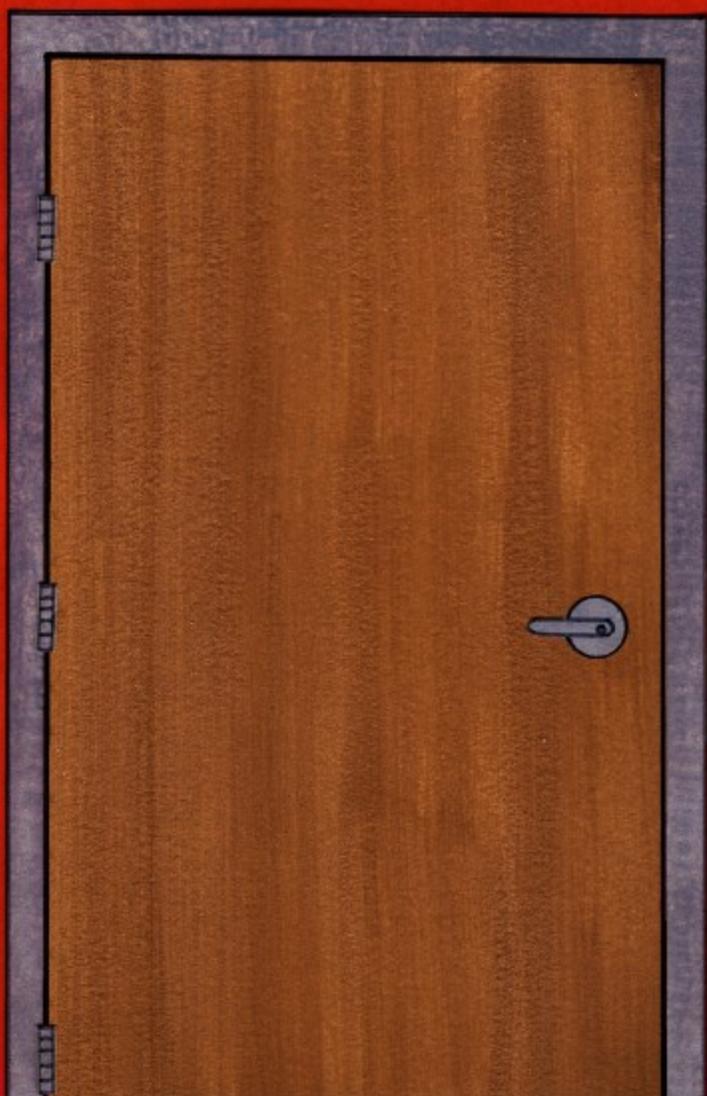


# IN DEATH HE'S BRIEFLY KEVIN



The loud banging outside has become a distraction. A woman in a lab coat spins around in her chair and asks, “Can someone check on that?” The others in the room, also wearing lab coats, look to Steven, who’s standing nearest to the door. He realizes that he’s being chosen, and he’s not thrilled about it.

“Ok,” he says, meekly accepting his fate. Everyone returns to their work.

He sets a box on a countertop and steps out from the lab, leaving the door open behind him. He’s surprised to find that he’s alone on the sales floor. A phone is ringing, but no one is around to answer it.

He jumps as the door to the waiting room rattles violently, then lightens his footsteps the rest of the way down the aisle of desks. “*Open the fucking door!*” a man shouts from the other side. The phone is still ringing.

Where has everyone gone? Steven peers into vacated offices along the perimeter of the room. “Hello?” he calls out in a hushed tone, “Whitney?”

He stops to stare at the ringing telephone, and it takes everything in his being to resist answering it. What would he even say, though? And why wasn’t it going to voicemail?

“Anyone?” he calls out.

He surveys the room. No one.

He continues down the aisle, past a half dozen empty desks, and emerges from the sales floor at an intersection between two doors. One leads into the hallway outside the office and, presumably, to freedom. The other shakes at its hinges as it’s battered mercilessly from inside the waiting room.

Steven reaches his hand out and nearly grabs the handle to freedom, but he’s distracted by a glittering light in his periphery. He glances toward it and spots Whitney, the office manager, poorly concealed behind a tropical plant, her large earrings somehow shimmering beneath the soft fluorescents.

“Whitney?”

She shushes him. “I’m hiding,” she whispers.

“But I can see you,” he says. “If you’re going to hide then you need to do a better job of it.”

She rises and steps out to stand beside the plant, then looks around for a new spot.

“Maybe under a desk,” Steven suggests with a noncommittal shrug, and her eyes light up.

“That’s perfect!” she exclaims. “I never would have thought of that! Thanks for the advice, Kevin!”

She scurries down the aisle and crawls out of sight beneath a desk. For the moment, Steven feels good – helpful even – but it’s short-lived as a battle cry erupts from the waiting room. He shivers.

The door absorbs its next blow with a groan and Steven’s impulse is to run and save himself, but he feels a nagging responsibility to alert his colleagues. It compels him to jog back down the aisle and poke his head inside the lab. “I think we need to get out of here,” he says.

There’s no immediate reaction, with everyone remaining studiously focused on their task. Finally, a man looks up from a machine to ask, very casually, “Why’s that, Steven?”

Another voice faintly chimes in from the back, “Also ask him where?”

“Also, where?” the man adds.

Steven is puzzled by the reluctance from his colleagues to accept his sound advice at face value. This simply isn’t a time for the rigors of scientific scrutiny, goddamnit. Behind him, a phone keeps ringing, and that door is about to quit. Then it makes a new sound – a crack – and begins to splinter.

“Trust me,” Steven pleads, “we’ve got to go!”

“We’re almost done,” a woman says. “If we stop now then we could corrupt the whole batch.”

“A whole morning’s work wasted.”

“Just buy us a few minutes, will you?”

“We’ll only need a few.”

“We’re really almost done.”

“And do answer that phone, please. It’s very aggravating.”

Steven scans the large laboratory, glancing at various chemists, researchers, engineers – educated people, all – and he wonders why the hell no one else has taken a full measure of their peril.

A chair leg pops through the splinter and is yanked back out quickly, a gaping yawn left in its wake. Steven is the only one to notice. “These people seem pretty pissed, you guys. I don’t want to be around when they break this door down.”

“Just a few minutes, Steven. That’s all we need.”

“We’re almost done.”

“Honest, we are.”

“And the phone, Steven. Please.”

Steven takes a few steps back down the aisle to get a better look at the hole, but then freezes mid-stride as the chair smashes into it again, two legs breaking through this time to multiply the damage. One leg snaps off as the chair is yanked back out, then a large man peeks his head through the hole and notices Steven staring back at him.

“Hey!” the man yells, his face beet red. “Get over here, you little piece of shit!”

One of the researchers steps out of the lab to see who’s yelling, and witnesses in horror as the waiting room door buckles down the middle and is rendered useless. “Oh, shit,” they say, then promptly retreat into the lab and slam the door shut.

From halfway down the aisle, Steven can hear chairs scraping behind him to barricade the lab as the large man kicks in the busted door and steps onto the sales floor. He stoops down to pick up the broken chair leg and weighs its heft in his paw, then points it menacingly at Steven. “You!” he shouts, “You owe me something!”

“It’s not ready yet,” Steven stammers, “we just need a few more minutes. Honest.”

The phone rings.

“I ain’t waiting no more,” the man says. He slowly advances down the aisle, swinging the chair leg to smash computer monitors and keyboards atop nearby desks. “Been

waiting all goddamn morning for my eight o' clock appointment.”

Ring!

An older couple, a man and a woman, trail him at his flanks. “It's not right to keep us waiting,” the old man snarls as a small dog hops around at his feet, similarly agitated by the whole ordeal. It yips and bares its teeth at Steven, working up the courage to attack.

Ring!

Steven takes a few defensive steps back. “Please, we're working as fast as we can. Just a few more minutes.”

Ring!

“It don't look like you're working,” the large man says. He brings the chair leg down hard on the ringing telephone and Steven begins to sweat. His heart pounds. He needs to do something. Do what?

He pulls a rolling chair into the aisle and pushes it toward the group, but the man effortlessly swats it aside. “It looks like you're just wasting more of my goddamn time.”

The dog, still yipping in frenetic bursts, charges forth and clamps its jaws onto Steven's pants leg, then thrashes its head side-to-side and shreds the fabric. Steven panics and kicks to buck the animal off, which infuriates its owners.

“Don't you fucking hurt her, you monster!” the woman shrieks. She grabs a stapler from a nearby desk and hurls it at Steven's face, the base clipping his forehead.

“Please!” Steven cries out, “Just a few more minutes!” He continues to kick his leg and loses balance, causing him to hop backwards down the aisle on one foot. The patients chuckle as they watch him flail helplessly, continuing toward him at their leisurely pace.

Steven holds his stance long enough to yank an empty drawer out of a desk and throws it just as the dog's teeth sink into his ankle. He howls out in pain as the drawer ineffectually strikes the large man in the gut, then clatters to the ground.

“Please,” Steven pleads, reaching down to pry the dog from his leg, “we’re nearly ready! Honest!” But they advance unimpeded, the dog prancing about their feet, yipping and snarling proudly to display the blood on its teeth.

“And it’s like I said before,” the large man says, “I ain’t waiting no more.”

Steven backs up against the door to the lab, then blindly reaches his hand behind him to try the handle. As suspected, though, it’s locked. With all hope nearly extinguished, he peers down the aisle, beyond his assailants, and sets his sights on the door to the hallway. His shining gateway to freedom.

To hell with his colleagues, he thinks. To hell with this bullshit job and these horrible people. He glances over to the next aisle of desks and can clearly visualize his plan of action.

It’ll be one bold maneuver, he decides, and there’s no time better than the present. He confidently takes a step forward, which gives the large man pause. “Please,” Steven says for the final time, “we just need another few minutes.”

“Fuck you!” the woman snaps, her dog yipping in agreement.

Steven reaches over to pull a chair out from the last desk on the aisle, fully expecting to ram it hard into the large man and buy himself just enough time to bound into the next aisle and make his sprint toward freedom. But the chair resists and is unmoved, and Steven is left defenseless with his intentions exposed. He’s stunned by his misfortune.

The man cracks the chair leg hard onto his forehead and everything flashes red, then goes black. He can feel his knees wobble and his chin crack against the front of the desk as he crumples to the floor.

Then his eyes blink open.

His vision is blurred.

He finds himself horizontal and is kicked several times before his attackers step over him and move on. His teeth ache and he can taste blood, and something warm and wet runs down his face in a steady stream, pooling just beneath

his slackened jaw, now partially disassembled. He thinks he's missing part of his tongue.

The pressure in his head is unbearable and he feels like his brain might implode. Can that happen? Oh god, was he about to find out? But then the pressure ebbs, replaced by a persistent ringing in his ears.

He can hear, but sounds are muted. He makes out some banging, some yelling, and after a moment he's violently flipped onto his back as someone rummages through his pockets, searching for a key that he doesn't have. He winces at the fluorescents overhead, the glare blinding through his narrow vision. He rolls his head to the side, blinks, then spots Whitney, crouched beneath the desk, her face buried between her knees with her arms wrapped tight around the base of the chair.

"They didn't even give you a fucking key?" the large man asks, looming over his wounded prey in a lab coat. He uses the toe of his shoe to force Steven's gaze heavenward to face him. "You're useless."

Steven squints against the lights before the crack of the chair leg drops the final curtain over his eyes and all goes red, then black.

*In Death He's Briefly Kevin* takes place simultaneously with Chapter 4 of *The Roark*, an upcoming novel.