

One: A Stranger Cometh

In the midst of a not-too-surprising snowstorm, a motorbike rolled up to Del's Diner in Barewallow. A heavy boot kicked the stand down. Pushing up with thick, padded gloves, the owner leapt off the seat, landing squarely in a snowdrift. Their messenger bag swinging against their hip, they ducked to fit through the doors into the restaurant, the black light and thermal sensors over the doorway revealing no unwanted guests. The stranger scanned the almost-empty room through the reflective surface of their full-face helmet.

Del, in the middle of pouring herself a cup of coffee, had turned to the sound of the door opening. Surprise turned to fear when she saw the imposing figure in the doorway.

Laurentius, a 300-pound person of indeterminate gender and age, was her sole customer, the only one unlucky enough to have been here when the snowstorm began an hour ago.

Del's mind quickly replayed the news vids from that AM, trying to recall if any raids had been sent out recently, or if there were any other reason for krakenites to be scouting. The diner might be behind city walls, but nothing's a guarantee. Fighting nonchalance, she retreated behind the counter. "What kind traveler seeks refuge in a strange diner?"

The dark figure nodded and approached. They peeled the gloves off their hands and dropped them on the counter. They raised their hairy hands to their helmet, their thick fingers pressing the release buttons on each side. The helmet came off slowly, as though moving through swamp water. Del held her breath, then her laughter when the glamour broke.

With a snap, the person that had been six-and-a-half feet tall shrunk at least two feet. Their hands narrowed and depilated, turned from white to medium brown; the muscles that had peeked out from the edges of the leather jacket disappeared; the thick thighs wasted away. What was left was a tiny person, bones insubstantial enough to be hollow. Her short frizzy hair framed a sharp face. Her voice, after weeks of unuse, came out jagged. "The kind 'at's froze through."

"Well 'nuff." Del smiled. "Glamour on helmet, eh?"

The stranger shrugged. "Did'na have trade for full."

"Might take seat, then. What your name?"

The stranger shrugged again. "Tea, I s'pose."

Del raised her brows. "Your name Tea?"

The stranger shook her head. "Nah. I take tea, if'n ya ask."

"How ya pay?"

The stranger chewed her cheek, then held up a tiny pen light hanging off her keychain. "Black light?"

Del pointed to the light above the doorway.

"Right." From her messenger bag, she pulled out an orange she'd plucked from a tree two days prior, mostly undamaged, and held it out.

Del snatched it. "I take. Kind?"

"Ain't no so long black and caff'ed."

"Up'n coming."

"Tank ya."

"Who ya?" The melodic voice shocked the stranger. Laurentius had crept up, jamming themself into the barstool on her right.

The stranger swiveled to face them. "Traveler. Ain't bout stayin'."

"Ya bring any o' dem w' ya?" They gestured vaguely to outside.

"Not I know. Be gone before." Del delivered the tea. "Tank ya, Del." She took the proffered mug from the waitress and began to sip.

"So dey's comin' for ya."

"Dey comin' for us all, eh?"

"May so, may not. But you bring 'em, gots stay to deal w' dem." They jabbed the stranger in the chest.

"If'n I stay make 'em come?"

"En may you no shoulda come." They squeezed themselves out, their fat rolls moving like water, and stalked back to their table, where they could watch the storm churning.

Two: What Came Before

She'd stretched to cuddle into her lover's armpit, only to find the bed empty. She opened her eyes and sat up. Her short hair was mussed, her skin silky like hot cocoa in the sunlight streaming in through the open window.

"Beck?" She called, standing up and wandering out of the bedroom. In the dining room, she found last night's dinner already cleaned up, the table clear as water again.

"Ere, Babe," they called out from the kitchen.

She found them making coffee in their full uniform. "Call come in?"

"Yea." They reached down to rub their hand across her bare skin and she shivered. "Ya can stay here if ya wanna."

Standing on tiptoes, she lifted her hand up their chest to their hair and tugged firmly. "Ye're a bad influence. What I do, if I no even graduate high school?"

Ze shrugged. "What ya want. Who need diploma, by the by?"

"Ya, Sarge Beck."

Ze snapped their fingers. "Shit. I gotta get in, 'mergency." They poured the coffee into a to-go mug and kissed her deeply. "I make up to you tonight."

After they left, she poured the rest of the coffee down the drain and made tea. From the bread box she grabbed a croissant then sat down on the white leather couch, careful not to spill crumbs. Beck was a stickler for cleanliness, probably something to do with their military career.

She took their advice and skipped school, opting to lay naked on the couch and watch the Sci-Fi channel instead, admiring the glammers used to depict aliens. When the screaming started, she was napping, a cup of ramen from lunch half-eaten on the coffee table and the TV still on, now blaring emergency broadcasts.

Finally stirred from REM, she stared unseeing, the news breaking through even to the Sci-fi channel, the panic clear on the screen, uncomprehending.

"...attacks..."

"...they don't know..."

"...looting..."

"...changed behavior..."

A reporter turned to a man breaking into the station. "Ralph? What are ya doing here?"

The tall, thin man shrugged off the dust from the broken door, his eyes black holes. "I couldn't stay away, Molly. I think of ya constantly."

"Ralph... We broke up a year ago. I moved on." The reporter backed up, looking wildly about for an escape.

"No, no. We're meant to be together." He strode up to the reporter and grabbed her by the waist, his face bending to meet hers.

The reporter, for one long second, locked onto the screen, pleading, pleading for help, before her eyes, still looking at the camera, turned as black as his. The screen filled with static.

In the apartment, the girl sat up, still naked. "What the fuck?"

She wandered into the bedroom and found her clothes from the previous night, heavily wrinkled and still sweaty. She salvaged her bra, covering up her small chest, and her underwear, then tugged out a clean pair of too-large cut-off jeans and a halter from her go-bag.

Dressed, she looked out the window, the scene below consistent with what she'd barely heard on the news. "Are ya out there, Beck?"

Chewing the inside of her cheek, she checked the lock on the front door then paced aimlessly around the apartment. She tried the TV again but all the channels were black or static, even the nationwide and international ones.

Behind her, the bed quacked. She jumped. The bed quacked again. She turned to the sound, memory kicking in and she scrambled to find her phone buried in the sheets, where it had fallen from her hand last night. She grabbed it and jammed her finger on the green button.

"Beck! Are ya okay?"

"Hey, Babe." Their voice was thin. "Shit's gone down, I don't know how much ya've seen on the telly. I need ya to listen, kay? Ya need to hide. These things... Dey showed up and started attacking people. Don't know why. They take over the body, change them. Don't get close to anyone, kay? Not even me. If ya see me, don't trust me."

"What da fuck are ya on about, Beck? What ya mean, don't trust ya? Ye're it, ye're the only one I've ever trusted. Where am I supposed to hide? What happened? Come home." When she stopped begging, she was gasping for air.

His breathing raged. "Listen. There extra helmet in my closet, visor has thermal sensor. Ya can use that to see 'em, o'wise they invisible."

"What are they?"

"Don't know. Kinda like octopuses. Got Joey, he killed his best friend, Babe. I had to shoot Joey down, and I don't even..." He rasped. "Listen. If ya see 'body acting weird, or ya see some shit on they back, kill 'em, 'fore they get ya. Look, gotta go. Dey surrounded my building, Babe. Nothing I can do. I'm gonna take out as many as I can 'fore they get me."

"No, Beck! Ya gotta-"

"Time I go, Babe. Take 'mergency credit card and find somewhere away from people, somewhere to ride this out. I love ya."

The phone went silent. She stared unblinking at the blank screen. Her fingers raced as she typed his number in. It went to voicemail. She tried again, and again, and again, tears streaming down her face until she could no longer see.

Three: A Lesson in Amish Hospitality, and What it Isn't

Twenty years later and she never did finish high school.

"More?"

"Eh?"

Del stood before her, a pot of coffee in her left hand.

"I ordered tea."

Del shrugged. "Caff's caff, eh?"

"Not me. If'n no mind, a reheat be nice."

Del snatched the mug up and walked away.

"Storm's passin'." Laurentius had snuck up on her again.

"S good."

They shuffled their feet.

"What want?"

"Ya be off when?"

She wrapped her hands around the mug Del had set down in front of her and inhaled the scent of over-steeped cheap English breakfast. "May so, may rest me head for a night, two."

"What do if'n they find ya?"

She slid her jacket aside, revealing the pistol on her hip.

"That it?"

She lifted her pants legs, showing off the knives strapped to her calves.

"Those not do much to protect ya."

She mimed throwing them.

"How many ya kill?"

"More'n I count."

"Still runnin' though?"

She shrugged. "Be one who strong wantin' me."

“Hm.”

“Ya?”

They shook their head. “We far nuff, able to close up town ‘fore they reached us. I ain’t never seen one, ‘cept on TV.”

“The wall?”

“We was Amish ‘fore. Always good at build fast.”

“Was?”

They shrugged. “Word got out. Lots folk come. Soon more’n English. Hard faith when so many ain’t know.”

“Hm.” She downed the rest of her tea, then looked around. Del was nowhere to be seen.

“Del!” Laurentius shouted. “More caff tea ‘ere, quick! Girl gon pass out!”

She snickered. “Ain’t that bad.”

“Only way get through Del when she be off smokin’.”

“That she doin’? Ain’t she know how bad it is?”

“I know a’ight. Jus’ don’t care.” Del slammed a mug of hot water down and a handful of tea bags. “Pick one.”

She selected Lady Grey and dunked the bag in the water.

Del swiped the rest of the tea up and pocketed them. “Ya think’n to rest a night?”

“Yea. Know where?”

“No.” Del stalked off.

“Amish hosp’tality?” She quirked her eyebrows at Laurentius.

They shook their head. “She ain’t, came after.”

“And ya?”

“Once. Now...” They stared out the window, at the wall. “Hard to keep believing.”

“Meant d’ya know place to rest?”

They tilted their head back and their eyes bored into hers.

Laurentius slid the barn doors open and the smell assaulted them both. The cows all turned to stare at them, their mouths busy working hay.

“Ain’t much, is it?”

Laurentius turned from her, then spoke over their shoulder. “Take, leave, yar choice. Dinner in hour, if’n ya choose.”

She thinned her lips and walked into the barn. Once her eyes adjusted, she saw the empty stall at the far end Laurentius had promised. She threw her bedroll down and then leaned up against the wall.

Perhaps the stank of the cows would shield her from Beck’s relentless pursuit.

In the dark, alone with the cows, it’s harder to keep her memories at bay, and so she didn’t try, letting them wash over her like rain in a storm.

Close enough to an hour passed in the dark and she trudged her way to the main house. The door was ajar so she walked inside. Simple, solid wood floors extended into the kitchen, where she could hear noises. As she walked through, she saw no photos on the walls, no personal details.

In the kitchen, she found Laurentius stirring a pot on the stove. They didn’t look up at her approach.

She dropped her bag on the table. “Ya want trade?”

“Hm. In time. Sit. Eat.” They pushed aside her bag and plopped bowls, utensils, cups on the table. They ladled chili into the bowls.

She cradled a bowl in her hands, the warmth seeping in through her skin.

“Ain’t much. Canned beans, stale spices.” They spooned a mouthful.

She followed suit. “Be nice have food ‘at’s warm.”

They scanned her over their spoon. “Hm.”

That last night with Beck, they’d had chili. Their mother’s recipe, with organic grass-fed steak and kidney beans soaked overnight, a sharp cheddar cheese freshly shredded, sour cream, and cornbread with homemade honey butter. She’d made the butter.

“Who be after ya?”

“My lover. They army sarge.”

They’d eaten at the table, linen napkins and candlelight and only slightly wilted roses that they’d brought home for her.

“Ya young, have lover so high.”

Her eyes filmed. “S’pose. Four years ‘part. When met, they senior, I freshman. They there for me ‘en none else.”

They’d sat across from each other, their long arms reaching over to hold her hands.

“Parents no care?”

“Why **ya** care?”

They hadn’t finished eating, leaving their bowls to cool on the table, their hands and tongues quick and hot on each other’s bodies.

They squinted their eyes. “Haps be trade, dinner for story.”

“Ya so starved, ya want know me?”

Sex that night hadn’t been any more special, any more unique, any more noteworthy than any other night, not even in retrospect. And perhaps that’s why it’s the only sex she can remember with them.

“I been living ‘ere thirty-five years, last twenty like this. Know everyone, everyone know me. Don’t get strangers oft.”

“That be different how?”

“Ain’t, s’pose, ‘cept rest of world gon crazy.”

“Truth.” She sipped at her water. “A’ight. I tell ya story, for dinner.”

And there, with a willing and open ear, she her mouth loosened.

She hadn’t believed them, hadn’t believed they could ever be a danger to her, hadn’t listened to their advice. She’d stayed in their apartment. She had been marginally intelligent, though, and hid in the attic, looking out through a crack in the hatch, helmet on her head, waiting for Beck to come home.

When they finally did, she had almost leapt down and into their arms, so excited she was to see their familiar shape. But then she’d seen the shadow following, just like they’d said, silvery tendrils wrapped around their skull and tasting the air around them. She’d bit down on her tongue to stop her scream.

She’d eased the hatch shut, sealing herself into darkness and dust. She’d heard Beck tearing apart the apartment, calling her name. They hadn’t stayed long, slamming the door shut as they went. She’d peeked out the hatch again, and at no sign of them, she’d eased herself down, the rock climbing she’d been doing with Beck the last year paying off. She’d used the access

stairwell, which the landlord never kept locked, to sneak out the back, to their old bike parked in the garage.

She'd thought herself clear once she left town, used their card to fill up the tank and get a bite. While in the bathroom, she'd heard bells clang over the door, their voice talking weird-like to the waitress, then silence. An hour later, she inched out to find a dark diner, a puddle of coffee on the counter and the carafe shattered.

She'd thrown the card away after that.

In truth, money lost its value soon after; in the free cities at least.

Five: A Dilemma of All Proportions

She'd lied. She hadn't thrown away the credit card, only buried it in her bag. It had been the last thing Beck had given her, before his brain had been taken by the kraken, and so it had been precious.

Many things had been, but most of them were lost when the kraken came through.

The kraken came from somewhere else, perhaps an extra-dimensional space, perhaps dumped from an alien spaceship as refuse. No one could figure that out. They showed up on the same day, same time, all over the world though not evenly. Pennsylvania, or what used to be called Pennsylvania, was almost completely spared, and so it became one of the main strongholds for the free people.

At first no one could see them, these kraken. It took most of that first day, and then by accident, for the military to realize that black and thermal lights could reveal them. But it was too late, too widespread. The kraken attached themselves to people and took over their brains, like a parasite, controlling them to acquire more food. At first, the krakenites seemed to focus on taking down the structures of government, but when they finished that, they returned to a semblance of normal.

Survival instincts persisted in the hosts, so they continued to eat, to defecate, even to fornicate. They went to work. They had arguments. They read bedtime stories to their kids. But every action they performed, they'd done it exactly the same way before, ad nauseum. They lived in cities of perpetual repetition, devoid of spontaneity and innovation.

Children weren't taken over, not until they reached some unknown point, a different point for each child. Some were confused by the change in their parents, but most were not, not at first. Eventually it became apparent that the krakenites were not equipped to be parents, and so the children became feral, trying to raise themselves until they too were taken by a kraken.

The free people realized the young children were not taken and so made every effort to rescue them, bring them into their communities. Sometimes this worked, and sometimes it led to the raiding party getting assimilated.

Multiple attempts had been made to separate the kraken from their victims. Every time, the host died with the kraken; the kraken disappeared after death and never appeared without a host.

Against such an enemy – one that you can barely see, that you can't get close to without falling prey, that you can't fight without killing your loved ones – what could the free people do? Some abandoned their loved ones; others actively sought out the afflicted and killed them. Who's to say which route was right, ethically, morally, spiritually?

Six: When Certainty Means Death

She woke up the next morning with a cow staring at her. She disentangled herself from the hay pile she'd slept on then began packing up her belongings, the road calling to her. After all this time, she'd acquired a sixth sense for avoiding Beck and always listened to it. How he found her, she couldn't figure out – did the kraken on his neck give him a superior sense of smell? A kind of ESP? Or was she simply that easy to track down?

Did it matter?

In the dawn light, with her bag slung over her shoulder, she stood over her bike and stared up at the still-dark house. No sense waking Laurentius; let them sleep. She plucked her last orange from the bag and set it carefully on the welcome mat.

Back on her bike, she motored down the empty streets, following her tracks from the previous day to the wall. Two teenaged boys guarded the exit, rifles slung over their shoulders.

She nodded to them. "I get through?"

They nodded back in unison.

The wall was less a wall and more of a solid fence, wooden two-by-fours lined up flush with each other, a single gate allowing exit and entry.

The boy on the left turned to the gate and lifted the beam, a crack opening in the seam.

As the gate opened, she revved her engine and rode on through.

She stopped at the crossroads, her neck tingling and telling her that Beck came from the east.

She began to ride.

When she finally saw Beck walking toward her; still a mile out but she knew it was them, knew the way they walked, knew the tingle getting stronger; she stopped, stepped off the bike and grounded both feet onto the cracked asphalt, her hand on the butt of her pistol. Elbow bent, fingers sweaty, pulse racing. She pressed the button to turn on the thermal sensors.

They raised their hand in greeting as they approached. Finally within hearing range, they said, softly, softly, "Hey, Babe."

Her hand raised the pistol, aimed it at their head. Then ever curious, needing to be certain, she moved slowly around them, pistol never wavering but her eyes searching, searching, for that silvery ethereal octopus that had to be on the back of their neck.