

*'Back to the Routine: A Summary of Why Clear Communication in the Workplace Matters, by Maureen Brandt'*

by CannibalisticApple

The sun had barely risen as Maureen walked to her office building, hands shoved in her pockets and breaths coming out in small, visible puffs. She dreaded having to expose her hands to the nippy air, but she had no choice if she wanted to get out of the cold. Her keyring at least felt warm against her palm as she withdrew it, hastily unlocking the side door.

"Morning!" she called out absently to the empty building as she entered the dark halls. Maureen was always the first to arrive. Benefits (or side effects) of living just two blocks away, her apartment was above a coffee shop that was a straight walk from the building. That, and she had always been an early riser, and liked to get out of her apartment before the morning rush at the coffee shop *really* began. The building manager had given her a key within her first month there.

Finding the light switch was muscle memory at this point, having to walk a few feet into the darkness since it was in an odd place rather than beside the door. The overhead fluorescent lights flickered a couple times before bathing the halls in steady, artificial white light. She made her way to the break room like always, switching on the coffee maker as she got to carrying out her other usual morning chores. None of it had been assigned to her, but she usually had half an hour before anyone else would show up and the routine helped her settle into a sort of zen state.

By the time the coffee maker beeped ten minutes later, she had restocked the printer paper, turned on the rest of the lights in the common areas, and unlocked the front entrance. She poured herself a cup and headed to the door only to pause and double back to check the outlet beside the microwave. Sure enough, the plug was lying on the counter next to it, and she sighed as she plugged it back in. Only took three instances of the cleaning crew forgetting to plug vital equipment back in after running their vacuums to decide to double-check for herself.

"At least it wasn't the fridge again," she muttered to herself as she opened it to confirm nothing had gone bad overnight. *That* had been a bad day.

She left the break room just in time for the first of her coworkers to arrive, exchanging silent nods as they passed each other. Earl was a nice enough guy, though hardly one for conversation first thing in the morning. She quietly snorted to herself as he beelined straight for the coffeemaker, pouring half the pot into his travel mug. They never worked together, but she doubted he'd be functional for the first hour.

Maureen carried her coffee to her own office, pausing long enough to nod at a concrete statue of a cat in the hallway. “Good morning, Lord Ulthar,” she greeted with a solemn nod, and raised her mug in a toast. “May you bless us with no objects mysteriously falling off desks today, and a peaceful and uneventful workday.”

She gave it a final nod and lightly rubbed the space between its ears before turning to continue on her way. Lord Ulthar was just some cement ornament with fading orange and cream paint that probably belonged in a garden. One of the old guys here had always greeted it that way, and she found the little ritual amusing enough to join in. Since he left last month, she’d been the sole one to greet the cat statue. She regretted not asking him about how it got that name. Or asking for *his* name, for that matter.

Then again, she barely knew anyone here. She’d been there for five months now, ostensibly as a technical writer, but instead she worked more like a pseudo-archivist. Because right after she was hired they *finally* convinced the big boss to start digitizing all their records and files, but he insisted they be typed up manually. The work had fallen to Maureen as the newest hire, which meant she spent most of her days sequestered away from her colleagues.

Yes, typing up years’ worth of documents was as tedious and dull as it sounded. At least she got her own private office to work in peace and could play whatever music she wanted.

Unlocking said office, she grabbed the top file from the latest stack of un-digitized papers and sat down at her desk. Sipping at her coffee as she booted her laptop, she grabbed a pen and crossed off the day on her desktop calendar. Her lips twitched into a smile at the circled square next to it, the word “VACATION” written in bold red marker with stars doodled around it.

For the first time in five months, Maureen Brandt was taking time off, and she was going to make the best of it.

Five glorious days later, Maureen felt pretty refreshed as she walked to her job. “Seriously, the cabin was actually *warmer* for once,” she said into the phone pressed to her ear. “Usually it’s colder, but no. I was able to take a nice hour-long hike, no problem, and here I’m just speed-walking two blocks with my fingers going numb!”

*“Weather can be weird like that,”* Barbara said sympathetically. *“At least it isn’t raining there. I haven’t seen the sun for two days.”*

“Yeah, we just get to deal with snow and ice instead,” Maureen snorted with an eye roll. Barbara was currently somewhere overseas for work—Asia, maybe? She

traveled a *lot*—so she wasn't subject to the bitter cold Maureen was. It also meant that early morning right before work was the only time their schedules aligned enough to talk. Kinda inconvenient, but Maureen could put up with it.

*"Yeah, alright, that might be worse,"* Barbara conceded. *"Never did like snow. At least the cabin must've been pretty."*

"Weirdly, not much snow by the cabin, or else I wouldn't have taken that walk I mentioned."

*"Really? Huh..."*

"Honestly, I'm glad it didn't have snow. The cabin was *just* what I needed. Just an extended weekend with no stupid paperwork to type up." Maureen unlocked the side door and scurried inside the darkened halls, glad to escape the chill. "Too bad it's over now."

*"Want me to send you a new playlist? I've picked up a bunch of cool new songs over here. No clue what half of them are saying, but the melodies are nice."*

Maureen hummed as she groped the wall for the light switch. "Yeah, that'd be awesome," she said as the lights flickered on. "I kinda work better when I—"

*"OH MY GOD, THERE'S LIGHT!"*

She froze mid-sentence as a distant yell sounded from deeper in the building, joined by a chorus of relieved screams and shouts. "...What the fuck?" she whispered, staring down the hall where the voices emanated from.

*"Maureen?"* Barbara asked sharply.

"There's... someone here?" Multiple someones, judging by the noise. Most of the voices were too muffled by distance to make out words, but she could catch what sounded like cries of *"oh thank god"* and *"my eyes, they burn"* and multiple loud sobs.

*"Someone's there? Maureen, I need more details than that! Is it a bad person or what?"*

"I have no idea." Hesitating, Maureen flipped the switch again, and winced at the immediate chorus of wails.

*"OH GOD NOT AGAIN!"*

*"IT'S GONE! IT'S GONE! WHAT DID WE DO TO DESERVE THIS?"*

*"I'M SORRY! PLEASE COME BACK!"*

She quickly hit the light switch again, and the despaired cries gave way to panicked and half-relieved shouts. “I have no idea what the hell is going on,” she said after a moment. Her mind kept going to horror movie scenarios, or old cartoons where people would overreact to light in quick one-off gags. Except this wasn’t a one-off gag, there was a continuous cacophony of desperate voices.

“*Should you maybe, uh, leave?*” Barbara suggested.

Probably. In fact, that sounded like a very good idea, and Maureen was about to do that when the door at the end of the hall burst open. A man scrambled through and all but fell to the floor as it swung shut behind him, frantic and wild-eyed as his hands splayed to catch his fall. She instinctively backed up a step, heart leaping into her throat as his eyes locked onto her. His eyes looked absolutely haunted as they bore into her, hair wild and messy with thick stubble shading his jaw.

“*Maureen?*” he gasped, and for a second her stomach rolled at a stranger recognizing her, before she suddenly placed his face.

“Wait, *James?*” she blurted incredulously. James was one of the few coworkers she saw semi-regularly, part of the technical writing team. They weren’t *exactly* friends, but they were friendly enough. They’d been desk neighbors before her quasi-transfer to a private office, and he made sure to drag her out to lunch with a couple others at least once a week so she wasn’t forgotten.

He stood out for always wearing colorful patterned ties with a button-up shirt in an office that didn’t require ties, and fun pins on his lanyard. Now he lacked any tie, his shirt half-open with several buttons apparently torn off and his lanyard absent. Also, he was missing a shoe. *Why was he missing a shoe?*

In light of their friendly relationship, Maureen felt comfortable enough to speak openly with him. “James, what the fuck is going on?” she asked.

James blinked at her query and sucked in a shuddery breath, slowly getting to his feet. His legs shook as he leaned against the wall, arms wrapping around himself in a hug. “I—there’s *so much*,” he said, his voice trembling and barely louder than a whisper. “I don’t know where to even begin...”

“Maybe the cries about light?” she suggested, and he slowly nodded.

“Right... Yeah, the light,” he muttered. “It’s—it’s been so *dark*, Maureen. One day we arrived at work, and there was no light. We had to use our phones to find our desks, and then our computer monitors had some more light, but those are in kinda fixed places—”

“Wait,” Maureen interrupted. “The computers worked, so it *wasn’t* a power outage?”

James looked at her blankly. “...No?”

“Then why didn’t someone turn on the lights?”

The question received a somehow even blanker look than her last one. “How do we even *do* that?”

...Maureen had no idea how to respond. She slowly raised a hand to point to the light switch, his eyes tracking her hand’s movement intently. She almost, *almost* flicked it for emphasis, but refrained at the last second as she remembered the screams the last two times she did. “You use this,” she said. “The light switch.”

James stared at the switch as if he’d never seen one before. He drew forward slowly, and she instinctively stepped away as he approached it. “There are light switches here?” he whispered, reaching towards it almost reverently.

“*Maureen, what’s going on?*” Barbara’s voice asked in her ear, reminding Maureen that she was still on the phone. “*Who is James and why are you explaining about... light switches? What?*”

“Coworker, and I think he and... maybe everyone else forgot that light switches are a thing,” she muttered as she watched him brush his fingers along the plate.

“*Wait, what? How?*”

*Good question, Barbara,* Maureen thought, but kept silent as James’s finger brushed the switch and accidentally dragged it down. She winced as screams erupted from the rest of the building, another chorus of despair. The lights came back on almost immediately as James leaped away from the switch, looking pale and shaken. “Oh my god,” he whispered, staring at his hands. “There are *light switches*.”

“...Yes, yes there are,” Maureen said after a beat. She knew *this* light switch was in kind of a weird place, not directly next to the door but several steps in, but the others should be...

Actually, now that she thought about it, the others were *a/so* in weird places. They were wired in the strangest ways, turning on lights in other rooms. This one, for instance, turned on the lights in this hallway and also the next hallway, which led to the break room. Then there was a switch in the open-concept office area that just turned on fans, while another turned on the lights inside a nearby conference room.

Maureen *knew* it was weird, had spent weeks puzzling over what each switch actually did and questioning what the wiring guys had been drinking when they wired this place. After a point though, she'd gotten used to it, and flipping the break room's switch to illuminate the alcove space in front of the bathrooms was second nature—

*Wait.* “Why didn't Earl turn on the lights?” Earl was the one who had pointed out that particular switch to her, along with all the other especially tricky ones. Before she started, he'd probably been the first to arrive each morning, so he theoretically also knew about most of the light switches.

James whipped around to look at her in shock. “Earl knows about them too?” he asked breathlessly.

“I... Probably?” Maureen suddenly wasn't so sure in the face of James's... everything. He seemed *marginally* calmer now, *slightly* more rational, but... Yeah, she wasn't sure how much common sense applied to the current situation.

James pursed his lips in thought. “Well, that's a no-go,” he muttered. “He can't do anything without coffee. Between that, his allergies and most of the office being dark, he's spent pretty much every day just totally conked out in his office.”

*Allergies?* Maureen had no idea where that came into play and had some questions, but the mention of coffee seemed more pertinent. “You do know there's a coffee maker in the break room, right?”

“None of us know how to use it though! We all get coffee at that place down the street! You know, that little shop—”

“I know the place,” Maureen cut in flatly. Hard not to when she lived directly above it and got reminded of that every morning by yelling below her bedroom. There was a reason she made coffee here instead of going there, and it wasn't just because it was way too expensive for how cheap it was.

“Yeah, so, none of us knew how to use it,” James continued with a helpless shrug. “And we tried trouble-shooting it and figuring it out on our own, but it just... I think it's broken?”

Was it silly that *that* sent a pang of despair through Maureen more than anything else so far? “It's broken?” she squeaked, voice pathetic to even her own ears. Coffee was a crucial part of her morning routine, okay?

Apparently she looked even more pathetic than she thought, because James actually cringed and grimaced. “Uh, maybe we can fix it, now that the lights are back on and we can, uh, see?” he suggested quickly, heading towards the door leading inside

the office. He hesitated at the threshold though, his steps faltering as he stared at it. "Just... past here... straight line... past the door... No problem..."

He sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than Maureen.

His plaintive murmurs snapped Maureen out of her pity fest, reminded that something was seriously wrong. The broken coffee machine, tragic as it was, still did not explain why no one bothered to at least *try* the light switches, nor anything else. Being in the dark didn't explain why James's shirt was messed up, the stubble like he hadn't shaved for days, and how he was *missing an entire shoe*.

"Hey, James?" she said, stepping forward. "Maybe you should get some fresh air?"

Once again he whirled around, his eyes wide and manic once more. "Wait, do you mean there's an *exit* here?"

Maureen gawked at him, once again rendered speechless. After a beat, she slowly stepped aside and raised an arm to point to the door behind her. James stared for a long moment before *lunging* past her, scrambling so fast he nearly stumbled and fell multiple times. When he shoved the door open a blast of cold blew inside, and he released a high-pitched squeal.

"*Light! Fresh air! The outside world exists!*" He laughed hysterically as he darted out of sight, the door shutting behind him. Maureen stood in shocked silence for several moments.

"...What the *fuck*," she whispered, with far more feeling than the first time.

"*I think that's my line.*"

Oh right, she was still on the phone with Barbara. Having to hear only Maureen's end had to be beyond confusing, given how confusing it had been being a direct part of the whole exchange. She took a breath to steady herself and pressed the phone to her ear again.

"My coworker just ran outside with only one shoe yelling about the outside world existing," she said.

"...*What?*" Barbara sounded just as stumped as she felt.

"I don't know. I just saw it, and I'm still questioning my own eyes."

*"For what it's worth, I at least heard you answering questions about a light switch and I'm pretty sure I could hear someone else's voice on your end. So I don't think you were crazy. But what was that about something being broken...?"*

"The coffee machine, I guess?" This time Maureen didn't feel a pang of grief like before, the rest of the bizarre situation taking precedence in her mind. The way James acted just then, she'd think he hadn't been outside in ages. Then there was how he went from acting all weird and panicked when he first stumbled into the hall, to somewhat calm and rational once she started asking questions, and then back to maybe-insane again.

"Something is really, *really* weird here," she told Barbara, both to fill her in and also organize her own thoughts. "I'm starting to think the lights haven't been turned on since I left for vacation, but also, James shouldn't be in the office this early. It's, what, seven thirty? Maybe eight? We have a few people who come at eight, but most people don't start until eight-thirty or nine. No one else should be here this early, but I definitely heard a bunch of people."

*"Right, I keep forgetting you're a weirdo who goes in extra early,"* Barbara said. It was a lightly teasing remark she made often enough, but this time it fell flat, tinged with uncertainty and nerves. *"So what, do you think he spent the night there or something?"*

"I have no idea," Maureen muttered, turning to look at the door James had originally entered through. Beyond that was the hallway leading to the rest of the building, where presumably many more of her other coworkers were based on the voices she heard every time she flipped the light switch. She couldn't stop thinking of James staring at this door, regaining that hesitant, haunted demeanor after a brief dip into sanity.

She should *probably* leave now, but she was also admittedly very curious about what the *hell* was going on.

"...Barbara, I'm going to put the phone on speaker because I think I'll need a witness for whatever the heck is going on to verify I'm not crazy."

*"Yeah, sounds like a plan. I'll mute my end so I don't give you away."*

"Thanks." Maureen hit the speaker button before creeping towards the door. She took a breath and pushed it open, revealing... an empty hallway. Somehow, it felt both anticlimactic and sinister at the same time. She exhaled a shaky breath as she walked down the familiar hall, the cheap overhead lighting feeling ominous despite looking the same as always.



First stop: break room. It was a straight line from that door, just as James had said. She slowed as she neared the open doorway and peered around the edge. Two coworkers she did not know sat slumped at the table with heads tilted back, both looking worn out.

“Hi,” one of them muttered as he noticed Maureen, making no move to get up.

“Hi,” she said back after a moment’s hesitation, and inched inside towards the counter while keeping an eye on them. The two barely paid her any mind, just gazing listlessly at the ceiling with limbs loosely spread as if to bask in the light. Some of her hesitation faded and she turned to the coffee maker, since that was one of the only things James had specifically mentioned. It... *looked* fine, she didn’t see any obvious damage, though the—

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” she groaned, resisting the urge to smack her forehead as she spied the plug resting on the counter. She shoved it into the outlet, and the little screen with the timer suddenly lit up with blinking numbers. She turned around with an exasperated huff, the familiar irritation at the cleaning crew easing her tension.

That tension instantly returned as she saw both of her coworkers’ eyes fixed on her, heads rolled slightly in her direction. They still slumped on the chairs, their expressions still just as tired and dull, but now she could see their eyes looked... empty. Glazed and not really seeing her, for all they stared.

She stood frozen for a moment, skin prickling under their gazes. “Coffee machine just... needed to be plugged in,” she muttered. “It’s good now.”

They didn’t respond, but soon enough their hollow eyes returned to the ceiling lights.

Maureen couldn’t get out of there fast enough, barely remembering to hit the light switch on the back wall next to the microwave. Might as well turn on any lights she could, though the chorus of relieved shouts from nearby made her wince. Once again, she was reminded the building was actually far stranger than she usually realized, and not just because of the wiring. The building was a practical labyrinth of hallways neatly separated by doors, making it near-impossible to get anywhere by going in a straight line.

At least the next hallway had the bathroom alcove connected to the break room light switch. As expected given the shouting she’d heard, there were several people milling about who all spun to face her when the door opened. “Morning,” she said with a cautious nod, hesitating in the doorway.

“There’s more light over there!” someone exclaimed. Maureen yelped and jumped to the side as the small crowd *stampeded* towards the door, struggling to squeeze through it. She might prefer the weird stupor of the break room duo over this frantic urge to run towards any light source.

“Okay, this is seriously giving me horror game vibes,” she whispered as she scurried down the hall. She paused near the end to reach up and hit the light switch near the ceiling, and—wow, how the *hell* did she come to think that was normal? No light switches should be *that* high, she had to stand on her toes to reach it.

As she continued creeping forward Maureen could feel a subtle chill settling more firmly, her mind racing. How many nonsensical design choices had she normalized in her head as odd little quirks? She *knew* the building’s layout was odd and unorthodox, remembered complaining to Earl plenty about getting lost her first week over coffee. But she was so used to following a set path to her office every day that it never really hit her just how wrong it was until now.

While right now something was *obviously* crazy and wrong, she was starting to realize something had *always* been wrong with the building. And the fact she only fully realized that *now*...

That was even scarier.

*I should leave*, she thought yet again as she rounded the corner to the open-concept office space. Desks had been arranged in neat groups all around the space, partitions sectioning off one area to create an artificial divide. Or at least, they *had* the last time she was here. Now everything was in disarray, desks and chairs rearranged in far more disorganized clusters with a few turned over like barricades.

More people sat or sprawled lethargically on the floor, their faces turned upwards towards the lights. They barely paid Maureen any mind as she slowly crept along the wall, her eyes roving over the space. She could glimpse feet and legs sticking out from behind some of the desks, and resisted the urge to get a closer look. Several computers had been tossed to the floor, shattered monitors lying in piles of glass shards.

Her gaze caught on the printer by the far wall, which had been similarly smashed. Red smeared the floor beneath its remains, and even from a distance she could recognize it formed a circle with a star.

A hysteric giggle caught in her throat as she thought of how she would refill the paper every morning. Given how frustrating printers were on a *normal* day, the idea of someone trying to perform a satanic ritual because it ran out of paper felt almost *reasonable*.

She slipped into another hallway and darted down it until she rounded a corner, exhaling a shaky breath once the room with her colleagues was firmly out of sight. The lights were off in this hallway, instead partially illuminated by light from an open door, but at least it was void of people. Maureen just stood there for a moment, giving herself some time to just—process. Digest what the hell was going on, and question why she was *still* venturing deeper into this chaotic mess.

She raised her hand to massage her eyes, and froze when the motion brought her phone into her line of vision.

Somehow, Maureen had forgotten all about the fact she'd been carrying it the whole time on speaker. Her hand hovered halfway to her face, her eyes locked onto the case. It was a soft powder blue, with a few pastel-colored hearts peeking just above her fingers. Something about the mundanity of it in this bizarre situation just struck her.

"Barbara?" she asked faintly. "What am I doing here?"

There was no response. Maureen frowned, raising her phone the rest of the way and turning it to face her. The screen was dim though, and her stomach sank as she hastily tapped it. To her horror nothing happened, and when she pressed the power button the lock screen came up, confirming her fears: the call had dropped at some point.

"Shit," she whispered, swiping through the pattern to unlock it. "Shit, shit, *shit!*" She pulled up the call log and saw the call had ended several minutes earlier. Maureen couldn't tell where she would have been when it ended, but she'd bet it was pretty soon after passing through that door. She tried to call back, but when she raised the phone to her ear Maureen heard only silence followed by the beep of the call disconnecting. A glance at the upper corner of the screen showed zero bars.

*Of course the Twilight Zone wouldn't have reception*, she thought hysterically. She remembered reading that calling emergency services could usually work with no cell service, but even if it *did* connect, what would she say? "*Hi, my building might be possessed or something and all my coworkers are acting like moths who haven't seen light in years, can you please send help?*" That *might* get a wellness check given how insane it sounded, but she doubted it would be a high priority.

As she stood there pondering her next move, it took her a minute to realize the hall was familiar. That was normal, since she worked in this maybe-Eldritch office building, but *this* hall in particular gave her a strong pang of déjà vu. Maureen looked around in mild confusion before it finally hit her: this was part of the route to her own office. There were two more hallways she'd have to navigate after this one, one of

which had a switch near the floor to turn on the lights for *this* hallway (how had she thought any of this was *normal*?), but she passed through here every day.

The only reason she took so long to recognize it was because it was missing one conspicuous, cat-shaped decoration.

She stared at the empty space usually occupied by the statue, her mouth oddly dry. Even in the mostly dim hallway, she could clearly see a patch of discoloration in the cheap carpet. She could easily make out the shape of the paws, and the tail that curled around its legs.

Its absence—she felt like she was crazy for even *thinking* this, but everything else was insane, so... “Lord Ulthar?” she called hesitantly and held her breath, dreading what might happen.

For a beat, nothing happened.

Then, the light coming from the open doorway blinked off for a moment, startling her. And, as her head snapped towards it for the first time, she abruptly realized that particular room shouldn’t have any lights on, because it was connected to a light switch in the lobby she had not touched.

The thought barely processed before she found herself staring at two large, golden orbs of light gazing directly into her soul.

“*Mroooooow*,” a deep voice rumbled, and she felt the noise reverberate in her bones. The orbs pushed forward, fluffy tufts of the fathomless darkness unfurling as they squeezed through the comparatively tiny doorway.

Maureen Brandt stared at the giant face of the feline whose statue she would pet every day, at a complete and utter loss for thought. After everything she had witnessed, all the odd behavior of her coworkers, all the revelations about how nonsensical her workplace had always been, *this* was the moment that broke her brain. The moment that rendered her mind empty and unable to compute reality.

In that blank, mindless state, her mouth opened, settling into autopilot.

“Good morning, Lord Ulthar,” she recited faintly. “May you bless us with no objects mysteriously falling off desks today, and a peaceful and uneventful workday.”

The golden orbs slowly blinked in response to her daily greeting, casting the hall in utter darkness for a moment. Lord Ulthar’s head tilted forward slightly, wisps of nothing brushing against her skin, and she slowly reached forward to touch it. Her hand sank into the void, fingers brushing fur-like wisps of emptiness.

The eyes slowly blinked shut again, and this time the light did not return.

The physical nothingness vanished, leaving the dark hallway feeling empty and lighter. Maureen stood in silence for a moment before scrambling to unlock her phone again, only to freeze as the light caught on something. Her head snapped to the floor, where the statue of Lord Ulthar sat looking just as regal as always.

Behind her, she could hear a slowly rising din of voices yet again, but this time it was quieter and lacked the frantic desperation of the other times. Maureen hesitated before slowly creeping back to the corner, and when she peered around it she glimpsed some of her coworkers walk past the entrance to the hall. They didn't move with the weird frantic energy of the people seeking the light though, didn't crane their heads to look at the ceiling.

"Seriously, what happened to the desks?" she heard someone say.

"Dammit, my computer's all busted... I'm gonna have to redo that dumb report from scratch, aren't I?"

"Did we have a party last night? I feel like I'm hung over..."

As Maureen listened to them try to make sense of the mess she felt some of that ever-present tension finally, *finally* begin to unravel. The murmurs and thoughts she heard were all so rational, their confusion exactly what she'd expect from anyone in this situation. With that thought, she noticed the air itself felt lighter, that oppressive sense of dread which had haunted her now gone.

She silently crept forward, stopping short of actually exiting the hall and just watching her coworkers amble around the room. She barely recognized any of their faces, and couldn't place names to any of those she did. The glazed looks had faded, replaced with wide-eyed befuddlement and frustration. Some of the concerns were still a bit bizarre, still not seeming to clock onto how *wrong* all of this was judging by the complaints about needing a new printer, but it was an improvement.

As she stood there a familiar face whose name she *did* know shuffled out of another hall (eventually) leading to the lobby. Earl looked more alert than usual, sipping from a travel mug as he glanced over the room. His attention quickly honed in on Maureen and he bypassed the chaos for her shadowy hallway, and she backed up to give him space to join her.

"Morning, Maureen," he greeted, raising his mug in greeting.

"Morning," she replied slowly.

"I see you wrapped things up with Lord Ulthar," he continued casually, oblivious to how part of her already frayed mind just *shattered* at the nonchalant statement. "Thanks for that. I would've done it earlier, but—you know. Allergies." He snorted and shrugged his shoulders in a "*what can you do?*" gesture, lips quirked in a rueful smirk.

Maureen just stared at him, her brain still reeling with a million questions and yet also nothing at all. "Allergies?" she echoed faintly, since that was the last thing he mentioned, and he snorted.

"Cats," he drawled. "Lord Ulthar triggers them way worse than any regular ones. I grabbed some allergy meds, but it makes my brain all foggy on a *normal* day, let alone when around the Abyssal Feline. Between that and the lack of coffee, I was pretty much a zombie every day. I finally decided to bite the bullet and grab some joe from that place down the street and power through the ritual, but looks like you beat me to it. So, thanks for that."

Once again, her brain struggled to process what he said, the words bouncing around her skull and refusing to come together in a way that made sense. Her mouth opened but no sound came out, her mind struggling to translate any of her mental turmoil into vocalizations.

"Ritual?" she finally managed to squeak, and Earl's smirk faded, eyebrows furrowing as he frowned at her with concern.

"You know, that chant you give to Lord Ulthar?" he pressed. "Didn't—didn't Dave explain this to you?"

"Who's Dave?"

A long moment of silence passed as he stared at her. "Dave," he said. "Old guy, white hair with a bad combover, and wore those eye-searing yellow shoes every day?"

The mention of the shoes was what jogged her memory. They stood out, bright yellow Oxfords made of shiny patent leather. Before she started working here Maureen didn't know patent leather could come in that sort of banana-yellow. Asking about them before he left was one of her few regrets about their sparse interactions, though that one was now *far* outclassed by never asking about the origin of Lord Ulthar's name. "So, his name was Dave?" she said slowly.

Earl just gaped at her, his stunned silence answer enough. At long last, he looked just as bewildered and stunned as she felt. "Wait, do you mean you've been handling the greeting part of the ritual without knowing *anything?*" he asked incredulously.

Maureen shrugged feebly, muttering, "I just thought it was kinda funny and cute and decided to copy him, and he never stopped me...?"

"But, you've been hitting the lights..." He trailed off, seeming to take a second to compose his thoughts before speaking again. "Maureen, why do you turn on the lights in the specific order you do every day?"

"Because that's the order you showed me?" He'd shown her early on after all her venting about the switches. At the time, she thought he was just giving her advice on the most logical and efficient way to turn on all the lights given how convoluted the wiring was, but now... "Earl, *why* did you show me?"

"Because I thought Dave explained everything to you since you were doing the greeting," he replied faintly. Another long beat of silence passed between them, and he looked at his mug before holding it forward. "Okay, I know I've drunk half of it and this isn't sanitary, but I added a splash of whiskey because I knew I'd be getting a headache—"

He didn't get to finish the offer before Maureen snatched the mug from his hands, downing it with the desperation of a man in a desert finally finding water. The coffee tasted just as thin and slightly burnt as she remembered from the place below her apartment, the whiskey barely noticeable, but *damn* if she didn't need something to take the edge off her nerves.

She lowered the empty mug with a small huff, staring forward with slightly glazed eyes but her mind now clearer. "What the fuck," she croaked.

"The building's a little cursed," Earl said with a shrug, gingerly taking his mug back from her limp hands.

"A *little* cursed?" she repeated, her incredulity pitching her voice higher, and he nodded.

"Yeah. Nothing *too* evil, but it screws with people's heads a bit. The wiring's all weird because of some ritual to keep the energy mostly contained, I think they're connected to runes...? Been a while since it was explained it to me, so memory's a bit fuzzy on details," he muttered under his breath, before continuing more clearly, "Anyway, Lord Ulthar's the bigger problem. He likes being greeted in a specific way and getting a customary head scratch. Without that, he kinda hijacks the curse energy and amplifies it while he takes over, or... something like that."

Another shrug, so dismissive of some mystical cat-thing apparently possessing the building, while Maureen just stared at him. "I have so many questions."

“Yeah, can’t blame you. Coming back from your vacation to this mess has to be the worst way to find out—which, damn, guess that explains why you didn’t mention that to me either,” he added thoughtfully. “We’re supposed to check in before any of us go on trips so we can make sure everything’s carried out properly. Which, sounds like you managed to carry out your part by pure chance.”

Maureen almost felt like crying, or laughing, or both. “There’s a proper protocol for this,” she said, more of a statement than a question. “And my morning routine just happened to match it.”

“Yeah, we got lucky. Petra, who retired a couple years back, wrote up this whole technical document about it. I’ll have to check around my office to see if it’s still around to pass to you. For now though, I need to get back to the bullpen and start helping everyone get things back in order.”

Part of Maureen wanted to protest and demand he give her answers now, but logically, she knew he was right. Earl was some sort of supervisor position, and right now everyone needed some guidance in the... bullpen, apparently. She assumed he meant the room with all the desks, where she could now hear someone *loudly* complaining about the paperwork needed to repot their dead fern?

“I guess I’ll just get to work too, then,” she said.

“Kid, you can take a whole day off if you need to. I’ll cover for you, say you got spooked by the big mess.”

The offer to go home and flop on her bed and pretend none of this happened was tempting, but... “Earl, there is a bottle of vodka hidden in my office left by whoever used it before me,” Maureen said bluntly. “I am going to open it, and spend the next three hours just transcribing all the stupid paperwork because I don’t need to be sober or *think* to type it up. I can fix any drunk typos tomorrow.”

Earl paused to consider that, and then slowly nodded. “Yeah, that sounds like a good plan. You just head to your office and I’ll get the rest of the lights. I’ll catch up with you after work and see if I can answer any of your questions then.”

“Sounds good to me.” They nodded at each other and parted ways, Earl heading back towards the chaos while Maureen retreated to her office. The light flicked on just as she unlocked it, and she wasted no time strutting to the cabinet on the back wall and swinging it open to reveal a bottle of vodka. Twisting off the cap, she plopped down at her desk and then nearly dropped it when her phone loudly vibrated.



She managed to set the bottle down on the desk, looking at her phone to see Barbara's picture flashing at her. Her finger shook slightly as she swiped to accept the call, raising it to her ear. "Hey," she muttered.

*"Maureen, oh thank god,"* Barbara greeted with audible relief. *"The call dropped and I couldn't get through to you! What happened?"*

*I just found out my building is cursed and I've been appeasing some sort of Eldritch cat straight out of Lovecraft,* Maureen thought. Out loud she said, "I don't know, but it's settled for now and I need to get to work."

Barbara huffed at her response. *"That's it?"* she asked icily. *"You talked to some weird coworker, went into the building, and the call dropped, leaving me to freak out about your safety for twenty minutes, and you're not going to explain anything to me?"*

"Barbara, right now, I am nowhere *near* sober enough for that conversation. I'm still processing everything I saw and I fully expect to have a meltdown in the next five hours when it hits me. I *promise* I'll call you later, but for now, I'm just gonna do my job and get drunk so I can stop thinking about it."

*"...Ugh, fine,"* Barbara groaned. *"I guess I can get—wait, get drunk?—"*

Maureen ended the call before Barbara could formulate her question, and threw back her head as she chugged straight from the bottle. Slamming it back down onto her desk, she turned on her laptop and grabbed the first stapled stack of papers on top of the ever-present pile of documents to transcribe. As she waited for her laptop to finish booting up she glanced at the top page, and then faltered as she registered the text.

*'Curse-Mitigation Protocols and Lord Ulthar,'* read the bold words at the top of the page. *'A comprehensive guide to the nature of the curse on 11463 Cornell Road, descriptions of the protocols to counter and dampen its effects, and background on the Great Abyssal Feline, Lord Ulthar, and his connection to this location.'*

Maureen finished the whole bottle before finishing the first document.