

HOW TO SURVIVE YOUR FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE: SHATTERING GLASS

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Be careful what you wish for.

Ten years after the calamity of Arkaen Spring, the city of Arkaic, Michigan was in dire straits. Blood ran in the gutters like wine. Houses lit up like candles on a birthday cake. The population had fallen by more than half, to just north of 100K. Property values had dropped just as quickly, a fact that was not overlooked by A. Olan-Murphy, chair and president of the Olan-Murphy Foundation and the wealthiest man in Arkaic.

Every town of any size has a benefactor, and Arkaic is no exception. For over one-hundred years, the Olan-Murphys have subsidized municipal projects, cultural events, and organizations from block clubs to rotary clubs to the local Freemasons and the Knights of Columbus. The family has been a lifeline to the city in its direst need. They've also ensured that the commie elements in this left-leaning union town stayed within their proper bounds, that is to say, in obscurity and tottering on an edge that drops off into oblivion. Well, we all know how that's turned out. The Arkaen Spring brought everyone's dreams to fruition. What followed, however, was more pure nightmare, and neither pinkos nor the Olan-Murphys could do much about the situation.

Until everything became as cheap as shit.

This was a rare moment, A. felt, a moment that hearkened back to the turn-of-the-century (20th) when Charles Olan-Murphy came into town and bankrolled a few brick buildings called X Automotives. It was a smart move. X became one of the largest corporations in the world, and Charles became a dangerously wealthy man. Of course, fortunes have diminished with time, both for X and for the Olan-Murphys, and by 2006 the clan had been reduced to a modest existence as non-sub-billionaires and a common source of names for buildings and parks.

Yes, yes, a rare moment indeed, A. felt, elusive and precious. Soft veins in hard rock deep underground. For the land had become so cheap, and tuition so high, that A. could buy up some dilapidated neo-gothic cathedralesque things in one corner of town, commit his funds to recruiting faculty and renovating, and still have plenty left over for a healthy endowment, as well as for his mansions and mistresses. He had always wanted to be a father, and now he would be a father of

minds, which is perhaps the best kind of father in the end. He would build his school on the highest hill in Arkaic, in the vacant Arken County Lunatic Asylum, and power it with the raw memories of the ruined town.

Yes, they would offer all sorts of programs, but they would specialize in the arts and humanities. Their rivals would be the engineers at X Automotives Institute across the river. Charles thought about calling his school the Olan-Murphy College, or the Lyceum, or the Arken Academy. In the end, he settled on the more straightforward Arkaic University. Their color would be gold.

And so, in 2008, the old oak doors swung open to students for the first time, and they carried their tomes of Cervantes and Sterne and hundreds of sweaty moleskine notebooks. They may have been the very first students, but the history of the place pressed down upon them. Pyrotherapy and cardiazol shock, and occasional stunning freedoms. The halls had all been fresh scrubbed and painted, but they smelled of the thickness of infinite dust. And then again, while the consciousness of preemptive spectres made cobwebs in the students' brains, they started, through their own activities, to structure some threats of their own. But what fantasies would these students construct? And how soon would their own mythology begin to intrude upon more accepted realities?

CHAPTER ONE

THE RAPID RISE AND FALL OF ADA SOMETHINGOROTHER

Don't let this happen to you.

September, 2011. Ada arrives late in the day, and the sparks leap from one serrated battlement to the next. Here it is, her new home, Calliope Cradle, her dormitory, and it looks more like a castle. Not a fairytale German palace, but a thick Slavic thing wearing a crumbling blanket of moss and dismay. She hauls her luggage up the ramp and through the door to the courtyard. Her heavy-lidded eyes take in the wide, wide sky. She has an expressionless face that is always half asleep (unless she's sleeping). It's hard to tell if she's listening or not. She yawns sometimes, which might mean that she's awake but dozy. Sometimes, she even picks up a pen and doodles out some equations. Not especially life-full, most days, but today she blinks. She blinks today, and those blinks, *shutter shutter*, are signs of startlement and discomprehension.

Shudder shudder. It's cool in here, and why won't you pick some berries off the lush cherry trees that have been planted about the Spectral Courtyard for you to enjoy? You'll find them near the alleged graves of Hobbes and Paine, ivy-duelling post-death. You'll have a tiny room on the very first floor crushed between the lower rampart moat and the inner house lounge. It is a single. You'll live alone, Ada. There are seven houses here and they all vie and compete with each other. This isn't like Hogwart's; none of these houses are virtuous, and each is devoted to a different deadly sin. You'll have to watch how you dress and undress, Ada, because your bedroom is in good view and the curtains are dangerously diaphanous. They say that leopards and lions browse the courtyard, and there, there, the students lie under the pear trees, but these are all the Orientation Designations. The brand new students are still too shocked and startled to repose at ease.

Touring the dorm, everything seems a flavorful extreme and as pearl perfect as possible on earth. Sugar crusts the pen-scarred doors, and they say a recruited descendent of the czar's daughter comes by to bless them with dappled frosting flowers she makes herself. In the basement, beneath the cafeteria, the floor has been graffitied with dangerous proofs, teaching earthbound Hydrogen fusion, and so doing, the solutions to the wounds of love. As George Clinton says, it's the balm. Calliope Cradle is neither the oldest dorm, nor the closest, nor the most remote. It sprawls along South Street, and students have to cross the Fairway to get to their classes, and while the Luminous Gardens with their firefly lanterns and Xenon lamps flare all night long, Ada is a little nervous about the massive subterranean tunnels with taut, tight snakes of chains. She's never heard of "chain power" before. She doesn't understand the premise of the temporelectrical turbine. She is a novitiate; here tread experts.

But, she tries her best, or at least a little.

She leaves her boxes in her room, and crosses the Fairway and the Quints to formally register at Olan-Murphy Commons. She's been here before, as a 12th grade prospie, but the room seems larger now that it is filled with new students. They seem correspondingly small because they are nervous and they don't know.

"Hi," says a boy as she stands in line.

She looks at him, peripherally. She looks away. She doesn't want to talk.

"I'm Sam," says the boy.

Okay, fine.

"... hello."

"What's your name?"

"... ada."

"Sorry, what?"

"... Ada."

"You just get here today?"

"... yeah."

"Coo'. Me too."

Sam is tall and slender, and, um, gangly, with knobby knees and elbows, and face a that looks almost triangular, like a Praying Mantis. He has dark black skin and short cropped hair. He wears a bright orange T-shirt with a zombie dolphin's head exploding in a spatula-print of blood. Sam seems way too confident for his awkward appearance. *Gregarious* would be a good word.

"Man, this place is *crazy*," he says. "I've been here a lot, but I never knew how *crazy* it was. Those lights and those gardens are wild. But there's so many little hidden places all over. My dorm has a secret passage to the law library. And there're bricks where the mortar is all crumbled apart, and it looks like there's a door behind that. I got a cannon – homemade, right – and I thought I might shoot some out of it. I've never shot a brick before."

Go away, Ada thought.

"You've been here a lot? As a prospie?" she says instead. *Why did I just say that?*

"Who, me?" *Who else?* "Oh, not as a prospective student, or whatever. I'm from Arkaic. I wanted to go to XAI – um, the X Automotives Institute – but my grades weren't good enough. So I'm here to study engineering. Aeronautics, I think. What about you, where you from?"

Shut up, Ada thinks, and is about to say, but then the question catches in her brain. Where *is* she from? Since she has arrived, the dorm, the moat, the tunnels and chains, and yes, the lights and gardens – in all their pungent power – their pregnant presence – they all ride (is that the word?) past or slide (is that it?) by or – elide – anything weaker and less vivid than themselves. Like her memories of her home. Her own dull memories of her own apathetic home.

"I don't know," she says, "Iowa or Missouri or something." *Davenport!* she thinks. *It's Davenport*, with relief.

"Huh," says Sam. "Well, it looks like I'm up," and he steps up to a desk and starts filling out forms.

Ada meets her parents back at Calliope and they spend the rest of the day in the vast dining hall with its poop deck and barrel-vaulted ceilings, and then she attends some talks where suited vagrants intone the legacy of the University and Arkaic in Latin-cadenced words. "Lorem ipsum" and all that. As the sun sets, Ada stands with her parents, trying to recall their names. She awkwardly says goodbye. She makes herself give them a hug, but she's not accustomed to this and it feels strange. Her hands are almost limp around their waists.

Back at the dorm, Ada goes to the bathroom to take a quick shower, to awaken her brain, always tired, always bored, and there she runs into – Sam!

"Hey!" he says, "You didn't tell me you were in Acedia house."

Blink blink. Startled. "Did ... did you tell me?"

“Yeah, I did!”

“Oh,” she says. “Well. I don't remember.”

“Oh, well anyway –”

“What are you doing in the girls' bathroom?”

“This isn't the girls' bathroom. The bathrooms are all coed!”

“They are?”

“Yeah, but you should look out that there,” and he pointed to an interior window of dull black glass. “It's for ventilation, but it funnels lightning from the chain tunnels. I stood there for ten minutes earlier, and I saw a big ol' bolt!”

“... Oh.”

“Anyway, I'm off to the house meeting. I'll see you soon?”

He leaves.

What's his name?

Ada decides to skip the house meeting. She's too confused, too bedazzled, to take on anything new. She wants refuge in her boredom and memories, such as they are. She wants to cultivate her nostalgia. She spends the rest of the evening unpacking and listening to her Black Eyed Peas – *The End, The Beginning, Blah Blah Blah* – and then she goes to sleep. She dreams her favorite dream. It's a dream about a time when she beat the computer at Hearts twice in a row.

While she dreams, things move just beyond her translucent curtain. Sam has gathered some other first years in the courtyard, and they shoot old bricks at the moon from a pneumatic potato cannon. On the Fairway, the fireflies have escaped their cages and they swarm the gate and alight on autumn snapdragons and September crocuses. It gets later, and most of the orientees go inside to unpack or sleep. There aren't any Designations drinking out on the lawn at this hour, and if they are, then they certainly aren't drinking Old Krupnik. Leave that amber honey for the Poles.

The grass isn't green in September. It's sharply emerald. It has turned purple now that it is nighttime, ultraviolet, as under a blacklight, yes, it is a black amythyst, like moonside shadows. The branches shake. The oak moans. Satyrs prance and the Designations don't ride them. Satyrs kick when you do that. Bugs have sex on the peonies. Theresa Romanov licks her sugar flowers as well as the belladonna buds. Pomegranate seeds have the double bonus of both prolonging life and acting as aphrodisiacs. Not that any naughtiness is happening here. Old Krupnik only bends Poles that way.

Meanwhile, high above, a late wash of the Perseids commences, and while most of the stones remain stone and fizzle in the atmosphere, a few of them spin and shift, dihydroxegenate and turn wet. They fall and hit the courtyard. The brambles and the trellises. The rambles and the turning pages of Descartes that ripple in the sourceless whisperless. Rain from a cloudless sky. The Designations don't kiss in the alcoves. They don't do more than kiss. The brighter and sharper of the new students don't step out into the dark to drink the wine of Histiaea and Lydia and, if they're feeling exotic, Kozol. The irregular stone walkway. The cobbled boards where parasites hide. Partisans' lances. Mumscores. Leaflets.

It's going to be a late fall this year. Balmy and barmy and strong. It isn't going to get cold at all. This September, September lasts forever. It isn't going to change, though the trees will grow and grow and grow and drop moon-shaped fruits to be eaten. The air is so thick you could suck it like a banana, and when you explode, your matter disappears.

Orientation is dangerous. It simply cannot be helped.

The RAs have warned the Designations to pay special attention to listless students like Ada. After all, the things that are happening right outside her window flush with frenzy and havoc that evades her very most cherished dreams. There's little hope not to dissolve to nothing. And even if she has one poignant last moment – a pale face, heaving chest, dry eyes, numb panic as she tries and fails to remember her parents' faces – she is simply too dull for this place. It forgets her as it made her forget herself. The air goes thin and dusty and cool. The walls become as the air. Her mind is stretched and expanded to sleep. Her body has ceased to be. She fades away, erased from the universe.

The Designations do their best. They really do. Still, nobody bats a hundred, and every year a few students are effaced and elided.

Housing doesn't notice the decline, and still sends bills to her parents.

“Ada?” they say, “Who's Ada?”

Her professors notice that she's not coming to class. They either fail her or assume she's withdrawn.

And then, one day, several weeks in, Sam goes walking down the hall of the first floor of Acedia House. He stops when he feels something tug like a metal hook right behind his aorta. It's the plain wood door to his right. It leads to a bedroom. A single.

“Didn't someone used to live here?” he says aloud.

But, the Tigers are on track for their 28th World Series win, and Sam doesn't want to miss the Game Four sweep.

He continues down the hall, and gets on with his life.