

Chapter 1: A Strange Encounter

I didn't like walking down Houston's streets at night. To be fair, Houston's streets didn't have my skin crawling or make me swivel my head for danger. That came when I was in any big city after dark. Houston just happened to be my home at the moment.

Today hadn't been great for me. My current work project was quickly approaching its deadline, and not only had I fallen behind on it, but the trip I was taking tomorrow would only further delay my progress. Unless I pulled a miracle from thin air, I'd miss my deadline, and while this would be my first time to do that at this job, the prospect nevertheless made me cranky. Disappointing people had always felt like crushing tiny bits of my soul into dust, even if the person disillusioned this time would only be my boss.

And of course, the trip home tonight had been, as usual, less than pleasant.

"I swear, public transit in this city is the worst," I grumbled, kicking at a loose pebble.

At least I'd made it to my final bus stop before the 'witching hour' had come. There wasn't that much crime in my neighborhood, nothing compared to Third Ward at least, but I liked to have a locked door between me and the rest of the world before the clock struck ten. It wasn't an entirely irrational desire, even if the chances of something bad happening after that hour were still small, but I liked playing it safe. Always had.

With the sun having fallen below the horizon, Houston's oppressive heat had begun to fade, but its ever-present mugginess persisted. I couldn't wait for fall to arrive, a time when you could walk outside without feeling like you were swimming through the ocean. Tonight, however, I pressed through an invisible wall of water, quickening my pace upon seeing the turn for my neighborhood up ahead. I'd eaten dinner on campus, so I only needed to finish packing before-

"Excuse me."

That rasping voice kept my foot hovering for a split second before I let it crash onto the sidewalk. Turning toward the noise, I dug in my purse for the can of pepper spray I'd been carrying since moving here. Since I'd never had to use it before, it lay under my wallet and copious amounts of junk, but after I'd curled my fingers around it, I didn't draw it forth. Not yet.

The tremulous greeting had come from a man leaning on the brick wall that surrounded my neighborhood. He looked like he'd just stepped out of a sci-fi and fantasy convention, none of which currently graced Houston with their presence, so far as I was aware. A cloak hung over his

homespun tunic and trousers, and at his side, a fairly convincing sword replica glinted in the street lamps' light. He wasn't wearing faux armor, though, which was strange. Usually, if someone decided to go all-out with a cosplay like this, they tried to stay historically accurate, and the average knight in the Middle Ages would have worn some form of protection over their clothing, not nothing as this man did.

"You're here," he said to the concrete at his feet. "I thought you'd never come."

He lifted his lolling head, and I frowned, tightening my grip around my pepper spray. This stranger's murky blue eyes kept skipping over me as if refusing to focus with his greasy brown hair, salted with gray, drifting in front of his face. Was he drunk? High?

"I have something for you," he said, taking a faltering step toward me.

I took my own step backward.

"No, thank you," I said. "Stay back, or I'll- I'll call the police."

Like that would do me any good.

A wistful smile flitted across the stranger's face as he stopped.

"Ships, you're as wary of me now as when I knew you," he said. "That's good. Well, not so good for us now but it'll serve you later."

He was definitely on something. I shuffled another step away, but a perceptible shudder, a clench of the man's teeth, and a pained whine stopped me from fleeing toward my neighborhood's safety.

"Are you... ok?" I asked. "Do you need a hospital or something?"

It would be just my luck to run across an overdosed junkie or someone just as troubling on my way home from a day like today.

The stranger laughed, an unnerving cackle that had me bristling. The sound of it intermingled with the big city's noise—the cars zipping down a nearby interstate and the ever-present buzz of electricity—and reduced it to so much chaff.

"Your medicine can do nothing to fix what's wrong with me," he gasped as his laughter died. "Although I appreciate your concern, word wright."

Word wright?

"What do you want?" I asked. "Money? I don't carry cash on me, but we can walk to the gas station on the corner if you like. I can get you food."

"Kind of you to offer," the stranger rasped with his eyes jittering over me, "but unnecessary. As I said, I have a gift for you. Nothing dangerous. Not a weapon hidden as altruism, as is so often done

in this iteration. Merely an item that might be useful to you.”

Reaching under his cloak, he pulled something free, something I couldn't clearly see in the dimmed light, and extended it to me. Ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble, I edged toward him. What was the harm in taking what he was offering? I could always throw it away later, and if I accepted it, this strung-out stranger might leave me alone.

And I had my pepper spray ready if he tried anything funny.

I fixed my eyes on the stranger as I plucked his gift from his hand. It went into my purse alongside every other scrap of junk I'd acquired since last cleaning it out.

“Thank you,” I stiffly said.

As if waiting for this specific moment, the stranger's eyes cleared, capturing my gaze with the intensity of the emotion in them, and smile lines creased their corners.

“No, thank *you*,” he said. “After everything that's happened, all of the sacrifices made and the terrible things I've done, I can truthfully say that it's good to see you this time, my word wright. Good journey to you.”

With a final, hesitant grin, he shuffled away from me, grazing his hand along the brick wall to steady his stumbling steps. Making my mouth work took a few seconds, but when I could, I cleared my throat.

“Are you sure you don't need help?” I called.

Pausing, the stranger slumped while his shoulders rose and fell.

“I'm getting what I deserve,” he said. “So, no. Thank you.”

“What you... who decides what you deserve?”

The stranger's chuckle was much less harsh this time, a weak protest against the city's hub-bub.

“Forget me, word wright.”

And he stumbled around the corner, leaving me frowning.

“That wasn't ominous *at all*,” I said under my breath.

If I didn't know better, I'd think this encounter heralded some grand change in my life, as it always did in the books I loved, but this wasn't a fantasy tale. This was real life, and that had been a bad luck meeting with a man who'd been high as a kite.

Shrugging, I continued toward my neighborhood's entrance. I'd trash the stranger's 'gift' the next time I turned my purse inside out, looking for my keys. Until then, it could rest in what, at times,

seemed like a bottomless pit.

As I strode past my neighborhood's identical townhomes, no one hovered in their driveways or strolled down the sidewalks, sparing me the trouble of making small talk. People in the city usually knew how to mind their own business, but every so often, an obnoxiously friendly person would greet me on my way home.

That wasn't fair, though. I shouldn't call those sorts of people obnoxious because their extroverted personalities clashed with mine. Just because *I* found them annoying didn't mean they were.

But there I went again, censoring my *thoughts* because they might not please someone. As if anyone could hear them! What was wrong with me?

I set my self-criticism aside as I closed my front door, and fifty pounds of tri-colored fur skidded to a stop behind me.

"Hey, buddy," I said, hanging my purse on its hook. "How was your day?"

When I faced him, Beau looked up at me with pleading eyes while his tail stub wiggled his back end. Crossing my arms, I listened to him whine for a moment before patting my stomach.

"Come here."

Beau jumped on me, and I curled over slobbery kisses to hug his squirming body. Rubbing his ears, I murmured nonsense words at him for a bit before pushing him to the floor. He followed me to the couch and when I collapsed on it, rested his head on my lap.

"I know," I said. "I'll take you out in a minute. Let me have a second to unwind."

Even saying that, I could never sit still for long. As soon as my feet had stopped aching, I let Beau out through the back door. Keeping an eye on him through the windows, I hurried to my bedroom. I dragged my suitcase out from under my bed and started shoving clothes into it. I'd filled it with only half of what I'd need when I spotted a black blob making for the townhome's back porch.

"You," I said, pointing at Beau as I let him back inside, "are too fast. Are you hungry?"

With his food serving as a distraction, I continued packing. Toothbrush, travel shampoo and soap, razor, phone charger, and most importantly, my e-reader. What had I forgotten?

I was zipping my suitcase closed when Beau trotted into my bedroom. Immediately, his ears went back, and he gave me the worried look he always wore when we went to the vet.

"Don't do that," I said. "I tried to hide what's happening tomorrow, but you had to inhale your kibble, didn't you? It's not my fault that I couldn't finish packing in the thirty seconds it took you to eat."

He continued staring at me while I set my suitcase on the floor.

“Stop! You’ll be fine,” I groaned. “Mom will pick you up tomorrow morning, and you’ll spend a week getting spoiled rotten by her lax rules about getting on the furniture.”

I rolled my suitcase to the front door while behind me, Beau’s claws clacked against the hardwood floor much less enthusiastically than they normally would.

“Fine!” I said, whirling on him. “You can sleep in the bed with me tonight, *and* we’ll play with the ball. How does that sound?”

At the b-word, Beau perked up with his body going alert and his upper lip getting caught in his teeth.

“That’s what I thought,” I said with a sigh. “Ball time, then maybe you’ll let me finish the quest I’m stuck on in Baldur’s Gate, hmm? And maybe you can help me pick which physical book I should bring with me. You know how much I need that textural part of reading sometimes.”

My musings went unnoticed by Beau. His world had become the spiky, rubber ball I was holding, his ‘crack ball’ as I affectionately called it. He hopped and skipped over himself on our way to the back door.

“What do you think?” I said. “Should I dive into Terry Pratchett’s fabulous irreverence again or return to a classic like *The Princess Bride*?”

Beau gave me no opinion as we strode into the dark and the door closed behind us.

Revision #1

Created 27 July 2025 18:26:49 by FatalisticFable

Updated 14 August 2025 13:52:25 by FatalisticFable