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TOR.COM SHORT FICTION
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LET

ALL THE

CHILDREN

BOOGIE*



Let all the Children Boogie

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**T O R
D O T
C O M**

*for David Bowie
and David Mitchell*

Radio was where we met. Our bodies first occupied the same space on a Friday afternoon, but our minds had already connected Thursday night. Coming up on twelve o'clock, awake when we shouldn't be, both of us in our separate narrow beds, miles and miles apart, tuning in to Ms. Jackson's Graveyard Shift, spirits linked up in the gruff cigarette-damaged sound of her voice.

She'd played "The Passenger," by Iggy Pop. I'd never heard it before, and it changed my life.

Understand: there was no internet then. No way to look up the lyrics online. No way to snap my fingers and find the song on YouTube or iTunes. I was crying by the time it was over, knowing it might be months or years before I found it again. Maybe I never would. Strawberries, Hudson's only record store, almost certainly wouldn't have it. Those four guitar chords were seared indelibly into my mind, the lonesome sound of Iggy's voice certain to linger there for as long as I lived, but the song itself was already out of my reach as it faded down to nothing.

And then: a squall of distortion interrupted, stuttering into staticky words, saying what might have been "*Are you out there?*" before vanishing again.

Eerie, but no more eerie than the tingly feeling I still had from Iggy Pop's voice. And the sadness of losing the song forever.

But then, the next day, at the Salvation Army, thumbing through hundreds of dresses I hated, what did I hear but—

"I am the passenger ... and I ride and I ride—"

Not from the shitty in-store speakers, which blasted Fly-92 pop drivel all the time. Someone was singing. Someone magnificent. Like pawn-shop royalty, in an indigo velvet blazer with three handkerchiefs tied around one forearm, and brown corduroy bell-bottoms.

“I see things from under glass—”

The singer must have sensed me staring, because they turned to look in my direction. Shorter than me, hair buzzed to the scalp except for a spiked stripe down the center.

“The Graveyard Shift,” I said, trembling. “You were listening last night?”

“Yeah,” they said, and their smile was summer, was weekends, was Ms. Jackson’s raspy-sweet voice. The whole place smelled like mothballs, and the scent had never been so wonderful. “You too?”

My mind had no need for pronouns. Or words at all for that matter. This person filled me up from the very first moment.

I said: “What a great song, right? I never heard it before. Do you have it?”

“No,” they said, “but I was gonna drive down to Woodstock this weekend to see if I could find it there. Wanna come?”

Just like that. *Wanna come?* Everything I did was a long and agonizing decision, and every human on the planet terrified me, and this person had invited me on a private day trip on a moment’s impulse. What epic intimacy to offer a total stranger—hours in a car together, a journey to a strange and distant town. What if I was a psychopath, or a die-hard Christian evangelist bent on saving their soul? The only thing more surprising to me than this easy offer was how swiftly and happily my mouth made the words: *That sounds amazing.*

“Great! I’m Fell.”

“Laurie,” I said. We shook. Fell’s hand was smaller than mine, and a thousand times stronger.

Only then did I realize: I didn’t know what gender they were. And, just like that, with the silent effortless clarity of every life-changing epiphany, I saw that gender was just a set of clothes we put on when we went out into the world.

And even though I hated myself for it, I couldn’t help but look around. To see if anybody else had seen. If word might spread, about me and this magnificently unsettling oddball.

Numbers were exchanged. Addresses. A pick-up time was set. Everything was so easy. Fell's smile held a whole world inside it, a way of life I never thought I could live. A world where I wasn't afraid.

I wanted to believe in it. I really did. But I didn't.

"What did you think that was?" Fell asked, in the parking lot, parting. "That weird voice, at the end of the song?"

I shrugged. I hadn't thought much about it.

"At first I thought it was part of the song," Fell said. "But then the DJ was freaked out."

"Figured it was just ... interference, like from another station."

"It's a big deal," Fell said. "To interrupt a commercial radio broadcast like that. You need some crazy hardware."

"Must be the Russians," I said solemnly, and Fell laughed, and I felt the world lighten.

And that night, tuning in to Ms. Jackson, "This song goes out to Fell, my number one fan. Wouldn't be a weeknight if Fell didn't call asking for some Bowie. So here's 'Life on Mars?' which goes out to Laurie, the girl with the mousy hair."

More evidence of Fell's miraculous gift. A thousand times I'd wanted to call Ms. Jackson, and each time I'd been too intimidated to pick up the phone. What if she was mean to me? What if I had to speak to a station producer first, who decided I wasn't worthy of talking to their resident empress? And who was I to ask for a song?

Also, I loved "Life on Mars?" I wondered if Fell knew it, had read it on my face or smelled it on my clothes with another of their superhuman abilities, or if they had just been hoping.

I shut my eyes. I had never been so conscious of my body before. David Bowie's voice rippled through it, making me shiver, sounding like Fell's fingertips must feel.

I wondered how many times I'd been touched by Fell, listening late at night, trembling at the songs they requested.

I remembered Fell's smile, and stars bloomed in the darkness.

But before the song was over, a sound like something sizzling rose up in my headphones, and the music faded, and a kind of high

distortion bubbled up, and then began to stutter—and then become words. Unintelligible at first, like they'd been sped up, and then:

"...mission is so unclear. I could warn about that plane crash, try to stop the spiderwebbing epidemic. But how much difference would those things make? I'm only here for a short—"

Then the mechanical voice was gone. David Bowie came back. And just as swiftly was switched out.

"Sorry about that, children," Ms. Jackson said, chuckling. An old sound. How long had she been doing this show? She always called her listeners children, like she was older than absolutely everyone in earshot. I heard a cigarette snuffed out in the background. "Getting some interference, sounds like. Maybe from the Air Force base. They're forever messing with my signals. Some lost pilot, maybe, circling up in the clouds. Looking for the light. Good time to cut to a commercial, I'd say."

Someone sang *Friendly Honda, we're not on Route Nine*, the inane omnipresent jingle that seemed to support every television and radio program in the Hudson Valley. I thought of Fell, somewhere in the dark. Our bodies separate. Our minds united.

"Welcome back to the Graveyard Shift," she said. "This is Ms. Jackson, playing music for freaks and oddballs, redheaded stepchildren and ugly ducklings—songs by us and for us, suicide queens and flaming fireflies—"

★ ★ ★

Fell's car smelled like apples. Like spilled cider, and cinnamon. Twine held one rear headlight in place. When we went past fifty miles an hour, it shook so hard my teeth chattered together. Tractor trailers screamed past like missiles. It was autumn, 1991. We were sixteen. We could die at any moment.

The way to Woodstock was long and complicated. Taking the thruway would have been faster, but that meant paying the toll, and

Fell knew there had to be another way.

“No way in hell that was a lost pilot,” Fell said. “That interruption last night. That was someone with some insane machinery.”

“How do you know so much about radio signals?”

“I like machines,” Fell said. “They make so much sense. Does your school have a computer? Mine doesn’t. We’re too poor.” Fell went to Catskill High, across the river. “It sucks, because I really want to be learning how they work. They can do computations a million times faster than people can, and they’re getting faster all the time. Can you imagine? How many problems we’ll be able to solve? How quickly we’ll get the right answer, once we can make a billion mistakes in an instant? All the things that seem impossible now, we’ll figure out how to do eventually.”

I lay there, basking in the warmth of Fell’s excitement. After a while, I said: “I still think it was the Soviets. Planning an invasion.”

“No Russian accent,” Fell said. “And anyway I’m pretty sure the Cold War is over. Didn’t that wall come down?”

I shrugged, and then said, “Thanks for the song, by the way.”

Instead of answering, Fell held out one hand. I took it instantly, fearlessly, like a fraction of Fell’s courage could already have rubbed off on me.

In that car I felt invincible. I could let Fell’s lack of fear take me over.

But later, in Woodstock, a weird crooked little town that smelled like burning leaves and peppermint soap, Fell reached for my hand again, and I was too frightened to take it. What if someone saw? In my mind I could hear the whole town stopping with a sound like a record scratching. Everyone turning, pointing. Shouting. Pitchforks produced from nowhere. Torches. Nooses.

Space grew between us, without my wanting it to. Fell taking a tiny step away from me.

We went to Cutler’s Record Shop. We found a battered old Iggy Pop cassette, which contained “The Passenger.” Fell bought it. We

went to Taco Juan's and then had ice cream. Rocky Road was both of our favorite.

Twilight when we left. Thin blue light filled the streets. I dreamed of grabbing Fell's hand and never letting go. I dreamed of being someone better than who I was.

As soon as the doors slammed, we switched on the radio.

"Responding to this morning's tragic crash of Continental Express Flight 2574, transport officials are stating that it's impossible to rule out an act of terrorism at this—"

"No *shit*," Fell said, switching it off.

"What?"

"The voice. They said *I could warn about the plane crash.*"

I laughed. "What, you think the voice in the night is part of a terrorist cell?"

"No," Fell said. "I think they're from the future."

Just like Fell to make the impossible sound easy, obvious. I laughed some more. And then I stopped laughing.

"Could be a coincidence," I said.

Fell pushed the tape in, pressed play. After our third trip through "The Passenger," rewinding the tape yet again, they looked over and saw the tears streaming down my face.

"It's such a sad song," I said. "So lonesome."

"Sort of," Fell said. "But it's also about finding someone who shares your loneliness. Who negates it. Cancels it out. Listen: *Get into the car. We'll be the passenger.* Two people, one thing. Plural singular."

"Plural singular," I said.

I'm sorry, I started to say, a hundred times, and told myself I would, soon, in just a second, until Fell looked over and said: "Hey. Can I come over? I don't feel like mixing it up with my mother tonight."

And that was the first time I ever saw fear on Fell's face.

My parents were almost certainly baffled by my new friend, but their inability to identify whether Fell was a boy or a girl meant they couldn't decide for sure if they were a sexual menace, so they couldn't object to Fell coming upstairs with me.

Three songs into the Graveyard Shift, Fell asked, "Can I spend the night?"

I laughed.

"I'm serious."

"Your mom wouldn't mind?"

"Probably she'd barely notice," Fell said. "And even if she did, it'd be like number nine on the list of things she'd want to scream at me about the next time she saw me."

"Fine by me," I said, and went downstairs to ask Mom and Dad.

Big smile. Confident posture. Think this through. "Cool if Fell spends the night here?" And then, without thinking about it, because if I'd spent a single nanosecond on it I would have known better, stopped myself, I added: "She already called her mom, and she said it was okay."

They smiled, relieved. They'd both been sitting there stewing, wondering whether what was happening upstairs needed to be policed. Whether a sex-crazed-menace male was upstairs seducing their daughter. But no. I'd said *she*. This was just some harmless, tomboyish girl.

"Yes of course," Mom said, but I couldn't hear her, just went by the smile, the nod, and I thanked her and turned to go, nausea making the room spin and the blood pound in my ears.

I felt sick. Somehow naming Fell like that was worse than a lie. Worse than an insult. It was a negation of who Fell was.

Cowardice. Betrayal. What was it, in me, that made me so afraid? That had stopped me from taking Fell's hand? That made me frightened of other people seeing what they were, what we were? Something so small that could somehow make me so miserable.

I was afraid that Fell might have heard, but Ms. Jackson was playing when I got back to my room, and Fell was on the floor beside

the speaker, so that our hero's raspy voice drowned out every shred of weakness and horror that the world held in store for us.

We lay on the bare wooden floor like that for the next two hours. The window was open. Freezing wind made every song sweeter. Wood smoke seeped into our clothes. Our hands held tight.

Six minutes before midnight, approaching the end of the Graveyard Shift, it came again. The sizzle; the static; the chugging machine noise that slowly took the shape of a human voice. We caught it mid-sentence, like the intervening twenty-four hours hadn't happened, like it blinked and was now carrying on the same conversation.

"—out there. I don't know if this is the right ... place. Time. If you're out there. If it's too late. If it's too early."

"Definitely definitely from the future," Fell whispered.

"You're so stupid," I said, giggling, so drunk on Fell that what they said no longer seemed so absurd.

"Or what you need to hear. What I should say. What I shouldn't."

The voice flanged on the final sentence, dropping several octaves, sounding demonic, mechanical. Slowing down. The *t* sound on the last word went on and on. The static in the background slowed down too, so that I could hear that it wasn't static at all, but rather many separate sounds resolving into sonic chaos. An endless line of melodic sequences playing simultaneously.

The voice flanged back, and said one word before subsiding into the ether again:

"—worthwhile—"

Control of the radio waves was relinquished. The final chords of "Blue Moon" resurfaced.

"There's our star man again," Ms. Jackson said with a chuckle. Evidently she'd had time to rethink her Air Force pilot theory. "Still lost, still lonely. I wonder—who do you think he's looking for? Call me with your wildest outer space invader theories."

"Want to call?" Fell whispered.

“No,” I said, too fast, too frightened. “My parents are right across the hall. We’d wake them.”

Fell shrugged. The gesture was such strange perfection. Their whole being was expressed in it. The confidence and the charm and the fearlessness and the power to roll with absolutely anything that came along.

I grabbed Fell’s hand. Prayed that some of what they were would seep into me.

Fell touched my mousy hair. Sang softly: *“Is there life on Mars?”*

“We’ll find out,” I said. “Right? Machines will solve all our problems?”

★ ★ ★

At school, two days later, during lunch, I marched myself to the library and enrolled in computer classes.

★ ★ ★

“Shit,” Fell said, pointing out the window, driving us home through snowy blue twilight.

Massive green Air Force trucks lined a long stretch of Route 9. Flatbeds where giant satellite dishes stood. Racks of cylindrical transformers. Men pacing back and forth with machines in their hands. None of it had been there the day before.

“What the hell?” I said.

“They’re hunting for the voice in the night too,” Fell said.

“Because it’s part of a terrorist cell and knew about a plane crash before it happened.”

“Or because it’s using bafflingly complex technology that could only have come from the future,” Fell said.

Then they switched on the radio, shrieked at what they found there. Sang-screamed: *“Maybe I’m just like my mother, she’s never satisfied.”*

"Why do we scream at each other?" I said, and then we launched into the chorus with one wobbly crooked magnificent voice.

My first view of Fell's house was also my first view of Fell's mother. She sat on the front porch wearing several scarves, smoking.

"Fuck," Fell said. "Fuck me, times ten thousand. I thought for sure she'd still be at work."

"We can go," I said. I'd been excited to see the house, for that insight into who Fell was and what had helped make them, but now panic was pulling hard at my hair. Fell's fear of the woman was contagious.

"No," Fell said. "If I act like she can't hurt me, sooner or later she really won't be able to."

She laughed when she saw me. "Of course it's a girl."

"Mrs. Tanzillo, I'm Laurie," I said, holding out my hand. "I'm pleased to meet you."

My good manners threw her off. She shook my hand with a raised eyebrow, like she was waiting to see what kind of trick I was trying to pull. I smelled alcohol. Old, baked-in alcohol, the kind that seeps from the pores of aging drunks. Which I guess she was.

"Don't you two turn my home into a den of obscenity," she called after us, as we headed in.

Fell let the door slam, and then exhaled: "God, she is such an asshole."

The house was sadder than I'd been expecting. Smaller; smellier; heaped with strange piles. Newspapers, flattened plastic bags, ancient water-stained unopened envelopes. A litter box, badly in need of emptying, and then probably burning. My parents were poor, but not poor like this.

"You're shaking," I said, and pulled Fell into a hug.

They stiffened. Wriggled free. "Not here."

"Of course," I said. "Sorry."

The TV was on. Squabbling among the former Soviet states. A bad divorce, except with sixteen partners instead of two, and with

thermonuclear warheads instead of children. I watched it, because looking around the room—or looking at Fell looking at me—made me nauseous. A talking head grinned, said: *“It’s naïve to think our children will get to grow up without the threat of nuclear war. There’s no putting this genie back in the bottle.”*

Fell talked fast, the shaking audible in every word. “This was a terrible idea. I felt good about us, like, it wouldn’t matter what this place looked like or what you thought of it, because you know I’m not this, it’s just the place where I am until I can be somewhere else, but now, I’m not so sure, I think I should probably take you home.”

So Fell wasn’t fearless. Wasn’t superhuman.

So it was in Fell too. Whatever was in me. Something so small, that could chain down someone so magnificent.

Of course I should have put up more of a fight. Said how it didn’t matter. But I hated seeing Fell like this. If Fell was afraid, what hope was there for me? Fell, who welcomed every awful thing the world had to show us. Fell was my only hope, but not this Fell. So I shrugged and said, “whatever you want,” feeling awful about it already, and we turned around and went right back outside, and Mrs. Tanzillo thought that was the funniest thing she’d ever seen, and we didn’t talk the whole ride home.

★ ★ ★

“That *is* what it sounds like when doves cry,” Ms. Jackson said, as the spiraling keyboard riff faded out, as the drum machine loop wound down.

I’d called the song in. I wondered if Fell was listening, if they knew what it meant. How hard it had been for me to dial that number. How bare the floor beside me was. How cold. How much my chest hurt.

“This extended block of uninterrupted songs is brought to you by Friendly Honda,” she said. “They’re not on Route Nine. Let’s stick with Prince, shall we? Dig a little deeper. A B-side. ‘Erotic City.’” Her laugh here was raw and throaty, barely a laugh at all, closer to a

grumble of remembered pleasure. Some erotic city she'd taken someone to, ages ago.

The song started. A keyboard and a bass doing dirty, dirty things together. Strutting, strolling. Becoming one thing, one lewd gorgeous sound that made me shiver.

I imagined Fell listening. Our minds entwined inside the song. An intimacy unencumbered by flawed bodies, troubled minds, or the fear of what could go wrong when we put them together. Small voices inside our heads that made us miserable.

What a magnificent thing we would be. If Fell ever spoke to me again. If we could make whatever our weird thing was work.

Just when things were getting good, as Prince was shifting to the chorus, the static sizzle:

"There are a million ways I could have done this. But anything else, something more straightforward, well, I thought it might just blow your minds. Cause panic. Do the opposite thing, from what I wanted to accomplish."

Prince and the star man struggled for dominance, dirty talk giving way to flanged static only to steal back center stage. I only heard one more intelligible phrase before the intruder cut out altogether, even though I stayed up until three in the morning to see if they'd return:

"—know it's all worthwhile—"

★ ★ ★

"I want to find her," Fell said, the next day, when I walked out the front door and there they were, sitting on my front steps.

I hid my shock, my happiness. My shame. My guilt. "Find who?"

"The voice in the night. The one Ms. Jackson keeps calling the star man."

I sat down. "You think it's a she?"

Fell shrugged. I had been imagining the voice belonged to a male, but now that I thought about it I heard how sexless it was, how

mechanical. Could be anything, in the ear of the beholder.

Cold wind swung tree branches against the side of my house, sounding like someone awful knocking at the door. I could not unhunch my shoulders. The magnitude of my awfulness was such that I didn't know where to start. What to apologize for first.

"How would we even begin to do something like that?" I asked instead.

Fell picked up something I hadn't seen before. The size of three record album sleeves laid out in a row. Four horizontal lines of thin metal, with a single vertical line down the middle.

"A directional antenna," they said. "It picks up radio signals, but it's sensitive to the direction of the origin signal. Point it directly at the source and you get a strong signal; point it away and you'll get a faint one. Plug it into this receiver"—Fell held up a hefty army-green box—"and we can take measurements in multiple directions until we find the right one."

They talked like everything was fine, but their face was so tight that I knew nothing was.

"Where did you get that?" I asked, making my voice laugh. "And how do you know how to use it?"

"I told you, machines are kind of my thing."

"So, wait, we just turn it around until we find the signal, and then go in that direction?"

"Not necessarily," Fell said. "It tells direction, but not distance. So the signal could be three miles away, or three thousand, depending on how strong it is. With just one measurement, we could be driving into the wilderness for days." Fell produced a map from the inner workings of the complex blazer they wore. "So the best way to do it is to take a measurement from one place, draw a line on the map that corresponds precisely to the signal, and then go to another location and take another measurement, and draw another precise line on the map—"

"And the point where they meet is the probable location!" I said, excited.

“It’s called triangulation,” Fell said.

“Amazing. But for real. How do you know all this?”

“My uncle, he learned this from my grandfather, who did it in the war. Transmitter hunting is kind of a nerd game, for amateur radio operators. They call it foxtailing.”

“Your uncle as in your mother’s brother?”

Fell nodded. And there it was, the subject I’d been trying to avoid.

“He was the closest thing to a dad that I had,” Fell said. “We used to have so much fun together. Didn’t give a shit about sports or any of that standard dude shit. He was into weird shit like directional antennas and science fiction. Then he met this girl, and moved to Omaha with her. Fucking *Omaha*. I’m sorry about the other day, at my mom’s. I acted like an idiot.”

“*You* acted like an idiot? Don’t be dumb, Fell—that was all me. I’m the one who should be apologizing. I didn’t know how to react when I saw how upset you were. I should have stayed. I wanted to stay.”

Fell grabbed my hand. I had so much more to say, and I imagine so did Fell, but we did not need a word of it.

Mom might be watching out the window, I thought, but did not let go of Fell’s hand.

“What if the source of the signal is moving?”

Fell nodded. “I thought about that. I don’t have a good solution. We just have to hope that’s not the case, or we’ll be triangulating bullshit.”

“It’s not the end of the world, if we end up standing in some empty field together.”

★ ★ ★

We drove to the top of Mount Merino, to take our first measurement. And then we waited. Kept the car running, blasting the Graveyard Shift from shitty speakers. Across the street was a guardrail, and then a sheer drop to the river beneath us. The train tracks alongside it. We lay on the hood and looked at stars.

“You won’t run out of gas like this?”

“The average car can idle for ninety-two hours—that’s just under four days—on a full tank of gas, which is what we have,” Fell said. “The battery will die long before we run out of gas.”

I marveled at the intricacies of Fell’s mechanical knowledge, but I had some knowledge of my own to share. I told Fell about my computer classes, and how, yeah, computers were incredible, they could do anything. Fell was as impressed as I’d hoped they’d be, but they kept asking me questions about the hardware that I couldn’t answer. All I knew was software. Fell looked at programming the way I looked at machines: probably fascinating, but way over my head.

Fell told me about transistors, and how processing power was increasing exponentially; had been for decades. How eventually computers would be able to store as much information and process as many simultaneous operations as swiftly as a human brain. Then Fell showed me how to work the antenna, read the receiver, detect signal strength. We practiced on other radio stations, penciled lines on the map.

Then three hours passed. We were way past my curfew, and the star man hadn’t shown.

“Fuck it,” Fell said, at the end of Ms. Jackson’s program. “Star person stood us up. We should go for a long drive. Charge the battery backup.”

“Okay,” I said, just assuming Fell was right and that was how those worked.

“Your parents won’t mind?”

“Nah,” I said, although they absolutely would, if they caught me sneaking back in, and there was a very good chance that they would because I am extremely clumsy, but that was the future and I didn’t care about that, I only cared about the here and the now with Fell in Fell’s car on this freezing night on this weird planet in this mediocre galaxy.

The radio show after Graveyard Shift was significantly less awesome, but we had to stick with it. Who knew whether star person

would stumble onto any other stations. I had my portable radio and my headphones, so that I could periodically coast back and forth across the radio dial in search of our elusive visitor, but somehow I knew that this would be fruitless. For whatever reason, the signal was pegged to this specific station.

The new DJ talked too much between songs, and he had the voice of a gym teacher. The opening notes of “Where Is My Mind” came on and we both started screaming, but this asshole kept rambling on about a concert in Albany coming up next weekend, and he only stopped when the singer started singing.

“Goddamn him,” Fell said, and then—static—then—

—that’s why I’m doing this, I guess. To tell you the future can be more magnificent, and more terrifying, than what you have in your head right now. And the one you embrace will be the one you end up with.”

As soon as the voice began, Fell raised the antenna, held it out like a pistol. Turned slowly. We watched the receiver respond to the signal’s varying strength, and hastily drew a bold thick line on the map when we found it. Cheered. Watched our breath billow.

“Told you he or she was a time traveler!” Fell said.

“That’s *not* what that means.”

“What does it mean, then?”

“We’re picking up lines of dialogue from a movie, maybe. Or love letters from a lunatic. We should keep driving, wait for another one.”

“It’s late,” Fell said. “My mom’s not doing so well, lately.”

The temperature dropped twenty degrees. The final notes of “Where Is My Mind” faded away.

“You can talk to me about it,” I said, gulping down air as the ground opened up beneath me. “Whatever you’re going through, I have your back. You know I love you, right?”

“I love you too, Laurie,” but I could hear the unspoken rest of the sentence—like our minds had linked up already—like Fell knew, in a way I never would, how little love mattered.

“We’ll go hunting tomorrow night,” I said.

Fell nodded.

★ ★ ★

At school the next day, alone with the computer, I saw why Fell loved machines so much. Not because they were simple, but because the rules were clear. And when something went wrong, there was a way to fix it.

★ ★ ★

And the next night, hands clasped on the hood of Fell's car again, listening to Ms. Jackson with the directional antenna balanced across our thighs, I thought—if only *we* were machines. The sturdiness of hardware; the clarity of software. Not these awful meat puppets, in this awful world. Heads full of awful voices holding us back.

"I feel so good, when it's just us," Fell said, tapping into my thoughts with that eerie precision. "Our minds linked up inside the music. I want to stay there, forever."

"Maybe someday," I said, nonsensically, and Fell had the kindness not to point out that it was nonsense. We were what we were. Damaged minds alone in dying bodies.

Ms. Jackson exhaled smoke. "This one goes out to our friend the star man. Hope you get where you're going, buddy."

I groaned at the opening chords. "Starman," by David Bowie. "This song always makes me cry," I whispered, the lump already emerging in my throat.

Fell said, "I knew you were a Bowie girl."

We listened. The chorus hurt.

Fell heard me snifle. "Hear the way his voice rises, between 'star' and 'man'?" they asked. "That's the same octave jump as in the chorus of 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow.' You hear it? *Star-man*; *Some-where*?"

Fell was right. I'd listened to the song a million times before, and never noticed. And now for as long as I lived I'd never hear it without noticing. And now I was crying. Because the song was so beautiful; because Fell was so incredible; because the world was too awful for love like ours to last.

The final chorus wound down:

*Let the children lose it
Let the children use it
Let all the children boogie*

And the guitar cranked up, and the background singers crooned, and we were doomed, Fell and me, I felt it as heavy as the skin on my bones, how impossible we were, how soon we'd be shattered, and then—there the voice was again:

"The future is written, you might say. What will be will be. What's the point of this? But so many futures are written. An infinite number, in fact. A billion trillion ways your story could end. I want to make sure you end up with the right future."

Fill raised the antenna. Turned slowly, searching for the signal. Found it. We drew a line on the map. We circled the spot where our two lines met.

Both of us were crying, but Fell's tears were happy ones.

★ ★ ★

Fell didn't call me the next day, the way they say they would. Nor did they come by the house. And there was no answering machine at the Tanzillo household, and no one picked up, no matter how many times I called.

I told myself this was something sacred, something practically supernatural, to go to the spot on the map where our lines crossed, where the star person's signal came from. So of course Fell was scared.

I told myself that's all it was.

I told myself that, the whole long bike ride to Fell's front door, where I knocked three times. The pounding echoed. How had I found the courage to come at all? What was I becoming?

"Quit calling my house," said Fell's mom when she opened the door. I'd only seen her sitting down before. She was taller than I'd imagined. Her long loose gray hair would have been glamorous on anyone else. "Christ, I feel like I spend half my time watching the phone ring, waiting for you to give the hell up."

"You could pick it up, actually talk to me."

She shrugged. The gesture was the same as Fell's, heavier on the left shoulder than the right, but this version oozed with cynicism and inertia instead of energy and exuberance. The news was on in the background, turned up too loud, more talking heads talking nuclear annihilation. On the way in, I'd passed more military trucks. Trailers getting set up along the Hudson River. Satellite dishes blooming like steel flowers.

"Where's Fell?"

"Not here."

"Do you know where?"

"Sometimes they go to sleep at their grandpa's place." Except Mrs. Tanzillo used the wrong gender pronouns, and clearly took great pleasure in doing so. "Old trailer, been abandoned since the man died ten years ago. Full of raccoon shit, and wasps in summer. I'll tell Fell you dropped by though." Her sweet smile made it clear she'd do no such thing, and then she shut the door in my face.

I got on my bike.

This pain, it was Fell's. It wasn't mine, and I couldn't do anything to diminish it. I could ride away and never feel it again.

I said that, but I didn't believe it. I remembered what the star person had said. About how we could have a future that was magnificent or one that was terrifying, depending on which one we embraced.

I got off the bike.

Fell couldn't see it, what a sad little creature their mother was. How absurd it was, that someone as magnificent as Fell could be made miserable by someone so weak.

Someone so small.

I knocked again.

She said nothing when she opened the door. Just smiled, like, *come on, little girl, hit me with your best shot*. And I had nothing. No practiced witty wise one-liners. Fell would have, for anyone but her.

"You're only hurting yourself, you know."

Her eyebrows rose. Her smile deepened.

"You might have the power to hurt Fell now, but that power won't last long. As soon as Fell realizes what a useless angry pitiful person you are, you'll lose that power." I wanted my words to be better. But I was done letting wishing I was better stop me from being what I was. "And Fell will leave you here, drowning in cat shit and bills, while they go conquer the world."

She said something. I didn't hear what it was.

★ ★ ★

That night I heard the star man again. Somehow I knew it was just me this time. Like our minds were already beginning to overlap, and I could see Fell lying in silence in that dirty trailer, shivering under a blanket, no radio, listening to pine trees shush overhead, while I heard the star man whisper:

"...Two soldiers trapped behind enemy lines..."

★ ★ ★

I stayed late after school, in the computer lab. In the library. Reading the science and the science fiction Fell had rhapsodized about. All the impossible things that could save us from ourselves. Solar power; a post-petroleum future; superfoods. Cold fusion. Brain uploading. Digital immortality. Transcending the limits of the human.

Each time I shut a book, it was the pain of waking up from blissful dream to wretched reality.

But then, blissful dream: Fell was on my front steps when I got home. Alone in the deep black-blue of late twilight. Snow fell in half-hearted flurries.

“Sorry,” they said when I ran straight at them. My hug took all the air out of them.

“Never disappear again,” I whispered.

Fell nodded. A crumpled map in one raised fist. “Are we gonna do this?”

“We are.”

A cassette blasted when Fell started up the car. David Bowie. We drove, heading for where our lines crossed. The gulf between us was still so wide. Maybe I believed, now—that we could work, that what we added up to could survive in this world—but Fell did not. Fell still believed what Mrs. Tanzillo believed: that Fell was hell-bound, disgusting, deserving of nothing good. The miles inched past my window, closing in on the X on the map, and I had no words, no weapons to breach the wall between us.

And then: Fell did.

“Whatever you said to my mom? It really pissed her the fuck off.”

“I am so sorry,” I said. “It was selfish. I didn’t think it through. What it might mean for you.”

“No,” Fell said, and turned onto Route 9. “I never saw her like that before. I went home and she didn’t say a word to me. Like, at all. Except to say you stopped by. That never, ever happens. I don’t know how, but what you said messed her up really bad.”

“She—”

“No fucking way,” Fell said, turning off the main road. “This can’t be it.”

We’d reached the spot on the map. We were stopped outside the Salvation Army. Where we’d met, a mere two weeks before.

“Nobody’s broadcasting from here,” they said.

We rolled down our windows. Snow fell harder now. Science fiction scenarios blurred in my brain. Time travel. Brain uploading.

“They’d need so much equipment,” Fell said. “If we heard it on the other side of the river? They’d need a massive antenna, but there’s nothing. And—”

Fell trailed off.

I looked up at the sky. Snow tap-tap-tapped at my forehead. I remembered what the star man said, the night before, to me and me alone. *Two soldiers trapped behind enemy lines.*

It was talking to me and Fell.

“The equipment’s not here,” I said. “Or, it’s *here*, but it’s not *now*.”

Fell got out of the car. I turned up the radio and got out after them.

“I get it,” I said, laughing, crying, comprehending. One wobbly crooked magnificent voice. “You were right, Fell. It’s coming from the future.”

We stood. Snow slowly outlined us.

“It’s us,” I said. Fell had finally infected me. The audacious, the impossible, was not only easy—it was our only way forward. “That machine voice? That’s ... you and me. Our two voices together, somehow. A consciousness made up of both of our minds.”

Fell turned their head, hard, like they weren’t listening, or were listening and not understanding, or understanding and not believing.

“Plural singular,” I said. “We are the passenger.”

“Plural singular,” Fell said, snow falling into their perfect face, while David Bowie told us *let all the children boogie*.

They still didn’t see, but that was okay. There would be time to tell Fell all of it. To say that there was so much to be afraid of—nuclear winter, ecological devastation, the death spasms of patriarchy. That the next fifty years would see unspeakable suffering. But we could survive it. Overcome it. Surmount the limits of our flesh and our mortality and our separateness. Combine into some new kind of thing, some wobbly magnificent machine who could crack the very fabric of time and space. We could send a signal back, into the past,

a lonely sad staticky voice in the night, to tell the beautiful damaged kids we had been that the future would be as good as they had the courage to be.



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SELF CARE

ANNALEE NEWITZ

#Selfcare

ANNALEE NEWITZ

illustration by

REBEKKA DUNLAP

T O R
D O T
C O M

Wildfire season turned sunset a rotten orange that seeped in through the shop windows and spread across the floor in lurid streaks. Edwina leaned on the poured concrete counter, watching women walk past outside, pushing strollers whose fabric gently strobed with the names of their nannyshare agencies. Usually they veered off to buy groceries at Whole Foods, currently bathed in a hellish glow. But sometimes they peered inside, looking beyond her to stare at rows of glass bottles full of creams and aromatherapies and anti-aging remedies. A small, tasteful sign in the window guardedly alluded to the services they offered at Skin Seraph:

Feel younger with a moisture peel
Indulge in a revitalizing mask
Try cool sculpting for clean lines
Even out your natural color with melanin toners
#skinseraph #selfcare #youdeserveit

Customers trickled in all day. Women asked for less hair and men asked for more. White people wanted to be tan, and brown people wanted to be paler. Older people wanted tight, matte skin and younger people wanted plump, dewy cheeks like on K-beauty Instagram. Edwina's job wasn't to help them. She was a "customer care associate," which mostly meant she babysat the system that texted appointment reminders. Occasionally she took calls from harried assistants trying to rebook their bosses. Her physical presence wasn't necessary, but her boss Isobel wanted Skin Seraph to feel elite and expensive. That's why she'd hired an actual human to stand here on the premises instead of outsourcing to Task Rabbits like Edwina's cousins in the Philippines.

Sometimes customers would ask if she used any of the products. Edwina had tried most of the Skin Seraph–branded masks, so she could say honestly that she did. She liked the company’s signature citrus-and-cinnamon scent. But she’d never had a chemical peel or Botox or laser color correction. Most customers were looking for something way out of Edwina’s price range. She tried to be nice to everyone, because this was a decent on-site job with health insurance and a 401K plan. There were limits, though. She wasn’t going to do free brand repping like Daisy, the staff clinician. Daisy’s self-care videos blew up pretty regularly, and they were full of artfully deployed Skin Seraph products. That’s why Daisy got bonuses while Edwina never would.

Isobel ran fifteen Skin Seraph stores in three countries, but she still found time to micromanage their bonus system. All the employees had to install this humiliating productivity app called MakeMeProud that tracked how many people they’d converted into loyal customers and pushed leaderboard updates to them every hour. Daisy always won because she had incredible numbers from her socials. The app could see who clicked “buy” after watching the clinician apply toning snails to her face on Instagram. But since Edwina worked at the front desk, it was hard to prove she’d triggered a sale. The one time she used the app to log a \$500 purchase of foot cream, Isobel rejected it because “merely operating the cash register is not the same thing as brand conversion.” Edwina had given up at that point. Her salary wasn’t great, but it was good enough. At least Isobel didn’t leave screamy voicemails for her like she did for the high-performing clinicians.

Edwina sighed, rested both elbows on the counter, and let her shoulders rise up until it felt like they were touching her ears. A cute person with a dog stood outside talking to someone remote. Maybe they were arranging a dinner date. Or having a conference with fifty people in Shenzhen. Idly, Edwina wondered what time it was in Shenzhen. Was it morning there? She blinked up an interface in her contacts and searched for the answer.

Outside, the sunset was browning into twilight, and the cute person wandered away. Edwina would be closing soon, leaving a few dim lights strategically trained on their most expensive products, which had been decanted into crystal polygons that shot rainbows onto the white display shelves. As she wiped Instagram out of the air, she noticed a woman staring into the window directly at her. Something was wrong with her skin, which maybe made sense because she was staring into a skin care boutique. Edwina squinted into the smoky shadows, blinking all the feeds out of her contacts. Was that a sunburn or some kind of scarring? The woman placed her hands on the glass, leaning in so close that her breath made a frosty, opaque circle. Now Edwina was sure the darkness was messing with her vision, because it really looked as if tiny cracks were growing outward from the woman's fingers.

No. It was actually happening.

She heard the unmistakable cry of glass fracturing, and the threadlike fissures spread faster, forming a snarled pattern like a medieval street map full of twisted roads. The woman continued to gaze at Edwina, hands and breath at the center of this bizarre form of vandalism. Edwina jumped out of her chair, flicking the emergency call screen into her left eye. But something kept her from pinching the button.

Hesitantly, she approached the woman. Her skin—it wasn't skin at all. There was no skin. The woman's muscles moved wetly, beaded with clusters of yellow collagen, veins and arteries a throbbing lace across her cheeks and neck. Her lidless blue eyes were set into sockets the color of rubies. Her lips slithered with fat.

The jagged cracks had wound their way to the edges of the window frame.

"Get the fuck away from here!" Edwina screamed without thinking. "I'm calling the police right now!"

The woman smiled, squeezing the tissues of her face into a new configuration of oil and blood. All around her, the glass whined and sagged, on the verge of collapsing into a million shards.

“Go away! Leave right now!” Edwina realized distantly that her voice was rising to a higher and higher pitch.

She reached up to pinch the button that would call Skin Seraph’s private security service. Before her fingers could rub together, the woman disappeared. It was as abrupt as a bad special effect: she was there, and then she was gone. Shaking, Edwina reached out to touch the glass where the woman’s hands had been. The windows were perfectly smooth.

Daisy came racing out of the back, where she’d been assisting with the day’s last chemical peel. Perfect pink ringlets bobbed around her pink face. “Are you okay, Edwina?”

“There was—there was a person messing with the windows.”

Daisy made a big show of opening the door and looking up and down the street, now glowing with LEDs from the Whole Foods parking lot. “Was it that homeless lady again?” she asked. “The one with the cute cat?”

With no other way to explain what she’d seen, Edwina nodded. “I think maybe it was her, yeah.”

“She used to stay down in the Mission at the BART station, but now she climbs the hill to Noe Valley because people in this neighborhood have more money.” Daisy sighed. “I have to admit it’s relatable.”

Edwina kept staring at the place where the woman had been, and Daisy finally went back to her chemical peel, still talking about homeless people. Except that woman hadn’t been carrying a cat. She might not even have been real. Edwina sat back down behind the desk and put her head in her hands, wondering if she’d finally gone crazy.

Half an hour until closing. There were no more tasks in her queue, and the last client of the day was with Daisy. She had no reason to be here other than to lock up. Pulling up a chat window, Edwina texted her best friend Alyx. They ran social for a few Memegen brands, and were always online.

Edwinner: *I think this job is starting to drive me insane.*

Alyx777: *Too many face transplants? That shit is grisly.*

Edwinner: *I seriously thought I saw a woman breaking our windows. I actually screamed or something? Daisy came running in, and now I feel like an idiot. I guess I'm hallucinating now.*

Alyx777: *Dang! You got Daisy to notice something other than her follow count?*

Edwinner: *Haha yes! But now I feel really weird. Do you want to hang out in a couple of hours and watch the new episode of Fae Killers?*

Alyx777: *YASSSSSS luv u!*

Talking to Alyx always made Edwina feel better. Maybe her job arranging appointments to revamp people's faces was bizarre, but it was practically mundane compared to Alyx making tax payment apps into loveable personalities on WimWam. Edwina sent some music to her earbuds and wiped more coin into her streaming account so they could watch *Fae Killers* uninterrupted.

★ ★ ★

By the time she returned to work after the long Memorial Day weekend, Edwina had chalked up the window incident to exhaustion and put it out of her mind. The wildfire smoke had cleared briefly, and Jupiter rose like the business end of a bright laser pointer in the sky over Whole Foods.

She blinked up two windows. In one, she stacked the week's appointments, and in the other she chatted with Alyx. They were excited about a new marketing campaign where the nannyshare app Babyfren came out as a *Fae Killers* superfan. In Babyfren persona, Alyx posted a video about how all infants secretly want *Fae Killers'* naughty shape-shifter Puck to be their daddy. It instantly sucked up a thousand new Babyfren subscribers in San Francisco alone. Edwina had to admit the video was pretty hilarious, especially when the infant drew a big circle around Puck's "tight fae butt." Idly, Edwina wondered if Babyfren got a kickback from *Fae Killers*, or if maybe Memegen represented *Fae Killers* too. She was about to ask Alyx when a dark silhouette blocked Jupiter's light.

It was the skinless woman again, raw face like a popped blister around her pus-slicked smile. “Hello,” she mouthed silently to Edwina, pressing her hand to the windowpane farthest from the front desk. She spread her fingers wide, trailing them behind her along the glass as she walked. Nothing cracked in her wake. The apparition paused in front of Edwina and rubbed both palms over the window as if washing it, but she left swirls of thick mud behind instead of soap. This time, Edwina didn’t pull up the alarm, and she didn’t scream. The woman swayed, almost dancing as she drew great arcs of wet brown curds over a display of snail masks. Just as the stuff blocked Edwina’s view of the Whole Foods parking lot, a smell hit her.

Anyone who rode the BART train in San Francisco knew it. People dug communal cesspits in the tunnels. Apparently using them was better than getting chipped and monitored at the city’s homeless facilities. And now the whole waiting room, with its clean white walls and spotless bottles of cream, was permeated by the unmistakable, heavy reek of day-old human shit.

Edwina’s eyes started to water. Only the most intense odors from the street could overpower the atomizer that perpetually emitted Skin Seraph’s aromatherapy mist. This had to be real. Should she call somebody? The woman grinned at her again, distorting the arrangement of blood vessels in her neck, and completed her work with a flourish of excrement in the shape of a blooming flower. And then, just like last time, she winked out.

“What ... the ... fuck?” It was Daisy’s voice behind her.

Edwina jumped. “What? What is it?”

Daisy had dyed one ringlet sparkly gold and wore two jeweled nourishment patches under each eye. “Is that ... shit smeared all over the windows?”

Two women in spa robes and revitalization socks padded into the front room behind Daisy. “Oh my god!” one of them cried, putting a hand to her mouth and dislodging the depilation caterpillar on her upper lip. The other woman’s face was still wrapped tightly in quick-

heal bandages and she couldn't say anything. Instead, her eyes widened and she made a mewling noise in her throat. Then the bandages over her mouth went puffy and gray as ribbons of vomit slid down her neck. She ripped the bandages off, revealing a sticky red chin and an even more disgusting smell as she dripped onto the floor.

"Mrs. Landsdale!" Daisy screamed. "You can't take those off!" She raced to help her client, grabbing a handful of soothing wipes from the counter and pulling the still-gagging woman into the back. "Ms. Desai, why don't you lie down again in the garden suite while my colleague cleans up?" She shot a meaningful look at Edwina over her shoulder.

"It's that hobo who begs in front of Whole Foods, isn't it?" Ms. Desai asked conversationally as Daisy and Mrs. Landsdale disappeared into a treatment room. "I don't know why they let her sit there. It's private property."

Edwina had finally processed what was happening. The woman was real. The shit was real. A woman had just vomited on the floor. And now she was going to have to be nice to a client while she cleaned everything up.

"I don't know who it was. She didn't look homeless." The words felt algorithmically generated by her mouth as she looked for cleaning supplies under the front desk.

Ms. Desai leaned on the counter, readjusting the caterpillar over her upper lip. "You should report her to the police. You guys have a security camera out there, right? Just take a screenshot from it and make a report. That's what my neighbor did when people kept stealing her Amazon packages, and they caught the guys. If the police have a face, they can find people anywhere."

Edwina hefted the motorized window washer in one hand, its plastic tank sloshing with Clorox-spiked fluid, and looped the hose over her shoulder. She could plug it in outside. "Well, I have to do some cleaning, Ms. Desai. If you go back to the garden suite, I'm sure Daisy will be right with you."

She didn't bother to wish Ms. Desai a nice evening.

Soapy water cascaded over the glass, and Edwina used the hose to chase wafers of caked excrement into the gutter. As she followed the edges of the shit flower with needles of spray, Edwina realized that Ms. Desai had a point. She could review security footage and figure out what she'd actually seen. At least, once she was done here. Edwina sighed and wished Skin Seraph's protective gloves didn't cost twenty dollar each. It would come out of her paycheck.

★ ★ ★

The windows still looked spotty when Mrs. Landsdale walked through the lobby with Ms. Desai. Both were dressed in those yoga pants that transformed from opaque fabric into mesh netting when exposed to perspiration. Mrs. Landsdale's bandages were newly applied. Daisy had given both women free youth-restoration elixir gift packages, gently strobing with luminescent jellyfish protein in their frosted bottles.

"My skin may never recover from that," Mrs. Landsdale said in a voice that was meant to be overheard. "I could have been seriously injured."

Ms. Desai shot Edwina a sympathetic look. "I hope you catch her. It's horrifying what those people think they can do."

They drifted outside, discussing whether to hire a rideshare or walk up the hill to their neighborhood.

As they passed out of earshot, Edwina caught Mrs. Landsdale's parting salvo. "Did that girl just sit there while a hobo destroyed her shop?" she asked with exaggerated incomprehension. "Why didn't she do anything? Is she profoundly basic? I'm never going to that place again."

"Same," said Ms. Desai. "We can always go to Nature's Blessing in the Marina."

Edwina made sure she'd sprayed every fleck of ordure off the windows before returning inside to start the shutdown routine. Daisy was still banging around in back, so she walked to the garden suite

to check on her. Daisy was kneeling next to the orchid display, carefully emptying several tiny trash containers into a scented plastic bag. She looked sweaty and her ringlets had wilted.

“Hey, I’m going to start closing up. Are you almost done?”

Daisy looked up, and Edwina braced herself for rage. Instead, her colleague’s face was streaked with tears. “I’m done.” Her voice was hoarse.

“Are you okay?”

Daisy shook what remained of her curls. “Of course I’m not okay. Mrs. Landsdale is one of my best clients. I’ve gotten a ton of referrals from her.”

Edwina flashed on the conversation she’d just overheard between Mrs. Landsdale and Ms. Desai, and felt an unfamiliar flare of sympathy for Daisy. Clinicians worked for those bonuses, and Skin Seraph wasn’t a just day job for Daisy. It was her career.

“I bet she’ll forget about it tomorrow when she tries that elixir,” Edwina said with forced cheerfulness.

Daisy shook her head. “I hope so. That wasn’t some free sample. I gave her the good shit.”

“I dunno. I think I’m the true judge of good shit now.” Edwina cracked a grin and Daisy let out a laugh-sob noise that turned into a genuine laugh. It was the first time Edwina had ever seen her without absolutely perfect makeup and structured hair.

Daisy slung the bag of trash over her shoulder and cocked her head at Edwina. “Do you want to drink some of those CBD coolers that Isobel and Brad left in the fridge?” she asked. “I really need to relax.” Isobel and her boyfriend Brad, whom she’d hired as some kind of nebulous marketing manager, always kept drinks on hand for pop-up influencer parties.

Edwina blinked up her chat with Alyx, which had mostly degenerated into poop emoji. “Can I invite my friend Alyx? I told them to meet me after work.”

“The more the merrier.”

The three of them sat on massage chairs in the restoration room, drinking and watching *Fae Killer* memes on YouTube. That's when Edwina remembered the security camera footage. She had two witnesses now, and wanted to see what they thought.

She and Daisy swiped through Skin Seraph's dashboard lazily, digging into several maintenance menus before they found the security cam file. It was set to delete anything older than a week, so her first encounter with the woman was gone. But this afternoon's encounter was there. They watched the scene unfold with mouths open. The webcam was positioned over the door, which meant most of the action at the windows happened at the edge of the video. Still, they could zoom in to see a person touching the windows, face averted, her movements a jerky blur.

"Is this in fast motion or something?" Alyx asked. "It looks weird."

Daisy fiddled with the controls and brought up the timestamp. "Nope," she said. "She's just moving really fast."

And then they came to the part where the woman winked out. It happened on film just the way it had in real life: she was there and then not there. Except now it was easier to blame on bad video than it had been when the actual scene was streaming into her eyes.

"There must be something wrong with the webcam," Daisy said uncertainly.

"Yeah it's glitchy," Alyx agreed. They chugged more CBD cooler, and looked over at Edwina. "Right? It's glitchy."

Edwina debated whether to agree with them or come out and say it. She took another swig of CBD, looked at Alyx's lean face with their jet-black eyes, and Daisy's pale, de-sparkled cheeks. "That's actually what I saw too. She moved really fast and then she disappeared. Daisy, remember how last week I said I thought I saw a woman breaking the window? It's the same one. She disappeared then too."

Daisy set her bottle down carefully. "So, what is this? Some kind of ... fae?"

None of them laughed.

Alyx pulled their mobile out of a back pocket and unfolded it on the table between them. “So obviously fae aren’t real,” they said. “But it could be somebody in a costume fucking around with the camera, right? Let’s see if there are other reports like this on Nextdoor. People freaking love to report vandalism there. There’s also a feed from San Francisco city government where people submit cleanup requests.” Alyx already had six feeds going on the mobile.

“You don’t think fae are real?” Daisy asked, using the very serious voice she usually reserved for talking to customers about gold flake masks.

Edwina and Alyx glanced at each other and then at Daisy. “I mean, I love *Fae Killers*, but that’s not real life,” Edwina said.

“Well, no, *that’s* not real life,” Daisy agreed. “But there are definitely fae here in San Francisco.”

Edwina’s heart sank. She was just starting to like Daisy, and now she felt herself withdrawing. It wasn’t as if she was some kind of douchey skeptic who hated all people with New Age beliefs, but it was going to be hard to solve this mystery if Daisy blamed it on ancient aliens.

Alyx broke through Edwina’s disappointment spiral. “What do you mean when you say there are fae here in the city?” they asked.

Daisy shrugged. “Don’t you run socials for brands? You must have seen Fae Twitter. A lot of companies hire fae consultants now to help them with outreach because dreamwalking is a great way to raise brand awareness.”

“I’ve heard of that, but I thought it was like hiring astrologers or something.” Alyx looked nonplussed.

Something about Edwina’s expression and Alyx’s tone had gotten through to Daisy. She dropped her eyes and picked at one of her nails. “I guess it’s like that. Some people believe fae are real, though.” Daisy laughed nervously. “It’s probably like those magicians in Vegas who turn people into giant pigs, but then it turns out to be a hologram, right?”

“Wait, did that happen? A magician turned somebody into a holographic pig?” Edwina was eager to change the subject. “I’m looking that up on YouTube right now.”

After she found it, they spent another hour clicking on even more bizarre magician videos. Then it was time to head home. Daisy hopped in a rideshare while Alyx and Edwina walked down the hill to catch BART.

At the West Oakland stop, Alyx hugged Edwina goodnight, but kept a warm hand on her arm as they separated. “I’ll use some of the algorithms we have at work to look for reports on that shit-smearing lady, okay? I bet somebody has reported her, and then at least you’ll know more.”

Edwina nodded. “Thanks. I’m still stuck in this weird energy from what Daisy said about the fae.”

“Social media people have a zillion superstitions,” Alyx laughed. “Gotta pray to the mushroom people if you wanna go viral, man.”

“I guess so.” Edwina managed a smile, but she couldn’t stop thinking about the skinless woman who had shattered and unshattered a window. Like she was casting a spell. Edwina glanced up at Jupiter, still burning brightly overhead, and remembered how the collagen had glistened in the woman’s cheeks as she said hello. Maybe it wasn’t a spell. Maybe it was a curse.

★ ★ ★

The next day at work was a lot more fun than usual because Edwina finally had an office friend. Now she and Daisy could roll their eyes at each other when there was a particularly rude client, and she had somebody to grab a turmeric latte with at Martha & Brothers up the street. Daisy snuck a look at her socials as they waited in the coffee queue behind three women with four Babyfren carriages between them.

“Oh shit, Edwina,” she said with a quaver. “Ohhhhh shit.” Her eyes had that foggy look of somebody accessing a lot of feeds on their contacts.

A chill crept up Edwina's arms. "What is it?"

"Mrs. Landsdale posted a seriously psycho review of Skin Seraph on Mommyland and it's blowing up everywhere."

"Omigod let me see."

Daisy flicked the link to Edwina's contacts. It was posted in the San Francisco shopping forum, and already had thousands of upvotes after only an hour.

Disgusting experience at Skin Seraph—DO NOT GO THERE

I have been going to Skin Seraph in Noe Valley for more than a year, and have always had a pleasant enough experience but NEVER AGAIN. Last night a hobo attacked the windows and smeared them with excrement, and the management did NOTHING. The entire place smelled terrible, and made me extremely ill. My skin peel was ruined and my doctor says I may have scarring. THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE AND DANGEROUS. This is a medical establishment and the management has NO SECURITY. The girls who work at the store did nothing to stop it, and then they rinsed the windows with nothing more than a little tap water. Can you believe it? That window is probably coated in all kinds of disgusting microbes now, and who knows how much has been tracked inside to infect everyone who goes there. I'm warning you, as a concerned mother, to avoid this place. It's another case of a local store becoming a chain and the service suffering as a result. I'm also contacting the city to recommend an inspection IMMEDIATELY.

The comment section was filled with outrage and recommendations for other local skin spas. When she got tired of blinking through them, Edwina looked up to see that Daisy had the same expression she'd worn last night when she was cleaning up in back. Her eyes were going red.

"At least she didn't name me," Daisy said shakily. "There's that. She didn't link to me or say I had personally done anything wrong."

Edwina touched Daisy's shoulder. "Nobody will be able to track this back to you. Skin Seraph might be canceled for a few days, but you're not."

Daisy looked vague again, and then refocused her eyes on Edwina. "Good. I gained a bunch of followers for this video I posted

yesterday. So far, I'm fine."

Then they both checked Skin Seraph's socials, and it was a bloodbath. Followers had plummeted, and people were screaming at them about how they were unsanitary and disgusting and doomed. There was some conspiracy group that was fixated on the term *seraph* as a sign of Satanism, and now the store was on their radar too. Skin Seraph's timeline was full of reminders that "the Beast can't hide" and vague threats to Isobel and Brad. Somebody had even dug up Isobel's mobile number and was urging people to text her about the dangers of consorting with devils.

"These guys don't even understand that seraphs are angels," Edwina grumbled. She got a half-hearted laugh out of Daisy.

"They are idiots, but Mrs. Landsdale is a huge influencer on Mommyland. She could actually kill the brand."

"I wonder what Isobel and Brad are going to do? Do you think they know about this?"

Daisy looked at her like she was basic. "Edwina. Of course they know. I'm sure they're having a very bad meeting with their marketing people right now."

Most of the afternoon appointments were canceled, so Edwina and Daisy did a deep clean on the garden suite and unpacked a new display of frog milk bottles. They got a memo from Isobel around three p.m.

To: All Staff

From: Isobel Chang

Subject: Exciting changes!

We are pleased to announce that Margot Redberry is taking over as Skin Seraph's new marketing manager. Brad will be stepping down to focus on special projects, working closely with our partners in the Philippines to develop new markets. Please take a moment to congratulate Margot. We're so excited to have her in this big new role!

"Wow—she fired her own boyfriend!" Edwina exclaimed. "This must be really bad."

“Uh, yeah. Did you see the story in *Teen Vogue*? Basically it’s quoting Mrs. Landsdale’s post and then linking to a bunch of other people talking about how the Skin Seraph stores have all become super unsanitary. Also they’re saying the frog milk line is made with endangered tree frogs or something?” Daisy looked dubious. “I’m pretty sure that’s not true. All this stuff is biomimetic. It imitates animal proteins, but it’s made in labs.”

Edwina stared out the front window. There was one smeary spot left in the corner, where the skinless woman had pressed her fingers last night. Were they going to lose their jobs? She still needed a hefty amount to build a solid nest egg for graduate school, and she didn’t want to go back to gigging for a dollar a minute.

As if she’d read Edwina’s mind, Daisy pulled out her mobile and spread it open to a page full of task offers in San Francisco. But then she wiped those away and opened up her Twitch dashboard. “Want to see something totally secret?”

“Sure!”

Daisy poked at an unpublished video called “Sweetie Quest.” It was a teaser for a new streaming romance series, starring Daisy, the hapless heroine looking for snuggles in the big city. Sponsored by Sugardew, the new Korean-style face-care brand. “They hired me to do a show about their new line of nightlife skin products—like all the stuff you need for going out and recovering afterwards. Isn’t it dope? I’m a real influencer now!” Daisy made a face. “I mean, I know that sounds awful but I’m really excited. I get to write and direct all the episodes, and they said I can do queer content and have lots of stories about women of color.”

Maybe Daisy believed in fae, Edwina thought, but she was also a genuinely nice person. It was hard not to like somebody who was promising to make romances that pandered charmingly to your exact demographic. She smiled. “Wow, congrats! Are you allowed to rep other brands while you’re here, though?”

Daisy looked around, as if Isobel might jump out of that memo and scream at them. “I was worried about that, but I think now ...

well, now might be a good time to think about finding other brands to rep? You know what I mean?”

Edwina hung her head. “Yeah. I know. I have no idea what I’ll do if this job goes away.”

Impulsively, Daisy hugged her. “Maybe it will be fine here. But if not, I know you’ll find something.”

★ ★ ★

That night, Daisy came along with Edwina and Alyx to an old bar in the Mission where the drinks were strong and grizzled millennials sat around debating politics with their thick phones propped on the tables next to their face masks. The wildfire smoke was back again.

“I love this place,” Edwina said. “It’s been around for forty years—like since the early 2000s. It’s the real San Francisco.” She finished her scotch in two gulps, and ordered another one.

Alyx sipped slowly on a rum and Coke. “So I found out something pretty interesting about Skin Seraph today while everybody was losing their shit about ... the shit.” They raised an eyebrow.

Edwina sighed. “I don’t know if I can take more Satanist conspiracy stuff.”

“Did you know that Isobel hired a fae-owned firm to promote Skin Seraph last year when she took the chain national?” Alyx asked. They flipped open their mobile on the bar so the two women could look over their shoulder at what was onscreen. It was a Tweet from a brand consultancy called Witchy Wonders, announcing that they’d just signed a contract with Skin Seraph to “sprinkle a little fairy dust on their already excellent brand.” Alyx thumbed to the next screen. It was a PDF of the actual contract. “Obviously you never saw this,” they said. “But Memegen has access to a lot of private corporate information. It looks like Isobel has been hemorrhaging money, missing bill payments. And she stopped paying this Witchy Wonder contract too.”

Daisy sucked in her breath. “Oh no. She didn’t pay her brand consultant?”

Edwina was starting to feel drunk, but it wasn't from the scotch. It was this conversation. "Okay, so you're saying that fae are real, and they are brand consultants in San Francisco." Her voice came out a lot more evenly than she expected it would.

"I mean, yeah?" Daisy arched a perfectly gilded eyebrow. "I told you last night."

"Like actual fae, with actual magic powers? Not cosplayers or pagans?"

"I don't know about powers, but they are contractors," Alyx said. "And I can definitely understand being pissed when you don't get paid. Contractors are always the first to get screwed."

"Tell me about it," Daisy groaned.

Edwina thought about the three years she'd worked as a Task Rabbit after college, and how grateful she'd been to get hired as a staffer at Skin Seraph. "I mean, I get why this Witchy Wonders person is angry, but she's going to ruin a lot of people's lives. It's not just Isobel. There are hundreds of Skin Seraph employees all over the world."

"I'm going DM them," Alyx said, fingers twitching midair.

"What? No!" Daisy yelped.

But Edwina was curious. "Do it!" she said. "See if you can find out how bad the contract violation is."

Alyx started giggling, eyes foggy with data. "The person running their socials remembers you, Edwina. She says she's really sorry because she liked how sparky you are." Alyx kept typing. "Okay, yeah. Yeah. This is bad. There's nothing you can do. Isobel really screwed Witchy Wonders over, like for tons of money, and Skin Seraph is going down hard. It's going to get a lot worse." Alyx's eyes cleared. "She says you should look for another job now. She's willing to give you a few days before she pulls the trigger on the next curse."

Edwina sank down on the bar stool, feeling simultaneously freaked out and vindicated. There was no way she was going to find another job with decent benefits in a few days. But it was oddly

affirming to know that there was a scary magical woman roaming the city who thought she was sparky. Suddenly, she had an idea.

“Alyx, ask if she’d be willing to meet with me and Daisy to work something out. Maybe we can salvage this.”

A smirk spread over Alyx’s face as they typed. “She’s open to talking. She says she’ll meet you at Skin Seraph tomorrow when you close.” They folded up the mobile and tucked it into a front pocket. “Her name is Agony, by the way.”

Recalling the fae’s last couple of visits to Skin Seraph, Edwina was willing to admit that Agony had earned her hyperbolic name.

“What are you thinking?” Daisy asked, picking at a piece of glitter caught in the sleeve of her sweater. “I told you I’m probably not staying at Skin Seraph. Plus, are you really going to try to bargain with a fae? That shit is dangerous.”

“Listen.” Edwina expertly flicked the glitter off Daisy’s sleeve. “She likes me, right? I just want to see if we can get her to slow down. I need this job if I’m going to save enough to go to grad school next year. Plus, I actually like working at Skin Seraph—it’s chill, and we have good benefits.”

“Yeah, I get that.” Daisy shot Edwina a look of sympathy.

Alyx poked Daisy’s shoulder. “Don’t you want to meet somebody who is a literal shit disturber? She sounds cool.”

Daisy laughed. “I guess so. But I’m out if things start to get weird. And I’m not going to make any deals or bargains with her.”

“Thank you!” Edwina hugged Daisy and Alyx at the same time, almost unseating herself in the process. She had no idea what she was going to say to Agony, but somehow it felt like she was making the right choice.

★ ★ ★

The next evening, Daisy kept finding excuses to sit at the front desk with Edwina, watching the sidewalk outside warily. Nearly every appointment had been canceled, so it wasn’t like she had anything to do in the treatment rooms.

As daylight drained from the picture windows, a flock of green parrots crowded into the tree outside, chittering and eating the tiny red berries that grew between its spoon-shaped leaves. More kept arriving. Within minutes, it was hard to tell parrot from tree.

“That’s kind of weird,” Daisy said, pointing at the growing flock.

As if in answer, the door shushed open and three parrots flew inside to land next to the bottles of frog milk. Their feathered heads were as red as the berries they’d been eating. One of them immediately squirted a shit onto the pristine glass shelf.

Following the parrots inside was a woman with magenta hair in a fitted green jumpsuit embroidered with tropical flowers. She was muscular and tall, her bulky silhouette filling the doorway. She curled her hand into a gun shape, index finger pointed at the camera over the front desk, and an alert flickered in Edwina’s contacts: *Skin Seraph Security Feed Temporarily Offline*.

“Well that wasn’t creepy at all,” Daisy whispered.

“You must be Agony,” Edwina said loudly. “I’m Edwina, and this is Daisy.”

The fae smiled and pretended to blow smoke from the loaded barrel of her finger gun. Now that she was wearing her skin, Edwina could see that she was probably in her late twenties, with a pale brown complexion. She might be Latinx, or possibly southeast Asian. Did fae have human racial identities? Probably best not to assume.

Agony walked slowly around the store, picking up a revitalizing cream packaged in a squishy plastic bulb, peering at its warning label, then setting it back down. One of the parrots landed on her shoulder.

“I—I like your jumpsuit, Agony,” Daisy said.

At last the fae looked directly at them. “Isn’t it the best? I got it on sale at Wildfang.” Agony finished her circuit of the room and leaned on the counter across from them. “I love your self-care videos, by the way. I’ve been following you for ages.”

“Oh thanks!” Daisy had the desperately upbeat tone she used when Isobel visited the store and yelled at the clinicians who weren’t

on the MakeMeProud leaderboard.

Edwina was glad the small talk was handled. “So, Agony, I wanted to talk to you about this thing you’re doing to Skin Seraph,” she said.

The fae turned her gaze on Edwina, and she felt a pleasurable tingle of ... something. Was that magic, or was Agony just super hot? “I told your friend Alyx that I’d give you a few days before I burn this brand down.” Agony looked down and the tingle receded. “And for the record, I do feel bad about it. My boss at Witchy Wonders has this scorched earth approach that feels very 2020. You know? She’s from that extremist generation.”

“Yeah,” Edwina sighed. “Our boss is awful too. Obviously.”

“That’s why I’m going to work for myself,” Daisy said. “I just got another sponsorship.”

Agony shrugged. “You’ll still be a contractor. That means you can get screwed by ten people instead of one. Trust me. I spend half my days chasing down payments for the company. And when they don’t pay, well ... I have to deal with that too.”

“Why do you work there, then?” Edwina was genuinely curious.

“I love doing socials and events. I figure I’ll work at Witchy for a couple more years, build up my portfolio, and then get a staff job at a marketing or design firm. I need some health insurance and stability.”

Daisy was losing her anxiety frown. “I hear that. I’m going to miss the health insurance here.”

Cocking her head, Agony blinked up something on her contacts. “Your numbers are amazing, Daisy. You should come to this healer pop-up I’m organizing. We need somebody to talk about nourishing beauty products.”

Edwina watched the two women talking shop and wished they could be friends. Agony might be a fae with supernatural powers—or a really good cosplayer with a camera-killing device hidden up her sleeve—but her job situation sounded a lot like theirs. There had to be some way to get her on their side. Suddenly she had an idea. “Remember how Wooden Board Café had that whole scandal where

the dude who owned it was forcing everyone to do creepy stuff like compete for overtime bonuses and clean the bathroom when he was in the stall taking a dump?”

“Ugh!”

“Yes!”

She had their full attention. “Well, Wooden Board is still open now, right? That’s because the workers all joined a class action suit, and the dude decided to settle by quitting and giving them the business. So they became a worker-owned cooperative. Everybody has a share in the shop. It worked out great and they started selling those really amazing cheese tarts.” Edwina paused. “We could do that.”

Daisy was dubious. “But Skin Seraph is an international chain. We can’t turn it all into a co-op.”

“No, you mean with the Skin Seraph workers at this one shop, right?” Agony continued to blink up feeds as she thought it over. “It might even work, because your boss could get rid of the shop that got her in trouble in the first place. She could do a total rebrand.”

“Okay, sure. But what would we do with a shop?” Daisy asked.

Edwina’s heart began to pound, and she realized with surprise this mattered a lot to her. “We all need jobs. Daisy, you want to be a self-care influencer, and this shop is the perfect place to build your brand and make video. Agony, you want to do events? We’ve got amazing spaces here for retreats, classes, and pop-ups. Listen. How often do you have the chance to grab prime retail real estate that has suddenly become garbage? Isobel has a dozen other outlets—she doesn’t need the hassle of dealing with all the fallout from Agony’s curse. We’d be doing her a favor. And we—we could make a really great store. We don’t have to do it forever. But wouldn’t it be nice to build a business where all the workers would be owners, so we could give ourselves good health benefits and vacation time and stuff?”

Daisy looked thoughtful. “We could get rid of Isobel’s shitty bonus system, too.”

Agony waved her hand to dismiss whatever she was accessing online. Nobody said anything for a minute while two parrots fluttered down to the counter. The third, still on Agony's shoulder, spoke first. "These humans have good hearts," the bird said. "You can trust them."

Another bird cackled. "Or you could swindle them! They're credulous!"

Agony rolled her eyes. "We've talked about this, Loudface. That's an inside-your-head thought."

Edwina glanced at Daisy, worried the talking animals might be triggering her anti-fae feelings. But she was toying with one of the free sample packets they kept behind the counter, seemingly oblivious to the possibly-magic, possibly-trained-parrot scenario.

And then Daisy said the last thing Edwina expected. "You know what? Fuck it. I'm in. Let's do this. Let's make a store."

"YESSSS!" Edwina did an awkward wiggly dance. "We can do this! What do you say, Agony?"

The fae looked at Loudface, then behind her through the windows, seeming to measure the armies of pedestrians swarming Whole Foods across the street. When she turned back around, she was smiling. "We're going to need a lawyer. And a business manager."

It was weird how you could want something badly, and not realize exactly what it was until you found yourself in a completely anomalous situation. Edwina drummed her fists on the counter in triumph. "I have a couple friends who might be able to help. They just got their MBAs and have done some start-up stuff."

"My mom is a labor lawyer," Daisy said haltingly. "This might be the only time she will ever understand my job."

Agony's smile turned hard. "And I can make your boss very ... receptive to our offer."

"We'll need to ask the other workers if they want to join us, too," Edwina said.

“After my next curse, though? Because we don’t want to tip our hand.”

“Yeah that makes sense.”

“Hey, do you want me to do it right now? It’s going to be super gross and scary.”

Edwina looked at Daisy. “Do you want to? I want to.”

Daisy shrugged and then grinned a little. “No more poop, though, okay?”

Agony crooked her finger and they followed her outside onto the sidewalk, facing the illuminated interior of a business they were about to claim as their own. The fae raised her arms, fingers spread wide, and Venus became visible in the evening sky.

That’s when the fat, warm drops of blood began to fall.



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SHARDS

IAN ROGERS



Shards

I A N R O G E R S

illustration by

G R E G R U T H

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

Dawn came and they were still alive. All except for Marcie. Only at the end, they supposed she hadn't really been Marcie anymore.

She was the only one who didn't come to the cabin as part of a couple. Later on, the others—Chad and Annabelle, Mark and Donna—would all privately wonder if Marcie had been targeted the moment she walked through the door. If she'd been singled out for being single.

It seemed such an absurd notion, but after the night they spent at the cabin, their lives seemed to exist in a series of absurd notions, one following directly after another. The grief counsellors and psychiatrists told them this was a perfectly normal response to the trauma they had endured. That this was the way the human mind functioned when confronted with such terrifying and inexplicable events. The only way to move on was to accept the things that didn't make any sense.

Which, to Chad and Annabelle and Mark and Donna, seemed like the most absurd notion of all.

★ ★ ★

They drove up on a Friday afternoon after classes ended. They went in Chad's new Expedition, an early graduation present from his parents. Annabelle sat next to him, playing navigator with Google Maps; Mark and Donna were in the back seat holding hands and staring at their smartphones; and Marcie was sprawled in the rear compartment with their luggage and groceries.

Chad glanced in the rear-view mirror and told her not to eat all their food before they reached the cabin, which earned him double fuck-you fingers from Marcie, who stood six one and weighed a solid

two fifty, none of it fat. On the rugby field they called her the Steamroller.

The others ragged her about her size, but there was never any cruelty in their remarks. No more than the jibes they made about Chad's thinning hair or Donna's lazy eye. It was the way they'd always spoken to each other, ever since they were kids. The jokes and taunts that others used to hurt and humiliate, they turned into shields to protect themselves.

They'd learned early on that even though there was no perfection in the human body, there was plenty to be found in friendship. It was a strange friendship, to be sure. Their families and schoolmates didn't understand it; they didn't even understand it themselves. But they didn't need to. It worked—*they* worked—and that was all that mattered.

Looking back, it made a strange kind of sense—an *absurd* kind of sense, one could say—that they should be the ones who ended up killing Marcie. They would have died for her if the situation had been reversed.

If you looked at it like that, killing Marcie was really the least they could do.

★ ★ ★

Still, there were some unanswered questions.

Like why did they dismember Marcie's body after they killed her?

None of them had an answer for that. A fact that—strangely, absurdly—provided even more support for their collective story.

The grief counsellors and psychiatrists would later say the survivors mutilated their friend's body because it was the only way they could externalize what they'd done to someone they'd known and loved since early childhood. Decapitating her and severing her limbs was their way of negating that relationship, of turning Marcie into a stranger, which, in a way, is what she had become to them during the course of the event.

The mutilation may have been vicious and violent, but it was also—strangely, absurdly—healthy.

★ ★ ★

It was Marcie who found the trap door. She tripped over the ringbolt while they were bringing their stuff into the cabin.

“The fuck?” she shouted, stumbling forward a few steps and almost dropping the two bags of groceries she was carrying.

“What’s the matter, Marce?” Annabelle said, dragging her suitcase through the doorway on its small plastic wheels.

“Damn thing almost killed me.” Marcie went over and nudged the ringbolt with the toe of her shoe. “They should’ve covered it with a rug or something.”

“They who?” Chad said, stepping around Annabelle with a large cooler. Mark and Donna came in behind him, still holding hands, still on their phones.

“Whoever you rented this piece-of-shit cabin from.”

“Hey,” Chad said. “It’s got four walls and a roof. What else do we need?”

Marcie glared distrustfully at the trap door. “What the hell do you think is down there?”

Donna shrugged. “Probably the ghost of a demonic entity that will slaughter us all while we sleep.”

She was wrong, but not entirely.

★ ★ ★

After they unpacked their bags and put away the groceries, they made a fire in the stone-lined pit out back and roasted hot dogs and marshmallows. They washed them down with beer, then moved on to vodka. They finished the bottle—the *first* bottle—and Mark stuck it between his legs and chased the girls around the yard, thrusting his hips and crying out, *Hoo-ah! Hoo-ah!*

Marcie grabbed the bottle and looked at it skeptically. “We’ve all seen your dick, Mark, and this is way too generous. Maybe we could find you one of those little wee bottles you get on airplanes.”

Mark dropped to his knees, head slumped. “Why you gotta wound me with the truth like that?”

Donna hugged him. “It’s okay, babe. It’s not the size that matters, it’s what you do with it.”

Mark perked up. “I gotta pee.”

Donna backed away. “You can do that on your own.”

Mark rose shakily to his feet. “I’m not sure I can.”

The others watched him stumble off to the edge of the woods. Annabelle intoned in a narrator voice: “The police found his body the following morning. They thought his penis was missing, but it turned out they just had to look really, really hard to see it.”

They all laughed while Mark peed against an oak tree. He let go of himself to flick double fuck-you fingers over his shoulders, then cursed and brought his hands back around.

“Don’t get any on ya!” Chad called, and they all laughed again.

“Too late!” Mark called back. After he was finished he shuffled back to the circle, buttoning his jeans. “What’s the matter, Chad, you couldn’t spring for a place with an outhouse?”

“The cabin has a bathroom, numbnuts. You’re the one who decided to piss in the woods.”

“That’s part of the cabin experience,” Mark said solemnly.

“I’ll be sure to tell that to the owners,” Chad said.

“Who are the owners?” Marcie asked him.

“I don’t know,” Chad said. “I found it on Airbnb. Which reminds me...” He gave them his smooth lazy grin, the one that always preceded a bad joke. “After I graduate, I’ve already got an idea for my first entrepreneurial venture. It’s similar to Airbnb, only mine will be aimed at the Spring Break crowd. You know: beach, booze, and babes. I’m gonna call it AirTnA.”

The others groaned in unison. Annabelle threw a marshmallow at him. “Pig,” she said, but she was smiling.

“Seriously,” Marcie said. She gestured at the cabin with the hot dog skewered on her stick. “Who owns this dump?”

“How the hell should I know?” Chad said. “I checked the listings for a cabin in the woods, someplace within driving distance of the city, and this one looked good.”

“And by ‘good’ you mean ‘bad,’” Annabelle said.

“Didn’t you talk to someone?” Marcie asked.

“No,” Chad said. “I emailed. They quoted a price, I paid it, and here we are. What’s the big deal?”

An awkward silence descended, threatening the pleasant mood of the evening. Since Marcie was the cause of this particular bring-down, she knew it was her responsibility to provide the requisite counterweight to bring it up again.

“Whatever they charged,” she said, “it was too much. Just like your mom.”

They all looked at her for a short beat, then burst out laughing.

Tragedy averted, Marcie thought.

And it was.

For the moment.

★ ★ ★

They went inside when the temperature began to drop.

Chad started another fire, this one in the big fieldstone hearth, while Annabelle made a round of drinks. Donna was checking her phone and marvelling at the excellent coverage they got way out here in the sticks. Mark was still outside, putting out the old fire and gathering up their trash.

Marcie was in the main room, staring at the trap door.

“If you’re just going to stand there,” Chad said, kneeling in front of the fire, “could you at least be useful and hand me some more kindling?” He pointed at the pile of cut wood next to the rack of fireplace tools.

Marcie picked up a piece and handed it to him without taking her eyes off the trap door.

She couldn't stop looking at it. When she was outside, sitting with the others around the fire, she hadn't been able to stop thinking about it. It was like when she tripped over the ringbolt something had dislodged in her brain, and now it was rattling around in there like the only penny in a piggy bank.

What was down there? she wondered. *Anything* was the answer. Including nothing.

But she didn't believe there was nothing. No, there was definitely something down there. She didn't know how she knew that, but she did. Something ... or *someone*?

No. There was no one down there. She was sure of that, not because of any particular reason but rather a feeling that was telling her—insisting to her—that there was *something* down there. Something other than dust and dirt.

But what?

She didn't know, and while a part of her was okay with not knowing, a bigger part was not okay, because the not-knowing side was motivated by fear. She was *afraid* of opening the trap door and going into the cellar. She was *afraid* of what she might find. And she couldn't accept that.

She took a deep breath, then blew it out. She needed to keep herself together. Her coach said fear was the forerunner of failure. Pretty words, Marcie thought, but they didn't mean squat on the rugby field. She was the Steamroller, for god's sake. Was she really going to be stopped in her tracks by a trap door that didn't even look strong enough to take her full weight standing on top of it?

"Fuck no," she muttered.

"Fuck what?" Chad said, jabbing at the burning kindling with a brass poker.

When he didn't get a reply, he looked over his shoulder.

Marcie was gone and the trap door was open.

★ ★ ★

Annabelle was handing out drinks. When she was done she had an extra one. "Where's Marce?" she asked.

Chad jerked his thumb at the trap door. "Down in the cellar."

Donna snickered. "We'll probably never see her again."

"You're one cold bitch," Chad said.

"The coldest," Donna said, her eyes glued to her phone.

Annabelle carried her drink (gin and tonic) and Marcie's (rum and coke) over to the opening in the floor and peered inside. She couldn't see anything beyond the first few steps of the wooden stairs descending into darkness below.

"Marcie!" she called down. "What are you doing?"

There was no reply.

Annabelle crouched, balancing the drinks on her knees, and tilted her head at a listening angle.

She couldn't hear a thing from the cellar, which seemed strange to her. If Marcie was down there, she should've been able to hear her moving around. Marcie was a lot of things, Annabelle thought, but light on her feet wasn't one of them.

"Come on, Marce." Her mouth had gone dry and she swallowed with an audible click. "If you're joking around, it isn't funny."

Mark came in the back door carrying a half-full garbage bag. "Shut the trap door and lock her in there," he said. "Now *that* would be funny."

Annabelle frowned at him, then turned back to the square-shaped hole in the floor. Locking Marcie in the cellar wouldn't be funny, but it would teach her a lesson. Teach her not to scare her friends like this.

Annabelle stood up and was actually extending her foot to push the door closed when she heard something from below.

It was a low scratching sound, almost like radio static, but gone so quickly she wasn't sure if she'd only imagined it.

She crouched back down and leaned forward, keeping the glasses in her hands upright so they wouldn't spill. She tilted her head to the side again, like a satellite dish trying to pick up a stray signal.

She reached the tipping point and was trembling on the balls of her feet when Marcie's face appeared out of the darkness and said, "Boo!"

Annabelle squealed and fell over backwards. The glasses flew out of her hands and spilled their contents across the plank floor. The others turned in unison, their startled faces turning to puzzlement as they watched Marcie climb out of the cellar.

She was carrying a record player.

★ ★ ★

It was a very old device—a gramophone, according to Donna, the music major—with a hand-crank on the side and a big brass horn that looked like a metallic flower in full bloom. Instead of a needle at the end of the tone arm, there was a curved hook of smoky black glass.

Marcie put it on the coffee table and they all gathered around it.

"It was just sitting there on the dirt floor," she said.

"Sweet," Donna said. "We need some tunes."

Annabelle reached for the hook at the end of the tone arm.

"Careful," Marcie said. "It's sharp." She showed a cut on the pad of her index finger, still weeping a bit of blood.

There was a record on the turntable, a plain black disc with no label.

"What do you think it is?" Chad wondered.

"Nicki Minaj?" Donna said.

The others laughed, then a deep silence fell over the room as they examined the gramophone.

Donna ran her hands along its smooth wooden sides.

Chad tipped his head toward the brass horn.

Marcie put her finger on the record and rotated it slowly around.

Annabelle reached out for the hand-crank.

Something might have happened in that moment, but the silence was broken by the plastic rustling sound of Mark digging around in

the garbage bag. Snapped out of their collective trance, the others turned to face him.

Mark was holding the empty vodka bottle. He grinned mischievously as he wagged it back and forth in his hand.

“Wanna play a game?”

★ ★ ★

They lost interest in the gramophone after that. All except for Marcie.

She was still kneeling on the floor in front of it, spinning the record around and around.

The others were on the far side of the room, sitting in a circle around the bottle.

Annabelle said she didn't want to play. Chad told her not to be a prude, and she accused him of only wanting to play so he could kiss Donna. Chad said his real plan was to see her and Donna kiss. Donna said she wanted to see Chad and Mark kiss. Annabelle shook her head and proclaimed them all childish. Donna said they'd be graduating soon and this would be their last chance to be childish, so they should enjoy it. Annabelle said fine, as long they didn't enjoy it *too much*, and shot a pointed look at Chad.

Mark put his hand on the bottle. “I'll start.”

He gave it a spin.

Across the room, Marcie turned the hand-crank on the gramophone.

The record began to spin, too.

★ ★ ★

When the turntable was going at a good, steady speed, Marcie lifted the tone arm and placed the needle on the spinning record.

No, she thought. Not the needle. The Shard.

She wondered where that thought had come from, but only for a second, then she inclined her head toward the brass horn.

There was nothing at first except the hollow sound of dead air and the low, expectant scratch of the needle.

The Shard.

Marcie leaned closer, wondering if it no longer worked, if a record could die like an old battery.

She heard only faint scratching, and was about to pull her head back when she realized the scratching wasn't random: it had a pattern to it. It wasn't scratching at all. It was a voice, a very low voice, and it was speaking to her, whispering to her. Asking her a question.

Wanna play a game?

★ ★ ★

A blast of sound exploded from the gramophone. A fusillade of horns so loud it knocked Marcie onto her back.

The squall rose to an ear-splitting level, then tripped back down the scale in a stuttering staccato that made everyone in the room feel as if icy fingers were tickling along their spines.

Their heads were all turned toward Marcie and the sounds coming from the gramophone—oblivious to the bottle in the center of their circle that continued to spin and spin.

As the horns trickled away, a tapping sound came in to take their place, a light pitter-patter as if of approaching footsteps. The tapping got progressively louder until it became the sharp rat-a-tat-tat of a snare drum, a percussive beat that sounded like gunfire.

The space between the drumbeats was soon filled by the razor-squeal of violins. A pained sound, as if the instruments were being tortured rather than played.

The auditory onslaught continued with a deep, pummelling bass that felt like a series of hammer blows against their eardrums.

Marcie suddenly jerked upright like a puppet whose master has pulled too hard on its strings. The music pounded out of the gramophone, causing the entire cabin to shake. The windows rattled in their frames. The floor was vibrating so much it looked like Marcie

was hovering six inches above it. Later on they would all agree she didn't turn to face them. She spun around. Like a record.

They knew right away something was wrong with her. Her eyes were glazed, her mouth hung slack, and her head was slumped at an unnatural angle. The autopsy would later determine her neck had been broken by that first burst of sound. She should've been dead, and yet she wasn't.

As the others watched, Marcie reached out with one marionette arm and snapped off the gramophone's tone arm. The record continued spinning on the turntable, and although there was no needle—no *Shard*—to play it, the sounds kept blasting out.

Sounds that became the soundtrack for everything that followed.

* * *

Donna was sitting on the front porch when the police arrived.

Who called them? she wondered.

Even though her arms were wrapped tightly around herself, she couldn't stop trembling. She thought that being outside to catch the first light of day would help to drive away the icy aura surrounding her. It didn't.

The first officers on the scene pointed their guns at her and told her to drop it. She didn't know what they were talking about, then realized she was still holding the fireplace poker. It was covered in blood. So was she.

She understood how it must have looked. Only some of the blood was hers. Most of it was Marcie's. There was a chunk of flesh stuck to the end of the poker. That was Marcie's, too. It had come from one of her massive shoulders. Hitting her with the poker had been like hitting the tough hide of some large animal. It hadn't stopped her, not at first. Not until the others joined in to help her. Killing Marcie had been a group effort.

Donna thought about letting the cops shoot her. She could stand up, raise the poker high over her head, and make like she was going to charge them.

She didn't do it. Not because she was unwilling but because she was so fucking cold she could barely move. Her hand felt like a frozen claw, and it took all her strength to open it and let the poker fall to the ground. The police told her to stand up and walk toward them with her hands raised. She ignored them. She was done. If they wanted to shoot her, they could shoot her.

They didn't. More cops showed up, and some of them stayed with her, watching her warily with their guns still drawn, while the others went into the cabin. Chad, Mark, and Annabelle were in there. And Marcie. Marcie was all over the cabin.

An ambulance arrived and a pair of EMTs tried to get Donna off the porch. She was hurt, they said, nodding at the slash wounds on her arms. She refused to move, wasn't even sure she could move. She was so cold it felt like her ass had frozen to the plank floor. One of the EMTs noticed she was shivering and put a blanket around her. It didn't help.

The EMT told her it was shock and would wear off eventually.

They were wrong on both counts.

★ ★ ★

Detective Russo entered the cabin and almost stepped on a severed arm. It was a strong, muscular arm with a large hand lying palm-down on the floor. For a moment he thought the nails on the fingers had been painted with red polish. Then he realized it was blood.

There was more blood at the mangled joint where the arm was once attached to the shoulder. A few feet away was the shoulder, still attached to the torso. Over there was another arm. A leg. A head with blood-splattered hair pulled back in a ponytail. The room looked like a slaughterhouse. Russo's gaze drifted over to a pile of smashed wood and a dented brass horn, what looked like the remains of an old record player. What the hell happened here?

Two young men were seated on a ratty couch being treated by EMTs. The one on the left had a vertical gash running from his temple to the edge of his thinning hair. The other had what appeared

to be a stab wound to his lower left side. A uniform was in the kitchen talking to a young woman sitting on a stool. She appeared uninjured.

Russo headed over that way, stepping carefully to avoid the puddles of congealing blood. As he was passing an open trap door, the head of another uniform popped up, giving Russo a minor heart attack. He froze in mid-step, clutching the mantel for support.

The uniform winced. "Sorry, Detective."

Russo closed his eyes. "What've you got?"

"Nothing down there." He looked around the cabin floor. "Looks like all the action happened up here."

The other uniform came over from the kitchen. Russo nodded at the open notebook in his hand.

"Tell me."

★ ★ ★

They told their story to the police, and from there it went to the media, and then out into the world.

Four friends had murdered a fifth after a night of partying at a cabin in the woods. The murder was committed in self-defence, after their friend experienced a psychotic episode and attacked them. Some reports insinuated that drugs may have been a factor, but this was never confirmed. There was no mention of the mutilation of the body.

Russo didn't like it. Not one bit.

When he questioned each of the survivors, they had spoken calmly and clearly, with no outward signs of lying or evasion. Their stories matched and their wounds were consistent with the makeshift knife they recovered from the scene. None of them had criminal records or a history of violence. All four were squeaky-clean college kids, due to graduate in a month. But there was something *wrong* about them.

"Wrong how?" asked the police chief.

Russo shook his head. "I can't explain it."

The chief spread his hands. “Try.”

Russo paced back and forth across the office, running his hand through his hair. “The dead girl’s body. Why did they chop it up?”

“You read the shrink’s report. They claimed it was the only way to stop her. It’s abnormal, but considering their state of mind at the time...”

“I know,” Russo snapped. “Their story makes sense, I get it. But it’s not the truth.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I don’t like it.”

“You don’t have to like it,” the chief said. “But you have to close it.”

So that’s what he did.

The coroner’s inquest determined that none of the four survivors was criminally responsible for their friend’s death and no charges would be brought.

The case was closed.

But not for Russo.

★ ★ ★

Summer.

Donna couldn’t get warm. One of the hottest summers on record and she was freezing. On the news, they talked about climate change and record-breaking temperatures. Donna was glad to hear it—if they were talking about the weather that meant they no longer cared about what happened at the cabin—but it didn’t change the way she felt. She was still fucking cold.

All summer long she cranked the thermostat in the house, and her parents kept knocking it back down. They argued about it constantly. Donna’s parents tried to be patient, figuring it was her way of dealing with the stress and the trauma. They told themselves it would pass.

One day in August, they returned from work to find the house so stifling it felt like they’d walked into an oven. In addition to turning up

the thermostat as high as it would go, Donna had a roaring fire going in the hearth. They found her sitting on the floor in front of the dancing flames, clothed in three layers of sweaters and her winter coat.

Her parents yelled at her—Donna couldn't hear them at first with the earmuffs she was wearing—then sent her to her room, something they hadn't done in ten years.

Donna was holding the brass poker she'd used to get the fire going, and for a moment she considered using it on her parents. The way she'd used the poker at the cabin on Marcie. The way she'd used it on the empty vodka bottle.

When Marcie was dead and the music stopped, the bottle had still been spinning on the floor. It showed no sign of stopping, and to Donna this was the final indignity of the evening, so she smashed it with the poker. Smashed it and smashed it until it stopped spinning.

That was when she started feeling cold. It was like a chill wind wrapped itself around her, enveloping her, sinking deep into her skin. It ran through her veins like ice water, turned her bones into frozen sticks. It numbed her very soul and filled her with a hopeless dread that she would never be warm again.

Donna decided not to use the poker on her parents. She went upstairs like the good girl she'd been all her life. She thought about calling Mark—that's what she normally would've done—but she didn't. They hadn't spoken since the cabin. None of them had spoken to each other. It was strange. They'd always been so close; they'd always been there for each other. Now they were like strangers. She didn't feel sad about it, which was even stranger. She felt nothing about it whatsoever.

She climbed into her bed, pulling up the duvet and the heavy quilt she'd brought down from the attic. The heat from the fire and the furnace hadn't been enough. She was still cold. Her parents said it was all in her mind, but what difference did it make? Hot, cold—they were all signals sent from the body to the brain. How was this any different?

She decided her parents were the problem. She couldn't get warm with them constantly stopping her.

So she waited a couple weeks, until they went away on a weekend trip. They'd been spending a lot of time out of the house since Donna returned from the cabin.

After they were gone, Donna turned up the thermostat and made a fire. Like before, it did nothing to stave off the cold she felt deep in her bones and all through her body.

She stayed up late, shivering in her layers of sweaters as she fed one piece of wood after another into the hungry flames. It made no difference—she was still freezing, so she decided to make another fire, this one in the basement. She emptied a can of turpentine onto a stack of old wooden chairs her father had been meaning to take to the dump. Then she tossed a lit match onto the pile and went back upstairs to start another fire in the living room. And another in the den. She locked the front and back doors and went up to the second floor. She lit more fires in her parents' bedroom and the guest room.

She went back downstairs. Thick black smoke chugged out of the basement door. The living room and den were burning nicely; flaming particles whirled through the air like a swarm of fireflies.

Donna surveyed her handiwork and decided it would do. She retrieved the brass poker from the rack of fireplace tools and went upstairs. She climbed into bed and pulled up the covers, clutching the poker to her chest like a teddy bear.

She listened to the strident beeping of the smoke alarms and the rustle of flames as they grew louder and louder. A flickering light soon filled her doorway. She closed her eyes.

The fire slipped into her room, climbed up the door, and spread across the ceiling in a red-orange wave.

Even as the room was engulfed, even as the flames crawled across the carpet and leaped up the bedsheets, even as the fire surrounded her body and encased her in a burning cocoon, even as her hair burned and her skin melted, even as her eyes boiled and

spilled down her cheeks, Donna trembled and shuddered and shivered.

Right up to the end, she was cold.

★ ★ ★

Fall.

Chad couldn't stand the silence. He could feel it nibbling at his mind, eroding his sanity. He couldn't believe how much of it there was in the world, with all the people, all the noise. But it was there, vast mountains of peace and small pockets of quiet, lying in wait, threatening to destroy him.

It didn't make sense. At the cabin all he wanted was silence. When the music had come blasting out of the gramophone, his first impulse was to shut it off, to stop those sounds from entering his head even if it meant driving iron spikes into his ears. The music was more than unpleasant; it was toxic, polluted, a raping of his auditory canals.

While Chad had taken no pleasure in what they'd done to Marcie, there had been a beatific smile on his face when they finally stopped the music. In the lull of silence immediately afterward, he'd felt a euphoric sense of calm and relief.

It didn't last.

He was fine when the police arrived. Better than fine, actually, because they bombarded him with questions—questions that began as thinly veiled accusations but quickly escalated into perplexed demands for the truth.

Chad didn't mind. He welcomed their inquiries, welcomed the sound of their raised voices, the louder the better. The others were sullen and barely coherent, but he was a regular chatterbox. He talked so much one of the officers suggested he might want to remain silent until his lawyer showed up. Chad couldn't do that; he was already growing suspicious of the silence. The only way to banish it was to fill it with sound.

So he talked to the police, to his parents, to the lawyer they got for him, to the press (even though the police and the lawyer advised him not to). He didn't care. He talked to anyone willing to listen, anyone willing to talk back to him, and it pushed away the silence. For a while.

Even though the cabin was big news that summer, interest waned over time and attentions eventually turned to the next tragedy. Soon Chad didn't have anyone to talk to—even his parents were tired of listening to him and responded only with single-word replies and grunts—and the silence returned.

It became a presence in his life, haunting him, infiltrating all the gaps of his existence that he couldn't fill with sound.

Nights were the worst. Lying in bed, trying to sleep with the house gone quiet around him. Leaving his television on helped him fall asleep, but in the depths of slumber the silence would return, telling him there was no escape even in the dreamworld. He'd wake up gasping, sometimes screaming, and although the sounds were caused by fear and anguish, they were sweet relief to his ears, reassuring him, telling him he was okay, when he knew he wasn't.

The people he could've talked to about this, the ones he *should* have talked to—his friends—he made no effort to contact. He couldn't say exactly why he didn't reach out to them, only that he knew on some level they wouldn't be able to help him. Just like he knew he couldn't help them.

He felt bad about not attending Donna's service, but the silence there would have been too great. There was no funeral, only a spreading of her ashes on the lakeshore, which Chad found ironic since ashes were supposedly all that had been left of her. The fire in which Donna had committed suicide ended up consuming almost every house on the street. The news said it was a miracle she was the only fatality.

Chad needed a miracle of his own, but he didn't think one was coming. No one wanted to talk to him anymore, and talking to himself only helped in a small, putting-off-the-inevitable sort of way.

He figured it was only a matter of time before he ended up like Donna, taking his own life once the silence became too much to bear.

As the days grew shorter and the leaves changed colour, the silence took on a new aspect. Almost as if it were adapting itself to Chad's efforts to eliminate it.

Now when he entered a room, even if it was occupied, the silence was there. If he was at work, or a party, or a mall filled with people, he would experience a sensation like the volume of the world was being turned down to nothing. Then, at the moment he was about to start screaming, the volume would go back up again.

He went to the doctor even though he knew it was pointless. This wasn't a hearing impairment. It was a life impairment. A warning from the silence that it could get to him anywhere, at any time.

One day while he was out for a walk—and pondering the idea of buying a gun to blow his brains out—a car drove by with its stereo blaring. The windows were up so he couldn't make out what song was playing, but it didn't matter. The sound was what mattered. The *music*. It was like an oasis in a desert. A blast of sweet relief from all the crushing silence.

He wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. Talking to people, talking to himself, even leaving the television on while he slept. They were all stopgap solutions. The silence couldn't be sated by the mere babble of spoken words. It wanted something more mellifluous. It wanted the pitch and rhythm of music.

Chad ran home and went up to his room. He had a small stereo and a couple dozen CDs. He put on the loudest one he could find—Nirvana's *Nevermind*—and cranked the volume as high as it would go.

He nodded his head to the opening guitar riff of "Smells Like Teen Spirit," followed by the rumble of drums that ushered in the full blast of Kurt Cobain's power chords.

It was music, and it was loud, but he could tell right away it wasn't the solution to his problem. Even though it held back the silence, he

could still sense it in the gaps between the music and the lyrics—lurking, waiting, biding its time, waiting for the song to end. It wasn't the miracle he needed.

The next day he went to a pawn shop and looked at a selection of record players. Many of them were old, although none were as ancient as the one Marcie had found in the cellar of the cabin. He bought one and brought it home. There were records at the pawn shop, but none that he wanted. Perry Como. Lesley Gore. The Beatles. No, no, and no.

He needed big sounds. Horns that could make your ears bleed. Drums that could pound your bones to dust. Music that could lift you off the ground and make your very soul tremble.

He thought of the record at the cabin, but it was gone, smashed to pieces.

He tried searching for it on the internet even though he had nothing to go on.

He searched and searched until he realized the answer couldn't be found on a computer.

The song was out there, somewhere, and he had to find it.
Before the silence took him.

★ ★ ★

Winter.

Mark couldn't sleep. He would drift, he would doze, but he could never enter the proper restful state that most people took for granted. It wasn't due to shock or stress or guilt or any of the other one-word diagnoses the doctors proposed to explain his condition. It wasn't that he didn't feel tired; he did, immensely so. He was simply incapable of shutting off his waking mind. It was like he'd forgotten how to sleep.

He tried drinking, he tried drugs, he tried drinking and drugs. He tried tricking his body by going through the ceremony of his sleeping routine: brushing his teeth, putting on his pyjamas, climbing into bed,

putting his head on the pillow. All in the hope of drawing the attention of the Sandman.

To no avail.

His parents wanted to send him to a sleep clinic, but Mark refused to talk to any more doctors. They couldn't help the others—Donna dead, Chad missing, Annabelle crazy—and they wouldn't be able to help him.

Eventually he grew to accept his sleepless state—mostly because he didn't have a choice—and began to explore the new vista that had opened up before him.

Nighttime.

While everyone else was tucked into their beds, luxuriating in slumber, Mark walked the streets in his neighbourhood. He explored other people's houses, sneaking in through unlocked doors and windows. He never stole anything or damaged anyone's property. He simply strolled from room to room, checking things out, admiring the interior world of other people's lives. He told himself he was only killing time, of which he had plenty these days. It never entered his mind that he was practicing for his future career.

On one of his late-night wanderings he ended up at the police station. He'd been there many times over the summer, usually during the day and in the company of his lawyer. It felt strange to be there now, alone at night. And yet, in another way, it felt perfectly right. As if he'd been drawn to this place.

He took to watching the police station. It was never closed, but late at night there were usually only a couple people working in the building, sometimes only a single desk officer manning the front counter.

Sneaking around to the back of the building, Mark broke a basement window and slithered inside. He landed on the concrete floor of an exercise room, with various pieces of workout equipment and a stack of gym mats against one wall.

He exited into a darkened hallway and wandered around until he found what he was looking for.

The evidence room.

The door was locked, but on the wall next to it there was a key on a hook below a handmade sign that said: RETURN KEY WHEN YOU ARE DONE WITH IT. DO NOT TAKE IT HOME WITH YOU!

“Fair enough,” Mark said.

He unlocked the door and went inside.

The evidence room was a long dark cave divided into narrow corridors by a series of free-standing metal shelves. Mark flicked a wall switch and fluorescent tubes sputtered to life overhead, filling the room with a cold, sterile light.

The shelves were lined with banker’s boxes, each one with a different case number written on it. Mark didn’t know their case number, so it took him a long time to find what he was looking for.

When he did, he sat on the floor with the box in front of him. It was like Christmas morning and he was about to open his present. Only he already knew what he was getting.

He opened the box and dug through a pile of evidence bags until he found the one with the gramophone’s tone arm in it. He took it out—the cylindrical tube with the hook of black glass on the end—and held it on the palm of his hand. It felt like nothing. It felt like everything.

He remembered the night at the cabin when Marcie snapped it off the gramophone. He’d thought she was going to attack them with it. That she would let out a primal scream and come flying through the air, slashing and stabbing. That’s what they told the police.

What really happened was that Marcie hovered in the air for a moment, clutching the tone arm in her fist, then she drew the obsidian hook across her own throat. As the skin parted and blood spilled out, the music grew louder and louder. It was unlike anything they’d ever heard before. It was the opening of something terrible, or something wonderful. They never found out which because they didn’t let it finish.

Mark wondered now if that had been a mistake. If instead of killing Marcie and destroying the—

The door opened.

Mark leaped to his feet.

He expected to see the outline of the desk officer framed in the doorway, but it was a different shape. A familiar shape.

“Chad?”

“Hello, Mark.”

Chad stepped into the room. His expression was calm, almost serene, as if he expected to find his friend here waiting for him. His gaze fell to the object Mark was clutching to his chest.

“I haven’t been able to sleep,” Mark blurted suddenly. “Not since the cabin. I thought if I found it…” He stared longingly at the tone arm. At the Shard.

“I have a song stuck in my head,” Chad said. “*The* song. I thought that”—he nodded at the Shard—“would help me find it.” He tilted his head to the side. “Maybe it’s a lullaby.”

Mark looked up hopefully. “It could help both of us?”

“Maybe,” Chad said. “But I think we have to help it first.”

“What do we need to do?”

“Things,” Chad said. “Awful, horrible things.”

Mark noticed his friend’s hands. There was blood on them. He thought of the desk officer.

“They’ll probably write books about us,” Chad said.

“What about songs? Will they write songs?”

Chad smiled. He reached out and put his hand around Mark’s, so they were holding the Shard together.

“I think they will.”

And what beautiful music they would make.

★ ★ ★

Spring.

Annabelle couldn’t stop spinning. Her thoughts were awhirl as the one-year anniversary of the cabin approached. Her attention span was in tatters; sleep was virtually impossible. Her mind kept going

back to that night—not to Marcie and the music, but to the game of Spin the Bottle they'd been playing before the horror began.

She should have been thinking about the violence of that night, the loss of her friend and the miracle of their own survival, but what kept popping into her head was the idea, the *conviction*, that Chad only wanted to play the game so he could kiss Donna. He had denied it at the time, but of course that's what she expected him to say.

In the weeks and months following the cabin, she became trapped in a circuit of denial and disbelief—thoughts of Chad and Donna kissing, touching, *fucking*, kept spinning around in her head like a torrid tornado—and there seemed to be nothing she could do to break herself out of it.

She stopped talking to them—which was easy to do, since the others stopped talking to her as well—but it didn't stop the whirling dervish of her thoughts.

The only thing that provided the slightest bit of relief was staying in motion. Walking, jogging, running, sprinting—it didn't matter as long as she wasn't standing still. When she stopped moving, that's when the thoughts returned, falling on her like a horde of vampire bats.

She went for long walks around town and in the woods behind her house. She went out at any hour, day or night, whenever the images in her head threatened to overwhelm her. Her parents grew more and more concerned, especially when a woman in town went missing. They tried to get Annabelle to limit her wanderings to the daylight hours, but she ignored them. She walked when she had to walk. This was the way it had to be. She knew there was no hope of clearing her mind; the best she could hope for was to quiet it.

And it worked.

For a while.

Over time the thoughts began to infiltrate her sleep, filling her dreams with images of Chad and Donna, their naked, sweaty bodies

locked together, writhing on the gritty floor of the cabin, with the empty vodka bottle next to them, spinning, spinning, spinning.

On a cold morning in March, it all became too much to bear, and Annabelle was flung from her noxious nightmares like a circus performer shot from a cannon. She could actually feel her mind coming untethered, the guy wires of her sanity popping loose one by one.

She ran outside in only a T-shirt and a pair of pyjama bottoms, her bare feet punching holes in the fresh blanket of snow that had fallen the night before.

She ran and ran, but the images in her head remained. She couldn't outrun them, couldn't push them out of her head as she'd done before.

Crying out in fury and frustration, she picked up speed and ran headlong into a thick oak tree. She struck it hard, throwing her arms up at the last second to brace for the impact, and went stumbling into another tree. She bounced off it, her feet moving frantically to keep her from falling, and pinballed off a third.

She continued to twirl around, waiting for the inevitable moment when she'd hit something hard enough to knock her down. While this was happening, she became aware of something: those poisonous thoughts of Chad and Donna had vanished. They'd been knocked from her head just as her body had been knocked from one tree to another.

Finally she came to a stop, her breath pluming in misty gasps, her feet so cold they were numb. In the same instant, the relief she'd experienced began to evaporate and the thoughts slipped insidiously back into her mind.

She threw her hands at the gray sky and shouted, "*What do you want? What do you want?*"

She spun and screamed at the trees, her feet pounding the snow into the frozen ground ... and the thoughts dissipated again. She slowed and felt them return.

It was the spinning, she realized. Not just moving but spinning! That's what kept the thoughts away.

She started twirling around and around with her arms stretched out to either side. The thoughts melted, like the snow beneath her feet, like the tears spilling down her cheeks.

She kept spinning until she made herself sick. Stumbling against one of the trees, she gripped the rough bark in one hand while she bent over at the waist and vomited onto the pristine snow.

She'd never felt better.

From that moment on, everywhere she went, Annabelle was spinning. She was like a human top, twirling and pirouetting as she walked around the house or strolled down the street. Step, step, spin, step, step, spin. She didn't have the grace of a ballerina, or the balance, and the dizziness that came with all the spinning contributed to a lot of falls and collisions. One time, on her way to the kitchen to make herself a sandwich, she walk-spun through the dining room and stumbled into the hutch containing her parents' wedding china. She was barely able to get out of the way before it toppled over and landed facedown on the floor, plates and cups exploding with a rattling, ear-splitting crash.

Her mom and dad were pretty upset about that one, but their anger turned quickly to concern for her mental state. They told Annabelle, as calmly as they could, that it wasn't normal for her to be spinning around everywhere she went.

Normal? Annabelle wanted to shout at them. *I left normal a long time ago. I left it at the cabin.*

That was when it first came to her, the thought of going back, although she supposed it had always been there, like the images of Chad and Donna that had taken root in her brain. Because the times she felt better—or as close to better as she got these days—were when she was outside, walking and spinning her way farther and farther from her house. At the time she'd thought it was only the relief of being away from her parents and their well-intentioned but mostly annoying concerns. Now she realized it wasn't just the

spinning that drove the images away, it was the fact she was moving as she spun, spiralling outward from the nexus of her life to some unknown destination.

Only it wasn't unknown. She knew exactly where her spinning was trying to take her.

The cabin.

Going back was the last thing she wanted, but she knew there was no way she could keep spinning for the rest of her life. Unlike the empty vodka bottle, she would have to stop at some point, and when she did, all those horrible thoughts would be waiting for her. She wouldn't live like that. She couldn't.

So she went back.

She took her parents' car, telling them she was going shopping. They were relieved she was doing something so normal, something the old Annabelle would've done. They told her to enjoy herself. She said she would. They told her to take her time and enjoy the day. She said she would.

Even though she remembered how to get there, Annabelle took a circuitous route, driving away from her house and through her neighbourhood in wider and wider circles until she left the orbit of town and entered the woods.

When she finally arrived at the cabin, she was surprised to see it looked the same. She'd heard it had become a site of morbid notoriety for true-crime buffs, and that one particular kill club had even recorded a podcast here shortly after the police released the crime scene. She was especially surprised to find it empty today of all days. The one-year anniversary. Maybe the cabin was keeping them away.

Annabelle got out of the car and walked up onto the wide front porch. The door was open. She went inside and looked around and around, spinning as had become her practice these days. She expected to see skeins of old police tape on the floor, or empty beer bottles from the kids drawn to this place with tales of murder and

mutilation. But there was nothing. It looked exactly as it did the day she and her friends had come here.

She was walking and twirling across the floor when her foot struck something and she went stumbling toward the fireplace. She managed to grab onto the mantel, then turned to see what she had tripped on.

It was the ringbolt in the trap door.

She went over to it, performing a quick spin without even thinking about it, and knelt. She remembered Marcie coming up from the cellar with the gramophone. She remembered the music that wasn't music, sounds that shouldn't have existed when Marcie tore off the tone arm, but continued to pound out of the brass horn. She remembered the way it felt when those sounds poured into her ears and entered her mind.

She remembered killing Marcie, their poor sweet friend, and destroying the gramophone and the record. Only that didn't put an end to the sounds. Because they weren't really coming from the brass horn. They were coming from Marcie. So they fell on her and dismembered her, chopped her body to pieces because that was the only way to make it stop.

And she remembered what happened afterward: the others taking the Shard and marking themselves with it. Donna slashing her arms. Chad drawing a jagged line across the side of his face. Mark stabbing himself in the side.

When it was Annabelle's turn, she stared at the Shard in her hand, the others watching her expectantly ... and dropped it on the floor.

She couldn't do it. She wouldn't. She remembered the bottle, the one that wouldn't stop spinning until Donna smashed it with the poker. She remembered telling them she didn't want to play their game. She didn't then and she didn't now. She refused to mark herself.

Only it didn't matter. She was still marked, and the music was still alive, still playing in their heads over and over and over again.

That's what this was all about. That's what had brought her back to the cabin.

It was the song, and it wanted what every song wanted: to be heard.

She pressed her finger into the dust on top of the trap door and drew a spiral curving outward and outward. Then she made a fist and knocked on the old, dry wood.

She went over to the couch and sat down.

She didn't have to wait long.

Shortly after the sun went down, the trap door rose. Chad and Mark climbed out. They were filthy, their clothes smeared with dirt, their faces streaked with dried blood.

Annabelle was no more surprised to see them than they were to see her.

The dirt was from the cellar. The blood was from their victims. There had been seven, by her count—or at least that's how many people the news had reported missing in the past few months. The police were baffled. No bodies had been found. Annabelle could've told them where they were.

Chad and Mark crept stealthily across the room toward her, tiptoeing across the creaky wooden floor. Chad had something in his hand. Even though it was too dark for Annabelle to make it out, she knew what it was.

The Shard.

"You heard it, too?" Chad said.

Annabelle nodded.

"Can you make it stop?" Mark asked.

Annabelle said, "No," and Chad and Mark hung their heads.

Then she reached into her jacket pocket and took out the gun. It was her father's .38 revolver.

She looked up into their blood-streaked faces.

"Wanna play a game?"

The police found the bodies a week later.

All three lay sprawled on the cabin floor, their heads surrounded by bloody halos.

Detective Russo crouched next to Annabelle's body. The revolver was still in her hand. Even though her finger was no longer capable of pulling the trigger, the cylinder continued to spin around and around.

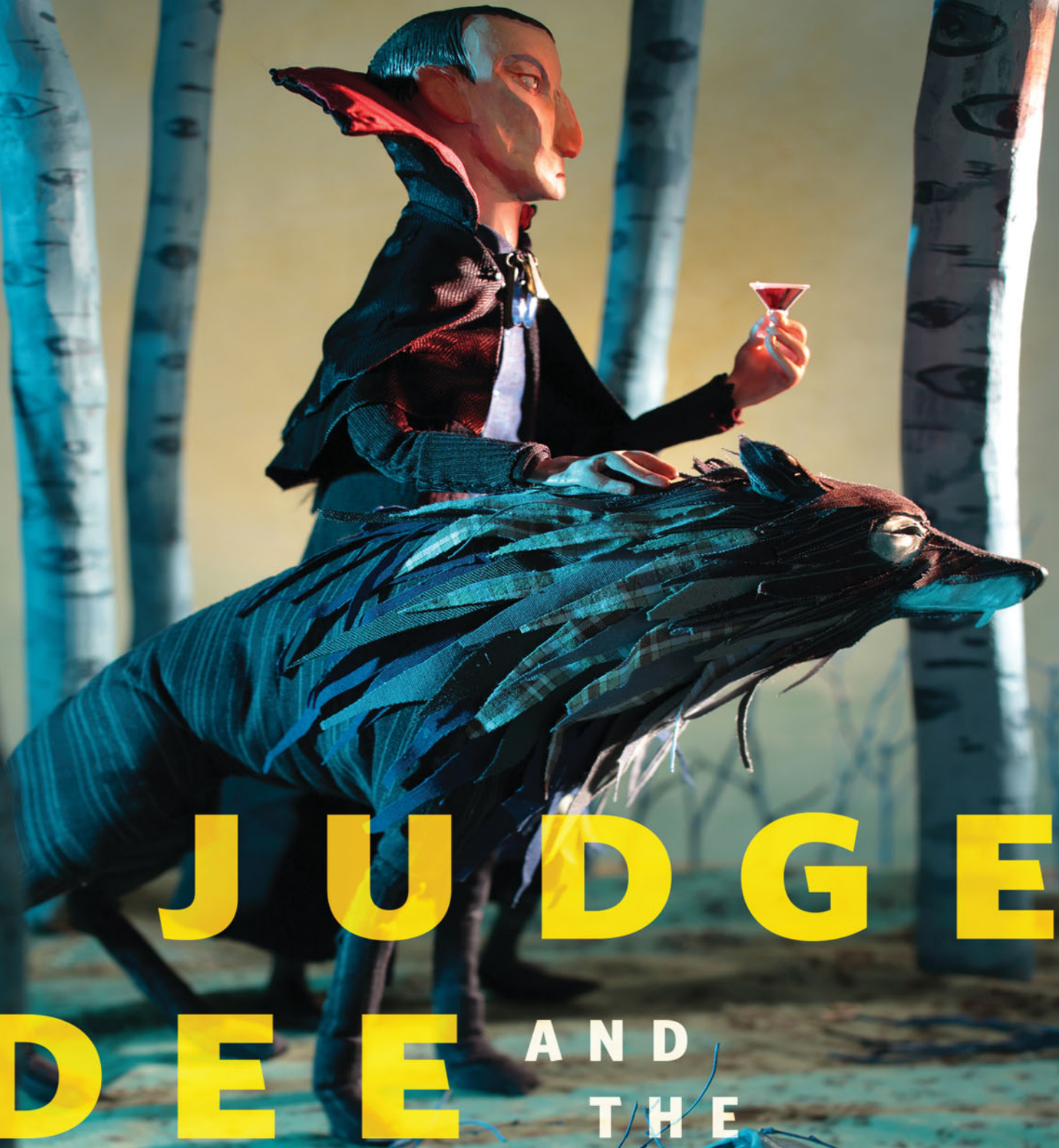
Across the room, one of the uniforms hissed in pain and dropped something on the floor.



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LAVIE TIDHAR



JUDGE

DEE

AND
THE

THREE DEATHS OF

COUNT WERDENFELS

Judge Dee and the Three Deaths of Count Werdenfels

LAVIE TIDHAR

illustration by

RED NOSE STUDIO

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

1.

The sun set coldly over the Alps as Jonathan woke with a scream. These days, he always woke with a scream. It was very cold in their mountain encampment. Jonathan shivered as he started to make a fire. His master, of course, cared little for warmth.

Soon enough Jonathan had the fire going. He rubbed his hands together. He wore a pelt coat, mittens, and padded boots. But still. He thought he'd never be warm again.

He raised his eyes to the last rays of the setting sun. The peaks of the Alps rose high overhead. The view would be considered breathtaking; but as Jonathan liked to say, you couldn't eat the view. He thought longingly of pork grease and bread. What he wouldn't give for some crackling.

Night fell swiftly in the mountains. The peaks above shone with their own ethereal light. Jonathan had heard the master say that there were powers in the peaks even his kind dared not disturb. Jonathan did behold the peaks with suitable awe. But it occurred to him it was just as likely that vampires didn't like disturbing the peaks for a simpler reason, which was that they were often quite lazy. It was not a thought he would have shared with his master, but it was true nonetheless. Vampires liked their home comforts as much as anyone, even if those comforts were bloodier than most. And there was no food up at the peaks. Jonathan was practical like that. Which made him a lot like the vampires.

His master emerged from behind a rock then and Jonathan suppressed a scream.

'Sleep well?' his master said. He looked without expression at Jonathan in the light of the fire. His face was long and austere, his

eyes cold. He seldom smiled.

‘Yes, master,’ Jonathan said miserably.

‘Come, come,’ his master said.

Jonathan looked at Judge Dee.

The judge had found Jonathan under a pile of corpses a long way from there, on the Isle of Britain. There had been death and fire, steel and blood. There had been horror. The judge rescued him for a purpose and after that, for whatever reason of his own, kept him by his side. Jonathan was grateful, but he wished serving a vampire judge involved less cold weather and more roast pork. Or at least a nice fat chicken.

‘Master,’ he said, ‘why do we trek here in the dead of winter? I mean, it *is* beautiful – such magnificent sunsets, do you know – but it is rather cold and I think there are wolves.’

‘There *are* wolves,’ his master said. He sat by the fire and extended his hands to the flames. ‘Have you eaten yet, Jonathan?’

Jonathan burrowed in his bag. He had two sausages left and half a loaf of bread. He threaded the sausages on a stick and put them over the flames.

‘Where do we go, master?’ he said.

‘To the other side of the mountains,’ Judge Dee said.

‘What’s on the other side of the mountains, master?’ Jonathan said.

The judge frowned.

‘Much of whatever there was on the side we just left,’ he said.

Jonathan sighed. ‘Yes, master,’ he said. He turned over the sausages.

The judge watched him.

‘You are unhappy, Jonathan?’ he said.

‘No, master. I mean, yes ... master? It is very cold.’

‘Oh.’ Judge Dee considered this. Jonathan took a bite of hot sausage. The grease ran down his chin.

‘I forgot it was cold,’ the judge admitted.

‘Master?’

‘I find the austerity of the mountains relaxing,’ the judge said. ‘But I see that you feel differently, Jonathan.’

‘I am sorry, master.’

‘Never be sorry for who you are, Jonathan,’ the master said. ‘Though I do wish you had better table manners.’

‘Yes, master.’ Jonathan wiped the grease off his chin with the back of his hand and the judge sighed.

‘Our business in the mountains will be concluded soon,’ he said, taking pity on him. ‘Come, finish your meal and let us be on our way. The nameless horrors that sit in the Monastery of the Old High Ones wait on no one, not even us.’

‘Of *course* they don’t, master,’ Jonathan muttered miserably. He swallowed the last bite of sausage and stuffed the rest of the stale bread in his mouth.

He stared at the steep climb ahead with foreboding.

2.

Jonathan tried to wash the blood off his shirt but the creek water was filled with tiny icicles and his hands were freezing and anyway the blood wouldn't come off.

There was a lot of blood.

He tried not to think of the Monastery of the Old High Ones and the horrors that, well, no longer dwelled there. It had been a complex case and it ended inevitably in a shower of blood. Jonathan gave up on his washing and sat back and let the dying sun warm his face.

At least they were out of the mountains at last.

At least spring was on its way.

At least he could smell roses and daisies again.

He was so sick of edelweiss.

As the sun set, Judge Dee emerged. They had made camp in a secluded valley, near a bubbling stream. Jonathan had made a small fire. The judge stood still and listened to the silence.

'It is peaceful, here,' he said.

Jonathan, who never slept peacefully anymore, said nothing. Though he had to admit it *was* nice. The air was crisp and clear, the fire merry, the bubbling of the brook was also merry, and before they left the now-ruined monastery, Jonathan had liberated a priceless bottle of Römerwein from the cellars. Now he carelessly popped it open and took a swig.

The master looked startled.

'This wine was brewed by the Romans,' he said. 'Centuries ago.'

'Sure,' Jonathan said. He took another swig. It was pretty smooth, considering it was so old. He'd once asked his master what happens to vampires when they died. The really old ones turned to dust,

apparently. The younger ones into mummies. And freshly turned vampires just turned up corpses. He thought it was a good thing vampires never drank ... wine.

He downed another swig, feeling the warmth spread through him.

'You're just going to guzzle it?' the judge asked.

'Sure,' Jonathan said. He took another swig. It really *did* go down easy. He giggled.

'May I?' the judge said. He procured a delicate cup made of pure glass and proceeded to pour a minute amount of the wine into it. He handed the bottle back to Jonathan, raised the cup in his long, graceful fingers, and sniffed it with evident appreciation.

'Priceless,' he said.

'Which is just another word for free,' Jonathan said. He took another swig.

'Nothing is free, but death is freeing,' the judge said.

Jonathan hazarded a guess. 'Herodotus?'

The judge looked at him blankly, as though he were an idiot. Which, if Jonathan was being truthful, was how the judge often looked at Jonathan.

Why did the judge keep him? Why did Jonathan accompany Judge Dee to horror after horror? After all this time, he still couldn't tell. Jonathan would age and die a mortal man, this much he knew. The judge made no vampires. He was a puritan.

'I drank this wine once when this wine was young,' the judge said. He smelled the liquid in the glass again and swirled it.

'Here,' he said, handing the glass to Jonathan. Jonathan took it and was about to gulp it down when a large black bird dove down on them from the skies. Jonathan, startled, dropped the precious glass. It smashed to pieces.

'Do you know how many centuries I have had this object?' the judge said.

'Two?' Jonathan said.

'Far many more,' the judge said. 'It was made by a glassblower of great skill, a long time ago, in a place far from here. It is sad, when

beauty breaks.'

'It was just a cup,' Jonathan protested. 'Meant to hold wine.'

'The glassblower, I think, had much the same idea as you, Jonathan,' Judge Dee said. He almost smiled then, and not for the first time Jonathan thought what an odd being the judge was.

The bird cawed loudly. It hopped on a rock by the fire, glaring at Jonathan with big mean eyes. The judge extended his arm and the bird flew to him. It cawed softly into his ear.

'I see,' Judge Dee said.

The bird cawed some more.

'Indeed,' the judge said. He nodded. 'Very well.'

He raised his arm and the dark bird took to the air and flew off.

'It is a summons,' the judge said to Jonathan. 'It appears I am needed elsewhere.'

Jonathan stared into the empty bottle of wine.

'Yes, master,' he said mournfully.

'It isn't far from here,' the judge said.

'Yes, master.'

'The Castle of Werdenfels, in the nearby Duchy of Bavaria,' the judge said. 'Come. Let us be on our way.'

'Yes, master,' Jonathan said. His momentary good cheer evaporated. He rose unsteadily to his feet. The judge's cold, inhuman eyes reminded him where he was and who he served.

The judge passed judgement. And his judgement was final.

'Castle Werdenfels?' Jonathan said as they set off into the night. Somewhere in the distance a wolf howled and made Jonathan jump. 'It sounds gloomy and cold, and no doubt filled with vampires of murderous intent.'

At this the judge *did* smile, revealing his sharp canines in that austere patrician face.

'You are correct as always, Jonathan,' he said. 'Only this time, one of those vampires is himself dead – it would seem that the Count of Werdenfels has been murdered!'

‘Yes, master...’ Jonathan mumbled. He shouldered his bag and trudged after the judge into the night.

For just a moment there, he reflected, he had almost been *happy*.

3.

They travelled slowly below the Alps, into the Duchy of Bavaria. The ground was marshy, and the mountains cast a long shadow over the plains during the day so that the sunset arrived early. Here and there, Jonathan could see pretty little villages in the distance, and farmed fields and herds of fat cattle. One night they came upon a midnight fair, with lit torches and everyone dressed in ghoulish costumes. Children ran excitedly between the stalls, and a whole hog roasted above open flames.

Judge Dee passed among the celebrations unobserved, and Jonathan ate more than his fill, and candied apples too. A central tent, erected in the midst of these festivities, sold wine and beer by the barrel. Jonathan gladly ordered some of the famed dark beer of Bavaria, while the judge merely held a mug, the drink within untouched. Everyone was too drunk and excited to notice.

‘Castle Werdenfels?’ one of the locals said, when Jonathan raised the subject. ‘It is a dreadful place. They have been trying witches there for decades. Trying, sentencing, and executing.’

‘A terrible place,’ another said.

‘There are wolves roaming wild in the forests round it,’ a third speaker said with relish.

‘Yes.’

‘And vampires,’ someone else said, in a hushed voice.

‘Yes.’

Jonathan flinched, and the speakers mistook the nature of his fear and laughed heartily.

‘Don’t worry,’ the first speaker said. ‘There’s a band of vampire hunters passed through here not that long ago. Their leader said

they planned to cleanse the castle of its ancient evil. He talked like that, too. But his blades were sharp and his scars were true.'

Judge Dee stirred for the first time at this mention.

'Did he give a name?' he said. 'This ... vampire hunter?'

The speaker shrugged. 'He was from Troyes?' he said.

'A Frenchman? Two scars like this?' The judge indicated two slashes through the air with his fingers.

'That's the one. You know him?'

The judge actually shrugged. Jonathan winced at the human gesture: it just showed the judge to be more clearly what he was, a monstrous, inhuman thing.

'Heard of him,' the judge said.

'Say, where are you two from?' the first speaker said. He was at the stage of drunkenness where jollity swiftly turns to brutality. 'I've not seen you around here before.'

'Just passing through, friend,' the judge said.

'I ain't your friend.'

There was a distance between him and Judge Dee. And then, there wasn't. The judge's face near touched the man's own. The judge said, 'That is more true than you could possibly know, my friend,' he said. 'But you don't want to be my enemy.'

He spoke very softly.

The man turned white. The judge patted him gently on the shoulder.

'Come, Jonathan,' he said. 'I trust you are full?'

Jonathan, very carefully, put down his cup. He had plenty of fresh bread and roast hog in his srip.

'Yes, master,' he said.

He followed Judge Dee away from the drinking tent, and they were not followed. Soon the torchlight of the fair was behind them, and they were back in the familiar dark.

'What do you make of it, Jonathan?' the judge asked.

'Master?' Jonathan swallowed and wiped his greasy hand on his cloak. He shrugged. 'I guess the vampire hunter did it,' he said.

'Have you known many vampire hunters?' the judge asked.

'Master?'

The hint of a smile played on the judge's lips.

'I thought not,' he said.

Jonathan shrugged again. He cared not for mysteries.

Instead he smiled as he reached into his srip and pinched a big fat chunk of meat to put in his mouth. He cared a lot more for pork.

4.

Castle Werdenfels stood about eighty meters above the Loisach Valley, not far from a pleasant little town called Garmisch, which Jonathan never got to see. It was another night and they had almost reached the castle, when the judge stopped and sniffed the air. His teeth lengthened and he hissed in a barely audible sound that raised all the hairs on Jonathan's arms. The judge's tongue flicked out as he tasted the air.

'What is it, master?' Jonathan said.

The judge did not reply, but began to trudge in a different direction. They passed through marshy grounds and patched fields and into wilderness, and came at last to a small hut that stood secluded in a spur of rock, and there were graves dug all around it.

'What is this place, master?' Jonathan said.

The master didn't answer him but hissed again in that strange, disconcerting way of his. A vampire's call.

A stooped, hooded figure stepped out of the hut. The moonlight bathed it. It made an answering cry, and a dark bird high overhead cried in alarm and took to the air.

The master nodded. The hooded figure slowly removed its hood.

In the light of the moon, Jonathan saw another vampire. It hardly came as a surprise to him, of course. This vampire looked old, his skin blotchy with red patches, his eyes sunken. He looked at them in turn, then spread his arms.

'Welcome,' he said, in a gravelly voice. 'Come in peace and enter of your own free will. I am Claus, the hermit.'

'How do you do,' Jonathan said politely.

The vampire hissed. Jonathan clenched his teeth so he wouldn't scream.

'We thank you,' the judge said. He took a step and Jonathan followed him. They came to the hut and stood before the strange hermit.

'I am Judge Dee,' the judge said.

The hermit looked startled. 'Your name is well known,' he said. 'What brings you to these parts?'

'We are headed to Castle Werdenfels,' the judge said. He examined the hermit closely. 'Do you know it?'

'It lies not far from here,' the hermit said. 'Ruled over by a boorish lord and his wife. But I do not truck with them. Many of our kind style themselves counts or princes. But I follow the Unalienable Obligations, and keep my presence hidden, and I make no get of my own, and I feed only sparingly. And thus I survive.'

The judge inched his head, for the hermit had recited the rules of survival, by which vampirekind is bound; and he was not displeased. Too many of their kind were venal fools, the judge often told Jonathan: who overfed; who drew attention to themselves; who made too many offspring. Such beings died young.

'May I offer you blood?' the hermit, Claus, said. 'It would be an honour to share what little I have with the famed Judge Dee.'

Jonathan looked about him. All around the hermit's hut lay a small cemetery. Graves were dug into the earth, and all but one had headstones carved and placed atop them. The last grave was small: a child's grave, he thought, and thus unmarked. He shivered. The air smelled damp here, and there were bones on the ground.

'How do you feed?' the judge asked.

'I am useful,' Claus said. 'The village folk nearby consider me a holy man. Sometimes they bring me those who suffer. The dying, those for whom death would be merely a release. These I help—' He flashed his fangs. 'Then I bury them properly, and honour them in this way. They value me here,' he said. 'Yes. They value me.'

Jonathan knew that most vampires did not live as lords and ladies in grand castles. Most lived as rats, hidden in the slums in cities, or out in the countryside as hermits, posing as holy men or witches. He almost felt sorry for this Claus, living here like this, feeding off the dying.

He did not like this place at all. He thought perhaps even the castle would be better.

‘You are welcome to shelter here,’ the hermit said. ‘The night is short, and word is there’s a band of vampire hunters on the loose in these parts of late. I have little enough of my own, but you will be safe here. Come in peace and enter of your own free will.’

The judge nodded appreciatively, for twice now the hermit spoke the invitation, and that is not lightly given by one vampire to another.

‘Tell me,’ the judge said. ‘What do you know of what transpires in Werdenfels?’

The hermit shook his head. ‘I care little for them. The count is fond of hunting, and likes executing witches. Poor women mostly, of these parts, who are more often than not mere herbalists or abortionists. The count hunts every night. His wife, the Lady Maria, is Italian and in life was a minor relation to the Duke of Saxony. So what nobility the count has comes purely from his wife’s side. More recently I heard they had a guest, an elder of our kind. But like I said, I do not mix with them what live in castles.’

‘We shall continue on our way,’ the judge announced. ‘Yet I thank you for your hospitality. Be well, hermit.’

‘Be well, Judge Dee,’ the hermit said. He stared at Jonathan with a hungry look.

‘Is this one your meal for the night?’ he said.

‘Come, Jonathan,’ the judge said. Jonathan didn’t need any further prompting. He couldn’t wait to get away from the hermit’s graveyard.

‘His blood must taste fresh and sweet,’ the hermit said longingly.

‘Be well,’ the judge said.

'I have half an old woman in the back, but her blood's cloying and thin,' the hermit said. He kept staring at Jonathan. Jonathan followed Judge Dee.

'Come back any time!' Claus the hermit said. 'If anything remains of the boy I will gladly take the leftovers.'

Jonathan shuddered. The judge smiled, showing sharp teeth. They walked away from the hermit's hut until that dismal place vanished into the night as though it never existed.

5.

They had sought shelter that day in the thick forest, and the next night came soon after sunfall to the castle. It rose forebodingly over the surrounding valley, high on its encampments, with steep hillsides leading up to it and with a dry moat on one side. Bats flew overhead, but they were fruit eaters, not blood suckers. Or so the judge said.

Jonathan said little. They came to the gates of the castle and the judge knocked. They stood and waited. Presently a side gate opened and an old man poked his head out.

‘Who dares disturb the solitude of Werdenfels—’ he began, in a voice that was more tremulous than grave. Then he finally noticed them and blanched.

‘M ... master!’ he said.

‘I am Judge Dee,’ the judge said.

‘Yes, yes!’ the old man said. ‘Come in, be welcome in the ... I mean, of your own free will and—’

‘I do not need an invitation,’ the judge said. His voice was icy. ‘I am the judge. I have been called and I will judge and pass sentence. My authority in this is absolute.’

‘Yes, yes, of course! Please! Judge Dee himself! And—’ the old man stared at Jonathan dubiously, ‘a person! Please, come in! Oh, it is so distressing! You see, my master, Count Werdenfels, he has been murdered!’

Jonathan stared back at the old man.

‘Yes,’ Jonathan said. ‘We *know*. Do you have any sausages?’

‘I ... what?’

‘Sausages. And some eggs and bread? If you could whip something up—’

‘Hush, Jonathan,’ the judge said. He crossed the threshold into the castle and Jonathan followed.

‘Who are you?’ the judge said.

The old man said, ‘I am Helmut, sir. The count’s familiar.’

‘Is your mistress in?’

‘My lord’s widow is within. She is...*entertaining*.’

‘And yet vampires so rarely are,’ the judge said. ‘Tell me, were you close, you and your master?’

‘Were you *familiar*?’ Jonathan said.

Helmut scowled at him. ‘He was my master,’ he said. ‘I served him faithfully. My life is without meaning now that my master’s gone. Take my blood!’ He exposed his neck pitifully to the judge. ‘It is not right that my master dies and I yet live.’

The judge’s pale hand shot out and his fingers wrapped around the old servant’s neck. He lifted him off the ground. Jonathan, who had taken an instant dislike to the dead count’s familiar, smirked. Helmut choked without sound.

‘Do you accuse anyone of killing your master?’ the judge inquired. He lowered Helmut to the ground. The old familiar made rasping sounds as he breathed in new air.

‘It is not ... for me ... to accuse...’ he said, pointing towards the lights within the castle proper. ‘You must ask ... her!’

‘Very well, then,’ the judge said.

And with that, he marched into the castle, with the reluctant Jonathan in his wake.

6.

'Who killed the count?' the Lady Maria said. She stared at Judge Dee in some surprise. 'Why, it was me, of course.'

'I beg your pardon?' the judge said.

Lady Maria sparkled. 'Oh, do not beg!' she said. 'And there is nothing to pardon! I've been trying to get the old bastard for years. Finally did it, too, and good riddance. Now I can have the castle to myself. Well, other than the guest who won't leave and those vampire hunters in the woods. But I'll deal with them myself.'

They had found the lady of the castle in the ballroom. A band played dancing music and several handsome young men from the nearby towns, their chests bare and glistening, danced with the Lady Maria. She was the sort of vampire who looked young until you stared too long into her eyes, and then you saw exactly just how old and just how deadly she really was. A fire burned, and all the young men had teeth marks on their necks and torsos, where the lady had nibbled on them like snacks.

'Care for a drink?' she said.

The judge shook his head minutely. He showed no outward emotion, yet Jonathan could imagine the cold anger underneath his calm exterior.

The truth was that mysteries were bunk: murder was straightforward and everyone did it, from the emperor down. Husbands killed their wives and sometimes wives killed their husbands. Men robbed and murdered every day in every street in every town of the Holy Roman Empire. Knights slaughtered Saracens in the Holy Land and Saracens slaughtered crusaders. The poor killed and the rich killed, and convicts were executed, and it

didn't matter if people used the sword, a kitchen knife, or poison. The end result was always the same.

'Why was I summoned?' the judge said.

The lady shrugged. 'Were you summoned? No one has informed me of this fact. But as you can see I am well within the Unalienable Obligations, and there is no need for your presence. I am sorry you've had a wasted journey. Feel free to stay the night. Oh, it's you again.' She turned and fixed her eyes on the human servant, Helmut, who came scuttling in after the judge and now stood shaking with righteous rage, pointing his finger accusingly at the mistress of the castle.

'You did not kill him!' he shrieked. 'You have no claim!'

'Wait,' Jonathan said. He couldn't help himself. 'You're accusing your mistress of *not* murdering the count?'

The lady burst out laughing. 'Did *you* summon Judge Dee?' she asked the familiar. 'I would have you drawn and quartered and boiled in vinegar, Helmut, if only you didn't delight me so.' She waved a hand airily. 'But the judge will take care of you himself, I am sure. One does not simply waste the Council's time.'

Helmut turned pale but stood his ground. 'You did not kill him,' he said. 'You cannot lay claim!' He turned to the judge, his face twisted in anguish. 'Is it not right, master, that whoever bested the count is the one to inherit?'

Judge Dee stared curiously at the deceased count's familiar.

'You argue for a matter of *inheritance*?' he said.

'I do.'

'So who killed the count?' the judge said.

'It is not for me to accuse.'

'This is absurd!' Lady Maria said. She hissed, and her teeth opened wide. 'I've had it with you, Helmut. I want you gone from my home, and the damned guest of my husband with you!'

'Who is this guest?' the judge said.

The lady shrugged. 'Some elder parasite. A Roman. He came three months ago and wouldn't leave. He is still here. My husband

paid him the respect of age and placed him in the upper quarters next to ours. I have him imprisoned there for the moment. He is a *parasitos*, an eater-at-another's-table. My husband tolerated him but I will not.'

'And these vampire hunters you mentioned?' the judge said.

'Oh, those. They're harmless fools. They hide out in the forest and make trouble. I will hunt them down eventually.'

'Curious,' the judge said quietly. But his voice carried nonetheless.

Helmut smirked.

'What is this?' the Lady Maria said. 'I told you, I murdered my husband! Do you dare question me?'

The judge looked at her coldly.

'I am Judge Dee,' he said. 'Do you dare question *me*?'

The lady had the good sense to blanch. 'Of course, of course,' she said. 'You will see for yourself. Please, be welcome in my castle. I shall have our best quarters prepared. Helmut, could you arrange accommodation? The judge—'

'Of course, mistress,' the old familiar said. He bowed and vanished noiselessly, and Jonathan reflected on the curious relationship the man had with his employer: for all their hatred they seemed equally dependent on each other.

'I will take a small glass,' the judge announced, surprising Jonathan, for the judge almost never fed in public. 'And I shall determine for myself how and in what manner the count perished. Is there a corpse?'

'He lived too long,' the lady said, with some evident regret. 'He must have turned to dust when he expired.'

'You were not there in person?' the judge said.

The lady exposed her teeth. 'A hunter lays a trap,' she said. 'And waits. Tomorrow night, I will show you.'

Jonathan rubbed the bridge of his nose. No one liked convoluted plots more dearly than a vampire. He put his hand out, halting one of the dashing young men who surrounded the lady.

'Is there some human food?' he said.

The man, trapped, shot a frightened glance at his mistress. She waved a hand.

'Take the judge's boy to the kitchens,' she said.

'There's plenty of venison,' the man told Jonathan in a low voice. 'And some good cheese and pickles.'

'Then lead the way,' Jonathan said, and he followed the young man to the one place in the castle he felt comfortable. Vampires, after all, seldom went into the kitchen.

7.

‘A curious case,’ the judge said.

They were in their opulent quarters. It was just before dawn. A warm fire burned and they both had drinks. Jonathan’s wine was red and so he pretended the red liquid the judge was sipping was also ... wine.

‘What do you make of it all, Jonathan?’ the judge said.

‘Master?’

More than once in their travels, when this question was posed to him, Jonathan wanted to ask the judge why, in all that was holy – or, rather, all that was unholy – did it matter what he, Jonathan, thought. Judge Dee had rescued him in England not out of kindness but from a simple need for, well, *directions*. Yet after the events of the Hell of Black Rock, the judge kept him on.

‘I suppose the lady did it,’ Jonathan said. ‘She did seem quite proud of it, master.’

‘If you believe everything a vampire tells you,’ the judge said, ‘you will not live very long, Jonathan.’

‘Those vampire hunters, then,’ Jonathan said. ‘That’s what vampire hunters do, don’t they? Kill vampires?’

‘Try to, at any rate,’ the judge said.

‘Well, there you have it then.’

‘What of this mysterious guest of the late count?’ the judge said. ‘We should endeavour to speak to him. A Roman elder, he would be quite powerful. Indeed, I doubt the good Lady Maria really has him imprisoned unless he chooses to let her, for reasons of his own.’

‘Yes, I thought that strange, too,’ Jonathan said. ‘The lady acts as the mistress of the castle, yet has little apparent control. A guest she

can't get rid of and vampire hunters in the woods, they are a sign of weakness, and weak vampires die quick, as the saying goes.'

'What saying?' the judge said.

'Well, not *technically* a saying,' Jonathan allowed. 'But, master, all these suppositions are entirely – what is that word you like to use? – *circumstantial*. We will not solve this case simply by discussing it.'

'Indeed, Jonathan, *we* will not,' the judge said. 'Though I believe the facts in the case are elementary. But regardless. Tomorrow we shall conduct our investigation' – he put a slight ironic emphasis on the 'our', Jonathan didn't fail to notice – 'and see for ourselves. I am sure that however the lady murdered her husband, it was done with flair.'

'Yes, master,' Jonathan mumbled. The sun was soon to rise. Judge Dee finished his cup and silently turned into mist and vanished. How and where the judge slept each day not even Jonathan knew. The judge did not survive the long centuries by being easy to find.

8.

‘My husband was a keen hunter,’ Lady Maria said. The night was thick and the stars numerous in the sky, and the lady’s eyes shone red in the dark. ‘And punctual. It is dangerous for our kind to fall into routine, yet a routine he had. My husband was turned some three centuries back, during the reign of one of the Ottos. I believe he was fond of hunting back when he was warm-blooded. As a vampire I think it still brought him comfort. Each evening after sundown he would wake and nibble on something warm, then climb out of his window. He crawled down the side of the castle, then vanished into the woods to hunt in wolf’s form. He liked to mark his territory in this way, too, so each evening he would pass the same corners and leave a scent. He was a fool! I will show you. Come.’

Jonathan raised his head to the top room at the turret. A light burned there, illuminating the small window that was shaped like an upside-down cross. Jonathan imagined the count crawling down the side of the castle like a spider, and he suppressed a shudder of revulsion.

They marched on into the night. The judge moved quietly, confidently, his red eyes missing nothing. Jonathan stumbled on roots and heard mostly the beating of his own heart in his ears. From time to time the lady would point out something invisible in the dark and say, ‘You see here?’ or ‘This is his mark,’ and the judge would nod, so Jonathan figured she was telling the truth.

‘Once he established a pattern,’ the lady said, ‘all I had to do was lay down a trap and wait. Even if he didn’t follow the exact same route each time, sooner or later he’d return to the same spot. And so I – hello, here we are.’

Jonathan stumbled, for the ground suddenly vanished underneath him. The judge's hand snapped out and caught him painfully by the wrist. The judge pulled. Jonathan was lifted into the air, then found himself back on solid ground. The lady's red eyes shone in excitement.

'You see?'

Jonathan peered at the hole. It had been cunningly disguised, a hole deeper than two men and covered in a thin weave of rope topped with a thin layer of earth and leaves, so that it looked like solid ground. The covering had fallen down, though. And sticking out of the hole were long, sharp wooden sticks.

'The tips are made of fragments of the True Cross,' the Lady Maria said with some pride. 'It was no easy task, acquiring them quietly, but I still have family connections in the old country, and there are relic merchants aplenty who hawk their wares. And that stake in the middle, there? It's tipped with a bone fragment from the skull of St. John the Baptist. The seller assured me it was genuine.'

'I see,' the judge said, though he did not sound impressed. Jonathan knew that if one were to put together all the fragments of the True Cross sold across Christendom, one would have enough wood to build Noah's Ark and still have wood to spare. Nevertheless: the spikes looked deadly.

'I set my trap, and waited,' the lady said. 'On the night in question, my dear husband departed his abode as usual. He ran into the woods as a wolf. I had gone to sleep early that night. The next evening, when I awoke, he had not returned. I came back here to check and saw that, indeed, the covering had fallen. He could not have survived my spikes. It is a shame there's no corpse to show you, but I suppose you could check the dust. It was easy work, Judge Dee. I only wish I'd done it years ago.'

'You were thorough,' the judge said.

'You're too kind,' the lady said.

The judge methodically examined the trap. From time to time he pointed out invisible marks, muttering to himself or Jonathan, it was

hard to say. 'Note this small avalanche of dirt there,' or 'The wood does not appear to exhibit holy properties which are immediately obvious,' and so on. Finally he was done.

'Well?' the lady demanded.

Judge Dee said nothing. His keen eyes had caught something in the dark, it seemed. Silently, he gestured for them to follow him.

Jonathan traipsed again through the dark forest.

This was his lot, he reflected resignedly. Ever since he'd met Judge Dee his life was at the service of dark forces. Yet something within Jonathan still, however foolishly, believed that not all in the judge's work was evil: that he represented order, a sort of moral compass even for the immoral and immortal beings of vampirekind.

So he followed him willingly, for all that the forest was dark and spooky, and things hooted in the dark, and somewhere there was the whistle of a rope and someone coughed and—

Something fastened around Jonathan's ankle and *pulled*. He lost his balance and found himself pulled up into the air.

He screamed.

In moments he was dangling upside down.

'Vampires!' came the cry from the night.

Jonathan saw flames bobbing between the trees. Arrows whistled through the air. Jonathan flinched, felt one pass too close for comfort.

The Lady Maria was a blur in the night, roaring with fury, her teeth elongated and her nails extended into claws. She slashed, and a man fell screaming at her feet.

Jonathan couldn't see Judge Dee.

An arrow whistled in the dark. The Lady Maria pulled the bloodied arrow from her chest. She hissed, a sharp inhuman sound like nails on glass. It made Jonathan's eyes water. There were shadows in the night. They crept up on the lady. They threw a net. It fell softly and the lady cried in pain. The net was weighed with silver.

'Enough!'

The cry rang out. Hanging upside down, Jonathan had trouble making out the scene. He saw a large, burly man with deep scars down his face.

Behind him was Judge Dee.

The judge held his sharp nails to the man's neck. His teeth were bared to strike. The man stood very still.

The Lady Maria, surrounded by vampire hunters, stood still, too. The men held weapons on her, stakes and arrows and swords.

'It seems,' the judge said, 'we are at an impasse.'

'You,' the scarred man said. His voice rasped.

'I,' Judge Dee said. 'Hello, Chrétien. I wondered when we'd meet again.'

'Kill me and she dies,' the man said.

The judge said, 'What is that to me?'

The Lady Maria howled in rage. She tried to strike out but the net held her down and the threat of the men was real. She subsided.

'Wait,' the hunter, Chrétien, said. 'Judge Dee! I claim the right of kill and thus the castle of Werdenfels. There are precedents—'

'What is this!' Lady Maria screamed. 'You are no vampire! You have no right! You're ... you're...*cattle!*'

'And you're a leech, a misbegotten thing, an abomination under God and Christ!' the Frenchman said.

'I will tear out your heart!' Lady Maria screamed.

'And I will cut off your head!' the Frenchman shouted.

'Could somebody let me down?' Jonathan said.

'Jonathan, what *are* you doing up there?' the judge said. 'Chrétien, you lay a claim of *inheritance*? But that would mean—'

'Yes,' the vampire hunter said, and his eyes shone with pride in the torchlight. 'It is I who killed Count Werdenfels!'

9.

It was sometime later. The lady had been released. She retreated back to the castle, promising to rain a thousand deaths upon the vampire hunters. And somebody *had* finally cut Jonathan down. His head spun for a while, but otherwise he was fine.

Judge Dee and the vampire hunter Chrétien sat around the fire. A burly Norman named Wace handed Jonathan a cup of wine, which Jonathan drank gratefully.

‘It was simple enough,’ Chrétien said. ‘The count had developed a routine. He was fond of hunting—’

‘We know all this,’ Jonathan said.

‘Hush,’ the judge said.

Chrétien shrugged. ‘We simply had to wait for him in the woods. He came as a wolf. Then we were upon him from our ambush. We slaughtered him. Our weapons are fashioned of cold steel blessed by the pope in Rome. He never had a chance. The castle should by rights be mine. And if I must kill his vampire wife to get it then so be it. She can stay and die or flee and live undead another century, it matters not to me.’

‘You know our laws, Chrétien,’ Judge Dee said. ‘You know they do not apply to humans.’

‘I have no fight with you, Master Dee,’ the vampire hunter said. ‘But I am tired of the long, cold nights and the inhuman monsters who inhabit them. I want some comfort now, and warmth, and I hear Castle Werdenfels has a wonderful wine cellar. I will trust you to judge me fairly. That is all I ask.’

‘Will you show me the place of the ambush?’ the judge asked.

‘I will.’

So Jonathan had to abandon the warm fire and the wine and traipse after the judge and this Frenchman, who the master had clearly met before, in some mysterious circumstances and clearly before ever Jonathan came on to the scene. As it were. And so here they were in the midst of the dark forest, and the Frenchman pointed out marks on the ground and signs of a scuffle and ugly slashes of steel on the bark of the trees, and blood on the ground, lots of blood.

‘Three men we lost, in the battle,’ Chrétien said, ‘three good men, for one lousy vampire. Begging your pardon, Judge Dee.’

The judge said little. He examined the scene. He said, ‘And is there a corpse?’

‘Alas,’ Chrétien said. ‘The count was old, when we finally killed him he must have turned into dust.’

‘I see.’

‘It is *my* claim,’ Chrétien said. ‘And my claim is righteous.’

‘The lady won’t like it...’ Jonathan murmured. But neither vampire nor man paid him much attention.

10.

It was almost dawn by the time they returned to the castle. The old familiar, Helmut, was the only one to greet them.

‘The lady’s in her chambers,’ he told them, ‘and in a most foul temper.’

He provided them with sustenance – a selection of cold cuts and wine for Jonathan, a small cup of fresh blood for the judge – and left them in their roomy accommodation. The judge sipped his cup as Jonathan devoured pork, cheese, and pickles.

‘You should have been a vampire,’ the judge said. It was not meant as a compliment.

‘Master,’ Jonathan said, his mouth still full – the judge grimaced – ‘who got him first, do you think?’

‘The lady or the hunters?’ the judge almost smiled. ‘Which do you think?’

‘I don’t know, master.’

The judge interlaced his fingers. ‘I shall make my final investigation tomorrow,’ he said. ‘But day is almost here. Good morning, Jonathan. I bid you fair sleep.’

With that, he finished the blood in his cup and, just like that, he was gone.

★ ★ ★

When Jonathan woke night had fallen, and the judge was already up. He paced the room. ‘Hurry,’ he said.

Jonathan groaned, rose, washed his face as best he could, and followed the judge. There were arrow slits cut into the walls here and

there and through them Jonathan could see flames burning outside, and he could hear voices, too, and he knew that the vampire hunters were gathered beyond. The judge led him to the late count's quarters. Helmut waited for them outside.

'Through here,' he said.

He opened the doors onto a sparse, austere room. Animal heads hung on the wall: deer, bear, wild boar, an ibex.

'Look,' Jonathan said. He pointed to dark stains on the floor. 'Blood.'

'Perhaps he was a messy eater,' the judge said, giving Jonathan a pointed look.

'Come out and face me!' came a cry from outside. 'I lay claim to this castle under the Unalienable Obligations and inheritance by kill!'

Somewhere down the corridor the Lady Maria shrieked in outrage. 'I will drain you of blood and leave your empty, shrivelled husk on the top of the Zugspitze!'

'I killed him!'

'I killed him!'

Judge Dee climbed out of the window. He crawled along the wall like a lizard, looking at things Jonathan couldn't. Jonathan suppressed a shudder. He sometimes forgot what the judge could do.

He was suddenly aware of another presence in the room. He turned.

'Master Dee?' Jonathan said. His voice felt weak and tremulous. 'Master Dee?'

'Yes, Jonathan?'

The master reappeared in the window.

'Ah,' he said.

Jonathan stood very still. A huge vampire wearing an old-fashioned armour and tunic, of a sort not seen in the Western world in centuries, stood towering over him, his teeth bared and extended.

'I am Magnus Maximus,' he said. 'And I claim this castle for myself. You see ... it is I who killed Count Werdenfels!'

Jonathan groaned. He couldn't help it.

'Of *course* you did,' he said.

11.

‘Maximus,’ the judge said quietly.

‘Fifth legion!’ the old vampire said. ‘I was Emperor of Britannia ... briefly. That bastard Theodosius had me thrown to the lions, metaphorically speaking. An old leech turned me, back in Aquileia. I have been doomed to wander ever since.’

The Lady Maria came storming into the room then. She stopped and glared.

‘What is the meaning of this!’ she said. ‘You! Parasite! I want you out of my home!’ She turned to Judge Dee. ‘This repulsive specimen has been leeching off the noble houses of Christendom for centuries!’ she said. ‘Once a guest, he never leaves! My husband let him in out of kindness, or more likely to annoy me. How did you escape your captivity?’

The Roman smirked. ‘You think you can hold me captive? I was an emperor.’

‘An emperor of a garbage heap!’ the lady said. ‘Well?’

An explosion boomed outside the castle walls, and once more Jonathan could hear the raised voice of the vampire hunter Chrétien.

‘Come and face me! The castle is mine!’

‘Oh, for...’ Lady Maria said. She glared at the Roman. ‘I will deal with *you* later,’ she said. Then she burst out of the window, turned into a huge bat, and flew straight at the vampire hunters gathered outside.

Jonathan heard screams. He rubbed the bridge of his nose. He felt a headache coming on.

‘So who killed the count?’ he said.

'I did,' the Roman said again. 'But it does not matter. I will go and deal with the others first. I want you gone from my castle by morning. Good night to you.' With that, he too leaped out of the window, to join the battle below.

The judge really did smile then. 'Well, Jonathan?' he said. 'What do you make of all this?'

'I am sure I don't know,' Jonathan said miserably. 'I am sure it does not matter, either. Vampires never play by the rules, anyway.'

'This is what I think happened,' the judge said. His only audience now was Jonathan. Even the old familiar, Helmut, had disappeared. He was probably hiding in the wine cellar, Jonathan thought rather uncharitably.

'Yes, master...' Jonathan said.

'I think we have been summoned here for a reason,' the judge said. 'And that reason is happening right now, outside.'

'Master?'

The judge rubbed his hands together. 'Count Werdenfels was a creature of habit,' he said. 'A dangerous thing for a vampire. He also had enemies, both within and without. Each night, the count came here, to this room. He would then climb out of the window and go hunting in wolf form.'

'Yes, master,' Jonathan said. 'I know all this.'

'I am merely summing up,' the judge said testily.

'Yes, master.'

'On the night in question, the count went out as usual,' the judge said. 'The first trap he came to was the Lady Maria's. I have examined the site in depth, Jonathan. It's a cunning trap, but the useless relics the lady bought were mere superstition. I surmise that the count did fall into the trap, and some of the spikes pierced his flesh, but they did not hit his heart. The Count was wounded, but alive. He escaped the lady's trap and, no doubt full of rage, headed back to take his revenge.'

'Yes, master.'

'Which is when he came upon Chrétien and his band of hunters.'

‘Yes, master.’

‘They had been waiting for the count. And the count was wounded, but still deadly. He killed three of Chrétien’s men. Once again, there was no corpse. I surmise that in the confusion the count turned into mist or a bat and vanished. He was badly hurt, but not yet finished.’

The judge smiled without humour. His sharp teeth glinted in the candlelight.

He said, ‘And he came back here.’

12.

Outside, the night echoed with screams. Jonathan stared at the dried blood on the floor.

‘The count came here,’ the judge said. Quietly, inexorably. Working out the only logical implications of a case that seemed to no longer matter. ‘He came back to his place of safety. He was wounded, badly hurt. But alive. He crawled in through the window, and then—’

‘The Roman,’ Jonathan said.

‘Yes. The *parasitos* was waiting. The count was weak. His guest pounced. It is the nature of vampires, Jonathan, to strike the weak. They had battled. You can see here, and here.’ The judge indicated marks on the walls. Jonathan did his best to follow. ‘The Roman was strong. But the count still had a fight in him.’

‘So this is it?’ Jonathan said. ‘The Roman killed him, here? So he has right of inheritance?’

Judge Dee sighed. ‘A vampire judge seldom resolves disputes,’ he said. ‘Vampires ultimately decide matters by teeth and claw. And consider this, Jonathan, if the Roman killed the count, then *where is the corpse?*’

‘Master?’

‘This is what bothered me from the start of all this,’ the judge said. ‘If Count Werdenfels was dead, then where is his body, Jonathan?’

‘But the count was old,’ Jonathan protested. ‘He must have turned to dust.’

‘Nonsense, Jonathan. This Roman *parasitos*, maybe. But the count? He was a mere three centuries old. Hardly an elder. There should be a corpse.’

‘Then what happened, master?’

The judge paced.

‘The count arrived in the room. He and the Roman battled. The elder was strong, but the count was cunning. I surmise that once more he turned into mist, thus fooling the older vampire. He drifted out of the room and the castle and fell to the ground. He was badly hurt and day was quickly closing. He needed to hide. He needed shelter.’

Outside, the sounds of battle were easing. Jonathan heard whimpers, a cry cut short. He wondered who was still alive out there.

‘You are saying...*none* of them killed Count Werdenfels?’ Jonathan said.

‘Yes. Come, Jonathan!’ Judge Dee hopped onto the windowsill. ‘Let us go!’

‘Master?’

‘Yes, Jonathan?’

Jonathan said, ‘If it’s all the same to you, I will take the stairs.’

★ ★ ★

Judge Dee met him down below. Jonathan followed his master. They passed what was left of the battle. The Lady Maria was pinned to a tree with a stake through her heart, her mouth still open in a silent scream. The judge found Chrétien of Troyes buried under a pile of corpses. His eyes stared into nothing. In his fist he still clutched a short sword: it was pinned into the *parasitos*’ Roman armour, now empty but for a pile of dust.

The judge did not stop. He hurried his steps and Jonathan followed, stumbling in the dark, while the judge pointed out marks Jonathan could not see.

‘The count went this way. Look. Here are wolf’s prints. Here he flew as a bat. See the blood he left behind on the bark of this tree. Here he hovered as mist. Here he crawled. Here – hello. Here is where he came.’

Jonathan raised his eyes. In the moonlight he could make out a small, forlorn hut.

It stood alone.

It was surrounded by graves.

'Ah...' he said.

'Master Dee.' The hermit, Claus, came out of the hut then. He smiled, revealing his sharp, long teeth. 'You came.'

'Master Claus. Were you packing?'

'My possessions are few,' the hermit said comfortably. Another figure came out of the hut then, and Jonathan recognised Helmut, the count's old familiar. Helmut froze when he saw them.

Jonathan looked at the scene with new eyes. He saw the small, lonely hut, the graves dug all around it. His eyes were once again drawn to one small, fresh grave. He had seen it before. The grave was unmarked.

A child's grave, he had thought.

But what if it wasn't?

'You?' Jonathan said. 'All this time, it was you?'

'The count came here,' Judge Dee said. 'He was weak and in pain. What final shape did he take, Master Claus? A bat? Something small.'

'They bring them to me, sometimes,' the hermit said. He sounded sad. 'Those who suffer, for whom death would be a release. These I help.'

Jonathan stared at the small, unmarked grave.

'Master?' the familiar, Helmut, said. 'We should go.'

'Yes, yes,' the hermit said. He turned back to the judge. 'I apologise, but the sun's soon to rise and I must take to my new abode. You are welcome to spend the night here, of course. Master Dee,' the hermit said. 'I trust all is well in your eyes?'

Judge Dee looked at the hermit. He looked at the grave.

He nodded curtly.

'All is well,' Judge Dee said.



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A man in a dark jacket and cap is leaning through a shattered window. The scene is dark and industrial, with a car visible in the background. The man's right hand is bloody. The overall atmosphere is gritty and suspenseful.

ACROSS THE DARK WATER

RICHARD
KADREY

Across the Dark Water

RICHARD KADREY

illustration by

JOHN ANTHONY
DI GIOVANNI

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

It took him months to find the right guide. His search had cost him a small fortune so, as much as the thief hated it, he had to go back to his old ways in the plague-ruined city. The man who'd taught him the trade years and years before had handed him a shovel and taught him to rob graves. When he was older and out on his own, the thief swore he'd never grub in the dirt again. Yet now—because he could no longer bear to steal from the living—he was back on his knees, foregoing self-respect, and driven by a fear and an anger that felt like a stone in his chest.

Earlier, when the plague had receded, Mina left him. She said she wanted to see if her mother was still alive. The thief offered to go with her, but she said no. She said she'd return when she could. Later, he went to look for her mother and found the old woman easily. That's when he knew Mina had lied to him. And in the ruined city with its ashen survivors, and in his pain and his loneliness, he hated her for it. He would do anything to leave.

The bar where he'd been told he'd find the guide was made up of three cargo containers laid out in a triangle. Sections were connected by flexible ribbed walkways looted from tram cars along the metro lines. The walls were red and gold gilt wallpaper, like some dream of a New Orleans bordello. Here and there were rips and bullet holes. Thick bundles of jasmine incense burned to hide the stink of cigarettes and sweat. It made the thief's eyes water.

The man he took to be the guide looked as he'd been described. Thick muscles under a cowboy shirt with roses by each shoulder. He still wore the police badge from a force he'd abandoned during the plague. Guns on a thick belt around his waist. The guide looked healthy. Healthier than anyone the thief had seen in months, and the thief took that as a good sign.

He went to where the man stood at the bar and said, "Are you —?" and he said the guide's name. The name he'd been told to use.

The man just looked at him. After an uncomfortable moment, the thief took a crumpled business card from his pocket and held it out. The man took it. Looked it over.

"The blind man sent you," he said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I want to hire you."

"Gun or guide?"

"Guide."

"Where are you looking to go?"

"I want to see the Turk."

The guide smiled and put the card in the breast pocket of his shirt.

"Do you know him?"

"No."

"What makes you think a man like the Turk will see you?"

"I can pay."

"I knew you had money or the blind man wouldn't have sent you. But do you really think the Turk will drop everything for money?"

The thief set his hand on the top of the bar. It was sticky, so he took his hand off and rubbed it on his leg.

"I don't know if he'll see me. But I have to try."

The guide's eyes widened a little.

"An optimist in times like these. Signs and wonders."

"You'll take me?"

The guide took the thief's arm in a strong grip and led him to an exit that let out on the interior of the bar's triangle. The ground was concrete with gravel at the edges. A few people were there smoking and drinking. They ignored him and the guide. The thief looked around. The space overhead was lined with razor wire. The only door led back into the bar. There was nowhere to run if things turned bad.

The guide shook his head. His gray hair was buzzed almost flat.

“Relax. No one is going to hurt you.”

“I just don’t like being closed in.”

“Tight spaces? Social proximity? Relax. The plague’s over.”

“That’s what they say.”

The guide gave him a look.

“So. You want me to take you to the Turk. That’s quite a trek.”

The guide then named a startling sum of money. The thief breathed in, not bothering to negotiate since both men knew he had nowhere else to go. They went to an empty corner of the triangle and the thief laid out gold, piles of cash, and four dense, semitransparent, emerald green plastic cards. The guide picked up a card. Held it to the light.

“Account IDs?”

“Yes. Each linked to a different offshore bank.”

“How much in all the accounts together?”

Now it was the thief’s turn to name a startling sum. Then, “I can show you if you don’t believe me. I have a reader in my bag.”

The guide held up a hand. “I believe you. You’re too anxious to lie.” He laughed once. “Too optimistic.”

The guide picked up the remaining cards.

“On the other hand, if these are so valuable, why don’t you keep them for yourself?”

“Fine,” said the thief. “Give them back and take the other stuff.”

The guide pressed the cards to his chest.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

The thief looked at him.

“When this is over I’ll be on the road. Gold is easier to trade.”

“Even these days, you think?”

The thief shrugged.

“In medieval times, people revert to medieval ways.”

The guide looked at him for a moment more.

“I’ll keep the cards.”

The thief relaxed a little.

“Then we can go?”

“Soon. There are details to sort out.”

The guide started back into the bar, but the thief stopped. A few men had been playing with remote control toys nearby. Little drones and kitten-sized military walkers. What stopped the thief was something on wheels. He couldn't quite figure out what it was. The dried flesh of a skinned cat had been stretched over the body of a small rolling mech. The machine's LED eyes lit up, making the cat's head glow. It raised its arms and made a grinding sound like it was trying to talk to him. When the guide looked back and saw that the thief wasn't with him, he went to the toy and kicked it across the concrete to the men. They moaned and cursed and he pulled the thief away with him.

The thief and guide walked a hundred yards down a long straightaway surrounded by immense parking lots full of dusty cars and empty trucks, the remains of a large homeless encampment. Sections of the lot had been cordoned off with biohazard warning tape. The vehicles in those areas were blackened husks, where the authorities had burned the dead in place. The guide noticed the thief staring.

He said, “It was better this way. Why risk a crew to move the bodies when fire did the job just as well?”

The thief had heard the jokes. “The gasoline vaccine.”

“Cheap and painless.”

“As long as you're sure everybody is dead before you strike the match.”

“We were sure.”

“It must be nice to be so certain of things.”

The guide slowed his pace.

“You think I'm lying?”

The thief had to stop so as not to leave him behind.

“No,” he said. “It's just that I'm not certain about anything these days, except that I want to leave.”

The guide pointed to the fairgrounds at the end of the long drive.

“Come up to my office.”

Inside, they went past the abandoned rides, many starting to show rust. Empty pens for animals. Dust and weeds everywhere. Food wrappers. Paper cups. The guide led the thief to a Ferris wheel near the center of the place. The thief was surprised by its size. The cars were large enough to hold a dozen adults. The guide went to the closest car and pulled the door open.

“We can talk here,” he said and went inside.

The thief followed him but, again, disturbed by the enclosed space, he remained by the open door. When they were inside, the guide took a metal box about the size of a cigarette pack from his bag and pushed a button. There was a metallic groan. The Ferris wheel jerked and the car rose into the air. The thief, caught off guard, slipped and would have fallen out if the guide hadn't grabbed him and pulled him back into the car.

“Not everything thing in here is broken,” the guide said and laughed.

The thief sat on the floor, breathing hard until the car reached its apex. When it did, the guide pressed another button on the box and the Ferris wheel stopped. The thief gradually pulled himself to his feet and turned one hundred and eighty degrees. The city spread out for miles in all directions.

“The view,” he said.

The guide spit out the open door.

“Nothing can sneak up on you from up here. It's a good place to get the lay of the land before going out.”

The center of the city and some of the outer suburbs were lighting up for the evening, but they were surrounded by vast stretches of darkness.

“I never realized how much of the city we'd lost. I'd heard the numbers, but seeing it—”

The guide lit a cigarette.

“It makes an impression.”

The thief turned to look at the guide in the doorway.

“Now that I was dumb enough to follow you, are we really here to talk or are you going to take my money and gold and throw me out?”

“I could, you know,” said the guide, looking down at the ground. “Take your shit and watch you fall.”

“I know.”

“You wouldn’t be the first.”

“Of course.”

The guide shook his head slightly.

“But I’m not going to. I just like the view and I like privacy when we’re working out details.”

The guide pulled a pint of bourbon from his pack, gulped a mouthful, and handed it to the thief, who took a good pull of the stuff and handed it back. The thief relaxed a little. Whatever was going to happen would happen. There was nothing he could do about it.

“You mentioned details,” said the thief.

The guide put the bottle back in his pack.

“I’ll take to you to the Turk, but I’m not going in. That means when you go inside, you’re not going to have any backup.”

“Do you have some kind of problem with him?”

“Of course I do. Warlords and power brokers—I don’t trust any of them. So when you go in, you’re on your own.”

The thief could tell there were things the guide wasn’t telling him, but he was grateful enough not to have been murdered that he let it go. “How long will it take to get there?”

The guide continued to smoke.

“Do you want to go fast or safe?”

“I don’t want to die in this city.”

“Safe it is, then.”

“How long will it take?”

“It depends on the road,” said the guide. “Two, maybe three days if the way is clear. If it’s not, it’s taken as long as five.”

“Five days?”

The guide gestured out into the dying light.

“You get pinned down somewhere by cops or a decon sweep, there’s nothing to do but sit tight.” He looked at the thief. “This isn’t sightseeing on a bus with lunch and pretty snapshots.”

“Still. Days.”

The guide tossed the cigarette out of the car.

“Take it or leave it. No refunds.”

The thief thought about it.

“How long is the fast route?”

“A couple days. If we make it at all. Of course for that, I’ll want your gold and cash, too.”

“No. Take me the way we agreed.”

Without a word, the guide pulled out a key and unlocked a compartment under the single chair in the car. He took out two neatly packed black bundles and tossed one to the thief. The thief unfolded it and found it to be a stiff bodysuit that seemed blacker than black.

“Light absorbent,” said the guide as he pulled on his suit over his clothes. “Put up the hood and the mesh over your face. You’ll sweat, but it’ll scramble facial recognition scans.”

The thief put his on and stood flexing, trying to work the stiffness out of the joints. The suit was indeed hot, and smelled faintly of mildew.

The guide continued to pull tools from the seat, some of which the thief recognized from his own work. Pitons. Breaching tools. A small cutting torch. A thin polymer climbing cord. The guide put it all into a larger pack that he also took from the seat. When he had everything he needed, he transferred the bourbon into the new pack and locked the seat.

“Can we leave now?” said the thief.

“When it’s darker and they’ve moved off across town.”

The guide pointed to pinpoints of light moving through the sky.

“Helicopters?” said the thief.

“Drones. As long as things stay quiet out here, they’ll soon move back to the center of town.”

So they sat and smoked and took occasional drinks from the bottle until it was night and the lights in the sky had gone. Then the guide took them back to the ground and they set out west into one of the blacked-out parts of the city.

They didn't talk as they walked. There was a bright moon, so the sleeping city was illuminated all around them. Skyscrapers and apartment buildings. Restaurants that even the rats had deserted. The thief shook his head. He'd avoided areas like this because they'd been picked clean early in the epidemic. Ransacked cars dotted the wide thoroughfare. Broken shop windows. Sodden boxes for electronics or food. For the most part, though, the empty neighborhood was perfect. Frozen in time. Yet ruins all the same.

Finally, the thief spoke.

"Do think they'll ever lift the quarantine?" he said.

The guide kept walking.

"We were the epicenter. What do you think?"

"I don't think they'll ever let us out."

They walked for perhaps a half hour more before the guide said, "Shit."

He raised his hand. Silent pinpoints of light, like shooting stars, swirled through the sky in their direction. He pulled the thief right and they ran down two blocks and waited behind the collapsed wall of a church. The side streets were much worse than the ones they'd been on earlier. More like war zones, thought the thief. There were bullet holes in the buildings and overturned police cars. Echoes of old riots.

The guide jacked into a spysat view of the area and said, "Sit tight." An hour later, they headed west again, walking carefully. The guide remained jacked in and the thief suspected that the other man had been spooked after encountering a skyborne patrol this early in the trip. He hoped he'd hired the right guide and not a fool who would lead him into a trap. There had been those in the past and he'd barely escaped.

They continued through the night, clambering over piles of bricks and barriers made from stacked cars meant to seal off the area from law enforcement. Near dawn, the men took shelter in the vault of an empty bank.

It was close to winter and the morning air was chill. Eventually it seeped into the thief's bodysuit, mingling with his sweat and making him shiver. The guide saw it and set out an ingot of metal that grew hot but gave off no smoke. The thief warmed himself near it.

The adrenaline that had carried the thief through the night was ebbing now, and he felt ragged. As his eyes closed, he heard the guide say, "Why is it you're willing to risk your neck to see the Turk?"

The thief kept his eyes closed for a moment, his mind racing through good and bad lies. Finally, he decided there was nothing wrong with the truth.

"Travel papers. It's not enough to have a clean online health certificate. You need a physical, notarized form."

"Sounds expensive," said the guide. "Think you'll have any cash or gold left after you pay for all that?"

"I don't know. But I can always get more."

The guide looked at him conspiratorially.

"Waylaying other sleeping travelers?"

The thief frowned.

"Not unless they try waylaying me first."

"Then how?"

"Graves," he said. "I rob graves."

For the first time the thief saw the guide look troubled. He said, "Stop talking and get some sleep. We'll move fast tonight."

The thief settled down on the hard floor near the burning ingot and was quickly asleep. He dreamed of the day Mina left him and of finding her mother still alive. When he awoke in the later afternoon, he was in a foul mood. He ate a protein bar and kept to himself until it was time to leave.

Before they left the bank, the thief took a small amount of a clear solution from a plastic bottle and rubbed it on his hands. Then he

dry-swallowed some pills.

“What’s in the bottle?” said the guide.

“Skin sealant. It helps with cuts.”

“And the pills?”

“Immunosuppressants. I have job-related implants. This helps keep my body from rejecting them.”

The guide, who’d been placing items in his pack, sat back on his haunches and laughed. “You’re taking immunosuppressants in the middle of a plague zone?”

“Now you know why I want to leave.”

“No. That’s not why you want to leave. Maybe part of it, but there’s more.”

“There’s always more to a story, that’s why we call them stories. Can we go soon?”

The guide gave him a look and poured water onto the heating ingot.

“It needs to cool a little more.”

★ ★ ★

In the evening, they passed a group of children picking through the remains of an automat that looked as if it hadn’t seen food in a year. There was a feral look to the pack, so the guide took out one of his pistols and held it to his side, making sure the children could see it. The men moved on and no one followed.

An hour or two later they came upon an old man pushing a shopping cart piled high with dirty clothes and cans of food, many without labels. The old man tried to run, but there were stones and one of his legs was bad and he fell. The thief started to help him up, but the old man pulled away. He waved at the cart.

“Take what you want, but don’t touch me.”

“I’m not sick,” said the thief, showing the man the QR code lasered onto his wrist. “I have antibodies.”

“I’ve seen men with a dozen of those. Talk to ’em and tomorrow you’re coughing up blood.”

“We don’t want your shit,” said the guide, and pulled the thief away roughly.

The old man stayed sprawled in the street. He shouted, “You’re going to die, you know. There’s nothing but death down there.” He pointed to his head. “I can see these things. You’re both going to die.”

The thief went back and threw a protein bar at the old man’s feet. He snatched it up and put it in his overcoat pocket.

“This doesn’t change anything,” he said and pointed to the guide. “Your death will be quick, though alone.” He looked at the thief. “But yours will linger and you’ll beg for it.” The old man began to weep quietly, so they left him to it.

The thief and the guide walked most of the night, until they saw the lights of a military APC in the distance. They went into a chain hotel and on the fifth floor found a room with comfortable beds and clean sheets. The guide jammed his breaching tool under the doorknob to block the entrance, and they moved a table and chairs against it for reinforcement.

The guide removed a small device from his pack, inserted needles into each of his arms, and lay back.

“What’s that?” said the thief.

“Blood scrubber. Clears out the toxins, bacteria, and what have you. With your idiot pills you could probably use a cleaning. I’ll let you have a turn for some of that gold.”

The thief considered it. He knew he could do with a cleaning, but losing more gold probably meant going back to cemeteries.

“Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

“Suit yourself. You feel like a million bucks after a round.”

The thief lay down. His body was stiff from sleeping on the floor of the vault and the bed helped ease the pain.

“I guess I won today,” said the guide quietly.

“How so?”

“I die quick and you die begging.”

“Yes. I’m sure that old man was psychic. Besides, he didn’t say begging for what. Maybe I’m having so much fun I beg for it to stop.”

“Right. That’s what he meant.”

“I’m tired and going to sleep.”

“Yeah. I won.”

The men closed their eyes, but neither slept soundly with the noise of patrols going by. There was gunfire in the distance at sundown.

★ ★ ★

The next morning there were still stars in the sky when the guide scanned the area on his spysat link. They headed out when there was just a sliver of light on the horizon.

A dog, large and brown, with wounds down its body that had torn away fur, eyed them as they came into the street. The guide shouted at it, but the dog didn’t move.

The thief said, “You’d think they’d be thinner. Strays, I mean, this far away from the inhabited neighborhoods.”

“He’s been eating all right. Maybe that old loudmouth from last night.”

The thief made a face at the idea.

Finally, the guide picked up a brick and threw it as hard as he could at the dog. It darted into a sunglasses store before the brick got near it. The two men headed out and when the thief looked back, the dog was watching them from the door of the shop.

With no patrols in sight and the sky empty, the guide led them back to a main boulevard where they made good time, even in the areas where the streets were crowded with ghuls. They reminded the thief of zombies he’d seen in old movies as a child. For the most part, their skin was gray and, on some of the worst ones, it sloughed off. But they weren’t dead. The victims of quack cures and contaminated black market medications, they paced the streets in vast herds like the undead he remembered. But the ghuls only attacked each other and it was just the maddest of them that did it.

They were oblivious to the thief and guide. At certain intersections, the crowd became so dense that pushing through it took all the men's strength.

"Should we go back to the side streets?" said the thief once they made it through a particularly resistant mob.

The guide said, "Only if you want to lose another day."

Ahead were some of the maddest of the ghuls. They were the most disturbing because they appeared utterly normal. Healthy skin. Clear eyes. On some, even their clothes were intact. But they couldn't help gnawing on the flesh of the slower, gray ghuls. The stink of infection and creeping death was awful, and the men gave them a wide berth.

When the way was clear again, the guide lit a cigarette, taking long drags on it as he spoke.

"They say that sometimes the Turk moves around. What if he's not there when we reach his place?"

The thief said, "Who says he moves?"

"It's just what I've heard."

"They were lying or joking. The Turk never leaves his compound. He might be sick himself or waiting for the all clear. Or maybe he just doesn't care what it's like out here."

"Maybe," said the guide. "So. You rob graves."

The thief felt ashamed again.

"I didn't always."

"You want to go back to the ghuls and pick some pockets?"

"No thanks."

"They won't mind."

"Stop it."

The guide smoked and nodded his head.

"You like your dead less pushy."

"They're not dead. They're insane."

"Some are probably full of plague, so I hope that skin sealant is working for you."

The thief cursed. "I should have brought gloves."

“I have an extra pair. You can have them for a little gold.”

“Let me think about it.”

Soon they reached another of the mobs—the largest one yet. They cut to a side street, but it too was packed, so there was nothing to do but shoulder their way through. Deep in the sluggish sea of bodies, someone slammed into the thief and grabbed his arm. The mad ghul started to bite him, but stopped when it smelled his fresh skin. It stared at him for a moment before spinning around to bite one of the gray shamblers. As the ghul let go, the thief felt it scrape a little of the sealant off his hand. He called to the guide.

“I’ll take the gloves.”

The guide pulled them from his belt and slapped them into the thief’s chest.

“I’ll get the gold later.”

That night, there weren’t any intact buildings for them to bed down in, so the guide removed a fabric tube from his pack and tossed it on a flat spot between a garage and a sandwich shop. The tube unfolded into a small Fuller dome and the two men crawled inside. The guide sealed the door with a transparent gel that carried an electric charge to keep out intruders. The thief slid to the far side of the dome. The bottom had inflated enough that they were off the hard ground and relatively comfortable. Inside, it smelled of antiseptic and outgassing polymers. It reminded him of cheap toys from his childhood. He took a protein bar from his pack and the guide took jerky from his. The men traded the food and each ate quietly for a while.

When he was halfway through the meat the thief said, “It’s been a couple of days now. Will we reach the Turk tomorrow?”

“This isn’t bad,” said the guide chewing the protein bar. “Unlikely tomorrow. The day after if we’re lucky.”

“All right,” said the thief. He was disappointed by the answer and ate the rest of the jerky trying not to imagine where Mina was.

The guide took out the bourbon, but the thief said, “Do you have any water?”

He found water and handed the bottle to the thief. He drank deeply and when the thief realized how much he'd swallowed he felt guilty.

"I'm sorry. I drank too much."

The guide waved it off. He opened his pack enough that the thief could see a little Maker inside.

"We can cook up anything. All the food or water we want."

"Not meat," said the thief. "Maker meat is always like rubber."

The guide put the pack away. He laughed lightly.

"It is, isn't it?"

The thief finished the water and when offered the bourbon again, he drank some.

The guide stared through the gel around the entrance and said, "I guess we're all thieves in our own way. I quit the force when I got a better offer."

"It wasn't grave robbing, I know that much."

"Distributor. Medicine for people who couldn't get it any other way."

The thief frowned.

"A lot of those bootleg meds didn't work. Watered down. People died."

"What people? People like the old man with the cart? The losers we burned in their cars? You saw the lights in the center of town. Plenty of good people made it through alive."

"And you decide who the good people are?"

The guide slid closer to him.

"We didn't force anyone to buy our shit, Mr. Corpse Fucker. They came to us begging."

"And you sold them poison."

The guide looked at the ceiling of the dome.

"The hospitals had all been bought up by the banks and techs by then. Concierge care. They wouldn't take those kinds of people. At least my way, they died with a little hope."

“That’s some twisted logic. Your garbage is partly responsible for those fucking zombies tonight. They didn’t die with hope.”

“They’re not dead. Besides, if I gave you a dollar for every corpse in every graveyard you ever stole from, would you really care how the dead got there? No. You’d say thanks and count your money.”

The thief balled up a fist.

“Friends of mine died from the bad medicine.”

The guide inched a little closer.

“I’m sorry for your friends, but like I said, I never forced anything on anyone.”

★ ★ ★

The guide was a much bigger man than the thief, and having him this close and clearly ready to charge made the thief nervous. He relaxed his fist and said, “Can we talk about something else?”

The guide slid back across the dome.

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk at all.”

“That’s fine by me.”

The guide put out his hand.

“But before you bed down, princess, I’ll take the gold for the gloves.”

The guide named an absurd amount and this time the thief haggled. When they reached half the original price the thief paid him and went to sleep.

He dreamed of Mina again. This time she wasn’t leaving him, but choking as she coughed up blood in their bed.

★ ★ ★

There were police patrols in the streets, so the guide took them onto the rooftops of a series of tower blocks. It was slow going, but the thief had spent hundreds of nights on similar roofs and felt at home crossing the tar paper walkways, stepping around and under air cleaners and dish antennae. However, an hour after sundown, the

temperature plunged suddenly and a light snow began to fall. They had to stop frequently as drones passed overhead, silent as bats. Soon, the thief's feet were numb in the snow.

He said, "Should we take shelter for a while? I can't feel my hands or feet."

The guide looked at the sky.

"We can, but the snow is just going to get worse. Stop now and we could lose another day."

"I have gear for this kind of weather back home, but I wanted to travel light."

"You should have come to me earlier and I would have told you what to bring."

The thief cursed himself for all the equipment he'd left behind. The temperature continued to drop and he shivered as they crossed flat roofs that offered no protection from the wind. He said, "That ingot of yours will keep a room warm. Do you have anything that will work for us?"

The guide kept up a steady pace as he spoke.

"Sure. But it will cost you more gold."

The thief didn't hesitate. "I'll pay. What do you have?"

The guide knelt by a large overturned satellite dish and took pills from a leather pouch on his belt. He gave the thief one pill and kept one for himself. They were small cubes without any markings that the thief could see.

"What is it?"

"It's Swiss. Good stuff. It'll jack your system into overdrive. Body temp. Strength. Endurance. Heightened senses."

"Will they warm us for the night?"

"No," said the guide. "They're only good for about three hours. But we can cover a lot of ground before they wear off."

The thief started to swallow the pill, but hesitated when he thought about the guide and the bad medicine he'd peddled.

The guide laughed at him and swallowed his pill.

"You think I'm dumb enough to take my own product?"

The thief swallowed his and they started out again. He was cold for a long time and the going was slow. He could tell that he was annoying the guide, who had to alter his pace. The thief felt weak and foolish when he thought of his brash thefts over the years. No fear at all back then. But something had broken in him when he'd discovered Mina's lie, and he'd never quite put himself back together again. He pushed the memory of it out of his mind and settled into counting his steps, trying to keep up with the guide.

A few more minutes of shivering, then a sudden warmth spread throughout his body. The sensation was like strong coffee and the stimulants he took when he was working all night. It was as the guide had said. He felt stronger and it seemed to him that the night cleared considerably as his vision and hearing expanded. The guide flashed him a knowing look and began to trot through the thin layer of fresh snow. The thief kept up with him easily and they ran that way for another hour without slowing.

Finally, they stopped behind a billboard advertising tropical vacations. The guide checked the spysat and said, "Patrols have moved on. Let's go down. We'll make better time in the street."

They went down four floors and had several more to go when the thief heard a guttural rumble. The guide put out his arm and abruptly stopped the thief. He'd clearly heard the sound too. The rumble came again and this time they understood it to be a growl. The thief thought about the dog that the guide had thrown a brick at and what he'd said about it: *He's been eating all right.*

Little light came through the building's dusty windows but with his heightened senses, the thief could see at least six large dogs waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs. There was something odd about them.

"What—?" the thief started to say.

The guide whispered, "Hush. Jadghunds." He quietly slipped one of the pistols from its holster on his belt.

Jadghund. The thief had heard the term, but never seen one. Lab-grown for heavy muscle. He'd heard tales about some with

plastique sewn in their gut that could stop a tank. Necrotizing toxins in their saliva. A single bite was death.

“What do we do?” whispered the thief. He was sure that with the drug in his system he could easily make it back to the roof.

The guide said, “Run. But not yet.” He bought the pistol up level as the alpha of the pack took a few slow steps up the stairs. The fur bristled along its back and there was something wrong with its eyes. They glowed silver in the dimness of the stairwell. “When I fire, go,” he said.

As the Jadghund readied to pounce, the guide fired off a volley of shots. There was little noise from the gun, but the dogs howled. The thief saw then that it wasn't bullets that had hit the pack, but electrified hobbles that wrapped themselves around the animals' legs and throats.

“Go,” shouted the guide, and he and the thief ran back up the stairs. The guide fired more rounds, but they must have gone wide because the thief could hear the Jadghunds closing on them. Instead of running all four floors back to the roof, the guide shoved the thief into an office and slammed the door shut. The men pushed a heavy metal desk against the door and went to the windows. Most were sealed shut, but one let out onto a fire escape. The window was jammed, however, and the thick glass wouldn't break when the guide kicked it. He slid his pack off and took out the breach tool—a small axe head on one end and a crowbar on the other. He used the bar to pry up the window and shoved the thief out onto the fire escape. The cool air felt good for a moment until the thief heard the office door splinter open and ravenous barking as the Jadghunds charged inside.

The guide fired at the three dogs that burst into the room and two went down. But the alpha knocked him onto his back before he could do anything except grab his pack and hold it before him to keep the hound's vicious jaws away.

The thief left his pack on the fire escape and climbed back through the window. The guide had dropped his breach tool and the

thief grabbed it, slamming the axe end down again and again onto the alpha's back and head. Blood, ink black in the moonlight, splattered the wall and his chest and arms. At first, the hound seemed oblivious to him, but after a few more blows it ceased its attack on the guide and turned on the thief. He never stopped striking the animal, even as it pivoted toward him. It seemed to him that there was nothing left of its head but bare skull and its silver eyes. The thief pressed against the wall before the Jadghund finally staggered and slumped onto the floor.

The thief went back to the guide and helped him to his feet. Once the man was upright, he jerked away and ran his hands over his arms and face. "Did it bite me?" he said. Then shouted, "Did it bite me? I don't have antivenom."

The thief looked him over. The alpha's blood was splattered on the guide's face and ran down his arms, but he didn't see any puncture wounds. The guide relaxed a little and used his sleeve to wipe blood from his face.

"Good job with the breach. Bring it to me."

The guide's pack had been shredded in the attack and he was trying to patch it back together with a sealing foam when one of the other Jadghunds broke free. The men had to scramble onto the fire escape and down to the street. The climbing cord, small boxes, and tools tumbled from the guide's torn pack as they went. They gathered up what they could when they reached the ground, but a ragged crowd was forming nearby, attracted by the sounds of the fight. Some of the gawkers held pipes and heavy clubs. The guide pulled a pistol and aimed it at them. It wasn't necessary. The last of the Jadghunds had freed themselves, stumbled down the fire escape, and leapt the last two floors onto the street. The panicked crowd scattered and the pack ran for them as the thief and guide hid, then slipped quietly away.

★ ★ ★

The guide set up the dome again, this time in a parking garage just off the main street. The sounds of growls and screams had long since faded. Before they bedded down, the thief pointed to some ghuls outside. The mad, clear-skinned kind in business suits and expensive dresses. Inside the dome, the guide used several packets of antiseptic wipes to clean the last of the blood off himself.

“I lost my pack back there,” said the thief.

“Lost most of mine too,” the guide said, laying out the shredded pack’s remaining contents. It wasn’t much. Some ammunition. A change of clothes. A single square of jerky. A collapsible machete. But the Maker seemed to be intact. He kissed it. “We’ll be okay with this. There will be food and water to keep going.”

The thief felt a little better and was surprised when the guide put out his hand.

“You saved my ass back there,” said the big man.

The thief reached out his hand and they shook.

As the guide rummaged through the pack’s side pockets he said, “Keep your gold for the pills. I owe you that much.”

“Thank you.” Then, “Fuck.”

“What? You get bit?”

“No. I lost my immunosuppressants back there.”

“No matter,” said the guide. “The Turk will have all that when you get there.”

“Something else to pay for.”

The guide threw the torn pack to the side of the dome.

“There’s always something else. That and death are the only two things you can count on.”

After the run across the roofs and the fight, the effects of the pill were wearing off. The thief checked his pockets hoping for a protein bar, but came up with nothing.

“I’m hungry too,” said the guide. “You know how to set up a Maker?”

“Of course.”

“Get it fired up. I’ll be back in two shakes.”

The guide unfolded the machete and went into the street. The thief prepared the Maker and wondered what the guide would return with. Weeds? A rat? As long as it was organic, he didn't really care. He just needed something in his belly and nourishment enough to keep moving. It amazed him when he thought about how, in just a few days, he'd moved so far from his old life. He was a thief and a good one, the opposite of a man of action like the guide. When he did his job well, there was no action at all. A concentrated calm, then in and out and back home. There was none of that left now. No subtlety and certainly no home. He rubbed his aching shoulder, wondering if he'd torn something in the fight with the hound.

The guide soon returned with something wrapped in blue fabric. He set it on the dome floor and said, "Is the Maker ready?"

The thief nodded.

"What is that?"

"About five pounds of protein. We can go for a week on this."

The thief looked at him.

"It's going to take another week to get there?"

The guide unfolded the fabric and said, "Relax. It's just an expression. We're nearly there."

With the fabric unfolded, the thief saw a bloody lump of fresh meat. Several pounds of it at least. He wondered for a moment if the guide had gone back and taken a leg from the dead hound. But the thief looked more closely and recognized the fabric as blue pinstripe. He backed away from it all the way across the dome.

"You cut that off one of the ghuls."

The guide took out a bowie knife and sliced the meat into pieces small enough to fit inside the Maker. "He won't miss it," he said.

"Did you kill him?"

The guide sighed. When he spoke he sounded weary.

"What do you want the Maker to cook up? You don't like Maker meat. So, what? Those shitty bars you choke down?"

"I'm not eating that," said the thief.

“That’s right. You’re not. Molecules are molecules. When the Maker is done you’ll forget all about where they came from.”

“No.”

The guide put the meat in the Maker and started it.

“Suit yourself, but you’re not going to make it to the Turk if you don’t eat. Especially after tonight. You think I don’t see you favoring that shoulder? You need protein for that to heal.”

“I can’t.”

The guide looked hard at him.

“You can and you will if I have to shove it down your throat.”

“Why do you care so much if I eat?”

“Because you think you’re better than me. People like you come to me all the time. Take me home. Take me somewhere better. Save me. But when they see the true cost of travel, they turn their back on the people who saved them. No, you’re going to eat. And tomorrow you’re going to walk. And that’s all there is to it.”

The thief lay down with his back to the guide until an hour later the Maker beeped. He listened as the guide slipped the tray of warm food from the device and set it down. To the thief’s horror, it smelled delicious.

“Dinner’s ready,” said the guide.

The thief didn’t reply.

After a moment, the guide said. “I know you can smell it and I know you’re hungry because I am. Let’s do this the simple way and you come over here because if I have to come over there it won’t be simple.”

The thief listened as the guide ate and it tormented him how much he wanted to eat too. Finally he sat up, hurting his injured shoulder in the process. He said, “I know that smell.”

“I made it just for you, princess. It smells and tastes just like corn bread,” said the guide. Then, mockingly, “Don’t worry. There’s no bones and it’s all protein.” He slid a slice of the loaf across the dome on a piece of the blue pinstripe fabric.

The thief knew the fabric was there so he wouldn't forget the origin of the molecules. He sniffed the slice. His stomach knotted and he knew what was going to happen next. He reached out and pinched off a tiny corner of the slice between his thumb and forefinger. It tasted exactly like corn bread, though the texture was a little gummy.

"Good, huh?" said the guide.

The thief stared at the slice.

"It's too late. You ate some and you want more," the guide said. "You're a monster like me. Now finish it."

The thief knew that the guide's threat to force the food on him wasn't an idle one. And he was starving. He broke off another piece from the slice and put it in his mouth. Then another. And began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" said the guide.

"My wife used to make corn bread. Back when you could get things like corn meal."

"Was it good?"

"Very."

"Does this remind you of home?"

The thief laughed again.

"Not in the slightest."

The guide shook his head.

"Me neither."

They ate in quiet until the guide said, "Did you kill her?"

The thief looked up from his food.

"My wife? Of course not."

The guide cut another slice from the loaf and handed it to the thief, who accepted it.

"I was just curious. You seemed so hot to get out of town and I can't help but notice you're traveling alone."

The thief picked at the food.

"She's gone now. It hurts to stay."

The guide leaned back a little.

“An optimist *and* a romantic. You’re a funny thief.”

“And you’re a chatty cop.”

The guide thought about it.

“I suppose I am. But I lost my cards so I can’t take your gold playing poker.”

“Good,” said the thief. “I cheat at cards and you’d just get mad.”

The guide wrapped the rest of the loaf in the pinstripe material and put it in the remains of his pack.

“Did you love her?” he said.

“Yes. I did.”

“The way you talk about her, though. She didn’t die. She left you.”

“So?”

“So, you loved her, but she didn’t love you.”

“She did. In her way.”

“But she still ran off,” said the guide. “Maybe with someone who didn’t fuck corpses?”

“I didn’t always steal from the dead. It’s just that I want to leave the living alone these days.”

“And now you ate one. How does that feel?”

The thief didn’t reply.

The guide lay back on the floor and said, “The Turk isn’t going to sell you anything. He’s going to take your shit and pluck your arms and legs like the wings off a fly. And don’t tell me that it’s okay because if it is, I’ll leave you right here and go home.”

“No,” said the thief. “Getting murdered by the Turk isn’t any better than dying from your poison medicine. But I have nowhere else to go for the papers.”

“Good luck. I’m not going in with you.”

“You said that.”

“Just so you understand.”

“Right.”

They went to sleep then. The thief didn’t dream, or if he did, he didn’t remember it and that was just as good.

★ ★ ★

The thief awoke, not quite sure where he was at first. The guide was outside, eating in the open air of the parking garage. The thief went and joined him, but refused more of the Maker loaf. It had snowed during the night and the streets were covered in two or more inches of a flat whiteness. When the guide saw him, he tossed the thief a small sealed pack. The thief opened it and shook out a sort of dull Mylar shawl with a hood.

“We’ll be easy drone targets in these dark clothes,” said the guide. “The hoodies will reflect the snow and make us harder to spot.”

They packed up the dome and their meager supplies in the guide’s crudely repaired pack and headed out as soon as the sun was gone. The thief was glad that he’d bought the gloves. They weren’t very thick, but they helped a little with the cold. After last night, he could no longer tell how many days they’d been camping.

“How much longer to the Turk’s?” he said.

“I’ll tell you later,” said the guide.

“Why later?”

“Because I said so. And because I want to get the lay of the land.”

“We’re not lost, are we?”

“Don’t insult me. It’s just that the snow changes things. I need all my eyes—the ones in my head and readings from the spysat. I can’t process it all with you chattering away.”

“All right, then. But tell me when you can.”

“Quiet.”

They walked west for several hours, sometimes on the thoroughfare and sometimes on the side streets, stumbling over bricks made slippery with ice. Once, the thief tripped over a body in the snow and almost fell. The guide kept walking and the thief had to trot a distance to catch up.

The road became stranger as they left the business district behind. What appeared to be people huddled together in a group was a collection of robotic and hologram greeters from local shops and hotels. Each lit up or gave them a mechanical smile as they passed. Some spoke to them in cheerful tones.

“Bonjour.”

“Hello.”

“Nǐ hǎo.”

“Zdravstvuj.”

Later, there was a charred apartment building festooned with torn biohazard tape, as if decorated for a party.

An hour on, a street sculpture of two people kissing that had been constructed from bricks and broken glass.

Then, a children’s playground full of naked mannequins.

At the very edge of the district were a dozen wooden poles with a human skull mounted on top of each. The guide took out the pistol, but if anyone was there, they didn’t show themselves.

Eventually, the thief and the guide came to a long suspension bridge covered in snow. The lights on top of the support towers shone, but the near end of the bridge had been blown up sometime during the pandemic to keep anyone from crossing. The thief’s breath caught in his throat at the sight of the dead end. The guide pointed out over the dark water.

“See that black hump on the hill on other side of the bridge? That’s the Turk’s bunker.”

“But how do we get there?”

“If things work out like tonight, we’ll be there by morning.”

“Do you have a boat?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

They turned north and went along the road facing the water. There was no sound except for their footfalls crunching in the dry snow. The breeze blowing in from the river was icy. The thief shivered, but didn’t feel bad about it because the guide shivered too.

“I don’t suppose you have any of those pills left?” said the thief.

The guide blew into his hands.

“Nope. Lost them all to the dogs.”

“Too bad. I would have paid a lot for one.”

“Me too.”

The thief looked back over the water.

“The Turk’s building looks odd.”

“It used to be a military bunker. Command and control. Fire center. Bang bang. Supposed to be roomy inside. A place to retreat to if things get too hot for the local powers that be.”

“Are they all in there with the Turk?”

“Maybe. But no one’s in there that the Turk doesn’t want.”

“Whoever’s there, it will be good to reach it soon,” said the thief.

“Just so you know, this is going to be the hardest part of the trip.”

“Why? How?”

“You don’t just stroll up to the Turk’s bunker. You’d get blown away by the cops, the national guard, or the Turk himself. There’s an old AI that runs the bunker. The Turk has most of the old systems online. Scout drones. Mines. Jadghunds. Romper Stompers.”

“What’s that?”

“Spooky perimeter mechs that almost look like people. You spot one, think you’re safe, then it takes your head off and skull-fucks you.”

“I’d rather not die this close to the end.”

“Smart man. That’s why we’re taking the safe route.”

The thief looked over at the guide.

“You’ve lost all your supplies. How will you make it back to the fairgrounds?”

“I’ve been in worse shape and even shittier situations. I’ll get back. I have your gold to spend and those cards to cash in.”

“What will you do with it? You have money now. Why don’t you ask the Turk for papers too?”

The guide gave him a dim smile.

“What’s out there for me? I’m at home here. With what you paid me, soon I’ll be a king.”

“You want to die in this city?”

“Why not? It’s as good as anywhere. But I won’t be doing it for a good long time.”

“Not according to the old man.”

“Fuck the old man.”

“Now who’s the optimist?”

As they went, the guide took out some of the Maker loaf. This time, in the cold, the thief ate with him.

The guide said, “Endings always make me happy. Don’t they make you happy?”

“It depends on the ending.”

“That’s your problem. You want things. People who want things are never happy.”

“If you don’t want anything, how about giving me my cards and gold back?”

The guide waved a finger at him.

“There’s a difference between wanting things and needing things. I need plenty. Your shit is going to get it for me.”

“What is it you need?”

“Don’t worry about it. Worry about getting in through that bunker without the Turk ripping out your organs to use for himself.”

“Is that why you’re afraid of the Turk?”

“I didn’t say I was afraid.”

The guide led them east, away from the water and back into the city. They walked for two blocks before the guide stopped.

The thief said, “How many times have you seen the Turk?”

“Who says I’ve seen him?”

“I just get the feeling that you went to see him and that something happened.”

The guide spit into the snow.

“I saw him once. And came out a rich man.”

“Was this before or after you peddled poison?”

“Before. I was still on the force. I quit after I’d made my fortune.”

“Money?”

“Plenty of it. More than on all your cards.”

“What happened to it?”

The guide looked away.

“Things didn’t work out.”

“What happened to the money? Did you lose it or did someone take it?”

The guide turned and gave him a sharp look.

“I’m not a cuck like you. No one takes from me.”

“So you lost it and sold snake oil.”

The guide got down on his knees in the street and wiped snow off a manhole cover.

“Forgive me if I don’t feel sorry for you,” said the thief.

The guide looked up. His face had turned hard.

“You know how the old man said you’d die begging? I hope I’m there to see it. We lost the crowbar to the dogs, so help me open this manhole.”

It took them several minutes to remove the heavy cover with their numb fingers. When they finally managed it, the guide stepped into the hole and climbed down a steel ladder set into the wall. The thief followed him and when he reached the bottom he looked up.

“Shouldn’t we close the cover?”

The guide looked around.

“They’ll do it later.”

“Who will?”

Pointing down one of the tunnels, the guide turned on a flashlight and said, “This way.” The thief was used to streets, and roofs, and the dark contours of other people’s rooms. He didn’t know what to make of this new world, so he followed the guide because the only other thing he could do was climb out of the hole and give up.

He quickly lost track of time in the sewers. The tunnels didn’t smell as awful as he thought they would. Maybe it was the cold. Maybe it was because there was no one left to flush anything into them. Whatever the reason, he was grateful. Still, there were standing puddles here and there and he cursed when the frigid,

slimy water splashed his legs. Sometimes, rats walked along the walls, pacing them. But they seemed more curious than anything. At one turn, the thief saw a half-frozen waterfall of old sewage. He found it strangely beautiful in the bluish glow of the flashlight LEDs. The tunnel they stepped into after going through a cracked wall was much wider and cleaner and their passage, while not pleasant, wasn't as difficult as it had been earlier.

There were moments when the thief wondered if the guide wasn't leading him to a place where it would be easy to kill him and take the last of his belongings. But that made no sense. The guide could have killed him as far back as the Ferris wheel and a hundred times since. No. Whatever the reason for the sewer detour, it wasn't an ambush.

Soon, though, the guide stopped. A tall woman stood in the tunnel ahead. Her black hair was tied back and she wore an expensive fur coat that stretched all the way down to her combat boots. Two other women stood behind her with rifles trained on the men.

"Hello, Maggie," said the guide.

"Hello yourself." She looked at the thief and said to the guide, "The blind man said you might be heading here. This your cargo?"

"He is indeed."

"You're really taking him to see the Turk?"

"It's what he paid for."

"Be careful. There's something going on at the bunker."

"What's going on?" said the thief.

Maggie grinned at him.

"Look. It can talk."

The women behind her laughed.

"I don't know what's going on exactly," said Maggie. "Things are just different. The Turk has more patrols out. He's cleared the countryside and shoots down anything in the sky that gets near him. It's like he's expecting something."

The guide looked at the thief.

“You still want to go?”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice, shithead,” said Maggie.

The thief looked at her and the other women.

“Do you live down here in the sewers all the time?”

Maggie looked at the guide.

“Where did you get this idiot?” She turned to the thief. “You haven’t been in the sewers for miles. What, were you expecting to pop out of the Turk’s toilet?”

“Then where are we?” said the thief.

“The metro tunnel under the river. Army pulled up the rails when they blew the bridge, but it’ll take you right to the bunker.”

“Then you’re the toll takers.”

“Exactly.”

“So, pay the lady.”

“How much?”

She named a sum.

“Gold or cash?”

“Cash is fine.”

When he’d paid, Maggie and the other women stepped aside so that the guide and the thief could pass. As they went, Maggie called to the guide, “Be careful out there. I don’t want to have to drag you in pieces back to the blind man. If you end up in a wheelchair, he won’t be able to help you wipe your ass.”

The guide gave her the finger without turning and the thief heard the women laugh again. The sound was high and clear and reminded him of Mina. More than ever, he wanted to get to the Turk and out of the mad city.

The guide stopped a few yards on and pushed a button set into the grimy wall. Gears ground and something heavy moved in the wall next to them. A moment later, doors opened and the two men stepped into an unlit elevator. The guide pushed the top button and the car clattered upward. A moment later, the doors opened and the thief found himself standing in morning light in an enclosed glass

atrium for the transit system. He pushed through the doors and back out into the cold. No more than a half mile off sat the Turk's bunker, black and immense, outlined in white snow.

The thief felt happier than he had in months.

"You said this would be the hardest part of the trip. That wasn't so bad."

The guide took out a piece of the loaf and ate it without offering any to the thief. "We're not at the hard part yet."

★ ★ ★

They went north for an hour without getting any closer to the bunker. Then turned west, and the building finally grew larger in the thief's vision.

"After what Maggie said, we're going to circle the place before you even dream about going in," said the guide.

By now the thief was impatient, but understood that the wisdom of the guide's plan.

They walked uphill into a thin stand of trees above the bunker. Hunkering down behind a sickly pine, the guide pulled a handful of spiked red marbles from his bag and threw them in a sweeping motion down the hill before them. Rolling under their own power, the marbles bounced far out in all directions. A few stopped in place and pulsed red before going out.

"Mines," the guide said. "Can't go that way. We'll have to try farther up."

He had just reached into his pack for more marbles when the thief caught sight of figures around them. He touched the guide's shoulder.

"There's someone here."

The guide didn't make a sound. His gun fired twice at the figures advancing on them. The bullets' hiss surprised the thief and he pressed himself down into the snow. These weren't hobbling shells. They were Raufoss. Armor-piercing.

One of the figures fell at an angle that allowed the thief to see it clearly. Though it possessed arms and legs, its face was a parody of anything human. Crooked, uneven teeth in what looked like a broken jaw. Lumpy clots of skin on its skull, as if someone had taken a blowtorch to it. The eyes were clear, but the forehead was cracked. A Romper Stomper, he guessed. The guide continued firing and more fell. Each face was different, but no less horrific. The thief grew less shocked by it all. It was a joke. The ridiculous faces were war paint meant to scare fools. Like us, he thought.

More of them came and the guide didn't stop firing until his pistol was empty. Yet the Stompers, mounted with rifles and grenade launchers, didn't return fire. The thief remained still. The guide dropped his pistol to the ground and cursed frantically as the mechs surrounded them. Two reached down and pulled the thief and guide to their feet, marching them around the minefield and down the hill to the bunker.

They bought them in through the front gates. More Stompers filled sides of the concrete deck outside an enormous armor-plated doorway that slid up as they approached. There were gun emplacements along the roof and drones overhead, spinning and diving in complicated circles in the sky above them.

As they approached the armored doorway, the guide dug in his heels and shook his head. He said, "I'm not going in. Shoot me here, but I'm not going in."

The Stomper escort stopped, but did nothing. The thief got the impression that they were communicating with whoever was controlling them from inside the bunker. A minute or so later, two Stompers pushed the guide away and escorted the thief inside.

The guide shouted after him, "If you make it out, I'll take you to the border with your damn papers. I always finish a deal."

★ ★ ★

Through the armored doorway was a large transport bay full of trucks and jeeps. They went through that area and continued deep

inside the bunker complex. Down dozens of gray corridors, some leading off to side offices with dusty glass. The thief could tell they hadn't been inhabited in years. He wondered if it was the military or the wealthy and politically connected who were bringing him so deep into the Turk's lair, and for what purpose.

The Stomper led him into an elevator and they went down for a long time. There were no numbers on the panel. Just simple up and down buttons. The thief counted the seconds and when the doors opened, he figured that they'd been descending into the Earth for close to a minute.

There's no escaping here, he thought. Even if I knew the way out. He took a breath and steadied himself for whatever awaited him.

To his surprise, when the elevator doors opened and he stepped out of the car, the Stomper didn't follow him. The doors slid shut again and he was alone. The thief stood in what could have been some kind of laboratory or, he thought, the basement of an electric power plant. Large monitors ringed the room, showing views of the hillside and rooms within the bunker. The thief saw himself on video from different angles. What looked like motors hung overhead. Around them, smaller devices ran on little wheels along lubricated poles.

The thief looked around and said, "Hello?"

A PA system crackled and a voice said, "Hello," and his name.

The thief turned just as something large swung down from the ceiling in his direction. He recognized it as some sort of particularly sophisticated mech. The central body was twenty feet tall and a dozen insectile arms with delicate titanium fingers hung in a ring from the thing's body. It spoke again: "Hello" and his name. The sound frightened and then disgusted him.

"Stop that," he said.

"Stop what?" said the mech.

"Stop using Mina's voice."

"You can't imagine Mina in a place like this?"

"No."

“Does that mean she should go away?”

That stopped the thief.

“Is she here? Show me. Let me see her.”

The mech slid closer and turned around. Mina’s face swung into view.

“Hello, baby. I’ve missed you.”

He wanted to run. He wanted to vomit. But instead, he went closer to the mech. Its insect limbs clicked and clacked.

It was Mina’s face he saw. In fact, her whole body. It looked as if the skin had been flensed from her body, stretched and intricately melded to the mech. The thief could see the profiles of other faces and skins beyond hers, wrapping around the bot’s entire torso.

The thief said, “How are you here?”

“They brought me here. The people who ran this place. I was almost dead. They experimented on me. When most of them were dead and there was no one to run the site, they gave me a second chance at life.”

“You’re the Turk,” said the thief.

Mina’s face grinned. It didn’t look quite right, but it wasn’t as bad as it might have been.

“If you mean the AI who runs the complex, no. There never was an AI. There was always a human behind the scenes. When the most intelligent parts of the system began to fail, it reasoned that it could survive with more human components.”

“Which means you *are* the Turk, except the Turk never existed.”

“No, silly,” said Mina. “The real Turk was an eighteenth-century automaton that could play chess and beat masters. Only there was no automaton. There was a man inside the box who made all the moves. The whole concept of the Turk is a joke.”

Suddenly exhausted, the thief looked for a chair and when he didn’t find one he sat on the floor.

“How is this possible? I’ve wanted to come here to see the Turk for months. What are the odds that the guide I hired would bring me to you?”

The Mina machine moved closer to him. It extended a metal hand and the thief touched it.

“There were no odds in this. Just me. I knew you were looking. I cleared a path for you to find me. Sent patrols to force you onto safer streets. Cleared buildings for you to bed in.”

“And the dogs?”

“Them too.”

“Why? They almost killed us.”

“Did they attack you?”

“They chased me.”

“But did they attack? I wanted to weaken your friend outside. Deprive him of some of his tools and throw him off balance so it would be harder for him to kill you.”

The thief made a face.

“He could have killed me a hundred times.”

“Yes, but he wants what you want.”

“Travel papers.”

“Yes. He’s been lying to you all along.”

The thief thought it over. It made a kind of sense.

“Why don’t you kill him?”

“Because I want you to do it for me.”

Like everything else since he’d arrived, that caught the thief off guard. He lay down on his back on the floor.

“You haven’t asked how I died,” said Mina.

“I was afraid.”

“It was medicine my mother gave me. *His* medicine.”

The thief sat up.

“Oh god. That’s why you led me to him.”

“I miss you. Do you miss me?”

“Every day.”

“We can be together. I’m not exactly who I once was, but I’m enough to still love you.”

“I love you too. I want to stay. But I want to make that fucker outside pay for what he did.”

Mina's metal hand lay gently over the thief's heart.

"To be with me, you're going to have to give up your body. You'll have to die."

The old man's words about his death came back to the thief: *yours will linger and you'll beg for it.*

"Yes," he said. "Please kill me."

Mina's arm retracted and another swung down. There was a sleek silver injector on the end.

"What's that?" said the thief.

"The virus. A new strain. It works quickly and no one has immunity to it. I've been saving it for just this moment"

"That's how I'll kill the guide?"

"Yes. But it's only transmissible through blood."

The thief looked at her and finally understood. He pushed up his sleeve.

"Give it to me."

The needle stung and the injection burned through his veins for a moment, but when it was over he felt as good and strong as ever.

After Mina gave him the travel papers, the Stomper took him through the building and out onto the bunker's concrete deck, where the guide was waiting. The man opened his arms wide when he saw him.

"You did it, princess. The Turk let you go. With the papers?"

The thief pulled the papers from inside his black bodysuit and showed them to the guide.

"We should get going," said the thief. "I'd like to make it to the border before dark."

"Absolutely," the guide said. He looked at the Stompers, but the mechs did nothing to stop them as he led the thief away. They headed back toward the transit tunnel. The guide talked amiably as they went.

"I don't believe you fucking did it. I have to admit, this trip, I thought you were a complete asshole the whole way. But now? Now you're my fucking hero."

They were halfway to the atrium for the tunnel elevator when the guide said, "Tell me. What does the Turk look like?"

The thief stopped.

"I thought you said he gave you a fortune."

The guide stopped too and looked around, uncomfortable.

"Shit. I did say that. No, I never saw the Turk, and he never gave me anything."

Before the thief could speak, the guide had the knife in his hand and plunged it hilt deep into the thief's gut. The man let out something that was half a groan and half simply a long exhalation of air. The thief fell forward against the guide's chest.

"Don't fight it," said the guide. "Just relax and wait for Jesus."

The thief looked at the guide, but his vision was collapsing to a long tunnel. He knew he would pass out in a moment, but before he did, he pulled off a glove with his teeth and raked his nails down, scratching the guide's cheek. The man screamed and stepped back, pulling out the knife. The thief reflexively pressed his hands over the wound in his belly. It took just a few seconds for the guide to regain his senses and stab him again. This time, the thief brought up a hand and smeared his blood onto the guide's wounded cheek. The guide shoved the thief to the ground and rifled through his bodysuit. When he found the travel papers he stood up.

The cold revived the thief enough that he could see the guide looking over the papers. He appeared elated as he tucked them into his own suit. Then he grimaced and put a hand to his cheek. "Fuck. It burns." The guide pulled his hand away and the fingers came back black. "What the fuck did you do to me?"

The guide ran in the direction of the atrium. The thief watched him sprinting madly away, trying to put as much distance as he could between himself and the thief. In red-slimed snow, the thief was able to push himself up on one elbow. He watched the guide run a hundred or so steps, stumble once, and fall face-first to the ground. He didn't get up.

Soon, a group of Stompers came from the bunker and the thief felt himself loaded onto a stretcher. He passed out and when he awakened, the wounds in his abdomen were healed with a cellular glue that left only vague scars. He had the impression that a long time had passed. Perhaps days.

When he finally sat up in bed, Mina's face flashed on one of the monitors.

"How do you feel?" she said.

"All right. Good, in fact."

"We've been feeding you supplements for days. You were quite malnourished."

"I didn't have any reason to eat."

"Come to me," Mina said. He went outside and a Stomper took him to the lab where Mina was waiting. "It's so good to see you," she said.

"And you."

"I have one more thing I'd like you to do for me."

"What?"

"It's my mother. Will you bring her travel papers?"

The thief rubbed his wounds as he thought about it.

"How long until the virus kills me?"

"The supplements will slow it long enough for you to go there and come back to me."

"But I want to stay now."

Mina reached down and touched his shoulders with her metallic fingers.

"Please do this for me. I don't want my mother dying in this city alone."

"What do you want me to tell her about you?"

"The truth. I'm gone. I took the bank cards from the guide. Give her those."

"The cash and gold too?"

"Yes. You won't need them here."

"Then I can come back?"

Mina looked down at him. "I'll protect you on the journey there and during your return. With my help, you'll be there and back in two days. And I'll be waiting for you."

The thief shook his head.

"I'm afraid."

"Don't be. You'll soon be part of me. We'll be together and you'll never be alone again."

The thief reached out to Mina.

"Can I touch you?"

"Of course."

He laid his hands on her face. She closed her eyes and any lingering suspicions he had about the machine evaporated.

"The sooner I go, the sooner I'll be back," he said.

"Don't be afraid. I'll watch your every step from the sky."

★ ★ ★

A Stomper took the thief back to the city in a zodiac so he wouldn't have to go through the tunnels and lie to Maggie about what happened to the guide. After a day of walking, the thief found Mina's mother as easily as the first time he'd looked for her. He gave her the papers, cards, gold, and cash. When he told the old woman that her daughter was dead she cried for hours. He slept on a battered green velveteen sofa so that she wouldn't be alone on that first night, then he left early in the morning.

The thief watched the sky as he walked, following the path of the drones overhead, leading him left onto this street and right onto that. No one blocked his way or even approached him.

He reached the shore an hour after sundown. The thief was tired. More tired than he should be, he knew. He suspected that the virus was finally taking hold. A Stomper with a zodiac waited for him and he hurried on board. The air felt chilly, but when he touched his forehead he was sweating. It didn't matter. The little craft sped away from the city, rocking over the waves to where Mina and home waited for him, out across the dark water.



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THE
TYGGER

TEGAN MOORE

The Tyger

TEGAN MOORE

illustration by

DION MBD

**T O R
D O T
C O M**

The museum was Jules's favorite place in the world, and the Path Through Time was the best part of the museum. It gave him the major creeps, though at twelve he was too old for it to be actually scary. But the Path's dark corners held the promise of feeling something besides the anger that had been silting up inside him for months. He wanted to feel little-kiddish again, that safe kind of scared that didn't seem to exist anymore.

Stepping onto the Path's nighttime street was like being picked up out of normal life and set down in olden days, and then, as you walked, older and older days, and all the way back to when animals were huge and everything was tusked, with the short-faced bear at the very end of it all, *Arctodus*: slavering, shaggy and clawed, his roar filling the room, teeth and tongue slimy and eyes like holes in ice, monster-king of the Path.

Arctodus was in every kid's nightmares; once you walked the Path he was with you forever, like a god. The Path led you to him, whether you hurried or didn't. Half the pleasure was knowing the horror you were headed toward.

Sounds drifted along the Path from Aunt Lydia's wedding reception: clinking glasses, little cousins shouting, laughter, and the clipping of heels on cobblestones. That should have made the Path less uncanny but it didn't. There was a sense of awful possibility draped over everything, chill and clammy. Tonight *Arctodus* would exist in its truest, purest form. Seeing the bear without distractions, without having to share it—anything might happen. Jules wasn't sure if he was brave enough to do it.

Even though the reception was in his favorite part of his favorite place, and even though Aunt Lydia was Jules's godmother and his favorite adult in the world, he felt awkward. A year ago, he and his mom would have been *in* the wedding. He didn't know what had

happened between his mom and her sister but it had cost him, Jules, a lot. Aunt Lydia hadn't even written his name on the invitation, just "Emily Kominski and family," as if his mom had anyone left besides Jules. As if Jules shouldn't be invited in his own right.

Jules wasn't sure he was supposed to be in the museum lobby alone. It had a sour-bitten smell, like an attic, like things in jars: the alchemy of preservation.

The Path was rented for the party, but everything else was off-limits. The other hallway in the lobby, to ancient Egypt and the gem room, was roped off and the lights were out. That was creepy, too, knowing all the mummies were still there in the dark.

He'd get someone to come with him to *Arctodus*. Maybe Aunt Lydia would go.

Jules stepped onto the Path Through Time.

He passed a factory with dirt-fogged windows, the faint clanking of machinery inside. He'd never noticed that before. That was the sort of thing that made the Path so satisfying. There was always a sense of something going on just out of sight: doors left ajar, lights going on and off behind curtained windows, legs ascending a staircase into the dark.

Jules passed an old-fashioned car parked outside the Barker Street Station, where a train whistle blew, then rounded a corner. The lobby was no longer visible. He was on an empty, lamplit cobblestone street lined with shops and homes, glass glowing softly with reflected light.

Jules went to the window with the little girl in it. She was the first of the Path's citizens. Mannequins, but it was hard not to imagine them as participants in some hoax, playactors who, when the last field tripper wandered off in search of the ancient Romans or the Amazon Rainforest, would let out a breath and slump into a chair. If Jules moved fast enough, or maybe slow enough, he could catch them at it.

Much of the Path was real: antique furniture in the houses, clothes on the frozen people. You could smell the molder and

furniture polish. Even the animals were real: taxidermied dogs and horses in town and wild animals on the prairies and in the woods. Must and formaldehyde. They'd been alive, once, and now they were dead but pretending they weren't. The little girl in the window had that same dead-not-dead look.

The girl was waiting for her mom and dad. She was ringleted and innocent; she looked cold. She clutched a doll, a porcelain-faced shepherdess with a long crook in one hand. Not the kind of toy for hugging. The girl didn't look like she'd ever been hugged, either.

Jules didn't like that window much, but it didn't matter. He had to look. It was a ritual, doing obeisance to the Path and the whole museum. The little girl was always the beginning, just like *Arctodus* was always the end.

Something convinced Jules, suddenly, that the girl was glaring, that she hated him for keeping her there like a pin-pierced butterfly. If he turned his head she would come unstuck and ... what?

Jules stared into the girl's eyes. Don't look away. Reflected light glossed her black pupils. Her eyes were cold and focused like a hunting cat's. Don't look away. Maybe her parents wouldn't ever come home. People died all the time back then; they sank on the *Titanic* or died of the flu. Maybe *Arctodus* got them.

Jules's toes curled. Nerves bubbled inside him. Something else, too: a hot feeling left over from his earlier argument with his mom. She hadn't wanted to come to the wedding, and Jules had to yell to get her to listen. Aunt Lydia was his *godmother*. She was his mom's best friend. Or she had been.

"Your parents are dead," he whispered to the girl in the window.

Something flickered across her eyes and it looked—for a second it really looked—like she'd glanced behind Jules. His heart stuttered. But of course when he turned it was just Aunt Karen passing along the cobblestone street toward the lobby. He turned back to the window.

The girl's tiny pearl teeth were bared, nose ridged with wrinkles like a snarling animal. At first he believed he actually saw that, and

he even stepped back as though the girl might smash through the window, tiny doll-fists reaching for his dress shirt. But he didn't. She was just the same boring, frilly little girl.

Jules staggered off the curb. He wanted to run, which was ridiculous. He had a good imagination and that made it easy to scare himself. He turned away from the window and started walking toward the party, though he still felt the girl's stare.

A squeal interrupted the quiet, and some little dressed-up cousins ran down the cobbled street. Sofia chased them. She was Jules's age, in a flowery dress with a babyish yoke of lace around the neck. Sofia's fingers were bent like claws and she was growling, and when she caught one cousin around the waist the little girl dissolved into hysterical giggles. "I'm gonna eat you," Sofia said, and shook her cousin back and forth.

Jules thought about going back the way he'd come, but it was too late. "Hey!" Sofia called to him. "Come play with us."

The 1800s hotel was at the end of the street, right before the next twist in the Path. It was busy with voices and movement. Jules pretended he hadn't heard Sofia and slipped onto the hotel's porch. Inside was a fancy bar where you could buy sarsaparilla, which tonight was a real bar for grown-ups. There were dusty plush chairs you could sit in, and old-fashioned music playing from hidden speakers. Adults were everywhere.

Immediately, Jules heard his mother's voice. She was crying, leaky and whiny, on the far side of the room twisted into an overstuffed chair with an empty wineglass in one hand. She had her brother Tomas's shoulder clutched in her other. "He's an animal," she said. "When I married him I never would've thought he was such a goddamn animal!"

Jules felt himself winding up tight, vaguely aware that Sofia had followed him into the hotel. He turned away, hooked his arms over the bar's edge, and stepped up on the brass kick rail. He asked the man behind the bar for a Coke.

"Coming right up," the bartender said.

Sofia climbed up next to him. "I'll have a Sprite. I'm not supposed to have caffeine." She rolled her eyes and then leaned back, testing her balance on the rail. Jules ignored her.

The bartender gave them both their sodas. Sofia sucked her straw into her mouth while still balancing on the rail. Conversationally, she said, "Sorry about your parents."

From the corner of his eye he saw his mother lean in to Tomas's arms. He couldn't hear the crying anymore; maybe she was done. "Thanks," he said, looking at the glass of Coke in front of him. What were you supposed to say when someone said they were sorry your parents got divorced? Sofia couldn't understand. Jules didn't care if she was sorry. It didn't help. Better if his dad said sorry, since the affair was his fault, but at least his dad didn't shout at Jules and cry in public all the time. His dad didn't talk about the divorce at all, or his pregnant girlfriend, or what it would be like when Jules had a half-sibling, which Jules's mom only ever called *the little bastard*. His dad just showed up every other weekend to take Jules to movies and things, and acted normal.

Normal wasn't right, either—something was broken, seriously broken—but at least his dad didn't act crazy. Jules's mom was crazy. She had some feral, furious, grieving thing inside her which she refused to tame. So if anyone should be sorry, it should really be Jules's mom.

But then he saw her coming toward him, Tomas in tow, face composed despite red-rimmed eyes, and whatever was cut loose in Jules swung toward her. The magnetism that had pushed him away reversed, and he wanted to be close to his mother, feral or not.

Tomas leaned against the bar. Jules's mom smiled and stroked Jules's back. "Hey, Sofia. Being good, Julian?"

"Yeah."

"I was telling your uncle about you going to State for poetry," Jules's mom said. She pushed her empty wineglass toward the bartender. "You should do your poem! You want to hear him, Tom? He's so good."

“Mom,” Jules said. Behind him, Sofia sucked the last of the soda out of her cup, liquid slurping past ice.

“Come on,” his mom said. Then, as if he’d forgotten how it went, she said, “Tiger, tiger...”

Jules sighed, exasperated. Now if he didn’t do it she’d just do it herself, or try to, and ruin it. He stepped away from the bar. Uncle Tomas and the bartender both turned expectantly.

“‘The Tyger,’ by William Blake,” he said.

He did the poem. He did the gestures—*what dread hand? And what dread feet?*—explaining the story with the way he told it, and by the time he got to *Did he who made the Lamb make thee?* his expression had grown puzzled, a little fearful, a little amazed. All those things at once. He was acting, and because he had won District for sixth graders and was going to the state competition, he guessed he was pretty good at it.

There was an essay he’d written and memorized, too, explaining the poem, how in Blake’s time people didn’t know about dinosaurs, so a tiger was the scariest thing they could imagine. How back then everyone believed that God made everything, and God was supposed to be like a loving parent, so it was confusing that He’d make something like man-eating tigers. It meant you had to accept the bad, scary parts of life if you wanted to really appreciate the good ones. But Jules’s mom never cared if he did that part.

When he said the second *fearful symmetry* that ended the poem his mom clapped, and Uncle Tomas and the bartender had to clap too. Sofia hopped down off the rail clapping too hard.

“Wow,” Sofia said. “Tiger, tiger!”

“Isn’t he good? He got the acting from me,” his mom said to Tomas. “Remember my senior play? I never got a chance to do any of that after high school. After I married Rob.” She looked at Jules appraisingly. “Don’t get married young.”

“Yeah, Mom,” he said. “No problem.”

“Oh, there’s your Papa Jan,” his mom said. “I’ll go get him and you can do it again.”

“Mom!” Jules said, sliding out of her reach. “I just *did* it.” He grabbed his Coke and hurried toward front door of the hotel, relieved that she didn’t call him back.

Sofia followed. On the porch, she did a dramatic jitter. “I drank my soda too fast. Sugar rush!”

The street was empty again, the little cousins gone. Jules turned the corner around the front of the hotel. Puddles glistened in the gutter. The Path here was further back in time, no longer cobblestones and gingerbread trim but dirt roads and rough boards, like a Western movie. Jules sat on a bench across the street from the saloon—distant, jangly piano music came through its dusty window—and set his Coke next to him. He didn’t want it anymore. He waited for the magical, held-breath feeling to come back, but it wouldn’t.

Maybe Sofia kept the feeling at bay, her heels banging on the plank sidewalk. He didn’t want her coming with him to *Arctodus*; she’d ruin that too. But he didn’t think he could look at the bear alone.

A group of people were gathered at the end of the street, doing something wedding-official on the general store’s porch. Jules saw the blaze of his Aunt Lydia’s white dress. She hadn’t even said hi to him yet. Jules wanted to go up to her and slide inside her arms for one of her extra-squeezy hugs, hear her say *Julian* in her bubbly voice, like she was so surprised and delighted that he existed.

He looked away.

Sofia plopped next to him on the bench. Jules felt his body go tight, teeth crushing together. He waited a few seconds, then gasped. “Sof,” he whispered, frozen. “Don’t move! Someone’s watching.”

Sofia scrunched up her face. “What?”

Jules knew the secrets of the Path Through Time, or most of them. Behind them, in a second-story window, a witchy old woman with a crooked nose was posed peering out at the street. He didn’t

have to check to know they were on the right bench, in the right spot, and he bet Sofia didn't know about her.

"Don't ... move."

The skeptical look on Sofia's face was melting toward uncertainty, but she didn't look scared yet, either. Jules whipped around and pointed at the window where the woman watched.

"There!"

He'd been ready to jump up and run, hoping to spook Sofia back to the party, but he dropped his hand. Nobody was in the window. The curtain was drawn.

"Nice try," Sofia said.

"There's supposed to be..." he muttered. Why wasn't Sofia catching on? He might have to just tell her to go away. He got up and stalked toward the general store.

The Path had always been the same, all Jules's life. Why would they change something? Especially something cool, like a creepy witch spying on you?

A flash snapped from the general store, an epileptic crack-crack of light. Aunt Lydia and her new husband posed for photos. Aunts and uncles had gathered, along with Papa Jan and Busia Gloria. Uncle Tomas and Jules's mom came out of the hotel. His mom tripped on the step but managed not to spill anything from the tumbler she carried. Jules heard his uncle say something, and his mom laughed. They joined the picture group.

Jules looked back at the curtained window. If he looked hard, he thought he could see a silhouette against the fabric. The old lady was there, but with the curtain drawn. Maybe the fabric had come loose. He thought maybe the curtains were moving. In, out, like something was breathing against them. Jules felt his breathing sync with the sway. In, out. In, out.

A laugh from the photo group broke his reverie. His mom hugged Lydia and said something, patting the groom on the arm like he was a little dog. Then she turned to everyone and shouted, "Let's hope he's not a cheating sonofabitch like mine! Ha!"

She might start crying again. When his mom cried people always expected Jules to do something about it. He glanced at the window one last time before putting his head down to slip past his gathered family.

There was a sharp twist to the Path beyond the store. Here the road turned muddy and rough, or at least was made to look that way while still being wide and flat enough for strollers. There was a rustic schoolhouse and a prairie diorama with a covered wagon train leading off into a painted background of high grasses. It was supposed to be early morning but the lights here were dim. Maybe this area wasn't part of the rental, or maybe it was just different at night. Jules leaned against a split-rail fence that bordered a marsh and looked at a frozen naturalist sketching a hawk.

Sofia caught up with him. "Where are you going?"

"Nowhere. Just following the Path."

"You aren't going all the way to the end, are you?"

"I don't know. Why not?"

"My mom said we're supposed to stay by the hotel."

Sofia's mom made up a lot of rules. "My mom didn't tell me that. But you should go back, or you might get in trouble."

"Are you gonna go look at the bear?"

He imagined her pretending fear in front of *Arctodus*. A grunt of irritation crawled out of him. "Sofia. Why don't you go play or something?"

Her face crumpled with anger. "I can stay if I want!"

Jules sighed and pushed away from the fence.

Next on the Path was a settler house nestled in the woods. Jules could smell woodsmoke, though probably that was something from the wedding. There was the sound of someone chopping wood and a taxidermied cat curled up on the porch. Jules wondered where they'd gotten the dead cat. Two pioneer kids, a girl holding a little boy's hand, were frozen among the trees that besieged the house, a thick forest of summer green and nighttime blue made darker, denser, in the low light.

“Where are you going?” Sofia said again, doggedly following.

Jules stopped and stared into the woods. “Those wolves are gonna get them.”

“There aren’t any wolves.”

He pointed. “Right there.”

It was hard to tell where the fake trees stopped and the painted trees began. Sofia took a step closer. “There’s no wolves, Jules Drools. I’m not scared.”

“You’ve seriously never seen them?”

The farmstead soundtrack played: chickens *bawking* about their business, the *thwock* of an axe in wood. A dog barked; birdsong. Cheery, even in twilight. Sofia took another step. “You’re a liar and I don’t believe you.”

She sort of believed him. “Look. Right there.” Sofia edged up to the rail to look. Right before Jules was about to grab her, the soundtrack played a wolf howl.

Sofia squeaked and darted back toward the camera flash and burble of party sounds. When she was at the corner, she turned to shout, “Jerk!”

Jules watched her go, and then squinted into the woods.

There weren’t any wolves. Or there had never been before. Had that changed too? In the dark he thought there might be the outline of a big shaggy dog back there. Maybe more than one.

A liquid feeling seeped into his belly. He didn’t want to stay there. A younger Jules would have run away, too, followed Sofia back to the safety of family, but this Jules hesitated. He watched the maybe-dog shape in the woods. Was it painted? Or real, amid the trees? He felt like it *was* there, and shouldn’t be.

If he stayed where he was Sofia might return Or, worse, the shape might move. He stepped away from the fence. His heart banged his rib cage—not fast, just hard. The Path felt strange, unfamiliar, even though he knew it backward and forward. Dangerous, even though it wasn’t and couldn’t be.

Beyond the homestead was the Pre-Columbian section, before white people took over America. Here the Path became a trail through the wilderness, though one with handrails. There was more forest, with skunks and a cougar hunting elk. In a clearing there was a cluster of Osage houses, tidy structures slabbed with bark shingles that Jules had repeatedly failed to replicate in the band of trees behind his house. Bare-chested kids chased each other; a woman buried her hands in the vines of her garden. All exactly as it had always been, because the Path wasn't supposed to change.

At the edge of the clearing a deer hung upside down from a tree while a man peeled its skin off. Its muscle gleamed licorice-red, the architecture of its ribs and the little cords of fiber between them fascinating, delicately gory. When you walked past you could see the darker red that showed in the flap cut in its belly. Clouded eyes, little pink tongue between its teeth.

Once, standing here with his dad, his father had explained how to skin a deer. His dad said he would take Jules hunting when he was older. If you weren't old enough to drive a car you weren't old enough to shoot a gun, he said, even though he'd done it when he was a kid, but as soon as Jules had his learner's permit they would borrow guns from his mom's brothers. That was three years away, almost forever, but the promise stood.

Who would they borrow guns from after the divorce? Especially with his mom crying to everyone. None of his uncles would loan his dad anything, after that.

He felt suddenly seasick, wobbly. He gripped the railing, pressed his forehead against it, and squeezed his eyes closed. There was a smell in his nostrils, a sick smell, like a hospital but dirtier. A roadkill smell; a dead-meat smell. He heard a zippy hum—the buzzing of flies lifting and settling again. His eyes snapped open, focused on the deer carcass. Beyond the Osage man's back the flayed muscles glistened in the low light.

His mother's voice carried around the corner, along with the clipping heels of approaching footsteps. Jules stood up.

A giant tree split the path just beyond the Osage houses. Jules stepped behind it and crouched down. He regretted it immediately. Only little kids hid from their parents. He still felt nauseated. He leaned against the cool, smooth trunk to keep his balance.

There were two sets of footsteps. "I just want to tell you," his mom was saying. Her voice was liquid and unhinged. "I just need to talk to you about—I want to say—"

"Em, you're spilling." Aunt Lydia's voice. His mom and his aunt came closer. Jules tried not to move. His pulse rose in his ears.

Right in front of him was one of his favorite parts of the whole Path: a tiny, white-spotted fawn tucked into a puff of grass. It lay flat against the ground and was hardly noticeable unless you knew to look. Jules was at eye level with it. The fawn had been real once, like the pioneer cat. Some baby deer had died and this was what was left, the shell of some perfect little dead thing.

Maybe the fawn was the skinned deer's baby. Jules remembered telling the girl in the window that her parents were never coming back. Her little pearl teeth and furrowed nose. But that was his imagination.

"Oops," Jules's mom said. "Oh, it'll wash out. Can we sit? I love you, Lyd, we need to sit and—"

"Now probably isn't the right time."

"I just—I'm so sad. We need to *talk*, Lyd, you're my *sister*."

Jules could feel the flicking of blood in the veins of his face and neck, in time with his heartbeat. That nasty meat smell coated his tongue. The molten quality of his mother's speech, fragments dissolving into each other, they warned him the way a sour-burnt miasma warns that someone's lit a cigarette nearby. Easy to know what was around the corner.

"Let's just enjoy the party, okay? I don't want to talk when you're drinking."

"I'm not! Lydia! I'm not drunk, I'm—I just wish you'd *talk* to me." His mother's voice was getting higher and faster. "I'm so sad. You're not *listening*. You're my *sister*—"

Jules stared at the fawn. His shoulder hurt where he leaned against the tree and his ankles burned from crouching. One of the baby deer's oversized ears flicked. It lifted its head so one tiny hoof could scratch behind its ear. Jules could hear the flutter of the hoof against fur.

His eyes stung and his mouth was dry. The fawn looked him in the eye, the small bony skull turning on an elegant neck. Then it lay its head down again.

Something heavy smacked to the ground. "Emily," Aunt Lydia said. "Emily, calm down. Breathe. Hey. Look at me. Breathe."

Jules toppled backward, away from the fawn, catching himself on the heel of one palm and tipping sideways. His knee banged against the hard ground. It was real; he'd seen it. It was dead, but it had moved.

"Julian!" Aunt Lydia called. She had one arm around Jules's mom, who was bent and red-faced, eyes bugging, tears smearing her cheeks. She looked like someone in a movie who had been punched in the stomach. A glass lay broken at her feet.

Aunt Lydia was pale, her hair piled up and shimmery, her dress as elaborate as the cake they'd cut earlier. She looked like a picture of someone else's aunt getting married, and her expression was almost as desperate as Jules's mom's. "Help me with your mom."

Jules wanted to run, to flip and scuttle away on all fours. He struggled to his feet. As soon as he was upright his mother reached for him from Lydia's arms, grabbed on to him while she heaved and shook. Lydia stepped back to let him take his mom's weight. Jules felt stiff and unreal. He didn't want to look at his aunt or his mother so he stared at the fawn, which didn't move. His mom's breath was hot. Snotty tears soaked his shoulder.

"Breathe," Aunt Lydia kept saying, and they stood there until his mother calmed down. It took a while. His mom grew heavier and heavier.

"My good boy," his mom said. She sniffled, recovering. "Isn't he a good one, Lyd?"

“Yes,” Aunt Lydia said. “Emily, I have to get back. The photographer—”

“Oh,” his mom said. “Have you seen him do his poem?”

“Mom. I don’t want to,” Julian said, but quietly.

Aunt Lydia did not look like she wanted to see Jules do anything. “Maybe later.”

“Come on,” Jules’s mom said. She could have been talking to either of them. “Real quick.”

From the warm and damp cave of her embrace Jules heard the wet, wringing sound of his mother swallowing. Her arms were hot and bony. Jules tugged himself free. He felt sick and his cheeks and neck burned. “I already did it tonight.”

“Don’t make him, Em,” Aunt Lydia said.

His mom’s face seemed gray and papery, like a mask. With both of them against her, she dug in. “It’s only a minute of your time,” she snipped. “One minute.” Again, it wasn’t clear who she was talking to—her sister or her son.

Jules mumbled, still looking at the grass that hid the fawn. “I’m sick of it.” He was sick of a lot of things. His voice got louder, getting desperate: “You’re always bugging me.”

She was still teary, barely recovered, but her eyes hardened. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she sneered. “I never ask you for anything!”

He rolled his eyes. That broke her.

“*You*,” she spat. “You are *just*”—she sucked in a breath—“like your *father*.”

“Emily,” Lydia said, taking Jules’s mother by her shoulder. “We’re going back. Come on. We have photos.”

Jules’s mother glared at him. One hand at her side twitched, like she might hit him with it. He couldn’t help it; he flinched. She’d spanked him when he was little, but with spare-the-rod detachment. Never with the anger that hardened her cheekbones and jawline now. He felt his own body twitch, too.

In the distance, someone called Lydia’s name. “Coming,” his aunt replied, and turned. Jules’s mom followed, arm caught in her sister’s

grip, her mouth tight. One ankle wobbled in its high heel.

Jules's face stung like he'd been slapped. That voice. It turned every word into a curse. What had he done to make her so angry?

He felt like a fist, clenched up, desperate to hurt something. He put a hand against the smooth bark of the tree. Then he drew it back and hit the tree, open-palmed. It made a loud, wet smack that rang the bones in his hand. He sucked air through his teeth and shook his wrist. He didn't feel any better. Jules turned his back on the future and moved in the other direction.

The Path grew darker; nighttime again, and plains instead of forest. Ahead, a herd of taxidermied bison were posed trundling around the turn from the Pre-Colombian to the Prehistoric, running in the night like massive bad dreams. Their coats were ragged and black. As they turned the corner the bison were replaced by bigger, hump-backed ones, some extinct kind, and then those by even huger mammoths, and at the end was a mastodon, biggest of all, great scythes of tusks curved and white as the moon, and then you were at the end of history.

Rocks lined the Path and kept its creatures at bay. It smelled cool, like the air after a thunderstorm. Jules felt crazy. It was anger, he realized; he was so mad. *You're just like your father.* When all she talked about was how much she hated his dad.

There was plenty of light along the Path, but it wasn't normal. The overhead lights were off completely, illumination coming from somewhere else, diffuse, as if lit by the moon screened by painted background clouds. The light pooled like ice, like you were walking someplace snowbound, but bright enough to see: there was the giant sloth pawing branches toward its shaggy Muppet face; a saber-toothed cat watching its cubs roll in the ice-light; a moose the size of a house brandishing its antlers at an ugly pig-thing. They were motionless, but the room felt like it was full of hidden motion, things moving behind his back. Jules might have been too afraid to go on. But the anger dammed up inside him was all he could feel.

Glass eyes followed him. He couldn't see the giant pelts rippling with breath, rib cages expanding, wet nostrils flickering, but that didn't mean they didn't. In the silent, silvery light everything was perfectly still, except for the wave-steady, slow-motion inhale, exhale. If he were watching, he would have seen it; if the fury hadn't clouded his vision, he could have seen.

The farther he walked, the angrier he got. It churned, solidified. Or maybe he was afraid. Maybe that's what it really was.

Arctodus was shielded behind an outcropping of rocks at the end of the hall, saved for last. Jules could feel its gravity. The air seethed where the sound of its voice would appear.

He kept going. Anger pushed him, but also fear: an awe-filled, childish fear, the kind where you covered your eyes but peeked out between your fingers; your first roller coaster ride, strapped in next to your dad, his arm over your shoulder. Except it was the roller coaster, too, slam-fast movement and the rage of speed. Reckless, almost out of control. You couldn't have the one without the other.

He couldn't find the edge to separate the fear from the anger. Maybe they were one piece, the same thing.

Jules's mom hated his father more than anything. *That fucking animal*. She'd only started cursing after she found out about the affair.

The sound of *Arctodus* slithered over the Path, a low quivering. Jules froze with one foot in front of the other, his breath shallow as the growl rose to a slavering snarl, and another, and then a roar. Then silence sank back over everything like fog.

Arctodus shouldn't scare him anymore, not really. But of course it did. It would always scare him.

Jules took another step. He touched the rocky outcrop that hid the great bear. The rocks were limned with frost. His fingertips burned with cold that was entirely real. Real ice on fake rocks. Real moonlight on imitation wilderness. He stepped around the boulders.

Arctodus should have been posed on a rubbly mound, reared up with one giant paw raised, but the plinth was empty. Just the painted

background of a sparse scrubland. There was no place for the bear to have gone.

Jules approached, looking to either side as if *Arctodus's* enormous, furious mass might be tucked behind a tree. There was no guardrail between the Path and the raised dais of mounded stone that usually kept *Arctodus* out of arm's reach. The placard that told you about the bear was still in place.

Jules touched the sign. He looked up at the empty pile of rocks. And then he was climbing, dress shoes slipping, hands on cold, real stone, waiting for alarms to sound, waiting to be dragged away and scolded and punished, but nothing happened. Jules climbed up to where *Arctodus* should have stood. He was afraid, and he was sorry he had come, except he had to come here and he couldn't ever go back. He had stepped off the Path and into the place where the bear should have been.

Lips quivering, he crouched on the rocks. Jules looked over the Path Through Time. He showed the Path his teeth.

There was a great sigh behind him, or above or around him, and *Arctodus* was exactly where it had always been. It was Jules that was changed, because he wasn't on the Path; he stood instead directly beneath *Arctodus*, with his back to it. The bear had returned, or had been there all along.

Jules craned his neck up and saw the great shape looming above him. Its coat was all the shades of shadow and stone and its mottled, slobbering mouth was frozen open in a roar. He felt its presence, its largeness, the terror of it, like a sudden fall.

The room's soundtrack started up again, that low, building growl.

The bear's hind feet were planted on either side of Jules, legs like pine trunks, fur faintly blue in the frozen light. He smelled the musk of its tangled, burr-snarled coat, the wet-meat stink of its breath.

Arctodus wasn't real, hollow inside its fake fur, just drama and awe. Its teeth were something else's teeth. The leather of its paws was some other animal's skin. But Jules could smell its foul, thick, animal reek.

It bellowed. Jules felt its massive chest vibrate as it rose to its full height. He looked straight up at jagged nonsense shapes tattered with dark fur. His eyes couldn't make sense of what he saw, and anyway they swam with adrenaline. The roar coughed to an end. The bear's huge jaws clapped shut. A strand of drool slunk out of the corner of its mouth and slimed to the floor next to Jules's foot.

It turned its face down toward him, eyes blank, like a crocodile's.

Arctodus stood over him, looking down as Jules looked up, its head over Jules's head. The weight of it surrounded him, wrapping him, enormous but also just big enough, like an adult's coat or a closet that you'd hide inside, shivering with delight at your own terror. Jules shuddered. He could feel the bear's claws extended from the ends of his own fingers, feel the bear's teeth hot inside his own mouth, canines pressing into his lips. He breathed *Arctodus*'s stinking breath. It wasn't real but it was real enough.

This was the end of the Path Through Time. There was nowhere for him to go but forward.



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About the Authors

Sam J. Miller is a writer and a community organizer. His fiction has appeared in *Lightspeed*, *Asimov's*, *Clarkesworld*, *Apex*, *Strange Horizons*, and *The Minnesota Review*, among others. His debut novel *The Art of Starving* (YA/SF) was published by HarperCollins. His stories have been nominated for the Nebula, World Fantasy, and Theodore Sturgeon Awards, and he's a winner of the Shirley Jackson Award. He lives in New York City.



Annalee Newitz is an American journalist, editor, and author of fiction and nonfiction. They are the recipient of a Knight Science Journalism Fellowship from MIT, and have written for *Popular Science*, *The New Yorker*, and the *Washington Post*. They founded the science fiction website *io9* and served as Editor-in-Chief from 2008–2015, and then became Editor-in-Chief at *Gizmodo* and Tech Culture Editor at *Ars Technica*. Their book *Scatter, Adapt, and Remember: How Humans Will Survive a Mass Extinction* was nominated for the LA Times Book Prize in science. Their first novel, *Autonomous*, won a Lambda award.



Ian Rogers is the author of the award-winning collection, *Every House Is Haunted*. A novelette from the collection, "The House on Ashley Avenue," was a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award. His work has been selected for *The Best Horror of the Year* and *Imaginarium: The Best Canadian Speculative Writing*. Ian lives with his wife in Peterborough, Ontario. For more information, visit ianrogers.ca.

Lavie Tidhar is the World Fantasy Award-winning author of *Osama*, *The Violent Century*, the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize-winning *A Man Lies Dreaming*, and the Campbell Award-winning *Central Station*, in addition to many other works and several other awards. He is also the author of the *Locus* Award nominated *Unholy Land* and debut children's novel *Candy*.

Lavie works across genres, combining detective and thriller modes with poetry, science fiction and historical and autobiographical material. His work has been compared to that of Philip K. Dick by the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*, and to Kurt Vonnegut's by *Locus*.



Richard Kadrey is the New York Times bestselling author of the Sandman Slim supernatural noir series. *Sandman Slim* was included in Amazon's "100 Science Fiction & Fantasy Books to Read in a Lifetime," and is in production as a feature film. Some of Kadrey's other books include *The Grand Dark*, *The Everything Box*, *Ballistic Kiss*, and *Butcher Bird*. He also writes screenplays and for comics such as *Heavy Metal*, *Lucifer*, and *Hellblazer*.



Tegan Moore loves to find the alien among us: in the minds of animals, in humans who might not be entirely human, in the monsters we create out of our own frustrations and fears. Her writing has been published in *Asimov's Science Fiction* and *Strange Horizons*. She is a Clarion West graduate, a professional dog trainer, is allergic to chocolate and only has eight toenails.



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