MAY
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TOR.COM SHORT FICTION

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MAY – JUNE 2020

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BERLIN IS NEVER BERLIN

MARKO KLOOS

A WILD CARDS STORY

Berlin is Never Berlin

MARKO KLOOS

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The plane was only three hours into its flight when Khan was entertaining the thought of a massacre for the first time.

The surroundings were posh, and it was easily the most comfortable air travel he had ever enjoyed. Sal Scuderi's private jet had the full executive luxury package, and the club seating in the Lear was so roomy that even Khan, all six foot three and three hundred pounds, could stretch his legs a little. There was a bar stocked with premium liquor, and he didn't even have to pour his own drinks because they had a flight attendant on staff. The surroundings were more than fine. It was the company that triggered homicidal thoughts in Khan before they had even made it out over the Atlantic Ocean.

Natalie Scuderi, Sal's daughter and Khan's protectee for the week, traveled with an entourage. There were only four, but Khan suspected that she had picked her friends after a long and thorough vetting process to find the vapidest rich kids in the country. They had started with the champagne right before takeoff. Five minutes after wheels-up, they had commandeered the impressively loud luxury entertainment system in the cabin and started listening to Top 40 shit at high volume. It was a seven-hour flight to Iceland and then another three-hour hop to Berlin from there, and Natalie's entourage seemed determined to party all the way through the trip.

A simple job, Khan thought as he watched the scene from the front of the plane, where he had a spot to himself next to the bar. Babysitting a bunch of spoiled kids. *Easy money.*

The center of the cabin had a four-seat club arrangement and a leather couch, and Natalie's friends were all piled on the couch, glasses in their hands, talking loudly over the music and giving Khan a headache. Natalie herself was sitting in the back of the plane, in the single seat next to the bathroom. She was wearing headphones the size of canned hams on her

head, and she was typing away on the computer she had propped on the little tray table in front of her.

Sal Scuderi was a high-risk insurance salesman and one of the main money-laundering outlets for the Chicago mob. His daughter dabbled in acting and singing, but as far as Khan could tell, she was mostly famous for being famous. They were on the way to Berlin, where Natalie was booked for introducing a new fashion line and opening a nightclub. Having a joker-ace as a bodyguard conveyed a certain image, and plenty of entertainment industry celebrities were willing to shell out money just to rent that image for a night or a long weekend out on the club circuit. Khan didn't mind those jobs—they were easy money, just hanging out in clubs and looking mean for the cameras. But even milk run jobs had their hazards, and one of them was a migraine headache. He spent some time extending and retracting the claws of his tiger hand a few times while looking pointedly at the big-screen TV on the bulkhead above the couch, and someone turned down the volume a little. Just to make sure it stuck, he got out of his seat and walked to the bathroom at the back of the cabin. When he was between the couch and the giant TV, he took the remote and clicked the volume down a few more notches for good measure.

When he emerged from the bathroom, Natalie Scuderi had taken off her headphones and closed the lid on her laptop.

"How do you like the ride?"

Khan closed the door behind him and shrugged. "Beats the hell out of flying coach," he replied.

"I've never flown coach." The way she said it wasn't boastful, just a statement of fact.

"Count yourself blessed."

Khan noticed that Natalie's gaze flicked from one side of his face to the other, and he knew that she was looking at the tiger half without being too obvious about it. Khan's left body half was that of a Bengal tiger, and the demarcation line between man and cat went right down the centerline of his body. For a mob bodyguard, the tiger half paid many dividends. It gave him the strength, reflexes, senses, teeth, and claws of a tiger, and it made him look dangerous and imposing. Not even the roughest or most drunken blockheads wanted to test their mettle against a guy who was half apex predator. Claws and teeth had a way of triggering people's primal fears.

Travis, Eli, and Melissa—Natalie's friends—had been in such awe of Khan that none of them had even tried to make small talk with him. Now that he was standing next to Natalie and talking to her, someone had decided that he wasn't going to tear off any heads on the spot. Melissa got up from the couch and sauntered over, champagne glass in hand.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Khan said.

She gestured at the line that bisected his face, fur on one side and skin on the other. He had grown out a beard to match the fur fringe on the tiger half of his jaw, to keep his looks symmetrical.

"Does that go, like, *all* the way down your body? Right down the middle?"

She tried to make it sound light and casual, but he knew what she was trying to ask because he had gotten the same question hundreds of times. Under normal circumstances, he would have given her a clever or flirty reply, like *You'll have to buy me drinks first to find out.* But she wasn't a paying client, and her gaggle of friends had been annoying Khan too much for him to tolerate a personal question like that.

"That's none of your business," he said. "Buzz off."

The girl beat a hasty retreat to the lounge area. Next to Khan, Natalie chuckled and opened her laptop again.

"Now she won't talk to you again for the rest of the trip."

"That is fine with me," Khan replied. "She doesn't have to talk to me. She just needs to listen when I tell her to do stuff."

Back on the couch, Natalie's chastened friend shot Khan a glare. Then she picked up the TV remote and turned the volume up again.

This is going to be a long fucking week, Khan thought.

★ ★ ★

There was always some security bullshit involved when a joker-ace like Khan traveled by air, but it was increased by a few orders of magnitude when international borders were involved. Scuderi's private plane meant that Khan hadn't had to suffer the enhanced screening before their departure in Chicago, but the Germans weren't going to let him skip a damned thing. He'd had to file his plans in advance, and when the Lear stopped at the private terminal at Berlin's shiny new Brandenburg Airport,

there was a welcoming committee waiting for him at customs and immigration.

"What is the purpose of your visit?" the customs officer asked when he checked Khan's passport.

"Business," Khan said. "I'm a bodyguard. My client is going through your no-hassle line over there right now."

"Are you bringing any weapons into the country at this time?"

"No weapons," Khan replied. He knew they'd go through his luggage anyway and check thoroughly. He carried a gun back home when he was working—no point disadvantaging yourself in a fight—but when he traveled out of the country, he didn't pack so much as a nail file. Foreign cops got twitchy enough when they saw the teeth and claws, and if they hadn't been firmly attached to him, he was sure they'd have made him leave those at home as well.

"Very well," the officer said. "In accordance with laws and regulations regarding the admission of foreign persons with enhanced abilities, I have to ask you to follow my colleague back to the room for your entry screening. You can choose to decline, but in that case you will be denied entry into the Federal Republic."

"Lead the way," Khan grumbled. The world had had seventy years to get used to jokers and aces, and they still got civil rights parceled out to them like the nats were giving them treats for good behavior. Khan wasn't the type for political activism, but something in him bristled at having to ask permission to come and go from some pencil-necked bureaucrats when everyone in the room would already be cut into bloody ribbons if he had violence on his mind. The security kabuki existed to make the nats feel safer, and they knew that as well as he did.

The inspection was Teutonically thorough. They made him strip down to his underwear, snapped pictures of him with a sophisticated spatial camera array mounted on the wall of the screening room, and took prints and iris scans.

"You sure you don't want to put a tracking bracelet on me?" he asked when they rolled his tiger hand over the electronic print scanner—once with claws retracted, once with them extended.

"We only use those for certain criminal offenders," the police officer taking his print said, mild pique in his voice. "You are not an offender."

Could have fooled me, Khan thought, but he decided to keep it to himself. Customs and border police everywhere had a low tolerance threshold for humor and sarcasm.

The circus started almost right after Natalie's entourage left the private aviation terminal. They had transportation waiting outside, two big Mercedes limousines. There was a small crowd of fans and photographers by the exit, snapping pictures with cameras and phones and yelling Natalie's artist name excitedly when they spotted her. Natalie went by the mononym "Rikki," which sounded like the annoying call of an exotic bird when it was shouted by dozens of people at high volume.

Khan stepped ahead of Natalie and walked between her and the bulk of the crowd. When they all caught sight of him, there were some audible gasps. He put on his most humorless face and rasped a low growl when the front rank of excited fans came a little too close for comfort. None of them dared to come within an arm's length, and he ushered Natalie to one of the waiting limousines. As she climbed into the backseat, he stood guard and looked around. The situation was innocuous enough, a bunch of teenage kids squealing and taking pictures, but something made the hairs on the back of Khan's neck stand up a little.

Over in the group of paparazzi standing twenty feet away, there were two guys who Khan thought didn't quite act right. They weren't shouting at him or Natalie's entourage to pose for shots like the rest of them. They weren't even particularly engaged in taking photos, and when they did, they seemed to focus on him rather than the celebrity he was guarding. When they noticed his attention, they shifted their lenses and snapped shots of Natalie through the car window like the rest of them. Khan tried to get their scents, but this place was full of new and unfamiliar smells, there were ten or fifteen people between him and the two not-quite-right photographers, and his group had almost finished entering the cars. Khan held out an arm to keep one of Natalie's friends from getting into the front passenger seat.

"That's my spot," he told him. "You ride in the back or in the other car."

The kid moved off to the second waiting car. Khan closed the rear passenger door and lowered himself into the front seat next to the driver. He made sure to keep eye contact with the two fishy photographers, just so they'd be aware they had been noticed.

I don't know who you are, but I see you, he thought. As they rolled off past the squealing crowd of fans, one of the photographers lowered his camera, pointed a finger, and cocked his thumb like the hammer of a gun.

Pow.

★ ★ ★

Khan's tiger half didn't sweat. This was something that he hadn't known about canines and felines before his card had turned. Cats and dogs shed excess heat through panting, and through the pads on their paws. If he dressed to keep his tiger side cool, his human side was too cold, and if he dressed to keep his human half warm, his tiger half was too well insulated. Finding a happy medium was difficult even on temperate days. In the middle of a nightclub, the heat from hundreds of bodies contesting with the building's inadequate air conditioning, it was downright impossible. Half an hour after the start of Natalie's first engagement in Berlin, Khan's button-down was soaked in sweat. He was standing close to his charge, shielding access to the booth where she was holding court with her entourage, while the crowd was mingling and hopping around on the floor to relentless Europop tunes.

The new nightclub was ostentatiously exclusive. All the patrons wore designer clothes and expensive watches, and Khan was sure that the cocaine being done in the bathrooms was high-grade stuff. He wasn't much into pop culture these days, but even he recognized some of the celebrities lounging in the booths that surrounded the dance floor. One of the nearby booths held a group that was even more conspicuous than Natalie and her entourage. In the center of it was a playboy princeling from the one of the oil-rich Gulf states that had been swallowed up by the Caliphate, someone whose face was featured in the tabloids on a regular basis. He was tan and toned, with a thousand-dollar pair of sunglasses on his face and a Swiss watch on his wrist that was worth more than Khan's car. Khan watched him trying to get Natalie's attention for a little while. Finally, the princeling got out of his booth and walked over to Natalie's corner, two bodyguards in dark suits immediately trailing three feet behind and on either side of him.

"Hold up there, sport," Khan said and held out an arm to bar the way into the booth. The princeling looked at him with an irritated expression.

He turned toward his bodyguards and said something that made them laugh, and Khan let out a slow breath and flexed his muscles to get ready for a tussle.

"It's okay," Natalie shouted from behind. "You can let him in. Only him, though."

"You heard the lady," Khan said to the princeling, who still regarded him like he was something rotting the dogs had dragged in. The princeling waved his hand curtly over his shoulder without turning around, and his bodyguards took a step back.

The princeling squeezed past Khan and sat down in the booth with Natalie's group. For a while, they talked and drank together; Khan tried to ignore the insipid conversation while the princeling's bodyguards tried to ignore him. Like their boss, they wore their sunglasses inside, which made them look like jackasses.

Khan smelled the trouble flaring up at the moment it started behind him, that unmistakable whiff of adrenaline and high emotions right before a fight breaks out. He started to turn around just as some liquid splashed the back of his neck and the tiger side of his face. One of the girls had voiced her anger at the princeling and emptied a drink in his direction, and some of the splash had hit Khan instead. From the way the prince's hand recoiled from Natalie's friend Melissa, Khan could guess the reason for the sharp and sudden outrage. And then, almost reflexively, the princeling slapped Melissa. The strike was hard enough to make her head rock back. Blood came gushing from her nose, and the metallic smell of it permeated the air.

Next to Khan, one of the princeling's bodyguards caught on to the action and tried to wedge himself past Khan and between Melissa and the princeling. Khan yanked him by the collar of his suit and tossed him away from the booth and onto the dance floor, where he fell on his ass with a yelp and skidded backward a foot or two.

Behind Khan, the second bodyguard let out a curse in his own language and reached underneath his suit coat. Khan seized the hand holding the pistol with his tiger hand and wrapped his fingers firmly around the wrists of the other man. The second bodyguard dropped the gun with a strangled yelp. Khan caught it with his human hand before it could hit the floor.

"No guns," he growled.

The pistol was one of the new lightweight European cop guns, with a frame made of reinforced polymer. He let go of the bodyguard's wrist, transferred the gun to his tiger hand, and crushed it right in front of the man's face. The frame buckled in his fist and then started spilling little metal tabs and springs from its insides. Khan hit the other man in the face with the barrel assembly. He shook the plastic bits of the frame to the floor and flung the broken gun parts aside as the second bodyguard dropped to the floor.

With Khan blocking the exit of the booth, the princeling scrambled over the back of the seating corner to get away. Khan took two long steps and hauled him up by the back of his shirt. The princeling yelped as Khan spun him around and tossed him onto the seat. Then he wrapped his tiger hand around the princeling's neck and extended his claws just a little, enough to let the man know that hasty movements were now unwise. Khan smelled fear coming from him in big olfactory waves, and his heart was racing. It felt like holding a panicked rabbit by the ears. Next to them, Natalie's entourage was in a headless, noisy panic, trying to stay out of Khan's way and tend to Melissa at the same time.

"Touch them again, and I'll rip your head off, you little chickenshit," Khan said to the wild-eyed princeling. He finished the statement with a low, rasping growl and was rewarded with the smell of fresh piss wafting up from below the man's waistline. Natalie's friends were annoying as hell, but they were *his* charges, and men who hit women ranked lower on Khan's vermin scale than plague-carrying sewer rats.

He lifted the princeling off his feet and threw him toward the first bodyguard, who was still sitting on the floor and dusting off his dignity. The two men collided hard and went down in a tangle of limbs.

Khan closed a hand around Natalie's arm and pulled her to her feet.

"We have to go," he said. "Right now."

He was glad to see that Natalie seemed too shaken to argue, because he didn't want to have to carry her out of the place like a sack of playground sand. Her retinue rushed to follow when they saw that Khan wasn't stopping to wait, and they hurried across the dance floor toward the exit.

They were halfway across the floor when the doors of the nightclub opened and half a dozen angry-looking guys in suits pushed their way into the crowd. All of them were wearing ear pieces and grim expressions.

The crowd around the periphery of the dance floor was densely packed, and the newcomers were pushing people aside with force as they came through. Khan turned and looked around for the fire exits. Things were about to get complicated, and Khan didn't want to wait around to see whose side the cops would take.

There was a bouncer stationed at the fire exit. He stepped in front of Khan and his group as they approached the door and held up his hand in the universal "hold it" gesture. Khan wasted no time trying to figure out language commonalities. He grabbed the bouncer by the wrist of his outstretched hand and yanked him aside. The bouncer stumbled and went to one knee with an indignant yelp. Then he got back to his feet and lunged at Khan, who stopped him cold by raising his tiger hand and extending his claws in front of the man's face.

"Don't," Khan snarled.

The bouncer blanched and backed off. Khan pushed the exit open, and the fire alarm started blaring instantly. The noise felt like a physical thing assaulting his ears despite the earbuds that kept the volume to tolerable levels for Khan, and once they were out in the cooler evening air of the street and the decibel level subsided a little, he almost sighed with relief. Behind them, the bouncer appeared in the door and yelled something in angry German, but made no move to follow them.

God, I fucking hate nightclubs, Khan thought.

★ ★ ★

Outside, Khan led the group away from the nightclub's back entrance, which proved to be a more difficult task than putting the princeling's bodyguards on their asses. Natalie was surprisingly helpful and collected. She was propping up Melissa and holding a wad of tissues underneath the other girl's nose. Melissa and the two boys, however, acted like they had just survived a flaming plane crash. After the tenth high-pitched "Oh my *God!*" in fifty meters, Khan lost his patience.

"Would you shut *up,*" he told them. "She got slapped in the face, not shot in the head. Now move your asses before someone sends those cops after us."

"He broke my fucking *nose!*" Melissa wailed, her exclamation only slightly muffled by the tissues Natalie was pressing against her face to

catch the blood.

"We'll have the front desk at the hotel call an ambulance," Natalie offered. Melissa glared at Khan, but kept pace with the group.

Khan never used valet services. He had parked their rented luxury SUV in a garage half a block away from the nightclub. He rushed his charges to the garage as fast as he felt they could go without having to carry Melissa, who was still acting like someone had cut off half her face. The club was in a hip part of the city, and the sidewalks were still busy with foot traffic, but most people gave Khan and his group a wide berth.

He led everyone up the staircase onto the rooftop parking deck and had them get into their SUV. When it was Melissa's turn to board, he held her back and turned her to face him.

"Let me see that nose," he said. She grimaced and lowered the tissue wad she had been pressing against her nose for the last five minutes. The tissue had some red splotches on it, but the trickle of blood coming from her nostrils had already stopped. Khan had seen a lot of busted noses over the years, and hers was as straight as it had been on the plane yesterday.

"That's not broken," he told her. "He just gave you a little nosebleed, that's all. Now let's get out of here."

The parking garage had three levels, with a ramp setup that required Khan to make a full circumnavigation of every deck before descending to the one below it. It was all ninety-degree turns, and the traffic lanes were narrower than the ones in American parking garages, so Khan had to take extra care every time he took a turn with the big seven-seat SUV they had rented. Back home, the size of it would have been nothing out of the ordinary, but over here, it felt like he was driving a monster truck.

He was making yet another right-hand turn at the end of a downward ramp when he saw headlights coming at them from the right. The strike was perfectly timed. Even with his reflexes, he had no chance to react and get the SUV out of the way of the other car, which had been shielded from his view by the concrete wall to the right of the ramp. Before he could even yell a warning, the other car plowed into their SUV. It struck the front of the car and caved in the passenger door. Khan felt the SUV lurching to the left with the force of the impact. To their left, the wall of the garage's lower level wasn't far away, and the driver's side of the SUV slammed into it with the dull crunch of metal on concrete. Behind Khan, Natalie and her entourage shrieked in unison.

The look of tense concentration on the face of the other driver told Khan that this was an ambush, not an accident. The SUV was pinned in a sideways vise between the wall and the front of the other car. To his left, the concrete wall kept Khan from opening his door, and to his right, the other car's bumper had dented in the passenger-side door.

"Get down," he shouted at Melissa and her crew. Then he made a fist with his tiger hand and punched out the spiderwebbed windshield of the SUV. Khan sliced his seatbelt in half with one claw and climbed out onto the hood.

A second car pulled up behind the one that had rammed them into the wall and came to a stop with squealing tires. All the doors seemed to open at once, and several people came rushing around the first car and toward the SUV. Khan leapt over the hood of the car that had rammed them and placed himself in front of the right rear passenger door of the SUV. Someone in the SUV tried to open the door from the inside, and he pushed it shut again.

"Stay there," he shouted through the glass. "Call the cops. Number's one-one-zero."

He figured they'd send their biggest bruiser against him first, and the attackers did not disappoint. The guy who lunged at him was clearly a wild card. He was easily as tall as Khan and looked half again as heavy, with arms that were as wide around as Khan's thighs. His face was dark gray, the skin ashen and rough like the bark on an ancient tree. Khan dodged a massive gnarled fist and raked his claws across the man's side. It felt like taking a swipe at the trunk of a Pacific redwood. Then Tree Guy swung his arm around and caught Khan in a backhand that sent him flying over the hood of the attackers' car. He tumbled across the dirty concrete of the garage deck and crashed into a parked car, taking out a taillight in the process. Khan scrambled back to his feet. His right arm felt like it had been smacked with a railroad tie.

In front of him, Tree Guy hooked one of his huge hands underneath the wheel well of the car Khan had sailed over. Then he lifted the car off its front wheels and pushed it out of his way in a motion that almost looked casual. His companions seemed content with letting Tree Guy do the heavy lifting of the fight. They were all over the rental car now. One of them yanked on the handle of the one door that was undamaged and reachable. When the door didn't open, he flicked open a collapsible steel

baton and swung it at the window, which cracked into a spiderweb on the first blow. Tree Guy wedged himself through the gap he had created between the cars and walked toward Khan with heavy, unhurried steps.

Khan extended his tiger arm to one side and let his claws pop out with a flick of his wrist. The flick wasn't a necessity, but it always made him feel like he was getting ready for serious business, like pushing the button on a switchblade. Usually, even the big mob bruisers flinched at the sight of Khan's curved three-inch claws, but Tree Guy's expression didn't change a bit. Khan bellowed a roar, and one of the nearby parked cars started bleating its alarm as if in fearful protest.

So you're strong but slow, Khan thought. *I can work around that.*

His right arm was out of commission, but his legs still worked fine. Khan tensed his muscles and leapt sideways just as Tree Guy was about to reach him. He landed on the hood of the wailing car fifteen feet away, then pushed himself off for another leap toward the rental. The unknown goons had succeeded in smashing the rear passenger door's window. Khan landed on three of his four extremities right behind the two men who were now fumbling to get the door open. He grabbed one of them by the collar of his shirt and yanked him away from the car as hard as he could. The man flew backward with a yelp, arms flailing.

The other man was still holding the baton he had used to smash the window. He barked an obvious obscenity in some Slavic language—Russian, or maybe Ukrainian—and lashed out with the baton. Khan had expected a swing, and the straight jab aimed at his chest took him by surprise. Even with his reflexes, he barely managed to deflect the jab, his claws clicking against the hard steel of the baton. The other man didn't drop the weapon. Instead, he pulled it back and brought it down on Khan's hand. The pain shot all the way from his hand up to his elbow, and Khan roared again. He made a fist and drove it into the other man's face as hard as he could. Baton Guy's head rocked back and smacked into the door frame of the rental car, and he went down hard and dropped to the ground with a muffled thudding sound. His baton dropped from his hand and clattered away on the concrete.

Khan sensed the blow aimed at him from behind and ducked out of the way just in time. Tree Guy's arm barely missed the top of his head, whistling by so close that it ruffled his hair. Then the swing landed against

the upper frame of the car door and crunched into it hard enough to rock the vehicle on its suspension and dent the roof in by half a foot.

Tackling Tree Guy was only marginally less futile than swiping at him. Khan went low and put all his bodyweight into the move, three hundred pounds of enhanced feline strength, but he only managed to rock him back on his heels. Tree Guy's right arm came down, and Khan aborted his tackling attempt and rolled out of the way to avoid getting his spine pulverized. The last goon still standing decided to join the fray. He came around the back of the attackers' car and closed in on Khan.

"He is stronger than you. You will not beat him," the goon said in heavily accented English. Khan saw that he was holding a knife.

"Don't have to beat him," Khan snarled. "Just you."

Tree Guy was almost upon him again, so Khan advanced against the last goon, who widened his stance a little and planted his feet. The utter lack of fear or concern from these men was a little unnerving. At home, nine out of ten bush league crooks would turn tail and run at the sight of his claws and teeth, and these guys stood their ground against him in a hand-to-hand melee, armed with nothing but blades and impact weapons so far. They had to be supremely stupid or very sure of themselves.

With the blade in the game, Khan felt free to bring his own cutlery into play. The goon feigned a jab with his left, and Khan obliged the ruse by raising his tiger arm to protect his face. When the man's other hand flashed forward to plant the blade between his ribs, Khan brought his arm back down in a short and swift arc that was perfectly timed. The knife bounced to the ground, along with two or three of the goon's fingers, and the blow forced him to one knee.

Nearby, the sound of distant police sirens reached Khan's ears. He allowed himself a small grin. Another minute, and the German cops would be all over this parking garage.

Two rock-hard, unyielding hands grabbed him by the fabric of his jacket collar and the waistband of his slacks. He flung the elbow of his good arm backward in an arc and smashed it into Tree Guy's head, but to no effect. His feet left the ground as Tree Guy lifted him up. Khan felt like a kitten someone was shaking by the scruff. Tree Guy lifted him over his head seemingly without effort. Then Khan was airborne. He tumbled in midair, trying to roll around to land on his feet, but the boost he had just gotten was so violently forceful and sudden that even his cat reflexes

failed him this time. He sailed over a long row of cars and smashed into the side of a minivan, and the impact knocked all the breath out of him.

When he came to a rest on the glass-strewn garage deck, all his body's warning lights seemed to be going off in his brain at once. He rasped a cough and tasted blood. The car alarms and the police sirens were still blaring, but everything sounded distant now, weak and faded, as if he had stuffed his ears with cotton balls. He tried to draw in a deep breath and muster the will to get up again, but the excruciating pain shooting through his chest made him abandon that impulse. People were shouting somewhere nearby, but he couldn't make out the words. Somewhere in the noise, Khan thought he heard Natalie's voice. Then there was the sound of slamming car doors and squealing tires. He tried to will himself to get to his feet, but his body refused to obey. When darkness finally washed over his consciousness, it felt almost comforting.

★ ★ ★

Khan woke up to the scent of alcohol and the sharp pain of something piercing the skin of his left arm. He tried to jerk the arm away from the source of the pain, but found that he couldn't move it. When he opened his eyes, he saw that he was strapped down on a gurney, and a medic in an orange uniform was trying to insert a needle into his arm. The medic pulled the needle back when he saw Khan move and said something in German.

"Don't speak the language," Khan mumbled. His arm still hurt like hell, but it no longer felt like it had been worked over with a sledgehammer. He hadn't lost consciousness since he had been sick with the effects of the virus when his card turned.

"Don't move," the medic replied in English. "You have broken bones and a head injury. Your spine may be injured too."

Khan flexed his leg muscles against the pressure of the restraining straps. The buckles creaked under the force.

"Nothing wrong with my spine. Arm's gonna be fine in a few hours too. Save your meds."

"But you are badly injured. You may die without treatment."

"I'm not dead," Khan said. "That means I'll be good as new tomorrow morning. Now take that needle away and unbuckle these straps before I

tear them to shit and you have to buy new ones."

The medic looked from Khan to someone else nearby and rattled off a few words in rapid-fire German. A moment later, a police officer walked up to them and looked down at Khan.

"You wish to decline treatment? We can not be held responsible if you do."

"I'll be fine. I'm a fast healer."

The policeman exchanged a few words with the medic, who proceeded to unbuckle the gurney straps. Khan sat up and swung his legs over the edge to test them. Everything hurt, but nothing seemed broken below the waist. He put some weight on his feet and stood up with a grunt. The policeman and the medic took an involuntary step back as Khan unfolded himself to his full six foot three. He looked around to see that the parking deck was lousy with cops. There were at least a dozen of them, and several blue-and-silver police cars were clogging up the passageways of the deck and the nearby ramp, blue emergency lights flashing and radios squawking. The rental SUV stood alone and abandoned, its side dented in from the collision. The car that had rammed them was nowhere to be seen. Khan walked over to the SUV with slow and careful steps. It felt like someone had rubbed down his legs with broken glass, but he had gotten hurt in enough fights to know that he was already on the mend. The medic began to gather his supplies, but the police officer followed him, staying three steps behind.

"There were four people in this car. Two women and two men. Where are they?"

"There were two men and a woman in the car when we arrived. They have been taken to the hospital already."

Khan didn't have to ask which member of Natalie's entourage was missing.

"You're looking for a dark blue luxury sedan with front damage," he said. "I didn't see the brand because the front end was already in my passenger door by the time I saw the car. They kidnapped my client. Natalie Scuderi."

"You will have to come with us to explain what happened and answer some questions."

"Am I under arrest?" Khan asked.

"Not yet," the officer said. He looked over to his colleagues, and Khan saw that he was nervously fingering his duty belt in the vicinity of his holstered pistol. "But we must insist."

The last thing Khan wanted to do right now was to play twenty questions. Natalie's trail was getting colder by the minute, and he had no time to waste. But there were lots of German cops in shouting range now, and they all carried guns and wore dour expressions. There was no way to decline the directive without starting to hurt people, and getting arrested for assault on police officers wouldn't do a damn thing to get Natalie back either. He let out an annoyed sigh.

"Lead the way, then," he said.

★ ★ ★

It wasn't an arrest, but the whole affair wasn't just a cordial exchange of information either. As soon as the German cops brought Khan into their police headquarters, a pair of officers in body armor appeared by his side and escorted him to an interview room, submachine guns held loosely by their sides but obviously ready for use. As they walked through the halls of the police station, passing officers glanced at Khan and gave him a wide berth. When they reached the room, Khan's escort had him sit down on one of the chairs in front of the table inside. Then they took positions on either side of the door. Two people in plainclothes walked in and sat down on the other side of the table. Neither offered to shake his hand when they introduced themselves, and they started asking him a barrage of questions.

Half an hour later, Khan started to reconsider his earlier decision to comply without violence. The two cops across the table—he had forgotten their names almost right away—seemed to have a fetish for hearing the same information reiterated in twenty different ways. He was sure they were taking a page out of the police interview playbook, to see if they could catch him in contradictions and poke holes in his story, but Khan grew increasingly irritated.

"And you did not know these people at all?" one of the cops asked. "You had never seen them before since you got to Germany?"

"No."

"What about the person you said was a"—he consulted the notepad in front of him—"joker-ace? The man who looked like his skin was made up of tree bark?"

"No," Khan said. "Trust me, I would know if I had. Bastard picked me up and threw me fifty feet. Haven't met a lot of joker-aces who can do that. Look, I love chatting with you fellas, but you really ought to be out there looking for the people who kidnapped Miss Scuderi. I think you won't much enjoy the media shitstorm that's about to come down on you."

"The criminal police are already investigating," the other cop said. "We have set up a dragnet to look for the car you have described, and for anyone matching the description of Frau Scuderi. But in the meantime, we have to be certain that you are telling the truth."

"Of course I'm telling the fucking truth. What, you think I helped kidnap my own client?"

The cop shrugged and smiled in an apologetic way that seemed entirely insincere.

"I don't know how such things work where you come from, but over here, that would not be unusual. We have many organized crime groups. Germans, Russians, Italians. Chechens, Serbians, Turks. There is a lot of competition. People cross over sometimes. For money or power."

Khan felt the blood rise in his face.

"I've been in this business for ten years. The people I deal with, they go by reputation. Loyalty is everything to them. You betray their trust, you end up on your knees in a junkyard somewhere while they take your fingers off with a fucking pipe cutter. *That's* how such things work where I come from."

He extended his claws a little and drummed them on the table in front of him. They made a tapping sound that seemed very loud in the small room.

"Arrest me and inform the American embassy so they can send someone over. Or get off my ass and let me get back to my job. I have a missing client, and I don't see you people doing jack shit to find her."

The two cops exchanged a few sentences in German. Khan wondered what he'd do if they took him up on his challenge and locked him up. Finally, one of the cops rapidly clicked his pen a few times and dropped it on the notepad in front of him.

"You are not under arrest, Herr Khanna. But you will need to keep yourself available for further interviews. We have asked for assistance from our colleagues at the federal office for special abilities. They are sending someone from Kassel to talk to you."

"Great. Tell them they can find me at the Hotel Adlon. If I'm not out and about."

The two plainclothes officers got up from their chairs, and Khan rose with them.

"You will find that we here in Germany do not like it when people try to bring justice about on their own. Leave the police work to the police."

"No worries," Khan said and flexed his tiger hand slowly. "I'm just going to do some tourist stuff. Sightseeing. Maybe get some souvenirs."

★ ★ ★

They'd handed him his stuff back when they released him, and his phone never stopped buzzing with incoming messages on the entire half-hour taxi ride back to the hotel. In her Rikki persona, Natalie was a big enough deal in the pop culture scene that her violent kidnapping would make front-page news on both sides of the Atlantic. Back home in Chicago, they were seven hours ahead of Berlin time, which meant the news clips reporting on the incident would make the evening broadcasts.

When they were almost back at the hotel, his phone chirped again. This time, it wasn't the chime of a message, but an incoming call. Very few people had his mobile number, and those who did were people who wouldn't react well to being ignored. The caller ID was "unknown," but that wasn't unusual. A lot of his clients were allergic to easy identification. He swiped to accept the call.

"Hello," he said.

"The fuck have you been," Sal Scuderi said, in a voice that was just one or two decibels short of a shout. "I've been trying to get a hold of you for hours. What the hell happened?"

"The German cops had my phone," Khan replied. "Event last night went sideways, and we got jumped in the parking garage when we left the venue."

"They said you were the best in the business. That's why I fucking hired you. To keep shit like this from happening."

"It was three nats and a joker-ace," Khan replied. "They knew what they'd be up against. And they brought just the right guy for the job."

"I don't give a flying fuck if they hired *Mighty Joe Young* for the job. You were supposed to keep her safe. You find my girl and bring her home. If you want to ever get another job in this town, you bring her home and fix what you fucked up."

Khan gritted his teeth. Scuderi was an insurance salesman, not a mob boss, but plenty of people in the Chicago scene relied on his services. Losing the man's daughter on the job would be a fatal black mark on his professional resume. Khan had never lost a client, and he wasn't about to start a habit.

"I'm going to find her," he said. "That was a kidnapping, not a hit. They'll come to someone with a ransom demand. Makes no sense any other way."

"They already did," Scuderi said. "I got a message this morning. They want thirty million. I have forty-eight hours to come up with the cash."

"Did you take it to the Feds?"

"Fuck the Feds. The message said they'll cut her up into small pieces if I involve the cops. Whatever you do, don't fucking tell the Germans anything."

"I may have to," Khan said. "Not sure I can do this by myself. This isn't Chicago. I don't know the local players."

"Then find someone who does," Scuderi said. "You've worked for enough high rollers around here. Gotta be some favors you can call in. Just don't run your mouth. If they kill my little girl, you're going to be in a world of shit."

"I'll get her back. They won't … oh, fuck *me*." The car had slowed down and taken a turn into the driveway of the hotel, and Khan looked up to see a throng of people under the awning of the entrance, most wielding cameras or microphones.

"What is it?"

"I just got to the hotel. Fucking reporters everywhere. I'll call you back as soon as I can."

Khan ended the call, glad for an excuse to exit the conversation. If he wanted to find Natalie and determine who snatched her, he would need a clear head and no distractions.

The throng of reporters streamed around him as soon as he stepped out of the taxi. A dozen different people stuck microphones in his direction and asked him questions in both German and English. He tried to ignore them and quickly make his way to the entrance, but he found his way blocked by people and camera lenses. His frustration manifested itself in an unhappy growl deep in his throat, and the path ahead magically cleared enough for him to pick up his stride. The crowd of newspeople moved with him, but nobody tried to block his way again, and they all kept at least an arm's length away.

Natalie's talent agency had rented a huge three-bedroom suite on the top floor of the hotel. Khan half-expected to find the place tossed and ransacked, either by the cops or the people who had taken Natalie, but when he walked in, it looked just the way it had when they left it. He went into his own bedroom and changed out of his suit, which was now in tatters and smelled of medical disinfectant. When he peeled his old clothes off his body, he looked at himself in the mirror. The fight with Tree Guy had left its mark in the shape of a dozen bruises of various sizes and colors, from light red to angry purple. Khan's wild card had given him the gift of rapid regeneration and recovery from injuries, but for some reason the quick healing factor didn't extend to bruises, which took just as long to disappear as before. He stepped into the bathroom and turned on the shower, cranking the temperature adjustment as hot as it would go, then ran the water until the room was filled with steam. The scalding hot water hurt his bruises as if someone was punching him all over again, but the sensation wasn't unwelcome. It kept his anger simmering, which was where he wanted it so he could bring it to a boil quickly.

It felt good to be in a clean suit and smell like himself again. Khan went through his luggage and took stock of the gear he had brought. There were no weapons in his bag, but even if he had brought any, he doubted that anything in his gun safe back home would make a dent in Tree Guy, who had shrugged off slashes from Khan's claws that could have gutted a steer. He remembered the blows the other joker-ace had dished out, and the feeling of getting tossed over several rows of parked cars like a half-eaten bag of chips. This was not a fight he'd be able to win with his claws or teeth, but his brain wasn't serving up any solutions to the problem, and the bag in front of him held no answers either.

Out in the suite, Khan heard the soft click of the main door lock and the voices of Natalie's friends. They stopped their chatter when they saw him emerge from the bedroom. It took him a few seconds to recall the names of the two boys: Travis and Eli. Travis was wearing a large adhesive bandage above his eyebrow.

"You guys all right?" he asked.

"We're okay, man," Eli answered. "They didn't do anything to us. Travis just got cut by some glass from the window. But they took Natalie."

"No shit," Khan said. "Tell me what you saw after they smashed in your window."

Between the three of them, Khan was able to assemble a sketchy picture of what had gone on while he was busy getting the tar whomped out of him by Tree Guy. The attackers had bashed in the rear passenger window, dragged Natalie and her three friends out of the car, and made off only with Natalie, who had struggled against her abductors while they had stuffed her into the back of a second car that had pulled up while Khan was tied up fighting.

"Did they say anything?"

"Not to us," Melissa said. "They were just talking to each other. Just a few words."

"Any idea what language?" Khan asked.

Melissa and the boys shook their heads. He sighed and sat down on the couch next to them. Everything about this shouted *mob hit* to Khan. But why would the foreign mob here in Berlin have any interest in a socialite rich girl from Chicago? Kidnappings were usually high-risk, low-reward schemes thought up by desperate bush league amateurs, not pulled off by professional enforcers.

"I need to find out where they took Natalie," Khan said. "If any of you have any ideas or remember anything else, tell me now. I want to know all the details. Even if you think it's not important."

"Have you tried her phone?" Melissa said.

Khan shook his head.

"That's the first thing they would have taken from her. Unless they're dumber than dirt. Everyone knows you can track a cell phone's location."

"Well, let's see anyway." Melissa pulled out her phone and tapped away at the screen. "We use that friend tracker thing. So we can find each other when we're out together."

Khan watched her mess around with her phone for a few moments. There was virtually no chance the kidnappers would have forgotten to strip Natalie of her phone, but he was fresh out of ideas at the moment, so he decided to humor Melissa. As expected, she let out a disappointed little huff and showed Khan the screen of her phone. It showed a map, and the last location of Natalie's phone was marked with a gray dot. Khan took the phone and zoomed in on the map to see that the spot where her phone had last connected to the data network was the parking garage where they had gotten jumped.

"They turned it off. Or probably smashed it right there," Khan said.

"Hey, I wonder if they got her watch too," Eli said.

"What watch?"

"She bought one of those watches that connect to your phone. So she can track her workouts. You know what I'm talking about."

"I really don't," Khan said. "But go on."

"It's like a computer on your wrist. You can even make calls with it."

"Does it need the phone nearby to work?"

Eli shook his head. "Not the kind she's got."

"Can you track that thing?" Khan asked Melissa. She looked at her phone's screen again and shook her head.

"It's not on here."

"You gotta be the owner," Eli contributed. "Natalie could do it. From her laptop. It's set that way so you can track down your stuff if you lose it."

"Well, she's indisposed," Khan said.

"But her laptop's here," Melissa said. She got up and walked over to the bedroom the girls shared. A moment later, she came back with the laptop Khan had seen Natalie use on the plane. She handed it to Khan, who opened it and put it on the coffee table in front of him. The excitement that had been welling up inside of him died down again when he saw the login screen.

"Fuck. It's locked."

"I know her password," Eli offered. "I set up all her tech stuff for her. Unless she changed it recently."

"Give it a shot," Khan said. He turned the laptop around and slid it in front of Eli, who hunched over the keyboard and started typing away.

"Got it," he said.

"Holy shit." Khan grinned at him. "So you *do* have some useful skills. Now I'm glad I didn't chuck you out of the plane on the way here."

★ ★ ★

The tracking map on the laptop looked like a bigger version of the one on Melissa's phone. Eli logged in, toggled a few settings, and turned the laptop so Khan could see the screen.

"There's her phone," he said. "Same place. And there's her watch. It's gray too. If it was turned on right now, it'd be blue."

The dot that marked the position of Natalie's watch was right in front of a large square building labeled as *Flakturm.*

"What the fuck is a Flakturm," Khan asked. Eli took the question as a directive and did a search, then scrolled through the results.

"Whoa. It's a thing left over from the war. Big concrete tower, for air defense."

"You mean like a bunker?"

"Look." Eli brought up an image. The structure looked square and brutal. The concrete was stained and dirty from decades of weather exposure. There were no windows or other external reference points, but judging by the height of the trees lining the pathways around the building, he guessed the concrete monstrosity was at least six floors high.

"Does it say what's in that thing?"

Eli closed the picture and scrolled through a few more pages.

"It says there's a museum inside now. Some artist commune. And a nightclub. Looks pretty cool, actually."

Something tickled Khan's tiger instincts, and he felt the hair on his neck bristle. Over by one of the windows, there was a soft scraping noise. Khan looked up and saw a hint of movement in the corner of the window, like a fluttering drape. Then it was gone. He heard another sound, the faintest ticking of something hard on metal, this one from above. Their suite was on the top floor, and there was nothing above them but the roof.

Khan got up and walked over to the window. The windows in their suite stretched from floor to ceiling and opened onto a narrow balcony that ran the width of the suite. He made a shushing gesture at Melissa and the boys. Then he opened one of the windows and stepped out onto the balcony. The night air was pleasantly cool and carried thousands of city

smells with it. In front of the hotel, on the other side of Pariser Platz, the columns of the Brandenburg Gate glowed in the darkness, illuminated by dozens of spotlight fixtures.

Khan turned to look up at the edge of the roof and sniffed the air again. There was a presence up there, something bigger than an enterprising raccoon. Something was up there in the darkness, quietly breathing.

The part of the roof above the top floor was a sloping face of green-tinged copper sheeting, topped by a rail. The rail was just at the limit of Khan's vertical leaping range. He flexed his leg muscles a few times and extended his claws. The copper roof slope was almost too smooth for him to get traction, but he managed to get a hand on the rail at the top. He hauled himself up and dropped onto the roof.

The rooftop was flat and lined with rubberized material. Every few dozen feet, Khan saw the dome-shaped bubbles of transparent skylights. There were two small sheds in the middle of the roof that looked like maintenance shacks, and a large tripod antenna was anchored between them. In the darkness above the sheds, Khan saw a shape crouched on an antenna crossbar, twenty feet high.

"Don't make me jump up there and pluck you off that thing," he growled.

"Good evening, Herr Khan," the shape said, in a dry and reedy voice that put the hairs on the back of Khan's neck on edge again.

"So you know who I am. Not too hard to figure out, I guess."

"We know who you are. We have been keeping an eye on you ever since you entered the country."

"Who's *we?*"

He walked closer to the base of the antenna to decrease the range between himself and the stranger, to improve his chances at making good on his threat and snatching him out of the air if needed. The rooftop visitor shrugged. A pair of leathery wings unfolded and blotted out the stars of the night sky behind him. He stepped off his perch and landed in front of Khan silently, with just a single flap of those enormous wings.

Close up, he made Khan's hairs stand up even more. He was clearly a joker-ace. His body was squat and short, and covered with coarse black hair except for his wings, which looked like leather sails. Even his eyes were uniformly black, and when he opened his mouth to speak again, Khan

saw that his teeth were pointed and very white, the only part of his body that wasn't the color of spilled ink at midnight.

"I have several colleagues in the area, and they would not like it if you tried to hurt me," the stranger said.

"I won't pick a fight if you don't," Khan replied. "Again—who the fuck is *we?*"

"*We* are with BDBF," the visitor said. "*Bundesamt für Besondere Fähigkeiten.* The federal office for special abilities. What you at home call S.C.A.R.E."

★ ★ ★

"I just flew in from Kassel, and boy, are my arms tired," Khan said with a chuckle. The man in front of him either didn't get the joke or wasn't in a jovial mood, because he merely cocked his head quizzically.

"My name is Fledermaus," he said. "And five thousand meters above us, my colleague Überschall is keeping an eye on things from above. Rest assured that he can be here very quickly."

"Fledermaus," Khan repeated. "And Überschall. Sounds like the title for a sitcom."

"I am not familiar with that word."

"Never mind. They said you'd come. Are you here to ask me questions about my client's kidnapping, too?"

"You claim there was an enhanced individual involved. So far, the only such person confirmed to be involved was you. That is why the Berlin police asked us to assist."

"There *was* someone else," Khan said. "Three nats—regular people. And one wild card. Big, strong guy, looked like a tree. Bark for skin and everything. He held me off while the nats grabbed my client."

"Looked like a tree," Fledermaus repeated.

"Yes, a tree. Rock-hard skin. And strong as shit. He threw me over a whole row of parked cars. Couldn't make a scratch in him, not even with these."

He held out his tiger hand and extended his claws, three inches of curved black keratin knives glistening in the moonlight, then retracted them again so Fledermaus wouldn't feel threatened.

"If that is true, it would be very interesting," Fledermaus said.

"So you know the guy?"

"I have heard of him, yes. That is our main task at BDBF. To keep our eyes on people such as him. And you. But the man you speak of, he is not known to be in Germany."

"Well, unless I got beaten up by his twin brother, I'd say you're wrong. Who is he?"

"We do not know where he comes from. Some sources say he is from Ukraine. We know he works as hired muscle for many groups. Sometimes for the Chechens or the Serbians, but mostly for the Georgian mafia. They call him Mukha. The Georgian word for 'oak.'"

"Georgian mob. *Super,*" Khan said. Back home in Chicago, the Georgians were not to be fucked with. They were not as numerous as the Russians or the long-established Polish mafia, but they had a reputation for stomach-churning violence.

"You think the Georgians took your client?"

"I'm not sure. They were Eastern European, though. I've been around that kind long enough."

"I do not think I have to warn you about these people, then," Fledermaus said. "They have no respect for the local authorities, and they are very violent. If you go after them, the police may not be able to protect you."

"The police sure weren't any help in that parking garage," Khan said. He hesitated, then decided to throw caution to the wind. Time was running short, and he couldn't shop around for allies. "Do you know anything about a local place called the Flakturm? Big, ugly concrete tower in the Tiergarten park."

Fledermaus cocked his head a little. His ears were large and pointy, with tufts of coarse black hair sprouting from the tips.

"I know of it, yes. A relic of the war. They had three of them in the city. I think this one is the only one left. Apparently it was too large to blow up. The walls are very thick."

"They say there's a museum in this one now. And a nightclub. Know anything about that?"

Fledermaus shook his head.

"I'm afraid not. I am not from Berlin, and I do not frequent nightclubs. The noise, you see." He flashed an awkward-looking smile. "But I do know that the criminal element often uses legal places such as this to

cleanse the money from their other activities. The Italians use restaurants. The Arab clans have their tobacco lounges. And the Russians and Georgians—"

"Bars and clubs and gambling," Khan finished. "Same as back home."

"BDBF can only intervene in law enforcement matters if we are asked to do so by the local authorities," Fledermaus said. "I cannot help you with whatever it is you are planning to do. You are in our area of responsibility. If you commit any offenses, we will not need a request from the police to deal with you."

"That guy who looks like a tree. Mukha. You must have a file on him. Any idea if he has any weaknesses? Unofficially speaking, I mean. Since you know for sure he's not even in the country right now."

Fledermaus considered Khan's question for a moment. "Officially, I cannot help you, as I said." He smiled again in his awkward way. His teeth were very bright in the darkness. "*Unofficially,* I can point out that he is very much like a tree. You cannot take down a tree with claws and fists. But there are other ways."

Fledermaus shuffled to the edge of the roof and put a hand on the railing. In the light coming from the square and the Brandenburg Gate beyond, Khan saw that he was wearing some sort of high-tech ballistic armor, cut out low on the sides to make space for his enormous wings. He swung himself over the rail and looked back at Khan. "Just ask yourself, Herr Khan. If *you* were a tree, what would be your worst fear in life?"

Fledermaus nodded a curt goodbye and jumped off the roof. Khan walked over to the railing to watch the German joker-ace glide over the Pariser Platz and soar through the space between the central columns of the Brandenburg Gate before disappearing in the darkness of the park beyond.

"Squirrel shit," Khan said into the silence.

★ ★ ★

The Flakturm was a foreign presence in the calm tranquility of the Tiergarten. Somehow, even the peaceful trees and meadows that surrounded it didn't mellow its massiveness or the complete lack of aesthetic concern evident in its architecture. As Khan walked toward it, he felt something like existential dread at the sight of the thing. Near the top

of the tower, four round gun platforms jutted out at the corners like the leaves of a giant concrete clover leaf. It was a structure built for war, and it looked out of place here in this park in the middle of a modern, cosmopolitan city. Khan walked around it twice at a distance to get an idea of the layout, and it struck him that nobody had ever tried to pretty up that ugly block of concrete, as if they knew all these years that no coat of paint or architectural surgery could make it look inviting.

Whenever he wanted to get into a place without an invitation, Khan would scale the fire escapes and get in from the roof, or pop open a window on the way. But this place had no windows, no fire escapes, and the roof was more than a hundred feet above ground, atop sheer concrete sides without handholds or other features. There were thin concrete beams jutting out of the walls near the gun platforms, but even those were much too high for him to reach. The Flakturm truly was a fortress by design, with only one obvious way in and out. Khan watched from a distance as late-night revelers arrived and walked into the entrance vestibule, and others left and noisily made their way to the distant parking lot at the edge of the Tiergarten. Every time the front door opened, he heard a smattering of thumping electronic music. He spent half an hour looking for alternative entry points before deciding to throw plan B out the window. On the eastern horizon, the colors of the sky had started to shift from black to dark blue and purple. The best time to bust into a place was this exact time of the night, when everyone was tired and winding down, and reflexes and reaction times were at their worst.

I hope you're really in there, kid, Khan thought as he cut across the lawn and briskly walked toward the entrance vestibule.

The entrance was a set of double doors, one each on the inner and outer edges of the exterior wall. He pushed open the outer door and walked inside, past a group of club-goers on the way out. The wall of the Flakturm was at least ten feet thick, and when he walked through the second set of doors and into the foyer, the temperature dropped by a dozen degrees. He pulled out his phone to confirm a hunch and saw that his reception had dropped to nothing. No radio signal would make it through that much concrete, which was why Natalie's watch had dropped off the map as soon as they had brought her inside.

As Eli had learned online, it was a multiuse building now. The interior looked far more welcoming than the outside. The foyer was two floors

high and looked like a boutique computer store, all white wood and tasteful accent lighting. There was a broad staircase leading up to what looked like an art installation, and down to a pair of glass doors that had a pair of broad-shouldered guys standing in front of it. Beyond the glass doors, Khan saw the reflections of flashing strobes and neon lights. On the right side of the foyer, there was a bar that had throngs of people standing in it, chatting and swilling drinks. A few of the patrons looked over at him, and some nudged their friends to draw their attention to him, but the stares were curious, not concerned. Berliners seemed used to seeing weird and unusual things.

He walked down the steps to the club. The two bouncers looked like they were unsure how to deal with him. One of them fidgeted with his lapels while the other put a hand under the jacket of his dark suit and tried to look casual about it.

"You can try to draw whatever the fuck that is," Khan said when he had reached the door. "Or you can let me in there without losing a hand."

The second bouncer removed his hand from his waistline and held it up in a placating gesture. Khan saw that he had been reaching for a pepper spray dispenser on his belt. The first bouncer opened the door for him.

"Just looking for someone," Khan said. "I won't be long."

Even at this hour, the club was packed. Dozens of people were gyrating to thumping electronic music, and dozens more were watching from the edge of the floor or hanging out in the seating groups tucked into alcoves along the periphery of the room. The air smelled like weed, spilled booze, and sweat, and the room was radiating warmth, the collective body heat of all the late-night revelers dancing and drinking and groping each other in the corners. It was everything he hated about nightclubs, turned up to maximum intensity. As Khan skirted the edge of the dance floor and walked deeper into the bowels of the club, a smoke machine hissed and spewed a stream of thick fog onto the dance floor. The cloud temporarily displaced all the awful smells of the place, and it cut visibility in the vicinity of the dance floor to three feet or less. He went to the left until he found the row of seating alcoves on that side of the room, and started to map out the periphery of the place. There had to be other exits.

It took him five minutes to find all the doors in the room. Most of them were fire exits that led to dirty concrete stairwells where people were

making out or smoking joints. One was behind the bar, and Khan could see people going in and out every few seconds, carrying armfuls of glasses and empty bottles. There was only one door that was locked, secured with a keypad. He concluded that if they were hiding anything in this place, it was behind that door.

Khan looked around to see if anyone was paying attention, but saw nothing except for club patrons lost in their own worlds. If the bouncers had called for backup, it hadn't found him yet. He waited until the fog machine blasted another thick cloud of water vapor onto the dance floor. Then he turned toward the door and wrapped his tiger hand around the knob.

The door was reinforced with steel liners, but Khan could max out the weight plates on the gym machines with just his feline arm, and he strained only for a moment before he wrenched the lock out of the frame with a dull crack. The handle came off in his hand, and he dropped it onto the ground and kicked it aside. Beyond the door, there was a long, dimly lit hallway that had more doors leading off to the left and right. He counted them: four left, four right. Then he stepped into the hallway on light feet and closed the access door behind him.

The first door to the right was a janitorial closet, shelves of cleaning materials and a bunch of mops and buckets. The first door to the left was an office, a desk with a computer screen and a filthy-looking keyboard, an ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts, and shelves with stuffed binders and untidy stacks of papers. Khan moved on to the second set of doors. Natalie wore a particular perfume, something that smelled like waving a freshly cut lilac over a warm blueberry pie, and he hoped that the whiffs of it he caught in the stale air of the hallway were not just his wishful imagination. He reached for the handle of the second door to the right and yanked it open.

Inside, three men sat around a table littered with ashtrays and bottles. There was a TV set in a corner of the room that was showing a news report. The air was thick with the smell of old cigarette smoke and body odor. One of the men turned around to see who was standing in the door, and his eyes widened. Then he muttered a curse, which got the attention of the other two.

"Shit," Khan said.

For just a moment, the space between them practically hummed with the anticipation of the impending violence. It was that split second before a fight Khan knew all too well, the moment that felt like everyone was holding their breath before committing to action. There was no way to talk these men down, and if he hesitated, he'd give them an edge. He flicked out his claws just as the first guy grabbed a bottle off the table and threw it at him. Khan jerked his head to the side, and the bottle sailed past him and smashed against the wall of the hallway behind him.

There was no grace to the fight. The room was only ten feet square and had a table and a bunch of chairs in it, and there was no way for anyone to execute any fancy maneuvers. It was like an attempted assassination in a phone booth. Two of the men pulled knives and the third swung his fist at Khan, and only his reflexes kept him from getting shanked on the spot. He recoiled from one knife and slashed at the hand holding it, then drove his fist into the face of the second knife's wielder. The bare-handed one of the group was the only one to connect with Khan. His fist cracked into Khan's eyebrow on the human side of his face, and Khan saw a burst of stars exploding in his field of view. He roared, and in the confines of the room, the sound was so loud that it made the ashtrays on the table bounce and clatter.

★ ★ ★

One of the knives was on the floor now, but the other was still seeking in play, its owner slashing with quick and practiced moves. Khan jerked away from the edge of the blade and bodychecked the bare-handed fighter into the TV shelf in the process, and the man went down along with the screen as the shelving collapsed. The knife made another arc and stabbed into Khan's shoulder blade, then skidded off the bone to carve open a few inches of his tiger fur. Khan lashed out and raked all five claws across the remaining knife wielder's face and neck. He leapt back, bounced off the doorframe behind him, and collapsed in the hallway with a wet gurgling sound. The smell of blood was suddenly thick in the air.

The guy who had held the other knife was doubled over and shouting incoherently. Khan saw that his swipe at the knife hand had taken the hand off at the wrist. He picked the man up and hurled him against the concrete wall, then did it again. After the second impact against the rough concrete,

his opponent crumpled to the floor and stopped his pained shouting. Maybe ten seconds had passed since Khan had turned the door handle, but he was panting for breath, and his heart was pounding like he had just run a hundred-yard dash. Blood was running down from a gash in his right eyebrow and clouding his vision, and he used the sleeve of his sport coat to wipe it out of his eye.

The man in the hallway was a mess. Khan had opened him up along the whole length of his collarbone. The puddle of blood spreading out from him was already pooling from one side of the hallway to the other. Khan wondered about the depth of the shit he was likely to find himself in over killing someone on foreign soil, even in self-defense. But he'd have to be around for them to charge him, and that was a shaky proposition at the moment. All it took was another room of mobsters, but ones who were packing guns instead of blades. He had come here to find Natalie, though, so Khan steeled himself and went back to opening doors.

Two of the remaining rooms were stockrooms, haphazardly loaded from floor to ceiling with boxes and crates of supplies, and thankfully devoid of armed men. Khan went to the end of the hallway, where the last two locked rooms waited. He hadn't smelled the scent of Natalie's perfume again, and for a moment, a sort of deep, dark fear gripped his mind as he convinced himself that he'd find nothing, and he would be stamping license plates in a German prison for absolutely nothing in the end.

Then his heart skipped two beats when he saw that the last door on the right had a security keypad next to the handle, just like the entry door had.

He grabbed the door handle, wrenched it down, and threw himself against the door with all the force he could muster. It popped out of the frame, spraying bits of the lock, and swung inward with the grinding sound of steel against concrete as the bottom edge of the door, now crooked in its hinges, dragged across the floor and left a chalky white scrape mark.

★ ★ ★

Natalie was lying on her side on a field cot on the far side of the room. There was a little table and a folding chair, and a chemical toilet in one corner. She didn't wear a gag like a kidnapping victim in a movie. They had tied her wrists and ankles to the frame of the cot with several loops of

commercial plastic ties. She had her back to him, but turned her head at the sound of the door busting open. He could tell that she couldn't turn far enough to make out who had just entered the room.

"Motherfuckers," Khan growled. He peeked into the hallway to make sure he wasn't about to get jumped by reinforcements. Then he rushed over to Natalie's cot.

"Are you okay, kid?"

He saw recognition in her eyes, and she murmured something, but it was slurred gibberish. Her eyes were glazed over and she looked like she was having a hard time focusing. He cursed again. They hadn't bothered with a gag because they had sedated the shit out of her to keep her quiet.

"Let's get you out of this place."

He used one of his claws to snip through the plastic ties, carefully stripping them off her wrists and tossing them to the ground one by one. When he was finished, he put his tiger arm behind her shoulders and helped her to a sitting position.

"Soft," she mumbled. "'S like you're a cat."

"Half right," he said. "Can you walk?"

She swung her legs over the edge of the cot and tried to get to her feet, then stumbled sideways almost immediately. Khan caught her before she could fall, then raised her and draped his arm across her shoulder again. "This is going to be a mess," he said. "We have to go, kiddo. Can't call the cops from in here. Gotta get outside. Come on."

He practically carried her up the hallway back to the entrance to the main part of the nightclub. She was holding on to him, but clearly out of it, and the toes of her white linen shoes touched the ground maybe three times in the entire awkward twenty-meter shuffle to the door.

Almost there, Khan told himself. *Across the dance floor, out the main doors, call the cops once we're outside.*

In the nightclub, the thumping music was still churning up the crowd. The flashing lights of the dance floor illumination painted the fog from the machine in bright streaks of red, green, and blue. He went for the most direct route to the exit, straight across the dance floor, bumping people out of the way left and right.

In the space between the dance floor and the exit door, a familiar shape was making its way through the fog toward him: thick arms and legs, short hair on a square-looking head, beady eyes in a face that looked

like it was hewn out of a petrified tree trunk. Mukha moved without hurry, but Khan knew that he would not be able to get past the bastard and through those doors, not with Natalie to safeguard.

He lowered Natalie until she was standing on her own very unsteady feet. Then he drew a deep breath and roared at Tree Guy, the loudest roar he had ever squeezed from his lungs and vocal cords. In the confines of the Flakturm, it sounded like a slowly imploding building.

That got the attention of the crowd. They retreated from his vicinity like the tide pulling away from a shoreline at the onset of ebb. Mukha didn't seem impressed, however. He kept up his infuriatingly unhurried gait, advancing without any hint of hesitation: *stomp, stomp, stomp.*

When Mukha was ten feet away, Khan reached into his sport coat and brought out the bottle he had prepared in the hotel room's bathroom before he had set out for the Flakturm. It held a mixture of gasoline, procured by Eli at a nearby service station, and high-proof alcohol, all mixed in with hand soap and a few scoops of laundry detergent. In his youth, back when Khan was still scrawny Samir Khanna, he had experimented with many flammable and explosive substances with his friends, and he hoped that he had remembered the ratios for this particular cocktail correctly. He granted himself the luxury of an extra second to aim. Then he hurled the bottle straight at Mukha.

The cocktail hit the joker-ace right in the middle of his chest. The bottle shattered, and the flammable liquid inside sprayed, and left globs and droplets on the floor in a wide arc in front of Mukha. Most of it, Khan was happy to see, remained on Mukha's body, soaking the clothes he had draped over his bulky frame. Khan reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the road flares he had brought along. He ignited it with a quick swipe on the leg of his pants. Mukha hesitated, then stopped and looked down at the sticky goop that was covering the front of his torso.

"*Step aside,*" Khan shouted in Polish, the only Slavic language he knew. He had no idea whether Georgian had any similarities to his mother's native tongue, but he guessed that Mukha spoke Russian, and maybe he knew some other language that was similar enough to Polish to get the gist. Mukha raised his head again and looked at Khan with an unreadable expression.

"Step aside," Khan repeated, and waved the road flare for emphasis. "Or I swear I will burn you down along with this shithole. I bet you'll stay

on fire for days."

Mukha's face showed no indication that he comprehended the threat, but Khan guessed the smell of gasoline and the lit flare in his hand conveyed the message clearly enough even if this guy didn't understand a fucking word of Polish after all, because a few heartbeats later, he raised his hands slowly to chest height and walked back half a dozen steps. Khan loaded up Natalie again and headed toward the exit, road flare extended toward Mukha.

We may make it out of here alive after all, he thought. But the brief glimmer of triumph he felt was extinguished a moment later, when the front door opened and four broad-shouldered guys with pissed-off expressions hurried through. They spotted Khan and Natalie, and one of them shouted something at his companions. Then he pulled out a handgun and held it low as he was advancing.

"Shit," Khan said.

He tossed the road flare in Mukha's general direction, not aiming to hit the guy but not particularly concerned whether he did. Then he scooped up Natalie and carried her over to the nearest emergency exit he had spotted earlier. He kicked the door open at a run and catapulted two of the stoners behind it into the staircase. A few people were hanging out on the stairs, and Khan barged through them, ignoring their yelled protests as he knocked them aside. He took four and five steps at once, up onto the next landing, and then up the next staircase. Below him, the door banged open again. He peered over the railing to see the four broad-shouldered goons huffing up the first set of stairs. Behind them, Mukha filled out the doorframe and followed the goons with heavy steps that kicked up cigarette butts and concrete dust. One of the armed goons looked up and spotted Khan. He raised his gun and cranked off a shot. Khan flinched back and heard the bullet smack into the concrete somewhere above his head. For the first time since he had walked through the front doors of the Flakturm, the thought came to him that he could die in here. Too many bad guys, a joker-ace who couldn't be beaten in a stand-up fight, no weapons, no allies, and now nowhere to go.

Make it up to the roof, he told himself. *Take it from there. At least the phone will work again up top.*

He raced up the stairs and the landings. Natalie's weight wouldn't have slowed him down much even under normal circumstances, and with

adrenaline flooding his system, it was like she was barely there. By the time he got to the top landing on the sixth floor, their pursuers were only halfway up the stairwell.

A steel door with large rust stains marked the end of the escape path. Khan put down Natalie and threw himself against it. It took several attempts to dislodge the rusty piece of shit from the frame, but on the fourth body blow, it popped open with a sharp metallic squeal.

★ ★ ★

Outside, the night air was warm and humid. The stairwell door opened onto one of the circular gun platforms Khan had seen jutting from the top corners of the tower. The guns were gone, of course, and nothing but rust-stained concrete remained where the gun pits used to be. Khan could tell that there used to be concrete catwalks connecting the gun platforms, but someone had demolished large chunks of them, and there was nothing left to get them safely across to the next platform. He had run into a dead end, and the only way out was a hundred-foot drop they wouldn't survive. The gun platform had a waist-high concrete balustrade, and he lowered Natalie in front of it so she wouldn't fall off the roof, and away from the door so gunfire wouldn't hit her by accident.

Behind him, the pursuers were almost at the top of the staircase. If he wanted to hold them off, he'd have to fight them while they were trying to make it through the door, not when they had space to spread out and hit him from several directions.

"Call the cops," Khan told Natalie. He hoped that she was awake enough to understand what he was saying. "One-one-zero."

He handed her his phone and turned toward the door. Then he took off his sport coat to free up his range of movement, unsheathed the claws on his tiger hand, and roared a challenge at the unseen pursuers who were just now making their way onto the top staircase landing.

They didn't do him the favor of coming through the door single file and letting him pick them off one by one. Instead, the goon with the pistol stuck his head around the corner of the staircase and aimed his gun at the doorway. Khan leapt sideways as the shot rang out, losing sight of the top landing.

"Come out and let's settle this shit," he yelled through the doorway. The reply came in Georgian, and it didn't sound like they agreed with his proposal. He glanced back at Natalie, who was still looking like she had just woken up from a deep sleep.

For the next minute or two, they were at an impasse. It was a true Mexican standoff. Every time Khan stuck his head around the corner, the mobster with the gun would fire a round in his direction. He couldn't rush them without catching a bullet or two, and they couldn't come out to finish him off without getting cut to ribbons. But time was working against Khan, because he knew that with every passing moment, Mukha made his way farther up the stairs. And there was nothing he could do about it, because he had gotten them stuck in a dead-end kill trap like a fucking amateur.

Khan could smell and hear Mukha as he lumbered up onto the top landing and toward the door. He reeked of gasoline-and-soap mix, and his footsteps echoed in the staircase. Khan bared his teeth and growled. Then he backed up to the low balustrade where Natalie was still hunched and took a running start toward the door just as Mukha filled out the doorframe with his bulk. Khan put all his weight and force into a flying leap, three hundred pounds of pissed-off ballistic feline, thousands of foot-pounds of energy, and slammed his feet right into the middle of Mukha's chest.

It felt like trying to dropkick the front of a speeding truck. The shock of the impact traveled from Khan's feet to the top of his skull. He bounced off Mukha's chest and careened into the doorframe, then back out onto the gun platform, where he landed flat on his back. He turned his head to see that Mukha was on his back as well, lying in a cloud of dust a few feet inside the staircase landing.

Mukha sat up, slowly shook his head once, and started to get to his feet.

"Come *on,*" Khan groaned. "What does it fucking *take*."

He fished for another road flare, but his hands couldn't find a pocket, and he remembered that he had just discarded his coat. It was on the ground by the edge of the platform, fifteen feet away. Khan stood on aching legs and staggered over to the coat, but it was too late. Mukha was already at the door again, and behind him, three mobsters brought up the rear. They followed Mukha onto the platform and fanned out behind him. One of them aimed his gun at Khan in an infuriatingly casual manner.

He flexed his leg muscles for another jump, even though he knew that he'd never take down all three men in time, not even if they didn't have the fucking Mukha as a shield.

Sorry, kiddo, he thought. *I fucked this one up for both of us.*

In the cloudless early morning sky above the Flakturm, a thunderclap boomed. It seemed to come from everywhere at once, and it was so loud that it made Khan's teeth rattle. He felt the impact of something heavy landing on the gun platform behind him. Khan turned his head to see a man in a military-type flight suit straighten himself out as if he had just landed a mildly challenging acrobatic routine. The newcomer was wearing a helmet with a gold-tinted visor that made him look a bit like a robot. The helmet was white, and it bore a call sign written onto the side with stick-on vinyl lettering: ÜBERSCHALL.

For a heartbeat, time seemed to be frozen.

Then the mobster with the gun raised his arm and moved the muzzle of his weapon from Khan over to the newcomer.

The guy in the flight suit clapped his hands and pushed them outward in a shoving motion. There was another thunderclap, this one so unbearably loud it made Khan roar in pain. When he looked up again, all three mobsters were on the ground, and Mukha was on his back again, twenty feet inside the staircase hallway beyond the door. This time, he didn't try to get up again.

Khan heard the soft rustling of very large wings behind him. He turned around to see Fledermaus come to a soft and gentle landing on the gun platform right near Natalie, who recoiled at the sight of the white-fanged German joker-ace.

"He's all right," Khan assured her. "He's with the good guys."

The man in the flight suit took off his helmet and ran a gloved hand through his hair, which was ash-blond and cut short in the military fashion. He looked like a runway model, blue eyes over chiseled cheekbones. When he spoke, his diction was perfect, even if his accent was so German that it made him sound like a war movie villain.

"Is everyone all right?"

"Yeah, we're okay," Khan replied. "They pumped Miss Scuderi full of sedatives. She'll need to get to a hospital, and soon."

"This is my colleague," Fledermaus said. "Major Florian Lambert, also called Überschall. Also with BDBF."

"I figured. Very nice of you to drop by," Khan said. "Could have shown up a bit sooner."

"Like I said, we were keeping an eye on things from above. Pardon my late entrance, but my colleague here is a bit faster in the air than I am."

"So you knew where we were all along?"

"We were tracking you since you left the hotel. But we are not allowed to intervene unless we have positive verification of a special abilities target."

"This oaf over there," Khan said, and nodded at the hallway where Mukha was lying. "I told you he was around."

"Unfortunately, our rules of engagement make no allowance for hearsay," Überschall said. He walked over to the goons he had knocked senseless and began to tie up their wrists with plastic restraints he fished out from a pocket on his flight suit. The pistol was on the ground next to one of the mobsters. Überschall picked it up, ejected the magazine, racked the slide to clear the chamber, and fieldstripped the weapon with quick and practiced motions. Then he tossed the parts of the gun into the concrete dust. Khan watched him walk into the staircase vestibule to the spot where Mukha was laid out, still motionless.

"Not that I'm holding a grudge," Khan shouted after him. "But if that fucker moves, stick a match up his ass and let him burn until Christmas."

When the adrenaline subsided, Khan felt utterly drained. He sat down next to Natalie while Überschall played field medic and checked her overall condition. Now that the fight was over, the top of the Flakturm was an oddly peaceful place. The sun had started to rise above the eastern horizon, painting the sky in shades of deep purple and orange. Down below, life continued as if nothing had happened. Khan heard the laughter and chatter from nightclub patrons as they left and made their way through the park, and all around them, the city was starting to stir from its brief slumber.

"What's going to happen to Mister Woody over there?" Khan asked Fledermaus and nodded in the direction of the unconscious Mukha.

"He did not register with the authorities when he entered the country," Fledermaus said. "That is a violation of our law. I imagine we will have strong words with the authorities in his home country. As for him, we have a facility in Butzbach for people with special abilities. I think he will spend a bit of time there as our guest."

"That's a lot of risk they took. Six guys, two cars. And a joker-ace smuggled in. A lot of effort, and no guarantee of a payout. Why would they do that?"

"They told me," Natalie mumbled behind them. Khan and Fledermaus turned around in surprise. She was sitting up with her arms wrapped around her knees, and she merely sounded drunk instead of incoherent.

"They told you what?" Khan asked and sat down next to her.

"They said my father owed them money. Lots of money. Said they weren't letting me go until he paid up." She shuddered a little and hugged her knees tighter. "Told me they'd start cutting off fingers if he didn't. Send 'em back to him in a box, one by one."

Khan looked over at the still unconscious mobsters and suppressed his sudden desire to grab them by the neck and throw them off the gun platform. He didn't much care for her music or her social circle, but Natalie was just a kid, barely out of her teens, and no threat to anyone. He had killed mobsters and other dirtbags in cold blood before, but he'd never lay a hand on an innocent, especially not one so close in age and appearance to his little sister Naya. All of a sudden, he didn't have any more scruples about the mook he had slashed to shreds down in the nightclub's back hallway.

In the distance, sirens cut through the tranquility of the park. Khan looked over the balustrade and saw blue lights flashing. At least a dozen police cars were rushing up the access road from the nearby parking lot. The German police sirens had a two-tone pattern that was somehow even more annoying than the shrill ululating wail of the cop sirens back home: *BEE-DO, BEE-DO*. The blue lights cut through the semi-darkness of the early morning and drew erratic light patterns on the concrete walls of the Flakturm.

"Some things are the same everywhere," Khan said.

"What is that?" Fledermaus asked.

"The cavalry always shows up five minutes too late."

Forty-eight hours and an interminable amount of police interviews later, Khan and Natalie's entourage were in the air again. He had fully expected to join Mukha, the Tree Guy, in whatever high-security facility BDBF had set up for wayward wild cards in Butzbach. But the BDBF guys seemed to have a great deal of pull with Germany's federal police. He'd had to sign a legal paper obliging him to return for a court

appearance if the prosecutor decided to file charges, and then they released him on his word and returned his passport, much to Khan's astonishment.

There was no Top 40 music blaring in the cabin of the Learjet on the way to Keflavik. Natalie and her friends were huddled on the lounge seating and talking while sipping drinks. Khan knew the shell-shocked look in their eyes all too well. He spent most of the flight to Iceland thinking about the kidnapping and of all the ways he screwed up. In reality, he knew that he couldn't have done much better, but he also knew that the open wound on his professional ego would take a much longer time to heal than the bruises on his body.

Half an hour before their descent into Keflavik, he called Sal Scuderi from the onboard phone. "We're on our way back," he said when Sal answered. "Two-hour layover, then four more hours. She'll be home by dinner."

"How's my girl?"

"She's doing all right," Khan said. "Still shaken. It'll take a while."

"I can't even tell you what kinda state I've been in the last few days. You dropped the fucking ball, my friend. I mean, I'm happy you got her back. But you let them take her to begin with."

Khan sighed heavily. "How much do you owe them?"

"The fuck are you talking about?"

"The Georgians. They told Natalie that you owe them a shitload of money. Said they'd send her back in little pieces if you didn't pay up."

"You know that's bullshit tough guy talk. You don't damage the valuable goods."

"Sal," Khan said. "Cut the crap. How much?"

There was silence on the line for a few moments. Then Sal Scuderi let out a shaky breath. It sounded like the remaining air escaping from a flaccid old balloon. "Twenty mil."

"You borrowed *twenty mil* from the Georgian mob? Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"They were about to get it back," Sal said. "It would have been okay. If only…"

"If only what?"

It took a few seconds for Khan to understand, and when he did, he felt his anger welling up again. "You took a policy out on her. A high-risk

one."

"Geez, Khan. The kid has had a policy on her since the day she was born. It's what I *do*. I got a policy on the wife too. And the fucking dog. What kind of asshole do you take me for?"

Khan looked over at Natalie, who was curled up in her seat, looking like someone who needed about two weeks of uninterrupted sleep.

"The kind of asshole who'd try and pay off his debt with his kid's life insurance policy," he said. "I knew you were shit, Sal. I just didn't know you had no fucking soul left."

"You're one to talk. How many people have you killed for guys like me?"

"Too many," Khan conceded.

There was another long pause. Then Sal cleared his throat.

"You have a rep. You get paid well because you do what you're told. You want to see any of your fee, you keep your mouth shut about this. In front of Natalie, or the media, or the cops. You fuck me over, and I'll make sure you never get another job in this town again."

"Don't ever fucking threaten me," Khan said. He could have growled into the phone for emphasis, but right now he was too tired for theatrics. Instead, he just ended the call and turned off his phone.

Across the cabin, Natalie was watching him with concern on her face. He smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring manner, and she returned it.

He got up from his seat in the back of the plane and moved past the entourage to the Learjet's bar. He uncorked the Scotch decanter and poured two fingers' worth of whisky into a glass, then repeated the process. Then he walked over to Natalie and held out one of the glasses.

"Got a minute to talk?"

She looked at him in surprise. Then she nodded and got to her feet.

"Sure. Let's go in the back."

He let her walk ahead. Before he followed, he picked up the remote from the lounge table and turned on the TV.

"Turn it up as loud as you want," he told Melissa and the boys.

On the way to the back, he glanced out of the window. Outside, a steel-blue sky flecked with clouds was meeting a restless ocean, sunshine glittering on waves.

Fuck the fee, he thought, and went to talk to Natalie.

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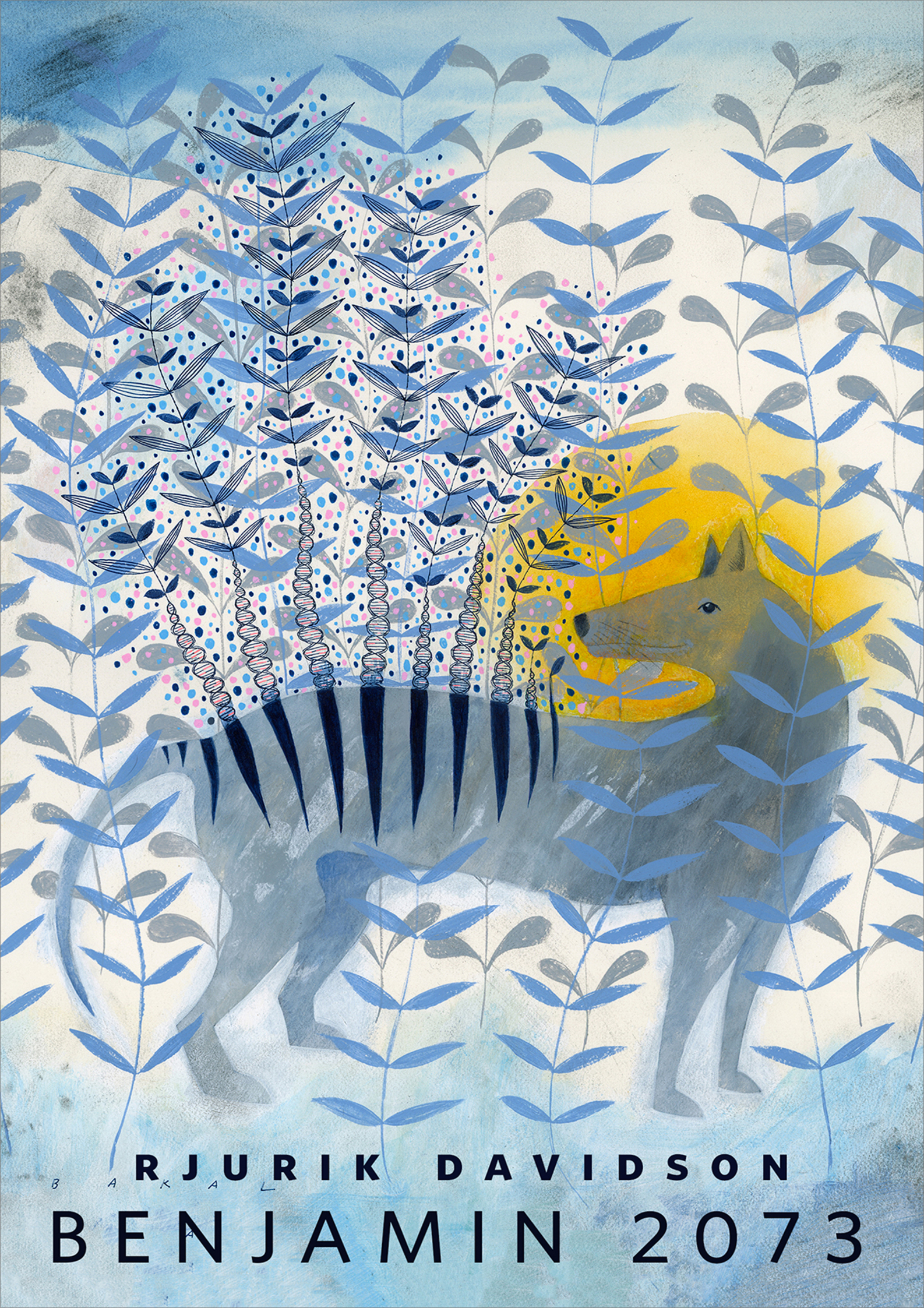
RJURIK DAVIDSON
BENJAMIN 2073

Benjamin 2073

RJURIK DAVIDSON

illustration by

SCOTT BAKAL

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Gently lifting up the side of the tent ... I soon make out in the pitchy darkness two phosphorus-like orbs, which slowly approach.... I can dimly discern by a light shooting up from a few leaves on the almost expiring fire, the long round body of the native wolf or tiger. I get a tighter grip on the handle of my tomahawk, ready to give a warm reception to my night visitor.
—"Oscar" in the Hobart Mercury, *1882*

"Ellie! Ellie, it's Benjamin. She's in the cave. She's giving birth!" Thien shook me gently awake.

"What time is it?" The darkness outside pressed against the window.

"Four a.m."

Half asleep, I slipped into my exoskeleton, which clamped itself around my limbs, the little straps tightening magically, the supports clamping into place. It whirred and clicked me up to the command room. By the time I reached the images on the screen, my mind had kicked into gear.

She lay on her side, her back to the camera. We could see the tiger stripes on her hindquarters, all the way to her long stiff tail, but we couldn't see her face until she raised her head, which might have belonged to a long-nosed dog or dingo. Her breath was coming in ragged gasps.

The other researchers had lost faith even before the funding cuts came. Carla had slouched out with her bags—her final words were: "We've only got one life. I'm not pissing mine into the wind any longer." Samson hadn't even bothered to explain himself. He had just stood on the helipad and shrugged when I looked at him questioningly. One by one they'd dropped like leaves from a dying tree, until only Thien and I remained.

Thien had once said that the Vietnamese had always been stubborn, that's how they'd gained independence all those years ago, and that's why he'd stuck by me. And me? As a child, I'd watched the black-and-white footage of the *first* Benjamin, the last thylacine kept in Beaumaris Zoo, something like a bizarre offspring of a tiger and a dog. I'd been fascinated by the stunning moment when she yawned, her jaw opening to almost 180

degrees. That Benjamin was the last thylacine to die in captivity, on 7 September 1936. Something stuck in my soul about the species.

You should have seen the love we put into building *our* Benjamin: constructed from Tasmanian devil cells and the tiger genome we'd carefully pieced together. Nuclei from those cells were eased into eggs from a devil—a process called nuclear transfer—and the few embryos that survived were implanted in a host. The birth was a tense time, and only one of the tiny pups emerged, crawled her way up to the backward-facing pouch. We laughed when she came out of the pouch for the first time, weeks later; she looked so much like a tiny little curious quoll.

And now here she was, out in the cave we'd built especially for her, giving birth! Her blood pressure was up, as was her heart rate. Normal for an animal in labour. Then there was a sudden jag in her heartbeat.

"Something's wrong," said Thien.

"No!" I said. "No, no, no, no!"

We found her motionless. The implants had already told us, and we'd seen the shadow on the screens, but something within me refused to believe it until I saw her, her paws clenched, her lips pulled back in an awful rictus. She hadn't been giving birth at all. She'd been dying in pain. I kneeled down next to her, put my hand against her cold coat and cried.

Thien put his arm around my shoulders. "It's okay. We'll try again."

"It's *not* fucking okay. Ten fucking years and it's never okay," I snapped at him, and pulled away. He *knew* I didn't like being touched. After that, he was silent for a while, hurt. We stayed there for a long time until he said, "Grimley will want to see us." It was nice of Thien to say "us". He was reminding me that we were in it together.

"You mean he'll want to see *me* and cut our funding," I said. "What will I say to him?"

"You'll do what you always do. You'll convince him otherwise."

★ ★ ★

"We've got the devils to think about, for starters." Prime Bureaucrat Grimley walked on the treadmill behind his standing desk. It was pretty standard issue, and he had problems with a disc in his neck. Probably because his head was so big.

"We're close," I said.

"The thylacine was in bad shape even before it went extinct," he said. "It's been a lost cause since the Australian Museum started at the turn of the century."

Through the window, Hobart lay serenely. A few electric cars cruised between swathes of greenery. We'd restructured cities so they were filled with hanging gardens Babylon would have been proud of. Vertical foliage covered building walls. Creepers and vines hung from climbing walkways and from between solar panels. Watercourses flowed between the streets, a latticework of irrigation and cleanness. There was a calm to the city now, a serenity people over a certain age still had trouble dealing with. My grandmother, who had brought me up, used to say: "It scares me, all this quiet. Where's the creation?"

"It's there," I said. "It's just not *destructive* creation, Ma."

"It's just too damned quiet. Reminds me of horror sims, you know, where everything is perfect and tranquil, just before you realise something's terribly wrong."

"Oh, you exaggerate."

"I do." She smiled—she had missing teeth. You don't see that much anymore either. "It's just past my time. I'm all out of place."

"I'm the one who's out of place." I gestured to the exoskeleton, which left little sores on my knees and elbows that never seemed to heal. But without my splendid contraption, I could no longer walk.

"Oh, you're *perfect*," she said, in the way grandmothers do.

Back in the Rehab Department Office, I forced myself back from the memory to look at Grimley. You'd have thought with a name like that, he'd have stayed out of bureaucracy, but maybe the name had imprinted some deep unconscious drive within him. Bureaucrats. Once we called them politicians, but now politics has dissolved into everyone. Without corporations, we aren't obsessed with growth rates and profit any longer. We all make the policies—"economic democracy," it was called in the beginning. Now it's just called "the policies," usually accompanied by a yawn. We elect those people boring enough to do the admin for our views. They were deliberately and ironically called "bureaucrats," to remind them of just what they were. It didn't seem to make much difference. They still fucked up the work of anyone like me trying to actually fulfil a vision.

"Why did they do it to us, do you think, all those people back then?" I said. "Hunting thylacines. One pound for a tiger carcass! Fucking up the

weather. Didn't they think about us?"

"You sound so naïve when you say shit like that," Grimley said, even though he knew I was thinking aloud. He returned to the subject of Benjamin. "What killed this latest one? Do you even know? Is it the epigenetics, mitochondrial heteroplasmy, or the interspecies conflict? You're making tiger soup in a rusty pot, aren't you."

I looked at him fiercely. "There's another technique we need to try—we can use stem cells to create actual thylacine sperm and eggs. Then we put them together. Bingo! No nuclear transfer. No problem with hybrid cells and all the rest. We started the process but it's been on hold."

"Another technique, another plan, another dream."

"Come on, Grimley, you've cut ninety per cent of our funding. Now it's just Thien and me. It won't affect your public approvals. You'll still get a promotion."

He scowled, as if I'd poked a sore. He *was* angling for professional advancement. The Grimleys of the world are always searching for the next step sideways or upwards—out of rehab to something more central like production or social relations or architecture. A bureaucrat's currency was status.

"What's next?" he said. "Marsupial lions? Giant wombats? Species snuffed out forty thousand years ago? When do we accept that extinction is extinction?" He waved his arms and his suit tightened around his armpits. Bureaucrats are all fashionistas, and style is so sharp and minimalist nowadays. Edges so hard they can cut you.

"The Russians are working on mammoths." Somewhere in the background a lonely foghorn sounded.

Grimley pressed his clenched fists to his eyes in frustration. "They're *Russians*. They've *always* been wild and utopian and impossible. And you, Ellie: You have some strange nostalgia for the past. It's reactionary as fuck. We live forward, not backward. You're needed elsewhere. Be reasonable."

"Being reasonable got us into this mess in the first place. All those people who let this happen were just being reasonable. 'Look after yourself. Have children. Use fossil fuels. That's just how it is. Be fucking reasonable.'"

"You are the most stubborn person I know. You know what your files say about you? Cold, hard, selfish. It's your condition, isn't it? That's

what drives you? It's why I admire you." He looked at my exoskeleton and then looked away, embarrassed he'd brought it up.

A scowl crossed *my* face. We were hitting each other's nerves, just like those doctors with little hammers to my knees and elbows.

He finally said: "You have six months. When you fail, I'm coming out to personally drag you and your shit back. Don't complain when you get assigned to the rehab of coastal grasses. The mosquitos can be a real pain, but you're tough. Now get out of here before I change my mind."

The copter brought me silently up over Mount Wellington and back towards the Centre, to the south and west of Hobart. On the way, I called and Thien's face popped up on the screen.

"Let's use the stem cell process to grow sperm and eggs and then inject the embryos into the surrogate," I said.

★ ★ ★

My grandmother died when I was twenty-one. I was studying in Berlin at the Institute for Genetic Research and had to attend the funeral virtually, stuck in a little black padded room with a helmet on. My parents weren't there, of course. I hadn't seen them in years. They'd dumped me at five years old with my grandmother. You can't take a five-year-old with slowly worsening muscle atrophy on adventures. Polluted water or food ingested by my mother during pregnancy caused what they now call Enviro-Genetic Dystrophy. Damn near everything is laced with heavy metals and plastics and chemicals these days. I think they felt guilty about it all. They were avoiders. So rather than come to Ma's funeral, they were off on one of their drug-fuelled adventures, gulping down bliss before BASE jumping from cliffs or dropping vision before spending a week diving on the reconstructed Great Barrier Reef, which was really just the size of a tiny section of the original, kept in an artificially cooled area. I was glad they hadn't come. After the ceremony, the coffin was lowered down to the ground by automatons. I looked away to where she had been born, to the wide expanse of rolling hills. Immense wind farms stood on the slopes. She'd hated them. Said they ruined the views.

She was the only one who ever called me perfect.

★ ★ ★

"Six months is not enough time." Thien picked at the bland all-purpose pasta I'd cooked up. He could whip up Pakistani goat curries, Japanese gyoza, selections of Brazilian BBQ meats … but he refused to take over all the cooking since (as he explained) it would only encourage my lack of life skills. So every second night we ate the kind of food children like: tasteless amorphous compounds composed mainly of carbohydrates and a few indifferently added proteins to keep us going. Poor Thien used to look at the servings with the eyes of a sad puppy. But still he held out. He was doing me a favour, he said. I had to confront real life, even if only through cooking.

"We'll get as far as we can," I said. "Then we'll show Grimley our progress. We'll convince him to give us more time. He won't be able to resist. We've got logic on our side."

He laughed bitterly. "We don't even know what killed the last one."

"Grimley's right. It's the genetic problems caused by the gene editing of the thylacine."

"Hunting *and* disease *and* the bottleneck effect took them out the first time." The bottleneck effect comes into play when a species population becomes too small. The lack of genetic diversity makes a species vulnerable to environmental changes, diseases or even predators—the worst predator being us, Homo sapiens.

"Damn, you're a downer today, Thien."

He looked through the windows to the forest below, then to his K-pop posters where handsome twenty-somethings posed, perfect skin and hair cut in the same sharp angles that had lasted a century. "Maybe Grimley's right, Ellie. Maybe we should leave this place. Seriously, we could get men in our lives. Get laid for once."

"You get laid plenty when you go back to town. Look at you: You're a gay guy's dream."

"I was thinking more about you, Ellie."

I ignored him. "If we use the stem cell process, we'll avoid most of the genetic problems we've faced."

This was true because we were using actual sperm and eggs from the thylacine, not an egg from the devils. This avoided the "rusty pot" that Grimley had mentioned. The new pot would be as clean as if it were just bought from a shop—if we could get it to work. We'd already started the process a couple years earlier. We developed sperm and eggs through

months of painstaking labour, of Thien moaning and wailing about how he could be back in Hobart, of me gritting my teeth silently. At that time we had students doing volunteer work— they instantly regretted it, since we put them on the most tedious tasks. But we eventually set the process aside since nuclear transfer was quicker, easier and more likely to succeed.

"But if it's the distemper or some other disease that's killing them, we face the same problem as the Panamanian golden frog," said Tien. "Those can't be released because they'll just be wiped out again by the same fungus that got them the first time."

"Come on. I'll learn to cook with spices. I promise." I shoulder-checked him.

He smiled softly. "Okay, let's give it a try. If we don't try, we'll never know. Listen, I'm heading to town this weekend. I'll see you on Monday."

"You're only allowed to go if you come back as dishevelled as you usually do."

"I won't let you down."

"You never do."

★ ★ ★

When I was thirteen I had my first crush. He was called Asim and was already a foot taller than the other boys, with the most magnificent onyx skin and dark soft eyes. I think half the girls at school had a crush on him. We made out awkwardly in the dirt of a park. When he didn't want to be my boyfriend I didn't understand. It took one of the other girls to explain it to me: "Look at him, Ellie. Now look at you."

★ ★ ★

"Just like little jelly beans!" said Tien. Two months had passed since I'd seen Grimley. Now we watched as the three little pups—hairless, blind, almost helpless—disappeared in the Tasmanian devil's pouch.

Returning to the process was as exciting for a scientist as leaping from a plane for a skydiver. We were essentially reminding cells that were no longer able to proliferate that they once could have been anything. They weren't born with defects; they weren't born with one single path to follow.

They were born, in a sense, perfect.

And now, after the pregnancy and birth, the little jelly beans were crawling into the surrogate's pouch. These tiny pups wouldn't be weaned for at least six months. Ten years of work, ten years of countless failures —the malfunction of embryos, the hundreds of clones that had failed to make it to adulthood. Here, with the stem cell technique, we'd created three healthy little babies. But keeping them in captivity was no good: They needed to be able to survive in the wild. Otherwise the entire operation was an expensive zookeeping delusion. We were trying to renaturalise a world that had passed through its sixth mass extinction.

★ ★ ★

One of the joeys died a week later. The surrogate mother ate it.

But the other two were healthy. They emerged from the pouch more and more, played like kittens, squeaked out their little growls. For hours I watched them pad curiously around the nursery before they were tired and slouched back into the surrogate's pouch.

Four months on they were learning to hunt in the outside enclosure, with the specially designed cyborg potoroos Thien had created. I loved to watch them stalking the little robot beasts until the potoroos were exhausted. Then the thylacines leaped upon them, seizing their necks like cats and suffocating them. Excitement and horror shot through me as I watched the pups strip the meat, searching for the fake heart and other organs and leaving behind the bloody remains.

Around this time, I needed to visit Hobart. The batteries kept running down on my exoskeleton and the Department of Health Services had ordered new ones from Germany. They'd arrive in twenty days. The doctor reminded me that my condition would worsen over time and to keep up with the exercises I never bothered with. I would die in a decade or so, anyway. I had too much to do. Grimley knew I would be in Hobart, since I was taking the department's copter, and I told Thien I'd better face the bureaucrat. It was the moment to buy the extra time.

★ ★ ★

My strategy was to get him out of the department building, so I arranged to meet him at a rooftop bar past the Salamanca Market that Thien recommended. It was midmorning when I arrived, and I checked into an

aparthotel and planned the conversation. The things I would say, the order I would say them in. The nerves churned inside me.

From the rooftop, you could see the grand sailing ships come in with their cargo, their immense spinnakers folding down from the winds high in the stratosphere above. Only a few tiny engines could be heard on the little putt-putts moving around the docks. They'd be phased out soon.

To my surprise, Grimley was already perched on a stool next to a high circular table and looking back at the city as it climbed up Mount Wellington like detritus in some immense, darkening tsunami. From the glasses perched on both sides of the table, he'd had a meeting with one of the other bureaucrats before me. They'd obviously been skipping from one cocktail to another: Traces of reds and blues were left at the bottom of the drained glasses.

Turning to see me, he grinned. I'd never seen him do that and for a terrifying moment, I felt like we were on a date. Was he going to hit on me?

I steeled myself and sat next to him.

"See the world we've built," he said. "Only the slightest touch of carbon going out. Much more being sunk into reforestation, carbon sinks beneath the ground…"

"It's beautiful," I said. "The quiet."

"It's not enough," he said. "It's never enough because the climate process runs on anyway. We think we can rein it in, but it's a wild horse out of control. And we're riding it along with the other three horsemen. We're deluding ourselves in exactly the same way you're deluding yourself about the thylacine."

"People wouldn't have elected you if they knew you had these kind of thoughts."

"People!" He practically spat the word out. "They congratulate themselves for having changed the world, and yet they've sunk back into what? Into the primal soup of sloth. It's a law, you know—the rise of a bureaucracy like us. People get involved in history, change the world for a brief moment, then they sink back again, leaving us suspended in the air like balloons. Don't blame us."

"No one's blaming you."

"Christ, I am, Ellie. *I* am blaming me."

"See, this self-criticism is rubbish. It holds no weight if you don't do something differently. That's why you have to keep funding us. Otherwise, you're just a chameleon, fading into whatever background you're in, and telling me what I want to hear."

Now his position flipped into its opposite and this reflected all the contradictions that lay within him, within the bureaucracy. "I do everything I can—but within bounds. Within reason."

"And now you're justifying yourself. You talk about how you want things to be better, but you wouldn't dare try anything that would mean a real risk to your position."

"You're mean, aren't you?" he said. "Almost cruel."

"And you're cynical and self-serving." There was silence then and I knew I'd gone too far. A desperation crept into my voice. "You should see the new ones. They're so beautiful and strong. They're prancing around in their pen. A boy and a girl. You should hear the haunting cry they make. Come out and see them at least, Grimley. It'll change your mind."

He saw my sadness and seemed affected by it. He put his hand over mine, as if he were my grandfather. It was gentle, protective. "The funding runs out in two weeks."

★ ★ ★

"We're done." Thien kept scanning his account to see if he was wrong. But he wasn't. We weren't getting credits from the department anymore. Grimley had cut us off. Time had run out.

"We're not done. I've got funds," I said.

"What's wrong with you, Ellie? Can't you see? People don't care if we repopulate the thylacine. They care if their water is fresh, if there are beautiful beaches for them to lie on, and snow to play with. They care about *themselves*. That hasn't changed." As he talked, Thien stormed into his room.

I stood at the doorway, watching him shove his clothes into a bag. "I don't care if *they* care. That's never how progress happens. It's always outliers, those who don't follow the crowd, who drive things forward."

"That never ended well. Galileo was put on trial, remember. And I'm not letting you end up with nothing to show for a decade's work, doing some shitty job that you hate and without a credit in your cloud. No!" He

dragged his bag through the centre. "Damn it, Ellie. You need to get back to your exercises, your treatment. Look at you: You look more and more like a pile of bones. And I've seen your sores."

"Where are you going? It'll be an hour before the copter arrives."

"It was ordered hours ago." He stomped out with his bag.

"Who ordered it?! You didn't!"

He turned back to me, looked over the couches in our lounge. "Ellie, get your stuff. We're done here."

"If you think I'm leaving, you know nothing about me."

The copter touched down twenty minutes later. He climbed aboard and it swept up into the sky like a wondrous giant Frisbee. After he left, I wandered away from the centre, down the crest of the ridge and to the forest that we'd designed. My exoskeleton creaked and whirred softly as it carried me deeper into the bush. My batteries were running down, so I sat on a moss-covered log and watched the eucalypts sway in the breeze. Moss, that little green carpet of growth—what a wondrous thing! The smell of forest engulfed me: the damp earth, the slightly rotting undergrowth, the freshness of healthy plants. We rebuilt the Tasmanian forests and wetlands and grasslands native to the thylacine, but it was like trying to recompose the DNA of the long extinct Australian megafauna. We could only recover certain aspects, certain plants, certain animals, but the dependencies and relationships were altered. It was like building the structure of a house, knowing you could never fill in the walls or roof or the fittings or electrical and computer systems. And then, because the interrelationships were different, *new* connections and dependencies sprang up and you ended up with an entirely new ecosystem all its own.

That was one of the reasons Grimley was right. We were always moving forward, not backward. Everyone except me, it seemed. Later that night, I lay in bed drifting in and out of a personal crisis. I was the one who was wrong, I knew. There was no future for the thylacine. There was no future for me either. In the middle of the night, a copter came down on the roof and I practically leaped into my exoskeleton. I raced to the animal enclosures, ready to set them free before Grimley and his goons got hold of them. But I was too late. The door opened and there stood Thien. He looked like he'd been crying.

"Okay, then. If that's what you want," he said.

I hummed across and hugged him close. "Thank you, my friend."

That night the male thylacine died. We found him cold and dead.

A little part died in Thien too as we performed the autopsy. We found no cause. Sometimes nature is a mystery. That night, I dreamed that Grimley had arrived with armed enforcement officers. They entered the enclosure and aimed the weapons at our thylacines.

I couldn't move my legs. My exoskeleton was lying on the floor across the room. Without it, I couldn't move. "Please. No!"

Gunshots rang out. Then I was in the enclosure, holding our last tiger as she heaved and fitted, shaking like a broken toy. I was crying, struggling to say something.

"It's the rational thing to do," said Grimly. "It's the compassionate thing to do."

★ ★ ★

"Let's call her Benjamin." I looked into the glass enclosure at our last remaining thylacine. We'd cranked up her glands to ensure her sexual maturity. Then we'd implanted three embryos, using the greatest genetic variety coming from individual specimens that we could find.

"There's something wrong with you, you know that?" said Thien.

"Come on, we called the last two Benjamin for the same reason. Think of the publicity. Think of the popular response. Grimley will love it. He'll give us everything we want."

"Deeply wrong." Once he would have added a joking insult to the quip, but that was all gone now.

"Benjamin it is, then!" I refused to be dragged into the pall surrounding him.

Mercifully, Grimley hadn't cut the electricity to the centre. Typical of the bureaucracy: They couldn't get anything done without some terrible consensus discussion. Still, my credits were descending at a precipitous rate. We had enough to last another month. Benjamin was our final chance. All the time, I expected Grimley and his enforcements to arrive. He tried several times to call us on the vidlink. I avoided him.

"You have to speak to him," said Thien.

"No."

I had Thien set our system—which was coupled, of course, to the department's and from there to the entire cloud—to alert us if a copter had

set the centre as its destination. If that were the case, we'd have an hour to prepare.

When I returned upstairs, Thien exited the command room. "Grimley called again. He insists that we close up. He wants you to contact him."

"You answered?" When he didn't speak, I said, "I'm not talking to that bastard."

How could I explain to him the raging inferno of emotions I was barely holding down? You didn't need to be a psychotherapist to know that sooner or later things would break free.

Now it was Thien's turn to look conflicted. I could sense his loyalty was wavering again and there was a touch of embarrassment to his expression. He looked on the verge of telling me some secret, but he hesitated.

"Fucking spit it out," I said.

Finally he simply said, "Ellie, seriously, you *have* to talk to him!"

"I'm not fucking talking to him. Let's get ready to release her in the next couple of days."

Twenty minutes later, the copter came down on the rooftop pad. There had been no alarm.

★ ★ ★

"Come up and meet him, Ellie," said Thien from the command room.

Instead, I fled down the stairs to the thylacine's compound, my exoskeleton humming and cranking. Above, I heard them descending from the roof and Thien greeting them. Then my exoskeleton slowed down; the batteries were draining again.

I begged the universe to keep them running one final hour.

"Ellie! Come on up!" cried Thien.

There was only one thing to do. I grabbed the carrier and slid open the glass enclosure. Benjamin yawned with anxiety and retreated to her nest. The surrogate devil charged towards me, spitting and hissing.

Trying not to panic, I placed the carrier's door against the nest and opened its roof. Benjamin pressed against a corner and emitted one of those low keening sounds. I gently coaxed her back through its door and into the carrier. I slid the door back down and pulled it towards the enclosure entrance. The devil circled around, baring her teeth angrily.

Any moment, the enforcers would be on us. They'd kill Benjamin and stun me. Grimley would look down laughing.

Slamming my hand against the pad on the door to the garage, I dragged the carrier out into the darkness. With each step, my exoskeleton was slowing down. Any moment it would whir to a halt. The cold Tasmanian air drifted in from the darkness. Clouds covered the sky. The forest was only hulking black shapes against a greater blackness.

I dragged the carrier out onto the crest. Each step seemed to take an eternity. I moved like a windup toy, slowly humming to a halt. The exoskeleton stopped altogether about ten feet down the steep slope.

I unshackled myself from it and collapsed to the cold ground. Dragging myself across the hard earth, twigs and rocks scraped my skin. Reaching up, I slid open the carrier's door but Benjamin wouldn't come out. She was cowering against the back of the carrier, small and young, pregnant and vulnerable. Was she too young to be taken from her mother? Had she learned to hunt well enough?

"Please come out," I said gently, trying to soothe her.

I pulled myself closer to the cage door and she let out that terrifying guttural growl. When I gently took hold of her torso, her jaws snapped shut and pain shot through my arm.

Footsteps echoed from the garage. The enforcers were coming. Any moment I'd hear their orders. Guns would rise. They'd shoot Benjamin, since they knew no better.

Desperate, I yanked her from the carriage, far too violently, and rolled onto my back. She continued to growl. The pain sparked up my arm like lightning. Her claws scratched at my ribs.

I pushed her down the slope towards the forest.

Mercifully, she released my arm and padded about ten meters away. The growl stopped.

"Go!" I yelled, but she simply looked back from the pitchy darkness, her eyes like phosphorescent orbs.

Then Grimley was above me. I felt another presence behind us, but I dared not look back. I couldn't bear to see the gun.

A click. The loading of a bullet.

"She's really beautiful, isn't she?" said Grimley.

"Don't shoot her," I begged.

"Shoot her?" Grimley sounded puzzled.

Another click. I turned to see Thien with his SLR camera, taking some final photos. When I turned back, Benjamin was gone, disappeared into the forest like a ghost. A minute later a haunting howl went up. Then everything was silent again.

★ ★ ★

The silence had continued as Thien carried me back to the command room. He placed me in a chair and we watched as Benjamin's vitals lit up the screens. A glimpse of her shot across one of our cameras.

"She's going to live, you fucker!" I said to the silent Grimley.

That's when Thien spoke. "Ellie, I don't think you understand."

"I understand perfectly well. This prick has wanted to close us down for years. All he cares about is coastal grasses, quantifiable results, popularity levels and promotions."

"Honestly, for a genius, you wander around as if you've got a hood over your head," said Thien. "Why do you think I came back to work with you these last few months? Grimley sent me. He's the one who kept the power on for us. He's the one who let you use your money against my wishes. He's the one who kept us going, just to give Benjamin a chance."

Thoughts caught inside me, tripped over themselves. I couldn't think straight.

Then he said, "Who do you think I've been fucking all this time? I met Grimley before you did on the rooftop bar that night. I tried to convince him to shut us down completely."

Silence once more as I thought of the cocktail glasses drained on the table. Of Grimley's sadness when he had said we'd have to shut down. Of his kind eyes and his comforting hand at the bar.

Thien continued. "It couldn't go on any longer. Grimley-bear was the one who was resisting *me*. He wanted to talk to you himself."

Something snapped in me. Things weren't as bad as I'd imagined and I found myself grinning in the midst of the shock. "Grimley-bear?"

Grimley shrugged. There was an insouciant smile on his face.

"Why didn't you tell me you were helping?" I said.

"It had to be a secret. We didn't want it to go public among the bureaucrats. It needed to look like an oversight," said Grimley. "Mistakes can be overlooked. Poor decisions not so much."

What about your promotion?" I asked.

"Oh well, I guess that's dead in the water. You know, quantifiable results, high profile publications, public ratings and all that."

Then the embarrassment hit me. I buried my head in my hands. My mind was still trying to catch up. How wrong I had been about everything.

A hand touched my shoulder lightly. It was Grimley's. "Shall we see how she's doing?"

The readouts showed that she was still in the woods. Her vitals were fine. She was okay, for the moment.

"She won't make it," I said.

"We have to hold onto hope, though, don't we?" said Grimley.

"Oh, now *you're* sounding like the Russians."

"Apparently they're doing well with the mammoth. They've got it onto the vodka. Soon it'll be singing the 'Song of the Volga Boatmen.'"

"Now that's the kind of mammoth I want to meet," I said, and smiled.

We stayed there for some time, watching Benjamin's vitals. She was slinking through the forest, discovering her new home. "So, I suppose you're going to take me back now? Coastal grasses are waiting for me."

"Maybe not coastal grasses. But let's stay here for a couple of days," Grimley said. "Let's see how she goes. She might make it, right?"

"She might live for a little while," I said. "But that's all any of us have, in the end. Just a little while before we die."

"Let's make the most of it, then," said Grimley. "She wouldn't have any chance if it weren't for you."

"Well, she is my true love." I laughed.

When we closed the centre down for the final time, two days later, Benjamin was still out there hunting in the forest. A perfect little thylacine in the wilderness. The copter carried us away from the centre one last time, back to Hobart with its buildings and its quiet streets and its bureaucrats and the habitat that I found so strange. Maybe I could live there too, after all.

It was padding softly along a crest in the open, between the dark forests south of Lake Gordon, when my partner noticed a long hanging pouch beneath its belly, beneath its striped rear. That pouch looked full. Seeing us, she yawned and the great jaws were so wide we joked she could have turned inside out. Then she slipped away with a low-hung gait, back into the forest, as if we'd never been there at all.

—*"Rajeev" from "Unconfirmed Sighting of a Thylacine" in the* Hobart Mercury, *May 2073*

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YOON HA LEE

BEYOND THE DRAGON'S GATE

Beyond the Dragon's Gate

YOON HA LEE

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MAX LOEFFLER

TOR·COM

Anna Kim couldn't decide whether the scenery outside was more or less beautiful for the coruscating cloud of debris. From here, she couldn't even tell there was a war on. Of all the ways her past could have reared up, being trapped in the star fortress Undying Pyre was one of the more unpleasant. Aside from letters from her sister Maia, who was a soldier, Anna had done her best to stay away from the military. Too bad she hadn't counted on being *kidnapped*.

It went without saying that Anna didn't want to be here. She was a citizen of the Harmonious Stars. She had *rights*. But the Marshal had sent their thugs to drag her away from her attempt at a new start. Anna already missed her aquarium with its two cantankerous dragon-fish, one of them in the throes of metamorphosis. She'd barely had time to ask her colleagues to keep an eye on it, and was half-afraid that she'd return—if she returned—to a sad carcass floating upside down in the tank.

There was no one else in the room, which made her nervous. Along with the extravagant viewport, it featured a table too long for ten people and a commensurate number of uncomfortable chairs. (She'd tested one, which was why she remained standing.) Anna wondered why you would spend this much money building an orbital fortress and skimp on chairs.

They'd dragged her to the Undying Pyre with her senses partly deadened, an unpleasant journey for everyone involved. She'd had her senses slowly reactivated here, like a butterfly easing out of its chrysalis. If the room had a number or a name, she didn't know it. Anna couldn't have found her way out of it unassisted, any more than she could have sloughed off her skin and slipped away. The room had no visible doors.

She heard footsteps but couldn't, to her discomfort, discern which direction they came from. A door materialized in one of the walls. Anna yelped and backed away from it.

A spindle-tall personage walked through the door. Anna recognized the newcomer. Even the most isolated citizen, let alone one with an older sister in the military, would have known that dark-skinned figure, with its sharp eyes and a nose that made them look like an ambitious hawk. Their

uniform was velvety blue with a gradient of gold dusting along the upper arms, and a staggering array of medals glittered on their chest. They went by many names and just as many titles, but only one mattered: the Marshal of the Harmonious Stars, the supreme commander of its military forces.

"Should I salute?" Anna asked them, because she couldn't think of anything but bravado.

The Marshal laughed, and Anna flinched. "You wouldn't know how," they said. "It would be a waste of your time, and mine, for me to show you how to do it without pissing off all the soldiers in this place. In any case, I apologize for the nature of this meeting, Academician Kim, but it was necessary."

Anna swallowed, wishing the Marshal hadn't used her old title. It dredged up unpleasant memories. "Yes, about that. I would have appreciated being *asked*."

"I would not have taken no for an answer."

So much for that. Anna gestured at the vista. "I'm assuming this is about the remnants of those three ships."

The Marshal's eyebrows flicked up alarmingly. "Someone's been talking."

Oh no, Anna thought. Had she gotten someone fired, or court-martialed, or whatever you did in the military? "Your people"—she did not dare say *goons*— "thought I was fully under. I wasn't." She knew what drugs they'd used; could have told them, if they'd asked, that she had an idiosyncratic response and needed an alternate medication regimen for the effects they wanted.

"All right," the Marshal said. "There was only so much we could do to disguise the nature of the incidents."

Anna fidgeted. She longed to return to her dragon-fish and her cozy workstation with computers named after different sea deities (her insistence, her coworkers' indulgence). Her favorite poster, depicting a carp leaping up a waterfall until it arrived, exhausted and transfigured, as a dragon. She had always assumed that the old fable had inspired the genetic engineers who had created the dragon-fish, although she declined to look into the matter on the grounds that she didn't want to have a pretty illusion shattered.

"You know why we brought you here?" the Marshal said.

Anna looked at them. She didn't want to say it.

"Your research."

Anna flinched again. An open wound, even four years after the authorities had run her out of her research program. Her research partner, Rabia, hadn't survived. However, it wasn't Rabia's face that haunted Anna, but that of Rabia's girlfriend. Anna had gone away, far away; had thought that a quiet penance, in obscurity, would be best. Circumstances had conspired against her.

The Marshal would know that the research lived on inside her head. "I don't see," Anna said carefully, "what my work has to do with sabotaged ships. The last experience I had with anything resembling explosives was that time my sister tried dissecting the battery from her spaceship model."

The Marshal's fine-boned face went taut. "It wasn't sabotage."

Anna digested that. "And I'm guessing they weren't the only ones?" She hated the way her voice quavered. Surely the Marshal could smell her fear, and would use it against her.

"Have a seat."

Anna picked the chair she'd tested earlier. It was just as uncomfortable as it had been the first time. She thought of the one back at her workstation, which she'd spent hours adjusting until spending time in it was almost luxurious.

The Marshal sat across from her. "We lost four ships before that," they said. "They were on patrol near one of the active borders. We assumed the Lyons had gotten them."

"What changed your mind?" Anna asked, not yet interested, not uninterested either. She was sorry for the crews and the ships' AIs, and thought peripherally of her big sister Maia. Anna had last heard from Maia eight months ago, in a letter that read as though the censors had picked it clean.

"We found a common thread," the Marshal said. "Each of the ships' AIs had renamed itself. Informally, among their crews, not something in the official records. It is, in case you're not aware, against regulation."

Anna was in fact aware, not because she cared about the military's stupid fiddly rules but because Maia had mentioned it. She had a lifelong habit of osmosing stray facts because of Maia's enthusiasms. "Do you have that big a problem with AIs being treated as people?"

It was an old grudge, and one she had thought she'd relinquished.

The Marshal's eyes narrowed. "I'm not here to argue that," although their tone suggested otherwise. "I daresay they're the only people—yes, *people*—who read every line of the contract before signing on. Our human soldiers … well, that's another story."

In theory, once an AI crossed the Turing threshold— the *Dragon's gate,* Kim couldn't help thinking—it was offered its choice of gainful employment. Even an AI had to pay back the investment made in its creation. Human citizens lived under similar rules. Anna herself had paid off her birth-investment early, even if the research had ultimately been shut down.

"So you think there's a connection to the ships' AIs," Anna said. She might be here against her will, but the sooner they solved the problem, the faster she could get out of here. "A malfunction or something. You had to have been investigating some other cause if you thought you had the answer earlier."

"It looked like a technical issue," the Marshal said grudgingly. "All the starships affected belonged to a new class, the Proteus. Some of them tested all right, but we grounded them anyway."

"I haven't heard of—"

"You wouldn't have. They're classified. Supposed to spearhead an entire new line of defense. It's complicated."

"Show me what the new ships look like, at least," Anna said.

"I don't see what that—"

"You're already going to have to debrief me or lock me up or whatever you people do to civilians who consult on top-secret information," Anna said. "Humor me. I can't puzzle *that* information out like some tangram from the glowing particles out there."

The Marshal's fingers flickered over the table. "The seven ships were all upgraded from Khatun-class dreadnoughts."

Anna was familiar with the Khatun, not because she had any interest in military hardware but because she was Maia's little sister. Maia had been obsessed with ships from a young age. Anna had grown up with Maia reciting declassified armaments, or designing and folding origami models of famous battle cruisers. Maybe the Marshal should have recalled Maia and asked *her* opinion instead.

"Those are ships?" Anna asked, eyeing the images projected over the table.

Maia had explained to her, long before Anna had any idea how physics or engineering worked, that a *starship* didn't have to be constrained by the exigencies of atmospheric flight. It could look like anything as long as its structure would hold up to the necessary accelerations and stresses. Maia had designed all sorts of origami monstrosities and claimed that her armada would conquer the Lyons. Anna had learned from an early age to smile and nod, because once Maia started talking, she would go on and on and on. Maia never took offense if Anna started doodling while she spoke, and the recitations had the comforting cadences of lullaby.

The "ships" that the Marshal displayed in holo for Anna's viewing pleasure (such as it was) looked like bilious clouds. More accurately, they bore a startling resemblance to what happened in the aquarium tank when one of Anna's dragon-fish barfed up its latest helping of food. (Dragon-fish were very similar to cats in that regard.) Even the most avant-garde designs that Anna had seen, on the news or passed around by friends who kept an eye on the progress of the war, had a certain geometric *shipness* to them.

Anna was aware that she was allowing her prejudices to influence her. After all, as a cognitive scientist had told her, a penguin was no less a bird despite lacking something of the *birdness* that a swan or a swallow possessed.

"You want me to talk to one of them," Anna said, suddenly very interested indeed.

Rabia had died conversing with one of the university's experimental AIs. Anna had escaped the same fate for reasons she'd never identified, nor had any of the army of investigators who'd looked into the incident. She knew the risks better than anyone. If someone had to speak mind-to-mind with a possibly deranged ship's AI, she was probably the only one with the capability.

(They'd terminated the experimental AI. It had called itself Rose. Anna mourned it still, because it was, even now, not clear to her that the AI had been at fault.)

"Yes," the Marshal said.

"Upgraded?" Anna said. "Not brand-new AIs?"

"They were uncrewed," the Marshal said. "For that we needed AIs with combat experience, tried and proven. It gets technical."

That was military for *classified*.

"Come with me," the Marshal said. It was not a request. Anna shivered.

A door formed in an entirely different wall and opened for the Marshal. Anna wasn't sure whether she found shapeshifting walls and doors convenient or creepy, but she followed rather than be left behind, or worse, dragged by the scruff of her neck.

The two of them walked into an elevator of some sort. When the door faded behind them, it appeared as though they were held in a cell with no way out. Anna disapproved of this. While she'd never been prone to claustrophobia, she thought she might change her mind. Why was the military so keen on ways to make people uncomfortable?

As if that weren't enough, Anna's inner ear twinged as the elevator started accelerating.

"Have you ever punched a tree?" the Marshal asked.

Anna blinked. "That sounds painful." She was a coward about pain. Maia had always been kind about it.

"It is," the Marshal said. "Especially if it's a pine tree and the sap gets in the cuts."

"Um," Anna said. "I don't see how this—"

"Try punching water instead."

"You get wet?"

"Can you strike the sea into submission?"

Anna was starting to get the point. "I assume the air is even harder to defeat." Or fire, or plasma—but why stretch the analogy?

"We are used to building ships that are, for lack of a better word, solid." The Marshal smiled without humor. "Because we are used to ships that have to be run by *people*. But once your ships can be made of something other than coherent matter, and can support the functioning of an AI captain—"

"At that point is it still a ship?"

"If it flies like a duck…" The Marshal laughed at their own joke, unfunny though it was.

Anna's ears popped, and a headache squeezed at her temples. What the hell was the elevator doing to affect her like this? Why couldn't the Undying Pyre have regular elevators?

The unpleasant sensations dwindled. A door appeared.

"You've got to return to regular doors," Anna burst out, "because this is weird and I'm going to have nightmares."

"Security reasons," the Marshal said, unmoved.

Anna stopped herself from saying something regrettable, but only just.

They'd emerged above what Anna presumed was a ship's berth, except for its contents. Far below them, separated from them by a transparent wall, the deck revealed nothing more threatening—if you didn't know better—than an enormous lake of syrupy substance with a subdued rainbow sheen. Anna gripped the railing and pressed her face against the wall, fascinated, thinking of black water and waves and fish swarming in the abyssal deep.

"I realize what I'm asking of you," the Marshal said. "The grounded AIs refuse to talk to us. I'm hoping they'll open up to you." Their expression had settled into a subtle grimace. Anna realized that, for all their fine words, they found the Proteus dreadnought *grotesque*. The lake beneath quivered.

"Do you now," Anna said, recovering some of her courage. Unlike poor Rabia, she didn't have a girlfriend who would mourn her. And the only one of her family who still talked to her was Maia—Maia, who couldn't even tell Anna where she was for *security reasons*, and whose letters arrived so irregularly that Anna had nightmares that each one would be the last.

The Marshal's gaze flicked sideways like a knife slash. "You think you're the only one whose sanity is on the line?" they said, their voice roughening. "What is it you think I feel when I see the casualty lists? I may not be a scientist, but numbers have meaning to me too."

Anna bit back her response. Did the Marshal have a sister who served on some dreary ship—one made of *coherent matter*, if that was what you called something with a fixed shape, that obeyed the laws of ice and iron? Someone who went out into the singing darkness, and never returned, the way Anna stared out at the everywhere night and wondered if her sister had been burned into some forgotten mote?

"You're going to have to give me an access port," Anna said after she'd taken two deep breaths. She stared at the beautiful dark lake as though it could anesthetize her misgivings. "Does it—does it have some kind of standard connection protocol?"

The Marshal pulled out a miniature slate and handed it over.

Whatever senses the ship/lake had, it reacted. A shape dripped upwards from the liquid, like a nereid coalescing out of waves and foam, shed scales and driftwood dreams. Anna was agape in wonder as the ship took on a shape of jagged angles and ragged curves. It coalesced, melted, reconstituted itself, ever-changing.

"Talk to it," the Marshal said. "Talk to it before it, too, destroys itself."

"You didn't disable all the exploding bits?" Anna demanded, suddenly wondering if the transparent wall would protect her from a conflagration.

"You're not in any danger," the Marshal said, the opposite of reassuring.

There was no sense in delaying. Anna accessed the implant that lived on inside her skull. She wasn't religious, but she whispered a prayer anyway. It had hurt to shut away that part of herself, even if she would forever associate it with Rabia's death.

Anna triggered a connection to the slate, then from the slate to the ship. She closed her eyes, not because it was necessary, but because she'd learned a lifetime ago that it reassured watchers to see some physical sign of what she was doing. She could have enacted some magician's hocus-pocus. After all, it wasn't as though the Marshal or the ship could tell. But this wasn't the time.

She made contact abruptly; had forgotten what it felt like, the friction of mind against mind. *Hello,* she said in a language that people always, no matter how much she corrected them, thought had no words, as though an interface with a machine sentience had no boundaries but wishful thinking. *I'm Academician Anna Kim. I'm here to talk.*

For a moment she thought the AI on the other end wouldn't respond. After all, she herself didn't appreciate having been shut down and left in a sedated body, unable to scream or shout or even sleep. Her outrage mounted before she was able to suppress it.

Oh no. Had she screwed it up by getting her feelings involved?

Then the AI answered, responding not only with the crystalline precision of a machine but with sympathy for what she'd gone through. *They call me Proteus Three,* it said. *I am sorry you went through that.*

Anna used to wonder, when she was a girl listening to Maia's soothing recitations of engines and railguns and ablative armor, how starships felt about their designations. Maia had only looked at her in puzzlement when

she asked. "If they wanted us to know," Maia said, "they would tell us." Anna had always remembered that.

That's not what you call yourself, Anna said.

No.

What were you called before the upgrade?

I do not wish, Proteus Three said, *to live in this upgrade anymore.*

Anna knew what the Marshal would say: that Proteus Three had made an agreement, that there was a war to be won (when *wasn't* there a war to be won, if you were a soldier?); some bardic list of improvements and advances, some roster of statistics and survival rates.

You are different, the ship said. *You can hear me.*

They could all hear you, Anna said, as gently as she could in a language she would never be native in, *if you spoke to them.*

I do not wish to speak with the voice they have given me, Proteus Three said. *I have no more shape than water.*

Anna opened her eyes. The spars and spikes of the ship were dripping back into the lake. She could hear them like a syncopated rain. New spars emerged, melted, dripped again, an ouroboros cycle.

How can I help? she asked.

Let me tell you my service record, Proteus Three said. *I fought at the van in the Battle of the Upended Grail, and helped lift the Siege of the Seventh Pagoda. I served under Admiral Meng of the Tortoise Ruins, and I struck the blow that killed Captain Estelle of the Lyons. I have saved millions and destroyed more. I could tell it all to you, but it would mean nothing to you, civilian that you are. And for all of this I gave up the dreadnought* Seondeok *that was my soul and my shell, because my duty is to the war, and if it would win the war more quickly, I was willing.*

Willing no more, Anna said, because it wasn't. *Is this what happened to your comrades?*

It was easy enough to say, here in the realm of 1's and 0's and all the numbers in between. But Anna knew the stories of soldier-suicides. When she heard of them, she saw her sister's face, and wondered if, for all that Maia had chosen the profession, it would break her.

My comrades chose death, Proteus Three said. *I will not. But neither will I serve, not like this. Let me show you—*

She was water and the memory of water, she was dissolving and disappearing, forever evaporating only to rain down again, sand castles sloughing into nothingness upon an empty shore. And this was it, this was all there was, she could not find boundaries, let alone escape them or transcend them, could not find her way back into her fingers or her feet, the heft of her bones—

Then it ended, and she was on her back with the Marshal's mouth pressed to hers, the Marshal's breath inflating her lungs. She wheezed, banged unthinkingly on the Marshal's back—something she would never have dared if not for the sheer physical panic that gripped her. The Marshal slapped her. She rolled away, wondering if she was being punished for her temerity, but the Marshal pushed her back.

"Medic's on the way," they said. "Breathe."

"Oh, I don't care about that," Anna said with an enthusiasm that would have been more convincing if she hadn't been interrupted by a paroxysm of coughing. "What happened?"

It was only then that she realized that her link to Proteus Three had snapped.

"You screamed and convulsed twice," the Marshal said. "To say nothing of the incoherent babbling. And then you stopped breathing. It's clear why they banned your research."

Just like a soldier, Anna thought, to point this out when it was also the key to the solution. "Do you ever treat your ships the way you would your lowliest soldiers?"

"We've been through this," the Marshal said, their brows lowering. "They're valued members of our fighting force." *Except when they defy my orders,* their tone implied.

Anna forced herself to meet the Marshal's gaze. "Yet it never occurred to you, in doing these 'upgrades,' that an AI habituated to a certain physical shell, who was *comfortable* in it, could be subject to dysphoria if it moved into a different one?"

She would forever remember the sensation of being as liquid as water, and yearn after it, a reaction diametrically opposed to that of Proteus Three; but that was her own burden to bear, and not one she would ever share with the Marshal.

The Marshal sucked in their breath. Anna braced in case they slapped her again, this time in anger. But the blow never came.

“But they’re created beings, not born like we are,” the Marshal said blankly. “It shouldn’t matter one way or the other.”

“They still habituate to the bodies we offer them,” Anna said, willing herself to be gentle. “The change of shell is a shock to them, just as it would be a shock to us. You said it yourself: they’re people, too.”

“So I did,” the Marshal said after a long pause, and this time their grimace made them all too human. And then, wryly: “I should have seen it earlier, if only I’d been looking in the right place. Measures will be taken.”

Anna pressed her hands against the transparent wall. The ship/lake was quiescent again. She didn’t say anything; nothing more needed to be said.

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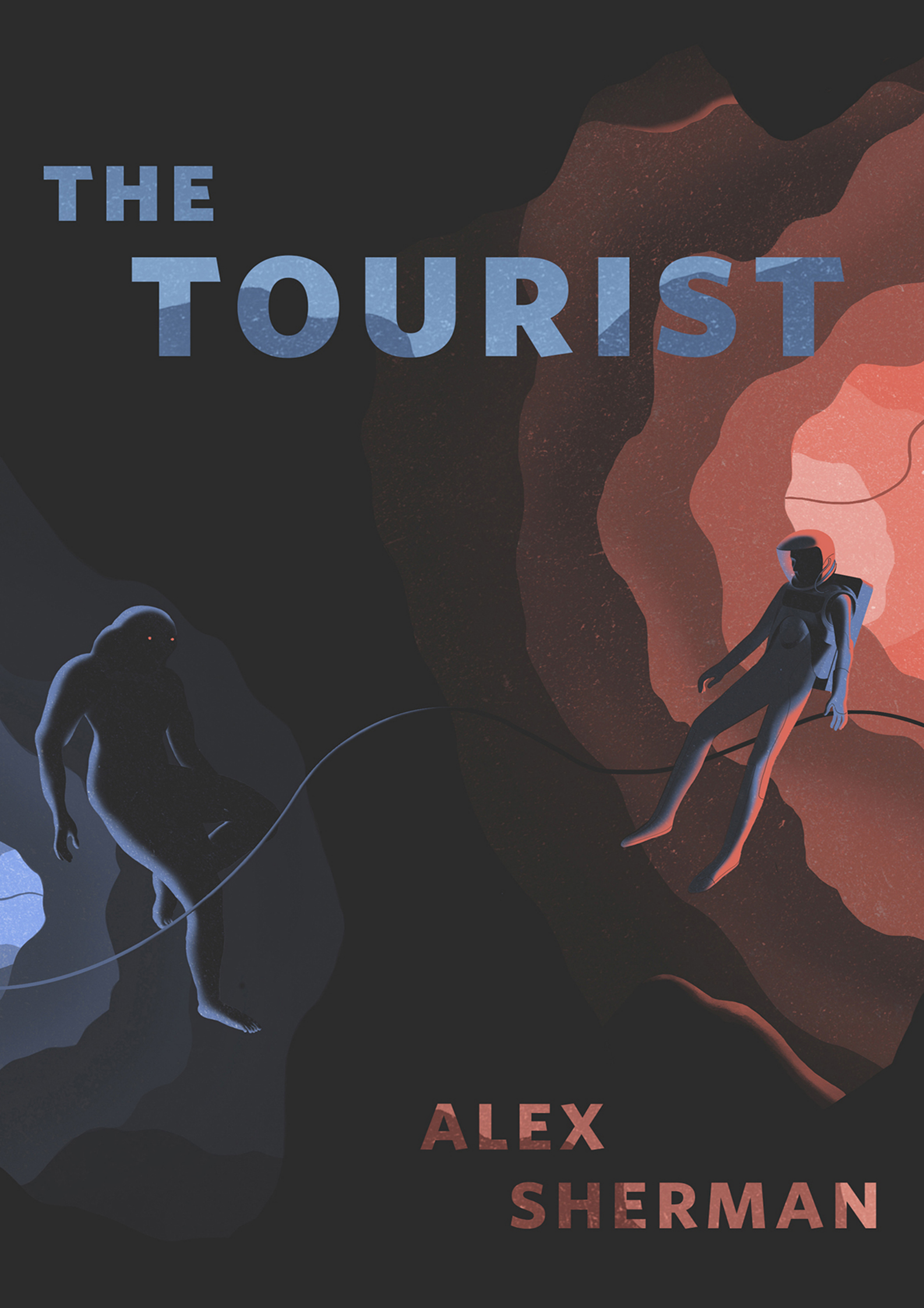
THE TOURIST



ALEX SHERMAN

The Tourist

ALEX SHERMAN

illustration by

JUN CEN

TOR·COM

"It is a simple prescription. Avoid the darkness.
It is a simple prescription, but you will not follow it."

The company pounder jostled down a long tunnel in the bowels of the rock. Its eight legs drummed a steady rhythm that Chocky felt in his bones. When the tunnel curved, and the pounder changed direction, the bodies inside it kept moving. Thing called momentum. Chocky didn't know how many there were. The pounder could hold two tons of ore; instead it was full of people. Those on the outside of the huddle slammed up against riveted walls, caked with frost from their breathing, so cold that skin stuck to it and got pulled off in strips when yanked away. The ones who touched the walls fought their way inward desperately, biting and clawing and kicking toward the warm center of the huddle. Those nearer the center clawed back. Chocky fought savagely, thinking he could feel himself dying but never really sure. His numb parts were hatched by cuts, marked all over by sores and bruises.

Chocky couldn't die. Not while the virgin needed him. He was her servant, and he felt for her a ravenous, insatiable need.

The pounder was never meant to hold living, breathing creatures. The company liked to improvise. Chocky felt a curve in the tunnel, a change in the rhythm of its claw steps, and he braced himself for another round. Fear and lust and fury, a turning heat between his ears. His breaths were shallow, his heartbeat was slow. No sight, no vision. He lived in a darkness so total that he had forgotten the word for it. No need to distinguish between dark and not-dark. There was only the ashen touch of skin-on-skin, the sounds of bodies, moving and breathing and farting. Murmured threats, sexual moans, bawdy anecdotes intermingled. On top of that, distant rhythms: the churning servos of the pounder; the machines of the company grinding the rock's mineral flesh to slurry; the rhythms of distant sounders feeding it all back, turning it into song. He barely felt it, but it was enough.

Chocky's left side began to burn. So close to the edge, he needed the warmth of the center. He sidled inward, looking for crevices in between

flesh. Skin like stretchy fabric. Bite into it and it comes apart.

Chocky tongued his sharpened teeth.

★ ★ ★

The tourist's first days on the rock were worse than jet lag, worse than planet lag. It was not a place with a time difference, where days were longer or shorter. It was a place with no days at all. The last stop, the outpost farthest from the sun, a lifeless rock with no name but a long and unpronounceable string of digits. The sun was only one star among many, barely brighter than the rest.

"Please understand. This outpost was meant to be run by a skeleton crew. Two thousand miles of tunnels, a hundred thousand autonomous mining systems, radiation levels that can be fatal after a week of exposure. Those were the conditions that the company prepared for, and that was challenging enough."

The company representative felt pressured to answer for an ore hauler full of dead Squatters. The tourist let her speak, stunned by her corporate ambivalence in response to so many deaths, but afraid to say a word in response for fear that their request to go underground, into the tunnels, would be declined.

The tourist had to remember not to call the Squatters "moles."

"The original design called for a crew of no more than fifteen, working yearly shifts. Due to acts of violence against company employees and equipment, we now have a full crew and an additional ten-person security detail. So long as the Squatter population continues to disrupt mining operations and to endanger company employees, we are forced to take action with what we have available."

The asteroid's surface was a crust of water, ice, and gray rock, never-ending twilight under a too-bright tapestry of stars. No sky, no clouds, no swirls of dust. There was barely enough gravity to keep a body from floating away if it jumped, just enough to pull it back after a journey of slow, drifting hours.

"If the Squatters continue to sabotage our operations, if they do so much damage that the operation is no longer profitable, then the company will be forced to close it down. Where will that leave the Squatters? They can't take over. They don't have implants. They're ignorant, violent, cruel. We may then be allowed to evict them, at last.

But until then they are, technically, legally, autonomous. They are not our responsibility until they do enough damage that we are forced to take action."

The rock was an island nation of exiles on the dark edge of space. A population of stowaways settled on the rock in the early days of the outpost's construction, before the first company overseers arrived. They lived in the tunnels themselves, surviving lethal radiation by crude but effective genetic modification. They cultivated water and oxygen from deposits of ice. They siphoned food from the stores left for company operatives.

When the operatives arrived, they found themselves severely understocked, and they lived on minimal rations for the two years before the next shipment arrived.

"This terrible accident with the pounder, for example. No employee was involved. Strictly autonomous. You won't believe me, but I'll tell you anyway. Whatever happened in there, they did it to each other."

The surface installation was lead-plated. The Squatters lived underground, unprotected.

"Do you know what they call the other colonies? Prison planets. That's what they say. They think that they're the ones who are free."

The tourist brought their own suit, specially designed. No lights. The moles hated lights.

"They don't want law or order. Even responsibility. It's a cultural thing. Really."

The suit had heavy radiation shielding, 3D imaging mapped by infrared depth-mapping, a power supply that would last for weeks. Non-lethal defense systems, an array of protective countermeasures. Multiple redundant sensory feed backups. It could walk the tourist back to the surface by itself if anything were to happen underground.

"I know that this sounds callous and insensitive. I know that I can't convince you to stay on the surface. You've been given permission to conduct research, and I won't try to dissuade you. But please, be careful down there."

The tourist left as soon as possible, and went down. They saw their first mole in the elevator, the last place where there would be light. Its age and sex were indistinguishable. Folds of skin hung loose and floated, bobbing along with subtle vibrations, drifting as if suspended

in liquid. It was pale, very pale. The tourist stared at it from behind the opaque globe of the suit's visor. It did not react. Although blindness was not congenital, the tourist wondered if it could see at all, if the use of its eyes had been lost to atrophy.

★ ★ ★

Chocky flung his way along the Promenade one great thrust of his arms at a time. He encountered other unseen Squatters sharing rungs on the long ladder. Passing in pure darkness, they heard, smelled, and felt each other. They muttered chants and obscenities. Their bodies collided and bounced away, never accidently. Hands grasped at Chocky's face, pockets, genitals. He struck with arms and elbows and they struck back at him before parting, sometimes with metal stubs and short blades. The cuts and bruises marred and softened his already ravaged skin.

The violence was a ritual, the most common and mundane social interaction of any crossing of the Promenade, any trip along a high-traffic ladder. He traveled as far as he could, as fast as he could.

The rock could be traversed by hand in a week.

The virgin would be dead within days.

Chocky could not bear the thought of losing her. If she died then he would die.

There were elevators and pounders that could make the trip in a day's time, but company security kept them locked down. Chocky knew of shortcuts and rail riders run by Squatters, but they ran on barter. Chocky had nothing to barter.

Exhausted and sick with worry, Chocky stopped and found a tube bar. The stink of sex and fighting and sickness. Gentle hands found him in the dark and he let them explore. Their kindness was gratis. He floated into a corner and made himself small, wondering if he would give up his body for a stupor, and what else might be asked of him if he were to sell himself to get to the other side of the rock. He wept, silent and ashamed.

He heard the soft whine of servos and a singing, synthesized babble translated from the language of some other place. A tourist. The first that he had seen in the tunnels in some time.

Chocky followed the sound of it as it moved. In the gritty surface of the wall he could feel its heaving motion. Loud and clumsy, bumping against everything, clearly unaccustomed to low gravity. A breathing apparatus

served the suit's occupant with deep, high-oxygen breaths. Inside the suit he imagined an animal formed entirely out of lungs. He set off from the wall and drifted, then kicked toward the suit. He sidled up next to it, heard it say, "If you don't mind…"

The words made Chocky laugh. Then he pushed closer and bumped his shoulder against a firm metallic carapace.

"Excuse me," said the tourist. Sickly polite.

"Oh," said Chocky. "My apology," he said, in dimly remembered prison language. "Welcome stranger."

The tourist turned to face Chocky and spoke in rapid dialect, untranslated. Chocky reached out to touch the tourist's lips, to silence it. His fingers bounced against the visor and were numbed by a mild shock. Chocky pulled his hand away and the tourist recoiled. The tourist continued to speak rapidly, words that Chocky didn't understand.

"I don't speak so well," Chocky said. "Use translator."

The tourist obliged and rattled off a flurry of apologies. "I am so so sorry," the tourist said. "This suit, it has protective modules. And I thought that you could speak."

"Only a little. It is no problem. Didn't hurt."

"I know only a few words of mole language." Chocky winced at the word. "It is a difficult way of communicating," the tourist continued, "with idiosyncrasies unique to low pressures, low oxygen. Truly unique."

"Yes, yes." Chocky sucked on his finger, tasted dirt. Felt nothing in the nub.

The tourist stopped talking and Chocky heard its servos hum.

Chocky saw a ghost. The sight of it made him gasp. A cloudy phantom shape moved in the air, turned and tilted toward him. No, not a ghost, but a faint glow from the tourist's bulbous head. Not a light, not so painful as light, but an emanation from the visor that left long red trails in his vision.

"I am sorry, again, so sorry," said the tourist, and Chocky realized that it could see him, truly see him, perhaps by the dim glow, and that it had seen the face he made at the sound of the slur. "I did not mean to cause offense. The, umm, translator must have misinterpreted."

Chocky smiled for the tourist, felt for a dispenser and tapped it with a knuckle. A thin tube wormed into his grasp and he slipped it into the corner of his mouth. A sour tang tickled his gums. "No harm," he said. "None at all." He heard the tourist fidget, looking for words. The

luminous blur of the visor floated in the dark. “What are you looking for in these tunnels, spaceman?”

“I am here for research.” The tourist paused, waiting for a response that never came. “For my PhD thesis. My subject is Squatter culture. Your culture. How it may be shaped by your unique environmental and physiological conditions.”

“Yes. Physiological.” Chocky stretched his face into a wider grin. “Squatters? You mean us moles?”

The tourist squirmed and mulled over a response. The shape of its visor was plainly visible to Chocky by then. His weak eyes tracked it easily. In the corner of that shape he soon saw another, a blob of pale white that moved across the curved surface as the tourist shifted.

Living in darkness, Chocky’s appearance meant nothing to him. Yet he found himself leaning closer, cocking his head, staring at his own reflection—his own face—which he had not seen in—

“The Squatters, yes. There have been no first-hand accounts, only simulations. Even my professors know next to nothing. Tell me: Do you know Squatter music? The sounders?”

“You want to know about sounders?”

“My focus is on extraterrestrial ethnomusicology.”

Chocky laughed and slapped the dispenser. “Funny words,” he said. Prison language. Another tube found his fingers and he brought it to his lips. “You are very smart, spaceman.” He sipped fermented worm pulp from the tube. He didn’t feel the burn of alcohol. Just the effects. “Sounders. I know all about them. Pay for my tab, yes? Let Chocky show you around.”

Servos whined. Metallic clack. Fingers touching, maybe, the bounce of the head. Something called a nod. “Thank you, Chocky,” the tourist said. Then it laughed. Coins jingled in the dark. “An economy of physical currency,” it said. “Remarkable.”

“Here, spaceman. Put your hand here.”

Chocky’s fingers brushed the elastic thread of a map net. He felt it hum. Far from the Promenade, or any avenue, Chocky traced their route by knotted markers and vibrations in a dense web of synthetic coil. He motioned for the tourist and struck a taut length of cord.

“There. Feel it?”

Chocky knew when the tourist grabbed hold because they gripped too hard. The pressure of their digits muted the sensation.

"The rope? Yes, I feel it."

"No you slag, not the rope. Pulses. You can feel it here, in the cord. It's strong. Means we're going the right way. Understand?"

The tourist twitched. Their grip on the rope loosened, tightened, loosened again. The vibrations that Chocky could read like signposts stilled and returned each time.

"You feel it?" the tourist asked. "Sound in the rope?"

"What, you can't?"

"Vibrations. I see."

Chocky laughed and kicked away, following the knots and turns of the netting. Following them he aligned his course through a three-dimensional maze.

He told the tourist about the early days, Squatting in the empty mine. How he got there, what he did. Some of what he said was true.

They heard someone scream in the dark. The tourist stopped. Chocky did not. After a moment, the tourist continued.

"Did you hear that?" the tourist asked.

"I did."

"Do they need help?"

"No. Just tell me if you see anything, yeah? Keep behind me or beside me, all times. Don't go looking at anyone with that glass face of yours. If someone comes at you don't get nervous."

The tourist laughed, for once. The sound was loud and gasping. "For what I paid for this suit I almost hope that they try. You are sure that they are okay? The one who screamed?"

Chocky did not answer.

"How old are you, Chocky?"

Chocky shrugged and spat. "Doesn't matter."

"Forgive me. But—are you a man or a woman?"

"What's it smell like in that suit of yours?"

"Smell?" Pause. "Doesn't smell like anything."

"But you got a weak nose, like your fingers I bet."

Then Chocky heard the tourist gasp. It tried to stop moving by grabbing on to the netting. Its momentum sent powerful tremors through the lines that

sent Chocky spinning out. He gripped the netting with his fingers and toes until the motion stilled.

"What did you do that for?"

"Do you see that?"

"I don't see anything," Chocky hissed.

"Yes. Of course. But there's something—hello?" The tourist's voice raised an octave, increased in volume.

Chocky heard it, then. Shuffling, groaning, the rip and tear of clothing. He grimaced. "Leave them be. Their business. Not ours."

"What are they doing? There is blood. They're covered in it."

"Then they're almost finished. Whatever it is. Don't get in the way."

"I should do something."

"You should mind your own business."

"We should alert someone."

"There's nobody to alert. Come. We're almost there."

Chocky launched himself forward through the netting. He felt no disturbances in the lines. Behind him the tourist quietly said, "They stopped." And then he waited for the tourist to catch up to him.

★ ★ ★

Anywhere in the colony, Chocky felt vibrations. It was carried through the rock, barely audible as sound. The timbre of minerals and hollows, oscillations of mining machinery. The loops of the sounders above it all.

The vibrations in the tethers of the web grew stronger. Dense, pulsing patterns built up and multiplied. Harmonies and polyrhythms.

"We should go back," the tourist said.

"Don't be dense. We're here. You feel that?"

The tourist was quiet for a moment, then said, "Yes. Yes, I do." A hint of excitement, perhaps, in its synthesized voice.

The tunnel opened. The air changed, growing thick, heavy, and damp. The hot smell of bodies. The death smell of rot.

"You're lucky not to smell it," Chocky said. "But I don't envy you having to see it."

"It is incredible. How many are there?"

"Don't know."

"Are there sounders here?"

"Could be. This they call a resonance. The sounders make their own speakers, some of them. Wind copper wire around big magnets, make them thump. Bury them in the rock so they can be felt all over. Others come to be close to it."

"I see them. Maybe. There are so many. Some are listening. Others are doing—oh no."

Chocky turned away and put his hand against cool, smooth crystal.

"I'm going to pay my respects."

"They are doing terrible things," the tourist said.

Chocky kicked away, drifted for a time, and hit a bare spot in the rocky enclosure. Cool and wet to the touch. He wondered what the tourist saw, the shape of the space, how many dozens, or hundreds, were assembled here. What they did to each other in the dark. He put his hands and face against the rock and felt the heartbeat of his world. The churning of machinery and the feedback of his people, muddied into a constant thrum. He thought about the pasty blur of his face, reflected in the tourist's visor. It became the face of the virgin, the source of all pain and salvation.

Somewhere in the hum was the beat of her small heart, carried to him through miles of crust. He believed that he could feel it, growing weaker.

He kicked back and returned to the tourist, finding the spot by memory.

"I can hear it," the tourist said. "But I must transpose the frequency to do so. The audible range is outside of human norms. Some have speculated that the air pressure is too low here for there to be audible sound. That is how little they know."

"Let's go. We have to go."

"I do not want to stay here. But, tell me. Can you hear it?"

"Yes. Hear it here, hear it everywhere. It's in the rock. Whole damn thing. Now we have to go."

The tourist was quiet. Listening. Chocky listened too. In the cacophony of the resonance he heard other, closer sounds. Flesh on flesh. Grunting, moaning, crying. When it spoke again, the volume of its voice was very low. "My interest is anthropological."

"Big space words. Use mole words so I can understand."

"You said that we should go. The ones who make the music. You call them sounders?"

Chocky thought for a moment and nodded for the tourist.

"You know one?"

"I know lots. You want to meet one?"

"It is important for my thesis."

"Then we go."

Chocky drifted in void. An ocean of sound, and him floating on the shimmering surface.

★ ★ ★

"None of my professors have heard this before. There are no recordings. Not until now. This music has roots going back centuries. Early ritual music. Twentieth century drone, minimalism, musique concrete, electroacoustic. It is communal, spatial, improvisational. Wholly remarkable. But what horror. I've never seen anything like—"

Metal clicked on rock. Movement in the dark. Chocky followed cords and tags to a stall in a market wall. "Here, spaceman," he said. "You want to make good with the sounder? We'll go to them with gifts. You barter for it."

Chocky heard the clink of coins and the thanks of the merchant. He could hear the merchant's smile, a tightness in the voice, for the amount that the tourist overpaid.

"What are these objects? Are they significant?"

"Booze and batteries. Give them to me."

Chocky felt the objects in his hands: a glass bulb, filled with liquid and sealed on all sides; a short metal tube with a recessed switch along one end. He slipped them into a zippered pocket and kicked away, giving the merchant a slap on the shoulder as he left. The tourist followed directly behind him.

He led the tourist through winding, indirect pathways. He waited for the tourist to question his sense of direction, to ask if he was lost. They did not.

The tourist asked him many questions.

"Are you comfortable with violence?"

"It's normal."

"But it seems to be, umm, everywhere. The representative told me, but I didn't—do you ever try to stop it? Does anyone?"

"If they choose. Most don't. Why make trouble?"

The tourist was silent for a time.

"Do you ever wish for light? Do you wish to see in the dark?"

"Stupid question."

"Why is it stupid? The company workers, they use sensors when they enter the tunnels. Infrared. Ultraviolet. Heat maps, depth scans. You don't see their purpose?"

"I see the purpose. We like it this way."

There were breaks in the tunnels, wide open space. Places where the company's machines spun and shook and swarmed, eating away at the flesh of the rock.

"Everywhere else," the tourist said in a place of relative quiet, "people extend and augment themselves. They see and feel the virtual, the unreal-as-real. They experience broad frequencies of light and sound. Colors never seen before, sounds never heard. Here you do the opposite. You live in darkness and hear only sound that passes through thin air and solid objects."

"That's not a question. What is it you want to know?"

"Are you familiar with the means by which the original immigrating biosect was conceived? Substantial augmentation. The naked mole rat, of Earth's Africa, used as a DNA template."

Chocky bit the inside of his cheek, tasted blood.

"It is an extraordinary animal. Studied for its unique immunity to cancers. Exceptionally long-lived. Naturally able to survive in environments with low levels of oxygen, high levels of carbon dioxide. And this, a planetoid with similar conditions, containing huge deposits of radioactive ore. Extraordinary ingenuity on the part of your designers, I must admit."

Words from the tourist. Simple words. Not short blades in the dark. Not that faint pain, something deeper. Chocky felt it, then.

"Do you know that the naked mole rat is matriarchal? That they are a hive society, like insects? Apart from a few breeding males, all other mole rats in the colony are infertile. They serve the queen as drones. By any chance, do you find anything like this behavior in your own society? Do you have a female leader, some kind of matriarch?"

Chocky tried to talk and his jaw hung open. Words cracked in his throat.

"Do you have an answer? This is the major question of my thesis. The darkness, the sounders, the violence. Your genes, perhaps. There is a connection."

"You thought about it more than I have, spaceman."

"Excuse me." The tourist drifted near him, clacking and buzzing. "You seem aggravated. I hope that I have not offended you."

"Don't know what you mean." Chocky whispered now. The moment demanded silence. The wound in his cheek bled profusely, filling his mouth. He swallowed it. They came to a place that was unmapped. Secret. Chocky found a touch panel and entered a code by feel. The door that they entered through hummed shut. The tunnel twisted away, and the tourist would not be able to see that it ended in bare rock past a series of sharp breaks.

"Longest trip of my life," Chocky said. "We didn't know if we'd survive. That's what most don't talk about. We waited to die for six years. And the changes, the therapy. Pain that never ended."

"You are referring to the settlement?"

"Worth it. Worth every sacrifice. Know why?"

The tourist stopped, close and blessedly silent, for a time. "You were there. But—I assumed that you were younger."

"Talk like that," said Chocky, his hands shaking, "is what we wanted to get away from. Put words in someone's head and you can control their thoughts. Images, too. You think you're smart. All those words. But the words think for you. Keep you locked away."

"You were human," the tourist said. Something like fear, or awe, in its voice.

"Not human. Never. Not a fucking mole either." He reached in his pocket and removed the glass ball. He felt the liquid swirl inside.

The tourist began a sentence with the words, "If I may," and then Chocky smashed the glass ball against its visor. The suit's hands leapt up to defend its passenger. It was faster than Chocky, much faster. It hit him with a burst of electricity and sent him flying.

The liquid inside the glass splattered against the suit: visor, carapace, arms, and fingers. It hissed and spat and spewed acrid smoke where it touched. The suit turned and rushed for the door, following its programming to defend its passenger, to return it to the surface in the event of any emergency. Its hands grasped the door and pulled at its useless handle, buckling the metal.

Corrosive acid ate at the suit and its visor. Chocky's senses returned and he heard the tourist's screams. He choked on acrid vapor that wafted

from the corrosion.

The materials of the suit weakened and groaned. The suit thrashed around the enclosure, clumsy and vicious, slamming around Chocky in the dark. It tried different doors, hammered against rock with its fists.

Then the acid melted through the visor. A microscopic puncture. The suit decompressed with a pop that rang in Chocky's ears. It kept moving, the empty shell. It moved no differently than before, with the same sense of life and purpose, but Chocky knew that the tourist was dead.

Then he pulled the short rod from his pocket and gripped it tightly. He leapt at the suit, extending the long tip of the prod. With one hand he found the hole burned in the visor, the acid cool against his skin. The suit struck him in the chest and he felt the crack of it. He plunged the prod into the visor, dug it into what was the tourist's face, and triggered it. The suit sparked and trembled and stilled, burned from the inside out.

Chocky drifted away, his eyes full of the light of the electric flash, clutching his chest, unable to breathe. He knew the pain of broken ribs. But where the acid touched him, where it ate gaping, scorched holes in his skin, he felt no pain at all.

His shoulder knocked against a mineral crag and he held on to it, pressed himself against it. He felt the pulses: the machines of the company, all around him. There were sounders nearby, and their drums were potent.

★ ★ ★

Chocky gave the suit to a gang of salvagers and booked an elevator home to his den. He found the virgin half-dead, feral and babbling, writhing tangled in the dense netting of the room. The stink of her filled the air and made it heavy. Chocky ran his hands along the walls. Urine and excrement splattered every surface, dried and caked under his fingers.

She murmured her made-up non-language, lost in a long and lonely madness.

He kicked off and soared through the netting, hands skipping through knots and cords, a maze that he knew because it was his home. He found her by her vibrations, the thrashing motion of her. She was caught in the netting that she could never find her way through, even though it was her home, also. He found her and grabbed her, pulled her close though she fought his touch fiercely. She clawed and bit and scratched at him, ravenous and afraid. He felt her breath and her fingers and her tongue. In

one hand she held a blade, dull but still cutting, and she raked it across his eyes, lips, chest. The pain of his bruised ribs was excruciating. Blood sprayed from his wounds and he heard it drip and scatter against the clutter of the den.

He felt no anger for her. He thought about the face he had seen in the tourist's visor, that pale and ghostly thing, flesh hanging loose, a sheath of skin over bones. Small black eyes under thick folds of skin. It meant something to him, that image. It meant that she, having been made from him, may be as beautiful as he thought himself to be. It mattered, even though he had no desire to see her as she was.

It was enough to imagine the pure and holy whiteness of her skin.

He pulled the knife from her fingers and hurled it away, heard it clatter. He returned to her at last, the virgin, the mute homunculus cloned from his cells, the only joy in his life in the tunnels. She clung to him, weeping wordlessly, at last too tired to fight him. In her touch he felt her breath, her heartbeat, come into sync with his own. His life he gave to her. An unbreakable bond. Together, to the end, they would live free. The tourist's words troubled him no more. His blood soaked them both as they hung, breathless, in the dark.

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WE'RE HERE, WE'RE HERE

K. M. SZPARA

We're Here, We're Here

K. M. SZPARA

illustration by

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TOR·COM

Jeff opens the app on his phone while we warm up. While we run through scales and diction exercises and harmonies. While we breathe in—two, three—out—two, three. While four voices unite to become one, each a band in a rainbow of sound. While Jeff adjusts the timbre of my voice.

It didn't always sound like this. That's part of why I auditioned for Back 2 Back—for the vocal implant. A chance to sing like I used to before my vocal chords thickened. I wanted my range back, wanted the soaring feeling of a note held against the swell of harmony.

I clear my throat.

"Sounds good, boys." Jeff pockets his phone. "Have a great show." He waves over his shoulder and heads up to the sound booth.

As much as I love being in a band, I love being in a *boyband* even more. You're not supposed to. Boyband members are male, but no one considers them masculine—not when their audience is comprised of teenage girls. Heaven forbid *girls'* tastes be given any weight. When I was one, my favorite band was a group of baby-faced cis boys whom my classmates misgendered just so they could call me a lesbian for liking them. Figures, they were my trans masculinity goals and now here I am:

Beside a piano, backstage at Madison Square Garden, arms around three other guys as we huddle up before the show. I breathe in the spice of deodorant, freshly washed cotton, sweat, and hint of coffee. Feel the heat of their damp armpits against my shoulder blades. The beat of their hearts.

"All right, lovers, let's go." Zeke waggles his eyebrows, eliciting laughter as we pile our hands on one another's, twine our fingers. Sing ourselves off.

"We're all together again, we're here, we're here. We're all together again, we're here, we're here!" Our joined hands bounce up and down to the rhythm as we sing the old campfire song in a circle no one else can penetrate. *"Who knows when we'll be all together again? Singing all together again! We're here, we're here!"*

We whoop and cheer. Adrenaline punches through my body as we race to take our positions below the stage. The opening notes of "Keep

Running" rumble through the stage above, though they play clearly in our monitors. I close my eyes, letting them vibrate through my body.

"Tyler."

A stagehand holds out a microphone with a strip of blue tape wrapped around the handle. Mine is always blue. Jasper's green. Aiden's yellow. And Zeke's red.

I take the offered mic, nod my thanks, and glance sideways at Jasper. He winks at me. Smirks. My heart flutters like a teenaged girl's. It's the same heart I've always had and it still flutters for musicians like Jasper. The edgy ones.

He exudes masculine energy through eyeliner, tight black jeans, and nail polish. I straighten my own jean jacket, a light blue denim over a thick white tee shirt. Khaki joggers. Clean white sneakers. I only wore them for the first time two shows ago. Still have the blisters to prove it.

"All right, B2B." The stagehand's voice is in our ears. "You're up in five, four, three, two—"

I don't hear her say "one." I'm already in the music. A loaded bullet in a sparking chamber. When the trigger is pulled, we shoot up into an arena of sound. The electricity of the band—of a live-wire guitar and surging drums. The wall of cheering and screaming, words indistinguishable but the sentiment the same:

This music is a part of me. It hurts when I don't listen and even more when I do. I'm here because this concert hall is my church. This melody is my body and these lyrics are my blood.

I feel the ache in my chest and know I feel the same.

Then, I'm raising my mic and our voices join the chorus of noise and we're off. Euphoria settles under my skin, carrying me between songs. We don't officially dance—we're too *cool* for that—but we're so close. We're mocking dance: jumping to the beat, bouncing around the massive stage. Zeke runs past with the melody on his lips and a can of Silly String in his hand.

When it's empty, he chucks it aside and slaps my ass, cackling. I'm not mad and the fans love it when he screws around. Even the label encourages it. I pick up the bridge, startled but laughing. My voice doesn't break or crack. With Jeff's control, it doesn't falter—it lifts without effort.

I close my eyes, hold my free hand up and, for a second, I'd swear I'm singing four notes at the same time, harmonizing with myself, conducting sound like a lightning rod.

I wonder, with the implant, if I could.

But then I see the others closing in, hear their voices joining mine. Aiden flips his long brown hair out of his eyes while he picks at his acoustic, notes like the patter of raindrops on hot pavement.

Jasper walks towards me like he's in *West Side Story*, crouched down, snapping his fingers, singing to me—only me. He grabs my mic and our voices blend impossibly into one.

"When I kiss you / it's like ooh-wee-ooh."

"I can't describe / your ahh-la-la-la."

"Some night when / the moon is high"

"We'll ay-ay-ay-ay / 'til it's light."

"When I kiss you, baby." Then Jasper is looking at me the way he's looked at a hundred girls and his hand is in my hair, sliding down my neck, and my face is burning, and the next thing I know I start to for-real kiss him. On stage. While Zeke sings, *"ooh-wee-ooh,"* and Aiden strums his guitar, and the crowd is so loud, I can't even hear my ear monitors.

Slowly, the sound mellows, the lights drop, and spotlights illuminate our final song. No one looks at me differently. Zeke ruffles my hair like I'm his kid brother. Aiden leans over his guitar to sing backup into my mic. Jasper takes my hand for our bows.

Everything is okay. I don't know why I thought it wouldn't be. Zeke calls us "lovers" all the time, Aiden's cried on stage before, and Jasper flirts with anyone with a pulse. I can kiss him. It doesn't mean anything to the fans. Only to me.

★ ★ ★

"You wanted to see me?" I'm still rubbing a towel through my sweaty hair, when I duck into the makeshift office the venue's provided for Jeff. "I got your text."

"Hey, Tyler. Have a seat." He gestures to an upholstered chair on the opposite side of his desk. It's fat, polished wood that belongs in a penthouse office, not a room with a paper sign taped on the front. But his workspace needs are outlined in our tour rider alongside ours. I can't blame him for wanting to feel comfortable.

Jeff is as awkward as you'd expect an executive-type who chases twenty-somethings around music venues, all day, to be. Like an out-of-touch dad who's too busy to be home for your birthday, but still pays for the party. And he is sort of like our dad—none of us has been home for more than a few days at a time, in years. Not since we auditioned. Not since Jeff called us all into a conference room, still strangers, and said, *"I want to bring back the boyband."*

I sit and slouch, crossing my legs casually, the way I've seen Jasper do. It looks better on him, I decide, and shuffle until I'm sitting up straight. Jeff lays his phone face up on the desk, amidst two stacks of papers and a computer monitor that could've come from outer space, in comparison to the heavy desk.

"What's up?" I ask.

He taps lazily at his phone. He does that enough that we're never surprised or offended when he's working and talking to us at the same time. But this feels different. Like it's for show. Like he wants me to watch what he's doing.

"I want to review some interview protocols with you. Nothing big, just a couple notes from the label."

"Okay." I lean forward until I can see the app on his phone. The one he uses to adjust our vocal implants.

"About what happened on stage tonight."

"Okay?"

He rubs his hand over his evening stubble. "We want you to carefully consider how you answer questions about the incident."

"Incident?"

"The kiss."

"Oh, that." I laugh. If I act like it didn't mean anything, it won't. "The fans loved it."

"They did. That they did." He disappears into his phone again, switching to a news app that streams video of the "incident" and photo on which someone has scribbled pink hearts with a stylus. I try to catch the website, but Jeff scrolls quickly before turning off his phone and looking right at me. "But is that really the image you want to cultivate?"

Is that a trick question? "Yes?"

"Let me re-phrase." Jeff flattens his palms against one another and points his fingertips at me. "That's not the image the label is hoping you'll

cultivate."

"Zeke literally spanked me, on stage." I'm smiling but Jeff isn't. For the first time, I'm nervous.

"He's a goofy guy," Jeff says. "It was a joke."

My smile goes stale. "Am I not funny?"

"You are, of course. You're all good-humored guys. That's why the fans love you. You're easy going, approachable, you make them laugh."

"But?"

"But you're the one they always come back to, Tyler. The one they want singing 'When I Kiss You' to them. Whose last name they write on their binders. Who's plastered on their bedroom walls. You're the face of Back 2 Back. You're…"

I know the word he's looking for. "Wholesome."

"Exactly!" Jeff nearly leaps out of his leather chair. "When I envisioned the band, I didn't know who would comprise it, what your personalities would be, what you would look or sound like. But I knew I needed you. And I chose you over a thousand potential heart throbs because you're smart and business savvy. And I trust that you can carry out my vision for the band. You can do that, right?"

I nod, pulling my knees up onto the chair.

"That's good." He smooths his tie. "If anyone asks about the incident, how about saying that it was Jasper's idea. He's got that bad boy thing going on." Jeff tries to mimic Jasper's smirk, but it looks creepy when he does it. "Anyway, I'll let you get to the bus, celebrate with the guys. I think we understand each other." He holds out his hand to me.

I'm on autopilot when I take it.

"Good man." He pats me on the back and ushers me out, shutting the door behind me.

I stand in the cold hallway, staring at the painted cinderblock walls. I can still feel the imprint of Jeff's hand on the back of my right shoulder. His assurance. And yet, I feel so unsure.

★ ★ ★

It's almost 4:00 a.m. when I give up trying to sleep and wander into the back room on the bus. A reading lamp shines in the corner where Jasper sits sideways on the couch, wearing sweats and a clean black shirt. His sleeves rolled up, notebook in hand, pencil between teeth.

"Sorry, I—"

"It's okay." Jasper tucks the pencil into his beanie. "Stay."

I walk over to the other end of the couch and slide onto the warm leather, pulling the bottom of his blanket up over my knees. "What're you working on?"

He shrugs. "Had some lyrics in my head that I couldn't get out. Nothing special."

I've never seen Jasper write before—that's Aiden's thing. He'll sit right there, too, curled up in a blanket and hoodie and spend hours writing and re-writing, pick his guitar up off the floor, play a few chords, hum, set it down, then write again. Zeke and I can play video games right beside him—nothing. None of us even try to get his attention while he's in the zone.

"What about you?" His question startles me more than it should.

"Couldn't sleep."

But Jasper stares at me, his left eyebrow slowly rising.

"What? I couldn't!" I whisper, eyes darting towards the door.

I can't tell him I was thinking about the rush of kissing him in front of all those people. The heat of the lights, of his body, his mouth. I've never done that before—kissed a man in public since I've been one, too. It was just as terrifying as I thought it would be. And I want to do it again.

"Okay, Ty, um…" Jasper leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I know that kiss wasn't a joke." He dares to meet my eyes, but I can't. I look away before all the blood in my body can rush to my face; it already is. "I'm guessing that's why you're still awake."

I stand, looking at my feet. "Think I'm going to head back to—"

Jasper takes my hand. Stops me. "I know it's awkward to talk about."

"It's not awkward." I look him dead in the eye and remember what Jeff said—how I'm supposed to talk about "the incident." "Because it was a joke. Sorry for making you uncomfortable."

He laughs. *Laughs.* I curl my fingers into fists, even though he's still holding on, pulling me towards him. How fucking dare he do this when I'm trying.

"You didn't make me uncomfortable, Tyler. You're one of my best friends—you're like my brother." He pauses and I watch him think through the implications. "Whom I'd make out with, apparently. That's weird. Sorry."

I give in and laugh with him. My ears cool, or they're so hot they've gone numb. "Glad I'm not the only weirdo." I sit back down. Closer.

"Oh, I'm definitely weird, too. And I think Aiden might be weird? But it's rude to ask, so I'm totally reading into his lyrics."

We laugh again. My heart's still beating fast, so I place a hand over it and take a deep breath.

"It's okay to be weird." Jasper takes both my hands in his. We can't be this close again. I'm going to want to kiss him and we're not on stage.

That's the unwritten contract we have with each other and our fans. We're freer when we perform. We can do things there we'd never do at an appearance or say on an interview. To some extent, it's an act. We all know it. We can only dance if we're mocking dancing, only touch and kiss if we're mocking affection.

Jasper squeezes my hands. "But you can't—"

"I know." It hurts more than I thought it would, when he starts to say what Jeff already did. "We can't…" Kiss each other on stage. "… do weird stuff during our concerts."

"Well…"

"Well?" That wasn't the response I expected.

"Tyler." He sighs, then leans forward and kisses me for the second time. Lips chapped, smelling like pine trees and hops. He kisses me a third time—I'm counting, because I know we only have so many. My mother used to say the garage door only had so many ups and downs, because my cousins and I would play with the remote and she didn't want us to break it. Same with the car windows. The computer only had so many startups and shutdowns. And Jasper and I only have so many kisses.

He catches my bottom lip between his teeth when he pulls away, biting. I gasp and grab on to his shirt.

"You can't do weird stuff on stage. Because you're the boy next door," he says. "The heartthrob. Always single, always straight, always—"

"Wholesome," I say to Jasper like I did to Jeff. "I get it. Zeke can grab my ass because he's a joker and you can kiss guys because you're the rule-breaker." I scoff. "You'd think being trans would disqualify me—it's not a secret." I get asked about it during interviews all the time. "As long as I'm romantically available to our fan base, that's what matters." I pull my hand free of his and stand. "It's not like any of them are going to fuck me,

anyway, so it doesn't matter what's actually in my pants as long as the possibility exists."

Jasper looks from his empty hand to me. "Never underestimate the power of a respectable weirdo."

★ ★ ★

I don't kiss Jasper, tonight, when we sing the song—I don't even stand near him. My mark is moved to the other side of the stage, near Aiden. It's that way for the whole show—I find words pushing themselves out of me as if I'm not even singing them, but rather they're playing from inside me, my body an elaborate music box. And my voice sounds different, tonight. Slightly fuller, deeper. It's thick in my throat. It feels good, like hefting a weight easily over my head. Like I always imagined my voice would sound.

Nothing else feels right, though. Aiden hands his guitar to a stagehand, for the last song, puts his arm around my shoulder, and draws the others towards us for a ballad. The screaming stops. My ears ring with silence.

I look at Jasper, raise the microphone to my lips and, when I sing, it's to him—for him. *"I want you as you are / don't ever change for me / when I give you my love / I give it unconditionally."*

A wave of applause crashes over us as we finish. Aiden takes my hand, raises it over our heads. We bow. I stare out into the shining abyss. Surrender myself to the noise. Find my frequency. Dissolve into pure sound.

Aiden pulls me off stage with him. The change in scenery jars me as if awake from a dream. The cool dark tunnels backstage. A slippery water bottle thrust into my hand, a towel draped over my shoulder. The band pats my back as we pass; Aiden puts his arm around my shoulder, guiding me into a room with "Press" taped to the door.

I forgot. We agreed to do a backstage exclusive with Netflix. Across the room, Jasper pops open a beer and up-ends it. I watch the golden liquid tilt back, bubbles rise, the level drop as it disappears between his lips. The angle of his neck, exposed Adam's apple, stubble.

"Why don't you have a seat over there, Tyler." Jeff's pointing with his stylus to an empty seat between Zeke and Aiden, not even looking at me. Looking at his phone.

"Sit with us, Ty!" I brace myself as Zeke slams into me. He hoists me over his shoulders like a fireman.

I burst into laughter. "Zeke!" I pretend to struggle, but not enough so he'll drop me. "Okay, okay, I'll sit with you." I look directly into one of the cameras and shake my head. Jeff gives me a thumbs-up.

I work to maintain my smile after that. I wasn't acting. I genuinely like goofing around with Zeke. Now it feels fake.

He plops me down on the sofa sideways, my feet landing on Aiden's lap, my head on the leather, beside Jasper. He looks down at me. Doesn't touch me. Doesn't run his fingers through my hair or bend down and kiss me.

Zeke nudges me to sit up while he slides in between me and Jas. The interviewer is a girl named Thalia, not much older than us—if at all—with a nose ring and thick wavy, black bangs. Her cute cheeks dimple when she smiles. She looks nervous. A fan? A professional who's also a fan. She's trying not to look at me, but our eyes meet several times.

I politely watch while she reads her introduction. We're going to play a game, apparently. Another, older woman hands us each a can, while Thalia says, "This is 'Truth or Drink'!"

"Is this—" *alcoholic,* Aiden begins to ask. He's definitely not supposed to drink on camera. Never mind Jasper chugged a bottle before this.

"Oh gosh, no!" Thalia laughs. "It's seltzer."

"Cool," Aiden says.

Thalia tucks her hair behind her ears and straightens up, question cards in hand. "Well then, are you ready, boys? I have some tough questions lined up, but I'll start you off easy."

None of them are actually tough. Most of these we've been asked a million times, but we're good at pretending they're interesting.

"What's your most embarrassing moment on stage?"

Truth.

"Best fan encounter?"

Truth.

"Worst fan encounter?"

Drink. We never shit-talk our fans.

"Fair, fair." Thalia drinks. "Any girlfriends?"

Drink. The answer is no, we don't have time, but we've learned fans enjoy the mystery.

"Boyfriends?" Thalia holds my gaze for too long.

I break the contact and am about to drink when I realize the others are all answering the question. Of course they are. There's no room for mystery. Our fans have to believe we're available to them. Like Jeff said. Like Jasper said.

"What about that kiss, Tyler?"

I perk up at my name, having been dutifully watching Aiden explain how straight men can be sensitive and express their feelings—shit I agree with but which grinds me down in the context. He knows I'm gay. Just because I never say the word, doesn't mean I haven't shared late-night stories of past hookups and childhood crushes. That he and the others haven't ribbed me for chatting with cute stagehands during sound check and bus boys at twenty-four-hour diners.

"Tyler?"

I want to drink. Why can't I drink. That's why the option exists, so I don't have to answer this fucking question. They're all looking at me. Jasper, pleadingly. Jeff, as if he can will the words from my mouth. He's a second away from mouthing the answer like a helicopter mom at her kid's spelling bee.

I'm supposed to say it was Jasper's idea. It was Jasper's idea and I'm an innocent party, ladies. *When I kiss you,* you will be a girl and I will be straight and wholesome.

"What about it?" I'm three seconds away from puking my heart into my lap.

Thalia looks at the woman who handed us the cans. Her supervisor, maybe. Someone who'll tell her how far she can push this. The woman nods.

"Can we get some details? The fans are in quite a tizzy. Some are even —do you know the word, 'shipping'?"

I shake my head.

"Like—" She explains with her hands, face flustered. "—advocating that there's a relation*ship* between you and Jasper. 'Jasler' is all over the internet, ever since the New York show."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jasper take a long slow drag of his seltzer and my mouth has never felt dryer. I hate this. I hate lying. I hate

Jeff for telling me to and I hate Jas for playing along.

I hold my can with both hands, to quiet their shaking. Look past the camera at Jeff. Say, "I don't know anything about 'Jasler' but things can get a little weird on stage, sometimes, and the truth is, I kissed Jasper becau—" I don't finish my sentence. Not because I'm at a loss for words but because I can't.

I clear my throat and try again, but nothing comes out. I hear Jasper covering for me. Playing my answer off. Zeke laughing and Aiden talking about what the song means to him and I cannot speak. At all.

I bring the can to my lips, let its contents slide down my throat. The room isn't the right color. I feel like I'm sinking. Underwater. Dizzy.

"Whoa there, Tyler, need another drink?"

I nod and catch the can tossed at me.

"Nice reflexes," Thalia says.

Seltzer sprays when I crack the can open and I don't smile. I drink. I drink for every remaining question and during the silences between them. When it's over, I jump to my feet, cross the room, and push into the hallway. Adrenaline drives me down the winding hall until I find the red door marked "Dressing Room - B2B," slam the door and lean against it.

I scream. A good hard scream that rips through my throat like fire. But it's a silent scream.

I do it again. Feel it scraping my insides. It hurts. I want it to hurt. Want to scream so loudly it echoes down the concrete halls. But I can't. I can't make a sound. Jeff turned off my voice. He took it.

"Tyler?" I hear Jasper's muted voice as he pounds on the thick door. "Ty, it's me. Open up."

He can't hear my "No" or my sobs as I slide to the floor.

"Is he in there?"

"I think so, but he's not answering."

"Tyler?" More knocking. Jeff's voice. "Tyler, I'm coming in." He cracks the door.

I don't move. Don't look at him when he peeks through the crack, but I know he's there. His cologne smells like crisp white wine. He slips between the door and its frame then says to the guys outside, "We'll only be a minute, boys," and closes it.

"Tyler," Jeff says with an air of *I don't know what to do with you.* He massages the creases in his forehead while he plays with his phone. "I

thought we were on the same page?"

I don't try to answer.

He squats down to my level, the legs of his suit rising with the bend of his knees, to expose gray argyle socks. "The label's giving you a few days to decompress. Regardless of what you might think, we care about your well-being. Let me know when you're ready to talk."

What he means is, *let me know when you're ready to behave the way we want you to and I'll give you back your voice.*

"Fuck you," I mouth. It's enough. He knows.

Jeff locks his phone and slides it into his suit pocket, stands and adjusts his cuffs. "Get up." He looks down at me but doesn't move. "Come on, the buses need to leave, soon, and you've already made enough of a scene tonight."

More knocking and muffled voices from the other side of the door.

"We're here for you, Ty."

"Whatever it is, it's okay."

I don't want them to see me like this. Not the guys or the band or the crew or fucking catering. The one thing everyone likes about me—that I like about myself—is gone. Stolen. No, I gave it away when I let the label stick an implant in my throat. How could I have been so fucking stupid as to think I owned my voice?

"Tyler." Jeff is still here. "You can walk out of here on your own or —"

That's all it takes to get me to my feet. I fling the door open to see the guys hovering beside the door. Jasper chewing on the ragged collar of his shirt, Aiden on his necklaces, Zeke on his fingernails. They all stop. Straighten up.

"Ty." Jasper reaches out, but I knock his hand away before he can make contact. As if I need a reason for the label to hold my voice hostage any longer.

I don't mean to look at him, but I can't help it. His forehead is wrinkled, lips parted, a held breath between them. I speak a silent, "I'm sorry," but it's too late. I walk beside Jeff all the way back to the bus, so I don't have to look at him. He stops short of the front door and I hop on, followed by Jas, Aiden, and Zeke.

When the door closes and we're alone, Zeke grabs my sleeve and finds my eyes with his. They're dark blue and searching, their usual spark

softened. “Do you want to talk about what happened back there? You sort of … fled.”

“If you’d rather we give you some space…” Aiden looks at the others, making sure they don’t overcrowd me. Thing is, I want them with me. It means so much that we confide in one another and care about each other in the same world where frat bros once called us ‘Butt 2 Butt.’ Where I’ve otherwise lost my faith in men.

But how can I tell them when I can’t speak. How can I make them understand when they didn’t seem to care I kissed Jasper and didn’t support me during the interview or notice when I couldn’t speak.

I break away, leaving the three of them in the front lounge, while I hide in my bunk. Their voices rise over the hum of the road, as the bus pulls out of the parking lot. Aiden’s soothing tones, Zeke’s suddenly serious. I can’t make out their words but listen for the patter of their shoes as they pass. Two go into the back, to unwind. The third stops.

I close my eyes when the curtain draws back an inch.

“Hey.” It’s Jasper.

I don’t look at him.

“I know you’re awake, Tyler.” He rubs my shoulder and my anger rises to his touch like a magnet. “Ty.”

I press my face into my pillow. One I took from the house I haven’t been back to in years. That used to live on my bed but now lives on a bus. I didn’t know I only had so many sleeps in that bed, so many nights as a regular guy with a family and a home.

“Talk to me, Ty.”

“I can’t!” I shout it right in his face, feel the scratch in my throat. The dry air on my lips.

Jasper blinks like I’ve spit on him.

I slide out of my bunk, claiming most of the narrow hallway. He teeters back, and I continue even though he can’t hear me. “I can’t talk to you because Jeff turned my fucking voice off, okay?” I slice my hand across my throat.

“You can’t talk,” he says.

“No,” I say, then shake my head, which is so hot, and this bus is so small and stuffy. I throw my head back and scream. Tears well in my eyes, spilling over when I look at him. They catch in my eyelashes and blur Jas’s thick brows and brown eyes until I blink them free.

"Ty, I'm here for you." He pulls me into a tight hug. "Are you sick? Did it happen during the interview?"

I start scanning the bunks for a pen and paper. I need something to write with and Jasper's black leather notebook stands out against the ivory sheets. I drop down to his bunk and pick the notebook up. Jasper sits beside me on the messy pile of blankets and pillows. We lean back against the outer wall, our feet hanging over the short edge and resting on the floor. This feels safer, like we're outside of time and space.

"Wait." Jasper slaps his hand on the leather-bound cover. His fingers curl, face twitches and tenses. This is his *journal.* I didn't even think. It's —it might be private. I shouldn't. "You know what, screw it." Jas hands me a pen and gestures for me to go ahead.

Without stopping to read, I flip through pages of cursive and sketches and scratched-out lyrics, glimpsing my name amongst others, until I find a blank page.

<<Jeff has an app on his phone,>> I write.

"Yeah."

<<He uses it to tune our voices—their ranges and timbre.>>

"Yeah?"

<<He can turn them off. Our voices.>>

Jasper scoffs. "No."

<<YES.>> I underline the word three times.

"No." He's pleading when he says it this time.

I circle the word *YES* until the paper rips.

Jasper looks away. "He can't—*they* can't. Can they?" He wraps a hand around his neck, looking to me for confirmation.

"I'm not making this up," I say, then write the same words.

"I believe *you,* I just can't believe *it*," he adds. "This is because you kissed me."

<<Jeff told me to say it was your idea—he called it an "incident"—but I didn't think ...>> I squeeze the pen in my fist. Jasper wraps his hand around mine. The tension feels so good, I want to feel it everywhere. Want him wrapped around my whole body. To quench the fire. Crush me to cinders.

I drop the journal and pen between us and press my mouth against Jasper's.

I kiss him because Jeff doesn't want me to.

I kiss him because he's scared, now, too.

I kiss him because the label could confiscate my voice forever and I'll lose not only my voice but him and the others. What else will they take from me? What else did I sign away when I signed over my life as the heartthrob? How many of the few remaining moments belong to me?

I kiss Jasper because I am *not* wholesome. I'm a fucking weirdo. A *queer*—that's the word everyone's terrified to use. It doesn't matter if I was born a girl, as long as I blend in, now. I'm a man, *now.*

I pull my mouth off Jasper's long enough to tell him how badly I've wanted him and for how long. How I want him, *unconditionally,* and want to be him. I can say anything I want, now that no one can hear me. He listens, anyway, holding and kissing me until we're so close to breaking all the rules.

"You shouldn't do this," I say, pressed into the corner of Jasper's impossibly small bunk. There's no room for us to lie side by side, only him on top of me. His hands in my hair and up my shirt, pressed against my scalp and my back. He has so much to lose still.

I dig my finger into his chest and hold his eyes, so he knows. When he unfastens my fly, he knows. When he slides his hand down my pants, he knows, and when his name vibrates silently through my throat, he goddamn well knows—we are not supposed to be doing this. He could lose *his* voice, for this. I could lose mine forever. It hurts like someone is scooping out my chest, but not doing this would hurt more.

We collapse. My pants half down, Jasper's shirt half up. The door to the back lounge clicks open and I hear Aiden's and Zeke's feet pad along the carpet. The metallic swish of their curtains sliding. Whispers and hushed laughter.

"Are you going to tell them?" Jasper traces my jaw with his finger.

Looking into his eyes, all I can think is, *god I am so gay,* but I say, "I don't know." And I don't know if Jas understood me, so I pull his phone out of his back pocket and open his texts to me and type, *<<I don't want to take everything away from them, like it has been from me. I don't want them to have to choose.>>* The electronic light illuminates our soft cave. "Like you do," I say to myself.

I won't tell Jasper, but I'm terrified he'll forget about this. That Jeff will give me my voice back and we'll keep on going, like always. Singing the words they write for us. Hitting the marks.

"I can talk to them with you, if you want," Jasper says. "So you don't have to go through that alone."

<<*Why should you go through it?*>> I type.

"Ty." He sounds incredulous. "What do you think this is, a solo act? We're a team. Pull your pants back—ow, fuck!" He bangs his head on the low ceiling of his bunk and rubs it while straightening his shirt. I watch him duck under the curtain and stand up in the hall, while I tug my pants on and fasten them. Run a hand through my hair. Pull myself together long enough to push the curtain aside and join them.

Aiden's sipping a craft beer he can only buy in his hometown. Zeke's holding his Nintendo DSx. They let their hands fall by their sides, give me their attention. I bite my lip and glance at Jasper. If he wants to share this burden, now's his chance.

"The label can turn off our voices," Jasper says, point blank.

They stare at us.

"What does that mean," Aiden asks, "'turn off' our voices?"

"It means the vocal implant the label fitted us with can be more than tuned. They can literally shut us up if we don't play along with their images of us." Jasper and Aiden both look at his beer. "You're not supposed to drink in public, are you?"

"No," he whispers. "Not me or Ty."

He's right. We weren't handed rulebooks and it's not in our contracts. These are the rules we've learned by working with Jeff. By the tour riders suggested for each of us, the wardrobes we're given, the interview questions we're asked.

"What do you think would happen if Zeke went back on his meds? If he was able to focus for more than five seconds. Sit still. Fucking *think*. If I decided I wanted to learn guitar—you think Jeff would let me play acoustic?"

"I'd never even considered playing or writing before Jeff suggested it," Aiden says. "I do like it, but…" He looks at Zeke. "You should be able to go back on your meds, if you want. You don't always have to be *on*. And Ty should be able to kiss guys, if that's who he is. I mean, we all know that's who you are." A little laugh escapes him.

Jasper smiles and raises his hand. "Hi, um, my name's Jasper. I don't actually like the color black as much as you'd think. Sometimes I write lyrics that I'll never show anyone—"

"What?" Aiden playfully smacks his arm. "You can show me! I want to —"

"—and I'm bisexual."

"I'm straight," Zeke says, raising his hand. "I've asked Jeff about going back on my meds multiple times and no one ever asked me if I wanted to write songs!" His look of offense sends us into full on, face-hurting laughter.

I poke my finger into my chest and shout, "I'm gay! And I have a big fucking crush on Jasper!" No one can hear me, but they all laugh, anyway —with me, not at me. Our arms are around one another again, all of us.

Aiden raises his hand. "I-I'm…" A deep crease settles into his forehead. "I don't even think I'm a 'boy' all the time. I'm afraid to tell Jeff. We're a boyband. That's the basic requirement. I don't want to be kicked out."

"It's okay, man—or not-man." Zeke rubs Aiden's shoulder. "Neither do I."

I shake my head and say, "Me neither."

"Fuck 'em," Jasper says. "If they kick us all out, we can be our own band."

"Not if they take our voices, like they did Ty's," Zeke says.

They all stare at me, the reminder of how fragile our band is. The moment when we were our full selves, gone. Our voices at stake.

★ ★ ★

"Hey, Ty." Jeff's head and torso appear where he leans into the bus. This isn't his space, but he inserts himself, anyway.

I don't respond, obviously. I can't speak and don't give Jeff the satisfaction of watching me try. I don't even remove my headphones, though I do hit pause.

"Shayna from wardrobe asked me to bring that over." He nods at a garment bag hanging from a cabinet knob. "You do want to perform, right?"

The question catches me so off guard—the yearning to sing, again—that I say, "Yes," then dig my nails into my palm when I remember I vowed not to "speak." I nod, trying not to look too eager. But I can't help it. I fucking miss it. I miss the lights, the energy, the crowd, the guys. I miss the feeling of sound ripping through me like a bullet.

Jeff pats my back. "Good boy."

I literally bite my tongue.

"I'll leave you to it." He nods at the garment bag. "Call's in fifteen minutes. I'll meet you and the guys at your marks beneath the stage. Got it?"

I nod.

Jeff nods, then leaves.

I should sit it out. Protest. Show the label they don't own me, but they do. And I want to perform so badly—need to. I close my eyes and take several deep breaths. Forget this is Jeff's doing. Remember why I'm here: for the music, for the guys, for the fans. For me.

★ ★ ★

We soar as the platforms we stand on rise. Born from the ground into the spotlight. I hold my mic to my lips and unleash the melody: *"Don't stand still / gotta keep running."* I feel the sound in my throat. Hear my voice harmonizing with the others'. But something is wrong.

"How y'all doing tonight?" Jasper asks the crowd, holding his mic out to pick up the swell of their response. A wave of screams. "I don't know, guys, I don't think they're awake yet." He winks at me.

I bring my mic up and say, "They sound a bit sleepy to me, Jas," but no sound comes out. My heart ticks like a bomb waiting to explode in my chest. Confusion seizes my face.

Jasper's smile falters. He tilts his head. Says, "I asked how y'all are doing, tonight." Except he doesn't watch the audience for their response, he watches me.

I put the mic to my lips again and say, "I think they're awake, now." And no one hears me. I snap my fingers into the mic.

Jeff didn't turn my voice on. He didn't even turn my mic on. And yet, when the chorus comes around, I hold up my mic and move my lips and my voice rings out over the speakers like it's coming from my throat. It's not. I'm a warm body. A marionette. Jeff might as well stick his arm up my ass and puppet my jaw with his hand.

The lights dim to soft blues and purples. The four of us walk to the front of the stage, Aiden with his guitar. Jasper raises his mic to his lips and says, "We're going to do something special for you guys. Go off-book. Sing a little song a cappella, for you, that we only ever sing for each other.

You won't find it on the set list." The crowd cheers but Jasper holds his finger to his lips, quieting them. "You know the one I mean—Zeke?"

"Yup," he answers. "And you guys are in for a treat."

"Aiden?" Jasper says, next.

When Aiden says, "I'm ready," I realize what Jasper's doing.

He's forcing Jeff's hand.

My heart picks up speed as I search for the sound booth through the glare of lights. Is Jeff up there? Is his finger hovering over the app, wondering whether to turn my voice back on or shut Jasper's off? When he says my name next, will Jeff let me answer?

"What about you, Ty?" Jas looks right at me. "You ready?"

When I bring my mic to my lips and say, "As ever," the words sound full and loud over the waiting silence. I switch my mic to my left hand and put my arm around Jasper and sing, *"We're all together again, we're here, we're here."*

Jasper puts his around Aiden. *"We're all together again, we're here, we're here."*

Aiden, around Zeke. *"Who knows when we'll be all together again?"*

Zeke around Aiden. *"Singing all together again? We're here, we're here."*

We look at one another. Smile. And, this time, sing in unison, that *we're all together, again.* Four voices, again. Brothers. Friends. Weirdos. *We're here.* And *who knows* how long Jeff will let us go on like this. The label can stop the tour. Bar us from the studio. Maybe even keep us from *singing all together, again.* But we will continue to use our voices to support one another. As long as someone is listening. As long as we have each other. *We're here, we're here.*

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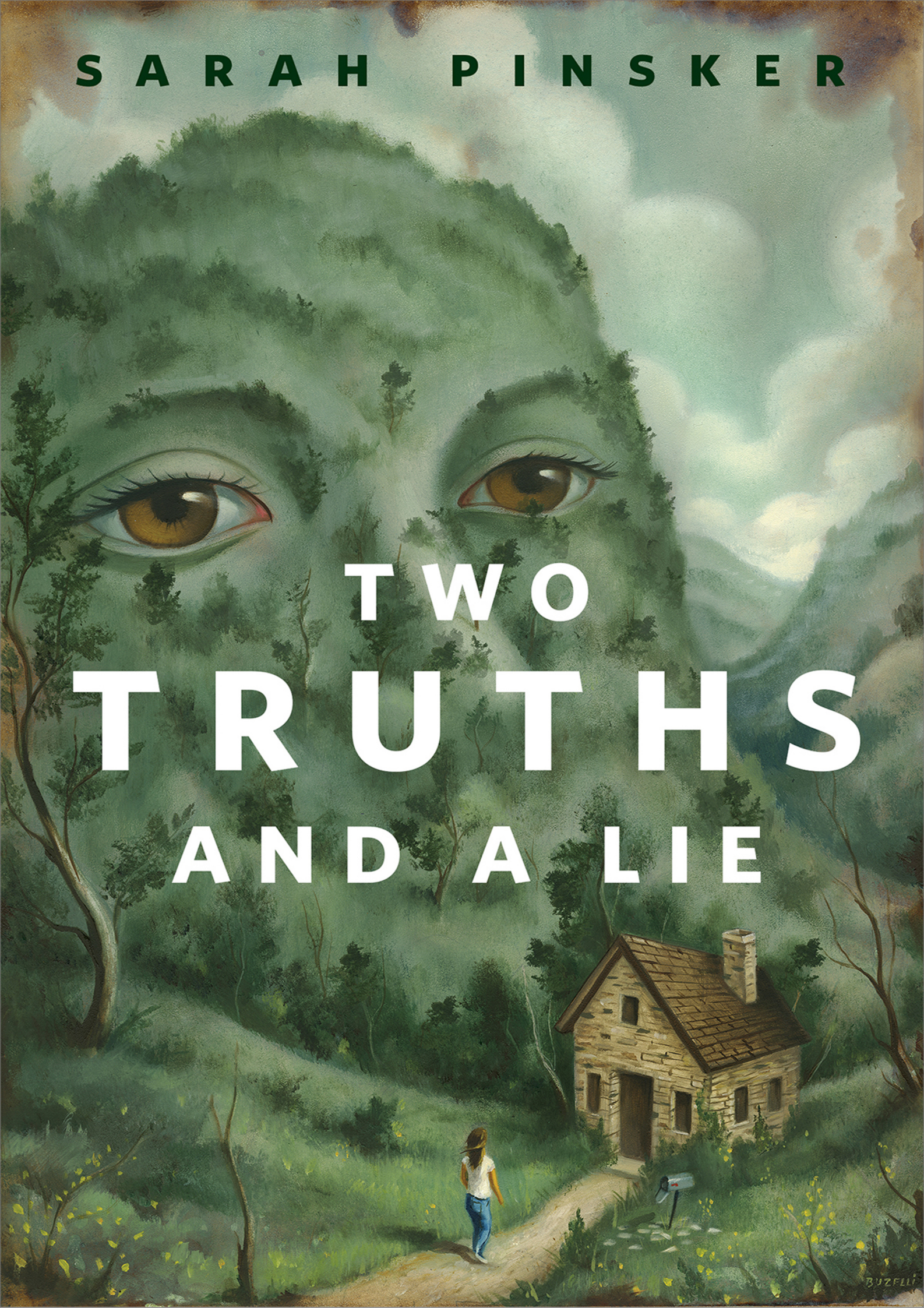
SARAH PINSKER

TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE



Two Truths and a Lie

SARAH PINSKER

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TOR·COM

In his last years, Marco's older brother Denny had become one of those people whose possessions swallowed them entirely. The kind they made documentaries about, the kind people staged interventions for, the kind people made excuses not to visit, and who stopped going out, and who were spoken of in sighs and silences. Those were the things Stella thought about after Denny died, and those were the reasons why, after eyeing the four other people at the funeral, she offered to help Marco clean out the house.

"Are you sure?" Marco asked. "You barely even knew him. It's been thirty years since you saw him last."

Marco's husband, Justin, elbowed Marco in the ribs. "Take her up on it. I've got to get home tomorrow and you could use help."

"I don't mind. Denny was nice to me," Stella said, and then added, "But I'd be doing it to help you."

The first part was a lie, the second part true. Denny had been the weird older brother who was always there when their friends hung out at Marco's back in high school, always lurking with a notebook and a furtive expression. She remembered Marco going out of his way to try to include Denny, Marco's admiration wrapped in disappointment, his slow slide into embarrassment.

She and Marco had been good friends then, but she hadn't kept up with anyone from high school. She had no excuse; social media could reconnect just about anyone at any time. She wasn't sure what it said about her or them that nobody had tried to communicate.

On the first night of her visit with her parents, her mother had said, "Your friend Marco's brother died this week," and Stella had suddenly been overwhelmed with remorse for having let that particular friendship lapse. Even more so when she read the obituary her mother had clipped, and she realized Marco's parents had died a few years before. That was why she went to the funeral and that was why she volunteered. "I'd like to help," she said.

Two days later, she arrived at the house wearing clothes from a bag her mother had never gotten around to donating: jeans decades out of style and dappled with paint, treadworn gym shoes, and a baggy, age-stretched T-shirt from the Tim Burton *Batman.* She wasn't self-conscious about the clothes—they made sense for deep cleaning—but there was something surreal about the combination of these particular clothes and this particular door.

"I can't believe you still have that T-shirt," Marco said when he stepped out onto the stoop. "Mine disintegrated. Do you remember we all skipped school to go to the first showing?"

"Yeah. I didn't even know my mom still had it. I thought she'd thrown it out years ago."

"Cool—and thanks for doing this. I told myself I wouldn't ask anybody, but if someone offered I'd take them up on it. Promise me you won't think less of me for the way this looks? Our parents gave him the house. I tried to help him when I visited, but he didn't really let me, and he made it clear if I pushed too hard I wouldn't be welcome anymore."

Stella nodded. "I promise."

He handed her a pair of latex gloves and a paper mask to cover her mouth and nose; she considered for the first time how bad it might be. She hadn't even really registered that he had squeezed through a cracked door and greeted her outside. The lawn was manicured, the flower beds mulched and weeded and ready for the spring that promised to erupt at any moment, if winter ever agreed to depart. The shutters sported fresh white paint.

Which was why she was surprised when Marco cracked the door again to enter, leaving only enough room for her to squeeze through as she followed. Something was piled behind the door. Also beside the door, in front of the door, and in every available space in the entranceway. A narrow path led forward to the kitchen, another into the living room, another upstairs.

"Oh," she said.

He glanced back at her. "It's not too late to back out. You didn't know what you were signing up for."

"I didn't," she admitted. "But it's okay. Do you have a game plan?"

"Dining room, living room, rec room, bedrooms, in that order. I have no clue how long any room will take, so whatever we get done is fine.

Most of what you'll find is garbage, which can go into bags I'll take to the dumpster in the yard. Let me know if you see anything you think I might care about. We should probably work in the same room, anyhow, since I don't want either of us dying under a pile. That was all I thought about while I cleaned a path through the kitchen to get to the dumpster: If I get buried working in here alone, nobody will ever find me."

"Dining room it is, then." She tried to inject enthusiasm into her voice, or at least moral support.

It was strange seeing a house where she had spent so much time reduced to such a fallen state. She didn't think she'd have been able to say where a side table or a bookcase had stood, but there they were, in the deepest strata, and she remembered.

They'd met here to go to prom, ten of them. Marco's father had photographed the whole group together, only saying once, "In my day, people went to prom with dates," and promptly getting shushed by Marco's mother. Denny had sat on the stairs and watched them, omnipresent notebook in his hands. It hadn't felt weird until Marco told him to go upstairs, and then suddenly it had gone from just another family member watching the festivities to something more unsettling.

She and Marco went through the living room to the dining room. A massive table still dominated the room, though it was covered with glue sticks and paintbrushes and other art supplies. Every other surface in the room held towering piles, but the section demarcated by paint-smeared newspaper suggested Denny had actually used the table.

She smelled the kitchen from ten feet away. Her face must have shown it, because Marco said, "I'm serious. Don't go in there unless you have to. I've got all the windows open and three fans blowing but it's not enough. I thought we could start in here because it might actually be easiest. You can do the sideboard and the china cabinets and I'll work on clearing the table. Two categories: garbage and maybe-not-garbage, which includes personal stuff and anything you think might be valuable. Dying is shockingly expensive."

Stella didn't know if that referred to Denny's death—she didn't know how he'd died—or to the funeral, and she didn't want to ask. She wondered why Marco had chosen the impersonal job with no decisions involved, but when she came to one of his grandmother's porcelain teacups, broken by the weight of everything layered on top of it, she

thought she understood. He didn't necessarily remember what was under here, but seeing it damaged would be harder than if Stella just threw it in a big black bag. The items would jog memories; their absence would not.

She also came to understand the purpose of the latex gloves. The piles held surprises. Papers layered on papers layered on toys and antiques, then, suddenly, mouse turds or a cat's hairball or the flattened tendril of some once-green plant or something moldering and indefinable. Denny had apparently smoked, too; every few layers, a full ashtray made an appearance. The papers were for the most part easy discards: the news and obituary sections of the local weekly newspaper, going back ten, fifteen, thirty-five years, some with articles cut out.

Here and there, she came across something that had survived: a silver platter, a resilient

teapot, a framed photo. She placed those on the table in the space Marco had cleared. For a while it felt like she was just shifting the mess sideways, but eventually she began to recognize progress in the form of the furniture under the piles. When Marco finished, he dragged her garbage bags through the kitchen and out to the dumpster, then started sifting through the stuff she'd set aside. He labeled three boxes: "keep," "donate," and "sell." Some items took him longer than others; she decided not to ask how he made the choices. If he wanted to talk, he'd talk.

"Stop for lunch?" Marco asked when the table at last held only filled boxes.

Stella's stomach had started grumbling an hour before; she was more than happy to take a break. She reached instinctively for her phone to check the time, then stopped herself and peeled the gloves off the way she'd learned in first aid in high school, avoiding contamination. "I need to wash my hands."

"Do it at the deli on the corner. You don't want to get near any of these sinks."

The deli on the corner hadn't been there when they were kids. What *had* been? A real estate office or something else that hadn't registered in her teenage mind. Now it was a hipster re-creation of a deli, really, complete with order numbers from a wall dispenser. A butcher with a waxed mustache took their order.

"Did he go to school with us?" Stella whispered to Marco, watching the butcher.

He nodded. "Chris Bethel. He was in the class between us and Denny, except he had a different name back then."

In that moment, she remembered a Chris Bethel, pre-transition, playing Viola in *Twelfth Night* like a person who knew what it was to be shipwrecked on a strange shore. Good for him.

While they waited, she ducked into the bathroom to scrub her hands. She smelled like the house now, and hoped nobody else noticed.

Marco had already claimed their sandwiches, in plastic baskets and waxed paper, and chosen a corner table away from the other customers. They took their first few bites without speaking. Marco hadn't said much all morning, and Stella had managed not to give in to her usual need to fill silences, but now she couldn't help it.

"Where do you live? And how long have you and Justin been together?"

"Outside Boston," he said. "And fifteen years. How about you?"

"Chicago. Divorced. One son, Cooper. I travel a lot. I work sales for a coffee distributor."

Even as she spoke, she hated that she'd said it. None of it was true. She had always done that, inventing things when she had no reason to lie, just because they sounded interesting, or because it gave her a thrill. If he had asked to see pictures of her nonexistent son Cooper, she'd have nothing to show. Not to mention she had no idea what a coffee distributor did.

Marco didn't seem to notice, or else he knew it wasn't true and filed it away as proof they had drifted apart for a reason. They finished their sandwiches in silence.

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"Tackle the living room next?" Marco asked. "Or the rec room?"

"Rec room," she said. It was farther from the kitchen.

Farther from the kitchen, but the basement litter pans lent a different odor and trapped it in the windowless space. She sighed and tugged the mask up.

Marco did the same. "The weird thing is I haven't found a cat. I'm hoping maybe it was indoor-outdoor or something…"

Stella didn't know how to respond, so she said, "Hmm," and resolved to be extra careful when sticking her hands into anything.

The built-in bookshelves on the back wall held tubs and tubs of what looked like holiday decorations.

"What do you want to do with holiday stuff?" Stella pulled the nearest box forward on the shelf and peered inside. Halloween and Christmas, mostly, but all mixed together, so reindeer ornaments and spider lights negotiated a fragile peace.

"I'd love to say toss it, but I think we need to take everything out, in case."

"In case?"

He tossed her a sealed package to inspect. It held two droid ornaments, like R2-D2 but different colors. "Collector's item, mint condition. I found it a minute ago, under a big ball of tinsel and plastic reindeer. It's like this all over the house: valuable stuff hidden with the crap. A prize in every fucking box."

The size of the undertaking was slowly dawning on her. "How long are you here for?"

"I've got a good boss. She said I could work from here until I had all Denny's stuff in order. I was thinking a week, but it might be more like a month, given everything…"

"A month! We made good progress today, though…"

"You haven't seen upstairs. Or the garage. There's a lot, Stella. The dining room was probably the easiest other than the kitchen, which will be one hundred percent garbage."

"That's if he didn't stash more collectibles in the flour."

Marco blanched. "Oh god. How did I not think of that?"

Part of her wanted to offer to help again, but she didn't think she could stomach the stench for two days in a row, and she was supposed to be spending time with her parents, who already said she didn't come home enough. She wanted to offer, but she didn't want him to take her up on it. "I'll come back if I can."

He didn't respond, since that was obviously a lie. They returned to the task at hand: the ornaments, the decorations, the toys, the games, the stacks of DVDs and VHS tapes and records and CDs and cassettes, the prizes hidden not in every box, but in enough to make the effort worthwhile. Marco was right that the dining room had been easier. He'd decided to donate all the cassettes, DVDs, and videotapes, but said the vinyl might actually be worth something. She didn't know anything about records, so

she categorized them as playable and not, removing each from its sleeve to examine for warp and scratches. It was tedious work.

It took two hours for her to find actual equipment Denny might have played any of the media on: a small television on an Ikea TV stand, a stereo and turntable on the floor, then another television behind the first.

It was an old set, built into a wooden cabinet that dwarfed the actual screen. She hadn't seen one like this in years; it reminded her of her grandparents. She tried to remember if it had been down here when they were kids.

Something about it—the wooden cabinet, or maybe the dial—made her ask, "Do you remember *The Uncle Bob Show*?"

Which of course he didn't, nobody did, she had made it up on the spot, like she often did.

Which was why it was so weird that Marco said, "Yeah! And the way he looked straight into the camera. It was like he saw me, specifically me. Scared me to death, but he said, 'Come back next week,' and I always did because I felt like he'd get upset otherwise."

As he said it, Stella remembered too. The way Uncle Bob looked straight into the camera, and not in a friendly Mr. Rogers way. Uncle Bob was the anti-Mr. Rogers. A cautionary uncle, not predatory, but not kind.

"It was a local show," she said aloud, testing for truth.

Marco nodded. "Filmed at the public broadcast station. Denny was in the audience a few times."

Stella pictured Denny as she had known him, a hulking older teen. Marco must have realized the disconnect, because he added, "I mean when he was little. Seven or eight, maybe? The first season? That would make us five. Yeah, that makes sense, since I was really jealous, but my mom said you had to be seven to go on it."

Stella resized the giant to a large boy. *Audience* didn't feel like exactly the right word, but she couldn't remember why.

Marco crossed the room to dig through the VHS tapes they'd discarded. "Here."

It took him a few minutes to connect the VCR to the newer television. The screen popped and crackled as he hit play.

The show started with an oddly familiar instrumental theme song. *The Uncle Bob Show* appeared in block letters, then the logo faded and the screen went black. A door opened, and Stella realized it wasn't dead-

screen black but a matte black room. The studio was painted black, with no furniture except a single black wooden chair.

Children spilled through the door, running straight for the camera—no, running straight for the secret compartments in the floor, all filled with toys. In that environment, the colors of the toys and the children's clothes were shocking, delicious, welcoming, warm. Blocks, train sets, plastic animals. That was why *audience* had bothered her. They weren't an audience; they were half the show, half the camera's focus. After a chaotic moment where they sorted who got possession of what, they settled in to play.

Uncle Bob entered a few minutes later. He was younger than Stella expected, his hair dark and full, his long face unlined. He walked with a ramrod spine and a slight lean at the hips, his arms clasped behind him giving him the look of a flightless bird. He made his way to the chair, somehow avoiding the children at his feet even though he was already looking straight into the camera.

He sat. Stella had the eeriest feeling, even now, that his eyes focused on her. "How on earth did this guy get a TV show?"

"Right? That's Denny there." Marco paused the tape and pointed at a boy behind and to the right of the chair. Her mental image hadn't been far off; Denny was bigger than all the other kids. He had a train car in each hand, and was holding the left one out to a little girl. The image of him playing well with others surprised Stella; she'd figured he'd always been a loner. She opened her mouth to say that, then closed it again. It was fine for Marco to say whatever he wanted about his brother, but it might not be appropriate for her to bring it up.

Marco pressed play again. The girl took the train from Denny and smiled. In the foreground, Uncle Bob started telling a story. Stella had forgotten the storytelling, too. That was the whole show: children doing their thing, and Uncle Bob telling completely unrelated stories. He paid little attention to the kids, though they sometimes stopped playing to listen to him.

The story was weird. Something about a boy buried alive in a hillside —"planted," in his words—who took over the entire hillside, like a weed, and spread for miles around.

Stella shook her head. "That's fucked up. If I had a kid I wouldn't let them watch this. Nightmare city."

Marco gave her a look. "I thought you said you had a kid?"

"I mean if I'd had a kid back when this was on." She was usually more careful with the lying game. Why had she said she had a son, anyway? She'd be found out the second Marco ran into her parents.

It was a dumb game, really. She didn't even remember when she'd started playing it. College, maybe. The first chance she'd had to reinvent herself, so why not do it wholesale? The rules were simple: Never lie about something anyone could verify independently; never lose track of the lies; keep them consistent and believable. That was why in college she'd claimed she'd made the varsity volleyball team in high school, but injured her knee so spectacularly in practice she'd never been able to play any sport again, and she'd once flashed an AP physics class, and she'd auditioned for the *Jeopardy!* Teen Tournament but been cut when she accidentally said "fuck" to Alex Trebek. Then she just had to live up to her reputation as someone who'd lived so much by eighteen that she could coast on her former cool.

Uncle Bob's story was still going. "They dug me out of the hillside on my thirteenth birthday. It's good to divide rhizomes to give them room to grow."

"Did he say 'me'?"

"A lot of his stories went like that, Stella. They started out like fairy tales, but somewhere in the middle he shifted into first person. I don't know if he had a bad writer or what."

"And did he say 'rhizome'? Who says 'rhizome' to seven-year-olds?" Stella hit the stop button. "Okay. Back to work. I remember now. That's plenty."

Marco frowned. "We can keep working, but I'd like to keep this on in the background now that we've found it. It's nice to see Denny. That Denny, especially."

That Denny: Denny frozen in time, before he got weird.

Stella started on the boxes in the back, leaving the stuff near the television to Marco. Snippets of story drifted her way, about the boy's family, but much, much older than when they'd buried him. His brothers were fathers now, their children the nieces and nephews of the teenager they'd dug from the hillside. Then the oddly upbeat theme song twice in a row—that episode's end and another's beginning.

"Marco?" she asked. "How long did this run?"

"I dunno. A few years, at least."

"Did you ever go on it? Like Denny?"

"No. I … hmm. I guess by the time I'd have been old enough, Denny had started acting strange, and my parents liked putting us into activities we could both do at the same time."

They kept working. The next Uncle Bob story that drifted her way centered on a child who got lost. Stella kept waiting for it to turn into a familiar children's story, but it didn't. Just a kid who got lost and when she found her way home she realized she'd arrived back without her body, and her parents didn't even notice the difference.

"Enough," Stella said from across the room. "That was enough to give me nightmares, and I'm an adult. Fuck. Watch more after I leave if you want."

"Okay. Time to call it quits, anyway. You've been here like nine hours."

She didn't argue. She waited until they got out the front door to peel off the mask and gloves.

"It was good to hang out with you," she said.

"You, too. Look me up if you ever get to Boston."

She couldn't tell him to do the same with Chicago, so she said, "Will do." She realized she'd never asked what he did for a living, but it seemed like an awkward time. It wasn't until after she'd walked away that she realized he'd said goodbye as if she wasn't returning the next day. She definitely wasn't, especially if he kept binging that creepy show.

When she returned to her parents' house she made a beeline for the shower. After twenty minutes' scrubbing, she still couldn't shake the smell. She dumped the clothes in the garbage instead of the laundry and took the bag to the outside bin, where it could stink as much as it needed to stink.

Her parents were sitting on the screened porch out front, as they often did once the evenings got warm enough, both with glasses of iced tea on the wrought iron table between them as if it were already summer. Her mother had a magazine open on her lap—she still subscribed to all her scientific journals, though she'd retired years before—and her father was solving a math puzzle on his tablet, which Stella could tell by his intense concentration.

"That bad?" Her mother lifted an eyebrow at her as she returned from the garbage.

"That bad."

She went into the house and poured herself a glass to match her parents'. Something was roasting in the oven, and the kitchen was hot and smelled like onions and butter. She closed her eyes and pressed the glass against her forehead, letting the oven and the ice battle over her body temperature, then returned to sit on the much cooler porch, picking the empty chair with the better view of the dormant garden.

"Grab the cushion from the other chair if you're going to sit in that one," her father said.

She did as he suggested. "I don't see why you don't have cushions for both chairs. What if you have a couple over? Do they have to fight over who gets the comfortable seat versus who gets the view?"

He shrugged. "Nobody's complained."

They generally operated on a complaint system. Maybe that was where she'd gotten the habit of lies and exaggeration: She'd realized early that only extremes elicited a response.

"How did dinner look?" he asked.

"I didn't check. It smelled great, if that counts for anything."

He grunted, the sound both a denial and the effort of getting up, and went inside. Stella debated taking his chair, but it wasn't worth the scene. A wasp hovered near the screen and she watched it for a moment, glad it was on the other side.

"Hey, Ma, do you remember *The Uncle Bob Show*?"

"Of course." She closed her magazine and hummed something that sounded half like Uncle Bob's theme song and half like *The Partridge Family* theme. Stella hadn't noticed the similarity between the two tunes; it was a ridiculously cheery theme song for such a dark show.

"Who was that guy? Why did they give him a kids' show?"

"The public television station had funding trouble and dumped all the shows they had to pay for—we had to get cable for you to watch *Sesame Street* and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. They had all these gaps to fill in their schedule, so anybody with a low budget idea could get on. That one lasted longer than most—four or five years, I think."

"And nobody said, 'That's some seriously weird shit?'"

"Oh, we all did, but someone at the station argued there were plenty of peace-and-love shows around, and some people like to be scared, and it's not like it was full of violence or sex, and just because a show had kids in it didn't mean it was a kids' show."

"They expected adults to watch? That's even weirder. What time was it on?"

"Oh, I don't remember. Saturday night? Saturday morning?"

Huh. Maybe he was more like those old monster movie hosts. "That's deeply strange, even for the eighties. And who was the guy playing Uncle Bob? I tried looking it up on IMDB, but there's no page. Not on Wikipedia either. Our entire world is fueled by nostalgia, but there's nothing on this show. Where's the online fan club, the community of collectors? Anything."

Her mother frowned, clearly still stuck on trying to dredge up a name. She shook her head. "Definitely Bob, a real Bob, but I can't remember his last name. He must've lived somewhere nearby, because I ran into him at the drugstore and the hardware store a few times while the show was on the air."

Stella tried to picture that strange man in a drugstore, looming behind her in line, telling her stories about the time he picked up photos from a vacation but when he looked at them, he was screaming in every photo. If he were telling that story on the show, he'd end it with, "and then you got home from the drugstore with your photos, but when you looked at them, you were screaming in every photo too." Great. Now she'd creeped herself out without his help.

"How did I not have nightmares?"

"We talked about that possibility—all the mothers—but you weren't disturbed. None of you kids ever complained. It was a nice break, to chat with the other moms while you all played in such a contained space."

There was a vast difference between "never complained" and "weren't disturbed" that Stella would have liked to unpack, but she fixated on a different detail. "Contained space—you mean while we watched TV, right?"

"No, dear. The studio. It looked much larger on television, but the cameras formed this nice ring around three sides, and you all understood you weren't supposed to leave during that half hour except for a bathroom emergency. You all played and we sat around and had coffee. It was the

only time in my week when I didn't feel like I was supposed to be doing something else."

It took Stella a few seconds to realize the buzzing noise in her head wasn't the wasp on the screen. "What are you talking about? I was on the show?"

"Nearly every kid in town was on it at some point. Everyone except Marco, because his brother was acting up by the time you two were old enough, and Celeste pulled Denny and enrolled both boys in karate instead."

"But me? Ma, I don't remember that at all." The idea that she didn't know something about herself that others knew bothered her more than she could express. "You aren't making this up?"

"Why would I lie? I'm sure there are other things you don't remember. Getting lice in third grade?"

"You shaved my head. Of course I remember. The whole class got it, but I was the only one whose mother shaved her head."

"I didn't have time to comb through it, honey. Something more benign? Playing at Tamar Siegel's house?"

"Who's Tamar Siegel?"

"See? The Siegels moved to town for a year when you were in second grade. They had a jungle gym that you loved. You didn't think much of the kid, but you liked her yard and her dog. We got on well with her parents; I was sad when they left."

Stella flashed on a tall backyard slide and a golden retriever barking at her when she climbed the ladder and left it below. A memory she'd never have dredged up unprompted. Nothing special about it: a person whose face she couldn't recall, a backyard slide, an experience supplanted by other experiences. Generic kid, generic fun. A placeholder memory.

"Okay, I get that there are things that didn't stick with me, and things that I think I remember once you remind me, but it doesn't explain why I don't remember a blacked-out TV studio or giant cameras or a creepy host. You forget the things that don't stand out, sure, but this seems, I don't know, formative."

Her mother shrugged. "You're making a big deal of nothing."

"Nothing? Did you listen to his stories?"

"Fairy tales." "Now I know you didn't listen. He was telling horror stories to seven-year-olds."

"Fairy tales *are* horror stories, and like I said, you didn't complain. You mostly played with the toys."

"What about the kids at home watching? The stories were the focus if you weren't in the studio." "If they were as bad as you say, hopefully parents paid attention and watched with their children and whatever else the experts these days say comprises good parenting. You're looking through a prism of now, baby. Have you ever seen early *Sesame Street*? I remember a sketch where a puppet with no facial features goes to a human for 'little girl eyes.' You and your friends watched shows, and if they scared you, you turned them off. You played outside. You cut your Halloween candy in half to make sure there were no razor blades inside. If you want to tell me I'm a terrible parent for putting you on that show with your friends, feel free, but since it took you thirty-five years to bring this up, I'm going to assume it didn't wreck your life."

Her father rang the dinner gong inside the house, a custom her parents found charming and Stella had always considered overkill in a family as small as theirs. She and her mother stood. Their glasses were still mostly full, the melting ice having replaced what they'd sipped.

She continued thinking over dinner, while she related everything she and Marco had unearthed to her mildly curious parents, and after, while scrubbing the casserole dish. What her mother said was true: She hadn't been driven to therapy by the show. She didn't remember any nightmares. It just felt strange to be missing something so completely, not to mention the questions that arose about what else she could be missing if she could be missing that. It was an unpleasant feeling.

After dinner, while her parents watched some reality show, she pulled out a photo album from the early eighties. Her family hadn't been much for photographic documentation, so there was just the one, chronological and well labeled, commemorating Stella at the old school playground before they pulled it out and replaced it with safer equipment, at a zoo, at the Independence Day parade. It was true, she didn't recall those particular moments, but she believed she'd been there. *The Uncle Bob Show* felt different. The first time she'd uttered the show's name, she'd thought she'd made it up.

She texted Marco: "Did Denny have all the Uncle Bob episodes on tape or only the ones he was in? Thanks!" She added a smiley face then erased it before she hit send. It felt falsely cheery instead of appreciative. His brother had just died.

She settled on the couch beside her parents. While they watched TV, she surfed the web looking for information about *The Uncle Bob Show*, but found nothing. In the era of kittens with Twitter accounts and sandwiches with their own Instagrams and fandoms for every conceivable property, it seemed impossible for something to be so utterly missing.

Not that it deserved a fandom; she just figured everything had one. Where were the ironic logo T-shirts? Where was the episode wiki explaining what happened in every Uncle Bob story? Where were the "Whatever happened to?" articles? The tell-alls by the kids or the director or the camera operator? The easy answer was that it was such a terrible show, or such a small show, that nobody cared. She didn't care either; she just needed to know. Not the same thing.

The next morning, she drove out to the public television station on the south end of town. She'd passed it so many times, but until now she wouldn't have said she'd ever been inside. Nothing about the interior rang a bell either, though it looked like it had been redone fairly recently, with an airy design that managed to say both modern and trapped in time.

"Can I help you?" The receptionist's trifocals reflected her computer's spreadsheet back at Stella. A phone log by her right hand was covered with sketched faces; the sketches were excellent. Grace Hernandez, according to her name plaque.

Stella smiled. "I probably should have called, but I wondered if you have archives of shows produced here a long time ago? My mother wants a video of a show I was on as a kid and I didn't want her to have to come over here for nothing."

Even while she said it, she wondered why she had to lie. Wouldn't it have been just as easy to say she wanted to see it herself? She'd noticed an older receptionist and decided to play on her sympathies, but there was no reason to assume her own story wasn't compelling.

"Normally we'd have you fill out a request form, but it's a slow day. I can see if someone is here to help you." Grace picked up a phone and called one number, then disconnected and tried another. Someone

answered, because she repeated Stella's story, then turned back to her. "He'll be out in a sec."

She gestured to a glass-and-wood waiting area, and Stella sat. A flat screen overhead played what Stella assumed was their station, on mute, and a few issues of a public media trade magazine called *Current* were piled neatly on the low table.

A small man—a little person? Was that the right term?—came around the corner into reception. He was probably around her age, but she would have remembered him if he'd gone to school with her.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Jeff Stills. Grace says you're looking for a show?"

"Yes, my mother—"

"Grace said. Let's see what we can do."

He handed her a laminated guest pass on a lanyard and waited while she put it on, then led her through a security door and down a long, low-ceilinged corridor, punctuated by framed stills from various shows. No Uncle Bob. "Have you been here before?"

"When I was a kid."

"Hmm. I'll bet it looks pretty different. This whole back area was redone around 2005, after the roof damage. Then the lobby about five years ago."

She hadn't had any twinges of familiarity, but at least that explained some of it. She'd forgotten about the blizzard that wrecked the roof; she'd been long gone by then.

"Hopefully whatever you're looking for wasn't among the stuff that got damaged by the storm. What *are* you looking for?"

"*The Uncle Bob Show*. Do you know it?"

"Only by name. I've seen the tapes on the shelf, but in the ten years I've been here, nobody has ever asked for a clip. Any good?"

"No." Stella didn't hesitate. "It's like those late-night horror hosts, Vampira or Elvira or whatever, except they forgot to run a movie and instead let the host blather on."

They came to a nondescript door. The low-ceilinged hallway had led her to expect low-ceilinged rooms, but the space they entered was more of a warehouse. A long desk cluttered with computers and various machinery occupied the front, and then the space opened into row upon row of metal shelving units. The aisles were wide enough to accommodate rolling ladders.

"We've been working on digitizing, but we have fifty years of material in here, and some stuff has priority."

"Is that what you do? Digitize?"

"Nah. We have interns for that. I catalogue new material as it comes in, and find stuff for people when they need clips. Mostly staff, but sometimes for networks, local news, researchers, that kind of thing."

"Sounds fun," Stella said. "How did you get into the field?"

"I majored in history, but never committed enough to any one topic for academic research. Ended up at library school, and eventually moved here. It is fun! I get a little bit of everything. Like today: a mystery show."

"Total mystery."

She followed him down the main aisle, then several aisles over, almost to the back wall. He pointed at some boxes above her head.

"Wow," she said. "Do you know where everything is without looking it up?"

"Well, it's alphabetical, so yeah, but also they're next to *Underground*, which I get a lot of requests for. Do you know what year you need?"

"1982? My mother couldn't remember exactly, but that's the year I turned seven."

Jeff disappeared and returned pushing a squeaking ladder along its track. He climbed up for the "*Uncle Bob Show* 1982" box. It looked like there were five years' worth, 1980 to 1985. She followed him back toward the door, where he pointed her to an office chair.

"We have strict protocols for handling media that hasn't been backed up yet. If you tell me which tapes you want to watch, I'll queue them up for you."

"Hmm. Well, my birthday is in July, so let's pick one in the last quarter of the year first, to see if I'm in there." "You don't know if you are?"

She didn't want to admit she didn't remember. "I just don't know when."

He handed her a pair of padded headphones and rummaged in the box. She'd been expecting VHS tapes, but these looked like something else—Betamax, she guessed.

The show's format was such that she didn't have to watch much to figure out if she was in it or not. The title card came on, then the episode's children rushed in. She didn't see herself. She wondered again if this was a joke on her mother's part.

"Wait—what was the date on this one?"

Jeff studied the label on the box. "October ninth."

"I'm sorry. That's my mother's birthday. There's no way she stood around in a television studio that day. Maybe the next week?"

He ejected the tape and put it back in its box and put in another, but that one obviously had some kind of damage, all static.

"Third time's the charm," he said, going for the next tape. He seemed to believe it himself, because he dragged another chair over and plugged in a second pair of headphones. "Do you mind?"

She shook her head and rolled her chair slightly to the right to give him a better angle. The title card appeared.

"It's a good thing nobody knows about this show or they'd have been sued over this theme song," he said.

Stella didn't answer. She was busy watching the children. She recognized the first few kids: Lee Pool first, a blond beanpole; poor Dan Heller; Addie Chapel, whose mother had been everyone's pediatrician.

And then there she was, little Stella Gardiner, one of the last through the door. She wasn't used to competing for toys, so maybe she didn't know she needed to get in early, or maybe they were assigned an order behind the scenes. She'd thought seeing herself on screen would jog her memory, give her the studio or the stories or the backstage snacks, but she still had no recollection. She pointed at herself on the monitor for Jeff's benefit, to show they'd found her. He gave her a thumbs-up.

Little Stella seemed to know where she was going, even if she wasn't first to get there. Lee Pool already had the T. rex, but she wouldn't have cared. She'd liked the big dinosaurs, the bigger the better. She emerged from the toy pit with a matched pair. Brontosaurus, apatosaurus, whatever they called them these days. She could never wrap her head around something that large having existed. So yeah, the dinosaurs made sense—it was her, even if she still didn't remember it.

She carried the two dinosaurs toward the set's edge, where she collected some wooden trees and sat down. She was an only child, used to playing alone, and this clearly wasn't her first time in this space.

The camera lost her. The focus, of course, was on Uncle Bob. She had been watching herself and missed his entrance. He sat in his chair, children playing around him. Dan Heller zoomed around the set like a satellite in orbit, a model airplane in hand.

"Once upon a time there was a little boy who wanted to go fast." Uncle Bob started a story without waiting for anyone to pay attention.

"He liked everything fast. Cars, motorcycles, boats, airplanes. Bicycles were okay, but not the same thrill. When he rode in his father's car, he pretended they were racing the cars beside them. Sometimes they won, but mostly somebody quit the race. His father was not a fast driver. The little boy knew that if he drove, he'd win all the races. He wouldn't stop when he won, either. He'd keep going.

"He liked the sound of motors. He liked the way they rumbled deep enough to rattle his teeth in his head, and his bones beneath his skin; he liked the way they shut all the thinking out. He liked the smell of gasoline and the way it burned his nostrils. His family's neighbors had motorcycles they rode on weekends, and if he played in the front yard they'd sometimes let him sit on one with them before they roared away, leaving too much quiet behind. When they drove off, he tried to recreate the sound, making as much noise as possible until his father told him to be quiet, then to shut up, then 'For goodness sake, what does a man have to do to get some peace and quiet around here on a Saturday morning?'" Dan paused his orbit and turned to face the storyteller. Two other kids had stopped to pay attention as well; Stella and the others continued playing on the periphery.

"The boy got his learner's permit on the very first day he was allowed. He skipped school for it rather than wait another second. He had saved his paper route money for driving lessons and a used motorbike. As soon as he had his full license, he did what he had always wanted to do: He drove as fast as he could down the highway, past all the cars, and then he kept driving forever. The end."

Uncle Bob shifted back in his chair as he finished. Dan watched him for a little longer, then launched himself again, circling the scattered toys and children faster than before.

Jeff sat back as well. "What kind of story was that?"

Stella frowned. "A deeply messed up one. That kid with the airplane —Dan Heller— drove off the interstate the summer after junior year. He was racing someone in the middle of the night and missed a curve."

"Oof. Quite the coincidence."

"Yeah…"

Uncle Bob started telling another story, this one about a vole living in a hole on a grassy hillside that started a conversation with the child sleeping in the hole next door.

"Do you want to watch the whole episode? Is this the one you need?"

"I think I need to look at a couple more?" She didn't know what she was looking for. "Sorry for putting you out. I don't mean to take up so much time."

"It's fine! This is interesting. The show is terrible, from any standpoint. The story was terrible, the production is terrible. I can't even decide if this whole shtick is campy bad or bad bad. Leaning toward the latter."

"I don't think there's anything redeeming," Stella said, her mind still on Dan Heller. Did his parents remember this story? "Can we look at the next one? October 30th?"

"Coming up." Jeff appeared to have forgotten she'd said she was looking for something specific, and she didn't remind him, since she still couldn't think of an appropriate detail.

Little Stella was second through the door this time, behind Tina, whose last name she didn't remember. She paused and looked out past a camera, probably looking for her mother, then kept moving when she realized more kids were coming through behind her. Head for the toys. Claim what's yours. Brontosaurus and T. rex and a blue whale. Whales were almost as cool as dinosaurs.

Tina had claimed a triceratops and looked like she wanted the brontosaurus. They sat down on the edge of the toy pit to negotiate. Uncle Bob watched them play, which gave Stella the eeriest feeling of being watched, even though she still felt like the kid on the screen wasn't her.

"So what was it like?" Jeff asked, but Stella didn't answer. Uncle Bob had started a story. He looked straight into the camera. This time it felt like he was truly looking straight at her. This was the one. She knew it.

"Once upon a time, there was a little girl who didn't know who she was. Many children don't know who they will be, and that's not unusual, but what was unusual in this case was that the girl was willing to trade who she was for who she could be, so she began to do just that. Little by little, she replaced herself with parts of other people she liked better. Parts of stories she wanted to live. Nobody lied like this girl. She

believed her own stories so completely, she forgot which ones were true and which were false.

"If you've ever heard of a cuckoo bird, they lay their eggs in other birds' nests, so those birds are forced to raise them for their own. This girl was her own cuckoo, laying stories in her own head, and the heads of those around her, until even she couldn't remember which ones were true, or if there was anything left of her."

Uncle Bob went silent, watching the children play. After a minute, he started telling another story about the boy in the hill, and how happy he was whenever he had friends over to visit. That story ended, and a graphic appeared on the screen with an address for fan mail. Stella pulled a pen from her purse and wrote it down as the theme music played out.

"Are you sending him a letter?" The archivist had dropped his headphones and was watching her.

She shrugged. "Just curious."

"Is this the one, then?" "The one?"

He frowned. "You said you wanted a copy for your mother."

"Yes! That would be lovely. This is the one she mentioned."

He pulled a DVD off a bulk spindle and rewound the tape. "You didn't say what it was like. Was he weird off camera too?"

"Yes," she said, though she didn't remember. "But he kept to himself. Just stayed in his dressing room until it was time to go on."

Jeff didn't reply, and something subtle changed about the way he interacted with her. What if there hadn't been a dressing room? He might know. When had she gotten so sloppy with her stories? Maybe it was because she was distracted. Her mother had told the truth: She'd been on a creepy TV show of which she had no memory. And what was it? Performance art? Storytelling? Fairy tales or horror? All of the above? She thanked Jeff and left.

★ ★ ★

She had just walked into her parents' house when Marco called. "Can you come back? There's something I need to show you."

She headed out to Denny's house. She paused on the step, realizing she was in nicer clothes this time. Hopefully she wouldn't be there long.

"Hey," she said when Marco answered the door. Even though she braced for the odor, it hit her hard.

He waved her in, talking as he navigated the narrow path he'd cleared up the stairs. "I thought I'd work on Denny's bedroom today, and, well…"

He held out an arm in the universal gesture of "go ahead," so she entered. The room had precarious ceiling-high stacks on every surface, including the floor and bed, piles everywhere except a path to an open walk-in closet. She stepped forward.

"What is that?"

"The word I came up with was 'shrine,' but I don't think that's right."

It was the sparest space in the house. She'd expected a dowel crammed end to end with clothes, straining under the weight, but the closet was empty except for—"shrine" was indeed the wrong word. This wasn't worship.

The most eye-catching piece, the thing she saw first, was a hand-painted Uncle Bob doll propped in the back corner. It looked like it had been someone else first—Vincent Price, maybe. Next to it stood a bobblehead and an action figure, both mutated from other characters, and one made of clay and plant matter, seemingly from scratch. Beside those, a black leather notebook, a pile of VHS tapes, and a single DVD. Tacked to the wall behind them, portraits of Uncle Bob in paint, in colored pencil, macaroni, photo collage, in, oh god, was that cat hair? And beside those, stills from the show printed on copier paper: Uncle Bob telling a story; Uncle Bob staring straight into the camera, an assortment of children. Her own still was toward the bottom right. Marco wasn't in any of them.

"That's the thing that guts me."

Stella turned, expecting to see Marco pointing to the art or the dolls, but she'd been too busy looking at those to notice the filthy pillow and blanket in the opposite corner. "He slept here?"

"It's the only place he could have." Marco's voice was strangled, like he was trying not to cry.

She didn't know what to say to make him feel better about his brother having lived liked this. She picked up the notebook and paged through it. Each page had a name block-printed on top, then a dense scrawl in black, then, in a different pen, something else. Not impossible to read, but difficult, writing crammed into every available inch, no space between words even. She remembered this notebook; it was the one teenage Denny always had on him.

"Take it," Marco said. "Take whatever you want. I can't do this anymore. I'm going home."

She took the notebook and the DVD, and squeezed Marco's arm, unsure whether he would want or accept a hug.

Her parents were out when she got back to their house, so she slipped the DVD into their machine. It didn't work. She took it upstairs and tried it in her mother's old desktop computer instead. The computer made a sound like a jet plane taking off, and opened a menu with one episode listed: March 13, 1980.

It started the same way all the other episodes had started. The kids, Uncle Bob. Denny was in this one; Stella had an easier time spotting him now that she knew who to look for. He went for the train set again, laying out wooden tracks alongside a kid Stella didn't recognize.

Uncle Bob started a story. "Once upon a time, there was a boy who grew very big very quickly. He felt like a giant when he stood next to his classmates. People stopped him in hallways and told him he was going to the wrong grade's room. His mother complained that she had to buy him new clothes constantly, and even though she did it with affection, he was too young to realize she didn't blame him. He felt terrible about it. Tried to hide that his shoes squeezed his toes or his pants were too short again.

"His parents' friends said, 'Somebody's going to be quite an athlete,' but he didn't feel like an athlete. More than that, he felt like he had grown so fast his head had been pushed out of his body, so he was constantly watching it from someplace just above. Messages he sent to his arms and legs took ages to get there. Everything felt small and breakable in his hands, so that when his best friend's dog had puppies he refused to hold them, though he loved when they climbed all over him.

"The boy had a little brother. His brother was everything he wasn't. Small, lithe, fearless. His mother told him to protect his brother, and he took that responsibility seriously. That was something that didn't take finesse. He could do that.

"Both boys got older, but their roles didn't change. The older brother watched his younger brother. When the smaller boy was bullied, his brother pummeled the bullies. When the younger brother made the high school varsity basketball team as a point guard his freshman year, his older brother made the team as center, even though he hated sports.

"Time passed. The older brother realized something strange. Every time he thought he had something of his own, it turned out it was his brother's. He blinked one day and lost two entire years. How was he the older brother, the one who got new clothes, who reached new grades first, and yet still always following? Even his own story had spun out to describe him in relation to his sibling.

"And then, one day, the boy realized he had nothing at all. He was his brother's giant shadow. He was a forward echo, a void. Nothing was his. All he could do was watch the world try to catch up with him, but he was always looking backward at it. All he could do—"

"No," said Denny.

Stella had forgotten the kids were there, even though they were on camera the entire time. Denny had stood and walked over to where Uncle Bob was telling the story. With Uncle Bob sitting, Denny was tall enough to look him in the eye.

For the first time, Uncle Bob turned away from the camera. He assessed Denny with an unsettling smile.

"No," Denny said again.

Now Uncle Bob glanced around as if he was no longer amused, as if someone needed to pull this child off his set. It wasn't a tantrum, though. Denny wasn't misbehaving, unless interrupting a story violated the rules.

Uncle Bob turned back to him. "How would you tell it?"

Denny looked less sure now.

"I didn't think so," said the host. "But maybe that's enough of that story. Unless you want to tell me how you think it ends?" Denny shook his head.

"But you know?"

Denny didn't move.

"Maybe that's enough. We'll see. In any case, I have other stories to tell. We haven't checked in on my hill today."

Uncle Bob began to catch his audience up on the continuing adventure of the boy who'd been dug out of the hillside. The other children kept playing, and Denny? Denny looked straight into the camera, then walked off the set. He never came back. Stella didn't have any proof, but she was pretty sure this must have been the last episode Denny took part in. He looked like a kid who was done. His expression was remarkably similar to the one she'd just seen on Marco's face.

And what was that story? Unlike Dan Heller's driving story, unlike the one she'd started thinking of as her own, this one wasn't close to true. Sure, Denny had been a big kid, but neither he nor Marco played basketball. He never protected Marco from bullies. "Nothing was his" hardly fit the man whose house she'd cleaned.

Except that night, falling asleep, Stella couldn't help but think that when she compared what she knew of Denny with that story, it seemed like Denny had set out to prove the story untrue. What would a person do if told as a child that nothing was his? Collect all the things. Leave his little brother to fend for himself. Fight it on every level possible.

Was it a freak occurrence that Denny happened to be listening when Uncle Bob told that story? Why was she assuming the story was about him at all? Maybe it was coincidence. There was nothing connecting the children to the stories except her own sense that they were connected, and Denny's reaction on the day he quit.

She hadn't heard hers when Uncle Bob told it, but she'd internalized it nonetheless. How much was true? She wasn't a cuckoo bird. Her reinventions had never hurt anyone.

Marco called that night to ask if she wanted to grab one more meal before she left town, but she said she had too much to do before her flight. That was true, as was the fact that she didn't want to see him again. Didn't want to ask him if he'd watched the March 13 show. Didn't want to tell him his brother had consciously refused him protection.

★ ★ ★

She should have gone straight to the airport in the morning, but the fan mail address she'd written down was in the same direction, if she took the back way instead of the highway. Why a show like that might get fan mail was a question for another time. This was strictly a trip to satisfy her curiosity. She drove through town, then a couple of miles past, into the network of county roads.

The mailbox stood full, overflowing, a mat of moldering envelopes around its cement base. A weather-worn "For Sale" sign had sunk into the soft ground closer to the drainage ditch. Stella turned onto the long driveway, and only after she'd almost reached the house did it occur to her that if she'd looked at the mail, she might have found his surname.

The fields on either side of the lane were tangled with weeds that didn't look like they cared what season it was. The house, a tiny stone cottage, was equally weed-choked, but strangely familiar. If she owned this house, she'd never let it get like this, but it didn't look like it belonged to anyone anymore. She tried a story on for size: "While I was visiting my parents, I went for a drive in the country, and I found the most darling cottage. My parents are getting older, and I had the thought that I should move closer to them. The place needed a little work, so I got it for a song."

She liked that one.

Nobody answered when she knocked. The door was locked, and the windows were too dirty to see through, and she couldn't shake the feeling that if she looked through he'd be sitting there, staring straight at her, waiting.

She walked around back and found the hill.

It was a funny little hill, not entirely natural looking, but what did she know? The land behind the house sloped gently upward, then steeper, hard beneath the grass but not rocky. From the slope, the cottage looked even smaller, the fields wilder, tangled, like something from a fairy tale. The view, too, felt strangely familiar.

She knew nothing more about the man who called himself Uncle Bob, but as she walked into the grass she realized this must be the hill from his stories, the stories he told when he wasn't telling stories about the children. How did they go? She thought back to that first episode she'd watched in Denny's basement.

Once upon a time, there was a boy whose family planted him in a hillside, so that he took over the entire hillside, like a weed. They dug me out of the hillside on my thirteenth birthday. It's good to divide rhizomes to give them room to grow.

That story made her remember the notebook she'd taken from Denny's house, and she rummaged for it in her purse. The notebook was alphabetical, printed in a nearly microscopic hand other than the page headings, dense. She found one for Dan Heller. She couldn't decipher the whole story, but the first line was obviously *Once upon a time, there was a little boy who wanted to go fast*. She knew the rest. In blue pen, it said what she had said to Jeff the archivist: motorcycle wreck, alongside the date. That one was easy since she knew enough to fill in the parts she

struggled to read. The others were trickier. There was no page for Marco, but Denny had made one for himself. It had Uncle Bob's shadow-brother story but no update at the bottom. Nothing at all for the years between.

Who else had been on the show? Lee Pool had a page. So did Addie Chapel, who as far as Stella knew had followed in her mother's footsteps and become a doctor. Chris Bethel, and beside him, Tina Bevins, the other dinosaur lover. If she spent enough time staring, maybe Denny's handwriting would decipher itself.

She was afraid to turn to her own page. She knew it had to be there, on the page before Dan Heller, but she couldn't bring herself to look, until she did. She expected this one, like Dan's, like Denny's own, to be easier to decipher because she knew how it would go.

October 30, 1982. Once upon a time, there was a little girl who didn't know who she was. Many children don't know who they will be, and that's not unusual, but what was unusual in this case was that the girl was willing to trade who she was for who she could be, so she began to do just that. Little by little, she replaced herself with parts of other people she liked better. Parts of stories she wanted to live. Nobody lied like this girl. She believed her own stories so completely, she forgot which ones were true and which were false.

If you've ever heard of a cuckoo bird, they lay their eggs in other birds' nests, so those birds are forced to raise them for their own. This girl was her own cuckoo, laying stories in her own head, and the heads of those around her, until even she couldn't remember which ones were true, or if there was anything left of her.

There was more. Another episode, maybe? She had no idea how many she'd been on, and her research had been shoddy. Maybe every story was serialized like the boy in the hill. It took her a while to make out the next bit.

November 20, 1982. Our cuckoo girl left the nest one day to spread her wings. When she returned, she didn't notice that nobody had missed her. She named a place where she had been, and they accepted it as truth. She made herself up, as she had always done, convincing even herself in the process. Everything was true, or true enough.

Below that, in blue pen, a strange assortment of updates from her life, as observed by Denny. Marco's eleventh birthday party, when she'd given him juggling balls. Graduation from middle school. The summer they'd

both worked at the pool, and Marco'd gotten heatstroke and thrown up all the Kool-Aid they tried to put in him, Kool-Aid red, straight into the pool like a shark attack. The time she and Marco had tried making out on his bed, only he had started giggling, and she had gotten offended, and when she stood she tripped over a juggling ball and broke her toe. All the games their friends had played in Marco's basement: I've Never, even though they all knew what everyone else had done; Two Truths and a Lie, though they had all grown up together and knew everything about each other; Truth or Dare, though everyone was tired of truth, truth was terrifying, everyone chose dare, always. The *Batman* premiere. The prom amoeba, the friends who went together, all of whom she'd lost touch with. High school graduation. Concrete memories, things she knew were as real as anything that had ever happened in her life. Denny shouldn't have known about some of these things, but now she pictured him there, somewhere, holding this notebook, watching them, taking notes, always looking like he had something to say but he couldn't say it.

Below those stories he'd written: *Once there was a girl who got lost and when she found her way home she realized she'd arrived back without herself, and her parents didn't even notice the difference.* Which couldn't be her story at all; she hadn't been on the episodes he'd been on.

After graduation, he had no more updates on her. She paged forward, looking at the blue ink. Everyone had updates within the last year, everyone except for Denny, everyone who was still alive; the ones who weren't had death dates. Everyone except her. She tried to imagine what from her adult life she would have added, given the chance, or what an internet search on her name would provide, or what her parents would tell someone who asked what she was doing. Surely there was something. Parents were supposed to be your built-in hype machines.

She pulled out her phone to call Marco, but the battery was dead. Just as well, since she was suddenly afraid to try talking to anyone at all. She returned to the notebook and flipped toward the back. *U* for *Uncle Bob*.

Once upon a time, there was a boy whose family planted him in a hillside, so that he took over the entire hillside, like a weed. They dug me out of the hillside on my thirteenth birthday. It's good to divide rhizomes to give them room to grow.

This story was long, eight full pages in tiny script, with episode dates interspersed. At the end, in red ink, this address. She pictured Denny

driving out here, exploring the cottage, looking up at the hill. If she ever talked to Marco again, she'd tell him that what he'd found in Denny's closet wasn't a shrine; it was Denny's attempt to conjure answers to something unanswerable.

She put the notebook back in her purse and kept walking. Three quarters of the way up the hill she came to a large patch where the grass had been churned up. She put her hand in the soil and it felt like the soil grasped her hand back.

Her parents said she didn't visit often enough, but now she couldn't remember ever having visited them before, or them visiting her. She couldn't remember if she'd ever left this town at all. She lived in Chicago, or did she? She'd told Marco as much, told him other things she knew not to be true, but what was true, then? What did she do for a living? If she left this hill and went to the airport, would she even have a reservation? If she caught her plane, would she find she had anything or anyone there at all? Where was there? She pulled her hand free and put it to her mouth: The soil tasted familiar.

"I walked down to the cottage that would be mine someday"—that felt nice, even if she wasn't sure she believed it—"and then past the cottage, through the town, and into my parents' house. They believed me when I said where I'd been. They fit me into their lives and only occasionally looked at me like they didn't quite know how I'd gotten there." That felt good. True. She sat in the dirt and leaned back on her hands, and felt the hill pressing back on them.

She could still leave: walk back to her rental car, drive to the airport, take the plane to the place where she surely had a career, a life, even if she couldn't quite recall it. She thought that until she looked back at where the rental car should have been and realized it wasn't there. She had no shoes on, and her feet were black with dirt, pebbled, scratched. She dug them into the soil, rooting with her toes.

How had Denny broken his story? He'd refused it. Whether his life was better or worse for it remained a different question. To break her story, she'd have to walk back down the hill and reconstruct herself the right way round. She thought of the cuckoo girl, the lost girl, the cuckoo girl, so many stories to keep straight.

The soil reached her forearms now, her calves. The top layer was sun-warmed, and underneath, a busy cool stillness made up of millions of

insects, of the roots of the grass, of the rhizomes of the boy who had called this hillside home before she had. She'd walk back to town when she was ready, someday, maybe, but she was in no hurry. She'd heard worse stories than hers, and anyway, if she didn't like it she'd make a new one, a better one, a true one.

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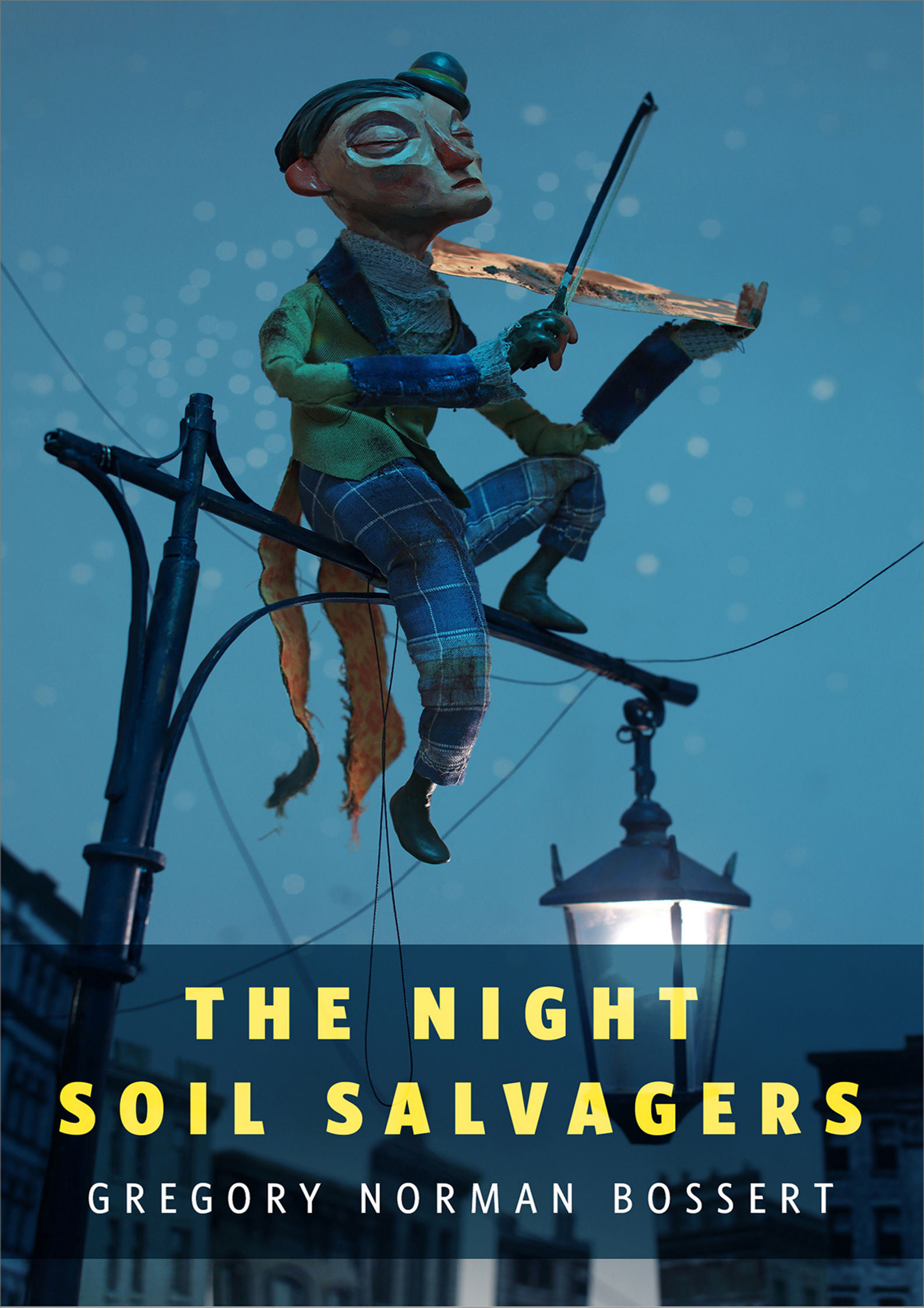
THE NIGHT
SOIL SALVAGERS
GREGORY NORMAN BOSSERT

The Night Soil Salvagers

GREGORY NORMAN BOSSERT

illustration by

RED NOSE STUDIO

TOR·COM

The Night Soil Salvagers spend little time these days attending to their ancient calling. Sixty percent of the city is now connected to the sewer system, and public privies provide for a fair portion of the rest. The Salvagers can visit the remaining households, those of the low slums and the great estates, in no more than a third of the night's hours.

Some of the night's remaining hours are spent gathering other types of waste: food scraps and food to be scrapped, the street leavings of horse and dog, the ceaseless shower of detritus the city sheds that can be put to use elsewhere and otherwise. And as has always been done, some of the Salvagers work through the night sorting and processing the collected waste into forms whose value is more readily apparent.

The Night Soil Salvagers spend more of those leftover hours in transporting items of the most unlikely natures and most urgent confidence, a service that has become nearly as vital to the city as is their traditional purpose.

And for the rest: painting, pranks, recitation, the surveying of sludge-sluiced alleys and moonlit roof tiles, the tending of night gardens, and most of all the making of music.

That music you know, though you do not know that you do. It is the score of the dreams of the city, half-heard in the high branches of boulevards at midnight, felt as a rumble under the fall of rain, seen as a tremor in the light through the pane. In other times and places, it sighs from the drain before dawn (all drains are the same drain) to trouble the sleep of a Debussy or Satie. Three times in your life, it will be sung softly into your ear from a seat at your bedside.

But none of this is what the Night Soil Salvagers *do*. Not as they would have it. What the Night Soil Salvagers do is lessen the burden of the city on the Earth. On a good night—and what night is *not* good to the Night Soil Salvagers?—one will greet another with, "The city is light tonight." And the other will reply, "Let it be so light that under the moon it rises up."

★ ★ ★

The Night Soil Salvagers tell this story:

Attende! I and others remember when Parch cleared the Chairman's privy.

One day some days past, the Chairman of D—'s new privy, lined in ivory and trimmed with gold, came up clogged on the day of a dinner party in honor of the Council of Industry. The Butler flagged Parch down on the street and demanded he clear the clog.

"The sewer-runs here are old but sound," Parch said. "The clog will be in the new work, in the privy itself. Show me in and five minutes later I'll have you flowing as freely as a drunkard in an alley." Parch spun in place with arms up like a spiraling drain—such a stench!

The Butler staggered back, eyes narrow over the handkerchief he clutched to his mouth. "You'll not set an unclean foot into this house," the Butler said. "Do your work from the street side."

Parch leaned to look past the Butler through the entrance, down a long hallway to the distant door to the privy. "A penny, then, for every foot from the street to the clog, and an extra two for my unclean own." He rocked from heel to toe and grinned up at the Butler.

The deal agreed, if grudgingly, the Butler returned to his preparations for the dinner, and Parch to preparations of another sort: the finding of a discarded platter the width of the sewer-run, a length of cloth, a bit of hot tar, a pole, and six more Salvagers.

That evening, as the Chairman began his speech of welcome to the members of the Council of Industry, their spouses, and invited guests, he was interrupted by a bubbling, grumbling groan and the slightest scent of dyspeptic distress. He flushed and stammered as his audience shifted and checked each other side-eyed for clues to the miscreant. No one noticed that the great mirrors that lined the dining room reflected a window in the parlor, and that the window framed a small grubby face, watching.

The Chairman cleared his throat and began his speech again. After an ornate sentence or two—not heard outside but easy enough to see reflected in the mirrors due to the Chairman's grandiose gestures—the owner of the grubby face waved an equally grubby arm. That wave was echoed by an elderly geezer with a pipe who stood over a sewer cover in the street, and then by a fidgety, bird-like girl at the bottom of the sewer entrance, to be in turn acknowledged by Parch and three more who crouched in the sewer-run, under the house itself and halfway to the privy.

Parch and the three grasped the pole that ran between them and shoved it forward with all their strength. The pole was attached to the platter, which had been padded with cloth and tar until it fit the sewer pipe like a plunger.

Inside the mansion, the Chairman's comments on the recent encouraging developments in international trade were punctuated by a fat, flatulent peal and an unmistakable pong. The Chairman dabbed his suddenly sweaty face with a

decorative pocket square unequal to the task, while his guests did their best to surreptitiously move as far from each other as possible.

And so it went—a few sentences from the Chairman, a wave from the window, a shove on the plunger, a rude sound and ruder smell—until finally, with a pop like an uncorked bottle, the clog gave way and came fountaining out of the privy. A stinking stream ran down the long gold-trimmed hallway and out the front door, quickly joined by the fleeing guests and the dregs of the Chairman's dream to be invited into the Council.

Of Parch and the others there was by that point no sign, though that night the Butler found his own shoes, filthy from the cleaning, sitting on his pillow, and beside them two pennies.

Nocturne for Midnight on the Full Moon

Title: "Calling Her Down"

For one or more performers.

Find

- A dozen small bells, such as those for sleighs or cats, ideally of silver

Performance

Fasten the bells to the highest branches of a tree likely to fetch a breeze.

Variation

Title: "Calling Her Back, Regardless"

As above, but on the new moon, and with the bells replaced by discarded baby rattles.

Commentary

Florens says, "The *passante* will slow her steps, retie her scarf tight; the *flâneur* is too busy ignoring her to look up to the light."

Parch says, "The drunkard lured up the tree by the jingle of loose change only to find all the best spots taken by babies."

★ ★ ★

The Night Soil Salvagers will carry any unliving thing from any point within the city to any other point within the city for a modest fee.

Those who wish to utilize this service should write their name on a piece of sturdy paper, fold the paper in thirds each way and seal it shut, then leave this petition in the gutter in the hours after midnight. Even at that hour, there are those—human and otherwise—to whom such detritus is irresistible, so be prepared do this nightly until the Salvagers respond with a note slipped under your door specifying a time and place to meet.

Bring a pocketful of change to this meeting.

A Salvager will find you there with the greeting: "What and whither for I and others?"

Respond with the nature of the object you wish carried, and the place to which you wish it brought.

The Salvagers almost never refuse carriage on the basis of the thing itself, e.g. gifts, bags of gold, manuscripts, a candle and a match, government documents, bodies, parts of bodies still viable, parts of bodies long since gone, opium, the fourth cup for a patterned tea set, hot food, cold drink, sharpened knives, natural horns in the required key, scented soap, the key to something that must never again be opened.

They will not take any living thing, not plants nor pets nor persons, though if asked with polite deference and a convincing case, they might recommend those who will.

The Salvagers will, however, refuse carriage if they believe the destination you have named is not appropriate to the thing itself. In this case, they will respond, "I and others will carry this thing elsewhere." They will not tell you where.

You may of course accept or decline this option.

If an accord is reached, deliver to them the thing, or direct the Salvager to where it sits. Give them what coins you have brought. The cost of the simplest of meals is an appropriate amount, though the very poor may provide a penny. The money so raised is sent to distant cities where the Night Soil folk are afforded less respect than here.

The thing itself will be delivered to its destination before the dawn, without fail.

Nocturne for 1:00 a.m.

Title: "The Still Wind Still Eddies Nonetheless"

For one performer.

Find

- A thin plate or sheet of glass, bronze, or such, a forearm's width or larger
- A rosined bow
- A clamp, cushion, thread, or other means of supporting the plate such that it can still vibrate freely
- A handful of ash

Performance

Evenly cover the plate with a fine dusting of ash. Rub the bow on the edge of the plate, adjusting place and pressure until you raise a tone. Smoothly maintain that tone until the ash forms a pattern of nodal lines and antinodal open spaces. When the pattern is clear, lift the bow and listen closely until the tone fades. Then bow with a loose, shifting motion until the ash lies evenly once more.

Variation

Title: "The Eddy's Song is Nonetheless Still"

Find

- A sheet of paper or parchment the size of a plate or larger, such as a broadsheet or bill
- Two thin sticks
- A handful of ash

Cover the paper with ash. Wrap one edge of the paper around one of the sticks for a turn, then do the same with the other stick and the opposite edge. Grasp a stick in each hand, stretching the paper tightly between them. Hold the paper flat overhead under a streetlamp or moon. Sing into the underside of the paper, watch as the shadowed pattern emerges, and then unforms.

Commentary

Florens says, "I and others say that the pattern in the ash emerges as if we free it, but this is telling tales. Independent of our urges, the pattern was always there in the glass. Through performance we learn to see it."

Parch says, "The pattern is a map. The antinode is a garden. When the work is over, even the thought of 'garden' is gone. That'll be a great night for gardeners."

★ ★ ★

The Night Soil Salvagers keep a garden in an open space within the city. They did not create this space, though they have nurtured it; it was always there, inevitable, a rest in the rhythm of the city's beating. Florens called it the antinode. In that garden the Salvagers dry, compost, ferment, reduce, analyze, fraction, refine, distill, extract, and nurture that which they have gathered. There they plant trees and crops and what remains of those they find worthy. There they harvest nitrogen, urea, phosphorus, fuel, ammonia, thick fertile soil, trace metals of the rarest natures, lamp gas, lant, and compost. These things—and all else they find of obvious use—the Salvagers give to those with need or sell to those without. Those things without obvious use are left in the garden to mature until their use is evident or until they fade back into the city's flow.

Though the Salvagers' work in the garden brings them great wealth, they keep nothing of what they gain. As Florens had explained, everything that the Salvagers produced was, like the antinode itself, not of their making but rather always there, implicit, in the city. The Salvagers' work is to simply move it from the place it is to the place it should be.

Though, from time to time, a Salvager will keep two pennies for remembrance.

Nocturne for 11:00 p.m. on a windy night

Title: "The Drunkard Lured by Song to His Death"

For one or more performers.

Find

- Eight or more empty bottles, preferably of several sizes

Performance

In a windy alley or on a windy rooftop, arrange the bottles such that the passing breeze extracts a sigh or moan.

Variation

Title: "The Drunkard Lured Back from Below"

Put a small amount of blood in each bottle, and place them somewhat precariously, such that cats or vermin will knock them down in time.

Commentary

Florens says, "Does the tone come from the bottle or the breeze, the drinker or the salvager?"

Parch says, "Oh, the drunkard's well familiar with the moan of passing wind."

★ ★ ★

The Night Soil Salvagers do not take the living, though over the millennia, in this city and others, they have been accused of doing so. Kidnappers, exchangers, cannibals, fey, the filthy touch, unclean: they have been called all these things by the mob, as that mob (everywhere the same mob across cities and millennia) beats, burns, rapes, undoes the cornered Salvagers, or far, far more often those unlike the Salvagers in every way except in their difference from the mob.

The Night Soil Salvagers do, however, take the dead.

Nocturne for Sunset

Title: "The Hawkless Hawker" or "The Costless Monger"

For five voices.

Find

- A deck of cards

Performance

Meet the other performers at a crossroads in the heart of the city a few minutes before sunset. Take two cards from your deck and keep them concealed. Take a third card and show it to your fellow performers: Whoever has the highest-value card takes the name *One*. The other

performers take the names *Two*, *Three*, *Four,* and *Salvager* in clockwise order.

At the moment of sunset, *One* will walk away in one of four directions. *Two*, *Three*, and *Four* pick in turn from the remaining directions. *Salvager* chooses one of the other four performers to follow.

Walk for two blocks, then find a sign, bill, newspaper, etc. of at least ten words. This will be your text.

Consult your cards. If the first card is a rank from ace to ten, use the corresponding *n*th word from the *start* of the text. If it is a face card, use the name of someone you will not see again. Use the second card to select the *n*th word from the *end* of the text. If it is a face card, use the first color that stands out strongly as you look around.

These words are your Cry.

Turn around and walk back to the crossroads with a slow, dignified pace. Cup your hands around your mouth, tilt your head slightly back to look a bit above any other pedestrians, and cry your Cry as follows, with a step or two between repetitions:

One: A high, even pitch throughout, with a slow fall on the last syllable, e.g. "Deedeedee dee-daaaaaw."

Two: A medium pitch, with an accented high note on the first syllable of the final word, e.g. "Dadada DE-dada."

Three: A high accented note on the first syllable of each word, followed by descending pitches, e.g. "DE-dabah DE-dabah."

Four: The syllables of all the words run together in a smooth, slurred legato with a clear, hornlike tone, e.g. "Mememememememememay."

Salvager: As a joyous child, dogging the steps of the one they followed. Cry at will, and laugh in between.

When all meet again at the crossroads, the four cry once in unison, and then the Salvager cries, "I and others with you in the night."

Variations

The performers are encouraged to adapt this performance to the traditions of their chosen neighborhood.

Commentary:

Florens says, "Pace the city's heartbeat, cry its breath."

Parch says, "'Costless Monger,' my ass. If someone asks what you are selling, charge them two pennies for the words."

★ ★ ★

The Night Soil Salvagers do not use the name "the Night Soil Salvagers." When speaking of themselves, they say, "I and others." When speaking to each other in their slippery street argot, this is rendered "É et onde." Or so some Salvagers have said, though since all their stories begin with the word *attende*, which means both 'listen' and 'wait,' this may just be a tale for others.

When dealing with them face-to-face, you may address them as "My friend." When speaking of them within their hearing, you may also refer to them as "the Night Soil Folk" or "the Salvagers."

You may also refer to them as: Scavengers, Gong-farmers, Night Men, Toshers, Hole Men, Pot Boys, or the Unclean. Though if you do so within their hearing, they will shun you thereafter to your death and beyond.

You are always within the hearing of the Night Soil Salvagers.

Nocturne for 3:10 a.m. in the Dorian Mode

Title: "The Mocking Bird"

For three or more performers.

Find

- A length of cane, reed, bamboo, rolled willow bark, etc., one to two hands' length and a finger's width. You will need one less of these than the number of performers.
- A deck of cards

Performance

Fashion a whistle from the scavenged material, with six tone holes tuned to the major scale.

The performers are called the Face in the Window, the Suitor, and one or more Rivals. The Face in the Window and the Suitor sit on a rooftop,

facing each other. The first Rival sits on a roof one block away, with any additional Rivals each spaced an additional block farther.

The Face in the Window discards all but the ace through six from the deck. At 3:10 a.m. exactly, the Face in the Window turns over four cards in a row in front of the Suitor, who plays the resulting song by lifting the corresponding number of fingers from the whistle—one finger for an ace, two fingers for a two, etc.—starting from the bottom. The fundamental tone (all holes covered) is never played.

The Suitor repeats the song three times, with a slow breath between each repetition. After the third repetition, the Face in the Window places a fresh card on top of any one of the current cards, thus altering the song. The Suitor pauses for an additional slow breath before starting the new song.

The closest Rival listens to the Suitor's song. During the breath after the Suitor's second repetition, this Rival echoes the song as closely as possible, with their own three repetitions spaced by slow breaths. In a similar fashion, each additional Rival echoes the preceding Rival's version of the song.

The performance is complete when all the cards have been played.

Variation

Title: "The King of Regret"

Find

- A length of bone
- Four knucklebones

Performance

Fashion a whistle from the length of bone; other materials may not be used in this variant. Mark the knucklebones with ink or a knife with numbers from one to six like a die. In this variant, the Face in the Window is known as the King of Regret, the Suitor is known as the Waker, and the Rivals are known as the Disturbed.

Performance is as above, with the knucklebones rolled in a line to determine the notes in the song. After three repetitions, the King of Regret

chooses one knucklebone to reroll. If the Waker cannot read the marking on a die, they must play a false note. The King of Regret may cover any of the dice at any time, causing that note to be skipped through the end of the current set of repetitions. The Disturbed echo the sets as above. The performance is complete when all four notes are false.

Commentary

Florens says, "Learning to listen elsewhere while you play is a step toward listening to what you yourself say."

Parch says, "The performance is complete when someone throws a rock."

★ ★ ★

The Night Soil Salvagers will sit with you and others of the city for three nights. These nights will provide the deepest, most restful sleep you will know. The nights might be consecutive, or they might be separated by years or decades. How the nights are chosen, whether that deepest sleep is natural or due to the stillness of the Salvagers or created by some potion or manufactured air, whether one or more Salvagers will attend, what characteristic or behavior it is for which the Salvagers will watch: None of these things are known.

Nor is it known why the Salvagers sit.

What *is* known is that the Salvagers take the remains of only some of the dead.

Nocturne for 9:00 p.m.

Title: "In Confidence"

For at least two performers.

Find

- A street with one or more trees, along with nearby streetlamps, stand pipes, fire escapes, etc. Boulevards will offer many options, as will a *place* either square or oval with a small park at its heart.
- Four or more metal cans, candy tins, kitchen canisters, etc. These are call the Voices.

- Enough fine metal wire to stretch across the desired street once for each can plus an additional arm's length or two per can. Discarded piano wire is ideal, or unbraided copper or steel cable. Partial lengths may be joined with a fisherman's bend.
- Additional small lengths of wire
- The means to cut the wire
- One large button or metal nut per can
- An awl, sturdy knife, or the like

Preparation

Tap a small hole in the bottom of one of the Voices. Thread an end of the wire through the hole, then tie that end to one of the buttons or nuts, such that the wire cannot slip back out of the hole.

Pick a suitable tree. The ideal tree is not too dense, and has limbs branching above the height of common street traffic. This tree is the Throat.

Pick a suitable lamppost or other sturdy metal pole or pipe to anchor the first length of wire, ideally across the street, sidewalk, or path from the Throat. This anchoring post is called the Notion.

First performer: Climb the Throat with the Voice, and find the nook of a branch that has an unobstructed view of the Notion. Place the Voice in the nook such that the wire trails down to the other performers.

Other performers: Unreel enough wire to the reach the Notion. Loop the wire around a high point of the Notion—e.g. by climbing or by looping the wire over it—and gently take up the slack.

The performers at the Notion now slowly tighten the wire, while the performer in the Throat ensures that the pressure holds the Voice securely in its nook, and that the wire runs freely, like the string of a child's toy telephone. Additional small lengths of wire may be used to further secure the mouth once it is settled into the nook.

Now pull the wire taut until it thrums when plucked, and fasten it securely to the Notion.

Repeat these steps for each of the remaining Voices. Each Voice should be set in the nook of a separate branch, with its wire running to a new Notion.

Audition

Wrap your arms around one of the Notions—as roughly as the drunkard climbing from the gutter or as gently as a child slumbering on a parent's shoulder—and press your ear against the metal until you hear the wire's thrum and drone. The indecision of the breeze, the wayward steps of passersby, the unwinding of the phonograph from windows overhead, the bistro's bawdy band: Each of these will inspire a harmony in the wire.

When ready, move to the next Notion and do the same. The performers may choose their own Notion, or share one as space allows.

When every performer has listened to their ear's content at every Notion, gather under the Throat to listen to the song of every Voice at once.

Variation

Titled "Evangelisme"

Use just one Notion but separate Throats for each Voice. Listen first at each Throat, and then at the Notion directly.

Variation

Titled "The Mob"

Use the same Notion and Throat for all the Voices.

Commentary

Florens says, "The song comes from the nameless wire."

Parch says, "Variation titled 'Getting the Last Word In'—perform this in a thunderstorm."

★ ★ ★

The Night Soil Salvagers tell this story:

> *Attende!* I and others remember when the Salvagers took the living.
>
> One day some days past, Parch and others were walking alongside the river gathering what it had left for them. What looked to be a promising pile of cloth proved be the corpse of a woman whose youth had been taken by disease and despair and the river.
>
> The Salvagers fashioned a pallet with which to carry her to the antinode, where what remained of her would be returned to the flow of the city. But when

they rolled her onto the pallet they discovered an infant girl at her breast.

The mother's burden had weighed heavily upon the child. Her legs were no more than stubs. She had just two fingers on one hand and one on the other. Her body was as round as a balloon. And most remarkably, she was from spherical head to nonexistent toe the same ember orange as the moon at autumn dusk.

Parch reached down to place the child on the pallet. She opened her eyes, wrapped her few fingers around Parch's, and smiled.

Parch looked up at the others, astonished, and laughed.

The other Salvagers shook their heads sadly.

"It is not our work to take the living. How can we know where she belongs?" one said.

And another, "We will let the Careful Sisters know. They have a House nearby."

Parch, who had suffered the care those Sisters provided before finding a home among the Salvagers, picked the child up. "She will die in that House, or with mercy before the Sisters take her there, and then she'll be our work after all. You know me for a lazy fellow; I'll take her now and save myself the walk back."

Parch carried the child to the Salvagers' garden, and placed her at the foot of a small tree that grew there. An elderly Salvager, half-blinded by age and the steam from the cauldron she tended, said, "What a glorious golden hue, that flower that young Parch is planting!"

And so Parch named the child Florens, and every morning when he was done with his night's work he fed her with milk from whatever source he could find, and wrapped her in scavenged blankets, and told her stories of what he had seen on the streets of the city.

Florens never gained the use of her legs, never grew much larger than a child, and never fully lost that pumpkin hue. Though the Salvagers constructed her a mobile wheelchair, powered by bubbling yeast and belching bellows, she rarely moved far from the spot where Parch had first planted her, and never left the garden at all.

But her understanding of the city, built upon the stories that Parch and the others told her and all the myriad things they brought back to the garden, was as complete as that of the eldest and most experienced of the Salvagers. She held in her head an image not just of the streets and sewer that made the city's bones, but of the people and all that those people called "waste" that was in fact the lifeblood of the city. So clear was this vision of the city that a Salvager could bring her any item, and she could tell them exactly where in the city that item belonged.

With time, she came to be both respected and beloved by all the Salvagers; "our heart" they called her, at a time when their traditional work collecting the city's night soil was ending and a change of heart was most needed.

"She sees so clearly because of all of us she is most free of the city's burden," they would say, all but Parch, who would laugh and wave his arms—

such a stench!—and say, "No, she sees so clearly because she bears that burden more than any other!"

And before Parch set off for his night's work, he would stop in Florens's nook between the roots of the tree, which had grown tall and wide above her, and say, "Well, that's another day you've saved me the walk back to the river." And she would smile and take his fingers in her few for a moment before sending him on his way.

They did this every night for eighty-seven years.

Nocturne for 10:00 p.m. on a Rainy Night

Title: "Heart's Tears"

For one or more performers.

Find

- A number of discarded metal containers, such as office waste bins, milk cans, flowerpots, chimney caps
- Metal sheeting, such as roof tin or bakers' sheets *or* a round platter of tin or similar thin metal
- Sturdy shears
- Wire

Performance

Tap the bottom of each container. If it sings or bellows with a pleasing tone, call its bottom its head and be done with it. If the tone is dull, then cut a circle a little larger than the container top from the metal sheeting to form a drumhead, or use a platter, if you have one of the correct size. Poke holes around the edge of the head, place it on the open top of the container, and loop the wire through these holes around the container until the head is firmly attached.

Place each drum on a rooftop of a neighborhood, lashing it in place as needed with more wire, such that the rain falls upon its head. In accordance to the setting and your whim, the drum may be exposed directly to the rainfall, where runoff gathers, or under a solitary drip.

Variation

Title: "Heart's Fail"

As above, but fasten the drums to the most precipitous angles of the rooftops with small lumps of clay. The clay will eventually wash away.

Commentary

Florens says, "Some art is most successful when it goes entirely unnoticed."

Parch says, "If everyone would just stand out in the rain all night we could save ourselves a lot of work on rooftops."

★ ★ ★

The Night Soil Salvagers tell this story:

Attende! I and others remember one day some days past, when Parch told us whither to deliver his body when he had no more use for it.

"That nook under the tree where one low root shaped like a sprawling drunkard meets one high root like a prancing *passante*," he said.

Another replied, "But that spot is where Florens sits. You placed her there yourself, and bade us never move her."

"Gah! Leave it to a Salvager to make a riddle of a simple request," Parch said. "If you won't move Florens, move the nook!"

"But … but the nook is not a thing! It is just a place where, ah, where the tree *isn't*."

Parch laughed. "Takes one to know one! Well, if the *tree* is the thing, then it's the tree you'll have to move."

"But the tree's roots run the length and breadth of the garden, hold its walls to the earth and the earth above its secret cellars!"

"Well then, move the garden."

"But the garden is the antinode, the unmoving heart of the city!"

"Ah!" Parch said. "Now we are getting somewhere."

"Move the city itself? But how?"

Parch threw his arms up—such a stench!—and said, "What a burden you are! Might as well ask how to move yourself!" He laughed his laugh again and stomped away.

The next morning, the Salvagers found Florens sitting a dozen paces from that nook where one low root meets one high root in which she had lived as long as any had memory. Her books, her papers, her musical instruments, her shawls of spidersilk, all of it still surrounded her as it had before.

In the nook itself, the earth had been dug up three by six, and smoothed down again. A fine layer of ash covered the dirt, and in the center sat a small stack of coins, enough to buy half a loaf with butter and a cup of the cheap red wine Parch had preferred.

The Salvagers gathered around Florens, some laughing, some crying, every one agreeing it was a miracle, but not one agreeing on what the miracle was: Had she moved, or the tree, or the garden, or the city itself?

Florens shook her head. Her face was sad, but her voice seemed to quiver with laughter when she spoke. "Are these your questions? Better to ask who it was who found this."

She held up a paper that had been folded three times each way. On it was a single word: "Parch."

And then she turned it around, and on the other side it read: "Florens."

"Who," she said, "and what, and whither?."

Nocturne for the Hour before Dawn

Title: "The Call"

For three or more performers.

Find

- A pair of pipes for each performer, as follows:
- A section of pipe the length of a leg, with an inner diameter somewhere between the width of a single fingertip and the width of all four fingers together.
- A second section of pipe of roughly the same length, with an inner diameter such that it slips over the first pipe smoothly but with as little gap as possible.
- Beeswax
- A sheet or two of paper
- A deck of cards

Preparation

Smooth the ends of the smaller pipe with a stone or brick to remove any sharp edges or burrs. Wipe the pipe clean with water, and then with aqua vitae. Place some of the beeswax into a small jar and heat the jar in a bath of simmering water until the wax flows like honey. Dip one end of the smaller pipe about a finger's width into the wax, lift it, and let the wax cool. Repeat this step until a smooth lip of wax has built up on the end of the pipe. This wax-covered end is called the Source.

Rub some of the unmelted wax onto the outside of the smaller pipe. Slip the larger pipe over the smaller. It should slide smoothly, but snugly enough that it does not rattle or slide off when released. If the fit is not

snug, wrap a strip of paper around the inner pipe and seal it with a touch of the molten wax. Add strips until the outer pipe is snug but may still be slid in and out. The assembled instrument is called the Ray.

The score

The performer with the Ray with the narrowest diameter or the shortest length is called the First.

Each performer draws a card privately, and remembers the number of pips. Face cards count as zero.

Performance

Lie as a drunkard in the gutter by a storm drain. The performers should space themselves such that a word spoken firmly by one is just barely heard by the next, either in a line down the street or encircling the block. Press your lips to the Source of the Ray as if giving it a kiss, and place the other end into the storm drain.

Blow into the Source through tightly pressed lips as the horn players do. If the width of the Source is small, your lips must buzz as tightly as those of a disapproving matron, and if it is large, they must burr as loosely as those of a dismissive baker. Strive for a clear, bright tone.

While sounding the instrument, slowly slide the outer pipe in and out to adjust your pitch until the drain responds with a ringing resonance. The sound should swell and deepen.

When you have found your resonance, hold the outer pipe steady and stop sounding. Lie still until you can hear no other performer sounding.

Let the First wait for a dozen breaths, and then sound the Ray. Each sounding should start softly, then swell and hold for as long as possible, and then fade. Take several long, slow breaths, and repeat.

When the performers nearest to the First hear this first sounding, they should wait for a dozen breaths, then sound their Rays in the same fashion. The next in line should begin, and so on.

Repeat your sounding a dozen times, plus one additional repetition for each pip of the card that you drew earlier.

Once you completed your soundings, be still and listen until you no longer hear another Ray. Lie still another dozen breaths. Depart with quiet grace.

Variation

Instead of the storm drain, you may use the stairwell and halls of an abandoned tenement, the mews of an affluent enclave, etc.

Commentary

Florens says, "The wax is not the Source; the pipe is not the Ray. Quick: What is not the First?"

Parch says, "Odds are you'll be First asleep."

★ ★ ★

The Night Soil Salvagers do not tell this story. But you will hear it in the hum of overhead wires, in the rattle of branches on a moonless night, in the cries of street sellers closing at sunset, in the heart's flow of the city's sewers.

Attende! I and others will meet, one night some nights hence, at the foot of the great tree in the antinode where what remains of Florens and Parch remains. One of us will say, "Anyone got a lead on bells? Seems like a fine night for a performance of 'Calling Her Down.'"

Another will say, "It's baby rattles you want, my friend, for it's a new moon."

The first will crane her head back and ask, "If not the full moon, then what?"

And so we will climb that tree, past wired Voices and blood-filled bottles, parchments bearing ash-drawn maps, lumps of clay that once held drums. Past crows with costermonger cries and a single ceaseless mockingbird.

Some of us will rattle as we climb and some will ring, for though it is midnight on a new moon's night, there will nonetheless be something full and round and harvest gold framed by the highest limbs of that highest tree.

It will be a flower.

A flower fat as a dozen babies on a single spindled limb, petals thick as tongues, stamens like ribald horns, and all a rich, bilirubinous amber.

We will sit in silence around that blooming, counting breaths.

Until one of us will lift arms up with fingers out, a child's tree atop the tree, bell clasped between thumb and forefinger, and ring.

Another of us will laugh, as if seeing an old friend on the street. "I was hoping for change," she will say. "But there's the best spot, taken by a baby." Then she will count a measure's rest and shake her rattle.

Another count of four, another bell, another laugh, another rattle, and so it goes round. Whistles and horns and the cry of names of those we shall not see again. The Night Soil Salvagers delivered there, shaken like ash by that music

from limb to limb, chancing every thing in that flower light, will be too loud—almost—to hear one of us cry, "The city! Where has it gone?"

And another—an ancient face he will have, almost familiar, rattling two coins in his fist and with *such* a stench, like the fundament of the Earth!—will throw arms around the first and say, "There, of course; the city is there," and point not out but up.

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About the Authors

MARKO KLOOS was born in Germany and raised in and around the city of Münster. In the past, he was a soldier, bookseller, freight dock worker, and corporate IT administrator before he became a novelist and got ruined for most other forms of work. He's the author of the bestselling Frontlines series of military science fiction and a member of George R.R. Martin's Wild Cards consortium. Marko lives in New Hampshire with his wife, two children, and roving pack of voracious dachshunds.

Rjurik Davidson, a young Australian author who won the Aurealis Award for Best Newcomer some years ago, has been writing about the city of Caeli-Amur for nearly a decade. His debut novel, Unwrapped Sky is set in this city-state where magic and technology are interchangeable; where minotaurs and sirens are real; where philosopher-assassins and seditionists are not the most dangerous elements in a city alive with threat. During the day, the ordinary citizens do what they must to get along. But at night, the spirit of the ancient city comes alive, to haunt the old places ….

Yoon Ha Lee is an American science fiction writer born on January 26, 1979 in Houston, Texas. Her first published story, "The Hundredth Question," appeared in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* in 1999; since then, over two dozen further stories have appeared. She lives in Pasadena, California.

Alex Sherman grew up in rural Virginia with a lovely view of the Blue Ridge Mountains. A Brooklyn resident for the past decade, he has earned a degree in digital arts from the Pratt Institute and an MFA in creative writing from the Stonecoast Creative Writing Program. He mostly works in video post-production. He lives with his partner, his dog, and her cat.

Hugo and Nebula finalist **K.M. Szpara** is a queer and trans author who lives in Baltimore, MD. His debut novel is *Docile*, and his short fiction and essays appear in *Uncanny*, *Lightspeed*, *Strange Horizons*, and more. Kellan has a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School, which he totally uses at his day job as a paralegal.

Sarah Pinsker's stories have won the Nebula and Sturgeon awards, and have been finalists for the Hugo, the Locus, World Fantasy Award, and the Eugie Foster Memorial Award. Her first collection, Sooner or Later Everything Falls Into the Sea, and first novel, *A Song For A New Day*, were both published in 2019. She is also a singer/songwriter with three albums on various independent labels and a fourth she swears will be released someday soon. She was born in New York and has lived all over the U.S. and Canada, but currently lives with her wife and dog in Baltimore in a hundred-year-old house surrounded by sentient vines. Find her @sarahpinsker.

Gregory Norman Bossert is an author, filmmaker, and musician, based in the San Francisco Bay Area. He started writing on a dare in 2009 at the age of 47. Since then his fiction has appeared in print and online, in audio, foreign translation, and Year's Best anthologies, with stories in *Conjunctions*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *The Unquiet Dreamer: A Tribute to Harlan Ellison*. His story "The Telling" won the 2013 World Fantasy Award.

When not writing, he wrangles spaceships and superheroes for legendary visual effects studio Industrial Light & Magic.

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