

Dirt Nap #1

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Table of Contents

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

Stem (noun) – deceased persons who sprouts from the ground post the DP chemical contamination; once their corpse begins to expire, they have the ability to take a dirt nap beneath soil, regenerating their corpse to a nearly living condition; can consume living persons to avoid quickened corpse expiration thus avoiding a lengthy dirt nap

1 –Contaminated

Roam's demise had all started with a toasted peanut butter and jelly sandwich for breakfast. He figured chewing and swallowing was something he had perfected, especially after eating solids for nearly all the twenty-two years of his life. He crawled across his condo floor towards the kitchen area, his lungs desperate for air. Roam made it to the refrigerator and opened the door to learn the only thing close to a beverage in stock was a bottle of creamy ranch dressing.

Roam's vision blurred and it was becoming tough for him to maintain his balance. He knew when it came to his life there was only a few seconds left on the clock. His eyes met with the kitchen sink. As he envisioned water coming from the faucet, he could only recall the warning that flashed across the bottom of every broadcast channel for the last two days around the world: don't drink the water. He weighed dying soon from a lack of air or eventually from the poisonous chemicals from the massive DP chemical spill. The chemical manufacturing company was solely responsible for contaminating various water supplies worldwide, miles of land bordering the company's plants, and the air that was now declared breathable by medical officials. One choice offered him the chance to say some goodbyes and maybe the time to start and then complete a bucket list.

Roam willed himself over to the kitchen sink, rested against it and turned on the faucet. He angled himself well enough to put his mouth beneath the pouring water that smelled like gasoline and drank. It tasted like tin foil and burnt like fire as it went down his throat. The burning sensation spread from his torso throughout his entire body. Roam was too weak to react to the pain, not even the strength to let out a single moan. The burning sensation faded, along with each of his five senses and everything went dark.

A constant ticking was all that could be heard and darkness was all that could be seen. Roam wondered if this was eternity, laying in a dark room listening to a ticking sound. He was a bit let down, expecting the after life to deliver a bit more if he was indeed in a better place or offer a bit less if he was in a worst place. A thumping sound joined the clicking. Each thump was accompanied by a sharp pain in his chest. Roam recognized the thumping sound; it was a heart, his heart, only a bit stalled. It was as if the organ was being poked with a needle for simply doing its job.

Roam opened his eyes and placed his palm in the center of his chest. "Ouch." Roam cleared his dry throat. "Shit."

His body ached as he sat up to find himself nude on a metal table. He continued rubbing his hand against his aching chest, his stalled heart still feeling as if it was being pricked with a needle. Around the room surgical equipment was placed on metal counters, cabinets with glass doors contained medicine, a poster promoting sanitation and another of the diagram of the human body was hung against the wall.

Roam narrowed his eyes as he put the puzzle together. "A morgue?" He said, his voice raspy.

His calves quivered as he slid from the table and stood. He walked as a toddler learning to take his first steps over to an area that contained personal items and a mint green colored telephone with the numbers faded on the dial pad. A framed news article that hung above the phone was of a man holding a large sweet potato and smiling proudly. Roam remembered the day the picture was taken, the Sweet Potato Fest two years ago, and recognized the man in the photo, Fred Ochers the coroner.

"I'm still in Moone Crest?" Roam wondered as he skimmed the article to make sure the details matched his memory.

If this was a hospital room, Roam would be more content with the situation, him nearly dying and being in a hospital to recover made sense. Instead, this was a morgue not a place for recovery, just a pit stop on the deceased trip to their final resting place. Still, this morgue, the items the room could all be a mirage.

The pain in his chest stopped, but his heart still stalled on each beat. It was as if the organ refused to go into overdrive no matter how panicked Roam actually felt. He needed some confirmation. Roam needed to know if this was reality and there was one way to be sure that he was still alive in Moone Crest.

He picked up the phone and listened to the dial tone as he tried to remember his best friend's phone number. It took two attempts for Roam to get the last digit correct, accustomed to just clicking Slade's name in the contact section on his cellphone. The call went to voicemail during the first attempt. Roam hung up the phone and tried again.

After three rings Slade answered and yawned out, "It's three PM, who in the hell calls people this early?"

Roam smirked at the sound of Slade's voice. "Slade you bum, wake up, it's me."

Slade groaned. "Me, who?"

"It's me, Roam."

Slade paused. "I don't know who this is but how about you fuck off. I guess the, *Slade got tasered on TV*, gag has run its course after all these years and now for some psychotic reason it's time to make fun of me because my best friend died. I will find out who this is and then I'm going to stomp your head in. I don't--"

"-Slade," Roam cut in, "It's really me. Don't you recognize my voice? This is not a joke."

"I recognize the voice, but it's only a cheap impersonation of a dead man."

"In sixth grade you, Maven and I made a fake InstaFace account to cyberbully Dustin and then deleted it after he tried to kill himself. He was a dick, but we all felt like borderline killers anyways. Afterwards we promised to never speak of it again, especially because the idea of a summer in juvi didn't sound all that amazing."

"What the fuck," Slade said.

"And the account password was 'dustindadick'."

"R-R-R-Roam," Slade uttered. "You're one of them?"

"Them, who?"

"The Stems? Dead."

Roam placed his hand against his chest and felt his heart beat once. "My heart beats kinda slow, but I'm alive I think."

"But it can't be true. It doesn't make sense. This is such a messed up phone call."

"Listen, I'll be waiting outside of the morgue. I need you to come pick me up and bring clothes."

"I'm putting on my pants right now, don't you fucking move. Don't die again either, I'm on my way."

"I won't," Roam said and softly chuckled.

He hung up the phone and grabbed a white lab jacket that hung near the door of the room and slipped it on. Roam opened the door and peeked out into a short and narrow hallway with flickering fluorescent lights. He

entered the grim hallway where a brown couch and a coffee table with tattered magazines piled atop were placed. More framed news articles were hung on the walls that were covered with brown, peeling wallpaper.

Roam started from the room he awoke. It was located furthest from the front door. He passed the locked emergency exit on his right and a door labeled storage on his left. The only doors left for him to pass were an opened office door that was across from the restroom. Roam peeked into the office to find Fred the coroner lounging on the couch napping with a half-eaten sandwich on his belly. On the television aired a football game on mute. Roam snuck pass the office door and left the morgue.

The outside sun left him blind and made his brown skin tingle. As his vision cleared, the more he realized that he was still in Moone Crest. The morgue was located on one of the many side dirt paths in town across from an abandoned cable provider office and a convenience store covered with a colorful graffiti mural and party lights. Roam spotted a tree near the store where photos of the deceased were attached to strings that were tied around branches. The small mountain town obsessed with tree art, decorated trees could be spotted all over Moone Crest and was another confirmation for Roam that he was home. Roam started to walk across the street to see if somebody hung his photo until Slade pulled up in his hooptie SUV.

Slade, his blonde hair messed and face puffy from his night's sleep, rushed from the car. "I cannot believe it."

"Slade, you have no idea how happy I am to see you."

Slade grabbed Roam and hugged him tight. "I thought you died, everyone thought you died. Man, if Fred wasn't so lazy your organs would've been yanked out yesterday and your body reduced to ashes. It's a damn miracle."

"Wait, turned into ashes?"

Slade released him from the hug. "With no family at all to cover your funeral expenses, they were going to cremate you. I was going to throw one amazing ass funeral party once I got paid to send your ashes off in style, tossing them off a mountainside. But fuck that, I get to save my paycheck and my best friend is back. What happened? How was dying? I mean...what did you see, feel?"

"I was choking, drank some water, blacked out and woke up here."

"You're talking as if you just woke up from a nap, Roam. It's been four days since your condo maintenance guy found you lying on your kitchen floor without a pulse."

To Roam, his time of darkness only felt like a few minutes. "I've been out for four days?"

"They just put an article in the newspaper yesterday. Roam, you standing before me is just...unbelievable."

Roam grabbed Slade's hand and placed it against his own chest. "My heart still beats."

Slade shrugged. "I don't feel anything."

"Give it a second; you have to wait for it."

Roam's heart thumped.

"I feel it," Slade said. "It's a bit fuckingslow, but it's there."

"It's better than nothing."

Slade removed his hand from Roam's chest. "When I realized you weren't joking I figured you were one of the Stems, but then I remembered on the news that they reported the Stems have no memories of their previous life so that just made shit so confusing. Roam, somehow you drank the contaminated water, died and came back but not as a Stem, but just Roam. You know who you are, unlike all the others."

Roam waved his hands before Slade's face. "Wait, what do you mean by a Stem? You said that word earlier."

"The DP chemical spill has really messed stuff up. The chemicals contaminated the water, ground, and air and caused those who've been dead for years to rise and some of the newly deceased who've died post the contamination to also come back aka like you minus the memory loss and heartbeat. We call them Stems; there's some scientific mumbo-jumbo explanation for the name, something about them being plantlike in a way."

"Wait, as in the, *I want to eat your brains type of dead?*"

"It's a bit more complex than that, but yeah." Slade stepped back. "You aren't craving brains, right?"

Roam placed his hand against his stomach. "No, not at all. I can't even imagine that."

"Well you might not want to eat somebody, but some of the Stems out there do. I'll catch you up on the ride to work, because if we don't leave now Tasha will be blowing up my phone any minute threatening to fire me." He thumbed over his shoulder to the car. "The spare clothes are in the backseat."

"Good looking out Slade."

Slade started over to the driver's side. "We also need to come up with a good explanation for your resurrection."

Roam climbed into the passenger's seat. "Wait, I forgot about Fred. He'll wake up and my body will be gone."

Slade got in the car and started the vehicle. "Don't worry about Fred; he's already been raided once by some Stems for all the bodies he was responsible for. A lot of people had warned him and still are pushing for him to add some sort of security system to the place, but you know Fred. He only cares about two things, growing the biggest sweet potato and a six-pack of beer. Once he wakes up and sees you're gone, he won't make a fuss about it. I think the last thing he wants is an article in the paper about his irresponsibility. He prides himself on good press."

"Hopefully, because I don't want him running around telling people I'm a Stem. I don't want to be feared."

"I'll be the first one to shut him up with my fist. Because it's what a real friend does."

Roam smirked at his best friend's words. He was glad to still be in Moone Crest, alive or close to being so.

2 - Change

Almost every eatery was advertising their variation of a dish that included the town's vegetable, the sweet potato. And Slade couldn't drive a block without passing a decorated tree or some type of street art. Roam was definitely in Moone Crest. It didn't take him long to realize things had changed. Several businesses displayed signs that read, 'No Stems Allowed'. And he spotted more deputies than he could remember patrolling the streets. Not only were the deputies armed with their issued firearm, but also with a machete.

Roam spotted a heavily tatted Patrick patrolling in a deputies uniform. "They let Patrick be a deputy? Patrick?" He repeated in disbelief.

Slade nodded as he kept his eyes on the road. "Yup."

"But he's been on probation since forever. Do you remember when he robbed us after school for our wrestling action figures?"

"It's called desperation, man. It's the living versus the dead. If you can wield a machete, you can be a deputy."

"Are Stems really out there eating people? How long has this been happening?"

"The first Stem to make himself known appeared in Louisiana four days ago. Ever since then they have been popping up everywhere and the world is scrambling to get everything under control. They're not like the dead you see in the movies, they're intelligent. There was one on the news requesting private lands for them to take dirt naps in peace."

Roam narrowed his eyes. "They want to take naps?"

Slade chuckled. "Not, exactly. They reported that somehow the chemical spill blended plant life with the corpse of the deceased who were buried under contaminated grounds. After a couple of hours Stems start falling apart, dropping eyes, limbs and other shit. So, they dig a hole, bury themselves under the dirt and after a couple of hours dig themselves out with all the pieces of their rotting bodies back in place. They call it dirt napping."

"And why do they need private land to go and put themselves back together again?"

"Because some of us living are digging them up mid-nap and burning them. A blow to the head takes them down, but complete destruction is the only way to make sure they don't ever come back. A portion of both sides are calling for peace, but life isn't that easy. We kill them and they kill us. Apparently consuming a human keeps them in good condition longer than taking a dirt nap. Nerds on the internet and shit have been providing better info than our government who's too busy deciding which parts of the country deserve military protection."

Roam had not seen one military vehicle or personnel the entire drive. "I guess Moone Crest isn't on their list."

"Not at all, but we've been holding our own here. Nobody fucks with Moone Crest."

Roam looked down at his hands. "I wonder what my situation is. I drank the contaminated water."

Slade stopped at a red-light. "I'm just glad you're back. The last four days have been brutal without you."

"Hey boys, got any change," A female voice begged.

Roam glanced out the passenger window to where a woman approached with her hand held out for change. Her fair complexion was dull and certain areas of her skin had dark spots. She was barefoot, her dark hair dry and hanging loosely down her back. The red dress she wore with the tag still attached looked brand new. The closer she got the more Roam realized what she was. Her irises were the color of the sky on a rainy day and face was covered with patches of dry skin.

She smiled revealing her teeth that were stained grey. "I said, got any change? Help a dead girl out."

Roam looked over to Slade who was scowling at the woman. "Slade, I don't know what to do?"

"We work at Mal Mart lady, of course we don't have any change," Slade said.

She looked inside the car. "It has to be something in here, check the floors. Don't be lazy."

She reached her arm in the car, before Roam's face, and held her hand open. One of her finger nails dropped in the cup holder.

Roam sat back as far as he could from her arm that smelled like a damp, dirty, mop. "Just give her something."

"I'm legit broke," Slade said as he patted his pockets.

The dead woman scoffed. "Fuck this."

She grabbed Roam by the neck and started to choke him and used her free hand to attempt to dig through his pockets. Slade floored the accelerator pedal and sped off, yanking off the woman's arms along with them. Her arms landed in Roam's lap, he spread his legs opened and screamed. Slade look in his rearview mirror to see the woman doing her best to chase after the SUV. He grabbed the arms from the lap of a heavily breathing Roam and tossed them out the car window.

Roam dusted bits of her dead skin from his clothes as fast as he could. "Holy shit, what the hell?" He shouted.

"She'll be fine. All she has to do is take a dirt nap and they'll grow right back."

"That would've been a lot less disgusting if you just gave her some change."

Slade shrugged. "Money is tight. That's why I can't afford to be late for work like this."

"Four days and the world has completely transformed. It's a mess."

"She was one of the nicer ones; at least she didn't want to eat us."

Roam placed his hand against his chest. "If my heart could race it would be right now."

They pulled into the crowded Mal Mart parking lot. A line extended out the door and two deputy cruisers were on guard. The Mal Mart superstore was the biggest building in all of Moone Crest and the only corporate owned company that managed to maintain a presence in town. Their low-low prices were truly too low to deny. Slade parked in the employee area and grabbed his black uniform vest from the backseat.

He slipped on his vest and adjusted his nametag below the yellow Mal Mart logo in bold letters. "I'm so late."

"What's with the crowd? Are we having a BOGO sale or something?"

"It's been like this ever since Stems popped up. Everybody is buying in bulk and shit in case the world ends."

Roam got out of the car. "Then corporate must be in profit heaven."

"Their morning emails are so happy it's almost sickening," Slade said as he got out of the car. "I'll lead you in. My vest is like a VIP pass."

As they made their way towards the entry of Mal Mart, Roam spotted many familiar faces from around town waiting in line. Judging by the looks of shock and whispers they recognized Roam, the face of a supposed dead man. He was so caught up in witnessing changes around town and surviving a confrontation with one of the Stems, he forgot to put together a believable explanation for his resurrection.

"A Stem," A woman shrieked out.

Roam tensed up and stopped in his tracks, "I'm not one of -"

He stopped his words mid-sentence as he realized she was referring to an elderly man in line. As the crowd scattered away from the man who held his ear in his hand, some shoppers pointed the two deputies on guard in the Stem's direction. Roam sped walk to catch up with Slade while trying to watch the scene unfold. A woman threw a plastic bottle toward the elderly dead man and missed. The Stem lunged towards his agitator and a deputy stopped the man in his tracks and shot him in the head. His limp body dropped to the ground and the crowd went silent.

Roam could only imagine that happening to him. He needed to come up with a good explanation for his return and fast.

3 - Security

A towering man with a bushy white beard and armed with a machete in each hand, stood as still as a statue at the entry automatic doors of Mal Mart. He wore a dark polo shirt with the Mal Mart logo stitched on the right breast area and a baseball cap with the word security on it in bold white lettering. Slade grabbed Roam by the arm and pulled him along with him as they passed the man and entered the store.

Roam looked back at the man as he kept forward. "Who is that?"

Slade let loose of Roam's arm. "That's Santa, get it? Because of the beard. He's with Mal Mart security."

Slade and Roam continued down the main aisle that was located between the grocery and women's apparel section.

"Mal Mart is the cheapest billion dollar company ever, so security can't be on their payroll, who do they work for?"

Slade laughed. "It's shocking, but Mal Mart took out a contract with that scary private security company Shadow Forces. They sent out agents to all the store locations to protect the products...I mean *employees*"

"I guess Santa is a master at wielding those machetes if he's guarding this store all alone from Stems."

"Nope, there's more of them," Slade said as he pushed through the employee lounge area.

Roam followed him inside into the room that contained their lockers, a lunch area, bathroom and the store manager's office. In the lunch area four men wearing security baseball caps were hanging out near the lunch area vending machines. Three of them sat at the lunch table laughing and eating while listening to the man who stood talking. None of them seemed to have any concept of what an inside voice was.

Slade took a seat on the bench by their lockers. "And that's the rest of Mal Mart security. The oily looking guy with the long dark hair and piercings is Rock. He used to be in a band. I searched them online, they were decent. The ginger one is Cannon. He was raised as a circus kid and used to get shot out of the cannon. The tall, dark and bald dude is Pretti. Apparently a smile and a flex of his pecs make panties drop."

"And who's the tatted dude who they're listening to as if he's the most interesting man in the world?"

"That's Hunter Diaz, their leader, comic book extraordinaire and a complete badass. I heard he killed fifty men."

Roam smirked as he sat down next to Slade. "Like them, you also seem to be a fan of his."

"He killed fifty men and has a comic book script tatted on his arm. He's the definition of cool."

Tasha, wearing a dark pantsuit, exited her office on her cellphone. "What do you mean school is from noon to four now? You know what, it doesn't matter. I don't want you or your brothers leaving the house at all." Tasha plugged her left ear using her finger and talked louder into the phone as the security team's chatter grew louder. "And don't order them takeout, make your brothers sandwiches. I'll call you guys back." Tasha hung up her phone. "Hunter!"

Hunter stopped mid-sentence and faced Tasha. "Yeah?"

"I told you before; the lounge is for employees only. You and your audience can have your breaks in the stock room."

Hunter thumbed at the vending machine. "There's no vending machine in there."

"And it's hot," Pretti added.

Rock twisted his nose. "I saw a rat in there. I fucking hate rats."

Cannon lounged back in his seat and motioned at the rest of the security team. "All my bros are here."

Tasha rolled her eyes. "You're all loud and messy. The high schoolers on staff are better behaved than all of you."

Hunter laughed. "Are you comparing us to children? I've killed fifty men."

"I know, you have a bad habit of mentioning that too often. I don't care." Tasha said.

"But you will care when Stems storm this store and we're the ones standing between you and them."

"I didn't ask for a security team, I'm content with the deputies out in the parking lot."

Hunter angled his head of dark, low-cut hair to the left as he stared her down. "Are you kidding me? The majority of them are bumbling fools who haven't even fired a gun or wielded a machete in their lives. If Stems storm this store you don't want some deputy with poor aim firing his gun. You'll want Rock, a sharpshooter."

Rock formed a smug grin. "Best shot in the South. And when I travel north, best shot in the North."

Hunter continued, "You don't want some deputy wielding his machete and dropping it. You'll want Cannon."

"I'll fucking kill myself if I drop my weapon in combat," Cannon said as he made a slicing motion across his neck.

Hunter pointed to Pretti, "You'll want the brute strength of Santa and Pretti at the front door, not a deputy."

Pretti formed a toothy smile and rubbed at his shiny, bald, head, "This pretty motherfucker can throw down."

Hunter stepped close to Tasha. "And when you're lost in this store, fearing for your life, you'll want me hunting for you not some deputy who can't even navigate a narrow road with a GPS. We take our roles very seriously. I know Mal Mart really sent us here to guard their store and not the people who make it run, but I value the human life, especially during a messed up time like this. Don't compare us to a couple of kids and citizen cops."

Tasha pointed toward the employee lounge door. "Nice speech, honestly. But I meant it when I said stock room."

Hunter locked eyes with Tasha and stood his ground. "Tasha," He said in a threatening manner.

"Mr. Diaz," She said as she crossed her arms and tightened her lips.

Neither Hunter nor Tasha budged a muscle, as if they were two battling lions waiting for the pounce.

He shook his head at her and turned to the security team. "Let's get back to work."

The security team dropped their trash to the lunch table, stood, and followed Hunter from the employee area.

"That was intense," Slade said.

Tasha faced Slade, "Why are-"

Tasha's jaw dropped, brown eyes widened and goose bumps formed on her mocha tone arms.

"Why am I late?" Slade finished. He thumbed over to Roam who was staring back at a still Tasha. "Blame him."

Tasha dropped her cellphone as she shook out of her daze. "Roam...are you...are you a Stem?"

Roam stood up from the bench. "No, I'm me."

Tasha slowly squatted down, picked up her phone and stood back up. "Roam, you died."

Hunter returned to the room and started to clean up the mess his team left behind.

Slade looked up from the bench at Roam. "Tell her, tell her the *truth*."

Roam started to speak until he realized he still lacked an explanation for his return. "I was...working for...the...uh...government. I was a big science geek back in high school. Based on my records they recruited me and a couple of others hours before the first Stems were made known to the public to train for some top secret science organization to combat them from a lab. I love Moone Crest, but figured it was time to do something that would give my life more meaning."

"They reported your death in the paper," Tasha said. "I read it myself."

"The government used their power to get it printed I guess," Roam said with a shrug.

"He's right," Hunter said. "I was a private contractor after my time in the military. Shit like this is normal. Hell, I'm legally dead in four states. When you combine the influence of the government and another private company like the one I used to serve under, anything can be made possible even if it sounds straight out of a movie. There's an island where scientists try to make super soldiers. Guarded a door there once, they told me to forget it existed. Oops."

Tasha ignored Hunter as she took slow steps toward Roam. "Why are you back in Moone Crest?"

"I failed the entry exam and they sent me packing, guess I'm not that smart after all. Since the entire walking dead situation has been made public they gave us rejected the okay to share the truth about our disappearances. If you need any documentation I can have them send you proof." Roam mentally punched himself for that last sentence. "Uh...so, do I still have a job?"

Tasha shook her head in disbelief. "I suppose, but you're working cosmetics as a punishment for fake dying."

Roam heard horrible things about cosmetics, but he needed a paycheck. "I'll start learning my lipsticks then."
"I'll get you a uniform vest to put on out of my office."

Hunter cleared his throat. "Tasha."

She turned her attention to him. "What is it?"

"I cleaned up the lunch area."

Tasha nodded at a sign that said, 'Keep Area Clean'. "Alright then, so you can read. Teach your team."

She smirked at Hunter and headed to her office to grab Roam a vest. Hunter left the lounge and got back to security detail and after clocking-in Slade went to work the men's apparel section of the store. After receiving his vest and a hand written schedule for the week, Roam took a deep breath, tried to block out the horror stories he had heard about cosmetics, and reported to his section.

The dead walked but that didn't stop the vain from occupying the cosmetic section. Roam stood at his register that sat atop of glass counter that displayed jewelry and watches. Behind him were four columns of black shelves where perfumes that gave him a headache, makeup-up he knew nothing about and more jewelry that was a pain to organize, rested. A woman in light blue nursing scrubs was in a mirror trying on a sample of lipstick.

She puckered her lips as she applied the red lipstick to her thin lips. "What do you think Jerome?"

"It's Roam," He droned out, "And it looks fine. Like I said the last five times."

"Yeah, but maybe I need something more out there. Maybe I should try something gold with glitter."

Roam turned and looked at the wall of lipsticks. "I don't think we have that."

The woman pointed. "It's right there. Look higher."

"If I look any higher I'll be looking at the ceiling." He faced her. "Just go with the red, it's nice."

She pouted as she checked her reflection. "But I'm tired of being the nice girl."

"What's wrong with being nice? Nice girls are rare in Moone Crest. You stand out."

"Moone Crest men don't want a nice girl, they want a girl who can build and shoot sweet potato cannons or go camping with them. I like doing all those things but I'm overlooked because I just look like the boring ol e nurse. You know what; maybe a new haircut will work better. I'll go do that, be safe Jerome."

Roam didn't even bother to correct her. He sighed, "They need to rename cosmetics to the self-help section."

Loud screams reached Roam's ears and caused him to jump. He faced the source of the eardrum bursting screams to find his teenage co-workers Millie and Eliza holding on to each other as they screamed. Eliza jumped up and down as she continued to scream and point at Roam, causing Millie's chubby body to jiggle in her arms.

"It's me," Roam voiced, "I'm not a Stem."

Millie stopped screaming and covered Eliza's mouth to silence her. "But...they said...you were."

"If I was a Stem, I would not be working cosmetics. This is a punishment for the living."

Eliza removed Millie's hand from her mouth. She brushed back her blonde hair as she calmed herself. "I'm lost."

"I was a part of a government program that required me pretending to be dead."

Millie adjusted her backpack straps on her shoulders. "Really?"

"Yup, so calm down. Tasha wouldn't rehire me if I was a Stem."

Eliza fanned her hand at her face as she exhaled in relief. "Well, welcome back. Sorry for the screaming."

Millie clutched her belly. "I was so freaked out though. Roam, you almost caused me to lose my lunch."

A lanky David walked by with his backpack lazily hanging from his shoulder and with his algebra textbook under his arm. "Miss Tasha is so desperate for dayshift employees she's hiring Stems now. Unbelievable."

"I'm not dead, David," Roam corrected. "I was-"

"-Dead, alive or whatever you are Roam, you're still the same failure you were four days ago." David stopped and looked Millie and Eliza up and down. "And Millie you looked even fatter in gym class today, so you can afford to lose a meal. Give it to Eliza. I can see her bones through her flesh."

Eliza and Millie turned their attention to David with snarls on the face. If they had claws, they would be out.

"I'm proud of who I am," Millie declared, "At least my face doesn't look like an acne orgy, geek scum. I heard they plan on leaving your picture out of the yearbook while Eliza and I will have our beautiful faces plastered on

every page. We'll be voted most fabulous seniors and you'll be voted most likely to get a virus from banging his computer. "

Eliza put her arm around Millie's shoulders, "Nobody likes you David. Fact."

David laughed of their insults and continued walking. "Cretins."

Eliza and Millie followed after David towards the employee lounge exchanging taunts with him. Roam refocused back on his section to discover he was joined by two women who were bickering back and forth about which type of makeup they should purchase for an upcoming wedding. He knew he would play a part in the debate and decided no matter what, he would side with the customer who could remember his name.

4 - Light

The shift that seemed to never end was finally over for Roam. During the closing process, Roam wiped lipstick from the glass display case with a rag and cleaner. A customer, while whining about her failed attempts to spice up her marriage, allowed her child to use a tube of lipstick to draw a happy stick figure family on the display case. David entered cosmetics with a box of inventory and started to stock the items on the shelves. Roam had a good relationship with all his co-workers, but the combination of the typical Moone Crest ego combined with David's intelligence made the act of small talk with him a challenge.

Roam put away his cleaning supplies in a cabinet under the register. "It's prom season, right?"

David shrugged. "I guess so. It's not on my radar."

"Please, prom and graduation are on the mind of every senior. Who are you taking?"

David continued stocking, "I'm not going to that shthead fest."

"I missed my prom and wish it was a memory I had."

"Couldn't find a date? Did your stench of impending failure scare the girls away?"

"Actually, I had that rare ole spring time flu," Roam said. "And lay up on the insults, it gets old."

The universe always found a way to take something from Roam, even the experience of prom.

David finished stocking the shelf and faced Roam. "Do you want me to lie? *You're a great success, good boy.*"

"I know I'm not a doctor or lawyer, but I like my life. It's been tough, but I'm still standing."

David motioned at Roam with a sign of disgust in his face. "You're sporting a Mal Mart vest. You had more value when you were dead."

"I wasn't dead," He lied, "And I happen to like working here...well, not in cosmetics."

"Nobody likes working. But I have college to pay for; you're just funding your insignificant life."

Slade popped up and put his arm around Roam's shoulders. "What are you two talking about? Eye liner?"

"I was trying to get the details on David's prom date but he's too busy spewing out negativity."

Slade laughed. "David? With a date? That would be a bigger revelation than the existence of Stems."

"At least I didn't get tasered by the cops on live TV," David quipped.

Slade's face went stone. "I'm tired of people in this town bringing that up. That was five years ago."

David smirked and started to mock Slade by pretending he was being electrocuted while walking away.

Slade removed his arm from Roam's shoulder and started boxing an imaginary opponent. "I want to hit that little dweeb."

"I think that's the real reason why all of those people were waiting outside. Just ignore him."

"I know. Anyways, I want to show you something," Slade said. "Tasha said you're free to go also."

"Alright, cool. So, what is it that you want to show me exactly?"

Slade started to leave. "I'll show you when we get there."

They left Mal Mart, Pretti and Santa still on guard until all the employees were gone, and got in Slade's SUV. Slade kept quiet on what he was planning to show Roam during the drive. At night neon signs from the opened bars and party-lights that decorated some of the businesses, trees and street art, lit up Moone Crest.

Music could be heard from the bars and a few people drunkenly danced on the sidewalks. Roam sniffed the scent of fried sweet potato cinnamon chips in the air that most of the bars served with a nice cold beer or glass of liquor. The signature scent in the air was one of the aspects that made Moone Crest so lovely at night.

"I see Stems haven't stopped people from getting drunk," Roam said.

"I think the last thing a Stem wants to do is provoke a Mooner with alcohol in their system," Slade said.

Roam smirked every time at the mentioning of the word Mooner. "Moonist will never catch on."

"Hell no, being a proud Mooner makes mooning the opposing team at football games even better."

"I love this place. I'm so glad to be alive again," Roam said as he took in the colorful sight of the lights.

"Nice explanation about your return, mister *science genius*," Slade said.

Roam laughed, "I barely could pass an open book science test, but it worked."

"And Hunter backing you up sort of made it more believable."

"That made me like him but I'm sure Tasha will eventually try to behead him."

Slade nodded. "I can see it happening. They've been at war since they first met. It's entertaining though."

"But, I can see them eventually having some very rough hate sex."

"Fucking somebody you hate is the Moone Crest way. That's how I was conceived, natural Mooner hate sex."

Slade turned down a side road that was surrounded by towering trees. The SUV wobbled from side to side as the vehicle ascended up the road. Roam immediately realized where Slade was taken him, but wasn't sure why he didn't tell him earlier. They arrived to a clearing where a graffiti covered playground and picnic benches were.

Slade stopped the car. "Alright, we're here."

"Graffiti Park? We've been playing here since we were kids. Why the secrecy?"

Slade got out of the car. "Just follow me."

Roam exited the SUV and followed Slade into the woods. Slade led him through a series of trails upon an unmarked path that they traveled many times before. They arrived at a smaller clearing and Roam set eyes on a new addition to the area. A light bulb hung from a tree with spray painted red leaves. On the tree was carved, RIP Roam. He took slow steps toward the tree along with Slade.

Slade motioned at the tree. "I did this all for you. In your memory."

"I remember when we found this spot in the third grade. It was our secret hangout, so much happened here."

"The big fight with Maven. That's sadly the last time we were here."

"Sadly," Roam said as he thought back to the argument.

"I tried to call Maven after you died, but he was too busy playing college boy to answer. Then I tried visiting his InstaFace but I forgot that he blocked me after I disliked his eight hundredth post about him pulling an all-nighter. More proof they added the feature to destroy friendships." Slade sighed, "Everybody was upset that you died, but I felt as if I had to mourn you alone. Putting this tree together helped."

"It's amazing. What is the meaning of the light bulb?"

"It's one of the bulbs from the ceiling light in your kitchen. I figured once you died you went into the light."

Roam smirked. "I get it."

Slade walked up to the tree, removed the hanging light bulb and gave it to Roam. "Welcome back."

Roam examined the light bulb in his hand. "I'm glad to be back."

Slade tensed up and quickly looked over his shoulder. "Alright, let's go before a Stem tries to ruin the moment."

They returned to the SUV and spent most of the ride chatting about some of the times they had at their hangout. Maven, Roam and Slade had always been a famous trio in Moone Crest, but there time was over the minute they graduated high school and Maven chose college life over life as a Mooner. Slade and Roam supported his decision, but not the fact that he basically cut them out of his life for the last five years.

Slade dropped Roam off at his condo. Grove Condos sounded fancy, but were basically intersecting narrow streets of individual, small, living spaces. Mostly community college students, divorcees and locals without enough money to rent or own something more desirable resided in the area. Roam was fortunate to own his condo, it left to him by his late grandmother. The area was a step above the local trailer park, where Slade lived a few minutes away.

Roam started up the stone steps that led to the mahogany door of his soft yellow painted condo.

He heard a gasp followed by, "Roam?"

He turned at the top of the stairs to find his neighbor from across the street, Dina. She stood holding a garbage bag and wore pink flip-flops, silver metallic colored sleeping shorts, a purple fitted t-shirt and her dark hair

in a braided ponytail. Dina was the girl that made speaking difficult for Roam and who often visited his wet dreams.

"I'm not a Stem," Roam quickly said, "I was a part of a government program that required my fake death."

"Yeah, that make sense I guess," She slowly said. "I'm going to toss my trash now."

She threw the bag into the trash can on the curb and sped walk back into her condo.

The last thing Roam wanted was any awkwardness between them. It was clearly obvious that she wasn't taking his return well like Slade and his co-workers. Roam had no idea how to rebuild his relationship with the girl he barely could look in the eyes. He decided to just sleep on it tonight.

He approached his door and realized that he didn't have a key. Roam decided to give the knob a turn as his first try to gain access to his own place and the door opened. He immediately abandoned the thought of trying to kick the door in or break a window. He entered his dark condo and sat the light bulb on the kitchen table. Roam flicked on the kitchen light and surveyed his place of death. The familiar creaking of his couch prompted him to face his living room area. A plump, hairy, balding man stood snarling, his skin dull, dark circles around his grey eyes.

The man's nose dropped from his sagging face to the floor. "I claim this space, get the fuck out."

Roam knew for sure his name was the only one on the deed, not the unwanted dead guest in his living room.

5 - Breaking News

Roam just regained his life and wasn't going allow the Stem in his living room to take it back. He remembered Slade explaining a blow to the head was enough to take a Stem out. Roam rushed into his kitchen and grabbed a hammer from his junk drawer. The Stem stood proud as he chuckled with his menacing grey eyes fixed on Roam. A determined but cautious Roam took careful steps toward him with the hammer raised.

"What are you going to do with that hammer boy," The Stem taunted, "Build a new house, because this is mine."

"I'm not giving it up. You can't just claim people's home."

"A sign on the door said vacated, so I occupied it."

"That sign was wrong, because I'm still here."

Roam swung at the Stem and the man jumped back. He took another swing with the hammer and missed. The Stem slapped the hammer from Roam's hand and it landed near his kitchen table. Roam started to sprint toward the hammer, but was tackled from behind. He and the Stem landed on the floor. Roam crawled toward the kitchen on his stomach. The Stem mounted his back, cupped his plump hands together and clubbed Roam in the back of the head.

The Stem laughed. "I'm the one doing the skull bashing tonight."

The Stem dug his nails into Roam's forearm and peeled away his flesh, leaving behind a big gash. Roam screamed out in pain as he watched blood seep from the wound. He used all the strength he had to sit up to his knees, causing the Stem to fall backward to the living room floor. Roam grabbed at his wounded forearm that burned.

The Stem lay on his back groaning with pleasure as he stuffed Roam's flesh into his mouth. "Tasty."

Roam looked back at the Stem in disgust as blood from his chewed flesh drained down the man's face. "Fucker!"

The Stem sat up and licked the blood from his fingers. "I want more."

Roam rose to his feet, rushed into the kitchen and grabbed his hammer from the floor. He spun around as the Stem charged from the floor towards him. Roam stepped aside, grabbed the Stem by the right arm and managed to tear it from the man's torso. The Stem kicked and cussed as he realized he lost an arm.

He pointed at Roam. "This isn't a fair fight anymore."

Roam grunted as he threw the hammer across the room with force and hit the Stem in the face.

The Stem loudly shouted, "Fuck," As the hammer and flesh from the right side of his face dropped to the floor.

The Stem rushed from the condo, leaving the door opened and his parts behind. Roam quickly picked up the Stem's nose, arm, and the rest of his face, threw it out on his lawn and shut his condo door closed. He locked his

door and rested back first against it. Roam panted heavily as he stared at the wound on his arm. He collected himself, rushed into the kitchen and wrapped his wound with a dish towel.

He made his way over to his couch and it creaked as he crashed down to sit. Roam closed his eyes as he seethed in pain. Today was a day he thought he would never experience. He woke up from death and survived attacks from a Stem, not only once but twice. He opened his eyes and turned on the television to witness how the rest of the world was handling coexistence with Stems. The headlines were different on each news station, but at the core Stems were the main subject: Home Security on the Rise, Hire Stems or Not, Government Declares Water Supply Safe Again, Stems be Gone.

A segment featuring Texas Senator Mercel and Stem activist Ford Layton was airing on cable news.

"All we ask for are rights, a place in society," Ford said. "Many of us are entering a time we know nothing about and we have nobody to aid us. We need land to take dirt naps, the right to own property and to work. These are the three simple demands we ask for. Not all of us have the intentions of hurting the living."

Senator Mercel, whose face was growing redder as the segment went on, scoffed, "And then you'll want to vote, run for office and try to take over our great country. Heck, I can see a Stem President declaring it legal to eat the living. Do us all a favor and return to death, it's only natural. Listen America, Stems, no matter if you recognize them or if they have the face of your loved ones, they're not the same persons you once knew."

"We didn't ask to be brought back," Ford interrupted, "It was the irresponsibility of the living."

"Never interrupt me dead boy, I'm a Senator!"

Ford shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I have to speak for my kind. We're being treated unfairly."

"The innocent humans being attacked are being treated unfairly."

"Every bunch has a few bad seeds. There are members of the living locked away for murder, raping, robbing and many other extreme crimes. I'm not afraid to say those Stems out there who commit the same crimes should be punished, but not by burning, but instead prison time. It shouldn't be that hard for the living and the dead to co-exist."

Senator Mercel laughed. "You talk as if we're equal. You're predators and we are the prey."

All Roam could see was defeat in the grey eyes of Ford as he tugged at the collar of his white dress shirt. The news anchor gagged as she noticed the flesh peeling on Ford's mocha toned hand. Ford quickly tucked his hand beneath the news desk and adjusted his sitting position.

He parted his lips to speak but stopped short as a clip of a Stem harassing a family of four in their car aired. Senator Mercel sounded as if he had an old roaring engine in his throat as he provided aggressive commentary to the airing video and banged his fists on the news desk. Roam continued watching the news until he dozed off to sleep on his couch.

He awoke the next morning with more of the same topics being discussed on the news. A recap of a DP press conference was being aired and the CEO was giving an empty apology and promising to work with the current administration to prevent future chemical spills and deal with the fallout.

Roam yawned and removed the bloody dish cloth from over his arm to check his wound. He blanked twice as he realized his arm was perfectly healed. Roam ran his hand across where the wound used to be and laughed in amazement. The discovery of self-healing was a nice way to wake up in this new world where Stems craved the living.

He stopped admiring his healed arm as he realized the time displayed in the lower right hand corner of the news show. The last thing he wanted to be was late for work after just being rehired. After a quick sink bath, he grabbed some change for the bus from a jar he kept atop of his microwave and left his condo in the exact same outfit he wore the day before. Outside, on his lawn, near the parts he left behind last night, stood the dead home invader in perfect condition.

The Stem picked up his old arm and waved it at Roam. "I came back to finish my meal."

Roam slowly made his way from his porch to the lawn. His self-healing gave him more confidence. "Fuck off."

The Stem charged at Roam and speared him to the ground. He attempted to take bites out of Roam with his graying teeth. Roam used all the strength he had to keep the dead man's mouth away from any part of his body.

Just because he could self-heal, didn't mean he couldn't feel the pain of being bitten into. Fighting on an empty stomach wasn't helping Roam and the Stem came very close to biting off a bit of his jaw.

A shovel came down and smacked the Stem in the back of the head. His body went limp and dropped down on Roam. The shovel came down once again on the Stem's skull and caused it to cave in. Roam quickly pushed the Stem's body from atop of him and crawled to his feet. Dina stood holding the shovel and panting.

Roam stood staring at her, eyeing her curves and beautiful brown skin. She wore red heels, black leather shorts and a white cut-off shirt that showed off her flat stomach. Roam liked her *I have no values* fashion sense but also for her brains of course.

"The garbage men will get the body." She grunted as she dropped the shovel to the ground. "Um, thank you?"

Roam nodded. "Yeah, thank you."

He kept repeating to himself don't be awkward, but already felt as if he accomplished that.

"I didn't believe you last night, but obviously a Stem wouldn't attack another dead man," Dina said.

"I'm alive. I have to go catch the bus."

She pointed at her car parked on the curb. "I can drive you."

"Save your gas, I'll catch the bus."

Roam walked away from Dina wanting to turn around and take the ride. That morning, he ended up on the bus.

6 - Moonist

Roam had managed to make it to work on time and decided to hang out in the employee lounge until it was clocking in time. He sat in the locker area trying to activate a prepaid cellphone he had purchased from the electronics section, watching Hunter as he told Tasha's brothers a story about the twentieth man he had killed.

The eldest of the brothers, Nate, stood proud, wearing his letterman jacket, against the fridge drinking a cup of orange juice. Solomon, the middle child, sat on the floor under the round lunch table biting at a hangnail. And the youngest, Vincent sat on his knees on top of the table staring at Hunter with glassy eyes as if the man was a super hero.

"This man was running for his life through a warehouse stocked with illegal narcotics," Hunter said as he pumped his arms back and forth as if he was running around a racetrack, "He ducked and hid behind anything he could find, but all of that shit is unnecessary when you have somebody as skilled as me hunting you down." He stopped pumping his arms as he pointed to the ceiling. "Then it started to pour through the old ceiling of the warehouse." He put his palm to his ear. "I could hear every little step this coward made. He was trying to circle around and sneak up behind me. I pulled out a knife that I took off the body of the nineteenth man I've killed as he drew closer from behind. Then, once I could sense how close he was to my back I -"

"I told you three to do your homework," Tasha said as she entered the lounge. "Hunter, get away from them."

"I have to finish telling them how I killed this dude in a narcotics storage warehouse."

She joined them in the lunch area. "Vincent is six and Solomon is ten. That is not a story for kids."

"I've seen a man beheaded on the internet," Solomon mumbled from beneath the table.

"Please let him finish," Vincent voiced. He bounced on his knees, "I can handle it."

Tasha ran her hand over Vincent's head of buzz-cut, dark, hair. "Vincent, work on your homework."

"I already did it and I even double-checked my work."

"Me too," Solomon added. "It was for health class. Sis, can I get a human brain in a jar?"

"No," Tasha said. "You have enough weird things in jars already."

"How about a brain in a box?"

"No," She sternly said.

Solomon shrugged. "I'll just go digging for one at the dump then."

Nate raised his hand. "What about me, Tash? Can I hear the rest of the story?"

"Not you either. Plus, I'm sure Hunter has customers to protect out on the floor."

Hunter crossed his arms and smirked. "I'm protecting these guys."

Tasha poked Hunter's left pec. "I deal with enough at work, stop adding to my misery."

"Fine, if I can't finish my story, how about I show Nate how to use a machete? He can use his new skills to keep his brothers safe and impress his prom date. If he can wield a machete, you don't have to worry about me protecting them and it'll make your life less stressful when Solomon and Vincent are under his supervision."

"I protect my brothers and most definitely don't want them taking any pointers from a killer."

"You should," The brothers said in unison.

Tasha threw her arms in the air in surrender. "You know what; finish the story, but no machete training."

Hunter focused on the brothers, "Then I basically turned around and sliced him open like a cheap leather couch."

Tasha walked off shaking her head as her brothers went wild over the ending and begged for more.

"I think Hunter's fan club just got bigger," Roam said as Tasha walked in his direction.

She stopped and rolled her eyes. "I know, maybe I should become a killer and start with him."

Roam laughed. "Yeah, but at least he's a free babysitter."

Tasha sighed and leaned against a locker. "I guess. The new school hours have really screwed me over."

"It's noon to four now, right? Why exactly did they change it?"

"They basically cut education in the budget and used the extra funds to pay all the new deputies. Once again they chose the needs of Sheriff Chén over the children. I was talking with my neighbor last night and she basically has to leave her kids at home during the day while she works and prays they don't go out and get into trouble before school. But either way, if it's before or after school, these Moone Crest kids will find trouble. I heard shooting sweet potato guns at Stems have become very popular lately." She looked around the corner of the row of lockers at her brothers. "I'll do my best to keep them here before and after school. I don't want my brothers to become Moone Crest boys."

Roam gasp in offense as he motioned at himself. "Hey, born and raised Mooner sitting over here."

She focused back on Roam. "I'm sorry but it's true. You Moone Crest boys are wild, prideful and always have something to say. I've dated plenty and you also make horrible boyfriends. I want my brothers to finish school, get rid of their attachment to this place and leave. My parents might not have cared enough, but I want my brothers to do better."

Roam got uncomfortable at the mentioning of Tasha's parents, like all in the town whose elderly family members had been scammed by the couple. They ran an old folks community, but had pocketed the majority of the money they received from their clients. It took a failed inspection and state-level investigation for the town to discover the poor conditions the couple had their clients living in. Roam's own grandmother, who had made plans to move into the community someday, never got her down payment back.

"Your brothers will be fine. You're a great role model."

Tasha smiled. "That was sweet. No more cosmetics for you, I'm putting you back on stock."

Roam felt as if he was just released from prison after decades. "A great role model and boss."

Tasha checked the time on her phone. "I get it ass kisser, now get to work, you're officially two minutes late."

Roam gladly got to work. The world of stocking was the complete opposite of working cosmetics. He would no longer have to listen to customers' life stories, but instead appear to be really busy while putting items on shelves. Another plus was that he wouldn't have to stand at or use a register, but instead roam the store freely. He found Slade doing stock in the hygiene department and joined him.

"I'm back on stock," Roam said. "My day just got even better."

"Awesome, now we can get back to *working* while discussing nonsense," Slade said.

"Slade and Roam," A male voice said. "My, my, my."

They looked to the end of the aisle to find Sheriff Maxim Chén approaching them with a wide smile. He ran his fingers through his jet black, spikey hair as he continued to swagger towards them. Maxim walked like a king, because in Moone Crest he basically was royalty. He was a fourth generation sheriff and surely his son, the current first grade hall monitor, would follow in his footsteps.

Maxim looked Roam up and down. "It's true, you're alive. Well goddamn."

"I was a part of a secret government program," Roam explained again. "Didn't work out, I'm back now."

"What do you want Chén," Slade cut in with attitude. "We're stocking deodorant over here."

"I want some lotion for my beautiful wife and you two to consider becoming deputies."

In Moone Crest, the only queen fit for royalty like Maxim was a former Miss Sweet Potato.

"No thank you, on the deputy thing and the lotion is on the next aisle," Roam said as he thumbed left.

"I'll never become the enemy," Slade said as he motioned at Chén's badge that was attached to his waist belt.

Maxim's toned arms flexed as he rested his hands on his waist and laughed. "Is this about you being tasered?"

"What else could it be about?" Slade asked.

"That was five years ago," Maxim said. "Move on."

"I'll move on when your crooked dad drags his butt down from *the Chén estate* and apologizes to my father and I on live television."

Calling the home an estate was an overstatement, but it was one of the largest houses in town and was constructed up a private mountain trail. Many banquets had been hosted at the place and it was large enough to house the entire Mal Mart staff, including the security team and probably a dozen shoppers.

"First of all, my father and my beautiful mother are in Thailand enjoying their retirement, you know, reconnecting with their roots and sending *millions* of pictures to my inbox every day. Not concerning themselves with people like you. Secondly, when your father goes on a violent drunken rage and doesn't stand down when told, being tasered is a rightful punishment. And as for you, maybe next time you won't jump in the way of an officer of the law wielding a taser. Five years have passed, let's move on. Sign up and protect your fellow Moonists from Stems."

"It's Mooner," Slade corrected, "And once again, I'll never become the enemy."

Maxim stared them down and wore that smug grin that was signature to his family. "Alright boys, see you around."

Maxim walked away whistling a tune and Roam and Slade got back to work.

Slade shook his head. "I wish the chemical spill had gotten rid of everything Chén in Moone Crest."

"Obviously that didn't happen, but it did keep me alive and gave me healing powers."

Slade raised his brows. "Healing powers?"

"Yeah, I got attacked by a Stem last night. He messed up my arm really bad and when I woke up the next morning all the damage he caused was undone. I know the news told us not to drink the water, but it's been the best decision I've made in a while. A second chance, healing powers, and I'm back on stock. No regrets."

Slade grabbed two bottles of mouthwash from the shelf. "Fuck yeah, toast?"

Roam grabbed one of the bottles from Slade; they toasted and got back to stocking shelves.

7 - Passion

A strong boiled egg like stench woke Roam from his morning sleep. He staggered from his bedroom and headed toward the kitchen where the stench was much stronger. Roam flipped the light switch only for nothing to happen. He noticed the time display on his microwave had gone dark and no sound emitted from his refrigerator and a puddle of water had formed before the appliance. Roam opened the fridge and took a step back as the scent rushed out in full force. The little food inside had spoiled and melted butter had drained all over the racks.

Roam grabbed a garbage bag from beneath the sink and swept everything from his refrigerator inside. He sprayed down the insides of the refrigerator with some pine scented cleaner and shut it. Roam slipped on a tank top, basketball shorts, grabbed his cellphone and took the trash out to the curb. He sat on his porch stairs and gave the electric company a call. The second after he entered the phone number associated with his account he was informed it was no longer valid.

"A dead man has no accounts," Roam said as he hung up his phone and tapped it against his forehead. "Duh."

He decided to start his morning by completing a post resurrection checklist. Roam made all the calls necessary to restore and maintain the utilities he used and to the housing authority, simply explaining that his death was a strange case of identity theft. Not everybody received a call from him, he figured he was better off dead to those he owed debt. He hung up his phone after a call with the cable company feeling accomplished for the morning.

Across the street a built man, well groomed and dressed, exited Dina's condo. He was followed by a man with less body fat than a stick figure who wore a fitted pink dress and carried a blonde wig in his hand. The thin man's lips were rapidly moving and Roam barely could understand the words of his high-pitched voice.

A frowning Dina, wearing a silver robe and yellow heels, followed after her guests. "Please stay guys."

The thin man turned to Dina. "I have a gown to sew for the ball tonight."

"You can do it here," Dina said, "I have all the tools and fabrics you need."

"I sew best at home, with my own tools, my own fabrics, and my own wine."

Dina turned her attention to the muscular man. "Adrienne, convince Sapphire to stay."

Adrienne shrugged as he arrived to the driver's side of his car. "If the man has to sew, the man has to sew."

"It looks like Sapphire wears the pants and dresses in your relationship then," Dina said with a smirk.

Sapphire spun his blonde wig around and laughed. "Oh bitch you're trying to start a fight out here."

"I heard you hit like a girl," Dina said as she blew a kiss toward Sapphire.

"I'm staying out of this, see you later Dina," Adrienne said as he got in the car.

Sapphire opened the passenger door, "I really have to go, sorry. Be at Estranga's tonight. I need your support."

Dina rolled her eyes and sighed. "I will be there because I'm a good friend and drinks are half priced."

"Thanks for breakfast. Drinks are on me. I love you forever."

"Love you forever too."

Sapphire got in the car and lowered the window. "Oh, and bitch, I hit like a man," He said with a deepened voice.

Dina laughed and waved as the couple drove away. She started to head back inside her condo until she noticed Roam sitting on his porch. Roam immediately tensed up and did his best to look laid back. He didn't know what to do as she made her way down her porch stairs. He started to stand but for no logical reason decided to remain seated and wave at her.

"I need a favor," Dina said from the curb of her condo.

"Sure."

"Don't you want to know what the favor is?"

Roam needed a recovery to turn this conversation away from awkward-lane. "I owe you, I have to say yes."

"That's very true actually. In return for saving your life I need you to listen to my speech."

Roam got up and started toward her condo. "A speech?"

"My political science professor is expecting me to deliver a passionate stump speech for my final exam."

Roam inhaled the sweet scent of maple syrup that emitted from her as he joined her on the curb. "Yeah, I'm all ears."

Roam did his best not to eye her body up and down as she led him inside of her condo. Her kitchen area was messy with dirty dishes, opened boxes of pancake batter, a half empty bottle of syrup and an orange juice carton. The living room area was buried under a sea of textbooks, clothing fabrics and multicolored pillows. Roam stood in the middle of the chaos as Dina moved a sewing machine from the couch to clear him a seat.

"You sew everything that you wear," Roam asked.

"Yeah," She said as she sat the sewing machine on the kitchen table, "But I get paid to usually sew gowns and all types of crazy outfits for men in the drag queen community. Every now and then I will do pieces for other people in town, but the majority of my clients are the queens who have mastered the runway down at Estranga's but not sewing. If I could do hair I would be in the money."

"So, fashion is your passion?"

"Not really, I just really enjoy being a part of the drag community. My father was a famous drag queen a long time ago here in Moone Crest, but passed away in a car accident when I was about five. My mother loathes the community, but for me it's all about connecting with the memory of my father."

"I'm sorry to hear about that. I know nothing about my parents. They left me with my grandma when I was one."

She motioned at the seat that she cleared for him. "I hope this isn't offensive, but what a couple of dicks."

Roam laughed. He actually agreed with Dina, but he rarely got his emotions, good or bad, invested in the topic of his parents. He made his way through the maze of stuff on Dina's living room floor and took a seat on the couch. He imagined himself building her a room specifically for sewing in a fantasy life where they were happily married.

Dina headed to her room and returned wearing a denim skirt and an oversized t-shirt. "I have another passion."

"And what's that?"

She held her head high and proudly announced, "Politics. I want to be president someday."

"I would vote for you." And be her first husband if it was possible, he thought to himself.

"I want to take this outdated country and push it toward the future. But I have to start out small and will focus on LGBT rights. My stump speech will focus on that topic actually." She motioned at her head. "In my mind I imagine myself on the campaign trail, accompanied by a fabulous team of drag security and each day wearing a dress made with a fabric using one of the colors of the rainbow. I'm in some hot Deep South city and the crowd is angry, they're repulsed by my drag security, but with this speech I will warm their hearts and have them shouting my campaign slogan: Vote Hunty Child, Vote!"

Roam was enjoying every minute of being with her, but at the same time had to work in about two hours. He wanted Dina to skip the buildup and go-ahead and wow him with her stump speech. Instead she was describing how her drag security will go out in the crowd handing out rainbow stickers to her new supporters.

Dina poised herself and deeply inhaled, "I'm getting too far ahead of myself. I'll need your honest criticism, okay?"

Roam smirked and nodded. "Go for the throat? I can do that." He didn't want to, but for her he would.

"Hello, my name is Dina Milton and I'm running to be elected the president of the United States." Dina paused and started to mumble to herself. "Wait, I need to start over. First I have to greet the crowd and get them all excited and hyped up. Fuck, that's so corny. I'll just stick with the original intro. I have to be a serious candidate. Not a circus show with rainbows and drag queens running around. Shit, I'm not calling them circus people at all, maybe I'll just have them all wear business casual type dresses."

Roam raised his hand. "Is this a part of the speech?"

"No," Dina snapped. She held her palm out toward Roam. "I'm sorry, that was bitchy of me. I just need to make sure this speech is perfect, but I'm having the hardest time making it sound authentic. Maybe I need to rewrite it or watch more online videos of some infamous stump speeches. My exam is next week though."

"I don't think a speech like this is supposed to be perfect, but instead raw and passionate."

"Are you saying I lack passion? Roam I told you to be honest, but damn."

"No," Roam quickly replied. "Maybe you're just not that passionate about LGBT rights. Yes, you support them, you play a big role in their community, but maybe it's not your calling to lead the fight for them. This struggle to write a speech supporting them seems like a clear sign that this isn't your topic."

"Then what is my topic? What drives me even more than LGBT rights?"

Roam shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not you Dina."

Dina sighed. "You're right. Actually, I think you're right about everything but I don't have time to sit around waiting for a new cause to slap me in the face. If I fail this exam, my grade will sink from an A to a B. Maybe if I clean up around here it'll unclutter my mind a bit." She brushed back a strand of her dark hair from her face. "Thanks Roam. I'm really glad you're not dead anymore."

He stood from his seat. "I like being alive much better."

Dina laughed. "Don't be shy about coming over either; don't let the drag queens scare you away."

"I won't."

Roam wasn't afraid of the drag queens, but instead being around Dina. As he left her condo he felt as if he deserved a pat on the back. He managed to have an actual conversation with her and grow their relationship in the right direction.

Nate aggressively swung his locker open causing everybody in the employee lounge to look in his direction. He took off his letter man jacket and carelessly tossed it inside his locker. Nate grabbed some fragrance body spray and doused himself in the strongly scented product. He swapped the body spray for a brush to touch up his fade style haircut and checked his reflection in his locker mirror. Instead of making an arrogant comment as usual, he scoffed. He finished off his primping by slowly grabbing his Mal Mart employee vest and staring at it as if it was his most despised enemy.

"What's his problem," Slade, who sat across from Roam at the lunch table, asked.

Roam shrugged, "I don't know but I think he's about to set his vest on fire."

"Just ignore him," Tasha said as she fixed a cup of coffee, "He's being a child," She loudly voiced.

Nate slipped on his vest and stormed over to the lunch area, "Well this child won't babysit anymore."

Solomon, who lay on the floor using his laptop to browse for images of dead bodies, laughed. "Awesome."

Vincent who sat at the lunch table doing homework gasped, "Wait, does that mean Solomon is in charge? No, he's weird."

"I'm not weird," Solomon said, "Can I borrow somebody's credit card? I wanna order a container of snot."

Tasha gagged, "Solomon, don't make me reinstate the strict parental lock."

"I said I'm not babysitting anymore," Nate voiced louder, "Since I'm just a child myself."

Hunter exited from Tasha's office. "I think we're witnessing a sibling civil war."

"Why were you in my office," Tasha asked with her eyes widened.

Hunter shrugged and smirked, "Because you have the best bathroom. Now, what's this war about?"

Tasha started to address the invasion of her private restroom, but her words were cut short by her brother.

"Tasha isn't going to allow me to go to prom," Nate said. "She claims it's too dangerous, but our school is making sure it's safe enough for the senior class to enjoy a final night all together without getting torn into bits by Stems. It starts at five and ends at six, so the sun will still be out. And two deputies will be on guard and chaperones are allowed. It's safe enough for me and all the other teens to work her Mal Mart evening shift, but how dare we try to go to a fully protected prom."

"I'm not keeping any of my employees from prom, just you because I'm your guardian not theirs," Tasha said.

"But it's not fair," Nate whined. "I'm the football team captain, so you know that basically means I'm also a future prom king. You not letting me go will ruin things for our family. We'll be known as the family of the prom king when I'm crowned, not the family of the crooked old people robbers. And think about the local black community, it's been ages since we've had a black prom king. Step over whitey, because a black guy is about to wear the crown again."

"Damon Tinibu won prom king last year," Tasha said as she narrowed her eyes. "He was born in Africa."

"It doesn't matter little miss historical dictionary or whatever," Nate said, "This is my moment!"

Tasha dumped out her coffee and put the mug into the sink. "This coffee is stale, Nate go stock some new tins."

Nate crossed his arms and stumped down his right foot. "I'm on strike. Who's joining me?"

"I'm in," Solomon shouted, "I'm not cleaning my room until I get a credit card."

"I wanna strike," Vincent said, "How do I strike?"

Hunter chuckled, "I swear this family needs a reality show."

"My family is nothing to laugh about," Tasha said.

Hunter raised his hand to her. "Alright, calm down, I'm sorry. Here's what I think, Vincent striking is what cowards do when they're too afraid to pillage and riot, Solomon getting people to sneeze into a bottle is much cheaper than going online to buy mucus, and Tasha stop being heartless and let Nate go to prom. It's a rite of passage, go to prom, dance your ass off, possibly win a crown and of course lose your virginity."

Nate scoffed and raised his right brow, "Dude, Hunter, don't insult me. I already have one of those things covered."

"Of course you do," Hunter said, "You're the football team captain after all. You probably can't even spell virgin."

Tasha raised her tightened fist to Hunter. "I'm on the verge of tearing off your n-u-t-s, Hunter."

"Nuts," Vincent said and giggled.

Solomon eyes widened, "Can I put them in a jar?"

Roam cleared his throat and raised his hand, "I have an idea. How about you go as a chaperone, Tasha?"

"I work," Tasha said. "I thought about that, but it's not possible. I need my hours. I have mouths to feed."

Roam motioned at himself, "Well, I'm off that night. I'll be a chaperone. Plus, I'll get to go to my first prom."

"That's a great idea," Nate said.

Roam also figured with his self-healing he would be a good protector.

Tasha shrugged. "I don't know."

"And I'll go to," Slade said. "It's like going to a free night club. I'll get drunk before then angry dance all night."

Nate's eyes lit up, "That's even better, a celebrity at prom: the boy who got tasered on TV. Epic!"

Slade aggressively got up from his seat. "That was five years ago," He stormed from the lounge.

"Slade and I will even drive him to and from prom," Roam added. "Don't deprive the student body of their next king."

Tasha shrugged and fanned her hand in the air, "I'm not happy about this, but fine."

Nate jumped into the air in celebration. Solomon and Vincent joined in with their brother. Vincent danced in his seat and Solomon got up from the floor and started dancing and chanting a phrase that sounded as if he was about to summon a demon from the depths of hell. Hunter grabbed Tasha by the hand and forced her to ballroom dance with him no matter how hard she punched at his muscled chest.

Into the lounge burst Eliza crying in the arms of Slade. Her face was covered in tears, her blonde hair a mess and she wore mix-matched shoes, pajama shorts and a white cardigan. The celebration stopped as everybody made their way over to the entry of the lounge, surrounding Eliza and Slade.

"What's wrong?" Tasha asked.

David entered the lounge and abruptly stopped in his tracks. He noticed a crying Eliza. "Did she gain a pound?"

Nate laughed but quickly stopped when Tasha's threatening eyes darted back at him.

"This is serious," Slade said as he looked over to David. "Shut up or get out."

David shrugged off Slade's words and headed over to his locker to get ready for his shift.

"What's the matter," Tasha said as she placed her hand on Eliza's shoulder. "Eliza?"

"Millie is gone," Eliza said with a brittle voice. "Her parent's officially reported her missing today."

"How long has she been missing?" Tasha asked.

Eliza shrugged and cuddled up close to Slade, "I haven't heard from her since yesterday after school. Her parents called me late last night asking about her and that's when I started to panic. I drove around with them all day searching for her. We found her car parked a few blocks away. They went to the police station and I came here to see if anybody else saw her."

"I worked with her last night," David said from by his locker. "We both left without an issue. Ask Santa and Pretti."

Hunter nodded. "Yeah, I'll double-check with Santa and Pretti. I'm sure she's fine."

"No," Eliza snapped, "Don't lie, she's dead. She always text me goodnight, she didn't. She's gone."

David started laughing and everyone turned their attention to him. The disgusts in their faces didn't seem to faze him as he kept laughing so hard that he had tears in his eyes. He shook his head in disbelief as he slipped on his vest and made his way towards them.

He stopped before the group. "I'm sorry, but the last thing she told me to do was die. I'm still here, but as for Millie, well her existence is looking very questionable. The universe works in mysterious ways. First my mom surprised me with a new laptop and now this shit, what an amazing night so far."

David's laughter continued as he pushed through the group and left them in the lounge to console a weeping Eliza.

9 - Army of the Dead

Hours after the Discovery of the First Stem

The Promotive acne cream had rave reviews across the board. It had more celebrity endorsements than letters in the alphabet, an endless amount of infomercials on television and radio, and many consumer groups voted it the number one acne cream in the world. David had purchased it from the shelves of Mal Mart, used it already to get rid of the eye sores on his face, only to wake up the next morning to discover more acne had emerged.

David blamed himself for his stupidity. Nothing in life worked in his favor. His mother had told him all he had to do was be a good boy and study and positive things would come. Instead, being a good boy caused him to miss out on a social life and studying just made him the smartest boy in class, crowning him the nerd, a negative title in the eyes of the people he attended school with.

David had wished many nights he could go back and tell his younger self to ignore the advice of a woman who crippled herself decorating a tree and lost her husband to the town whore. It was too late for him to go back, he had to deal with the life he had now until it was time to leave Moone Crest and start a new one. The idea of leaving Moone Crest was too positive to happen to him, the universe threw every wrench in his plan that it could.

"You're the perfect student, but your college application lacks any extracurricular activities," His counselor explained. "None of the schools on your wish list are a reality at this moment and no scholarships are coming in either. Moone Crest Community College might be the perfect fit instead and the most affordable."

David had zoned out after her last sentence. Apparently working a part time job, having perfect grades and not having a criminal record unlike some of the seniors at Moone Crest High wasn't enough to get him into any of the schools worthy of his brain and land him scholarships to afford them.

"I'm sure there's time to join the prom or yearbook committee," His guidance counselor said with a doubtful grin.

David wanted to smack that grin off her face, but instead left her office with a feeling of doom in his heart.

David lay in bed one night staring blankly at the ceiling. He had heard a crashing sound but only suspected it had been his mother stumbling from her wheelchair once again in the kitchen. David had told her many times, if she needed something from up high to ask for his help, but she was stubborn like most Moone Crest women.

He left his room that night to discover his mom was still in bed sleeping. David headed down into the kitchen and heard another crashing noise coming from the basement. He grabbed a knife from the kitchen drawer, opened the basement door and made his way down the creaky basement steps. David flicked the lights, gasped and dropped his weapon as he set eyes on twelve men, covered in dirt, stumbling over his mother's old wheelchair and medical equipment, and wearing letterman jackets crawling from their graves beneath the cheap tile floor.

The blonde rushed over to David, grabbed him by the neck and pinned him against the stone wall. "Hungry!"

David gasped for air as he tried to fight free. He read online earlier about the dead rising because of the DP chemical spill, but didn't expect Stems to show up in a spec on the map town like Moone Crest. David knew he wouldn't be able to experience the demise of this place or even the world, if he allowed this Stem meathead to kill him.

"I can end all of your hunger," David eked out. "You need me."

The Stem freed David, "How?"

"I'll deliver fresh batches of the living to all of you. Hell, I even know an event coming up that'll offer a buffet of fresh teenage meat. Trust me, I can make this all happen but in exchange I want you to promise that I'll never be craved by you and that I'm named the leader of this team, no, general of this army, an army of the dead."

The jock smiled, "Interesting."

David read the dingy name of the school and of the jock stitched on the letterman jacket. "Jeffers High? Billy Knox? I know you."

The Stem pointed at himself, "What do you mean? Who's Billy Knox?"

"You don't remember anything," David asked, "I'm pretty sure you're Billy Knox and these are your teammates."

Billy looked back at the other Stems and tugged at the collar of his jacket. "That explains the matching jackets."

David knew exactly who these twelve Stems once were. "Back in the seventies, a mudslide basically destroyed a ton of Moone Crest. You all were coming back from an away game and the bus got lost under the mud, never to be found. Jeffers High also got pretty damaged and was shut down and replaced with the school I attend now. And it seems my house was built over your unfortunate early graves."

Each of the Stems looked down at their jacket and read their names aloud.

"Billy Knox," Billy said as he read from his jacket.

David motioned at himself, "And I'm David Michaels, your general."

That night David couldn't sleep, he was too busy compiling a list of people to feed to his army. First, he had targeted the punk rocker next door who never liked to turn down his radio. David had convinced the rocker his mom had allowed him to set up a music studio in the basement, but instead the rocker ended up being dinner for twelve Stem jocks. He got Nurse Macer who had always pocketed some of his mother's pills and the guidance counselor that crushed his dreams after he invited her over to *meet with his mother*. David's list had gotten very ambitious, he even added the makers of the acne medicine Promotive to someday fall to his army.

After his shift one night, he had found himself incredibly lucky when Millie's car broke down. Nobody else was around to pick her up and her cellphone had gone dead. David gladly offered her a ride home. She sat in the passenger's seat avoiding conversation with David at all cost by flipping through a gossip magazine his mother left in his car. Millie was so focused on the *Who Wore it Better* section that she didn't even notice that he was going towards his house that was in the opposite direction of hers. He pulled into the parking lot.

"Wait," Millie said as she looked up from the magazine and out at the small home, "This isn't my house, idiot."

He powered off his car. "I had to check on my mom first, she texted and said she fell from her chair."

"She's still in a wheelchair? Geez."

"Of course she's still in a wheelchair," David snapped, "She's paralyzed."

Millie rolled her eyes. "Calm down, first of all. And secondly, when are you taking me home?"

"I'm just going to go help her up. I might need your help."

"Ask your dad...wait...didn't he like marry a whore or something?"

David got out of the car. "Stop talking and come help. The quicker you move the quicker I can get rid of you."

Millie got out of the car and followed after David. "Trust me; I'm tired of being around you myself."

He led her inside the place and tried not to snap at every little sound of disgust or snide comment Millie made.

Millie giggled, "OMG, she has a stair lift like the little old ladies. Can't she just slide down the stairs?"

"Can you just get on a treadmill?" David mumbled under his breath.

"I think there's a rat on the kitchen table," Millie said as she twisted her nose and pointed at the table.

David looked at the table as he opened the basement door. "That's meatloaf, my fav actually."

"I think you should reconsider your favorite." Millie arrived at his side. "I'm not going down there. Hell no."

David rolled his eyes. "Bitch, shut up and get your fat ass down those stairs."

David strained and grunted as he shoved Millie down the basement stairs. She cried out as she tumbled down the stairs and landed on the basement floor. Millie panted heavily as she touched at the wound on her forehead where blood poured from. She whimpered as she did her best to crawl up the stairs.

David smiled down on her. "It's time for you to die."

"No," Millie grunted as she raised her weak arm and pointed up to him, "You're going to die, fucker."

"I would like you to meet, this year's prom special guests, my army of the dead."

David slammed the basement door closed. A tingling feeling rushed up his spine as he listened to Millie be dragged down the basement stairs and her screams travel up the staircase into the kitchen. David sat down and enjoyed his meatloaf while his army enjoyed their meaty oaf. After dinner, he headed upstairs to check on his mother.

He knocked on her door and entered the room. "Mom, the meatloaf was amazing. What's the special occasion?"

She sat up and from under the pillow beside her revealed a new laptop. "It's an early graduation gift."

David instantly recognized the logo of the high-tech Martianware laptop brand, the apple of many geeks' eyes. He ran his hand over the neon green logo that was a silhouette of an alien head with pointy antennas and big oval shaped black eyes. David opened the laptop to discover she had already preloaded the browser and set the homepage as the website for his school. A big flashing graphic on the website read, vote online for prom king and queen.

David clicked the graphic to vote and the rules only required senior students to enter their student ID and password to sign in and then vote via typing in the first initial and last name of the student they wanted to vote for, only one vote per student allowed. A light bulb went off in David's head as he checked the brand of the voting software the school installed on the website.

"I'll hack it," He said aloud. "This software was basically coded by monkeys."

His mother laughed. "Hack it? It was one thousand dollars; don't start messing around with the insides already."

David looked at her with a phony smile. The woman had no idea she was staring at the next self-made prom king.

10 - Prom

It was prom night in Moone Crest and everybody had an agenda, whether it was to share their first time with that someone special or to spend a grand night out with their best friends, tonight was essential for everybody. Eliza was hoping to keep the memory of her best friend alive, wearing the dress Millie picked out for herself and narrating a special presentation at the dance.

David had started prom early, before the morning school bell had even rang. He had shared the hopeful details of his upcoming prom night with his army of the dead and found them the perfect hiding place, a prop closet located behind the curtains of the school stage in the cafeteria where the dance would be hosted. Slade was half way to his goal of a night of drunken dancing, just missing a beat and dance floor to go along with his buzz. And Roam, he was minutes away from experiencing a moment in life he missed out on before.

First, before the night could officially start for Roam and Slade they had to pick up Nate from home. Tasha and her brothers resided in one of the very few suburban areas in Moone Crest. It lacked the more risky tree décor and street art, but instead a more classic look that was approved under the guidelines of the neighborhood board.

The tree in Tasha's yard was simply decorated with white party lights and aluminum star cut outs. It wasn't a home a Mal Mart manager could afford, but the Hill children were fortunate enough to avoid having the home they grew up in seized after their parents were arrested.

Roam and Slade hung out inside of the SUV watching the family share a moment outside of their home.

On the neatly trimmed lawn, Tasha was taking pictures of Nate, who wore a grey, three-piece suit.

"He looks like a man dressed to kill," Solomon said with a sinister grin from the porch.

Vincent lightly shoved Solomon, "Shut up, he looks like a king. I get to wear his crown first."

Tasha kept using her cellphone to snap photos. "I think I'm going to cry."

Nate did his best to look as cool as he could in his photos. "You barely wanted me to go."

"That doesn't mean this moment isn't special for me. First prom, then graduation and finally college."

Nate rolled his eyes and rapidly snapped his fingers. "Are you done? The prom king can't be late."

Solomon and Vincent came down from the porch and took a couple of silly photos with their brother until Nate finally had enough and forced Tasha to wrap things up. She trapped her brother in a hug and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Nate broke free from her hug, sprinted over the SUV, and got into the backseat.

Tasha approached the SUV. "Roam and Slade, I want an update text every five minutes."

"Don't listen to her," Nate said, "Speed away, very fast. Go to work Tasha."

"I'll send all the texts that I can," Roam promised, "I think Slade is a bit too drunk for all of that."

"He's drunk," Tasha panicked, "And driving?"

"I'm not *drive off the road drunk*, I'm just *might run a stop sign drunk*," Slade said as he gave her a crooked thumbs-up.

Solomon tugged at Tasha, "Let's go, you have to drop us off at Mrs. Griddle. She has a bald cat."

"I don't want her to babysit us," Vincent whined, "Her cat scratches."

“Not after I’m done with him,” Solomon said as he kept tugging at Tasha.

“Roam,” Tasha said, “You drive, Slade switch seats with Roam.”

Nate leaned in close to Slade’s ear, “Drive now and I’ll point out all the girls at the dance that are officially legal.”

Slade sped off so fast that Nate went crashing back to his seat. Nate quickly buckled up while he laughed.

During the drive, they made their way through town and every business got into the prom spirit by decorating the outside of their establishments with the school colors of black and gold. A couple of bars were hosting adult proms later tonight and some clothing stores were offering student discounts for those prom goers that needed any last minute wardrobes. A line of stretched limos and soccer mom vans were a clear indicator that they had arrived to Moone Crest High Senior Prom.

Before they could park, Nate ditched the SUV and joined his date and some of his teammates in a white stretch limo. Slade was too drunk to care that they lost Nate this early and Roam was sure the deputies on guard would do their job to keep all the students safe. Roam attempted to be a good chaperone and browsed the area around the school from the car to make sure that any of Stems didn’t lurk.

“The coast is clear,” Roam said as Slade pulled into a parking space. “Let’s go be the creepy old guys.”

“Fuck yeah,” Slade exclaimed.

At the school entry, two deputies were on guard. Roam and Slade entered the building and instantly were rushed with memories of their time here at Moone Crest High. They both didn’t want to admit it, but they were thinking back specifically to the times they had along with the once third of the friendship, Maven. As Roam watched the current batch of seniors walk down the halls toward the cafeteria enjoying their friendships, he found himself wondering which one of them would be the friend to go away from Moone Crest and never look back.

All his negative vibes faded when he entered the cafeteria that was decorated with the school colors. A dozen round tables were covered with black table cloths and a center piece of gold and silver balloons. Poster sized portraits were hung around the cafeteria displaying the class selection for such titles as Best Hair, Class Clown, and Most Likely to Succeed, in gold frames. Roam spotted Nate in three of the portraits, the football team captain earning the titles of Most Athletic, Most Handsome and Best Smile. Millie was awarded the title of Most Fabulous along with Eliza and the special title of Always Remembered.

The majority of the students crowded the dance floor, and also Slade who was removed twice for dancing to wildly by a teacher. No matter what though, Slade ended up back on the dance floor and the center of attention. Roam was busy soaking in the environment. He spotted Eliza at a table alone with her blonde hair curled and sporting a violet gown.

He walked up to her. “Do you want some punch?”

“I’m fine,” She softly said, “Did you see that Millie and I won Most Fabulous? We deserve it.”

“You do. Eliza you look beautiful in your gown.”

She shrugged. “Millie would’ve looked much better. She was going to wear it tonight you know?”

“I know.” Roam didn’t want her to remember all of this night as a somber one. “Do you want to dance?”

Eliza eyes widened as she gawked up at Roam. “Um, thanks but no thanks. You’re my co-worker.”

“I’m off the clock,” Roam said as he reached his hand out to her.

“And you’re not even a student. Look, I appreciate this little moment but I have to maintain some fabulousness.”

“I understand, you do hold half of the title. I’ll just walk away looking really sad as if you just crushed me.”

Eliza smiled and nodded. “Turning down an older guy? That is fabulous indeed. Do that and look really sad.”

Roam winked at her and did his best to walk away looking heart broken. He just imagined if Dina told him to stay away from him forever and used that as inspiration. Roam dropped the act once he was away from Eliza, grabbed some punch, found a spot on the wall and continued to watch Slade terrorize the other chaperones.

“It’s that time ladies and gents,” A woman with red hair and a mousey voice said into the mic stand on stage as the music stopped.

“I love you Miss Raditz,” A male student shouted from the crowd, “You teach English real good.”

Raditz cringed at the butchering of the language she loved so much. “Moving on.”

Roam spotted David with his dark hair nicely styled and wearing a black suit. David's eyes met with Roam's and he formed a grin no man who despised prom as he claimed, should've been wearing. The smile made Roam uneasy in his own skin. David vanished into the crowd of seniors like a snake in the grass.

"It's time to announce this year's prom king and queen," Raditz exclaimed as loud as she could. "It's been an exciting year and I know you're all eager for the results. Mr. Sully, may I have the results please." A scrawny teacher on stage wearing a cheap brown suit passed her a black envelope. Raditz opened the envelope and jerked her lips to the right as she stared at the name on the paper. "This is a big twist, our prom king this year is David Michaels."

The shocked crowd gasped and a silence followed as David made his way onstage with the same sick smile that was ruining Roam's night the longer the newly announced prom king wore it across his face. Mr. Sully placed a golden crown on David's head and passed him a scepter of the same tone of his headwear, branded with the school logo of a half-moon.

"Bullshit," Nate hissed as he stormed from the dance with his date doing her best to sprint behind him in heels.

Raditz read from the envelope once more, "And our prom queen is Millie Walker."

The very sentimental crowning of Millie was still overshadowed by the victory of King David Michaels.

A sea of whispers, boos, and looks of confusion came from the crowd of seniors. Roam had a gut feeling the smirk that David had yet to drop was connected to his controversial victory. He wasn't sure how it happened, but Roam didn't believe the senior class voted David as their prom king.

Raditz motioned out to Eliza. "Millie's best friend Eliza will accept the crown in her honor."

Eliza reluctantly made her way to the stage accompanied by forced applause led by the adults in attendance. She arrived to the stage snarling at the newly crowned king. As Mr. Sully handed her the crown, David stepped in the man's path and kicked Eliza in the waist from the stage to the floor of the cafeteria. Quickly Slade and Roam rushed to Eliza's aid as she cried and grabbed at her swelling wrist. They helped her up from the ground and stared up with snarls on their faces at a cackling David on stage.

"I think my arm is broken," Eliza cried out.

Slade lifted her up in his arms. "I'll take her to the car and then I'm coming back to kick David's ass."

Slade carried Eliza away and a few other students followed out with them.

"David," Roam shouted out, "You've gone too far tonight. What's wrong with you?"

David snatched the mic from the stand and shoved Raditz out of his way. "I don't have to answer to you or anybody else in this room. I'm a king. After years of dealing with the simpletons in this cafeteria and the brain-dead people of Moone Crest, I will not tolerate it anymore. Those who refuse to answer to me will suffer. And like every great king I have an army to deliver that suffering, an army of the dead!"

From behind the burgundy stage curtain David's army of Stem jocks charged, all wearing dark suits. Raditz and Mr. Sully were attacked by two Stems, and the remainder of David's army focused on the crowd of seniors. David remained on stage with his arms raised in victory as he watched some of his classmates fall to their deaths, a few brave ones fight for survival and others run for their lives. It didn't take long for the deputies on guard to charge inside. It proved difficult for them to fire their weapons so they resorted to breaking out their machetes and carefully attacking the right targets.

Roam managed to get through the chaos and join David on stage. "It's over David; tonight you ruined your life."

David pointed at the crown on his head. "I'm doing pretty fucking good, I'm king!"

"It's time for you to be dethroned."

Roam charged at David. King David took the pointed end of his scepter and drove it into the chest of Roam, stopping him before he could attack him. Roam dropped to the stage and not until he noticed the blood spurting from his chest did he start to feel an intense burning sensation traveling throughout his body.

David squatted down beside him. "As I said, you're more valuable dead."

David rushed off behind the stage curtain and the surviving members of his army retreated along with him. Roam didn't come back to life just to experience prom, he wanted to do more, but the darkening of the reality

before him wasn't promising that he would. He could vaguely see Slade stepping over bodies and pushing aside a deputy and surviving students as he ran towards him.

As Slade grabbed him from the stage, the pain only got worse but Roam lacked the strength to scream in pain or to beg his friend to rest him back down. Roam shut his eyes as Slade carried him. He rested his head against Slade's chest and listened to his friend's rapidly beating heart until once again, all his senses faded.

Epilogue

Rock music was all that could be heard and darkness was all that could be seen. There was a thump.

Will Roam Be Given A Third Chance At Life?

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