Who Would Follow In Their Footsteps

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ISLE OF RUM INFLUX

Dustin Kunke

Herons, two, came winging through
The westerly wind
Greeted us with profiles swift,
Fleet, dipping close
Into the grasses
And passed like
Shadows
Inland.

WHO WOULD FOLLOW IN THEIR FOOTSTEPS

Kaitlyn Montague

Foolish infants. They couldn't be defined otherwise.
They completed the rituals and prayed to their gods—their
true gods—and didn't even know it. Probably wouldn't ever,
either. They changed; they honored a heritage. They should
have been proud.

And yet there were those who thought this connection
was nothing but everlasting dirt under their fingernails, labeling
it a curse. Would they ever understand? Could they?

As he watched from the rooftops, rain pounding down
and shattering the midnight silence of the alleyway, he ponders.
He'd been watching the same alley for weeks, biding his
time. Waiting. A boy in a trench coat wandered into view, long
shaggy hair slicked down to the sides of his face. The arms of
the coat bunched up as he wrapped his arms around himself.
It was obviously too large, the tails of the jacket skirted close
to the oil-slicked pavement. The boy's head bowed against the
onslaught of rain, his step hitched slightly, as if ready to run at
any moment. The watcher smiled. Yes, they could understand.

He'd make them see reason if he had to shove it into
them like an awl into a lobotomy patient.

# # # # #

Robert sat watching the clock ticking, the minute-hand
slowly creeping its way towards freedom. Would it ever come?
The creation of clocks was clearly a government conspiracy,
made to annoy and torture fifteen-year-old high school stu-
dents. They had time machines too, and aliens, and everything
was a cover-up. Or he was bored and blowing everything out
of proportion.

Either option worked.
He sighed and looked over to the boy at the desk next
to him, sitting as rigid as his pressed shirt and slicked-back hair.
"Psst. Dimitri."
The boy’s head slowly turned, blue eyes rolling in an exaggerated manner. He said nothing, but a slender eyebrow rose in inquiry.

“You’re not going straight home, are you?” Robert whispered.

Dimitri shook his head, though Robert could practically hear the frustrated sigh coming. “You had plans?”

Robert grinned. “You expected less, D?”

“Mr. Harding.” A voice boomed from the front of the room, and as Robert twisted back toward the front of the room, he met his teacher’s disparaging glare with a shrug.

“Sir?”

“I assume you’ve been paying attention and can give the class the answer to the equation on the board?”

“42?” As far as Robert was concerned, it was the answer to everything.

“I don’t believe that was the question, Mr. Harding. As the presence of variables…” A loud buzzing from the speaker above the door interrupted his diatribe, and the man sighed.

“Class dismissed.”

Dimitri stood from his desk and turned to his cohort.

“You really should start paying attention in class, Robert.”

“30 years from now, are you going to want to tell people you cared more about a math class than having a life?” Robert asked, following his friend out of the room.

“I happen to enjoy the subject—something you might notice if you were privy to paying attention.”

“Uh huh, because the quadratic whatchacallit is going to be so important to my future aspirations?”

“Look,” Dimitri started. “You can have until seven to do whatever it is that we’re off to do, but then we’re back at my place studying for Biology. Test tomorrow, remember.”

Robert balked and braced against the cool metal of the lockers in the hallway. Dimitri couldn’t be serious. “What? We don’t have a…”

“Yes, we do. And you’re going to fail it unless we study for it.”

Robert grimaced, but his friend was right. Alarmingly so. And failing a test was only going to give Rafael excuse to find something else wrong with him. But then again, studying with Dimitri was like reading Ayn Rand while listening to Frank Sinatra: nothing but droning leading to an inevitable nap.

“Alright, deal.”

# # # # #

The same alleyway, a different day. How long had he been standing? Waiting? He watched, an amused smile creeping up his cheeks, pulling at a pair of thin lips. Two of them now, he noted. The smaller still tried to hide in the oversized of his coat, now obviously black leather as the afternoon sun shone off the surface. He’d come to know the jacket almost intimately. A visual cue. The boy bounced alongside his much calmer companion, and the alley watcher glared as they moved away.

But they’d be back. There was a routine in this—the voyeurism had become a sort of ritual. The boy’s routine had become his. But now there were two, and just in time.

Oh yes, they would return.

# # # # #

“Robert, hurry up,” Dimitri called, leading the way down the darkened street. He’d already given his friend an extra half hour. As amusing as it was to watch Robert fight with forty-year-olds over the last comic…something or other, he wanted to get home. Home meant quiet and seminal solitude. And dinner, he mustn’t forget that.

Manicotti night even. Robert would be placated, and not have to go home to the guardian that obviously had no time for him. Dimitri had been there when Robert’s father died. When his mother left. Hell, his own mother had tried to fill the gap for a few years. The boy was practically a brother.

“I’m coming,” Robert cried, panting as he caught up.

“Biology is still going to be Biology, you know?”

“And you’ll still be no closer to passing the test, will you?”

Robert mumbled something about conceding a point, and he couldn’t help but laugh. His friend’s ego could only
withstand so much.

"Maybe I would, you know. Pass it though knowledge osmosis."

"I don't think it works like that," Dimitri replied.

"Well maybe you just haven't tried....oh, uhm, hi?"

Robert stopped suddenly and Dimitri followed his turning gaze until both of them were staring up at the figure ahead of them. He hadn't been watching where they were headed, trusting his feet to know.

But he never did like narrow passages. He liked the open, and the streetlights. When had they ended up here?

The man took a cautious step forward. Two. Three. The moonlight reflected off his teeth, illustrating his grin and shadowing the rest of his face. He cocked his head to the side. Another step.

"I've been waiting, Brother." The voice was like boot steps on gravel, and it grated in the wrong way.

No matter how personable his friend was, this couldn't be a good idea. Robert, apparently, was thinking the same thing, as he moved with him. But Robert wasn't focused on the man.

His gaze was focused up above. The sky had begun to grow dim, the pink pastels of twilight fading into the cerulean hues of night. The moon was bright, more so as the sky darkened.

"I think you've got the wrong guys, dude," Robert answered. His voice was calm, and steady as a teenager could manage. But his body betrayed him. He was shaking as he slowly backed away. His hand extended out toward Dimitri. He took it of course, what would any other friend do?

"No, no, you misunderstand," the gravel-scratching voice started again. The figure took another step forward, his coat swaying behind him. "I don't mean you. You, Mr. Harding, run away from your birthright, and I'll have nothing to do with it. You were born a god, and you turn your back! In fact...I'll bet your friend here has no idea, does he?"

Robert gripped Dimitri's hand and pulled backward, stepping back faster than he was. Dimitri stumbled back, trying to keep pace. What in the hell was Robert doing? They were trying to get home, not keep up with homeless nut jobs.

"Dimitri, we need to go. Now," Robert panted. His breathing had sped, eyes wide as they passed from one figure to the other.

Dimitri nodded, and the pace quickened again.

"Wait."

The boys stopped in their tracks, though Dimitri's brain screamed at him to leave. This isn't safe. You're late. Mom's waiting. Food is cold.

"You want to know, don't you?" the man asked. "Why your friend lies to you. Why he'll always lie to you. Why he's doing it now."

Was Robert lying? There were those few ritualistic days in which it seemed like Robert's guardian was stricter than normal; the house was quiet and still when he'd come and visit. There were also the days Robert skipped school, looking like he hadn't slept in three days. But overprotective guardians and skipping class was nothing new. Was it?

"Robert, what is he talking about?"

"Don't worry about it, we need to go."

The man strode forward again, closing the gap between them. Dimitri noticed now the stubble on his face, his unkempt hair, and his beady eyes. He swallowed hard and the man leaned in, his face mere inches away. Dimitri jumped back into the brick wall, still clutching Robert's hand.

The man cocked his head again as he stared at Dimitri. Why did he feel smaller? Did the world suddenly get bigger? Colder? A hand reached out, shoving Robert into the other wall. Dimitri watched with wide eyes as his friend's limp body slid down the wall—down into oblivion. He swallowed and turned back to the grinning face in front of his.

"Why?"

"Why? Is that all you can really think to ask? All I want is to offer you something he never would."

Dimitri's brow furrowed. Of course, this is what happened when you didn't study for Biology tests—you ran into crazy homeless people who try and kill you and your friends. Oh, wouldn't his mother love to hear about this when he got home.

"I find that hard to believe," he replied.
“Tell me, brother, about your gods.”
Dimitri was ready to shove this guy away, pick up his friend, and drag them both home before he was here for another three hours listening to a religious diatribe.
“There’s only the one. Is there a point to this? I have money, if that’s what you’re after.”
“Money?” the man asked, taking another step forward. No space to breathe. “You insult me, brother.” Dimitri chastised himself. He should have known better. He should have shot first. He should have just gone home a half hour ago.
Too many shoulds.
Not enough coulds.
He swallowed again. “I’m not your brother.”
“No. Not yet.”
Yet?
“But the moon wills it,” he continued. “And so do I.”
The grin broke into a snarl, and the bright moonlight no longer glinted off teeth, but fangs.
Dimitri shook, frozen in place, muttering a Hail Mary under his breath.
The teeth bit into the flesh at his neck and shoulder, and he cried out in pain. He flailed for a moment, trying to push back. And then hung limp.
Lifeless.
He felt a twinge of pain as the teeth pulled back, ripping joints and skin. Sparks flew across his vision as he hit the ground with a thud. The moon was full, bright. The only thing Dimitri could see as his eyes threatened to close. Didn’t they say to move to the light? Was he dying?
Darkness blocked it now, blood dripping from its lips.
“No sleeping now,” it said. “This is the most important part.”
Dimitri ignored it and the dull throb in his neck. He turned to Robert, who, while awake now, was writhing on the gravel. The boy’s neck pulled up as he howled in agony.
And the same fangs flashed in the light.
“Robert?” he croaked. Was this what he’d lied about?
The boy turned, with a roar. Had he sprouted fur?
The man leaned forward, his nose looking longer than he recalled. “Come brother. Your real Gods will show you how to run free.”
The throbbing in his neck faded to a prickling tingle and the light was calling again. Pulling like an insistent mother to an infant. He felt he had a place there, in the light—a duty to it even.
“Robert, why didn’t you tell me?”
The two feral men roared into the night. Challenging each other.
Dimitri, even as a useless, bloody wreck, was caught in the middle. He realized that he had to make a choice. The deceiver or the instigator?