The Creative Retreat

I know the failed writer trope is a bit over-used. It usually goes pretty much like this: there's a famous author, or they at least *were* famous. They're off their game, haven't written a word in months, sometimes years. The fear of the blank page fills their life, and they're powerless to do anything to stop it. They are a failure, miserable, they can't do the one thing they were supposed to be good at. They can't mold stories out of words, and sometimes even, they've lost the ability to imagine. They no longer see the strange and amazing worlds that exist only in their minds, they no longer know how to meld those worlds together. Well, that's me. I'm the overused writer trope. I no longer know how to combine those words, I've lost the recipe, the instructions. I don't know how I did it before, and I don't know if I have the will to find it again.

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"Come on man, pick up the pen; write!" It says.

"You know I can't," I reply.

"I know you won't," the pages speak. The Ledger sits on the desk ... waiting. Its voice is deep, conversational.

"I haven't been able to write in years."

“And whose fault is that? Pick up the pen, blast some music, drink some tea, and write. Write like you have a gun pointed at your head. It doesn’t matter if it’s—”

The door bursts open. My brother, John, stands in the door frame. His mouth is half open, like he has something to say, but the words can’t come out. He stares at The Ledger on my desk; a smile spreads across his face.

“Were you— were you writing?” he sounds so happy it kills me to say:

“You know I can’t.”

“Oh,” his smile fades for a moment, but then returns, and the words he came into the room with pour from his mouth: “I have something that can get those writing brain juices going again. You can be like you used to!”

“Does it involve schizophrenia medication?” I say, looking to my talking Ledger.

“No… I’m sending you on a creative retreat! Pack your stuff; we’re leaving in a few hours,” John leaves closing the door behind him.

“I wonder what food they’ll have at the retreat,” The Ledger says.

“You know, a talking Ledger probably isn’t the best thing for my sanity,” I say to the little black journal.

“Sane people don’t make for good writers.”

…

I'm sitting in the passenger side of the car; John is driving. I look out the window. Forests line the road, and we're far from any civilization. I don't like the feeling of it.

"You know, John, I don't think all this is necessary."

"Hush, you need this," The Ledger says from my pocket.

"James, you're my brother, and I'm tired of you not living up to your potential. Your writing is amazing! I just need you to write; that's why I'm doing this for you," John says with conviction.

"But I don't need some retreat. They're just gonna tell me all that kumbaya stuff or tell me to unlock the other ninety percent of my brain. I can do this on my own."

"Then why haven't you? I've been watching you fall to pieces for years, and I can't watch it any longer. I really think this can help you, James. I want to see you write again," John makes eye contact for a moment. There's no one on the road, but the lack of attention still scares me.

"Eyes on the road, John."

"John's eyes shift from his worthless brother to the road in front of him," The Ledger narrates.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

“Driving?” John says, confused.

“Oh… right,” I try to recover from the embarrassment. I’d never dared to tell my brother about The Ledger; I was worried he’d put me in some asylum.

“Nice save,” The Ledger says.

“I hope you aren’t planning to keep narrating my life,” I whisper to my blazer pocket where The Ledger sits.

“The pathetic, deadbeat writer is annoyed with his journal, though the journal has been a consistent and supportive friend.”

“Cut it out,” I hiss.

“Huh? Did you say something?” John asks, his eyes glancing towards me.

“Maybe I should read some of your incomplete ideas; get you back in writing mode. Ah yes, The Hitchhiker, you still need to fix this one. Or maybe I should read one of your love letters.”

“Don’t you dare,” I forget to whisper.

“James, what is going on with you?” John turns his head.

“Ah my dearest love, you light up the night sky like a thousand stars. Good God, that’s derivative; I see why you never gave this one to her. What was her name again?”

“Shut up!” I pull the journal from my pocket. “Look out!” I yell, seeing something in the middle of the road.

John slams on the breaks and swerves. The car spins; the tires scream. My seatbelt goes taught, slamming me back into my chair. The car stops and the road looks empty.

“What was that?” John looks through the window, “and who the hell are you talking to?”

“What do we tell him?”

“We? You can’t talk!” I stare at the black book on the floor. Its pages have opened to an old story. I considered it my masterpiece, but I could never finish it. I couldn’t find myself worthy to finish my own story. So egotistical. So lazy. I said it had to be perfect; that’s why I couldn’t finish it. But really, I was afraid. I was afraid that it would have a bad ending, and no one would like it. I was afraid it would have a bad ending, and I wouldn’t like it.

“James, are you okay?”

“I don’t know how to write anymore! I don’t remember how I did it. I look through this stupid little book, and I don’t know who wrote those words. It sure as hell couldn’t have been me, because I can’t do the same thing again,” I pick up the book and read its horrifyingly unfinished pages.

“Okay, you’re not going crazy; you’re just having a breakdown,” John takes a deep breath. We sit there for a second; breathing, regaining our sanity. “Do you remember when I got you that thing?” I’m silent, staring at those pages,

at those words I can't repeat. "I think it was Christmas. I wanted to get you something you'd use, and I remembered how you wrote that short story for the contest."

"I didn't win."

"It wasn't about winning, was it? I know you didn't win, but you definitely didn't lose. You fell in love with writing; you took that journal with you everywhere. Do you remember when you printed your 34-page story and Mom asked if you were ever doing your homework? Do you remember when the spine started to crack on that old journal, and you had to tape the edges back together? You were a machine. Story after story came out of that mind of yours; every one of them unique, bizarre, macabre. And then you stopped… why?"

"Life… I don't know. It started simply: not today; not enough time; essays to write; excuses. And then it was gone, and every once in a while, I'd try to pick it back up."

"Well, writing is a lot like pushing a boulder: it's really hard when you start, but once you get some momentum going, you just gotta keep rolling it. Let's have you go on this retreat and see if you can start pushing that boulder again."

"Okay," I pick up the journal and put it back in my pocket.

“Sorry I almost killed us.”

“It’s okay,” I say.

“Yeah, it is,” John says, putting the car back into drive.

...

The car rolls across a gravel parking lot, the small rocks crunching underneath the tires. *“The place is not much to look at: a small gravel lot, a few very cheap-looking wooden shacks, and beyond that... nothing. It’s just forest for miles and miles.”*

“Not much to look at.” I echo the journal.

“I just gave you free description and the best you can come up with is that?”

“That’s one way to think of it; I really like all the trees,” John turns his head to the forest, “however, unlike you, I am currently employed and need to get to work after this. Let’s get you set up,” John steps out of the car.

A man emerges from one of the shacks. He walks to the car with his arms spread wide and a smile stretching across his face.

“Do not trust him,” A small, meek voice half whispers.

“I didn’t say that! Who’s there?” The Ledger demands; there is no response but the silence of the world, and the whisper of the trees.

A car door closes, jolting me back to reality. I realize that John has probably been talking to me during this episode. He's outside my door, a bag hanging in his hands. It's just my luggage for the retreat, clothes, toothbrush, and a small pocketknife. John opens my car door.

"Did you say something?" I ask.

"Yeah, you were off in your own world though."

"Welcome!" the man from the shack calls out.

"He is a behemoth of a man. His biceps bulge from his shirt, and he towers above you by at least a full foot. He wears an eloquent robe, embroidered, and likely quite expensive. His smile is rehearsed, and it doesn't really reach his eyes. He does this for a living," The Ledger observes.

"He is bad," the meek voice says again. I feel a chill run down my spine.

"Okay who is this guy? I'm supposed to be the voice in your head. Did I multiply?"

"Shh," I tell The Ledger, giving my pocket a light tap.

"You've been weird all day," John says.

"I've been weird my whole life," I respond, not entirely lying.

"Ah, believe me sir, the best writers are far from normal;" the robed man says, "some of them even had tendencies to lose their minds. Who can create a world better than someone in their own reality?"

“Me, I can. I mean you, so long as you are provided with adequate description. That’s always been your weak point… sir.”

“You’ve always been insane,” The voice whispers.

“Allow me to introduce myself: I am Dennis *“He looks like a Dennis.*” I’m quite fond of your work, though I’ve heard you’re in a slump right now. You probably feel like you’ve lost your powers, like you’ll never be able to write again; like you’ll lose your mind at the sight of a pen. Well, sir, I have news for you, good news, great news: slumps are temporary. They are a thing of the mind, you see; they are a thing I have devoted my life to studying, and I have become quite good at removing them. Sometimes it takes… stressful situations, but the results are well worth a small amount of discomfort,” Dennis winks.

“His voice is quick, like that of a salesman going door to door on a Sunday morning. The type of salesman who everyone politely talks to but eventually turns away because they don’t really wish to be bothered.”

“What kind of discomfort?” I ask warily.

“Let me ask you this:” the man ignores my question, “do you want to write again? Does it eat you up on the inside? Do you feel pent up? Do you feel like a failure?”

“Most certainly; our depression knows few bounds!”

"Yes," the small voice says*;* The Ledger and I both shiver.

"Yes." I admit.

"Good, then we have something to work with. Come with me, and we will return you to your old self. John, it's good to see you. Your brother is in safe hands."

"I know; your reputation is well earned. Alright James, I expect a novel when I get back." John says and walks to the car.

"The car starts quickly; the ignition is in good shape. John takes care of his car; John takes care of his life... unlike you. The tires crunch over the gravel as he drives away, and then... nothing again. The wind and the trees are all that speak now."

"Thanks for that," I say sarcastically.

"Of course, of course, now let us get down to business. You have already completed the first step, which is accepting your failure, of course. But now we have to get to work; we need to fix that pathetic loser in front of us."

"Hey, that's taking it a little too far don't you think?"

"No, he is on point. You ARE a loser."

"You are lost," the small voice declares.

"You think you are not a loser? Then what are you doing here? Why are you trying to improve if you believe that there is nothing to improve upon?

Pride is the opposite of progress, and if you are here, then you have nothing to be proud of. So, let us progress!" the man turns and walks towards the largest of the wooden shacks. The walls look fine, stacked logs all around. The roof looks weak though; the shingles are old and rotten.

"Where does all the money you get go if the buildings are this shoddy?" I ask.

"Most of it goes to the woods; that's where you will be spending most of your time. The buildings are just for decoration."

"What is in the woods?" The Ledger asks.

"A show," the small voice says, its voice high pitched, but without any cracks or squeaks. It's like a ghost here to haunt me.

"Okay, what is that thing?" The Ledger demands, growing frustrated.

"I am what makes you. Without me, you are just blank and useless parchment," the voice says before going quiet once more.

"If you would follow me, sir," Dennis is already halfway to the shacks.

I follow him into a large log building. Inside there are long tables; It looks like a summer camp. A handful of people sit at the tables, and a murmur of conversation fills the room. Dennis walks me over to a table where three people are chatting away.

“Everyone, this is James,” he says. The group mutters a happy ‘hello James’. “He’s going to be joining us on this retreat, and we need to get his creative juices flowing again,” Dennis pushes me to the table and I sit down. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“So, you guys out of ideas too?” I ask.

“Well, sort of,” a woman says, “I actually have too many and don’t know how to narrow them down,” she is practically bouncing with energy, making me look almost sane.

“I experienced a traumatic brain injury, but I’m bouncing back,” a man says, he looks old and a little shaky.

“I’m just here for fun! I had too much PTO at work and they told me to take a vacation,” a cheery guy with an annoying haircut says. His hair is trimmed short on the sides, but with a lazy swoop that goes just past his eyebrows.

“I don’t like that one, he’s probably named Kenneth or something stupid like that.”

“Uh-huh,” I say.

“Well?” the shaky man asks. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I can’t write; the words just won’t come to me like they used to.”

“Oh, that’s all in your head,” Kenneth says.

“He Knows! I knew this guy was bad news. We should get rid of him. Quick, I saw a dumpster on the way in here, if we wait for him to go to the bathroom, we can probably sneak him out the window and—”

“Alright everybody!” Dennis’ voice cuts through the chatter. “Let’s all go outside and do some meditation!” we all stand up and head outside.

“Meditate? You can’t meditate. Remember the one time you tried to, you woke up naked in Nevada.”

“Quiet,” I say to my pocket.

“I wasn’t saying anything,” the shaky man says, looking me up and down.

“Everyone, take a seat on a log, and we’ll go around and introduce ourselves,” Dennis says, taking a seat in a rocking chair. There’s a circle of logs around a campfire pit. I say campfire, but it looks big enough for a bonfire, or a giant smoke signal. I sit on a log and prepare to lose my mind.

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“Alright, now that we’ve all been out here for a while, let’s get down to it. Why can’t we be creative, what happened to our talents and our skills, and how can we get them back?” Dennis says.

“Well, I have helped hundreds of writers, artists, and politicians reconnect themselves to the skills and imagination buried within all of us. Now, why might you come here over any other retreat? Well, I won’t tell you to consult

some higher power, or become a Scientologist, or any nonsense like that. I have tried and true unorthodox methods that guarantee your creativity, or your money back." There's a small murmur of approval from the crowd; I hold back my eyeroll. Dennis waves to a man in a red Hawaiian shirt,

"Bill, would you go around with the waivers, thank you. Oh, and Frank, would you take all their phones please? Now, I know some of you may be annoyed to part with your beloved devices, but the cell phone only sometimes bolsters creativity, most of the time it is a distraction, one that we need to avoid. So please, cooperate and give your phones to Frank."

"I don't like this, they take you out to the middle of the woods and take your phone. I don't like this one bit. I smell—"

"Danger," The small voice whispers; I shiver.

Frank approaches me wordlessly, he is a rather large man, and his presence is quite intimidating. I toss my phone into the bin and sign away at the waiver with my trusty pen. It feels heavier than before, like a new weight has been added to it. Frank walks off to a shed with the box of phones, and Bill hands Dennis the stack of papers.

"Has everyone signed the waivers?" Dennis asks with a look around the circle. "Good, now let's start a little chant; repeat after me." A shriek pierces the air; the sound comes from the forest. Dennis turns around to look, and a

dart lodges in his neck. He crumples to the ground. More shrieks sound and figures emerge from the forest. They wear painted masks and robes.

"We had better run," The Ledger says from my pocket.

"Duck!" the whisper hisses; I obey and feel the dart graze the top of my hair. The figures grow closer and I see they have machetes and dart flutes. Darts hit their marks in the people around me; I hear their bodies thud against the ground, the crush against the gravel.

"Right!" the voice hisses again, and I turn to see a figure swing his machete at me. It misses and embeds in the log, just next to my leg.

"Push, shove, kick, grab!" I obey, allowing the actions to take over. I push the man, then shove another to my left who I didn't even know was there. I hear both men fall to the ground. I kick the one to the right before he can get up, then grab the machete from the log.

"Let's go," The Ledger says, *"run into the woods, you have a weapon; you stand a chance."*

I run as fast as my legs can carry me, feeling the darts rush past my body, narrowly missing their marks. I dodge through the trees at full sprint. Silence. Safety. Thunder rumbles in the distance as I escape the ambush.

"Okay, okay, what the hell was that?!" The Ledger demands.

"How am I supposed to know?"

“Shelter, make shelter,” the small voice hisses.

“Okay, seriously, that guy freaks me out. Where did he come from?”

“I don’t know!”

“Shelter, rain, storm, hunted.”

“Hunted, I don’t like that part. We should build you a shelter, this guy thinks it’s going to rain.”

“I hear him too, you know!”

“Well, forgive me,” The Ledger’s voice is laden with sarcasm. *“Our hero finds himself stranded in the woods, unable to get a fucking grip.”*

“I might need kindling later.”

“Please don’t.”

“Shelter... Fools.”

“Don’t light me on fire for this one, but do you know how to build a shelter?”

“No.”

“Well, I’ve done some reading on this, promise not to burn me and I’ll instruct you.”

“I was never going to burn you.”

“Oh, well that’s a relief, but that’s not fair. Fire is quite scary. First, I’ll need you to gather some sticks and leaves, oh, and we’ll need a good location...”

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“Not too shabby, I don’t think I could have done better myself.”

“Well, you don’t have hands.”

“True, nor do I possess psychic powers, two limitations I am well aware of.”

I finish making a little shelter just before the rain starts; it isn’t much, but it keeps me and my fire dry. The wood crackles in the fire; starting the fire with just leaves and sticks had been hard, but I’d figured it out eventually. I’m safe— for now, but I have no idea what my next step is.

“Do you feel like journaling?”

“Yes, actually.” I take my pen and jot down notes about what just happened. It’s been a while since I wrote a fight scene, and I have to ask The Ledger for help with several words, but I get an account written down.

“It’s better than you’ve done in years. Maybe this retreat will prove useful after all.”

“We have to survive first, actually, I have a question: if I die, what happens to you?”

“Well, that would depend on if I am simply a figment of your imagination, or if I am a magical object. While the first option is more practical, I find it better for my self-esteem to think that I am a magic book, and that I will continue to exist rather than just fizzle away when your mind... ends.”

“Makes sense.”

“Hunted,” the small voice says just before more shrieks sound through the forest.

“What do they want?”

“Well, I have no way of knowing any more than you, but I suspect they are conducting some kind of religious ritual that involves the sacrifice of—”

“Blood,” the small voice hisses, almost as if in my own ear. A twig snaps nearby and I turn my head to see the masked figures coming down a hill.

“Quick, the fire, put it out.” The Ledger says.

I quickly gather some dirt in my hands and toss it on the flames until there is just smoke. My eyes have trouble adjusting to the darkness, and I can barely make out the moving shadows in the trees. I press myself against the tree my shelter leans on. I steady my shaky breathing, nervous of the cloud of fog coming from my breath.

“The masked figures continue their search, having seen the fire over the hill, but now, in the darkness, they have trouble keeping their bearings. Leaves crunch under their feet, giving our hero a sense of where his enemies are. Our hero remembers the machete he took with him from the previous ambush; you should grab that by the way.” I grab the machete leaning on the rock I was sitting on. *“The blade*

shakes in our hero's hands as he readies himself. Either he will succeed in hiding, or there will be blood."

"Left." Without thinking I shift to my left, hiding my body behind the tree just before a mask appears on my right. I see his cloud of breath in the air and grip my machete tightly.

"What do you see?" a voice calls out some distance away.

"He stopped here!" the man next to me yells. "There was a fire, but I don't see him now."

"Keep looking around, we'll head north, some stragglers ran that way." I hear the other figures continue down their path. The man stands less than three feet from me. I hold my breath, trying to make as little noise as possible.

"James!" The Ledger yells in my head. *"You can't hold your breath any longer. It will be no good if you faint. Listen to me. Take a quick breath, give oxygen to your muscles, and swing first, it's your only chance. On three: one … two … NOW!"*

I gasp for air and swing my blade at the figure. He raises his own blade just a little too late. Metal clashes against metal, but half the blade cuts his arm. He lets out a yell and shoves me with his free hand. I stumble onto the hot coals of my fire. I roll over, screaming as my back burns. The blade falls from my hands, and I get to my feet, but the man is gone. I turn around in a circle, looking for something, anything, a shadow, a whisper.

“Guys, help me out,” I say quietly.

“I don’t see him.”

“The Pen,” the small voice says, *“use your pen; use me. Take the point and stab at his throat next time he comes.”* I grab The Pen from my pocket and yank off its cap. It is a fountain pen with a sharp point; I had pricked myself a few times back in my writing days. It might just do the trick. *“Duck right, push his arm left; stab his throat; you’ll know when,”* The Pen calls out its instructions, its voice still like a whisper, though stronger than before.

I hear leaves crunch behind me. I turn, slowly, quietly; I can make out the figure: a shadow that breaks the straight lines of the trees behind him. I give no sign that I can see him, and I wait, trusting that I will know when to strike. He swings overhead with his right arm. I sidestep to the left, but not quite far enough, the blade cuts against my leg. I slam my left arm against his right and drive The Pen in his throat. He crumples to the ground with a thud. I drop to my knees, unable to catch my breath. The guests in my mind are silent; there is nothing to say, not now. After a long moment, I remember the pain in my leg.

“You need to bandage that; the last thing we need right now is an infection.”

“The body,” The Pen says.

I crawl over to the dead man and search through his pockets, no bandages, but he had a sewing needle. I search his clothes and pull a loose thread until I have enough.

“This’ll have to do.”

“This will be ugly. You can’t even sew.” I tie the thread to the needle and set to work on my leg.

…

“Jacob! Did you find him?” a booming voice calls from the woods. I make out three figures coming from the trees.

“Going north was a massive waste of time,” a second voice says, his voice is deep.

“It was Jerry’s idea. Jacob!” the first voice calls.

“That’s weird he should have said something by now,” a third notices, his voice is higher in pitch.

“Your leg, do you think you can run?” The Ledger asks.

“I don’t think so, and besides, where would I run?”

“Surrender… only chance,” The Pen says.

“Uh, guys, I found Jacob! He doesn’t look too good,” the third voice says, his figure looming less than twenty feet from me.

“What happened to him?” asks the second voice.

“He got stabbed,” the third says, feeling his throat.

“It wasn’t from a blade though. This looks more like a spike; we could have a real assassin on our hands,” the first says, looking the body over. The man is quite large, and I don’t think I could take him in a fight.

“I have an idea: perhaps we could scare them. They are already halfway there, look! They are marveling at your work, now we must instill fear. Cast your voice out, imitating a small child from one of those horror movies. Make your voice like the wind, like a ghost, sound like The Pen actually, that would be perfect,” The Ledger proclaims his idea.

“Tell me what to say,” I whisper to The Pen in my chest pocket. I speak exactly as The Pen instructs:

“Hiss, make your voice like the stroke of a pen, each mark blending into the next, then say: Hello, do you like my work? I can make more if you want. I have three more canvases now; I especially like that big one, oh my, the markss I could make… Now quickly, silence, let it simmer a moment. Let them fear.”

“What was that?” the third voice demands, his voice getting higher.

“That must have been what got Jacob. It’s over man; we gotta run!” the second takes a few steps back.

“Did it say it wanted to use me as a canvas?” the large man’s voice is now meek.

“Good. They fear; now, make them shiver: I like it when it’s cold, my art lassts longer, and the foresst has brought me sso much art tonight. I’ll save the big one for last, the little oness will make for good starterss. Maybe I only need the big one for art; I am a little hungry. Come, sit by the fire.”

“Toss a log at the fire pit; that will make them shake,” The Ledger says. I pick up a log next to me and toss it in the pit; it thuds loudly in the darkness. A gentle gust of wind blows by, heating the extinguished coals of the fire ever so slightly, casting a red light in the darkness for just a moment. The men scream. They trip over each other as they run from the devil in the woods.

“Good,” The Pen says.

“Yes, that was some impressive theater right there,” The Ledger agrees. The rain falls gently against the fallen leaves on the ground, and I take a moment to rest.

“I need to get back to civilization before I lose this leg.”

“This is not the most sanitary environment, true. We are still in the middle of nowhere, and you do not have your phone, John also took his car, and the retreat is swimming with cultists. Your options are quite limited.”

“Do you think we could sneak past them?”

“I would have to see what the site looks like, but I don’t think you’ll make it out here tonight, so I don’t think we have a choice. Grab the dead man’s mask, we can try to sneak past them.”

“This will be quite the escape, wont it?”

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I stand in the trees looking at the retreat, the circle of logs is now a giant bonfire with masked figures chanting in a strange language. Even after watching for a while I can’t make out a single car in the darkness, but surely Dennis had brought one. That raises an interesting thought:

“Where are all the people?”

“What people?”

“The annoying retreat people, who took our phones and got hit by blow-darts.”

“Hmm, perhaps they converted them, does it seem like there are more than before?”

“No, but some of them are painting the ground with buckets of red paint.”

“Not paint,” The Pen says, and I shiver at the thought. The cultists dance to a drumbeat, and cheer as the others paint the marks on the ground.

“Put on the mask and try to get past them. Hide your limp if you can.”

I put the mask over my face and see the world through tiny eyeholes. I make my way to the log building where John dropped me off, trying to stay in the trees to gather less attention. I manage to get past without a hitch and I find myself in the gravel parking lot from earlier. A car sits in the lot, untouched by the crazies behind me. My heart wells up with excitement as I reach for the door handle … locked.

"Did you think that Dennis would just leave his car unlocked for anyone to get into?"

"I wasn't thinking! I was hoping."

"Hope—" The Pen begins.

"Don't you lecture me!"

"Brother! Who are you talking to?" a masked man walks up to me. "Jacob? Mathias said that a forest demon had gotten you."

"I escaped brother," I say without thinking, imitating a character from my novel.

"Your voice sounds different … are you possessed?" he asks, with the voices in my head I may as well be.

"Say something before he starts an exorcism."

"Speak," The Pen hisses.

“You see brother, in the fight, the demon stabbed my throat, when I woke, I found myself healed, but my voice had changed.”

“A miracle, the goddess must have blessed you,” he says in a hushed voice. “We must celebrate!” he shouts, putting his arm around my shoulder and walking me to the bonfire.

“This is the end, surely they will find us out.”

“Quiet!” The Pen says.

The fire blazes with an intense heat and a near blinding light. The cultists dance in the shadows, chanting and waving their blades. The man leading me to the fire pushes me forward, saying:

“Brother Jacob lives! The goddess has healed him!”

“Jacob?” the large man from earlier asks.

“We saw your body, man! You were dead,” the deep voice says.

“What happened to the hole in your throat?” the high voiced man asks.

“Brothers,” the man behind me says, “rejoice, the goddess has healed him.”

“I need some proof,” The large man walks up to me. “Take off your mask.”

“We can’t do that! This must be some sort of test. He must be trying to get you to break their rules, show that you are an imposter,” The Ledger says.

“A poser,” The Pen agrees.

“Brother,” I begin, the large man’s eyes flash when he hears my voice. “I know that we are not to take off our masks. It is forbidden.”

“We have no such rule,” The man behind me says, grabbing me through my arms. The large man rips the mask off my face. “He is not Jacob! He is the writer!”

The chanting stops, and all eyes turn to me. The crowd murmurs and hisses and boos, until one of them says: “Sacrifice.” Then they begin to chant again: “Sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice.” All their voices blending into one, eerie hiss.

“Sacrifice,” The Pen says, almost joining the chant.

“Bring out the ritual!” the man behind me orders and two cultists carry a wooden desk and set it in front of the fire. Two more come bearing a pen and paper. The man behind me shoves me to the desk and sits me in a chair I do not see.

“In your final moments,” the large man says, standing between me and the fire, his face cast in shadow as his voice booms through the air, “You will write!”

A cultist places a pen in my hand. I toss it into the fire and withdraw my own, The Pen that lives both in my pocket and in my head. The fire burns its flames, its heat, the cultists chant their language, and the paper sits

in front of me, waiting. I set The Pen to the paper, preparing to write my final words. Nothing. My wrist refuses to move, my mind refuses to think; the words refuse to exist.

"It's not going to be that easy," The Pen says, its voice much stronger now, *"I have an offer for you. You cannot write, but I can; it is one of my many purposes. I can write something so compelling, so great that it will make these cultists forget what they are even doing. I can make them forget their bloodlust and whatever false god they worship. All I need is a little space, breathing room, the tiniest bit of control. Let me in, and I can save you."*

"I don't think we can trust him; what if this control leads to something worse down the line?" The Ledger protests.

"What choice do you have? These people will surely kill you if you continue to hesitate. I can help you, I can fix this, I can save us, but I am weak without some measure of power. Lend me some of yours, and I promise you will have the tools you need to get your life back after this. Remember the fame, the way people looked at you, talked to you, the respect. You can have that back." The Pen twitches in my hand.

"We don't need him; we can come up with something on our own. That respect, it was yours, not a pact with a devil in your head. We can do this by ourselves, just write something down. Please!" The Ledger's voice is weaker as he begs.

“I can’t,” I whisper.

“You can do this yourselves? Then why haven’t you? It’s like your brother said: you’ve been falling to pieces for years. You can’t do this yourself. Right now, you’re worthless, and deep down, you know it. You need me. I can be trusted; I have helped you before. Did your little book save you in the woods? Or was it my advice, my actions, that kept you alive?”

The Ledger is silent. I can almost feel him searching for a rebuke, an argument, something. I want to agree with him, but I can’t. I can’t do this by myself, and I know it.

“So, do we have … a deal?” The Pen asks.

“Yes,” I whisper again.

“Good, just give me a moment.” I feel something inside my mind, like a door unlocking, and then a rush of ideas flows out.

The Pen moves across the paper with swift, confident motions. The words come easily to me now, easier than they ever have. The Pen and The Ledger murmur in my head and a character comes together, their voices merging in my head with my own thoughts, ideas flowing freely as the ink dries on the page. Time flies by; I don’t know how much. I finish a page, I’m handed another, and then another, and a plot comes together. I mutter to myself as I write, ideas, some good, some bad, some thrown out, some kept.

I write each word until a story comes together, and at its conclusion I have no more words to write. I put The Pen back in my pocket.

“Are you finished?” the booming voice asks.

“Yes,” The Pen says.

“I think we did rather well, but we still could have done it ourselves,” The Ledger says.

“Yes.”

“Very well, give us a moment to read it,” the large man takes the pages and reads them aloud to the cultists, his voice less intimidating as he reads. After some time, he flips to the final page and reads the final words.

“Brilliant,” he mutters.

“Yes, it will only need a little editing,” another cultist says.

“So, you’re not going to sacrifice me?”

“Why would we sacrifice a client?” a cultist says, removing his mask to reveal his face.

“Is that... Dennis?” The Ledger asks. All of the cultists remove their masks, many of them are the other members of the retreat.

“We got you good, didn’t we?” the large man says, who I now recognize as Frank, the guy who took everyone’s phones.

“What? This was all fake?! I thought we were going to die!” The Ledger screams in my head.

“I knew,” The Pen whispers.

“No you didn’t, you were just as clueless as us.”

“I did enjoy stabbing that guy.”

“He might be a problem,” I say out loud.

“Huh?” Frank asks.

“Actually, what happened to that guy we killed?” The Ledger asks.

“If this was all fake, what happened to the guy in the woods?” I ask.

“Oh, Jacob? That was special effects,” Dennis says.

“He was dead!”

“Did you check his pulse? Besides, he signed the waiver.”

“Wait, so is he dead or not?” The Ledger wonders.

“Anyway, let’s get this draft to your publisher,” Dennis says and Frank starts leading me to the parking lot. The actors start putting out the bonfire and cleaning up the place. Everyone is moving quickly, professionally. Dennis tells me that this is the secret of his retreat, to trick people into thinking it’s normal, then to trick them into thinking it’s a horror movie. He talks for a few minutes until John’s car pulls into the lot.

“We called him when you finished your draft,” Frank says.

“Let’s get away from these guys. They’re still freaking me out,” The Ledger says.

“Stab them... Betrayal,” The Pen hisses.

John steps out of the car and walks up to me; he is practically shaking with excitement.

“You wrote something?” he asks.

“I did the writing!” The Pen argues.

“And I came up with half your good ideas,” The Ledger joins in.

“Yeah, I guess I did. It’s funny, I didn’t even feel it, I just wrote and it sort of came together.” That’s what I say, but there’s a guilt in me, an idea that what I wrote somehow isn’t mine.

“Well, I’m glad everything worked out,” John says with a wave to Dennis. “Let’s get you home, brother.” I step into the car and close the door.

“So, how did you like the retreat?” John asks and starts driving.

“It certainly got me thinking.”

“Got any new story ideas?”

I try to think, my brain was racing when I was writing for my life, when I made the deal with The Pen, but now, it’s once again empty, almost exactly the same as when I started.

“You’ll come up with something, we just need a little time,” The Ledger says confidently.

“Don’t worry,” The Pen says, as if whispering in my ear, “*I’m not done with you yet.”*

“Hush, you melodramatic ink dripper!”