

“Hey, wake up.”

*He probably isn't talking to me*, I reasoned astutely, and resolved to fall asleep again. Then I felt a jab against my ribs. *He probably isn't poking at me*. It was a noble effort, but even I couldn't believe that, and I had been known to believe just about anything. I opened one eye.

“You've been sleeping continuously for seventeen hours,” said Bartley.

“So why you gotta interrupt me?”

“Because there's another guy who's going to be sleeping continuously for the rest of eternity. He's dead. Wake up, kid. You're a private eye. This is Christmas come early.”

I got out of my chair and put my hat on. With my hat on, I was ready for anything.

“Who's dead?”

“Steven LaRue.”

I hadn't been ready for that. I staggered back into my seat and took my hat off. Steven LaRue. The new face in town, from Breckinridge far to the east. He came to Hitchcock an idealistic reformer, a white knight determined to take a stand against corruption and end Hitchcock's decades of isolationism. His message of hope spread through Hitchcock like wildfire, and soon enough, you couldn't turn a corner without seeing an “I believe in Steven” sign. He was elected in a landslide victory to represent Hitchcock in HARC, an international institution committed to multilateralism, and immediately won a Nobel Peace Prize for being such a good guy.

“He went pavement diving from forty stories up,” continued Bartley. “And I don't think he was an extreme sports aficionado, if you catch my drift. It's happening already, the trouble I warned you about. You need to find out what Jorgen Harris is up to.”

“Jorgen Harris? You think he's involved in all of this?”

Bartley laughed. “Does a pig fly?”

“No.”

“Oh, wait, shit. I mean, does a bird fly?”

“Yes.”

“Well, there's your answer. That is to say, yes, I do think he's involved. And I'm afraid I'm next on his hit list. I'm gonna have to lie low for a while. You won't be seeing much of me, starting now.”

“Wait, Bartley—”

But he was gone. It didn't make much sense, but I decided it was high time I oughta be gone as well. On my way to pay the president a visit, I picked up a paper and glanced over the state of the world. There was no mention of LaRue's untimely death. But I did learn that nearby Snell had been conquered by the Alans, who, as far as anybody could tell, were a confederation of nomadic pastoralists last seen in North Africa in the first century AD. And that Erica Fagin, minister for sexual health, had fled the country with our entire stock of contraceptives, and pregnancies were spiking already, which really made no sense if you started to think about it.

For the sake of my sanity, I didn't think about it, and tossed the paper aside, for I had reached Jorghannesburg, the enormous, opulent palace complex our new president had built upon coming to power. All around the grounds were devotees of the Jorgonaut's Armadillo Cult, who were encouraged to ritually mutilate their bodies and sell themselves into slavery in an effort to become "deformed but useful." At least it wasn't as bad as Generalissimo Pranco's Kermit Cult. As I walked up the drive, flanked on either side by thirty-foot tall armadillo statues, I concluded that worrying about the state of the world was a luxury not permitted to those living in a state ruled by total fucking lunatics.

When I entered his throne room, the Jorgonaut was being debriefed on the condition of different parts of his realm.

"Most gracious supreme leader," Jesse Roth began. "Section III still hasn't received the federal subsidies we requested last month. Discontent is widespread, and if aid doesn't come soon, I'm afraid the people may join the citizens of Section II in open rebellion."

"What are you talking about? There is no rebellion in Section II," said Glenn Wang quickly, perhaps too quickly.

"That's right," said the supreme leader. "Besides, as far as we're concerned, there's no such place as Section III. It isn't mentioned in any of our records."

"Um, but I live—"

"Silence!" roared the Jorgonaut. "Out of our sight, all of you! Oh, and Albachten, Keep sending us those cookies, and we will look favorably on your province. We do enjoy our cookies."

Graham Albachten, who had put on about thirty pounds since I'd seen him last, smiled smugly, and exited with an extravagant bow. The other section representatives tiptoed out behind him meekly, and almost collided with Sam Spiegel, who barged through the door with a shovel over one shoulder and an sack overflowing with wads of hundreds over the other.

"Don't mind me," said Spiegel. "This is entirely legal."

"Ah, our dear friend the minister of propaganda!" exclaimed Harris, turning to me. "Let's propagate. Not in the sense of increase and multiply. You know what we mean. First of all,

there's this troubling business of LaRue. What a shame. Such potential. Totally accidental, of course."

"Yes, of course, supreme leader. A wise insight. You're completely right," I said, deciding it was better to be safe than sorry. Harris was famous for having no dietary scruples whatsoever, going so far as to occasionally eat advisors who displeased him.

"Of course we are. But the masses must not be informed of his death. They might get the wrong idea. We must come up with a different explanation. For instance, the general good demanded that LaRue retire from the public sphere to discuss quantum mechanics with the world's most prominent physicists. That's what you'll write."

"Sir?"

The Jorgonaut roared with laughter.

"We didn't hire you to think, you fool! Your job is to write. If we wanted somebody to think, we naturally would have hired ourselves."

Had the Jorgonaut been in a foul mood, My moment of imprudence might have cost me my tastiest limb. I was overcome with a newfound appreciation for my appendages.

"While you're at it, you should draft a statement about how Mutually Assured Destruction is our official policy in the event of a barbarian invasion from Snell. And write a set-theoretical proof of the nonexistence of Section III. Go now. We have permitted the masses to enter our presence and kiss the hem of our robe. Which means we need to acquire a robe."

As he plodded away in search of the requisite article of clothing, Spiegel grabbed my sleeve and pulled me into the hall.

"You seem like a smart enough guy, Brubaker, so I'll get right to the point," he said. "If Steven LaRue's death was an accident, I'll eat my shovel."

There was an awkward silence as I waited to see if he would eat his shovel, and he focused intently on not doing so.

"You win, kid," I said at last, impressed with his perseverance. "Go on."

"My predecessor, Josh Lerner, was no friend of LaRue. He put a lot of time and energy into promoting his friend John Bolton's bid for HARC Representative. Bolton never stood a chance in the first place, of course, because he's gone on record saying he doesn't believe HARC actually exists. But now Lerner and Bolton are back with a vengeance. It looks like they're determined to make conservatism politically relevant again. I think they're out to get me next, since Lerner lost his life savings when I took his place as secretary. Don't worry, that was also entirely legal. The point is, you've got to protect me!"

“Why me?”

“You control the flow of information, and as I’ve always said, that’s where the real power is. On the other hand, the real power also lies in controlling the money, which is what I do. So I figure us guys with the real power should stick together. On yet another hand, the power that lies in being able to throw people out of windows shouldn’t be underestimated. So actually, I guess I have no idea. I don’t have enough hands to figure it out.”

I left Spiegel trying to figure out how best to graft mechanical arms to his back. His argument was as full of holes as a hunk of swiss cheese. On the other hand, there were many other varieties of cheese with holes. I was having a hard time pinning down the metaphorical significance of this observation, but I was pretty sure it meant I shouldn’t dismiss Spiegel’s accusation out of hand. How far could I trust a guy who walked around with a shovel and two million dollars in cash? Probably no further than I could throw him, and I was out of practice. I was determined to get to the bottom of this mystery, even if, like a beneficiary of plastic surgery, it had a false bottom. I would have to pay a visit to Josh Lerner.

**BUT WAIT, THERE’S MORE:**

-Tom Wood said something I missed, because I arrived thirty seconds late. It probably wasn’t very important.

-Grider says get on CAlert. Grider speaks the truth.

-Josh Lerner wants you all to go see John Bolton speak, because otherwise he’s out like a billion dollars. Keep in mind that Josh Lerner and John Bolton may be responsible for the death of Steven LaRue.

-Steven LaRue is not dead, but he was replaced as HARC Rep by Mandy Stafford in a special election

-Jordan Phillips wants to start a Google Calendar for the house. You can talk to him about this.

-Talia Penslar loves you and your music, but sleep is marginally more important to her.

-Bad Movie Night Sunday at 10PM: the movie is called *The Apple*

-Study Break by Malika Sunday at 9PM: the food may or may not involve apples

-Aaron says that we’re going to have a *House Homecoming* at some point. This may or may not have something to do with the fact that we won a sports match.

-You could talk to Yuto Nakafuku about transportation or dining issues.

-House Meeting will become *House Meeting: The Musical* next week. You should tell Jory about any musical ideas you might have, and he may spare your life.

-Peer Health Exchange is an organization that talks to high school kids about important things. You should contact Grace Evans if you’re interested.

-Some of the words in this part of the minutes will be in italics (just kidding).