

GUIDED TOURS  
THROUGH  
WINTERGREEN HILLOCKS

BEN MOATS

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

IF YOU KNOW, YOU KNOW.

# THE PACKAGE PLAN PROPOSAL

Alright. Here we go. The name's Agatha. I'm twenty-two years old and since I was fourteen, I've suffered from agoraphobia. Now, I know what you're thinking. "Isn't that the thing where you're afraid of crowds?" Listen. I'm not going to explain every aspect of my condition to you. You want to know more? Google it. All you need to know is that tonight, I'm getting what's mine. It arrives at 4 pm. The mailbox is down the street and around the corner in a nice, secluded area. I would love to go get it the moment it arrives, but life isn't that simple. You see, Noel the Know-It-All always loiters outside when she gets off school. She arrives at 3:45 pm every day and stays out until it gets dark. When it comes to most people, I can give them a faint smile and quickly walk in a wide circle around them to avoid talking. That technique doesn't work on Noel, who fancies herself an investigative journalist. She will chase down anyone in sight and read them those blasted headlines of hers until their ears fall off. There is no escaping Noel. If I tried to get my package before she goes inside, I would be held verbally hostage. Just the thought of it makes my jaw clench and my heart beat too fast. No. That's not an option. Here's the plan. Noel usually gets called into dinner by her grandmother, Claudia the Caregiver, at around 7:30 pm. I will go get my package the moment I hear Noel running inside. Wait. No. That won't work. I'm not the only one avoiding Noel. The entire apartment complex comes to life the moment that girl is out of sight. Fiona the (Failed) Fortune Teller sneaks out by the benches to have her nightly smoke, Greg the Gardener waters his plants, Alexander the Great (Disappointment) walks his dog down the street, and Emre the Inscrutable just stands outside and stares at the stars. Impossible to avoid all of them simultaneously. I'll have to wait until they all

go back inside. So, I'll leave my apartment at 8:30 pm, grab the package, and be back in no time.

This will work. It has to.

## FRAUDULENT FORTUNES

“I see...”

“Yes?”

“I see...”

“What do you see?”

“I see...i c...icy roads. You...on an icy road. Yes, yes. You’re walking down an icy road in the middle of the night. There’s someone following you.”

“Who?”

“A strange man. Not someone you really know. He wants to hurt you.”

“What? When?”

“Next week. Your car breaks down, and you end up stranded.”

“That’s impossible. My car is brand new.”

“Well, it doesn’t exactly break down, per se. The man following you isn’t there by accident. He tampered with your car. He followed you until you broke down. He’s going to hurt you.”

The woman grimaced and shook her head gravely. “What should I do to avoid this?”

Fiona smiled softly. “Ah, my dear, never fear. I can ensure that this fate does not come to pass.”

One of the woman’s eyebrows raised ever so slightly, and the corner of her mouth twitched into a smirk for the briefest of moments. She reached down into her bag and spritzed some perfume on herself before looking back up at Fiona expectantly.

The fortune teller blinked rapidly as she came out of her trance, looking up at the young customer. Fiona's eyes began to water as she fought back a sneeze. "Excuse me, dear. I'm afraid I need to go blow my nose. I'll be right back."

The woman feigned a look of surprise and concern. "Oh, of course! Take as much time as you need."

Fiona hurried out of the room.

The woman waited for a few moments, listening for the bathroom door.

As soon as she heard the door close, the woman began speaking quickly. "Orin. I need your help. I...I made a mistake. My fiancé and I were waiting...I made a mistake. I don't know what to do. I don't want to...but I can't hide it from him. If he finds out, I just don't know what would happen. Orin, please. Help me."

Silence filled the room.

"Damn it. It's my choice, isn't it? That's what people always say. My choice. But...I don't know. Would I even be able to? What's worth more? My happiness or...Orin, please. What should I do?"

*Our lives are not our own.*

The woman's eyes welled with tears. She pitched forward, staring at the floor, letting the fear take over. Her shoulders rose and fell as she took deep breaths. She leaned back up, her eyes clear and her mind made up. She placed some money on the table and left.

Fiona remained where she was, leaning against the wall just out of sight. She rounded the corner and glared at Orin briefly before going to the table and counting the money. She sighed.

"Another day's work, eh, Orin?"

*I learn to get by on little victories.*

Fiona snorted and pulled out a cigarette. She stared at it for a long time, spinning it slowly between her fingers before shaking her head. “Damn that Noel girl and her newspapers. How am I supposed to find a moment’s peace outside?” Fiona sighed and put the cigarette away, temporarily defeated. She stood, stretching as her joints creaked in all too familiar ways. She took off the ceremonial headdress she always wore during predictions, massaging the tense muscles on her lower neck and shoulders. “You know, they never do tell you just how heavy those beads can be. Strange how having even a small amount of weight on your head can make you feel like you’re holding the world on your shoulders.”

Fiona looked at Orin, waiting for a response, but none came.

“Ah well, wouldn’t want to waste your *talents* on me now, would we?”

*So abundant are we, left alone I shall be, but a waited phone never rings.*

Fiona chuckled and sat down on the couch. She picked up the TV remote. “Channel surfing is kind of like gambling, isn’t it? You never know what’s waiting on the next click. I think they should change the way television works. Once you skip past a channel, you shouldn’t be able to go back to it until whatever was on ends. People are so busy looking for new excitements that they never appreciate what they have.”

Fiona skipped through the rest of the channels. She settled briefly on a historical documentary before skipping through all the channels once again. She turned the TV off and tossed the remote away, dissatisfied.

Fiona’s doorbell startled her out of her melancholy and spurred her into action. Fiona donned her headdress, straightened her robes, and answered the door.

A tall, thin man with light blond hair and piercing, bright blue eyes waited on the other side.

Fiona blinked in surprise. “Emre?”

“Hello, Fiona. May I come in?”

Fiona realized she had been rooted in place, blocking the entrance. She quickly sidestepped and ushered him in with a lavish sweep of her arm. “Of course, of course. All are welcome here.”

Emre entered slowly, his gaze taking in every corner of the room. They lingered briefly on a solitary crystal ball waiting on a decorative shelf. Emre took a seat and beckoned for Fiona to do the same.

“Now, what can I do for you today, Emre? A reading perhaps?”

Emre leaned in, whispering conspiratorially. “Fiona. I’ve heard that you are extremely allergic to the scent of cinnamon. Is that true?”

Fiona leaned back in her chair. Her expression was confident, but her eyes held suspicion. “Ah, yes. I’m afraid I’ve had that allergy since I was a young child. Any trace of cinnamon in the air sends me into a sneezing fit.”

Emre smiled widely and nodded quietly to himself. He leaned forward again, a glint in his eyes. “Fiona. I happen to have an extremely strong sense of smell, and I could not help but notice that almost all of your visitors enter with one scent and leave with another.”

A well-prepared lie rested on the tip of Fiona’s tongue, but she stopped herself. The eyes staring back at her were far too clever and far too perceptive.

“I suspect you’ve heard more than you’re letting on, Emre.”

Emre offered a wide smile and an approving nod at the riposte.

“I suppose I have. Tell me, are the rumors true?”

Fiona stood and walked away, returning with two glasses and a bottle of wine. “Drink?”

Emre shook his head. “None for me, thank you.”

Fiona shrugged indifferently. “More for me then.” She filled one of the glasses and took a long sip, then nodded towards the crystal orb. “Orin’s right there if you want to ask him yourself. I can leave the room if you’d like.”

Inquisitive eyes flickered towards Orin, and Emre tilted his head. “Tell me, O.R.I.N., when I am on my deathbed, how am I meant to find peace?”

*Happiness can be found in the darkest of times—*

“If only one remembers to turn on the light,” Emre finished, his eyes twinkling. “No, Fiona, I am not referring to O.R.I.N. I am referring to the rumors about your powers.”

Fiona froze mid-sip, a slight tremor in her fingers as she set her glass down.

“Fiona. How do your powers work?”

Fiona hesitated, again tempted to lie. Instead, she evaded the question. “Why do you want to know?”

“I will explain after you tell me.”

Fiona’s laughter rang out loudly, but her smile never reached her eyes. She spread her hands widely. “Just ask around, Emre. Everyone knows I’m a fraud.”

“Cut the bullshit, Fiona.”

Fiona stood suddenly, prepared to throw Emre out, but, despite his sharp words, Emre's expression remained neutral. He was calm, collected, and utterly intent on finding the answers to his questions. Fiona returned to her seat and took another long sip of wine.

“Ah, what the hell,” she shrugged with a sigh. “You’re not going to believe me anyway. I can see anyone’s future, but the moment I tell them about it—”

“Their future changes.”

Fiona’s shock was not hidden quickly enough. Emre leaned back in satisfaction.

“How did you know?” asked Fiona.

“O.R.I.N.?”

*If you only listen with your ears, I can't get in.*

Emre nodded in agreement and cracked his knuckles. “Well, it is quite straightforward, is it not? You are a fortune teller, so you are required to claim mystical powers as a matter of profession, but your customers are not here for you. Quite the opposite, they deliberately produce the scent of cinnamon to induce a sneezing fit that will take you from the room, leaving them alone with O.R.I.N. I suspect you are not actually allergic to cinnamon and simply spread this rumor to make it easier on your customers and yourself to create a pretext for you to be out of the room long enough for them to consult O.R.I.N. But why do your customers have no interest in hearing their futures from you? There are only two possibilities, and either way you come out looking like a fraud. Either you *are* a fraud, as they say, or your powers have some sort of line you yourself are unable to cross—a limitation, if you will. The only limitation that makes sense, the only one I can imagine, is that your predictions have an impact on the future. But, alas, what impact could they have?”

Emre twirled an unlit cigarette between his fingers, feigning a look of confused frustration before his eyes lit up dramatically, and he began speaking quickly again. “The way I see it, the only logical conclusion is that when you tell someone their future, you *change* that future. So, there are two situations that can happen when you see someone’s future. You might lie to them, but then obviously the false future you foretell will not come to pass, and they will conclude that you are a fraud. Or, you might tell them the truth, in which case the limitation of your power would take effect and their future would change. Yet again, they would be left with no other choice than to presume that you speak only in falsehoods. It is quite tragic, really.”

Fiona sat stunned and speechless for several moments. When she recovered, she opened her mouth to respond, but Emre raised a halting hand.

“Please, if I may continue. I have one more conjecture. Once you see someone’s future, you have no way of telling if that future is the best possible future for them. Inevitably, you see some negative encounter in their future, and you have to decide whether or not that suffering is worth all the good that you can see in their future. Since your customers think you are a fraud, they will often not come back to see you, so you likely have only one chance at this. Is their current future better or worse than whatever new future would result from you sharing your prediction? A coin toss.” Emre’s eyes glinted with a private joke. “A gamble. Tell me, Fiona, how many times have you gambled with their futures?”

Fiona swallowed hard.

“Every time, then?” Emre’s smile turned solemn. “Then you really are quite the gambler.”

Fiona finally shook herself from her silence. “Why did you come here today?”

Emre's smile vanished for the first time. He massaged old aches from his hands and said softly, "Fiona, I want you to look into my future."

Fiona frowned but realized he was serious. "Oka—"

"On one condition." Emre leaned forward, a look of severity on his face. Fiona could not escape his piercing gaze. "Fiona. You must promise me that you will tell me the truth. Whatever future you see, you must tell me."

Fiona searched his eyes before nodding slightly, uncomfortable with the silent promise.

Emre held her gaze a moment longer, then nodded, satisfied that Fiona would respect his wishes.

Fiona took a steadying sip of wine and settled back. She folded her legs up, straightened her back, and slowly released a long breath. Emre remained motionless. As Fiona's eyes sealed shut, an ageless weight escaped Emre's carefully constructed mask, but only for a moment.

Fiona tensed and shivered, goosebumps raising the hair along her neck and arms. An awed expression spread as she began to speak. Emre listened intently as words fell from her lips. As she finished, a crease formed between her eyebrows. Emre looked down solemnly, nodding silently to himself. He thanked her quietly and left without another word as tears flooded Fiona's eyes.

"What have I done?"

*I'm the hero of the story, don't need to be saved.*

## CAREFULLY CRAFTED COSTUMES

The alarm sounded for the dozenth time with no response. Alexander remained sprawled across his bed with no intention of quieting the nuisance. After a while, he even began to enjoy the upbeat tune, belting out off-pitch counter-melodies and fancying himself quite the musician. Alexander waited until morning sun shifted into afternoon light, and then he pulled himself unceremoniously out from under his heavy comforter. He stretched loudly, yawning and sighing and groaning as he glanced at the clock.

“It’s noon already, Rufus? Where does the time go?”

The Tolesian Shepherd glanced up at Alexander, his tail thumping lightly against the floor as he sprawled across his own bed.

“Don’t you just love Halloween, Rufus? You can be anything or anyone. You know, last time I talked to Orin, he said that everyone becomes who they pretend to be. I wonder if he was talking about Halloween?” Alexander shrugged and began preparing his costume.

“You see, Rufus, the real trick is to create a costume that seems lived-in. I could have gone out and found some store-bought costume, but it wouldn’t be real. It would stink of amateurism. No, no. I’m committed to my costume’s authenticity. There’s a *reason* I haven’t showered in days. My dedication is so great that I’ve decided that I will spend the rest of the day sitting on my couch, watching television, and eating day-old pizza, because I have *standards*. My costume will be perfect.”

Hours passed as Alexander mindlessly consumed media, hearing much but listening to little. He checked his watch every hour or so, the anticipation nearly killing him. Abruptly, he jumped off the couch so fast that his dog yelped softly.

“This is it, Rufus! It's time. Let me see how I look.”

Alexander rushed over to the mirror to examine his costume.

“Ah, yes. The creases across the pajamas. The pizza stains. The disheveled hair. The bloodshot eyes. The dirty glasses. I have truly captured the look of a lazy man. How brilliant. How absolutely inspired.”

Rufus exhaled a loud huff and stood up, wagging his tail as he came to stand by Alexander.

“Ah, Rufus! I had completely forgotten. It's time for your nightly walk! You must be miserable. Let's go together. You'll be the trusty sidekick to my inventive costume.”

Alexander opened the door and bowed extravagantly as Rufus marched outside, exuding all the pride and prestige of kings of old. Alexander reached into his pockets to find his keys only to discover that his pajamas did not, in fact, have pockets. He shrugged and simply closed the door behind him.

“Nothing to worry about, Rufus. No one steals here anyways.”

Rufus gave him a dubious look.

“Alright, fine,” Alexander sighed. “I'll use the spare.” He opened the door again and flipped the lock before closing it once more.

Alexander looked around at his neighbors and how they were dressed up. He spotted Agatha emerge from her apartment briefly, standing under her flickering porch light before a look of utter horror eclipsed her features and she hurried back inside.

“Ah, what a shame. I don’t think I’ve ever had a chance to speak with Agatha. Come on, Rufus, let’s see what everyone is up to on this fine evening.”

As he gazed around, Alexander saw not his neighbors but rather a mismatch of monsters and misfits. A vampire, a sleuth, an ape, a fortune teller, and a TV with a mirror in place of a screen. The only costume with any real merit was that of a rather convincing horned devil. The rest were utter disappointments. Yes, monsters and misfits indeed. Alexander shook his head, wrought with dismay.

“You see what happens, Rufus? These people put no thought or creativity into their costumes. Store-bought and thrown together, to boot. That ape doesn’t even have a banana, just a bag of...what is that, hard candies? A travesty if I’ve ever seen one. They all grabbed the first thing they saw and never looked back, didn’t they? You and me? We rose above. Alas, Rufus, we must make do. I’m sure we can still salvage the night.”

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*Smile, my boy. It’s sunrise.*

Alexander woke to a warm heat on his face. He squinted in the bright light, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He looked around in utter confusion before realizing he must have fallen asleep on the seat of a bench. He wondered idly if he took his depiction of a lazy man a little too far as he searched for his glasses. His wandering hand returned only a piece of hard candy.

Groaning at the crick in his neck, a punishment from his poor choice of bed, Alexander sat up and looked around. Fiona was walking away, Orin in hand as she chuckled to herself—at his expense, Alexander suspected.

“Rufus? Are you there, buddy?”

Rufus came running to Alexander, licking his face excitedly after having enjoyed an entire night outside.

“Come on, Rufus. We should get you back inside.”

As Alexander stiffly walked back, he noticed Greg rifling through the bushes.

“Too much excitement last night, huh, Greg? Searching for your dignity?”

“Very amusing, Master Alexander. I’m afraid I’ve lost my shears. I could have sworn I placed them over here.” Greg continued to sift through the bush, tossing aside leaves and stray hard candies as he searched.

“What kind of bush is that, Greg?”

“A rosebush.”

“Doesn’t that hurt? Shouldn’t you be more careful?”

Greg barked with laughter. “It doesn’t matter much, Master Alexander.”

“Why not?”

Greg motioned around him. “What do you see?”

Alexander shrugged, feeling lost. “I see bushes, flowers, fruit, vegetables...”

Greg shook his head sharply. “No, Master Alexander. You see a rosebush. You see chrysanthemums. You see oranges. Look, have you ever seen anything like this?” Greg held out a carrot that was shaped very strangely, with protrusions coming at various angles.

“I suppose I haven’t, but why does that matter?”

Greg continued shaking his head. “You don’t understand. You never will.”

“What does that mean?”

Greg pointed towards Orin. “Ask him.”

*Make your life spectacular. I know I did.*

Alexander nodded respectfully towards Orin, taking his words to heart.

“Master Alexander, what do you think of that?”

“Well...what do you think?” Alexander countered.

Greg breathed out sharply as he struggled to contain a laugh. “What do I think? I think that we shall never more, at any future time...”

Greg walked away suddenly, leaving Alexander and Orin alone.

*Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds.*

Alexander breathed in quietly, taking in the wisdom of those around him. He pictured himself working peacefully in a meadow, penning great works that men would read for generations to come. He felt totally, completely at ease.

“Detectives duped!” Noel entered like a hurricane, waving a piece of hard candy in Alexander’s face before he had time to flee. “Deceitful, defamed drifter downplays dastardly defeat, daring dimwitted detectives!”

Alexander forced a polite smile. “Ah, Noel. So nice to see you. Can I help you with anything?”

“Yes, you can,” she responded seriously. “I have been censored. This just in! My trusty pen has been stolen! And I need your help to find it.” Noel pointed a finger at Alexander with such authority that, for a moment, he felt compelled to obey.

“I’m afraid I can’t help you look, Noel. You see, I’ve lost my glasses, and I won’t be any good to you until I find them.”

“Glasses?” Noel thwacked Alexander on the forehead with a handmade newspaper. “Goodness Gracious! Gallant great-grandfather generously gifts Greek gods’ glossary, giving great-grandkids guidance!”

“I really must be going, Noel.”

“Inconceivable! Itinerant illusionist imbues idealism in illuminating, ingenious imaginarium!”

“Those are incredible titles, Noel, really, but I have to leave now.”

“Tallyho! Traitorous trader traditionally trafficking tragic traumas travels transnationally!”

“See you later then.”

“Shazam! Shaken sister structures stake-out, spying suspicious salad-selling steakhouse! Steals secret stash, showing sister’s sinister, shameful sham!”

Alexander began running with Noel in hot pursuit.

“Zoom! Zing! Zowie! Zoologist Zoey Zachary zaps zesty zucchini!”

Rufus kept close to his owner, glancing back occasionally at the little girl following them.

“Falconer Fabio Ferdandez flabbergasted! Friendly fowler faints! Fortunately feeds fascinating facts first!”

Alexander attempted to sprint away, but Noel would not be deterred by such tactics.

She hopped into a small golf cart and hit the gas, driving behind the fleeing man. “Presto! Police pursue Peter Piper, popular pickled peppers poacher!”

“Where did you even get that cart?!” Alexander exclaimed, ducking left through the bushes. “You shouldn’t be driving!”

Noel was not to be evaded so easily. She tore after him through the plants, to the dismayed cries of the gardener. “Huh?! Hazelnut hoax horrifies highbrow horticulturist!”

“Rufus, save yourself!”

“Anon! Aghast author accidentally accepts accelerated astrophysics assignment!”

Alexander almost tripped over a hose, but he caught himself at the last moment, sweat beading on his forehead as his muscles protested.

Noel did not relent. “Karma! Kidnapped kangaroo keeps kimono, karate-kicks kidnapper!”

## AVOW. ACCEPT. AVENGE.

Damn it all. Why did it have to be Halloween? Of all days, why did it have to be yesterday? Those misfits and monsters made it impossible for me to get my package when I planned, and now it's gone. Rather than a package in my mailbox, all I found was a damned hard candy. So not only was my package stolen, but littering was afoot as well!

Voices outside. Blinds opened marginally.

“Mayhem! Mailman Maisie Makes Maelstrom Mistake!”

It's that Noel girl again. She's harassing Alexander, chasing him down in a golf cart, of all things. Well. Good. Keeps them both busy.

“Eureka! Empathic eyewitness Evie Everdeen emphatically establishes extensive evidence, egregiously encouraging emancipation!”

Now I've gotta figure out who stole my package.

“Natalia Nightingale's nightclub Nightowl nurtures nonchalant notoriety!”

They think they can get away with this? They stole from the wrong person.

“Xenization! Xenagogue xeroxes xanthic, xyloid, xiphoid, xylocarpus xenagogy!”

I know these people inside and out. I've been watching them for years, subconsciously learning their patterns and behaviors.

“Roger, Roger! Radioed rangers raid rambunctious rascal ruining respected rap records!”

I know when they smoke, what they throw away, when they sleep. I know them better than they know themselves.

“Voila! Vigorous vagabond Valkyrie voluntarily vanquishes villainous vampire, vaccinates various victims!”

Now all I have to do is write it all down and figure out who had something to gain from robbing me last night.

“Quotha! Quick Quotes queen Quincy Quinn quips quintuplets’ quinceanera!”

I’ll find them.

“Whew! Watercolorist Winona Wyder wishes weeping willows were...well, weepier!”

I have to.

## FLEE(T)ING FORTUNES

Alexander peeked around the corner of his hiding place, searching for signs of enemy presence. The hum of the golf cart made him jerk back, but the little girl hadn't seen him. Or at least, he didn't think so. He raised a hand to his mouth, trying to soften his panting.

“Baffled! Before being brought by belatedly, bystander Betty Branch brandishes bewildering balderdash!”

Alexander shrunk back behind the tree as the humming engine faded a little.

“Oopsey! Omniscient O.R. operative offers oversleeping odontologist overtime opportunities!”

The voice was distant and quiet. Alexander breathed a sigh of relief and stood. He began walking back to his apartment on high alert. Idly, he wondered if this was how Agatha felt all the time.

Suddenly, Noel appeared behind him. “Jeepers! Journalist Jefferson J. Jackson joins jalopy jip jury, justifies jilted jogger!”

Alexander jumped in surprise and broke into a sprint again, racing to get into his apartment before Noel caught him. Rufus didn't seem to understand the urgency of the situation, instead panting happily and barking delightedly at the golf cart like this was some sort of game.

This was no game.

“Yippee! Youthful yeomen yank yellow yarn! Yearning yellowjackets yelp, ‘You’ll yield your yarn yet!’”

Noel was closing in. Alexander scrambled to find the spare key to his apartment.

“Uh-oh! Unhappily ubiquitous understudy underestimates unintelligible, unabridged, unfinished utopian ultimatum, unintentionally unveiling undesired ulterior understandings!”

As Alexander flung the doormat away, a hard candy pinged across the sidewalk. Alexander searched desperately for where he had hidden the key, but it was gone. Rufus barked and flung his body around wildly, excited by all the action.

“Catastrophe! Campaigning collegiate Collin Cork captivates cops concerning caustic calamity!”

“For the love of—!” Alexander kicked candy wrappers away and searched for his second spare key. He thrust his hand into a pot and searched the dry dirt, crying aloud when he felt the solid key. It got stuck in the lock for a terrifying moment, but then the door sprang free from the frame. Alexander shouted wordlessly, ran inside, and slammed the door shut, breathing a deep sigh of relief. Then, he heard paws scraping against the wooden doorframe. Alexander flung the door open and cried out, “Rufus, for the love of Aisha, get inside!”

As Rufus trotted in happily and Alexander bolted the door, he heard Noel whisper through the letterhole, “La-di-dah! Lonely lummoX loots laughable lockbox, loosening lax laces!”

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When his courage returned later that night, Alexander crept cautiously outside and took Rufus for a walk. As he waited in the cold, he felt a presence behind him. Alexander whipped around, prepared to flee at the first utterance of a headline, but Noel was nowhere to be seen. Instead, a tall, dark figure stood in the shadows.

“You scared me.” Alexander said, still shaken by his encounter with Noel.

“My apologies, sir. I meant no harm. I am new to the neighborhood and was hoping you might be able to tell me a bit more about our neighbors.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I’m afraid I can’t tell you much.” Alexander turned away and began searching for Rufus. “I’m fairly new to the area myself. If you really wanted to know more about everyone, you’d have to talk to someone who’s been here forever, like Agatha. She knows this place inside and out, but she’s not much for talking...” Alexander trailed off as he turned around and realized that the stranger had vanished without a trace.

“Huh. Well, that was a bit unusual, wasn’t it, Rufus? Wait, did you hear that? No...no, I’m just being paranoid. Hurry, boy, we don’t have much time.”

As Alexander walked back to his apartment, he noticed Emre talking with Claudia. He noted she looked abashed, almost like a chastised child. A bush nearby them rustled, and Alexander spotted the unmistakable edge of a deerstalker sticking out, prompting Alexander to hurry into his apartment.

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Alexander stood outside the door, hesitant to knock. Each time he raised his hand, his courage left him. Instead, he simply twirled his umbrella handle in circles and traced the apartment number—a jagged number and a curved letter.

“You can come in, you know,” a voice called from inside the apartment.

Alexander blushed with embarrassment as he opened the door.

“How did you know I was here? Another mystic power of yours?” Alexander lingered in the doorway.

“Something like that.” Fiona motioned towards a small mirror she had placed at an angle just outside her window, showing the area just outside the doorway.

“Astounding Anchor Alexander! Breaking news! This just in, No-Nonsense Noel has cracked the case of the missing—” The door slammed shut and the bolt slid into place. Alexander stood with his palms bracing the door against the inevitable assault. The fortune teller snorted derisively but didn’t comment.

Alexander cleared his throat. “I was hoping you would be able to tell my future.”

“Of course, of course. Please, take a seat.” She guided him towards a comfortable chair and offered him some water before disappearing into the next room to prepare herself.

Alexander sipped his drink nervously as he waited for Fiona to return. He glanced over at Orin, nodding respectfully. “How are you today, Orin?”

Orin sat silently on the shelf.

Alexander whistled tunelessly to himself. “You know, I’m turning thirty-two next month. This isn’t exactly where I pictured myself being at this point,” he said before taking a nervous gulp of water.

*Everyone fails at—*

Alexander swallowed wrong and choked violently as tears filled his eyes. He coughed and spluttered, gasping dramatically for air. When he finally recovered enough to speak, he croaked, “I’m terribly sorry, Orin. Could you repeat that?”

Orin sat silently on the shelf.

Fiona returned to the room, apologizing for the delay.

“Now, Alexander, you said you wanted me to gaze into your future?”

Alexander nodded and placed the water cup and its remaining contents well outside of his reach. Fiona breathed deeply and slipped into her trance. She sat motionless for seconds, then minutes. Alexander could not breathe. He stared intently, excitement and anxiety building in his heart. After what felt like centuries, Fiona returned from her trance.

“Well? What did you see?”

Fiona gazed into Alexander’s eyes, sizing him up. Alexander shrank away, concerned that he had offended her. At long last, Fiona spoke.

“I’m afraid I didn’t see anything, Alexander.”

“What does that mean? Does that mean I’m going to die?”

“No, no. Nothing of the sort. Fortune telling is more art than science, a lot of people don’t get that. Sometimes it reveals itself to me, sometimes it doesn’t. There’s nothing you or I can do about it. Please, take your money and go.”

Alexander frowned, disappointed. He gathered his belongings and opened the door to leave. He sighed glumly as he watched a man get out of a well-polished car and slip his hands into his coat.

As soon as Alexander had turned his back, tears of pride welled up in Fiona’s eyes. Her entire body shook with elation and validation. “I did it,” she whispered to herself.

“What was that?” Alexander turned back, puzzlement in his eyes.

“Oh! Nothing, Alexander. I just said...” Fiona trailed off as her eyes quickly searched the room. “Don’t forget your umbrella! It’s going to rain tomorrow.”

## SECOND SHOT

64 mph.

The perfect speed.

One unit more, and some bored traffic cop might get desperate enough to pull him over, just to feel alive again.

One unit less, and Henry would lose valuable seconds.

64 mph.

Henry had been at this a long time. The fresh recruits always looked up to him, tears of admiration and jealousy staining their eyes. Henry was the best there had ever been. If you needed a job done right, you didn't do it yourself. You asked Henry to do it for you.

Henry's eyes flicked between his rear view mirror, his side view mirrors, and the clock. He didn't look at the speedometer. He didn't need to.

64 mph.

Henry took the next exit and slowed down to 59 mph. He gripped the steering wheel tightly, pale knuckles straining against his tanned hands. He reached over and flicked open the glove compartment, checking to make sure his silenced pistol was still there. Henry shook his head and chuckled to himself, imagining the new recruits seeing him now. He hadn't been this nervous since his first hit, over twenty years ago now. Henry's eyes lost focus as he remembered being a young man. His father and brothers had all worked for the Greek mob, and it had been his turn to join their ranks. He'd always been such a sensitive kid, crying at the death of any creature. His uncle had offered him an out, a different life, but Henry was conflicted. If he

couldn't follow in his father's footsteps, what kind of man was he? He'd heard rumors of someone called "The Oracle" who could look into your soul and tell you what to do. He'd sought them out, desperate for their wisdom.

*You are your father's son.*

Those words had echoed in Henry's mind for over two decades. Every time he got into his car. Every time he cleaned his pistol. Every time he held someone as the light faded from their eyes.

*You are your father's son.*

Well, they were right. Henry had become the most efficient hitman in the mob. He was very particular about which contracts he took, but he had never failed to deliver. Today would be no different.

Henry slowed his car to a stop. He was here. His eyes flicked around rapidly, taking in the scene. Some empty benches, a shoddy garden, a young man with an umbrella standing in a doorway, a package barely visible beneath a flickering light, and an apartment number—4B. Henry bowed his head and recited a silent prayer to himself, remembering all the lives he had taken after saying those same words. He no longer knew what he hoped the words would accomplish, but they made his hands steadier. He took a deep breath and slipped his pistol into his coat as he exited the car.

The rest was a blur. The door bursting from its hinges. A woman's scream. Two shots into the body.

As the oracle lay dying, the final words came.

*Να είσαι καλύτερος άνθρωπος από τον πατέρα σου.*

A loud thump as the pistol hit the floor. A louder thump as Henry fell to his knees, his heart shattered and his eyes full of tears and regret.

## IMMOR(T)AL INFERNOS

“It’s scorching. Doesn’t it ever rain here?” Dante sighed to himself. The sun beat down on him mercilessly as he made his way towards the apartment complex. He’d been through hell, but this was *hell*. Dante checked his watch. In five minutes, Agatha would leave her apartment, and Dante would find the information he needed.

“By all rights, I shouldn’t even be here,” Dante muttered to himself as he waited. But then again, this was his penance, after all. One deed, and he would be forgiven. He would be given a second chance.

Agatha left her apartment, glancing around anxiously as she hurried to her car. Dante had been spying on her for weeks. This was the only time slot she ever left her apartment—10:40 to 11:20 pm. Forty minutes every five days to get groceries. As soon as Agatha was out of sight, Dante sprung into action. He made short work of the lock and was inside her apartment within moments. The boy had suggested that Agatha would know more about her neighbors than anyone else. Dante suspected that she might have a journal hidden somewhere with the hints he needed to track down his target. He searched through the living room but found nothing. Suddenly, he noticed a strange curtain hanging in the middle of the wall. He opened it and almost shouted with glee.

Jackpot. Agatha may not be the person he was searching for, but she had given him exactly what he needed—a conspiracy theory board with detailed information about every resident of the apartment complex. Dante checked his watch again. He had seventeen minutes to find their identity.

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All the people in the complex were strange in one way or another, but there was only one person who fit the description—the pale man with an affinity for stargazing.

Dante broke into his apartment and hid in the shadows, his knife ready. The moment the man returned from his nightly routine, he would be dead and Dante would be redeemed.

“You might as well come out of the shadows.”

Dante froze in disbelief, his eyes probing the darkness for the source of the voice. A blinding light turned on, and Dante sprang into action, taking a defensive stance as he prepared for the strikes, but none came.

The man stood at the edge of the room, gentle amusement in his eyes. He motioned casually towards the couch. “Please, you will be more comfortable there.”

Dante remained rooted in place, his heart beating quickly and his hands shaking from adrenaline.

The man took a seat. “I wasn’t expecting you so soon, but I suppose that is life.”

Dante finally swallowed his fear and slowly lowered his guard, keeping his eyes trained on the man. “How did you know?”

The man smiled. “You are not the first of your kind to come seeking me.”

Dante brandished the knife again. “And the others? You killed them?”

The man held his hands in the air calmly, no fear in his eyes. “I can honestly say that I have never killed any sentient being, from my world or yours. Now please, you are embarrassing yourself.”

Disarmed by the man’s utter lack of alarm, Dante warily took a seat.

“That is much better, is it not? Now tell me, my young friend, what is your name?”

“Dante.”

The man smiled wryly. “Dante? I wonder who copied whom...”

Dante blinked in confusion, unnerved. “What are you?”

The man smiled again. “I am but a man, albeit one with some...unique circumstances. You, my friend, may call me Emre.”

“Did they warn you I was coming?”

Emre laughed. “No, there was no need. As I said, you are not the first to come searching for me.”

“You said you didn’t kill the others. What happened to them?”

“They departed peacefully, of their own accord.”

“And they were like me?”

Emre’s eyes glinted. “Yes, they were quite like you.”

“Liar. I am of the first of my kind to ever do something like this.”

Emre nodded slowly, his gaze drifting just over Dante’s head. “And what kind is that?”

Dante glared at Emre.

Emre raised his hands, placating Dante. “I suppose you would not want to use the term anymore. Very well. I will do it for you.” Emre leaned forward. “You are a demon.”

Dante nodded once sharply.

“And you want to become an angel.”

Dante nodded again, more slowly this time.

Emre leaned back. “And if you kill me, the angels will accept you into their ranks.”

Dante looked down in guilt. “Yes.”

“What do you think is the difference between an angel and a demon?”

Dante looked up in confusion. “What do you mean? Everything. There are no similarities. We are polar opposites, two distinct sides of a coin.”

“I suppose they would tell you that.” Emre shook his head sadly. “Listen to me, Dante. There is no dichotomy between angels and demons. The only difference between who you are and who you want to be is how you define yourself.”

Dante shook his head vigorously. “It’s not that simple. I can’t just wake up one day, look in the mirror, and say, ‘Oh look! I’m an angel!’”

Emre’s laughter filled the room. “Of course not, my friend. That is not how anything works. You create yourself, but not in a moment. Your thoughts and actions constantly define and redefine your identity. You are ever-shifting. Who you are right now, in this moment, is not who you were a few moments ago when you broke into my home. Your path is *not* destined for you.”

Dante looked closely at Emre. “The others who found you. They were all angels, weren’t they?”

Emre smiled widely. “They all thought of themselves that way, yes.”

Dante sighed deeply and put his knife away. “I can see why none of them killed you.”

Emre’s smile turned somber. “Tell me. Do you know why you were sent here?”

“Because you are an abomination.”

“Ah. So that is what they are calling me these days. An abomination. I quite like the ring of it. Do you know what they meant by that?”

Dante shook his head.

“They view my existence as a crime, purely because I have broken their precious laws, their cruel restrictions.”

Dante searched Emre’s expression searching for signs of falsehood but found none. “Why would the angels care about one human?”

“Because they have a vision for how the world should be, and I do not fit into that vision.”

Dante sighed. “Listen. I hold no ill will towards you, but I need to do this. I don’t have a choice.”

Emre leaned forward and gave Dante a hard gaze. “You always have a choice. You must decide for yourself what it means to be Dante. Who are you? And what do *you* want?” Emre pointed a commanding finger at Dante, holding the pose for several moments before relaxing back into his chair. “Regardless of what you decide, I do have one question for you.”

Dante stirred from his contemplations. “Yes?”

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“Can you really see it?”

“Oh. Yes...and no. Only at the end.”

Emre nodded thoughtfully. He clapped his hands and stood suddenly. “Come, Dante. Take the night to think it over. I will not be going anywhere. Meet me beneath the stars tomorrow night. Come with your mind made, or not at all. ”

Dante left without a word.

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“Can it be done?”

*Can a man change his stars?*

“Can one act undo a lifetime of evil?”

*Sic Parvis Magna.*

“Is it worth the cost?”

*Not to men like you.*

“I wish I didn’t have to choose.”

*Time spent wishing is time wasted.*

“What do I do?”

*Become who you were born to be.*

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Emre looked at the stars, thinking about how they have changed throughout his long life. He smiled softly. “It is only a record of important nostalgia.”

Dante approached.

Emre breathed deeply, soaking in the world around him. He turned, with a smile on his face and sorrow in his eyes.

Dante’s knife pierced his heart. Emre collapsed into Dante as the two kneeled to the ground. As the life drained out of him, Emre whispered, “Dante. Tell me what you see.”

Dante gazed at the long, familiar shapes curving out from Emre’s head. They intertwined elegantly with each other, crystallizing sinuous, shadowed forms. Tears flooded Dante’s eyes.

“I can see your halo.”

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*Were you reading closely?*

What did Fiona see in Emre's future?

What did Noel discover?

Who did Henry shoot?

What did Dante see?

Is Orin wise?

Why didn't it rain?

What did Greg know?

Who got a happy ending?

Did Fiona see Alexander's future?