing at Sawhorse, Jack immediately regretted bringing the pooch. He’d thought his companion might be able to help sniff out some clues, but climbing down an elevator shaft wasn’t his forte.

Before committing to the climb, Jack decided to first check the strange door. He examined the lock, and hinges making note of the

contraption and how it had remained hidden. Once he was satisfied he stuffed the end of the flashlight in his mouth, and picked up Sawhorse in one arm. "Don't come in." Jack warned. "If you don't hear from me in a few hours, do yourself a favour and call the police." Jack suspected Lion would ignore the advice, but felt obligated to say it anyways.

"Of course detective. Good luck, stay safe." Lion said with feigned encouragement. "I hope you find and put an end to the culprit."

"Thanks." Jack rolled his eyes. With some fear, Jack grabbed one of the ladder rungs. He tugged it, testing it's strength. It seemed sturdy enough, so he stepped forward. Climbing the ladder one handed would be a difficult task for anyone. More so for Jack, who's right leg trembled with each rung.

When he reached the bottom of the shaft, he stepped onto the top of the elevator. The service hatch was unlocked, allowing Jack to flip it open easily. He dropped down, staggering, pain shooting up his leg. He took the flashlight from his mouth, and place Sawhorse on the ground. The mutt immediately began sniffing around the elevator.

Jack took a moment to breathe and recover from the climb down. The elevator grate was open, revealing a few crates and an old oil lantern. His flashlight illuminated the dusty, cob web filled tunnels before him. They clearly hadn't been maintained in a long time.

Once he'd caught his breath he let Sawhorse take the lead. The canine's sense were much sharper than Jack's and he would be able to sniff out anyone who had recently passed through. The dog quickly began pulling Jack down the tunnel. The canine's snout pressed to the dusty concrete as he picked up a scent.

Jack followed cautiously, keeping his flashlight forward, casting away the clinging shadows. Small puddles of stale water leaked from pipes overhead.