

CALL DOWN THE HAWK

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I

Creatures of all kinds had begun to fall asleep.

The cat was the most dramatic. It was a beautiful animal, if you liked cats, with a dainty face and long, cottony fur, the kind that seemed like it would melt away into liquid sugar. It was a calico, which under normal circumstances would mean it was certainly not an *it*, but rather a *she*. Calico had to be inherited from two X chromosomes. Perhaps that rule didn't apply here, though, in this comely rural cottage nearly no one knew about. Forces other than science held domain in this place. The calico might not even be a cat at all. It was cat-shaped, but so were some birthday cakes.

It had watched them kill him.

Caomhán Browne had been his name. Was still his name, really. Like good boots, identities outlived those who wore them. They had been told he was dangerous, but he'd thrown everything but what they'd feared at them. A tiny end table. A plump and faded floral recliner. A stack of design magazines. A flat-screen television of modest size. He'd actually stabbed Ramsay with the crucifix from the hallway wall, which Ramsay found funny even during the act of it. *Holy smokes*, he'd said.

One of the women wore lambskin dress-for-success heeled boots, and there was now an unbelievable amount of blood on them. One of the men was prone to migraines, and he could feel

the dreamy magic of the place sparking the lights of an aura at the edges of his vision.

In the end, Lock, Ramsay, Nikolenko, and Farooq-Lane had cornered both Browne and the cat in the low-ceilinged kitchen of the Irish holiday cottage, nothing within Browne's reach but a decorative dried broom on the wall and the cat. The broom wasn't good for anything, even sweeping, but the cat might have been used to good effect if thrown properly. Few have the constitution to throw a cat properly, however, and Browne was not one of them. One could see the moment he realized he didn't have it in him and gave up.

"Please don't kill the trees," he said.

They shot him. A few times. Mistakes were expensive and bullets were cheap.

The calico was lucky it hadn't gotten shot, too, crouched behind Browne as it was. Bullets go through things; that's their job. Instead it merely got splattered with blood. It let out an uncanny howl full of rage. It bottle-brushed its tail and puffed its cotton coat. Then it hurled itself straight at them, because you can trust that the Venn diagram of cats and folks willing to throw cats is a circle.

There was a very brief moment where it seemed quite possible that one of them was about to be wearing a cat with every claw extended.

But then Browne gave a final shiver and went still.

The cat dropped.

A body hits the floor with a sound like no other; the multi-faceted *flop* of an unconscious bag of bones can't be replicated in any other way. The calico made this sound and then was also still. Unlike Browne, however, its chest continued to rise and fall, rise and fall, rise and fall.

It was impossibly, unnaturally, entirely asleep.

“Truly fucked up,” remarked Ramsay.

There was a window over the little white sink, and through it one could see a deep green field and, closer, three shaggy ponies standing in the churned-up mud by the gate. They sagged to their knees, tipping against each other like drowsy fellows. A pair of goats bleated a confused question before slumping like the ponies. There were chickens, too, but they had already fallen asleep, soft multicolored mounds littered across the green.

Caomhán Browne had been what the Moderators called a Zed. This is what it meant to be a Zed: Sometimes, when they dreamt, they woke up with a thing they’d been dreaming about in their hands. The cat, as suspected, was not a cat. It was a cat-shaped thing drawn out of Browne’s head. And like all of Browne’s living dreams, it could not stay awake if Browne was dead.

“Note time of death for the record,” said Nikolenko.

They all cast their attention back to their prey—or their victim, depending on how human one found him. Farooq-Lane checked her phone and tapped a message into it.

Then they went to find the other Zed.

Overhead, the clouds were dark, eclipsing the tops of the slanting hills. The little Kerry farm was edged by a tiny, mossy wood. It was beautiful, but in between the trees, the air hummed even more than in the cottage. It was not exactly that they couldn’t breathe in this atmosphere. It was more like they couldn’t think, or like they could think too much. They were all getting a little nervous; the threats seemed truer out here.

The other Zed wasn’t even trying to hide. Lock found him sat in the crook of a mossy tree with a disturbingly blank expression.

“You killed him, didn’t you?” the Zed asked. Then, when Farooq-Lane joined Lock, he said, “Oh, you.”

Complicated familiarity coursed between the Zed and Farooq-Lane.

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” Farooq-Lane said. She was shivering a little. Not a cold shiver. Not a frightened shiver. One of those *rabbits running over your grave* numbers. “All you have to do is stop dreaming.”

Lock cleared his throat as if he felt the bargain wasn’t quite as simple as that, but he said nothing.

“Really?” The Zed peered up at Farooq-Lane. His attention was fully on her, as if the others weren’t there. Fair enough; her attention was entirely on him, too. “That kills me either way. I expected more complexity from you, Carmen.”

Lock raised his gun. He did not say it out loud, but he found this Zed a particularly creepy son of a bitch, and that was even without taking into account what he’d done. “Then you’ve made your choice.”

During all of this, Ramsay had fetched his gas cans from the back of the rental car; he’d been dying to use them all day. *Petrol*, he’d smirked, as if variations in English usage were sufficient material for a joke. Now the small copse had begun to stink of the sweet, carcinogenic perfume of gasoline as Ramsay drop-kicked the last of the gas cans in the direction of the cottage. He was probably the sort of person who would throw a cat.

“We’ll need to watch the road while it burns,” said Lock. “Let’s make this quick.”

The Zed looked at them with detached interest. “I understand *me*, guys, but why Browne? He was a kitten. What are you afraid of?”

Lock said, “Someone is coming. Someone is coming to end the world.”

In this humming wood, dramatic phrases like *end the world* felt not only plausible but probable.

The Zed quirked a gallows smile. “Is it you?”

Lock shot him. Several times. It was pretty clear the first one had done the job, but Lock kept going until he stopped feeling so creeped out. As the shots finished echoing through the wood, something deeper in the copse thudded to the ground with the same distinctive sound as the cat in the kitchen. It had some weight to it. All of them were glad that this dream had fallen asleep before they’d had a chance to meet it.

Now that the woods were silent, everyone left alive looked at Carmen Farooq-Lane.

Her eyes were squeezed tightly shut and her face was turned away, like she’d been bracing for a bullet herself. Her mouth worked but she didn’t cry. She did appear younger. Ordinarily she presented herself with such corporate sophistication—linen suits, lovely updos—that it was difficult to guess her age: one saw only a successful, self-possessed businesswoman. But this moment stripped away the glamour and revealed her as the twenty-something she was. It was not a comfortable sensation; there was the strong urge to wrap a blanket around her to return her dignity. But at least they couldn’t doubt her dedication. She’d been in this as deep as any of them and had seen it through to the end.

Lock put a paternal hand on her shoulder. In his deep voice, he rumbled, “ Fucked-up situation.”

It was difficult to tell if this offered Farooq-Lane any comfort.

He told the others, “Let’s finish this up and get out of here.”

Ramsay lit a match. He used it first to light a cigarette for Nikolenko, and next to light a cigarette for himself. Then he dropped it into the gasoline-soaked undergrowth just before the flame bit his fingertips.

The forest began to burn.

Farooq-Lane turned away.

Releasing a puff of cigarette smoke in the direction of the dead Zed’s body, Ramsay asked, “Have we saved the world?”

Lock tapped the time of Nathan Farooq-Lane’s death into his phone. “Too soon to say.”