

The Loyalty of Pawns
Copyright 2013 Theron Couch

1

REPORTER: *Jason Allen, the first person tried under the Information Security Act passed last year, took the stand yesterday. When asked how he justified his actions in the face of the new law, Allen had this to say:*

ALLEN: *A free society can't stay free if anything can be labeled a "secret" and classified. I'm just researching information for my clients. They want the truth. I find it for them.*

REPORTER: *Opponents of the law and supporters of Jason Allen immediately took to the net demanding the government free him and other "searchers of truth."*

—partial transcript from Net Nine News *Morning Notes*

Sweat clung to Blake Johnson's brow and chest; he wasn't quite gasping for air, but the man breathed deep and heavy as he sat upright in his bed. There in the dark, somewhere in the middle of the night, Blake remembered—for the moment—every detail of the nightmare that drove him from sleep. As Blake's eyes adjusted to the dark, he glanced at his wife on the other side of the bed. If his sudden awakening had disturbed her, Blake saw no sign.

Blake's breathing slowed, returning to normal; the dream was already fading. Fatigue bit at the back of his eyes; Blake felt the deep desire to go back to sleep. But momentarily fearful of what that sleep would bring, Blake struggled instead to stay awake. It wasn't long, though, before he stopped pushing on the ocean and lay back down. Fatigue and agitation warred with each other until, quite without realizing it, Blake drifted off...

A piercing, screeching beeping woke Blake for a second time; his hand catapulted toward the alarm clock out of reflex. Missing the switch on the first attempt, Blake's fingers felt around until he silenced the alarm. Blake lay almost motionless, his eyes still closed, and he noticed his wife's absence from the bed. Katharine was likely downstairs already, parked at the kitchen table with a mug of hot coffee; whatever compulsion led his wife to consistently start the day so early absent a reason baffled Blake.

Minutes later, standing beneath the shower spray of hot water, the nightmare revisited Blake; he couldn't recall the last time a dream had impressed itself on him so completely. The imagery, remembered through a haze, felt ripped from some psychological horror story: vague scenery shrouded in mist through which pale-skinned people aimlessly wandered, their lives forever confined to a purgatory of abandoned desires and desperate insignificance, lost to an unidentified force of apathy because none of them chose anything better for themselves—and indeed it was at the moment of his own acquiescence to this purposeless existence given form that Blake had awoken.

A few minutes after that, his shower done, Blake paused in front of the bathroom mirror. In a moment he didn't really understand, Blake drew two short horizontal lines, almost dots, in the fogged-up glass; he added a longer horizontal line under the first two and found himself staring at an unexpected face. Blake wiped it away, staring instead at his own reflection, the same reflection that greeted him every day: a forty-two-year-old, average in almost every way except for his eternally hungry brown eyes. Blake didn't know what they were hungry for, and he couldn't have hazarded a guess if he tried; they were always hungry and more so on this morning than others. Happy to abandon his reflection and bury the memory of the nightmare, Blake grabbed a robe and padded his way through the house and down the stairs, stopping when he reached the kitchen.

"Morning."

Katharine's greeting was more perfunctory than anything else. Over the course of their marriage, Blake had never proven himself a great conversationalist in the morning. More and more, though, that difficulty—centered initially on one time of day—extended throughout much of their relationship. The stilted, almost “default” interaction gave Blake pause; somehow it seemed too much a piece of what had awoken him in the night.

“Sleep okay?” Blake asked as he filled his own mug.

“Fine.” Katharine didn't look up as she answered. She sat engrossed in her pad, scrolling through the morning's news, and didn't turn around, so all Blake really saw of his wife in that moment was her untamed shoulder-length, straw-colored hair—so light that Katharine had started going gray and silver before she'd turned thirty-five.

“Good.” The one word preceded Blake taking a sip of coffee. The contents were hot, dark, and more than a little bitter; as he did every morning, Blake softened his coffee with ample cream and sugar.

Additional words seemed to pile up on Blake's tongue. He watched his wife seemingly ignore him as she read from the pad. Rather than saying anything, Blake took another sip from his mug. A few moments later Blake retreated back to the master bedroom long enough to finish getting ready. When he returned and donned his coat, Katharine finally stood from the table, her hazel eyes setting on him for the first time that morning.

“You need a haircut,” Katharine commented as she reached toward his brown hair, which was shaggier by the day; Blake offered no response. After another moment, Katharine leaned in and kissed Blake. It wasn't as perfunctory as the conversation; some chemistry remained even if it wasn't the intoxicant it had once been.

“Love you.” Katharine always followed up the kiss with the same two words. Blake offered a few words that added up to little more than a grunt, grabbed his coffee mug, and left the house.

Ninety minutes or so after his departure, Blake walked down a Chicago street much like any other. Spring in and around Chicago barely deserved the name. A breeze off Lake Michigan—light by a Chicagoan's standards—cut through the canyons of the city. This particular Tuesday morning, whether as a consequence of the nightmare or the fatigue that had resulted from it, the walk through the city—the whole commute—felt more tedious than usual; Blake blamed the nightmare, only impressions of which remained by this point.

What the hell am I doing?

It wasn't the first time Blake had asked himself that question—not hardly. Not by a long shot. But it seemed suddenly louder in his head. And he didn't exactly have an answer. He might, though, have a solution.

About ten minutes later, Blake stood in his cubicle. He set his bag down on one of two small desks and hung his coat behind him. A heavy sigh escaped Blake's lips as he sat; the sigh bordered on its own kind of ritual. But rather than set about at the activities of his daily grind, Blake swiveled around to face his hanging overcoat. Still preoccupied by the thoughts and feelings stirring within him since the dark and cold middle of the night, Blake reached toward one of two inside pockets; his fingers snatched a slip of paper.

The information on the paper came to Blake months ago courtesy of drunken reverie. A night that began innocently enough saw Blake and a close friend named Mitchell sitting in a bar just this side of a dive, swigging scotch as though it were malt liquor and doing their damndest to one-up each other's past accomplishments—of all stripes. Mitchell had soon held a commanding lead. But then, Mitchell was involved in Chicago politics, and it was hard to beat that above or below the board. The net result for Blake had been a brief but inevitable maudlin spell where he confessed a certain sense of inadequacy and failure—a lament over roads not taken. Mitchell, perhaps out of drunken kindness or perhaps out of drunken spite, grabbed a pen and scrawled some words on a napkin; he handed this inebriated wisdom to Blake. “*You can learn more than enough to change your lot—if you can pay,*” were

the words Mitchell offered as Blake took the napkin. But a few seconds later, the reverie had returned; the napkin was pocketed, and the moment was largely forgotten.

Mitchell had never again spoken of that moment or that napkin. Blake had never pressed the matter. And when he was honest with himself, Blake expected never to go out on a limb and see if Mitchell was on the level. But now Blake looked at that crumpled napkin like a teenager might look at a dirty magazine. Written on it—legibly but just so—was a name and a time and, probably most importantly, a place.

Blake made his decision with surprising ease.

The work Blake was being paid to do all at once lacked any sense of importance. The time Mitchell had specified was late afternoon, and the location was halfway across the city. Blake would need to leave work early. And in what felt like a blink of an eye, the day was more than half over, and Blake was walking down one of the dirtier streets in the city; it always seemed to Blake—who had not been born and raised in Chicago—that much of the city was dirty. That thought seemed even more relevant in the moment.

All of a sudden, and a little involuntarily, Blake paused. The alley he needed to turn down lay straight ahead. A quick breeze ripped down the street, gone as fast as it appeared. The light chill, a harbinger of the evening soon to come, bit at Blake's face. He took a deep breath and considered—for one last time. That Blake started walking forward again before having consciously decided to do so settled the matter in his mind. In under a minute, Blake was down the alley and in front of a heavy metal door. His right hand reached to it. Gripping the door's handle, Blake pulled. He couldn't remember a choice in his recent life as satisfying as pulling open that door. But then he couldn't remember having made too many worthwhile choices.

The grungy alley and cold air were replaced by comfortable heat, white tiled floor, and bright fluorescent light. The surroundings proved so unexpected that Blake failed to register the door through which he'd entered swinging shut behind him. As it closed, the door latched with a click. Turning around, Blake discovered that the door's interior side offered no handle. And a quick push confirmed that it was latched shut.

Blake reigned in a suddenly blossoming concern. He turned around once more, again facing toward the building's interior. Another door sat on the opposite wall. Blake crossed the rectangular, white room, his legs moving with a new urgency. The prospect that this inner door would be locked as well didn't occur to Blake—until he had grasped its handle and pulled. The door didn't move. Not even a little bit. And despite the fact that the door appeared to be mostly glass, it was frosted to such a degree that Blake couldn't make out even vague details of what lay beyond.

What did I do?

Apparently trapped, Blake took note of his surroundings. Only then did he notice the chairs lining one wall; their presence explained to Blake just where he was: a waiting room. Blake hoped he was prepared for whatever it was he was waiting for.

Mozart played in the background. Aaron Collins couldn't recall the name of the current piece—nor, for that matter, the piece before it. In fact, the music did little more than fill the silence as Aaron's eyes shifted between three different flat screens sitting on his desk. Of greatest concern to Aaron was the image on the leftmost screen: a feed from one of many hidden cameras, this one poised in the waiting room. The visitor was unknown and unexpected. Aaron loathed the unknown and the unexpected.

An electronic chirp called out for Aaron's attention; he looked away from the newcomer, his mind setting that concern aside for the moment. The chirp demanding Aaron's attention announced the receipt of a message. On seeing the sender's encrypted client number, Aaron immediately guessed its contents; arching an eyebrow as near platinum blond as his hair, Aaron contemplated which new matter to handle first.

Turning back to the video feed from his waiting room, Aaron regarded the man for a few moments more. Something about him seemed familiar—but only just. As insistent as that feeling of familiarity was, though, Aaron was certain that he'd never met the man personally. Fortunately facial recognition software answered questions just like this. Setting such a program in motion, Aaron looked back to the new message. He opened the electronic missive and saw that he'd guessed right about the message's subject. This client, a business powerhouse of a man named Jameson Masters, phrased the concern as one of the highest urgency; he implored Aaron to solve the problem as soon as possible—while making it abruptly clear that his regular schedule of payment to Aaron may suffer negatively if assistance wasn't forthcoming.

Aaron was seldom prone to a revealing expression—especially alone when no benefit could come from such a show. Yet he found himself holding in a slight grin. For what Jameson Masters paid Aaron, this request and subsequent threat wasn't at all out of line. Of course, disclosing that Aaron himself was the ultimate cause of Jameson's urgent problem wouldn't do at all.

An insistent chime demanded Aaron's attention; he turned back to his search on the newcomer—ample opportunity remained to fashion his latest convincing cover story for the other matter.

No kidding.

The thought ran quickly through Aaron's mind as he saw the result of his search: a 98 percent probability that the man's name was Blake Johnson. Other biographical details were listed below the name. That his wife's name was Katharine immediately set Aaron's memory in motion. Suddenly more relevant was how Blake came to be in Aaron's waiting room. Katharine Johnson didn't tend toward indiscretion especially regarding her old job. *So what is he doing here?* Another name, a somewhat low-level client that Aaron kept mainly to keep up appearances of insignificance, featured in connection to Blake's and provided the likeliest answer: Mitchell Ryan. Chicago itself may tolerate indiscretion as a matter of course; Aaron did not. Mitchell behaved much like a leaky faucet when it came to confidences; at times the man's behavior had worked to Aaron's advantage. But it was evidently time to fix the faucet.

Deciding what to do with the newcomer—now that he'd been identified—would have been simple enough had Aaron any intention of making Blake a client; Aaron's most basic search programs could scour the net quickly enough to determine Blake's interests and find some nugget he would pay to learn. And dealing with him in the manner of a non-client would have been faster and easier still. But Aaron had debts to repay—even if only he knew about them.

Aaron looked back to the security feed. How long to let this intruder—even if not belligerent, Aaron saw him as an intruder—stew was a hard question to answer. The matter of Jameson Masters's problem would have to wait some few minutes; Aaron judged that left to his own devices, this Blake Johnson would soon enough be climbing the walls on his way to a full-blown panic. Taking a deep breath, Aaron composed himself—an effort which consisted of little more than checking his recently

developed tendency to grin—and straightened his tie and custom-fitted shirt; he judged what veneer of self would be best when facing Blake and then reached toward the flat screen of security footage, touching the door release for the waiting room. Aaron saw that Blake quickly understood the meaning of the sounding buzz; the intruder leapt to his feet, barely grabbing his bag before bounding for the door. The waiting room's door opened to a hallway that passed by Aaron's office before continuing around a corner toward the only obvious exit; in such a hurry was Blake that he practically passed by Aaron's open office door.

"In here, please." Aaron spoke the words with an affable air. He wore a fresh-off-the-rack smile. Were Aaron capable of commanding his blue eyes to twinkle, they'd have been doing so.

For his part, Blake paused in the doorway, his expression not yet giving way to fear but not without half trying. When the early-forties, perfectly average "nobody" that Aaron beheld failed to enter, Aaron gestured to one of two chairs in front of his desk.

"You may be a bit more comfortable, *Blake*," Aaron emphasized the name with subtlest menace, "if you have a seat."

Blake took the hint. He stepped into the office, practically dropping his bag as he took the indicated chair. Aaron's concession of a few seconds' silence seemingly gave Blake the opportunity to collect himself. His obvious distress, while not melting away entirely, mellowed considerably.

Just how much fun should I have? Aaron asked himself as he took in the "highlights" of Blake's appearance, which were not much more than combed but defiant hair and a not-quite-pressed shirt. And his eyes. His eyes—pleadingly unhappy—wanted something. Aaron opened his mouth to speak.

"Blake Johnson of Denver, Colorado now living in Evanston, Illinois. Graduated from the University of Texas with a major in history and a minor in political science. You moved to the Chicago area when Katharine Mullen—then your girlfriend and now your wife—transferred to the CPD. You were hired by SynthSync in their customer sales department and now work as a mid-level product manager. Though still satisfactory, your evaluations have become steadily more mediocre over the past four years, and you've been passed over for advancement twice." Aaron refrained from glancing at the screen that displayed this data; he'd discovered that reciting seemingly memorized private information unnerved most people—Blake was no exception. "There's still more that I could pull up, but suffice it to say you're an all-around ordinary person who doesn't involve himself in...well, much of anything really."

"You're a searcher." The way Blake said the words betrayed his probable unawareness that he'd come to see an illegal dealer of secret information. Aaron, for his part, offered a polite nod. His inviting expression endured, but he let his eyes communicate a shift in tone.

"I think I made a mistake," Blake continued after another moment. He started to stand up; Aaron put up his hand.

"Yes," Aaron agreed with almost a touch of pity. "Quite the mistake. But you might as well stay and get what you came for."

Blake was somewhere between standing and sitting when he froze. Aaron fixed his eyes on the man, harder perhaps than a simple stare. He wondered how long it would take Blake to decide just what to do. After a second, Blake elected to sit back down.

"The man that revealed me to you was not at liberty to do so. Therefore when you leave here, you will be taking great pains to forget whatever he said and lose whatever he gave you."

Blake offered a nervous nod.

Aaron, the smile still on his face, looked at Blake for a few moments more. After a passage of several seconds, Aaron tossed a small crystalline wafer—not two inches long—across to Blake; the man caught it—just barely—after a bit of a flinch.

"I don't understand," Blake said after staring at the data slip.

Aaron leaned forward and rested his folded hands on his desktop.

"Load it on your computer and find what you're after."

Saying nothing further, Aaron looked from Blake to the flat screen on his right. It took a moment, but Blake finally got the message. He stood up and started out of the office.

“Blake Johnson.”

Aaron spoke the words while still looking at the flat screen; he changed his tone for the first time, dropping much of the friendly veneer. Blake froze in the doorway, not looking back.

“I expect that you’ll never come to my attention again.”

Blake said nothing in response. Aaron offered no follow-up. After another moment, Blake resumed his departure. Aaron glanced toward the security feed, watching Blake go. Once the unexpected visitor was away, Aaron turned his attention back to finding a deceptive solution to Jameson Masters’s threatening plea.

Find an extended preview of *The Loyalty of Pawns* at [my blog](#).