

# FOG OF MOURNING

*by ellerean*

## Chapter 1

Jill closed her eyes as Mist instructed. Standing in the shower stall, bare feet cold on wet tiles. Hair flipped over her head as Mist scrubbed and scrubbed the dye from it.

“You have *so* much hair!” Mist said. “How do you *wash* all this?”

“It’s not easy,” Jill mumbled.

Cold water crept into the collar of her bathrobe. The instructions on the box said to rinse until the water ran clear, and with her eyes closed, waited for Mist’s verdict. She hadn’t planned to recruit her roommate for the task, but Mist had brightened when Jill came back with the small bag from the drugstore. Now, they stood cramped in the dorm’s shower stall, Mist in terrycloth shorts and a T-shirt and Jill in her black bathrobe. Jill peeked one eye open, watching pink rivers run into the circular drain at her feet.

She wasn’t sure what made her do it. She hadn’t been *rebellious* freshman year—she followed the rules, didn’t skip a class, and attended only a few parties. *Maybe that’s why*, she thought, now standing in the shower in the middle of the day, staining its tiles red.

“I think that’s clear,” Mist said, squeezing handfuls of water with both hands. “The box said it might run a little next time you wash it, but that’s normal.”

Jill carefully flipped over so the damp, clingy hair spilled down her robe. She squeezed down the length of it, water trickling through her fingers and onto the previously-beige tiles.

“We won’t *really* know how it looks until it’s dry,” Mist said. “But I can already tell it looks great!”

Jill held the ends of her hair in one hand, water clinging in droplets. *What would my father think?* she thought, until she realized it didn’t matter anymore.

“Mr. Haar might actually kill me,” she said.

Mist laughed, drying her hands on her shorts. “Come on, let’s go see it!”

It was mere steps from the stalls to the row of sinks, the mirrors on the wall permanently distorted. Jill tried not to look at her hair right away. She stared at her face, at the streaks of dye along the hairline. She tightened the belt of her bathrobe to hide the hint of cleavage, damp from the shower. But there was no avoiding the hair, dripping wet over both shoulders and arms, disappearing beyond the view of the mirror. It was dark with water, hours until it would air dry.

And it was *red*.

Mist’s reflection slid in beside hers, their eyes meeting in the mirror. Jill broke into a grin.

It had been three months since her father died. It wasn’t the summer break she had dreamed of, traveling cross-country with college friends. Instead, she visited the cemetery, a remote plot of land not far enough from their house near campus,

watching Haar lower the polished casket. He had insisted it be closed for the funeral; she hadn't the strength to protest when he said not to look.

Once fall semester started, Jill went to the gym every morning. She was often alone there at eight o'clock; her father had trained her to wake up early, and it was nice to have her pick of equipment. As she stacked weights on the squat rack, she thought of the day Haar suggested she transfer. Maybe she didn't want to hang around Daein University, he'd suggested, with the shadow of her father around every corner. Maybe she didn't want to see *him* anymore, either.

*I like it there*, she'd simply replied.

And thus sophomore year began as an orphan, with no memorable road trip, and Haar's quick promotion to Director of Public Safety.

She went light on the first set, gradually increasing the weight like her father had taught. He would probably have a word about how hard she'd been going lately. There was no particular reason, besides the satisfaction of doing it. When Haar had been Assistant Director, he'd sometimes wander through the gym on supposed rounds, despite the early hour. Or perhaps her father had deliberately assigned him that schedule. She'd never asked.

Jill grit her teeth, setting the one-hundred pound bar back on the squat rack. She stretched one leg behind her, then the other. She hadn't visited the Public Safety office since the year started; she wasn't even sure what Haar looked like behind that counter by himself, or if he'd thought to change anything in there. Probably not.

She moved to the bench press, setting her university-issued water bottle and sweat towel on the floor. She stacked the weights on the bar, large to small. She wondered if she should put on more.

“Hey, uh... Jill, right?”

She hadn’t noticed she wasn’t alone. The boy standing near the bench was cast in a beam of early-morning light, hands shoved into the pockets of knee-length shorts. His red tank top strained across wide shoulders; the sweat towel draped around his neck looked comically small.

“That’s me,” she said.

He grinned. “I thought so! I almost didn’t recognize you with your hair. I like it a lot.”

Jill smoothed her hair back, which she’d tied into a high ponytail, an elastic headband pushing the fringe off her face. “Thanks! I’m still getting used to it.”

“Oh, and, hi! I’m Boyd.”

“Right,” she replied. “I’ve seen you around here before.”

Boyd motioned to the bench press. “You want a spotter?”

“Really?” She glanced from Boyd, with his wide grin and similarly wide shoulders, to the bar. “That would be great. Do you mind if I put on more weight?”

His laugh echoed over the high walls. “I can handle it!”

As Jill lay on the bench, an extra ten pounds on each side, she wondered if she could do it. It’d been months since she’d tried. Boyd stood over her head, upside-down, hands hovered just below the bar.

“Take it slow,” he said, as she grasped the bar. “I don’t want to have to save you.”

“How chivalrous,” she said. But as she began, the extra weight was just what she’d needed. She pushed herself to do extra reps. Boyd remained silent as she worked, lifting the bar with strained effort. But the second set was easier, bracing her back against the bench. Boyd lightly held the bar on the last rep, helping her ease it back into the bracket.

“That was awesome!” he said, as Jill sat up. He passed her the towel. “Hey, you’re Mist’s roommate, right?”

His feigned nonchalance wasn’t as casual as he tried, but Jill didn’t know him well enough to quip about it. “That’s right,” she said, wiping her hands. “How did you know?”

The nonchalance dropped as he scratched the back of his neck. “I don’t— I just figured, since I see you hanging out a lot. Not that I *follow* you or anything; we’re in the same dorm, so—”

“That’s right,” Jill said. “I’ve seen you in the lounge.”

She never knew if the boys hanging in the common area actually lived there, or were *friends* of people who lived there, but it was enough to put him at ease. He tugged at the ends of his towel, nodding.

“I’m switching to free weights,” Jill said, motioning to the racks against floor-to-ceiling mirrors. “Want to come?”

Jill had only ever worked out alongside her father or Haar, but she liked having a friend at the gym. Sometimes Boyd made it for eight o’clock, but more often he showed up when she was finishing up at the treadmill. And he always came with

stories, from football practice or late nights in the lounge. He always offered to spot for her, with the promise to get her strong enough to spot him, too.

“You think I couldn’t do it?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t want you to break a nail,” he replied, to which she whipped him with her towel.

Boyd straddled a bench, stretching his arms behind him. “Hey...” he said. Jill paused from where she was stacking her own bench. “There’s this party on Saturday,” he said in a rush, not looking at her. “You wanna come? Mist, too, if she wants.”

She must have waited too long to reply, because Boyd kept going. “I mean, the guys want to get into Zeta, and I was thinkin’ about rushing, so—”

“You want to join Zeta?”

Boyd swung a leg over the bench to face her. “Yeah! A bunch of guys from the team are brothers, and they’re really cool. You kinda have to go to a party for them to consider you, you know?”

Jill had only attended a handful of parties. She’d been curious freshman year, hanging out with girls whose names she didn’t remember now, always at the same frat house because someone knew someone else there. But she’d never gone up to the Zeta house, on that hill at the edge of campus. It always seemed dark, even in the daylight, hidden behind the trees with its painted black bricks.

“Well anyway,” Boyd went on, “you can just show up, or come with me if you want. But don’t forget to ask Mist, too! I can look out for both of you.” He flexed his arms. “You know I could handle it.”

She couldn't help but laugh, which made Boyd laugh, too. "I'll go if she goes," she replied.

Truth was, she hadn't seen Mist a lot since classes started. They had different courses, and Jill couldn't keep track of her roommate's volunteer schedule. But they made it a point to meet for lunch on Thursdays when their schedules lined up. The cafeteria was crowded after eleven o'clock classes let out, but they managed to find a vacant spot at the end of a table.

"He invited you to a *party*?" Mist asked, spearing a potato wedge. "At a *frat house*?"

"Well..." Jill said, "do you want to go?"

Mist tilted her head as she chewed, looking around the cafeteria. They sat across the table from each other, trays parallel, Jill with her back to the wide double-doors that served as the entrance. So she didn't know who came or went as she watched Mist, who stared over Jill's shoulder, and smiled a little at something she couldn't see.

"Hey, Jill! Mist!"

Boyd strode to their table in normal clothes, in jeans and a shirt with real sleeves. The rest of the football team was settling in a few tables over, shoving each other and their trays to make room for them all.

"Nice day, isn't it?" Boyd went on. "Mist, I liked your presentation in Literature today. That reading was really good."

Jill raised her eyebrows, which neither noticed as they smiled at each other.

“Thanks!” Mist grinned. “I thought it would be scary reading in front of everyone, but it wasn’t so bad.”

“I have to do mine next week,” he said. “Maybe you can give me some pointers?”

“Sure!”

Boyd lightly smacked Jill on the shoulder. “I’ll see you at the gym tomorrow! Don’t forget about that invitation!”

He left for the football table, crowding in where there looked to be no room for anyone else. The boys had taken food off their trays to conserve space, stacking them at the end of the table for some new recruit to bring up later.

“Literature?” Jill whispered, though no one would’ve heard over the noise. “Boyd is in *Literature*?”

Mist shrugged. “I wonder what book he picked. Or if he read it.”

Jill hadn’t touched her chicken sandwich yet, and the side salad was already starting to congeal in its dressing. She poked the salad with a fork as Mist updated on her latest ventures, between volunteering at the animal shelter and tutoring a kid at the local high school. Jill listened while she ate, distantly aware of the wide double-doors opening and closing. An older woman sat at a table by the doors, who scanned ID cards as people came in, depleting one prepaid meal after another with each scan of a barcode.

Mist sat up straighter. “Hi, Mr. Haar!”

Jill froze, half-eaten sandwich in her hands.

“Hi, Mist. Hi— oh.”

He was a shadow at the end of their table, in that same navy uniform he’d always worn. Shirt buttoned to his neck, with the tie she knew he hated, and slacks less neatly-pressed than they should’ve been. With his shirt tucked in, she was eye-level with his silver belt buckle, but averting her gaze upward was worse. The patch over his right eye was legendary throughout campus; there were rumors, but he ignored anyone bold enough to ask. The good eye squinted, scrutinizing her red hair.

“Jill,” he finally said.

“Hi, Mr. Haar,” she managed to say, exactly what Mist had said, but maybe he hadn’t noticed.

But he scoffed a little, cracking a small smile before it disappeared again.

“Hey, Mr. Haar!”

His gaze shifted to what Jill suspected was the football table. But she didn’t know for sure, because she couldn’t make herself move, now staring at the underside of his chin. There was a small spot of dried blood from a recent shave.

“I’ve got another idea,” the football grunt called out.

Haar shook his head. He glanced back at Jill and then turned, the back of his shirt wrinkled from when he doubtless fell asleep in her father’s old chair. He raked a hand through his hair as he walked away, shoulders lifting slightly in what was probably a sigh.

“Jill?” Mist leaned over the table. “Are you all right?”

*I miss my father*, she thought, watching Haar take a tray and cut the line. *I miss the way things used to be. I miss his smile, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry—*

“I never told him about my hair,” she replied, turning back to her lunch. “So do you want to go to that party?”

Mist always tried. When they were alone in their room, she would try prompting Jill to talk about her father, without outwardly asking. If it had been up to Jill, her friends wouldn't have known about her father's death at all. But it was a small school, news traveled fast, and there was no hiding the death of the Public Safety Director when the accident was on campus.

So Jill threw herself into schoolwork, and weight training, and actively avoiding Public Safety. She skipped Psych one day to get a manicure in town, which was almost pointless with her too-short nails. But she wasn't in the mood to listen to another lecture about human behavior, a topic she would never understand anyway. Instead, she let someone else paint her nails red, a woman not much older than herself who didn't try to have a conversation. The mani should last two weeks, she'd said, which was more than enough time to last for the Zeta party.

Jill was already in bed in her top bunk that night, staring at the ceiling with the lights on, when Mist brought it up.

“I've never been to a real frat party,” she said, back turned as she changed into pajamas. “I'm curious to see what it's like.”

“We'll know other people there, too,” Jill reminded her. “Don't forget, Boyd always asks for you to come.”

Mist's reaction was shielded by the pajama top she was pulling over her head. "I never told you, he passed his Literature presentation. He just repeated most of what I said during our study session, but he's actually a good speaker."

Jill turned onto her side. "And cute?"

Mist had finished changing, so Jill could see the eye-roll as she turned around. She moved to their shared closet, opening her own side with its neat rows of bright colors. "What do you wear to a party, anyway?" she asked.

Jill rolled back to stare at the ceiling again, listening to the jangle of plastic hangers as her roommate rummaged through the options. "Something cute?"

Parties didn't start until after dark. The Zeta house sat on the opposite side of campus, a long walk in a cheap pair of sandals. Mist had insisted the shoes looked good with Jill's skinny jeans, though the cool night air bit at her exposed toes. Heather down the hall had loaned her a shirt—or was it a corset?—that accentuated her small breasts, a look she didn't entirely dislike. But she felt overdressed beside Mist, who was *cute* in her tights-and-shorts combination. She also wore a light jacket, which Jill now wished she'd considered.

They hadn't said much since leaving the dorm. Though it was dark, campus had enough lampposts to illuminate its main sidewalk. Daein University truly never slept—there was always someone walking around, often someone familiar who offered a silent wave in passing. They all had somewhere to go: a movie night; an overnight shift; a party in someone's room or in a frat house that loomed over the hill.

"Boyd better be there," Mist said, unprompted.

“He said he would meet us,” Jill told her, not for the first time.

The sidewalk leading up to the house felt longer than most, entirely uphill through a thicket of trees. As they drew closer, the black house was still barely visible in the black night. There was only a sliver of moon, and no exterior lights. They paused, far enough away to see the house in full view.

“It doesn’t seem that big up close,” Jill admitted.

The building was two-story, like the rest of the campus frat houses, the ZETA letters gray against its black exterior. There were no shutters, but faint scratches around the windows, like they’d been hastily removed. Most of the upstairs rooms were dark, but downstairs was ablaze through open windows. A steady, thumping beat traveled down to where they stood.

Mist twisted a ring around her finger. “We don’t have to go,” she said.

Jill knew enough about late-night complaints about parties, her father hastily throwing on a uniform with the promise to return home soon. How she’d lay awake as a child, listening to the engine revving, imagining her father hiking up this very hill to— she never knew what, exactly. She’d fall back asleep before he returned home, but he was always in the kitchen with his coffee when she woke in the morning.

*Midnight, a pounding on the door, too late for visitors; Mist out of bed first but Jill knew that knock, even before the handle turned, she knew, she knew—*

“We’re already here,” Jill said, tugging the hem of her shirt. “Unless *you* don’t want to go.”

Mist grabbed her wrist, too hard, thumb jabbed into her pulse. “Let’s go!”

The house vibrated with pounding bass. The front door was closed, and they looked at each other, the silent *what now?* even as Mist grasped the curved, brass handle. The door was unlocked, and she paused before pushing it open. The bass crescendoed, pounding in Jill's head as they stepped into the foyer. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting—partially-disrobed boys; a pile of tapped kegs—but aside from the deafening sound of what was probably music, the living room was *tame*. Two battered couches sat against the wall, opening the floor for people to hang out. A white folding table was set up along the back wall, with red plastic cups lined in formation; more of the same cups were scattered throughout the room, piled on the floor and propped on the disused fireplace. She scanned the room for someone, *anyone*, who looked familiar. Some of the boys were older, *much* older, too old to be students. As Jill entered the room, Mist close behind, her steps squelched with the sticky remains of beer. There was one keg that she could see, partially hidden by a blond man with too much hair gel who was struggling to tap it. She hastily looked away when he noticed her watching, hurrying past and into what she assumed was a dining room.

“Hey, ladies!”

Mist released an audible sigh of relief. “Hi, Boyd!”

Boyd seemed to wear more clothes every time she saw him. His green polo shirt was tucked into pleated slacks, and she envied the white sneakers. Boyd pulled her into a hug, her eyes wide in surprise; his grip was firm enough that she could hardly move.

There was a slight hesitation before he hugged Mist, one that was less soul-crushing, at least to the extent that Mist could properly hug him back. Jill couldn't see her face, hidden as it was by Boyd's wide shoulders. Jill looked around the dining room during the embrace, with its long table surrounded by ten chairs, its walls lined with frames that she was too far away to read.

“Wow,” Boyd said from behind her, “you look really cute.”

Jill turned to catch Mist blush. “T-Thanks, I wasn’t really sure what to wear.”

Boyd slapped a hand on each of their shoulders. “Come on, I’ll give you the tour!”

Jill followed, for lack of knowing what else to do. She was nearly deaf already, that *thump-thump thumping* bass in her ears. Boyd guided them back through the living room, which was more densely-packed as they shimmied past clusters of people; they went down a short hall to the kitchen, which was remarkably clean besides the stacks of empty cardboard boxes from canned beer. The kitchen connected to a back porch, where people had escaped from the sticky floors and the music, talking in whispers.

Already, the cold night air was sweet relief. Jill leaned against the porch railing, staring into the darkness beyond. Boyd continued talking as she stared into that yard, picturing what lay past the bordering fence. Her ears were dully ringing, and Boyd sounded distant though he stood right in front of her. Mist was looking up at the house, hanging on to whatever Boyd was sharing, and Jill stared at the back of Boyd’s arm that kept brushing Mist’s shoulder. When he laughed, turning to Mist, there was a slight blush on the bridge of his nose.

Jill fingered the boning at the hem of her shirt. She stared up at the house, not sure what she was supposed to see, until Boyd tapped her on the shoulder.

“Want something to drink?” he asked.

They squeezed back into the tight-packed living room. The music had swelled again, vibrating the wall she leaned against. Mist accepted a cup of something green from an oversize punch bowl, and Jill nodded when Boyd offered her one as well. It was too sweet, but it was cold on her lips.

A hand on her shoulder made her jump.

“I haven’t seen you around here before,” the man slurred, calloused hand on exposed skin and a strand of long hair that crept near her cleavage.

“I’m with him.” She twitched his hand away, inching closer to Boyd.

“Aw, Shinon, knock it off,” Boyd said, shoving his arm. Shinon, for his credit, shrugged like he couldn’t be bothered, staggering out of the living room. Boyd offered a lopsided smile. “Sorry about that,” he said. “Some of the alum never go away.”

“It’s fine,” she said, and it *was*, the thrill of it all, of the beer pong and the pounding bass and the clearing of the living room floor for dancing. The exposed brick wall scratched her shoulders, but she laughed at the boys dancing together, pulling some girls in with them. Then it was louder, louder, her red plastic cup empty. Boyd raised his eyebrows questioningly, motioning to the makeshift dance floor, but Jill shook her head. There was Mist, laughing, cheeks pink and jacket discarded somewhere to reveal a spaghetti-strap camisole. Boyd kept sneaking glances at her, the blush creeping into his cheeks.

Jill leaned close to Mist’s ear. “Why don’t you dance with him?” she whispered.

Mist froze for a split second, then traded her mostly-full cup for Boyd’s hand. She laughed as she tugged him into the fray, leaving Jill to sip the weirdly green liquid she’d left behind.

She saw a boy approach from the corner of her eye, familiar from one class or another. She couldn’t place his name, his face all sharp angles, smiling as he dodged clusters of dancers. He bypassed the punch bowl to lean against the brick wall; she liked that he didn’t touch her, standing only close enough to speak.

“I hope I’m not too presumptuous,” he said, “but I hate seeing a girl standing around by herself.” He motioned to what had become a dance floor, packed tight between the battered couches. “It looks like fun, if you want a partner.”

His eyes were green like the punch, hair pushed back like he wanted her to see them. Clear, honest. She smiled. “Why not?”

He returned the smile, bowing slightly as he offered a hand. The gesture made her laugh, cramped together as they were, and she curtsied in acceptance. He rested a hand on her hip as they began to move. Jill grasped his shoulder with one hand, the cup in the other; she eased into the beat, matching his sense of rhythm. She pulled him closer, which he didn’t refuse, to watch Mist and Boyd over his shoulder. They danced like they were chaperoned, a hand on Mist’s waist, Mist’s hands on his shoulders. But they smiled, cheeks pink, a respectable space between them.

Jill watched the delicate balance of hands-on-bodies, the tentative, questioning touches. She breathed in the scent of a boy she didn’t know as his hand roamed to the small of her back. He was thin, his shoulders narrow and lean. Unfamiliar. The music picked up, the thumping bass guiding her feet, and she gasped when his arm tightened around her. His cheek was smooth against hers, freshly-shaven; she shivered when his long hair brushed her naked shoulder, his face in the crook of her neck.

“You’re beautiful,” he breathed.

And she *felt* it, the jeans tight on her thighs, the corset-shirt constricting her lungs. She arched her neck as the music pulsed, as his lips grazed the back of her ear.

“Wanna go upstairs?” he whispered.

A hand grasped her shoulder. Small, feminine, breaking her from a trance. Jill leaped backward, tumbling into another dancer, who didn't seem to notice he'd been thrown off-balance. Jill stared at her dance partner—who she didn't know at all, ear burning from the imprint of his lips, whose body and face and smirk were all *different* and strange.

“I—” she glanced from Mist, whose grip was hurting her shoulder, to *him*, smiling, anonymous. “I-I have to go,” she said, as Mist dragged her from the living room. She never looked back to see his reaction.

Boyd was nowhere in sight—or was that him near the corner?—but her vision blurred; they were moving too fast, and Mist was pulling her through the kitchen and onto the back porch. It had rained sometime in the past hour, and the peeling wood was slick under her cheap sandals. They were alone outside, but even with the door closed could hear every pulsing word of the floor-rattling music.

“I’m sorry,” Mist blurted, grasping her hands. “Boyd said to rescue you. That boy...” she trailed off.

“It’s fine,” she whispered. Jill shivered, staring into Mist’s concerned face, the words she didn’t know how to say.

Then at once, Jill began to cry.

“Oh no, Jill!”

Mist’s hands were on her shoulders, so *warm* despite being so cold. Mist was a full head shorter than her, but managed to pull her head down so Jill could cry on her shoulder. Mist rubbed her back, and her head hurt so much, because she had been trying so, so hard to have a nice time and not *think* about anything—

“Mist.” She lifted her head, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand. “I... there’s something I have to tell you.”

Mist nodded, waiting.

The days, weeks, *months* she had wanted to tell Mist, summer break an impenetrable wall between them. Because she hadn’t told anyone, couldn’t admit to what she’d done, impossible because she wasn’t *like* that. The fog of mourning, late into the night, creeping from her bedroom and surprised to find him awake—

“It’s about Haar.”

She realized too late that she’d omitted the *Mister*, a habit drilled into her since receiving her acceptance letter. *You call him Mr. Haar when you’re at school*, her father had said, a sign of respect despite it being *Haar*, who had a key to their house. Who had been her father’s emergency contact, who helped move her into her first dorm. *Haar*, who hadn’t wanted the promotion, who had stayed with her after her father’s death, who made the blush crawl up her neck and caused the shiver that Mist likely felt as she grasped her hands.

Her eyes watered as she stared at Mist, who would have a nice, normal relationship with a man like Boyd, who was a nice, normal man who played football and pledged a fraternity. Jill squeezed her hands as the world itself stopped, as the porch ceased to vibrate under her feet.

Mist looked up. She’d felt it, too.

They both turned toward the house. The absence of sound rang in her ears, and the light in the hallway blinded them through the glass porch door.

“Is the party over?” Mist asked.

It was only midnight, and they crept across the porch, slowly opening the door like they were sneaking back into the house.

Jill didn't have to see the man in the foyer to recognize the voice.

"I don't care if you party," he was saying, "but the neighbors aren't too happy about it."

Jill braced against the wall as her knees buckled. Mist's hand on her back, peering around her shoulder. The porch door squealed closed, a grating echo down the long, bright hallway that made the new Director of Public Safety squint in their direction—navy slacks, DU sweatshirt halfway zipped over a black T-shirt. Hair limp from humidity or a recent shower, falling over the eyepatch.

"Oh," Mist whispered, as Jill stared.

## Chapter 2: Interlude

*Haar heard the crash before receiving the call. It roused him from sleep in the apartment outside campus, jerking awake from a rapidly-dissolved dream. Flat on his back, staring at the moonlit ceiling, pulse hitched when the phone rang. He barely remembered driving to the crash site.*

*There were no skid marks, only the twisted remains of what used to be an SUV and a pick-up truck. The kid was loaded into an ambulance, wide-eyed on a stretcher, blood alcohol of 0.05%. Not drunk, but drunk enough. The town police saying scrambled words, words he understood individually but not strung together.*

*“Sir? Sir, we need you to confirm his identity.”*

*The hood crumpled into the driver’s side, a mangled door; the bloody, deployed airbag—*

*“Yes, sorry. That’s him.”*

*He drove to Jill’s dorm, idling outside with the radio low. He watched windows blink on and off, freshman going up and down the stairs, swiping their cards to get inside. Nice, normal lives, smiling and laughing and sleeping, the monotony of normality.*

*When he mustered the strength to go up those stairs, swiping his universal key card, he stood outside room 201 until it was weird. A student passed with a “Hi, Mr. Haar,” and he couldn’t remember if he replied. Finally, pounding on the door, certain they were asleep, guilty when the roommate answered because it wasn’t her sorrow to burden.*

*“I need to talk to Jill,” catching her descending shadow from the top bunk.*

*Silent on the ride home, silent in the morning, when he forced them to eat. He would inherit the house for some goddess-forsaken reason, beneficiary and second-in-command. Paperwork all in order, as if*

*Shiharam had expected something like this. A double-plot from when his wife died. A trust in Jill's name.*

*She was a shadow beside him for weeks, in planning the wake and funeral, half its expenses paid by the university. Impossible to keep secret, though they tried; faculty and staff and a few friends packed in a small chapel. A closed casket because Haar had seen the body, and Jill hadn't. Too many people at the cemetery, where he recruited a couple men to help lower Shiharam into a hole in ground.*

*Standing beside Jill while mourners filed out, a respectful nod before returning to their unbroken lives.*

*Perhaps he had initiated it, inadvertently, when she clung to him. Staring into the open grave, the shovelful of dirt that soiled the polished casket. Jill's head on his shoulder, silently trembling, as he kissed the top of her head.*

*He didn't formally move in, but couldn't leave her alone. She canceled her road trip; he reluctantly accepted a promotion. He slept on Shiharam's couch because he couldn't bring himself to use the bedroom. Jill hovered, tidying things that didn't need tidying or reading beside him on the couch. She handled dinners, and he cooked breakfast. She took a liking to black coffee. He would wake from a nap to rearranged furniture or the scent of lemon cleaner. She became touchy, brushing a shoulder when talking or pushing hair from the eye that couldn't see anyway.*

*So he wasn't surprised when she emerged from her bedroom, hoping he was still awake. When she sat at the edge of the couch, staring down at him. When she trailed a hand up his biceps. When he answered a silent question he denied she was asking.*

*"I don't want to be alone," she whispered.*

*He traced the line of her jaw. "You're not."*

*He let her stay.*

*Because he needed her, too, not ready to go at this alone. Allowing her to nestle onto the old couch, already strained with the weeks it had supported his weight. Her face in his neck, maybe not crying anymore, but he murmured into her hair that it was all right, telling himself this was fine, making excuses for the hand that crept into his shorts.*

*It had been too long since he'd been with anyone, the awkward fumbling of it all. The blanket sliding to the floor as she twisted out of her pajama top, laughing when it tangled in her hair. Because she was smiling, even as the protests—we shouldn't do this; I can't—dissolved against eager lips. Squeezing her thighs as she mounted him, as he pushed back all that hair to unveil her body. He assumed he was Jill's first, but didn't want to ask, that slight pause with her hand between his legs. Not like this, he thought, but it would be worse to push her away with a "not yet" because she needed it; he needed it—*

*"Help me feel something," she said, gasping as he entered her.*

*How later, the casual touches stopped.*

*He slept and woke on the couch, not knowing if she was home.*

*She handled dinners, and he cooked breakfast.*

*Jill denied help for move-in day, insisting Mist's brother didn't mind. Haar moved into Shibaram's office, pictures of his family still on the wall. He would see her on campus, and she would see him, and they'd go their separate ways.*

*He never even noticed she'd changed her hair.*

## Chapter 3

He couldn't make sense of what Jill was wearing.

Bare-shouldered, the ends of her tied-back hair falling into the shadow of cleavage. A red belt cinched dark, tight jeans that had no chance of falling down anyway. His most logical thought was that her feet must be cold, which were mostly exposed with crisscrossed gold straps through the toes. There were shadows beneath her eyes despite the blinding hallway light.

"Cut it out with the music," he said, as if speaking only to her. "Just let me sleep."

Someone laughed.

Haar slammed the door on his way out.

He hated the Zeta house; Shiharam had hated it, too, sitting dark on that hill. It was a bad omen, one the neighbors constantly complained about. He'd almost been asleep when the call came, a nearby dormitory griping about the frat brothers again.

He tried to focus on the annoyance, rather than the mental imprint of Jill. Tight jeans, wide eyed—

When his name traveled across the lawn, he thought for a moment he imagined it.

"Haar!"

He slowly turned.

Jill carefully stepped down that absurdly steep sidewalk, wearing those shoes not made for this weather. She panted, though she moved slowly, a glisten of sweat at her clavicle.

“I’m so sorry,” she blubbered, cheeks pink, “I should—”

“Were you *drinking*?”

She skidded to a stop. Swaying trees threw shadows across her damp, exposed skin. It was an effort to keep his face neutral, watching the slow shift of her expression, the sudden comprehension that his question wasn’t at all rhetorical.

“A little,” she replied, sheepish.

Haar frowned. “After what happened to your father?”

“I don’t even have a car.” It was barely audible.

The music started up again, a low thump in the back of his skull. Jill crossed her arms over her chest, staring at his feet as he climbed back uphill. He distantly wondered if anyone watched from the house; her roommate hadn’t come out, nor that kid from the gym. Haar hated him for it, but also wanted him as far away as possible.

“Are you drunk?” he asked, quieter.

She shook her head, perhaps too quickly. “I don’t think so.”

He sighed, unzipping his sweatshirt. She didn’t meet his eye as he draped it over her shoulders. He tried to discern a *scent* on her, beer or weed or a man, but found only the salty musk of sweat. Jill hastily pulled her arms into the sleeves and zipped it to her neck. The sweatshirt was too large, falling to mid-thigh, making her look impossibly small. She buried her nose in the collar, pushing her hands into the pockets.

“What do you want to do?” Haar asked.

Jill studied her feet, wiggling her exposed toes.

“Just tell me.”

“I want to go home,” she whispered.

She allowed him to take her arm. They walked slowly, Jill watching her feet though she seemed steadier now. She didn’t need his help once they reached the bottom of the hill, but he didn’t let go, a gentle “Steady, now,” as she stepped down onto wet pavement.

It hadn’t been worth the hassle to take the campus SUV. He opened the passenger’s side door of his own black sedan, which he now saw was a mess. Jill kicked aside empty Styrofoam cups on the floor, and didn’t seem to notice crumpled napkins on the seat. He waited until she leaned back in the worn fabric seat, eyes sliding shut, to ease the door closed.

Shiharam used to watch her sleep. It was his nightly ritual until the day she moved into the dorms, cracking open the bedroom door to make sure she was there. Haar never intruded, nor made comment. It was just something Shiharam *did*.

The room was a little emptier now, but otherwise not much different: the wooden dresser Shiharam had built, with matching child-size desk; the sheer yellow curtains over a single window, casting filtered sunlight across the bed. There was the bed itself, with a plain headboard, and the yellow-striped comforter. Except now there was a tangle of red hair on its white pillow, Jill curled in sleep with her back to the door.

She was usually an early riser. He knew that well enough from the early-morning rounds Shiharam had assigned him, intentionally passing through the campus gym at

eight o'clock in the morning. He never knew if Jill noticed him, focused as she was on training. Now, he let her sleep, quietly setting a glass of water and bottle of Aspirin on the empty nightstand.

Haar internally cursed when she rolled over, blearily staring at him. He retreated to the far wall. "How do you feel?" he asked.

She glanced at the nightstand. "Fine."

"Are you nauseous? Headache? Sensitive to light?"

Jill sat up against the headboard, tucking the comforter around her. "A little headache," she said, "but it's fine." She studied the hem of her sleeve, one of his own faded T-shirts.

"Could be worse." He jerked his chin at the nightstand. "Take a couple of those."

Jill rubbed her legs over the comforter. "Did you *undress* me?" she asked.

"Sorry." He looked away from her hands. "I couldn't let you sleep in that getup, but I don't know where you keep your pajamas. It didn't seem right to go through your drawers."

Jill glared. "You'll take off my clothes, but you're embarrassed to open my drawers?"

She blushed as she grabbed the Aspirin, tapping out two small, white pills. He didn't want to know where she got that corset from, or who'd seen her in it. It lay crumpled at the foot of the bed, hidden beneath the jeans that had almost been too tight to peel off. Jill downed the glass of water quickly, hungrily, like she never drank water before.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, changing the subject. "Eggs and toast?"

He'd gotten used to being in the house alone. But it still wasn't *his*, as he closed her bedroom door. He hadn't made breakfast for himself in some weeks, but routine guided him to the fridge and the stove, cracking two eggs into a pan. When Jill emerged from her room, in her own T-shirt and shorts, she sat at the table and tucked loose hair behind her ears.

"I called Mist," Haar said. "I let her know you're here."

"Oh. Thank you."

He set two plates on the table, settling into the chair across from her. Jill poured herself orange juice. Haar wished he'd made coffee.

"I'm sorry," she blurted.

Haar swallowed a bite of egg. "What for?"

"I know you hate my hair," she said.

"I never said I hated it."

Jill prodded her eggs with a fork. "I don't know, that's not it. I didn't mean to follow you last night. It just felt like... something was wrong." She abandoned the eggs, nibbling a piece of toast instead. "Haar, what are we doing?"

She stared at him expectantly, like he knew the answer to anything.

"You're going to school," he replied, "and I'm working."

She rolled her eyes, comforting in its familiarity. "You know what I mean."

"And I think you know what *I* mean."

Jill cleaned up after breakfast, but wouldn't remain. She had too many excuses for why she had to return, most of which he presumed weren't urgent. She packed her party clothes into an old tote bag, and was waiting by the door before he found his keys.

He drove to campus with the windows cracked open, the radio louder than normal. Jill fiddled with the stations but couldn't find anything decent, settling on campus radio in case the student DJ would shut up already and play something good. Jill stared out the passenger's side window, twirling the ends of her hair.

"It suits you," Haar said.

She turned down the radio. "What?"

"Your hair. Did you do it yourself?"

Jill turned back to the window. "Mist helped."

"Seems like a lot of work."

They pulled in front of the dorm. A couple of girls were jogging down the stairs in shorts and sweatshirts, a look he never completely understood. They didn't notice the black car, and Jill didn't wave to them.

"Thanks," she said. "I... needed a change."

Haar cleared his throat. "Listen, if you ever want a drink, just come home. I have better stuff than that bug juice they serve."

Something flashed in her expression, too fast to register. A Jill of yesteryear, a banter that didn't fully develop. Instead she smiled, reaching for the tote bag between her feet. "It wasn't even that good," she said.

"It never is."

He watched her go up the stairs. She rummaged through the tote bag; he thought he'd have to let her into the building, but she procured her key card from somewhere. She scanned the card, waited those few seconds for the door to unlock, then glanced over her shoulder before disappearing inside.

He went to work. He sat in the Public Safety office, behind the counter that faced the hallway. The counter wasn't terribly high, but it was enough of a barrier between him and unfortunate visitors.

He'd never removed Shiharam's things, and stared at an old family photo taped to the wall. Shiharam was younger than he'd ever known him, with a pretty wife Haar had never met. Jill was five years old, according to her mother's scrawl on the back, with a full-toothed grin. The photo's corners were curled and faded, but Haar couldn't bring himself to get rid of it.

"Hey, Mr. Haar!"

He glanced up. It was that boy, the one with the green hair. He poked his head into the office, glancing around like this was new and exciting territory.

"Boyd," the boy said.

"Right." Haar didn't rise from the chair.

He stepped into the office, standing back against the wall, as far from the counter as possible. “Nice place,” he said, looking at nothing in particular, and especially not at Haar.

“Is there something you need?”

“I, err... can I ask you something? Man to man?”

Haar raised his eyebrows. “If you must.”

To his dismay, Boyd closed the door. He leaned on the counter, crossing his arms, and Haar mimicked the position as he sat back further in his chair.

“This might be weird,” Boyd started, “but you... I... I’m going on this date.”

Haar squeezed his hands into fists. He regretted that he had only one eye to glare, which Boyd didn’t seem to notice anyway. He was staring over Haar’s head, though there was nothing of interest along the back wall. A campus map; a windowless door to the private office.

“She’s a really great girl,” Boyd went on, “and I don’t want to mess it up.”

“Don’t you have friends?” Haar asked, deadpan. “Why are you *here*?”

“Man, those guys don’t know anything about this stuff. This is the real deal, you know?”

Boyd was blushing now, cracking his knuckles. He shifted against the counter, rustling some papers and bumping into the pen holder. “S-Sorry,” he stammered, smoothing out the paper like Haar would’ve noticed the difference.

It was obvious now, he thought. Romance stormed across campus, in promises of love or one-night stands. He reluctantly overheard enough stories of who was in love with whom, which would last hours or months. He studied Boyd, who seemed a nice enough kid, even if he talked Jill into that blasted party.

“You could try asking her what she wants,” he replied, unsure why he was still talking.

Boyd pursed his lips, considering.

“But they also want us to figure it out.” Haar shrugged. “Sorry to tell you, it’s not easy.”

“That makes sense. I think.” Boyd pushed off the counter. “You’re pretty smart for an old guy.”

“Keep talking and you won’t make it this far.”

He hired a new guy for his old position, a hyperactive recruit right out of college. Kieran was willing to work any hour of the night; Haar wasn’t sure if the man ever slept. He read the Director’s Manual and found nothing about rounds, confirming Shiharam had made the whole thing up. But he took the old route anyway. It was almost nice being on campus during sunrise, when there were fewer people around. He took the old loop from the campus center to the academic buildings, passing by the dorms and through the gym. He never went into the weight room, but caught glimpses in passing. Jill would be at one machine or another, lifting more than he remembered her being able to lift. Sometimes Boyd was there, showing off or spotting her, his laugh echoing into the hallway. Well, that was fine. Jill smiled, and that was good enough.

He walked back to the campus center, tugging on his necktie as he pushed through the main doors. The lounge was a bustle of activity, with the cafeteria doors thrown open for breakfast and a line at the coffee bodega. He offered a nod to Calill at her usual spot behind the counter.

“Not coming to visit today?” she called over the hiss of a milk steamer.

“Save one for me,” he replied.

A chorus of *Hi, Mr. Haar!* greeted him through the main lounge, by students responsible enough to be awake at that hour. Or grabbing coffee before class. Or maybe they had slept there, on those oversize sofas that weren’t comfortable to sleep on, not that he’d tell them why he knew.

“Good morning, Haar.”

The Dean of Students always made sure to approach from his seeing side, which was more than some others considered. “Morning, Sigrun.” She looked sharp in her signature white suit and gold button-down shirt. He envied its open collar, glancing at the new gold locket at her throat. “How’s the missus?”

“Very well, thank you.” She nodded to a student in passing. “I’m pleased to see you’ve taken up your old schedule. The student body needs you.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” He smirked. “But thanks.”

She accompanied him to his office, patiently waiting while he unlocked and went around the counter. When he’d first taken over, she used to come around more often. She’d offered to “spruce things up,” but Haar politely refused. Now, she stood at the counter, openly staring at Shiharam’s family photo on the wall.

“Have *you* been well?” she asked.

*There it is*, he thought, leaning on the counter between them. The pleasantries, the casual walk, a seemingly simple question that she wouldn’t ask in front of students.

“Well enough,” he admitted.

Sigrun nodded. “If you need anything at all,” she said, “you know you have friends here. That’s easy to forget when we’re all busy running this place.”

“Hey, old man!”

Sigrun turned, which caused Boyd to seize in the doorway. He quickly looked from Sigrun to Haar, one hand grasping a backpack strap, his smile dissolving. “Hi, Dean Sigrun.”

“Good morning, Boyd. Is everything all right?”

“Y-Yes, fine! Just saying hi to my favorite officer.”

Sigrun clasped her hands. “Well, I’ll leave you to it.”

“I wish you wouldn’t,” Haar muttered.

Boyd stepped aside to allow Sigrun to leave, standing up straighter as she nodded in farewell. Nary a wrinkle on the back of her suit jacket, smoothing down the front as she turned into the hall. Boyd peered around the doorway, waiting until she presumably disappeared.

“Are you in trouble?” Boyd asked.

“No. Do you need something?”

He strode across the small office to lean on the counter, which forced Haar to back up a few steps. “I never said thanks for helping me out before.”

“Oh. Well, don’t mention it.”

“We’re going to dinner on Friday,” he went on. “At a real restaurant! Well, as real as you can get around here, but at least it’s not the cafeteria. Not that the cafeteria is bad,” he hastily added.

“You don’t have to defend it to me,” Haar replied.

“I guess I should get her flowers. Girls like flowers, right? I don’t know anything about—”

“Boyd,” Haar interrupted. “Leave me out of this. If you want to know what Jill wants—”

“Jill?” He frowned. “I’m going out with Mist.”

The room went still. There was a distant peal of laughter in the hallway, and the usual droning buzz of campus. There was his own breathing, an inhale that filled his lungs, thawing a deep-set frost.

“Wait,” Boyd went on, “aren’t *you* going out with Jill?”

They stared at each other, eye-to-eye. Boyd’s knitted brow, Haar’s one-eyed squint. Finally, Haar pushed off the counter. “Boyd. This conversation never happened.”

“Y-Yes, sir.” He inched toward the door.

“Tell me, Boyd.” Haar wasn’t sure why he didn’t allow the boy to sneak out the door, with one foot already in the hallway. “What do you plan to do when you get out of here?”

“Well,” he slowly replied, “I have Bio...”

He shook his head. “When you graduate.”

“Oh! I want to play football.” When Haar didn’t answer right away, he added, “But I don’t know if I’m good enough to go pro. Coaching would be cool. There’s a couple old Phys Ed teachers in Crimea who will probably retire by the time I’m out, so we’ll see.”

“Huh.” Haar crossed his arms. “That’s... a very respectable answer.”

Then, he smirked. “Way older than you, even.”

“*Now* you can get out.”

Boyd laughed as he ducked into the hallway. Haar pushed his hair off his forehead, looking around the small office—the paper-strewn counter to the unused desk, to the chair he’d sometimes nap in. Then he laughed, for what felt like the first time in weeks, his chest rattling like something had dislodged. A group of students glanced in, but hurried past, their lives an endless list of important things to do. Haar loosened the noose-like grip of his tie and decided to get that coffee after all.

He didn’t pay enough attention to Boyd’s workout schedule. It didn’t seem consistent, but Haar risked showing up early at the gym anyway. He hadn’t lifted a weight in months, but the room had that same musty smell—the permanent tinge of college-

aged sweat; the thick, rubber mats dinged with dropped weights. Jill was warming up at the floor-to-ceiling mirrors, stretching both arms behind her back. Her backside was visible in the mirror, the spandex leggings and tank-top with one drooping strap.

“Mr. Haar?” She released the stretch to pull up the strap, concealing the neon-yellow sports bra.

“It’s been a while, huh?” he said.

She tugged at the ends of the towel around her neck. “Need me to spot you?”

“Funny.”

He never had much of a workout routine. Shiharam, and later Jill, was better at that part. He’d do whatever came to mind next, or whatever machine was free. At that hour—of which Boyd was still absent—anything was for grabs. He started light, trying to remember what he lifted.

“I have his notebook,” Jill said. Haar looked up from the free weights, where he’d already traded the twenty-pounders for thirties. “He let me hold onto it when we weren’t working out. I couldn’t make myself use it this year, but it has all our notes.”

The thirties felt right, his grip solid.

“Have you looked at it?”

Jill shook her head. “I keep everything in my head now. I’m not sure I could stand seeing his handwriting.”

She watched his bicep curls, alternating one weight and then the other, a distant look in her eye. He couldn’t think of the last time they were there together, all three of

them, trying to remember the neat print in a workout notebook. He watched her in the mirror, watching him, the strap of her tank top sliding down again, then the quick adjustment as she tugged it back up. She turned to the weight rack; he hastily looked away from the mirror.

Haar set the weights down. “Jill,” he said, as she picked up her own dumbbells, “you should take that road trip.”

She met his eye in the mirror, the weights hanging at her sides. “It’s only November,” she replied.

“Not *now*. You already had it planned, right?”

She nodded.

“So take the trip this summer. Take my car if you want. You deserve a normal college experience.”

Jill set the weights back without using them. “Is this about the party?”

“No. Maybe.” He rubbed his biceps, which would hurt the next day. “I should’ve let you see your father. It wasn’t pretty, but it wasn’t my place to hide it from you.”

Jill settled on a nearby bench, twisting her water bottle in both hands. “But I needed that from you. I thought you knew that. He never prepared me for any of this.”

“You’re never *prepared*.” He wanted to sit beside her, but students were starting to file into the gym. The treadmills were slowly filling, radiating their steady hum. “I should go. Why don’t you come home tonight?”

Jill smiled, but didn’t look up. “Can I get that drink?”

He picked her up from the dorm. Haar wasn't sure why he'd invited her home, only that he needed her to climb into the car beside him, to drive across campus and onto the main road. The days were getting shorter, the nights colder; she huddled in an oversize university sweatshirt, the pullover kind with the giant pocket. She slipped both hands into that pocket, staring into the twin beams of the headlights.

"How'd Mist's date go?" he asked, mostly to break the silence.

"She had fun!" Jill said. "Boyd found a new restaurant in town. Mist said the food there was really good."

Haar tapped the wheel. "Good for him."

They passed the academic buildings, then the campus center, his morning round in reverse. They reached the edge of campus, the dark hill that led up to the Zeta house. Jill stared straight ahead. "Boyd decided not to rush."

"Oh?" They left behind the house, and campus, merging onto the main road into town. "Why not?"

"He didn't really say."

Haar had forgotten to leave the outside light on, so the house was dark when he pulled up. He rarely turned on the inside lights, either, and Jill didn't flip the switch. She settled on the couch, legs curled beneath her, as Haar selected a bottle from the unlocked liquor cabinet. He set two tumblers on the coffee table, their diamond pattern reflecting the splash of whiskey he poured into each. Wordlessly, he offered one to Jill, settling onto the opposite end of the couch with his own. She held the glass to eyelevel, lightly swirling the amber liquid within.

It was a familiar scene, but not with Jill. The couch, when it had been newer, and the liquor cabinet that used to be locked. But it was the same whiskey glasses—a fact Jill wouldn't have known—the same twilight, the same companionable silence before one or the other began to speak.

“It wasn't even a student,” Haar said.

Jill stopped swirling her glass. “What?”

“The driver.” It was Haar's turn to be transfixed, staring into his own whiskey. “It was some local who'd crashed a Zeta party. Your father was coming back from a noise complaint, and the guy left the party at the same time.”

Jill took a sip of her drink. She didn't wince.

“They called me because it was on campus. I guess it was my jurisdiction. Or, his.” He paused. “If it had been any farther down the road, they would've called you instead.”

Jill tucked one hand between her knees. “How bad was it?”

He couldn't pretend he didn't remember, standing in the middle of the road, putting off contacting Jill. The dark cold, the scattered metal. “There was no hood,” he eventually said. “He looked... distorted. There was a lot of blood.”

She closed her eyes. The soft glow of a streetlamp offered enough light to see her, in that sweatshirt and black yoga pants, when she curled up a little tighter. When she opened her eyes, they were dry, and she rubbed a thumb over the patterned glass.

“I'm sorry for what I did,” she said.

She was sitting where he'd looked up at her, flat on his back. The shadow of her face when she hovered, wandering hands as she sought to know him, a trembling kiss damp with tears. Now those lips hovered over the rim of her glass, distantly staring into recent memory, until she kicked back the rest of her drink.

"It's fine," he replied.

She scowled. "It's *not* fine!"

"I forgive you," he offered. "Is that better? Listen, Jill. You can't live regretting every stupid thing you ever did. You won't get anywhere."

Jill lightly clicked her nails on the empty glass, cheeks suddenly pinked. She set down the glass to tug the sleeves of her sweatshirt, pulling it up and over her head. The form-fitting T-shirt beneath lifted slightly, revealing a strip of pale skin as she tossed the sweatshirt on the floor. Haar finished his own whiskey, a shot that burned down his throat, a warmth settling in his stomach.

"Someone tried to hook up with me at the party," she said, and his chest burned again. "I didn't even know his name. I wonder if that's why Boyd didn't want to rush. He... I think he saw what was happening before I did."

Haar wanted more to drink. "Do you want me to kill him?"

"Maybe." She smiled slightly. "But I didn't want it. Everything felt *wrong*, because it wasn't you." She rushed on before he could respond. "I know. You don't have to tell me it can't happen again. But I'm saying a stupid thing because I'll regret it if I don't. I shouldn't live with regrets, right?"

The couch sank when he slid over, gathering her in his arms. She folded into him easily, head tucked under his chin, legs draped across his lap. He rubbed her back as

she breathed, rapidly at first, calming as her arms encircled his waist. He rested his cheek atop her head, inhaling a trace of whiskey and sweet-smelling soap. And that was fine enough on that old couch, groaning under their combined weight, that might just hold a while longer.

He didn't bother with the tie. It didn't seem worth the effort. He took his morning rounds, even if no one was pressing him to do it. He'd almost come to enjoy the loop around the small campus, down the same path through the academic buildings and around the dorms. He cut through the gym, taking his time, pausing outside the weight room. Neither Jill nor Boyd noticed him, turned away from the door, silently counting their own reps. Haar didn't linger.

It wasn't a particularly nice day. Daein quickly turned biting-cold in the autumn, always on the verge of an early winter. He hadn't bothered with a jacket, hands in his pants pockets and top button of his shirt undone. Facilities hadn't turned up the heat in the campus center yet, so being indoors offered no quick relief.

He stopped at Calill's bodega—medium black coffee, with a pump of spice he hadn't requested. Calill winked, like she was in on some secret. He found he didn't mind the seasonal spice.

"Hey, Mr. Haar!" a student fell into step beside him. "I've got another idea. Were you in a knife fight? Did some punk gouge your eye out?"

"Yes," Haar replied.

His eyes widened. "No way! Really?!"

"No."

Haar smirked, leaving him behind with an *annn man, you're no fun*, sipping his seasonally spiced coffee.

Sigrun's office door was open, her assistant's desk empty. The Dean of Students was shuffling through papers in a folder, but waved him in. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" she asked.

The guest seat in front of her desk looked comfortable, with a plush, red cushion that matched the school's colors. He stood in the doorway instead, leaning against the frame with his coffee.

"Would Tanith be interested in a job?" he asked.

Sigrun folded her hands on her desk. "Oh? Are you looking to expand again?"

"No. I quit."

The tilt of her head was nearly indiscernible. Her smile didn't waver as she studied him, sipping his coffee, staring out that window behind her. There was a potted plant in the corner behind her desk, which was a nice touch. He wish he'd thought of that in his dark, windowless office.

"I see." She leaned back slightly. "I don't suppose we could convince you to stay."

He shook his head. "No, but I appreciate the effort."

"Haar." Sigrun rose, smoothing down the front of her white jacket. "Shiharam's death has been difficult for us all. Surely you'd be approved for a leave of absence—"

"You've been a good friend," he interrupted. "Thanks for helping out when he was gone. But I think I'll do something else now."

“Is there something you have in mind?” she asked. “Can I help in some way?”

“Maybe.” He shrugged. “I’ll let you know.”

There wasn’t a lot to pack from the office. He took Shiharam’s photos from the wall, and left instructions for Kieran. He set the Director’s Manual and his keycards on the desk in the back, that desk that he’d never bothered to use. He carried out only a manilla envelope, not enough personal items to bother with a box. He passed through the campus center, waved to Calill and the woman at the cafeteria desk. Jill was probably in class, but he could wait. He went home to change into jeans and a black polo, something that opened at the collar that he could never wear with a tie. He set Shiharam’s old photos from his office on Jill’s desk. He opened a living room window, though the air was cold, the curtain lightly fluttering in the breeze.

It was late afternoon when he pulled up to her dorm. Haar didn’t know her schedule at all, but he thought most students had a break before dinnertime. He waited for someone to exit the dorm to get in, since he’d forfeited his universal rights.

It didn’t take long. “Hi, Mr. Haar!” a girl said, holding the door for him.

Jill was on the third floor, but he took the stairs. He didn’t know which room was hers, but doors were always decorated. Haar walked the third floor slowly, like he was on duty, examining each one. He stopped outside room 312, and smiled. They made it easy, with the affixed whiteboard that he almost had to crouch to see. “Leave a message for Mist and Jill!” it read, with a black marker tied to a ribbon. Someone had drawn a stick-figure with a smiling sun.

He knocked on the door.

“Be right there!”

If the students passing in the hall noticed he wasn't in uniform, they didn't stop to ask. Inside, there was the scrape of a desk chair, then the turn of a deadbolt as Mist opened the door.

"Oh, Mr. Haar! Is everything all right?"

Jill poked her head out from around a corner. Both hands gathered her hair at the crown, mid-ponytail. He could see the line across her brow where the dye was starting to grow out.

"Everything is fine," he replied, as Jill slowly wound her hair into an elastic.

"I was just heading out," Mist said, glancing between them, grabbing a lanyard from a hook near the door. She squeezed past, waving as she trotted toward the stairwell.

"See you later, Mr. Haar!"

He turned back to Jill. "Can I come in?"

He'd never been inside the room, admiring their small, shared space as Jill closed the door. Jill still had the top bunk, with those same orange sheets; her desk was in the corner, with photos taped to the wall. He hadn't seen some of those photos in a long time: Jill with her parents outside their house, first day of elementary school; Shiharam and Jill, posing with medals after a 5K; Shiharam and himself, outside in sunglasses, when Jill moved into the freshman dorm.

"Want to go out?" he said, at the same time she asked, "What are you wearing?"

He tugged at his collar. "I quit my job."

"You"—she shook her head, like she'd misheard—"You what?"

“I never really wanted this. Your father hired me because I needed a job, but it’s time for me to do something I actually want to do.”

Jill threw up her hands. “You’re unbelievable. Like *what?*”

“I don’t know. I’ll figure it out.”

He liked their girly room, with its pinks and yellows, with the framed photo of Boyd on Mist’s desk. He liked that picture of himself, too, deadpan in those sunglasses, pretending he didn’t want to help Jill move. He’d have to get a copy.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said. “Do you want to go out?”

She frowned. “Mr. Haar—”

“You can stop with the *Mister*, you know.”

“But you’re...” she trailed off.

“Just a man who wants a date.”

She grabbed a light jacket. He held her arm on the way out, as she locked her room and they descended the stairs. His car still bore a Daein University parking pass, which he couldn’t take advantage of much longer. Jill hesitated at the passenger’s side door, even as he unlocked it, watching him go around to the other side.

That when they climbed into the car and he revved the engine, and she leaned across the center console to kiss his cheek, he wondered where they would go.

Chapter End Notes

Postlude: Haar goes to work for the postal service and miraculously doesn't get fired, despite the back of a mail truck being a great place for a nap.

Please also appreciate this magnificent modern AU [Haar & Shiharam](#), if you need a visual for those sunglasses.

([here on tumblr.](#))

## Chapter 4: Epilogue

### Chapter Notes

All right, yes, technically this was complete. But I've been thinking about this for the past four months and decided to share it. (Besides, don't we all need more Haar and Boyd banter?)

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

It was hard to feel nostalgia for a place he never got away from. But Haar felt its nagging as he steered into the campus center lot, passing the designated spot for Director of Public Safety. He parked his old, black sedan at the far edge of the lot instead, under a tree still shedding the pollen of late spring. He cut the engine and adjusted his aviators, watching the comings and goings of the campus center. It was mostly quiet, with a few scattered students sharing a long, final hug goodbye.

He was early. He tugged at the collar of his shirt; he didn't wear a tie much anymore, but figured the occasion called for it.

*“Do you want to stay here after I graduate?”*

*“Why wouldn’t I? I like this little house.”*

*“I just thought... maybe you wanted something different. We have a lot of memories here.”*

*“They’re good memories, Jill. And your parents are buried here. You’d leave them alone like that?”*

*They pretended Jill still used her own room, though she’d ceased sleeping there when she came home. The room was useful, anyway, when Boyd and Mist came for dinner and drinks, often staying too late. And it was comfortable, even if Haar had to wake before everyone else, wondering how he’d been suckered into another early-morning job. But it was a peaceful silence as he dressed for the post office, with Jill still asleep, clutching his pillow. She wasn’t as light a sleeper as she claimed, undisturbed when he kissed her forehead before leaving.*

The incessant tapping jerked him awake. It couldn’t be anyone else, the muffled laugh and *tap tap tap* on the passenger’s side window. Haar glared at Boyd’s mashed face against the glass, a damp fog on what used to be a clean window.

“Wake up, old man!”

“Get your face off my window,” Haar muttered, gathering the bouquet of roses from the passenger’s seat.

Boyd embraced him like they hadn’t seen each other only a week ago—the one-armed hug, the pounded fist on his back. But Haar smiled regardless.

“I brought this guy, too,” Boyd said, backing away.

Mist’s brother looked smart in his blue polo; Haar rarely saw him in anything but a greasy T-shirt. “Ike,” he said, shaking his hand. “It’s been a while. How’s the garage?”

“It’s fine,” Ike replied. “I like the work.”

The only place on campus big enough for graduation was the football field, which Haar had crossed countless times during the empty, dull hours of morning rounds. Now, they filed into the stands with the other families who, judging by their dazed expressions, had never stepped foot onto the field. Haar had attended a graduation only once, the year prior, when Jill and Mist dragged him to Boyd’s ceremonies. He should’ve known the drill, but it was still strange, accepting the staple-bound program from the student volunteer. The girl gave him a second glance, but she was too young to recognize him from campus. Jill had been a sophomore when he’d left; it felt like both yesterday and a lifetime ago.

They found a space near the front of the stands, though it was a tight fit. Boyd perched at the end of a bleacher, sitting sideways to allow Ike to pass.

“Slide over,” Haar said, smacking Boyd’s shoulder with the program. “I’m not sitting between you two.”

There was nowhere to put the flowers besides his lap—the bleachers were open at the bottom, and he didn’t trust Boyd not to step on them, anyway. Haar idly flipped through the program. He hardly remembered his own graduation, and certainly not its keynote speaker; now, the program listed someone vaguely familiar, some successful alumni who would talk about the future. He found Jill’s name in the pages-long list of graduates, then closed the book and contemplated the logistics of a nap.

*He'd insisted Jill stay on campus senior year. It felt like something Shibaram would be stubborn about. She deserved a normal college experience, the same words her father had said years prior.*

*But Jill rolled her eyes. "Are you kidding? My father died and I hooked up with the public safety director."*

*"Could you not put it that way?"*

*"You can't deny the truth, Haar."*

*He averted his gaze when she inched closer, popping her chin on his shoulder.*

*"Do you know why your father gave me those blasted morning rounds?" he asked, unprompted.*

*"To teach you a lesson?"*

*"Maybe." He shrugged. "But it was mostly to watch out for you. He knew you were always at that gym."*

*She clasped his hand, her palm calloused from those early mornings. "I don't think this is exactly what he meant."*

*"No, probably not."*

*She stayed on campus, of course, with the same roommate she'd always had, "joined at the hip" as Boyd liked to say.*

The people in the stands were loud. But that wasn't the reason he woke; it was Boyd and Ike, whose incessant buzzing had stopped completely. They both stared at the football field, with its neat rows of empty chairs. The stage was at the far end of the field, with that short runway each graduate would pass over far too briefly.

*"It's weird being back, isn't it?" Haar asked.*

“It’s really the end, huh?” But Boyd suddenly grinned, elbowing Ike in the ribs. “Hey, remember when Mist came to see us play in high school? She kept rooting for the wrong team.”

“That was once,” Ike replied. “It was an away game.”

It was already too hot in the stands; Haar tugged at his collar and breathed a relieved sigh when the procession music began. Boyd rolled his program in both hands; Haar clutched the stem of the bouquet, willing the roses not to wilt in the heat.

“There she is!” Boyd said, pointing, but it wasn’t Mist who Haar saw first—Jill stood a head taller, after all, her freshly-dyed and braided hair slung over a shoulder. The mortarboard and pink sunglasses obscured her face, even in profile. Mist wasn’t too far behind the line, waving wildly into the stands. “Ike! Do you see her?”

*Boyd had proposed immediately after he graduated. Haar had reluctantly accompanied him to buy the ring, driving two towns over to avoid seeing anyone they knew at the mall. The clerk had the patience of a priest, taking one dainty ring from the display after another, allowing Boyd to slide each to the knuckle of his pinky to examine it.*

*“What does your father think?” she delicately asked, as Boyd picked up another ring.*

*“I’m not his father!” Haar cried, drowned out by that boisterous laugh.*

*But Boyd had done a fine job, not that Mist could see anything past the welling tears when he dropped to one knee.*

*“You should’ve got one, too,” Boyd whispered later, when the girls were out of earshot.*

*Haar raised a brow. “You think I’d ask for your help?”*

*“C’mon, Haar, I’m not a dumb kid anymore. I’m gonna be a married man!”*

“Haar, wake up! It’s getting to the good part.”

He blinked awake, staring at those neat rows of chairs. Tanith was droning off the names of graduates; Sigrun was the one smiling, distributing those fake rolled diplomas tied with a red ribbon. Haar adjusted his grip on the bouquet as he found her in line, like he always found her—that thick, red braid over a shoulder, arms straight at her sides. Jill turned toward the stands as she waited in those pink sunglasses; Haar sat up straighter as Tanith announced her name.

Sigrun smiled a little wider when Jill crossed the stage. Maybe everyone standing up there did, for even Tanith paused a little too long, waiting for Jill to accept that rolled paper and prolonged hug from the Dean of Students.

“Hey, man.” Boyd tapped his arm with the program. “Are you ready for what’s next?”

Haar rested his forearms on his thighs, the bouquet in a two-handed grip between his knees. Jill was walking back to her seat, and he started to wonder if the roses were too much. At least he hadn’t sprung for the full dozen.

Ike leaned over Boyd to shove Haar’s shoulder. “Aren’t you glad your girlfriend isn’t a college girl anymore?”

Haar shoved him back. “No one asked you.”

*Boyd came with the territory, he supposed. But Haar couldn't remember authorizing his solo visits, without the buffer of Mist or Jill. Maybe Boyd instinctively knew, though Haar hadn't thought he'd acted any different. He wasn't sure how Boyd, of all people, had become his confidant, standing at the threshold of the bedroom they still denied sharing, while Haar sifted through the dresser drawer that used to be her father's.*

*"Let me see it," Boyd said, craning his neck.*

*"If you tell anyone," Haar replied, "I will murder you in your sleep."*

*Boyd smirked. "Don't you have to be awake for that?"*

*But he showed Boyd anyway, who was mildly sore he hadn't been invited along. The small, blue box had been hidden in his sock drawer for a week, ever since he took the drive two towns over. Haar moved to the doorway, opening the hinged lid away from him like he was practicing.*

*"Whoa," Boyd said. "How much do they pay you at that post office?"*

*The diamond wasn't as big as that—princess cut, visually flawless. It would look nice on her, he thought, if she wanted him.*

*"If you need advice, I—"*

*Boyd startled backward when Haar snapped the lid shut.*

*"Is he sleeping?" Ike whispered. "Standing up?"*

*They'd agreed to meet outside the gym afterward, away from the flurry of lost parents and idling cars. Haar had crossed his arms, bouquet tucked in the crook of his arm, leaning back against the brick exterior. Campus came into view slowly from their*

shaded spot at the entrance, that long sidewalk leading toward the campus center. Maybe it was the haze of sleep, but Haar almost missed that walk.

“Haar!”

He hadn’t seen her approach from his blind side, grinning with that mortarboard and fake diploma in hand. She’d hung the sunglasses from the collar of her graduation gown, revealing watery eyes. He had only a second to uncross his arms, freeing the roses before Jill crashed into him, pressing him back into the brick wall. Her hair smelled of confined sweat from the cap, warmed from the sun, her wet face on his neck.

“Congratulations,” he whispered, deliberately ignoring Boyd’s side-eye.

The others would come to the house, later. Jill had insisted on a congratulatory dinner, buying enough hamburgers and salads to feed an army. Haar tore off his tie before reaching the bedroom, the dress shirt matted to his spine. He listened to Jill move around the kitchen, the rushing sound of water into a glass vase, then a brief silence when she was likely arranging flowers. He pulled on a pair of jeans as she passed into the living room, setting the small bouquet of roses on the coffee table. She still wore her graduation gown, those sunglasses perched on the collar. Then she stood there, staring down at the roses, her back to the bedroom.

“What’s on your mind?” Haar asked. He stood in the doorway in his jeans, a gray polo slung over a shoulder.

She didn’t look up from the roses. “What do I do now?”

He crossed his arms, leaning against the doorframe. There were a thousand answers to that question, answers he still didn't know.

"Whatever you want," he replied.

Jill turned around, unhooking the sunglasses from her collar. He knew she wore that green knee-length dress under the gown, but his breath still hitched when she unzipped it down the front, the flimsy gown pooling around her bare feet.

"Let me ask you this," he added. "Do you want me around for it?"

"Don't be stupid." She tugged the hem of her sleeve. "Of course I do."

"That's a good start, isn't it?"

She crossed the room in two long strides, and he closed his eye to her touch—one hand at his waist, the other at his jaw. There were few things he knew for certain, but this was one of them, how she initiated a kiss with enough force to knock him backward, the shirt sliding off his bare shoulder. That when he held her, too, a hand threaded through plaited hair, perhaps there was one thing they both understood.