TARGET PRACTICE

An InCryptid Story
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by

Seanan McGuire
The forest was quiet. Not the quiet of actual peace, actual stillness; the quiet that follows a sharply indrawn breath, hesitant and fragile and easily broken. No bushes rustled. No frickens sang. It was a rare moment of absolute calm—at least until the blonde blur broke through the blueberry bushes, running hell-bent for the border.

Alice covered the uneven ground with a sprinter’s speed and a resident’s confidence, her feet finding the safe space between twisting roots and gaping holes. No one else in the county could have run that wood that fast, and that was swell and all, but it was going to be a small comfort if she still wasn’t fast enough. Because that was the thing about speed: it was always relative. She could be the fastest runner in the whole damn state, and it wasn’t going to help her if the thing she’d woken in the woods turned out to be a hair’s-breadth faster.

She could hear it gaining. It wasn’t bothering to dodge or go around obstacles, no, it was ploughing straight through them, letting size and a heavily armored hide carry it through branch and briar alike.

_I am going to be eaten alive by something I can’t name and didn’t even see that clearly, and the first words Mama says to me when I get to Heaven are gonna be bad ones_, she thought nonsensically. It felt like there wasn’t any air getting to her brain anymore, on account of she was running so hard her lungs ached. Not as badly as her legs, though. _Those_ felt like they were going to drop clean off, and to hell with the rest of her.

The beast kept gaining. Alice kept running. Light was filtering through the tree line up ahead, marking the blessed end of the wood. She’d be even faster on flat ground, and depending on where she came out, she might even have a convenient house to hide behind. It would be better if she didn’t lead whatever was chasing her into a group of campers or something, but honestly, if she did, they would probably be better armed than she was. Nobody with any sense went into the woods without at least a BB gun to their name.

Too bad no one had ever accused her of having any sense. She’d been carrying her second-best hatchet—and she was never going to see that again, having dropped it somewhere between the scream and the sprint—and six knives, all of which had already been thrown. No guns. Not even a slingshot. Her father didn’t want her getting too comfortable with firearms, which struck her as just short of “her father didn’t want to have any living children.” He seemed to think that being poorly armed would keep her from going looking for trouble. Sometimes she wasn’t sure her father had ever actually met her.

Alice hit the edge of the wood, somehow unsurprised to see the Parrish Place looming up ahead of her like an invitation to expand her horizons to include even more terrible ideas. She could still hear the thing behind her. Apparently, it didn’t care where the wood ended. She had woken it—she had stepped on it—and it was going to eat her for her crimes. Placing two fingers in her mouth, she took as deep a breath as her aching lungs would allow and whistled shrilly.

_Please be home, please be home, please be home_, she chanted silently, as she ran straight for the porch.

She was almost there when the back door opened, and she was treated to the sight of Thomas Price in his undershirt, expression cycling rapidly from confusion to surprise to outright fear.

“Run!” he shouted.

Normally, Alice would have shouted something back, probably to the effect that she was already running, and if he didn’t think she was doing it right, she’d be happy to trade places with him. Under the circumstances, she was happier saving her breath and angling for the back porch stairs. If she could just get to the house, she would be…well, not necessarily safe, but at least better equipped not to have her head bitten off by a thing from the deep woods.

Alice ran. The beast gained. Thomas pulled something out of the waistband of his slacks, taking careful aim. His finger was well clear of the trigger, and for good reason: at least for the moment, any shot he wanted to
fire would need to travel straight through Alice to get the thing behind her.

She wasn’t going to reach the steps. There was only one option left, and while it was a lousy one, it was better than nothing. “Now!” she shouted, as loudly as she could, and hit the dirt, landing hard enough that she felt the knees of her jeans give way. There wasn’t time to dwell on the pain: she could hear the beast closing in.

Thomas fired. Three times in quick succession, each shot loud enough to block out the rest of the world. The beast yelped. The sound was surprisingly high and shrill for something that large, and was followed by the sound of hooves thundering away. Alice resisted the urge to roll over and look. She needed to keep herself out of the line of fire until Thomas gave the all-clear, and not think too hard about the fact that she was trusting her life to a man who still swore his allegiance to the Covenant of St. George. She liked Mr. Price, honest she did, but sometimes it was hard to forget that they were supposed to be on different sides.

Footsteps approached, and then Thomas asked, in a mild, puzzled tone, “Miss Healy, why did you just lead a giant hog to my back door?”

“How?” Alice pushed herself off the ground, wincing as the motion drove the dirt deeper into her skinned palms. She quickly reviewed what little she’d seen before she’d turned and run, and brightened. “Aw, Grandma’s going to be tickled pink. She’s been saying for years that there were dire boars in the woods around here, but we’ve never actually managed to find one before today.”

“You’re not answering my question,” said Thomas. He sounded less angry than puzzled, like he honestly couldn’t figure out why she would have done such a thing. “Why did you lead the, ah, dire boar to my back door? Oh dear lord, that rhymes. I’m transforming into a children’s book.”

“Too bad ‘damp’ doesn’t actually rhyme with ‘swamp,’ or you’d have a best-seller on your hands,” said Alice. “According to Grandma, there aren’t any native pigs in North America, but there are lots of pigs imported by stupid people who really liked bacon, and some of them got loose.”

“Including, presumably, the ancestor of your dire boar, which you led to my back door, for reasons you still have not bothered to take the time to properly explain.” Thomas stuffed the gun back into his waistband. “Are you hurt?”

“Only from falling down,” said Alice. She looked down at the shredded knees of her pants and grimaced. “Also going to get a hiding when I get home, I guess. I wasn’t supposed to be in the woods. But piggy didn’t catch up with me, if that’s what you’re asking. He was pretty fast. I was just a little bit faster.”

“You wouldn’t have been for long,” said Thomas grimly. Unlike Alice, he had seen the thing that was pursuing her: had seen how close its tusks had been to her shoulders when he opened fire and drove it back. “I don’t think you appreciate how narrow a miss that was.”

“See there? You’ve answered your own question.” Alice looked up and smiled brightly at him. “I wasn’t exactly aiming to bring you a giant pig as a houseguest, but when I came out of the woods I saw your house, and I figured you’d be better suited to deal with it than I was, on account of I sort of ran out of weapons while I was still in the woods.”

Thomas was silent. It wasn’t a matter of not knowing what to say. It was more an issue of not knowing which of the many conflicting things he should say first, beginning with “you could have been killed” and moving from there into a long litany of words that he was reasonably sure he wasn’t supposed to say in front of the teenage granddaughter of Alexander Healy.

Alice took Thomas’s silence as an opportunity to dust herself off and smooth her hair back into a semblance of order. Most of the things she knew about her mother came from her father, whose stories were always sanitized and saintly, her grandmother, who tried to present her dearly departed daughter-in-law in the best light possible, and the mice. According to the mice, much of Fran’s wisdom had related to her hair. “Good hair
can cover for a multitude of sins, including a thorough dousing of ichor," was one of the main pieces of Aeslin wisdom she had absorbed.

And the thing was, they—and by extension, Fran—were right. If she kept her hair nicely combed and shiny, people were more inclined to believe her when she said she was running because she was late for class, or that the blood on her clothes was really strawberry juice. If she let herself get scruffy, the world turned suspicious. If she kept herself clean and neat, she could get away with almost anything.

Finishing with her hair, she looked back to Thomas, intending to thank him for keeping her from being pig-food. Then she froze. The rush of adrenaline that had propelled her out of the wood had faded, leaving her hollowed-out and shaky, and for the first time, she really realized what he was wearing—or wasn’t wearing, as might be more accurate. His undershirt left both his arms exposed, revealing the tattoos that ran from his shoulders all the way down to his wrists in a swirl of colors and unfamiliar shapes. The tattoos continued across the front of his chest, going right up to the edge of where they would be hidden by a standard men’s shirt. Alice suddenly found it difficult to breathe.

“Miss Healy?” Thomas sounded concerned. “Are you all right?”

No, you’re naked, she thought nonsensically. Cheeks flaring red, she said, “I should go. I’m not supposed to be here. My father doesn’t like it. I, uh…thank you. For your help. With the dire boar. I’m going to tell Grandma about it. She may come here. Looking. For it, I mean, not at you, not that there’s anything wrong with looking at oh God I almost said that out loud thank you again good-bye!”

She turned and bolted for the road, leaving Thomas blinking quizzically after her.

“I had expected her to at least ask how the tailypo was doing,” he said to himself. Then he turned and walked back up the porch stairs to the house. If he was going to be chasing a giant hog around the woods, he was going to do it in better shoes.

Distances traveled in the woods didn’t always translate well to the world outside them. They curved around Buckley Township like a great hand, broken only where the trees had been cleared for housing or to let the roads scythe through. It was possible to walk for hours and travel less than half a mile. It was equally, paradoxically possible to spend twenty minutes in the woods and come out entirely on the other side of town. Alice sometimes suspected the trees of having a mind of their own. It always seemed like the days when she needed to stay close to home were the ones where she came out the farthest away.

This day…it was a Sunday, which meant church in the morning, to keep up appearances, followed by her father vanishing off to the library to do his paperwork for the week. He never stayed gone for more than a few hours. It had seemed like plenty long enough to go for a walk in the woods and clear her head, but that was before she’d wound up being chased by a dire boar and ripping the knees out of a pair of practically-new pants. Coming out all the way over by the Parrish Place was just icing on the cake of how much trouble she was in.

Normally, she would have cut through the woods to make the trip home faster. Normally, she wasn’t unarmed and painfully aware of the giant pig that was lurking somewhere out there, wounded and angry. Could pigs hold a grudge? She didn’t want to find out the hard, getting devoured way. So she trudged down the road and across the fields between her and home, hoping all the while that she would somehow have beaten the odds and have time to get herself cleaned up before her father came back from the library.

Hope died as she started up the driveway and saw her father’s car—a battered jalopy of a thing, but it ran more smoothly than the family truck, which was sometimes what mattered—parked in the shadow of the barn. She was busted. Well, if she was going to her own execution, she was going to go proudly. Squaring her shoulders andslicking back her hair with the palm of her hand, she walked straight for the front porch, up the steps, and through the door.
As she had expected, her father was waiting in the foyer. He didn’t rise, just looked at her with a puzzled, wounded expression on his face, like he couldn’t understand how this was happening. “Oh, Alice,” he said. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Give me a gun and let Grandma teach me how to use it better, so I don’t come home late anymore,” she replied. She was already in trouble. There was no point in playing innocent now.

Jonathan’s face hardened, puzzlement fading into anger. “You know better than to ask me for that. Where were you? What have you done to your clothes?”

“I went for a walk in the woods, Daddy,” she said. “I got a little turned around and wound up going further than I’d planned to, or I would have been home before you were. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“You didn’t mean to worry me,” he echoed. “Well, you did, Alice. What’s more, the way you say that makes me suspect that this wasn’t the first time you disobeyed me in this manner. Have you been going to the woods often?”

Alice paused for a moment. The thought of lying was tempting—more tempting than it should have been, for someone who at least tried to be a good girl. But what had being good ever gotten her? Just lectures and shame and hiding herself away. She took a deep breath, and said, “Just about every day. After school, when I don’t have too much homework, and after dinner, when I do. Twice a day on the weekends. Sally Duffy hasn’t been my friend for almost three years, not since the igneous scorpions ate her dog. So every time I’ve said I was going to a sleepover at her place, I spent the night in the woods. The frickens aren’t afraid of me anymore, Daddy. They keep singing even when I’m sitting in the tree with them.”

Silence fell, leaden and heavy, as Jonathan stared at her. Then, in a cold, choked-off voice, he said, “Go to your room.”

“But Daddy—”

“I said go to your room.”

Alice took a quick breath, fighting the urge to burst into tears, and turned to silently run for the stairs. There was nothing delicate about the way she pounded up them. The slamming of her bedroom door followed a few seconds later.

Jonathan dropped his head into his hands and sat there, not moving, for several minutes. Finally, he lowered his hands, and said, “I know you’re there, Father. Did you have something to say?”

“I’m not sure you’ll listen,” said Alexander. “You can be a little pig-headed where Alice is concerned.”

“Pig—she’s my daughter.” Jonathan twisted without rising. Alexander was leaning up against the doorway, a rag slung over one shoulder and a flensing knife in his right hand. He looked like a butcher on his way to work. It couldn’t have been a greater contrast to his tight-laced son, who was still dressed for the public, from his carefully shined shoes to his high-buttoned shirt. “I am not pig-headed. I’m a concerned father who wants what’s best for his little girl.”

“Is what’s best for her getting eaten alive by something nasty from the swamp? Because that’s what you’re setting her up for. You won’t let her learn to shoot. You barely let her learn how to do field dressings. You’re keeping her unprepared for the world.”

“Because that’s not the world I want for her!” Jonathan rose, only half-aware that he was shouting. “When are you and Mother going to realize that? She’s my little girl. She needs a normal life, friends, hobbies. She should be mooning over boys at the soda shop and making me reach for the shotgun, not asking for a shotgun of her own!”
“But if she did those things, she wouldn’t be Alice,” said Alexander. “She’s her mother’s daughter as much as she’s yours, and it’s not like we’ve given her a ‘normal’ upbringing. Her best friend is her former babysitter, and Mary’s been dead a long time now. The mice tell her about Fran every chance they get. The only way that girl would have had a shot at normal was if you’d whisked her off the day we buried her mother—and even then, the mice would have tracked her down. Or Mary would have. One way or another, she would have found out who she was.”

“So you’re saying that she never had a chance,” said Jonathan. “I refuse to believe that. You’re the one who wouldn’t let me leave with her after Fran died. Should I blame you, then? Should I sit by the door waiting for the sheriff to arrive, hat in hand, and tell me that they’ve identified my daughter’s body by a shoe?”

“No,” said Alexander patiently. “You should give her a gun. You should trust her. She’s smarter than you give her credit for, and more invested in her own safety. She’d be long dead, if that wasn’t the case.”

“Unbelievable.” Jonathan shook his head. “She’s your granddaughter. Don’t you want her to be safe?”

“More than anything,” said Alexander. “That’s why you need to let go of your expectations for who she’s going to be, and trust who she actually is. If you don’t, you’re going to lose her, whether she lives or not. The choice is yours, son. I hope you’re smart enough to make the right one.”

Alexander turned and walked back down the hall before Jonathan could settle on a reply.

Enid was in the kitchen, preparing a chicken for dinner, when Alexander entered the room. He didn’t say hello to her; just stalked past, wrenched open the icebox, and removed a bottle of root beer, which he carried, wordlessly, to the table. He sat, knocking the lid off against the edge of the napkin holder. Enid watched all this in silence. When it became clear that he wasn’t going to say anything, she cleared her throat.

“Are you planning to be like this through dinner tonight? Because I was going to roast the chicken, but I suppose there’s room for both of us to stew.”

There was a long pause. Alexander slowly turned to look at her. “That pun was horrific,” he said.

“I know.”

“There should be a law.”

“There probably is.” Enid cracked a smile. “But look: you’re speaking to me. So if you choose to turn me over to the authorities, I’ll go quietly, and feel that I have earned my punishment. What happened?”

Alexander sighed, looking down at his root beer before he said, “Alice wasn’t quick enough getting home, and when she did get here, she’d managed to ruin another pair of blue jeans. Ripped the knees right out.”

“I heard the shouting, and trousers can be patched.” Enid resumed her dinner preparations, hands moving automatically through the familiar motions. “How angry is he?”

“He feels like we’ve all betrayed him, like Alice never had a chance to be normal. He doesn’t understand that she never wanted to be his kind of normal—and honestly, he doesn’t know what that word means. This is how he grew up. This is the only world he’s ever known.”

“Maybe that’s what makes the alternative seem so appealing,” said Enid. “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence. Mind you, I always assumed that meant the other side of the fence was where all the bodies were buried, but that’s neither here nor there. He wants to keep her safe. He loves her. All of this is his way of trying to be a good father, and while I can’t say I approve, I can’t say I blame him, either. Not after what happened to Daniel. Not after what happened to Fran.”
“There are plenty of bodies buried on our side of the fence,” agreed Alexander, and heaved a sigh. “He’s still on edge over Thomas. Afraid the man is here to kidnap Alice and drag her back to the Covenant for their judgment.”

“As if a Price boy would go back on his word like that,” said Enid. She opened the oven, testing the heat with her hand before placing the roasting pan on the rack. “Tommy says he’s not here to betray us, and I believe him.”

“But this is where having a Covenant upbringing becomes an asset,” said Alexander. “You know that no Price would break a promise that had been freely given, or change his mind once he had decided on a course of action. Johnny only has what we’ve told him.”

“And for most of his life, we’ve been telling him not to trust the Covenant,” said Enid grimly. She closed the oven. “We couldn’t have anticipated this. I always assumed that if they sent someone after us, it would be an outright attack, not a quiet little spy. I was almost looking forward to it. We could have put a few bullets in the appropriate places, and been left alone for another thirty years.”

“Unfortunately, sweetheart, the Covenant knows us as well as we know them,” said Alexander.

Enid sighed as she walked over to sit down across from him. “Yes, they do. Their information is equally outdated. So Tommy’s presence makes Johnny even more paranoid, and all the while, Alice is getting older and less willing to listen to her father, especially when he insists on making damn stupid rules. How long before all this blows up in our face?”

“Not long,” said Alexander. “Something’s got to change.”

“I suppose that’s true.” She leaned across the table, grabbed his root beer, and took a swig before passing it back. “Can you keep an eye on the chicken, make sure that it doesn’t burn the house down? I think I need to go calling on our neighbors.”

“I’m assuming that by ‘neighbors’ you mean ‘Thomas Price,’” said Alexander.

Enid smiled. “You’re a smart man.”

“You married me for a reason.”

“Yes—you had a fabulous rear end when you were younger.”

Alexander roared with laughter. Saluting his wife with his half-empty root beer, he said, “Just be careful, and take the truck. I don’t want you walking all that way alone.”

“I’ll be home soon,” said Enid, and left.

There were rats in the attic. Thomas hadn’t seen any, and his attempts at trapping them had all, thus far, come to naught, but he still heard them scampering about when he was trying to sleep at night. He’d try poison next, if it didn’t stop. Or maybe he’d set the tailypo among them.

“You’re a carnivore,” he said to the long-tailed creature that was currently sitting on the kitchen table, peeling an egg with its unnervingly humanoid hands. The tailypo looked up, watching him unblinkingly. “I know you prefer hard-boiled eggs and whatever it is I’m trying to eat, but you must have hunted for yourself before you came here. You could catch the rats, couldn’t you?”

The tailypo snuffled once and went back to peeling the egg. Thomas sighed.
“This is how it begins, you know,” he said. “I’m speaking to the wildlife. Soon enough, I won’t even need an animal to talk to. I’ll just talk to myself, stop shaving, and go slowly mad from the pressure of seclusion. Never give the Covenant of St. George reason to punish you, all right? They’ll find the worst thing they can possibly do, and then they’ll make you thank them for doing it.”

The tailypo, which had reached the yolk, didn’t look up again.

The doorbell rang.

Thomas turned toward it, instantly alert. He didn’t get many visitors, apart from Alice, and she had never used the doorbell. In fact, she had told him, on multiple occasions, that the doorbell didn’t work. Since he doubted she would lie about that—what would be the point?—it didn’t make much sense for someone to be using it now.

“You stay here,” he told the tailypo. “Should someone attempt to murder me, you can piss upon them and then hide under the bed, as you are already inclined to do.”

The tailypo made a chittering noise and went back to eating its egg.

Thomas made his way from the kitchen into the living room, which was beginning to look lived in, if by “lived in” one meant “filled with stacks of boxes, books, and boxes full of books, all of which will eventually need to be unpacked.” The postman didn’t customarily deliver to Old Mill Road, which was considered sufficiently rural to require picking things up at the station, but Thomas had been able to bribe the man to drive out several times all the same, dropping off his worldly possessions one crate at a time. The weapons were stowed in the basement, by and large, where they wouldn’t frighten anyone who happened to drop by—although again, most of the “dropping by” he’d experienced thus far had come from Alice, and he doubted that she would be frightened by something as simple as a machete on the couch.

The doorbell rang again. Thomas picked up the pace, and opened the front door to the edifying sight of Enid Healy crouched down, a screwdriver in her hand, putting the plate back on the doorbell.

“You had a short,” she said, looking up with a broad smile. “It should work just fine now. Are you not a handyman, or had you just not gotten around to it?”

“This is the first time I’ve had reason to concern myself with home repair,” he admitted, attempting to reconcile the woman in front of him with the stories he’d been told about the great betrayers. Alexander and Enid Healy were meant to be wicked, monster-loving masterminds who had turned against their friends and family to begin an orgy of destruction and chaos. That didn’t mesh very well with the couple he’d met on his first night in town. It certainly didn’t mesh with their cheerfully stubborn granddaughter, who seemed more like a disaster waiting to happen than she did the calculating villain in training painted by the Covenant.

Everyone above him had wanted him to view the Healys as the enemy, worthy foes who would need to be constantly monitored and observed, lest they destroy the natural world.

Instead, he’d found a family that just wanted to be left alone to make their own mistakes and live their own lives. And possibly lead dire boars to his back door in their spare time.

“Well, then, you’d best get on it,” said Enid, making the screwdriver vanish back into a pocket as she got to her feet. “This place would be happy to come down around your ears if you don’t keep it in shape.”

“I think the house is too malicious to collapse,” said Thomas. “Dump splinters in my oatmeal, certainly, but fall down? Not quite. To what do I owe the pleasure, Mrs. Healy?”

“Oh, the usual.” Enid flapped a hand, indicating the essential unimportance of her reasons for visiting.

“Johnny’s convinced that your presence is a sign that the Covenant is out to get us in general and Alice in specific, since she might still be young enough to be molded into a good little soldier. I wanted to get a sense
of what was going on in your head. Also, Alice had let slip that your doorbell was broken, and I rather thought you might like to have it fixed.”

“Ah.” Thomas took a step backward, holding the door wider open. “Would you like to come in? I can put the kettle on. The stove works. For the most part. When it doesn’t work, it doesn’t explode, so I feel relatively confident in using it.”

“It’s good to see that nothing has changed back at the Covenant,” said Enid, and stepped inside. Thomas raised his eyebrows. She gave him a sidelong look. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s just that, ah, Alice refuses to come in the house under normal circumstances. I wasn’t expecting you to agree so quickly.”

“She might be showing common sense about being alone with an older man, but as I’ve met my granddaughter, I know she isn’t,” said Enid. “This house has something of a reputation with the local teenagers.”

“Yes, so I’ve been told,” said Thomas. “She calls it ‘the murder house,’ and stays out on the porch when she visits—not, I hasten to add, that she visits often. That would be inappropriate.”

“Don’t worry, dear, I’m not here to ask what your intentions are toward my granddaughter.” Not yet, anyway. Enid had seen the way Alice’s smile went soft around the edges when she talked about Mr. Price and his spooky murder house. Even if Thomas’s intentions were never anything beyond friendship and survival, Alice was nursing the beginnings of a crush—and a well-nursed crush had the potential to mature into a full-blown infatuation if it received any encouragement at all. “Alice goes where Alice will go. She always has. That’s part of the problem.”

“I see,” said Thomas. He shut the door. “I assume that Jonathan is using that to support his ideas about what I’m doing here.”

“You live near the woods and Alice has wound up asleep on your couch at least once; she came home today with the knees ripped out of her trousers, asking for a gun. He’s quite sure that you’re the devil.” Enid looked around with undisguised curiosity. “Still haven’t unpacked?”

“I’ve been here less than a month,” said Thomas. “The postman only brought the last of my things on Friday. I think he’s relieved to be done with me.”

“Most of these boxes would be…?”

“Books. I was a researcher before I got assigned here. I’m planning to continue my work while I’m in exile.”

Enid gave him a thoughtful look. “So you think you’ll eventually be recalled?”

“I rather hope I won’t be, which means it’s virtually guaranteed to happen,” said Thomas. “Would you like that tea?”

“Yes, please.”

Thomas nodded and led the way back to the kitchen. The tailypo had finished its egg, and was ripping a piece of bread into bite-sized chunks. It looked up as the two humans entered, making a chittering noise and baring its teeth.

Enid blinked. “Mr. Price, I’m not sure you’re aware, but there is a tailypo on your kitchen counter.”

“Yes, I know,” said Thomas, continuing onward to the stove. “Alice found it while she was showing me around the woods. It had been injured, probably by something she called an ‘angler tortoise’—I’ve been trying
to find one for reference ever since, but whatever they are, they hide well—and she brought it back here to be nursed back to health.”

“Which she promptly conned you into doing, I see,” said Enid. “It looks like it’s healing nicely. Have you thought about returning it to the woods?”

“Not quite yet,” said Thomas. He set the kettle on the stove. “If nothing else, it serves as a sort of company. It can get quite lonesome out here.”

“I suppose it would,” said Enid. There was a kitchen table, flanked by two rickety-looking chairs. She gingerly sat, relieved when the aged furniture supported her weight. “Nothing like the Covenant here, is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” said Thomas. “I was always reasonably solitary—most of the trainees from my year went into the field, and I was more interested in the research side of things, so I didn’t form many close alliances. Then I started following bad avenues of inquiry, and was sent away to learn the error of my choices. We can all see how well that turned out.” He grimaced, indicating the stained, peeling wallpaper. “At the same time, I never realized how comforting it was to be surrounded by people who would know what the hell I was talking about if I chose to speak to them. Er. Pardon my French.”

“I was one of those trainees who went into the field,” said Enid, with a sudden, dimpled smile that made her Carew origins perfectly clear. “I was the best marksman in my class. If I wanted something dead, it was on the ground before it knew it was being hunted. If you really think a little mild swearing is something I’ve never heard before, they’ve gotten a lot better at sheltering you study boys than they were in my day.”

“I know your reputation; they gave me files on both you and your husband before they sent me here,” said Thomas. “If you don’t mind my being candid, that’s a good part of why I don’t wish to offend you. I’m still not interested in being buried in the woods.”

“I’d love to see those files,” said Enid. “What did you find that was so appalling that they had to send you here?”

“Ah, you see, you have the cause and effect reversed,” said Thomas. He took down two mugs from the cupboard. “What I found to get myself banished from England was your husband, or rather, your husband’s notes. He had drawn some parallels between monster extermination and damage to the local settlements that I felt needed to be further explored—and then he sent in that write-up on the invasive thought-manipulators you encountered in Whiting. It took years for it to be declassified by our leadership and handed over to the researchers. Years.” He sounded suddenly furious. “We had been tracking Apraxis movements that whole time, for the sake of exterminating the things. When I looked at Mr. Healy’s statement, and compared it to our charts, I could intuit the presence of at least three of the thought-manipulators, maybe more. Frederic Myers calls the phenomenon ‘telepathy,’ by the by. It’s a good word.”

“I like it,” said Enid. “So what, you confronted the leadership about withholding Alexander’s research? What did they say?”

“That I was pursuing dangerous ideas, and needed to be reminded of why we do the work we do,” said Thomas. “They loaded me onto the next ship departing for the tropics. It was my job to assess the native creatures, determine how many of them were dangerous and unnatural, and make recommendations regarding future purges of those areas. They sent me to Hawaii, Australia, the Philippines—all the places they thought of as far off and terrifying. I suppose the intent was to frighten me into line. It…let’s say ‘backfired.’ That’s the charitable interpretation.”

“And the uncharitable?” asked Enid.

The kettle began to wail. The tailypo flattened its ears and hissed. Thomas turned off the gas and reached for the mugs, saying, “It exposed me to a wide range of people and cultures that I’d never expected to see. Did you know that the Ukupani of Hawaii are not only well-disposed toward humans, they don’t enjoy the taste of
us? Their presence keeps actual man-eating sharks at bay. Yet the Covenant says sharks are God’s creatures and the Ukupani are not.”

“What do you say?”

“I say I passed a lovely evening playing chess with an Ukupani fisherman while his sons sat by the fire weaving nets and telling the sort of jokes that are universal to small boys, regardless of species. He brought his wife to meet me. She was a shark twenty feet long and white as polished ivory, and he stroked her gills like a man in love. I left their company, went back to my ship, and penned a report that claimed Hawaii was utterly devoid of dangerous creatures, and wouldn’t need a purge in our lifetime.” He grimaced as he poured hot water into their mugs. “I might have gotten away with it, too, if I hadn’t tried to say essentially the same thing about Australia.”

Enid raised an eyebrow. “You mean the island of deadly snakes and spiders the size of your face? Yes, I’d wager the Covenant would have known you were pulling their legs if you said Australia was harmless.”

“Someone caught on, someone else reviewed all my reports, and I found myself labeled untrustworthy and possibly dangerous. So they shipped me here.” Thomas walked over to offer Enid one of the mugs. “I believe you’re a test. If I’m inclined toward turning traitor, you should push me over the edge, and then the Covenant can eliminate us all in one go.”

“Oh, I would very much like to see them try,” said Enid. There was an unnervingly feral gleam in her eye. “And what if you’re not inclined toward turning traitor?”

“Well, then, I suppose I’m expected to return to them with a full report on your movements in America, possibly after having assassinated one or more of you. In the best case version of that scenario, I’d have killed you all, drugged Alice—who is, as you say, young enough to be presumed malleable—and carried her home as a prize. Even if she could never be trusted in the field, she might be useful as a researcher. You know how the Covenant hates to lose anything that might be useful.”

“That makes sense,” said Enid, and sipped her tea. “Which way are you leaning?”

“Right now, I’m more focused on getting the leak in the upstairs bathroom to stop. It keeps me awake at night. Sometimes I wind up sleeping on the porch. Alice suggested I fix the swing. I’ve been thinking about doing just that.”

“I’ll send Alex over to help you with that,” said Enid. “I don’t know that Johnny will ever come around to seeing you as anything other than a threat, but the rest of us can be neighborly.”

“I don’t know that he’s wrong to see me as a threat, Mrs. Healy,” said Thomas gravely. “As I said, I still haven’t decided which way I want to go.”

“You’re a Price,” said Enid. “You announced your presence because it was both the honorable and the sensible thing to do. If you decide that we’re going to be enemies, you’ll tell us, if only to save any possible confusion. I’ve liked every Price I’ve ever met, but you’re not what I’d call subtle.”

Thomas sobered. “Well, ma’am, you may have the advantage on me. Aside from a few cousins on assignment in Germany and Finland, I’m the only Price I’ve met.”

Enid blinked. “Your parents?”

“I never knew them. I was brought up in the libraries. There was a pen in my hand before I knew that some people had skies overhead, and not ceilings painted with frescos of angels and monsters. We are a doomed lineage, which may be part of why the Covenant was so eager to ship me off. Can’t exactly resurrect an entire family from one man, no matter how hard you might try, and once I die, all our assets go to the Covenant to use as they see fit.”
Enid blinked again. "I hope you order a lot of very rare books and bill them to your family’s accounts."

"Oh, believe me, I do." Thomas opened the jar next to the icebox and withdrew a hardboiled egg, which he rolled down the counter to the tailypo. "I don’t know yet what my plans are for the future. Honestly, I haven’t really had the chance to make any. But at the moment, I have no intention of betraying anyone. It seems… untidy, and like a waste of time that could be better spent exploring the woods."

"Alice is best guide you could possibly have for that," Enid assured him.

Thomas snorted. "So I’ve noticed. She led a dire boar straight to my door this afternoon, and—Mrs. Healy? Is something wrong?"

Enid, who had gone rigid in her seat, gingerly set her virtually untouched mug of tea down on the edge of the table. "Is that how she ripped the knees out of her jeans?" she asked.

"Well, yes. I assumed you knew."

"No. She got sent to her room by her father before I could find out what had happened." Enid stood. "Do you have guns?"

Thomas blinked. "I’m going to try not to be offended by that question."

"Good, because I need an answer," she said. "Do you have guns? Large, boar-hunting guns?"

"I have an elephant rifle. Why?"

"Because Alice got sent to her room, and her father didn’t ask her what she’d seen." Enid looked at him grimly. "She’s upset, she’s not being listened to, and she’s Alice. What do you think the chances are that she’s still in her room?"

Thomas was silent for a moment before he said, "I’ll go get that rifle, shall I?"

"Please," said Enid. "And hurry."

It was late enough in the afternoon that the light filtering down through the trees was dim and getting dimmer, creating an artificial sort of twilight. Alice moved through the trees as quickly as she dared, careful to set her feet on the clearest patches of ground. She didn’t want to make any noise that might tell her quarry she was coming.

Sneaking out of her room hadn’t been hard. It never was. She had a window; she had a drainpipe; she had no concern about skinning her palms, especially when they were already scraped up. It wasn’t like she was planning to start holding hands with boys any time soon. All the boys in Buckley were stupid. They dared each other to go into the woods, and then they acted all surprised when some of them didn’t come back. That, or they made up stories about things they’d seen in the swamp, trying to sound all brave, when really, they just sounded more like cowards than ever.

Getting her grandfather’s shotgun hadn’t been hard either. He’d been inside, watching the chicken that Grandma was making for dinner, and her father had been in the study. All she’d needed to do was avoid the windows as she made her way to the barn and took it down from the rack. It was already loaded, and while she wasn’t the best shot, the weight of it was reassuring against her shoulder. She wasn’t going to be caught by surprise a second time.

Dire boars weren’t native to North America. Killing one would let them find out what it was eating, where it was nesting, all of the things they needed to know so that they could make informed decisions about what to do with the rest of them. There would definitely be more than one. There was always more than one. It wasn’t
right to kill things that belonged in the ecosystem, but killing the boar would be putting the forest right, not making it wrong. And maybe then her father would believe she could take care of herself. Maybe then he would trust her, and understand that this was what she wanted—this, and only this, forever. This was her forest. This was her town. Trying to take those things away from her wasn’t going to work. It was just going to make her fight harder for what she knew was hers.

The frickens croaked merrily away overhead, signaling safety, or at least something like it. She knew better than to count on the frickens, since sometimes they didn’t think things were dangerous just because those things weren’t dangerous to them, but they were useful all the same. They didn’t like big things, like the boars. Or dead things, like the corpses that sometimes shambled out of the deep swamp, looking for…she wasn’t quite sure. She’d never stopped running long enough for them to catch her.

Alice Healy moved through the wood, and everything around her was green, and quiet, and very, very dangerous.

Enid and Thomas stopped at the edge of the wood, looking into its shadowy depths with appropriate caution. Thomas spoke first.

“She might not be in there.”

“True.”

“She might have decided to take a nap rather than dwelling on the unfairness of it all.”

“Also true.”

Thomas sighed. “But she didn’t do that, did she?”

“No. Probably not.”

“She’s out there in the woods, alone, looking for the dire boar.”

“Almost certainly.”

“She’s going to get herself killed.”

“Again, almost certainly.” Enid tightened her grip on her borrowed rifle. “Follow me.”

It wasn’t hard to follow the boar’s trail through the wood. Alice might be adept at moving between the trees without doing any real damage, but the dire boar was considerably less interested in minimizing its impact on the environment. It had crashed its way through the foliage, leaving broken branches and trampled brush in its wake.

“Good lord,” murmured Thomas. “It’s a miracle she made it out of the woods.”

“Healy luck,” said Enid. “Sometimes it’s good, sometimes it’s bad, but it’s always exciting. This looks like the exit—it was chasing her here. Even if it took another route back to its lair, we should wind up there if we follow it. With the added bonus of the boar having already frightened off most of the things that would think we looked tasty.”

“This country is a cornucopia of delights,” said Thomas.

“At least you have us.” Enid glanced at him before returning her attention to the path ahead of them. “When we came here, we were foreigners with no support, no friends, no one to tell us how anything worked—it was
like being exiled on Mars. I broke down crying the first time I saw an igneous scorpion. It was all too much. I wanted to go home.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Oh, a lot of reasons. I don’t know how much you know about our exit from the Covenant, but I did my best to knock Pembroke Cunningham’s ah, personal parts into his throat when he grabbed me on my way out the door. So there was that. And we had already made the decision to cut ties. I left my children with the Covenant. Do you know what that takes? For a mother to leave her children behind?”

Thomas was quiet for a moment. “No,” he said finally. “I have no conception of what that would be like. I left no one behind when I left home. Honestly, I’m not sure most of my peers would notice if I switched sides tomorrow. I’m just a name on a roster to them. No one would mourn me.”

“I think about them every day. Charles and Ada. Back then, I thought about them every hour. It would have been so easy to go back, with or without my husband. To say we’d been wrong about everything, to beg forgiveness—and we would probably have received it, even after what we’d done. We hadn’t hurt anyone, hadn’t helped any monsters escape from justice. We’d just been misled. It could happen to anyone. If we had been willing to repent, the Covenant would have made it all go away. Sometimes I still wonder why we didn’t.” Enid smiled, the expression grayed out by the shadows around them. “But then there was Jonathan, and I watched him playing with the mice, not knowing that he was supposed to hate them for being ‘unnatural,’ and I thought, this boy. We can raise this boy without any of our prejudices. We can let him have the world, the whole world, and never need to kill anything for the sin of being born. So we stayed. And then we stayed a little longer. And eventually, it was too late to go back, if we had ever really wanted to. We learned the land. The land learned us. We settled. We grew roots. This is our home now. The only home Jonathan and Alice have ever known.”

“I can’t quite imagine her in the Covenant’s halls,” Thomas admitted. “She’d cause a chain reaction that destroyed the place inside of a week.”

“That’s my granddaughter,” said Enid fondly. “She’s a good girl, honestly. She tries hard. She just has more enthusiasm than skill, at times, and little sense of self-preservation.”

“She hasn’t gotten herself killed yet, so she assumes she never will,” said Thomas.

“Exactly,” said Enid.

The trail of broken and shattered trees lead them deeper and deeper into the wood, until even Enid wasn’t quite sure where they were. Alice might have known. Alice spent more time in the woods than was good for her. The ground here looked chewed, like it had been rooted up over and over again. They were getting close to where the boars lived.

She was starting to feel like this might be all right—they could reach the boars before Alice did, set a boundary, and watch for her wayward granddaughter—when the unmistakable bark of a shotgun spoke from up ahead, followed by the enraged squeal of a pig the size of a mature Guernsey bull. Thomas broke into a run. Enid was only half a step behind him.

For a man who didn’t have much familiarity with the woods, Thomas covered ground with remarkable speed. He broke through the trees into the boars’ clearing just as the shotgun boomed again, with Enid close on his heels. Both of them took aim and fired at the sow, which was charging the tree where Alice had taken cover. The other boar was already down, a hole clean through the center of its skull.

Four bullets later, the sow was down. Enid didn’t wait to see if there was a third dire boar. She shoved her rifle into Thomas’s arms and went stalking across the clearing, fury radiating from every pore. Alice—showing more common sense than she had hitherto been heir to—stayed in her tree.
“Alice Enid Healy have you no sense,” demanded Enid, glaring up the tree at her granddaughter. “You could have been killed!”

“But I wasn’t,” said Alice smartly. “I found the boar. I killed it before it could kill me.”

“Oh, and how were you planning to handle its mate? You have to think, girl! You have to plan!”

“Mrs. Healy.” Thomas touched Enid’s elbow, pointing to the tree. “Look.”

Enid looked. There was a smear of blood there, too high to have come from the boar, and too red to be anything but fresh. She paled, squinting upward at Alice once again.

“Are you hurt?”

“Just a little,” said Alice, and swung down from the tree one-armed. She had to: her left arm dangled by her side, the shoulder clearly dislocated. There was a cut through the left thigh of her jeans where the boar’s tusks had caught her. She was bleeding. Not copiously enough for the boar to have severed an artery, but enough to worry her grandmother. “I’m fine.”

“No,” said Enid. “You’re not. Mr. Price?”

“No,” said Enid. “You’re not. Mr. Price?”

“On it.” Thomas handed her back the rifles before stepping over to Alice. “Please forgive me,” he said, and swept her off her feet, hefting her against his chest.

“For what?” asked Alice bemusedly. Then she closed her eyes, and passed out.

It took almost an hour to get out of the woods and back to the old Parrish Place. It was slower when carrying an unconscious teenage girl, especially since the smell of blood had a tendency to attract the nastier things that lived in the underbrush. It took another hour to wake Alice up, bandage her wounds, and feed her enough sugared lemonade for Enid to pronounce her fit to travel. Alice spent most of that time petting the tailypo, which hid eggshells in her hair and chittered at her.

After Enid had Alice safely settled in the truck she turned to Thomas and said, “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it.” He looked past her to Alice, who had put her head against the rolled-up window and closed her eyes. “Please. Is she going to be all right?”

“She’s sturdy,” said Enid. “Jonathan’s likely to be more traumatized than she is. Still, I appreciate the help. I’m going to make sure he understands that you’re a friend to this family, at least for now.”

“At least for now,” Thomas agreed. “When she’s feeling better, can you ask her to be more careful? Please? I’m not sure how much of this my nerves can take.”

Enid laughed. “Ask her yourself,” she said. “You’re likely to get a better answer than I do. Good day, Mr. Price.”

“Good day, Mrs. Healy.” He stayed where he was, watching as Enid walked back to the truck, climbed into the driver’s seat, and drove away. Then, because he couldn’t think of anything better to do, he turned to study the remains of the porch swing.

Maybe it was time to repair the thing after all.
Enid leaned over and shook Alice by the shoulder. “Wake up,” she said. “We’re home.”

“Already?” Alice lifted her head, blinking blearily. “I don’t feel so good.”

“That’s because you’ve lost a lot of blood,” said Enid. “Come on.”

Slowly, she led her granddaughter up the walkway to the front door. Carefully, she pushed it open. And then she hollered, “Jonathan Healy you get out here right now!”

“Mother?” Jonathan’s head emerged from the study. His eyes widened. “Alice!” The rest of him emerged already running. “What happened? If that Price fellow hurt her, I’ll—”

“He saved her, Johnny,” said Enid. Her arm around Alice’s waist was the only thing keeping the girl on her feet. “She’d be dead and eaten if not for him, and no thanks to you. We can’t keep her out of those woods. You’re going to let me train her. Starting today. I know that isn’t what you want, and frankly, I don’t care anymore. You can’t change the kind of girl she is. All you can do is get her killed trying. Do I make myself clear?”

Jonathan stared for a long moment before he nodded. “Yes,” he said. “You do.”

“Good. Now go summon Mary. I’m going to need her to keep Alice in bed while the rest of us go back to the woods to recover two dead dire boars. Tell your father the chicken will have to wait.” She started toward the stairs, dragging Alice along with her. Jonathan watched them go, not saying a word.

Sometimes there wasn’t anything to say.

Alice woke hours later to an empty house and the distant sound of mice cheering the end of the night’s catechisms. She rolled over, wincing as the motion tugged at the stitches in her leg.

“Go back to sleep,” said the ghost of Mary Dunlavy, pressing a cool hand to Alice’s forehead. “You’re not dead yet, and there’s nothing here can hurt you while I’m sitting by your side.”

“Okay, Mary,” said Alice, with calm obedience, and rolled back over, and went back to sleep.