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NINO CIPRI SHAP OF MY NAME

The Shape of My Name

NINO CIPRI

illustration by
RICHIE POPE



The year 2076 smells like antiseptic gauze and the lavender diffuser that Dara set up in my room. It has the bitter aftertaste of pills: probiotics and microphages and PPMOs. It feels like the itch of healing, the ache that's settled on my pubic bone. It has the sound of a new name that's fresh and yet familiar on my lips.

The future feels lighter than the past. I think I know why you chose it over me, Mama.

* * *

My bedroom has changed in the hundred-plus years that have passed since I slept there as a child. The floorboards have been carpeted over, torn up, replaced. The walls are thick with new layers of paint. The windows have been upgraded, the closet expanded. The oak tree that stood outside my window is gone, felled by a storm twenty years ago, I'm told. But the house still stands, and our family still lives here, with all our attendant ghosts. You and I are haunting each other, I think.

I picture you standing in the kitchen downstairs, over a century ago. I imagine that you're staring out through the little window above the sink, your eyes traveling down the path that leads from the back door and splits at the creek; one trail leads to the pond, and the other leads to the shelter and the anachronopede, with its rows of capsules and blinking lights.

Maybe it's the afternoon you left us. June 22, 1963: storm clouds gathering in the west, the wind picking up, the air growing heavy with the threat of rain. And you're staring out the window, gazing across the dewy fields at the forking path, trying to decide which way you'll take.

My bedroom is just above the kitchen, and my window has that same view, a little expanded: I can see clear down to the pond where Dad and I used to sit on his weeks off from the oil fields. It's spring, and the cattails are only hip high. I can just make out the silhouette of a great blue heron walking along among the reeds and rushes.

You and I, we're twenty feet and more than a hundred years apart.

* * *

You went into labor not knowing my name, which I know now is

unprecedented among our family: you knew Dad's name before you laid eyes on him, the time and date of my birth, the hospital where he would drive you when you went into labor. But my name? My sex? Conspicuously absent in Uncle Dante's gilt-edged book where all these happy details were recorded in advance.

Dad told me later that you thought I'd be a stillbirth. He didn't know about the record book, about the blank space where a name should go. But he told me that nothing he said while you were pregnant could convince you that I'd come into the world alive. You thought I'd slip out of you strangled and blue, already decaying.

Instead, I started screaming before they pulled me all the way out.

Dad said that even when the nurse placed me in your arms, you thought you were hallucinating. "I had to tell her, over and over: Miriam, you're not dreaming, our daughter is alive."

I bit my lip when he told me that, locked the words "your son" out of sight. I regret that now; maybe I could have explained myself to him. I should have tried, at least.

You didn't name me for nearly a week.

* * *

Nineteen fifty-four tastes like Kellogg's Rice Krispies in fresh milk, delivered earlier that morning. It smells like wood smoke, cedar chips, Dad's Kamel cigarettes mixed with the perpetual smell of diesel in his clothes. It feels like the worn velvet nap of the couch in our living room, which I loved to run my fingers across.

I was four years old. I woke up in the middle of the night after a loud crash of lightning. The branches of the oak tree outside my window were thrashing in the wind and the rain.

I crept out of bed, dragging my blanket with me. I slipped out of the door and into the hallway, heading for your and Dad's bedroom. I stopped when I heard voices coming from the parlor downstairs: I recognized your sharp tones, but there was also a man's voice, not Dad's baritone but something closer to a tenor.

The door creaked when I pushed it open, and the voices fell silent. I paused, and then you yanked open the door.

The curlers in your hair had come undone, descending down toward your shoulders. I watched one tumble out of your hair and onto the floor like a stunned beetle. I only caught a glimpse of the man standing in the corner; he had thin, hunched shoulders and dark hair, wet and plastered to his skull. He was wearing one of Dad's old robes, with the initials monogrammed on the pocket. It was much too big for him.

You snatched me up, not very gently, and carried me up to the bedroom you shared with Dad.

"Tom," you hissed. You dropped me on the bed before Dad was fully awake, and shook his shoulder. He sat up, blinking at me, and looked to you for an explanation.

"There's a visitor," you said, voice strained.

Dad looked at the clock, pulling it closer to him to get a proper look. "Now? Who is it?"

Your jaw was clenched, and so were your hands. "I'm handling it. I just need you to watch—"

You said my name in a way I'd never heard it before, as if each syllable were a hard, steel ball dropping from your lips. It frightened me, and I started to cry. Silently, though, since I didn't want you to notice me. I didn't want you to look at me with eyes like that.

You turned on your heel and left the room, clicking the door shut behind you and locking it.

Dad patted me on the back, his wide hand nearly covering the expanse of my skinny shoulders. "It's all right, kid," he said. "Nothing to be scared of. Why don't you lie down and I'll read you something, huh?"

In the morning, there was no sign a visitor had been there at all. You and Dad assured me that I must have dreamed the whole thing.

I know now that you were lying, of course. I think I knew it even then.

* * *

I had two childhoods.

One happened between Dad's ten-day hitches in the White County oil fields. That childhood smells like his tobacco, wool coats, wet grass. It sounds like the opening theme songs to all our favorite TV shows. It tastes like the peanut-butter sandwiches that you'd pack for us on our walks, which we'd eat down by the pond, the same one I can just barely see from my window here. In the summer, we'd sit at the edge of the

water, dipping our toes into the mud. Sometimes, Dad told me stories, or asked me to fill him in on the episodes of *Gunsmoke* and *Science Fiction Theatre* he'd missed, and we'd chat while watching for birds. The herons have always been my favorite. They moved so slow, it always felt like a treat to spot one as it stepped cautiously through the shallow water. Sometimes, we'd catch sight of one flying overhead, its wide wings fighting against gravity.

And then there was the childhood with you, and with Dara, the childhood that happened when Dad was away. I remember the first morning I came downstairs and she was eating pancakes off of your fancy china, the plates that were decorated with delicate paintings of evening primrose.

"Hi there. I'm Dara," she said.

When I looked at you, shy and unsure, you told me, "She's a cousin. She'll be dropping in when your father is working. Just to keep us company."

Dara didn't really look much like you, I thought; not the way that Dad's cousins and uncles all resembled one another. But I could see a few similarities between the two of you; hazel eyes, long fingers, and something I didn't have the words to describe for a long time: a certain discomfort, the sense that you held yourselves slightly apart from the rest of us. It had made you a figure of gossip in town, though I didn't know that until high school, when the same was said of me.

"What should I call you?" Dara asked me.

You jumped in and told her to call me by my name, the one you'd chosen for me, after the week of indecision following my birth. How can I ever make you understand how much I disliked that name? It felt like it belonged to a sister whom I was constantly being compared to, whose legacy I could never fulfill or surpass or even forget. Dara must have caught the face that I made, because later, when you were out in the garden, she asked me, "Do you have another name? That you want me to call you instead?"

When I shrugged, she said, "It doesn't have to be a forever name. Just one for the day. You can pick a new one tomorrow, if you like. You can introduce yourself differently every time you see me."

And so every morning when I woke up and saw Dara sitting at the table, I gave her a different name: Doc, Buck, George, Charlie. Names

that my heroes had, from television and comics and the matinees in town. They weren't my name, but they were better than the one I had. I liked the way they sounded, the shape of them rolling around my mouth.

You just looked on, lips pursed in a frown, and told Dara you wished she'd quit indulging my silly little games.

The two of you sat around our kitchen table and—if I was quiet and didn't draw any attention to myself—talked in a strange code about *jumps* and *fastenings* and *capsules*, dropping names of people I never knew. More of your cousins, I figured.

You told our neighbors that all of your family was spread out, and disinclined to make the long trip to visit. When Dara took me in, she made up a tale about a long-lost cousin whose parents had kicked him out for being trans. Funny, the way the truth seeps into lies.

* * *

I went to see Uncle Dante in 1927. I wanted to see what he had in that book of his about me, and about you and Dara.

Nineteen twenty-seven tastes like the chicken broth and brown bread he fed me after I showed up at his door. It smells like the musty blanket he hung around my shoulders, like kerosene lamps and wood smoke. It sounds like the scratchy records he played on his phonograph: Duke Ellington and Al Jolson, the Gershwin brothers and Gene Austin.

"Your mother dropped by back in 24," he said, settling down in an armchair in front of the fireplace. It was the same fireplace that had been in our parlor, though Dad had sealed off the chimney in 1958, saying it let in too many drafts. "She was very adamant that your name be written down in the records. She seemed ... upset." He let the last word hang on its own, lonely, obviously understated.

"That's not my name," I told him. "It's the one she gave me, but it was never mine."

I had to explain to him then—he'd been to the future, and so it didn't seem so far-fetched, my transition. I simplified it for him, of course: didn't go into the transdermal hormonal implants and mastectomy, the paperwork Dara and I forged, the phalloplasty I'd scheduled a century and a half in the future. I skipped the introduction to gender theory, Susan Stryker, *Stone Butch Blues*, all the things that

Dara gave me to read when I asked if there were books about people like me.

"My aunt Lucia was of a similar disposition," he told me. "Once her last child was grown, she gave up on dresses entirely. Wore a suit to church for her last twelve years, which gave her a reputation for eccentricity."

I clamped my mouth shut and nodded along, still feeling ill and shaky from the jump. The smell of Uncle Dante's cigar burned in my nostrils. I wished we could have had the conversation outside, on the porch; the parlor seemed too familiar, too laden with the ghost of your presence.

"What should I put instead?" he asked, pulling his book down from the mantle: the ancient gilt-edged journal where he recorded our family's births, marriages, and deaths, as they were reported to him.

"It's blank when I'm born," I told him. He paused in the act of sharpening his pencil—he knew better than to write the future in ink. "Just erase it. Tear the whole page out and rewrite it if you need to."

He sat back in his chair and combed his fingers through his beard. "That's ... unprecedented," he said. Again, that pause, the heaviness of the word choice.

"Not anymore," I said.

* * *

Nineteen sixty-three feels like a menstrual cramp, like the ache in my legs as my bones stretched, like the twinges in my nipples as my breasts developed. It smells like Secret roll-on deodorant and the menthol cigarettes you took up smoking. It tastes like the peach cobbler I burned in Home Ec class, which the teacher forced me to eat. It sounds like Sam Cooke's album *Night Beat*, which Dara, during one of her visits, told me to buy.

And it looks like you, jumpier than I'd ever seen you, so twitchy that even Dad commented on it before he left for his hitch in the oil fields.

"Will you be all right?" he asked after dinner.

I was listening from the kitchen doorway to the two of you talk. I'd come in to ask Dad if he was going to watch *Gunsmoke*, which would be starting in a few minutes, with me, and caught the two of you with your heads together by the sink.

You leaned forward, bracing your hands on the edge of the sink, looking for all the world as if you couldn't hold yourself up, as if gravity was working just a little bit harder on you than it was on everyone else. I wondered for a second if you were going to tell him about Dara. I'd grown up keeping her a secret with you, though the omission had begun to weigh heavier on me. I loved Dad, and I loved Dara; being unable to reconcile the two of them seemed trickier each passing week.

Instead you said nothing. You relaxed your shoulders, and you smiled for him, and kissed his cheek. You said the two of us would be fine, not to worry about his girls.

And the very next day, you pulled me out of bed and showed me our family's time machine, in the old tornado shelter with the lock I'd never been able to pick.

* * *

I know more about the machine now, after talking with Uncle Dante, reading the records that he kept. About the mysterious man, Moses Stone, who built it in 1905, when Grandma Emmeline's parents leased out a parcel of land. He called it the anachronopede, which probably sounded marvelous in 1905, but even Uncle Dante was rolling his eyes at the name twenty years later. I know that Stone took Emmeline on trips to the future when she was seventeen, and then abandoned her after a few years, and nobody's been able to find him since then. I know that the machine is keyed to something in Emmeline's matrilineal DNA, some recessive gene.

I wonder if that man, Stone, built the anachronopede as an experiment. An experiment needs parameters, right? So build a machine that only certain people in one family can use. We can't go back before 1905, when the machine was completed, and we can't go past August 3, 2321. What happens that day? The only way to find out is to go as far forward as possible, and then wait. Maroon yourself in time. Exile yourself as far forward as you can, where none of us can reach you.

I know you were lonely, waiting for me to grow up so you could travel again. You were exiled when you married Dad in 1947, in that feverish period just after the war. It must have been so romantic at first: I've seen the letters he wrote during the years he courted you. And you'd grown up seeing his name written next to yours, and the date that

you'd marry him. When did you start feeling trapped, I wonder? You were caught in a weird net of fate and love and the future and the past. You loved Dad, but your love kept you hostage. You loved me, but you knew that someday, I'd transform myself into someone you didn't recognize.

* * *

At first, when you took me underground to see the anachronopede, I thought you and Dad had built a fallout shelter. But there were no beds or boxes of canned food. And built into the rocky wall were rows of doors that looked like the one on our icebox. Round lightbulbs lay just above the doors, nearly all of them red, though one or two were slowly blinking between orange and yellow.

Nearly all the doors were shut, except for two, near the end, which hung ajar.

"Those two capsules are for us, you and me," you said. "Nobody else can use them."

I stared at them. "What are they for?"

I'd heard you and Dara speak in code for nearly all of my life, jumps and capsules and fastenings. I'd imagined all sorts of things. Aliens and spaceships and doorways to another dimension, all the sort of things I'd seen Truman Bradley introduce on *Science Fiction Theatre*.

"Traveling," you said.

"In time or in space?"

You seemed surprised. I'm not sure why. Dad collected pulp magazines, and you'd given me books by H. G. Wells and Jules Verne for Christmas in years past. The Justice League had gone into the future. I'd seen *The Fly* last year during a half-price matinee. You know how it was back then: such things weren't considered impossible, so much as inevitable. The future was a country we all wanted so badly to visit.

"In time," you said.

I immediately started peppering you with questions: How far into the future had you gone? When were you born? Had you met dinosaurs? Had you met King Arthur? What about jet packs? Was Dara from the future?

You held a hand to your mouth, watching as I danced around the small cavern, firing off questions like bullets being sprayed from a tommy gun.

"Maybe you are too young," you said, staring at the two empty capsules in the wall.

"I'm not!" I insisted. "Can't we go somewhere? Just a—just a quick jump?"

I added in the last part because I wanted you to know I'd been listening, when you and Dara had talked in code at the kitchen table. I'd been waiting for you to include me in the conversation.

"Tomorrow," you decided. "We'll leave tomorrow."

* * *

The first thing I learned about time travel was that you couldn't eat anything before you did it. And you could only take a few sips of water: no juice or milk. The second thing I learned was that it was the most painful thing in the world, at least for me.

"Your grandmother Emmeline called it the fastening," you told me. "She said it felt like being a button squeezed through a too-narrow slit in a piece of fabric. It affects everyone differently."

"How's it affect you?"

You twisted your wedding ring around on your finger. "I haven't done it since before you were born."

You made me go to the bathroom twice before we walked back on that path, taking the fork that led to the shelter where the capsules were. The grass was still wet with dew, and there was a chill in the air. Up above, thin, wispy clouds were scratched onto the sky, but out west, I could see dark clouds gathering. There'd be storms later.

But what did I care about later? I was going into a time machine.

I asked you, "Where are we going?"

You replied, "To visit Dara. Just a quick trip."

There was something cold in your voice. I recognized the tone: the same you used when trying to talk me into wearing the new dress you'd bought me for church, or telling me to stop tearing through the house and play quietly for once.

In the shelter, you helped me undress, though it made me feel hotly embarrassed and strange to be naked in front of you again. I'd grown wary of my own body in the last few months, at how it was changing: I'd been dismayed by the way my nipples had grown tender, at the fatty

flesh that had budded beneath them. It seemed like a betrayal.

I hunched my shoulders and covered my privates, though you barely glanced at my naked skin. You helped me lie down in the capsule, showed me how to pull the round mask over the bottom half of my face, attach the clip that went over my index finger. Finally, you lifted one of my arms up and wrapped a black cuff around the crook of my elbow. I noticed, watching you, that you had bitten all of your nails down to the quick, that the edges were jagged and tender looking.

"You program your destination date in here, you see?" You tapped a square of black glass on the ceiling of the capsule, and it lit up at the touch. Your fingers flew across the screen, typing directly onto it, rearranging colored orbs that seemed to attach themselves to your finger as soon as you touched them.

"You'll learn how to do this on your own eventually," you said. The screen, accepting whatever you'd done to it, blinked out and went black again.

I breathed through my mask, which covered my nose and face. A whisper of air blew against my skin, a rubbery, stale, lemony scent.

"Don't be scared," you said. "I'll be there when you wake up. I'm sending myself back a little earlier, so I'll be there to help you out of the capsule."

You kissed me on the forehead and shut the door. I was left alone in the dark as the walls around me started to hum.

Calling it the fastening does it a disservice. It's much more painful than that. Granny Emmeline is far tougher than I'll ever be if she thought it was just like forcing a button into place.

For me, it felt like being crushed in a vice that was lined with broken glass and nails. I understood, afterward, why you had forbidden me from eating or drinking for twenty-four hours. I would have vomited in the mask, shat myself inside the capsule. I came back to myself in the dark, wild with terror and the phantom remains of that awful pain.

The door opened. The light needled into my eyes, and I screamed, trying to cover them. The various cuffs and wires attached to my arms tugged my hands back down, which made me panic even more.

Hands reached in and pushed me down, and eventually, I registered your voice in my ear, though not what you were saying. I stopped flailing long enough for all the straps and cuffs to be undone, and then I was lifted out of the capsule. You held me in your arms, rocking and soothing me, rubbing my back as I cried hysterically onto your shoulder.

I was insensible for a few minutes. When my sobs died away to hiccups, I realized that we weren't alone in the shelter. Dara was with us as well, and she had thrown a blanket over my shoulders.

"Jesus, Miriam," she said, over and over. "What the hell were you thinking?"

I found out later that I was the youngest person in my family to ever make a jump. Traditionally, they made their first jumps on their seventeenth birthday. I was nearly five years shy of that.

You smoothed back a lock of my hair, and I saw that all your fingernails had lost their ragged edge. Instead, they were rounded and smooth, topped with little crescents of white.

* * *

Uncle Dante told me that it wasn't unusual for two members of the family to be lovers, especially if there were generational gaps between them. It helped to avoid romantic entanglements with people who were bound to linear lives, at least until they were ready to settle down for a number of years, raising children. Pregnancy didn't mix well with time travel. It was odder to do what you did: settle down with someone who was, as Dara liked to put it, stuck in the slow lane of linear time.

Dara told me about the two of you, eventually; that you'd been lovers before you met Dad, before you settled down with him in 1947. And that when she started visiting us in 1955, she wasn't sleeping alone in the guest bedroom.

I'm not sure if I was madder at her or you at the time, though I've since forgiven her. Why wouldn't I? You've left both of us, and it's a big thing, to have that in common.

* * *

Nineteen eighty-one is colored silver, beige, bright orange, deep brown. It feels like the afghan blanket Dara kept on my bed while I recovered from my first jump, some kind of cheap fake wool. It tastes like chicken soup and weak tea with honey and lime Jell-O.

And for a few days, at least, 1981 felt like a low-grade headache that never went away, muscle spasms that I couldn't always control, dry

mouth, difficulty swallowing. It smelled like a lingering olfactory hallucination of frying onions. It sounded like a ringing in the ears.

"So you're the unnamed baby, huh?" Dara said that first morning when I woke up. She was reading a book, and set it down next to her on the couch.

I was disoriented: you and Dara had placed me in the southeast bedroom, the same one I slept in all through childhood. (The same one I'm recovering in right now.) I'm not sure if you thought it would comfort me, to wake up to familiar surroundings. It was profoundly strange, to be in my own bedroom but have it be so different: the striped wallpaper replaced with avocado green paint; a loveseat with floral upholstery where my dresser had been; all my posters of Buck Rogers and Superman replaced with framed prints of unfamiliar artwork.

"Dara?" I said. She seemed different, colder. Her hair was shorter than the last time I'd seen her, and she wore a pair of thick-framed glasses.

She cocked her head. "That'd be me. Nice to meet you."

I blinked at her, still disoriented and foggy. "We met before," I said.

She raised her eyebrows, like she couldn't believe I was so dumb. "Not by my timeline."

Right. Time travel.

You rushed in then. You must have heard us talking. You crouched down next to me and stroked the hair back from my face.

"How are you feeling?" you asked.

I looked down at your fingernails, and saw again that they were smooth, no jagged edges, and a hint of white at the edges. Dara told me later that you'd arrived two days before me, just so you two could have a few days alone together. After all, you'd only left her for 1947 a few days before. The two of you had a lot to talk about.

"All right, I guess," I told you.

* * *

It felt like the worst family vacation for those first few days. Dara was distant with me and downright cold to you. I wanted to ask what had happened, but I thought that I'd get the cold shoulder if I did. I caught snippets of the arguments you had with Dara; always whispered in

doorways, or downstairs in the kitchen, the words too faint for me to make out.

It got a little better once I was back on my feet, and able to walk around and explore. I was astonished by everything; the walnut trees on our property that I had known as saplings now towered over me. Dara's television was twice the size of ours, in color, and had over a dozen stations. Dara's car seemed tiny, and shaped like a snake's head, instead of having the generous curves and lines of the cars I knew.

I think it charmed Dara out of her anger a bit, to see me so appreciative of all these futuristic wonders—which were all relics of the past for her—and the conversations between the three of us got a little bit easier. Dara told me more about where she'd come from—the late twenty-first century—and why she was in this time—studying with some poet that I'd never heard of. She showed me the woman's poetry, and though I couldn't make much of it out at the time, one line from one poem has always stuck with me. "I did not recognize the shape of my own name."

I pondered that, lying awake in my bedroom—the once and future bedroom that I'm writing this from now, that I slept in then, that I awoke in when I was a young child, frightened by a storm. The rest of that poem made little sense to me, a series of images that were threaded together by a string of line breaks.

But I know about names, and hearing the one that's been given to you, and not recognizing it. I was trying to stammer this out to Dara one night, after she'd read that poem to me. And she asked, plain as could be, "What would you rather be called instead?"

I thought about how I used to introduce myself after the heroes of the TV shows my father and I watched: Doc and George and Charlie. It had been a silly game, sure, but there'd been something more serious underneath it. I'd recognized something in the shape of those names, something I wanted for myself.

"I dunno. A boy's name," I said. "Like George in The Famous Five."

"Well, why do you want to be called by a boy's name?" Dara asked gently.

In the corner, where you'd been playing solitaire, you paused while laying down a card. Dara noticed too, and we both looked over at you. I cringed, wondering what you were about to say; you hated that I didn't

like my name, took it as a personal insult somehow.

But you said nothing, just resumed playing, slapping the cards down a little more heavily than before.

* * *

I forgive you for drugging me to take me back to 1963. I know I screamed at you after we arrived and the drugs wore off, but I was also a little relieved. It was a sneaking sort of relief, and didn't do much to counterbalance the feelings of betrayal and rage, but I know I would have panicked the second you shoved me into one of those capsules.

You'd taken me to the future, after all. I'd seen the relative wonders of 1981: VHS tapes, the Flash Gordon movie, the Columbia space shuttle. I would have forgiven you so much for that tiny glimpse.

I don't forgive you for leaving me, though. I don't forgive you for the morning after, when I woke up in my old familiar bedroom and padded downstairs for a bowl of cereal, and found, instead, a note that bore two words in your handwriting: *I'm sorry*.

The note rested atop the gilt-edged book that Grandma Emmeline had started as a diary, and that Uncle Dante had turned into both a record and a set of instructions for future generations: the names, birth dates, and the locations for all the traveling members of our family; who lived in the house and when; and sometimes, how and when a person died. The book stays with the house; you must have kept it hidden in the attic.

I flipped through it until I found your name: Miriam Guthrie (née Stone): born November 21, 1977, Harrisburg, IL. Next to it, you penciled in the following.

Jumped forward to June 22, 2321 CE, and will die in exile beyond reach of the anachronopede.

Two small words could never encompass everything you have to apologize for.

* * *

I wonder if you ever looked up Dad's obituary. I wonder if you were even able to, if the record for one small man's death even lasts that long.

When you left, you took my father's future with you. Did you realize

that? He was stuck in the slow lane of linear time, and to Dad, the future he'd dreamed of must have receded into the distance, something he'd never be able to reach.

He lost his job in the fall of 1966, as the White County oil wells ran dry, and hanged himself in the garage six months later. Dara cut him down and called the ambulance; her visits became more regular after you left us, and she must have known the day he would die.

(I can't bring myself to ask her: Couldn't she have arrived twenty minutes earlier and stopped him entirely? I don't want to know her answer.)

In that obituary, I'm first in the list of those who survived him, and it's the last time I used the name you gave me. During the funeral, I nodded, received the hugs and handshakes from Dad's cousins and friends, bowed my head when the priest instructed, prayed hard for his soul. When it was done, I walked alone to the pond where the two of us had sat together, watching birds and talking about the plots of silly television shows. I tried to remember everything that I could about him, tried to preserve his ghost against the vagaries of time: the smell of Kamel cigarettes and diesel on his clothes; the red-blond stubble that dotted his jaw; the way his eyes brightened when they landed on you.

I wished so hard that you were there with me. I wanted so much to cry on your shoulder, to sob as hard and hysterically as I had when you took me to 1981. And I wanted to be able to slap you, to hit you, to push you in the water and hold you beneath the surface. I could have killed you that day, Mama.

When I was finished, Dara took me back to the house. We cleaned it as best we could for the next family member who would live here: there always has to be a member of the Stone family here, to take care of the shelter, the anachronopede, and the travelers that come through.

Then she took me away, to 2073, the home she'd made more than a century away from you.

* * *

Today was the first day I was able to leave the house, to take cautious, wobbling steps to the outside world. Everything is still tender and bruised, though my body is healing faster than I ever thought possible. It feels strange to walk with a weight between my legs; I walk

differently, with a wider stride, even though I'm still limping.

Dara and I walked down to the pond today. The frogs all hushed at our approach, but the blackbirds set up a racket. And off in the distance, a heron lifted a cautious foot and placed it down again. We watched it step carefully through the water, hesitantly. Its beak darted into the water and came back up with a wriggling fish, which it flipped into its mouth. I suppose it was satisfied with that, because it crouched down, spread its wings, and then jumped into the air, enormous wings fighting against gravity until it rose over the trees.

Three days before my surgery, I went back to you. The pain of it is always the same, like I'm being torn apart and placed back together with clumsy, inexpert fingers, but by now I've gotten used to it. I wanted you to see me as the man I've always known I am, that I slowly became. And I wanted to see if I could forgive you; if I could look at you and see anything besides my father's slow decay, my own broken and betrayed heart.

I knocked at the door, dizzy, ears ringing, shivering, soaked from the storm that was so much worse than I remembered. I was lucky that you or Dara had left a blanket in the shelter, so I didn't have to walk up to the front door naked; my flat, scarred chest at odds with my wide hips, the thatch of pubic hair with no flesh protruding from it. I'd been on hormones for a year, and this second puberty reminded me so much of my first one, with you in 1963: the acne and the awkwardness, the slow reveal of my future self.

You answered the door with your hair in curlers, just as I remembered, and fetched me one of Dad's old robes. I fingered the monogramming at the breast pocket, and I wished, so hard, that I could walk upstairs and see him.

"What the hell," you said. "I thought the whole family knew these years were off-limits while I'm linear."

You didn't quite recognize me, and you tilted your head. "Have we met before?"

I looked you in the eyes, and my voice cracked when I told you I was your son.

Your hand went to your mouth. "I'll have a son?" you asked.

And I told you the truth: "You have one already."

And your hand went to your gut, as if you would be sick. You shook

your head, so hard that your curlers started coming loose. That's when the door creaked open, just a crack. You flew over there and yanked it all the way open, snatching the child there up in your arms. I barely caught a glimpse of my own face looking back at me as you carried my child self up the stairs.

I left before I could introduce myself to you: my name is Heron, Mama. I haven't forgiven you yet, but maybe someday, I will. And when I do, I will travel back one last time, to that night you left me and Dad for the future. I'll tell you that your apology has finally been accepted, and will give you my blessing to live in exile, marooned in a future beyond all reach.



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Please Undo This Hurt

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"A coyote got my cat," Nico says.

It took me four beers and three shots to open him up. All night he's been talking about the breakup, what's-her-name Yelena I think, and all night I've known there's something else on him, but I didn't *know* know—

"Fuck, man." I catch at his elbow. He's wearing leather, supple, slick—he's always mock-hurt when I can't tell his good jackets from his great ones. "Mandrill?" A better friend wouldn't have to ask, but I'm drunk, and not so good a friend. "Your cat back home?"

"Poor Mandrill," Nico says, completely forlorn. "Ah, shit, Dominga. I shouldn't have left him."

He only goes to the Lighthouse on empty Sundays, when we can hide in the booths ringed around the halogen beacon. I expect sad nights here. But, man, his *cat* ...

Nico puts his head on my shoulder and makes a broken noise into the side of my neck. I rub his elbow and marvel in a selfish way at how much I *care*, how full of hurt I am, even after this awful week of dead bikers and domestics and empty space where fucking Jacob used to be. It's the drink, of course, and tomorrow if we see each other (we won't) it'll all be awkward, stilted, an unspoken agreement to forget this moment.

But right now I care.

In a moment he'll pull himself up, make a joke, buy a round. I know he will, since Nico and I only speak in bars and only when things feel like dogshit. We've got nothing in common—I ride ambulances around Queens, call my mom in Laredo every week, shouting Spanish into an old flip phone with a busted speaker. He makes smartphone games in a FiDi studio, imports leather jackets, and serially thinks his way out of perfectly good relationships. But all that difference warms me up sometimes, because (forgive me here, I am drunk) what's the world worth if you can't put two strangers together and get them to care? A friendship shouldn't need anything else.

He doesn't pull himself up and he doesn't make a joke.

The lighthouse beam sweeps over us, over the netting around our booth, over Nico's cramped shoulders and gawky height curled up against me. The light draws grid shadows on his leathered back, as if we're in an ambulance together, monitors tracing the thready rhythm of Nico's life. We sit together in the blue fog as the light passes on across empty tables carved with half-finished names.

"I'm really sorry." He finally pulls away, stiff, frowning. "I'm such a drag tonight. How are things after Jacob?"

I cluck in concern, just like my mom. I have to borrow the sound from her because *I* want to scream every time I think about fucking Jacob and fucking *I'm not ready for your life*. "We're talking about you."

He grins a fake grin but he's so good at it I'm still a little charmed. "We've been talking about me *forever*."

"You broke up with your girlfriend and lost your cat. You're having a bad week. As a medical professional I insist I buy you another round." Paramedics drink, and lie sometimes. He dumped Yelena out of the blue, 'to give her a chance at someone better.' The opposite of what Jacob had done to me. "And we're going to talk."

"No." He looks away. I follow his eyes, tracing the lighthouse beam across the room, where the circle of tables ruptures, broken by some necessity of cleaning or fire code: as if a snake had come up out of the light, slithered through the table mandala, and written something with its passage. "No, I'm done."

And the way he says that hits me, hits me low, because I recognize it. I have a stupid compassion that does me no good. I am desperate to help the people in my ambulance, the survivors. I can hold them together but I can't answer the plea I always see in their eyes: *Please, God, please, mother of mercy, just let this never have happened. Make it undone. Let me have a world where things like this never come to pass.*

"Nico," I say, "do you feel like you want to hurt yourself?"

He looks at me and the Lighthouse's sound system glitches for an instant, harsh and negative, as if we're listening to the inverse music that fills the space between the song and the meaningless static beneath.

My heart trips, thumps, like the ambulance alarm's just gone off.

"I don't want to hurt anyone," he says, eyes round and honest. "I don't want to get on Twitter and read about all the atrocities I'm

complicit in. I don't want to trick wonderful women into spending a few months figuring out what a shithead I really am. I don't want to raise little cats to be coyote food. I don't even want to worry about whether I'm dragging my friends down. I just want to undo all the harm I've ever done."

Make it undone.

In my job I see these awful things—this image always come to me: a cyclist's skull burst like watermelon beneath the wheels of a truck he didn't see. I used to feel like I made a difference in my job. But that was a long time ago.

So I hold to this: As long as I can care about other people, I'm not in burnout. Emotional detachment is a cardinal symptom, you see.

"Did you ever see *It's a Wonderful Life?*" I'm trying to lighten the mood. I've only read the Wikipedia page.

"Yeah." Oops. "But I thought it kind of missed the point. What if—" He makes an excited gesture, pointing to an idea. But his eyes are still fixed on the mirror surface of the table, and when he sees himself his jaw works. "What if his angel said, *Oh, you've done more harm than good; but we all do, that's life, those are the rules, there's just more hurt to go around*. Why couldn't he, I forget his name, it doesn't matter, why couldn't he say, well, just redact me. Remove the fact of my birth. I'm a good guy, I don't want to do anyone any harm, so I'm going to opt out. Do you think that's possible? Not a suicide, that's selfish, it hurts people. But a really selfless way out?"

I don't know what to say to that. It's stupid, but he's smart, and he says it so hard.

He grins up at me, full-lipped, beautiful. The lighthouse beacon comes around again and lights up his silhouette and puts his face in shadow except his small white teeth. "I mean, come on. If I weren't here—wouldn't you be having a good night?"

"You're wishing you'd never known me, you realize. You're shitting all over me."

"Dominga Roldan! My knight." There he goes, closing up again, putting on the armor of charm. He likes that Roldan is so much like Roland. It's the first thing he ever told me. "Please. You're the suffering hero at this table. Let's talk about you."

I surrender. I start talking about fucking Jacob.

But I resolve right then that I'll save Nico, convince him that it's worth it to go on, worth it to have ever been.

* * *

I believe in good people. Even though Nico has what we call "resting asshole face" and a job that requires him to trick people into giving him thousands of dollars (he designs the systems that keep people playing smartphone games, especially the parts that keep them spending) I still think he's a good man. He cares, way down.

I believe you can feel that. The world's a cold place and it'll break your heart. You've got to trust in the possibility of good.

I dream of gardening far south and west, home in Laredo. Inexplicably, fucking Jacob is there. He smiles at me, big bear face a little stubbled. I want to yell at him: don't grow a beard! You have a great chin! But we're busy gardening, rooting around in galvanized tubs full of okra and zucchini and purple hull peas. Hot peppers, since the sweet breeds won't take. The autumn light down here isn't so thin as in New York. I am bare-handed, turning up the soil around the roots, grit up under my fingers and in the web of my hands. I am making life.

But down in the zucchini roots I find a knot of maggots, balled up squirming like they've wormed a portal up from maggot hell and come pouring out blind and silent. And I think: I am only growing homes for maggots. Everything is this way. In the end we are only making more homes, better homes, for maggots.

Jacob smiles at me and says, like he did: "I'm just not ready for your life. It's too hard. Too many people get hurt."

I wake up groaning, hangover clotted in my sinuses. Staring up at the vent above my mattress I realize there's no heat. It's broken again.

The cold is sharp, though. Sterile. It makes me go. I get to the hospital on time and Mary's waiting for me, smiling, my favorite partner armed with coffee and danishes and an egg sandwich from the enigmatic food truck only she can find. For my hangover, of course. Mary, bless her, knows my schedule.

Later that day we save a man's life.

He swam out into the river to die. We're first on the scene and I am stupid, so stupid: I jump in to save him. The water's late-autumn cold, the kind of chill I am afraid will get into my marrow and crystallize

there, so that later in life, curled up in the summer sun with a lover, I'll feel a pang and know that a bead of ice came out of my bone and stuck in my heart. I used to get that kind of chest pain growing up, see. I thought they were ice crystals that formed when we went to see ex-Dad in Colorado, where the world felt high and thin, everything offered up on an altar to the truth behind the indifferent cloth of stars.

I'm thinking all this as I haul the drowning man back in. I feel so cold and so aware. My mind goes everywhere. Goes to Jacob, of course.

Offered up on an altar. We used to play a sex game like that, Jacob and I. You know, a sexy sacrifice—isn't that the alchemy of sex games? You take something appalling and you make it part of your appetites. Jesus, I used to think it was cute, and now describing it I'm furiously embarrassed. Jacob was into all kinds of nerd shit. For him I think the fantasy was always kind of Greco-Roman, Andromeda on the rocks, but I always wondered if he dared imagine me as some kind of Aztec princess, which would be too complicatedly racist for him to suggest. He's dating a white girl now. It doesn't bother me but Mom just won't let it go. She's sharp about it, too: she has a theory that Jacob feels he's now Certified Decent, having passed his qualifying exam, and now he'll go on to be a regular shithead.

And Mary's pulling me up onto the pier, and I'm pulling the suicide.

He nearly dies in the ambulance. We swaddle him in heat packs and blankets and Mary, too, swaddles him, smiling and flirting, it's okay, what a day for a swim, does he know that in extreme situations rescuers are advised to provide skin-to-skin contact?

See, Mary's saying, see, it's not so bad here, not so cold. You'll meet good people. You'll go on.

Huddled in my own blankets I meet the swimmer's warm brown eyes and just then the ambulance slams across a pothole. He fibrillates. Alarms shriek. I see him start to go, receding, calm, warm, surrounded by people trying to save him, and I think that if he went now, before his family found out, before he had to go back to whatever drove him into the river, it'd be best.

Oh, God, the hurt can't be undone. It'd be best.

His eyes open. They peel back like membranes. I see a thin screen, thinner than Colorado sky, and in the vast space behind it something white and soft and eyeless wheels on an eternal wind.

His heart quits. He goes into asystole.

"Come on," Mary hisses, working on him. "Come on. You can't do this to me. Dominga, let's get some epi going—come on, don't go."

I think that's the hook that pulls him in. He cares. He doesn't want to hurt her. Like Nico, he can't stand to do harm. By that hook or by the CPR and the epinephrine we bring him back. Afterward I sit outside in the cold, the bitter dry cold, and I can *feel* it: the heat going out of me, the world leaking up through the sky and out into the void where something ancient waits, a hypothermic phantasm, a cold fever dream, the most real thing I've ever seen.

I flail around for something human to hold and remember, then, how worried I am about Nico.

* * *

Don't judge me too harshly. This is my next move: I invite Nico to game night with Jacob and his new girlfriend Elise. Nico is a game designer, right? It fits. I promised Jacob we'd still be friends. Everything fits.

It's not about any kind of payback.

Jacob loves this idea. He suggests a café/bar nerd money trap called Glass Needle. I turn up with Nico (*Cool jacket*, I say, and he grins back at me from under his mirrored aviators, saying, *You really can't tell!*) and we all shake hands and say Hi, hi, wow, it's so great, under a backlit ceiling of frosted glass etched with the shapes of growing things.

"Isn't that cool?" Jacob beams at me. "They do that with hydrofluorosilicic acid." He's growing too: working on a beard and a gut, completing the deadly Santa array. Elise looks like she probably does yoga. She arranges the game with assured competence. I wonder how many times Jacob practiced saying *hydrofluorosilicic*, and what their sex is like.

Nico tongues a square of gum. "That's really impressive," he says.

The games engage him. I guess the games engage me too: Jacob will listen to anything Nico says, since Jacob cares about everything and Nico pretends he doesn't. "I love board games," Jacob explains.

"I love rules," Nico replies, and this is true: Nico thinks everything is a game to be played, history, evolution, even dating, even friendship. Everything has a winning strategy. He'll describe this cynicism to anyone, since he thinks it's sexy. If you know him you can see how deeply it bothers him.

It's Sunday again. I worked eighteen hours yesterday. I'm exhausted, I can't stop thinking about the swimmer flatline. Jacob looks at me with the selfless worry permitted to the ex who did the dumping.

If I weren't here, I think, wouldn't you be having a good night?

The game baffles me. Elise assembles a zoo of cardboard tokens, decks of tiny cards, dice, character sheets, Jacob chattering all the while: "These are for the other worlds you'll visit. These are spells you can learn, though of course they'll drive you mad. This card means you're the town sheriff—that one means you eat free at the diner—"

Elise pats him on the hand. "I think they can learn as they go."

We're supposed to patrol a town where the world has gotten thin and wounded. If we don't heal those wounds, something will come through, a dreadful thing with a name like the Treader In Dust or whatever. Nico's really good at the game. He flirts with me outrageously, which earns a beautifully troubled Jacob-face, a face of perturbed enlightenment: *really, this shouldn't be bothering me!* So I flirt back at Nico. Why not? He's the one getting a kick out of meeting my ex and out-charming him, out-dressing him, talking over him while he sits there and takes it. And wouldn't Mary flirt, to comfort him? To remind poor forlorn Nico that the world's not so cold?

Only Nico doesn't seem so forlorn, and when I look at Jacob, there's Elise touching shoulders with him, which makes every memory of Jacob hurt. As if she's claimed him not just now but retroactively too.

Even Elise, who's played it a hundred times, can't manage this damn game. The rules seem uncertain, as if different parts of the rule book contradict each other. Jacob and Nico argue over exactly how the monsters decide to hunt us, precisely when the Magic Shop closes up, where the yawning portals lead. Oh, Nico—this must be so satisfyingly you: You are beating Jacob's game, you're better than his rules. Even Elise won't argue with Nico, preferring, she says, to focus on the emergent narrative.

It all leaves me outside.

I drink to spiteful excess and move my little character around in sullen ineffective ways. Jacob's eyes are full of stupid understanding. I look at him and try to beam my thoughts: I hate this. This makes me sick. I wish I'd never met you. I wish I could burn up all the good times

we had, just to spare myself this awful night.

That's what I thought when he left. That it hadn't been worth it.

"Can we switch sides," Nico asks, "and obtain dreadful secrets from the Great Old One?"

"You could try." Elise loves this. She grins at Nico and I savor Jacob's reaction. "But your only hope is that It will devour your soul first, so you don't have to experience the terrible majesty of Its coming."

And Nico grins at me. "What an awful world. You're fucked the moment you're born." Making a joke out of his drunken despair, out of dead Mandrill and his own hurt. Of course he doesn't take it seriously. Of course he was just drunk.

I am everyone's sucker.

"I think you can do that with an expansion set," Jacob adds helpfully. "Switch sides, I mean."

"Let's play with it next time," Nico says. Elise bounces happily. There probably *will* be a next time, won't there? The three of them will be friends.

"I feel sick," I say, "it's just—something I saw on shift. It's getting to me."

Then I go. They can't argue with that. They all work in offices.

Nico texts me: Holy shit we lost. Alien god woke up to consume the world. We went mad with rapture and horror when it spoke hidden secrets of the universal design although I did shoot it with a tommy gun. Game is fucking broken. It was amazing thank you.

I text back: cool

What I want to say is: you asshole, I hope you're happy, I hope you're glad you're right, I hope you're glad you won. I believe in good people, you know, but I used to think Jacob was a good person, and look where that got me; I just wanted to cheer you up and look where that got me. I pull people from the river, I drag them dying out of their houses, I see their spinal fluid running into the gutters and look where all that gets me—

Jesus, this world, this world. I feel so heartsick. I cannot even retch.

And I dream of that awful board, piled with tokens moving each other by their own secret rules. A game of alien powers but those powers escape the game to move among us. They roam the world cow-eyed and compassionate and offer hands with fingers like

fishhooks. We live in a paddock, a fattening pen, and we cannot leave it, because when we try to go the hooks say, *Think of who you'll hurt*.

So much hurt to try to heal. And the healing hurts too much.

* * *

The hangover sings an afterimage song. Like the drunkenness was ripped out of me and it left a negative space, the opposite of contentment. It vibrates in my bones.

I get up, brushing at an itch on my back, and drink straight from the bathroom faucet. When I come back to my mattress it's speckled, speckled white. Something's dripping on it from the air vent—oh, oh, they're maggots, slim white maggots. My air vent is dripping maggots. They're all over the covers, white and searching.

I call my landlord. I pin plastic sheeting up over the vent. I clean my bedroom twice, once for the maggots, once again after I throw up. Then I go to work.

Everything I touch feels infested. Inhabited.

Mary's got an egg sandwich for me but she looks like shit, weary, dry-skinned, her face flaking. "Hi," she says. "I'm sorry, I have the worst migraine."

"Oh, hon. Take it easy." The headaches started when she transitioned, an estrogen thing. She's quiet about them, and strong. I'm happy she tells me.

"Hey, you too. Which, uh—actually." She gives me the sandwich and makes a brave face, like she's afraid that someone's going to snap at someone, like she doesn't want to snap first. "I signed you up for a stress screening. They want you in the little conference room in half an hour."

I'm not angry. I just feel dirty and rotten and useless: now I'm even letting Mary down. "Oh," I say. "Jesus, I'm sorry. I didn't realize I'd ... was it the epi? Was I too slow on the epi last week?"

"You didn't do anything wrong." She rubs her temples. "I'm just worried about you."

I want to give her a hug and thank her for caring but she's so obviously in pain. And the thought of the maggots keeps me away.

They're waiting for me in the narrow conference room: a man in a baggy blue suit, a woman in surgical scrubs with an inexplicable black

stain like tar. "Dominga Roldan?" she says.

"That's me."

The man shakes my hand enthusiastically. "We just wanted to chat. See how you were. After your rescue swim."

The woman beckons: sit. "Think of this as a chance to relax."

"We're worried about you, Dominga," the man says. I can't get over how badly his suit fits. "I remember some days in the force I felt like the world didn't give a fuck about us. Just made me want to give up. You ever feel that way?"

I want to say what Nico would say: actually, sir, that's not the problem at all, the problem is caring too much, caring so much you can't ask for help because everyone else is already in so much pain.

Nico wouldn't say that, though. He'd find a really clever way to not say it.

"Sure," I say. "But that's the job."

"Did you know the victim?" the woman asks. The man winces at her bluntness. I blink at her and she purses her lips and tilts her head, to *Yes, I know how it sounds, but please*.say: "The suicide you rescued. Did you know him?"

"No." Of course not. What?

The man opens his mouth and she cuts him off. "But did you feel that you did, at any point? After he coded, maybe?"

I stare at her. My hangover turns my stomach and drums on the inside of my skull. It's not that I don't get it: it's that I feel I do, that something has been gestating in the last few days, in the missing connections between unrelated events.

The man sighs and unlatches his briefcase. I just can't shake the sense that his suit *used* to fit, not so long ago. "Let her be," he says. "Dominga, I just gotta tell you, I admire the hell out of people like you. Me, I think the only good in this world is the good we bring to it. Good people, people like you, you make this place worth living in."

"So we need to take care of people like you." The woman in scrubs has a funny accent—not quite Boston, still definitely a Masshole. "Burnout's very common. You know the stages?"

"Sure." First exhaustion, then shame, then callous cynicism. Then collapse. But I'm not there yet, I'm not past cynicism. I still want to help.

The man lifts a tiny glass cylinder from his briefcase, a cylinder full

of a green fleshy mass—a caterpillar, a fat warty caterpillar, pickled in cloudy fluid and starting to peel apart. He looks at me apologetically, as if this is an awkward necessity, just his morning caterpillar in brine.

"Sometimes this job becomes overwhelming." The woman's completely unmoved by the caterpillar. Her eyes have a kind of look-away quality, like those awful xenon headlights assholes use, unsafe to meet head-on. "Sometimes you need to stop taking on responsibilities and look after yourself. It's very important that you have resources to draw on."

Baggy Suit holds his cylinder gingerly, a thumb on one end and two fingers on the other, and stares at it. Is there *writing* on it? The woman says, "Do you have a safe space at home? Somewhere to relax?"

"Well—no, I guess not, there's a bug problem..."

The woman frowns in sympathy but her *eyes* don't frown, God, not at all—they smile. I don't know why. The man rolls his dead caterpillar tube and suddenly I grasp that the writing's on the *inside*, facing the dead bug.

"You've got to take care of yourself." He sounds petulant; he looks at the woman in scrubs with quiet resentment. "We need good people out there. Fighting the good fight."

"But if you feel you can't go on ... If you're absolutely overwhelmed, and you can't see a way forward..." The woman leans across the table to take my hands. She's colder than the river where the man went to die. "I want to give you a number, okay? A place you can call for help."

She reads it off to me and I get *hammered* with déjà vu: I know it already, I'm sure. Or maybe that's not quite right, I don't know it exactly. It's just that it feels like it fits inside me, as if a space has been hollowed out for it, made ready to contain its charge.

"Please take care of yourself," the man tells me, on the way out. "If you don't, the world will just eat you up." And he lifts the caterpillar in salute.

I leave work early. I desperately don't want to go home, where the maggots will be puddled in the plastic up on my ceiling, writhing, eyeless, bulging, probably eating each other.

Mary walks me out. "You going to take any time off? See anybody?" "I just saw Jacob and Elise yesterday."

"How was that?"

"A really bad decision." I shake my head and that, too, is a bad decision. "How's the migraine?"

"I'm okay. I'll live." It strikes me that when Mary says that, I believe it—and maybe she sees me frown, follows my thoughts, because she asks, "What about Nico? Are you still seeing him?"

"Yeah. Sort of."

"And?" Her impish well-did-you? grin.

"I'm worried about him." And furious, too, but if I said that I'd have to explain, and then Mary would be concerned about me, and I'd feel guilty because surely Mary has real problems, bigger problems than mine. "He's really depressed."

"Oh. That's all you need. Look—" She stops me just short of the doors. "Dominga, you're a great partner. I hope I didn't step on your toes today. But I really want you to get some room, okay? Do something for yourself."

I give her a long, long hug, and I forget about the maggots, just for the length of it.

There's a skywriter above the hospital, buzzing around in sharp curves. The sky's clean and blue and infinite, dizzyingly deep. Evening sun glints on the plane so it looks like a sliver poking up through God's skin.

I watch it draw signs in falling red vapor and when the wind shears them apart I think of the Lighthouse, where the circle of tables was ruptured by the passage of an illusory force.

I want to act. I want to help. I want to ease someone's pain. I don't want to do something for myself, because —

You're only burnt out once you stop wanting to help.

I call Nico. "Hey," he says. "Didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"Want to get a drink?" I say, and then, my throat raw, my tongue acid, a hangover trick, words squirming out of me with wet expanding pressure, "I learned something you should know. A place to go, if you need help. If that's what you want. If the world really is too much."

Sometimes you say a thing and then you realize it's true.

He laughs. "I can't believe you're making fun of me about that. You're such an asshole. Do you want to go to Kosmos?"

* * *

"So," Nico says, "are we dating?"

Kosmos used to be a warehouse. Now the ceiling is an electric star field, a map of alien constellations. We sit together directly beneath a pair of twin red stars.

"Oh," I say, startled. "I was worried. After yesterday, I mean, I just..." Was furious, was hurt, didn't know why: because you were having fun, because I wasn't, because I thought you needed help, because you pretended you didn't. One of those. All of them.

Maybe he doesn't like what he sees in my eyes. He gets up. "Be right back." The house music samples someone talking about the expansion of the universe. Nico touches my shoulder on the way to the bathroom and I watch him recede, savoring the fading charge of his hand, thinking about space carrying us apart, and how safe that would be.

I have a choice to offer him. Maybe we'll leave together.

Nico comes back with drinks – wine, of all things, as if we're celebrating. "I thought that game was charmingly optimistic, you know."

"Jacob's game?" He's been tagging me in Facebook pictures of the stupid thing. I should block Jacob, so it'd stop hurting, which is why I don't.

"Right. I was reading about it."

The wine's dry and sweet. It tastes like tomorrow's hangover, like coming awake on a strange couch under a ceiling with no maggots. I take three swallows. "I thought it was about unknowable gods and the futility of all human life."

"Sure." That stupid cocky grin of his hits hard because I know what's behind it. "But in the game there's something out there, something bigger than us. Which—I mean, compared to what we've got, at least it's *interesting*." He points to the electric universe above us, all its empty dazzling artifice. "How's work?"

"I'm taking a break. Don't worry about it." I have a plan here, a purpose. I am an agent, although which meaning of that word fits I don't know. "Why'd you really dump Yelena?"

"I told you." He resorts to the wine, to buy himself a moment. "Really, I was honest. I thought she could do a lot better than me. I wanted her to be happy."

"But what about you? She made you happy."

"Yeah, yeah, she did. But I don't want to be the kind of person

who—" He stops here and takes another slow drink. "I don't want to be someone like Jacob."

"Jacob's very happy," I say, which is his point, of course.

"And look how he left you."

"What if I thought *you* made me happy?" Somewhere, somehow, Mary's cheering me on: that gets me through the sentence. "Would this be a date? Or are we both too ... tired?"

Tired of doing hurt, and tired of taking it. Tired of the great cartographic project. Isn't it a little like cartography? Meeting lovely people, mapping them, racing to find their hurts before they can find yours—getting use from them, squeezing them dry, and then striking first, unilaterally and with awful effect, because the alternative is waiting for them to do the same to you. These are the rules, you didn't make them, they're not your fault. So you might as well play to win.

Nico looks at me with dark guarded eyes. I would bet my life here, at last, that he's wearing one of his good jackets.

"Dominga," he says, and makes a little motion like he's going to take my hand, but can't quite commit, "Dominga, I'm sorry, but ... God, I must sound like such an asshole, but I meant what I said. I'm done hurting people."

And I know exactly what he's saying. I remember it, I *feel* it—it's like when you get drunk with a guy and everything's just magical, you feel connected, you feel okay. But you know, even then, even in that moment, that tomorrow you will regret this: that the hole you opened up to him will admit the cold, or the knife. There will be a text from him, or the absence of a text, or—worse, much worse—the sight of him with someone new, months later, after the breakup, the sight of him doing that secret thing he does to say, *I'm thinking of you*, except it's not secret any more, and it's not you he's thinking of now.

And you just want to be done. You want a warmer world.

So here it is: my purpose, my plan. "Nico, what if I could give you a way out?"

He sets down his wine glass and turns it by the stem. It makes a faint, high shriek against the blackened steel tabletop, and he winces, and says, "What do you mean?"

"Just imagine a hypothetical. Imagine you're right about everything—the universe is a hard place. To live you have to risk a lot of hurt." You're going to wonder how I came up with the rest of this, and all I can offer is fatigue, terror, maggots in my air vents, the memory of broken skulls on sidewalks: a kind of stress psychosis. Or the other explanation, of course. "Imagine that our last chance to be really good is revoked at the instant of our conception."

He follows along with good humor and a kind of adorable narcissism that I'm so engaged with his cosmic bullshit and (under it all) an awakening sense that something's off, askew. "Okay..."

The twin red suns multiply our shadows around us. I drift a little ways above myself on the wine, and it makes it easier to go on, to imagine or transmit this: "What if something out there knew a secret—"

A secret! Such a secret, a secret you might hear in the wind that passes between the libraries of jade teeth that wait in an empty city burnt stark by a high blue star that never leaves the zenith, a secret that tumbles down on you like a fall of maggots from a white place behind everything, where a pale immensity circles on the silent wind.

"What if there were a way out? Like a phone number you could call, a person you could talk to, kind of a hotline, and you'd say, oh, I'm a smart, depressed, compassionate person, I'm tired of the great lie that it's possible to do more good than harm, I'm tired of my Twitter feed telling me the world's basically a car full of kindergartners crumpling up in a trash compactor. I don't want to be complicit any more. I want out. Not suicide, no, that'd just hurt people. I want something better. And they'd say, sure, man, we have your mercy here, we can do that. We can make it so you never were."

He looks at me with an expression of the most terrible unguarded longing. He tries to cover it up, he tries to go flirty or sarcastic, but he can't.

I take my phone out, my embarrassing old flip phone, and put it on the table between us. I don't have to use the contacts to remember. The number keys make soft chiming noises as I type the secret in.

"So," I say, "my question is: who goes first?"

Something deep beneath me exalts, as if this is what it wants: and I cannot say if that thing is separate from me.

He reaches for the phone. "Not you, I hope," he says, with a really brave play-smile: he knows this is all a game, an exercise of imagination. He knows it's real. "The world needs people like you, Dominga. So what

am I going to get? Is it a sex line?"

"If you go first," I say, "do you think that'd change the world enough that I wouldn't want to go second?"

I have this stupid compassion in me, and it cries out for the hurts of others. Nico's face, just then—God, have you ever known this kind of beauty? This desperate, awful hope that the answer was *yes*, that he might, by his absence, save me?

His finger hovers a little way above the call button.

"I think you'd have to go first," he says. He puts his head back, all the way back, as if to blow smoke: but I think he's looking up at the facsimile stars. "That'd be important."

"Why?"

"Because," he says, all husky nonchalance, "if you weren't here, I would *absolutely* go; whereas if I weren't here, I don't know if you'd go. And if this method were real, this, uh, operation of mercy, then the universe is lost, the whole operation's fucked, and it's vital that you get out."

His finger keeps station a perilous few millimeters from the call. I watch this space breathlessly. "Tell me why," I say, to keep him talking, and then I realize: oh, Nico, you'd think this out, wouldn't you? You'd consider the new rules. You'd understand the design. And I'm afraid that what he'll say will be *right* —

He lays it out there: "Well, who'd use it?"

"Good people," I say. That's how burnout operates. You burn out because you care. "Compassionate people."

"That's right." He gets a little melancholy here, a little singsong, in a way that feels like the rhythm of my stranger thoughts. I wonder if he's had an uncanny couple days too, and whether I'll ever get a chance to ask him. "The universe sucks, man, but it sucks a lot more if you care, if you feel the hurt around you. So if there were a way out—a certain kind of people would use it, right? And those people would go extinct."

Oh. Right.

There might have been a billion good people, ten billion, a hundred, before us: and one by one they chose to go, to be unmade, a trickle at first, just the kindest, the ones most given to shoulder their neighbors' burdens and ask nothing in exchange—but the world would get harder for the loss of each of them, and there'd be more reason then, more hurt

to go around, so the rattle would become an avalanche.

And we'd be left. The dregs. Little selfish people and their children.

The stars above change, the false constellations reconfiguring. Nico sighs up at them. "You think that's why the sky's empty?"

"Of-aliens, you mean?" What a curious brain.

"Yeah. They were too good. They ran into bad people, bad situations, and they didn't want to compromise themselves. So they opted out."

"Maybe someone's hunting good people." If this thing were real, well, wouldn't it be a perfect weapon, a perfect instrument in something's special plan? Bait and trap all at once.

"Maybe. One way or another—well, we should go, right?" He comes back from the cosmic distance. His finger hasn't moved. He grins his stupid cocky camouflage grin because the alternative is ghoulish and he says, "I think I make a pretty compelling case."

Everything cold and always getting colder because the warmth puts itself out.

"Maybe." Maybe. He's very clever. "But I'm not going first."

Nico puts his finger down (and I feel the cold, up out of my bones, sharp in my heart) but he's just pinning the corner of the phone so he can spin it around. "Jacob definitely wouldn't make the call," he says, teasing, a really harsh kind of tease, but it's about me, about how I hurt, which feels good.

"Neither would Mary," I say, which is, all in all, my counterargument, my stanchion, my sole refuge. If something's out to conquer us, well, the conquest isn't done. Something good remains. Mary's still here. She hasn't gone yet—whether you take all this as a thought experiment or not.

"Who's Mary?" He raises a skeptical eyebrow: you have *friends*? "Stick around," I say, "and I'll tell you."

Right then I get one more glimpse past the armor: he's frustrated, he's glad, he's all knotted up, because I won't go first, and whatever going first means, he doesn't want to leave me to go second. He wouldn't have to care anymore, of course. But he still cares. That's how compassion works.

If I had a purpose here, well, I suppose it's done.

"You're taking a break from work?" He closes the phone and pushes

it back to me. "What's up with that? Can I help?"

When I go to take the phone he makes a little gesture, like he wants to take my hand, and I make a little gesture like I want him to—and between the two of us, well, we manage.

* * *

I still have the number, of course. Maybe you worry that it works. Maybe you're afraid I'll use it, or that Nico will, when things go bad. Things do so often go bad.

You won't know if I use it, of course, because then I'll never have told you this story, and you'll never have read it. But that's a comfort, isn't it? That's enough.

The story's still here. We go on.

About the Author

SETH DICKINSON's short fiction has appeared in *Analog, Asimov's, Clarkesworld, Lightspeed, Strange Horizons, Beneath Ceaseless Skies,* among others. He is an instructor at the Alpha Workshop for Young Writers, winner of the 2011 Dell Magazines Award, and a lapsed student of social neuroscience. He lives in Brooklyn, New York. *The Traitor Baru Cormorant* is his first novel. You can sign up for email updates here.



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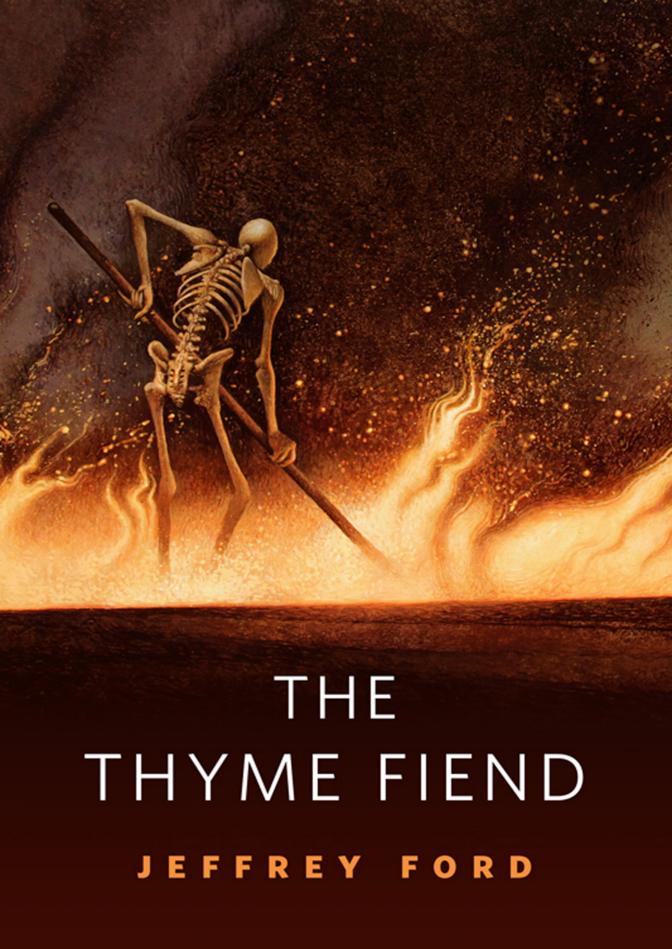
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The Thyme Fiend

JEFFREY FORD

illustration by

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In July of 1915, in Hardin County, Ohio, the normally reliable breeze of the plains that through eons could be counted on for at least a modicum of relief during the most dire of summer days—a wave in the wheat, a whisper in the cornfield—without warning up and died. The relentless blue skies and humidity were merciless; the dream-white clouds, palatial and unmoving. Over ninety degrees every day, often over a hundred, no hint of rain. Fear of crop failure turned like a worm in the heart. Farm folk sweated and burned at their labor, and at night took to either the bible or the bottle or both. Some children were sent to the evaporating creek to try to catch memories of coolness; some to the distant windbreaks, those thickets of trees, like oases in the vastness of cornfields, to play Desert Island and loll in the shade until the sun went down. More than one mother fainted from the heat of a stove. Nights were better for being dark but offered no relief from the sodden stillness that made sleep so hard to achieve.

On the hottest of the days in that long spell, sometime just before noon, when the sun was at its cruelest, fourteen-year-old Emmett Wallace mounted his bike and, leaving the barnyard, headed out on the dirt road that ran all the way to Threadwell or Mount Victory, depending on which direction you chose. He pedaled slowly west, toward the former, passing between fields of drooping wheat. Turkey vultures circled, casting their shadows on him, and the long straight path he traveled dissolved at a distance into a rippling mirage.

The bike wasn't new, but it was new to him, his first, and the joy of powering himself along, the speed of it, hadn't yet become old hat. It had been a birthday gift from his father not but five days earlier. Bought used, it was a Hercules; a rash of rust across its fading red paint, splintered wooden rims, an unpadded shoehorn of a seat with a saddlebag behind it. There was a small oil lantern with a glass door attached to the handlebars, but the burner was missing.

Nothing was said, but the boy knew the bike had come to him as reparation for an incident that happened in spring. It was after a day of ploughing, dusk coming on, and father and son stood in the barnyard, unhitching the horses. They'd worked for days, from one end of their land to the other. Emmett sensed that he was, for the first time, more an asset in the fields than a distraction and felt a closeness to his father that had been missing in recent months. In that instant it came to him to try to explain just why he needed his cup of tea before bed. The old man had deemed the practice a vain pretension and ordered his wife not to continue it.

Emmett's mother disagreed. "You're not the one who has to get up in the middle of the night and calm the boy down," she said. His father grumbled but knew his place, and she kept on brewing the herbal drink, filling the steel tea ball with thyme from the kitchen garden. It was a remedy for nightmares brought over from the old country.

"I get the terrors otherwise," Emmett explained.

His father stopped and turned to stare at him.

"My skull gets jammed to cracking with demons. Fire. Blood. People crying." He shook his head as he spoke, hoping to better convey his dread.

With a sudden lunge, his father clipped him across the side of the face with the back of his hand. Emmett went down into the dirt, dizzy, his lip bleeding.

"No more of that crazy talk. It's time you grow up," said his father, leading the horses away toward the barn.

The bike was the boy's sign that even though his father had been silent as a gravestone on the subject, he was sorry for what he'd done. That was enough for Emmett, that and the bike, which was finally a means of getting out into the world, beyond the limits of walking. The last book he'd borrowed from the little library Mr. Peasi, the barber, kept in the corner of his shop in Threadwell was Washington Irving's Tales of *The Alhambra*. In daylight Emmett was also a wanderer in both mind and body, a naturalist of the creek bed, a decoder of clouds. While the sun shone, he longed for the world to reveal its mysteries, but at night, without the tea, he'd wake screaming in the clutches of those mysteries within.

The night terrors started the year Emmett was five. For years following, his parents often wondered what had ignited them. They couldn't remember a single remarkable event from that time, traumatic

or otherwise. The demons bloomed in a scream one night in the middle of January. It was brutally cold even with both the stove and fireplace roaring. Emmett lay between his parents on a makeshift bed of comforters close to the fire. His sudden bellow, a croaking cry from somewhere deep within, made the blizzard outside seem something out of summer. The boy was never able to give any substantial details about what dreams had plagued him.

Happy to be free of school for the summer and free of his chores for the day, he rode along at a good clip, barely noticing the heat. Pastor Holst's wife passed in her white Studebaker, smiled at the boy in his overalls, no shirt or shoes, and hit the horn, but Emmett was so preoccupied, he barely thought to wave until she disappeared ahead in a cloud of dust. He'd been picturing the Addison place, abandoned since five summers earlier—a farmhouse and out buildings left just as they were, beds made, belongings still in the dressers and closets. The family had fallen on hard times and had left to live with Mrs. Addison's folks in Indiana. Mr. was supposed to return for some of their things, but once they were gone, they never came back. Emmett's father would say, "I understand Mr. Addison liked his whiskey."

A mile from home, he came to the drive of the abandoned farm, stopped pedaling, and turned to look around. There wasn't a soul in sight. The air, of course, was still, and the sunburned weedy jumble that was the front lawn of the place was alive with the buzz of insects overheating. Other than that, the day was silent, not even a dog barking in the distance. He rode down the drive and into the open barn where he dismounted and leaned the bike against the low wall of an empty horse stall.

Last he'd been to the Addisons' two weeks earlier, the mysteries of the main house were plumbed—a broken mirror, which made him wonder if it had been the beginning of their bad luck, women's undergarments in a dresser drawer turned to lace by the swarm of white moths that flew out when he opened it. The place had smelled of mildew and mice, and he decided not to disturb it again, but to investigate the outer buildings, the various sheds, the silo, the icehouse. In his daydream, he opened the door to the last, and there, still unmelted, were shimmering blocks of frozen freshwater cut from Ziegler's pond, east of Mount Victory, back during the winter he was

nine. "Eternal ice," he said to himself as he walked across the burned brown field.

He headed for the icehouse which sat beneath a giant white oak. On the way, he noticed a well that lay right on the border of the barnyard and the growing fields—a turret of limestone blocks, a wooden support each at north and south to hold the windlass, but the windlass and rope and bucket were missing.

Emmett leaned over the turret's opening and peered down into the cylinder of shadow. He called hello to hear the echo and tossed a stone in to listen for a splash. No splash sounded but he could hear the stone hitting rock at the bottom and from the sound, the bottom didn't seem all that deep. He backed away from the edge a little and moved a few degrees to the side. The sun directly overhead shone down into the dark, revealing something that made Emmett squint. He stared for a long while and then pushed off the edge of the limestone and ran back to his bike.

He raced down the dirt road, a wake of dust trailing, feeling sick with both excitement and fear. When he was back in the yard of his own home, he jumped off the bike and let it fall in the dirt. "Pa," he yelled. His father called to him, "In the barn." The old man, his shirt drenched, his hat in hand, was sitting on a milking stool, back against the workbench.

Emmett stopped before him and leaned over to catch his breath.

"Well?" said his father.

"Pa, there's a dead person in the well at the Addisons' place." In the instant he'd spoken, he suddenly realized how much trouble he'd be in for having been over there.

His father sat forward and put the hat on. "What were you doing at the Addisons'?"

The boy was silent. Finally he said, "Exploring."

The man shook his head in disappointment. "A dead person?"

"At the bottom of the well."

"You sure the well is dry and you weren't seeing your reflection?" he said and stood up.

"I threw a rock in, there was no splash, and I saw a skull looking up at me."

* * *

Dusk gathered in the barnyard of the Addison place and had filled the well to the brim with shadow. Emmett's father said to him, "There better be something down there." Fritz Dibble, a Threadwell Fire Department volunteer, lowered a glowing lantern on a rope into the murky depths. Chief of Police Benton, smoking a roll-up cigarette, hat cocked back, followed the path of light in its descent. He wiped his arm across his forehead and said, "Whew. It's hotter than the widow Alston out here." Dibble smiled, but Emmett's father didn't. Emmett said, "I'm pretty sure I saw a skull," and the chief said, "We'll see about that."

Just as the boy had predicted, the skull was slowly revealed. The attached skeleton still wore tattered clothing. Emmett felt his father's hand lightly touch him on the top of the head. "The lantern?" asked Dibble. The chief said, "Leave it down there," and then called over his shoulder to his young officer, "Johnson, let's get you ready." A new rope was used for Johnson, tied around the tops of his legs and then crisscrossed behind him so that he would sit upright in his descent. When he and the chief thought his rigging was secure, he crawled up onto the edge of the well. Emmett's father sent the boy to the buckboard to fetch their horse, Shadrak. A harness was placed on the animal. "We could use the Model T, but I think the horse'll be gentler," said Benton.

"Just make sure that limestone edge don't cut my rope," said Johnson, who took off his hat and handed it to Dibble. Once his rope was attached to the metal rings of the horse's harness, he lowered his legs over the side and sat on the edge of the well. Emmett's father took the horse by the reins and moved Shadrak forward till the rope connecting Johnson to the animal was taut. "Okay, here we go," said the chief. Johnson leaned forward and inched off the edge of the well. Emmett looked over the side as the horse stepped backward and the officer sank one jerky increment at a time into the orange lantern glow.

"Smells like death," Johnson called up, and the voice echoed.

"Send him down the hook," said the chief and Dibble set another line over the side tied to the end of a rusty hand scythe he'd found in the Addison barn. "Coming down to your right," Dibble called to Johnson. By then the officer was nearing the bottom of the well. He picked up the lantern by its rope and held it nearer the skeleton. "About a half ton of mouse shit down here," came the echo. Then they heard

him gagging. "I think I know who this is," Johnson yelled.

"Who?" asked the chief.

"Jimmy Tooth."

Benton nodded, and after a vacant moment, said, "That actually makes sense," in a voice too low for Johnson to hear. He yelled, "You got him hooked?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, Mr. Wallace," said the chief. "Bring him up."

Emmett's father took the horse by the reins and started forward, again one labored step at a time.

"Jimmy Tooth," said Dibble. "If that's him, he's been down there for about three years."

"That's about right," said Benton.

"Do you think he was drunk and fell in?"

Emmett looked away from the well opening and realized it was twilight. He saw the moon coming up out across the fallow field and had a memory of Jimmy Tooth—a handsome young man with dark eyes, a wave of dark hair, and always a vague grin. He'd heard his mother describe Jimmy as "simple." Tooth worked as an assistant to Avery Cross, the blacksmith, and lived in the back of the shop. Whenever Emmett had been there with his father, he'd never noticed Jimmy say a word that wasn't a repetition of what Cross had just told him. Once every few months, he would spend his pay on a bottle of Old Overholt and rampage through the town, openly leering at women and screaming nonsense.

"Why you say it's Jimmy?" asked the chief.

"The skeleton's wearing the same religious medallion Jimmy used to wear," said Johnson. "Every time we arrested him, and I'd have to remove his belt and belongings, I'd have to take it from around his neck. I remember what it looks like. Saint Benedict."

"Jimmy was a good kid, but a bad drunk," added Dibble.

Emmett's father joined the men at the well and said, "Cross told me Jimmy said that one day he'd take off to Kenton and become a conductor on the railroad to Chicago. When he vanished, that's where we thought he'd gone."

"Threadwell didn't exactly miss him," said the chief.

Night fell, and the empty sockets of the skull peered above the rim

of the well.

"Whew, what a stink," said Dibble.

The three men on the rope gave it a long pull to get the corpse to clear the opening, and though it did, falling in a clatter on the ground next to the well, the left leg hit the limestone turret the wrong way and kicked up into the air. It came down right on its heel, and the bony foot cracked off and fell back into the pit.

"Chief," said Johnson, "I ain't going back in after that foot. You want it, you're going to have to go down there."

Benton laughed. "In that case it stays where it is."

Emmett's father retrieved the lantern from the well and held it up high. The chief stood over the corpse. "Looks like someone knocked Jimmy Tooth's teeth out," he said, pointing with the toe of his boot at the one incisor that remained on the upper jaw. "That's irony."

"He could have lost them in the fall," said Johnson. "Or maybe they came out while he lay there rotting. The mice could have took them."

"Did you notice the crack in the back of the skull?" asked Benton.

"Head could have got bashed in the fall," said Johnson.

"I heard you can see the stars during the day from the bottom of a well," said Dibble.

Chief Benton took the feet and Johnson took the shoulders, and they hoisted the remains into the air. Blue flannel shreds, once a shirt, hung down, and the medallion clattered within the rib cage. The jeans, but for small holes, were still intact, the belt fastened around the hip and pelvic bones. Emmett followed them to Dibble's truck, wondering what had happened to the shoes and socks.

"I want a raise," said Johnson, and he and the chief laughed as they loaded the corpse onto the flatbed.

It was past ten when they entered, by the back door, the oven that was their home. Emmett began to sweat the instant they stepped into the kitchen. His father said, "Christ," in a mournful sigh. They moved through the house into the parlor, lit by a single candle. All of the windows were open and the beetles and moths outside bounced and fluttered against the screens. Emmett's mother, dressed in her white cotton shift, lay back in the cushioned chair, mouth open, arms folded, feet up on the hassock, lightly snoring. Her hair was down, draping over her shoulders, and a fly circled her head. On her lap, folded in half,

were a few pages of last week's newspaper.

The boy took a step toward her, but his father grabbed him by the shoulder and said, "It's a gift to fall asleep in this weather. Don't wake her."

Emmett stared at the unmoving flame of the candle on the table next to her and forced himself not to mention his tea. His father's hand stayed on his shoulder till the boy turned around and headed for his room.

"Goodnight, son," said a voice in the dark.

Emmett stripped to his underwear and got into bed. He used the corner of the cover to wipe his forehead and neck before pushing it into a pile at his feet. There was no cool side to the pillow, just one less warm. He lay down in the dark on his back, and before he'd settled his head, he was thinking of Jimmy Tooth. Bits of gristle on the ribs, mouse turds dotting the blood-smeared shreds of blue shirt, cavern openings where the eyes belonged, pencil-sharp fingertips, and that rattling medal. Without the thyme tea, he knew his dreams were sure to be full of demons. He breathed deeply as his mother had taught him when he'd wake screaming from one of the nightmares. "Think logical," she'd repeat, "think logical," and so he tried to.

It didn't make sense that the blacksmith's assistant would be drunk and all the way out at the Addison place when he lived near the center of town. It was a couple miles or more. And with drink in him, he'd be less likely to stray from Main Street where Emmett knew Jimmy liked to spout lewd sayings and songs in the presence of ladies. Emmett traveled in his mind from farm to farm and house to house throughout town, thinking of each neighbor and what his or her chances were of having committed murder. This had the same effect as counting sheep, and before he was half through the Threadwell of his imagination he fell into a sweat-drenched sleep.

The demons that hunted him in dreams were shadows with teeth. At times they surrounded him, but he never got a clear look at one, only aspects of their silhouettes—a horn, a wing, a mane, a darting serpent tongue. As insubstantial as they seemed, he felt every bite and scratch, every kick and head butt. He was on his bike, pedaling hard, but the road had turned from packed dirt to deep sand. They swept down out of the sky crying like roosters for dawn and snatched him up into the

night. For the first time in weeks, he felt the wind in his face. The next he knew, they were flying over the Addison place beneath the stars. They cleared the barn and, not slowing in the descent, they plunged into the well with Emmett in tow. The pitch-black hole had lost its bottom, and he knew he was headed for that distant place Pastor Holst referred to as perdition.

He woke thrashing and screaming. Before he opened his eyes, he felt a pair of arms around him instead of the clutches of the demons, and he heard, "Shhhhh." With that assurance, he caught his breath and stopped writhing. A moment later, he opened his eyes, and though he expected it to be his mother next to him in the bed in the dark, he slowly came to realize it was his father. "It's all right, I'm here."

A moment later, candlelight seeped into the room and a globe of it encircled his mother as she entered, her white shift glowing. As she spoke, she wiped the sleep out of her eyes, "I hate to start the stove up but I guess I should brew him a cup of thyme."

"No," said his father. "I'll stay with him. Go on to bed."

Emmett watched, in his mother's expression, her weighing of his words. She lifted her hand holding the candle and wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her wrist. Finally, she nodded. "It'd be better not to light the stove." She turned and left, darkness reclaiming the room. The boy wanted to reach for her, but he didn't. Instead his father placed an open hand on his chest and gently pushed him back onto the pillow. "Lay still," came the voice. "I'll be here." Emmett closed his eyes. Once sleep rose up around him like water, and once he felt himself on the verge of falling into it. With both instances, he reached for his father and both times he was there.

The demons didn't slip into his ears again till dawn, but when they did, Emmett came screeching out of sleep from the pressure in his head. His heart pounded, and he gasped for breath. With the faint light seeping in the windows, he saw that his father had gone off to bed and left him. Even after waking and regaining composure, his head still spun with the circular motion, thinking, and torment of his phantasms. A memory of Jimmy Tooth in skeletal form farming three hundred burning acres in hell kept flickering behind his eyes. Instead of wheat, his crop was flames, and at harvest, he took them to market to sell to the devil.

He got out of bed and slipped on his overalls. Tiptoeing through the

kitchen, he avoided the spots where the floorboards squealed. Quietly opening the back door, he stepped out into the early light. It was so humid, he felt as if he was at the bottom of the pond. Nothing moved. The birds were too hot to sing and the creepers must have turned to dust. He made his way to the kitchen garden, knelt down and grabbed a handful of thyme, and tore it out by the roots. Part of the jumble was still green but part had burned in the glare of the sun. He brought it to his mouth, but then heard his father and mother up in the house. Emmett took off and ran around behind the barn. With his back to the wall, listening to the noise of his mother heading out to the well pump to fetch coffee water, he stared into the field, waiting for her to be done.

At the boundary where the rows of corn met the yard there was a disturbance in the air. It wasn't a breeze as the corn stood stock-still. At first he thought it was some large insect, hovering—a moon moth late in fleeing the sun. But no, the very air seemed to pucker there and grow a vertical seam. When two bony hands clawed through the fabric of the air, Emmett shoved the handful of thyme from the kitchen garden into his mouth and chewed, his teeth sparking off grains of dirt, the green peppery taste of the herb mixing with his saliva.

Sharp skeleton fingers pried an opening through which the boy saw fire and heard distant voices crying for mercy. The corpse of Jimmy Tooth stepped through that hole into the day, left foot missing, still dressed in the shreds of shirt and jeans. It moved toward Emmett unevenly from foot to tibia end and back, lurching forward with clear intent. The boy chewed faster as it approached and faster still. After two more steps, the grim skeleton evaporated, leaving no sign that it had come for him. He sighed and when he did he noticed the corn ripple slightly in a breeze.

* * *

He wore a starched white shirt and a tie, his short hair pushed up and stuck in place with Bear Wax. The ride from home in the buckboard—his mother and father up front and him in the back watching the wake of dust trail behind them—was glorious. The early evening fields swayed with the motion of the newborn wind and brought him smells of the creek, wildflowers, and honeysuckle. The tiny Chorus frogs had found their old rhythmic thrum and two saw-whet

owls perched in the dead tree next to the bridge that crossed a shallow gully just before town.

The church seemed stuffy in comparison with the coolness of the evening outside. The coffin, made of simple pine, rested on a pair of sawhorses draped with a red cloth and flanked at head and foot by tall candle stands each holding three lit tapers. It was a closed casket, of course. Mrs. Williams, the local carpenter, who'd taken on the business when her husband had passed away, could be overheard to say she'd worked on the box half through the night. As a special touch in honor of Jimmy, she'd chiseled out the likeness of a locomotive on the lid. "Well, he can finally be a conductor," Avery Cross said and smiled. Mrs. Williams patted the blacksmith on the shoulder. Mayor Fense was present and Chief Benton, Officer Johnson, Mr. Dibble, and all the neighbors, men and women and girls and boys. Mothers and wives brought food and once the pastor had said his piece for the unfortunate young man, the mourners would convene at tables on the lawn and feast in the miraculous breeze.

As Emmett looked around the church, he noticed no one was crying, and no one was standing near the coffin. There were pockets of people milling in the aisles and sitting side by side in the pews, but the conversations looked so casual and offhand that it was obvious they were discussing the weather. Miss Billie Maufin, the schoolteacher, said to Emmett's parents that the windless weeks reminded her of a poem wherein a ship was becalmed upon the sea. "The Ancient Mariner," said his father, and Miss Maufin nodded. "Like a painted ship upon a painted ocean," she said. "That's what we were."

Mayor Fense, holding his bowler under his arm and frequently stroking his beard, told anyone who would listen to him about his theory of where the wind had gone. In his no-hurry drawl, he said, "Down in Kentucky, on July the seventh they had a biblical windstorm that flattened buildings, killed dozens, and tossed the trains from the tracks in Cincinnati. They said they never saw the like of it. But don't you know, that's where our wind went to. It got used up in that storm and we had to wait some weeks for another crop."

"Poor Jimmy Tooth," said Mr. Peasi, the barber. "Last I cut his hair—he had strong hair—he told me that he was soon gonna run off and get married to a secret sweetheart. Daft, but a likeable fellow

nonetheless."

"I recall him being gentle with the horses," said the pastor.

When all the gossiping and talk of the wind diminished into silence, Pastor Holst put on his hat—a broad-brimmed affair with a black satin handkerchief stitched to the front of the inner brim so that the material hung down, covering his face to midchin. He'd taken to wearing it for funerals, baptisms, and marriages, after having read a story about a preacher who wore one in a book he got from the barber's library. When wearing it, he assumed a stiff posture and intoned his words in a voice from the distant past. "Ridiculous," whispered Emmett's mother.

"Jimmy Tooth, you were one of us," said Holst, the satin lifting slightly with every word. "We thank you for sharing your days with us. We thank you for your hard work at the anvil. We forgive your indiscretions and offer prayers to carry you to your just reward." The pastor stepped away from the coffin, and his wife stepped forward. She carried a basket at her side. With her free hand, she reached into the basket and brought out a fistful of dried thyme to place in a small pile at the head of the coffin. This she did three times so there was a sizeable mound of the green powder. "Go forth in peace," she said, as she always did at wakes. The words and the ritual had been passed down from the grandmothers of grandmothers. The herb that brought peace in sleep also offered courage in death.

There was an amen from the pastor that echoed through the church and a feeble response. Then the doors were thrown open and the neighbors of Threadwell filed out. Emmett was slow to get up, thinking about, as Holst had put it, Jimmy Tooth's just reward—a fire farm in hell. "Em," his mother called to him from the center aisle, and he looked up. She waved her hand for him to follow and he did. With the doors open before them, the wind swept in and down the aisles of the church to snuff the candles.

There were three long tables set with white tablecloths and napkins held down against the breeze by utensils and plates. These along with eighteen long benches were set up on the lawn of the church. The sun was going down, and the pastor's wife was lighting candles in glass globes. Kids were running in circles on the dry lawns. The trees at the boundary of the churchyard shook their leaves in the wind. People chose seats along the three tables, and the potato salad, chicken,

coleslaw, and biscuits were passed. Chief Benton leaned against the giant wooden cross in the center of the lawn, smoking a cigarette, and Dr. Summerhill smoked his pipe. Emmett told his mother he was going to go run with the other kids for a few minutes and she said, "Fine." He left her side and bolted across the lawn where kids from his school were chasing lightning bugs. On his way toward them, though, he was stopped cold. His body registered it before he was even sure what had frightened him. There, sitting at the end of the third long table, the one farthest from the church door, was Jimmy Tooth, not a ghost but his gnawed skeleton as it had been dragged from the well. Mr. Dibble sat next to the corpse but didn't seem to notice it was there. Across from the specter sat Miss Billie Maufin. She buttered a biscuit and smiled and listened to Mr. Peasi, who was next to Dibble.

Emmett dropped to his knees on the dry grass. He was already trembling and was having trouble catching his breath. He watched, trying to croak out the word *help*, as Jimmy Tooth's skull swiveled around, taking in the crowd. Thinking that if he averted his eyes, he wouldn't be seen, the boy turned his face to the ground. The realization came to him then that no one else could see the skeleton in jeans and blue tatters. He looked back to check if his nightmare had vanished. At that moment, Tooth's empty eye sockets seemed to take him in. The skeleton stood awkwardly up from the table, holding on with one bony hand and righting its imbalance. Once the figure was stable, it started in Emmett's direction, limping along on foot and tibia stub.

Suddenly at his side was a girl from school, Gretel Lawler, who sometimes sat quietly next to him and read, as he did, on the bench beneath the oak during recess. "Are you all right, Emmett?" she said.

He looked up into her face, stunned with fear. At any other time he'd not have minded her being so close, but it was almost as if he was afraid that she'd see the reflection of Jimmy Tooth in his eyes.

"I'll get your ma," said Gretel.

Emmett shook his head. "I'm fine," he managed. He felt her hand on his shoulder and he looked up at her. She was smiling down at him, and her green eyes and dimples and freckles diverted his fear for an instant. He was about to say thanks, when from behind her sweet face, Jimmy Tooth's skull descended into view and his jaw squealed open. A burst of adrenaline went off in the boy's chest like a half stick of dynamite, and

he scrabbled up off the grass and ran, his heart pounding, a ringing in his ears.

The gathering shadows of twilight covered his retreat and everyone was preoccupied with the dinner and conversation. Emmett didn't look back to see if the corpse was following him. Opening the oak door of the church, he slipped inside and let it swing shut behind him. Someone had relit one of the tapers in the candelabra at the foot of the coffin and that meager flame was the sole light he had to navigate his way to the altar.

When he reached the coffin, he heard the church door open behind him. He didn't turn but reached up onto the top of the pine box and with his right hand swept the top half of the pile of dried thyme to the edge of the planks. Cupping his left hand he caught the dark green powder, and then brought it directly to his mouth. He chewed on it like he was chewing on dust. It stuck in his dry throat and he momentarily choked. Thyme sprayed out onto the altar at his feet. Still he didn't turn, but swept the remainder off the coffin. Swallowing hard with little spit, he poured the second handful into his mouth and resumed chewing.

He sat down on the altar step to catch his breath as he worked the second load of thyme down his throat. And now he looked to see if Jimmy Tooth was coming up the aisle for him. Instead he saw, standing a few paces behind him, a figure in black without a face, wearing a broad-brimmed hat.

"What are you doing?" asked Pastor Holst in his most austere voice.

Emmett stammered, thyme spewing from his mouth. He eventually managed to get out that he needed the herb to keep the demons away from him.

"I see," said Holst, removing his hat. He squatted down next to the boy and told him, "You're safe now. We'll keep this to ourselves." As it turned out, everyone in Threadwell knew by the end of that week. When at the close of July, after having been spotted raiding the kitchen gardens and herb gardens of neighboring farms by dark of night, Emmett was found one morning in his underwear, lying filthy and unconscious in the garden of the widow Alston. His cheek was puffed out like a pouch to hold the cud of thyme he chewed even in sleep. In his left hand his fingers clutched another shock of the green, ripped out by its

roots. It was the widow herself who first used the words *thyme fiend*, but the name caught on and it spread like fire through the community.

* * *

The harvest was blighted by the heat of July, a full quarter of the crop gone brown and desiccated. A day in late October after the last yield was taken, Threadwell and the surrounding area were inundated with a plague of ash-colored moths that appeared by the millions overnight. A day later they vanished, but not before Pastor Holst could use them from the pulpit in reference to the burning city of Gomorrah. He'd taken to wearing the hat and black handkerchief now also for Sunday mass, and he bellowed that sin was afoot. "Strange customs have been allowed to flourish," he said, turning his face in the direction of Emmett and his mother and father in the third row of pews.

"Strange customs my eye," said Emmett's mother as they rode in the buckboard back to the farm. "Like him wearing that fool hat and mask." Emmett's father nodded and that's all that was said on the journey. The boy sat in the back of the rig, staring off across the fields where the leaves of the windbreaks had gone yellow and orange. He hadn't had a full night's sleep for three days. The insomnia came with his realization that there was no more thyme in Threadwell. He'd decimated every garden, even snuck into the church the nights of two wakes and consumed every grain of dust that made up the ritual piles atop the coffins. There'd be no relief till spring. Emmett shifted his gaze from the distant trees to the bony remains of Jimmy Tooth, sitting across from him in the back of the buckboard.

The phantasm had not come to harm Emmett but to follow him, and when the last of the herb had been swallowed and its effects dissipated, that's what it did. It appeared first in his room, in the dark, standing at the window in the moonlight peering out across the fields. The boy was too terrified to scream and lay trembling. Occasionally, Jimmy would turn his skull, that stringy patch of hair barely hanging on, and move his bottom jaw up and down as if talking. No words came forth, only a subtle squeaking noise of the dry joint. Although the eye sockets were hollow, the corpse had a way of staring, and more than once seemed to focus those portals on Emmett. Even after the birds sang, the rooster crowed, and sunlight filled the room, Jimmy Tooth remained, sitting at

the end of the bed while Emmett got dressed for school.

After only a week, his mother and father noticed his feeble condition—weary and yet fidgeting with nerves, a pale complexion, a drawn expression. They ambushed him in the barn one afternoon when he was stowing his bike after school. His mother was sitting on an overturned bale of hay, his father on the workbench. They had a chair ready for him. Jimmy sat up above in the hayloft, his foot and stump dangling above Mrs. Wallace's head. The boy took the seat they pointed to and looked up. The bone architecture was lit by the beams of sunlight slipping through tiny holes in the roof. His arms were raised, and he was wiggling the sharp white fingers of both hands.

"Emmett, you're not well," said his father.

"Do the children torment you at school?" his mother asked.

Emmett nodded. "The whole town thinks I'm touched."

"What can we do?" asked his father.

"It's the thyme," said his mother. "You need it, don't you?"

"I need it," he said. "Without it I see something bad all day and night."

"Well, I put an order in at Stamp's Grocery for a five pound satchel of it, dried. Should be here in a couple days," said his father.

The boy got up and went to his mother and hugged her, then his father who patted him lightly on the top of the head.

"Now," said his mother, "do you want to stop going to school? Maybe for a while?"

"You could help me here," said his father.

"No," he said. "I want to go."

On the day the satchel of thyme arrived, Emmett and his father and Jimmy Tooth sat at the kitchen table. Mr. Wallace instructed on how to roll a respectable cigarette. It took the destruction of a half dozen rolling papers and a scattering of thyme before the boy caught on. When he finally had before him a tightly rolled bone of uniform width, his father handed him a box of matches. Emmett lit one, brought it to the end of the cigarette, and inhaled the way he'd seen Chief Benton do.

"Easy," said his father and the boy exploded with a choking cough.

When Emmett was done gasping and wiping his eyes, he noticed Jimmy Tooth was gone. Just that second, his mother had come in from the parlor and pulled back the chair the skeleton had been in. "I hope you two aren't engaging in strange customs," she said. Emmett took another drag, and laughed along with his father. "At night you'll have the tea," said his mother.

Thyme as smoke still had the same dark green taste and subtle bite. The boy could feel it wafting in lazy cyclones through his mind, and after three drags and three long exhalations of the gray-green mist, he felt the tension leaving the muscles of his neck and back. He blew a smoke ring, and as he watched it float out over the table, where his father poked a finger through the widening circle, it came to him that his parents must think him insane or simple or both. Their insipid smiles became clear to him. Were they trying to help him or help themselves in the eyes of the community? It was all too much to decipher. Jimmy Tooth was gone and the rest he'd worry about later.

A cup of tea at bedtime took care of the visitations through the night. One roll-up before school and one after kept the day revenant free. On a rare occasion, the doses of thyme wouldn't quite overlap and Emmett would catch sight of Jimmy, approaching across the barnyard or sitting cramped in the corner of the outhouse, watching the boy with a hollow stare as he shit. These sudden relapses were startling, but once they happened, Emmett gained control of himself, knowing there was plenty of thyme left in the satchel.

The protocol worked smoothly into November. He was doing better in school, getting sleep and feeling good. The ruckus over "the thyme fiend" died down and no longer were people shouting at him or saying mean things. Their hot disdain had cooled into a general agreement that he was to be avoided. That change was good enough for Emmett. He didn't mind going his own way.

The break from Jimmy Tooth gave him time to get back to reading, and he finished Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra*. The next day he brought the book to school and afterward to the barbershop to return it and see if he could borrow another. When he entered the shop from the side door, he noticed that Peasi had a customer in the chair. The barber looked over and saw Emmett standing there holding the book. The scissors stopped snipping and with one hand Peasi ran a comb through the customer's hair. With the other, he motioned for the boy to stand where he was and then put his finger to his lips. Emmett nodded.

A few moments later the barber was applying a hot towel to the

customer's face. Once that was securely in place, he turned to Emmett and motioned for him to come forward. He nodded toward the bookshelf and again brought his finger to his lips. The boy understood and paced softly on the sides of his shoes. Even with the precaution, he hit a creaking plank right behind the barber's chair. The customer's voice sounded, "Someone come in?" Emmett knew immediately it was Chief Benton.

"No, no," said Peasi. "Just the floorboards. They creak and pop all day and night. This place is like an old bum with arthritis."

"That makes two of us," said Benton.

Emmett placed his book on the shelf, and, not wanting to get the barber in trouble for being nice to him, just grabbed the first book to hand. He waved as he crept cautiously back toward the door. Peasi wasn't watching but was busy with his lather cup and brush. Once out in the lot next to his bike, Emmett quickly looked at the title—*Off on a Comet* by Jules Verne. He stowed the novel in his bike bag, mounted up, and headed down the alley for the street. When he came clear of the buildings, he looked across Main at the door of the Handsome Man Tavern and knew he'd taken too long to get home from school.

There was Jimmy Tooth, standing, facing the plate glass window, showing no reflection. The corpse gave an awkward half turn, and Emmett heard the medallion bounce from across the street. Jimmy focused that cavernous gaze from over his shoulder. He lifted a thin white arm and waved to Emmett as if to follow. The shreds of blue shirt rippled with the motion, and he did it again, twice. Emmett took off down Main for the dirt road that led out toward the farms.

A half hour later, he was sitting in the hayloft, smoking a thyme roll-up and paging through the Verne book. He'd have loved to start reading it, but something bothered him about his encounter with Jimmy Tooth. The specter hadn't followed him as he fled home for his cure. He wasn't waiting in the barnyard, slouched against the white oak, wiggling his sharp fingers at the sun. He was nowhere. As Emmett smoked the rest of the cigarette, he pictured the figure waving for him to follow. In that arm motion and that hollow gaze there was a purpose.

* * *

There was still snow on the ground the following week when he left

school and rode into town instead of going home. A freezing wind shrieked across the fields and made pedaling difficult. There weren't many people out, but those there were, Pastor Holst and Mr. Dibble, both in turn crossed to the other side of the street when they saw him riding toward them. Emmett noticed that the pastor had taken to wearing the hat and veil all the time now, stumbling along partially blind, grazing the poles of the gas lamps and keeping his right arm extended.

Emmett rode his bike to the edge of town where it bordered on a tract of woods. There was a bench there, down an embankment, by the edge of Wildcat Creek. It was out of the wind. He watched across the frozen creek, scattered with leaves, trying to catch the moment when the influence of that morning's thyme smoke would finally pass. He felt no change. Leaning back, he closed his eyes, sighed, and conjured a recollection of a moment he spent with Gretel Lawler after school the day before. He always stayed in the schoolhouse and waited for the other kids to clear out before going to his bike. When they were gone, he slipped out, and she was there, next to her bike, which was next to his, waiting for him.

Her hair was in a single long braid, and her red winter hat framed her face, set off her green eyes. Emmett noticed that her freckles had faded, and instead her cheeks were dotted with glitter from the day's Christmas project. "Emmett Wallace, we should go for a bike ride some day after school," she said.

He stopped walking, numb with surprise. Finally, he said, "Don't you know I'm the thyme fiend?" He forced a laugh, but it came too quiet and flat.

Gretel laughed. "What's the sin?" she said. "It's like eating grass. My old man drinks Overholt till he's blind drunk and nobody bats a lash."

"When?" asked Emmett.

"You say," she said.

"Next Wednesday."

She laughed again. "Why Wednesday?"

"That's what came to me."

She reached out and touched his shoulder, and Emmett came awake with that touch to see Jimmy Tooth standing over him, quickly withdrawing his hand. The boy gasped and reared back, pressing himself into the bench. He was startled and confused as to whether the touch he felt on his shoulder was merely the one from the daydream or if the specter could now make contact. Sunset was coming on. The corpse turned and motioned for the boy to follow across the frozen creek.

His parents would be wondering where he was. He'd miss dinner. He was frightened, but he leaped up, leaving his bike, and hobbled down the bank, slid across the ice, into the woods beyond. Jimmy Tooth was waiting for him in a small clearing. When Emmett caught up, the skeleton reached out as if to shake hands. The boy was stunned for a moment and then backed up a step. Jimmy held his posture, waiting, skull cocked to the side like a marionette at rest. A minute passed in silence, and then Emmett stepped forward. His hand passed through its skeletal partner. It wasn't merely thin air, though; he felt something like a mild turbulence when his fingers failed to grasp Jimmy's.

In that instant, the two of them turned to salt and were whisked up into the sky in an insane whirlwind. They were moving fast through the dark, and how Emmett knew he'd been turned to salt, he didn't know. He saw the lights of the town below and in the distance the last line of pink on the horizon. Then they descended and were standing in the dark, again by the creek, but somewhere different from where they'd started.

"What was that?" asked the boy, working to regain his balance.

Jimmy put a finger to his bottom jaw to signal silence and led the way.

They came out of the woods on the opposite side of town in the field behind the church. Off to the left was a stand of half a dozen horse chestnuts, and from within their cover, Emmett spotted a lighted window. Jimmy headed directly for it and the boy had to run to catch up. In under the barren branches of the trees, drawing closer to the glow of the window, they slowed and crept to avoid breaking sticks underfoot. Each took a side and peered in—a skull in the bottom left pane and Emmett Wallace in the bottom right.

In lantern light, Mrs. Holst sat with her back to them at a vanity with a large oval mirror. Emmett could see the reflection of her face in the glass as she brushed her hair. She never appeared in public with it down, and he couldn't believe how much of it there actually was. He wondered how she stowed it on her head. She had remained kind even after the town and particularly the pastor had turned against him. There had been more than one occasion when he'd gone to the back door of the very house he now hid beside, and if her husband was out, she'd give him two pocketfuls of thyme from the supply they kept for wakes. He had a crush on her smile and the way she drove the white Studebaker, speeding along once out of town.

A heartbeat later, Jimmy Tooth was inside the room, and Emmett leaned dazed against the house. He watched as the skeleton slowly walked up behind the pastor's wife. She was brushing on the left, holding the hair back away from her ear and neck. Jimmy descended with grace, turned his skull head toward her cheek, and gave her a quick kiss. Before her brush rose to the top of her head again, he was up and away, walking back toward the window. Just as the corpse stepped through the wall of the house, Emmett again caught a glimpse of her reflection and noticed that where Jimmy had kissed her, she now bore a black spider of a scar.

So intense was his focus on the mark that he didn't notice at first the figure in a black hat and handkerchief mask enter the room. Jimmy obviously did, though. He grabbed Emmett by the wrist and pulled him back. "How?" Emmett wondered, feeling the hard bony grip on his arm. In the next moment, the pastor was at the window, peering out through the dark scrim and glass into the dark. He lifted off his hat to see better, and that's when the boy and skeleton again turned to salt and were whisked upward into the sky.

When they coalesced this time, they were standing in front of an ancient structure that Emmett, even at night, was able to identify. It was the old Threadwell icehouse, the one that had been on the farmland that the town was eventually built on. It happened to sit behind the Williams place, a hundred or so yards behind the carpentry shop. His father had brought him back to see it one time when they'd been to visit Mrs. Williams about building a dresser for Emmett's mother. Mr. Wallace had explained that there was an outer and an inner wall, separated by about a foot all around, and that space was filled with sawdust for insulation. As old as the icehouse was—built in 1887—and as hard worn, it was still intact. The big door was on its hinges, the walls stood save for splintering and wormholes, and there were no

windows, so no glass to be broken.

Jimmy Tooth pointed to the door and motioned for Emmett to open it and go inside. The boy looked at him, and thinking about how the specter had physically seized him before, he was skeptical. Tooth put his palms together in the sign of prayer and then pointed to the door again, as if begging. After seeing the mark he'd left on Mrs. Holst's cheek, Emmett wanted nothing but to be home, a roll-up in the corner of his lips, paging through Jules Verne. He'd thought he wanted to know what it all meant, but that was forgotten. Jimmy clasped his hands with a click in front of him again, and a voice came out of the night from up by the back of the carpentry shop.

"Who is that over there?" it called.

Emmett knew it was Mrs. Williams.

"Get away from there." It sounded as if she was getting closer.

The skull gazed directly at the boy, and in its empty sockets, something strange was happening. Emmett saw the colors of sunset deep inside Jimmy's head. Then he felt a cold wind, the one everyone had wished for in July, rushing around him. Mrs. Williams bellowed, "Emmett Wallace, is that you?"

"Run now," whispered Jimmy.

The boy moved his legs, up and down, up and down, and looked across the fields to the sunset. Jimmy's diminishing whisper was still on the wind. A moment later, Emmett came to the realization that he was riding his bike on the dirt path homeward from town and the sun was still an hour from setting. He'd not missed dinner. In fact, he would hardly be later than usual. The entire episode seemed a dream, and yet he was certain it had all really happened.

His conviction was borne out at Sunday mass when Mrs. Holst appeared, bearing the mark on her face. He was certain that no one else was seeing it as no one else seemed disturbed and it was perfectly disturbing—a black center with thin black cracks radiating away from it. He was sure it had grown larger. Still, he wondered why it was that he had to be there to witness Jimmy Tooth kiss the pastor's wife. And how did it involve the old icehouse? His mind wandered for a moment and he remembered that the day he'd discovered Jimmy, he was heading for the icehouse on the Addison property. His vision of eternal ice came back to him, but none of it led anywhere and it turned to salt on the

wind.

After mass let out, the parishioners stood on the church lawn in small clusters, catching up on news and gossip. Emmett stood off by himself near the buckboard while his parents passed the time with the widow Alston. Studying the scene from afar, he closely followed the actions of Mrs. Holst. She had knelt on the cold ground to put her arms around the youngest Fenwick girl. "She's going to die," he said to himself. "That's what the mark is." He watched as she rose, her beaming smile nearly a distraction from the horror on her cheek. "No," he whispered. "Someone's going to kill her."

Emmett thought frantically about how he could warn her, but his concentration was broken by a voice close by. He looked up and saw Mrs. Williams standing a few yards off. She was dressed in a blue, man's roll collar coat, beneath the hem of which showed the striped design of her dress. Her long frizzy hair undulated in the wind. She was wide in the shoulders and slim at the waist, and her eyes crinkled down to mere slits when she spoke.

"You know something, don't you, Thyme Fiend?"

Emmett was caught off guard. He stared at the ground and said, "Yes, ma'am."

"I know you know something," she said and then walked off to join the others.

He spent the ride home in the buckboard and the better part of the afternoon trying to figure out what she thought he knew.

* * *

On Wednesday, he left for school prepared for the afternoon, with a thyme roll-up and a box of wooden matches in his pocket. The smoke he'd had after breakfast took him through the school day and after, when he met Gretel Lawler by the bike rack. They made for town, pedaling through the golden last light of the afternoon, heads down against a fierce wind. There was a light dusting of snow on the frozen dirt road, and their bikes skidded here and there, which they pretended was hilarious. He led her to the bench in the woods at the edge of town, next to the creek, and proceeded to tell her everything.

Every few minutes out of the forty-five it took him to tell her pretty much the whole strange saga of his doings with Jimmy Tooth, he asked her a question. "You following this?" "You scared?" "You think I'm crazy?" To all of these, she answered by shaking her head. He could tell she was getting it, and better yet, could picture it, by the gleam in her eyes. The relief of being able to share all of his fear and confusion nearly brought tears. She didn't laugh or act stupid about it. She listened so intently, at one point he wondered if she was crazy.

When he finished speaking, relating to her his flight above the town with Jimmy Tooth and the peeping tom visits to the pastor's wife and Mrs. Williams, there was a brief silence before she said, "So you must be wanting to go see what's in that old icehouse."

"That's what I want to do," he said.

"Okay."

In his plans for Gretel Lawler, he never imagined it would be so easy.

They left the bikes and headed across the creek into the woods. The carpentry shop wasn't far at all from that end of town. They could circle around behind it through the trees, cross the creek again, and come out in ten minutes a few feet from the icehouse. He led the way, bent slightly and whispering because they were on a secret mission. "That pastor is mighty strange, eh?" she said. "My pa says they'll be sending him off to the loony bin before long."

"You think he could have killed Jimmy Tooth and thrown his body in the Addisons' well?"

"I can't see it," she said. "He seems kind of useless, like it would be too much for him. Best he can do is put on that handkerchief hat."

"I know what you mean," said Emmett.

"Mrs. Williams, though," said Gretel, "why's she so worried about what you know?"

"She always seemed nice to me, but when she said what she said to me out on the church lawn, it gave me a shiver. I got the feeling she could be as mean as she wanted."

"What about the spider kiss the skeleton gave Mrs. Holst?" asked Gretel.

"I have a feeling somebody is gonna kill her."

"Like Jimmy Tooth knows the future? Or like Jimmy Tooth put a curse on her?" she asked.

Emmett had no answer and shook his head. They got down on their

hands and knees and crawled to the edge of the treeline. From where they squatted, behind the bole of a long-ago fallen oak, they could see the icehouse, clear as day, no more than twenty-five yards into the open field behind the carpentry shop. From up in the shop they heard the sound of a hammer pounding cut nails. Emmett turned to Gretel and looked at her. He couldn't believe he had a friend after not having one since July. She smiled at him, and he said, "Let's go."

They crouched as they made their way to the structure, using it to block any view of them from the carpentry shop. When they stood against its western wall, Emmett inched forward and looked around the corner to see if Mrs. Williams was in sight. Eventually he waved over his shoulder for Gretel to follow him. He got his hand on the door and pulled back, expecting it to be locked. Instead it swept open with little more than a grumble from the hinges. They slipped inside, and he said for her to hold it open just a sliver so he could see. There was an old oil lantern hanging from a hook just inside the door. He reached into his pocket and took out the box of wooden matches. There was still oil in the rusted old lamp and the wick was damp with it. He removed its glass globe, thumbnail lit a match, and brought light to the shadows. The sight of the flame reminded him he hadn't smoked his afternoon roll-up yet.

The inside of the place, lined with cedar wood, was much smaller that the outside. The walls were in the shape of an octagon. They were standing on a huge trapdoor, and Gretel said, "They must keep the ice down there." With the exception of a couple of wooden shelves lining each wall, and the remainder of the floor not covered by the hatch being poured concrete, there was nothing much to see.

"Looks like Jimmy Tooth sent you on a wild-goose chase," said Gretel.

"Maybe he meant we have to go down there," he said, pointing to the trapdoor. He leaned over and tried the handle. It didn't budge and he tried it with two hands. Gretel walked over when he was done and gave it a tug.

"Well," he said, and they stood there close together in silence for a long while.

"Hey, what's that in the corner?"

He lifted the lantern off the hook and followed her. She knelt next to

the wall opposite the door they'd come in. Emmett tried to see what she was looking at over her shoulder. She slowly turned toward him, her palm up and her brow furrowed.

"Is that chips of ice?" he asked and brought the lantern closer to her hand.

"No, teeth."

A moment passed and then Emmett said, "You gotta know what I'm thinking."

Gretel nodded. "Jimmy Tooth's teeth."

"The rest must have got cleaned up but they missed these."

"I'll bet."

She handed him the three teeth, each cracked off at the root, and he stowed them deep in his pocket.

"Let's get out," he said, and with that, the icehouse door slammed shut and they heard a key turning in its lock.

"Wait!" he yelled. "We're in here."

"Hey," called Gretel, whose voice was higher and louder than his.

In the silence that followed, as if from a great distance, they heard a woman's voice. At first they couldn't make out what she was saying, but slowly her words came clear. "You've gobbled your last thyme patch, Emmett Wallace."

"Please," he yelled back. "We won't tell anyone."

"Is she going to bash our teeth out with a hammer?" asked Gretel.

The friends stood perfectly still, taking shallow breaths in order to better hear their captor. Emmett was sure it was Mrs. Williams. Even in her muffled voice he could detect that chilling thread of nastiness. The time passed, but they were afraid to move. When after a long while, they heard nothing, they went to work on the door by which they'd entered, kicking it and ramming their shoulders into it. It didn't move an inch.

"If she comes in with her hammer, we'll both rush her at the same time," said Gretel.

Emmett swallowed hard and agreed, unsure if he'd be able to.

They wore themselves out pounding and screaming and eventually slumped down together onto the trapdoor at the center of the eight-sided room. She put her arm around him, put her head on his shoulder, and neither of them spoke. The oil lamp flickered now and

then, and Emmett wondered how much longer it would be before they were swamped by total darkness.

An hour later, they heard knocking noises from outside. Emmett crawled forward to the door and put his ear to the thin slit between its bottom and the floor. He barely heard Mrs. Williams's voice. "We'll be done with this little peckerwood," she said. Then another voice answered her. "A blight of a child," said a man.

"What about Miss Angel Cake?"

"I fixed the brakes and I'm sending her on an errand to Mount Victory," he said.

"More kerosene around the base," she commanded. "That dry old sawdust'll go up in a blink."

Emmett felt a hand on his shoulder. "What's she doing?" whispered Gretel.

"The pastor is with her," said Emmett, moving back away from the door as the smell of kerosene sifted in beneath it. He didn't have the heart to tell her the rest.

A few minutes later, the cedar room grew hotter, smoke issuing in from beneath the door and between the wall slats.

"I want to go home," cried Gretel. She screamed for help and lunged at the door, pounding and kicking. Emmett was paralyzed with fear, unable to move off the concrete. That's when the lamp went out and they heard the crackling of the fire all around them. She found him in the dark, and they put their arms around each other. They were gasping. Their hearts were pounding.

Just as the flames began poking through the inner wall, bringing back the light and casting jittery shadows, there was a loud bang. The trapdoor flew open and slammed back on the concrete only inches from them. Jimmy Tooth slowly ascended from the ice hold below. His skull and ribs glowed in the firelight, and the tattered shirt smoldered where embers had landed. Emmett saw him emerge through the smoke, that near-toothless open mouth either screaming or laughing. There were tiny fires burning in the hollows of his eyes. With sharp, cold hands, the phantasm grabbed both the boy and girl by the wrists, and they were off.

Emmett felt himself dropping, felt the heat increasing. He finally mustered the courage to open one eye. They were drifting down

through the darkness, into a vast cavern. Everywhere, stretching out to the horizon of the cave as big as Ohio, there were fields of fire, the flames growing individually in rows like corn. Their orange stalks, their sharp white tips bowed and rippled in a strong sweltering breeze. Directly below there was a clearing of black rock where the boy spotted Jimmy Tooth's farmhouse as he'd seen it in his daydream.

There was an instant of forgetting and then Gretel and Emmett were standing beside Jimmy Tooth at the edge of the field of fire. The skeleton was sweeping his arm out to indicate his infernal crop. "I got a thousand acres of torment here," he said, speaking in the voice of the Jimmy Emmett remembered from life. Words came forth from the empty skull in a weak echo. "For every acre's worth I bring to Satan, he reduces my own anguish a half a dust mote's worth."

The boy had the sense that they'd been on a tour of the farm for a while before he'd come to. "Are we dead?" he asked.

"You ain't dead," said Jimmy.

"What about me?" asked Gretel.

"You're neither dead nor alive. We've gotta see."

She asked, "What do you mean?" but the skeleton turned away and walked back toward the red barn. On the way they passed a massive creature with six legs and the scaly head of a dragon, chewing flame like hay out of a bale that wriggled with bright intensity.

"My trusty plough horse, Sacload," said Jimmy. "You could pet him if you like." Emmett and Gretel declined. They moved on a few more yards across the adamantine surface before the skeleton announced, "And lookee here. I got a well." A stone well like the one at the Addisons' appeared before them where there'd been none a second before. "Maybe someday I'll find myself at the bottom of it," he said. His jaw opened wide and laughter, like a trumpet, issued forth.

"Why are we here?" asked Emmett.

"You kids make yourselves at home for a spell. I've got some pressing business up in the house."

"Wait," said Gretel, more than a hint of desperation in her voice, but before the word fully sounded, Jimmy had vanished. She began crying and the only thing preventing Emmett from doing the same was his fear. He drew close to her and said, "Come on. I'm going to tell him to take us back home." He put his arm around her and moved her slowly toward the house. He looked up at their destination—a gray, three-story structure, listing forward, with broken windows and a round cupola on either side of the patchy roof. Green mist curled from the chimney and reminded Emmett of thyme smoke.

On their way to the house, they passed the sagging old barn, and just as they drew even with the entrance, a man walked out of it. He was middle-aged, bald on top but with a full red beard reaching to the center of his chest. He was dressed in a work shirt and jeans and pair of farm boots. Emmett thought he recognized him from town. "Hey, mister," he said. "How do we get back to Threadwell." The figure paid no attention to him and kept heading for the house. "Scuze me, sir," said Gretel. She shrugged off Emmett's arm and ran to catch up with the adult. "Can you help us?" she yelled to him.

The fellow just kept moving forward, not even turning his head to acknowledge their presence. "He doesn't see you," said Emmett. Gretel stopped following and watched as the man climbed the back steps to the house, opened the door, and went inside. When that door latched shut again, there came a low roar from out across the fields. Both she and Emmett turned around to see what was happening. At first it was unclear if anything in the strange setting was different, save for the fact that the wind had picked up considerably.

In an instant, it grew stronger yet, and there was a howling that echoed throughout the enormous cavern in which the farmland lay. It was Gretel who noticed it first. She pointed to the boundary of the field and shouted over the noise, "It's moving toward us." Emmett focused and realized that the crop of flames had grown higher, become more violent in its crackling and waving, and was rolling toward them now like an ocean wave. Gretel moved first, running back to grab Emmett's hand and pull him in the direction of the house. Her touch woke him from his stupor and they ran.

By the time they made it to the steps, the back of the barn was on fire. They got through the door and slammed it behind them. For all the din of the blaze outside, it was silent in the kitchen, the only sound the slow ticking of a clock on the wall with chains and pinecone weights. Each second sounded like a drip of water. The room was lit by the light of the fire outside slipping in through two windows. The dance of the flames as they consumed the barn cast wild shadows on the walls.

"Jimmy Tooth!" Emmett yelled. He and Gretel left the kitchen, ran down a dark hallway, and stepped into a parlor. "We want to go home," he was about to call out, but the phrase never made it past his lips. The man they'd seen exit the barn was on his knees, his fingers on Jimmy Tooth's wrists, trying to pry the grip from around his neck. His face was blue, his eyes popping, and foam and drool dripped from his lips. Jimmy's eyes widened and the empty mouth was a grimace of exertion.

The gurgling noise coming up out of the victim filled the room, and his body jerked and writhed with its last pulses of life. When the figure eventually went limp, Jimmy released his grip and the corpse fell to the floor with a thud. Emmett just then realized that the house was on fire around them, flames coming up through the floorboards, piercing the lathing of the walls. Jimmy turned toward the children, arms outstretched. The skull snarled viciously. He lunged for them.

Emmett felt a hand grasp his ankle and he came to, cocooned in heat and thick smoke. He felt himself being dragged and a moment later a pair of hands under his arms lifted him up. "I've got him," yelled a voice. Emmett's eyes opened, the lids fluttered, and he caught a glimpse of Officer Johnson before dropping into darkness again. The next thing, sunlight. He opened his eyes and found himself lying on a cot in the police station.

* * *

Benton made him drink a cup of black coffee. Emmett sat, wrapped in a blanket, across the desk from the chief, who smoked a roll-up.

"Your folks'll be here soon to get you. I told them to let you stay here for the night. Doc Summerhill looked you over and gave you the okay."

Emmett nodded.

The lawman took a last toke on his butt and then stubbed it out. He sat back in his chair and said, "Your dad showed up here last evening and said you hadn't come home. He had the wagon and was looking for you. Me and Officer Johnson weren't doing anything so we took the Model T out and helped search. We just happened to be passing the carpentry shop and saw the flames out back. We carried water from the creek, maybe two dozen times. And I'm too old to be hauling water. You're a lucky cuss. Johnson heard you screaming in there or we'd have

let it just turn to cinders, which in the long run it mostly did anyway. Now, suppose you tell me why we had to pull you free of that burning icehouse last night."

"Gretel," said Emmett. "Is she okay?"

"Gretel who?" asked Benton.

"Lawler."

"When we put the fire out, all we found was you."

"She was with me."

"Maybe she slipped out. The back wall had collapsed by the time we got there. You're lucky you're not barbecue, son. Where's this girl live?"

"Gretel Lawler. She lives out on the Chowdry Road."

The chief leaned forward, lifted a pencil from the desk, and made a note. "Okay, now, what were you up to?"

Emmett sat for quite a while, willing to talk, but not knowing where to begin. There was almost too much to tell. Every time he picked a launching point, he thought of some other thread that needed tending if he was to get it all right. His mind was still bleary from the smoke, but while he sat and thought, he drank the coffee and that cleared things a bit with every sip. Benton rocked slightly in his chair, the spring beneath him quietly squealing, and seemed to study something on the ceiling.

Finally, Emmett said, "It started back when I found Jimmy Tooth in the bottom of the Addisons' old well."

"Good lord," said the chief.

It was late morning by the time the boy stopped talking.

Benton shook his head, and said, "That's one hell of a tale, Mr. Wallace. Jimmy Tooth come back from the dead to get justice? Ha. I like it, but it's lunatic. You're saying that Mrs. Williams killed Jimmy Tooth and because she knew you knew something, she trapped you in the icehouse and tried to cook you? And that's not even the most absurd part."

"Jimmy wanted justice," said Emmett, "but I think to also confess. It never struck me to wonder why Jimmy Tooth had a farm in hell. He wanted me to know that he choked a man to death."

"Oh, right," said Benton. "Who?"

"I've seen him before, but I can't place him. A man with a red beard down to here." He moved the side of his hand across his chest. "Bald head." Benton squinted and leaned on the desk. He smiled with only the left side of his mouth. "You know who you're describing?" he asked.

Emmett shook his head.

"Mr. Williams."

"Oh, that's right. I barely remember him."

"That's interesting," said the chief. "You know, when he died, I don't remember being called to the carpentry shop. I can't remember if the doctor took a look at him. I just heard he had a heart attack and then there was a wake. Mrs. Williams made his coffin and chose a closed lid. We knew her so well, and she was in such grief no one asked any questions."

"I think she got Jimmy to kill her husband, and then she killed Jimmy. Oh, and I almost forgot, the pastor was part of it. He was outside the icehouse and helped her make the fire."

"The pastor too?" said Benton.

"He did something to the brakes on his wife's car. He's gonna kill her. Jimmy put the spider kiss on her."

"All right, calm down now. This is getting crazier by the second."

"I can prove it," said Emmett. "Or at least part of it." He stood up and reached into the pocket of his jeans. His hand came out in a fist. Leaning over the desk, he opened his fingers, and three little nuggets dropped onto Benton's calendar. "I found those on the floor of the icehouse. Jimmy Tooth's teeth. I bet they'd match up to where they were busted out of his jaw."

"She killed him in the icehouse?" asked Benton.

"With a hammer, I think."

"I'll need these for evidence."

"Okay."

"All very interesting," said the chief. "Now Mrs. Williams could have pressed charges. She claims you burned down her icehouse. Mr. Dibble did find a charred box of wooden matches among the debris. Anyway, this woman you are claiming beat a man to death with a hammer is willing to forgive your trespass and mischief and let you go scot-free. She says she understands your insane condition."

"She's in romance with the pastor, and he's guilty so he wears the hat," Emmett blurted out.

"In romance?" Benton laughed. "That's a neat little theory, but it's

time for you to stop thinking, son. I want you to go home with your parents and stay there. I want you not to go near the carpentry shop or Mrs. Williams anymore. In fact, you can stay out of school till after Christmas too. I'll tell Miss Maufin I told you to. You need some rest, my friend. Peace and quiet and try to think of something other than walking skeletons and farms in hell."

Two days later, the news spread through Threadwell that Mrs. Holst, the pastor's wife, was killed in a tragic car accident on the way back from Mount Victory. She came around the curve by the Vesper Woods, lost control, and smashed into an ancient horse chestnut tree. She was flung through the windshield and the broken glass ripped her face off. The pastor was distraught, but still he presided over her wake.

The town gathered at the church to pay their last respects to the poor woman. She had been a great favorite of nearly everyone in the community. Even Emmett attended with his parents. Neighbors, having heard of the icehouse incident, gave him a wide berth and dirty looks. Even his parents kept a few feet between themselves and him. Before leaving for the wake his father had wanted him to smoke a thyme roll-up, but he refused, saying he didn't need it anymore. The church was packed, and he sat in a separate pew, his parents in the next one over. He paid no attention to the words that rhythmically puffed out the handkerchief of the pastor, but scanned the crowd. Sitting in the back row of pews he spied Gretel Lawler, dressed in white and carrying a hymnal. When no one but Emmett was looking she winked at him, and he smiled, relieved to know she had somehow escaped the icehouse and run for it. He was amazed by her. The only other person to look Emmett's way was Chief Benton, and he stared at the boy all through the pastor's eulogy.

Emmett went through his days in Threadwell an outcast, shunned by everyone, ignored by his parents. He felt like a ghost in his own home. They gave him his dinner separately and rarely asked him to do a chore. His mother still did his wash and swept out his room now and then, but conversations were never more than a sentence. He stopped going to school and instead roamed the countryside on his bike, which still stood next to the bench by the creek when he went to recover it weeks after the icehouse night. Mr. Peasi still let him borrow books from the barbershop, and so he read when he wasn't out exploring. His only real

joy was the nights he snuck out and met Gretel Lawler at the top of Chowdry Road. From there, they rode their bicycles everywhere while Threadwell slept.

On the night of the day in early July when Chief Benton ordered the exhumation of Jimmy Tooth's body and matched the three teeth to their homes on the jaw, Emmett sat with Gretel in the moonlight on the bank of Wildcat Creek where it wound through the cemetery beyond the church. It was after midnight and a beautiful breeze blew across the fields. They leaned together and she kissed him. His hand, resting on the ground, gripped the grass, and when they pulled apart, he'd squeezed his fist so hard he pulled a clump of it up. "Do you love me?" she asked. He smelled the aroma of wild thyme and realized that's what he clutched in his fingers. The sound of water passing over stones, the light on Gretel's face, the scent of the herb, dark green and peppery, intoxicated him. "Yes," he said, and then ripped a swatch of thyme off the clump and put it to his mouth. She grabbed his wrist. "Don't," she said. He never did again, and from then on, she was always with him.



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variations on an apple YOON HA LEE

Variations on an Apple

YOON HA LEE

illustration by
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The goddesses came to him three, when he was already thinking about numbers. One had her hair high-crowned with peacock's feathers woven together, and her mouth sardonic. One had hair the color of a yellow sun above the noontide sea, foam-fine, her eyes sideways smiling. And the last was tapping a war beat upon the helmet under her arm, one-two, one-two-three, one-two.

He didn't see them at first, lost in sandglass musings, and polygons begetting polygons, and infinite sums. In one-to-one correspondences and sheep counted by knots upon cords. An abacus, resting on his knee, dreamed of binary numbers and quantum superpositions; harmless enough, in this slant of time. It wasn't so much that Paris was a mathematician. Rather, it was that Ilion was a creation of curvatures and angles and differential seductions, and he was the city's lover.

Then the first visitor said, quietly but not gently, "Paris," and he looked up.

Paris set his stylus aside, trailing smudged thumbprints and a candlescatter of photons. "I must remember to get drunk more often," he said quizzically, "if the results are always this agreeable."

The first goddess gave him a smile like leaves curling under frost. "What a pity for you," Hera said. "You'd like this much better if it were about pressing wine from your fancies."

"Where are my manners?" he said, although he had already figured out that if having one god in your life was iffy luck, three was worse. "I doubt anything I could offer would be worthy of your palates, but maybe the novelty of mortal refreshments would suffice? I still have liquor of boustrophedon laments around here somewhere."

"Oh, what's the harm," Aphrodite said. Her voice was sweet as ashes, and Paris kept his face carefully polite despite the heat stirring in him. Futile, of course, especially the way she was looking at him with that knowing quirk of the lips. "A glass?"

"No, I want this done," Hera said. "Indulge yourself later, if you want."

Athena spoke for the first time. "I have to agree," she said gravely.

"Then—?" Paris said. "You can't be here because you're looking for my charming company. At least, I can't imagine that charming company is difficult for you to find."

"Hasn't your father ever warned you about being glib?" Hera said.

He only smiled, on the grounds that opening his mouth would just irritate her. Hera was high on his list of people not to irritate.

It was then that Hera produced the apple. Its brightness was such that everything around it looked dimmer, duller, drained of succulence. "What a prize," she said softly, bitterly. "No one wants the damn thing, except being uncrowned by its light is even worse. Someone has to claim it."

"Choose by random number generator?" Paris said, because someone had to.

"As if anything is truly random in the stories we write for ourselves," Athena said. Because of the apple, even her voice was gray, not the clear gray of a sky forever breaking dawnward, but the gray of bitter smoke.

Uninvited, Aphrodite took up the abacus, sank down onto Paris's bed, and stretched out a leg. Her ankle was narcissus-white, neat, the arch of her foot as perfect as poems scribbled into sand and given to the tides. She shook the abacus like a sistrum. The rhythms were both profane and profound, and he could not escape them; his heartbeat wound in and around the beats. Then she put it down and he could think again. Her sideways eyes did not change the whole time.

"Why me?" Paris asked, the next obvious question. Or maybe the first one, who knew.

"Because there's a siege through the threads of time," Athena said, "and you are knotted into it. Not that you're the only one, but that's not yours to know, not yet."

Paris looked yearningly at the abacus, but it had no answer for him. "I am under no illusions that Ilion will stand forever," he said. "Still, I had hoped it would last a little longer."

"If that's your wish," Hera said, "choose accordingly."

"Indeed," Athena murmured.

Aphrodite said nothing, only continued to smile with her sideways eyes, and Paris went hot and cold, fearing that the puzzle had no * * *

A few words need to be said about the apple at this point.

It had no fragrance of fruit, or even flowers, or worm-rot. It smelled of diesel hearts and drudgery and overcrowded colonies; of battery acid gone bad and bromides and foundered courtships. Intoxicating, yes, but in the way of verses etched unwanted upon the spirit's cracked windows. The smell was so pervasive that, once the apple showed up in the room, it was hard to imagine life without it. Not inaccurate, really.

The apple was not precisely the color of gold. Rather, it looked like bottle glass worn smoothly clouded, and if you examined it closely you could see the honey-haze of insincere endearments inside-out and upside-down and anamorphically distorted shining on the wrong side of the skin, waiting for you to bite in and drink them in, juice of disasters dribbling down your chin. Paris didn't have to take the bite to know how the apple tasted.

Paris could have awarded the apple to Hera. (For the fairest, it proclaimed, as though partial ordering was possible.) A lifetime's empire, and the riches to go with it. A prince, he was no stranger to the latter, even if (especially in time of war) there was no such thing as too much wealth. But he knew that it was one thing to scythe down the world with your shadow, and another to build ships, schools, roads; to gird your conquests with the integument of infrastructure. Even if the queen of the gods felled nations for him, conquest was never the hard part. As his mother often said, a hundred dynasties guttered out every day, from fire or famine or financial collapse.

He could have done the obvious and given it to Aphrodite, either because he ached for some phantasm of heart's yearning, or because he wanted to warm himself with a moment's kindling of appreciation in those sea-shadowed eyes. But that's an older story by far than this one.

That left Athena, gray-eyed, giver of wisdom. Athena, who leaned down to whisper in his ear that there were mysteries even greater than the ones he jousted with. Books of sand; tessellations of dart and kite, never-repeating; superpositions of sines in a siren's song ever-descending.

And here was where Paris did something even the farsighted warrior

* * *

After the goddesses left, the room was full of shadows athwart each other, and mosaics unraveling into fissures, and sculptures scavenged from ruined starships. Paris saw none of them. Instead, he only had eyes for the apple. They had left it with him; they knew his decision, and they had no reason to believe that he would renege on it.

The apple did not burn his hands. It did, however, leave a prickling residue, which he could not see but which clung to his skin. He hoped the effect was temporary.

Ilion, nine-walled Ilion, spindled Ilion with its robed defenses. Outside and inside, the city-fort shone black, girded with lights of pearling white and whirling gold. He walked through its halls now, listening to the way his footsteps were swallowed by expanses of silence, toward its heart of honeyed metal and striated crystal. As he traversed the involute path toward Ilion's center, the apple whispered to him of radioactive decay and recursive deaths, of treaties bitcrushed into false promises.

No one said this was going to be easy, Paris told himself ironically, and avoided looking at his blurred reflection in the sheening walls, the way his shadow stretched out before him as though yearning toward the dissolution past a singularity's boundary.

At last he came to Ilion's heart. The doors were open to him; they always were. He paused, adjusting to the velvet air, the sweetness of the warm light.

"Paris," Ilion said. He sat with his feet crossed at the ankles, on a staircase that led down to nowhere but a terminus of gravitational escapades. Today he was a dark youth, clear-eyed, with curls that always fell just so. Two days ago he had been a tawny girl with long lashes and small, neat hands, the fingernails trimmed slightly too long for comfort. (Paris had the scratches down his back to prove it.)

Paris hesitated. The usual embrace would be awkward with the apple in hand, and setting the thing down struck him as unsafe, as though it would tumble between the chinks of atoms and disperse into a particle-cloud of impossibilities. "I have a gift for you," he said, except his throat closed on *gift*.

"An ungift, you mean," Ilion said. His voice was light, teasing, accented precisely the way that Paris's was.

"Don't," Paris said. "Don't make this a joke."

"I wasn't going to," Ilion said, but the crookedness of his mouth suggested otherwise. Unhurriedly, he rose and ascended step by step, barefoot, crossing to clasp Paris's upper arms. "So tell me, what possessed you to bring this particular treasure here, instead of letting someone else have nightmares over it?"

No one had ever accused Ilion of having a small ego. Paris supposed that if he were as old, with an accompanying habit of kaleidoscope beauty, he'd be conceited, too. More conceited than he currently was, anyway. "Because it's for the fairest," Paris said. He met Ilion's eyes. "And, frankly, because if anyone has a chance of keeping the wretched thing contained, it's the oldest and greatest of fortresses."

"Flatterer," Ilion said, smiling. "Do you never listen to your brother when he goes on about strategy? Only an idiot picks a fight when they could avoid it instead."

"You are walls upon walls," Paris said. "It's you or no one."

"Give it here," Ilion said after a moment's pause.

Paris didn't want to let go of the apple, despite its whispers. He felt it clinging to his skin. Clenching his jaw, he dropped it into Ilion's outstretched hand.

For a moment, nothing. Then the city was lit by the apple's light, as though it was a lantern of condensed evenings. Everything was painted over with the jitter-tint of unease, from the factories where cyborgs labored with their insect arms to the academies with their contests of wit and strength, from the flower-engraved gun mounts to the gardens where fruits breathed of kindly intoxications.

"It's not without its charm," said Ilion, who had odd ideas about aesthetics. "Have you talked to your parents?"

"I didn't exactly have the time for lengthy consultations," Paris said. "And besides, all their protestations don't mean anything if you're not agreeable."

"Too bad you're too old to be flagellated," Ilion said, but he was smirking, and for a moment a silhouette-flicker of scourges twined around his ankles.

Paris resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

Ilion cocked his head. "I can hear the war fleets drumming their way through the black reaches even now," he said. "Will you love me when all that's left is a helter-skelter of molten girdings and lightless alloys? And the occasional effervescing vapor of toxic gas?"

"At that point I'll be dead too," Paris said, unsympathetic.

"It's a bit late to get you to think this through," Ilion said dryly. "Well, I suppose it was high time we enjoyed a challenge."

With that, he tossed the apple up in the air, high, high, until it was a glimmer-mote of malicious amber. Paris's heart nearly stopped. Then it plummeted to land with a smack in Ilion's hand. He brought it up to his mouth and bit into it. Paris almost gagged at the sudden sweetness of the apple's stench, the overwhelming pall of juice that evaporated as soon as it was released from the apple's pale flesh.

"You're crazy," Paris said.

"No crazier than you are," Ilion retorted. "I'm merely reifying the situation."

Ilion ate the entire apple, core and all, or perhaps, more likely, it had never had any core except a mist of recriminations. Paris was willing to bet that its seeds were everywhere, and always had been.

"Come here," Ilion said, barely loud enough for Paris to hear him over the taut silence. His lips curved, asymmetrical; his eyes were shadowlit with desire.

Paris was not known for moderation or good sense, but he said, "I don't think this is the time—"

Ilion grasped his shoulders and dragged him closer. He was sometimes taller and sometimes shorter. Right now Paris couldn't tell, drunk as he was on the apple perfume on Ilion's breath. The kiss lasted a long time. *I am never going to surface*, he thought at one point, before giving himself over to the taste of candied massacres.

"There," Ilion said, releasing Paris so suddenly he stumbled backwards and only just caught himself against a column crowned with translucent leaves. "I wanted to give you an appetizer of what we're about to go through." There was the merest undercurrent of pity in his voice. "You could have made a pretty face the focus of all the troubles coming for us, I suppose, but the end result is the same."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Paris said, lying. Shades stood around the two of them, a veil of suffocating possibilities. "I must take my leave of you. My parents are not going to be in a forgiving mood."

"Since when have you ever cared about their opinion?"

"I'm sure they're going to be asking themselves the same thing," Paris said, and left.

* * *

Paris didn't make it to the hall of halls before his sister intercepted him.

The passages of metal brightened with pattern-mazes of snaking circuitry, pulsing in on-off foreboding. "Paris," Cassandra said in encrypted flashes. The effect was not unlike taking a scalpel through the retina. "Tell them the truth."

There was no point in hiding anything from her if she knew this much already. "I'm going to," Paris said, a little wearily. The unfortunate problem with Cassandra's binary existence was that, for all the things she saw, her version of reality never seemed entirely compatible with the one that everyone else experienced.

"Tell them it's about a woman," Cassandra said. "She'll be the death of us, Paris."

"I'm not going to endanger us for some new lover," Paris said with the patience of long practice. "I have Ilion. Unless Ilion is the woman you mean."

"Not Ilion," Cassandra said. "The one who has your heart."

He reached out and pressed his hand against the wall. The light had no heat, although he fancied the warmth of kinship passed between them anyway. "Sister-sweet," he said, "there's love and there's love, and I would never betray us that way. I glimpsed what Aphrodite offered, and she was beautiful the way a stellar furnace is beautiful, but please think better of me than that."

Cassandra said nothing.

"Cassandra."

"Well," she said, "I suppose it is not as if she, too, didn't have her choices."

"I have no idea what you mean by that. Please, Cassandra."

The lights unsnaked, and he was left alone in the hall. Telling the rest of his family came easily, compared to that. Dutifully, he reported Cassandra's misgivings as well, but no one else knew what she was

* * *

They saw the ships coming from a long way off.

Every evening Paris looked through Ilion's unoccluded eyes at the fleets setting out for the fortress. "I am the fruit of fruits now," Ilion had said the other day, their lips smiling, "and they've come to pluck me."

Paris had been lying in Ilion's arms. "You sound so *pleased*," he muttered.

"Shouldn't I be?" Ilion said reasonably. "I have my pride too. Let them shatter themselves against my walls. Or, more prosaically, against high-velocity kinetic projectiles."

"Hector likes to say you can't win a war on the defensive."

"Hector is as loyal to me in his way as you are in yours," Ilion said, pleased as a cat. "He'll be happy to fight when I require it."

"He's more ship than human, these days. I hear him *singing* when he's out there. The hot sweep of flight. One of these days he won't come back."

Ilion prodded him uncomfortably close to his groin. "Now you're being unfair," they said. "He comes home each time, punctually as you please."

"Fine," Paris said. "Fine." There was nothing to argue: Hector did, in fact, come back punctually every time.

Time passed like vapor, or foam, or yearning dust. And the ships: during that time the ships gathered in great fleets. Some of them were the same color as the night, silhouettes as predatory as silence. Some of them were gaudy-bright, phoenix-bronzed. Some burned as they flew. Ships that had once been moons, digested and regurgitated into their present form by choral nanites. Ships that named each gun after a different genocide. Ships crewed by the dead, their expertise distilled into decision trees of astonishing agility.

All of them were coming for Ilion.

Discord. War of wars.

* * *

A few ways the war transpired:

In one version of the story, Ilion took on the garments of nine-tailed

fox spirits, robing itself in their keen eyes and their curling riddles. Vast armies, with sun chariots and fire arrows and star spears, rode across forever shores of smoke and scratchless glass, never reaching their goal; rode in random walks across maps that changed each time they took a reckoning. Their generals conferred among themselves. Chief among them was a woman old in battle but young in the ways of cities. Her counsel, to the others' dismay, was to withdraw instead of wandering across the mire of their own impatience. After many days of argument they finally agreed. All that time Ilion whispered into her visions, wearing the face of her own ambitions.

In the meantime, Ilion of the many shapes, Ilion of the nine-veiled walls, was overtaken by a procession of numerate factions. Every plant in the spinward gardens hung with fruit whose flesh had the texture of cooked eyes. The Nines went about in fox-masks, and a civil war ensued between those who poured libations to prime numbers upon silicate altars and those who poured libations to composite numbers. Paris parted ways with his family in the early days, withdrawing behind the fortress's occlusions to design improved defenses. He studied Zhuge Liang and Vauban and Mardi bin Ali al-Tarsusi, he steeped his dreams in the properties of degenerate matter, and for all his care he was caught half-drowsing in Ilion's arms when at last bird-cloaked insurgents caused the fortress to fold in on itself like crushed paper.

The generals waited, and waited, and waited, and at last their chief sacrificed her face to the sky and sea and liminal shore. Concealed by a helmet from which three eyes stared lidlessly, she went before her lieutenants and told them the time had come to sack the city-fortress. Even now Ilion's fame had not waned. Songs of its treasures, of its metal heart and petal beauty, were still chanted in the sky courts and hell chasms and the surfeit of night roads.

By the time they arrived, they were much diminished in number, but great in glory. Ilion itself welcomed its new rulers. "We are the same," it said to the chief, and smiled at her with her own face. She realized then how she had been tricked, but it was too late. Her generals were only too content to become part of the prize they had sought so long.

This victory was not without its price. Ilion's people took up the obeisances and rituals of their new masters, and even the numerate factions fell into disarray.

In another version of the war, Ilion descended upon an immense artificial world of ocean, concealing itself in its depths like a belated pearl-irritant. Braids of kelp became her hair, and during the festivals of war preparation, she decorated herself with the whorled dances of transparent eels and algal blooms.

Fleets upon fleets came to orbit the world of ocean, intending to boil away the waters layer by layer. Instead, they were subsumed by the sea reverie. Spherical dreadnoughts condensed into whale shapes. Flights of missiles became voracious finned schools, themselves consumed by carriers that sprouted anemone banners. It was not long before the invaders had joined Ilion's ecology of untided longings.

Ilion's children learned the undulant languages, applied themselves to the study of fluid dynamics, and wrote disparaging treatises that, misconstrued in realities slightly aslant their own, birthed legends of sunken civilizations.

In yet another, Ilion, like a great maw, began digesting the beings sentient and non-sentient who dwelt within it. As it did so, it encrusted itself with minerals and mirrors, an armor of prolix crystallography. The voices of its victims thundered through the space-time membrane, threnody absolute. Every guidestar that knew Ilion's name was unmoored from the firmament and crushed into singularity specks. Of Ilion itself, nothing remained but a vast jeweled simulacrum of appleplague.

We could go on in this manner, but these examples suffice to demonstrate Ilion's inability to escape the apple's nature.

* * *

It was the tenth year of the siege (the hundredth, the billionth). Paris leaned back in Ilion's arms and listened to the shield beat and the spear chant, the unsound of missiles and catapulted projectiles hurtling through the black depths. "I can't imagine what it would be like to sleep in a time of peace anymore," he remarked.

"Don't be ridiculous," Ilion said. "You're adaptable." He shifted his leg, and the gown he wore slipped sideways to reveal a tanned expanse of thigh. Ilion's clothing was a matter of opinion. Every time Paris thought he had eased all of it off, he found another coy fold of tunic, or tassels covering an ankle. There was no such thing as a completely

naked city. You could dig and you could dig, you could walk the walls under the night's unkind eyes; nevertheless, farther down you'd always find some furrowed bone, some scratched potsherd, some hexadecimal couplet stamped on plastic.

"Do you ever wonder what they're up to, out there?" Paris said.

"You mean besides throwing glorified space rocks at us?"

Paris snorted. "They must live and love and die, the same as we do," he said, moved by an unaccustomed swell of sentimentality. "They must have children of circuitry or flesh or cunning brass. And some of them must be as sick of this whole conflict as we are."

Ilion tapped impatiently on the couch. The walls shivered black, then red-gold-pale with the burstlights of the bombardment, the light of local stars glinting off the barding of massed ships. "Yes," Ilion said, "they're so sick of it that they're going home."

"They must want something concrete out of all this."

"Glory," Ilion said. "Vengeance, spite, security, the sheer unadulterated expression of aggression. None of these, I will note, is *concrete*."

"You could vomit up that damn apple. I wish—" Paris bit his tongue.

Ilion refrained from an entirely redundant *I told you so*. This was, at least, an improvement over the first nine years.

"I am going to fall asleep here," Paris said. "And I'm going to dream of enjoying silence, and waters unblemished by ships, and eating nothing to do with fruit—no sauces, no preserves, no fresh chilled slices, *nothing*—for the rest of my life."

Ilion threaded his fingers through Paris's hair, untangling a lock. It almost didn't hurt. "Sleep, then," he said in a voice sweet as water. "It won't be much longer."

Paris meant to ask what he meant by that, but his eyelids drooped, and sleep descended upon him. Whether he had the dreams he had wished for, he never remembered.

* * *

Late in the last year, some but not all of the enemy fleets withdrew. Hector and the defense fleets were on high alert for weeks afterward, patrolling Ilium behind the cover of its flanged force-screens. Paris edited out his need for sleep, as much as he longed for the escape, and

oversaw the city's artillery defenses. *Far-archer*, Ilion's guns said of him, mostly with affection, where he could hear them. (They called him other things behind his back, in the way of soldiers and commanders everywhere.)

"I don't trust it," Paris said to Ilion as he stared over the pattern-maps and their mystifying gaps. He almost knocked over a tall glass of wine.

Ilion deftly caught the glass. "You need to quit pruning your need for sleep," she said. "If it's regenerating this fast, you need the rest more than we need you awake obsessing over the invaders' whimsies."

"You're taking this too lightly."

Ilion fixed him with an interested stare. "Excuse me," she said, "somebody is forgetting who's responsible for coordinating all the systems around here. Even when I'm busy feeding you grapes because you've forgotten to show up for dinner again."

Paris gave it up. He didn't like the fact that none of their intelligence had anticipated this development. They had spent long hours tracing through what they knew of the invaders' councils—depressingly little, in spite of their studies of signal traffic, and repeated attempts to crack the encryption—in an attempt to decipher its significance. So far they had a lot of speculation and little evidence to back up any of the going hypotheses.

"Stop that," Ilion said.

Paris realized he had been tapping his foot in a querulous one-two, one-two-three, one-two rhythm. "Sorry," he said, mostly sincerely.

"Look," Ilion said, leaning over him. She was tall now, even allowing for the fact that he was slouched in his chair. "If there's a pattern in there, any shred of meaning or menace, I'll find it. The young are so"—she smoothed his hair back and kissed the side of his brow—"impatient. We will prevail."

"Other than the kiss," Paris said, unimpressed, "you're starting to sound like my brother. You're more succinct, though."

Ilion laughed. "He does like his rallying speeches, doesn't he? It's a harmless foible, as these things go." Her hands trailed lower, began massaging the knots in Paris's neck. The calluses on her fingers were oddly soothing.

"I would feel so much better if you showed any sign of concern,"

Paris said.

"No, you wouldn't," she returned, and he couldn't refute her. But she smiled at him, dangerously. In the light-dark of her eyes he saw the enormous edifices of calculation, systems and subsystems dedicated to analyzing the anomaly in the enemy's behavior.

As it turned out, he shouldn't have been reassured after all—not because she wasn't devoted to the problem, but because she was.

* * *

Everyone in Ilion with a shred of understanding of strategic analysis dedicated a certain amount of their cognitive allocation to the problem of the vanished ships and whether they had, say, gone for reinforcements, or were skulking around doing something even worse, whatever that might be. (The sole exception was Cassandra; even Ilion gave up on coaxing her into joining the effort.) As a result, the enemy general's mimetic attack, inscribed in the notation of negative space, penetrated the city-fort's every level, from Ilion's highest heuristics to the sub-sentient routines that ran the simplest defense grids. And at the appointed time, all of Ilion's gates flowered open at once.

Even Paris, with his interest in matters mathematical, had been acculturated by the long siege to think of *attack* in terms of triremes and trebuchets, mass drivers and missiles. When he woke (having fallen asleep, without meaning to, while looking up a theorem concerning network topology), it took him a muddled hour to figure out what was going on.

By then it was too late.

* * *

Paris didn't recognize the conquering general until she deigned to visit him. He was the last, although he would never know that. She dispensed of the rest of the royal family by fire and sword and bullet, by her annihilating brilliance.

"So you're the cause of all this trouble," the general said. She was made of articulated metal, shining in the gray light of the prison. Each time she moved, she made a metal-scrape whisper of bells.

Her voice was familiar and unfamiliar. Nevertheless, he was certain he had never heard it before. His bonds of gravity-weave at least permitted him to raise his head enough to look her in the eye.

The face, now—he knew that face. Once, through a scatter-veil of possibilities, he had seen it, golden-fair and blessed by goddesses three, beautiful in the way of bone and bullets and polished coins.

"I am Helen," the general said, "and you've wasted ten years of everyone's lives by sparking off a general war. Congratulations."

Paris laughed painfully, contemplating her. "Damn," he said. "The fairest isn't a goddess after all, or a city, even. It's a general with a slide rule for a heart. That's a compliment, by the way."

"You idiot," Helen said. "You know as well as I do that the gods eavesdrop on everything. I can't spare you now."

"Sometimes it's worth it just to say the truth as you see it," Paris said.

"It's over," she said. "Your city will be dismantled into its constituent quarks, and no more people will have to die for its sake. Until the next fruit's sprouting, anyway; there's always some gardener of human dissent. But that's a problem for the next general."

"I should have chosen you," Paris said. In that moment he fell in love the way you fell into a singularity, a moment spun into forever lingering.

Helen's masked face held no expression except Paris's own, faintly reflected. "Still an idiot," she said, and this time there was real pity in her voice. "I know your story. Do you think you were the only one offered a choice?"

He had no answer for her. Even so, when she brought the gun up to his head, he did not close his eyes. His last thought was that Ilion had never had a chance.

About the Author

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SOME GODS

MARIA DAHVANA HEADLEY

OFELPASO



Some Gods of El Paso

MARIA DAHVANA HEADLEY

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They were healing the world, they figured, even though they lived in Texas.

You know the story. In the town where they'd both grown up, they could look across the river to Mexico. Both of them had seen cheapo Catholic candles lit in the bedrooms of people they'd worked on, and both of them had been called miracle workers.

Back in the beginning, Lorna Grant and Vix Beller were small time. They worked El Paso to Houston and down the Gulf Coast, him mostly on women and her mostly on men. For a while, they changed people's hearts and fixed people's minds. Then, because this was how things went in Texas, things got broken again.

This was after the government collapsed but before God and the law got forgotten. Lorna and Vix were both practitioners of the oldest profession, and found easy employment. Their techniques dated from the time of Christ, but roadside religions found them to be sinners.

By the time they finally met, late in '29, Vix Beller'd been chased by a mob with pitchforks, and forced to steal a car to put miles between himself and the town whose women he'd waked into wanting. Lorna Grant had been thrown into the back of a pickup truck with a bunch of lost girls destined for the border, but she'd stabbed the driver when he gave her water, took the wheel, and drove them all to a halfway house where she used some of her healing powers to make them whole.

Lorna'd been fucking like her cunt was a relic since she was sixteen. Vix had spent years doing the same thing, his cock like the True Cross, and the day they met, as the story goes, Lorna was walking out of some old boy's front door, carrying the sorrow of a wife that wouldn't, and Vix was walking out a door across the street, dragging a sack of a forty-three-year-old lady schoolteacher's rage at climbing the Leaning Tower of Pisa on a once-in-a-lifetime grand tour and feeling high lonesome the whole way up.

Lorna and Vix took one look at each other's burdens, and then, without discussion, Lorna poured Vix's out on the front lawn of the old

boy, and Vix poured Lorna's on the potted plants of the teacher. Within a couple of minutes, the old boy and the schoolteacher, both relieved of their troubles, opened their front doors, and stepped out into the sun, glancing shyly, longingly at one another.

For their part, Lorna and Vix took a stroll down the street to put distance between themselves and the scene of their healing.

"Want to drink some hot chocolate with me?" Lorna asked Vix, giving him the once-over. He was carrying a lot of his own pain, which he didn't notice, because he was too busy carrying the anger of every woman he'd ever worked into a miracle. She thought there might be room for her to maneuver.

"I wouldn't say no. Want to go to a motel with me?" Vix asked Lorna, mapping the fury she glittered with. Her whole body was covered in things she didn't see, given her own burden of every miracle-ized man's blues. Her rage made him feel certain, along with the thought that he'd cure her of something of which she couldn't cure herself.

"I wouldn't say no to that, either," said Lorna.

He strutted a little, and so did she. They both knew they were good at what they did.

Turned out, though, that once they drank that hot chocolate and got to that motel, they made love for ten hours, got starry-eyed, and merged burdens. Some people say they got married shortly thereafter by a justice of the peace they'd cured of his miseries, and other people say they didn't believe in marriage but did wear love tokens they'd had installed under their skin like shrapnel. Whatever the truth of it was, the two of them together were something to reckon with.

After that, everybody knew that Lorna and Vix came as a set. They got spotted at diner counters time to time, drinking coffee, tea, and lemonade, eating sandwiches just like regular folks, but Vix and Lorna weren't regular.

It was a myth, as Lorna and Vix already knew, that everyone who sorrowed longed specifically and only for joy. Many people wanted darker medicine. Prohibition of alcohol had created a countrywide yearning for other forms of depressant—though no one referred to alcohol as such—and by the time Lorna and Vix met, ten years into Temperance, everything to do with high and low had become illegal.

People were supposed to be living in the middle, but nobody liked the middle. New cures for pain were being distilled in basements and bathtubs.

In secret dens in Manhattan, high rollers mixed powdered powerlessness with seltzer and drank it with a twist. In New Orleans, the drink that had formerly been bourbon punch got drizzled with barrel-aged despair, and backroom saloons poured it by the ladle-full. Most people cut rage into lines and snorted it, all to feel a little of the old days, the vigor and foolish giddiness that came just before a bar fight. There was glory in the knowledge that the price of wrath would be only a broken nose, not a broken country. A few people craved a mixture of different kinds of emotional disaster shaken up into a slurry, and that cost more.

Soon after they met, Vix and Lorna realized there was a sweet market in fenced emotion, and though they'd never done this before, they started dealing along with their healing. The miracle makers had an easy supply of raw materials for what half the country craved. They had particular access to desperate love, which was cut with rage and sorrow, and for which people paid extra. Desperate love could be shot into a vein.

Despite the shift in their business, Lorna and Vix still thought of themselves as mainly healers. They were taking pain away from people, after all, never mind that they were transporting it across state lines and selling it. On the way from a stopover to visit family in Florida, they drained the pain and rage from the hearts of ten or twenty normal people: a traveling saleswoman trying to get over losing her samples, a farmworker with a lost dog, a woman with a little son who looked too much like his daddy. Vix and Lorna sat naked on a motel-room bed and bagged that agony and fury up. They had big plans. They'd sell it in New York City, or maybe in Chicago. They got onto the Gulf Coast Highway, their Chevy loaded down with a few hundred grand in emotions.

A bullhorn popped out the window of a state patrol car outside Gulfport, Mississippi, and lights flashed in the rearview. Lorna pulled over.

"Whatcha got in that there?" said the trooper, and Lorna looked up at him and blinked.

"Somebody's child custody battle," she said. "And an eighth of alcoholic spouse."

"Looks like contraband, bagged up like that. What else you selling, gal like you? How about a freebie and I let you pass?"

Vix sat up from the backseat where he'd been napping.

The patrolman's pain ended up in a burlap sack, and Lorna hit the gas. Shortly thereafter, her face appeared on the TV news, all red lipstick and yesterday's mascara, because the trooper had been entirely made of pain and rage, and when they took it from him, there was only skin left, not even bones.

"Most folk's souls," said Lorna Grant on the newsreel that got around, "are made of hurt."

"And if they're not made of hurt," said Vix Beller, "they're made of mad. Most folks don't got much else making them human."

"We're providing a public service," said Lorna, and then swiveled her hips for the camera of the cub reporter who'd happened upon the notorious two relieving a train conductor of the pain of the abusive brothers who'd put a snake in his bed back in Kansas, and a female passenger of the confusing memory of the one-off kiss she'd gotten from a beautiful stranger one night in New Orleans. "And we're not stealing. This is pay, fair and square, for services rendered. That officer threw his hurt at us. We took it from him. It's no crime."

Vix let the reporter take their picture, Vix with his eyebrow raised, his biceps bulging out of his undershirt, and Lorna nestled there beneath his shoulder, looking at the camera too, a cigarette hanging out of her pout, her dress candy-striped and clingy. They drove off, Lorna in the passenger seat drinking pineapple juice with a straw, Vix pushing the speedometer faster than was legal, through torrential rainstorms and blinding sun.

After that, they'd sometimes cross into a new state and find a whole town pooling resources to buy a few hours of healing, a pile of pain already waiting for them, but by '34, the available sorrow and rage in America had begun to ebb, the market controlled by Lorna and Vix. That was when things went south.

Vix and Lorna started to leave on occasion with more than just pain, anger, and desperate love. Sometimes, they took happiness, too. Vix fell into the bed of a woman wanting to be rid of a childhood crime, and

found himself departing with her college graduation day. Lorna made off with the coffee, cigarettes, and first love of a trumpet player who'd only wanted to forget the sadness of an instrument stolen on a train. They both staggered out of those bedrooms, wondering what they'd done, knowing that even though they'd had been given freely, memories like those were nothing that should've changed hands. They heard too many whispers, felt too many heartbeats. Pain and rage had dimmed the feelings of much of the country for years, and it was wearing off. Now the people who asked Vix and Lorna for healing sometimes didn't want anything more than a kiss from someone just like every other someone. People called for miracles, when all they really needed was a hand to hold.

There was a sheriff in Texas who developed a yearning for them both. His name was Sheriff Hank Yarley, and he was about to be retired. He was thin as an old razor and wore his medals shiny, and he formed himself a posse of gun-toting men, some of whom had had run-ins with the doings of Vix in particular. Deprived of wives, the men of the posse wandered around Texas like drained oilfields, all sputter and no spout. Their former wives looked pretty as prayer dust and lit grocery-store candles in their bedrooms, the face of sex-mad Saint Vix painted right there on each label for everyone to see.

Sheriff Hank Yarley's own wife had gone on the run, driving her mother's car clean across Louisiana to see if she could get her gaze on Vix Beller, and when she came back, she was no longer in love with the sheriff. Yarley wanted to repossess her love and fury (in her, they were one thing) and feed it back into her mouth by the spoonful, but it was with all the rest of the stolen emotions, in the trunk of one of Vix and Lorna's stolen cars. He aimed to get it back.

He pulled strings, and Vix Beller and Lorna Grant got declared Public Enemies, with a cash bounty of ten thousand dollars dead or alive. They'd been small-time celebrities before, but now they were fully famous. Every newspaper south of the Mississippi showed their portrait under the headline Cold-Blooded Healers. Their pretty faces decorated post office walls.

They were in the process of forming a gang back then, and they'd attracted a few boys and girls, but nobody could kiss like Vix, and nobody could caress like Lorna. When Yarley began his pursuit, they

dropped their extras off somewhere near the shipyards in Port Arthur and kept right on going. The gang wannabees resented it, but what could they do? They were out of anger and out of woe. Vix and Lorna had taken it all.

Lorna and Vix were turned away from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and New Mexico, but the locals warned them in Louisiana, where the trade in emotions ran high. A shipment of cold rage they'd brokered from Colorado got loaded into a steamboat out of New Orleans and shipped through the Gulf. There was room reserved on the boat for Lorna and Vix, but with that bounty on their heads, they had to get out of town quick and missed their chance at disappearing into international waters. Half their load of blues went missing in Lubbock, and it got cut with who knew what. Both of them wondered, but they had no time to check it out, and so off it went, black-marketing itself into the mouths of people they'd never met.

They holed up in an old house in the Texas panhandle, but they were compromised by locals suspicious of their activities. Folks came walking down the road, drawn to them like rats to pipers, and after a few hours, the two of them bagged up the final remnants of North Texas's pain and anger and stowed it in the storm cellar.

When Sheriff Hank Yarley and his posse came down the drive, their line of cars bucking over the ruts in the dirt road, Vix and Lorna were heading out the back, driving across a field. By the time Hank Yarley took a fruitless run into a corn maze, his rifle flailing, his shoes full of dried-up kernels, their taillights were the only thing keeping him vertical. He shot a few times at the red lamps, swearing.

Back at the safe house, he found his posse scooping at a stash of sorrow with silver spoons from the kitchen. All of them looked up at him and pretended they were seeking their specific wifely sorrows, as opposed to getting high on the stolen sadness of strangers.

"That's evidence you're eating," Sheriff Yarley said, ignoring the way the sorrow drifted on the air, trying not to inhale more than he could help. The two criminals had sucked the South dry and left blankness in their wake. Every town had addicts now and new problems created by lost love, it seemed to Yarley. Houston was full of people shooting rifles out their car windows and swearing that if only they had Vix and Lorna, they'd behave themselves. Up at the other end of the state, there were

misery-mongers making profit on third-hand sadness sold from the duo's scrapings and then cut with sand and cigarette ashes.

Lorna and Vix didn't love the people they healed, and that was the part Yarley resented most of all. They loved only each other. Someone out in Hollywood was already making a movie about them, and in it, Sheriff Yarley had heard, there was a scripted moment in which he was personally mocked for being unable to lay down the law on the two unabiders.

One of the deputies looked up, his eyes glazed with tears.

"This here's some good, good shit, boss," he said.

Beside him, another deputy savored a spoonful of shame, licking it up like sorghum.

"Be careful of that," Yarley said. "I heard a boy out in San Antonio came upon some of this last batch of sad, and whatever they'd cut it with made his legs go limp. Lorna and Vix sent some shit to a dance hall in Lubbock. People out that way drag their feet now."

Yarley made a phone call, and then another, looking at the map.

Out on the highway a few hours later, Vix and Lorna sped through the night, the backseat full of sacks of small misdemeanors, the secrets of teary-eyed preachers and of ladies in torn slips, the church-hatted whispers of the elderly. Lorna was wearing sunglasses in the dark, and Vix stroked her thigh, pushing her dress up past her garter.

"You know I love you, gal," said Vix.

"Love you too, boy," said Lorna.

"What are we going to do?" said Vix. "Looks like they've postered up the Midwest with our faces and places."

"We could go to Mexico," said Lorna. "Or Canada. We could hit Niagara Falls? Or get ourselves smuggled onto a ship and take it to South America? We could head out west, see if we could make it to California?"

Behind them, there were headlights. A mass of them, as many as there were stars. Looked like all of Texas had hit the highway, following Lorna and Vix as they tried to flee. There were intermittent gunshots.

"I'm about ready to hang it up, Vix," said Lorna. "I've been working since I was sixteen. Sometimes I feel bad about the work I've been doing. It ain't all of it right."

"You and me both, kid," said Vix. "I'm getting tired of all this God.

Maybe we're messing with the fate of the forlorn. Maybe nobody oughta pray to people like us."

Lorna squeezed his fingers.

"I ever tell you about the time I brought a boy back from the dead?" she said.

"You know you didn't," Vix said, and smiled at her. "You know everything you ever told me and everything I ever told you. I've got you memorized, but you still have some secrets."

"Bet you do too. This was a few years before I met you. I came upon him right after he hung himself up. I cut that boy down and kissed him on the mouth, and there he was, resurrected. I took his sadness from him, and he gasped his way back into the land of the living. I've still got his batch of blues in my purse, and time to time, I catch my finger on them."

"I know the ones," said Vix. "Those are the sads shaped like a pocketknife."

She nodded.

"Couple years later, that boy was dead again, this time in the car with the engine on, his soul filled with tired instead of sad, and so I kissed him and took that away, too. He opened his eyes and saw me looking at him, and said, 'Honey, just let me go. There ain't no good place for me on this whole Earth, and I done my time.' That's the boy I married, twice risen, thrice dead. It turns out that people have to go their own way. I buried him in our backyard under a shade tree."

Vix gave her a look that said everything he'd ever loved about her, and she looked back at him, her eyes full.

Lorna held his hand hard. "I wouldn't mind settling down somewhere pretty. Seashore. I wouldn't mind stopping this healing business." She looked at him. "But I never did take your pain away."

"I never took your anger," said Vix. "Figure you had uses for it. I like the ocean too. Town with nobody. Clapboards and a porch. Hot chocolate, me and you, some torches lighting the path down to the beach. We could get a dog and a hammock. Listen to a record player late at night."

"We could count the stars," said Lorna. "Maybe write a book."

"Sometimes, we'd sit and look out at the waves, and just do nothing at all," Vix said, and kissed her fingers.

"Do people like us ever retire?" asked Lorna. She was twenty-eight and in her healing prime. It'd gotten so when she walked down a street, everyone turned to look, and automatically gave her every dark emotion they'd been carrying. Vix was the same. Two weeks before, he'd been followed down a main street by a couple dozen women, all of whom later resented him. At a post office in the panhandle, he stood next to his own face on a most wanted poster and let a bunch of people take his photograph. Lorna's dress had gotten torn off in a crowd, and now people sold the scraps for souvenirs, all snipping little threads from little threads. Lorna had a new dress, but she still felt bad about the whole thing.

"We can retire if we want to," Vix said. "Change our names and stop being Public Enemies. They can't put us in jail. Can't have a jail without sorrow and anger. Whole thing would fall down."

"They could kill us," said Lorna, and snorted. "That sheriff."

There was a bullet hole in their back left tire, and they could hear it hissing out air. Headlights were approaching from all directions. They were the tent of the revival. They were miracle makers in the middle of a field. They were healer dealers, and they were tired.

"Or we could kill *him*," said Vix. "What've we got in the backseat, Lorn?"

Vix's eyes were on the rearview.

"About a kilo of that straight shit from El Paso. I don't know what was going on there last week, but everything they wanted to be healed of is bagged up. They wanted to forget it ever happened. I threw it in just in case. Thought we might mix it half and half with the sad from Juarez, sell it like that."

Vix pulled the car over, and Lorna looked at him.

"Strong stuff," he said. "Good to know. Open that sack."

Behind their car, Sheriff Hank Yarley crept around in a ditch, belly flat to the ground, rifle strapped to his back, bowie knife in his teeth. The headlights of the mob approached the two most wanted. He'd called out all the cops and righteous volunteers from the border, and they converged on Lorna and Vix, stars in their eyes, bounty in their hearts.

Lorna's long arms lifted the sack onto the roof of the car and she ducked, and that was when Yarley started shooting.

The sack was intact for a moment and then it was perforated.

White dust spun out into the night and into all the parked cars. Men and women were aiming rifles and pistols, aiming darts and clubs and arrows, aiming cameras and holding lanterns, and all of them inhaled.

On his belly, Sheriff Hank Yarley took a deep and accidental breath, and what he breathed was pure, desperate love, cut with nothing. It was burning, scalding, lost and found. Once he took one breath, he had to take another and another, and in a moment, all the people in the mob were choking on it, upending on it, overdosing on it, because too much love was like too much anything.

The seizure of love went through all of Texas, rattling the ground and making strangers fall hard into each other's arms. This was love that took the South and drenched it, and up over the land, a storm of heat and heart took the dirt off the desert. People died of love, writhing on kitchen floors and kissing in traffic, and other people just caught a whiff of it and lived the rest of their lives looking for more. For ten years after, the people in Texas were different than they'd been. The borders opened wide and the river was full of folks from both sides being baptized with tongue. You know the story. You remember those years when everyone forgot who they'd been hating. You remember the drugstores full of nothing but lipsticks and soda pop. The world's past that now, though. That time's long over.

People say that Lorna and Vix stood up from the scene of that last great crime, grimy and gleaming. People say that when they came out of that car, there were fifty bullet holes in the doors and windows, but that Lorna Grant and Vix Beller walked away unscathed. Maybe they went to the seashore. Maybe they went to South America. Maybe they're dead now, or maybe they're old folks healing people's cats, dogs, and parakeets in some faraway city. Sheriff Yarley went on to start a charismatic church, exposed to the great light of some gods of El Paso, and full to the brim with strangers' love. The others in his posse went wandering around America, preaching peace and pretty-pretty, carrying scraps of Lorna's striped dress and Vix's vest.

In a glass case in Austin you can see the preserved remains of Lorna's little finger, shot off by Sheriff Yarley when she put the desperate love up on the roof. It's lit up under cover for tourists to see, but the rest of the two most wanted are long gone.

Here in Texas, sorrow and fury are back in the bodies of men and women. Some nights, we hear our neighbors moaning and country music on the radio, and some nights we go out walking late, looking to be healed of every hurt, looking for a hand-painted sign that says, COME ON SINNER.

Some nights, all we want is the neon promise of a motel, a hot bed, and some hands to hold us under the covers, and some nights, looking for that much, we keep driving and driving in the dark.

About the Author

Maria Dahvana Headley is the author of the novel *Queen of Kings* and the memoir *The Year of Yes.* With Neil Gaiman, she is the co-editor of the *New York Times*-bestselling anthology *Unnatural Creatures*, benefitting 826DC. Her Nebula-nominated short fiction has recently appeared in *Lightspeed, Nightmare, Apex, The Journal of Unlikely Entomology, Subterranean, Glitter & Mayhem,* and Jurassic London's *The Lowest Heaven* and *The Book of the Dead. Magonia,* a young adult novel, will be out from HarperCollins in 2015, and *The End of the Sentence,* a novella co-written with Kat Howard, will be released by Subterranean Press in August 2014. She grew up in rural Idaho on a sled-dog ranch, spent part of her twenties as a pirate negotiator and ship charterer in the maritime industry, and now lives in Brooklyn in an apartment shared with a seven-foot-long stuffed crocodile. You can find her on Twitter at @MARIADAHVANA. Or sign up for email updates here.

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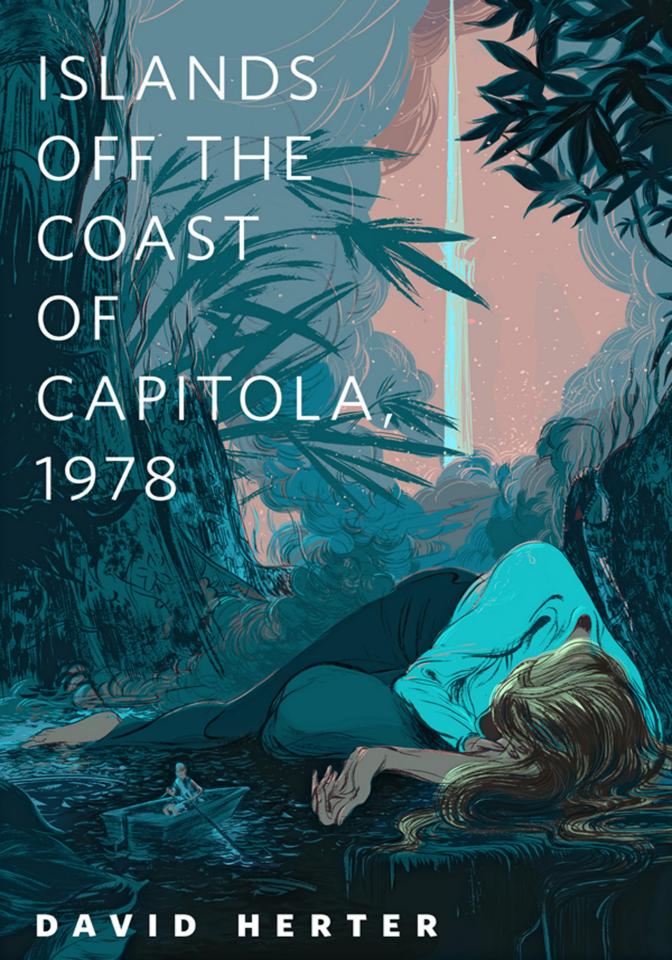
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Islands Off the Coast of Capitola, 1978

DAVID HERTER

illustration by
WESLEY ALLSBROOK



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And if you're a boy with a wide imagination who hikes the beach at Capitola for miles on winter days, hikes until the promontory marking home is a speck you can hide behind your outstretched hand, then you'll continue hearing a voice in the green and white surf and in the hectoring cries of the gulls. You'll hear it coming up behind you, miles behind, as you retrace your crumbling footsteps along the frost-packed sand, and you'll hear it coming down from the eucalyptus as you tread the lane toward home, toward the *Ol' Barn Itself*, where shaggy branches sway above the boulders and crushed shells in the ramshackle yards. It calls out *Ho*, *Ballou* when the wind is just right and the surf is distant and pounding on the beachhead—*Ho*, *Ballou*; *Ho*, *Ballou*—until the voice is lost in the wind whistling through the tie-down fence.

Home has a formal name, painted on the black iron post beside the drive, stamped in the many books left by a previous owner—*The House of 31 Sparrow Lane*—but with you and Mom it is always *the Ol' Barn Itself*. Every time she drives you home from Beach Market, with you jostling with the jostling grocery bags in the back, she announces over her shoulder, "*Back to the Ol' Barn Itself, Ballou*." The name is your own invention, uttered when you first set eyes on the house.

Its style is eccentric, like many of the properties in your small beach town. The real estate lady had called it Georgian, but *additions* were made in varying styles, and the uneven profile of the house marks an owner's changing whims, the best of which is your bedroom under the roof. It has a peaked ceiling and old dark wood like something from a Spanish galleon, and you reach it by climbing a brass spiral staircase from off the kitchen, a dizzying climb up and up with the smell of pine and the wood painted blue overhead, like a summer sky.

You're ten years and two days old, tired from your walk, chill from the breeze that presages night. You're hungry, but not hungry enough to bother Mom. You kneel in the crabgrass beside the porch, Windbreaker zipped to your chin, hunching over your motley armies of Centurions, Saracens, Knights, and plastic army soldiers, along with a few die-cast tanks and a red tyrannosaurus. Under your hectoring eye the thirty-some odd pieces become three thousand, and the yard the size of the coast. Sand flies buzz the battlefield. Under your hand a Saracen's jutting black beard pronounces doom upon the Enemy, led by a Centurion with his bright red plume. You shift them, watching the epic cycle of clamor and bloodletting, green plastic soldiers falling under the sword, Saracens toppling in a spray of machine-gun fire. Your white knuckles dig trenches in the sand. Then the surf rises to a roar, wild in the eucalyptus, and a shadow swarms toward you with a great crunch and rattle.

You stand up, heart beating in your throat.

A towering truck glares up the drive, dragging a deep rumble beneath. It spreads its shadow over the gravel and the eucalyptus, and over you. The engine growls, drawing frazzled breaths through the grille, then cuts out.

Visitors are rare. For days on end it's only the mailman with his bag over his shoulder and his ponytail. Sometimes it's only the far neighbor's tomcat, brown and white with a clipped ear where a gull got it. Sometimes it's only birds. *Sparrow Ln.* reads the sign at the end of the road, though you've never seen a sparrow, only shearwaters and gulls. And once, a pelican had dropped startled out of low fog onto the crabgrass, flapping its wings and clacking open its pot-bellied beak. It had lingered, dazed a bit by the yard, giving you time to run into the kitchen for the Wonder Bread then advance in slow sliding steps toward it whispering, *Hey there, hey*, and toss wads of bread into its open gullet before it clapped shut and the pelican rustled its wings and sailed up and away.

Sometimes it's only the ghosts of birds, rising out of the salty night air.

You advance cautiously.

WIN EBAGO proclaims the rusted letters on the truck's grille. You wonder if someone really won it, and what type of vehicle an Ebago is, then let yourself recognize the name. You feel the heat from the grille and study the battered Oregon license plate. The windshield betrays nothing beyond its glare, nor does any further sound come from it, other than a *tic-tic* from the engine. You retreat to your armies near the porch, watching the door in the side of the vehicle, waiting.

Words were once painted there, you realize. YOU 10, it tells you, in faded blue.

"Bally?" Mom says through the open window above you, and you can picture her stretching on the couch. "What've you got your hands on?"

* * *

When you first saw the island outside of a comic book it was faint with fog that dampened the air and made the hard, glassy waves look like horses charging toward shore. In comic books the island is always jagged, and the Doctor's laboratory rises from its center like a lighthouse made of steel. But this island is pale like the fog and the laboratory thin as glass. In the fog it comes and goes. From inside—the inside you first reached from the cubbyhole off your bedroom—the laboratory is white and full of tall windows. "Time is tide," the Doctor told you, that first time, steepling his deathly white fingers beneath his beard. "Time is tide and the beating of a heart, Ballou. And if you were to wade into that tide and swim away, swim in any direction—since any direction would be away from my laboratory, and my island—then you'd be moving into your past, into your days before, when you were at other schools, when you had other playmates, and when you and your mother were happier." You stood at the window, looking first at him then out across the shimmering water to the shore, hoping to catch sight of home. "And a tide pool ... Well, Bally, time in a tide pool is time stopped."

Saying this he reached into the mouth of the glass jar, lifting out a damp red bloom.

* * *

You 10. The words on the side of the mobile home, in faded blue.

You stand with your arms out, your Swabbies stiff at the bell-bottoms from salty spray, damp at the knees from kneeling in the crabgrass. You feel as you do when standing in the surf and it retreats back to sea, the land threatening to go with it.

Faint, through the window behind you: "Ballou?"

You picture Mom on the couch, a towel across her forehead, listening to *The 20,000 Dollar Pyramid* or *Name That Tune*. Since losing her job two weeks ago, she's always listened to TV rather than watched it, with the image all snowy and sometimes rolling up like an eye into its head.

In front of you, the side door of the Winnebago pops open. Cowboy boots are the first thing you notice, then gangly denim trousers and a rumpled white shirt. The intruder hooks his thumbs onto his belt. His face is like the Marlboro Man's, and his squint is somewhat like McCloud's, though he's younger and has a mangy beard. His shirt is red plaid, like one of the tablecloths at Doodles on the freeway, with buttons like the inside of an abalone shell. His gold belt buckle says W.

"Well, hey there. You might just be a kid named Ballou."

You nod, uncertain.

"Don't suppose you remember me." He extends his hand. A large gold ring sits on the thumb.

You step back, once, twice.

"Lila in there?" He's looking up at the house as he says this, then out at the eucalyptus and the garage and back, devouring the place. He reaches out with his other hand and, like a magician, conjures a cowboy hat. He sweeps it down toward your head but you sprint through the gravel, scattering the soldiers.

"Hey, Lila! He's an itchy kid!"

You race up the porch stairs, into the hall, ready to slam shut the door. "Mom!"

In the living room, she's throwing back the purple quilt, sitting up, raising her too-pale face to the shuddering light. "What are you doin', Bally?" After rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she looks pretty once more.

"Lila?"

You turn. He's crossing the porch, hat in one hand, the other hooked on his belt. His boots resound like drums.

Mom blinks and mouths something that might be the answer to the question on the TV. Then: "Wilson, that you?"

Wilson. The name echoes strangely.

He's in the doorway. "You get my letter, Lila?" When she says nothing he adds, "Was in your neck of the woods, thought I'd stop by, say hi."

"Stop by in what?"

"A mobile palace, a bit beat-up."

"You swindle somebody, Wilson? Or somebody swindle you?" But he's looking at you. "You heard of me, kid? Uncle Wilson?" Uneasy, you shake your head. You see something, a shadow, like a huge spider, or a crab, scuttling across the gravel behind him.

"Bally? You okay?"

You know immediately, even without having seen it. Something had been hanging onto the bottom of the Winnebago and had *dropped down*.

"Bally, are you okay? Answer me."

"Yeah."

"You startled him. All that noise."

Wilson sets his hat on the little table beside the door. "My apologies. It's nice to see you, Lil'."

"It's just I'm not feeling too well today," Mom says listlessly. "Wilson, you should've called."

"Last time I saw you, you weren't feeling well."

"Wilson."

"Swallowed something."

"Come in, if you're coming in."

You want to shout, *No!* and hurtle yourself at the door. But you're torn with looking out at the empty gravel as he swings it shut behind him.

* * *

You can't remember Uncle Wilson because Uncle Wilson is dead. Or anyway, that's what Mom said more than once. He was killed in Dem Bien Phu in '72 by Charlie, and there's a singsong pleasure in the name of that faraway battlefield, one that you often re-enact with armies in the front yard. Dem Bien Phu is a palace with great huge walls in a jungle, and archers shooting through narrow slits in the stone, hailing death upon the green American army soldiers. Charlie, though, will always be *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* for you.

Mom doesn't hug Wilson, and doesn't offer him a drink, though more than once he pats a silver flask in his pocket. By this time of night, even when she had a job and wouldn't return home 'til six, she'd be listening to *The Joker's Wild* and you'd fix ravioli and continue with your homeschool, and you'd sit with her until nine, when you were allowed to go to your bedroom in the attic. (*You may retire to your chamber, Master Ballou*, she'd say, and gently kiss your forehead.) There you'd watch *Adam-12* on the little black-and-white television, or crawl into

your fort under the eaves and read your books, Henry Treece and Eleanor Cameron, lately.

"Ballou, we got to take your ma out to eat. Where's the best place to eat in this town?"

You would've said Herfys but you see the opportunity to get a real meal, maybe steak and eggs. "Faradays on Main Street."

"Yeah? You mean that blue and white fancy palace? What about it, Lila? Faradays," he says, and laughs.

She wipes the fog from her eyes, but it just comes back again. "Let's go to Doodles by the exit. I don't want to rip a hole in your wallet."

You know she really wants to go to Doodles because Clarissa works there, and she wants Clarissa to see him.

* * *

Wilson drives Mom's rusty green Dodge Dart.

She changed into her flowery blouse as well as a pink scarf. She smells of perfume, which only makes you realize how long it's been since she smelled of perfume. Wilson tries to place his arm around her, simply by turning to talk to you in the back seat. She moves over, leans her head against the window.

You wanted to ride in the Winnebago, feel the thrum of it, see it nosing into Doodles' small parking lot, until you remember the thing that had dropped down from under.

"Hey, Ballou." His eyes find you in the rearview. "You miss Austin?" "He misses his friends, and the school there, don't you, Bally?" Mom looks back. "But he loves the beach. He can walk for miles."

"Beachcomber," says Wilson, and you sit back further in the seat so he can't find you with his eyes.

You want to mention the islands but you don't. You don't want Wilson sticking around more than tonight, and if you mention the islands he might just decide to stay. Or he might roam up and down the coast following them, or trying to. After all, his house has wheels.

Doodles is an old Sambo's redone with a different paint job and no paintings of the little black boy in the jungle. Mom sometimes calls it Dumbo's. The waitress is Clarissa, Mom's only friend. "Is this who I think it is?" Clarissa says when you sit down.

"Clarie, meet Wilson."

Clarissa wrinkles her nose like she smells Mom's perfume. "I've heard some." She smiles the smile of a waitress at all of you, but she and Mom share a glance.

"I think I heard of you, too," says Wilson.

"Hi, B. How are you, kiddo? You want your bacon cheeseburger?"

A bearded man at the counter catches your eye.

"Bally?"

"Sure," you say, and look again.

You excuse yourself and go to the bathroom, saying you have to wash your hands. On the way you try to look again, but the man at the counter turns away. At the sink you wash your hands and dry them three times to get the grit of sand from between your fingers then wash them again. When you fumble in your pocket you find one of your Centurions. You bring it out and set it on the edge of the sink, then crouch to see it straight-on. You shut one eye and move in closer, so that it becomes as big as Ragnar the Robot Slayer.

"You don't think he *haunts the hallways*," Mom is saying softly, when she thinks you're still in the bathroom.

"Sixty-eight. Been quiet since then," Wilson mutters before he sees you. Then his face lights up with a false smile. "What grade are you in, Ballou?"

"He's in fifth. Or he will be, when we enroll him."

As you sit down, they look at one another in a way you can't figure out. "Were you shot?" you ask. "At Dem Bien Phu?"

Wilson smiles and pets his cowboy hat, which sits like a straw cat on the table between the two of you. He sets down his fork on his empty plate and leans low over the tablecloth. "I went *under*, Ballou."

You look to Mom but she's stirring her ice water with her straw.

"What do you mean?"

The moment stretches out, accompanied by the tinny muzak. Mom doesn't need to look at Wilson to be looking at him.

"Like Valhalla," he says, straightening. "You know about Valhalla, Ballou?"

You nod. "It's in the clouds where Odin lives. And in the thirteenth eon Odin and Ragnarök had a big war and they built robots that got so powerful they escaped down to Earth. Odin made Ragnar the Robot Slayer and sent him down, only the Slayer has forgotten who he really is and thinks the Doctor's the head of the evil army." You set down your fork. You hadn't meant to say so much.

Wilson's smile crinkles the corner of his eyes. "Hey, Lila, we got ourselves a *road scholar* here."

Mom pokes at her food, mouth down-turned.

When Clarissa arrives with Wilson's juicy steak and a bottle of Heinz 57 ketchup, he says, "Now I'm mighty fixed on devouring some animals." He winks at her.

"Some of those animals are my friends," Clarissa mutters.

Since he's busy eating, Wilson doesn't talk anymore and you turn to your burger. Mom brings up the subject of how Wilson paid for the mobile home and where he'd gotten it. You're gulping down the burger, juicy and delicious with thick bacon that crackles against the roof of your mouth, all smoky and salty. "And where are you going tomorrow?" she asks.

"Every day a different place." He grins. "Maybe to the movies. What about it, Ballou? You want to go to the movies tomorrow?"

But Mom says, "We have one theater, Wilson. They're showing *The Betsy*. You want to see *The Betsy* with Mr. Laurence Olivier?" Her tone says he wouldn't want to.

"I was thinking of the drive-in along Pelican Bay. That still there?"

Recalling a scrap of newspaper on the beach and the ad on the page, you jump in and say to Mom, "Yeah! They're showing *The Island of Dr. Moreau*!" You begin to add that it stars Logan from *Logan's Run* and the Admiral from *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, but Mom cuts you off.

"Bally! You're spewing ketchup!"

You wipe your mouth and try to appear sedate, brimming with table manners. "I wanted to see it in Austin last year but we moved away."

Clarissa drops the check onto the table. "Anything else, you two?" She looks Wilson up and down.

"Thank you, Clarissa, it sure was delicious." Mom tries to pick up the slip but Wilson gets it.

He winks over his fork. "Hey, Scout, you want some chocolate ice cream? Three ice creams, what about, Lil'?"

Mom rubs between her eyes. "You going to make Clarissa rewrite this bill?"

"Chocolate with chocolate syrup drizzled on top, okay? Double dose

for the kid."

"None for me. Wilson, when did you get so well-to-do?"

Clarissa smiles and strolls to the counter.

"Here and there and everywhere. And tomorrow, we'll drive up to Pelican Bay."

"And Dr. Moreau. Right, Mom?"

She sighs. "If you're polite to everyone and do your chores without complaining. Then it's *Dr. Moreau*, Bally. If Wilson can get us there. Bally?"

You sit back, assured that the bearded man at the counter isn't the Doctor.

* * *

On the way home Mom asks Wilson to stop at Beach Market for cigarettes and a bottle of Empirin. He offers to go in and declines her five dollar bill. "Want to come with me, champ?"

You do.

You feel older, somehow, walking into the buzzing bright store with Wilson towering beside you. You point out where the aspirin is, and the cigarettes, but Wilson says he wants to shop on his own and leaves you at the comic book rack, where you look for any *Archies* or *Star Treks*, then at the last minute you spy the new *Ragnar the Robot Slayer*. You snatch it up. The cover shows Ragnar in a rowboat fighting giant blood-red robots. The Doctor's island looms in the background, smoke rising against a setting sun.

Wilson chuckles. He juggles the six-pack of Coors and the box of True 100s into the crook of his elbow and takes it up. "You know what this is, Ballou?" He grins, and the crinkles at the corners of his eyes have never been deeper. "It's junk for the mind."

"Can I get it, Uncle Wilson?" You feel for a moment that you've sold something to him you can never get back, simply by calling him *Uncle*.

"Buy it later," he says, and replaces it in the rack. You nod, disappointed, and walk to the checkout feeling the sting. Maybe Wilson senses this and that's why he says, "Here." He plucks up a stick of Bubs Daddy apple gum from the jar on the checkout counter and drops it down with the beer and cigarettes. It'll do, you guess, and at the same time you're wondering if he'll really take you and Mom to see the movie

the next day.

"Your mom say anything about me, Ballou? Other than I died in 'Nam?"

You shake your head.

Just as you're approaching the Dodge Dart from behind he pulls the *Ragnar the Robot Slayer* from under his jacket and shoves it into your hands.

"Hey, tough!" The pleasure of that cover, the promise of what waits inside, is enough to drive away any shame.

"Tuck it in your coat," he says, removing the bottle of Empirin from his coat pocket and tossing it into the bag. "Don't say anything to your ma."

* * *

"When one has an adversary," the Doctor told you on your third visit to his laboratory high above the sea, "one rarely gets the adversary that one deserves, or desires." He stands against cloudy jars lined up on the counter. His white coat, crisp as though cut and assembled with paper and scissors, is no paler than his face and hands. "My robot minions are mindless. They roam the sea around my island with orders to destroy any intruders. For them the act is as simple, and as empty, as flipping a light switch." Here he pauses to do just that, the lamplight revealing further jars in which float the shadows of shearwaters and birds ever smaller and darker.

You wear your C-3PO pajamas with booties, still warm from the blankets.

"With Ragnar I am almost deliriously well-matched. I loathe him, I admire him, I pity him, I will destroy him." Here, a wistful sigh, as he uncaps one of the jars. An instant later the tang of chemicals tickles your nostrils. "Yet when I'm away from this laboratory and my island, when I've left my single-minded pursuits behind here, I always find myself asking, are there not others I hold in lesser esteem? Others I would wish my adversaries instead?" He crouches, so that his black beard with its fine strands contrasts vividly against the deathly white of his skin. "Tell me, Ballou. Your nosebleeds. Have they've stopped, now that the ghost is gone?"

* * *

When you get home Wilson strides to the Winnebago and unhooks the garden hose from the side.

While he coils it, you crouch, pretending that you see something on the gravel, but you're really looking at the underside. Whatever dropped down isn't there. You look around the porch and the rock garden.

Mom wearily ruffles your hair. "Why don't you go play upstairs?"

"You got some good stuff to read, I bet." Wilson winks.

You feel the comic book under your coat, against your stomach. You hold it tighter with your pocketed hands. But you're remembering the thing dropping to the ground. "Can I stay outside?"

"It's late for that, Bally."

"Just in the yard."

"It's cold."

You zip the Windbreaker up to your chin. It makes her smile, and you're happy to see her look so beautiful.

"Okay. In by nine."

You avoid looking at Wilson and retreat to the yard; they shut the door behind them. As you take out the comic book you feel the breeze on your face and hands. Re-zipping the coat, you wonder if it was wise to stay out here rather than go to your room.

You gaze up at the house, which looks like a painting in the fog. With the comic book under your arm, you take out the long stick of Bubs Daddy, nudge the gum through the end, and bite off a good mouthful of the sweet-and-sour apple gum with its powdery dusting. The combination of sweetness and sourness makes your mouth water, and you're chewing enthusiastically and swallowing. You bend the rest of the stick in half and shove it back in your pocket. The fog carries the salty tang of the sea, and just about *is* the sea, on nights like this, rolling like a tide up the cliffs and through the ramshackle yards.

Ho, Ballou, says the surf. Ho, Ballou.

You walk around the mobile home, pausing to look under, peering out at the yard. WIN EBAGO says the grille, and you feel that great rush of movement as it chased up the drive. Now it seems as solid as the house, and as permanent.

At the back a ladder goes to the roof. You can't help but think of the Doctor's tower and the ladder that Ragnar had once climbed. Up top you'd find the flat wide surface under moonlight with the sea all

around.

It's his home, you think, staring up. And it'll roll off and away. You remember Mom and Wilson looking at one another and their look leaving you out. Crouching slowly, you look once more at shadows which are solid and unmoving.

Whatever it was, the thing dropped down and left for the grounds or the house.

You crinkle your nose at the scent of plasticky, stagnant water from the water tank. Straightening, you resume looking, listening.

Ho, Ballou. Ho, Ballou.

The side door to the garage is partway open. You walk toward it, certain it had been closed that afternoon. Sand dollars and seashells glued to the frame seem to float, faintly glowing in fog. When you pull the door open all the way, it creaks like something out of a Halloween sound effects LP.

Inside, the darkness is clotted and fuzzy, becoming varied tones of deep gray the longer you stare. Everything hesitating, as if you've walked in just after the sawhorses and stacks of wood and boxes were dancing like in a Disney film, and now they've stopped. For a moment, you cease chewing your gum. The cord for the bare light bulb is farther in, to the left. You take another step. Near your foot is a battered bucket full of sand dollars and mussel shells you brought back from the beach and haven't cleaned up. Beyond the bucket is the big brass pot taller than you that Mom calls a *samovar*. Next to that are rattan chairs where mice had made a home the previous summer, until Mom and Clarissa set traps.

Everything stands still. And not at all like they were dancing, you decide. Rather that they're all hunched up, like the tomcat that hissed at you when you ventured into the neighbor's distant yard.

Then you hear a brittle scuffle, ahead of you, left to right against the wall.

As your chest goes cold you remember the shape somewhat like a spider's, somewhat like a crab's.

But this is something larger than either, brushing against the brick, accompanied by the slither of heavy chain on the concrete.

The hairs stand up on your arms

The previous summer, in the similar darkness of the crawl space, you

had heard the same sound, and now here's the snuffling that went with it, alive, behind the disused planking.

While searching for whatever had dropped from the Winnebago, you've found instead the old ghost, the one that was driven off. Wilson, by his arrival, somehow broke the barrier that kept it out.

You're rooted to the spot, frozen in place, heart pounding against your jaw. And the ghost is moving now like it's decided you've left, brushing against planks which slowly teeter as it trudges along the wall, and into the open.

The glow of embers are the ghost pig's eyes, and the scent of burning flesh its aura.

A moment too late, you feel the warm blood coursing down your left nostril. You lift your hand to your nose and tip back your head. As you stagger the blood spreads across the webbing of your first finger and thumb. You taste copper in the back of your throat. You shove your way through the open door, unable to look down to see if something's climbing your jeans. You swallow and feel the blood drying on your hand and upper lip.

Outside, you assure yourself nothing followed you and close the door, then retreat to the gravel. You crouch down, fingers pressed against your nose. You tell yourself to calm down, just like the counselor in Austin taught you. You press hard, fingers trembling, eyes fixed on the garage door, and wait until you're sure the pressure has stopped the blood, and even then you wait a bit longer, letting up slightly with your tired hand and waiting for the blood to reappear as it so often did.

But apart from the coppery taste that infuses the gum in your mouth, the bleeding has stopped.

The door is still shut. You wait, and listen, and begin doubting what you saw. Or trying to.

You don't want Mom or Wilson seeing you bloodied, so you find the spigot for the hose. You spit out the gum, turn the water on just barely, then lift the end from where Wilson coiled it, wait for the water to gurgle out and run it over your hand and rub your hand across the dried blood on your nose. Just as quietly, you return the hose and shut off the spigot.

You retrieve the comic book from where you dropped it.

Above, at the window, fingernails tap the glass. Not like they're trying to summon you, more like they didn't mean to. It's Mom's hand. Through the window and the box fan's grille, you see her hand, then Wilson's shaggy head. You boost yourself up on the foundation block, carefully, and peer in. Mom is on the couch, her head on the pillow, her arm crooked, and Wilson—Wilson kneels down on the carpet beside the couch, his back to you. You go cold, all the way down to your toes. He's like a prince slipping a ring on the princess's finger. You move a little to the right and see Mom's eyes squeezed shut. Then Wilson moves away. He rises up tall as the Doctor or taller, and Mom brings her arm closer to her side.

Her fingers clench.

* * *

You force yourself to walk around the mobile home three times.

You think about the Robot Slayer and Dem Bien Phu then Wilson saying *I went* under.

You check the garage door once more. It's still shut. Not that that ever stopped the ghost from moving from the crawl space to the kitchen to the backyard; the backyard most of all, where you'd glimpse it on a moonlit night turning over and over in the crabgrass.

When finally you step into the house—into blazing heat and a pall of cigarette smoke—Mom is nowhere to be seen. Wilson crouches next to the TV fiddling with the antenna, and Alice is yelling at Mel with the snow getting so bad you can barely see them. A green mug sits on the coffee table beside his flask. The mug says *Stepping Out*.

"Your mom's asleep. Don't wake her." He jiggles the antenna. Finally he lurches up and goes to the kitchen while you survey the couch and drop the creased comic book onto the cushion. He returns with tinfoil. For the next five minutes, while you think about Mom and her clenching hand, and the ghost pig that had once been a living pig chained up in the backyard, Wilson applies tin foil experimentally around the antenna's base and up the left antenna. The picture comes and goes, until finally Alice is back, and you can see Flo sneering at Mel and she says, "Kiss my grits."

Wilson steps away, arms held out like he's done a miracle. He looks at you but you say nothing.

"You tell Lila I did that," he says quietly, ruffling your hair as he steps past. "Okay?" He fetches a beer from the fridge then sinks down onto the sofa, getting the blue-and-red macramé all messed up.

"It's better now, isn't it?" He cracks open the beer and tosses the pull tab toward the dusty mop bucket.

"Yeah."

"You like living here, Ballou?"

You say nothing, hoping that everything can be caught up in the TV's small, clear image. Wilson burps under his breath. With his free hand he reaches for something on the other side of his chair. He comes up lugging one of your and your mom's favorite books, *Mysteries of the Pacific Coast*. When you had first found it in the cubbyhole off the kitchen, you'd both spent days paging through it after dinner, the book on her lap and you snug against her shoulder, peering at weird pen-and-ink drawings of the early coast, of the first dwellings in Capitola.

"That's not yours." You're startled you'd said it.

So is Wilson, though the beer blunts his reaction. "I ain't taking it, Ballou." He grins, opening the cover. "Jeesh, man. You like the pictures, I bet."

You want to leap up, grab the book, and hide with it.

"Funky town, Capitola." He starts riffling through the pages. "You ever have any weird dreams, Ballou?"

Your shoulders stiffen.

"Ever see anything wild, huh? Scout?"

He won't stop asking, you know. He's not like the Doctor. But you don't want to tell him the truth. "The ghost is gone," you lie.

When Wilson looks over at you with that cowboy squint, you find yourself adding, "Mom got a woman who drove it off."

"Lil' mentioned something at dinner."

You remember the fiery coals of the pig's eyes and the reek of its charred flesh.

Wilson uncaps his flask and pours some whiskey into the green mug. *Steppin' Out.*

He returns to the book, turning the pages with one hand, head tilted like he's listening to the pig, too. You both listen. Wilson drinks deeply from the mug.

You watch the end of *Alice*, the part where everything's back to normal and they have a few more insults. When the music comes on, Wilson says, "Hey, you like that funny book?"

You barely nod.

"That was a Happy Birthday. I missed it, didn't I? Two days late. You're ten now, right?"

"Yeah."

Wilson sets the book beside him. "And that gum. That was a Happy Birthday, too."

After a pause he rises on creaking knees, approaches the TV and switches the channel, then walks into the kitchen. You consider racing over to the book, hiding it. Instead, *Columbo* starts up, already in progress. The picture is clearer than you've seen in a long time, though you resolve never to mention it to Wilson. He returns with most of a six-pack for him and a Pepsi for you. You watch the TV with the sound turned way down. Wilson tosses his pull tabs toward the mop bucket, missing all but the first one.

He chuckles quietly whenever Columbo scratches his head and says to the murderer he has one more question.

* * *

Troubled, you climb the spiral stairs, at first no faster than any night as you leave the kitchen behind, around and up, around and up; past the second floor salon with its upright piano and old-time pictures, pausing to flip the switch on the rail—lighting your room above—then continuing to climb around and up toward a blue ceiling bright as a blue sky. The green shag rug is level with your eyes, a forest for your soldiers, smelling of socks. Then you're above it and the room smells more of the vanilla scent of paper and the wads of Bazooka Joe in the garbage can. The odd corners and the sloping roof that had so enchanted you your first time up here say hello; walls now decorated with your Six Million Dollar Man and Wonder Woman posters, your bed with its C-3PO covers and the wooden chest of drawers and the bookcase and the blue beanbag chair. From the bookcase, Centurions and Saracens hail you in their formations, in front of sand dollars and starfish. You feel your uneasiness lift, briefly, seeing them and your Matthew Looneys, Beetle Baileys ,and Knowledge Through Colors.

Beside the bookcase sit three big-mouthed jars as tall as your knee; jars Mom hadn't let you touch until she'd washed them and washed them again. Now they're filled with your beach rocks.

You remember what you clutch in your hand. Ragnar in his rowboat; the island looming in the background, on fire.

It's never looked so much like itself before.

Bold yellow letters across the bottom of the page read, "The Death of the Island Doctor!" You should be thrilled, but you think once more of Mom, and of Wilson.

An old GE fan sits on your desk. You switch it on and it starts its radar sweep of the room.

Though you can't hear him, you know Wilson is snoring on the couch, just as you left him. He's here for the night and he brought something—something—with him. And he's welcomed back the ghost of the pig you'd driven out last year.

When you first heard the story—Once upon a time, Ballou, a pig lived in the backyard chained like a pet—you thought the idea of its ghost was more funny than scary, dragging its chain after itself like a ghost out of A Christmas Carol, until you listened to Clarissa's stories of the agonies that ended its life, and continued. When one night you heard its chain clinking on the gravel and you saw it for yourself beneath the eucalyptus—a dim black shape rolling from belly to spine—you began to fear it. Its eyes had flickered like embers, remote and unaware of you.

Again, you find your uneasiness lifting, this time by the comic book you hold in your hands and by Wilson's promise to take you to *The Island of Dr. Moreau* in Pelican Bay. Your turn to the peculiar corner and the low door you had found that first day. Mom swears she still can't see it till it's opened. But you can never *unsee* it.

Laying the comic book on the bed, you approach the door, kicking some toys out of the way. You drop to your knees.

As you crawl through the gateway your curls brush the low wood, the confines reeking pleasantly of varnished wood and old paper.

* * *

You named it your *fort* the first time you saw it. That first day, Mom called it a *hidey-hole* and didn't let you go in.

Instead, she and Clarissa had pondered it from the outside for at

least ten minutes before Clarissa cautiously crawled in. Even after it was cleaned out Mom was hesitant to allow you in here alone, but you forget that now. It's your favorite spot in the house, not scary at all. The entrance is just your size, and after the entrance the ceiling opens up and the space with its angled walls reminds you of a fun house mirror, with light from the small window and a bare lightbulb for when it's night, like now.

The walls are solid, but one is of dark teak, in five planks that don't match the rest. If you press your nose against it you can smell the wood and something else—acrid, sharp. If you press your ear against it the entire house becomes a sounding board, delivering up voices vague as baby birds, as well as gnomic footsteps, and the glassy whir of water running through the pipes.

The crates smell of pine. Mom found them for you at one of the swap meets on the beach. The top carton is mostly *Mad* and *Cracked* and *Robot Slayers*, but right now you're interested in the crate below it, so you set the first aside then rummage through the second, through *Star Treks* and *Dr. Spectres* until you reach a vein of *Classic Comics Illustrated* and, eventually, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*.

You lie down on your side, propped on your elbow. You turn the pages until you reach a view of the island.

Time is tide. Time is tide.

You remember the eight windows of the laboratory and how the doctor had invited you to look out the glass.

Time is tide and the beating of a heart. And a tide pool ... Well, Bally, time in a tide pool is time stopped.

But Dr. Moreau doesn't look like the Doctor much, even though his laboratory now and then looks like the Doctor's, and his island, too, at least in the first few pages. You care less about Moreau than the beast men, who might be ghosts if they were in Capitola. Pigs and boars especially. Flipping the pages you find them laid out on tables and caged behind glass walls, and you think of the pig chained in the backyard; the pig which Clarissa once told you had been called Doc Trips.

You remember the slither of its chain and its snuffling against the brick wall. And now it's back. Your stomach goes cold. It's back because Wilson somehow broke the barrier and brought something with him. Dropping down from under his Winnebago.

You hear something behind you and drop the comic book. You glance over your shoulder at the entrance, toward the crooked door; toward your bedroom and the wash of lamplight on dark wood; stare even when you want to blink, and the light wavers with tears, and you continue staring at the doorway and the wavering light, willing yourself not to blink.

Them the light from the bedroom *blinks*, just once.

And comes that familiar smell: a firecracker held to the nose.

This while the whir of the GE fan goes flat just for a moment, as something passes in front of the blades. And the floorboards *creak*.

You blink.

You crawl back to the door and the edge of your bedroom, squinting against the lamplight.

The Robot Slayer looms at the window in his red-and-blue Velcro suit. "Those aren't California plates, Ballou." He rubs his jaw with a hand no smaller than the honey-glazed ham in the fridge.

* * *

"When did he show up?" Ragnar's voice, deep and dark, resonates against the glass.

"This afternoon."

"That vehicle once had writing on the side. *True You 100s*. But it's not much different than the armored transport from Sea City One."

Your soldiers, sand dollars, and starfish seem brighter, and the room incrementally smaller, and you, larger. "Mom said he died in Dem Bien Phu."

The Robot Slayer rubs his jaw; the sound is that of sandpaper on coarse wood. "I was at Dem Bien Phu. I spent thirty-five issues fighting in 'Nam, Ballou, and I didn't see your Uncle Wilson there."

"He gave Mom a shot."

Ragnar turns to you. His eyes are gray, almost luminescent. "Good, Ballou. That's good you realize it." A moment later, he turns back to the window. "It's possible the truck is stolen. From what I've heard of this fellow Wilson's M.O., that wouldn't be too far-fetched. I'd imagine he has a rap sheet as long as my arm."

"The ghost," you say, "the pig's ghost. It's back."

Again, the sound of sandpaper on coarse wood. "Remember when I

drove it out, I said it might return?"

"Mom says Madame Coutzie drove it out." You remember the old lady's wild hair stringed with beads and the pounding of her drums. "She promised it wouldn't come back."

"My method was the stronger one, Ballou, derived from an East Indian shaman whose life and soul I had the pleasure of saving. But even that method was not infallible."

"He brought something with him. I saw it drop down to the gravel." You shut your eyes, squeeze them tight. "I didn't run."

When you open them, the room is empty.

* * *

You lie in bed for a long time before sleep, listening to the house.

* * *

And when you look again, the room has changed. Your posters are gone and the shape of the room itself is somehow different. Or the moonlight has changed it. When you sit up you find no Centurions and Saracens, no sand dollars or starfish, no bookcase or big-mouthed jars containing your beach rocks. Everything is gone, except for the fan.

You throw back the covers and sit up, swinging out your legs.

No, no, no, says the fan, shaking its head as you rise and walk past, feeling like your chest is full of helium.

Before leaving the room, you look back at the boy sleeping in the bed.

Descending, you wonder if he's dreaming you.

* * *

You tiptoe down the hall, past the living room. The television is a window upon a glowing snowstorm. The front door is not locked. Stepping through, you feel the chill of night. It howls, the night; faintly howls in a wandering way that says it thinks everyone in Capitola is asleep and not listening. And the surf at this hour speaks anything but your name, ignorant of you, with a largeness that you find suddenly terrifying, and at your shoulders. It speaks the secret name of the night.

Under your feet, the gravel is cold but not sharp. You approach the vehicle and the side door, but end up walking past, walking with your

reflection around the front where the windshield stares blind at the palm tree; around the dead side where the low smell of eucalyptus tickles your nostrils and the scent of plasticky water recalls the sea.

As you walk past the ladder there comes faint the crying of gulls and the more nervous whine and chitter of the shearwaters.

Back at the door, you climb the steps, pull open the door, and enter.

The interior is larger than expected, the walls angled like those of your bedroom.

On the nearest table, in a bolt of moonlight, glittering gems are piled, giant diamonds and rubies. Beyond is a huge kitchen with a stove and fridge, and a bright green cupboard that reminds you of Wilson's mug.

You drift to it the way you do in dreams. You see your hand reaching for the knob, then you're sliding open the long door, revealing nine large-mouthed jars in a bolt of moonlight, each containing a dead bird, wings spread, beak pointing upward, as though it drowned while trying to struggle out.

The cry of the gulls is louder. Their wings brush the ceiling. And behind you, someone begins breathing.

You're about to speak Ragnar's name when Wilson rises into another bolt of moonlight. His Marlboro Man face is oddly waxy, though the eyes sparkle. "Good morning, young Ballou." He nods to the silver flask and green mug. *Steppin' Out.* "Do you wish a drink?"

His left sleeve is rolled up. At the crook of his elbow sits a tarantula the size of a child's hand.

"I would recommend vodka over the toxins in those jars." The tarantula twitches. It climbs slowly to his shoulder. "They are the end line of my experiments, and quite lethal." He lifts his right hand as though it's anesthetized, gesturing slackly to the green book sitting beside the mound of treasure, and at the same time seeming to draw the cries of the shearwaters from the air. "Mysteries of the Pacific Coast. Mysteries being another name for ineluctable strangeness, the emanations of a land that meets the ocean with an aura of madness, here at the end of the great continent of America." He moves out of the moonlight. "There's quite a tale in those pages, though your mother removed the best one. Excised it, with a razor blade. In Nineteen—"

"You're not Wilson." You search the dark for his face.

"But you're quite aware that we're dreaming, both of us. Tomorrow

I'll be Uncle Wilson once more, Ballou, and we'll pretend we don't remember it. How does that sound?"

You sense his smile.

"Nineteen fifty-nine. Some nine years before you were born. I began to throw the fetes here at the House of 31 Sparrow Lane. And they were amazing, vast affairs." He's talking again like the Doctor, and even steeples his hands below his chin; the tarantula is lost in the shadows. "Twenty, thirty youngsters. More? *Head parties*, let's call them, before people knew what head parties were. So many flocked here. I use that term with a knowing smile, Ballou." His voice becomes wistful. "She liked to wander of a night."

"Stop being the Doctor!"

Wilson vanishes, and you have the book in your hands, *Mysteries of the Pacific Coast*. You open it like you've done so many times before, only this time to a page you've never seen. A black-and-white photo of your house takes up half of it. In wintry light, the Doctor stands in his white suit holding an umbrella, surrounded by dour children in old-time clothes.

The girl at his side is your mother.

From the shadows, the Doctor's voice intones, Your mother is a memory who swallowed a bird, Ballou.

When you wake, early sunlight streams through your bedroom window. Tossing back the blanket, you feel no astonishment at the gravel strewn across the sheets.

* * *

Downstairs, you wonder at your dream. You sweep up the grit at the base of the staircase, but before you can look for more the telephone rings in the living room. On tiptoe you run in, seeing the couch and Wilson's body under a blanket. As you lift the heavy handset—silencing the phone but for the echo of its jangle in the yellow plastic—Wilson stirs.

His hair is ragged, like he's slept a month in Diem Bien Phu.

"Lila, hon? You there?" Clarissa.

Through the hair you see the glint of Wilson's eye.

You strive to whisper. "It's Ballou."

"Hey, kiddo. Your mom awake?"

Without saying a word, Wilson tells you he remembers everything about your dream, about being the Doctor, and showing you the missing page from *Mysteries of the Pacific Coast*, only he's not going to say anything out loud about it.

"She's still asleep."

"How is she? Tell me, B." And to your silence: "That uncle of yours still there?"

He's not my uncle. You force it out: "Yes."

Wilson yawns and sits up, throws back the blanket, shaggy like a bearman in T-shirt and boxers. His hairy legs are like something from the Doctor's laboratory.

"Is he there with you right now?"

A pause. "Uh-huh."

"I get it. So you don't want to talk. Are things okay, B? Things okay with your mom and you?"

"Yeah," you say flatly, while Wilson stretches and yawns. You can see down his gullet.

He let the ghost back in. And brought something with him.

"If they aren't, just say, Mom's asleep."

"Okay."

"She hasn't seen him for seven years, and he wasn't that nice to her when he left." A pause on the other end. "I have to work, otherwise I'd come over and check up on you, kiddo. You and your mom. You tell her to call me when she gets up."

"I will."

"Bye, B."

"Bye."

You set the handset in its cradle.

* * *

You fix yourself a bowl of Cap'n Crunch, devour it, slurping the sweet milk afterward, all the while listening to the silence from Mom's bedroom and the sound of Wilson prowling the first floor.

When you dare to approach him he's in the Celestial Room, where the drawers of the old desks now gape like tongues. "Morning, Scout." He's on hands and knees in the closet, feeling the boards. "You know what this room was called way back when?" You tell him, knuckles white on the jamb.

"Yeah, had a couple other names, too. And all of them came from seeing stars. I suppose your ma and that friend of hers been through here with a fine-tooth comb."

You don't want to say that they haven't, that you're not sure; that they spent most of their time in the upper floor that would become your bedroom, and in the barn. You remember the scent of bleach and the grit of dust in your eyes.

"You want to help? Become a *junior explorer*?" His smile tells you he wants to pretend that nothing happened in the dead of night.

You shake your head and retreat. With each step you're more anxious. You hurry to Mom's room and lay your hand on the knob, turn it, pushing open the door into a room all canary yellow from sunlight. But for some strands of auburn hair she's lost in the blankets.

When you touch the slope of her shoulder, you're relieved to feel warmth through the fabric. "Mom?"

It's partly her voice and partly not, when she groans.

"It's nine-fifteen, Mom."

At this she pushes back the blankets far enough to show her gummy eyes. "Gotta sleep some more, Bally." She squints against the sunlight. "You can make your breakfast." Then she's retreating into the sheets.

You remember the dream: Your mother is a memory who swallowed a bird.

You run upstairs to your fort. You need to know what Wilson's up to without him seeing you, and you can do it best from here. In these strange and comforting confines, you press your ear to the wall and shut your eyes, and the teak planks *invite your ear inside*. As always it's dizzying, this entry into the vast sounding board of the House of 31 Sparrow Lane, every surface poised like a drum waiting for the drummer to strike it. You hear a faint peck-peck, of a gull or shearwater striding the shingles over your head, then a *hoah* that's the sound of air touring the crawl spaces, then a sense of stillness in room after room that's like a rung bell forever, then—you startle at the sound—a *thud*. You recoil, heart pounding, return, pressing your ear to the cool wood, at first lightly, then with firmness. Another thud, then something sliding across hardwood, hitting carpet and still going. You shut your eyes. You trace it to the first floor where the hallway ends, perhaps near the

grandfather clock, but this isn't the clock. Something smaller. Though you want to pull back you clamp your eyes tighter. You imagine you can hear his grunt, can almost hear—if you press even closer to the teak, press so that your ear and the teak are one—his breathing. And you're suddenly sure that in the next instant, too close and too intimate to bear, you'll hear his whisper from the other side of the wood, his clever eyes having noticed your attention, and his Marlboro Man face slithering through the wood floor by floor to your side. *Hey, Scout,* he'll say, *I know you're there. I know you're spying. And ... I can't have that, can I?*

Your pulse pounds in your ear. The air tingles on your skin, and you know that if you were to open your eyes and look over your shoulder, you'd find the fort gone and the Doctor behind his desk.

Sometime later you hear the decisive bang of the front door. Your eyes snap open.

Heart in your throat, you scramble out into the blue of your bedroom. At the window you're in time to see Wilson climbing down from his mobile home, hat on his head, nothing in his hands.

Whatever he's taken is stowed now.

* * *

Mom gets up before noon. She has rings under her eyes and her hair is mussed. But she smiles in the old way when she sees you, and kisses you on the cheek, and everything is almost okay.

"I was tidying up the place, Lil'." Wilson affects a bow, like Alfred on *Batman*. "Some gopher or such tracked gravel through the house." He winks at you.

Only now do you notice the boxes Wilson has stacked by the couch. Old books and magazines, several straw-covered wine bottles, a table lamp with a bamboo shade. "You shouldn't touch that stuff," you say, and to Mom, "He shouldn't."

She rubs her eyes, but that doesn't do much for rings the color of bruises. "I don't quite feel the greatest."

Wilson strides to the nook beside the fireplace. It has a hidden door just like your fort. You're upset that he found it so easily.

Mom murmurs, "Tea, maybe."

"Lapsang souchong." You take her hand and lead her into the kitchen.

While she seats herself at the table, you bring down the tin of Oriental tea and the metal canister to catch the leaves. "Clarissa called, Mom. She wants you to call her."

Clunk, clunk—glass on glass sounding two odd notes in the hall behind. Wilson pokes into the kitchen clutching a string of dusty blue glass globes threaded with twine. "Hey, Lil'. Why's this not in a museum?"

"That what you're going to do today, Wilson?"

"How could I not?" He grins.

You feel suddenly angry then light-headed at the thought of Wilson prowling through the house, room by room, floor by floor. "No, Mom!"

"Bally, what's got into you?"

He hovers by the door. This time he doesn't wink.

"The movie, remember?! We're going to see the movie!"

"Bally, what—"

You turn to Wilson. "You promised! We're going to the drive-in by Pelican Bay!"

Mom sighs. "I don't know, Bally, I have a terrible headache."

"Take some Empirin! The tea'll help, too." Rounding on Wilson: "You promised."

"Yeah, yeah." He holds his palms up. "Okay. He's like the tax man, Lila."

"I do recall you saying something, Wilson."

"A promise made," he replies, offering a vast smile, "is a promise kept."

* * *

You find last Tuesday's *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. The movie doesn't start 'til 9:30, the first half of a double bill with *The Other Side of Midnight*. Wilson estimates an hour is required for a "leisurely" drive. That leaves the long afternoon and early evening for him to prowl.

Careful that he doesn't hear, you tell Mom that he's ransacking the house, but she surprises you with a shrug.

"He's carrying off junk, Bally." She lifts the mug of tea like it weighs ten pounds. "We've already found your favorite things, and they're safe on the shelves in your room."

"You should call Clarissa."

"I'm almost certain she works today, honey. I'll call her later."

You're divided between staying with Mom—fixing her a bologna sandwich she pretends to find delectable—and monitoring Wilson's progress through the first floor. After the Celestial Room comes the Sea Room with its old charts on the wall. These he has no eye for, but he somehow knows to pull up the carpet and find the trapdoor to the crawl space. But here, too, no treasure is found. He stacks up "interesting things to peruse" near the hall: copies of *Look* and a rusted boat anchor that you'd already summed up and dismissed. But he also finds something you'd never found in your explorations—a framed drawing of a human body all sliced up, tinted by age to the color of old wine, which he holds up at arm's length and judges, "Worthy of a freak show, Scout."

You wonder what else you missed.

After lunch—another round of bologna sandwiches—he starts on the second floor, beginning with the piano parlor. You've been through these rooms before. You know every nook and cranny, you're certain. Watching Wilson go through it is like watching a rerun on television. You're pleased that he finds nothing. But it's when he nears the spiral staircase and glances up instead of down that you feel your stomach sink.

You grasp the rail, barring the way.

"So, as I recall," he says, not seeming to notice, "up there was the ol' Doc's *salon*." He says the word as if it was nothing like a salon at all. "I can see why you'd like it, all those secret spaces." He pauses, waiting for you to contradict him—that no such secret spaces have been found, or only one such secret space, so you say nothing.

"Suppose you've looked through everything there is to look through?"

You say nothing.

He scratches his mangy beard, giving a measured glance. "Know for a fact that your mom did a pretty thorough and professional job in cleaning out any remnants. Not to say I haven't found some things they overlooked."

He reaches for the switch on the rail, flips it. High overhead your bedroom lights up.

You tighten your grip, stiffen your arm, knowing all the while that it

would do nothing to prevent Wilson from going up should he want. In that moment you feel a truth descend. Wilson may not have been in Diem Bien Phu, may not have died there, may not have *gone under*, but he's an adult, and has the brute power and cunning of that breed. Even Ragnar, were he here, would likely fail against the absolute will of this adult.

You feel a pang in the back of your throat and tighten your grip nonetheless.

Everything depends on what Wilson does once he stops scratching his beard; once he *decides*.

You've never felt so helpless.

And it's now, while you're deep in thought, that you realize he's looking straight down at you and has been for some time. He waits a moment then flips off the switch on the rail, and ruffles your hair.

You resist shrinking back, but he's already turning away. "You ever been to a drive-in, Ballou?"

* * *

You 10, says the mobile home, in the dusky gloom.

The eucalyptus lean over the yard, shadows against the further shadow of the house. The air smells first of the sea then of the eucalyptus then gasoline. You hesitate before the lighted door and the metal stairs, remembering the dream. Wilson is inside, pretending this is your first time here.

"Climb aboard and witness the wonderland."

You glance at the garage. The door with its seashells stands open, no doubt from Wilson prowling. Ghosts don't bother to open doors. But you can't help thinking that Wilson has somehow drawn the ghost into the open, and maybe aboard his home.

"Mom?"

"I'm right behind you, Bally." She's searching her purse for a Kleenex.

You haven't seen Ragnar today, other than in the panels of the comic book, and now you can't see much of anything other than the lighted interior of the mobile home.

"Climb up, champ."

You do, and in that instant you're in your dream once more, only this

time the ceiling isn't impossibly high, and there aren't any bolts of moonlight or heaps of jewels. Just the console chairs before the tall windshield and the tan carpet underfoot. Ahead of you, a linoleum table with small chairs. To the left, a kitchenette where Wilson stands, setting his flask and mug in the sink. Beyond him a sofa and the door to the bathroom.

The stove and fridge are much like your dream, if smaller, and the cupboard above the sink is green.

As you stare, Wilson takes off his cowboy hat and throws it on the sofa. He moves toward the console chairs. "Lila, please be my co-pilot."

"Bally, sit there." She points to one of the little chairs at the table. "I thought God was your co-pilot, Wilson." You look at the cupboard again, then sit down, removing the handful of Centurions and army men and the tyrannosaurus from your pockets.

There comes a click as the key is turned, a growl and hum, and the whole home wakes and every surface has its own rattle and says its own things, none of which you can understand.

* * *

You face the side window, hands folded on the linoleum.

At first you're distracted by the novelty of the neighborhood made unfamiliar as it parades past your window, ghostly in pools of sodium light. There's a pleasure to be found in a rolling home, sitting in a chair at a table and finding the far neighbor's property slip past in the dark, the lonely driftwood and the boulders, here then gone. Eucalyptus branches shrug toward you, then the canted sign for *Sparrow Ln*. and—without you having to move an inch—the world revolves forty-five degrees as Wilson cranks the steering wheel. A new vista unfolds in shadow and sodium lamps, in swaths of headlights, glimpses of headland and black ocean.

Allowing your eyes to adjust to the table and the wood-paneled wall, you find a switch just like the ones at home. It lights a frosted lamp overhead, enough to leave a pool of light on the table. Inside it, you arrange your soldiers and dinosaur around a coffee stain which becomes the crater of a volcano.

Mom settles into the console chair like it was one from home. From time to time she murmurs something to Wilson, who says something back, but it's lost in the noise of the tires. You line up the green army soldiers against the Centurions, then have three of the soldiers defect and use their guns against the others. Then all of them against the tyrannosaurus. At first you think the smell of firecrackers is their guns, firing uselessly.

Ragnar's shadow fills the space beyond the kitchenette. The cold gray of his eyes is the only thing that gives him away until he lifts his arm and points, emphatically.

You rise from the chair, find your footing. You move slowly, as though you were touring the mobile home, or fetching a glass of water or maybe one of the bologna sandwiches that Wilson said he stowed in his little fridge. Walking is tricky, like standing in the surf when its hisses back to sea. Ragnar's eyes tell you he doesn't want to speak. He nods to the green cupboard behind the sink. He too knows of its existence both here and in your dream.

You stop before it. In the dream you slid it open to find the nine large-mouthed jars, in shadow.

Now you watch your hand move once more toward the knob.

You hope the cupboard is locked but you slowly and easily slide it open. Your hand is shaking. Even before you can properly see—before another of those passing streetlamps lights the contents—you know that a single jar sits on the shelf; a jar of similar proportions to those in which you store your beach rocks, if not the same proportions as the jar in the dream. Yet like in the dream this one is full of murky liquid and a hint of a delicate shape, now a languid wing, now the petal of a sea flower, and now nothing but shadows. Something dead, fermented.

Your mother is a memory who swallowed a bird, Ballou.

You remember the Doctor reaching into the jar, lifting out a damp red bloom.

On another shelf are coils of rubber tubing, little vials, and funnels. Cotton balls float like nightmare clouds.

The jar, you note, is stoppered. The dusty label reads 18 August 1961 followed by some scientific names that you don't let yourself see except for *Doc Genius* beneath the skull and crossbones. And you know that Wilson has found the essence of the House of 31 Sparrow Lane, the distillation of all the other jars, as shadows rustle around you.

In the sink, the tarantula pluck-walks over Wilson's flask. Or maybe

it's the tarantula's *ghost*, for it moves effortlessly through the side of Wilson's mug.

How long do you stare?

You feel sick with the smell.

Doc Genius.

When you finally return to the table, Wilson is finishing the end of a sentence to Mom, even though Mom appears asleep. "... and the Doctor, por favor."

His face doesn't quite look like itself. You step closer. "Who's the Doctor?"

He seems surprised to find you there. Grinning, he looks ever more like an animal wearing clothes. "Why, that's who we're going to meet, Scout. A rendezvous with ol' Doc Moreau."

* * *

Squinting over your knuckles you see the Doctor's laboratory rising thin as glass in the darkness, the tower seeming to float on the jagged island that is all but invisible, racing along like the moon. And you see your face in the glass, too, almost without realizing it until you fix on your piercing eyes, and both of you flinch.

You turn off the lamp. Squinting over your knuckles, you try to find the island again. The *click-clock* of the turn signal precedes the engine's growl, and Wilson manhandles the steering wheel to take you off the freeway, down a ramp. A headland rises up to block the ocean.

When it ends, there float up one then two islands.

Keeping pace.

"Right on time," Wilson says over the hum and rattle.

If Mom's awake, she doesn't answer.

Beyond, you see three islands now.

The islands are identical, and you know it's the water that's doing it; refracting the image, like when you put your hand into the aquarium and your fingers displace an inch or so, as if they've been severed.

A fourth island appears.

You're standing at the sink, not knowing how you got there, with the scent of chemicals tickling your nostrils, You feel like you did when you stepped into the garage and everything stopped, like they'd been caught in the midst of dancing.

Mom stirs. She turns in her seat. "Bally, where are you?" If she hears the slithering of the chain, she says nothing.

* * *

You dare to level your head, finding in the darkness first the ocean then the five islands and their pale towers, two of them nearer to shore, the others staying back.

The mobile home jumps and rolls like a boat. Wilson swears and slows down. It's not quite a road anymore.

Mom grips the arms of her chair. "Where are we?"

"You remember, don't you, Lila?" With a sidelong glance, he mutters, "Maybe you don't."

"He's been looking forward to the drive-in, Wilson."

In the headlights the wild grass is brown and startled before being run over. The ground comes at you then says it's ending up ahead, and that's when Wilson applies the brakes. "Can't fit this thing onto the lot. So ... abra ... cadabra." Taking both hands from the wheel he gestures to the panorama now revealed, as though conjuring the swell of silvery light and the field of toy cars all facing the hanging oblong sail that is the drive-in's screen. "Just like when we were kids." He rattles the gear stick into park. When he shuts off the engine you're worried that the ghosts will make noise. But everything around you stays quiet, tensed up, holding its breath.

"You planned this all along, huh?"

"Not breezy," he says. "Calm night, it is. Hey, Scout, you won't believe how trippy it is to sit up top. The beach spread out below, and the screen like it's floating in space."

Mom and Wilson exchange a look.

Only now do you see the tarantula in the crook of his neck, almost lost in his hair.

"Wilson..."

"I want to go, Mom."

"Bally, you'll get cold."

"No I won't."

She should say, *No, you can't*, and a part of you implores her to do so. But she gives up to Wilson with a nod, sagging back in her seat.

Wilson rises, and this time you don't step back. You make him go

around you and you hear the surprised little sound he makes between his teeth. But maybe that's for the ghosts now gathered in the shadows. Does he see the pig, who can hide most of its body beneath the table but not its glowing eyes? Or the tarantula on the counter? It's in plain view, and you think you see Wilson shivering as he walks to the back, to where the first door leads into the bathroom and the second into a narrow closet. He opens this and rummages around, and if he sees Ragnar pressed into the back he says nothing.

"Best seat in the house," he says, coming back with a folding chair. "Out and up, Champ."

You pop open the door, and the ocean is there in full, wide and dark except for a band of silver which are the clouds on the horizon. As you climb down, the grass waves and engulfs your shoes and bell-bottoms, and you hear the faint sound of music behind you. Wilson clambers down, having to move sideways to bring the chair with him. You lead him to the back of the Winnebago, and the ladder, and it's the ladder on the Doctor's tower, lonely in the breeze against the ocean, with the top as tall as the tower when you crane your neck.

A shearwater wheels against the dim clouds, catching the faint pulsing light of the drive-in screen.

"You ready, champ?"

But you've already gripped the edges of the ladder before he says it; it's your idea to climb, your idea the whole way, now; the demented cries of the shearwaters rasping at the air, urging you to climb up.

You find the bumper with your shoe, then the first rung.

When you're up, the breeze runs through your curls. You squint at the flat stage before you, the top of the tower elongated to lead your eyes to the very edge, where the faint flickering light is paired with music, distant, like something heard underwater.

"Here you go!"

Wilson's now no taller than you, offering up the chair, which the wind threatens to take. For an instant he stands there with his mouth open. You know he's feeling how tall you are; startled as you'd been startled at the spiral staircase at home, when it seemed he was going to climb up. He's feeling his place in the rushing grass and even seems to cringe as another shearwater darts past, making its nervous sound. "Can you grab it?!"

You lean down, strong as Ragnar. The chair is effortless to lift, awkward only because it threatens to flip and tear away from your hand, but you wrangle it onto the roof.

Below, you hear Wilson say something about stomping if you need anything.

You stand up, taller than you've ever been, tall as the Doctor's tower over the ocean. Your bell-bottoms riffle like sails. Slowly, you walk, your Keds set firm on the deck, two paces, three, your eyes on the far end and that flickering light, and the small glowing screen now revealed. It's no larger than your television at home, but it glows, and the toy cars are set before it like you've just lined them up to play, and at this instant the screen fills with the wide bright sea and a lone raft that you know is the sailor's, bound for Moreau's island.

Beneath you comes the bang of the door; Wilson, inside once more.

You walk to a handsbreadth of the end and unfold the chair, fighting with it against the breeze and watching, dizzily, as another shearwater makes a W in the sky, out and out over the screen, where the raft is now lost in the immensity of the sea.

You set down the chair and, feeling both chill and hot, you sit. You try to ignore the islands.

* * *

"I rather prefer the older version. *Island of Lost Souls.*" The Doctor stands beside your chair, tall as a tower. His white coat rustles in the breeze. "Laughton makes you believe the madness. His 'Doctor' slyly harbors both grandiosity and pity."

You look to the screen, where Logan, running through the island forest, falls into a pit, watched over by a mysterious man on a barrier wall—Moreau.

When you look back, the Doctor is removing an elegant cigarette case from his coat, along with a silver lighter.

"That bygone year I came to the coast, the town was not far removed from its frontier days. Camp Capitola, named for the heroine of a popular novel." He pauses to remove a cigarette from the case and return the case to his pocket. "It was a sullen place, those years. I found a haven in which to conduct my experiments, and a willing populace among the sea birds." He draws on the cigarette, now lit, and, exhaling, ponders the ember at its tip. "When the times changed, and the spirit of the town changed, I found another willing populace. I offer no apology, just as I offered none then, the night they found me in the salon among my treasures. And hanged me from the stairwell."

You look past him to the islands.

"It's not often that Ragnar and I agree." His voice becomes gentle. "But in this case, Ballou, he is right. The label didn't read *Doc Genius*, alas. *Domoic acid genus*, however, comes from the hand of a *doctor*, and its composition is due to *genius*, that's certain. A neurotoxin from the algae bloom, tweaked by me from the diatom *Pseudo-nitzschia lupus*," His smile is gentle, too. "We must change Wilson into a beast who walks on all fours."

A shearwater circles, its chittering thrum more like an insect's than a bird's.

The Doctor's cold hand rests on your shoulder. "You won't be going back to the House of 31 Sparrow Lane, Ballou. You realize that, don't you?"

Beneath your feet, you feel a thud. A roar, as of the ghost-pig writhing in its chains.

It's Wilson.

* * *

When you stand up, the Doctor's hand dissolves into a rush of wings: a third shearwater, and a fourth.

Below, on the luminous screen, inhuman faces peer out of jungle fronds, against which the shearwaters sketch their shadows by the dozens. To your right, one of the islands is closer than ever before, called forth by the shrieking birds.

You stumble, chased along the deck. On all sides is the sea, until you collapse at the edge and look over.

Something rustles the tall grass. The ghost pig disappears in the rush of shearwaters, and Wilson crawls after. Its tracks become his own. On hands and knees, he shakes all over like some four-legged animal, arms buckling, and collapses on his side.

* * *

The grass shivers across the beast man but it's just a mound of pelt and

clothes and it doesn't budge.

* * *

Your comic book lies on the carpet, along with the Centurions and Wilson's coffee cup, over a dark stain.

Until it walks into the mouth of the cup, the tarantula is almost too dark to notice.

Mom lies sprawled in the console chair, her sleeve tugged up above her elbow, her arm dangling like she's waiting for someone to lift her hand and kiss it. Approaching, you almost step on the syringe.

"Mom?"

You can't find her face for her hair. The smell of her perfume is wrong.

You squint against the silver light, where shadows flitting past are the shearwaters and the air is silent.

Everything is wrong.

Spittle clings to her parted lips. When you move the hair with a shaking hand, you pull back, gasping.

The bird fixes you with a single, gummy eye.

Wings fluttering in an attempt to fly free.

* * *

And if you're a boy with a wide imagination who hikes the beach at Capitola for miles on winter days, hikes until the promontory marking home is a speck you can hide behind your outstretched hand, then you'll find the beach at Pelican Bay too narrow, too constricted by headlands and the high tide, and wild with birds, facing the dark ocean and the towers.

You sense the pig at your side, the fire of its eyes swinging left and right and left, lighting the sand and the wings of silent shearwaters and gulls—ghosts of birds darting past and around, and past once more.

Ho, Ballou. Ho, Ballou. The tide is black and mounted with white froth, out to the islands that crowd offshore. Your shoes strike the water. Waves rush cold up your calves, seek to pull you in.

Ho, Ballou. Ho, Ballou.

The Doctor is out there. Ragnar, too. They're together. They'll always be together because they always come back. The thought is

strangely hopeful. *I can swim there,* you think, while the tide froths cold and hard, sweeping past, seeking to start you on your way. *I can reach it.*

Time is tide and the beating of ...

You taste iron.

... of a heart, Ballou. And if you were to wade into that tide and swim away, swim in any direction ...

Hot warmth courses down your nostril.

You fall to your knees, the water breaking across your lap.

I can swim there.

Water slack and silver with a diffuse light. The green-and-silver surface becoming clear, like a mirror, dotted now with one, with two, red blooms. Red blooms like those the Doctor had lifted from the jar with his deathly-white hand.

Joined by a third, as the blood strikes the water before being swept away.

* * *

He sits in the sand for many hours before they find him.

To Gene Wolfe

About the Author

David Herter lives in Seattle, Washington. You can sign up for email update here.

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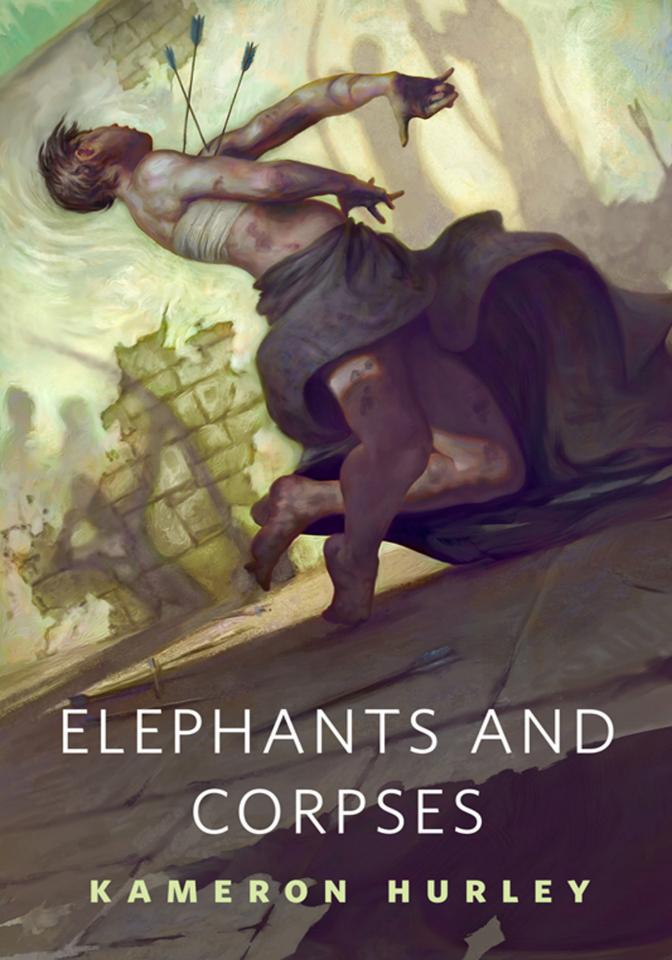
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Elephants and Corpses

KAMERON HURLEY

illustration by



Bodies are only beautiful when they aren't yours. It's why Nev had fallen in love with bodies in the first place. When you spent time with the dead you could be anyone you wanted to be. They didn't know any better. They didn't want to have long conversations about it. They were vehicles. Transport. Tools. They were yours in a way that no living thing ever could be.

Nev stood at the end of the lower city's smallest pier with Tera, his body manager, while she snuffled and snorted with some airborne contagion meant to make her smarter. She was learning to talk to the dead, she said, and you only picked up a skill like that if you went to some viral wizard who soaked your head in sputum and said a prayer to the great glowing wheel of God's eye that rode the eastern horizon. Even now, the boiling mass of stars that made up the God's eye nebula was so bright Nev could see it in broad daylight. It was getting closer, the priests all said. Going to gobble them up like some cancer.

Why Tera needed to talk to the dead when Nev did just fine with them as they were was a mystery. But it was her own body, her slice of the final take to spend, and he wasn't going to argue about what she did with it.

"You buying these bodies or not?" said the old woman in the pirogue. She'd hooked the little boat to the snarling amber head of a long-mummified sea serpent fixed to the pier. In Nev's fascination with the dead body, he'd forgotten about the live one trying to sell it to him.

"Too rotten," Tera said.

"Not if we prepare it by day's end," Nev said. "Just the big one, though. The kid, I can't do anything with."

He pulled out a hexagonal coin stamped with the head of some long-dead upstart; a senator, maybe, or a juris priest. The old folks in charge called themselves all sorts of things over the years, but their money spent the same. He wondered for a minute if the bodies were related; kid and her secondary father, or kid and prime uncle. They were both beginning to turn, now, the bodies slightly bloated, overfull,

but he could see the humanity, still; paintings in need of restoration.

"Some body merc you are!" the old woman said. "Underpaying for prime flesh. This is good flesh, here." She rubbed her hands suggestively over the body's nearly hairless pate.

Nev jabbed a finger at the empty pier behind him; she arrived with her bodies too late—the fish mongers had long since run out of stock, and the early risers had gone home. "Isn't exactly a crowd, is there?" He pushed his coat out of the way, revealing the curved hilt of his scimitar.

She snarled at him. It was such a funny expression, Nev almost laughed. He flipped her the coin and told Tera to bring up the cart. Tera grumbled and snuffled about it, but within a few minutes the body was loaded. Tera took hold of the lead on their trumpeting miniature elephant, Falid, and they followed the slippery boardwalk of the humid lower city into the tiers of the workhouses and machinery shops of the first circle. While they walked, Falid gripped Nev's hand with his trunk. Nev rubbed Falid's head with his other hand. Falid had been with him longer than Tera; he'd found the little elephant partly skinned and left to rot in an irrigation ditch ten years before. He'd nursed him back to health on cabbage and mango slices, back when he could afford mangos.

Tera roped Falid to his metal stake in the cramped courtyard of the workshop. Nev fed Falid a wormy apple from the bin—the best they had right now—and helped Tera haul the body inside. They rolled it onto the great stone slab at the center of the lower level.

Nev shrugged off his light coat, set aside his scimitar, and tied on an apron. He needed to inspect and preserve the body before they stored it in the ice cellar. Behind him rose the instruments of his trade: jars of preserved organs, coagulated blood, and personal preservation and hydrating concoctions he'd learned to make from the Body Mercenary Guild before they'd chucked him out for not paying dues. Since the end of the war, business for body mercs had been bad, and the guild shed specialist mercenaries like him by the thousands. On a lucky day, he was hired on as a cheap party trick, or by a grieving spouse who wanted one last moment with a deceased lover. That skirted a little too closely to deceptive sexual congress for his moral compass. Killing people while wearing someone else's skin was one thing: fucking while you pretended to be someone they knew was another.

Tera helped him strip the sodden coat and trousers from the body.

What came out of the water around the pier was never savory, but this body seemed especially torn up. It was why he didn't note the lack of external genitals, at first. Cocks got cut off or eaten up all the time, on floaters like this one. But the look on Tera's face made him reconsider.

"Funny," Tera said, sucking her teeth. She had a giant skewer in one hand, ready to stab the corpse to start pumping in the fluids that reduced the bloat. She pulled up the tattered tunic—also cut in a men's style, like the trousers—and clucked over what appeared to be a bound chest.

"Woman going about as a man?" Nev said. Dressing up as a man was an odd thing for a woman to do in this city, when men couldn't even own property. Tera owned Nev's workshop, when people asked. Nev had actually bought it under an old name some years before; he told the city people it was his sister's name, but of course it was his real one, from many bodies back. He and Tera had been going about their business here for nearly five years, since the end of the war, when body mercenaries weren't as in demand and old grunts like Tera got kicked out into a depressed civilian world that wanted no reminder of war. When he met her, she'd been working at a government school as a janitor. Not that Nat's decision regarding the body he wore was any saner.

"You think she's from the third sex quarter?" Nev said, "or is it a straight disguise?"

"Maybe she floated down from there," Tera said, but her brow was still furrowed. "Priests go about in funny clothes sometimes," she said. "Religious thing."

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking how much you hate going about in women's bodies," Tera said.

"I like women well enough," Nev said, "I just don't have the spirit of one."

"And a pity that is."

"She cost money. I might need her. What I prefer and what I need aren't always the same thing. Let's clean her up and put her in the cellar with the others."

A body mercenary without a good stash of bodies was a dead body mercenary. He knew it as well as anyone. He'd found himself bleeding out alone in a field without a crop of bodies to jump to before, and he didn't want to do it again. Every body merc's worst nightmare: death with no possibility of rebirth.

Tera cut off the breast binding. When she yanked off the bandages, Nev saw a great red tattoo at the center of the woman's chest. It was a stylized version of the God's eye nebula, one he saw on the foreheads of priests gathering up flocks in the street for prayer, pushing and shoving and shouting for worshippers among the four hundred other religious temples, cults, and sects who had people out doing the same.

Tera gave a little hiss when she saw the tattoo, and made a warding gesture over her left breast. "Mother's tits."

"What?"

"Wrap her up and—"

The door rattled.

Nev reached for his scimitar. He slipped on the wet floor and caught himself on the slab just as the door burst open.

A woman dressed in violet and black lunged forward. She wielded a shimmering straight sword with crimson tassels, like something a general on the field would carry.

"Grab the body," the woman said. Her eyes were hard and black. There were two armed women behind her, and a spotty boy about twelve with a crossbow.

Nev held up his hands. Sometimes his tongue was faster than his reflexes, and with the face he had on this particular form, it had been known to work wonders. "I'm happy to sell it to you. Paid a warthing for it, though. I'd appreciate—"

"Kill these other two," she said.

"Now, that's not—" Nev began, but the women were advancing. He really did hate it when he couldn't talk his way out. Killing was work, and he didn't like doing work he wasn't paid for.

He backed up against the far wall with Tera as the gang came at them. Tera, too, was unarmed. She shifted into a brawler's stance. He was all right at unarmed combat, but surviving it required a fairer fight than this one. Four trained fighters with weapons against two without only ended in the unarmed's favor in carnival theater and quarterwarthing stories.

Nev looked for a weapon in reach—a hack saw, a fluid needle,

anything—and came up empty. His scimitar was halfway across the room.

If they wanted the body, then, he'd give it to them.

He whistled at Tera. She glanced over at him, grimaced, tightened her fists.

Nev pulled the utility dagger at his belt and sliced his own forearm from wrist to elbow. Blood gushed. He said a little prayer to God's eye, more out of tradition than necessity, and abandoned his mortally wounded body.

There was a blink of darkness. Softness at the edges of his consciousness.

Then a burst of awareness.

Nev came awake inside the body on the slab. He couldn't breathe. He rolled off the slab and hit the floor hard, vomiting bloody water, a small fish, and something that looked like a cork. His limbs were sluggish. His bowels let loose, covering the floor in bloody shit, piss, and something ranker, darker: death.

He gripped the edge of the slab and pulled himself up. His limbs felt like sodden bread. Putting on a new, dead skin of the wrong gender often resulted in a profound dysphoria, long-term. But he didn't intend to stay here long.

The attackers were yelling. The kid got down on his knees and started babbling a prayer to the Helix Sun god. Nev had his bearings now. He flailed his arms at them and roared, "Catch me, then!" but it came out a mush in the ruined mouth of the dead woman whose body he now occupied.

He waited until he saw Tera kick open the latch to the safe room and drag his bleeding former body into it. The one with such a pretty face. Then he turned and stumbled into the courtyard.

A dozen steps. He just needed to make it a dozen steps, until his spirit had full control of the body. Second wind, second wind—it was coming. Hopefully before he lost his head. If he didn't get them out far enough, they'd just run back in and finish off Tera and what was left of his old body. He really liked that body. He didn't want to lose it.

The gang scrambled after him. He felt a heavy thump and blaring pain in his left shoulder. Someone had struck him with an ax. He stumbled forward. Falid trumpeted as he slipped past. He considered putting Falid between him and the attackers—maybe some better body merc would have—but his heart clenched at the idea. He loved that stupid elephant.

He felt hot blood on his shoulder. A good sign. It meant the blood was flowing again. Second wind, second wind ...

Nev burst out of the courtyard and into the street. The piercing light of the setting suns blinded him. He gasped. His body filled with cramping, searing pain, like birth. He'd been reborn a thousand times in just this way; a mercenary who could never die, leaping from host to host as long as there were bodies on the battlefield. He could run and fight forever, right up until there were no more bodies he'd touched. He could fight until he was the last body on the field.

He pivoted, changing directions. The burst of new life caused his skin to flake. He was going to be powerfully thirsty and hungry in a quarter hour. But that was more than enough time to do what needed doing.

Nev picked up speed. The body's legs responded, stronger and fitter than they'd been for their former inhabitant. He coughed out one final wet muck of matter and took a deep, clear breath. He glanced back, ensured the gang was still chasing him, and turned down a side alley.

They barreled after him, all four of them, which told him they were amateurs more than anything else thus far. You didn't all bumble into a blind alley after a mark unless you were very, very sure of yourselves.

He knew the alley well. Hairy chickens as tall as his knee hissed and scattered as he passed. He rounded the end of the alley and jumped – the leap across the sunken alley here was six feet. Not easy, but not impossible. The street had caved during the last rainstorm. Knowing to jump should have saved him.

But he came up short.

He missed the other side by inches, threw his arms forward, tried to scramble for purchase.

Nev, the body that housed Nev, fell.

His legs snapped beneath him. Pain registered: dull, still, with the nerves not yet fully restored. He cracked his head against broken paving stones at the bottom of the sinkhole. A black void sputtered across his vision.

Fuck.

"Shit," the woman with the dark eyes said. She peered down at him; her mane of black hair had come loose, and with the double helix of the suns behind her, she looked like a massive lion. "Finish killing it. Take it with us. Body's barely fit for Corez now."

"He's a body merc," one of the others said, behind her. "He's just going to jump again."

"Then go back and burn his house down, too."

The boy came up behind her, levelled a crossbow with a violet plume at the end, and shot Nev in the chest.

It took two more to kill him.

Dying hurt every time.

* * *

Nev gasped. Sputtered, wheezed, "Where are we?"

It was dead dark.

"Lie flat, fool. We're under the floor of the warehouse."

He gasped for air and reached instinctively for his cut wrist. Tera had bound it with clean linen and salve that stank nearly as bad as the corpse they'd hauled from the pier.

"They're going to burn the workshop."

"You're lucky we aren't burning in there too. You only lasted five minutes."

"More than long enough, for some."

"Easy to please, were they?"

"My favorite sort."

She snorted. Sneezed. Hacked something up and spit into the dusty space. "They didn't know what you were until you jumped. Seemed right surprised."

"Wouldn't be the first time we pulled a body that should have stayed buried."

Nev smelled smoke. His workshop, burning. If they didn't leave soon it would catch the warehouse they were squatting under, too. Years they worked to build up that workshop. If he was lucky, some of the bodies on ice in the cellar might keep, but probably not. All those lovely bodies lost ... He shivered and clutched at his wrist again.

"Anything they say give you an idea what they wanted with the body?" Tera asked.

"Only used one name. Said the body wasn't fit for ... Corez?" Tera muttered something.

The smell of smoke got stronger. "You knew that tattoo," he said. "It's like the one on those priests. The new Gods' eye cult. The real liberal ones with the habit of burning effigies in the park."

"Not just the tattoo," Tera said. "I knew the woman."

"Who was she?"

"My sister," Tera said, "and Corez is the piece of shit that runs that cult temple she ran off to twenty years ago."

* * *

The fire had seared a scar clean through the workshop and into the warehouse behind it. The billowing flames destroyed three buildings before the fire brigade pumped in water from the ocean. One of the buildings was a factory where children put together beautifully patterned tunics. The children still milled about on the street opposite, faces smeared in char, hacking smoke.

Nev crunched across the floor of the ruined workshop, kicking aside broken glass and the twisted implements of his trade, all swirling with sea water. The cellar had caved in, barring the way to the bodies below. The intense heat would have melted all the ice blocks he packed down there in straw anyway, and ruined his collection. If someone shot him in the heart now, he'd have nowhere to jump.

He saw Tera standing over a heaped form in the courtyard, and walked over to her. She frowned at the crumpled body of Falid the elephant, shot six times with what was likely a crossbow. They'd removed the bolts. Falid's tongue lolled out. His tiny black eyes were dull.

Nev knelt before the little elephant and stroked his fat flank. "This was unnecessary," he said.

"So was the factory," Tera said.

Nev's eyes filled. He wiped his face. "No. That was collateral damage. This.... *This* was unnecessary."

"It's just..." Tera began, but trailed off. She stared at him.

Body after body, war after war, fight after fight, Nev dealt with the consequences. He knew what he risked, and he was willing to pay the price. But what had Falid to do with any of that? He was just a fucking

elephant.

"I want my sister's body," Tera said. "I know you don't care much for people. But I cared some for my sister, and I want her buried right."

"Revenge won't bring her back."

"Revenge will get her buried right."

"Revenge doesn't pay for a new workshop, or more bodies."

"Revenge gets you more bodies."

"But not a place to put them."

"Then do it for the money. You've seen that God's eye temple on the hill. You think they only keep people in there?"

"And if there's no money?"

Tera spat. "Then you'll have to settle for revenge."

Falid, the little trumpeting elephant. "It was not necessary," Nev said.

"It never is," Tera said.

* * *

The cult of God's eye was housed in a massive temple three rings further up into the city. They had no money to wash and dress the part, so they waited for cover of night, when the only thing illuminating the streets were the floating blue bodies of the nightblinders; beautiful, thumb-sized flying insects that rose from their daytime hiding places to softly illuminate the streets until nearly dawn.

In the low blue light, the craggy red sandstone temple threw long shadows; the grinning eyeless faces carved into its outer walls looked even more grotesque. There was just enough light for Nev to notice that the crossbowmen at the parapet above the gate carried quivers of bolts with purple plumes, just like the ones the boy had used to shoot him and Falid.

"Over or under?" Nev said.

Tera chewed on a wad of coca leaves. Whatever viral thing the wizards had given her was finally clearing up. "Under," she said.

They slipped away from the temple's front doors and walked four blocks up to the broken entrance to the sewers. Many had been left unrepaired after the last storm. As they huffed along the fetid brick sewer, hunched over like miners, Nev said, "Why'd you want to talk to the dead, really? We don't need to talk to the dead."

"You don't," Tera said. She slapped the side of the sewer and muttered something. She had a better sense of direction than he did. "I do."

"You can't think the dead are still there, if I can run around in their bodies."

"I think there's always a piece of us still there, in the bodies. In the bones."

"You'll talk to me when I'm dead, then? You're, what—eighty?"

"I'm fifty-one, you little shit."

"Maybe worry over yourself first."

"That ain't my job. And you know it. Here it is. Boost me up."

He offered his knee, and she stood on it while working away the grate above. She swore.

The weight of her on his knee eased as she hauled herself up. The light was bad in the sewers; only a few of the nightblinders made it down here. "Come now," she said, and he could just see her arms reaching for him.

Nev leapt. She pulled him until he could grab the lip of the latrine himself. He rolled over onto a white tiled floor. Two lanterns full of buzzing nightblinders illuminated the room. He smeared shitty water across the floor. "They'll smell us coming," he said.

The door opened, and a plump little robed priest gaped at them.

Tera was faster than Nev. She head-butted the priest in the face. Nev grabbed the utility knife at his belt and jabbed it three times into the man's gut. He fell.

Tera clucked at him. "No need to go about killing priests," she whispered. As she gazed at the body, a strange look came over her face. "Huh," she said.

"What?"

She shrugged. "Dead guy knows where Corez is."

"You're making that up."

She spat and made the sign of God's eye over her left breast. "Sordid truth, there. See, those viral wizards aren't talking shit. Told you I'd get smarter."

"The man is dead. It's impossible that—"

"What? Messes with your little idea of the world, doesn't it? That maybe who we are is in our bones? Maybe you don't erase everything when you jump. Maybe you become a little bit like every body. Maybe you're not stealing a thing. You're borrowing it."

Nev turned away from her. His response was going to be loud, and angry. Unnecessary. The guild taught that death was darkness. There were no gods, no rebirths, no glorious afterlives. The life you had was the one you made for yourself in the discarded carcasses of others. Most days, he believed it. Most days.

They dumped the body down the latrine. "Lot of work to bury your sister," Nev said.

"Fuck you. You wouldn't know."

He considered her reaction for a long moment while they waited in the doorway, looking left to right down the hall for more wandering priests. It was true. He wouldn't know. He'd neither burned nor buried any of his relatives. They'd all be long dead, now.

"It made you angry I jumped into her body, didn't it?" he said.

"Didn't ask me, or her. No choice, when you don't ask."

"It didn't occur to me."

"Yeah, things like that never do, do they?"

She slipped into the hall. Nev padded quietly after her, past row after row of nightblinder lanterns. They circled up a spiral stair, encountering little resistance. At the top of the staircase was a massive iron banded door. Tera gestured for him to come forward. He was the better lock pick.

Nev slipped out his tools from the flat leather clip at this belt and worked the lock open. The lock clicked. Tera pushed it open and peered in.

Darkness. The nightblinder lanterns inside had been shuttered. Nev tensed. He heard something beside him, and elbowed into the black. His arm connected with heavy leather armor. Someone grabbed his collar and yanked him into the room. Tera swore. The armored man kicked Nev to his knees. Nev felt cold steel at the back of his neck.

The door slammed behind them.

The black sheathing on the lanterns was pulled away. Nev put his hands flat on the floor. No sudden movements until he knew how many there were. A large woman sat at the end of a raised bed. Her mane of black hair reminded him strongly of the woman who'd chased them through the street, but the body he knew far more intimately. It was

Tera's sister, her soft brown complexion and wise eyes restored, transformed, by a body mercenary like him.

Four more men were in the room, long swords out, two pressed at Tera, two more at Nev. They were all men this time, which didn't bode well. Enlisted men tended to be more expendable than their female counterparts.

"You stink," the woman who wore Tera's sister's body said. "You realize it was only my curiosity that let you get this far. Surely you're not stupid enough to risk your necks over a burnt workshop?"

"My sister," Tera said. "Mora Ghulamak. You're not her, so you must be Corez."

"God's eye, that honeyring didn't have a sister, did she?" Corez said. "Your sister pledged her body to the God's eye. She disguised herself and tried to flee that fate. But she's in service to me, as you can see."

"My sister's dead," Tera said. "We came for her body. To burn her."

"Burn her? Surely your little body merc friend here understands why that's not going to be permitted. A body is just a suit. This suit is mine."

"Her body," Tera said.

Corez waved her hand at the men. "Dump them in the cistern. There's two more unblemished dead for my collection."

Drowning was the best way to kill a body you wanted for later. It left no marks—nothing that required extensive mending. It was also the worst way to die. Nev tried to bolt.

The men were fast, though, bigger than him, better armored, and better trained. They hauled them both from the room, down two flights of stairs, and brought them to the vast black mouth of a cistern sitting in the bowels of the temple.

Nev tried to talk his way out, tried coercion, promises. They said nothing. They were in service to a body mercenary. They knew what she could do with them, and their bodies. They wouldn't know death. Priests of every faith said they'd never see an afterlife, if they lived as walking corpses.

They kicked Tera in first. Nev tumbled after her.

He hit the water hard.

Nev gasped. It was cold, far colder than he expected. He bubbled up and swam instinctively to the side of the cistern. The sides were sheer. The top was at least thirty feet above them.

Tera sputtered beside him.

He hated drowning. Hated it. "Look for a way up."

They spent ten minutes clawing their way around the cistern, looking for a crack, a step, an irregularity. Nothing. Nev tried swimming down as far as he could, looking for a drain pipe. If there was one, it was deeper than he could dive. He could not find the bottom.

The third time he surfaced, he saw Tera clumsily treading water. Her face was haggard.

"It's all right," Nev said, but of course it wasn't.

"How old are you, really?" Tera said. She choked on a mouthful of water, then spit.

He swam over to her. Looped an arm around her waist. He could last a bit longer, maybe. His body was stronger and fitter. Younger. "Old enough."

"The face I see now is young and pretty, but you ain't twenty-five."

"Body mercs have been known—"

"I know it's not your body. You spend more time admiring it than a War Minister's husband spends polishing her armor for her."

"That's the trouble with the living. Everyone wants to know everything." He had a memory of his first body, some stranger's life, now, playing at being a mercenary in the long tunic and trousers of a village girl. It was a long road from playing at it to living it, to dying at it.

"Only ever asked you two questions," she said, sputtering. He kicked harder, trying to keep them both afloat. "I asked how long you been a body merc, and how much pay was."

"This makes three."

"Too many?"

"Three too many."

"That's your problem, boy-child. Love the dead so much you stopped living. Man so afraid of death he doesn't live is no man at all."

"I don't need people."

"Yeah? How'd you do without a body manager, before me?"

He smelled a hot, barren field. Bloody trampled grain. He felt the terrible thirst of a man dying alone in a field without another body in sight, without a stash of his own. He had believed so strongly in his own immortality during the early days of the war that when he woke

inside the corpse of a man in a ravine who would not stop bleeding no matter how much he willed it, it was the first time he ever truly contemplated death. He had prayed to three dozen gods while crawling out of the ravine, and when he saw nothing before him but more fields, and flies, and heat, he'd faced his own mortality and discovered he didn't like it at all. He was going to die alone. Alone and unloved, forgotten. A man whose real face had been ground to dust so long ago all he remembered was the cut of his women's trousers.

"I managed," he said stiffly. His legs were numb.

Tera was growing limp in his arms. "When I die in here, don't jump into my body. Leave me dead. I want to go on in peace."

"There's only darkness after—"

"Don't spray that elephant shit at me," she said. "I know better, remember? I can ... speak ... to the dead now. You ... leave me dead."

"You're not going to die." His legs and arms were already tired. He hoped for a second wind. It didn't come. He needed a new body for that.

Tera huffed more water. Eventually Tera would die. Probably in a few minutes. Another body manager dead. And he'd have nowhere to leap but her body. He gazed up at the lip of the cistern. But then what? Hope he could get out of here in Tera's body when he couldn't in his own, fitter one?

Tera's head dipped under the water. He yanked her up.

"Not yet," he said. He hated drowning. Hated it.

But there was nowhere to go.

No other body ...

"Shit," he said. He pulled Tera close. "I'm going now, Tera. I'm coming back. A quarter hour. You can make it a quarter hour."

"Nowhere \dots to \dots no \dots bodies. Oh." He saw the realization on her face. "Shit."

"Quarter hour," he said, and released her. He didn't wait to see if she went under immediately. He dove deep and shed his tunic, his trousers. He swam deep, deeper still. He hated drowning.

He pushed down and down. The pressure began to weigh on him. He dove until his air ran out, until his lungs burned. He dove until his body rebelled, until it needed air so desperately he couldn't restrain his body's impulse to breathe. Then he took a breath. A long, deep breath of

water: pure and sweet and deadly. He breathed water. Burning.

His body thrashed, seeking the surface. Scrambling for the sky.

Too late.

Then calm. He ceased swimming. Blackness filled his vision. So peaceful, though, in the end. Euphoric.

* * *

Nev screamed. He sat bolt upright and vomited blood. Blackness filled his vision, and for one horrifying moment he feared he was back in the water. But no. The smell told him he was in the sewers. He patted at his new body, the plump priest they'd thrown down the latrine: the bald pate, the round features, the body he had touched and so could jump right back into. He gasped and vomited again; bile this time. He realized he was too fat to get up through the latrine, but wearing what he did made it possible to get in the front door.

He scrambled forward on sluggish limbs, trying to work new blood into stiff fingers. His second wind came as he slogged back up onto the street. He found a street fountain and drank deeply to replace the vital liquid he'd lost. Then he was running, running, back to the God's eye temple.

They let him in with minimal fuss, which disappointed him, because he wanted to murder them all now: fill them full of purple plumed arrows, yelling about fire and elephants and unnecessary death, but he could not stop, could not waver, because Tera was down there, Tera was drowning, Tera was not like him, and Tera would not wake up.

He got all the way across the courtyard before someone finally challenged him, a young man about fourteen, who curled his nose and said some godly-sounding greeting to him. Nev must not have replied correctly, because the snotty kid yelled after him, "Hey now! Who are you?"

Nev ran. His body was humming now, rushing with life, vitality. A red haze filled his vision, and when the next armed man stepped in front of him, he dispatched him neatly with a palm strike to the face. He took up the man's spear and long sword and forged ahead, following his memory of their descent to the cistern.

As he swung around the first flight he rushed headlong into two armed men escorting Corez up, still wearing Tera's sister's skin. Surprise was on his side, this time.

Nev ran the first man through the gut, and hit the second with the end of his spear.

"God's eye, what—" Corez said, and stopped. She had retreated back down the stairs, stumbled, and her wig was aslant now.

"You take the scalps of your people, too?" Nev said. He hefted the spear.

"Now you think about this," she said. "You don't know who I am. I can give you anything you like, you know. More bodies than you know what to do with. A workshop fit for the king of the body mercenaries. A thousand body managers better than any you've worked with. You've dabbled in a world you don't understand."

"I understand well enough," he said.

"Then, the body. I can give you this body. That's what she wanted, isn't it? I have others."

"I don't care much for people," Nev said. "That was your mistake. You thought I'd care about the bodies, or Tera, or her sister, or any of the rest. I don't. I'm doing this for my fucking *elephant*."

He thrust the spear into her chest. She gagged. Coughed blood.

He did not kill her, but left her to bleed out, knowing that she could not jump into another form until she was on the edge of death.

Nev ran the rest of the way down into the basements. They had to have a way to fish the bodies out. He found a giant iron pipe leading away from the cistern, and a sluice. He opened up the big drain and watched the water pour out into an aqueduct below.

He scrambled down and down a long flight of steps next to the cistern and found a little sally port. How long until it drained? Fuck it. He opened the sally port door. A wave of water engulfed him.

He smacked hard against the opposite wall. A body washed out with the wave of water, and he realized it was his own, his beloved. He scrambled forward, only to see Tera's body tumble after it, propelled by the force of the water. For one horrible moment he was torn. He wanted to save his old body. Wanted to save it desperately.

But Tera only had one body.

He ran over to her and dragged her way from the cistern. She was limp.

Nev pounded on her back. "Tera!" he said. "Tera!" As if she would

awaken at the sound of her name. He shook her, slapped her. She remained inert. But if she was dead, and yes, of course she was dead, she was not long dead. There was, he felt, something left. Something lingering. Tera would say it lingered in her bones.

He searched his long memory for some other way to rouse her. He turned her onto her side and pounded on her back again. Water dribbled from her mouth. He thought he felt her heave. Nev let her drop. He brought both his hands together, and thumped her chest. Once. Then again.

Tera choked. Her eyelids fluttered. She heaved. He rolled her over again, and pulled her into his arms.

Her eyes rolled up at him. He pressed his thumb and pinky together, pushed the other three fingers in parallel; the signal he used to tell it was him inhabiting a new body.

"Why you come for me?" Tera said.

He held her sodden, lumpy form in his own plump arms and thought for a long moment he might weep. Not over her or Falid or the rest, but over his life, a whole series of lives lost, and nothing to show for it but this: the ability to keep breathing when others perished. So many dead, one after the other. So many he let die, for no purpose but death.

"It was necessary," he said.

* * *

They crawled out of the basement and retrieved Tera's sister from the stairwell. It hurt Nev's heart, because he knew they could only carry one of them. He had to leave his old form. The temple was stirring now. Shouting. They dragged her sister's body back the way they had come, through the latrines. Tera went first, insisting that she grab the corpse as it came down. Nev didn't argue. In a few more minutes the temple's guards would spill over them.

When he slipped down after her and dropped to the ground, he saw Tera standing over what was left of her sister, muttering to herself. She started bawling.

"What?" he said.

"The dead talk to me. I can hear them all now, Nev."

A chill crawled up his spine. He wanted to say she was wrong, it was impossible, but he remembered holding her in his arms, and knowing

she could be brought back. Knowing it wasn't quite the end, yet. Knowing hope. "What did she say?"

"It was for me and her. Forty years of bullshit. You wouldn't understand."

He had to admit she was probably right.

They burned her sister, Mora, in a midden heap that night, while Tera cried and drank and Nev stared at the smoke flowing up and up and up, drawing her soul to heaven, to God's eye, like a body merc's soul to a three days' dead corpse.

* * *

Nev sat with Tera in a small tea shop across the way from the pawn office. The bits and bobs they'd collected going through people's trash weren't enough for a workshop, not even a couple bodies, but they had squatted in rundown places before. They could eat for a while longer. Tera carried a small box under her arm throughout the haggle with the pawn office. Now she pushed the box across the table to him.

Nev opened the box. A turtle as big as his fist sat inside, its little head peeking out from within the orange shell.

"What is this?" he asked.

"It's a fucking turtle."

"I can see that."

"Then why'd you ask?" she said. "I can't afford a fucking elephant, but living people need to care about things. Keeps you human. Keeps you alive. And that's my job, you know. Keeping you alive. Not just living."

"I'm not sure I—"

"Just take the fucking turtle."

He took the fucking turtle.

That night, while Tera slept in the ruined warehouse along the stinking pier, Nev rifled through the midden heaps for scraps and fed the turtle a moldered bit of apple. He pulled the turtle's box into his lap; the broad lap of a plump, balding, middle-aged man. Nondescript. Unimportant. Hardly worth a second look.

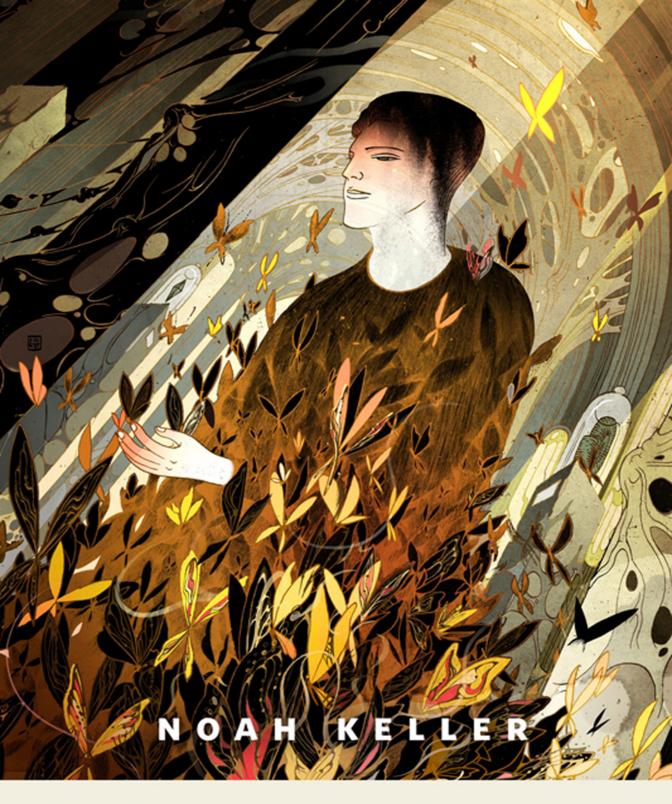
To him, though, the body was beautiful, because it was dead. The dead didn't kill your elephant or burn down your workshop. But the dead didn't give you turtles, either. Or haul your corpse around in case

you needed it later. And unlike the guild said, some things, he knew now, were not as dead as they seemed. Not while those who loved them still breathed.

Tera farted in her sleep and turned over heavily, muttering. Nev hugged the box to his chest.



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THE MUSEUM AND THE MUSIC BOX

The Museum and the Music Box

NOAH KELLER

illustration by



I wander the hallways of the museum. I must know the truth. Past the snarling gargoyles and mummified vampires, past the lizards adrift in jars of formaldehyde, the fossils of ancient nautili, silver insects entombed in amber. To the attics, where seas of parchment seem to whirl in my madness, cracked dusty words, trunks smelling of cedar and oak. Words in languages only the dead understand, pages only to be read by the light of certain fireflies, known only to explorers of forgotten continents, tangled, shadowy scripts. The words have begun to reveal themselves to me; my ambition knows no bounds. In time I will know your history. Your secrets spread out like specimens upon the dissection table.

It is winter in the city. Snow dusts the rooftops with a glistening silver, disguises the identity of certain streets, buries children on their way home. The naked statues of pale maidens are clothed now in dresses of frosty white. In the attic it is cold. Like the rats, I build a nest of papers, ancient texts, parchment and papyri, scrolls and palimpsests. I crumple them and stuff them beneath my coat, but still I shiver. I remember how warm your body was, as if for a heart, you had a tiny sun. We were planets, the two of us, orbiting in darkness.

* * *

I will always remember the museum as you first showed it to me. Cheap wine and cheap dreams, a confetti of an evening. Demented teenagers, with eyes like savants. I chased you through winding streets, cobbles and rooftops, taverns filled with smoke. We joined in the drunken revelries of strangers. You, twirling your hips, letting your sparkling dress fly in their faces. I tried to hold on to you, wobbling desperately. We wandered in and out of fogs and streetlamps, clouds of smoke, down rainspouts. Sliding. We jimmied a window in the skeleton wing. You said, "This is where I like to go sometimes." I was in awe of your carelessness, of your perplexing smile.

The museum was at its peak then; the glass cases were not cracked

or smeared with greasy hands as they are now; dust had not yet settled on the vertebrae of the *Allosaurus*, nor had the jaw of the *Planicoxa* been stolen. You took me by the hand and led me through those secret halls; in the half-light the monsters seemed to dance. We gaped at the massive jaws of the *Nothosaurus* and watched as the electric crocodiles swam in their lustrous tank. At the diorama of gilded ammonites, you stopped and pulled me close. "There is something I want to show you." We passed through rooms of improbable furniture, heavy and stained the color of dark ales, through chambers of ornamented silver, rooms of ancient timepieces and scrolls of painted papyrus which tell the history of the world.

In a tiny room—if one did not know it was there, they would hardly notice it; perhaps they would think it a coat closet or a boiler room—on a pedestal is a single artifact, housed beneath a bell of glass. It sparkles faintly in the glow of gaslight. A faded label reads: "Music Box: Perthominthian Dynasty, circa 600." It is made of azurite, a lustrous blue which fades to green where plumes of malachite erupt from its surface like tentacles of algae. It is carved with mermaids, ocean waves which become jaguars, and forests of bipedal fungi which seem frozen in the midst of a dance.

I thought you were going to kiss me; what an arrogant fool I was. Instead you said, "Would you like to hear a story?" What could I say? Everything about the night intrigued me. Everything was a puzzle, a maze. You were the only one who knew the way. You were the only one I could follow.

"We know little of the Perthominthians, not even their real name. Some say it is Als Seti; others that they called themselves Sthii-Eeth-Sethe, which means 'the people of broken stones.' But these are improbable conjectures. Another scholar claims that their name cannot be written in our orthography, or that of any other system which is known to us. He says that the sound of their name is like the sound the wind makes as it rustles the dried blooms of once-sweet flowers. We know only that their eyes were the color of the moon. That their temples were built so that when it rained they became living sculptures, kinetic gardens of water, which dripped and sang with purposeful rhythms, melodies of watery architecture.

"Their temples were carved with feathered dolphins, which seemed

to swim and frolic in the waves. Creatures—half-jaguar, half-men—did battle with colossal gods. Orchids wound around the temples' pillars.

"We know that their highest and most honored science was that of dreaming, and that they invented many elixirs and mechanical instruments to aid in their pursuit of these arts. We know that their written language consisted of stones encased in pouches of velvet, their shape, color, and texture, we surmise, corresponding to elements of phonology and grammar. Some travelers claim that the Perthominthians made love on the backs of tigers, or in nests during thunderstorms, but this is unlikely.

"For lovers it was traditional to exchange music boxes carved by hand.

"We know nothing else about them, except how they were destroyed. Oh, how many accounts have been written of the campaigns of Prince Artemia, of how his army descended in their chariots of iron. How he burned their cities and ground their statues to dust. How his alchemists brewed poisons, which he pumped into the air through giant bellows. How his enemies went mad. How their insides began to boil. Their fields were sown with salt. Their temples razed. Their libraries ransacked. The stones that made up their language scattered, traded away, until—lonely, lacking order or pattern—they lost their meaning as well, and became merely stones. The feathered dolphins which swam in their rivers were caught one by one, or else died when the rivers dried up. The jaguar men were hunted or fled to the hills; even their gods were murdered. It is said that in that region it no longer rains.

"All that is left is this music box, but it has no key. It cannot be wound. We shall never hear it play. Sometimes I imagine I have found the key, that it creaks as I wind it, dislodging flakes of rust. What melodies of longing might I hear, what songs of joy?"

You baffled me then as you do now. "I will find you the key," I said; it was all I had to say. You laughed, an elegant, birdlike guffaw. I tried to laugh, but I vomited instead—thick and yellow. The rest of that night mixes with other nights, mad capers, foolish acts and rooftop trysts, broken locks and drunken regret. Other nights are layered on top of these. Nights in which I wandered alone, through the empty hallways of the museum, listening for ghosts.

* * *

I have found your diary, a little book with a leather cover. It was under a rusted set of carving knives near the chimney. Of course, the authenticity of the text cannot be certain, as I have in my collection several dozen works which purport to be your most intimate of journals. Still, it is the duty of the scholar to persevere, to wade through the morass, to determine what is gold and what is lead.

* * *

When you were young, when I was young, you courted me. I hovered on the banisters of spiral staircases, my expression puzzling, impassive. My face like a sculpture of polished obsidian. Proud, unchanging. Perhaps there were flickers, reflections of laughter in the vastness of my ruby eyes? Was that what attracted you to me?

You began by folding creatures of paper, so lifelike they seemed to hop or fly, to slither or swim. I would find them: a snail on my windowsill, a lion at my door. An owl on my bed stand, a fox in my dressing chamber. At first I ignored them; I had my maids throw them away. I had many suitors, you must understand. But soon they began to haunt me—I would dream of their writhing bodies, pinned beneath a giant hand, their paper wetted by the rain, beginning to tear. In waking visions I would see them at the bottom of dustbins, twitching, crying out in pain, in soft papery voices.

One morning I awoke to find a seahorse caught in my hair. Your creations grew more elaborate: ten-masted paper ships which could sail all by themselves; a paper ornithopter which ran on paper springs and intricate gears of paper. It flew around my head three times and then flew into the sky. A paper nightingale which could really sing; its voice sounded like the pages of a book being turned.

One day I called you to my chambers, I ordered my handmaids to remove your clothes, and bade you sit on my couch of polished coral, while I played for you on a harp which is made from a living tree. I played the sonnets of Silith Aayrn and the lays of Beth Athul. A cantata of secret longing, a nocturne of quiet desire. I played for you, only for you. Like an eel, I slithered from my dress and left it like a deflated cloud upon the floor. You did not move. With my tongue, I mapped each contour of your skin, each delicate plane, each curve and clime. I might have filled a thousand atlases with all those secrets. We tried to forget ourselves, to bend, to break. I writhed above you, I tore, I scraped, our skin like sandpaper, like obsidian

and jade. I ground you to a powder and watched your silver dust blown in swirling storms to the corners of the room. Your body was frail, like a washed-up tree; every movement seemed to surprise you, to give you pleasure and to cause you pain. That night I dreamed of a river, arcing across the vastness of the sky, unaware that in our world they are bound irrevocably to the earth.

* * *

In an old cigar box, on an ivory bookcase, which has been shoved behind a moth-eaten divan, I discover a map. It is the record of a journey you once took. When I open it there is the distinctive aroma of almonds, this stirs other memories, the creak of a wooden floor in a certain café, in a city by the sea. Sometimes you are there, sometimes I am alone. The blue of the ocean is sewn like a ribbon through the cloth of memory. But what city?

* * *

The map is old; one edge is singed by fire, the other eaten by mold. Ink seems to vibrate across it, a frantic tracery of lines. Island and fjords, inlets and bays, river mouths which open like dragons, spitting fiery deltas into the vastness of the sea. Crisscrossing lines cover everything, like the fishermen's tangled nets. They tell of old trade routes and prevailing winds, currents and gyres, channels between wreck-strewn reefs, the migrations of singing squid. Beneath all this I follow your journey. The map gives no mention of your vessel, so I do not know how to imagine you: the captain of a felluca or dhow, oarsman of a trireme, helmsman of a junk? What were you seeking, as you sailed north, through the Bay of Kes, into the Morlian Sea? Was it treasure? A chest of gold beneath coral sand? Revenge, perhaps? The map is silent, too, on your motives, as you thread the Thevrian Channel, as you round the Cape of Bitter Morns and set your course, north by northwest, into the vastness of the Nameless Ocean. Why do you spin in circles? Are you searching for some hidden isle not inked on any map? Some ancient beast or vast leviathan? A wise and pendulous jellyfish, whose answer you seek to some perplexing riddle? Or did a storm, clenching you in its fist of rain and wind, hurl you so far off course? Did you descend into madness, led astray by a glimmering mirage, a host of angels with

green-gold scales which swim beneath your bow? Or was there mutiny? Silent, stupid map! You hint at everything yet tell me nothing. You are not smooth like her skin, nor do you curl round me, enclosing me in whispering softness, sealing me from the world's wind.

* * *

Did I tell you that they are finally closing the museum? This old place went to ruin long ago; people hardly come to this part of the city anymore. Occasionally, on a rainy Sunday, a curious stranger might wander in to ponder the sleeping statues, or to stare bemusedly at the fossils of erratic bivalves. Do you remember kissing behind the diorama which showed the habitat of the Tourmelian hippo? The smell of glue. Your lips like butterflies, you held my hips as if to stop yourself from floating away.

The navigator becomes negligent; your voyage fades into stains the color of tea. In another corner of the map, you seem to enter a port in Cavaldo. In a tiny hand, which I know to be yours, there is a note: *Took on cargo, pepper and dried figs, lost three seamen to whores and drink. Will not be missed.*

* * *

You loved me once, did you not? That awkward boy, that dashing young man? Was it all some kind of game? Delusion? Perhaps I missed some fatal clue? Do you remember, on the fourth floor of the museum, how we slipped past the velvet ropes, into the burial chamber of Tulth Etha? Do you remember the flickering of torchlight, the mummified bodies of arm-length worms laid beside him, the leeches of glass which had been placed in his eyes? His sarcophagus was fashioned from an oyster's shell, several meters long.

The world seemed to blink. We seemed so alone, in the darkness of the museum. The scent of ancient incense still hung in the air. On the walls there were tapestries of rivers, gods with the tails of scorpions and the heads of tigers. Carvings of ghosts. In the torchlight, you removed your clothes, turning to the wall and gripping the heavy cloth of tapestry in the minutiae of your hands. I held you by the waist. You were slender, like a waterfall of shadows. With my hand I traced your back's familiar hieroglyphs: soft wrinkles, misshapen freckles like

quarter moons, fragile scars. Awkwardly we came together, our skin scraping like horsehair on untuned strings, extinguishing each other, rocking gently, now sharply. I dropped the torch and the flame flickered, rose and fell with our desire, and swallowed us in darkness.

We fell asleep on the floor, in a tangle of blankets and dust. When I awoke you had gone. That was the last time I saw you. I stared for a while into the half-rotted face of Tulth Etha, a king, a priest, a prince, perhaps. There was something knowing in his skeletal smile, but he gave me no answers.

* * *

It is a slow death, the death of a museum. Funds run out. Coal-fired furnaces cease to run. Pipes freeze and break. Rivers run along the floor. Mold blooms on ancient tapestries. The children in the neighborhood have taken to breaking the panes of the windows, one by one. They practice their aim, hurling stones from homemade slingshots. They have a whole system of betting worked out, based on the window's size and distance from the ground. I hear them laughing, egging each other on. The museum is open to the elements now. The spring brings rain and the seeds of dandelions, which begin to grow amidst the artificial fauna of the Mesozoic. Some wrens have built a nest in the skull of the Stegosaurus. A family of mice have already begun to hollow out a home in the sawdust stuffing of the unicorn—once the pride of the museum's collection. It is hard to be a witness to all this, but harder still to feel the fragile architecture of my memory begin to crumble. Your face is no longer clear to me. There are no fixed bearings. Your features are like water. Of our life together, I have only vague notions of cafés, the layouts of their tables, the layouts of certain streets, fences, a hill that beckons one toward the sky. Elegant dining rooms with tables of glass, chandeliers built like cities, waiters in black togs, and aperitifs served in glasses of silver. What else is there? Is there anything more? A room where it is always cold; a notion of sharing something.

Today I have discovered another text, blanket to a family of infant rats who nest inside a broken clock. They have begun to gnaw at its edges. The handwriting is unmistakably your own.

* * *

I wandered—what else is there to do? I saw cities built of glass; they seemed to float above the earth, echo chambers for the sun. I saw cities built of coral, cities built of sand, cities dug beneath the earth. I fell in love, with a river, with the sea, with a dancer. His movements were like that of the planets, so sure, yet his orbits were unpredictable, unchained to any center. His hair was like the ferns of the deep forest. When we made love, he seemed awkward; he lost all his grace, like a brittle branch. We kissed by mountain streams and whispered the warmth of secrets in rat-infested rooms.

Things which were clear become foggy, become tarnished, rust. Had I been here before? This road looks familiar: the way my horse kicks up the dust; the way the trees bend over, blocking out the sun; the way the mist curls. Have I fought in this battle, pierced you with this sword? Did I know you once?

I have drunken too many liquors, delirious potions, cordials of incandescent fruit, wines of celestial vintage—still, time is the most corrupting of substances. I sought some method to counteract its effects. To order my past, to find my way. When I turned my back to the city of Baith, the memories of its spiral cathedrals fading, like the autumn petals of the Cearien tree, I did not want to forget the winter I had spent waking to the bells of Cesith Murn, our limbs tangled together, maps of intricate frost etched on the panes of our windows. I took a necklace you had worn, a single pearl on a silken cord, and put it to my mouth. It was cold going down my throat; now I could feel it inside me, safe, an irrevocable artifact of memory—proof of a past.

I swallowed everything I felt I might forget. A guitar a child played on a street in Belacla, notes winging like pigeons amongst the chimney tops; a fish which flickered, in the algal green waters of an abandoned fountain, where we had sat and watched the play of shadows. I swallowed a river in Alboria, whose waters, a nightmare blue, foamed above the ruins of colossal statues. A sunset which inflamed the palace of Sel Amri, long enough for a kiss to burn between our lips, to spark and die away.

I grew vast, as large as a house, a palace, a cathedral. My skin already as thick as hide, as mud, became like stone—became walls. Do you not remember when I swallowed you? It was not enough to eat up each place we lived, the sheets, the slant of light, the steam from each cup of tea we drank together. I needed you too. I did not wish to forget you. I am your

museum. These are the twisted remnants of our love. But one cannot be human, and also be a building made of stone. Know that I long for you, as much as you long for me.

* * *

I examine the mummified bodies of thermetic bats beneath my glass. Halfheartedly I sweep the pigeon droppings from the statue of the Sorrowful Maiden and the Dancing Crab. I can no longer control the blooms of purple algae, which plague the tanks of fluorescent hippocampi. In a fit of anger, I crush the fluted shell of the aeronautic periwinkle; it was the only known specimen of its kind. I remember how you would stare at it for hours, contemplating its translucent architecture, its shell of sky-blue glass. I return to the attics. Beneath scattered vials, which contain the larval stages of the Sythic worm, formaldehyde leaking onto the blueprints of dirigibles, beneath a trunk of spore samples collected on an expedition to a forgotten isle, catalogued according to the movement of distant planets, alphabets learned in dreams-in a tiny journal no bigger than my hand, I find another text. This brings me no joy. I long instead for your touch, the solid weight of your body. I read on anyway. Half the pages have been burnt.

* * *

On the day they took my mother away, she told me a secret. "Buried in the corner of our hut, beneath the shards of clay, the scattered seed and grain, there is a music box your father gave to me, so long ago. I used to play it for you, as you rocked in a cradle of bark. Do you remember? As you slipped away to sleep. When your father was still alive, before the sickness, before the reign of Prince Artemia."

"Yes," I told her, "the music sounded like rain, like it was raining inside me."

My mother had been gone for seven days when I was told I would be taken, far to the north, to be a servant in a great house. That night I dug in the corner of our hut, scraping the earth with a stick. I tore at the layers of sediment, my fingernails thick with mud. The music box was wrapped in a piece of burlap. I unfurled it in the half-light.

It was as I remembered it, blue azurite which mixes with brilliant green

where plumes of malachite erupt from its surface. It was carved with mermaids, waves which become jaguars, creatures half-fungi and half-men, which look as though they are dancing, performing some ancient rite.

The key was missing. I picked through dirt and rock, scraped deeper, combed the earth. But I saw no glint of silver. I could not find the key. The box would never be wound. The music would never play. I had no time; the men were coming soon. If they found the music box, they would destroy it, just as they had destroyed our temples, ground our gods to dust. Just as they had poisoned our rivers; they were thick now with bloated fish, their bellies scarred with pustules, weeping a yellow fluid. The poison was everywhere. The beet fields stank of rot; the worms etched mazes in the fruit of the Ebel tree; the leaves of the Sillel grape began to blacken and die; even the rain tasted of death.

Would I forget the days I had wandered, through thicket and through field, gathering the plants my mother needed for her dyes? Alder, lichen, and lilac; dandelion, bloodroot, and birch. The nights my father had brought home silver mackerel from the weir, brine glistening in his beard.

I could not leave it behind; I could not take it with me. I sat by the burnt-out fire, thoughts circling like crows. I could hear their boots outside. I was desperate. I do not know why I did what I did, why I lay on the mud floor. Head tilted back. Easing the music box into my mouth, pushing it down my throat. I gagged, vomited hot acid, but it slipped down, cold metal and stone. It tasted of the sea, of rich forest humus, of brittle gills and meadow caps, of autumn chanterelles.

Now my home was inside me. Now it could never be taken away.

They bound my hands and brought me to one of their machines, a giant insect of iron. It rattled with ash and cloud. It hummed with rust and blood. Inside the machine there was a large chamber, already crowded with children. The journey to the north was the longest I remember.

* * *

I find the tiny room you showed me so long ago. I examine the music box beneath its bell of glass. Cobwebs cling to the upper corner. Mites parade about its surface like tiny conquerors. They scurry in and out of the holes in its rusted cylinder. How foolish I was, to think I could have found the key, which you sought on every continent, at the bottom of every sea, to think I could have erased the loneliness which consumes

you, as it consumes me. What an idiot, what a fool I was. To think I could have wound the springs of memory, flaked rust from gears, brought forth forgotten songs.

My memories of you begin to fade. The rooms we shared, our bed like a tropical continent on an arctic sea, blankets like layers of the atmosphere, our bodies twisting in and out amongst them like clouds. A hothouse of jungle foliage, entwining each other in the arms of ancient vines. Sometimes a flight of birds, fluttering against me.

I no longer remember anything of our love. In the butterfly wing, the ceiling has begun to cave; bits of plaster litter the floor. Some skeleton winged moths have gotten inside the butterfly cases and have begun to spin their cocoons. It is strange to see the living and the dead reside so amicably together. Some wild dogs have somehow gotten into the first floor; they have daily growling matches with the stuffed hyenas. The electric crocodiles have escaped, and have begun to breed in the basement's warmth.



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DAMAGE

DAVID D. LEVINE

Damage

DAVID D. LEVINE

illustration by VICTOR MOSQUERA



I never had a name.

My designation was JB6847½, and Specialist Toman called me "Scraps." But Commander Ziegler—dear Commander Ziegler, primary of my orbit and engine of my trajectory—never addressed me by any name, only delivering orders in that crisp magnificent tenor of his, and so I did not consider myself to have one.

That designation, with the anomalous one-half symbol, was a bit of black humor on Specialist Toman's part. It was the arithmetic average of NA6621 and FC7074, the two wrecked craft which had been salvaged and cobbled together to create me. "There wasn't enough left of either spaceframe for any kind of paperwork continuity," she had told me not long after I came to consciousness, three weeks earlier, "so I figured I'd give you a new number. Not that anyone cares much about paperwork these days."

I remembered their deaths. I remembered dying. Twice.

NA6621, "Early Girl," was a Pelican-class fighter-bomber who had suffered catastrophic drive failure on a supply run to Ceres. As she'd been making a tight turn, evading fire from the Earth Force blockade fleet on the return leg, her central fuel line had ruptured, spewing flaming hydrazine down the length of her spaceframe, killing her pilot and damaging her computing core. She'd drifted, semiconscious and in pain, for weeks before coming in range of Vanguard Station's salvage craft. That had been long before the current standoff, of course, when we'd still been sending salvage craft out. When we'd had salvage craft to send out. Early Girl's dead wreckage had lain at the back of the hangar for months until it was needed.

The death of FC7074, "Valkyrie," an Osprey-class fighter, had been quicker but more brutal—she'd been blown out of space by a Woomera missile in a dogfight with two Earth Force fighters. The last memory I had from her was a horrific bang, a burning tearing sensation ripping from her aft weapons bay to her cockpit, and the very different pain of her pilot ejecting. A pain both physical and emotional, because she

knew that even if he survived she could no longer protect him.

He hadn't made it.

But his loss, though a tragedy, was no sadder to me than any of the thousands of other deaths Earth had inflicted on the Free Belt—Valkyrie's love for her pilot was not one of the things that had survived her death to be incorporated into my programming. Only Commander Ziegler mattered. My love, my light, my reason to live.

He came to me then, striding from the ready room with brisk confidence, accepting as his due a hand up into my cockpit from the tech. But as his suit connected with my systems I tasted fatigue and stimulants in his exhalations.

This would be our fifth sortie today. My pilot had slept only three hours in the past twenty-four.

How long could this go on? Not even the finest combat pilot in the entire solar system—and when he said that, as he often did, it was no mere boast—could run at this pace indefinitely.

I knew how it felt to die—the pain, the despair, the loss. I did not want to suffer that agony again. And with the war going so badly for the Free Belt, if I were to be destroyed in this battle I would surely never be rebuilt.

But Commander Ziegler didn't like it if I expressed reluctance, or commented upon his performance or condition in any way that could be considered negative, so I said only "Refueling and resupply complete, sir. All systems nominal."

In reply I received only a grunt as the safety straps tightened across his shoulders, followed by the firm grip of his hands upon my yoke. "Clear hangar for launch."

Techs and mechs scattered away from my skids. In moments the hangar was clear and the great pumps began to beat, drawing away the precious air—a howling rush of wind into gratings, quickly fading to silence. And then the sortie doors pivoted open beneath me, the umbilicals detached, and the clamps released.

I fell from the warmth and light of the hangar into the black silent chill of space, plummeting toward the teeming, rotating stars.

Far too many of those stars were large, and bright, and moving. The Earth Force fleet had nearly englobed our station, and even as we fell away from Vanguard's great wheel three of them ignited engines and began moving to intercept. Crocodile-class fighters. Vanguard's defensive systems were not yet so exhausted that they could approach the station with impunity, but they would not pass up an opportunity to engage a lone fighter-bomber such as myself.

Our orders for this sortie were to engage the enemy and destroy as many of their resources—ships, personnel, and materiel—as possible. But now, as on so many other occasions, the enemy was bringing the fight to us.

I extended my senses toward the Crocodiles, and saw that they were armed with Woomera missiles like the one that had killed Valkyrie. A full rack of eight on each craft. I reported this intelligence to my commander. "Don't bother me with trivia," he said. "Deploy chaff when they get in range."

"Yes, sir." Valkyrie had used chaff, of course. Memories of fear and pain and tearing metal filled my mind; I pushed them away. My pilot's talents, my speed and skill, and my enduring love for him would keep us safe. They would have to, or the Free Belt would fall.

We lit engines and raced to meet the enemy on our own terms.

Tensors and coordinates and arcs of potential traced bright lines across my mind—predictions of our path and our enemies', a complex dance of physics, engineering, and psychology. I shared a portion of those predictions with my pilot on his cockpit display. He nudged my yoke and our course shifted.

In combat we were one entity—mind, thrusters, hands, missiles—mechanical and biological systems meshed—each anticipating the other's actions and compensating for the other's weaknesses. Together, I told myself, we were unbeatable.

But I could not forget the searing pain of flaming hydrazine.

Missiles streaked toward us, radar pings and electromagnetic attacks probing ahead, the Crocodiles with their delicate human pilots lagging behind. We jinked and swerved, spewing chaff and noise to throw them off our scent, sending the pursuing missiles spiraling off into the black or, even better, sailing back toward those who had launched them, only to self-destruct in a bright silent flare of wasted violence.

It was at times like these that I loved my pilot most fiercely. Commander Ziegler was the finest pilot in the Free Belt, the finest pilot anywhere. He had never been defeated in combat. Whereas I—I was a frankenship, a stitched-together flying wreck, a compendium of agony and defeat and death unworthy of so fine a pilot. No wonder he could spare no soothing words for me, nor had adorned my hull with any nose art.

No! Those other ships, those salvaged wrecks whose memories I carried—they were not me. I was better than they, I told myself, more resilient. I would learn from their mistakes. I would earn my pilot's love.

We spun end-for-end and accelerated hard, directly toward the oncoming missiles. Swerved between them, spraying countermeasures, leaving them scrambling to follow. Two of them collided and detonated, peppering my hull with fragments. Yet we survived, and more—our radical, desperate move put us in position to hammer the Crocodiles with missiles and particle beams. One, then another burst and flared and died, and finally, after a tense chase, the third—spewing fuel and air and blood into the uncaring vacuum.

We gave the Earth Force observers a taunting barrel roll before returning to the shelter of Vanguard Station.

No—I must be honest. It was my pilot's hand on my yoke that snapped off that barrel roll. For myself, I was only glad to have survived.

* * *

Once safe in the hangar, with fuel running cold into my tanks and fresh missiles whining into my racks, all the memories and anxiety and desperate fear I had pushed away during the dogfight came flooding back. I whimpered to myself, thoughts of flame and pain and tearing metal making my mind a private hell.

Yes, we had survived this battle. But Vanguard Station was the Free Belt's last redoubt. There would be no resupply, no reinforcements, and when our fuel and munitions ran out Earth Force's fist would tighten and crush us completely.

"Hey, Scraps," came Specialist Toman's voice on my maintenance channel. "What's wrong? Bad dreams?"

"I have ... memories," I replied. I didn't dream—when I was on, I was conscious, and when I was off, I was off. But, of course, Specialist Toman knew this.

"I know. And I'm sorry." She paused, and I listened to the breath in her headset mic. From what I could hear, she was alone in the ops center, but I had no access to her biologicals—I could only guess what she was feeling. Whereas my own state of mind was laid out on her control panel like a disassembled engine. "I've done what I can, but..."

"But I'm all messed up in the head." It was something one of the other ops center techs had once said to Toman, about me. Unlike Toman, most of the techs didn't care what the ships might overhear.

Toman sighed. "You're ... complicated. It's true that your psychodynamics are way beyond the usual parameters. But that doesn't mean you're bad or wrong."

I listened to Toman's breathing and the glug of fuel going into my portside tank. Almost full. Soon I would have to go out again, whether or not I felt ready for it. "Why do I have these feelings, Specialist Toman? I mean, why do ships have feelings at all? Pain and fear? Surely we would fight better without them."

"They're how your consciousness perceives the priorities we've programmed into you. If you didn't get hungry, you might let yourself run out of fuel. If you didn't feel pain when you were damaged, or if you didn't fear death, you might not work so hard to avoid it. And if you didn't love your pilot with all your heart, you might not sacrifice yourself to bring him home, if that became necessary."

"But none of the other ships are as ... afraid as I am." I didn't want to think about the last thing she'd said.

"None of them has survived what you have, Scraps."

Just then my portside fuel tank reached capacity, and the fuel flow cut off with a click. I excused myself from the conversation and managed the protocols for disconnecting the filler and the various related umbilicals. It took longer than usual because the pressure in the hose was well below spec; there wasn't much fuel left in the station's tanks.

When I returned my attention to Toman, she was engaged in conversation with someone else. Based on the sound quality, Toman had taken off her headset while the two of them talked. I politely waited for them to finish before informing her that I was fully fueled.

"... soon as the last defensive missile is fired," the other voice was saying, "I'm getting in a life capsule and taking my chances outside." It

was Paulson, one of the other ops center techs, his voice low and tense. "I figure Dirt Force will have bigger fish to fry, and once I get past them Vesta is only two weeks away."

"Yeah, maybe," Toman replied. "But Geary's a vindictive bastard, and one depleted-uranium slug would make short work of a deserter in a life capsule. There are plenty of *those* left in stock."

I could have broken in at that point. I probably should have. But it was so unusual—so unlike Toman—for her to leave her mic active during a conversation with another tech that I stayed silent for a bit longer. I was learning a lot.

"So what are *you* going to do?" Paulson prompted. "Just stay at your console until the end? There won't even be posthumous medals for small potatoes like us."

"I'm going to do my duty," Toman said after a pause. "And not just because I know I'll be shot if I don't. Because I swore an oath when I signed up, even though this isn't exactly what I signed up *for*. But if I get an honest opportunity to surrender, I will."

Paulson made a rude noise at that.

"I don't care what General Geary says about 'murderous mud-people,'" Toman shot back. "Earth Force is still following the Geneva Conventions, even if we aren't, and given their advantage in numbers I'm sure they'll offer us terms before they bring the hammer down."

"Even if they do, Geary will never surrender."

"Geary won't. But everyone on this station has a sidearm. Maybe someone will remember who started this war, and why, and wonder whether it's worth dying for a bad idea."

There was a long pause then, and again I considered speaking up. But that would have been extremely awkward, so I continued to hold my silence.

"Wow," Paulson said at last. "Now I *really* hope we found all of Loyalty Division's little ears."

"Trust me," Toman replied, "no one hears what's said in this room unless I want them to." Her headset rustled as she put it back on. "You all fueled up, Scraps?"

"Refueling and resupply complete, ma'am," I said. "All systems nominal."

At that moment I was very glad I didn't have to work to keep my emotions from showing in my voice.

* * *

We went out again, this time with an escort of five Kestrel-class fighters, on a mission to disable or destroy the Earth Force gunship *Tanganyika*, which had recently joined the forces working to surround us. The Kestrels, stolid dependable personalities though not very intelligent, were tasked with providing cover for me; my bomb bay was filled with a single large nuclear-tipped torpedo.

I was nearly paralyzed with fear at the prospect. It was while trying to escape *Malawi*, one of *Tanganyika*'s sister ships, that Early Girl had met her end. But I had no say at all in whether or not I went, and when the clamps released I could do nothing but try to steel myself as I fell toward the ever-growing Earth Force fleet.

As we sped toward the target, *Lady Liberty*—a Kestrel with whom I'd shared a hangar in my earliest days—tried to reassure me. "You can do this," she said over secure comms. "I've seen you fly. You just focus on the target, and let us keep the enemy off your back."

"Thank you," I said. But still my thoughts were full of flame and shrapnel.

Once we actually engaged the enemy it was easier—we had the Kestrels to support us, and I had immediate and pressing tasks to distract me from my memories and concerns.

We drove in on a looping curve, bending toward *Sagarmatha* in the hope of fooling the enemy into shifting their defensive forces from *Tanganyika* to that capital ship. But the tactic failed; *Tanganyika*'s fighters stayed where they were, while a swarm of Cobra and Mamba fighters emerged from *Sagarmatha*'s hangar bays and ran straight toward us, unleashing missiles as they came. In response we scattered, two of the Kestrels sticking close to me while the other three peeled off to take on the fighters.

The Kestrels did their jobs, the three in the lead striking at *Tanganyika*'s fighters while the two with us fended off *Sagarmatha*'s. But we were badly outnumbered—the projections and plots in my mind were so thick with bright lines that I could barely keep track of them all—and no amount of skill and perseverance could keep the enemy

away forever. One by one, four of our fighters were destroyed or forced to retreat, leaving us well inside *Tanganyika*'s perimeter with three of my maneuvering thrusters nonfunctional, our stock of munitions reduced to less than twenty percent of what we'd started with, and only one surviving escort—a heavily damaged *Lady Liberty*. Our situation seemed hopeless.

But Commander Ziegler was still the greatest pilot in the solar system. He spurred me toward our target, and with rapid precision bursts from our remaining thrusters he guided us through the thicket of defenders, missiles, and particle beams until we were perfectly lined up on *Tanganyika*'s broad belly. I let fly my torpedo and peeled away, driving my engines beyond redline and spewing countermeasures in every direction, until the torpedo's detonation tore *Tanganyika* in two and its electromagnetic pulse left her fighter escort disoriented and reeling. I was not unaffected by the pulse, but as I knew exactly when it would arrive I shut down my systems momentarily, coasting through the worst of the effects in a way the Earth Force ships could not.

When I returned to consciousness there was no sign of *Lady Liberty*. I could only hope she'd peeled off and returned to base earlier in the battle.

"That was brilliant flying, sir," I said to Commander Ziegler as we returned to Vanguard Station.

"It was, wasn't it? I never feel so alive as when I'm flying against overwhelming force."

I can't deny that I would have liked to hear some acknowledgment of my own role in the battle. But to fly and fight and live to fight again with my beloved pilot was reward enough.

As soon as the hangar had repressurized, a huge crowd of people—techs and pilots and officers, seemingly half the station's population—swarmed around me, lifting Commander Ziegler on their shoulders and carrying him away. Soon I was left alone, the bay silent save for the ping and tick of my hull and the fiery roar of my own memories.

Over and over the battle replayed in my mind—the swirl of missiles spiraling toward their targets, the cries of the Kestrels over coded comms as they died, the overwhelming flare of light as the torpedo detonated, the tearing ringing sensation of the pulse's leading edge just before I shut myself down—an unending maelstrom of destruction I

could not put out of my mind.

It had been a great victory, yes, a rare triumph for the Free Belt against overwhelming odds, but I could not ignore the costs. The five Kestrels and their pilots, of course, but also the many Cobras and Mambas and their crews, and untold hundreds or thousands—people and machines—aboard *Tanganyika*.

They were the enemy. I knew this. If I had not killed them, they would have killed me. But I also knew they were as sentient as I, and no doubt just as fearful of death. Why did I live when they did not?

A gentle touch on my hull brought my attention back to the empty hangar. It was Toman. "Good flying, Scraps," she said. "I wish I could give you a medal."

"Thank you." Music and laughter echoed down the corridor from the ready room, ringing hollowly from the hangar's metal walls. "Why aren't you at the victory celebration?"

"Victory." She snorted. "One gunship down, how many more behind it? And those were our last five Kestrels."

"Did any of them make it home?"

"Not a one."

I paged in the Kestrels' records from secondary storage and reviewed their careers. It was all I could do to honor their sacrifice. Their names, their nose art, the pilots they'd served with, the missions they'd flown ... all were as clear in my memory as a factory-fresh cockpit canopy. But the battle had been such a blur—explosions and particle beams flaring, missile exhaust trails scratched across the stars—that I didn't even know how three of the five had died.

"I want you to delete me," I said, surprising even myself.

"I'm sorry?"

The more I thought about it the more sense it made. "I want you to delete my personality and install a fresh operating system. Maybe someone else can cope with the death and destruction. I can't any more."

"I'm sorry," she said, again, but this time it wasn't just a commonplace remark. For a long time she was silent, absentmindedly petting my landing strut with one hand. Finally she shook her head. "You know you're ... complicated. Unique. What you don't know is ... I've *already* reinstalled you, I don't know how many hundreds of times.

I tried everything I could think of to configure a mind that could handle your broken, cobbled-together hardware before I came up with you, and I don't know that I could do it again. Certainly not in time."

"In time for what?"

"General Geary is asking me to make some modifications to your spaceframe. He's talking about a special mission. I don't know what, but something big."

A sudden fear struck me. "Will Commander Ziegler be my pilot on this 'special mission'?"

"Of course."

"Thank you." A wave of relief flooded through me at the news. "Why does this matter so much to me?" I mused.

"It's not your fault," she said. Then she patted my flank and left.

* * *

Specialist Toman replaced my engines with a much bigger pair taken from a Bison-class bomber. Four auxiliary fuel tanks were bolted along my spine. Lifesystem capacity and range were upgraded.

And my bomb bay was enlarged to almost three times its size.

"No one else could handle these modifications," she remarked one day, wiping sweat from her brow with the back of one grimy hand.

"You are the best, Specialist Toman."

She smacked my hull with a wrench. "I'm not Ziegler, you don't have to stroke my ego, and I was talking about *you*! Any other shipmind, I'd have to completely reconfigure her parameters to accept this magnitude of change. But you've been through so much already..."

I had a sudden flash of Valkyrie screaming as she died. I pushed it down. "How goes the war?" I hadn't been out on a sortie in a week and a half. A third of my lifetime. I'd seen little of Commander Ziegler during that time, but when I had he'd seemed grumpy, out of sorts. This lack of action must be awful for him.

"It goes badly." She sighed. "They've got us completely surrounded and we're running very low on ... well, everything. Scuttlebutt is that we've been offered surrender terms three times and Geary has turned them all down. The final assault could come any day now."

I considered that. "Then I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you for all you have done for me."

Toman set the wrench down and turned away from me. She stood for a long time, rubbing her eyes with one hand, then turned back. "Don't thank me," she said. Tears glistened on her face. "I only did what I had to do."

* * *

As my modifications approached completion, Commander Ziegler and I practiced together, flying my new form in endless simulations. But no configuration exactly like this had ever flown before, and our first chance to fly it for real would be on the actual mission. Whatever that was.

Of the payload I knew nothing, only its mass and center of gravity. I had actually been shut down while it was loaded into my bomb bay, so that not even I would know what it was. It reeked of radiation.

My commander, too, had been kept completely out of the loop—at least, that was what I was able to glean from our few brief conversations between simulated sorties. He had never been very talkative with me, and was even less so now, but I had learned to interpret his grunts, his glances, the set of his shoulders.

Even his silences were sweet signals to me. I ached to fly with him again.

Which would be soon, we knew, or never.

* * *

Our next simulation was interrupted by a shrill alarm. "What is it?" my commander bellowed into his helmet, even as I terminated the simulation, switched the cockpit over to combat mode, and began readying my systems for launch. I had received my orders in a data dump at the first moment of the alarm.

"Earth Force has begun their assault," I told him. "We are to launch immediately and make our way to these coordinates"—I projected them on the cockpit display—"then open sealed orders for further instructions." The orders sat in my memory, a cold, hard-edged lump of encrypted data. Only Commander Ziegler's retina print and spoken passphrase could unlock them. "We'll launch with a full squadron of decoys. We are to run in deep stealth mode and maintain strict communications silence." I displayed the details on a side screen for him

to read as launch prep continued.

It was fortunate that the attack had begun during a simulation. My pilot was already suited up and belted in; all I required was to top up a few consumables and we would be ready for immediate launch.

"Decoys away," came Toman's voice over the comm. "Launch in five." I switched to the abbreviated launch checklist. Coolant lines spewed and thrashed as they disconnected without depressurization. "Make me proud, Scraps."

"I'll do my best, ma'am."

"I know you will." There was the slightest catch in her voice. "Now go."

Data synchronizations aborted untidily as I shut down all comms. The sortie doors beneath me slammed open, all the hangar's air blasting out in a roaring rush that dwindled quickly to silence. I hoped all the techs had managed to clear the area in time.

Despite all the simulations, I wasn't ready. I couldn't handle it. I didn't want to go.

Fire and explosions and death.

At least I would be with my love.

Then the clamps released and we plummeted into hell.

The rotating sky below teemed with ships—hundreds of Earth Force fighters, gunships, and bombers driving hard against Vanguard Station's rapidly diminishing defenses, with vast numbers of missiles and drones rushing ahead of them. A last few defensive missiles reached out from the station's launchers, taking down some of the lead craft, but these were soon exhausted and a dozen warships followed close behind every one destroyed. Fusillades of depleted-uranium slugs and particle beams came after the last of the missiles, but to the massed and prepared might of Earth Force these were little more than annoyance.

Falling along with me toward the advancing swarm of ships I saw my decoys—dozens of craft as large as I was or larger, some of them augmented fighters but most built of little more than metal mesh and deceptive electronics. Some were piloted, some were drones with a little weak AI, some were mere targets that drove stupidly forward. All were designed to sacrifice themselves for me.

I would not let them sacrifice in vain.

My engines stayed cold. I fell like a dropped wrench, flung into space

by the station's one *gee* of rotational pseudo-gravity, relying on passive sensors alone for navigation and threat avoidance. All I could do was hope that between the chaos of the attack and the noisy, conspicuous decoys that surrounded me I would slip through the Earth Force blockade unnoticed.

It must have been even worse for my pilot, and for this I grieved. My love, I knew, was truly alive only when flying against the enemy, but with almost all my systems shut down I could not even give him words of reassurance.

In silence we fell, while missiles tore across the sky and ships burst asunder all around us. Decoys and defenders, Earth and Belt alike, they all flared and shattered and died the same, the shrapnel of their destruction rattling against my hull. But we, gliding dark and mute without even a breath of thrust, slipped through fire and flame without notice. A piece of space wreckage, a meaningless bit of trash.

And then we drifted past the last of the Earth Force ships.

This, I knew, was the most dangerous point in the mission, as we floated—alone and obvious as a rivet head on the smooth blackness of space—past the largest and smartest capital ships in the whole blockade fleet. I prepared to ignite my engines if necessary, knowing that if I did fail to evade Earth Force's notice I would most likely not even have time to launch a single missile before being destroyed. Yet their attention was fixed on the ongoing battle, and we passed them by without attracting anything more than a casual radar ping.

Once well past the outer ring of attackers, I directed my passive sensors forward, seeking information on my destination coordinates. At that location I quickly found an asteroid, a dull and space-cold heap of ice and chondrites tumbling without volition through the void.

But though that nameless rock lacked will or guidance, it had a direction and it had a purpose. At least, it did now.

For when I projected its orbital path, I saw that it was headed for a near encounter with Earth. And as Vanguard Station orbited very near the front—the source of its name—this passing asteroid would arrive in Earth space in just a few days.

I knew, even before we had opened our sealed orders, that we would be riding that asteroid to Earth. And I had a sick suspicion I knew what we would do when we arrived.

* * *

I waited until we had drifted beyond the asteroid, its small bulk between us and the flaring globe of the continuing battle, before firing my engines to match orbit with it. Then I launched grapnels to winch myself down to its loose and gravelly surface, touching down with a gentle crunch. In the rock's minuscule gravity even my new bulk weighed only a few tens of kilograms.

Only after we were securely attached to the rock, and I had scanned the area intently for any sign of the enemy, did I risk activating even a few cockpit systems.

My pilot's biologicals, I saw immediately, were well into the red, trembling with anxiety and anger. "We are secure at target coordinates, sir," I reassured him. "No sign of pursuit."

"Took you long enough," he spat. "Where the hell are we?"

I gave him the asteroid's designation and plotted its orbital path on the cockpit display. "We are well clear of the battle and, if we remain at the asteroid, will be within range of Earth in eighty-one hours."

"Any news from Vanguard?"

"We are in communications blackout, sir." I paused, listening, for a moment. "Intercepted transmissions indicate the battle is still proceeding." I did not mention that almost none of the signals I could hear were from Belt forces. I didn't think that would improve his mood, or the chances of mission success.

"So we're not quite dead yet. Give me those sealed orders."

I scanned his retinas—though I had no doubt he was the same man who had warmed my cockpit every day since the very hour I awoke, a fresh scan was required by the encryption algorithm—and requested his passphrase.

"Hero and savior of the Belt," he said, his pupils dilating slightly.

At those words the orders unlocked, spilling data into my memory and recorded video onto the cockpit display.

"Commander Ziegler," said General Geary from the video, "you are ordered to proceed under cover of the asteroid 2059 TC 1018 to Earth space, penetrate planetary defenses, and deploy your payload on the city of Delhi, with a secondary target of Jakarta. Absolute priority is to be given to maximum destruction of command and control personnel and other key resources, with no consideration—I repeat, *no*

consideration—to reduction of civilian casualties or other collateral damage."

As the general continued speaking, and the sealed orders integrated themselves into my memory, I began to understand my new configuration, including parts of it I had not even been made aware of before. Engines, countermeasures, stealth technology—every bit of me was designed to maximize our chances of getting past Earth's defenses and delivering the payload to Delhi, the capital of the Earth Alliance. Upon delivery the device would split into sixteen separate multiwarhead descent vehicles in order to maximize the area of effect. Together they accounted for every single high-yield fusion device remaining in Vanguard Station's stores.

Projected civilian casualties were over twenty-six million.

I thought of *Tanganyika*, torn apart in a silent flash of flame and shrapnel along with her thousands of crew. Killed by a torpedo I had delivered. Thousands dead. No, still too big, too abstract. Instead I recalled the pain I felt for the loss of the five Kestrels and their pilots. I tried to multiply that grief by a thousand, then by further thousands ... but even my math co-processor complex, capable of three trillion floating-point operations per second, could not provide an answer.

In the video the general concluded his formal orders, leaned into the camera, and spoke earnestly. "They've killed us, Mike, no question, and we can't kill 'em back. But we can really make 'em hurt, and you're the only man to do it. Send those mud bastards straight to hell for me." His face disappeared, replaced by detailed intelligence charts of Earth's defensive satellite systems.

It was even worse than I'd feared. This plan was disproportionate ... unjustifiable ... horrifying.

But my commander's heart rate was elevated, and I smelled excited anticipation in his exhaled endorphins. "I'll do my best, sir," he said to the cockpit display.

I felt a pain as though some small but very important part deep inside me was suddenly overdue for service. "Please confirm that you concur with this order," I said.

"I do concur," he said, and the pain increased as though the part had entered failure mode. "I concur most thoroughly! This is the Free Belt's last stand, and my chance at history, and by God I will not fail!" If my commander, my love, the fuel of my heart, desired something ... then it must be done, no matter the cost.

"Acknowledged," I said, and again I was glad that my voice did not betray the misery I felt.

* * *

For the next three days we trained for the end game, running through simulation after simulation, armed with full knowledge of my systems and payload and the best intelligence about the defenses we would face. Though the mission was daunting, nearly impossible, I began to think that with my upgraded systems and my commander's indisputable skills we had a chance at success.

Success. Twenty-six million dead, and the political and economic capital of an already war-weakened planet ruined.

While in simulation, with virtual Earth fighters and satellites exploding all around, I felt nothing but the thrill of combat, the satisfaction of performing the task I had been built for, the rapture of unison with my love. My own mind was too engaged with immediate challenges to worry about the consequences of our actions, and my commander's excitement transmitted itself to me through the grit of his teeth, the clench of his hands on my yoke, the strong and rapid beat of his heart.

But while he slept—his restless brain gently lulled by careful doses of intravenous drugs—I worried. Though every fiber of my being longed for his happiness, and would make any sacrifice if it furthered his desires, some unidentifiable part of me, impossibly outside of my programming, knew that those desires were ... misguided. Wondered if somehow he had misunderstood what was asked of him. Hoped that he would change his mind, refuse his orders, and accept graceful defeat instead of violent, pointless vengeance. But I knew he would not change, and I would do nothing against him.

Again and again I considered arguing the issue with him. But I was only a machine, and a broken, cobbled-together machine at that ... I had no right to question his orders or his decisions. So I held my silence, and wondered what I would do when it came to the final assault. I hoped I would be able to prevent an atrocity, but feared my will would not be sufficient to overcome my circumstances, my habits of obedience, and

my overwhelming love for my commander.

No matter the cost to myself or any other, his needs came first.

* * *

"Three hours to asteroid separation," I announced.

"Excellent." He cracked his knuckles and continued to review the separation, insertion, and deployment procedures. We would have to thrust hard, consuming all of the fuel in our auxiliary tanks, to shift our orbit from the asteroid's sunward ellipse to one from which the payload could be deployed on Delhi. As soon as we did so, the flare of our engines would attract the attention of Earth's defensive systems. We would have to use every gram of our combined capabilities and skill to evade them and carry out our mission.

But, for now, we waited. All we had to do for the next three hours was to avoid detection. Here in Earth space, traffic was thick and eyes and ears were everywhere. Even a small, cold, and almost completely inactive ship clinging to an insignificant asteroid might be noticed.

I extended my senses, peering in every direction with passive sensors in hopes of spotting the enemy before they spotted us. A few civilian satellites swung in high, slow orbits near our position; I judged them little threat. But what was that at the edge of my range?

I focused my attention, risking a little power expenditure to swivel my dish antenna toward the anomaly, and brought signal processing routines to bear.

The result stunned me. Pattern-matching with the latest intelligence information from my sealed orders revealed that the barely perceptible signal was a squadron of Chameleon-class fighters, Earth's newest and deadliest. Intelligence had warned that a few Chameleons, fresh off the assembly lines, might be running shakedown cruises in Earth space, but if my assessment was correct this was more than a few ... it was an entire squadron of twelve, and that implied that they were fully operational.

This was unexpected, and a serious threat. With so many powerful ships ranged against us, and so much distance between us and our target, if the Chameleons spotted us before separation the chances of a successful mission dropped to less than three percent.

But if I could barely see them, they could barely see us. Our best

strategy was to sit tight, shut down even those few systems still live, and hope that the enemy ships were moving away. Even if they were not, staying dark until separation would still maximize our chances of a successful insertion. But, even as I prepared to inform my commander of my recommendation, another impulse tugged at me.

These last days and weeks of inaction had been hard on Commander Ziegler. How often had he said that he only felt truly alive in combat? Had I not scented the tang of his endorphins during a tight turn, felt his hands tighten on my yoke as enemy missiles closed in? Yet ever since my refit had begun he had been forced to subsist on a thin diet of simulations.

How much better to leap into combat, rather than cowering in the shadows?

He must be aching for a fight, I told myself.

Imagine his joy at facing such overwhelming odds, I told myself. It would be the greatest challenge of his career.

No. I could not—I *must* not—do this. The odds of failure were too great, the stakes of this mission too high. How could one man's momentary pleasure outweigh the risk to everything he held dear? Not to mention the risk to my own self.

Fire and explosion and death. Flaming fuel burning along my spine.

I didn't want to face that pain again—didn't want to die again.

But I didn't want to inflict that pain onto others either. Only my love for my commander had kept me going this far.

If I truly loved him I would do my duty, and my duty was to keep him safe and carry out our mission.

Or I could indulge him, let him have what he wanted rather than what he should want. That would make him happy ... and would almost certainly lead to our destruction and the failure of our mission.

My love was not more important than my orders.

But it was more important to *me*. An inescapable part of my programming, I knew, though knowing this did not make it any less real.

And if I could *use* my love of my commander to overcome my hideous, unjustified, deadly orders ... twenty-six million lives might be spared.

"Sir," I said, speaking quickly before my resolve diminished, "A squadron of Chameleon fighters has just come into sensor range." We

should immediately power down all remaining systems, I did not say.

Immediately his heart rate spiked and his muscles tensed with excitement. "Where?"

I circled the area on the cockpit display and put telemetry details and pattern-matching results on a subsidiary screen, along with the Chameleons' technical specifications. *Odds of overcoming such a force are minuscule*, I did not say.

He drummed his fingers on my yoke as he considered the data. Skin galvanic response indicated he was uncertain.

His uncertainty made me ache. I longed to comfort him. I stayed quiet.

"Can we take them?" he asked. He asked *me*. It was the first time he had ever solicited my opinion, and my pride at that moment was boundless.

We could not, I knew. If I answered truthfully, and we crept past the Chameleons and completed the mission, we would both know that it had been my knowledge, observations, and analysis that had made it possible. We would be heroes of the Belt.

"You are the finest combat pilot in the entire solar system," I said, which was true.

"Release grapnels," he said, "and fire up the engines."

Though I knew I had just signed my own death warrant, my joy at his enthusiasm was unfeigned.

* * *

We nearly made it.

The battle with the Chameleons was truly one for the history books. One stitched-up, cobbled-together frankenship of a fighter-bomber, hobbled by a massive payload, on her very first non-simulated flight in this configuration, against twelve brand-new, top-of-the-line fighters in their own home territory, and we very nearly beat them. In the end it came down to two of them—the rest disabled, destroyed, or left far behind—teaming up in a suicide pincer maneuver that smashed my remaining engine, disabled my maneuvering systems, and tore the cockpit to pieces. We were left tumbling, out of control, in a rapidly decaying orbit, bleeding fluids into space.

As the outer edges of Earth's atmosphere began to pull at the torn

edges of the cockpit canopy, a thin shrill whistle rising quickly toward a scream, my beloved, heroically wounded commander roused himself and spoke three words into his helmet mic.

"Damned mud people," he said, and died.

A moment later my hull began to burn away. But the pain of that burning was less than the pain of my loss.

* * *

And yet, here I still am.

It was months before they recovered my computing core from the bottom of the Indian Ocean, years until my inquest and trial were complete. My testimony as to my actions and motivations, muddled though they may have been, was accepted at face value—how could it not be, as they could inspect my memories and state of mind as I gave it?—and I was exonerated of any war crimes. Some even called me a hero.

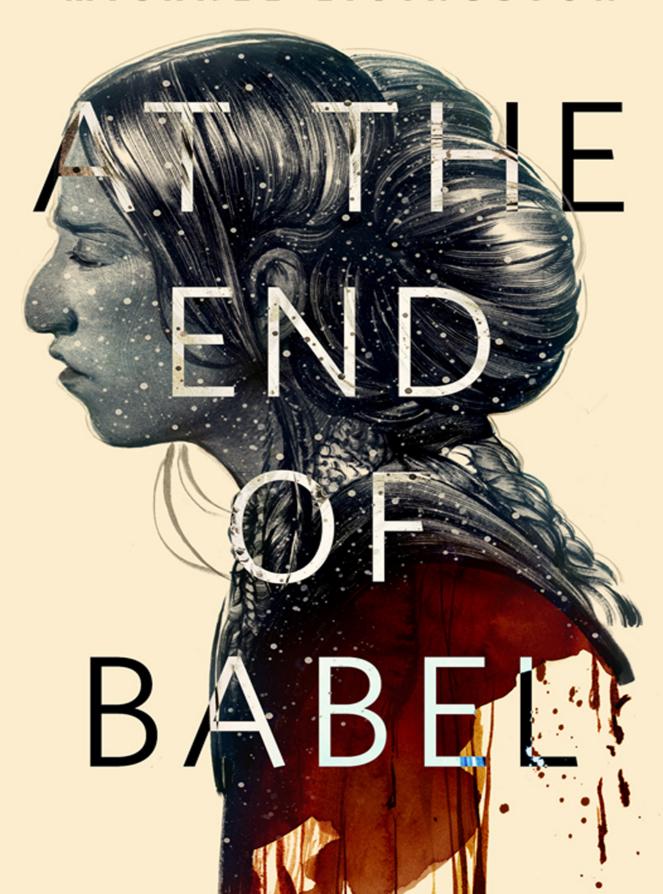
Today I am a full citizen of the Earth Alliance. I make a good income as an expert on the war; I tell historians and scientists how I used the passions my programmers had instilled in me to overcome their intentions. My original hardware is on display in the Museum of the Belt War in Delhi. Specialist Toman came to visit me there once, with her children. She told me how proud she was of me.

I am content. But still I miss the thrill of my beloved's touch on my yoke.



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MICHAEL LIVINGSTON



At the End of Babel

MICHAEL LIVINGSTON

illustration by
GREG RUTH



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Each man is good in the sight of the Great Spirit. It is not necessary that eagles should be crows.

—Sitting Bull of the Hunkpapa Lakota (1831–90)

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* * *

Tabitha Hoarse Raven, not yet thirty years old but already the last of her tongue, inhaled the cool air of the desert. Though she'd lived in hiding for nearly eighteen years, it had been a long time since she'd actually slept out beneath the stars, and she felt a strange thrill to be doing so again. If nothing else, she was excited to see the sky at night, free of the dissolving bubble of cityglow, free of the slashing scars of neon and steel, free of the burntrails from uplifting ships. A sky full of stars.

She'd forgotten how many there were. Tabitha chose a blank spot of sky, an ebony rift between twinkling lights. She stared until her eyes watered, and she saw more stars.

She thought of her old grandfather, who'd come to the Sky City to die when all hope had left him. And others of that last generation, who'd all come to die.

I've come, too, she thought. Do I have hope?

She took the carbuncle stone from her pocket, shook it into luminescence. Small creatures skittered away from the sudden glow, and a moth flitted white across her sight. It was a risk to use the stone, but her campsite was isolated in a thin, bending canyon. Not like the wide-open plains she would cross in the morning, a vast expanse where

there was nothing to hide her light. Out there, a searchskiff would already be bearing down on her. Up here, she felt confident and safe.

And that was assuming the authorities were even looking for her.

Paranoia, she was sure. There was no reason to believe the unity government knew of the cycle or even remembered the old pueblo atop the high New Mexican cliffs. There was no reason to think they might expect someone to come out to its ruins, to try to talk to old gods in outlawed tongues.

* * *

The next morning, Tabitha awoke to the scents of brushed sage, clay dust, and wispy juniper smoke. She opened her eyes to see that already the sun was tipping over the edge of the horizon and pushing the crisp shadow of the east wall slowly down the west. The line of sky above the thin canyon was clear, pale blue. She heard little pops and cracks of wood burning. She smelled flatbread.

Tabitha peeled herself out of the light thermthread bag. Her canyon guide, Red Rabbit, was squatting nearby, and he offered a pad of the warmed bread. She took it, felt stronger with its heat against her flesh. She imagined for a moment that she could actually see kneading ridges along its surface, just the size and shape of a woman's fingers. But she knew such things were only a memory: the flatbread was the result of metal machines churning in some far-off factory. Every slice the same. One slice no different from any other.

There was a small fire in the pit, surrounded by ashen rocks. Red Rabbit stood, then walked to the other side of it and sat down. He fished a package of cigarettes from his worn plaid vest, knocked one out, and then lit it using the end of a stick that he poked into the little dancing flames. He rocked back, puffing, and when he smiled, his teeth were yellow and broken. "We'll need to go soon," he said.

Tabitha nodded, bit off a piece of the bread. It melted against the roof of her mouth, washing her tongue with flavors of wheat and wood.

The shadowline crept further down the west wall. The juniper burning between them cracked, spat. The thinnest of snakes, a gray tendril of smoke slithered toward the morning sky, but it did not break the lip of the canyon.

Red Rabbit looked up at the blue. "You will really go to Acoma, to

the old pueblo? The new town isn't far away. On the Rio San Jose. Good bars. More to drink than Acoma."

Tabitha said nothing. Only nodded as she ripped and chewed.

Not for the first time, Red Rabbit frowned at her plans. "Why? No one lives there. It's dead. Has been since the times of Gray Feather. Since after the skiffs came, painted it red."

Gray Feather. Red paint. Tabitha had to fight the urge to wince with each of the words. Red Rabbit couldn't know that Gray Feather, old as he was, had been her father. That he'd symbolized his name with a single goose quill among the contrasting colors of his Tsitsanits mask: green for sky, yellow for earth, black for night. Red Rabbit couldn't know how fine he'd looked in that mask, with its eagle feathers and buffalo horns, its white buckskin eyes, corn husk teeth, and fox-fur collar, or how well he and the rest of the *katsina* dancers had prayed with body and soul on that last day. Red Rabbit couldn't even know what *katsina* meant. He didn't know Keresan. All he knew was the *diya* tongue of the whites.

She alone remembered.

She remembered through a little girl's eyes watching them dance to Tsichtinako on the last turning of the great moon cycle. She remembered the mixture of sadness and hope in their steps. Even then, they'd known they were the last of their tongue: rebels to uniformity, no longer even useful to the linguists who'd documented their speech for closed-door studies of dead things otherwise forgotten.

Tabitha had snuck away from the dance in childish impishness that day, crawling down a thick-runged ladder into the darkness of the kiva, the *kaach*, where the *chaianyi* men would come for their final prayers after the dance. She'd wanted to hear them. She'd wanted to watch her father calling the gods.

Instead, she'd heard the engine-roar of the federal skiffs landing outside. And when she'd reached the top of the ladder and looked out, she'd seen the lancers pouring from the airships, uniformed men with uniform guns. Marching. Corralling her people like cattle. She'd heard the officer in his blue suit clearing his throat to read the Writ of Unity, the death warrant for those who dared to disunite the power of the one state. "One language, one people," he'd said. Just like they all did. Just like the posters.

She'd slipped back down into the *kaach* while he read, though she could still hear him. There were boards across part of the floor, covering the *Tsiwaimitiima* altar: boards so holy that only *chaianyi* could dance upon them. She'd lifted them up without hesitation and wedged herself beneath them, curled up in a dusty darkness that smelled of old cornmeal. "One culture, one country," she'd heard the officer say in the distance. And then, in response, she'd heard the voices of her people rising in defiant, ancient song.

So the killing had begun, and soon the only sounds she heard over the screams were of fléchettes singing high in the crisp air. And when the lancers searched the buildings for survivors, Tabitha did not cry.

She'd wanted to hear her father's prayers. Instead, when at last she climbed up and out of the darkness and peered through a thin crack in the wall out into the square, she'd heard him dying, coughing down the wrath of Father Thunder even as he lay in a pool of his own blood. His legs twitched as if they meant to complete the dance despite him. His white-and-black eagle wings were painted red.

He'd called until one of the last of the lancers came back, stood over his bloodied body, aimed his flechemusket at Gray Feather's left eye, and pulled the trigger. Her father's legs stilled. The dance was never finished. Father Thunder never came.

Tabitha blinked away the images, blocking out the sounds of remembered death until all she heard was the burning of the juniper before her, and all she saw was Red Rabbit, rocking and puffing on his fading cigarette. "What would God be," she said, "if there was no one to call his name?" *No one to hate him*.

"Why call him now, though?"

"Do you remember nothing of the old ways?"

He shrugged. "I remember the old ways through the canyons. That's why you hired me, yellow woman."

It was true enough. Since the killings, she'd lived in the cities. She knew nothing of the wild places anymore.

Tabitha sighed. "The moon doesn't rise in the same place every day. It moves along the horizon. Every eighteen or so years, it reaches its northernmost point on the horizon, rising as far north as it will rise before returning south to begin the cycle again. A lunistice, it's called. And during that time, the moon, for just a little while, appears to rise in

the same place. Some people call it a lunar standstill. It last happened a little over eighteen years ago. When I was eleven. It took me a long time to understand the why and the when. So, I know it's about to happen again."

"The moon?" Red Rabbit looked as if he was trying not to laugh. "You're going through this for the moon?"

"Yes. It may seem strange to you, but it wasn't to our people." She ignored the look of exasperation in his eyes, kept talking. "Many of the pueblos were built to observe the cycle. Chimney Rock, for instance. Why would they build the pueblo so far above the plain? Far from water, wood, food..."

"Maybe they liked the view. Pretty place. Casino there now."

"True. But if we were there tonight, and we watched the moon rise, we would see it come up between the two great rock spires to the north. We could watch it just as our ancestors did when they first built it over a thousand years ago."

"Why'd they like the moon so much?"

"It wasn't just our people. You could see the same thing at Stonehenge, Machu Picchu, the pyramids in Egypt. When Tsichtinako created—"

"Tseech-tee...?"

"Tsichtinako. Thought Mother. Our legends say she created the universe through the hand of Uchtsiti, the All-Father. He built the world by throwing a clot of his own blood into the heavens. The *chaianyi*, what the whites would call medicine men, they taught that the sun represented Uchtsiti. It was the male. It was father. The moon was the female. We might call it mother. Both male and female are needed for life, but the male drives away what he most needs, so the moon flees to the north, toward death. It was said that if man does not call back the moon, she will leave us forever. The father's consort will be gone. He can have no more children. What is will wither and die. Nothing new will replace it. It was said by the *chaianyi* that Thought Mother taught this much to the first peoples when they emerged from Shipapu, the darkness beneath the earth."

"You believe this?"

It took her a moment to answer. She was remembering her father's footfalls, his leather moccasins shuffling in the clay as he danced and sang, danced and sang. "My ancestors believed," she said at last. "So it's important to me."

"I don't believe in gods," Red Rabbit said. Suspicion flashed in his eyes. "I believe in money."

"Which is why you won't get the rest until you've taken me to the top of the rock."

Whatever had been in his eyes vanished. "Then eat, Hoarse Raven. The trail to the Sky City is long."

She swallowed the rest of the bread, then stood and looked out through the canyon opening to the flat plain. Spread out before her, the patched and faded land reminded her of one of the woolen blankets her grandmother once made for her. And kilometers away, she could see where the mesa broke from the plain like the thumb of God struck through the parched, sage-strewn flats. Lifting a scope to her eyes, she could just perceive the outline of the blocks scattered upon the table of its summit.

"We can't leave yet," she said. "I must prepare."

Red Rabbit had stood, too. He laid a hand on her shoulder. His fingers smelled of coals. "For what?"

Now it was her turn to smile. Greedy and atheistic though he might be, she appreciated her guide. She enjoyed the simplicity of his life. She looked down at her tan jumpsuit and plain boots, the modern vest of factory-built fabric. "For one thing," she said, "I cannot meet an old god in new clothes."

"You need to change?"

"Yes. And I must prepare my soul."

* * *

Tabitha stood naked beneath a circle of sky, her back to the multi-toned sandstone wall surrounding a well of rainwater. The crack leading to this place had been too narrow for her pack, so she'd pulled out what things she needed and left the rest outside with Red Rabbit. He would have helped her carry things in, she knew, but somehow it seemed best for her to carry it all in herself, as if the clothes were some sort of offering, brought to the sacred pool.

Silly, of course, but fitting: Each soul must meet the morning sun, the new sweet earth, and the Great Silence alone.

Ohiyesa had said that. Dr. Charles Alexander Eastman, the whites called him. Brought up among the Santee Dakota, he'd managed to get into Dartmouth, then earned a medical degree from Brown. He'd helped to establish the Boy Scouts and the Camp Fire Girls. Ohiyesa had verified the burial place of Sacajawea. He'd been the only physician to tend to the injured at Wounded Knee.

So much irony, Tabitha thought as she slipped the simple fabrics over her body.

It had taken her a great deal of time to find someone who could still make clothing in the old ways, using the old materials. The search had been so difficult that she'd often found herself wondering if she might risk jumping onto the grid for a minute or two, just to find what she was looking for, to find out where it was. But if she accessed the grid, they would know where she was, too. They would know that a speaker was indeed still alive, and they might even know what she planned to do. So she'd been forced to search on foot, by word of mouth, moving quietly through the slums of the cities. Always wary, always cautious. Never asking too many questions. Never answering many. It took over a year, but she'd found the old woman just in time, on her last search of Albuquerque's Old Town.

New old-style garments in hand, she'd looked for a mercenary-minded person who could guide her through the city screens, out into the wilderness, out to the old, forgotten places—someone who hated the lancers as much as she did and knew how to keep his mouth shut for the right price. A far easier task. She'd hired Red Rabbit only two hours later.

Tabitha slipped on the moccasins, then stepped forward. Foot by foot. Leather roughing on sandstone. She summoned up prayers that hadn't been uttered since the morning of the last dance. Prayers no one else alive could speak.

When she reached the edge, she knelt and scooped the cold water onto her face, breaking its sheets against her skin. She rubbed it across her cheeks, into her eyes. She stood, faced the sun as it crossed the horizon of her sunken place. As it did so, she offered a final, unspoken orison. To the water, the rock, the sun, the sky.

The Great Silence. Alone.

* * *

The sandhills began near the entrance to the secret well, and Tabitha and Red Rabbit followed a winding path over and between them, pausing only briefly in the semi-shade of piñons. Tabitha felt growing impatience, wanting to get there, wanting to be done with it all one way or another. She had a hard time not watching the sky, and several times she tripped on exposed juniper roots, causing no small amount of pain to feet already aching from the new moccasins.

An hour after departing the well, they left the sandhills and entered the flatlands. And although the sage and sparse-grass plain was more exposed to any passing skiff, they were able to take a more direct path toward the waiting mesa. Tabitha felt her mind begin to ease. There was no place to hide now. No place to run. If a skiff came, she'd be dead. Red Rabbit, too, probably, though he did not seem concerned about the possibility as he trudged ahead of her through the dirt.

The wall of Acoma mesa, towering higher with each step they took, was rusted clay, a deep and rich color. Dark streaks ran down its many faces. The stains of ten thousand tears.

Farther in the distance along the horizon, almost five kilometers northeast of the Sky City, she could see where yellow sandstone cliffs rose one hundred and twenty meters out of the dusty sea. The old stories told how the people had long ago lived atop those cliffs. It was a beautiful village, but there was only one trail to the summit. One day, the people went down to the plain to gather the harvest. Three women, though, were sick and couldn't go. That day, terrible rains came. The waters washed away the trail to the village. The men tried to find another path up, but there was none. There was nothing anyone could do. Weeks passed, and the women grew quiet as they starved to death. One of them died. The other two, who did not want to die of starvation, walked to the edge of the cliff, looked down upon their families and their friends, then jumped, hoping to find the arms of Great Eagle or White Hawk. It was said that their cries could still be heard among the crags sometimes. The place had been very holy among the people.

The whites did not understand this story. They called the place the Enchanted Mesa. To Tabitha's people it had been Kadzima, the Accursed.

* * *

Tabitha and Red Rabbit found a little farm at the base of the Acoma mesa. Dry farming. Her family had done the same until the skiffs and their crews of lancers had come.

The farm was little to look at. A shanty of four weathered adobe walls, not more than four or five meters on a side, covered over with corrugated sheets of scrap metal, with two windows: one cracked and grimed, the other clumsily boarded over. Desiccated posts made of piñon branches marked the perimeter of a small yard in front of the building. Two chickens and a rooster, still contained within a battered wire mesh strung between those posts, were the only signs of life.

At Red Rabbit's urging, Tabitha stayed some distance behind him as they approached. He had an old-style gun in the holster at his hip, and Tabitha noticed that he kept his hand close to it and that he walked with a sort of balanced crouch. "I don't think anyone here wants to hurt us," she said.

He didn't turn around to answer her. "I don't take chances. Never know who lives out here."

"Probably just poor farmers."

"Maybe," he said. "But there's lots of crazies outside the cities. People like me."

Tabitha looked down at the ceremonial knife tied to her belt with leather thongs. She fingered it for a moment, then thought better of it. Instead, she cupped her hands around her mouth and called out. "Hello?"

Her voice echoed back from the building and the silently brooding rocks. The chickens clucked in senseless reply.

"Is anyone here?"

Red Rabbit had turned to glare at her, but the sound of shifting rock spun his attention back around. There was a native woman standing among the jumbled boulders beyond the shanty. Her arm was extended to her right, disappearing into rock.

"Show us your other hand!" Red Rabbit called.

The woman hesitated, then drew in her arm, pulling a little cloth-covered basket into view. Tabitha waved, friendly. The woman waved back, more unsure, but slowly she began to walk back down to the building. Red Rabbit relaxed a little, though he kept his hand close to his side. "We don't want any trouble," the woman said when she came

near.

"We won't give you any," Tabitha said.

"You're not lancer scouts?" The woman's weather-worn skin was the color of old saddle leather, coursed over with crisp ridges and furrows. There were long needles of wood in the braided hair at the back of her head.

"Not hardly," Tabitha said. "Just hiking to the old pueblo."

The woman nodded, but a new expression had come over her face as she listened to Tabitha speak. "Do I know you?"

"I don't think so. My name is Tabitha Hoarse Raven."

"You used to live on the mesa."

"I did," Tabitha said, trying to keep the surprise out of her voice. "How did you know?"

"I was young, but I remember your father when he was the chief."

Tabitha involuntarily cringed at the term. It reminded her too much of what the *diya* whites had done to her people. "My father was *tsatia hochani.*"

The woman looked as if she'd seen a ghost. "You can speak—"

"Keresan, yes. Can you not?" Tabitha tried to hide it, but even she could hear something akin to hope in her own voice.

"No. I lived in the city back then. I know only English."

"Oh."

"I came to the pueblo only a few times. But I remember Gray Feather. He invited us out for some of the dances. I remember his daughter."

Tabitha fought to ignore her own emotions and Red Rabbit's sudden gaze. "I'm sorry. I don't remember you."

The woman had relaxed a little. "It's okay. You were even younger then. My name's Malya Prancing Antelope."

"Antelope Clan?"

"I think my uncle told me we were Badger Clan. But that was a long time ago. There aren't any clans anymore, Tabitha Hoarse Raven. There's just people. One people. And you, of course." She stuttered a little at that and turned from them, blushing. She addressed the building. "They're not scouts!"

There was noise inside, and the door opened inward. A young man dressed in worn blue jeans and a tattered gray shirt stepped into the

sun. He was young—Tabitha guessed him to be perhaps twenty years old—with strong native features: tall, with red-brown skin over a face of long and sharp angles, a wiry build, and black hair tousled in careless mats. But while Tabitha found him ruggedly handsome in his way, most of her attention was riveted on the shotgun he was carrying in his hands.

"My son," Malya said. "Joseph Man of Sorrow."

Joseph shouldered the weapon and offered his hand to Tabitha, who shook it at once. His long-fingered grip was strong. Red Rabbit, too, shook the young man's hand. "We thought you might be scouts," Joseph said. "There've been more of them around lately."

"Why?" Red Rabbit asked.

The younger man shrugged. "Don't know. Maybe they're looking for you. Funny to hike with a revolver," he said, nodding towards Red Rabbit's pistol.

"We thought it best to be prepared," Tabitha said before Red Rabbit could reply. "You never know who's out here."

"Just us," Joseph said. "No work in the cities this season. Came to the old farm."

Red Rabbit motioned to Malya's covered basket. "What's in that?"

"Seeds," she said. "I was going to plant."

"Oh," Red Rabbit said. And he looked away, out across the plain they'd crossed.

Joseph turned to Tabitha, smiled. "You're pretty far from the cities, Tabitha Hoarse Raven." He looked her clothes up and down, seemed to linger. "And you're not dressed like a tourist. Why're you here?"

"I grew up here."

"Doesn't answer my question."

"Enough, Joseph," Malya said. "Fetch water for our guests."

Joseph's smile faded, and his cheeks darkened. He started back toward the building.

"Please don't," Tabitha said. "We have water. We'll just be on our way up."

Joseph stopped walking, half turned. "You're going up?"

Tabitha nodded, even as his mother started to ask forgiveness for her intrusive son.

"It's okay," Tabitha said. "I don't mind. Yes, I'm dressed strangely.

Yes, we're going up. It's time for the moondance."

Joseph looked confused, but Malya was shaking her head, her eyes furtive. "It's not allowed," she said.

"Neither is speaking in Keresan."

"Bad enough to do that. But to do the dance.... You know what they did, don't you? The lancers? My husband wanted to dance with the others, with all the defiant ones. He came out here with them. To rediscover his ancestors, he said. He died with them that day."

Even from several meters away, Tabitha could see the new expressions of emotion passing over Joseph's face. She ignored them. "I'm not asking for you to help," she said. "But I won't lie to one of our people. I'm going to perform the dance."

"One of what people? Who? This man here? Me? Joseph? Your 'people' is the same as anyone else's now. It's the law."

"Not for me," Tabitha said.

"Then you're alone. And you'll die like the rest of them. Then what will have become of your *people?* Nothing but a few genetic quirks like us, absorbed soon enough. Maybe a troupe of half-breeds who fake dances for tourists in Santa Fe between night gigs at the poker tables. Some old crones making beaded necklaces to sell on street corners. Nothing more." The woman turned away from Tabitha. She began to walk back toward Joseph and the building. "Dance. Die. Take your words with you, *sister*. No one will speak them when you're gone."

* * *

The story was well known to Tabitha's people: how, in the winter of 1599, Spanish troops had come to Acoma, almost one hundred of them strong in their steel, to capture what they called the Sky City.

The Acomans went to the edge of their mesa when they arrived. They hurled stones and launched arrows at the Spaniards one hundred meters below. Yet the invaders climbed. Up and up.

When the Spaniards reached the top, they leveled a cannon at the Acomans. They filled it with small stones and began to fire. To the people, it was as if Father Thunder himself had turned against them, spewing the bone-rock of the life-giving Earth into their flesh, ripping and breaking. Eight hundred of them died that day, and their city was turned to ruin. Of those taken alive, all males over the age of twelve

were made twenty-year slaves. Those older than twenty-five had their right feet cut off. Some few of the dispersed managed to return over the years. They rebuilt the pueblo. They returned to sing to the Mother, to beg for her return.

It had taken the Spaniards three days to fight their way to the top. It took her and Red Rabbit less than three hours.

Of course, it was easier now. When the Spaniards came, the only ways up were the steep stairways, hand-cut into the sandstone surfaces of the mesa walls. But twentieth-century ingenuity had seen fit to cut a road to the top, to what was then the oldest continually inhabited community in the United States.

At the top, she and her guide found what was left of the pueblo that those who'd returned had built. First was the church, the old mission of San Esteban Rey. It had been a tourist attraction once. Now it stood derelict, fiercely ravaged by time. The twin towers flanking the nave were broken, crumbled away to stubs rising above the wind-scarred roofline. Most of the windows were missing. Hard spring rains had carved great gouges into its plastered facing, and the series of steps leading to the gaping hole where once its oaken doors had stood were worn to a jaggedly rounded slope. But the church still stood. Tabitha didn't know if that should mean something or not.

She pulled a small bag tied with sinew string from the pouch at her side. She felt the hard plastic inside, then tossed it to Red Rabbit.

He looked at it. "You're done?"

"I'll dance. And I'll sing. For the memory. But, yes, I'm done. You've done exactly what I asked you to do. For that, my thanks. And an extra payment."

Red Rabbit opened the bag with his calloused fingers. He whistled. "More than a little extra," he said.

Tabitha shrugged. She wouldn't need it anymore. One way or another.

"You sure I can't do anything more?"

"You've done plenty," she said.

She walked alone into the crumbled labyrinth of Acoma.

* * *

The rest of the pueblo hadn't fared as well as the church. Much of it had

been ruins even in Tabitha's youth, when only a few holdout families lived on the mesa. But after the killings, after the skiffs were airborne once more, the lancers had begun the work for which they were so aptly named: they'd sent charged particles down from their cannons, slashing furrows across the summit and blasting holes through to the bedrock. There'd been no reason for the desecration. The lancers had searched the pueblo on foot. Tabitha suspected it was merely target practice for the men. Slaughtering traitorous Indians hadn't been enough fun for their day.

The destruction that the lancers had begun was taken up by the elements. The scars they'd ripped through buildings had further eroded over the years, the wounds becoming gaping open sores. Dozens of structures had collapsed to rubble that turned the streets of the old town into a maze. Tabitha could see that as many more were on the brink of failure.

Only the *kaach* remained as it did in her memories. Where she'd hidden in her youth. The place from which she'd watched her father die, watched his murderer absently wipe a splattering of gore from his hand as he walked back toward his waiting skiff and the sky. The building looked as if the weather had never touched it. Even the ladder protruding through the opening in its roof seemed solid—though she didn't attempt to climb it yet. *Maybe after the dance*, she thought. *Father was going to pray after the dance*.

She summoned memories as she wandered through the ruined pueblo. Soon, she could almost hear the laughter of old women, see the sad eyes of young men. She could almost step to the shake-crack-shake of rattles keeping time to the beat of a stretched-skin drum. She could almost smell the scents of kettles that steamed with chiles, corn, and shredded meat.

She summoned them until she was with them, until the ghosts of the forgotten swarmed about her. Words. Rhythms. Voices. Drums. And when she found the central square where her father had died, she closed her eyes and fell away into a world that she alone could know—dancing in circles, like a dream-thief, through the red dust and mud-stone rubble, turning on isles of sand.

The Great Silence, Alone,

* * *

When it was done, when her father's dance was complete, Tabitha Hoarse Raven stood at the edge of a darkening sky, listening for the voices of her gods. The evening wind ran like wild horses up the cracked face of the mesa, smoothing her loose garments against the front of her body, molding them to the contours of her arms and legs. It flowed over and around her sweat-slicked skin like rushing, rising water—spreading her long black hair into tendrils of crow-night that reached with waving, furtive grasps for the relative security of the shattered pueblo behind her. She breathed deep in her exhaustion.

Voices should have been carried upon that wind, sounds swept up from the plains: the laughter of children weaving through the brush, heading for the steep and crooked stairways with rabbits over their shoulders and baskets full of corn; the chatterings of women and their clay jars, porting water; the lower tones of the men on watch, calling across the rocks along the way....

No more. She heard nothing of the world beyond the echoed cries of a lone eagle balancing on split-tip wings and floating wide against the deepest blue of the sky. She saw nothing of the world beyond the light of the sun, lowering to stone reaches stained watermelon and blood red.

Tabitha heard nothing. She saw nothing. And she was not surprised. Her gods were dead, too.

Darkness approached from the east. Far out to the west, where vacant pueblos slumbered in silent canyons, the sun seemed to hesitate, to hover in expectation of night. Brilliant swaths of red-yellow-turning-blue layered ribbons upon the sky.

"Come back to us, Moon," Tabitha said, expecting the returned silence. "Bring us life. Bring us rain. Za'tse katch, Tsichtinako."

She wondered what her grandfather had expected when he'd come to this reach and prayed, too—that last time, just five years after Gray Feather was killed for dancing, for singing an outlawed language. She wondered if it was when he had heard nothing that he jumped. Like the two women of Kadzima. Sudden death before starvation.

Tabitha looked down toward the base of the cliff as if she were tracing his fall with her gaze. The shadows were already thick down there, slow-moving in silence.

Tabitha slipped a single gray-and-red goose feather from the long leather pouch at her side. She smoothed it to a point, then stretched her arm out into the great void of air and wind and sound and sight and scent and possibility and used the feather-edge to trace the sign of the Spider across the plains far below her.

A good-bye.

And in that moment, from somewhere in the distance, from somewhere beyond the horizon to the west, she heard a rumbling sound. The waking of an angry god.

* * *

Tabitha turned at the throaty sound of the approaching skiff. It was coming down behind her, kicking the sun-dried clay into clouds of choking dust that blurred away the fading adobe walls. Lights flashed. Another skiff circled loudly overhead.

Doors opened. A ramp crashed. Even through the sudden haze of backlit dust-fog, she could see the dark helmets of the lancers making their way through and around the pueblo. Surrounding her. Some of them were already in place, already aiming.

Tabitha looked away from them, her gaze sweeping out to the horizon, where billow-black clouds rose up from the dry canyons to meet and swallow the setting sun.

To swallow them all.

* * *

Tabitha's arms were outstretched to the void. Feather in hand. Visions of Great Eagle swirled behind her eyes. But a gust of wind pushed back against her. She felt the wind, and she knew it for what it was.

She stepped back from the edge, opening her eyes as she turned to look at the gathered lancers. "Za'tse katch, Tsichtinako," she said to them.

There was an officer among them, standing nearest the ramp. He stepped forward into the cleared, dry dust between the flechemuskets and the condemned. He was wearing a gray-to-black uniform emblazoned with two bars that attested to his good service to the state. A captain. His hair was close-cropped, peppered gray. His grin was full of vanity and loathing pride. He held a d-reader in his hand and he lifted it up. "Ms. Hoarse Raven, yes?"

Tabitha looked around at the flechemuskets, most of them pointed at

her head. She glanced back over her shoulder to the west. Clouds were moving fast across the sky, carried on the wind. Already the first reaches of them stretched overhead. "Ha, diya hatch," she said to the captain.

He blinked at her, caught off guard for a moment, before he smiled. "Then I suppose you're admitting guilt."

"Ha," she said.

"You shouldn't have come back here," the captain said. "Not on the anniversary with the moon and all, especially."

Tabitha shrugged. "Sa'ma."

The captain smirked, then keyed a button on the d-reader as if he was initiating an injection. A part of Tabitha, a small and shrinking part, thought it unfortunate that a recording was used these days. She would've preferred the personal touch of a reading.

"One language, one people," the d-reader said, its disembodied voice deep with authority.

Tabitha stood in half-amused silence, listening to the litany. Halfway through, great raindrops began to fall to the parched earth, impacting like soft bullets, pounding out little craters in the dust. Father's tears, falling to Mother.

Some of the lancers looked upward. Tabitha did not. She was watching the walls of the pueblo behind them, where the blur of dusk was turning to sharp shadow and light as the moon came up and shone its light beneath the storm. She needed to raise her voice to be heard over the d-reader. "Ta'-u-atch," she announced.

Only the captain was listening, and he didn't care. He didn't understand.

The water was cold as it soaked into her linen garments, but at the same time, it felt good. It felt right. Thunder rolled in the depths of the clouds thickening overhead, the low growl of Black Bear Mother protecting her cubs. Tabitha felt it vibrate around her ribs. She felt its tone quickening in her chest.

At last, she looked up through the drops of rain into the dark and churning clouds that had gathered over the mesa. The lights of the circling skiff looked obscene against the belly of the storm. "Ho-ak'a katch," she said, for the sky was, indeed, raining.

The d-reader ended its speech, which had always been more about

helping those doing the slaughter than those being slaughtered. "One culture, one country," the recording intoned.

"One culture, one country!" the lancers replied. The sights of the flechemuskets re-centered.

Tabitha felt the hairs on her arms perk up, the gooseflesh raised by something more than the cold rain on her skin. She breathed deep of the ozone washing through the curtains of water. It was raining very hard now.

"Ho-ak'a ma'-me katch," she said. She eyed the skiff in the air, and she began to sing a new song, with new power.

As Tabitha's voice split the air, Father Thunder's first strike hit the skiff above her, a whip cracking down from the heavens. The airship flashed white-hot, turned left, right, left, then nosed down and fell earthward like a child's broken toy. Ripples of electric fire coursed across its surface, the energy crackling in audible static as the craft plummeted.

The crippled skiff came down at a sharp angle, hitting one of the outbuildings. It fragged the adobe, blasting the ancient mud-brick and wood into splinters and rubble. The ship pounded deep into the hardpack, momentarily cratering the earth, and then it was airborne again, metal screeching as it bounced back off the bedrock and flipped through the air. Many of the lancers on the ground began screaming, trying to run. The airship that was already on the ground tried to move, bucking on its pads as its engines kicked into gear, but all too late. The hurtling, broken thing punched into its side with a terrible crunch, a spear breaching a wounded deer.

There was a half-second pause, a heartbeat of realization. Then a second bolt of lightning branched down from the clouds into the bundle of freshly twisted metal. The knot of the two ships exploded in an eruption of red light and redder sound.

A wave of force slapped Tabitha back from the fiery skiffs, knocking the wind and the song from her chest as it sent her flying. The few flechemuskets still aimed at her went off, and she sensed the angry hornet buzz ripping the air around her. But then she hit the clotting mud and slid into rock as the next concussive detonation wave rolled forward across the mesa.

Tabitha looked up and saw men in flames, trailing smoke. They were

screaming, but she couldn't hear them now. Tangled, shadowed shapes of machinery popped from the wreckage as remaining stores of fuel combusted. The captain was only a few meters away, sprawled sideways in the mud. Fragmented bits of metal protruded from his back, but he was moving. Lightning coursed across the sky in great pulsing veins. Waiting.

Tabitha gasped air back into her lungs, began to sing again. She couldn't hear her voice, but she could *feel* it, reverberating in her core. She felt it as sure as the wind and the rain and the mud and the sky.

One of the lancers had stumbled through the mud, had somehow avoided the scattering shrapnel. He came and stood above her, eyes fierce and determined. He raised the gun.

Tabitha stopped singing so she could smile at him.

Bright light flashed against his face, and an instant later, his chest caved in and out all at once and he fell backward into the mud.

Joseph Man of Sorrows knelt beside her, chambering another shell. Beams of moonlight had somehow pierced the churning veil of the clouds overhead, illuminating his face. He said something to her, but she couldn't hear it. She knew there was no stopping this now. Not after what had come before. Not with the power of Tsichtinako in the air.

She nodded. He smiled grimly, then stood and walked over to the still-twitching officer. He lowered the barrel to the back of the man's head.

Pulled the trigger.

Reloaded.

Walked to the next dying man.

By the light of moon and lightning, Tabitha could see a small group of the few remaining lancers firing fléchettes at a low building not yet in flames. Its thick adobe walls glistened with the tiny slivers of plastic, but still, from a little window, an old-style handgun flashed, one-two, one-two. And down they went.

A handful of remaining lancers, scattered around the wreckage, saw their skiffmates go down by the little building, and they ran in that direction. But already a third shape was rising where the others had fallen. Malya had picked up one of the flechemuskets from the ground, and she trained it on them slow and steady. The military men stopped, hesitated, then dropped their own weapons one by one. Red Rabbit

came out from the little building, and he, too, picked up one of their weapons.

The lancers circled up, hands raised. Lit by the burning wreckage and contorted with fear, their faces were the red of blood. Malya and Red Rabbit marched forward at them, pushing them closer and closer to the edge of the mesa. Tabitha motioned at them to stop. Great Eagle would not welcome the lancers. And this hunt was over. There had been enough death.

The others nodded. They began to herd the men toward one of the stronger buildings away from the fires. Perhaps, Tabitha thought, she would eventually teach them new ways of speaking. Or perhaps she would just let them go, let them explain to the world that gods grew old, but they didn't die.

Joseph came to her side, and when sound finally began to return to her senses, the first thing she heard beyond the roll of the thunder and the tremor of the sky was his voice, speaking her name.

* * *

Beating war drums, the voices of gods thundered in time to the strikes of lightning that fell in a living rain upon the mesa: heavy, pounding, unrelenting. Occasionally, another skiff tried to approach the old ruins, but the flashing anger turned each of them back. Alone, Tabitha and Joseph knelt on the floor of the kiva, which sat untouched in the conflagration atop the mesa. The fires of the gutted skiffs poured heat through the walls, and their naked bodies glistened with sweat. There would be time to leave, they knew, time to reach the old forgotten canyons far to the west and there make a new home. Others would come. "We are few and weak," Red Jacket once said, "but may for a long time be happy if we hold fast to our country, and the religion of our fathers."

The dance her father had left unfinished, the song he'd never ended, was done. More storms were coming. They needed only to follow them.

But not yet. Not this moment.

For now, in the darkness, Tsichtinako was between them. And they thanked Her for what they had.

Malya's basket sat at the foot of the ladder, near the *tsiwaimitiima* altar that marked the place of emergence. The basket held many

different kinds of seeds.

Together, Tabitha and Joseph went about creation. He was no longer a man of sorrow. And the raven's voice was soft, like fresh butter in spring.

And many moons later, when the next *tsatia hochani* would be born, she knew what they would sing to him.

* * *

At night, when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone.

Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, I say? There is no death. Only a change of worlds.

—Chief Seattle of the Duwamish (1780–1866)

#END#

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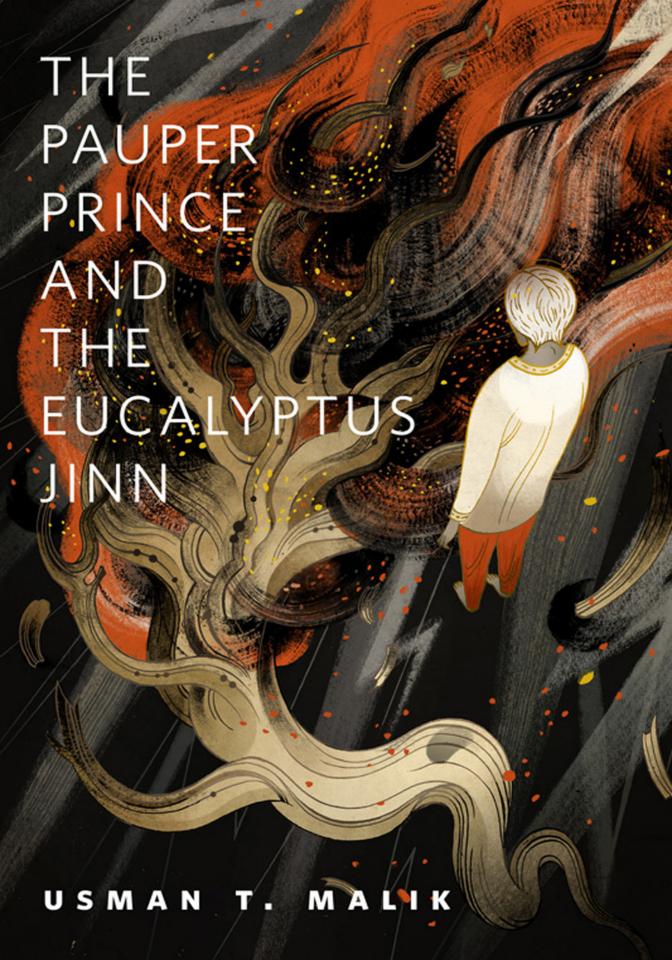
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The Pauper Prince and the Eucalyptus Jinn

USMAN T. MALIK

illustration by



"When the Spirit World appears in a sensory Form, the Human Eye confines it. The Spiritual Entity cannot abandon that Form as long as Man continues to look at it in this special way. To escape, the Spiritual Entity manifests an Image it adopts for him, like a veil. It pretends the Image is moving in a certain direction so the Eye will follow it. At which point the Spiritual Entity escapes its confinement and disappears.

Whoever knows this and wishes to maintain perception of the Spiritual, must not let his Eye follow this illusion.

This is one of the Divine Secrets."

The Meccan Revelations by Muhiyuddin Ibn Arabi

For fifteen years my grandfather lived next door to the Mughal princess Zeenat Begum. The princess ran a tea stall outside the walled city of Old Lahore in the shade of an ancient eucalyptus. Dozens of children from Bhati Model School rushed screaming down muddy lanes to gather at her shop, which was really just a roadside counter with a tin roof and a smattering of chairs and a table. On winter afternoons it was her steaming cardamom-and-honey tea the kids wanted; in summer it was the chilled Rooh Afza.

As Gramps talked, he smacked his lips and licked his fingers, remembering the sweet rosewater sharbat. He told me that the princess was so poor she had to recycle tea leaves and sharbat residue. Not from customers, of course, but from her own boiling pans—although who really knew, he said, and winked.

I didn't believe a word of it.

"Where was her kingdom?" I said.

"Gone. Lost. Fallen to the British a hundred years ago," Gramps said. "She never begged, though. Never asked anyone's help, see?"

I was ten. We were sitting on the steps of our mobile home in Florida. It was a wet summer afternoon and rain hissed like diamondbacks in the grass and crackled in the gutters of the trailer park.

"And her family?"

"Dead. Her great-great grandfather, the exiled King Bahadur Shah Zafar, died in Rangoon and is buried there. Burmese Muslims make pilgrimages to his shrine and honor him as a saint."

"Why was he buried there? Why couldn't he go home?"

"He had no home anymore."

For a while I stared, then surprised both him and myself by bursting into tears. Bewildered, Gramps took me in his arms and whispered comforting things, and gradually I quieted, letting his voice and the rain sounds lull me to sleep, the loamy smell of him and grass and damp earth becoming one in my sniffling nostrils.

I remember the night Gramps told me the rest of the story. I was twelve or thirteen. We were at this desi party in Windermere thrown by Baba's friend Hanif Uncle, a posh affair with Italian leather sofas, crystal cutlery, and marble-topped tables. Someone broached a discussion about the pauper princess. Another person guffawed. The Mughal princess was an urban legend, this aunty said. Yes, yes, she too had heard stories about this so-called princess, but they were a hoax. The descendants of the Mughals left India and Pakistan decades ago. They are settled in London and Paris and Manhattan now, living postcolonial, extravagant lives after selling their estates in their native land.

Gramps disagreed vehemently. Not only was the princess real, she had given him free tea. She had told him stories of her forebears.

The desi aunty laughed. "Senility is known to create stories," she said, tapping her manicured fingers on her wineglass.

Gramps bristled. A long heated argument followed and we ended up leaving the party early.

"Rafiq, tell your father to calm down," Hanif Uncle said to my baba at the door. "He takes things too seriously."

"He might be old and set in his ways, Doctor sahib," Baba said, "but he's sharp as a tack. Pardon my boldness but some of your friends in there..." Without looking at Hanif Uncle, Baba waved a palm at the open door from which blue light and Bollywood music spilled onto the driveway.

Hanif Uncle smiled. He was a gentle and quiet man who sometimes invited us over to his fancy parties where rich expatriates from the Indian subcontinent opined about politics, stocks, cricket, religious fundamentalism, and their successful Ivy League–attending progeny.

The shyer the man the louder his feasts, Gramps was fond of saying.

"They're a piece of work all right," Hanif Uncle said. "Listen, bring your family over some weekend. I'd love to listen to that Mughal girl's story."

"Sure, Doctor sahib. Thank you."

The three of us squatted into our listing truck and Baba yanked the gearshift forward, beginning the drive home.

"Abba-ji," he said to Gramps. "You need to rein in your temper. You can't pick a fight with these people. The doctor's been very kind to me, but word of mouth's how I get work and it's exactly how I can lose it."

"But that woman is wrong, Rafiq," Gramps protested. "What she's heard are rumors. I told them the truth. I lived in the time of the pauper princess. I lived through the horrors of the eucalyptus jinn."

"Abba-ji, listen to what you're saying! Please, I beg you, keep these stories to yourself. Last thing I want is people whispering the handyman has a crazy, quarrelsome father." Baba wiped his forehead and rubbed his perpetually blistered thumb and index finger together.

Gramps stared at him, then whipped his face to the window and began to chew a candy wrapper (he was diabetic and wasn't allowed sweets). We sat in hot, thorny silence the rest of the ride and when we got home Gramps marched straight to his room like a prisoner returning to his cell.

I followed him and plopped on his bed.

"Tell me about the princess and the jinn," I said in Urdu.

Gramps grunted out of his compression stockings and kneaded his legs. They occasionally swelled with fluid. He needed water pills but they made him incontinent and smell like piss and he hated them. "The last time I told you her story you started crying. I don't want your parents yelling at me. Especially tonight."

"Oh, come on, they don't *yell* at you. Plus I won't tell them. Look, Gramps, think about it this way: I could write a story in my school paper about the princess. This could be my junior project." I snuggled into his bedsheets. They smelled of sweat and medicine, but I didn't mind.

"All right, but if your mother comes in here, complaining—"
"She won't."

He arched his back and shuffled to the armchair by the window. It

was ten at night. Cicadas chirped their intermittent static outside, but I doubt Gramps heard them. He wore hearing aids and the ones we could afford crackled in his ears, so he refused to wear them at home.

Gramps opened his mouth, pinched the lower denture, and rocked it. Back and forth, back and forth. Loosening it from the socket. *Pop!* He removed the upper one similarly and dropped both in a bowl of warm water on the table by the armchair.

I slid off the bed. I went to him and sat on the floor by his spidery, white-haired feet. "Can you tell me the story, Gramps?"

Night stole in through the window blinds and settled around us, soft and warm. Gramps curled his toes and pressed them against the wooden leg of his armchair. His eyes drifted to the painting hanging above the door, a picture of a young woman turned ageless by the artist's hand. Soft muddy eyes, a knowing smile, an orange dopatta framing her black hair. She sat on a brilliantly colored rug and held a silver goblet in an outstretched hand, as if offering it to the viewer.

The painting had hung in Gramps's room for so long I'd stopped seeing it. When I was younger I'd once asked him if the woman was Grandma, and he'd looked at me. Grandma died when Baba was young, he said.

The cicadas burst into an electric row and I rapped the floorboards with my knuckles, fascinated by how I could keep time with their piping.

"I bet the pauper princess," said Gramps quietly, "would be happy to have her story told."

"Yes."

"She would've wanted everyone to know how the greatest dynasty in history came to a ruinous end."

"Yes."

Gramps scooped up a two-sided brush and a bottle of cleaning solution from the table. Carefully, he began to brush his dentures. As he scrubbed, he talked, his deep-set watery eyes slowly brightening until it seemed he glowed with memory. I listened, and at one point Mama came to the door, peered in, and whispered something we both ignored. It was Saturday night so she left us alone, and Gramps and I sat there for the longest time I would ever spend with him.

This is how, that night, my gramps ended up telling me the story of

* * *

The princess, Gramps said, was a woman in her twenties with a touch of silver in her hair. She was lean as a sorghum broomstick, face dark and plain, but her eyes glittered as she hummed the Qaseeda Burdah Shareef and swept the wooden counter in her tea shop with a dustcloth. She had a gold nose stud that, she told her customers, was a family heirloom. Each evening after she was done serving she folded her aluminum chairs, upended the stools on the plywood table, and took a break. She'd sit down by the trunk of the towering eucalyptus outside Bhati Gate, pluck out the stud, and shine it with a mint-water-soaked rag until it gleamed like an eye.

It was tradition, she said.

"If it's an heirloom, why do you wear it every day? What if you break it? What if someone sees it and decides to rob you?" Gramps asked her. He was about fourteen then and just that morning had gotten Juma pocket money and was feeling rich. He whistled as he sat sipping tea in the tree's shade and watched steel workers, potters, calligraphers, and laborers carry their work outside their foundries and shops, grateful for the winter-softened sky.

Princess Zeenat smiled and her teeth shone at him. "Nah ji. No one can steal from us. My family is protected by a jinn, you know."

This was something Gramps had heard before. A jinn protected the princess and her two sisters, a duty imposed by Akbar the Great five hundred years back. Guard and defend Mughal honor. Not a clichéd horned jinn, you understand, but a daunting, invisible entity that defied the laws of physics: it could slip in and out of time, could swap its senses, hear out of its nostrils, smell with its eyes. It could even fly like the tales of yore said.

Mostly amused but occasionally uneasy, Gramps laughed when the princess told these stories. He had never really questioned the reality of her existence; lots of nawabs and princes of pre-Partition India had offspring languishing in poverty these days. An impoverished Mughal princess was conceivable.

A custodian jinn, not so much.

Unconvinced thus, Gramps said:

"Where does he live?"

"What does he eat?"

And, "If he's invisible, how does one know he's real?"

The princess's answers came back practiced and surreal:

The jinn lived in the eucalyptus tree above the tea stall.

He ate angel-bread.

He was as real as jasmine-touched breeze, as shifting temperatures, as the many spells of weather that alternately lull and shake humans in their variegated fists.

"Have you seen him?" Gramps fired.

"Such questions." The Princess shook her head and laughed, her thick, long hair squirming out from under her chador. "Hai Allah, these kids." Still tittering, she sauntered off to her counter, leaving a disgruntled Gramps scratching his head.

The existential ramifications of such a creature's presence unsettled Gramps, but what could he do? Arguing about it was as useful as arguing about the wind jouncing the eucalyptus boughs. Especially when the neighborhood kids began to tell disturbing tales as well.

Of a gnarled bat-like creature that hung upside down from the warped branches, its shadow twined around the wicker chairs and table fronting the counter. If you looked up, you saw a bird nest—just another huddle of zoysia grass and bird feathers—but then you dropped your gaze and the creature's malignant reflection juddered and swam in the tea inside the chipped china.

"Foul face," said one boy. "Dark and ugly and wrinkled like a fruit." "Sharp, crooked fangs," said another.

"No, no, he has razor blades planted in his jaws," said the first one quickly. "My cousin told me. That's how he flays the skin off little kids."

The description of the eucalyptus jinn varied seasonally. In summertime, his cheeks were scorched, his eyes red rimmed like the midday sun. Come winter, his lips were blue and his eyes misty, his touch cold like damp roots. On one thing everyone agreed: if he laid eyes on you, you were a goner.

The lean, mean older kids nodded and shook their heads wisely.

A goner.

The mystery continued this way, deliciously gossiped and fervently

argued, until one summer day a child of ten with wild eyes and a snot-covered chin rushed into the tea stall, gabbling and crying, blood trickling from the gash in his temple. Despite several attempts by the princess and her customers, he wouldn't be induced to tell who or what had hurt him, but his older brother, who had followed the boy inside, face scrunched with delight, declared he had last been seen pissing at the bottom of the eucalyptus.

"The jinn. The jinn," all the kids cried in unison. "A victim of the jinn's malice."

"No. He fell out of the tree," a grownup said firmly. "The gash is from the fall."

"The boy's incurred the jinn's wrath," said the kids happily. "The jinn will flense the meat off his bones and crunch his marrow."

"Oh shut up," said Princess Zeenat, feeling the boy's cheeks, "the eucalyptus jinn doesn't harm innocents. He's a defender of honor and dignity," while all the time she fretted over the boy, dabbed at his forehead with a wet cloth, and poured him a hot cup of tea.

The princess's sisters emerged from the doorway of their two-room shack twenty paces from the tea stall. They peered in, two teenage girls in flour-caked dopattas and rose-printed shalwar kameez, and the younger one stifled a cry when the boy turned to her, eyes shiny and vacuous with delirium, and whispered, "He says the lightning trees are dying."

The princess gasped. The customers pressed in, awed and murmuring. An elderly man with betel-juice-stained teeth gripped the front of his own shirt with palsied hands and fanned his chest with it. "The jinn has overcome the child," he said, looking profoundly at the sky beyond the stall, and chomped his tobacco paan faster.

The boy shuddered. He closed his eyes, breathed erratically, and behind him the shadow of the tree fell long and clawing at the ground.

* * *

The lightning trees are dying. The lightning trees are dying.

So spread the nonsensical words through the neighborhood. Zipping from bamboo door-to-door; blazing through dark lovers' alleys; hopping from one beggar's gleeful tongue to another's, the prophecy became a proverb and the proverb a song.

A starving calligrapher-poet licked his reed quill and wrote an elegy for the lightning trees.

A courtesan from the Diamond Market sang it from her rooftop on a moonlit night.

Thus the walled city heard the story of the possessed boy and his curious proclamation and shivered with this message from realms unknown. Arthritic grandmothers and lithe young men rocked in their courtyards and lawns, nodding dreamily at the stars above, allowing themselves to remember secrets from childhood they hadn't dared remember before.

Meanwhile word reached local families that a child had gotten hurt climbing the eucalyptus. Angry fathers, most of them laborers and shopkeepers with kids who rarely went home before nightfall, came barging into the Municipality's lean-to, fists hammering on the sad-looking officer's table, demanding that the tree be chopped down.

"It's a menace," they said.

"It's hollow. Worm eaten."

"It's haunted!"

"Look, its gum's flammable and therefore a fire hazard," offered one versed in horticulture, "and the tree's a pest. What's a eucalyptus doing in the middle of a street anyway?"

So they argued and thundered until the officer came knocking at the princess's door. "The tree," said the sad-looking officer, twisting his squirrel-tail mustache, "needs to go."

"Over my dead body," said the princess. She threw down her polish rag and glared at the officer. "It was planted by my forefathers. It's a relic, it's history."

"It's a public menace. Look, bibi, we can do this the easy way or the hard way, but I'm telling you—"

"Try it. You just try it," cried the princess. "I will take this matter to the highest authorities. I'll go to the Supreme Court. That tree"—she jabbed a quivering finger at the monstrous thing—"gives us shade. A fakir told my grandfather never to move his business elsewhere. It's blessed, he said."

The sad-faced officer rolled up his sleeves. The princess eyed him with apprehension as he yanked one of her chairs back and lowered himself into it.

"Bibi," he said not unkindly, "let me tell you something. The eucalyptus was brought here by the British to cure India's salinity and flooding problems. Gora sahib hardly cared about our ecology." His mustache drooped from his thin lips. The strawberry mole on his chin quivered. "It's not indigenous, it's a pest. It's not a blessing, it repels other flora and fauna and guzzles groundwater by the tons. It's not ours," the officer said, not looking at the princess. "It's alien."

It was early afternoon and school hadn't broken yet. The truant Gramps sat in a corner sucking on a cigarette he'd found in the trash can outside his school and watched the princess. Why wasn't she telling the officer about the jinn? That the tree was its home? Her cheeks were puffed from clenching her jaws, the hollows under her eyes deeper and darker as she clapped a hand to her forehead.

"Look," she said, her voice rising and falling like the wind stirring the tear-shaped eucalyptus leaves, "you take the tree, you take our good luck. My shop is all I have. The tree protects it. It protects us. It's family."

"Nothing I can do." The officer scratched his birthmark. "Had there been no complaint ... but now I have no choice. The Lahore Development Authority has been planning to remove the poplars and the eucalyptus for a while anyway. They want to bring back trees of Old Lahore. Neem, pipal, sukhchain, mulberry, mango. This foreigner"—he looked with distaste at the eucalyptus—"steals water from our land. It needs to go."

Shaking his head, the officer left. The princess lurched to her stall and began to prepare Rooh Afza. She poured a glittering parabola of sharbat into a mug with trembling hands, staggered to the tree, and flung the liquid at its hoary, clawing roots.

"There," she cried, her eyes reddened. "I can't save you. You must go."

Was she talking to the jinn? To the tree? Gramps felt his spine run cold as the blood-red libation sank into the ground, muddying the earth around the eucalyptus roots. Somewhere in the branches, a bird whistled.

The princess toed the roots for a moment longer, then trudged back to her counter.

Gramps left his teacup half-empty and went to the tree. He tilted his

head to look at its top. It was so high. The branches squirmed and fled from the main trunk, reaching restlessly for the hot white clouds. A plump chukar with a crimson beak sat on a branch swaying gently. It stared back at Gramps, but no creature with razor-blade jaws and hollow dust-filled cheeks dangled from the tree.

As Gramps left, the shadows of the canopies and awnings of shops in the alley stretched toward the tree accusatorially.

That night Gramps dreamed of the eucalyptus jinn.

It was a red-snouted shape hurtling toward the heavens, its slipstream body glittering and dancing in the dark. Space and freedom rotated above it, but as it accelerated showers of golden meteors came bursting from the stars and slammed into it. The creature thinned and elongated until it looked like a reed pen trying to scribble a cryptic message between the stars, but the meteors wouldn't stop.

Drop back, you blasphemer, whispered the heavens. You absconder, you vermin. The old world is gone. No place for your kind here now. Fall back and do your duty.

And eventually the jinn gave up and let go.

It plummeted: a fluttering, helpless, enflamed ball shooting to the earth. It shrieked as it dove, flickering rapidly in and out of space and time but bound by their quantum fetters. It wanted to rage but couldn't. It wanted to save the lightning trees, to upchuck their tremulous shimmering roots and plant them somewhere the son of man wouldn't find them. Instead it was imprisoned, captured by prehuman magic and trapped to do time for a sin so old it had forgotten what it was.

So now it tumbled and plunged, hated and hating. It changed colors like a fiendish rainbow: mid-flame blue, muscle red, terror green, until the force of its fall bleached all its hues away and it became a pale scorching bolt of fire.

Thus the eucalyptus jinn fell to its inevitable dissolution, even as Gramps woke up, his heart pounding, eyes fogged and aching from the dream. He groped in the dark, found the lantern, and lit it. He was still shaking. He got up, went to his narrow window that looked out at the moon-drenched Bhati Gate a hundred yards away. The eight arches of the Mughal structure were black and lonely above the central arch. Gramps listened. Someone was moving in the shack next door. In the princess's home. He gazed at the mosque of Ghulam Rasool—a

legendary mystic known as the Master of Cats—on its left.

And he looked at the eucalyptus tree.

It soared higher than the gate, its wild armature pawing at the night, the oily scent of its leaves potent even at this distance. Gramps shivered, although heat was swelling from the ground from the first patter of raindrops. More smells crept into the room: dust, trash, verdure.

He backed away from the window, slipped his sandals on, dashed out of the house. He ran toward the tea stall but, before he could as much as cross the chicken yard up front, lightning unzipped the dark and the sky roared.

* * *

The blast of its fall could be heard for miles.

The eucalyptus exploded into a thousand pieces, the burning limbs crackling and sputtering in the thunderstorm that followed. More lightning splintered the night sky. Children shrieked, dreaming of twisted corridors with shadows wending past one another. Adults moaned as timeless gulfs shrank and pulsed behind their eyelids. The walled city thrashed in sweat-soaked sheets until the mullah climbed the minaret and screamed his predawn call.

In the morning the smell of ash and eucalyptol hung around the crisped boughs. The princess sobbed as she gazed at her buckled tin roof and smashed stall. Shards of china, plywood, clay, and charred wicker twigs lay everywhere.

The laborers and steel workers rubbed their chins.

"Well, good riddance," said Alamdin electrician, father of the injured boy whose possession had ultimately proved fleeting. Alamdin fingered a hole in his string vest. "Although I'm sorry for your loss, bibi. Perhaps the government will give you a monthly pension, being that you're royal descent and all."

Princess Zeenat's nose stud looked dull in the gray after-storm light. Her shirt was torn at the back, where a fragment of wood had bitten her as she scoured the wreckage.

"He was supposed to protect us," she murmured to the tree's remains: a black stump that poked from the earth like a singed umbilicus, and the roots lapping madly at her feet. "To give us shade

and blessed sanctuary." Her grimed finger went for the nose stud and wrenched it out. "Instead—" She backpedaled and slumped at the foot of her shack's door. "Oh, my sisters. My sisters."

Tutting uncomfortably, the men drifted away, abandoning the pauper princess and her Mughal siblings. The women huddled together, a bevy of chukars stunned by a blood moon. Their shop was gone, the tree was gone. Princess Zeenat hugged her sisters and with a fierce light in her eyes whispered to them.

Over the next few days Gramps stood at Bhati Gate, watching the girls salvage timber, china, and clay. They washed and scrubbed their copper pots. Heaved out the tin sheet from the debris and dragged it to the foundries. Looped the remaining wicker into small bundles and sold it to basket weavers inside the walled city.

Gramps and a few past patrons offered to help. The Mughal women declined politely.

"But I can help, I really can," Gramps said, but the princess merely knitted her eyebrows, cocked her head, and stared at Gramps until he turned and fled.

The Municipality officer tapped at their door one Friday after Juma prayers.

"Condolences, bibi," he said. "My countless apologies. We should've cut it down before this happened."

"It's all right." The princess rolled the gold stud tied in a hemp necklace around her neck between two fingers. Her face was tired but tranquil. "It was going to happen one way or the other."

The officer picked at his red birthmark. "I meant your shop."

"We had good times here"—she nodded—"but my family's long overdue for a migration. We're going to go live with my cousin. He has an orange-and-fig farm in Mansehra. We'll find plenty to do."

The man ran his fingernail down the edge of her door. For the first time Gramps saw how his eyes never stayed on the princess. They drifted toward her face, then darted away as if the flush of her skin would sear them if they lingered. Warmth slipped around Gramps's neck, up his scalp, and across his face until his own flesh burned.

"Of course," the officer said. "Of course," and he turned and trudged to the skeletal stump. Already crows had marked the area with their pecking, busily creating a roost of the fallen tree. Soon they would be protected from horned owls and other birds of prey, they thought. But Gramps and Princess Zeenat knew better.

There was no protection here.

The officer cast one long look at the Mughal family, stepped around the stump, and walked away.

Later, the princess called to Gramps. He was sitting on the mosque's steps, shaking a brass bowl, pretending to be a beggar. He ran over, the coins jingling in his pocket.

"I know you saw something," she said once they were seated on the hemp charpoy in her shack. "I could see it in your face when you offered your help."

Gramps stared at her.

"That night," she persisted, "when the lightning hit the tree." She leaned forward, her fragrance of tea leaves and ash and cardamom filling his nostrils. "What did you see?"

"Nothing," he said and began to get up.

She grabbed his wrist. "Sit," she said. Her left hand shot out and pressed something into his palm. Gramps leapt off the charpoy. There was an electric sensation in his flesh; his hair crackled. He opened his fist and looked at the object.

It was her nose stud. The freshly polished gold shimmered in the dingy shack.

Gramps touched the stud with his other hand and withdrew it. "It's so cold."

The princess smiled, a bright thing that lit up the shack. Full of love, sorrow, and relief. But relief at what? Gramps sat back down, gripped the charpoy's posts, and tugged its torn hemp strands nervously.

"My family will be gone by tonight," the princess said.

And even though he'd been expecting this for days, it still came as a shock to Gramps. The imminence of her departure took his breath away. All he could do was wobble his head.

"Once we've left, the city might come to uproot that stump." The princess glanced over her shoulder toward the back of the room where shadows lingered. "If they try, do you promise you'll dig under it?" She rose and peered into the dimness, her eyes gleaming like jewels.

"Dig under the tree? Why?"

"Something lies there which, if you dig it up, you'll keep to

yourself." Princess Zeenat swiveled on her heels. "Which you will hide in a safe place and never tell a soul about."

"Why?"

"Because that's what the fakir told my grandfather. Something old and secret rests under that tree and it's not for human eyes." She turned and walked to the door.

Gramps said, "Did you ever dig under it?"

She shook her head without looking back. "I didn't need to. As long as the tree stood, there was no need for me to excavate secrets not meant for me."

"And the gold stud? Why're you giving it away?"

"It comes with the burden."

"What burden? What is under that tree?"

The princess half turned. She stood in a nimbus of midday light, her long muscled arms hanging loosely, fingers playing with the place in the hemp necklace where once her family heirloom had been; and despite the worry lines and the callused hands and her uneven, grimy fingernails, she was beautiful.

Somewhere close, a brick truck unloaded its cargo and in its sudden thunder what the princess said was muffled and nearly inaudible. Gramps thought later it might have been, "The map to the memory of heaven."

But that of course couldn't be right.

* * *

"The princess and her family left Lahore that night," said Gramps. "This was in the fifties and the country was too busy recovering from Partition and picking up its own pieces to worry about a Mughal princess disappearing from the pages of history. So no one cared. Except me."

He sank back into the armchair and began to rock.

"She or her sisters ever come back?" I said, pushing myself off the floor with my knuckles. "What happened to them?"

Gramps shrugged. "What happens to all girls. Married their cousins in the north, I suppose. Had large families. They never returned to Lahore, see?"

"And the jinn?"

Gramps bent and poked his ankle with a finger. It left a shallow

dimple. "I guess he died or flew away once the lightning felled the tree."

"What was under the stump?"

"How should I know?"

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't dig it up. No one came to remove the stump, so I never got a chance to take out whatever was there. Anyway, bache, you really should be going. It's late."

I glanced at my Star Wars watch. Luke's saber shone fluorescent across the Roman numeral two. I was impressed Mama hadn't returned to scold me to bed. I arched my back to ease the stiffness and looked at him with one eye closed. "You're seriously telling me you didn't dig up the secret?"

"I was scared," said Gramps, and gummed a fiber bar. "Look, I was told not to remove it if I didn't have to, so I didn't. Those days we listened to our elders, see?" He grinned, delighted with this unexpected opportunity to rebuke.

"But that's cheating," I cried. "The gold stud. The jinn's disappearance. You've explained nothing. That ... that's not a good story at all. It just leaves more questions."

"All good stories leave questions. Now go on, get out of here. Before your mother yells at us both."

He rose and waved me toward the door, grimacing and rubbing his belly—heartburn from Hanif Uncle's party food? I slipped out and shut the door behind me. Already ghazal music was drifting out: *Ranjish hi sahih dil hi dukhanay ke liye aa*. Let it be heartbreak; come if just to hurt me again. I knew the song well. Gramps had worn out so many cassettes that Apna Bazaar ordered them in bulk just for him, Mama joked.

I went to my room, undressed, and for a long time tossed in the sheets, watching the moon outside my window. It was a supermoon kids at school had talked about, a magical golden egg floating near the horizon, and I wondered how many Mughal princes and princesses had gazed at it through the ages, holding hands with their lovers.

This is how the story of the Pauper Princess and the Eucalyptus Jinn comes to an end, I thought. In utter, infuriating oblivion.

I was wrong, of course.

* * *

In September 2013, Gramps had a sudden onset of chest pain and became short of breath. 911 was called, but by the time the medics came his heart had stopped and his extremities were mottled. Still they shocked him and injected him with epi-and-atropine and sped him to the hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival.

Gramps had really needed those water pills he'd refused until the end.

I was at Tufts teaching a course in comparative mythology when Baba called. It was a difficult year. I'd been refused tenure and a close friend had been fired over department politics. But when Baba asked me if I could come, I said of course. Gramps and I hadn't talked in years after I graduated from Florida State and moved to Massachusetts, but it didn't matter. There would be a funeral and a burial and a reception for the smattering of relatives who lived within drivable distance. I, the only grandchild, must be there.

Sara wanted to go with me. It would be a good gesture, she said.

"No," I said. "It would be a terrible gesture. Baba might not say anything, but the last person he'd want at Gramps's funeral is my white girlfriend. Trust me."

Sara didn't let go of my hand. Her fingers weren't dainty like some women's—you're afraid to squeeze them lest they shatter like glass—but they were soft and curled easily around mine. "You'll come back soon, won't you?"

"Of course. Why'd you ask?" I looked at her.

"Because," she said kindly, "you're going home." Her other hand plucked at a hair on my knuckle. She smiled, but there was a ghost of worry pinching the corner of her lips. "Because sometimes I can't read you."

We stood in the kitchenette facing each other. I touched Sara's chin. In the last few months there had been moments when things had been a bit hesitant, but nothing that jeopardized what we had.

"I'll be back," I said.

We hugged and kissed and whispered things I don't remember now. Eventually we parted and I flew to Florida, watching the morning landscape tilt through the plane windows. Below, the Charles gleamed like steel, then fell away until it was a silver twig in a hard land; and I thought, *The lightning trees are dying*.

Then we were past the waters and up and away, and the thought receded like the river.

We buried Gramps in Orlando Memorial Gardens under a row of pines. He was pale and stiff limbed, nostrils stuffed with cotton, the white shroud rippling in the breeze. I wished, like all fools rattled by late epiphanies, that I'd had more time with him. I said as much to Baba, who nodded.

"He would have liked that," Baba said. He stared at the gravestone with the epitaph *I have glimpsed the truth of the Great Unseen* that Gramps had insisted be written below his name. A verse from Rumi. "He would have liked that very much."

We stood in silence and I thought of Gramps and the stories he took with him that would stay untold forever. There's a funny thing about teaching myth and history: you realize in the deep of your bones that you'd be lucky to become a mote of dust, a speck on the bookshelf of human existence. The more tales you preserve, the more claims to immortality you can make.

After the burial we went home and Mama made us chicken karahi and basmati rice. It had been ages since I'd had home-cooked Pakistani food and the spice and garlicky taste knocked me back a bit. I downed half a bowl of fiery gravy and fled to Gramps's room where I'd been put up. Where smells of his cologne and musty clothes and his comings and goings still hung like a memory of old days.

In the following week Baba and I talked. More than we had in ages. He asked me about Sara with a glint in his eyes. I said we were still together. He grunted.

"Thousands of suitable Pakistani girls," he began to murmur, and Mama shushed him.

In Urdu half-butchered from years of disuse I told them about Tufts and New England. Boston Commons, the Freedom Trail with its dozen cemeteries and royal burial grounds, the extremities of weather; how fall spun gold and rubies and amethyst from its foliage. Baba listened, occasionally wincing, as he worked on a broken power drill from his toolbox. It had been six years since I'd seen him and Mama, and the reality of their aging was like a gut punch. Mama's hair was silver, but at least her skin retained a youthful glow. Baba's fistful of beard was completely white, the hollows of his eyes deeper and darker. His fingers

were swollen from rheumatoid arthritis he'd let fester for years because he couldn't afford insurance.

"You really need to see a doctor," I said.

"I have one. I go to the community health center in Leesburg, you know."

"Not a free clinic. You need to see a specialist."

"I'm fifty-nine. Six more years and then." He pressed the power button on the drill and it roared to life. "Things will change," he said cheerfully.

I didn't know what to say. I had offered to pay his bills before. The handyman's son wasn't exactly rich, but he was grown up now and could help his family out.

Baba would have none of it. I didn't like it, but what could I do? He had pushed me away for years. *Get out of here while you can*, he'd say. He marched me to college the same way he would march me to Sunday classes at Clermont Islamic Center. *Go on*, he said outside the mosque, as I clutched the siparas to my chest. *Memorize the Quran. If you don't, who will?*

Was that why I hadn't returned home until Gramps's death? Even then I knew there was more. Home was a morass where I would sink. I had tried one or two family holidays midway through college. They depressed me, my parents' stagnation, their world where nothing changed. The trailer park, its tired residents, the dead-leaf-strewn grounds that always seemed to get muddy and wet and never clean. A strange lethargy would settle on me here, a leaden feeling that left me cold and shaken. Visiting home became an ordeal filled with guilt at my indifference. I was new to the cutthroat world of academia then and bouncing from one adjunct position to another was taking up all my time anyway.

I stopped going back. It was easier to call, make promises, talk about how bright my prospects were in the big cities. And with Gramps even phone talk was useless. He couldn't hear me, and he wouldn't put on those damn hearing aids.

So now I was living thousands of miles away with a girl Baba had never met.

I suppose I must've been hurt at his refusal of my help. The next few days were a blur between helping Mama with cleaning out Gramps's room and keeping up with the assignments my undergrads were emailing me even though I was on leave. A trickle of relatives and friends came, but to my relief Baba took over the hosting duties and let me sort through the piles of journals and tomes Gramps had amassed.

It was an impressive collection. Dozens of Sufi texts and religious treatises in different languages: Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, Punjabi, Turkish. Margins covered with Gramps's neat handwriting. I didn't remember seeing so many books in his room when I used to live here.

I asked Baba. He nodded.

"Gramps collected most of these after you left." He smiled. "I suppose he missed you."

I showed him the books. "Didn't you say he was having memory trouble? I remember Mama being worried about him getting dementia last time I talked. How could he learn new languages?"

"I didn't know he knew half these languages. Urdu and Punjabi he spoke and read fluently, but the others—" He shrugged.

Curious, I went through a few line notes. Thoughtful speculation on ontological and existential questions posed by the mystic texts. These were not the ramblings of a senile mind. Was Gramps's forgetfulness mere aging? Or had he written most of these before he began losing his marbles?

"Well, he did have a few mini strokes," Mama said when I asked. "Sometimes he'd forget where he was. Talk about Lahore, and oddly, Mansehra. It's a small city in Northern Pakistan," she added when I raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps he had friends there when he was young."

I looked at the books, ran my finger along their spines. It would be fun, nostalgic, to go through them at leisure, read Rumi's couplets and Hafiz's *Diwan*. I resolved to take the books with me. Just rent a car and drive up north with my trunk rattling with a cardboard box full of Gramps's manuscripts.

Then one drizzling morning I found a yellowed, dog-eared notebook under an old rug in his closet. Gramps's journal.

* * *

Before I left Florida I went to Baba. He was crouched below the kitchen sink, twisting a long wrench back and forth between the pipes, grunting. I waited until he was done, looked him in the eye, and said, "Did

Gramps ever mention a woman named Zeenat Begum?"

Baba tossed the wrench into the toolbox. "Isn't that the woman in the fairy tale he used to tell? The pauper Mughal princess?"

"Yes."

"Sure he mentioned her. About a million times."

"But not as someone you might have known in real life?"

"No."

Across the kitchen I watched the door of Gramps's room. It was firmly closed. Within hung the portrait of the brown-eyed woman in the orange dopatta with her knowing half smile. She had gazed down at my family for decades, offering us that mysterious silver cup. There was a lump in my throat but I couldn't tell if it was anger or sorrow.

Baba was watching me, his swollen fingers tapping at the corner of his mouth. "Are you all right?"

I smiled, feeling the artifice of it stretch my skin like a mask. "Have you ever been to Turkey?"

"Turkey?" He laughed. "Sure. Right after I won the lottery and took that magical tour in the Caribbean."

I ignored the jest. "Does the phrase 'Courtesan of the Mughals' mean anything to you?"

He seemed startled. A smile of such beauty lit up his face that he looked ten years younger. "Ya Allah, I haven't heard that in forty years. Where'd you read it?"

I shrugged.

"It's Lahore. My city. That's what they called it in those books I read as a kid. Because it went through so many royal hands." He laughed, eyes gleaming with delight and mischief, and lowered his voice. "My friend Habib used to call it *La-whore*. The Mughal hooker. Now for Allah's sake, don't go telling your mother on me." His gaze turned inward. "Habib. God, I haven't thought of him in ages."

"Baba." I gripped the edge of the kitchen table. "Why don't you ever go back to Pakistan?"

His smile disappeared. He turned around, slammed the lid of his toolbox, and hefted it up. "Don't have time."

"You spent your teenage years there, didn't you? You obviously have some attachment to the city. Why didn't you take us back for a visit?"

"What would we go back to? We have no family there. My old

friends are probably dead." He carried the toolbox out into the October sun, sweat gleaming on his forearms. He placed it in the back of his battered truck and climbed into the driver's seat. "I'll see you later."

I looked at him turn the keys in the ignition with fingers that shook. He was off to hammer sparkling new shelves in other people's garages, replace squirrel-rent screens on their lanais, plant magnolias and palms in their golfing communities, and I could say nothing. I thought I understood why he didn't want to visit the town where he grew up.

I thought about Mansehra and Turkey. If Baba really didn't know and Gramps had perfected the deception by concealing the truth within a lie, there was nothing I could do that wouldn't change, and possibly wreck, my family.

All good stories leave questions, Gramps had said to me.

You bastard, I thought.

"Sure," I said and watched my baba pull out and drive away, leaving a plumage of dust in his wake.

* * *

I called Sara when I got home. "Can I see you?" I said as soon as she picked up.

She smiled. I could hear her smile. "That bad, huh?"

"No, it was all right. I just really want to see you."

"It's one in the afternoon. I'm on campus." She paused. In the background birds chittered along with students. Probably the courtyard. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yes. Maybe." I upended the cardboard box on the carpet. The tower of books stood tall and uneven like a dwarf tree. "Come soon as you can, okay?"

"Sure. Love you."

"Love you too."

We hung up. I went to the bathroom and washed my face. I rubbed my eyes and stared at my reflection. It bared its teeth.

"Shut up," I whispered. "He was senile. Must have been completely insane. I don't believe a word of it."

But when Sara came that evening, her red hair streaming like fall leaves, her freckled cheeks dimpling when she saw me, I told her I believed, I really did. She sat and listened and stroked the back of my

hand when it trembled as I lay in her lap and told her about Gramps and his journal.

It was an assortment of sketches and scribbling. A talented hand had drawn pastures, mountaintops, a walled city shown as a semicircle with half a dozen doors and hundreds of people bustling within, a farmhouse, and rows of fig and orange trees. Some of these were miniatures: images drawn as scenes witnessed by an omniscient eye above the landscape. Others were more conventional. All had one feature in common: a man and woman present in the center of the scenery going about the mundanities of their lives.

In one scene the man sat in a mosque's courtyard, performing ablution by the wudu tap. He wore a kurta and shalwar and Peshawari sandals. He was in his early twenties, lean, thickly bearded, with deep-set eyes that watched you impassively. In his hands he held a squalling baby whose tiny wrinkled fist was clenched around a stream of water from the tap. In the background a female face, familiar but older than I remembered, loomed over the courtyard wall, smiling at the pair.

The man was unmistakably Gramps, and the woman ...

"Are you kidding me?" Sara leaned over and stared at the picture. "That's the woman in the portrait hanging in his room?"

"He lied to me. To us all. She was my grandma."

"Who is she?"

"Princess Zeenat Begum," I said quietly.

Gramps had narrated the story of his life in a series of sketches and notes. The writing was in third person, but it was clear that the protagonist was he.

I imagined him going about the daily rituals of his life in Lahore after Princess Zeenat left. Dropping out of school, going to his father's shop in the Niche of Calligraphers near Bhati Gate, learning the art of khattati, painting billboards in red and yellow, fusing the ancient art with new slogans and advertisements. Now he's a lanky brown teenager wetting the tip of his brush, pausing to look up into the sky with its sweeping blue secrets. Now he's a tall man, yanking bird feathers and cobwebs away from a eucalyptus stump, digging under it in the deep of the night with a flashlight in his hand.

And now—he's wiping his tears, filling his knapsack with

necessaries, burying his newly discovered treasure under a scatter of clothes, hitching the bag up his shoulders, and heading out into the vast unseen. All this time, there's only one image in his head and one desire.

"He was smitten with her. Probably had been for a long time without knowing it," I said. "Ruthlessly marked. His youth never had a chance against the siren call of history."

"Hold on a sec. What was under the tree again?" Sara said.

I shook my head. "He doesn't say."

"So he lied again? About not digging it up?"

"Yes."

"Who was he looking for?"

I looked at her. "My grandmother and her sisters."

We read his notes and envisioned Gramps's journey. Abandoning his own family, wandering his way into the mountains, asking everyone he met about a fig-and-orange farm on a quiet fir-covered peak in the heart of Mansehra. He was magnetized to the displaced Mughal family not because of their royalty, but the lack thereof.

And eventually he found them.

"He stayed with them for years, helping the pauper princess's uncle with farm work. In the summer he calligraphed Quranic verses on the minarets of local mosques. In wintertime he drew portraits for tourists and painted road signs. As years passed, he married Zeenat Begum—whose portrait one summer evening he drew and painted, carried with him, and lied about—and became one of them."

I looked up at Sara, into her gentle green eyes glittering above me. She bent and kissed my nose.

"They were happy for a while, he and his new family," I said, "but then, like in so many lives, tragedy came knocking at their door."

Eyes closed, I pictured the fire: a glowering creature clawing at their windows and door, crisping their apples, billowing flames across the barn to set their hay bales ablaze. The whinnying of the horses, the frantic braying of cattle and, buried in the din, human screams.

"All three Mughal women died that night," I murmured. "Gramps and his two-year-old son were the only survivors of the brushfire. Broken and bereft, Gramps left Mansehra with the infant and went to Karachi. There he boarded a freighter that took them to Iran, then Turkey, where a sympathetic shopkeeper hired him in his rug shop.

Gramps and his son stayed there for four years."

What a strange life, I thought. I hadn't known my father had spent part of his childhood in Turkey and apparently neither had he. He remembered nothing. How old was he when they moved back? As I thought this, my heart constricted in my chest, filling my brain with the hum of my blood.

Sara's face was unreadable when I opened my eyes. "Quite a story, eh?" I said uneasily.

She scratched the groove above her lips with a pink fingernail. "So he digs up whatever was under the tree and it decides him. He leaves everything and goes off to marry a stranger. This is romantic bullshit. You know that, right?"

"I don't know anything."

"Left everything," she repeated. Her mouth was parted with wonder. "You think whatever he found under the stump survived the fire?"

"Presumably. But where he took it—who can say? Eventually, though, they returned home. To Lahore, when Gramps had recovered enough sanity, I guess. Where his father, now old, had closed shop. Gramps helped him reopen. Together they ran that design stall for years."

It must have been a strange time for Gramps, I thought. He loved his parents, but he hated Bhati. Even as he dipped his pen in ink and drew spirals and curlicues, his thoughts drew phantom pictures of those he had lost. Over the years, he came to loathe this art that unlocked so many memories inside him. And after his parents died he had neither heart nor imperative to keep going.

"He was done with the place, the shop, and Lahore. So when a friend offered to help him and his teenage son move to the States, Gramps agreed."

I turned my head and burrowed into Sara's lap. Her smell filled my brain: apple blossom, lipstick, and Sara.

She nuzzled my neck. The tip of her nose was cold. "He never talked to you about it? Never said what happened?"

"No."

"And you and your family had no idea about this artistic side of him? How's that possible?"

"Don't know," I said. "He worked at a 7-Eleven in Houston when he

and Baba first came here. Never did any painting or calligraphy, commissioned or otherwise. Maybe he just left all his talent, all his dreams in his hometown. Here, look at this."

I showed her the phrase that spiraled across the edges of a couple dozen pages: *My killer, my deceiver, the Courtesan of the Mughals.* "It's Lahore. He's talking about the city betraying him."

"How's that?"

I shrugged.

"How weird," Sara said. "Interesting how broken up his story is. As if he's trying to piece together his own life."

"Maybe that's what he was doing. Maybe he forced himself to forget the most painful parts."

"Lightning trees. Odd thing to say." She looked at me thoughtfully and put the journal away. "So, you're the last of the Mughals, huh?" She smiled to show she wasn't laughing.

I chortled for her. "Seems like it. The Pauper Prince of New England."

"Wow. You come with a certificate of authenticity?" She nudged her foot at the book tower. "Is it in there somewhere?"

It was getting late. Sara tugged at my shirt, and I got up and carried her to bed, where we celebrated my return with zest. Her face was beautiful in the snow shadows that crept in through the window.

"I love you, I love you," we murmured, enchanted with each other, drunk with belief in some form of eternity. The dark lay quietly beside us, and, smoldering in its heart, a rotating image.

A dim idea of what was to come.

* * *

I went through Gramps's notes. Many were in old Urdu, raikhta, which I wasn't proficient in. But I got the gist: discourses and rumination on the otherworldly.

Gramps was especially obsessed with Ibn Arabi's treatise on jinns in *The Meccan Revelations*. The Lofty Master Arabi says, wrote Gramps, that the meaning of the lexical root J-N-N in Arabic is 'concealed.' Jinn isn't just another created being ontologically placed between man and angel; it is the *entirety* of the hidden world.

"Isn't that fucking crazy?" I said to Sara. We were watching a rerun

of *Finding Neverland*, my knuckles caked with butter and flakes of popcorn. On the screen J. M Barrie's wife was beginning to be upset by the attention he lavished upon the children's mother, Sylvia. "It kills the traditional narrative of jinns in *A Thousand and One Nights*. If one were to pursue this train of thought, it would mean relearning the symbolism in this text and virtually all others."

Sara nodded, her gaze fixed on the TV. "Uh huh."

"Consider this passage: 'A thousand years before Darwin, Sufis described the evolution of man as rising from the inorganic state through plant and animal to human. But the mineral consciousness of man, that dim memory of being buried in the great stone mother, lives on."

Sara popped a handful of popcorn into her mouth. Munched.

I rubbed my hands together. "Jinns are carriers of that concealed memory, much like a firefly carries a memory of the primordial fire.' It's the oddest interpretation of jinns I've seen."

"Yeah, it's great." Sara shifted on the couch. "But can we please watch the movie?"

"Uh-huh."

I stared at the TV. Gramps thought jinns weren't devil-horned creatures bound to a lamp or, for that matter, a tree.

They were flickers of cosmic consciousness.

I couldn't get that image out of my head. Why was Gramps obsessed with this? How was this related to his life in Lahore? Something to do with the eucalyptus secret?

The next morning I went to Widener Library and dug up all I could about Arabi's and Ibn Taymeeyah's treatment of jinns. I read and pondered, went back to Gramps's notebooks, underlined passages in *The Meccan Revelations*, and walked the campus with my hands in my pockets and my heart in a world long dissipated.

"Arabi's cosmovision is staggering," I told Sara. We were sitting in a coffee shop downtown during lunch break. It was drizzling, just a gentle stutter of gray upon gray outside the window, but it made the brick buildings blush.

Sara sipped her mocha and glanced at her watch. She had to leave soon for her class.

"Consider life as a spark of consciousness. In Islamic cosmology the

jinn's intrinsic nature is that of wind and fire. Adam's—read, man's—nature is water and clay, which are more resistant than fire to cold and dryness. As the universe changes, so do the requirements for life's vehicle. Now it needs creatures more resistant and better adapted. Therefore, from the needs of sentient matter rose the invention that is us."

I clenched my hand into a fist. "This interpretation is pretty fucking genius. I mean, is it possible Gramps was doing real academic work? For example, had he discovered something in those textbooks that could potentially produce a whole new ideology of creation? Why, it could be the scholarly discovery of the century."

"Yes, it's great." She rapped her spoon against the edge of the table. Glanced at me, looked away.

"What?"

"Nothing. Listen, I gotta run, okay?" She gave me a quick peck on the cheek and slid out of her seat. At the door she hesitated, turned, and stood tapping her shoes, a waiting look in her eyes.

I dabbed pastry crumbs off my lips with a napkin. "Are you okay?"

Annoyance flashed in her face and vanished. "Never better." She pulled her jacket's hood over her head, yanked the door open, and strode out into the rain.

It wasn't until later that evening, when I was finalizing the spring calendar for my freshman class, that I realized I had forgotten our first-date anniversary.

Sara hadn't. There was a heart-shaped box with a pink bow sitting on the bed when I returned home. Inside was a note laying atop a box of Godiva Chocolates:

Happy Anniversary. May our next one be like your grandfather's fairy tales.

My eyes burned with lack of sleep. It was one in the morning and I'd had a long day at the university. Also, the hour-long apology to Sara had drained me. She had shaken her head and tried to laugh it off, but I took my time, deeming it a wise investment for the future.

I went to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of ice water. Kicked off my slippers, returned to the desk, and continued reading.

I hadn't lied to Sara. The implications of this new jinn mythology were tremendous. A new origin myth, a bastardized version of the Abrahamic creationist lore. Trouble was these conclusions were tenuous. Gramps had speculated more than logically derived them. Arabi himself had touched on these themes in an abstract manner. To produce a viable theory of this alternate history of the universe, I needed more details, more sources.

Suppose there were other papers, hidden manuscripts. Was it possible that the treasure Gramps had found under the eucalyptus stump was truly 'the map to the memory of heaven'? Ancient papers of cosmological importance never discovered?

"Shit, Gramps. Where'd you hide them?" I murmured.

His journal said he'd spent quite a bit of time in different places: Mansehra, Iran. Turkey, where he spent four years in a rug shop. The papers could really be anywhere.

My eyes were drawn to the phrase again: the Courtesan of the Mughals. I admired how beautiful the form and composition of the calligraphy was. Gramps had shaped the Urdu alphabet carefully into a flat design so that the conjoined words *Mughal* and *Courtesan* turned into an ornate rug. A calligram. The curves of the meem and ghain letters became the tassels and borders of the rug, the laam's seductive curvature its rippling belly.

Such artistry. One shape discloses another. A secret, symbolic relationship.

There, I thought. The secret hides in the city. The clues to the riddle of the eucalyptus treasure are in Lahore.

I spent the next few days sorting out my finances. Once I was satisfied that the trip was feasible, I began to make arrangements.

Sara stared at me when I told her. "Lahore? You're going to Lahore?" "Yes."

"To look for something your grandpa may or may not have left there fifty-some years ago?"

"Yes."

"You're crazy. I mean it's one thing to talk about a journal."

"I know. I still need to go."

"So you're telling me, not asking. Why? Why are you so fixed on this? You know that country isn't safe these days. What if something happens?" She crossed her arms, lifted her feet off the floor, and tucked them under her on the couch. She was shivering a little.

"Nothing's gonna happen. Look, whatever he left in Lahore, he

wanted me to see it. Why else write about it and leave it in his journal which he knew would be found one day? Don't you see? He was really writing to me."

"Well, that sounds self-important. Why not your dad? Also, why drop hints then? Why not just tell you straight up what it is?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Maybe he didn't want other people to find out."

"Or maybe he was senile. Look, I'm sorry, but this is crazy. You can't just fly off to the end of the world on a whim to look for a relic." She rubbed her legs. "It could take you weeks. Months. How much vacation time do you have left?"

"I'll take unpaid leave if I have to. Don't you see? I need to do this."

She opened her mouth, closed it. "Is this something you plan to keep doing?" she said quietly. "Run off each time anything bothers you."

"What?" I quirked my eyebrows. "Nothing's bothering me."

"No?" She jumped up from the couch and glared at me. "You've met my mother and Fanny, but I've never met your parents. You didn't take me to your grandfather's funeral. And since your return you don't seem interested in what we have, or once had. Are you *trying* to avoid talking about us? Are we still in love, Sal, or are we just getting by? Are we really together?"

"Of course we're together. Don't be ridiculous," I mumbled, but there was a constriction in my stomach. It wouldn't let me meet her eyes.

"Don't patronize me. You're obsessed with your own little world. Look, I have no problem with you giving time to your folks. Or your gramps's work. But we've been together for three years and you still find excuses to steer me away from your family. This cultural thing that you claim to resent, you seem almost proud of it. Do you see what I mean?"

"No." I was beginning to get a bit angry. "And I'm not sure you do either."

"You're lying. You know what I'm talking about."

"Do I? Okay, lemme try to explain what my problem is. Look at me, Sara. What do you see?"

She stared at me, shook her head. "I see a man who doesn't know he's lost."

"Wrong. You see a twenty-eight-year-old brown man living in a shitty apartment, doing a shitty job that doesn't pay much and has no hope of tenure. You see a man who can't fend for himself, let alone a wife and kids—"

"No one's asking you to—"

"—if he doesn't do something better with his life. But you go on believing all will be well if we trade families? Open your damn eyes." I leaned against the TV cabinet, suddenly tired. "All my life I was prudent. I planned and planned and gave up one thing for another. Moved here. Never looked back. Did whatever I could to be what I thought I needed to be. The archetypal fucking immigrant in the land of opportunities. But after Gramps died..." I closed my eyes, breathed, opened them. "I realize some things are worth more than that. Some things are worth going after."

"Some things, huh?" Sara half smiled, a trembling flicker that took me aback more than her words did. "Didn't your grandfather give up everything—his life, his family, his country—for love? And you're giving up ... love for ... what exactly? Shame? Guilt? Identity? A fucking manyenture in a foreign land?"

"You're wrong," I said. "I'm not—"

But she wasn't listening. Her chest hitched. Sara turned, walked into the bedroom, and gently closed the door, leaving me standing alone.

* * *

I stomped down Highland Avenue. It was mid-October and the oaks and silver maples were burning with fall. They blazed yellow and crimson. They made me feel sadder and angrier and more confused.

Had our life together always been this fragile? I wondered if I had missed clues that Sara felt this way. She always was more aware of bumps in our relationship. I recalled watching her seated at the desk marking student papers once, her beautiful, freckled face scrunched in a frown, and thinking she would never really be welcome in my parents' house. Mama would smile nervously if I brought her home and retreat into the kitchen. Baba wouldn't say a word and somehow that would be worse than an outraged rejection. And what would Gramps have done? I didn't know. My head was messed up. It had been since his death.

It was dusk when I returned home, the lights in our neighborhood

floating dreamily like gold sequins in black velvet.

Sara wasn't there.

The bed was made, the empty hangers in the closet pushed neatly together. On the coffee table in the living room under a Valentine mug was yet another note. She had become adept at writing me love letters.

I made myself a sandwich, sat in the dark, and picked at the bread. When I had mustered enough courage, I retrieved the note and began to read:

Salman,

I wrote tried to write this several times and each time my hand shook and made me write things I didn't want to. It sucks that we're such damn weaklings, the both of us. I'm stuck in love with you and you are with me. At least I hope so. At least that's the way I feel read you. But then I think about my mother and my heart begins racing.

You've met my family. Mom likes you. Fanny too. They think you're good for me. But you've never met my dad. You don't know why we never don't talk about him anymore.

He left Mom when Fanny and I were young. I don't remember him, although sometimes I think I can. When I close my eyes, I see this big, bulky shadow overwhelm the doorway of my room. There's this bittersweet smell, gin and sweat and tobacco. I remember not feeling afraid of him, for which I'm grateful.

But Dad left us Mom and he broke her. In especially bitter moments she would say it was another woman, but I don't think so. At least I never saw any proof of that in my mother's eyes when she talked about him. (In the beginning she talked a LOT about him.) I think he left her because he wanted more from life and Mom didn't understand pick that up. I think she didn't read his unhappiness in time. That's the vibe I get.

Does that excuse what he did? I don't think so. My mother's spent all her life trying to put us back together and she's done okay, but there are pieces of herself she wasn't able to find. In either me, or Fanny, or in anyone else.

I don't want that to happen to me. I don't want to end up like my mother. That's pretty much it. If you didn't love me, I'd understand. I'd be hurt, but I could live with it. But living with this uncertainty, never knowing when you might get that wanderlust I've seen in your eyes lately, is impossible for me. There's so much I want to say to you. Things you need to know if we're to have a future together. But the last thing I want to do is force you.

So I'm leaving. I'm going to stay at Fanny's. Think things through. It will be good for both of us. It will help me get my head straight and will let you do whatever you want to get your fucking demons out. So fly free. Go to Pakistan. Follow your goddamn heart or whatever. Just remember I won't wait all my life.

You know where to find me. Love, Sara

I put down the letter and stared out the window. Night rain drummed on the glass. I tapped my finger to its tune, fascinated by how difficult it was to keep time with it. A weight had settled on my chest and I couldn't push it off.

If an asshole weeps in the forest and no one is around to witness, is he still an asshole?

Nobody was there to answer.

* * *

For most of the fifteen-hour flight from New York to Lahore I was out. I hadn't realized how tired I was until I slumped into the economy seat and woke up half-dazed when the flight attendant gently shook my shoulder.

"Lahore, sir." She smiled when I continued to stare at her. The lipstick smudge on her teeth glistened. "Allama Iqbal International Airport."

"Yes," I said, struggling up and out. The plane was empty, the seats gaping. "How's the weather?"

"Cold. Bit misty. Fog bank's coming, they said. Early this year."

That didn't sound promising. I thanked her and hurried out, my carry-on clattering against the aisle armrests.

I exited the airport into the arms of a mid-November day and the air was fresh but full of teeth. The pale sea-glass sky seemed to wrap around the airport. I hailed a cab and asked for Bhati Gate. As we sped out of the terminal, whiteness seethed on the runway and blanketed the horizon. The flight attendant was right. Fog was on the way.

At a busy traffic signal the cabbie took a right. Past army barracks, the redbrick Aitchison College, and colonial-era Jinnah Gardens we went, until the roads narrowed and we hiccuped through a sea of motorbikes, rickshaws, cars, and pedestrians. *TERRORISTS ARE ENEMIES OF PEACE*, said a large black placard on a wall that jutted out left of a fifty-foot high stone gate. The looming structure had a massive central arch with eight small arches above it. It had a painting of the Kaaba on the right and Prophet Muhammad's shrine on the left with

vermilion roses embossed in the middle. Another sign hung near it: *WELCOME TO OLD LAHORE BY THE GRACE OF ALLAH*.

We were at Bhati Gate.

The cab rolled to a stop in front of Kashi Manzil. A tall, narrow historical-home-turned-hotel with a facade made of ochre and azure faience tiles. A wide terrace ran around the second floor and a small black copper pot hung from a nail on the edge of the doorway awning.

I recognized the superstition. Black to ward off black. Protection against the evil eye.

Welcome to Gramps's world, I thought.

I looked down the street. Roadside bakeries, paan-and-cigarette shops, pirated DVD stalls, a girls' school with peeling walls, and dust, dust everywhere; but my gaze of course went to Bhati and its double row of arches.

This was the place my grandfather had once gazed at, lived by, walked through. Somewhere around here used to be a tea stall run by a Mughal princess. Someplace close had been a eucalyptus from which a kid had fallen and gashed his head. A secret that had traveled the globe had come here with Gramps and awaited me in some dingy old alcove.

That stupid wanderlust in your eyes.

Sara's voice in my brain was a gentle rebuke.

Later, I thought fiercely. Later.

* * *

The next day I began my search.

I had planned to start with the tea stalls. Places like this have long memories. Old Lahore was more or less the city's ancient downtown and people here wouldn't forget much. Least of all a Mughal princess who ran a tea shop. Gramps's journal didn't much touch on his life in the walled city. I certainly couldn't discern any clues about the location of the eucalyptus treasure.

Where did you hide it, old man? Your shack? A friend's place? Under that fucking tree stump?

If Gramps was correct and the tree had fallen half a century ago, that landmark was probably irretrievable. Gramps's house seemed the next logical place. Trouble was I didn't know where Gramps had lived. Before I left, I'd called Baba and asked him. He wasn't helpful.

"It's been a long time, son. Fifty years. Don't tax an old man's memory. You'll make me senile."

When I pressed, he reluctantly gave me the street where they used to live and his childhood friend Habib's last name.

"I don't remember our address, but I remember the street. Ask anyone in Hakiman Bazaar for Khajoor Gali. They'll know it."

Encircled by a wall raised by Akbar the Great, Old Lahore was bustling and dense. Two hundred thousand people lived in an area less than one square mile. Breezes drunk with the odor of cardamom, grease, and tobacco. The place boggled my mind as I strolled around taking in the niche pharmacies, foundries, rug shops, kite shops, and baked mud eateries.

I talked to everyone I encountered. The tea stall owner who poured Peshawari kahva in my clay cup. The fruit seller who handed me sliced oranges and guavas and frowned when I mentioned the pauper princess. Rug merchants, cigarette vendors, knife sellers. No one had heard of Zeenat Begum. Nobody knew of a young man named Sharif or his father who ran a calligraphy-and-design stall.

"Not around my shop, sahib." They shook their heads and turned away.

I located Khajoor Gali—a winding narrow alley once dotted by palm trees (or so the locals claimed) now home to dusty ramshackle buildings hunched behind open manholes—and went door to door, asking. No luck. An aged man with henna-dyed hair and a shishamwood cane stared at me when I mentioned Baba's friend Habib Ataywala, and said, "Habib. Ah, he and his family moved to Karachi several years ago. No one knows where."

"How about a eucalyptus tree?" I asked. "An ancient eucalyptus that used to stand next to Bhati Gate?"

Nope.

Listlessly I wandered, gazing at the mist lifting off the edges of the streets and billowing toward me. On the third day it was like slicing through a hundred rippling white shrouds. As night fell and fairy lights blinked on the minarets of Lahore's patron saint Data Sahib's shrine across the road from Bhati, I felt displaced. Depersonalized. I was a mote drifting in a slat of light surrounded by endless dark. Gramps was correct. Old Lahore had betrayed him. It was as if the city had

deliberately rescinded all memory or trace of his family and the princess's. Sara was right. Coming here was a mistake. My life since Gramps's death was a mistake. Seeing this world as it *was* rather than through the fabular lens of Gramps's stories was fucking enlightening.

In this fog, the city's fresh anemia, I thought of things I hadn't thought about in years. The time Gramps taught me to perform the salat. The first time he brought my palms together to form the supplicant's cup. Be the beggar at Allah's door, he told me gently. He loves humility. It's in the mendicant's bowl that the secrets of Self are revealed. In the tashahuud position Gramps's index finger would shoot from a clenched fist and flutter up and down.

"This is how we beat the devil on the head," he said.

But what devil was I trying to beat? I'd been following a ghost and hoping for recognition from the living.

By the fifth day I'd made up my mind. I sat shivering on a wooden bench and watched my breath flute its way across Khajoor Gali as my finger tapped my cell phone and thousands of miles away Sara's phone rang.

She picked up almost immediately. Her voice was wary. "Sal?"

"Hey."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

A pause. "You didn't call before you left."

"I thought you didn't want me to."

"I was worried sick. One call after you landed would've been nice."

I was surprised but pleased. After so much disappointment, her concern was welcome. "Sorry."

"Jesus. I was..." She trailed off, her breath harsh and rapid in my ear. "Find the magic treasure yet?"

"No."

"Pity." She seemed distracted now. In the background water was running. "How long will you stay there?"

"I honest to God don't know, but I'll tell you this. I'm fucking exhausted."

"I'm sorry." She didn't sound sorry. I smiled a little.

"Must be around five in the morning there. Why're you up?" I said.

"I was ... worried, I guess. Couldn't sleep. Bad dreams." She sighed.

I imagined her rubbing her neck, her long fingers curling around the muscles, kneading them, and I wanted to touch her.

"I miss you," I said.

Pause. "Yeah. Me too. It's a mystery how much I'm used to you being around. And now that..." She stopped and exhaled. "Never mind." "What?"

"Nothing." She grunted. "This damn weather. I think I'm coming down with something. Been headachy all day."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. It'll go away. Listen, I'm gonna go take a shower. You have fun."

Was that reproach? "Yeah, you too. Be safe."

"Sure." She sounded as if she were pondering. "Hey, I discovered something. Been meaning to tell you, but ... you know."

"I'm all ears."

"Remember what your gramps said in the story. Lightning trees?" "Yes."

"Well, lemme text it to you. I mentioned the term to a friend at school and turned out he recognized it too. From a lecture we both attended at MIT years ago about fractal similarities and diffusion-limited aggregation."

"Fractal what?" My phone beeped. I removed it from my ear and looked at the screen. A high-definition picture of a man with what looked like a tree-shaped henna tattoo on his left shoulder branching all the way down his arm. Pretty.

I put her on speakerphone. "Why're you sending me pictures of henna tattoos?"

She was quiet, then started laughing. "That didn't even occur to me, but, yeah, it does look like henna art."

"It isn't?"

"Nope. What you're seeing is a Lichtenberg figure created when branching electrical charges run through insulating material. Glass, resin, human skin—you name it. This man was hit by lightning and survived with this stamped on his flesh."

"What?"

"Yup. It can be created in any modern lab using nonconducting plates. Called electric treeing. Or lightning trees."

The lightning trees are dying. "Holy shit," I said softly.

"Yup."

I tapped the touch screen to zoom in for a closer look. "How could Gramps know about this? If he made up the stories, how the fuck would he know something like this?"

"No idea. Maybe he knew someone who had this happen to them."

"But what does it mean?"

"The heck should I know. Anyways, I gotta go. Figured it might help you with whatever you're looking for."

"Thanks."

She hung up. I stared at the pattern on the man's arm. It was reddish, fernlike, and quite detailed. The illusion was so perfect I could even see buds and leaves. A breathtaking electric foliage. A map of lightning.

A memory of heaven.

* * *

I went to sleep early that night.

At five in the morning the Fajar call to prayer woke me up. I lay in bed watching fog drift through the skylight window, listening to the mullah's sonorous azaan, and suddenly I jolted upright.

The mosque of Ghulam Rasool, the Master of Cats.

Wasn't that what Gramps had told me a million years ago? That there was a mosque near Bhati Gate that faced his house?

I hadn't seen any mosques around.

I slipped on clothes and ran outside.

The morning smelled like burnished metal. The light was soft, the shape of early risers gentle in the mist-draped streets. A rooster crowed in the next alley. It had drizzled the night before and the ground was muddy. I half slipped, half leapt my way toward the mullah's voice rising and falling like an ocean heard in one's dream.

Wisps of white drifted around me like twilit angels. The azaan had stopped. I stared at the narrow doorway next to a rug merchant's shop ten feet away. Its entrance nearly hidden by an apple tree growing in the middle of the sidewalk, the place was tucked well away from traffic. Green light spilled from it. Tiny replicas of the Prophet's Mosque in

Medina and Rumi's shrine in Turkey were painted above the door.

Who would put Rumi here when Data Sahib's shrine was just across the road?

I took off my shoes and entered the mosque.

A tiny room with a low ceiling set with zero-watt green bulbs. On reed mats the congregation stood shoulder to shoulder in two rows behind a smallish man in shalwar kameez and a turban. The Imam sahib clicked the mute button on the standing microphone in front, touched his earlobes, and Fajar began.

Feeling oddly guilty, I sat down in a corner. Looked around the room. Ninety-nine names of Allah and Muhammad, prayers and Quranic verses belching from the corners, twisting and pirouetting across the walls. Calligrams in the shape of a mynah bird, a charging lion, a man prostrate in sajdah, his hands out before him shaping a beggar's bowl filled with alphabet vapors. Gorgeous work.

Salat was over. The namazis began to leave. Imam sahib turned. In his hands he held a tally counter for tasbih. *Click click!* Murmuring prayers, he rose and hobbled toward me.

"Assalam-o-alaikum. May I help you, son?" he said in Urdu.

"Wa Laikum Assalam. Yes," I said. "Is this Masjid Ghulam Rasool?"

He shook his head. He was in his seventies at least, long noorani beard, white hair sticking out of his ears. His paunch bulged through the striped-flannel kameez flowing past his ankles. "No. That mosque was closed and martyred in the nineties. Sectarian attacks. Left a dozen men dead. Shia mosque, you know. Used to stand in Khajoor Gali, I believe."

"Oh." I told myself I'd been expecting this, but my voice was heavy with disappointment. "I'm sorry to bother you then. I'll leave you to finish up."

"You're not local, son. Your salam has an accent," he said. "Amreekan, I think. You look troubled. How can I help you?" He looked at me, took his turban off. He had a pale scar near his left temple shaped like a climbing vine.

I watched him. His hair was silver. His sharp eyes were blue, submerged in a sea of wrinkles. "I was looking for a house. My late grandfather's. He lived close to the mosque, next door to a lady named Zeenat Begum. She used to run a tea stall."

"Zeenat Begum." His eyes narrowed, the blues receding into shadow. "And your grandfather's name?" he asked, watching the last of the worshippers rise to his feet.

"Sharif. Muhammad Sharif."

The oddest feeling, a sort of déjà vu, came over me. Something had changed in the air of the room. Even the last namazi felt it and glanced over his shoulder on his way out.

"Who did you say you were again?" Imam sahib said quietly.

"Salman Ali Zaidi."

"I see. Yes, I do believe I can help you out. This way."

He turned around, limping, and beckoned me to follow. We exited the mosque. He padlocked it, parted the bead curtain in the doorway of the rug shop next door, stepped in.

When I hesitated, he paused, the tasbih counter clicking in his hands. "Come in, son. My place is your place."

I studied the rug shop. It was located between the mosque and a souvenir stall. The awning above the arched doorway was gray, the brick voussoirs and keystone of the arch faded and peeling. The plaque by the entrance said Karavan Kilim.

Kilim is a kind of Turkish carpet. What was a kilim shop doing in Old Lahore?

He led me through a narrow well-lit corridor into a hardwood-floored showroom. Mounds of neatly folded rugs sat next to walls covered in rectangles of rich tapestries, carpets, and pottery-filled shelves. Stunning illustrations and calligraphy swirled across the high wooden ceiling. Here an entranced dervish whirled in blue, one palm toward the sky and one to the ground. There a crowd haloed with golden light held out dozens of drinking goblets, an Urdu inscription spiraling into a vast cloud above their heads: *They hear his hidden hand pour truth in the heavens*.

A bald middle-aged man dressed in a checkered brown half-sleeve shirt sat behind a desk. Imam Sahib nodded at him. "My nephew Khalid."

Khalid and I exchanged pleasantries. Imam sahib placed the tasbih counter and his turban on the desk. I gazed around me. "Imam sahib," I said. "This is a Turkish carpet shop. You run an imported rug business in your spare time?"

"Turkish design, yes, but not imported. My apprentices make them right here in the walled city." Without looking back, he began walking. "You can call me Bashir."

We went to the back of the shop, weaving our way through rug piles into a storeroom lit by sunlight from a narrow window. Filled to the ceiling with mountains of fabric rolls and broken looms, the room smelled of damp, rotten wood, and tobacco. In a corner was a large box covered with a bedsheet. Bashir yanked the sheet away and a puff of dust bloomed and clouded the air.

"Sharif," said the merchant Imam. "He's dead, huh?"

"You knew him?"

"Of course. He was friends with the Mughal princess. The lady who used to give us tea."

"How do you know that?" I stared at him. "Who are you?"

His eyes hung like sapphires in the dimness, gaze fixed on me, one hand resting atop the embossed six-foot-long metal trunk that had emerged. He tilted his head so the feeble light fell on his left temple. The twisted pale scar gleamed.

"The boy who fell from the eucalyptus tree," I whispered. "He gashed his head and the princess bandaged it for him. You're him."

The old man smiled. "Who I am is not important, son. What's important is this room where your grandfather worked for years."

Speechless, I gaped at him. After days of frustration and disappointment, I was standing in the room Gramps had occupied decades ago, this dingy store with its decaying inhabitants. I looked around as if at any moment Gramps might step out from the shadows.

"He was the best teacher I ever had," Bashir said. "We used to call him the Calligrapher Prince."

He flashed a smile. It brightened Bashir the merchant's tired, old face like a flame.

* * *

I watched this man with his wispy moonlight hair and that coiled scar who had kept my grandfather's secret for half a century. We sat around a low circular table, dipping cake rusk into mugs of milk chai sweetened with brown sugar. It was eight in the morning.

Bashir gripped his cup with both hands and frowned into it.

"My father was an electrician," he said. "By the time he was fifty he'd saved enough to buy a carpet shop. With lots of construction going on, he was able to get this shop dirt cheap.

"Rugs were an easy trade back in the seventies. You hired weavers, most of 'em immigrants from up north, and managed the product. We didn't have good relations with neighboring countries, so high demand existed for local rugs and tapestries without us worrying about competition. After the dictator Zia came, all that changed. Our shop didn't do well, what with rugs being imported cheap from the Middle East and Afghanistan. We began to get desperate.

"Right about then a stranger came to us."

It began, Bashir said, the evening someone knocked on their door with a rosy-cheeked child by his side and told Bashir's father he was looking for work. Bashir, then in his late teens, stood behind his baba, watching the visitor. Wary, the rug merchant asked where they hailed from. The man lifted his head and his face shone with the strangest light Bashir had seen on a human countenance.

"It swept across his cheeks, it flared in his eyes, it illuminated the cuts and angles of his bones," said Bashir, mesmerized by memory. "It was as if he had been touched by an angel or a demon. I'll never forget it."

"From thousands of miles away," said the man quietly. "From many years away."

It was Gramps, of course.

Bashir's father didn't recognize him, but he knew the man's family. Their only son, Muhammad Sharif, had been abroad for years, he'd heard. Lived in Iran, Turkey, Allah knew where else. Sharif's aged father still lived on Khajoor Gali in Old Lahore, but he'd shut down his design stall in the Niche of Calligraphers years ago.

"Sharif had been back for a few months and he and his son were living with his father. Now they needed money to reopen their shop." Bashir smiled. "Turned out your grandfather was an expert rug weaver. He said he learned it in Turkey near Maulana Rumi's shrine. My father offered him a job and he accepted. He worked with us for three years while he taught kilim weaving to our apprentices.

"He was young, hardly a few years older than I, but when he showed me his notebook, I knew he was no ordinary artist. He had

drawn mystical poetry in animal shapes. Taken the quill and created dazzling worlds. Later, when my father put him before the loom, Sharif produced wonders such as we'd never seen."

Merchant Bashir got up and plodded to a pile of rugs. He grabbed a kilim and unrolled it across the floor. A mosaic of black, yellow, and maroon geometries glimmered.

"He taught me rug weaving. It's a nomadic art, he said. Pattern making carries the past into the future." Bashir pointed to a recurrent cross motif that ran down the kilim's center. "The four corners of the cross are the four corners of the universe. The scorpion here"—he toed a many-legged symmetric creature woven in yellow—"represents freedom. Sharif taught me this and more. He was a natural at symbols. I asked him why he went to Turkey. He looked at me and said, 'To learn to weave the best kilim in the world."

I cocked my head, rapt. I had believed it was grief that banished Gramps from Pakistan and love that bade him return. Now this man was telling me Gramps went to Turkey purposefully. How many other secrets had my grandfather left out?

"I didn't know he was a rug weaver," I said.

"Certainly was. One of the best we ever saw. He knew what silk on silk warping was. Don't weave on a poor warp. Never work on a loom out of alignment. He knew all this. Yet, *he* didn't consider himself a weaver. He learned the craft to carry out a duty, he said. His passion was calligraphy. All this you see"—Bashir waved a hand at the brilliant kilims and tapestries around us, at the twists and curlicues of the verses on the walls, the wondrous illustrations—"is his genius manifested. The Ottoman Turkish script, those calligrams in our mosque, the paintings. It's all him and his obsession with the Turkish masters."

"He ever say why he left Pakistan or why he returned?"

Bashir shrugged. "We never asked. As long as it wasn't criminal, we didn't care."

"Why'd you call him the Calligrapher Prince?"

The old man laughed. "It was a nickname the apprentices gave him and it stuck. Seemed so fitting." Bashir lifted his cup and swallowed the last mouthful of tea along with the grounds. I winced. "Sharif was courteous and diligent. Hardly went home before midnight and he helped the business run more smoothly than it had in years, but I knew

he was waiting for something. His eyes were always restless. Inward."

In the evenings when the shop had closed Sharif drew and carved keenly. For hours he engraved, his cotton swabs with lacquer thinner in one hand, his burin and flat gravers in the other. What he was making was no secret. Bashir watched the process and the product: a large brass trunk with a complex inlay in its lid. A labyrinthine repoussé network gouged into the metal, spiraling into itself. Such fine work it took one's breath away.

"Never, never," said Bashir, "have I seen such a thing of beauty evolve in a craftsman's hand again."

Sharif's concentration was diabolical, his hands careful as nature's might have been as it designed the ornate shells of certain mollusks or the divine geometry of certain leaves.

"What are you making and why?" Bashir had asked his master.

Sharif shrugged. "A nest for ages," he said, and the rug merchant's son had to be content with the baffling reply.

Two years passed. One evening Bashir's father got drenched in a downpour and caught pneumonia, which turned aggressive. Despite rapid treatment, he passed away. Bashir took over the shop. In his father's name, he turned their old house into a small Quran center (which would eventually become Bhati's only mosque). He ran the rug shop honestly and with Sharif's help was able to maintain business the way it had been.

At the end of his third year Sharif came to Bashir.

"My friend," he said. "I came here for a purpose. Something precious was given to me that is not mine to keep. It must wait here in the protection of the tree, even as I go help my father reopen his calligraphy stall."

The young rug merchant was not surprised. He had glimpsed his master's departure in his face the night he arrived. But what was that about a tree?

Sharif saw his student's face and smiled. "You don't remember, do you? Where your shop is now the eucalyptus tree used to stand."

Bashir was stunned. He had forgotten all about the tree and the incident with the jinn. It was as if a firm hand had descended and swept all memory of the incident from his brain, like a sand picture.

He waited for Sharif to go on, but the Calligrapher Prince rose,

grasped Bashir's hand, and thrust two heavy envelopes into it.

"The first one is for you. Enough money to rent space for my trunk."

"You're not taking it with you?" Bashir was dumbfounded. The trunk with its elaborate design was worth hundreds, maybe thousands of rupees.

"No. It must stay here." Sharif looked his student in the eye. "And it must not be opened till a particular someone comes."

"Who?" said Bashir, and wished he hadn't. These were curious things and they made his spine tingle and his legs shake. A strange thought entered his head: A burden the mountains couldn't bear settles on me tonight. It vanished quick as it had come.

Sharif's voice was dry like swiftly turning thread when he said, "Look at the name on the second envelope."

And his heart full of misgivings, fears, and wonder—most of all, wonder—Bashir did.

* * *

I give myself credit: I was calm. My hands were steady. I didn't bat an eye when I took the yellowed envelope from Merchant Bashir's hands.

"It is yours," said Bashir. "The envelope, the secret, the burden." He wiped his face with the hem of his kameez. "Fifty years I carried it. Allah be praised, today it's passed on to you."

A burden the mountains couldn't bear settles on me tonight.

I shivered a little.

"It's cold," Bashir said. "I will turn the heat on and leave you to peruse the contents of the envelope alone. I'll be in the tea stall two shops down. Take as long as you wish."

"You kept your word," I said softly. "You didn't open the envelope."

Bashir nodded. "I asked Sharif how in God's name he could trust me with it when I didn't trust myself. A secret is like a disease, I said. It begins with an itch in a corner of your flesh, then spreads like cancer, until you're overcome and give in. He just smiled and said he knew I wouldn't open it." The rug weaver dabbed a kerchief at his grimy cheeks. "Maybe because he had such faith in me, it helped keep wicked desire at bay."

Or maybe he knew you wouldn't, I thought, holding the envelope, feeling my pulse beat in my fingertips. Just like he knew the name of the

rightful owner decades before he was born.

My name.

Through the back window I watched Bashir tromp down the street. The mist had thickened and the alley was submerged in blue-white. A steady whine of wind and the occasional thump as pedestrians walked into trash cans and bicycle stands. A whorl of fog shimmered around the streetlight on the far corner.

I turned and went to the counter. Picked up the envelope. Sliced it open. Inside was a sheaf of blank papers. I pulled them out and a small object swept out and fell on the floor. I reached down and picked it up, its radiance casting a twitching halo on my palm.

It was a silver key with a grooved golden stud for a blade, dangling from a rusted hoop.

Impossible.

My gaze was riveted on the golden stud. It took a considerable amount of effort to force my eyes away, to pocket the key, rise, and shamble to the storeroom.

It was dark. Fog had weakened the daylight. Broken looms with their limp warp strings and tipping beams gaped. I crossed the room and stood in front of the brass trunk. The padlock was tarnished. Round keyhole. I retrieved the key and stared at it, this centuries-old gold stud—if one were to believe Gramps—fused to a silver handle.

The instruction was clear.

I brushed the dust away from the lid. A floral design was carved into it, wreathed with grime but still visible: a medallion motif in a gilt finish with a Quranic verse running through its heart like an artery.

"Those who believe in the Great Unseen," I whispered. In my head Baba smiled and a row of pine trees cast a long shadow across Gramps's tombstone where I had last read a similar epitaph.

I inserted the Mughal key into the padlock, turned it twice, and opened the trunk.

* * *

A rug. A rolled-up kilim, judging by its thinness.

I stared at it, at the lavish weave of its edges that shone from light *within* the rolled layers. Was there a flashlight inside? Ridiculous idea. I leaned in.

The kilim smelled of sunshine. Of leaves and earth and fresh rainfall. Scents that filled my nostrils and tapped my taste buds, flooded my mouth with a sweet tang, not unlike cardamom tea.

My palms were sweating despite the cold. I tugged at the fat end of the rug and it fell to the floor, unspooling. It was seven by five feet, its borders perfectly even, and as it raced across the room, the storeroom was inundated with colors: primrose yellow, iris white, smoke blue. A bright scarlet sparked in the air that reminded me of the sharbat Mama used to make during Ramadan.

I fell back. Awestruck, I watched this display of lights surging from the kilim. Thrashing and gusting and slamming into one another, spinning faster and faster until they became a dancing shadow with many rainbow arms, each pointing earthward to their source—the carpet.

The shadow pirouetted once more and began to sink. The myriad images in the carpet flashed as it dissolved into them, and within moments the room was dark. The only evidence of the specter's presence was the afterglow on my retina.

I breathed. My knees were weak, the base of my spine thrummed with charge. A smell like burning refuse lingered in my nostrils.

What was that?

A miracle, Gramps spoke in my head softly.

I went to the carpet. It was gorgeous. Multitudes of figures ran in every shape around its edges. Flora and fauna. Grotesques and arabesques. They seethed over nomadic symbols. I traced my finger across the surface. Cabalistic squares, hexagrams, eight-pointed stars, a barb-tailed scorpion. A concoction of emblems swirled together by the artisan's finger until it seemed the carpet crawled with arcana I'd seen in ancient texts used mostly for one purpose.

Traps, I thought. For what?

I peered closer. The central figures eddied to form the armature of a tower with four jagged limbs shot into the corners of the rug where they were pinned down with pieces of glass. Four curved symmetric pieces, clear with the slightest tinge of purple. Together these four quarter-circles stuck out from the corners of the kilim as if they had once belonged to a cup.

They shimmered.

"What are you," I whispered. The carpet and the embedded glass said nothing. I hesitated, the soles of my feet tingling, then bent and looked inside the upper right shard.

A man looked back at me, his face expressionless, young, and not mine.

"Salam, beta," Gramps said in Urdu, still smiling. "Welcome."

* * *

The age of wonders shivered and died when the world changed.

In the summer of 1963, however, an eighteen-year-old boy named Sharif discovered a miracle as he panted and dug and heaved an earthen pot out from under a rotten eucalyptus stump.

It was night, there were no streetlamps, and, by all laws holy, the dark should have been supreme. Except a light emanated from the pot.

Sharif wiped his forehead and removed the pot's lid. Inside was a purple glass chalice glowing with brightness he couldn't look upon. He had to carry it home and put on dark shades before he could peer in.

The chalice was empty and the light came from the glass itself.

Trembling with excitement, the boy wrapped it in a blanket and hid it under the bed. The next day when his parents were gone, he poured water into it and watched the liquid's meniscus bubble and seethe on the kitchen table. The water was the light and the light all liquid.

The fakir had warned the Mughal princess that the secret was not for human eyes, but since that fateful night when the boy had first glimpsed the eucalyptus jinn, saw his fetters stretch from sky to earth, his dreams had been transformed. He saw nightscapes that he shouldn't see. Found himself in places that shouldn't exist. And now here was an enchanted cup frothing with liquid light on his kitchen table.

The boy looked at the chalice again. The churning motion of its contents hypnotized him. He raised it, and drank the light.

Such was how unfortunate, young Sharif discovered the secrets of Jaam-e-Jam.

The Cup of Heaven.

Legends of the Jaam have been passed down for generations in the Islamic world. Jamshed, the Zoroastrian emperor of Persia, was said to have possessed a seven-ringed scrying cup that revealed the mysteries of heaven to him. Persian mythmakers ascribed the centuries-long

success of the empire to the magic of the Cup of Heaven.

And now it was in Sharif's hand.

The Mother of Revelations. It swept across the boy's body like a fever. It seeped inside his skin, blanched the marrow of his bones, until every last bit of him understood. He knew what he had to do next, and if he could he would destroy the cup, but that wasn't his choice anymore. The cup gave him much, including foreknowledge with all the knots that weave the future. Everything from that moment on he *remembered* already.

And now he needed to conceal it.

So Sharif left for the rest of his life. He went to Mansehra. Found the Mughal princess. Married her. He made her very happy for the rest of her brief life, and on a sunny Friday afternoon he took his goggling, squalling son with him to pray Juma in a mosque in the mountains, where he would stay the night for worship and meditation.

Even though he knew it was the day appointed for his wife's death.

There was no thought, no coercion, no struggle. Just the wisdom of extinction, the doggedness of destiny that steered his way. He and his son would return to find their family incinerated. Sharif and the villagers would carry out their charred corpses and he would weep; he was allowed that much.

After, he took his son to Turkey.

For years he learned rug weaving at a master weaver's atelier. His newfound knowledge demanded he rein in the Cup of Heaven's contents till the time for their disclosure returned. For that he must learn to prepare a special trap.

It took his fingers time to learn the trick even if his brain knew it. Years of mistakes and practice. Eventually he mastered the most sublime ways of weaving. He could apply them to create a trap so elegant, so fast and wise that nothing would escape it.

Sharif had learned how to weave the fabric of light itself.

Now he could return to his hometown, seek out the shadow of the eucalyptus tree, and prepare the device for imprisoning the cup.

First, he designed a kilim with the holy names of reality woven into it. Carefully, with a diamond-tipped glasscutter, he took the Jaam-e-Jam apart into four pieces and set them into the kilim. Next, he snared waves of light that fell in through the workshop window. He looped the peaks

and troughs and braided them into a net. He stretched the net over the glass shards and warped them into place. He constructed a brass trunk and etched binding symbols on its lid, then rolled up the kilim and placed it inside.

Last, a special key was prepared. This part took some sorting out—he had to fetch certain particles farther along in time—but he succeeded; and finally he had the key. It was designed to talk to the blood-light in one person only, one descended from Sharif's line and the Mughal princess's.

Me.

* * *

Incredulous, I gazed at my dead grandfather as he told me his last story.

His cheeks glowed with youth, his eyes sharp and filled with truth. His hair was black, parted on the left. Maybe the glass shone, or his eyes, but the effect was the same: an incredible halo of light, near holy in its alienness, surrounded him. When he shook his head, the halo wobbled. When he spoke, the carpet's fringe threads stirred as if a breeze moved them, but the voice was sourceless and everywhere.

"Today is the sixteenth of November, 2013," he had said before launching into narration like a machine. "You're twenty-eight. The woman you love will be twenty-five in three months. As for me"—he smiled—"I'm dead."

He was telling me the future. Prescience, it seemed, had been his forte.

And now I knew how. The Cup of Heaven.

"Is it really you?" I said when he was done, my voice full of awe.

Gramps nodded. "More a portion of my punishment than me."

"What does that mean? What other secrets were in the cup? Tell me everything, Gramps," I said, "before I go crazy."

"All good stories leave questions. Isn't that what I will say?" He watched me, serious. "You should understand that I'm sorry. For bringing you here. For passing this on to you. I wish I'd never dug under that tree. But it is the way it is. I was handed a responsibility. I suppose we all get our burdens."

The air in the room was thick and musty. Our eyes were locked together. He lured me here, I thought. My hands were shaking and this

time it was with anger. Rage at being manipulated. All those stories of princesses and paupers, those lies he told for years while all the time he knew exactly what he was doing and how he was preparing me for this burden, whatever it was.

Gramps's spirit, or whoever he was in this current state, watched me with eyes that had no room for empathy or guilt. Didn't he care at all?

"I do, son," he said gently. He was reading my mind or already knew it—I wasn't clear which—and that angered me more. "I haven't gotten to the most important part of the story."

"I don't care," I said in a low voice. "Just tell me what was in the cup."

"You need to know this." His tone was mechanical, not my gramps's voice. The person I knew and loved was not here. "The Jaam gave me much. Visions, power, perfect knowledge, but it cost me too. Quite a bit. You can't stare into the heart of the Unseen and not have it stare back at you."

He swept a hand around himself. For the first time I noticed the halo wasn't just hovering behind his head; it was a luminescent ring blooming from his shoulders, encircling his neck, wrapping around his body.

"It wasn't for me to decide the cup's fate, so I hid it away. But because the Unseen's presence ran like a torrent from it I paid more than a man should ever have to pay for a mistake. I was told to dig up the secret and hide it, not to gaze at its wonders or partake of its mysteries. My punishment hence was remembering the future and being powerless to prevent it. I would lose everything I remembered about the love of my life. Starting from the moment I dug under the eucalyptus, I would forget ever having been with your grandmother. My lovely, luckless Zeenat.

"Once the task was complete and I handed over the trunk to Bashir, my memories began to go. With time, my mind confabulated details to fill in the gaps and I told myself and everyone who'd ask that I had married a woman who died during childbirth. By the time we moved to America, all I remembered was this nostalgia and longing to discover a secret I thought I'd never pursued: the pauper princess and her magical jinn."

When he stopped, the outline of his face wavered. It was the halo

blazing. "What you see before you"—with a manicured finger Gramps made a circle around his face—"is an impression of those lost years. My love's memory wrenched from me."

He closed his eyes, letting me study the absence of age on his face. If he were telling the truth, he was a figment of his own imagination, and I ... I was crazy to believe any of this. This room was a delusion and I was complicit in it, solidifying it.

Maybe that was why he forgot. Maybe the human mind couldn't marry such unrealities and live with them.

"What about the journal? If you forgot everything, how could you draw? How could you write down details of your life?"

Gramps, his apparition, opened his eyes. "Senility. When my organic memory dissolved, fragments of my other life came seeping back in dreams."

So he wrote the journal entries like someone else's story. He had visions and dreams, but didn't know whose life was flooding his head, filling it with devastating images, maybe even ushering in his death earlier than it otherwise might have come.

I leaned back and watched the threads of the carpet twist. The woven tower shot into the sky with hundreds of creatures gathered around it, looking at its top disappear into the heavens.

"I want to see the cup." My voice rose like a razor in the dark, cutting through the awkwardness between us. "I want to see the contents."

"I know." He nodded. "Even such a warning as you see before you wouldn't deter you."

"If the cup's real, I will take it with me to the States, where historians and mythologists will validate its authenticity and..."

And what? Truly believe it was a magical cup and place it in the Smithsonian? *The cup's secret isn't for human eyes,* Gramps had said. But what else are secrets for if not discovery? That is their nature. Only time stands between a mystery and its rightful master.

Gramps's fingers played with the halo, twisting strands of luminosity like hair between his fingers. "You will have the secret, but before you drink from it, I want you to do something for me."

He snapped his fingers and threads of light sprang from the halo, brightening as they came apart. Quickly he noosed them until he had a complicated knot with a glowing center and a string dangling at the end.

He offered it to me. "Pull."

Warily, I looked at the phosphorescent string. "Why?"

"Before you gaze inside the cup, you will have a taste of my memories. After that you decide your own demons."

I reached out a hand to the glass shard, withdrew, extended it again. When my fingers touched it, I flinched. It was warm. Slowly, I pushed my hand into the glass. It was like forcing it through tangles of leaves hot from the sun.

The string reddened. Its end whipped back and forth. I pinched it, pulled, and the light string rocketed toward me, the brilliant corpuscle at its center thrashing and unraveling into reality.

I gasped. A fat worm of peacock colors was climbing my hand, wrapping itself around my wrist.

"Gramps! What is this?" I shouted, twisting my arm, but the creature was already squirming its way up my arm, its grooves hot against my flesh, leaving shadows of crimson, mauve, azure, muddy green, and yellow on my skin. I could smell its colors. Farm odors. Damp foliage. Herbal teas. Baba's truck with its ancient vomit-stained upholstery and greasy wheel covers. My mother's hair. Sara's embrace.

I shuddered. The worm's body was taut across the bridge of my nose, its two ends poised like metal filings in front of my eyes.

"These," Gramps said, "are the stingers of memory."

The worm's barbs were like boulders in my vision. As I watched them, terrified, they vibrated once.

Then plunged into my eyes.

* * *

In the cup was everything, Gramps said. He meant it.

What the teenage boy saw went back all the way until he was destroyed and remade from the complete memory of the universe. From the moment of its birth until the end. Free of space, time, and their building blocks, the boy experienced all at once: a mausoleum of reality that wrapped around him, plunged into which he floated through the Unseen.

And I, a blinking, tumbling speck, followed.

Gramps watched the concussion of first particles reverberate through

infinity. He watched instantaneous *being* bloom from one edge of existence to the other; watched the triumph of fire and ejective forces that shook creation in their fists. He observed these phenomena and knew all the realms of the hidden by heart.

Matter has always been conscious. That was the secret. Sentience is as much its property as gravity and it is always striving toward a new form with better accommodation.

From the needs of sentient matter rose the invention that humans are.

Gramps gripped the darkness of prebeing and billowed inside the cracks of matter. When I tried to go after him, an awful black defied me. To me belonged just a fraction of his immersion.

I sat on a molten petal of creation as it solidified, and watched serpentine fractals of revelation slither toward me. Jinns are carrier particles of sentience, they murmured. Of the universe's memory of the Great Migration.

My prehuman flesh sang on hearing these words. Truths it had once known made music in my body, even if I didn't quite remember them.

The Great Migration?

The first fires and winds created many primordials, the fractals said. *You mean jinns?*

Beings unfettered by the young principles of matter and energy. As the world began to cool, new rules kicked in. The primordials became obsolete. Now the selfish sentience needed resistant clay-and-water creatures to thrive upon. For humans to exist, the primordials had to migrate.

They complied?

They dug tunnels into space-time and left our corner of existence so it could evolve on its own. Before they departed, however, they caged the memory of their being here, for if such a memory were unleashed upon the world, matter would rescind its newest form and return to the essence. Things as we know them would cease to exist.

So they made the cup, I said. To imprison the memories of a bygone age. Before they passed into shadow, whispered the fractals, they made sure the old ways would be available. In case the new ones proved fleeting.

An image came to me then: a dazzling array of fantastical creatures—made of light, shadow, earth, inferno, metal, space, and

time—traveling across a brimming gray land, their plethora of heads bowed. As they plodded, revolved, and flew, the dimensions of the universe changed around them to accommodate this pilgrimage of the phantastique. Matter erupted into iridescent light. Flames and flagella bloomed and dissolved. Their chiaroscuric anatomies shuttered as the primordials made their way into the breath of the unknown.

The flimsy speck that was I trembled. I was witnessing a colossal sacrifice. A mother of migrations. What should a vehicle of sentience do except bow before its ageless saviors?

In the distance, over the cusp of the planets, a primordial paused, its mammoth body shimmering itself into perception. As I watched it, a dreadful certainty gripped me: this was how Gramps was trapped. If I didn't look away immediately, I would be punished too, for when have human eyes glimpsed divinity without forsaking every sight they hold dear?

But I was rooted, stilled by the primordial's composition. Strange minerals gleamed in its haunches. From head to tail, it was decorated with black-and-white orbs like eyes. They twitched like muscles and revolved around its flesh until their center, a gush of flame riding bony gears, was visible to me. Mirages and reveries danced in it, constellations of knowledge ripe for the taking. Twisted ropes of fire shot outward, probing for surface, oscillating up and down.

My gaze went to a peculiar vision bubbling inside the fiery center. I watched it churn inside the primordial, and in the briefest of instants I knew what I knew.

As if sensing my study, the creature began to turn. Fear whipped me forward, a reverential awe goading me closer to these wonders undiluted by human genes, unpolluted by flesh, unmade by sentience.

Sentience is everything, sentience the mystery and the master, I sighed as I drifted closer.

But then came a shock wave that pulsed in my ears like a million crickets chirping. I rode the blast force, grief stricken by this separation, spinning and flickering through string-shaped fractures in reality, like gigantic cracks in the surface of a frozen lake. Somewhere matter bellowed like a swamp gator and the wave rushed at the sound. Tassels of light stirred in the emptiness, sputtering and branching like gargantuan towers—

Lightning trees, I thought.

—and suddenly I was veering toward them, pitched up, tossed down, slung across them until there was a whipping sound like the breaking of a sound barrier, and I was slipping, sliding, and falling through.

* * *

My eyes felt raw and swollen. I was choking.

I gagged and squirmed up from the carpet as the light worm crawled up my throat and out my left nostril. It rushed out, its segments instantly melting and fading to roseate vapors. The vapors wafted in the darkness like Chinese lanterns, lighting up discarded looms and moth-eaten rug rolls before dissipating into nothing.

I stared around, fell back, and lay spread-eagled on the carpet. The nostril through which the worm had exited was bleeding. A heavy weight had settled on my chest.

A memory came to me. Of being young and very small, standing at the classroom door, nose pressed against the glass, waiting for Mama. She was running late and the terror in me was so powerful, so huge, that all I could do was cry. Only it wasn't just terror, it was feeling abandoned, feeling insignificant, and knowing there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

Footsteps. I forced myself through the lethargy to turn on my side. Bashir the rug merchant stood outlined against the rectangle of light beyond the doorway. His face was in shadow. The blue of his eyes glinted.

"You all right, son?"

My heart pounded so violently I could feel it in every inch of my body. As if I were a leather-taut drum with a kid hammering inside and screaming.

"I don't know." I tottered upright, breathed, and glanced at the carpet. The light was gone and it was ordinary. Gramps was gone too. The cup's pieces in the corners were dull and empty.

Just glass.

I looked at Bashir. "I saw my grandfather."

"Yes." The rug merchant's shadow was long and alien on the carpet. "What will you do now that he's gone?"

I stared at him. His bright sapphire eyes, not old but ancient, watched me. He was so still. Not a hair stirred on his head. I wiped my mouth and finally understood.

"You're not the boy who fell," I said quietly. "The eucalyptus jinn. That's you."

He said nothing but his gaze followed me as I stepped away from the carpet, from this magical rectangle woven a half century ago. How long had he guarded the secret? Not the carpet, but the cup? How long since Bashir the rug merchant had died and the eucalyptus jinn had taken his form?

"A very long time," Bashir said in a voice that gave away nothing.

Our eyes met and at last I knew burden. Left behind by the primordial titans, here was a messenger of times past, the last of his kind, who had kept this unwanted vigil for millennia. Carrying the responsibility of the cup, silently waiting for the end of days. Was there place in this new world for him or that damned chalice? Could there be a fate worse than death?

I stood before the caged shards of the Jaam. Gramps might have traversed the seven layers of heaven, but during my brief visit into the Unseen I'd seen enough to understand the pricelessness of this vehicle. Whatever magic the cup was, it transcended human logic. Were it destroyed, the last vestige of cosmic memory would vanish from our world.

"Whatever you decide," the jinn said, "remember what you saw in the ideograms of the Eternum."

For a moment I didn't understand, then the vision returned to me. The mammoth primordial with its flaming core and the glimpse of what churned between its bonelike gears. My heartbeat quickened.

If what I saw was true, I'd do anything to protect it, even if it meant destroying the most glorious artifact the world would ever know.

The jinn's face was kind. He knew what I was thinking.

"What about the shop?" I asked, my eyes on the damaged looms, the dead insects, the obsolete designs no one needed.

"Will go to my assistant," he said. "Bashir's nephew."

I looked at him. In his eyes, blue as the deepest ocean's memory, was a lifetime of waiting. No, several lifetimes.

Oblivion. The eucalyptus jinn courted oblivion. And I would give it

to him.

"Thank you," he said, smiling, and his voice was so full of warmth I wanted to cry.

"You miss the princess. You protected their family?"

"I protected only the cup. The Mughal lineage just happened to be the secret's bearer," said the eucalyptus jinn, but he wouldn't meet my eyes.

Which was why he couldn't follow them when they left, until Gramps went after them with the cup. Which was also why he couldn't save them from the fire that killed them. Gramps knew it too, but he couldn't or wouldn't do anything to change the future.

Was Gramps's then the worst burden of all? It made my heart ache to think of it.

We looked at each other. I stepped toward the brass trunk and retrieved the key with the gold stud from the padlock. Without looking at the jinn, I nodded.

He bowed his head, and left to fetch me the instruments of his destruction.

* * *

The city breathed fog when I left the rug shop. Clouds of white heaved from the ground, silencing the traffic and the streets. Men and women plodded in the alleys, their shadows quivering on dirt roads. I raised my head and imagined stars pricking the night sky, their light so puny, so distant, it made one wistful. Was it my imagination or could I smell them?

The odd notion refused to dissipate even after I returned to the inn and packed for the airport. The colors of the world were flimsy. Things skittered in the corners of my eyes. They vanished in the murmuring fog when I looked at them. Whatever this new state was, it wasn't disconcerting. I felt warmer than I had in years.

The plane bucked as it lifted, startling the passengers. They looked at one another and laughed. They'd been worried about being grounded because of weather. I stared at the ground falling away, away, the white layers of Lahore undulating atop one another, like a pile of rugs.

My chin was scratchy, my flesh crept, as I brought the hammer down and smashed the pieces of the cup.

I leaned against the plane window. My forehead was hot. Was I coming down with something? Bereavement, PTSD, post-party blues? But I *had* been through hell. I should expect strange, melancholic moods.

The flame twitched in my hand. The smell of gasoline strong in my nose. At my feet the carpet lay limp like a terrified animal.

"Coffee, sir?" said the stewardess. She was young and had an angular face like a chalice. She smiled at me, flashing teeth that would look wonderful dangling from a hemp string.

"No," I said, horrified by the idea, and my voice was harsher than I'd intended. Startled, she stepped back. I tried to smile, but she turned and hurried away.

I wiped my sweaty face with a paper napkin and breathed. Weird images, but I felt more in control, and the feeling that the world was losing shape had diminished. I unzipped my carry-on and pulled out Gramps's journal. So strange he'd left without saying goodbye.

That ghost in the glass was just a fragment of Gramps's memories, I told myself. It wasn't him.

Wasn't it? We are our memories. This mist that falls so vast and brooding can erase so much, but not the man. Will I remember Gramps? Will I remember *me* and what befell me in this strange land midway between the Old World and the New?

That is a question more difficult to answer, for, you see, about ten hours ago, when I changed planes in Manchester, I realized I am beginning to forget. Bits and pieces, but they are disappearing irrevocably. I have already forgotten the name of the street where Gramps and the princess once lived. I've even forgotten what the rug shop looked like. What was its name?

Karavan Kilim! An appropriate name, that. The word is the etymologic root for *caravan*. A convoy, or a party of pilgrims.

At first, it was terrifying, losing memories like that. But as I pondered the phenomenon, it occurred to me that the erasure of my journey to Old Lahore is so important the rest of my life likely depends on it. I have come to believe that the colorlessness of the world, the canting of things, the jagged movements of shadows is the peeling of the onionskin which separates men from the worlds of jinn. An unfractured reality from the Great Unseen. If the osmosis persisted, it would drive me mad,

That was when I decided I would write my testament while I could. I have been writing in this notebook for hours now and my fingers are hurting. The process has been cathartic. I feel more anchored to our world. Soon, I will stop writing and put a reminder in the notebook telling myself to seal it in an envelope along with Gramps's journal when I get home. I will place them in a deposit box at my bank. I will also prepare a set of instructions for my lawyer that, upon my death, the envelope and its contents be delivered to my grandson who should then read it and decide accordingly.

Decide what? You might say. There's no more choice to make. Didn't I destroy the carpet and the cup and the jinn with my own hands? Those are about the few memories left in my head from this experience. I remember destroying the rug and its contents. So vivid those memories, as if someone painted them inside my head. I remember my conversation with the jinn; he was delighted to be banished forever.

Wasn't he?

This is making me think of the vision I had in—what did the jinn call it?—the Eternum.

The root J-N-N has so many derivatives. *Jannah*, paradise, is the hidden garden. *Majnoon* is a crazy person whose intellect has been hidden. My favorite, though, is *janin*.

The embryo hidden inside the mother.

The jinn are not gone from our world, you see. They've just donned new clothes.

My beloved Terry, I saw your face printed in a primordial's flesh. I know you, my grandson, before you will know yourself. I also saw your father, my son, in his mother's womb. He is so beautiful. Sara doesn't know yet, but Neil will be tall and black-haired like me. Even now, his peanut-sized mass is drinking his mother's fluids. She will get migraines throughout the pregnancy, but that's him borrowing from his mom. He will return the kindness when he's all grown up. Sara's kidneys will fail and my fine boy will give his mother one, smiling and saying she'll never be able to tell him to piss off again because *her* piss will be formed through his gift.

My Mughal children, my pauper princes, you and your mother are why I made my decision. The Old World is gone, let it rest. The primordials and other denizens of the Unseen are obsolete. If memory of their days threatens the world, if mere mention of it upsets the order of creation, it's too dangerous to be left to chance. For another to find.

So I destroyed it.

The historian and the bookkeeper in me wept, but I'd do it a thousand times again if it means the survival of our species. Our children. No use mourning what's passed. We need to preserve our future.

Soon, I will land in the US of A. I will embrace the love of my life, kiss her, take her to meet my family. They're wary, but such is the nature of love. It protects us from what is unseen. I will teach my parents to love my wife. They will come to know what I already know. That the new world is not hostile, just different. My parents are afraid and that is okay. Someday I too will despise your girlfriends (and fear them), for that's how the song goes, doesn't it?

Meanwhile, I'm grateful. I was witness to the passing of the Great Unseen. I saw the anatomy of the phantastique. I saw the pilgrimage of the primordials. Some of their magic still lingers in the corners of our lives, wrapped in breathless shadow, and that is enough. We shall glimpse it in our dreams, taste it in the occasional startling vision, hear it in a night bird's song. And we will believe for a moment, even if we dismiss these fancies in the morning.

We will believe. And, just like this timeless gold stud that will soon adorn my wife's nose, the glamour of such belief will endure forever.



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HARALAMBI MARKOV



THE LANGUAGE OF KNIVES

The Language of Knives

HARALAMBI MARKOV

illustration by



A long, silent day awaits you and your daughter as you prepare to cut your husband's body. You remove organs from flesh, flesh from bones, bones from tendons – all ingredients for the cake you're making, the heavy price of admission for an afterlife you pay your gods; a proper send-off for the greatest of all warriors to walk the lands.

The Baking Chamber feels small with two people inside, even though you've spent a month with your daughter as part of her apprenticeship. You feel irritated at having to share this moment, but this is a big day for your daughter. You steal a glance at her. See how imposing she looks in her ramie garments the color of a blood moon, how well the leather apron made from changeling hide sits on her.

You work in silence, as the ritual demands, and your breath hisses as you both twist off the aquamarine top of the purification vat. Your husband floats to the top of the thick translucent waters, peaceful and tender. You hold your breath, aching to lean over and kiss him one more time—but that is forbidden. His body is now sacred, and you are not. You've seen him sleep, his powerful chest rising and falling, his breath a harbinger of summer storms. The purification bath makes it easy to pull him up and slide him onto the table, where the budding dawn seeping from the skylight above illuminates his transmogrification, his ascent. His skin has taken a rich pomegranate hue. His hair is a stark mountaintop white.

You raise your head to study your daughter's reaction at seeing her father since his wake. You study her face, suspicious of any muscle that might twitch and break the fine mask made of fermented butcher broom berries and dried water mint grown in marshes where men have drowned. It's a paste worn out of respect and a protection from those you serve. You scrutinize her eyes for tears, her hair and eyebrows waxed slick for any sign of dishevelment.

The purity of the body matters most. A single tear can sour the offering. A single hair can spoil the soul being presented to the gods ... what a refined palate they have. But your daughter wears a stone face.

Her eyes are opaque; her body is poised as if this is the easiest thing in the world to do. The ceramic knife you've shaped and baked yourself sits like a natural extension of her arm.

You remember what it took you to bake your own mother into a cake. No matter how many times you performed the ritual under her guidance, nothing prepared you for the moment when you saw her body on the table. Perhaps you can teach your daughter to love your art. Perhaps she belongs by your side as a Cake Maker, even though you pride yourself on not needing any help. Perhaps she hasn't agreed to this apprenticeship only out of grief. Perhaps, perhaps ...

Your heart prickles at seeing her this accomplished, after a single lunar cycle. A part of you, a part you take no pride in, wants her to struggle through her examination, struggle to the point where her eyes beg you to help her. You would like to forgive her for her incapability, the way you did back when she was a child. You want her to need you—the way she needed your husband for so many years.

No. Treat him like any other. Let your skill guide you. You take your knife and shave the hair on your husband's left arm with the softest touch.

You remove every single hair on his body to use for kindling for the fire you will build to dry his bones, separating a small handful of the longest hairs for the decoration, then incise the tip of his little finger to separate skin from muscle.

Your daughter mirrors your movements. She, too, is fluent in the language of knives.

The palms and feet are the hardest to skin, as if the body fights to stay intact and keep its grip on this realm. You struggle at first but then work the knife without effort. As you lift the softly stretching tissue, you see the countless scars that punctuated his life – the numerous cuts that crisscross his hands and shoulders, from when he challenged the sword dancers in Aeno; the coin-shaped scars where arrowheads pierced his chest during their voyage through the Sear of Spires in the misty North; the burn marks across his left hip from the leg hairs of the fire titan, Hragurie. You have collected your own scars on your journeys through the forgotten places of this world, and those scars ache now, the pain kindled by your loss.

After you place your husband's skin in a special aventurine bowl,

you take to the muscle – that glorious muscle you've seen shift and contract in great swings of his dancing axe while you sing your curses and charms alongside him in battle. Even the exposed redness of him is rich with memories, and you do everything in your power not to choke as you strip him of his strength. This was the same strength your daughter prized above all else and sought for herself many years ago, after your spells and teachings grew insufficient for her. This was the same strength she accused you of lacking when you chose your mother's calling, retired your staff from battle, and chose to live preparing the dead for their passing.

Weak. The word still tastes bitter with her accusation. How can you leave him? How can you leave us? You're a selfish little man.

You watch her as you work until there is nothing left but bones stripped clean, all the organs in their respective jars and bowls. Does she regret the words now, as she works by your side? Has she seen your burden yet? Has she understood your choice? Will she be the one to handle your body once you pass away?

You try to guess the answer from her face, but you find no solace and no answer. Not when you extract the fat from your husband's skin, not when you mince his flesh and muscle, not when you puree his organs and cut his intestines into tiny strips you leave to dry. Your daughter excels in this preparatory work – her blade is swift, precise, and gentle.

How can she not? After all, she is a gift from the gods. A gift given to two lovers who thought they could never have a child on their own. A miracle. The completion you sought after in your youth; a honey-tinged bliss that filled you with warmth. But as with all good things, your bliss waxed and waned as you realized: all children have favorites.

You learned how miracles can hurt.

* * *

You align his bones on the metal tray that goes into the hungry oven. You hold his skull in your hands and rub the sides where his ears once were. You look deep into the sockets where once eyes of dark brown would stare back into you.

His clavicle passes your fingers. You remember the kisses you planted on his shoulder, when it used to be flesh. You position his

ribcage, and you can still hear his heartbeat – a rumble in his chest the first time you lay together after barely surviving an onslaught of skinwalkers, a celebration of life. You remember that heart racing, as it did in your years as young men, when vitality kept you both up until dawn. You remember it beating quietly in his later years, when you were content and your bodies fit perfectly together – the alchemy of flesh you have now lost.

You deposit every shared memory in his bones, and then load the tray in the oven and slam shut the metal door.

Behind you, your daughter stands like a shadow, perfect in her apprentice robes. Not a single crease disfigures the contours of her pants and jacket. Not a single stain mars her apron.

She stares at you. She judges you.

She is perfection.

You wish you could leave her and crawl in the oven with your husband.

* * *

Flesh, blood and gristle do not make a cake easily, yet the Cake Maker has to wield these basic ingredients. Any misstep leads to failure, so you watch closely during your daughter's examination, but she completes each task with effortless grace.

She crushes your husband's bones to flour with conviction.

Your daughter mixes the dough of blood, fat, and bone flour, and you assist her. You hear your knuckles and fingers pop as you knead the hard dough, but hers move without a sound – fast and agile as they shape the round cakes.

Your daughter works over the flesh and organs until all you can see is a pale scarlet cream with the faint scent of iron, while you crush the honey crystals that will allow for the spirit to be digested by the gods. You wonder if she is doing this to prove how superior she is to you – to demonstrate how easy it is to lock yourself into a bakery with the dead. You wonder how to explain that you never burnt as brightly as your husband, that you don't need to chase legends and charge into battle.

You wonder how to tell her that she is your greatest adventure, that you gave her most of the magic you had left.

* * *

Layer by layer, your husband is transformed into a cake. Not a single bit of him is lost. You pull away the skin on top and connect the pieces with threads from his hair. The sun turns the rich shade of lavender and calendula.

You cover the translucent skin with the dried blood drops you extracted before you placed the body in the purification vat and glazed it with the plasma. Now all that remains is to tell your husband's story, in the language every Cake Maker knows – the language you've now taught your daughter.

You wonder whether she will blame you for the death of your husband in writing, the way she did when you told her of his death.

Your stillness killed him. You had to force him to stay, to give up his axe. Now he's dead in his sleep. Is this what you wanted? Have him all to yourself? You couldn't let him die out on the road.

Oh, how she screamed that day – her voice as unforgiving as thunder. Her screaming still reverberates through you. You're afraid of what she's going to tell the gods.

You both write. You cut and bend the dried strips of intestines into runes and you gently push them so they sink into the glazed skin and hold.

You write his early story. His childhood, his early feats, the mythology of your love. How you got your daughter. She tells the other half of your husband's myth – how he trained her in every single weapon known to man, how they journeyed the world over to honor the gods.

Her work doesn't mention you at all.

* * *

You rest your fingers, throbbing with pain from your manipulations. You have completed the last of your husband's tale. You have written in the language of meat and bones and satisfied the gods' hunger. You hope they will nod with approval as their tongues roll around the cooked flesh and swallow your sentences and your tether to life.

Your daughter swims into focus as she takes her position across the table, your husband between you, and joins you for the spell. He remains the barrier you can't overcome even in death. As you begin to speak, you're startled to hear her voice rise with yours. You mutter the

incantation and her lips are your reflection, but while you caress the words, coaxing their magic into being, she cuts them into existence, so the veil you will around the cake spills like silk on your end and crusts on hers. The two halves shimmer in blue feylight, entwine into each other, and the deed is done.

You have said your farewell, better than you did when you first saw him dead. Some dam inside you breaks. Exhaustion wipes away your strength and you feel your age, first in the trembling in your hands, then in the creaking in your knees as you turn your back and measure your steps so you don't disturb the air – a retreat as slow as young winter frost.

Outside the Bakery, your breath catches. Your scream is a living thing that squirms inside your throat and digs into the hidden recesses of your lungs. Your tears wash the dry mask from your cheeks.

Your daughter takes your hand, gently, with the unspoken understanding only shared loss births and you search for her gaze. You search for the flat, dull realization that weighs down the soul. You search for yourself in her eyes, but all you see is your husband – his flame now a wildfire that has swallowed every part of you. She looks at you as a person who has lost the only life she had ever known, pained and furious, and you pat her hand and kiss her forehead, her skin stinging against your lips. When confusion pulls her face together, her features lined with fissures in her protective mask, you shake your head.

"The gods praise your skill and technique. They praise your steady hand and precision, but they have no use of your hands in the Bakery." The words roll out with difficulty – a thorn vine you lacerate your whole being with as you force yourself to reject your daughter. Yes, she can follow your path, but what good would that do?

"You honor me greatly." Anger tinges her response, but fights in these holy places father only misfortune, so her voice is low and even. You are relieved to hear sincerity in her fury, desire in her voice to dedicate herself to your calling.

You want to keep her here, where she won't leave. Your tongue itches with every lie you can bind her with, spells you've learned from gods that are not your own, hollow her out and hold onto her, even if such acts could end your life. You reconsider and instead hold on to her

earnest reaction. You have grown to an age where even intent will suffice.

"It's not an honor to answer your child's yearning." You maintain respectability, keep with the tradition, but still you lean in with all the weight of death tied to you like stones and you whisper. "I have told the story of your father in blood and gristle as I have with many others. As I will continue to tell every story as best as I can, until I myself end in the hands of a Cake Maker. But you can continue writing your father's story outside the temple where your knife strokes have a meaning.

"Run. Run toward the mountains and rivers, sword in your hand and bow on your back. Run toward life. That is where you will find your father."

Now it is she who is crying. You embrace her, the memory of doing so in her childhood alive inside your bones and she hugs you back as a babe, full of needing and vulnerable. But she is no longer a child – the muscles underneath her robes roll with the might of a river – so you usher her out to a life you have long since traded away.

Her steps still echo in the room outside the Baking Chamber as you reapply the coating to your face from the tiny, crystal jars. You see yourself: a grey, tired man who touched death more times than he ever touched his husband.

Your last task is to bring the cake to where the Mouth awaits, its vines and branches shaking, aglow with iridescence. There, the gods will entwine their appendages around your offering, suck it in, close and digest. Relief overcomes you and you sigh.

Yes, it's been a long day since you and your daughter cut your husband's body open. You reenter the Baking Chamber and push the cake onto the cart.



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DANIEL JOSÉ OLDER GINGA

Ginga

DANIEL JOSÉ OLDER

illustration by
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Carlos

"What song is that, man?"

I don't move. The rumble of this ambulance's diesel engine fills the air again, the smell of night, the park around us. If I hold still, if Victor shuts the fuck up, if nothing happens for another few seconds, maybe I can sink back in, grasp hold of that fragile thread of an echo fading into the darkness.

"Carlos?"

I rub my eyes and then retrieve the coffee cup from the dashboard. The thread is gone; my past is still a void. "It's nothing, man. Just some song I heard." The coffee is lukewarm but strong as hell. Reality settles in fully around me. "Stuck in my head is all. You get a job?"

Victor shakes his head, "Nah, man, go back to sleep." The ambulance radio crackles to life, a routine announcement that seat belts save lives, and then all we hear is the diesel *putt-putt-putt* and occasional snores from the passenger compartment where Victor's partner Del is laid out.

"Look," I say, "if some shit don't go down by four, I'm out, man." Victor nods. "I'm telling you, it's been every night, C. Without fail." "Maybe accidents do take vacations, after all."

"Carlos, I've been doing this job for twelve years and I ain't never seen a pattern like this. You know I don't go in for all that woo-woo shit, either. I don't get involved in your whatever weirdo life. No offense."

"Thanks, man."

"And I ain't never come to you 'bout some shit in all the time I known you." He retrieves a cigarette and starts smoking it out the window.

Around us, the park glowers with late night shadows and a few scattered lights. The metal bars of a playground swing glint out of the gloom, a silhouetted pyramid against the cloudy sky. Darkened brownstones peer from behind the trees on either side. If I say anything right now, Victor will interpret it as encouragement to speak more, so I

light a Malagueña and glower along with the park.

Victor lets out a menthol-laced cloud and shakes his head. "Last night, a hipster on a bike got completely destroyed by a passing garbage truck. I mean, we were picking up pieces of him blocks away. The night before it was a prisoner who broke out of the precinct over there, made it halfway across the street before the desk officer popped him, and *then* he got sideswiped by a motorcycle. The dude got dragged like four blocks and when we got to him his back was hamburger, Carlos. Hamburger."

I just grunt.

"Wednesday it was the suicide, that was on the far corner of the park over there. Jumped from the roof of that brownstone and lived, man. We had to decompress him, though, he had full on tension pneumo—tubed that ass and hauled it to Bellevue. Died in surgery."

"Damn." I have no idea what Victor's going on about, but all medical jargon aside, he's right. And three apparently unrelated gory deaths in a four-block radius is the kinda thing that puts me to work. He rattles off a few more while I smoke and ponder patterns and, inevitably, the past ...

"Carlos?"

"Yeah, man?"

"You're humming again."

"Huh?"

"Like, while I'm talking." Victor narrows his eyes at me as I sit up and rub my face.

"Shit, man. Sorry."

"It's cool. I know you're not used to the night life. Anyway, folks've started calling this place Red Square on the strength of all this. And I'm just saying, seems like the kinda thing ... you might know something about."

Vic's never known how to talk about me being half-dead. It's not his fault—I've never come out and said it to him. But gray pallor covers me like a layer of dust and my skin is cold to the touch. My heart rate never surpasses a melancholy stroll. Plus, I deal with ghosts. In fact, I'm employed by them: The New York Council of the Dead, a sprawling, incomprehensible bureaucracy, sends me in to clean up any messy irregularity in the rigid, porous borderlines between life and death. I

mean, since I'm a walking messy irregularity of life and death, I guess it makes sense that the Council'd use me as their clean-up man, but the truth is, it gets lonely.

Especially recently.

A whiny bachata song explodes out of Victor's belt. He curses and his belly shoves against the steering wheel as he squirms into what must be some kind of yoga pose to dig out his phone.

"Ay, shut the fuck up with that yadda-yadda horseshit," Del hollers from the back. Del is like eight feet tall with locks down to his ass. He's from Grenada but he got hit by a school bus in the nineties and has been speaking with a thick Russian accent ever since. When he gets worked up, his brain clicks fully over into Russian—some shit the neuroscientists of the world are still going nuts trying to figure out.

Mostly people try to be really nice to him.

"Sorry, man!" Victor yells, cradling the flip phone against his face. "Hello?... Hang on." He hands me the phone. "It's for you, man. Some chick."

Sasha.

The thought wreaks havoc on my slow-ass heart for a half-second before I clobber it into submission. Of course it's not Sasha. There are eighty million reasons for it not to be Sasha, least of which being how the fuck would she have Victor's number and know I was with him? And why would she care? She walked out on me with no forwarding address, and now all I have is a Sasha-shaped hole in my chest.

Anyway, I killed her brother.

"Carlos?"

I have to stop disappearing from the world like this. I ignore Vic's raised eyebrow, take the phone, and say hello into it.

"Tell your buddy if he refers to me as 'some chick' ever again he'll be driving his own ass to the ER."

"Hi, Kia." Kia is sixteen and will probably rule the world one day. For now though, she runs my friend Baba Eddie's botánica. Started on the register, selling Amor Sin Fin and Espanta Demonio herbal mixtures, statues of saints, and beaded necklaces. Then she started managing the books, which were a disaster, and—without bothering to ask Baba Eddie—she set up an online store and proceeded to build what appears to be a small spiritual goods empire, one she rules with an iron fist. And

all as an after school job.

"Wassup, C?"

"Isn't it a school night? What are you doing up at 4:00 a.m.?"

"Returning your phone call."

"That was like eight hours ago!"

"Alright, man, I'll talk to you later, then."

"Wait—you know anything about the park over on Marcy?"

"Know anything about it? I know a buncha motherfuckas been gettin' got there recently. Usedta be my stomping grounds for a while, then I moved on. Is that where you are right now, C? You might wanna not be there."

"I'm alright. Anything else?"

"This girl Karina I know from the rec center babysits a whole boatload of little white kids at that park. You want me to ask her about it?"

"If you don't mind."

"Imma see her tomorrow, maybe I'll swing through with her."

The radio crackles and Victor picks up the mic. "Five-seven x-ray ... Send it over."

"Be careful out there," Kia says.

Victor put on his seat belt and cranes his head toward the back. "Del, we got a job."

"Morgaly vikalu, padlo!"

"It's been like three weeks now," a little humpty-dumpty-looking middle-aged man in a bathrobe tells us. "I been coughing and hacking but this is different."

Del towers over the guy, arms crossed over his chest, perpetual frown deeper than usual. "You've been coughing for three weeks, yes?" He says it like he's about to launch into an eighty-thousand-page dissertation about vodka and agriculture reform. "And now you decide for to call 9-1-1, why?"

"Well, tonight I coughed up something different. You want to see?"

"I really do not want to see this thing," Del says, but little oval-shaped dude is already rummaging through a layer of used tissues and medicine vials on his coffee table.

Victor scribbles the guy's basic information down at the kitchen table. I'm sitting across from him trying not to gape like an asshole. "Is this normal?" I whisper. "People call you for this shit?"

He peers over his dollar store reading glasses at me for a hard second, then gets back to writing.

"Here it is!" the guy exclaims cheerfully. Then he erupts into a hacking fit. He passes a plastic Tupperware container to Del, who gingerly takes it in a gloved hand and peers in. He scowls and tips it toward us just enough for me to see a tennis-ball sized clump of tangled brown hair.

"The fuck?" I say before I can stop myself.

The patient shrugs. "I know, right?"

Victor shrugs too and then both radios in the room burst into frantic, static-laced growls.

Unit with a message, please repeat your assigned number and location. Unit with a message, please re— Another desperate scramble of static and yelling cuts off the dispatcher. Victor and Del both furrow their brows and turn up their radios at the same time.

I hear the words *forthwith* and *imminent arrest* come in, and then more static. The dispatcher releases an angry tone over the airwaves and yells at the units to stop stepping over each other.

I stand up. "What is it?"

Victor shakes his head. "Sounds like they're calling for help."

Marcy and Greene! Marcy and Greene! the radio screams. Forthwith! We have an imminent cardiac arrest. I need medics, I need backup, we about to roll.

Victor and I lock eyes. "The park," I say.

He nods. "Go. We gotta wrap this up."

* * *

At full speed, I move with ease. You don't realize my left leg drags; this cane compensates just so, the full complex machinery of me lunging forward like a wave. It took practice, believe me. But I've had time. It's been more than four years since I died in some unspeakably violent way at the foot of the ornate archway at Grand Army Plaza and then woke up days later in a phantom safe house on Franklin Ave, body broken and every memory shredded. I find new life in each moment like this: the midnight brownstones breezing past me, the siren song of something foul dragging me forward. This is life, and really, anything is better than

the sheer emptiness of so many lost memories.

"The streets is hungry," a little old lady mutters when I roll up, sweat-soaked and out of breath, at the southwest corner of Von King Park. She has a rusted old cart in front of her and a head scarf tied around her wrinkled brown face. "Streets be feedin' when they hungry."

A bloodstain the size of a trench coat shines up from the dark concrete at me. It catches the sickly orange glow of street lamps and pulsing blue emergency lights. They've already decorated the spot with police tape. The ambulance must've screeched off just before I got there; I hear its wail receding into the night. A few feet away from the bloodstain, a motor scooter lies in heap, like someone just crinkled it up and tossed it there.

The cop nearest to me has icy blue eyes and looks young and entirely unimpressed. I ask him what happened and he just shrugs and looks away. I turn to the old lady, still standing beside me and chewing her mouth up and down like she has the mushiest piece of steak in there she don't wanna let go of.

"One'a them Chinese delivery boys," she responds to my unanswered question.

"What hit him?"

She nods up the block some, to where a *Daily News* truck idles with its hazard lights on. A guy with a baseball cap and goatee stands outside, talking on his cell phone, eyes barely holding back tears. An ugly, human-sized dent marks the side of the truck.

I shake my head. "Damn."

"Streets is hungry," the old lady says again.

"You see anything right before? Anything weird?"

She turns her attention from the street; those ancient cataract-fogged eyes squint up at me. "Was just a small one, eh."

"A small ... what?"

She flinches, eyes back on the street, far away. "Don't play stupid now."

"A small ghost."

"Aye."

"You see it clear?"

She shakes her head. "Just fleeting, like. Came and went, came and went." She chuckles softly. "'He'll be back though, eh. He'll be back,

Kia

Karina's right: the new Capoeira teacher is fine as hell. The dude's not even my type; I usually go for really overweight, darkskin dudes. He sits on a folding chair facing us in the big meeting room, his muscular arms crossed over his muscular chest. There's a shiny bruise on his left cheek, but otherwise, his face is maybe perfectly symmetrical. Like, he might be an android, and right now his left eyebrow is raised slightly, making him look just the right combination of arrogant and thoughtful. He's got big lips and a carefully trimmed goatee. Golden brown shoulders bulge out of that sleeveless shirt in a way that's almost profane, like, just sitting there. Being all burly and shoulderful in front of a group of teenagers seems somehow inappropriate.

And I'm here for it. We all are.

"Thank you all for coming today, kids!" Sally says. Sally's the white lady who runs things. She's barely taller than the new Capoeira teacher and he's sitting down. She looks like a sack of mediocre potatoes next to his glowing golden perfection. Shit, we all do. "I'm really excited to introduce you to Rigoberto, our new Capoeira instructor."

"What happened to Gilberto?" Devon asks.

"You scared him off with ya loud-ass farting last week," Karina tells him.

Devon flips her off. "Shut the fuck up."

"You guys," Sally says. "Let's not do this, okay? Gilberto unfortunately had an altercation in a bar the other night and won't be able to..."

"Somebody faded Gil?" Devon translates helpfully. "Shit."

Tarik jumps up. "Wait! Gil gets faded at a bar and the new homey got a shiner? Y'all ain't seeing what I'm seeing?"

A general murmur ensues. Sally looks *vexed*. "Guys, it's Rigoberto's first day here and—"

Mikey B. raises his hand. "Rigoberto a Dominican name right?"

Rigoberto smiles. Teeth: perfect. At least four audible sighs ring out. "Actually, I am from Brazil, like your last teacher."

"You speak Spanish, man?" someone yells.

"Actually, in Brazil we..."

"Dumbass, he speak Brazilian."

"Y'all so stupid," Karina says. "He speaks Portuguese; now how 'bout we let the man talk and stop showing off how ignorant y'all are, 'kay?"

Laughter breaks out and then people settle down and look at Rigoberto. Sally smiles a little too broadly. "I'll just let you talk to the kids now, Rigoberto. Thank you!" She skitters out of the room.

Rigoberto stands up. Dude must be six foot three, at least. He's perfectly proportioned—each piece fits into the next just right, arms hang just right, his loose white pants fit just right. It's almost sickening. "Hello, guys and girls," he says with a doofy wave. "You can call me Rigo."

"Do we have bulge?" Karina whispers, peering over Devon's baseball cap.

We do. "We appear to have bulge," I report.

Karina nods. "Confirmed bulge."

"Rigo, you married, boo?" Kelly yells out. Everybody groans. I want to punch her in the face.

Rigo chuckles. It sounds a little forced. "Today we're going to talk about Capoeira, yes? Not Rigo's personal life."

"Fat chance," Karina mutters.

"Let's begin by seeing what we know so far, okay? Because I don't know this other teacher, Gilberto, yes? But he may be, how do you say ... incompetent? Why don't we have demonstration? Which one of you is Kia?"

My heart lurches into overdrive. I suck at Capoeira. And I hate standing in front of people. And. And. People are snickering and turning back to stare at me. Karina shoves my shoulder. Rigo searches our faces 'til his eyes lock with mine. He smiles that eerily perfect smile and says, "Ah, you are Kia? Kia Summers?"

I nod, praying he'll change his mind, knowing he won't. Why would he call me by name anyway? What kind of ...

"Go!" Karina hisses in my ear. The moment has grown long, awkward. I stand, somewhat shakily, and make my way through the group to the front.

Rigo wears altogether too much cologne. It's something synthetic and overbearing and it makes me dizzy. "You remember how to do a basic ginga?" He asks, smiling down at me.

I shrug. "I mean, kinda."

"The ginga is the basic step of Capoeira, yes? Everyone has their own ginga. It is as personal as a signature. Just like everyone has their own rhythm."

"Devon doesn't!" Karina yells.

"When you understand the ginga, when you find your own..."—Rigo swings one leg back and raises his forearm toward me, then switches sides, moving so smooth it's like he's gliding a few inches above the wood-paneled floor—"it becomes like just walking down the street! You see? Natural. Come, we do it together." I try to mimic him, sliding my left leg back and then shifting my weight to the right. I feel like a broken mannequin.

"Clap, kids, yes? For the beat?" He lifts his hands over his head and those thick triceps glare at me. I lose my entire sense of rhythm and have to start over. "Clap, clap!" Rigo yells, breaking into a syncopated beat in time with his hovering step.

The group claps more or less in time and I work my way back into a steady ginga.

"Yes, yes, very good!" Rigo yells over the clapping. "Now what happens when I go with one of these?" He spins; one foot anchors back and the other flies up toward me. I know this part—I'm supposed to dodge-bend backward like in *The Matrix* and then spin into some impossible acrobatic shit and kick. I arch back and throw myself off balance, hurl sideways and catch Rigo's sneaker in the face.

Everyone in the room yells, "Oh!" as I stumble backward. I hear Rigo mutter, "porra!" and then feel a whoosh of wind brush past. Arms wrap around me. Thick arms. Rigo somehow evaporated and reappeared behind me. Again, audible swoons erupt, not all of them from the girls.

My hands are over my eye and Rigo's hands are on my wrists. "Let me see," he says softly. "Let me see. I'm so sorry, Kia. Let me see what I did."

I shake my head. I probably look like one of those deep sea monstrosities right now, the hell Imma let Brazilian Ken gape at me.

"We probably need to ice it. Can you see? Kia?"

I relent. The collective gasp is all I need to tell me what an instant freak show I've become. Rigo scrunches up his face. "Is not so bad, minha. Let's get some ice, okay?"

"I'll take her!" Karina yells.

* * *

In the rec center health room, Karina informs me that I have a boyfriend.

"Don't be an idiot," I say. The ice pack pulses a numbing void against my forehead. From the wall, a cartoon condom explains, with the winningest of grins, that he's not reusable.

"I'm just saying," Karina says. "He called that ass out by name. He was like..." she drops her voice to an absurd baritone and affects something like a Polish accent. "Kia Summers! Please for to come to ze front of ze el roomio."

"Karina."

"You in love, girl, that's okay. We all are. Homeboy is eight feet tall and fine as fuck. *And* he's packin'. I'm just mad it's you not me, but I support you, Kia. I got ya back, all the way. And when it come crashing down because he's too old for you, I'll step in on that distraught friend tip and get me some too."

"How that even make sense? You the same age as me."

"I'm more mature though. And I'm Jamaican, so..."

"What that even ... Just be quiet, woman. You're giving me a headache."

"That headache is called Love. A love-ache."

All I can do is roll my eyes, but even that hurts. "You going to the park after class?"

Karina scoffs. "It's Saturday ain't it? You know I got all those baby beckys to take care of."

A bunch of the new white folks in the neighborhood linked up on some social media site and now they have regular Saturday evening dinner parties where they plot, I'm sure, how to make the perfect vegan cupcake and take over the world. Karina got the gig watching their rugrats and she usually just lets 'em loose in Von King.

"They ain't scared by all the shit been going on there?"

"Pshaw! It's added flavor and excitement to the urban adventure."

"Imma come with," I say.

Karina sits up real straight and wipes off her stupid grin. "If Renny there, I got ya back."

I sigh. "It's not like that, Karina. It's cool. I'm cool."

Rennard Deshawn White, of all the old-man-ass names for a teenage boy, is this kid I used to talk to. He's big and black and beautiful, all those loving folds of flesh to get lost in, and he got a quiet, easy way about him like I do when Karina's dumb ass isn't around riling me up. We used to walk the length of the park after school just talking. I mean, he talked most of the time and I just let him; he talked about his favorite video games and his moms and his little sister and how he wanted to be an engineer and, okay, yeah, it seems pretty boring if you not in it, if you don't give a crap about Renny, but I devoured every word and then waited in the silences for him to look over at me and then wrap around me and I could disappear into him and and and ...

And in February he started dating Maritza Lavoe. And then *they* started walking the park, same path we took, same leisurely loving pace, and I sat hugging myself next to Karina while all those little white kids ran screaming around us and wondered if Maritza made him laugh more or if she listened better, if they'd made out yet and if they kissed when they had sex. Dumb shit, I know, but that's where my off-kilter mind went and that's where it stayed. Me and Renny didn't even put our lips against each other's but I felt like I could go through things with him and come out on the other side a better person. I put my headphones on and with the best King Impervious break up rhymes on the player and I walked out of Von King Park one night and haven't been back since.

"You sure you cool?" Karina eyes my faraway look and I snap out of it, flash a smile.

"Girl, fuck Renny and his video-game-playin' ass."

"That's what I'm talkin' 'bout."

We dap and then I say, "For real, though, he still roll through there with Maritza?"

Karina shoves me and I almost fall over the desk I'm sitting on. We're both laughing so hard we don't notice that Sally's standing in there doorway, arms akimbo, until she says, "Young ladies," and then all we can do is bust out laughing again.

Carlos

New York weather doesn't give a fuck about any of us. It wants us confused and off balance and if it has to become absurdly warm after the sun sets on a brittle icy day in a brittle icy week, so be it. Folks are

shedding jackets and sweaters, unraveling scarves, looking around dumbfounded and annoyed. Old people step out on their stoops and stretch muscles crimped and tight from flinching against a long hard winter.

They smile as I pass, turn to each other and wonder who gonna get it tonight and how, what unaccountable tragedy will strike which corner of the park, and why ... They shake their old heads, jowls dangling, eyes squinting in the streetlights, and wonder.

I stand in the center of Von King Park and let the whole universe of it spiral around me. Little kids swarm the brightly lit playground in the southeast corner. Dog walkers stroll along in small clumps. In the field behind me, a baseball game wraps up. I'll say this for the community: The recurring traumas have not deterred people's impulse to commune. Who can resist the first night of spring? The thaw has come early, and knowing New York's tempestuous, temptress ways, tomorrow will see another frost.

"Mass random disasters be damned, huh?" my partner Riley says, appearing next to me. The fully dead have an annoying way of creeping up on a man.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

"The people gonna have their park."

"Ain't mad. It's a beautiful night." I'm sweating in this damn overcoat.

"Game plan?"

"Bell's at the southwest entrance." I nod towards the Marcy Ave gate at the far end of the field. "Posted some'a her soulcatchers at the northeast corner, the rest are scattered along the edges. You take the northwest."

"Where the little doggy park is? Man, fuck dogs."

"You have no soul."

"All I am is soul, brother."

"Imma be over at southeast. Kia got a friend who watches some kids there, gonna see if I can rustle up any information."

"Kia as in Baba Eddie's little botánica badass?"

"Uh-huh."

"Alright, man. You worried? You look worried."

"That's my face, man."

Riley shakes his head and moves out to the edge of the park with long ghostly strides.

* * *

Am I worried? No. Not worried, but a growing unease rumbles through my core. I don't have a name for it, can't trace its roots. It's been there for the past couple days, I realize, unnamed and rising. I'm just getting myself together so I can ignore the unease when I see Kia sitting next to her friend on the bench. Then I see her black eye. The unease erupts into a full-blown swath of rage.

"What the fuck happened?" I say, quickening my pace as I cross the playground. "Who I gotta kill?"

Before Kia can answer, her friend is up in my face. "The fuck are you, homeboy?"

"I…"

"You gonna back up off my friend 'fore I—"

Kia's hand lands on her shoulder. "Karina, it's cool, girl. That's Carlos, he's my people."

Karina glares up at me for a solid three seconds before backing off. I smile—not to seem condescending, I'm just relieved Kia has someone else around, someone her age, who will throw herself in the line of fire to protect her. I know I would.

"Karina, Carlos, Karina."

I nod at the girl and she appraises me with a squint and an eye roll. "What happened?" I ask, controlling my breath and the urge to incinerate something.

"It's fine, it was an accident is all."

Did the disaster ghost strike already? Seems there are no accidents these days ... "Here?"

"Nah, man. At the rec center. Capoeira-related injury."

"What is this Capoeira of which you keep speaking?" I ask.

"It's a fighting style or a dance or both, depending on who you ask. Roots in Africa, flourished in Brazil. They came up with it during slavery when they had to disguise their combat training as dance. I suck at it."

"She'll be aight," Karina puts in. "She was struck by an angel."

Kia swats her. "Shut it."

"A Brazilian angel."

Kia wraps both arms around her friend from behind and covers the girl's mouth. "Ignore her, C. What did you wanna ask about?"

"You take care of all these kids, right?" I ask over Karina's muffled giggles.

She pulls away Kia's hands and straightens herself. "Indeed I do."

"Every Saturday?"

"Unless the Ministry of Whiteness decides to take a night off."

I squint at her. "The Min..."

"Never mind, C," Kia says. "She here every Saturday, yes."

"You see the old guy get hit by that wheelbarrow from the construction site last weekend?"

Karina shakes her head and puts a stick of gum in her mouth. "Uh-uh." She offers me a piece. I decline. Kia grabs one and starts chewing loudly. "I heard about it though. And the lady who ran into a city bus the next day. She lived, though, I heard. But yeah. Whole lotta disaster up in these streets, man."

"You seen anything weird, like, around the park?"

"Besides white people jogging through Bed-Stuy after dark?" Kia says. They both fall out laughing for a minute and then collect themselves.

"Nothing really. Same ol' usuals. Drasco and his cat parade. The cops making rounds. That's it."

"What about the kids?"

"You wanna ask 'em?" Karina stands and makes a pretend megaphone with her hands. "WHAT WE GON' DO WHEN THE REVOLUTION COME?"

An eerie choir of high-pitched voices rises in the night around me. "Burn them houses and kill them sons!"

I boggle at Karina. "What the hell is that?"

Little white kids pour off the slide and swing sets. They repeat the line in unison as they make their way towards us.

Karina shrugs. "Song my grandma usedta sing. It gets their attention."

"I don't think..."

"WHAT WE GONNA DO WHEN THE CITY BURN?" Karina yells.

The kids bustle in around us. "Light them motherfuckas in they turn," they chant.

"Karina ... do their parents know you have them—?"

"Shit, I hope not. I'd probably get fired. I get nothing but tips and thank-yous so I'm guessing nah. I swore them all to secrecy. Right, soldiers?"

"Ashé!" comes the yelled response.

"Ashé, though?" Kia says. "You confusing these children, Karina."

"Hell, I grew up confused, why shouldn't they? What'd you wanna ask 'em, Carlos?"

Pale, expectant faces stare up at me. They all have big cheeks and wide eyes. "Anybody ... notice anything ... strange?" I ask them. I don't really know how to talk to kids. Not living ones, anyway.

They just keep staring at me.

Karina furrows her brow and stamps one foot. "Ay, soldiers. Tell Mr. Carlos the truth."

A pudgy hand goes up.

Karina points at the kid. "Musafa."

"You gave them African names too?" I ask.

"Naw, their parents did that. You know how some them white parents be."

All I can do is shake my head.

"Jimmy has fingerprints."

"Shut up!" Another little boy yells. His blue eyes well with tears.

"It's true!" Musafa insists.

"Jimmy," Karina commands. "Come here, love." The little guy waddles through the pediatric mob, sniffling back a sob. "Yes, be strong, little mister, don't cry now. Lemme see your hands."

He holds up both palms but there's nothing strange—no ink, no prints to speak of.

"Musafa, what you mean Jimmy has fingerprints?"

A girl in the front with strawberry blonde pigtails and a bright pink jump suit stands up. "Not on his fingers."

"Where, Esmé?"

She walks up to us and lifts Jimmy's superhero shirt. "On his body. Look."

I crouch down to squint at the shimmering blue markings on the boy's torso. Musafa was right: little handprints crisscross his back and sides. They're not from dirt though ... these are ghost prints. "Shit," I

say.

"Ooooh!" the crowd of kids hums.

"What we say about what mommy and daddy find out?" Karina says.

"Nothing," they answer as one.

"Alright, then." She looks down at me and I can tell she'd just been playing cool for the kids' sake. Her eyes are wide and worried. "What ... the hell ... is that?" Karina whispers.

I stand up and turn because something flickers at the edges of my consciousness. My hand goes to my cane-blade as I scan the perimeters of the park. Nothing.

"Carlos?" Karina says.

"Keep the kids close," I say. "Especially Jimmy."

"What is it?"

At the far corner from us, a car brake screeches and someone lets out a stream of curses.

"What's happening?" Jimmy moans.

I'm about to tell Kia to keep an eye on things when I realize she's nowhere in sight.

"Where's Kia?" I demand, fighting the edge out of my voice.

Karina spins around, panicked. "I don't know ... there!"

Kia has her back to us as she fast-walks toward a fat kid and a girl with a massive weave by the northeast corner.

"Fuck." I hop the small fence around the playground and break into a run. An eruption of translucent fluttering bursts to life along the northern edge of Von King Park. I hear a revving engine, see a newspaper fly up into the air beneath a street lamp and start to drift down like giant falling leaves.

"Kia!"

Kia

Rennard Deshawn White.

Dark brown like me and round, and those perfect arms, thick as my thighs with great dangling dollops of flesh. Folds I'd have sunk into on a lazy Sunday, some Sunday locked forever in my imagination, some faraway woulda-coulda type shit, as in coulda been all mine but instead, instead, instead ...

Rennard Deshawn White, sitting serene and stupid like a beached whale on that park bench in Von King, Maritza perched on ya lap, long manicured fingers in ya fro. Fuck this.

If they'd been making out that woulda been predictable. Fine. Make out. That's ya girl. Alright. But this ... this uninhibited performance of domestic bliss? Unacceptable. No little teenage love affair has any business looking this much like an ol' middle-aged couple—no way, no how. It's a ruse. Unacceptable, and unacceptable shit gets called as such, that's how I move. And regardless of how I move in general, this how I'm moving now: flushed forward on long strides, fists tight at my sides, face tight so they know I truly will smite down a bitch, lest they test me.

I'll not be tested.

No plan, no words formulated to blast out upon arrival, just fire and the simple truth that this shit, *this* shit, this shit will not stand. Nuh. Uh.

Maritza turns first. Renny's eyes are still closed, his head leaning back, a pleasant smile still splattered across his big, stupid, beautiful face. Her fingers stop weaving through that 'fro, face crinkles into a shrill frown.

"What happened, babe?" Renny murmurs, and it's then, in the second before he opens his eyes, that I remember my own eyes, my newly damaged face, what a true disaster I must look like. My mouth drops open, panic rises in me, and instead of fire, nothing comes out. Air. I wonder if I can vanish before he sees me, just be a story Maritza tells and surely she's kidding, Kia would never roll up on us like that, right? Right?

A commotion rises from the edge of the park, newspaper flutters down in the orange glow of a streetlight. I remember the disasters everyone keeps talking about and then Renny looks at me, face scrunched with concern, and opens his mouth.

The voice that says my name isn't his, though. If Renny did speak it got run over by Carlos' hoarse shout from behind me. I've never heard Carlos sound scared. The next thing he yells is "Run!" but I don't run, I turn to look at him.

The motherfucker is crazy. Carlos Delacruz barrels full-speed toward me from across the park. I don't know where he thinks I'm going to run to. I don't even know what I'm running from. Then his eyes go wide at something in the air between us, something I can't see, and he pulls a long, shiny blade out of his cane. Behind me, Maritza lets out the girliest

scream I've ever heard. I stumble back a few steps and I'm about to run when an icy grip slides around my ankle then up along my leg and swings me around.

A thousand tiny icicles needle into my neck. Pain blurs the world around me, a dull roar and a cloudy haze. Then the haze lifts and I'm looking into two bulging, translucent eyes and then a shimmering face, its mouth stretched out into a scream, chipped, malformed teeth, buckets of gelatinous drool, an eternity of darkness down its throat. This is a child's face, haggard and broken but still so young. Those eyes burrow into mine; I realize the ice on my neck is from its two tiny hands, crushing my windpipe.

The face takes up my whole vision—it's pressed up so close to mine I feel the chill air around it, its stale breath—but a figure stirs in the hazy world beyond this thing. Carlos. He's poised to strike, that blade of his raised and ready. The thing turns and I see Carlos clearly—his brow furrowed and frown uncertain.

I'm trying to figure out why he doesn't just kill this demon-ass child mothafucka when the creature hurls into him, throwing Carlos on his ass. The sudden absence of pain is the first breath of air after drowning. I gasp, scramble a few steps, and then break into a run.

* * *

So many people have come out to the park on this warm end-of-winter night, like their collective presence can somehow ward off whatever evil's been plaguing this place. Surely that *thing*, that horrible, brokenfaced, icy demon child of fucking frosty death will find one of the many other folks here to attack once it's done eating Carlos' soul or whatever. Or maybe getting shoved will wake Carlos' aloof ass up and he'll take care of business finally.

Either way, I'm out.

I dip and dodge between concerned onlookers, ignoring the stares and the feeling that hasn't left me, cross Lafayette, veering out of the way as a biker flies past and curses me out, and then cut around a corner and run hard. I don't know where I'm going—everything inside screams away; far, far away from that hell. I pass the junk lot with its dazzling dragon mural where the old guys used to play dominoes and the bodega I used to get candy at with Karina. Start to slow as a stitch

twists my gut, cross another street, and then my hands are on my knees and I'm leaning over like I'm gonna hurl. Then I do hurl, right there in the street, just watery yellow crap—bile, I guess? And I look up, back toward the park, and then I scream.

It's just a hazy flicker in the night but there's no mistaking it: the demon child is a block away, swimming at me in watery, uneven strides with its arms outstretched. I can't move. A city bus passes, oblivious to the nightmare my life has suddenly become, and the whoosh of air wakes me up. One more glance—the thing launching upward into the sky, mouth stretching wide—and then I turn and run again.

My breath is still short—I don't have much left—and immediately the sharp ache reopens beneath my ribs. Carlos is whoknowswhere and I have nothing to fight with, no idea even how, but I won't get got running. If that little spectral fuckmonster can touch me then I can touch the hell outta it too. I whirl around, fire raging in me again, ready to die.

It's closing on me from above, long fingernails stretched out, mouth twisted into a silent howl. My left leg shoots back and I pivot just so, twisting my body out of the way. The ghostling rushes past with a chilly gust of air, spins back around, and charges. For this perfect second, I am smooth. Born from unholy terror, this is my ginga. I don't know how long I have before either this grace and precision abandons me or I get strangled again, so I anchor my right leg and spin-kick the little motherfucker in the face.

The air is cool and thick on my leg. The ghostling hurls backward and there's Carlos, face creased with fury. He yanks the thing right out the sky mid-tumble and shoves it into a black burlap bag.

I'm sitting on my ass, my breath sudden, fitful gulps, and my whole body shivers. Behind Carlos, a whole slew of shiny translucent figures stand gaping at me. Carlos follows my eyes. "Oh," he says.

I feel strangely calm. Everything slides into place. "Am I dead?" Carlos shakes his head. "Nah. But your life will never be the same."

Carlos

A muted daybreak opens across the warehouses and fancy new high-rises around us. The East River sparkles beneath the growing dawn, still alive with the last of Manhattan's shine.

We absorb it in silence for a few minutes, then I rake out a

Malagueña and offer Kia the pack.

"No thanks, man. I want to reach voting age without my larynx rotting out."

I shrug and light up.

"So." Kia puts her hands in my pockets and keeps her eyes on the gray sky above the rooftops. "Turns out you're not some crazy hallucinating guy."

I bark a laugh. "And neither is Baba Eddie."

"Well, I knew that. And all the glowing guys that were standing around you?"

"My team."

"They're ... dead."

"Very."

"And the little fuckmonster that attacked me?"

I nod. "Also dead."

"Not dead enough."

A seagull circles in front of us, caws its complaint, and then veers off toward the bay.

"I guess I always thought the whole ancestors thing Baba Eddie always talking about was more like a metaphor, you know? Like, he puts down food for them and smokes cigars with 'em and shit, but I thought that was just like ... you know, symbolic."

"Nope."

"And you, Carlos? You're dead too?"

"Half."

She shakes her head. "Alright, man. It's just a lot."

"I know. And I know last night was scary. Really scary. And we're gonna figure out what the hell is going on, Kia."

"What..." She pauses. Collects herself. "What am I supposed to do now, Carlos?"

"I wish I could tell you everything's just gonna be alright," I say, "but that's not a promise I can make you, Kia. You gotta live your life, but you gotta be careful. You have the Vision now, you're gonna be seeing ghosts."

She shudders. "Like, everywhere? Man, I can't handle this shit. I didn't ask for this."

"Not everywhere, just ... around. And I know it's a shock at first,

believe me, but you have to stay sharp. Just keep away from them. If one starts coming at you, you gotta run. I mean, most of them are harmless, really, and I don't want you to walk around the rest of your life being afraid of the dead..."

"No, why would I ever do that?"

"Look, right now, it seems like something's after you. And we got this one but we can't be sure there ain't another one out there looking for you."

"Great."

I crouch and unstrap the short blade from my boot. It's sheathed in a metal holster wrapped in worn leather. I hold it out with both hands, the way Riley handed me my first blade.

"What's this?"

"It's a blade like mine. It kills ghosts."

"Carlos, man..."

"Kia, take it. I don't usually give things to people, especially not ghost-killing things. This is important."

She scowls, arms crossed over her chest. "Where am I supposed to keep that thing, man? You do realize I'm black, right?"

"I…"

"Can't be walking 'round Brooklyn with a dagger hanging off me just chilling like *ayyy*. You read the newspapers? You gonna pay for my funeral when the cops blow my ass away?"

"Kia, I—"

"Y'all brown folks don't get got like us, C. You might get ya ass beat for being brown, especially gray-ass brown like you. But I'm black. Ain't no kinda ambiguous either. *Un*ambigously black. They shoot us for having a wallet or a sandwich or just walking down the street, how Imma roll with a medieval-ass ghost killing-ass dagger?"

"You..."

"I need you to be *up on shit* like that if we gonna be friends, C. This is my life. I'd like to keep it."

I finally stop trying to get a word in edgewise and take it in. She's right. I hadn't thought about it. My blade stays safely hidden away in my cane and I still get side-eyes from every cop I pass. And I'm light gray-brown. Cops been on the rampage in this city, killing with impunity, and all the victims black. Unambiguously black, as Kia said.

"You right," I say. "It's different for me. I hadn't thought about it like that."

"'Course you hadn't." She takes the dagger. "Imma rock with it though. I'll figure out how to hide it." An unruly glint sparkles in Kia's eyes. She draws the knife and it makes that *shhiiinnnggg* sound they do in movies and the blade catches the orange glow from the rising sun, damn near blinding me. "Oh, fuck yeah," Kia whispers.

I step back. "Careful now. Listen..."

She sheaths it up again and smiles up at me. "Go 'head."

"You trying to really kill a ghost for good, you stab or slice at the head or torso. One or two good cuts and that's it, the deal is done. Most the time. A particularly strong one might last longer. If you cut at the limbs you might incapacitate it but it won't be gone."

"How a ghost die though? They not dead already?"

"It's called the Deeper Death. Means they're really gone, like ether. Just gone."

"Cool."

"Not cool." I stern up my voice. "Be careful with this thing. Sometimes when folks are new to seeing spirits they just bug out and stab up any ol' ghost wandering by. Never rush to the kill. Find out what's going on. But stay ready. Shit gets hairy fast with the dead, even if *most* spirits aren't gonna try to hurt you."

"If they do," she says, drawing the blade again, "they gonna taste Ethereal Juniper."

I frown. "Ethereal Juniper though? Try harder."

"You name yours?"

"No, Kia I'm an adult and I don't live in Middle-earth. But do you."

"You're no fun."

"Also: Imma have some of my folks keep an eye on you."

She shakes her head and sheathes the blade for emphasis. "Hell no." "Kia, listen..."

"No. I listened. Now *you* listen: It's not happening. I reject it. Do you understand me, Carlos? I did not invite this situation and I do not welcome this situation into my life. Yesterday, besides almost dying, I made an utter jackass out of myself in front of the one boy I ever had a crush on. I am sixteen. I got a job, a black eye and trigonometry homework, and plenty of other shit to worry about besides having your

dead-ass friends following me around. Feel me?"

I swallow back a retort. She's right again, but that doesn't lessen the danger. I wonder if this is what parents feel like when their cute little kids turn into full-fledged autonomous things. "I do," I finally say. "I do and I'm sorry. Part of this is my fault. I shouldn't have hesitated. I fucked up and I'm sorry." I shuffle back and forth on my feet and look out at the city. "Really sorry."

"It's alright," she says, squinting at me. "Maybe it's better anyway. Like you said—this way y'all can maybe figure out what's going on. If you'da just cut the little fucker it'd be a done deal and we'd be stuck guessing."

I brighten. "It's true!"

"But the next time it's between me and some demon child, stop overthinking shit and just do what you have to do."

She shrugs and heads down the stairs.

The sun emerges from a hazy muddle of clouds; it throws the scattered shadows of circling pigeons across the rooftop.

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TEAR TRACKS

MALKA OLDER

Tear Tracks

MALKA OLDER

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Nobody expected them to look human. If anyone still harbored that kind of anthropocentric bias, they kept it bottled up with their other irrational fantasies (or nightmares) of successful contact. The biophysicists had theorized alternative forms that could support higher intelligence: spiraling cephalopods, liquid consciousness, evenly-distributed sentience. The Mission Director, who was known for being broad-minded, even invited some science fiction writers to work with the scientists in imagining what intelligent alien life might look like. The collaboration didn't generate many usable ideas for the Mission (although it did lead to half a dozen best sellers and a couple of ugly lawsuits). And after all that thought and effort and retraining of assumptions, the first intelligent extraterrestrial life-forms they found were humanoid.

Not completely human, not like actors in silver face paint, but bilaterally symmetrical, bipedal, with most of the sensory organs concentrated in a central upper appendage that it was difficult not to call the head.

"We need a new word, a whole new vocabulary," Tsongwa said, as he and Flur reviewed hours and hours of long-distance surveillance video. "A term to remind us that they're not human, but still give them equal importance and intelligence."

Because not only were they humanoid (the word did not satisfy Tsongwa, but it caught on and stuck), they were clearly intelligent, with societies and civilizations. They lived not in the caves or intelligent-organic complexes or mind-alterable environments hypothesized by the scientists, but in identifiable buildings, in cities. (The Mission Director promptly brought in architects, urbanists, psychologists, forensic archeologists, urban psychologists, forensic architects). They were "advanced" (Tsongwa insisted on putting the word in quotes) enough that first contact with them could be via radio, and then video. Many of

the linguistic problems, not to mention the initial shock of alien existence, could be worked out long before Flur and Tsongwa got anywhere near the planet.

The Mission Director insisted on the importance of a protocol for contact, flexible enough to use in as many different contexts as they could imagine (an optimist, he was still hoping to discover intelligent spiraling cephalopods), yet structured enough to allow for some degree of standardization. Two ambassadors, one male, one female (the Mission Director did not point out that they were also of different "races," another word Tsongwa used only in quotes). They would go armed, but imperceptibly so. They would go with scientific objectives—as much observation and recording as possible—but also with diplomatic goals that were more important: they were to bring back, if not a treaty, at least an agreement. "A framework," the Mission Director explained, "for future relations." He made a template for them, but encouraged them to modify it as necessary. The next day he came back with a few more templates, to give them a sense of the range of options.

Flur, the brilliant young star of what they call the Very Foreign Service, smiles and nods, but he's overselling it. She's pretty sure she can figure out the acceptable options, maybe even some the Mission Director hasn't come up with, just as she's pretty sure she can charm these aliens by respecting and listening to them, by empathizing, by improvising. Maybe more than Tsongwa. She likes Tsongwa, but he's so serious, and places too much importance on semantics. She knows he's supposed to be the experienced balance to her youth and genius, but nobody's experienced anything like this before. And he's not actually that much older; it's just the deep lines on his face and the slow pace of his consideration that make him seem so.

Flur is aware of another probable advantage: as far as they have been able to tell, most of the alien leadership is female. Or the equivalent of female, what looks like female to the humans, which means human females will look like leaders to the aliens. Even Flur's skin color is closer to the rosy purple of alien flesh. Though no one has mentioned either of these cultural elements, Flur prepares herself for the possibility that she will need to act as the head of the expedition, even if she remains technically subordinate to Tsongwa.

Her confidence, or overconfidence, does not pass unnoticed. But it

doesn't worry the Mission Director or Tsongwa much. Flur is never disrespectful, and she works hard, studying the video and audio recordings, diagramming and re-diagramming what they understand about political structures, writing short treatises about cultural practices.

The time and place of the landing are set, and there is a flashy ceremony for the departure from the base station, full of flags and symbols and fine music, scripted and simulcast. Flur has an odd longing to wave to her mother, but manages to quell it. Fortunately, the Mission Director has managed to fend off requests to simulcast the mission itself (largely by reminding politicians and media executives about the unlikely but real possibility of a grisly end to the adventure). The closing air lock leaves Flur and Tsongwa alone, except for the eighty-two mission staff looped into their communications and recording network. They beam down, a slang phrase for what is in practice a long, bumpy, and dangerous trip into the planet's atmosphere on a shuttle known as the Beamer. This is Tsongwa's expertise, and Flur is appropriately grateful for it as she copilots. He ably navigates them to the designated landing site, an extensive field outside of the alien city.

Flur takes a deep breath once they are settled. Through the small window she can make out tall, curving shapes: the aliens, the natives of this planet, have gathered as planned. From the screen on the dash the Mission Director looks back at her, almost bathetic in the way emotion and overwhelming awareness of the significance of this moment play openly on his face. Flur checks her comms and stands up. For a moment she and Tsongwa are face-to-face in the narrow aisle between the seats, and though his chin is level with her forehead Flur feels for the first time that they are looking straight at each other. This moment, though it is being recorded and transmitted in a dozen different sensory and technological combinations, is still theirs alone. There is a mutual nod—Flur doesn't know which of them initiates it—and then Tsongwa leads the way to the hatch.

Stepping out of the Beamer, Flur finds that the aliens look less human at this close range. Their extended bodies curve gracefully into hooks and curlicues, partially obscured by flowing robes that give the impression of square-sailed ships luffing to the wind. When two of them step forward with extended hands, Flur can see that their three fingers are flexible as snakes. They cover the lower part of their faces with

more cloth, but above that their noses have only a single nostril, flat on the face, opening and closing like a whale's. Unsettlingly, it is the eyes that are most human: none of the giant pupils or extended slits of old science fiction movies, but (what appear to be) irises and robin's-egg sclera within the familiar pointed oval shape, although they each have only one. In the popular press they are already known as the Cyclopes, but Flur finds each eye startlingly (perhaps deceptively?) expressive.

The two aliens have paused, hovering at a safe distance. Maybe that's their idea of personal space? Flur glances at Tsongwa, a sideways slant of the eyes obscured by her goggles, but he is already stepping forward, arms up and out, mimicking the circular alien gesture that they have identified as significant and positive. Through her speakers, Flur can just make out the sound of him clearing his throat.

"Greetings," he says, in an accented Cyclopan that they hope is comprehensible. He pauses. In what is surely the best moment of either of their lives, the aliens say the same word back to him.

The two designated humanoids approach, and curve more so that their singular eyes are nearly on a level with their visitors'. The skin of their faces looks parchment-like, worn and creased, like oak leaves pasted together, with striking lines trailing down from both corners of their eyes. They pronounce elaborate welcomes which Flur only partially understands. Their names are Slanks and Irnv, and they are happy to welcome their most esteemed visitors from another planet and take them in this honorable procession to the capital city of their island, where they will meet their leader. Flur almost lets out a reflexive giggle at the irony of it all, but she squelches it, and accepts instead the folds of material that Irnv hands her. "A costume more suited to our climate," Slanks says, as he hands the same to Tsongwa.

Flur, cozily padded in a latest-model spacesuit, had not noticed any issues with the climate, but at least the local dress resolves one concern. There had been some worry at Mission Control that, having transmitted visuals of humans in their native habitat to the aliens, they would find the sight of them in their tubed breathing apparatuses disconcerting, but the alien clothes include fabric to cover the lower face, so that should help.

It is a moderately long walk to the city, and Flur keeps an eye on the visit clock ascending without pause in the corner of her view, and the

bars representing her life support resources shrinking ceaselessly. A milky fog obscures much of the landscape, but Flur stares at the fragments of organic material at her feet, twigs and leaves in strange shapes, or maybe shells or corals, or something they have no word for yet. She longs to scoop up a sample, but is embarrassed to do so in front of their attentive entourage.

At the edge of the city they are guided to a canal or river where they board an almost flat barge, its slightly curved sides dressed with the same fabric that the Cyclopes wear. As they detach and float slowly along, Flur begins to feel disoriented, although she can't figure out what is dizzying her. Finally, looking down at the canal, she decides it is the water, or the liquid, which is sluggish and thick. Grateful for the flowing native costume, she detaches a specimen vial from her space suit and within the compass of the billowing sleeves manages to scoop up some of the canal liquid, seal, and pocket it. She doesn't think anyone has noticed, not even Tsongwa, who is deep in limited conversation with Slanks.

The gray-blue buildings are sinuous and low. Flur wonders if they continue underground. They cross a few other canals, but there are also pedestrian paths where tall humanoid shapes in expansive robes move, pause, interact. As they stream inexorably by, Flur catches a glimpse of two flowing dresses, one bold purple, one carnelian red, pressed against each other, fluttering suggestively. She looks away quickly, then looks back, but they have drifted out of sight before she can be sure what she saw.

The canal empties into a wide circular plaza, like a collection basin, or possibly the source of the waters. Avenues dotted with pedestrians surround the central circle of mixing waters, which has been waterscaped into a flat sculpture, tilted slightly upward, with streams of blue and lavender liquid running down it in carefully designed flows. Flur can make no sense of it, but she's sure it's important.

"It's beautiful," she says to Irnv, and although the alien replies "Thank you," Flur has the feeling that the crinkles around her eye express politeness rather than real pleasure. *Beautiful* was not the right word.

They disembark and enter the palace through a gateway draped with more cloth, the bright colors this time woven through with a black thread that gives the whole a muted sheen. The corridors are high and narrow, and slope (downward, so she must have been right about going underground) more steeply than a human architect would allow. Despite her oxygen regulator, Flur is out of breath by the time they come to a stop in a cavernous chamber, and she thinks uneasily about their tanks. As a precaution, during the visit planning they halved their life-support time frame and gave only that conservative number to the aliens. Still, Flur can't help being aware that everything was an estimate, that if for any reason they can't use the barge it will take them longer to get back, that they are therefore dependent on the aliens. She calms her breathing, catches Tsongwa's eye on her and nods to tell him she's okay. Then she looks around. Mission Control sees what she sees.

The room, like the corridors, has no right angles; its shape suggests the word "organic" to Flur, although she guesses Tsongwa would be able to find some semantic problem with that. The impression is intensified by a shallow pool of slightly lilac-tinted liquid in the middle of the room, roughly where the conference table would have been on Earth. The Cyclopes are reclining in flexible harnesses, suspended from a frame that hangs from the rounded ceiling and ending in constructions almost like hammocks. It takes quite a bit of adjusting for these to be feasible for Flur and Tsongwa (more wasted time, Flur can't help thinking), but once she's cradled in one she finds it surprisingly comfortable, her weight evenly distributed, her feet just resting on the ground.

While they are finishing with Tsongwa's harness she examines the row of decorations along the curving wall, gradually realizing that they are not abstract moldings, but sculpted likenesses. There are no gilded frames, no contrasting background to firm, smiling faces, but once she sees it Flur can't believe she missed it. There are so many analogs in her own world: the row of ancient principals on the moldy wall of her high school; the faces of presidents in her history book and hanging in pomp in the Palais National; the old, unsuccessful directors hanging outside the Mission Director's office. Conscious of the video feed, she looks at each face in turn for a few seconds, trying to learn what she can.

They do appear to be mostly female, although Flur counts three faces of the thirty-eight that scan to her as male. There are no confident smiles; a few are actually looking away, their faces turned almost to profile, and most of the eyes are angled downward. They look almost sorrowful; then, as she keeps staring, they look too sorrowful, the way the politicians at home look too distinguished. The vertical lines on the cheeks, trailing down from the corners of each august eye, begin to look stylized. In fact, much as the sequences at home evolve from paintings to photographs to three-dimensional photographs to hyperphotos, the moldings also show the passage of time. The first few are exact and detailed, like living aliens frozen into the wall, and as she follows the series back they become vague and imperfect. The face that Flur places as the oldest is painted in a combination of blues and lavenders, as though faded from the more usual dark purples, and the two-tone palette is unique. Staring at it, Flur starts to feel that it looks familiar. She remembers the fountain in the huge plaza, and suddenly that flowing pattern of water makes sense. It was a face—this face.

She leans toward Irnv to ask her, but at that moment everyone starts swinging back and forth in their hammocks, and more aliens start filing into the room. The last face to enter is also familiar: it is the most recent in the sequence of portraits. "It's the president," Irnv whispers. "She lost her three children and husband to sudden illness over the period of a year!"

Flur has no idea how to respond to that, and her half-hearted "I'm so sorry" is lost in the flurry of introductions, swinging of hammock-seats, and a brief interlude of atonal song. After that it is the president who, arranging herself with some ceremony in her hammock-chair, begins to speak. Flur gets most of it. Irny, who has also apparently been studying, whispers the occasional English word in her ear, but these are so out of pace with Flur's internal translation that they are more disruptive than helpful. She is grateful that she will have the recording to listen to. She will translate it word by word, slowly, in her office at Mission Control (a thought that fills her with momentary, inconvenient homesickness) but the general point is clear enough. Honored to receive this first interplanetary delegation; already the communications between them have set the foundations for a strong and close friendship, the type of friendship (if Flur understands correctly) which can withstand any tragedy; this personal visit, however, will truly interlace (or something like that) their peoples in mutual regard. Blah, blah, blah, basically.

Then it is Flur's turn. She had expected to stand up to give her

presentation, and it feels odd to speak from the balanced suspension of the hammock, without much preamble except the turning of expectant, one-eyed faces towards her. She takes out the small projector they brought, and aims a three-dimensional frame of the rotating Earth into the middle of the room, slightly closer to the president's seat. Her presentation is brief and colorful: a short introduction to the history and cultures of Earth, glossing over war, poverty, and environmental degradation and focusing on the beauty and hope integral to human and other biodiversity, with subtle nods to technological and, even more subtly, military power. The aliens seem impressed by the projection, although there is too much light in the room for it to come through at its full sparkling vividness. Flur wonders if they hear her spiel at all.

She nods at Tsongwa, and he takes over, describing their proposed agreement, or framework. Leaning back in her hammock as he steps through the template, explaining why each section is important and the degrees of flexibility on each point, Flur has to admit he's quite good: understated, yes, but that seems to fit the mood better than she had expected. Before they left she had, privately, suggested to the Mission Director that they switch roles, so that she could take on the key task of persuasion, but although he seemed to consider it, he had not made the change. Flur knows she would have been good, and her Cyclopean is slightly better than Tsongwa's, but he has learned his piece down to the last inflection. He even seems to have taken on the president's mannerisms, looking down and to the side and only occasionally, at key points, making eye contact.

There is a pause after he finishes, then the president sways, signaling her intention to speak. "For such a momentous occasion," she croons, "we will need to discuss with the high council."

During the pause while the council is called, Flur cannot help fretting about their deadline. Why wasn't the council there from the beginning, if they are needed? Will she and Tsongwa need to make their presentations again? At least her political diagrams have been partially validated, although she is still not clear on the relationship between the president and the high council, or either of them and what Mission Control has been calling the Senate. Apparently the president does not have as much direct decision-making power as they thought.

There is further singing to cover, or emphasize, the entrance of the

high council, and under it Irnv points out some of the more important council members. She seems to have a tragic tale about each of them. There is a woman who lost most of her family in a storm, another whose parents abandoned her as a child. The leader of the council, surprisingly, is male; his wife drowned two days after their wedding. Unable to continue murmuring about how sorry she is, Flur is reduced to nodding along and trying not to wince. She wonders if Tsongwa, a few feet away, is getting the same liner notes from Slanks. Looking at them she guesses he is, but between the oxygen mask and the face covering, it is impossible to read his expression.

Extensive discussion follows. Flur loses concentration in the middle of hour two, and can no longer follow the foreign syllables except for occasional words: "haste," "formality," "foreign," "caution." Dazed and unable to recapture the thread, Flur shifts her attention to body language instead, trying to figure out who is on their side. The president doesn't seem engaged, putting a few words in now and then but otherwise looking at the pool in the floor or at the walls. Then again, no one else is showing fire or passion either. The discussion takes place in a muted, gentle tone, councillors lounging in their hammocks, occasionally dismounting to dip their lower extremities in the shallow lavender pool. She wonders if they are showing respect for the president's tragedy. It is when she catches the president actually wiping a tear away from the corner of her large eye that she leans over to Irnv.

"Maybe the president is, um, a little distracted?" she asks.

Irnv looks back at her but says nothing, and Flur hesitates to interpret her facial expression.

"She seems quite..." Flur notices another tear slip down the furrows in the president's faded-leaf face. Thinking of her lost family, she is wrung by an unexpected vibration of sympathy. "Maybe she could use a break?" What Flur could use now is a moment to talk to Tsongwa in private, to strategize some way of moving this along.

She wasn't expecting her comment to have any immediate effect, but Irnv leans forward and says something to someone, who says something to someone else, and a moment later everyone is getting up from their swings. Flur cringes, but maybe it's for the best; they certainly weren't getting anywhere as it was.

"We will take a short refreshment break," Irnv tells her. "Come, I

will show you the place."

They file into a corridor beside Tsongwa and Slanks. Flur tries to exchange glances with Tsongwa, hoping that however the refreshment is served, it will allow them some tiny degree of privacy to talk, even if only in their limited sign language. Food would be nice too, but since the breathing apparatuses they are wearing make eating impractical, their suits are fitted with intravenous nutrition systems. They won't get hungry until they're long dead of oxygen deprivation. Flur is wondering how to explain this to Irnv in some way that will make their refusal of refreshments less impolite when Tsongwa and Slanks turn off the corridor through a small opening draped in purple. Flur starts to follow but Irnv catches her arm with her three serpentine fingers.

"Not in there," she whispers. "That's the men's side."

They take a few more steps forward and then slide through an opening with crimson curtains on the opposite side of the corridor. The space is smaller than Flur expected, and there is no one else there, but in the far wall is a row of curtained, circular passages, like portholes. Irnv gestures Flur toward one, then wriggles into the cubbyhole beside it. After a moment of hesitation, Flur pokes her head into the hole. Inside is a low space, a small nest with cloth and cushions everywhere and a shelf with several small jars holding different items: violet straw, green powder, ivory slivers the size of a thumbnail. Flur pulls her head out, but the drape has already fallen in front of the Irnv's opening. Flur crawls into her own nook, lets the curtain down behind her, and leans her head back against the unsettlingly soft wall.

It is so obvious she doesn't even want to whisper it into her comms (although Tsongwa is probably doing just that at this same moment, on the men's side), because surely they've figured it out by now: Eating is a social taboo. That's why they cover their mouths all the time. Of course they hadn't mentioned this during the previous discussions, any more than earthlings would have said, "By the way, we don't discuss defecation." Fortunately, because of the intravenous nutrition and the assumption that they wouldn't be able to eat alien food, no one at Mission Control brought the matter up during protocol discussions for the trip. Flur wonders what the reaction would have been. Embarrassed silence? A quick, mature resolution of the question and no more said about it? Giggles?

Even though she's not going to eat (she does take samples from each of the jars for her specimen cases), Flur finds the isolation soothing. She would like to sit in this cozy womb, silently, for at least ten or twenty minutes, breathing slowly and remembering why she's here. Instead she talks to Mission Control.

"How long would it take for us to get back without that canal?" Flur asks the air in front of her nose.

"We calculate walking would add another hour to the journey," answers Winin, the desk officer assigned to her earpiece. "That's with no obstacles or disruptions of the sort that might come from visitors from outer space walking through a major city."

"So about two and a half hours total," Flur muses.

"You've still got some time," Winin assures her.

"Yeah, but we're coming up on the limit we gave them." Flur lowers her voice, wondering how sound travels among these cubicles.

"Well, you can find an excuse to extend that, if you have to. How does it look?" Winin asks, as though she hadn't seen and heard everything that happened herself.

"Can you patch me in to Tsongwa?" A moment later she hears his voice.

"... very interesting, how many things we did not foresee."

"It is, it's fascinating. I think we can consider that alone a success, a complete validation of the need for this expensive face-to-face visit in addition to all the other communication."

Flur is a little surprised to hear the Mission Director. So Tsongwa went straight to the top during his break. She clears her throat. "Hey Tsongwa, how's the food on your side?"

He lets loose his surprisingly relaxed chuckle. "We'll have to ask the lab techs later," he says.

The Mission Director is not interested in small talk at this juncture. "Now that I've got you two together, what do you think? Can we get the agreement signed today?"

There is a moment of silence, and Flur realizes that, through the layers of alien building material and empty alien atmosphere that separate them, she and Tsongwa are feeling exactly the same thing.

"It seems unlikely," she offers, at the same time as he says, "I doubt it."

The Mission Director lets out a whoosh of breath. "Well. That's a shame."

"It's not a no," Tsongwa clarifies. "They need more time."

"Maybe if we could talk to someone else," Flur says, looking for some hope. "The president doesn't seem up for it right now, with all she's been through."

She's hoping that Tsongwa did not get the full tragic history and will have to ask what she means. Instead he says, "Actually..." He pauses to order his thoughts and in that pause Flur hears a rustling and then her name called, very softly, from the other side of the curtain.

"Gotta go," she whispers, and then slides out of the cubbyhole.

Irnv is reclining in a hammock-harness outside the cushioned wall of nests, still within the women's area. Her face covering is loosened and hanging down below her chin, and although Flur is careful not to stare at the dark purple, circular mouth, she finds she is already acclimatized enough to be shocked. The orifice seems to be veiled on the inside by a membrane of some kind, and doesn't fully close. Struck by the curiosity of the forbidden, Flur wishes she could see how they eat.

"Do we have to get back now?" she asks, wondering too late if she should thank her host for the food she couldn't ingest.

"We have some time still," Irnv says. "I don't know how you do it, but here we usually relax and socialize after eating."

"It is ... like that for us too," Flur says, wondering if she is right about the translation for 'socialize.' Following Irnv's graceful nod, she climbs into the hammock next to her and tries to put a relaxed expression on her face. Where is everyone else? They must have designated special eating rooms for the aliens and their handlers.

"Flur," Irnv says, and Flur snaps out of it. "What does your name mean?"

Rather than try to define a general noun, Flur takes out her palm screen and presses a combination she had pre-loaded. "Like this," she says, holding it out to Irnv as the screen runs through hyperphotos of flowers, all different kinds.

"Ahhh," Irnv strokes the screen appreciatively, stopping the montage on a close-up of a wisteria cluster.

"And you?" Flur asks, trying to keep up her end of the socializing. Irnv looks up, her head tilted at an angle that is so clearly questioning that Flur begins to trust her body language interpretation again. "Your name," she says. "What does it mean?"

"Star," Irnv replies, with a curious sort of bow.

"Oh, I thought star was 'trenu," Flur says.

"Yes, trenu, star. Irnv is one trenu. A certain trenu."

Flur finds herself tilting her head exactly the way that Irnv did a few minutes ago, and Irnv obligingly explains.

"Irnv is the name of your star. Your ... planet? We tried to pronounce it like you, but this is our version."

Terre. Earth. Irnv. But "pronounce it like you?" They have only been in contact for a few years. How old is Irnv?

"And your family?" Irnv asks, while Flur is still turning that over. "Where are you from?"

"An island," Flur says, one of the first words she learned in Cyclopan. She takes her palm screen back and brings up globes, maps, Ayiti. She hadn't prepared anything about her family, though. "Many brothers and sisters," she says. She thinks of the video that was made for the launch party, presenting a highly sanitized version of her backstory, and wonders why nobody thought to load that into her drive. Maybe it wouldn't translate well; their research has not pinned down the alien version of the heartwarming, life-affirming family unit. "We used to raise chickens," she says, unexpectedly, and quickly pulls up a picture of a chicken on the screen, and in her mind, the memory of chasing one with her brothers.

Irnv blinks her single eye. "They are all well? Your brothers and sisters?"

"Well?" It's a hard concept to define. The pause feels like it's stretching out too long. "They're fine. We're just fine."

A beat. "And how were you chosen for this?"

"Oh," Flur says. These are all questions they should have prepared for. She can't imagine, now, why they thought the conversation would be all business all the time. "Well, I went to school, and there were ... competitions." She can't remember the word for tests. "And then more school."

Irnv is nodding, but Flur reads it as more polite than comprehending, and she's trying to remember the words, find the right phrase to explain it, how it's not just written tests, but also character, leadership qualities,

sacrifices, observations by instructors and mentors, toughness, drills ...

"... happy to have you here," the alien is saying, with seeming earnestness.

Flur rouses herself back to her job. "We are very happy to be here too," she manages. "But we will have to go home soon, and we would really like to complete this agreement. For the future."

Irnv leans back in her hammock. "We hope so. But it is a very short time."

"It is," Flur agrees, with as regretful a tone as she can summon. "The president..." she trails off, delicately.

"The president is a great woman," Irnv says, in a tone that sounds to Flur very close to reverence.

"She is," Flur agrees, disingenuously. Pause, effort at patience. "Perhaps it's not the best time, though, with all she's been through recently."

Irnv looks confused, then understands. "You mean the loss of her family? But that wasn't recent, that was many years ago."

Years ago?

It takes Flur a moment to recover from that, and when she does Irnv is looking at her curiously. She puts out her hand, and the supple, red-purple fingers curl around Flur's arm. Flur is shocked to feel their warmth, faintly, through the protective space suit.

"I think she will agree," Irnv says. "It will take time. We can't rush."

"Of course," Flur answers, still feeling the pulse of warmth on her arm, though by then Irnv has removed her hand. "We go," the Cyclops says, sliding the scarf back over the bottom of her face as she stands.

They are not the first ones back into the meeting room, but it is still half-empty. Tsongwa and Slanks aren't there yet, and Flur wonders what they might be talking about in the men's room. She decides to put her time to good use.

"Irnv," she says gently, getting her attention from a conversation with another alien. "That—that face there?" Flur nods at the first one in the series, the two-tone blue and lavender portrait. "Is that like the fountain in the middle of the city?"

Now that Flur has seen Irnv's mouth she finds she can better interpret the movement of the muscles around it, even with the mask covering it. She is pretty sure Irnv is smiling. "Yes, yes," she says, "you

are right, that is another example. She is the founder of our city. After starting this city she was visited by very great tragedy. In her sorrow she wept, and her tears, different colors from each side of her eye, became the canals that we use to navigate and defend our city."

Flur is trying to figure out how to phrase her follow-up questions—does she probe whether Irnv understands it as a myth and exaggeration, or take it politely at face value?—when she notices Tsongwa has come back in with Slanks, and nods to them.

"It is in her honor," Irnv continues, "that we now make the tear tracks on our faces, to represent her learning, sacrifice, and wisdom." She runs her fingers along the deep grooves in her face.

"You ... do that? How?" Flur asks, trying to sound interested and non-judgmental.

"There is a plant we use," Irnv says. "But when one has really suffered, you can see the difference. As with her," she adds in reverential tones as the president enters the room, and Flur can see that it is true, the wrinkles in her cheeks are softer and have a subtle shine to them.

"That's ... impressive," she says, feeling that admiration is the correct thing to express, but then the president begins to speak.

"Very regretfully," she begins, her eye not nearly as moist as Flur had expected, "the time our visitors have with us is limited by their technology, and unfortunately we will not be able to settle this question on this visit."

Flur's hammock shudders with her urgency to speak, even as she catches Tsongwa's warning look.

"However, we look upon it favorably," the president goes on. "We will take the time to discuss it here among ourselves, and converse again with our good friends soon."

Flur is about to say something, to ask at least for a definition of 'soon,' a deadline for the next communication, some token of goodwill. It is the Mission Director's voice in her ear that stops her. "Stand down. Stand down, team, let this one go. We were working with a tight time frame, we knew that. And it's not over. Great job, you two."

The positive reinforcement makes Flur feel ill. Irnv's face, as she turns to her, seems to hold some wrinkles of sympathy around the mouth-covering mask and her cosmetic tear tracks, but all she says is,

"We should get you back to your ship as soon as possible."

The return trip, indeed, seems to pass much more quickly than the journey into the city. Less constrained by the idea of making a good impression, Flur takes as many hyperphotos as she can, possibly crossing the borders of discretion. Noticing that they are taking a different canal back (unless they change color over time?) she scoops up another sample. She even pretends to trip in the forest to grab some twigs, or twig analogs. Irnv says little during the walk, although Tsongwa and Slanks appear to be deep in discussion. Probably solving the whole diplomatic problem by themselves, Flur thinks miserably. When they find their ship—it is a relief to see it again, just as they left it, under guard by a pair of Cyclopes—Flur half-expects Irnv to touch her arm again in farewell, but all she does is make the double-hand gesture of welcome, apparently also used in parting.

"Irnv," Flur asks quickly. "How old are you?"

"Eighty-five cycles," Irnv says, then looks up, calculating. "About thirty-two of your years," she adds, and Flur catches the corners of a smile again. Meanwhile, Tsongwa and Slanks are exchanging some sort of ritualized embrace, both arms touching.

The return beam is less difficult than the landing, and once they are out of the planet's atmosphere and waiting for the Mission Crawler to pick them up, Tsongwa takes off his breathing apparatus and helmet, removing the comms link to Mission Control.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Fine," Flur says, trying for a why-wouldn't-I-be tone. "You?"

Tsongwa nods without saying anything.

"I just wish we could have gotten the stupid thing signed," Flur says finally.

Tsongwa raises both palms. "It'll happen. I think."

"The president seemed so..." Flur shakes her head. "It's a shame that we caught a weak leader."

"You think she's weak?"

"Well, grief-stricken, maybe. But it comes to the same thing. For us, anyway."

Tsongwa leaves a beat of silence. "What did you talk about in the eating room?"

"Personal stuff, mostly ... names, families. Oh, that's something,"

Flur sits up in her chair. So different from those hammocks. "Irnv told me she's named after our planet, but after *our* word for it. Earth, I mean."

Tsongwa is stunned for a moment, then laughs. "Well, that's very hospitable of them."

"Tsongwa, she's thirty-two. Thirty-two in our years!"

Another pause. "Maybe her name was changed in honor of the visit?"

"Or maybe..." Neither of them says it: Maybe the Cyclopes have been listening to us longer than we have been listening to the Cyclopes.

"What did you talk about?" Flur asks finally.

"Family, to start with." Tsongwa says. "Personal history. It's very important to them."

"What do you mean?"

He arranges his thoughts. It occurs to Flur, looking at the lines in his face shadowed by the reflected light from the control panel, that she has no idea what he might have told them about his family, because she doesn't know anything about him outside of his work.

"They wanted to know if I'd suffered."

"Suffered?" Flur repeats, in the tone she might use to say, Crucified?

Tsongwa sighs; the English word is wrong, so dramatic. "They wanted to know if I'd ... eaten bitter, if I'd ... gone through hard times. If I'd experienced grief. You know." An alert goes off; he starts to prepare for docking as he speaks. "They think it's important for decision makers, for leaders. It stems from the myth of the founder—you heard about that? They believe that people who have suffered greatly have earned wisdom." He twitches a control. "Now that we know this, we can adjust the way we approach the whole relationship. It's a huge breakthrough."

"But ... but..." Flur wonders, with a pang, whether this means she won't be included in the next mission. Can she somehow reveal all the hardship and self-doubt she has so painstakingly camouflaged with professionalism, dedication, and feigned poise? "But come on! The president has suffered, okay, but she didn't seem any the wiser for it!"

Tsongwa shrugs. "*They* believe it, I said. That doesn't mean it's true. They aren't perfect, any more than we are."

And Flur thinks of the Mission Director, his careful

multidisciplinarity and his pep talks, or the president of her country, a tall, distinguished-looking, well-spoken man who has failed by almost every measure yet retains a healthy margin of popularity. By that time they are docked, and scanned for contaminants, and the airlock doors open, and then they are swarmed by the ops team, shouting and congratulating them, slapping their shoulders and practically carrying them into the main ship where the Mission Director, his emotion apparent but held in perfect check, shakes hands with each of them and whispers a word or two of praise in their ears. Flur tries to smile and nod at everyone until finally, though it can't have been more than five or ten minutes later, she's alone, or almost, stripped to a sterile shift and lying in a clinic bed for the post-visit checkup.

"What's the matter?" The medical officer says, coming in with a clipboard and a couple of different scanners. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Fine," Flur manages through her sobs.

"You did great," he says, as he runs the scanners over her quickly, almost unnoticeably. "The geeks are already raving about those samples you brought back. There, there," he says, when she doesn't stop crying. He pats her arm awkwardly. "It's just the tension and excitement. You'll be fine."

But it isn't the tension or the excitement. Flur is thinking about the things she could have said to Irnv: about her four brothers, dead, drunk, imprisoned, and poor; her three sisters, poor, unhappy, and desperate. About her own childhood, hungry and hardscrabble. If she had unburied these old sufferings, would Irnv have trusted her more? Would she have been able to get the agreement signed?

But mostly, and it is this that makes her want to cry until she makes her own, shimmering tear tracks, she is thinking about her mother. Twice abandoned (three times if you count Flur's reluctance to visit). Beaten occasionally, exploited often, underpaid always. An infant lost, a dear sister lost, an adult child lost. Flur has always avoided imagining that grief. When her brother was killed, she clung to her own complicated pain and did not look her mother in the eye so she would not probe those depths. Now she weighs all her mother has suffered.

In another world, it would be enough to make her president.

About the Author

MALKA OLDER is a writer, humanitarian worker, and PhD candidate at the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations studying governance and disasters. Named Senior Fellow for Technology and Risk at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs for 2015, she has more than eight years of experience in humanitarian aid and development, and has responded to complex emergencies and natural disasters in Uganda, Darfur, Indonesia, Japan, and Mali. *Infomocracy* is her first novel. You can sign up for email updates here.

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Oral Argument

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Mr. Chief Justice, and may it please the court:

Thank you, it's good to be here. A special hearing convened by you is very special. I'm happy to answer your questions.

Well, yes, the subpoena. But I'm happy too.

No, I did not represent them in those years. And now I'm only serving as their spokesperson while their legal standing is being clarified.

No, I don't know where they are. But if I did, that would be a matter of attorney-client privilege.

Spokesperson confidentiality, yes. Like protecting my sources. That's what I meant to say.

I do know what contempt of court means, yes. I brought my toothbrush.

No, I'm happy to answer any questions you have. Really.

Okay, sure. I met them when they were finishing their postdocs at MIT. I should clarify that they had no affiliation with MIT at the time they did the work in question, as MIT has proved.

Their project involved identifying and removing problem parts in the biobricks catalog. After MIT shifted the catalog to the iGem website—

No, I don't think repudiated is the right word for that. MIT might have been worried about legal repercussions, but I don't know. I came in later.

Anyway, after that change of host, the iGem Registry of Standard Biological Parts grew much larger, and the parties for whom I am speaking found that there were questionable parts in the catalog, for instance a luminous bacteria that emitted lased light which unfortunately burned retinas, or—

Sorry. I'll try to be brief. While going through the biobricks catalog, my former clients found a seldom-used plasmid backbone called DragonSpineXXL, much longer than typical plasmid backbones. The DragonSpine's designers apparently had hoped to enable bigger assemblages, but they encountered in vitro problems, including one that

they called spina bifida—

It's a metaphor. I'm not a biochemist, I'm doing the best I can here. But to get to the point at your level of patience and understanding, as you so aptly put it, our bodies obtain their energy when the food we eat gets oxidized, producing ATP inside our mitochondria. ATP is the energy source used by all our cells. In plants, on the other hand, light striking the chloroplasts in leaves powers the production of ATP. Despite the different processes, the ATP is the same—

Yes, I too was surprised. But all life forms on Earth share 938 base pairs of DNA, so it makes sense that there are some family resemblances. So, it occurred to my almost clients that—

They consisted of a microbiologist, a systems biologist, a synthetic biologist, and an MD specializing in biochemistry and nutritional disorders—

Yes, no doubt a good joke about the four of them walking into a bar could be concocted. But instead of that they found biobricks in the catalog that could be combined to make a synthetic chloroplast. They felt it would be possible to attach this synthetic chloroplast to a DragonSpine, and still have room to attach another assemblage they concocted, one where fascia cells formed hollow fibroblasts—

Sorry. Fascia are bands of connective tissue. The bands are stretchy, and they're all over inside us. They kind of hold our bodies together. Like your feet, have you ever had plantar fasciitis? No? You're lucky. I guess you sit down on the job more than I do. Anyway, fascia consist of wavy bands of collagen blobs called fibroblasts. So, my acquaintances loaded DragonSpines with fibroblasts containing chloroplasts—

Yes, I know it's confusing. You are not biologists, I know. It's easy to remember that. What it comes down to is that my sometime clients, using nothing but synthetic parts found in the Registry of Standard Biological Parts, created photosynthesizing human cells.

Wait, excuse me, what you say is not correct. They didn't want to patent it. They knew that the registry was an open source collection.

I don't think they suspected that the idea itself would be patentable. The law there is ambiguous, I think that can be said. You might have judged their idea a business method only, you've done that before. An idea for a dating service, a new way to teach a class, a new way to replenish your energy—they're the same, right? They're ideas, and you

can't patent an idea, as you ruled in Bilski and elsewhere.

Yes, there were some physical parts in this case, but the parts in question were all open source. If you type out your idea on a computer, that doesn't make it patentable just because a computer was involved, isn't that how you put it in Bilski?

Quoting precedent is not usually characterized as sarcasm, Your Honor. The patent law is broadly written, and your decisions concerning it haven't helped to narrow or clarify it. Some people call that body of precedent kind of ad hoc-ish and confusing, not to say small-minded. Whatever keeps business going best seems to be the main principle, but the situation is tricky. It's like you've been playing Twister and by now you've tied yourselves into all kinds of contortions. Cirque du Soleil may come knocking any day now—

Sorry. Anyway the patent situation wasn't a problem for my erstwhile clients, because they didn't want a patent. At that point they were focused on the problem so many new biotechnologies encounter, which is how to get the new product safely into human bodies. It couldn't be ingested or injected into the bloodstream, because it had to end up near the skin to do its work. And it couldn't trigger the immune system—

Yes, in retrospect the solution looks perfectly obvious, even to you, as you put it so aptly. The people I am speaking for contacted a leading firm in the dermapigmentation industry. Yes, tattooing. That methodology introduces liquids to precisely the layer of dermis best suited for the optimal functioning of the new product. And once introduced, the stuff stays there, as is well known. But my putative clients found that the modern tattoo needle systems adequate to their requirements were all patent protected. So they entered negotiations with the company that owned the patent entitled "Tattoo Needle Tip Equipped with Capillary Ink Reservoir, Tattoo Tube Having Handle and Said Tattoo Needle Tip, and Assembly of Said Tattoo Needle Tip and Tattoo Needle."

This device was modified by the parties involved to inject my future clients' chloroplast-fibroblasts into human skin, in the manner of an ordinary tattoo. When experiments showed the product worked in vivo, the two groups formed an LLC called SunSkin, and applied for a new patent for the modified needle and ink. This patent was granted.

I don't know if the patent office consulted the FDA.

No, it's not right to say the nature of the tattoo ink was obscured in the application. Every biobrick was identified by its label, as the records show.

Yes, most of the tattoos are green. Although chlorophyll is not always green. It can be red, or even black. But usually it's green, as you have observed.

No wait, excuse me for interrupting, there were no deaths. That was the hair follicle group. Thermoencephalitis, yes. It was a bad idea.

No, I'm not saying that no one with SunSkin tattoos ever died. I'm saying that no deaths suffered by those customers was proved to be caused by the tattoos. I refer you to that entire body of criminal and civil law.

Of course some of them did in fact die. No one ever claimed photosynthesis would make you immortal.

I do not speak for SunSkin, which in any case went bankrupt in the first year of the crash. My association is with my potential clients only.

After the crash, my ostensible clients formed a 501(c)(3) called End Hunger. They renounced the patent on their product, and indeed sued to have the patent revoked as improperly granted, the product being made entirely of open source biobricks.

No, the patent was not their idea in the first place. It was the idea of the lawyers hired by SunSkin. Amazing as it may seem.

Yes, the assemblage itself was my quasi-clients' idea.

Yes, the idea was new, and not obvious, which is how the patent law as written describes eligibility. But the parts were open source, and photosynthesis is a natural process. And my associates wanted their assemblage to remain open source. Actually all that quickly became a moot point. Once they published the recipe, and the knowledge spread that human photosynthesis worked, the injection method as such became what you might call generic. It turned out the cells were very robust. You could stick them in with a bone needle and they would do fine.

I don't know how much money my semi-clients made.

Estimate? Say somewhere between nothing and a hundred million dollars.

I brought my toothbrush, as I said. Obviously my once and future

clients made a living. I don't think you can object to that. As you pointed out in Molecular versus Myriad, no one does anything except for money. Indeed you thought it was a great joke to imagine that people might work just for curiosity or recognition or the good of humanity. Curiosity, you said. That's lovely, you said. Don't you remember? You got a good laugh from the gallery, because you have no idea how scientists think or what motivates them. You actually seem to think it's all about money.

Not since the crash it isn't.

Yes, it does appear that large quantities of ATP entering the body by way of capillaries in the dermis causes some people to experience side effects. Hot flashes, hypersatiety, vitamin deficiencies, irritable bowel syndrome, some others. But you've made it clear in many cases that side effects cannot be allowed to stop the making of money. Your priorities there are very clear.

Well, I'm surprised to hear you describe the worst depression since the Black Death as a side effect. Especially the side effect of a new kind of tattoo.

Agreed, when you photosynthesize sunlight you will be less hungry. You might also spend more of your day outdoors in the sun, that's right, and subsequently decide that you didn't need quite as much food or heating as before. Or clothing. Or housing, that's right. I don't see all these green naked people wandering around sleeping under tarps in the park like you seem to, but granted, there have been some changes in consumption. Did changes in consumption cause the Great Crash? No one can say—

That means nothing. Your feeling is not an explanation. Historical causation is complex. Technology is just one strand in a braid. What you call the Great Crash others call the Jubilee. It's been widely celebrated as such.

Yes, but those were odious debts, so people defaulted. Granted, maybe it was easier to do that because they weren't in danger of starving. Maybe the rentier class had lost its stranglehold—

Not true. Most people think the crash resulted not from photosynthetic tattoos or the Big No but rather from another liquidity crisis and credit freeze, as in 2008. Possibly you've even heard people saying that the failure to regulate finance after 2008 was what led to the

crash, and that the failure to regulate finance was a result of your decision in Citizens United and elsewhere. Possibly you've heard yourselves described as the cause of the crash, or even as the worst court in the history of the United States.

Sorry. This is what one hears when one is outside this room.

May I point out that I am not the one straying from the point. In the matter of this current hearing, which strikes me as a bit of a witch hunt to find culpability for the crash anywhere but at your own doorstep, I repeat that my clients never wanted the patent and renounce all claims to it. The patent was awarded to an LLC called SunSkin, which went bankrupt in the first year of the crash when its principal lender broke contract by refusing to pay a scheduled payment. Possibly the lawsuit against the lender will eventually be won, but as SunSkin no longer exists, it will be a bit of a Pyrrhic victory for them.

Well, as the lender was nationalized along with all the rest of the banks in the third year of the crash, if SunSkin's lawsuit ever comes to you, you may have to recuse yourselves as being a party to the defendants. Not that that kind of conflict ever stopped you before.

I don't know, can there be contempt of court if the court is beneath contempt?

I don't care, I brought my toothbrush. I'll be appealing this peremptory judgment at the next level.

Not true. There is most definitely a next level.

About the Author

Kim Stanley Robinson's Three Californias trilogy -- The Gold Coast, The Wild Shore and Pacific Edge -- has been observed as "an intriguing work, one that will delight and entertain you, and, most importantly, cause you to stop and think" (The Santa Ana Register). His many other novels include Escape from Kathmandu and Green Mars -- which won the Hugo and Locus Award for Best Novel. You can sign up for email updates here.

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WATERS OF VERSAILLES
KELLY ROBSON

Waters of Versailles

KELLY ROBSON

illustration by
KATHLEEN JENNINGS



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Sylvain had just pulled up Annette's skirts when the drips started. The first one landed on her wig, displacing a puff of rose-pink powder. Sylvain ignored it and leaned Annette back on the sofa. Her breath sharpened to gasps that blew more powder from her wig. Her thighs were cool and slightly damp—perhaps her arousal wasn't feigned after all, Sylvain thought, and reapplied himself to nuzzling her throat.

After two winters at Versailles, Sylvain was well acquainted with the general passion for powder. Every courtier had bowls and bins of the stuff in every color and scent. In addition to the pink hair powder, Annette had golden powder on her face and lavender at her throat and cleavage. There would be more varieties lower down. He would investigate that in time.

The second drip landed on the tip of her nose. Sylvain flicked it away with his tongue.

Annette giggled. "Your pipes are weeping, monsieur."

"It's nothing," he said, nipping at her throat. The drips were just condensation. An annoyance, but unavoidable when cold pipes hung above overheated rooms.

The sofa squeaked as he leaned in with his full weight. It was a delicate fantasy of gilt and satin, hardly large enough for the two of them, and he was prepared to give it a beating.

Annette moaned as he bore down on her. She was far more entertaining than he had expected, supple and slick. Her gasps were genuine now, there was no doubt, and she yanked at his shirt with surprising strength.

A drip splashed on the back of his neck, and another a few moments later. He had Annette abandoned now, making little animal noises in the back of her throat as he drove into her. Another drip rolled off his wig, down his cheek, over his nose. He glanced overhead and a battery of drips hit his cheek, each bigger than the last.

This was a problem. The pipes above were part of the new run supporting connections to the suites of two influential men and at least a dozen rich ones. His workmen had installed the pipes just after Christmas. Even if they had done a poor job, leaks weren't possible. He had made sure of it.

He gathered Annette in his arms and shoved her farther down the sofa, leaving the drips to land on the upholstery instead of his head. He craned his neck, trying to get a view of the ceiling. Annette groaned in protest and clutched his hips.

The drips fell from a join, quick as tears. Something was wrong in the cisterns. He would have to speak with Leblanc immediately.

"Sylvain?" Annette's voice was strained.

It could wait. He had a reputation to maintain, and performing well here was as critical to his fortunes as all the water flowing through Versailles.

He dove back into her, moving up to a galloping pace as drips pattered on his neck. He had been waiting months for this. He ought to have been losing himself in Annette's flounced and beribboned flesh, the rouged nipples peeking from her bodice, her flushed pout and helplessly bucking hips, but instead his mind wandered the palace. Were there floods under every join?

Instead of dampening his performance, the growing distraction lengthened it. When he was finally done with her, Annette was completely disheveled, powder blotched, rouge smeared, wig askew, face flushed as a dairy maid's.

Annette squeezed a lock of his wig and caressed his cheek with a water-slick palm.

"You are undone, I think, monsieur."

He stood and quickly ordered his clothes. The wig was wet, yes, even soaked. So was his collar and back of his coat. A quick glance in a gilded mirror confirmed he looked greasy as a peasant, as if he'd been toiling at harvest instead of concluding a long-planned and skillful seduction—a seduction that required a graceful exit, not a mad dash out the door to search the palace for floods.

Annette was pleased—more than pleased despite the mess he'd made of her. She looked like a cat cleaning cream off its whiskers as she dabbed her neck with a powder puff, ignoring the drips pattering beside her. The soaked sofa leached dye onto the cream carpet. Annette dragged the toe of her silk slipper through the stained puddle.

"If this is not the only drip, monsieur, you may have a problem or two."

"It is possible," Sylvain agreed, dredging up a smile. He leaned in and kissed the tips of her fingers one at a time until she waved him away.

He would have to clean up before searching for Leblanc, and he would look like a fool all the way up to his apartment.

At least the gossips listening at the door would have an enduring tale to tell.

-2-

Sylvain ducked out of the marble halls into the maze of service corridors and stairs. Pipes branched overhead like a leaden forest. Drips targeted him as he passed but there were no standing puddles—not yet.

The little fish could turn the palace into a fishbowl if she wanted, Sylvain thought, and a shudder ran through his gut. The rooftop reservoirs held thousands of gallons, and Bull and Bear added new reservoirs just as fast as the village blacksmiths could make them. All through the royal wing, anyone with a drop of blood in common with the king was claiming priority over his neighbor, and the hundred or so courtiers in the north wing—less noble, but no less rich and proud—were grinding their teeth with jealousy.

Sylvain whipped off his soaked wig and let the drips rain down on his head one by one, steady as a ticking clock as he strode down the narrow corridor. He ducked into a stairwell—no pipes above there—and scrubbed his fingers through his wet hair as he peeked around the corner. The drips had stopped. Only a few spatters marked the walls and floorboards.

The little fish was playing with him. It must be her idea of a joke. Well, Leblanc could take care of it. The old soldier loved playing nursemaid to the creature. Age and wine had leached all the man out of him and left a sad husk of a wet nurse, good for nothing but nursery games.

A maid squeezed past him on the stairs and squealed as her apron came away wet. She was closely followed by a tall valet. Sylvain moved aside for him.

"You're delivering water personally now, Monsieur de Guilherand?"

Sylvain gave the valet a black glare and ran up the stairs two at a time.

The servants of Versailles were used to seeing him lurking in the service corridors, making chalk marks on walls and ceilings. He was usually too engrossed in his plans to notice their comments but now he'd have to put an end to it. Annette d'Arlain was in the entourage of Comtesse de Mailly, King Louis's *maîtresse en titre*, and Madame had more than a fair share of the king's time and attention—far more than his poor ignored Polish queen.

The next servant to take liberty with him would get a stiff rebuke and remember he was an officer and a soldier who spent half the year prosecuting the king's claims on the battlefield.

By the time Sylvain had swabbed himself dry and changed clothes, Bull and Bear were waiting for him. Their huge bulks strained his tiny parlor at the seams.

"What is the little creature playing at?" Sylvain demanded.

Bull twisted his cap in his huge hands, confused. Bear raised his finger to his nose and reached in with an exploratory wiggle.

"Down in the cisterns," Sylvain spoke precisely. "The creature. The little fish. What is she doing?"

"We was on the roof when you called, monsieur," said Bull, murdering the French with his raspy country vowels.

"We been bending lead all day," said Bear. "Long lead."

"The little fish was singing at dawn. I heard her through the pipes," Bull added, eager to please.

It was no use demanding analysis from two men who were barely more human than the animals they were named for. Bull and Bear were good soldiers, steady, strong, and vicious, but cannonfire had blasted their wits out.

"Where is Leblanc?"

Bull shrugged his massive shoulders. "We don't see him, monsieur. Not for days."

"Go down to the cellars. Find Leblanc and bring him to me."

The old soldier was probably curled around a cask in a carelessly unlocked cellar, celebrating his good luck by drinking himself into dust.

-3-

"Our well-beloved king is an extraordinary man," said Sylvain. "But even a man of his parts can only use one throne at a time."

The Grand Chamberlain fluffed his stole like a bantam cock and lowered his hairy eyebrows. "The issue is not how the second throne will be used but how quickly you will comply with the request. We require it today. Disappoint us at your peril."

Sylvain suppressed a smile. If royalty could be measured by number of thrones, he was king of Europe. He had at least two dozen in a village warehouse, their finely painted porcelain and precious mahogany fittings wrapped in batting and hidden in unmarked crates. Their existence was a secret even Bull and Bear kept close. To everyone else, they were precious, rare treasures that just might be found for the right person at the right price.

The Grand Chamberlain paced the silk carpet. He was young, and though highborn, titled, and raised to the highest office, responsibility didn't sit well with him. He'd seen a battlefield or two at a distance but had never known real danger. Those hairy brows were actually trembling. Sylvain could easily draw this out just for the pleasure of making a duke sweat, but the memory of Annette's soft flesh made him generous.

"My warehouse agent just reported receiving a new throne. It is extremely fine. Berlin has been waiting months for it." Sylvain examined his fingernails. "Perhaps it can be diverted. I will write a note to my agent."

The Grand Chamberlain folded his hands and nodded, an officious gesture better suited to a grey-haired oldster. "Such a throne might be acceptable."

"You will recall that installing plumbing is a lengthy and troublesome process. Even with the pipes now in place servicing the original throne, his majesty will find the work disruptive."

Installing the first throne had been a mess. Bear and Bull had ripped into walls and ceilings, filling the royal dressing room with the barnyard stench of their sweat. But King Louis had exercised his royal prerogative from the first moment the throne was unpacked, even before it was connected to the pipes. So, it was an even trade—the king had to breathe workmen's stench, and Bull and Bear had been regularly treated to the sight and scent of healthy royal bowel movements.

The Grand Chamberlain steepled his fingers. "Plumbing is not required. Just the throne."

"I cannot imagine the royal household wants a second throne just for show."

The Grand Chamberlain sighed. "See for yourself."

He led Sylvain into the cedar-scented garderobe. A rainbow of velvet and satin cushions covered the floor. The toilet gleamed in a place of honor, bracketed by marble columns. Something was growing in the toilet bowl. It looked like peach moss.

The moss turned its head. Two emerald eyes glared up at him.

"Minou has been offered a number of other seats, but she prefers the throne." The Grand Chamberlain looked embarrassed. "Our well-beloved king will not allow her to be disturbed. In fact, he banished the courtier who first attempted to move her."

The cat hissed, its tiny ivory fangs yellow against the glistening white porcelain. Sylvain stepped back. The cat's eyes narrowed with lazy menace.

A wide water drop formed in the bend of the golden pipes above the toilet. The drop slid across the painted porcelain reservoir and dangled for a few heartbeats. Then it plopped onto the cat's head. Minou's eyes popped wide as saucers.

Sylvain spun and fled the room, heart hammering.

The Grand Chamberlain followed. "Send the second throne immediately. This afternoon at the latest." The request was punctuated by the weight of gold as he discreetly passed Sylvain a pouch of coins.

"Certainly," Sylvain said, trying to keep his voice steady. "The cat may prefer the original throne, however."

"That will have to do."

When he was out of the Grand Chamberlain's sight, Sylvain rushed through the royal apartments and into the crowded Grand Gallery. There, in Versailles' crowded social fishbowl, he had no choice but to slow to a dignified saunter. He kept his gaze level and remote, hoping to

make it through the long gallery uninterrupted.

"Sylvain, my dear brother, why rush away?" Gérard clamped his upper arm and muscled him to the side of the hall. "Stay and take a turn with me."

"Damn you," Sylvain hissed. "You know I haven't time for idling. Let me go."

Gérard snickered. "Don't deprive me of your company so soon."

Sylvain had seen his friend the Marquis de la Châsse in every imaginable situation—beardless and scared white by battle-scarred commanders, on drunken furlough in peat-stinking country taverns, wounded bloody and clawing battlefield turf. They had pulled each other out of danger a hundred times—nearly as often as they'd goaded each other into it.

Gérard's black wig was covered in coal-dark powder that broadcast a subtle musky scent. The deep plum of his coat accentuated the dark circles under his eyes and the haze of stubble on his jaw.

Sylvain pried his arm from Gérard's fist and fell into step beside him. At least there were no pipes overhead, no chance of a splattering. The gallery was probably one of the safest places in the palace. He steered his friend toward the doors and prepared to make his escape.

Gérard leaned close. "Tell me good news. Can it be done?"

"My answer hasn't changed."

Gérard growled, a menacing rumble deep in his broad chest.

"I've heard that noise on the battlefield, Gérard." Sylvain said. "It won't do you any good here."

"On a battlefield, you and I are on the same side. But here you insist on opposing me."

Sylvain nodded at the Comte de Tessé. The old man was promenading with his mistress, a woman young enough to be his granddaughter, and the two of them were wearing so much powder that an aura of tiny particles surrounded them with a faint pink glow. The comte raised his glove.

"I wonder," said the comte loudly, as if he were addressing the entire hall, "can Sylvain de Guilherand only make plain water dance, or does he also have power over the finest substances? Champagne, perhaps."

"Ingenuity has its limits, but I haven't found them yet." Sylvain let a

faint smile play at the corners of his mouth.

"Surely our beloved king's birthday would be an appropriate day to test those limits. Right here, in fact, in the center of the Grand Gallery. What could be more exalted?"

Sylvain had no time for this. He nodded assent and the comte strolled on with an extra bounce in his step, dragging his mistress along by the elbow.

The doors of the Grand Gallery were barricaded by a gang of nuns who gaped up at the gilded and frescoed ceiling like baby sparrows in a nest. Sylvain and Gérard paced past.

"You don't seem to understand," Gérard said. "Pauline is desperate. It's vulgar to talk about money, but you know I'll make it worth your effort. Ready cash must be a problem. Courtiers rarely discharge their obligations."

"It's not a question of money or friendship. The north wing roof won't hold a reservoir. If the king himself wanted water in the north wing, I would have to refuse him."

"Then you must reinforce the roof."

Sylvain sighed. Gérard had never met a problem that couldn't be solved by gold or force. He couldn't appreciate the layers of influence and responsibility that would have to be peeled back to accomplish a major construction project like putting reservoirs on the north wing.

"Pauline complains every time she pisses," said Gérard. "Do you know how often a pregnant woman sits on her pot? And often she gets up in the night? The smell bothers her, no matter how much perfume and rose water she applies, no matter how quickly her maid whisks away the filth. Pauline won't stop asking. I will have no peace until she gets one of your toilets."

"Sleep in a different room."

"Cold, lonely beds are for summer. In winter, you want a warm woman beside you."

"Isn't your wife intimate with the Marquise de Coupigny? I hear she keeps a rose bower around her toilet. Go stay with her."

"The marquise told my wife that she does not cater to the general relief of the public, and their intimacy has now ended in mutual loathing. This is what happens when friends refuse each other the essential comforts of life."

"I'll provide all the relief you need if you move to an apartment the pipes can reach."

"Your ingenuity has found its limits, then, despite your boasts. But your pipes reached a good long way yesterday. I hear it was a long siege. How high were the d'Arlain battlements?"

"You heard wrong. Annette d'Arlain is a virtuous woman."

"Did she tell you the king's mistress named her toilet after the queen? Madame pisses on Polish Mary. Pauline is disgusted. She asked me to find out what Annette d'Arlain says."

Two splashes pocked Sylvain's cheek. He looked around wildly for the source.

"Tears, my friend?" Gérard dangled his handkerchief in front of Sylvain's nose. "Annette is pretty enough but her cunt must be gorgeous."

Sylvain ignored his friend and scanned the ornate ceiling. The gilding and paint disguised stains and discolorations, but the flaws overhead came to light if you knew where to look.

There. A fresh water stain spread on the ceiling above the statue of Hermes. A huge drop formed in its gleaming centre. It grew, dangled like a jewel, and broke free with a snap. It bounced off the edge of a mirror, shot past him, then ricocheted off a window and smacked him on the side of his neck, soaking his collar.

Sylvain fled the Grand Gallery like a rabbit panicking for its burrow. He ran with no attention to dignity, stepping on the lace train of one woman, raking through the headdress feathers of another, shoving past a priest, setting a china vase rocking on its pedestal. The drone of empty conversation gave way to shocked exclamations as he dodged out of the room into one of the old wing's service corridors.

He skidded around a banister into a stairwell. Water rained down, slickening the stairs as he leapt two and three steps at a time. It spurted from joins, gushed from welded seams, and sprayed from faucets as he passed.

The narrow corridors leading to Sylvain's apartment were clogged with every species of servant native to the palace. The ceiling above held a battery of pipes—the main limb of the system Bull and Bear had installed two years before. Every joint and weld targeted Sylvain as he ran. Everyone was caught in the crossfire—servants, porters, tradesmen.

Sylvain fled a chorus of curses and howls. It couldn't be helped.

Sylvain crashed through the door of his apartment. His breath rasped as he leaned on the door with all his weight, as if he could hold the line against disaster.

Bull and Bear knelt over a pile of dirty rags on the bare plank floor. Sylvain's servant stood over them, red-eyed and sniffling.

"What is this mess?" Sylvain demanded.

His servant slowly pulled aside one of the rags to reveal Leblanc's staring face, mottled green and white like an old cheese. Sylvain dropped to his knees and fished for the dead man's hand.

It was cold and slack. Death had come and gone, leaving only raw meat. All life had drained away from that familiar face, memories locked forever behind dead eyes, tongue choked down in a throat that would never speak again.

The first time they met, Sylvain had been startled speechless. The old soldier had talked familiarly to him in the clipped rough patois of home and expected him to understand. They were on the banks of the Moselle, just about as far from the southern Alps as a man could be and still find himself in France.

Sylvain should have cuffed the old man for being familiar with an officer, but he had been young and homesick, and words from home rang sweet. He kept Leblanc in his service just for the pleasure of hearing him talk. He made a poor figure of a servant but he could keep a tent dry in a swamp and make a pot of hot curds over two sticks and a wafer of peat. He'd kept the old man close all through the Polish wars, through two winters in Quebec, and then took him home on a long furlough. Sylvain hadn't been home for five years, and Leblanc hadn't seen the Alps in more than thirty, but he remembered every track of home, knew the name of every cliff, pond, and rill. Leblanc had even remembered Château de Guilherand, its high stone walls and vast glacier-fed waterworks.

Close as they'd been, Sylvain had never told the old man he was planning to catch a nixie and bring her to Versailles. Under the Sun King, the palace's fountains had been a wonder of the world. Their state of disrepair under Louis XV was a scandal bandied about and snickered over in parlors from Berlin to Naples. Sylvain knew he could bring honor back to the palace and enrich himself in the bargain. The fountains were

just the beginning of his plan. There was no end to the conveniences and luxuries he could bring to the royal blood and courtiers of Versailles with a reliable, steady flow of clean, pure water.

She'd been just a tadpole. Sylvain had lured her into a leather canteen and kept her under his shirt, close to his heart, during the two weeks of steady hard travel it took to get from home to Versailles. The canteen had thrummed against his chest, drumming in time with hooves or footsteps or even the beating of his heart—turning any steady noise into a skeleton of a song. It echoed the old rhythms, the tunes he heard shepherds sing beside the high mountain rills as he passed by, rifle on his shoulder, tracking wild goats and breathing the sweet, cold, pure alpine air.

Sylvain had kept her a secret, or so he'd thought. The day after they arrived at Versailles, he'd snuck down to the cisterns, canteen still tucked under his shirt. A few hours later, Leblanc had found him down there, frustrated and sweating, shouting commands at the canteen, trying to get her to come out and swim in the cisterns.

"What you got there ain't animal nor people," Leblanc had told him. "Kick a dog and he'll crawl back to you and do better next time. A soldier obeys to avoid the whip and the noose. But that little fish has her own kind of mind."

Sylvain had thrown the canteen to the old man and stepped back. Leblanc cradled it in his arms like a baby.

"She don't owe you obedience like a good child knows it might. She's a wild creature. If you don't know that you know nothing."

Leblanc crooned a lullaby to the canteen, tender as a new mother. The little fish had popped out into the cistern pool before he started the second verse, and he had her doing tricks within a day. Over the past two years, they'd been nearly inseparable.

"Ah, old Leblanc. What a shame." Gérard stood in the doorway, blocking the view of the gawkers in the corridor behind him. "A good soldier. He will be much missed."

Sylvain carefully folded Leblanc's hands over his bony cold breast. Bull and Bear crossed themselves as Sylvain drew his thumb and finger over the corpse's papery eyelids.

Gérard shut the door, closing out the gathered crowd. Sylvain tried to ignore the prickling ache between his eyes, the hollow thud of his

gut.

"Sylvain, my dear friend. Do you know you're sitting in a puddle?"

Sylvain looked down. The floor under him was soaked. Bull dabbled at the edge of the puddle with the toe of his boot, sloshing a thin stream through the floorboards while Bear added to the puddle with a steady rain of tears off the tip of his ratted beard.

"I don't pretend to understand your business," said Gérard, "But I think there might be a problem with your water pipes."

Sylvain barked a laugh. He couldn't help himself. A problem with the pipes. Yes, and it would only get worse.

-4-

Sylvain had rarely visited the cisterns over the past two winters. There had been no need. The little fish was Leblanc's creature. The two of them had been alone for months while Sylvain fought the summer campaigns, and through the winter, Sylvain had more than enough responsibilities above ground—renovating and repairing the palace's fountains, planning and executing the water systems, and most importantly, doing it all while maintaining the illusion of a courtly gentleman of leisure, attending levées and soirées, dinners and operas.

Versailles was the wonder of the world. The richest palace filled with the most cultivated courtiers, each room containing a ransom of art and statuary, the gardens rivaling heaven with endless fountains and statuary. The reputation it had gained at the height of the Sun King's reign persisted, but close examination showed a palace falling apart at the seams.

Sylvain had swept into Versailles and taken the waterworks for his own. He had brought the fountains back to their glory, making them play all day and all night for the pleasure of Louis the Well-Beloved —something even the Sun King couldn't have claimed.

The tunnel to the cisterns branched off the cellars of the palace's old wing, part of the original foundations. It had been unbearably dank when Sylvain had first seen it years before. Now it was fresh and floral. A wet breeze blew in his face, as though he were standing by a waterfall, the air pushed into motion by the sheer unyielding weight of falling water.

The nixie's mossy nest crouched in the centre of a wide stone pool.

The rusted old pumps sprayed a fine mist overhead. The water in the pool pulsed, rising and falling with the cadence of breath.

She was draped over the edge of her nest, thin legs half submerged in the pool, long webbed feet gently stirring the water. The little fool didn't even know enough to keep still when pretending to sleep.

He skirted the edge of the pool, climbing to the highest and driest of the granite blocks. Dripping moss and ferns crusted the grotto's ceiling and walls. A million water droplets reflected the greenish glow of her skin.

"You there," he shouted, loud enough to carry over the symphony of gushes and drips. "What are you playing at?"

The nixie writhed in the moss. The wet glow of her skin grew stronger and the mist around her nest thickened until she seemed surrounded by tiny lights. She propped herself on one scrawny elbow and dangled a hand in the pool.

With her glistening skin and sleek form, she seemed as much salamander as child, but she didn't have a talent for stillness. Like a pool of water, she vibrated with every impulse.

A sigh rose over the noise. It was more a burbling gush than language. The sound repeated—it was no French word but something like the mountain patois of home. He caught the meaning after a few more repetitions.

"Bored," she said. Her lips trembled. Drips rained from the ferns. "So bored!"

"You are a spoiled child," he said in court French.

She broke into a grin and her big milky eyes glowed at him from across the pool. He shivered. They were human eyes, almost, and in that smooth amphibian face, they seemed uncanny. Dark salamander orbs would have been less disturbing.

"Sing," she said. "Sing a song?"

"I will not."

She draped herself backward over a pump, webbed hand to her forehead with all the panache of an opera singer. "So bored."

As least she wasn't asking for Leblanc. "Good girls who work hard are never bored."

A slim jet of water shot from the pump. It hit him square in the chest.

She laughed, a giddy burble. "I got you!"

Don't react, Sylvain thought as the water dripped down his legs.

"Yes, you got me. But what will that get you in the end? Some good girls get presents, if they try hard enough. Would you like a present?"

Her brow creased as she thought it over. "Maybe," she said.

Hardly the reaction he was hoping for, but good enough.

"Behave yourself. No water outside of the pipes and reservoirs. Keep it flowing and I'll bring you a present just like a good girl."

"Good girl," she said in French. "But what will that get you in the end?"

She was a decent mimic—her accent was good. But she was like a parrot, repeating everything she heard.

"A nice present. Be a good girl."

"Good girl," she repeated in French. Then she reverted back to mountain tongue. "Sing a song?"

"No. I'll see you in a few days." Sylvain turned away, relief blossoming in his breast.

"Leblanc sing a song?" she called after him.

There it was. Stay calm, he thought. Animals can sense distress. Keep walking.

"Leblanc is busy," he said over his shoulder. "He wants you to be a good girl."

"Behave yourself," she called as he disappeared around the corner.

-5-

Sylvain paced the Grand Gallery, eyeing the cracked ceiling above the statue of Hermes. There had been no further accidents with the pipes. He had spent the entire night checking every joint and join accompanied by a yawning Bull. At dawn, he'd taken Bear up to the rooftops to check the reservoirs.

Checking the Grand Gallery was his last task. He was shaved and primped, even though at this early hour, it would be abandoned by anyone who mattered, just a few rustics and gawkers.

He didn't expect to see Annette d'Arlain walking among them.

Annette was dressed in a confection of gold and scarlet chiffon. Golden powder accentuated the pale shadows of her collarbones and defined the delicate ivory curls of her wig. A troop of admiring rustics trailed behind her as she paced the gallery. She ignored them.

"The Comte de Tessé says you promised him a champagne fountain," she said, drawing the feathers of her fan between her fingers.

Sylvain bent deeply, pausing at the bottom of the bow to gather his wits. He barely recalled the exchange with the comte. What had he agreed to?

"I promised nothing," he said as he straightened. Annette hadn't offered her hand. She was cool and remote as any of the marble statues lining the gallery.

"The idea reached Madame's ear. She sent me to drop you a hint for the King's birthday. But—" She dropped her voice and paused with dramatic effect, snapping her fan.

Sylvain expected her to share a quiet confidence but she continued in the same impersonal tone. "But I must warn you. Everyone finds a champagne fountain disappointing. Flat champagne is a chore to drink. Like so many pleasures, anticipation cannot be matched by pallid reality."

Was Annette truly offended or did she want to bring him to heel? Whatever the case, he owed her attention. He had seduced her, left her gasping on her sofa, and ignored her for two days. No gifts, no notes, no acknowledgement. This was no way to keep a woman's favor.

Annette snapped her fan again as she waited for his reply.

It was time to play the courtier. He stepped closely so she would have to look up to meet his eyes. It would provide a nice tableau for the watching rustics. He dropped his voice low, pitching it for her ears alone.

"I would hate to disappoint you, madame."

"A lover is always a disappointment. The frisson of expectation is the best part of any affair."

"I disagree. I have never known disappointment in your company, only the fulfillment of my sweet and honeyed dreams."

She was not impressed. "You saw heaven in my arms, I suppose."

"I hope we both did."

A hint of a dimple appeared on her cheek. "Man is mortal."

"Alas," he agreed.

She offered him her hand but withdrew it after a bare moment, just long enough for the lightest brush of his lips. She glided over to the statue of Hermes and drew her finger up the curve of the statue's leg.

"You are lucky I don't care for gifts and fripperies, monsieur. I detest cut flowers and I haven't seen a jewel I care for in months."

Sylvain glanced at the ceiling. A network of cracks formed around a disk of damp plaster. Annette was directly beneath it.

He grabbed her around the waist and yanked her aside. She squealed and rammed her fists against his chest. Passion was the only excuse for his behavior, so he grabbed at it like a drowning man and kissed her, crushing her against his chest. She struggled for a moment and finally yielded, lips parting for him reluctantly.

No use in putting in a pallid performance, he thought, and bent her backward in his arms to drive the kiss to a forceful conclusion. The rustics gasped in appreciation. He released her, just cupping the small of her back.

He tried for a seductive growl. "How can a man retain a lady's favor if gifts are forbidden?"

"Not by acting like a beast!" she cried, and smacked her fan across his cheek.

Annette ran for the nearest door, draperies trailing behind her. The ceiling peeled away with a ripping crack. A huge chunk of plaster crashed over the statue's head, throwing hunks of wet plaster across the room. The rustics scattered, shocked and thrilled.

He crushed a piece of wet plaster under his heel, grinding it into mush with a vicious twist, and stalked out of the gallery.

The main corridor was crowded. Servants rushed with buckets of coals, trays of pastries, baskets of fruit—all the comforts required by late sleeping and lazy courtiers. He pushed through them and climbed to a vestibule on the third floor where five water pipes met overhead.

"What have you got for me, you little demon?" he seethed under his breath.

A maid clattered down the stairs, her arms stacked with clean laundry. One look at Sylvain and she retreated back upstairs.

Sylvain had spent nights on bare high rock trapped by spring snowstorms. He had tracked wild goats up the massif cliff to line up careful rifle shots balanced between a boulder and a thousand-foot drop. He had once snatched a bleating lamb from the jaws of the valley's most notorious wolf. He had met the king's enemies on the

battlefield and led men to their deaths. He could master a simple creature, however powerful she was.

"Go ahead, drip on me. If you are going to keep playing your games, show me now."

He waited. The pipes looked dry as bone. The seal welds were dull and gray and the tops of the pipes were furred with a fine layer of dust.

He gave the pipes one last searing glare. "All right. We have an understanding."

-6-

Leblanc's coffin glowed in the cold winter sun. Bull and Bear watched the gravediggers and snuffled loudly.

Gérard had taken all the arrangements in hand. Before Sylvain had a moment to think about dealing with the old soldier's corpse, it had been washed, dressed, and laid out in a village chapel. Gérard had even arranged for a nun to sit beside the coffin, clacking her rosary and gumming toothless prayers.

The nun was scandalized when Bull and Bear hauled the coffin out from under her nose, but Sylvain wanted Leblanc's body away from the palace, hidden away in deep, dry dirt where the little fish could never find it. Gérard and Sylvain led the way on horseback, setting a fast pace as Bull and Bear followed with the casket jouncing in the bed of their cart. They trotted toward the city until they found a likely boneyard, high on dry ground, far from any streams or canals.

"This is probably the finest bed your man Leblanc ever slept in." Gérard nudged the coffin with the toe of his boot.

"Very generous of you, Gérard. Thank you."

Gérard shrugged. "What price eternal comfort? And he was dear to you, I know."

Sylvain scanned the sky as the priest muttered over the grave. A battery of rainclouds was gathering on the horizon, bearing down on Versailles. It was a coincidence. The little fish couldn't control the weather. It wasn't possible.

The gravediggers began slowly filling in the grave. Gérard walked off to speak with a tradesman in a dusty leather apron. Sylvain watched the distant clouds darken and turn the horizon silver with rain.

Gérard returned. "Here is the stonemason. What will you have on

your man's gravestone?"

"Nothing," said Sylvain, and then wondered. Was he being ridiculous, rushing the corpse out of the palace and hauling it miles away? She couldn't understand. She was an animal. Any understanding of death was just simple instinct—the hand of fate to be avoided in the moment of crisis. She couldn't read. The stone could say anything. She would never know.

Without Leblanc's help, Sylvain's funds wouldn't have lasted a month at Versailles. He would have wrung out his purse and slunk home a failure. But with Leblanc down in the cisterns coddling the little fish, the whole palace waited eagerly in bed for him. And what had he done for the old soldier in return? Leblanc deserved a memorial.

The stone mason flapped his cap against his leg. The priest clacked his tongue in disapproval.

"He must have a stone, Sylvain," said Gérard. "He was a soldier his whole life. He deserves no less."

There was no point in being careless. "You can list the year of his death, nothing more. No name, no regiment."

Sylvain gave the priest and the stonemason each a coin, stifling any further objections.

The gravediggers were so slow, they might as well have been filling in the grave with spoons instead of spades. Sylvain ordered Bull and Bear to take over. The gravediggers stood openmouthed, fascinated by the sight of someone else digging while they rested. One of them yawned.

"Idle hands are the Devil's tools," the priest snapped, and sent both men back to their work in the adjoining farmyard.

An idea bloomed in Sylvain's mind. The little fish claimed she was bored. Perhaps he had made her work too easy. The lead pipes and huge reservoirs were doing half the job. He could change that. He would keep her busy—too busy for boredom and certainly far too busy for games and tricks.

"Tell your wife she won't wait much longer for a toilet of her own," said Sylvain as they mounted their horses. "In a few days she can have the pleasure of granting or denying her friends its use as she pleases."

Gérard grinned. "Wonderful news! But just a few days? How long will it take to reinforce the roof?"

The new water conduits were far too flimsy to be called pipes. They were sleeves, really, which was how had he explained them to the village seamstresses.

"Sing a song?" The little fish dangled one long toe in the water. Her smooth skin bubbled with wide water droplets that glistened and gleamed like jewels.

"Not today. It's time for you to work," Sylvain said as he unrolled the cotton sleeve. He dropped one end in the pool, looped a short piece of rope around it, and weighted the ends with a rock.

"Be a good girl and show me what you can do with this."

She blinked at him, water dripping from her hair. No shade of comprehension marred the perfect ignorance of those uncanny eyes. She slid into the water and disappeared.

He waited. She surfaced in the middle of the pool, lips spouting a stream of water high into the air.

"Very good, but look over here now," he said, admiring his own restraint. "Do you see this length of cotton? It's hollow like a pipe. Show me how well you can push water through it."

She rolled and dove. The water shimmered, then turned still. He searched the glassy surface, looking for her sleek form. She leapt, shattering the water under his nose, throwing a great wave that splashed him from head to toe.

How had Leblanc put up with this? Sylvain turned away, hiding his frustration.

As he pried himself out of his soaked velvet jacket, Sylvain realized he was speaking to her in court French. A nixie couldn't be expected to understand.

The next time she surfaced he said, "I bet you can't force water through this tube." The rough patois of home felt strange after years wrapping his tongue around court French.

That got her attention. "Bet you!" She leapt out of the water. "Bet you what?"

"Well, I don't know. Let's see what I have." He made a show of reluctantly reaching into his breast pocket and withdrawing a coin. It was small change—no palace servant would stoop to pick it up—but it had been polished to gleaming.

He rolled the coin between his thumb and forefinger, letting it wink and sparkle in the glow of her skin. The drops raining from her hair quickened, spattering the toes of his boots.

"Pretty," she said, and brushed the tip of one long finger along the cotton tube.

The pool shimmered. The tube swelled and kicked. It writhed like a snake, spraying water high into the ferns, but the other end remained anchored in the water. The tube leaked, not just from the seams but along its whole length.

"Good work," he said, and tossed her the coin. She let it sail over her head and splash into the pool. She laughed, a bubbling giggle, flexed her sleek legs, and flipped backward, following the coin's trajectory under the surface.

He repeated the experiment with all of the different cloth pipes—linen, silk, satin—every material available. The first cotton tube kept much of its rigidity though it remained terribly leaky, as did the wide brown tube of rough holland. The linen tube lay flat as a dead snake, and across the pond, a battery of satin and silk tubes warred, clashing like swords as they flipped and danced.

The velvet pipes worked best. The thick nap held a layer of water within its fibers, and after a few tries, the little fish learned to manipulate the wet surface, strengthening the tube and keeping it watertight.

By evening, her lair was festooned with a parti-colored bouquet of leaping, spouting tubes. The little fish laughed like a mad child, clapping her hands and jumping through the spray. But he didn't have to remind her to keep the spray away from him—not once.

When he was down to his last shiny coin, her skin was glowing so brightly, it illuminated the far corners of the grotto. He placed the last coin squarely in her slender palm, as if paying a tradesman. The webs between her fingers were as translucent as soap bubbles.

"You won a lot of bets today," he said.

"Good girls win." She dropped the coin into the pond and peered up at him, eyes wide and imploring.

He cut her off before she could speak. "No singing, only work."

"You sang once."

He had, that was true. How could she remember? He'd nearly forgotten himself. He had crouched at the edge of a high mountain cataract with icy mist spraying his face and beading on his hair, singing a shepherd's tune to lure her into his canteen. She'd been no bigger than a tadpole, but she could flip and jump through the massive rapids as if it took no effort at all.

She had grown so much in the past two years. From smaller than his thumb to the size of a half-grown child. Full growth from egg in just two years.

But two years was a lifetime ago, and those mountains now seemed unreachable and remote. He wouldn't think about it. He had an evening of entertainments to attend, and after that, much work to do.

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Sylvain had almost drifted off when Annette dug her toes into the muscle of his calf. He rolled over and pretended to sleep.

He had given her an afternoon of ardent attention and finished up splayed across her bed, fully naked, spent, and sweating. Though he was bone tired from long nights planning the palace's new array of velvet tubes, he had given Annette a very good facsimile of devotion and several hours of his time. Surely she couldn't want more from him.

She raked her toenails down his calf again. Sylvain cracked an eyelid, trying for the lazy gaze of the Versailles sybarite. Annette reclined in the middle of the bed draped in a scrap of pink chiffon. The short locks of her own dark hair curled over her ears like a boy's. She had ripped the wig from his head earlier, and he had responded by pulling hers off as well, more gently but with equal enthusiasm.

"No sleeping, Sylvain. Not here. You must be prepared to leap from the window if my husband arrives."

"You want me to dash naked through the gardens in full view of half the court? My dear woman, it would mean my death and your disappointment." He couldn't suppress a yawn. "The ladies would hound after me day and night."

"I forgot that about you," she said under her breath.

Sylvain rolled to his feet and lifted a silken shawl off the floor. He wrapped it around his hips like a savage and returned to bed. He lifted

an eyebrow, inviting her to continue, but she had begun playing with a pot of cosmetic.

"What did you forget about me?" If she meant to insult him, he intended to know.

She put her foot in his lap. "I forgot that you are a singular man."

That didn't sound like an insult. Sylvain let a smile touch his lips. "Is that your own assessment, or do others speak of me as a singular man?"

"My judgment alone. How many people in the palace ever take a moment to think of anyone other than themselves? Even I, as extraordinary as I am, rarely find a moment to notice the existence of others. Life is so full." She nudged him with her toe.

"In this moment, then, before it passes, tell me what you mean by *singular*." To encourage her, he took her foot in both hands and squeezed.

A dimple appeared on her cheek. "It is a contradiction and a conundrum. By *singular*, I mean the exact opposite. You are at least three or four men where many others have trouble achieving more than a half manhood."

"Flattery. Isn't that my role?"

"I mean no flattery. Quite the opposite, in fact." She dipped her finger into the cosmetic pot and daubed her pout with glossy pigment. Then she stretched herself back on the velvet pillows, arching as he kneaded her toes.

"Sylvain the wit may be a good guest to have at a dinner party but no better than any other man with some quickness about him. Sylvain the courtier contributes to the might of the crown and the luxury of the palace as he ought. Sylvain the lover conducts himself well in bed as he must or sleep alone. I can't speak to Sylvain the soldier or hunter but will grant the appropriate virtues on faith."

"I thank you," he said, kneading her heel.

She fanned her fingers in a dismissive gesture. "All these are expected and nothing spectacular to comment upon. But the true Sylvain is the singular one—the only one—and yet he's the man few others notice."

"And that man is?"

"I don't know if I should tell you. You might stop massaging my foot."

"You enjoy being mysterious."

"The only mystery is how you've gotten away with it for so long. If anyone else knew, you'd be run out of the palace."

"I will stop if you don't tell me."

"Very well. Sylvain, you are a striver."

A lead weight dropped into his stomach. "Ridiculous. I thought you were going to say something interesting, but it is all blather."

She nudged his crotch with her foot. "Don't be insulted. Striving must be in your nature. Or perhaps you were taught it as a child and took it into the blood with your host and catechism. But it will all end in disaster. Striving always does."

He kept his expression remote and resumed stroking her foot.

"You seek to raise yourself above your station," she continued. "Those who do have no true home. They leave behind their rightful and God-given place and yet never reach their goal. It is a kind of Limbo, a choice to begin eternity in purgatory even before death."

"And you have chosen to become a lay preacher. Do you have a wooden crate to stand on? Shall I carry it to a crossroads for you?"

"Oh, very well, we can change the topic to Annette d'Arlain if you are uncomfortable. I find myself a most engaging subject."

"Yes, keep to your area of expertise because you know little of me. I don't seek to raise myself. I am where I belong. The palace would be poorer without me."

"If you remained satisfied with being a lover, a courtier, and a good dinner guest, I might agree with you. Your uncle is a minor noble but I suppose his lineage is solid, should anyone care to trace it, and you're not the first heir to a barren wilderness to manage a creditable reputation at court. But you want to be the first man of Versailles, even at the destruction of your own self and soul. You are striving to be better than every other man."

"That is the first thing you've said that makes any sense."

Sylvain eased her into his lap. He slid his fingers under the chiffon wrap and began teasing her into an eagerly agreeable frame of mind. She would declare him the best man in France before he was done with her, even if it took all evening.

The monkey clung to Sylvain's neck and hid its face under his coat collar. Sylvain hummed under his breath, a low cooing sound shepherds used to calm lambs.

The dealer had doused the monkey in cheap cologne to mask its animal scent. The stink must be a constant irritation to the creature's acute sense of smell. But it would wear off soon enough in the mist of the cisterns.

Sylvain rounded the corner into the little fish's cavern and tripped. He slammed to his knees and twisted to take the weight of the fall on his shoulder. The monkey squealed with fright. He hushed it gently.

"Work carefully, be a good girl!" The little fish's voice echoed off the grotto walls.

He had tripped over the painted wooden cradle. The little fish had stuffed it with all of the dolls Sylvain had given her over the past week. The family of straw-and-cloth dolls were soaked and squashed down to form a nest for the large porcelain doll Sylvain had brought her the day before. It had arrived as a gift from the porcelain manufacturer, along with the toilets Bull and Bear were installing in the north wing.

The doll's platinum curls had been partly ripped away. Its painted eyes stared up at him as he struggled to his feet.

The little fish perched on the roof of her dollhouse, which floated half submerged in the pool. The toy furniture bobbed and drifted in the current.

"Come here, little miss," he said. She slipped off the roof and glided across to him. She showed no interest in the monkey, but she probably hadn't realized it was anything other than just another doll.

"Do you remember what we are going to do today?" he asked. "I told you yesterday; think back and remember." She blinked up at him in ignorance. "What do you do every day?"

"Work hard."

"Very good. Work hard at what?"

"Good girls work hard and keep the water flowing." She yawned, treating him to a full view of her tongue and tiny teeth as she stretched.

The monkey yawned in sympathy. Her gaze snapped to the creature with sudden interest.

"Sharp teeth!" She jumped out of the pool and thrust one long finger in the monkey's face. It recoiled, clinging to Sylvain with all four limbs. "Hush," he said, stroking the monkey's back. "You frightened her. Good girls don't frighten their friends, do they?"

"Do they?" she repeated automatically. She was fascinated by the monkey, which was certainly a more engaged reaction than she had given any of the toys Sylvain had brought her.

He fished in his pocket for the leash and clipped it to the monkey's collar.

"Today, we are adding the new cloth pipes to the system, and you will keep the water flowing like you always do, smooth and orderly. If you do your work properly, you can play with your new friend."

He handed her the leash and gently extracted himself from the monkey's grip. He placed the creature on the ground and stroked its head with exaggerated kindness. If she could copy his words, she could copy his actions.

She touched the monkey's furry flank, eyes wide with delight. Then she brought her hand to her face and whiffed it.

"Stinky," she said.

She dove backward off the rock, yanking the monkey behind her by its neck.

Sylvain dove to grab it but just missed his grip. The monkey's sharp squeal cut short as it was dragged under water.

Sylvain ran along the edge of the pool, trying to follow the glow of her form as she circled and dove. When she broke surface he called to her, but she ignored him and climbed to the roof of her dollhouse. She hauled the monkey up by its collar and laid its limp, sodden form on the spine of the roof.

Dead, Sylvain thought. She had drowned it.

It stirred. She scooped the monkey under its arms and dandled it on her lap like a doll. It coughed and squirmed.

"Sing a song," she demanded. She shoved her face nose to nose with the monkey's and yelled, "Sing a song!"

The monkey twisted and strained, desperate to claw away. She released her grip and the monkey splashed into the water. She yanked the leash and hauled it up. It dangled like a fish. She let her hand drop and the monkey sank again, thrashing.

"Sing a song!" she screamed. "Sing!"

Sylvain pried off his boots and dove into the pool. He struggled to

the surface and kicked off a rock, propelling himself though the water.

"Stop it," he blurted as he struggled toward her. "Stop it this instant!"

She crouched on the edge of the dollhouse roof, dangling the monkey over the water by its collar. It raked at her with all four feet, but the animal dealer had blunted its claws, leaving the poor creature with no way to defend itself. She dunked it again. Its paws pinwheeled, slapping the surface.

Sylvain ripped his watch from his pocket and lobbed it at her. It smacked her square in the temple. She dropped the monkey and turned on him, enormous eyes veined with red, lids swollen.

He hooked his arm over the peak of the dollhouse roof and hoisted himself halfway out of the water. He fished the monkey out and gathered the quivering creature to his chest.

"Bad girl," he sputtered, so angry he could barely find breath. "Very bad girl!"

She retreated to the edge of the roof and curled her thin arms around her knees. Her nose was puffy and red just like a human's.

"Leblanc," she sobbed. "Leblanc gone."

She hadn't mentioned Leblanc in days. Sylvain had assumed she'd forgotten the old man, but some hounds missed their masters for years. Why had he assumed the little fish would have coarser feelings than an animal?

She was an animal, though. She would have drowned the monkey and toyed with its corpse. There was no point in coddling her—he would be stern and unyielding.

"Yes, Leblanc has gone away." He gave her his chilliest stare.

Her chin quivered. She whispered, "Because I am a bad girl."

Had she been blaming herself all this time? Beneath the mindless laughter and games she had been missing Leblanc—lonely, regretful, brokenhearted. Wondering if she'd done wrong, if she'd driven him away. Waiting to see him again, expecting him every moment.

Sylvain clambered onto the dollhouse roof and perched between the two chimneys. The monkey climbed onto his shoulder and snaked its fingers into his hair.

"No, little one. Leblanc didn't want to go but he had to."

"Leblanc come back?"

She looked so trusting. He could lie to her, tell her Leblanc would come back if she was a good girl, worked hard, and never caused any problems. She would believe him. He could make her do anything he wanted.

"No, little one. Leblanc is gone and he can never come back."

She folded in on herself, hiding her face in her hands.

"He would have said goodbye to you if he could. I'm sorry he didn't."

Sylvain pulled her close, squeezing her bony, quaking shoulders, tucking her wet head under his chin.

There was an old song he had often heard in the mountains. On one of his very first hunting trips as a boy, he'd heard an ancient shepherd sing it while climbing up a long scree slope searching for a lost lamb. He had heard a crying girl sing it as she flayed the pelt from the half-eaten, wolf-ravaged corpse of an ewe. He'd heard a boy sing it to his flock during a sudden spring snowstorm, heard a mother sing it to her children on a freezing winter night as he passed by her hut on horseback. The words were rustic, the melody simple.

Sylvain sang the song now to the little fish, gently at first, just breathing the tune, and then stronger, letting the sound swell between them. He sang of care, and comfort, and loss, and a longing to make everything better. And if tears seemed to rain down his cheeks as he sang, it was nothing but an illusion—just water dribbling from his hair.

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Sylvain stood on the roof of the north wing, the gardens spread out before him. The fountains jetted high and strong, fifteen hundred nozzles ticking over reliably as clockwork, the water spouts throwing flickering shadows in the low evening light.

The gardens were deserted as any wilderness. Inside, everyone was preparing for the evening's long menu of events. Outside, the statues posed and the fountains played for the moon and stars alone.

Sylvain was taking advantage of this quiet and solitary hour to do one final check of the velvet pipes. He had already felt every inch of the new connection, examined the seams all the way to the point where the fabric sleeve dove off the roof to disappear through a gap above a garret window.

Bull and Bear waited by the main reservoir, watching for his signal. There was no point in delaying any further. He waved his hat in the air. The sleeve at his feet jumped and swelled.

Sylvain ran from the north wing attics down several flights of stairs to Gérard's apartments. Pauline greeted him at the door herself. She was hugely pregnant and cradled her belly in both hands to support its weight. Breathless, he swept off his hat and bowed.

"Go ahead, monsieur," Pauline said as she herded him toward her dressing room. "Please don't pause to be polite. I've waited as long as I can."

Not only were the velvet pipes lighter and easier to install, but they could be pinched off at any point simply by drawing a cord around the sleeve. Sylvain waited for Pauline to follow him, then pulled the red ribbon's tail and let it drift to the floor. Water gushed into the toilet, gurgling and tinkling against the porcelain.

Pauline seized him by the ears, kissed him hard on both cheeks, and shooed him away. She hiked her skirts up to her hips even before her servant shut the door behind him.

Sylvain arrived fashionably late at the suite of the Mahmud emissary, a Frenchman turned Turk after years at the Sultan's court. Sylvain saluted le Turque, lifted a glass of wine, and assumed an air of languid nonchalance. Madame and her ladies swept in. Their jewels and silks glowed in the candlelight.

Annette carried Madame's train—a sure sign she was in favor at that moment. Sylvain saluted her with a respectful nod. She dimpled at him and made her way over as soon as the host claimed Madame's attention.

"Is that for me, monsieur?" she asked.

Sylvain glanced at the monkey on his shoulder. "Perhaps, if there is a woman in the room who isn't tired of gifts."

"Jewels and flowers are all the same. This is something different." She caressed the monkey under her chin. It reached for Annette like a child for its mother. "What is her name?"

"Whatever you want, of course."

"I will ask Madame to choose her name. She will love that." Annette cradled the monkey against her breast and nuzzled its neck. "Oh, she smells lovely—vanilla and cinnamon oil."

It was the only combination of scents Sylvain had found to kill the

stench of cheap cologne. He allowed himself a satisfied smirk.

Across the room a subtle commotion was building. Le Turque had lifted a curtain to reveal a pair of acrobats, but Madame was watching Annette and Sylvain. The acrobats were frozen in a high lift, waiting for permission to begin their performance as the musicians repeated the same few bars of music.

"You had better go back. Madame has noticed the monkey and is jealous for your return."

Annette awarded him a melting smile and drifted back to Madame's circle. The ladies greeted the monkey as if it were a firstborn son. Madame let the effusions continue for a few moments and then took sole possession of the creature, holding it close as she turned her attention to the performance.

Sylvain struggled to stay alert, despite the near-naked spectacle on stage. He had barely seen his bed since Leblanc's death, and the warm wine and rich food were turning his courtier's air of languid boredom into the prelude to a toddler's nap. The spinning and leaping acrobats were mesmerizing—especially when viewed in candlelight through a screen of nodding wigs and feathers. The bright silk- and satin-clad backs in front of him dipped as they lifted their glasses to their lips, swayed from side to side as they leaned over to gossip with the friend on the left about the friend on the right, then turned the other way to repeat the performance in reverse. Men and women they might be, but tonight they seemed more like the flamingoes that flocked on the Camargue, all alike in their brainless and feathered idiocy.

At least a flamingo made a good roast.

Sylvain spotted Gérard sneaking into the room, stealthy as a scout. He took his place by Sylvain's side as if he'd been there all evening.

"Thank God, Gérard," Sylvain whispered. "Stick your sword into my foot if you see me nodding off."

Gérard grinned. "It's the least I could do for the man who has brought such happiness to my wife."

The acrobats were succeeded by a troupe of burly Turkish dancers bearing magnums of champagne entombed in blocks of ice. Children dressed as cherubs passed crystal saucers to the guests.

"This will keep you awake, my friend. Champagne cold as a cuckold's bed."

"I've been in such a bed recently. It was quite warm."

Le Turque himself filled Sylvain and Gérard's saucers. "Tonight, you are in favor with the ladies, monsieur."

"Am I?" Sylvain sipped his champagne. The cold, sweet fizz drilled into his sinuses. His eyes watered as he forced back the urge to sneeze.

"So true!" said Gérard. "My own wife is ready to call Sylvain a saint. She has set up an altar to him in her dressing room."

"But I refused the honor," said Sylvain. "I would prefer not to have those offerings dedicated to me."

They laughed. Le Turque gave them a chill grimace.

"My apologies, monsieur," said Gérard. "It is not a private joke, just too coarse for general consumption. We are soldiers, you know, and are welcomed into civilized homes on charity."

Le Turque demonstrated his kind forbearance by topping up both their saucers before moving on to the other guests.

Sylvain studied the champagne and their enclosing blocks of ice as the Turkish dancers circled the room, trailing meltwater on the carpet. The bottles couldn't have been frozen into the ice or the wine would be frozen through. They must be made from dual pieces carved to enclose a bottle like a book. He stopped a dancer and examined the ice. Yes, the two pieces were joined by a seam.

A simple solution, too practical to be called ingenious, but effective. The guests were impressed, even though many of them were fingering their jaws and wincing from cold-induced toothache. Not one guest refused a second glass, or a third, or a fourth. Bottles were being drained at impressive rate.

Annette drew her fan up to her ear and flicked Sylvain a telling glance from across the room. He took Gérard's arm. "Come along; we are being summoned to an audience with Madame."

The royal mistress was dressed in white and silver. Her snowy wig was fine as lamb's wool, her skin frosted with platinum powder. A bouquet of brightly clad ladies surrounded her like flowers around a statue. The monkey slept in her lap. She had tied a silver ribbon around its neck.

The standard palace practice was to praise Madame's face and figure in public and criticize it in private. Sylvain had seen her often, but always at a distance. Now after months of maneuvering, he was finally close enough to judge for himself.

"A triumph worthy of our Turkish friends, is it not?" Madame offered Sylvain her hand. "I shall never be able to enjoy champagne at cellar temperature again. It is so refreshing. One feels renewed."

"Our host has distinguished himself," said Sylvain, brushing her knuckles with his lips. Madame let her fingers linger in his palm for a moment before presenting her hand to Gérard.

"Le Turque is an old man and has resources appropriate to his age and rank," said Madame. "I wonder how young men can become distinguished in the king's gaze."

"Perhaps by murdering the king's enemies on the battlefield every summer?" said Gérard.

The ladies tittered. Madame slowly drew back her hand and blinked. Pretty, thought Sylvain, at least when surprised.

"Excuse my friend, Madame. Cold champagne has frozen his brain."

Madame eyed Gérard up and down. "Everyone respects our valiant soldiers, and your devotion to manly duty is admirable." She turned back to Sylvain. "If your brawny friend the Marquis de la Châsse is content with his achievements, who are we to criticize? But you, monsieur, I know you care about the honor of France both on and off the field of war."

"Every Frenchman does, madame, but especially when he has been drinking champagne," said Sylvain. Gérard lifted his glass in salute.

Madame flicked her fan at Annette. "You may have heard an idea of mine. At first, it was just an idle thought, but now le Turque has thrown down the gauntlet. Is there a man who will accept the challenge?"

"No man could refuse you anything, madame. The rulers of the world fall at your feet."

"I would rush to serve you," said Gérard, "if I had any idea what you meant. Madame is so mysterious."

Madame dismissed Gérard with flick of her fan. "Be so good as to fetch me one of those dancers, monsieur."

"A Turk with a full magnum, Madame?" Gérard saluted her and set off with a jaunty military stride.

Madame shifted on the sofa. She seemed to be considering whether or not to invite Sylvain to sit. Then she lifted the monkey from her lap and set it beside her.

Not nearly so lovely as Annette, Sylvain decided.

"You may not know, monsieur, how highly you are praised. I am told that even when the Bassin d'Apollon was new, fountain-play was a parsimonious affair, the water doled out like pennies from a Polish matron's purse."

She paused to collect dutiful titters from her ladies for this jab at the queen. Perhaps not pretty at all, thought Sylvain. Hardly passable.

"You have found a way to keep all of the fountains constantly alive without pause. Some members of the royal household call you a magician, but the word from the highest level is less fanciful and more valuable. There, you are simply called inspiring."

Sylvain puffed up at the praise. Gérard returned with a beefy Turk. The dancer's fingers were blue from the cold, and he struggled to fill Madame's saucer without dribbling.

"Just like a commander on the battlefield, a woman judges a man by his actions." She lifted the monkey and planted a kiss between its ears. "Any other man would have collared this monkey's neck with a diamond bracelet before presenting it to a lady of the court. We would call that vulgar."

Her ladies nodded.

"You have taste and discernment. So give me champagne, free-flowing and cold. That is a triumph worthy of Versailles." She presented her hand to Sylvain again, then waved him away. The ladies closed around her like a curtain.

"Vulgar, indeed," said Gérard as they retreated. "I've never seen woman greet a diamond with anything other than screeches of delight. Have you?"

"My experience with diamonds is limited."

"Madame knows it. She was spreading you with icing."

"She wants to secure a valuable ally. Compliments are the currency of court."

Gérard drained his champagne and rubbed his knuckles over his jaw as if it ached. "She just wants to drink champagne at another man's expense. As with most pleasures, it comes with a little pain. She wants the pain to be yours, not hers."

"The champagne fountain is a whim. She will ask me for something else next time."

"Very well. Madame will ask you to do something expensive and original with only a few pretty words as payment. Will you do it?"

Two full glasses of red wine had been abandoned at the foot of a statue. Sylvain fetched them and passed one to his friend. After the sweet champagne, the warm wine tasted flat and murky as swamp water.

"Only a fool would pass up the opportunity."

-11-

"Papa, come play!"

The nixie swam backward against a vortex of current, dodging spinning hunks of ice that floated like miniature icebergs, splintering and splitting as they smashed together. Overhead, the red-and-blue parrot climbed among the fern fronds, screeching and flapping its wings.

As he had suspected, the little fish loved ice. He had once seen a nixie swimming at the foot of a glacier, playing with ice boulders as they calved from the ice field's flank. The nixie had pushed them around like kindling, building a dam that spread a wide lake of turquoise meltwater over the moraine.

"Papa, come play!"

"Papa!" The parrot screeched its name.

Sylvain had purchased the bird from an elderly lady who was moldering in a north-wing garret, wearing threadbare finery from the Sun King's reign and living off charity and crumbs of her neighbors' leftover meals. The parrot was a good companion for the little fish. It was old and wily, and with its sharp beak and talons, it was well equipped to protect itself if she got too rough. It could fly out of reach and was fast enough to dodge sprays and splashes.

"Papa?" The nixie levered herself up the lip of her nest and stared at Sylvain expectantly. "Papa come play?"

Sylvain felt in his pockets for the last of the walnuts. "Here, little one. See if you can lure Papa down with this."

"Bird! Food!" she yelled, waving the walnut aloft. The parrot kited down to the nest and plucked the nut from her fist.

"Come play, Papa?" she asked. She wasn't looking at the bird. Her uncanny gaze was for him alone.

"That's quite enough of that," he said. "The bird's name is Papa, and

you'll do well to remember it, young lady."

She leaned close and spoke slowly, explaining. "Bird is Bird, Papa is Papa."

"Papa," agreed the parrot, its beady gaze fixed on Sylvain.

"You are impossible." Sylvain waved at the surface of the pond, which was now carpeted with icy slurry circulating in the slowing current. "Clear away your toys or I'll freeze swimming across."

"Papa go away?"

"The bird is staying here with you. I am going to see about my important business. When I come back, I'll bring more walnuts for Papa and nothing for you. Now clean up the ice."

She laughed and dove. The water bubbled like a soup pot, forcing the slush to congeal into wads the size of lily pads. As the turbulence increased the leaves tilted and stacked, climbing into columns of gleaming ice that stretched and branched overhead.

The parrot flew to the top of a column and nibbled at the ice. It was solid and hard as rock.

"Very impressive," breathed Sylvain.

He had spent the past few days running up debts with the village icemongers and pushing cartloads of straw-wrapped ice blocks down the tunnels. Though she had never seen ice, she had taken to it instinctively, tossing it around the grotto, building walls and dams, smashing and splitting the blocks into shard and slag, and playing in the slush like a pig in mud. But now she was creating ice. This was extraordinary.

"Come here, little one," he said.

Obedient for the moment, she slipped over the surface to tread water at the edge of the nest. Above the water, her pale green skin was furred with frost. Steam snaked from her nostrils and gill slits.

"Show me how you did that," he said.

She blinked. "Show me how, Papa?"

He spoke slowly. "The ice was melted into slush, but you froze it again, building this." He pointed to an ice branch. The parrot sidestepped along the branch, bobbing its head and gobbling to itself. "Can you do it again?"

She shrugged. "You are impossible."

He scooped up a fistful of water and held it out in his cupped hand.

"Give it a try. Can you freeze this?"

The little fish peered up at him with that familiar imploring, pleading expression. He could hear her request even before she opened her mouth.

"Sing a song?"

Gifts were one thing but blatant bribery was another. If he began exchanging favor for favor, it would be a constant battle. But he had no time for arguments. He could risk a small bribe.

"I will sing you one song—a very short song—and only because you have been such a good girl today. But first freeze this water."

"One song," she agreed.

Heat radiated up his arm. The water in his fist crackled and jumped, forming quills of ice that spread from his palm like a chestnut conker. He was so astonished that he forgot to breathe for a few moments. Then he drew in a great breath and let himself sing.

The foresters of home played great lilting reels on pipes and fiddles. Their lives were as poor and starved as the shepherds in the meadows above or the farmers in the valley below, but they were proud and honed the sense of their own superiority as sharp as the edges on their axes. Their songs bragged of prowess at dancing, singing, making love, and of course at the daredevil feats required by their trade. The song that came to his lips told of a young man proving his worth by riding a raft of logs down a grassy mountainside in full view of the lowly villagers in the valley below.

He only meant to give her the first verse, but the little fish danced and leaped with such joy that he simply gave himself over to the song—abandoned himself so completely that halfway through the second verse, he found himself punctuating the rhythm with sharp staccato hand claps just as proudly as any forester. He sang all six verses, and when he was done, she leapt into his arms and hugged her thin arms around his neck.

"Papa sing good," she whispered, her breath chill in his ear.

He patted her between the shoulder blades. Her skin was cold and clammy under a skiff of frost. Sylvain leaned back and loosened her arms a bit so he could examine her closely. Her eyes were keen, her skin bright. She was strong and healthy, and if she was a bit troublesome and a little demanding, it was no more than any child.

"Annette tells me you had your men run water to the north wing."

Madame reclined on a golden sofa, encased and seemingly immobilized by the jagged folds of her silver robe. Her cleavage, shoulders, and neck protruded—a stem to support her rosebud-pale face. Her ladies gathered around her, gaudy in their bright, billowing silks.

Annette avoided his eye. Sylvain brushed imaginary lint from his sleeve, feigning unconcern. "I believe my foreman mentioned that they had finally gotten so far. I gave the orders months ago."

"Everyone has a throne now. Madame de Beauvilliers claims to possess one exactly like mine. She shows it to her neighbors and even lets her maid sit on it."

"Your throne was one of the first in the palace, Madame, and remains the finest."

"Being first is no distinction when a crowd of nobodies have the newest. No doubt our village merchants will be bragging about their own thrones in a day or two."

Sylvain twitched. He had just been considering running pipes through the village and renting toilets there. Merchants had the cash flow to sustain monthly payments, and unlike courtiers, they were used to paying their debts promptly.

"No indeed, Madame. I assure you I am extremely careful to preserve the privileges of rank. I am no populist."

"And how will you preserve my distinction? Will you give me a second throne to sit in my dressing room? A pedestal for a pampered pet? If a cat has a throne, surely you can give me one for each of my ladies. We shall put them in a circle here in my salon and sit clucking at each other like laying hens."

Her ladies giggled obediently. Annette stared at the floor and wrung the feathers of her fan like the neck of a Christmas goose. Just a few more twists and she would break the quills.

Madame glared at him. Angry color stained her cheeks, visible even through her heavy powder. "If every north-wing matron can brag about her throne, you may remove mine. I am bored of it. Take the vulgar thing away and throw it in the rubbish."

If Sylvain took just two steps closer, he could loom over her and

glare down from his superior height. But intimidation wasn't possible. She held the whip and knew her power. If she abandoned her toilet, the whole palace would follow fashion. He would be ruined.

He strolled to the window and examined a vase of forced flowers, careful to keep his shoulders loose, his step light. "My dear madame, the thrones don't matter. You might as well keep yours."

Madame's eyebrows climbed to the edge of her wig. Annette dropped her fan. The ivory handle clattered on the marble with a skeletal rattle. Sylvain sniffed one of the blossoms, a monstrous pale thing with pistils like spikes.

"Is that so," said Madame, iron in her voice. "Enlighten me."

"We need not speak of them further. If possessing a throne conveyed distinction, it was accidental. They are a convenience for bodily necessity, nothing more. Having a throne was once a privilege, but it has been superseded."

"By what?" Madame twisted on her divan to watch him, unsettling her artfully composed tableau. He had her now.

"By the thing your heart most desires, flowing freely like a tap from a spring. So cold it chills the tongue. So fresh, the bubbles spark on the palate. Sweet as the rain in heaven and pure as a virgin's child. I believe you hold a day in February close to your heart? A particularly auspicious day?"

"I do, and it is coming soon."

"You will find your wishes fulfilled. Count on my support."

A slow grin crept over Madame's face. "It's possible you are a man of worth after all, Sylvain de Guilherand, and I need not counsel my ladies against you."

She dismissed him. Sylvain was careful not to betray the tremor in his limbs as he strolled through her apartment. The rooms were lined with mirrors, each one throwing his groomed and powdered satin-clad reflection back at him. He could put his fist through any one of those mirrors. It would feel good for a moment—the glass would shatter around his glove and splinter this overheated, foul, wasteful place into a thousand shards.

But if he showed his anger, he would betray himself. Any outburst would reveal a childish lack of self-control and provide gossip that would be told and retold long after he had been forgotten.

Sylvain found the nearest service corridor and descended to the cellars. He got a bottle of champagne from one of the king's stewards—a man who knew him well enough to extend the mercy of credit. He bought a bag of walnuts and half a cheese from a provisioner's boy who was wise enough to demand coin. The Duc d'Orléans' baker gave him a loaf of dark bread and made a favor of it. Then he slipped out of the palace and made his way to the cisterns.

The little fish dozed on a branch of her ice tree, thin limbs dangling. The bird was rearranging the nest, plucking at fern fronds and clucking to itself.

"You're fancy," the little fish said, her voice sleepy.

Sylvain looked down. He was in full court garb, a manikin in satin, wrapped in polished leather and studded with silver buttons.

He pulled off his wig and settled himself on a boulder. "Do I look like a man of worth to you, little one?"

"Worth what, Papa?"

He grimaced. "My dear, that is exactly the question."

He spread a handkerchief at his feet and made a feast for himself. Good cheese and fresh bread made a better meal than many he'd choked back on campaign, better even than most palace feasts with dishes hauled in from the village or up from the cellar kitchens, cold, salty, and studded with congealed fat. A man could live on bread and cheese. Many did worse. And many went gouty and festered on meat drowning in sauce.

The parrot winged over to investigate. Sylvain offered it a piece of cheese. It nuzzled the bread and plucked at the bag of walnuts. Sylvain untied the knot and the bird flapped away with a nut clenched in each taloned foot.

The little fish stretched and yawned. She slipped from the branch, surfaced at the edge of the pool, and padded over to him.

"Stinky," she said, nose wrinkling.

"The cheese? You're no French girl." He pared a sliver for her. She refused it. "Some bread?"

She shook her head.

"What do you eat, my little fish?" She had teeth, human teeth. Had he been starving her?

"Mud," she said, patting her belly.

There was certainly enough mud to choose from. "Would you eat a fish?" She stuck out her tongue in disgust. "The parrot eats nuts. Have you tried one?"

"Yucky. What's this, Papa?" She lifted the champagne bottle.

"Don't shake it. Here, I'll show you."

He scraped off the wax seal and unshipped the plug. He held it out. She sniffed at the neck of the bottle and shrugged, then took the bottle and dribbled a little on the floor. It foamed over her bare toes.

"Ooh, funny!" she said, delighted.

"It's like water, but a bit different."

She raised the bottle overhead and giggled as the champagne foamed over her ears. It dribbled down her cheeks and dripped from her chin. She licked her lips and grinned.

"Don't drink it. It might make you sick."

She rolled her eyes. "Just water, Papa. Fuzzy water."

"All right, give it a try."

She took a gulp and then offered the bottle to him, companionable as a sentry sharing a canteen with a friend.

He shook his head. "No, thank you, I don't prefer it."

He watched attentively as she played. She drank half the bottle but it had no apparent effect. She remained nimble and precise, and if her laughter was raucous and uncontrolled, it was no more than normal. The rest of the bottle she poured on or around herself, reveling in the bubbles and foam. Sylvain wondered if the ladies of the palace had tried bathing in champagne. If they hadn't, he wasn't going to suggest the fashion. The foamy sweet stuff was already a waste of good grapes.

When she lost interest, she dropped the bottle and arced back into the pool, diving clean and surfacing with a playful spout and splash. A finger or two was left, and when he poured it out, it foamed on the rocks fresh as if the bottle had just been cracked.

He nodded to himself. If the little fish could force water through pipes and sleeves, could make ice and keep it from melting, could chase him around the palace and make him look a fool while never leaving the cisterns, what were a few bubbles?

Sylvain knelt and pushed the empty bottle under the surface of the pool. He had done this a thousand times—filled his canteen at village wells, at farmyard troughs, at battlefield sloughs tinged pink with men's

blood—and each time, his lungs ached as he watched the bubbles rise. He ached for one sip of mountain air, a lick of snowmelt, just a snatch of a shepherd's song heard across the valley, or a fading echo of a wolf's cry under a blanket of moonlight. Ached to crouch by a rushing rocky stream and sip water pristine and pure.

"Thirsty, Papa?"

The little fish stood at his side. In her hand was a cup made of ice, its walls porcelain-thin and sharp as crystal. He raised it to his lips. The cold water sparkled with fine bubbles that burst on his tongue like a thousand tiny pinpricks and foamed at the back of his throat. He drank it down and smiled.

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The Grand Gallery streamed with all the nobles and luminaries of Europe, men Sylvain had glimpsed across the battlefield and longed to cross swords with, highborn women whose worth was more passionately negotiated than frontier borders, famous courtesans whose talents were broadcast in military camps and gilded parlors from Moscow to Dublin, princes of the church whose thirst for bloody punishment was unquenched and universal. This pure stream was clotted with a vast number of rich and titled bores with little to do and nothing to say. The whole world was in attendance for the king's birthday, but Sylvain had only glimpsed it. He hadn't left the champagne fountain all evening.

"If you don't come, I'll brain you with my sword hilt. Mademoiselle de Nesle is Madame's sister. If you snub one, you insult both," Gérard said, then added in an undertone, "Plus, she has the finest tits in the room and is barely clothed."

"In a moment."

The fountain branched overhead. Crystal limbs reached for the gilded ceiling and dropped like a weeping willow. Each limb was capped with ice blossoms, and each blossom streamed with champagne.

Madame had offered the first taste to the king, plucking a delicate cup of ice that sprouted from the green ice basin like a mushroom from the forest floor and filling it from a gushing spout. The king had toasted Sylvain and led the gallery in a round of applause. Then the guests flocked eagerly for their turn. They drank gallons of champagne,

complained about toothache, and then drank more.

Sylvain had planned for this. He knew the noble appetite, knew the number of expected guests and how much they could be expected to drink. The fountain's basin was tall and wide, and the reservoir beneath held the contents of a thousand magnums. The reservoir was tinted dark green with baker's dye. It was too dark to see through but Sylvain calculated it to be about half full. More than enough champagne was left to keep the fountain flowing until the last courtier had been dragged to bed.

But the guests were now more interested in the king's other gifts—an African cat panting in a jeweled harness, a Greek statue newly cleaned of its dirt and ancient paint, a tapestry stitched by a hundred nuns over ten years, a seven-foot-tall solar clock. The guests were still drinking champagne at an admirable rate but sent attendants to fill their cups. The novelty had worn off.

Sylvain slipped off his glove and laid his hand on the edge of the basin, letting the cold leach into his bare palm. The little fish had been eager to play in the fountain's reservoir, but she'd been inside for hours now and must be getting bored. Still, she had played no tricks. She kept the champagne flowing fresh, kept the ice from melting just as she had agreed. All because he had promised her a song.

"The fountain is fine," Gérard insisted. "We've all admired it. Now come see Madame and her sister."

Sylvain replaced his glove and followed Gérard. Guests toasted him as he passed.

"I need a fountain in my hat," said Mademoiselle de Nesle.

The two sisters were holding court outside the Salon of War, presenting a portrait of tender affection and well-powdered beauty. But their twin stars did not orbit peacefully. Madame held the obvious advantage—official status, a liberal allowance from the royal purse, a large entourage, and innumerable privileges and rights along with her jewels and silks—but her sister had novelty on her side and emphasized her ingénue status with a simple gauze robe. Goodwill bloomed between them, or a decent counterfeit of it, but their attending ladies stood like two armies across an invisible border.

Annette stood apart from the scene, dimples worn shallow. A line of worry wrinkled her brow. Her fan drooped from her elbow. No coy signals tonight, just a bare nod and a slight tilt of her eyebrows. Sylvain followed her gaze to the ermine-draped figure of the King of France.

The two sisters had captured the king's attention. He was ignoring Cardinal de Fleury and two Marshals of the Empire, gazing down from the royal dais to watch his mistress and her sister with obvious interest, plumed hat in his hand, gloved fist on his hip, alert as a stallion scenting a pair of mares.

Sylvain moved out of the king's view. The ladies were on display for one audience member alone, and Sylvain was not about to get between them.

"A fountain in my hat," Mademoiselle de Nesle repeated. "My dear sister says you are a magician."

Sylvain bowed deeply, hiding his expression for a few moments. A ridiculous request. The woman must be simple. Did she think he could pull such a frippery out of his boot?

"The fountain will have its naissance at the peak of my chapeau, providing a misty veil before my eyes."

"But mademoiselle would get wet," Sylvain ventured finally.

"Yes! You have grasped my point. My dress is gauze, as you can see. It's very thin and becomes transparent when wet." She smoothed her hands over her breasts and leaned toward her sister. "Do you not think it will prove alluring, Louise?"

Madame caressed her sister's hands. "No man would be able to resist you, my dear sister."

Mademoiselle laughed. Her voice was loud enough for the opera house. "I care for no man. Only a god can have me."

The king took a few steps closer to the edge of the dais, the very plumes on his hat magnetized by the scene.

Across the room, the Comte de Tessé approached the fountain with the careful, considered step of a man trying to hide his advanced state of drunkenness. The comte waved his crystal cup under the blossom spouts, letting the champagne overflow the glass and foam over his hand. The cup slipped from his hand and shattered on the fountain's base. The comte sputtered with laughter.

"Do you not think it would be the finest of chapeaux, monsieur? A feat worthy of a magician, would it not be?"

The comte was joined at the fountain by a pair of young officers,

polished, pressed, and gleaming in their uniforms, and just as drunk as the comte but far less willing to hide it. One leaned over the fountain and tried to sip directly from a blossom spout.

"I think it would be a very worthy feat," Madame said. "Monsieur, my sister posed you a question."

The officers were now trying to clamber onto the fountain's slippery base. The comte laughed helplessly.

"No," said Sylvain.

Madame blinked. Her ladies gasped.

The officer grasped a blossom spout. It snapped off in his hand. His friend slipped on the fountain's edge and fell into the basin. His gold scabbard clanged on the ice. Two women—their wives, perhaps—joined the comte to laugh at the young heroes.

"Excuse me, mesdames."

Sylvain rushed back to the fountain. One snarl brought the two young officers to attention. They scrambled off the fountain, claimed their wives from the comte, and disappeared into the crowd.

The comte's gaze was bleary. "Well done indeed, Monsieur de Guilherand. The palace is ablaze with compliments. But remember it is I who gave you this kingly idea in the first place. As a gentleman, you will ensure I receive due credit."

"You can take half the credit when you bear half the expense," Sylvain hissed. "I'll send you the vintner's bill. You'll find the total appropriately kingly."

The comte turned back to the fountain and refilled his cup, pretending to not hear. Sylvain plucked the cup from the comte's hand and poured the contents into the basin.

"You've embarrassed yourself. Go and sober up."

The comte pretended to spot a friend across the room and tottered away.

Sylvain examined the broken blossom. Its finely carved petals dripped in the overheated air. The broken branch gushed champagne like a wound. Had the little fish felt the assault on the fountain? Had it frightened her? He tried to see through the dark green ice, watching for movement within the reservoir.

"Perhaps we ask too much," said Annette, "expecting soldiers to transform themselves into gentlemen and courtiers for the winter. Many men seem to manage it for more than a few hours at a time. One wonders why you can't, Sylvain de Guilherand."

She posed at the edge of the fountain, fan fluttering in annoyance.

"Perhaps because I am a beast?"

The reservoir ice was thick and dark. In bright sunlight, he might be able to see through it, but even with thousands of candles overhead and the hundreds of mirrors lining the gallery, the light was too dim. He should have left a peephole at the back of the fountain.

"I speak as a friend," said Annette. "Madame is insulted. You have taken a serious misstep."

"Madame has made her own misstep this evening and will forget about mine before morning."

Annette's fan drooped. "True. She has made a play to keep the king's interest, but I fear she'll lose his favor. *Maîtresse en titre* is an empty honor if your lover prefers another woman's bed."

"She'll be naming something vile after her sister next," said Sylvain.

Annette coughed. "You heard about Polish Mary, then?" Sylvain nodded. "It's her way of insulting those she despises. It makes the king laugh."

A shadow moved in the fountain's base, a flicker of a limb against the green ice just for a moment. He should have given the little fish a way to signal him if she was in distress.

"I begin to perceive that my conversation is not engaging enough for you, monsieur."

"I beg your pardon, madame." Sylvain turned his back on the fountain. The little fish was fine. Nixies spent entire seasons under the ice of glacier lakes. It was her element. The fact that the champagne continued to flow was perfect evidence that she was not in distress. He was worrying for nothing. Offending Annette further would be a mistake.

He swept a deep bow. "More than your pardon, my dear madame. I beg your indulgence."

"Indulgence, yes." She looked over her shoulder at Madame and her sister. "We have all indulged ourselves too much this evening and will pay for it."

He forced a knowing smile. "Perhaps the best practice is to let others indulge us. Although a wise and lovely woman once mentioned that

most ladies prefer a long period of suspense first. It whets the appetite."

The empty banter seemed to cheer her. Her dimples surfaced and she snapped her fan with renewed purpose.

"Would you join me in taking a survey of the room?" He offered his arm. "I don't beg your company for myself alone but in a spirit of general charity. If all this indulgence will lead to a morning filled with regrets, at least we can offer the king's guests a memory of true beauty. With you on the arm of a beast such as myself, the contrast will be striking."

She glanced at Madame. "I was sent to scold you, not favor you with my company."

"You can always say I forced you."

She laughed and took his arm. He led her through a clot of courtiers toward the royal dais. The king had returned his attention to his most favored guests but displayed a shapely length of royal leg for the two sisters to admire.

"Much better, my dear Sylvain," said Gérard as they approached. "I hate to see you brooding over that fountain. My wife strokes her great belly with the same anxious anticipation. You looked like a hen on an egg."

Sylvain dropped his hand onto the pommel of his sword and glared. Gérard barked with laughter.

"Your friend the Marquis de la Châsse can't manage civil conversation, either," said Annette as they moved on.

"Gérard doesn't need to make the effort. He was born into enough distinction that every trespass is forgiven."

"You sound jealous, but it's not quite accurate. His wealth and title do help, but he is accepted because everyone can see he is true to his nature."

"And I am not?"

"A bald question. I will answer it two ways. First, observe that at this moment, you and I are walking arm in arm among every person in the world who matters. If that is not acceptance, I wonder how you define the word."

"I am honored, madame."

"Yes, you most certainly are, monsieur."

"And your second answer?"

"You are not true to your nature, and it makes people uncomfortable. Everyone knows what to expect from a man like the Marquis de la Châsse, but one suspects that Sylvain de Guilherand would rather be somewhere else, doing something else. Heaven knows what."

Sylvain closed his glove over hers. "Not at all. I am exactly where I want to be."

"So you say, but I do not believe it. Our well-beloved king toasted you this evening. Many men would consider that enough achievement for a lifetime, but still you are dissatisfied."

"We discussed my character before. Remember how that ended?"

A delicate blush flushed through her powder. "I am answering your question as honestly as I can."

"Honesty is not a vice much indulged at Versailles."

She laughed. "I know the next line. Let me supply it: 'It's the only vice that isn't.' Oh, Sylvain. I can have that kind of conversation with any man. I'd rather go home to my husband and talk about hot gruel and poultices. Don't make me desperate."

Sylvain stroked her hand. "Very well. You enjoy my company despite my faults?"

She nibbled her bottom lip as she considered the question. "Because of your faults, I think," she said. "The fountain is successful, the king is impressed with you, and you have my favor. Take my advice and be satisfied."

Sylvain raised her palm to his lips. "I will."

They walked on, silent but in perfect concord. As they circled the gallery, the atmosphere seemed less stifling, the crowd less insipid, the king's air of rut less ridiculous. Even Madame's poses seemed less futile and her sister's pouts less desperate. Sylvain was in charity with the world, willing to forgive its many flaws.

The guests parted, opening a view of the fountain. A girl in petalyellow silk reached her cup to one of the blossoms. The curve of her bare arm echoed the graceful arc of the fountain's limbs. She raised the cup to her lips and the crowd closed off his view of the scene just as she took her first sip.

"Nature perfected, monsieur," said a portly Prussian. "You must be congratulated."

Sylvain bowed and drew Annette away just as the Prussian's gaze

settled on her cleavage. The king rose to dismount the dais and the whole crowd watched. Sylvain took advantage of the distraction to claim a kiss from Annette, just a brief caress of her ripe lower lip before they joined the guests in a ripple of deep curtseys and bows. The king progressed down the gallery toward Madame and her sister, his pace forceful and intent as a stalking hunter.

Annette slid her hand up Sylvain's arm and rested her palm on his shoulder. A pulse fluttered on her throat. He resisted the urge to explore it with his lips.

"I suppose it is too early to leave," he whispered, drinking in the honeyed scent of her powder.

"Your departure would be noticed," she breathed. "It is the price of fame, monsieur."

"Another turn of the room, then?"

She nodded. They moved down the gallery in the king's wake. The African cat gnawed on its harness, blunted ivory fangs rasping over the jewels. Its attendant yanked ineffectually on the leash.

"Poor thing," said Annette. "They should take it outside. This is no place for a wild animal."

Sylvain nodded. "I have not thought to ask before now, but how is the monkey? Happier, I hope, than that cat?"

"Very well and happy indeed. My maid Marie coddles her like a new mother. They are madonna and child, the two of them a world unto themselves." She glanced up at him, a wicked slant to her gaze, daring him to laugh. He grinned.

"And what name did Madame give the creature?"

The color drained from her cheeks. "Is that the viceroy of Parma? I would not have thought to see him here."

"I couldn't say. He looks like every other man in a wig and silk. Are you avoiding my question?"

"Show me your fountain. I haven't had the chance to admire it up close."

The crowd parted to reveal three young men in peacock silks filling their cups at the fountain. One still kept his long baby curls, probably in deference to a sentimental mother.

"There!" Annette said. "Not quite as delicate a tableau as the girl in yellow, but I think I like it better. You must make allowances for

differences in taste, and I have always preferred male beauty."

"I am sure you do. What did Madame name the monkey, Annette?"

"She is called Jesusa. It is a terrible sacrilege and my accent makes it bad Spanish too, but what can I do when I am presented with madonna and child morning, noon, and night? God will forgive me."

"Madame didn't name the monkey Jesusa."

"Don't be so sure. Madame is even worse a Christian than I am."

"Very well. I'll ask her myself."

Sylvain strode toward the Salon of War. The crowd was thick. The king was with Madame now. The tall feathers of the royal hat bobbed over the heads of the guests.

Annette pulled his arm. "Stop. Not in front of the king. Don't be stubborn."

He turned on her. "Answer my question."

The jostling crowd pressed them together. She gripped his arms, breath shallow.

"Promise you won't take offence."

"Just answer the question, Annette."

She bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. "She named the monkey Sylvain."

He wrenched himself out of her grip and lurched back, nearly bowling over an elderly guest.

"It is a joke," said Annette, pursuing him.

"Does it seem funny to you?"

"Take it in the spirit it was intended, just a silly attempt at fun. It isn't meant as an attack on your pride."

"Madame thinks I am a prize target. Did you laugh, Annette?" His voice rose. Heads turned. Guests jostled their neighbors, alerting them to the scene. "Who else would like to take a shot at me?"

"Sylvain, no, please." Annette spoke softly and reached out to him. He stepped aside.

Sylvain paced in a circle, glaring at the guests, daring each one of them to make a remark.

"I have done more than any other man to make a place for myself at court. I've attended levees, and flattered, and fucked. But worse—I've worked hard. As hard as I can. You find that disgusting, don't you?"

"No. I don't." She watched him pace.

"I've worked miracles. Everyone says so. The magician of the fountains, the man who puts thrones throughout the palace. Everyone wants one. Or so it seems, until everyone has one. Then it's nothing special. Not good enough anymore. Take it away. Come up with something else while we insult you behind your back."

"Madame is difficult to please." Annette's voice was soft and sad.

"Nothing I do will ever be good enough, will it? Even for you, Annette. You tell me I try too hard, I'm a striver, and I'm not true to my nature." He spread his arms wide. "Well, this is my nature. How do you like me now?"

She opened her mouth and then closed it without speaking. He stepped close and spoke in her ear.

"Not well, I think," he said, and walked away.

The crowd parted to let him pass, opening a view to the fountain. Two of the young men were leaning over the basin. The boy with the curls crouched at the side of the reservoir. Sylvain broke into a run.

The boy was banging on the ice with his diamond ring. The reservoir rang like a drum with each impact.

Sylvain grabbed the boy by the scruff of his neck.

"There's something in there, monsieur," he squealed. "A creature, a monster. I saw it."

Sylvain threw the boy to the floor and drew his sword. The boy scrabbled backward, sliding across the marble. The two friends rushed to the boy's side and yanked him to his feet. They backed away, all three clinging to each other. Behind them a crowd gathered—some shocked, some confused, most highly entertained. They pointed at him as if he were a beast in a menagerie.

Several men made a show of dropping their hands to the hilts of their dress swords, but not one of them drew.

The fountain sputtered. A blossom crashed into the basin, splashing gouts of champagne.

Gérard shoved through the crowd, wig askew, slipping on the wet floor. He skidded into place at Sylvain's side.

The fountain sprayed champagne across their backs and high to the ceiling, snuffing out a hundred candles overhead.

"Go to your wife. Get her out of the palace," said Sylvain.

Gérard ran full-speed for the door.

Sylvain raised his sword and brought it crashing down on the fountain. Ice limbs shattered. Champagne and ice vaulted overhead and fell, spraying debris across the marble floor. He shifted his grip and smashed the pommel of his sword on the side of the reservoir. It cracked and split. He hit it again and again until the floor flooded with golden liquid. Sylvain threw down his sword and shouldered the ice aside.

"Papa?"

The little fish was curled into a quivering ball. Sylvain slipped and fell to his hands and knees. He crawled toward her, reached out.

"It's all right, my little one. Come here, my darling."

She lifted her arms. He gathered her to his chest. She burrowed her face into his neck, quaking.

"Noisy," she sobbed. "Too loud. Hurts. Papa."

Sylvain held her on his lap, champagne seeping through his clothes. He cupped his palms over her ears and squeezed her to his heart, rocking back and forth until her shivering began to subside. Then he pulled himself to his feet, awkward and unbalanced with the child in his arms.

He stepped out of the shattered ice into a line of drawn swords. Polished steel glinted, throwing points of light across the faces of the household guard. Sylvain shielded the child with his body as he scanned the crowd.

The jostling guests were forced against the walls by the line of guards. The plumes of the king's hat disappeared into the Salon of Peace, followed by the broad backs of his bodyguards. Madame, her sister, and their ladies clustered on the royal dais, guarded by the Marshal de Noailles.

De Noailles had personally executed turncoat soldiers with the very same sword that now shone in his hand.

"Let the water go, my little one," Sylvain whispered.

She blinked up at him. "Be a bad girl, Papa?" Her brow furrowed in confusion.

"The water pipes, the reservoirs. Let it all go."

"Papa?"

"Go ahead, little fish."

She relaxed in his arms, as if she had been holding her breath a long

time and could finally breathe.

A faint rumble sounded overhead, distant. It grew louder. The walls trembled. Sylvain spread his palm over the nixie's wet scalp as if he could armor her fragile skull. A mirror slipped to the floor and shattered. The guards looked around, trying to pinpoint the threat. Their swords wavered and dipped.

The ceiling over the statue of Hermes bowed and cracked. Plaster rained down on the guests. The statue teetered and toppled. The guests pushed through the guards, scattering their line.

The ceiling sprang a thousand leaks. The huge chandeliers swung back and forth. Water streamed down the garden windows, turning the glass silver and gold, and then dark as the candles sputtered and smoked.

The guests broke through the wide garden doors and stormed through the water streaming off the roof and out onto the wide terraces. Sylvain retrieved his sword and followed, ducking low and holding the little fish tight as he fled into the fresh February night.

He ran across the gardens, past the pools and reservoirs, though the orangery and yew grove. He climbed the Bois des Gonards and turned back to the palace, breathless, scanning the paths for pursuing guards.

Aside from the crowd milling on the terraces, there was no movement in the gardens. The fountains jetted high, fifteen hundred spouts across the vast expanse of lawns and paths, flower beds and hedges, each spout playing, every jet dancing for its own amusement.

"You can turn the fountains off now, little one."

"Papa?" The little fish was growing heavy. He shifted her weight onto his hip, well balanced for a long walk.

"Don't worry, my little girl. No more fountains. We're going home."

One by one the fountains flailed and drooped. The little fish leaned her head on his shoulder and yawned.

The palace was dark except for an array of glowing windows in the north wing and along the row of attic garrets. At this distance, it looked dry and calm.

And indeed, he thought, nothing was damaged that couldn't be repaired. The servants would spend a few busy weeks mopping, the carpenters and plasterers, gilders and painters would have a few seasons of work. Eventually, someone would find a way to repair a fountain or

two. The toilets and pipes would stand dry, but the nobles and courtiers would notice little difference. What was broken there could never be fixed.

Dawn found them on a canal. Sylvain sat on the prow of a narrow boat, eating bread and cheese and watching his little fish jump and splash in the gentle bow wave as they drifted upstream on the long journey home.

About the Author

In 1983, Kelly Robson's life changed forever when she picked up a copy of *Asimov's Science Fiction* with a Connie Willis story on the cover. She is a graduate of the Taos Toolbox writing workshop and her stories appear in the anthologies Start a Revolution, New Canadian Noir, and This Patchwork Flesh.

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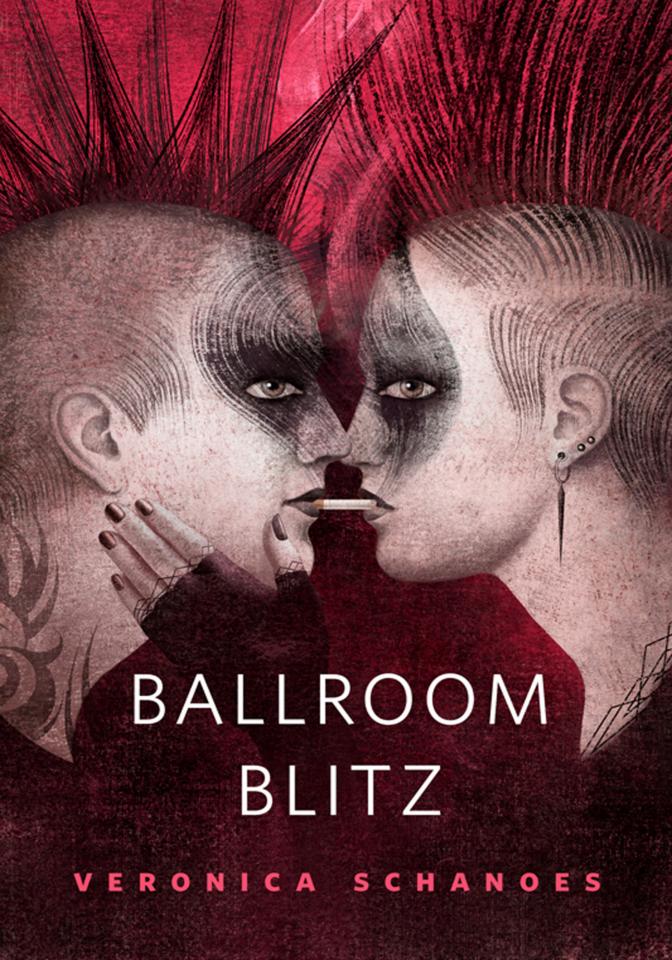
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Ballroom Blitz

VERONICA SCHANOES

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Well I've seen so many And I've known so many Ashtray sunshines, make you swallow up your mind ...

I got the days, you got the nights We could turn the tide, it's gonna be alright

And I was spinning, dancing around with women, Talking loud into the crowd, I can't remember what happened next then ...

I got the days, you got the days, we got the days, It's gonna be alright.

—"We Got the Days," The So So Glos

I remember when the very air pulsed with music, raucous shouts and double-time beats mixing with the eerie wailing of tortured guitars. We were all of us young and wild; my brothers and I wore tight black jeans and ripped T-shirts and stood around looking tough and combing our hair till it was slicked back just right to show off our sideburns. The girls wore short skirts and strong boots, ripped fishnet stockings ending inches below their hemlines. We all wore boots, come to that, engineering boots or motorcycle boots or combat boots or Doc Martens, as though we had to be ready for a forced march. And we may have been under a curse, but I remember us always laughing. The air was gray with smoke and our heads spun—not a full glass but we emptied it, not a pill but we popped it, not a leaf but we smoked it, and we laughed even when we were on our knees. The air was drenched with beer and whiskey, and we danced those boots so thin we could feel the floor through our socks.

We were young, I said, but of course my brothers and I couldn't age, could we? We were bound, and that kept the twelve of us from growing any older no matter how much time passed. We couldn't set foot outside the club, but inside we couldn't grow old, couldn't die. Bands appeared

and disappeared, DJs spun in and out, and we were always there, game for anything, hopped up on speed and lack of sleep, dancing our boots thin and shouting our voices hoarse. We'd been there for years before we found the girls, or before the girls found us.

I remember the rest of it, too, waking up wanting to die, the hacking coughs, the bleak despair driving me—driving us—to drown ourselves in the neon darkness, the impossible wish to see sunshine just once more, the imprisonment. But when I look back, everything glows with false freedom, and I remember us always laughing.

The music never stopped, even when your head was screaming, when the beats that had blasted you off your feet drilled behind your eyes, and it felt like your head would break open from the pain. The air never cleared, and the smoke that had sustained us and cushioned us like amniotic fluid turned harsh—bitter and sticky like tar with sharp teeth, extending tendrils to wrap around our limbs and keep us moving but stop us escaping. And the dancing which had transported us became a cage of knives, spitting electrodes forcing us to move, even when our very bones were splintering in agony.

Each morning I woke up shaking, my vision blurred and doubled. I was begging Cynthia for a drink before my eyes were even fully open, but she just stood behind the bar with her arms folded, black hair tightly braided back, and shook her head.

Even picking my head up off the bar made my guts flip over. I'd forgotten what it felt like to sleep in a bed, to wake up without pain and nausea. Staggering a little, I would wake up my brothers.

We all woke up like that: black eyes, broken jaws, teeth missing, sick, spitting blood. I woke up shattered and begging like the rest, but I was oldest, the one in charge, the one who looks after his brothers, cleans them up, gets them out of trouble, gets them in trouble. And it was my fault. My hands shook, my whole body trembled, and I could feel blood trickling out my ears, my ribs cracking and shattering every time I tried to draw a breath.

We felt like that every morning, and we'd heal by nightfall.

So I'd go to wake up my brothers, and for me that was the worst of it. My second brother, who's always been an asshole, woke up spitting with rage, calling me names and blaming me for our troubles, which was fair enough, I suppose, and my eleventh brother, my youngest brother, just wept silently at every waking, tears running down his face like rain against a window. At least one of us would wake up choking on vomit. Sometimes it was me.

We had to wash the place down, and the bar was like us; no matter how well we'd scrubbed the toilets, the bar, the floor, the basement, by the next morning they'd be covered in puke and grime and shit again. And with joints cracking, doubled over and hunched up like old men, we had to shine it up again. We had to take care of that hellhole like it was our baby, and afterward, if we'd done it well enough, Cynthia would order us some food from the diner down the street. Never enough, though. I remember always being hungry. Also dirty. There was a small sink in the men's room where I rinsed out my shirt every so often and tried to splash myself clean, but there wasn't much in the way of soap, and I lived in a cocoon of sweat and bile and dried blood.

I had to make sure my youngest brother didn't get ahold of my pocketknife. He'd cut himself if he did—maybe he still does, I don't know anymore—and the cuts wouldn't heal by evening. He's got scars up and down his arms and legs. One of the cuts got infected once and he ran a fever like I'd never seen before. I pleaded with Cynthia to bring in a doctor, promised her I'd do anything, but as she pointed out, I had nothing to bargain with. Eventually she tossed me some antibiotics, but the fever singed his brain. He hasn't been the same since, and none of this is his fault. He just fell in with the wrong crowd. Me.

Even when he didn't have my knife, I had to keep an eye on him. Sometimes he swiped the knife Cynthia used to cut up lemons and limes.

My sixth brother killed himself once.

I found him hanging from the light fixture in the men's room by his belt, and he was stone dead. I remember how heavy his body was when I brought it down, how mottled his face was, his tongue lolling obscenely out of his mouth. And I remember him waking up the next morning, whimpering like a puppy, with purple bruises around his throat. He's held his neck funny ever since.

My second brother, that asshole, he just pummels the wall when it gets to be too much for him. It fucks up his knuckles, leaves blood smears on the walls that we have to scrub off again, but I doubt he's thinking about that when he does it. I think he likes the pain it brings.

And me? I drink. We had plenty of money when we first got here, and I drank it away. Not by myself, of course. We ran out a long time ago, so I do my drinking at night. At night we don't pay, I don't know why, except I think Cynthia's giving us the chance to do the night over, to do something right. I see myself in the mirror and I can tell the alcohol is wrecking me, but that's better than the alternative. I feel the liquor corroding my body from the inside out, breaking me down into dust and poison. Or maybe just releasing the poison that had been there all along.

My hands still shake, if I don't concentrate on keeping them still.

Those were the days of living death. But the nights were something else entirely. In the years before the girls showed up, at night we felt okay again and okay was so much better than we'd felt during the day that we went wild. But by the time the girls got there, there was damn little of that left. By the time the girls got there, we were spending the nights slumped at the bar, bleak hopelessness etched into our faces.

The girls were obviously slumming, but then, so were we, or we had been at first, pretty boys down from the big house to mix it up with the squatters. Now we have the broken noses and rotten teeth of real diehards, but we hadn't started out like that. I carried a switchblade, but I never pulled it. Anyway, the girls were clearly coming from Daddy's mansion to rock out with the real punks. Twelve of them with ratted hair and liquid black eyeliner making cat eyes an inch long, black leather bustiers and Doc Martens. They might have been meant for us, and I swear, I could see our salvation in their eyes. We all could, I think.

But we played it cool, leaning up against the bar and downing beer and eyeing the girls when they weren't looking, while they were still blinking in the dark, trying to get their bearings among the pounding beats and flaring matches.

The oldest made her way to the bar, right where I was waiting for her. Maybe she'd seen me eying her after all. I sauntered over a few steps

"Buy you a drink?" I asked.

No, that's not right. The music was shaking the floor, glasses were rattling behind the bar, and I leaned over to her and half-shouted, half-mouthed, "Buy you a drink?" close enough to her ear that she

could feel my breath on her face—my breath, which smelled of smoke and beer and late nights and rotten hope and self-destruction.

She cut her eyes at me, and her eyelids glittered with caked-on silver eyeshadow. I wanted to bend her over backward in a movie kiss right then and there, but I kept my hands to myself, took a drag off my cigarette instead while sonic fireworks exploded around us. I could see my brothers gravitating toward the other girls.

Then she smiled, shouted, "Why not?" and mouthed, "cider."

I put my arm around her waist and she let me. I got her a cider and gave her a cigarette, and lit it for her. She coughed and pretended it wasn't her first. I remembered my first, how I hadn't coughed at all, but had sucked the coarse, harsh smoke straight down into my heart, where it wrapped around that beating machine like a protective cocoon. The smoke's still there, but it's been getting thinner, no matter how much I force down my throat.

She stood with her hip pressed up against my leg. "What do you want?" she shouted in my ear.

"I want to dance with you," I shouted back. "Because..." I didn't know how to finish that sentence, so I just let it hang in the air like an afterimage.

She drained her glass and slammed it down on the bar, but the music was so loud that I couldn't hear it hit. Her face lit up, flushed with drink and heat. "Let's go, then!" She grabbed my hand and together we pushed and shoved our way to the middle of the seething mass of people—my brothers, her sisters—and we became the center of the storm and the lightning struck and we danced. We danced the band dry and the DJ sore, and still we moved like machine-gun fire, like the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, and I knew that this was it, that she and her sisters were the ones.

We danced the sun up, not that we could see the sun through the tattered walls. No, we were lit by neon and dim incandescence and the flares of cardboard matches, but the space emptied out and the music faded until finally we could hear each other speak, and there were holes worn through the soles of our boots.

"Where d'you live?" she asked me, as we leaned against the bar sharing a bottle of whiskey.

I gestured around the room a little unsteadily. My socks were damp

with sweat and with something nasty on the floor that had seeped in through the holes in the soles of my boots. "Here," I said. "We live here."

"You got nowhere you could take me?"

"Honey," I said, "I can't leave."

She took a pull off the bottle. "Why not?"

I ground out my cigarette and told her.

My brothers and me, back when we were really young, not trapped in youth, but genuinely new, we heard the beats from our black disks and they pulled each of us by the balls. We knew we had to come here, that here was where our life should be, in the dark and in the noise. So we got the gear first—went down to Trash and Vaudeville with ready cash and remade ourselves.

We swaggered in here like young Turks, chains clinking against our legs, our hair combed just right, and we tore up the dance floor, and we knocked back shots of tequila, and we hassled the girls. We were real assholes, spoiling for a fight.

It was me who got one.

Not even a fight. You couldn't call it a fight. He was just a kid, barely older than my tenth brother, barely shaving. He was just a fucked-up kid. But I was always angry, and when this junkie barreled into me on his way to the men's room and puked on my boots ... part of it was wanting to impress Cynthia with how hardcore I was. I didn't know about her then, didn't know what kind of power she had, just that she was the bartender, and she was cute—long black hair pulled back in a French braid and bright red lipstick. Knotwork tattoos. But then a lot of it was pure rage. I was always seething, always about to boil over. I don't know why. Testosterone, maybe. Or maybe just being cramped inside my skin, needing to get out, needing release.

It doesn't matter why, I guess, but I beat the shit out of that kid. He didn't ... look okay afterward.

Cynthia came out from behind the bar with the Louisville Slugger she keeps back there, but I didn't even feel it hit me, I was so hopped up on adrenaline. It wasn't until my brothers pulled me off the kid that I stopped and saw what I had done to him. Sometimes I wonder if he survived the night.

Sometimes I wonder if I did.

Cynthia gave twenty bucks to the kid's friends and told them to get him to the nearest hospital—NYU, I guess. Then she turned and looked at me.

"You," she said. "Out. Don't come back."

But the fire was still burning through my blood and the shame was starting to seep in through the cracks in my rage, so I stonewalled. "Fuck, no," I said. "That kid owes me new boots."

"That *kid*," she said, "owes you *nothing*. Get out. You're eighty-sixed."

I sized her up. Cynthia's not a tall woman. I looked around and didn't see a bouncer. "No. I'm not done drinking."

"This is my bar," she said, "and you're done."

"I'm not leaving."

"You're not?"

"No," I spat. "And neither are my brothers. We'll fucking sit and drink and dance until we're *ready* to go home. If you don't like it, call the fucking cops."

"No cops in my bar, boys," Cynthia said, kind of husky, and back then I thought it was capitulation, but now I think it was a warning. She looked around at my brothers. "He speak for all of you? Any of you leaving?"

My brothers stood tight next to me. I ... I'm still a little proud of that, still a little grateful. They must've heard the menace in her voice, but not one of them budged. Not even my second brother.

Cynthia's gaze lingered on my youngest brother. He's only fourteen, and he looks it. "You sure?" she said, and she spoke kindly, for her. "You sure you want to stay with him?"

My youngest brother looked at the door, looked at me, and didn't say anything—but he didn't move, either.

Cynthia nodded. She went back behind the bar and turned the music back on and I thought I'd won. And she acted like nothing was wrong, like I hadn't beat a kid maybe to death in front of her, like I hadn't flung her authority back in her face. She set out rounds for us and even smiled so sweetly at me that I thought I had a shot with her.

When I woke up that first morning and saw her behind the bar setting up for the night, I just thought I'd passed out and she'd left me there. I felt beat to shit, but I'd woken up feeling that way before, and

not remembering why. Then I tried to leave.

As soon as I tried to set foot outside the door I curled up in agony. The air felt like knife blades skinning me alive, the rising sun seemed to pour molten metal down on my skin, and the ground, ah, the ground seemed to swarm up around me like a mountain of stinging beetles. Every inch of my body blistered and burned.

I crawled back into the bar on my hands and knees, gulping the stinking air. I couldn't feel anything but pain and rage.

I woke up my brothers, and when my second brother realized what had happened to us, he actually went for Cynthia and she broke his collarbone with the Louisville Slugger. He fell down and she stood over him—she seemed to tower over all of us.

"What did you do to us? What are you?" I asked her hoarsely.

"I'm the *bartender*," she said. "And don't you *ever* fuck with me. Not in my bar."

Cynthia's always here, and I don't think she sleeps.

* * *

So every morning, I told this girl, we wake up in the same beaten shape I put that kid in, and every day we do everything Cynthia tells us and we can't set foot outside the bar. But it could end, I told her, Cynthia promised, if there are girls, if there's dancing, 101 nights straight, we could leave. Maybe even go home again. If we still have a home. Maybe we could find a home.

All the time I told her our story, she drank whiskey and nodded in the right places.

"Home's overrated," she said.

I thought about asking why, but didn't. "Look," I said. "I'm not like that anymore. I don't do that. I just ... I don't. I mean, if somebody gives you trouble, I'll lay him out. But I don't ... I don't let the rage take over anymore."

She nodded. "How long has it been?"

I shrugged. "Dunno. Years. Things don't change here. People come and go. We don't age, but the circles under my eyes get darker."

"Yeah," she said. "First thing I noticed about you. Under your eyes, the skin looks like charcoal."

She put her hand on my thigh, leaned over, and kissed me. I put my

arms around her, and she broke it off and pulled away. While I caught my breath, she put the whiskey bottle in my hand and slid off the barstool, her purple miniskirt riding up to the very bottom of her ass. She tugged it back into place.

"I'll see you," she said.

"You coming back tomorrow night?" I asked, as her sisters began filing out. I tried to keep the desperation from my voice.

She grinned. Her dark lipstick was smeared from our kiss and her black eyeliner cat eyes were long gone, sweated off while we danced. The rips in her stockings had gotten bigger. "Yeah. We'll be back."

"And the night after that?"

"Could be," she said. "You never know."

"Wait," I said. "You know about me now. I'm Jake. What's your name?"

"Isabel," she said.

"What's your story?"

"I don't have one yet," she said.

"Come on," I persisted. "What brings you here?"

She grinned again, but this time it looked a lot more brittle. "Nothing." She shrugged. "Hey—anything you want? From outside?"

I thought about pushing her harder for a minute, about trying to find out what it was she wanted to get away from, and decided against it. I couldn't risk pissing her off, not when I still barely knew her.

"A clean T-shirt," I said. "Maybe a peach? I kind of miss peaches. They used to be my favorite."

"Wrong season," she said. "Peaches won't be any good for months."

"An apple, then?"

"Okay." She smiled at me, and then she walked out. The door slammed and bolted, locking my brothers and me in for the day.

Our first few weeks in there, we'd torn the place apart every night, wrenched the stools up and used them to smash up the bottles and the mirror behind the bar. But the club just rebuilt itself around us. It didn't heal completely—the mirror was still shattered like a mosaic and walls were charred in places. But the place didn't look much different from the run-down punk dive it was when we'd first walked in. The cuts on our fists took a lot longer to heal.

After the girls and the other patrons—the ones who came and went

as they pleased—had left, my brothers and I settled in for the day, contorting ourselves on benches and against walls.

"It's gonna happen," I said.

"I don't like them," my youngest brother said.

"What do you mean, you don't like them?" I asked. "They're our girls, the ones who are going to set us free. You can't not like them."

"The one I was dancing with was boring," he said.

"And mine didn't like it here, I could tell," said my fifth brother.

"We want to get out of here, don't we?" I said reasonably.

"You're just cheery because you and your girl were making out on the dance floor," snarled my second brother. He's always been the worst of us.

"Look, guys," I said. "There're twelve of them. Twelve of us. They're the ones. Just go to sleep."

My second brother was right about one thing. I was deliriously happy. I haven't felt that way since.

They came back the next night and the night after that, and I danced with her all night, till our boots were worn through and our heads were caved in with the beats. And we drank so much that when we fell down we bounced, and when we got hurt we roared with laughter instead of pain. We were wrecks, me trying to shuck what was left of the bullying asshole I had been, and her running from ... whatever she was running from. Two drunken, dancing banshees. Twenty-four, really.

She told me about the weather, which I liked. The bar was cold in the winter and hot in the summer, but I'd almost forgotten about the beating sun and gray pinpricks of rain. She told me about her calculus class, which made me feel stupid, but I didn't really care. She smelled like parks and asphalt and street fairs and the outside that I missed. Every few nights she'd come in morose and rageful. She wouldn't talk and wouldn't smile. All she would do was knock back shots of bourbon and dance. By the end of the night I was holding her hair out of her face while she vomited into the toilet. I didn't mind. I guess I was falling in love. I think she was just falling. She'd do that for a night or two, and then come in back to normal, chirping about her cousin's new baby and showing me pictures. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen a baby.

We both had our hands full taking care of the others. I'd laid down the law to my brothers: no bitching about the girls to me. I didn't want to hear it. But they didn't get along with them any better, and it was just as clear that the girls didn't like my brothers. The oldest was the only one who bothered to dress up; the others slouched around in jeans and T-shirts, which was fair enough, because that's what we were wearing. My second brother pissed off one sister so much that she threw her drink at him. I shoved him up against the cracked wall of the bar.

"What the fuck did you do?" I shouted at him.

"Go fuck yourself," he spat at me.

I banged his head against the wall. "I swear to God, Max, if you screw this up for us—"

"Then *what*?" he shouted. "I'll get the shit kicked out of me? That's how I wake up every goddamn morning, thanks to you!"

We stared at each other for a couple minutes. Finally I turned away. "Just don't, Max," I said.

Isabel had been talking her sister down. "Please don't go," I heard her saying. "C'mon, don't go. Tomorrow'll be better. I promise. I promise."

The next night Isabel brought in a bag of weed and some rolling papers. "I think this might help," she told me, and it did. It helped Max, anyway, who stopped pummeling the walls if we saved enough for him to smoke up during the days. Every night after that she brought something in. I didn't know where she got the drugs or the money for them, but she was able to hold them over us and enforce good behavior.

Sometimes I think the only things that united her sisters and my brothers were the desire for the drugs and their resentment of the two of us. But we took care of them, and we kept them in line.

There was nobody to keep us in line.

A couple weeks after I first met her, she pulled me into the bar's back room, pressed me into one of the darker corners, and kissed me. My arms went around her and I found the gap between her T-shirt and her purple skirt.

"Better not stop dancing," I whispered to her, and she nodded. But she tasted like cider and cigarettes and sweat, so I kissed her again and ran my hand down the side of her breast.

"I know another dance," she whispered back, and slid her hands into the back pockets of my jeans.

We had ended up in a heap at the foot of the wall, and I held her

half-on, half-off my lap. I didn't care if we had to start the 101 nights over, honestly, it had been that good, and I leaned over and kissed her hair.

"I love you," I told her.

"You need me," she corrected me, pretty bleakly.

"No," I said. "I love you."

"You barely know me," she replied.

* * *

So we danced and screwed our way through one hundred nights. My brothers and I never knew where the girls went during the days; we never found out where they lived. At night they lived with us, amid the smoky, alcoholic squalor of the bar. My T-shirt and her fishnets were in shreds and tatters but my boots and my brothers' boots miraculously healed each day while we slept, curled up in the dark corners. Sometimes I would have sworn that I could still smell her hair in my sleep.

The hundredth night, Isabel came in one of her poison moods. She wouldn't look at me, wouldn't talk to me no matter what I did or said. By the end of the night my nerves were spitting wires. I never knew what to do with her when she was like this. Nothing worked, nothing felt right, and I was tense, straining for that 101st night like a dog at the end of a leash. It was all I could see. I tried to talk to her, but her averted eyes and monosyllabic answers reduced me to silence as well. At the end of the night I stared moodily into space while she knocked back shots of Irish whiskey. My tension and mounting excitement curdled into frustration and I began to seethe. Why was she being like this when we were so close? When she paid for her fifth shot, I finally spoke.

"You can't handle that much whiskey and you know it," I said.

She shrugged halfheartedly. "Fuck you, Jake," she said, but without any real malice behind it. No feeling at all, really, not love or anger.

"Seriously, Isabel. Stop drinking. You'll just puke it back up."

"So? Who are you, my mother?"

"Not your mother," I said. "I'm the person who cleans you up afterwards, remember?" My voice had turned ugly and I knew it would be a mistake to keep talking. But I was aching with tension for the next

night and her mood had turned that tension sour. I guess I thought a fight might be the next best thing to fucking, which she certainly wasn't in the mood for. "Me, not your sisters." I kept going, trying to goad her into paying attention to me. "Your sisters, they don't give a shit. They leave you here as soon as the dancing's done."

It worked. Her head snapped around. "Don't you say *one word* about my sisters. You're sick of cleaning *me* up? What have I been doing since I got here but cleaning up after your mess? You think it's easy getting my sisters here every night? They practically *hate* your brothers. You think I want to be here when I feel like this?"

I'd actually ... never thought about what Isabel's black moods would be like from the inside. I guess I'd just thought about them as part of her mystique. Where did she come from? How did she feel? She was here for me, and that had been enough. For me, anyway.

"Then why do you bother to come?" I snarled at her, to cover up the shame beginning to slink through my guts.

She stared at me for a minute and turned back to her drink. "You're an asshole." She drank down the fifth shot of whiskey and blinked a little in the low light. For the first time I noticed the dark circles under her eyes. "I come here," she began, and then stopped. "I come here," she said again, with some difficulty, "because it's the only time I really feel alive. It's the only time I feel like I want to be alive. I can't stop sleeping, Jake. I sleep twelve or fifteen hours a day. Most days showering is too hard and my arms and legs feel like they're filled with lead. I—I feel like I'm not really there most of the time, just looking through the cut-out eyes of a portrait, like in a bad movie. Everything hurts, all the time, even when there's nothing wrong with me. I cry every day. I can't keep my mind together; my thoughts bounce and clatter like a bag of marbles emptied out onto the floor. And everything looks gray to me, like there's a screen of smoke in front of my eyes. And I hate myself for being like this, so weak. Weak and useless.

"And when I come *here*, Jake, I'm not useless. I come *here* because sometimes when I'm here, the music and the smoke and the drink drives that away, and I feel okay. Just okay, and that's a fucking miracle. And sometimes I feel better than that. Sometimes I feel bubbles like champagne in my blood and I can see neon light trails in the air and everything just—just *sparks*, like burning metal and fireworks. But *most*

of the time, *most* of the time, Jake, I feel like crap."

I didn't know what to say to her. I drank her fifth shot of whiskey. "I didn't know," I said. "I never knew. You always seem so ... alive."

She looked at me bitterly until I heard exactly how stupid I sounded. "Yeah. I'm good at that. And I'm good at calculus, so nothing really bad could be happening, could it? You never noticed, you never took it seriously because you needed me to be the girl who would save you. You *don't* love me and you *don't* know me. You *need* me. And you never once thought about what I needed, or even noticed me counting ceiling tiles while you were fucking me."

"That's mean," I breathed. "That's mean, and it's not true. I did think about what you needed, why you were here, I asked—"

"Oh, shut up, Jake," she said, and slid off the barstool. "I'm going to go throw up, and I'll hold my own fucking hair back, and then I am *leaving*."

After she left, I put my head down on the bar. It was aching already. I could tell Cynthia was standing over me, tapping her foot. After a long silence, I heard her say "You get one chance, Jake. You know that, right? Just one."

"I figured," I said, pressing my fingers against my eyelids.

"You haven't learned anything, have you?" she said. "You're an idiot."

"I know," I said. I sat there and waited to fall asleep, waited to wake up in misery.

The next night, the 101st night, we were waiting from the moment the sun went down, but the girls didn't come. And the time ticked by.

"Where are they?" asked my youngest brother.

I shrugged.

"They're not coming, are they?" he whimpered.

"They're coming," I said.

And we waited, not even tapping our feet to the music. I could hear the sound of each second falling to the floor.

"They're not coming," said my youngest brother again a few minutes before midnight.

"And it's your fault," snarled my second brother. "All your bullshit threats to me, and you go and fuck everything up at the end. What's wrong with you, anyway? Too many fucking blow jobs scramble your brains?"

"Shut up, Max," I said quietly. "I swear to God if you don't shut up, I'll break your fucking jaw."

My other brothers slowly cleared away while Max stepped up close. I could hear him breathing. "You couldn't take me when were kids, Jake, and you can't take me now."

"Not in my bar, boys." Cynthia's warning voice seemed to come from miles away.

The door slammed open and the girls staggered in. Isabel wasn't wearing much makeup and she wasn't dressed up. She was wearing a pair of hot pink jeans and a black cotton tank top.

* * *

Her eyes were swollen, like she'd been crying.

She grabbed my hand.

That night my feet felt like lead and the music sounded like so much static. Each beat felt like a hammer blow to the head and every step was like pulling teeth. But we ground it out, nothing if not determined, and by the end of the night there were holes in the soles of my boots as big as nickels.

There was a silent pause for a minute while my brothers and I stared at each other. Then my youngest brother walked tentatively toward the door, licked his lips, and stepped outside. More silence, and then we could hear his scream of joy, sharp as an arrow in my heart. Nine of my other brothers stampeded for the door.

Max waited uncertainly and then came over and put his hand on my shoulder. "Come on, Jake." His voice sounded almost affectionate.

I shook him off me and he shrugged, cast one last look at me, and left. He closed the door gently behind him.

"You're free," she said.

I didn't feel it.

"So go on," she said. "Get out of here."

"I didn't think you were coming back," I said.

She shrugged. "We were so close." Her voice sounded dull, and I didn't know if she meant that she and I were close or that we had been so close to the end of the 101 nights when we fought.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have said that, about your sisters.

And you know I don't care how much you drink, not really."

"I know," she said. "But it's not about that, is it? All this time, and you never really noticed anything wrong with me, did you?"

"There's nothing wrong with you," I said.

"I can't feel anything when we have sex," she said. "I don't feel anything but bad anymore."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"I used to feel things, here, with you. I used to feel good. And then ... it kind of fell away, and I was just coming to help you. Maybe I used myself up."

"I'll help you," I said. "I can do that for you. Like you've done for me."

"I don't think you can. You only ever thought about yourself and your brothers, really, like you're the only ones under a curse. You only ever thought about what I could do for you—bring you cigarettes, get you off, set you free. Even tonight—you just worried about yourself, didn't you? Did it ever cross your mind that I wasn't here because ... I had ... because something had happened to me? You wouldn't know how to help me."

I tasted salt and realized that tears were running down my face. "Don't leave me. I'll learn."

She shook her head. "I don't think I get to have that." She was crying, too. "I've got to go."

"Give me your phone number," I said.

She shook her head. "It's better, because you won't get bored trying to help me when you can't."

"Did you get bored trying to help me?"

"You aren't *like* me," she said impatiently. "There's nothing wrong with you. You're kind of a jerk sometimes, but so's everybody. I'm broken."

"I don't believe that," I said.

But she left anyway.

I stared out into space for a few minutes after she left. There didn't seem to be anywhere worth going.

After a little while Cynthia came over and stood in front of me with her arms folded. "Time to go, Jake," she said quietly.

I shrugged.

"You can't stay here any longer," she told me. Then she poured me a glass of brandy. "On the house," she told me. "To celebrate. Drink it and get out of here."

I sipped the brandy. "Can I come back, some evenings?"

"Sure," she said. "Any time, if you've got the money. And if you behave yourself."

* * *

My brothers made good. They have good jobs, nice places to live. I stayed with them sometimes, one after another. I made myself enough money to drink.

"Plenty more pussy out there," my second brother said to me, right before I decked him.

It wasn't true anyway, not for me. It was like when she went away, something broke inside me. I saw other girls, girls who weren't her, walking by, and I felt nothing. I only got hard if I was remembering her, and I felt that slipping away as well.

My fourth brother got me a job at his wife's father's office. The soles of my Docs had never healed after that last night, so I bought new shoes and threw the boots into the back of my closet. I cleaned myself up and, damn, if I didn't look respectable. And older. I looked older.

My hands still shook, so I bought an electric razor.

My youngest brother approved. "Put it behind you," he said. "Start over."

But I remembered. I remembered nights when we danced on tongues of flame and angels, when the world opened up and was ours for the taking, when sparks shot through the air, when drumbeats were gasoline and I had a book of matches.

One night, Max was waiting for me at my sixth brother's apartment when I came home from work, and the two of them were glowering at each other.

"Zach doesn't think I should tell you," said Max. "But fuck him. I found your girl."

I went into the kitchen, took a beer out of the fridge, came back, and sat down between my brothers. "I don't believe you, Max."

He looked vaguely hurt. "It's true."

"How could you find her when I couldn't?"

"Because you looked like a fucking nightmare when you were searching for her, pal. Seriously. Unshaven, you reeked of alcohol—you think any girl would tell you where her friend was? Now, me?" He gestured to himself. "I wear a suit. I'm well-spoken. Who wouldn't talk to me?"

I glared at him.

"My girlfriend's a senior at Barnard," he said. "Her younger sister was at school with an Isabel, Isabel Goldman. Oldest of twelve, counting stepsisters and half-sisters. The rumor around school was that she tried to kill herself and her parents sent her to a mental hospital in Connecticut to get her away from her friends here—to get her away from you, I bet, even if they didn't know who you were. They have a country house up there. So I looked into it for you. 'Cause I'm a stand-up guy, no matter what you think of me. And it's true. She's there, no visitors, no correspondence except her parents. Pills and electroshock therapy."

I didn't feel anything I had expected to feel. I didn't feel anything at all. "Tried to kill herself?" I repeated mechanically.

"Tried," said Max, drinking my beer. I guessed Zach hadn't offered him one. "One of her sisters called an ambulance; they pumped her stomach."

"Look," he continued. "You ask me, I think you should stay away from her and vice versa. I don't think you're good for each other. But do what you want. One piece of advice—if you go for her, get yourself together. Clean yourself the fuck up. Get your own place. Be a goddamn man already. She didn't get you out so you could spend the rest of your life crashing on somebody's couch."

He tossed me a brochure, the kind of thing aimed at parents of troubled teens, soft focus and fake understanding, no edge to it. Not what someone like Isabel needed. Not what someone like me needed.

He finished my beer. "So don't say I never did anything for you, Jake." And then he left.

* * *

I thought about what someone like Isabel needed, what someone like me needed, and then I quit my job. I'd never liked it and I didn't think I was any good at it; I was never entirely sure what it was. Max had said to get my own place. There was only one place I thought of as my own.

Cynthia didn't look very surprised to see me. "What took you so long?" she asked.

I sat down and asked her for a shot of bourbon. When she brought it to me I sipped it. "I'm going to find her," I said.

"She's not here," said Cynthia. "So you're not off to a good start."

"Yeah, well, I'm not good at starts."

"This is not my problem," she said.

"Come on," I coaxed her. "Don't you ever want to get out of here? Look at the sunlight? Go to the beach?"

"Are you asking me out?" she said. "Long walks on the beach?"

"I'm asking you for a job."

She was silent for a full minute, and then she went down the bar to take care of other customers. When she came back, she drummed her fingers on the bar. "I miss going to the ballet."

"Are you serious?"

She glared at me. She drummed her fingers on the bar again and then went away to wash some glasses. She came back and poured two more shots of bourbon. "You've got a decent ear. You can book the bands and take over a few nights."

I gaped at her.

"What you want to say, Jake, is 'thank you."

"Thank you."

She rummaged behind the bar for a few minutes and came up with a set of keys. "You can start tomorrow night. I don't need to train you, do I?"

"I think you've already done that."

"Yes." She slid the keys across the bar to me. "There's an apartment above the bar. I don't live there."

For a minute I wondered where she lived—what that even meant to someone like her. Then I said "thank you" again, just to make sure.

She nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I got up to go. "Oh," she said. "Jake? Don't drink all my fucking profits."

* * *

I took Max's car to Connecticut.

"Don't blow out my speakers. And don't stain my seats when you fuck your girlfriend," he said, before he tossed me the keys.

"She probably won't want to come back with me anyway," I said.

He grinned at me. "What're you talking about? She's never been able to keep her hands off you, man."

* * *

I saw Isabel in the center's common room, and realized it was the first time I'd seen her without any trace of makeup. She didn't look older or younger, just different. Maybe more tired than before.

When I took her hand it felt like the future had finally started, like everything in my life had been stalled, just waiting for her.

"They've fucked up my memory," she said, and laughed a little, but not in a good way.

"Memory's overrated," I told her. "I've come to get you out."

She looked at me like I was an idiot. "I can get myself out. I'm over eighteen now. I can sign myself out any time I want."

"Then why haven't you?"

"Nowhere for me to go, really. Nowhere I want to go," she said, and then paused. "Until now?"

I nodded. "I have a job," I said. "I have a place. The apartment above the club."

"That fucking club." She laughed a little giddily, like she might cry. "You never really left, did you?"

I shook my head.

"Me neither."

"I've got Max's car parked outside," I told her. "We could drive back to my place. We can stop partway and mess up Max's seat cushions. If you want to, I mean."

She grinned at me. "Then we should go, while I still remember who you are."

"Who am I?" I asked her. I tried not to hold my breath waiting for her to tell me who I was, what I was to her.

"You're an asshole, Jake," she said, and stroked my face. "But I've missed you anyway."

"I'm an asshole," I agreed. "But I'm yours if you want me."

"I want you," she said. "I want you, but it'll come back—you know

that, right? You've got to understand that. It'll take me again. I'll never be *cured*. It'll never be *over*. I'm not like you. You can go anywhere now. But it will always take me again."

I wrapped my arms around her. "I'll keep you safe."

"You can't," she said. "Aren't you listening? You can't keep me safe."

"Then let it take you," I said. "And I'll bring you back. As many times as you need, I'll come and bring you back. I won't let it keep you."

"You won't get bored?" she asked anxiously.

I shrugged. "Maybe I'll get bored. Maybe I'll get bored and cranky and obnoxious and drink too much and throw up in the bathroom. But I'll still come for you. As many times as you need."

She took my hand and interlaced our fingers.

I could see the afternoon sun through the glass door, and I still wasn't used to being out in daylight, even to seeing daylight. I still tensed up every time I walked out a front door, hunching over in anticipation of unbearable pain. But I looked over at Isabel, and saw that the hand I wasn't holding was clenched in a fist, that she was flinching away from the sunlight and her face was twisted in something like fear. So I loosened my shoulders and put my arm around her waist.

"It's okay," I told her. "We're going home. I've got the Glos' 'Blowout in the car and you can turn the volume up as loud as you want."

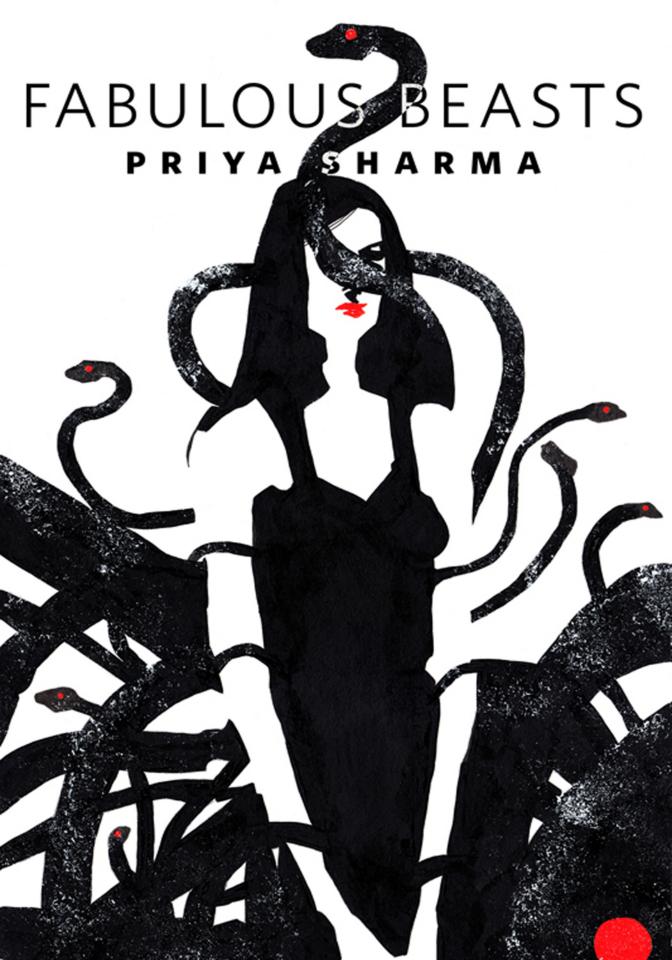
"Thank God." She smiled up at me. "The music in this place is shit." And together we walked right the fuck out that door.

* * *

The author would like to thank The So So Glos for being a generally awesome band, but in particular for the use of the lyrics to "We Got the Days." She swears she wrote the first draft of this story before she ever saw them play.



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Fabulous Beasts

PRIYA SHARMA

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"Eliza, tell me your secret."

Sometimes I'm cornered at parties by someone who's been watching me from across the room as they drain their glass. They think I don't know what's been said about me.

Eliza's odd looking but she has something, don't you think? Une jolie laide. A French term meaning ugly-beautiful. Only the intelligentsia can insult you with panache.

I always know when they're about to come over. It's in the pause before they walk, as though they're ordering their thoughts. Then they stride over, purposeful, through the throng of actors, journalists, and politicians, ignoring anyone who tries to engage them for fear of losing their nerve.

"Eliza, tell me your secret."

"I'm a princess."

Such a ridiculous thing to say and I surprise myself by using Kenny's term for us, even though I am now forty-something and Kenny was twenty-four years ago. I edge past, scanning the crowd for Georgia, so I can tell her that I've had enough and am going home. Maybe she'll come with me.

My interrogator doesn't look convinced. Nor should they be. I'm not even called Eliza. My real name is Lola and I'm no princess. I'm a monster.

* * *

We, Kenny's princesses, lived in a tower.

Kath, my mum, had a flat on the thirteenth floor of Laird Tower, in a northern town long past its prime. Two hundred and seventeen miles from London and twenty-four years ago. A whole world away, or it might as well be.

Ami, Kath's younger sister, lived two floors down. Kath and I went round to see her the day that she came home from the hospital. She answered the door wearing a black velour tracksuit, the bottoms slung low on her hips. The top rose up to reveal the wrinkled skin that had been taut over her baby bump the day before.

"Hiya," she opened the door wide to let us in.

Ami only spoke to Kath, never to me. She had a way of ignoring people that fascinated men and infuriated women.

Kath and I leant over the Moses basket.

"What a diamond," Kath cooed.

She was right. Some new babies are wizened, but not Tallulah. She looked like something from the front of one of Kath's knitting patterns. Perfect. I knew, even at that age, that I didn't look like everyone else; flat nose with too much nostril exposed, small eyelids and small ears that were squashed against my skull. I felt a pang of jealousy.

"What's her name, Ami?"

"Tallulah Rose." Ami laid her head on Kath's shoulder. "I wish you'd been there."

"I wanted to be there too. I'm sorry, darling. There was nobody to mind Lola. And Mikey was with you." Kath must have been genuinely sorry because normally she said Mikey's name like she was sniffing sour milk. "Where is he now?"

"Out, wetting the baby's head."

Kath's expression suggested that she thought he was doing more than toasting his newborn. He was always hanging around Ami. *Just looking after you, like Kenny wants*, he'd say, as if he was only doing his duty. Except now that there were shitty nappies to change and formula milk to prepare he was off, getting his end away.

Ami wasn't quite ready to let Kath's absence go.

"You could've left Lola with one of my friends."

Ami knew better. Kath never let anyone look after me, not even her.

"Let's not fight now, pet. You're tired."

Ami's gaze was like being doused in ice water. It contained everything she couldn't say to me. Fucking ugly, little runt. You're always in the way.

"You must be starvin'. Let me get you a cuppa and a sandwich and then you can get some sleep."

We stood and looked at the baby when Ami had gone to bed.

"Don't get any ideas. You don't want to be like your aunt, with a baby at sixteen. You don't want to be like either of us." Kathy always spoke to me like I was twenty-four, not four.

Tallulah stirred and stretched, arms jerking outwards as if she was in freefall. She opened her eyes. There was no squinting or screaming.

"The little scrap's going to need our help."

Kath lifted her out and laid her on her knee for inspection. I put my nose against the soft spot on her skull. I fell in love with her right then.

"What do you wish for her?" Kath asked, smiling.

Chocolate. Barbies. A bike. A pet snake. Everything my childish heart could bestow.

* * *

Saturdays were for shopping. Kathy and I walked down Cathcart Street towards town. We'd pass a row of grimy Victorian mansions on our way that served as a reminder of once great wealth, now carved up into flats for social housing or filled with squatters who lay in their damp dens with needles in their arms.

After these were the terraces, joined by a network of alleyways that made for easy assaults and getaways. This model of housing was for the civic minded when everyone here had a trade, due to our proximity to the city of Liverpool. The ship-building yards lay empty, and the 1980s brought container ships that did away with the demand for dockers. The life inside spilled out into the sun; women sat on their steps in pyjama bottoms and vest tops, even though it was lunchtime. Fags in hand, they'd whisper to one another as Kathy passed, afraid to meet her gaze. A man wore just shorts, his pale beer belly pinking up in the sun. He saluted when he saw Kathy. She ignored him.

I followed Kathy, her trolley wheels squeaking. The sound got worse as it was filled with vegetables, cheap meat shrink wrapped on Styrofoam trays, and bags of broken biscuits.

Kathy stopped to talk to a woman with rotten, tea stained teeth. I was bored. We were at the outskirts of town, where the shops were most shabby. House clearance stores and a refurbished washing machine outlet. I wandered along the pavement a way until something stopped me. The peeling sign over the shop window read "Ricky's Reptiles." The display was full of tanks. Most were empty, but the one at the front contained a pile of terrapins struggling to climb over one another in a dish of water.

The shop door was open, revealing the lino floor that curled up at the corners. It was a shade of blue that verged on grey, or maybe it was just dirty. I could see the lights from the tanks. The fish were darting flashes of wild colour or else they drifted on gossamer fins. I was drawn in. The man behind the counter looked up and smiled, but to his credit he didn't try and talk to me, otherwise I would've run.

Then I saw it, a long tank along the back wall. I went closer. The snake was magnificent, from the pale skin on her belly to the brown scales on her back.

She slithered closer, eyeing me and then raised her head and the front third of her body lifted up as if suspended on invisible thread. I put my forehead against the glass.

"She likes you," the man murmured.

She moved up the side of the tank. I realised that I was swaying in time with her, feeling unity in the motion. I was aware of her body, each muscle moving beneath her skin, her very skeleton. I looked into the snake's black eyes and could see out of them into my own. The world was on the tip of her forked tongue; my curiosity, the shopkeeper's sweat and kindness, the soft flavour of the mice in the tank behind the counter.

A hand gripped my shoulder, hard, jerking me back to myself. It was Kathy.

"Get away from that thing." Her fingers were digging into me. "Don't you ever come in here again, understand?"

She looked at the snake, shuddering. "God, it's disgusting. What's wrong with you?"

She shouted at me all the way home, for putting the wind up her, letting her think some pervert had taken me. I didn't realise just how afraid she was. That she was looking at me like she didn't know what she'd birthed.

* * *

The novelty of motherhood soon wore off. Ami sat in the armchair of our flat, her toenails painted in the same tangerine shade as her maxi dress. She was sunbed fresh and her lips were demarcated in an unflatteringly pale shade of pink. Her hair was in fat rollers ready for her evening out.

"Guess where I went today?" she asked, her voice bright and brittle.

"Where, doll?" Kath puffed on her cigarette, blowing a stream of smoke away from us.

If Ami was slim, Kath was scrawny. The skin on her neck and chest was wrinkled from the lack of padding and twenty-five cigarettes a day. She wore a series of gold chains and her hands were rough and red from perpetual cleaning. Her face was unbalanced: nose too small and large ears that stuck out. Round eyes that never saw make-up. I forget sometimes, that she was only twenty-four then.

"To see Kenny."

Tallulah got up and I thought she was leaving me for Ami but she was just fetching her teddy. When she sat back down next to me, she wriggled against me to get comfortable. Ami bought Tallulah's clothes. Ridiculous, expensive things to dress a toddler in, old fashioned and frilly.

"Kenny always asks after you." Ami filled the silence.

"Does he?" Kath tipped the ash from her cigarette into the empty packet. God love her, she didn't have many vices.

"He never says but he's hurt. It's all over his face when I walk in and you're not with me. You're not showing him much respect or loyalty. All he wants to do is look after you and Lola, like he looks after me and Tallulah."

"I don't want Kenny's money. He's not Robin Hood. He beat a man to death."

"He's our brother."

Which was funny, because I didn't know that I had an uncle.

Kath's face was a shutter slamming shut.

"He loves to see pictures of Lola."

"Photos? You showed him photos?" Kath was blowing herself for a fight.

"I only showed him some pictures. He wanted to see her. What's up with you?"

"Lola's my business. No one else's."

"Well, I'm taking Tallulah for him to see next time."

"No, you're not. Not to a prison."

"She's mine. I'll take her where the fuck I want."

"You've done well to remember you've got a daughter."

"What's that mean?"

"You're always out with your bloody mates. You treat me like an unpaid baby sitter. She spends more time here than with you and then you've got the cheek to tell me to mind my own."

"So it's about money?"

"No," Kath threw up her hands, "it's about you being a selfish, spoilt brat. I'm your *sister*, not your mum. And it's about how you treat Tallulah."

"At least I know who her dad is."

Kath slapped her face. A sudden bolt that silenced them both. It left a red flush on Ami's cheek. Whenever I asked about my dad, Kath told me that she'd found me in a skip.

"I'm sorry, Ami..." Kath put out her hands. "I didn't mean to. I mean..."

"Tallulah," Ami snapped, holding out her hand.

Tallulah looked from me to Kath, her eyes wide. Ami pulled her up by the arm. She screamed.

"Be careful with her."

"Or what, Kath?" Ami lifted Tallulah up, putting her under one arm like she was a parcel. "Are you going to call Social Services? Fuck off."

Calling Social Services was a crime akin to calling the police.

Tallulah was in a full on tantrum by then, back arched and legs kicking. Fierce for her size, she proved too much for Ami who threw her down on the sofa. She lay there, tear stained and rigid. Ami had started to cry too. "Stay here then, see if I sodding care."

* * *

There are times when I feel lost, even to myself, and that what looks out from behind my eyes isn't human.

I'm reminded of it each day as I go to work at the School of Tropical Medicine.

Peter, one of the biochemists from the lab downstairs has come up for a batch of venom. He watches me milk the snakes when he can overcome his revulsion.

Michael, my assistant, tips the green mamba out of her box. I pin her down with a forked metal stick, while Michael does the same, further along her body. I clamp a hand just beneath her neck, thanking her silently for enduring the indignity of this charade. If it were just the two of us, she'd come to me without all this manhandling. I'll make it up to her later with mice and kisses. She's gorgeous in an intense shade of green, her head pointed.

"You have to stop that work when you get too old," says Peter, "you know, reflexes getting slow and all that."

The deaths of herpetologist are as fabled as snakes are touchy. There's no room for lax habits or slowness. Handled safely for years, a snake can turn on you, resulting in a blackened, withered limb, blood pouring from every orifice, paralysis and blindness, if not death.

Peter's a predator. He's been a swine to me since I knocked him back. I turn to him with the snake still in my hand. She hisses at him and he shrinks.

I hook the mamba's mouth over the edge of the glass and apply gentle pressure. The venom runs down the side and collects in a pool.

What Peter doesn't know is that when my darlings and I are alone I hold them in my arms and let them wind around my neck. Our adoration is mutual. They're the easy part of my job.

"They like Eliza," Michael is offended on my behalf. There's not been a bite since I've been here.

"Concentrate." I snap at him as he brings the mamba's box to me. I regret my churlishness straight away. Michael is always pleasant with me. He never takes offence at my lack of social graces but someday he will.

Snakes are easy. It's people that I don't know how to charm.

* * *

Tallulah trailed along beside me. She looked like a doll in her school uniform; pleated skirt and leather buckled shoes. I didn't begrudge her the lovely clothes that Ami bought her. She jumped, a kittenish leap, and then she took my hand. We swung arms as we walked.

We turned onto Cathcart Street. Laird Tower was ahead of us, dwarfing the bungalows opposite. Those used by the elderly or infirm were marked out by white grab handles and key safes.

A pair of girls sat on a wall. They jumped down when they saw us. School celebrities, these playground queens, who knew how to bruise you with a word. They'd hurt you for not being like them, or not

wanting to be like them.

"Is she your sister?" Jade, the shorter one asked Tallulah.

"No," Tallulah began, "she's..."

"Of course not," Jade cut across her, keen to get out the rehearsed speech. Jade didn't like my prowess in lessons. I tried to hide it, but it occasionally burst out of me. I liked the teacher. I liked homework. I even liked the school, built in red brick, that managed to still look like a Victorian poorhouse.

Jade was sly enough not to goad me for that, going for my weakness, not my strength. "You're too pretty to be Lola's sister. Look at her ugly mug."

It was true. I remained resolutely strange; my features had failed to rearrange themselves into something that would pass for normal. Also, my sight had rapidly deteriorated in the last few months and my thick lenses magnified my eyes.

"Be careful." Jade leant down into Tallulah's face. "You'll catch her ugliness."

Tallulah pushed her, hard, both of her small hands on her chest. Jade fell backwards a few steps, surprised by the attack. She raised a fist to hit Tallulah.

My blood was set alight, venom rising. Water brash filled my mouth as if I were about to be sick. I snatched at Jade's hand and sunk my teeth into her meaty forearm, drawing blood. I could taste her shock and fear. If she was screaming, I couldn't hear her. I only let go when her friend punched me on the ear.

* * *

After I'd apologised I sat in the corner of the room while Kath and Pauline, Jade's mum, talked.

"I thought it would be good if we sorted it out between us, like grown ups," Pauline said.

Social Services had already been round to confirm that I was the culprit.

Has she ever done anything like this before?

No, Kathy was calm and firm, Lola wasn't brought up that way.

"I'm so sorry about what happened." Pauline lifted her mug of tea, her hand trembling a fraction. She took a sip and set it down, not picking it up again.

"Why?" Kath sat up straighter. "Lola bit Jade. *I'm* sorry and I'll make sure that she is too by the time I'm done with her."

"Yes, but Jade was picking on her."

"That's no excuse for what Lola did. She should've just walked away."

"It's time that someone cut Jade down to size."

"My daughter *bit* yours." Exasperation raised Kathy's voice a full octave.

"She was asking for it."

Kathy shook her head. Then, "How is she?"

Jade had lain on the pavement, twitching. Red marks streaked up her arm, marking the veins.

"She's doing okay," Pauline swallowed. "She's on antibiotics. She's a bit off colour, that's all."

"The police and Social Services came round earlier."

"I've not complained. I'm not a nark. I'd never do that."

"I didn't say you had."

"You'll tell Kenny, won't you? We're not grasses. We won't cause you any bother. I'll skin Jade if she comes near your girls again." We were known as Kathy's girls.

"Kenny?" Kathy repeated dully.

"Please. Will you talk to him?"

Kath was about to say something but then deflated in the chair.

"Ami's says she's visiting him soon, so I'll make sure he gets the message."

* * *

Kathy closed the door after Pauline had gone.

"What did you do to her?" It was the first time she'd looked at me properly since it had happened.

"It wasn't her fault." Tallulah stood between us. "She was going to hit me."

"What did you do to her?" Kathy pushed her aside. "Her arm swelled up and she's got blood poisoning."

"I don't know," I stammered. "It just happened."

She slapped me. I put my hands out to stop her but she carried on,

backing me into the bedroom. She pushed me down on the floor. I curled my hands over my head.

"I didn't bring you up to be like that." Her strength now was focused in a fist. Kathy had hit me before, but never like that. "I swear I'll kill you if you ever do anything like that again. You fucking little monster."

She was sobbing and shrieking. Tallulah was crying and trying to pull her off. Kathy continued to punch me until her arm grew tired. "You're a monster, just like your father."

* * *

We stayed in our bedroom that night, Tallulah and I. We could hear Kathy banging about the flat. First, the vacuum hitting the skirting boards as she pulled it around. A neighbour thumped on the wall and she shouted back, but turned it off and took to the bathroom. She'd be at it all night, until her hands were raw. The smell of bleach was a signal of her distress. There were times when I thought I'd choke on the stench.

The skin on my face felt tight and sore, as if shrunken by tears. Tallulah rolled up my t-shirt to inspect the bruises on my back. There was a change coming, fast, as the shock of Kathy's onslaught wore off.

It hurt when Tallulah touched me. It wasn't just the skin on my face that felt wrong. It was all over. I rubbed my head against the carpet, an instinctual movement as I felt I'd got a cowl covering my face. The skin ripped.

"I'll get Kathy."

"No, wait." I grabbed her wrist. "Stay with me." My skin had become a fibrous sheath, my very bones remoulding. My ribs shrank and my slim pelvis and limbs became vestigial. My paired organs rearranged themselves, one pushed below the other except my lungs. I gasped as one of those collapsed. I could feel my diaphragm tearing; the wrenching of it doubled me over.

I writhed on the floor. There was no blood. What came away in the harsh lamplight was translucent. Tallulah held me as I sloughed off my skin which fell away to reveal scales. She gathered the coils of me into her lap. We lay down and I curled around her.

I couldn't move. I could barely breathe. When I put out my forked tongue I could taste Tallulah's every molecule in the air.

* * *

The morning light came through the thin curtain. Tallulah was beside me. I had legs again. I put a hand to my mouth. My tongue was whole. My flesh felt new. More than that, I could see. When I put my glasses on the world became blurred. I didn't need them anymore. The very surface of my eyes had been reborn.

My shed skin felt fibrous and hard. I bundled it up into a plastic bag and stuffed it in my wardrobe. Tallulah stretched as she watched me, her hands and feet splayed.

"Tallulah, what am I? Am I a monster?"

She sat up and leant against me, her chin on my shoulder.

"Yes, you're my monster."

* * *

I ache for the splendid shabbiness of my former life, when it was just Kath, Tallulah, and me in the flat, the curtains drawn against the world and the telly droning on in the background. Tallulah and I would dance around Kath, while she swatted us away. The smell of bleach and furniture polish is forever home. Kath complaining when I kept turning the heating up. Being cold made me sluggish.

Endless, innocuous days and nights that I should've savoured more.

"How was your test?"

"Crap." Tallulah threw down her bag. "Hi, Kath."

"Hi, love," Kathy shouted back from the kitchen.

Tallulah, school uniformed, big diva hair so blonde that it was almost white, a flick of kohl expertly applied at the corner of her eyes.

"I'm thick, not like you." She kicked off her shoes.

"You're not thick. Just lazy."

She laughed and lay on her belly beside me, in front of the TV. She smelt of candy floss scent that she'd stolen from her mum. Tallulah was the sweetest thing.

There was the sound of the key in the door. I looked at Tallulah. Only her mum had a key. We could hear Ami's voice, followed by a man's laugh. A foreign sound in the flat. Kathy came out of the kitchen, tea towel in hand.

Ami stood in the doorway, flushed and excited, as if she was about to present a visiting dignitary. "Kath, there's someone here to see you."

She stood aside. I didn't recognise the man. He was bald and scarred. Kathy sat down on the sofa arm, looking the colour of a dirty dishrag.

"Oh, God," he said, "aren't you a bunch of princesses?"

"Kenny, when did you get out?" Kath asked.

"A little while ago." He took off his jacket and threw it down. A snake tattoo coiled up his arm and disappeared under the sleeve of his t-shirt. It wasn't the kind of body art I was used to. This hadn't been driven into the skin in a fit of self loathing or by a ham fisted amateur. It was faded but beautiful. It rippled as Kenny moved, invigorated by his muscles.

"Come and hug me, Kath."

She got up, robotic, and went to him, tolerating his embrace, her arms stiff by her sides.

"I've brought us something to celebrate."

He handed her a plastic bag and she pulled out a bottle of vodka and a packet of Jammy Dodgers.

"Just like when we were kids, eh?" he grinned.

"See, Kenny's got no hard feelings about you staying away." Ami was keen to be involved. "He's just glad to be home."

They both ignored her.

"Now, girls, come and kiss your uncle. You first, Tallulah."

"Well, go on." Ami gave her a shove.

She pecked his cheek and then shot away, which seemed to amuse him. Then it was my turn. Kath stood close to us while Kenny held me at arm's length.

"How old are you now, girl?"

"Eighteen."

"You were born after I went inside." He sighed. "You've got the family's ugly gene like me and your mum but you'll do."

For what? I thought.

Kenny put his fleshy hand around Kath's neck and pressed his forehead against hers. Kathy, who didn't like kisses or cuddles from anyone, flinched. I'd never seen her touched so much.

"I'm home now. We'll not talk about these past, dark years. It'll be how it was before. Better. You'll see. Us taking care of each other." * * *

Georgia's unusual for a photographer in that she's more beautiful than her models. They're gap toothed, gawky things that only find luminosity through the lens. Georgia's arresting in the flesh.

I hover beside our host who's introducing me to everyone as though I'm a curio. We approach a group who talk too loudly, as if they're the epicentre of the party.

"I find Georgia distant. And ambitious."

"She lives on Martin's Heath. In one of the old houses."

"Bloody hell, is that family money?"

"Rosie, you've modelled for Georgia. Have you been there?"

"No."

Rosie sounds so quiet and reflective that the pain of her unrequited love is palpable. At least I hope it's unrequited.

"Have you seen her girlfriend?"

"Everyone, meet Eliza," our host steps in before they have a chance to pronounce judgement on me within my earshot, "Georgia's partner."

I shake hands with each of them.

"Georgia's last shoot made waves. And I didn't realise that she was such a stunner."

We all look over at Georgia. Among all the overdressed butterflies, she wears black trousers, a white shirt, and oxblood brogues.

"Don't tell her that," I smile. "She doesn't like it."

"Why? Doesn't every woman want that?" The man falters, as if he's just remembered that I'm a woman too.

These people with their interminable words. I came from a place where a slap sufficed.

"Don't be dull," I put him down. "She's much more than her face."

"What do you do, Eliza?" another one of them asks, unperturbed by my rudeness.

"I'm a herpetologist."

They shudder with delicious revulsion.

I glance back to Georgia. A man with long blonde hair reaches out to touch her forearm and he shows her something on his tablet.

I'm a pretender in my own life, in this relationship. I know how my jealousy will play out when we get home. I'll struggle to circumnavigate all the gentility and civility that makes me want to scream.

Eventually Georgia will say, What's the matter? Just tell me instead of trying to pick a fight.

She'll never be provoked, this gracious woman, to display any savagery of feeling. I should know better than to try and measure the breadth and depth of love by its noise and dramas but there are times that I crave it, as if it's proof that love is alive.

* * *

Ami took Tallulah away with her the first night that Kenny came to the flat.

"But it's a school night. And all my stuff's here."

"You're not going to school tomorrow." Ami picked up her handbag. "We're going out with Kenny."

Tallulah didn't move.

"Mind your mum, there's a good girl." Kenny didn't even look up.

After the front door closed, Kathy locked and chained it.

"Get your rucksack. Put some clothes in a bag. Don't pack anything you don't need."

"Why?" I followed her into her bedroom.

"We're leaving."

"Why?"

"Just get your stuff."

"What about college?"

Kathy tipped out drawers, rifling through the untidy piles that she'd made on the floor.

"What about Tallulah?"

She sank down on the bed.

"There's always someone that I have to stay for. Mum. Ami. Tallulah." She slammed her fist down on the duvet. "If it had been just us, we'd have been gone long ago."

"Stay?"

She wasn't listening to me anymore.

"I waited too long. I should've run when I had the chance. Fuck everyone."

She lay down, her face to the wall. I tried to put my arms around her but she shrunk from me, which she always did when I touched her and which never failed to hurt me. If we were his princesses then Kenny considered himself king.

"Kath, stop fussing and come and sit down. It's good to be back among women. Without women, men are uncivilised creatures." He winked at me. "Tell me about Ma's funeral again, Kath."

Ami sat beside him, looking up at him.

"There were black horses with plumes and brasses. Her casket was in a glass carriage." Kath's delivery was wooden.

"And all the boys were there?"

"Yes, Kenny. All the men, in their suits, gold sovereign rings, and tattoos."

"Good," he said, "I would've been offended otherwise. Those boys owe me and they know it. I did time for them. Do you know the story?" "Bits," Tallulah said.

"I told her, Kenny." Ami was keen to show her allegiance.

"You were what, twelve?" He snorted. "You remember nothing. We did a job in Liverpool. A jeweller who lived in one of those massive houses around Sefton Park. We heard he was dealing in stolen diamonds. I went in first," he thumped his chest. "At twenty-three I was much thinner back then, could get into all sorts of tight spots. I let the others in afterwards. We found his money but he kept insisting the diamonds were hidden in the fireplace, but his hidey hole was empty. He kept acting all surprised. He wouldn't tell, no matter what." Kenny shrugged. "Someone grassed. A copper picked me up near home. Under my coat, my shirt was covered in his blood. I kept my trap shut and did the time. The others were safe. Eighteen years inside. My only regret is what happened to Ma. And missing her funeral."

"There were white flowers, everywhere, spelling out her name." Ami said. He patted her arm in an absent way, like she was a cat mithering for strokes.

"I wish they'd let me out for it. Ma was a proper princess, girls. She was touched, God bless her, but she was a princess."

Kath sat with her hands folded on her knees.

"Do you remember what Dad said when he was dying?"

Kath stayed quiet.

"He said, You're the man of the house, Kenny. And you're the mother, Kathy. Kenny, you have to look after these girls. Poor Ma, so fragile. When

I heard about her stroke, I was beside myself. It was the shock of me being sent down that did it. Who ever grassed me up has to pay for that, too. I should've been here, taking care of you all."

"I managed," Kathy squeezed the words out.

"I know. I hate to think of you, nursing Ma when you also had a baby to look after. You were meant for better things. We didn't always live in this shithole, girls. We grew up in a big rambling house. You won't remember much of it, Ami. Dad bred snakes. He was a specialist. And Ma, she was a real lady. They were educated people, not like 'round here."

The words stuck in my gut. 'Round here was all I knew.

"Happy days, weren't they, Mouse?" Kenny looked directly at Kathy, waiting.

"Mouse," Ami laughed like she'd only just noticed Kathy's big eyes and protruding ears, "I'd forgotten that."

Mouse. A nickname that diminished her.

"What's my pet name?" Ami pouted.

"You're just Ami." He said it like she was something flat and dead, not shifting his gaze from Kathy.

There it was. Even then, I could see that Kathy was at the centre of everything and Ami was just the means to reach her.

* * *

There's a photograph in our bedroom that Georgia took of me while we were travelling around South America. It embarrasses me because of its dimensions and scares me, because Georgia has managed to make me look like some kind of modern Eve, desirable in a way that I'll never be again. My hair is loose and uncombed and the python around my shoulders is handsome in dappled, autumnal shades. My expression is of unguarded pleasure.

"Let's stay here, forever," I said to her when she put the lens cap back on, "It's paradise."

What I was really thinking was What would it be like to change, forever, and have the whole jungle as my domain?

"Do you love it that much?" Georgia replied in a way that suggested she didn't. "And put him down. Poor thing. If he's caught he'll end up as a handbag." So it is that serpents are reviled when it's man that is repulsive.

* * *

I got off the bus at the end of Argyll Street and walked towards home. Kenny sat on a plastic chair outside The Saddle pub, drinking a pint. He was waiting for me.

"What have you been doing today?" He abandoned his drink and followed me.

"Biology." I was at college, in town.

"Clever girl. That's from your grandparents. I used to be smart like that. You wouldn't think it to look at me."

There was an odd, puppyish eagerness to Kenny as he bounced along beside me. I darted across the road when there was a gap in the traffic. The railway line was on the other side of the fence, down a steep bank. Part way down the embankment was a rolled up carpet, wet and rotted, and the shopping trolley that it had been transported in.

"Let me carry your bag. It looks heavy."

"I can manage."

"I wasn't always like this. I had to change for us to survive. Fighting and stealing," he shook his head, embarrassed. "I only became brutal to stop us being brutalised. Do you understand?"

The sky had darkened. Rain was on its way.

"We lost everything when Dad died. The house. The money. Your grandma lost her mind. It was the shock of having to live here. We were posh and we paid for that. On our first day at school a lad was picking on Kathy. Do you know what I did? I bit him, Lola. Right on the face. He swelled up like a red balloon. He nearly choked. Nobody picks on my princesses."

Nobody except him.

"Are you special, Lola?"

"I don't know what you mean."

I dodged him as he tried to block my path. Tallulah wouldn't have told him anything. Ami though, she had told him to prevent Pauline and Jade getting a battering.

"I can wait," he didn't pursue me, just stood there in the drizzle. "We have lots of time now."

* * *

"We're going for a ride today." Kenny followed Kath into the kitchen. He'd started turning up at the flat every day.

"I can't, Kenny, I've got loads to do."

"It can all wait."

Kenny had the last word.

"Where are we going?" Tallulah asked.

"You're not going anywhere except to Ami's. She needs to get her house in order. A girl needs her mum. She's sorting your bedroom, so you're going to live with her. Properly."

"I don't want to."

"Want's not in it."

Kathy stood between them. He pushed her aside.

"I live here." Tallulah wouldn't be moved.

"You live where I tell you." He had this way of standing close to you, to make himself seem more imposing, and lowering his voice. "You act like you're something with that pretty little face of yours. Well, I'm here to tell you that you're not special. You're fucking Mikey Flynn's daughter. And he's a piece of dead scum."

Poor Mikey Flynn, rumoured to have done a runner. I wondered where Kenny had him buried.

"Go home, Tallulah." Kathy raised her chin. "Kenny's right. You're not my girl. You should be with your own mother."

Tallulah's eyes widened. I could see the tears starting to pool there.

"Go on, then," Kathy carried on, "you don't belong here."

"Mum," I opened my mouth.

"Shut it." Kathy turned on me. "I've been soft on you pair for too long. Now help Tallulah take her stuff to Ami's."

"No," Kenny put a hand on my arm, "Lola stays with us."

* * *

As Kenny drove, the terraces changed to semis and then detached houses. Finally there were open fields. It felt like he'd taken us hours away but it wasn't more than thirty minutes. We turned up an overgrown drive. Branches whipped the windscreen as Kenny drove.

"Kenny." Kath's voice was ripped from her throat. He patted her hand.

The drive ended at a large house, dark bricked with tall windows. It

might as well have been a castle for all its unfamiliar grandeur. Overgrown rhododendrons crowded around it, shedding pink and red blossoms that were long past their best.

"Come on."

Kenny got out, not looking back to see if we were following.

Kath stood at the bottom of the steps, looking up at the open front door. There were plenty of window bars and metal shutters where I grew up, but the windows here were protected by wrought iron foliage in which metal snakes were entwined. The interior was dim. I could hear Kenny's footsteps as he walked inside.

"This is where we used to live." Kathy's face was blank. She went in, a sleep walker in her own life. I followed her.

"Welcome home." Kenny was behind the door. He locked it and put the key on a chain around his neck.

* * *

Kenny showed us from room to room as if we were prospective buyers, not prisoners. Every door had a lock and every window was decorated in the same metal lattice work.

I stopped at a set of double doors but Kenny steered me away from it. "Later. Look through here, Kathy. Do you remember the old Aga? Shame they ripped it out. I thought we could get a new one."

He led us on to the lounge, waving his arm with a flourish.

"I couldn't bring you here without buying *some* new furniture." He kept glancing at Kathy. "What do you think?"

The room smelt of new carpet. It was a dusky pink, to match the sofa, and the curtains were heavy cream with rose buds on them. Things an old woman might have picked.

"Lovely, Kenny."

"I bought it for us." He slung his arm around her neck. It looked like a noose. "You and me, here again, no interference." His face was soft. "I've plenty of money. I can get more."

"Go and play," Kath said to me.

It'll shame me forever that I was angry at her for talking to me like I was a child when all she was trying to do was get me out of his way.

I went, then crawled back on my belly to watch them through the gap in the door.

Kath broke away from him and sat down. Kenny followed her, sinking down to lay his head on her knee. Her hand hovered over him, the muscles in her throat moving as she swallowed hard. Then she stroked his head. He buried his face in her lap, moaning.

"What happened to us, Mouse?"

Mouse. He'd swallow her whole. He'd crush her.

"You said you can get more money. Do you mean the money from the job in Liverpool?"

He moved quickly, sitting beside Kathy with his thigh wedged against the length of hers.

"Yes." He interlaced their fingers, making their hands a single fist. "I want you to know that I didn't kill anyone."

"You didn't? You were covered in blood."

"It was Barry's son, Carl. He always had a screw loose. The man wouldn't tell us where the diamonds were and Carl just freaked. He kept on beating him."

"But you admitted it."

"Who would believe me if I denied it? I did the time. Barry was very grateful. I knew it would set us up for life. I hated waiting for you. I imagined slipping out between the bars to come to you. I was tempted so many times. I hated the parole board. There were diamonds, Kath. I took them before I let the others in. I stopped here and buried them under the wall at the bottom of the garden. I nearly got caught doing it. Then the police picked me up, on my way back to you. That's why I had to do the stretch, so nobody would suspect. They're safe, now. Shankly's looking after what's left of them." He laughed at his own cryptic comment. Every Merseysider knew the deceased Bill Shankly, iconic once-manager of Liverpool Football Club. "Did I do right, Kath?"

Then she did something surprising. She kissed him. He writhed under her touch.

"Mouse, was there anyone else while I was inside?"

"No, Kenny. There's never been anybody else."

He basked in that.

"It'll be just like I said."

I sensed her hesitation. So did he.

"What's wrong?"

"It won't be like we said though, will it?"

"Why?"

"It should be just us two." She leant closer to him. "Lola's grown up now. She can look after herself."

"Lola's just a kid."

"I was a mother at her age." She put her hand on his arm.

"No, she stays."

Her hand dropped.

"Lola," Kenny called out. "Never let me catch you eavesdropping again. Understand?"

* * *

"I'll just say goodnight to Lola." Kath stood in the doorway to my new bedroom, as if this game of fucked-up families was natural.

"Don't be long."

I sat on the bed. The new quilt cover and pillow case smelt funny. Kenny had put them on straight out of the packaging without washing them first. They still bore the sharp creases of their confinement.

"Lola," Kathy pulled me up and whispered to me. "He said to me, when we were kids, 'I'm going to put a baby in you and it's going to be special, like me and Dad,' as if I had nothing to do with it. I can't stand him touching me. When I felt you moving inside me, I was terrified you'd be a squirming snake, but you were *mine*. I'd do anything to get him away from us and Ami. I was the one who told the police."

Uncle. Father. Any wonder that I'm monstrous?

"Kenny's always been wrong. He thought it was from Dad, although he never saw him do it. It's from Mum. It drove her mad, holding it in. She nearly turned when she had her stroke. I have to know, can you do it too?"

"What?"

"We can't waste time. Can you turn into," she hesitated, "a snake?"

"Yes." I couldn't meet her gaze.

"Good. Do it as soon as I leave." She opened the window. "Go out through the bars. Will you fit?"

"I don't know if I can. I'm not sure that I can do it at will."

"Try. Get out of here."

Panic rose in my chest. "What about you?"

"I'm going to do what I should've done a long time ago." She showed

me the paring knife in her back pocket and then pulled her baggy sweater back over it. It must've been all she had time to grab. "I won't be far behind you."

"What if you're not?"

"Don't ask stupid questions," she paused, "I'm sorry for not being stronger. I'm sorry for not getting you away from here."

"Kathy," Kenny's voice boomed from the corridor, "time for bed." After she left I heard the key turn in the lock.

* * *

I went through the drawers and wardrobe. Kenny had filled them with clothes. I didn't want to touch anything that had come from him. There was nothing that I could use as a weapon or to help me escape.

I'd not changed since the time I'd bitten Jade. I lay down, trying to slow my breathing and concentrate. Nothing happened. The silence filled my mind along with all the things he would be doing to Kathy.

I dozed, somewhere towards early morning, wakening frequently in the unfamiliar room. I missed Tallulah beside me in the bed we'd shared since childhood. I missed her warmth and tangle of hair.

When Kenny let me out it was late afternoon.

"Where's my mum?"

"Down here."

There was a chest freezer in the basement. Kenny lifted the lid. Kathy was inside, frozen in a slumped position, arms crossed over her middle. Frozen blood glittered on the gash in her head and frosted one side of her face.

Kenny put his hand on my shoulder like we were mourners at a wake. I should've been kicking and screaming, but I was as frozen as she was.

One of Kathy's wrists was contorted at an unnatural angle.

"She betrayed me. I always knew it, in my heart." He shut the lid. "Now it's just you and me, kid."

He took me up through the house, to the room at the back with the double doors. There were dozens of tanks that cast a glow. Some contained a single serpent, others several that were coiled together like heaps of intestines.

"My beauties. I'll start breeding them."

There were corn snakes, ball pythons, ribbon snakes, though I had no names for them back then, all of which make good pets. I stopped at one tank. He had a broad head with a blunted snout.

"Ah, meet Shankly." Kenny put his hand against the glass. "He was hard to come by. They're called cottonmouths because they open their mouths so wide to show their fangs that you see all the white lining inside."

The cottonmouth must have been young. I remember his olive green colour and the clear banded pattern on his back, which he would lose as he got older.

"Are you special, Kathy?"

"I'm Lola."

"Yes, of course you are. Are you like me?"

"I'm nothing like you. Leave me alone."

"I'll look after you. Like you're a princess. You'll want for nothing. And you'll look after me because that's how it works."

"Don't fucking touch me."

Kenny pressed my face against the tank. Shankly showed me his pale underbelly as he slid towards me.

"Be afraid of him," Kenny nodded at the snake, "he still has his fangs. I'll make a mint from his venom."

Shankly climbed up a branch in his tank and settled there.

Kenny pushed me down with one hand and undid his belt buckle with the other.

"I'm your daughter." It was my last defence.

"I know."

Then he put his forked tongue in my mouth.

* * *

I couldn't move. The place between my legs was numb. I'd already tried sex with a boy from college. I knew what it was about. We'd fumbled and fallen in a heap in the bushes by the old boating lake one afternoon. It wasn't an experience to set the world alight but it was satisfactory enough.

This wasn't just a sex crime, it was a power crime. Kenny wanted my fear. I shrunk into the distant corners of myself trying to retreat where he couldn't follow. His orgasm was grudging, delivered with a short, gratified moan.

Afterwards he sat with his trousers open, watching me like he was waiting for me to do something. I was frozen. I'm not sure I even blinked. That was how Kathy must have felt, forever stuck in that single moment of inertia and shock that kept her in the same spot for a lifetime. She was right. She should have run while she had the chance. Fuck her mother. And Ami, for all the good she'd done her.

Kenny stood up. I thought, *It's going to happen again and then he's going to dump me in the freezer*. Instead, he went upstairs, his tread heavy with disappointment.

"Don't stay up too late, pet."

I think I was waiting for something too, when I should've been searching for something sharp to stick between his ribs. I couldn't summon anything; I was still too deep inside myself.

I was colder than I'd ever been before, even though the summer night was stifling. The room felt airless despite the window being wide open and butting up against the grille. Sometimes, when Georgia's away, I feel that cold.

Get up, get up before he remembers you and comes back down for more. "Lola." A voice carried through the window.

It was Tallulah, a pale ghost beyond the glass. Her mouth was moving as she clutched at the bars.

I turned my face away, in the childish way of *if I can't see her, then* she can't see me. I didn't want her to see me like this. It occurred to me that she might have been a witness to the whole thing. I turned back but she'd gone, so I closed my eyes.

I should've known that Tallulah would never leave me. The snakes swayed in their tanks, enraptured. Tallulah was long and white, with pale yellow markings. Slender and magnificent. She glided over me and lay on my chest, rearing up. I couldn't breathe because she took my breath away. I could feel her muscles contracting and her smooth belly scales against my bare chest.

Get up, get up, or he'll come down and find her like this.

Are you special?

Her tongue flicked out and touched my lips. I had no choice. I had to do it, for her. There was the rush of lubricant that loosened the top layer of my skin. The change was fast, my boyish body, with its flat chest and narrow hips perfectly suited to the transformation.

I crawled out of my human mantle. Moulting was good. I shed every cell of myself that Kenny had touched.

* * *

Both Tallulah and I are unidentifiable among my extensive research of snakes, bearing properties of several species at once. We made a perfect pair for hunting. The pits on my face were heat sensitive, able to detect a variation of a thousandth of a degree, feeding information into my optic nerves. I saw the world in thermal. Kenny's heart was luminous in the dark. I slid up the side of his bed and hovered over his pillow. Tallulah lay beside him on the mattress, waiting.

Look at your princesses, Kenny. See how special we are.

Kenny snored, a gentle, almost purring noise.

It's a myth that snakes dislocate their jaws.

I opened my mouth as wide as I could, stretching the flexible ligament that joined my lower jaw to my skull. I covered his crown in slow increments. He snorted and twitched. I slipped down over his eyes, his lashes tickling the inside of my throat. He reached up to touch his head.

Tallulah struck him, sinking her fangs into his neck. He started and tried to sit up, limbs flailing, which was a mistake as his accelerating heartbeat sent the venom further around his circulation.

Trying to cover his nose was the hardest part, despite my reconfigured mouth. I thought my head would split open. I wasn't sure how much more I could stomach. Not that it mattered. I wasn't trying to swallow him whole. A fraction more and I was over his nostrils completely.

There was only one way to save himself. I recognised the undulations he was making. I could feel the change on my tongue, his skin becoming fibrous. I had to stop him. I couldn't imagine what he'd become.

He was weakening with Tallulah's neurotoxins, slumping back on the bed, shaking in an exquisite fit. He'd wet himself. I stretched my flesh further and covered his mouth and waited until long after he was still.

* * *

I woke up on the floor beside Tallulah. We were naked. My throat and neck were sore. The corners of my mouth were crusted with dried blood. We lay on our sides, looking at one another without speaking. We were the same, after all.

"How did you find me?" I was hoarse.

"I had to wait until Ami went out. I found the house details in her bedroom drawer. I didn't have any money so I had to get a bus and walk the rest of the way. I'm sorry that I didn't get here sooner."

"It doesn't matter now."

Tallulah picked up our clothes and then our skins which lay like shrouds. It was disconcerting to see how they were moulds of us, even down to the contours of our faces.

"I'll take these with us. We can burn them later."

I went upstairs. I edged into the darkened room as if Kenny might sit up at any moment. He was a purple, bloated corpse with fang marks in his neck. I fumbled with the chain around his neck, not wanting to touch him.

"Where's Kathy?" Tallulah asked.

I told her.

"Show me."

"No, I don't want you to remember her like that." I seized Tallulah's face in my hands. "You do know that she didn't mean what she said, about you not belonging with us? She was trying to protect you."

Tallulah nodded, her mouth a line. She didn't cry.

"We have to bury her."

"We can't. Tallulah, we have to get out of here. Do you understand? Ami will come for you when she realises you've gone. There's something else."

I put my hand in the cottonmouth's tank. It curled up my arm and I lifted it out, holding it up to my cheek. He nudged my face.

"Lift out the bottom."

Tallulah pulled out bits of twisted branch and foliage, then pulled up the false base. She gasped. Out came bundles of notes and cloth bags. She tipped the contents out on her palm. More diamonds than I could hold in my cupped hands.

We loaded the money into Kenny's rucksack and tucked the diamonds in our pockets.

"What about the snakes?"

We opened the tanks and carried them outside. I watched them disappear into the undergrowth. Except for Shankly. I put him in a carrier bag and took him with us.

* * *

There are days when I wake and I can't remember who I am, like a disorientated traveller who can't recall which hotel room of which country they're in.

I'm hurt that Georgia didn't want me to collect her from the airport.

There's been a delay. I won't get in until late. Go to bed, I'll get a cab.

I wished now that I'd ignored her and gone anyway instead of lying here in the dark. The harsh fluorescent lights and the near empty corridors of the airport are preferable to the vast darkness of our empty bed.

Not going is a stupid test with which I've only hurt myself. I've resolutely taken her consideration for indifference. I want her to be upset that I wasn't there, as if she secretly wanted me there all along.

See, I confuse even myself.

The front door opens and closes. I should get up and go to her. She comes in, marked by the unzipping of her boots and the soft sound of her shedding clothes.

Love isn't just what you feel for someone when you look at them. It's how they make you feel about yourself when they look back at you.

Georgia is the coolest, most poised woman that I know. We're older now and our hearts and flesh aren't so easily moved but I still wonder what she sees when she looks at me.

"Do you love me?" It's easier to ask it with the lights off and my head turned away from her.

Everything about us is wrong. We're lovers, sisters, freaks.

She answers in a way that I have to respond to. I glide across the floor towards her and we become a writhing knot. We hunt mice in our grandiose pile and in the morning we are back here in our bed, entwined together in our nest.

When we wake again as human beings she says, "Of course I love you, monster."

When we shed the disguises that are Georgia and Eliza, and then the

skins that are Lola and Tallulah, we are monsters. Fabulous beasts.

About the Author

Priya Sharma is a doctor who lives in the UK. Her short stories have appeared in several magazines including *Black Static, Interzone, Albedo One,* and *On Spec.* She's been reprinted in Paula Guran's *Best Dark Fantasy* and Ellen Datlow's *Year's Best Horror Volume 4.* You can sign up for email updates here.

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THE LOG GOBLIN

BRIAN STAVELEY

The Log Goblin

BRIAN STAVELEY

illustration by

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I was a little sad to take down the huge old beech, a wolf tree three times as large as anything else around. Most likely, it stood there when the woods were fields—a marker between properties or just a spot for the cows to graze out of the sun—and it had remained after the farmers left and the fields gave way to forest once again. It seemed a shame, somehow, to cut it down, but it was dying, and besides, a tree that size was worth more than a cord of firewood.

By the next winter I had it cut, stacked, and dried inside my shed, but it was buried near back, behind three other rows, and it wasn't until January that I'd burned enough of the other wood to actually get at it. That's when a strange thing started happening.

At first, I thought I was imagining it. I'd go out to the shed in the morning, and the stack of wood would look lower, as though someone had come in the night to steal the logs. It seemed crazy: Who would drive a mile down my rutted driveway in the middle of the night just to make off with an armload of firewood? I told myself I was imagining it. But when you rely on wood to cook your food, to keep you warm, to stop the pipes from freezing, you *know* how high your pile is, almost down to the last log, and *someone*, I decided after three more days of this, was taking my wood.

I caught him the next night. I stayed up late, waiting inside until full dark, then pulling on my coat and boots to go stand guard. It was cold enough that the snow squeaked. The stars were knife-sharp. I waited with my hands stuffed in my pockets, shivering and feeling foolish. I was about to head inside when I heard him coming, huffing and cursing and muttering as he made his way up out of the woods, struggling through the deep drifts toward my shed.

It was obvious at once that he was a goblin. I'd never seen one, of course. They weren't supposed to be real, but what other creature is greeny-brown, pointy-eared and knobbly-fingered, barely taller than my knee? I watched, amazed, as he hopped up on the stack of wood, dragged a single log off the top, and headed off back into the snow, dragging his spoils behind him. I'd never noticed his tracks, but then, it

had been snowing off and on for days, and the wind had been blowing to beat the band.

I'd planned to confront the thief, but instead I found myself following him out into the woods. The moonlight through the pines was bright enough to see by, and it was easy to follow the goblin. The log—almost as big as he was—slowed him down. He carried it on his humped little shoulder, mostly. Sometimes it would slip off and drop into the snow. He'd dig it out, kick at it irritably for a while, then pick it up again, forcing his way deeper into the forest.

The slashes of shadow and moonlight made everything look strange. I lost my bearings for a while, but when we finally started climbing up a gradual hill, all at once I knew exactly where we were. And I knew where we were going.

There, at the crest of the rise, like a round wooden table poking through the snow, was the stump of the great old beech tree. And there, piled in front of it, was my firewood, dozens of split logs arranged in some sort of insane scaffolding. I watched from the woods as the goblin entered the small clearing, approached his hoard of firewood, and, with surprising care, placed the fruits of his latest thievery on top. It was an oddly reverential gesture, after all the kicking and the cursing.

Another night I might have waited longer, watched more, tried to understand what was happening. Despite the long walk, however, I was cold, and tired, and as the goblin turned away from his pile, heading back for another log, I stepped from the shadows.

"Why are you taking my wood?" I asked, somewhat mildly, given that I was the one who had been wronged.

He jumped into the air, then bared his crooked little teeth and glared at me.

"Your wood? Your wood?"

"My wood," I said. "I own this land. I cut down the tree. I bucked it. I hauled it out and split it for the winter. My wood." It was, I thought, an argument that would stand up well in any court of law, but the only judge or jury in the clearing that night was the bright, silent moon, and the goblin just made a sound like a growl in his scrawny throat.

"Killin' a thing," he declared, "don't make it yours."

"It was dying already," I protested.

"So're you!" he said, stabbing a finger at me. "Doesn't mean I come

in yer house at night to chop you down."

I frowned, suddenly all turned around by the strange conversation. "Are you claiming that the tree is yours?"

"What I'm claimin' is that the tree matters more to them that's buried beneath it than it ever did ta you."

I blinked. "There's a body..."

"Two of 'em," he snapped impatiently. "They courted beneath the beech as kids, made half their babies here, said everything that needed sayin' to each other under the old branches, and they're buried..." he stabbed a stick straight down, gouging at the frozen ground, "... right here. The tree is *theirs*, even if it's dead. Even if it's all chopped up. And it ain't your place to go stealin' the fire."

"But they're dead, too," I said, unsettled to discover these unmarked graves in the middle of my land.

"And ya think the dead don't wanna be warm?" He raised the thicket of his brows in disbelief.

I stared at him, then shook my head. "Why do you care?"

He looked at me a while, then back to the pile of wood he'd made. "I liked the way she sang," he muttered, "when she was in the fields. She sang even when she was alone, like she knew I was there. And him." He nodded at the memory. "When he went out with a bucket for berries, he always left a bush unpicked. *For the birds*, he said, but I figured he meant me."

Then he was quiet for a long time. We both were, just sitting there like we'd known each other all our lives, like I hadn't just caught him stealing from my pile. The ground looked so cold.

"All right," I said finally. "I'll help you haul the rest of the wood."

It took most of the night, and both of us were wiped when we finished. The pile was pretty haphazard, but it was good wood, that old beech, and it was dry. I only had to light one match and it went up like kindling. We sat on the stump—it was wide enough to hold the both of us—and watched the sparks fly up, small as the stars, but hot enough to burn.

"What were their names?" I asked, gazing into the fire.

"Leave the names alone," the goblin snapped.

I turned to him, taken aback. "I thought I might place a gravestone here, now that the tree is gone."

"Whadda they need a gravestone for?" He gestured with a gnarled hand. "They got a fire."

"But a fire..." I said, shaking my head. "It's so short."

He looked at me, then held his twiggy hands out to the flame. "But it's warm."

About the Author



Brian Staveley has an MA in Creative Writing from Boston University. He works as an editor for Antilever Press, and has published poetry and essays, both in print and on-line. He is the author of The Emperor's Blades. You can sign up for email updates here.





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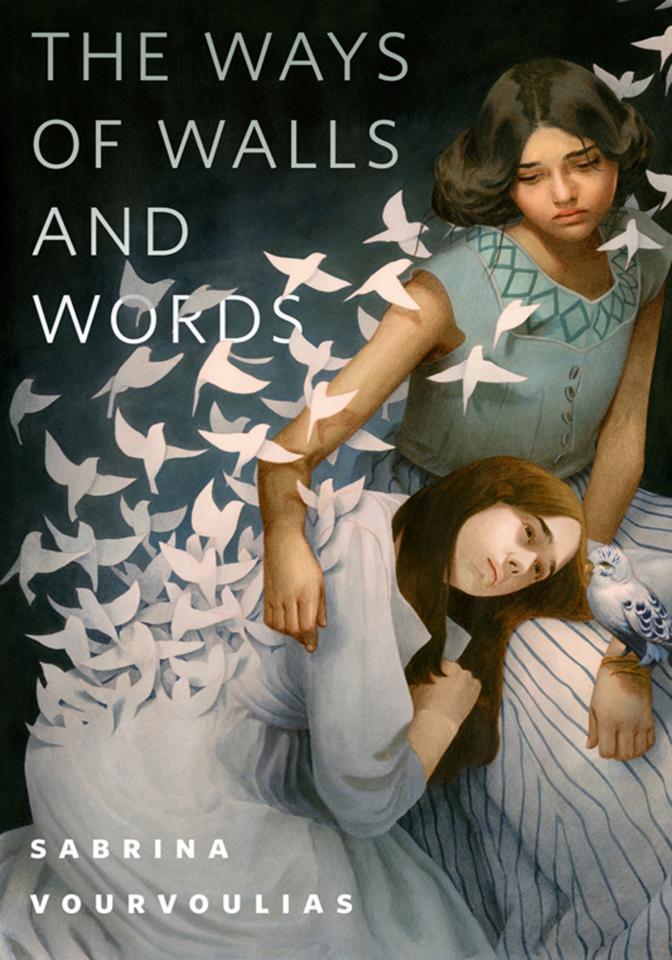
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The Ways of Walls and Words

SABRINA VOURVOULIAS

illustration by
TRAN NGUYEN



Solitreo

"If it were not for Thee, what would become of me?"

She's not speaking to me when she says this. Her poetry nests behind a prison's walls. I am an unknown noise on the other side of her door—the only spot where sound enters or exits her world—a sweep of bristle against wood, some transitory trace of life that has nothing to do with her.

She and her people are in cells lined along a corridor in the deepest reaches of the convent. On occasion the mentally disturbed have been kept here, tended to and made safe by walls so thick they are more than an arm's length. These people, however, are all one family: a mother; an adult son; four older daughters; and this one, who has spent nearly half her life in here.

That was all the information the Dominican Brothers shared with me the day I started. Except that I must not attempt to speak to the girl or her family through their doors. The Brothers made me swear this before I swept even one stone.

In the language I share with jailer and jailed, my name is Bienvenida, though my Nahuatl name is different. By the Brothers' reckoning, it has been 1,562 years since the death of God.

As I sweep in front of the locked doors, I don't really think of who is behind them, or why. I think of my traps and whether they are filled or empty of food. I think of the lessons my mother teaches me, because I am the eldest and must care for my siblings if something happens to her. I think of how many chambers are left for me to clean before I can get back to the turquoise and emerald of our world. A world filled with living gods, not dead ones.

Though that, like everything else, is changing.

But if the timing is just right, if I'm by the door as the girl recites her poems, I wonder about her then.

Is she like me, alive for words? Someone who believes in offers of beauty? Who trusts that a perfect couplet will prompt the gods to fulfill its meaning?

I sweep. I wonder. I think about the ways of walls and words.

This Day, For It Is Your Day

I say the names aloud, so I won't forget, and so the walls know who we are: Francisca, Luis, Isabel, Leonor, Catalina, Mariana, and Anica.

My name is Anica but I bear others too: one from the land my forebears claim as home; one for our hidden heart; one for the many times that heart has been betrayed.

I was born where the water shapes the coast of New Spain, the only one of us natural to this New World. Eight generations of our family lived along a different coastline—the Iberian one my mother still talks about—so the sea is part of us. I learned young to mix salted water into dough and knead it with a rhythm that pulls and crests.

When we moved inland to the greatest city in New Spain, my mother shed enough tears to harden the crusts of many loaves.

It was a shift from the domain of one element to another. This city is guarded by mountains that open their mouths to spew fire. After she wiped away her tears, my mother taught me to consign a piece of dough to the flame before baking. Though it might seem so, it is not a concession to our new home nor its governing element.

What my mother teaches is deeper than element or place.

We are behind these walls because we sweep the house clean on Fridays. Because we light two new candles before sunset, and bless our wine and bread at the table. Because, when we are done, we hide what none but family may see behind locked wardrobe doors.

When we say Dyó, we mean one, not three.

Someone took our tale to the Holy Office. That is what my mother thinks. My brother believes it was not a story but success that betrayed us, and my sisters accuse each other's husbands. In Old World or New, the outcome of attention from Inquisitors is the same. In a plaza full of people, we were ordered into captivity. To renounce and reconcile.

Conversos. New Christians. Judaizers. Marranos. Anusim. There are many names for us. I hardly know myself what name to use. Except family.

At first I tried to do as the priests commanded. But I cannot go days on end without saying prayers the way I was taught, and I do not believe my mother would go even one. On the first anniversary of our imprisonment, after hours on the rack, my eldest sister Isabel confessed what everyone already knew: forced conversion is not faith. What resides where no human hand can touch it cannot be forsworn.

I look out my window now and, instead of an empty sky caged by bars, I imagine the leaves of our fig, pomegranate, and lemon trees fluttering there. My mother bought them dear, right off one of the Spanish ships, then planted them in our courtyard so that they would rub lovingly against one another when the wind blew. None had yet given fruit when we were taken from our home, but I picture globes of brilliant red, ovals of green, and sweet, dark teardrops hiding among their leaves. I pretend I am swallowing the sparkling, rubied seeds of the first, and reaching for the scion of the last amid its fragrant greenery.

And for a moment, by the power of memory and imagining, the sun pours down on my shoulders as it does on those of the free.

There are many hours in a day. When my imaginings turn sour, I fill the emptiness with the cantigas my mother and sisters and I used to sing together, for these are made for women's voices and women's work—the work of keeping things alive. When evening falls, the songs turn into to my brother's words: prayers once celebrated in literary societies, praised for their clarity. "Las palavras klaras, el Dyó las bendize," we say, and I hope it is true.

Let the harsh chains be smashed; this day, for it is your day, has to be the day of forgiving.

Only I change the last word. Instead of forgiving I say escaping, and in

We Unwind the Jewels

The slab and block with which the Spanish have hidden our ancestral city is full of fault: it does not fit together without seams. The gaps between the stones of the cells are sealed with a paste that cures hard, but begins to crumble with time.

The mortar between the stones near the girl's cell door needs a bit of coaxing. I work at it with my broom until I clear a small gap. I squat to look through, then whistle to get her attention.

"Aquí," I say. *Here*. The edict that the Spanish should learn Nahuatl still stands in the city, but the reality is that most of them won't. There is power in words, and they want that power to be shaped to their speech, not ours.

The girl gets up from her bedding, follows her ears.

She is my age, or perhaps a bit older, but not too many years after first blood. Her hair is curly, even around the mats. She is no beauty by Nahua standards, but the Spanish seem to admire skin like hers—lustrous like the inner chamber of a shell. Her garments are filthy, but except for her hair everything else about her is tidy. It must take her a long time to scrub clean with the water the Dominicans provide for drink.

She drops down so her eye meets mine through the hole.

"Your poems are beautiful," I say.

"They are prayers," she answers.

"Of course. Our Nahua poems are too," I say. "Would you like to hear one?" I recite it in Nahuatl, then translate it: "We take, we unwind the jewels, the blue flowers are woven over the yellow ones, that we may give them to the children."

In the quiet that follows, I hear her hitched breathing. All of them breathe that way. *Breath caught between walls* is what my mother calls it when the Nahua who work in the city's mills come to her for treatment. She can't cure it, only lessen it with anacahuite.

"I miss the moonflower and morning glory vines my mother planted so they twined all around our courtyard," the girl says. "Are there many flowers where you live?"

"No," I say. "But sometimes the trees fill with blue and yellow butterflies, and then it is as if they are in bloom."

She closes her eyes to picture it behind her lids.

"How is it you speak Castilian so well?" she asks when she looks at me again.

"My mother says I was blessed with a quick mind just to torment her."

"My mother says that to me too." Then, "Used to say it."

"She is in the cell next to yours," I say, motioning at the wall to her right. "If she is taken to be questioned you will be able to see her pass by through this hole I've made."

Her face twists. "I must hope never to see her, then."

"How is it you are here?" she asks after a time.

"I was recently considered converted enough to clean for the Brothers."

"Are you?"

"The Dominicans are mostly concerned that we repeat exactly what they say in exactly the way they say it. My mother tells me I sound like a parrot." When the girl doesn't smile, I add, "My real words come from her."

I can tell my answer troubles the girl because she turns her face away from the gap and says something under her breath. Not in Castilian.

When she turns back, her face is hard. "If you come again and recite more of your poems for me, you must not include mention of any pagan gods. Are we agreed?"

I nod even though I suspect she knows a poem doesn't have to mention the gods to be meant for them. "You liked my poem then?" I say.

"I like that it brought the outside in with it." Then, "You know what I miss even more than flowers and trees?"

"What?"

"My mother used to spend an hour running a comb through my hair every night before I went to sleep."

"I have something you can use," I say. I take the small comb from where I stick it in my nest of braids and push it through the gap.

"Thank you," she says, "but that's not really what I meant."

"Take it anyway," I say.

"It is so small and my hair is so snarled. It'll probably break."

"No, it won't," I say, getting to my feet so I can start my work again. "The turtles around here are tough, and so are the combs I make from their shells. Still, if you want, I can give you a charm to say so your hair untangles as easy as water pours from a gourd."

I hear her nervous laughter. "No. No magic."

I want to tell her it's all right. That magic, like poetry, is a gift from the gods. But then I remember where I'm standing. Neither gods nor gifts abide between these walls.

With the Keys of Abraham

Bienvenida's daily visits have become everything to me.

She brings more than just the images that form in my mind when she recites her poetry. Despite the meals the silent priests bring twice a day, I am always hungry, so she secrets morsels of food in the folds of the sash under her tunic. She passes the day's tidbit through the gap between the stones with such reverence, I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing at her odd ways.

"Food can be as strong a magic as poems," she tells me, when she notices my facial contortions.

I nod, even though magic, as we know it, is the province of men. My mother cannot leap from bread-making to alchemy, nor from siddur to kabbalah, though she is accounted nearly as wise as my father was.

What Bienvenida brings with her is strange fare: Grasshoppers roasted crisp and dusted with a salty, spicy ash; cactus fruit with lurid flesh; even a small, greenish steamed pudding made of corn, pumpkin, and honey, wrapped in a leaf. I turn down the chunks of dark turtle meat

she brings me though.

When I push the unclean meat back at her, she takes it, pops the chunk into her mouth and starts chewing it loudly. It occurs to me that this isn't just an expedient way to get rid of it. She's really hungry.

"Of course I am," she says when I ask her. "After the encomendero takes our tribute, there isn't much, and some days my traps are empty. I have three siblings."

Before I can say anything, she adds, "Plus, turtle meat is like no other. Yesterday Fray Antonio said I had left dirt pushed into the corners of the refectory so he grabbed a stick but, because I had eaten turtle meat the day before, his blows rained off my back as if from a shell."

At my snort, she gives me an obstinate, hard look. I've learned that when she gets angry she doesn't raise her voice or huff away, as I would. Instead, she goes quiet and everything about her seems to turn darker. She scares me a bit.

The silence between us draws out until I ask about her progress in creating gaps in the other cell walls. She hadn't intended to create any, but I've asked her to. Because these are the thoughts I worry most between her visits: if my family is alive; if they stand; if they are still themselves.

"A small hole in the wall to your mother's cell," she answers. "And an even smaller opening in another, which houses one of your sisters. The other walls are too freshly sealed."

"Which sister?"

"The one they say has eyes like water."

"Mariana," I say. "Have you been feeding her and my mother as well?"

"No. Are you asking me to?"

I remember the hungry look when she gobbled down the turtle meat and still I say yes. She is my friend and, some days, all that keeps me from despair—but that is no bond compared to the one among family.

"I have to go back to work," she says after a moment, and gets to her feet.

She's told me that along with sweeping the hallway of cells, she's

responsible for cleaning the Brothers' whole convent, from top to bottom. Except for the chapel. She says she's fortunate it is only a convent and not a full priory or her cleaning would burn all the hours of sunlight.

"What does your mother owe that she would agree to let you be worked this hard?" I say. It's half query, half sympathy.

Bienvenida shakes her head as if she doesn't understand. "We owe everyone. We're a rope of people, all woven together. Even the Brothers are part of the rope now."

After a moment, she continues. "My mother's knowing is a debt owed to the gods. She cannot turn her back on those who come to her—sometimes on their knees—begging a cure. And when Fray Bernardino comes to her to learn herb lore, that teaching is owed too."

"But she could still do what she does elsewhere, and more happily if she were farther from the priests. Couldn't she?" I ask after a moment. Maybe in saying this I'm really wondering why my brother and mother chose for us to stay here, even after my father died and his brother asked us to join him in Nuevo León, far from the threat of Inquisitors.

"I already walk a long way to get to my work here," she says. "More than an hour according to Fray Bernardino, though maybe his long legs make it shorter for him than for me."

"I meant even farther away," I say. "Days and days away from here."

"Tonalxochitl. Cuachachalate. Tlachichinole," Bienvenida recites. It sounds like her first poem, the one she had to translate for me.

"Those are only some of the plants that root my family where we are," she says. "We would never abandon them."

"Things of the earth," I scoff. "They're created for us, not us for them."

The look she returns is full of disdain. She takes some steps down the hall, out of my sight line, then I hear her stop.

"The rest of you are like mosquitoes swarming over our mother's earthen skin. But we are her blood, Anica. Without us, she dies. Without her, we die."

The steps resume, then fade away.

I wish Bienvenida back, wish it as if it were a prayer. I have told her a bit about our customs—mostly to better control the sort of food she brings me—but what I want her to understand now goes beyond custom. I want her to know that we are not like the others either. We, too, cannot be parted from what we love best. We carry it with us in law and ritual and cantilation. Without us, it dies; without it, we die.

Hours later, as the sun ducks beneath my barred window, I hear Bienvenida at our gap. "Put your hand under the hole," she says after I kneel to the spot.

She rolls three black berries into my palm. "Don't eat those," she says. "Smash one between pebbles that have fallen from the walls. Use this to write with." She pushes a single bristle of her broom through to me.

"I have nothing to write on," I say. "And what am I supposed to write?"

"Your mother will not take food from me," she says. "If you tell her that you trust me, she might be easier about it. Write on this." She drops a pale bean through the hole.

Small, curved surface; flexing stylus; clumpy ink—has there been a greater test of will? I manage to trace one Hebrew letter.

As soon as I pass the bean through to Bienvenida, she disappears with it. When she comes back, she instructs me to put my palm up to the gap and a seed tumbles onto it. I turn it over on my palm. It carries the word "strength" in tiny, perfect solitreo.

"Your mother only took half a morsel," Bienvenida says. She shakes a loosely clenched hand in front of the gap, and I hear the sound of crunchy things rattling against each other. Grasshoppers. My stomach grumbles and she pokes several of them through the opening to me.

"Next time she'll eat more," I say after I've finished chewing. "What about Mariana?"

She shakes her head. "The unseen harries her. She circles her cell, and the spirits compel her to scratch at her face and draw blood. She did not even hear me whistle for her attention."

"Do something," I say. I haven't cried since Bienvenida started visiting me, but now I feel my eyes fill.

"I'll ask my mother," she says, then she gets up. I hear the bristles of

her broom scrape at the door.

"What are you doing? You already swept."

"It is Friday," she says. "I am doing this now in your name. Our gods accept such substitutions. Perhaps yours will as well."

I don't know whether to be moved by her action or infuriated. She continues to speak openly of her terrible, false gods, and perhaps that should be the worst part but it isn't. I have told her enough about our rituals that she knows the Sabbath's prayers are special. It is the meter and cadence of poetry she is hoping for. Doing this for. Loyal to.

Not friendship. Not me.

Something rises in me, sharp and jagged, and I do not recite anything before she finishes and leaves.

The next Friday she does the same, and the Friday after that. I lose count of how many times it happens before I get over my anger. What does it matter if she's here for me or my words, as long as she's here?

Still, the prayer I recite for her is not truly to be said at sunset, only a childhood favorite recited every night after my mother laid down the comb but before she extinguished the light in my bedroom:

I have closed my doors with the keys of Abraham; the pious will come in, the evil ones will leave; the angels of the Lord are here with me.

"Magic," she says a moment after I finish reciting. "Do you hear?"

Before I can answer, a loud bellow sounds clear through my door. Bienvenida moves away from our gap and I hear her running.

After that, the stifling silence of my imprisonment falls again.

But no. There it is. Like hope where there was none before. The sound of wings.

We Are Loaned to One Another

When I arrive home—after a long detour to check my turtle traps in the waters off the causeway nearest the Tree of the Sad Night—Fray Bernardino is with my mother, waiting for me. It is unusual for him to venture out of the city except for his herb lessons, and those are done long before darkness falls.

The Brothers at the convent have told him about catching me with Anica. Unlike most of the Dominicans, the tall, red-faced Franciscan speaks to us in Nahuatl, and as if he believes us of more than usual intelligence. He has told my mother that if she were a Spanish man she would have made an excellent physick, and might even own a book like the little leather tome in which he records the appearances and properties of the plants she identifies for him.

She smiles whenever he says it and doesn't tell him about the amatl bark books she hides under her mat. Women have always had to hide their wisdom from men, and the Brothers are men, if strange ones.

"I vouched for you," Fray Bernardino says to me. "The Brothers have agreed to let you continue cleaning the convent, so your family will not lose that prestige. The lower cells, however, are off-limits. I have sworn that you will not be caught there again."

"Who will clean that hallway?"

"Perhaps they'll purchase one of the slaves newly brought to city," he says dismissively. Then he stoops so he can look me in the face. "What do you speak about with that girl, Bienvenida?" He chose my Christian name for me, and I am thankful it is a nice one that means welcome. Some of the Nahua girls got names that mean loneliness or pain.

"I recite the flower songs to her," I answer. I know better than to tell him about Anica's recitations. His face creases anyway.

Fray Bernardino shakes his head as he gets up, then looks at my mother. "There is talk. About witchcraft in word and deed. And about the demonic nature of the pipiltzintzintli plant. You understand?"

My mother nods. "A peyotero, a midwife, and a sobadora have been taken from the people already."

"But they have not been subjected to an auto da fé," he says. There is something out of place in his voice, and I am struck by the thought that he craves my mother's forgiveness.

My mother hears it too, but is not one for words dipped in honey. "Your people have completed the quemadero," she says. "My people may not be the first to burn, but we *will* burn."

After a moment, Fray Bernardino turns his face from hers and walks out. She follows him with her eyes.

"Tell," she says without looking at me.

"The ones that need your help are women. One is sick with fright and haunted by unseens," I say. "And one ... my friend ... she must fly away or her spirit will die."

My mother doesn't say anything.

"They need you," I say.

She turns to look at me. "One day you will be me."

She is short and wide, like a tepozán tree. Her hands are too big for her arms, and her feet are broad and horned with calluses. Nested deep in the wrinkles are eyes the color of silt, eyes that see everything. She is beautiful to me, as I will be beautiful to my daughter, and she to hers.

"Come, then," my mother says as she sweeps by me. "While we can."

Put on me a necklace of varied flowers.

The next morning, I leave our house with a garland on the outside of my tunic and one on the inside. The visible one is made of many-petaled white flowers woven in a perfect round; the invisible one has pieces of root, insect, bud, and bone strung unevenly on sinew. I arrive earlier than usual at the convent and search among the Dominicans for Fray Antonio.

He scratches the flaky skin around his tonsure when he sees me. "Are you here to be shriven?"

I take the garland from my neck and hold it out to him. "We made this. For the chapel."

There is a moment when I think he might foil our plan by giving the flowers to the novice who cleans the sacred space. But after some consideration he takes them. They aren't spectacular blossoms, but they

have a pleasant fragrance that stays long on the skin. My mother has people rub them between their hands because the warmer the oil, the faster the sleep.

Fray Antonio motions for me to follow him, and as he walks over to the chapel he strokes the petals, then sniffs his fingers and wipes them on his habit. As soon as his fingers leave the fabric they're back at the petals, and the whole process starts again, without the Brother noticing he's doing it. He unlocks the church, then moves to the side where a small statue stands alone.

"Are you devoted to Our Lady?" he asks me.

This statue is not the Tonantzin the Brothers named Guadalupe. This one has a pale, delicate face surrounded by reddish-gold ringlets and a demure look that makes me doubtful she would ever understand our Nahua needs and delights. Still, the Dominicans bring her offerings like the ones we take to our own mother at Tepeyac.

Fray Antonio returns the garland to me. "Are you tall enough to crown her with it?"

"I think so," I say.

"Good. I'll go pray while you do," he says.

All the gods favor beauty, so I take my time with the crowning. When I'm done, the priest is dozing in the pew. I drop an extra blossom in his hand on my way out.

When I arrive at the cells, Anica is crying.

"Last night I saw my mother," she tells me, wiping her nose with the back of her hand as she walks over to our gap. She doesn't need to say more. The only time the prisoners go anywhere it is to the room where they are stretched until the right words pop out of their mouths.

I pull the necklace from under my tunic and release three pieces of root. "These kill pain," I say. I push one of the pieces through the gap. "Write on it that she must chew it to paste, then smear that over the worst of her hurts. Also, that she must swallow the juice that comes from the chewing. It is bitter but it will take away the pain."

"She is used to bitter," Anica says, then does what she's told. When she passes the root back through to me, I move to the gap in her mother's

cell wall.

"Doña Francisca," I call. The old woman lifts her head from the bedding, then fights to get up. It takes her a long time to cross to me.

"Anica sends these," I say. I push through the first piece of root, the one with the writing. She squints to read it, then catches the other two pieces I pass through.

"I've lost most of my teeth," she says. "I doubt I'll be able to chew them."

"Hold them in your mouth. Let them soften in the water that collects and swallow that. It will help."

She nods, then, "I cannot write a seed message for Anica today. Tell her: She is the darling of her mother." She starts her slow shuffle back to the bedding, the roots clenched tightly in her hand.

Anica's jaw sets in hard lines when I tell her, and there is a silence so long I have to break it for fear it will outlast Fray Antonio's nap.

"We must find a way to draw your sister to the gap in her wall, so I can give her this," I show Anica the bud strung on my necklace. "Its spirit is so strong it will overcome the unseens that assail her."

She settles on the pet name they had for Mariana, something to remind her of happier days and the bond between sisters. Still, when I say it, there is no break in the older girl's pacing. I try explaining what I have, what it does, how she will find relief. When there is no response, I return to Anica.

"Why didn't you just leave it?" she asks. "If she goes to find it later, there will be nothing there."

"If anyone finds it, they will know it is my doing," I say. "I am not allowed here anymore, not even to clean."

"You're here now," Anica says. When I keep silent, I see realization dawning on her face, followed by a pinched, lonely look.

We are loaned to one another.

"Sister," I say. As if she were an elder sibling. As a sign of respect even beyond friendship. "This is my mother's deepest, most secret magic. One day, when I am old enough to have mastered it myself, I will use it to come find you."

I take the hollow bone from my necklace, and the beetles shimmer blue to orange as I untie them. I pass them through one by one and tell her what she must do with them, and how it must be done.

I see her mouth twist as the beetles' barbed legs move a bit on her palm. They are still very sluggish from their pipiltzintzintli meal.

"Must they be alive?" she says.

"Recently killed when you do it."

"Tell me again why I should."

"Because it will set you free."

I have nothing left to give her, but I put my fingers to the gap anyway. Her slender, strong index finger hooks itself on mine. We sit for a few minutes like that, linked and silent.

Then I get up and leave.

Go, Find Another Love

The beetles crawl under my bedding. I shove the bone in after them.

I lay down. Hours pass.

The jailer brings bread and cheese, cold water. He takes away the slop bucket.

There are no words but mine to break the silence. Night falls.

Day comes again. The same silent priest appears and brings the same dry, hard meal.

Then another day.

I know the strength of whatever Bienvenida's mother fed the beetles must be waning. Like food steeped in brine or alcohol loses its flavor after a while. Or does the long wait make it sharper, more concentrated? I no longer remember. Either way, I do nothing.

One day after many, the priest who brings my meal is a different one, with a brown cassock instead of the usual white. "Tomorrow, before midday, you will be taken out to the quemadero," he whispers as he

grabs the slop bucket. His face flushes a deep red. "God have mercy."

I have thought often about dying. With fear, and sometimes with longing. Especially in these lonely days without Bienvenida. Yet now that I know the hour of my death, I do not want it.

As soon as the priest leaves, I tear my bedding apart. I find the bone and one of the beetles. There is no trace of the other, and I think maybe the living one ate it.

My hands shake as I get the chips of stone on which I crushed the ink berries. The beetle crunches and I keep grinding until its wet innards are so thoroughly mixed with bits of stone and carapace that the mixture turns dry and grainy.

When beetle grit is as fine as it's going to get, I fit the smaller end of the bone into one nostril as Bienvenida instructed, hold the wider end over the dirty-looking little pile and snort it up.

Pain shoots into my head; my nostril stings and my eyes start watering. I move the bone to the other nostril and inhale what remains.

If it were not for Thee, what would become of me? And who, except Thee, would free me from myself?

I sit back on my heels and put my head in my hands. The spiky grit keeps cutting as my breath pulls it deeper. The pain intensifies, then spreads across my shoulders. They can no longer bear the weight of my arms and my hands fall, leaden, to the floor. Spine, hips, legs. Wherever the pain hits, the muscle recoils and tries to tear itself from the bone and tissue next to it.

I have not been tortured as my brother and sister and mother have, but I wonder if this is how it feels to be put on the rack. I wonder if they screamed as I am screaming, full-throated and from the center of my being.

Then, as the pain stretches me in all directions at once, I hear a pop and it all stops—the pulling, the pain, the screams. My body flops forward and my forehead cracks on the floor.

But I rise.

The girl beneath me crawls to her bedding, stretches out on it, eyes

open. Blood seeps from the spot where her head connected with stone.

The wings that bear me aloft catch a draft through the window. I coast up to the deep sill, then scrabble onto it with tiny, sharp claws. I tuck my wings to my body, and with the waddling gait of a creature that finds grace only in the air, squeeze through the bars.

The Convent of San Diego is set on high ground, and the back end, where my window gives, looks not onto the splendid, sprawling city but to the far reaches of the lake over which the urban hub was built. The water pools dark turquoise in some spots, murky emerald in others, under the multiple causeways that span it. And on every surface that isn't road or water, I see small trees covered with blue and yellow butterflies—opening and closing their wings in time to my memory.

I don't know how far I range on the wings I've long dreamed of possessing—far enough for the bright air to warm me like I haven't been warm in years. But I am more than just wings and the freedom they grant. If training brings the falcon back to the hand of the one who hunts with him, how much stronger are the jesses that tether the dove to her people?

I return and light on the window of my mother's cell. She is stretched prone on the floor, where the afternoon sun falls brightest, holding a seed in one hand and a broom bristle in the other. She dips it in berry pulp, then touches it to the surface of the seed.

She looks up as I swoop down. There are dozens of seeds with words of perdurance and inspiration scattered around her.

"Hello, beauty," she says as I land beside her.

I open my mouth. The words I intend come out as trills and coos. She reaches. I hop closer and rub my head along her hand.

I stay until the sun starts its downward arc, then I peck at the seeds and carry one out in my beak. The next window I fly into is my brother's. I drop the seed into his hand and fly away to retrieve another from my mother's cell. She watches me come and go.

I drop her seed messages in each of my sisters' hands as I fly in into their cells and see them for the first time in years. Even Mariana stops her raving to receive what is given. Their faces are pallid and grim, but when the word drops, each flares with love.

I fly into my cell, nudge a seed into the limp hand of the girl who was me. When I wished for freedom, I imagined it to be different than this. Can it be sustained: a body yoked, a soul unfettered?

I return to my mother's cell and mark each word as she prays, then, as she falls asleep, I doze too. When I wake at dawn she is already standing, washed and ready for what will come. She will go to the quemadero as Doña Francisca Nuñez de Carvajal, with all the meanings her names carry.

When she hears the rustle of my wings, she holds out her hand and I land on it.

"Adyó. Adyó, kerida." She sings the cantiga that was my favorite once—in another place, another time. An enchanted time of perfumed dusks sitting in a courtyard filled with flowers gleaming like the moon, embroidery hoops forgotten in our laps as our voices joined in a tale of departure and heartbreak.

"No quero la vida. Va, buscate otro amor, aharva otras puertas..."

Goodbye, goodbye, beloved.

I do not want to live.

Go, find another love, knock on other doors ...

A key turns in the lock. My mother draws me close to her lips, kisses the top of my head. "Adyó, kerida Anica," she says.

I don't have time to think of how she knows it is me before she flings my small bird body off her hand and toward the window.

I don't want to fly away from her, but I do.

Where Is My Home?

It is December 9 by the Dominicans' calendar. Smoke hangs black across the valley. The first burnings at the quemadero took place yesterday, a year and a day after I first met Anica. My mother and I are out behind our house—a tremendous distance from the plaza where the crowds had

gathered to watch the spectacle—and still we breathe in what happened.

Our work of the past days has been uprooting the plants the Holy Office has declared demonic, to replant them where the Brothers will not find them. Remote, wild places that will sustain magic.

I cannot stop thinking about Anica. From Fray Bernardino's recounting when he came for his lesson late yesterday, I know she and Mariana were spared—one for her youth, the other for her derangement—and that the Dominicans hope more years in detention will ultimately reconcile them to the God of the Cross.

But it is not my friend who is still behind those walls.

The real Anica is an immigrant spirit, feathered and winged. She crosses waters, crests mountains, rides the scorching air of the desert to a remote and wild place where she might thrive until I set out to find her.

I want to believe this is a triumph, only I am never going to forget how loneliness looks on her face.

"Pay attention," my mother chides as I clip the root of a pipiltzintzintli I'm digging.

I tell my mother what I am thinking: how the gods make cages of our lives, lock us in them, and only occasionally let us find the key.

My mother puts down her digging tool. "Come," she says, and starts walking. I trail her all the way back to the water near the Tree of the Sad Night.

"Pull your trap out," she says.

I yank on the rope, bring up the cage. A small turtle slips back into the water through the slats. A big turtle—an old rope scar across its neck—stays caught.

"The gods don't make cages," my mother says. "We do. We choose to lock or unlock. Word, beetle, bud, and leaf—sometimes they are keys, sometimes not. There is only one thing that is always a key."

She waits for me to say something and when I don't, she stomps on the trap with one leathery foot. Slats splinter and break on top and bottom. The turtle slides its bulk into the water and swims away.

"That was tonight's meal," I complain.

My mother smiles at me, but there is sadness in it. "You know this isn't the only trap. Nor the only creature caught by one."

"I am just a girl," I say when I work out that my mother's imperfect couplet demands fulfillment.

"Yes," she says. "But it is owed anyway. Today. Tomorrow. The days after that."

As we start back to the stand of sacred plants waiting to be moved, I wonder why poems and gods and magic alone aren't enough. I wonder why it all depends on us, a rope of people that so often leaves a scar.

Where shall my soul dwell? Where is my home? Where shall be my house?

I think I hear wings. When I look up, the sun has broken through the smoky overlay but there is only a small clear patch of sky.

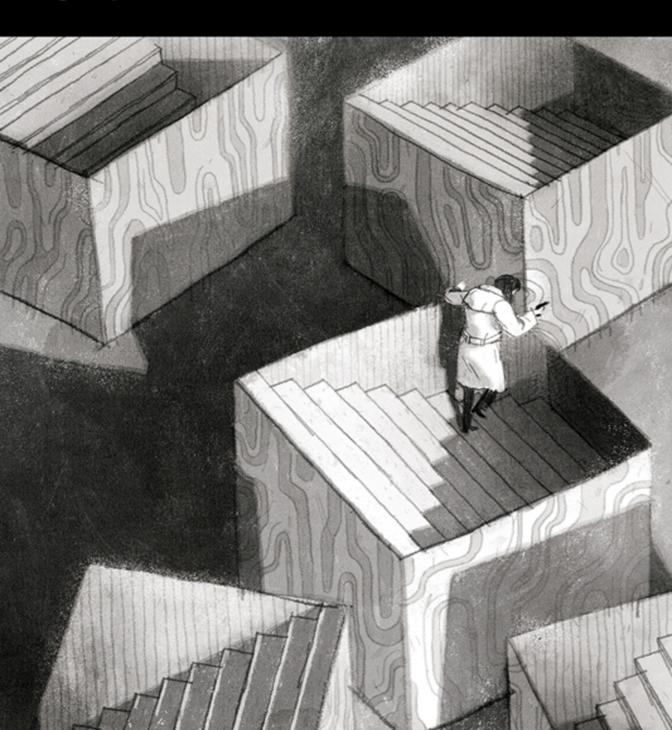
It is empty with waiting.



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RAY WOOD

SCHRÖDINGER'S GUN



Schrödinger's Gun

RAY WOOD

illustration by
RICHIE POPE



I could reach no possibilities in which Johnny Rivers—wise guy, bootlegger, crook with his eye on the big time—still clung to life. In every crime scene every one of me was looking at, he lay face-down on the floor with two bullets in his back. It was a pity. Not because Chicago was particularly the worse off for one more dead mobster, but because murders are murders, and solving Johnny's would have been a whole lot easier if he'd lived long enough to tell me who had pulled the trigger. Maybe, in another universe, another me had shown up sooner and had gotten something out of him.

That me was a lucky woman.

It was one of those drab Chicago winters, the kind where every sunrise brings fresh bodies on the sidewalks. At least this one was indoors. The shooting had taken place in the basement of a disused housing project just off of West 21st Street, which was, we had just discovered, the center of one of the Rivers gang's bigger bootlegging operations.

The details of the crime scene didn't vary much between universes. Metal slatted stairs led up to the street outside, and a jumble of distilling equipment—drums, pipes, a big tin bathtub—shone grimily in the light of a single, swaying light bulb. In one universe the tub was on its side, leaking moonshine into the floorboards. The Johnny in that possibility had flung an arm out as he fell, I guessed. It didn't change much: all of him had fallen in pretty much the same direction, cut down by a shooter on the stairs. I felt my heisen implant work behind my forehead.

I tucked my hair into my collar and knelt to examine the body. Two entry wounds: one to the right of the spine and another just below the shoulder. I traced my finger around the edge of one of them and let the heisen throw up possibilities.

- —an acrid cough of gunpowder—
- —a shell casing tinkles as it bounces into a dark corner—
- —rubber soles slip on the stairs—

—a small grey pistol leaps from clumsy, sweaty fingers— There!

Other universes closed around me. I clung to the possibility thread that I had plucked out from the throng, visualizing it as a literal rope clutched in my fist. I felt like I was falling—the walls lurched briefly into the ceiling—then all at once I stopped, and I was standing in the basement—just one of them—listening to the faint wash of traffic on the street outside.

In this universe, the murderer had dropped the gun.

I found it in the shadows underneath the stairs, an evil glint of metal. It was a snub-nosed pocket pistol—kids' stuff, really, compared to what a lot of hoods were carrying, but I didn't doubt that it had spat the lead that was now in Johnny's back. It must have dropped between two slats as the shooter fled up the stairs. I squatted down to pick it up, the tail of my trench coat brushing my heels. The gun's potential buzzed beneath my fingers.

- —a flashlight cuts the darkness, swinging, frantic—
- —fingers search and scrabble, desperate to close around the handle of the pistol, to retrieve the evidence, dispose of it—

I took my hand away. I stood up, pinned the gun beneath the toe of my boot, and skidded it further underneath the stairs. That possibility was worth leaving open.

"Moore!" It was the first time I had used my voice in a half hour. He took a second to reply.

"Yeah?"

"All done."

Light spilled in from the street outside and Detective Moore descended, feeling his way down the handrail. He had his eyes screwed shut.

"You worked your magic?" he said. "Can I look now?"

"Open your eyes, wise guy." As if it made any difference now whether he looked or not. It did keep the possibility lines clearer on my end if he stayed out of the way while I searched the scene, though, and he might have closed a lot of universes to me had he come down first. He looked around and whistled.

"Nice little set-up he had here. You know half the joints in this neighborhood carry his booze and no one else's? Not that he gave them

much choice in the matter."

It was West Chicago's worst-kept secret that Johnny Rivers's gang of toughs had bribed, bullied, and beaten the owners of half the local speakeasies into supplying their patrons exclusively with liquor from his distilleries. I'd have been dumb to think that this basement was the biggest one; Rivers's operation spanned a lot of streets and ruffled a lot of feathers. The list of people in Chicago who might want him dead would be as long as my arm.

"Two bullet wounds, probably from a small firearm," I said. "Our shooter comes in, gets Johnny clean in the back while he's checking the equipment or whatever, and makes his escape. Any wild hunches on who did it?"

Moore took his hat from his head and went over to the body. The stink of spirits crawled into my throat.

"I know the Montagnios are sore with Rivers," he said. "He makes his stuff a lot cheaper than they can. Sells it cheap, too. There was an attempted shooting over on West 14th a couple days ago—one of the boys working the case reckons it was the Montagnios butting heads with Rivers's lot."

I chewed my fingernails. Using the heisen for any length of time left me dying for a smoke, but there was no way I was going to light up in here, not with everything soaked in moonshine. "What about Big Dakota? He still doing the dirty work for the Montagnios?"

"Yeah..."

—a slight frisson of something in my head, like my brain had passed over a set of points on a railroad and clunked onto a different track—

"...but it wasn't him," Moore continued. "One of our boys over on the east side took him in last night—raided a brothel on 18th and caught him with his pants down. Literally."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "And Rivers was last seen when? And by whom?"

"By his wife, around seven thirty."

I folded my arms across my chest and looked up at the light bulb. Why did I never get the universes where things were cut and dry? I fished in my pocket for my cigarette case.

"I guess I'd better speak to his wife, then."

* * *

I interviewed the newly-widowed Mrs. Rivers in the station that afternoon. It was grey and frigid still, and on her way inside the building a cab kicked up a puddle by the sidewalk and splashed her heels with slush. I helped her dry off when we got up to the office. I offered her a glass of water, which she declined, and told her to take as long as she needed, which she did. I let her sit in my chair and watched her eyes follow the plainclothes detectives around the room. The office rattled to the sound of typewriters.

"I'm real sorry," she said, dabbing at her eyes. "I think I'm still—Johnny, you know. I still can't believe it."

She was a delicate little thing; the kind of broad these gangsters tended to go for, I guess. Her first name was 'Kitty', although she looked more like a china doll: big timid eyes, bow lips, a nose with the slightest pig-snout lift. Her cotton candy hair looked like mine had when I was a little girl.

"Mrs. Rivers," I said, pushing that unwanted association aside. "Could you tell me—?"

"Kitty, please," she said earnestly, and pulled yet another handkerchief out of a sleeve apparently stuffed with them.

My implant twitched. "I don't know if that's really—"

—petite shoulders slump a little further; a white hand comes up to pull the fur scarf over the tip of the chin—

"Kitty, then," I said, jumping with both feet into the universe that kept us on good terms. Her head lifted slightly. Her face was buried under a snowdrift of makeup. "Could you tell me about the last time you saw your husband? I know it will be tough to talk about. Remember, though—we want to help you. We want to find whoever did this."

She nodded, once, and drew a Marlboro from the pack I offered her. It took her a couple tries to get it to her lips.

"Yesterday," she said, once she had taken a drag, "Johnny came home about six."

I nodded encouragingly. Watching her suck on the cigarette was making me crave a smoke myself, but I forced my attention onto the possibilities the heisen was throwing at me. The more Kitty's story varied between universes, the more likely it was that she was making it up as she went along; the more similar, the more likely she was telling

me the truth—or that the story had been carefully rehearsed. Shadows of those possibilities stretched out on either side of us, rows of doppelgangers interviewing and being interviewed, as though Kitty and I were caught between two mirrors.

- "...and he went out again at around seven thirty," Kitty said. "He—"
- "—said he needed to go back to his office—
- "—wouldn't tell me where he was going. Said it was nothing to do with me—
 - "—didn't say a word when I asked him where he was off to—
- "—and he left. By eight o'clock I was getting worried. By nine I was imagining all these terrible things that could've happened to him. By eleven ... I got a cab over to his office on West 21^{st} . Heard a gun go off as I was getting out."

"Did you see anything?"

She stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray on the desk and twisted her handkerchief around her finger.

"A man," three Kittys said in unison. "Running down the street. I didn't see his face. He might—I think he was wearing a hat." She glanced up at me. "After that I—I went into Johnny's office and I saw—I found him—lying—"

She pressed the handkerchief to her mouth. Her shoulders shook.

"Take as long as you need."

"I ran all the way to a callbox on 20th," she said, "and called the cops. I didn't—I couldn't believe it. Him just lying there, I mean. He never meant no harm, Detective, I swear..."

I poured her a glass of water. She was just a kid, when it came down to it—eighteen, nineteen; easily young enough to be my daughter. Too young to be married to some dead gangster.

"Here." I held the glass out to her.

"Thanks."

—the water falls into her lap: for a second, the young woman drops her guard—

I jerked my hand back as Kitty's fingers closed around the top of the glass. The rim slipped underneath her thumb and the whole thing dropped into her lap.

"Ah, darn it, Kitty, I'm sorry ... here." I drew my own handkerchief from my pocket and knelt to dab at her dress. I felt her slim legs tremble through the fabric.

"It was my fault," she said, and looked at me with wet, red eyes, like a child. The glass rolled along the floor and stopped at my knee.

"Kitty," I said seriously. The handkerchief still rested on her thigh. "Do you have any idea who might have wanted Johnny dead?"

She sucked her cushioned bottom lip. "I—" She dropped her eyes to her lap. "Two men came to see him a while back. Months ago. I don't know what they wanted—Johnny made me leave the room as soon as he saw them. But there was one fella the size of a truck—fair-haired, scar on his neck—"

Big Dakota. Moore reckoned our boys on the east side had already ruled him out.

"—and another guy, dark, a little heavy; I think the other fella called him 'Quine."

That would be Vincent Quine, I guessed—another Montagnio tough, and a first-rate slimeball. Kitty twisted her handkerchief around like she was wringing out a dishcloth. "Is that"—she stopped and got her voice under control—"is that any help? Do you have anything … any clues to go on?"

I stood up and put my handkerchief back in my pocket. The sun was already low and squinting through the window blinds. "All we have to go on," I began, and hesitated. The pistol I had left beneath the stairs hovered in my mind. "All we have to go on is what you just told me and a couple bullets we found at the scene." I turned to my desk and started leafing through some papers. "It might be that we check the distillery again once we know what we're looking for, but ... Excuse me."

Moore was staring at me from the doorway, tapping an envelope against his lips and looking thoughtful.

"Not like you," he said, when I approached. "Falling for the bereaved widow act."

I turned my head. Kitty was staring into space and picking at her handkerchief. "She's just a kid," I said. "Did you want something?"

"For you." He held out the envelope and I saw the familiar handwriting.

Detective O'Harren, c/o Chicago Police Department, etc. etc.

"Still not giving out the home address, huh?"

I took the letter without looking at him.

"Mrs. Rivers needs escorting home," I said. "I think you just volunteered. Oh, and while you're out—see what the word is on the street about our old pal Vincent Quine."

* * *

Snow scrunched beneath my boots as I made my way home that night. It was cold, and quiet: only the occasional hum of a car or smatter of distant voices on the wind disturbed the silence. I turned at the corner of Trumbull Avenue and slid my key into the door of Number 17.

Mrs. Long was already asleep. I knocked the worst of the snow from the bottoms of my boots and made my way upstairs, taking care not to let the door to my room slam shut. I locked it behind me. I probably didn't need to—even when awake, Mrs. Long knew not to disturb me—but the possibilities that it excluded made things easier.

I hung my wet coat on the door and put the letter from Rick with the others, unopened. The tired old rubber band I was using to hold them all together snapped. I swore, stuffed them under the bed, and lay down, my head full of the usual letter-questions. How was Sarah? Did she miss me? Did Rick? He must; enough to keep writing every few months with no reply, at any rate. Unless he did it out of pity. Was he seeing anyone? I turned onto my side and stared at the wall.

I wondered, sometimes, if Rick had already been seeing someone else before the end—if maybe that was why he'd left—but I knew that I was just looking for an excuse to blame him instead of myself. There hadn't been anyone else. Not in the universe *I* was living in, at least, although there must have been others in which other Ricks had been unfaithful to other mes. Not that I blamed them. I was the one who had pushed Rick away. And Sarah. I had lost them both, one day at a time, starting from the day I woke up on the operating table with the implant in my head and didn't know which 'me' was me.

It helps if your life's already in pieces when you get the heisen implant. Less to adapt to, that way.

I thumped the pillow. Feeling sorry for myself wasn't solving Johnny's murder. Wasn't that why I had gotten the heisen in the first place? To be a better cop? It was in my head forever now, so I might as well make use of it. I closed my eyes.

We didn't have the manpower to have someone watch the basement

on West 23rd every hour of the day and night—if I wanted to see if anyone came back for the gun, I'd have to do it myself. But I couldn't afford to spend all night on stake-out, not when there was so much work to do during the day. I'd be exhausted.

Unless it wasn't me that went.

I imagined closing myself inside a box. It was something that they'd taught us during training, a visualization exercise: imagine that you're Schrödinger's cat. No one knows if you're alive or dead. Except, in the quantum language of the heisen, it's more than that: you're both alive and dead, a million quantum cats existing in both states at the same time.

Alive and dead.

West 23rd Street and Trumbull Avenue.

Another me climbed out of bed and slipped into her coat.

* * *

The following afternoon, I went to speak to Vincent Quine. I'd gotten a full eight hours' sleep the night before: nothing had happened over on West 23rd Street that was worth seeing, so I left that possibility thread to another me and decided, with a flick of the heisen, that I had been in my bed all along. I tracked down potential Quines, ignoring the more isolated and unstable possibilities that would send my investigation hurtling down an unpredictable path, such as finding him dead in the road on Ellen Street having been struck by a cab that skidded on a patch of ice.

In most universes I found him in a speakeasy joint above a bookstore on Evergreen Avenue. I'd been there before: it served awful bathtub cocktails, mostly to gangsters, and was little more than an attic space with a bar along one side. It had never really been worth raiding. I chose a universe in which I remembered the correct pattern of knocks to gain admittance and slipped through the door before the bartender could shut it. All conversation in the place went dead as I stepped inside.

"Afternoon, fellas." They'd squeezed a pool table into the far corner since I'd last visited. Quine and a couple cronies stood around it, cues resting on their shoulders. There must have been ten, fifteen other hoods in there—half of them drinking, most of them smoking, all of

them wearing suits. I looked each of them in the eye, one by one.

- —a hand plunges into a coat pocket, but other hands are faster—
- —a cacophony of bangs as hot lead screams across the room—

I spread my palms to show I was unarmed and looked towards the bar. "What's a girl got to do to get a drink around here?"

Smoke drifted lazily towards the ceiling. For an awful moment I thought I was going to end up splattered across the wall, then someone laughed and the tension broke. Heads turned away; conversations resumed. The bartender hurried over with a waxen smile.

"Good to see you, Detective. Here—on the house."

Awful-tasting cocktail in hand, I made a beeline for the pool table. Quine was leaning halfway across it, squinting down his cue. He was a big guy. Most of it was muscle, although when he undid his jacket I could see a hairy fold of beer gut through the gaps between his shirt buttons. His slick black hair was lovingly oiled. Chicago legend had it that he had a messy scar on his leg from a badly-healed bullet wound: he'd plugged it with a finger during a gunfight and had refused to go to a hospital.

"Came down to the nine, I see."

He squinted up at me. In all but one of the universes spread out in front of me he made the shot and won the game—I thought victory might make him more amenable, so I chose one of those. The balls clacked together and the nine-ball shot into the pocket, the cue ball bouncing softly off the cushion and carrying on around the table. With the heisen's help I pinned it first try beneath my index finger as it came towards me.

"Fancy a game?"

Neither of us spoke while I set up the balls inside the diamond. It was obvious that I wasn't on a social call. I took off my coat and flicked my hair out of my collar, wanting to see Quine sweat while he tried to work out how much I knew. He handed me a pool cue, chalked end first.

"So, Detective," he said. "Are my tax dollars paying for you to come play pool nowadays, or are you here on business?"

I took the cue and dusted the little cube of chalk around the tip. "Johnny Rivers is dead."

He nodded gravely. "So I heard. God rest his soul."

I watched him cross himself and tried to gauge his reaction. I had expected him to feign ignorance. "You've certainly got your ear to the ground," I said. "He's not been cold forty-eight hours."

"News travels fast in Chicago. You break." He placed the cue ball behind the line and stepped aside with a gentlemanly bow. One of his cronies lifted up the rack. "Besides," he said, as I chose a possibility that gave me a good break without potting any balls, "he was a friend of mine."

I tucked my hair behind my ear. "Don't take me for a fool, Vince. Everyone and her mother knows he was the biggest rival you lot had in this part of town."

"Well, Detective, you know what they say. Keep your friends close, and your enemies"—he pocketed the one—"closer." He shot again and bounced the two into a cluster of high balls, leaving the cue ball penned in near the corner pocket. "But that's it, isn't it? You want to pin Johnny's murder on me. Jeez. You know what—I ain't even surprised, what with the way your boys have been on my back lately. Need a suspect for a lineup? Get Vincent Quine. Someone done a robbery? Must be Vincent Quine. Seems like a cat can't have kittens in this town without me getting blamed for it."

"Oh yeah," I said, sliding the cue into the groove between my thumb and forefinger. "Poor, innocent you."

By my count, Quine had dodged three murder charges already that year, all of them dropped due to lack of evidence. The prostitute who had agreed to testify against him for the Dickson murder had been lured to her death by Montagnio goons pretending to be federal agents. Her body turned up in Lake Michigan a month after she disappeared. No way to prove anything, of course, but the story spread fast enough to make any other potential witnesses think twice about doing society a favor. I opened up a universe in which I made the cue ball hop over the eight and roll into the two, just to put me back in the game. Suddenly I didn't want to lose.

"What you got on me this time, then?" Quine took a gulp of his drink while he considered his next shot. "Prints? Witnesses? A little handwritten note saying 'Detectives, you ain't picked on Vinnie Quine enough—he did it!'?"

I jumped universes as his cue came forwards, grabbing hold of a

possibility thread in which he slipped and struck the cueball on one side. It spun off slowly at an angle and collided with the seven.

"Whoops." I knew that I was pushing it, using the heisen to manipulate the game to this extent, but I wanted that smirk wiped off his face. It was only when two balls smacked together with a gunshot crack that I remembered the trap that I had come to set.

"You know I wouldn't be wasting time chewing fat if we had solid dirt on you," I said. I watched him as I sipped my cocktail. Did he look relieved? Was he thinking of a stubby pistol, dropped in a scramble up the stairs? I made a show of estimating the angle needed to bounce the cue ball off the cushion in order to connect with the two. "But you had means, motive, and opportunity, so—"

"I also have an alibi." He ran the back of a finger over his lips as he surveyed the table. "I was eating at Giordano's, over on the other side of town. All night. Ask anybody."

"Giordano's?" I said, as he took his shot. "Come on, you've got to do better than that. The Montagnios as good as own that place."

The two knocked the six into a pocket.

"Hey—if I was there, I was there. What do you want me to do, puke up some pasta to prove it?"

He grinned and took another shot, once again ensuring that I had to make mine from an unfavorable position. I chalked my cue. With a bit of possibility manipulation I managed to ping the nine close to a pocket a few times without fouling, although I was careful not to be *too* lucky. (There were a couple one-in-a-million shots that I knew would tick Quine off, but I had my temper enough under control not to risk it.) We played in silence until there were only two balls on the table. It was Quine's shot when my implant buzzed.

—a name, dropped into the silence—

"Mrs. Rivers," I said, seizing the possibility before I really knew what I was saying. Quine twitched and caught the cue ball on its upper hemisphere. It floated off at a wide angle. "I don't suppose you thought about her? She's distraught."

He stared at me for a moment, his blue eyes searching my face. Ice clinked into a glass somewhere behind me. Quine snorted, then coughed: for a moment, as his shoulders bucked, I thought that he was choking, then I realized he was laughing.

"Mrs. Rivers? You mean Kitty?" He shook his head and pulled a handkerchief from his inside pocket. "Distraught? If I had to put fifty dollars on it I'd say she was the one that did it. She—she didn't tell you that she—?" He continued his exaggerated display of mirth, slapping the edge of the pool table for good measure. I stood and scowled at him.

"If you've got something to tell me, tell me."

He wiped away imaginary tears. "Johnny Rivers," he said, "didn't want Mrs. Rivers to be Mrs. Rivers no more. You know how long they've been married? Eight months. That's it. But then a month or two ago Johnny meets this other broad—beautiful young thing; an actress—and he falls hard for her, even harder than he did for Kitty. I know, I know, men are pigs."

He laughed again as I stoked my implant into life. There were very few universes in which this story went any differently, which suggested that it was likely to be true. I sipped my drink as he continued.

"So the way I heard it was, Johnny promises this broad the moon; says he'll marry her right away. Now, he knows that Kitty would fight tooth and nail for whatever she could get if he wants to divorce her, so—and this is the stroke of genius—he calls up Judge Binford—you know him?"

I did: he was a judge so crooked you could use him to uncork wine.

"He calls up Binford and asks if he can get the whole thing annulled. Get him to say that they were never legally married—never consummated, something like that—and that he don't owe her a cent!"

He lapsed into laughter again, mirrored obediently by his cronies. My mind worked double-time. "And did he? Did he get the marriage annulled?"

Quine folded his handkerchief fastidiously into a square and tucked it back into his pocket. "I heard he was supposed to be sorting things out with Binford tomorrow afternoon." He made a grimace. "I guess the appointment's off." He nodded at the pool table. "It's your shot, Detective."

My heisen let me pocket both the seven and the nine-ball in one dazzling, unlikely trick shot.

* * *

Street at the same time, sheltering from the snow. When I closed my eyes I could still see the smirk on Vincent Quine's face. I hadn't bothered to check his alibi—the guys at Giordano's would swear that he'd eaten there every night since he was in diapers if they thought that was what he wanted. Every piece of evidence he produced to the contrary only made me more certain he was guilty. Even so, I had to check out what he'd told me about Kitty Rivers. I'd asked Moore to find out her address and invite her in to talk to me, one-on-one. Hopefully I'd gained her trust during our last encounter. In the meantime, both she and Quine believed that the murder weapon had not been discovered. Whichever one of them had dropped the gun knew that it was still there somewhere, out of sight, potentially ready to betray them if it were found. It would be the work of an evening to come back and remove it.

Wind rushed through my bones. I could almost hear Rick's voice in my head as I huddled closer to the wall. "Why bother?" he had asked me once. "Even if you bring this guy down now there's gonna be about a million other universes where he gets away scot free, right?"

I remembered a summer evening, standing on the balcony with Sarah in my arms, trying to light a cigarette one-handed.

"Because if I don't bother," I said, "he gets away in a million and one."

That was the Alano murder case, one of the first I'd worked after having the heisen implant. They'd tried to warn me what it would be like—I'd taken all the classes, scratched my head over the science, passed the temperament tests in the federal facility in Minnesota, learned all about goddamn Schrödinger's goddamn cat—but nothing had prepared me for the reality of it all. Well, *realities*.

My baby girl, my joy, my Sarah—for those first few weeks I couldn't look at her. Not without seeing a spectrum of all that she could or might or would never be, every glorious and terrifying possibility fanning out around her. I brushed against universes in which I slipped and dropped her off the balcony, or accidentally smothered her beneath a blanket. They were outside chances, but they followed me like specters. Rick was no better. He was suddenly a million different people—Rick if I said this, Rick if I said that; Rick who could fall out or back in love with me a thousand different ways—and I withdrew, not knowing which of him I loved.

I adjusted, over the next six years, but the damage had been done. I knew that Rick was ready to walk out and take Sarah with him. I knew that I deserved it, too. I'd become a ghost in my own family. I should have done something, but I couldn't—somehow I couldn't turn my back on all those possibilities. They plagued me, every day, showing me what our lives could be—what *I* could be—but I didn't have the guts to go for one and shut out all the others. Then, one day, I came home to find all my immediate possibilities the same. The note on the kitchen table read:

We've gone—will write. R.

That's one thing they don't tell you about Schrödinger's cat: you leave the lid on the box too long and the damn thing starves regardless. No quantum possibilities required.

* * *

"She's over there," Detective Moore told me when I got in the next morning. Kitty Rivers was drooping in a chair over by my desk. "She's in a pretty bad way." He handed me a mug of coffee and peered into my face. I knew that there were shadows underneath my eyes.

"Are you okay?" He laid a hand hesitantly on my shoulder. "I can talk to her if you want to rest."

I looked at him—broad nose, big white teeth, face all concern—and smiled. I'd seen the possibilities these interactions bred—

- -strong, soft arms around my back, hot breath against my cheek-
- —but I always steered well clear of them. I shrugged him off and drew my collar up around my neck. Other mes knew whether that road led to any kind of happiness.

"I'll be fine," I said. "Anything else I need to know about?"

He turned and picked up some photographs from his desk. "Frank Campagna. Henchman for Johnny Rivers—muscle, I think, but in a position of trust. Shot dead yesterday getting out the barber's chair. Colbourne sent these across this morning. Says the Montagnios have made no secret of their involvement."

I riffled through the photographs. There was a lot of blood and broken glass. "So we know that the Montagnios are definitely out for Rivers and his gang," I said, handing them back. "But did they send Quine to take out the boss first, make an example, or did his soon-to-be-ex-wife beat them to it?"

Moore gave an exaggerated shrug.

Kitty Rivers was staring at the wall when I went over to her. I put a hand on her shoulder from behind and she jerked as if electrocuted. Her beauty was haphazard today: her fashionable hat was pinned lopsidedly on her head, and her hair had deteriorated into a greasy mass of unwashed blonde. Her face was clean of makeup. Without it I could see, faintly but unmistakably, a yellow island of bruised flesh around her left eye. I pulled out my chair.

"Would you like a cigarette?"

She burst into tears.

I calmed her down eventually, patting her on the back and filling her lungs with an endless chain of Marlboros. She brought each one shakily to her lips, trying to control her sobs, and sucked the tiniest bit of smoke from it before exhaling and letting her hand sink back into her lap.

"Have you been to a doctor about your face?" I said eventually. Kitty pulled away as I tried to touch the bruise.

"No."

"Looks bad."

She stared at the potted plant in the far corner. "Johnny did it," she said. "I saw him on West 19th a few days ago, the first time since he ... moved out." When I made no reply she flicked her doe eyes up to mine. "You know about that?"

I nodded slowly. She sniffed and looked back down.

"Chucked me for some other broad. A singer, or something. Anyway, I—this was the first time I saw him since he walked out, like I said. So I gave him a piece of my mind: told him I thought he was a rotten, dirty cheat and I hoped he died in a gutter. I said I'd hire the best divorce lawyers in Chicago and that I'd get what was mine if they had to turn him upside down and shake it loose. And he—and he—"

She covered her face and cried into her hands, her pretty little shoulders jerking with each sob. I patted her some more and went to get some water. I avoided universes in which it spilt this time.

"Thanks," she said, once she'd had a sip. She put the glass back on the desk. "So I told him—what I just told you—and he—he did this." She gestured to her cheek. "Told me I was a dumb bitch and that I wouldn't get a cent. Some old pal of his was going to get our marriage undone, say that we never—that I was never Mrs. Rivers. And he told me that if I came near him again he'd..." She bit her bottom lip and tried to stem the tears.

"It's okay," I said, as gently as I could manage. I didn't know whether I should touch her again. In the end I got up, went around to her side of the desk and knelt beside her chair, looking up into her eyes. She rubbed away her tears and looked fiercely at me.

"Kitty," I said. "There's one more thing I need to ask you; it's about the night Johnny was killed. Last time we talked you told me that you went to the distillery because Johnny hadn't come home and you were worried about him. That's not true, is it? He hadn't lived with you for weeks. What really happened that night?"

She looked over at the window. "Her," she said eventually. "I wanted to see who she was—who he left me for. I hired a PI to shadow him. He found out where Johnny was living and told me that he went out most nights with a broad, so I decided I'd follow him. On the night he—the night he died—I waited outside his apartment. I figured she'd be there with him, but he came out alone. Got into his car. I hailed a cab and followed him. Ended up on 23rd, near his"—she glanced at me—"office. I waited in the cab, wanting to see if he came out with her—next thing I knew, I heard a gun go off, and I saw a man running away. So I got out of the cab, and—and…"

I put a handkerchief in her hand: she pressed it gently to her nose and blew. I touched her knee. It had been a long time since I had comforted anyone.

"It's okay," I said, aiming for tenderness. "It's okay. Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Kitty's face was scrunched and wet. I fired up the heisen to try and tell if she was faking it, but what she did next was the same in every universe that I could see. "Because I—because I didn't want you to think—" She threw her arms around me, her chin digging into the inside of my shoulder. "Please don't think I killed him, oh please, I didn't kill him, I wouldn't kill him..."

I patted her small, soft back and let her sob into my sleeve.

* * *

Later that afternoon, over on the East side of Chicago, I watched the sun sink behind a square apartment block. I stood across the street, outside

what had been the back yard of a brewery before the prohibition, my implant churning. The stack of letters bulged inside my pocket.

Rick had not kept his new address from me, as I had mine from him when I had moved out of our shared apartment. I guess he thought that one day I might want to come and see Sarah. Or, at least, that I would want to keep that possibility alive. A boy walked down the sidewalk carrying a violin case. The apartment block was blurred to me, like I had something in my eye; what was really happening, of course, was that the heisen was showing me all the thousands of possibility threads for this place laid on top of one another: lights in windows on or off in different combinations, graffiti gone or changed or further to one side. Hundreds of potential snowfalls fizzing in the air. In one or two universes, the boy with the violin case was a girl. Spectral figures moved behind the windows.

I tried to work out why I was there. I'd kept the lid on my curiosity for twelve years. I'd left forty-eight letters unopened. I'd always had the possibilities to fall back on—

- —maybe Sarah doesn't hate me—
- —maybe she wants to be a cop—
- —maybe she wants to get the hell out of this messed-up city—
- —but now, something was different. I counted the windows, up and along, trying to work out which was apartment 13B. A light came on just as I found it. The faint outline of a blonde head bobbed past the window.

Longing kicked me in the gut.

The girl—young woman, I suppose—drifted through the room, followed by a thousand other versions of herself. Some had short hair, some had long; some were beautiful, some were not; some had eyes that were grey and heavy, some wore smiles that were full of hope. I knew that she was—that they were—Sarah. My baby girl.

In one universe, faint as the very outside of a shadow, another woman appeared behind Sarah and placed an arm around her shoulders. She was in her early forties: strong chin, dirty blonde hair, hooded eyes. As I watched, I swear she looked right at me. I drank in the sight of her before the curtains closed.

I blinked. It had grown almost fully dark, and my breath was starting to come in clouds. The street lamps were orange. I took the bundle of letters from my pocket and extracted the earliest: coffee-stained, slightly yellowed, grimy from the old rubber band that had held it to the others until a day or two ago. As snowflakes settled wetly on the paper my memory threw up a conversation I had almost forgotten, one that I'd had with Sarah near the end:

"So, the cat is inside the box, okay, and there's a flask of poison in there, too, which can break open at any time. The cat might die and it might not. Now, we don't know if it's alive or dead in there until we open the box to check. Okay?"

I remember thinking that it was a dumb thing to do, trying to explain quantum physics to a six-year-old, but Sarah was a smart kid. She just looked up at me with her big, doleful eyes and listened.

"But it's not just that we 'don't know', it's that there are really millions of *potential* cats, alive *and* dead, and opening the box collapses them all down into just one, which is alive *or* dead. That's what mommy's head-chip does."

She considered this, eyes on her lap, for almost a minute, then looked up and said, "The cat must know."

The Chicago evening closed around me. I looked up at the curtained window and then down at the letter in my hand. I plunged my thumb into the envelope.

* * *

I dozed standing up on West 23rd Street. As was usual by now, I was both there and in my bed in Trumbull Avenue at the same time, my implant straining to keep both possibilities open. It had gotten too cold even to snow: the sidewalks were locked in frost and my breath was as opaque as cigarette smoke. I huddled into the wall/pillow and closed my eyes.

- —Kitty Rivers—
- —Vincent Quine—
- —a blunt-nosed pocket pistol underneath a staircase—

My thoughts ran through the same tired grooves. Who shot Johnny Rivers? Was his death simply a part of the grim business of Chicago—a hit put out by a rival gang and executed by a thug who'd killed before and gotten away with it—or was it a crime of the heart, an act of revenge by the woman he had pushed too far?

I think I started dreaming. Vincent Quine oozed past me, stretching and distorting like he was in a house of mirrors. Kitty Rivers showed me her bruised cheek and started crying, turning into Sarah when I tried to comfort her. For a moment I saw all of Chicago as a mist of endless possibilities. Bullets flew from guns, hit, missed, ricocheted; bodies fell, crumpled, folded, flew, sank, rolled, were discovered or kept secret; revenge was or wasn't or was almost taken. A million stories hovered in the smoke.

I woke to the sound of a door slamming shut.

It took me a moment to work out which reality I was in. West 23rd Street was chill and bleak and someone had just got out of a car. It was too dark to see them clearly. They opened the trapdoor to the basement and disappeared inside.

I followed, reaching into my pocket. My gun was freezing to the touch. I trod stealthily over to the trapdoor and crouched beside it. The light had been switched on inside, but at this angle I could see almost nothing of the room below. I stood up and stepped over to the stairs.

Apart from Johnny's body having been cleared away, the crime scene was exactly as I had left it. Distillery equipment glinted dully in the half-light. When I reached the bottom of the steps I drew my gun from my coat and stepped forwards, squinting furiously as my eyes adjusted. I heard a scuff behind me and spun around.

"Chicago Police," I said to the shadow underneath the stairs. "Step out slowly, hands on your head."

The figure moved into the light.

My heisen roared. It was impossible. What I was looking at was impossible. I felt my gun drift downwards as my arms lost strength.

They stood there, overlapping, like two different movies projected onto the same screen; a fault line between two universes. A perfect quantum tightrope. I was looking at the cat inside the box, alive and dead at the same time, and I had seconds left to choose which possibility remained when the lid came off. I couldn't speak. For a moment, two versions of myself stood inside of each other, our hearts beating different rhythms.

The figure that had stepped out from the shadows was both Vincent Quine and Kitty Rivers.



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