

# Sample of **DARKSOME THIRST**

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# Chapter 1

Matricaria stared through the window at the swiftly darkening hazy summer sky. The troubled sky and the heat and humidity foreshadowed a thunderstorm. She could feel the energy — the power — growing. Closing her eyes, she began deeply breathing in the energy. The moisture and smells of the emerging storm tickled her nostrils.

The phone rang.

“Hi, it’s Amethyst. What are you doing for eats tomorrow night?”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought about food.” As she switched the phone to her other ear, Matricaria wondered how she could have forgotten *food*.

“Some of us are going to meet early for dinner in town. Care to join us?”

“Thanks, but by the time I could meet you, it’d be too late.” Unlike them, she had a 25-mile drive into the city. “I don’t want to eat anything heavy anyway. I’ll just bring a sandwich or something.” Better to drop by her apartment after work and slap a quick sandwich together before she drove in.

“Okay. Were we supposed to bring anything?”

“No, I don’t think so. Just a notebook and ourselves. Tonight’s just a lecture night.” She wondered if she had forgotten anything. She had, after all, forgotten about food.

“You sound tired. Are you okay?”

Matricaria fought off a yawn. “Yeah, I didn’t sleep well last night. Strange dreams.”

“Really? You’ll have to tell us about them.”

“Definitely. I could use some help interpreting them. See you tomorrow at 7?”

“Yup. See you then.”

Matricaria hung up the receiver and stretched back out on the couch. *Yes, tomorrow will be a long day. I wish the group met on Saturdays instead.*



Alicia Anderson flipped through the shift reports while casually sipping coffee from a paper cup. She grimaced as she tasted; someone must have had soup just before she got her coffee. The single outlet design of the coffee machine meant her coffee now had a faintly greasy, chickeny taste. She would drink it anyway, not being one to waste.

Bill Gwynn burst, shoulder first, through the computer room door, using his weight to open it. Through the half-open door, the thump-thump-thump of disco music blasted from a portable radio. Bill's arms were wrapped around a precariously skewed pile of large, eight-inch magnetic tapes. He barely managed to shift them to the desk before they started to tumble.

Eyeing Alicia over the top of the tapes, he asked, "Did you meet Meg yet?"

"Who's Meg? A new girlfriend?" Alicia knew Bill didn't have a girlfriend, never had a girlfriend, but she kidded him anyway.

"Meg MacMillan. No, Alicia, she's not a *girlfriend*." He pretended to act exasperated, but it wasn't a very good act. He was too cheery to be rude to anyone, especially Alicia, his workplace confidante, peer, and friend. "Meg's one of the new programmers."

"Oh, I didn't know they were hiring anyone...." Alicia spoke from the top of her throat, trying to make her voice sound flat and unconcerned. She would have liked a chance to apply for the job. *It's a good thing I came in early, or I probably wouldn't have heard at all, she thought to herself, bitter about the slight.*

"Yeah, they've been interviewing for a couple of weeks. I heard they might talk to a few more, too. See what you miss when you're on second shift?" Bill began hanging the tapes

on the rack next to the desk where Alicia sat. She moved her chair out of the way, and started handing him tapes.

“Second shift wasn’t *my* choice,” she shrugged. “So what’s she like?”

“Seems okay. She’s supposed to be pretty good. I’ve only met her once. Seems easy to get along with. She started on Monday, but they sent her to some seminar. You won’t see her until next week.”

That still didn’t explain why no one had told Alicia that they hired Meg. How was she supposed to maintain computer security if they didn’t tell her who the authorized programmers were? “Who set up her account?”

“Hasn’t got one yet. They haven’t decided which machine she should be on. We’ll most likely see the request Friday at quarter of five. You know how it is.” Bill smirked as he slammed another tape on the rack.

Alicia smiled back, a mocking half-smile. “Don’t I, though? So what’s on tonight’s schedule? Anything special?”

The last tape put away, Bill grabbed a clipboard containing the schedule of jobs that were to be run on the computer that evening. He started going through the jobs with Alicia,

but she wasn't concentrating. As he stopped to turn a page in the job list, she interrupted.

"Bill, maybe I'm being childish, but why didn't anyone tell me about them hiring someone? I mean, I know I'm not a manager, so I don't have a *right* to know, but I *do* work here. It's common courtesy. And besides, we're supposed to know, you know, for security reasons," she said, her voice thin and strained.

Bill stopped looking at the schedule and gave her a reassuring glance. "I know, I know, but you know how it is. When you work second shift, people tend to forget you. Don't take it personally."

Maybe he was right. Or maybe her friend Susie was right: Alicia *was* getting too involved in her job. She was taking even minor slights too personally.



As he scratched his beard and stroked his moustache, the young man in a white tee shirt and cut-off denim shorts asked no one in particular, "Okay, who are we waiting for?"

"Amethyst and Patty. They were going to stop for something to eat first. They should be here soon," Matricaria volunteered, glad she

hadn't joined them. It was almost 7:30 and she could tell that Rob was anxious to start.

Although only a few years older than the rest of the group, to her he seemed so much older, so much more authoritative. Maybe it was a spillover from his day job. By day he was an assistant literature professor at one of the city's many colleges.

Most of the people in the group knew each other from there. They had met in libraries and bookstores browsing the same shelves for the same books on myth, folklore, and anthropology, or they found themselves sitting next to each other in comparative religion classes. Some of them had graduated, and like so many students who came to the city, decided to stay.

Rob looked at his watch again and wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his hand. He had lived in southern New England all his life and was used to the hot, humid summers, but this summer was worse than usual, and as the calendar turned toward autumn, the heat showed few signs of letting up. A couple of weeks of seasonable late summer weather were being followed by an unseasonable heat wave.

The air in the fourth floor apartment welled, hot and stagnant. The faint pleasant smell of old incense, captured by the sagging drapes and threadbare Oriental rug, mingled with the smells of cigarette smoke and sweat, the air's movement hindered, no doubt, by the floor-to-ceiling bookcases in the packed living room.

The old Victorian house was most likely cool enough when it was one large unit, but chunked into small, crammed apartments, the new walls blocked the air flow the architects planned. It was no match for the heat of the evening, not even with its high ceilings and long windows.

Slouched in a chair, *Matricaria*, a native like Rob and therefore used to the heat, nonetheless began to drowse. A disparate mix of students, former students, work associates, and other related friends, all in their early to mid-twenties, were collapsed around the room.

One woman fanned herself with a spiral-bound notebook. Another sat in front of a small oscillating fan that creaked, whirred, and clicked atop a low bookshelf constructed out of cinder blocks and lengths of cheap wood. One of the men began to take off his shirt. Another followed.

Despite the enervating effects of the heat, conversation was animated, lively. Across the room from Matricaria, Gabe rapidly and breathlessly described an encounter at a bar the night before. His witty, catty, rapid-fire soliloquy kept those closest to him clutching their sides in unabashed laughter.

Rob took a deep breath and stood up straight. “Okay, let’s start without them.” As if on cue, the door buzzer sounded. Amethyst and Patty apologetically announced themselves, and, after being buzzed in, huffed and puffed up the four flights of stairs.

As Rob unbolted the door to let them in, the others rose to welcome them with hugs, everyone apologizing and joking about how sweaty they were. By the time everyone said hello, exchanged tidbits of gossip and compliments and the two had found something cool to drink, it was getting close to eight.

Above the chatter and giggles, Rob’s voice announced, “Okay, let’s get started.”



(End of Preview)