

STRAYS

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To My Sons

Stephen Archer

Jaiken Montaigne

Oz Maethelvin Anderson

Tallis Jove

and

Regis Augustine

My Reason for Writing

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CHAPTER ONE

A MIGHTY FORTRESS

Out of the hills in the early evening, where finally the Appalachians rolled to a rest in northern Alabama, descended a gray van, a trail of dust signaling its arrival. The nearby mountain had many names, including Gategwa or Oostanaula, though most of the locals called it Skeleton Mount due to the stone snake effigy built like a spine atop its peak. For the passengers in the gray van, the mountain was the tombstone to their journey.

Inside the van was the Niemand family—or two-thirds of the Niemand family, for Mr. Niemand had left Virginia, his wife of thirteen years, and his son Rodney in early spring to make a name for himself in the City of Angels. Rodney thought

his dad was already off to a bad start if he wanted to make his name in a town called that.

Their destination was at the foot of Skeleton Mount, a little town once called Etowah but now known as Twin Rivers, where Rodney was to spend the summer with his weird Uncle Ray.

The first of these “twins,” the Snake River, flowed alongside the mountain before curling off and corkscrewing through the farmland outside the town. The second was simply named the Second River, and it flowed down Skeleton Mount in buoyant leaps and waterfalls. These two rivers gradually drew nearer until they united as they left the county. The van outlined the Snake River before crossing over a bridge to town.

Rodney brushed back his thick brown hair and settled his red ball cap back to its usual place. They drove down Main Street, where most of the businesses had already closed. Here and there the bright signs of a diner or coffee shop or cinema would add their light to the late afternoon sun. Rodney plucked out his earbuds. “For real, he doesn’t have a TV?”

“For real,” she said, moving her hand to flip her hair over her shoulder, but finding only a shorn wisp of sandy brown.

“I thought he hid one in his bedroom.”

“Nope. Sorry, kiddo.”

“How far outside the city does he live?”

His mother laughed. “I bet you could walk from his front door to this gas station up ahead in an hour. Less if you use your bike.”

“I’m going to need more video games,” he muttered to himself as they left the town and followed the curve of the mount westward. On the right were rows of cotton plants, about a month or so

into their growth, green and hardly knee-high. On the left side of the road, a wall of trees grew thick up the toe of Skeleton Mount.

Rodney's mother slowed as they arrived at a gravel road that led into the woods. The road was marked by a wood barrel mailbox. The final stretch to Ray's house was a long driveway that looped around a steep hill. The gray, moss-covered trees slumped, and the roof screeched as their low branches scraped the top of the van.

"I think it will be good for you," said his mother, picking up the discussion they'd had the last two weeks. "He used to play baseball. He could probably help you."

"I hate baseball." He kicked the bat lying at his feet, still looking new despite a full year of use.

"You're still learning. It'll be more fun when you get better at it."

"Dad made me play. I didn't want to."

"It's good to get some sunshine."

"Ugh, I hate sunshine."

"Rodney Abner Niemand." Her voice was a crisp even tone, not angry, but as if she were invoking an historical figure. She shot him a mirthful look from the rearview mirror. (He'd chosen to sit in the back.) "You don't get to talk like that. Tell me you love sunshine."

Rodney pulled his hat low. "I love sunshine."

"What was that?"

"I love sunshine."

"You need to keep practicing. It sounds like you don't mean it." She playfully stuck her tongue out at him. He tried to smother his smile with a shrug.

She flipped on the headlights to see through the shadows and slowed the van to creep over a washed-out section of the road. Potholes made the whole van shiver.

“Ray’s got rabbits. He’ll let you play with those. And you’ve got the woods to explore.”

“Uncle Ray’s always so busy, Mom. He’s not going to play with me. Besides, he talks to himself.”

“Oh, he’s just joking around,” she said, catching his eyes in the mirror to gauge his reaction. He drew his lips into a straight line, noncommittal, like his dad. Balanced between smart remarks and sincerity. “He’s doing us a big favor.”

“Doing *you* a favor.”

She slowed the car down to a crawl. “Rodney,” she said more sternly.

His voice leaped a measure, to the tone of pleading, but short of whining. “I want to go with you. Why can’t I go with you?”

“Rodney, I’ve told you. We’re starting a new life. A new everything, new city, house, job, friends, everything. I need to get some things settled first, and then you can come.”

Rodney crossed his arms and muttered, “Abandoning me.”

She paused to let the argument die. They’d spoken these same words again and again. She increased the van’s speed and the gravel took up the complaint.

“What am I going to do with rabbits?”

“Hey, maybe you could help make a rocking chair. That’d be good for you to learn.”

Rodney picked at the loose threads of his shirt. “Yeah, I guess. If I get to use knives and other things.” He chopped at

the stray threads with his hand. They rumbled across the wood bridge that spanned Second River.

“Rodney, Rodney, Rodney,” she said, “. . . you’ll be happy.”

Uncle Ray only invited them the week after Christmas and on Easter Sunday. Rodney had never stayed there longer than a couple of nights. He usually spent the whole time on the couch playing his video games or reading. When he was younger he’d lie on the rug and push cars across it.

They lived an hour and a half away in Rome, Georgia, but Ray never visited. His mom would always invite him, and his dad would always give her a look, but Ray stayed home tending his garden and making the rocking chairs he sold online. Both the governors of Alabama and Georgia had bought one. Another was in a museum somewhere. It made the newspapers. “Recluse woodworker,” they called Ray. He’d had to look up that word—*recluse* meant a person that had withdrawn from the world to live alone.

“Mom?” he looked up to find her eyes in the mirror. “Did Ray go crazy?”

She kept her eyes on the road as she answered. “No, of course not.”

“Dad said he did.”

“Your dad . . .” she slowed the car till they were almost stopped. “Ray is just a little lonely.”

They rounded the last bend and descended into a clearing where the house was. Though the sun was at a low angle in the sky, the two light poles out front were already on, emitting a soft yellow light.

His uncle had built his house as a series of interlocking honeycombs, each room a hexagonal cell. Ray had named his

home Corleonis, Heart of the Lion, but the locals simply called it the Honeycomb House. The first floor was in a flower pattern with six petals around a central stair room that held a grand spiral staircase. The second floor held three bedrooms—Ray’s and two guest bedrooms—plus two bathrooms. A more modest spiral staircase climbed to the third floor, which was an observatory. Last Christmas Ray had tried to get Rodney interested in looking at stars, but after staring at far away white dots for ten minutes he’d had enough of that for a lifetime.

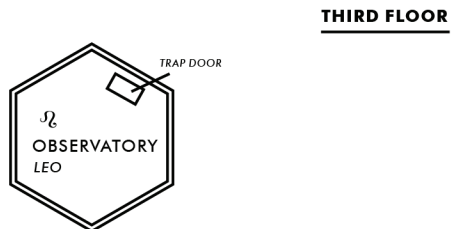
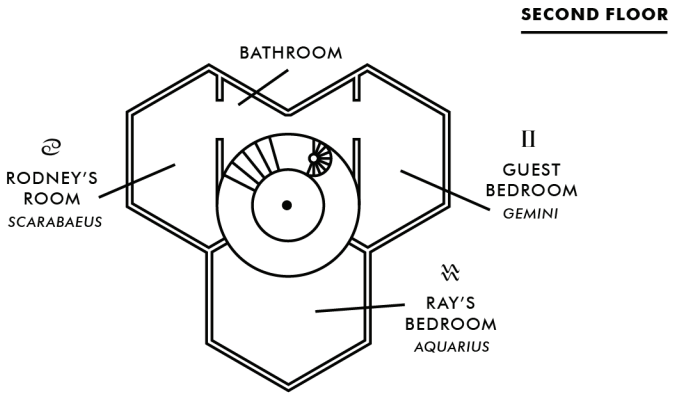
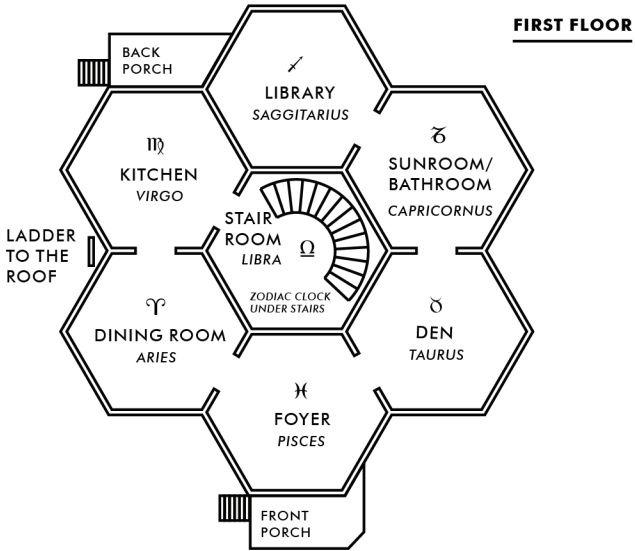
Next to the towering Corleonis was Ray’s workshop. It was a great wooden hall with a concrete floor and a high ceiling, crossbeamed throughout. It held whispers like regular speech and speech like shouts. Rodney could hear the whine of the circular saw reverberate through the walls. Inside you could feel it with your teeth.

Between the house and the workshop was Ray’s car. It was a beat-up yellow Honda Civic Wagon, an “old hoopty,” Ray called it. It had long ago lost the “da” at the end of “Honda” and his mom had pried off the c-v-c from “Civic” so that it would read “Hon i i” and henceforth called it the Honey Pot.

Rodney’s mom parked the car, and he began gathering his belongings: a stack of comic books, his baseball glove and bat, and a slingshot his mother rarely let him use back home. Rodney waited until the whine of the car died before he opened his door.

Ray was standing on the porch to greet them. His beard, salted with grays, hid his neck. His nearly shoulder-length hair was without the ponytail today, but he wore one of his signature tie-dye shirts. His tie-dye shirts weren’t spirals; they were

CORLEONIS, THE HONEYCOMB HOUSE



vertical pillars of color with purple in the middle and reds, greens, yellows, and blues flowing out of it.

He gave the black suspenders spanning the length of his stomach a snap and smiled as Rodney trudged around the van. Then Ray rumbled down the steps swatting the air in front of him and saying, “Out of the way scalawag—let me greet my nephew.” He put a hand on Rodney’s head and gave him a rough hair tousling, knocking off his cap. “Rodney, my man.”

“Hi, Ray.” Rodney straightened his hair and picked up his cap, settling it more tightly.

Ray took the suitcase his sister pulled out of the trunk. “Need some supper, Ginny?”

Ray called her Gin or Ginny, short for Virginia (only her co-workers called her that). Sometimes Ray called her Spica. Rodney was in the dark as to why, but his mother would brush it off as from some forgotten story. His father assumed it was racist.

“No, we got something on the way.” Rodney’s mom pulled out his bike from the back and wheeled it to the house. She leaned it against the wall beside the front stairs.

“Aw, at least have some winter apples. They’re just starting to peak. I put ’em up as soon as I harvested them, and they’ve got this perfect sweetness to them now.”

“Are they from Daddy’s trees?” she asked.

“Yup, and I got this great apple peeler too.” He led them up the front steps. “Mind the hooligans,” he said gesturing to nothing as they entered.

They dropped Rodney’s stuff on the floor of the foyer. Carved on the floor was a sign like two crescent moons back to back with a bar connecting them, like an H. This is partly

why most called it the Honeycomb House, yet the walls were decorated with little fish.

The wood floor creaked as they walked into the dining room. There, carved on the wall between the windows, was a charging ram. Its head was down like it wanted to burst through the wall into the kitchen. Rodney couldn't help but touch the intricately carved chairs and table as he passed. His uncle had spent years "doodling," as he called it, etching symbols, scrolls, and pictures into the wood surfaces. They entered the kitchen. The panel over the back door was of a woman holding two wheat stalks in her outstretched hand.

"I've got you in the bigger bedroom this time, Rod, since it's just you."

"That's okay, I like the little one." The smaller one had beetles carved into the walls.

Ray pulled out wood bowls from the cabinet and set them on the counter. He reached into the fridge and took out a wood bowl with reddish-yellow apples in it.

"Rodney? Would you like one?"

"Sure."

He brought out a metal contraption with a wide wood base from one of the cabinets. It had a long screw with a crank at one end and three prongs at the other that passed through a sharp metal hoop cutting out the apple core, while another blade cut the apple meat into a spiral.

"These babies are Stayman-Winesaps," he said as he pressed the top of an apple into the prongs. "A tad tart when you harvest them, but if you store them right, they take on a bit of sweetness over a few months." He began turning the crank,

which pushed the apple into the skinner. The apple skin was spit from the peeler and spilled to the counter with a wet slicing sound.

When the apple had passed through the hoop, Ray pulled it free, leaving the core impaled on the prongs, and pulled apart a perfect slinky of apple. He handed it to Rodney.

“Eat hearty, me lad.”

“Cool,” he said as he played it like an accordion. “Can I do one?”

“Do two, so I can have one as well.” He pulled off the core, unwound the crank so that the screw returned to its starting point and stuffed another apple on the prongs. He stepped aside so Rodney could turn the shaft.

The crank required more effort than he expected. Not wanting to look weak, he turned his shoulders into it and the apple shot through the bladed ring, sending out a rooster tail of apple peel.

“That was fun,” he said as he finished. He pulled the fruit free and handed it to his mother. She put the head of the spiral into her mouth and bit. The crack of the apple was like fingers snapping.

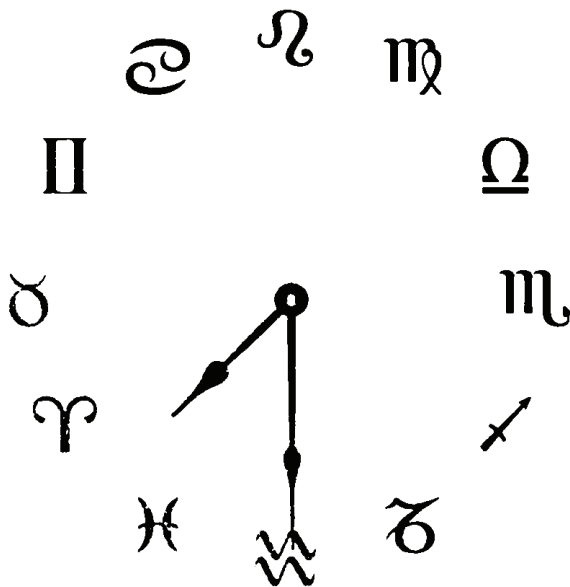
“Mmmm,” she said. She raised the fruit, letting it dangle from three fingers, closed her eyes and said, “I love apples, I love apples, I love apples.”

Rodney finished an apple for Ray, picked one of his own, and announced, “I’m going to look at the walls.”

“Hey, check out the library,” Ray called as the boy pushed through the swinging door into the stair room. “I just put in some wildlife to go with the hunter.”

With his eyes, Rodney followed the thick central beam way up to the third floor. Ray always joked that if he ran into it too hard the whole house would come crashing down. The pillar was about the only thing that was untouched by his carving knife.

He approached the strange clock that was built into the wall under the stairs. It was a pendulum clock with symbols instead of numbers, gold set in a blond wood so finely grained that it looked like the Aurora Borealis. The little hand was pointing between a symbol that looked like an H with two fish behind it and one that looked like a Y, where the seven and eight would be on most clocks, and the long hand was pointing to squiggly lines over a picture of flowing water, where the six would be. The second hand circled over the other marks, a horseshoe, the letter M, an arrow, and other weird symbols.



Below the clock was the only phone in the house. A little shelf was built into the wall with a piano bench pushed underneath. Years ago, Rodney would tuck himself into this cubbyhole to play with cars or action figures. He could lie curled up and watch the ankles of others as they walked through the house.

He heard the voice of his mother speaking in a secretive tone. Though it was quiet, it sounded like a siren in his ears: *Grown-up talk. Pay attention.* He moved nearer to the wall to listen.

“Ray, I’m thinking about going back to my maiden name.”

“Did you get papers?”

“Yeah, last week. I’m not going to contest. He doesn’t want anything. It’ll be official in thirty-one days.”

Rodney slouched to the floor, his back against the wall, knees to his chin. Turns out his mother wanted to make a new name for herself, as well. He felt like the last Niemand alive. The thread of his mom’s voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

“But what about Rodney?”

“What about him?”

“What should I do about his name?”

“Have you talked to him about it?”

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t want him to feel like his last name is bad. I also don’t want him to feel abandoned. He’s only twelve.” Rodney only ever heard his mom speak this way when he was out of the room. To him she was as cheerful as ever.

His uncle cleared his throat. “I could ask him about it.” Then Rodney heard the wood bowls clink and the faucet turn on. He stood and tiptoed into the library. The walls were

bookshelves stuffed with books, and across from him were two small windows looking out into the backyard. He slid the door shut behind him and noticed an archer carved into it, an arrow strung on his bow. He scanned the walls for what the archer hunted, but could see only rabbits and a single snake carved at the foot of a tree.

His eyes were drawn to a shelf of brightly colored paperbacks. He ran a finger across the cracked spines, silently reading their titles: *The Order of Angels*, *The Flood of Demons*, *The Cloak of Colors*. They were well worn, probably read yearly. Ray was rarely without a book in his hand or a potboiler tucked into his back pocket. He and his mother would quote comedic lines to each other from stories they'd both read. They could go for hours.

The phone rang, its rattle springing into his ears. He returned to the stair room, pulled out the little bench below the telephone and sat. Rodney could never remember a time when the phone rang. He thought the only person that called Ray was his mother. He waited for another ring before answering.

"Hello?" he said and held his breath.

"... Rodney? That you?"

"Dad!" Rodney looked back at the kitchen door to see if his mom or Ray had entered behind him. No one stirred. They must have known who was calling.

"Hey, buddy. How ya been?"

"M'okay. School's out."

"Yeah, I heard Mom's dumping you at Uncle Ray's for the next month or so."

"Yeah. Until she gets things settled."

“Sorry about that.” There was a slight pause, Rodney held his breath again. Finally his father spoke, “He still crazy?”

Rodney checked for Ray again. He gave a whispered laugh. “Yeah, he is.”

“Crazy with a capital R-A-Y.” This was an old joke. Rodney laughed softly again. His dad continued, “Sorry I couldn’t take you with me. You understand, right? Sometime, when I’m more settled, you can come out.” After another pause he added, “To visit. Would you like that?”

“Sure.”

“Alright, buddy. Just wanted to check in. Hate that mom left you there. Don’t go cra-ray-zee.”

“Okay.”

“See ya, bud.”

“Love—” Rodney heard the click on the line as his dad hung up.

The last day of school followed by the drive had sapped his energy. The shadows moved, and Rodney shook his head to keep his eyes from playing tricks. He returned to the library to sit in the last of the sunlight.

The thought of being here all summer settled heavily on his shoulders. The house was musty, and creaked and groaned when the wind blew. He didn’t want to be abandoned in a house like this. Maybe if there was a television to dull time and shrink it to nothing. Or if there were other kids to distract him with talk of their father’s jokes and their mother’s cooking. The last thing he wanted was to stay with a man who talked to himself and wore too much tie-dyed clothing.

His mother entered and read his mood. “You’ll have a good time, Rodney. You’ll see.”

Rodney angled his back to her. “You’re abandoning me.”

She stood silent. Rodney put his hand on the books in front of him. He read the title of the volume his hand rested on: *The Jawbone of Heaven*. He knew his mom was fighting back tears, something that happened a lot in their recent exchanges. They were both so full of wounds that every hard word was like salt to them.

He pulled his hand away and the book toppled off the shelf and crashed on his foot. The book’s pages were splayed open, making a tent over his shoe. He was angry at himself and felt anger and sorrow for his mother.

She moved closer and put her arms around him. He felt her breath in his hair.

Without turning his head he said, “Please take me with you.”

She whispered back, “You need to be here.”

“Please don’t leave me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Rodney kicked the book off his shoe and turned to put his arms around her.

She pulled back and looked into his eyes. “I’m sorry.” Her voice entered softly. He pulled out of her arms and left the room. He went straight through the stair room into the foyer and out the front door.

Leaping off the porch and into the thick grass of the front yard, he felt tears welling up, so he took off in a sprint to keep his eyes fierce and alert. He ran straight for the woods before him.

Rodney stumbled up the slope and entered the trees, pushing past the undergrowth. He was already beginning to slow, his lungs burned and his eyes itched with sweat. The last dregs of the day were swallowed, and a darkness settled around him.

His mom would be leaving first thing in the morning to travel to Nashville. She was taking a nursing job at some hospital. A new start for them both, but it would be starting without him. It was only fair that their old life would end without him too.

He trudged and tripped through the brush. As he walked, he realized why the driveway looped. There was a steep incline that dropped to a ravine where the river ran. There was a twelve-foot waterfall upstream, spattering as it sloshed against the rocks.

The water seemed slower at the bridge and more shallow. Here, however, the water boiled and sloshed. Rodney sat to slide down the embankment to the water below. He started slipping so he fell back, sprawling against the turf to slow down.

“Jeez!” He scrambled for a foothold. A root like a jutted lip stopped him short of the water. A coolness moved across him. “Jesus,” he said more carefully. He felt the absence of his father again, who would say that name at any slip or stubbing. His mother would hiss and make mean eyes at his dad, but if she heard Rodney say it, he’d be in a heap of trouble. He stood and placed his foot on the nearest rock peeking out of the stream. Soon he was drenched in the waterfall’s spray. In the dim light he couldn’t see the mist, but could feel it pulsing over him.

The cool of the water was soothing and seemed to cut through the grime he had gathered in his run through the woods. He felt refreshed, and the heat of the night had been swept back.

It took three leaps, stone to stone, before he made it across and clambered up the other side. From this point, he could hear the whooshing of cars speeding down the road. He continued his walk and soon stepped out of the woods. Ahead of him was Ray's mailbox. He walked up to look into its dark mouth, but it was empty. Not quite ready to follow the road back to the house, he crouched down in the gravel. The thrum and siren of the cicadas awoke in his ears, a chorus he'd blocked out till then.

Down the road, the lights of a small car appeared. Rodney watched as it slowed and turned off the road in front of him. The car kept running as the door opened and a wiry man stood up.

"Who are you? What are you doing?" He sounded afraid.

Rodney stood. "I'm Rodney."

"Oh," his tone changed. "Do you know Raymond?"

"He's my uncle."

"Staying with him, are you?"

Rodney nodded. "For the summer."

The man reached into the car and withdrew a stack of letters, magazines, and fliers wrapped in a rubberband. "I'm Otis, the mailman." He took a few steps toward Rodney and handed him the mail.

"It's late. Did you have a lot to deliver today?"

"No, but I live up the road a bit. I drop Raymond's stuff off last. He don't mind."

Rodney nodded again.

Otis put his foot back in the car. "You don't seem too happy about being here for the summer?"

Rodney shook his head no.

Otis looked up the winding gravel road before speaking again. “If you find yourself in any sort of trouble, you just let me know.” His tone was hushed.

“What kind of trouble?”

Otis gave a wan smile. “Haven’t you heard? Your uncle is a bit of a troublemaker.”

“Mom says he’s just lonely.”

“Listen, I’m not talking bad about the man, but just keep an eye on him. Something happens, anything, you call me. I’m right down the road.”

Rodney stood silently. He knew people considered Ray weird, but this was the first time he’d heard that Ray was trouble.

Otis sat down and shut the door. He stuck his head out of the window. “You wouldn’t understand. Forget I said anything.” He stopped. “And don’t tell your uncle. He don’t like me, neither. Just be careful.”

He drove off before Rodney could ask anything else. He followed the red lights of his car until it turned off the road. In the distance he spotted the lights of Otis’s house.

Rodney turned and started the trek back to his uncle’s house, his thoughts growing as dark as the night around him.