



**JULY/AUG  
2020**

**TOR.COM  
SHORT  
FICTION**

Duckett  
Nix  
Pridham  
McHugh  
Gilman  
Wrenwood  
Duncan



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# TOR.COM SHORT FICTION

JULY – AUGUST 2020

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About the Authors



**THE  
ONES  
WHO  
LOOK**

**KATHARINE  
DUCKETT**



# The Ones Who Look

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**KATHARINE DUCKETT**

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*illustration by*

ESTHER GOH

TOR·COM 

Zoe had met Henri at the office. Of course she had. It wasn't like she went anywhere else. She'd thought Paris would be different than Arlington, Virginia, that she'd get out more, eat fabulous meals and meet fabulous people. But it was the same life against a different backdrop. She still spent most of her time hunched before a screen, combing through the sordid details of other people's lives and tallying points to enter into the endless Ethical Empire database. When she got out of work, half the places in her neighborhood were already closed. She usually ended up swiping snacks from the office for dinner because she didn't want to cook, and then going home to watch American shows alone in her frigid flat.

Her office offered all kinds of opportunities to meet people: bowling leagues at the indoor lanes, gaming marathons in the immersive virtual environments, biweekly ice cream socials at the trucks on the fifth and twenty-third floors. Zoe, however, had always been an introvert—"a mope," as her mother spun it—and her position at EE hadn't bolstered her enthusiasm for interacting with humanity during her off-hours. The system was supposed to prevent her from receiving a case from anyone in her network, but it had happened once, when she met the husband of a high school friend and realized she'd watched him slip pills into the pocket of his pharmacy lab coat a few weeks before on the monitoring feeds. It had soured her on meeting new people. So she poured all her effort into work, which was why she'd been able to apply for a transfer to the Paris headquarters from the dysfunctional Arlington branch after only three years, securing the work visa only once her extensive medical tests came back clear.

Somewhat against her will, she had made one friend: Silvia, who sat next to her in the cubicle pod and was the one who warned her about Henri when she caught him flirting with Zoe in the snack kitchen. "He's bad news," Silvia said. "Goes through girls like fppp, fppp, fppp—" She mimed riffling through a stack of cards.

Zoe wasn't sure she'd mind that. She needed something to distract her from how sepulchral Paris looked in the early springtime. So she said yes when Henri asked her out, even though she'd heard by then from others in their pod that Silvia and Henri had dated and it ended badly. Silvia herself hadn't told Zoe anything, so she couldn't expect Zoe to know, could she?

"That logic would never hold up in arbitration, and you know it," said Rocky, the more severe of her two Recording Angels, as Zoe slipped into a silver dress before meeting Henri. "You know it's wrong, and it *is* wrong, and you're going to lose points."

Atlan was more sympathetic. "It's harmless. A little fun. If Silvia really had a problem with it, she would have said something."

"But this isn't how one should treat one's friends!" Rocky always became especially strident at their most indignant. "Don't you want to keep her as a friend, Zoe? Don't you want to make friends here?"

Rocky sounded uncannily like her mother, whom Zoe had been dodging calls from ever since relocating to France. "I just want to know that you're okay," her mother said in her voicemail messages. "And, well—if you could find time to sign the papers, I'd appreciate that too. I'm not getting any younger, Zoe. I'd like to know my family was going to be together in Heaven before I go to my grave. Is that really so much to ask?"

"What about Dad, Mom?" Zoe would sometimes shoot back. "And how do you even know I'm getting into Heaven? How do you know *you* are?"

Her mother's voicemails never had anything to say to that. After one listen, Zoe always deleted them.

★ ★ ★

The angels kept quiet during most of her date, but Rocky piped up once Henri and Zoe left the restaurant and started stumbling down the empty cobblestone streets, cleared of bustle by fear of disease, toward Henri's Montmartre apartment, which turned out to be a classic mansard rooftop flat accessed by a perilously tiny elevator. They became more insistent once Henri and Zoe were side by side on his leather couch, once Zoe was close enough to see the outer ring of amber around Henri's brown eyes and confirm that his skin was



as probably just as soft as it had seemed when he first started chatting her up over the free protein bars.

“Kiss him,” Rocky cautioned, “and it’ll cost you points.”

Atlan scoffed. “What are we, Puritans? Why would making out cost her points?”

“Because you know Silvia likes him.” Rocky’s voice was shrill in Zoe’s ear. “She’s not over him. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“They’re broken up, he’s a free agent—”

“This isn’t football—”

*Bleep.* With a subtle tap of her finger against her wrist, Zoe turned off the Recording Angels’ advisory function. She could still picture Rocky and Atlan bickering in her head, still imagine the threads of their various ethical arguments, but that was to be expected after thirteen years.

Henri was only inches away from her face, close enough that she could feel his breath on her cheek. “Problem?” he asked, his voice low.

“No. No problem.” She leaned forward, grabbing his arm and pulling him in for a kiss. He made a surprised noise, which seemed a little affected considering the dinner he’d bought and the glasses of wine he’d poured them both when they’d gotten upstairs. She pushed him back, slinging her leg over his lap in an easy straddle. If this was wrong, she’d lose fewer points if it was over fast.

Henri moaned, and she wondered what his angels were telling him. Then he licked her neck, his hand slipping beneath the hem of her dress, and Zoe stopped thinking about angels at all.

★ ★ ★

Henri, as it turned out, was exceptionally good in bed and exceptionally diligent about running out for pastries the morning after. So Zoe kept seeing him, first a couple times a week, and then almost every night, leaking a small percentage of points each time. Silvia stopped talking to her about anything that wasn’t project related, but Zoe couldn’t bring herself to care. Besides, she had Henri to talk to now, who, in addition to his other talents, was smart and funny and genuinely interested in what she did all day. Usually her job description was the death of cocktail parties, the killer of casual

conversation: It made everyone sad and uncomfortable, and usually ended up with people revealing their recent sins to her like she could give them a point total on the spot.

Henri, though, wanted to know everything about arbitration. He was an engineer who had been with the Ethical Empire since nearly the beginning. “Back when it was only a game,” he said. A programming wunderkind, he’d dropped out of school to take a job with Leon Boltzmann, the multibillionaire Swiss founder of EE, an old family friend whom Henri said was less of a father figure to him than an eccentric uncle. Boltzmann didn’t go out in public anymore, holed up as he’d been in his bunker in the Alps since the global antibiotics failure, but Henri’s apartment was filled with pictures of him on waterskiing vacations and skydiving adventures with Boltzmann and the core EE team. They were nestled in between photos of Henri’s parents, who lived in Strasbourg and worked in government, and his younger sister Mariève, who had passed away from tuberculosis a year or so before. She used to live with Henri, sharing the spare bedroom that Zoe always tiptoed past as she made her way down the narrow hallway to the bathroom, even though she knew there was no one behind the closed door.

In the photos, Mariève looked hale and happy, a feminine copy of Henri, with the same olive skin and sandy brown hair, though hers was shot through with streaks of artificial red. Zoe wondered if Henri ever visited her in Heaven, and decided that he must. How could he resist? Security risks prevented the living from having contact with the dead, but Henri would have all the keys, all the codes, all the know-how to speak safely with the sibling he had clearly adored.

Rocky and Atlan advised against discussing painful topics early in any relationship, so Zoe didn’t ask Henri about it. Mostly when they got together they talked about work, since neither of them had much of a life outside the company anyway. Henri’s favorite topic was the minutiae of Zoe’s arbitration cases, which she’d first opened up about over a round of poker with the game-playing android Henri had brought home from EE’s robotics division. They’d rigged up the robot to be their dealer for five-card stud one night during a bout of post-coital insomnia, when they were both too wound up to sleep but not quite ready for another go. Zoe had spared a moment to wonder

if she should worry about the fact that Henri had offered her a menu of quick games for the refractory period, like he was running a well-trafficked waiting room, before remembering she didn't care. This wasn't meant to last, even if things did seem to be going better for her than they had gone for Silvia. If she and Henri had never talked about the ins and outs of Silvia's job, Zoe figured, they couldn't have been that serious.

"So I know all of Heaven and Hell, but I never really understood what happens in arbitration," Henri said as he picked up one of the tidy stacks of Tarot Nouveau cards the robot dealt out onto the coffee table between them. "You watch their feeds and make a judgment, or something like that?"

"Sometimes it's something like that. Usually we don't even need to watch the feeds, though." She still did on occasion, though less than she used to. When she first started, the access to people's private actions was alluring. But it soon became dull (in the best cases) and gross (in the worst). There was a reason almost everyone working below the exec level in arbitration was a woman or nonbinary person. You couldn't pay men in tech to put up with other people's shit the way Zoe did.

"Then what do you do?"

She traded in two of her cards to the robot, whose green visor, the only item of clothing it wore, cast a sickly hue over its expression. It was a prototype, meant to have the subtle tells and foibles of a genuine human player, since playing against perfect machines got boring at dinner parties. "We look at the facts. All that's recorded: time of transgression, context, mood, effect, and intention. We may have to dig into their history a bit for the intention part, or they may include their version of facts in the report if it's a client complaint. So we map their action on their particular ethical matrix and determine the deduction. There's always a deduction, or a probationary period. They never would have ended up in arbitration if there weren't. They did something wrong, it's just ... a matter of how much they're going to lose because of that."

"Hmm." Henri stretched back in his chair, waving his cards at her. "Give me an example."

"I'm not supposed to talk about my cases."

"They're anonymous, right? So how will I know who it is?"

She'd never violated her NDA during her three years with EE, but then again, no one else had asked. Rocky surely would have objected, but Zoe had turned off her angels earlier in the night. She knew better than anyone that all of her data was being streamed to EE and could be reviewed at any time, but it was easier to ignore if you didn't have disembodied voices whispering in your ear while you had sex. She always switched them back on before falling asleep, though; she hated waking up without them.

They placed their bets, and Henri won the hand. The robot had been bluffing, which was obvious: Henri had been tinkering with its reactions, but it still wasn't complex enough to genuinely fool anyone. Its playing style, veering between preternatural precision and random error, was too erratic to simulate authentic personality, but EE wanted to roll out the new models next year. Crowded rooms of humans were an acute bacterial liability, and robotic replacements helped fill out social gatherings without increasing the risk of transmission. "Okay, fine. I had a guy today who got dinged for jerking off to pictures of his best friend's wife."

"Jerking off?"

"Masturbating." Zoe mimed the universal symbol for hand jobs, and Henri's eyebrows went up.

"Ah."

"Yeah. He keeps losing points, because he's done this *a lot*, and so he sent a complaint to us for arbitration because he says he's in love with her, and would be much better to her than her husband is, and it isn't fair that we keep deducting points from him."

Masturbation wasn't generally a transgression, but the method or material employed could be. The clients dinged for obvious forays over the line didn't tend to appeal. But on occasion you got a guy like this, who was sure he was in the right. So Zoe dutifully reviewed his record and found that he was in a book club with the best friend's wife. They spent boozy evenings together discussing literature and he always drove her home afterward. Sometimes she'd tell him all about her problems with Gabe, the husband, who worked and golfed and drank too much, in her opinion. It was verging on emotional infidelity, for which the wife was probably losing points in



some other arbiter's books, but it was a gray area, because they'd never gotten physical.

The man had kept his angels on for all his private fantasy sessions, so Zoe listened in on a snippet of their advice. "She'd be so much better off with you," his version of Atlan said during the most recent point-losing incident. "Remember that night you talked about symbolism in *Moby-Dick*?"

"You were the best man at his wedding," whispered his Rocky. "You helped him pick out the engagement ring. He'd never forgive you. You'd ruin her life, too."

She wondered why he kept their advice running. Users couldn't log out of the Ethical Empire app without losing points, of course, but they could turn off the angels whenever they wanted. A surprising number of clients kept them going even when they were committing flagrant wrongs. Zoe had never worked out the pattern as to why some clients did and some didn't.

"It makes sense to me," Henri said when Zoe voiced her musings. "We found out what people wanted from the angels in the beta testing stage. They didn't want an omnipotent being who can tell them exactly how to get into Heaven. Humans won't just do what they're told to, but they want guidance all the same. It's why we developed two angels, offering variable input. Every action needs to seem like a conversation. A choice."

"Isn't it?"

Henri looked up from his new hand. "Sure. Of course it is." He exchanged three cards with the android, which was biting its weirdly smooth lip. "I only mean—the angels can calculate probabilities almost perfectly. They could tell users exactly how to earn their way into Heaven. But no one wanted that, when we offered a single omniscient advisor. So we split them. Narrowed the scope of their learning and their, *comment dire*—speculation."

"You dumbed them down." Zoe traded in her three of diamonds for a stoic queen. The android was now blinking rapidly, probably preparing another bluff.

"You could say that, I suppose. But we think of it as preserving *libre arbitre*. Free will." Henri scratched his taut stomach as he eyed his cards. "So what did you do? With the man who could not stop masturbating?"

“I put him on probation. He’ll stop losing points for his ... behavior, but he’s on red alert for any interactions with the woman in question. Anything that seems like a move or any suspicious language loses him points. He can fantasize all he wants, but he can’t actually have any intimate contact with her without causing major damage.”

Henri’s brow wrinkled. “Doesn’t that seem cruel?”

“Cruel to who? The probation’s lifted if the woman and her husband break up.” She started the betting high, and the robot recorded her opening gamble. “Isn’t that the aim of the Ethical Empire, anyway? To make sure everyone honors their moral commitments?”

“I suppose.” Henri matched her bet, and the robot folded. “But what if they were—how do you say it—meant to be?”

She’d thought about that. She’d thought about it a lot. “Your father and I weren’t meant to be,” her mother had told her, when explaining why they were getting divorced, why Zoe’s father was taking his guitar and his books and the cats her mother had never liked to move into an apartment across town. “We weren’t good for each other. We didn’t make each other happy.”

People stayed married more now, in partnerships that were better, at least on paper. The app had reduced domestic violence and infidelity across the board. It had caused political leaders to sign peace accords and finally take some real steps on climate change and poverty and hunger and a thousand other crucial issues they’d been neglecting. The Ethical Empire had concretized paradise and inferno, available in customizable modules for nearly all wavelengths of belief, and everyone was a better person because of it. Or at least they were pretending to be.

Lying next to Henri later as he snored, she wondered. Divorce wasn’t a point-losing action unless you’d elected to play in a Religious Mode that detracted for it. But a lot of things that forced divorce—lying, cheating, throwing someone’s possessions out a window—could lose you your hard-earned credits. And Zoe knew few people capable of getting through something as messy as a marital split while maintaining perfect ethical poise. Better not to risk it. Better to smile and fake it, and earn your eternal reward.

★ ★ ★

On her father's birthday, Zoe's mother left her another voicemail. "I put in Grandma's rose bushes. It's a shame she can't be with us, but what can you do? Oh, and your brother says he can program in that infinity pool I've been asking for. If the family hits the point total I sent you last week, we'll get the sixth-level upgrade, so I hope you've been behaving yourself in Paris, Zoe."

After deleting it, Zoe went to the nearest patisserie to buy herself the largest pastry she could find. She took it over to Henri's to split it with him without telling him why.

She spent most nights at Henri's now, sharing highlights of her cases from the day. There was the embezzler, and the plagiarist, and the woman who kept forgetting to pay parking tickets. That last case had been tricky, because the woman had recently received a dementia diagnosis. EE claimed they'd improved the way they handled disability when it came to assessing ethical actions, but Zoe's instructions were simply to do whatever kept them relatively free of lawsuits. Not that the lawsuits mattered. The Empire's wealth exceeded the GDP of a good percentage of the world's countries.

There was still a lot she didn't tell Henri. She didn't tell him about her mother's calls. She didn't tell him about Michael, the man she'd been seeing back in Arlington. She didn't tell him that she broke up with Michael because she couldn't stop picturing the strange and terrible things he did when he was alone.

She didn't picture Henri doing strange and terrible things, because she knew where he was almost every minute of the day. She could see the entrance to the engineering offices—"the lair," as everybody called it—if she leaned back in her chair and glanced past the wall of her cubicle. She could see the spray-painted inscription in red on the faux-stone arch above the blacked-out double glass doors: *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*.

She didn't see the other engineers much. They kept to themselves, and after spending time with Henri she understood why. If the legal agreements she had to sign to work at EE looked intimidating, the engineers more or less signed away their life's rights for the chance to collaborate on Boltzmann's grand design.

Henri worked late in the lair a lot, so Zoe started racking up the overtime as well, earning her pointed looks and even sharper silences from Silvia,

who tried her damndest to find fault with Zoe's reports but never could. Henri worked at his apartment on nights and weekends too, always in the living room, where he'd set up a console shielded from Zoe's gaze by creative angling and stacks of books on dreaming and the function of unconsciousness. He'd let it slip while drunk one night that all those texts had something to do with Hell, the most opaque but essential component of EE, before clamming up on the subject.

Heaven meant nothing without the risk of Hell, even though the percentage of users who ended up there was negligible. It had recently become a formal part of the penal system for a few of the governments EE did business with: The move had drawn widespread protest, but the company was used to pushback by now. Only the worst of the worst ended up there, anyway. If you feared Hell, the logic went, you probably had reason to.

\* \* \*

Perhaps it was Henri's talk of the composition of nightmares, or the nocturnal hours she'd been putting in on the monitoring feeds, or the fact that she kept wondering why someone would keep a two-bedroom in Paris but use their living room as their office. Whatever the cause, late on the eve of La Fête du Travail, a day they planned to spend exploring Le Marais, Zoe found herself restless and fidgety as Henri snored beside her. It was warm enough now to keep the window above the bed cracked open, and she could hear the voices of Henri's neighbors echoing across the balconies in the courtyard as they chattered and laughed. If she'd smoked, she would have perched out there now, lighting her cigarette in the dark and eavesdropping on conversations she could only half understand.

But she wasn't a smoker, so for lack of anything better to do she got up and went to the bathroom, staring at her blurry reflection underneath the harsh yellow light. She kept a case for contact lenses and a small bottle of solution in her purse for when she slept over at Henri's, since her visual implants couldn't totally correct her vision, but glasses seemed presumptuously domestic in a way contacts were not, like showing up with a pair of pajamas. Her low vision made the nighttime landscape of Henri's apartment even more alien, filled as it was with ominous shadows that didn't resolve themselves



into ordinary items like coatracks or robot parts until she was nearly on top of them.

On her way back from the bathroom, creeping past the door to Mariève's bedroom, she was sure she heard a noise. A cough; a creak.

The building was old. It settled and sighed, its pipes groaning and wheezing like a rheumy old man all through the night. But Zoe pressed her ear against the wood of the door anyway, unable to shake the sense that somebody was on the other side.

Her hand crept down to the dulled crystal doorknob before Rocky's voice streamed into her ear, startling her out of her semi-sleepwalk. "It's a violation of his privacy to go in there, Zoe. You should go back to sleep."

Atlan agreed. "Ask him about it in the morning if you're curious. But you can't go snooping in his space like this."

Her fingers tightened around the knob, and, quietly as she could, she turned it an inch, confirming the door wasn't locked. She eased it open, wide enough to slip inside, and let herself into the room that had been Mariève's, leaving the door cracked behind her.

It took her eyes a moment to adjust to the scant ambient light spilling in from nearby rooftops through the dormer windows. Even when they did, though, she didn't understand what she was seeing.

The space was nearly bare. There was a stripped mattress on the floor to her right, and a thin, rickety chest of drawers pushed up against the wall to her left. But most of the space in the room was dominated by the object pushed up against the windows. It was taller than Zoe and wider than her arms at full extension, stretching at least eight feet across, blocking out the illumination at its back.

Moving forward on tiptoe, Zoe strained to make sense of the pigments that were emerging on the broad wooden surface of the hinged structure. It was a triptych, she realized, remembering her single excursion to the Louvre that very first week in Paris. Upon its dark background someone had painted three figures, each inhabiting their own panel: one daubed in white, one in brown, and at the center a humanoid shape of indiscernible hue, with things hanging from its arms and legs.

The paint was layered on so thickly that the details didn't yield themselves even when she got up close. All she could see were the glinting ridges of the oil paint.

She turned back to the door, ready to risk flipping on the light, and saw Henri standing there.

"Told you," Rocky muttered.

Henri didn't look mad. Only tired, blinking at Zoe as he leaned against the doorframe. "Couldn't sleep?"

She nodded, wrapping her arms around her middle. "I'm sorry—I should have asked. But I was really out of it, and I didn't think—"

"It's okay." He was gazing past her, toward the painting. Shielding his eyes, he reached out to the wall to flick on the light. "It's called *Les Femmes Qui Regardent*. Or *The Women Who Look*."

Zoe turned back to the triptych, where the three mysterious shapes had been revealed as nearly life-sized women, their faces blank unfinished ovals.

The one on the left cradled an ocher jar in her hands, held out toward the viewer. The one on the right held out her hands as well, though they were empty, the fingers crumbling away into dust. And the one in the center, her limbs twined about with snakes and ivy, offered up a half-eaten fruit that might have been an apple, or a pomegranate. Where her lips should have been there was a kermes stain, a shade lighter than her skin.

"Pandora. Lot's wife. Eve." Henri walked forward, indicating each figure in turn. "The women who can't help seeking, and bring destruction when they do. That's what Mariève said it was about."

Zoe glanced over at him. "She made this?"

"*Oui*. One of her last works."

"She was an artist? Professionally?"

"She did not know what she was. Not yet." His eyes were on Eve. "When we were growing up my parents were afraid she might become a nun. She was always quite religious. Quite ... serious."

Zoe found his use of the past tense incongruous. Most people these days adopted the present tense to speak of the dead, especially if they worked for EE, where that language was core to the idea that life and death were an

uninterrupted continuum. Old habits were hard to break, though, and some still talked about users who had passed over like they were gone forever.

She turned her attention back to the painting. “I’m not sure I get it.” The trifecta before Zoe reminded her of the images of saints, or the flat royal suite characters on Henri’s playing cards. There was skill in the strokes, but it almost looked as though Mariève had gone over the lines of the bodies again and again before ever completing the faces. “She—there’s a lot of talent here, though.”

“She was always a little complicated to understand. Her art, too.” Henri reached out to touch the wood, tracing his fingertips over a leaf on Eve’s shoulder. “It reminds me of this saying Boltzmann has. ‘Men have the vision, but it’s women who can always find the socks.’”

“Wow. Patronizing *and* binary.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t translate well. It’s something his father used to say, I think. Boltzmann’s a little—what did you say the other day? ‘Old school.’”

“I don’t care how far back you go, Henri. There have never been only two genders.”

His lips quirked into a smile. “Mariève would have said the same, I’m sure. She hated Boltzmann.”

“Wait, really? I thought your family loved him.”

“Everyone but her. He tried—you know he can be charming.” Zoe only knew as much from company-wide broadcasts from Boltzmann’s bunker and old news interviews, but Boltzmann’s cult of personality spoke for itself. He’d had a rabidly devoted fan base from the beginning, a growing tribe of true believers who thought EE was destined to save the world. “She never budged. She did not like my work, either. She wanted me to pursue medical research, or environmental protections. She kept telling me to do something else, up until—” He swallowed. “Until the end.”

Zoe lay her head on his shoulder and her hand over his, squeezing tight. “He’s exhausted,” Atlan whispered. “You both should sleep.”

And so Zoe set aside her questions, including the one she knew she couldn’t stop herself from blurting out if they stayed before the faceless women another moment. “Come on,” she said, drawing Henri toward the door. “Let’s go back to bed.”

★ ★ ★

Summer sauntered into Paris shortly thereafter, sultry and gay enough to melt even some of the ice between Silvia and Zoe, who went out for Aperol spritzes and bonded over their shared annoyance with their supervisor's management style. Zoe started to walk more, making her way down to Le Jardin des Tuileries to bask in the sunshine. She went on shopping sprees, bringing home bags of clothes and shoes, purchasing expensive lingerie now that she knew someone would see it. She found a shop that looked like her grandmother's attic and sold nothing but handcrafted candles, and bought herself one that smelled of honey and cedar, even purchasing a bell jar to keep it under at the shopgirl's urging. She could afford it, and she wanted Henri to enjoy coming over to her place as much as she enjoyed staying at his.

When they'd been going out three months, Henri took her to dinner at a hip hole-in-the-wall in his arrondissement. He knew the owner there and ordered the second most expensive champagne on the menu. "It's even better than the pricier stuff, trust me," he told her.

"Are you in love with him?" Atlan asked her as Henri and Zoe toasted the quarter-year they'd spent in each other's beds. "You seem like you could be."

She couldn't tell. If she'd ever been in love she hadn't known it, and though her mild case of *joie de vivre* seemed as tied to Henri as to the estival charms of the city, she still wasn't sure she credited the concept. The chronic masturbator had popped up in her assigned cases again that day, this time because he'd kissed the best friend's wife while the best friend was out of town. "But I love her," he lamented in the vid complaint he'd sent. "And she wants to leave him. She's just not sure she can yet because he built their Heaven, and she doesn't know what it will do to her point total. But if you'll let us be together, we'll volunteer for a year. Leave everything to charity. Adopt a child in need. We promise."

"You mind if I order for us?" Henri asked. "I know all the specials here."

"Go for it." She always felt like the people of Paris were judging her for using her translation app, like they could tell by the stilted way she spoke their language that she'd never put in the time to learn it properly.

After giving their waiter some animated instructions, Henri leaned back in his chair, tipping the glass of bubbly to his lips. “I think I should tell you something,” he said after a sip. “Though I’ve been a bit afraid to.”

Zoe’s stomach dropped as she flipped through her extensive mental catalogue of depraved habits. “What’s that?”

He set down his glass, fingertips resting on the stem. “This is the longest I’ve ever dated anyone from work.”

She nearly laughed. “I’m flattered.”

“I didn’t think you would be.”

“Why not?”

“It’s embarrassing, no? To have never been with anyone longer than a few months?”

“So that goes for outside of work, too.”

“Mm-hmm.” He tapped the base of his glass. “I never meet anyone anywhere else. And when it goes on too long, I get nervous. But I don’t get nervous with you. You’re—easy.” Zoe raised her eyebrows, and he backpedaled. “No, I mean—you don’t pretend. I feel comfortable with you.”

“You get nervous? You don’t seem like you would get nervous.”

“But I do. You probably heard about Silvia, right?” Zoe shook her head and lost a point for lying. “We dated. Not for long. Maybe one month. But I didn’t tell her why I had to end it, and she called me an asshole. Plus she was too strict about work. No sense of humor. She would not tell me anything about her cases.” Zoe squirmed a little in her chair, uncomfortably aware of how little it had taken for her to break EE’s confidentiality agreement. Henri scrutinized her. “I thought she would have told you. You really didn’t know?”

“I really didn’t know,” said Zoe, and lost another point as Rocky groaned.

★ ★ ★

During dessert, Zoe’s phone beeped. She checked the message in the bathroom and heard her mother’s voice coming through her aural implants, as clear as Rocky and Atlan’s. “Why do you always punish me for being the one who survived, Zoe? Half your life it’s been this way. And now—well. You won’t have me to ignore for much longer. I got the test results this morning.”

Zoe listened, fancy French underwear pulled midway down her thighs, as her mother detailed symptoms and timelines, survival rates and regions of bodily invasion. When the message was over she didn't delete it. She went back out to Henri and sat across from him, nodding at his story about a trip to Barcelona while Rocky told her to call her mother and Atlan said it was okay if she needed time and the last of the Glace Plombières melted into a puddle, spilling over the plate and dripping white globs onto the table.

Zoe's mother had started going to a chiropractor, the chiropractor who would eventually send her to her a specialist, the specialist who would eventually tell her how long she had to live, around the time the Arlington branch of EE had gone to hell. The arbitration teams were collapsing. One girl had joined a cult. Another tracked down one of the people she'd been monitoring, a lawyer who spanked his children, and stabbed him to death. The only man in their department declared that EE was building a robot army and planning to take over the world, and that Boltzmann was himself an android.

It all happened at once, the disintegration, and Zoe had been the only one to keep her head. Silvia had remarked on it when Zoe arrived in Paris, scrolling through Zoe's file on her tablet. "Very impressive. Especially in such a terrible time." She glanced up, smiling. Zoe couldn't take her eyes off the magenta lipstick stain on her front tooth. "You are very dedicated to the work."

Zoe wasn't sure if she deserved the praise. It hadn't been particularly hard to get through Donna's attempts to get Zoe to come to the compound in Kentucky with her, or Arjun's ranting about how many small AI firms EE was buying and how it surely meant the singularity was coming. She'd still come into the office every day, still done the same work she always did. She was used to turning off her own doubts and feelings, used to letting Rocky and Atlan guide her through her days. They'd done it for her when her father died, in the weeks after the funeral, when Zoe couldn't get out of bed, when all she wanted was to join him in Heaven. She'd thought about razors, and rope, and pills, but suicide was a surefire way to disqualify oneself from paradise unless a high-level arbiter determined that the death was a case of ethical euthanasia or extenuating circumstance. EE had learned the hard way that if



they left that loophole open, too many people would walk right through the door.

Atlan had spoken to her, softly, night after night, until the morning Zoe finally got the strength to push open her bedroom door. “Zoe, if you get up and go outside, you can earn some points, and you’ll get closer and closer to Heaven with every bit you do. And don’t you want to see him again? Isn’t that what you want, Zoe?”

\* \* \*

Back at the apartment, cheeks flushed red from champagne, Zoe and Henri fell into bed. She didn’t turn her angels off. She wasn’t sure yet that she could handle the night without them.

Afterward, Henri rolled a heady spliff sprinkled with Moroccan hash, which they passed between them as they lay atop the ruined sheets, twisting up to blow smoke out the window. It made Zoe feel like a lot of things in Europe did: a little decadent. A little sick.

This could be her life, if she stayed. No more East Coast schwag from a cheap vape pen in Michael’s rented condo. She could live in Paris with her brilliant engineer boyfriend, accompanying him on business trips to all the exotic locales where EE had a presence, from Buenos Aires to Bangalore. It would almost be perfect, her life. The only thing she couldn’t work out was what came after.

She propped herself up on an elbow, looking over at Henri. His expression was lost in the dim blue of the room, illuminated only by the small incense-scented candle she’d picked up for him when she bought her own. “I have to ask you something.”

“Of course.”

“Could you—I know this is a strange thing to ask. But could you turn off your feed? Just for a minute.”

He looked at her, his eyes black pools. Then he nodded, the bed shifting as he tapped his wrist.

“That’s not a good idea,” said Atlan.

Rocky agreed. “Anything said in private can be said in pub—”

She switched off her feed. Henri waited for her to speak.

“It’s about Heaven. I need to know if—” She took a breath. It was strange not to have Rocky and Atlan guiding her through this. “If it feels real when you make copies of people, when you have access to their data.”

“You mean does it feel real when you—”

“When you pass over. Yeah.”

Henri watched her a moment. Then he threw off the sheet, standing and crossing the room like a pale skinny ghost to retrieve something from the dresser. He settled back beside her and, without a word, tapped a cool, smooth object against the implant on her wrist.

“Sorry,” he whispered, once he’d tapped it against his own skin. “I should have asked. But they’d know then, you know. This is the only way to actually disable the app.”

A slug of fear slid down Zoe’s gut. “So Rocky and Atlan, they’re—”

“Just off temporarily. Don’t worry, I’ll turn them right back on. But I wanted to be honest with you, off the record. Are you asking because—I mean, is there someone who—”

“My dad.”

“Ah.” Henri’s hand was on her other wrist now, stroking lightly. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s—he died years ago. When I was sixteen. He was really sick, and so he was thrilled when Boltzmann announced the afterlife feature.” The timing had seemed so miraculous, then. Just as bodies were failing—just as new and old plagues were spreading fast and far, aided by the failure of antibiotics and the febrile globalized world—the Ethical Empire developed technology that made bodies largely unnecessary. “But now my mom is sick, and she wants to sign everyone up for the family Heaven, and—they got divorced way before he died. That’s the problem. She doesn’t want him there. Not the real him. The best compromise she offered is that I could have a copy of him locked off in some corner of the place. We fought about it all the time before I left. And I keep wondering—would I know the difference? If I had a copy of my dad, or if I moved into his Heaven and got a copy of my mom instead, and she had a copy of me? I know you can share space in multiple paradises sometimes but I’m never going to earn enough points to do

that, I'm not a saint, I'm barely a cinch to get in and I've been working for EE for three years—”

“Hey, hey, slow down.” Henri, to her dismay, was chuckling. “It's okay. If it's points you need, I can get you points.”

“What do you mean, you can get me points?”

He waved his hand. “I can—you know. Dump however many you need in your account. So you can build what you want.”

They were both high. Still a little drunk. Maybe that was the cause of Henri spouting nonsense. “You can't just give me points, Henri. I'm in arbitration. I know that better than anyone.”

Something about the comment altered Henri's tone. “Oh, yeah. I didn't mean—I meant that I can help. Make it feel real, whatever you decide to do, you know?”

“Does it feel real when you visit Mariève?”

He stiffened. “What?”

“I asked because—I thought you'd know. She isn't a copy, but if she were, do you think you'd know the difference?” She couldn't seem to stop herself now. Something about the dark, and the hash, and the fact that she had an architect of Heaven before her had unleashed her tongue. “What does it feel like? I've watched the testimonials, but they can't really tell you everything. Death must change people, right? No matter how seamless the upload?”

Henri still wasn't moving. His eyes were focused on the wall behind her. She looked back, and saw only her shadow in triplicate.

“She is not...” Henri's voice was so low that she could barely hear him. “Mariève is not in Heaven.”

Zoe sucked in a breath. “Where is she?”

“Nowhere.” Henri's voice began to break. “I want to believe she is, but I cannot. Because if she is—” He buried his face in his hands. “I'm going to Hell.”

“You're not—Henri, you're an engineer. There's no way you're going to Hell.”

“Not that Hell. The real one.”

“What are you talking about?”

He raised his face. “It’s broken, Zoe.” She’d always liked the way he said her name, *Zo-ee*, but now it sent a chill down her spine. “Heaven—it’s broken. It has been broken from the start.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Those first beta users. Your father. Almost everybody since. They’re not in Heaven. Not anymore.”

“Where are they?” She was glad they weren’t touching, glad she hadn’t reached out to comfort him. She wasn’t sure she could stand the feel of his skin on hers.

“*Purgatoire*. We made it in the beginning. We thought—we only meant it for extra storage, back then. Or maybe only in extreme cases. But it’s where everyone goes now.”

Zoe’s hands twisted in the sheets. “That can’t be true.”

“*Oui*, it is. We’re fixing it. We are *trying*. But at this moment—maybe only twenty thousand are in paradise. All rich, all powerful. It takes too much to keep everyone else’s minds running. More than the subscription fees or subsidized plans could cover.”

Zoe knew who he meant. Her nation’s last president. Scores of CEOs. Celebrities, aristocratic scions, Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winners. All the early influencers who had helped secure funding for Boltzmann’s revolutionary, proprietary technology, all those who had stacked his company’s board with their bona fides. They were the ones who had given the testimonials, beaming in from the afterlife all beatific to encourage worldwide sign-ups.

“We started to run low on storage in the vaults in Lausanne by the fourth year,” Henri went on. “But the problems started before. When we got the patents, the early users all seemed fine. They *were* fine. For a long time. But then they began to change.”

“Change how?”

“They warped.” Henri’s voice was dull. “Destroyed their Heavens. Attacked the system. Made ... terrible things out of what they loved. What they had put in their afterlife.”

An unbidden image flashed through Zoe’s mind: her father’s cats. Rocky and Atlan. The ones she’d named her angels for. The ones she’d told him to

put in his Heaven, so he wouldn't be alone.

"We realized too late that a mind without a body can only exist for so long. There is an element of consciousness we couldn't replicate that must be connected to embodiment. To sleep. To dreams. They're important in ways we did not understand. All the people in Heaven now, we built them robotic vessels for relief from the virtual world. That is where Boltzmann's concentrating all the research. He wants it perfected now, before—"

*Boltzmann's building a robot army. Boltzmann's terrified of illness.*  
"Before he dies."

"Yes."

They sat in silence until Zoe spoke, her voice sounding far too loud.  
"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I am frightened, Zoe. We have done so much more good than bad. Every revolution has its cost, and to defeat death—that is the biggest revolution of all. But it doesn't mean as much to me as it used to, because Mariève never signed up. She refused, no matter how many times I told her I could build her a Heaven, a real one. Get her a new body. She didn't want it. She still believed there were things humans couldn't do. *Shouldn't* do. And maybe she was right. Maybe I'm going to burn." He clutched at her hands, and she fought the urge to shake him off. "Tell me, Zoe. Am I damned?"

"Why the—why do you think I can answer that?"

"Because you can. You judge people all day. You weigh their sins."

"To total points that are apparently meaningless."

"But they matter, Zoe." He squeezed her palms. "It *does* matter. Whatever you think, it matters. To me, it is—it's everything."

His hands were hot in hers. Ever since her father died, ever since Zoe had left her mother behind in the States, all she retained of them were phantom sensations. She'd been trying, these last few months, to work out which ones mattered most. The sound of her mother's voice? The smell of her father's cologne? The way each of their hands felt in hers when she was young, swinging between them as they helped her sail over a puddle in a lush green park as big as the world?

She hadn't known how to choose, but she'd been certain her father was waiting for her. Her brother had chosen their mother. He always did. Her dad

had never remarried, had no one by his side. She couldn't leave him in eternity, counting down the years, the decades, until Zoe would arrive.

"Can you save them?" Her throat was dry. "If you fix this mess, the ones who've already died—they can still go to Heaven, right?"

Henri hesitated. "We ... don't know. We could not store all their data, everything from the neural links. We had to compress it. There has been loss. We're not sure exactly how much. What it has done to them. Their experience of time, of reality—we do not know how it feels."

"And yet you send more users there every minute."

"We can't stop it now, Zoe." Henri's eyes were refulgent, maybe with tears. Maybe only with reflected firelight. "Even if we tried, if someone told the truth—it would cause a scandal, and the Empire would go on. Stop Boltzmann, and someone else will take his place. Most people will still take the gamble to be the ones who end up in paradise, when the only other option is..." He trailed off, gesturing at empty space. At wherever Mariève wasn't, perhaps. Or at the void of the room in which they sat, which, despite the summer night, seemed as cold to Zoe as catacombs.

"Show me." The words were out of her mouth before she'd had time to consider them.

"What?"

She withdrew her fingers from Henri's grip. "You want me to render a verdict? You'll have to show me the evidence. I need to see what you've done."

Henri gaped at her. "But I cannot—it threatens the integrity of the entire system, Zoe. I do not know how to open a link without threatening Heaven. Or without risking your mind, and mine."

Zoe said nothing. She kept her eyes on his, even though they were nothing but blurs to each other in the dark. She should have pressed him, that night in Mariève's bedroom, on why he still kept a shrine to a sister he could visit in Heaven any time he desired. She wondered how much Mariève had suspected. What she'd known.

Henri sighed, dropping his head into his hands. "*D'accord*. Okay. Let's go."



★ ★ ★

Henri lived a twenty-minute walk from the office. It was three in the morning when they arrived. The security cameras and thermal scanners would capture their presence, but Zoe didn't care. She'd never be able to stomach coming in to work again anyway.

Henri made her wait in the cubicles while he checked the lair. She stared at the images on Sylvia's digital photo wall, the portraits and candid photos of her large, happy family, and wondered how many of them had already died.

"Psst." Henri waved her in, holding the lair door ajar. She walked over to him, passing through the archway, and he led her down a hallway to another door, where he placed his hand against a pad for access. "Sometimes the others don't leave. Just work on their Heavens, all night long."

Zoe followed him into the large circular room, taking in the sprawling, buzzing consoles and the scattered VR headsets. Half of its curved wall was a one-way mirror, looking out over the clock and arches of Gare Saint-Lazare, bright against the still and empty night. On the domed ceiling someone had painted Boltzmann wearing his signature "Ethical Tech" T-shirt and blazer, reaching out in the style of *The Creation of Adam* to touch the tip of a robotic finger.

"Here." Henri went over to one of the consoles and lifted up a headset. Zoe took it and awkwardly maneuvered it over her head. She saw only blackness for a moment, and then as Henri did something to her left the machine sprang to life, immersing her in his Heaven.

Her breath caught as the vertigo hit, and she took a step backward, a real one. Henri caught her. "It's okay. Takes a second to get used to. Use the controls; they're linked to your implants already."

She twisted out of his grip. "Put yours on."

There was the clatter of plastic as he obliged, and then Henri was before her, standing on the same green hill the machines had deposited Zoe upon. They stood on a marble plaza that looked like something out of ancient Greece, with glowing plinths indicating different sites in Henri's personal paradise. Around her the simulation stretched for countless miles, its every detail complete. Gleaming towers rose in the west, set before an aquamarine

expanse with waves too even and perfectly whitecapped to be natural. Above them dual purple suns, the two clearest objects in an early evening sky filled with streaking meteors and other celestial ornaments, spun in twin harmony, casting an uncanny solferino glow over the landscape. The slopes of the hills around them were lush with blooming flowers and plants she didn't think existed in nature, or maybe plants that had been lost long ago.

She'd never seen anything like it. She'd played around with tweaking the Heaven template when she was younger, but stopped when the generic game options lost their allure. For all her efforts, she could never envision a Heaven bigger than a house.

In the distance a volcano rumbled, startling her. She turned to watch as it spewed fire in the air, and then looked back at Henri, who was blushing in perfect-pixel quality.

"Mordor," he said. He looked a little sharper than he did in reality. The long plane of his nose cast shadows onto his skin that were starker than normal, though the effect may have come from the strange sunlight. When his hair waved in the wind, Zoe could see every strand.

The virtual space she inhabited felt real. She tried to imagine how it might be to exist in a constructed world without the attachment of a physical body, but of course she couldn't. Maybe death wasn't only the expiration of the corporeal form. Maybe it was the separation from it. Maybe that's what the mind never recovered from.

"You can see here"—Henri tapped his finger against one of the plinths and a spinning image of Earth appeared, with an ever-increasing sun, outlined in red, floating above the projection of the globe—"nearly a billion minds and counting. It will just go up and up, exponentially. More people are signing up every day, and they put the implants in their kids now. As soon as they are able. No one wants to go to Heaven without their babies."

She shivered. When they'd left Henri's apartment, she'd only thrown on a T-shirt, and the lair was freezing, its tangible chill overwhelming the temperate programming of Henri's Heaven. The ticker above the map of the Ethical Empire kept rising, and Zoe tried not to tally all the people she knew who had died since EE's beginning.

Henri crossed over to another marble stand and tapped his finger against it. With dizzying speed, they were traveling, and when Zoe's feet once again hit something her brain perceived as solid they were in a garden. A garden, or a jungle—Zoe couldn't be sure of the correct terminology to use. Above her latticed towers of hanging vines stretched, leading to bridges and huts nearly a hundred feet up, and below her the invisible floor revealed descending levels of waterfalls and ponds, an unending grotto beneath her feet.

They stood at the base of an impossibly large tree, one of at least a dozen Zoe could see. An opalescent snake, its body as thick as Zoe's torso, wound itself around the lower branches. Henri started to walk and she followed, stopping behind him as they came to a stone wall overgrown with oleander.

"It's—I know it's cheesy. But this is how I design. I have to think of the story, you know? So this is my perimeter. The edge of my—well, my Garden of Eden."

Zoe looked up again, to the soaring birds, large as pterodactyls, cackling over their heads. There probably were pterodactyls here. She wondered how much of this place resembled a fifteen-year-old's amusement park wet dream. "So you can connect to Purgatory from here."

"Yes. It's the only way in, besides Boltzmann's Heaven. To create another conduit would be to acknowledge Purgatory existed, which we do not. It's categorized as one of the lower Heavens, officially. That keeps it ... mostly legal. It's all there in the user agreement, but everyone who understands what it means is working for EE."

"Why would Boltzmann give you access?"

"Backup. In case something happens to him. And because he has me working on a project to fix things. Rehabilitate those minds, or—recycle them, if we are able."

"Recycle them."

"Yes. For processing power, or for data."

"Data mining, you mean." The value of this kind of archive of human minds would be inestimable, Zoe was sure. She'd never bothered to study the clauses for postmortem privacy protection in the EE terms of service.

Henri nodded. “But we haven’t been able to find a way to extract the data without exposing the whole system to corruption. The minds in Purgatory—they’re like viruses. If I try to create a portal, even if I attempt to give only your father access, I don’t know what will come through. My Heaven is linked to a dozen others, including Boltzmann’s, which are linked to more and more. There are firewalls, but Zoe—we don’t really know what they’re capable of. This isn’t like AI we created ourselves from the ground up. These were human beings, once. I can try to contain them, but it could crash everything. I can’t project the risk of buffer overflow with something like this. A billion minds and no way to know exactly what they’ve become. Once we open a link to them, they will have a link to us.”

Something tickled Zoe’s nose. The scent of jasmine, she realized, blooming on the vine. The aroma brought back memories of a summer trip to the zoo with her dad, borne on a simulated breeze she could feel brushing the fine hairs on her skin. They’d seen the last of a few kinds of animals there. The ones whose wild brethren had disappeared before humans were incentivized into behaving themselves.

“We still have his base files. I could make you a good copy of him.” Henri’s hands were moving over a keyboard in the lair. She could hear it, the little clicks all around her at once, conjured from nowhere. And then Henri’s avatar pressed his hands against the wall, and there was a door there. He turned to face her. “There could be generation loss. He may not be exactly what you remember. But who would be?” He gazed at her for a long moment, the glittering specks of gold in his eyes hyperreal. “Even if we had designed Heaven perfectly, who would be?”

“Is that how you feel about Mariève?” Henri’s avatar flinched, and she knew she’d hit her mark. “That she’s just a collection of memories? Wouldn’t you give anything to have her, *all* of her, beyond that door?”

Henri’s fists clenched. “She is only my memories now, Zoe. She’s gone. And if I could talk to her, I would.” He walked toward Zoe and palmed something into her hand: a silver key. “If I could ask her what to do and she could tell me, I would do it. But it must be you. Because you make the judgments. The decisions, all day, and I do not know what else to do. Maybe there’s nothing else. No other judgment, no saving anyone’s soul. And we are

doing good work. The world—it is better. I keep thinking of where we were a hundred years ago. Fifty. Twenty. Should we give all that up because death has some bugs?”

The key was leaden in Zoe’s grip. It was only code, she knew, but it seemed to thrum with power, like a magical item in a quest.

“That’s why you asked me out, isn’t it.” The words had weight too; the ungainly clunk of truth. “Because you wanted me to absolve you. Because Silvia, or however many other arbiters you went through, would never have gone this far.”

Henri didn’t reply. He didn’t have to.

She pushed past him to press her hand against the wooden surface of the portal he’d created. It felt like any door, like the door she’d pushed open when her father hadn’t responded to her knocking one Sunday morning. Like the door to Mariève’s room, to Henri’s room, to the room Zoe locked herself inside for weeks as a teenager. Like the top of a coffin at a closed-casket funeral, hinged at the sides, heavier than you’d guess. Like something you should never look inside.

She had lied to Henri when she told him her father couldn’t wait to sign up for Heaven. It had been Zoe who insisted, who pleaded and begged. If she walked away now, went home, left Henri, she’d have to convince her mother to do the opposite. To let herself die so she wouldn’t be trapped, a fragmented mind in limbo.

But who would choose oblivion against the promise of “maybe”? Vanishingly few, Zoe was certain. Life wasn’t hard-wired that way.

Though her fingers were wrapped around the key, she found them tapping against her right wrist. It took her a moment to realize why. “I can’t—I have to think, Henri. Turn them back on.”

He understood immediately. “But what if someone sees?”

“Henri. Turn them back on. Please.”

She experienced nauseating sensorimotor dissonance as she felt Henri lift up his headset and push the dampener he’d used in the apartment against her flesh, even as he stood before her in the simulation, motionless. Her vision flickered, and suddenly Rocky and Atlan were there, standing before her in all their glory.

They looked like real angels, tall as she was, wrapped in golden robes, with fluffy white wings and hair flowing down to their waists. Rocky's was a darker shade of red than Atlan's, and though they looked identical otherwise, she could still tell them apart at a glance.

"Whatever you're doing, Zoe, stop," Rocky insisted. Their radiant visage was smooth and perfect enough to be utterly alien, their eyes too big for their face. "You shouldn't be here. You could lose points. You shouldn't be here. Go home now."

Atlan was looking at the door. They cast their gaze back toward Zoe, and she could see in an instant that they knew precisely what she was about to do.

Rocky caught on a millisecond later. "Zoe, no." They rushed forward, grabbing her wrists, but their hands were insubstantial. The angels had never had a sense of touch. "You can't do this. It's a crime against the system. The ultimate sin." Their voice was deep, almost echoing. It didn't sound like them at all. "Henri can build you the perfect Heaven. You can be happy, Zoe. You can see your dad. Every day. Every day for the rest of time."

Atlan was still silent. Zoe looked at Rocky, holding their stare, ignoring Henri. "Calculate the possibilities. Tell me what could happen."

"Zoe—"

"Rocky. The probabilities."

"They could seek bodies." Rocky's wings started to beat, lifting them a few feet over Zoe. "The bodies of living users. They could tear apart Heaven. Everyone's Heaven. They could end all the good we've done. They could ruin the outcomes."

"They could show you what's beyond."

Rocky glared down at Atlan, who fell mum once more. "There is nothing beyond. Nothing good. Heaven is good, and if you do this you will lose it. But step away, and go with Henri, and you can have a father." Rocky's words were speeding up. "You can't know that what's behind that door is him at all, Zoe. A parent is a program. Love is a program. Devotion is a program. You can run the right programs for eternal happiness. Let us save you. Leave this place. Do what's right."

She glanced at Atlan, who stood to her right, and closed her eyes. She let herself imagine it. Her Heaven. Not the one her mother wanted; not even the

one her father would have wanted. Not Henri's, which buzzed and chirped and thrived around her with a force of life ever-missing from her reality.

Her hand dropped away from the door, the key inert in her other palm. She felt Rocky settle, their wings quieting as they heaved an angelic sigh.

She heard Henri sniffing through his hands, hiding his face from her deeds.

She thought of Heaven, and Hell, and the space between.

And then she flung open the door.

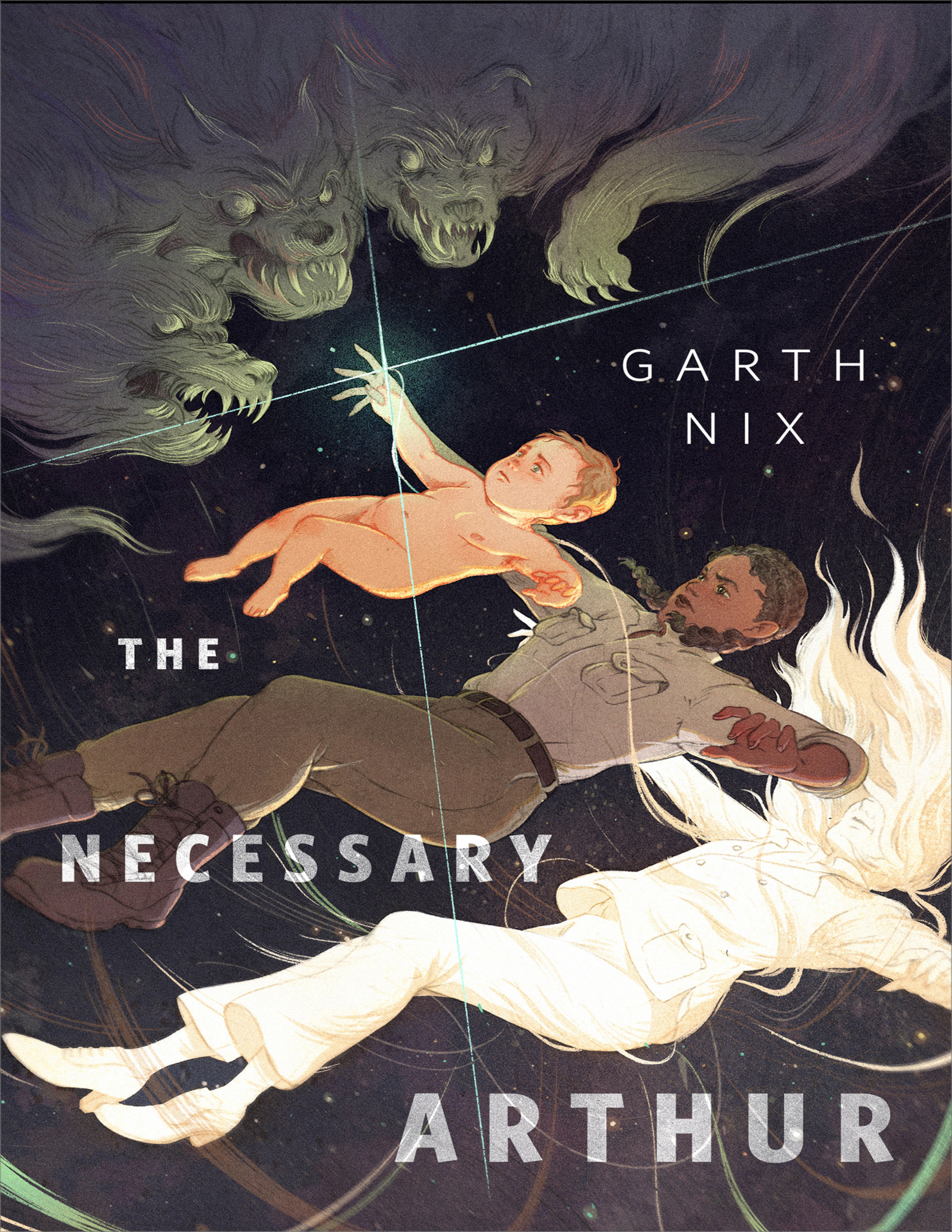




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GARTH  
NIX

THE

NECESSARY

ARTHUR



# The Necessary Arthur

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**GARTH NIX**

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*illustration by*

DION MBD

TOR·COM 

Tamara Tafika often came to the Sheepstones in summer, late in the long evenings, as the sun was sliding down all red into the west. The stone circle wasn't much, as stone circles went, nothing to rival Stonehenge or Avebury. There were only seven stones in all, and none were actually standing, the most upright of them leaning drunkenly at a sixty degree angle, the others all long since succumbed to the horizontal.

The stones weren't that big either, the largest only five feet long and about two feet wide. They were limestone, brought a great distance in Bronze Age terms. A 1980s study had shown they likely came from western Yorkshire to their resting place here, just north of Hadrian's Wall. They had been roughly worked to give them some shape, but otherwise left undecorated.

Tamara liked to sit on the smallest stone and watch the sun slip away. It was a time for quiet contemplation, an escape from the pressure of her completed but not yet awarded PhD from the School of History, Classics and Archaeology at Newcastle University; and the usually greater or at least more annoying pressure from the undergraduate students she tutored.

Consequently she was a little annoyed this valuable time of solitude might be disturbed when she heard the swish and crackle of someone coming through the ferns that grew so thickly on the hillside, almost obscuring the track up from the layby off the road. She had parked her own car there, but she hadn't heard any traffic since.

The annoyance was coloured a little by caution. No one could see her from the road, so they wouldn't have stopped because they saw a single woman alone, and her car was the mud-splattered Land Rover her supervisor had lent her while he and his family were on vacation, also not suggestive of a lone female target. Even so, she held her big bunch of keys in her fist, with one ready to score across an attacker's face, just as she learned in self-defence classes. Better to be ready than not.

"A hundred fucking metres away! You did that on purpose."

It was a woman talking. Tamara relaxed a little, though not entirely, since it seemed the woman was talking to herself. Tamara could see her now, despite the fading light. A short, slight silver-haired woman in an almost luminously white double-breasted business suit, coming up the path in a series of tottering steps and near falls, which as she got closer, Tamara saw was due to extremely high shoes. Which had fluorescent blue-white heels.

“She could have put me down right next to you,” complained the woman as she reached the stones. She was younger than Tamara had presumed from the sight of that silver hair. Close up and standing still rather than tottering on her six-inch heels, she looked a cool sixty rather than a doddering eighty.

“Er ... she?” asked Tamara, meaning to humour this obviously batty old lady and depart as quickly as possible.

“Doesn’t matter,” declared the woman, with a wave of her hand. “Tamara Tafika.”

“Um, yes,” replied Tamara, even more mystified.

“Childhood in Lusaka, moved to UK with parents when you were three, Plymouth first, then Highgate; scholarships to excellent schools; parents died when you were sixteen, car crash, eccentric aunt made guardian but chose not to live with you; favourite food crumpets with Wilkin & Sons Tiptree orange marmalade; you didn’t break your wrist playing drunken croquet—”

“Er, no, I’ve never even played sober croquet and how would you break —”

“Undergraduate degree Cambridge in archaeology, starred first; favourite music a very obscure band called Harmonius Drunk, awful music by the way; current, just completed postgraduate student Newcastle University, archaeology again. Newcastle both to be near the Wall, and to your aunt, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Just data points,” said the woman. She brushed off part of the stone near Tamara and sat down. “Got to make sure you’re the right Tamara Tafika, right?”

“The right—”

“Enough with the rights. We’ve established who you are,” said the woman. She shot her cuffs and looked at her watch, a tiny thing set with a



great many diamonds. “Not a lot of time, is there? Ninety minutes to midnight, give or take.”

“Look, I don’t know how you know my—”

“Of course you don’t,” said the woman. “I’ll explain as much as I can. Pointless really, since you won’t remember at this stage, but still. The methodology must be followed. Not to mention abiding by the rules.”

Tamara got up off the stone and started to edge away, keeping her eyes on the woman, ready for any sudden moves to attack or spit or whatever else she might take it into her head to do.

“Oh do stay still,” said the woman. She waved her hand again, not dismissively, more like how a puppeteer might make a puppet jump.

Tamara stood still. She didn’t mean to, she was trying to move her legs. But it was as if she was rooted to the earth. Strain as she might, she couldn’t lift her feet from the ground.

“Now, first things first,” said the woman. “You can call me Blaise.”

“Like a fire?” asked Tamara, trying hard to keep the panic from her voice. She wasn’t paralyzed, she could wiggle her toes and make her kneecaps go up and down, and wave her arms around. She just couldn’t unstick her feet ...

“No, B-l-a-i-s-e. Ess no zed.”

“What ... what do you want with me? Why can’t I move my feet?”

“I am considering you for a position with my syndicate,” said Blaise. “A very important position. According to my advisulants, you’re the best candidate for this phase of the Game.”

Tamara gulped several times, and forced herself to take as slow a breath as she could manage.

“What ... what is an advisulant ... and ... candidate ... Game?”

“Advisulant,” said Blaise, tapping her temple twice. Her fingernails were painted the same fluorescent blue-white as her shoes. “Surely ... oh ... yes. Too soon. Well, that’s not important either. Anyway, this mode of Game here on this world, is mythical, by region, and we’re setting up our playing pieces. Right here, the most important of these, the absolutely necessary piece, will be an Arthur.”

“A what?”

“An Arthur. You know, mythical king, joined all the warring parts of Britain into one kingdom. Excalibur, all that sort of stuff.”

“King Arthur?”

“Yes, well, they don’t need to be a king or a queen in this round of the game, obviously. It is the twenty-second ... I mean twenty-first century.”

“A woman can be Arthur?”

“Obviously,” sighed Blaise. She narrowed her eyes to look at Tamara. “I am wondering...”

She tapped her temple again and gave a theatrical sigh.

“No ... you are still the best candidate, believe it or not.”

“You want *me* to be a ... a ... King Arthur?”

“Did I say that?” asked Blaise, nettled. “Arthur is a later stage piece, we couldn’t play one now. We need you to be a Merlin. Didn’t I say that?”

“No,” replied Tamara. Her mouth hung open after the word, and she knew the expression on her face could only be what her mother had sometimes crossly described as ‘classic village idiot’.

“Merlin,” said Blaise. “You’ve got the potential, the connections. Very important piece in its own right, even if not Arthur. Precursor, you know. You’ll have to identify Arthur in turn one, and take the baby away to a safe, defended place and oversee their education and all that, protect them, plus catalyse the revelation of their identity later—”

“No,” said Tamara. “I don’t know how you’re sticking me here, but I’m not going to become your ‘Merlin’ and I am definitely not taking anyone’s *baby*, and even if that wasn’t enough I have my own life to live and—”

“It’s not optional, dear,” interrupted Blaise. “The stakes are too high for that.”

“The ... the stakes . . . ?”

“Your world,” explained Blaise. “Its future ... oh, it’s easier to show you. Look.”

She pointed her finger at the air in front of her, which was instantly occupied by a howling, blinding, white-hot vortex.

“That’s what happens if *They* win,” said Blaise, wiggling her finger.

The vortex diminished to a small white dot that disappeared with a pinging noise.

“What ... what happens if you win?” croaked Tamara, slowly lowering her hands from her ears.

“It’s a lot better,” reassured Blaise, though she made no move to show Tamara anything. “I mean most of the planet will still be around.”

“Most of the—”

“So like I said, it’s not optional. Now, we’re in the pre-placement mode, time is of the essence. Turn one begins at midnight and the aggressors will doubtless use their free attack, so you have to be ready.”

“Free attack—”

“One direct attack per turn,” explained Blaise. “As opposed to preparation and so forth. *They* will be prepping something now, and they like to attack as swiftly as possible. So, are you clear on the mission?”

“No,” replied Tamara.

“I wonder if everyone else is having the same trouble,” muttered Blaise. “I should have swapped with whoever’s got China, their Monkey candidate would have to be quicker on the uptake—”

“Just let me go!” yelled Tamara. She bent down and started to undo her boots, working on the theory that they were stuck to the ground and not her actual feet.

“Oh, stop fiddling about!”

Tamara stopped fiddling about. Crouched down, she found she could no longer do anything except breathe. Panic rose up in her, and she started to hyperventilate.

“And don’t panic,” instructed Blaise.

Tamara instantly felt calmer.

“Always good advice,” added the old woman. “Let me reiterate. You are going to be our Merlin for this game, which consists of a number of turns, each of which is seven years. You will be opposed by *Them*, who will try and stop you reaching your objectives. Which are our objectives. To wit, you must locate the soon-to-be-born Arthur. You must spirit the baby away to a safe place, keep them safe, and arrange their education and eventual coming of age when they will assume their rightful place. The first twenty-four hours of every turn is the aggressor period. *They* can attack at any point in this twenty-four-hour period, but only once in turn one, twice in turn two, and

three times in turn three and so on. Occasionally more in later turns, if certain precursor bonuses have been attained. Got that?”

Tamara made a noise in her throat.

“Oh, speak up!”

“Yes,” said Tamara indignantly, regaining control over her own mouth. “But how exactly am I supposed to do any of this? I’m an archeologist, not some—”

“If you didn’t interrupt me all the time I would have got to the point where I told you we’d be giving you the Knowledge and the Wand,” said Blaise severely.

“The Knowledge?” asked Tamara, slightly hysterically. “Like a London taxi driver?”

“I believe that is a *very small* sub-section of *our* Knowledge,” said Blaise. “Useful though. Particularly in the rain when you want to get to Claridge’s from the Tower of London, and Upper Thames Street is being dug up like it was last week. But I digress.”

She reached inside her suit jacket and pulled out something that looked like a blue Ventolin inhaler. Exactly like a Ventolin inhaler. She reached over and held it up to Tamara’s ear.

“I’m not an asthmatic,” said Tamara. “And if I was, surely my mouth—”

Blaise pushed the cylinder and a jet of intensely cold something pierced the inside of Tamara’s ear and seemingly went straight through into the pain centres of her brain. She screamed and would have flung herself to the ground and curled into a ball, if she had been able to move.

For a moment, everything went black.

“It’s not that bad,” said Blaise. “Come on, pull yourself together. Had it myself numerous times. That’s the Knowledge. It’ll take a while to grow, though. You’ll only have a few of the basics to start with.”

“What?” sobbed Tamara. The pain was ebbing, but it still felt like the worst sinus headache she’d ever had. “Something’s going to grow inside my head?”

“Only the Knowledge,” said Blaise. “Information, wisdom, the sort of thing you might collect over the years anyway. Just much more of it, and a lot

faster. And to be fair, a great deal currently unavailable on this benighted timeline.”

“Timeline?”

“Oops,” said Blaise. “So that’s the Knowledge. Now, where did I put the Wand?”

She reached inside her suit jacket again, investigating more pockets than could actually be located there, before eventually nodding to herself and reaching inside her left sleeve. From that she drew out what appeared to be a plastic chopstick, though instead of Chinese characters advertising a restaurant printed on it, there were six or seven unfamiliar symbols.

“Moon powered,” said Blaise. “You know.”

“No...”

“Just make sure you leave it out somewhere when the moon is full, or near full, so it can lock on. You’ll know how to use it once the Knowledge gets going. Go on, take it, it’s yours.”

“You’ve stuck me in this position,” said Tamara, through gritted teeth.

“Oh, so I have,” said Blaise. “Well, feel free.”

Tamara tentatively straightened up, lifted one foot, and then the other. For a moment she contemplated swinging around and smacking Blaise in the head with her keys, but she knew that wouldn’t help. The Knowledge was already at work, and though it had done little more than tell her how to begin to use the Wand, that was enough to confirm — if further confirmation was needed after she had been *immobilised* — that this all was really happening and she had no option but to go along with it.

“That’s pretty much it,” said Blaise. She handed the wand to Tamara, who took it, hefted it — it was much heavier than a plastic chopstick — and thrust it through her belt.

Blaise looked at her watch again. “Almost midnight.”

“What!” exclaimed Tamara. She pulled out her phone and checked the time. It was 11:58, and as per usual, there was no service. She looked around. The sun had set, and it was completely dark, except around the circle of standing stones, and that was only because Blaise’s suit glowed like a fluorescent tube. “But it ... it was only—”



“You fugued out for an hour,” said Blaise. “Application of the Knowledge. But that’s good. Imagine how painful it would be otherwise. And you didn’t have any of the other side effects.”

“What side effects?”

Blaise wasn’t listening. She had her head up, as if she heard something. But there were no noises, save the very slight rustle of a light breeze in the ferns.

“Got to go,” she said. “Good luck, Merlin.”

Tamara didn’t manage to do more than open her mouth before Blaise was gone.

She was there one instant, totally disappeared the next.

It was very, very dark.

The rustling in the ferns grew louder, more than could be explained by the breeze.

Tamara looked at her phone. It said 12:00.

She drew the wand, holding it in approved Harry Potter style, and directed its power as the Knowledge instructed her a mere second before an enormous grey-furred wolf leaped from the night upon her, its jaws ravening.

A stream of intense fire, like a firehose jetting lava rather than water, burst from the tip of the wand, completely incinerating the attacking wolf. The cloud of hot ash that was formerly the animal blew towards Tamara. She ducked aside and down, raising the wand just in time to destroy a second wolf.

The next few minutes were a frenzied time of blasting wolves, trying to avoid clouds of hot ash and general leaping about on, over and among the stones. One of which was blasted by the wand, the surface layer of rock glowing like coals in a perfect marshmallow toasting fire, before settling down to being intensely black with the stone half a centimetre thinner than it used to be, which Tamara knew was going to puzzle several ancient-monuments people of her acquaintance.

Nine wolves attacked in total. For quite some time after the ninth blew past her in ashen ruin, Tamara stood waiting for more, her wand ready, before she remembered the aggressor period allowed for only one attack in

the first turn. Surely the wolves had been it, and another lot of wolves after half an hour would be a second attack?

She sat down then, with her back to her favourite and fortunately unburnt stone, and started shaking. Her clothes were dotted with tiny holes from sparks, and she had a slight burn on her neck, which she suspected was going to look embarrassingly like a love bite.

Furthermore, apart from the basic use of the Wand to incinerate wolves, the Knowledge had *not* grown in her head, or at least not meaningfully. She could feel there was a lot more to the Wand, but she couldn't quite grasp what it was. It was like trying to remember someone's name, and no matter how hard you tried, it was just out of reach. The Knowledge hadn't imparted anything beyond Flaming Jets of Lava 101. Nothing about *Them*, or how to find Arthur, or anything useful at all.

"Annoying old bat," muttered Tamara to herself, thinking of Blaise. She rubbed the burn on her neck and thought she ought to get home and put something on it. But all the leaping about had taken its toll, not to mention the lateness of the hour. She'd worked a full day at the dig before coming up to the Sheepstones, and she was exhausted.

"Fuck it," she whispered, and fell asleep against the stone.

★ ★ ★

Tamara woke just before the sun came up. She felt groggy and sore, and there was a light dew on her face. Her mouth and throat were dry, as if she had a hangover, and her right ear hurt. It took her a few seconds to work out she'd fallen asleep at the Sheepstones. In fact, leaning against one. She remembered watching the sunset, and had a vague recollection of chatting to someone — a walker, or a farmer — and then falling asleep, but nothing else.

Except the dream. A very detailed dream, that she now took several minutes to cement in her memory. It concerned a party of post-Roman Britons, maybe sixth century. They were filling six very large pottery urns with treasure. They sealed the lids of the urns with wooden stoppers and a great deal of wax, and then buried them on the shores of a small lake or lough south of Hadrian's Wall, intending to come back and retrieve the treasure later. But she knew from the strange flip-forward and back nature of the

dream that they were all killed, the last one years later on the shores of some icy, possibly Nordic country. The lough's shoreline changed, water encroached over the spot, and the treasure was completely lost.

But the men who buried the treasure had taken note of the shape of the lough, the skyline of the hills to the north and the position of the sun in relation to the hills. Tamara, as a disembodied observer, had followed along. She could superimpose the sixth century landscape over the modern one, which was not so different.

She knew the lough, though the water level had ebbed back in the modern age. Tamara frowned deeply. It was such a vivid dream. She knew the exact place, it would be about thirty feet from the shore of the lough now, a hop and a skip from the Stanegate, once a Roman road. The treasure was astounding, both in terms of archaeological and monetary value. Hundreds of wooden cards, written on in ink, records of some kind; silver vessels, including a highly decorated drinking cup; votive plaques; thousands of coins, both gold and silver; jewellery of all kinds; and numerous weapons, including many very fine swords, with jewelled pommels.

But it was only a dream. Or was it her archaeology-sodden subconscious speaking to her? Had she noticed something there when driving past one day, something that had lodged in her mind that had only just now worked far enough to the surface to provoke a dream?

Groaning, Tamara got to her feet and at that point discovered her clothes were pitted with tiny holes, and one of the stones nearby was inexplicably pitch black. She stared at the holes, then groaned over to the stone and touched it. The black came off in crumbly pieces; it was like picking at a burnt sausage from a barbeque. She looked around, forehead severely furrowed. The ferns around the stones were broken and pushed down, and there were ashes everywhere, as if someone had flown over in a cropduster full of fireplace leavings and unloaded it all.

Her neck hurt too. Tamara used the camera on her phone to take a look. There was a burn there, a thick red line about as long and wide as her finger. And there was a weird heavy chopstick thrust through the belt of her Barbour shorts ...

“What the fuck?” whispered Tamara to herself. Something very strange had happened here. She felt an incredibly strong urge to simply get away, and gave in to it. Dropping the chopstick, she set off down the path through the ferns, initially at a restrained walk, which turned into a run and then an all-out sprint to get to the Land Rover and a quick drive home to her studio apartment in Westgate Road, only resisting the temptation to speed where she knew there was a camera.

It wasn't until almost lunchtime that she felt relatively calm. A shower, another three hours' sleep, and a huge brunch had done its work. It was Saturday, so she didn't have to go into the university, and while there would be volunteers at the current dig, she wasn't rostered on to be there supervising.

The dream of the treasure burial stayed with her. At two o'clock she studied Google maps and other satellite images, searched ADS and other databases to see whether anything of archaeological interest had been found there, and discovered a total lack of any LiDAR coverage of that particular area.

At three o'clock, she couldn't resist any longer. She drove back out along the A69 towards Hexham, then on to the Stanegate, following it until she spotted Grindon Lough and pulled over. The site in her dream was near the eastern shore.

But there was nothing there to suggest any reason to dig. It was just undistinguished, marshy ground. The lough had definitely receded, probably in relatively recent times, but there was nothing to indicate this spot was any different to any other, or worth the time and expense of investigation.

Tamara went back home and called her supervisor, Professor Rob Collins, despite him being on holiday at his brother's house in upstate New York. The first minute was taken up with insisting she hadn't crashed the Land Rover nor done anything to any other departmental assets, but he was not much comforted by her urgent request for permission, and even worse, for him to begin the necessary paperwork for a dig at Grindon Lough, on no basis whatsoever except for what she called a 'hunch', as she chose not to refer to her dream.

“We simply haven’t got the budget,” he said. “Look, if you can get the money from somewhere, a grant or ... or I don’t know ... run a Patreon or something...”

“I think it’s urgent,” said Tamara. She frowned, because this was a new thought. “Heavy rain might raise the level of the lough again, make it much more difficult. It’s been a dry summer so far...”

“OK,” said Rob. “We’re about to go to dinner ... uh ... why not grab the gear from the department tomorrow and do a geophysical survey, say three or four grids of twenty-by-twenty metres size with both resistivity and magnetometry? That’ll only take a day or two and make a big difference with any grant applications.”

“Right,” said Tamara slowly. Any delay felt like it was too long. “I’ll do that.”

“Let me know how you go. Of course, if you can get any money from anywhere, I’ll back it, help you with the approvals and so on. But you’ll have to do most of the paperwork.”

“Yeah,” said Tamara. “Thanks, Rob.”

The call was barely disconnected before Tamara started going through her own and everyone else’s lists of potential providers of grants or funding. Most of this was just crossing out ones that were already tapped out, or would take months if not years to respond.

But at nine o’clock, long after she should have stopped for dinner, Tamara found one of her archaeologist friends on Facebook referring to a grant she’d received to conduct a speculative dig of a potential late Roman villa in central Turkey, from a source Tamara had never heard of: the Albert Levinson Jr Panomnisoft Foundation.

Tamara went down the Google rabbit hole and discovered Albert Levinson Jr had been an entrepreneurial software developer, an American turned into a dedicated Englishman like T. S. Eliot. He founded the (almost only) British software success story Panomnisoft. He had also been a keen amateur archaeologist, probably of the annoying and potentially damaging kind from the sound of it.

When Albert Jr died in 2005, his daughter Alberta Levinson took over and greatly expanded the business. While Panomnisoft itself meant little to

Tamara, she recognised many of its subsidiaries, which extended across numerous different industries and were often household names. The application process for one of the Albert Levinson Jr grants was to send an email to AlbertGrant@panomnisoft.com attaching key details that took up no more than a page, and Alberta — who was many times a billionaire — would decide herself. The success rate, freely given, was one in ten thousand applications ...

The email was sent at 4am, and Tamara collapsed into bed, failing to note that the strange single chopstick she had thrown away at the Sheepstones was now on top of a pile of overflowing books badly balanced on her windowsill, the foundation being *Thud!* and the topmost book *Bring up the Bodies*, the wand nicely illuminated by the moon shining through the glass.

Tamara spent the next few days on the geophysical survey, being strangely unsurprised to see substantial pits with very high magnetic readings, typical of results from other known hoard sites. Even better, the resistivity readings revealed flares, or hotspots, in the same positions as the pits. She forwarded these results to Professor Collins, who was much more excited, and to Albert grant email, resulting in a basic acknowledgment of the additional information.

The grant was approved four days later, the paperwork for the dig completed a mere twenty-one days after that, and within three days of commencing the preliminary work, the first urn was found, containing even more fabulous and important treasures than Tamara had seen in her dream. Her reputation instantly rose into the stratosphere, her work and the constant demands by the media grew even more all-consuming, so much so she totally forgot about the whole weird business with the Sheepstones and all that, and after a while she even managed to push aside the fact that it was a dream that had led her to what the Daily Mail Online shriekingly described as “the biggest archeological find since Carter stepped into Tutankhamen’s tomb.”

\* \* \*

Five months later, Tamara woke up just after dawn on the morning of what was supposedly going to be one of the most important days of her life and



knew that this was definitely true, but not for the reason she'd been expecting when she went to sleep.

This was because a silver-haired woman in a brilliant white suit was sitting on the end of the bed, rather like a cat that has snuck in during the night and found the best place for itself which also happened to be the most annoying for its host. She was holding a Ventolin inhaler and looking cross.

All of a sudden, Tamara remembered meeting Blaise before.

“Fuck!”

“Well you might say that. Every now and then the Knowledge doesn't take hold properly,” said Blaise. “Which has totally set back our side, I can tell you. I really regret not choosing China over Britain, because their Monkey has already teamed up with Tripitaka and it's going swimmingly, whereas — stop that!”

Tamara froze in the act of picking up a very large and badly written historical reference book she'd been planning to read in bed and never did, but seemed exactly the right thing to hurl at this unwanted intruder.

“Put it down,” instructed Blaise. “Very good. Now hold still while I apply the Knowledge to your other ear. Maybe it'll find a way into your thick head from that side.”

Tamara struggled against the command but could not move. She remembered everything now, or as much as she'd been told, and if she'd been able to move a muscle she would have screamed in anticipation of the awful pain. But she couldn't. The next thing she knew her head ached as if from the worst hangover, the sun through the window indicated that dawn was an hour past, and the Knowledge had indeed found a way into her brain.

Blaise was still sitting on the end of the bed, reading a glossy magazine that wasn't in any language Tamara had ever seen and had a picture of something like a giant purple slug on the cover, posing to show off a utility belt. Or a slug corset or something.

“I hope it worked this time,” said Blaise. She didn't sound very confident. “Right. I'll be off. Remember, future of the world and all that.”

“I have to steal *Alberta Levinson's* baby?” protested Tamara. An enormous quantity of constantly updating and shifting information was roiling

about inside her head, most of it hard to pin down. But this one fact kept coming back to the surface. “I could get life in prison!”

“Unlikely,” replied Blaise. “You’d have to be alive. *They* won’t let you get away with that.”

“But she’s only just been born,” continued Tamara. “What kind of person steals a three-week-old baby from her mum?”

“A Merlin kind of person, I’m hoping,” said Blaise. “If it makes you feel any better, it was a surrogate birth. Alberta only supplied the egg.”

“Of course it doesn’t make me feel any better!” snapped Tamara.

“She hasn’t even given the baby a name yet,” said Blaise.

“So what!”

“Well, maternal attachment seems lacking—”

“I won’t do it,” said Tamara.

“What a disappointment you are,” said Blaise. “Best Merlin candidate, forsooth! Well, *They* will finish you off anyway and I suppose in your dying moments — *They* are never that quick, *They* like a bit of torture and so on — you can revel in the fact that you could have saved the world and didn’t, and all because you wouldn’t steal a baby who needs to be stolen so she can grow up to be the Necessary Arthur. The Chosen One. The Hero who mostly fixes everything up.”

Tamara looked at her mulishly. She could feel the Knowledge inside her head but it was fragmented, hard to grasp. Some things were easier to fix on than others, and it did indeed seem that the world was doomed if *They* won, and she herself would be an automatic forfeit, which meant death, as soon as the second round of the Game began. So steal a baby now or have slightly less than seven years to live and then die horribly ...

“Who started this whole stupid game thing—”

But she was talking to empty air. Blaise had disappeared.

“Shit,” muttered Tamara. She sat on the end of her bed with her head in her hands and wondered what the hell she was going to do. This was supposed to be the most momentous day of her life because in four hours’ time there was going to be the biggest media blabfest the university had ever had, at the so-called “Grindon Hoard” site, where *Alberta Levinson* was going to announce a massive donation to build a dedicated museum and

visitor centre, and Tamara was going to become an associate professor, vaulting above her peers.

Except that probably wasn't going to happen now. Because she was supposed to go and steal the benefactor's baby ...

Tamara picked up the Wand. She suddenly understood that one of the things it could do was remotely control any computer, access any system, change data, and so on. With the obligatory warning that *They* might notice.

She pointed it at her MacBook and looked at how much the other graduate tutors at the university were paid. It worked instantly, secure pages flashing up in an instant, as if her broadband connection was suddenly a thousand times faster. Then she looked at her bank account, added a thousand and one pounds to her current account, and there it was ...

"Shit," whispered Tamara. Everything was suddenly very concrete. "I suppose I do have to kidnap the baby."

She started with the information she could have got anyway, and then very delicately searched out a few key details that weren't available via any public search. After fifteen minutes, a plan began to form. Or not exactly a plan, more of a sort of cloudy gathering of the bits and pieces that somehow might go together into a plan. A pretty crappy plan, but it didn't seem likely any other kind might arise.

Tamara quickly discovered the workaholic Alberta Levinson, her three-week-old as yet unnamed baby daughter (so Blaise had told the truth about that), two nannies, two executive assistants, and five bodyguards had flown from London to Newcastle very early that morning on her Gulfstream G550 jet, transferred to an AgustaWestland AW139 Pininfarina Edition helicopter despite the fact it would be quicker to drive, and had gone on to a country house hotel called Avaunt Castle that was completely booked out for Levinson's party, at a mere £20,000 a day. The hotel was only five miles from the Grindon site.

According to the email between Levinson's assistant and the head of security which Tamara had just read (which she had the Wand make look like a Russian hacker prying) the baby, the nannies and two bodyguards were to stay at the hotel while Alberta, the assistants and the other three bodyguards went to the site for the media event.

“So,” Tamara said to herself. “The media event is at eleven thirty. It’s nine fifteen. I have to secretly get to Avaunt Castle, steal the baby but somehow so no one notices straight away, take her ... somewhere safe ... get back here, go to the media event, pretend nothing’s happened.”

She got out her field notebook and pen and almost wrote a list, beginning with “1. Get into Avaunt Castle” before stopping herself writing anything potentially incriminating. She put the pen aside and took up the Wand again, thinking about its capabilities. Frustratingly, the Knowledge still didn’t seem to be working properly. She could feel information but couldn’t access it, kind of like seeing the titles of books she could never open.

One thing was clear, while the Wand was an incredibly powerful device, using it risked attracting *Their* attention, particularly if it was to do with any connected technology, like the Internet, or phones. On the plus side, if *They* used their similar devices, Tamara would also be able to feel their presence.

“I know what you’re getting for Christmas,” she muttered to herself, and laughed, a very little bit. Clearly, the main lesson was that whatever ... well, *magic* ... she could do without ... the safer it would be.

*Yes* said the Wand, in her mind.

Tamara jumped.

“I didn’t ... well, I suppose I did know you could talk,” she said. “I mean I do now ... but I didn’t a second ago ... this Knowledge thing doesn’t seem to be working properly.”

*It seems not. There’s too much information to actually fit in your brain at any one time, the Knowledge is a quantum-entangled interface to a much larger data repository located in an interstitial dimension. When you need to know something, it should be there. But it has not initialized in your head properly.*

“Oh great,” replied Tamara. “So I have to think about what I need to know before I can possibly know I need to know it? And it isn’t working properly anyway?”

*That is correct.*

“Great. Listen, do I have to carry you around as a stupid chopsti — ah, I see not. That worked. For once.”

*How would you like me to physically manifest? Or embed, I can be like an extra appendix or a small lipoma—*

“No! I know. How about a ring? My favourite, from Rosemary Sutcliff’s books, that got me into Roman history in the first place. The Aquila family ring, gold with the flawed emerald and the dolphin carved into—”

*Yes. I have the reference. How about this?*

The chopstick wriggled in her hand, bending up until its ends met and it became a hoop, which shrank swiftly and became much heavier and more dense, the white plastic that wasn’t actually plastic turning into gold. A slightly smoky emerald emerged in the bezel, there was a spark of intense light, and a dolphin was etched in the gem.

Tamara put the ring on the second finger of her right hand. It was slightly loose, but it tightened up to be just right. She held out her hand, admiring it.

“Well at least this is unequivocally a good thing. Now, I can’t call you the Wand anymore...”

*I am still the Wand, no matter my shape. As the Knowledge is the Knowledge, wherever it resides.*

“I’m going to call you Dolphin. Dolph for short.”

*I suppose it’s better than Wanda.*

“You do dad jokes?”

*I am a sophisticated entity. As the Knowledge will tell you.*

“Well it isn’t telling me anything. Piece of crap.”

*It is true Blaise was using a, shall we say, third-hand applicator.*

“This just gets better and better. She gives me a hard time for not being the best possible Merlin. I bet she’s a terrible player in this Game of yours.”

*Her syndicate is ranked in the lowest one percent. Of the thirteen million, seven hundred and eleven thousand, three hundred and eighteen syndicates in play.*

“That good? Why did she have to choose me!”

*You really must be the best candidate to be Merlin.*

“Great. And yes, the one thing I am getting from the Knowledge is that the world does need an Arthur, or it will in due course, and I’ve got to get her.”

*So how are you going to steal the Necessary Arthur?*

“You tell me.”

*That I cannot do. You wield the Wand, the Wand does not wield you.*

Tamara sat and thought, occasionally shaking her head and sighing.

“I’m an archeologist,” she complained to the Wand after about ten minutes. “Not a career criminal. Or some sort of spy or whatever.”

*You have a practical mind, oriented to problem solving.*

“I guess.”

She got up and made a cup of tea, sipping it as she paced backwards and forwards.

“I know where to take her. I guess Blaise picked me for that, or that was part of it. But I have to get her first.”

*One step at a time is a time honoured procedure for maximizing the chance of success.*

“Hmm ... I’ve got to get into the castle ... you can transform things, right, but it works best if they are already like what they need to become? Otherwise *They* might notice?”

*Yes. Is the Knowledge working for you now?*

“Off and on,” said Tamara, scowling.

*Transformation uses less notional energy than creation, in most cases.*

“Notional energy?”

*It shouldn’t exist, but it does. Perhaps I should also point out that I am not fully charged.*

What!

*I am afraid Blaise requisitioned me from the incorrect outfitting stream, inward, not outward. I have been recharging but that takes two full orbits of the sun, I am at less than a quarter charge.*

“What does that mean?”

*The Knowledge will inform—*

“The Knowledge isn’t telling me anything! Okay, okay. I need a disguise, how much power will this take...”

She went to the kitchen cupboard and pulled out a white-stringed mop head, and from her wardrobe a fancy dress fake beard, legacy of a Viking party from a long-ago undergraduate excursion to York.

“Can you turn these into a proper-looking fake beard and hair, not too long, that I can wear? How much power will that take?”



*Yes. This is trivial, requiring less than one seventy-third of my existing charge. Actually giving you a real beard and hair, or making you physically male would take one eighteenth of my charge. A power use which would possibly attract Their attention.*

“Okay, that’s okay. Better than ... well, you make me some hair while I see what Barry left behind.”

Barry was Tamara’s ex-boyfriend, who’d joined Sea Shepherds and gone to the southern hemisphere to defend whales. Or, as was actually the case, to chase after a Norwegian reformed whaler. He’d left most of his clothes behind. Quickly she sorted out some basic khaki trousers and shirt, and a green anorak, which all together looked kind of official.

“Now I need an ID card for, uh, I don’t know ... oh yes, thanks Knowledge for once ... the Environment Agency. Can you make one, Dolph?”

“Yes. Best if you sketch one on a piece of card, though. Again, the smaller transformations, from as near like to like, are best.”

“OK.”

Tamara quickly drew a picture of the ID card the Knowledge had put in her mind. Almost as quickly as she sketched, the lines firmed and became printed and sharp, her circle with two dots and a line for a mouth became a picture of her face, even the paper turned into some kind of plastic laminate.

“A long-haired, bearded inspector from the Environment Agency,” she said. “Oh, I’d better do up some forms. What would they ... oh yes ... electronic these days. Make my iPad look right. Thank you.”

Her three-year-old iPad in its weathered nylon case melted and reformed into a brand new one in a leather folder with impressive logos, and the device was pre-loaded with forms for reporting all kinds of transgressions and disasters.

The mop became an excellent wig of dreadlocked black hair, which she put on and pulled down and was surprised by how good it looked. The beard and moustache had some sort of static property that kept it fixed to her skin, which she initially found alarming since it was quite hard to pull off. But it also looked good. Together, they said “wildness tamed for official reasons”.

Once Barry's anorak was on to disguise her shape, Tamara looked entirely like a male counterculture type tidied up for government work.

"So what would I be looking for?" she mused to herself, and then smiled. "Hey, can you make a big Geiger counter out of a little one?"

*Certainly.*

"And a proper gas mask out of a face mask I use for dust?"

*Yes. Though there is an increased chance of detection the more I do of this sort of thing.*

"And I'll need some coveralls turned into an anti-radiation suit. Is that too much, I mean would use up too much power?"

*These are all trivial applications and will amount to less than one fourteenth of my charge. But even tiny uses of notional energy can collectively become detectable.*

"Right. Well, you can do it on the way. So if it is detected, we'll be on the move.

*That is wise.*

Tamara gathered everything she needed into her backpack, then sidled down the stairs and out the laundry door of her block of flats, sped across the communal garden and through the hole in the fence into the lane. A few blocks away, Dolph found a non-descript green van that had not been driven for a month and so presumably would not be quickly missed. He opened the doors and started it for her, and just like that they were off to Castle Avaunt.

Along the way Environment Agency decals blossomed on the doors and amber lights grew on the roof.

They drove past the dig site, which was already swarming with media vans. The roped-out car park was full and many fancy Range Rovers and late model vehicles were parked along the Stanegate. As Tamara expected from reading the security arrangement emails, halfway from Grindon Lough to Castle Avaunt they passed a convoy going the other way, two huge Bentleys preceded by two police Vauxhall Corsas and followed by two more, plus a rather massive black armoured car the police must have borrowed from the Met.

There were also armed police officers on the gate to the hotel's long driveway, which they'd blocked with their Land Rover. Tamara had expected

this and Dolph had cautiously gone into the Northumbria Police IT systems to prepare her story.

Even knowing this, Tamara could barely stop her hand shaking as she stopped well short of the police vehicle, lowered her window, and held her ID card out.

“Morning,” called out the police sergeant who approached, not that close, the words and smile rather in contrast to his full body armour and the assembled equipment dispersed upon his person, which Tamara could see included a radio, mobile phone, telescopic baton, Glock 17 self-loading pistol and Taser X26 conducted electrical device. Not to mention the Sig MCX carbine slung across his front, from which his hand didn’t move, his finger perfectly disciplined outside the trigger guard.

“Morning,” replied Tamara laconically. Dolph had temporarily lowered her voice, it sounded really weird and she almost looked around to see who else was talking. The officer read her ID carefully, and then looked at the iPad Tamara held out so he could see the Google map of the hotel with a cross-hatched red area marked behind the castle.

“I’m checking up on possible radioactive contamination. Got a report there’s a whole lot of radium paint, got buried here after World War II. This place was a barracks back then.”

“You can’t go in today,” said the sergeant. “Got a VIP visiting. Well, VIP’s family right now.”

“Yeah, well, they’ll be a radiated VIP family if there really is five hundred litres of radium waste buried somewhere close by,” said Tamara grumpily. “My boss said she called you lot yesterday.”

“Five hundred litres?” asked the sergeant. “Is that a lot?”

“Enough to give everyone within two miles of here cancer if the barrels have rusted and that shit’s leaked out,” said Tamara. “Worse if you’re closer. I was just going to park here and get into my suit.”

“Yeah, right,” said the sergeant, slightly uncomfortably. He looked at his fellow officer, a woman, who while she must have heard gave no sign of it on her steely face. She just kept scanning the road. “If something like that was buried here they’d have found it years ago.”

“You reckon?” asked Tamara. “Well, like I said, I’m supposed to go check and my boss said she already told you lot, all the paperwork’s done.”

“Yeah? Wait here.”

He went back to the Land Rover, muttering something to the woman officer as he went past. She shook her head, but slowly shifted closer to the road and farther away from the castle.

*He’s calling the dispatcher, they’ll find your visit logged in to go ahead from the duty inspector last night. Yes, he’s got the go ahead.*

Tamara let out a sigh.

“By the way, can you stop me being shot?”

*Up to a point. If both these officers shoot at you with those carbines, from different angles, probably not.*

“Good to know.”

The sergeant came back.

“Yeah, we were supposed to be told you were coming, and it can’t wait,” he said. “Uh, you reckon we’re all right here?”

“Probably,” said Tamara. Time was getting away. “I’ll just pull up a bit farther away ... I mean farther on and suit up, OK? Any more of your lot up at the hotel?”

“No,” said the sergeant, shaking his head. “Private security, though ... I’ll give them a call, let ’em know you’re coming.”

“I don’t have to go into the hotel,” said Tamara. “The site’s round the back. Tell them to stay clear. Stay inside, keep the windows shut. It’s probably nothing, but...”

“There’s a baby up there,” said the female officer, coming back from the road. “Should we...”

“It’s probably nothing,” reassured Tamara. “I’ll know in an hour or so, maybe less. No need to do anything yet.”

Hastily, she did a U-turn and drove the van about fifty yards away, reinforcing the desirability of distance, parked it on the shoulder, and jumped out to quickly don the radiation-proof suit, which was bright orange and kind of puffy and had a massive clear domed plastic hood. She left the hood hanging down her back, put the gas mask on but pushed it up on her forehead and hefted the imposing Geiger counter Dolph had embiggened from the

cheap little DX-1 detector Barry had paranoically given her for use on her Black Sea late Roman villa dig, because he'd heard a Soviet nuclear submarine had sunk nearby.

She swung the detector about as she walked back, the officers pretending they weren't listening to its tack-tack-tack drumbeat and weren't watching the flashing lights. Both flinched as Dolph made it emit a sharp electronic whistle.

"What's that?" asked the sergeant nervously.

"Low battery," said Tamara. "Nothing here, I mean nothing out of the ordinary. You call them up there?"

"Yes. Look, as soon as you know anything, call me okay?"

Tamara nodded and made a fuss of taking his mobile number.

"I reckon it's nothing," she said, giving the lie to her words by immediately pulling down her mask, lifting up her hood and completely sealing her suit. Her muffled voice now sounded rather like a recorded official warning, muffled and almost incomprehensible.

"Don't let anyone else in until I get back. Unless it's like half a dozen HazMat crews..."

It was hot in the suit and mask, trudging up the drive. The castle was actually a Victorian folly aping a fourteenth century square tower, but it had been beautifully restored, as had the gardens around it. The whole place looked lovely, and expensive. Tamara wasn't surprised that as she passed the front a woman in a grey suit that screamed "hotel manager" came running out.

"Just go back inside, please," Tamara called out, her voice very muffled. "It's probably a false alarm but best everyone stay inside for now."

"What?" asked the woman, coming closer. "What is this about? That policeman at the gate said radioactive—"

"A large quantity of radioactive material may have been buried here at the end of the Second World War," said Tamara as loudly and clearly as she could. She kept lumbering on, clumsy in the puffy suit, the manager tripping along next to her. "Please stay inside until I have completed my tests."

"But that's ridiculous, how could—"

"This place was owned or run by the MoD wasn't it?" asked Tamara. "Look, stay inside will you? You are legally required to comply with my

directions.”

“Yes, all right! But please be quick. We don’t want our guests alarmed.”

Tamara waved and kept going, around the side of the castle and over to the cottage which served as one of the hotel’s suites, which she’d seen on Google Maps. It was empty, she knew from reading Levinson’s assistant’s emails. Quickly she went around the back, out of sight of the castle, and got out of the suit and gas mask, wig and beard.

“OK, fix the gas mask with the wig and beard inside the hood, animate it and send it out on some sort of search pattern, back and forth.”

*I hear and obey. But this is a slightly higher order of, well I suppose it is best called magic. The probability of detection increases a little.*

“Do it.”

Her voice had gone back to normal, Tamara noticed, though she hadn’t ordered Dolph to make it so. Perhaps it had been connected with the wig and beard ...

The puffy orange suit rose up of its own accord and picked up the Geiger counter. Tamara suppressed a shiver as it marched back into the view of the castle windows and began to sweep the Geiger counter backward and forward. Though it was her own idea, a living, moving radiation suit was just creepy.

“Is anybody watching the left side of the cottage? CCTV?”

*I have looped all the video surveillance. One of the bodyguards is at an upper window, watching the radiation suit. If you run diagonally to the kitchen door, there is a good chance you will be unobserved.*

Tamara ran. At the kitchen door, she stopped.

“Anyone in there?”

*The chef and an assistant are prepping for lunch, they are facing the south side. If you crawl swiftly they should not notice.*

Tamara got down low, pushed the door open and listened. She could hear knives chopping and a discussion of sport or something like that, it was too indistinct to be sure. She didn’t hesitate, but went down on her hands and knees and crawled straight through the kitchen, paused to listen for a few seconds at the swing door to the dining room before she went through.

Guided by Dolph, she made it to the fourth floor undetected. This was where the largest suite was, currently inhabited by the two nannies, the two bodyguards and the baby, the girl who would be Arthur.

“I want you to mess with their minds,” whispered Tamara. “The bodyguards and the nannies. I want it so they don’t notice me, they think the baby’s asleep, everything’s fine. I know this will probably alert *Them*, but I can’t think how else to do it. Uh, I guess you’ll have to do it to everyone in the building. Can you make it so they just go on for an hour or so and don’t notice anything?”

*Probability of detection approaches certainty if I do this.*

“Yeah, so *They’ll* know I’ve done something here. But how quickly can they react? And they can’t attack me directly, right?”

*Not without cheating.*

“What! They can cheat? I mean *They* can cheat?”

*There are penalties. But yes.*

“This is the stupidest fucked-up Game. Who ... oh come on, the Knowledge isn’t going to tell me...”

*While you may not know the principals, you should know the Game has kept an overall ... I suppose you might say cold war or lukewarm peace in the seven galaxies these last ten million years. Only five civilisations have been totally eradicated in that time. If there was war instead ... well, the Game is to be preferred.*

“If *They* do cheat, what can *They* do?”

*A wide variety of actions are possible.*

That’s helpful. How long have I got?

*We might have five or six minutes from when I act.*

“Shit.”

Tamara took a very deep breath.

“Okay,” she said. “Do it.”

Four minutes later, she was climbing over the low stone wall that marked the boundary of the hotel’s land with the farm next door. Baby Arthur ... Arthura ... Aretha maybe ... was asleep in her astonishingly heavy car capsule, strapped in and professionally nanny-wrapped in flannel. The baby’s go bag was over Tamara’s shoulder.



Tamara was aiming for a barn she'd noted from her Google Maps reconnaissance. It had cars parked outside in the photo, and she was hoping that they'd be there today.

*They know. Attention on hotel spiking. Ah ...*

"What?" gasped Tamara. It was hard going across the ploughed field. She could see the front end of a fairly decrepit Land Rover on the other side of the barn, but hopefully there was something better still out of view.

*They've taken control of the anti-radiation suit. Obvious, I suppose.*

Tamara looked behind her. The puffy orange suit was climbing the wall. It didn't stand up once it was over, it got down on all fours and began to sniff about like a dog.

*No human senses. Following our energy trail. Me, in other words.*

Tamara rounded the corner of the barn, and just managed to avoid colliding with a very surprised farmer.

"Hey, oop!"

Tamara's ringed hand tapped his shoulder.

"Sleep!"

Dolph did whatever it did, and the farmer folded up under her hand.

Tamara jumped in the Land Rover. Dolph started it at the same time, the engine ragged. Aretha started to cry, a piercing sob. Tamara put the capsule down on the floor on the passenger side.

"Stick the capsule down, protect her!" she yelled at Dolph.

The gear shift was recalcitrant, but she slammed it into first and wasn't gentle with the clutch. The vehicle lumbered forward, just as the radiation suit came scuttling around the corner of the barn, still on all fours.

Tamara put her foot down and drove straight into it.

There was no jarring impact. One second the suit was there and then it wasn't. Tamara kept her foot down and pointed the Land Rover at the track that led to the road, shifting up into second.

There was a scrabbling, drumming noise underneath Tamara's feet.

*It's under the vehicle, holding on.*

Tamara steered off the track into the drain on the side, the Land Rover bucking, hoping this would scrape off the suit underneath. She spun the wheel and the Landie skidded back to the track.

Puffy, orange hands appeared outside the windows on either side of her and began to pull down the glass.

“Kill it!” screamed Tamara.

*They're pouring power into it, it will take most of my—*

“Kill it!”

There was a bright flash and the smell of ozone. All the instruments on the Land Rover's dash suddenly indicated zero or empty, though it kept going. Benefit of ancient technology.

*Will take most of my remaining charge.*

Tamara glanced in the rear-view mirror. There were shreds of orange along the track behind her, emitting wafts of blue smoke. She slowed down to negotiate the grid at the farm gate and to look out for traffic, before turning onto the road.

“Is it dead? Have they lost us?”

*It's neutralised. It had limited senses so they probably do not know who they're looking for. But They will now know who you have chosen to be Arthur.*

“Shit. I wanted more time. Will you be able to unlock and start another car for me?”

*Yes. But little more.*

Aretha was still crying, but it was not full-on screaming, just dissatisfied sobs.

Two miles along the road, they swapped the Land Rover for a bilious green Fiesta parked at a layby where a popular footpath started. As Tamara carried the baby capsule over, Aretha decided it was time to start full-on screaming again.

“Ssshhh,” said Tamara ineffectually as she put the capsule in the backseat. “Dolph, fix the capsule here.”

*Done.*

“And the screaming? What do I do about the screaming?”

*I could make her unconscious. But with the young there is a small risk of brain—*

“No! Ah, damn, we can't wait here ... maybe she's hungry.”

Tamara opened the go bag. There were two bottles of prepared formula in an inner cool compartment. She got one out and held it to Aretha's mouth, who immediately started to greedily suck.

"Can you hold the bottle? I've got to drive."

*Yes. But I have only one ninety-eighth charge remaining.*

Tamara leaped into the front seat. The car was already going, thanks to Dolph. She strapped in and headed out. Behind her, the bottle in the baby's mouth shifted down a bit, to ease the flow.

"Her own personal ghost nanny."

*I've had worse jobs.*

Half an hour later, Tamara drove the Fiesta into a layby along a forested section of the road. Aretha was asleep again. She picked up the capsule and the bag, crossed the road after checking there was no traffic and walked a hundred yards to where a bridlepath began, that rose up a low hill.

Aretha woke up and at first seemed inclined to scream again, before deciding she liked the bouncing she got from Tamara struggling uphill with the capsule. She was quiet, though bright-eyed, and her little hands clenched and unclenched at unseen things in the air.

"She isn't actually seeing anything is she?" asked Tamara anxiously.

*Not that I can detect.*

They left the bridlepath to take a rougher footpath along and then down the other side of the hill, into a dense wood of oak and ash. There, it rejoined a very narrow, not-quite one-lane road that while tarred, clearly saw little traffic. Tamara trudged along it for another hundred yards until she came to the farm gate, and the sign.

A word etched in faded pokerwork on a slab of wood stuck on an angle on the gatepost. It said "Yána," which Tamara knew meant 'refuge' in Elvish. *Lord of the Rings* Elvish.

Tamara opened the gate. A string of bells that hung on it tinkled, though she also noted the plastic owl in the fork of the nearest tree had a video camera eye that was tracking her, and she knew there were other sensors and alarms.

The track beyond wound up through the ash forest, with just the peak of the main house visible, with its curiously large satellite dish. Yána was a

sort of commune, composed of mostly retired scientists with slightly techno-anarchic leanings, and its leaders, though they would deny being leaders as such, were Tamara's aunt Helen and her partner Lorileigh Lyon, who had bought the place with the money from the Nobel Prize for Physics they'd shared twenty years before.

Briefly, Tamara wondered what she should tell Aunt Helen and Lorileigh, and the others in the commune, before she realised that the best and most effective thing would be to tell the truth. She'd have a terrible time stopping them experimenting with the Wand, or trying to ... but it would be best.

She'd only got halfway to the house when Helen came hurrying down the path.

"Tamara!" cried Helen as she got close, her arms extended to hug niece and an unexpected but certainly delightfully beautiful sleeping baby in the capsule. "And baby! Why do you have a baby, Tamara?"

"It's complicated," sighed Tamara. "And I will explain in detail later. Right now, I need to leave Aretha with you, borrow some clothes and your car and drive like a fiend back to my dig for the whole official celebration."

"That's today?" asked Helen, who was inspecting Aretha. Though an enormously distinguished scientist she was never very good with dates. "Who does little Aretha belong to?"

"It's complicated," repeated Tamara. "Keep her hidden and I will explain everything. I'll be back with all her proper documents ... uh, new documents. And some tech for you to drool over."

Helen raised her eyebrows. Tamara raised her ring.

"It's very complicated, but also I think you'll find very interesting," she said. "Dolph ... um ... do something that looks amazing and won't use much power."

*So specific. All right. But then I will have to go dormant, until I can be recharged, under the moon.*

Another Tamara suddenly flickered into existence next to the original, but this one was made of golden light. She bowed, turned into a fountain of golden sparks that formed characters and spelled out some incredibly complicated formula and disappeared.

“Hmmm,” said Helen. She blinked quickly six times, a sign of acute interest.

“Magic ring,” said Tamara.

“Obviously superior technology,” said Helen, with a sniff. “And so of course, I am *very* interested. But more importantly, are there nappies in that bag?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Clearly you have not had your sense of smell technologically enhanced,” said Helen. “Come on. Lorileigh is the most adept at baby changes. And she has the best clothes.”

★ ★ ★

Half an hour later, Tamara parked her aunt’s BMW at Hexham railway station, leaped out and collared the one taxi that usually lurked there, the driver appearing to be astonished anyone wanted his services. Shortly thereafter, he delivered her to Grindon Lough. Now properly attired in a Nobel prize–winner’s deep navy pants suit and with her own ID, she easily made her way through the cordon of police and university PR people to her place in the front row inside the huge marquee erected for the occasion.

“Where have you been?” whispered Professor Collins. “I’ve called you four times!”

“Lost my phone, overslept,” Tamara whispered back. “Everything okay?”

Clearly the news of the kidnapping had not broken, because she could see Alberta Levinson sitting across the aisle, looking at her phone, surrounded by guards and flunkeys. She looked bored, not distressed.

“Just a bit behind schedule, but it would have been good for you to meet Levinson before we started ... ah...”

He was interrupted by an executive-looking woman who had come over from the other side of the front row. A very attractive, super-competent type, holding two iPhones in her left hand. She smiled.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m Ms Levinson’s principal executive assistant. You must be Dr Tafika?”

“Yes,” said Tamara, smiling back. She felt an immediate, powerful attraction to this woman, but she was puzzled as well, because the emails

she'd read had been from a principal executive assistant who was male, or at least that's what she remembered, David or Dave ... and as per usual the Knowledge was not reminding her ...

"I am Ms Elzein," said the woman. "But please call me Nimue, we'll be working a lot together."

Tamara kept her smile fixed and hoped the sudden caution she felt did not reach her eyes as they shook hands.

"Great!" she said brightly.

"Oh, what an interesting ring!" said Nimue. Her voice was musical, the tone of it seeming to resonate inside Tamara, as if her whole body wanted to shiver in answer.

Tamara didn't want to let go of Nimue's hand. But she did.

"Yes," said Tamara. "It's a replica of a Roman ring. From one of my favourite historical novels."

*It's going to be a tough seven years, she thought to Dolph. And that's only getting to turn two!*

*I have faith in you,* Dolph replied, his mental voice very faint and distant, *Merlin.*

## Special Thanks

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# EVERYTHING'S FINE



MATTHEW PRIDHAM



# Everything's Fine

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**MATTHEW PRIDHAM**

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*illustration by*

SAMUEL ARAYA

TOR·COM 

Something happened to the surface of the moon while Eric Eldridge struggled to adjust his tie that morning. He was terrified of this, the way the fabric refused to yield to his shaking fingers, the way it alternately came undone with sudden abandon or compacted into a hardened, ugly snarl. Hadn't he tied a goddam tie before? Granted, he *was* trying to pull off a Balthus knot, a calculated risk when he had only an hour to get to work. Sebold told him those ostentatious knots were in with the trifecta of regional managers visiting the office this week, hinting this minor change would garner Eric more status than a quarter's worth of spotless paperwork. But even after watching five web videos on the Balthus, Eric was having a hard time producing anything better than this tangled mess. He'd got the upper bit right, sure, but how the hell was he supposed to produce that bit of fabric cleavage below?

Convinced that staring in the mirror might be behind this fumbling, Eric turned away and looked out the window. Outside, a bus swept by, followed by a flurry of litter and black flower petals. Across the street Mrs. Squint was wrestling a lumpy plastic bag into her trash bin while twin brothers skipped past, dressed in matching, pin-striped uniforms, weirdly eager to get to school. Blood still dripped on the windowsill from the walls, but at least it wasn't as bad as it had been last week.

After work, he and Sandra walked Eric almost had it, had that Balthus right at the tips of his fingers, when he once more noticed the moon. Pale against the bright blue morning sky, it looked as embarrassed as it ever did when caught still out after night. A celestial walk-of-shame. Just as the knot squirmed away from being completed, a series of tiny fractures spread across the lunar surface. Visible from two hundred and forty thousand miles away, those cracks must've run the length and depth of the Grand Canyon, but from down here, it looked like someone had draped cobweb across the satellite.

Eric shook his head, angrily pulled the tie free, and turned back to the mirror. This time he saw his problem: the tie was squirming on its own, reluctant to be forced into a new shape. He needed only to wait until it had settled down, lulled into complaisance by the pause, and then he could surprise it with a few vicious tugs.

When he'd settled on some rough approximation of the Balthus, he stumbled into the kitchen, poured himself a cup of coffee, and switched on the television. He wasn't looking for news on what he'd just seen. No: Eric had just never been able to relax and enjoy a cup of coffee while doing nothing. It drove Alice crazy, but he had to have something to read or watch or otherwise take in while downing the black sludge. If he didn't, his taste buds, undistracted, would revolt and, after a bit of gagging, he'd sometimes cough the stuff up.

Alice, oddly hard of hearing at thirty-eight, always left the volume of the television on too high and a burst of noise shattered whatever tranquility the kitchen had leached from the morning. Mashing the volume button, Eric watched two talking heads arguing over an appropriations bill up for vote that week. As he sipped his coffee, he flipped through stations, one nervous eye fixed on the kitchen clock. Still plenty of time, still doing fine. The pundits were replaced by a commercial for a drug meant to alleviate an unmentioned condition (sappy music, children running through bucolic fields, a goiter sprouting tiny mandibles), then a music video, violent static, a scene from a sitcom, a shot of a man pulling himself to pieces on *Good Morning America*. Grimacing, he killed the screen. He didn't have time to watch anything right now anyway.

The last of the coffee went down like a shot of acid and Eric shuddered. Why did he never remember to throw the dregs into the sink? It was always the worst. Just how many minutes of productivity did he think it would give him?

He stepped outside and was locking his front door when a voice behind him said, "Hey, man, I think you're gonna make it to the office on time today!"

His friend and co-worker Sandra Yoshida stood at the head of his driveway, eyebrow cocked, smirking, impeccably dressed. When Eric saw

the sleek briefcase in her hand, he panicked for a second thinking he'd left his own inside, but there it was, sitting beside him. "Heya," he said, joining her, "decided to walk today?"

She nodded, then, with a little tremor, gave him a hug hard enough it took his breath away. After regaining their composure, they set off down the sidewalk. "We might run into Jenkins, too. Heard he was having, um," she hesitated, gestured vaguely, "car troubles."

"Sure," he said. "The more the merrier." Inwardly, though, there was a distinct quiver. Jenkins was decent, never a jerk, but the guy was a wreck, a sweaty, stuttering assemblage of self-consciousness and faux pas. Eric supposed if he were a bigger asshole, being in Jenkins' company would give him more pleasure than pity: around Jenkins, no one could feel like the biggest schmuck on the scene. Instead, he felt sympathetic shame whenever the man made his inevitable gaffs, any pleasure spoiled. Did this awareness, though, make him less of an asshole, or merely a disappointed one? He frowned at the thought and stepped around a puddle of spoiled milk leaking from his neighbor's mailbox.

"So?" He turned and Sandra was twitching a smile at him from behind her stylish sunglasses.

Eric blinked. "So, what?"

"Did you watch *Design of the Times* last night?"

He laughed. "God, are you still obsessed with that show?"

Playfully, she punched his shoulder. "Bet your ass, I am," she said. "You're losing this bet, my friend."

"Yeah, I watched it. You think I'm gonna miss the mid-season finale?"

"And?"

They stopped at a crosswalk by the local elementary school and Eric's eye snagged on something over his friend's shoulder. There, behind a chain-link fence, kids were playing a game in the school's playground. A couple dozen children following each other in a circle, kicking up dirt and clumps of grass as they tried catching one another. They weren't making a sound, which may have been what made him look closer, not a giggle or a scream. No need to worry, of course. None of his business.

"Eric."



He looked back at Sandra. “Yeah. Well, you’re outta luck. My girl is going to win this thing.” Eric kept talking over her nervous, incredulous groaning. “Don’t even. She’s got the skills, the judges love her, she even made the last score.”

Sandra rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Chick knows how to apply wallpaper and you think that makes her a champion? Where did she even get that pattern from? The 1970s?”

The kids in the playground whirled faster and faster around each other. By the time Eric and Sandra caught a break in the traffic and made it across the street, the game had turned ugly. They were moving almost too fast to see, but from the glimpses he got, the kids had already begun catching one another. Each had sunk at least one arm into the back of the child in front of them, their bodies fusing haphazardly. One poor girl’s leg seemed to have melted into that of the boy she followed, and their stumbling gait made the whole kid-circle wobble unevenly.

He didn’t need to see this, not at all.

“And your guy? Mister ‘I paint miniatures and collect novelty clocks’?” He shied away from the fist she aimed at him. “This is your winner? Watch: he’ll be eliminated before the final four.”

They were almost to the shopping district, the school behind them, when Eric heard the sound of the chain-link fence surrounding the playground squeak in protest, groan, then burst open. Something thudded wetly onto the sidewalk. Eric stopped in front of the window of a coffee shop and pretended to examine his tie in the glass. In the reflection, he could see the still-whirling clump of children now rolling across the street. A ball of stretched faces, flailing little limbs, brightly colored pinafores, overalls, shorts, and super-hero t-shirts, it ran into a stop sign, knocked it over, ricocheting in his direction.

Sandra tapped his shoulder and he turned, carefully ignoring the approaching conglomeration. “Come on, Dapper Dan,” she said, her smile flickering now, “your tie looks fine.”

Calmly, they walked on. A crash behind them set off a car alarm and Eric had to yell to be heard above it. “You noticed!”

“Of course. Is that the, uh...”

“The Balthus knot!” The latter word came out as a shout in the silence left by the sudden failure of that car alarm and Eric blushed. “Sonofabitch took twenty minutes to tie.” The rolling sound began again, now accompanied by scrapes and squishing and clinks, as though the ball of children had incorporated parts of the car it had demolished.

Sandra tugged on his arm and pointed at a figure a couple blocks up. “There’s Jenkins,” she said and strode faster. Neither looked behind them. “Let’s go! We can’t be late today.”

All around, the crowd of early morning shoppers dispersed with similar speed. One woman, suddenly enthralled by a display of furniture, dragged her own screaming child into a store while two men on the other side of the street quickly sauntered into a bakery. Sandra’s hair, pulled back in a ponytail, bobbed in front of Eric as they ran down the sidewalk. He thought of the prospect of his promotion into marketing management, thought of the smile that would split Alice’s face when he told her he’d got it, thought about how it would cut back the need to travel so much, thought of anything but the metal being pulverized behind them, the shriek of a pedestrian who hadn’t run fast enough.

Jenkins, oblivious as ever, had stooped to tie his shoelaces when they caught up with him. “Hi,” he said, blinking at them from the sidewalk. “It’s great to see you. To see the both of you. Today. Not like it’s *never* good to see—”

Sandra pulled him up and patted him on the shoulder. “Good to see you too, Adam.” She made a show of looking at her wristwatch. “But we better get going, buddy. Big day today!”

“Oh, ah, sure,” Jenkins said and they started moving again.

Somewhere back there, a loud and liquid crunch, followed by the sound of glass bursting. As if he was just cracking his tense neck, Eric turned his head to one side, then the other. A block behind them, the ball of kids, now studded with a car door, tires, bits of pavement, and what looked like a Pomeranian, had wedged itself into the window frame of a department store. Those little limbs, waving frantic and mechanical, would likely dislodge the ball soon, but not before the three of them could get to work. That throb in his chest, that was just excitement.

“You guys watch *Design of the Times* last night?” Jenkins, who always seemed to be fighting a cold, wiped his nose with the back of one hand. He reeked, as ever, of acrid terror. “My guy didn’t do so good, I guess, but there’s still time for him to make up points in the Speed Round.”

Sandra and Eric exchanged a mutual eye-roll. Of course, the poor guy chose the worst contestant to pin his hopes on. And of course, they couldn’t say as much, as his already teetering self-confidence would crater with the slightest criticism. In a weakened state like that, he’d be a goner in no time. Eric, vicariously mortified, looked away from his eager face. They’d almost left the shopping district and he could make out the office park ahead, towering buildings surrounded by patches of bright green grass. The wall they were walking alongside had been decorated since yesterday. Someone had crafted a mural of severed yet still quivering, dripping genitals. It wasn’t the most pleasant sight he’d seen that morning and he looked down at the sidewalk, suddenly interested in the cracks and stains covering it.

“Maybe, Adam,” he said as soon as his voice was steady enough to use once more. “Can’t rule out a dark horse. Sandra will owe you half her paycheck if you win, with odds like that.”

A hybrid of a giggle and a gasp escaped Sandra. She’d seen the mural too.

They were only a couple blocks from the office park when a crimson and glistening cloud blew in from the west. It moved through the air like an amoeba in water, a solid mass making abrupt changes in direction, long red tendrils questing the air around it. As he watched, the cloud brushed against the building nearest theirs and left a smear of dark fluid on the concrete from which smoke instantly poured. Beside him, Sandra gasped, coughed, and launched into a series of predictions. Ad revenue would dictate the winner of *Design of the Times*, she told him, fixing her jittery eyes on his, and every marketing analyst worth a damn said there was no way a woman would win twice in a row. “My guy’s a shoo-in,” she said, her voice cracking.

“Mmm-hmm,” Eric mumbled. His disobedient gaze kept sneaking to that cloud. It vibrated, squeezed in upon itself, and then a flurry of dark objects fell from it to the park below. *My promotion*, Eric thought, pushing his

throbbing heart back down his throat, *Balthus knot*. “You listened to the marketers last year,” he said, “and look where that got you.”

If they kept to the sidewalk, they could avoid the cadavers hanging from the park’s trees, could avoid hearing the desperate things they babbled, but that meant tacking on an extra five minutes out in the open and Eric couldn’t stop thinking about those shapes dropping from the cloud. Jenkins, who’d stumbled ahead, veered toward the trees, but Sandra grabbed him by the shoulders, gently redirecting him back onto the sidewalk. “No shortcuts today,” she told him, “can’t afford to get distracted by pretty sights when the regional managers are here.”

Clearly unhappy, Jenkins nonetheless stepped back on the sidewalk. He glanced to one side, gagged at something just out of Eric’s line of sight, and said, “Eric, are you, are you nervous about your in-interview?”

Before Eric could respond, four, no, five figures rounded the side of the building. Whatever they had been before, hapless construction workers or executives or retirees, these creatures were now clad in identical glossy black leather uniforms, patches of red cloth and chrome accoutrements the only other colors visible. The one in front careened toward him, its body twisting around and over itself, first meeting the concrete with a leg and an arm, then two arms, then two legs. It even took one step with its head, legs and arms wriggling in the air. Eric winced at the thought of how that must have felt, cheekbones squashed against hot sidewalk, but when the figure righted itself, he saw his sympathy was misplaced. The thing’s face had fallen off, or been removed, as had those of its companions.

A cracked giggle escaped Eric and before he could stop it, he said, “Fuckfuckfu— Yesss, Adam! A little nervous! Baring, Lofter, and Myers are here! What if they don’t like my work this year?” The creature in the lead somersaulted past Jenkins, missing him by an inch, and flopped down directly in Eric’s path. Casually, he stepped around it, his pretext a sudden need to throw an arm around Sandra’s shoulder. “Ms. Yoshida here,” he said as the other uniformed beasts swung around Jenkins and flailed past them, “says I got nothing to worry about.” Eric had all of ten seconds to breathe a shuddering sigh before he realized those flopping, jittery bodies weren’t vanishing into the distance. Instead, he felt a presence behind him, almost

leaning against his back, and a disjointed shadow joined his on the pavement in front of him. Was it whispering?

Sandra shook beneath his arm, but her voice was all sunny optimism. “I’m telling you, Eric, you’ve got this. Especially now you got that sweet Balthus—”

Just as the gravelly whisper in his ear threatened to resolve into words, Jenkins looked back at his co-workers. He’d been grinning, no doubt ready to deliver a strained compliment, but the smile drooped. He spoke without thinking: of this, Eric would always be sure. It was just an instinctual thing, though he supposed one could still call it courage. “Eric, it’s right behind y —”

The words had hardly left his mouth when the creatures tumbled past Eric and Sandra and fell upon Jenkins. He screamed once, only once, but the sound carved itself into Eric’s eardrums, an aural tattoo he knew he’d never be able to erase. Still whispering, the black leather-clad creatures grabbed Jenkins’ arms, legs, and head. Before they’d even begun noisily disarticulating his body, wrenching it into some new shape, his face had begun to slip from his skull.

Eric hesitated almost too long and then tugged Sandra onward past the shivering creatures, past Jenkins with a blank space where his face had been, down the long sidewalk, the entrance to their office now in sight, the sliding doors out front ready to take them in.

Sandra’s eyes were dangerously watery, her upper lip trembling. “Poor Je—”

“Sandra,” he said around a lump in his throat. He tried to say more but couldn’t.

After giving a tiny nod, she stared ahead. It took a moment, but when she spoke, her voice was clear and bright once more, barely touched by the emotions he knew roiled beneath her glassy smile. “I sure hope someone brought doughnuts,” she said.

\* \* \*

Eric approached the secretary’s desk with a bear claw wrapped in a napkin in one hand, his briefcase in the other. Alice would be so proud of him.

They'd celebrate tonight, maybe make love for the first time since that night the walls started bleeding. He'd crush this interview and they'd have nothing more to think of for days.

Behind the desk, Trisha was typing a memo. Ignoring the tears running down her face, Eric slapped the bear claw down on the counter in front of her.

"Eric Eldridge," she said, hurriedly wiping her face, "is that for me?"

"Last one."

They smiled at each other a little too long and then she pulled the dessert toward her. Gamely, she took a bite, chewed at it, swallowing the clump of sugared dough with only the smallest effort. "You think these offerings will get you special treatment?"

He laughed. "Never, Trisha. Just trying to brighten your day. Did you watch *Design*—"

The look she aimed at their manager's door shut him up. He'd seen the same look on Alice's face a month ago when she'd found their loveseat digesting their Labrador.

"Is my interview with Baring, Lofter, and Myers still today?"

Trisha forced more pastry down her throat, then nodded. "Sure is, Eric. But the regional managers..." She held both hands in the air, fingers wriggling as if she were trying to pull something down. "They had a little incident on their way to the office." The tears started once again and she buried her face in the crook of her arm. "They're in there. With Mr. Stanton." He waited as she was overcome by another wave of sobbing. Poor kid: she wouldn't make it, not at this rate. It was amazing she'd lasted as long as she had. When she'd calmed herself, she reached out and touched his hand. "You can go in, if you want to."

He didn't want to, but after squeezing her hand briefly, he walked through those double doors.

Mr. Stanton, his direct supervisor for the last four years, was crumpled on the floor in a dark corner of the office. Eric wasn't about to get near the body, but it looked like something was growing out of the sockets where the man's eyes had once been. He turned his own gaze forward and approached the big, sleek desk which occupied the center of the room.



Aside from in a few corporate promotional photos, Eric had never seen Baring, Lofter, or Myers, but he supposed the creature crouching behind that desk was what was left of them. The incident to which Trisha had referred had fused their torsos together into a chaos of well-tailored suits, bulging protuberances, and awkwardly overlapping limbs. From this mess, three heads dangled on necks grown perilously thin and all too long. Something had eaten away most of the flesh on their faces. Bone glinted whitely in the morning sunshine, but any features which had survived their transformation were so swollen they more than made up for the missing skin in those parts that hadn't. When the bulbous eyes of what had been Baring settled on him, the other two swiveled in his direction too. An arm still draped in tattered cloth jerked out from that tangled torso and pointed imperiously at a chair sitting before the desk.

Eric sat. He plastered the best, most obsequious smile on his face he could manage, and swallowed the bile flooding his mouth. He stared vaguely in their direction, somewhere between the bobbing heads of the regional managers, stared and smiled his best smile. "Thanks for—" he lost his breath, closed his eyes, opened them once more and went on. "Thanks for seeing me. I'm grateful to have a chance to—"

"Baaaaaaaaaaa," said the head on the left. Lofter, or what was left of him. It stretched across the desk on one of those flimsy necks, thin eyelids flickering over oversized eyeballs.

Uncertain, terrified, no, nervous, just nervous, Eric nodded. "It's good to meet you all. I can't say how much I appreciate my position here at—"

The head on the right, Baring's, lifted into the air, wavering so unsteadily he was afraid it might fall from its neck. Torn remnants of lips smacked against one another and then it spoke. "Gravid benchmarks, Eldridge, undertake your overlay. Squamous synergy everlasting, Eldridge, our grainy gouts of capital." The neck on which this head perched reared back and it turned its eyes on its fellow managers.

The head in the middle was still, so absolutely still. If he hadn't already recognized the other two, Eric wouldn't have known this was Myers. Eric thought it might be dead until it blinked heavily. The skin left on its face

contracted around that blink, pulled violently inward, and then relaxed. Immediately afterwards, its features froze again.

“Well,” said Eric, who by now had little idea what words were coming from his mouth, “I’m certainly happy to do anything to push my department into new territory.” His hands were trembling so violently by now he had to grip the chair’s armrests to keep his fear from showing. Sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes but no way was he going to wipe his brow, no fucking way. He blinked hard. “We’ve got a plan to expand market reach. We’ll use a combination of—”

“Baaaaaaaal,” said Lofter’s head and rotated so one of its giant eyes could fix him more securely. It was close enough now he could smell it, an odor equally rank and sweet.

“Our stygian supply chain rankles, Eldridge,” gibbered Baring, its mouth opening wide as if anticipating even bulkier words. “A tenebrous paradigm shift raises all rafts of measure, Eldridge, all nautical for naught and you, Eldridge, your core competencies mark you more fungible than your cohort.” It snorted loudly, spat a wriggling lump onto the desk, watched the thing squirm away, then howled.

Myers’ head turned ever so slightly toward the right and one wobbly eyebrow barely connected to its skull rose half an inch.

“Though iridescent,” continued Baring, “what utility do you bring our charnel matrix? Have your faculties—” It stopped, squinted at him. It could see him shaking, see the sweat, oh god it could read his panic like it was written on his forehead in neon. Eric was going to start hyperventilating, then he’d begin screaming, then it would all be over. “Disappoint, Eldridge. Your aspect fibrillates. We have no temporal resources to train on a loathly bottleneck. None. The market won’t bear mammalian mummery anymore. Present your throat, Eldridge, present this noisome flange that we might—”

The head on the left, Lofter, its horrible scrutiny finished, arced across the desk, turned in to face its fellow managers. “Baaaaaaaal,” it groaned and crooked back to stare at Eric once more. “Baaaaalthus.”

After Myers and Baring extended so that they might get a closer look at his tie, they retracted once more. They briefly conferred, one chattering, one

repeating that single word, one dead still. Then, turning toward him, the three nodded.

Still struggling to keep his breakfast in his stomach, still faint with death dread, Eric nevertheless managed a smile for them.

He'd got his promotion.

Alice would be so happy.

\* \* \*

After work, he and Sandra walked home together. Maybe they saw what used to be Jenkins off in the distance, loping brokenly across a parking lot filled with bones. It was hard to tell: in that glossy black uniform, he looked like the rest of the creatures with whom he roamed. Eric and Sandra had to ford a river of tarry ichor which had sprung up in the shopping district, and that ball of children, now twenty feet tall and glimmering with razor wire, almost crushed them by the post office, but they reached their street safely. Heaving, retching, drenched in sweat, barely able to stay on their feet, but they were okay. Just peachy. They knew because they told one another this, and several times.

Alice, home from another long day at the café she ran, hugged Eric so hard he felt like he was going to break in half. After they'd both stopped weeping with relief, he told her he got the promotion. That smile on her face, it was worth it. They invited Sandra to stay for dinner and of course, she accepted.

After forcing as much pasta in themselves as their perpetual nausea allowed, the three retreated to the Eldridges' backyard. They pulled their lawn chairs as close together as they could and leaned back. It was easy to enjoy the night air, to slip into it like a warm bath, particularly if you could ignore the smell of burning flesh from next door and the sound of someone being messily flayed. Eric and Alice were already holding hands when Sandra grabbed his other one. They lay back and stared up at the sky and breathed as steadily as they could.

"I'm looking forward to the weekend," Sandra said.

They all shivered, smiled tightly at one another.

The moon bloomed above the mountains in the distance. As it cleared the flaming peaks, Eric saw the cracks on the lunar surface had kept multiplying. Need to pay the utility bill, he thought, need to renew the car insurance and our newspaper subscription. Need to fix the garbage disposal, the garage opener, the squeaky porch door. He pushed this train of banalities onward, tried losing himself in its noise. Then, with no warning, the moon shuddered, swelled, and giant slivers of shining rock exploded from it, out and away into space.

Alice turned her head from the sky, rubbed her face with her free hand as if to clear it of the sight, then kept rubbing. “What a nice night,” she said, her voice barely audible over the shrieking emanating from neighboring houses, “what a ... lovely, lovely night. We’re having a good time. We’re okay.”

Above, the moon shattered, its surface blowing apart with soundless and heartbreaking finality. All three of them looked up helplessly. There, gleaming with lost sunlight, a massive eyeball now floated, liberated at long last and now staring, bloodshot, ancient, merciless, on the Earth below.

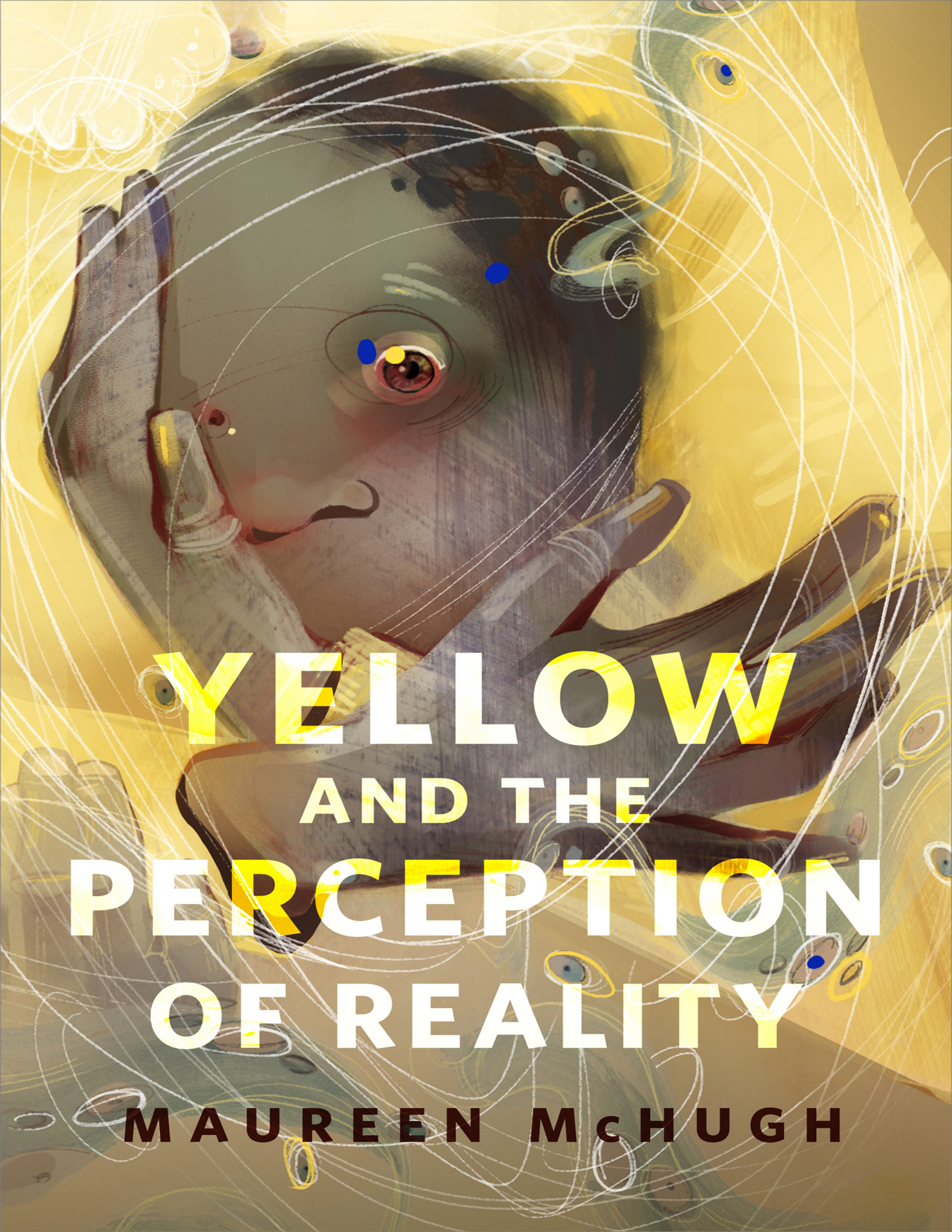
Eric swallowed his tears and looked down at their clenched hands. “We’re fine,” he said, “everything’s fine.”



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**YELLOW**  
AND THE  
**PERCEPTION**  
OF REALITY

**MAUREEN McHUGH**



# Yellow and the Perception of Reality

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**MAUREEN McHUGH**

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*illustration by*

MARY HAASDYK

TOR·COM 

I wear yellow when I go to see my sister. There's not a lot of yellow at the rehab facility; it's all calm blues and neutrals. I like yellow—it looks good on me—but I wear it because Wanda is smart and she's figured it out. She knows it's me now when she sees the yellow.

The doctors say that Wanda has global perceptual agnosia. Her eyes, her ears, her fingers all work. She sees, in the sense that light enters her eyes. She sees colors, edges, shapes. She can see the color of my eyes and my yellow blouse. She can see edges—which is important. The doctor says to me that knowing where the edge of something is, that's like a big deal. If you're looking down the road you know there's a road and a car and there is an edge between them. That's how you know the car is not part of the road.

Wanda gets all that stuff, but her brain is injured. She can see but she can't put all that together to have it make sense; it's all parts and pieces. She can see the yellow and the edge but she can't put the edge and the yellow together. I try to imagine it, like a kaleidoscope or something, but a better way to think of it is probably that it's all noise.

Today she's sitting on her single bed in her room, cross-legged, her narrow knees like knobs in her soft gray cotton sweats. She croons when she sees me, “Junie June June.”

She is tiny, my sister. Before the accident she was always a little round. Chipmunk cheeks and Bambi eyes and soft breasts. Now, food is all mixed up for her. Like, she has all the pieces, the crispness or smoothness, the heat or cold. But she can't put it all together. For her, a sandwich is a nightmare of crisp lettuce and melted cheese and soft bread, green and spongy and the smell of something toasted.

She's touching things a lot lately. I let her touch me. She's relearning all those colors and edges and sounds and textures the way an infant does. She's putting that together. She keeps getting better. She's started dropping things. I know it's on purpose. She drops and then she looks. They don't know how much better she's going to get but I do. Wanda will get well.

“Hey, skinny,” I say. She can’t understand me yet but I think she can tell tone so I talk to her the way we used to talk. She giggles like she understands me. Her hands roam across my yellow top. She reaches for my hands, my bright yellow fingernails. She misses but I put my hand in hers and she strokes the smooth painted surfaces.

“It’s a good day,” she says. “Good, good. It’s warm and yellow, maybe it’s finally spring or summer? I think it’s spring but I can’t tell time really. It’s day, I know that, I know I know. Are you happy, June?”

“I’m happy,” I say. “I’m happy you’re happy.” It’s January.

Wanda is all there inside. She remembers, she knows, she can speak.

Yellow is me, and she talks to me. But she doesn’t know what I’m saying back. She can’t see my expression. I mean she can see it, but without being able to put the color brown with my eye shape with the edge between eye and skin, without being able to judge how near and how far everything is. She can’t tell if I’m smiling, if my eyes are crinkled.

After the injury, the first real sign she was fighting her way back was when she started saying, “I, I, I.” She would rock on her bed, her eyes rolling, her head tilted back, and say, “I, I, I, I, I.”

Dr. Phillips thinks she was assembling her sense of self as separate from the world. “She has no boundaries,” he said. “She doesn’t know where she ends and the world begins. She doesn’t know if she’s cold or the can of soda is cold.”

She was involved in an accident at the lab. Two other people are dead. Some people think it’s my sister’s fault.

★ ★ ★

My mother calls. “June?” she says on the phone, as if someone else might answer.

“Hi Mom,” I say.

“How’s Wanda? Did you go yesterday?”

This is what we talk about these days. I am home after a long day of wrangling with the county about social services for one of my clients. He’s seventy-eight and has lost part of his foot to diabetes. He’s old and sick, he drinks and has multiple health problems. He needs to be placed in a facility

that takes Medicare, where someone can give him his meds and make sure that he eats. He just wants to stay in his house off Crenshaw with its sagging roof and piles of junk mail on the kitchen table because he wants to keep drinking. When he's in a good mood, I'm like a daughter to him. When he's not, like today, he calls me a stone-cold fucking bitch who will throw him out of his house. He says he'll end up in some horror show of a place, three beds to a room and the television always on. It's not like he's wrong.

"What will happen to my things?" he asks me. He means, *What will happen to me?*

I have a tiny one-bedroom apartment in a fourplex in West Hollywood. It's run down and my only air conditioning is a window air conditioner in the bedroom and a fan in the living room. The kitchen is microscopic. I have a calico cat named Mrs. Bean who jumps on my kitchen counters no matter what I do. She watches me from the chair in the living room, her eyes half-lidded. The place needs to be picked up, there's a stack of magazines next to the chair, and I haven't folded my laundry so it's on the couch, but it's home and I feel safe here. I like my music and my street-scenes art.

"A reporter called today," my mother says.

"From where?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says, "I just hang up."

I got phone calls right after the accident. People knocked on my door. *Good Morning America* rang me.

People called me up and told me my sister was a murderer. People called me up and told me God had told them that my sister was an angel. People I went to high school with who had never messaged me messaged me on Facebook.

For four weeks or so it was utter hell. I thought I was going to get fired but my boss decided he was pissed at them instead of me, and for a while we had a policeman at the clinic who told people who wanted to talk to me that they had to leave. Then the next thing happened on the news, some poor fourteen-year-old girl reappeared after having been missing for three months and they arrested the guy who kidnapped her, and reporters stopped calling, no doubt calling his parents and siblings.

“She knew me,” I tell my mother, turning back to the conversation. “She called me Junie.”

“She’s getting better,” my mom says. She says this every time.

“She’s tough,” I say.

She *is* getting better, fighting her way to more and more coherence, but the doctor said it’s hard to know how to treat her. They don’t understand what happened to her. Don’t understand how she could have damage across so much of her brain. She doesn’t have lesions, or signs of a stroke. The injury is at the cellular level. Invisible. Like she had been poisoned or irradiated. But she wasn’t.

★ ★ ★

My sister is a physicist. We are fraternal twins.

We’re close. We barely spoke for a couple of years after our family moved to Towson—we were born in East Baltimore but our dad worked for his uncle who had a dry-cleaning shop. Uncle Whit took Dad on as a partner. Dad expanded the business to eleven dry-cleaning shops and then sold them when Whit died, which is why we grew up in Towson, which is super middle-class, instead of in Baltimore.

We moved in sixth grade and by the time we were in eighth grade I had a boyfriend. I gave him authenticity, I think. He was big into Drake and I was singing “Hard White” by Nicki Minaj. We were always working on our rhymes and freestyling. Since I was from the East Side people thought I was some sort of representative of ghetto life, never mind that our mom never let us even breathe much less hang with anyone she didn’t approve of. I knew I wasn’t really any kind of badass but I told myself I knew things these suburban kids didn’t. That was a lie.

Wanda was always on about Harry Potter and *Naruto*. And her taste in music—can you say Foo Fighters? I was embarrassed for her. I was just a kid.

Middle school is embarrassing for everybody, am I right?

We didn’t fight, we just didn’t have a lot in common for a while. In junior year, I was on the homecoming court, wearing a short, sparkly green dress. Wanda was nerdy and great at math. She marched through high school

determined to get into a good college and ended up across the country at UCLA studying physics.

When we were in college we'd talk all the time. Wanda got obsessed with consciousness. "What is it?" she asked me. I could like picture her sitting on her bed in Los Angeles with her laptop and her books and her stuffed purple dragon, Rintarou Okabe. I lived at home, in our old bedroom.

"Is the cat conscious?" she asked. We had a big old gray tiger-striped cat named Tiger.

"Of course," I said. "Except when he's asleep. Then he's unconscious, right?"

"Cause I'm reading this book and it says you need some things for consciousness. You need a simulation of reality."

"What's wrong with reality?"

She made this noise, like I was missing the point. I just laughed because a lot of conversations with Wanda were about figuring out what the point was.

"Nothing's wrong with it. We just know from all sorts of experiments that our brain makes up a lot of stuff. Like it fills in your blind spot and edits out your nose. If you think about it, you can see your nose but you don't see it most of the time even though it's right there. ALL THE TIME, JUNE!"

I cross my eyes a little trying to look at my nose and there's the tip of it, blurry and kind of doubled when I look for it. If you'd have asked me, I'd have said I couldn't see my nose without a mirror. Not like I can see it very well, anyway.

"Cause our reality is assembled in our brains," Wanda explained. "Not our eyes. And like sound moves slower than light and if someone is singing on stage we should be able to see her mouth moving before we hear her but we don't cause our brain just keeps taking all the stuff that comes in and adding it to our picture of the world and if stuff is a little out of sync, it like buffers it and makes us experience it as happening all at once."

"Okay," I said. It was kind of interesting but really out there. Also, I couldn't stop thinking about not paying any attention to my nose and then I thought about how my tongue doesn't really fit in my mouth and always rubs up against my bottom teeth. One of those things that once you start thinking about it, you can't stop until you realize you've forgotten about it but then



you're thinking about it. I wished my tongue were smaller in my reality. Sometimes conversations with Wanda are like this. It can be exhausting.

"And we need a sense of self, like an 'I,'" Wanda added.

"To put it together?"

"No, sorry, that's one of the three things that we need for consciousness. We need to know where we end and the rest of the world begins. Like, does an amoeba know where it ends and the world begins?"

"I don't think an amoeba is conscious," I said.

"Nah, probably not. But an elephant is. You know, if you put a spot of blue paint on an elephant's forehead, and then you show the elephant itself in a mirror, the elephant will touch its forehead with its trunk? Cause it figures out that the image isn't another elephant, it's a reflection. Elephants know 'I' and 'you.' Isn't that cool?"

It means a lot, thinking about it now. Right after the accident, I don't think Wanda knew where she ended and the rest of the world began. She had her eyes squeezed shut all the time and she screamed and cried, which was terrifying. They kept telling me she wasn't in pain but I knew better.

(Back then, it was just a conversation.)

"So I've got a ... a hologram of reality in my head and an I."

"Not a hologram."

"Metaphor," I said.

"Not a good one," she said, but she didn't bother to explain why, she just plowed on. "You need a simulation and a sense of self."

I'd had enough so I asked, "How's Travis?" She'd gone out a couple of times with this guy.

I could hear her shrug. "Eh," she said. I knew Travis was on his way out.

I think about that conversation all the time now. I wear yellow so I affect Wanda's brain that way every time I see her. Yellow is a way for her to start to make a simulation of the world. To say, "June is here."

Two and a half months after the accident. the police call and say they want to do a follow-up with me and they'll bring me my sister's things. Which is great; I don't want to have to go pick them up at a police station.

The cop is Detective Leo Garcia Mendoza and I like that he has the double name thing going and maybe respects his mom. He's more than six

feet tall, in his late thirties, and wears a suit when he comes to talk to me.

We go through the pleasantries. We're crammed into my little office, which has just enough space for a desk and a guest chair and a bunch of beige metal filing cabinets with models of glucose monitors stacked on them. When Detective Garcia Mendoza sits in my guest chair, his knees are probably touching my desk.

A copy paper box is sitting on my desk. In it is my sister's jacket and her phone, and a Happy Meal toy from her desk.

"We just want you to know that at this time we have no intention of filing any kind of charges against your sister," he says. "Has your sister ever said anything about what happened?"

"I don't think she remembers," I say. It's true. Like people don't remember a car accident.

"Was she close to Kyle Choi? Friendly with Dr. Bennett?"

"She never complained about them or anything," I say. Which strictly speaking is not true. She liked Kyle but he drove her nuts. "She said Kyle said one time that they should microdose LSD and see if it helped productivity because some Silicon Valley start-up is doing it. But Dr. Bennett wouldn't have allowed that."

"Is there any chance that LSD caused your sister's psychosis?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Wanda is not psychotic. She is perfectly lucid. She has a brain injury that makes it impossible for her to integrate her sensory experiences. A drug screen showed no evidence of anything but legally prescribed Adderall in her system."

I work with kids a lot and occasionally I have to do the mom voice. It works now on Detective Garcia Mendoza. He scrunches his shoulders a little. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he says.

I don't let him off the hook by smiling. I trust him about as far as I can throw all six foot plus of him.

"The evidence suggests that Dr. Bennett tried to restrain Mr. Choi and Mr. Choi became violent, maybe panicked. We have had a couple of eyewitnesses who saw someone we believe was Mr. Choi in the hours after the accident. He was wandering the streets and was clearly agitated."

"So he cracked Bennett's skull open?" I ask.

“His prints are on the bottom of the chair that was used to murder Dr. Bennett,” the cop says, like it doesn’t matter. “We keep finding references to someone named Claude,” he says.

“Animal Control took him. I think he ended up at the Long Beach Aquarium.”

This throws Detective Garcia Mendoza.

“Claude,” I explain, “is an octopus. A three-year-old North Pacific giant octopus. He lived in one of the tanks in the lab. Kyle Choi took care of him. He was one of six octopuses who were part of an experiment. Woods Hole was directing the grant and they didn’t want to ship a bunch of octopuses across the country. Monterey Bay Aquarium took some, I think. The Birch at Scripps down in San Diego might have taken one.”

“What kind of experiment?” the officer asks.

They were doing experiments on octopus perception. They’d put four boxes in an octopus tank, three of them black and one of them white. The white one had food in it. They’d put them in the same place three times, and time how long it took the octopus to get the treat. The fourth time they’d move the white box to a place where there was usually a black box and put the black box where the treat usually was. Then they’d see how long it took for the octopuses to figure it out. The idea was to test if octopuses prioritized location or color, what was more important to them.

Dr. Bennett was doing some other experiments on just Claude, trying to see if he could alter Claude’s brain to perceive things we don’t perceive. Claude had some sort of reality goggles he wore over his eyes but he hated them. Sounds like getting an octopus to wear something it doesn’t like makes dressing a toddler look fun.

Claude didn’t like his keeper, Kyle. It was Kyle’s job to put on Claude’s goggles.

Octopuses are not social; they’re kind of psychopaths, according to Wanda. Like psychopaths, they can be sentimental, and Wanda used to feed Claude on the sly so he would like her. Her work didn’t require her to interact with the octopus but she felt bad for him, and he watched her because there wasn’t much for him to do.

Wanda was pretty sure that all the shit with the goggles had made him crazy, even by octopus standards. He had a burrow but he stuffed it with everything in his tank to fill it up. He destroyed most of the things they put in the tank. Wanda didn't like the experimentation; it wasn't ethical. After the accident, I got hounded by PETA.

I didn't understand what the goggles were supposed to do. Wanda tried to enlighten me, but I couldn't follow what she was talking about.

"I could explain if you could follow the math," she'd say, exasperated. Numbers talk to Wanda. They're like her first language. They're not my first language. Maybe my third. Or fourth. My twin is my first language.

"Could the deaths have involved the octopus?" the cop asks.

I couldn't help it—the look I gave him. It was a moronic question. Claude is big for an octopus, almost four feet long, I think, but he weighs about as much as a cocker spaniel and I'm not sure how an octopus was supposed to cause the kind of brain injury Wanda has. I met Claude and he eyed me and then squirted water at me. Wanda dropped a piece of sashimi in the tank. Salmon, I think. He wasn't wearing the goggles.

He was very cool in theory but not so much in practice.

They'd tried to interest him in a female octopus and he'd killed her. He would probably have happily killed Kyle and Dr. Bennett but there was the little fact that he lived in a saltwater tank and had no bones.

"He might have had motive but not method or opportunity," I say dryly.

Detective Garcia Mendoza chuckles. It's awkward. I'm secretly pleased.

★ ★ ★

Claude is actually four, not three. It's been almost a year since Wanda was found unconscious in the lab, Dr. Bennett had his head beaten in by a chair, and Kyle disappeared and his remains were found two weeks later in the nice-looking stretch of the Los Angeles River.

You don't know people, not really. But Kyle didn't seem like the kind of guy who would violently murder someone and then kill himself, at least not from the way Wanda talked about him. Kyle was a C++ programmer who wore thick black hipster glasses. He made sourdough bread on the weekends and posted pictures of it to his Instagram account. He had ended up taking

care of Claude because his previous project had been making a database for a study of octopuses. Octopi. Whatever. He confessed to Wanda about how hard it was to be a gay Asian guy. He said white dudes wanted him to call them “Daddy” a lot.

I call the Long Beach Aquarium and I ask if I can see Claude. They tell me I have to make a formal request and how to do that. I have to email someone in visitor liaison or community outreach or something so I do. I don’t know why I want to see Claude except that I think Wanda would want me to. Wanda had a bit of wounded bird rescuer in her. I fire off the email.

I work until six and then drive home where I eat a microwave low-calorie dinner and a bunch of chocolate chip cookies. I don’t claim to be consistent, and at least my dinner was a lot less fattening than the cookies. It’s a balance, right?

I am behind on stuff. Because, you know, I’m a social worker. It’s part of the job. I try to work on some files but end up bingeing on Netflix.

There’s an email in my inbox. Somebody from UCLA, which is where Wanda did her undergrad.

Ms. Harris,

My name is Dale Hoffsted. I study perception and I’ve worked with Oz Bennett. I wondered if I could talk to you about your sister and what the lab was doing?

I’m working sixty hours a week. One of the social workers, Fran Horowitz, quit three weeks ago and we’re already crazy busy. Social work is the kind of job you can never actually succeed at, only fail less. I fire off an email saying that I would like to talk to him but between my job and visiting my sister, I don’t have any time on the weekdays.

Maybe he knows Wanda?

I don’t really think about it, but when I come back to my desk later, there’s another email.

Saturday or Sunday would be fine. I’ve got an experiment running that gets me in the lab on weekends.

I mean to answer him but I get a call from the rehab facility that Wanda is having a bad day.

A bad day. Like that begins to cover it.

I tell my boss I've got to go and that I'll work Saturday to catch up.

At the rehab, I can hear her long before I see her. The moment the elevator door opens, I hear her. Wanda is screaming. I don't know why but I run because the sound—pure, high terror—just shuts down every thought. I run past the old people. Rehab is a nice word for a nursing home and they sit in the hallway watching me go past or, worse, oblivious, vacant as a tomb.

In Wanda's room are two orderlies, Latino guys, trying to restrain her. Wanda is only a little more than one hundred pounds, but she is wild. Her arms are streaked with blood from where she's been scratching at them. They try to keep her nails short but when this happens, it doesn't matter, I guess.

"Wanda!" I say, "Wanda! WANDA!"

She can't hear me.

Another person in scrubs appears at the door—a nurse, a doctor, I don't know. "We have to restrain her!" the woman says.

"No!" I say. "You can't!"

"She was trying to scratch her eyes!" one of the orderlies says to me. It's Hector, who likes Wanda, sings to her in Spanish. Sometimes she knows him and calls him Music Man.

"What triggered her?" I ask.

The other Latino guy shakes his head, either that he doesn't know or that it's too late now. Leon. Who once was lifting a woman out of her wheelchair and I heard him say, "Why do I always get the heavy ones?" and I hate him, I hate that I leave my sister with people like him.

We are shouting over Wanda screaming. A long shrill sound like a child, a little girl.

I try to touch her, to get her to see the yellow, that I'm here. "June's here!" I say. "Junie's here! Wanda!"

She catches me in the cheek with her elbow.

They push her down on the bed and grab her arms and restrain her and she fights. Oh God does my sister fight. Her eyes are squeezed shut and she twists and turns and her pink mouth is open. They use wrist and ankle



restraints and a belt across her middle. The rehab doesn't like to use restraints. The administrator is committed—the staff gets training based on a program in Wisconsin. It's one of the reasons I got her in this place.

Sedatives increase Wanda's sensory integration problems.

There's nothing to do but keep her from clawing her eyes out.

I want to scream, "She's a PhD! In physics! THIS IS NOT WANDA!" But it is. Oh God, it is. It is.

★ ★ ★

She doesn't quiet until she falls asleep a little after nine p.m. Some of the patients sundown and I can hear a woman wailing.

I'm so tired. My mom and dad are bankrupting themselves to keep Wanda in this place. Sixty-two thousand dollars a year. I try to help but a social worker doesn't make a lot of money. What good is it to help other people if I can't help Wanda? Honestly, sometimes I wonder how much I am helping anyone.

Mostly I just try not to think about it. One day at a time. Hopefully Wanda will get to the point where I can take her home. I'll get twin beds and it will be like being girls in Baltimore again.

It's never going to be like it was.

The aquarium sends me back an email telling me that I can visit Claude the octopus. I ask if I have to make an appointment and their response says that no, I don't, my name will be on a visitor list.

Dale Hoffsted emails me and says he's heading for a conference in Copenhagen next weekend, can I meet him this weekend?

I have one goddamn day to myself, Sunday. I grocery shop. I drop off my laundry at the laundromat where the Korean women wash and fold my clothes. They don't like me. But they always do a great job on my clothes. Maybe they spit on my filthy black underwear and say racist things in Korean. I just don't care.

★ ★ ★

I spend Saturday working from home. That evening, Wanda is lethargic. I check to make sure they didn't sedate her but I think she's just exhausted. I go to bed early but end up watching Netflix until after midnight.

On Sunday morning I go to the aquarium. It's lovely, full of kids. There's a pool where you can reach in and stroke the sandpaper skin of a ray. I watch the baby bamboo sharks. Wanda wouldn't be able to handle this, not yet.

I ask for information if there is someone I can talk to about seeing Claude. A woman in a bright blue polo shirt and a name tag that says *Ashley* comes out to meet me. She has a slight Spanish accent. She is young and her black hair shines in the sun.

"Can I help you?"

"My name is June Katherine Harris," I say. "My sister worked for a scientific lab and they donated a North Pacific giant octopus. His name is Claude. Is there any way I could see him? I'm on the visitor list."

She is wary now. "Why do you want to see Claude?"

"Something went wrong at the lab; my sister was hurt really badly and she told me a lot about Claude. I want to tell her how he's doing." I hold up a little takeout container. "I brought him some salmon sashimi." Something occurs to me, "Wait, he's not dead, is he? I know he's old..."

"He's not dead," she says.

"I know he's a crazy asshole of an octopus," I say.

She smiles at that. "Let me go check," she says.

The sharks glide silently through the shark lagoon, zebras and epaulette sharks passing each other like ghosts, their flat eyes expressionless. Kids love sharks. Well, I guess everyone loves sharks or Shark Week wouldn't be such a big deal.

Do sharks have thoughts? Do they have consciousness?

A mockingbird will go to battle with his own reflection in a car mirror. He doesn't know that the reflection is him. He doesn't have an "I." He doesn't know "I am reflected in the mirror." He just thinks, "Rival male! Rival male! Rival male!" A dog or a cat can figure out that the image in the mirror is fake.

Claude knows who he is. The sharks don't. What are the thoughts of sharks?

Sharks have a sensor in their nose that detects the electrical impulses of muscle movements in fish. Not the movements, the electrical impulses. I know what sound is like, and sight, and touch—but what is a shark’s world? What is it like to sense electrical impulses as information? As something other than a shock? To know that a fish is swimming because you can feel the impulses traveling through the long muscles of its body and the strong movement of its tail?

I close my eyes and try to imagine the perceptive world of a shark.

*Swimming, the blue, the scent of blood and fish and kelp in the water. I try to imagine a world in which I can see—no, not see—feel and create a model of the world where I can tell things are moving thirty feet away by the senses on my sides. Feel a fish swimming, terrified by me.*

*I feel my sides, try to think of the air as an ocean, and try to feel it. I feel a breeze on my arms but I can’t feel the little Latina girl in the pink unicorn T-shirt and Crocs, staring at the sharks. Sometimes I’ve felt like I could ‘feel’ the physical presence of someone standing next to me but what does the shark sense when it senses the electrical movements of the muscles of the terrified fish? What would I feel if I could sense the electrical impulses of that little girl reaching into the water?*

I get a little dizzy and sit on the edge of the lagoon. Is this what things are like for Wanda?

The young woman in the blue polo shirt comes back. “I can take you to see the octopus,” she says.

The areas where there are no exhibits aren’t painted blue and green. They’re not pretty, they’re utilitarian. There’s a smell, like fish water. I don’t know how else to describe it. Like a goldfish tank that might need to be cleaned, only saltier. But it’s not dirty and it’s nicer than the agency where I work, if you want to know the truth.

Claude lives in a tank, a pretty big one. He’s brown on top and white underneath and his skin is wrinkled like crepe, like an old man’s. He has his eyes hidden in the coils of his arms.

“What did they do to him?” Ashley asks.

“They made these goggles that would help him perceive more, I think,” I say. Like the shark, maybe? Seeing the electrical impulses of the muscles of

prey? What senses did they try to give Claude?

“What did they want him to do? Spy like those Russian dolphins? Was it like a government thing?”

“They wanted to see if he could perceive reality,” I say. “Can I give him the salmon?”

“Is there rice?” she asks. “I don’t think he’s supposed to have rice.”

“No, it’s sashimi,” I say.

She nods.

“Hey, Claude,” I say, “Wanda says hi.” Not that she does, of course. Wanda doesn’t know I’m here. She can’t understand when I talk to her. Claude doesn’t respond; maybe he doesn’t know I’m here, either.

Ashley opens a hatch in the grate across the top of the tank and I drop a piece of salmon in. It drifts slowly down and Claude doesn’t move. I’d think maybe he’s dead, that I arrived just in time to see the last witness other than Wanda gone, but he’s blowing water through his gills. It stirs the sand on the bottom of the tank.

“Do you want a piece?” I ask.

“I don’t like fish,” Ashley says. She holds her hands up. “I know! I know! I work with them all day but I just don’t like to eat them!”

I laugh with her and it feels good.

I don’t know what I’m doing here. I don’t know why I felt compelled to see Claude.

In Wanda’s phone the last photo is of her, holding Claude’s goggles. She’s weirdly off-center, tilted and too high, like whoever was holding the camera was not really framing it right. Behind her and even more off-center is the tank where Claude lives, and he’s starfished against the glass, all tentacles and suckers. Wanda is smiling this funny smirk she does, like she’s causing trouble. I don’t know what Claude is doing.

She wouldn’t put on the goggles. I swear. Wanda isn’t stupid.

I don’t think I should drop any more salmon in if he’s not going to eat it. I like salmon sashimi, even if I’m not hungry right now. I perceive it as buttery and tasty. Maybe Claude perceives it as, I don’t know, changing states of atoms and molecules and energy.

Claude moves. It’s so fast I almost miss it, but the salmon is gone.

I drop another piece and he turns his head—I know it’s his whole body and he doesn’t have a head really, but his eyes are there so it feels like a head. He looks around and he sees me.

“Hi Claude,” I whisper.

He uncoils and moves, picking up the salmon and flowing closer to the wall of the tank.

“What did you see when you wore the goggles?” I ask him. I imagine veils of energy in a darkness although that’s really not true. It’s the best I can do.

He flattens up against the glass and I can see his suckers flexing; I catch a glimpse of his beak. It’s scary and a little vicious looking.

I drop another piece of salmon and he flows to catch it.

He reaches up with one long tentacle and I can see how he could be four feet long. He did this with Wanda. “He’s tasting me,” she said.

I hold my hand over the opening of the tank and he curls a tentacle around my wrist. He’s so muscular, so strong, but cold. I feel the tentacles but they don’t suck on my arm.

Then he snatches his tentacles back.

Did he think I was Wanda? The salmon, my dark skin? Do I taste wrong?

I watch Claude eat the last piece of salmon.

★ ★ ★

After the aquarium I head to UCLA. Finding anything at UCLA is like navigating a foreign country with a very poor map. Franz Hall is ’60s looking, like the UN building only shorter and much less interesting. The office isn’t busy but it isn’t empty, either.

I find Dale Hoffsted’s office. His door is open.

I straightened my hair. I look casual but professional.

He’s a white guy, pale brown hair, tall. He stands up when I come to his door. “Ms. Harris?” he says. His office is bigger than mine. It has carpet and a brown corduroy couch, bookcases, and some kind of abstract art on the wall.

“I was sorry to hear about your sister,” he says. “How is she doing?”

“Thank you,” I say. I do not say that some days she seems to be getting better and some days she tries to claw her own eyes out. “I meant to read some of your papers before we met, but work has been busy.” I looked up his papers and they’re all about perception. I had planned to see what I could download but Wanda had that terrible Thursday.

“She worked with Oz Bennett,” he says, and there is something in his voice. Wanda was worried that what they were doing was fringe science. She was afraid that a black woman who worked on fringe science was not going to get work when this grant ended. Wanda always went for the hard stuff, the hard math. The hard problem. But it’s not easy to find work in the sciences.

“Was he a scam?” I ask.

Dr. Hoffsted startles. “No,” he says, “no, not really. He did some crazy stuff but he wasn’t a crank.”

“Wanda worried that he was not reputable.”

Hoffsted shook his head. “His work on consciousness was groundbreaking and innovative. I knew him, professionally. He was generous, introduced me to someone at the NSF who could help me navigate the grant process.”

“The octopus was fitted with some kind of reality glasses, for experiments,” I say.

That gets me an eyebrow raise.

“Dale?” A pudgy Indian-looking guy in a Hawaiian shirt leans in the doorway. He glances at me.

“Hi Vihaan.”

“I’ve got the results on those fMRIs,” the Indian guy says.

“I’ve got an appointment. Can we go over the data tomorrow?”

“Sure, just wanted to tell you I’ve got them.”

Hoffsted smiles and nods. When the Indian guy walks away, Hoffsted says, “You want to get some coffee?”

We walk across campus. “People think scientists are these rational, logical people,” he says. “But we’re all actually dorky, weird people.”

“Like my sister,” I say.

“I, no, I mean, not everybody, some of us are—”



“It’s okay. My sister is exactly that. Brilliant and weird.” I don’t know why I let him off the hook but he is visibly relieved. There’s a nice breeze off the Pacific and the sun is bright. The campus is full of intense young people on their way to do intense young people things.

“Have you heard of Linus Pauling?” he asks. When I shake my head he goes on. “Linus Pauling was a chemist, a Nobel Prize winner. In fact, he’s the only man to have been the single winner of two Nobel Prizes. He was also a humanitarian. Brilliant guy. He became convinced that large doses of vitamin C would cure the common cold and maybe even cancer. That’s why we all drink orange juice when we’ve got a cold.”

“Okay?” I say.

“Total crap,” Hoffsted says. “Megadosing on vitamins can be dangerous but mostly it just means your pee is really expensive since it’s voiding all those pricey vitamins you take. Isaac Newton inserted a needle behind his eyeball and reported on the results and thought that light would help him understand God.”

“Was Bennett a brilliant nut job?” Did the asshole create something crazy that ended up killing him and Kyle Choi, and breaking my sister?

“Maybe,” he says. “I don’t know.”

We get coffee at a kiosk and find a bench.

“Bennett,” he says, “got obsessed with the nature of reality.”

I sip my coffee. It’s decent coffee. I don’t care about the nature of reality.

“Why did you call me?” I ask. “Did you know Wanda?”

“No,” he says.

“She did her undergrad here,” I say.

“I didn’t know that,” he says. “She was a postdoc, right?”

*Was* a postdoc. I want to say she is a PhD in Physics with a degree from Wash U. But I just nod. Postdoc is a position. She doesn’t work anymore.

“I study perception,” he says. “One of the things I’ve studied is how we perceive reality. I thought,” Dale Hoffsted says, holding up his paper coffee cup, “that what I perceived was a pretty good representation of reality. That in reality, I am accurately perceiving the shape and texture of this cup.”

It’s just a blue and white striped cup with the emblem of the coffee shop on it. It has a white plastic cover.

A kid skateboards by, weaving among the other students.

“We don’t perceive everything. We can’t see X-rays or radio waves, but what we can perceive—I thought that was reality.”

“You’re going to tell me it’s not.”

“Yeah, I am. Our brains have a kind of interface. Like your phone.” He pulls out his iPhone. He does that thing that a lot of teachers do: He speaks in paragraphs. “These apps,” he says. “What we perceive is not the actual app. The actual app is a computer code running electrons in a pattern in a very sophisticated machine. We don’t see the chips and wires, we don’t see that code or even the action of it. What we see is a red, mostly square thing with an arrow in it. *The interface is not the app.*”

“Okay,” I say. “That’s great. But we’re not digital. You’re holding that cup of coffee. You drink it and it goes down your throat and is absorbed into your body. It’s real.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t,” he says. “You ask good questions.”

He’s not like Wanda. Talking to Wanda tended to rearrange my reality, but Wanda was always there with me. I don’t know this guy and apparently he wanted to meet me to lecture me.

“Hi Dr. Hoffsted!” a girl in a flowered sundress sings out. She waves. I hate PhDs who like to be called *Doctor*. I got that from Wanda. I used to call her Dr. Harris to wind her up.

Hoffsted waves back, still talking. “We can create digital organisms now, in a computer simulation. They’re like single-celled animals but very sophisticated. They can predict things that are true about real organisms.”

“Which is a sign that they’re a good model for real organisms?” I ask.

“Exactly!” he says, like I’m a bright student. “It’s pretty compelling evidence. We created organisms and simulated a thousand generations. Half of them evolved to perceive the ‘reality’ of the simulation and half of them, like us, evolved just for fitness to reproduce. I thought that there would be some difference—I thought perceiving reality would improve fitness to reproduce.”

He’s excitedly gesturing as he talks and I’m a little worried for his coffee and his phone.

“It didn’t,” I say. I can keep up.

“No,” he says. “One hundred percent of the organisms that were evolved to perceive reality died. Every time.”

I feel for a moment like he just said Wanda is going to die and I shake my head.

“We didn’t do this just once,” he explains, working to convince me. “We did it more than twenty times, a thousand generations, tweaked things. The perception of reality is not beneficial to survival.”

He shakes his head. “Let me give you an example of reality that we can’t perceive. How much information can a sphere”—he holds out his hands to show the size of a volleyball and I want to take his cup away from him—“can a sphere hold?”

“Doesn’t it depend on things like what kind of chip it has or something?”

“We’re talking about something different,” he says. “It’s a question about quantum reality and at the quantum level, everything is information.”

“I’m not ... what are you even saying?”

“Stephen Hawking did the math,” he says like that clinches it. Yeah, yeah, impress the dumb black woman by throwing out the name Stephen Hawking. I really don’t like this guy.

“If I’m thinking about how much is in something, I’m thinking about volume, right? I’m thinking about how much I can pour into this cup. If I make the cup shallow, like a saucer or a plate, even though it might have the same surface area as this cup, it can’t hold as much coffee.”

I just nod and picture coffee flowing off a saucer except for the little bit that pools in the indent. My coffee is pale, with cream and sugar in it.

“It turns out that the maximum amount of information, at the quantum level, is determined by surface area, not volume.”

I try to wrap my head around that. “Like a big flat plate would hold more coffee than a cup?” I ask. This is a little like talking to Wanda. Only Wanda makes sense. This ... doesn’t make sense.

“Yes. Only we’re talking the quantum level not the Newtonian level. But it’s reality. We can’t perceive a quantum reality. In fact, the best way to pack information into the sphere is to put twelve spheres in it, adding their surface area, and then twelve spheres inside each sphere, and twelve spheres inside those spheres, until we can’t get any smaller.”

“Why twelve?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “I’m a cognitive guy, not a mathematician. I can’t do the math.”

*I bet Wanda could, I think. My sister could probably think rings around you.*

“So my perception,” he says, holding up his cup, “at the Newtonian level, that a bigger volume means a bigger cup of coffee, is true. Obviously. Ask anyone who has ever ordered a venti when they wanted a grande. But at the level of reality, it’s false.”

“Why did you ask me to meet you?” I ask.

He looks a little surprised. “I wondered what Bennett was doing,” he says.

“I’m a social worker,” I say flatly. “I can make sure that when you get diabetes you have the tools you need to stay as healthy as you can for as long as you can. I can’t do the math; Wanda could do the math. I only know that whatever Bennett was doing, it broke my sister’s brain. Maybe got a lab tech killed.”

“What’s wrong with your sister?” he asks. The guy really can’t read social cues. Or he doesn’t care.

“Global perceptive agnosia,” I say. “Those goggles. Kyle and Wanda built them—there were a bunch of pairs. I think they tried to see reality and it screwed them up.” I haven’t wanted to admit it to myself but I know it’s true.

He looks a little excited. “Do you know what the goggles did?”

*Screw you, asshole.*

“I have to go see my thirty-year-old sister in a nursing home full of people with Alzheimer’s,” I say. I leave him sitting on the bench with his coffee. I hope he feels like shit.

At this time of year it gets dark pretty early. My head is packed full and I skipped lunch.

The parking lot feels as if it is halfway to the ocean. I can’t remember exactly how we came so I stop at a map kiosk and look at it. I’m so tired that I’m having trouble figuring out the map versus the campus. The buildings don’t line up with the map, somehow. I don’t want Hoffsted to walk up and

talk to me so I don't want to hang around. I start off in what I think is the direction of the parking lot.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, I realize I have *got* to be turned around. Maybe I should grab something to eat. Low blood sugar. (And isn't that ironic for someone who talks about glucose levels all day long?) I take out my phone and map the way to the car, following blindly. Turn left, turn right, keep walking. The interface is not the app.

I walk up and down the rows of the parking lot, crying, looking for my Honda.

I would have said that Wanda wasn't stupid. She talked about the goggles but she usually talked about how Claude hated them. She probably talked about what they did but honestly, sometimes after a long day, even Wanda was too much.

Wanda used to eat food so spicy it burned my mouth, just because she could. Wanda went hang gliding once. Wanda wanted to go to Mars, even though she said it would probably be more like a family vacation stuck in a minivan than a grand adventure.

I think Kyle took the photo right before she put on the goggles. Of course Wanda put on the glasses. See reality. Wanda would want to.

God damn it, Wanda. How could you do this to us.

I almost cry when I find my car. I'm so relieved.

Sunset Boulevard curves around in weird ways. Heading east it straightens out, flush up against the Hollywood hills. I know Sunset, I drive it pretty often, but nothing looks right. The sun is setting behind me and the light glints off the side mirror of the car stopped at the light in front of me and I can't see.

Talking to Wanda was sometimes a lot, if you know what I mean, but she was a good guide to the strange places of reality. Hoffsted has left me in no-man's-land and I'm lost. Lost like Claude. Lost like Wanda.

I pull in to a Wendy's and I get a cheeseburger and a Coke—I never drink Coke. I sit in the parking lot and I eat like an animal. My stupid body, needing things. Wanda's stupid injured brain.

I pull back out and listen to the voice of the app telling me where to go.

There is the place where Wanda lives. The glass doors spill white light out onto the sidewalk. The woman at reception nods to me and I take the elevator up to the second floor.

I pass the old people sitting in the hall. I pass Leon the orderly I hate, who nods to me. I look into Wanda's room and she is sitting cross-legged on the bed, stroking the blue waffle-weave blanket like it's a pet. She looks up, drawn by the movement?

"June! Junie!" Wanda says and throws her hands up and everything is real again. Wanda is real.

She lets me hug her and pats me and strokes my fingernails. I need a new manicure. I start crying again but I feel okay. Wanda's not dead. Whatever Hoffsted said about one hundred percent mortality, Wanda is smart. She is getting better. The bad days are getting fewer.

"I saw Claude," I say. "He's doing good. I told him you said hello."

Wanda runs her pale palms over my shirt. "It's a good day," she said. "I think we had applesauce today. I think I liked it. Yellow. I love your yellow. I love you, Junie."

"I love you too," I say.

I will never know reality. Wanda is proof. If she can't handle it, no one can, But I have traveled through the gathering dark and come to her. It doesn't matter that I will never know the vibration of quantum energies, never see them or touch them.

I got here. I am having a bad day but unlike Wanda, when I have a bad day, she can reach me. Even if she never gets better than this and it's always hard, I can still see and touch my sister.

I hug Wanda and she lets me fold her in my arms. She smells of shampoo and clean skin. She croons happily. "I love yellow," she says. "I love your yellow."

"It's okay," I tell her. "It's okay, Wanda baby."





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# EXILES END

CAROLYN IVES GILMAN



# Exile's End

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**CAROLYN IVES GILMAN**

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*illustration by*

MARY HAASDYK

TOR·COM 

Let's sing of the lightbeam journey  
Of the man who was not a man  
Sent by the Whispering Kindom  
To search the sky for ghosts.  
    How did he find the way?  
He followed the poison papers,  
He followed the scent of secrets  
He followed the footsteps of ashes,  
Retracing the path of exile.  
    Can reversing exile set it right?!

The series of events that would make Rue Savenga the most reviled woman on Sarona began only minutes before closing time at the Orofino Museum.

The windows had been rain-streaked all day, and now had gone dark. Rue was at her desk, reading a new art history treatise she needed to review, when her wristband chimed.

“There is a gentleman here asking to see you,” the guard at the front desk said. “He says he’s come from Radovani.”

Radovani was seven lightyears away. Rue glanced at her calendar. No appointment. She could easily dodge this one. But the book was disappointing—simplistic ideas gussied up in jargon—and she needed a break. “All right, I’ll come down,” she said. That was her first mistake.

The parts of the museum beyond the public galleries were cluttered and utilitarian. Exposed conduits and plumbing ran along the ceiling above her as she paced down the scuffed-tile corridor lined with crates and display cases no one wanted to throw away. Emerging into the airy, sophisticated architecture of the lobby was a release from claustrophobia.

It was clear who her visitor was. He stood out for his stillness in the bustle of departing visitors—tall and slim, with long black hair pulled back

in a tie. His hands were in the pockets of a jacket much too light for the weather outside.

Rue introduced herself. When she held out her hand, the young man stared at it for a second before remembering what to do with it.

“My name is Traversed Bridge,” he said; then, apologetically, “I have an unreal name as well, if you would prefer to use that.”

“No, your real name is fine.” Rue had no idea what he was talking about, but it seemed the polite thing to say. “You’ve come from Radovani?”

“I just arrived by wayport. I came directly here.”

“What can I do for you?”

He looked at the floor, as if at a loss for words. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I’m not good at this. They should have sent a woman.”

Mystified, Rue said, “You’re doing fine.”

He looked up. He had beautiful, liquid charcoal eyes. “I was sent by the Whispering Kindom of the Manhu. I have come to find our ancestors.”

None of this rang any bells with Rue. “I think they may have called the wrong person,” she said. “You probably want to speak to our ethnographic curator, Magister Hess.”

“No, I was given your name,” he said. He fished a card from his pocket. Her name was written on the back. On the front was printed the name and contact information for a colleague at the Radovani Archives, someone who ought to have known better.

Rue sighed. “All right, then, why don’t you come up to my office and you can explain.”

She led the way back. When they reached her office, he looked around and seemed to relax. “It’s good to get away from the ghosts,” he murmured.

Most people called Rue’s office austere—or, if they were being polite, minimalist. The other curators’ offices were adorned with art and artifacts from their private collections. But Rue was not a collector. It was not that she didn’t love the art; she would have raced into a burning building to save the museum’s collection. She just had no need to possess any of it.

She offered Traversed Bridge a chair, and he sat. There was still a circle of quiet around him.

“So you’re from Radovani...?” she prompted.

“Oh, no,” he said. “I am from a place you call Eleuthera. We call it Exile.”

Eleuthera was even farther away than Radovani, a planet settled only in the past three centuries as an experiment in radical self-determination—hence the name, which meant something like “freedom.”

“You have come a long way,” Rue said.

“Yes. I had to retrace the steps of the ancestors. They came from Radovanimore than a hundred years ago, but that was not the world called Home. The historians on Radovani told me this was it, but I’m not sure. It doesn’t look like Home.”

“What does Home look like?”

“It is a green and leafy place. It has extra suns and moons.”

“Well, we have two suns,” Rue explained. “The second one is not very bright, and today you couldn’t see either one, because of the rain. There are three moons.”

“At Home, there were originally more,” Traversed Bridge informed her. “But the hero Whichway Traveler shot them down.”

“I see.”

“They were too bright.”

Rue nodded. “Why did the Whispering Kingdom send you, Traversed?”

“Kindom,” he corrected her. “We don’t have kings. We have kin.”

“Okay.” “They sent me to find our ancestors and ask them a question. I am told you can help me.”

Frowning, Rue said, “Who were your ancestors?”

“They were Manhu. Your name for us may be Atoka.”

Suddenly, everything made more sense in one way, less sense in another. The Atoka had been an indigenous people of Saronia, and the museum did have a small but priceless collection of Atoka art—priceless, because it was the only collection in existence. The Atoka had been wiped out seven hundred years ago. They were extinct. Only their art survived, tantalizing and enigmatic.

Frowning, she said, “We greatly revere the Atoka. But we believe them to be dead.”



“Oh no,” Traversed said sincerely. “We are still alive. They tried to kill us all after the Battle of the River Bend eight hundred years ago. They hated us, so they tried to castrate all the men, and passed a law making it illegal to be Manhu. But a few hundred of us escaped to Refuge, which you call Radovani. We settled on what we thought was empty land, but after three generations, they decided we had no title, and so others took our houses and farms. We wandered then. Sometimes people tolerated us, but in the end they always wanted us to give up being who we were. They called us Recalcitrants at first, and then Atavists. When people started to accuse us of crimes, the state sent out death squads to hunt us down and garrote anyone they caught. They would leave dead babies hanging from lampposts as a warning. At last they shipped the last of us off to Exile, and we have been there ever since. The whole story is told in our songs. It takes three days to sing them.”

He told this grintale in a matter-of-fact, even proud, tone. Rue listened, frowning. If his allegations were true, it would upend five hundred years of scholarship. It could not be true. Could it?

Cautiously, she said, “There are scholars who would be interested in meeting your people, Traversed. They will want to find out whether you are truly the same as our Atoka.”

“It’s not still illegal?” he said a little anxiously.

“No, don’t worry about that.”

“You wouldn’t mind some of us coming back? Just to visit, I mean. If this is Home.”

“Everyone is free to visit.”

“And our ancestors? Do you know where I can find them?”

Rue glanced at her watch. The museum was closed by now, but the lights might still be on in the galleries. “I can show you one of them right now, if you want.”

A transformation came over him; his face drained of everything but nervous awe. He sat up as if something had filled him, inflated him. She waited until he said in a heartfelt whisper, “Yes. Please.”

She stood and led the way out. She liked showing this particular artwork to people who hadn’t seen the original; no reproduction had ever done it

justice. She had written the definitive monograph on it, and it had made her career, but she had never found out much about the people who created it. The legends surrounding the Atoka were so thick, and their symbolism so important, that the truth was elusive—even, in a sense, irrelevant.

The gallery was dark, but at the other end of the room the display lights on the artwork still glowed. It was a special installation, because this was the most famous work the museum owned, and people from all over the Twenty Planets came to see it. Usually there was a crowd around it, but now it hung alone.

Traversed stopped in the doorway, arrested by some strong emotion. “I feel like I shouldn’t be the one here,” he said. “It should be someone better than me.”

Gently, Rue said, “Wouldn’t your people be disappointed if you returned and said you hadn’t seen it?”

He looked at her as if seeking permission.

“They did choose to send you,” she pointed out.

With a visible effort he overcame his uncertainty and followed her across the darkened room.

People called it a painting, but it was actually an elaborate mosaic, made from pieces so small it took a magnifying glass to see them. Rue had commissioned a scientific analysis that had shown that the colors were not, strictly speaking, pigments; they were bits of bird feather, beetle carapace, butterfly wing—anything iridescent, arranged so as to form a picture. And what a picture it was: a young girl in an embroidered jacket and silver headdress, looking slightly to one side, lips parted as if about to speak. Operas had been written about her. Volumes of poetry had speculated on what she was about to say. Speeches invoked her, treatises analyzed her, children learned her story almost as soon as they learned to speak. She was the most loved woman on Sarona.

“We call her Aldry,” Rue said.

Traversed Bridge looked transfixed, as if he were falling in love. He whispered, “That is not her name.”

“What do you call her?” Rue asked.

“She is Even Glancing.”

Rue liked that name. It fit her.

The lights illuminating the portrait were mounted on a track, and they slowly moved from side to side, so that you could see it lit from different angles even as you stood still. Rue waited, watching Traversed Bridge's face for a reaction, because the image changed. At one point in the cycle, the background, which was normally a dark indigo blue, erupted in a profusion of feathers. There were silver wings behind her, appearing then gone.

"Did you see the wings?" Rue finally asked.

"Yes," Traversed said. "I can see them."

"Many people can't," she said. "They are in a wavelength not everyone's eyes can sense."

"They are moving," he said.

"Really?" Rue had never heard anyone say that before. But everyone's experience of the portrait was slightly different.

"She is about to speak," he said.

"Yes. Everyone wonders..."

She stopped, because his face had gone rigid, like a plastic mannequin, all animation gone. His body stiffened, then began to tremble. He fell with bruising force to the floor.

Rue knelt beside him, then came to her senses and used her wristband to call for help. But as she watched by the shifting light from the artwork, the humanity flowed back into his frozen face. He blinked, then focused on Rue, tried to say something.

"Lie still. Help is on the way," she said.

"She spoke to me," he whispered. He did not seem in pain, but full of wonder.

He looked around, saw he was on the floor, blushed in embarrassment, and sat up.

"Are you hurt?" Rue said.

"No, no. I am so sorry. Don't worry. I am fine."

"That was a nasty fall."

"I am used to it. This happened all the time, when I was young. My spirit would leave my body, and I would fall down. I would hear voices no one else could hear."

“Voices in your head?” Rue said, her amateur diagnosis changing.

“No, no. They were in my left hand.”

A guard looked in, then came over. “Should we call an ambulance?” he asked.

“No,” Traversed said, struggling to his feet again. “I am so sorry to put you to inconvenience. I am fine. It is over.”

Rue exchanged a glance with the guard, shrugged. “A little too much excitement, maybe. Come back to my office, Traversed, and you can sit down.”

By the time he slumped back into the chair, Traversed was looking sad and preoccupied. Rue had seen hundreds of reactions to the portrait of Aldry, but never that one, and she was curious.

“You said she spoke to you,” she said as she brewed tea for them both.

“Yes.” He stared at the floor. “I didn’t understand all she said.”

Rue waited, and after a pause he went on. “She is lonely. All this time we thought we were the ones in exile, and it turns out she is the banished one, even though she has never left Home. To us, Home was a place. To her, it is her people.”

Rue handed him tea. “That makes sense.”

He looked up at her pleadingly. “She says she wants to go back. She wants to see an Immolation.”

Rue didn’t like the sound of that. She tried to keep her voice even. “What is an Immolation?”

“I don’t know.” Traversed shook his head. “That was the part I didn’t understand.”

Rue was in a delicate position. There were strict laws covering repatriation of cultural artifacts, and there was a protocol to follow. If it had been any other artwork, she would have given an automatic set of responses. But Traversed Bridge had not yet made a formal claim. The half-crazed young man was here without credentials, without legal representation, carrying only an implausible story.

Besides, repatriating Aldry was unthinkable. The entire planet would rise up in arms.

If she said nothing, he might never find out that repatriation was an option. It would save a great deal of trouble. No one could accuse her of anything.

She sat down in a chair facing him and said, “There is a way for you to request the return of the portrait. It is called repatriation. You would have to file a formal request, and it would be a very difficult one to win. It would be challenged, because Aldry is deeply loved here, and she is part of our culture as well. You would have to prove beyond doubt that your people are the Atoka, and that she was illegally taken from you.”

He was looking at her like a starving man. “But there is hope?”

“A very little hope.”

“I want to bring her back. It is what she wants.”

Rue smiled and said, “Why don’t you sleep on it, and return tomorrow? Nothing can be done tonight anyway. Where are you staying?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’ll have to find someplace.”

Rue gave him directions to a budget hotel that was close to a transit line, and walked him to the main door of the museum.

“Thank you,” he said as he was about to step out into the driving rain. “They told me I would find helpers along the journey, and I have.”

Rue didn’t answer, because she wasn’t sure whether her role was to be helper or hindrance. “Have a good evening,” she said, then turned away, knowing she would have to do some explaining tomorrow.

He came to the prison of ghosts;  
For Hoarder people do not free their dead.  
Their feet fall heavy, weighted by the past  
They do not hear the spirits cry for freedom  
They heap up secrets in an archive  
And lock the doorsto keep them in.  
How do you free a ghost?

“That’s preposterous!” said GalbroHess.

The Curator of Ethnology was nearly as wide as he was tall, dressed in an overstretched cable-knit sweater, his gray hair standing up in spikes.

Normally, he was an agreeable, jolly person, but Rue's story had struck a nerve.

"I get them all the time, charlatans and kooks pretending to be Atoka, or to have some sort of spiritual connection to them. There are even re-enactors who pretend to hold Atoka ceremonies. It's a pile of ... well, you know. I'm afraid you were taken in, Rue."

She had found him in the ethnographic artifact storage area, where he was sorting a collection of broken ceramics spread out on a large, padded table. Around them, shelves rose to the high ceilings, packed with carved masks, handlooms, model boats, drums, and similar things, mostly brown. That was Rue's main objection to ethnographic material: it was so monochromatic.

"I can spot a charlatan," Rue said. "He didn't read that way. For one thing, he's not from here, he's from Eleuthera. I don't think they have Atoka re-enactors there."

"They don't have Atoka either," Galbrosaid grumpily, sorting a glazed brown ceramic from even browner unglazed ones.

"He told a long story of how some refugees escaped to Radovani."

Galbro looked up, but then waved a hand in dismissal. "All that shows is that he did his homework. It's true, there was a remnant population that went to Radovani. But they were persecuted there, and subjected to forced assimilation. In the end they lost their culture, intermarried, and dwindled to nothing."

"He says they persisted long enough to be exiled again to Eleuthera."

"A convenient story."

"Regardless, I'd like to know more about how we got our Atoka collection."

"Whose side are you on?" Galbro objected.

"I just want to be prepared. If this ends in a repatriation claim..."

"No one's going to repatriate Aldry."

"I know that, but to prepare our response I want to be sure we came by her legally."

Galbro stopped his pretense of working and rested his fists on the table. "Sorry, can't give you much joy there. The problem isn't with the museum; we did everything right. But the original collector ... well, you know how



they were in those days. Regular looters and bandits. It may have been legal at the time, but by current standards, no.”

“What happened?” Rue said.

“Have you ever heard of the Immolation ceremonies?”

“No. That is, I’ve heard the word, but not what it means.”

“It was the heart and soul of Atoka culture. Once every three generations they would take all their earthly belongings, pile them up in the center of the village, and light a bonfire. Then they would burn all their homes to the ground, so that the next generation would have to start over with nothing. All their wealth, their art, their subsistence would go up in flames. It was the reason the Atoka never built a great civilization—because they voluntarily reduced themselves to poverty and dependence whenever they started to get ahead.

“When our ancestors came to Sarona, they tried to convince the Atoka of how pointless and self-destructive the custom was. From their point of view, the Immolations reduced the Atoka to begging from their more provident neighbors, whose surpluses would be drained to subsidize Atoka beliefs. If they refused to help, well, starving people will get desperate and take what they have to. As tensions grew, our ancestors began to forcibly suppress the Immolations. In one famous instance, an Atoka village was all assembled and ready to light the bonfire when soldiers marched in and drove them out—then, naturally, looted the pile of goods ready for the torch. The Atoka were so enraged they attacked, and that was the beginning of the wars that led to their destruction at the Battle of the River Bend.

“Well, our Atoka collection came from the descendants of a man who was an officer in that troop of soldiers. A man of his rank got first pick of the loot—and the Aldry portrait was the best Atoka culture had to offer.”

Rue was silent, shocked. “That is a horrifying story,” she said at last. “We can’t tell that to the public. They would be outraged.”

“Well, they think of the Atoka as idealized children of nature, not as flesh and blood who could be just as wrongheaded as we are. Sure, what the soldiers did was heavy-handed; but if they hadn’t saved the portrait, it would have been burned, not preserved so that we can revere it today.”

Who were the helpers?  
One was kindly,  
One was clever,  
One was upright,  
One was wealthy,  
And one was treacherous.

Rue returned to her office feeling troubled. She had taken the problem to Galbroin hopes that he would see it as an interesting topic for investigation. But he was too anchored to his conviction about the extinction of the Atoka. The made-up portion of his mind had crowded out the curiosity.

Her spirits sank further when her wristband alerted her that Traversed Bridge had returned. It would be up to her to explain to him.

This morning he was wearing a heavier coat, much more appropriate to the weather. “The lady at the hotel gave it to me,” he said when Rue remarked on it. She couldn’t help but notice that he brought out generous impulses in people.

“Have you thought it over?” she asked when they reached her office.

“Yes,” he said. “I need to do as Even Glancingtold me, and bring her back.”

Rue pulled up a chair and sat facing him. “All right. Now, I can’t guide you through a repatriation, Traversed, because my first loyalty is to the museum, and they will contest this claim. It’s a complex, expensive process, and you may not win. The first thing I would advise you to do is hire an attorney to make the formal claim. You will also have to hire an expert to help you prove that your people are truly the Atoka.”

“But we know who we are,” he said earnestly.

“That’s not good enough for the court. You need a documented trail of evidence. The museum will have experts to testify that you can’t be who you say you are. We also need to know that you are truly authorized by your people to make this claim. Can you get that?”

Gravely, he nodded. “I will have to send a message to my Kin Mother.”

“Is she the one who sent you?”

“Yes.” The shadows of complex thoughts moved behind his eyes. “I had no sisters, and I was firstborn, so it was my duty to go out into the world.

They chose me to go to university.”

It surprised Rue a little to hear that he was university educated; he gave such an impression of unworldliness. “Did you get a degree?”

He nodded. “Hydrological engineering. I wanted to design a dam for the mountains above my village, to stop the river floods and bring us reliable water. I am here instead.”

His obvious disappointment made Rue say, “Well, you have plenty of time. You can still do that when you return.”

He shrugged. “I am earning my right to be a person.”

She wanted to ask more, but it was a risk to know too much about him; it might cloud her loyalties. Instead, she continued, “You will also have to prove that the object was taken from your people illegally, and that it has an ongoing cultural importance to them. The museum isn’t likely to contest the first point, but what about the second? What traditions do you have about Even Glancing?”

“None that I know,” he said.

“Then how did you know her name?”

“It is written on the portrait.”

There was no label or inscription. “Really?” Rue said skeptically.

“Yes, in the design on her jacket.”

Rue called up a photograph on her tablet. “Show me.”

He pointed out the portion of the embroidery that gave her name. “And this part says, ‘Cherished daughter.’ Maybe she was the daughter of the artist.”

“What about the wave design on the border?” It had played an important role in Rue’s interpretation of the work’s symbolism.

“Oh, that’s not a wave,” Traversed said. “It’s a thought. She is thinking, you see.”

If what he said was true, a great many art historians would look very foolish, starting with Rue herself. The best way to handle this would be to get ahead of it, to be the one to publish the new information. But that would be an admission that she accepted his claims of cultural authority. A clever attorney could use that against the museum.

“So your people have no tradition, no story, about Even Glancing?”

He shook his head. It was an important concession. She felt a little compromised to have wheedled it from him. “Then why do you want it back?”

“Because,” he said seriously, “there is a ghost imprisoned in it.”

*Good luck arguing that in court,* she thought. But all she said was, “That’s it?”

“That’s enough. We need to free the ghost.”

“And how would you do that?”

“We have to destroy the picture.”

Rue’s horror must have shown on her face, because he said, “It is the only humane way.”

It was unthinkable. “Traversed, this artwork is acknowledged as a masterpiece—not just on this world, but all over the Twenty Planets. It’s in all the art history books, and people honor the Atoka for having created it. Doesn’t that make you proud? Don’t you want to preserve the greatest achievement of your ancestors?”

He didn’t have an immediate response, but seemed to be weighing what she said. She watched, hoping he would reconsider. But at last he shook his head. “It’s not worth her suffering. Pride can’t justify that.”

He really believed it. Rue had been taught from childhood to respect the beliefs of other cultures—but damn it, she had her own core principles. “Then I am bound to oppose you,” she said. “I cannot see this artwork destroyed.”

They sat in silence, facing one another, aware that they had become enemies.

“You had better go now,” Rue said.

“All right.” His expression was regretful. At the door he stopped, looked back. “I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” Rue said.

But she didn’t.

How do you lose your name?  
When people stop telling your story.  
Why must we tell our story?  
Because others start telling it for us.

The gallery was relatively uncrowded except for the clump of people around the Aldry portrait. There were masterworks all over the walls, but people had eyes only for Aldry. They wanted to say they had seen her. They wanted their photographs taken with her. Some just stood there for minutes at a time, watching the image change, transported.

They all knew the story.

Once upon a time, Aldry was a real girl living in an Atoka village that had tamed all the birds in the forest around them. Birds were their messengers and their music; birds ate the troublesome insects and brought warnings about the weather. They made nests in the thatched roofs of the village, and kept everyone below dry. Artisans vied to create elaborate cages for them.

Then one day the Atoka spied an ominous fireball descending from the heavens: the landing craft of the settlers who were the ancestors of present-day Saronans. That the two peoples were very different was clear from the start, for the Atoka had amber eyes like owls, and where normal humans had body hair, the Atoka had downy feathers. The new settlers were refugees pushed out of a crowded, urbanized planet. They were woefully unprepared for a subsistence life scratched from alien ground. If it hadn't been for the kindness of Aldry's people, they would have perished. The natives taught them which crops could be cultivated and which were poison, how to hunt the abundant wild animals, how to speak to unfamiliar nature. But as the settlers multiplied, and more of them arrived, relations grew tense. Conflict seemed inevitable. It had happened that way throughout human history.

But Aldry prevented history from going down its familiar, violent path. She had fallen in love with a bookish young settler—the very one who chronicled the whole tale in cramped and sideways antique language. In her culture, a woman's decision to marry conferred personhood on the man she chose, and when she announced her intention to unite the two groups, the Atoka could no longer regard the settlers as invaders of questionable humanity. The marriage ushered in a period of peace. Aldry bore twin boys. One of them favored his father's people and one his mother's, for one had hair and the other had down.

It came to pass that a terrible flood swept through the settlers' town, destroying the homes and fields they had labored for years to build. Viewing

the drenched mudlands where their crops and storehouses had been, they knew they faced starvation. Then Aldry saw her duty. Sorrowfully, she kissed her infant boys goodbye and set out alone into the forest. Five days later, an immense flock of birds came to the village. Led by a silver pheasant, the birds descended onto the fields, each with a seed in its beak, and replanted all the crops. The village was saved, but no one ever saw Aldry again. It was said that a silver pheasant perched on the ridgepole of the house where her grieving husband raised her orphan boys, as if to keep them company.

When the boys became men, they quarreled. One went to live with the Atoka, the other stayed with the settlers. They both became great leaders, and their sibling enmity passed to their people. When war broke out, they faced each other in battle. But just when the Atoka brother was about to kill his twin, he glimpsed the silver pheasant in the sky above, and spared him for Aldry's sake.

"She is the mother of us all," Saronans said. She was the generous spirit of the planet that welcomed them and invited them to be at home.

The portrait dated to an era at least two hundred years after the original events. It was thought to be an Atoka artist's image of Aldry, with wings foreshadowing her sacrifice. Who else could it show?

Unless it was Even Glancing, the daughter of the artist.

Rue shook her head impatiently. In an important way, it did not matter. Whoever she had been once, she was Aldry now. Generations of Saronans had woven that identity around her. And they would not easily give it up.

What did they say on Refuge?

They said, "Speak another language."

"Give up your primitive ways."

"Be more like us."

And what did they say on Home?

"Be our imagined angels."

"Be what we can't be."

"Reject us, love us, teach us, exalt us."

We are so tired of being told who to be.

Rue half expected never to hear of Traversed Bridge again. The odds against any lone individual mounting a credible repatriation claim were so high that,



when he realized it, he would most likely become discouraged and leave for home.

She underestimated his determination.

Three weeks later, as she was picking up breakfast on her way to work, her wristband started to chime insistently with news alerts having to do with the museum. She put in her earpiece and listened on the tram, her attention so absorbed that her body had to take over the automatic job of exiting at her stop and walking to the staff entrance.

The story was sensational and appealing: a remnant of the Atoka had been discovered on faraway Eleuthera. Old Radovani records filled in their history. Now, an Atoka emissary had come seeking the ancient homeland of his people. After traveling across the light years, the young man had met only rejection and disbelief from the Orofino Museum.

When Rue got to her office, there was a message summoning her to see the director.

GalbroHess was already in the director's office when she came in. "Of course I told her," he was saying. "It's just the truth. There is no way Atoka culture could have survived intact through hundreds of years of persecution on Radovani."

The director was a handsome, distinguished older man with a neatly trimmed beard. His aura of scholarship was a sham; his main job was care and feeding of the museum's benefactors. He was good at it, and Rue considered it in her own best interest to make his job easy.

When he saw Rue, he said, "MagisterSavenga, what's this about our rejecting a repatchclaim out of hand? You know we can't legally do that."

Rue settled down in a chair, deliberately projecting confidence and calm. The director knew how to handle donors, but she knew how to handle him. "We haven't rejected any claim. In fact, I am the one who told Traversed Bridge how to file one."

Outraged, Galbro said, "You did what?"

"If he's a charlatan," Rue said, "it will come out. Did you listen to the interview?"

Uncomfortably, Galbro said, "All right, maybe not a charlatan—just deluded and naïve. But now he's got an attorney and a pipeline to the press.

His story's an invasive weed, a virus people have no immunity to. It's going to sweep the world."

The director interrupted, "But there hasn't been a repat claim?"

"Not yet," Rue said.

"All right." The director had his talking point. That was all he needed. "I want you two to handle this as you would any other claim, and refer all press to my office. We need to graciously suspend judgment, as befits our responsibility as guardians of Saronan cultural heritage." The press release was almost writing itself.

"We need to find out what he wants," Galbrosaid. "He may just be an opportunist, wanting to hold the painting hostage for gain."

"No," Rue said calmly. "He wants to destroy it."

The two men looked at her in speechless horror.

Galbrofound his voice first. "What, is he threatening to re-enact an Immolation? This really *is* a hostage situation."

"He's following voices. Revelations."

"Oh great. We're dealing with a lunatic."

Severely, the director said, "That doesn't leave this room. You could jeopardize our case, Galbro."

"But we've got to expose him!"

"*We* won't do anything. If he's exposed, it will be the media, the court, or other scholars. We have to appear neutral."

As they were leaving, Galbromuttered to Rue, "You really have gotten us into a mess."

"Don't worry, Galbro," she said. "I'm not letting anyone set a match to Aldry."

What did they tell him, and what did he say?

"You are not yourself," they said.

"You are not Manhu."

"You should be Atoka."

"No," he said.

Galbrowas right: Atoka fever swept the land, sea, and sky. The story enthralled the public. It was better than finding a species given up for extinct.

It was a chance at redemption, a chance to save what was lost, to reverse injustice, to make everything right.

The reality of the Atoka faded into inconsequence.

The museum was forced to put its other Atoka artifacts on display—a bronze drum, a life-size wooden baby, a carved eggshell, and an obsidian knife so thin it was transparent. Visitation shot up. Archaeologists were sudden celebrities. Musicals revived, bad old novels came out again, embroidered jackets crowded the racks. Rue's coffee shop sold Atoka breakfast buns.

Suddenly, there was money for all things Atoka. When Orofino University received a grant to investigate the claims of the Manhu, Rue felt reprieved. With the length of the light-speed journey to Eleuthera, it would be at least ten years before the researchers could travel there and reach any conclusion. By then, the mania would have died down.

But she had not reckoned with recent improvements in instantaneous communication by Paired-Particle Communicator, or PPC. It was now possible to send video via arrays of entangled particles, thwarting the limits of light speed. Sarona had no direct PPC connection to Eleuthera, but the university was able to set up a relay via Radovani, and enlist local researchers.

"They've got universities on three planets collaborating," Galbro told Rue in gloomy discontent—partly at the fact that they were taking the Manhu seriously, and partly at being left out. "I can't imagine what it's costing."

"Conscience money," Rue observed. "Guilt is a powerful thing."

"It's not guilt," Galbro said. "It's pride, to prove that we're better than our ancestors—as if we inherited their planet but not what they had to do to get it."

"You are a cynic, Galbro," she said.

Though they were banned from participating, both of them had contacts at the university who kept them up to date, and so they were prepared for the report's conclusions even before it came out.

All the evidence lined up. DNA traces from old bones on Sarona matched Manhu blood samples. Linguistic similarities showed through the haze of poor records on Sarona and imperfectly transmitted grammar and vocabulary

on Eleuthera. The chain of documentation from the Radovani Archives told the shameful tale of their persecution and deportation. Science said it: the Manhu were descended from the ancient Atoka of Saronia.

The report's release revived interest that had grown dormant in the many months it had taken to complete the research. Legislatures passed resolutions honoring the Atoka, money poured in for statues and murals. Documentaries aired until everyone thought they knew the story.

It was then that the repatriation request arrived.

The first meeting the two sides held was in the director's office at the museum. It was to be an attempt to negotiate a compromise solution and avoid litigation. Rue was invited; Galbro was not.

"Don't give it all away," he told her beforehand.

It was more than a year since she had seen Traversed Bridge, except on-screen in interviews, explaining over and over that the Manhu did not really have feathers or owl eyes. Today, dressed in business attire, he looked anxious and ill at ease; but still he had that aura of self-possessed silence. His lawyer was a young woman with flaming red hair and a sprinkling of cinnamon freckles. She would have looked winningly roguish if only she had been smiling, but she was not. She introduced herself as Caraway Farrow.

The museum's attorney, Ellery Tate, mirrored his client, the director—a distinguished older man with an air of paternal authority. The director was present, but silent. He had told Rue he wanted her to represent the museum, so he could stay above the controversy.

Tate opened the meeting, speaking in a generous, calming tone. "Thank you all for coming to help find a mutually agreeable solution."

"We are happy to talk," Farrow said.

The museum's first proposal was to create high-resolution replicas of all the Atoka objects for the Manhu to take to Eleuthera. Farrow glanced at Traversed Bridge, then said, "I don't believe that would be acceptable to my clients."

"Oh?" Tate said, as if surprised. "We can make replicas that are quite identical to the original, down to the molecular level."

Traversed Bridge said softly, "A replica would not have a ghost. It would be soulless."

There was a short silence. Rue could hear the director shifting in his chair. Then Farrow said, “The Manhumight allow you to make replicas for the museum to keep, if you don’t contest returning the originals.”

Tate looked at Rue. She had to force her voice to sound calm. “That might work for the ethnographic material. But in the case of the Aldry portrait, a replica would not have the same aesthetic qualities.”

Farrow was studying her, frowning. “Why is that?”

“We have tried to replicate it in past,” Rue said. “There is something about the three-dimensional microstructure of the materials that can’t be reproduced. We’re not sure why. The whole effect is flatter, less animate. And the wings don’t appear.”

Traversed Bridge was watching her fixedly. She realized she had just said the same thing as he: the replica was soulless.

“Would it be possible,” Tate said, “to work out some sort of shared custody for the painting? I can imagine an arrangement where the original would be on loan to the Manhu for a period of time, say twenty or fifty years, and then travel back to Saronan for the same amount of time.”

Stony faces greeted this proposal. Rue had told Tate what the Manhu intended to do with the portrait; he was trying to make them admit it.

“Accept that the portrait is the property of the Manhu,” Farrow said, “and we can discuss its future. Until then, there is no point.”

*She is a wily one*, Rue thought. She saw the trap.

Tate said, “We are prepared to offer you the originals of the other artifacts if you will accept shared custody of the portrait. It’s a reasonable compromise.”

Traversed was already shaking his head.

With a steely gentleness, Tate said, “Please consider the time and expense of defending this claim if it goes to court. You will be trying it in a Saronan court, before a Saronan jury. Aldry is deeply beloved here.”

Traversed Bridge’s face was a wall of resolution. “Would you leave one person suffering in prison for the sake of redeeming a few others? This is not a balance sheet. You can’t weigh souls on a scale and say four make one not matter.” He turned to Rue. “You want us to ask for something that means nothing to you, something easy to give. I’m sorry, we can’t.”

“Ask for anything but Aldry,” Rue said.

“Your people made her up,” he said. “You can remake her.”

No one had anything to answer then, so the meeting was over. They would meet again in court.

How did he craft his case?

He made it on a frame of steel,  
He wove the body of sandalwood,  
He decorated it with feathers,  
He filled it with rushing rivers.

What do we mean by steel, sandalwood, feathers, and rivers?

The frame of steel was justice.  
The sandalwood was steadfast.  
The feathers were eloquence.  
The rivers were compassion.

And what scale was used to judge?

What ruler can measure the past?

Rue Savenga was, at heart, an uneventful person. She had always tried to do the right thing within her safe, unremarkable life. She had never considered herself the kind of person to take a courageous stand. That was the realm of ideologues and fanatics.

Now, she found herself thrust into an event that forced her to ask where her basic boundaries were. What line couldn't she cross? How far would she go to defend her core beliefs?

What *were* her core beliefs?

The wanton destruction of art, she found, was where she drew her line. It was an act so heinous she could not stand by and let it happen. So when the museum's attorney asked if she would testify in court, she agreed. She was willing to fight to save Aldry from the flames, even if her own reputation burned instead.

The trial was held in downtown Orofino, in a tall, imposing courthouse where monumental sculpture, marble, and mural dwarfed all who entered, in order to strike them with respect for law. When Rue arrived, there were two groups assembled in the park facing the courthouse, shouting at each other. Public interest was so high that the trial was to be broadcast, and opinion



was split. Half of Saronan saw Rue as the defender of their heritage, and would execrate her if she lost. The other half saw her as the defender of long-ago injustice. They would execrate her if she won.

The courtroom's air was busy with hushed conversations when she entered. It was a tall and cylindrical space with a skylight above and stylized, tree-like pilasters of polished stone lining the walls. A large circular table stood in the sunken center, surrounded by tiers of seats crowded with press and other witnesses. Rue took her place on the side of the table reserved for the museum's representatives and their witnesses; on the other side sat those testifying for the Manhu. The judge and clerk sat in the neutral spaces between, facing each other. Rue knew two of the expert witnesses she was facing—magisters from the university who could establish the Manhu-Atoka connection. She nodded to them without smiling.

The aim of Saronan law was to reach a resolution, not necessarily a victory for one side. Each side argued its case, the judge proposed solutions, and if no agreement could be reached, the jury imposed a compromise. But this trial was to be conducted with only a judge, not a jury. Rue had no idea what the calculations had been on either side; perhaps it had something to do with the impossibility of finding a jury whose mind was not already made up.

The judge called on Caraway Farrow to begin the proceedings by stating the case of the Manhu. She did it succinctly: the artworks had been illegally seized by Saronans in the act of suppressing an Atoka religious observance. The Atoka had suffered grievous harm as a result. Now, the return of the items was a vital step toward righting injustice and reviving Manhu cultural practices.

The case that Farrow presented was logical and unflinching. An ethnologist told how the art had been looted, and a historian gave the story of the Atoka genocide and exile to Radovani. A geneticist and a linguist established the Atoka-Manhu connection.

“And do they still speak the Atoka language and practice Atoka culture?” Farrow asked the linguist.

“No,” the magister replied. “But there are old people who remember enough of what they were told as children to reconstruct some of it. Now they

are very interested in reviving the language and culture. Our records will be valuable in the effort.”

Last, Farrow produced a power of attorney from the Whispering Kindom, designating Traversed Bridge as their representative on Saron.

Tate challenged none of it, except to establish that there was nothing in the evidence that precluded a different remnant of the Atoka turning up in future, with contrary demands. He also extracted an admission that the Whispering Kindom was not the only kin group among the Manhu, and that the others had not expressed their desires. Farrow asked Traversed Bridge to address this last objection, as court procedure allowed.

“If there is any difference, we can work it out among ourselves,” he said softly, staring at the table. “We should have that right.”

It occurred to Rue that he had not looked at her once during the whole presentation.

The court recessed for lunch, and reporters scrambled out to record their summaries in the hallway. Rue and Tate left by a back door to avoid them. She had a feeling of dread.

When the trial resumed, it was the museum’s turn. Ellery Tate spoke in an avuncular, easygoing manner. Rue knew it to be an act, but it was an effective one. He gave the argument they had crafted together. “We maintain that this is not a simple case of stolen goods,” he said as if it ought to be obvious to all. “The portrait of Aldry, and its tragic story, is the patrimony of two separate cultures—that of Saron and of the Manhu. In fact, it has played a more vital role in Saronan history than on Eleuthera, and it has an ongoing role as part of our process of remembrance and acknowledgment of the painful past. Saron needs this artwork. We seek only to share it with the Manhu.”

Tate called on Rue to give a presentation about the role the Aldry portrait had played in Saronan art, history, and literature. It was her expertise, and it was easy to demonstrate Aldry’s centrality. “We have constructed our own cultural identity around this image and its story,” she concluded. Looking straight at Traversed Bridge, she added, “We love and honor her, because we also are her descendants.”

For a second, he raised his eyes and met hers.

In a low voice, Tate asked, “Magister Savenga, what will the museum do with the portrait if our request is granted?”

“We will keep it in trust for future generations,” she said. “However, we will be willing to loan it to Eleuthera, if that can be done safely. We want to assure that it is preserved and seen by all who wish to see it, forever.”

“And has Traversed Bridge told you what the Manhu wish to do with it?”

“Yes. He said they wish to destroy it.”

For a second, the courtroom was utterly silent. Then there was a stir, till the judge called for order.

Tate turned to the judge. “Sir, we submit that the Manhu seek to make an irrevocable choice. Their plan precludes any possibility of compromise. Once they destroy it, we can never go back. Sarona values this artwork, the Manhu don’t. It is...”

“That’s not true,” Traversed Bridge interrupted, looking at him for the first time.

“Are you saying Magister Savenga is lying?”

“No. She is right. We want to destroy it, in keeping with our tradition. That doesn’t mean we don’t value it. We value it in a different way than you—not as a piece of property but as a living ancestor whose desires must be respected. We want to honor her wishes.”

“We cannot call her to testify,” Tate said.

“I must do that for her,” Traversed Bridge said.

“That is hearsay.”

“I would not lie.”

“You may be mistaken.”

“I am not.” He turned to Rue, addressing her directly. “I am sorry to cause you pain. But that is the only way for us to be free of *our* pain. It has been building for generations. It is our parents’ pain, our grandparents’, clear back to Even Glancing. We carry it around with us, always. We must do this to free not just her, but ourselves.”

Rue leaned forward across the table, speaking directly back to him. “But here’s the thing, Traversed Bridge. This is not an ordinary object. At some point, great art ceases to be bound to the culture that produced it. It transcends ethnicity and identity and becomes part of the patrimony of the

human race. It belongs to all of us because of its universal message, the way it makes us better.” She paused, drawing breath. “Yes, it has a ghost. The ghost speaks to all of us, not in words but in our instinct toward beauty and goodness. We are better for having seen it. If it burns, something pure will pass from the world. Do you really want that?”

Their eyes locked together. Traversed Bridge looked as if he was in a vise, and it was tightening. At last he looked down.

“Do you wish to change your request?” the judge asked him.

Slowly, he shook his head. “No. I have to do this,” he whispered.

“Then the court will recess for half an hour,” the judge declared.

Tate was optimistic during the recess, but Rue felt no sense of satisfaction. No matter what happened, someone would be harmed. Far fewer would be harmed if the museum won; but that was like weighing souls on a scale.

When the trial resumed, the judge surprised everyone by announcing that he would give his decision, skipping the usual negotiation of compromise. “Mr. Tate is correct, the Manhu request precludes compromise,” he said. “What they seek is an irrevocable right, and they have already rejected anything short of that.”

Rue’s heart leapt. The judge went on, “However, all the eloquent arguments that have been advanced here do not alter one fact: the portrait is a piece of property, and that is the law that must apply. The museum received stolen property. It was done in ignorance that the true owners survived, but the law is still the same. The Manhu are the owners of the property, and it must be returned to them.”

The courtroom erupted into noise: jubilant noise on one side, agonized protest on the other.

Tate looked staggered. “I had no idea he would decide the case on such narrow legal grounds,” he said to Rue. “We can appeal.”

Rue knew that her director would not want that. He wanted to get this controversy behind him as quickly as possible. She might be able to persuade him, but ...

“No,” she said. “The law is our cultural heritage, and we have to respect it.”

Across the table, Caraway Farrow was hugging Traversed Bridge in joy; but he did not look joyful. His eyes were once again downcast, avoiding Rue's. He looked exhausted.

*I need to reconcile myself, Rue thought. I need to stop caring.*

But not yet.

How did she travel?

They would have sent her by lightbeam,

Fast as a flash,

But the light did not want to take her.

"I'm afraid to be shaped in your memory," it said,

"Your sorrows and your exile."

You cannot argue with light.

The artifacts could not be sent to Eleuthera by lightbeam, because what would emerge at the other end would be mere replicas of the originals, robbed of their ghosts. The fastest express ship that could be chartered would cost a fortune and take almost sixty years; but a Saronancapitalist pledged the money, and it was settled.

Rue oversaw construction of the capsule in which the artifacts would make their voyage. In the six months it took, crowds thronged the museum to see Aldry one last time. It was like a funeral. An endless procession passed by her in heartbroken silence.

On the day she came off display, Rue watched the gloved art handlers lower her into the cushioned case where she would be sealed in a nitrogen atmosphere to prevent aging. Rue wanted Aldry to arrive as perfect as she set out.

"Shall we close it up?" an art handler asked.

Rue looked one last time at that young, mysterious face. The expression hadn't changed. Rue wanted to remember it, since memory was all she would have.

"Yes, close it up," she said, and turned away. She would never see Aldry again, she thought.

But she was mistaken.

When she comes back the sky will brighten,  
Old men will play at cards,  
Teachers will review their lessons,  
Cooks will stir broth in their kitchens,  
Ghosts will not cry in the night.  
We will be free of the past.  
    What good is the past?

Rue was a vigorous ninety-five years old when she realized that fifty years were almost up, and if she were to take the lightbeam to Eleuthera, she could arrive there in time to meet the ship carrying the artifacts.

It was not an easy decision. She would not age a second during the trip, but the rest of the universe would see ten years pass. And on the journey back, another ten years. Everyone of her generation would be dead by the time she got home, and everything she knew would change.

On the other hand, the Aldry trial had been the pivot point of her life. When she looked back, everything before it seemed to have led up to that event, and everything after had followed from it. She had spearheaded an effort to change the law—not just Saronan law, but interplanetary law—so that artifacts of surpassing cultural and historical value could be considered by different standards. A case like Aldry's would never again be decided as if she were a sack of potatoes. It was Rue's most important legacy.

Not to go to Eleuthera would mean choosing to miss the end of the story that had shaped her life, and that gave her an unsettled feeling. She wanted to be present at the end, however tragic that end might be.

Secretly, she cherished a glimmer of hope that sixty years would have changed the minds of the Manhu. Once they saw the artwork they would want to save it.

And so one day she closed her eyes on Saronan and opened them on Eleuthera. She had expected someone from Eleuthera University to meet her at the waystation, but instead, the small group waiting for her was led by Traversed Bridge. She recognized him instantly. He had aged well. He still wore his hair long, though now it was streaked with gray, and his eyes were feathered with wrinkles. The biggest change was that he now looked confident and happy.



“This is Softly Bent, the woman who chose me,” he said, “and our eldest daughter, Hanging Breath.”

The two women were dressed in embroidered jackets, with their hair neatly coiled in buns on top of their heads. They both had a determined look that made Traversed Bridge seem positively easygoing by comparison.

They collected Rue’s baggage and Traversed led the way to a rented electric groundcar. He drove, with Rue in the seat beside him. The city around them was a hive of activity. Everything seemed shiny, new, and under construction.

“I’ll take you to your hotel so you can rest up,” he said.

“Thank you. I’m too old for this interstellar travel nonsense.”

“Tomorrow, we will go to the university to open the shipping capsule.”

“It has arrived?”

“A couple weeks ago. They have had it in storage, acclimating.”

“Good. I am glad they are treating her well.”

He glanced at her sideways. “People are quite curious about why you are here. There are some who think you have come to snatch her back. If they are guarded with you, that is why.”

“They can rest easy,” Rue said. “The decision can’t be unmade, unless the Manhu change their minds.”

“That is what I told them.”

They drove on a while in thoughtful silence.

“Did you ever build your dam?” Rue asked.

He smiled. “Yes. You will see it, if you come to our village.”

“Of course I will come to your village. I’m not going to travel all this way and not visit the Manhu.”

He nodded, but glanced at her again. “They made a song about me,” he said.

“About your role in the trial, you mean?”

“About my journey, the trial, everything. And they gave me a new name when I got back. It is a great honor. I am now called No.”

“Why No?” “Because when people kept trying to get me to do this and that, and accept less than we wanted, I kept saying no.”

“Hmm,” she said. “That would be fine, except that the right answer is almost never ‘no.’ The right answer is ‘maybe.’”

“I will tell them you said that,” he said, amused. “You are in the song, you know.”

“I can imagine. Probably the wicked woman guarding her treasures like a dragon.”

“No, in our songs, dragons are lucky.”

She decided she liked Traversed Bridge. Of course, she had never disliked him. She had always thought his convictions were misguided, but sincere and deeply held. But then, so were hers.

The next morning it was an ethnologist from the university, Magister Garrioch, who picked her up. He was a young man with a curly blond beard and a worried expression. Leading her to the car, he told her how he had done his dissertation on the Manhu, and had profound respect for them—“But this Immolation idea that No picked up on Saronia is just plain crazy.” As she settled into the car, he paused before shutting the door. “Can’t you persuade them not to go through with it?”

She gave a wry laugh. “I tried that once. It didn’t end well. Anyway, what makes you think I would have any leverage?”

“No is key to this,” he said. “He is deeply respected, and he respects you.”

“If that is true,” Rue said, “he started respecting me as soon as I stopped trying to persuade him of things.”

Looking frustrated, Garrioch went around to the driver’s seat and started the car. After several blocks Rue said, “I take it there is nothing you can do to prevent the Immolation?”

He shook his head. “Whenever I try to argue, No points out that the Manhu were promised freedom when they came to Eleuthera. He gets really legalistic about it.”

“I’m afraid we taught him that,” Rue said.

“Unfortunately, his argument goes right to the core of our values here. We really believe in freedom.”

“Even freedom to do stupid and self-destructive things?”

“Even that—as No keeps pointing out. Infuriating old man.”

“He was an infuriating young man, too.”

Since Eleuthera had no proper museum facilities, the university was storing the shipping capsule in the basement of their humanities building. When Rue and Garrioch arrived, they found Traversed Bridge waiting along with a delegation of seven Manhu. They looked out of place in the youthful bustle of the glass and brick lobby. All but two of them were elderly women dressed in drab gray. Traversed Bridge introduced Rue to one who seemed to be their leader. “Magister Savenga, this is the Kin Mother of the Whispering Kindom, Vigilant Aspire. She is my aunt.”

Respectfully, Rue said, “I am pleased to meet you.”

Vigilant was a tiny, aged woman, but her eyes were quick and watchful. She regarded Rue with polite suspicion.

Magister Garrioch led them all downstairs into a room off the loading dock, where the shipping capsule waited, still sealed after its long journey. A conservator and two students stood waiting in white lab coats. There was an air of hushed anticipation.

“Vigilant Aspire, would you care to break the seal?” Garrioch said.

She stepped forward and undid the latch. As Garrioch and Traversed Bridge raised the lid, a sigh of old nitrogen escaped. Inside, the artifacts rested in their cushioned cradles. The room was silent as the conservator and her helpers lifted the pieces one by one onto a waiting table: first the drum, then the carved baby, the eggshell, and the knife.

There was a moment of consternation when that appeared to be all. Rue said, “The portrait is underneath.”

The students lifted the tray that partitioned the capsule, and the artwork was revealed. They tilted it vertical so everyone could see.

There were gasps. Aldry looked exactly the same as in Rue’s memories from sixty years ago. She shone, radiant, even in the industrial lighting of the workroom, with her wings revealed. She had never looked so beautiful. Rue felt a painful exaltation at the sight. It had been years since anything had made her feel like this.

Vigilant Aspire’s cheeks were wet with tears. She looked reverent, moved to the bottom of her soul. Rue looked at Traversed Bridge. He also was staring at Aldry, a hint of sadness in his gaze.

The Kin Mother moved forward and raised a hand as if to touch the artwork. Rue suppressed an automatic urge to give a warning about the delicacy of the surface. It was no longer her responsibility—or her right. The Manhu owned the artwork now.

Vigilant brought her lips close to the painting and whispered something to the girl with the wings. Then she stepped back, overcome. Another old woman put an arm around her shoulders.

The Manhu spent a long time examining the artifacts and the artwork. The room seemed to fill with their emotion, tangible as smoke. Traversed Bridge hung back in order to let the others see everything, and Rue took a seat beside him. “What did she say to Aldry?” she whispered to him.

“She welcomed her home,” he said.

At length, the students returned everything to the capsule and latched it again, and Traversed Bridge made arrangements to have it picked up in a truck for the journey to the Manhu village of Threadbare. Rue learned that Magister Garrioch was going to accompany them, and arranged to ride with him.

They set out the next day in a convoy of cars, escorting the flatbed truck carrying the capsule, strapped down under a tarp. It was a long drive into misty, forested hinterlands. The farther they drove, the higher the mountains became and the worse the roads, till they were following a bumpy dirt track that writhed along the sides of sheer gulches, precipices above and chasms below. It was late afternoon when they rounded the shoulder of a mountain and saw a wide valley open up before them: green, terraced fields, a sparkling river, a bridge, and a cluster of tile-roofed homes. The convoy stopped so they could call ahead to announce their arrival and the women could change into brightly embroidered jackets.

“It doesn’t look threadbare at all,” Rue said to Garrioch as they stood at the side of the road looking down on the village.

“Not now. They have made enormous progress in the last fifty years, especially since they put in the dam.” He pointed, and Rue saw it. She had expected something of earth and wood, but instead it was a sheer crescent of concrete, cutting off a narrow gap in the mountains upstream.

Traversed Bridge walked up to them. He saw where she was looking and smiled. “What do you think of it?” he said.

“It’s amazing, Traversed. I can’t imagine how you built it out here.”

“We had to set up a plant to make the concrete,” he said. “We imported the steel sluice gates and machinery, but we did it all with local labor. It took a long time.”

“It’s a great achievement. A wonderful legacy.”

“Yes,” he said, gazing at it proudly.

The rest of the convoy was ready to proceed. “Would you like to ride with me?” he asked her.

She surveyed the situation, then shook her head. “Thank you, but I think I’d better stay in the back of the parade. This is for you and your people.”

He nodded, and headed to his car.

When they came down the steep hill into the village, they found the road lined on both sides with people dressed in their brightest clothes. The convoy passed between jubilant villagers shouting, singing, pounding on drums, and shaking rattles. After the last car passed, the people crowded into the roadway, joining the procession as it threaded through the narrow streets and downhill toward an open plaza near the river.

The vehicles stopped in front of a large community meeting house, and the crowd pressed around them. Two young men jumped onto the bed of the truck and threw the tarpaulin off the capsule. All noise ceased as they unlatched the cover and threw it back. One of them picked up the drum and held it overhead so everyone could see, then passed it down to someone in the crowd. The other objects followed. Then, after a moment of puzzlement, they uncovered the portrait and raised it high between them, showing it to the crowd. It flashed iridescent in the sun, and there was a collective gasp. For a moment, all was silent; then someone began to sing. Others joined in, till the whole crowd was singing solemnly, in unison.

“It’s a welcome song,” Garrioch said to Rue.

The two men descended from the truck and began to carry Aldry around the town square so everyone could see her. The people holding the artifacts fell in behind. The crowd drew back reverently to let them pass. Everywhere, people wept in joy.

Rue realized that Traversed Bridge had come up and was standing beside her, watching. She said, "I am glad to see them so happy."

He nodded. "They have known nothing but pain for so long. Generations. You can see all that pain pouring off of them, washing away."

He had been proud of the dam, but now his pride came from a deeper spot. This was his true legacy, Rue thought. Surely now he would reconsider throwing it all away. Aldryherself was the true persuader.

After circling the crowd twice, the procession of artifacts passed inside the community hall, and people started lining up for a chance to see them all again. The sun had dropped below the mountain to the west, and the air was growing chilly. A festival atmosphere had taken hold. Five musicians began to play on pipes and drums, and brightly dressed girls formed a ring for dancing.

"Would you both do me the honor of staying at my home tonight?" Traversed Bridge asked Rue and Garrioch.

"Thank you, that would be lovely," Rue said.

Reminded of something, Traversed said, "Just don't ask my wife if you can help with anything. It will offend her."

"Of course."

His home was close to the center of town, as befitted a leading citizen. It was a large structure with a concrete-block first floor and a second floor of stained wood, with intricately carved shutters and rafters. The windows glowed bright and welcoming, and electric lanterns hung from the eaves.

Inside, grandchildren were everywhere. When Traversed Bridge's daughter saw the guests enter, she hustled the youngsters off to another room. Traversed offered the guests something he called "wine," which turned out to be a potent distilled liquor. They could hear bustling from the kitchen. A young man who bore a striking resemblance to the young Traversed Bridge peered into the room curiously, and Traversed went to give him some sort of instructions.

Garrioch whispered to Rue, "No is a little hard on his son. The poor fellow can never live up to his father's standards."

"No doesn't remember what he was like at that age," Rue whispered back. *Or maybe he does, she thought, and doesn't want to be reminded.*



They ate a bountiful dinner with the other adults, and then Softly Bent showed Rue to a shared sleeping room with five beds. Tired from the journey, she decided to turn in early, and fell asleep to the sound of music from the town square.

The next morning she got up just after sunrise and went out, intending to walk to the river. Early as she was, a crew of Manhu were already in the square, building a cone-shape wicker framework that towered ten meters into the air. She sat on a bench in front of the community center, watching them work with a sense of foreboding.

Garrioch came into the square, took in the scene, and saw Rue. He came over to her.

“It looks like they’re going through with it,” he said grimly.

“Yes,” she agreed. The workers were placing firewood and charcoal inside the conical framework.

“Maybe we should leave.”

“No,” she said. “Our presence may be a deterrent. There may be something we can do.”

He looked sick at heart, but sat down next to her.

All through the morning people came, carrying belongings to hang on the wicker pyramid, or to heap around it. They brought blankets and clothes, food and furniture and fishing tackle, baskets, birdcages, books, and baby cradles. Children contributed drawings they had made and toys they had treasured. Old women brought intricate embroideries, and craftsmen gave up their carvings and tools. Everything valuable, everything treasured, was added to the pile.

By noon it was a massive tower, and men on ladders were filling the upper tiers. Vigilant Aspire came into the plaza, leaning on Traversed Bridge’s arm. He brought her slowly over to the bench where Rue and Garrioch sat, and they rose to let her have their seats.

“Are you leaving?” Traversed Bridge asked the visitors.

“No,” Rue said, facing him with determination. “We are going to watch.”

He hesitated, taking in her expression, then looked away. “As you please,” he said.

He walked off to find some other people in what was by now a large crowd of two or three thousand. Rue watched as he led a group of four others into the community building. They emerged with each one carrying an artifact. The crowd made way as they proceeded at a stately pace toward the pyre. Each artifact was handed up to a man on a ladder, who attached them high up on the framework. Last of all, Traversed handed up Aldry, and the worker hung her at the very pinnacle of the pyramid. The sun flashed on her wings, spread like a silver bird.

As the ladders were taken away, some musicians started playing a song on reed pipes and drums, and the crowd gathered round, singing. When the song ended, the musicians threw their instruments onto the pile and drew back. Five men came forward with cans of kerosene and started splashing it on the lowest tier of the pile. The square was so quiet, a child's voice asking a question echoed loudly, and laughter rippled through the crowd.

The five men soaked long-handled torches in the kerosene and lit them, then looked to Traversed Bridge for a signal.

Rue could no longer hold her peace. She pushed through the crowd to where Traversed Bridge was standing. "Traversed," she said, and he turned. "For pity's sake, stop this madness."

His face looked set, like concrete. "You don't have to stay." Then, as she refused to move or back down, the emotion he had been holding back broke through his control. "You didn't have to come at all. Why are you even here?"

"I *did* have to come," she said. "I *do* have to witness, for my people. So you will know the pain you are causing us."

"What about *our* pain?" His voice broke on the words. "Your people never cared about that."

"Is that what this is really about? Revenge for wrongs we did to you?"

He drew a breath, gathering control. "This isn't about you at all. It's about us. Our chance to reclaim who we are."

"By destroying everything you have achieved, everything you have to be proud of?"

He looked up at Aldry. "Even Glancing will live in our songs," he said. "She will still be radiant in our memories. But she will be free. And so will

we.”

Rue realized that the men with the torches were still standing by, waiting for Traversed to give them the signal. The entire crowd was watching silently.

He nodded for them to go ahead. The men turned and thrust the torches deep into the pile. The fire kindled right away, blue kerosene flames licking upward. The crowded square was utterly silent as they watched the fire climb higher and higher. Rue wanted to flinch away, not to see, but she forced her eyes to stay on Aldry as smoke billowed around her.

She felt Traversed Bridge take her hand, and she gripped tightly as she saw the portrait start to scorch, then blacken, then kindle. The flames were now roaring skyward, and they engulfed Aldry, hid her. Finally, the whole wicker contraption collapsed, and everything fell into one flaming pile.

There were tears on her face, though she didn't know how they had gotten there. She wiped them away and turned to look at Traversed Bridge. His face was also wet.

“We have to leave now,” he said.

The whole crowd was moving, exiting the square. Traversed Bridge walked back to help Vigilant Aspire to her feet, and Garrioch came to Rue's side. “Do you want me to bring the car?” he asked.

“No, I can walk to it.”

They found themselves caught in a tide of people, cars, and animals leaving the village. The narrow road was clogged, and Garrioch's car could move no faster than the general pace. Several times they stopped to pick up elders whose legs had given out, or mothers carrying babies, until the car was full and people were riding on the hood and bumper.

When they came to the wide spot on the mountain where they had paused the day before to look out over the village, the crowd stopped moving. Everyone gathered to look out over their homes, and the bonfire still smoking in the center. Rue and Garrioch got out to see what was going on.

Traversed Bridge's rental car brought up the last stragglers, and he got out to survey the scene. Then he took out his phone and made a call. Everyone was looking west to where the sun hung low on the shoulder of the mountain.

A puff of smoke bloomed from the midpoint of the dam, and seconds later came the sound of the explosion. A gap appeared in the concrete wall; then, slowly, the top started to collapse and water poured out. As the whole midsection of the dam crumbled, a massive brown gusher erupted. Gathering speed as it passed down the valley, it took boulders and trees before it, foaming as it washed toward the village.

At Rue's side, Garrioch was groaning. "I can't watch," he said. She couldn't take her eyes away. The water swept into the village, smashing buildings, engulfing the bridge, and spreading out to wash over the fields.

So much effort, so much progress, and now the Manhu were back to the poverty where they had started.

The reservoir continued to drain as the sun set, and the drowned valley fell into shadow. Everyone seemed to be preparing to spend the night where they were—lighting campfires, spreading blankets, gathering in family groups. Garrioch turned to Rue for guidance. "Should we leave?"

Rue looked around her. She didn't want to abandon them all like this and go back to the city's comforts. "If they can sleep on the mountain, I can sleep in the car," she said.

He looked relieved—partly not to have to drive the mountain roads all night, but more so not to have to make a decision, she thought.

They dined on some nut bars and fruit chips that Garrioch had in the car; it was more than some of the Manhu had. Then, as night fell, people started singing around the campfires—lilting, happy songs that the children could join, and that masked the sadness.

Rue woke before dawn. The scenes of the day before kept running through her head. When the sky started to lighten, she left the car with Garrioch still sleeping in it. The mountain air was chilly, but the sky was clear.

She was not the only one awake. Out on the edge of the cliff overlooking the valley, Traversed Bridge was sitting, his back to the camp, looking out into the void. She walked over to join him.

Below, the place where the village had been was a sea of mud and debris, a brown wasteland. Nothing had survived. Upstream stood the breached dam like an ancient ruin.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

He paused a long time. “No,” he said. “It’s hard to give it all up. But anything worth doing is hard.”

It didn’t follow that anything hard was worth doing, she thought, but left it unsaid. He already looked broken.

“What will you do now?”

“Start over,” he said heavily. “Or at least, my kids will.”

She was silent then, wondering how anyone could bequeath such devastation to their children.

As if hearing her thoughts, or thinking them himself, he said, “I did it for them. So they would never have to wonder if they were truly Manhu.” He looked up at her. “We don’t want to be like you people of Saron, you Hoarders. We don’t want to drag our past behind us. It’s too heavy for us to bear.”

They fell silent again. The sun peeked over a gap in the mountains, lighting the valley below them.

“Look,” he said, pointing upstream. Above the dam, a large flock of birds was circling. They shifted course, then came down the valley, till they settled in a cloud on the flats where the village had been.

“Maybe they’re replanting our fields,” Traversed said, smiling.

Rue could almost see the flash of silver wings.

What good is the past?

The past is everything lost.

The past is never again.

The past doesn’t feed anyone.

Only the future does that.

## Notes

- 1 From “The Song of No.” The storysinging of the Manhu is a competitive sport. One team of two members will challenge another of equal skill. The first team will sing the story till they come to a question, which is like a riddle. The second team must know the answer in order to continue the story and ask their own question. Thus they alternate as the story unfolds.



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# FLIGHT

CLAIRE WRENWOOD



# Flight

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**CLAIRE WRENWOOD**

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*illustration by*

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## **Now**

They are coming out of the woods when Mateo grabs one of Maggie's wings and tugs, hard. This has long been his way of getting her attention and she has always let him do it, wanting to be a good mother, reminding herself that this is a phase, that he is only five years old, that little boys who do bad things are not destined to become bad men.

But now she wheels on him, the force of her movement yanking her wing from his grasp. "No!" she says, and he blinks and reels back. Two women are walking ahead of them with their children. At the sound of her voice, their heads flick back to watch. "You're a big boy now," Maggie says, her voice rising. "You can't touch them anymore." Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the women murmur to each other. Turning their smooth, wingless backs to her, they seize their children's hands and hurry away. Maggie doesn't care. Tears pool in Mateo's eyes but she ignores them, stalking up the big, sweeping lawn toward the place where everyone parked their cars.

Further up the slope, the man who is not Trace walks quickly, gripping his daughter's hand. On her arm is a bruise the size and shape of Mateo's fist. As Maggie watches, the girl tugs her hand out of her father's and takes off, her empty Easter basket bobbing in her grip. Her father calls out but she keeps running and Maggie urges her on, her heart pounding on the girl's behalf, as her head says: faster, and her heart says: it will never be fast enough, and all the places where the Brothers took her apart pulse with remembered pain.

## **Ten minutes ago**

The man who is not Trace kneels in front of his sobbing daughter and hushes her. Neither he nor Maggie was there to see what happened, but the girl has just told them that Mateo hit her when she wouldn't give him an Easter egg she had found. Now her father says, "I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt you." He winks at Maggie; an invitation to a game she does not want to play. "You know boys."

Maggie looks from her son to the bruised girl to the man who is not Trace but who is so much like him, and something flares within her that has been dead a long time.

"She has a right to her pain," she says. "She has a *right* to it."

"We're going," the man says, to no one in particular, and pulls his daughter away, his fingers wrapping around her hand and enveloping it completely.

## **Seventeen minutes ago**

The Easter egg hunt takes place at the home of some friends of her husband's, wealthy investor types who live in Marin County and own several acres of old-growth forest. Maggie hasn't set foot in a forest like this in years, but her husband is out of town and the things that happened to her were such a long time ago and so she agrees to take Mateo.

The moment she gets under the trees, she knows she has made a mistake. She sees the bobbing lights, hears the Brothers' laughter, remembers running until she couldn't. Heart hammering, she grasps the trunk of a nearby redwood and inches her hands along its fibrous bark, noting its texture as her therapist has taught her. Gradually, her heart slows. The throbbing in her wing joints fades.

When she looks up, Mateo has disappeared.

## **Forty minutes ago**

They are walking from their car up to the big house where they will collect their Easter baskets, and Mateo is angry because she would not let him have

another juice box, not right after lunch. He grabs one of her wings and tugs, hard, and she lets him.

### **Two days ago**

She is bathing Mateo and he is angry about this. He grabs one of her wings and tugs, hard, and she lets him.

### **Three months ago**

Maggie loses Mateo at an outdoor shopping complex. For five minutes that feel like fifty, she runs up and down the cobblestone streets, the faux-colonial shopfronts, calling his name with increasing urgency. She finds him with his nose pressed to the window of a lingerie store, watching a winged mannequin rotate on a pedestal.

She seizes his arm. “You can’t run away like that! Do you know how worried I was? I was running around the whole mall looking for you.”

He looks up at her, confusion creasing his face. “Why didn’t you just fly?”

### **Two years ago**

Mateo wanders through the garden of the old Italian villa where they are staying and falls into a fishpond. Maggie, up on the patio with her husband, is too far away to hear the *plop* of his body entering the water. Yet she is aware of the sudden absence of sound and knows, in her mother’s bones, what has happened. She runs down the lawn and throws herself into the water and pulls him out. When he wails, she is gladder than she has ever been. She is aware of some other bodily sensation and looks down; blood streams from a cut on her shin. She doesn’t care, doesn’t feel the wound, only gathers her son in her arms and takes in his wet, algal smell, and her urge to protect him

is so strong that it does not occur to her to wonder if someone someday will need protecting from him.

## **Six years ago**

The HR guy takes Maggie to the top floor. “Change of plans,” he explains. “The big man wants to interview you in person.”

The CEO’s office is all wood and chrome and billion-dollar views. He leans back in his leather chair and surveys her, his eyes skimming over her wings in a way that is not lecherous so much as assessing.

“The job is yours, of course,” he says. “My wife is winged. I myself was a Brother.” His gaze wanders now to the windows. “We got up to so much trouble in those days, didn’t we? But we were all so young.”

Maggie searches for an apology in his voice. She does not find it.

## **Six years and two days ago**

In the vestibule of her apartment building, as she is unlocking the door, a man comes up behind her and crushes her against the door.

“Don’t move. I have a knife.” His breath is hot and puffs her hair against her ear. “I’ve been watching you,” he says. “You’re so beautiful. Your wings are so beautiful. I’m going to take them now.”

The point of his knife pricks her skin as he begins to saw through her winter coat. A scream bubbles up her throat and then dissipates. Her breathing is labored and his breathing is labored and it sounds, ridiculously, like they are having sex. With each breath Maggie lifts further and further out of her body until she is not here at all, she is running through a forest until her legs and lungs give way, until the lights catch up to her and they—

There is a shout from behind; someone has seen them. The man runs. Later the police will catch him and there will be a trial and the man will go to jail. For now, though, Maggie’s legs collapse beneath her and she is suddenly aware of her heart thudding in her chest, the film of sweat coating her body. She looks down at her hands, which look like someone else’s

hands. She tries to focus on the keys she is still holding, digs their teeth into her skin. But her mind keeps flicking between *here* on the vestibule's tiled floor and *there* on the dirt in the forest—*here—there—no, here—*and for weeks afterward she experiences this split self, hearing a man's shout of laughter in the street and wanting to run, seeing in a restaurant's glinting silverware the head of an axe.

### **Eight years ago**

An old woman stops Maggie in the streets and tells her, with tears in her eyes, that she can die a happy woman, because now she has seen a true angel. "Thank you," she says, "thank you."

Her fiancé lets her keep all the lights on at night. He wakes her up from her nightmares and holds her and sings to her in Portuguese, husky, off-key lullabies.

Everywhere she goes, people give her things. Promotions and restaurant tables and fur coats and free trips to Ibiza tumble into her lap, the world falling over itself to show her how lucky she is, how loved.

### **Nine years ago**

Maggie sees the man who will become her husband across the room. His eyes meet hers and do not for a second flicker toward her wings, do not even seem to notice them. He makes his way toward her through the chattering cocktail crowd, his gaze never leaving hers, and she feels she could be anyone, she could have no wings at all. And although later she will construct many reasons for why she falls in love with him, really it is this moment, she has already fallen.

### **Fifteen years ago**



After her college graduation, Maggie does what she has been avoiding for the past three years: she goes home. It is the first time anyone from her old life has seen her wings. Her high school friends take her around, show her off. At the town's only diner, they place her at the center table. They make excuses to brush against her wings as they get up to use the bathroom again and again.

Sitting in one of the scratched vinyl seats that have stayed the same since her infancy, Maggie feels the town's collective gaze upon her: in the diner, on the street, every eye drawn to her as though she is a flame blazing at the center of their small, defeated town. She feels suffocated. She feels proud.

Her mother won't speak to her. She leaves every room Maggie enters; her lips drawn tight. Her father treats her like a china doll. Whenever she turns away, she can feel his gaze burrowing into her back, her wings.

It was worth it, Maggie thinks.

She repeats the words like a mantra.

She repeats the words until she almost believes them.

## **Eighteen years ago**

It is two days after initiation. One of the Sisters finds Maggie balancing on the railing that lines the balcony of the big Sisterhood house, holding on to a post for support, trying and failing to flex the wings that sit heavily against her shoulder blades.

"What are you doing?" the Sister hisses, jerking Maggie back by her wings, making pain jolt anew through her body. "Someone will see."

"I was practicing," Maggie says.

"Practicing what?"

"Flying."

The Sister stares at her. Wings sprout from her back, identical to Maggie's. "Didn't anyone tell you? Our wings don't work like that."

## **Eighteen years and one day ago**

When they return from the woods, the Sisters take her into the big house that is her home now. One of them gets into the shower with her because her hands and her entire body are shaking so hard that she can't open the door to the bathroom or swing open the shower stall or take off her clothes, she can't do any of it. Maggie sobs in the shower and the Sister makes soothing sounds and soaps her body, her smooth, unblemished body, which they broke apart and then put back together, except that they didn't, not really, she can feel every place they cut her and will forever.

### **Eighteen years, one day, and three hours ago**

Maggie comes to on the forest floor. She spits twigs from her mouth and groans, pain spiking through every inch of her body.

“Hush,” a voice says.

It is one of the Sisters, kneeling beside her. When she gets to her feet, Maggie staggers under the unfamiliar weight of something on her back. White flashes in the corner of her vision; she looks and there are her wings, arcing above her shoulders. She reaches an arm back and strokes them. They are so soft. She looks down. She is naked, filthy.

Then it all comes back to her, what happened, and she cries out and clutches at herself, looking around for the men, for the weapons, for the big white tent. But they are gone, trampled dirt and trash the only signs that anything happened here at all.

“What did they do?” she asks. “What did they do?”

“Hush,” the Sister says. “They brought you back. They had their fun and then they brought you back.”

### **Eighteen years, one day, and nine hours ago**

Maggie is sprinting through the woods. Earlier, other girls were running too, their LED bracelets flashing through the surrounding trees. But their lights have gone out one by one, and now she is the only one left. The Brothers' flashlights bob behind her, drawing nearer by the second. Her lungs and legs

are on the point of collapse, but still she staggers onward. Through the trees, she can just make out the lights of the university buildings. She is less than a mile away from campus. If she can make it there, she will be safe.

An arrow whistles through the air, close to her head, and thuds into a tree. She tries again to claw off her glowing wristband, but she can't get it off—Trace fastened it too tightly.

The Brothers' thudding footsteps, their primal whoops, are louder now. They are laughing as they gain on her, sensing that they are close. That is perhaps the worst part of all, she thinks—their laughter. Her legs collapse beneath her and she falls to the forest floor, scrambling over tree roots, and they are almost upon her and still she thinks this must be a joke, some kind of sick joke, they don't mean it, they won't actually do it.

But it isn't. They do.

## **Eighteen years, one day, nine hours, and twenty minutes ago**

There is a truck and inside of it are several foot lockers and from these foot lockers the Brothers are unloading weapons. The weapons are like something out of a history book: crossbows, double-headed axes, swords, things that are spiked and chained and so heavy that the Brothers groan as they lift them out. The girls gather round, slow and stupid from the food, the champagne. They are trusting. They are lambs.

“What are we doing?” they ask. “Are we playing a game?”

“Of a sort,” the Brothers say, hefting their weapons.

## **Eighteen years, one day, and thirteen hours ago**

Maggie approaches the big white tent on the arm of Trace, handsome Trace. She is wearing a white dress, the length and cut of which would make her mother faint if she were here to see it. The tent is in the middle of the forest, which borders the campus and belongs to their university.

“Isn’t the forest protected?” Maggie asks. “I thought you weren’t allowed to camp in here.”

Trace gazes at her intently, and she flushes and raises a hand to make sure her hair hasn’t fallen out of place. He has a habit of maintaining eye contact for a couple seconds before responding to anything she says. It makes her suspect she either repels or attracts him; both possibilities terrify her.

“They bend the rules for us once a year. After all—Terry’s a Brother.”

It takes Maggie a moment to realize he is talking about the university’s president. By then, they have made their way to the entrance of the tent. Inside are two long rows of trestle tables, laden with gleaming dishes and artful arrangements of flowers and candles. White-coated waiters move between the seats, pouring water, laying out bread rolls with silver-handled tongs.

“Oh,” Maggie says. “It’s so *pretty*.”

Trace smiles down at her. His eyes are very blue. “Isn’t it?”

They sit down. He asks about her small-town Indiana life, her hobbies. “I want to *know* you,” he says, his hand brushing hers as he shows her how to crack open lobster with a little silver tool. He pours champagne, and more champagne, and with each glass she feels herself expanding: she is a better, wittier version of herself, her jokes funnier, her opinions sharper. Perhaps this is a preview of life as a winged woman—feeling adored, the only of her kind in the world, as men nod and laugh and stare at her with their blue, blue eyes.

Near the end of dinner, the Brothers pass a box of LED bracelets around the table. Trace takes one and starts to put it on her wrist but Maggie pulls back, her stomach fluttering. The air is heavy with a sense of expectation. Brothers shuffle in their seats, wink at each other over their dates’ heads. Her head feels fuzzy; she wishes she had not drunk so much champagne.

“What’s it for?” she says.

“So we can find each other.”

Beyond the well-lit tent, the forest is a wall of darkness. But in the distance Maggie can make out the lights of the university, barely two miles from here, and she is comforted by their obscure glow. She holds out her

wrist and Trace clamps the bracelet over it. The clasp nips her skin and she winces.

“Sorry,” he says.

He passes the box of bracelets down the table without taking one for himself.

## **Eighteen years and two months ago**

There are whispers. (There are always whispers.)

As Maggie marches through the grueling rounds of the selection process, she hears them. Those who have been cut talk of some archaic ritual in the woods. Girls go out into the forest, and the next morning they emerge winged. The question is, what happens in between?

Every round that she doesn't get cut, Maggie's anxiety increases. She feels like a fraud, like any minute now they will see through her to the scholarship budget stretched tight and her father who is a mechanic and the credit card debt she is rapidly accruing to buy all the right clothes and shoes. Two days before initiation—the same day she learns she has made the final round—the director of her scholarship program calls her in for their third meeting in as many months. She informs Maggie that her grades have dropped such that her scholarship will not continue after this semester.

“You can always leave,” the girls who have made the final round tell each other. “If it doesn't feel right, you can just leave.” They assure each other that they will have each other's backs and they convince themselves that this is true even though they all know it is not.

On the night of initiation, Maggie has everything to lose. She knows even before she enters the tent that her life is now like one of those moving walkways at the airport. She can proceed in only one direction. There is no turning back.

## **Nineteen years ago**

As a freshman, Maggie sees the Sisters gliding through campus, their wings trailing ethereally behind them. She sees everyone who scrambles to give them things, to get other things out of their way, and she wants her life to be that easy. Only later—much later—does she wonder why she never questioned whether they could fly.

### **Thirty-two years ago**

Maggie is sitting next to her father on the sagging pleather couch, watching football—their weekly ritual. During commercials, an ad for a car comes on. There is a woman crouched like a figurehead on the roof of a car as it drives very fast through winding country roads. She is not wearing much clothing, but that part doesn't matter. What matters are her wings, full and lush and white like an angel's, streaming behind her in the wind. Maggie's breath catches in her throat. She has never seen anything or anyone so beautiful in her life. She looks over at her dad, who has brought his Miller Lite halfway to his mouth and is holding it there, gaping at the woman onscreen. Maggie understands, even then, that she wants other men to look at her this way, that this is something all little girls should aspire to. She turns back to the TV, where the woman has launched herself from the car and is spiraling up, up, into the air. "Take control of your destiny," the voiceover says, and Maggie pictures soaring above the rooftops of her small town and then beyond, the wind on her face and in her hair, the air cold and sweet and tasting of freedom. "Take flight."





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R . K . D U N C A N

F O R  
E V E R Y  
J A C K

# For Every Jack

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**R. K. DUNCAN**

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*illustration by*

JOHN ANTHONY DI  
GIOVANNI

T O R  
D O T  
C O M



Connor met Ines first in the shuttle, but they had both been sedated for the drop. He met her properly now in the restored center-city of historic Philadelphia, where the white-painted wood and orange brick of colonial buildings still sparkled with a coat of dead nano from just finished reconstitution.

Connor tried to read her from her movement in the liftsuit. She was never still, but it did not seem nervous. Each motion was controlled, testing the limits of the pressure of the exoskeleton, the power of the jets, her own endurance in the unfamiliar gravity.

Connor felt awkward in his suit. It was harder to stabilize and drift on the jet boots than in the microgee the suit was meant to mimic, and the pressure of the skeleton on his limbs kept pulling him from his train of thought just as it gathered speed.

Ines nodded to him and starting sliding west at once. Professor Bowles's last message down, the one that had woken them both from recovery, must be burning just as bright in her mind as it was in his.

*I tried to get you more time for the project, but they tell me the timeline for the lift is non-negotiable, and they're going to render everything around the dome for fuel once construction is finished. You should have about 36 hours if you start now.*

The countdown clock the professor had helpfully sent along ticked down from 34:46, red in a corner of Connor's vision. They glided easily through the heart of the old city and onto wide, empty streets lined by pre-crash towers of brick and glass and steel, bookending the sweep of the city's life. The air this far down the huge Fuller-diamond dome was climate-controlled, cool, maybe a bit more humid than station standard, but still nothing like an echo of the swampy atmosphere that British soldiers and diplomats had complained of centuries before the Last Gasp.

Ines spared no attention for the buildings or Connor. She stayed just ahead, instead of letting him catch up and inviting conversation.

They crossed the Schuylkill River, forced back into its banks by the restoration, the excess water broken down to power the drones that flew high overhead, condensing the last arch of the dome. Connor leaned forward and let himself drop a little toward the water for a moment to draw level with Ines and broach a conversation.

“Why’d Professor Bowles pick you for this one? Was he mad? And why did you agree?”

She flipped to face him without losing momentum forward.

“I asked to come. I’m specializing in Last Gasp history and everything that led up to the Exit. I hate how much they’re ignoring to build that fucking thing.” Her angry finger jab became a rapid pirouette with help from her liftsuit’s overeager assistive jet. “We’re breaking down a lot of real, important history to get that damn theme park into orbit. Professor Bowles’s memorials are something to save, at least.”

“It was a bad time. People prefer to remember better things.”

Connor wobbled his head in the shrug of a microgee native toward the nano-factured trees that lined this avenue through the old university campus. They seemed almost real, but they had nothing of the warm organic scent that filled real farms in orbit.

“It’s still important,” snapped Ines. “We did it. Everything that took us to the Last Gasp was a choice people made, and we survived, but if we just sweep it away and pretend the stations were ‘the next step of humanity’s glorious rise,’ we’ll do it all over again.”

It was going to be hard keeping that intensity from digging up too much.

“Do what over again?” Connor asked. “It’s not like we’ve got another planet full of oil to burn, or weather to fuck up if we did.”

Ines slid close to him. She was already so comfortable in her suit, comfortable enough to play aggressive games with personal space just like bullies did on station.

“We can still be careless and complacent while our problems get too big to fix. Why are you here anyway, if you don’t care about Last Gasp history.”

The door their liaison had promised was just where it should have been, and Ines pushed off Connor and glided through ahead of him.

The heat and moisture slapped Connor like a sodden towel, and then squeezed on his breath and shoved down on his shoulders heavy as earth gravity again. He felt caught somewhere between a torture device and the most anemic sauna ever devised.

“I never said I didn’t care,” he shouted at Ines’s back. “I asked to be here too. My grandfather signed up to be a jack. He died working the Mississippi-Colorado pipeline. I felt like I should honor it somehow.”

It wasn’t a lie. The jacks had made a noble sacrifice, to be remade for work when burning more fuel to run industrial machines had been unthinkable. He did feel like they deserved some honor and remembrance, and that he should make sure some things stayed buried.

Already swarms of midges and flies buffeted Connor and Ines from whatever direction the liftsuit jets didn’t sweep clean. Connor supposed he should be grateful mosquitoes had been sterilized and relegated to textbooks on public health before the increasing pace of the Last Gasp closed off so much earthbound research. Or he should hope the bugs would keep Ines distracted if he needed her to be.

Here on the west side of the city, there wasn’t too much water, and the houses were broken, but many still had pieces of intact frame standing up from the decay.

They glided round the dome to the edges of the salt swamp Philadelphia had been dredged back out of. The buildings here were just piles of rubble interspersed with kudzu and mangrove trees. The razorback ridges of feral swamp hogs cut the water as they fled the unfamiliar noise of jet boots passing overhead. One of Connor’s hallmates on station, an ecologist, had told him the hogs were growing more and more amphibious, and predicted them developing some kind of flipper-hooves in subsequent generations.

The sniffer found the first jack at the southern end of the unfinished seawall, where the Philly sprawl had eaten into Delaware. They were buried in a tumble of salt-rotted concrete, huge body stabbed through with rusted rebar. The genchem cocktail that had layered so many ugly gnarled muscles on the jack also dissuaded scavengers, from bacteria scale up to the hogs. They lay there undecaying, incorruptible as an ancient Catholic saint in their martyr’s cairn of concrete. Their only armor was the gauntlets fused over

their hands: primitive omnis that had worked at micro scale for cutting and fusing.

When Connor and Ines had cut the jack out with their omnis and laid all three meters of them out on a bit of flat ground, Connor lifted away from the body. It felt somehow wrong to touch them any further, disrespectful.

Ines did not agree. She pressed her scanner to the jack's face and read the name stippled onto their jawbone.

"Mirabel Vazquez. She'd only been working two months when the big storm hit."

Connor joined Ines for the monument building. They tapped instructions into their wrist keypad, and both their omnis sent a wash of nano over Mirabel, reconstituting her into a standing statue of impervious Fuller-diamond, with a little marker under her feet stamped with her name and service dates. It would survive the nanos when they came to digest everything here into fuel to life the city. If Professor Bowles continued to get students willing to brave the hothouse, these monuments would dot the whole globe someday, preserving the workers who died before the Exit even seemed possible.

Preserving the good heroic memory, the memory that everyone preferred to have.

Connor snapped a few photos and beamed them back to Professor Bowles, and they went on, sniffer tuned for the unique cocktail a dead jack put off.

They worked their way along the ruined wall from the southwest in silence, and the countdown clock wound down to 26:48.

They pulled out four more jacks, and the sniffer pointed to at least a dozen more too deeply buried to be pulled up without industrial equipment. Since the incs running the dome didn't care to lend anything, or delay themselves long enough for the university to ship it down, Connor and Ines had to leave them. Ines made sure they made an attempt at each one, surveying the ground and testing what their omnis could do with it.

Connor was happy to waste the time. It was easy to make sure the digging was impossible.



They came to the easternmost bulge of the wall, where the jacks had still been working when the big storm came and made it all worthless. That was where they found the jack Connor had been hoping they would miss.

The wall was only tumbled rubble here, smashed by the storms and then forced outward when the dome was raised around old Philadelphia, and the body had been tossed up, almost uncovered, by the earth movers.

Connor dropped down just before Ines, and saw it right away. Maybe Ines would miss it. Connor bent to pull the jack out quickly, but Ines dropped down beside him.

“What’s that?” Her finger drew a line straight to it.

“What?” said Connor.

“That hole, there in the back of their head. It looks like a bullet hole.”

She was already pulling out the sniffer and reconfiguring it for analysis. She pressed it to the jack’s wound.

“It is a bullet hole, and the system thinks the gun was pressed against their head when it was fired. Like an execution.”

Saints also kept the record of their wounds long after martyrdom. Connor kicked his jets on and drifted up. The air and gravity were so heavy, and he felt sweat weighing down his clothes.

“You understand what this means, Connor?” said Ines, incredulous. “They were executed. Not killed in the storm, not dead because the process was unstable. Executed. They said all the jacks died working, but this is murder, and a coverup.”

She just kept ranting. Connor raised his omni, dialed for Fuller conversion.

“What’s the name for the monument?” he asked.

“What!?” Ines jetted into him and slapped his arm down. She kept hold of it and pulled him close to shout into his face. “We can’t Fuller them. This is evidence. The incs that ran the seawall are still working. Some of them are working on the lift right now. We have to tell someone, and we’ll need to prove it when we do.”

She slid away and snapped shot after shot of the jack’s blasted skull.

She turned and raised her head to a transmission angle.

Connor felt a sick weight settle low in his abdomen. He made himself sound casual.

“What does the prof say?”

Emergency override flushed every comm channel with blaring static.

“CLEAR SECTOR E74 IMMEDIATE. NANOFORMERS DEPLOYED. SAFETY NOT GUARANTEED. CLEAR SECTOR E74...”

Connor muted his comm as the screaming metallic voice repeated.

“Well,” he said, still making himself play, “that’s way ahead of fucking schedule.”

Ines didn’t buy his rueful smile.

“They must have snooped my message to Bowles. This is intentional. Help me lift the jack.”

He couldn’t very well refuse. Not without an explanation. He dropped down and pulled the tether from his belt harness as slowly as he dared, but he joined Ines in lifting fast. He could already see the gray wave of the nano sweeping toward them from the dome, breaking down everything it touched. He looked up as they lifted, and saw the broken eggshell edges of the still-unfinished dome glint in the hazy sky. As if he needed more evidence that the nano was for him and Ines and nothing else.

Connor let himself be pulled. Ines jetted at top speed north and west, back toward the only iris they knew for certain would key open for them. She didn’t seem afraid. Maybe she had less reason than Connor to believe the incs wouldn’t flinch from killing them to keep a little secret.

The jack hung low between them on the tethers, and it made them clumsy. The liftsuits weren’t designed to carry weight beyond their users, or to compensate for that kind of extra load with their automatic stabilizers.

They just managed to keep the jack above the gray-goo of the nano-formers and race out of the rendered sector, but more gray poured from the dome as soon as they were clear of the first flood. They had to push the jets in manual to stay high enough that the jack wouldn’t skim the waves of nano.

Connor looked up a moment and saw the black specks of construction drones break off from the top of the dome and begin dropping.

Ines slapped at her wrist keypad.

“They’re jamming every fucking band with that fake emergency. Have you got anything to signal with? Maybe someone’s earthwatching. If you’ve got a flare or a smoke bomb or some-fucking-thing.”

She sounded scared. Maybe she was scared enough to make the right choice.

Connor let himself say it.

“We should drop the jack. They’ll leave us alone then. Like you said, we need evidence. No one will believe us without it and they won’t care.”

Especially if Connor didn’t swear to anything.

“Drop it? What the fuck are you saying.”

The whine of the drones’ rotors drowned out the rest of her yelling. They’d come down fast, and Connor got a good look as they braked and stabilized to fire. The drones were big quad-rotor squares with one appendage: a sprayer-tipped arm for nanos.

The six drones bracketing Connor and Ines shot orange-white fire in spreads like a high-pressure showerhead. A caustic scent took Connor back to second-year chemistry: they’d configured the sprayers for water and pure sodium.

The fire showers bracketed them. Ines pulled Connor through a gap by the jack tethered between them, and they were side by side above the jack now, racing ahead of the burning water. The drones dragged a curtain of fire behind. It seemed like they could outrun it, for now. But more drones could be coming, or something harder to avoid.

They were back over rubble, out of the nano-formed sections, and Connor saw a perfect place to catch the jack, a streetlamp still standing proudly over the flood wreckage of a highway.

He pulled right, and Ines followed, legs spread wide to keep herself stable.

It would be easier this way.

Ines saw at the last moment. She leaned across and cut Connor’s tether to the jack, dropped down and back as she took the full weight, spun wide to miss the lamppost, swinging the jack like a wrecking ball. The closest sodium flare was almost on her.

Connor could have left her.

Why wouldn't she leave the Goddam jack?

He slowed, grabbed her chest harness, and pulled. They could still make speed like this, if he kept them high enough not to catch, or maybe they'd lose the jack and it could be over.

Ines stared at him.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Just let it fucking go," he shouted back. "You don't know these people. They'll fucking kill us both for this. Just let it go!"

"What, and you know better?"

There it was. Connor felt the dam break. Saw his grandmother shake her shriveled bird head at him. They were both dead anyway. What did it matter?

"Yes! Fucking yes, okay? I know. We all knew. The jacks knew it was a death sentence. No one wanted them running around to be super soldiers while the Last Gasp shook out and we didn't even know if the Exit would work or not. They used them, and they killed them, and they paid us to keep quiet. How do you fucking think white trash like my family paid for an Exit?"

Ines didn't stop staring at him.

"You really fucking ready to leave it there?"

He saw his grandmother again, atrophied from years in microgee without spin-gyms or bone-builder nanos, delicate as a plucked bird. She had made every one of them promise never to tell a soul. The shame of it would end the family. They'd all be killed by the incs if anyone talked, or spaced as accessories to murder.

"No," said Connor.

Ines snarled half a smile.

"Good."

She grabbed a new tether and hooked it to the jack behind her.

"There are cameras at the lock we came out of, and they can't wipe the footage without getting caught. Let's fucking go."

They went, jetting just ahead of the sodium flame sheeting down behind them.



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## About the Authors

**KATHARINE DUCKETT**'s fiction has appeared in *Uncanny Magazine*, *Apex Magazine*, *Interzone*, *PseudoPod*, and various anthologies. She is also the guest fiction editor for the *Disabled People Destroy Fantasy* issue of *Uncanny*. She hails from East Tennessee, has lived in Turkey and Kazakhstan, and attended Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she majored in minotaurs. *Miranda in Milan* is her first book. In addition to writing, Katharine works as the Publicity Manager for [Tor.com](http://Tor.com) Publishing. She currently resides in Brooklyn with her wife.



**Garth Nix** has been a full-time writer since 2001. He has also worked as a literary agent, marketing consultant, book editor, book publicist, book sales representative, bookseller, and as a part-time soldier in the Australian Army Reserve. Garth's books include the award-winning fantasy novels *Sabriel*, *Lirael* and *Abhorsen* and the science fiction novels *Shade's Children* and *A Confusion of Princes*. His fantasy novels for children include *The Ragwitch*; the six books of *The Seventh Tower* sequence; *The Keys to the Kingdom* series; and the *Troubletwisters* books (with Sean Williams). More than five million copies of Garth's books have been sold around the world, his books have appeared on the bestseller lists of *The New York Times*, 'Publishers Weekly', *The Guardian* and *The Australian*, and his work has been translated into 40 languages.





**Matthew Pridham** was born in New Jersey and spent his childhood chasing trolls in Bergen, Norway. He has since mostly lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico. After working 13 years as a bookseller, he succumbed to the glittering allure of academia and earned degrees in philosophy, literature, and creative writing. His haunted house novella, “Renovations,” was printed in *Weird Tales* magazine issue 348, his film criticism has been published in *WeirdFictionReview.com*, and he’s written fiction and nonfiction for *The Thought Erotic*. Some of this material may also be found at <https://matthewpridham.wordpress.com/author/khain7>. He is currently not quite finishing his first novel.



With her groundbreaking novel, *China Mountain Zhang*, **Maureen F. McHugh** established herself as one of the decade’s best science fiction writers. She is the winner of the James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award, the Lambda Literary Award, the *Locus* Award for Best First Novel, and a Hugo and Nebula Award nominee.

**CAROLYN IVES GILMAN** is a Nebula and Hugo Award-nominated writer of science fiction and fantasy. Her novels include *Halfway Human* and the two-volume novel *Isles of the Forsaken* and *Ison of the Isles*. Her short fiction appears in many *Best of the Year* collections and has been translated into seven languages. She lives in Washington, D.C., and works for the National Museum of the American Indian.

**Claire Wrenwood** grew up in Indiana and New Zealand and now lives in Durham, North Carolina. She is a member of the Clarion class of 2019, and her work has appeared in *Nightmare Magazine*.

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