

Hellhound's Delight

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HELLHOUND'S DELIGHT

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Written by JC Ballard.

For Mom & Dad.

Thanks for believing in me.



I'M LOST



THIS ISN'T WHAT I WANTED. Not today. Not ever.

Friday night. I'm supposed to be home, in bed, my sweet patch-coated tabby cat curled up at my feet. At the same time, I enjoy a good book or out with my friends, watching some lousy creature feature at the dollar theater and making fun of it over salty popcorn and sour candy, not laying in a crumpled heap on cold, wet concrete after drinking too much at my best friend's boyfriend's house party.

Everything aches. My head spins. I can hardly catch my breath. The fall must've knocked the wind clear from my lungs.

I sit up to collect myself and get my bearings before a shiver trickles down my spine. I'm not dressed to be outside like this; my sweater, leggings, socks, and sneakers are soaked by drizzling rain. It would be bad any night, but more so this chilly October evening. I check myself over carefully, finding some nasty scrapes on my arms and a worse one on my forehead. Do I have a concussion?

I don't know. I don't want to know. I want to know where I am, but nothing looks familiar, and my head hurts so bad I don't think I could read the street signs even if they did. I feel around for anything; my purse, phone, even my car keys, but I come up empty. I scan my surroundings as best I can, fighting the pounding headache to look for my friend.

Gina. Gina left the party with me. She should be here somewhere, but I don't see her either. Did she leave me when I fell?...did she really leave with me?

I want to go home.

But where is home?

I force myself to my feet, struggling as my head spins harder, and look at the crossroads I find myself at. There's a sidewalk to my right and street lights marking the path. I can almost make out the street sign — maybe I'll recognize it?

To my left...I can't quite tell. The street lights haven't come on that way, but I see something shapeless lying there. Something green. My purse, maybe? And my purse means my phone.



GO RIGHT or GO LEFT



LEFT



THE STREET LIGHTS LOOK appealing, but I need my purse. More than that, I need my phone, and the only place my phone could be is in my bag. Walking around a strange neighborhood in the dark during a thunderstorm is an awful idea when I can call for help. I'm not going to risk it when I know I can't.

But it's hard to make myself take the first step into the darkness, knowing I won't be able to see what — if anything — might be lurking there for me. Eventually, fear of being out in the middle of all this for a moment longer than necessary drives me forward, but I regret my decision shortly after.

It's too late to turn back once I'm shrouded in darkness though, and walking towards my bag — even as it seems to drift further away — is really my only option. I keep my eyes forward, watching it instead of listening to the world around me. If I let myself lose focus for even a second, I start to feel like someone's following me. I can almost hear their breath near my ear, though I tell myself it's just the wind.

It is just the wind.

When I finally reach my bag, I'm too relieved to hold it in my hands to even care that it's torn and muddy, like something took a liking to it after I stumbled in the street. I try not to think about that as I dig through it, finding my wallet (thank god!) and

my phone, looking worse for wear because of the rain but still willing to power on for me.

I check it for a signal, which holds firm, but the battery is nearly dead. I've probably only got one call left. I need to make it count.



CALL MY FRIENDS or CALL MY DAD



CALL MY DAD



LOOK. I GET IT. I MESSED up. There's no other way to describe the situation I find myself in, and I don't want to call anyone to rescue me. Especially Dad. He always says, "I want you to call me first if you're in trouble, and I'll come, no questions asked," but I don't think anyone in history ever believed their parents when they said the same thing. Not that I have many options.

So, I suck it up and hit the sugary-sweet photo of us as a kid, then bring the phone to my ear. I'm impatient as the familiar ring buzzes in my ear, tapping my foot and shivering as more winter rain downpours — adding an unnatural chill to my misery.

I sigh with relief for the first time tonight when I hear someone fumbling on the other end to answer the call. His voice is rough. I know I've woken him from a dead sleep, and I'll pay for it when he gets here. "Hello? Who is this?"

"Funny, Dad. It's me," I say, hoping that the sound of his little girl's teeth chattering will earn me some pity points. "Can you come pick me up?"

I don't hear his answer, too focused on the feeling of something brushing lazily against my leg. Knowing I shouldn't, I look down and find the most enormous tail of any animal I've ever seen resting against me. When I look up, I can't help but scream

because I'm looking into the solid ice-blue eyes of a rain-soaked black dog much bigger than I am.



HOLD STILL or RUN AWAY



HOLD STILL



I WONDER WHY PEOPLE always say, “It’s more afraid of you than you are of it,” when they’re talking about a predator that wouldn’t hesitate to hurt you before you hurt it. When did we decide that, and who knows if it’s true? I promise you, this giant hound isn’t afraid of me. If it’s thinking anything about me, I’m either its dinner or its next chew toy — neither option appeals to me.

Don’t panic. Don’t panic.

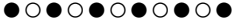
Well, maybe not dinner since it’s acting like it doesn’t even realize I’m here so long as I hold still and make no sudden movements. Like dropping my purse when it lifts a paw and swats at it, but even then, it’s more interested in sticking its nose there to inspect the contents.

Should I tell him there’s no food?

I make a strange noise — a cross between a laugh and a sob — and the hound’s attention returns to me briefly after pulling its head from my purse pockets. It tilts its head, regarding me with glowing blue eyes, before nipping my sweater. I’d almost think it was being careful, trying to avoid skin with its teeth, before it tugs down gently. Barely enough for me to feel it, but firm enough to get my attention.

Why?

Because it wants me to go somewhere. With it. Alone.



FOLLOW HIM or REFUSE



FOLLOW HIM



LOOK. I GET IT. I'VE made a lot of bad decisions that led me to this moment. No one ever wakes up one day and thinks, "I'm going to put myself in the path of the largest black dog I've ever seen." Not that I really believe this is my fault. Who would ever imagine an invitation to a simple house party would set me here, in front of said hound, trying to nudge me along instead of eat me?

I weigh my options, but I don't think I have a choice here, and it's probably best not to argue. *What's the worst that could happen?*

Oh...right. I could still be eaten. Mom would kill me if she had to plan a funeral this week (well, more so than she's already going to kill me after all the trouble I've gotten into).

But the hound is impatient, nudging me more insistently now that it assumes I've made my decision. I start to move, even though my legs ache terribly from all the exercise I've done tonight. I follow the giant beast over the fence between the street and the clearing, then deep into the forested tree line, far from the beaten path.

I chuckle at the irony, much to the hound's dismay. I'm quickly becoming Little Red Riding Hood, but the wolf is less predator than you'd expect. For now. Definitely not forever; I'm

under no illusions of safety whenever the hound gets me wherever it wants to go.

After what feels like hours of walking, we come to a temporary stop beside a winding river I've never seen or heard of before. It stops at the riverbank, inspecting the silver-gray water before dipping down for a long drink. Then, it sits back on its heels to watch me. I step closer to the river and its ears perk, eager to see what I'll do next. But what will I do next?



SIT DOWN or DRINK



DRINK



MY THROAT IS DRY, AND the bits of rainwater I've managed to moisten my tongue with on our walk to the river are only just enough to keep me from coughing. I know I need a drink soon, and I trust an animal's instinct on what's safe and what's not...well, I trust that it's still standing after taking a drink.

Bottom's up.

I kneel beside the river and dip my hands into its silvery depths, bringing cool water up to my lips. I drink, desperate for the relief it brings, and sigh softly as the hound howls beside me. I look up and see the moon, smiling briefly when I know the rain has finally stopped pouring, leaving me and my hound alone in the cool winter air.

Relief lasts for a moment, maybe more, before the river water droplets burn at my skin. My insides catch fire and I collapse in the mud, writhing in pain. My hound howls again as I gasp for air, choking out weak pleas with some inhumane force for mercy, for relief, for death if it means the pain will end.

The sky is still a sickening pitch-blue when my agony ends slowly, and I feel like I can stand once more. My hound smiles as it creeps to my side, otherworldly eyes regarding me as I look to the river.

I catch a glimpse of something, a reflection that looks somewhat like my own, but it can't be. This figure is near translucent,

a ghost, with muddy robes instead of a muddy sweater. I blink. It disappears, leaving me and my hound. "What did you do to me?"

The hound doesn't answer. It smiles sharply instead and I worry. *What does it mean?*



I'M DEAD or I'M DREAMING



I'M DREAMING



I'M DREAMING.

That's the only way to explain all these things happening to me. Right? Yes, right. The hound, the party, the water, Gina — it's all just symbolism in my subconscious pointing to issues with my life outside my dreams. I laugh again, comforted by the reality I paint for myself.

I pinch my arm to prove it, but nothing happens. I look in the river again; I pray being aware it's a dream will set something straight, but no luck there either. My skin, still pale, and my clothes, still muddy. No black and purple floral pajamas in sight.

I look to my hound for answers. None come. Instead, it leaves me sitting beside the river, alone once more. I don't know where to go or what to do next without my hound dragging me along. I just want to go home and lie down in my bed, after I've had a long shower. Is that so much to ask?

“Of course, little one. You're not quite there yet.”

I startle at the sound and look around the riverbank for the source of the ethereal voice haunting my thoughts. I don't see anyone or anything, but a light. A small light, further into the forest. It dances before me, beckoning me across the river. “Closer, closer,” it teases me. “Ever closer now.”


I know better now about following things I don't understand, but I don't feel like I have a choice. I need to keep going

and see what this dream (*please be a dream!*) has left in store for me. I follow the light along the river, through one forest past a rocky field, and into another until we reach a cliffside. I hear the roar of a great waterfall but see none nearby. I know there aren't waterfalls this close to town.


The light doesn't care, drifting down towards the water, before disappearing beneath the dark waves of silver water.



JUMP or **GO BACK**



JUMP



THE STRANGEST DREAM I've ever had...wasn't actually all that different from this. Of course, I was wearing blue spandex with a cape, standing on the edge of a skyscraper, and I could fly, but still. Not that different. I didn't go 'splat' on the sidewalk in that dream. I know I won't drown in this one.

Besides, as I said...it's just a dream. Nothing can hurt me when I'm dreaming; it might just be enough to scare me awake when I hit the water. I step closer to the edge of the cliff, peering down into a dark ocean of silver. Even in dreams, I know this isn't a good idea.

Am I really crazy enough to go through with this?

Am I really about to jump?

Is this really my only way home?

Yes. I know in my heart that it's my only way home. These forces mean to tell me something, something my subconscious thinks I need to know. I take a deep breath, get a running start, and feel my feet leave the ground when I finally force myself to take that leap.

I hover for a second, no longer on land but not quite in the sea, before plummeting down toward the water. Its silver embrace grows closer and closer with each heart-pounding second, as do the rocks lining the shore. I didn't see them before I jumped.

This will hurt.



PUSH OFF THE CLIFFSIDE or CLOSE MY EYES

one knows that the beast who took our lives is still out there, lurking in the forest, waiting for its next victim.

Who will join us next?



Want to see the other endings?

*Go back to the start and take another trip through Hell-
hound's Delight!*



CLOSE MY EYES



I DON'T HAVE TIME TO do anything. I can't think. I can't breathe. But I know now this isn't a dream. I would've woken up now if it was, but I haven't. This is real, all of it, and I'm going to die.

If this is how I'm going to die, I don't want to see it.

I force my eyes to close and hold my breath, waiting for my body to crumble against the rocks or water. I wait and wait, but the cruel, crushing impact of bone against rock never comes. Instead, I feel cold as I hit the water. Cold and heavy, then suddenly...hot. Boiling hot, like I'm being burned alive by water.

Shit.

I force my arms forward, then back, over and over again as I swim towards the surface. I need to get out, though I worry the burning might just kill me before anything else can. It takes everything I have to breach the surface and brush the poisoned water from my eyes. And when I do, all I see is light.

Deep blue billowing light, teasing me once more as it dots a perfect path to the shore's edge. The pain falters in its presence, bright, warm, and alluring, and I feel safe despite the crashing waves threatening to throw me into the rocks. I reach for it, groaning in grief as it disappears, leaving me to follow the next one, and the one after that, each wisp of light vanishing before I can feel it on my fingertips.

I won't stop trying to catch them, swimming along the path they set, because I know I can't tread water forever. Each wave threatens to send me under and hold me there until I drown. I only have one path ahead of me — swim to safety — and it's not one with easy options.



FOLLOW THE LIGHTS or SWIM TO SHORE



FOLLOW THE LIGHTS



THE BEAUTIFUL BLUE light calls to me. It whispers my name, begging me to play its game, and I do. I force my freezing arms to move, swimming through terrible waves, pushing closer and closer to the cave until my legs scrape the rocky cave entrance. I don't wince, even as their sharp edges bite the skin under my jeans.

I lift myself from the water, shivering as subterranean air wraps around me, and take the first step inside. My foot makes contact with a patch of moss, and I flinch as the underground world shrouded in darkness comes to life around me.

Colorful skeletal creatures along the cave walls dance as I pass, their glow near blinding. I can feel strength returning as I creep closer to my final destination, my clothes shifting from a water-logged sweater into a dark black robe. I grow warmer (though it might be hypothermia finally setting in) when I step into the single splash of moonlight in the cave's center.

A familiar friend, my hound, brushes against the back of my legs before joining me in the moonlight. It shifts, taking on a new form, bones cracking and popping as it changes like I've changed tonight. It — no, he stands to greet me with a skeletal smile. "It seems I've found myself a worthy replacement."

He holds out his hand and a scythe blossoms from the palm before he turns the handle toward me. It's an invitation and I

take it, power coursing through my veins as his body turns to dust with a howling laugh. His job is complete. He can finally find peace.

I balance the scythe in my palm, feeling its weight and its responsibility settle on my shoulders. I know and feel everything in the world, every birth, every death, and every instant in between. I understand my own death, the moment the river claimed me when I drank from its banks, but *before* no longer matters now that I am Death itself.



Want to see the other endings?

*Go back to the start and take another trip through Hell-
bound's Delight!*