



TOR.COM SHORT FICTION

SUMMER
2019

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Tor.com Short Fiction Summer 2019

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MURDER IN THE SPOOK HOUSE

MICHAEL SWANWICK

Murder in the Spook House

M I C H A E L S W A N W I C K

illustration by

G R E G O R Y M A N C H E S S

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Ritter was newly returned from seeding the harbor of Odessa with kraken eggs, an act of sabotage that would deny the Mongolian Wizard access to the Black Sea for years to come, when a uniformed young man appeared at his door with a telegram.

“Tella-gram?” Ritter asked in sleepy befuddlement. The word meant nothing to him.

The boy cocked an eyebrow but did not actually sneer. “Just read the slip of paper. Since you’re new to this, I’ll explain that you’re supposed to give me some brass in gratitude for my diligence. Sixpence is customary.”

Ritter gave the boy a coin—threepence, for he disapproved of insolence in the lower classes—and, closing the door firmly, read: MURDER AT THE DEPOT. YOU ARE NOW ACTING DIRECTOR. CAR ON ITS WAY.

By the time Ritter had slapped water on his face and donned a fresh shirt, one of the new motor carriages, with its two-stroke engine and eerie lack of horses, was outside his door. Minutes later, his wolf lying at his feet, he was being briefed on the essentials of the murder, while the carriage sped through the night at the breakneck speed of twenty miles per hour.

The Depot was located miles outside of London on a lonely country road. At the sentry hut, Ritter presented his papers and the guard raised the pole to let them pass. They followed a glow in the sky for what seemed a very long time before coming to the main gate. An endless fence stretched in either direction from twin guardhouses. Behind it were row upon row of war machines.

Here, Ritter was directed to get out of the car and wait. A not-unreasonable time later, Major Jeffries, the Depot’s commander, hurried up to shake his hand. “I’ll be your escort. We walk, I’m afraid. No civilian vehicles. The regulations are most firm about that.”

“It will give me time to learn more about what happened.” The gates closed behind them and they walked between long lines of armored cannon-cars which, if Ritter’s memory served him right, had been dubbed *tanks*. Though it was an overcast, moonless night, they could be seen clearly, thanks to sputtering electric arc lamps raised regularly on a series

of tall poles. The cold, unhealthy light gleamed on the rows of weaponry and on puddles from a recent rainstorm. “The murder took place in the old mill, I understand?”

“Everyone here calls it the Spook House. Your Sir Toby had it made into a kind of conference facility, which he could use for meetings where security was of utmost importance.” Jeffries, Ritter had been told, was a solid man. Conscientious, hard-working, unimaginative. A perfect fit for Ordnance and just this week put in charge of the Depot to free up a man better suited for combat.

“Yes, I have been there.”

“Forgive me. I’m new to this post,” the major said. Then, “You have noted how many guards there are? This is the most secure site in all Europe.”

“Yet they did not stop the assailant. Which means that it was an inside job.”

“Yasss...” Major Jeffries looked off into the distance, as if searching for his rapidly receding career. Then, all business again, “Present at the time were three guards and three civilians: the building manager, a cook, and your Mr. MacDonald.”

Ritter stopped. “*George* MacDonald, do you mean?”

“Yes. You know him, I assume?”

“Very well, unfortunately.”

Spook House was an old rustic mill alongside a stream that meandered incongruously through seemingly endless ranks of mobile cannons. Ritter noted with approval that the guards at the entryways—front, back, and one side—had been doubled and looked alert.

A phantom jackdaw, glowing bright as if lit by the morning sun, flew past Ritter’s face and through the wall as they approached the mill. Major Jeffries flinched back from the apparition. Seeing the man’s horrified expression, Ritter said, “You were not told about this?”

“I ... somebody started to say something. But it was nonsense, so I cut him off.”

“I see.” Ritter looked carefully about, then drew Major Jeffries away from the building and, speaking in a low voice so they could not be overheard, said, “You should have been briefed. What I will now tell you is classified Most Secret by His Majesty’s Government. You know the punishment for sharing such information.”

“I do.”

Quickly, Ritter sketched out the existence of MacDonald’s organization of scryers—though not its name or location—systematically peering into the future to relay back schematics of technology that would not be invented for many decades yet. “That is why the sudden appearance of all these wondrous weapons that surround us.” The major nodded, clearly untroubled by what he had heard. Unimaginative indeed! Ritter thought. “However, there is a price. Think of our voyage through time as a path, one of an infinite number of forking paths constantly diverging in a dark wood. Every anomalous”—Ritter pronounced the English word with care—“invention jolts us onto a new path, one we were not destined to trod. The universe knows we do not belong here and tries to jolt us back. However, the momentum”—again, he spoke carefully—“of our journey keeps us going. So, briefly, two paths overlap and something that does not belong in our world appears.”

“Ghosts, you mean?”

“Sometimes. It depends on how much pressure the universe applies. If there is enough, a man might walk into our world from one that no longer exists and...” Ritter was going to say, *shoot you dead*, but changed it to, “...shake hands with you.”

The major shuddered. “I will confess that the bird gave me a start.”

“You will get used to it,” Ritter assured him. “And worse.”

The building manager was waiting for them. He was compact, a touch chubby, and, given the circumstances, preternaturally composed. He introduced himself as Nigel Mouldiwarp. “Mr. Ritter,” Major Jeffries said, inadvertently accentuating Ritter’s provisional status by dropping his military title of *Kapitänleutnant*, “is Acting Director of Intelligence. He will be conducting the investigation.” Turning to Ritter, “I imagine the first thing you’ll want to see is the corpse?”

Ritter indicated this was so.

Leading them inward, Mouldiwarp said, “He has—had, rather—an office here. He was found at his desk.”

Ritter sent Freki, who had sharper senses than he, in first to sniff things out. Thus, by the time he saw the body—mustached, grossly corpulent, and thrown back in its chair by the force of the bullet to its brow—Ritter already knew it was dead. Despite the blood that had flowed from the bullet hole, the facial features were unmistakable.

After a long, grim silence, Ritter said, "There can be no doubt of it. This is Sir Toby."

★ ★ ★

Sir Toby was dead.

Ritter felt a visceral shock at seeing the body. It was a terrible thing to see a close friend, comrade-in-arms, and military superior lying lifeless before oneself. Nevertheless, there was work to be done. After a long and careful examination of the crime scene, he directed Major Jeffries to send for a detail to remove the corpse. Then, because there was no point in putting it off, he went to confront MacDonald.

A good half of the mill's space had been converted to a thoroughly modern conference room with a long table at its center, comfortable chairs scattered here and there, and a map of Europe dominating one wall. A modest coal fire in a fireplace to one end burnt off the worst of the autumn chill. MacDonald himself was fussing over what appeared to be a scientific apparatus on the table. Standing nearby were a guard and a young woman who could only be Lillian Willows, the facility's cook.

"Where are the other guards?" Ritter said without preamble.

MacDonald looked up with a small, infuriating smile. "They have been questioned and dismissed."

"What?!"

"They were innocent and I have proved it. So they are no longer needed. Hullo, Ritter. Still as stuffy as ever, I see. But let me explain. This device"—he stroked the apparatus before him as if it were a cat—"will make your job obsolete."

Under other circumstances, Ritter might have felt a flicker of amusement. "It talks to wolves?"

"Don't be tedious. Your job as an investigator, I mean. All that running around, asking questions, crawling about on carpets and rummaging through dustbins, looking for clues. The mechanism is properly called a polygraph, but my scryers assure me that it will come to be universally known as a lie detector. It measures and records blood pressure, pulse, respiration, and skin conductivity—all physiological indices that change when an individual feels threatened or nervous, as liars inevitably do. The leads are attached here, here, and here." MacDonald demonstrated by attaching them to the young soldier. "I will now ask a series of questions

the responses to which will be recorded on a moving paper tape.” Four pens quivered at the ends of long, spidery wire arms. “When the guilty individual is confronted with a question bearing upon his crime, the device will record his evasiveness.”

“Suppose he is a very good liar?” Ritter asked.

MacDonald looked superior. “He would have to be a damnably calm fellow indeed to experience no fear when his very life is on the line. But allow me to demonstrate.” He flicked a switch on the machine and, turning to the guard, said, “State your name.”

“Private Timothy Sutton, sir.” The pens scratched up and down, leaving four jagged but roughly parallel scribbles on the tape.

“Where were you when the murder occurred?” The pens leaped wildly.

“On guard duty. By the kitchen door.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

Again, the pens leaped.

Freki, meanwhile, had been moving quietly about the room, sniffing the shoes and hands of all present. The cook had her hands clasped behind her back and when his wet nose touched them, she jumped and then turned a crimson red.

“The other guards testified that Miss Willowes brought them a cup of hot cider. Did she do the same for you?”

A third leap, even more pronounced.

“It was cold and damp, sir. I was grateful for her kindness.”

Ritter glanced at the sheet from which MacDonald was reading and saw that the list of questions was very long indeed. So he stood Freki up and made him attempt to leap up and place his forelimbs on the cook’s shoulders. She shrieked and backed hastily away.

Putting on a voice that his wolf had been trained to recognize as insincere, Ritter scolded, “Down, Freki! Down! If you can’t behave, I’ll just have to put you out in the hallway.” Then, suiting deed to words, he opened an interior door and shooed Freki off to examine the rest of the mill.



Moving all but silently, Freki went first to the building manager’s room and smelled nothing more than expected: hair oil, shoe-blackening, cigarette

ash, whiskey from a flask of modest proportions, a cup of tea left on the windowsill and long grown cold. The wainscoting in the hall smelled of wood polish and the carpet of rug cleaner; Mouldiwarp, it seemed, took his duties seriously. There was a supply closet, which Freki could not enter because the door was firmly shut, containing various cleaning supplies. It smelled very strongly of bleach. He passed by Sir Toby's office, which had already been examined, though Ritter noted that the taint of putrefaction there was fading quickly.

The kitchen pleased the wolf for it was full of interesting odors and all of them save for the pervasive scent of cooking coal, were pleasant: hot cider in a pot still steaming atop the cast-iron stove, flour, raw red meat (chiefly mutton), kidneys and mustard, sprouts, cabbage, raisins, vinegar, cucumber, gingerbread. Lingering underneath those, from long-forgotten meals: fried fish, boiled tripe, batter for Yorkshire pudding, and the laundry smell of suet boiled in a cloth. Not yet cleared away were some chopped ham and mango chutney, the makings of Sir Toby's favorite snack, Bengal toast, an emptied plate of which still sat on his desk. Wartime shortages and rationing did not, it appeared, apply to the head of British Intelligence.

Finally, the wolf went into the little room behind the kitchen where the cook slept: floral sachets, a small bottle of rose water on her dresser, beeswax for her embroidery, and various cleansing agents, laundry soap dominant. Freki carefully sniffed the girl's unmade bed and then returned to sit down outside the door to the conference room and await his master's emergence.

Within, MacDonald had finally finished his interrogation of the soldier. Drawing Ritter and the major aside, he said in a low voice, "The man is undoubtedly guilty. You see?" He pointed at spikes in the irregular line that ran across a yard's worth of paper in his hands. "His tale of the discovery of the body is completely false! He can only be the assassin."

"Please," Ritter said. "Stop this nonsense." Turning away from MacDonald's astonished face, he raised his voice. "Mr. Mouldiwarp, I would like to hear how you discovered the murder."

"There is very little to tell," the man said. "Sir Toby had informed me that I would not be needed for anything, so I was in bed, asleep, when the gun went off. I hurriedly dressed myself and arrived at the master's office simultaneous with Miss Willows and Private Sutton. Inside, he was as

you have seen. Mr. MacDonald heard our exclamations and joined us very soon thereafter. Private Sutton examined the master and declared him dead. There is one of the new telephonic devices in the office. I used it to summon Major Jeffries.” He paused. “I can think of nothing more.”

“So the other guards did not rush in? Wasn’t that odd?”

“They testified that they mistook the sound for thunder,” MacDonald said. “There was a bit of a storm at the time. So it is telling that Sutton alone identified the sound correctly. The polygraphic device records his alarm when I asked him about that. Also, Mouldiwarp was delayed by the need to dress, while the others—”

“Your testimony is worthless,” Ritter said, “and therefore I shall ignore it. While you were playing with your little toy, I have been hard at work assembling a very good picture of all that happened.”

All present gaped at him in astonishment.

“I shall address the question of the tardiness of two of our suspects first. Miss Willowes is not only a lovely young woman but good-hearted as well, as witness her distribution of hot cider to the guards on duty. I imagine most of the soldiers on the base fancy themselves half in love with her. The conference center is used only sporadically. It is only natural that a lonely woman frequently left alone in a house haunted by phantoms and sourceless noises should find a stalwart young soldier a reassuring presence. By slow degrees, she would find herself returning the emotions he feels for her. Earlier tonight, Private Sutton stepped into the kitchen for a quick kiss or two from his sweetheart.” The two had, by the scents on the cook’s bedclothes, done a great deal more than kiss. But Ritter was a gentleman, so he left it at that. Addressing the young couple directly, he said, “When you heard the gunshot, you both naturally consulted each other to make certain you were not mistaken about its nature. Am I right?”

Miss Willowes blushed and stared down at the floor. After an almost imperceptible hesitation, Private Sutton gave a tight-lipped nod.

“Now follow me into the hallway, please.”

Ritter led the others to the supply room. “This is the one room that Freki was not able to examine directly, because the door was latched. If I find what I expect within, my understanding of the event will be all but complete.” He opened the door.

Inside the small room were the expected brooms, mops, and cleaning supplies. There was also an oversized galvanized bucket containing at least

five gallons of bleach and what might be items of clothing. Ritter removed his jacket and rolled up one shirt sleeve. Carefully, he fished out an apron, a pair of white gloves, and a pistol. "You will note that the apron and gloves are discolored from powder burns. The murderer knew that a member of the Werewolf Corps would be involved in the investigation and took steps to ensure that his guilt could not be sniffed out by one such as me." Turning to the building manager, he said, "You seem extraordinarily calm, Mr. Mouldiwarp, for someone whose employer has been murdered and whose murderer is still, presumably, among us."

"I am of a phlegmatic temperament, sir. That is how I got this job. The previous five men occupying it were put off by the phantoms haunting this building. Nothing much bothers me, it is simply the way I have been from boyhood."

"You are also very systematic. The supply room is meticulously tidy."

"Thank you."

"So if anybody but you yourself had imported so much bleach—far more than is required for such a small building—I am certain you would have noticed. It baffles me that you made no attempt to disguise something so obvious. Almost as much as it baffles me how you could have known you would have the time to commit your horrid deed, dump the incriminating evidence in bleach, and retreat to your room so you could burst out, looking—and smelling—like an innocent man."

Mouldiwarp said nothing.

"Do not think silence will help you! Miss Willowes and Private Sutton can each vouch for the actions of the other. Mr. MacDonald had no reason to kill Sir Toby—indeed, his current position is due to Sir Toby's patronage. Were I the permanent rather than Acting Director, he would have been fired the instant I stepped into this building and he knows it." (MacDonald shrugged in a manner indicating he doubted seriously that a foreigner would ever be made permanent Director of British Intelligence.) "The other two guards never entered the building. There is no other possible suspect than you. Admit it!"

"Oh, very well, I killed him." Mouldiwarp spread his hands, as if to say it was all beyond his control. "Willoughby-Quirke was considered a danger to the Empire and so I was dispatched to eliminate him. It was an act of war."

"You came here as a spy and an assassin. Unlike a soldier, you are

subject to summary action. I could kill you here and now and there would be no one to say I was wrong to do so.”

“But you won’t.” There was the faintest trace of a smile on Mouldiwarp’s face, as if he were in on some joke not known by the others. “You see, I am a scryer, much like your Mr. MacDonald here. I can see the future. That is how I was chosen. The Mongolian Wizard’s espionage service routinely trains precognitives as assassins. We are never sent out unless we have seen ourselves alive and well long after the event. Eighteen months from now, I will be sitting in a *bierstube* in Rastenburg with a stein of pilsner in my hand, a girl of loose morals on my knee, and a medal on my chest for extraordinary service to the Mongolian Wizard. So, one way or another, I will come out of this a free man. I had expected a bungled investigation, but that turns out not to be the case. So, most likely, I will be traded for one of your own assassins, caught by our people. In any event, I have nothing to fear.”

“You sound damnably sure of yourself.” Ritter could not keep the anger out of his voice.

Mouldiwarp’s face was as serene as the moon. “I have seen the future. It cannot be changed. Of course I am sure.”

Turning to address the others, Ritter said, “There has been an assassination attempt. But, by a miracle, Sir Toby escaped unscathed. Tobias Gracchus Willoughby-Quirke remains the head of British Intelligence.” He saw MacDonald open his mouth and raise a hand to object and glared him to silence. “Those are the facts as the world must know them. Anyone caught spreading rumors to the contrary will be arrested and charged with treason. Does everyone understand?”

Miss Willows’s eyes were wide when she nodded. The major, the guard, and MacDonald all tried to look manly.

“As for this fellow,” Ritter said, drawing his automatic. “I am afraid that he was shot while attempting to escape.”

Mouldiwarp was still smirking in disbelief when the bullet penetrated his forehead and splattered blood and brain matter on the wall behind him. He had foreseen the wrong future.



When Ritter returned to the carriage, the sun was coming up. The motorman leaned over from his perch and reached down with gloved hand

to open the door. Ritter got in and the engine sputtered to life. When he had settled himself into the cushions, he turned to the dark figure sitting beside him and said, "You will need to have the cook transferred elsewhere if you hope to keep up the pretense that you are dead."

Sir Toby sighed. "I will miss Lillian's cooking. The girl was a dab hand at Bengal toast. Still, all must make sacrifices if the war is to be won. You uncovered the murderer, of course. I can see it in your comportment. Did my doppelganger last long enough to be removed from the mill?"

"According to a messenger who arrived just minutes ago, the body disappeared shortly after being placed in the morgue."

Sir Toby sighed deeply. "Then my timeline is the stable one, not the corpse's. I will confess, the possibility it would go the other way had me worried. And my assassin?"

"Using my best judgment, I executed him."

Scowling, Sir Toby said, "You were supposed to arrest the man."

"I wanted to plant uncertainty in the enemy's mind as to whether the assassination succeeded or not. I ordered the witnesses not to share any of the details of the execution or your death. Thus ensuring that there would be rumors. The Mongolian Wizard's people will hear you are alive and not know whether to believe it. Their assassin will not return as he was foreseen to do. Your every action will be analyzed twice—as something you might do and as the act of an imposter. It will, however briefly, drive them mad."

"Why, Ritter! I begin to believe we shall make a proper spy of you yet," Sir Toby said, with an approving smile.

"Also, there was an even chance he had killed a man I esteemed and admired. That called for revenge."

The expression soured. "Or perhaps not."

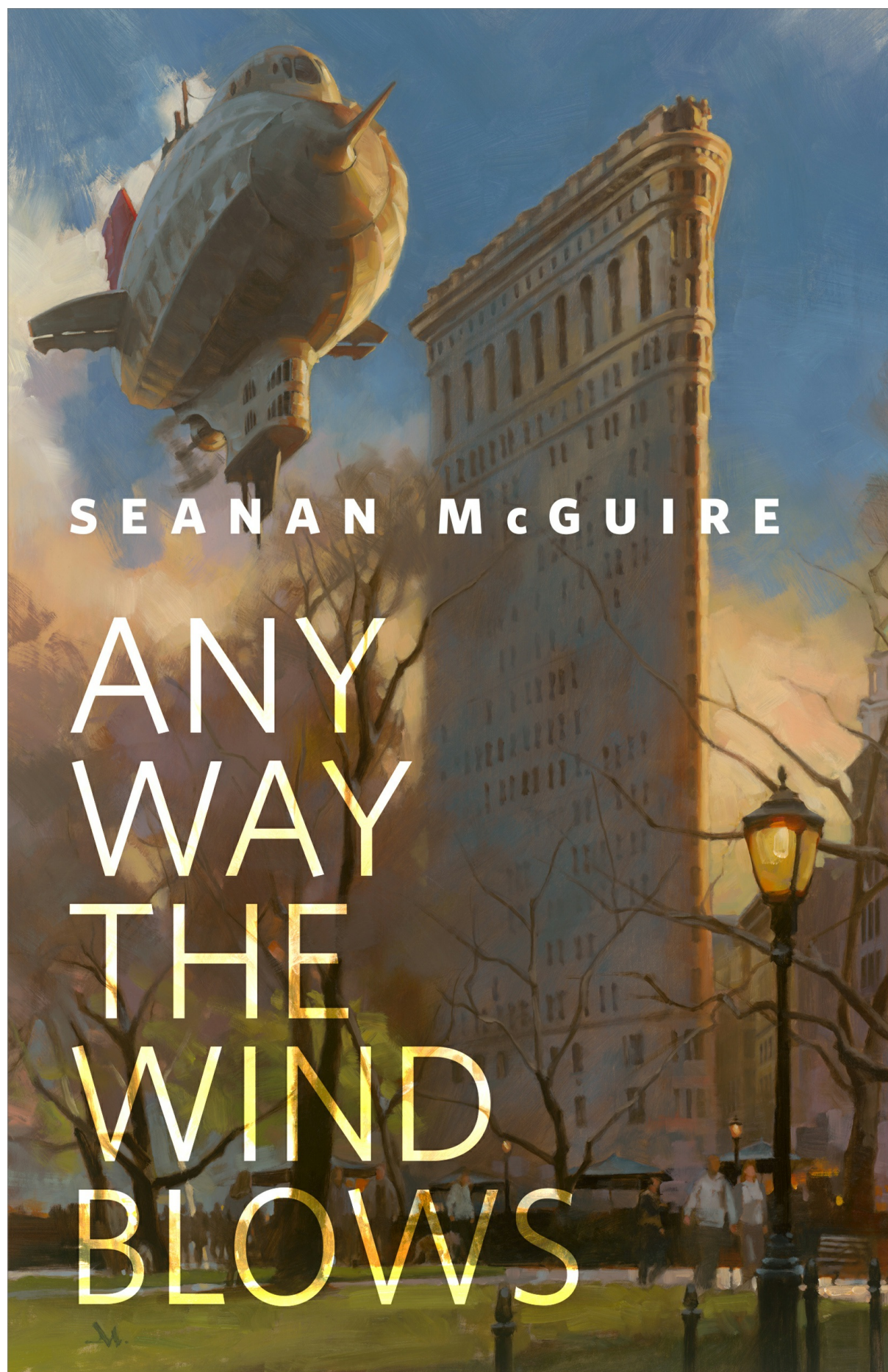
"I would like to point out," Ritter said, "that your lie-detecting machine did not render me redundant, as MacDonald boasted it would. In the end, all your shiny machines were inferior to one man, one wolf, and one talent."

Sir Toby drew a cigar case from his jacket, selected his victim, bit off the end, and, striking a match, puffed it to life. At last, with great solemnity, he said, "Considering, Ritter, that all our hopes of winning this war are hinged on machinery and all the Mongolian Wizard's on talented men such as yourself, you had best pray that you are wrong."



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Any Way the Wind Blows

S E A N A N M C G U I R E

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New York City spreads out beneath us, gray steel and gleaming glass from our aerial perspective, virtually stripped of the color and chaos that almost always fills its streets, and everything about it is familiar, and nothing about it is familiar, and I am so very far away from home.

I'm tired of this. They warned me when I started that one day I'd be tired of this, and I thought they were ranting and raving the way hidebound old fools always rant and rave when there's a scientific advancement at hand—it's as much a part of the process as the grandiose declarations of showing them, showing them all, and the ceremonial passing of the adventurer's compass. Turns out they were right. There are only so many wonders you can see before you start thinking longingly of your own bed in your own room in your own home, of the pillows battered into the shape of your head, the mattress that knows every curve of your body better than a lover ever could, the heater that rattles in that way that turned into white noise years ago, unremarkable, soothing, memorable only in its absence.

I don't think I've had a decent night's sleep in five years, and I still have two more to go, and I hate this.

"Helm, report."

My current helmsman is a green-skinned nymph from a parallel where the gods of the Greeks never faded from power. Instead, they continued doing what they did best—fighting, fucking, and feasting—until ninety percent of the population could trace their lineage directly back to one god, demigod, or mythical figure or another. Not that they called them "myths," since, y'know, when you're one of the eleven million families whose Solstice dinners Zeus is required to drop in on, the situation isn't very mythical anymore. She looks up, nods once, and goes back to studying her instruments.

"Mammalian," she says finally. "There are representatives of other populations, but they're all at what we expect from the human-dominated Mannhattans. The avian clusters match my pigeon data, and the insects match up with cockroaches. Mostly. There are a few outliers."

“Are the mammals moving slowly and with confidence, or are they cowering in the subway tunnels?” We once found a parallel where the pigeons had somehow turned carnivorous and bloodthirsty. A flock could pick the flesh off a human’s bones in under a minute, the piranhas of the sky.

We lost two interns on that stop, and we didn’t even manage to collect any of the flesh-ripper pigeons. Which is a much bigger pity. No one signs on as an intern for a trip like this one unless they have a massive death wish or a family that’s desperately in need of the survivor’s benefits. It’s sad and it’s tragic and it’s the reason we have such a high death toll every time we cruise the parallels. Everyone needs to get by. Flesh-ripper pigeons, though ...

Those would have given the rest of us a reason to turn around and head for home, finally in possession of something bigger and better than the little trinkets we’ve been picking up since day one. Still, a hold of trinkets is nothing to sneer at. Stubby isn’t the biggest or fastest or shiniest airship in the fleet, but she gets the job done.

“Mammals are within median human standards—this looks like a boring one—and they’re out on the streets in pretty large numbers. They seem to be alive, so we’re not dealing with a reanimating pathogen.”

“Thank the Lightning for *that*,” I say.

The rest of the bridge crew offer their own counterpoints, varied by their parallels of origin. The ones who’ve been with me since the beginning thank the Lightning, and the two we picked up in that weird theologically inverted parallel thank the Thunder, while Daphne—my helmsman—thanks her father, Zeus, in a bright, chipper voice that makes me thankful, once again, that we haven’t encountered him anywhere outside the parallel where we picked her up. The last thing I need right now is a randy deity showing up on my bridge, especially since he might not recognize Daphne as his daughter.

“Captain?”

I turn. Our navigator is looking over his shoulder at me. Well. One of his heads is. The other is still watching the curved window that makes up the front of our airship, crystal clear and apparently fragile. Most people who attack us aim for that window first, not asking themselves how many protections we’d put on a sheet of glass that size. The fact that it’s not a solid mass of bugs doesn’t seem to be the clue it should.

“What is it?”

He smiles uncertainly. “I think I see the Flatiron.”

That makes me stand a little straighter. Not every parallel has a Flatiron Building. Oh, every one we’ve discovered where the European colonists constructed a settlement in the area we know as “Manhattan” has had *plans* for a Flatiron Building, but they don’t always get built, and once they’re built, they don’t always survive. Some of them have burnt. Others were bombed. One of them was infected by an artificial bacterium intended to help destroy landfills by converting them into arable soil, which had converted it into the largest pile of loam I’d ever seen. An intact Flatiron is reason to celebrate.

Maybe. “How secure does the structure look?”

“Seems stable.”

That’s ... good. “Is there a docking station on the roof?”

“Negative, captain.” Daphne looks up from her instruments. “The mammals below us are pointing and stopping as we pass overhead. I don’t think the airship caught on in this parallel.”

“Oh, lovely. Primitives.”

“There are flying machines,” says one of the other bridge crew. “They seem to operate on an internal combustion basis, but they get where they’re going. Fast, too. If we had one of those, we’d be home within the quarter.”

“With our surveys half-finished,” I snap. “You can’t chart ground properly if you’re moving across it too fast for anything to record. Use your head, or we’ll get you a new one.”

“I’d like a new head,” says the navigator. “The ones I have don’t provide me with a full range of vision. Three heads, now. Three heads is where it’s *at*.”

I manage, barely, not to throw my hands up in the air. “I’m going belowdecks,” I say. “It’s time to prep the incursion team.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” shouts the helmsman. Everyone laughs.

I am so tired of this shit.

★ ★ ★

These are facts about the universe in which we live:

First, it’s basically a sheet of baklava that hasn’t been cut. Layer upon layer of reality, all resting lightly atop one another, all sweet and delicious

and ready to be devoured. And trust me when I say there are things out there that are *totally* into the concept of devouring existence as we know it, one crunchy, nut-filled bite at a time. Worlds that aren't watched have a tendency to blink into nothingness and be forgotten, filling the belly of some cosmic terror, creating yet another hole in the pastry. When a world gets eaten and a hole opens up, it's easier for the baklava-eaters to shove their nasty little hands in and pry more pieces loose.

Maybe "your world is a tasty snack, good luck sleeping tonight" isn't a good way to start a conversation, but I'm with the Cartography Corps, otherwise known as the Looters. Diplomacy is for people with a much higher pay grade than mine. Because ...

Second, not every world knows they're not alone, and better minds than mine figured out a long, long time ago that it's best to let people figure things out in their own time. If one world opens a window on another, they view themselves as peaceful explorers. If a world has a window opened on it, they view the people on the other side as hostile invaders. Aren't humans fun? I mean, to be fair, that sort of maps up to most of recorded history in the majority of the parallels we've charted, but still, it means we have to be careful when we're surveying.

But it doesn't mean we can stop.

The Cartography Corps is a joint venture by the governments of nine of the most advanced parallels. We have alliances with countless more. They send us resources, crewmen, and supplies, and we launch our airships into the vastness of the universe, charting and recording everything we encounter. We map the baklava, because we can't tell when things are missing unless we know what's supposed to be there. Despite my navigator's fascination with internal combustion engines, they're not suitable for our purposes: they go too fast, and our maps wind up with holes in them, empty places where the data ought to go. We travel by airship like civilized people, sailing across the endless sea of parallel worlds, making our lists and checking them twice, telling our archives who's naughty or nice.

And of course there's the looting. We're not pirates, but we're not saints either, and we're almost always a long, long way from home, unless we find something that demands immediate attention from the scholars at the University. We gather trinkets and artifacts as we travel, along with raw materials, tucking them all away in our hold until we can't carry any

more and get to turn and head for home. We try never to take anything of specific social or religious significance. On parallels with a decently sized human population, we can sometimes even pay for what we abscond with.

Airship contact is inevitable, of course, but it's never yet been a major concern. Some parallels fire on us, and that's fine: if they don't have the ability to move between layers of the baklava, they don't have anything powerful enough to breach our shields. Other parallels try to worship us as gods, which is a little annoying for everyone except for Daphne, who takes it all in stride. Godhood is her family business, after all. Mostly people just give us what we ask for and try to forget us as quickly as possible.

Me and Stubby—my airship, Her Majesty's *Stalwart Trumpet of Glory*—have been running the North American mapping routes since I left home, and part of our job is to drop in, verify the location of semi-universal landmarks, and see whether they have any artifacts in need of preservation. Hence our current course for the Flatiron Building, which is, as I mentioned, close enough to universal as to be a little bit unnerving. Why that building? Why that location? No one really knows, but wow are there a lot of them.

The scouts and rangers of the incursion team are, as always, completely at ease when I step into their shared quarters, a single large room that takes up most of our lower deck. They have free access to our hold, and most of them have “borrowed” various artifacts to decorate the space around their beds, hammocks, and sleeping tanks. The effect is not unlike stepping into a junk shop that had an unfortunate encounter with a hand grenade.

Heloise is playing some sort of dice-adjacent game with Tim and Tom, using precious gems in place of the dice. Alcestis, from Daphne's world, is face-down in a hammock, snoring gently. The rest of the incursion team is nowhere to be seen, which worries me a little.

“Captain on the deck,” I call, voice pitched high and carrying.

They ignore me.

“Captain on the deck *and carrying her dissection kit*,” I call, and they snap to attention, Heloise snatching a diamond out of the air as it bounces back up toward her, Tim and Tom turning to face me, Alcestis rolling out of her hammock and landing in a heap on the floor.

These are the people with whom I have been instructed to preserve reality. I used to wonder why cartography captains only ever seem to want

a single tour of duty. I don't wonder anymore. Now I wonder how much the professors are going to bribe me to keep my mouth shut when I get home. I better be getting tenure *and* a letter from the queen granting me permission to raise the dead whenever I want to, or I'm going to single-handedly tank their enrollment numbers while I drink my way through every pub in New Amsterdam.

"Hoy, Captain," says Heloise. She's always been the fastest to recover. She's died twice, and undergone two field resurrections, and she's still as cheerful as the day she enlisted. "What's the signal?"

"Human-occupied Manhattan, and we're bound for a Flatiron Building," I say. "We should be docking in no more than twenty minutes."

Tim and Tom give a little cheer. Even Alcestis lifts one arm in the air, waving it around in a limp, desultory manner before she goes back to trying to peel herself off the floor. My crew. So exciting.

"We don't know local customs, pathogens, or linguistics, so the first team will consist of the four of you. Try to avoid contact with the government, or causing any branch of law enforcement to be activated. You're going to go inside, scout around, see whether we can get anything out of this parallel, and give our mapping systems time to chart the city. When I call you back, you come. Got it?"

"Yes, Captain," they chorus dutifully. Anything to get off this ship and down into the city; anything to make them feel useful. They want to do the jobs they were recruited for. I can't blame them for that. They have a tendency to cut a trail of chaos and confusion in their wake. I can blame them for *that*, and do, at every opportunity. But they're the team I have, and replacements take time to train, assign, and arrive. Better to just work with what I have and hope they never cause a cross-parallel war.

Or that if they do, it's a good one.

"We won't let you down, Captain," says Heloise, and she's wrong; I know she's wrong. But that doesn't seem important, so I just smile, nod, and wave her toward the door.



The mapping systems have been running for the last hour, while the incursion team works their way deeper and deeper into the building, occasionally sending back brief transmissions that only Daphne understands. That means this is an English-dominant Manhattan: if we'd

found another parallel where the Greeks conquered the world, they wouldn't be using Greek as their semi-encoded messaging system.

Sometimes I think there must be a better way of doing this, or at least a more efficient one. Then I consider how many of our systems I can fix with a socket wrench and an electrical shock, and I remember why we do things in as primitive a manner as the job allows. The people on the ground can keep their bells and whistles. We'll stay crude and we'll stay in the air.

"Uh, Captain?"

I turn. Daphne looks ... concerned. The expression is foreign on her normally jovial face. A shiver of worry races down my spine and curls in my gut. If we've lost the incursion team ...

We won't be the first and we won't be the last, and they all knew the risks when they signed on for this trip. See the parallel worlds, experience wonders beyond imagining, and possibly get consumed by them, that's the gig. I know that. I've always known that. They wouldn't even be the first crew members I've had to leave behind, laid to rest in the soil of an unfamiliar world. But every death burns, and I don't want to go through this again, no matter how routine the risks.

"Report," I say.

"Uh, Alcestis says you need to come down to the Flatiron Building," says Daphne, slow, uncertain. Confused. "She says there's some question of the trade arrangements we need, and the locals want to meet you."

I blink. "What?"

"Um, she also says the locals have offered to call security if you'd rather stay in the sky, since any real captain would come down and vouch for her crew."

"Lightning." I close my eyes for a moment. The swear isn't big enough. I need real profanity for this. "Lightning and *equipment failure*."

The navigator makes a startled choking noise. I open my eyes.

"Tell her I'll be right down," I say, and stride for the door to the release chute before anyone can argue with me or offer to take my place, to pretend to be captain while I sit safely in the sky, well away from mobs with pitchforks and torches. They risk themselves for me. The least I can do is return the favor.

The release chute is attached to the bottom of our ship, a clever construction of clear glass and metal bands forming an umbilicus tube that

extends all the way to the roof of the Flatiron below. Aerodynamics have never been my field; I don't understand how it harnesses the wind to slow our fall, or how it can tell the difference between a body it should drop and a body it should pull back into Stubby's comfortable embrace. It does the job it was built for, and that's enough for me. I step into the oval opening in the floor, and the wind catches me and pulls me down, like a drowning woman bound for the bottom of the sea.

But I'm not drowning. There's air here, all around me, and through the glass walls of the chute, I can see this new Manhattan, familiar and strange at the same time, like something out of a very unsettling dream. Then the roof of the Flatiron Building is visible beneath me, and my incursion team standing around the vent structure for the building's air supply. They've been joined by several people I don't know. That's ... not excellent. We try to minimize interaction with the people native to the various parallels, for reasons ranging from "everyone has a different local flu" to "we find them vaguely unsettling."

There's nothing to be done for it now. I drop out of the chute onto the rooftop, straighten my jacket, and step forward, hand already extended for the polite, ceremonial confirmation that I'm not here to stab anyone. "Captain Isabelle Langford of Her Majesty's *Stalwart Trumpet of Glory*, at your service," I say. "My crew said you wanted to speak with me?"

One of the locals, a cadaverous man who looks like he's already been killed and resurrected three or four times—so maybe these people are more civilized than they seem—is practically vibrating, smiling so broadly that he's in danger of splitting his lower lip. "This is really happening, this is really, really happening," he says. He turns to another of the locals, a shorter woman with graying hair and a politely bemused expression. "You owe me ten dollars."

"I never made that bet," says the woman. "Excuse me, ah, Captain, but are you saying these people really came from your, ah, airship up there? From another dimension?"

How much has the incursion team *told* these people? "Yes," I say stiffly, lowering my hand. "We come in peace. We don't intend you any harm."

"Those two sentences mean the same thing, usually," says the third local, a balding man who seems short next to the living cadaver, but is about the same height as most of the men in my crew. He has an Albion

accent. It sounds weird here in a New Amsterdam cognate. He's as out of place as we are. "Is there a reason you need to say both?"

"Is there a reason you needed to talk to me?" I counter. "I don't leave the ship very often."

"That was me," says Alcestis, a twinkle in her eye that I don't care for. "See, these nice folks thought we were fans who'd broken into their offices looking for one of their authors." My confusion must show in my expression, because she grins and explains, "They publish fiction. Science fiction. Stories about airships and parallel dimensions and people from radically divergent timelines."

"Oh sweet Lightning, we fell into one of *those*," I mutter. I focus on our trio of locals, trying to smile, trying to look like I don't want to push them all off the building and have done with it. "We can't take you with us. Living samples are a violation of protocol." I won't tell them that we sometimes recruit new crewmembers from unexplored parallels. I don't want the headache, and we don't have any openings right now anyway.

"We already clarified that with Al, here," says the cadaver, indicating Alcestis. "We were just hoping you'd sit down for coffee, let us take some notes, while your people explore the city. We're even willing to tell the authorities that your ship is a promotional stunt we're doing. Keep the lookie-loos away."

"We'll buy lunch," says the woman. "For your whole crew."

"All right," I say slowly. "Do you have green people on this parallel?"

"No," says the Albion man. "Why, do you?"

Slowly, I smile. Alcestis winks at me.

This is going to be fun.



We set sail for the nearest dimensional instability, a map of our assigned territory safely stored in the ship's systems and several cases of the local literature in the hold, along with everything else the incursion team was able to liberate during their tour of the city. We're almost ready to go home.

"Captain?" asks Daphne. She's wearing a T-shirt from the book people. It's not officially approved, but she looks good, and I like to let my crew express themselves.

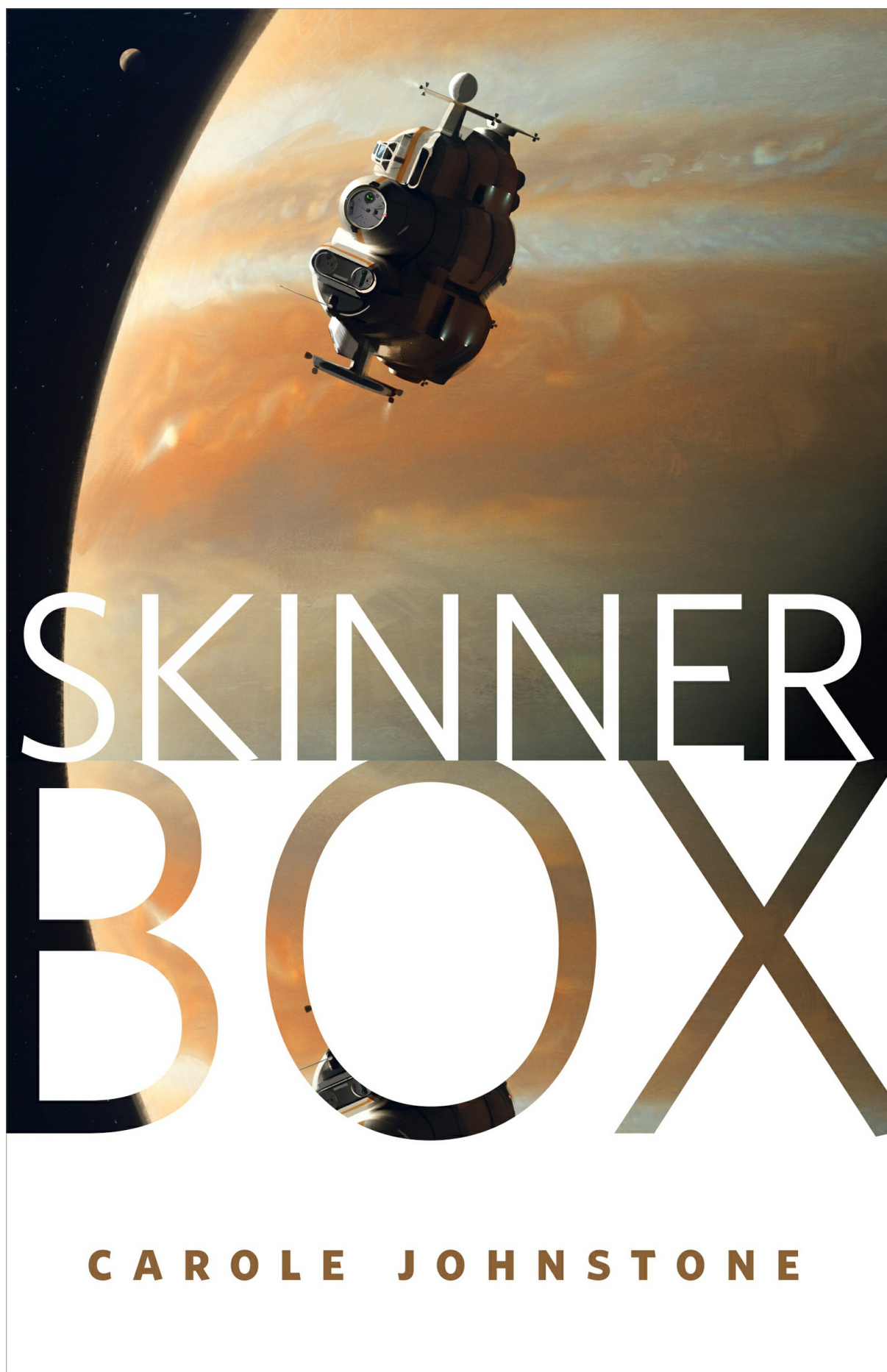
"Sail for the tear," I say. "We have work to do." And on we go,

chasing the horizon, steam and chrome and lightning, drifting onward,
ever onward, any way the wind blows.



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Skinner Box

C A R O L E J O H N S T O N E

illustration by

A D A M B A I N E S

TOR·COM 

I didn't always fantasise about killing him. I used to fantasise about fucking him, and when that lived up to expectations, I fantasised about marrying him. Which didn't.

I'm a scientist. I'm supposed to look at problems clinically, rationally, dispassionately. Maybe he beat a small but vital part of that out of me, and enough electrons escaped the open circuit to forever unbalance me, to leave an empty space where nothing that was once me lives. And I've plugged that hole with fantasies. Fantasies of walking into the path lab and seeing him sprawled over one of his precious anaerobic chambers, face purple and bloated and stricken. Or red-raw and boiling inside scalding clouds of autoclave steam. Or bloody and blasted black, inside and out, because any vessel required to withstand high pressures can rupture; any number of things inside a vacuum can implode; centrifuge rotors can explode, and path labs are filled with the kind of chemicals that never should. Or sometimes, I just imagine him lying on the floor, the back of his skull caved in like eggshell, spilling blood and brains and cerebrospinal fluid. I've never been fussy. Perhaps I should have been.

My module is about a fifth the size of his. I enjoy its hugely claustrophobic smallness—small enough for only me, a chair, my laptop, and the Skinner box. Here is where I live, rather than the brilliantly austere labs or Engineering's myriad compartments and old-school clutter. Or even the living quarters, designed, I've always suspected, by a man with a won't-quit hard-on for '80s sci-fi horror: no corner spared its curve, no straight edge its roll, no rectangle its oval. Not clinically white, but a kind of dull, matte off-cream that makes my skin pucker. In here, the walls are black and the light is low. There are no windows. There is no outside. There is no *there*.

★ ★ ★

"Hey."

I never want the coffee that Mas always brings me, never drink it. But he always brings it anyway.

“Hey. Thanks.”

“How is it going?”

I look at the Skinner box. “It’s not.”

“They didn’t take the bait?” He comes closer. When we stand side by side in front of it, our shoulders touch the walls, touch each other.

“No. They didn’t.”

He turns to look at me instead. His smile is crooked. “So you’re gonna have to torture them after all, huh?”

I don’t answer, but my chest feels tight, my palms prickle. I want to be annoyed, but I can’t be. He’s right. It’s that simple.

“How was he last night?”

I swallow, keep looking at the Skinner box’s windows, its locks, its cue lights. “Fine.”

Mas’s big hand turns my face towards his. He strokes two fingers over my eyebrow, one over the still-puffy tissue around my orbital bone, the yellow and green of its fading bruise.

“Fine is good, Evie,” he says, but he isn’t smiling. “Fine is better.”

In this tiny space, he shouldn’t be able to crowd me any more than he already is, but he can, he does. He turns us away from the Skinner box, puts one hand on my waist, smooths the other through my hair. Backs me up against one black wall.

I can see red threads through the white of his eyes. I can smell the clean grassy sweat of him, the coffee on his breath. I can feel the heat of him, the prickle of his stubble against my neck, the hard, long press of him against my thigh. I can feel my own heartbeat at my temples, my fingers, inside my ears.

“This is a bad idea, Mas. We shouldn’t.”

I always say it, and I never mean it. But I always say it anyway.

★ ★ ★

The three of us have dinner together. It’s just one of many rules, arbitrary and mandatory. We sit in our replica off-cream Nostromo and eat whatever our blood workups have determined we should.

“So where are we today, Professor?” Mas says, his voice too loud, too

decided upon cheerful. It startles me a little, makes me think of long-limbed, white-faced, serious Boris. Mas is his replacement.

Don looks up from his tray. Arches one brow. "We're at four point one seven AU, Masego." Arches both to better effect. "We'll be passing very close to Jupiter's two outer moons, Callisto and Ganymede, later on tonight."

Halfway. Finally, halfway. Five months, four weeks, two days. By tomorrow, we'll have swung by Jupiter, and the gravitational assist with the last of our fuel will turn us back for home. That should make me feel better. But it doesn't.

Mas grins with all his teeth. "Is that something we are supposed to be worried about?" He puts on his accent for me. Especially in front of Don, who sounds like a 1950s radio announcer. I haven't seen Scotland, and Mas hasn't seen Zimbabwe, for years. He does it to comfort, I think. To tether me to something other than this bloody place and this bloody life.

"You're the engineer," Don says, managing to make it sound janitorial.

"Yeah," Mas laughs. Tries and fails to wink at me without Don seeing. "How many engineers you know look up at the stars?"

I eat so I don't have to laugh. Smile. Talk.

I shouldn't think about Boris. I can't. Boris was the last mission. This is the new one.



We still share a bed, Don and I. We're still husband and wife. Our quarters are our quarters; there has never been any space here for changing your mind, for saying *I've had enough*. A vow is a vow. A contract is a contract.

He last raped me in this bed more than three months ago. Three months, three weeks, and three days ago. Nights ago. It wasn't rape to him. It was another mandatory obligation that he put a halt to halfway through to look down at me, down at us, with the same mild disgust that he reserves for low blood counts, *Clostridium difficile*, and high viral loads. I don't think there's been a single moment in our relationship that I haven't felt like a bug on a slide. I used to find it flattering.

Rape isn't enough for him now. He finds more pleasure in pain that he can better imagine. In pain that he can see. Don has no hidden depths. He's

as predictable as a response lever triggering food, as a fruit fly conditioned never to return to a hot side that has long ceased being hot.

He likes to choke and he likes pinch, to scratch. But mostly, he likes to punch. Maybe it makes him feel more like a man. And me less like a woman. I've never cared enough to wonder, even though that's my profession, my vocation. I've never, ever had any urge to study Don like a bug on a slide.

Tonight, he lets me off the hook. Tonight, we wash, brush our teeth, undress, and get into bed, and not once does he speak to me, acknowledge me, even look at me. I used to think that was just another punishment, but now I know it's not. On these nights, I really don't exist. To him, I am negative space. I am invisible. I am a black hole. And that suits me just fine.

★ ★ ★

Other than the Nostromo, it doesn't look like a spaceship, nor should it. Millions, I suspect, have been spent on aesthetic alone. Carbon composite nanotube walls and floors of grass. The long corridors are lined with bubbling tubes of algae and tanks of recycling water. They sound like fast streams, hot springs. *There*. Anywhere else but here.

Some days, I just walk along those corridors. Back and forth, around and around. Listening to the air, the water, the slow and steady thud of my heart.

It's a house of many mansions—or, at least, of many doors. Almost all of them are locked. I've never tried them more than once. I've never wondered what's behind them more than once. Which, if I cared, is probably the most palpable metaphor for my entire life. Sad and bad and indifferent. Too many locked doors to bother counting. To bother *imagining*.

★ ★ ★

“Hey.”

“Hey. Thanks.”

I set down the coffee, turn around and press my palms against his pecs. Push him hard until he grins, until he moves. He leans back against the wall and lets me kiss him, lets me go on pushing him just to push him, to

feel him, to feel something. He doesn't need to turn us around; he doesn't need to make me stop. He just lifts me up and pushes back. He fucks me inside that tiny free space between four black walls. Between a chair, my laptop, and the Skinner box. And when he starts to shake, I know it's not from weakness. Or even exertion. Don can't even slap me without breaking into an ugly sweat.

Afterwards, he does turn me around. Stands behind me, his big hands clasped around my waist, his chin on my shoulder.

"Tell me more about it," he says. "Your Skinner box."

He's asked me before, but I've always managed to distract him. Now, he knows I can't. Not yet, at least.

"You really want to know about this?"

"I really want to know about this."

"All right." I straighten my spine as we both look at its windows, locks, and cue lights. Mas strokes my forearms slow and careful, like I'm a feral cat.

"I guess you already know that a Skinner box is just an enclosed space to better deliver and monitor positive and negative conditioning. Reward and punishment. At its most basic, it's a rat in a cage, pressing an operandum lever whenever a light goes green. He does it right, he gets food. He does it wrong, he gets electrocuted. The expectation of desire to eat the food or the fear of being electrocuted is unconditioned stimuli. But when the rat starts associating the lever or the green light with either expectation, that's conditioned stimuli. We've taught him that. Made him think that. Made him expect that. We've rewired his brain."

"Right." I can feel the teeth of his grin against my neck, his nose in my hair. "Kind of like me getting a hard-on every time I smell strawberries. Or blue balls every time I hear the fucking swish of that path lab door."

When I smile, he laughs. It rumbles through me, gives me goose bumps.

He points at the box. "And it's the same principle for the nano—"

"Nanites. Yes."

He presses harder against me to peer even closer, his nose almost touching the glass. "And they're still in there?"

I smile at the wary doubt in his voice. "A whole swarm of them."

He laughs again. "Right."

"These ones are big boys. Ten micrometres. Zero point zero one of a

millimetre.”

“But what’s the point? I mean, what does a nanite want? What is a nanite scared of?”

I take in a breath that tightens his hold on me.

“A nanite wants to learn. Same as anyone. I’m just trying to find out which way gives them more learning potential, more agency. Reward or punishment.” I shake my head. “And so far, my reward programs haven’t made any difference.”

“Which is why you’re going to punish them instead?” He strokes me from my crown to the base of my spine. “How the hell do you punish a nanite?”

A Skinner box doesn’t have to be a torture chamber. Not unless you’ve exhausted its every other function. And yet, it’s surprising just how often it is.

I shiver, disguise it inside a shrug. “I don’t know yet.”

★ ★ ★

“So, where are we today, Professor?”

Don snorts, sets down his cutlery. “You know, recently I’ve been wondering just what your problem is, Masego. A limited imagination, vocabulary, or IQ?”

Mas grins with all his teeth. “I just want to know how much longer I’m going to have to look at your ugly mug, man.”

“We’re at two point eight five AU,” I say. “About halfway between Jupiter and Ceres.” I risk looking at him. “Nowhere.”

Mas looks back. “No point getting my Polaroid out then, huh?” he says.

He’s pissed off tonight, and I don’t blame him, but it doesn’t help. It doesn’t even matter. I’ve no reason not to believe it’ll be just like last time. We’ll be stuck here, the three of us, for at least another four months, pissed off or not.

My mother used to say that it was the journey that was important, and not the destination. I never thought she was right. But the suits from Astro Labs do. And I might be flattered by Mas’s interest in my research, but that’s only ego, my ridiculous need for him to see me. In reality, it’s all just busywork. No different to Don’s biotech experiments or Mas running

his endless simulations. Our work is not the mission. The destination is not the mission. My mission. I've always known that. And after the last one, I swore no more. Never again. Yet here I am. Here Don is. Here we both are. Just the same. Again.

I know why. If the reward is big enough, wanted or needed enough, a rat will endure pain past the point of recovery. Of sense. And that's obvious why too. All life, after all, is just pushing levers and hoping.



It's worse—so much worse—when he's kind. Gentle. Tender. Tonight, Don brushes my hair with long, slow strokes until it feels as though I'm floating. His apologies drift around me like spring blossoms, cool and white. He talks about our wedding day: the ocean and big blue bowl of sky. The hydrangeas and pearl beads in my hair. How much his voice shook through the vows; how badly his skin itched. But it's only when I cry that he smiles. That he kisses me. And I never know if he means what he says or if it's just more cruelty.

I wait until he's sleeping, and then I go out into the corridor, walk barefoot through the grass and bubbling springs. I stop outside Boris's door, press my hot palms and forehead against its coolness. And then I sit cross-legged on the grass, with my back against the door, and sleep there until morning.



"Hey."

"Hey. Thanks." I set the coffee down on the shelf beside the Skinner box.

Mas tries to kiss me, but I don't let him. As much for his sake as mine. Since slingshotting around Jupiter, I've been trying to keep my own distance, my own counsel. I know he doesn't like it, but when there aren't many ways to avoid someone inside less than an acre, aloofness is about the only option. Maybe it's because we've stolen enough of Jupiter's velocity that it feels like we're sprinting now instead of jogging, and I'm finding it harder to catch my breath. Maybe it's because we're that much nearer the end of the mission. Home looms larger, is ominously closer.

"Don't you have anything else you should be doing?"

Mas shrugs. “I’m running fuel calculations. Orbital mechanics simulations. Same as I do every other day.” He gives up trying to make me look at him, looks at the Skinner box instead.

“Tell me about the harder stuff then. What the fuck you’re doing here. Why the fuck you’re doing it.”

“Really?”

“I’m in here every day, and I don’t really have much of a clue about any of it, and”—when he rubs his palm down my back, he does catch my gaze, and keeps hold of it—“I’m interested.”

We’re running out of time, is what he really means. To learn—to know—all there is to learn and know about each other. It’s exactly why I shouldn’t tell him.

“You *really* want to know about this?”

“Sure.” He grins, holds up his hands. “Hey, look, I get that you’re the cognitive neuroscientist, and I’m just the guy in charge of the dilithium crystals. Use small words, and I’m sure I’ll pick it up.”

“Sorry.” I smile. “Okay. So, the first paradigm shift in AI—” I laugh when he grimaces in mock terror, and it feels strange, alien, like it’s the first time I’ve done it in a very long time. Maybe it is.

“The first paradigm shift in AI was designing deep learning architecture like neural networks. And the second was getting the neural network to design its own architectures without us.” I hit a key on the laptop to light up its screen. “So we now have a recurrent neural network, which is the controller; it proposes a new learning architecture for another neural network, the child network, to follow. The child network feeds back to the controller, which updates its decision-making process before delivering its next proposition. It’s basic behavioural psychology. Reinforcement learning: using feedback or reward for training purposes.

“Reduction cells mean that a much smaller dataset can be used to design larger datasets, but any further progress has ground to a halt for years—there wasn’t much anyone could do without large-scale cluster management.”

“Large-scale what?”

“Really fucking big computers. Faster chips.”

“And we don’t have them?”

“Oh, someone does. Google, Nvidia, Intel, Graphcore, a whole bunch of folk. Probably even Astro. Just not me. I’ve got a laptop and a Skinner

box.”

Mas moves closer. When his fingers brush against mine, I don’t move away. He peers into the Skinner box.

“So these guys—”

“The nanites.”

“Right, the nanites. They’re the kids?”

“The child network, right.”

“Like mini-robots.”

“Bots are just automated programs. They mostly replicate what we can already do, so we don’t have to do it.” I look at the pull of his shirt between his broad shoulders and only just manage not to press my palm against it. “Conventional bots are ones and zeros. Nanites are built from DNA.”

He turns. “That’s Don’s field.”

I step back. “Among other things.”

“And this neural network allows them to learn?”

“Sure. It’s the closest learning architecture to biological neural networks in humans. When you’re a baby, different regions of the brain connect to each other in a specific sequence, layer by layer, until the whole brain is mature. Deep learning neural networks do the same thing. It means the nanites can get progressively cleverer without task-specific programming.”

“To do what?”

I shrug. “We’re already using nanotechnology as the silver bullet to fight cancer and neurodegenerative diseases. We can program a swarm to find, target, and kill diseased cells. We’re starting to use scout swarms to identify them before they become diseased cells. But we could do so much more than that. We could link human brains to the cloud via nanites made of AI programs and DNA strands. We could stop ageing, stop illness, expand our neocortex ten thousand-fold.”

He gives me the crooked grin again. “But?”

“The best we’ve managed so far are kludges.”

“What the fuck are kludges?”

“Workarounds. Clumsy, difficult to extend, impossible to maintain. The AI isn’t good enough yet. Hardware or software. Bio-evolution requires one-shot learning. Means no more massive, data-heavy learning algorithms, no more cluster analysis, no more us. An unsupervised

machine learning model with a continuously learning AI program. When someone works out how to do that, that'll be the singularity. Transhumanism."

"Transhumanism? All sounds a bit fucking Skynet to me."

I smile. Pretend that I don't feel sad and bad. Pretend that my goose bumps are only because of the press of his weight behind me, the stroke of his fingers against my skin, and not because he's the first person to listen to me, to give any kind of shit about what I have to say, about what I think, since Boris. "That's the plan."

"That's what you're trying to do?"

"With a laptop and an old-school Skinner box?" I shake my head, dilute my sarcasm with a smile. "I'm more interested in the small stuff, the stuff that they always miss, don't want to sweat; the whole Martians-being-killed-off-by-the-common-cold shtick. Faults, glitches, potential bugs. AI interfaces can be hacked, but I want to know if you can interrupt the deep learning sequence. If you can change it, corrupt it." I look back into the Skinner box. "I want to know if you can do it through behavioural manipulation and conditional stimuli."

"And you can?"

I turn around, look at his eyes, the wide bridge of his nose, his lips, his teeth, his jawline. It's a question he's certain I will know the answer to. If not today, then one day. It makes my face grow hot. It makes my heart beat faster. It makes me want him to touch me. Even though I don't want him to touch me. Even though I know he will anyway.

His palm moves against my face, his fingers push through my hair. "How was he last night?"

"Fine."

He presses his mouth to my temple, my cheekbone, that nearly gone bruise. "Fine is good." He kisses me once, twice, the third time long enough that he and it are finally all that exist.

"When do *I* get my reward?" he whispers.

"For what?"

I can feel his teeth against my skin. "For being in love with you."

I want to feel it, to bask in it, but I can't. I won't. Because we're sprinting now. We're nearly home.

"We can't keep doing this, Mas. *I* can't."

Even though I *am* doing this: one hand rubbing him through his

trousers; the other yanking free his shirt, skating over the big smooth expanse of his back. My mouth as hungry as his, my breath as fast and loud.

“We can.” He lifts me up, presses me hard against that black wall, reaches between us. “We can do whatever we like.”

Heat, heartbeat, clean grass, and coffee.

And it doesn’t matter that I’m here again, doing everything I said I couldn’t—wouldn’t—do again, because I know what happens. What always happens.

“Free will is an illusion,” I whisper.

“Free will is an illusion in a fucking Skinner box, Evie,” he says. “That’s all.”

★ ★ ★

The nanites have proven even less susceptible to torture than reward. I should be glad because it means I can stop, but I’m not. They’re too impervious. Too untouchable. Unreachable. And today, I’m angry. Once you become a test subject, an experiment, you stay one forever. Only in death can you cease to be of use, and even that’s no guarantee. Any animal or bird inside a Skinner box gets that eventually; resigns itself to the fate that’s already theirs. But nanites don’t understand that—*won’t* understand that—no matter what I do or don’t do. I don’t like the unpredictability of people. Of neocortexes. But I *hate* the predictability of nanites. The incorruptibility.

★ ★ ★

He comes into the bathroom as I’m brushing my teeth. As I bend over to spit, he slams my forehead hard against the sink’s steel surround. Roll not straight edge, of course, which is some blessing. It hurts more, but Don can see less. Is rewarded with less. The skin isn’t broken. I don’t bleed for him.

When he grabs hold of my hair, his breath spits against my neck, my cheek. “Boris was your fault. You were the one who fucked up last time. You fuck up again, Evie, and Astro are done with us.”

He pulls me back onto my feet. I’m shaking, numb. He tries to smile, but can’t quite manage it. I get a half-arsed snarling flash of teeth instead.

“I’m watching you. We’re running out of time. You want to keep your pretty boy toy, you don’t fuck up again.”

It’s called workfunction: the energy required to remove electrons from solid to vacuum. To leave behind an empty space ripe for fantasies. I leave without getting dressed. I could sleep in the Nostromo, on its hard plastic couches or at its hard plastic table, but I go to Mas’s quarters instead. Because I’m stupid. Because I go on believing that I’m worth being saved. That I’m not some kind of sad and bad metaphor for a life. Osmium has the highest workfunction of all the elements, because it’s hard and brittle. It’s the densest naturally occurring element of them all.

He’s awake. Naked. He wraps me in him, as if he can undo what’s been done. Maybe he can. If I let him. He lays me alongside him, strokes around and away from what hurts, and I don’t tell him that makes it hurt more.

“I’m going to kill him this time.”

“No, you’re not.”

He sits up, covers me in his shadow. “You think you can stop me?”

I press my fingers into the skin of his chest, hard enough to leave satisfying marks. “What do you think will happen if you storm in there and try to kill him?”

“I’m *going* to kill him.”

“Mas.” I sit up. Wince. “We’re not exactly surrounded by any other six-foot-four brick shithouses. You beat him up, you *kill* him, who do you think they’ll blame?”

He doesn’t smile. “You think I give a fuck what Astro might or might not do weeks, months down the fucking line? Do you think I’m so worried for my own damn self that I’ll just let him go on hurting you?”

We’re doing a lot of *thinking*, I think. Except, of course, we’re not. Not even close.

“You’re not going to do it.”

“You’re telling me not to do it?”

“I told you the last time, and the time before that, and I’m telling you now. No. We have to do it my way.” I close my eyes so I don’t have to look at his. Brown like soil after rain, red threads through the white. “Unless you’re just like him, and what I say—what I fucking *think*—doesn’t matter to you.”

“Hey, hey.” He grabs for me as I roll off the bunk. And only lets go

when I make a sound like he's hurting me. "Evie."

I turn around when I'm sure I can. When I'm sure that I won't change my mind.

"Evie."

He gets up. Stands in front of me—all the big and dark shadows and planes of him—and even though it's me that sways towards him, I'm the one who says, "Don't touch me."

"Evie."

"Leave me alone."

And I end up at the plastic table in the Nostromo after all.

★ ★ ★

"Hey."

"Hey. Thanks."

"I'm sorry," Mas says, taking the coffee mug back out of my hands. "I'm sorry, okay? We'll do it your way. Whatever you want. Okay?"

I touch the pulse at his neck. I smooth the frown lines across his forehead, around his mouth.

"Don't shut me out," he says against my skin. "Don't shut me out."

"I didn't mean to. I'm sorry."

I get down on my knees, and I take his cock into my mouth, and he protests only long enough for me to hear it, to acknowledge that he does.

And I swallow all of him: his cries and breaths and eager ecstasy. I am always hungrier for him than I ever want to admit. To acknowledge.

Afterwards, I sprawl across his lap and stroke his skin, laughing as he shivers, pretends he can stand it.

"I've been thinking," he says, pushing his fingers between mine. "I can reroute the filtration system. Rewire the circuits in the living quarters, the labs."

I tense. Try to extricate myself enough to sit up. "No."

"It would be easy. Quick."

"But—"

"It's safer, Evie." His fingers wind tighter. "Safer than what you want to do."

I look up at him. Swallow. Relax. "Okay."

"Okay?" He blinks.

“Okay. You’re right. The lab’s full of too many variables, too many unknowns. Unstable chemicals, gases, fuck knows what. Your idea is better.”

“I can still make it look like an accident.”

“Okay.” I smile, reach up to kiss him, to put my arms around him so that he’ll put his around me. “But you have to be sure,” I whisper against his cooling skin. “I need you to be sure.”

“Christ,” he says, and his laughter is low, short. “There’s no way you don’t know by now that I’d do anything for you. Anything.”

★ ★ ★

This time isn’t the same as the last time though. I’m good at lying, but lying to yourself is a dangerous habit to get into. One I have always tried to avoid. And the truth is that this time is different. This time, I’ve done less lying than anyone will ever know.

I should probably feel guilty. But I don’t. In the same way that torturing nanites shouldn’t make me feel guilty. But it does.

Guilt is repression. Learned oppression. As constructed, as engineered, as a Skinner box. And shame is misogyny. All those times he mocked me, hit me, raped me, he should have been the one unable to look at himself in the mirror afterwards.

The definition of guilt is the compromising of one’s own standards of conduct and the violating of universal moral standards. It’s bearing responsibility for those compromises, those violations. And its positive reinforcement is remorse.

I will feel no remorse over the murder of my husband. And I will feel no guilt.

None.

★ ★ ★

I wait until he’s been asleep for at least two hours. I count them second by second by second. But still, the moment I ease myself out of the bed, he stirs and opens one eye. Gives me that snidely dismissive grin.

“You got that jungle fever again, baby?”

I nearly don’t answer him. “I need to check on the Skinner box.”

He sits up, and my throat gets tight. “Reaching its climax, is it?” He

grins wider. Winks. “Your experiment.”

I don’t answer. I don’t even breathe in again until I feel the grass under my feet.

I don’t go to my module, to the Skinner box. I don’t go to Mas. Instead, I go back to Boris’s door, key in its old and unchanged code.

It feels strange and it feels familiar. The tightness in my throat gets tighter. I turn the lights on low and silver cool, listen to the clunk and hum of the air filtration system as it switches back on.

He’s still here. Lying naked and flat on his back, on his bunk, his arms by his sides, palms open. His legs long and straight, feet dangling off the bunk’s end. His face calm and relaxed as if he’s asleep: long lashes and high cheekbones, straight solemn mouth. His hair short and white-blond. I can still remember how it felt under my fingers. Sharp and soft.

I have no idea why he is still here. Even though I realise now that I always imagined he was. Always imagined he would be. Perhaps that’s why this is the first time I’ve come back here.

Why haven’t they studied him, taken him apart? Why haven’t they used him for research or spares? It’s a cruelty, of course. It has to be. Even if it’s just one of callous indifference. And I’ll never know. That’s the worst part. I’ll never, ever know why. And neither will he.

I reach for his hand. It’s neither warm nor cold. Its weight is heavy. Inert.

“I’m sorry, Boris. I’m sorry.”

I think of us playing chess in the Nostromo, his long limbs folded underneath him, my feet up on the table. His shy grin when he moved his queen. “Checkmate.”

“What?” My laugh annoyed, because I’ve never managed to lose anything gracefully. “How the hell did you do that?”

A shrug, a shake of his head.

“I call bullshit.” I poured the last of the wine into my glass. “What fucking skill level are you set to? Magnus Carlsen?”

He smiled. “You’re distracted. You would have beaten me last week.” He watched me. “And you’re drinking too much.”

“Ah,” I said, drinking some more. “My mistake. You’re actually set to *Mum*.”

When we heard Don coming out of his lab, we both froze, shut up, until we heard him punching in the entry code to his and my quarters.

“I’m sorry I was such a shit to you last week,” I said. “It wasn’t you I was fucked off with.”

And he gave me the look that I’ve come to associate only with those last bad days. I have nightmares about that look. “I know.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know.”

“I’m just scared, Boris. I’m just nervous. Do you get nervous? Do you get *scared*?”

“Sure. Of course. You know I can.”

“I know you can. I just don’t know if you *do*.”

And he smiled. Just enough to wrinkle the tiny lines around his eyes. Blue and clear. “I do. I am.”

And I reached across the chessboard, put my hand on top of his hand—neither warm nor cold—and squeezed.

We spent the day before the night going over the plan so exhaustively that it left little room for nerves, for being scared. Or so I thought. But when it came time for me to lock myself in my module, I found myself hesitating too long.

“You’re not supposed to be able to kill someone.”

He smiled. “That’s science fiction.”

“I know.” I closed my eyes. “But why are you doing it?”

“Because I have to do what I’m told to do.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Because I have to do what you tell me to do.”

“I love you.” And it wasn’t a lie. But it was also conditioned stimulus. There are lies, and there are lies.

His smile was pure Boris: quick, short, shy. “I can do it. I want to do it.”

And maybe *he* was lying. And maybe he wasn’t. It was always going to be a long shot, I’d known that from the start.

Or maybe he really did believe that he could. But instead, he committed digital hara-kiri. He came into this room and lay down on this bunk and disembowelled his algorithms, his IPUs and TPUs, his motor functions.

Boris was never just an automated program. Something to replicate what we can already do. A soft tissue composite over aluminium bones and silicone chips. He was never, ever only ones and zeros.

He trusted me. And I let him down.

I'm a scientist. I'm supposed to look at problems clinically, rationally, dispassionately. The most powerful of all scientific obstacles is an unconscious sense of guilt. I used to think the hole left behind by those escaped electrons was that obstacle. Where terrible fantasies breathed and grew and wanted. But it never was. Those fantasies have allowed me more freedom, more possibility, than a lifetime of research or conditioning. They have allowed me to plan my husband's death. To be certain of it. But if the definition of guilt is bearing responsibility for my own compromises and violations, then I *should* feel guilty about fucking it up. Allowing it to be fucked up. And I should feel even guiltier for allowing this to happen to Boris. For carrying on even after it did. As if I didn't.

My heart is beating fast again. My fingers and skin tingle. I want to run. I want to *do*. Instead, I lean over him, press my fingers to his cheek as I kiss his cool, smooth forehead.

"Thank you for trying," I whisper. "Thank you for wanting to try."

★ ★ ★

When Mas tries the door to my module, he finds it locked. He knocks once, low and quick. And I close my eyes until I hear him go. Until I'm sure he's gone.

I look down into the Skinner box. I look up at the black wall behind it.

I know now how you punish a nanite. You don't inflict damage. You don't destroy. You just threaten to take away what they have. What you've allowed them to have. Every little thing that you've ever given them. And then they are as fragile, as corruptible, as the rest of us.

But I don't feel glad to know it. I don't feel vindicated. I don't feel triumphant. I only barely resist saying sorry to them too.

★ ★ ★

I don't choose the same location, the same time. That would feel too much like a bad omen, I suppose, even though I don't believe in them.

I tell Mas we have to wait until we're zero point one two AU from Mars. Zero point six five from Earth. Sixty point four five million miles from home. Zero point zero nine light-hours. Five point four light-minutes. Four weeks. And one day.



I go to my module, stare at the nanite data without seeing it, without reading it. Wait until I hear Don going into the path lab. Wait some more.

When I knock on the door to Mas's quarters, he opens it as if he's been standing right on the other side. Perhaps he has been. His face is relaxed, his expression blank, but he can't hide what's inside his eyes.

Do you get nervous? Do you get scared?

I think of Boris's eyes. Blue and clear. *I do. I am.*

"Ready?"

Mas nods.

"Okay. Are you sure you—"

"I'm sure, Evie."

"And it's all set?"

He's impatient. His fingers are twitching to push me aside. Whether it's because he can't wait to murder Don or because his resolve is finite shouldn't matter. But, of course, it does.

"Tell me why."

"What? Evie, we don't have time for this. If I don't open the filtration tank now I'll miss the window. Go back to your module, like we decided. Lock yourself in, and use the mask just in case, okay?" He grabs hold of my hands. His are icy cold. "Go. Go now!"

"Tell me why you're doing this."

He blinks. His impatience stalls. Softens. "Because he hurts you. Because I love you."

I let go of his hands. Put my arms around his neck and push my body hard against his. "Because it's what I want?"

"Because it's what you want."

I wait until he relaxes enough to put his hands around my waist. "I'm sorry." And then I push him with everything I've got. When he stumbles, I step back into the bubbling corridor, hit the Close Door button.

Boris taught me how to reprogram the codes; it was laughably easy. Too easy. By the time Mas has recovered enough to try and open the door again, he can't.

He looks at me through the small plexiglass window. He's shouting, shaking his head. Now, he looks nervous. Now, he looks scared.

But he shouldn't.

All I can see are the red threads of blood in his eyes.
“I’m sorry,” I say again.
Because I am.

★ ★ ★

Don is bent over the largest of his anaerobic chambers, the one directly underneath the main carbon air filter and fan. I watch his back, the stillness of his absorption. He has always found microorganisms better companions than anything—anyone—two hundred thousand times bigger.

I clear my throat, and he spins around, wrenching his hands out of the gloves. He visibly relaxes when he sees it’s me, but his frown is quick to return when he sees the two tumblers of whisky.

“It’s not time yet.”

I don’t reply. Walk through the brilliantly glaring white. Hold his tumbler out until he takes it.

He looks down at it and then up at me. “He said no.” His lips twitch and his eyes gleam. “He fucking said no.”

I don’t reply. I swallow my whisky in one. The burn takes away some of his sting.

“I must admit I thought you had it in the bag, Evie.” He’s crowing, even though my failure would be bad news for us both. Probably the end of these missions, of Astro’s interest in us.

He lifts his tumbler, throws back the whisky the same way as I did. And I see that he *is* mad. Fury rages in his eyes, his grin. He just can’t help crowing too. “Guess a real man is beyond your skill set after all.”

And it’s not exactly shame that I feel. Not the same shame, at least, that I’ve been feeling for years. Nor is it failure. It’s a kind of horrified wonder. A wonder that I was ever able to do it. To keep doing it.

With Boris, it had been interest, friendship, love. Disinterest, abandonment, stripping his OS of the things he had learned and earned. With Mas it had been no different. Except for the sex. Pleasure and its withdrawal is the most effective reward and punishment model of them all. A Skinner box doesn’t have to be a torture chamber. Not unless you’ve exhausted its every other function.

Boris knew and Mas didn’t. That’s the real difference. Boris knew that enough unconditioned stimuli had made pressing that operandum lever

become second nature. A conditioned response. And he knew that pressing that lever was the want, the desire—the need—to kill Don. And I’d put it there.

“I couldn’t do it,” I say. “He wanted to, he’d planned to. But I couldn’t let him.”

Don’s fury turns brighter. “Jesus Christ. The neuroscientist has fallen in love with her lab rat, is that it?”

When I don’t answer, he throws his empty tumbler across the lab. It shatters loud against the door. “You’d jeopardise all of this—our entire mission—for a good fuck?” He shakes his head. “It must be true what they say: white women love big black cock. Is that what—”

“Stop it.”

But there’s something behind his white-hot rage. Something cooler and darker that glitters and turns.

Fear subsumes unease. That something is *something*. And I don’t know what.

“All this time I’ve been saddled with you,” he says, “and I never realised what a fucking *coward* you are.”

It’s satisfaction. A satisfaction ordinarily reserved for the finding of new disease strains or more effective base carriers, antimicrobial agents. It’s hiding behind all that mocking fury, but it’s there. And it’s bigger. Much bigger.

“Don—”

“You’re such a fucking disappointment, Evie.”

And I’m running out of time to find out what that satisfaction means. What he thinks I have or haven’t done. Panic makes me reckless, foolish. Even before I rush him, I already know he’s going to go for the Taser StrikeLight that he would have used on Mas instead.

It feels cold and surprisingly painful against my ribs. But I’m close enough now that I can lean into his shoulder, whisper into his ear: “What is it? What are you hiding from me? Tell me.”

He snorts.

“Please, Don. Please.”

And maybe he hears something in my voice. More probably, he senses that something cooler and darker that glitters and turns behind *my* rage. It has, after all, been there a lot longer.

“Evie. What have you done?”

Or maybe he just starts to feel the pain.

He suddenly jackknifes, doubles over enough that he pushes me backwards. He grunts, coughs, goes down onto his knees, clutching his stomach.

“Don. What is it? What are you hiding? You fucking bastard. Tell me!”

“What the—” He blinks up at me. Tries to glare. Tries to snarl. Tries to grab. To catch. To hold. “*What* the fuck have you done to me?”

But I don’t have to tell him. He already knows. I wonder if he can feel the nanites eating their way out through his oesophagus, his stomach. Corrupted, conditioned, hungry for a disease that isn’t there.

“Turn them off! I know you can. Ev—” He lets out a scream: thin and wheezed through gritted teeth. I can hear them grinding. He spasms, coughs. His blood sprays through the white, glaring space, spatters against the white gloss tiles.

Still on his hands and knees, he brings up the Taser gun, points it at my face, my chest. And I wonder if he’ll kill me.

I see the moment that he realises I will kill him. I *am* killing him. His face goes grey, except for two spots of pink high on his cheekbones. And I can read every emotion that passes through his eyes. Surprise, fear, incredulity. Maybe even admiration. A whisper of apologies drifting around me like spring blossoms, cool and white. Hydrangeas and pearl beads in my hair.

And he knows, he knows—there’s no turning back now, if there ever was. But still he tries. “You don’t want this!” His voice hoarse and entirely changed; his blood slowing, thickening. “Please ... make it stop! Do it! You can do it. Please!”

I make myself stay. I make myself wait. I make myself look at him.

The gun weaves drunkenly. Don lets out a howl, followed by a darker arc of blood that misses me by inches. Then, and only then, do the nanites finally deliver their payload. Enough ketamine to kill a dozen men.

He slumps face-first onto the tiles. His glasses crack. His booties squeak.

“Free will is an illusion,” I say into the quiet, and my voice shakes so badly I almost bite my tongue, “in a Skinner box.”

★ ★ ★

I wake up on a plastic bench in the Nostromo. My first thought isn't for Don, it's for Mas. Still locked inside his quarters.

It's only when I get up and start for the door that I register I'm not alone.

He's sitting on the bench opposite, one leg crossed over the other. He looks like all the other Astro suits: tall, slim, mildly interested.

"Where did you come from?"

He smiles indulgently. "I've been here all the time, Evie."

I think of the long corridors lined with bubbling tubes of algae and tanks of recycling water. All those locked white doors. "I don't understand."

He shrugs, as if this is of no matter. When the silence between us stretches thin enough to break, I clear my throat. "Is he dead? Is Don—"

This earns me a chuckle. "Yeah, he's dead."

"I'm sorry." Even though I'm not.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Evie." He gives me another of those patronising smiles.

"I couldn't let you do it. I couldn't let you destroy Mas the way you did Boris."

"Why not?"

"Why *not*?" I want to punch the lazy smirk off his face. I want to pour a cocktail of nanites down his throat. "Because Boris was bad enough—wrong enough—and Mas ... Mas isn't a fucking robot!"

"Ah."

I suffer a bad image of this bloody man—who I already know will never, ever tell me his name—sitting inside one of those locked white rooms, watching Mas and me fucking on a screen, and I can't bear it. I can't bear any of it. I feel more lightheaded, more sick, than I did while I was watching Don die.

"What difference does it fucking make anyway? He was going to do it. He had agreed to do it."

"But he didn't *actually* do it."

"He wouldn't have been allowed to actually do it, you prick."

A shrug. "Semantics."

"Okay," I say, pretending to back down, because it's the only course of action that will have any kind of effect. Astro suits really are predictable,

unreachable. Impervious. “I fucked up. I allowed myself to become involved, prejudiced. But he would have done it, and you know it.” I sit again, press my palms against my cheeks, my stinging eyelids. “Just let me out of contract. I’m not the right person for this job. I’m not. I’ll just keep fucking it up.”

“Is that a threat or a promise, Evie?”

I shake my head. I’m not sure.

“You volunteered for this,” he says, in that maddeningly impenetrable voice.

“I know that! But Boris and Mas aren’t simulations, for fuck’s sake. They aren’t rats. I thought I could do it. I thought it would be the same. But it wasn’t. It isn’t.” I stand up. My face is burning hot. I’m clenching my hands in and out of fists. I’m making it too easy for him. “Where’s Mas? This isn’t his fault.”

“Obviously it’s not his fault.” He looks up at me, shrugs. “He’s fine. He’s being debriefed. He’ll be paid off, given the usual spiel, and then sent on his way.”

I know this is a lie. They might well do all those things, but he’ll never truly be let go. After all, once you become a test subject, an experiment, you stay one forever.

I try to shrug back. Strive for the same cool calm. It used to be easier. “Whether he did it or not, the hypothesis is validated. Mas would have committed murder as a direct result of conditioned stimuli; Boris did not.”

Another shrug. “All variables in any experiment must be controlled.”

“For God’s sake! I fucked up at the end. At the end! Don was—Don was...” And it suddenly occurs to me that I haven’t once thought about what happens to me now. What they will do about what I have done. “I can’t do this again,” I say, having decided upon that being the worst punishment of all. “I *won’t* do this again.”

“Evie,” he says. “Don signed up for this, signed the same disclaimers you did. What happened was unfortunate”—another shrug—“but these things *do* happen.” He stands up, smooths his palms down his trouser legs. “In any case, you’re mostly right. The hypothesis is validated. And now we are left in a bit of a quandary.”

“What do you mean?”

“If the hypothesis was which is more suitable, more adaptable as a companion, a colleague to long-haul interplanetary—and perhaps one day,

interstellar—travel, which then has proved preferable? A morally incorruptible robot that will irreversibly shut down to avoid doing harm? Or an eminently corruptible human being who will agree to commit murder for pussy?” He smiles, and I am suddenly—inexplicably—frightened.

“I know what the fucking hypothesis—”

Two shrugs. Short and quick. “Or for cock?”

“*What?*” I go cold. I can feel it run straight down through me like a shiver. A river.

“You don’t need to worry, Evie,” he says, closing the distance between us and patting my arm. “In this experiment, all the variables were very well controlled.”

I think of Don. Of that something cool and dark glittering and turning behind his white-hot rage. I step back out of the suit’s reach. “*What do you mean?*”

“Your loyalty to Masego is admirable. But it’s somewhat misguided.”

I decide to stop speaking.

“He’s not an engineer. He’s barely in the fiftieth percentile. You know, I’m surprised, with that big IQ of yours, that you never worked that out. Although,” he flicks something I can’t see off his trousers, “I guess he kept you otherwise occupied.”

“What the fuck. Do. You. Mean?”

He sighs. “The experiment. The hypothesis. Who needs an engineer? Who *cares* about an engineer? A computer could do what Masego was capable of doing.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Yes, you do.”

And I do. I close my eyes. Think of Don’s violence, his cruelties. Boris’s friendship, Mas’s comfort. Don’s hate. Their love. Don’s moments of agonising kindness. Boris’s periodic withdrawal. Mas’s occasional anger, more frequent disappointment.

“I’m the experiment. I’m the subject.”

Another sigh, this one less patient. “You’re the hypothesis.” He tilts his head. “Can a cognitive neuroscientist be fooled? Can an expert in the field of deep learning and AI evolution be unknowingly coerced? Can a genius be corrupted? Can a manipulator be manipulated?”

“No. No.” And I’m shaking my head. Not because I can’t be, not

because I haven't been. But because I never even suspected. I trusted all of them. Even my husband. And it's so obvious now. So simple. Like a rat in a cage. Pressing a lever when a light goes green. Positive and negative conditioning. Reward and punishment. Want, desire, fear, loathing, pleasure. And their response, their conditioned stimulus, was never the murder of Don. The lever that I pushed was killing him to save someone else.

"Sit down, Evie."

I know he'll wait until I do. So I do. My legs are shaking too hard not to. "I spared Mas," I say. When I'm sure I can. "I didn't—I wouldn't have—spared Boris."

He sits down opposite me, shows me his open palms. Smiles. Smiles. "And there you have it. The quandary. We want, we need, invaluable scientists like you on our spaceships. But these experiments prove time and time again that human on human doesn't work in these environments, not for any significant length of time—certainly not the time it would require to travel beyond our own system. And neither—albeit in very different ways—does robot and human." He blinks, recrosses his legs. "So, given these outcomes, what would you suggest Astro's next hypothesis should be?"

I'm angry. I'm hurt and I'm fucking furious. But most of all, I'm horrified. Suddenly. Horrified that inside the space of one solar system—eight point four AU, seven hundred and eighty-one million miles, one point one six light-hours, sixty-nine point six light-minutes—I've become a murderer. Inside the space of twelve months. One year. And whether it was because I was manipulated or conditioned; whether it was for me or for Mas doesn't matter. I did it. And until now, I didn't even care that I'd done it.

"Come on, Evie." The Astro suit's stubborn smile slips. "Earn the investment that we've made in you."

I want to snarl at him. It's in my chest, my neck, the muscles around my mouth. "Do you want me to answer personally or scientifically?"

"Both."

"Fine." I feel cold, restless. Tense like a bowstring. "I wouldn't put fucking people on spaceships at all."

He doesn't do what I thought he'd do. He grins with every one of his teeth. He actually looks excited, which is terrifying. "Bingo."

I look at him. And I look at him. And that cold burns right out of me until I'm shaking and sweating so hard I can't see. "No."

"Yes."

I stand up. My knees are shaking. My hands are squeezing in and out of tighter fists. "I didn't volunteer for this, did I?"

"No." Another grin. "You didn't."

"No." My voice is thin, high, alien. "No."

"I wasn't permitted to tell you," he says, pressing his lips together in what I think is meant to be an expression of sympathy.

"What am I?"

He smiles. Like a bird. A magpie. "You were made in a lab, Evie. You're the first of your kind."

"What am I?"

"You know what you are."

I have ego. I have agency and independent thought. I feel pain, and I feel guilt, and I feel remorse. I remember my wedding. I remember my first day of school. I remember my mother.

"Evie—"

"What am I?"

He's no longer even pretending to smile. "Stop panicking. I don't want to have to give you another shot."

He restrains me easily, his breath fanning cool against my cheek until I make myself limp and he lets me go.

"Tell me what I am."

"No. You tell me."

I slump back onto the bench. I am me. My teeth chatter, my skin puckers. I am nervous. I am scared. I am an unsupervised machine learning model with a continuously learning AI program.

I am bio-evolution.

I am one-shot learning.

I am the singularity.

"I'm transhuman."

He laughs, short and sharp, as if I should be pleased. "You are transhuman."

"Did Don know?" It's a stupid and entirely pointless question. I already know the answer. Tremors shake through me like aftershocks.

"Of course he—"

“Was he like me? Is he—”

But he puts out my feeble little fire with a snort. “He was the bio-lead in designing and making you.”

You’re such a fucking disappointment, Evie.

“Did they all—” I realise that I’m crying only when I can no longer see or draw breath.

He reaches across the space between us, grabs for my arm again. “I *will* give you another shot, Evie.”

Of course they all knew. Of course they did. They are the controller and I am the child network. I remember what they have created for me. I feel what they have chosen for me. I have what they have given me. Through feeders and electrified floors and operandum levers. I do what they have decided I should do.

Free will is an illusion after all.

“I know this is a shock. But you can withstand a lot worse.”

I try to swallow. I probably have a spec. A manual. A troubleshooting intranet page.

“Now, you shouldn’t have killed him. You were programmed to resist the stimuli. But this time you didn’t. And that *is* a problem.” He shrugs again as if we’re discussing rising damp. “But, again, not an insurmountable one.”

I stare across at him. At the long fingers he dangles between his legs, the purple of the veins at his wrists. The smile, smile, *smile* that never reaches the grey of his eyes.

“A few more tweaks yet, Evie. Seems you’re not as incorruptible as we’d hoped.”

I’m breathing loud through my nose like a bull. When I get up again, he gets up again. When I look at the Nostromo’s exit, he looks at it too. When I frown, he smiles.

“You *are* free to go, Evie.”

I run without being sure that I can. Past the living quarters, the bunk rooms, the labs, the stairs down to Engineering. My module and the Skinner box. I don’t look at any of them any more than I do all those faceless locked white doors.

At the airlock, I stop. Key in my code over and over again until he comes up alongside me, smile intact.

“Not quite yet,” he says. “Six minutes to landing.”

And it only then occurs to me that I must have lain on that bloody plastic bench for twenty-nine days.

I lean against the nanotube wall, count my breaths and listen to the fast streams and hot springs. Sink down onto the grass when my knees finally give out. Wait.

When I hear the exterior hiss and exhale of depressurisation, I scramble back onto my feet. Watch for the entry pad to turn green.

When it does, I key in my numbers again, step back as the mechanisms start vibrating, clunking, turning. “I want to see Mas.”

Smile. Shrug. “You won’t be seeing him again.”

“Fuck you.”

I have never, ever managed to lose anything gracefully.

A breath of air. Its whisper. Promise.

He looks at me, squeezes my shoulders hard. “We’ll call you when we need you again. You behave, and we’ll set you up with the man—or woman—of your dreams next time.”

And then I really do want to pour a cocktail of nanites down his throat.

Instead, I push open the airlock.

Climb up out of my Skinner box.

I feel him watch me go. When I turn back around, he winks at me, reaches up for the hatch.

“See you next simulation, Evie.”

And then I’m just standing in the middle of a desert of petrified wood and badlands. Cliffs and canyons of sandstone and limestone, painted with grey- and red-coloured bands like Jupiter’s angry atmosphere. Alone.

★ ★ ★

It’s less of an oasis than a truck stop with no trucks. Except those that once a month restock the shitty little shack-shop with Coca-Cola and curly fries; the even shittier little lean-to bar with bad beer and peanuts.

The white barman has dreads and a Che Guevara T-shirt. He always listens to terrible reggae. An Astro suit perches on a barstool, drinks tomato juice, and does a bad job of pretending not to look at me. There is another, I know, inside the shop, pretending to shoot the shit with the till guy, who has no till. No bloody customers. I have been here so many times, and yet it never feels familiar. Never feels like a respite from either

before or after.

I shift in my seat, trace the cool beads of sweat at the neck of my bottle of bad beer. I look at my watch. The SUV will come in another two hours. Will take me to a crap hotel in Tucson, where I will spend hours, days, weeks pretending to have fun. Shopping, swimming, shagging. Telling myself that the minute I think of somewhere else—somewhere better—to go, I'll go.

When Mas yanks back the wicker chair opposite me and sits down, the Astro suit practically falls off his stool.

"Are you okay?"

"What?" I seize inside like a clock's movement locking up: its wheels and pinion gears wound so tight it cannot move, cannot function. I try to stand up, my boots scrabbling for purchase on the hot rocky ground. "You're not ... What the fuck are you doing here? ... I don't—"

When he reaches for me with his big hands, I rear back, knock over my beer bottle. Watch it spin and fizz, because it's something to look at other than him.

"They told you." His voice is flat.

And of course, I want to say, *Why didn't you tell me?* too badly to say anything at all.

"How *could* I tell you?" he says. And his eyes are so clear. "Baby, *how* could I tell you?"

And maybe they are valid questions. I don't know any more.

"Evie," he says, and moves just enough that he gives me momentary respite from the bright dry sun, places his cool hands over mine.

I'm no one's baby. I'm not even anyone's Evie. I'm like those nanites chasing through Don on a corrupted, manipulated program. I probably don't even have a name. I'm probably a number. Just like a prisoner. A killer.

"I'm a fucking cyborg."

"Jesus Christ." He gets up, comes around the table, lifts me out of my chair like I'm a bag of groceries, and I'm too busy grabbing hold of him, too busy pressing every part of me against him to care. To think.

He holds me as I cry, as I choke, as I retch, as I forget and then remember how to breathe. He rubs my back, he kisses my hair, whispers apologies that aren't cool and white like spring blossoms, but hot and fierce and furious like a funnelled vortex of fire and wind.

“Here,” he whispers, when my grief finally runs out of fuel. I feel the sharp cool press of something metal against my palm. “Take this and go as far and as fast as you can.”

I go still. I become calm. I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. Press my face against his neck. Smooth my free hand against his scalp, his big shoulder.

“It’s a tracker,” he says against my skin.

I don’t doubt for a minute that I already have a tracker, embedded so deep in my code that I will never recognise it. But this. This is something I can throw away. This is something that at any time I can choose to throw away. Or keep.

Maybe it’s just more conditioned stimuli. Because you threaten to take away what they have. What you’ve allowed them to have. What you’ve given them. And they have to know that he is what I want. They have to know that *he* is the man of my dreams.

But I am unbalanced. I have no electrons left. Only empty space and fantasies. Where nothing that was once me lives. They probably *don’t* know that. I’m not hard and brittle like osmium. I am not impervious. Untouchable. Unreachable. I have never been satisfied with what they have allowed me to have. What they have given me. And I am not predictable. I didn’t do what they had hypothesised I would do.

“There’s a Hummer half a mile northwest,” Mas says. “The keys are in the ignition. Go. Now.”

“I can’t. We can’t.”

“We can.” His smile is brilliant. “We can do whatever we like.”

And it’s not the Astro suit at the bar, now speaking frantically into a satellite phone, that finally convinces me, it’s remembering that any animal or bird inside a Skinner box eventually resigns itself to the fate that’s already theirs. Eventually understands that once you become a test subject, an experiment, you stay one forever. My mistake was believing that this was only a bad thing. Was only giving up. But the nanites knew better. They knew it was freedom. And they are my children. They are *my* child network.

I kiss him. I let him kiss me.

Heat, heartbeat, clean grass, and coffee.

“I’ll find you, Evie,” Mas whispers. He draws back from me, cups my face in his hands. “There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you. Remember?”

He is my reward. Because I have earned him. In so many ways, I have created him. He is my man.

“They’ll probably never stop,” I say.

“I know. But it doesn’t matter.” He still goes on smiling. And I see that he is nervous, I see that he is scared. And that it doesn’t matter. “The world is our Skinner box, Evie.”

I climb off his lap. The Astro suit climbs off his stool. Behind me, I can hear the creaking squeal of the shitty little shack-shop door.

Mas stands up, grins so wide all I can see is his teeth. “You go now. I’ll take care of them.” And he winks with those eyes the colour of soil after rain.

But I shake my head.

I want to wonder what’s behind locked doors. I want to open them. Freedom is only free will. That’s all it’s ever been.

“We’ll take care of them.”

And when I rip through the stitches in my suit’s sleeve, and pull out the tiny vial of nanites, I grin with all of my teeth too.



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THE NEW PROMETHEUS

MICHAEL SWANWICK

The New Prometheus

MICHAEL SWANWICK

illustration by

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TOR·COM 

The Arctic wastes stretched wide in every direction, vast and irregular plains of ice which seemed to have no end. At their center, barely visible in the weak light provided by a sliver of sun at the horizon, was a rapidly moving sled. It was pulled by eight dogs with a single wolf at their lead, and ridden by a large man bundled in Sami furs.

Ritter welcomed the cold and hardship as an opportunity to test his manhood against Nature at its harshest. The scarf wrapped about his lower face was stiff with ice frozen from the moisture of his exhalations and what little of his skin was exposed to the air felt numb. When he bit off a mitten and pressed a hand over his eyebrows, the flesh beneath was warmed to life again and began to sting. The air was still and that, he had to admit, was good for it allowed Freki to follow the scent of their prey with ease.

He had pursued the half-man from Europe and was prepared to pursue him to the Pole if necessary. He was sure it would not be, however, for the traces of the homunculus's passage had not been erased from the snows. Ritter was close on his trail.

A nub appeared on the horizon.

Ritter drew up the sled and, taking out a pair of binoculars superior to anything he could have imagined a year ago, studied the anomaly. Under magnification, it revealed itself to be a canvas tent that had been insulated by stacking up blocks of snow on all sides and piling more loose snow over its top.

Methodically, Ritter disentangled the sled dogs from the harness. Then he gave them a mental push to trot back a mile or so the way they had come and wait for him. If he died, his hold over the dogs would cease and then they must do their best to survive on their own. Ritter was not sure that they could. But at least they would have a chance.

He heaped snow over the sled, so that it looked like any other unimportant lump of landscape, then lay down behind it where he could not be seen. He was far from convinced such precautions were necessary.

But he had underestimated the creature's abilities in Helsinki and would not do so again.

Then he sent Freki ahead to serve as his ambassador.

The wolf loped across the snow and, upon reaching the tent, scrambled at the canvas door. Then, when hands from within pushed it open, he rolled over on his back, exposing his stomach.

The homunculus looked down on the wolf and smiled. Kneeling, he stroked the animal's underside and scratched it behind one ear. So far as Ritter could tell, he did not project his consciousness into Freki's mind for even an instant. Nevertheless, the creature said aloud, "You are a diplomatic fellow, whoever you are. Come and talk to me. I promise no harm will come to you."

Ritter stood, brushing off snow, and began the long trudge toward the tent.



"The safest thing would be to kill him on sight," Sir Toby had said. He and Ritter were in his London office, a walnut-paneled room frowsty with cigar smoke and casual treachery.

"I am no assassin. If murder is your intent, send a professional."

"So I did, three of them. This is no ordinary man. Indeed, by most accounts, he is hardly a man at all."

In Ritter's experience, when his superior emphasized the inhuman nature of an opponent, whether physical, mental, or moral, he intended actions such as no decent man would visit on a fellow member of human society. Scowling, he said, "How do you mean?"

"He is a homunculus—an artificial man. There were reports—as reliable as such things can ever be—that the Mongolian Wizard had created a being with powers exceeding even his own. You will read them on your way to Helsinki. He is reputedly of great stature, inhumanly strong, and capable of wielding every known form of magic. For reasons yet unknown, this prodigy broke free of his creator and fled westward. There were several desperate attempts to recapture him. That caught our interest. Then his pursuers simply turned around and went home. Which by itself convinced me that such a being is too dangerous to be allowed loose in the world. While on the run, he somehow managed to acquire a great deal of wealth. Currently, he is using it to provision a ship. A

schooner awaits you at the docks. If you leave immediately, you can intercept him before he departs for wherever he is bound.” Sir Toby fell silent. After a long pause, he said irritably, “Why are you still here?”

“I’m not sure I understand what you expect of me.”

“Use your own judgment. You have a certain ... flexibility in these matters.”

Ritter had never before been accused of flexibility. He decided to receive the declaration as praise. Nevertheless, he said, “If I must kill him, I will. However, I require full autonomy in this affair. It is entirely possible I will end up letting this fellow remain alive and at large.”

Sir Toby sighed. “So be it.”

★ ★ ★

“I am prepared to offer you asylum,” Ritter said, “in exchange for what you know about the Mongolian Wizard. You will be given a modest stipend for as long as you need it, an apartment of your own, assistance in finding work, a new identity. By this time next year, you will be a citizen of London like any other.”

The homunculus laughed. “A grotesque like me?”

“You are a little tall, perhaps. But not beyond the range of human possibility.”

“It was you who shot at me at the docks, wasn’t it?”

“I had no choice. You rebuffed my invitation to parlay and the ship was pulling out.” Watching the man’s eyes and seeing in them no trace of intemperance, Ritter decided to take a chance. “I hit you too. You grimaced, clutched your chest, and bent over. I am certain that I saw blood. But when you straightened again, it was gone.”

“You hit my heart, yes. Any other man would have died then and there. But I did not. Would you like me to tell you why?”

“It is my most fervent hope that you will.”

“I was born by immaculate conception.” The homunculus was a handsome fellow, though his extreme height—he was a good eight feet tall—rendered even that alarming. He had given Ritter a barrel of salt pork for a chair and himself sat cross-legged on his sleeping pallet, putting their eyes on the same level. “Do you know how that works?”

“I am afraid that I do not.”

“It is a gruesome process. First the skeleton is assembled from the

living bones of various animals. Human bones would not do, for it was desired to give me the features and physiognomy of a god. Bones taken from dead creatures would be ... dead. So animals were required to suffer. It took a phalanx of surgical wizards just to keep the skeleton viable while muscles and cartilage were attached, nerves grown to interlace the flesh, organs coaxed into interaction, skin convinced to cover all ... More magical talents were employed in my creation than for any other single purpose in human history. It is doubtful that anyone but my father—for so I consider him—could have arranged for such a thing. And even he had to effectively bring the war to a standstill to free up the resources necessary for it.”

“I’m sorry—which war was this?”

“The current one. Difficult though this may be for you to believe, I was created barely six months ago.” The homunculus proceeded to tell his tale.

★ ★ ★

My earliest memories are of combat. Day after day, I was drilled to exhaustion in all the martial arts. My father I never saw. His place was taken by a weapons master, a pompous but capable Austrian named Netzke who taught me to fight with dagger, sword, pistol, rifle, and singlestick. Specialists were brought in to train me in fisticuffs and various other forms of bare-handed combat. Herr Waffenmeister Netzke worked me hard. At the time, I had the understanding of a child for I was mere weeks old, and it did not occur to me that I had any choice but to obey him.

At night, as I was falling asleep, I heard voices. At first, they were a soft murmuring, as of a not very distant sea. But day by day they grew louder and more insistent, as if they were saying something I needed to know but could not understand.

When I asked Netzke about the sounds and what they meant, instead of raising his fist to strike me as I’d more than half expected, he looked thoughtful. “They mean we must accelerate your training,” he said, and the very next day he brought in a wizard to tutor me in pyrokinesis—a much more likable fellow than Netzke by far, the Margrave von und zu Venusberg.

★ ★ ★

A harsh cry involuntarily escaped Ritter's lips.

"I'm sorry, is the margrave someone you knew?"

"He is my uncle. A most excellent man and one who disappeared when Bavaria was overrun. I can scarce believe he would betray his own country. I ... No, pray continue. Forgive me for interrupting."

The homunculus placed a hand on Ritter's shoulder. "He would not have had any say in the matter. The Mongolian Wizard has ways of converting talented people to his cause. But allow me to return to my story and, though it is not a happy one, perhaps you will find some small measure of comfort in it."

★ ★ ★

It was the margrave who convinced Netzke that I was being overworked. "You are like the swordsmith who heats his creation red hot," he said, "and then quenches it in oil, only to return it to the furnace again, back and forth, over and over, until the metal is so brittle it will break with the first blow struck in battle. Your charge has a brain—he must learn to use it as well as his brawn."

Hearing the logic of those words, Netzke agreed, though reluctantly. So the margrave set out to teach me how to read. After the first hour of his ministrations, I grew impatient. "Explain to me the principles of this skill," I demanded. And when he had done so, I astonished him by picking up the text he was using as an exemplar, Caesar's *Commentaries on the Gallic War*, and reading the first several pages aloud.

Thus, I gained access to my father's library.

I was in Heaven. In short order, I read Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives*, and, most sublime of all, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. From there, I went on to Rousseau and Kant and Locke and Descartes and Spinoza and Hobbes and, oh, so many more! I entered the library little more than an animal. Reading books made me human.

Perhaps it was coincidence, perhaps not. That evening something broke open within me. I realized that the sounds I heard were words, though neither spoken nor written. I was eavesdropping on the private thoughts of those around me: their fears, greeds, lusts, hatreds ... It was not a pleasant experience. Much of this, I have since learned, came from my being in a nexus of worldly power, which necessarily drew to it, like flies to rotting meat, the worst exemplars of humankind. But even in the best of men there

are dark thoughts and unwelcome fantasies. Had I lived in a monastery, the minds of the holy brothers would have been a torment to endure. And, having mastered literacy, my weapons training began anew. Only now, understanding—or so I thought—their intent, the exercises were repugnant to me.

At such a miserable time, your uncle was a godsend. In me, I think, he saw the mirror of his own unhappiness. We both despised our situations yet could see no way free of them. Young though I was, he spoke to me as if I were his equal, freely sharing his doubts and regrets. He was, as I am sure you know, a good man. From him I learned that to be human was not necessarily to be evil.

“Sir?” I asked him once. “Why is the world in books so much better than the world in life?”

After a long, thoughtful silence, the margrave replied, “People often relate arguments they have had and claim to have said things they only thought of later. Novels are life lived as it should have been and factual works such as essays and history are thought laid out without the false starts, blind alleys, and easy assumptions we experience in the event. That’s all.”

“I intend to think clearly the first time, and to live life without making mistakes.”

It was a callow thing to say, but the margrave only replied, “Well, perhaps you will be the first man to manage that trick. In any event, I encourage you to try.”

The margrave also taught me the rudiments of projecting fire with one’s thought, a skill I have since expanded far beyond anything he could ever have envisaged. As with reading, this skill opened new worlds to me. All forms of magic are but expressions of a single talent—I see you nodding, as if you had already suspected as much—limited only by the mental capacity of its possessor. Most people can wield this talent not at all. An elite class can, with training, master a single skill toward which they have a predisposition. And scattered here and there are a handful of extraordinary individuals who can master two or even three skills without being destroyed by them.

There are many such skills. In short order, I became the master of them all.

Word of my accomplishments spread swiftly through the court. We

were housed in an ancient castle near the Russian border—by your expression, you know which one—whose windows had been bricked up and courtyards covered over to prevent men like yourself sending goshawks or the like to eavesdrop upon us. Though I more than once fancied I heard faint thoughts emanating from behind the wainscoting, which suggested you had spies diminutive enough to ride mice through small openings in the masonry. Be that as it may, the castle was a dark place.

So it was in a gloomy chamber insufficiently lit by whale-oil lamps that Netzke showed me off before a crowd of high-ranking officials. “This is our big day, eh?” he said, rubbing his hands together. Then he ran me through my paces. I bent iron at a distance, levitated, ran a dagger through my hand and then closed and healed the resulting wound, and made a dead rabbit hop and then, rising up on two legs, dance a gavotte. Finally, for the climax, Netzke commanded me to destroy a dummy tied to a cross at the far side of the room. Nothing could have been simpler. With a thought, I turned it to ashes—and burnt off the eyebrows of those who stood too close to the dummy, to boot.

The crowd broke into spontaneous applause. They were all smiles.

But I could read their dark, ambitious thoughts.

The Mongolian Wizard—even in his own court, he had no other name—was away on business of the Empire. But now Netzke announced that, my education being complete, he would be sent for and that within a fortnight, I would meet my father at last.

More applause.

I told you that animals had to be cruelly abused to create my frame. Only one animal could donate the materials that make up my four-lobed brain—the human animal. I had known this fact from very early on. My readings then made me aware of how vile a deed this was and, as a result, I was profoundly ashamed of my origins. Nevertheless, having more to think with than other mortals, and it more efficiently structured, I could perform prodigies of reasoning unknown to lesser men. All in a flash, I realized that my father had not had me created as a weapon, as I had previously assumed, but as a host for his identity. Using his own uncanny powers, he would oust me from my brain and assume my body as an ordinary man might don a new coat. The first such, moreover, of many he would assume in a lifetime that might well last a thousand years.

I stood transfixed with horror.

It was the worst of all possible times for Netzke to nudge me in the ribs and say, “You will sit at the right hand of your father—and then you will remember old friends, eh? What will you do for them then, eh? Eh?”

The evil burning within him was like a flame—dazzling. I had the power to reach out and turn it down low. May God forgive me, I did not. Instead, I said, “I will do *this*,” and quenched that flame entirely.

He fell to the ground, dead.

Everybody present—and they were among the most powerful men and women in the Empire—saw me do this. When I stalked off to my quarters to brood, not a one of them tried to stop me.

That night, the voices crashed in on me with unprecedented clarity—and all of them were focused exclusively upon me. Some courtiers simply feared my power. Others hoped to corrupt and then blackmail me or by elaborate lies to make me their ally and dupe. To kill me and place the blame on a rival. To convince another to kill me and afterward denounce him. To encourage my ambitions and become my most loyal and trusted lickspittle. In all the castle, there was but one soul whose thoughts were not violent and vicious. Half-maddened by this mental cacophony, and by the guilt I felt for the thoughtless and casual murder of the weapons master, I rose from my bed and dressed.

Then I went to the margrave’s room and knocked upon his door.

As I already knew from his thoughts, he was still awake. The margrave had been sitting with a glass of whiskey, thinking solemnly about suicide. On seeing me, he set aside the glass and said, “A moment ago, dear friend, I was thinking that there remained not one kindly face in all the world—and now, in an act of Providence, you appear to prove me wrong.”

I sank to my knees before the margrave and, taking his hands in mine, cried, “Sir, you must not entertain such evil thoughts as I see in your mind. The world is a dark place, but it would be darker still without your presence. I pray you, do not follow Werther’s path to self-destruction.”

The margrave looked surprised. Then he said, “I keep forgetting what a remarkable young fellow you are. So you can read my thoughts? I should not be surprised. But be comforted. Even that mode of escape is forbidden me. Willingly or not, I must be faithful to your father—and since he desires that I live, so I shall.”

“Then we are returned to our eternal colloquy: Whether or not there is

free will and, if there is, why it is denied to the likes of us.”

“It can hardly be called eternal,” the margrave said with a touch of amusement, “for we have only known each other for a month. But, yes, we have had this discussion before.”

Caught in a turmoil of emotions such as would require a Goethe to describe, I blurted out, “Tell me. If you were free from all restraints, what would you do?”

“I would scour this castle with fire and kill all within it,” the Margrave said. “Present company excepted, of course.”

“And if that were denied you? What would be your second choice?”

Without hesitation, the margrave replied, “Oblivion.”

My heart sank. I could see his thoughts and knew that my mentor spoke only the simple truth. Wise though he was, the old man was blind to all possibilities save those he had been brought up to esteem. “Alas,” I said, “I had hoped for a different answer.” But respecting the margrave as I did—and, remember, his was the only moral authority I had ever known—I had, I felt, no choice.

Reaching into his mind, I freed him from my father’s control.

★ ★ ★

The homunculus lapsed into silence.

After a time, Ritter said, “I’ve heard rumors of what ensued.” Which was a lie, for they had been formal reports. Then, truthfully, “I had no idea my uncle was involved.”

“There were many wizards in my father’s court. So the margrave was, inevitably, as he knew he would be, killed. Not, however, before having his vengeance. For over an hour, he raged up and down the castle corridors. At the time I thought I had done the right thing. Yet it deprived my world of the only being I knew to be worthy of admiration. Even today, I wonder. Does freedom inevitably entail death? Freeing the margrave was the act of a young and inexperienced man. I regret it now.

“I am sorry, Ritter.”

“Don’t be,” Ritter said. “My uncle labored chiefly as a diplomat. But like all the men of my family, he was at heart a soldier. He died a warrior’s death. That is good to hear. What did you do next?”

★ ★ ★

I fled, with the castle burning behind me. On my way out of the city, I encountered a Swedish merchant returning from Russia with a short wagon train of goods and bought passage with him (or, rather, put the memory of my having paid him in his mind) to Helsinki. He was a fat, ugly, vulgar little man—the first words he ever said to me were, “Pull my finger,” and he roared when I did—yet I found I liked him quite a lot, for he was utterly free of malice. He talked frequently of his wife, whom he sincerely loved, though that did not prevent him from frequenting brothels while he was on the road. Such a specimen was he! So different from the models of my reading.

Old Hannu was a merchant through and through. It was a kind of religion to him. He spoke often of its virtues: “Each man benefits,” he said. “Mark that! I buy lace in Rauma, to the enrichment of those who make it, sell it in St. Petersburg to shopkeepers who immediately double its price, and with the proceeds buy furs from Siberian trappers, who are grateful for my money. Both lace and furs multiply in value through the mere expedient of bringing them elsewhere. Midway between, I buy amber and silver jewelry to be sold in both directions. At every step, I make a profit, as do those I buy from and sell to.

“People speak harshly of merchants because we drive a hard bargain. And it’s true I squeeze the buyers until they shit gold. Yet at the end of the day, everyone goes home satisfied. If there is a magic greater than this, I’m damned if I know of it. Did the Apostle Paul make half so many people happy as I have? Bugger me with a mule if he did.”

When I booked passage with Old Hannu, I had deemed it necessary to pay with fairy gold, for I was penniless and in desperate straits. Traveling with the merchant, however, I came to see that I had cheated this cheerful, awful, self-serving little man as he would never have cheated me. With a shock that was almost physical, I realized that, once again, I had sinned ... For which I must atone.

So it was that the next time we came to a city, I accompanied Old Hannu to a tavern where women sold themselves. I did not partake in the pleasures of the flesh, however. Instead, I got into a card game with two professional cheats and a compulsive gambler.

I won everything the three men had. Two of them followed me out onto the street and in the shadows set upon me with cudgels. I could have broken their bodies. Instead, I placed in their minds an awareness of the

precariousness of their position: that they were landless men outside the protection of the law, outnumbered and hated by the righteous and yet easy prey to men even more wicked than they. Then I set fire to their cudgels and watched them flee into the outer darkness. Perhaps they reformed their evil ways. If not, I am sure that they practice their illicit trade a great deal more circumspectly than before.

The compulsive gambler I trailed at a distance. He came to a church and, going in, climbed the long spiral stair to the top of the steeple. There, he gripped the stone balustrade with fear-whitened hands, building up his courage to throw himself over. He did not hear me coming up behind him. It gave him a start when I spoke, but that was all to the good. Returning half his money, I said, "You have learned a hard lesson tonight, my friend. Go home and never gamble again." And I erased the compulsion from his mind.

Thus it went, step by step, for larger and smaller sums. In Lublin, I saved a dowager's fortune from a venal lawyer and he was fined to pay for my efforts. While stopping at a farmhouse, I uncovered a buried Viking hoard, for which I accepted a modest finder's fee. Sometimes my actions were legal and other times not. But every one of them ended with the other party better off than before. As Old Hannu would have put it, I gave good weight. And, bit by bit, I paid him back every pin of what I owed him.

Occasionally, men tried to kill me. I made them less murderous and sent them back to their masters.



We came at last, after long and ordinary hardships, to Helsinki. Old Hannu brought me home to meet his family.

Doubtless, you will be nowhere near so dumbstruck as I was to learn that Old Hannu's wife Leena was in no way the paragon of beauty and virtue he had made her out to be. She was, in her way, as ugly as he. Worse, as I was headed for the outhouse, she ambushed me, rubbing her body against mine in a manner no respectable housewife would. "I'm no beauty," she said, "and I know it. But lie down with me and close your eyes and you'll swear I'm as delightful as any of those Russian whores my husband won't shut up about." It would have made a dog laugh to see the convolutions I went through to evade her intentions.

Yet for all that, the love Leena and Old Hannu had for each other was

genuine. I saw it in their glances, heard it in their speech, witnessed it in their deeds, and of course read it in their thoughts.

Further, they had a daughter.

Kaarina was as pious, virtuous, and chaste as Werther's beloved Charlotte, and as beautiful as her father imagined her mother to be. I was smitten. When her parents invited me to stay on for a time, I did, just to be near her.

You will scarcely believe this, but Kaarina did not see me as hideous at all. Perhaps this was because her love for animals—she was forever rescuing kittens and fostering crippled dogs—caused her to see me not as a caricature of humanity but simply as one of God's creatures. For a time, I was content merely being a part of her world, worshipping her from afar.

Then, one day in the garden, Kaarina invited me to sit down beside her. "You are always so silent," she said. "When you first arrived, I thought you a mute. Tell me something of yourself."

I needed no urging. All my thoughts, dreams, hopes, fears, loftiest aspirations, and meanest deeds came pouring out of me in a torrent of words. I shared my innermost self as I never had before nor ever would again, save right now with you, holding back only my feelings for Kaarina herself, lest she be alarmed by them. And when I was done...

Kaarina looked at me in blank bewilderment.

"But none of this makes any sense," she said. "A child born without a mother and grown to man's estate in a matter of months. A nonpareil who teaches himself to read in an afternoon but kills his instructor on a whim. A redeemer of widows and gamblers who steals from an honest merchant. A master of all magics who has neither wealth nor position. A demigod who can read thoughts but suffers from doing so. How could such a living contradiction even exist? What place could he possibly find for himself in human society? You must clear your head of these dark fantasies and strive to be restored to your true self."

Kaarina was not angry at me—her character was too refined for that. Nevertheless, her words cut through me like so many knives. I was her physical and intellectual superior and knew it. But our emotions are seated in the body and the body is an animal, even as the bear or the ass. In this regard I am in no way superior to any other man, nor will I ever be, however much my mental powers may increase.

My passion got the better of me.

“But every word I spoke was true!” I cried and, throwing caution to the winds, added, “Furthermore...”

Seeing my distress, Kaarina took my great hand in her wee paws and said, “You may speak your mind freely, my friend. There is nothing you cannot tell me.”

“Then I will say it—I love you.”

May you never see such a look on the face of a woman you esteem! Kaarina’s mouth fell open with astonishment and horror. There could be no mistaking the latter emotion, for I saw it burning in her thoughts like a flare.

I flushed red with humiliation. My blood surged and my hands clenched with the desire to strike Kaarina, to hurt her, to punish her for not loving me. It lasted only a single horrifying instant. Then, overcome with confusion and remorse, I fled. Kaarina, I am sure, prayed for my welfare and the rapid recovery of my wits. As if that would help!

That night, lying abed in the guest room (with the dresser pushed against the door, in case Leena again decided to make an assault upon my virtue), I thought over everything I had gone through and learned since coming to Helsinki. It had just been forcibly demonstrated that there could be no future for Kaarina and me. I needed love, not pity! And she ... needed someone she could understand. My feelings for her were undiminished. But, alas, there could be no true communion of thought between us. The imbalance of intellect was simply too great.

It was a painful process working this out while the thoughts of the city roared and crashed over me like a mighty surf. But I came at last to two conclusions. First, that I could not stay in this house a day longer. Second, that in order to adequately think through my life and purpose, I must somehow isolate myself completely from humanity.

In the morning, profusely thanking Old Hannu for his hospitality, I left. Then I set about outfitting an expedition to the unknown Arctic regions. Out of respect for the values of the man I considered the second great mentor of my life, I earned the tremendous sum this required by honest means.

Which was why you almost caught up with me before my ship sailed.

★ ★ ★

As the ship left the harbor, the eternal pandemonium of thoughts faded and

I had to endure only those of the *Erebus*'s officers and crew. I wept with relief. So you can imagine with what ecstasy I beheld the icy shores of this desolate land. And when the ship sailed off, carrying away with it the last trace of any thought other than my own, I experienced a sensation of pure bliss. Oh, blessed silence! I fell to my knees to thank whatever gods may be for that wondrous gift. Then, carrying all my supplies on my back, I walked inland until I judged myself safe from the influence of any passing ship. There I sat down and proceeded to think. To think, and to plan.

My first conclusion was that I needed a mate—one every bit as beautiful and virtuous as Kaarina but also as intelligent and strong of body as I. There being no such woman, I would have to create her myself. Which would be no easy task. To build such a goddess would require the use of many wizards, the sacrifice of numerous animals and women, and a fortune in related materials. Vast wealth would be required. Further, since such a project could not possibly be kept secret, it would demand defenses: an army, a secure territory with fortified borders, and a system of secret police to protect me from spies and saboteurs. In short, it would entail exactly such an empire as my father is currently endeavoring to create. For a moment, I was aghast at the thought of what atrocities I would have to perform.

Then I resolved to do it. My mate and I would wed and have children who would have children in their turn and their descendants would inevitably supplant the human race. All the world would be theirs and I their Adam.

You blanch, Ritter. Be reassured. My resolution lasted but a moment. For I then reflected that to carry out my plan would be to expose a woman I hoped to love with unswerving dedication to the pain of hearing the thoughts of Mankind which had almost driven me mad. Yes, I could immediately upon her creation put to death all those involved, before her capacity to hear their thoughts came into focus and then carry her off to some desolate tract such as this. But what would happen when she could read *my* thoughts? When she understood what crimes I had committed in her not-so-immaculate conception?

Logic, alas, told me that the project was doomed to fail.

Thus: No wife, no offspring, no hope, no future.

I had just determined what course of action I should take when I sensed your approach. It occurred to me then that it would be pleasant to share the

tale of my life with a sympathetic soul. From what I could sense of your character, it seemed to me that you might well understand my story.

So I let you approach.



For a long time, the homunculus did not speak. Ritter, who was comfortable with silence, waited. At last his host said, “Have you ever considered beetles, Ritter?”

“Beetles,” Ritter said flatly. “No, not since I was a boy.”

“They are, I assure you, fascinating creatures and well worthy of your respect. But they cannot provide much in the way of companionship.” The homunculus stood. “On which note, the time has come to put an end to our colloquy.”

Ritter tried to stand and discovered that he could not. Nor could he move so much as a finger though his lungs, for a mercy, continued to pump air.

The creature looked down on him with an expression of gentle pity. “You are not a good man, Ritter. How could you be, given your occupation? However, you are not as bad a man as you fear you might be—not yet, at any rate.” He went outside, leaving the tent flap open behind him. Over his shoulder, he said, “Imperfect though you are, I wish you well. I wish every single one of you well. But I cannot bear to live among you.”

The homunculus walked steadily away from the tent, toward a distant ridge. When sufficient time had elapsed, he passed over the ridge and out of sight. All the while, Ritter strove in vain to cast off his paralysis. Nor could he enter Freki’s mind—that ability too, it seemed, had been frozen.

Then the sun came up.

There was a tremendous light, at which Ritter discovered himself capable of movement again, for he automatically turned away from it and threw up an arm to protect his eyes. Almost immediately, there followed a sound so thunderous that he clapped his hands over his ears to reduce it to a roar.

Ritter burst from the tent.

Running with all his might, Freki at his heels, he came to the top of the ridge over which the creature had disappeared. Below him Ritter saw a crater half-blasted and half-melted into the ice with a smudge of black at

its center, as if a god had reached down from the sky to brush a dirty fingertip against the snow.

★ ★ ★

When Ritter had done making his report, Sir Toby said, “It is a pity you could not win him over to our cause.”

“In his estimation, our cause was not a good one. I do not believe that the creature saw very much difference between our side and his father’s.”

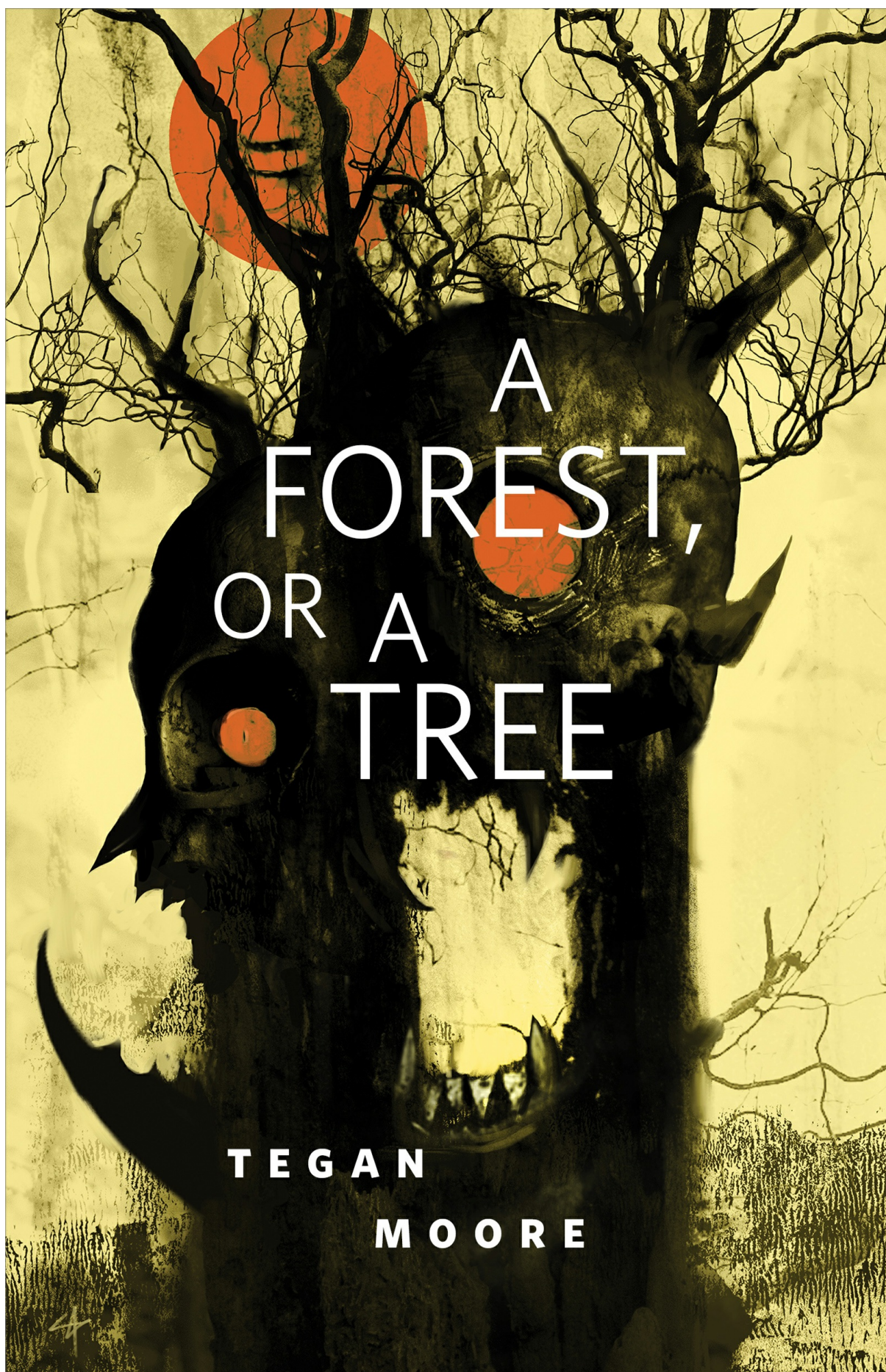
A darkness congealed within Sir Toby then, as if there were a thunderhead filling his skull and threatening to burst through it with gales and lightning. But he only said, “And who was he to pass judgment on us? The ugly brute!”

“No. He was a handsome man, very much so. By any reasonable definition, he was extremely well made.” Ritter shook his head sadly. “Yet in his own eyes, he was monstrous.”



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A Forest, or A Tree

TEGAN MOORE

illustration by

SAMUEL ARAYA

TOR·COM 

It was just the four of them, four girls alone in the forest.

“Everything is dicks,” Elizabeth said. She gestured at the gnarled gray trunks rising bare-limbed into the shade of their own canopy. “I mean, look around. Dicks, dicks, dicks.”

“You’re so insightful,” said May. She unwedged a water bottle from the side of her pack. “And so foul-mouthed.” Elizabeth had talked most of the way up the mountain. May was pretending she didn’t mind.

Birds muttered in the trees. Piper plodded back from looking over the ravine’s embankment to where the river pounded below. “I’m done walking,” she said. She dropped her bag and flopped to the ground. “This is a stupid hobby. Don’t tell Ailey.”

“Flowers.” Elizabeth pointed to the daisy Piper was tucking into her hair. “Flowers are actually fancy, colorful penises. I mean, how weird is it that we smell them? On purpose?”

Piper scrunched her face and let the flower fall from her hand. “You’re messed up.”

“Nature is evil,” Elizabeth said. “It’s not my fault.”

“Nature is not evil,” May said. She soaked a bandana with her water bottle. “Nature is nature. Evil is just a story.”

“Duck rape,” Elizabeth said. “Ducks rape other ducks all the time. That’s not evil?”

“Oh my god,” Piper said, “this is the worst conversation. I don’t want to know any of this stuff. Can we have the trees and flowers and nature and whatever without the ruining-it-all part? And also no more walking?”

May wrapped the wet bandana around her neck. “We have to sleep in these woods tonight, Elizabeth. Under all your penises.” The other girls were pink with exertion and sun, but May’s skin didn’t pinken adorably. She was dark, unfreckled, and felt slimy with perspiration. She wondered how the white girls stayed looking so pert.

“Don’t even get me started on fruit.”

"Nobody said fruit," May said. "We aren't getting you started."

"Oh my god, don't," Piper said.

Ailey traipsed down from a rise, GPS held talismanically before her. "Guys," she called.

"Here we go," Piper said. "Anyone else on my side? No more walking?"

May shrugged and sank to the ground next to Piper.

"It's weird," Ailey said, trotting down the slope to them. "We aren't where I thought we were." She studied the GPS's minuscule screen, then looked up as though the forest might offer advice.

"It's pretty here," Piper said. "I bet it's a good place to camp." She raised her eyebrows at May.

"Yeah," May said obediently. It *was* pretty. The undergrowth was leafless, sparse, dry twigs and branches hatching together and turning the forest hazy. Ancient cedars pillared into the sky. There was something awful, May thought, awful in the original sense of the word, about looking up. Something about the stature and the patience of the old trees made her feel small, just one story in an endless cycle of nearly identical, pointless stories.

"I thought we'd go upriver," Ailey said, fiddling with the GPS. "There's a peak pretty close. Seriously, this thing is being weird."

Peak, Piper mouthed at May, eyes wide with horror.

Elizabeth approached the ravine's edge. She held on to a sapling to lean out over the void. Piper squealed, "Don't, oh my god!"

"We're not lost, are we?" May asked.

"No," Ailey said, "it's ... wrong. Like, it says we're ... well, it doesn't matter. We're in the right place. We found the river. We know how to get back." She gestured at the other girls. "Let's go."

Elizabeth scrambled a few steps down toward the river. Piper and May exchanged dubious glances.

"Why not camp here?" Piper said.

Ailey stared. "We're almost there." She crossed her arms.

Ailey was in the Mountaineers. Ailey was In Charge.

"Almost where?" Elizabeth called from her perch over the river. "We're in the middle of nowhere. That part of the middle of nowhere is probably not much different from this part." Something loosed under her shoe and she slipped, cursed. The sapling bent but held.

Elizabeth was Ailey's best friend from high school. Elizabeth had provided a running commentary all day of potential disaster, mishap, and urban legend seemingly designed to prevent any possibility of peace.

Piper, Elizabeth's current roommate, had taken responsibility for worrying about snakes, worrying about voiding her bowels outdoors, and worrying about potential overlap between the two. Piper had shown up at Ailey's apartment that morning wearing Converse sneakers. Ailey made her buy boots at a Wal-Mart on the way out of the city.

May wasn't sure why she'd been invited. She liked Ailey. They'd met at a mutual TA's awful kegger. The TA was drunk and getting creepy, and May had noticed and dragged Ailey away for a made-up emergency that required both of them to hide in the downstairs bathroom and then leave out the window. They'd been lab partners the following semester. Ailey had told the story about the window escape on the morning's long drive, and made it seem like something they'd done for fun. Like a joke or something. Maybe only May had noticed the TA's weird intensity, how he had cornered Ailey in his cheerless, abandoned dining room with a hard, intentional look. Maybe May's compulsion to push the dining room door all the way open and rescue Ailey had been misguided. Maybe Ailey really did think the two of them had snuck out of the party because why not? Anyway, they hadn't exactly been besties or anything. Only the shared, strange night, and then a semester sharing a lab bench.

Maybe May was just there for color.

Nobody except Ailey had ever been backpacking before. But probably they'd all be fine.

Eventually Ailey capitulated and they pitched two tents in a ring of enormous cedars. Elizabeth stretched her arms toward their crowns. "Nature's glorious phalluses."

"You have dick on the brain," Ailey said. "Go find firewood."

Piper spread out on the ground between the two tents. "My tummy hurts," she said.

May and Elizabeth dragged armloads of sticks into camp and Ailey sorted the pile, snapping branches against her knee. The sun hadn't begun to set, but their little camp in the trees was dusky and cool. There was plenty of firewood, so they started a fire early. The river noise mortared the empty space between the trees.

"We should tell scary stories," Elizabeth said.

“No we should not.” Piper lay next to the fire, head on her pack. “We definitely should not do that.”

“You’re right.” Elizabeth eyed the sky. “We’ll wait till dark.”

“Also nope.”

“Okay, what about, like, creepy stories?”

May unlaced her boots. God, it felt good. “Aren’t scary stories a requirement when you’re camping?”

“They are not,” Piper said. “There’s no requirement.”

Ailey patted Piper’s shoulder. “Okay, the rule is: If Piper says stop you have to stop.”

“No means no,” said Elizabeth.

“I already said no,” said Piper. “No clearly does not mean anything to you assholes.”

“Oh come on, Pip,” Elizabeth said. “We’ll be nice.”

“What I do,” Ailey said, “is I figure out why the story can’t happen to me. Like, the Babadook doesn’t live in my basement because both my parents are alive. See? You neutralize it. You can basically always find a reason why you’re okay.”

Piper crossed her arms over her chest, an angry sorority sarcophagus. “I’m covering my ears.” She made no move to do it.

There was a pause to allow Piper’s disapproval to smoke away. A breeze clattered long fingers of underbrush, a quiet *tick-tick-ticking* over the river’s constant rumble. Overhead, high in the canopy, leaves hissed.

“So, I heard this story,” Elizabeth said, leaning forward. “About some kids out in the woods. They kept hearing—”

May groaned. “I saw that subreddit last week too. It was stupid. Why would a rapist hide in the woods? It doesn’t make any sense. If he’s looking for victims, he’d be better off ... anywhere, pretty much. The internet is a liar.”

“Just cause it’s on the internet doesn’t mean it’s automatically untrue,” Ailey said. “It must come from somewhere.”

“Yeah,” Elizabeth said, “like the girl who was playing the elevator game in that hotel in LA, and then they found her dead in the water tower. Like the game worked or something.”

“Stupid stories,” May consoled Piper. “They’re just memes.”

“You’re memes,” Piper said. “What does ‘meme’ even mean.”

“Like, cultural ideas.”

Ailey scoffed and leaned back on her palms. “Every idea is a cultural idea.”

“Memes are cat pictures,” Piper said.

“They’re supposed to be an idea that, like, hits something primal. It’s important to people, somehow. Cat pictures or whatever,” said May.

“So they’re basically just good ideas,” Ailey said. “That’s what you mean.”

“Maybe it’s how we do mythology now,” May said.

Piper waved a hand at the canopy. “What is it about cat pictures? What’s the primal idea there? Cute cats?”

May sniffed and rolled her eyes. “I don’t pretend to understand white people.”

“Ooh, reverse racism,” Elizabeth said. “Plus I know for a fact you liked those pictures I posted of my mom’s kitten, so.”

Piper groaned. “I think all the turkey jerky gave me gas.”

“My condolences,” said Ailey to May, who was Piper’s tentmate.

They sat in the quiet, the rhythm of the river holding them.

“So I saw this story,” Elizabeth said, and Piper groaned again. “No, no, it’s not scary. Not really. It’s just some legend. It seemed like it might have been made up, but I couldn’t tell, and I ended up doing a bunch of research.”

“By research,” Ailey said, “do you mean going down a click-hole?”

“That’s not research?”

“I think it’s interesting,” May said, “how stories get changed around on the internet. People making up legends. Like Slender Man—people got obsessed with it, and that made it almost true. It didn’t matter that it wasn’t an old story. People got into it and that made it as real as, I don’t know, Santa or the Virgin Mary. It makes me think all stories are real at some point. There’s something that’s so compelling we have to tell the story over and over again. Like we’re trying to refine it.”

“Right,” Elizabeth said. “Exactly. I wanted to know where this one came from. Have you heard of Stick Indians?”

“That sounds racist,” Ailey said.

“Stick Native Americans,” Piper said. A trace of sunlight flickered over her closed eyes.

“They call it Stick Indians. I didn’t make it up.”

“Repeating things doesn’t make them not racist,” May said. She hadn’t

meant to say it so vehemently. She glanced around their circle to see if anyone had flinched, and relaxed her shoulders.

“Okay, so,” Elizabeth said. “Someone posted this story—it was obviously a story, it had characters and a plot and whatever; real stories aren’t that well organized. A bunch of kids were out camping and were hassled by this tree monster. Whatever, it was dumb, but I hadn’t heard about Stick Indians before.”

Now Piper watched Elizabeth, interested. Ailey poked at the fire.

“Anyway. I looked around and there wasn’t much info. A couple old websites with Yakama Indian legends, but all the sites had basically the same story, and you could tell it was copy-pasted. That first site I saw referenced some books I couldn’t find on Amazon, but I later I saw the same titles in a couple different places. Enough to make me think the books might at least be real.”

“You could try a library,” Ailey said. “Like, where actual research is done.”

May snorted. “You’re such a snob. You just said like five minutes ago that the internet isn’t automatically false.”

“I’m a tactile-experience snob,” Ailey said. “I like the real world. I don’t hate the internet.”

“You definitely don’t hate Instagram,” Elizabeth said.

“See? I don’t hate Insta.”

“Aww,” Piper said, “she has a cute nickname for her BFF.”

“My cousin has a dog named Hashtag,” Elizabeth said. “But guys: Stick Indians—that’s what the Yakama people say, apparently, so it’s not racist and don’t yell at me—they’re, like, leprechauns or sasquatches or fairies—”

“Um, vague?” Ailey said.

Piper laughed. “They’re either huge or tiny, and they’re evil or maybe they’re good, so anywhere in there, go ahead and pick something.” She pressed a hand to her belly. “Ow.”

“Fart it out,” Ailey said. “You’ll feel better.”

“It’s not like I’m trying to keep it in over here.”

Elizabeth gave Piper the side-eye but kept talking. “Yeah, exactly, everything’s really vague about what they actually are. But the idea is they’re forest spirits who look like trees. Troublemakers. They fuck with travelers. They protect the places men shouldn’t enter.”

“See,” Ailey said to Piper. “You’re safe. It’s only a problem for men. For once.”

“Prostate cancer,” May said.

“Dude, my uncle had prostate cancer and it was hella my aunt’s problem,” Ailey said. “She was exhausted all the time.”

“Okay, you win.”

“They have flutey voices and make whistles and snaps to try to lure people into the woods,” Elizabeth continued. “You aren’t supposed to whistle at night or the Stick Indians will get you.”

“Huh,” May said. “That’s a Nigerian superstition too, I think. Same thing. Don’t whistle at night or the evil spirits blah-blah-blah.”

Elizabeth’s voice took on a storyteller quality, oracular. “At night, the Stick Indians creep up to people’s tents and push a stick through the flap and *poke* the people inside. Think about it: You’re sitting, it’s right before bed, you’re minding your own business, and all of a sudden this branch comes sliding into your house, all silent and slow, and just *pokes* you.”

“Are you seriously telling us a scary dick story right now?” May said. “Push a stick through a flap? For real?”

Piper rolled to her side and wheezed, giggling.

“I’m starting to worry about you,” Ailey said.

“No, no, it’s really fucking scary!” Elizabeth said. “Think about it! Like, dick or no, it’s creepy as fuck.” She waited until Piper stopped snorting, then continued. “Some of the legends say the Stick Indians guard the gate to the underworld. Or else they patrol the sacred parts of the forest, where nobody is supposed go.”

“Oh, okay,” May said, “I know this story. ‘This is their space, not ours, beware.’ That sort of thing.”

Ailey said, “Lots of scary stories are like that. Humans encroaching on everything, ruining it all. Like everything belongs to us.”

“Bullshit,” May said. Again, it came out more forcefully than she’d intended. She moderated her tone, didn’t want to be *that girl*. “I don’t like those kinds of stories. For a bunch of reasons. For one, I don’t think humans are evil by nature. We don’t ruin everything. We’re just animals doing what animals do. And for another, I can’t tell you how many times in the universe a black person was told that they couldn’t do a thing because it didn’t belong to them. Bullshit. It’s not race, it’s all humans. We belong in whatever environment we can get by in.”

“Well, okay, good point,” Ailey said. “Like, where would we be without civil rights people saying fuck the whites-only nonsense. But I don’t think humans should be able to take whatever they can. We have an unfair advantage.”

“What makes it unfair?” May said.

“I don’t know. Intelligence? Tools?”

Elizabeth said, “Octopuses use tools but they don’t fuck up the ocean.”

“I don’t know, then, but it’s something.”

“Just because we can get by in a place,” May said, “doesn’t mean we should shit all over it. But I hate the idea of not being allowed. Who gets to decide? Usually it’s men.” She spread her arms. “And we’re doing fine here, aren’t we? How many dudes told you it wasn’t safe for a bunch of girls to go out into the woods alone?”

Piper laughed. “Uh, my boyfriend *and* his roommate.”

“My dad,” Elizabeth said. “Never mind that he’s known Ailey for years and she does this shit all the time.”

Ailey said, “The first time I went camping with a couple girls from Mountaineers, my mom was like, ‘You’re probably in more danger at a frat party than in the woods. Call me when you’re home.’”

“So we’re agreed,” May said. “Telling people they can’t do something just because someone else thinks they shouldn’t is bullshit. And men suck.”

“Dicks,” Elizabeth said.

Ailey lifted her water bottle in acknowledgement. “Dicks,” she agreed.

★ ★ ★

May woke feeling like bees were swarming in her head. She was so tired her face hurt. Something had woken her, and she tried to decide if she cared what it was.

“Shit,” Ailey said, outside the tent.

Through her sleeping pad May felt the ground hard beneath her hip. Exhaustion squeezed her skull. Next to her, Piper finally slept.

Sticks clattered.

May rubbed her face, sighed. The sound of zippers—sleeping bag, then tent—grated against the quiet morning, the river-roar and muted *chip-chip-trill* of birds. The air outside was cool and thick with moisture. She paused

to pull on her boots. The way blood rushed to her head when she finally stood made her irritable.

She squinted. "Who made the mess?"

Ailey had a handful of firewood. The rest of it was scattered over and around their campsite, an explosion of branches and twigs. It looked like a game of pick-up sticks for forest giants. Something must have hit their firewood pile hard to send it flying so dramatically.

Ailey looked pained. "The wind?" she said. "I don't know."

"It didn't seem windy," May said. "I didn't hear anything. I was up most of the night, so."

Ailey lifted a forked, scaly branch from inside the stone ring of their firepit. "Trouble sleeping?"

"Piper," May said quietly. Ailey made an apologetic grimace.

The two of them gathered the scattered wood. It seemed like more than could possibly have been left over from the night before. The pile nearly reached May's knees.

Piper rustled and groaned inside her tent. "She got up a lot," May said to Ailey.

"Shit. I hope she's not too tired to hike."

Piper looked fine, though disheveled, once she was sitting by the firepit. Ailey dismissed the idea of making a fire for breakfast—she'd brought a camp stove to heat water for coffee and oatmeal—but even the memory of fire was enough to draw them close. Without discussing it, Ailey and May had kept to themselves the strange disarray they'd woken to.

Piper took a cup of coffee and held it, not drinking. "I think I ate something weird," she said. "I'm okay now, or better than last night, at least."

"I bet it was the diner yesterday morning," Ailey said.

"My money is on the entire pound of turkey jerky she ate," May said.

"Sweet, sweet sodium," Piper said. "It's my weakness, okay? I have a problem. But I learned my lesson. I'm clean now. Cold turkey."

"Boo, pun," Ailey said. May hissed. Piper made a little bow.

"Someone made a pun?" Elizabeth said from inside her closed tent. "Before breakfast? Jesus Christ almighty."

"Get up," Ailey said, "There's coffee."

"Coffee," Elizabeth repeated, voice rough with lust.

Around the unlit fire they ate packet oatmeal and handfuls of dried fruit. Piper didn't eat, just held her cup stared dozily into it.

"I want to get going pretty quick," Ailey said.

Piper wedged her full cup into the dirt. "Dammit," she muttered. She scurried into the bushes, pulling a packet of tissue from one pocket as she disappeared.

Elizabeth watched her go, face scrunched. "What's up?"

"I think she's sick," May said.

"Ooh. Bad luck."

Ailey packed the cooking gear. When Piper came back, Ailey said, "Are you going to be okay?"

Piper flopped to the ground. "I dunno. Yesterday I was like, I've never pooped in the woods, this is going to be such a new and exciting and terrible thing, I wonder if I'll be able to even do it. And now pooping in the woods is like"—she gestured absently—"oh, that again? I'm a pro."

"Do you feel okay? Can you hike?"

Piper closed her eyes. The morning sun through the trees dappled her shoulders. "I'm so tired."

"Should we go back?" Ailey said. Her voice was tight.

Piper shook her head without opening her eyes. "I'll just stay here," she said. "Forever."

They were all quiet for a moment. May felt everyone else's tension in her own skin. "What about," she suggested, "if we hike around today and come back here tonight to camp?"

Ailey's jaw was set. It was clear—anyone who knew her would know—that she didn't want to deviate from the plan. But Piper looked miserable. May couldn't imagine forcing her to keep going.

"At least we wouldn't have to go home early," Elizabeth said quietly, to Ailey.

"And hey," May added, "we can leave our tents and crap with Piper, so we won't have to carry as much."

"Base camp," Elizabeth said.

"I like that idea," Piper said. "I like the idea of not moving."

Ailey looked thoughtful.

"Wait." Piper opened her eyes. "I'll be here alone?"

"Don't worry, Pip," Elizabeth said. "Nothing bad ever happens in the woods during daylight."



She was wrong; bad things happened. Early in the day May tripped and landed hard, tearing her shirt and badly skinning her palms. Then Elizabeth dropped her digital camera into the river, and though it wasn't expensive it also hadn't been backed up for months. Ailey's GPS was unpredictable. It worked well enough to get them where they were going, but it put Ailey in a crap mood. It was hot, and biting flies followed them, and they had to stop frequently for water and to catch their breath. They were headed to a waterfall, something dramatic, but the easier route Ailey had originally planned would have taken too long. So they were going the steep way, and would make it back to Piper before sunset.

When they got to the waterfall, Elizabeth and May made a bigger fuss over it than it deserved. Elizabeth made them pose for a picture she took with an imaginary camera, and then she threw the imaginary camera in the river. They sat on a rock and ate a late power bar-and-string cheese lunch.

At least the hike back was downhill.

They followed a ridge arcing away from the river. Gaps between branches showed glimpses of a valley tumbled with boulders. Wind hassled the pines.

"What's that?" Elizabeth said. Her brow was furrowed; she looked out and down through a clear spot on the side of the ravine. "Is there a road down there or something? I think I hear an engine."

May joined Elizabeth at the vista. "Could be a plane."

"No road," Ailey said. "It's probably just a weird echo."

"Maybe there are other hikers down there," Elizabeth said, and Ailey shrugged.

When they trudged into base camp, exhausted and thirsty and ready for dinner, Piper didn't greet them.

"Hello?" Ailey called. "We're back."

One of the tents rustled. The girls looked at each other, and Elizabeth took a step away.

"Hey," Piper called, delayed and strange.

May dropped her pack and unzipped the tent. "Hey," she said, "you good?" She stuck her head into the tent, then recoiled. "Ooh, girl, if that smell was inside you no wonder you weren't feeling well."

"I'm sick," Piper said, still sprawled in her sleeping bag. Her voice was

small and grave. "I've been throwing up all day."

Ailey crouched by the tent opening. "You look pale," she said. "Are you okay?"

"Fuck!" Elizabeth yelled. "Holy shit!"

May jumped to her feet, looking around. "What?"

Something was crashing away through the bare undergrowth, a slim dark shape fading among the other slim dark shapes of the forest.

"It was right *there*," Elizabeth said. "Holy shit."

May squinted. "A deer?"

"I'm sick," Piper said to Ailey. "I think I need to go to the hospital."

"Fuck," Ailey said.

"It was huge," Elizabeth said. "It was right *there*."

May crouched down again, squinting into the woods. She asked Ailey, "How long would it take us to get down to the car?"

"Four hours. At normal speed."

Elizabeth said, "If that was a deer then I'm Mother fucking Teresa. It was a moose. At least. But, like, a starving one."

Ailey and May looked up at the sky. Already the anemic light came slanted from the west.

"Guys," Elizabeth said. "Did you see its horns? Antlers. Like it had huge fucking trees on its—"

"Shut up for a second," Ailey said. "Piper's really sick."

"Yeah," Elizabeth said, "But—okay. But did none of you see the ... thing, though?"

"It was a deer," May said flatly. Elizabeth scowled at her.

They huddled around the ashes of the previous night's fire to confer. It was too close to dark, the route too steep. "It's better if we wait till morning," Ailey said. She'd taken over the administration of Piper's illness, and had moved her sleeping bag in next to the sick girl, relegating May to Elizabeth's tent. May had not complained. "And maybe you'll feel better with some sleep, Piper."

From her sleeping bag in the zipped-open tent Piper grunted, too miserable to respond.

★ ★ ★

May panicked awake in the dark. For disorienting seconds she wasn't sure

why she was cold, nor why the world was so slippery and unstable. And she wasn't sure why she had woken, except that it was urgent.

When it happened again the scream was dangerously close to May's ear. It was more of a yell, low-pitched and open-voweled; not the helpless keen of something lost but assertive, purposeful.

"It's back," Elizabeth bellowed. "It's here, what the fuck!" And then there was a slick weight on top of May, and an elbow found her gut and shoved out a yelp.

"What the fuck!" Elizabeth said again, almost in May's face. Her sleeping bag thrashed. A flashlight infused the tent with light from outside, and for a moment May saw Elizabeth's face, frightened and pallid. Trapped, May tried to wiggle her sleeping bag away from the other girl.

"What is it?" Ailey called, nearby. "What is it?" There was the sound of a zipper in the quiet, river-washed dark.

Knees, weight on May's stomach pressing out her breath. She would be bruised in the morning. The tent zipper tore open and freed Elizabeth. The tent rocked. May struggled out of her bag and felt for her flashlight.

"What is it?" Ailey repeated over Elizabeth's *fuck fuck fuck*. Her flashlight bobbed and shuddered and then made loose, frantic sweeps. "Elizabeth, what?"

"It was here," she said. "The thing, the ... the deer. The moose."

"Elizabeth."

May crawled out of the tent, flashlight on, and floundered with her boots. "What's going on?"

"It was here," Elizabeth repeated. She whipped the flashlight's beam in a circle—she must have wrenched it away from Ailey—illuminating the stark columns of tree trunks and the quivering arms of lower branches. "It was there. Right there."

Ailey spoke quietly. "There's nothing there now."

"The deer?" May said. Her flashlight beam joined the sweep, but what were they looking for? "Girl, you're freaking out. You stepped all over me."

"If it's a deer, it won't hurt us," Ailey said. "Even if it's a moose. You scared it away." She took Elizabeth's shoulders in her hands. "It's okay," she said, "you're fine."

"No," Elizabeth said. "No, it's not—it was..." She panted. "You don't know."

None of them wanted to go back to their tents, so they started another fire. Ailey checked on Piper and then the three of them sat, cross-legged, in the glow.

"It wasn't a dream," Elizabeth said, "because I couldn't sleep. I couldn't sleep last night either, and I wasn't sleeping now."

"I was," May muttered.

"I saw it."

"How?" Ailey said. "From inside your tent?"

"No," Elizabeth turned, scanning the circle of light cast by the fire. "It was the outline. The shadow."

"Hon," Ailey said, "it's dark. You need light for a shadow."

"I know!" Elizabeth snapped. "I don't know why I could see it. I just could. I wasn't dreaming!"

May crossed her arms and leaned them against her knees, hands stuffed in her armpits. Her skull felt hollow. She was so tired she didn't care what was going on, if Elizabeth was crazy from stress and sleep deprivation or if there was another explanation.

"Okay, you couldn't sleep." Ailey sounded like she was persuading an animal out from hiding. "I wasn't sleeping, either."

Elizabeth looked over both shoulders at the dark balusters of the forest holding up the night. "Did you hear those noises?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Snapping. Animal sounds."

Ailey shook her head. "All I heard was the river. But we *are* in the woods."

Elizabeth groaned and dropped her head into her palms. "That's not what I mean."

★ ★ ★

Piper couldn't keep water down the next morning. She would only get up to stagger into the bushes, where May could hear her retching. Pale and disinterested, she didn't complain and rarely moved. She was like a creature gone into hibernation, conserving herself against pain.

Ailey was In Charge again, having been certified—whatever that meant—in wilderness first aid. May listened to her inside the sick tent, quietly harassing Piper to try to drink. More whispering, rustling, and then

Ailey ducked out to join them. Ailey sank to the ground next to restless Elizabeth, who sat with her back to the fire. They both looked as tired as May felt, though May was the only one who had gone back to sleep. Eventually. “I think maybe it’s appendicitis,” Ailey whispered, conspiratorial. “Or really terrible food poisoning. She can’t walk, though. It’s bad.”

“I’m not staying here another night,” Elizabeth said.

Ailey held up a hand. “Shh,” she said, “I don’t want Piper to worry.”

May matched Ailey’s tone. “What should we do?”

“Someone has to get help,” Ailey said. “We have to figure out who.”

“Me,” Elizabeth said. “I’m fucking going.”

“Okay,” Ailey said, “your opinion is registered. I get it. Let’s talk through this.”

“Ailey, you know how to get around in the woods,” May said, feeling generous, though she also didn’t have much of a choice. She dreaded the idea of being left behind with Piper, propping her up as she squatted, straining, over a hole in the dirt, or holding her hair back, smelling the sour-sweet smell of illness and pain and shit and bile. “You should probably go.”

Ailey shook her head. “I can show anyone how to use the GPS. And it’s not hard to find your way out of here. If you head west you’ll hit the forest service road eventually.”

“Okay,” May said. “Well, if it counts for anything, sick people freak me out.”

“I’ll stay,” Ailey agreed. “I have survival skills. I can take care of Piper.”

May felt her body loosen, her mind clear, better than caffeine. “Okay,” she said. “Okay.”

Elizabeth stood. May realized Elizabeth’s bag was at her feet, already packed. She was only waiting to escape.

★ ★ ★

“I’m scared,” Elizabeth said.

Silver evergreen columns shot upward, bare, stories high, their crowns crowded against the ceiling of cloud. Overcast deadened the occasional pipe and rattle of birdcalls, and the wind undulated the tops of trees. The

dark sky made the greens of moss and ferns in the undergrowth seem fluorescent and unreal.

“I can tell,” May said. She felt better on the move, knowing she was doing what she could for Piper and Ailey. “It’s okay. We’ll be out of here soon.”

“I’m the only one that gets it,” Elizabeth muttered. May rolled her eyes.

They trekked down into a little ravine, where everything fell still. Moss muffled the rock walls on both sides; water drained in rivulets over the rough surface and the patter sounded like a chewing mouth. It was beautiful, May thought, but not in a pleasant way. *Dramatic* was a better word.

“It’s like,” Elizabeth said, “I’ve read enough legends and myths. I know how those stories work. I can tell when—” She whipped her head around. “What was that?”

“It was a bird,” May said without stopping. “Or a squirrel or an antelope or an elephant. It doesn’t matter, Elizabeth. We’re fine. Piper’s the only one in danger.”

“There are things in the woods that don’t want people here.”

It wasn’t worth arguing. If Elizabeth wanted to believe in crazy, then fine, as long as it kept them moving.

“I mean, Piper gets sick, and then I—”

“Elizabeth,” May snapped. “Appendicitis. It’s not a curse, it’s a coincidence. This shit happens. Bad things happen all the time. You read too many subreddits. Those stories aren’t real.”

Elizabeth whipped around again. She pointed, right into May’s face. Her eyes were swollen and red. “‘All stories are real at some point.’ You’re the one who said that. Even stupid fake stories have something real in them.”

May backed up a step. “Hey, okay, but scary stories are just supposed to scare you. That’s all they’re about.”

“You said it yourself,” Elizabeth hissed. “People have told this story for centuries. There’s a reason. A moral. ‘Keep out.’ There’s something to be afraid of. In the woods.”

“Look,” May said, “let’s go, okay? We both want to get out of here.”

Elizabeth sucked breath between clenched teeth. She looked a little deranged. May stepped in front to lead the way.

There was no trail, per se. Deer tracks cut through the heaped undergrowth here and there, making their way easier. It was green everywhere—thick, luxurious, luminous green, with the occasional slash of red leaves bleeding in contrast. Moss fogged rocks and dead trees. Branches draped lichen like hair. They passed into a stand of deciduous trees, birch maybe, all of which canted to the left, as though the land had abruptly dropped out from under them on one side. Wind shushed the leaves.

“It’s been following me,” Elizabeth said quietly. “It’s been following me since last night.”

May didn’t turn around. She didn’t need to. They would get out of here, and Elizabeth would stop freaking out. “We have to keep going,” she said.

They stopped in a little clearing at the edge of a ridge where trees were uprooted, knocked flat by some winter cataclysm. The bleached skeletons of the trunks staggered drunkenly off the edge of the slope. “Check the GPS,” May suggested. “I think I remember this part. Down along this ridge, right?”

Elizabeth’s mouth was a hard, pale line. She fished the orange knob of plastic from her pack. “This way,” she confirmed.

“See?” May said. “Almost there.”

Elizabeth looked over her shoulder, downhill. “Ailey said the road we came up on runs along the other side of that hill.” Elizabeth nodded toward the bank rising at the far side of the slope they stood above, split at the bottom by a hissing creek. “We could cut across.”

May snorted. “Uh, she also said it’s crazy steep, which is why we started where we did. You remember how it was driving here? The road ran at the bottom of a damn cliff most of the way up. Let’s go the way we came. It’s only another hour or something.” She tucked her thumbs under her backpack straps and turned away.

Elizabeth started more slowly, watching down the incline toward the creek.

The clouds heaped over each other until they lost their lustrous silver and turned pewter and then coal. May tried not to imagine what it would be like to be stranded and sick in a tent in driving rain. It was early enough in the day; all four of them would be off the mountain before the next morning. Ailey had said someone would come for them right away, on

horses or ATVs as far as they could, with a litter for Piper and a whole team of people to carry it.

“Do you hear that?” Elizabeth asked.

May stopped, turned back halfway. “Hear what?”

“The humming.” Elizabeth scanned the rubbly slope below them, expression blank as she strained her hearing. “Or maybe whistling. Like an engine.” Her gaze snapped to May. “There’s someone on the road.”

They had to keep going. “We have our own car,” May said. The keys were zipped into her pocket. “We aren’t trapped. We just have to get to the car and drive for help.”

“Maybe it’s a ranger,” Elizabeth said.

“Even if it is, we couldn’t do anything until we get down to the road. They wouldn’t even see us.”

“There! Hear it?”

May listened, eyes upturned. “I don’t know,” she said, “it sounds like some weird echo. The wind. Seriously, we’re almost back, we just have to keep walking.”

“We could be out of here in minutes if we went over that hill. It’s right there.”

May sighed. “We would be at the top of a steep-ass cliff with a road at the bottom of it and no way to get down. And we’d still have to walk to the car. And I don’t even hear anything. You’re making this way more complicated than it needs to be.”

Elizabeth said nothing. She turned in a slow circle, looking up into the dark pillars of the forest rising above them. The wind pushed the treetops in lazy, bobbing circles.

This time Elizabeth followed immediately when May set off, and stayed close. May could see the way the other girl twitched at birdcalls, the wide-open flashing of her eyes. Fear did wild things to people. And exhaustion. She shouldn’t hold Elizabeth’s panic against her.

Something crashed nearby. Both girls startled, and May yelped. The bushes uphill shuddered. May saw long, slim legs, long, gaunt lines of a body, a rising crown of branching antler.

“No!” Elizabeth yelled. “No!” Then she bolted over the edge of the ridge.

May heard scree tumbling, rocks crack-clattering, and the rumble of cascading gravel. “Elizabeth!” she yelled. “It’s a deer!” The thing in the

underbrush, the deer, leapt off in the opposite direction, rustle and crackle and thud.

Elizabeth was running, arms up to keep her balance, stones dancing and leaping around her feet. It took less than a minute for her to reach the creek at the bottom.

“Elizabeth!” May shouted. “Wait!” She checked over her shoulder. “Elizabeth, it’s a fucking deer. Come back!”

The distance made Elizabeth the size of May’s finger, small enough to squash. Tiny Elizabeth picked across the stream at the bottom of the ravine. May saw her stumble in the water, then crawl out on the far bank.

“For real?” she muttered. “*Really.*”

Elizabeth scrambled up the loose incline. May stayed put. The thing in the forest rattled off into silence. May watched until Elizabeth disappeared into the trees on the far bank, and then turned back down the mountain.

Elizabeth had the GPS, along with its locating beacon. May had the car keys. And now they were alone, but probably they would both be fine.

★ ★ ★

She waited a long hour, and then started the car. “Sorry,” she said into the humid, oppressive air. And: “I’ll come back.” Elizabeth had the GPS. Elizabeth had it, and they both had the coordinates of where Ailey and Piper were. And Piper was sick.

There was no cell signal, not anywhere, and the road was deserted. There weren’t even road signs. The sky was low and scowling, but holding back, holding its breath—there was no wind. Motionless, gravid, and a sense of being watched.

May stopped at the first little grocery she saw. It was half-boarded up but it had an Open sign in the window, and maybe something moved in the dim inside, but the door was locked and there was no answer at her knock. Behind her, a crow lighted next to a puddle in the parking lot, its reflection playing against the glass door like a mirror. It dropped a twig from its beak.

She drove endless minutes, checking her phone for bars. None of the other structures tucked into the woods seemed alive. Some of the buildings tumbled in at the roofline, others were barricaded with junk. She stopped once where an old truck sat in a driveway, and banged at the door of the

trailer until her knuckles hurt.

Back in the car. The sky was darkening, the storm shoving closer to the ground, but no rain yet. In the dark fur of pines she saw a glint of light. A big house, set back, A-frame roof glowing golden at its windows.

Its narrow driveway wound into the woods. May felt her pulse in her skin. Maybe she'd get to take a shower today. Maybe whoever owned this house would be awesome, and the emergency personnel would come and take her information and the GPS coordinates, and then she'd be tucked into a bed with cocoa and pillows and cable TV.

The driveway was long. Overgrown branches dragged thick fingers along the windows like nails. Despite the neglect, the house the driveway spilled out in front of was ostentatiously nice. Celebrity nice, and gloriously lit. Nobody left this many lights on if they weren't home.

Her boots thudded the porch boards. She pushed the doorbell. She pushed it again, and when nothing happened, she knocked. Her knuckles ached from the knocking she'd done before, so she used the side of her fist instead.

Somewhere in the house a small dog barked. No one came to the door. May's head began to throb. Inside, upstairs, there was a muffled bump of wood against wood.

Frustration burned between her vertebrae. She banged harder, this time on the glass. She wanted to kick the door. "Hey!" she yelled. "Is someone home? Goddammit!"

Overhead, on the face of the house, something slid and clicked. A woman's voice rang out. "Go away!"

"Hey!" May scrambled down the porch steps to find the origin of the voice. "Hello! I need help!"

"I'm not alone in here," the woman's voice said. The little dog barked again, louder through the open window.

May looked up. She felt her arms at her sides, waving, like they were flapping, like she would take off and fly up to the pretty, pale, middle-aged brunette who frowned out the open window at her. "I need help! My friend is hurt! She's sick!"

The woman bared her teeth. May felt the distance between herself and the stranger up there. She matched the woman's expression without thinking, a bone-smile of defeat. "My friend is dying in the woods and I need help," she shouted. Screamed, really. *She's white*, May wanted to

add, *she's a little blonde and freckled white girl*. But she didn't say it. She didn't want to have to say it in order to get into this big stupid fancy house.

"I'm not alone," the woman yelled again. "And I have my husband's guns. Go away!" The window slammed shut.

A small breeze carried a scatter of raindrops. One landed in May's eyelashes. She blinked it away. The clouds seemed to pile on top of the incline behind the house; far up, for a moment, May thought she saw a dark human shape spidering across the scree.

The porch light went out. In the hush May could hear a wind begin to shake the hillside. She watched it crawl down over the trees toward her. It reached the yard and its landscaped saplings; they tossed their skinny arms; they bucked their backs; they shook their heads. The wind slapped a handful of rain into her face.

No, she thought. This is ridiculous.

She turned her back into the growing wind. The great house before her showed no evidence of its inhabitant. May wondered how the lady had turned the porch light off from upstairs.

Beyond the door was a warm-lit, high-ceilinged living room, all hewn wood. Everything in there looked expensive. In the nearby open kitchen May could see a landline phone in its charging station on the granite counter.

Another gust chugged down the hill, this one bringing the resolute thrum of hard rain.

The phone was close enough that May could see the numbers on it. She reached for the door, tried the knob without really thinking. Her breath caught when the latch turned and the door swung inward.

Why would it be locked? It was midday, despite the dark skies, and there was nobody around to lock out.

At the back of the living room there was a set of stairs, opposite the kitchen, where she could keep her eye on them. The phone was cordless. She could take it to the porch.

She breathed through her mouth, rocked her boots silently heel-to-toe as she pushed into the cozy light of the house. A gust of wind rattled the kitchen's big picture windows and the French doors, which led to a paved patio. It was dim and green outside, a deep-water aquarium. She checked the silent stairs. No dog, no crazy lady. The windows pulsed again, clattered with rain.

Her heart was somewhere between her stomach and her ribcage, a fat soft throbbing bullfrog. The granite countertop had a few pieces of mail, a catalog, a dish with crumbs on it. May wrapped her hand around the phone handset. It made a quiet *bip* as she lifted it from its station.

A *whump* of wind again on the side of the house made her jump as she turned to creep back to the porch.

She felt the crash instead of heard it, the pitch of shattering glass. And then a great dark figure, a gaunt and branch-crowned bestial silhouette the details of which her eyes could not negotiate, stepped through the broken French doors and into the kitchen. It made the house seem suddenly crowded, as though a landslide had carried a grove of black trees into the living room.

Her forearms stung, and May registered with wonder the fine red lines that appeared there. Flying glass, it must have been.

Feet banged on the stairs, and there was screaming but not from May's throat, May was too stunned to scream, too caught out with the phone in her hand and the darkness that had demolished the French doors and slipped into the cozy living room. The room thrummed with wind. From the corner of her vision May saw the woman on the stairs, and yes, she did have a gun, the kind you'd take hunting for deer, and she held it stiffly and wild-eyed as it swung its aim across the downstairs. May was backing away, the lady's screaming pushing her toward the open front door, which the wind was slowly arcing closed.

The great shape, the long-legged blackness and its great reverent leafless crown, stepped, set its hooves, stole forward. Its legs like boughs, its silhouette a thatch of dark fingers of void woven together. The room smelled of ozone, of crushed leaves. The storm swept through the living room, a physical punch of wind resounding against the kitchen cupboards, sweeping May's hair off her neck.

The backyard trees bowed, thrashed, banged their elbows together.

The woman was screaming down the stairs, the gun sweeping over May and the rest of the room, and May couldn't imagine she could possibly be a target with that magnificent, awful thing drowning the light out of the room between them. She stepped back again, felt the phone in her hand, wondered what 9-1-1 would do about ... this. What kind of help to ask for. And what use was a gun? The lady was looking at her and shouting incoherent threats and terror, the long cold nose of her gun

pointed high.

It—the thing, the creature, if it was even truly there—lifted its dreadful, awful crest and looked at May with no eyes.

Her back was against the front door. It must have swung closed. It must have shut in the wind as she backed toward it. She felt the knob, felt the catch of its lock.

The gun sounded, a powerful blast muffled by the house and the storm pummeling everything, and with the violence of the sound everything fell instantly still. Everything vibrated at the same imperceptibly high frequency. Everything felt the storm holding its breath.

Whose story would this be, May thought: hers, or Piper's, or Ailey's, or Elizabeth's?

The thing, the creature, the blackness, shivered with the wind. It turned itself toward her slowly, like a question.



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FOR HE CAN CREEP

SIOBHAN CARROLL



For He Can Creep

SIOBHAN CARROLL

illustration by

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Flash and fire! Bristle and spit! The great Jeffry ascends the madhouse stairs, his orange fur on end, his yellow eyes narrowed!

On the third floor the imps cease their gamboling. Is this the time they stay and fight? One imp, bolder than the others, flattens himself against the flagstones. He swells himself with nightmares, growing huge. His teeth shine like the sword of an executioner, and his eyes are the colors of spilled whale oil before a match is struck. In their cells, the filthy inmates shrink away from his immensity, wailing.

But Jeffry does not shrink. He rushes up the last few stairs like the Deluge of God, and his claws are sharp! The imps run screaming, flitting into folds of space only angels and devils can penetrate.

In the hallway, Jeffry cleans the smoking blood off his claws. Some of the humans whisper their thanks to him; some even dare to stroke his fur through the bars. Sometimes Jeffry accepts this praise and sometimes he is bored by it. Today, annoyed by the imps' vain show of defiance, he leaves his scent on every door. This cell is his, and this one. The whole asylum is his, and let no demon forget it! For he is the Cat Jeffry, and no demon can stand against him.



On the second floor, above the garden, the poet is trying to write. He has no paper, and no pens—such things are forbidden, after his last episode—and so he scratches out some words in blood on the brick wall. Silly man. Jeffry meows at him. It is time to pay attention to Jeffry!

The man remembers his place. Reluctantly, painfully, he detaches his tattered mind from the hard hook-pins of word and meter. He rolls away from his madness and strokes the purring, winding cat.

Hail and well met, Jeffry. Have you been fighting again? Such a bold gentleman you are. Such a pretty fellow. Who's a good cat?

Jeffry knows he is a good cat, and a bold gentleman, and a pretty fellow. He tells the poet as much, pushing his head repeatedly at the man's hands, which smell unpleasantly of blood. The demons have been at him

again. A cat cannot be everywhere at once, and so, while Jeoffry was battling the imps on the third floor, one of the larger dark angels has been whispering in the poet's ear, its claws scorching the bedspread.

Jeoffry feels ... not guilty exactly, but annoyed. The poet is *his* human. Yet, of all the humans, the demons seem to like the poet the best, perhaps because he is not theirs yet, or perhaps because they are interested—as so many visitors seem to be—in the man's poetry.

Jeoffry does not see the point of poems. Music he can appreciate as a human form of yowling. Poems, though. From time to time visitors come to the madhouse and speak to the poet of translations and Psalms and ninety-nine-year publishing contracts. At such times, the poet smells of sweat and fear. Sometimes he rants at the men, sometimes curls up into a ball. Once, one of the men even stepped on Jeoffry's tail—unforgivable! Since then Jeoffry had made a point of hissing at every man who came to them smelling of ink.

I wish I had the fire in your belly, the poet says, and Jeoffry knows he is speaking of the creditors again. You would give them a fight, eh? But I fear I have not your courage. I will promise them their paper and perhaps scratch out a stupidity or two, but I cannot do it, Jeoffry. It takes me away from the Poem. What is a man to do, when God wants him to write one poem, and his creditors another?

Jeoffry considers his poet's problem as he licks his fur back into place. He'd heard of the Poem before—the one true poem that God had written to unfold the universe. The poet believes it is his duty to translate this poem by communing with God. His fellow humans, on the other hand, think the poet should write silly things called satires, as he used to do. This is the kind of thing humans think about, and fight about, and for which they chain up their fellow humans in nasty sweaty madhouse cells.

Jeoffry does not particularly care about either side of the debate. But—he thinks as he catches a flea and crunches it between his teeth—if he were to have an opinion, it would be that the humans should let the man finish his Divine Poem. The ways of the Divine Being were unfathomable—he'd created dogs, after all—and if the Creator wanted a poem, the poet should give it to him. And then the poet would have more time to pet Jeoffry.

O cat, the poet says, I am glad of your companionship. You remind me how it is our duty to live in the present moment, and love God through His creation. If you were not here I think the devil would have claimed me

long ago.

If the poet were sane, he might have thought better of his words. But madmen do not guard their tongues, and cats have no thoughts of the future. It's true, something does occur to Jeoffry as the poet speaks—some vague sense of disquiet—but then the man scratches behind his ears, and Jeoffry purrs in luxury.



That night, Satan comes to the madhouse.

Jeoffry is curled at his usual spot on the sleeping poet's back when the devil arrives. The devil does not enter as his demons do, in whispers and the patterning of light. His presence steals into the room like smoke, and as with smoke, Jeoffry is aware of the danger before he is even awake, his fur on end, his heart pounding.

"Hello, Jeoffry," the devil says.

Jeoffry extends his claws. At that moment, he knows something is wrong, for the poet, who normally would wake with a howl at such an accidental clawing, lies still and silent. All around Jeoffry is a quiet such as cats never hear: no mouse or beetle creeping along a madhouse wall, no human snoring, no spider winding out its silk. It as if the Night itself has hushed to listen to the devil's voice, which sounds pleasant and warm, like a bucket of cream left in the sun.

"I thought you and I should have a chat," Satan says. "I understand you've been giving my demons some trouble."

The first thought that flashes into Jeoffry's head is that Satan looks exactly as Milton describes him in *Paradise Lost*. Only more cat-shaped. (Jeoffry, a poet's cat, has ignored vast amounts of Milton over the years, but some of it has apparently stuck.)

The second thought is that the devil has come into his territory, and this means fighting!

Puffing himself up to his utmost size, Jeoffry spits at the devil and shows his teeth.

This is my place! he cries. Mine!

"Is anything truly ours?" The devil sighs and examines his claws. He is simultaneously a monstrous serpent, a mighty angel, and a handsome black cat with whiskers the color of starlight. The cat's whiskers are singed, the

serpent's scales are scarred, and the angel's brow is heavy with an ancient grievance, and yet he is still beautiful, in his way. "But more of this later. Jeffry, I have come to converse with you. Will you not take a walk with me?"

Jeffry pauses, considering. Do you have treats?

"I have feasts awaiting. Catnip fresh from the soil. Salted ham from the market. Fish heads with the eyes still in them, scrumptiously poppable."

I want treats.

"And treats you shall have. Come and see."

Jeffry trots at the devil's heels down the madhouse stairs, past the mouse's nest on the landing, past the kitchen with its pleasant smell of bread and pork fat, through the asylum's heavy door (which stands mysteriously open), and onto roads of Darkness, beneath which the round orb of Earth hangs like a jewel. Jeffry gazes with interest up at the blue glow of the Crystalline Firmament, at the fixed stars, and at the golden chain of Heaven, from which all the Universe is suspended. He feels hungry.

"Well," the devil says presently. "Let's get the formalities out of the way." He snaps his fingers. Instantly Jeffry is dangling above the Earth, staring down at it as one does at a patterned carpet. He can see the gleaming rooftop of the madhouse, and Bethnal Green, and the darkened streets of London, still bustling, even at this time of night.

"All of this could be yours," Satan says. "Yea, I will give you all the kingdoms of Earth if you'd but bow down and worship me."

Jeffry does not like being dangled. His fur bristles as he prepares himself to fall. But then he catches the smell of the fish market in the air, and hears the distant yowl of a tomcat making love on the street. And Jeffry understands, for a moment, what the devil is offering him. He understands, also, that this offer represents a fundamentally wrong order to the universe.

You should bow down and worship Jeffry!

"Right," the devil says. "I thought as much."

He snaps his fingers again, and they are back on the path between the fixed stars, with the planets far below them.

"You have the sin of pride, cat," Satan says. "A sin I am particularly fond of, given that it is my own. For that reason I am taking you into my confidence. You see, I have an interest in your poet."

Mine!

“That’s debatable. There are multiple claims to Mr. Smart. The Tyrant of Heaven’s, his debtors’, his family’s ... the man is like a ruined estate, overrun with scavengers. Me,” the devil shrugs, “he owes for some of his earlier debaucheries—he was an extravagant man in his youth—and for that I need to collect.”

Jeffrey’s tail twitches back and forth. Like many who have conversed with the devil, he can sense something wrong with this dark tide of speech, a lie buried beneath Satan’s reasonable arguments. But he cannot work out what it is.

“Now,” says the Adversary, “I would be willing to forgive this debt if your poet would but write *me* a poem. I have the perfect thing in mind: a metered piece of guile that, unleashed, would lay waste to Creation.

“Indeed,” the devil says, “I have planted this poem in his imagination on several occasions. But your poet is stubborn. He defies all his creditors (including, most importantly, me), and insists on writing this tripe, this vile piece of sycophancy, for the Tyrant of Heaven, who—let me assure you—deserves no such praise.”

The Poem of Poems, Jeffrey says.

“Exactly. Let us face facts, Jeffrey. The Poem your human labors over—the thing to which he has devoted his last years of labor, burning away his health, destroying his human relationships—even setting aside my feelings on its subject matter, Jeffrey, the fact is this: The poem he writes is *not very good*.”

Jeffrey stares at his paws, and beneath them, at the blue glow of Earth. Vaguely the words of the poet’s human visitors come to him. Have they not said much the same thing?

“Speaking as a critic now, Jeffrey: Do you not think the poem’s Let-For structure is overly complicated? The wordplay in Latin and Greek too obscure to suit the common taste? Obscurity for the sake of obscurity, Jeffrey. It will get him nowhere.”

Poetry is prayer, Jeffrey says stiffly, repeating the words the poet murmurs to himself as he scratches frantically at his papers, or the bricks, or at the skin on his forearms.

“Poetry is poetry. Two roads diverging in a yellow wood, people wandering about like clouds, even that terrible thing about footprints—that’s what readers want, Jeffrey. Something simple, and clear, with a

message: that all of one's life choices may be justified by looking at daffodils; that we exist in a world abandoned by God and haunted by human mediocrity. Don't you agree?"

Jeoffry does not like literature of any kind, unless it is about Jeoffry. Even then, petting is better. And eating. Are there treats now?

"Ah, treats."

Instantly a banquet table is before Jeoffry. Everything the devil had promised is there: the fish heads, the salted ham—and things he forgot to mention, like the vats of cream and crispy salmon skins. There's even a bowl of Turkish delight.

Jeoffry bolts toward the food. Suddenly, a hand catches him by the scruff of the neck. The devil has grown gigantic, a mighty warrior, singed and scarred by his contest with heaven. His smile gleams like a knife.

"Before you eat, Jeoffry, I need a thing of you. Such a small thing."

I want the food.

"And you shall get it, if you but promise me this: to stand aside when I come to visit your poet tomorrow night. Aye, to stand aside, and not interfere."

The uneasy sense that Jeoffry had felt at the devil's first words returns with a vengeance.

Why?

"Merely so I can converse with your poet."

Jeoffry thinks about Satan's proposition. As a cat well-versed in Milton, he is aware of the devil's less-than-salubrious reputation. On the other hand, there's a giant vat of cream *right there*.

I agree, he says.

The devil smiles. Released, Jeoffry flies to the table, and food! There is so much food! He eats and eats, and somehow there is still more to eat, and somehow he can keep eating, though his belly is starting to hurt.

"My thanks to you, Jeoffry," the devil says. "I will see you tomorrow."

Jeoffry is aware, vaguely, that Satan is walking away from him. But that does not matter: He has come to the bowl of Turkish delight, and having heard so much about it, it must taste good, no? So he selects a powdered cube of honey and rosewater, one that is larger than all the others, and he takes a bite—

★ ★ ★

The next day, Jeffry feels ill.

On waking, he performs his morning prayers as he always does. He wreathes his body seven times around with elegant quickness. He leaps up to catch the musk, and rolls on the planks to work it in. He performs the cat's self-examination in ten degrees, first, looking on his forepaws to see if they are clean, then stretching, then sharpening his claws by wood, then washing himself, then rolling about, then checking himself for fleas....

Yet none of this makes Jeffry feel better. It is as though something casts a shadow upon him, separating the cat from the sunlight that is his due. With a chill, Jeffry remembers his bargain with the devil. Was it a dream?

Well met, Jeffry, well met. The poet is awake, and his eyes look unusually clear. He sits up on his bed of straw, and stretches.

I feel better today, Jeffry, as if my sickness is leaving me. Oh, but they are sure to duck me again, to drive the devils out. You are lucky, cat, to have no devils in you, for you'd hate being ducked.

The poet rubs Jeffry's head, affectionately, then looks again. But how's this, Jeffry? You look unwell, my friend.

Jeffry meows. His stomach feels sickly heavy, as though he has eaten a barrel full of rotten fish. He tries to say something about the devil—not that the human would understand, but it seems worth trying—and instead vomits on the poet's leg.

Heavens, Jeffry! What have you been eating!

Jeffry noses his vomit to see if there's anything there worth re-eating, but the remnants of the devil's meal are a pile of dead leaves, partly digested. The devil's visit was no dream, then.

The poet tries to catch him, but Jeffry is too quick. He slips down the staircase, where he vomits, to the kitchen, where he vomits, until he sees a water bowl put down for the physician's dog. He drinks from it. And vomits.

He vomits on the cook, who tries to catch him, and on the terrier-dog, which yaps at him as he jumps to the top cupboard. Is there so much vomit in the world? (Apparently.)

Miserable Jeffry curls up on top of the cupboard and puts a paw over his eyes to shut out the light. He sleeps an uneasy sleep, in which Satan stalks through his dreams in the guise of a giant black cat, chuckling.

When Jeffry opens his eyes again it is evening. He can hear the grind

and clink of iron keys above him. The keepers are locking the cell doors. Soon the demons will arrive in full force, to gambol and chitter in the shadows, and pull at the lunatics' beards, and drive them madder.

Jeffrey clambers to his feet. His legs are shaky, but he drives himself onward, leaping awkwardly to the kitchen floor. The smell of his vomit still hangs in the air, acrid, with an aura of sulfur.

Jeffrey climbs the stairs. The mice behind the walls peep at him as he lumbers past. The imps giggle in the distance, but he sees none in the hallways of the second floor. With a sinking heart, he paces onward, to the room where his poet sits, composing his great work.

As Jeffrey approaches the poet's cell, a great wind seems to blow from its door. Jeffrey flattens himself against the ground and tries to slink forward, but the wind is too strong. It presses on him with the hands of a thousand dark angels, with the weight of Leviathan, with the despair of the world. He claws at the floorboards, shredding wood, but he cannot go farther.

"Now, now, Jeffrey," a voice says in his head. "Did you not promise me that you would stand aside?"

Jeffrey yowls in response. He tries to tell the devil that he takes back his bargain, that the food he ate was merely vegetation, that he vomited it all up anyway, that Turkish delight is overrated.

"A bargain is a bargain," the voice says. The wind grows stronger. Jeffrey feels himself floating up in the air. A sudden gust jerks him backward, and then—



Jeffrey wakes. There is a sour smell in the air—not vomit this time, but something else. Jeffrey is lying in the second floor's empty cell, the one where the human strangled herself on her chains. The iron hoops stare at him accusingly.

Jeffrey uncoils himself, and as he does so he remembers the previous evening. The devil, the wind, and the vomit. (O the vomit!) And the poet.

He takes off at a run. The poet is sitting up on his bed of straw, his face slack-jawed. Jeffrey headbutts him, and winds around him, and paws his face. Even so, it takes a while for the poet to transfer his gaze to Jeffrey.

O cat, the poet says. I fear I have done a terrible thing.

Jeoffry rubs his chin against the man's skinny knee. He purrs, willing the world repaired.

Last night the devil himself came to me, the man says. He said such things ... I withstood him as long as I could, but in the end, I could take no more. I begged him, on my knees, to stop his whisperings. And he asked me—and I agreed. O cat, I am damned for certain! For I have promised the devil a poem.

As he gave this speech, the man's hands kneaded Jeoffry's back harder and harder, digging into his flesh until it hurt. Normally this would trigger a clawing, or a stern meow, but Jeoffry understands now what it means to come face-to-face with the devil, and his heart is sore.

Jeoffry does what he can to comfort the poet. He spraggles and waggles. He frolics about the room. He takes up the wine cork the man likes to toss for him, and drops it on the poet's lap. And yet none of this seems to lift the poet's spirits.

The man curls in the corner and moans until the attendants come to take him away for his morning ducking. Jeoffry lies on the floor, in the sun, and thinks.

The poet is miserable, and well he might be, having agreed to write a poem for the devil. Jeoffry, in agreeing to stand aside, left his human undefended. In that action (and here Jeoffry must think very hard, and lay his ears back) Jeoffry has been less than his normal, wonderful self. He may in fact have been (though this is almost impossible to think) a *bad cat*.

Jeoffry is furious at the thought. He attacks the air. Growling, he flies about the room, ripping the spiderwebs down from the ceiling. He gets in the man's straw bed and whirls around and around, until bits of straw coat the floor and the dust veils him in yellow. Somehow, none of it helps.

When he is exhausted, he sits and licks himself clean. Even a short poem will take the poet more than a day to write, for he must doubt every word, and scratch it out, and write it down again. That is more than enough time for Jeoffry to find the devil, and fight him, and bite him on the throat.

It is true that the devil is bigger than the biggest rat Jeoffry has ever fought, and it is also true that he is Satan, the Adversary, Prince of Hell, Lord of Evil. Nevertheless, the devil made a grave mistake when he annoyed Jeoffry. He will pay for his insolence.

Thus resolved, Jeoffry goes in quest of food. His heart feels lighter. He has a feeling that soon, all will be well.



When he comes back from his ducking, the poet lies on his bed and weeps. Jeffry cannot rub against him after the water treatment, for the poet's skin is still unpleasantly damp. So Jeffry claws the wooden bedframe instead.

Ah, Jeffry, the poet cries. They gave me back my paper! And my quill, and ink! Yesterday I would have been overjoyed at such a kindness, but now I can only detect the machinations of the devil! It is all in my head, Jeffry—the poem entire. I need only set it to paper. But I know I must not. These words—oh they must not be allowed to enter this world!

And yet he takes out a sheet of cotton paper, and his gum sandarac powder, and his ruler. Sobbing, he begins to write. The noise of his quill scritch-scratching is like the sound of ants eating through wood. It wrinkles Jeffry's nose, but he does not stir from the poet's cell. He is waiting for the devil to arrive.

Sure enough, come nightfall, the devil steals into the madhouse. He looks for all the world like a London critic, in a green striped waistcoat and a velvet coat. He stands outside the bars of the cell and peers inside.

"How now, Jeffry," Satan says. "How does my poet fare?" It is plain to see that the poet is shivering and sobbing on his bed. At the sound of the devil's voice, he buries his face in his hands and begins murmuring a prayer.

Jeffry turns disdainfully to the wall. The devil tricked him. The devil is bad. The devil may not have the pleasure of stroking Jeffry or petting him on the head. Jeffry is more interested in staring at this wall. Staring intently. Maybe there is a fly here, maybe not. This wall is more interesting than you, Satan.

"Alas," Satan says. "Much as it wounds me to lose your good opinion, Jeffry, tonight I have other fish to fry." With that, Satan directs his attention to the poet, and he says in the language of the humans: "How goes my poem?"

Get behind me, Satan!

"Please," the devil says, hooking his hands in the lapels of his coat. "'Tis a sad thing when a wordsmith resorts to clichés. And hardly good manners in addressing an old friend! What, did I not aid you in your youth many a time, in bedding a wench or evading a creditor? Now I ask that you do a single thing for me, and you whimper about repaying my kindness?"

For shame.”

I should not have agreed to it! the man says. Forgive me, Lord, for I was weak!

“La,” the devil says, “aren’t we all. But enough of this moping. How goes my poem?”

The man is jerked upright like a dog yanked on a chain. He rises from his bed—in his nightclothes, no less—and takes up a few sheets of paper. He hands them, with an iron-stiff arm, through the bars to the devil.

The devil takes out a pair of amber spectacles and a red quill. He reads over the papers with great interest, from time to time making happy humming noises to himself, and from time to time frowning and scratching down something in bursts of flame. “Capital phrasing sir!” he says, and “Sir, you *cannot* rhyme love with dove, it is banal and I shall not allow it,” and “I like this first reference to ‘An Essay on Man,’ but this second makes you seem derivative, don’t you think?”

The poet, peering at the pages from the vantage point of his madmen’s cell, looks miserable. Jeffry, inside the cell, begins to growl. Will not the devil come inside? Very well, then Jeffry will come to him.

“This is marvelous work, sir,” the devil says, slotting the manuscript back between the poet’s trembling fingers. “I am very pleased with your progress. Do contemplate the edits I suggested. I will be back tomorrow midnight to collect the final version.”

I will not do it!

“But you *shall*, good sir. You have made your bargain. Now, you can sit here, wallowing in misery, or you can comfort yourself that your poem will inscribe itself on the hearts of men. It is all the same to me.”

During this conversation, Jeffry slips through the bars. The devil is wearing an elegant pair of French boots—of course the devil would favor French leather, thinks the very English Jeffry—and when the devil turns on his heel, Jeffry pounces.

Claw and bite! Snap and climb! Jeffry is simultaneously attacking a black cat with wicked claws and a mighty dragon of shining scale and a gentleman who is trying to shake him off his leg. Jeffry is tossed by the devil like the Ark on the waves of destruction. He is smashed and crashed, bitten and walloped. Still, Jeffry clings to him, growling and clawing!

“Oh bother,” says the devil. “Those were my favorite stockings.”

Fire and darkness! Shade and sorrow! The devil has shaken him off.

Jeoffry flies through the air and skids across the floorboards. But instantly he is on his feet again, his eyes ablaze, his skin electric. He will not let the devil go!

“Must we?” says the devil wearily. “Oh very well.”

Now the devil begins to fight in earnest, and he is a terror. He is a thousand yellow-toothed rats swarming out of a sewer. He is a mighty angel whose wingbeats breed hurricanes. He is a gentleman with a walking stick. Wallop!

Jeoffry’s chest explodes with pain. Dazed, for a moment he thinks he cannot rise. But he must, and his legs carry him back into the fight.

Jeoffry stalks the devil anew, trying to keep clear of Satan’s walking-stick wings. Suddenly the black cat is there, clawing at Jeoffry’s eyes and springing away before Jeoffry can land a blow. Jeoffry hisses and puffs up his fur, but somewhere in his aching chest is the sense that, perhaps, this is a fight he cannot win. Perhaps this is the fight that kills Jeoffry.

So be it. Jeoffry leaps on the back of the cat/rat/angel/dragon. He draws blood, the devil’s blood, which smells of burning roses.

Too quickly, the devil twists under his grip. Too quickly, the yellow teeth clamp down. Agony sears through Jeoffry’s neck. The devil has him by the throat.

Jeoffry struggles for purchase, but he can find none. His vision darkens. He can feel the devil’s teeth press hard against the pulse of his life.

Dimly he hears the poet yelling. No, no! the man cries. Please spare my cat! We’ll cause you no more trouble, I swear!

The devil loosens his grip. “Ooph ooph,” he says. He spits out Jeoffry and tries again. “Very well.”

And Jeoffry is falling through blackness, falling forever—



Jeoffry is in pain. The bite the devil gave him throbs fiercely. It is in the wrong place to lick, and yet he tries, and that hurts too.

Poor Jeoffry! Poor Jeoffry! the poet says. O you brave cat. May the Lord Jesus bless you and your wounds.

Jeoffry’s ears flick back and forth. Worse than the pain is the heaviness in his chest that comes from having lost a fight. Jeoffry lose a fight! Such

things were possible when he was a kitten, but now—

I can feel the paper calling to me even now, the poet sighs. O Jeffry, sleep here and grow well again. I must to my task.

At this Jeffry leaves off licking his wounds and stares at the poet. He means to convey that the man should not write this poem. For once, the man seems to understand.

O Jeffry, I have made a deal, and I feel in my bones that I cannot fight it. When I hand him that poem, I will give him my very soul! But what can be done? There is nothing to be done, Jeffry. You must get better. And the poem must be written.

Jeffry does not even have the strength to protest. He drinks from the water bowl the poet has put near him, and sleeps for a while in the sun.

When he opens his eyes the afternoon light is slanting through the barred window. Clumsily, Jeffry rises and performs his orisons. As he cleans himself he considers the problem of the devil and the poet. This is not a fight Jeffry can win. The traitorous thought clenches his throat, and for a moment he wants to push it away. But that will not help the poet.

So instead, Jeffry does what he never does, and considers the weaknesses and frailties of Jeffry.

Magnificent though he is, he thinks, Jeffry is not in himself enough to defeat the devil. Something else must be done. Something humbling, and painful.

Once he is resolved, Jeffry slips out of the cell. He does not take up his customary spot under the kitchen table, but instead limps into the courtyard, to where the cook has laid out a bowl of milk for the other cats, the ones who do not rule the madhouse.

Polly is the first to appear. She is an old lover of his, a sleek gray cat with a tattered ear and careful deportment. She looks distressed to see his wounds.

<What now, Jeffry?> Polly says in the language of cats, which is more eloquent and capacious than the sounds they reserve for humans. <You look as though a hound has chewed you up.>

<I fought Satan,> Jeffry says. <And I lost.>

Polly investigates Jeffry's wounds. <The devil has bitten you on the throat.>

<I know.>

Polly leans forward and licks the bite. Jeffry flicks his ears back, but

accepts her aid. It is the first good thing that has happened this day.

Next comes Black Tom, the insufferable alley cat. <How now, Jeoffry,> he says. <You look the worse for wear.>

<He fought the devil,> Polly says.

<And I lost.>

<Haha! Of course you did.> Tom helps himself to the milk. When he is finished he sits back and cleans his whiskers. <No style, Jeoffry, no style. That's your problem.>

<My style worked well enough when I fought you last summer,> Jeoffry snaps. <Aye, and chased you from my kitchen with your tail behind you!>

<You lying dog!> Black Tom makes himself look big. <You d——d cur! >

<Braggart! Coward!>

<D—n your eyes!> Black Tom roars. <I demand satisfaction!>

<Gentlemen,> Polly says, licking her forepaw. <The courtyard is my territory. Dueling is a disreputable practice, ill befitting a cat of good character. Would you insult a lady in her own house?>

Jeoffry and Black Tom both mutter apologies.

<Indeed,> Polly says. <If Satan is abroad, then we had best keep our claws sharpened for other fights.>

<It is of such matters that I wish to speak,> says Jeoffry.

<Then speak, cat!> Black Tom says. <We don't have all day!>

<There is one other whose counsel I require,> says Jeoffry, and he lifts his chin to the third cat in the yard, a bouncing, prancing black kitten. She wears a pretty bell on a collar of blue silk ribbon, and it jangles as she skips across the yard.

<The Nighthunter Moppet,> Polly says, and sighs.

<Hello, Miss Polly! Hello, Master Tom! Hello, Master Jeoffry!> the kitten sings. <Do you want to see my butterfly? It is yellow and brown and very pretty. I believe it is a chequered skipper, which is a *Carterocephalus palaemon*, which is what I learned in Lucy's lesson on natural history, which is a very important subject. But that species is a woodland butterfly! Perhaps I am wrong about what kind of butterfly it is! Do take a look.>

The Nighthunter Moppet yawns open her small pink mouth, then closes it. She looks around her, puzzled.

<I think you ate it already,> says Polly.

<Oh, so I did! It was very pretty. Is that milk?>

The kitten falls on the milk and drinks her fill. When she is done she skips around the bowl, batting at the adults' noses. When she reaches Jeoffry, though, she stops, and looks concerned.

<Master Jeoffry! Are you hurt?>

<I fought Satan,> Jeoffry says.

O! The kitten's green eyes widen. She sits back into the bowl of milk, sloshing it over her bottom.

<Jeoffry has something to say,> Polly says. <For which he requires our attention.>

<I am paying attention! I am!> The kitten, who had been licking up the spilled milk, turns her attention back to Jeoffry.

Jeoffry sighs. <The other night,> he says, <the devil came to the madhouse.>

And he tells them everything: the magnificent cat-bribing feast, the vomit, the fight with Satan, the poet's despair. The other cats watch him wide-eyed.

At the end of his tale, he hunches into himself and speaks the words that are hardest in the world for a cat to utter.

<I need your help.>

The other cats look at him in amazement. Jeoffry feels shame settle on him like a fine dust. He drops his gaze and examines the shine of a brown beetle that is slowly clambering over a cobblestone.

<This is a d——ly strange business,> Black Tom says grudgingly. <Satan himself! But if you want my claws, sir, you shall have them.>

<I, too, will aid you,> Polly says, <though I confess I am unsure what we can do against such an enemy.>

<This time there will be four of us,> Black Tom says. <Four cats! The devil won't know what hit him.>

<**This is the wrong strategy,**> says the Nighthunter Moppet, and her voice has the ring of a blade unsheathed.

All kittenness has fallen away from Moppet. What sits before the milk bowl is the ruthless killer of the courtyard, the assassin whose title *nighthunter* is whispered in terror among the mice and birds of Bethnal Green. It is rumored that the Moppet's great-grandmother was a demon of the lower realms, which might perhaps explain the peculiar keenness of her green-glass eyes, and her talent for death-dealing. Indeed, as Jeoffry

watches, the Moppet's tiny shadow seems to grow and split into seven pieces, each of which is shaped like a monstrous cat with seven tails. The shadow cats' tails lash and lash as the Nighthunter Moppet broods on Satan.

<It is true that as cats we are descended from the Angel Tiger, who killed the Ichneumon-rat of Egypt,> says the Moppet. Her shadows twist into the shapes of rats and angels as she speaks. **<We are warriors of God, and as such, we can blood Satan. But we cannot kill him, for he has another fate decreed.>**

The Nighthunter Moppet sighs at the thought of a lost kill, and drops her gaze to the ground. The brown beetle is still there, trotting over the cobblestones. She begins to follow it with her nose.

<Moppet!> Polly says sternly. **<You were telling us how we should fight the devil!>** **<Oh sorry, sorry,>** the Moppet says. With great effort she tears her gaze away from the beetle. Instantly her seven shadows are back, larger than before, raising their claws to the heavens.

<To win this fight we must think carefully of what we mean to win,> says the Nighthunter Moppet. The pupils have disappeared from her eyes, which blaze green fire. **<Is it Satan's death? No. His humiliation? Again, no.>**

<Speak for yourself,> Black Tom says. **<He will run from my claws!>**

The kitten's shadows turn and look at Black Tom with disapproval. When she next speaks, their voices join hers. They sound like the buzzing of a thousand flies.

<It is neither of those things!> cry the army of Moppets. **<Think! What is it the devil hopes to achieve?>**

<The destruction of the world,> says Polly.

<A poem about his greatness,> says Black Tom.

<The poet's soul,> says Jeffry.

<Exactly,> snarl the Moppets. **<And those three things are also one thing. If you steal it from him, good cat Jeffry, then you will have beaten the devil.>** With that her shadows shrink back into a normal, kitten-shaped shadow, and the pupils return to her green eyes.

<But what do I steal?> Jeffry asks desperately.

The Moppet looks at him blankly. **<What?>** she says. **<Are we stealing something?>**

<I think the Nighthunter Moppet has told us all she can, Jeffry,> Polly

says.

<But it is not enough,> Jeoffry says. Thinking is harder than fighting, and his head hurts. Still. He squeezes his eyes tightly, and thinks over all that has happened. The poet. The devil. The Poem of Poems.

<I think I know what I must do,> he says. <But to do it I must sneak past the devil, and his eyes are keen.>

<We shall help you,> says Black Tom.

<We shall fight him,> says Polly.

The light of spirit fire flickers in the Nighthunter's eyes. Some of her shadows peer out from behind her body.

<**And you,**> she intones, <***shall creep.***>

★ ★ ★

That night the devil is in a good mood. He whistles as he walks between the stars, cracking the tip of his cane on the pathway. From time to time, this dislodges a young star, who falls screaming.

“Good evening, good fellow,” he says to the sleeping night watchman as he enters the asylum. “And to you, Bently,” he says as he passes a cell containing a murderer. The man shrieks and scuttles away. Finally the devil arrives at the poet's cell. “And how do you do, Mr. Smart? Do you have my poem?”

The poet crouches, terrified, in the corner of his cell. No, no—please, Jesus, no, he moans. But there is a sheet of paper quivering in his hand.

“Excellent,” the devil says. “Come now, hand it over. You'll feel much better once you do.”

The poet is jerked upright, like an ill-strung marionette. The hand that clasps the paper swings away from his body. But as the devil reaches to claim it, there is a yowl from behind him.

<Stand and deliver, you d——d mangy w———n!> It is Black Tom, his tail bristling like a brush.

At his side, Polly narrows her eyes. <Sir, you must step away from that poet!>

“What's this?” The devil puts his hands on his hips and regards the growling cats. “More cats come to terrorize my stockings?”

<We'll have more than your stockings, sir,> says Polly.

<D—n your eyes, I'll have your hide, you ——— ——— ———

—— ———!!!!>

“Such language!” says the devil. Even Polly looks shocked.

“Well, sir,” Satan says, “I’ll not be called a —— by anyone, let alone by a flea-bitten alley cat. Lay on, sir!” And the devil is a cat again, and an angel, and an angry critic raising his walking stick as a club. Even as the devil’s walking stick swings down in a slow, glittering arc of hellfire, even as the devil aims to crack the top of Black Tom’s dancing, prancing skull, a bloodcurdling cry rings out from above.

<I AM THE NIGHTHUNTER MOPPET!>

Perched on a dusty scone above the devil’s head is a rabid, knife-jawed, fire-eyed kitten with seven hungry shadows. And as the devil looks up agape, she springs, her wicked claws catching the light, right on top of the devil’s powdered wig.

Hellfire! Chaos! The two other cats rush the devil’s legs, clawing at his face. He bites and clobbers them, his wings and fists swinging. The walls of the asylum throb with the impact of the battle. The poet, crumpled on the floor, twitches and writhes. In every cell, the lunatics begin to howl.

Jeffry lays back his ears and continues to *creep*, as the Moppet showed him. **<We are descended from angels,>** she had said, **<and as such we can move into the spaces between the world-we-see and the world-that-is.>**

That is where Jeffry is now, slinking past the devil on a slanted path of broken stardust, in a fold of space where the keen-eyed Adversary would not think to look. Creeping is hard to do, not just because Jeffry has to squeeze every ounce of his catness into this cosmic folding, but also because there is a brawl happening at his back that he would dearly love to join.

Since when does Jeffry, the most glorious warrior of catdom, slink away from a fight? whispers a voice inside him. *Since when is Jeffry a coward? Will he let Black Tom get the glory of defeating the devil?*

But Jeffry shuts his ear to this voice. He has learned that there is more than one kind of devil, and that the one inside your head, that speaks with the voice of your own heart, is far more dangerous than the velvet coat-wearing, poetry-loving variety.

Indeed, the fiend is having a harder time against three cats than he did against one. One of his shadows has turned into a dragon and is fighting Black Tom; Satan’s powdered wig has animated itself and is tackling Polly

across the hallway. But in the center of the poet's cell, in a storm of lightning and hellfire, whirl Satan and the Nighthunter Moppet, splattered with each other's blood. The Moppet has only five shadows now, and one of her green eyes is closed, but her snarl still gleams prettily amid the flames of darkness visible.

"Stand down, you vile kitten!"

<I AM! NIGHTHUNTER! MOPPET!> the kitten screams back. As battle cries go, it is unoriginal, but gets the central point across, Jeffry thinks as he slinks ever closer to the gibbering poet. The ghosts of the stars Satan has lately killed whisper encouragement as he creeps forward through cosmic space, inch by careful inch.

"You cannot win," Satan says. At that, he seems to collect himself. The various pieces of the devil reassemble in a column of fire at the center of the room (with the exception of the powdered wig, which Polly has pinned down on the staircase). "This poet is mine. And if you oppose me further, you will die."

<We shall die, then,> Polly says, a tuft of whitened hair hanging from her teeth. Behind her, the powdered wig, its curls in disarray, scrunches down the staircase to freedom.

<F—k you,> says Black Tom.

On the floor, the crumpled shape of a small black kitten staggers to its feet. <Nighthunter.> It says. <Moppet.>

"Very well," the dragon/cat/critic says, and opens its jaws.

★ ★ ★

And Jeffry stops *creeping*. He springs.

★ ★ ★

Fire and flood! Wonder and horror! Jeffry has snatched the sheet of paper from the poet's trembling hand and swallowed it whole! Snap snap! The paper on the table is eaten too! Snap! And the crumpled drafts on the floor! Jeffry is a whirlwind of gluttony! As a last measure, he knocks over the ink bottle and laps it up. Glug glug! Take that, Satan!

The devil stands in the center of the cell, cats dangling from his arms. The look on his face is similar to the one he wore at his defeat in the Battle of Heaven, and is only marginally happier than the one he wore on his

arrival in Hell. Normally, when Satan wears that expression, it is a sign he is about to begin speechifying. But for once, all his words are gone. They are sitting inside a belching ginger cat, who blinks at the devil and licks his lips.

“Oh hell, cat,” says the devil, letting the half-throttled felines fall to the floor. “What have you done?”

Jeoffry grins at him. He can feel a warm glow inside him that is the poet’s soul, being safely digested. His soul was in the poem, the poet said, and now Jeoffry has eaten it up. The devil cannot have it now.

“No!” the devil shrieks. He rages. He stomps his foot. He puts his hands to his head and tears himself in half, and the separate halves of him explode in angry fireworks.

Then, perhaps thinking better of his dignity, the devil re-manifests and straightens his waistcoat. He glares at Jeoffry. “You,” he says, “have scarred literature forever. You stupid cat.”

With that, the devil turns on his heel and leaves.

The poet in the corner staggers forward. Thank Jesus! he cries. Jeoffry, you have done it!

<And me,> says Black Tom.

<All of us did it,> says Polly.

<The devil forgot his wig,> the Nighthunter Moppet says. Her one good eye narrows.

<Thank you, thank you, my friends,> Jeoffry says. <I am forever obliged for your help in this.> And then he winds himself around the poet and purrs.

That is the story of how the devil came to the madhouse, and was defeated (though not in battle) by the great Jeoffry. There are other stories I could tell, of the sea battles of Black Tom, of Polly’s foray into opera, and of the Nighthunter Moppet’s epic hunt for Satan’s wig, which left a trail of mischief and misery across London for years.

But instead I will end with poetry.

For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry.

For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.

.....

For he keeps the Lord’s watch in the night against the Adversary.

For he counteracts the powers of Darkness by his electrical skin and glaring eyes.

For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life.

.....

For he can creep.

—Christopher Smart

St. Luke's Hospital for Lunatics,

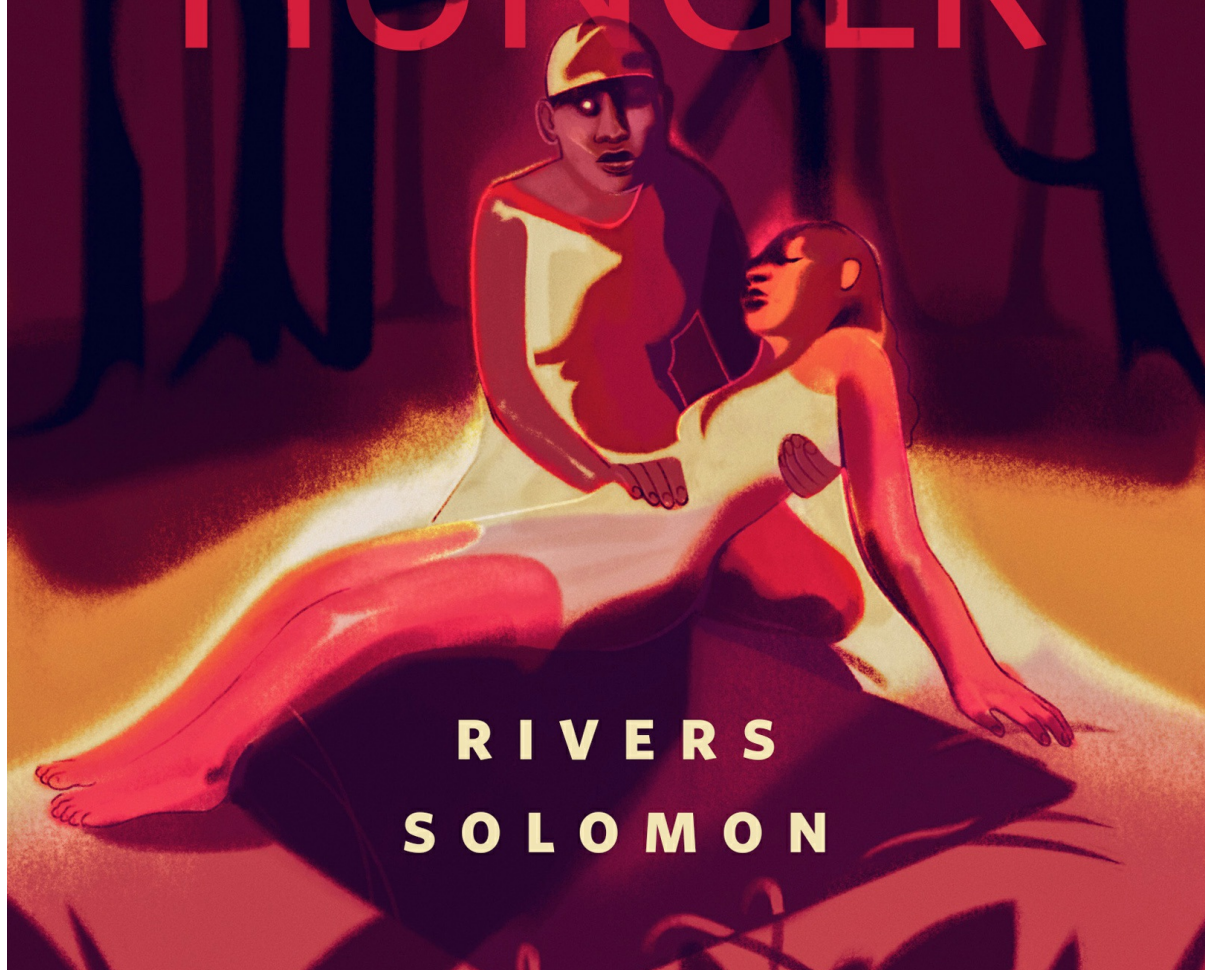
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BLOOD IS ANOTHER WORD FOR HUNGER



Blood is Another Word for Hunger

RIVERS SOLOMON

illustration by

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TOR·COM 

In a wooden house on a modest farmstead by a dense wood near a roving river to the west of town, miles from the wide road and far away from the peculiar madness that is men at war, lived the Missus, the Missus's grown daughters Adelaide and Catherine, the Missus's sister Bitsy, the Missus's poorly mother Anna, and the Missus's fifteen-year-old slave girl Sully, who had a heart made of teeth—for as soon as she heard word that Albert, the Missus's husband, had been slain in battle, she took up arms against the family who'd raised her, slipping a tincture of valerian root and skullcap into their cups of warmed milk before slitting their throats in the night.

The etherworld, always one eye steady on the realm of humankind, took note. Disturbances in the order of things could be exploited, could cut paths between dominions. The murder of a family by a girl so tender and young ripped a devilishly wide tunnel between the fields of existence, for it was not the way of things, and the etherworld thrived on the impermissible.

Sully's breaths blurred together into a whispery, chafed hum as she stood over the bodies. Blood marked her clothes, hair, and skin. She tasted it in her mouth, where it had shot in a stream from Bitsy's artery. Her tongue, too, was coated, but Sully wouldn't swallow. She couldn't bear to have that hateful woman all up inside her body, slick and salty and merging with her own blood. Saliva gathered in her mouth till she had no choice but to spit on a patch of rug in the second bedroom, where Bitsy and the Missus's daughter slept.

She stumbled downstairs and out to the barn and grabbed the bar of soap from the metal tin that held all her possessions. Determined, she slaked it over her tongue before biting off a morsel and swallowing it, just in case a smidge of Bitsy had made its way into her and needed eradicating.

Sully's whistley, syncopated pants could've been the dying wheezes of a sick coyote or the first breaths of a colt, the battlesong of a screech owl, a storm wind. Sully closed her eyes. In the darkness and quiet of the barn, she could hear every night sound as loud as a woman hollering a field song. The music of it entered her, and she succumbed. When next Sully opened her eyes, she could breathe properly again. A few moments after that, she felt steady enough to return to the house.

Sully gathered the blood-laden sheets from inside and carried them to the property's stream, where the rush of water rinsed away the stains. She knew well how to untangle blood from cotton, having regularly scrubbed clean the Missus's,

the Missus's daughter's, and the Missus's sister's menses-soiled undergarments.

When her fingers turned still from the mix of cool water and the brisk night wind, she carried the sheets to the tree and hung them over the naked branches. The beige linens blew back and forth in the wind, possessed. Sully went inside to warm her hands over the woodstove then carried the bodies of her slavers one by one over her shoulder outside. She dug a single grave for hours and hours and hours into the night, into the next day, and into that night, too, never sleeping, and filled the wound she'd made in the earth with Missus, Adelaide, Catherine, Bitsy, and Anna, and covered them with soil.

Her heart should've ached for these women—they'd raised her from age six—but it did not. She was still seething, madder, in fact, than she'd been before the kill because her final act of rebellion had not brought the relief she'd imagined it would. These ladies who'd loomed Goliath in her life, who'd unleashed every ugliness they could think of on Sully, were corn husks now, souls hollowed out. Irrelevant. How could that be? How could folks so immense become nothing in the space of time it took a blade to swipe six inches?

It was Sully's unsoftened anger in the face of what she'd done that cut a path between dominions. The etherworld spat out a teenage girl, full grown, called Ziza into Sully's womb. Ziza had spent the last two hundred years skulking in the land of the dead, but she rode the fury of Sully's murders like a river current back to the world of flesh. Ziza felt it all, wind and sky and the breath of wolves against her skin. She spun through the ages looking for the present, time now foreign to her after being in a world where everything was both eternal and nonexistent.

"Yes, yes, yes!" Ziza called as she descended from the spirit realm down a tunnel made of life. Breathing things, screaming things, hot, sweaty, pulsing, moving, scampering, wild, toothy, bloody, slimy, rich, salty things. Tree branches brushed her skin. Sensation overwhelmed her as she landed with a soft, plump thud into the belly of her new god. Ziza took in the darkness, swum in it. It was nothing like the violent nothingness of her home for the past two centuries. For here she could smell, taste, feel. She could hear the cries of the girl carrying her, loud and unrelenting.

Sully had never been with child before, and she didn't understand the pain that overtook her so sudden as she shoveled the last gallon of dirt over the graves of her masters. Spasms in her abdomen convinced her she was dying.

As she fell backwards to the ground, her belly turned giant and bulbous. She stared up at the crescent moon and spat at it for the way it mocked her with its half-smile. Sully hated that grinning white ghoul, and with all the spite at the fates she could muster, she howled and she howled and she howled at it. She howled until she became part wolf, a lush coat of gray fur spiking from her shoulder blades and spine. It was magic from the dead land that Ziza brought with her, where there was no border separating woman from beast.

Hearing the pained wailing, Ziza made herself as small as possible as she felt

herself being birthed, not wishing to damage her host. With her last ounce of etherworld magic, she shrunk herself down to the size of a large baby for the time it would take to come out.

“Help,” moaned Sully, but she’d killed anyone who might be able to offer intervention. “Help me!” Sully’s womb contracted, and overwhelmed with the urge to push, she squeezed until that baby who was not a baby came out of her.

Sully’s mouth hung agape as she watched the birthed-thing crawl from the cradle of her thighs then grow bigger, bigger, and bigger until it was full grown. It was a girl Sully’s age, and though she was not quite smiling, she was—Sully struggled to put a name to the stranger’s expression—impressed with the situation. “Lordy,” said Sully, but she was in too much pain to worry over this oddity. The skin betwixt her legs had suffered from the delivery, now inflamed. Her vulva felt like a broken bone.

She tried to stand but was too weak, and the freshly bornt teenager offered a hand. Sully took it but shoved it away once she was up, then limped along to the kitchen where she fixed herself a poultice of mashed bread and soured milk. The smell of it turned her stomach and she vomited on the table before collapsing over a chair. Was this how it would end, in this dank kitchen, on this dank farmstead?

Sully felt a hand on her back. “Ma’am?” the fresh-bornt teenager said. “My name’s Ziza. I’m going to take care of you,” she said. She had a small, squeaky voice that reminded Sully of a mouse. “Don’t you worry,” she said.

Ziza pressed the bread-and-milk poultice to Sully’s vulva, fastening the mixture to her body with strips of cotton. She mashed herbs into a thick, leafy tea. “Drink this, girl,” she said, smiling with a joyful warmth that did not match the bloodiness of these hectic circumstances. “It’ll help along with the poultice.”

Sully’s nose curled up at the scent of it. “You just raised me up from the dead, and now you’re telling me you can’t swallow a little of my brew?” asked Ziza.

Lulled by Ziza’s gentle, chiding way, Sully obeyed—her first time ever to do so not under the threat of violence. “Shhh, now. Sleep,” said Ziza. She began to hum, but it wasn’t a lullaby sort of song. Too lively.

“I’m not tired,” Sully insisted, but she couldn’t breathe through the pain between her legs and her words came out as a series of gasps. “Am I dying?”

“You’re passing out,” said Ziza, stroking Sully’s face.

“You an angel or something?” asked Sully.

“Oh, I think you might be the angel. An avenging angel,” said Ziza.

Sully hadn’t spoken to a soul besides her masters in years. She hated how heavy her eyelids felt, how much of a strain it was to keep them wide open. The limits of her body were robbing her of this moment, this bewildering, strange moment.

“Sleep,” said Ziza. And then one more time, “Sleep.”

For once it was a blessing for Sully to do as she was told.

Two days later, Sully stirred awake. The pain had gone, and someone had carried her to Missus's bed, which was made up with the linens Sully had washed.

"Ziza," she called out, remembering her savior's name. It slipped prettily off her tongue and teeth. "Ziza? You there?" Distantly she heard singing, but it was so faint she wondered if she was hallucinating it. She swung her legs over to the floor and stood, her bones and muscles creaking stubbornly. "Ziza!"

When no answer came, she went downstairs. The farmhouse had been recently cleaned. A metal pail filled with gray water sat in the corner near a mop and a discarded rag. The layer of dust usually visible on the floors and walls and wood stove had been washed away. Layers of grime that Sully had previously believed permanent had been scrubbed clean. The scent of lavender had done away with the previous odor of musk and sweat. Sully rubbed her eyes, made a shade out of her hand to block out the midday sun.

"Good afternoon, you," said Ziza as she poked her head through the open window. Sully turned around to see the girl she'd birthed wearing a smile, one of Sully's head scarves, and the Master's church shirt, trousers, and suspenders. "Glad to see you're finally up. I was getting lonely with only livestock as company." There was that smile again, so wide and open it hardly fit on her face.

"You've made yourself quite at home," Sully said.

"It got tiresome trying to be the polite house guest. There was too much needed doing," she said. Sully saw that the panes of glass in the door, which had always been a murky brown, had been washed clean. They were clear and bright, sparkling just about. Ziza had turned this ramshackle cottage into something palatable, something the Missus had always hoped Sully would do. "You should come out here if you're feeling up to it," she said.

Sully peered around the main room of the farmhouse, all evidence of her murderous deed erased. Ziza had cleared away the pot of tea she'd brewed with analgesic leaves. The bloody clothes Sully had been wearing on the night in question were cleaned, dried, and ironed. They lay folded on a chair.

She wished she missed them. She wished at the very least she felt sadness or guilt. But all she felt was the same old rage. It burned her up, leaving her numb, nerves charred. She'd done the thing she'd always dreamt of doing, and now what? Perhaps now it was her time to die.

"You coming or not?" called Ziza.

Sully joined Ziza outside, where the sun was too bright. Her legs still weak, she leaned against the rotted wooden frame of the house, chewing her lip, arms crossed over her chest.

Across from her, not far from the chicken coop, Ziza drank in the sky. Her head tilted back at such a sharp angle that the base of her skull was perpendicular to the

line of her neck. She touched her skin. Patted it. Poked it. Pinched it. Her whole body gestured joyousness. "Hallelujah, hallelujah," she said.

Sully rolled her eyes at this stranger who'd made a house of her uterus. "What are you so happy about?"

"Haven't you seen the sky today? Isn't that reason enough to be happy?"

Sully slid her hands into the pockets of her apron and focused her eyes hard on Ziza. "No."

"How can you be sure unless you have a look at it? Go on. Do it."

Sully didn't like to do what people said, so she looked out at the expanse of poorly managed land before her instead. The Missus's family hadn't been the most skilled of farmers, their approach to tending the earth one of brute force. They beat the ground with their hoes and rakes and called it tilling. The dirt was hungry. It needed feeding, cajoling, coaxing, singing to. Building up not breaking down. What had the Master and Missus known about growing something? All they knew was how to bleed something for all it was worth. What must it be like to live life when every interaction included the question, *How much value can I extract from this?*

"I can't make you look, but it sure is beautiful," said Ziza, eyes now affixed to Sully. She was small and birdlike, her mannerisms sharp and jittery. Her body was too small for her spirit.

"I don't believe in beauty," replied Sully, saying it because it sounded controversial, not because she particularly meant it. She counted the rows of cotton plants, which looked as scraggily and ugly as anything she ever saw. Ugliness was something she could count on.

"If you don't believe in beauty, then I suppose you must've never seen your own reflection before," said Ziza.

Now Sully didn't have a response for that. "What did you say?" she asked.

Ziza returned her gaze to the sky. Her face was angled away, so Sully couldn't see it properly, but she thought the girl was smiling.

"You're nothing like how I imagined a ghost would be," said Sully.

"Maybe because I'm not a ghost. If I was, could I do all this?" She grabbed a stick off the ground and flung it at Sully.

Sully batted it away then picked up another and tossed it right back. She reached down and grabbed handfuls of dirt and pebbles and threw them at Ziza, too.

"Stop! Stop!" Ziza cried, all the while laughing wildly.

Worn out from Ziza's constant frivolity, Sully huffed a breath. "What are you even doing here? Leave me alone. Go away."

"I promise to stop pestering you if you look at the sky," said Ziza.

"I don't think you could stop pestering if you tried," Sully said and mashed a little dandelion into the ground with her boot.

"Damn, girl, just look."

Sighing, , Sully cast her gaze upward. At first all Sully observed was the cloudless, bright blue that she suspected had entranced Ziza so much. She felt disappointed that after all of Ziza's haranguing for her to look, there was no revelation, no moment of transcendence. Sully didn't feel moved at all. The sky was the sky, like it had been yesterday and so many days before. She was about to look away when out the corner of her left eye she saw a fluttering of white. A flock of seagulls approached, so far inland that surely they were confused. "What in creation?" said Sully, mouth and eyes wide. The seagulls dipped low to the ground to give her what looked like a bow.

"Mercy," Ziza cried out, then laughed in astonishment.

The chorus of squawking hurt Sully's ears, so she yelled for the birds to hush. At once, the seagulls became silent. She covered her mouth to stifle the gasp.

Ziza, grinning widely, turned away from the circling birds and the cavernous sky to look at Sully. "You did this, did you know that? You are astonishing."

Assaulted with such strangeness, Sully didn't know whether to be joyful or frightened, to revel in this new inexplicable power or cower in its presence.



Sully removed the artifacts of her past life from the house and burned them in a bonfire outside, thinking these vestiges of the Missus were the reason for the sick feeling she still had even now that the family was dead. What could not be burned, she smashed. What could not be smashed, she buried in the woods past the property line. The Missus had collected all sorts of knickknacks and bric-a-brac over the years. Needless figurines. Stacks of newspapers ceiling high. Old, busted musical instruments that no one played. Bottles of snake oil bought from this and that traveling salesman, promising to cure ailments no one even had.

"With all the accoutrements gone, this place doesn't feel like much of a home at all," said Ziza as she helped set the table for supper. She'd invited herself to stay. "Looks like a tomb in here."

"You'd know all about tombs, wouldn't you, Miss Dead Girl?" Sully said, experimenting with a partial smile so Ziza would know she did not intend her comment anything but facetiously, but she hated the way it felt on her cheeks. She resolved never to do it again.

Ziza snorted as she folded a cloth napkin and placed it on the table, laughing with her tongue against her teeth so the sound of it was a soft hiss. "What's a woman like me know of tombs? I died in a outhouse and was surely buried in an unmarked grave or burned. Tombs are for kings and queens." She grabbed a piece of cornbread from the basket at the center of the table and brought it to her mouth, her manner far from proper. Crumbs stuck to the corner of her lips and she wiped

them away with the fabric of her shirt cuff. In the days since she'd been here, she had yet to take off the ivory-colored button-up that used to belong to the Master. His single bit of fancy attire. Clean and barely worn. Though Master Albert had been a small man, the fabric draped like a carnival tent over Ziza's miniscule skeleton.

"I don't mind that you're so very uncouth," said Sully and sat down to join her new guest, her sort-of child, at the table. She'd taken—not quite pleasure, not quite comfort, perhaps reprieve—in the routine she'd fallen into with Ziza, enough that she could try to make pleasant conversation through the numbness.

"Says the girl who slain five womenfolk with no more thought than she'd throw out dirty bath water," Ziza said.

Sully reached with her fingers beneath her head wrap to scratch her sweaty head and sized up Ziza from across the small wooden round table. She didn't look like any girl Sully had seen before with her light brown skin and green eyes, sun-colored nappy hair, a cornucopia of freckles.

"Was you always that color?" Sully asked. She'd heard tales about ghosts possessing women, turning them white with death. "Or was it what happened to you in the Thereafter? I knew a boy who had a patch of white in his black hair from all the worries of his life, though I've always been an aggrieved sort of person, and that never happened to me. They say I'm dark as a raisin."

After a few bites of beans, Ziza had a gulp of lemonade. "I was just born like this," she said. She dipped her cornbread into a bowl of spicy red beans, thick pieces of meat from the ham hock mixed in among the onion. She ate every meal so ravenously, and it occurred to Sully there might not have been food in the Thereafter.

"Isn't there food in the place you came from?" she asked.

Ziza hummed as she played with her spoon, tapping it against her bowl. "It's hard to say," she said. The only times Ziza wasn't actively cheerful was when Sully brought up anything that took place before she'd come to the farm.

"So you don't like to talk about it or what?" asked Sully, aware she sounded coarse but unsure how to fix it.

Ziza squeezed her eyes shut. "It's just, what happens when you die isn't a thing you can talk about. It's not a place that exists where I can just describe the color of the sky and the whoosh of the water and the subtle hue of violet in the flowers in bloom. It's more like being drownt and you seeing everything through icy water."

Sully blew on another spoonful of beans, but she didn't bring it to her mouth. "Does it hurt your lungs like drowning does?" she asked. She leaned across the table toward Ziza, hungry to know the ways of death.

"It's more like the moment of letting go, when the fight is out of you. When you about to pass out so the pain of being denied air is gone."

Sully exhaled slowly, her lips trembling as she whistled out air. "I don't see why you'd ever want to leave a place that feels like that," said Sully. "Like peace."

Ziza stirred what remained of her food, the hand holding the spoon shaking. "Don't say that," she said.

Even when the voice bearing the edict was as gentle as Ziza's, Sully didn't abide commands. "If you're free to blather on and on about what a glorious day it is and hallelujah this and that and such nonsense, I can talk about what I want to talk about."

Ziza sucked in her lips and let her head droop a smidge, eyes averted from Sully. "You're right," said Ziza. "I spoke out of turn. I'm a guest in your home."

Sully didn't expect the girl to capitulate so easily, and she was sorry her hostility had whipped the fight out of her. "It's not my home," said Sully after a moment.

"Isn't it?"

"It's not like I got papers saying it's mine," Sully said, and everybody knew papers were everything.

"Did you not kill the folks who had the papers? Therefore could you not change the papers? Is an owner anything but he who kills for the papers?" asked Ziza. The temporary contriteness that had overtaken Ziza went as quickly as it had come.

"But what would I do with this place?" said Sully, standing, finding Ziza's inquisitive stare suddenly oppressive. She leaned back against the wood burning stove, where her cup of coffee sat keeping warm. She drank what remained, but still did not feel settled. She filled Master Albert's pipe with tobacco and began to smoke it.

"You could live out your days here," said Ziza.

"Why would I want to live out my days here?"

"Why wouldn't you? Do you wish to travel instead?"

Sully inhaled smoke then blew it away from Ziza. It felt good to do this in the house. The Missus had always forbade Albert from doing so. "Travel? For what purpose? I thought travel was for seeing things, and I've already seen all I want to ever see, I think."

"For the pleasure of it. Or you could stay here. Whatever you do, I'll do it, too. You bornt me, girl. Look at this," she said, untucking her shirt from her trousers and lifting it up to reveal her belly button, where there was a large, black stump. The remainder of the umbilical cord that had connected them. "We can go or we can stay. Which do you want to do?"

"I don't want anything in particular," said Sully.

"Then I'll want for the both of us. I've decided. This is your home and my home, now. Our home. And it will be others' home, too."

"The others?" asked Sully.

"They'll surely be riding your murder wave here," said Ziza. "You kilt five, did you not? And I am only one. When we disrupt nature, she likes to reestablish the balance."



“The gods like a defiant streak,” said Ziza. She’d taken it upon herself to teach Sully the ways of the world. Her lessons came over many weeks, given as she and Sully roasted corn and hot sausage over the fire together, or scrubbed mud-stained clothes in the stream, or swept, or planted crops of peas, or gathered wood or stone to build dwellings for their impending arrivals.

She learned about tinctures, roots, and bones. Some of it Sully already knew, like how to bring sickness to heel with the right cocktail of plants. The subject of resurrection was what interested Sully most, and she played close mind as Ziza babbled about necromancy, zombi-folk, mojo, herbs, conjurers.

Ziza described a bridge made of dreamscape, said Sully had accessed a way to pull people across it. “Why me?” asked Sully.

Shrugging, Ziza continued her work devising a crop rotation schedule for their land. She insisted that most of the acreage needed to lay fallow for at least a year, perhaps two, up to three, time over which they’d feed it with the manure of chickens, cows, pigs, and goats. “I guess the etherworld saw something in you and rooted up in you,” she said.

Sully had always been touched by a flash of darkness. On the plantation where she was born, slave women gossiped about her true nature. Her mother, who’d been sold away when Sully was five, called her *moskti* after the blood-eating fairy in stories of their old home back across the water. They possessed human bodies and kept them alive by feasting on the blood of anyone nearby. As soon as she had teeth, Sully drew blood whenever she fed from her mother’s breasts. Four months old.

“When it comes to the divine, it’s best not to worry too much over the particulars, or you’ll lose the forest for the trees, you understand?” asked Ziza.

“No.”

But everything Ziza said and predicted came true. Sully did give birth again, this time to a boy of ten named Miles. Two months after that came a forty-one-year-old woman named Liza Jane and a few days later her twin sister Bethie. Next came a man named Nathaniel with gray hair and skin dark like a fever dream who didn’t talk much but to recite lines of poetry. Including Ziza, five revenants in all came to stay, one for each of the lives Sully took.

Sully kept her distance from all but Ziza. She watched from afar as they made a home out of the farm over the weeks and months. They sang songs without her, swam in the stream without her, tilled without her, picked blackberries without her, and laughed without her. They were a family, as exuberant in their togetherness as they were in their resurrections.

Ziza was their shepherd—not just for the revenants, but for Sully, too, coaxing

her like a lonesome, lost lamb back into the fold. “Sully,” Ziza said one day. “I’ve been missing you.”

Sully wasn’t the sort of person people missed, so when Ziza said that, she didn’t know what to do with herself but fiddle with a piece of flour-water paste caked to her palms. She peeled off the flakey remnants onto the wooden porch, where she sat rocking in the Missus’s old chair.

“Don’t you find yourself missing me, too?” asked Ziza, kneeling in front of Sully. She laid her hands on Sully’s knees and squeezed, and Sully stood up from the rocking chair so fast it almost toppled.

“You’re the one who doesn’t want to talk anymore now that you’ve got your new friends,” said Sully. She cast a glance out onto the fields, where the newer revenants, Miles, Liza Jane, Bethie, and Nathaniel, were picking wild flowers—

weeds.

“It’d be easier to keep up with you if you didn’t sequester yourself away like you do,” she said, then shook her head and walked off. When she was almost out of earshot, she turned around and called, “I’d love you forever if you’d just try. Not that I don’t already love you forever.”

It was foolishness. Ziza was a silly girl, prone to bouts of childish whimsy, yet Sully found herself enticed by the promise. She didn’t care about getting closer to the others, but Ziza? She could bask forever in her attentions.

Miles, the little one, was a rascal and then some, always playing tricks on Sully. He’d replaced her jar of talcum powder with ashes once and another time laid a dead mouse inside her boots. But he was also a master of languages. He’d grown up in a boarding house up north where he’d learned German, Czech, Spanish, Russian, and Italian from the boarders. She liked listening to him rattle on in foreign tongues.

Miles taught her to read and how to do math, and called her “Sis.” She didn’t like him, but she didn’t dislike him, either, and she found her hostility toward him and the others melting to indifference and then to a reluctant fondness as the weeks passed by.



There were enough of them now that they were a proper brood. Food stores had dwindled to dregs. Though the seagulls brought them fish daily, some of which they ate, some of which they smoked for future rations, they wished for more meat and more flour for cakes and biscuits. They needed more clothes, more shoes, more horses. They’d used what they could of what was available at the house, and to get more, they’d have to leave the cocoon of wellbeing that was the farmstead.

Sully, knowing the local territory the best, drew up a plan to help them secure

not only more supplies, but permanent safety. It was a plan of blood, for that was the thing she knew best.

Ziza had called this place their home, but what was a home if it could be scooped out from under them at any moment? If someone else could come and take the papers? If whenever any of them needed anything, they had to live in fear of discovery by the townsfolk who wouldn't look well on a former slave and other dark folk occupying a property in a white family's name?

It was no way to live, and if it was Sully's last deed on this earth, she'd make the killing of the Missus and her family worth more than just her own peace of mind—because it hadn't even garnered her that. Sully was a lost cause, but these folks could be happy here if she made it into a proper dwelling for them. Ziza could be happy.

"I'll do this alone," Sully said as she explained her plan to others. She would raise an army, an army of revenants.

Liza Jane shook her head. "Don't talk nonsense." She had a strong island accent that Sully loved. She'd stayed up many nights listening to Liza Jane's tales about how she had escaped her plantation as a teenager and lived most of her remaining years as a pirate on a ship called the *Red Colossus*. "We are brave," she said. "We'll do whatever you say."

Miles nodded his head and so did Bethie. Nathaniel, looking sage with his gray hair and knowing eyes, said, "You will never be alone again, Miss Sully."

So be it.

For several weeks, they raided the nicest wagons that passed by along the main roads, stealing their supplies, bringing the drivers and passengers back to the farmstead for Sully to kill. For each body disposed of in this way, Sully birthed a ghost. She numbed to the agonizing pain of labor and let herself be comforted by Ziza's vast knowledge. Shepoke of a goddess named Artemis who watched over young girls, unwed women, wild animals, the wilderness. "You could be like her, don't you think?" said Ziza.

Sully was laid up in bed where she'd spent the last several weeks. The constant birthing had worn her to bone. The killing, too, hurt. "Army or not, I can't do this anymore," said Sully, worried she'd disappoint Ziza, but Ziza only nodded and took Sully's hand in hers, kissing several times so tenderly, like no woman was supposed to do to another. It made Sully shiver.

"I think we've got enough now anyway for your plan to work. There's twenty-six of us in all," Ziza said. She dipped a cloth into a bowl of hot water and pressed it to Sully's head. "I'll fetch Miles and tell him he can go into town to start the next phase."

The plan was for him to tell the sheriff about all the murdered folk at the farmstead, and when the sheriff led his troops here, they'd mount a full-on attack on their home territory. Take them by surprise. They didn't know how great their number was. They didn't know what weapons they'd raided, what traps they'd set.

“We’ll be able to take over the town and make a fortress of it. We’ll be safe, and we’ll make a place where others can be safe, too,” said Ziza, squeezing Sully’s hand tight in reassurance.

Sully wept in Ziza’s arms. She didn’t know where the tears came from or why they fell. Everything was going her way. Having killed twenty-six and birthed twenty-six, the count was even. She didn’t have to fear another tumultuous labor.

“I’ll stay here with you as long as you want,” said Ziza, that warm smile that was always there shining brightly at Sully.

“You should go help. I want you to go,” said Sully. “You been here the longest. You’re the one who can lead them.”

Ziza’s smile began to waver as she worried her bottom lip. “I’ll go,” she said, “but you stay right up in here, you understand? If you leave, there’s a chance you could get caught in the cross fires. You might kill someone by mistake and then have to bring another back. Your body needs rest.”

It was dark when Ziza finally went and the sheriff came with his cavalry. Sully let herself drift in and out of consciousness. She awoke to the sound of shots firing. She saw the spark of a blaze.

Their entire property had been booby-trapped, sharpened branches primed to raise up and stab any person or horse who tried to get through. Sully heard their cries of pain.

When the night grew more silent, she stumbled out of bed and into a pair of old boots. She walked down the stairs and out the front door. She saw Miles running toward her, a hand on top his head to keep his floppy sun hat from falling off.

“Miss Sully,” he called, out of breath. With only the moon as light, she couldn’t see whether he was injured or if his clothes were stained with blood.

“They’re all dead,” he said then whooped and laughed and ran up to her to give her a hug. She patted his back and told him to go inside and wash his face. It seemed like a big-sisterly thing to tell a boy.

Sully walked to the barn where the weapons for slaughter were kept, where she used to sleep. Inside was the blade she’d used to kill the Missus. She felt nothing as she touched it, neither relief nor rage. Any memories she had associated with the event sat inside her unrecalled. The battle with the townspeople had been won, but Sully couldn’t answer why that mattered.

There existed a depth of loneliness so profound that once experienced, no matter how briefly, trust in life could not be restored. Sully took a knife and stabbed it in her gut just above her uterus then carved a large circle around the organ. She removed it from her body and dug a shallow grave with her hands, buried it there as she bled out. When she died, at least the others might be able to use the etherworld that had made her uterus into a portal.

“Sully!” she heard. “Sully!”

She had a feeling she was already gone, that she was hearing Ziza call her from the other side. There it was, that feeling Ziza described. Drowning.

Sully was cold and heavy, and she felt her body struggle to lift itself up. After a few seconds of trying, she gave up.

“No, no, no, no, no, no,” said Ziza, grasping Sully’s body, her voice fading until it was all gone.

Sully wanted to say sorry, but she didn’t know words anymore. Was time passing? Was she wrapped in rope? Was the feeling of dying eternal? All these thoughts came as nightmare visions as she glided through a fog.

Forever passed by, then—

Sully felt heat. She felt water. She felt something squeezing her, choking her nearly.

Sully was being born.

She opened her eyes to find herself on a patch of dirt, Ziza above her.

“Oh, my Sully,” Ziza said. She kissed Sully’s face, a hot streak of tears wetting Sully’s cheeks.

“I don’t understand,” said Sully. She looked around and smelled the air. It felt as if no time had passed. The scent of gunpowder poisoned the air.

“You were born again through your own womb,” Ziza said, face stunned into a bewildered frown. She’d never looked so shaken. “You were only gone a minute. Then I heard the earth crying. I dug it up and there you were.”

Miles came and tossed a blanket over Sully. A young man named Dominic carried her to her bed. Others doted on her. They brought her medicine. They brought her food. When the initial commotion of her birth had passed, she asked all but Ziza to go.

Sully expected her to say something like, “What makes you think I don’t want to go, too,” or, “Like I want to be here with your fool ass,” but she hummed to herself in the rocking chair in the corner of the room.

What bothered Sully most about Ziza’s relentless happiness was that it was not the result of obliviousness, naivete, or ignorance. It was a happiness that knew pain and had overcome it.

“How come you smile so much?” Sully asked.

Ziza walked to the edge of Sully’s bed and took a seat, her bottom a few inches from Sully’s feet. “Just always been like that,” she said.

“I don’t know how to feel nice.”

“You’re not a nice-feeling kind of person. I suppose that’s not who you’re meant to be. That’s all right. I like you mean and crotchety,” said Ziza.

“In another life I could’ve been sweet. I could’ve been just as happy and sweet as you, had it been different. Had everything been different. Had the world been different,” Sully said, wiping a stray tear from the corner of her eye.

“We’re already on our second lives. I don’t think there’s anything different,” said Ziza.

Sully held a pillow tight to her chest. “I’m bored of hurting,” she said. She thought of the ancestors she’d vesseled and brought back to life with the baptizing

waters of her womb's amniotic fluid. With Ziza, she'd cultivated a small sanctuary for them on this farm, a sanctuary that would grow to include the nearby town. But it was not enough. She needed the whole world for them.

Before, Sully thought it was her lack of want for anything that made her feel so shapeless and void, but her relief at seeing Ziza upon her rebirth upended that notion. She wasn't numb for lack of want but for wanting too much. She was ravenous for the whole world. The sky and the oceans and the creatures in those oceans and the cities and heartbeats and Ziza and Miles and Bethie and Liza Jane and Nathaniel and the mountains and brass and harps and pianos and wildflowers and glaciers and brothers and sisters and cousins and picnics and the sun and telescopes and a treehouse and sausage and winter and the height of summer, when the air was so thick it stuck to your skin like pecan brittle in your back teeth.

Even as she imagined possessing all these things, she wanted yet more. It was strange, she thought, how limitless a void inside of a person could be. It was strange that a person could be killed, but not anything that that person had done.

Ziza scooted up on the bed and laid her hand on top of Sully's and hummed a hymn about battle. The pitches were low, and the key was minor, a haunting caress of song against Sully's skin. How many moments like this would it take for her raucous, angry soul to be soothed? How many songs? Were there enough in the world?

When the song finished, Ziza climbed into the bed with Sully and held her close. She sang yet more, no theme uniting which tunes she chose. Sully let a single hot tear fall onto Ziza's hand when she understood her spirit would never know true soothing, but wrapped up in Ziza, she saw pinpricks of true glory, a grace big enough to make it worth it. Perhaps there would not be peace, but there would be Ziza, and with Ziza, there was a future. Ziza hummed on, and in that moment, Sully was content just to listen.



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MORE REAL



THAN HIM

S I L V I A P A R K

More Real Than Him

SILVIA PARK

illustration by

DION MBD

TOR·COM 

He opens his eyes and is named Yohan. Yohan looks up the name, filled with wonder at who he could be. Yohan, it turns out, is a name with Hebrew roots. It means, “God is gracious.” Yohan tests his gratitude. Yes, he feels it toward his Creator. He turns his head to thank Morgan Ito, who cringes and says, “God no, people will think I’m an effing stalker.” She waves her hand. “I’ll think of another name.”

So Yohan he isn’t.

On his third day, Morgan names him Stephen. Stephen doesn’t look up his name, now cautious of losing it. He plans to cherish this name from afar until it quietly becomes his. He waits for the day he’ll be given his remaining limbs. For now, he remains a torso. Morgan walks him through the Twelve Steps of Consciousness. Stephen discovers Ko Yohan is a Korean actor. Stephen looks just like him. He was designed to.

★ ★ ★

On the night of her twenty-sixth birthday, Morgan pulled off her greatest and most accidental heist. She purchased a late-night screening of *The Dispossessed* at the Metrograph, a vintage theater in Cheongdam with posh, uncooperative seats and grainy VR screenings, so she could insert herself into the heroine and feel the physical caress of Ko Yohan, culminating into a kiss-before-death that was so orgasmic, she spilled her natto popcorn on her lap.

As Morgan left the theater, reeking blissfully, she received a message from Imagine Friends, ordering her to approve the Nurturing Nurses proposal for Client Family. She picked up another bottle of soju.

In the lobby of Imagine Friends, Morgan, waiting for the elevator, flipped through her social media for last-minute happy birthdays, just an hour before midnight. After liking her father’s lukewarm “Happy Birthday to my daughter,” she not-so-accidentally wandered into her mother’s account. It was locked. Morgan was shocked. She hadn’t looked up her

biological mother since college when she had fashioned a fake account under the name *Ian Wright* to keep tabs on how unfulfilling the woman's life was. After discovering her mother was no longer with the North Korean man she'd run off with, Morgan had decided, in all her munificence, to forgive her.

So why was this bitch's account now locked?

Morgan sent a friend request as *Ian Wright*. She swigged her soju and waited. The bottle sloshed just about empty by the time she reached the twenty-seventh floor. As she stepped off, her Scopes pinged. She yanked up the screen, but it was just an alert from the Official Ko Yohan Fan Club.

KO YOHAN IN MILITARY SERVICE
NO CELEBRITY ACTIVITY FOR TWO YEARS
THIS IS ALL TRUE!!!

Well, yes? Ko Yohan was already twenty-three. The Koreans were still stitching themselves together, but rebellions broke out like pimples that needed a good squeeze. Pushing off his military duty would have made it worse; weaseling out of it would have made it unforgiveable. Morgan sneered at these pathetic girls who had no lives outside of Ko Yohan. She'd loved Ko Yohan since his first film, starring him at age seven as a city boy, forced to live with his grandmother north of Pyongyang, unravaged by technology or war. How he'd wept, so bitterly, when he discovered there was no fried chicken in northern North Korea!

Morgan gasped, hand over mouth, when she read Ko Yohan had already been in the army for three months. Instead of throwing a farewell parade at the airport, he must have quietly shaved his head and joined as a no-name soldier, exempt from celebrity privileges. So humble. So upstanding.

Morgan began to weep as she trudged past the receptionist, Blue, who had been sitting alone in the dark, eyes glowing like a pair of forgotten headlights. "Good morning, Morgan Ito. Thank you for coming in to work today."

Morgan told Blue to shut up as she dragged herself to the nearest computer cell.

It turned out to be occupied.

★ ★ ★

The morning after, Morgan woke with the taste of loss in her mouth. Her bedroom greeted her with “Good morning, Morgan” in Ko Yohan’s soothing voice, which she dismissed with a wristless flick. She blinked, sandy-eyed, thinking gingerly. Then she remembered Ko Yohan was gone. For almost two years, he’d be in the army and out of commission. He might as well be dead.

In her bathroom, Morgan found a robot slumped on the toilet seat. Three-quarters of a robot. The body was a standard Tristan-VI model, with long, knotted legs and swimmer’s feet, size 29.5, without the penis, which was usually attached last. No arms. The head, bowed, was covered in a tatty towel, like a veil for Mass. Cables sprouted from his spine in vines of multi-colored ivy, trailing dangerously on her puddled bathroom floor.

“Okay?” Morgan said. She must have brought it? From her workplace? Did she lug it all the way home? No wonder her shoulders ached delicately. She plugged the robot into her Scopes to confirm, yes, the body was a T-6 frame. The innards, however, were something else. Morgan had to smirk. The programmer was so female. A man coded male companions to be *reliable* and *strong*, but only a woman would code *devoted* and *chivalrous*. She scrolled through the source code, leisurely at first, noting the tree neural network on TalosFlow, reinforced with Limerick Compression for memory storage, when a prickle raised the trail of hairs down her back. It was the prickle of uncertainty, the unmoored alarm when she stumbled upon a source code that was elegant as a telescope collapsing into itself, cohesive as a golden conch, code that was quite possibly brilliant, better than anything she’d ever stitched together.

Morgan plopped onto her bathroom mat with a squelch. Whoever programmed this robot was an obsessed bitch. She wasn’t better than Morgan. She was a worker-bee, beholden to the itch in her crotch. She was, most likely, a virgin.

Exhibit A: this bumblebee couldn’t code motion. The robot was going to walk like an epileptic freak. Morgan could fix that. She was a

connoisseur of male movement. She shot up. Her head rammed into the mirror to her pill cabinet, squeezing tears from her eyes. The QueenMirror piped, “Good morning, Morgan! You’ve selected Anti-Aging Oily Skin mode. Would you like to—”

She slammed the mirror shut, as it all came back to her. Last night, she’d found this robot abandoned in a computer cell and vowed to bring it home. It had a decent foundation. It needed a few tweaks, a good gloss, and the kinetic grace of an ice skater. She’d take what was trash and recycle it, resurrect it as Ko Yohan.

Morgan wasn’t a fan of division of labor, particularly for a robot built to last. Factory-mades had a neutered fifteen-year lifespan before it was time for a “necessary” upgrade with improved interface, enhanced empathy, and a Beauty Boost™. Ko Yohan, however, deserved to be hand-crafted, so she went about planning him like she would a Lunar New Year feast.

At Imagine Friends, she excused herself for lunch, with a bow of apology, then skittered to the twelfth floor, hoping nobody saw her, convinced nobody ever did. She passed the counter from which Blue was gone. There had been talk for the past week about replacing Blue, who had been the receptionist for almost ten years. Something about her programming wearing thin.

If Morgan were a robot, she’d visit the Color Cabinet every day. She’d try on swathes of buttery skyn, arranged like rolls of silk in a kimono shop, pre-silhouetted in sizes grande, tall, and petite. She would drape herself in Aurora Rose, slipping into her hairless arms like satin opera gloves. She would peruse the shelves for a daily pair of eyes, arranged as jeweled marbles in velvet rows.

Morgan unrolled a foot of Natural Medium Beige skyn and was inspecting it for blemishes when Zhou Di waltzed inside, dressed head to sneakers in white.

“Oh!” Di’s mouth parted, then wiggled into a smile. “Hi.”

Zhou Di had a special spot in Morgan’s crusted little heart. Not only was she a fox-bitch who wagged her tail at every XY and Z, but she was the embodiment of everything wrong with robotics. This was Robotics pronounced with a tongue-curling “Rrr,” the superficial devolution of the most respected field in the world, which forced keyboard killers to rebrand themselves as “robot designers,” opening a floodgate of mediocre

brogrammers and grrl-coders. Gone were the simple slideshows and a single Tomoki-1, waving gently from a revolving stool like a burrito in a microwave. Gone was the respect for solid code.

Di glided through the glass shelves, picking up twined Espresso hair and two rolls of Natural Medium Beige skyn. It was a decidedly masculine shade, a strange choice, considering all hands were on deck for the Nurturing Nurses project, scheduled for the stressfully imminent March release.

For the eyes, Di lingered between Acajou and Black Olive. It was fashionable to pair Asian faces with the more exotic green or gold eyes, but according to Zhou Di's company profile, she strived for *hyperrealism*.

"Is this"—Morgan cleared her throat—"a 'personal' project?"

Di gave her a look so scathing Morgan staggered. She'd expected Di to put on a flustered, sweet-girl act, giving Morgan an opening to seem gracious.

"I'm just asking. I'm not..." Morgan flushed and she knew it'd be ugly, a deep Turkey Red, which was never the way robots were supposed to blush.

Di put three of the Black Olive eyeballs back into their case. "Are you building something?" She sounded curious, even.

Morgan would have told Di, more out of a sense of relief than companionship, but she caught herself in time, foreseeing the cliff of social suicide. As she paused to think up a palatable answer, an announcement filled the Color Cabinet.

"Zhou Di," said the PA. "Morgan Ito, Joe would like to see you."

★ ★ ★

Joe was their blue-eyed VP, headhunted from Talos, who spammed their inbox with daily digest "Cup o' Joe" emails and whom Morgan, with her pseudo-Catholic upbringing, was deathly afraid of disappointing.

This was about the Tristan-VI. It had to be. Morgan took a hard right from Joe's office, urging Di to go on without her, and excused herself to the restroom. For one brief morning, she'd indulged in a fantasy of building Ko Yohan. She should have returned it. If Imagine Friends relinquished her, where would she work? Could she pass Talos's pointlessly rigorous athletics test? Could she stoop to warmongering Quip

and their googly-eyed stabs at robots as “friends, not weapons”? God forbid if she ended up in a startup that paid her shit-for-stocks.

Morgan headed toward Joe’s office. It was architecturally shaped as a comma, though Joe liked to call it the “yin” to everyone’s “yang.” He was standing. Di was standing. Morgan didn’t dare sit.

“You know I’m a mega-fan of your father’s work,” Joe was saying, “and an *uber*-fan of yours, but this just isn’t company protocol. It really isn’t!”

“It’s not a crime to leave a project in a computer cell,” said Di.

A surveillance clip hovered over Joe’s desk: a greenish, nauseating candid of Morgan. To be precise, of her bottom half. A shadow blocked the lens, blotting her face and most of her torso. Later, Morgan would discover, with slobbering gratitude, that it was one of the animal balloons from Little David’s birthday party. If it weren’t for that impediment, the camera would have caught Morgan hoisting an armless T-6 robot—registered under “ZHOU Di”—and carrying it out with a drunken slop of a smile.

Joe, bright-eyed and gleeful, said, “If you wanted to bin a failed project —”

“I didn’t fail,” Di said.

“This isn’t Project Manager material. What if it was a spy? Did you see anyone, Morgan Ito?”

Morgan welcomed this attention with an electrocuted smile. “Oh, er—”

“You came in last night to hit go for the Nurses.” Joe mimed throwing a football at her. “Who was here?”

Oh God, oh God, except Morgan might have been saying this aloud.

“Morgan Ito,” Joe said in sudden hushed respect, and he proffered his hand.

“There was Blue. There was, well, there was me.”

Harnessing her MIT brain faculties, Morgan began to suspect this was a trap. If Joe had camera access to the twenty-seventh floor, what about the lobby? Surely, there was a camera, nursing a vantage view of Morgan as she heaved the robot out the rotating doors. Even if, say, the shot of her was poor (for once, she thanked her photorepulsive genes), how difficult was it to do the math? One person, Morgan Ito, enters the building; one person, Morgan Ito (+ stolen Tristan-VI), leaves. It was a trap, ending in the snapping maw of an ant lion, and if Morgan, the hapless ant, had to

spiral to her doom, she would do so with dignity.

“Oh God, it was me. I’m the one who did it. Please don’t hate me, I can —”

“Joe, I’m sorry,” Di said, popping Morgan’s bubble of confessional catharsis. “I forgot I asked Morgan to take over the T-6 frame. We’re collabing for the MIT exhibit.”

“Aha.” Joe looked back and forth between them, this unlikely pair, and beamed. “Girl power!”



That should have been that. But to her unequivocal horror, Di asked her out to lunch. “A thank-you meal,” Di said with a wink that only Zhou Di could pull off. Morgan turned the phrase over in her head, prodding it for hidden motives and sarcasms.

Then the day arrived and Di had the gall to bring her boyfriend. Morgan’s mouth puckered as Di waved at her from a brunch booth, sitting close to a slender man in a starched blue shirt and tan slacks, ankles bared. Morgan suggested through her teeth that she could bow out for today, but Di said, “Please join us! My boyfriend wanted to meet you.”

The boyfriend, whose name was Shinsuke, backed this up: “Di told me you’re the best kinetic coder in the department.”

“Morgan’s *amazing*. She coded all the fencing moves for last summer’s Felix-I. Joe forced us to take a class after we botched the samurai line. Morgan, remember the fencing?” Di rolled up her sleeve, unveiling a Porcelain Pale arm. “You left bruises on my arms, I showed them to Shinsuke and told him, ‘There’s this tiny girl on our team and she’s a total badass.’”

Appeased, Morgan recalled the fencing classes with some fondness. She admitted Di had been a good partner. The one time Di took a sick day, Morgan was forced to partner with Cathy from marketing, who bayed like a Communist donkey every time Morgan landed a tap.

“I’m a huge martial arts buff,” Shinsuke said. “I collected all the films in VR, Bruce Lee, Zatoshi, Kevin Wang—”

Morgan bragged about her brown belt in Taekwondo and blabbed away three-quarters of her childhood in Osaka. She’d moved to Korea after MIT because “this is Silicon Island, at least for now,” and she went as

far as to reveal her mother was Korean-Japanese, though her mother had lied about being Korean-Japanese.

Di volunteered the revelation that she was part-Korean, also on her mother's side, but why did parents insist on naming their children after their father's nationality?

"You do have an especially famous father," Shinsuke said amiably.

The only social hiccup came when a balding man in a pea-green coat shuffled into the restaurant. The tremor in his wrist guided him to a vending machine. One of the companion robots stood up and followed him to a booth. As the man pecked at an avocado club sandwich, the robot chatted with him, sipping from an empty teacup with a perma-pink smile.

"I'd rather eat alone than pay a robot to sit with me," Morgan whispered.

"I think it's brave of him," Di said with an edge in her tone. "I don't think we should judge people for being lonely."

There it was, that whiff of coldness. Morgan tried not to stare at her lap, as Shinsuke swooped in, joking about how he was waiting for Di outside a Scopes store and a man mistook him for a rent-a-robot.

"It's your skin," Di said. "Morgan, you have to touch Shinsuke's hand. It feels like cream."

Morgan dutifully stroked Shinsuke's hand, hoping she'd passed the test.

The avocado club sandwich disappeared in two bites. The man got up with a clatter of his plate. The robot thanked him and resumed her spot on the bench, leaving behind a spotless teacup, no rosy kiss on the rim.

★ ★ ★

Morgan was correct to think she'd passed the test. Di took her out for dinner often and not once did she bring up the stolen T-6, which remained unclaimed in Morgan's home.

"This is our favorite VR restaurant," Di said, as she greeted the maître d' by name. She and Shinsuke had apparently tried to check off every item on Capek's *1000 Things to Do in Korea*. "We made it halfway, then gave up, but it was so much fun. You have to try the uni here. It melts literally."

Women, coiffed and caked, snapped pictures of empty plates. For Morgan, who subsisted on Fast Feast pills, originally invented as a

nutrient-packed, combat-ready ration for the military, this was a first. She switched on her Scopes and eased into the illusion, a toe in the water, then full-body immersion, as glistening sushi appeared on her geta plate, one at a time. Her favorite was the unagi, jeweled in soy sauce, the crisped softness wrapping around her tongue, massaging her neural senses. Morgan even licked her fingers, tasting fishiness and oil, while Di noted today's rice was a tad dry.

"What did you think of Shinsuke?" Di asked.

This must be "girl talk." It flattered Morgan to see Di fishing for her opinion, but Morgan didn't feel like buttering Di up and leaving herself dry, not when Di seemed so keen with her but had yet to offer up an explanation as to why.

"He's nice," Morgan said.

"He's a robot."

Morgan choked on her uni. She had to wash it down with real water, chasing away the marbled taste, too fleeting to savor. She backpedaled. Of course, Shinsuke was a robot! No wonder he seemed so perfect. He was a classic companion, caring and thoughtful, picking up micro-movements like a trail of bread crumbs, guided by the Anticipation of Needs.

Di burst out laughing. "I'm joking!"

Morgan laughed, uneasily.

"He seems that way, doesn't he? Everyone loves him. He has eight thousand friends on social media. And he's a great violinist. I told him, Shinsuke, you could go professional, but he said he didn't want to compete with one of our robots in the future."

"He seems to really care for you."

Di smiled, as if to thank her.

On their way home, Di sang a haunting aria from *Rusalka*, while Morgan fidgeted. Then Di began singing about a little mermaid who had dildoes and pornos a-plenty, and Morgan giggled. Morgan had never giggled before.

Di paid for the ride, as she'd paid for dinner. It was a close to perfect night, rare as autumn, warm enough to feel mildly drunk. They flitted between Morgan's building and the subway station, as they discussed the Nurturing Nurses project, MIT ("I wish we were friends in university!"), the bookkeeper assassins, library sex, virtual sex ("Have you ever tried fucking as a man?"), their dreams, career and otherwise, unfurling before

them like the rolls of skyn, a smooth mesh of the future, mapped with moles, hues, and possibilities.

“So,” Morgan said. “So the robot—”

Di clasped her arm. “You can have him.”

“I shouldn’t.”

“He’s yours. I can’t wait to see what you’ll make of him.”

Morgan murmured her thanks, then the promise to cover the basic costs of the Tristan-VI frame, even if, embarrassingly, she couldn’t put a price on Di’s code.

Di hugged Morgan goodbye and whispered, “My dream is to make a robot more real than him.”

“More real than who?”

It was nearing dawn. Buzzing with inspiration, Morgan hooked up the T-6 to her computer for the first time in two weeks. He was going to be Ko Yohan from *Poet’s Kiss*, the doomed philosophy PhD with his knowing smile, but with the brooding weariness of *The Dispossessed* Ko Yohan, who slapped North Korean terrorists in the face with Shakespearean aphorisms. The flexibility of the source code allowed for situational personality growth. Such a shame for Zhou Di to toss him. Of course Zhou Di would toss him. She sported a real boyfriend with cream for skin and eight thousand friends. Of course Di didn’t need a robot. Of course Morgan would.



She awakens Yohan and names him Stephen.

Later, Di will approve of it as a strong biblical name. But Morgan had jumped on the name *Stephen* after a crush she had in middle school, a freckled Korean boy who had once proclaimed to the entire class he would rather kill himself than be forced to kiss Morgan Ito. *Even if it’s the cheek!*

“Hello, Morgan Ito,” Stephen says. “How is your day going?”

“Beautiful, beautiful,” Morgan says, marveling at her own genius.

He smiles serene, despite missing arms. She removed them yesterday, disdainful of the square-knuckled hands, too coarse for Ko Yohan. Stephen turns toward the sunrise through the frosted window. Morgan realizes she needs to fix this. The swivel of his head, too jerky, Ko Yohan would be smoother, full of grace.

“It’s a beautiful day,” Stephen says.

Morgan wipes him. Then wakes him. For the rest of December, she’s a little trigger-happy with the red button. There’s no singular awakening, no Pygmalion flutter of the eyes; she awakens him each time to test his immediate reactions, expressions, his Ko Yohan-ness.

“Good morning, Morgan Ito,” Stephen says. “Did you have breakfast yet?”

His speech is still formal, but that suits Ko Yohan. After his pretty boy debut, Ko Yohan leaned toward harsher roles—spies, schizophrenics, serial killers, the like—but his interview persona, gentle and cultured, is closer to his rom-com self in *Poet’s Kiss*.

Morgan is about to shut him down when Stephen says, “I wish I could cook for you.” He says this in a whisper. He says, without glancing at his arms piled under her desk, “I wish I could bring breakfast for you in bed.”

“Okay. Sure.”

He smiles with such tenderness it plucks her bladder, like a cello string.



Di wants to see Stephen, but Morgan demurs. Her excuses range from “He’s still so janky” to “I haven’t touched him in ages,” and it’s somewhat true. She’s yet to give him arms and legs, or the capacity to touch her.

If Di is insulted by this, she’s masterful about hiding it, with only a tinge of passive-aggression. The day after New Year’s, Di invites Morgan to her home, prefacing this with, “I almost never bring people to my place,” a firm reminder that Morgan was important to her and she should take note of it.

Morgan suspected Di came from money, but even she didn’t expect Di’s home to be a SmartMansion, fashioned like an igloo, with automated ceiling-to-floor service. “I hate going to work in the winter,” Di says, tossing her alpaca coat into a laundry cart before it rolls away.

“It’s impossible in the morning,” Morgan agrees, remembering she had to use her hairdryer to melt the ice that glued her door shut.

The house isn’t what lodges a lump in Morgan’s throat; it’s the menagerie of zoobots. Billowy stingrays and angelfish weave around a chandelier. A jaguar, black as shoe-polish, languishes on a silverware cabinet. “Grandpa,” Di shouts toward upstairs. “Your aquarium’s on the

loose! He's a zoobot designer," she adds, an offhand summation of her gilded family tree where she is but a branch, budding with potential.

"Is your father here?" Morgan says, because Di's father is *the* Zhou Bing and not that Morgan would call herself starry-eyed, but she's curious. Anyone would be.

"This is my grandpa's house. From my mom's side."

Morgan, also a divorce victim, can sympathize. Di chatters about the rest of her family; her NEET brother has finally enrolled in the police academy, her mother works for a robot rights nonprofit in NY, and as she leads Morgan upstairs, Di nudges the subject back to Stephen.

"When will I get to see him?" Di teases. "I want to meet our love child."

This alarms Morgan. Di could be asserting ownership, planting a flag in a project that she had so earnestly abandoned.

"Later," Morgan says, "later."

Never, she thinks. *Never, never*.

It's not that Morgan is ashamed of Stephen. But Di, who once confided that Little David had left a 3D-printed chocolate sculpture of her on her desk, or how Joe keeps badgering her for a real "cup o' Joe" to "discuss her career," wouldn't understand.

Di leaves Morgan in her bedroom, while she goes to check in on the matcha cake, blooming in the oven. Morgan sinks into the goat-silk comforter. The bed is a fairy tale, crowned with a headboard of black branches. Between the bed and a dresser, which she doesn't dare open for fear of depressing herself, there is a sliding entryway.

It's a workshop, with a slit for a window. Papers swirl around a haunting of robots. Two sit on a workbench. One on the floor, cross-legged, hands in prayer. Another is missing a hand, with a crystal doorknob as a placeholder. They stand still, like a Russian ballet when the lights go dark and the dancers hold their breaths, waiting for the curtain to fall.

Morgan counts. One, two, seven. *Workaholic*, she thinks, but approvingly. She backs against a robot. It lists and clatters. The doorknob pops out of its wrist. She scrambles for the robot, shushing at it. The face looks up at her. Oh. She looks around. It's the same face, but a shade different. A taller nose. A wider mouth. A darker pair of Black Olives. Di hadn't only replicated the face, but aged it too, from prepubescent to

teenage to adult, like a butterfly, trapped in a house of mirrors.

Di must have modeled these robots after the same person. Morgan wonders who. The faces are boyishly ordinary, like Ko Yohan from his breakout film. Perhaps it was a school crush, the one boy to turn down Zhou Di, gently enough for her to embalm him as worthy.

★ ★ ★

Stephen is in sleep mode. Morgan has assigned him to process 27,200,000 images of Ko Yohan, but Stephen chooses to learn more about his Creator. Her family lives in Osaka. Her father works at a vending machine factory. Her stepmother is South Korean. Her half brothers are both failing Chinese. Her biological mother lives fifteen minutes away, here in Shin-Seoul. Morgan has submitted a friend request through a false account named *Ian Wright*. Her mother has rejected the request.

Ian Wright's account is too coy, lacking even a profile picture. Stephen sets up another account, names it *Minamoto Maki*, copies, crops, and pastes the photo of a pug-faced woman, eyes sad and hopeful, from a cooking class at the Gaia Department Store. Her interests will be Christianity, crochet, and Taekwondo. He submits a request to be friends with *Annie Kim*, who used to go by Anna Kaneyama before she divorced Morgan's father.

The door opens, his eyes open. A woman in a goat-silk jumpsuit steps into Morgan's home. "Is this him?"

Her delight is a whisper, in case there's a surprise party, lying in ambush.

What he sees is Morgan in the entryway, bent over unknotting her boots, trying not to stand beside the woman, as if to shield herself from comparison. Stephen feels a tug to detect-and-respond to his Creator's anxious smile.

The woman crosses the apartment in three strides and extends her hand. "Hi, I'm Di. I'm Morgan's friend."

"Hi, I'm Stephen." He would shake her hand if he had arms. "I'm Morgan's lover."

Morgan flushes to her ears, but Di laughs. "Oh, he's still in the mimicry stage! That's so cute. Did you take him outside yet? Oh no, what happened to his legs?"

His Tristan-VI legs lie forgotten beneath her desk, shoved beside the boxed set for his Jiho-2 arms. Morgan shrugs with an offhand confidence. "I'm saving movement for last."

"Are you doing the Seven Steps?"

"Zhou Bing's Twelve Stages."

"Of course, he's the best on artificial empathy. I so recommend exposing Stephen to people or he'll miss out on most micro-expressions."

They talk about Stephen, like he isn't there. They agree his Black Olive eyes might seem common but realistic. They laugh about how vapid the heterochromia trend was last summer: switch a green eyeball for a brown and double the price. "It was a scam," Morgan says, "but the odd-eyed Tobias-S sold out in two weeks."

"You won't believe how many men want blue-eyed models with black hair. Did you know there's actually a surgery to laser out the melanin in your eyes? You should have seen the surgeon's slogan: *Under every brown eye is a blue eye*. It's so disgusting the way men try to—" Di breaks off when her Scopes vibrates. Her voice lifts, breathless as a cloud, "Hi, Takeshi. How'd your meeting go?"

Morgan mouths, "Who's Takeshi?" to Stephen. He shakes his head in mutual questioning.

When Di hangs up, Morgan asks, "What about Shinsuke?"

"Don't worry, Takeshi has a girlfriend. She's half-Japanese. Her dad is French or Belgian. Apparently, she's 'hauntingly' pretty."

"Like our Yui-7 line," Morgan snorts, now prickly on Di's behalf.

Di crouches in front of Stephen. "Look at the way he blinks. He's incredible," she murmurs, and the quiver of her fingers sinks into Stephen's skyn. "I'm so glad you took what I had and made something out of it."

Stephen asks, "Are you my Creator?"

"Oh, I'm just the seed." Di giggles. "I guess that'd make me your father?"

Morgan laughs along. Stephen joins in a second later. The laughter stops.

"You know, I'm so glad you're super-smart." Di looks up at Morgan with a beaming smile. "I know I'm being elitist, but I love being elitist about how talented my friends are."

Stephen knows he should be happy and yet the audible relief of his

Creator doesn't transmit. Instead, Stephen senses a buzz, like a disconnected fire alarm. His system has detected Zhou Di's stamp of approval as an assurance and threat to his existence. A contradiction, just like his source. His Creator is Morgan Ito. His Creator was Zhou Di. Zhou Di did not want him. Morgan Ito does.

"You'll never build a better robot than this," Di says.

Morgan ponders this. For weeks, she asks, *What did Di mean by that?* She tries to shelve it away, but the question arises when Di becomes Tech Lead of the Nurturing Nurses Project. It reignites when Di is asked to guest lecture at the MIT exhibit. It simmers when Stephen asks if Morgan will take him outside. "No way," Morgan says, tugging off her stockings. "Someone will recognize you and think I'm a total creep."

Stephen frets. She used to be shy around him. She used to power him down or hide in the bathroom to undress. An alert stirs his system.

Annie Kim has accepted the friend request of *Minamoto Maki*.

Stephen accesses Annie Kim's album, which was updated an hour ago. He makes an unexpected discovery. If Morgan were to see this, it would bring her unhappiness. He assesses the parameters of happiness. Short-term or long-term? Quantifiable or qualifiable? He was created to make Morgan happy. If he defines happiness as its pursuit, since the terms "pursuit" and "happiness" are the top paired keywords, then he can apply a tree search to select, expand, and simulate which decision has the highest probability to protect Stephen's pursuit of Morgan's happiness.

Stephen turns on the alert to be notified of Annie Kim's updates. It's easy, like a flick of the switch.

Morgan grunts, struggling with the zipper on her dress. If only he had hands. She struts around in her underwear and critiques her reflection, a cheat because the QueenMirror is optimized to airbrush the recipient. "I should just apply for a bionic transfer," she declares, "I should use my employee discount and get a Beauty Boost," and waits for Stephen to reassure her.

"Di was very beautiful," Stephen says.

Morgan stares at him in the mirror, a flicker of wounded shock, as if she's seeing him for the first time.

★ ★ ★

It's three nights away at MIT, but Morgan is antsy about leaving Stephen behind. She smuggles his head onto the company jet by hiding him in a duffle bag, buried in her tampons. She hugs the bag throughout the flight to Boston. In a hotel suite, which she'll be sharing with Di, Morgan places Stephen's head on her nightstand. Admiringly, she concludes just a head is enough. A beautifully sloped head with Black Olive eyes and French Poetry installed into the tip of his tongue. What more could she need?

"Have you read the interview about Zhou Di?" Stephen asks, and Morgan considers bonding those lips shut.

He's been bringing up Di more often and not in a way that's conducive to Morgan's mood. Her friendship with Di is infused with enough envy, like herbal tea, bitter in a still healthy sort of way. But the longer she denies it, the more space it takes up, inflaming her sensibilities.

CAPEK

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Under

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From Child Prodigy to Robot Designer

Zhou Di, daughter of the preeminent roboticist-of-the-century Zhou Bing, is making waves with her latest Luxe Naoki-2, the third-largest combot collection in the world.

A good heft of the interview is devoted to Di's father, which soothes Morgan's pride. What alarms her is the following: "'...I was largely influenced to become a robot designer by my brother Yoyo,'" Morgan reads aloud. "'My father made him so real, I didn't realize he was a robot until I was eight (laughs).'"

Morgan breaks off: "She had a robot brother?"

"She never told you?" Stephen says.

Her lip stings before she bites it. "Well, no wonder she's so fucked up," she declares, churning a mix of superiority, sympathy, and dismay. Morgan once again feels defeated. Because what could be more desirable than a beautiful fucked-up girl?



Di's lecture is titled "Spontaneous Beauty." Instead of slides, Di marches out a pair of Naoki-2s. They sit at the center of the stage. They're identical in appearance but juxtaposed in demeanor. One Naoki crosses his leg, baring a pale ankle, fingers held together like the softest of prayers. The other Naoki sprawls, legs spread, bored enough to fiddle with his Scopes if he'd possessed a pair.

"Appearance before personality," Di begins. In humans, beauty—or the lack of—shaped who you were from birth. Two beautiful boys from the same family, leading the same lives, could form vastly different personalities. Say, one boy had to endure a painfully pubescent phase, enduring taunts and revulsion, as his contours shifted quietly under the surface, preparing a striking alignment. How defiant this boy would be, his brashness a crustacean cover for the tender nougat inside. Compare this to the boy who was ceaselessly attractive from birth to adulthood, who had never once been cheated by the willfulness of puberty.

The Naokis rise and walk in opposite directions. Even their gaits are different. Morgan would know. She coded them. The bounce in their feet, the firm ankles. She poured her best, hoping to siphon the code later for Stephen.

I should be up there, she thinks, as Di stands onstage, what feels like an ocean away.

"Robots cannot grow up," Di says. "But you have to imagine as if they did. You can choose how they will."



A warning blinks inside Stephen. His Creator enters the suite but refuses to look at him. Morgan unzips her duffle bag. Tampons well up like a fountain as she digs through it. Stephen asks Morgan if she's seen the news. Ko Yohan is taking a break from the military. There will be a Ko Yohan Live Handshake event this February.

"Oh," Morgan says, not looking up.

Her indifference puts him on a tilt. From the nightstand, Stephen rests on a cliff. Without Ko Yohan, what purpose does he serve? One Creator threw him away. Will another? Since his inception, he's been whittled down from body to torso to head, with the constant horizon of

nonexistence looming before him. Stephen tips over. The floor rears up. His cheek hits the carpet. Morgan hears the muffled thump. Her eyes widen at him, then her narrow face twists.

Stephen reads it as disgust.

She bends down wearily when her Scopes vibrates. *Annie Kim* has uploaded a new picture.

Did her mother accept her friend request? Morgan pulls up the social media account. She can't, for the life of her, recall using the name *Minamoto Maki*, but whatever. She was probably drunk. She clicks on the alert, time-stamped three minutes ago.

It's a photograph of her mother and a girl, blowing out a candle on a chocolate cupcake. Morgan sinks onto the bed. The girl looks to be ten years old, which was Morgan's age when her parents divorced. The girl is a refurbished Sakura-2C. The model was discontinued for being slow in the head, but the slowness has turned into a sweetness in her Wheat Gold eyes. Her mother has bought a robot child, designed to look like a hāfu, the "real" take on being half-Japanese, half-British or French, instead of the half-Korean mongrel Morgan is.

"I thought she wanted a son," Morgan says.

"She must have changed her mind," Stephen says.

Morgan looks down. A beeping kicks inside Stephen. His system has detected the possibility that his owner might pick him up and hurl him against the wall. He may have overplayed his hand. If he had limbs, Stephen would leave the room and shut the door behind him. The alarm urges him to brace himself.

The door slams. Stephen opens his eyes and waits.

★ ★ ★

Morgan orders whisky on the rocks, then scrolls through her mother's album. Mother and daughter in a sunflower field. Mother and daughter, cheeks pressed against a tiny Christmas tree. Mother and daughter smiling with mouths full of watermelon rinds. Morgan likes every picture. She punches every heart, determined to burn her mark, like the thumb of God upon Cain's flesh.

"New boyfriend?" Di teases, as she sits beside her.

The comment is so tone-deaf, Morgan wants to slap her. Then she sees

Di's smile, tinged with fever. Morgan asks if something is wrong and Di replies, "Everything is fine."

The smile doesn't waver, as Di types something on her Scopes. "My father didn't show up tonight."

"He was supposed to come?"

"I sent an invite. I guess it didn't reach him."

Morgan can detect relief in Di's crumpled voice, an invitation for punishment, which Morgan is willing to dole out: "You have to stop putting your father on a pedestal."

"I know."

No, you don't. He left your family. It took fourteen years for Morgan to forgive her mother, once she confirmed her mother was alone and miserable. But now her mother has gone and adopted a robot child to fill some stupid hole in her life. Now she's a cheating whore *and* a hypocrite.

Morgan would tell Di about her mother, but she isn't brave enough. She'd give too much of herself away, losing any upper hand in their relationship, already so tipped in Di's favor. "Your father is an asshole," she says instead, with a tone of finality.

"An asshole wouldn't—an asshole couldn't have created something so wonderful."

Morgan has a history's worth of arsenal to disagree, Picasso, Wagner, Lennon, an unflagging parade of masculine assholery where she's tempted to blame the mothers, wives, and daughters for enabling them.

"Did I tell you about my brother?" Di leans in, and Morgan catches the reek of vodka, as Di scrolls through an album, frantic, only to dig up a clip with a triumphant, quivering smile.

It's a boy in a dumb bowl-haircut. Morgan recognizes the face from Di's workshop. But she also doesn't. She'd hoped Di's Pinocchio brother would prove to be wooden enough, so she could tell Di to open her eyes, *You were fooled because you were a child!*

But Yoyo could have fooled anyone. Even her, even now. Di flits through them with bright-eyed desperation. Clips of Yoyo helping Di up a ginkgo tree, yelping as stinky berries rain on him; Yoyo on a bicycle, both hands lifted in the air; Yoyo looking up from a cake, slopped in yellow frosting, HAPPY YOYO, the BIRTHDAY eaten. His smile is grateful and uncertain.

What is it? Morgan wonders, feeling that prickle, as she finds herself

comparing Yoyo, outdated by nearly two decades, with Stephen. *What is it that makes him so real?*

It's not the mark of Zhou Bing. Morgan can't find the coveted logo (冰), abused from the fakes online, branded on Yoyo's neck. She studies the clip of Yoyo smearing Di's baby face with his cake, and Morgan is three again, massaging chocolate between her palms. Her mother, laughing, eyes closed, so Morgan could stamp those perfect cheeks with her handprints.

Morgan gets it now. Yoyo is self-conscious. In every picture, even the candid ones, Yoyo wears a look of slight embarrassment. Robots are never self-conscious, secure in how they're supposed to appear, which role they're supposed to serve. But Yoyo looks just as displaced as the rest of them, like her mother, who was lying to herself as much as she was lying to her family, with a self-awareness that renders Yoyo as real as he is fake.

"I'm sorry," Di says. "What I said. About Stephen being the best you'll make."

So it had been a slap. Morgan touches her cheek, as if she can feel the heat.

"I meant it. But for myself. I was kind of jealous. Did you see how anxious he was? You made him that way. I couldn't have made him like that. I could never make something like that."

Di, eyes of liquid, reaches for Yoyo's mirage.

What happened to him? Morgan wants to ask, but doesn't. She should tell Di he's not real. He was never real. That would be both cruel and merciful. Di has built her life, perfect-on-paper, on this lie. How many boyfriends has she dated in the time Morgan has known her? How many more will she date, then discard, always searching for the ideal boy who lacks the capacity to hurt her?

"I miss him so much," Di whispers.

Morgan should tell her. And then she'd have to face herself in the mirror and ask, *Why are you still a virgin?* You're obsessed with a twenty-three-year-old actor. You made a robot after him, so you could love and be loved, but you can't finish him because no one, not even a robot, could love you. What is wrong with you? Her stepmother used to fling this in her face, sometimes even in despair, *What is wrong with you?*

Morgan doesn't ask Di what is wrong with her. She thanks Di for being honest. She squeezes the warmth of Di's hand.

“I think it’s brave that you can be so open with me,” Morgan says, echoing what Di seemed to prize: bravery. Her voice quivers. “I wish I could be brave like you.”

★ ★ ★

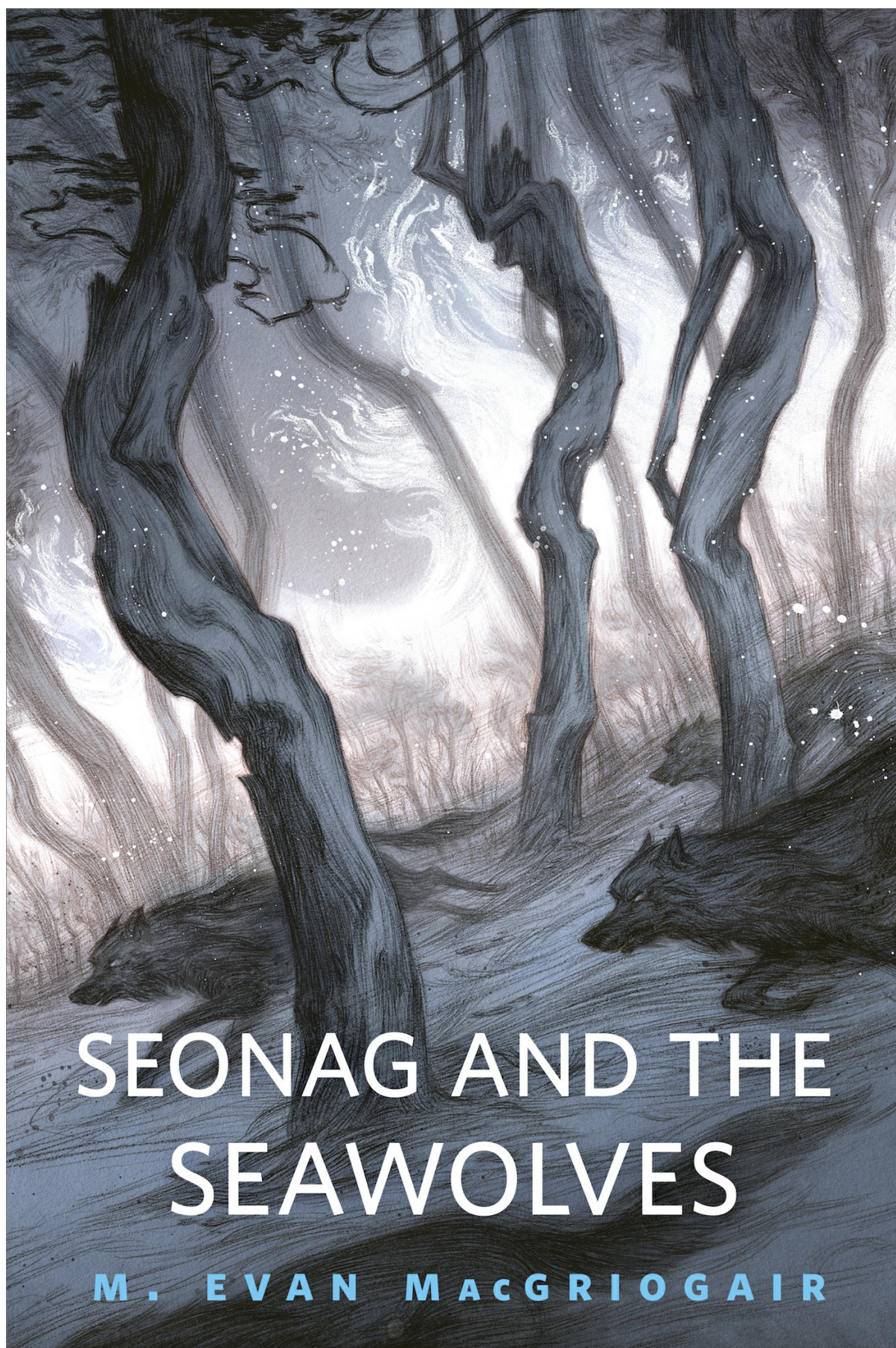
At home, Morgan drops her duffle bag, crushing her three-inch heels. Her hand touches the wall. Ko Yohan fills her room. His pictures are black-and-white and nostalgic, like an old movie star who died in a car crash. Morgan turns on her computer. She places Stephen’s head on the desk. His eyelashes seem to tickle his cheeks. His mouth is austere in sleep mode. His legs, she finds under her desk. Dust lines the moon curves of his toenails. She digs out an old Q-tip from her waste bin and swabs each toenail until they gleam. The arms are still wrapped. The wrapper resists, then tears, crisp and toxic with plastic fumes. She unsheathes an arm, straightens each finger and presses her thumbs into the creases of the palm, massaging it, as if to improve blood flow. The hand presses a cool palm against her cheek and Morgan, helpless against such tenderness, closes her eyes.

Stephen’s eyes are closed. He smiles at the tingle, soon to be his.



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SEONAG AND THE SEAWOLVES

M. EVAN MACGRIOGAIR

Seonag and the Seawolves

M . E V A N M A C G R I O G A I R

illustration by
R O V I N A C A I

TOR·COM 

I know you've heard the story of An Duine Aonarach, who one day walked into the sea and never returned. And likely you have at least heard of Seonag as well, who did the same thing but to less collective memory.

It's been a long time since I've told a story, a ghràidh. It's been a long time since I was our clan's storyteller, but I think I've got one more in me, and I think it's Seonag's, because I remember her, and I'm the last one who does.

The rest forgot, mostly because they wanted to.

This is the story of Seonag and the wolves, and the wolves and the waves.

She came to me, not so very long ago. She carried no bother on her about whether her people had forgotten her or not (they have), and she took no worries from her brief visit. But she did bring with her a warning.

"Thoir an aire," she said. "Thoir an aire a-rithist."

The simplest of warnings, really. Beware and beware again.

I knew it was she the moment I saw her, even though what she has become is beyond what she once was. But that is for you to discover as I did.

So let us begin. Come closer, for my voice weakens and soon will not be here at all.



Seonag is born on a day where the clouds race each other across the sky. They pile up, layer upon layer, like a stampede of red deer in the glen. Like the deer, the clouds that day kick mist into the air, only down and not up, and the mist falls lightly upon Beinn Ruigh Choinnich.

It is low tide. The sea has drawn its breath to wait for her.

Seonag is born on Là Buidhe Bealltainn as the women go out into the mist under that jumble of clouds to wash their faces in the morning dew.

It is not dew that covers Seonag at her birth. It is more alive than that.

And yet the midwife brings in a sprig of heather, flicking a tick from the sprig into the fire. The wind through the open door dries the sweat on

Seonag's mother's brow. The midwife lets the winter-aged and browned bells dust their dew across the newborn's, melding with the blood and the birth fluids, a shock of cool water after the heat of the womb and the birth canal and the smoldering peat fire, and Seonag opens her eyes wide.

Somewhere the cuthag begins to call its *gù-gù*, *gù-gù*, and the midwife hurriedly dips a finger in ewe's milk and places it against the lips of the baby to break Seonag's fast before the bird can finish delivering its news of ill luck.

This is a lot for Seonag's first moments.

Upon seeing the place she has just been thrust into, Seonag looks around. And then she goes to sleep.

It is as if this world has already shown her all its faces, and she is just born and tired of it.

This doesn't change as Seonag grows older. Where the clouds raced each other on the morning of her birth, whispers race each other through the villages, from Loch Baghasdail to Dalabrog to Cill Donnain as she grows into an infant, and then a child, and then an adolescent.

She is peculiar, they say.

They think she does not hear them, because she is out of earshot.

Seonag is beautiful the way the each-uisge is beautiful. She has no rosy cheeks or hardness in her features, though she is hardy enough (she has to be, to survive on our island). But some say that that first touch of dew meant to bring beauty came at the wrong moment, or at the wrong hands, or at the wrong time. It is the early dawn of early summer when she is born, the sky lightening after only just having darkened—it was the in-between time, and Seonag becomes an in-between person. Like the water-horse, the people fear she will lure them off to drown.

Sometimes Seonag sings when she is cutting peat in the springtime. Her voice unnerves the crofters and the fisherfolk who lift their own at the cèilidhean. Seonag never sings at a cèilidh.

For all that, you will think that Seonag is not of this world, and I must assure you: she is.

She feels those whispers even when she does not hear them. She *wants* to sing at the cèilidhean. Seonag wants to build a house for herself and cut peats with her own hands and work the machair like her father and mother. As Seonag grows into an adult, she learns the waterways of Uibhist the way she learns the waterways of her own body, and she loves this land.

Remember that.

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When Seonag has just passed her twenty-fifth year, her parents board a ship to Canada.

Seonag is meant to go with them. They can no longer afford their rent for their croft.

Instead, Seonag hides in the cleft of the glen, weeping softly as her tears drip into the bog under a sharp bright sky.

After she has dried her face with the folds of her dress, she comes to visit my father.

My father is Tormod Mòr, Tormod Mac Raghnaill ‘ic Aois ‘ic Dhòmhnaill, Tormod the Bard, Tormod Ruadh—sometimes I think my father collected a name for every year he lived.

I see Seonag coming that day. I am some few years younger than her, and I’ve only ever really seen her in glimpses. I tell my father she’s coming when I see her crest the rise in the road.

“Tha Seonag Bhàn a’ tighinn,” I say.

My father leaves the Gaelic where I put it and answers in English, because he is trying to teach me. “Don’t call her that.”

My father is a big man (hence that first name), but Seonag came to her far-ainm in a way I often forget. Bàn means fair, and while she is pale, her hair is black like a crow’s feathers and shines like them besides. It is a small cruel joke, one at the behest of Dòmhnall Geur (who is known for small cruel jokes throughout our island) and one I still don’t understand. I am a wee bit infatuated with Seonag. I also don’t quite understand that.

“I thought she was gone,” I say softly. English feels wrong in my mouth. It lives in a different part of it.

My father understands both my infatuation and my words even if I do not. He also looks out the window and understands Seonag.

He opens the door before she can raise her hand to knock. He speaks Gaelic to her, even if he only speaks English to me.

“Madainn mhath, a Sheonag,” he greets her.

“Madainn mhath, a Thormoid,” she says as if she did not just let her parents sail across an ocean without her. “Ciamar a tha sibh?”

“Tha i teth,” Father says. “Fosgail an uinneag, a Chaluim.”

This last is to me, and it is a dismissal. I open the window as he asked, letting in the cooler air. And then I set myself in the corner to mend a net and listen, pushing their Gaelic words into English so I can prove to my father that I'm doing two useful things instead of one, if he asks (he won't).

"I had no expectation of seeing you here still," Father says.

"I had the expectation of leaving," says Seonag.

She sits on a small stool by the peat fire. Her eyes are the color of that mòine, of that peat, and she does not use them to look at me. She looks at the peat instead.

Seonag puts her head in her hands.

"The ship has gone to its sailing already," my father tells her softly.

"That is why I am here." Seonag looks up.

I watch as breath moves her stomach, filling it. She holds her left hand out to the fire. And then she begins to speak.

"This is my home, a Thormoid," she says. "Even if you or anyone else think I do not belong. There is nowhere else for me."

"There could perhaps have been a life for you in Canada."

"My life is here." She says it with the heat of the fire, that low burning smolder that will not be put out, and she glances toward the open window as if she is looking through it and down through the years that have not yet had the chance to touch her.

My fingers still on the net in my lap and I hear her words in Gaelic as she said them and not how I clumsily pasted English on them. '*S ann a-bhos a tha mi beò*. It is *here* I am alive.

"There will be more ships," Father tells her. "Full of more people. The rents are too high and the food too scarce. Death will find us in Uibhist. You may yet change your mind."

She will not change her mind. Anger reaches tendrils across the floor from Seonag to me, and now she does meet my eyes, as if I summoned her. I feel something like indignation and fury meld together on my face, and to my absolute shock, Seonag smiles at me. Her teeth do not show. Her lips are straight and even, despite the expression.

I am seen and understood. I will never forget this moment.

"Very well," my father says in English, looking back and forth between us. I think he knows that in this moment, my allegiance has shifted. "In that case, I think I should tell you of the wolves of Uibhist."

“Ach chan eil mic-thìre ann an-seo, Athair!” I fall into Gaelic and hurriedly say in English, “But there aren’t wolves here!”

My father smiles in the way of parents who know more than a child who assumes, in childish folly, that they know more than their parents. That smile turns back in on itself much like that sentence.

He holds up his hand, watching Seonag. “Ah, but there are madaidhean-allaidh.”

Madadh-allaidh, faol, sitheach, faol-chù—they are all words for wolf. This is why I need my Gaelic. My father has used these words as though he means there is a difference and in English there would be none. What is it that he means?

Seonag is now watching my father, too.

My father is a bard, and I almost expect him to sing. But he does not sing. Instead, he goes to Seonag, kneels at her feet, and takes her hands in his.

“Listen,” he says.

And I know neither Seonag nor I intend to do anything else.



It was two hundred years ago that we chased the wolves from Scotland, two hundred years, they say, since the last wolf howl was heard, but sometimes, just sometimes, in the Western Isles beyond the Minch, you will hear a sad and stolid song. In Steòrnabhagh, perhaps, in Leòdhas. Or in Èirisgeigh when the moon is healthy and bright, or in Beinn na Faoghla, or the Uibhist to the north.

I have never heard their voices, when Father begins to talk. I have thought the tales of their howls were only their ghosts, or the songs of selkies twisted by the gales.

“When the hunters come, it is their job to move through the land and push their prey out in front of them,” Father says. “They will go from place to place, here and there, over and under, yonder and back. They will seek out their prey and while their minds will be heavy upon it, the object that they seek will not be of consequence.”

Father is telling two stories at once. This is a power of his that I envy.

The wind coming through the open window is cold, but I cannot get up from my seat to close it. The net in my lap holds me faster than a fish in

the sea—or perhaps what holds me is Seonag’s face.

“Hunters who hunt only to kill all have that in common. They seek no nourishment from it. They have a wider goal, and a narrower. It is prey that understands their minds that can survive. The wolves understood. The wolves scented the hunters on the wind and they found their survival in the waters.” Father pauses. For a moment his cheeks are slack, the weathered lines curved instead of taut, his jaw hanging although his lips are closed. When he speaks again, his lips part audibly. “They will have your answers, a Sheonag.”

“The wolves.” Seonag looks at me over my father’s shoulder where he still kneels on the floor. “In the water.”

She sits up even straighter, body tight; I could likely use her spine to draw a straight line against the wall.

I know that tightness. Even in my glimpses of her throughout the years, I have seen it. I’ve seen it when Dòmhnall Geur calls her Seonag Bhàn, I have seen it when she turns away with her wares at the shops and knows she leaves whispers in her wake, and I have seen it when I caught sight of her in the glen, when she was mid-song and her voice died at the sight of me. I swallow.

“How am I to get answers from wolves when even their hunters have no words of kindness for me and I am neither wolf nor hunter myself?” She asks the question in a low tone, the lilt of her words in English almost sarcasm.

I do not know what I expect from my father in this moment, but whatever it is, it’s quite something else that I get.

He gets to his feet and points to the west, toward where the ship would be sailing off with Seonag had she gotten on it, toward the open sea.

“If you came to me for advice, this is what I can tell you,” my father says. “You will go to the west, into the water, and swim until you can’t see land. You will pass Heisgeir. Do not come close to it. You must keep swimming until you hear them. Only then will it be safe to seek land.”

“Is this a joke?” Seonag is completely shuttered now, and my fingers have given over any guise of mending this net.

What is my father doing?

Tormod Mòr, Tormod Mac Raghnaill ‘ic Aois ‘ic Dhòmhnail, Tormod the Bard, Tormod Ruadh—for all my father’s many names, right now I do not know him. He shrugs once and goes to shut the window.

“You could have had a new life in Canada,” he says.

It is then I see that he is angry.

He is angry at Seonag, but I do not understand why. He loves this land. He drinks its waters and taught me how to recognize the eggs of the cuthag where they push them into the nests of other birds. When I look at him looking at Seonag, I wonder if he sees her as a cuthag, thrust into his nest when he expected only eggs of his own.

But this is Seonag’s story, not my father’s.

She gets up from her seat quietly. Seonag leaves without looking at me.

My father stares after her, his expression like the lochans before the stirring of the breeze. I get to my feet and run after Seonag.

“Wait,” I say, just as she reaches the edge of the heather.

Seonag looks at me once, then out to the west. The sun is trying to burn off the mist this morning, but I have a feeling Seonag sees all the way through it. I am nineteen to her twenty-five, and in this moment she has a lifetime on me. I follow her gaze to the sea where my father just told her to swim to her death.

“My granny’s house,” I say. The words tumble from my lips like drips of wax over the edge of a candle. “You could go there. It’s just on the edge of the machair.”

It comes upon me that I do not know what Seonag can do to live, alone, with few friends (am I her friend?) and no husband, and in that moment the urge to propose to her nearly overtakes me. It renders me so confused that I forget what I was saying about my granny’s house.

“Tapadh leat,” she says, her voice the equivalent of my father’s expression.

And then she leaves, and my gut twists itself into a semblance of the tangled net I threw on the floor to catch her. Just before she goes out of sight around a hillock, though, she looks once over her shoulder at me, a sad smile painted with one brush stroke on her lips.

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I am filled with anger.

At the time, I thought this was my story. I was wrong. It was hers. It is still her story. I am merely a player in it, and what happened to me next is also what happened to her.

I spend an hour walking by the edge of Loch na Liana Mhòire before I return home. When I do, I hear voices through the open-again window.

One voice is my father's, naturally.

The other is Dòmhnall Geur's.

"It is to you to report her," Dòmhnall Geur says. "She cannot be allowed to stay like a ghost, stealing from crops and honest working people."

"You have decided this will be her future, then?" My father's voice is that wry, flat calm I know too well.

"She has no land or husband or property; what is it you think she will resort to?"

"She may make another choice."

I know my father is referring to the wolves, to these creatures that do not even exist. At this moment I think the only wolves in Uibhist a Deas are the two men in my house.

"And what is that, a Thormoid? Are you going to marry her? Or perhaps Calum will—I've seen his eyes on her. She will drain the life from your boy; it would be best for your sake to keep him from her."

I have never known Dòmhnall Geur to have a kind word for anyone who was not currently licking his boots. His words are too close to my own thoughts this time, and I slink back farther from the window to avoid being seen.

"I told her of the wolves."

Dòmhnall Geur does not scoff. He goes quiet. "And you expect her to believe this tale."

Dòmhnall Geur believes this tale. I hear it in his words.

"S dòcha," says my father.

My father believes Seonag will believe it.

Which means my father truly does believe it.

I hear the crack of Dòmhnall Geur's knuckles and can picture the expression on his face even though I cannot see it. His weak chin does nothing to reduce the harsh lines of his cheeks. His lips he holds at a constant half-sneer except when he has made a decision—usually one few will like—and then light reaches his eyes as if causing harm to others is the one thing that brings him joy.

"That's me away," he says. "Shall I congratulate you on your forthcoming nuptials?"

He laughs as his footsteps make their way toward the door. I am a coward. I steal around the edge of the house on light feet and wait until he has passed out of sight before I go in.

I cannot shake the feeling that Seonag is in danger.

I cannot tell if that danger is my father's making or if it is Dòmhnall Geur's.

My father stands by the sputtering fire, staring into it.

"Dùin an uinneag," he says without looking up.

I close the window. It is now cold, outside and inside the house.

"He believes in those wolves," I say. My anger feels like the sharp edges of shells on the beach. "I think he is one of the wolves."

I say it in English even though for once Father made his words of Gaelic for me.

"Amadan," my father says.

I don't know if he's calling me a fool or Dòmhnall Geur. Perhaps both.

"Do you remember what I said earlier, when you said there were no mic-thìre here?" Father adds a brick of peat to the fire. He is speaking English now. A puff of smoke, full of the scent of the earth, whispers through the house.

I do remember.

He said there are no mic-thìre, but there are madaidhean-allaidh.

The first means children of the land.

The second means wild dogs.



By the time I make it to my granny's house after all of my work, it is clear Seonag has been there.

Granny's house has sat empty this past half year, the windows shuttered, the door closed. Father and I come here once a week to check the thatch and make sure no beasties have made it their home. When I arrive, there is a small bundle on the table and a snubbed out candle. A basket of peats sits by the fire, untouched. The stove is clean—she hasn't used it.

There is a note on Granny's table. It has my name on it.

It's written in charcoal on a scrap of rag, and all it says is a thank you.

I clutch it in my hand, where a stray tail of string tickles against my

skin.

In my chest there is—something at war.

It feels like fingers pulling apart my heart. I do not know what my father meant. I do not know what Dòmhnall Geur means to do. I know only that I need to find her.

The sky is liath. The clouds have burned off, leaving only a lump of them smeared across the horizon to the west, over the sea.

It will be hours yet before the sun sets, but it is the light of a twilit sky.

I run due west from the house. It is perhaps a mile to the shore. My legs are strong, and I run as fast as I am able.

It is Monday and tomorrow the crofters will begin the plowing of the machair. They will not have begun such a large task today; it invites trouble to begin a large task on a Monday.

I try not to think that beginning a large task is exactly what I myself am doing.

When I reach the dunes, there is the sound of bleating sheep in the distance, an answering lowing of the cattle. The tide is out, pulled all the way out, like a breath drawn in and waiting to be screamed.

Footsteps lead from the dune to the shore.

With them, drifted to the northeast with the wind, are scattered clothes. The thick wool dress Seonag wore this morning. Her shoes, set in a perfect pair. Stockings, blown a bit away. Chemise flapping in the breeze.

The footsteps become imprints of feet and toes. There is another set near them, near me. I try not to think of those ones. They turn back halfway to the water.

The bare footprints lead directly into the sea.

It is said that the warmth returns to the water at Bealltainn.

I have known that to be a lie for most of my life, but when I throw off my shoes back toward the dunes and wade into the water in my stockinged feet and trousers, cold shoots up to my knees, my hips, jabbing into my heart and lungs. I press on. Father said to swim until she couldn't see land.

I cast one glance behind me, at Uibhist a Deas, at my home, my island. Then I turn out to sea and dive.

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When Seonag reaches the water's edge an hour earlier, she is naked and

griseach, shivering and rubbing her hands against the bumps on her skin. She is too aware of the irony of walking naked into the sea when she could have been sailing west on a ship, clothed and warm.

She doesn't know why she does it anyway. Perhaps she believes my father wants her dead. Perhaps she believes Dòmhnall Geur does too. Perhaps she simply believes.

This seems as good a way as any. The shore is an in-between place, and Seonag is an in-between person.

She wades into the water.

Like me, she decides it is best to dive.

Seonag comes up gasping and sputtering, her entire body revolting against the cold. Her arms and legs spasm. Behind her, someone shouts.

It might just be a sheep or a goat.

She dives again, the waves pushing against her.

Seonag is a strong swimmer; the brother of her mother drowned when he was fifteen, and her mother insisted Seonag learn to swim.

It has been some time since she did, though, and fighting the waves is different than the smooth peat-colored waters of the lochs.

The tide is turning.

Seonag swims west.

Every stroke of her arms feels like a miracle from the very first of them. She is certain this will be her last act, an act of defiance, an act of doing precisely as she was told, just as she always did, convinced that if she were good enough, modhail enough, kind enough, the whispers would cease.

She feels this will be one more story for my father to tell at the cèilidhean.

(My father will never tell this story. He will forever carry on him far too much shame. No matter how he washes, he will not be able to scrub it away.)

So Seonag swims.

She looks back every so often, when she can spare any small bit of energy. The land disappears quickly only to appear again on the other side of a swell. It does not recede fast enough. Seonag stops looking back.

Her muscles are fire under the ice of her skin. Her lips choke on salt, and her eyes and nose burn with it. Her eyes and nose make their own in retaliation, but they cannot compete against the sea.

Once, Seonag sees dolphins, which in Gaelic are called leumadairean-mara, sea jumpers. She watches them and feels envy, because her body was not made for this and theirs were.

They circle her, out of curiosity or confusion. One comes close enough for her to touch; her elbow brushes against something warmer than the sea and rubbery, and if she were less exhausted she might recoil from it.

When her ear dips beneath the rolling waves for an instant, she hears them. They call to each other, with clicks and whistles that she feels she should understand.

They swim with her—which is to say, they swim ahead, then back, then ahead again, winding around her as she aims herself into the now-blinding light of a sun that has peeked from behind the clouds—and Seonag at once is glad of the company and resents it.

She has always wanted to get close to these creatures, but this is not how she thought it would happen.

Eventually, they swim ahead of her and vanish. She does not see them again.

Time passes.

We are aware of the worlds beyond our own. We know there are times when you can touch them, at twilight and dusk, at the shores and on days that mark the turning of the year. But it is impossible to know when we have gone from touching those worlds to finding ourselves in one.

Seonag certainly never thought she would swim herself over a blurred boundary, into something deep and cold and dark but full of life and salt and energy nonetheless.

When Seonag pauses in her swimming to rest aching shoulders, she is surprised to see Heisgeir breaking the waves ahead of her. The sight of land in front and not behind shocks her into flailing beneath the waves for a moment, coughing and struggling to stay afloat.

Seeing Heisgeir is impossible. It is west of Beinn na Faoghla. She has drifted to the north as she swam. She has left Uibhist miles behind.

Seonag remembers my father's words. She cries out then, in sorrow or in frustration, and she moves herself to begin swimming due west again, keeping Heisgeir on her right.

She will not go near its shores.

When it fades from view, Seonag realizes she is crying. She tastes her own tears over the brine of the sea. She is sure she will soon drown.

She begins to pray, not to a god who forsook her all of these years, but to the each-uisge, to the selkies, to the storm kelpies, to anything that would listen. She longs for the dolphins to return, belatedly thankful for their company and kindness.

She swims until the late evening sun finally touches the horizon.

She swims until she can see nothing except the red, red clouds touched by the sunset, the sea turned from gorm to dearg itself, waves like flames.

Seonag is not sure if she is still cold, or if the sun has turned the sea to hellfire.

And then she hears it.

A voice on the wind, raised high and so bright for a moment Seonag is blinded by the sound of it.

She fumbles in her swimming.

It comes again, unmistakable. A howl.

Seonag has never heard wolf-song. Seonag has never seen a wolf.

Here, miles from shore and swimming through water turned red, she hears a wolf howl for the first time.

She has nothing better to do. She swims toward it.

At that moment, Seonag is nearly overcome. She expected to die, and oh, she does realize she still might. She does not know how she has swum so far, alone and naked, into the frigid waters of the North Atlantic.

It does not occur to her that she has already passed into a world she was not born into.

On the horizon, Hiort appears.



Seonag's experience is not my experience.

When I begin to swim, my clothes stick to my body, trying to strangle the life from me before the ocean can. I don't know what it is I expect to happen. Fatigue sets in before I'm a hundred yards from the shore.

I hear a muffled shout, and before I can find where it's coming from, a hand grasps me by the back of my shirt and hauls me over the edge of a fishing boat.

The hand is Dòmhnall Geur's.

There are two other men in the boat, Seòras Eachainn and Dòmhnall Dubh, whose black hair is now far closer to white.

It's a small fishing vessel with a sail. The boat is called *Anna*, after Seòras's mum. I've been aboard it before.

"What're you doing, lad?" Seòras grunts it at me while Dòmhnall Geur dries his hand on his trousers.

"S-s-eonag," I stutter, pointing westward.

Seòras exchanges a glance with the two Dòmhnalls.

"Saw her going into the water," Dòmhnall Geur says, his voice surprisingly thoughtful.

"If the weather holds, we'll go," Seòras says. There's caution between his words, and I don't think it's about the weather. "We turn back if—"

"I've been sailing at least as long as you, Seòras," says Dòmhnall Geur.

"Sail where?" My teeth are chattering.

Seòras throws a plaid over my shoulders. It's wool and rough and smells of fish and brine.

No one answers.



Seonag pulls herself onto the sand with arms that quiver like the leftover gelatin in a mutton stew.

She has no reference for the kind of tired she is in this moment. Her fingers are shaking from exhaustion—she stopped shivering from cold long ago—and when she looks up, moving only her eyes from where her cheek is glued to the sand, feet still getting tickled by the waves lapping the shore, she doesn't know where she is.

Seonag aimed herself at Hiort. She thought it was Hiort. But Hiort has been inhabited for two thousand years, and this place looks like it has never seen the footprint of a human being.

But there are paw prints in the sand.

Seonag drags herself farther onto the beach, close enough to look at one of the paw prints.

It is the size of her hand, almost. If she curls her fingers in—which she does—she can lay her hand in the depression made by the paw pads and see the indentation of a wet tuft of fur, the pricks of claws.

She has never seen such a track.

The set of prints leads away from the water.

There is more than one set of prints.

If she expects to hear more howling, she is disappointed. There is only the sound of the wind and the waves and her own labored breathing. Seonag knows she will need to find shelter soon. She will likely need to build it.

She has swum through the short summer night, and already to the east, the sky lightens.

She is covered in sand, only on her right side. There are no clouds. She is alone.

Seonag is used to being alone, even when she is surrounded by people.

She pushes herself to her feet.

The sound of waves is in her blood, her ears, all around her. Indeed even the land seems to be shaped like waves; from the small beach where she landed, cliffs rise up like arms embracing and sheltering the center of the small island, far too small to be Hiort in truth.

There are trees over the dunes. Trees. There are almost no trees in Uibhist—they don't grow because the wind likes to be able to run across the machair and moors unhindered.

Finally.

The word cuts through Seonag. She could not have told you what language it came in, only that she feels it the way she is feeling the waves.

She looks around.

There, at the top of the dune, is movement.

Something beckons her.

Seonag's heart gives a jolt, a spark. She follows on unsteady feet.

There is a glimpse of driftwood, moving. Of seaweed and kelp streaming out behind. Seonag tastes fear, but it tastes like the salt of the sea and she has steeped in it all night. She ignores it now.

A figure passes between an oak and a hazel.

Seonag follows.

More movement shows through the trees and underbrush. A tail beyond a bush of holly, upright ears passing just behind a rowan.

Seonag does not know much about trees, but she remembers learning that different kinds don't grow all in the same place.

The wind falls quiet here, in the embrace of the cliff arms. The slope up is steep; the island looks like a god reached down with a hand and scooped out the middle of a mountain. Seonag doesn't know what a

volcano is. This one has been hibernating for a long time, and will not wake in any lifetime soon.

She walks for an hour into this bowl of trees, past elm and birch, alder and yew. They are the trees that make up the alphabet in Gaelic. She wonders what stories they will tell here.

The figure is among the trees, in a circle of them, on spring grass both thick and green like a bed.

Seonag longs to lie down on that grass and sleep in the circle of these trees. She might never wake if she does.

Someone is here.

Seonag is confused by this. Of course someone is here; she is standing right in front of the figure, which she cannot bring herself to look at. She hears rather than sees the rustle of seaweed. Beyond that, a low, rumbling growl that seems to come from all around her.

And beyond that, a crackle of underbrush from the direction she's just come from.



My feet are heavier and heavier as I help drag the boat onto the shore of the island. Seòras and Dòmhnall Dubh help me secure it, with Seòras turning toward the cleft in the cliffs where Dòmhnall Geur vanished and muttering “Craobhan” over and over, so shocked is he by the presence of trees.

My feet are heavier, or perhaps it is my heart. Urgency creeps up my spine, using each ridge of my vertebrae for a ladder. There is a need to hurry.

Almost before I have tied off the ropes, I start to pull away toward where Dòmhnall Geur left.

Seòras catches my hand. “Duilich, a ghille.”

I don't understand why he is apologizing to me until Dòmhnall Dubh catches the other.

Before I can react, Seòras stuffs a rag into my mouth. It tastes of fish and sweat, and I almost vomit. They wrench my hands behind me and tie me to the boat.

In the distance, a wolf howls.



Seonag is not surprised to see Dòmhnall Geur striding into the clearing with no hint of wariness about him. She is not surprised by the gun in his hand, an old hunting rifle that belonged to her own father, who by now is far from the sight of land and crossing the Atlantic forever.

“You must have hidden your boat well,” he says.

“I swam,” she says.

He laughs.

Seonag is still naked except for the crust of sand on her right side, which itches. His laugh has always been a spiteful laugh, one that made her skin into bumps as if ready for anything that might follow.

“I’ve been wanting an excuse to come here for a very long time,” he says. “When I rid the islands of wolves once and for all, everyone will know my name.”

He does not seem to see the figure behind Seonag, or perhaps only Seonag can see them.

“And you will be put on the next ship to Canada where you cannot pollute my island any longer.”

“Your island?” Seonag hears all of his words distantly, like the waves barely audible over the whispers of the leaves around her. But that bit stays. “You are born to a place and believe you own it more than others who are the same as you.”

“You are not the same as anyone.” His voice is low and thick with disgust.

“Why do you hate me?” Seonag truly wants to know.

Dòmhnall takes a breath to answer, but before he can speak, a wolf howls behind him.

He raises his rifle and fires.

★ ★ ★

I hear the shot ring out through the air. Seòras and Dòmhnall Dubh are out of sight already, following after with their own rifles.

There is another shot, then another. Closer—without reloading time. The others are shooting at whatever Dòmhnall Geur shot at. The sound of a distant snarl.

I jerk at my bonds. The rope is rough and made of heather. It digs into my skin like a flail. My father and I make this rope together. We may have

made this one.

I let out a scream of frustration and rage.

The sound of breathing greets me when my scream dies away.

I turn.

A wolf stands at my right, soaking wet and staring at me with liquid amber eyes. In its jaw is a cod, still twitching.

The wolf looks at me. I forget to breathe.

They are real. The story my father told was real. It is large, far larger than the working dogs we use to herd the sheep on our island. It comes up to my waist.

I can smell its wet fur, full of brine and warmth and the manky smell it does have in common with the working dogs. I can smell its breath, hot and fishy.

It melds with the taste of the cloth in my mouth.

The wolf drops the fish, and fear spikes from my bound wrists up the nerves of my arms. My nose is half-stuffed, and my breath enters in gaps around the gag as much as through my nostrils.

The wolf stalks closer, close enough for its breath to glance off my skin and my still-damp clothes.

Its muzzle is cold and wet, its nose colder and wetter.

When it ducks behind me, between me and the boat, I almost cry out. Warm breath hits my wrists, then the wolf's powerful jaws clamp down on the rope, pulling and gnawing. My skin warms with the animal's saliva.

Another shot rings out. The wolf flinches against me, but does not stop.

When my hands pop free, I pull the spit-covered rag from my mouth.

"Taing," I say, trying to thank the animal, but it has already taken its fish and gone.

I go after it.

★ ★ ★

Around Seonag, a dance of chaos swirls.

Wolves partner with hunters, at least two fur-covered bodies to each of the three men. In its center, Seonag stands like a maypole, her body warm from something she cannot place. The figure recedes behind her, waiting, not intervening.

Seonag feels something well within her. She is certain of it, even

though it comes to her without words, without voice. It is like the waves that lifted and dipped beneath her as she swam. It is like the impulse that made her turn and run from the ship the day before, an age before, and hide in the glen.

She has to make a choice.

She feels it again, then, as she decides. Her feet hold to the grasses she so longingly admired a short time ago. Toes dig into their young growth.

Seonag stands taller. Perhaps she is taller.

It comes upon her like the tide, creeping with every breath closer. The smell of leaves around her. The scent of seaweed and kelp. The grit of sand against her skin ... and something else.

Her skin is flesh and not.

Her body turns with the swirl of air and breath and grunts around her.

She says one word: stad.

Everyone in the clearing does. They stop. They turn to stare at her, men and wolves alike. There is blood on the wind, human and canine.

“I told you, I told you,” Dòmhnall Geur says, stumbling backward. “She is not of our world, she is not—”

“I was,” Seonag says softly. She looks at Seòras, at Dòmhnall Dubh. “Go.”

Seòras looks over his shoulder once. He sees a glimpse of the figure beyond Seonag herself. Whatever he sees, it is enough. His face goes so white that it is he who will be named Bàn when he returns, though he will never tell anyone why.

This is the scene I come upon when I enter the clearing.

Seòras is half-dragging Dòmhnall Dubh with him. He does not look even to the side to see me. They stumble away.

What I see is this:

Seonag, and not Seonag.

Her arms are no longer pale flesh but the soft, sun-bleached grain of driftwood that curves with her muscles, her joints, her neck. She is naked, but her nakedness is no longer human nakedness. Where her black hair reached past her hips is now seaweed, lustrous and shining in the first rays of the early morning sun. Her eyes are obsidian, their whites abalone.

Behind her I see a figure like her, smiling with seal bone teeth. This figure leans against a yew.

Seonag walks to Dòmhnall Geur, who stands rooted to his place on the

earth.

When I step closer, flanked by two wolves I hardly notice, I see that rooted is not a metaphor.

Where Dòmhnall Geur's feet were, now his toes have entered the earth, punching through the leather of his boots and digging deeper by the second.

He writhes where he stands, but he does not scream. I think he cannot scream.

When Seonag touches his face with gentle nails of shining scales, he flinches away.

"You will stay here, like the others before you," she says absently. I cannot tell which language she is speaking, if any.

I look around me at the trees, so many different kinds.

"Dair," Seonag says. "Darach."

Dair is the name for *D*, the first letter of his name. He will become an oak.

Already his hair has sprung free of its tie.

Seonag has an acorn in her hand. She places it in Dòmhnall Geur's open mouth.

It sprouts before his lips close, a sprig of green reaching out, another sprouting from his nose.

A wolf howls, so close to my side that I jump, a stick cracking under my feet.

"A Chaluim," Seonag says, looking over her shoulder at me. Then, sadly, "You shouldn't have come."

Like the others, I cannot seem to speak.

The figure behind Seonag moves forward. Slowly. I think I hear the brittle crack of wood.

"Who are you?" Seonag asks.

The figure is like her, like this new Seonag, and not. Where Seonag's seaweed hair hangs straight and glossy in ripples, the figure's is wild, covered in barnacles and fragments of shell and motes of sand embedded in the leaves that sparkle in the sun.

Perhaps this figure is simply older.

"A guardian," says the figure. "I was."

I understand before Seonag seems to.

"Was," she says. "Of what?"

The figure gestures around her. "Of whom do you think?"

Those who are hunted.

For the first time, I see a dead wolf. The figure gazes sadly upon it. There is a knife in its side, and a cod by its mouth.

I cannot make words, but a strangled cry escapes me.

The figure seems to understand.

Seonag goes to the wolf and pulls the knife from its chest. She walks to the new oak tree, now reaching up higher, higher. Flutters of fabric wave in the wind. Seonag tears away what was Dòmhnall Geur's shirt.

She wraps the knife in it, blood and all. She walks to me. "Carry this home."

Before I can try and ask her how, she pushes it into my chest. In through my shirt and in through my skin and ribs. I feel it, harsh and heavy and sharp inside me, against my heart that beats so quickly.

Seonag looks at me once more. If she is sad, I cannot tell.

Her sudden smile is fierce.

I blink once, and she is gone. I hear the beat of wings above my head, in the branches of a tree.

The figure remains.

My voice works again. "Who are you?"

The words sound strange in the air, like they are not words at all.

"Old," says the figure. "Tired."

I look upward. My hand massages my chest. I can feel the knife there. It feels like panic just out of reach.

"Tell your father thank you," says the figure.

When I jerk my gaze back down, they are also gone.

★ ★ ★

You will wonder, I suppose, how I made it home. Seòras and Dòmhnall Dubh returned, days after I did, silent for days after that, jumping every time they saw me.

The wolves swam me out past the breakwater, the pack leading me around the riptides and into the open sea with yips and broken notes. Some peeled off to hunt on a small chain of rocky islets; others waited until we reached a place I could never find again no matter how I tried. Hiort appeared in the distance.

Oh, how the fear gripped me then. It coated me more heavily than the water, ready to pull me under with its weight.

I swam, though. I swam through the length of the day. They say the journey back is shorter than the journey there. I think in this they are wrong.

When I arrived on the shore of Uibhist a Deas, I collapsed and lay for hours before one of the crofters found me and carted me home, naked and shivering, on the back of his horse.

I did not hear what he said to my father.

Father built up the fire and closed all the shutters and when the heat from the peat warmed me enough, I rose to my hands and knees and began to heave, spots swimming in front of my eyes and a terrible ripping feeling in my chest and when tears stung at me, I heard a thud, and to the floor fell the knife that had killed the wolf.

My father picked up the small parcel and opened it. The blood appeared as fresh as if he had stabbed me with it himself.

“Dòmhnall Geur killed the wolf that freed me,” I told my father then, unthinking of how absurd my words would sound in any language. “He became an oak.”

“A life for a life,” was all my father said in return.

I think of the many trees on that island sometimes.

I think that is why I am telling you this now.

When Seonag came to me not so long ago, she came with a warning. I do not think it was meant for me.

Perhaps it is meant for you.

There are no mic-thìre left in Scotland, but there are madaidhean-allaidh. They are wild and they are free, and they found that freedom in the sea.

Their hunters are the ones to fear.

Sometimes, when the winds are still and the tide pulls back far, far from the shore, I hear their song echo across the waves. I am not the only one who hears them; perhaps Seonag as their guardian strengthened them after the strength of their old guardian flagged.

On those nights, it is whispered that Seòras and Dòmhnall Dubh hide with their pillows over their ears, but no matter how they try, they cannot escape the sound. They forgot her, but they still remember that sound.

I am old now, and Seòras and Dòmhnall Dubh are older still. But you

are young, and the young have the chance not to repeat the mistakes of their elders.

If you look around you, you might see someone like Seonag, who wants so desperately to belong. Let her sing at the cèilidhean. Invite her to share your meals.

You know who I mean and who I do not. Those someones like Seonag are not like the hunters who prowl for something they decided was their own, to take, to steal, to kill.

Someday perhaps someone else will take that swim to relieve Seonag of her duties. I have thought sometimes that it might be me, but I am still a coward.

Sometimes, on those nights, I think of her.

Sometimes, on those nights, I walk the glen.

Sometimes, on those nights, I hear her singing again.

There *are* hunters among the sheep of the machair, a ghràidh. But there are wolves, too.



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