

A man with grey hair, wearing a white robe with gold trim, is seated at a desk in a dimly lit, ornate library. He is looking down at a large, open book with a grid of numbers and text. The desk is cluttered with various items: a magnifying glass, a small globe, a scroll, and several glass bottles. In the background, a bed with white linens is visible, and the walls are lined with bookshelves filled with books. The lighting is warm and focused on the man and his work.

True Friends Commit Deicide Together

Truth

Jamie Watson

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*For my friends and family, who inspired many parts of this story
whether they know it or not.*

And for the one who inspired more than they ever knew.

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Author's Note

I used large language models to help outline, draft, and edit this story, and artificial intelligence tools to create its cover and illustrations. Some readers will want to set the book down right here, which I understand. Artificial intelligence is a tool, not an author. The characters in these pages came out of my own life, my own love, my own excitement, and sometimes even my own guilt. Every word in this book is here because I decided it deserved to be. Writing tools have changed. For this story, the human crafting it hasn't.





CHAPTER ONE

Strangers in a Strange Land

“Can you keep a secret?”

The barely audible voice came from the main deck below, under the snap of the sails, and was clearly not meant to be overheard. Pincus had been raised that a dwarf who listened in on private talk became a dwarf people stopped talking near, and he had spent his life trying not to be that dwarf. He had climbed the steps to the raised deck at the stern to be alone with his thoughts. The whole deck rolled slow and patient underfoot in a way he had not gotten used to yet. Then he saw the fish.

These fish could *fly*.

He had been told the surface world had things like this and had not believed it. He did not want to be laughed at as a fool. Not again. But there they were: real fish, with silver wings and deep

blue bodies, breaking out of the water in little crowds and spreading fins as wide as his palm and *gliding*, not jumping, sailing along beside the hull for three or four seconds at a stretch, catching the low sun and turning briefly, impossibly gold as they slipped back under. Pincus gripped the rail and grinned at them. He had lived his whole life under stone and never once left it, not for the other holds, not for anything; three days at sea, and the world had not yet run out of impossible things. If this vacation was already starting out so wondrous, then how would it end?

Coming from the same place as the other voice, “—I keep secrets professionally. I’m a lobbyist after all.”

“Wonderful, then I can finally say what is forbidden to speak back home.”

Pincus slightly turned his head. He did not move his feet. Moving his feet would have been eavesdropping.

“The religion of Peace has lost its way.”

Pincus leaned a little with his face still looking over the railing. Just his shoulders. Shoulders weren’t feet.

“When I was young, peace meant no one stopped you from living your life your own way. Now it means the god tells a city to kneel, and the city kneels. The warships came, and the God of Peace told us to surrender before we’d raised a hand; half of us call that mercy, the other half call it conquest with better manners.”

Above them a sail snapped taut with a crack like a whip, and the deck heeled hard enough that Pincus grabbed the rail; the lobbyist cut in, and the wind took whatever he said. The first voice pressed on, lower.

“My point is that peace has become the one subject nobody in

this city can discuss peacefully, and a man can still get himself hurt for trying. Which I find—”

Pincus leaned toward the head of the stairs, a little more than he should have, and he stumbled. The step he took to catch himself caught the coil of rope someone had left on the deck, and the stumble became a trip. He grabbed for the rail and got sea air, and then the deck was gone from under him and he rolled to the steps and then down them the hard way, the shield on his back clattering off every one. He came to rest on his back at the boots of two men: a tall one with a thin gold chain, and one in a long green-and-gold scarf lifting and snapping behind him in the breeze, the kind a man wears so strangers will ask about the scarf. Above him the mainmast climbed into a tangle of rope and dark sail, a late gull crossing it toward the harbor. From the boards of the main deck, looking up at the tall man, he saw a small worked-metal pin attached to his shirt: a hand whose thumb, as the man shifted, seemed to *move*, rubbing across the fingers in the gesture every land used to mean *pay up*. Above the pin a disapproving face, and past it the first stars coming out.

“I wasn’t listening.”

In a monotone voice the tall man said, “Plainly.”

The man in the scarf looked the length of Pincus, took in the leather armor and the guilty upturned face, and gave a smile. He crouched and put out a hand, his fingertips stained dark, ink maybe, and Pincus filed him under *writer* and felt clever about it.

“Elrond. Writer, traveler, student of life. Are you alright?”

“Mostly. My training-sergeant said I was the best faller he ever taught. The trick is to roll.” Pincus warmly took the hand and vigorously shook it. He was shorter than both of them, which was

usual; nearly everything on the surface was higher than he expected: the doors, bed frames, and even fish apparently. He was coming around to the theory that the surface had been laid out by someone never told that brave dwarves might leave their mountain keeps for a vacation from time to time.

Elrond asked, “And what brings a dwarf to Arhuna?”

“I’m traveling. I left home after—” Pincus stalled, started again. “I trained to join an elite war unit. It had a dangerous mission coming up and needed new recruits. It was a mission that I was perfectly qualified to join, but likely none of us would come back from. I wanted to go, but they wouldn’t take me.”

Elrond held up one finger. “Wait. You were rejected from a *suicide mission*? Was it for the war between the gods, a war between nations, or a war between brothers?”

Pincus opened his mouth. “The gods. The goddess of Apathy’s forces had gotten too close to Tholgar Hold.”

Elrond asked, “And you wanted in?!”

“I wanted to be useful. I’m the best smith in Kazrik Deep, three years running. People just don’t take to me. They didn’t need a smith — they needed someone the others wanted beside them at the end. That was never going to be me.”

Elrond looked at him a moment, and the look was warm. Pincus had not been looked at warmly in a while.

Elrond’s mouth moved without sound, as though he were tasting something. “The finest hand in the mountain,” he murmured, “and not one soul who would hold it...” He caught Pincus watching, and waved his ink-stained hand. “Forgive me — I keep the good ones for later.”

“My friend,” Elrond said, “what you need is a festival.”

“A festival? The traders back home in Kazrik Deep spoke of Arhuna, but they never mentioned a festival. What are they celebrating?”

“It’s New Year’s. Out with the year of the dog, in with the year of the dragon, which Arhuna takes as license to drink itself stupid and set the sky on fire at midnight. Music, exotic food I can barely pronounce, and dancing partners enough that no man need go home alone.” He clapped Pincus on the shoulder, and the scarf nearly took Pincus in the eye. “Arhuna is this boat’s next stop. Get off and enjoy the night. And should you find yourself with a free morning, come hear me give a sermon in Hono Park at midmorning. You may have heard of us: Compassionism. Four months old, and already the fastest-growing faith in the world. By revenue that is. But what is most important is that we are about *love*. Real connections with real people make this a world worth living in. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Pincus was nodding before he’d decided to. Then the rest of it caught up with him. “Is Arhuna safe? You just told that man that talking about Peace could get a fellow—”

Elrond clapped a hand over Pincus’s mouth and laughed, quiet and quick, the smile not quite fitting his face, and said, “Arhuna is perfectly safe. Just don’t say the wrong thing to the wrong people.” He moved his hand back to his side. “Will you join us tomorrow for a sermon so moving that only a true professional could have given it?”

Pincus, who had been raised to settle a debt the instant it was named, reached for his coin purse to find out what a sermon might run him. He got it open. The cut stones inside caught the last of the

light and sparkled it back: a garnet, a little raw silver, the blue stone his mother had favored. For a moment the purse was the brightest thing on the deck.

“Does your faith accept garnets?”

Elrond’s hand closed over the coin purse. Gently, folding it shut, and his eyes did something quick and complicated before continuing.

“Yes, of course we do.” Elrond looked around the ship and quietly said, “Put that away. A man never knows who’ll decide that much coin is worth more than his life.” Then the smile came back. “Least of all at a festival.”

The fish had come back. Pincus felt them before he saw them, a stir along the hull, and he drifted to the rail because he couldn’t help it, and there they were again, a crowd of them with wings looking almost gold in the dusk. He laughed.

The tall lobbyist said, “You like the fish?”

“I’ve never seen anything like them.”

“Do you know how they manage to fly?” The man came to the rail. His voice had warmed a degree. “They take in a little of the water and let out an oil. A magic one, rare. It lightens and propels them.” He nodded at the water sliding past. “A dwarf could do the same you know. Go over the side, take a mouthful where the fish have been, and you’d be up among them in just a few seconds.” The tall man let out a small laugh.

“Truly?” Pincus looked at the fish, then down at the water, deep blue and a long way below, and then back at the man. The wanting was real. So was the drop. “But I can’t swim.”

“You won’t be swimming. You’ll be *flying*.” The tall man tipped his head at the sea and snickered. “Go on.”

Pincus looked at the water one more time, and the want pulled at him hard. But the want had been wrong before. “Show me first.”

The tall man’s smile went flat. He said, “Go *on*. It’s easy.”

Pincus looked over the railing at the flying fish. It looked so easy for them, but it would not be for him. He felt a hand on his back and then a small shove. Pincus stumbled half over the railing, one boot even leaving the deck, the dark water swinging up to meet him with the tall man laughing. A hand caught the back of his collar and hauled him in while Elrond’s scarf wiped against the side of his face.

Pincus came down on both boots, his face hot, his heart slamming. Elrond rounded on the tall man. “He can’t swim! What’s wrong with you, Tarrant!?”

Tarrant shrugged and set his moving pin straight. “People like *him* are lost already. People like *us* may as well get a laugh while we can.” He looked at Elrond and his smile faded, “We could have thrown him a rope...”

Elrond stared at him with his mouth slightly open and slowly shook his head.

Tarrant continued, “I have to prepare for my meeting with the new governor of Arhuna anyway.” He turned for the stairs below deck, his steps even and unhurried.

Elrond gently placed his hand on Pincus’s shoulder while Pincus looked down into the sea, the place that almost taught him that he couldn’t fly. His heart was racing.

“I almost—”

“You did,” Elrond said. “Don’t make a study of it.” But he left the hand on Pincus’s shoulder.

Down the deck, a passenger had stopped at the rail and was pointing into the harbor mouth ahead. “Is that a warship? Why’s it flying that flag?”

Pincus followed the arm. Past the bowsprit, past the flying fish, Arhuna was coming up out of the dusk, a city the sea looked to have built and then dressed for a party, pale towers and crowded roofs and the first lantern lights coming on in strings along the water. And in the throat of the harbor, riding low and dark and bristling, sat a ship dressed for no party at all, a flag at its mast that Pincus didn’t know and the pointing man plainly did.

Nobody answered the man. Pincus didn’t know enough to know what the silence meant, only that it meant something.

Elrond brought his hand back to his side. “There she is.” Lightness back in him, the scarf streaming toward the city. “Wait until you taste the food.”

A bell rang forward. From somewhere above, the captain’s voice came down the deck, flat and bored, “We’re docking in Arhuna in fifteen minutes. Gather your things.”

The flying fish dropped under the hull a last time and did not come back up. Pincus watched the place where they’d been. Then he watched the city instead, bright and waiting, the warship low and dark at the mouth of it like the one cloud in a clear sky. He went to gather his things. He could really use a festival.

* * *

The gangway was steeper than it looked, and Pincus took it one careful step at a time, one hand on the rope rail and the shield on his

back knocking his spine with every step, as though the ship were tapping him goodbye.

Halfway down he stopped to look at it. Arhuna opened out from the water in a great green V, palm trees lining the white-sand shore, close-packed thatched-roof buildings resting upon gentle hills running down to a harbor crowded with masts, a river splitting the whole city in half on its way to the sea. On the hill to his left squatted a grey fort, the dark arms of its ballistae trained out across the water; and far back, small only because it was far, a pale temple lifted a cluster of gilded domes above every other roof, its high windows of purple glass holding the last of the light after the streets below had let it go. A sailor behind him said, “You’re holding up the line”, and Pincus went the rest of the way down.

At the foot of the gangway an official in leather stood over a strongbox. “Festival tax. One silver a head.”

Ahead in the line, Tarrant did not reach for a coin. He turned the pin on his shirt to catch the lantern light, the fingers rubbing their endless rub, and the official sighed. He waved the man through.

Tarrant paused at the end of the dock and waved to Elrond as he pronounced, “May you disproportionately benefit from the tax system.” He gave a small nod and then he was gone into Arhuna.

Behind Pincus a dockhand muttered, “I hate lobbyists,” and half the line laughed.

Pincus laughed too. It was a good line, and everyone was laughing together.

Then everyone stopped, and Pincus did not. He went on a breath too long, into a quiet that had closed over the line, and the faces nearest him turned to consider the dwarf still chuckling at a joke

that had ended some seconds ago. The old heat climbed his neck, the particular heat of being the last one laughing. He shut his mouth, paid his silver, and stepped through.

And Arhuna hit him in the face.

Not the way the mango cart nearly did (though it came close), but in every other way a place can hit a dwarf who has spent his whole life under a mountain. The air was thick and warm and smelled of salt and frying oil and a sweetness he had no name for. Music came from three directions and agreed on nothing. A woman sold paper flowers from a cart hung with colored cloth. Somewhere a drum was losing an argument with a horn. Back home the air was still and dry, and a noise came cleanly across the stone; he had always known where a sound began. Here it bounced off stone and water and buildings and arrived all at once.

Lanterns hung in strings between the rooftops, hundreds of them, and the crowd moved underneath in a slow river. And through it all, drifting between the lanterns with no string to hold them, were more small lights, wandering, winking in and out. Pincus stopped in the middle of the street. He had taken them for sparks at first, or embers off a fire, except embers did not climb, and embers did not choose where they went next. These were alive. The surface kept its small lights loose and let them go wherever they pleased. Someone bumped into Pincus and looked down at him.

“Mind yourself.”

Pincus moved to the side of the road, but he kept his eyes on the small lights, afraid that if he looked away they might be gone when he looked back.

Elrond found him by the elbow. “I’ve got to check on my son,” he

said, already half-turned into the crowd, the scarf reaching ahead of him like it knew the way. "You should eat something. Talk to strangers. There's no such thing as a stranger at a festival." The smile creased all the way to his eyes. "Only, steer clear of the elves that look out of place. Oh, and the priests of Peace too."

"You keep saying that."

"Because it keeps being good advice." He pressed Pincus's shoulder once and was gone, scarf and all, before Pincus could ask which way the best food was.

And then Pincus was alone in the crowd.

He knew the feeling all too well. Back home he could stand in a packed hall among people who liked him well enough, but never invited him to join them. He'd thought he was leaving it under the mountain. It had come along the dock with him instead. But out here, with the music coming from everywhere and the lights loose overhead and people laughing in the streets, it quickly left him. Tonight was his first night in Arhuna, and he was going to enjoy it.

He set his shoulders. The coin purse was still heavy at his belt; he closed his hand over it, the way Elrond had, and went looking for something to eat.

Pincus walked into the festival with his head tipped back, and he did not put it down. He had seen stars before, every night since he left the mountain. They were thick as sparks off a forge, and not one going out. Under the mountain there had always been a ceiling; even in the dark he had known it was there. Out here there was no ceiling. There was just up, and the up had *beauty* in it.

He bumped into a man.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m sorry, I wasn’t looking. I was looking *up*, which is the opposite of where I was going.” The man had already moved off. Pincus apologized to the space where the man had been, in case it helped, “Sorry.” He brought his eyes down to find that his feet had carried him to the edge of a crowd. A board stood propped there, lit by a swinging lantern: **FREE TACOS WITH SERMON**. Under it, smaller text: *Come and submit to Peace*.

Pincus did not know what a taco was. He had heard the word once, from a trader passing through Kazrik Deep who told his father it was both soft *and* crunchy. Pincus had thought about it, on and off, for most of a year now.

A young woman stood at the crowd’s edge with an instrument case open at her feet: brown-skinned, dark hair loose down her back, wrapped in layered silks that had been fine once and were going soft and travel-worn now, the bright colors fading. The case held only a few coppers, not enough for even one of Elrond’s sermons. Her eyes kept going back and forth from the crowd to the taco stand.

At the stand, three priests in pale robes, each marked at the breast with a stitched sword, point down, worked the festival crowd: two of them talking with some children, the third a stout woman tending a grill where strips of meat smoked and spat. One of the boys began to cry and ran behind his mother.

The priests were not scolding the children. Why were the children crying? A girl of maybe four stood in front of the nearest one with her lip wobbling, and the priest crouched to her height and said, in the gentlest voice in the world, “Do not struggle, little one. We must all submit to Peace.” The girl shrieked and vanished into her mother’s skirts. The priest straightened, baffled, and murmured to

the priest beside him, "...That keeps happening."

"It's what you keep *saying*." The woman with the instrument case had drifted closer, and she was fighting a smile. "They aren't resisting Peace. You're ordering toddlers to *submit* and *surrender* and *stop struggling*. You sound like every bad dream they've ever had. Try saying anything else."

"We always bless the little ones this way," said the priest.

"Yes. And it always makes them cry."

"The children are not yet at peace."

The woman shut her eyes a moment, looked down, and put her hand on her forehead.

Pincus had arrived at her elbow without quite deciding to. The whole thing struck him as a genuine puzzle, and he turned to her with it.

"Do you think they're crying because they don't like foreigners?"

The woman let out a quick laugh and turned to him grinning. Then she looked at his face and her grin changed.

"You're serious?"

"I've never been to the surface. I don't know why children cry up here." He considered. "Back home it's mostly goblins."

She stared at him, and then she laughed again, differently: a startled, helpless sound. "The kids don't mind foreigners," she said. With an outstretched hand and a warm smile she continued, "I'm Zannah."

He gave the firmest handshake he could, the way his father had taught him. "Pincus." Zannah winced and let go.

The sermon had begun. The lead priest stepped up onto a crate, raised his hands, and the crowd, most of it probably there for the

food, shuffled into something like attention.

The priest preached, “Peace is not merely the absence of war. Peace is the end of struggle. And struggle ends when the self stops clawing at the hand set above it.”

Behind him hung a banner: the God of Peace among children, white doves spilling from his open hands, which the painter had haloed in soft light so no one would mistake him for an ordinary man. One of the children came up almost to his shoulder. There were real doves too, Pincus noticed, a wooden cage of them by the table, cooing and shifting in the heat, their feathers drifted white across the cut up tomatoes.

“Peace comes from submission,” the priest went on. “Submission is not humiliation. Submission is trust.”

Pincus leaned toward Zannah. “Do the temples of Peace smell like bird poop?”

Zannah made a noise into her hand.

The priest faltered. “...I beg your pardon?”

“The doves.” Pincus pointed, to be helpful. “You’ve got a lot of them. In the mines we kept canaries, for the gas, and the cages smelled *terrible*. And those are small birds. Doves are bigger. Do you keep them inside? In the temples?”

The priest’s face went the color of cured ham. “The doves of Peace are a sacred symbol of the trust between Gorstag and his children.”

“Right,” Pincus said. “But do they poop inside? Is the smell why the children were crying?”

The priest turned back to the crowd and spoke louder than before, “Gorstag stands above our quarrels, and guides us past our own selfishness.”

Pincus nodded slowly. He had spent his life in the working caste, his worth in what his hands could make; he understood being set beneath others. But something in *stands above* caught on a rough edge in him.

“Who holds Gorstag accountable?”

The plaza dropped half a step quieter.

The priest looked at him. “Gorstag is constrained only by his own immaculate ethics.”

Beside Pincus, Zannah rolled her eyes.

Pincus said, “That’s a big thing to say.”

Many in the crowd nodded, and Zannah quietly said, “Yes, it is.”

The priest raised his voice. “If you are here for the tacos, you may have them after the sermon. If you are here to disturb the peace—”

“I’m not disturbing anything. I’m asking questions.” The old confusion rose in Pincus, the same one the paladins back home had left him with. He was trying, he was always trying, and it pushed the next words out before he could weigh them. “I think Gorstag means well, but I just don’t think I can look up to a god like him.”

The crowd went silent. Something was wrong.

“He is not as short as everyone says!” The priest’s voice cracked on *short*. He pointed at Pincus, then at Zannah, then at the festival crowd that had quietly begun finding other places to be. “If you want to cause trouble, go and do it somewhere else!” Zannah grabbed Pincus by the sleeve and dragged him out of the square.

They surfaced in a side street hung with lanterns, the ground soft with trodden flower petals. Pincus looked back the way they’d come.

“I ruined everything with my big mouth and I don’t even know

how.”

“You did nothing wrong.”

“The priest seemed upset.”

“The priest is sensitive about how tall his god is.” She sighed, “I just wish we’d gotten the tacos first.”

“I cost you the tacos. I’m sorry. I owe you dinner then.”

She looked at him, at the hole worn through his shirtsleeve, at the fat coin purse.

“You don’t owe me dinner.”

“I do, though. You were going to eat, and then I asked about the doves, and now you’re not.”

She opened her mouth, about to speak, and then she closed it.

“There’s a tavern up the hill.” She picked up her case and continued, “I think I smelled roast pig coming from there an hour ago. Do you like roast pig?”

“Yes, and I’m definitely buying.”

On the walk up the hill there were merchants selling dyed eggs filled with confetti that teenagers were crushing on their friends’ heads and laughing. As he climbed he noticed that people were having more trouble walking in a straight line. Zannah watched them stumble, and smiled. Taverns leaned over the hill from both sides, spilling lamplight and music and the smell of cooking into the crowd. A woman danced by herself outside a doorway with her eyes shut. Two men carried a third between them, singing badly and laughing as they went, the third contributing only his feet.

Pincus said, “I’m surprised the religion of Peace has any followers at all if that is how the priests act.”

Zannah considered him. “The religion has changed ever since the

previous god of Peace, Armallilla, suddenly died. Most of the faithful are left over from her day — strangers in their own religion now.” She pointed at a banner strung over the street: a sword, pointed down, stitched in white. “That’s Gorstag’s mark—I’ve seen it at least ten times already, and I just arrived in Arhuna this morning.”

“So you’re not from here either?”

“Mernillow.” A pause. “It’s across the Ostrine Ocean. About three months by ship.”

“Are you on vacation too?” He stopped. “Alone? No, you must be moving?”

Zannah studied him a moment, then let a breath out. “...No. Well. It’s *like* moving.”

A reveler came weaving down the hill, and Zannah drew them both a step clear of him without breaking stride.

“I just don’t know where I’ll end up yet.”

“Most people end up back home?”

Somewhere a firework went off too early, and a dozen people cheered, and one small boy began to wail; his mother quickly comforted him.

“Home isn’t somewhere I can go back to.”

“Why not? Did something happen to it?”

Zannah sighed. “Something happened to my place in it.”

The roast-pig smell had grown stronger and Pincus’s stomach made a growl that he hoped Zannah hadn’t heard.

The tavern at the top had a painted sign: a mermaid with a harp, the paint old and the colors gone soft. Under the sign a crowd, and in front of the crowd, blocking the door, the most handsome man Pincus had ever seen; tall, broad, gold-haired, a strong jawline, all

traits that Pincus lacked. He stood on an overturned crate. Behind him a small crowd of perhaps eight young adults held signs and chanted:

“Mermaids are more than just their tail!”

Pincus had never once thought about mermaids. Perhaps they were like the serfs of Kazrik Deep, made to haul for those above them and never once asked how they felt about it.

Beside him, Zannah was staring at the handsome man with a look that was not the wince she’d given his handshake, and not quite a smile. Pincus turned to her.

“Are mermaids forced to tow ships?”

Zannah turned her body toward him, and then her head followed. “...What?”

The handsome man threw both hands skyward. “We demand this tavern be renamed!”

The crowd took it up behind him, “Mermaids are more than just their tail!”

Zannah laughed again. She laughed a lot. “Mermaids are almost never seen, Pincus. I think this protest has rather less to do with mermaids and rather more to do with that young man.”

Pincus nodded. “Yes. He wants their struggle shown to the world. So do I.”

Zannah tilted her head to the left and her neck dropped as she looked down at Pincus. He had seen this look before. He had done something wrong.

She said, “The mermaids are fine. Our trouble is getting past this lot and through the door.”

A few others trying to reach the door were stuck behind the

protest too.

The tavern door banged open and an elf woman with sleeves shoved up came out. She took in the crate, the signs, the chant, and the handsome man, and did not appear to weigh any of it for long.

“Fine,” she said. “New name first thing in the morning. Now move on.”

The handsome man threw both fists over his head. “Victory!” he announced, to the street, to the festival, to the stars. The eight cheered like eighty. Two of them even hugged. The elf woman had already gone back inside.

“See that?” He stepped down off the crate, walked over, and clapped Pincus on the shoulder, hard, the way big friendly men did. “That’s how it’s done. You don’t ask ignorance nicely. The mermaids deserved better and now they have it.” Which was, to Pincus, the wisest thing anyone had told him since he left the mountain.

Then he looked at Zannah, and the whole group of protesters turned to face her.

“Well,” he said, and the warm voice dropped half a register. “The cause draws all the right people tonight.” He looked at her the way Zannah had looked at the tacos.

“I see that you are as passionate as I am.”

Pincus watched the ease go out of Zannah’s face.

“I’m Cadan. Paladin of Justice. And you are?”

“Hungry,” Zannah said, and walked past him into the tavern.

Cadan watched her go, entirely unfazed. He confided to Pincus, “I bet she’ll still let me buy her a drink,” and held the door open.

Pincus followed, because following seemed like the right thing, and because the open door let out a wall of humid warmth and

cheers and roast pig smell that reached into the street and pulled him.

The Mermaid's Tail, or whatever it was about to be called, opened herself up to them.

Inside was a long timber hall, jammed wall to wall: near a hundred people, every heavy wooden table taken, more standing in the gaps and leaning along the walls. On Pincus's right, the wall held half the tavern by itself: first a broad stone hearth with a worn bear fur rug thrown down before it, the light climbing into the rafters; beyond that, along the same wall, ran a bar so long and so deeply stocked that a little three-step ladder leaned against it, for the bottles too high to reach. A narrow lane ran between the bar and the nearest tables, just wide enough for servers, stools, and people who had stopped pretending they were going anywhere. Above the whole room a chandelier with candles hung from the beams. The windows stood open on the warm night, and past them Pincus could make out leaves broad as his shield, and a spill of red flowers he had no name for, nodding in the dark.

Then the sound of it reached him: music, nearly a hundred voices, a cheer going up somewhere; and the smell of roast pig and spilled ale. One man had given up on chairs entirely and sat on the floor with his back against the bar, a fistful of ale, content. In the far corner opposite the hearth, a small band sawed away on a platform barely big enough to hold them. Two servers cut through the crush with trays held overhead, moving fast, exact, and adapting to every change with grace.

There was nowhere to sit, so Zannah went first and Pincus followed her into a gap near the middle of the room, both of them

turning sideways as a server cut past with a tray held overhead. The fire was to Pincus's right. So was the good table nearest it, the kind a tavern keeps for the guests it wants to keep. A few elves sat there in fine clothes listening to the music. Their mugs and bowls were empty; which was true at several other tables too. An elf who had rings on all but his wedding finger watched the servers pass him to other tables with a still face. He demanded, "We want another round and the food we ordered."

The nearest server glanced at him, "I'll go check the kitchen when I can." She was pulled away by someone else's request. He gripped his mug, and his friends looked down at the table.

To Pincus's left, past the reach of the hearthlight, a small table had been wedged beside a roof post and half-blocked by a stack of stools stolen from somewhere else. A young man sat there alone with his left arm in a sling and nothing but a cup of water in front of him. His eyes found Pincus; Pincus, not knowing the surface custom, gave him a small nod, and the young man looked back at his water.

Zannah spotted the only open place left at the bar: not seats, exactly, but a standing space where the stools had gone missing. She took the far end of it. Pincus stood beside her, between Zannah and the strangers already gathered there. Behind them, near the gap where they had first stopped, Cadan had sat at an open seat next to a pretty girl. The rest of his fellow protester stood around the table.

Above them, on a smoke-dark beam a small owl sat folded into itself, blinking down at the room; every so often a boy sitting nearby glanced up to find it. The boy was perhaps thirteen—messy dark hair, fair skin with a light tan, the slight build of a kid who'd shot up

too fast. With a beard? Pincus looked again. The boy was definitely wearing a beard: a good one, thick, dark, neatly groomed, and shiny. The kind only the nobles could afford to maintain. Wait, it was *too* shiny, and it was definitely not growing out of his face. It hung half a finger's width off his chin, and when the boy turned his head, the beard took a moment to catch up.

On Pincus's right, an elf was being obnoxiously loud. He was older, light brown from sun and drink, a mug of frothy ale in one hand, his collar open and a string of seashells at his throat, telling a story to the 'bearded' boy beside him with the whole-body commitment of someone who had told it before and improved it each time.

The loud elf turned to Pincus, "The beard's an illusion. He decided to put it on. Tell him it's fooling no one — he won't hear it from me."

The boy said, "It *is* working," while his beard was failing him even as he spoke. "No one has questioned my age all night."

The loud elf turned back to the boy, "No one has spoken to you all night."

"That is because the beard commands respect."

The loud elf said, "The beard. Is floating."

The loud elf swung round on his stool to take in Pincus and Zannah as they stood there. "You're here for the festival. No better place to start than the Mermaid's Tail. I'm Laucian. That's my employee, Umbra. That's my personal assistant, Geth. And this is Arthur, my intern, who is ..." The elf's smile stalled.

Arthur said, "Thirteen. Fourteen in five weeks."

Pincus offered helpfully, "This tavern's name is being retired. There was a protest. For the mermaids."

Arthur frowned. "Then why does the sign still say *Mermaid's Tail*

Tavern? And why is there a mermaid painted over the door, playing a harp?”

“It changes in the morning. We convinced the owner that ...” He looked to Zannah, not quite sure how to finish.

Zannah went faintly pink and then asked Laucian, “Sorry, a misunderstanding. How much of the fish stew is actually fish?”

Geth lurched upright, eager to answer. “All fish. Whole fish, caught this morning right off the—”

Laucian eased him back down by the elbow. “It’s half a fish and a hill of potatoes, Geth — you don’t have to field every question. Or, really, any of them.” He turned back to Zannah. “Goes well with bread, if you’re hungry.”

Geth gave a wide smile and clapped Laucian on the shoulder. “This man looks out for me. Always has. Did I—” He lost the thread, and frowned at his ale like it had wandered off with the rest of the sentence.

Then his eyes found the fine-dressed elves at the hearth, he scowled, and leaned past Laucian toward the newcomers. “Those occupiers from Sunnmoor should go back where they came from,” he said, with great conviction. “Arhuna’s our city.” A few heads turned. Laucian’s hand landed on Geth’s shoulder, friendly and quick.

“Don’t mind him. He’s had a few,” Laucian said, smiling at the turned heads until they turned back. Under his breath, almost laughing he looked at Geth, “You’ll get me hanged one of these nights.”

Geth said, into his ale, “Sorry, Laucian.”

Beside Geth sat Umbra, dark-haired and pale, prettier than her plain travel clothes suggested, a single knife at her belt and a cup in front of her she did not drink from. Pincus nodded to her. She

looked at him up and down, gave him a small smile, and went back to watching the room.

Except she was not watching the room. Pincus followed her eyes and found she was watching one person in particular. A few years younger than her. It was the same young man with the sling Pincus had nodded to on the way in, alone at the little table by the post. He was watching the room too. A few tables off, Umbra had landed on the one person doing the same thing she was: plainly dressed, a cup sitting untouched in front of him, his eyes moving over the room instead of resting in it.

“Do we order at the bar?” Zannah asked.

Laucian looked over. “No, usually a server’s meant to come round to you, but it’s awful busy tonight. The service has been a tragedy.”

Laucian watched Pincus settle the shield against the bar, and something behind the drink in his eyes sharpened, then went soft again. “You look like a soldier. Where’s the war?”

“They wouldn’t take me,” Pincus said.

“Wouldn’t they? A dwarf with a shield and no war to fight could do well in a city like this. I could find you a job or two if you’re interested?”

“No. I’m on vacation. Arhuna is my first stop. I am not sure where I should go next. I’ll need to buy a map while I’m in town.”

A server stopped at their stretch of bar: the young one, a wiry elf girl of maybe fifteen, black-haired and fair skin, flour on her jaw, a necklace with the small down-pointed sword of Peace at her throat. She balanced a tray on one forearm, moving so fast she seemed to arrive and leave in the same motion. A small, scruffy, wheaten-gold dog wove after her between the table legs, keeping her in sight. Her

eyes went to the case at Zannah's feet. "Do you play that lute?"

"I play it."

The server girl said, "My mother runs this place. She likes exotic music. I can give you an audition, one song. If the room likes you, there's dinner in it, five copper pieces, and the attic cot for the night, and a chance to play more, if my mother likes you." Already turning away: "The stage is in the corner by the band. Tell them Orla sent you."

Arthur watched her go the whole way across the room, and as he watched, the beard, untended, thinned, and faded, and was gone, leaving nothing on his chin but a boy. When he caught himself, it flickered back, a little crooked.

Zannah reached for her lute and paused halfway down.

Pincus smiled, "You should play."

Zannah came back up and looked at the room. "I know I should. I haven't played for a tavern before. I've only ever played for my ex-husband's guests or busked outside."

Laucian announced to the whole room, "A song!" He turned to Pincus, "The band's played four songs about surfing already. Somebody sing something that isn't about surfing."

"Two of them were about surfing," Arthur said.

"Arthur."

"A third is arguably also about surfing. The metaphor was not subtle."

Zannah picked up her case. She gave Pincus a look that temporarily took the fun out of the night as she slowly began walking across the room.

The band made what space they could for her on stage. She tuned

the lute. The room did not go quiet. It was too full and too drunk for that. But a few heads turned. She began.

It was not what Pincus had expected. He'd expected something fast and bright, to match the night. What she played was slow, and old, and the first notes cut through the tavern the way a clean tone carries down a stone hall, not loud, but exact.

*When storm swallowed lantern and night drowned the shore,
the dragon flew low where the lost cried no more.
She carried the sun in the gold of her wings,
and taught frightened sailors why mercy still sings.*

The noise thinned. Not all at once. A festival crowd doesn't hush. But conversations dropped to murmurs, and mugs paused halfway up. She sang the next verse, and the one after, and the room fell into the music. The song was about a dragon, and where Pincus came from a dragon was a thing to run from. This one flew low to guard the drowning sailors and asked for nothing in return, and the song made that sound like the most natural thing in the world.

The young man at the little table by the post, the one Umbra had been watching, had gone very still.

He had not moved much before; now he did not move at all. His good hand lay flat on the table, and his eyes were on the cup of water, and they did not come up. Once, partway through, he reached into his pocket, set a small copper coin on the table, and half-rose, his weight already shifting toward the door, and then he didn't. He sat back down. He stayed. The song went on, and after a while Pincus stopped watching because Zannah's performance had his eyes again. She let the last note hang. The lute hummed under it, and then let it go.

The room came back slowly, and then it clapped. Someone at the bar started it; then the table by the door, then the whole tavern. Laucian even stood and accidentally spilled some ale onto his own arm while clapping. Arthur clapped very fast. From his table a familiar voice whistled, Cadan, applauding the woman who'd walked past him earlier without a backward look. Coins came, a few of them, tossed from the nearer tables: coppers, mostly, and one bright piece that Laucian threw and Zannah caught without looking, which made the applause louder.

Zannah came back to the bar with the coins in her case. Orla found her there, smiling. "My mother says you've got it. Dinner, the copper, the cot, after the rush. Play the rest of the night if you want."

"Could I have the fish stew, with some bread?"

Already moving: "I'll bring your stew and bread shortly."

Pincus quickly asked, "Can I have some tacos?"

Orla looked back, gave a nod, and then went back to weaving through the crowd.

For a moment, just a moment, something in Zannah's face let go and gave way to a smile.

She addressed Pincus. "You were right. I should have played." With Zannah on his left and Laucian on his right, the tavern was exactly what it had looked like from the harbor: warm, and loud, and full of joy.

A few tables off, the elf in the expensive clothes still had an empty mug and an empty bowl, and he was still watching Orla fill the tables around him.

Orla came back along the narrow aisle between the hearth tables

and the bar with an empty tray and the quick walk of someone three tables behind where she ought to be. As she passed the good table, the elf with the rings and expensive clothes put out his hand and closed it around her wrist. He enunciated slowly, and louder than expected. "We have been sitting here since before that woman sang."

Orla pulled to get free and could not. "I'll go check the kitchen." The elf's grip tightened. She gave a small cry; the tray tipped; an empty bowl rolled off and broke on the floor. A few faces near the hearth turned, then went carefully back to their drinks.

Then the little dog came out from under the tables and growled. Pincus had forgotten it was there, the scruffy wheaten thing that had trailed the girl all night. The nearby patrons went quiet.

The elf said, "*I will not be kept waiting.*" Orla was trying to get away. He swatted at the dog with his boot and pushed it back. It came out low and fast and bit the elf's shoe. He made a sound, high and surprised, and let go of her wrist and stood up. Orla stumbled into a table and slid down and crawled away from him, toward the gap at the bar, the dog snarling between him and her.

He drew his jewel-encrusted saber, a curved length of bright steel, and smiled down at the dog. "I've something sharp for you, too." The other elves at his table looked at each other.

Pincus had seen people draw steel. He had not seen a person draw it on a young serving girl and her dog over a meal, and the wrongness of it reached him slowly, the way cold water finds you through good boots. And someone was already moving before it finished arriving.

The young man with his arm in a sling, who had sat alone with his water at the little table by the post and not moved all night.

Pincus did not see him stand; he saw him already through the gap between the tables, too fast, and wrong, for a young man with one arm bound to his chest, and then the young man put his one good hand on the ringed elf's chest and the elf was forced backward onto his table, the saber knocked loose, landing on the bear rug by the hearth, and the whole room went quiet. The owl on the roof's beam gave a single ringing shriek and beat its wings in tight circles under the rafters.

The elf with the rings lifted himself off the table. He hissed, "You *malapert*."

And then it stopped being one man and a bully. The elf's companions came up out of their chairs with steel already drawn, three of them: a long-haired one with a curved scimitar, and two with plain swords, a thick muscular one and one dressed head to foot in blue. They spread out around the young man, who had one arm bound to his chest, no weapon, and the fallen saber nowhere near his feet. Around them the room shoved back all at once: stools scraping the boards, a chair going over, a clear ring opening up with him and the drawn blades at the middle of it.

Pincus snapped out of his shock and shouted towards a nearby open window, "Peace keepers!" He was certain that somewhere out in the festival stood men whose whole purpose was to stop this. A man was already going out that same window headfirst, calling for help to the street as his boots cleared the windowsill. And then there was no time left for shouting.

The band struck up something fast and bright. Somewhere in the crush a man threw a fist in the air and roared, "This is my *favorite* tune!" Laucian vaulted over the bar counter with a nimbleness

Pincus would not have guessed was in him, planted himself in front of the bottles, and bellowed, "I'll guard the booze!"

Two patrons waiting for drinks lurched in front of Arthur, and Arthur clambered up to stand on his stool, craning to see the fight over the heads of the crowd, the way a boy does the instant a real fight breaks out. Pincus shoved off from the bar.

The companions closed in on the young man, who backed away until his hip struck the little table by the post. The muscular elf reached him first. The young man leaned back over the table, let the swing go past, and grasped a heavy clay jug which he promptly swung into the muscular elf's face with his one good arm. It shattered. The muscular elf shook it off and came on again. The young man ducked beneath the next swing, but his boot went out from under him on the ale-wet boards, and he hit the ground hard. He twisted under the little table, trying to get wood and chair legs between himself and the swords, but the muscular elf caught his boot and began to drag him back into the open. The third of them, the one in blue, had a sword out like the others, but he hung at the edge of the fight, shifting his weight, his eyes going from his friends to the door and back.

Orla was on the floor still, scrambling away from the hearth toward the gap at the bar, trying to get behind it, and her dog planted itself between her and the elves and barked, once, high and furious, at all of them. The long-haired elf broke from the table by the hearth at the sound and came after the dog, scimitar leading, across the cleared ring toward the bar.

Pincus came in from the bar side and got between the dog and the long-haired elf's scimitar. The shield was up in both hands.

There had been no time to strap it to his arm. The curved blade rang off the rim hard enough to drive him down to the boards, its edge skating off the metal and opening a cold bright line along his forearm that did not hurt yet. The blow knocked Pincus onto his back. The long-haired elf stood over him. The scimitar went up for a stroke you don't walk away from.

From the floor Pincus saw Cadan come, cutting through the shoved-back crowd at a dead run, snatching a chair out of the hands of a person rising to flee. He reached the edge of the cleared space and brought it down on the elf in blue. The chair broke to pieces; the elf in blue's head found the table's edge on the way down, and he did not get up. The muscular elf saw it, let go of the young man's boot, and came up off the floor with his sword rising. Cadan tackled him before the blade ever cleared.

Cadan was on the floor and tangled with the muscular elf; no one was coming for the blade above Pincus. From the bar a voice came up under the noise. It was Zannah's. Her eyes gave off a faint glow; she was singing, the words of her own song slurred. It reached Pincus where he lay. The floor rolled like a deck at sea; the lamps smeared; his own arms turned heavy and far away. Above him the long-haired elf swayed, frowned at the scimitar in his hand, and brought it down a full foot wide of Pincus, into the boards. Then he sat, suddenly, hard, and inexplicably, and began, quietly, to giggle.

Pinned by Cadan's arms, the muscular elf fought for freedom with all his might, and then, like everyone else in the room, simply gave up. Pincus's shield had got away from him somewhere on the floor; he could not have said when.

Over by the band, the music had caught it too, a horn going flat,

the drum dragging a half-beat behind, the bright brawl-tune sliding into something that staggered.

From the boards Pincus watched the whole room go clumsy and harmless, grown fighters sitting down where they had not meant to, swinging at one another and missing by feet. It shouldn't have been funny, but it was.

The elf with the rings was up again, his hand having found the jeweled saber where it lay on the bear rug; he used it now as a cane to aid his stumble around the table toward Cadan, and he howled: "Howww, d-airrrr youwwww!" He grabbed the table's edge to steady himself and raised his blade.

On his stool still, Arthur saw his moment. He fixed his eyes across the cleared space, raised both hands with enormous formality. Arthur's eyes gave off a faint glow as he moved his hands in strange gestures, "You sleep nowww, whoooh—" Arthur swayed, and the stool tipped under him. The beard vanished off his chin. Arthur's spell left his hands, sailed across the fight as a glowing bead, missed everyone it might reasonably have struck, and settled with great gentleness into the elf's hair, where a patch of it caught fire and singed, curling, smoking. He yelped, dropped his saber, and beat at his own head, and when that did nothing, he stumbled to the bar and poured someone's drink on his head.

Through the drunk blur, Pincus had lost the young man under the tables. Then he saw him hauling himself up behind the ringed elf, one hand on the table edge, coming on a step at a time, unhurried.

He drove the ringed elf's head into the wood of the bar. The elf reeled.

Zannah stopped her song, and Pincus crawled over to the giggling

elf and punched him square in the jaw. He plopped to the ground.

The band stopped playing. The elves were either unconscious or lost the will to fight. The fight was over. Pincus sat in the wreck of it with his arm bleeding into his sleeve and his shield some distance away, but Orla safe at his back against the foot of the bar, both her hands buried in the dog. He would not have said it aloud, not with the blood and the damaged chair, but for one breath it was the most purely satisfying thing he had ever seen.

The young man picked up the elf with the rings by the collar and raised him off the ground.

Pincus stood up and turned to the young man. "He's done. He's done, he's stopped fighting, look. He's stopped."

The young man looked at the elf with the rings, who hung from his grip with both hands locked on the wrist that held him. For a moment Pincus was not sure the words had reached the place they needed to reach.

Then his hand opened, the elf with the rings dropped and stumbled backwards, falling to a seat on the floor.

An elf man behind the bar popped his head up and asked, "Is everyone alright? Oh my, darling get some fresh towels to help with the bleeding." The elf woman who owned the tavern disappeared into a backroom.

Out in the street, a whistle blew.

The peace keepers came in fast and loud, and for one bright moment Pincus's whole chest unclenched. He had called for them, and they had come. He got to his feet in the wreck of the room, holding his cut arm, and waited for this whole mess to be sorted out.

There were six of them, batons and short blades, and an older one who came in last and the others parted to let him through. The room was quiet. Cadan let go of the muscular elf he had grappled; they both stood up. The two elves Cadan and Pincus had put down were stirring on the floor, groggy and slow. The elf with the fancy clothes and rings was hauled to his feet by the peace keepers, the fine hair down one side of his head singed, his face still wet from the drink he'd doused it with.

Pincus said, "He drew his sword on the girl. On the girl and her dog, over a broken bowl. We only stopped him —"

The older peace keeper was not listening to him. He was not arresting the elf with the rings and the fine clothes. He was watching him.

The elf with the rings raised his voice. "Do you know who I am. I am Khalin Nailo. Son of the king of Sunnmoor. And this" — he turned his singed, wet face on the whole silent room — "is *my* city."

The older peace keeper stood straight, his whole attention on Khalin. "Your Highness. I'm sorry, I didn't —"

Khalin's finger found them one at a time, in no hurry at all. "Those. The one who put his one good hand on me. The blond man. The brown woman. The dwarf. The boy." He turned away. "Hang them."

He said it the way another person orders a drink.

Pincus waited for the older man to laugh, or to call it a mistake, or to do any of the things the men who keep the peace are supposed to do when someone powerful tells them to kill the people who stopped a crime. Pincus had called them. They had come. Surely now —

The peace keepers grabbed each of the sentenced. Hands took

Pincus by the arms and brought his wrists together behind him, and he let them, certain it was about to be put right.

In a confused rush Pincus said, “Wait, no, you don’t — I called for you. Would I have called for you, if we were the ones in the wrong?”

For a moment the older peace keeper looked at him. In a low, and not unkindly voice he said “The Sunnmoorians hold Arhuna now. I respect that fact; you should have.” He was already turning away.

And that was the whole of it. Something Pincus had carried his entire life, the plain belief that the men with the uniforms stood on the side of the people who did right, went quietly out, like a lamp in another room.

They took Zannah, who had sung a roomful of strangers into not killing one another. They took Cadan, who had gone at drawn steel with a tavern chair. They took Arthur, the beard gone, lost somewhere in the brawl, just a boy now, white to the lips. And they took the young man, who did not resist, who put out his good wrist for the rope. As the rope went on, Pincus caught his face in the lamplight: two dried tracks down through the grime of the brawl, tears gone to salt a while since, the eyes above them dry and steady now.

Pincus turned to look for his new friends. Umbra and Geth were gone. Pincus had not seen either of them go. The woman who had spent the night watching the doors had finally used one. Laucian was standing behind the bar and the sight of him gave Pincus a flicker of hope. He might speak up for them.

Laucian did not move.

It would have ended there, in rope, except that Khalin was not finished. “The girl, and the dog. They are guilty too. I’ll have them

as well.”

The elf woman who owned the tavern dropped the towels in her hands and came out from behind the bar so fast she struck it on the way. She did not argue. She did not say that the girl was a child, or the dog a dog, or any of it. There was a look on her face Pincus had never seen before. She went down on her knees in the spilled ale in front of Prince Khalin.

“Please. Spare my girl and our dog.” And then, to her husband, without turning her head: “The whisky. The old one, our best, from the top shelf. Bring it.”

Orla’s father climbed the step ladder and grabbed an unopened, dusty bottle. He carefully carried the bottle to his wife, grasping it in both hands. The mother held it up to the prince with her arms shaking as flickers of gold swirled inside the bottle.

Khalin did not take it. “Maybe. Let me see what you’re offering.”

Then he took it, and drew the cork with his thumb; it gave a ‘pop’ that carried across the silent room. He moved his nose to the bottle and breathed in. He poured a little into a glass and took a sip. He let it linger in his mouth while Orla’s mother was still crouching on her knees.

Khalin turned to the peace keepers, “Let the girl and the animal go.” He looked down at the mother, still on her knees, and his mouth curved. “Good to see a fellow elf know her place.”

The mother bolted to Orla and guided her behind the bar, both arms around her and the dog crushed between them, and she did not look at the five she had not been able to free.

The peace keepers took them out into the street, and the street did not stop for it. The New Year’s festival was still going: lantern

light strung house to house, a fiddle playing somewhere, the warm rolling noise of a crowd that has had plenty to drink and means to have more. People stepped aside to let the little procession through the way they would step aside for a cart, closed back in behind it, and went on with their night; in the distance a stranger laughed. Ahead of him, Cadan's bound hands hung at his back, and past them Arthur's too, the boy's head down now and not coming up. The street underfoot was soft with trodden petals and the burst husks of confetti eggs, the same wreck of celebration Pincus had climbed through on the way up, when his hands had still been his own. And in the middle of all of this celebration, Pincus, Zannah, Cadan, Arthur, and the young man were marched through the bright streets with their hands bound in rope, like people who had done something wrong.

About the Author



Jamie B. Watson is a physicist and writer. He earned a master's degree in physics from the University of Leiden, in the Netherlands, and works as a data analyst. His interests include creative writing, yoga, and mathematics-based research. He was born in Santa Barbara, California, in 1992, and still lives a few miles up the coast, in Goleta.

True Friends Commit Deicide Together: Truth is his first novel: a fantasy-comedy that interlaces fun with meaningful drama. It is the first of three books with the same title but separate subtitles: “Truth”, “Forgiveness”, and “Peace”.

Find *True Friends Commit Deicide Together* online:

theoristjamie.com/well-we-killed-a-god

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Beta readers wanted (people who know me). If you know me personally and would be up for reading more of this, I'd be grateful. Reach out, and I'll send you the next chapters. Honest reactions, good or bad, are worth more than you'd guess.