

Probability Angels

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ISBN: 1441403868

Printed in the United States of America.

*For Michele, Laura, and Tammoye:
Three people who kept Matthew and Epp alive long after they were dead*

Part 1: Second Choice

The patterned wallpaper, the waist high molding, the chandeliers every ten feet, the glass covered wooden tables with overly ornate vases stuffed with flowers, everything in sight screamed out that this was a place designed to look nice with no thought given to whether or not someone would want to live there. Matthew walked along as quickly as he could in his tuxedo, wondering why hotels always had to look like this.

Matthew was a short man but not so short that people noticed that about him, his thinning hair made him look in his thirties while the glint in his blue eyes put him closer to twenty. A pair of thin rimmed glasses sat on his face like a statement of health. His tuxedo was well cut and lacked the rumpled shininess of a rental.

He passed an intersection of hallways, glancing to his right and seeing the elevator bank he continued on. Then he passed the vending machines. Then he made it to the bathroom.

Entering the bathroom he slowed down, the door eased shut on its spring behind him and Matthew stood there listening. He could hear him, softly, somewhere past the row of sinks. As Matthew trod through the bathroom, which itself was an orgy of overly ornate decorating, he glanced in the corner at the gold mesh wastebasket. There was something there that shouldn't be, or at least he saw something there that shouldn't be, and for the first time since he had walked out of the grand ballroom Matthew broke stride, his casual cool bounce faltering as he closed his eyes hard and shook his head. When he opened them again the wastebasket was empty.

He turned to face forward and picked up his stride again, turning the corner to where there was a row of stalls with beautifully stained wooden doors. Matthew walked down the row, glaring at the doors one after another. He finally crept around one and looked in to see a man sitting on the toilet with the lid down, the door open, his face in his hands as he sobbed.

"Excuse me?" Matthew said gingerly. The man looked up. "I was just looking for the cigar bar when I got lost and wandered in here and then I heard you from over by the sinks and I...well...I mean what's wrong, pal?"

The man looked up, all elbows and knees from how he was folded onto the toilet seat. Matthew caught his eyes and smiled. "Come on," Matthew said, "let's go over by the sink, you can splash a little water on your face, talk it out, maybe I can help. At the very least," Matthew looked around and smiled a good-natured smile that oh so delicately pointed out the absurdity of a grown man sitting alone in a toilet stall crying by himself, "I can definitely listen."

Matthew coaxed the man out, led him to one of the sinks, turned on the tap for him, patiently listened as the man told his story, which Matthew already knew. Matthew nodded, one ear open in case there was anything new he should know, he reached into the breast pocket of his jacket and withdrew a cigar, spent time enjoying its aroma while he waited for the man to finish his tale of heartbreak and fear and unrequited love.

Matthew hopped up onto the counter, using only his legs, his hands never getting involved. He landed between sinks in what he somehow made look like a comfortable position. Through the whole leap the only thing he seemed intent on protecting was his cigar, which he held between thumb and forefinger of one hand. As he sat listening to the man's speech wind down he rolled the freshly cut cigar gently, feeling the moist tobacco leaves giving slightly under the pressure of his fingers.

Matthew glanced over and saw that the man had finished and was looking at him with a face that was still damp from a few splashes of cold water. Matthew knew he was ready.

"Look," Matthew started, leaning back into a position that should have been ten times more awkward but that he managed to make look ten times more comfortable. "I'm no expert on these things. I'm just here for this wedding as a distant uncle. Just wanted to find the cigar bar is all. But I see a fellow man sobbing himself to pieces in a toilet stall over a girl, and there isn't any question in my mind as to what I should think. You, my friend," and Matthew stared hard at the man, "need to go after this girl."

"But she's married," the man said.

Matthew continued to stare, the man's eyes drawn to his like something deeper was passing between them. "Doesn't matter," Matthew said. "A love that can make a man sob in a toilet...that's a love that you've

got to at least give a chance to, isn't it? You said yourself; you knew she was having doubts about her marriage." Matthew stared.

Finally the man broke eye contact and turned to face himself in the mirror. "Yeah," he said, "she has doubts."

"Okay then," Matthew said, smiling like a high-school football coach after a particularly good pep talk. "Then go get her."

The man looked at himself in the mirror for a few more seconds; doing something to his face that Matthew could only assume was some form of courage gathering. Then he said, "Thanks," and turned and walked out of the bathroom.

Matthew continued sitting on the counter, his legs dangling like a little child's, kicking happily back and forth. There was a beep and he reached into his pocket and withdrew a cell phone. Flipping it open he glanced over a text message, surprise registering on his face. All thoughts of the man and the conversation were gone as he pondered the text message, gone until he looked down at the counter and saw a neat stack of twenty dollar bills sitting there. "Hm," he said, "quick work."

Hopping off the counter he grabbed the bills and placed them in his pocket then popped the cigar into his mouth. He looked at himself in the mirror, hands in his pockets, the cigar clenched between his teeth off to the side of his mouth, and took a pull, only sucking air through the unlit end. He looked disappointed and concentrated harder. His cheeks formed small hollows in his face as he took a more determined draw, the unlit cigar bobbing between his teeth, once, twice, three times until, during the fourth pull, the end suddenly burst into bright red flames, catching the cigar alit before residing and leaving only a perfectly glowing red ember. Matthew smiled at himself, taking his hands out of his pocket he smoothed down his jacket as he took a few puffs, then he turned and walked out of the bathroom.

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Matthew walked down 72nd street underneath the modern-gothic windows of the looming apartment building on the corner. He stopped at the edge of the sidewalk, taking a pull at his cigar, now mostly gone, enjoying the warm summer midnight. It had rained earlier and the streets were damp. He waited on the light, then crossed over Central Park West and followed the double-wide 72nd street into the park. He turned off the street about twenty yards in and followed a path up a gentle rise, a canopy of trees closing in around him.

Matthew walked further and further into the park, following path after path, cursing more than a few times as branches he hadn't noticed swatted at his face. Then, through the darkness, he saw a thin band of yellow hovering in the air. As he drew closer his eyes recognized it as a strip of tape, like the kind used to mark off crime scenes, only different, strung across the path. Matthew paused and looked around, looked at the darkness that was behind him, then looked at how the light on the other side of the tape was different somehow. He smiled, a little laugh coming out of his mouth, then with a touch of nervousness he ducked his torso and stepped onto the other side of the tape.

The first difference was as immediate as it was obvious. All noise ceased. As Matthew straightened himself up there was no more wind in the trees, no more muffled sounds of traffic from Central Park West, there was only silence. He continued walking down the path, the second change slowly sinking in as he realized he was no longer walking through a post-midnight darkness. The air was now mellow, lighter, like it was only a little past dusk. Then he stopped short and walked a slow circle around a single point of light, smiling as he recognized a firefly, its bottom flashing electric green, frozen in time, hovering in the air. He reached a finger up and slowly pointed it towards the glowing beetle, was about to tap it to see what would happen when a voice spoke up behind him.

"Please don't."

Matthew jumped and turned, then smiled and shook his head. "Jesus, Epp, you scared the hell out of me."

Epp walked over, his face lit by the firefly's light. His skin was sable black, the color of an exotic hardwood, and he was a good head taller than Matthew, although due to a complete lack of anything but muscle on his body, he probably weighed the same.

"What happens if I touch it?" Matthew asked, looking back to the firefly.

“Just more work for me,” Epp answered, the calm undertone of his voice making Matthew’s easy confidence seem like a bad case of nerves. Epp looked Matthew up and down. “Nice tuxedo,” he said.

There was honest appreciation for good tailoring in Epp’s voice, but Matthew found himself unable to accept it as a straight compliment considering that Epp was wearing a suit that seemed more like a symphony composed of charcoal threads than mere clothing.

“I was working some adultery at a wedding,” Matthew said to explain his clothes.

“Adultery?” Epp asked turning and walking away. Matthew started walking with him, the idea of not following never crossing his mind. “At a wedding? With your skill? Seems a little beneath you, Matthew. You might as well tailgate at the political conventions with the rest of the newbies.”

“Well,” Matthew said, not letting himself get rankled, “the woman in question *was* the bride.”

A slow exhalation of breath through Epp’s nose was all Matthew got, but he knew enough to know that this was as close to laughter as he was likely to get. “I suppose that does contain a certain amount of flair worthy of you, Matthew.”

“Yeah?” Matthew said, a touch of haughtiness in his voice. “The guy involved was the priest.”

A smile spread across Epp’s dark features and as his eyes softened Matthew knew that he had redeemed himself.

“You know, it’s been twenty-two years,” Matthew said, “you think it might be time for you to give me a little credit?”

The smile disappeared from Epp’s face. “Not a chance.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Matthew said, “so why’d you text me?”

“Come,” Epp said, and Matthew followed him off the path into a patch of lawn, more trees popping up between them and the views of the city. Not much farther in, at a secluded area, they came upon a frozen couple. The woman was in the process of saying something with strong emotion to the man. The man was stuck with a panicked look on his face, his body lurching forward as if he was trying to break into a run. There was a large knife in his hands. Matthew bent down and examined the knife, saw the red sheen covering it, the blood frozen in the air spraying off the blade, could imagine the man’s arm moving fast, the knife whipping around as he panicked. Matthew straightened up. The man was running...he turned...he saw a form lying on the grass not far away and gathered easily enough that this was the victim.

Matthew turned back to Epp. “I’m still not used to murders.”

“I don’t know that we ever get used to them.” Epp was looking down at a clipboard.

“Still though,” Matthew walked over to him, “I don’t get it.”

Epp looked up from his clipboard. “It’s an insurance thing.” He pointed to the couple, “These two need a body. Don’t worry about that, it gets complicated.”

“But,” Matthew was looking around at the coverage, more trees than you’d normally get in Manhattan, that was for certain, but it was still awfully thin, “I mean, it’s 2007, who the hell dies in Central Park anymore? And what time is it, actually?” He squinted, trying to read the frozen light level. “It barely looks like the sun has set.”

Epp flipped a page, studying something, flipped another page. “We are here to test their spirits, Matthew. Their intelligence is out of our hands. This isn’t even my work, to tell the truth. Someone else started it. It’s not bad. A little sloppy, definitely not great, but not bad. I just took it over recently.”

“Really? You can do that?”

“These are special circumstances.”

“Well whoever set this up must have been pretty angry when you took over. You’ve got a knife murder, by a couple, in Central Park? How much is this worth?”

“For me? Nothing,” Epp shook his head. “You don’t get to jump in this late and gain any currency. And as for the guy who started this in motion, he’ll be fine. He’ll wind up making double what this is worth. We’re sending him to Hollywood for a week.”

“Yeah,” Matthew said, his tone not fading, “but you’ve probably had a hand in a dozen of these types of headline cases. I’ve never wondered but how much are cases like this worth?”

Epp shrugged, cool eyes never leaving Matthew. “They keep me in Zegna.” Epp extended a hand with the clipboard in it.

Matthew took it and glanced down. “*Plus* you get to use all the neat toys.” He began flipping through the sheets. “These are probability photographs, aren’t they?”

Matthew turned page after page, each one showing a possible outcome, most of them involving the couple being herded into a jail cell, or a police car or a courtroom. Each photo had a graph in the lower right-hand corner containing simple probability waves of varying heights. Matthew stopped at a photo of the couple sitting happily at home; he glanced at the graph in the corner and saw that the curve was barely more than a straight line. Matthew chuckled. Then he handed the clipboard back.

“I still don’t get it. Why bother with the,” he circled his finger in the air, looking around, “you know, the time tape stuff?”

“Special circumstances,” Epp said, reaching a hand out to take the clipboard back.

“And what might these special circumstances be, Epp? And what am I doing here?”

Epp paused. Matthew was struck by the fact that Epp seemed unsure of how to continue. Epp took a deep breath, his lips pursing in thought. Then he pointed. Matthew turned and looked at the form on the ground. “She’s a jogger. She wound up being their choice for victim. Like I said, it’s complicated. It’s also just awful bad luck.”

“Why?” Matthew asked, taking tentative steps towards the form lying on the ground.

“Matthew,” Epp paused again, the rarity of Epp being unsure was making Matthew’s nerves start to sit on edge. “Matthew, she’s yours.”

“Yeah?” Matthew asked, curious. He was creeping around now, moving very low to the ground, the back of the woman’s head the only thing visible. “I don’t remember doing her,” he said puzzled, “but it’s been a long time. I guess she could be one of mine.”

“She wasn’t a case of yours, Matthew.” Epp looked around, as if hoping for some help in saying what he had to say. When no help came he continued speaking. “She was your choice.”

Matthew’s body reacted before he did, his legs giving out as he leaned over the body so that he fell kneeling into the grass. “No,” he said in a whisper. He looked up at Epp, eyes stunned, his face showing nothing but denial. “NO,” he said, his voice rising in a shout. Shaky hands reached out and rolled the body over with a thump, her hair falling off of her face. Matthew sucked in a stuttering breath and looked down at the blood covering her shirt. He ran hands over her body, smoothing out her shirt, trying to wipe away the blood; he looked up at Epp again. “Fix her.”

“Matthew, that’s not how this works. She—”

“Fix her!” Matthew yelled. He stumbled up and began walking towards Epp, who held up his hands, trying to calm Matthew down. “You fix her!” Matthew said, his finger jabbing out behind him at where she lay. “You fix her right now!” Epp lowered his hands as Matthew approached.

“*She doesn’t die!*” Matthew yelled in Epp’s face. One hand rose up and shoved Epp’s shoulder hard, “*that* was the deal,” he screamed, his eyes stinging now. “The bullet changed paths and went into me and she gets to live and I die. *I die!*” Matthew shouted, slapping his own chest. “*Me!* Not her!” And he pointed another finger back at the body.

“You chose life for her, and she’s had a decent one, as per the deal,” Epp said, calm enveloping him, “but immortality for her was never part of it. Her time has come.”

“Fix her,” Matthew said. Epp remained impassive. “*Fuck you!*” Matthew screamed, and he stormed off past Epp.

“You go blow off steam, Matthew,” Epp yelled out after him. “You walk this off and I’ll clean up here and I’ll meet you at the usual place.”

Before Matthew disappeared into the dark Epp saw him walk past the firefly and with one angry hand reach up and swat it out of the air.

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Matthew fumed down the street. His hands were in his pockets, his bowtie unstrung and dangling from his collar. He wasn’t sure where he was going; he barely recognized his surroundings. He was breathing heavily through his nose, the hot summer air pumping in and out of him like fuel. He spotted a couple walking towards him and he lowered his shoulder and walked into the girl, with a hush like a steam vent he

wafted through her, eyebrows angry. "He's cheating on you," he thought, and then he was through her, past her, and two steps later he heard her turn and start cursing off the young man with her. A handful of coins appeared in his pocket and he ran his fingers through them.

Another pedestrian came into sight, a lone woman, and he never broke stride, just ducked his head and plowed through, baring his teeth as he went, and he heard the woman burst into sobs behind him and more change appeared in his pocket.

His cheeks were moist and with the flat of his hand he tried to wipe the tears away but they kept coming and he was walking through a group of street dwellers and drug dealers and behind him he heard a fist fight break out and the change in his pocket bulged then flattened into a couple of bills and he thumbed at the corners.

His eyes stung and his nose was running and now he tried the back of his hands but he couldn't keep his cheeks dry and he heard someone calling his name. He spotted a group of tourists and thrust both hands into his pockets, angling his walk so he'd catch all of them square on. His lip curled up and his teeth were bared and he was only a few steps away from them when an arm caught him across his chest and he was being restrained.

"Matthew!" someone was shouting in his ear and he turned and saw Benjamin with his jowly face and rough beard. Benjamin's clothes were burly, if not disheveled, and the belt of his trench coat never seemed to hang right. "Matthew, leave some for the rest of us, here," Benjamin was laughing.

"What do you care about them for?" Matthew was staring at the family of tourists.

"I don't care about them, I care about you."

"Lemme do 'em," Matthew said, his body practically going limp under Benjamin's restraining arm, as if he wasn't even able to hold himself up anymore. "I got a good one for 'em."

"Okay, but then we go get a drink at the place, right? Maybe get your head back together?"

Matthew nodded and Benjamin let down his arm and gave him a shove. Matthew teetered on one foot, hopping along, passing through the family of tourists who began pointing at a map and arguing. Matthew looked at Benjamin from over the father's shoulders. "Arguing over a map?" Benjamin said. "That was your big idea?"

"I don't..." Matthew stopped talking, looked around confused. "This isn't helping."

"Come on," Benjamin said, and they walked towards the street. "You have a fever?"

"Yeah."

"Okay then."

Benjamin held up his hand with a five dollar bill in it and Matthew stood next to him doing the same. There was a whir and Matthew felt the wind in his hair as the five dollar bill vanished and then he was standing next to a statue of Ralph Kramden and looking up at steel girders painted aqua-green. Benjamin was over by a row of double glass doors holding one open. Matthew walked through into the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

They walked through the long hallway, mostly empty at this time of night, ugly brown brick walls rising up to the ceiling three stories above them, their feet stepping on tiling that looked like it had been decorated with a can of glue and the contents of a well used three-hole punch. They rode up an escalator and continued towards the back of the building until they reached another set of double glass doors. They walked through into the Port Authority bowling alley. On the right was the arcade, down the hall straight ahead were the lanes, Matthew and Benjamin turned left and walked into the bar.

"What do you think?" Benjamin asked, looking around at the bar half full of college students, bus drivers getting off their shift, bowlers, and anyone else sucked into drinking at the Port Authority. The bar was an island in the center of three walls of booths, most of which were full.

"I don't know," Matthew said, running the back of his hand over his forehead like he was testing to see if he had a fever. "You mind clearing a few seats? I think I'm through bumping skin tonight and I certainly don't feel like going visible."

"Sure thing, buddy," Benjamin said and he walked to the farthest corner of the bar where a man was sitting between two empty stools. Benjamin leaned towards him and whispered something in his ear and the guy stood up and stormed out, a half drunk pint glass still sitting on the bar.

"Cheating wife?" Matthew asked, watching the guy leave.

“Thieving brother,” Benjamin said.

“Interesting,” Matthew said, sitting down.

Benjamin was fishing in his pocket as he pulled back the barstool next to Matthew. He put a stack of twenties on the bar as he sat down and with a wave of his hand a couple of cheap rocks glasses appeared filled with flat ice cubes and pale scotch. They sat in silence, sipping their drinks, listening to the bar around them. One drink finished, Matthew threw a twenty on the bar and another round appeared.

“It was 1985,” Matthew said, apropos of nothing. “We had married the year before when everyone said we weren’t ready. We knew we were ready. We thought we were ready, anyway. Who the hell is ever ready for marriage?” Benjamin nodded, sipping his drink, staring straight ahead, listening but not intruding. “Anyway,” Matthew went on, “we were living in Brooklyn in some god-awful apartment complex where the noise of the train was a welcome distraction from the mice in the walls. But, you know, we loved it. And we weren’t going to stay there forever of course. We had big plans.” He took a gulp of scotch, holding it on his tongue before clenching his teeth and swallowing it down.

“We went to a Mets game one night. Neither of us were fans or anything, that was the funny part. It was sort of a, ‘We’ve never done anything like this so why don’t we give it a try,’ kind of thing.” He shook his head. “I mean we didn’t know what the fuck we were doing and we left in the middle of the game and wandered down the wrong street and...well it was New York in the eighties.” His glass came up and a couple of ice cubes went into his mouth, he chewed them awhile.

“Anyway, there he was...I can’t even remember really what he looked like, but the gun I remember. And there were some words, it all gets a little jumbled and then the gun went off,” Matthew mimicked a gun with his thumb and forefinger, his thumb dropping, his mouth making a little “pow” sound. “And all I really remember is this rush of thought chased with pure adrenaline and all that was going through my head, over and over was, ‘Please be me not her, me not her, me not her, me not her...’” He sucked another ice cube into his mouth, got a good hold of it between his back teeth and crunched it down with a laugh.

“And then things get hazy,” Benjamin said, recognizing the laugh.

“And then things get hazy,” Matthew said with slightly drunken camaraderie and the two raised their glasses and clinked them together.

“Next thing I know,” Matthew went on, “I’m standing at my own funeral and this preposterously well dressed black man is talking to me about things I in no way understand. And he says his name is Epp. And he takes me under his wing.” Matthew breathed out a sad sigh and it came rushing back. He put his glass down on the bar with too much force and liquor splashed over his fingers. “And twenty-two years later she dies anyway.”

“It’s not Epp’s fault you know.”

“I know, I know,” Matthew held his alcohol soaked fingers up and looked around, then settled on wiping them off on his pants. “But you can’t really blame me for my reaction. I never gave this a whole lot of thought, I guess. It’s all sort of jumbled in my head.”

“Of course,” Benjamin said as if Matthew was blaming himself for things that he shouldn’t. “If you don’t think things through, things stay jumbled. That should be our motto.” Benjamin caught sight of a friend on the other side of the bar and he gave a smile and a nod of his head. “Anyway, the deal was never for our choice’s immortality, just that you’d go instead of them, and they’d have a shot at a decent life.”

“Is yours gone yet?”

“Mine? No, forty years later and she’s still pattering on, god bless her.”

“Yeah. Well I still feel like Epp could have filled me in a little better.”

“Ah. You can’t blame him. That’s just how he is, all impassive and what have you. You know why he’s like that don’t you?” Benjamin looked around like he was worried he was being watched. “It’s because he was a slave.”

“No shit? He’s been doing this for more than a hundred years?”

“That’s why he’s got the rank.”

“And we get cheap whisky.”

“Amen,” Benjamin raised his glass and held it towards Matthew who obligingly gave it another clink with his. “Anyway,” Benjamin placed his glass down and looked past Matthew, “oh shit.” There was a change in his demeanor, a straightening of his back and a quickening of his pulse. “He’s *here*.”

Matthew looked around and saw Epp coming through the bar towards them. “Yeah, he said he might drop by.” They watched Epp walk the bar, those who could see him giving curt nods like they were afraid to display any emotion around him. He was courteous in turn, waving and greeting those who he passed, but there was an aloofness about him that kept him detached.

“Hello, sir,” Benjamin said with a little nod of his large head as Epp came over to them.

“I don’t outrank you, Benjamin,” Epp said as he slid into the barstool on the other side of Matthew. “I keep telling you that.”

“Yes, sir,” Benjamin said. “Let me buy you a drink.” He threw another twenty on the bar and watched as it broke into a ten and some singles and another rocks glass appeared in front of Epp.

Epp picked up the glass slowly, turning it in the light, he swirled it gently under his nose and breathed in. Then he took a sip, letting it slide on his tongue, and then swallowed. He put the glass back down. “I don’t outrank you, Benjamin, but tonight I’m going to insist that you drink what I drink.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a crisp stack of bills held together by a paper band. Two of these dropped on the bar and Benjamin stared at them from the corner of his eye, frozen in mid-drink. Matthew looked at Epp, then down at the two stacks of money.

The bands across the packets had “Five Thousand” written on them in orange letters and as Matthew watched they began to shake and shrink, depleting in size as three new crystal rocks glasses appeared on the bar in front of them. The glasses filled up with a new type of scotch. When Matthew looked back at the stacks of bills, there were only a few left.

“Sir, I can’t let you...” Benjamin started, but Epp waved him silent.

“Even for the immortal, Benjamin, life is too short to drink bad scotch.”

Matthew picked up his glass, amazed at how heavy it was and how cool the crystal felt. He smelled the liquor inside and just closed his eyes, enjoying it. Benjamin only stared down at the bar, afraid to go near it. Epp took a sip and smiled, then looked over and saw all of this. “Don’t worry. Next round’s on me as well.” He threw another two stacks of bills onto the bar.

Matthew dared a sip and Benjamin dared to pick his glass up. Much the same as before, the three sat drinking in silence, letting the whisky do the talking. More rounds came, and the conversation started up again, nothing important being said, just words being exchanged over a shared drink or two. After a few more Benjamin pushed his chair out and stood up a little wobbly. “I think I’m done for the night,” he said. “Want to come down to the East Village, Mattie? We’ll fuck with the hipsters and scrounge for change. It’ll be fun.”

Matthew laughed. “No, thanks, I think I’m just going to sit tight for awhile.”

“Suit yourself,” Benjamin said, easing his weight off his barstool. He caught Epp’s eye. “That’s some good scotch,” he said, stifling a burp, “I thank you for that, sir.”

He gave a couple of slaps on the shoulder as he walked past them, then exited out of the bar. Epp watched him go. “That guy *will* not listen to me when I tell him I don’t outrank him.”

“Don’t you?”

Epp turned to look at Matthew and Matthew instantly regretted what he had said Epp’s look was so disappointed. “Don’t tell me you think like him.”

“Well you do get to do a lot of pretty neat things that we don’t get to do.”

“It isn’t rank, Matthew. I can do those things because I have learned how to do them, not because some sanctioning body allows me to do them. I don’t get to use the tape because someone says I get to, I can use the tape because I’ve come to learn a few things about space-time. The elders meet together not to decide the rules for everyone else but because we like meeting together, we like exchanging ideas and lessons. But the pool of knowledge is open for anyone to drink from. We have no control over that. You should know that by now.”

“I feel like there’s a *lot* I should know by now.”

“It takes time,” Epp said, his voice soft and understanding after his small tirade. “You’ll get there. But the first thing you should do is stop listening to people like Benjamin. I know, he’s fun to share a drink with and I’ll stand him a round anytime, but he’s got a lot of things backwards. Like most newbies he seems to think that we’re in control here. They make their first choice and they get a taste of this new world and they think the meat bags are somehow below them,” Epp looked around at the regular people drinking in the bar all around.

“We do seem to hold a lot of the cards,” Matthew said, and to illustrate his point he waved a hand through the head of a guy walking past his stool. The guy decided then and there to cheat on his taxes.

“But it’s a lot more give and take than most newbies ever care to realize. They have their fun and then their choice straight-lines and then they’re gone. But we share this world, and we use what the mortals come up with. I mean, take the tape again. Do you realize that when I first learned that trick the tape didn’t even exist yet? I mean I had to pound wooden stakes into the ground, and then spool this spindly twine around them to mark off an area. But then tape comes along and I get to use tape. You know? Or take the money,” Epp dropped another two blocks of cash down on the table. “We use money because a symbol for our currency is damned handy but it’s only a symbol. Most newbies *never* bother to question that.”

Epp looked over at Matthew, who was watching the cash shaking on the table, slowly depleting itself as his glass filled again with scotch. “Look at you,” Epp said. “I forget sometimes how far along you aren’t. You’re picturing some lady at a desk somewhere tallying up what’s been spent and what’s been earned. You think the elders run the money, don’t you?”

“Well,” Matthew said, clearly thinking something along those lines but also not sure he was so crazy for thinking it.

“It’s just the easiest way for us to visualize what is happening, but there is no bank of accountants somewhere that cuts your paycheck when you do a meat bag, Matthew. It’s just how we come to express the notion of how much you’ve pushed and how much they’ve pushed back. I mean, do you think there’s an exchange rate?”

Matthew’s face was a wrinkle of puzzlement that was part him staring at the money and part scotch. “It doesn’t matter what it looks like, Matthew.” Epp reached a hand out, he flexed his fingers a few times, then made a fist and pounded down on the bar. At first Matthew didn’t notice what was happening, the sound that came out of the bar was so booming, so unnatural, that the sound was all he could focus on, but before Epp’s fist came down again he caught a glimpse of the pile of money and saw that it was now some form of large silver coin he had never seen before. Epp banged the bar again and the coins jumped and Matthew was pretty sure he was looking at Spanish Doubloons. Epp pounded, the coins jumped and Matthew caught sight of something that must have been Chinese, then a coin that looked vaguely familiar but he couldn’t place, then something he’d never seen before, then back to a stack of crisp \$100 bills.

“Neat trick,” Matthew said.

“It’s not a trick, and you will learn in time. If you want to that is. You might not. But tonight it’s time for your second choice.” Epp quieted down and went back to sipping his scotch.

“I don’t get it,” Matthew said, shaking his head, not even sure what it was he wasn’t getting.

“It comes in time. And give yourself some credit, you’re learning already. That trick with the cigar you’re so fond of, that takes a fair amount of chemistry and thermodynamics. And you’re doing rather well grasping,” Epp’s hand reached out and plucked at the bar a few times and three or four small waves sprang up, much like the kind Matthew had seen on the photographs in the park earlier, “probability waves.”

Matthew groaned and laid his head on the bar behind his glass of scotch, but he could see the waves dancing through the crystal. “Please...no math.”

Epp smiled, and one by one he pushed down the waves until one began to rise higher and higher until it was the only one left and it reached up to the ceiling. “You have plenty of math yet to learn. Again, assuming you come our way. You do have your second choice to make.”

“That’s the second time you’ve said that. I have no idea what it means.”

Epp didn’t answer, only turned back to his drink, took a delicate swallow, rolled it around in his mouth, then let it pass down his throat. He looked around after a few seconds, his eyes glancing to the speaker in the corner then over at the jukebox as he listened to the song that was playing. Matthew realized he wasn’t going to get an answer so he went back to his drink and the two remained silent for a few more minutes.

“I still don’t think I get the part about them pushing back,” Matthew said finally, something in the rushed form of the question giving away how rare he considered it to have Epp’s mind to pick.

Epp shrugged. “That’s one of the simplest concepts to grasp.” He held his hands out in front of him so his palms were down and his fingertips were touching. “Some you test and they come out okay, they get a little stronger for it, but some you test and they push back,” and Epp pushed in with both his hands, allowing his fingers to rise up like a mountain growing. “Some push back a little,” and his fingertips rose up a little,

“and some...well some push back a lot,” and the mountain grew higher. “But, in the end, someone has to give,” and Epp let one of his hands collapse under the other.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure I’ve ever felt that.”

“Of course not, you’re not a tester yet. You haven’t made your second choice. You’re still a newbie. And, frankly, the only thing a newbie really amounts to is a bad idea on legs.”

At the mention of a second choice Matthew looked at Epp, but Epp’s face gave nothing away and he decided not to push it. Matthew returned to his drink, and slowly the events of the night flooded back to him, and he saw her hair tousled and her shirt bleeding red. “I can’t believe she’s gone,” he said, confused.

Epp didn’t say anything but there was a warmth in his silence.

“Why? Why did you put the tape up to start with?”

“To help you.”

“How does that help me, to know she’s out there dying and I can’t do anything?”

Epp curled his fingers around his glass and smiled down at the bar.

“This have something to do with my second choice again?” Epp didn’t answer and Matthew returned to staring at the rainbows forming in his crystal glass. Then he turned to Epp with a new question. “Do you remember when your choice died?”

“Of course, you never forget. It was a house fire. I woke up and could hear her screaming in the next room. That was when I made my choice. Twenty years after that I watched as my wife was buried.” He took a drink. “That never fades, Matthew. Never.”

“And you’ve been doing this for two hundred years?”

“Two hundred? You really *are* bad at math.”

“Sorry, Benjamin said that you were a slave, so I figured—”

“This would be a wonderful time for you to take stock of everything that exists in your head, and to separate out the assumptions from the facts.”

“So you weren’t a slave?”

“Oh, I was a slave.”

“So...”

“My slave name, which I kept, is Epictetus, not Chicken George. Epictetus. That is Greek, Matthew.”

“Greek, but...” and then Matthew saw. “That first set of coins you turned the money into...”

Obligingly Epp pounded the bar again and the cash jumped up and landed as a set of crude silver discs. “Ancient Greek,” Epp said. And he thumped the bar one last time, turning the silver back into a pile of hundreds.

“Jesus Christ,” Matthew said under his breath, still staring at the bar.

“Never had the pleasure of meeting him, no. But he *was* my mentor’s last great push. After him she retired. Not that I can blame her; the work does take something out of you.” Epp looked down at his glass hollowly.

“She...she retired?”

Epp nodded. “She decided to cross over.”

“So where is she now?”

“How the hell should I know? One world at a time, thank you very much.”

“So,” Matthew was having a hard time with this, “you’ve been doing this for...and she...how long did she test for?”

“Her first great push was to strike Homer blind, and she finished things out by chatting with Yehoshua in the desert. Not a bad pile of work by anyone’s standards.” Epp turned to his drink.

“Fuck me,” Matthew said, and for lack of anything better to do he finished his drink.

“That’s nothing,” Epp said, as the cash on the table shook and Matthew’s drink filled up. “What will really baffle you is the notion that she herself had a mentor. I mean, when you start thinking about what sorts of things came about because of *that* man’s pushing...” Epp waved his fingers over the bar and the image of a small stone wheel rolled across it, then the image of a fire being lit. “It gets pretty interesting.” Epp looked around the bar. He stood up. “But anyway, we old timers will go on if you let us. I’m going to leave you for now, Matthew. You have a choice to make.”

“I made my choice,” Matthew said glumly. “My life and not hers, and now hers is about to end out in the park when you take that tape down. That was my choice. It’s made already.”

“Oh no. That was your first choice. You still have—”

“My second choice. So you keep telling me, although I have no idea what you mean.”

“Who was it you were protecting, Matthew?”

“My wife.”

“And what was it you saw in the wastebasket of the bathroom?”

Matthew turned on his stool, his face unsteady, his eyes trying to carve away Epp’s calm. “How...how did you know about that?”

“You’ve been seeing it again, haven’t you? That’s a good thing.” Epp nodded as if this confirmed a hunch of his.

“How did you know about that?”

“Our biggest lies are the ones we tell ourselves,” Epp said, and then he was gone.

Matthew sat drinking, thinking about the wastebasket at the hotel earlier that evening. Only that didn’t seem right, and there hadn’t been anything in there, he had only thought he had seen something. But what had he thought was there? And why did it rattle him so much?

Matthew sat and drank his way through Epp’s cash. Then he started working through his own. It was hours before he left the bar.

—

Matthew walked through the park again. Ducking under the tape he made his way to where his wife lay dying and as he looked down the tears started again. It was strange, he felt so distant from her, but looking at her face the memories were able to reform. The way she had looked up at him after he kissed her, the way she always swung her arm when he took her hand as they walked, how she couldn’t keep the bathroom in any sort of order to save her life. And now that the memories were forming again Matthew turned away from the body, grotesque in its frozen state. He started walking, remembering how they had been stupid and in love. He was out of the park and thinking about how they had made plans. And then he was thinking about what he had seen in the bathroom wastebasket. And suddenly he was on his knees for the second time that night, collapsing to the sidewalk with what he had seen, his sobs split by screams as his world cleaved neatly in two. When his scream stopped he only knelt and quietly breathed, hands shaking at his sides. He saw a familiar pair of dress shoes walk in front of him and stop, the pants hovering above them forming a perfect break just above the cuff. Dawn began to spill over the sidewalk.

“Epp, what is going on?” he said quietly.

“What was in the wastebasket, Matthew?”

Matthew started to stand up, but thought better of it and wound up sitting down on the concrete. He wiped a stray tear away from the side of his nose with the tip of his finger. “A home pregnancy test. I saw a home pregnancy test in the wastebasket of my bathroom the morning before the Mets game. And it was positive.”

“Very good, Matthew. Are you starting to understand now?”

Matthew looked up at him, bewildered. He shook his head. “I have a child?”

“You have a daughter,” Epp said. “And it is time to make your second choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“All those years ago, when you called out for that bullet to strike you...who was it you were protecting?”

“But I didn’t know about my daughter, did I?”

“You knew enough,” Epp said, and he plucked two curves up out of the sidewalk. He pointed at the larger one, “Your wife,” and he pointed at the smaller one, smaller but still pronounced, “and your daughter.”

“But it was my wife, I was protecting my wife.”

“Were you? Then why did you spend so much time away from her? How come you didn’t even know she was approaching her death? How come you can’t even remember her name?”

“I know her name,” Matthew said, angry, “it’s...” and he stopped, frowning.

“I’ve mentioned before that you were tethered to your choice. Didn’t you ever wonder why you never traveled the world? You have this rather strong new power and yet you never once saw any other lands, never walked through The Vatican at midnight or took a swan dive off of Angel Falls. You’ve been tied here. But what you didn’t realize, some would argue *couldn’t* realize, was that you’ve been splitting time between two lives. You’ve been following your own daughter.”

“Oh god, whose wedding was I at?”

“Relax. This isn’t a Greek tragedy. I believe she was in attendance as a guest of the bride.”

“So what happens now?”

“I would think that would be obvious. You choose.”

“I get the feeling that there’s more at stake here than I think.”

“How true. Stand up.”

Matthew obliged, and Epp reached out to straighten his jacket, brushing a stray leaf from the park off of his shoulder. Then Epp spoke. “There exists for you now a small window of opportunity. Pick your daughter and you remain tethered, still on this world but permanently a newbie until your daughter’s time comes and you both pass out of this world together. Choose your wife, however, and everything changes. Once she passes, you will be set free. Or cast loose, depending on how you look at it.”

“Won’t I cross over with her?”

Epp shook his head. “Your tether to your daughter will keep you in this world as your wife leaves, but once she is gone, the tether will snap and you will be,” Epp waved a hand through the air absently, trying to think of the correct word, “free.”

“You mean...”

“You’ll be a newbie no longer.”

“So I’ll...I’ll be an actual tester,” Matthew said, starting to understand.

“Indeed. But I really have to warn you, once the tether snaps...once your tie to the ones you loved enough to die for breaks...everything changes.” Epp stopped talking until Matthew finally looked up at him. Epp’s eyes were specters and Matthew wished he could look away, but he only stared and listened as Epp spoke. “You will know for certain that you are entirely alone on this earth, and that you are loved by no one. You will be cast adrift with no compass and no oar. Your brain will expand in ways you never thought possible, but your heart will remain frozen in the same place forever containing nothing but the memories of your two choices. And those memories will haunt you, they will come upon you when you least expect them, when you least look for them, they will reappear to rip into you millennia after they should have vanished quietly into the night. You will not be able to stop the hurt, and your heart will well up, and your eyes will bleed hot tears. You won’t own the memories. You won’t be able to cherish them or enjoy them or call them up for company. The memories will own you. The pain stays with you always, and all you will have to look forward to is the work.”

“And the work makes it worthwhile?” Matthew said, seeing hope.

“The work is horrible,” Epp said bluntly, and he began to pace in front of Matthew as his speaking picked up pace and energy. “You will be known as the scourge of mankind. People will curse you, spit when they refer to you, hate you. You will be viewed as the biggest problem their existence has. Nobody will understand, nobody will see what it is you do, none of them ever grasp that they become who they are in this world *because* of the obstacles in their lives, not in spite of them. The few you do get through to, the few who come to appreciate the strength you draw out of them, they will instantly be mocked by everyone else the minute they speak these thoughts. The ones who break too easily when you push will be nothing but disappointments, and the ones who make you proud will push back so hard that you will shatter and it will take centuries to put your head back together. The work is nothing but a heartache you chase to wash away the pain of your choice.”

“Then, Epp,” Matthew shook his head, clearly shaken, “I’ve got to ask. What is the upside?”

And Epp stopped short, seemingly frozen, head staring down at his foot. Then he snapped up and his words began rattling off in crisp, strong syllables and his eyes were so strong that Matthew felt a chill run down his spine. “The upside is that you can be greatness itself. You could be Shakespeare’s broken heart, Beethoven’s deaf ears, Van Gogh’s madness. You could be Keller’s scarlet fever, Roebbling’s crushed left foot, the color of Dr. King’s skin. You could be the entry for light to pass into the soul. You could be the reason

that anything worth doing on this rock ever gets done,” and he stared at Matthew and repeated himself. “You could be greatness itself.”

Matthew stared down at the curb, his eyes out of focus as he thought, one hand reached to rub the back of his neck.

“Do you understand what you need to do?”

He gave the back of his neck a squeeze, then looked up and his eyes met Epp’s. He nodded and said a silent, “Yeah.”

“Do you understand what I’m going to go do?”

Matthew thought for a few seconds. “Yes,” he nodded, “you’re going to go take the tape down.”

“Are you ready?”

“How will I know what to do?”

“I can’t answer that for you.”

“You went through this too?”

Epp nodded with his eyes closed. “When I woke up in that house fire I heard her screaming. I heard *both* of them screaming. I made my first choice and twenty years after that I attended my wife’s funeral. My wife was the strongest thing in my life. But it was twelve years after her death that the woman I truly loved was buried. We tell our biggest lies to ourselves.”

“Shit.”

“Well put.” Epp raised his eyebrows. “Are you ready?”

Matthew realized his body was trembling. “I think so.”

“Then, Matthew Huntington of Brooklyn, New York, I wish you luck.”

“Thanks,” Matthew said. He looked around, clearly unsure of what exactly to do next, but then his face cleared and he nodded one last time before stepping towards the curb. He held his hand up with a five dollar bill in it and with a blur he was gone.

Epp looked around at the 72nd street square as dawn reflected rosy pink off of the puddles in the street. Then he turned and walked towards the park.

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Matthew looked at the door, glancing about the frame as if it was going to offer up any number of clues as to what lay beyond. He ran a finger over the doorknob, and then stepped through.

In the park, Epp was standing at the tape, the sunlight growing brighter around him as he stared across the yellow line to the large square of darkness it contained. He reached a hand up and grabbed the strip of yellow, then gave a yank. It grew warmer in his hands as it stretched thinner and thinner, until finally it snapped, the end not in his hand recoiling and springing back whip-like and light towards the tree where it was tied. Inside the square the light began to change.

The hallway Matthew entered was dark, but he had the feel of high ceilings and dusty white walls. He walked, his feet noticing the occasional warped slat of wood under his feet. He walked past a semicircle arch that led to a cramped kitchen, past a closed door, then around a corner to a bedroom. There was a fluffy comforter, rumped and bright like starched snow, an end table with a clock radio and a lamp, a small desk cluttered with books and a laptop. He stared around; everything looked generic enough on its own, but combined there was a personality here.

Epp stood at a tree, his hands passing around and around it as he unwrapped loop after loop of tape until he finally reached the end. He walked around the tree, gathering handful after handful of tape as he went, the light on his left shifting from dusk into darkness now, and two figures ran towards him, one of them tossing a knife into the bushes before they reached the barrier where the tape had been and they disappeared to catch up with their present selves.

Matthew heard a door slam and he spun around to see a woman standing in the hallway, sleepy eyed, wearing a large t-shirt, reaching a hand through the doorway he had passed to flip off the bathroom light. He breathed in, and in, and in, seemingly unable to exhale any as his blood beat warm in his ears. “Christ, you look like your mother,” he said as his daughter walked past him. And her face, on top of the resemblance to his wife, was somehow so familiar, and he remembered in rapid succession, a child’s laugh at the corner of a

room he was working, a little girl in pigtails who had watched as he caused a fight on a street corner, the glimpse he caught in the shop window of a teenager walking past as he looked over the clientele, her face at a thousand different moments in his past appearing again and again as he floated through his work and it was like an optical illusion that he had only seen one way until just this moment when it became so clear how close he had been to her this whole time, how much of her life he had witnessed.

Epp wound his way around the third corner of the square he had marked out, tugging the tape off a tree branch. Inside the square the light rain that had passed through earlier that night began to fall, the raindrops tapping soothingly against the treetops.

Matthew watched her climb into bed, roll around a few times trying to get the comforter right on her body. She settled down onto her back, her face up at the ceiling. He watched and could tell that she was debating whether she should go back to sleep or not. She reached a hand up, scratched her forehead, half rolled over and looked at the clock radio, then rolled back. She clasped her hands behind her head, wriggled back onto the pillow, and smiled as she looked up at the ceiling. One thought went through Matthew's head as he watched her and it shocked him with its certainty, but as a lifetime of watching his daughter grow up flooded through his memory he knew it was true.

"She'll be okay," he thought.

He lingered for a moment longer, each new breath he took seeming to drink in something from the content form lying under the comforter in front of him. Then he turned and walked to the bathroom. Not knowing if there was some sort of rule against this and not particularly caring if there was he focused on the mirror. With a little effort he managed to steam it up. Then with the tip of his finger, he began to write.

Epp reached the last tree, the mess of tape wrapped around his hand quite large now. He reached up and tugged at a loose end, the knot holding the last bit of tape coming undone. Behind him the uneven square of light was lurching its way towards the present. The knot came undone, the last bit of tape collected in his hands, and behind him everything looked normal. He balled the tape up again and again, compressing it more and more each time until with a final brushing of his hands nothing was left.

He turned and saw Matthew standing in front of him. Epp's eyes picked him over carefully, starting at his feet and working his way to the top of Matthew's head. The smallest vibration of a smile wavered on Epp's lips. "Did you leave her a note?"

"Yeah."

"Hard to resist. Believe me I know."

Matthew smiled and then faltered, a puzzled look coming over his face, he stared aslant at the ground looking very much like someone who had walked into a room only to realize they forgot why they had gone into that room to begin with. "Wait, did I leave a note? Why can't I remember? That happened barely twenty seconds ago, didn't it?"

"I'm sorry," Epp said gravely, "the bond is broken. The memories own you now, not the other way around."

Matthew swallowed. "Why do I have a terrible feeling?" he looked up and winced as he pressed his palm to his chest. "This is awful. Does this go away?"

"You grow accustomed to it."

"That's not the same thing."

"No. It is not."

Matthew raised his hand and pointed beyond Epp. "Did my wife pass?" Epp nodded. "I'm going to go say goodbye. Maybe look at her one last time."

As he started to walk past Epp, Epp's hand came up and barred his passage. "I have to insist that you do not. That is an itch you can't scratch, Matthew. You have to trust me that a simple goodbye is very much for the best."

Matthew looked sick and not at all sure that he agreed with Epp.

"Does she get found soon? I don't want her just lying there," he said, not conceding anything to Epp just yet.

"It will be a matter of minutes."

"Then we should wait for that. Maybe wait and make sure she's taken care of okay, you know, just to make sure—"

“I think maybe we should occupy you with some simple drills...take your mind off of it.”

Matthew breathed out shakily. “Yeah, okay. So you’re my teacher now? Is that how this works?”

“You are free, Matthew. Anything and anyone you care to learn from you may call teacher. I’m more of a welcoming committee.”

“Okay,” Matthew said, not sure he was going to be okay with this, but wanting to start just to do something. “So where do we begin?”

“Some light travel. The choice you just made was difficult, you’ve earned a bit of currency from it. And you’ve never traveled freely before in your existence. I think we should go somewhere far away that you’ve never been.” Epp turned and looked up at the sky, his eyes keen, his face observant, almost as if he were smelling something in the wind. Then he turned back. “Night is falling over the Himalayas. I think we should go view the sunset there. See what long shadows look like upon Mount Everest.”

“Really?”

“It’s as good a place to start as any. A better place to start than most.”

“How the hell do I go about getting there? All I’ve done so far is—”

“Forget what you’ve done so far. And forget what’s in your head right now. Just take a deep breath and give it a try.”

Matthew clearly felt he deserved the right to object some more, but he couldn’t bring himself to open his mouth with the way Epp’s eyes were boring into him, so he gave a cockeyed smile and looked around. Then he closed his eyes. For a few moments nothing happened, but then his form began to waver and then ripple and then vanish. Epp was staring at nothing.

Epp tilted his head and his face took on a vacant look as if he were staring at something far in the distance. He had a look of high expectations growing steadily each second until finally he winced as if watching someone take a bad fall. “So close,” Epp said. And with a quick glance around he began walking, his form rippling as he went, until he was gone and there was nothing but the damp grass of the park and the morning sun.

In an apartment downtown a ruffled white comforter was piled at the foot of a bed, its owner having just recently decided that it was time to get up. She was currently standing next to the shower, trying to adjust the water, leaning over the tub, gingerly running her hand under the spray that was far too hot. As she fiddled with the knobs and steam filled the little bathroom her eyes caught sight of her mirror. She walked over, slowly, head tilted to the side as she read what was written. She gave a glance behind her, as if someone was watching, then turned back. One of her friends must have written that there last night, she knew, while they were getting ready for the wedding. Only there was something conveyed in the note that was so simple and so warming that she couldn’t imagine which of her friends had written with such emotion. And it was the strangest damned thing. Suddenly all she wanted to do was cry but when she opened her mouth a soft laugh cascaded out, and, after reading the note one more time, she turned and hopped happily back over to the shower.