JANUARY/
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TOR.COM SHORT FICTION

Ashing-Giwa
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Zozulya

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KEMI ASHING-GIWA

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Begin Reading

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About the Author

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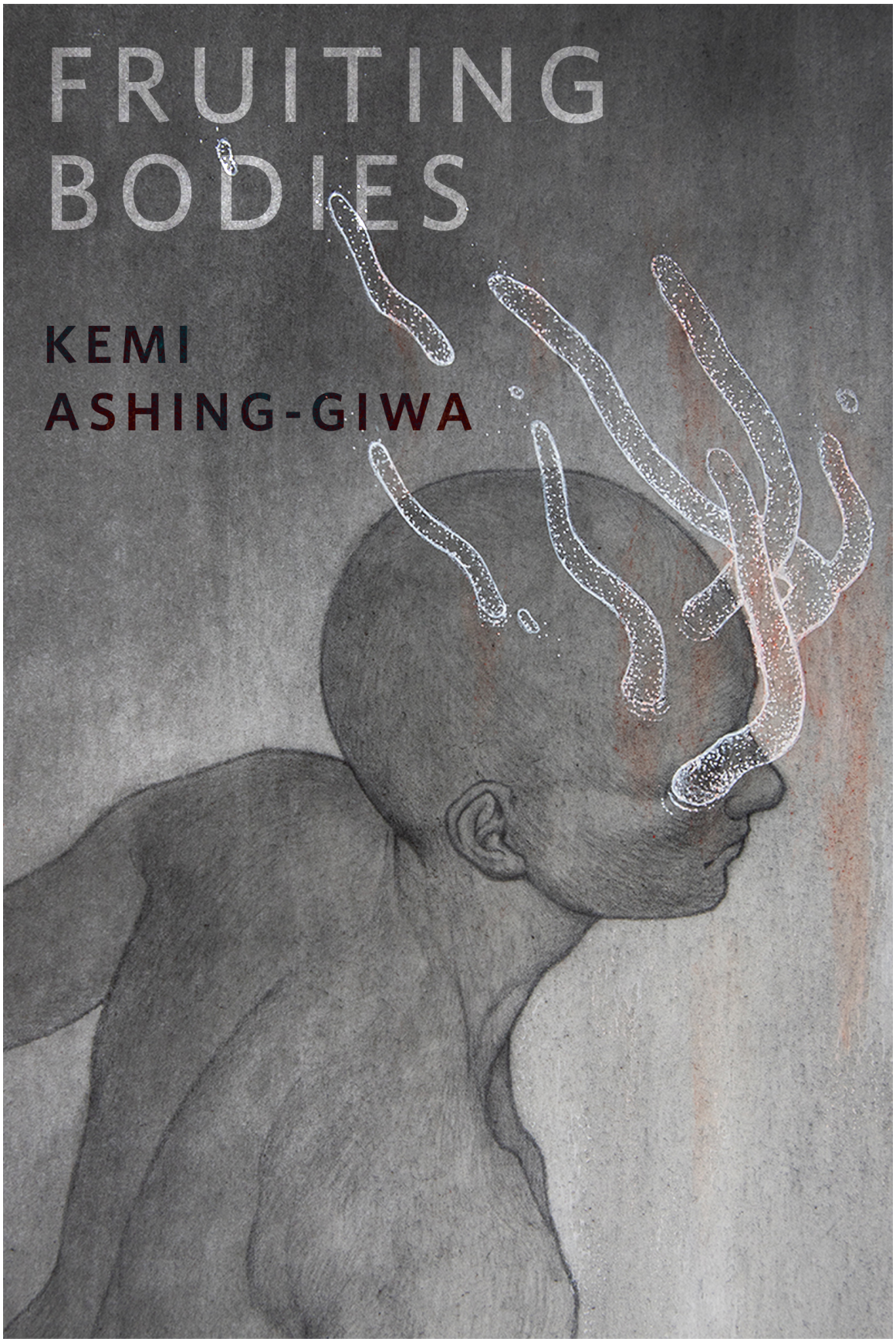
KEMI ASHING-GIWA



Fruiting Bodies

KEMI ASHING-GIWA

illustration by

REIKO MURAKAMI

For every civilization, for every species, for every being, there is an end—an insurmountable challenge from which there is no escape without some exceptional change. Ancient Earth scientists called this the Great Filter. It was an explanation for why, when we cried out into the stars in the hope that intelligent life would sing back, the stars remained silent. The end of humankind was *supposed* to be fire and brimstone raining from the polluted skies of Earth. What happened was far, far worse.

★ ★ ★

Today the sun blazes through the dark clouds, a circle of burning white in the shadowed sky. The rock around me gleams in a thousand shades of black and vermilion, volcanic peaks sticking into the firmament like needles. Only a few scraggly esoberi bushes, and the dust-hoppers that pollinate them, are able to eke out a living in this barren land. I watch the gray-black clouds drag by for a moment as I chart my course in my head. The terrain is treacherous; one misstep could see me trapped in a pit of poisonous volcanic fumes even I cannot survive.

Not long ago, I thought our death would be Kushisha, the molten rock that pulled our generation ship into its orbit and refused to let go. But now, those of us still living call our species' Great Filter the arinkiri—the night walkers. When the two moons rise and the temperature plummets, the arinkiri crawl up from the boiling rock of our new home.

Then they hunt, crawling across the smoking expanse in search of warm bodies.

I wake with them. I must, for Morayo. My beloved. My home, my heart.

A sharp, sweet smell fills my nose with the abruptness of a punch. My senses lead me forward, step by step, until I find the source. A tiny drop of blood on a stray chunk of igneous rock, baked by the heat into an ochre spot. It's not hers, thank the stars.

It's one of *theirs.*

Almost all of us are lost now, but those who survived took Morayo. They want a future, and they know that I am all the future that there is. Or my genome is, at least. But the greatest of our reproductive technology died with the Before, so I suppose it would be more accurate to say that only a piece of me is their future to them. They certainly don't need my mind. They know that I am coming, that I have been coming for them for a long time. The only thing left for them to do is wait for me. The blood is only a week old, perhaps. My hands curl into fists. I'm close.

"Hello, Inyama."

Though the voice is horribly familiar, a wave of panic crashes down on me anyway, sending my heart slamming into my ribs. I haven't heard another voice, seen another being, in months. Out on the flats, there's nothing to hear but the thick bubbling of lava, the whisper of sulfuric wind.

"Eranko." I turn toward him, running a tired hand down the round curves of my face. My fingers move freely, unobstructed by metal or mesh. I don't need a respirator. My lungs are different; they've adapted to Kushisha. So have I.

Eranko looks worse every time we meet. His tattered ash-coated clothes, his shriveled skin faded to a jaundiced yellow-gray. His lips and half of his left cheek have rotted away, revealing cracked, yellow molars.

He wags a scolding finger at me. "You've forgotten the most important rule, Inyama."

I say nothing. I've forgotten how to laugh. Back when there was still a colony, back when the proud walls of Apogee still gleamed under the dim sun, the first edict was that no one was to ever, *ever* venture outside alone. But now Apogee is the domain of the arinkiri.

Everyone that's still someone is outside now, and most of us are alone.

"How long?" Eranko asks after a moment.

"Turn around."

He does as I ask, and I carefully pull aside the few lank bits of reddish-blond hair he has left. I run my fingers over his skull—there. A round, almost imperceptible bump. The pileus of a fruiting body preparing to pop his head open.

I was a mycologist, Before. The transmission and development of the contagion are quite similar to those of the entomopathogenic Earth fungus *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis,* only differing in minor ways. The zombie ant fungus, it was called. The colonists had hoped I would be able to save them, given my expertise.

"A fortnight, at most," I tell him.

Eranko gives a shallow, croaking sigh. The infiltrating mycelium has begun to decompose his lungs. Less than a week, then.

"Does it still hurt?" he asks, gaze lifting to my right bicep.

"No," I lie.

"I'm sorry for biting you."

"I'm sorry I startled you."

When the arinkiri are around other humans, they're little more than gnashing mouths, clawing fingers. With me and with each other, they're themselves. Until the fungus consumes them completely; then they're just dead.

I was leaving Apogee when Eranko bit me. He was still riled up from the family he'd just chased down. I lift a hand to the mottled scar on my arm. He stopped chewing once he tasted my blood.

Eranko turns around to face me, bending his triple-jointed limbs at unnatural angles as he crawls. And yet, on the whole, he moves like water, his re-formed flesh made inhumanly flexible.

"They're fools," he growls.

"They are."

"You'll find her."

"I will."

Eranko grins with all his sharp, sharp teeth and nods as if satisfied with my answer. “This will be the last time we meet, I suppose.”

“You could come with me,” I say. “There’ll be … food.”

“Oh, no.” Eranko lets out a harsh bark of laughter. “No. I think I’ll spend my last days pretending to be human.”

“Then I hope that the end, when it comes, is painless.”

Eranko reaches out a hand, only to retract it before his fingers brush against mine. “Will you mourn for me?”

Something between resignation and pity fills my throat as I gaze down at him.

“No.” I place my hand on his shoulder to soften the blow. “When I walk into the days ahead I will not look back.”

Without another word, I turn on my heel and set off into the broken land before me. As I walk, I think, and as I think, I remember. *Walking into the provisional quarters of the last surviving physician, a month after we crashed, for my injection of the serum that was supposed to save us all. Seeing her for the first time in a very long time. I hadn’t known she’d joined the mission. I hadn’t known….*

A syringe. Later, agony. A scream, clawing its way out of my bloody mouth. Nothingness, as dark and empty as the expanse of space. And then light. Morayo. Morayo greeting me with a joyous cry, showering me with a thousand apologies. Morayo dragging me into her arms, pressing a cool kiss to my forehead.

★ ★ ★

I reach Hope the next day. Not New Hope, not Second Hope. Just … Hope. From my vantage point atop a boulder, I glimpse the four round, hut-like structures of the new settlement. They’re enclosed by a thick wall of volcanic rock. Slumped against the side is the crumpled chassis of a rockrover, one of the cumbersome transport vehicles we used to haul equipment from the crashed ship to Apogee. Rockrovers have a top speed of a measly fifteen kilometers

an hour, and yet, that was more than enough to take Morayo from me.

Something twitches at the bottom edge of my vision, and I twist to get a better look. Portable frames of sharpened plastic and metal stick up from the ground at random intervals around the other side of the wall. There are arinkiri stuck on two of the frames. One still twitches, moaning. Her arm is outstretched toward the settlement, even as dark blood oozes from her skewered chest.

As I watch, the gleaming, bone-white pileus of a fruiting body bursts through her skull with a sickening crunch I can only just hear. The sound reverberates in my chest nevertheless, as does the arinkiri's pitiful shriek. Scraps of skin and splinters of skull paint the ground beneath her as she writhes in torment.

A flat gray stone at the base of the wall shifts, sliding aside to reveal a small tunnel, just wide enough for a person. A man steps out, and then another. The second reaches back into the darkness to pull out a pair of makeshift spears. Lips curled in disgust, the first settler spears the convulsing arinkiri through her mycelium-softened head. She lets out a wretched whimper and goes still. The other man stabs the dead arinkiri—they're known to play tricks—before dragging him off the metal spikes.

There's a deep pit a few hundred meters from the settlement, and the men throw the arinkiris in. Even lifeless, their bodies fall gracefully through the air, like raindrops cutting through the atmosphere. Oh, how I missed rain during the first few years here. When we were still on Earth, when we were just children, Morayo and I would climb up to the top of the air recyclers and watch the sky bleed.

My gaze jerks back to the stone as the men head back toward Hope. That's my way in. I watch the settlement for the rest of the day, trying to get an estimate of the inhabitants. By the time the sun dips below the mountains, I've counted four men in all. The others must be dead.

When night falls, I rise. A soft wind blows over the flats, a hot hiss of breath over the cracked skin of the planet. The esoberi bushes rustle loudly, whispering to each other like old friends. Moonlight leaps through a gap in the clouds, dancing over the glistening skin of a cluster of wrinkled seedpods. Soon, it will be harvest time. The settlers will never see that day come.

The full moons light my way as I run over the parched stone and to the entrance. I drag the flat rock aside and slip into the shadows below. Unlike the scorched surface of the planet, the tunnel is cool. Moist, even. When I drag a hand over the stone and dirt, it comes away slick. I creep forward until I can do so no longer; my fingers press against a rough wall. I feel around myself in the swirling darkness, running the tips of my boots over the ground—nothing, but there must be something.

I lift my arms. Sure enough, the ceiling gives way. I climb up the tunnel wall and push aside the woven covering.

The settlement seems even smaller from within than it does from without. Baskets of bits of wood and preserved seedpods take up much of the space. They'll make excellent hiding places. I scramble all the way out of the tunnel and behind a stack of baskets. I make my way along the round edge of the wall, tiptoeing toward the central hut, where I pray she'll be.

I leap from the wall to the side of the hut, throwing myself against the warm stone. Then I shove my way through the curtains covering the entrance and burst inside. Four glassy-eyed men. And Morayo, my Morayo, crumpled in the corner. Rough-hewn rope binds her wrists and ankles.

Relief floods my lungs, a sweet gulp of air for a drowning woman. The sound that leaves my throat is half a joyful sob at seeing her whole, half an enraged growl at seeing her bound and bleeding.

Her head jerks up at my entrance, tears immediately coalescing over her eyes. Moonlight creeping in from cracks in the ceiling illuminates her face. Her cheeks are sunken, and her skin, once a warm brown, looks almost drained of color.

“Inyama,” she croaks.

She sounds so terribly small. Anger boils in my veins like magma. My heart beats as though for the first time, as if to escape the heat of the rage engulfing my chest.

One of the men lurches to his feet, a spear already in hand. “We don’t want you anymore, woman.”

A flush of anticipation skitters over my skin. “I know.”

“Leave us now, while you can,” he warns.

I stay where I am. “Let her go.”

Another man takes one halting step toward me. It’s his last. I pull my knife from under my sleeve and stab him in the chest. Once, twice. He stumbles back, arms wheeling for balance that will never come.

The three remaining men circle me, their starved bodies forming a shrunken triptych. In the months it has taken me to find them, they have grown thin and brittle, while I’ve grown stronger. They’re not made to survive here. I am.

Time splits into discrete moments, bound by the hammering of my heart as I shoot forward. I knock a spear from one man’s feeble grip as I duck below the sharpened point of another’s weapon. I grab the shaft of the spear as it whistles through the air and pull, guiding its path to a new target: the second settler’s stomach. I whirl around just as the third man pulls his spear from his comrade’s gut with a broken cry. I spin, driving the heel of my foot into his side. When he doubles over, my knife finds his neck. Blood sprays across my face.

Before I can turn around, rough fingers curve around my own throat. The fourth man grabs my skull and slams my forehead into the wall. The world flashes black, only to burst with stars as he does it again. My teeth sink into my tongue. The tang of copper fills my mouth.

“You should have stayed away,” he growls.

“You should have left us alone,” I grit out, gasping for breath as blood trickles over my lips. Blood roars in my ears, howling to the beat of my pulse.

I drop the knife. And then I move like water, slipping out of his grasp and catching the hilt just before my weapon hits the floor.

A roar of surprise flies out from between the settler's lips. "We thought you were immune! But … you're one of them!"

A chuckle, sharp and foreign, bubbles out of my throat. "Not quite." The serum I received *worked.* Mostly.

My right arm whips through the air. My fingers latch around the man's throat, and we both go down. My fingers press into the pulse at his neck, just to feel his heartbeat before I end it.

"P-please," he spits out, phlegm studding his thin lips. "You have to understand why we took her, she…" He wheezes when my grip tightens. "She started this. She created you—you monsters, but perfected the serum just in time to inoculate *herself.* Don't you despise her?"

I bring my face down to his, so close our foreheads touch. "No."

He spits out a choked laugh. "You're deluding yourself. You know she deserves to die."

"Our species as it was could not survive on this planet," I snarl. "But now there is a future. You just won't be part of it."

When I swing my arm, the blade comes with it. A hot gush of blood, scarlet and stinking. I push myself off of him and turn to Morayo—my light, my life. My beginning. I cut away her bindings, and she takes my hand.

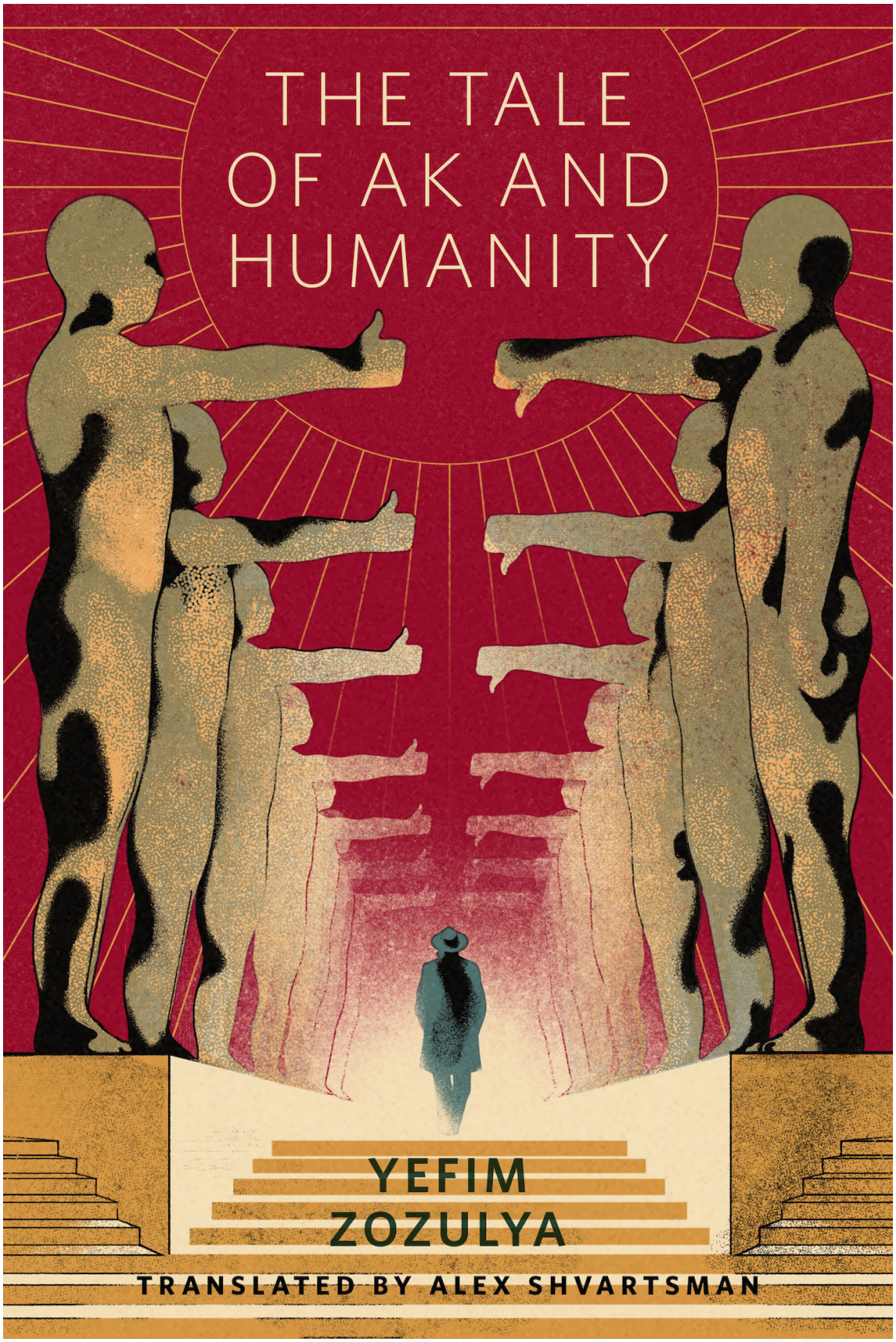
She opens her mouth, her gaze sliding to the dusty ground. "I—"

"Don't." I pull her to her feet. "Don't say what you're about to say. I don't blame you. My love, you saved me."

Her gold-flecked eyes meet mine. "You are everything that will ever be," she says, some of her old strength seeping back into her voice.

"No." I lace our fingers together, letting my eyes drift closed as I concentrate on our heartbeats: mine, hers, and just under that, a tiny flutter. A flicker of life, flaring bright in Morayo. "*We* are. All three of us."

Together, we walk into the days ahead.


THE TALE OF AK AND HUMANITY
YEFIM ZOZULYA
TRANSLATED BY ALEX SHVARTSMAN

The Tale of Ak and Humanity

YEFIM ZOZULYA

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illustration by

JUAN BERNABEU

TOR DOT COM

Intro:

Yefim Zozulya may be the greatest Russian fabulist you've never heard of.

The height of his popularity and success came in the 1910s and 1920s, when Zozulya worked as a journalist and wrote many short stories and several novels. He soon developed a signature style combining elements of the satirical, the grotesque, and the fantastical. At the time, his short stories were referred to as "satire-philosophy fairy tales." While contemporaries struggled to label his unique style, Zozulya was busy breaking new ground in speculative literature.

Two of his short stories stand out as masterpieces. The first is "The Doom of Principal City," a tale of oppression, culture clash, and power imbalance. It was originally published in 1918 and translated for the first time in 2016, when it appeared in *The Big Book of Science Fiction* edited by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer.

The second is "The Tale of Ak and Humanity." Noted editor and literary critic Yevgeny Golubovsky proclaims, "Had Zozulya written nothing other than this text, he would have earned his place in Big Literature." The thinly veiled critique of the Soviet regime, written merely a year and a half after the Bolsheviks gained power in Russia, helped establish the anti-utopia genre, and directly inspired and influenced Zamyatin's *We*, which was finished a year later.

Zozulya worked as a magazine editor throughout the 1920s and helped nurture a generation of influential writers and poets in Russia. He wrote several novels and many short stories, but it became increasingly more difficult for him to be published as the Soviet censorship machine grew more pervasive with each year. His career had stalled, and during the 1930s he could only get an occasional short story published in magazines.

When Nazi Germany invaded Russia in 1941, Zozulya volunteered to fight for his motherland. He was mortally wounded and died two months later, just a few weeks shy of his fiftieth birthday.

His work remained out of print for decades and became virtually forgotten, but was rediscovered in the 1990s alongside other long-proscribed talents such as Bulgakov and Solzhenitsyn. Several collections of his fiction have been published since, and virtually all of it—now in public domain—is available online. To this day, his influence on both fabulism and dystopian fiction remains outsized compared to his notoriety.

1. The posters were put up.

The streets and houses looked ordinary, and the sky casually shone blue above them with its age-old monotony. The gray masks of the cobblestones were as impenetrable and indifferent as ever while the crazed individuals were putting up those posters, tears flowing down their faces and into buckets of glue.

The text on those posters was simple, ruthless, and inevitable.

Here it is:

To everyone without exception:

Verification of the right to life for all residents of the city will be carried out by district, performed by special panels, each containing three members from the Board of Supreme Determination. Medical and mental surveys will be conducted concurrently. Residents deemed unnecessary for life are obligated to leave it within twenty-four hours. Appeals are permissible within that time frame. Written appeals are forwarded to the Presidium of the Board of Supreme Determination. Decisions will be delivered within three hours or less. For those unnecessary people who cannot leave life, because of their love thereof or due to their weak character, the judgment of the Board of Supreme Determination is to be carried out by their friends, neighbors, or special armed squadrons.

Notes.

1. City residents are obliged to fully obey the actions and decisions of the Board of Supreme Determination. All questions must be answered truthfully and completely. A profile-protocol will be drawn up for each unnecessary person.
2. This decree will be carried out with unwavering resolve. Human rubbish that interferes with the restructuring of life on the basis of fairness and happiness must be mercilessly destroyed. This decree applies to all citizens without exception: men and women, the rich and the poor.
3. It is unconditionally forbidden for anyone to leave the city for the duration of the verification process of the right to life.

2. The first waves of anxiety.

“Have you read it?”

“Have you read it?!”

“Have you read it?!”

“Have you read it?! Have you read it?!”

“Did you see it?! Have you heard?!”

“Read it???!!!”

Crowds gathered in many parts of the city. Urban traffic slowed and weakened. Passersby afflicted by sudden weakness leaned against building walls. Many were crying. Some fainted. By evening, the number of them grew exponentially.

“Have you read it?!”

“How awful! This is unheard-of and terrifying.”

“But we were the ones who elected the Board of Supreme Determination. We were the ones who granted it the highest authority.”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“We are the ones responsible for this terrible misdeed.”

“Yes. That’s right. It’s our fault. But we wanted to make life better. Who could’ve known that the Board would approach this problem in such a straightforward and awful manner?”

“But think of the names the Board is composed of. Such great names!”

“How do you know? Has the list of the Board members already been published?”

“An acquaintance has told me. Ak was chosen to preside over the Board!”

“Oh! You don’t say. Ak? How wonderful!”

“Yes. Yes. That’s a fact.”

“How wonderful! He’s such a luminous person.”

“Of course! We needn’t worry. Only the human rubbish will be made to leave life. There will be no room for injustice.”

“Dear sir, do you think I will be allowed to live? I’m a very good person. You know, there was a shipwreck once and twenty people were escaping on a lifeboat. But the boat couldn’t carry so much weight, and doom hung over everyone. To save fifteen, five had to throw themselves into the sea. I was among those five. I jumped overboard voluntarily. Don’t look at me with such doubt. I’m old and weak now. Back then, I was young and brave. Haven’t you heard about that incident? It was in all the papers. Four of my comrades perished. I survived only by random chance. What do you think, will they let me live?”

“What about me, sir? Me? I gave away all my belongings and my money to the poor. This was a long time ago. I’ve got the documents to prove it.”

“I don’t know, truly. It all depends on the point of view and the goals of the Board of Supreme Determination.”

“Let me inform you, dear citizens, that basic usefulness to others alone doesn’t justify the person’s existence on this earth. That way, any stupid nanny would have the right to exist. That’s old-fashioned thinking. You’re behind the times!”

“Then what makes a person valuable?”

“What is the worth of a man?”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, so you don’t know? Then why do you interject with your explanations, if you don’t know?”

“I’m sorry. I’m explaining the best I can.”

“Citizens! Citizens! Look! The people are running! Such confusion! Such panic!”

“Oh, my heart, my heart … Ahh! Save yourselves! Save yourselves!”

“Wait! Stop!”

“Don’t contribute to the panic!!”

“Stop!”

3. They ran.

The crowds ran in the streets. Red-cheeked young men ran, their faces marred with boundless horror. Humble employees of offices and organizations. Bridegrooms wearing clean cuffs. Hobbyist choir singers. Dandies. Storytellers. Billiard players. People who go to the cinema in the evenings. Careerists, troublemakers, crooks with white foreheads and curly hair. Sweaty, good-natured libertines. Belligerent drunks. Funny guys, hooligans, beauties, dreamers, lovers, cyclists. Broad-shouldered eristics, talkers, liars, long-haired hypocrites, brooding losers with sad black eyes and cold emptiness behind those eyes hidden beneath the veneer of youth. Young curmudgeons with full, smiling lips. Wanton adventurers, freeloaders, quarrelers, kind underachievers, clever villains.

The women ran. Fat, gluttonous, and lazy. Thin hags, demanding and annoying, bored, the wives of geniuses and fools, gossips, traitors, envious and greedy, and now equally disfigured by fear. Proud fools and kind nobodies. Those who dye their hair out of boredom, indifferent debauchees, lonely, helpless, arrogant, pleading, those robbed by fear of their graceful façades.

The gnarled old people ran; fat, short, tall, handsome, and ugly.

Building managers, pawnshop appraisers, iron traders, carpenters, craftsmen, jailers, grocers, gracious brothel keepers, gray-haired dignified butlers, respectable patriarchs mired in turpitude and deceit, experienced cardsharps, and corpulent scoundrels.

They ran in a thick, swift, solid, and rigid mass. Pounds of rags enveloped their bodies and limbs. Hot steam gushed from their mouths. Vitriol and screams echoed across the lurking indifference of abandoned buildings.

Many ran with their belongings. With crooked fingers they dragged pillows, boxes, bins. They grabbed their valuables, children, and money. They returned, wrung their hands in horror, and ran again.

But they were turned back. All of them. People who were just like them shot at them, cut them off, beat them with sticks, with fists, with rocks, bit them, and shouted mightily at them. The crowds shrank back, shedding the wounded and the dead.

By evening the city had returned to its usual state. Shivering people returned to their apartments and jumped into their beds. A brief and sharp hope pulsated desperately within their cramped, hot skulls.

4. The procedure was simple.

“Your surname?”

“Boss.”

“Age?”

“Thirty-nine.”

“Occupation?”

“I stuff cigarette tubes with tobacco.”

“Tell the truth!”

“I’m telling the truth. I’ve held an honest job for fourteen years, supporting my family.”

“Where’s your family?”

“Here they are. This is my wife. And this is my son.”

“Doctor, examine the Boss family.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, how are they?”

“Citizen Boss is anemic. His overall health is average. The wife suffers from headaches and rheumatism. The boy is healthy.”

“Very good. You may go, doctor. Citizen Boss, what’s your pleasure? What do you love?”

“I love people, and I love life overall.”

“Be more precise, Citizen Boss. We’re short on time.”

“I love…? What do I love … I love my son … He plays the violin so well … I love to eat, though truly, I’m no glutton … I love women. It’s nice to see a beautiful woman walk down the street. I love to rest

in the evenings, when I'm tired … I love filling cigarette tubes. I can fill five hundred tubes in an hour … I love a lot of things … I love life…"

"Calm down, Citizen Boss. Quit crying. What say you, psychologist?"

"Nonsense, colleague. Trash. These are the most ordinary of creatures. Wretched existence. The temperament is semi-phlegmatic, semi-sanguine. The activity is weak. Lowest class. There's no hope for improvement. Passivity seventy-five percent. Madame Boss is even lower. The boy is vulgar, but perhaps … How old is your son, Citizen Boss? Quit crying."

"Thirteen…"

"Don't worry. Your son can remain, for now. A five-year deferment. As for you … Well, that's none of my business. Your call, colleague."

"In the name of the Board of Supreme Determination, and in order to cleanse life of unnecessary human rubbish, indifferent creatures that slow down progress, I order you, Citizen Boss, and your wife to leave life in the next twenty-four hours. Quiet! Don't shout! Orderly, calm the woman down. Call the guards. These two are unlikely to manage without their help."

5. The profiles of the unnecessary were kept in a gray cabinet.

The Gray Cabinet was located in the corridor at the headquarters of the Board of Supreme Determination. It had an ordinary, solid, pensively stupid look, like all cabinets. It was less than seven feet wide and less than seven feet tall, but it was the grave to tens of thousands of lives. There were two short inscriptions on it:

The Catalog of the Unnecessary

and

Profiles-Protocols.

The catalog had many sections, including the following:

Impressionable but clueless.

Small-time followers.

The passive ones.
The uncentered.

Et cetera.

The profiles were brief and objective. However, there was an occasional harsh comment. Without fail, it was accompanied by a red pencil mark by Board president Ak, noting that the unnecessary shouldn't be scolded.

Here are several of the profiles:

Unnecessary No. 14741

Average health. Visits acquaintances without being necessary or interesting to them. Offers advice. In his prime he seduced some girl and abandoned her. Considers the acquisition of new furniture for his apartment to be the biggest event in his life. Sluggish, lax brain. Inefficient worker. When ordered to tell the most interesting thing he knows about life or has seen, talked about the Quisisana restaurant in Paris. The simplest of creatures. The category of lowest inhabitants. Weak heart. – In 24 hours.

Unnecessary No. 14623

Works in a cooperage. Class—mediocre. Doesn't love his work. Thought process in all areas follows the path of least resistance. Physically healthy, but mentally ill with the most basic of afflictions: he's afraid of life. Afraid of freedom. On holidays, when he's free, he becomes inebriated. During the revolution he showed initiative: wore a red bow, bought potatoes and everything that was available, was afraid there wouldn't be enough. Was proud of his working-man background. Did not take an active part in the revolution; was too afraid. Loves sour cream. Beats children. Dull and steady pace of life. – In 24 hours.

Unnecessary No. 15201

Speaks eight languages, but is boring to listen to even in one of them. Likes fancy cufflinks and lighters. Very self-confident. Derives that confidence from his knowledge of languages. Demands respect. Gossips. Oxlike in his indifference toward living real life. Fears the

paupers. Unctuous in his communications, out of cowardice. Loves to swat flies and other insects. Rarely experiences joy. – In 24 hours.

Unnecessary No. 4356

Shouts abuse at the hired help out of boredom. Secretly eats the lactoderm layer from boiled milk and the fatty top layer from broth. Reads trashy novels. Sprawls on the couch all day. Greatest aspiration: to sew a dress with yellow sleeves and wide skirts. A talented inventor was in love with her for twelve years. She didn't know what he did and thought he was an electrician. She left him and married a leather merchant. Has no children. Often cries and complains without cause. Wakes up at nights, orders the samovar to be put on, drinks tea and eats snacks. An unnecessary existence. – In 24 hours.

6. At work.

A crowd of specialist employees formed around Ak and the Board of Supreme Determination. These were doctors, psychologists, observers, and writers. They all worked extraordinarily quickly. In some cases, a small group of specialists sent a hundred people to the next world in a matter of an hour. A hundred profiles added to the Gray Cabinet, clarity of expression rivaling boundless self-confidence of its authors in each one.

Morning to evening, work was in full swing at the headquarters. Residency committees came and went, execution squads came and went, while dozens of people sat at the tables as though in an enormous newsroom. They wrote with quick, firm, unthinking hands.

Ak looked at all of this with his narrow, strong, impenetrable eyes and thought his private thoughts, which made his body hunch over and the hair on his large, rebellious, stubborn head grow ever more gray.

Something was brewing between him and his employees, something standing between his tense, sleepless thoughts and the blind, unthinking hands of the bureaucrats.

7. Ak’s doubts.

One time, members of the Board of Supreme Determination arrived at the headquarters, intending to make another report to Ak.

Ak wasn’t at his usual place. They looked for him but couldn’t find him. They sent for him, called on the phone and still couldn’t find him.

Two hours later they accidentally found him inside the Gray Cabinet.

Ak sat in the Cabinet atop a pile of grave profiles of those killed, and thought with an unprecedented—even for him—intensity.

“What are you doing here?” they asked Ak.

“Can’t you see I’m thinking?” Ak replied wearily.

“But why in the Cabinet?”

“This is the most suitable place. I am thinking about people, and one can only think fruitfully about people while perched directly atop the acts of their destruction. Only while sitting on the documents of a person’s destruction can one study their extremely strange life.”

Someone laughed, a flat and empty sound.

“Don’t you laugh,” Ak warned. He brandished someone’s profile. “Don’t laugh. The Board of Supreme Determination seems to be in crisis. Studying those who have perished has led me to search for new paths toward progress. You have all learned to concisely and venomously prove the uselessness of a person’s existence. Even the least talented among you can convincingly prove it in a few sentences. And so I sit here and think whether we’re on the right path.”

Ak pondered this, sighed bitterly, and spoke quietly.

“What to do? What’s the solution? When you study living people, you come to the conclusion that three-quarters of them should be culled. But when you study the slaughtered, you don’t know: perhaps they should’ve been loved and pitied instead. This, in my opinion, is the dead end of the human question, the tragic dead end of human history.”

Ak mournfully fell silent and buried himself in the mountain of profiles of the perished, painfully reading their eerily standardized laconic entries.

The Board members withdrew. No one objected. First, because it was useless to object to Ak. Second, because no one dared object to him. Everyone felt that a new solution was brewing, and almost everyone was dissatisfied. There was an established process, clear and definitive, that would probably have to be replaced with something else. But with what?

What else would this madman, who had such unprecedented control over the city, think of?

8. Crisis.

Ak disappeared.

He always disappeared when he needed to think. They searched for him everywhere but couldn't find him. Someone said that Ak sat in a tree outside the city and cried. Someone else said that Ak ran on all fours in his garden and gnawed at the ground.

The productivity of the Board of Supreme Determination had weakened. With Ak gone, something went awry with their work. Residents put up iron bolts on their doors and refused to let commission inspectors in. In some neighborhoods the Board members' questions about the right to life were answered with laughter. In some instances, the unnecessary people grabbed the members of the Board of Supreme Determination and checked their own right to life, mockingly writing profile-protocols that weren't much different from the ones stored in the Gray Cabinet.

Chaos descended upon the city. Unnecessary, insignificant people who hadn't yet been culled grew so impudent as to appear freely in the streets, began to visit each other, have fun, engage in all sorts of entertainment, and even get married. They congratulated each other in the streets:

"It's over! It's over! Hurray!"

“The verification of the right to life has ended.”

“Don’t you find, fellow citizen, that life has become more pleasant? There’s less human rubbish. It’s become easier to breathe.”

“Shame on you, citizen! Do you think only those who had no right to life have died? Oh! I know those who have no right to live for even an hour and yet they live on and will live for years, while on the other hand so many worthy individuals have died. If only you knew!”

“This means nothing. Mistakes are inevitable. Tell me, do you know where Ak is?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ak sits in a tree outside the city and cries.”

“Ak runs on all fours and gnaws at the ground.”

“Let him cry!”

“Let him gnaw!”

“You rejoice too soon, citizens. Too soon. Ak is coming back tonight, and the Board of Supreme Determination will resume its work.”

“How do you know?”

“I know! There’s too much human rubbish remaining. We must cleanse and cleanse and cleanse!”

“You’re very cruel, citizen.”

“I don’t care.”

“Citizens! Citizens! Look! Look!”

“They’re putting up new posters.”

“Look!”

“Citizens! What happiness! What joy!”

“Read, citizens!”

“Read!”

“Read! Read!”

“Read!!!”

9. The posters were put up.

People ran through the streets out of breath, with buckets full of glue. Stacks of huge pink posters unfurled with a cheerful crackling rustle and stuck to building walls. Their text was clear, crisp, and so simple.

Here it is:

To everyone, without exception:

From the moment this announcement is published, all citizens of the city are permitted to live. Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The Board of Supreme Determination has fulfilled its solemn duty and is hereby renamed the Board of Supreme Sensitivity. Citizens, you are all beautiful, and your right to life is inalienable.

The Board of Supreme Sensitivity charges special three-member commissions with the task of visiting apartments daily and congratulating the residents on the fact of their existence. They're to write down their observations in the special Joyous Protocols.

Members of the commission have the right to interview citizens about their lives, and the citizens may, if they wish, answer in detail. The latter is preferred. Joyous observations are to be stored in the Pink Cabinet for posterity.

10. Life returned to normal**.**

Doors, windows, and balconies opened. Loud human voices, laughter, singing, and music burst from them. Fat, incapable girls studied the piano. Gramophones roared day and night. People played violins, clarinets, and guitars. Men took off their jackets in the evenings, sat with their legs spread wide on the balconies, and hiccupped with pleasure. Urban traffic increased tremendously. Young men and women rode in cars and carriages. Nobody was afraid of appearing in the streets. Bakeries and candy stores sold cakes and soft drinks. Haberdashery shops did a brisk business in selling mirrors. People bought mirrors and enjoyed looking at their reflections. Artists and photographers received portrait commissions. The portraits were framed and hung on apartment walls. Such

portraits were even the cause of one murder, written about in the newspapers. Some young man who had rented a room demanded that the portraits of the landlord's parents be removed from it. The owners took offense and killed the young man, throwing his body into the street from the fifth floor.

Self-esteem and self-love flourished. All manner of conflicts and squabbles became commonplace. In those cases, along with the usual insults, they pestered each other with such newly minted clichés:

"You seem to be living in the world by mistake. It seems the Board of Supreme Determination did a poor job…"

"Very poor job, if someone like you has remained…"

Such squabbles were insignificant overall. Pantries groaned from excess, people made jams. The demand for warm, knitted underwear increased considerably as everyone greatly valued their health.

Members of the Board of Supreme Sensitivity dutifully visited apartments and interviewed residents about their lives.

Many answered that life was good, and even forced proof upon the interviewers.

"Here," they said, smirking smugly and rubbing their hands. "We've got pickles, and marinated herring. Recently I weighed myself and I've gained half a pound, thank the Lord…"

Others complained about inconveniences and lamented the poor performance of the Board of Supreme Determination:

"You see, I was on the tram yesterday and—can you imagine?—there were no empty seats. What a disgrace! My spouse and I had to stand. There are too many unnecessary people left over. They swarm everywhere, swarm, and why do they swarm, devil only knows. It's too bad they weren't removed during the inquiry…"

Still others were indignant:

"Keep in mind that no one came to congratulate me for existing on Wednesday or Thursday! This is insolence! Unacceptable! Am I supposed to come visit you to get congratulated now?"

11. End of the tale.

In Ak's office, work was in full swing as ever: people sat and wrote. The Pink Cabinet was filled with joyous protocols and observations. Birthdays, weddings, festivities, lunches and dinners, love stories, all manner of adventures were described in careful detail. Many reports acquired the character and form of stories and novels.

Residents asked the Board of Supreme Sensitivity members to publish them in book form, and devoured those books.

Ak was silent.

He became even more hunched over and his hair even more gray.

Sometimes he climbed into the Pink Cabinet and sat there for a long time, as he used to do in the Gray Cabinet.

One day Ak jumped out of the Pink Cabinet, shouting:

"Slaughter them! Slaughter! Slaughter! Slaughter!"

But when he saw the white hands of his employees hovering over papers, describing the living residents with the same zeal as they used to the dead ones, he gave up, ran out of the office—and disappeared.

There were many legends about the disappearance of Ak. All sorts of rumors abounded, but Ak was never found.

And people from that city—the people whom Ak had slaughtered and then taken mercy upon, and then had wanted to slaughter again, people including those who are real, those who are beautiful, and those who are human rubbish—still continue to live as though Ak had never existed, and no one had ever raised the great question about the right to life.

THE CHRONOLOGIST

IAN R. MACLEOD

The Chronologist

IAN R. MACLEOD

illustration by

RED NOSE STUDIO

FIRST QUARTER

The Chronologist came to our town out of the time-haze according to the workings of a calendar that was entirely his own. He bore a metal staff and across his back was a leather tool bag, and word of his arrival passed swiftly from house to house. Rare though these visits were, they were greatly anticipated, and it was enough for most townsfolk to simply hear the phrase, *He's here,* to know. People would rush out into the streets pulling on boots and snatching at clothes, some already clutching their precious timepieces for him to attend to—at least after he'd serviced the tower clock from which the hours of all our days were set.

I was a boy of eleven years and five months according to our reckoning on the morning I first remember the Chronologist arriving. I lived with my father, who was mayor of our town, in a rambling but comfortable house just off the main square. He was a plump and fussy man with a nervous moustache and a chronic tendency to misbutton his clothes. Since my mother's death from the effects a of stray time-wind a few difficult seasons earlier, he'd moved out of the main bedroom they'd once shared, and now prowled about the house every night like a particularly heavy-booted ghost, his footsteps making a counterpoint with reassuring beat of the tall case clock in the hall. But he was diligent in his mayoral responsibilities, the most important of which by far was to attend to the tower clock.

Every morning without fail, he'd set out from our house and head on across the main square to open the pitted wooden door at the base of the tower beside the hunched buttresses of the old church, then ascend the ladders through their many levels to rewind the weights. I often went up there with him, up and up through the dusty haze filled with a deep, resonant, *tock,* although not so much out of

any intrinsic fascination with the clock's mechanism as because of the rare views these higher levels afforded of the time-hazed lands beyond the confines of our town.

Despite all our best efforts, it had already been full summer for far too long, with the lime trees dripping dusty sap, the crops wilting and the cattle barely giving milk, on the morning when word of the Chronologist's arrival finally came. I scurried in my father's wake as, buttoning his best coat sideways and pulling on his mayoral sash the wrong way round, he bumbled out into the main square and fought his way through the crowds to formally welcome the Chronologist to our town. After a preliminary twitch from his moustache, he attempted a stumbling bow, then launched into a typically rambling speech.

"Is it keeping good time?" the Chronologist interrupted, his voice sharp as turning gears.

"*Good* time…? You mean our tower clock? Well, as far as we can tell, sir. And inasmuch, I should say, as it isn't keeping *bad* time. Although there's no real way—"

"I shall go and check."

Everyone fell back to let the Chronologist through. He was a tall, thin man with keen grey eyes, skin the colour of weathered bronze, a pointed chin, and a narrow nose. There was something weary about him, but his manner was rigorously precise. Even the way he walked to the regular beat of his staff on the flagstones as his tool bag swung to and fro at his back. I didn't expect to be able to enter the clock tower on a day as rare and significant as this, but there was a moment of typical confusion as my father opened the door to let the Chronologist through, and I, amid a push of civic bosoms and bellies, was able to squeeze quickly in.

Of course, most of these town worthies weren't up to the task of following the Chronologist all the way up through the tower, climbing ladder after ladder past the iron weights on their long chains to the floor beneath the bell that chimed the hours and the slow-turning hands of the clock-face that housed the mechanism itself, but my

father was used to doing so. And so, as the Chronologist began to ascend after he'd pushed his staff through the strap of his tool bag like an antique sword, was I. Standing in the pigeon-cooing shadows as my father fiddled with his buttons and breathed too loudly through his nose, I was then able to watch the Chronologist at his work.

First, he set aside his staff and unstrapped his tool bag. Then he laid out a series of tools and knelt before the heavy winding spools and the many wheels and gears large and small that turned quickly or slowly or hurried back and forth—I didn't then know the correct horological terms. His hands moved, I noticed, to something like the same tocking heartbeat as the clock itself. It seemed not so much an act of repair as a kind of healing dance. It was fascinating to watch, at least for a while, although the process, and my father's noisy breathing—which of course also followed the same rhythm—went on. And on. I confess I grew a little bored. And in the absence of any other distraction, and trapped as I was in the tower, I did what I generally did when I came up here: clambered over to one of the narrow windows and gazed out.

First of all, there was our town itself, neatly spread below me as only I and the birds ever saw it. The red pantiles. The stilled weathervanes. The shadow-gullies of the streets. The occasional square with its green froth of lime trees. The town dump. Some warehouses and workshops. Then came the fields and the vineyards and the orchards in their neatly combed rows, and the sheep and the cattle tiny as toys, and the farmhouses with their ramshackle sheds and barns, and the dusty tracks that unravelled here and there but always turned back on themselves. But after that …

After the last hedge and scrap of farmland lay a boundary of unkempt wasteland that we had all been warned never to approach, let alone cross. But from up here, peering on through the time-haze, I believed I could make out a little of what lay beyond, and for one moment I was sure there were fields as prim and regular as our own, and the next I saw hills and sunlit meadows, and deep woodlands, and places of ravaged gloom. And beyond even this lay a staggering

sense of ever-greater distance, where lights twinkled, and towers and spires far higher and more fabulous than our own gave off signal glints. I was sure that snowy mountains lay out there, too, and the fabled salty lakes known as oceans, and other places and realms beyond anything we in our town were ever permitted to know.

A sudden calamitous noise startled me out of my reverie, but it was merely the bell striking its hourly chime. The Chronologist, I saw, was no longer attending to the clock mechanism but walking around it and studying it from various angles, as an artist might a portrait or a potter a pot. My father, of course, took this as his signal to engage the poor man in yet more conversation about things that, to me, still nursing my visions of the lands beyond our monotonous little town, didn't matter at all. Even more irritatingly, the Chronologist deigned to join in with this pointless babble, his work up here presumably finished, although his tool bag remained open and his tools were still neatly laid out.

They gleamed appealingly on the dusty wooden floor. Many I recognised——files, screwdrivers, pincers, and the like; even a small can of oil—but some I did not. There were spikes and prods attached to little boxes. There were tiny nests of steel and glass. One or two even pulsed with lights of their own. I studied them with curiosity, thinking of the impossibly distant flashes I had glimpsed through the time-haze, and wondering if they were somehow linked. Now that his attention was distracted, I even considered quietly pocketing one of these treasures as a small souvenir. But my nerve failed me. After all, he would be bound to notice, being so orderly and precise.

But then I saw the dog-eared corner of a book poking out from the flap of his open tool bag, and decided it looked so old and yellowed it was unlikely to be missed. I'd crept forward and pocketed the thing before I could have second thoughts. Soon after, my father finally stopped his chatter, and the Chronologist slipped his tools back into his tool bag, and we made our way back down the many ladders toward the square with its eager clusters of clock-clutching townsfolk.

I watched as a chair and a trestle table were set up under the wilting lime trees, and people queued up to have their timepieces serviced by the Chronologist's clever hands, and the dog-eared book I'd shoved into my pocket was forgotten as a far more dramatic idea began to form in my head. Keeping back so as not to be noticed, I followed the man as he went from door to door amid a gaggle of town worthies to service a few larger mechanisms such as the grandfather clock in our hall. Then, as ever, or so it seemed, his work was done, and it was time for him to leave.

The Chronologist's departure was far less heralded than his arrival. Apparently, most townsfolk cared little about where else he went or what he did once he'd set our days and hours back to their regular beat, and he, I imagined, would want to slip away without enduring another of my father's interminable speeches. So his only companions were a few very young children who had nothing better to do than follow in his wake as he left the town in the late afternoon. At least, apart from me.

The children were a silly bunch, shoving and giggling and skipping. They soon grew bored, or tired, or hungry, or otherwise distracted, and fell away. I, though, quietly and at a distance, kept on his trail. Out from the town with its tall houses and railing-framed squares, then on through a scatter of markets, mills, and foundries, then beside storage yards and other such hinterlands, and on into the fields beyond. Still, the Chronologist walked on in his usual brisk manner, between low stone walls and rambling hedges along tracks ridged and dusty after this prolonged summer's heat, past several farmsteads where dogs barked and geese hissed, until the horizon ahead began to loom and grow dim. But he, if anyone—or so I reasoned—must know the way through.

The sky darkened and the tracks gave out and the last fields fell away, and there were only sharp snags of bramble and choking swathes of ivy and burning patches of stinging nettle, and my sense of direction was vague. I could still go on, or so I told myself, as long as I followed the figure shimmering ahead, but I was being stalked

by an increasing sense of dread. A wind was rising, too, along with an even colder stirring that raked inside my scratched and stung flesh. Where was I, and what was I doing? I no longer knew, and my resolve failed me. I turned and stumbled back from the looming time-haze, and ran and ran until I reached familiar fields, and staggered, aching and gasping, the rest of the way home.

SECOND QUARTER

Clouds closed across the sky next morning. By noon it was raining, and by nightfall there was a definite chill in the air. Soon, what was left of our crops finished ripening, and the meagre harvest was taken in, and not long after the lime trees began to shed their ragged leaves, and everyone in the town rejoiced that temporal regularity had returned. At least, apart from me.

When I finally remembered it, the book I'd stolen from the Chronologist's tool bag proved to be a disappointment. I'd hoped for some kind of clue as to who he really was—or, better still, a map or guide to the worlds beyond the time-haze—but it was nothing more than a very old, dry, and extremely technical manual on the servicing, maintenance, and repair of various types of timepiece. It was deeply irritating.

I also I found myself irritated by many other things, not least my father's bumbling inability to manage his own buttons, let alone our town, and the pointless and repetitive tasks we children were expected to perform at school. After all, I had already seen much farther than here, and believed I would see farther still. Why should I have to endlessly draw and redraw the same street maps of our town, or memorise the weights of every recent harvest, or count the number of seconds in each hour, or copy out calendars from years long erased?

I often went upstairs to my mother's old bedroom when I returned home from school. Typically, my father had done nothing to deal with the ravages the time-winds had inflicted—the blistered paintwork, the

contorted ceiling, the furniture bleached to bony heaps, the bed blackened into something that was scarcely a bed at all—but that suited my mood. I remembered how angry I had been when her affliction first became evident. After all, she was so quick and lively and pretty and smart. So why did she now need a stick to walk with, and why was her back so stooped? I would visit her up there when her condition worsened and she retreated to her bed, much though I hated to witness what she had become. She barely recognised me, her eyes were vague, and the hands that clutched my own were sharp and dry as twigs. Sometimes, though, although I wished she wouldn't, she'd begin to speak in a crackling, quavering voice that came and went like dry leaves. Gabbling nonsense, or so it then seemed, of the times when the arrow of time flew straight and true.

Marvels and miracles. Machines bigger than houses or smaller than ants. Some that could peer so far into the sky that the past itself was glimpsed. Others that looked so deep into the fabric of everything that the quivering threads of reality could be examined, then prised apart, to see what lay beyond. And it was through one of these rents, or so her whispers told me, that a hole of sheer nothingness widened, and the fabric of everything warped and twisted, and the time-winds blew through. Worse still, at least for me, the curtains stirred as if these words called to them, and the peeling wallpaper flapped, and the ceiling receded like an upturned well, and the claws of her nails drew blood. I stopped going up there, but soon the entire house was rent with her screams until one morning there was sudden silence, and absolute relief, and after what little was left of her was buried beyond the farthest fields, my father and I could go back to pretending that our days were ordered exactly as they should be.

But they weren't. And, more than ever now, I longed to escape. My plan, as I first conceived it, was simple. I would set out along the all-too-familiar streets of this town and then carry on across the fields into the shimmering wilderness beyond until the time-haze swallowed me whole. There were, admittedly, some problems with

my absence being noticed too soon—all the more so when my daylight habits were tied to following my father to the clock tower and going to and from school. So I would have to leave at night, and along the quieter back streets, in case I was noticed by some interfering busybody, and then avoid the barking dogs and honking geese of the various farms. There was also the issue of my father's ever-wakeful prowling, but the man was so set and regular in his habits that even his nightly pacing had a predictable pattern that, by listening to the familiar creaks and footfalls as they came and went, I was soon able to anticipate.

This was it, then. My destiny was set. I didn't even feel afraid on the spring night I finally got up from my bed and crept through the house in delicate counterpoint to the beat of the tall case clock and my father's thumping prowl, pulled on my coat and boots, lifted the oiled latch of the front door, and headed out of town along the darkest and quietest back streets. Or, if I was afraid, what I feared was that my plan would fail.

But that didn't happen; I simply walked on through the bland night along muddy tracks toward the strange vortex beyond, once again following the route that the Chronologist had taken when he left town. A breeze began to stir around me, warm at first, and scented with nothing but mud, manure, and grass. Then it grew colder and deeper, touching my thoughts and bones, and the paths dissolved and the way ahead grew ragged and rough. But I had prepared by dressing in my stoutest clothes and I did not turn back as I fought my way through the clawing vegetation, not even when the stars above me began to churn and melt.

When I paused to look back, all I could now see was a shimmering, twisting curtain. And ahead of me … ahead, there were neat fields and slumbering rooftops, all captured in the soft spring dark. This town, I saw, had a clock tower much like our own, and the way toward it avoiding the hissing farmyard geese and barking dogs was oddly familiar. Then came the same streets, the same squares, the same buildings, and then the same rambling house, where the

front door latch was oiled, and I was easily able to avoid my father's continued pacing on my way upstairs, and climb back into bedsheets that were still warm.

THIRD QUARTER

Spring passed into summer with dreadful, predictable monotony, and everyone commented on how wonderfully set and regular the seasons had become since the Chronologist's visit. But *he* had then left this prison, walked away from it as easily I might walk home from school, and the constant repetition of my days was an unbearable drudge.

Oh, how I hated the cowardly way I had turned back from following him on that fateful day at the end of the long summer before! I relived the moment again and again, and cursed my own fearful stupidity—and the tower clock's stolid reliability, which meant that he wouldn't return anytime soon, and perhaps throughout all the rest of my tedious life. Affecting an interest I certainly didn't feel in the affairs of our town, I tried asking my father about the Chronologist's habits one morning over breakfast. If, after all, he only came according to the workings of a calendar that was entirely his own, how did he know when, or when not, to come? My father twitched his moustache and dabbed ruminatively at a blob of egg on his mis-buttoned shirt. This was, apparently, a most astute question of a kind which marked me out as a strong candidate for mayor of this town in whatever passed here for the future. The way these things worked, at least to the best of his understanding, was that the Chronologist came because he knew his presence was required. Although precisely how that happened, he had no idea.

A little later, and in a thoughtful daze, I followed my father up the ladders in the clock tower, and stood staring at that patiently tocking mechanism rather than at the views beyond, wondering what I could do to bring about the Chronologist's arrival according to a calendar of my devising rather than his.

The key was, of course, that tedious book, and had been all along. I began to study its creased pages and stained diagrams. A clock, after all, was just another machine like a plough or a handcart, if a little more complicated, with workings that could be measured, tested, adjusted, and fixed—or broken. I can't pretend that it was fascinating, but it gave me hope and purpose, and that was enough.

What struck me most was how innately fragile all clocks were. They might just go on, and on, like time itself, yet they were easily perturbed. The chains, gears, levers, weights, sprockets, wheels, brushes, flies, trains, dials, and pinions, the escapement that caught and held each gear for a precious second before moving on, all had to be precisely balanced and calibrated. Standing and studying the mechanism in the tower, which I now knew was technically known as a turret clock, as my father huffed and sweated to rewind its weights, I saw that it would be a matter of mere moments to make it run fast or slow.

But that, as I'd already decided, wouldn't be enough. A slight tightening or loosening would certainly retard its workings, but how on earth would we, or even the Chronologist, know that that had happened, when the turning of the clock itself governed the days and hours our lives? Whatever I did would have to be more profound, and more damaging, than that. And, oddly enough, as my thoughts and ruminations expanded, I found that I was no longer in the same fever of hurry. After all, I reasoned, the time I had left in this drab little town was now mine to command.

Like any self-respecting craftsman, I decided to do a little practise work first. And what better example of a lesser timepiece could I have to hand than the tall case clock in our own hall? Of course, in many ways it was a different kind of device, with chime hammers, a pendulum, and a gathering pallet, but that was also part of the challenge. After getting hold of a screwdriver and a small steel file, and pretending a stomachache so I could leave early from school, I crouched before it, opened its bevelled glass front, and set to work. It was then merely a matter of shaving a few brass slivers from the

teeth of the central wheel that fed the escapement so that some seconds ran more quickly than others, although doing so briefly caused the entire clock to scream and shudder as if in pain. But then I applied a little oil.

In many ways, the effect was far less subtle than I'd intended, although I mostly blamed my father's habitual nighttime prowling for that. The regular beat that matched his paces might have seemed superficially the same, but the rhythm of his march along the corridors and up and down the stairs now became a series of stumbles, trips, and muted curses. He crashed into vases and tumbled over chairs. He bashed his head on roof beams and fell through doors. But it wasn't just him. There was no doubt that the house itself felt less set, less stable—even less the happy home it had once been. Things started to shift and unravel in the temporal desert of my mother's bedroom as well. The bones of the furniture rearranged themselves into worrying shapes. The pastel decorations bloomed into bloated parodies of their old selves. At least, that was what I glimpsed when I opened the door a few inches, then pulled it firmly shut, and turned the lock, although I still sometimes heard wet, dragging shuffles moving as if in echo to my father's footsteps, and distant—but not quite distant enough—screams.

My father was distracted and distraught, his clothes madly awry and his moustache wildly a-twitch, and things were difficult for me as well during those misarranged times. But they also offered an opportunity I hadn't expected would come so easily. When I suggested one late spring morning over the breakfast table as a half-cooked newborn chick tried to peck its way out of his soft-boiled egg that I could go and wind the weights in the clock tower on my own today, seeing as he looked so tired and I already knew exactly what to do, he dabbed his eyes and readily agreed.

I studied the mechanism turning and tocking high in the dusty heights of its tower more as an adversary than as a fine example of the horologist's art. After all, its regularity was the very thing that was preventing the Chronologist's return. And, without him to show me

the way out through the time-haze, how could I possibly escape? The answer, of course, lay in what I now had to do. First of all, though, I wound the weights—I didn't want time to stop entirely—and then, with that task completed, I took out my file and screwdriver and set to work.

There was, perhaps, a spirit of vengeance in what I did, although I would have been hard pressed to say what slight or wrong I was trying avenge. It had to be more than my father's untidy buttons and stupid moustache, or the pointless activities at school, or the generalised drudgery of our days, or the broader confinements of our lives. There was, of course, the tragedy of what had happened to my mother, but that was no one's fault but time itself … And, although it sounds nonsensical, I now think that it was time that I truly wished to hurt. And this clock was its emblem, its enabler, its beating heart.

If there was such a thing as an anti-Chronologist, it was me that morning. I scraped and shaved and misadjusted. I shoved and bent and pushed and pulled. Yet the damn thing kept on turning and tocking—it was, after all, a large and powerful device—and so my attack on it continued beyond anything I had planned. But even as, surrounded by metal shavings, discarded balancing weights, and the odd fallen bolt, I continued at my task, there was no immediate sense of time going awry. Which, the remaining rational part of me reasoned, made absolute sense. After all, I was a part of the bigger workings of our town, which this infernal machine drove.

Then I cleared away the evidence, and left the tower, and headed across the main square to school.

FOURTH QUARTER

It began with the cocks crowing at odd times in the morning, then well before sunrise, then throughout most of the night. Which set the town dogs howling, although perhaps they already sensed the change. And the dawn chorus grew strongest at noon, and the stars wheeled in the heavens like drifting snow. All of which was of course

noticed and commented upon, and people set and wound their timepieces with even greater regularity, and always according to the reassuring chimes of the tower clock in our main square. Just like the cows in the fields lowing to be milked at midnight, and the rats scurrying the streets in daylight, everyone in our town instinctively felt this disarrangement: in troubled nights and weird bouts of hunger or sudden thirsts.

My father was at a loss. He knew that something was wrong, and felt sure he had somehow betrayed the townsfolk in fulfilling his duties as mayor. But yes, yes, of course he wound the tower clock as constantly and consistently as any man could, he assured a rowdy public meeting in his predictably longwinded way. As I, as his son and regular witness, would confirm.

All the awkward, annoying things that had happened before when time slipped just a little—fruit suddenly ripening or rotting, cheese dissolving back into milk—happened again now, but grew worse. Whole fields full of nearly ripe grain, which we would all depend upon for sustenance whenever winter came, shrank back to mere shoots, then died in a sudden, bitter frost. Even our preciously tended and copied books at school weren't immune. The print on their pages greyed and dissolved, or turned into strange symbols, or obscene doggerel, and their bindings fell apart. Which might once have been amusing, but wasn't now.

Every morning, although the mornings no longer felt like mornings, I made my way with my father across the shadow-shifting main square to the clock tower, and ascended the ladders, and looked out toward the vistas beyond, where the time-winds tumbled in the mad air and even this tower seemed to waver and tilt. Or I stared at the mechanism of the turret clock as it wheezed in a gravelly grinding, and waiting for the next *tock* was like waiting for a dying man's last breath. Then, in the afternoons, and after the all uncertainties of school, I would return to a house where the floors were stinking and slippery from a plague of frogs, and the windows

offered crooked views, and the doors no longer fit in their frames but creaked and groaned in a clamour of drafts.

Often, in what now passed for *now,* as my father and I sat at a meal that might turn raw at any moment, or dissolve into maggoty mush, we heard a painfully slow *lump, lump, lump* coming down the stairs. But the stairs themselves, when we dared to look up at them, had grown so wide and high that their top dissolved into murky distance, and whatever it was that was coming toward us—and we both knew it probably wasn't anything resembling my mother—never came quite into view. Which was a blessing of sorts. In fact, now that the mechanism of the tall case clock was a whirring, crickety blur, that endless descent was almost the only regular sound we knew.

This was a full time-storm, with whole houses collapsing and rain sheeting down from hot, clear skies. We were losing ourselves and we were losing one another, falling away through the unnumbered days. So where was the Chronologist? Why hadn't he arrived already in these broken times of our greatest need? Surely he had to come right now. Or now. Or now. But the *now*s staggered past us, or slipped backward, or melted like the faces of our clocks, and it already seemed that it as far too late.

FIFTH QUARTER

It was a hot, moonlit morning of no known season when he finally arrived, and things were suddenly almost as they had been before, with the dogs panting and the cocks crowing and fresh pollen drifting with the fallen leaves and drizzles of snow across the greyed and emptied fields. Children came shouting and running, and I rushed to join them, for yes, yes, he was here, he had come, and my father stumbled and hurried, his shirt as ever mis-buttoned and askew, to greet the Chronologist in the main square.

"You are…" He panted as shadows shrivelled and bloomed around us. "… most, most welcome. Indeed, may I venture, it would have been good if you had arrived before."

“I arrive when I can,” the Chronologist replied with a brisk tap of his metal staff. Then his gaze—knowing yet somehow deeply lost—swept across us townsfolk like a withering wind until it settled on me.

“You, lad”—he pointed—“shall accompany me up the tower.”

“But—but,” my father protested, “… he’s only a child! Surely if anyone comes with you, it should be me. After all, I am mayor of this town and whatever has happened is my responsibility.”

But the Chronologist shook his head, and I, of course, was in no position to refuse. After all, wasn’t this exactly what I wanted—for the Chronologist to arrive from wherever he came from, so that I might follow him and escape?

The tower’s interior went up and up through the levels, almost as before. But the dusty gloom stirred with whisperings, and that patient *tock* was irregular. It came and went, now close as my own agitated heartbeat, now distant as the spinning stars, and the levels and ladders seemed to expand and contract. Briefly, there was no sign of the Chronologist climbing ahead of me—no, there were two of him, then three, then again just one—but I knew that I had to keep climbing in his wake.

One foot and then the other. Rung after rung. One hand gripping above. The other below. I tried counting each upward step as I would once have counted the tedious hours, days, and seconds at school, but the numbers were torn from me, and the tower was twisting like a corkscrew, and I felt very cold. But I was still clinging, I was still climbing, even as the walls, ladders, and levels tunnelled ahead and behind me, and the weights swung wildly on their chains. Soon there was no up or down, or now or then, or before or after, but just this endless tower and the pouring, emptied air.

I was climbing through a time-storm, drenched in sweat despite the chill, and shivering and aching beyond exhaustion, and with no sense left of where, or when, I was. But then I glimpsed something familiar, and it seemed it was deep below me rather than high above, and I started laughing. Somehow, I had reached some unknown level of the tower that soared far beyond the turret clock’s mundane

mechanism, face, and bell. Which obviously meant I needed to work my way back down. I changed my grip on the rungs, and shifted my feet to adjust, and was about to begin my long descent when something slipped within me, and my hands scrabbled for purchase, and I fell.

I suppose I must have lost consciousness. Perhaps I even died—was blasted to dust and ancient smithereens by the time-winds. But some part of me still existed, and it dreamed that I had fallen into a wilderness of clocks. There were fob watches and skeleton clocks and carriage clocks and half hunters, and things so strange or elaborate that they scarcely seemed to be timepieces at all, piled in glittering hills and dunes. There were clocks that might once have been driven by springs or weights, or the drip of water, or the flame of a candle, or the sparks of a summer storm, and there were brass dials that stole the shadow from the sun. There were devices to record the flicker of light though crystal, or a human body's living pulse, and yet others that measured the age of all existence, or the nothingness beyond. They were here in all their endless variety, stretching off in a vast desert, horizon after horizon, on and on and on. And, but for the wind, that desert was silent and timeless, for not one of these clocks worked.

Then I, or whatever I had become, awoke, and I found myself lying scratched and aching in a wasteland beyond the farthest edge of an ill-kept field. I stood up, I started walking—dazed as I was, what else was I supposed to do?—and soon I heard dogs barking, and the lowing of cattle, and the hiss of geese, and for a few delicious moments I believed that I was back in my own town, and my heart filled with hope. Then a farm worker balanced on a strange, chuffing machine noticed me, and shouted across the furrows, and some children ran up and screamed as if I were some wild intruder, and started throwing stones. Which, I realised as I looked down at myself, was understandable, because I no longer recognised myself.

I was taller, or at least farther from the ground, and my hands were like spiders, and brown as bronze, and I was peculiarly clothed,

and a pressure across my chest and back came from the strap of a tool bag, and the thing I hadn't even realised I was leaning on was some kind of metal staff. Even the tones and accents of my voice, as I tried to reason with the people who were gathering around me, were as strange to me as they were to them. And I suddenly felt very, very old.

I was shouted at, jeered and prodded, and not one of the faces that leered over me was familiar as I was hauled like a sack of potatoes through the streets of a town filled with moving glass-and-metal machines that clearly weren't timepieces, although I had no sense of what their purpose was. Yet the place wasn't entirely strange to me, which was somehow the strangest thing of all. It was down to the dusty scent of the lime trees, and to the way the main square framed a church and a clock tower, even if every detail was changed. The church buttresses were finer, and the tower was clad in polished grey blocks rather than rough brown stone. That, and the man who came up to me and demanded to know my business here was clearly the mayor, even if he had no moustache and was dressed in perfectly buttoned clothes. There was something else as well. It was the sense of tired restlessness, and the smell of dogs and drains, and the uncertainty of the shadows beneath the lime trees, and the madly crowing cocks.

Did these townsfolk understand what was happening? With approximate gestures and half-understood phrases, it was difficult to make myself entirely clear. But yes, yes, they agreed after a great deal of pointing and prompting, they sensed their tower clock wasn't working quite as it should, but were at a loss to explain why. Nor, it seemed, had they heard of someone called the Chronologist. If such a being did exist beyond what they called *the space of nothing* that surrounded their small and carefully maintained haven, he'd certainly never come here.

Of course, it took a great deal of persuasion before they agreed that my strange and sudden arrival might serve some useful purpose, and were prepared to allow me to go up into their tower

and inspect the mechanism of their turret clock at first hand. Of course, they also insisted that I was accompanied, although everyone apart from the mayor, who was used to climbing these ladders every morning, soon ran out of breath. I found it oddly soothing to make this journey and be up in the ticking shadows in the company of this thing of brass and steel. It was a neat, sleek mechanism, more complex in some ways but simpler in others than the turret clock I had damaged and abused. Overall, though, it had broadly the same workings, with changes and improvements here and there. Lost as I was, it was like greeting an old friend.

Overall, I decided, the device was working well enough, but there were one or two minor issues—a crooked nut, a few grains of dirt, a slightly misaligned wheel—that needed to be addressed. I was pleasantly surprised, looking into my tool bag, to discover that I had the necessary tools, and was soon able to set things right—a tightening here, a loosening there, some slight rebalancing, a wipe with a rag, a few drops of oil—and it was satisfying to feel the sense of renewed purpose and solidarity that now emanated from this timepiece with every *tock,* and to hear the relief in the mayor's voice as he thanked me, and the cheers of the townsfolk rising from the square below.

They wanted me to stay with them in that town, but I refused. I knew I would be of no other use to them, and that they would soon begin to ask questions about things I had no answer for, and then to doubt the purpose and meaning of their carefully measured lives, and to blame me for all that went wrong. So I left in the late afternoon, at first in the company of the mayor and some civic worthies, and then merely a few giggling, scampering children, and then entirely alone.

I'm no longer sure I can remember the many, many other towns I have come across on my journey, nor that it would be good if I did, but I do know that all are different and yet somehow the same. Sometimes, when I arrive, my presence is expected, or thought long overdue. Sometimes, I am barely needed, or just a mad curiosity, or

a dangerous pariah to be cursed and stoned. There must be days and arrivals which I do not survive. Sometimes, the townsfolk recognise and remember me, although I rarely do myself. Sometimes, I am far too late. Sometimes, there is neither place nor time and once again I find myself falling through the time-winds in a madly corkscrewing clock tower—or perhaps it's for the first time—and awaken changed and aching from dreams of a wilderness of clocks, and with no real sense of who or what I am.

I have visited towns where the clocks are lumbering and primitive, and the people are frankly primitive as well. There have been others where their devices are little more than light and energy, and time somehow pours down from the skies. I have spoken with machines in the shape of people, and people in the shape of machines. I have been to places where the clock tower is worshipped through human sacrifice, and others where the inhabitants have razed it to the ground. It is in one of these ruins, or so I imagine, that I found my metal staff, which appears to be the minute hand from the face of a town clock, although I can't be sure. I have yet, however, to come across a volume on the repair and maintenance of the commoner types of timepiece. Unless, that is, I've already lost it, or it's been stolen by some ill-meaning lad, or I've forgotten that I have it with me right now. My memory's not what it once will be. Or was. Or is.

One town, though, I do particularly remember, because I truly recognised every detail, with each house and street and field arranged exactly as I knew them to have once been, and the faces of all the people who welcomed me achingly familiar in every way. But I was glad to discover that the mayor's wife was still alive, and that she and he made a happy couple. Nevertheless, the mayor quietly confessed to me as I attended to the case clock in the hall of their well-appointed house, it was a small grief to them both that they had never been blessed with a child.

There will, I suppose, come a day when I will force some foolish child nurturing dreams of reaching other times and lands to follow me up the ladders of the clock tower in a particular town. Or perhaps

it has already happened, and the event lies so far behind me that the memory has dissolved. Either way, I know I can never tell him that there is nothing more precious than waking each morning and knowing that today will probably be much the same as yesterday, tomorrow as well, although I wish I could. All I can do is to keep pushing on through the time-winds according to the workings of curse and a calendar that is entirely my own.


LAVIE TIDHAR
SEVEN VAMPIRES:
A JUDGE DEE MYSTERY

Seven Vampires: A Judge Dee Mystery

LAVIE TIDHAR

illustration by

RED NOSE STUDIO

1.

The flames rose behind them as Jonathan and Judge Dee fled Paris.

The city *burned*. Jonathan, panting, wished he'd packed his *good* pair of trousers. He wished he'd not been so tardy that he forgot to pick up the juicy pork chops from the butcher that morning. How naïve he was that very morning!

Their long sojourn in the city had made Jonathan complacent. He *forgot*.

Forgot that his master was a vampire judge, and that rest and tranquillity were things only *other* people enjoyed.

Now he ran, and wished he'd picked up the second string of sausages, and maybe an extra cheese. The city burned behind him.

Judge Dee moved easily, his long legs striding without effort. He was wrapped in a dark travelling cloak. To anyone watching they would seem like a monk and a novice, fleeing the city.

They were hardly the only ones.

The fire had begun on Fish Street. Churchmen armed with crosses and crossbows stormed the nest of the Fish Street Coven, in truth a dismal hole of poor, starved vampires only recently arrived in the city.

There were too many vampires in Paris. The city crawled with them all.

The churchmen slaughtered the fiends of the night. The fire caught. The city was built on wood. Even the bridges burned over the Seine. In the confusion only one thing seemed clear: destroy the monsters who for too long had preyed on Paris.

Vampires died. Those who could fled the city.

Judge Dee had made arrangements long in advance for just such an eventuality. They were to meet the rest of their travel companions at a crossroads far from the city. Jonathan had protested. Surely their best chance was to travel alone. He didn't voice the real reason

for his unease, though the judge knew it well enough: the thought of spending his nights with a group of murderous vampires was enough to put even Jonathan off his dinner.

The dinner he'd left on the table, untouched, when the fire began.

'Master,' he panted, 'may we slow down? I think I am suffering an attack of the heart.'

The judge did not slow. 'Perhaps it is indigestion,' he suggested.

'But I did not eat!' Jonathan said, and the unfairness of it all would have made him cry.

'You have grown somewhat rotund since we first arrived here,' the judge observed. 'More rotund than before, I mean. Some exercise would do you a world of wonder, Jonathan.'

'Yes, master,' Jonathan said miserably.

The judge, he reflected, could be quite hurtful sometimes.

The judge had found Jonathan long ago back in England. Jonathan was buried under a pile of corpses, but the judge sensed the spark of life under the dead. He'd rescued him for a purpose, and kept him around afterwards. Jonathan was never sure why. Wherever the judge went, murder waited. This did not help Jonathan's digestion one bit.

He had *liked* Paris! For a while he had been almost happy. It was a rare and unfamiliar feeling for Jonathan. He wished it had lasted longer.

The flames grew smaller in the distance. The night was dark and cold but Jonathan sweated. He struggled to keep up with the judge's long strides. There were other people around them now, Parisians fleeing the burning city, some on foot, the more wealthy ones on horses. The river was somewhere to their right.

'Why don't we take a boat, master?' Jonathan said.

'The river is not safe,' the judge told him.

'But why? Is it that it's running water?'

He had heard that somewhere.

'No, Jonathan,' the judge said. 'It is because the river will be watched and boats will be stopped and searched, and soldiers have

swords.’

‘Swords are bad,’ Jonathan mumbled.

‘Indeed, Jonathan,’ the judge said. ‘We shall keep to dry ground and dirt roads until we reach the English port town of Calais. Then we shall take ship across to England.’

‘England, master?’ Jonathan said. He had not been back home since … How many years had it been? He realised he didn’t know. There were too many bad memories waiting for him back on the island. ‘But it’s cold.’

‘I envy you,’ the judge said, ‘that you can feel the cold. It is a mark of life, and life is precious – ah, here we are.’

The judge often said strange things like that. The judge’s kin killed with abandon, and the judge could be as ruthless as any – more than most, if Jonathan was honest. A vampire judge did not just pass a sentence, after all – he also carried out the punishment. And the judge was *old*. He came from a distant land long ago, and there were few of vampirekind who could measure up to him in power. Judge Dee was a name that gave monsters nightmares.

Jonathan squinted in the dark. He did not have the judge’s night vision. But soon he saw that they were, indeed, nearing a crossroad, and that six dark, cowled figures stood in a half circle and watched them approach.

Jonathan’s heart filled with foreboding.

Or perhaps it really was indigestion.

The six vampires waited silently at the crossroad.

2.

‘Judge Dee. I am Gregor.’

He was a large, bearded man with a fur rim on his cloak. He glared at Jonathan.

‘What is this?’ he said. ‘We cannot have humans. They keep trying to kill us!’

Jonathan would have laughed, but Gregor had muscles like a boxer and teeth like blades. Jonathan would have shivered but he was sweating too much from the walk.

'Yes,' a tall, slim woman said, stepping forward. *She* was in an expensive velvet cloak and wore a thin, exquisite gold band on her head. 'I am Lady Aisha, my dear judge. You may have heard of me? I was Princess of Agadir for over two hundred years before the infidels deposed me. I must say, this Gregor here is right. I was forced to leave my *entire* staff *and* my familiar back in Paris, and I had to kill the maid. The maid! She turned on me with a kitchen knife. It is so hard to find a good maid, did you know that? They grow old and die just as you get used to them. No, Gregor is right. We must leave this one behind.'

She smiled, showing her sharp teeth. 'Perhaps I could help you dispose of him. He is like a fat little lamb, isn't he?'

Jonathan cowered and Lady Aisha laughed delightedly. But Judge Dee put out his hand.

'He is with me,' he said. His voice commanded. The others stepped back. Gregor stared at Jonathan, then spat.

'Yes?' the judge said. Gregor wilted under his gaze.

'Just keep him near you,' he mumbled.

'We should get going,' a burly yet friendly-looking man said. Like Gregor he had a thick beard.

'I am Bertolli, the painter,' he said. 'It is an honour to meet you, Judge Dee. Perhaps I could take your portrait on the way?'

'The painter? You studied with Gaddo Gaddi!' Judge Dee said in surprise.

The judge had an odd fondness for modern art.

Bertolli swelled at being recognised. He beamed with pride. 'Studied with him? I taught the brat everything he knows!'

'We shall talk,' the judge promised.

'I believe one of our party is missing.' The speaker was a thin, young-looking man with an equally thin moustache. He said, 'I am Jacques. But you can call me Jack, seeing as our destination lies at

the barbarous coast of the English. There were supposed to be seven of us assembled here, not including yourself, Judge Dee. But one never made it.'

'So? Perhaps they died in Paris,' a new speaker said dismissively. She was an older woman, in plain, much stained travelling clothes. 'I am Melissandra,' she told the judge. 'We met before.'

'Jerusalem,' the judge said. 'Some while back. I remember.'

'And I will not forget,' Melissandra said. The words were ambiguous. And Jonathan was reminded again of the longevity and viciousness of vampires.

Melissandra turned to Jack. 'I do not care for this missing person. We should go, and quickly. The sun doesn't wait to rise and too many people are abroad due to the fire. We should make haste and put some distance between us and the city.'

'I was first here,' Gregor said. He frowned in concentration. 'At least, I thought so. As I approached I imagined, if for a moment, that I saw two people against that large rock over there, the one that marks the boundary. But when I came closer I saw no one.'

The party turned and looked uneasily at the rock. The judge went first, and the rest of the party hurried to follow.

The judge stopped.

'Alas,' he said softly.

A shrunken body, withered and aged, lay limply on the ground. Its head, Jonathan saw, had been torn clean off. It lay a few feet away. The corpse was clothed in a grey cloak. There was a gold ring on the corpse's hand.

'Nils!' Melissandra said in evident surprise.

Judge Dee looked at the corpse. 'You know him?' he said.

'You can tell him by his ring,' Melissandra said. She seemed unconcerned. 'He was an old Norseman. I met him a couple of times in Paris. One of those old pirates of the north, you know the type. He was a bum.'

‘He was murdered?’ Lady Aisha said. She shuddered theatrically. ‘How terrible,’ she said. ‘So much death in one night. Well, shall we get going?’

‘He was *murdered*!’ Jack said.

‘We should search him for valuables,’ Gregor said.

The judge, strangely, seemed to agree. He looked through the victim’s clothes, then shook his head.

‘Nothing,’ he said.

‘Well, that’s settled, then,’ Lady Aisha said. ‘And as we are most likely to be murdered, too, if we don’t make haste, I suggest we set off.’

The rest of the vampires exchanged anxious glances. Lady Aisha was right, seemed to be the consensus.

‘A moment,’ Judge Dee said. He continued his examination of the corpse, then nodded to himself.

‘Well?’ Gregor demanded. ‘Is he dead?’ and Melissandra laughed, then quieted.

‘He’s dead enough,’ Lady Aisha said. She reached her hand to Jonathan. ‘Come, walk with me, little lamb. I can tell you like food almost as much as I do.’

She flashed him a smile with her sharp, white teeth.

Jonathan shrunk from her. Judge Dee rose.

‘There is no more I can learn here,’ he said. ‘And the Lady Aisha is right. We must make haste before the sun rises. Come, Jonathan.’

No one offered to bury the corpse. Vampires weren’t sentimental. When they went, they went violently. If they were very old they turned to ash. Nils’ body was withered and shrunken, so he must have had a few centuries on him.

Not that Jonathan cared. But he could tell the judge did. Judge Dee loved truth, and truth was hard to come by when vampires were involved.

‘Yes, master…’ he said.

The travel party huddled into their cloaks. The moon shone down. They trudged across the fields, following the stars north.

3.

There was one more member of their party. Jonathan met him by the fire, the second night.

The others were away, hunting. Jonathan did not want to think about that. The Lady Aisha had brought Jonathan a bloodied hare. She smiled charmingly.

‘I like a man who likes to eat,’ she said.

Jonathan cooked the hare on the fire. There was something very unpleasant about the way the Lady Aisha looked at him. Like *he* was the hare.

But he was used to that.

‘There is a killer in our midst,’ the man said. He came and sat by the fire. He scowled at Jonathan. He wore Benedictine black.

‘You are a monk?’ Jonathan said in surprise.

‘I was in life,’ the man said. ‘My name is Borja Moura. You can call me Brother Borja. I followed the Lord Christ in life, and when my life was cruelly taken from me by a fiend, I saw no reason why I should not follow the Lord still, even in undeath. I am a pious man,’ he said piously.

‘You suspect one of the others?’ Jonathan said. This Borja made him uneasy. Jonathan turned the hare on the coals. His stomach rumbled.

‘Of this Nils’ death? But of course. Don’t you? Murder, young Jonathan!’ Brother Borja said with no little satisfaction. ‘Murder most foul. Mark my words—’ He scowled again, then rose to his feet. ‘It will not be the last. I bid you farewell, I must to my supper.’

He turned into a bat and flew away.

‘What a revolting man,’ Melissandra said. She appeared so softly out of the shadows that Jonathan jumped. How long had she been lurking there? The night seemed suddenly full of shadows, and he swore he could hear a wolf howl in the distance. ‘I used to be the Queen of Jerusalem, you know.’

‘I did not,’ Jonathan said.

‘I know many secrets,’ she said, ignoring him. ‘For instance, that Aisha is no lady. A houri, is what she is! The houri of Agadir. Ha! And that Bertolli, he has no talent as a painter. How absurd! Can you imagine a vampire painting? We are made to *rule*. I know all kinds of things. I might keep you, my little chick, when they are all gone. I am short a familiar, and though you are dirty and your breath smells of cheese, at least you can cook.’

She did not wait for a reply and stalked off into the night. Jonathan was left alone. He pulled the hare out of the fire and burned his fingers as he pulled meat off the bones.

Grease ran down his chin.

Where was the judge? Jonathan wondered. He did not feel safe without his master near. Though truth be told, he never felt safe even *with* his master there. He thought of their previous adventures – or nightmares, as Jonathan privately thought of them. The Horror of the Hogsmead. The Massacre in Pine Needle Bluff. The Terror in Turin.

He might have considered writing them down, but his handwriting was terrible and besides, no one wanted to read stories about vampires.

He tore another chunk of meat off the bone.

A scream pierced the night.

Jonathan kept chewing. He was used to screams in the night. Judge Dee materialised out of the air and stood beside the fire.

‘Come, Jonathan,’ he said. ‘I fear the worst.’

Jonathan always feared the worst. The worst was inevitably what happened when you were in the company of vampires.

‘Yes, master,’ Jonathan said. He took a leg of hare with him. Not that there was much meat on the hare. He followed Judge Dee into the night, the thin bone of the hare held before him like a spectacularly useless weapon.

‘He’s dead!’ Jonathan heard the cry.

‘Who is dead?’

The judge strode fast. In moments Jonathan saw the corpse. The man had a thick beard and in death looked much like he did in, well,

undeath.

Jonathan said, ‘Bertolli.’

‘I stumbled over him on my return to camp,’ Lady Aisha said. She sounded disgruntled. ‘Corpses everywhere!’ she said.

‘How did he die?’ Jonathan said. The judge nodded. He crouched next to the corpse. Pointed.

‘He was cut with a silver blade, very small and sharp,’ he said. ‘A barber-surgeon’s weapon, I would wager.’

‘What barber uses such delicate knives?’ Jonathan said. He wondered when it was the judge last went in for a haircut or an amputation. ‘This seems more like a lady’s weapon to me, begging your pardon, madam.’

‘Well, *I* am certainly not a barber-surgeon,’ Lady Aisha said. ‘Though I am a lady.’ She turned suspicious eyes on the others. The rest of the vampires materialised one by one at the scene. Last amongst them was Gregor. He too looked suspiciously at the rest.

‘Where is Borja?’ he demanded.

‘I am here,’ Borja Moura said. ‘I was praying. What is this? Ah. The Lord’s vengeance has struck again.’ He seemed rather pleased at the thought.

‘It is not your God who did this!’ Melissandra said. Lady Aisha nodded.

‘Whoever did this did not even feed on Bertolli,’ she said. ‘Such a waste. I bet he was delicious.’

‘You’re a pig,’ Melissandra said.

‘Pigs are beautiful animals,’ Lady Aisha said.

‘I would make a nice rug out of your skin, Aisha.’

‘Enough,’ the judge said, before the furious Melissandra could attack Aisha. ‘Where are his belongings?’

Not waiting for a reply he turned and left the corpse. When they reached the camp, Jonathan saw Bertolli’s single travel bag had been ripped open, its contents scattered.

The judge said nothing and merely frowned. He examined the bag, then what remained of Bertolli’s belongings. Jonathan saw jars

of paint, brushes which the judge handled with care, bundles of carefully rolled vellum, knives and a pair of scissors, a gold locket and various items of personal grooming. There was even a bar of soap.

‘Is anything missing?’ Jonathan said.

‘He had nothing worth stealing,’ Lady Aisha said disdainfully. ‘The man was a pauper and a simpleton.’

‘There’s a gold locket,’ Gregor said. Jonathan had not seen much of Gregor since they set off. He was a surly sort, and stomped ahead of the rest when the group travelled. ‘Why not take the gold? Gregor take. Give it to me.’

He reached for the locket. The judge’s hand shot out and grasped him by the wrist. Gregor’s face turned red. Veins bulged on his face, but the judge held him in an iron grip.

‘Enough!’ Gregor said. He pulled his arm away. ‘Keep the stupid trinket,’ he said. He turned his back on them and stalked back to the makeshift grave he had dug himself for the sleep of day. The vampires had all dug graves, all but for the judge. Where the judge went to spend the time of light not even Jonathan knew.

What *did* Bertolli carry that was worth dying for? Jonathan wondered. He had not had much time to form an impression of the man. And if it were valuables the killer was after, why not take the locket, the only thing of value? Unless…

‘Are his paintings valuable?’ he said.

‘His paintings?’ Melissandra snorted, and even Lady Aisha laughed. ‘No one likes this modern art stuff,’ Melissandra said. ‘Now, give them a few centuries more and they might be considered the works of old masters.’

‘A vampire might consider that a reasonable investment,’ Jonathan offered. Aisha and Melissandra both laughed openly at that one.

‘A vampire cares only for tomorrow night’s dinner,’ Lady Aisha said. Her gaze lingered hungrily on Jonathan.

‘See for yourself,’ Melissandra said. ‘I met Bertolli in Paris. Let us just say that his artistic persuasion was somewhat … single-minded.’

The judge had already unrolled the scrolls of vellum. In the wan light of the fire Jonathan saw the images and blushed.

‘Do not tell me you have not seen two men fornicating before!’ Melissandra said. ‘My, Aisha, I see what you mean. He *is* delicious.’

Jonathan wilted under their combined attention.

But he had to admit the women were right. Even Jonathan’s wilfully ignorant eyes could tell the work wasn’t very good. Proportions were wrong, the colours too dark, the figures sketched out oddly.

‘He painted in blood,’ Melissandra said. ‘I remember he was very proud of that one. Well, blood and other bodily fluids. I cannot see this sort of thing catching on.’

Jonathan stared at the paintings. Vellum after vellum showed naked men fornicating, mostly in the same setting of a room at an inn, with the same washbasin and the same four-poster bed, though judging by the depiction no one had ever cleaned the sheets. One man was usually Bertolli himself. The other changed from painting to painting.

‘What is this?’ Jonathan said.

The judge held one of the last paintings. The figures in it both seemed familiar. One was Bertolli himself. The other was—

‘That’s Nils!’ Lady Aisha said. ‘He doesn’t look that much different from his corpse after all.’

The ancient Norseman stared back at them from the painting. He was naked, erect, and caught in an amorous embrace by Bertolli.

‘They were lovers?’ Melissandra said. Jonathan saw the others had their backs to them now. Jack and Gregor were speaking with each other. Brother Borja sat cross-legged, evidently praying. Jonathan wondered if the lack of interest was a sign of guilt or just a lack of interest. It was hard to tell with vampires.

With vampires, it could very well be both.

‘Interesting,’ the judge said. He rolled the vellum back carefully and tucked it away.

‘Interesting?’ Lady Aisha said.

‘He was not a good painter,’ the judge said – with some regret, Jonathan thought. ‘I wonder if he even really knew Gaddo Gaddi. What do you think, Jonathan?’

‘About Gaddo Gaddi?’

‘About events so far. What conclusions can you draw? Apply what the Greeks called *logos*, reason.”

As he spoke, the judge returned the rest of Bertolli’s belongings to the travel bag; all but for the paintings, which Melissandra and Aisha both promptly helped themselves to. They wandered a distance away, no longer interested in the conversation, and instead examined each of Bertolli’s paintings with evident fascination, discussing the merits and faults of each of the nude men depicted, while laughing uproariously.

Jonathan tried to concentrate. ‘I don’t know, master,’ he said. ‘Bertolli and Nils knew each other. Nils ended up dead and Bertolli followed shortly after.’ He glanced around him nervously. ‘One of our party killed them both for an unknown reason?’

‘*Think*, Jonathan. How was Nils killed?’

‘He was strangled,’ Jonathan said. ‘I mean, his head was torn clean off.’

‘Exactly. And Bertolli?’

‘A silver knife, you said.’

‘A nasty weapon.’

‘We should search everyone here!’ Jonathan said. ‘Whoever possesses the knife will be our killer.’

The judge rarely smiled, but he did so now. ‘And do you think we would find it? Or that any of them would agree to a search?’

‘I suppose not…’ Jonathan said.

‘The two different methods suggest two different murderers, do they not?’ Jude Dee said. ‘One killed Nils. The other killed Bertolli.’

‘But whatever reason could they have!’ Jonathan said.

‘I cannot yet speak to it with full knowledge,’ the judge said. ‘But may I advance a proposition?’

‘Master?’

‘Bertolli knew Nils. They were intimate, we know that from the painting.’

‘So?’

‘It would have made it easy for Bertolli to come close to the Norseman. Close enough to twist his head off his neck, maybe. It would seem an act of intimacy, until the very end.’

‘You say *Bertolli* killed Nils?’ Jonathan said. He stared at the judge in bewilderment. ‘Then who killed Bertolli?’

‘That I cannot yet say.’

‘And *why* kill either of them?’ Jonathan said. ‘What did they ever do to anyone, besides, well…?’

‘Besides being murderous fiends and unholy creatures of the night?’ the judge said. ‘Is that what you meant?’

‘I wasn’t going to *say* it…’ Jonathan mumbled.

‘They must have had something of value. Or rather, Nils must have had something of value. Which then passed to Bertolli. Valuable enough for Bertolli to kill Nils for it. Valuable enough for someone else to kill Bertolli.’

‘Someone who already knew Nils had the item?’ Jonathan said.

‘Exactly.’

Jonathan stared around him at the camp. Lady Aisha and Melissandra were looking at the nude paintings. Brother Borja was still praying silently. Jack was lying on his back, stiff as a corpse. Perhaps he liked watching the stars. Gregor sat on his own, whittling a stick of wood with a knife. Jonathan tried to see what sort of knife it was. He hoped to catch a glimpse of silver. But it was just an ordinary knife.

Each of them could be the murderer.

Each of them *was* a murderer.

And the judge had solved one mystery, only to be faced with another.

Jonathan reached for what was left of his breakfast. The meat was still warm, and he was always so hungry.

He sighed.

Jonathan hated it when things got *complicated*.

4.

Two nights of hard walking under the cold indifferent stars. Heading north. On and on they went, heading to the coast.

They stayed off any roads. They saw few people on the way.

On the third night after sundown they found Gregor dead in his grave.

Jonathan stared. The large vampire lay on his back in the open grave, a sharp wooden stake sticking out of his heart. Jonathan remembered Gregor sharpening a stick much like it.

Gregor's mouth was slack.

'This is absurd!' Lady Aisha said. 'We are supposed to be travelling together for mutual protection! What is the meaning of this outrage?'

The vampires began to argue heatedly. Even Brother Borja, who was usually aloof, could not help but join in.

'A punishment from God for our nature!' he said.

'You're a buffoon,' Jack said. 'And I am digging my next grave far from any of you, or I am sure I will be next!'

'Why would *you* be next?' Melissandra demanded in affront. '*I* was the Queen of Jerusalem, did you know that? You are nothing but a peasant, *Jacques*.'

'You are a boor,' Jack said coldly.

'A boor! You take that back!'

'I am clearly going to be next,' Lady Aisha said. She seemed pleased at the idea. 'In truth I do not see why anyone would bother killing this Gregor at all, the man was a simpleton, though he was pleasant in the sack.'

'*I* will surely not be harmed,' Brother Borja said. 'For I follow the Lord.'

They squabbled. Judge Dee pulled Jonathan aside.
‘What do you think?’ he said in a low voice.
‘Another murderer?’ Jonathan said. ‘The spike through the heart—’
‘I believe this time the means were a matter of convenience,’ Judge Dee said. ‘Gregor did inexplicably plant that very stake like a marker right by his grave. I fear he was not the brightest of souls. If he had a soul, of course, which is a matter of some debate.’
‘Perhaps Gregor killed Bertolli?’ Jonathan suggested. ‘Which means he stole the item of value from Bertolli and then someone else killed him for it in turn?’
The judge frowned.
‘It is logical,’ he allowed. ‘And yet I have my doubts. Gregor struck me as a man who kills with his fists, violently. Whoever killed Bertolli was methodical, and this new murder follows suit. It is quick, efficient. It is not done with emotion but with *intent*.’
‘But if Bertolli’s killer already had the item, why kill Gregor?’ Jonathan said.
The whole thing gave him a headache. He wished they’d reach Calais already. There’d be inns in Calais, and inns meant wine, and roasted birds, and bread dipped in fat. Jonathan really missed bread. And fat.
‘I do not know. Perhaps Gregor suspected someone in our group. Perhaps he wanted to share in whatever the item of value was. We do not know what, if anything, it is worth.’
‘This item,’ Jonathan said. ‘It was brought by Nils, the Norseman, is that correct?’
‘It is.’
‘Then what could an old Norseman possibly have that is worth anything!’ Jonathan said.
‘That is a good question,’ the judge admitted. ‘I do not know.’
‘And how did Gregor – as you said, not the brightest of people – know who murdered Bertolli?’
‘You’re overthinking things,’ the judge said – unfairly, Jonathan thought. ‘It is possible Gregor simply witnessed the murder. Perhaps

he saw the nature of the item, too. In that case, even a simpleton like him could be motivated to act.'

'I wish we were still in Paris,' Jonathan said miserably.

Brother Borja insisted on giving a short speech on Gregor's grave. The short speech grew long. Melissandra and Lady Aisha soon began to trade insults, and that escalated quickly to threats of violence. Jack announced he would happily murder them both. The atmosphere was tense.

'In the midst of life we are in death,' Brother Borja said.

'Oh, shut up,' Jack said.

On that, it turned out, they all agreed.

They set off again into the endless night. Excluding Jonathan and Judge Dee there were only four members of the original travel party left: Jack, Melissandra, Borja, and Aisha. Each of whom seemed ready to kill the others at a moment's notice.

They were coming to a narrow valley. Jonathan squinted, trying to look ahead.

'I am hungry,' Jack announced. His sharp teeth grew longer.

Aisha hissed.

Melissandra said, 'I smell blood and cold metal and the sweat of men's lust.'

Judge Dee said, in his cold and calm voice, 'There is an ambush waiting for us in that valley.'

Aisha smiled.

'Good,' she said.

'I am hungry,' Jack said.

They walked into the valley and the mountains closed on them from either side like walls.

5.

Jonathan cowered.

Jonathan was good at cowering.

The brigands fell on the travellers from their hiding places.

They had steel swords and a lust for blood.

The vampires had sharp teeth and an equal lust for blood. Melissandra turned into a wolf. She tore one of the attackers' throats out and growled.

Jonathan cowered further.

Even Brother Borja joined the fight.

'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do!' he cried. Then he fell on one of the attackers and sank his teeth into the man's neck and began to feed like a starved dog over a hot supper. Blood jutted over Borja's face and arms. Jonathan had never discounted Borja as the possible murderer and now his suspicions rose further. Clearly the former Benedictine was as dangerous as the rest of them.

Two men with swords went for Jack. He snarled and whirled like a dancer. He was lightning-fast. Jonathan could not quite make out what happened next, only that suddenly both men were on the ground and they weren't moving. Jack howled laughter at the moon. Jonathan crawled behind a rock and tried to make himself as small as possible.

He couldn't see Judge Dee, and he couldn't see the Lady Aisha.

'Here's one!' he heard someone shout.

Jonathan looked up.

A giant man with scars on his face towered above him. A sword glinted in his hand. The sword came down on Jonathan.

Jonathan screamed.

A wolf jumped out of the shadows and bit the attacker's hand off. The sword cluttered to the ground. The wolf turned back to Melissandra.

'Hello, duckling,' she said. 'Oh, stop screaming.'

She turned to the attacker. The man stared at her in horror, his awful wound jutting blood. Melissandra smiled.

'Yum, yum,' she said.

She jumped on the man.

The man screamed.

Jonathan screamed.

Melissandra fed.

The battle was brutal and short. Only the moon shone down to illuminate the aftermath. Jonathan emerged cautiously from behind his rock. Corpses littered the ground.

The vampires seemed drunk. They staggered, their bellies so full they protruded. Jack burped. Melissandra farted. Borja stared into the distance with vacant eyes and licked his lips.

Jonathan tried to back away to his rock, but that only drew the three vampires' attention.

Their eyes fell on him.

'Hold on, hold on,' Jonathan said desperately.

'Yum, yum,' Melissandra said.

The three vampires staggered drunkenly towards him.

It was Judge Dee who came to his rescue. He materialised out of the night and stood between Jonathan and the three vampires. He looked at them coldly.

'The Lady Aisha is dead,' he said.

The vampires blinked. Reason came back slowly.

'Dead?' Jack said. 'Whatever for?'

'Good,' Melissandra said. 'I never liked her.'

'May God have mercy on her soul,' Brother Borja said. His lips were stained with blood.

'Come, Jonathan,' the judge said. Jonathan followed his master. They came to a depression in the earth, a little way away from the site of the battle. The Lady Aisha lay on the ground there – what was left of her. She really *was* old, Jonathan realised. There was little left of the beautiful lady he remembered. The corpse was withered. It looked like a tiny mummy. Jonathan had seen mummies before. He thought of the Case of the Monastery of Madness, early on in his sojourn with the judge.

He had seen his share of horrors.

'A silver blade?' he said softly.

The judge shook his head.

‘Did one of the attackers kill her?’

‘I do not think so.’

‘I see.’

The other three vampires came to join them. They looked down at the corpse.

One of them was the killer, Jonathan knew. And it was possible that same person also murdered Gregor and Bertolli. And Bertolli may have murdered Nils. It was hard to keep track.

‘Why kill the Lady Aisha?’ he asked the judge.

‘Perhaps she knew something. Or perhaps…’

‘She’s dead,’ Jack said, without much interest. ‘And I am sated, and Calais grows close. Let us go while the night’s still young. You really do have an unseemly interest in corpses, Judge Dee.’

The judge turned his cold eyes on the three remaining vampires.

‘I *am* a judge,’ he said, ‘and the killer of these vampires *will* answer to me.’

‘I really don’t see why,’ Melissandra said, and even Borja nodded. ‘What’s done is done, and who will miss them, anyway? I say we go.’

The judge nodded. Their small party continued on their journey. Jonathan noted that Brother Borja did not offer to speak over the corpse this time. Perhaps he’d had enough of funerary speeches. Or maybe he was simply too full to care.

They hiked on. Through the valley and into open fields, and in the distance Jonathan could hear gulls cry. He thought he could smell the sea.

Towards sunrise they had reached Calais.

6.

After Paris, Calais was a dump. After the long and wearing road, however, it seemed to Jonathan like paradise. He even bathed, though the water was lukewarm. He sat by the fire at the inn and feasted on pheasant, drippings, and bread. He quaffed wine in between.

‘Your manners,’ Judge Dee said, ‘leave much to be desired, Jonathan.’

It was not the first time he had made such an observation.

‘Yes, master,’ Jonathan mumbled. For once he was fed, and warm, and clean. He wished the moment would last forever. The wine gave everything a nice rosy glow.

‘What do you make of it all?’ the judge said.

‘I think they were all in it together,’ Jonathan said. ‘Or, I don’t know. That Borja Moura’s a suspicious character.’

They were all suspicious characters, if he was honest. He swallowed a chunk of bread. ‘Was Melissandra really a queen?’ he said.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ the judge said. ‘She ruled a coven of vampires in the crypts under Jerusalem for some decades. They had broken the Unalienable Obligations by growing too many and feeding too much on the populace. I was summoned. I dealt with the situation.’

‘Yet you spared her life?’

The judge said nothing. Jonathan looked at him in suspicion. It was not like the judge to leave survivors. Perhaps Melissandra was unusually persuasive.

‘Could she be our killer?’ he said.

‘Certainly.’

‘And then there’s Jack,’ Jonathan said.

‘Indeed. All three could have done for Lady Aisha during the battle.’

‘So Gregor killed Nils,’ Jonathan said, ‘then someone else killed Bertolli, Gregor, and Lady Aisha?’

‘Someone, or more than one,’ the judge said. ‘Perhaps it was Lady Aisha who killed Gregor and Bertolli.’

‘Then someone else killed her?’ It made Jonathan’s head spin.

‘I said it is possible,’ the judge said. ‘Not that it is what happened.’

‘How will you know?’ Jonathan said.

‘Ah,’ the judge said, and Jonathan’s heart sank. ‘This is where you come in.’

He explained. Jonathan nodded miserably.

‘Yes, master,’ he said.

The wine lost its allure. The remains of the pheasant sat on the plate, bones protruding, coated in grease. There was no more bread.

‘I have chartered a ship,’ Judge Dee said. ‘It will take us tomorrow night across the sea to England. It has been many years since I last visited London. I believe the Romans are no longer there.’ He sounded regretful.

‘Romans, master? In London? What a curious notion.’

‘They built it, Jonathan. It seems like only yesterday…’

Just how old *was* the judge? It was not the first time that Jonathan wondered. Such elders as him must have seen many wonders in their lifetime. Many horrors, too, no doubt. Jonathan was glad to remain a mortal. And the judge had assured him he would grow old and eventually die. The judge did not make others of his kind.

At least, Jonathan reflected, he would grow old and die if he ever got a *chance* to grow old before he died. Which seemed a dubious proposition in his current line of work.

The others of their party were out, stalking the night streets of Calais, no doubt eager for some fresh, English blood. Who knew if they would come back? Perhaps, Jonathan thought, there’d be yet another murder. Perhaps ultimately only one vampire would remain out of the original seven, and then they’d know who was to blame.

But he was to be disappointed. The others returned to the inn one by one. Jack first, then Melissandra, and finally Borja. They trudged in and sat down uninvited in the common room.

‘Calais is a rubbish heap!’ Melissandra announced. ‘I hope this is not a sign of what’s to come in London or I may well change my mind and go elsewhere.’

‘The men are filthy and the women disgusting,’ Jack announced.

‘And there is nary a church to be seen,’ Borja said. ‘What?’ he said into their sullen looks. ‘I like to listen to the prayers from outside.’

‘You are a strange one,’ Jack said. ‘I would not be surprised if you murdered the others.’

‘I did not,’ Borja said. He folded his hands comfortably in his lap. ‘But I will hardly shed a tear at their demise. They were monsters.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ Melissandra said. ‘Ah, what is the use? I am to my coffin. The sun is almost up.’

‘We shall meet by the docks tomorrow,’ the judge said. ‘The good ship *Ceres* will be waiting for us.’

‘I do not care for the sea,’ Jack said. He rose too, and Jonathan could not help but notice that as Melissandra climbed the stairs Jack was close behind her. Jack said something inaudible and Melissandra laughed.

‘Come, Jonathan,’ the judge said. ‘You should get some rest.’

Unspoken in his words was the task he had given him.

‘Go, then,’ Brother Borja said. ‘I shall remain here awhile and contemplate the flames. They are but a shadow of the true flames of Hell, yet as I glance into them I seem to sense a kinship with the—’

‘*Goodnight*,’ the judge said firmly, and Jonathan barely hid a smirk. He fled swiftly. He lay on his pallet of straw but did not sleep.

He waited for dawn.

7.

‘You might be wondering,’ Judge Dee said, ‘why I have assembled you all here.’

He looked at the others expectantly. They were on board the ship. The *Ceres* flew an English standard but was crewed by pirates out of the Channel Islands, and the sailors gave their passengers as wide a berth as was possible on a small sailboat in the middle of the ocean.

It was very cold. The moonlight shone down on the black and choppy sea.

‘Not really,’ Melissandra said. ‘There is only one room on this boat. Where else would we be? Do they call it a room, on a boat?’

‘A cabin,’ Jack said.

‘Yes,’ Melissandra said dubiously. ‘That.’

Brother Borja said nothing at all.

They had met just after sundown by the docks. The ship for London waited. The sailors muttered, but they took their pay all the same.

If the judge was disappointed at his fellow travellers’ dismissive attitude he showed no sign of it.

He said, ‘I have no official authority in this matter. I was not *summoned*. There is no one here to call out on the dead’s behalf.’

‘Then why harass us with this matter?’ Jack said, and Melissandra hid a yawn.

‘Because,’ the judge said, ‘I have taken an *interest*.’ He turned his cold eyes on the other vampires and they shied away from him.

‘A vampire may not kill another vampire without justification or valid excuse,’ Judge Dee said. ‘It is the third of the Unalienable Obligations.’

‘But they were all killed *with* reason!’ Melissandra blurted. ‘I mean, I assume so, anyway. I didn’t kill them all!’

‘No,’ the judge said. ‘You didn’t. For one, there is the matter of Nils’ murder.’

‘Oh, him. Yes,’ Melissandra said.

‘Let me begin in the beginning,’ the judge said. ‘We have plenty of time. The wind is in our favour but the shores of England are still far. So let me put together a story for you, if only to pass the time.’

‘Oh, good,’ Melissandra said. ‘I like stories.’

‘The only stories I need are in the Good Book,’ Brother Borja said, and Jack snorted. He shrugged and sat down.

‘Go on, Judge Dee,’ he said without much interest.

‘I will. Now then. There were seven travellers destined to journey together out of Paris.’

‘Eight, counting you. And nine if you count your human,’ Melissandra said.

‘I do not,’ the judge said.

‘Very well. Just making sure.’

‘There were *seven* travellers,’ Judge Dee said again. ‘Yet only six were present upon my arrival. The seventh we discovered dead. His head had been pulled off.’

‘How awful,’ Jack said.

‘Indeed. His name, I learned, was Nils, and he was a Norseman. A poor Norseman, too, if Melissandra here is to be believed.’

‘I would not lie about poor people!’ Melissandra said, affronted. ‘They are the worst. I told you I knew him slightly in Paris. What of it?’

‘I suspect,’ Judge Dee said, ‘that he was murdered for something he had with him. Something of value.’

‘What could an old Norseman possibly have of any value?’ Melissandra said, laughing.

‘Indeed, what…’ the judge murmured. He looked at each of them in turn. They gazed back – Melissandra amused, Jack disinterested, Borja amiable.

‘Gregor claimed to have been first on the scene,’ Judge Dee said. ‘He saw two figures in a close embrace. It suggested the murderer was one of our party. He, or she, could have arrived early, lying in ambush for Nils, killing him and presumably robbing him of his valuables.’

‘It makes sense,’ Jack said, nodding. ‘It is exactly what I would do.’

‘But you didn’t,’ the judge said. ‘On the *second* night, Bertolli was killed. He was an artist of dubious merit. His murder aroused my suspicions—’

‘It was a *murder*, man!’ Jack said. ‘Of course it was suspicious!’

‘And I searched his belongings. I did not find anything of value, but that was no surprise – someone had beat me to it and been through his bag. My suspicions were confirmed when I found a painting Bertolli made, which showed him and Nils, the first victim, in an amorous embrace. Clearly the two knew each other: it was simple to deduce that Bertolli was the one to kill Nils. But why?’

‘He wanted to take Nils’ valuable thing for himself?’ Melissandra said.

‘Precisely.’

‘But you found nothing of value?’

‘I did not.’

‘Then whoever murdered Bertolli *knew* Nils was carrying the item. And that Bertolli stole it.’

‘That is what I think,’ the judge said. ‘And the reason our murderer knew this was that he or she was waiting for Nils to deliver the valuable item to them.’

‘In that case,’ Melissandra said, ‘the murderer had a valid reason to kill Bertolli, for he – or she, if you insist on including me as suspect – was merely retrieving their own property.’

The judge inched his head, acknowledging her logic.

Jonathan buried his head in his hands. The case was growing more convoluted by the minute!

‘But then someone killed Gregor,’ Brother Borja said.

‘Yes,’ said Judge Dee.

‘If the murderer already had their property to hand, why kill another member of the party? It makes no sense.’

‘Unless,’ Melissandra said, seemingly enjoying following the thread, ‘Gregor saw something.’

‘Yes,’ the judge said. ‘I suspect Gregor was a witness to Bertolli’s murder, and most likely tried to take advantage of this knowledge to blackmail our killer, perhaps to share in the value of the item. The killer, therefore, killed him.’

‘Quite right!’ Jack said. ‘It’s disgraceful, extortion is a most unseemly violation of a person. Gentlemen do not *blackmail*. I am

glad he is dead.'

The judge nodded. 'Following Gregor's murder,' he said, 'logic dictates that our killer – the killer of Bertolli and Gregor, but *not* of Nils – had no need to kill again. The item was obtained, and after Gregor's murder our killer's secret was safe. And yet, later that night, another murder occurred. Under cover of a brigands' attack on our party, the Lady Aisha was felled.'

'What are you suggesting?' Brother Borja asked with sudden interest.

'I would suggest to you,' Judge Dee said, 'that, seeing as our killer had no need of killing Aisha, somebody else in our party did.'

'So we have not one but *two* murderers in our midst?' Brother Borja turned accusingly on the others. 'Clearly, it was them!'

'It was you two!' Melissandra said.

'Clearly it was the two of *you*!' Jack said.

The vampires hissed at each other. The mood turned ugly. Jonathan crawled under a table. Just to be on the safe side, he thought. Besides, the whole conversation was giving him a headache.

'But let us leave the matter of the poor departed Aisha for the moment,' Judge Dee said. 'To get back to the question of just what it was that Nils carried with him. Something small. Something light. Something *portable*, and yet of great perceived value.'

'Gold?' Brother Borja said.

'Gold is heavy, if there's enough of it worth stealing,' the judge said.

'Then I am sure I don't know.'

The judge paced. The ship moved in the waves. Jonathan felt queasy. He didn't know if it was the sea or the company that disagreed with him more.

'Gold…' the judge said. 'We do so love gold, don't we?'

'It's shiny,' Melissandra offered.

'Yes,' the judge said. 'But gold alone – how much could an old Norseman carry? No, Nils wasn't carrying the metal itself, I think, but

perhaps he did the *promise* of it. A promise is so much more enticing, is it not? Nils was carrying a dream. And a dream, even for vampires, is sometimes worth killing for.'

'I haven't dreamed since I died,' Jack said.

'No?' the judge said. He turned on him ruthlessly, and with one effortless motion grabbed him by the throat and lifted him off the floor. Jack struggled. He reached into a pocket and a vicious, small silver knife came out, but the judge knocked it away. The knife clattered to the floor. Melissandra moved to get it.

'No,' the judge said. 'You do not.'

Melissandra froze. Jack dangled in the judge's grip and all pretence was stripped from him then. Jonathan, looking up fearfully from under the table, saw the vicious murderer that hid behind the cool, disinterested exterior.

'Take the knife, Borja. If Melissandra moves, cut her throat.'

Brother Borja moved fast. He took the knife gingerly. The handle was made of wood, not silver, and was safe to hold. He said, 'With pleasure.'

'Sit down, Melissandra,' the judge said.

She sat down heavily.

'There was one simple way to ascertain both guilt and *purpose*,' the judge said. 'I knew you would never agree to a search, but vampires sleep through the day and humans do not. Luckily for me, I have a human assistant. Jonathan visited each of you during the sleep of undeath. I told him what to look for, and he brought it to me.'

Jack's hand twisted. He tried to reach into his cloak. The judge smiled.

'It is not there, Jack,' he said.

'Thief!' Jack croaked. 'It is mine. Mine!'

'What is it?' Borja said eagerly.

'Jonathan, if you please?' the judge said.

Jonathan crawled out from underneath the table and Melissandra hissed. 'I would make a rug out of you!' she said.

‘Don’t move, fiend!’ Brother Borja said. His eyes glinted with excitement.

‘What is it? What is it?’ he said.

Jonathan shrugged. He took out the small piece of old vellum that he had found, much as the judge told him he would, in a hidden pocket sewn inside Jack’s cloak. He unfurled it.

‘It is a map of some sort,’ he said. ‘I think.’ He stared at it dubiously. ‘It makes little sense to me,’ he said.

‘Is it a *treasure* map?’ Borja said.

Judge Dee released Jack, and the vampire fell to the floor. He remained there, rubbing his throat.

‘In a manner of speaking, yes, you could say that,’ Jack told Borja. His voice came out in a croak.

‘*You* were Nils’ accomplice,’ the judge said to Jack. ‘You waited for him at the crossroads, eager, anxious – but he never came. *You* were the one to tell us we were missing one of our party. You must have been devastated when we found him dead. You wanted to search him, but I beat you to it, and of course the map was already gone. You knew then someone had stolen it. How did you know it was Bertolli?’

Jack stared at the judge in hatred. ‘Nils had told me he was shacked up with an artist for a while. It was easy enough to deduce, and when I searched his belongings I found that same terrible painting you saw. I tracked down Bertolli and confronted him. He laughed at me so I killed him. I like to kill. I used to kill even before I became a vampire. I took the map from him and would have considered the matter closed and honour satisfied, only that buffoon Gregor saw me. He was a dimwit and wanted to become my partner. I do not need a partner and so I killed him, too. You cannot accuse me of anything, Judge Dee! I acted within the bounds of our law.’

‘You do not need a partner?’ Melissandra said. Her voice rose threateningly. ‘This is not what you told me last night, you lying boor!’

‘You horrid hag!’ Jack said. ‘What choice did I have?’ He turned beseechingly to the judge. ‘*She* killed Aisha, isn’t it obvious? And in

Calais she figured out I must have been Bertolli's killer and so came to me offering the same partnership Gregor wanted. I could not kill her with you being ever present, so thought to delay her attentions until we arrived in London. Once there I would have cut her throat with my pretty little knife, and would have been finally free of you all!'

'You lying scum! I will kill you!' Melissandra said. She, too, turned to the judge. 'Of course I killed Aisha. She was a dreadful person and annoyed me greatly. Surely it was obvious. I do not suffer an affront to my person!'

And, saying that, she launched herself at Jack, seemingly intent on killing him, too.

Jack jumped at her. Claws and teeth emerged and the two vampires hissed like monstrous cats.

The judge's hands snapped out. He grabbed them in mid-air and separated them. He held both by the throat.

'I have had enough of you both,' he said. 'But, seeing as I am not acting in an official capacity, as it were, I will not kill you as is my right as judge. Come.'

He dragged them out of the cabin. Jonathan and Brother Borja followed cautiously behind.

They emerged onto the deck. The wind howled and the waves rose and the white moon shone down. Jonathan squinted against the wind. He could see no shore, either behind them or ahead.

'Swim,' Judge Dee said simply.

'*Swim*?' Jack said.

Melissandra opened her mouth to add a comment of her own, but she never got the chance. The judge lifted both vampires up and then tossed them, like one would toss a couple of chicken carcasses past their prime, into the sea.

The two vampires flailed in the water.

'I cannot swim!' Jack screamed.

'Learn!' Brother Borja shouted back, and burst out laughing.

The two figures swiftly grew small behind them. The wind was strong and the sail full. The last thing Jonathan heard was

Melissandra, screaming, ‘I will get you for this, Judge Dee!’

But the wind soon snatched her voice away, and then they were gone from sight.

8.

‘I don’t understand,’ Brother Borja said. ‘What was it? May I see it?’

‘You seem awfully interested in treasure, for a monk.’

‘I thought your presentation was most edifying,’ Brother Borja said to Judge Dee, ignoring Jonathan’s comment. ‘You might be wondering why I assembled you all here! Brilliant line. I was hooked the whole way through!’

Jonathan stared at this shameless flattery of the judge. It wasn’t like the summation was *that* good, he thought. But the judge seldom had an audience to practice on.

‘Jonathan?’ the judge said.

‘Yes.’ Jonathan frowned. ‘The map purports to show, I do not quite know how to put it. It shows the familiar coast of Europe, and the wide sea beyond it—’

‘Yes? Yes?’ Brother Borja said.

‘Beyond the sea,’ Jonathan said, ‘the mapmaker had drawn a new, unknown continent.’

‘A *continent*?’ Brother Borja said.

‘Yes. The mapmaker called it Vinland, and indicated…’ Jonathan hesitated. ‘Indicated that it is rich with gold. There are people living there, it said, in cities of gold.’

Borja breathed. ‘The old Norsemen were said to be seasoned travellers,’ he said. ‘But to cross the ocean, and to find new land? Surely that is impossible.’

‘The map indicates currents and favourable winds,’ Jonathan said miserably. In truth he thought a map was something stupid to die over. Especially one as fantastical as this.

An unknown continent filled with gold?

Judge Dee was right, he thought. All those deaths were purely for a dream.

‘So Jack thought he could go there?’ Brother Borja said. ‘To this Vinland?’

‘I suppose so,’ Jonathan said.

‘Remarkable!’

‘Foolhardy,’ the judge said; but he said no more.

★ ★ ★

The rest of the journey was uneventful. The judge stood on deck, and Brother Borja sat staring out of the porthole, seemingly deep in prayer. Jonathan dosed. He wondered what it would be like to be back home, to hear a familiar language, to eat pottage again. He rather liked pottage.

He slept, and dreamed of cities filled with gold. When he awoke he heard gulls cry, and when he came up on the deck the moon was low in the sky, and ahead of them he could see white cliffs, and soon the ship docked at a dismal little port and they disembarked. Brother Borja wished them well. He would go to Canterbury, he said, where the Bishopric was.

‘Few blood suckers dwell in the shadow of the church,’ he said. ‘And I have had enough of other vampires.’

Jonathan couldn’t blame him.

He and the judge set off along the road. It would be daytime soon, and they would need shelter. Jonathan was tired. He hurried after the judge.

‘An unfortunate business,’ the judge said.

‘Do you think they will make it to shore?’ Jonathan said. ‘Jack and this Melissandra?’

‘I would not put it past them.’

‘They were not very nice,’ Jonathan said.

‘Vampires seldom are, Jonathan.’

‘An unknown land beyond the ocean, with strange people and cities of gold,’ Jonathan said. ‘It seems fantastical.’

The judge said nothing.

Jonathan's dream still lingered. How pleasant it might be to go there, after all, he thought. He would just have a look, he thought. That's all.

He reached for the map.

The map wasn't there.

'Master?' he said in panic. 'Master!'

'What is it, Jonathan?' Judge Dee said.

'The map, it is gone!' Jonathan said. He tried to think.

'It was that lying Benedictine!' he said. 'Brother Borja must have stolen it from me when I was asleep!'

Jonathan had never heard the master laugh. Nor did he do this time. But a sound that could have, just possibly, been a mirthless little chuckle did escape the judge's lips, and Jonathan was so startled he would have dropped the treasure map if only he still had it.

'Master?' he said. 'He took it, he took the map to Vinland! What if he tries to go there?'

Judge Dee put his hand on Jonathan's shoulder.

'Let him,' he said.

The judge stared into the distance. What did he see? Jonathan wondered. What did he know? Fire pits burning, and spears, and blood soaking into the good dark earth…

'By all means, let him,' Judge Dee said. 'And he will find out the hard way what they do to vampires there.'

And with that, they set off once more along the road.

About the Author

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*. You can sign up for email updates here.