

HOMEWORK OPENERS LESSON TWO: CHANGE

(A)

I was being chased by a pissed off naked guy with a knife. A really big knife.

His being naked was expected since I was doing my ducking, weaving, and dodging down a hall in the Isle of Mid's finest bordello. You'd think that the worst that could happen to me was acute embarrassment and possible death. But this naked guy was possessed by the specter of a three-thousand-year-old, evil elven sorcerer who'd turned Mid's red-light district into his personal playground. I'd interrupted recess, and he was mad as hell.

My name is Raine Benares, and I'm a seeker. Tonight I'd found what I was looking for, as well as things I never wanted to see. The men who frequented The Satyr's Grove were here because they had money, not muscle tone. These weren't your finer specimens of manhood. And believe me, I got to see enough manhoods and fleeing pasty white posteriors to last me a lifetime.

(B)

Chapter One

Alona Dare

Dying should have been the worst moment in my life.

I mean, hello, getting run over by a school bus full of band geeks while wearing the regulation gym uniform of red polyester short shorts and a practically see-through white T-shirt? It doesn't get more tragic than that. Or, so I thought.

On Thursday, three days AD (after death...duh), I woke in the usual way—flat on my back and just to the left of the yellow lines on Henderson Street with the heat of a bus engine passing over my face.

It wasn't "the" bus, obviously. The one that killed me was probably still being repaired or maybe decommissioned or whatever they do with vehicles that now have bad juju.

I coughed and sat up, waving the hot plumes of bus exhaust away. I know, weird, right? No lungs, no body, no breathing, but hey, whatever. I don't make the rules, I just live here...sort of.

I got to my feet just in time for Ben Rogers's Land Rover (his dad owns a dealership...lucky) to pass right through me. I flinched, but it didn't hurt. These days, nothing did, but it was taking a while to get used to that. Ben, of course, didn't notice a thing, just kept jabbering on the cell phone pressed to his ear. He couldn't see me. Nobody could.

(C)

The *Careless Venture's* intruder alarm erupted through the cavern with a harsh wail. Trilby Elliot shot to her feet, knocking over the makeshift repair table. Sonic welder and integrator cables clattered against the cavern floor.

She bolted for her freighter's rampway. Overhead, a nest of sleeping bloodbats burst out of the rocky crevices like small, leathery missiles. The panicked bats spiraled in front of her. Screeching, they fled through the wide mouth of the cavern into the lavender twilight.

She reached her rampway just as a silver object flashed across the sky behind them.

"Damn. Double damn." Another ship here meant big trouble. Even a little trouble was more than she could handle right now.

She sprinted through the airlock.

Coils of black conduit snaked down the freighter's corridor, humped over the hatch-tread into the bridge. She sidestepped the cables and reached for the alarm, slapping it into silence. A flick of her thumb activated intraship. She shouted the obvious. "Dezi, we got incoming! Take the bridge."

(D)

Sam went around the back of the house, looking for the kitchen door and praying that he was wrong, praying that Janine, Mary Lou and Haley had gone to visit Mary Lou's mother in Northern Florida, and that an animal—a raccoon or a skunk—had gotten into the house and, trapped there, had died.

But Jesus, there were flies covering every window, even in the back of the house. Especially in the back. Whatever was dead in there was bigger than a skunk.

Sam knew he shouldn't touch the doorknob in case there were fingerprints on it. He had to call the authorities.

Except, he didn't know for sure that anyone was dead.

Yet the fact that Mary Lou hadn't returned his call for three weeks—three long weeks—suddenly seemed telling. He'd assumed that she wasn't calling him back—not that she couldn't.

Please God, don't let her be dead.

He lifted the clay flowerpot that sat on the back steps—Mary Lou's favorite hiding place—and sure enough, there was a key beneath it.

The lock on the kitchen door was right on the knob, and he knew he could unlatch the door by inserting and then carefully turning the key. He didn't need to touch the knob and therefore wouldn't add to or subtract from any fingerprints that might be there.

The lock clicked as it unlatched, and he gagged. Jesus. Even just the inch or two that he'd opened the door was enough to make his eyes water from the unmistakable stench of death. Sam quickly pulled the collar of his T-shirt up and over his nose and mouth and swung the door open.

Oh God, no.

Mary Lou lay face down on the linoleum floor—although, Christ, she'd been lying there so long in this heat, she probably didn't have much of a face left.

Sam couldn't bring himself to look more closely.

He saw all he needed to see. She was undeniably dead, her brown hair matted with blood and brains and, shit, maggots. She'd taken what looked like a shotgun slug to the back of her head, probably while she was running away from whoever had come to the kitchen door.

(E)

The surgery hurt far more than he'd expected.

But then, how could he have prepared for an experience so new? He'd known nothing of pain. Until the first cut.

A line of fire ripped across his back and he screamed. It was the first audible sound he'd ever made.

Feathers were falling, surrounding him with a curtain of drifting white. It took him a moment to realize that they were his own feathers. They had lost their familiar luminescence and looked alien.

He was becoming alien himself. The idea horrified him, until the surgeon sealed the wound. Heat seared across his back, following the line of the incision. Wetness spilled on his cheeks and he tasted the salt of his tears.

Another first.

His bellow made the floor vibrate. The smell of burned flesh was new as well, and sickening.

He reminded himself that he had volunteered.

The second cut hurt less, maybe because he knew what to expect. Maybe it was the way of earthly matter, so susceptible to sensation, to learn to ignore stimuli once they had been experienced.

Munkar didn't know. He crouched on the floor, shaking, his flesh pulsing and wet. He waited for the surgeon's fingertip to sear the second wound. He caught his breath at the burn on his skin, then heard the steady pound of his heart. He spread his hands and looked at the flesh he had become.

He felt heavy and slow, bound by gravity in a way he'd never known before. The physical constraints of his body were inescapable, unforgettable, impossible to ignore.

He felt weak.

No, he felt diminished.

There were other cuts—one in the back of his neck, one in the palm of his left hand—but they seemed almost incidental in comparison to losing his wings.

(F)

“There is no such thing as ghosts,” I said firmly.

“Glad to hear it,” my partner in grime answered.

I squinted up at him, suspiciously. Not only is he quite a lot taller than me, but I was kneeling on the floor of my Second Empire Victorian cottage, putting the finishing touches on a chair I was reupholstering. He lounged in the doorway, scuffed boots crossed at the ankles and sculpted forearms crossed over his chest. “Why is that?”

He grinned, causing crinkles to form at the corners of his cornflower-blue eyes. “Because you won’t freak out when I tell you I bought a haunted house this morning.”

“You did *what*?” I said, right on cue. He chuckled. I rolled my eyes. I love the guy – sort of – but his sense of humor can be a little trying at times. Those times when I’m the brunt of the joke, like now.

Derek Ellis and I had been business partners for just a few weeks and romantically involved for a few more. I had known him longer, but it had taken us a while to get to the point where we wanted to be this close.

Our joint venture, which had started out as Derek’s venture, was a home repair and renovation business headquartered in the small town of Waterfield, Maine. We both lived there, although not together. I had inherited my aunt’s house the previous May, while Derek lived in a converted loft above the hardware store in downtown. It has exposed brick, concrete kitchen counters, lacquered Scandinavian cabinets, and a whole lot of other things he won’t allow me to put into Aunt Inga’s house because it would mess with the original 1870s mojo.

When I first learned of Aunt Inga’s death and my inheritance, my plan had been to renovate the house and then sell it, and take the money I made back to New York to start my own textile design firm. But during the weeks I had spent in Maine getting everything ready, I had fallen in love with both the town and with Derek. So instead of going back to Manhattan at the end of the summer, I stayed in Waterfield. Ever since then, we had been keeping an eye out for a property to buy and renovate. Now, it seemed, we’d found one.

(G)

The man stood in front of Thomas Pitt in the untidy office, papers all over the desk from half a dozen cases Pitt was working on. There was no discernible order to the papers, except to him. The visitor’s appearance was immaculate, from his discreet regimental tie to his crested gold cuff links. Not one silver hair was out of place.

“Yes, sir,” he said gravely. “Her Majesty would like to see you as soon as possible. She hopes that now would be convenient.” There was not a flicker of expression in his face. Quite possibly no one had ever refused him. Victoria had been on the throne since 1837, sixty-two years, and he was merely the latest in a long succession of emissaries.

Pitt felt a chill run through him, and his throat tightened.

“Yes, of course it is.” He managed to keep his voice almost steady. He had met Queen Victoria before, on two occasions, but not since he had become head of Special Branch, that part of Her Majesty’s Government that dealt with threats to the safety of the nation.

“Thank you.” Sir Peter Archibald inclined his head very slightly. “The carriage is waiting. If you would be kind enough to accompany me, sir . . .”

There was no time for Pitt to tidy the papers, only to inform Stoker that he had been called away. He did not say to where, or by whom.

“Yes, sir,” Stoker said, as if such things happened every day, but his eyes widened slightly. He stood back a little to allow them to pass him and head through the door into the passage.

Sir Peter led the way down the stairs and onto the street, where a very well-turned-out Clarence carriage stood waiting half a block away, outside a tobacconist’s shop. There was no crest on the carriage’s door to proclaim its owner. The coachman nodded in acknowledgment as the two men climbed in, and a moment later they moved into the traffic.

“A trifle cool for early summer, don’t you think?” Sir Peter said pleasantly. It was a polite, very English way of letting Pitt know that there would be no discussion of why the Queen wished to speak with him. It was even possible that Sir Peter himself did not know.

“A little,” Pitt agreed. “But at least it’s not raining.”

Sir Peter murmured his agreement, and they settled to riding in silence the rest of the way from Lisson Grove to Buckingham Palace.