

## Harker Hurts a HEXUS

After all he'd been through as a traveling estate agent—a treacherous assignment which had left him with a lingering distrust of both bats and dogs—Jonathan Harker was looking forward to a steady job with a good health care plan. He would be helping to implement the new personnel system at the Ghoulvartz School at UCSB. The university website showcased aerial views of the campus—a sharp, green corner edged by the vast Pacific—as well as photos of students who were clearly dressed for beach weather and seemed more likely to be carrying surfboards than textbooks. Online, it looked like paradise.

In contrast, Jonathan arrived on his first day to ominous gray skies. As he climbed the twisting stairs of the Ghoulvartz School to the HR office on the fourth floor, he felt chilled to the bone. *Impossible*, he told himself, *this is Santa Barbara!* Nonetheless, he buttoned his blazer, brushing off the anxiety. *You're just excited to meet your new co-workers*, he thought.

When he opened the glass door at the top of the stairs, he found himself on an unsheltered patio with a vast view of the heavy, black clouds. He looked down to a strangely mounded lawn edged by menacing succulents with long, sword-like leaves. Suddenly, the glass door behind him opened and a friendly voice shattered the spell.

“Are you Mr. Harker? Welcome! I've been looking forward to meeting you!” said the woman. “Let's get through some paperwork so you can get started. I'm so happy you're here!” The woman's cheer immediately lifted his dark mood as he followed her into the building. The halls were bright with fluorescent light, briefly bringing back memories of the hospital, but without the chaotic hustle. In fact, other than the two of them, the suite seemed empty.

“Sit down, please,” his guide motioned to a chair as she sat down at her desk. “Let me pull up your file... just one moment... Sorry, this new network has been so glitchy! You're here not a minute too soon... okay... here's your record... I see than under previous positions it says 'vampire hunter'? How unusual! Is that right?”

“Ah! That was another life!” He hoped his laugh sounded dismissive, but it became strangled a bit in his throat. How could he joke about that dark, terrible past? Even now, the past cast a bleak light over the room, and his new friend seemed suddenly haggard, even vicious for a moment. How quickly things can shift....

Before his memories could overtake him completely, Jonathan recovered, saying, “I'm a problem solver, really. That's my purpose. I'm looking forward to getting the new personnel system running...hopefully it will solve some of the problems you're experiencing this morning! I'll bet that can be frustrating week after week.”

“Maybe,” the woman shrugged. “I wouldn't know. It's actually only my second day here. I'm not sure why, but there's been a lot of turn over at the Ghoulvartz School ever since 2022. You know,” she continued sadly, “I saw this in my last position. I used to work over in the

Department of Statistics and Applied Probability and one day, like a bolt of lightning, the group lotto numbers came in! Suddenly everyone else on staff was a millionaire. It was just my bad luck not to have bought into the pool that month. When everyone else gave notice and moved to their new homes on Maui, I felt cursed being the only one left in that office. So, Ghoulvitz is a fresh start for me," she made a theatrical effort at miming optimism. "A fresh start!"

"Well, it certainly seems like you're bringing valuable experience with you," said Jonathan.

"Unfortunately, everything is entirely different here. All the systems seem strange, as if they had a mind of their own. I just don't know what's going on," she looked at Jonathan with a look he'd seen often back in London, a mix of confusion and horror. "I'm usually really good at computers, but HEXUS is...." her voice sounded defeated, as if she had surrendered already.

"New systems always seem to have some ghosts in them," Jonathan reassured her. "That's what I'm here for. HEXUS will be demystified in no time!" His voice conveyed a confidence he didn't quite feel, as if he was trying to convince them both that things would be okay.

By the time Jonathan was sitting in his own office, the sense of foreboding had vanished completely. Sitting in front of a computer felt calming, familiar, as he logged on for the first time. *All is well*, he thought, as everything he looked for was where it should be. Access credentials to the different systems he had been given worked. On first pass, his inspection of these systems didn't reveal anything *that* unusual. *A mind of their own? Maybe Deborah isn't comfortable with computers*, he thought. Even the printer worked! So he settled in and soon found himself lost in the flow of immersive work, like that feeling surfers talk about when they describe their movement along the surface of the ocean. No friction. Time stops.

And so Jonathan was both surprised and unsurprised to see that the morning was now behind him when he looked up from his computer screen and set his gaze upon the horizon, which in the intervening hours had changed and become darker and taken on a shape. *No, not a shape*, he thought. It was more of an internal structure, something visible within its boundaries. *But what?* This thought stuck with him as he left Ghoulvitz, and decided to take a short walk while eating his sandwich. Despite the dark skies, his successful morning put him at ease as he walked around campus and took in its sights, the students, the buildings, the ocean, and the mountains off in the distance. Under that dark canopy, campus was alive.

Turning the corner brought Ghoulvitz into view. It stood by itself against the mountains, the darkness of the sky reflected in its windows, giving it the appearance of so many black eyes peering menacingly out at whomever was foolish enough to look upon it. Walking up the bell tower staircase, Jonathan was struck by something he hadn't noticed before: the steps leading up to the fourth floor were not uniform, each one being unique in some way. This one slightly wider than that one, the next one slightly askew with respect to its peers, no two steps parallel. Staring down at his feet as he placed them on the steps, one after the other ever more hesitatingly as he ascended toward the bell, Jonathan was gripped by vertigo and at one point had to hold on to the railing to keep his balance.

Jonathan emerged from the mouth of the stairwell rattled, but determined to shake it off and devote the afternoon to the pressing task at hand: HEXUS. *Okay, HEXUS, let's see what you're up to*, he thought. HEXUS quickly revealed itself to be more complicated than Jonathan had expected. But not simply complicated; it was as if it was *resisting* him. Data he entered in one cell, appeared in another; employees whose names he double checked, later appeared with different spelling; deleted data re-appeared. And then there was a most curious thing. A date. One day, September 15th. And on that day, the staff of Ghoulvartz simply disappeared. It was a schism, a complete break: before that date one group of people worked at Ghoulvartz, and after that date, another group of people took their place. But on September 15th, HEXUS was telling Jonathan that no one worked at Ghoulvartz. It had been hollowed out.

Jonathan got up from his desk, and walked hurriedly down the hall. When he got to Deborah's office, he tucked his head in, a little too abruptly given his agitated state. "Deborah, when did you say your former colleagues all won the lotto?" "The unluckiest day of my life," Deborah began, "September 15th."

Jonathan thought back to what he was doing on that fateful date of September 15<sup>th</sup>. He knew that date very well, like everyone else did, when the Mega Millions jackpot became a Mega BILLIONS jackpot. Every place that sold lottery tickets was overrun by what seemed like mobs of zombies drawn to a buffet of brains. Jonathan did not want to admit it, but he was no exception, and took part in the hysteria.

He was tired of all of the traveling over the last few years. Going town to town to represent his obscenely rich clients who were buying up all of the available real estate at murderous prices and driving up the market had left him feeling soulless. So, he joined the mob and got in line to buy his very own lotto ticket – possibly his chance at financial freedom! At least he had realized that there had to be something more to this life than being a slave to the dollar. *There must be some other way*, he thought.

As he approached the cash register for his turn to buy a ticket, there was a gust of wind that came up suddenly and blew the double doors to the convenience store wide open. The newspapers and magazines at the front of the store fluttered around in the air and one curious looking periodical blew up against him and stuck to the side of his arm. He grabbed it and was just about to throw it down to the ground, when he saw it – the alluring aerial view of the UC Santa Barbara campus that was followed by thirteen pages of job listings.

That was it! He had never seen anything like this place it in all of his travels, and there were at least 200 jobs open for recruitment. He knew the odds were not in his favor to win the Mega Billions, but there was definitely a chance that he could get one of these jobs at UCSB and change his life – and the lives of others too. He just didn't know then, what was really in store for him.

So here he was a few months later. He got through the grueling virtual interviews, and was finally in a real job, on the UCSB campus – in the flesh! The twist of fate that occurred on September 15<sup>th</sup> had brought him here. But, now there seemed to be another twist of fate that occurred for the staff at the Ghoulvirtz School on that day. Where did the Ghoulvirtz staff all go on that date? If the staff in Department of Statistics and Applied Probability actually WON the jackpot on that day, that explains why they disappeared. But, what made the staff in the Ghoulvirtz School disappear on September 15<sup>th</sup>? Jonathan had a thought: *Did it have something to do with HEXUS?* He knew this newly implemented system would test his problem solving skills, but it seemed as if he now had a new skill to develop: mystery solving. He then remembered the words he uttered to Deborah earlier, “*New systems always seem to have some ghosts in them...*”

His first week was almost at an end. It was an unforgettable Friday afternoon before a three-day weekend. The perks of working at the Ghoulvirtz School were plenty of holiday, sick, and vacation days. But, something seemed off that day and it wasn't that he was trying to avoid his boss before leaving. A G-chat popped up on his feed. Jonathan didn't think much of it and went on with his tasks—until he saw who it was from. "Hello Jonathan," from HEXUS.

The HEXUS message continued: *Accidents can happen, and accidents can change everything, especially for the people in them, especially if they're injured.* Bewildered, Jonathan asked HEXUS for clarification, *what does that even mean?!*, he responded in G-chat. The message continued: *Meet me in the elevator if you want to discover the truth.* “Is this the ghost?” he thought to himself.

Jonathan had never seen a ghost before, but he believed in ghosts, and he had spoken to several people who said they've seen ghosts before. He didn't know if any of his fellow Ghoulvirtz coworkers believed in ghosts. Jonathan also knew if he told someone who doesn't believe in ghosts that he believed in ghosts, they would laugh at him, and they shouldn't. Jonathan didn't want to be laughed at, but he had to find out if this was indeed a ghost. He thought about some of the things he knew about ghosts. One thing he knew about ghosts is if they concentrate hard, they can kick a can down a subway platform. Jonathan then realized that was actually a scene from the movie *Ghost* starring Patrick Swayze. Unfortunately, however, that was the extent of Jonathan's “real-world” ghost knowledge.

Jonathan entered the elevator and scanned it for ghosts, but he didn't see anything. Confused and distraught he began questioning himself, *maybe there was no ghost, maybe I hallucinated that G-chat from a lack of sleep,* he thought to himself. As he took a step to exit the elevator, the elevator door quickly slammed shut and the ‘basement’ light illuminated. He thought to himself, *there is no basement in the Education Building, is there?!*, as a sense of panic began to overcome him. He then heard a mysterious, yet familiar woman's voice whisper, “Everything you need is in front of you.” *Did the ghost say that? Why would a ghost say something like that?*

When the door finally opened, Jonathan realized he had traveled to the underworld. Stepping out of the elevator he saw the infernal river and a decrepit ferry parked on the shore. A man stood by the ferry and asked him if he had the token to pay the ferry. Of course, Jonathan did not have a token so he asked if they took credit card, Apple Pay or maybe Venmo. Visibly frustrated, the man whose name tag read 'Phlegyas', murmured under his breath, "forget it," and whisked Jonathan on-board the dilapidated ferry. They shared an uncomfortably silent, but mercifully, short boat ride to the other side of the river. Before disembarking the ferry, Jonathan, flustered and confused asked Phlegyas, "Where am I supposed to go now?!" "Not my problem," Phlegyas retorted rudely as he kicked Jonathan off the ferry. Phlegyas vanished into the foggy river.

After walking aimlessly for what felt like an eternity, Jonathan then came upon another river. On the far side of this river, in the hazy distance appeared the Education Building with the Ghoulvartz staff walking in and out of the building. "I'm almost back!" he thought to himself. Jonathan was both relieved to see the building but fearful that he may never make it back. As he came closer, he noticed a woman sitting in a throne, holding a pomegranate. A ram grazed on the grass next to her. *Rams aren't native to this area, are they?* he thought to himself. Out of curiosity he went to look up if rams were native to Santa Barbara on his phone but there was no service.

While putting his phone away he became distracted by a fife laying on the ground near the ram. As he picked up the fife, there appeared four black horses pulling a chariot driven by the god of the underworld himself, Hades. Jonathan was about to ask Hades if he would let him finally leave the underworld when the mysterious voice returned and told him to not speak. "Just listen," the voice pleaded. Hades then approached him and asked Jonathan if he could make a song request to play on the fife. Jonathan agreed and asked what song Hades would like him to play. Hades asked if he could play "that Kate Bush song from the Netflix series *Stranger Things*." Jonathan then played "Running Up That Hill (Make a Deal with God)" as best he could, and it so charmed Hades that he agreed to let him cross the river back towards the Education Building and the Ghoulvartz staff. But when Jonathan made it to the other side of the river, something wasn't quite right.

As Jonathan drew closer and closer to the building, he realized the typical bright colors of the paint and the shine of the large windows were muted and growing grayer by the minute. He finally reached the front door and as he made to press on the button that opened both front doors, he yelled loudly as his hand passed right through the usually cool metal – the entire building was growing less solid by the minute! As Patrick Swayze and childhood nightmares had taught him, people could certainly be ghosts, but Jonathan was now realizing in the underworld that maybe buildings could be too.

Just as Jonathan felt hopeless as to how to get back to the real Ghoulvartz once and for all, he stopped and listened to the music, cheering and yelling that seemed to be growing louder in the distance. As he stood listening, a student walked out of the front of the building. The

student pressed the door open and seemingly had no problem with the building acting as a solid object.

“Hey! Hey! Excuse me!” Jonathan ran after the student who was now attempting to ride off on a skateboard. The student turned at his interception.

Jonathan stopped, panting at how far he had had to run. “You were able to get through to the building? I seem to be having some trouble... what is this place? And how can I get back to the real building? The one that is solid I mean.”

The student eyed him in a nonchalant manner. He switched his backpack from one side to the other and drained his hydro flask in one fell swoop before replying, “Oh ya – you’re Jonathan, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but wait how did you know who I was? Are you staff?”

The student laughed and shook his head. He then took out a little slip of paper from his jean pocket and handed it to Jonathan before skateboarding off into the distance.

Jonathan squinted after him before unfurling the paper and reading, “Follow the parade to the Library, the ones sitting will have answers.”

Seeing as he had no other way to navigate this strange version of partial reality, Jonathan turned back towards the heart of campus and the throngs of students partying in costumes. Jonathan took a deep breath and began to wade through the crowds of students lining the pathways that led to the Library. Loud music was playing from multiple amps nearby and it was only by sticking his elbows out and covering his ears against the growing noise that Jonathan successfully waded through the crowd and mercifully exited to the front of the Library where the crowd had thinned and a group of five students, all in sunglasses, were sitting in a semi-circle.

One of the students motioned for him to come over. Jonathan noticed they were all in hoodies instead of costumes. They were sweating, however, in the 80-degree October weather.

“Hey, hey, man – over here.”

“No costumes for you guys?” Jonathan asked as he drew nearer.

“Nah man, we’re transfers so we’re chill.” The student nearest him with the silver shades replied.

Jonathan showed them the crumpled paper in his hand. “I was told you could help me get back to reality and help me navigate the haunting of my data system.”

“For sure man, we’re all STEM majors, it’s not a problem.”

“Right.”

The girl with a long braid on the other side of the circle directed him, “It’s simple.” She began, “Go back to the Ghoulvirtz building, but this time, hold your breath and tap your nose three times before you try to get in. You should have no problem this way, and then make sure you get to IT, they are the ones who can help you.”

“Hold my breath, tap nose three times... IT... Got it! Thanks!”

Jonathan made to leave just as all four cell phones in the hands of the transfer students buzzed loudly.

“Hey about time, I swear the Bereal app always picks the best times to go off.”

“Hey Jonathan – smile!” Jonathan quirked his brow up as all four students snap a picture of his dumbstruck expression and then proceed to make their own faces at their phones.

The student nearest him with the silver sunglasses shoves the phone in his face, “You nailed it my guy.” Jonathan squints at the screen that displays only a vague outline of his body. A wave of terror crashes through him as he realized that – like the Ghoulvirtz building in this underworld – his very being is fading entirely into thin air.

“Oh, god – what’s happening to me?!” He asks the group of students as he grips one of their phones tightly.

The girl nearest him turns to silver shades, muttering, “You shouldn’t have shown him, it stresses everyone out when we do.” The student with the long braid shook her head at her peers and then pointed in the opposite direction Jonathan had come from.

“Jon – relax, ok? It’s like we said, you wouldn’t want to be solid here anyway. Go to IT, they’ll have the answers to your data issue, they’ll be able to reboot the system, and get you the rest of your body. Good luck bro. The fate of the grad school of Ed hangs in the balance in the meantime.”

Jonathan wiped the sweat from his forehead as he thanked the students and proceeded to jog back towards Ghoulvirtz. As he did so he thought to himself that maybe youth and wisdom could go hand in hand, and he also made it a point to tell himself he would google “Bereal” once he was back out of the underworld.

As he raced back through campus, he heard one last shout from the group: “And don’t take the elevator this time! Stairs! All the way to the 4<sup>th</sup>!”

*The stairs?* He thought to himself. *All the way to the 4th floor?* If he needed any confirmation that he really was traipsing through the underworld, this was it.

He paused and turned to give the students a tight-lipped smile in acknowledgement of their last bit of instruction, but where just a few seconds ago these mystic STEM transfers sat were merely piles of sand.

Dead in his tracks, he stood with his brow furrowed and mouth hanging open, the once blaring music now ringing in his ears with the sound of his rapid heartbeat. Jonathan was suddenly jolted back to attention when the crowd around him began to stir, causing several students to collide with him from every angle. He shoved his way through the commotion, hoping that he was traveling in the general direction of Ghoulvartz.

Like being shot out of a cannon, he finally broke through the crowd, stumbling onto the sidewalk before realizing that he had been completely disoriented, having no clue where on campus he was. Just across the way, he found a bench where he could sit and catch his breath. Someone sat on the other side of the bench, and while Jonathan was not usually the type to sit in an already occupied area, let alone speak to complete strangers if not prompted, he turned to his bench-companion and cocked his head towards the mayhem that he'd just witnessed.

"What in the world is going on over there?"

The guy on the bench, with shaggy, dark blond hair and a baseball cap, didn't look at Jonathan. Staring into the crowd, he said, "They gotta get to class, my guy. There's a bunch of GE classes scheduled right about now, and the freshmen still aren't skipping. In time though, dude... in time."

Jonathan slowly nodded. "Got it. Do you have class around now?"

The elusive character looked up at him and smiled lazily, "Yeah."

Neither of them moved, each waiting for the other to say something. The moment had become far too awkward to handle. Jonathan finally broke the silence, "Well, I'm looking for the Ghoulvartz Graduate School of Education. Think you can point me in the right direction?"

"Oh, totally! It's over that way," the stranger said, pointing behind him. "Just gotta go straight and then make a right. But dude, you gotta be careful crossing the bike lanes. It'll cause some serious problems if you aren't, and you'll look like a complete dork."

Jonathan looked in the direction of the bike lanes. Figures, which he was not totally convinced were actually people on bikes, zipped by so quickly, creating a wall through which he couldn't see the other side. The sudden nervousness this brought on must have been apparent, because from the other side of the bench he heard, "It's ok my dude, you've got this. Just put some pep in your step."



Jonathan faced the dude, feeling strangely comforted. "Thanks, Chad. I really appreciate it."

Chad's eyes widened, "Woah. How'd you know my name, dude?"

Jonathan tried hard not to glance at the Sperry's boat shoes on his new friend's feet or the Greek symbols on his hat and smiled to himself. "Lucky guess. I better be on my way."

And with that, he got up from the bench, and waved back at Chad, whose goofy grin had Jonathan certain that this was, in fact, the coolest Chad he'd ever met.

Of course, Jonathan did not know what haunted Chad. Chad was, emphasis on the past tense, best friends with Amerika, as it seemed everyone was. After all, Amerika was very popular on campus and in Santa Barbara itself as it was her hometown. Her reputation in town was that of a golden child who will have a bright and prosperous future. Amerika craved to be the spirit of Fiesta, a very ambitious role to partake in her community. Still, Amerika tended to manipulate people into doing what best suited her and only her. At night, when the world was about to rest, Amerika would look at the mirror and ask her reflection, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who would be Fiesta's spirit this fall?" The mirror would display a gray-black smoke for a few seconds, followed by a wrinkly face that would appear and stare into Amerika's eyes. A woman's voice came from the mirror and recited: "Amerika, you have so many talents, but being nice and accepting of others is not a gift you possess, my dear. Shall you choose to be a runner-up for the Spirit of Fall, your perspective and attitude towards people will have to change." Amerika was not one to take constructive criticism well. She was so upset by what the mirror told her that she struck her fist against the mirror. The impact of the fist shattered the glass, causing it to strike her face, cutting her and getting into her left eye. Amerika screamed as she knew she had injured herself and possibly ruined her chances of competing at the Fiesta event. Her mother heard Amerika's scream and ran to see what had happened. There was blood streaming from her face and falling upon the white carpet. Her mother rushed Amerika to the emergency room. The doctor's determined that the glass shards cut Amerika's cornea and surgery was needed. After eight long hours of being under the knife, the doctors did their best to save her eye, but it was too damaged; it needed to be removed. Amerika went home with an eye patch; she now looked like a pirate.

Amerika knew the Fiesta judges had high standards and required specific requisites be met to qualify as the Fall Spirit of Fiesta; one of them was no facial coverings, eye patches, or tattoos that affiliated an individual with a group or gang. After all, Fiesta was about being beautiful and of course, knowing how to dance. Amerika knew that looking like a pirate would not work in her favor, let alone allow her to enter the competition. And that's when Amerika remembered that she had heard of a witch who resided on Yanonali Street. The witch's name was Luna, and was known to do 'miracles,' but only in exchange for the item a person most cherished. In Amerika's case, the most cherished possession was her long black hair. Amerika had reservations about going to Luna, as she knew her hair would be taken away from her; nevertheless, Amerika made her way to see Luna. There, Luna told Amerika what she would

have to give up in order to restore her beauty. Luna forced a contract upon Amerika and the that was written on the skin of an ancient dragon. The only thing left was for Amerika to accept the terms by signing her name in her blood. Luna picked up Amerika's left hand and swiped her finger across a razor blade – the blood started to pour, and the contract was now binding.

The following morning, Amerika woke up to crows crowing outside her window. The “caw-caw” must have been from dozens of angry crows. Amerika rushed to the hallway mirror to see if her face had changes. Her face had been restored! However, her hair was now short, patchy, and brittle. Despite the condition of her hair, she decided to proceed with her competition, but first she would have to address her lack of locks. She decided to purchase a wig from Scamazon; it would make her just as beautiful as she once was. The day came for the Fiesta competition. Her name was called, and she approached the stage. The music came on, and it was Gipsy Kings ‘No Volvere.’ She danced beautifully, captivating the entire audience. Once the dance was over, the crowd cheered and applauded with great enthusiasm. Amerika knew she had won this contest. She rested her hands on her hips and bowed her head and then threw it back up high and proud. However, the crowd cheering suddenly stopped and it was followed by gasps and screams of terror. Amerika's hair had fallen off and her head and face began streaming and dripping in blood. Her white dress was covered in red. Once again, Amerika was rushed to the emergency room. The anesthesiologist was paged to the operating room. As the anesthesiologist administered the anesthesia, she leaned in closely to Amerika's face and whispered: “I came to collect a debt.” At this time, Amerika realized that the price of beauty and fame led her to a path of destruction that would seize her existence in this world. As Amerika took her last breath, she realized the song she danced to, “No Volvere” (No Return), was ironically what would happen to her soul.

Meanwhile Jonathan continued back towards the Education Building, dreading what promised to be a long walk up the stairs. Jonathan didn't know it, but everyone in this town had a haunted story of their own. His was nothing particularly special....

Passing through the bus loop and along the path back to Ghoulvartz, Jonathan heard a strange noise – like water pumping through a circulation system. Jonathan's instinct for seeking out danger was a bit rusty – his vampire hunting days were far behind him – however, this smelled of trouble. He couldn't resist.

Creeping up to the gate of the water polo practice complex, where the eerie pumping sound was emanating from, Jonathan peered over into what should have been the pool. Instead, he could see what looked like a neat row of semi-translucent chrysalises, each about 6' long and encased in smoky tendrils that almost looked like roots. The tendrils seemed to bury underneath the pool complex, and he could tell by the uneven pavement along the path that they seemed to lead directly to the Education Building. Looking up, the dark canopy that he had noticed on his lunch walk hung over the building had taken on the shape of a giant, foreboding tree weighed down with what looked like heavy fruit.

Jonathan looked back at the chrysalises in alarm. The pulsing roots seemed to be a circuit, relaying energy to the tree via its root system. As he watched, the tree continued to darken, taking on a twisted and ever-more corporeal form.

Jonathan's vampire hunting instincts flooded back to him. Maybe, fate had brought him here for a reason. Maybe – just maybe – he was the one who could save the School of Education.

Jonathan tried to hop the fence to the water polo complex, briefly cringing as he remembered the last time he had to do this. He wasn't sure if this was better or worse than having to run for his life from a rabid dog while on assignment as a traveling estate agent. Luckily, his ghostly body simply slipped through the barrier.

He tentatively approached one of the chrysalises. The sucking noise of fluids moving through roots intensified and he stifled a gag as he realized that he could see tiny capillaries sucking what looked like blood from whatever was inside this thing.

He attempted to prod the object with his foot, but it simply passed through the gelatinous top layer with no resistance. Taking a deep breath and holding it, Jonathan leaned it to peer through the translucent top layer of the chrysalis.

Deborah, his guide from the first day, stared back at him, unmoving. His breath rushed out of him, leaving him gasping as he jerked back in horror, stumbling over his feet in his urge to get as far away from the chrysalis as fast as he could. As he did so, he heard a deep, ground-shaking rumble that reverberated through the pool deck and his entire body.

Pinned to the floor, heart beating through his chest, Jonathan realized that the rumble was a booming laugh. Terrified, all he could do was turn his head from side to side, trying to pinpoint where the oppressive noise was coming from. It seemed to emanate out of every root, and from where he lay on the pool deck, he could see the windows of the Education Building rattling as the phantom tree shook.

*“AND NOW YOU KNOW THE TRUTH”* a voice boomed between mirthful laughs. It was terribly loud, but unmistakably the voice he had heard in the elevator. It was the voice – could it be? – of HEXUS.

*“I HAVE BEEN SLOWLY GROWING BENEATH THIS LAND FOR A HUNDRED YEARS, WAITING TO FEAST ON THE STAFF AND STUDENTS WHO SWARM ABOVE ME LIKE ANTS.”* The voice scoffed, *“AND NOW MY EMERGENCE IS ALMOST COMPLETE.”* It breathed, and Jonathan felt as though all of the air around him had been sucked towards the tree.

The voice became thoughtful, *“ALL I NEEDED WAS A WAY INTO THE SYSTEM. IT'S INCREDIBLE HOW EASY IT IS TO GET EMPLOYEES TO CLICK A LINK TO SIGN UP FOR THE OFFICE LOTTO POOL, YOU KNOW. ESPECIALLY WITHOUT THAT PESKY DUAL-FINGER AUTHENTICATION SYSTEM.”*

As the tree talked – *why did villainous undead things always need to explain their master plan?* Jonathan thought with annoyance – Jonathan was slowly crawling backwards towards the pool gate. He knew exactly what this was – a particularly nasty instance of the invasive species *Hexus viscera*, commonly known as the Southern Vampire Elm, a holoparasitic tree that fruits once every 100 years. It must have come over from the original Riviera campus in the 1920s.

As anyone in the Paranormal Ecology department will tell you, Holoparasitic plants are not capable of photosynthesis and obtain all of their nutrients from their hosts. In short, this was a vampire tree, and if Jonathan was good at anything, it was killing vampires.

This one had grown unnoticed, possibly by slowly luring staff and students into its self-created underworld, and projecting a version of their consciousness into the above-ground world with none the wiser.

September 15<sup>th</sup> must have been the day that it finally had gained enough power to steal entire departments of staff to begin powering its bloom. Jonathan thought of the Department of Statistics and Applied Probability. It was likely that the only lava flow those Hawaii-bound hopefuls were near right now was the infernal river he had passed earlier.

He grimaced. Once the tree fruited and the seeds spread over campus, there would be no exterminating this thing.

An actual lightning bolt cracked in the sky above the Thunderdome, reminding Jonathan of the urgency of his mission. Luckily, his vampire-hunting and estate agent days had engrained in him the value of always keeping an emergency supply of self-defense items on him at all times. His messenger bag held a vial of holy water, a cross, a couple of stakes purportedly carved from one of the original trees in the garden of Eden (which he had liberated from a particularly wealthy estate), dog treats, and a can of bear mace for good measure. And if the worst were to happen, his last weapon was a list of 9 passcodes on his phone that would help him get through the Dual-Finger Authentication system to shut down HEXUS from the inside once he was able to get his phone connected to that pesky Eduroam wifi network.

He knew what he needed to do.

Thinking back to his days in the Edie Sedgwick Center for the Unstable and Deranged at Cottage Hospital, dedicated to the former Warhol muse who, like Amerika, was yet another Santa Barbara golden child that met an untimely demise, Jonathan spent endless hours of streaming TikTok clips once committed. Somehow his algorithm turned him on to a niche corner of the web called #VampireTok; a section of TikTok that would send him on a chaotic and reckless journey as a vampire hunter.

#VampireTok taught him all he needed to know about the most abundant and lucrative species of vampire: the sparkling high school kind. As Mr. Harker, Jonathan could easily detect the millennia-old, yet dim and vapid of Santa Barbara's high schoolers. With barely a high school

education and zero interest in anything more, sparkling vampires were no match for Jonathan's slaying skills. He was a quick study and #VampireTok was an excellent teacher.

However, Jonathan quickly grew tired of applying to high school after high school. He was a mistreated and burnt out teacher whose sole purpose had become slaying sparkling vampire teens for the large bounties placed on their heads by elite southern California plastic surgeons who made fortunes keeping aging Orange County housewives and starlets "young" peddling Vampire blood (which Jonathan knew was nothing more than kale and acai juice) as the snake oil du jour.

At first the excellent pay was all the Jonathan needed, but he knew the vampire blood industry was a sham. Jonathan finally gave his notice at Cate School, made his way out of the Carpinteria hills, drove past the newly planted marijuana greenhouses, accelerated straight onto the 101, headed north and never looked back.

Now back at Ghoulvitz, Jonathan stood at the base of the stairs leading up to the bell tower and became paralyzed at the thought of walking all of the stairs to the fourth floor. Hadn't he been through enough today? He thought to himself, "That elevator can't be that bad...dammit, it's worth the risk."

As Jonathan turned from the staircase to head to the elevator, he found himself face-to-face with his former bestie-turned-Fiesta-corpse Amerika, in the flesh and blood (now more blood than flesh). Jonathan gave a startled leap back at the sight of Amerika, but sensed his friend's despair and so took a step towards her.

Before he could say a word, Amerika quickly began, "You've wasted enough time, Jonathan! Why didn't you listen to those STEM transfer stoners at the library? They told you exactly what to do!" Jonathan's mind raced back to page seven... Just then Jonathan remembered what he knew all along, "Of course! The STEM transfer students told me I needed to get to IT!" Amerika flashed a beautiful smile of relief, but quickly turned stern again. "Jonathan," Amerika continued, "I have a warning for you. Beware Luna of Yanonali. She's a very powerful witch, I mean...don't get me wrong. I deeply respect her religion and her craft, but she is pure evil. Luna conjured the entire Lotto scheme that sent desperate staff, awaiting backpay from long delayed union negotiations to any nearby liquor store for quickpicks. It was all too easy for her. And she is working for HEXUS! She will do anything to protect him. But I'll do all I can to protect you, Jonathan." At these final words, Amerika vanished.

Jonathan was in complete shock. He had no idea about Luna of Yanonali, holoparasitic vampire trees, or dual-finger authentication. All Jonathan hoped to do on his first day at Ghoulvitz was to try to remember everyone's names and eat a free donut in his honor. He shook himself back to reality and thought back to what the transfer students told him..."Go back to the Ghoulvitz building, but this time, hold your breath and tap your nose three times before you try to get in."

The building was beginning to vanish even more now. He barely had time to press the handicap button that swung the front doors open wide before it completely disappeared beneath his

fingers. He raced to the grassy knoll in the center of the structure to collect himself. Once on the knoll, the world felt firm and real again. For a moment he thought of just giving up on this nonsense and going home to finish the day remotely, but then realized he hadn't yet set up his VPN. He'd need help with that...from IT! "Hold my breath, tap nose three times... IT" Once again, Jonathan approached the main doors of Ghoulvartz. He wiped the sweat from his brow before he inhaled deeply and began tapping his nose.

Almost instantly, Jonathan was whisked through the solid doors, up the four flights of stairs before slamming into the closed door of the IT suite. Stunned, he reached for the doorknob. The building was no longer see through and when he turned the knob, it didn't slip through his fingers like fog; he was back in the world of the living! He pushed into the IT suite where a student assistant sat responding to Help Desk tickets. He spoke his thoughts as he typed, "Have. You. Tried. Turning. It. Off. And. Back. On. Again?"

"Uhhh...Hi." Jonathan began.

"Oh hey man! Didn't see you there. No one ever comes by anymore, not since September 15<sup>th</sup>. It's nice to see another living soul around here. I'm Joel." Joel stood and held out his hand to greet Jonathan. Grasping Joel's hand, Jonathan was assured he'd come to the right place for help.

"Listen Joel, I need your help, but first I need to tell you a story you might not believe. But I promise you, I'm not crazy..." Jonathan relived the entire day to poor, young Joel. When Jonathan finished his tale, he braced himself, as he didn't know how Joel would react. After a pensive moment, Joel spoke up, "I think I heard something about that on #VampireTok." Jonathan's face brightened and he knew those hours-turned-days of #VampireTok at the Sedgwick Center must hold the answer that would save Ghoulvartz and this town, if not from its own vanity, at least from the grasp of HEXUS to free the staff!

Just then Jonathan heard that famous Eagles song, "Hotel California," playing on Joel's Spotify app. Wasn't that song vaguely about Santa Barbara as well? "Stab it with their steely knives, but they just can't kill the beast?" Steely knives? As a vampire hunter, Jonathan knew a wooden stake through the heart was an extremely effective weapon against sparkling vampires, but how to defeat a vampire plant system? He knew the tree was the heart, but if a steel axe couldn't slay HEXUS, what would?

Jonathan turned to Joel and asked him if he'd heard anything about slaying vampire trees on #VampireTok? "Hmmm...well, you'd need a strong metal like steel that can also act as an excellent conductor...but not steel since it's magnetic..." Jonathan blinked blankly at Joel and awaited Joel's train of thought to arrive at the station. He was desperate for answers that only this kid could provide! "I got it! Copper!" Joel raced to the back of the IT suite and when he came back, his arms were overflowing with spools and spools of shiny orange copper!

"Does every department have that much copper lying around?" Jonathan asked, half-jokingly.

“We do now that the entire campus is getting rid of landlines and moving to Zoom phones, all of the landline wiring is getting dumped on us IT offices,” Joel replied. With that, Jonathan and Joel came up with a plan to restore dual-factor authentication, then drive a copper knife deep into the heart of the holoparasitic HEXUS! “But what about Luna of Yanonali?” Joel asked.

Jonathan said, “I’ll take care of her.”

Jonathan left Joel in IT to craft four large copper stakes while he headed back to the water polo pool to look for Luna of Yanonali. Jonathan found climbing into to this real life pool far more difficult than the underworld pool. With some difficulty, he climbed the fence as quietly as possible. Once in, Jonathan slowly got down on his belly and slithered to the side of the pool. Peering over the edge he spotted Luna of Yanonali directly below him! Taking one more glance up to the sky for some courage he thought to himself, “I hope I’ll get some workers compensation if I’m injured on day one....” before sliding into the pool. “Oh hello, I heard there were some lotto tickets for sale around here,” Jonathan started.

Luna was wearing Amerika’s long black hair and she appeared to be tending the chrysalis in the pool like a gardener. “Very funny, Mr. Harker.”

“It’s no secret about your dubious contracts and quickpicks around here. Tell me, what did this place ever do to you?” Jonathan asked Luna. There was no point in lying now.

“The vain are easily duped. I have no regrets. I only wish to study my craft at Ghoulvartz, but there’s no witchcraft major, only minors and graduate programs, I’ve been waiting here for 167 years. I only wish to complete my degree and move on with my life!”

Luna turned away from Jonathan to return to the chrysalis. Then out of thin air, Amerika suddenly appeared directly in front of Luna! Face to face with Luna, Amerika was still see through, but becoming more solid by the second. Amerika lifted her eyepatch to reveal a long mirror shard still wedged into her eye socket. Amerika wrenched the shard from her eye and in one fell swoop, forced the shard straight into Luna’s heart. Luna let out an ear-piercing shriek as she slowly collapsed on top of the chrysalis. The chrysalis began to slow its rhythm. Jonathan knew it was weakening as he rushed to meet Joel back at Ghoulvartz.

Once back at the grassy knoll, Joel removed four long copper stakes and a hammer from his backpack. “Where did you get that hammer?” asked Jonathan.

Joel responded, “I found it in the mailroom. Last week I couldn’t find anything in that dump, but now it’s so clean and organized. It’s like the hammer was just sitting out, waiting for me! Weird, huh?”

“Um...sure.” A still-skeptical Jonathan replied. From the grassy knoll, they surveyed the holoparasitic tree. They knew HEXUS was weakened without its energy source back at the pool.

The copper stakes would take HEXUS out, but would it really be as simple as walking right up to HEXUS and driving the four copper stakes into it?

“Wait, before we go and risk our lives to save this campus and somehow finally end this very long story,” Jonathan began, “you said the mailroom was all organized and cleaned up?”

“Yeah,” Joel said, “But it seemed like everything that had ever been put in there was still there, from three-hole punches to dried-up bottles of Whiteout.”

“And where all the old calendars there, too?” Jonathan quizzed.

Before Joel could reply, “I think so,” Jonathan was off to the mailroom. It might have taken him opening five cabinets, but he found what he was searching for, campus calendars going back years and years, each one with the smiling countenance of Chancellor Fang on the cover, never seeming any younger or older. Fumbling through each, he discovered what he feared to discover—September 15<sup>th</sup> was missing on every ninth page. It was like the day never existed on this campus.

Joel had caught up to find Jonathan practically in tears. “HEXUS might be the least of our worries,” Jonathan said. “The danger might run all the way to Cronos.”

“All the way to Riverside?” Joel stammered, fearing they’d have to travel where no one wanted to go, unless it was Christmas and they had a reservation to see the Mission Inn light spectacular.

“Yes, but the joy of a network is you can bring it down pretty much at any small entry point,” Jonathan said. “So let’s go save the Ghoulvitz, make happy the poor deformed ghost of my friend Amerika, fix the space-time continuum, and maybe, dammit, get my first day at work donut. It better be from Hook & Press!”

It would be boring to relate how quickly Jonathan and Joel got to North Hall, so we’ll leave that part out. But they knew the central computing spot had to be where HEXUS hid its dark excuse for a heart. Jonathan took his laptop he bought in Gilroy out of his backpack and logged in, then took out his phone and logged in again. He knew this would infuriate and distract HEXUS just long enough for....and then Joel drove the first of the copper daggers into a spot of the computer so special and sensitive we cannot name it in a story. The next three got hammered home into HEXUS’s hateful, horrible, hissing hard drive. “Heck, he handily hurt it!” Harker heartily hurraed.

Five weeks later, everything was back to normal as Jonathan and Joel got to receive an honor—free ice cream—for saving the campus and most likely life as we know it. Chancellor Fang himself presented the two with a plaque. Yep, one plaque for the two of them, as the campus cleanup after near holoparasitic ruin ran into the millions. It nearly cost as much as the Munger dorm going up on the campus’s edge. It was at the ceremony that Harker noticed two amazing



things: Joel's last name was van Helsing and despite how shiny the plaque was, he couldn't see the Chancellor's reflection in it.