

**Chris Hunnicutt**  
**Open Arms**

“Sit down, Eveo. Relax. Here, have a cup of quileae. There you go. Ahh, now, where were we? How have you been? These last few weeks have been quite busy, have they not? Things are changing, Eveo, I tell you that for sure. No doubt about it, things are changing.

“Now, I suppose you are wondering why I called you down here. I know you are a very busy person, but like I said, things are changing, and they are changing with you, Eveo. I called you down here because I have a job for you. Actually, it’s more like a mission, a very important one. ‘Why me?’ you ask? Well, Eveo, because you are the best, and don’t be modest. You are the strongest and you are the smartest. Come on now, who won the temperae derby? Who had the highest score on the Tillinaou exam? That is right, Eveo, it was you. There was once a time when I would have said that I was the best, but unfortunately I am not as young as I used to be. Oh, what I would give to be in your shoes, Eveo! I just get so excited thinking about it. Ha! I am sure you are wondering what I could possibly be talking about.

“Well, it all goes back to the history of our people, the old story we all know so well. Once we lived not in these cold, wet caves. You remember learning about the prophet, Erisque? Well, the time has come to fulfill his final prophecy. That is right, Eveo! We are going back to the surface, and you will lead the way! You will be up there for seven nights - when the sky turns dark, testing the waters, so to speak, to make sure that the men above will welcome us with open arms, as Erisque claimed they would.

“Like I said, you are the best. You are our hero, our champion, and it is you who must save our people. Think of it, Eveo, you will be the first of us to see the sun after all these years! Dear God, how I wish I were in your shoes! Just remember to be careful up there, Eveo. Lie if you have to, just in case they can’t be trusted. But don’t worry too much. I think the world out there is ready to accept us.”

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Beer in hand, Roger stepped away from the party to look out the window at the upper middle class homes of South Charlotte. Sipping at his drink, Roger’s eyes wandered around the dark neighborhood until they focused on movement. A manhole cover slid open and a figure emerged. The stranger rubbed his eyes and cocked his head to stare into the night sky. For minutes he stood on the street, circling, observing the wonders of suburbia. Roger stumbled toward the entrance of the house. He turned the knob, and the door swung open, letting out the light from within. The stranger looked up and raised his arm to block the light from his eyes. The man was short, but well built. His face was hairless, but the

black hair atop his head flowed down past his neck, and he was dressed in dark, rough rags. Roger waved him in. "Come on in, man. We're just getting started," he said with a smile. The stranger grinned back and took a few steps toward the door. "That was *awesome* man. God, I can't believe you did that. You really play the part. Oh, damn. I should've gotten some friends to come watch," Roger hesitated, "Do I know you? What's your name again?" asked Roger.

"I am Eveo," replied the stranger.

"How ya doin'? I'm Roger." He lifted his hand to shake Eveo's. Eveo looked down at the arm held out toward him, then lifted his eyes up and met Roger's gaze. There was genuine warmth in the teenager's expression, like that of a friendly old man. Eveo focused again on the extended hand, and he reached out his own similarly and found it being grasped strongly by his new acquaintance. His eyebrows lifted up high into an expression of curious uncertainty as Roger led him inside.

People crowded into every room of the house. Brightly dressed teenagers, sipping at their drinks, chatted and danced. They all wore unique costumes. Roger was dressed as a cowboy, with authentic boots and a hat. He led Eveo inside and pointed to a table in the back of one of the rooms. "There's the drinks. Hey, are you one of Carl's friends?"

"Yes," replied Eveo.

"Oh, ok. I thought you looked familiar. So that means you go to Sun Valley, right?"

"That is right."

"Hey, do you know a girl over there named Stacey Atkinson?"

"I don't think so."

"Oh, ok. Well, she's this girl I've been thinking about asking on a date."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, she's really cute, and a good softball player too. If you had known her I would've asked if you knew if she had a boyfriend. Oh well."

A girl approached them, posing as a lioness, with cat's whiskers painted on her face. She held a plastic cup with a red drink.

"Hey, what's up Roger?"

"Not too much, Jen. How about you?"

"I'm doin' pretty well."

"Jen, I'd like you to meet – what's your name again, Eveo? Yeah, this is Eveo. He goes to Sun Valley."

Eveo looked at Roger once more, and he found again that expression of warmth. Eveo smiled with confidence, like a student on his way to ace an exam. He turned to face Jen, who was also smiling warmly, and thrust out his hand and she grasped it.

"Well, I need to go talk to Jason." Jen said, and she stumbled off into the party.

"Okay. I'll catch you later," replied Roger. He then turned to Eveo, "Hey, do you want something to drink?"

“Sure.”

Roger turned and led Eveo into the crowd. Submerged in the dense throng of people, Eveo looked around confusedly and tried to keep track of his bearings. He passed one teenager dressed all in red with horns and a tail, one with his face painted white and hair colored orange, green, and red, and one person with a long beard and a tall, pointed hat. They all briefly exchanged glances with the newcomer. To his left a girl and boy, dressed in all black, with skeletons painted onto their clothes, danced, rhythmically moving their bodies in a mock sexual act. The music flowed through the room, so strongly that Eveo felt the vibrations deep in his stomach. There was the sound of a repetitious bass line, an organ bit and a singular voice speaking so furiously that the only words Eveo could comprehend were the primitive rhymes that the speaker emphasized at the end of each sentence: “bitch,” “ditch,” “stitch!” To his right a partygoer dressed in a rubbery outfit, with something clear covering his eyes and nose, suddenly cringed. The person lifted his hand to his mouth and awkwardly darted out of the room, stumbling over his large, flattened shoes. Eveo sniffed the air and winced at how the house reeked of smoke and other smells he could not determine. When he neared one doorway he recognized the odor of vomit.

Finally, they reached the table with the drinks. Roger turned to him, “What would you like?”

“Whatever you are drinking.”

“Ah. Good man, Eveo. Good man. Heh, I am going to get *wasted* tonight.” Eveo wrinkled his brows in response. He shrugged it off and accepted the drink, and raised it to his mouth. The beer poured from the cup and splashed onto his tongue. Eveo opened his eyes wide and stared down at the cup in surprise. He raised it to his face again and sniffed it, and then took another, much smaller sip.

“Ha! That’s right, my friend. Don’t wimp out on me now!” exclaimed Roger as he slapped Eveo on the back. Eveo smiled and bobbed his head in a quick nod. Somewhere in the crowd a teenager called out Roger’s name. “I need to go say ‘hey’ to Mike. I’ll catch up with ya later though,” and suddenly, Eveo was left standing alone at the table. He turned toward the crowd and took another taste of his drink. He surveyed the energized teenagers steadily.

A soldier walked up to the table to get a drink. Leaning over the bottles and cups, he said to Eveo, “Sup man, what’s your name?”

“I am Eveo.”

“Hey, I’m Carl.” He set down the bottle he had been pouring from so that he could shake Eveo’s hand. “Eveo? That’s a funny name.”

“Well, I suppose so.”

“Heh. Wait wait. Say something else,” requested Carl.

“Umm... what would you like me to say?”

“Ha! You sound funny too!”

“Well, I am not from here. Do you go to Sun Valley?”

“Yeah! How’d you know?” asked Carl.

“Well, I have heard of you,” replied Eveo.

“From who?”

“Uhh... Roger.”

“Roger Wilkinson or Roger Banks?” wondered Carl.

“I do not know.”

“Oh... Well, if it had been Banks I would’ve wanted to know what that bitch has been sayin’ bout me.”

“Well, he was wearing -” Eveo was suddenly interrupted.

“Hey, it’s been nice chattin’ with ya, *Eveo*, I’ll seeya later,” and Eveo was once again standing alone at the table. He turned back to the crowd when another teenager approached him.

“Hey, what’s yer name again? Eveo?”

He turned to see the face of the lioness once again. Her playful eyes met his and she smiled at him. “Hello, Jen. Yes, that’s right.” She stumbled nearer to him, nearly tripping over her own feet and poked him in the chest with her finger.

“You’re kinda small, but I think you’re cute,” she said lazily. Eveo raised an eyebrow at her and smiled. He grasped her hand to remove it from his chest when she fell forward and he caught her in his arms. She lifted up her head and stared into Eveo’s eyes, and he returned her gaze, puzzled. For a moment they stood looking at each other. Then Jen slurred, “Oh, shuddup,” and she leaned forward and closed her eyes, intending to kiss him.

As her mouth inched its way toward his, Eveo, with his brows folded and his eyes staring intently at Jen, not knowing why she was trying to kiss him, desperately tried to avoid the oncoming contact. She pushed her head forward until she could not extend it any further. That far out and still not touching Eveo’s face, she realized that she had failed, and she let her head slump forward.

A voice rose above the sound of the music and the commotion in the room. “Hey! What the fuck are you doing with my girl?” A gigantic zombie football player emerged from the swirling waters of the crowded living room. “Yeah, you! What the hell is this? What, you think you can take advantage of my girlfriend when she’s drunk?”

“Hi Jason,” mumbled Jen. She let herself fall from Eveo’s grasp and stumbled into the arms of the zombie, who held her protectively with one arm. He stood up straight, twice as tall as Eveo. He lifted his chin and thrust his chest out belligerently. His eyes reflected his anger, but they also had a hint of desire in them. He reached out with his free arm to grab Eveo’s rags and pulled Eveo toward him.

Eveo opened his mouth to say something, but Roger, who appeared from another direction, interrupted him. “Eveo, what are you thinking? You just met her, and she’s drunk? Man, I thought you were all right.” Eveo’s eyes looked like those of a child who knew he had done something wrong, but was not quite sure what. He turned to Roger to say something,

but Jason's fist interrupted him when it smashed into his jaw. Eveo stumbled out of the grasp of the zombie and he winced in pain. He bent over and spit blood onto the floor, along with a single tooth, then turned to face his opponent with a surprising calm. Jason swung again, but Eveo caught the fist, and using the momentum of the punch he funneled it into a new direction, twisting it until he heard a good crunching sound. Eveo's hand then reached to his side where he pulled out a long knife. Someone in the crowd screamed. The music stopped.

A partygoer to Eveo's side leapt forward and tried to grab the knife, but Eveo instinctively turned and slashed at the assailant's chest. He looked up to see Roger's face imbued with fear and pain. Looking down, he saw a long split in Roger's cowboy shirt, blood soaking through.

Realizing he was in trouble, Eveo ran from the house. Hands reached out to grab him, but he shook them off as he ran toward the front door. Angry voices screamed at him from all directions. "Piece of shit!" "Freak!" "Psycho!" He attempted to block them from his mind until he finally reached the front of the house and leapt through the door.

He dashed down the street, then through a yard, and then down another street. Next, he sprinted into some trees behind a three-story brick house. He went with the bloody knife still in his hand. As he outran his pursuers, horrible thoughts raced through his mind. He kept seeing the face of Roger when the blood seeped from his chest. He heard the voices of hatred, all screaming at him in angry unity. How could everything have gone wrong so suddenly, when things were looking so good? He did not understand what he had done wrong. He hardly said anything. He had done very little the entire night. Why were they suddenly so angry with him?

He stopped at the opposite edge of the woods and looked up at the moon, squinting at its brightness. The sky was a beautiful sight to him, but it overwhelmed and scared him. Not far from him was a cow, standing still in a small field. Eveo grew angry as he dwelled over the party. Every time a vision of Jason, Jen, or Roger entered his mind, he was once again filled with sorrow and anger. With eyes full of tears, he screamed out loud in agony. In a sudden frenzy of anger he leaped toward the peaceful cow and plunged his knife into its side. It let out a strangled cry of pain, and Eveo, sobbing, held the handle of the knife for two seconds, with the blade still inside the animal, before drawing it back out. He staggered backward and fell against a tree trunk. He spun around and started to slash at the tree's bark. He swung at it over and over, weeping.

Finally, he relented and let his hand fall. He wondered if at any moment those crazy teenagers would find him. He wondered why he had just stabbed the poor creature and slashed at the innocent tree. He didn't like the freedom of the outside world. He didn't like the wind flowing all around him. The bright moon looking down at him and the feeling of

having no idea where he was scared him. He longed for the security of a firm set of walls all around him. He missed the comfortable feeling of home. Why would he ever want to live up here?

Turning around, he started to run again, this time toward the neighborhood, in search of the entrance to his dark world. He had gotten near the hidden doorway when he was running behind a house with an oval shaped pool and a diving board. Suddenly, a loud voice rang out, "Freeze! Drop the weapon!" Eveo looked to the left to see a man dressed in blue pointing at him with a small, dark metallic object. Who was this man? He wasn't at the party. What was the object in his hands? The voice was strong and commanding, but who was he to command Eveo? Eveo turned his head away and kept running. "I said freeze, Goddamnit!" Eveo looked back for a moment, then continued. Two loud gunshots filled the air as lead slugs burst through Eveo's heart.

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"Now, we must wait for Eveo's triumphant return. His success will mark a new era of greatness for our people. Our future is bright and beautiful, but it is up there, not down here! We have managed to survive in these damned caverns, but the time is upon us for new things. The time is upon us for change, for us to prove ourselves to the outside world, and out there we will find a new way of life, a better one. We are finally going to take our rightful place in the world, and we will have Eveo to thank for it.

"Now, all we can do is imagine what Eveo is experiencing as we speak. Oh, just to envision what he must be seeing! The sun, the moon! How I have dreamt of these for so long. I'm sure he is up there, making friends, seeing new things, thinking of our future. Our fate lies in his hands."