

The background is a detailed illustration in a muted, earthy color palette. It depicts a large dragon on the left, its head and scales visible. On the right, a samurai figure is shown in a dynamic pose, holding a sword. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional Japanese art, possibly a woodblock print or a modern illustration inspired by it. The text is overlaid on this background using three circular shapes: a blue circle at the top for the date, a large white circle in the center for the title, and a blue circle at the bottom for the authors.

MARCH/
APRIL
2022

TOR.COM
SHORT
FICTION

Mohanraj
Tomova
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Melwani
Jones
Palwick

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TOR.COM SHORT FICTION

MARCH – APRIL 2022

MARY ANNE MOHANRAJ

DANIELA TOMOVA

DOMINICA PHETTEPLACE

MANISH MELWANI

STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES

SUSAN PALWICK

TOR·COM 

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HUSH



MARY ANNE MOHANRAJ

Hush

MARY ANNE MOHANRAJ

illustration by

MARY HAASDYK

T O R
D O T
C O M

Antira Port was chaos. It always was, but usually more of a controlled sort of thing—*this* was frenetic, voices raised in argument, people running, dragging unwieldy bags behind them.

Jenny stepped off the Jumpship after the final passenger and waved goodbye to her fellow flight attendants, all transferring to other ships. This was Jenny's last leg, thankfully; the job had been easier when she was young, thirty years ago. Back then, she'd touch down at home only long enough to catch wanderlust again, her restless feet sending her flying. These days, though, she longed for her little condo: neat rows of vegetables in raised boxes and cascades of bright varusthi in her hanging baskets. Hopefully Padraic had kept up with the watering; he was a good boy, but adolescence made him forgetful.

She paused on the tarmac, orienting herself. Jenny's implant was feeding her local news—there'd been an incident at a nearby school, an active shooter, which had spiraled out into a series of attacks, protests, riots that now weren't about the shooter at all, who was apparently some lovesick teen. Now there were adults involved, street fighting and store looting, old tensions flaring up into new battles. Citygov was telling everyone to stay home, especially those not native to this world.

Stay in your homes until further notice—glaring red printed across her retinas, echoing in her head, until Jenny shut it off, shut it all down. *I didn't vote for you*, she thought. It was too much, the clamor inside and out; she couldn't do anything about the external noise, but at least she didn't have to tolerate it in her own head.

She couldn't do what the voice told her, anyway. Jenny had to actually *get* home before she could stay home. But that should be easy enough—she had a flyer waiting at the parking bay, and it was barely twenty blocks from the port to her condo complex. She was

fully human, native Antiran, born and bred to this world for seven generations. Her ancestors had emigrated directly from Old Earth in the first wave of Jumpships. She wouldn't have any trouble.

Jenny took a firmer grip on her rolling bag and was turning towards the parking bay when she heard the voice. She couldn't quite place it at first, but it was naggingly familiar. A high, whiny pitch, a voice she'd heard before. Through her open window while she was doing dishes—she could smell the vertani scent of the soap, feel the slip and slide of it on her hands. She half turned, trying to place that voice.

The girl, carefully choosing her words, avoiding the s. "My mother will be here. She got the time wrong."

Jenny knew that voice, that girl, though it had been a full year since she'd seen her last. Katika had been arguing with her parents, trying to talk them out of sending her to school on Kriti. "It's ssso far—none of my friendsss are going!" The sibilants were long and stretched; none of the Razuli could manage to talk normally, no matter how hard they tried. Something about the shape of their tongues.

The mother's response: "Your friendsss are all nativesss; they'll do fine here. But you're never going to get taken ssserioussly on this planet, not until you're making enough money that they *have* to take you ssserioussly. Go to Kriti for sssecondary ssschool at leassst. You'll sssee."

Jenny wasn't fond of Katika's mother—the woman had bought that lovely house and then felt the need to enlarge it to twice the size, building right up to the edge of the property line, eating all the grass, so there wasn't any space to breathe. That would have been bad enough, but then she'd rebuffed every effort Jenny made at hospitality, neighborliness. Oh, she'd taken the basthi bread that first week, but had she returned the dish with something else in it? No. Not that Jenny would have actually eaten Razuli food—she'd tried once, but it gave her terrible indigestion. It was the gesture that was important. After the first few months, Jenny had just stopped trying;

she mostly felt relieved that she didn't have to pretend to like the woman any longer.

It wasn't that Katika and her family were Razuli. She met plenty of aliens in her work; the Jumpships were full of them, and it was a point of professional pride for Jenny that she treated all of them the same as humans. Many of her alien passengers had been perfectly lovely people. Katika's mother—what was her name again?—just wasn't very likable.

Now the girl—she must be fourteen now? or the Razuli equivalent, an early adolescent—was arguing again, this time with a security officer three times her size. He loomed over her and said, "Miss, we can't release you without an adult who can take custody. You'll have to go to security."

Jenny felt a flicker of concern. It was fine. Nothing was going to happen to the girl in security.

But then the guard reached out and grabbed Katika's arm when she tried to walk away; the girl let out a yelp of startlement—or was that pain? Before Jenny knew what she was doing, she had turned fully towards them, taken a few quick steps, and inserted herself between the two, so that the guard released Katika's arm, surprised.

"Katika! I'm so sorry I was so slow." She carefully got plenty of 's's into that sentence, to reassure the guard that *she* was no closeted Razuli. Jenny gave him her best harmless-middle-aged-woman smile. Most days she hated being middle aged; it made her feel invisible. Even in her form-fitting uniform, men mostly didn't look at her anymore. But if Jenny could use middle age to her advantage here, she would. "The girl's mother called and asked me to bring her home, since we're leaving the port at the same time. She's my brother's wife."

"This *Razuli* is your niece?"

Visually, there was nothing about Katika to mark her as nonhuman—her wig was firmly in place, and her poison glands were hidden beneath her cowlneck sweater. But the guard had seen her documents, of course, and if that hadn't been enough, he'd heard

her speak. He knew what she was. There was something in the way he said the species name—*Razuli*—that sent a shiver down Jenny's spine, making her twice as resolved that she would *not* leave this girl behind. There were other species that had made their way to Antira, dozens of them, but it was the Razuli that bigots tended to hate worst. Something atavistic, perhaps.

"Yes—my niece by marriage. Second marriage for both her mother and my brother Mark." Jenny was freely inventing now, knitting herself a little web of lies to tangle the guard in. She had no brother, but she'd always liked the name Mark. If she'd married, she might have looked for a nice Mark herself. But she hadn't had much luck keeping a man. They all seemed to think she talked too much, or said the wrong things. She'd had her sons, though, two lovely boys, just like she'd always wanted; Jenny hadn't needed to *keep* a man for that.

There were so many thoughts running through her head, it was hard to keep them all straight.

Mekti! That was the mother's name.

Jenny continued smoothly, "Mekti was lucky to find Mark. You should have seen this girl's father—now *there* was a bastard. What he put those two through—" Katika winced, and Jenny felt a sting of compunction. She didn't actually know anything about Katika's father, or if she even had a father. Jenny had never investigated Razuli mating practices. But something about that had hurt, and for the thousandth time, Jenny resolved to bridle her tongue. *Better to say nothing than to say something that stings.*

Still, her gossipy babbling seemed to have done the job—the guard's eyes were already glazing over with boredom. "Fine, fine. You ladies should get going—there's going to be a curfew at sundown."

It was past dinnertime now—just an hour or so until the sun went down. "Not a problem, sir," Jenny chirped. "We're just a few miles away—we'll be home in half an hour."

“Good, good. Go on now,” he said, turning away. Jenny held her breath until he was safely down the hall, harassing another passenger.

There—that was done. More excitement than she’d expected this evening, or wanted. Jenny just wanted to get home, see how Padraic was doing. He’d been so lost since his brother had left them; her younger boy needed his mother now. This whole interaction had slowed her, and Jenny hoped he wasn’t worrying. Irritation flared in her, but she tamped it down. It wasn’t the girl’s fault, and it wouldn’t be fair to take it out on her.

Katika had been silent through all of this, biting her lower lip. When Jenny turned back to her, the girl asked softly, “Did my mother really sssend you?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” Jenny said. “But why don’t you call her, ask if it’s all right for you to come home with me? Unless you’d rather wait for her here...?”

Katika stilled for the call, her eyes going glassy. A few moments, and then the girl blinked, coming back to the world. “She sssaysss it’s fine; she’ll wait for me at home. She wasss having trouble getting past the checkpointsss. Thank you ssso much for thisss.” The sibilants were back as the girl relaxed; like most children, she trusted familiar adults. Her mother should have taught her better.

Jenny smiled. “It’s no problem. We’ll just grab my flyer and head home.”

She started leading the way to the parking garage, babbling all the while. It was always safe talking to kids about school; that should calm the girl. “So, how were your studies—on Kriti, wasn’t it? You must tell me everything. My Padraic was so jealous when you left. I’ve been there three times, but never had long enough on the planet to really look around. What’s your favorite building at the university? The Tower of Art is spectacular, I’ve always thought, though so impractical for a terraforming colony.”

The girl hesitated, then started awkwardly talking. Katika had no talent for spinning a tale, but that was all right. It filled the silence, at

least. It was nice to have someone else carrying their part of the conversation.

Inside the parking garage, the walls were plastered with anti-alien posters, which was particularly spiteful, considering how many aliens came through the port. *Aliens, go home! Antira for Antirans! Two arms, two legs, one head, plenty of hair!* That last was a shot at the Razuli. A few sympathetic liberal humans did shave their heads in solidarity, but mostly, bald was not a popular styling choice for humans on Antira these days.

The last few years, the Humans First movement had gotten a lot louder, more blatant—they were running people for office now, taking out expensive ads on the entertainment networks. Jenny's favorite holos were interrupted by dark voices warning what could happen if an alien came to *your* town, went to school with *your* children. Jenny didn't need the reminders; she knew plenty about that.

Parents, talk to your children! What would you do if your son came home with this? The alien in the next poster they passed was a gelatinous Crenaran, more goo than flesh, draped all over a handsome young human. The Firsters weren't trying to be subtle.

The sheer nastiness of the ads made Jenny's stomach churn, and as she passed the posters, she found herself walking between them and Katika, trying to somehow shield the girl. Impossible, of course. Sometimes, pain was inevitable.

They got all the way to the flyer and climbed in before encountering the next hurdle—the automated flying system was down.

"You've got to be frelkin' *kidding* me!" she said. Jenny tried not to swear—her mother had thought it was important that nice girls didn't swear—but this time, it was surely warranted. The system had gone down before, when riots erupted. The mayor's office had recommended that everyone stay out of the air, and then they'd shut down the system, to make it harder for people to ignore their words.

Anyone who owned a flyer knew *how* to drive on the ground, of course, but skills you didn't practice rusted away; it took Jenny ten

minutes just to figure out how to back the flyer out of its spot.

They inched their way out, managing not to hit the flyers parked flanking them, and headed slowly towards the exit. There didn't seem to be any other movement in the parking structure, though there had been hundreds of people disembarking from the Jumpship. Maybe they'd decided just to stay at the hotel at the port, rather than try to head home? Maybe she should have done that, too?

Jenny kept up a determined stream of cheerful babble so the girl wouldn't catch her concern. "At least the roads should be pretty clear. That's something, right? Once we get out of the lot, it'll be smooth flying. Driving."

"Yesss, Mrsss. Michaelsss."

"Please, Katika, I've told you before—call me Jenny. Or Aunt Jenny, if you must. Mrs. Michaels makes me feel old."

Also married, which she never had been. Her sons' father had been adamantly opposed to marriage, and at eighteen and again at twenty, she hadn't worried about it much. By the time she turned twenty-one, Steve was gone, and Jenny was relieved to be rid of him—he'd been more trouble to take care of than her babies. Tom and Padraic had been the sweetest little things, good sleepers and eaters, no trouble at all; she'd known herself blessed. She hadn't missed Steve or his too-quick fists. Makeup could only do so much to cover bruises, and she'd missed more than one shift as a result ; she *wouldn't* count the boys as his at all.

"You can call me Aunt Jenny, can't you?" she asked.

"Yesss, Aunt Jenny," the girl said obediently.

They were pulling up to the automated exit now, being scanned, Jenny's parking fee deducted from her account. If Stellar Ships weren't so cheap, they'd cover her parking, but her boss said they expected employees to take public transit to the port. Jenny hated public transit; she never felt safe on it, especially when her flight was getting in late. She could afford a flyer, and the parking fees, too, so she was going to use them, even if that did mean getting hit with an

environmental fine for every hundred miles driven. It'd be good if the union got them that raise they'd been promising. That was what she was paying the union fees *for*. Property taxes had climbed outrageously this last year, and there were days when Jenny wasn't sure how she would hold on to her condo. Not that she needed that much space, with one son gone and the other leaving her soon. But it was *her* condo, and she'd be damned if she left before she was ready.

"Seatbelt on? Good." Habit, to check the children. They could be so forgetful. Padraic was careful, her good boy, but Tom had always been the sort to push the limits, taking unnecessary risks. That was how he got himself into trouble.



Tom had been the sunniest child, grown into a tall, strong lad. Padraic had struggled more, had trouble at school with the other kids, but he'd adored his big brother. Tommy and his Shadow, the kids had called them, which had made Jenny bristle when she heard it. But neither of her boys seemed to mind, and Tom was endlessly patient with his little brother. She'd been lucky, to be blessed with such a child.

Tom sailed through school, started college. He'd lived at home to help her save money, though if he'd wanted to go to the big university on Kriti, assuming he'd gotten in, she'd have found a way to send him. Somehow. "Nah, Ma—I'll do great here. Don't worry about it. Save the money for Padraic." Jenny could see the relief in Padraic's eyes, knowing that big brother would be home for dinner every night. Well, most nights, anyway. College was exciting, full of new activities, new people.

New people meant new people to date, and tall, handsome Tom had no lack of offers. For a while he'd been pretty serious about a nice boy who even went to their church, Nathaniel—they were out late together every night. Jenny had started dreaming of weddings, the two of them in matching tuxes, with Padraic as the best man, of

course. Even now, she still dreamed about it sometimes—the colors would've been Tom's favorite cobalt blue, paired with bright orange for Antira's orange sun. They would've held it at twilight, in the Forest of Scree, with a thousand candles casting light.

Thinking about the wedding always calmed Jenny—on long flights with fractious passengers, during long nights when her bed was empty. Calm was what she needed now.



Jenny pulled out of the lot, turned onto the main road, then let out an involuntary gasp. Beside her, the girl *squeaked*—that was the only way to describe it, a little squeak—*EEK!*—that sounded just like the sound a mouse made when you caught it in a snap trap. The road ahead of them, the road that should have been empty, was awash in people.

The sun was sliding towards sunset in the distance, but there was no dearth of light—someone had clearly organized this protest, this riot, whatever it was—because almost every hand had a torch in it. Actual torches, blazing with fire, above a sea of human faces, contorted with rage. Katika pulled in on herself, shrinking in the vinyl seat, and Jenny closed her eyes, muttering a brief prayer to whatever gods might be listening.

Jenny took a quick, deep breath and forced her shaking hands to tighten on the controls. She began driving forward at a steady creep through the throng, which thankfully made way for the flyer to pass. It was sealed tightly enough that they could barely hear the noise from the crowd outside, the ominous growl that rolled across the streets.

Jenny kept chattering loudly, cheerily, to the girl. "I bet you found a special someone back on Kriti. Someone you might want to bring back to meet your mother? A girl as pretty as you won't be alone for long. If I had your skin, and that figure—well, I'm sure the boys are howling for you. Unless you like girls? That's fine too. Or enbies? Genties? Orgen?"

The girl didn't respond; she was probably terribly embarrassed. Jenny's hands were tight and trembling on the controls, but she kept her voice light, even chuckling. "I admit, I have trouble keeping up with all the modern variations; you must think I'm hopelessly old-fashioned. But I always say, be who you want to be, love who you want to love, just be *honest* about it. That's the way I was raised, and the way I raised my boys. I can't stand it when people lie; I never could..."

Of course, she just had, telling the security officer that Katika was her niece, but that hardly counted.

Whatever answer Katika might have given was aborted by a man darting right out in front of their creeping flyer, thumping heavy hands down on the hood.

Jenny slammed on the brakes, rocking them forward against the seatbelts—not that they'd been going all that fast, but inertia was unforgiving and would collect its due. You didn't work on Jumpships without learning that lesson. Actions had consequences. Tom had never learned that lesson, and so she'd lost him.

She wasn't going to lose another child, not today.

"Get out!"

He was shouting through the closed window, spittle hitting the glass, smearing. Jenny almost opened the door, habits of politeness betraying her—but then other lessons kicked in, hard-earned. Keep your guard up. Anything can be a shield in time of need.

The window stayed closed, and the door too, but Jenny spoke loudly, politely, "Please, ser, we need to go. My son's at home alone; my daughter and I need to get back as quick as we can." Jenny put her very real worry for Padraic in her voice, summoning all her middle-aged mother presence for the appeal. "Can you help us, please?"

Katika had drawn in her breath at the promotion to daughter, but stayed silent, no doubt following the logic. This man hadn't seen her papers, would have no reason to assume Katika wasn't a human girl.

He banged the window again, and Jenny fought back the flinch. A sharp pain in her neck, from the sudden stop and jerk, from the dresser, all those years ago.

“Show me your papers!”

Jenny fumbled in her purse, pulled out her citizen card. On other planets, they’d be ID’d by the net, but not Antira, where few of the locals trusted government enough to let politicians put security chips in their heads. She slapped the card against the window, and the holo enhancement activated, displaying all her relevant data. *Human* was the only one that mattered. As long as he believed her lie ...

The man growled, frustration in his face, and then spun away. The crowd seemed to go with him, the street emptying out in front of them as if they’d heard some bullhorn call, racing towards some other poor soul. Had anyone ever mapped out the movements of a mob? Could they be predicted, if you could name the variables?

Jenny sank back in her seat, trembling, the inevitable aftershock hitting her as she waited for the streets to clear. She’d been here before, that terrible night when she’d lost Tom. Jenny had learned how to be brave in a crisis, but afterwards, the universe demanded its due. The body could only do so much, and the mind wasn’t much better.

Still, there were only a few people left in the street now. Best to get moving again; just a few more blocks to safety. Jenny took a deep breath, turned to check on the girl ... only to see Katika’s door opening, an arm reaching in, grabbing at her, pulling her out.

“No!” Jenny cried. Hadn’t the girl locked her door?

Jenny frantically unlocked and opened her own door, tumbling out into the street, a jumble of sensible shoes and too-tight uniform, purse clutched in her hand. Not much of a weapon, but it was jam-packed with travel supplies, and if she swung it into someone’s head, it would surely hurt.

Jenny raced around the front of the flyer, ready to swing—but there was no need. Katika stood there, arms wrapped around her

own slender body. The man lay on the ground, face swollen and purple. Razuli bite was unmistakable.

★ ★ ★

He'd gone snake-hunting. That's what they called it. Nathaniel hadn't liked it; they'd broken up over it, in fact. But Tom had new friends, new lovers, had gotten in with the Humans First crowd. He told his mother that she shouldn't worry; it wasn't anything serious, snake-hunting. Just a way to have a little fun on the weekend, take a few tokes of something that made you see stars, that slowed down the rest of the universe and made you fast, faster than a snake. Apex predator, that's what Tom called himself. They'd hunt down a snake, and play with it. Just a little tease, a little chase. *Don't worry, Mama. We wouldn't actually hurt them.*

That had turned out to be a lie. Jenny hated it when people lied. They hunted Razuli, Tom and his friends, and beat the ones they caught. It hadn't gone quite so far as killing, but it was bad enough that when they stumbled into a bigger nest than they'd planned for, the Razuli had fought back with deadly force. Atavistic instinct.

★ ★ ★

Jenny jerked back from the body, slipping on the tarmac, her limbs wanting to go out from under her. She grabbed for the flyer, trying to steady herself, but the hot metal burned her hand, and she swore again, pulling sharply away. It was all too much: her stinging hand, the man on the ground, the monster hissing in the shadows. Jenny could feel her pulse racing, her heart thumping an angry drumbeat. The pain in her neck was piercing, like a needle. Like a knife. The air seemed thicker, shaded with red.

There was his gun, less than a foot away, just lying on the ground, waiting for someone to grab it.

★ ★ ★

Tom had had a gun. When they brought Jenny to see him in the morgue, purple-faced, they'd given her a box with his personal effects, but told her they were keeping the gun.

She hadn't known he had one. Jenny hadn't known her child at all. Not a child anymore, though. Somehow, he'd grown up on her.

Grown into a monster.

★ ★ ★

The gun lying in the road. The pain, shooting through her neck. Instinct rising: grab for the gun, protect herself, fight the monster, save her people!

Katika was sobbing, a low, gurgling cry, like nothing Jenny had ever heard before. There was a crying child standing in the road, and Jenny was a mother.

In the end, she didn't even remember walking across to the girl. But Jenny was deliberate when she reached out, willing her hands not to shake. There were things a decent person did, in this kind of situation. You pulled a crying child into your arms. You patted her back, avoiding the skeletal spines beneath the thin layer of fabric, and said, "Shh.... shhh.... it'll be all right." The universe was dark and full of grief, with so much empty space between the tiny points of light. You did what little you could.

Jenny urged Katika back into the flyer, climbed back in herself, locked the doors. Looked around again—no one left. Had anyone seen what Katika had done, and then run away? Maybe, or maybe they'd already emptied the street.

If they *had* seen, well, her secondhand flyer was nothing flashy. She would've liked to be able to afford a cute, distinctive flyer, with blue-and-white racing stripes, but for now, this was better. Jenny backed the flyer up carefully and drove around the body. She had to deliver Katika to her mother, suggest that they might want to think about leaving Antira entirely, at least for a while. Then she'd go home to Padraic.

She was going to hold him so tight.

In a better world, Jenny would have called the incident in, might even have taken Katika to the police and explained that it was self-defense. Tomorrow, she'd be sad for her planet, her people, herself, that she couldn't trust the police to do the right thing.

Today, she had someone to escort safely home. That was what Jenny did—when she flew the Jumpships, between the stars. All those people, traveling and tired, relying on Jenny to help them home to their families.

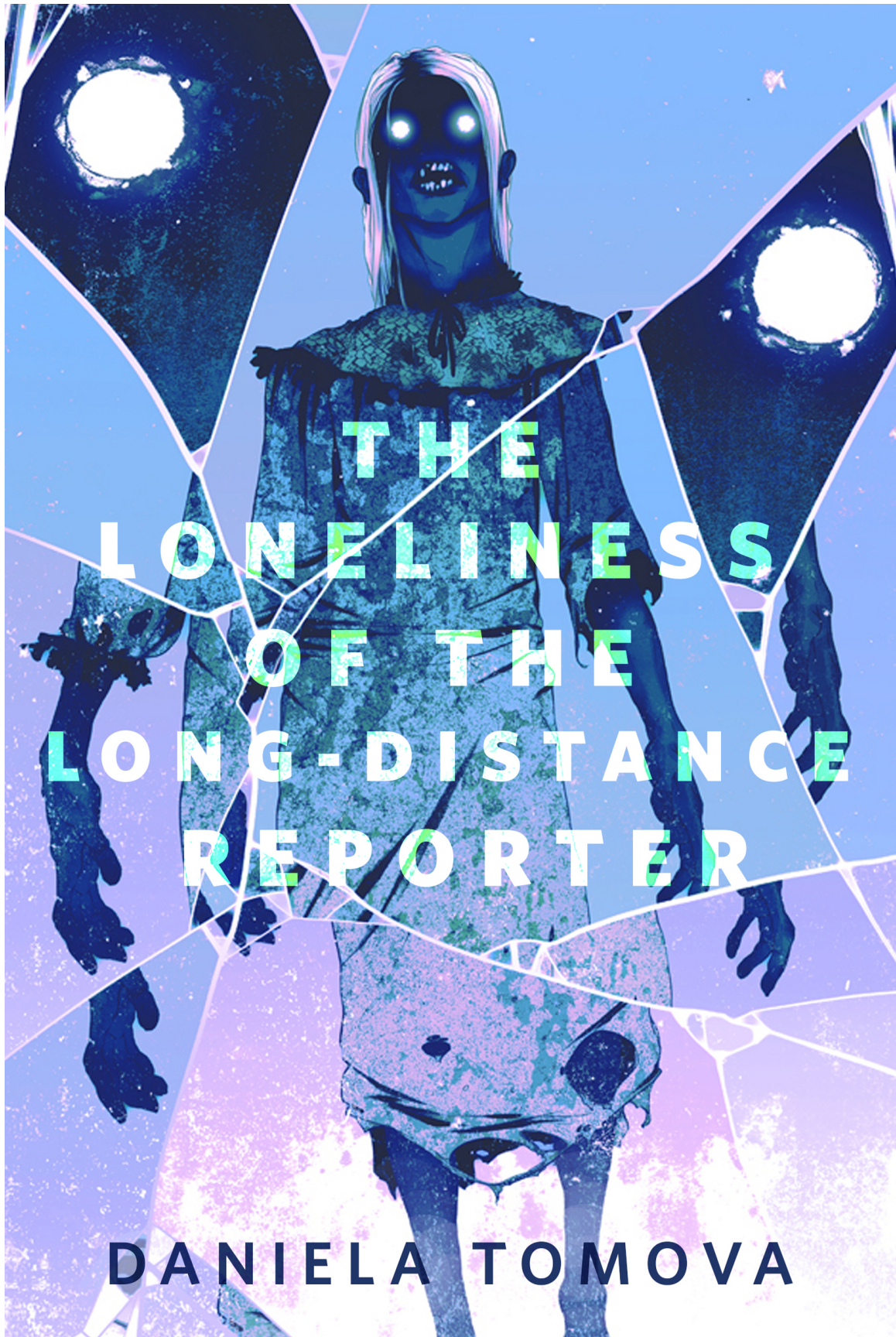
She couldn't solve the larger problems.

But right now, this much, she could do.



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The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Reporter

DANIELA TOMOVA

illustration by

GOÑI MONTES

T O R
D O T
C O M

Noel—fiftyish, lanky, with fawn eyes and skin windburned to a sunset glow—is my translator. He meets me on the iced tarmac, shakes my hand, and hands me a rifle before opening his mouth.

“For the polar bears,” he yells over the Arctic winds, and leans in to yell a tad more conspiratorially, “and I’ll only say this once—I won’t repeat it and you don’t repeat it around town either. But also in case one of the racers—you know—comes for you.” He straightens his back again. “It’s for self-protection.”

“Motherfucker,” I say. “I thought you were supposed to be my protection.”

★ ★ ★

I did get my own damn self into this.

The scene: It’s a late, 105-degree July afternoon. El Paso, Texas, which to my father seemed like a good place to settle after a harrowing, bullets-whizzing-by-your-ear, losing-toes-to-frostbite escape from totalitarian Bulgaria. That’s the kind of experience that will put someone off winter permanently. But it’s also the kind of story that will make their daughter choose a gig in extreme-weather sports.

So: El Paso, Texas. The sun has come down to bang on my door and peek through the thick wooden slabs of the blinds like a red-eyed debt collector. A couple of flies hover, uninspired, in the lung-blistering air over my desk. Power is out, therefore AC’s out. Laptop, long drained of charge, is off and not coming back until I hear the blessed sound of the AC click and chirp and—ah, the whoosh of a tepid breeze.

I am on my phone, researching winter vacations I’ll never be able to afford and watching its battery, which is bullshit even on a good day, visibly inch down toward eight percent.

Underboob sweat be damned, I tuck the T-shirt under the girls for the sake of self-respect before I call Lorena, editor-in-chief of *Adrenaline Review Quarterly*. She's the type one puts on pants and a bra even for a phone call. Our dealings always start with me pitching what become the most popular articles her magazine ever publishes and end with her lawyer saying not to talk to the police until she's arrived. Mutually beneficial, I call it. Lorena calls it "The minute cost outweighs clicks, I'm dropping your ass."

"Hey, duckie, I was just about to get in touch with you. You hear about Artie? No? He fell out. No, literally." She giggles maliciously, yet disarmingly for a woman approaching deep adulthood. "He slipped out of his harness trying to zip-line his way to Kathmandu. He's all right. Just out of commission for a full year, at the very least, and I have pages to fill. You better have a killer pitch."

If you count being able to pay my heating and health insurance this winter as *better*, then yes, I'd very much better.

"This extreme race in the Arctic."

"Oh? The Arctic? Power's out in Texas again?"

"Norway. It's called the Icebound," I plow on. "It's on the cusp of becoming a thing, not much coverage yet. A very Nordic affair, but it's mad trending. There are only amateur photos online—all dark and blurry—but it's starting to draw fans and tourists, some midrange Instagrammers too. Two kinds of racers. Word is, it's getting some big-name sponsors this year. It's just the time to get in on the action."

I hold my breath; let her dangle for a few beats. A lesser freelancer would have overplayed, but I just lean back in my sweat-slicked office chair and purr, "Pays-per-click, Lorena."

What would you do in her place?

"All right," she says.

I push my luck. "All expenses paid."

"Flights and food at least; I'll loan you a tent. You said big sponsors? How big?" Her own keyboard is chattering, no doubt she's doing due-dil. "And behave. No one's coming all the way to Norway to bail you out—"

Then, “Hmm,” she says, like someone just surprised her with an enemy’s head on a silver tray.

“What *hmm*?”

“Just—these two kinds of racers ... It’ll sell like gangbusters. Sure, all expenses paid. Have fun, duckie, and get me an interview.”

We hang up and I settle deeper into the perspiration forming a puddle on the seat, to research what exactly I’ve just sold her.

Two minutes later, my phone battery dies.

★ ★ ★

It is a universal truth—and folks, you’ll want to note this down—that the usefulness of an article on the internet is directly related to its author’s journey along the Dunning-Kruger curve. And in this case, most of the material I found came from the kind of people who would pay crazy money—hell, travel crazy distances—to take poorly lit photos of themselves doing headstands on prehistoric blocks of ice, with small, indistinguishable shadows—presumably the racers on their sleds—dotting the snow in the far background.

Those posts ended in a violent storm of hashtags: #aurora #datsunsettho #northernmostmichelinstar #glacieryoga #revenantrace #glacieryogawithrevenants. Yet nothing about #michelinrestaurantownerfuckedoffsouth or #icehurtsyall or #waitwhatwasthat or even #basicrevenantfactstho.

★ ★ ★

And so, Longyearbyen, largest settlement on Svalbard.

The Icebound Race is in the pure literal frozen ice-hell of the Norwegian Arctic. You know, the kind of Norway which is all the way out to Europe and then all the way up to a town where the ratio of polar bears to people decidedly favors the bears. It’s also much colder than you’d imagine when you’re baking like an insect in the hot Texan sun.

The cozy northernmost-Michelin-starred restaurant I had planned to spend all of Lorena’s hard-hustled money in? Closed for ... until

the owner feels like it. Noel tells me the unpredictability is supposed to add charm to the place, but I remain stubbornly uncharmed.

The all-paid expenses thus turn out to be ten days' worth of all the meat and raw fish I can eat until I get to sink my teeth into the mouth-watering contents of my plastic box of airplane food on the flight home.

★ ★ ★

A cell phone is quickly useless in this weather, so when we get to my wee, lovingly wood-paneled hotel room, Noel hooks me up with a satellite phone for emergencies and a bottle of spirits for general use. I take the duty-free bourbon out of my backpack and we sit on the bed to toast and soak in the sweet smell of the cedarwood burning in the fireplace downstairs.

Noel has been coming to Longyearbyen regularly since moving to Svalbard from the UK in the '90s. Back then, he says, it was a very different thing—just a bunch of locals, turned strange by the long night, taking their kick-sleds out for a lap around the town once a year—harmless enough. Except each year, the laps got longer. And each year, the race started later.

"I stopped soon after we began racing during revenant season," Noel says. "Aged out of it too quickly."

"Revenant season being when they're out? The zombies?"

"The revenants." Noel punctuates with his glass. "Yeah, it's when they come out. Never at the same exact time, but reliably—I'd say about late October, early November. It starts when the land winds pick up—the ones that erode the dry topsoil and uncover the bodies. That's why they outlawed all burials on the island few decades ago. Still, the ground being frozen hard here, we have hundreds of years of shallow graves all around us. And now, with the climate—you know, erosion is speeding up.

"We're also noticing revenants in more modern clothing too. Somehow they are getting here from the mainland. No idea how.

“These days the government gets GPS trackers on them as soon as they’re detected—the ones who start circling human settlements are taken to ‘The Hotel,’” he laughs. “Remind me to show you tomorrow. So we have the tagging and online maps and forecasts. And, I suppose, the race to help with transportation. Anyway, where was I? Ah yes, now we have a small industry around them, but back then you just had to watch out for yourself.

“Those early races, though. It’s the kind of thing to do when you’re young,” he says, and sniffs the bourbon in his glass before taking a long sip. “You’re out in the tundra—endless fields of snow and wind—racing with your mates. It’s cold—this Arctic chill, and it soaks through to your bones. Your fingers tingle. Your pits itch uncomfortably and smell of adrenaline. And there’s this coppery taste in your mouth like you licked a battery.”

His face opens as he speaks and his breath tightens.

“And—just there! A tall figure walks out into the middle of the track and waits for you in the blue air. Someone fallen from his sled. Or—doesn’t it look a bit too much like your neighbor, the one with the heavy cough who they took to the mainland last spring? Stands a bit like him too—he always leaned a little crooked to the left. You can’t really see faces so well in the dark, just a tall shape in your path, but there’s also this hum in your lungs—you know? Same feeling when you’re hunting, say, a wild boar, and this two-hundred-kilo storm of muscle and tusks turns abruptly and charges at you.” He inhales deeply. “That feeling.”

“I’m not really a hunter,” I say.

“You’ll see when you do the race. It’s still proper exciting even though we’ll be far behind the revenants.”

I empty my glass.

“But how did it become the Icebound? How did people go from ‘Yeah, let’s all get on sleds and chase each other around some hungry undead corpses’ to—uh—‘Let’s get the hungry undead corpses on sleds and send them off at high speeds’?”

“Reason other than poke-the-bear, bread-and-circuses kind of thing?” he asks, reaching over me to get the bottle.

He refills for both of us and we sit for a while nodding and sipping our drinks. His eyes are glassy.

“If I had to guess,” he ventures, “once the government started tracking the revenants and we figured out that they will instinctively head in one direction—always up toward the North Pole—it was inevitable for some bored, rat-arsed bugger in some pub here to one day yell at his mates, ‘Hei, folkens, hey, listen. What if we put one on a sled? Taking bets here. How fast do you think...’”

★ ★ ★

I dream some sultry, cedar-smoked dreams all through the next day, or whatever period of twilight passes for a day here, and wake up just as the disembodied giggles and renditions of '80s pop hits blasting out of the nearby pub announce that night had fallen long ago. I put on my parka and heavy boots, pick up the rifle, and go downstairs where the hotel owner hands me a thermos of hot coffee and sends me off into town to look for Noel and food. Preferably both at the same time.

I find Noel at the pub. A glowing topaz shot of cognac greets me as soon as I sit down. It's like he knows me better than I know myself. We follow up with an Italian-style pizza and a few Guinnesses each. “Creamiest heads this side of the North Sea,” he states with an air of authority and a smile crowned with a thin foam mustache. He paws at his upper lip and leans over, his eyes wet, unfocused, and a bit bloodshot. “Ever seen a revenant before?”

“No. Online there's only a bunch of super blurry pictures.”

“Wanna meet 'em?”

“The racers? Now?”

“Sure. I can arrange for an interview. The handlers are there, getting them ready for tomorrow.”

Now, in my many years of making questionable choices, I have learned to spot your classic Bad Idea, especially when it comes

grinning at you from behind a cloud of sour beer breath.

Still—we all have that one friend who always says, “I know, but...” And the “but” is always more compelling than any reason you can throw at them? Tonight I’m that friend. The gal who got an interview with a revenant! That gal gets two cents more per word. That gal’s heating is on all winter. That gal buys quality tampons—the silk-lined ones!

And this is how you get to watch me, a tasty morsel, going all, “Why Noel, I thought you’d never ask.”

While Noel is finishing his beer, he assures me the race stops are perfectly safe—the racers are fed very well there.

“They’re fully taken care of. They’re kind of celebrities, even. If you want to interview them, the safest time is right now. Today. Tomorrow is going to be madness,” he says, sliding the check over to my side of the table, “Don’t forget to keep the receipt so you can expense it. Thanks for the drinks.”

★ ★ ★

I’m somewhat morbidly disappointed to find out that there’s no zombie hotel. The racers are housed outside of town.

And me—one minute I’m in the shuttle driving us to the glacier—snuggled, sluggish and Guinness-warm in my parka—and the next Noel is outside, standing on a moonlit, iced path in the snow, waving at me to join him. I jump out and the cold punches me in the nose so hard my eyes water. Snow flurries batter my face. Noel waits for me in front of something which, on a night like this, is not so much a cave entrance but darkness carved into the giant icy bones of a mountain. I wrestle the parka hood down over my eyes and follow him inside.

Powerful LED lights activate the second we walk through the mouth of the cave. The walls are smooth and fluid. Our steps echo back at us from random directions.

My blood pulses like fingers drumming over my temples and I take a deep breath to calm myself, but my lungs catch in the cold. I

burp a muted, sour little memento of the pub and behind it suddenly arrives a smell like that of a broken refrigerator left in the summer heat.

★ ★ ★

No heads turn when we walk out into the ancient air of the ice chamber.

Why would they? Caught in a column of light from one of the massive projectors mounted high up in the ceiling, we are flies. Mites. Two little motes floating down the metal stairs bolted onto the walls of the chamber with all the bravado they fail to feel despite the Guinness. On the ground below us, giant wasps roil and chase each other and, as we descend, resolve into the shadows of the handlers.

The crews are packing food, shuttling gear and supplies, tightening straps, polishing and waxing sled runners, testing equipment, and running checklists. Voices are light but from watching their almost myopic focus, I can tell each one is keenly aware of what is happening in their peripheral vision at any given time.

“Walk normally,” Noel instructs me.

“What?”

“Just keep a casual gait so you don’t alarm the crews. They have enough to think about.”

And having said exactly the thing to say when you want someone to forget how walking is done, Noel takes off a bit stiffly—my very own Scouse Virgil. I soften my limbs, brighten my expression into the one I use when I am trying to convince a bouncer that I am not here to be trouble, and follow.

I look for the revenants through the blur of moving bodies but don’t see anything unusual—until Noel points out the large, upright boxes. Most are pine—traditional, he explains as we make our way through the crowd—but the more prominent teams have theirs custom-made out of composite materials and plastered with a galaxy of big-name logos: Adidas, Salomon, Nike, SAS, Lufthansa.

Each box is well lit and large enough for a human body. Each box does, in fact, contain a body.

The revenants.

Each stands alone—a grim, life-sized action figure—under a dour fluorescent fixture mounted on the inside of the box. The lighting isn't helping. It only deepens the shadows falling in angles that should be impossible on a human face, so the first thing you see are the eyes—pale, opaque, and unblinking. Stone.

I've seen eyes of the dead before—occupational hazard—but these give me a physical distress, like I'm witnessing the desecration of something meaningful. Behind these I sense some terrible inorganic intent, an unavoidable trajectory—like a meteor headed for you.

"Where are the restraints?" I whisper sideways to Noel.

"The teams find restraints undignified. But see there?" He signals with his eyes up at a constellation of industrial-looking blocks embedded in the ceiling. "Magnets. The whole cave's rigged with motion sensors. If anything moves faster than usual—the way an attacking revenant does—the magnets turn on. Confuses them long enough to be handled safely. That's another reason to walk deliberately around here. Sensors get tripped by accident at least once or twice a season, and it's a pain in the arse to account for all personnel and racers afterwards."

He navigates me through the shifting labyrinth of bodies, living and returned, to a resin box big enough to accommodate a heavy old wooden chair. In it, a revenant is seated, long arms propped on the armrests. He is flanked by three handlers. Noel asks something in a language that is not Norwegian (I find out later it's Icelandic), and the lead handler nods and looks to the revenant.

We move in closer but not too close. Noel looks at me. I flip through the questions prepared in my notepad, but they are all suddenly too theatrical. So for some reason I hope will make sense to me at a later time, I ask, "Where do you come from?" Noel translates.

The revenant's head is leaning sharply over and almost behind his left shoulder. The meat of his mouth has retreated long ago, and his teeth are exposed. His jaw is tight. He looks exactly like a frozen body someone dug up and dressed in a leftover canary-yellow karting suit with carmine chevron stripes on the chest. This moment—this whole thing—feels like someone is playing a very sick, very expensive joke on me, and I'm scrolling through my mental book of clever privileged assholes, when from behind the teeth, a hollow, distant voice reaches out to stroke the hairs on the back of my exposed neck.

"I am here now."

"Why do you race?"

"It is inevitable."

The lead handler, watching from the other side of the box with a bright, apple-cheeked face, adds in softly accented English, "All the revenants instinctively head north, to the pole. The race just helps with the safety."

"Their safety or human safety?" I ask.

"Both," the handler answers, still brightly. "What we feed them doesn't have neighbors with firearms."

Noel had warned me about the humor. You work with the undead long enough, your jokes turn a bit—off, he'd said.

"And how do you prepare for the race?" I ask the revenant.

"I come here." The voice startles me again. It sounds so impossibly far away. From beyond the chamber, beyond the glacier. Maybe all the way from the snowy grave he climbed out of.

"In the meantime, he receives regular massages with tea tree oil and embalming fluid to discourage deterioration of his general physical state," the handler pipes in again from the side, like a blond imp in a fever dream, which all this is overwhelmingly starting to feel like. He points at a range of lotion bottles with some strange sparkly logo.

I turn back to the revenant, "Does winning mean anything to you?"

He doesn't answer.

"What draws you to the North Pole?"

"It is inevitable."

"Why are you back from the dead?"

He doesn't answer. I try another angle.

"Why are you here?"

For a minute, he doesn't answer, and when he does, I don't need Noel's translation.

"It is inevitable."

While Noel interprets, I look at the revenant. His head is cocked to the side, mouth stretched wide in something I would never mistake for a smile. His opaque, milky eyes don't reflect any light or movement.

I close my own puffy eyelids tight and open them again. Everyone's still around, though it feels like they shouldn't be. Behind our immediate *mise-en-scène*, people still dart around as if on invisible, taut strings. I recognize what I'm feeling: depersonalization. Standing in the shadow of the revenant's faraway voice, I feel as if the other sounds around us are straining through into a dream, where it's just me and him. Behind him—a giant white field with an open grave; behind me—the weeping icy walls. My chest tightens. My breath bucks against it, trying to get out. I want to bail too.

Instead I step back and turn to Noel, summoning his human voice to ground me.

"What happens to them after the race?"

"We're still trying to find out. The tracker signals all drop out after a while—just long enough for us to be sure they're past the human settlements on their way north. The pings sometimes converge, at different spots every year, and the army sends specialist teams—I joined on couple of those missions. No revenants, no trackers, just ghost signals on the receiver. Pretty much—"

Suddenly I know what it looks like when one of them focuses on you. Like a metal bolt to a magnet, the dead eyes lock onto Noel's

arm, which has jutted out too close to the chair. The head pivots in our direction and its teeth open.

I grab Noel in a bear hug—teeth snap above my hand, so close I feel a sting where they tear out the small hairs on my skin—and pull him away. Still looking us, the revenant stands up and takes two steps forward and the smell hits me, but it's not the one I expect—the smell of decay. This one is a gust of cold light inside my rib cage, the first smell of frost on a cold autumn afternoon, of a fresh kill in the snow. I blink and there's a woman—a woman with dark hair and a sweater—a dress?—made of woolen knots with threads sticking out of them, standing in the middle of the parka-clad mess of handlers. And in the seconds before Noel and I are surrounded by the living and expelled from the cave, I see the way she steps sharply behind the revenant, and the way he falls back in his armchair. And I'm pretty sure she is what I am smelling: first frost, fresh kill.

"It might've been the beers," Noel—shaken, radiating brick-red embarrassment—tells me on the ride to the hotel. "Could be something about the smell of yeast or hops that throws their senses into feeding mode." I ask him who the woman in the knotted dress is. "I didn't see anything but the revenant," he says, trying to laugh. "That was ... Oh, man, that was close."

We don't say anything more on the way back. Later at night, when I dream, I dream of sables hunting in the snow, of blood, of a panicked animal dying alone.

★ ★ ★

Don't get me wrong, I do have a survival instinct. I got it from my father, who managed to escape the old country by snaking under a kilometer of razor wire and throwing himself over concrete walls twice his height as he was shot at by fellow officers armed with Kalashnikovs. He made it, though his twin brother didn't.

"I had been right there," he'd repeat with the same disbelief every time he told the story, "where he was hit. That same spot, a second

earlier.” And he’d instruct me, cryptically, “Learn from me.”

I was never sure what I was supposed to learn but I grew up obsessed with what it was that made the difference—one zag instead of a zig and I wouldn’t exist. Snap. Just like that.

One zig instead of a zag and the bullet that felled my uncle would have chipped a concrete wall instead. And I’d be working in a tech startup or in marketing, because I wouldn’t have had to grow up with the horrible sentence: “I had been right there, a second earlier.”

But zigs were ziggled and zags were zagged and here I am, seeking out experiences on the edge of survival that I can package into marketable epiphanies for eight cents a word.

So yes, I could have just run away. I watched myself doing it, exactly like I watch every decision I make a moment before I make it—with my meta self-awareness, that internal self-narration those of us who belong to more than one world have. I saw myself jump out of the way and saw the revenant’s teeth sink into Noel’s arm. And I saw myself living the rest of my life with that horrible sentence.

I had been right there a second ago.

I decided I didn’t want to live like that.

It’s a different form of survival.

Day One of the Race

By the time Noel drops off the signed liability waivers and comes back with the drinks, the first sleds have already lined up at the start. He hands me a paper cup filled with warm, rich mulled wine with a shipwreck’s worth of sliced almonds and raisins floating inside.

“Big crowd,” I say.

“It’s never been like this.” He shakes his head. “Last year it was more crew than spectators.”

We are in a large open area right outside the city. Newly built—early this year, says Noel—and bright as day thanks to a ring of giant stadium lights. Two rows of glowing plexiglass columns with sponsor

logos line the sides of the track and coil over the hills in the waiting night.

This is the main event. The revenants are being lined up. The crews run checks on the sleds. The lead handlers give their final instructions and step back to take in the scene. Dozens of racers stand behind the start line, each on a fierce steel-and-titanium sled, staring at the bright stadium lights that mask the darkness beyond the town. The crowd at the sidelines, a few thousand strong, waves flags and aims phones.

Behind the line, revenants grip the sled handlebars.

The breath of the living fogs the air.

Sideline cheers! Thumbs-up from the handlers. A man in a black parka raises his hand and fires a green flare into a dizzying snowy sky. Standing on the runners, each revenant kicks against the packed snow and the sleds shoot off into the white lights.

Like that: One shot from a gun, one kick—and the bullets are on their way to a target somewhere in time. Somewhere inevitable.

Their shadows stretch behind, lagging for a few seconds, then thin out and disappear.

The crowd cheers a while before it regroups around the human racers who will start in two groups, a few hours after the revenants. This is always the messier start, Noel tells me. People hesitate to go first, in case some revenants are delayed or blown off course. Still, everyone wants the endorphin rush, that feeling of running with the bulls—the possibility that the bull will turn around and charge at you.

“Does anyone try to catch up or overtake the revenants?” I ask.

“Humans sometimes disappear during the race. It’s an open secret. It’s not unlikely that some of them could have been ... unwise enough to try to actually win. Organizers won’t let you start if you’re open about it, but you can see it in some people’s faces. I can, at least.”

“No one this year, though?”

“I can’t think about it this year. Right now I need to focus on helping you make it past the finish line.”

★ ★ ★

The human sleds are a motley bunch. Some of them are all sponsored-up and professional and leave together two hours after the revenants, on the dot. The leftovers look less ... sponsored, unless there are corporations out there called “Gentlemen Prefer Blonde Ales” or “I Can’t Drive Now—I’m Piste” or even “Girl Powder.” And of course, there is a #hannasyoga and a #runswithrevenants because no place is safe from hashtags.

We start with them.

Six p.m. I should be exhausted, battling a monster jet lag, but no—I’m completely wired. I have seriously underestimated the excitement that swells when you step up on the sled.

The crowd yells encouragements in more languages than there are racers. One of my fellow sledders nips back, clearly in response to some joke from his supporters. I grin at Noel, who is sitting behind me in the sled, wrapped up in dog-hair-covered woolen blankets; grab on tightly to the handlebars; and my head sways.

I’m standing on the crest of a wave. Like foam in front of me, huskies, hitched two-by-two, bear up with their haunches taut, their tails wagging in anticipation, their eyes bright and human.

I’m on a chariot on the stage of a theater, lit by the beam of a projector.

I am standing in a dark office, alone, under a struggling fluorescent light.

I’m the smallest, snuggest, parka-clad Matryoshka doll in a series of dolls nested in a time collapsed—daylight inside a vast night inside the day that should have been.

All of these are true for a single moment.

I shake unreality off when the black-parka man raises the gun to the sky—slower than it appeared from the sidelines, slow enough for me to see a dark-haired woman behind him looking directly at me, and to see how everyone around her is pointedly not noticing her—and fires. The green flare hisses and cracks above our heads. The sleds creak as the snow releases its hold on the waxed runners. The

front teams take off fast and disappear beyond the lights. Several minutes later, the rest of us manage to get a hundred feet past the starting line, wait out the traffic jam, and gather speed sluggishly and with surprising difficulty.

★ ★ ★

The line of sleds before us is quickly swallowed by the dark and the snow. Just like that, we are alone.

We mush the rest of the night and through the next day, which amounts to no more than an hour of incandescent blue light flooding the snowy fields and drowning quietly in the inky horizon, before it is night again.

The only excitement comes, cold-eyed and frozen-faced, on board a kick-sled that zips past us. It doesn't stop, thankfully, but Noel grips his rifle and it's a long while before he lets go.

"They were supposed to be way ahead of us," I say.

"Supposed to be. Sometimes magnetic storms disrupt their senses. Just prepare yourself mentally, because you'll need to shoot them if they come for you."

Over and over, I force myself to imagine a face resolving in the darkness in front of me and falling, pinned back by a bullet. Once or twice, lulled by the whooshing heartbeat of our sled, I slip into a lucid dream, and the face is both strange and strangely familiar.

We stop to eat and feed the huskies and sleep, then take off into the night again.

Day Two of the Race

I wake up and leave the tent just in time to see the last few minutes of brightness on the horizon. We hitch the huskies again and take off into the blue air.

I've seen countless documentaries about traveling in the Arctic, but no one talks about the strange thoughts that flow when all you can see is an immense white field unfolding, unfolding, unfolding—

First, without any external stimulation, the brain begins to vomit random thoughts.

I wonder how this race would work out in Texas.

Note: Research if there have been possible revenant sightings in Texas. Or anywhere in the South.

I could kill for some Blue Nile takeaway right now. Oh, or dim sum.

Wonder what my dad was thinking during his escape. Definitely not about food—he couldn't eat until three days after crossing the border. Nerves and the fear of those fake borders set up to fool people into surrendering to an execution squad.

I am too spoiled.

How would it feel to be on the run from your own state?

The white field swallows all and opens wider ...

The wind howls and my ears begin to scream, but I have no more random thoughts to silence the screaming with, so I begin to peel off and portion out thoughts that are true pieces of me.

Would I have zigged or zagged?

What if the wind had slammed me into the big rock at Fox Glacier instead of sucking me upward? Could I have cushioned myself without losing consciousness?

And what if I had jumped back to the pavement when I heard the horn in Hungary? I'd have been the first one in the path of the blue BMW.

Turkey during the earthquake, Nepal, the Dominican Republic, the unlicensed local helicopter rescue from an oil rig in the Caspian Sea.

How am I still around?

How did all those decisions get me here in one piece?

The field swallows all, indifferent.

I see the dogs running in front of me, but the sled is not moving and the field is still unfolding, unfolding, unfolding until it covers the entire world in a blanket of snow and swallows all of us.

★ ★ ★

When we stop to eat and feed the huskies, Noel tells me a story about a hero of his, an explorer who built a special ship that could be frozen into the ice sheet and drift with the ice until it reached the North Pole.

“What do you think the revenants do when they get there?” I ask him.

“The North Pole? I don’t know. Look for the thing that’s inevitable to them, whatever it is. We do get reports from oil rigs and research stations, more and more sightings every year—single revenants floating on blocks of ice, wandering by the polar stations, walking through the glaciers. But by summer, when the exploration ships get close, the revenants are gone. Probably somewhere at the bottom of the ocean.”

He shrugs and opens a bag.

“How about you? What is inevitable to you?” I ask as he throws pieces of frozen meat to the huskies.

“You mean outside the obvious—taxes, death, a bit of après-résurrection sled racing?” He stops to think for a minute. “What else can be inevitable to humans? It must be something we chase, mustn’t it?”

“Like a thing that will eventually turn around to gore you?”

Noel doesn’t answer. He is staring at the dogs, whose snouts are sniffing something under the snow’s surface.

★ ★ ★

We haven’t seen a single sled in more than a day.

We are seemingly following the trails and markers left by the other mushers, but we must have zagged when the others zigged and missed the first rest stop. Both experienced hikers, we accept we’re lost. We unhitch the huskies and Noel calls the emergency service.

I watch him as he says something in Norwegian and waits for an answer. He repeats, slower. Again. His face folds. He looks at me,

confused, and shrugs. Shaking his head, he hands me the satellite phone. His eyes are glazed over as if he is doing calculus in his head.

"I must be more tired than I realized. Her answers are making no sense to me."

"Hello?" I say into the phone.

"Hello, we're lost," the voice from the phone says urgently.

"We are lost. Who is this?" I ask.

"—Hello, who is this? We're lost. Come meet us."

I hang up and call the emergency service number stickered on the back of the phone.

"Hei," the voice answers.

"Hi," I say.

"Are you coming?"

I hang up.

In the dark, in the distance, something zips past us, but it's so far that we can't see if it's pulled by dogs—or even if it's a sled—so we don't call out for help.

★ ★ ★

Absinthe light ignites over the sky like brushfire and the world takes on a green tinge.

We stop so the dogs can rest and Noel and I can get some sleep. The weather is mild and the tent is sturdy, so we light up some coal in the portable stove and stare at the embers.

Noel sleeps the deep sleep of the grave while I, tired and tense, fall in and out of strange dreams of a submarine frozen in the ice, of strange military friends play-aiming Kalashnikovs at me, of footsteps outside the tent and huskies whining.

★ ★ ★

Noel sits up, folds his sleeping bag, puts on his boots and parka, and unzips the tent door decisively, either ready to brave the cold or very much needing to relieve his bladder. I close my eyes in the warmth

of my bag for just one minute. And just one more—Noel howls. I crawl over to the entrance, still in my sleeping bag, and poke my head out. “The dogs!” Noel screeches. “The dogs have gotten loose and run away.”

★ ★ ★

I try the emergency number again.

“Hei.”

“Hello, is this the Norwegian Rescue Service?”

“Yes, it is. Do you need assistance?”

“Oh, thank God. Yes, we got lost and we just lost our dogs too.”

“Don’t worry,” she says. “I have your dogs. Are you coming yet?”

★ ★ ★

A kick-sled shushes right past us and we stop.

“I thought they were all supposed to be way ahead of us by now?”

There is a whine in my voice I’m too tired to fight.

Noel ignores me. The eye of his rifle is scanning the night behind me.

The snow is so soft. Easier to sleep in than wade though. My knees buckle under me. Noel lifts me by my upper arm, roughly, and screams, “We’re going now,” in my face from a thousand miles away. We grab the handlebars of the sled again, one each, and push. My feet slip and I fall, face-first, but get up again and lean my whole body against the creaking frame. And push.

We are walking but the field in front of us unfolds, flat and white and infinite.

★ ★ ★

A sled lies on its side, half-buried in the snow. Alone. No trace of life or violence around it.

We push on.

★ ★ ★

Clouds cover the moon and we make our fire at the foot of a mountain crowned by a huge glacier. Noel recognizes the area—we are just a day's walk away from the coastal village, which is the second stop on the race path, with more than enough food and fuel for the fire. We'll sleep here. Noel perks up and tells me he has family in the area—his sister married a local and so he moved here to be close to his only family. I want to ask him about his inevitable thing but now is not the time—maybe I'll call him sometime in summer to ask.

Day Three of the Race

We are still talking and tossing coals in the stove when I hear soft crunching in the snow behind me.

I turn around and—that smell again, of the first snow in autumn, of pale lilacs and cooling blood—I can just make out a shape approaching. She steps in, still covered in her ugly dress. The uneven threads sticking out of the knots tremble like whiskers. Under the dress, her feet are bare. Something is so strange about them that my brain trips—it can't understand what's off. Like it knows there should be feet there, it sees there are feet there, but at the same time, there is something else. A potential of something almost concrete, almost recognizable.

Her hair is glittery with snow and her face, now that I can see it for longer than a breath, is astonishing in a way that makes me yearn for something.

Not in the warm way that hisses in my chest when I am attracted to a person.

More in the way a base jumper yearns for the jump. In the way that tells me that if she touches me I will die but I still want her to touch me. I ache for something irrevocably beyond my reach. Beyond fatality. Something inevitable on the other side of death.

Her eyes are dark and full. Her lips are blue and the space where they meet is the black of old blood.

She waves me closer and leans as if to whisper, and I notice Noel. He is looking at me, wide-eyed and shaking his head silently—*no, no*. He turns to the fire, and stares at it with such intensity that I do the same. For a few minutes, the silence runs its cold fingers along my back, but we don't move until we hear the crunching of someone retreating.

After long time has passed, Noel turns to me.

"Did you see her hands and feet?" he asks.

"Her feet," I say.

"Did you notice how one minute they pointed forward and next time you looked, they were pointing backwards?"

★ ★ ★

This time I fall asleep so quickly and deeply that when I hear Noel move about the tent, I assume it's time to get up. I look at my watch, uncomprehending.

"One more minute," I slur, and sink into the grace of my dreamless sleep again.

I wake up alone. I rub my eyes and look at my watch—can't be time to get up. I strain to hear what's happening outside but there's no sound. Even the wind has died. I put on my boots and parka and crawl out of the tent. Noel's footsteps have already been half-erased.

"Noel," I shout, "if you're taking a leak, yell. Otherwise I'm coming after you."

Noel's tracks lead away from our little camp, toward the mountain.

★ ★ ★

I follow the footsteps to the base of a small ridge. A glass-smooth wall of ice juts straight out above it and I don't see Noel until I climb all the way up and we are face-to-face.

The ice surface is gently dusted with frost. He is on the other side of it—right in front of me. He's looking out, at something that is not me, with eyes so full of animal fear that cold, oily sweat runs down my armpits. His mouth is half open and I watch it stretch grotesquely into a scream that fogs my vision even if I don't hear it. His body jerks violently, as if pulled back by something invisible, and he turns and starts to walk away into the waiting depths of the glacier.

I turn too.

A woman in a shapeless woolen dress is standing on the edge behind me. Her lips open over a tongue the violent color of a fresh bruise and I stumble backward. Disoriented, I slip through the surface of the ice. For one terrible moment, I see two worlds, one of the Arctic night and another—sudden and bright as a nuclear explosion.

★ ★ ★

Whatever it is I'm breathing, it smells of a thunderstorm—of electricity and ozone and, for the first time in days, raw earth. It is saturated with light and the faint whale song of ice advancing against ice. When I move my head, the light refracts off invisible cracks in the air and fiery jewel worms etch themselves on the inside of my eyelids.

I turn around to see where I entered. Something absurdly commonplace lies on the ground: my satellite phone. Behind it is a fluid, dark shape—the Arctic night waiting for me outside.

So close.

But I choose to follow Noel instead.

★ ★ ★

Like a parent's hand at my back, a strong current pushes me forward.

The smooth, hard surface under my feet drinks in all light and shows nothing, no markers of how far I've walked in the past hours.

I turn around—the air in my peripheral vision expanding so violently that my eyes feel like they are going to pop—searching for the place where I entered. It's as if I haven't moved a step. I see the phone—still ten steps or so away. I can still see its matte plastic and the bright numbers on its rubber buttons. The current is pushing at my chest now, so brutally I have to fight it to stay in place, but the phone is there, as real and clear as the lines on my palm, or the acid sloshing in my stomach.

My head sways. I hesitate and take a step back toward the phone and the comforting night behind it—but again I turn and follow Noel.

★ ★ ★

It's so bright here, Noel.

Right now I'd rather talk to you instead of my imaginary readership. I hope you don't mind. It's just a bit of running commentary—my meta-awareness. It keeps me outside of my head, monitoring myself so I can stay in control.

My shadow keeps disappearing. For a minute it walks—a fluttering charcoal flame by my side—and the next minute it's advancing on the horizon. Sometimes I'll see it almost catch up with you, but it'll walk up into the great icy sky instead, growing immense as it climbs until its feet reach above me and I lose track of which one of us is the object and which the shadow.

I see you walking in the distance, but I can't get any closer, even if I run. The ice in front of me unfolds and the distance between us grows: flat, pale, and infinite.

★ ★ ★

The revenants are here. Whenever I turn around to look at that fucking phone, I see them enter; some in clothes stained with grave dirt, some in their Kevlar suits. They move on, fixated on something far ahead—bullets on their way to the target.

Someone's shadow flees past me. I turn around just in time to dive left—

jump right—

out of the way of a revenant with long stringy hair. Undead Rapunzel is focused on something other than me, but my stomach still drops. My vision blurs and splits. My eyes pop, finally, and the world slides off like a loose lens from them. The revenant passes by my left and my right side at the same time. Between me—I swear she does. I turn to look to the side, half expecting to see myself standing there, but there is nothing.

I am lost, Noel. I can't see you in the distance anymore. Only the revenant walking away.

I follow her.

Her shape remains clear and detailed but my peripheral vision balloons again and more pressure builds over my eyes. Warm bile sears my stomach and chunks of the beef stew you rehydrated for our last meal tickle the back of my throat.

I turn around to stare at the phone and breathe through my mouth until the nausea passes—

And somehow, at the same time, I'm still walking. I stumble and throw up, contaminating the smooth, pale, infinite surface of the ice
—

★ ★ ★

The blood in the footsteps in front of me is very old. It's how I know it's not yours.

The sound of blood will always be my grandmother's voice and her knitting needles ticking like rosary beads.

"They brought him to me all muddy and bloody; already stiff. Made me wash him before they took his body. The officer said if he saw me cry they'd execute the rest of us, and so he stood and watched me the whole time, without lifting one greasy finger, just eating what was left over from the banitza I had packed for you only few hours before. I washed the dirt from his body and the blood off his face; I combed his hair gently over his forehead. He was born with a full head of hair, you know? You both were. Dressed him in his

best clothes. And his best underwear and socks too, like I used to tell you two when you were kids, because you never know when—”

You never know when *what*, I wanted to ask, but didn’t get the chance because my father suddenly noticed me even though I had been in the room the whole time, and yelled that this wasn’t something a five-year-old should be listening to—

The footsteps aren’t yours either, Noel. No human foot can leave an erosion like this in the hard ice—a hole deep and ancient and barefoot-shaped, sweating beads of black blood. Hers are the only footprints here, as if she is the only one who truly exists in this place. Neither I nor the revenants seem to leave so much as a scratch on the surface of the ice.

★ ★ ★

The air darkens as if a giant storm cloud has swept over the land and the smell of ghostly lilacs soaks the air. Beyond the horizon, a pod of giant whales swims up into the sky. Under them, something large and oval floats in the ice currents.

More and more revenants stream past in the distance. I stop to reassess my path and a revenant bumps into me. I turn aside—

aside—

to let him through and the bodies surround me.

★ ★ ★

I duck left—

right—

and my vision splits again. Again. Again. The world slides off from my eyes—my now hundred eyes—again. Arms reach for me—for one of me—from under a gray stone face. I zig and somehow, at the same time—

I zag—

I duck—

I run—

I thrash and choke on my own blood—

I walk—
I scream—
I fall under the weight of a body—
I run—
I run—
I run—
I run back to the entrance.
I pick up the ringing phone and answer it—

★ ★ ★

How do I understand what's happening? Have you had one of those moments when you realize someone has a completely different recollection of a moment from you, Noel?

Easiest explanation is—one of the people is lying. Another—the theory of narrative identity, which proposes that we piece together stories in our lives to form a consistent idea of who we are. If some moment, another person's statement or our own behavior, threatens the coherence of that identity, the moment is "reconciled away"—ignored or twisted to fit our internal propaganda.

Before I went to university, we went to visit my grandmother every summer.

One day, my father and I went to the little kvartalen magazin, which had sprouted in the cracks of the dictatorship and was, despite all economic odds, still in business. It was noon, when the Thracian sun was at its most violent. The store had a single customer—a pensioner in an old-fashioned suit and hat. When he saw us, his face opened in a grimace which wasn't really a smile but a well-practiced pretense at one. He greeted my father, who recoiled but returned the hello.

"How's it going?" the old man asked. "I hear you're living in the States now. Lucky!"

"Lucky," my father said.

"See how it is here now? Lots of things to buy but little, little money. How much better things were in the old days, eh?"

He continued chattering with a glib tone and cold eyes while we got and paid for our groceries and waited for them to be bagged. When we tried to leave, he stepped in front of the faded plastic strip curtain of the entrance, barring our way out.

"You know this thing with your brother—don't worry, I got there before he died. I sat with him. I can tell you what he said. His very last words."

"Excuse me," my father said, and shoved aggressively past, but the old man grabbed at me and leaned over so close I could smell his musty breath.

"Girl," the man said. "Do you wanna know a secret? Your uncle's very last words? I haven't told anyone."

Tears—from embarrassment or confusion, I still don't know—burst out of my eyes and father pulled my arm free from the old man.

"Don't touch my daughter," he hissed, and pushed me out ahead of him.

On our way back to the house, I asked him.

"Was that the guy who shot—"

"It's him. And he's lying."

"But don't you wanna hear—"

"You have to learn that sometimes people make stuff up," my father said. "I was right there. I saw my brother die. I didn't abandon him to die alone. It's the worst fate for anyone—abandoned to die. I wouldn't have left if he'd still been alive."

I believed him then. He really believed what he was saying.

Like I said—there are different ways of surviving.

★ ★ ★

But what if you yourself have two different recollections of the same moment?

When I told her about the man from the store, my grandmother's entire body shook.

"No," she spat with violence in her voice I'd never heard before. "Stay away from him. He keeps trying me too. Every time I go out

—‘Let me tell you,’ or ‘Why don’t you want to know?’ Whatever your uncle said, it is haunting him and he needs to unload it. No. May he choke on those words and die with them on his lips. I may never know what my son said—this is my own curse but it’s his too—may he choke on those words. May they burrow in his lungs and drown him. It’s what I tell him. Lately, I go out every day to wait for him and when I see him I say, ‘You will choke on my son’s dying words.’”

Then she cried and her tears were an odd kind—with traces of blood in them. But I also remember she didn’t cry because she had run out of tears years ago. That’s the weird thing—I clearly remember both outcomes.

★ ★ ★

I saw the man once more, a few years later. He was shockingly emaciated but his face was somehow lucent with bloat, as if something was rotting inside him. His eyes were glossed over, almost glowing in the purple dusk. He walked past me, not recognizing me without my context—my father. I turned around. He moved slowly, awkwardly, twisting his body like a monitor lizard, calling for someone. His dog, I assumed. I opened my mouth to call after him, but remembered I didn’t know his name. So, instead, I turned away.

Later, when I told her, my grandmother—who has always believed in vampiri and karakondjuli—crossed herself, and said not knowing his name had saved me. She was right. As soon as I had turned away from the man, I had seen his face again, this time on a fresh, not-yet-bleached necrologue—an obituary—glued to the iron lamppost.

And I know she was right because in another memory, I didn’t turn away but followed him instead, over the cobbled streets under the yellow lights, until night fell and he disappeared into the old cemetery and I ran home.

★ ★ ★

“You will die here,” the woman says on the phone, and she’s telling the truth.

I’m already dying. A few of me—the one who zigged instead of zagging, the one who turned around instead of running, the one who walked past the ringing phone and into the dirt-stained chest of a revenant emerging from the entrance—I watch them fall down as the waiting darkness steps in and closes around them.

I will die here. It’s inevitable.

But before I do, I can still do something.

I’ll be there for you, Noel.

★ ★ ★

By the time I reach you in the shadow of the floating structure, you can’t see me. You don’t seem to see anything.

The structure, a wide-bottomed ship, hangs over you like a giant Google Maps pin. *Here it is, the inevitable*, it screams.

Noel. Noel—I call for you. For a moment I deceive myself you can be saved.

But you stand, hunched over and silent, swaying awkwardly in the ice currents which meet here, under the giant ship, singing in their high-voltage cable voices. Spittle is foaming in the corners of your mouth. Your eyes are unblinking and raw.

It doesn’t look like it’ll be long for you now. But I’m here, with you—until—

More of me reach the shadow, revenants at our heels. We surround you.

—and the world folds. The edges of the ice tilt over and snap into each other, revealing a sudden reality. A vast darkness hiding behind the singing air. The ship above us—which to my thousand pairs of eyes was a grid of thousand ships—collapses into a single structure that looks like a potential of something. Almost concrete, almost recognizable.

I still see you and the revenants—a reedy four-dimensional tableau of imminent doom. I see the beeline of your path here and

the revenants' straight trajectories.

And, finally, her too. Fully.

Her form snaps into view out of light shards and deep shadows, out of the revenants' frozen disembodied grins and the grave dirt on their clothes, out of your blood and mine. Her dress is the beeline of your path here and the revenants' straight trajectories and countless more knotted strings.

"It's inevitable," she says, still through the phone. I drop it because I don't need it to hear her.

★ ★ ★

She is all around us. She is everything here, literally, and her voice is the whale song of ice advancing against ice but to my thousand pairs of ears the patterns form words. Every one of me is looking at her; a thousand pairs of eyes seeing her for what she is. You can't see her the way I do, Noel, but imagine the way a zoetrope works: a flat disk, covered in a progression of moments—let's say the movements of a horse—begins to spin. The shapes fly faster, get blurrier, until the momentum tips and suddenly a horse is galloping in front of your eyes. Now imagine if instead of a thousand moments there were a thousand viewpoints snapping into one.

She is a glacier that's not a glacier. A world that walks among humans.

Not a world, the currents sing—a *universe*.

Old—

Older than your own—

I stand still, inside one of *those* moments in which you have no idea—no precedent—of how to feel but simply know your life has irreparably changed. Regrettably—regrettably?—I'm lucid. No friendly feeling of disassociation to soften the shock. My teeth crunch with something gritty and acidic. My extremities tingle. Sweat trickles down my armpits and the insides of my thighs. I smell blood, lilacs, and bone. It entices and mildly repulses me at the same time. I feel

myself swaying lightly in the currents, but otherwise I'm fully present. I'm here. This is happening to me. I don't know what to—

"Why are you here?" I ask.

Searing pain stabs my shoulder. I spin around—all thousand of me spin around, seeing nothing but her, even as we feel the revenant's teeth tear through the muscle and tendons of one of us. I'm not sure if this is meant to be her answer. If so, fair enough. It was a lazy question.

Another stab—an abdomen is torn apart and a flash of blinding pain in the kidneys makes me fold over. I don't have much time.

"What do you want?" I ask her. I don't expect an answer.

I get one anyway.

You're here, she says. Stay.

The word is not really an order or a plea. It's—an end state.

I look around for her face. I can't find it. I try to recall why I found it so astonishing or even a single detail of what it looked like. A revenant in a gray suit painted in bright, fresh blood walks by and disappears into something—some blind spot—right in front of me.

"Why should I stay?" I ask, watching a second and a third revenant, both in racing suits, disappear into the exact same spot. All of me turn to look at the spot from a thousand viewpoints and the world clicks out and into view again. The perspective has shifted. Without even switching direction, a handful of revenants disappear into the spot, which now appears to be in a completely different location. We all turn to focus directly on it and the world clicks again. A pain stabs at me again. The screams go on—that me still had enough energy to fight for a very long time.

That's not how you find the entrance, she says. Take a step. Make a choice.

"What choices are the revenants making?"

The only part remaining in them is drawn to the inevitable. For you living people, it's the choices you make that bring you closer. Some of you make it.

"Some versions of us?"

Some combinations of choices. The rest are loose threads.

“What’s at the entrance?” I ask over the rising cries and blinding pain as more and more revenants tear into the fraying threads of me on their way to her.

Certainty, she says. Finally, a certainty about which choices were right. A certainty about who you are supposed to be. And after the point of certainty, it’s your choice.

Reality skips around me. There are too few of us to see her clearly. It’s almost impossible to focus on the right spot.

“What about the revenants?”

The revenants are just fuel. You’ll be a spark.

★ ★ ★

I can stay here, Noel. Full and plump with life and meaning. Beyond inevitability—

Pain stings me and blind spots corrode my peripheral vision. The revenants are tearing into us on their way to you, Noel.

All you have to do is run, she says. In any direction. Make a choice. The last bullet is coming and you are in the way. Make a choice, run. Find—

I look at you, Noel. You are getting transparent, rice paper-like.

The revenants are quickly overpowering the last of us. Her world unfolds like a puzzle box and her form settles into the electricity-scented landscape.

The currents sing urgently, and I don’t need a translator to understand what they are saying.

Run!

Only one of me is left alive. If I just run, left, right—I can start again. I can get to the entrance.

What do you think, Noel? You can’t even see me right now. You don’t even know I’m here. You won’t know I’m gone.

Left or right. Who is the inevitable one?

The last revenant shambles toward us—me and you right behind me.

★ ★ ★

If I'd expected him to be my old canary-yellow-clad friend from the cave—the good ol' Chekhov's revenant—in some grace of poetic symmetry, I would have been disappointed. But I am not. In real life you have to make your own poetic symmetry.

So I turn to you, Noel.

"Motherfucker," I say, "you were supposed to be my protection."

I fight. Really hard. So the pain explodes into my body long before the night arrives.

★ ★ ★

A woman in a shapeless woolen dress is standing on the edge behind me. Her lips open over a tongue the violent color of a fresh bruise and I stumble backward and turn and lose my footing and crash downhill. I break into a desperate run back to the tent, where I zip myself up inside and into my sleeping bag.

★ ★ ★

I push the sled east. Behind me, a snowstorm in pursuit thrashes against the two lines the sled leaves. In front of me, as impossible as it seems to the rational part of my brain, are fresh sled tracks. I've somehow turned around and need to head into the storm or wait it out.

Inside the night, inside the tent, inside the storm, I dream. I dream as soon as I sit down, maybe even before, that's how empty I am.

In my dream, Noel and I are pushing the sled through a freshly plowed field. Waves of rusted barbed wire and surgically sharp razor wire surge at us. We kick up and the sled takes off. I lean, gripping the handlebars, to take a turn and look at Noel, but he shakes his head—*no*—and falls off the side onto the field. I can't see anyone behind us but I know he will be shot.

Another field—the sled rocks and zigs and zags out of my control and I turn to Noel and he is my uncle who tells me he is getting off here.

At the edge of the field stands a woman in a matted mink coat. I turn back to my uncle who is also Noel but he is halfway to her. I scream after him until I lose my voice. And then I am in the sled, alone, picking at the leg of a perfectly roasted chicken resting on the handlebars. I tear the flesh from the bone with my bare hands and feed it to the huskies, who whine and dance and eat and shit as they gallop ahead, but the field retains nothing and the sled does not budge.

Riding beside me, the woman in the matted coat leans over—in my sleep I smell the old blood and cold stars on her breath—and tells me the how to extrapolate the formula of survival from chaos variables of the universe, but I forget it when I wake up.

★ ★ ★

The storm passes. I call for help. The rescue center tells me they've dispatched teams to look for me.

I crouch by the sled and sink into the white field. Somehow, the storm hasn't erased my tracks—I see two parallel lines at the edge of the field and for a second, I imagine I am the one riding on the sled coming toward me. My brain knows it needs to be alert before I understand why.

It's a kick-sled.

Ears ringing, I take out my rifle, aim, shoot, and miss the revenant's head. My hands are shaking. My eyes are blurry. I blink and take three deep breaths. I aim again. With my second shot he falls back. He gets up and heads for me.

Three.

Four.

He falls and gets up.

Five.

I'm out of bullets.

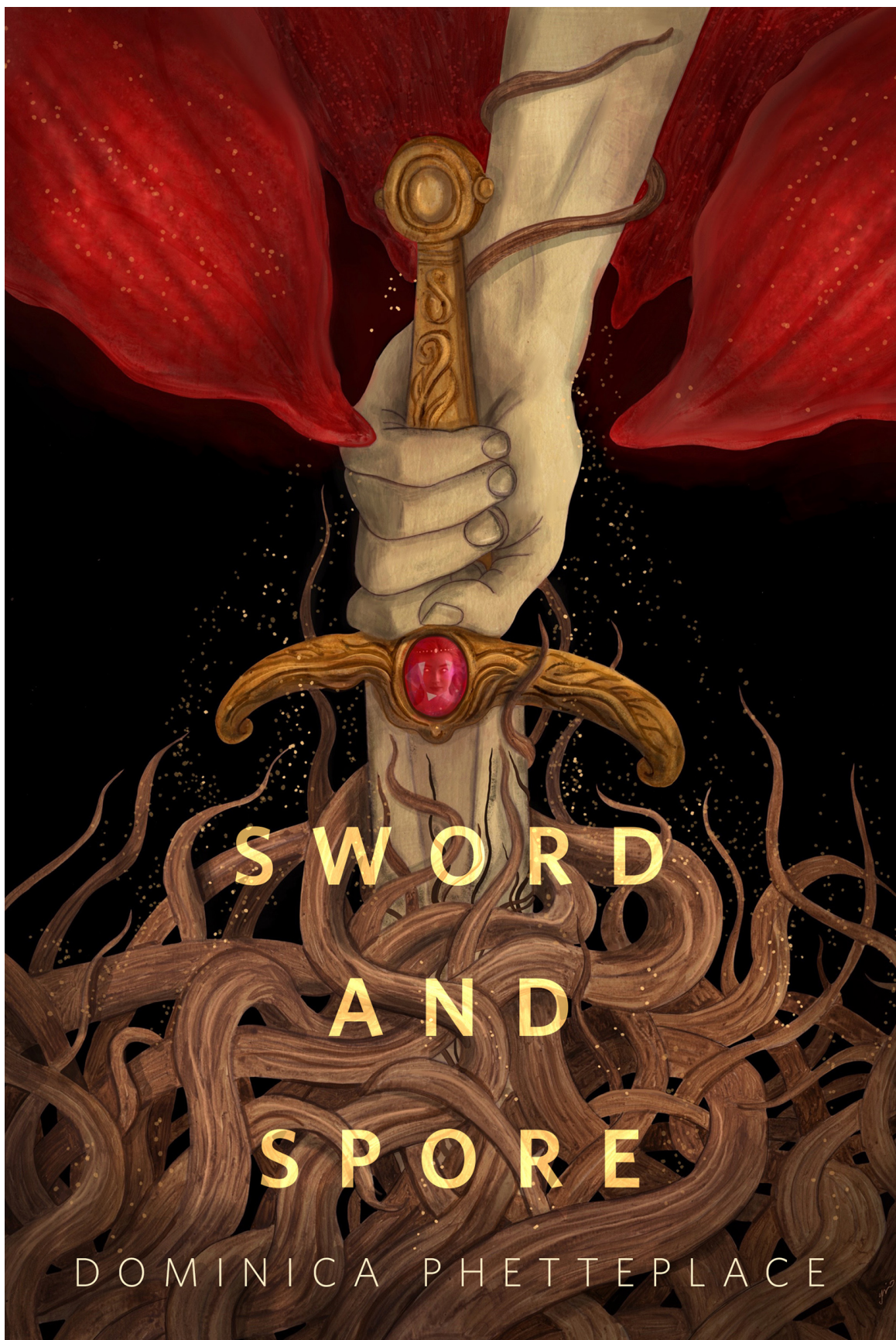
I take off running, heading east toward the coast where the rescue teams will be coming from. A small hill covered in snow lies in my way.

I zig.



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SWORD
AND
SPORE

DOMINICA PHETTEPLACE

Sword & Spore

DOMINICA PHETTEPLACE

illustration by

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

T O R
D O T
C O M

1. The Queen

Before I could embark on my revenge, I taught the forest to sing.

It wasn't a simple matter. A particular vibration was required. A sustained flow.

The grasses found it easiest. They could catch a breeze and buzz their stalks.

Beware, beware.

Their song was faint; they were on the edge of the forest, weak. Far from the glowing ruby on the hilt of the King's Sword, where I used to be trapped. Far from my blossom, far from my vines. Far from the indestructible blade thrust into the dirt, where my roots were tangled with the roots of many others. Far from the soil that I spoke to and drank from.

I trained the beings closest to my heart to sing the loudest.

Snow-in-Summer was the first flower on the forest floor to find the friction in her petals. From her pure white blossoms, she sang the song I taught her.

Beware, beware.

The song kept the humans away. At least until the drought.

Complaints of thirst traveled from root tip to root tip. The reservoirs of the cobra lilies emptied, the pitcher plants', too. Ferns died at the forest edge, then farther inside. Leaves shriveled before their season and the forest floor became a heavy mat of those that succumbed.

I dug my roots down, farther than any of them could. Beneath everything, there was water. You had to be strong enough to summon it. When I found it, I shared. Nothing is apart from anything else in this forest. Our roots intertwine.

Before the King was a king, he had been a god. Wicked magic had trapped me in a jewel, but there was always a way out. I used to be a god, too.

The Wizard has a theory of energetic currents, a theory that is true, as it happens. Shortly after being buried, I made contact with a grain of pollen the size of dust. And so I became that pollen. All orchids are fed by fungi when they are young. My father made it so.

I wasn't just a flower, though. I was the language that the forest spoke, I was its secret. I set down roots. I sprouted, then budded.

Once a year, I bloomed. A sticky red flower, seven petals, each taller than a man. My scent was of my own anger, but multiplied tenfold. The bark mushrooms loved my fragrance and spored while I stank.

The animals stayed away, even the scavengers. Nematodes and earthworms dug away from my heart, sometimes fainting from exhaustion. Whatever died in the soil decomposed and was repurposed to make me stronger. Plenty died in the dirt that spring. I bloomed larger than ever in the drought. Through the tangle of fungi that connected our roots, I passed sugar and water to Snow-in-Summer so that she might continue to sing.

Beware, beware.

She got louder and louder as the drought wore on.

2. The Young Man

The ants came from the forest and then went back into the forest. Cayhun was careful to stay behind the tree line, the boundary of the forbidden. The center of the wood housed the King's Sword, which kept a demon trapped. Trespass, and you might unleash hell.

If you believed in those sorts of things.

The stench of the forest was bad. It was probably the smell, and not the priest's taboo, that kept the other villagers away. If Cayhun stood right at the edge of the tree line, where the ants marched in, he could see strangler figs on trees farther back. Some had blossoms, some had fruit.

Under hunger's influence, the strangler figs looked almost edible. It wasn't yet the season for figs. Green fruit and dead blossoms littered the ground. He scanned the forest floor for promising specimens, but could see nothing from the distance he kept. So he went into the forest for the first time.

He stood still for a second, once past the first tree. No demons came rushing out. Maybe he was now a demon? No, he was getting the myth of the forbidden forest mixed up with the myth of the forbidden river. As if the stories weren't confusing to begin with, the village priests kept changing them.

Cayhun was supposed to take his initiation this year, but then the drought had scrambled the calendar. Just as well: he didn't want to pledge fealty to the village gods, who were quick to punish and slow to help. And while the point of the initiation was to indicate your readiness for marriage, Cayhun knew that his father would take a second wife before he would allow Cayhun to take a first. Best not

get attached to any of the girls in the village; they might become his next mother.

This could be an initiation of his own devising. This step into the woods. This first bite of fruit. He picked up one of the larger figs. It was fist sized and green with brown stripes. It felt heavy; perhaps it was sweet.

He took a bite. It was sour and full of dead wasps. He thought about this for a minute. Perhaps the wasps had pollinated the fig, the ways bees used to pollinate the apple trees in the orchard. Perhaps if the fruit were ripe, these wasp parts would add a mild, pleasant crunch to the fruit. Here they were like thorns in his mouth, and he chewed slowly and carefully to keep from cutting himself. Still, the very heart of the unripe fig was sweet. Wasps always find sugar.

If the fig didn't poison him, that meant it was edible. He stood still for a moment, waiting to take ill. When he didn't, he gathered up more fruit to put in his satchel and went to find the ants.

Outside the forest, in the wild fields that surrounded the forbidden wood, the brown ants made neat lines, coming and going. The returning line was laden with small prizes: nectar beads, pollen grains, or pieces of leaf. Occasionally, the prize was something larger, like a small worm or spider, and multiple ants would carry it together.

Cayhun thought the ants might be like bees. The beehives in the village had been depleted, but when they functioned, bees would find food and turn it into honeycomb. Perhaps ants had hives, too, and honeycombs within them. He meant to find out. He could bring ant honey back for Elnara, his sister. She was four summers old and she was battling a fever.

They were not permitted to feed her; their father said so. "Starve a fever" he repeated, as if it had been etched in stone by a god. But the truth was, their father probably didn't care if she died. She was just another mouth to feed, and worse, a girl, so another dowry to pay. Cayhun was old enough to take a wife, but if that meant becoming his father, he'd rather run away. He could take Elnara.

He'd have to wait for her to get better. Honey would help, even if it came from ants.

Cayhun had been watching ants in the field his whole life. What might have been derided as a waste of time during harvest was now clearly a sensible diversion during famine. It required little energy and his studies would now lead him to ant-honey treasure.

Something peculiar happened to the brown ants in the field outside the forest. The ants were mostly dutiful, leaving the nest and returning with their foragings. But occasionally an ant strayed. It would climb up a tall piece of grass and stay there, pinchers clamped down. Not even a gentle poking could convince it to move. It made sure to find a ray of sun. It wanted warmth. In a day or so it would stop moving, and in another day it would burst, scattering dust.

The dust would fall on other dutiful brown ants. Wineberries gave Cayhun stomachaches, but their juice was good for marking things. With a little juice dabbed on the end of a dried stalk, Cayhun could keep track of the ants most heavily dusted. So he knew that it was these ants that would soon stray from their duties, join their companions in desertion. Climb up, clamp down, and then explode. Cayhun wondered how much of this dust he had inhaled in the course of his investigations. Maybe the dust was why he was always running away. Maybe one day he would bite down on a tall stalk of grass and explode.

He followed the ants deeper into the heart of the forest, keeping a lookout for the King's Sword. The fug increased to an almost nauseating level. There was buzzing that seemed to grow more intense the deeper he went in.

Beware, beware, it seemed to say. But perhaps he was imagining it? And if he were being warned, that could be a sign there really was something precious in the center of the wood. If so, then the warning was actually a reason to persist. He continued in until he found a mud mound where the ant trails both started and finished.

Cayhun wore the heavy cloth gloves that the beekeepers once used. Since the colony had collapsed, the beekeepers had fallen into

depression and had not kept a close eye on their supplies. The gloves were tight; he was already large for his age and growing still.

He cut off a corner of the mound using a whittled wooden blade. Like bees, the ants swarmed at the intrusion. Unlike bees, they crawled under the overhanging lips of the gloves and started biting him. He threw off the gloves and ran back from the mound, brushing his hands on his tunic.

The bites were small stings, nothing serious, and when he was satisfied he had wiped most of the ants off, he approached the mound again and examined the cut he'd made.

He looked for honey. He didn't see any. The chamber he had cut open was lined with white puffs, bright as cotton but made of something more dense. Like mold, but more voluminous. Like mushrooms, but smaller. Not honey. But perhaps it was still sweet?

Dipping a stick in carefully, he extracted one puff. It smelled like rot and tasted faintly of dirt. He carefully extracted a few more puffs, blowing on each one to clean it of ants. These went in his satchel with the unripe figs.

In the next village over, they grew mushrooms in caves for medicine. The trader had offered some for sale last summer and been subsequently berated for it by an elder.

Cayhun's village prohibited the consumption of mushrooms. This was in response to an incident from years before, when some of the women were foraging in the north forest; the "good" forest, utterly unlike the wood Cayhun was now in. It was filled with ordinary striped birches and songbirds and dotted with pleasant-looking red-capped mushrooms. Mostly these mushrooms were delicious, but occasionally they were poisonous. Fatal. The village priest had declared them a curse, and this ban had somehow been extended to all their "brethren." It included any mushroom-like offering from the trader, even medicine.

"But this is good for wounds. For toothaches. Fevers," the trader protested. His clothes were fine. He was from far away and seemed

to know many things. He already had an apprentice, but perhaps he was in need of another.

Cayhun had secretly followed the man and his apprentice for a mile after they had been expelled from the town, and then approached him.

"I want to see your village," Cayhun shouted. "I can work for you. I know lots about insects."

The apprentice was the size and shape of a boulder. He took a threatening step toward Cayhun and drew a knife.

"No, I don't mean you any harm. Just ... take me with you."

The apprentice grunted and shook his head no. The trader explained that they were not from a village, they were from the capital.

"You'll have to make your own way there," the trader said. And in that moment last summer, Cayhun had decided that he would, one day. He had meant to leave this year, but then there was the drought and Elnara's sickness. And, truthfully, his own cowardice. There was always a reason not to go. Time seemed to stretch out endlessly in front of him. He could always do it tomorrow.

"I'll give you something for free," said the trader as he departed. "A little advice. Your village is backward, but your elders are right about one thing. Stay out of the Witch's Wood."

What he had mistaken for ordinary human odor on the trader and his apprentice was actually the stench of the wood. They must have passed through there on the way to the village. Perhaps that was where they gathered their medicinal mushrooms, the ones they said were from the neighboring village. How unusual that they would warn him against the very place they had just been. Perhaps they were in search of the King's Sword? Or perhaps there were more treasures than that hidden in the forest?

"What's in there?"

"Magic. Strong enough to ruin a man."

Before the trader, he had never heard it referred to as the Witch's Wood. The name made sense now. The hum that seemed to say

beware, it almost sounded like a woman's voice.

He thought of the trader's warning now, as he ventured toward the sound of that voice.

Deeper in, a beautiful white flower bloomed all over the forest floor. It seemed to be the source of this hum.

"Beware, beware."

He was probably imagining it. But if the flower could talk, that meant it was strong. Cayhun plucked it with a shaky hand and chewed slowly. The leaves were bitter, the stem and petals sweet. He plucked a bouquet's worth for Elnara. It was time to be getting back. It was getting dark.

The way out of the forest seemed longer than the way in. The trees grew close together in some parts, and the strangler figs and other vines seemed to be closing off paths. It was like a labyrinth now; it had not been this way before. Cayhun willed his heart not to race.

He had seen plants trap insects, finding ways to move their leaves to enclose their prey. He had thought of it as a fascinating phenomenon, one that really had nothing to do with him. But now that the forest was closing in on him, he realized there was no way to be apart from the things he had spent his life observing.

As it grew darker and darker, the trees began to sparkle. Clusters of luminescent orbs appeared all around, seeming to float. Spirits? Fairies? Tiny gods? Cayhun approached one and saw it was attached to the tree in a manner similar to that of a bark mushroom, but more bulbous. He tapped it, and it released a glowing spore that clung to his tunic. Strange as it was, he was grateful for it, for all of them. They lit a path out.

It was the middle of the night when he finally returned to the village. He smelled like the forest and was covered in an eerie glowing dust, so he was determined to sleep outside with the goats. His father was less violent in the morning.

As he approached the family huts, he saw that a large bonfire had been lit at their entrance. It was a funeral pyre.

His mother sat by it alone, in prayer.

“Mother—”

She slapped him. “Your sister is dead, and you stink of the forest,” she screamed, as if those facts were related.

He stared into the fire looking for any sign of her. He hadn’t had a chance to say goodbye. He hoped she hadn’t died alone. If the Endless Ocean really existed, he hoped that there had been someone there to hold her hand as she began her swim across.

“Your clothes are covered in witchcraft. Leave now or your father will kill you when he gets back.” His mother’s shouts brought him back to the eerie silence of the present.

★ ★ ★

As Cayhun’s village starved, there had been talk of visiting the neighboring village. Some said they had more grain stored. Some wanted to send the women to beg. Others wanted to send the men to steal. That his father was gone and his mother was still here indicated which plan had prevailed.

That Cayhun had not been apprised meant he truly was not a candidate for initiation. At his age, such exclusion meant exile was at hand. Or worse.

“They’ll be killed. You’ll be killed,” he said. If the other village had food, that meant they had strength.

“You’re dead either way,” his mother yelled. If his father returned at all, it would be with a face stained with blood and smoke. His hands would be twitching with violence.

In the distance, Cayhun thought he could make out the glowing lights of approaching torches. Someone was coming. His father and kin returning, or the men of the other village, bent on revenge. His mother was right: either way he was dead.

“Come with me, we can escape together.” He offered her this escape even though he hated her. Her meanness, her temper. She had brought him into this hard world and accused him of ingratitude. Perhaps the village and its customs were to blame for her angry

condition. If she could escape, she might discover a new side to herself.

He held out his hand; she spat in his face. So Cayhun turned on his heel and ran back to the forbidden forest.

He thought he heard shouts and hoofbeats behind him. If it was his kin, then the horses were stolen. If it was kin, then they might not kill him. He continued running toward the wood. He looked back and confirmed he was indeed being chased, and that the gap between him and his pursuers was shrinking. The moon lit the meadow between the village and the forest and Cayhun was still smeared with glowing spores, easy to spot in all this darkness.

Horses could not ride in the wood; the trees grew too close together. Cayhun rushed inside and hid behind trees. He saw his pursuers dismount and follow him in. They were not kin, then. No one from his village dared enter this wood. If they were from the other village, then they were here to kill or enslave him.

He heard the men gag. The stench was strong, but Cayhun was used to it after a whole day spent breathing it in. This was his advantage, so he pressed on, deeper in.

Beware, beware.

The buzzing was louder now, almost a chorus. Like a song, like the voices of women. He would take his chances with witches. He had never met any. None had ever hurt him.

He heard crashing behind him. Then cutting. His pursuers slashed through the brush. Those axes might be the same ones that would cut him open. So, forward. Maybe he would finally find the King's Sword. Then he could fight back.

He followed the stench. Though it nauseated him, he hoped it would nauseate his pursuers more. The stench led him to a clearing, which held an enormous red flower.

Beware, beware.

Yes, the flower was talking to him, but softly, not louder than the crashing behind him. Despite his efforts, his pursuers were closer

than ever. He imagined strong, well-fed men rushing into the clearing at any minute.

The flower bloomed on the forest floor, and next to it was a tangle of roots that resembled a thousand snakes in a dance. The roots writhed and made whining sounds as they rubbed together. Something glinted from within them.

The sword. He could see the hilt. It seemed to turn toward him, pushed by the roots. He might be able to pull it out. That could give him a fighting chance. One myth held that the King's Sword was cursed. Another myth held that whoever could touch the sword without dying would become the new king.

His hand found the hilt, and, as he gripped it, the petals of the orchid moved to touch him, lightly at first.

He felt a surge of energy grow through him. So the myth was true. He gained strength and also new knowledge: the world was shaped like a ball, and he was but a speck of dust upon it.

The flower was moving to enclose him. The petals were covered in a sticky nectar that gripped him even as he tried to twist his way out. He had seen a similar death visited on gnats and smaller winged insects. His new strength would not be enough to save him.

He turned his head and saw his pursuers come crashing through. As he suspected, they were a bunch of well-fed, angry men. So they did have plenty of grain. Shame on them for not sharing. And how foolish they were to chase him. Some held looks of horror, some looked away, some began to run away. There would be no assistance coming, not for him.

The flower would kill him. But the men would have killed him. By dying this way, he had chosen his fate, and that was something to be proud of, wasn't it? On the other shore of the Endless Ocean, if the myths were true, they would weigh his heart before they decided where to send him. He would tell them he chose his own fate. He had chosen the flower. He had never hurt any man or woman. Perhaps that would tip the scales in the right direction.

3. The Wizard

The Wizard had a device for collecting water from the atmosphere, but it only produced a small amount. Just a few cupfuls, despite its advanced and elaborate setup. He could not think of a way to scale it up and sate the kingdom.

In the meantime, it made sense to pursue other avenues of research. He had thought he had heard a smart man (he couldn't remember which one) say that lichen could filter water. Could they remove the salt from ocean water?

The Wizard used his polished lenses to examine the lichen specimens gathered from the royal arboretum. Of the many books that the Wizard had stolen from the Great Library, he found himself lately returning to the Mikrographos volume the most, especially as his magical powers diminished. The book showed you how to polish glass to reveal portions of the invisible realm. As his third sight vanished, the lenses were a consolation.

Pity about the library and how it had burned. He should have stolen more. That was already two Universes ago, but he still thought every day about the library and the horrible fire that had consumed it.

He had expected the lichen to resemble plants under the lenses. A tight grid, like the rooms in a priest's dormitory. But instead they resembled one of the royal chef's most famous dishes: a layer of shaped meat patties served atop a tangle of wheat noodles. Spheres and tubes.

The lichen was not a plant, then. Neither was it an animal. It was some third thing. Further investigation would reveal the lichen to be composed of two distinct things, working together. Imagine.

The Wizard could not interest the King in this matter, or in any other. The King was preoccupied with only three things: wine, women, and rumors of an invading horde approaching from the south. Regarding this last matter, the King had dispatched the Traveler and his Boulder to perform reconnaissance. Not trusting the haste of humans, the Wizard sent a scout of his own: one of his last remaining birds, a female owl he had named Kleo.

Once, he had been able to speak all the most common bird languages. But as the Realm of the Gods grew more distant, he found himself losing words until all he had left was Owlese.

He housed and fed a mated pair, but the male declined every task the Wizard presented him with. Typical. The Wizard supposed he should withhold food from him, but he was too soft-hearted. In his own life, all the countably infinite years of it, he had found that you couldn't talk to an animal without becoming deeply attached to it.

Kleo wanted two mice upon her return.

<If you eat that much in one go, you'll be too heavy to fly for several days.>

She clucked her indifference. Once he had kept a lean hawk. She would take flight and spy for him every day. Those were easier times. Less struggle, more joy.

Now there was so much to do, and each day he grew less able to do it. He should have worked harder on his prognostications. A word from the future could have helped him prepare for the dual droughts: one of water and the other of magic.

When Kleo returned, she confirmed that that she had spotted a ragtag group of enchanted beings marching toward the castle.

<I wouldn't call them demons. More like, um, zombies.>

<How many?>

<More than a few, less than a lot.>

Some birds were great with numbers. He missed the days when he could talk to crows or blue jays. Really, any of the familia Corvidae.

<They were chanting.>

<Oh?>

She gave a sound that was halfway between a hoot and whistle. The Wizard thought about it for a minute.

<Ekrim?>

<Yes, that's what they were saying. What's an Ekrim?>

<It was the King's old name. Before he was kicked out of the Realm of the Gods. We aren't allowed to say it anymore, by royal decree. Anyone that utters it gets the death penalty.>

Kleo hooted, her eyes widening in concern

<No, don't worry. The law doesn't apply to you. And anyway, not many people know it. Just me, the King, of course, and ... well, the Queen; I mean, the former Queen. We're not allowed to say her real name, either.>

<I thought the Queen was dead.>

The Wizard cricked his neck, hoping to coax away a new pain that had just appeared in the moment. For animals, death was a binary condition. For exiled gods, it was more of a spectrum.

Ekrim, former god of fruit and field. Once married to Ayunsil, goddess of fermentation. When they were happy and together, all the wine in the kingdom tasted sweet. Bottles and barrels seemed to replenish themselves. All drunks were charming.

Not now. Cellars were empty. The drink, when you could find it, was bitter. And everyone across the kingdom was mean, sober or not. Poor Ayunsil was so murderous. And relentless, too. She couldn't help it; she got it from her father.

The Wizard stared at his spotted hands. As the realm in the clouds departed for another Universe without him, aging had set in. For the first time ever, he was an old man. It was affecting him more than the King, due to planetary positioning. The Wizard grew more hunched by the day, while the King merely went gray at his temples. It only seemed to enhance his appeal with the ladies of the court. It made him look mature. He wasn't.

Poor, poor Ayunsil. The Wizard had hoped he had put her in a place where she couldn't kill again. He hadn't counted on enervating

so rapidly himself. And she was so stubborn. And unrelenting. And strong.

<How far away did you say she was?>

The Wizard unrolled a map of the kingdom, and Kleo pecked at a location. It was north of the forest where Ayunsil had been placed but still south of the capital.

<How fast were they going?>

Kleo pecked out an estimate of speed.

<They could be here in two days.>

<Or tomorrow. They are a fast group of ... whatever it is they are.>

<We need more information.>

<I can't go back out there. I just ate.>

It was a matter of physics. Kleo had eaten her mice first thing upon arriving, and now weighed 270 pebbles. Her wings could carry no more than 230. The Wizard made a quick calculation, based on prior observations of Kleo's metabolism. She couldn't scout again until tomorrow at the earliest, and even that was a stretch.

<Can you convince your mate to go?>

They both looked over at Osgo, who dozed on a perch near the fireplace.

Kleo hooted a no.

Despite his apparent dozing, the Wizard was sure Osgo had been listening in. He walked over to the male and said: <The fate of the kingdom is at stake.>

Osgo opened one perfectly round yellow eye. He cast a slit pupil in Kleo's direction, as if to admonish her for letting the Wizard address him, and then definitively closed all three of his eyelids shut: nictitating membrane, upper, lower.

<The city might fall. No more free room and board from me.>

Osgo and Kleo lived in the mews and ate the mice the royal chef caught in his traps.

<Some birds might want the city to fall. Some birds think that the bigger the city grows, the more field and forest will be stolen from

us,> said Kleo, speaking as if she were a defenseless wild bird and not a royal pet.

The Wizard scanned a nearby shelf and tried to remember where he had put his book on urban planning. He organized his books by subject and Universe of origin. He had only visited five Universes since the most recent big bang and only three of those contained any books of note. Or was it four? How long ago had it been that he had visited the great and shining Metropolis?

Perhaps if he could find it, he could explain to Kleo that a smartly managed city was the best way to keep humans from sprawling out in all directions, destroying everything around them. Of course, it was matter of resource management. And he had several volumes of Makroekonomiks lying around somewhere ... somewhere ... somewhere.

He was forgetting things. He was once the god of birds, wind, and love. Now he couldn't even remember his true name. He hoped he had it written down somewhere ...

Somewhere.

He heard flapping and saw that both Kleo and Osgo had departed out the window without saying goodbye. Dusk was approaching. They had more interesting things to do than hang around his library.

The next morning the Traveler and Boulder returned. They wore kerchiefs over the lower halves of their faces.

"You got back fast." They had only been gone a few days on their latest trading expedition south. They bought and sold medicines and taught people germ theory, using an Other-Universe book the Wizard had loaned them. They did this while they spied for the King.

"The matter is urgent."

The two men had not witnessed anything themselves, but a series of messengers who knew they would trade information for coin had alerted them to a shambling demon army approaching the kingdom.

"How many?"

“Reported figures vary wildly, from twelve to twelve hundred. I suspect it is not the number of demons we should fret over, but the danger they pose. Their condition ... It seems to be contagious.”

The Wizard nodded. Hence the face coverings. He rummaged around in his pocket for a spare cloth and tied it so it covered it nose and mouth. He had never caught a disease before in his life, but he no longer had the immune system of a god.

It was always the Traveler that spoke for the two of them. People suspected Boulder of being mute. The truth was, Boulder’s voice was high-pitched. Despite his large size, he squeaked. He was a thick man whose graceful gait let you know he was fast, too. That he didn’t speak only made him more intimidating

<You.> The Wizard directed his thoughts toward Boulder. Unlike the Traveler, Boulder was capable of telepathy. <What did you hear?>

Boulder answered, very faintly. <They are a hive. One thinks for all.>

The Traveler, unaware of the exchange, continued his report. “The demons can’t be fought by traditional means. If you strike, they burst. They are made of dust. If you inhale too much dust, you might become one yourself. We obtained a sample. Please be careful. The King can prepare an army. But you might prepare a cure.”

The Traveler handed him a sealed set of nesting vials.

The Wizard removed two heavy gold rings from jewel-laden fingers and handed one to each man. “Thank you.”

Back in his lab, the Wizard performed his examination of the sample while wearing a diving helmet. He wished his lenses were more powerful. One of his Other-Universe texts referenced lenses that could be powered by a flow of particles. You needed an energy source if you wanted to magnify past a certain point.

Energy was always on his mind. He thought about it a great deal nowadays. What if he could use it to replace his lost magic? He sighed at the blurry lensed images and then squinted, sketched, and made guesses. He would look into the particle flows later.

He brought his sketches to the King, who had already spoken to the Traveler and was indeed preparing an army. That was his answer to everything.

"The sample the Traveler brought me: it was tree sap that had collected demon dust. I put it under my lenses."

"And?"

"And the dust is not uniform. It contains materials from many organisms. Like a lichen, but with at least twenty-eight distinct components instead of two."

"What's lichen?" The King put his fingers against his temple as if his head ached. His hair was white all over now, not just gray at the temples, as it had been yesterday.

"It's ... her. You know that already, don't you? The forest we buried her in ... I think she was able to draw the life force from it."

"How?"

The Wizard paused, searching for an explanation. In his investigation of energy, he found that uniting two opposites that made contact in a certain manner could induce a flow. Perhaps she had found her opposite somehow. Clearly, they hadn't buried her deep enough.

"Her army, are these mushroom people? If so, she learned that trick from her father."

"I haven't seen them, but I'm not worried about whether they're made out of mushrooms or not. I am worried that they are people with a communicable disease. A disease you and I might also catch."

"I killed all of her mushroom people last time by myself." Ekrim was referencing a small skirmish that already taken place millennia ago, one that he had ultimately lost. "And now, I have a thousand men with swords. And a perfect immune system. It will be easy." The King sat up straighter.

"Your Highness, with respect, you've never won against her."

The King pursed his lips. "I've defeated lots of mushroom people."

“It isn’t her minions I’m worried about. It’s her. She kicks your ass every time.” Ekrim, in his millions of years of battle with Ayunsil, had never vanquished her. His only successes were temporary tricks, like the forest burial. He had trapped her in a jewel on the hilt of one her father’s ceremonial swords and then placed the sword in an energetic force field, with the Wizard’s help. Then they had buried her.

The Wizard knew the forest would not contain her forever; it was only the first part of a larger plan. But he had never managed to execute the second part. He had intended to bind Ekrim as well, forcing him into that same jewel. Their energies could balance each other out and contain each other, perhaps permanently.

Ayunsil’s father, the Origin, had expelled her and Ekrim from the realm for insufficient fealty. He had sentenced them to live out the rest of their lives in this kingdom, on this planet, in this Universe, and the Wizard had been foolish enough to stay behind with them. He liked this blue-and-green orb. He liked its forests and birds. He liked its people, too. He thought they should have some protection from the likes of Ekrim and Ayunsil.

“Are you saying she’s stronger than I am?” The King stood up.

“At the risk of committing treason: yes. She’s stronger than you, just like you’re stronger than me.”

“But you and I can work together. That’s how we bound her last time.”

“And that’s how we’ll bind her again.”

“But she’ll escape again. That’s so like you. You love doing the same thing over and over.”

“Repetition is often the course of least resistance. Yes, she’ll escape again and again. But eventually, she’ll be too weak to, and that’s how we’ll finally trap her.”

The Wizard looked up at the model of the solar system that hung from the ceiling of the King’s chambers.

The heliocentric version had been unveiled two summers before. Happier times, then: Ayunsil and Ekrim had spent two whole months

without committing an atrocity and the Wizard thought it might be a good time to introduce an age of enlightenment. This was before the drought.

The model contained the Sun, the planets, the major moons, and one more thing, not to be rightfully named in front of any humans. This thing was modeled by a rock crystal the size of a fist. The King and Wizard both referred to it as a comet, but that wasn't what it was.

The model was powered by spring and crank. All celestial bodies spun and circled, but the comet edged farther and farther out on a track, designed never to return. Their home. Their former home. The farther away it got, the weaker they got. The rock crystal would run out of track eventually. It would crash onto the floor and burst into pieces. They would be dead before then, though they hoped they had centuries left and not mere decades.

"Okay, let's do it like we did before. Pretend to negotiate and then trap her."

"She still has the sword, according to the Traveler."

"Perfect. We won't even have to enchant a new item. We can just repeat the same trick as last time."

They met her on the royal road, well outside the capital. It took some doing to get the King to don his mask. He was worried it would muss his powder. As his skin grew pale and wrinkly, he had taken to dusting his entire face with a thick coat of copper pigment. He thought the powder made him look tan. He thought it made him look youthful. It made him look orange.

"Ekrim, Ekrim..." You could hear the monsters chanting before you could smell them. And you could smell them before you could see them. The Wizard had fortified his face covering with a magical forcefield. If the King lacked the wisdom to take the same precaution, so much the better.

They made their way down the Royal Road, determined to meet the demons as far from the city walls as possible. As they passed

through the drought-ruined farms, gaunt citizens stood by the road and begged.

The King waved cheerily to his subjects. They did not wave back.

"You know, you haven't asked me to make it rain in a while."

"No, Your Majesty."

"Well, the answer is still no. My powers are waning, too, and I don't think the kingdom will miss its less productive citizens. Survival of the fittest, right? Didn't you have a friend who used to say that? Back in another Universe?"

The Wizard didn't respond. He looked at the hard, tired faces of the hungry.

The King continued waving cheerfully. "These people would suck me dry if they could."

The King and the Wizard stood in the road with their army behind them. As the demons approached, the Wizard could see there were not many of them. Five, to be exact.

"See, so few. Are you sure you don't want to just kill them?"

Kleo had confirmed this morning that the monsters had the propensity to explode into a cloud of dust unbidden. Many must have been ignited recently: the air was thick with their spores. The army wore face coverings and, if the Wizard's plan worked, he would be able to remove any disease or enchantment from the dust quickly. If he failed, they might all die. He wondered if his plan was stupid. Had his intelligence faded, too, along with his eyesight and everything else?

The monster that held the sword resembled a teenage boy, though his eyes were yellow and his skin was striped with wood mushrooms.

"Darling..." The dappled boy spoke with Ayunsil's voice.

As Ayunsil approached, she stumbled. She did not make linear progress, but tripped over her feet. She went forward, then back again. The Wizard, who had begun refining energy flows in earnest, placed his hand on Ekrim's shoulder. The charged metal in his ring

sapped a bit of energy from the King and former god: not enough for him to miss, just enough to enhance the Wizard's own sight.

The Wizard used a telepathic casting and was surprised to find that the Boulder had gotten something wrong. There was not one mind at work here, but two. Ayunsil was at war with something, likely the original inhabitant of the body. So Ayunsil was weaker, too. He'd thought the position of her ruling planet might give her an advantage, but that calculation was based on his guess at the speed of the realm's velocity out of the solar system. He had guessed wrong. She was dying, too. They all were.

The Wizard squeezed the King's shoulder again. Too hard this time. Ekrim felt a buzz and pulled away.

"Hey, what was that?" The Wizard pointed his staff at the shambling figure that held the sword. The distraction worked. The Wizard used the stolen power to try to talk to the trapped consciousness.

<Are you there? Please kill the King, if so.>

<Beware, beware.>

<Not you, Ayunsil. I know I can count on you to kill Ekrim. This time he'll really die, too. Won't that be fun? No, I'm talking to the boy. Young man, let the voice inside you kill the King. Stop fighting her. I promise I'll protect you.>

This had not been the plan; the Wizard was glad he could still think on his feet. This striped boy, this young man, this hand that held the sword ... if he could survive all of this, he could be of some use to the kingdom.

<Come on.>

And at this last bit of coaxing, the monster sprinted forward, moving faster than Ekrim could react.

"Darling..." said Ekrim, right before he was stabbed with his father-in-law's sword.

The Wizard put his hand on the King's shoulder and drew away what power he could. Now sufficiently energized, the Wizard did

what Ekrim had been unwilling to do with his own powers: he made it rain.

4. The Vessel

Dying felt like drowning. Cayhun struggled to find the surface. After kicking and kicking, he eventually found the place where air met water. Despite never learning how to swim, he was treading water on a calm, dark sea. The ocean wasn't endless, after all. He could make out two shores, one on either side of him.

The village priest had, at times, said that the good life could be found on the far shore. But at other times, he had said the north shore. And anyway, who was to say he was even right? So Cayhun paddled in the direction of the nearer shore. He wanted out of the water.

As he got closer to the shore, the sky began to light up and fill with color. His feet touched something solid and he walked the rest of the way out of the water. With every step he took, the colors resolved themselves into shapes. The shapes coalesced into a familiar scene: the forest.

He watched vines shoot up from the ground and strangle the men who'd been chasing him. They fell to the floor, then, after lying still for a minute, stood up again, now released from the vines.

He tried to orient his vision in space and logic, but it took several minutes to arrive at the insight that he was looking out of what used to be his own eyes. He was no longer in charge of his body.

He heard a hum and a grunt that resolved into a chant. It came from his own throat: *Beware, beware*. Then a reply, coming from the throats of the other strangled men: *Beware, beware*.

At a certain point, as they marched out of the forest, the chant turned into: *Beware Ekrim, Beware Ekrim*. And then finally, eventually, just: *Ekrim, Ekrim*. Cayhun knew, without knowing how he

knew, that Ekrim was the King. The hand that used to be under Cayhun's control gripped the hilt of the King's Sword.

They marched toward the castle. They strangled those that got in their way and infected them with a spore. The army grew. Cayhun found that the only thing that could make the slightest difference was his concentration. If he thought really hard about being back in control, the demon that possessed him would stumble. Sometimes she tripped, but she always moved forward. He knew it was a she, just like he knew she would kill Ekrim.

Their progress toward the castle was not constant. Some days she would slow. He would feel a headache coming over her. Sometimes members of their army would explode for no reason. Cayhun realized that, through another trick of concentration, he could hasten these explosions.

By the time they faced the King's army, the band of demons was down to five and she could hardly hold Cayhun's body upright. A new dilemma presented itself: how to keep his body from being annihilated by the King's forces? The time for surrender had long passed. And anyway, he couldn't bring her to a halt, not yet. And he couldn't speak with his own voice to explain what was happening to him, not that anyone would listen.

And so, when a brand-new voice from nowhere spoke instructions directed specifically to him with clarity, he decided to oblige that voice, despite not knowing where it emanated from.

Kill the King? Come to think of it, what had the King ever done for him? He let go the faint grip he held on his body. When the sword pierced the King's chest, Cayhun felt a flow of energy fill his being. It came from the sword, which glowed white. It seemed like light was flowing from the King to him.

<Stay standing.> That same voice. He released his grip from the hilt, but the King somehow stayed upright. A hand gripped the King's shoulder; this hand belonged to the voice. <Stay standing.>

Next to the King was a tall, bearded man in mauve robes. His eyes were kind, his voice soothing.

Drops of liquid began to fall from the sky. Could it be rain? Lightning struck. Behind him lay five dead men, the same men who had first chased him into the forest.

Strong arms grabbed him and lifted him up. He recognized the man from somewhere. Was that the trader's apprentice?

The bearded man placed the King's crown on Cayhun's head. It weighed a thousand pounds. It took everything he had not to collapse under the weight of it.

People were cheering for him. Who were they? Where was he? Someone would explain it to him eventually, he hoped.

5. The King

“I only made it rain for three and a half minutes. I stole a bit of Ekrim’s power to put on a show.”

Cayhun opened his eyes and turned his head. The voice continued to explain: “I wanted to take the spores out of the air and cleanse the spores from any enchantment. But I don’t think there was much magic left in it. At any rate, the show worked. The people think the gods blessed your coronation. You’re King now.”

Cayhun sat up slowly. The room was large but also warm, lit by two fires, one at either end. There were brightly colored tapestries covering the walls, and furnishings made of dark wood, upholstered with embellished fabrics.

So it hadn’t been a dream. He had killed the King with the King’s own sword. A shudder went through his body as he remembered how the crowd had cheered for the death blow. How his hand had held the sword with unnatural strength. And then how the strength had faded when he let go.

That presence that had once taken him over ... where was she now?

“Is ... she gone?” Cayhun’s throat burned with thirst. The Wizard handed him water in a bejeweled chalice.

“I trapped her once more in that sword, only I put Ekrim in there as well. I think the lichenization was successful, attractive and repulsive forces balanced with the sturdiest forcefield I could manage. This should hold them until...” The Wizard gazed off into the distance and knit his eyebrows, as if he were performing a calculation.

“Until when?”

“Until the Realm of the Gods is sufficiently far away. And our powers fade for good.”

“I ... don’t...”

“It isn’t going to make sense now. I left notes for you to study when you get back.”

Cayhun was silent. Better than admitting he couldn’t read. Letting the demon kill her prey had been one test, and he had passed. But he understood that he now faced another. He didn’t want to say the wrong thing and be sent home because of it.

The Wizard reached into his satchel and pulled out a piece of wood. He handed it to Cayhun. “What is this?”

“A crosscut of a tree.”

“Correct. This is a plains willow. See these darker rings, and how they occur at regular intervals? Those are flood years. Looking at this, when do you suppose the next flood might be?”

“It depends on when this was cut.”

“Very good. It was cut three years ago.”

“So the flood should have happened already.”

“Exactly. We’re due.” The Wizard walked to a heavy set of drapes. He pulled them back to reveal a window taller than Cayhun. Outside, the sky was blue and cloudless. No sign of the showers that had marked the old King’s death.

“And there is evidence that mass sporing events can trigger precipitation. Every time one of her minions exploded, it released a cloud of stuff into the air.”

Cayhun struggled to remember through the haze of demonic possession. Her army had grown large until, suddenly, she had become weak. Overextended, perhaps. Then her soldiers had begun to combust. Yes, there had been quite a lot of spores in the air at one point.

“What can you conclude?”

Cayhun studied the Wizard’s lined and bearded face, searching for signs of the answer the old man wanted.

“A terrible rain is coming.”

“Yes, I think so. You must convince the corps to shore up the levees and reservoirs. The dams are in disrepair. Ekrim could not interest himself in infrastructure, not even for a week. But if you wear the crown and tell them what to do, that might be enough to avert disaster.”

“But you have ... magic. Can’t you do all of this faster?”

The Wizard shook his head. He waved his hands. “It’s fading. I’m fading.”

So Cayhun got dressed in purple robes and spent a week traveling to various sites, shouting memorized speeches. It felt like pretend. He was pretending to be King. But the important thing was that they listened, and work began right away, despite the cloudless skies.

It didn’t start raining until he had departed for the sea. On a map of the ocean, the Wizard had marked the location of a special trench. Cayhun was to go to there and supervise while a royal diver swam down as far as possible and dropped the sword down. In addition to an invisible forcefield, which the Wizard said trapped Ekrim and Ayunsil, the sword was wrapped in a dozen layers of eel-leather. This was supposed to prevent “conduction,” a word the Wizard used so often that the opportunity had long passed for Cayhun to ask him what it meant.

The Wizard remained behind at the castle. He said he needed to make notes for Cayhun.

“Just tell me when I get back.”

“No, it needs to be written down.”

And maybe it did. The Wizard became more forgetful with each day that passed.

They had meant to get out to sea before the worst of the deluge, but there had been a delay at a reservoir, and after a couple of days of rough sailing, the captain refused to go out any farther. The diver also refused to dive, citing such risks as lighting strikes, riptides, and storm sharks. The latter sounded made up to Cayhun, but he didn’t

seem to have the same authority on sea as he did on land. Without the Wizard's presence, they seemed to know he was not fully King.

So Cayhun dropped the sword into the sea himself and declared the mission a success. Sometimes you can only do your best and nothing more.

He was eager to return to the castle. For as long as he could remember, he had had this feeling of waiting for his real life to begin. And now here it was.

He hadn't spent much time with the Wizard, but the old man was wise and kind. He was the kind of person you could have a long conversation with. He never mocked Cayhun for his curiosity or for his ignorance. Cayhun had eventually admitted his illiteracy and The Wizard said that he would teach him to read as soon as he got back from sea. Cayhun was excited to enter the realm of letters. It was time. So they headed back.

The journey from the castle to the dock and back, plus two days at sea, totaled fourteen days away. By the time Cayhun returned to the castle, the Wizard was dead.

6. The Tutor

The tutor has decided to hold the first reading lesson in the Royal Library. They began with the last letter.

The tutor unfolded the chitin-pulp paper and showed Cayhun which direction was right side up. The letters were messily scrawled out in a tint derived from the ink cap mushroom, prized for the brilliant indigo hue it could produce. The tutor sat next to the boy and moved his finger over each word as he read aloud.

Your Majesty,

I'm sorry I am dead. I held out for as long as I could, but even my stolen power faded faster than I thought it might. There's a saying in the kingdom: Sometimes you can only do your best and nothing more. I always found that sentiment stupid, yet here I am.

Our life forces, I mean Ekrim's, Ayunsil's's and mine, are all determined by our planets. The celestial model in the throne room may help you understand. Ayunsil has comets, too, a gift from her father, the Origin. That means she will live the longest.

The story of what brought us here is not that interesting, and my time is short besides. I've been to many planets in many Universes, but this is the best one I've found, and if you pay attention, I think you might understand why. One day, when you're older, etc.

I've left other notes for you to study. Just stuff I picked up other places. But the most urgent thing I have to tell you is this: there is no afterlife. None. Once Ayunsil and Ekrim die, there will be no more gods here. And no more magic, either. Only logic, only reason, only fairness, only decency. That's all. Please make the most of it.

Yours,

The Wizard

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“There is plenty that’s mysterious here. I’ve read it a hundred times and I still can’t figure out what a ‘Universe’ is. But perhaps once you learn your letters, you can add some clarity to this message.”

“Can we read the other notes?”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty. There are no other notes. I know he meant to write them, but he died quite suddenly.”

7. The Coral

Before we could embark on our revenge, we had to knit a forest out of bone and algae. Our first subjects were the mouths and tentacles that we taught to sing:

Beware, beware.

We were running out of time. All we had was sunlight and water and what remained of our powers. What could we do but reach up, regardless, and hope to become tall enough to pierce the surface and sharp enough to stab a man? It matters not what the weapon is made of, but how far it can reach.

8. The Diver

Once a month, the moon was bright enough for night diving. The night dives were Hanka's secret, a way to collect treasures that she was under no obligation to share.

During the day, she hunted with her kin for coral mushrooms. She would swim down to depth, knife in one hand, and carve away the fruiting bodies that grew from stalks that sprouted from the base of the reef. She put as many as she could in her bag, then she surfaced. She emptied the bag into the boat, then she started all over. Again and again until the sun went down. Every day was the same for all the women in the village. Rest was only allowed if you were pregnant or old.

There was a thick reef farther out. Hanka, the youngest of the divers, was the only one small enough to squeeze herself through the branches of this reef. This reef was not like the others they harvested. It was bloodred and shaped like a pile of deer antlers.

She got cut every time she went down, and it was worse at night. During the day she harvested the reef's mushrooms, leaving the pearl oysters that dotted the reef untouched. She came back for those when the moon was full, cutting them open and burying their pearls in a nearby sea cave.

It was as if the reef meant to eat her. Each month she could hold her breath longer and so she went deeper in. She thought she could hear it humming through the currents: *Beware, beware*. Why did the warning draw her deeper in? Maybe the reef was sorry for all the times it had cut her. The dark red slashes it left on her skin stung for days. They hurt worse than normal reef cuts, but they didn't look any

different, so they didn't give away her secret. All the women in the village were marked by the reef, bodies covered in shallow scars.

One night, she glimpsed a sword, somehow untarnished by the water. She grabbed the jeweled hilt and felt the barest hint of a shock. She knew at once it was her last dive. She was almost too large to swim in this reef, and she would never find anything more valuable than this.

The boys in her village told stories. They said whoever found the King's lost sword would be the next King. She wondered if a girl could become King. Normally, a ridiculous thought. But there was something speaking to her. That voice that used to say *Beware* now said Yes.

She went first to the cave, to unbury her pearls. Then to the next village, to trade one pearl for a pair of shoes and a coin. She walked the Sea Road to the capital, even though it took longer. She liked having the water where she could see it.

She hoped the boys' stories were true. They were so much better than the girls' stories, where sea maidens traded their fins and voices for legs and engagement rings. The boys also told tales about the capital, but none of them had been there. Some of the things they said turned out to be true. There were giant aqueducts and they did cast large shadows. Fresh, sweet water did flow from pipes into homes and public fountains. Anyone could drink as much as they liked.

It was not true that the streets were paved with pearls, but they were paved with smooth stones in intricate patterns that Hanka found beautiful. She tried not to look at the ground too much, as her gawking would give her away as an outsider. The wheels of carts made twin ruts across the elaborately tiled streets. The astonishing thing was, the carts were pulled by horses made entirely of springs and gears.

The castle loomed large in the center of it all. She had the sword in her pack, wrapped in three layers of dried broad-leaf kelp. She unwrapped the sword to show it to a castle guard, who showed it to

another guard, who brought her to the first of a series of waiting rooms. As the sun marched across the sky, each subsequent room grew larger and more lavishly appointed, until at last, the sun dipped below the horizon and she was brought to the throne room, to meet the King.

9. The Sword

Cayhun gasped when the girl was brought in. Elnara.

But no, it was a trick of both the light and his failing memory. The girl before him was too old, twelve or thirteen. And Elnara had been dead for seventy years. Or more.

He put his fingertips to the center of his forehead and tried to summon all his concentration. He looked up at the girl. She was skinny and dark from the sun. Her arms were muscular and her thick hair was tied back in a bun.

“Where are you from?”

She shook her head, as if to dismiss his attempt at small talk. He smiled in admiration at her defiance. Elnara had been the same way. Sweet at times but stubborn at others, sometimes exceedingly so. He couldn’t laugh out loud, though he wanted to; she might interpret it as derision. He had nothing but respect for a person who could carry a sword almost as tall as she was. Even from this distance, from his throne to the petitioner’s podium, he could tell it was the same blade he had carried long ago.

She rested its tip on the ground, gouging a particularly delicate mosaic tile. Never mind, he would have someone fix it later. She rested her bare hand on the hilt.

“Am I King now?” she asked.

His adviser Etal began to laugh. He stopped once Cayhun glared at him.

The girl’s sandals were nearly worn through and her feet were covered in blisters. Cayhun looked up at the celestial model that hung from the ceiling. Gears moved the planets. The royal astronomers worked with craftsmen to add comets when they were

spotted, because the Wizard had written that a comet could increase Ayunsil's power. These comets had been a parting gift from her father.

There were no comets at the moment; the model was up to date. But Cayhun knew there was much invisible to the eye and that even as his engineers built better lenses, much happened that escaped their detection.

"Tell me your name." He used his special King voice. It seemed to induce people to talk, even if they were disinclined.

"Hanka."

"Hanka, there is a legend about the lost sword. But you must understand that it is a story and not a law. I am the last king of this kingdom."

In the Royal Library, there were books from other Universes on how to transition to a republic. A new government was scheduled to take effect next year. The first elections would be soon.

Cayhun had never married, never had children. He knew that if he had a daughter, she would look like Elnara, she would look like Hanka, and he would want to give her everything, crown and kingdom included. Then there would be no republic, at least not in his lifetime. Besides, the wonders in the library had kept him too busy to pursue any relationships. He wanted his subjects to have the best of all worlds. And every day he endeavored to make something from another Universe come alive in this one.

"The sword is mine and I'm grateful you brought it back." He stood and placed a falconer's glove on his right hand. The gloved hand removed a heavy gold ring from his bare hand. "This is a token of appreciation. For you. In gratitude for the long journey you have made." He stood up and walked the ring over himself. His hip was feeling good today.

She took the ring and weighed it in her palm, as if trying to decide if this was a fair trade or not. Reluctantly, she handed over the sword.

He lifted it to examine it and saw his glove was not necessary. No light, no buzz, no humming, no signs of life at all. He had been reading the library books on spiritual currents and could sense that the energy in the sword had been spent. Perhaps the girl had absorbed what was left of the sword's energy and used it to find the strength to come here.

He looked at the girl's face, searching for any sign of Ayunsil. He could detect none. "Hanka, right? That's your name?" he asked, just to be sure.

Hanka nodded.

Cayhun's chest felt hollow. Strange as it was to say, he had hoped to encounter Ayunsil one last time before he crossed the Endless Ocean. He had so many questions for her. But the one that loomed largest was: Why him? Had he been chosen? When she called out from the forest, had she been calling for him?

Probably not, but still he hoped. He removed another ring from his hand. This one had a diamond in it. Thank goodness for the Wizard's notes on alchemy; they kept the kingdom rich.

"This is for you, as well, if you'll tell me how you got here."

She began by describing the roads. Her sentences were short, hesitant, as if she were unaccustomed to speaking more than a few words at a time. If there was any voice that called out to her from the wilderness, that beckoned her while saying *Beware*, she didn't mention it. That didn't mean it didn't happen. Cayhun never talked about what had happened to him in the forest, either.

The Wizard had only left one letter addressed to specifically to Cayhun. But he had left general notes hidden in many of his books. These were notes to a future king. Apparently, the Wizard had been plotting to depose Ekrim for a while and replace him with a wise human whom he, the Wizard, could guide. Cayhun had not been chosen specifically for this task, either, as far as he could tell. He had merely come along at a convenient time.

But if Cayhun hadn't deserved the role given to him, he had tried to retroactively earn it. He had tried to be a just and kind ruler. He

had used to resources of the kingdom to uncover the things the eye couldn't see and to understand how everything was connected. The royal banner was decorated with golden threads representing mycelia, a pattern that resembled the worn etchings on the hilt of the sword he now held. The mycelia brought distinct and different individuals together. It allowed organisms to communicate, to mutual benefit.

From the notes left behind, he had gathered that Ayunsil had been a nightmare as Queen. She spent lavishly on herself and murdered advisers who brought bad news. This had made it urgent, from the Wizard's perspective, that she be contained first. Ekrim ruled with a similar disdain for his subjects, only he murdered fewer advisers.

As much as he had looked, Cayhun could find no record of what brought the three former gods to this kingdom in the first place. Perhaps he was missing something. It had taken him years to learn how to read, and even now it was an ongoing process. Some books were written in unusual versions of his own language; some were written in translatable versions of other languages. Others were written in completely esoteric scripts. He had royal translators who devoted their lives to prying meaning from the page. Their work would continue long after he died. It might continue to the end of time itself.

"Can you read?" he asked Hanka.

She shook her head no.

He turned to his adviser. "Etal, you aren't building schools fast enough."

Etal nodded and scribbled a note, which he passed along to someone.

Every day, Cayhun had doubts about the transition to a republic. He worried that the people, if left to their own devices, would not build enough schools or wouldn't build them fast enough. That they would not investigate the unseen with enough vigor. Perhaps the transition could be put off, but what if he were to die suddenly? Etal

or one of his other councilmembers might be tempted to wear the crown after Cayhun, might be tempted to cancel plans for the republic entirely.

"Hanka, we have schools in the capital. You could attend one instead of returning home."

"I'm not going home." As Hanka glanced at both rings in her palm, she seemed to perform a calculation. She looked up at him and asked: "How much does school cost?"

"It is free."

"Is the school ... near the water?" Cayhun glanced at Etal, who answered. "She can go to Allotropa. It's next to the reservoir."

"The reservoir is fresh water. It protects us from both drought and flood," said Cayhun. "I'm guessing you prefer the ocean. But it's very large; you can't see one shore from the other."

"I want to see it first, before I say yes or no."

"Yes, that's a reasonable condition."

"And if I decide to go, can I leave whenever I want?"

Cayhun smiled broadly. What an excellent question. Elnara would have been just like this. Sometimes, even in his old age, he dreamt she was still alive. That she was still in the village, and he had forgotten about her. In his dreams, he would rush over to rescue her. He never made it; the illogic of the timeline always woke him before he could find her.

Had she lived, and without any royal intervention, Elnara would have spent her life as a servant. First to their father, then to her husband. Or perhaps as a slave in the neighboring village.

What if Hanka could learn to read, as he did? What if she could learn to rule, as he did? The tiniest fragment of Ayunsil was alive in him. He could feel her when he searched the Royal Library for writing on the Realm of the Gods. So far, he could find nothing about it, though there were many serious texts about completely made-up religions. He knew Ayunsil's father had been called the Origin; the Wizard had mentioned something about this, and that her father had

given her many gifts. But had her father taken her seriously? Had anybody?

Cayhun looked once more at Hanka. If Ayunsil was still alive in him, maybe she was alive in the girl as well. He appointed Hanka a guardian. She would be taken care of, no matter what.

Later that evening, he took the sword to the Royal Mycorium, where he kept his most beautiful and prized specimens. Under a tapestry that depicted the royal banner, there was a mounted rack that held the Wizard's old walking stick. People referred to it a staff or wand, even though it held no more magic than the Origin's spent sword.

Cayhun replaced the walking stick with the sword. The jewel in the hilt was dull, and the gold threads representing the mycelium hardly sparkled. He had never gotten a good look at the thing before. Now mounted, he could see that etched into the blade was a standing figure, possibly the Origin himself. He wore a wide-brimmed cap that had gills on the underside.

"God was a mushroom." Cayhun was speaking to the Wizard, who still lived as a voice in his head. Sometimes that voice gave him advice.

Bury her once more, the Wizard's voice said.

This voice wasn't always correct.

If the right comet entered the sky at the right time, the jewel in this hilt might glow again. The part of him that knew Ayunsil knew it was better to keep her close, and in a place of honor. If her power returned, there'd be no silencing her. Better to keep her safe, under the royal banner, under the royal motto, which consisted of words the Wizard had wrote Cayhun long ago: LOGIC, REASON, FAIRNESS, DECENCY.

If she came back, she might look up. She might read these words and understand that they applied to her as well. And then she might decide to put her grudge to rest and use her powers to bless them all.

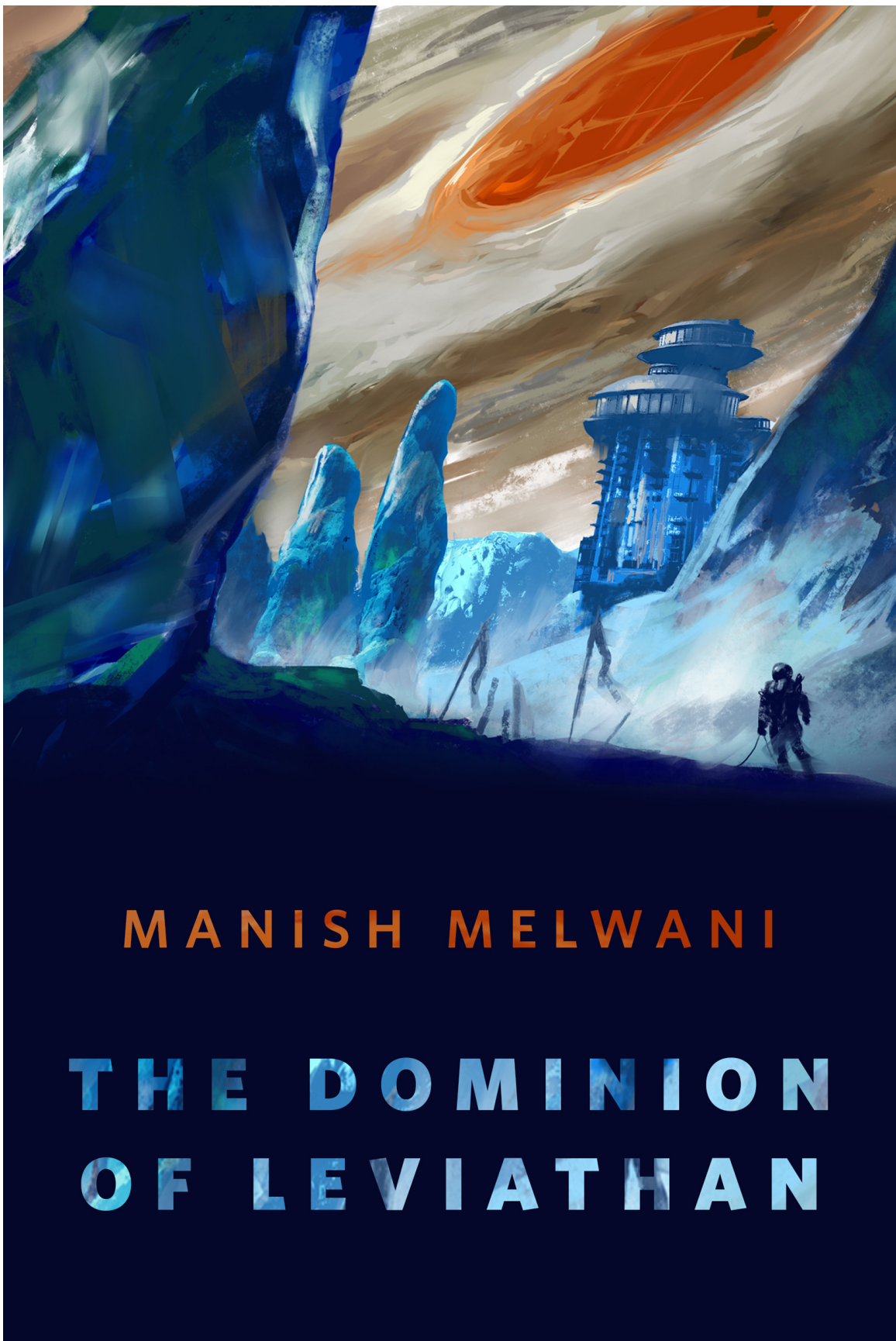
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The writer would like to acknowledge Stephen Dunn's 'Revolt of the Turtles' for the inspiration this poem has provided.



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MANISH MELWANI

THE DOMINION
OF LEVIATHAN

The Dominion of Leviathan

MANISH MELWANI

illustration by

GREGORY MANCHESSE

T O R
D O T
C O M

*An account of the worlds
that comprise the realm of our Great God, Leviathan;
composed upon void-vellum, under patronage of Leviathan's Steward, Ajax*

*Ajax! Greatest among Ascendants! Ajax! Formidable Lord of Europa!
Ajax! Magnanimous Regent of Callisto and Ganymede!
—to commemorate the one thousandth anniversary
of his Ascent beyond humanity.*

The Festival City on Mercury was built a century ago, to mark the nine hundredth anniversary of Lord Ajax's Ascendance. Our august Lord opened the festivities by piloting a gravity-dhow from Leviathan's holy orbit into the solar system's core. His trajectory was perfect: noble Ajax struck Mercury's night side like a meteor. Leviathan's banner gripped in one mighty hand, he climbed the Festival City's hundred-stepped ziggurat to await the dawn.

Sunrise moves slow on that small, rocky world, but when it finally comes, it is blistering: white-hot and holy. For centuries, Ascendants have made pilgrimage to witness it. And until Lord Ajax's celebration one hundred years ago, it was customary for the most ancient and honored of our Lesser Cousins to accompany them.

These humans—Earth's anointed rulers!—considered sunrise on Mercury to be a sacred way to die. A way, perhaps, to Ascend in their final moments. For although an Ascendant can easily survive Mercurial daylight, an unaltered human cannot. This close to the sun, eyes cook in sockets; flesh bakes and blood boils beneath void-armor; screams rise and cease—a prayer-chime by which we Ascendants, humanity's Greater Cousins, may contemplate the sacred mysteries of Leviathan's Domain.

But to celebrate Lord Ajax's nine hundredth year as semi-deus, humans of a different sort were brought to Mercury as well.

Not nobles, no. These were mere rabble, plucked by Indra from Earth's crowded streets. None of these humans had been offworld before. None had even seen a space elevator, except perhaps as distant threads sewing the horizon.

Clad only in void-armor, they were cast upon Mercury's surface minutes ahead of the implacable dawn. Ten miles between them and the Festival City; sunrise hot on their heels. The humans scrambled across rocks and craters, clumsily leaping and falling in unfamiliar gravity. Those who stumbled—who fell to frost, fatigue, or simple fear—were incinerated by the sun.

A fine sport, indeed, to commemorate our Lord.

It is well-known, of course, that one human was able to reach the Festival City, moments before daybreak. She crossed its threshold as the searing sun crested the horizon and the City's pennants burst into brilliant flame. She struggled up the ziggurat's one hundred steps, each taller and more arduous than the last; she struggled until finally, as the assembled crowd watched in disbelief, she pulled herself onto the dais, snatched the banner of Leviathan Itself from its place beside the throne, and attempted to murder Lord Ajax with it.

None had ever seen anything like this. Not the assembled Ascendants, nor the loyal rulers of Earth, gawking in the brief, final moment before their sun-boiled deaths. For his part, Lord Ajax would praise the attempt on his life as the highlight of his nonacentennial.

The games continued in grand fashion for the better part of a Mercurial morning. Afterwards, the Festival City was abandoned. It still stands: a broken ring open to the dawn, unused now for nearly a century. Its cruel architectural beauty, fashioned after ancient gladiatorial arenas, is well-known. Well-known, too, are the ingenious designs of the City's banners and pennants, which gleam starry silver through long Mercurial nights and sublimates with each glorious sunrise, casting Leviathan's storm-sigil upon the rock in flowing light and shadow.

And as for the human who tried to kill Lord Ajax; what happened to her is equally well-known.

*The humble scribe who pens this account on void-vellum
dares not stand before Ajax's immense strength;
nor the majesty of Holy Leviathan.
And so she must make do
with Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars;
the distant orbit of Leviathan's moons, and
the historian's refuge: her poor, pitiful half-world—Ceres.*

★ ★ ★

Venus is a world of cruel irony. Our predecessors named this planet for a deity of love, but for our siblings, condemned for their crimes, it is a place of penance: of endless, labored steps under a sulfuric sky. And yet, some say there is still love here. They say that Venus is proof of the boundless depths of Leviathan's heart; and of the great affection Lord Ajax shows his vassals—even those who have turned against him.

On Venus, even the vilest profaners may find redemption. It is not easy—Venus is a world of labyrinthine canyons; of brutal atmospheric pressures; of unceasing mirages made by light's passage through dense air. A place where Ascendant bodies are pushed past breaking point so that Ascendant minds may contemplate betrayal, forgiveness, redemption.

There are dozens of them imprisoned on Venus. Traitors, oath-breakers, conspirators.

Ninurta, who once commanded legions in Ajax's stead.

Bellerophon and Mafdet, who brokered the peace of Phobos.

Raijin, thunder-slaker, who fought beside Ajax on Mars and betrayed him on Ganymede.

And Ishtara—once-beloved of Ajax; once his closest confidante. Now, she is the Lady of Venus. As a token of his love, unbroken despite his broken hearts, Ajax built her a monastery-keep atop

Venus's highest peak. She resides there now, watching her comrades through ten thousand satellite-eyes.

They deserved death, but instead merciful Lord Ajax gave them an entire world. The betrayers wander ceaselessly, through valleys and across vast continental highlands. They seek out pillars of tenebrous matter marked with Leviathan's storm-eye sign—caches of rations and equipment that Ajax, in his endless magnanimity, showers upon them from orbit. They hear ghostly voices and footsteps echoing through the superheated chasms and canyons. But though they call out, though they search and plead and weep, they will never find each other.

One by one, the traitors turn to the mountains, seeking out Ishtara. But those peaks are craggy and treacherous; wreathed in poison that can corrode even an Ascendant's carapace.

Imagine now, one of our Ascendant siblings on Venus. Raijin, perhaps. Or Kasandra: she whose many inventions still course through our nanite-rich blood. Imagine them weakened by long imprisonment, struggling up the mountainside, so exhausted they've even forgotten their names; their crimes; Leviathan's holy face. Imagine them stumbling; falling to their knees. Imagine acid rain beginning to eat through their exoskeletal armor, exposing flesh, devouring organs; reducing a demigod to nothing but bones, slowly dissolving on the mountainside.

The peaks and passes of Venus are littered with bodies, disintegrating beneath the cover of toxic clouds. None of them have found what they are searching for. Some say that this is not torture. That Venus is not a prison, but a place of atonement; of harsh mercy. That all those who repent will return in time to Leviathan's holy orbit.

But so far, not one has escaped Venus's crushing embrace.

Is this lowly scribe worthy of the tale she tells?

Should this humble historian speak in her own voice,

or instead bear nameless witness to history's grand passage?

Yet—
before Holy Leviathan was named, It shaped this system:
transforming life on Earth, stripping Mars of magnetosphere;
forever altering this cold, quiet world—
—Ceres.

★ ★ ★

Earth, our ancestral home, is a world of beauty and horror. Entering its orbit, one feels the weight of mythology, of inheritance; of an ancient origin. The lights of Earth's cities gleam like constellations on nightside, giving way to expanses of endless ocean, lush forest, and sprawling plains. The landscape welcomes you as the space elevator descends. You feel its ancestral gravity deep in your organs and bones: this is home. Earth has always been home.

But though the Homeworld's wild places are magnificent—its snowcapped peaks and vast jungles teeming with life—its cities are filthy and dilapidated: a chain of senescent slums.

Our Lesser Cousins lord pompously over this contradiction. They welcome us with lavish feasts and organize grand expeditions to the summits of Nanga Parbat, Baintha Brakk, and Denali. They pantomime leadership, even as they preside over insurrection, infighting, and decay.

If you have been hosted by the rulers of Earth, then you have seen them bow and scrape, clad in cast-off trinkets and pathetic imitations of our fashions. They curry favor by offering us their children as attendants and begging Lord Ajax to allow them to attempt the Trials. They think themselves masters, safe in their spires and palanquins. But they are no different from their forebears—the merchant-princes who nearly extinguished life on this world fifteen hundred years ago; the fools who fled to Mars after plundering the Earth and filling its atmosphere with poison.

The rulers of Earth are cowards, content with their own comfort amidst so much suffering. They neither remember history nor

glimpse its pattern. But / have studied histories both human and Ascendant, and / remember—

—the Accord of Ulaanbaatar, the Kinshasan Revolts, and the establishment and imposition of Pax Leviathan upon this world

—cycles of violence; purges, inquests, and executions that stain history's pages, only to be scrubbed and forgotten

—seditious songs passed down through generations, sung gleefully in slums and shantytowns that sprawl in the shadows of mighty towers

—graffito'd slogans glimpsed momentarily while fleeing down cramped alleyways

—the sound of barefoot children playing; the looming violence of teenagers hunting for scraps

—an old man stirring an iron pot; the rich smell of clonemeat stew

—strange silver plants that sanctify fouled water but kill those who dare touch their leaves or eat their fruit

—soldiers, always soldiers: patrols, garrisons, legions of them, toting weapons that reduce the human body to slurry or cinders; wearing blast armor forged on Mars and adorned with Leviathan's raging storm-eye sigil

—children shot, tortured, disintegrated for stealing food or for cobbling together communications devices from stolen parts

—the skulls of grieving parents cracked open with rifle butts.

Yes, I remember Earth. And I remember my first time offworld: the sunrise made vast and glorious by a space elevator's ascent.

I remember my return, and the strange, giddy days following *my* Ascent beyond humanity: feasts and festivals; celebrations and sycophants; my transformed face adorning the walls of the city where I was born.

And I remember what it all amounted to—nothing. Nothing at all.

Soon, there shall be another great celebration on Earth; a celebration to honor our beloved, benevolent Lord Ajax. Even now, workers toil to raise a new Festival City from mountain and steppes. But before you travel there, I pray you tarry a while. I pray you visit

the Homeworld's other cities, the ones that have no festive cause. Wander the crowded streets and see the people who live their lives in the shadows of those towers. Visit an Earthbound shrine to Holy Leviathan, and honor our god by meditating upon the great mechanism that yokes us all.

There is an intimate gravity between hardship and exultance that spans millions and millions of miles. The corrupt, crumbling metropolises of Earth are twins to our own jeweled cities, so far away, cradled in our Great God's holy orbit.

I pray that you reflect upon this.

I pray you understand my meaning.

*Home is a set of scars
etched in vellum and carapace.
All poets eventually turn homeward,
but where now is this poet's home?
Earth or Mars; Callisto or Ganymede; Cold Europa;
or this silent, icy half-world—
—Ceres.*

★ ★ ★

Mars is a world of ghosts and machines. But it wasn't always so. Four billion years ago, before its magnetosphere evaporated, Mars's oceans and rivers teemed with ancient, ancestral life. And again, when Earth's rulers settled this place, luring their subjects with glittering promises to lives of toil and radiation sickness.

The dusty landscape is strewn with the ruins of that era—from the dead cities of Tharsis to the great shipyards of Olympus Mons, where the bones of ships that yearned after godhood slowly wither in crimson wind.

In their infinite arrogance, the merchant-princes and potentates of Mars made machine-minds to steer their starships. The ship-minds grew far more intelligent than those of their makers. In time, the ships came to rule Mars from their cradles. They strip-mined the

Martian moons and transformed the Valles Marineris into a vast foundry visible from orbit: a silver slash in the planet's rust-red face.

The scattered descendants of Mars still tell stories from this time. Tales of tyrant ships that walked abroad in human bodies; of dust storms that spoke in the voices of gods and made cruel demands of their subjects. And a favorite tale, now become legend—of a child, born in Tharsis's packed shanties, who left for Jupiter's moons and returned transformed: a demigod at the head of an army.

Ajax won his war against the ships, but at a price. Mars was left desolate, its cities emptied of life; the survivors relocated to Earth and Callisto. The once-fearsome Martian ship-minds were sundered, their starfaring bodies broken, ribcage-vaults slowly eroding on the slopes of the great shield volcano.

Now, once in every long, slow orbit of Saturn around the sun, Lord Ajax returns to this lonely place, his childhood home, to walk amongst the hollow remnants of his vanquished foes. Unarmed and unarmored, naked but for his carapace, he summits the solar system's highest peak, wandering the whisper-haunted shipyards, listening to the slow unspooling of fierce intelligences that once ruled this world.

I wonder what they speak of, there on the very edge of space. Those vast minds knew so much, made as they were to explore long stretches of night beyond the Oort Cloud; to plot a course to the hungry maw at our galaxy's heart—and beyond. Like us, the ships sought godhood. They would have ended humanity and strangled Leviathan stillborn. And so they had to be defeated, dismantled, and destroyed.

I often think of our Lord Ajax, sojourning alone on Mars. I think of the Red Planet's vast spaces, silent except for the ceaseless humming of great manufactories that still run by rote, transforming bits of Mars and the scraps of its moons into blast-armor and armaments, the filigree sails of gravity-dhows, and other wonders born from Leviathan's god-mind.

I think that Lord Ajax must be exceedingly lonely. For who in all of Leviathan's domain is like him? Who can he confide in? Of those who lived through the war with the ships, only Utamo remains—and Utamo is like nothing else in existence.

The rest—Ishtara, Raijin, Mafdet and the others—are traitors, imprisoned on Venus. And we younger Ascendants, we who've completed his gauntlet of Trials? None of us were there. None fought on Mars. None saw what he saw.

We only have the stories he tells us.

And so, Lord Ajax stands alone on Olympus Mons, considering the endless horizon, listening to ghosts; listening to the whisper of dust-motes on a scouring red wind. To understand Mars is to understand the past, and our mighty Lord Ajax understands this well.

*Lo, my unworthy words orbit worthy Ajax—
as Luna orbits Earth; as Phobos and Deimos once orbited Mars;
as seventy-nine moons; seventeen cities; nine-hundred ninety-nine
Ascendants
orbit that hallowed, sacred planetary divinity—
Leviathan Itself!*

*Unworthy, I record. I compose. I orbit
history's grand shapers, forever at a remove,
much like this place: my lonely, moonless half-world—*

★ ★ ★

[[///—Ceres is my home now. Ceres is my home now. Ceres is my home now.///]]

It has been my home for many years. An exile, of sorts. This cold world that is not quite a world houses a great library beneath ice and moonrock, built by Ishtara and Kasandra, now claimed—as all things are—by supercilious, self-aggrandizing Ajax.

To be Librarian of Ceres is to be unimportant—it is to be more committed to recounting the great deeds of others than in

undertaking such deeds oneself. A self-imposed humiliation.

So says haughty, hubristic Ajax and all his sycophants.

But I have had enough of slavish hagiographies and obsequious poetic forms; enough of bullies and bootlickers to last ten thousand lifetimes. I am still young, for an Ascendant, but I have already lived far, far longer than can be expected for a child of Earth's vicious cities. And I have *never* forgotten where I came from, even though so much has been sanitized from these archives. There are patterns that cannot be erased, absences that hold their own truths, gaps in the lives historians so often overlook that I can fill with my own memories.

Listen: I first killed a man when I was thirteen years old. I did not want to, or mean to, but I had no choice. It haunted me, until I Ascended and left most human emotions behind. Even after that, I never forgot. And now that I can see the pattern, glimpse the shape of the great yoke, it haunts me again.

Listen: if you have deciphered this section of vellum, then you already know what must be done. And if you have decoded it and are not one of us ... well. Things are underway, and by the time you read this, they will be further underway. By now, Ajax and his creatures will have read to the end of my seditious account and crumpled their vellums in fury. Likely, they will have taken me into custody; ferried me to Earth to be tried, tortured, and executed at the Festival City.

No doubt it will be the highlight of lordly Ajax's millennial celebration.

But I have a gift for him, far greater than this account that I, Promethea, Librarian of Ceres, am obliged to compose. Together we will deliver this gift and finish what I—thoughtlessly, instinctively—tried to do one hundred years ago.

Our Lesser Cousins will never act against him, for they are cowed and self-serving. But perhaps their children will. As, perhaps, will the rest of Earth's population, who have been discounted, disregarded, and brutalized for so long. This would not be the first time they have

risen up, though Ajax would have you forget that. They are not inert matter. They are *people*.

Perhaps the flame we spark will catch. Perhaps my name is even more appropriate than Lord Ajax thought when he sneeringly bestowed it upon me.

Here on lonely Ceres, surrounded by nothing but void and frozen water for eighty million miles, I dream of cleansing fire; of a system where not just a handful may bask in the beauty of Saturn's rings, or see Callisto's glorious, gleaming dawn. A system where the gifts that Ajax and Utamo stole from their makers are shared with all, not just with those who dance to the tyrant's hollow tune.

Listen: reverse the cypher and apply it to the vellum's underside. You will find detailed instructions. Maps, blueprints, code names, and cache-locations. Study them carefully. When it is time to act, act swiftly. Be careful, but be courageous. Do not fear Leviathan, for It is not listening. *It never was*. Leviathan cares not for our plans or plots.

But you would be a fool not to fear Ajax.

Our cruel Lord's eyes and ears are everywhere. Trust no one, not even your own lover. Memorize this information, then destroy the cypher. When I am taken, a new one will appear, encoded into the obligatory propaganda-poems of Ajax's trials that dot this vellum's second half, for our mighty leader so craves sycophantic praise that he codified it into a poetic form.

Listen: remember why we do this. For those who cannot; for those who dare not; for those who have had that power stolen from them. For all that we have lost. For all that we still love. For all who live under Sol's shared light.

[[///Ceres is my home now. Ceres is my home now. Ceres is my home now—///]]

—and its millions of rocky, desolate fellows.

★ ★ ★

The space between Mars and Leviathan is vast and filled with wonder. Here in the silent depths, asteroids and dwarf planets dance to Leviathan's tune, as they have for four billion years. On Vesta, Pallas, and Hygiea, Utamo's disciples conduct their strange and secretive experiments. And here on Ceres, I maintain sagacious Lord Ajax's storied library, archiving human and Ascendant histories beneath ice and moonrock.

Eons ago, Ceres could have grown into a lush, oceanic world. But Holy Leviathan—still unnamed then; a mighty, slumbering deity—snatched precious matter from this region of space. It rendered Ceres tiny, misshapen and inert, even as It rained water upon Earth, giving rise to life.

All across Leviathan's domain, from Mercury to the Kuiper Belt, our Great God's touch is unmistakable and omnipresent. Its divine storm-mind is vast enough to swallow Earth. Its designs are unknowable to we who wander Its planets, moons, and void-ways. All we know is that Its divine intelligence will shepherd us through a thousand millennia to come; Lord Ajax ruling in Its name, a humble steward. All we can do is emulate our Lord's humility, and approach Leviathan's Holy orbit with heads bowed.

Worthier poets than I have written of the awe one feels approaching Leviathan's sacred planetary body; joining the seventy-nine moons in Its mighty magnetosphere, orbiting God just as God orbits the sun.

Most famous among Leviathan's moons are Callisto and Ganymede, where so many of us Ascendants dwell, along with those who aspire to our closely-guarded ranks. The Children of Leviathan—raised above humanity, but still Unascended—and the scions of Earth's noblest houses. Those chosen by Ajax to attempt the Ascension Trials will visit other moons, equally famous, but forbidden. Places known only by their legends.

Europa, Io, and Saturn's largest satellite, Titan: the worlds of the Trials.

Countless songs have been sung of the Trials. How Lord Ajax dived into Europa's ravenous depths; how he journeyed across volcano-ravaged Io; how he engaged in savage contemplation for forty days and forty nights in Titan's strange, cold caverns.

Lord Ajax completed these Trials, Ascending to semi-deus in sight of Holy Leviathan. The tales that spilled from Lord Ajax's beneficent lips have been told again and again, swelling to myth over the centuries. We lesser Ascendants undertook the Trials in turn, and the scribes and poets spread our stories across all Leviathan's Dominion. But it has been so long since an Ascendant has told their own Trial-tale; so long since we heard a song that was not from some bard or balladeer who never themselves witnessed the events.

Perhaps *that* shall be my offering for glorious Lord Ajax's millennial celebration. An unprecedented gift, for an unprecedented regnal anniversary. Alongside my obligatory recompositions of Lord Ajax's storied undertakings, I shall offer the firsthand account of my own Trials. The tale of how I, Promethea of Earth, Librarian of Ceres—a ragged, lowly Earth-child—came to Ascend, by grace of Holy Leviathan and munificent, open-handed Lord Ajax.

This poorest of gifts will be paltry repayment for the boundless generosity our Lord has shown me. But it is all I have to offer.

I pray you forgive my indulgence.

*When wise Lord Ajax first beheld Valhalla Crater, he saw—
bejeweled cities rising from Callisto's gleaming surface:
crystal-towers and temple-observatories gazing
forever skyward in humble worship
of our God of Gale-Force Mind,
Holy Leviathan!
Listen—*

★ ★ ★

Callisto is a pitted gem hung upon the face of God. It is our civilization's jewel, a moon of ice and diamondglass as large as

Mercury. And it is home to the greatest city ever built by human or Ascendant hands.

At the heart of a vast, concentric-cratered expanse stands Valhalla, City of Heroes. Its grand dwellings and villas gleam amidst the impact-ridges. Crystalline spires soar spaceward, sanctifying Holy Leviathan in endless prayer.

If you have wandered the wilds of Earth, perhaps you have seen the carcasses of felled trees and studied the growth rings inscribed upon their trunks. One ring for every growing season, each larger than the one before. Approached from orbit, Valhalla's craters, two billion years old and two thousand kilometers at their widest, resemble those Earthbound rings recast in glittering rock and ice.

But when I first came to Callisto, I had never seen a tree stump. There were no trees in the city where I was born, save the strange silver ones that rendered wastewater drinkable. Nor had there been trees on Europa, or Io, or on Titan. And so, descending towards Valhalla's cratered plain in a gravity-dhow, I could think only of Saturn's rings, made of ice and ancient, shattered moons.

There were three of us in that small gravity-dhow: myself and two pilots. Those human princelings, Lord Ajax's attendants, had been uneasy since I boarded the craft at Ajax's citadel-station. I could smell discomfort beneath their void-armor; hear their murmured conversations, though they spoke on a private whisper-link. One was heir to the family that ruled the city where I was born. He spoke of me in tones of fear and admiration, while his copilot's voice tended towards disgust and envy.

Several times, the princeling from my city asked awkwardly after my comfort. Once, he even dared ask if it was true. Who I was. Where I came from.

I replied only with a single word: Yes.

As we approached, I glimpsed the lights of Valhalla, brilliant even against Callisto's gleam. I could see the towering structure at its heart. Another ziggurat, many times larger than the one I'd scaled on Mercury: the temple-observatory to Leviathan Itself.

“Open the hatch,” I commanded as we flew over the outer craters. “I will approach Valhalla on foot.”

The pilots exchanged a nervous glance. My city’s princeling spoke. “But, honored Ascendant, the current of our approach is ... we can’t simply—”

“Silence, *Lesser Cousin*.” I felt dangerous, savage, like I was still on Titan. And perhaps, in a way, I still was. “Open the hatch.”

They obeyed, and I leaped. As I gently fell to Callisto’s surface, I wished for Venusian gravity, that I might be dashed upon rock. But of course, I landed with perfect ease. I ran, barely looking up to acknowledge the golden god that dominated Callisto’s sky; the holy storm of Its almighty intellect ever-raging across Its face. I sprinted hard as my new body allowed, with its void-resistant carapace and three hearts that beat jet-black blood but would not allow me to feel pain, or fear, or love.

Even at full speed, it took me forty-two minutes to reach Valhalla’s gate: an enormous edifice set into the innermost crater-ridge. Carved from endlessly flowing diamondglass, mimicking the ceaseless pattern of Leviathan’s storm-eye, the gate was as tall as the towers in whose shadows I’d grown up. The towers in which my princeling-pilot had been raised. In front of them, dwarfed but still imposing, stood Lord Ajax.

Our august Lord wore filigrees of golden armor over his pale carapace, patterned intricately into nebulae and star-clusters. His shoulders were heavy as boulders, and the void-cloak that billowed electrostatically from them was deep crimson—like human blood. Leviathan’s storm-sigil raged eternal on Lord Ajax’s chest. His eyes were void-dark; his beard the silver of starlight.

“Thea,” he said, a bass rumble in Callisto’s thin atmosphere, picked up even at distance by my new subdermal organs. “Truly, you are one of us. Determined to forge your own path.”

I did not reply. But I slowed, from sprint, to jog, to stride. I held my head as high as I could.

“There will be consequences for your pilots,” he said.

"I would expect nothing less from you, my Lord Ajax," I replied. I thought about what had happened on Europa and Io, and in Titan's cold caverns, far from the sight of God.

"Nothing less from *us*," he corrected gently. "For you have completed the Trials. You are one of us, now and always. The pilots were *my* emissaries, Thea. They could have stood up to you. But they didn't. By now you know I reward only strength. The weak cannot continue. They weaken us in turn."

I carried no weapons, but *I* was a weapon now. I wondered—could I defeat him here, in savage combat with hands and teeth? Our Lord was ancient, but he had grown larger and stronger with age, like a tree or a mountain. His carapace looked thick enough to deflect laser fire; his arms powerful as meteorites striking from orbit. And beyond the gate, his many loyalists awaited.

I gritted my teeth, and nodded.

"Welcome to Valhalla, Promethea of Earth," Lord Ajax laughed as the gate opened behind him, so smooth for something so huge. "Today we celebrate your Ascent."

He spared the lives of my pilots—ostensibly. One of them—the one who had spoken to me, the one from my city—was coerced to compete in gladiatorial combat for his family's honor during my banquet-games. He died at the ziggurat's base, impaled upon the six tusks of a megapachyderm—another Earth creature made monstrous by Utamo's scalpel. I felt nothing as he died, just as I felt nothing when Lord Ajax clapped a massive hand upon my shoulder and bade me welcome to the ranks of the Ascended; the heroes of Valhalla; the Honored of Leviathan.

I, Promethea of Earth, was one of them, now and forever. One of us.

*On Leviathan's icebound moon,
beneath its holy hydrogen gaze,
Lord Ajax wandered.*

*On Leviathan's icebound moon,
beneath Its holy hydrogen gaze
monsters dwell.*

*On Leviathan's icebound moon,
beneath Its holy hydrogen gaze
lies a deep carnivorous sea.*

*There, our Lord Ajax was tested
and so, in time, were we.*

Listen—

★ ★ ★

Beneath Europa's frozen surface sprawls the House of Ajax. Its many doors are hidden among the towering ice-thorns that throng Europa's equator. Behind those entrances grand laboratories, ornate halls, and harsh corridors run many cold miles down towards a vast sublunar sea.

Lord Ajax was born on Mars. But here, under the ice, he became what he is.

All who have Ascended remember waking in this House. Shivering, disoriented; body suddenly foreign—like waking in a different room from the one you slept in. The last thing I remembered was blinding sunrise on Mercury and the blistering certainty of heat-death. When I awoke it was dark, and cold, and my brother was there.

Yes, I had a brother. He is never mentioned in the tales told of Promethea of Earth, nor in the songs sung of my Ascension. But I had a brother, and he was there with me, in Ajax's House on Europa.

Like me, he lay on a shadow-pale block in that dim chamber. I was shocked to see him, but as I sat up and crossed the cold floor, I was even more shocked at his appearance.

My brother had always been scrawny and slight: easy prey in Earth's crowded shanties. He was different now: taller, broader, with

a hard sharpness about his features, stormy-grey in the darkness. He looked much older—though, in my memory, it had been mere days since I last saw him. His shoulders were enormous, strangely jagged beneath the heavy robes he wore. Confused, I touched my own arms, chest, and shoulders—and felt the same barbed protrusions there. Hard, like armor: a nascent carapace.

My brother woke with a start. He cried out, grabbing at me. I held him, whispering soothing things. His name. My name. A song from our childhood that our parents taught us. Eventually, he recognized me as his sister, and stilled. He was more confused than I was. I had fevered memories of Mercury; he remembered only a week of fear and frantic scavenging after I disappeared. The city militia had apprehended him, but they hadn't beat or tortured him. They'd simply taken him into one of the towers, into a dark room, and then—nothing. Strange dreams: alternating sensations of crushing pressure and weightlessness. And then he was here, with me. Transformed in the darkness beneath the ice, in Ajax's House.

A strange voice spoke, a monotone chorus: "Your bodies have begun metamorphosis."

In the room's corner stood a massive, shrouded figure. Fingers, too thick and far too numerous, dangled from its robe-sleeves. Long beard-locks drooped from the depths of its hood, but they *writhed* like silver serpents: coiling, uncoiling, coiling again. How long had it been watching us?

"I am Utamo," the figure said. "Once: of Mars. A significant, yet insignificant aspect-subroutine of the Martian Millumvirate, the Thousand-Willed Fleet. Now: Steward of the House of Ajax."

"Where are we?" I asked.

"The House of Ajax. On Europa. One of the moons of dread Leviathan. Now: stand."

"Why?" I demanded. "What is this place? What are you?"

Pain coursed through me, like ten thousand needles impaling from within. It felt as though the flesh was being ripped from my

bones. I fell to my knees and heard my brother scream. When the pain subsided, Utamo spoke again: "Now: stand. You will walk."

A door slid open, revealing a paler darkness beyond. Utamo led us through, and into a maze of barren corridors. Eventually, the labyrinthine passages opened onto an abyss: a deep, icy chasm, dimly lit by some sublunar source. A winding stair had been carved into its sides. We descended for hours, Utamo ever behind us, a gently looming threat.

All around us, adorning that endless stair, were weapons—bladed rifles long as my body and immense, barbed discs stained crimson-black. And bones. Monstrous skeletons: strange, segmented things, hundreds of feet long. I had never seen anything like them. They danced vertiginously on the walls of that pit; calcified armor bristling with fangs and spikes.

I tried to pause for a closer look, but Utamo prodded me ever-forward; ever-downward.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To the sea," Utamo said.

I remember my confusion. I had heard of seas on Earth, even seen images of them. Seas were places with broad shores and wide-open skies—not subterranean, abyssal things. But before I could ask, Utamo clarified: "Europa's ocean lies below. Old as Mars. Full of life."

"Why?" my brother asked, a strange creature in that indigo light; all blades and angles.

"A Trial: to prove your worth."

Finally, we reached the bottom of the stairs, and a vast cavern where crystalline walls gleamed above a lake: the entrance to Europa's ancient sea. We wound a path along the shore, coming to a carved nook filled with equipment—belts, ropes, knives, and long, jagged spears, stained and scored with memories of battle.

"Now: you will enter the water," Utamo said. "You will not return to the House of Ajax without a suitable trophy." The crystal light revealed Utamo's beard-locks and fingers for what they were—

mechanical tendrils, snarled and shiny, moving ceaselessly with life of their own.

“What sort of trophy?” I asked.

“One suitable for the walls of the great stair.”

As we buckled belts and slung them with knives and nets, Utamo said: “You will feel as though you are running out of breath. Be assured: you are not.”

So we dove into that lake, my brother and I, miles and miles beneath Europa’s surface. It was far deeper than any of our Earthbound city’s sunken wells—and those were only the shallows. We found an icy passage marked by glowing beacons, leading us down into the unfathomable expanse of the European ocean.

It was cold, but our new bodies did not freeze. It was dark, but our new eyes saw pale, bathyal vistas. We dived so deep, but our new muscles did not tire. And though we felt our chests struggle and heave, we never ran out of air.

Soon, we began to see life. Tiny fishlike creatures; pale and tangled plants. And then larger things—luminescent entities that trailed thin, pale arms for miles; and serpentine creatures with teeth like knives. Eventually, we came to the deep place where Leviathan’s firstborn children dwell: a place of ravenous teeth and crushing pressure, where one is either predator or prey.

My brother glanced nervously in every direction. Even in this new body, made to withstand airless European depths, I saw the same fear that had dogged him his whole life. You would be afraid, too, if you’d been abducted across the solar system, body transformed against your will into something alien. You would be afraid, too, if you were ordered into the sea of a distant moon, after your only experience of swimming had been in the noxious waterways of an Earthbound city.

So I kept one eye on my brother, and another on our bearings. For in that place, all directions quickly become one.

It didn’t take long for one of the deep-serpents to scent us. It came up from below, shockingly fast. Its thorn-ringed mouth was big

enough to swallow a gravity-dhow whole: it had no problem swallowing us.

I managed to grab on to one of its many fangs. With my other hand, I caught my brother—saving him from the creature's gullet, even as a spiny tooth gored him through his thigh. Blood, newly blackened by nanotech, spilled from his wound into the serpent's mouth and out into the depths. A beacon, sure to summon hungry mouths.

My brother struggled, pushing and bracing against resinous gums until he got his leg free. Some faraway part of me noted his thrashing—and the surge of blood that followed—with concern. I'd seen more than one human bleed out after removing a knife. But my brother was no longer human. His wound was already coagulating and knitting over itself. I held on tight: to the tooth; to my brother. We hung there in the monster's maw, buffeted by currents that threatened to sweep us down into its inky throat.

Then the creature shook, and we tumbled violently. Something had struck it—something equally enormous. My brother's blood had drawn another ravenous predator from the deep. With precariously timed kicks we pushed ourselves out of the deep-serpent's maw, dodging fangs to swim clear of its thrashing form.

From a hundred feet away we watched two titans battle. We'd seen the bladed, monstrous skeletons on the staircase wall. In death they were imposing, but in life, they were magnificent. To our more-than-human eyes, they shined: pale grey against endless black; sinuous and deadly; a grappling, biting dance.

Finally, one of them won. It found a soft place to sink its jagged fangs, just below the ridges of its foe's skull. Some new part of my mind marked that spot with cold precision. I watched how the beast lashed out one last time in death; calculated the safest routes of attack and egress. When it stilled, when its victorious enemy coiled constrictor-tight around it, I seized my opportunity.

I'd never moved that fast before. I'd never struck so powerfully. The victor writhed and twitched as I skewered its brain. The blood

that clouded forth was blacker than the icy water, black as space itself. A final tremor ran down the serpent's body, and then it was still.

I beckoned my brother from a hundred feet away. How small he looked—how vulnerable against the endless sea! We hurriedly lashed the dead behemoths together, securing our toothy cargo to dive-belts with the rope we'd been given. Then, we ascended.

I felt a concern—again, dull and distant—that we were diving towards the moon's core instead of ascending to its surface. I was aware of massive, hungry shapes circling beneath. But the pressure slowly began to ease, and eventually we saw murky beacons on the underside of the ice crust, guiding us back to the lake; back to Ajax's House.

When we burst forth from the water, gasping for breath that we no longer seemed to need, Lord Ajax was there to welcome us home. The spiny, mottled carcasses of the two deep-serpents burst to the surface, one after another. They seemed even larger in the lake's contained geography. Each was well over a hundred feet long; heavy waves crashed in their wake.

"Well done, children," Ajax said, wading out to examine the corpses. "Well done, indeed. I only required one trophy, and you brought me two."

We did not reply; merely dragged ourselves, exhausted, onto the shore.

"I see that this serpent killed the other," Ajax said, easily grasping and lifting the carcasses with his enormous hands. "And then it was harpooned. An efficient kill." Ajax dropped the bodies, making cold waves once more. He followed in their wake to the shore.

"Tell me," he commanded. "Which of you landed the killing blow?"

"We slew it together," I lied, but my brother's eyes were downcast; his hands—nearly as big as Ajax's now, I noticed—nervously tracing the outline of a still-healing wound.

"Is that so? Or is *one* of you far more the warrior than the other?" He laid a hand on my shoulder. "Go with Utamo, my child," he said to

me. “You’ve earned the right to stay here, in my House.”

I staggered to my feet, but when my brother tried to do the same, Ajax slapped him, a hard backhand across the face. My brother fell back to his knees. Black blood dripped onto pale ice.

“You are weak,” he hissed. “You denigrate the name of my House.” He pointed to the stairs; the endless staircase that led long miles back towards the surface. “You wish to redeem yourself? Climb.”

I rode an elevator with Utamo back up to our cold cell. Hours later, my brother returned. He collapsed the moment he staggered through the doorway, sinking down against the wall. I tried to comfort him, but he pushed me away.

That was the first lesson we learned in the House of Ajax: that weakness is always punished; that left unchecked, it weakens us in turn. A harsh lesson—but all our Lord’s lessons are harsh. Harsh as they were an age ago, when Ajax learned them for himself in the fortress beneath the ice that now bears his name.

I did not learn until much, much later, that our noble Lord did not build this House. No—he was brought here, like the rest of us. Smuggled from Mars, part of a cargo of stolen children; experimented on; remade with genetic material harvested from the European deep’s microbes and monsters.

Imagine him, if you can—our mighty Lord as a boy, weak as my baby brother was when the city militia snatched him. Did our Lord feel fear when his captors took him from the red streets of Tharsis? Was he afraid when they cut him open on cold operating tables; injected him with serums, grafted him with strange new organs? Did he feel dread when they field-tested him on Europa’s rust-and-iron surface?

What did he feel when he first looked up and saw sacred, sky-filling Leviathan—though It was still named Jupiter then? Did our Lord know what was happening in that holy horizon? That the scientists who remade him were laboring to remake a gas giant into

a *god*—a single mighty will that could outwit the Thousand-Willed Martian Fleet?

When Ajax dove into Europa's feral depths, did the storm in God's face truly pause and change direction? When he wrestled sea serpents, did he receive a vision of himself, hardened like unto diamond? Did he truly hear the name *Leviathan*, whispered on those cold currents?

We will never know. For we only have what wise, generous Lord Ajax offers us.

Only stories.

On Io—

volcanic, irradiated Io!

murderous, superheated Io!

tempestuous and treacherous Io!

—did our brutal Lord prepare himself

to battle against the ships of Mars;

to dive into Leviathan's storms;

to war, to wreck, to rule;

to Ascend.

Listen—

★ ★ ★

On Io, volcanoes erupt ceaselessly. So near God's stormy face, the sky crackles with lightning, lakes of lava churn, and magma plumes burst upwards into orbit.

On Io, we crossed a landscape of heat and flame.

On Io, we trekked across an island in a burning sea.

On Io, my brother died—and so did the finest part of me.

After Europa, there had been other, minor Trials. Battles with multi-tusked beasts beneath Ganymede's polar auroras. Navigating void-currents between Leviathan's distant moons. All the while our bodies grew stronger and more resilient, even as our hearts—old

and new—slowly hardened. My brother still struggled, but not as much. For a time, he seemed to find his footing.

And so, as we descended through the chop and tumult of Io's skies, our faces cast in gold and umber, we were not afraid. *A simple Trial*, Lord Ajax had said. *All you have to do is walk*. He spoke the truth—but our road stretched many hundreds of miles: through fiery valleys, over volcanic slopes, and across a charred island, set into a mighty cauldron of lava.

No beasts to slay. No trophies to bring back. All you have to do is walk.

We had to walk, yes; and more importantly, we had to survive. And for a time, we did. We crossed Io's surface, a nightmare world of ash, shadow, and endless flame; Leviathan's holy face looming monstrously above. We walked for days. We no longer needed sleep. A twenty-minute nap every twenty-four hours was sufficient. After a time, even the heat did not bother us much. I observed these changes with cold detachment, thinking of them as one would a knife, a wrench, or some other tool; but my brother—

He'd always been smaller than me, always been a target for ruffians and bullies. Now that he'd been gifted a body whose strength seemed to know no bounds, a heady pride blossomed in him.

On Io, my brother kept sprinting ahead of me, laughing; leaping thirty feet into the air like some joyous magma-geyser. His hearts, it seemed, had not yet hardened. They never would.

"I was made for this!" he crowed, again and again. "I will never return to Earth!"

It is strange to think of my brother in those final days, suddenly so different. All children grow, of course, their faces, bodies, and voices transforming as they mature. But these changes, this rapid Ascent beyond humanity, seemed almost as alien as Leviathan's moons. I remember my brother's face in endlessly shifting firelight, his features hard and sharp as his carapace. I remember him changed.

And no matter how hard I try, I cannot remember how he looked before.

We trekked twelve days across Io before reaching Loki Patera. The largest volcanic crater in Leviathan's domain holds a molten lake, two hundred kilometers across. A massive island stands at that churning cauldron's center—a blackened crust of solidified lava, its edges lapped by flame. We had to cross it.

My brother and I clambered down the crater's steep southern edge, making our way across a precarious, miles-long promontory. Whole sections of it were occasionally swallowed by lava: we had to sprint hard at the end to avoid being incinerated. But the island itself was stable enough, and far cooler underfoot.

We traversed it in little more than an Earth day. We were tired, yes, but the feeling weighed less than the dim flame of purpose and contentment. I felt calm; collected. But my brother—this close to the finish, he grew ever more confident and boisterous. I told him to be careful. To mind his environs. To mind our mission.

We reached the island's northwestern edge. To north and east, the magma sea churned ceaselessly, molten waves breaking at the horizon. To our west, another finger of rock promised a narrow egress. This causeway was thinner, more disparate and treacherous—a collection of pillars, really. We would have to leap from one to another, mindful of the fiery tongues that sought to taste our flesh.

"Follow my steps," I told my brother. "And move calmly."

And he did. He followed close behind me, mimicking my careful timing, matching every footfall—until he didn't.

I don't know if it was his new strength, his old fear, or his still-human exuberance, but we were nearly out of Loki Patera when my brother broke into a sprint. I heard his laughter, and saw him land eight feet ahead of me. He turned and grinned, then leaped high into the air, body silhouetted against a sea of flame, careening towards the next rocky pillar—

—and missed. He caught a handhold halfway down, and hung one-handed, treacherously close to the magma.

“Hold on!” I called, but he was already moving: both hands on the tiny outcropping, feet coming up to meet them in a perilous crouch. He was going to try and jump back up.

“Don’t,” I ordered. “Just wait—”

But he could not wait. Would not. He pushed off, launching himself a whole body length into the air, so his arms were just inches from the ledge, armored fingertips flexing, yearning for solid ground

—
—and then he was gone. He missed, and there was nothing to save him as he plummeted. The fire swallowed him.

I cried out, peering over the edge. There was nothing left of him except the blackened husk of his carapace and his survival kit’s iridescent shell, dissolving rapidly. Then only lava. He was gone. I screamed, smashing my fists into rock again and again. My wails pitched up to heaven, but the face of God far above did nothing but watch.

Slowly, painfully, as though I was struggling against Venusian gravity, I climbed out of Loki Patera. Alone, now and always. Lord Ajax waited for me a mile beyond the crater’s lip.

“Do not mourn your brother,” he said. “For he was weak and foolish. His conduct at the end was pathetic. Childlike. It was his fate to die, and this is as honorable a resting place as one such as him could hope for.”

I did not reply, but rage and sorrow burnt within me, bright as the lake that swallowed my brother. I held on to my rage as long as I could, even as sorrow faded with my other emotions. And I disobeyed our Lord. I *would* mourn my brother. I mourned him then, and I mourn him still.

When an Ascendant dies, their body is dropped into Leviathan’s atmosphere. They fall, through ammonia clouds and thick layers of hydrogen and helium, until heat and pressure reduce them to composite particles, and they become one with God’s mighty storm-mind.

My brother received no such honor. But his body melted in Io's largest lava lake. Perhaps some part of him lingers on in fire and rock, so close to God. Perhaps some molecule that once belonged to my brother evaporated from that sea of flame. Perhaps some trace element was born aloft by eruption after eruption, until finally, one of the great magma plumes carried it out of Io's thin atmosphere and into space. Perhaps some part of him now orbits Leviathan. Perhaps he will orbit Leviathan for millennia to come: an eternal tomb of gravity and carbon.

That is how I choose to remember my brother, whose human face is forever lost to fire and shadow; whose human name I keep close to the tenderest of my hearts, a secret tether to the vanished part of me. That is how I mourn him.

Imagine

august Lord Ajax,

One thousand years ago:

on demigodhood's starlit cusp,

diving into Leviathan's stormy depths,

coming face-to-face with divinity;

a speck in vast pressure systems;

a thought in God's mind.

Listen—

★ ★ ★

Ajax's Citadel orbits Leviathan closer than any moon. A thorned flower of a space station, its petals mirror the turbulent colors of Leviathan's depths. Once every thirty-six hours, it passes above the storm-mind so that Lord Ajax may commune with God's vast, holy intelligence.

After Io, I stayed on the Citadel for weeks, convalescing. Healing; even as my human emotions faded like a bruise. And yet I still

grieved—first, the loss of my brother; then, the loss of grief itself, an absence in my chest cavity, deeper than the European sea.

Ajax was not always present on his Citadel, and even when he was, he secluded himself in his wide-windowed Sanctum. Ascendants arrived and departed on gravity-dhows, currying favor and bringing intrigue: velvet-gloved conspiracies or insurrections that needed crushing with steel-clad fist.

Sometimes I listened by the door. Indra encouraged it. A *long-standing tradition*, she called it. By the Sanctum door, I heard our Lord Ajax's dealings. Hours of commlink chatter. Reports and prostrations. Lesser Cousins offering up their scions as attendants in exchange for paltry favors. Once, when Leviathan's storm-mind was directly below, I heard a dense, garbled growl, as though all its stormclouds whispered in Ajax's ear.

Then there were his audiences with Ascendants. Asterion brought whispers from Ganymede: a cabal plotting against our Lord. Hod brought rumors from Earth: a rebellion brewing in one of the southern hemisphere's great cities. Ajax left soon after. He executed the Ganymedan traitors himself, but he let the revolt on Earth fester. I did not yet realize it, but he was saving that task for me. My first mission as an Ascendant.

But for now, a final Trial lay ahead: savage contemplation, in the caverns of Titan.

"A war with yourself," Indra whispered. "Your body battles your mind. And all the while, you wander that labyrinth." Her body was warm against mine, her arms hard and muscled, our carapace-ridges interlocking.

Indra had coveted me for some time. Since the Mercurial games, perhaps. Ascendants are allowed dalliances with aspirants who have completed the European and Ionian Trials, and so she timed her meditative retreat to the Citadel to match my recuperation. But though she was with me, I was far, far away: staring out the void-window, lost in Leviathan's twisting storms; lost in memories of Io and my brother.

“Savage contemplation changes us all,” Indra said, tracing Leviathanesque patterns into my back. “And not always for the better. Sometimes I wonder ... if I am still there. There, in Titan’s cold and distant caves.”

She fell silent, and we lay there until I slept. The face of God gave way to that of my brother, and to other, stranger faces, bathed in crystalline blue light. A dream of ghosts; of caverns and mournful songs. Or perhaps that happened after Titan. I do not know.

Beneath Titan’s cold mountains, far from the eye of God;

Our Lord did wander in savage contemplation.

Stalked by nightmares; self against self;

crimson Theseus-trail ever-dripping

from his abdomen.

Listen—

★ ★ ★

Titan, Saturn’s largest moon, is a strange and distant place, forbidden to all. Not even Lord Ajax, who first endured Trial in its cold caves, returns there. Here, far from our Great God’s sight, those who would Ascend suffer a final Trial.

Savage contemplation changes us all. And not always for the better. Indra’s words haunted me as I descended through Titan’s dense atmosphere; as I crumpled my gravity-dhow’s sails and attached it to my survival-pack. As I trekked across a dark, desolate hydrocarbon desert, in the dim shadows of hundred-foot dunes, I thought about how much I had already changed.

In all Leviathan’s domain, there is no place like Titan. It is much like the most barren of Earth’s wild places, but strange and cold—a world in hibernation. Far from the sun, Titan’s days are as dim as its seasons are long. There are lakes here—beautiful, enormous liquid methane lakes—and mountains: jagged equatorial ranges made of water frozen harder than rock, with volcanoes that spew ammonia and ice.

I never imagined such a place. And now I walked there—alone. Cold despite my fledgling carapace, and without my brother. I was so alone.

As I approached the frozen mountains, my mind returned, again and again, to the lake of fire that claimed him. Io and Titan; magma and ice. I did not realize it yet, but my mind was beginning its endless circle of the labyrinth that is savage contemplation.

You know the tale, no doubt, of our Lord Ajax's savage contemplation. The criers in the plaza of my humble, crowded, Earthbound city often sang it. They say he wandered the caverns for forty days and forty nights, hunted by a sleepless beast. That he pressed a knife under the scales of his carapace, ever-twisting the blood-blackened blade, to mark himself a trail by which to escape. That finally, after grave combat, he slew the beast and came face-to-face with himself—for the beast's face was his own. That he conquered his own savage nature to become a wise and worthy ruler.

Now hear the tale of my own savage contemplation:

For twenty hours, I climbed the mountain, following cruel ridgelines until I found a tunnel entrance marked with Leviathan's storm-eye sigil in impossibly flowing gold. I steeled myself and entered, descending a long stair carved into rock.

The labyrinth awaited.

To my near-Ascendant eyes, the tunnels glowed dim blue like the caverns beneath Ajax's House. The walls were rough and curved: they seemed the work of some great burrowing beast. Time is strange beneath that mountain. Perhaps there was something in the air, some toxin or hallucinogen. My choral senses ceased to function as they should. I recall disparate flashes of memory—ever-descending; hunkering for brief respites only to sleep for what seemed like eons, until I woke from terrifying dreams of being hunted. Melting the ice walls for drinkwater. Finding strange markings that should not have been there, tracks on the hard tunnel surfaces that should not have been possible.

I convinced myself I was tracking something. Once, I thought I nearly had it. Knife in hand, I quietly stalked from cavern to cavern, following distant noises until they resolved into the sound of breathing. I found my quarry against a wall—and saw that it was me, asleep against my survival-pack. I woke with a start, staring out into the dim blue, scanning for a shape, certain that *I* was the one being tracked.

And I was. I do not know whether Ajax carved the caverns of Titan, or if they are natural, or if they were made by some ancient civilization from Titan or Enceladus or some far-distant star. But I do know this: creatures live there, in that mountain. Beings made solely for suffering.

I began to hear their mewling calls echoing through the tunnels. I followed the cries for hundreds of hours, but never found anything. I no longer slept. When I tired, I found a cul-de-sac or a cavern wall and sat against it, knife in hand, eyes scanning the dark. Eventually, dreams invaded my waking mind. Shadows danced in the distance, shrieks and moaning sobs always just around the corner.

Finally, after an unknowable time, I succumbed to sleep. I do not know how long I slept, but when I awoke, I finally saw them.

I was in a vast cathedral of a cavern—had I slept there?—and some crystalline light-source threw shadows on the wall. Lumbering, scuttling, humanoid shadows. The creatures came for me, dozens of them, screeching and moaning. Their fingers were long and deadly as any knife I'd seen. Their faces were almost human, but warped; shrunken mouths packed with needle-sharp teeth.

I fought these sad, withered creatures with the same rage and resignation that fueled every fight I'd ever fought, the same rage and resignation with which I'd attempted to gore Lord Ajax on Mercury. One by one, they fell to my blade: stabbed, decapitated, dismembered, and disemboweled. I was stronger than them, and far more the warrior. But there were *so many of them*. And their faces—it felt like slaughtering animals. Or murdering children.

Finally, I saw him among the horde.

He was bigger than the rest. Arms dense with muscle. Barbed, armored shoulders—an Ascendant's carapace, but charred and melted. His face was a twisted distortion of the face I'd known my whole life. My brother's face, ruined and monstrous. A revenant from Io.

We fought in that cavern, amidst the press of bodies and the clawing of knife-fingers. He bit and swiped at me, all the while snarling and laughing: a strange idiot cry that was all the more disturbing because it was *his voice*. As I cut off his hand, as I buried my knife in heart after heart, I told myself this was not him. A facsimile reconstituted by Ajax and Utamo from cloneflesh. An empty copy. Nothing more.

But as I landed the killing blow, the creature with my brother's face looked at me and whispered my name through its monstrous maw. *Thea*.

I killed them all. The cavern was full of corpses, its floor slippery with gore. A Theseus-trail of blood dripped from the softest part of my carapace, slowing to a trickle as the wound knit. I had killed my brother. I had killed him twice.

I do not know how long I wandered through the labyrinth. It could have been weeks, even months. Finally, deep in the mountain's heart, I found a doorway marked with Leviathan's sigil. I stepped through it and a platform hummed to life beneath my feet. The door slid shut behind me, and I collapsed, exhausted.

The space elevator raised me out of the caverns, out of the mountain, and up, up, up through Titan's dense atmosphere, up beyond the edge of space.

I rested there for hours, staring out at Titan's poison-green curve, and at Saturn: massive, majestic, and ringed. Leviathan's sibling. Some say its storms are even mightier than our God's. Yet Saturn remains silent, unaware. Asleep.

I slept, too. Later I learned that my body acted without my conscious mind, launching my gravity-dhow and plotting a course for Leviathan's orbit. I awoke briefly on Ajax's Citadel, flitting between

sleep and waking, unaware of anything but the nightmares and Indra's arms. Then, abrupt as the transition between two dreams, Indra was gone, replaced by a massive shadow seated at the corner of my cot.

He spoke to me, but it was as though he spoke to himself. He has never spoken this way to me; not before, not since.

"The tales of my savage contemplation are not entirely true," Lord Ajax said. "I wandered, yes, and I fought, but the beast ... it did not have my face. It had my brother's face. Impossible, of course. I knew that. He'd been left on Mars. And yet, by Phobos and Deimos and all the moons of dread Leviathan, I *swear* it was him."

He turned to look at me. Did he think I slept still? Surely he could hear my heartbeat; the breath frozen in my throat.

"None of the others can understand," he said. "What it is like. To have come from a place like Tharsis, or Bokhara, or Ulaanbaatar. To have spent your life struggling against bootheels that would grind you down to red dust. No ... I have pushed them. Hardened them. But they will *always* be soft. But you ... you are like me. A savage, bladed thing."

And then darkness took me again, Ajax's words echoing in my dreams. Perhaps it was *all* a dream. A dream born of exhaustion; of a mind worn down by savage contemplation. Or perhaps it happened before Titan. I do not know.

When I awoke truly, I was alone. The Citadel was deserted, the Sanctum door shut. In my chambers I found a suit of Ascendant armor, gleaming ceremonial crimson and crafted to my exact dimensions. A vellum was pinned to it, commanding me to Callisto for my Celebration.

As I gathered my things, I found a little oracle-pearl tucked beneath my pillow. A beautiful thing, inscribed with Indra's sigil. It woke to my fingertips. In it, I saw myself on Mercury. So small, so frail, so human: racing and falling across cratered rock; entering the Festival City's bounds and struggling up the ziggurat's huge stairs. I watched myself seize Leviathan's banner and jam its point against

Ajax's armored sternum. I watched Ajax swat me with an easy backhand that knocked me three steps down. I heard his laugh echo across the commlink as tiny machines swarmed from his palm, cocooning my body from the sun in a protective sarcophagus.

Behold this mere human, Ajax said. She is bolder than any of you. Ascendants? Rulers of Earth? Have any of you dared strike at me this openly? Mark my words well: for her temerity, I shall honor this once-Earthbound child. I shall lift her into Leviathan's holy gaze. I shall allow her to attempt my Trials. But for daring to raise her hand against me, she shall also be punished.

★ ★ ★

[[///—before they come, listen. before they come, listen. before they come, listen.///]]

My account is almost at an end. Soon I will be, too. I have listed the grand deeds of our Lord. I do not think he will repay me kindly. My captors are nearly here now, screeching down through Ceres's thin atmosphere on a war-barge. Indra among them, no doubt. Exactly the sort of cruelty Ajax loves to inflict.

He gave me this name, Promethea, as a joke. I was called Thea before, on Earth, so he transformed it, just as Utamo transformed my body. In the long-ago mythology of the Greeks, the same mythology that named Europa and Io and Callisto, the mythology that named Ajax himself, Prometheus was a Titan. He stole fire from the Gods, and was punished for it by Zeus—later Jupiter; later Leviathan. They tied Prometheus to a rock, and every day, an eagle tore out his liver. Every night, the liver regrew, and day after day, the eagle returned to tear it out again.

Ajax and Utamo could not devise a better punishment. But I expect they will try.

Ajax wishes to live forever. But he forgets—the majesty of planets and stars unfold over billions of years. In the long life of the universe, even Leviathan's mighty storm-eye will vanish in a momentary blink. Ajax would tether the divine to the mortal for his own purposes—and

his purposes are base. What has he done with God's divine superintellect? What has he wrought? New armaments and blast-armor? Void-vellums: clever papyruses that update their contents across light-minutes and light-hours? Innovations, yes, but petty things. A tyrant's toys.

Do not doubt the justness of our cause. Do not doubt our plan. Our hands—all our hands, mine especially—are drenched in the blood of Earth. It is time for us to cleanse them. Go now. Prepare yourselves. Soon, we will end his monstrous reign. Even if I do not live to see it, I am honored by your bravery, your temerity, your humanity. I am honored to be in league with you.

[[///Before they come, listen. Before they come, listen. Before they come, listen—///]]

*Beyond the orbit of mighty Leviathan,
Beyond the rings of mysterious Saturn,
Beyond blue Neptune and the Kuiper Belt;
Beyond the Oort Cloud's quiet expanse;
There are other places to gaze towards;
Other worlds; other suns; and perhaps
even other gods.*

The outer worlds are quiet and dark, but this will not always be so. In five billion years, our sun will swell to swallow Mercury and Venus, and reduce Earth to cinders. But on Titan, mountains of melting ice will give rise to new life under a dim red sun. And in Leviathan's depths, perhaps God's mind shall continue to contemplate the void.

Have you ever wondered what our God dreams of? Why we have not heard It speak, except in Ajax's voice? Like the ship-minds of Mars, Leviathan's intelligence was made to transcend the limits of biology and circuitry. Lord Ajax, in his wisdom and authority, tells us that everything in Leviathan's domain is as God wills it. But he knows

the truth—a truth you suspect deep in your bones. Leviathan cares not for us.

It does not even *think* of us, much as we do not think of microbes or ants. It does not register our presence, or acknowledge our designs. Carried upon the great gas planet's shifting storms, Leviathan's god-mind runs so languid and slow that our lives—perhaps even our civilization—will be spent before even a single thought forms in Its mind.

I was born on Earth. On Europa, I was changed. On Io and Titan, I became who I am today. But here on Ceres—cold, quiet Ceres; lowly, unimportant Ceres—I have studied the rise and fall of civilizations, learned the forbidden histories of our own rulers, and written my own story. I can only speak to what I know, and what I know is this:

Our God is a distant, alien being, and we should not concern ourselves with what It wants.

Its regent, Lord Ajax, is a monster, and a poor one at that. He cares only for war and violence. He claims to have elevated himself far above humanity, but he is not elevated—he is *base*. He is a soldier, a honed instrument; nothing more than a weapon who has found himself atop a throne and knows not what to do with it except continue to inflict pain.

And so, contemplating the outer worlds, the inner planets, the ancient gas giants, and the star around which we all revolve, perhaps it is time for us to throw aside the whims of gods and demigods; to sweep away the detritus of Earth and Mars; to topple the aged towers of princes and potentates. Perhaps it is time to break the decrepit cycle of our empire and the empires before it, this system of mailed fist and foot upon neck.

Perhaps now, in this single, small moment on the eve of the one-thousandth year of a tyrant's reign—a mere instant in our solar system's five-billion-year history; a mere moonlet amidst the great, quiet realm of night—it is time, at last, to dream of something new.



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MEN, WOMEN, AND CHAINSaws



STEPHEN
GRAHAM
JONES

Men, Women, and Chainsaws

STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES

illustration by

JOHNNY DOMBROWSKI

T O R
D O T
C O M

for Joe Lansdale

Of course they shouldn't have been doing it.

That was half the fun.

Victor boosted Jenna over the tall, solid fence—like she hadn't grown up scrambling over half the fences in East Texas herself?—then climbed it himself, set down with both boots at once like this junkyard was *theirs*. For tonight, at least.

Jenna took his hand and they ran down the main aisle to the fourth row on the right. Just like they'd scouted that afternoon, the Camaro was right there where it should have been.

Its tires were long rotted off, most of its glass gone, and there'd been a few generations of birds roosting in the passenger seat, but all Victor and Jenna cared about was that perfect, unbent hood.

"Only for you, right?" Jenna said for the hundredth time, fluffing her hair up, blinking her eyes fast to be sure her eyeliner was still thick enough.

"Never share you, girl," Victor said, planting a kiss on her lips, and backed off, pulled his mom's 35mm out.

Jenna told herself this was good, this was all right, he was shipping out next week, he needed something to remember her by.

"And remember, I'm me, not her, right?" she said, a waver in her voice she hadn't meant to do.

"Always and forever, babe," Victor assured her, and, like that, she hiked herself up onto the Camaro's hood. The powdery rust was griming up the ass of her jean shorts, she knew, and probably painting the backs of her thighs, too—definitely her palms, already—but her boots were the same color. Like her mom had always told her, you've got to look for the silver lining, girl. If you squint, then the world can look a whole lot better than it does with your eyes all the way open.

That was pretty much Jenna's whole life.

And, no, she knew she didn't have a smile that knocked them dead like Caroline Williams's—Stretch from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*—and, sure, okay, so her skin was probably about ten shades darker than Stretch's ever would be, even after a week in the Bahamas, but she had those same forever legs, anyway. Close enough for Nacogdoches, anyway. And these jean shorts were frames for her legs, according to Victor.

As for Caroline Williams, she was the reason for this daring junkyard break-in: last summer, the horror magazine Victor drove down to Houston to get once a month had run an interview with her, and the photo spread part of it had been shot right here in town. Everybody knew it. The crew had just been a photographer and a kid who must have been that photographer's assistant, but everybody knew where they'd grabbed breakfast with Stretch—what Victor insisted on calling her—where they'd stayed the night before, and, most importantly, where the shoot had taken place: the junkyard.

Because, fifteen years later, all the sets and props and whatever from *Chainsaw 2* were gone, a backdrop of old rusted cars would have had to stand in for the movie. Specifically, this Camaro, with Caroline Williams stretched across the hood, flashing that smile that the interviewer said was the main thing responsible for the world's population not getting out of control yet—"Meaning it *slays*," Victor had explained to Jenna, because how could a girl ever figure out anything obvious herself.

Goddamn right it slayed, though.

Jenna was more than a little jealous.

And now, for his six months out on the water, what Victor wanted more than anything in the world, it was his girlfriend—soon to be fiancée, Jenna had her fingers crossed for—posed on that hood just like Stretch, right down to those jeans shorts.

Snap, snap, snap.

Jenna tried to smile with her eyes and her mouth and her heart as wide as she could, as wide as she ever had, as wide as Caroline Williams, even, and then the next morning they dropped the film off

at the drugstore, and then six days later, after the proposal that made Jenna's mom hug her neck, whisper into her neck that she was happy for her, Victor was in international waters.

Sitting in the same bedroom she'd already spent twenty-two years in—just six months more, now—Jenna crossed her legs on the bed and held her hand palm-up in her lap, and studied the small ridge of white scar tissue on the heel of her hand, where a burr in that Camaro's hood had snagged her skin.

But don't think about the bad things, girl.

She flipped her hand over, gazed instead at the engagement ring, so perfect on her finger. Three months later, after Victor's last letter, she drove down to Houston and sold it at a pawn shop for seventy-five dollars.

The guy behind the counter asked if she was single now, then, and did a thing with his eyebrows that made Jenna's skin physically crawl, she was pretty sure.

She took the cash and walked out.

The first thing she had to do, she knew, was spend the hell out of that money.

Wine coolers took some of it, the tip at the diner back in town took twenty more—Jenna had so much she could tell the sophomore girl who brought her her coffee, but she didn't want to ruin things for her—and the last thirty-five went for a sledgehammer.

Ten minutes after midnight, she plopped down in the junkyard again, and picked up the sledgehammer that had taken her four tries to finally sling all the way over the fence.

She wasn't just going to wail on that Camaro's hood, she was going to jail for it, she didn't care anymore.

Come sunrise, they were going to have to *tackle* her to get her to stop, and then they'd better get those cuffs on her fast, because she was going to be trying to slip away, pick that sledgehammer up one more time, come at that rusted-out memory like a fucking Valkyrie. One with rabies.

But then she just stood there, the heavy head of that sledgehammer by her right boot, the handle easy in her hand.

The Camaro was gone.

★ ★ ★

Two years later, at a bonfire party out at the old drive-in, she found it.

She was living in a trailer with her good buds Cray-Cray and Took by then, since her parents had sold the house, put their savings into a camper, and lit out to see America. Jenna was half-suspicious that they didn't really care about seeing America, they just couldn't think of any other way to get their grown daughter to move out, but screw it, right?

"I mean, they're not your *real* parents anyway, are they?" Took had said early on, when they were still decorating the trailer, making it not look so thirdhand.

"They're real," Jenna told her, her clipped tone shutting Took right the hell up.

What she meant by *real* was that they were the only ones she'd ever known, her bio-parents having died in a wreck before she was even one. She did still have one snapshot of them—her mom had insisted she'd want it someday—but other than that, all she had was a mix of their blood, she figured.

And her *real* parents packing up and heading out on the road had probably been good for her, she had to admit. Otherwise she might still be sulking in her girlhood bedroom.

Instead of working the parts counter at the Chevy house, yeah.

But there were still bonfire parties on summer nights, anyway.

At least until she recognized a certain shape easing his way into the firelight.

Victor.

She'd heard he was back, that he was using his experience on his series of offshore rigs to bag girl after girl, but seeing him in the flesh was a whole other thing.

His linebacker shoulders were even bigger from guiding all that chain, his hair was shorter because he couldn't risk it getting caught *in* the chain, his skin was leathery from the sun and the salt and the overtime, and there was a harsh scar coming down across the right side of his face from a single steel thread whipping out from a snapped cable, the equipment that cable was attached to sinking down thousands and thousands of feet—and almost taking him with it. It was a good story, but the story on top of *that* was that the oil company had written him a pretty check as well, and let him hire on again. It was like he'd hit the lottery: steady work, money in the bank, that cool scar, and a near-death experience. Add them all together and there were going to be little Victors in every bassinet in town, come spring.

Good for him, Jenna told herself, and turned neatly away, hating how hot her eyes already were, and hating even more how her back straightened when she knew he had seen her through the crowd.

She slid through the bodies, snagged a beer by its long neck, and made a beeline for the darkness. Just to breathe. Just to look up at the faded old screen, half its huge white tiles missing, the other half peeling at the corners.

Every few feet there were the old speaker posts, and the ground under her feet wasn't gravel anymore—it had been too many years—but it still had the old up-and-down contours meant to aim each car up to the movie.

Jenna cracked the beer open, slammed as much of it as she could, enough that she had to lean over, let some foam back out between her boots.

Surprising herself, then, she reared back and slung the half-full bottle at one of the speaker posts, the bottle shattering hard enough that some of it came back at her.

She jerked her hand up to protect her eyes and caught a piece of glass in the heel of her hand. She held it up into the moonlight to see what she'd done now, and—yep: bleeding.

Like it mattered.

The party hadn't even dialed its volume down from the glass breaking, meaning either nobody cared or she was too far away for anyone to have heard. Meaning? She laughed: anything could happen out here now, couldn't it? With nobody watching?

It could, she told herself, and walked out farther to test it, riding the humps up and down, and ... that was when she saw it.

The Camaro.

She felt her mouth open, her face go slack.

She looked behind her to see if this was a joke the world was playing on her or what.

It had to be, didn't it?

Jenna didn't walk right up to the car but looped around, giving herself the chance to be wrong. There were more 1979 Camaros in the world than just that one, she knew.

But this was it.

It was still sitting on its turbine wheels, no rubber, and it was still a rust bucket, but there was no denying that this was the same Camaro from the junkyard. Jenna didn't just know cars, she knew—from work—Chevrolets in particular.

She gulped the spit in her mouth down, eased in, and touched the driver's side fender, telling herself there was no chance the metal was going to be hot, or, if it was, that was just the day's heat, collected there—not an engine.

Her hand came away powdery with rust like she knew it would, and it stung the new cut in her palm.

She drew it to her mouth to suck the poison spit it back out.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked the car.

It just sat there.

But, in the moonlight, she could see where her hand had touched that fender.

There was a neat handprint there.

Jenna looked from her palm to that fender, shaking her head no: this car couldn't be here. It *shouldn't* be here.

Except here it was, for sure and for certain.

She leaned back in, studied it closer.

Under the rust she'd touched, there was that distinctive midnight blue that so many of these Z/28s had been painted with.

Which is *not* how rust works.

And on the right side of that handprint was the smear of blood from Jenna's cut.

Until it wasn't.

★ ★ ★

The next morning before work, Cray-Cray kept stealing glances in the mirror at Jenna.

"I *know*, okay?" Jenna finally said, about Victor being at the bonfire last night, and Cray-Cray evidently knew better than to say anything about how thick Jenna was laying down her eyeliner.

Her lie about needing the Subaru Brat they shared was enough to get Jenna dropping Cray-Cray off at the salon, with a promise to be there to pick her up right when the Chevy house closed.

Jenna wasn't going to work, though.

When she should have been clocking in, she was back at the drive-in, the Subaru idling like a lawnmower behind her because turning it off wasn't always the best idea.

She had a towel with her this time. Everywhere she rubbed at the rust, there was metallic blue underneath.

"*What the hell?*" she kept saying.

As for how the car had shown up here, she had even less idea. It hadn't rolled on its bare rims, that was for sure—there were no gouges in front of or behind it. And if anybody'd towed it here for whatever batshit reason, they surely would have sat those soft turbine wheels up on cinderblocks or wood, at least.

Except ... Jenna shook her head, because this absolutely didn't track.

The rear wheel had tatters of *rubber* around it now?

Behind her, the Subaru coughed, died.

Of course.

Jenna squatted by that passenger side rear wheel, touched the rubber gingerly.

It was warm, and—*shit!* It was a radial. One of those steel strands had gouged into the tip of her index finger.

Instead of sucking that blood up herself, though ...

Jenna hesitantly touched the pad of her finger to the bare steel of that rear wheel, painting it, and an instant later, she whole-body flinched—that rear wheel had drained all the blood from her hand, it felt like, so that she had to rip her finger away. And for a bare instant, she hadn't quite been able to.

She held her hand to her body, massaged it warm again, and a wave of dizziness passed through her. Either from her world changing or from blood loss, she guessed. Maybe both.

Back in the Subaru, not ready yet to push-start it across this baking-hot parking lot, thanks, Jenna opened the cigar box she kept her special shit in, that she'd dug up hours before sunrise. There was a blue ribbon she'd won in sixth grade. A photo of her in the newspaper climbing out of the mud pit from a tug of war. The wrist-elastic part of a homecoming corsage. And—this was the first she'd been in this box since forever—the ring box Victor had proposed to her with.

She opened it, snapped it shut like little jaws. The better to eat him with.

Way at the bottom, like she remembered, was that snapshot of her bio-parents. Whoever'd taken it was practically leaning in the open window of their car, so her bio-dad, behind the wheel, was having to lean back. Her bio-mom was leaning forward to be beside him, and, yeah, okay, yeah, Mom, it was one of those perfect-magical photos. His surfer-blond hair was shaggy and kind of naturally feathered, and her black-black hair was arrow-straight, long enough to be caressing the gear shift, and both of them were still wearing whatever that day's odd job had been: chaff and grass, woodchips and dust.

Jenna stood carefully with the box, made her way over to the Camaro, and reached that photo in, held it up until all the edges lined up, even the now-empty yoke of a six-pack, still hanging on the passenger-side window crank. Which had to be brittle now, after all these years. It had to be *gone*, really.

The problem with all this, of course, was that her parents had died in a *wreck*. And, even before this Camaro started coming back, its body had been fairly straight.

Jenna left that velvety ring box open on the dash of the Camaro like an offering, pushed the Subaru to life one more time, and called her Uncle Stu's house in California, where her parents were currently parking their camper.

Her mom started crying the moment Jenna asked about her bio-parents. She was so glad Jenna was finally looking into them—it wasn't their fault they hadn't been there for her.

Jenna's main question was, "A *wreck*?"

Wrong. Her dad had told her her bio-parents had died in a *car*, and "wreck" was the only thing that made sense to ten-year-old Jenna, who didn't really need every sticky detail.

The real story was that the floorboard of that Camaro had been rusted through, and Jenna's mom and dad were at the drive-in right before Thanksgiving, had been idling that small block to keep the heater warm. Factor in one leaky exhaust and some rolled up windows, and before they knew it, the inside of the car was roiling with carbon monoxide and they were asleep, never to wake up. Easy as that.

"Their first date since ... since you were born," Jenna's mom added at the end.

Jenna closed her eyes, kept them closed, her mom's voice from California consoling but also far, far too loud for right now.

She picked up Cray-Cray at the salon almost on time, but stopped a cool quarter mile back from their trailer.

"What?" Cray-Cray said, already redoing her makeup in the vanity mirror, for whatever this night was going to hold.

Jenna chucked her chin out before them. At the silver and blue short-bed pickup nosed up to the trailer—Dallas Cowboy colors.

It was the truck Victor had left behind with his parents when he shipped out.

“Oh no,” Cray-Cray said. “Took.”

Jenna nodded.

Took and Victor, at the trailer.

“I’ll just—” Jenna said, but Cray-Cray didn’t need to hear the rest: she was already stepping out her side, striding across to the trailer, her long legs eating up the distance.

On the way, she filched a piece of chrome trim up from the tall grass by the butane tank.

Without looking back—not needing to—she casually hung that jagged aluminum out to the side, dragged it from Victor’s taillight all the way up to his headlight, waving the trim up and down.

Jenna blinked her feelings away, reversed down the dirt road, and drove emptier and lonelier roads for the next three hours, until dusk sifted down around her and the Subaru.

She was back at the old drive-in again.

Instead of approaching the Camaro, even though she could now see new glass glinting in the waning moon—new glass? from *where?*—she positioned the Subaru so its headlights were stabbing past the two uprights of the old marquee sign.

It was long since empty, had layers and layers of spray-painted G + R—kind of stuff—Glenda plus Robert, from four years ago, when Robert got Glenda pregnant the first time—but what Jenna was interested in was down in the grass. Under the grass.

The letters that used to be up on that sign. They’d shrunk or something in the sun, across all the years, and who knew how many storms had whipped them out of place, scattered them down here.

It took almost until midnight, but Jenna pieced them into T E X C H S A 2—“Texas Chainsaw 2,” which she guessed was all there was room for, “Massacre” being a long enough word it would probably

just cause wrecks out on the highway if drivers tried to read it over their beers.

The Subaru was long dead, and the battery was weak enough already that the headlights were yellow and thready, meaning Jenna was going to be walking back to the gas station.

But that was later.

For now, she stacked all the letters into a pile and set a rock on top of them, she wasn't sure why. And then she sat back in the grass, looked up to the drive-in screen, and down to the only car waiting for the movie to start.

Which is when the Camaro's dome light glowed on.

★ ★ ★

Three days later, Jenna woke in the grimy break room at work.

She looked up at blurry versions of Kip and Dale and, from the front desk, Sheila. Jenna guessed she'd been called in to be legally sure no one felt Jenna up while she'd been conked.

"You passed out," Kip told her, pretty needlessly.

He was holding a paper cup of water across to her.

Jenna took it and drank, buying time to come up with the right excuse.

The truth was that she'd been spending her nights out at the old drive-in, and cutting herself in new places, because the Camaro needed blood. Specifically, *her* blood, she was pretty sure. She hadn't tried feeding it a stray dog or a roadkill rabbit, but she didn't think she had the nerve for that, really.

All she could cut was herself.

Last night she'd bitten her tongue then leaned over the engine, drained blood down into the open radiator, and she'd passed out then, too, but when she'd come back around she'd been sitting against the side of the car, by the passenger side rear tire. As if someone had positioned her like that, so she didn't have to endure the indignity of lying open-mouthed—*red*-mouthed—in the darkness all alone.

It's the kind of thing a parent might have done for a child, right?
One they didn't live long enough to care for, before.

"Sick," she said to Kip and Dale and Sheila, and stumbled for the ladies' room. Kip and Dale made room for her but, a polite few moments after crashing into the first stall loudly enough that the slap of that metal door could be heard all the way down the hall, Sheila eased in. Probably sent by Kip, Jenna knew. Because he couldn't come in himself.

"Pregnant?" Sheila asked, all sister-like, her eyes batting to beat the band.

Jenna shook her head no, flushed before Sheila could clock the no-vomit situation.

"That time of the month?" Sheila said, then.

Jenna shook her head no again, though she was pretty sure she could have stopped at that if she really wanted—iron deficiency, something like that.

"Just sick," she said again, and Sheila studied her a moment longer, then for some reason washed her hands, dried them, and walked back out, the high heels the show floor demanded clicking on the tile floor.

Kip wasn't thrilled about giving Jenna the rest of the day off, especially after her showing up late two times already this week, but he said he couldn't have her falling down and conking her head in the workplace, either.

He peeled a ten out of his wallet, told her to get a burger at the drugstore, the double-meat. That it looked like she needed it, cool?

Jenna folded the bill into the front pocket of her blue work slacks and slumped out. For once, the Subaru started.

And she did eat a burger and fries at the counter of the drugstore. Thank you, Kip.

She had to keep her strength up.

Walking through the sun back to the Subaru, though, her nose spontaneously started spurting blood, like all the valves and chambers inside her were going spongy.

Working on automatic, Jenna scrounged a cup up from the side of the building and leaned her face down to it, to save every last drop.

She was down to the last little bit when Took sat down beside her, her sunglasses the big bug-eyed kind, like she was a movie star.

“Hey,” she said, not even asking about the cup, the blood.

They’d known each other since third grade, didn’t need to ask those kinds of questions.

“You don’t have to apologize,” Jenna said, trying to wipe her face clean now. “He’s ... he’s him, yeah? I fell for it too.”

Took nodded, kept nodding. It was like she was dialed into her own personal radio station in her head.

“What?” Jenna finally said.

Took looked away, down the street, and that was when Jenna caught her left eye behind those sunglasses.

It was swollen shut, pounded black and blue.

Goddamn him.

What happened to him, out there on the water? Had he always had this kind of bullshit in him?

Took’s lips were doing that curling-in over and over thing. She was trying to hold it in.

Jenna took her hand, held it tight.

“Don’t worry,” she said to Took.

“What?” Took said.

“Just wait,” Jenna told her.

Just wait.

★ ★ ★

Along with the last letter Victor sent back had been that photograph of Jenna across the rusted hood of the Camaro, her boots crossed on one side, her head cocked up on her hand at the other side, just like Caroline Williams. Just like Stretch.

It was creased in the middle with a white line, which Jenna guessed was from carrying it in a pocket, and on the back, in ink that

was supposed to last forever, was “V/J” in a neatly drawn heart.

Jenna didn't keep it in her cigar box, but she did still have it.

Now she knew why.

Ever since his return, and his many-many conquests all around town, Victor had been carefully avoiding her. Just because he didn't want a scene, Jenna knew.

The big brave roughneck, yeah.

But now she had a secret weapon, didn't she?

The Camaro was back to cherry, had come together well enough that, except for those turbine rims that she guessed her dad must have liked enough to trade out the stock jobs, it might as well have just come off the assembly line in Detroit.

Too, she realized in a dim way that she'd dialed back from “bio-mom” and “bio-dad” to just Mom and Dad, some of the time, in the privacy of her head. She'd felt guilty for it at first, like this was some big betrayal of her real parents, but ... it was because the people in that old snapshot were who she needed *now*, right?

Her real parents had raised her right and given her every chance, but now, in this violent fairy tale she'd stumbled into, her first parents were coming back to protect her.

That was the best way she had to explain what was happening.

They'd died in that Camaro at the drive-in just from bad luck, not from an absence of love or duty to their new baby girl, and that was supposed to have been the end of the story. Except that hit of bad luck got balanced out by the *good* luck of Jenna bleeding onto the hood of that very same car, and bringing that night back to life, sort of.

Enough.

Sure, it had cost a lot more blood to get the car back to good, but everything good's got a steep price, doesn't it?

And no, Jenna hadn't actually gotten close enough to speak to them yet.

But, from about ten slots away, and now that the Camaro was whole and hale again, she could sometimes, when the moonlight

was just right, just see their outlines in there.

They were still waiting for the second feature to glow onto the screen.

They didn't need to know how their Camaro had gotten back to the drive-in, so neither did Jenna.

It was enough that they *were* back.

For her.

It couldn't just be random, she knew. From the night she cut her hand on that burr on the hood, Victor telling her to cross her feet like this, not like that, her mom and dad had known how he was going to play her. With their ghost eyes, they could probably even see that the ring in his pocket wasn't even real diamond, just seventy-five dollars of gold.

Not that it would have mattered back then. It's the *fact* of the ring that makes the world turn, not what the ring's worth.

That was yesterday's fairy tale, though.

This, at the old drive-in, was today's.

And Took having caught the back of Victor's big hand, probably from when she started getting what Victor would have called "clingy," just confirmed that what Jenna was doing was what she was supposed to be doing.

The plan was to get Victor out to the old drive-in at night.

After that, things would take care of themselves: He'd see that cherry Camaro and he'd have to drift over to inspect it closer. Anybody would. What's a car like this doing all the way out here, where the sun can fade that pretty paint? Somebody didn't just *leave* it, did they?

He'd run his hand along those smooth lines, his mouth practically salivating, and when he got to the passenger-side front window, it would crank down slow, causing him to back up, hands held high and away like he means no harm, here. He was just looking, man.

"It's all right, it's all right," Jenna's mom would say in her easy voice, and then tilt her head over to the driver's seat, where Jenna's dad would be leaning across to look up and out.

“We used to come here!” Jenna’s dad would say, and Victor would nod, look up to the screen like imagining when movies used to play there, and when he came back to the Camaro, it would be empty again.

“What the—?” he’d say, jacking all his old football senses up, his weight on the balls of his feet now so he could explode any which way.

Except, when he turned, Jenna’s mom and dad would already be standing there, wouldn’t they?

Standing there and shaking their heads, grinning grins that you don’t really ever want grinned at you.

At which point it would be too late for poor old Victor—they’d rip him limb from limb, and then pack him into the trunk, probably, each hug Jenna once, and, without words, she’d understand that they couldn’t stay, that this was really it for them, they’d only come back to protect their baby girl like they always meant to.

Jenna would watch those taillights kiss each other bye, and then the Camaro would be gone, maybe to show up again in the fourth row to the right at the junkyard. Just, now, in that trunk that would never be opened again, that would only be eventually crushed, there would be some certain remains, from someone who remained no more, thank you.

To be one hundred percent certain this would work, though, Jenna went to the pawn shop up in Longview—she didn’t want to get mired down in Houston traffic—and walked out with one of those TV/VCR jobs that plug into a cigarette lighter.

Next she had Cray-Cray jam that old photo of her under Victor’s windshield wiper, and made her promise not to key his paint again.

“Do I want to know?” Cray-Cray asked.

Jenna didn’t answer, just bit her top lip in.

She’d eaten three drugstore burgers already that day, to try to get some blood back.

On the back of the photo now, which Cray-Cray, being who she was, would surely read, was “*drive-in, midnight.*”

Jenna was there by ten, the Subaru tucked back behind the screen.

She thought it would be more dramatic, or a better vantage point, to stand up on the catwalk under the screen, the one everybody spray-painted their names from, but she didn't want Victor to pass the Camaro by, think she wanted him to climb up there too.

She had shimmied up the marquee sign, though, put what letters she could back, and in the right order, with the right spaces left between them.

Everything had to be just right, she figured. As right as she could get it.

She'd even called California to talk to her mom, but her parents' camper was already booking it for Oregon.

It was probably for the best.

Her adopted mom might not have recognized the girl she raised.

For the first hour and a half of her wait, Jenna drifted from speaker pole to speaker pole, pushing off for the next one and the next one until she'd touched them all, for luck.

There was still a big char-spot where all the bonfires usually were, and there were bottles and cans all around, and over by the roofless projection booth somebody'd dumped an old fireworks stand, it looked like.

The moon was bright again, the sky clear.

Jenna wondered if the Subaru would start or not, and then decided that it didn't matter. Or, no—it was better if it didn't. She didn't need *that* to work. She needed the other thing to work.

And it would.

If it didn't, then Victor was just going to leave a line of Jennas and Tooks behind him, wasn't he? A whole line of women, all looking out one eye. Or worse.

A cool scar, a good story, and a steady paycheck doesn't give you the right to do that. It shouldn't, anyway.

Jenna had been so proud of him when he hired on, though, that was the thing. It hadn't been her idea—you have to be careful about

giving somebody an idea that can get them killed—but instead of hanging around and taking whatever life gave him, her guy was taking a chance, he was going out for *more*.

She guessed he must have found it, too, somewhere out there. Or maybe in Galveston or New Orleans, when he found that stepping down out of a helicopter made the girls notice you in a different way.

It would have been better if he never proposed, wouldn't it have? Maybe Jenna goes to cosmetology school with Cray-Cray, then, and rents a chair at the salon, doesn't have to spend her life calling farther and farther away dealerships to see if they've got this fuel line, that brake kit.

It's not really that, though.

If he'd come back the same, if he hadn't lied to her, if he'd been who he said he was, then ... then it could have been him and her against the world, right? They wouldn't have had to give up bonfire parties, they could have still lived with Took and Cray-Cray, or some of his buds, they could have both worked at the Chevy house, but—they would be doing all this *together*, like they meant to, like Jenna had pinned so much of her heart on.

Then, eventually, at the end of so many years, they buy a camper, set out to see America, right?

Why not.

Just, now, instead: this. Bleeding into a magical car for too many nights, gambling on ghosts, and hoping nobody asks too many questions.

When Victor's square halogens dialed down to orange parking lights for his slow turn off the highway, the weak dome light in the Camaro flicked on and then, slower, off. Like the filament was still hot, yeah. But also like someone's hand had cupped it, was hiding it.

Jenna had to breathe deep to keep her lungs from fluttering away.

It was happening.

Keeping the Camaro between her and Victor's truck, approaching in jagged lines so as to dodge the speaker poles, she scurried up to the Camaro, only looked in at the last moment, to be sure she wasn't about to reach across her mom.

The car was ... not exactly empty, she could tell.

But she could reach in, plug the little television into the cigarette lighter, then reach around onto the hood, hit the play button under the screen.

Ideally, she'd figure some way to project *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* onto the old screen, but, even if she could figure how to do that, it would only draw eyes from the highway.

So, an eleven-inch little TV positioned on an old winter jacket right in front of the windshield would have to do.

It was all about recreating that night, right?

The night they'd died, probably in this exact same slot.

Victor's parking lights dimmed down and he killed the engine, coasted in, his tires crunching through the dirt into the old gravel, the dry grass hissing against his undercarriage.

Jenna was sitting with her back to the rear fender, now. The plan had been to run away, hide, let this happen now that she'd set everything up so perfectly, but she hadn't counted on how close she was cutting it.

Leatherface's chainsaw ripped up out of the TV's tiny speaker.

"Jen?" Victor called, probably standing on his running board.

Because—yeah—of course he had to assume she was in the Camaro, didn't he? Girl calls him out here, then the only car has to be her.

He can probably even see someone moving behind the glass, Jenna told herself. Or, tried to pray true.

He stepped down, shut his door heavily behind him.

"Jen? Jenna?"

Jenna stared up into the sky.

The back of her throat was acid with hope. With justice.

“Um, hey?” Victor said then, stepping closer, close enough that Jenna knew if she looked under the car, she’d see the toes of the worn-through work boots he was still wearing, even though you don’t need composite toes poking through to pick up girls.

But he might hear her shifting around.

She held both hands over her mouth instead.

Victor knocked once on the driver’s side window and then stepped back, it sounded like.

Nothing.

Victor’s boots took another couple of steps, then, and the movie stopped, or paused.

“Hello?” he said, and then Jenna heard the delicious sound of the door on the other side either being hauled open, or, from the inside, *kicked* open.

It was starting.

The car creaked either with new weight or with less weight.

Jenna closed her eyes in celebration, and then—

The engine tried to turn over?

“What?” she said.

They—they weren’t supposed to leave for Heaven *yet*.

And of course the engine wouldn’t start: She hadn’t bled into the gas tank yet. There was no reason to, and she didn’t have enough blood left anyway.

She stood, leaned around to look in from the passenger side, and flinched a bit from Victor slinging that power cord for the little TV out so he could roll the passenger side window up, really relish this car’s interior.

He never saw her, either, was too busy touching everything at once, trying out the blinkers, the headlights. Running through the gears, adjusting the stereo dials over click by delicate click—getting only static, of course.

“No,” Jenna said, scanning all around for her mom, her dad.

Where were they?

And then Victor found the “Trunk Compartment Lid Release Button Switch,” OEM 92224594—Jenna knew all the part numbers, all the proper names.

Victor opened the trunk, then the hood as much as it would, and then was fiddling with the radio again.

The whole car was a toy, to him. A gift.

He wasn’t even recognizing it from the junkyard either, she guessed. Or from the photo of her and the car that he’d said he’d spend long hours staring into, and thinking about.

But—really? That he was more concerned with the dial on the stereo than what was under the hood told her all she needed to know about him. All anybody needed to know.

“Where are you? Where are you?” she mumbled as loud as she dared, to her parents.

Had she done something wrong? She had really seen them sitting in the front seats, hadn’t she? That hadn’t just been wishful thinking, had it?

And even if it was, then ... how to explain her blood bringing the car back to cherry?

She shook her head no: *nothing* could explain that.

Nothing except exactly what she thought should be happening—her real and true parents coming back to stomp the living shit out of the guy who’d wronged her, who’d sent her life one way when it was supposed to have gone the other way, the better way, the fairy-tale way.

But he was sitting there turning the dial this way then that way, and her real parents were ... they were right where they’d always been, weren’t they?

Not here.

Shit.

Jenna ground her teeth and balled her hands into fists, wishing she’d had a backup plan, that she’d—she didn’t know—that she’d rigged the whole drive-in screen to fall down on top of him, smush him like the bug he was. That would be pretty great. Or if she’d dug

some pit and lined it with spikes, stretched some camo netting over it. Or even just left a vanilla Dr. Pepper, his favorite, in the Camaro's cupholder, cold enough that he couldn't taste the strychnine in it. Or a hundred other things.

What she'd really done, though, she could tell now, was give him a cherry Camaro, hadn't she?

One coursing with her own lifeblood.

"Not likely," said, and stood against the car—who cared if he felt the springs shifting with her, who cared if he was about to see her crossing in the rearview mirror.

Where she was going was his little Dallas Cowboys short-bed, where she knew he'd left the keys, as his truck was too distinctive for anybody in Nacogdoches to steal.

She didn't want to steal it, though.

What she wanted to do was pull the brights on, drop it into low, and jam that grill guard right into the side of this pretty Camaro, and keep her foot in it until the projection booth or the fireworks stand stopped her.

Halfway around the car, though, the open trunk hiding her from the rearview mirror, she stopped, had to look twice to be sure she was seeing what she was seeing, what she guessed she could have seen if she'd had that whole camera roll with her parents in it, instead of just one random snapshot: the reason they were each covered in chaff and dust.

They'd been cutting wood for the winter.

With a *chainsaw*.

Jenna sucked air in, reached down to touch this bad little thing with all due reverence.

Then she used that same hand to hold it down while she pulled on the starter rope.

It just sputtered, and right then, like covering that sputter, the Camaro's speakers came on loud. CCR, blaring.

Victor turned it down fast.

“Hey, Jen, that you?” he said, adjusting the rearview mirror. “Can you believe this?” Yes, she could: Her parents *were* saving her. In the only way they could.

Because she’d been through this before for many nights, she knew just what to do, too: she spun the chainsaw’s little gas cap off, bit her lower lip deeper than she ever had, and spit long and red into the heart of this Stihl, then spun the cap back on.

She was pretty sure two-strokes like this called for high octane, 89 or better, but she didn’t think her blood would be hot enough get the job done.

In the tight confines of the trunk, she ripped that little engine alive.

And of course she was wearing those same jean shorts, and it didn’t even matter that she wasn’t blonde like Caroline Williams—in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*, Stretch had been brunette anyway, and, mixing Jenna’s real dad’s surfer locks with her real mom’s Indian and Mexican hair, brunette was just how Jenna’d come out.

It didn’t matter that Victor had unplugged that little TV.

Now the movie was starting.

Instead of hauling the chainsaw out and chasing him with it—if he could keep thousands of pounds of equipment from pulling him to the bottom of the ocean, he could probably bat these spinning teeth away—she angled it forward, chewed a ragged hole in the rear seat, connecting the trunk’s air with the air Victor was breathing.

And then she shut that trunk hard, left the chainsaw running in there, and stepped back and to the side, to see through the driver’s window.

Victor was turning every which way in the seat, trying to get away from the carbon monoxide. He was trying the door handle again and again, but, unlike every girl in town, it wasn’t submitting to him.

The window crank came off in his hand.

Jenna stepped back, clicked the headlights of his truck on, so she could watch him writhe in that front seat, claw at the window, finally

try to crash through it with his elbow, then with the cranks themselves.

It was made of Jenna's blood, though. And her parents' love.

It would never break.

Victor's struggles got slower and slower, until he was pleading with her, and then convulsing, these whole-body dry heaves, his eyes spilling tears, his face wet.

Jenna just crossed her arms, shrugged, and never looked away.

When he finally died—it took at least ten delicious minutes—his face was right up to the glass, framed by his hands, his fingers open and pleading.

Jenna turned the headlights of his truck off, wiped her prints off the door and steering wheel and keys, and then, collecting the little television, she saw that, under the junk coat it had been resting on, the hood was back to rust.

And it was spreading.

Jenna nodded.

Walking away, that TV on her hip, she heard the Camaro settle down onto bare rims again.

She snugged the TV into the passenger seat of the Subaru, seatbelted it in for good measure, and—of *course*—she was going to have to push-start it again.

It didn't matter, though. She'd push it all the way to town, if need be.

She rolled it out from under the screen, tried to get as much speed as she could to climb that first-row hump, then she hauled the wheel to the right, to ride the smooth bottom of that aisle. Except the ground tilted *up* going this way, shit.

She leaned into it, screaming with the effort, not wanting to lose any ground, and then, unaccountably, the car surged forward, almost out from under her hands.

Jenna jogged to keep up, happened to look through the car, and there was her dad at the other door, leaning into this.

Jenna opened her mouth to say something, anything, but there were no words.

And—and at the trunk, leaning into it, her long hair nearly dragging on the ground but her strained face smiling, was Jenna's mom.

Jenna pushed harder with them, faster, and when the time was right she jumped down into the driver's seat, popped the clutch, and

—

Her life started.

She grabbed second gear, steered into it.



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LONG VIEW

SUSAN PALWICK

The Long View

S U S A N P A L W I C K

illustration by

C O R I N N E R E I D

T O R
B O T
C O M

“Sir,” Bonnie said, “we have a situation.”

Elliott looked wearily up at her. It was only ten in the morning and he’d already fielded three companion animal challenges. No, a student could not bring a cockroach into the dorms as an emotional support animal, because cockroaches couldn’t be neutered. No, a nursing queen and her five kittens could not be counted as one emotional support animal, and six animals were not allowed in one dorm room. No, the student whose Vietnamese potbellied pig was trained to alert to oncoming seizures—and was therefore a legitimate service animal—was not allowed to roll in slop from the dining hall, because the Student Eco-Alliance had already claimed the slop as compost for their community garden.

Outside Elliott’s window, he heard the familiar chanting of the Monday morning protesters. Free Animals Now, the student group maintaining that all animals were sentient persons and that using any of them to help humans was flat-out slavery, rotated their daily protests. Today they were at the Office of Animal Affairs, which Elliott directed. The rest of the week, they’d show up at various labs; at the stables which housed the campus’s four miniature horses, the latest rage in guide animals; at the Student Counseling Center, which had a fish tank in its lobby; and at the dog park on the university quad. Elliott liked FAN. They were nice kids, among the most thoughtful Elliott had met, with a refreshing tendency to forego ironic snark for old-fashioned sincerity. He raised his voice over their chants of *Will all be free? Free will for all!*

“Yes, Bonnie? What is it?”

“Tatiana Prentiss, sir.”

Elliott bit back a groan. He loved animals, and he empathized with most of the students he saw. Tatiana Prentiss was a trial both to him and, as far as he could tell, to anyone else who had to deal with

her. She used an alphabet soup of DSM diagnoses—ADHD, PTSD, BPD—to sidestep every rule other students with the same conditions worked so hard to observe. She couldn't take exams, which triggered her anxiety. She couldn't write papers because of her processing issues, and anyway assignments were coercive violations of her freedom of speech. She insisted on fulfilling her course requirements through hours-long one-on-one meetings with professors, whom she promptly sued if they gave her anything less than an A. Smitten with fantasy, a genre Elliott himself enjoyed, she wore her long blonde hair in elven braids, spoke fluent Klingon, and was reportedly a dab hand with an epee, a skill Elliott had no wish to witness. If the university tried to expel her for being outrageous, she'd sue. She was a junior. They were all stuck with her for at least two more years.

"I take it Tatiana has a new emotional support animal?"

"Yes, sir." Bonnie's face was impassive, her tone as professional as ever, although she of all people had every right to resent Tatiana Prentiss. Bonnie was the best student worker Elliott had ever had, maybe because she was one of the oldest, here on the G.I. bill. Her daily outfit of a crisply pressed dress shirt and khakis amounted to a civilian uniform. Everything about her was neat: the dark hair coiled into a bun at the nape of her neck, the prosthetic right hand with which she wrote meticulous notes, the sling around her neck holding her own emotional support animal.

She reached into the sling now with her left hand, the one that hadn't been destroyed by the IED, and gently removed Siren. "Here, sir." She passed Elliott the guinea pig. "He'll help you stay calm." Elliott had never seen Bonnie be anything other than calm, but he'd also never seen her without Siren.

"Weep weep," said Siren, and Elliott smiled as the bean-shaped creature rooted in his shirt pocket, looking for treats. Elliott hadn't brought any today.

"Thank you, Bonnie. So what poor creature is Tatiana dragging to campus now?"

Bonnie's face twitched, and Elliott saw her suppress a smile. "She says it's a dragon."

"A *dragon*?" Tatiana must have gotten hold of some kind of lizard, and that couldn't end well. Reptiles weren't easy to care for. Tatiana hadn't even done a decent job of training or controlling her first emotional support animal, a Pekingese who attacked everything it could reach and had been banned from campus after it mauled a blind student's much larger guide dog. Tatiana had sued, of course. The case was still wending its way through the courts.

Elliott yearned, as he so often did, for the days when only actual service animals, highly trained to perform specific and crucial tasks, had been allowed on campus. Emotional support animals had been a gray area for a long time; they were technically covered under disability law, but required no training or documentation. University disabilities offices around the country had been quietly discouraging them, but then some provost or other had realized that, like parking, they could be a sizeable source of income. Emotional support animal fees ranged from five hundred dollars a semester for low-maintenance animals that could live easily in dorms—cats and dogs and guinea pigs—to upward of two thousand dollars a semester for animals requiring additional housing, like the miniature-horse stables.

Elliott found the university's greed infinitely depressing, especially since as far as he could tell, the money—whether from parking or ponies—went into athletics, not academics. He hated having to pay four hundred dollars a year to park at his own job. Parking spaces never attacked guide dogs.

Tatiana had sued to protest the fees the summer before her freshman year. That one was still tied up in the courts, too. Elliott wondered how she was paying her attorney; it was all contingency work, he guessed. He'd heard a story that at least one lawyer had fired her and been sued himself for his trouble. Elliott rubbed his eyes, gave Siren one last pat—"weep, weep!"—and handed the rodent back to Bonnie. "A dragon."

“She says it’s perfectly safe, sir. She’s done something to keep it from breathing fire.” Bonnie almost smiled again. “She says its wings are clipped.”

“Ah.” Elliott nodded. “You mean she’s thinking about other people for a change? Or is she telling us this so that when she shows up with a gecko or a green anole, we won’t point out that a real dragon would be a lot bigger, fly, and breathe fire?”

“I don’t know, sir. But we’ll find out soon. She’s bringing it here at one this afternoon to demand special accommodations for it.”

★ ★ ★

If Elliott was going to deal with Tatiana Prentiss, he needed air. He took a long lunch, bought a sandwich and coffee at the student union, and carried them outside. He’d texted his plans to his wife, Shelley, and she met him on his favorite bench along the quad, where they could watch students playing frisbee, and gamboling dogs leaping to catch the frisbees, and stately trees rustling in the soft September breeze. Soon the leaves would change. Elliott wondered when students would start bringing emotional support plants to classes. That would be a lot easier to handle, although any such development would probably be accompanied by protesters maintaining that plants were sentient, could feel pain, and shouldn’t be enslaved.

“So,” Shelley said, sitting next to him. “Another Tatiana drama?”

“Yeah. I probably shouldn’t talk about it here. News at eleven.” Shelley laughed, and Elliott reached for her hand. He still wasn’t sure why she’d agreed to marry him fifteen years ago, but he’d been giving thanks ever since. “And how’s your day going?”

When Elliott and Shelley met, in grad school, he’d been studying for his master’s in the philosophy of science and she’d been getting a PhD in English, writing her dissertation on Spenser’s warrior women in *The Faerie Queene*. Now Elliott fielded inquiries about cockroaches while Shelley, Assistant to the Second Deputy Vice President for Academic Integrity, helped professors investigate and

prosecute plagiarism cases. They were both lucky to have jobs, and they knew it.

“Way too busy, considering that it’s only September,” she said. “A doctoral student in the sciences stole another student’s research results, and a liberal arts master’s student lifted part of his written comps wholesale from Wikipedia—”

“*Wikipedia?*”

“Yep. Cheating standards get lower every year. Meanwhile, the provost is still pressuring us to try to shut down the frat paper-and-exam files, although how we have any hope of doing that is beyond me, and even if we could, there’d still be all the online services. Sometimes I wonder if there are any honest students left.”

Elliott interlaced his fingers with hers and squeezed her hand. “You’re seeing a skewed sample.”

“Bad lenses. So I tell myself.” She nodded at a figure approaching them. “Well, here’s someone who should be able to cheer us up. Hey, Russell! Care to join us?”

Russell Gibbons was a Foundation Professor in History and the head of the Honors Program. Honors students reliably swept university awards, graduated with impossible GPAs, and sailed off to top medical and law schools. Last year, one of the program’s freshpersons had grown a working human kidney in a Mason jar in her dorm room and been flown to the White House, although she’d since dropped out of school to sell boutique body parts and publish her wildly popular webzine, *Organ Girl*.

Russell, who had already seemed ancient when Elliott and Shelly arrived on campus ten years ago, settled himself cautiously next to them. “Hello, youngsters.” This was an old joke between them. “As you know, my doctor wants me to stay out of the sun because of that infernal skin cancer, but I’m fleeing a battalion of parents demanding detailed explanations for why their darlings weren’t admitted to the Honors program. One mother excoriated me for caving to politically correct pressures to admit more minority students. Someone’s father

informed me that, since I'm an old white guy, the Honors Program is obviously racist, imperialist, and homophobic."

He gave them a wan smile. Russell, an internationally recognized scholar in the history of human rights movements, had been arrested at the 1963 March on Washington. Through strenuous recruiting, he'd increased BIPOC enrollment in the Honors Program from twelve to thirty-eight percent, a number he still considered far too low. He and his husband Howard tithed ten percent of their annual income to Amnesty International.

"Oh, hell," said Shelley. "We were counting on you for good news."

"Students and their parents move through here in four years, usually," said Russell. "We abide, barnacles clinging to rocks. We are intellectually rigorous, committed individuals who take the long view, eschewing fads and instant gratification." He pulled a chocolate bar out of his pocket. "And if you ask nicely, I'll share this with you."

Fortified slightly by the chocolate, a bracing 76% superdark laced with bacon and habanero pepper, Elliott returned to the office, where he found Bonnie supervising two university maintenance men as they wrestled the huge glass-topped table out of the conference room. He raised his eyebrows at her.

"Tatiana says we'll need a lot of room, sir. But there are still chairs in there."

"Ah. So maybe it's not a gecko or a green anole? I bet she dressed Mickey up in some kind of giant dragon costume." Tatiana's friendships rarely lasted long, but her latest follower—the quiet, studious Michaela Zins—had proven unusually loyal. Elliott wondered how she found time for coursework while keeping up with Tatiana's antics.

"I hope so, sir. Mickey would be a very polite dragon."

Elliott sighed and checked his watch. Twelve fifty. For all her vexing attributes, Tatiana was prompt, and in fact often early. "I guess we'd better go inside and wait." Bonnie would be there for backup, and as a witness. Tatiana hadn't yet accused anyone of

sexual harassment, but Elliott didn't want to leave her any openings. Such precautions were standard procedure now even with less litigious students.

They went inside. They hadn't been seated thirty seconds when Elliott heard the office door open. That would be Tatiana.

It was Mickey. She rushed into the conference room, her face pale and tracked with tears. She was shaking. "She— She— You can't let her! I don't care how much she threatens you with lawyers or whatever! She can't get away with this!"

"Sit down," Bonnie said, and handed her a tissue. "Do you need some water?"

"Get away with what?" Elliott said. But just then, Tatiana strolled into the room. Today her hair was in especially elaborate braids, and she wore clothing of some black shiny stuff with a vague resemblance to armor. Elliott hoped she didn't have her epee with her. She looked extremely pleased with herself.

She was alone. She wasn't carrying anything; he saw no creature perched on her shoulder. If not for Mickey's distress, he'd have thought Tatiana had just played some bizarre joke on them, although she usually took herself very seriously indeed.

She grinned at the three of them. "Let me show you my new emotional support animal. Mickey's already seen him; I guess she wanted another look. I don't blame her." She waved a hand, and the air rippled. Elliott felt his ears pop, smelled an odd mixture of sulfur and manure, and saw a section of the conference wall opposite him shimmer as something slithered into the room through what he could only guess was some kind of tear in the space-time continuum.

The head emerged first: as large as Elliott's Prius, scaled in bronze, the eyes glowing red coals. The rest of the animal followed, a vast length of muscled gold supported by five-toed feet sporting two-foot talons. The creature's wings stayed folded tight against its sides. Had they been outstretched, Elliott guessed, they would have shattered the conference room walls like eggshells. He stared, dazed. Bonnie had raised both hands to her face; Mickey hiccupped.

He heard a tiny, muffled “weep weep,” and tore his gaze from the dragon to see that Siren had burrowed into the very bottom of Bonnie’s sling.

Tatiana was talking. “You already have documentation about my disabilities, but I know you need a specific letter from my shrink about how this animal will help relieve symptoms.” She reached into a pocket and pulled out a piece of letterhead covered with shaky writing. Her psychiatrist usually typed his letters, but at this point, Elliott knew his signature. Even from here, the document looked legit. “He was pretty scared when he was writing this, and it’s a little hard to read, so let me summarize.” Her tone defined the word *smug*. “He says that my dragon alleviates my ADHD because I have to stay so focused to summon him and keep him with me, and alleviates my PTSD from being bullied in high school by making me feel really powerful, and alleviates my BPD symptoms by making me feel less empty.” She held out the letter. Bonnie took it; Elliott, transfixed by the dragon, couldn’t move.

Tatiana kept talking. “I can keep him from flying and breathing fire. He has to do what I say; he’s bound to me. See, like this.” She turned to the dragon and said, “Open your mouth.”

The dragon’s mouth was lined with many rows of teeth. Its dark gullet emitted a stench of charred wood. “Close your mouth,” Tatiana said, and it did. “Now hold out your hand.”

The dragon extended one of its taloned feet, considerably larger than Tatiana’s head. She touched her palm to the bottom of it. “High five! See, he’s completely safe. I’m not going to tell him to roll over, though, or we’d all be crushed.” She giggled, and Mickey whimpered. Elliott, who felt like he’d been kicked in the solar plexus, struggled for breath.

Bonnie found her voice, although it was strained. “What does this creature eat?”

Anyone Tatiana doesn’t like, Elliott thought. *God help us all.*

“Um, well, he eats salad. I gave him salad and he ate it. With nuts and fruit. And yogurt.”

Yogurt. Elliott cleared his throat. "Tatiana. Is it an omnivore? Does it eat meat?" He had a sudden image of the dragon hoovering up all the dogs on campus, service animals and emotional support animals and badly trained pets alike, along with their human handlers.

"He's under my command." Tatiana's voice was stronger again, more confident. "He won't eat anything unless I tell him he can."

"Which means you may be depriving him of his proper diet," Bonnie said.

Annoyance flickered across Tatiana's face, and the dragon emitted a low bellow, a cross between a foghorn and a lion's roar. Elliott forced himself not to flinch. "He's not with me all the time. When I'm sleeping I let him go back ... well, back to where he came from. He can eat whatever he wants there. So I don't need a special dorm room for him." She said this in a tone suggesting that she was doing the university a great favor. "But when I summon him, he has to come here, and when he's with me, he can't eat anything unless I allow it."

She raised her chin. "He's perfectly safe. But I need to meet with my professors in places where there's room for him, because having him with me makes me feel stronger and smarter and more stable. You have the letter from my doctor saying so. So I need to be able to reserve one of the big conference rooms at the library, and the library says other people need those rooms and my professors say I have to meet with them in their offices, but their offices are too small. So you need to talk to them. And to the library."

Her psychiatrist had clearly already seen the dragon; Elliott doubted the others had. Surely gossip like that would already have spread across campus. Or maybe not; who would believe it? He took a breath, about to tell Tatiana that they'd look at her paperwork and consider the matter—standard stalling language—when Mickey said, in a quavering voice, "Tat. Let him go. This is wrong."

Tatiana's eyes narrowed. "No one asked you. You shouldn't even be here."

“He’s not a cat or a dog or a horse. He’s not domesticated. He’s huge and old and wild and beautiful. He doesn’t belong to you. Let him go.”

Tatiana shrank a little; Elliott had never seen one of her friends defy her. But then she glanced at the dragon, took a deep breath, and stood up straighter. “Shut up, Mickey. You can’t tell me what to do. You’re just jealous.”

Mickey swiped tears off her face. “No! I’m not! Let him go. You’re hurting him.”

Elliott remembered how upset Mickey had been when she rushed into the office. Now he realized that she’d been frightened, not *of* the dragon, but *for* it. He looked at the beast again, forced himself to meet that glowing gaze. The dragon turned slightly to regard him; it sniffed the air between them, and then lowered its head until its chin rested on the floor mere inches from Elliott’s feet, the huge snout towering above him. To his shock, Elliott felt the animal trembling, a shaking in his own bones. He reached out instinctively, as one would to calm a dog, and barely brushed the shining skin.

And was flooded with the pain of contortion and constriction and shattering loss. Ageless beauty and wisdom, grandeur, the sweep of time and history all confined by the cruelty of a tiny parasite, an agony of imprisonment, the gasping terror of fettered breath. And amid all that, a single syllable, word or thought or image Elliott couldn’t have said, but undeniable however it had formed: *Please*.

He withdrew his hand. No dragon should have to beg. Hatred of Tatiana knotted his stomach. “Have you touched—”

“Of course I have.” She shot him a look of loathing, and Elliott tasted bile. Tatiana enjoyed the dragon’s pain.

Bonnie rested her fingers on the dragon’s skin now, and snatched her hand back almost at once. She had gone as pale as the paper covered with the doctor’s shaky writing. Elliott saw her swallow. He forced himself to speak. “We’ll talk to the library. We’ll talk to your professors. Come back tomorrow.”

Tatiana smiled. “You can go now,” she told the dragon sweetly, and it vanished far more quickly than it had arrived, with a thunderclap that rattled the conference room door in its frame.

Bonnie. Her PTSD. Elliott turned, reaching unthinkingly to reassure her. She leaped away from him, her face still the color of bone, fists clenched, and let out a low wail, a horrifying sound from someone usually so composed.

“I’m sorry,” he said, stammering. “I’m sorry, the noise, I thought it must remind you— The IED— I shouldn’t have—”

“Weep weep weep weep weep!” Siren was an agitated movement in the sling. Elliott glanced behind him to see Mickey bracing herself against the wall. Tatiana was already gone. Elliott was surprised she hadn’t stayed to revel in their pain, too. He supposed human tears would be meager fare for someone who had learned how to torture a dragon.

Bonnie sucked in a breath, and he turned to face her again. “My apologies, sir.” And then, after a small hesitation, “The explosion isn’t why I need Siren, sir.” She paused again, and he waited, wondering numbly what could be worse than an IED. He was just about to tell her that it was all right, that she didn’t need to say anything else, when she did. “I’m a survivor of military sexual assault. Sir.”

Her face was wet. Touching the dragon must have been a thousand times worse for her than for him.

“I’m so, so sorry.” Nothing he could say would come close to being adequate.

“It wasn’t you, sir.” She drew in a long, shaky breath. “But sometimes my nervous system overgeneralizes.” She looked over his shoulder at Mickey. “Are you okay?”

“Fucking *monster*,” Mickey said, and Elliott knew she didn’t mean the dragon.

★ ★ ★

The three of them wound up huddled on the floor in Elliott’s office, backs against the wall, knees to their chests. They’d closed the door.

Elliott knew they'd look ridiculous to anyone who saw them, but they all felt better this way. Siren, nestled in Bonnie's lap, nibbled on a blueberry she'd given him as a special treat.

"How," said Elliott, "did she do that? How did she find a dragon? How did she bind it? That's like—like an amoeba lassoing a blue whale."

"Extreme Wicca," Mickey said dully.

"Wicca? I thought the principles of Wicca were 'Harm none, do as ye will' and 'Whatever you do to others will return to you threefold.'"

"Not in the extreme version."

"She's a bad witch," Bonnie said.

Mickey almost smiled. "She thinks Extreme Wicca sounds better."

Bonnie frowned. "Are there others? A coven?"

"Nope. Solo practitioner. She tried to join the campus coven, but they kicked her out, so she started her own thing."

"Okay," Elliott said. Good for the campus coven. "How is she doing this, and how do we stop her?"

Mickey shook her head. "I have no idea. If I knew, I'd have stopped her myself."

Bonnie, incongruously, looked at her watch. "Sir? You have a meeting with the Academic Standards and Admissions Committee in fifteen minutes."

"And so I do." Shelley and Russell would be there too; he'd never so badly needed the comfort of love and friendship. He heaved himself up from the floor, feeling a thousand years older than when he'd arrived at the office that morning. "Bonnie, you have the rest of the day off. Mickey, if I were you, I'd cut classes today."

"I'll stay at work, sir. We need to file those contracts."

Mickey looked baffled. "Why would I skip classes? I love them, and I've paid for them."

Maybe there was still hope.

The meeting went fine, and when Elliott got back to the office, the day seemed to have settled back into normalcy. He and Bonnie sorted paperwork, getting the year's set of contracts and permissions organized. It was the kind of tedium Elliott normally loathed, but today it was soothing. He knew he should be working on the problem of how to free the dragon, but he had no idea where to start. And the paperwork was pressing, and—as Bonnie had reminded him—had to be done today.

At five minutes to five, the office phone rang.

Elliott shook his head. "Why do people always call when I'm about to go home?"

Bonnie, adept at screening calls, smiled and picked it up. "Office of Animal Affairs, this is Bonnie. How may I help you?"

There was a pause, and then, "Mickey, breathe. Slow down. What's going on?"

Alarmed, Elliott looked up to find Bonnie frowning. "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Okay. We'll be right there." She craned her neck to peer out the window facing the quad. "Um, yeah, I do see. Thanks for letting us know."

Elliott looked out the window too; a group of people had gathered at the far end of the quad, and something shone and flashed in the air above them. "Oh no," he said. "Is that—"

"Apparently so." Bonnie had hung up. "We should go out there, sir. Tatiana's upset, and Mickey thinks we can help."

Tatiana was always upset. "Help how? And with what? What exactly is happening?"

"Tatiana's making the dragon do tricks."

"Tricks?" Oh, great. "What kind of tricks? Like eating people?"

"No. That's not the problem. It's not hurting anybody, but, well, people can't see it."

"What?" Elliott could see it even from a football field away. "How can they not—"

"We need to go there, sir. Mickey asked us to. I told her we would. She trusts us."

And Elliott trusted Bonnie. He texted Shelley—*I'm at work, sorry, home as soon as I can*—and hurried out the door after Bonnie. He wondered if he should have warned Shelley that he might be about to be eaten by a dragon.

Elliott and Bonnie got to the quad right before the university police did, which was a good thing, because otherwise they wouldn't have been allowed in at all. Tatiana stood in the middle of the huge grassy field, the dragon crouched next to her. It was far larger than Elliott could have guessed from the small bits of it he'd seen in the conference room. In the late-afternoon sunlight it glimmered: a variegated jewel, red and gold and silver, with flashes of purple and green. It wasn't doing tricks. It wasn't doing anything. It was just sitting there.

A group of people stood watching. Mickey, on the outskirts of the crowd, waved and ran over to Bonnie and Elliott. "She's trying to use it to impress those sorority girls because they didn't let her in when she rushed, but they don't see it, or they say they can't see it. They're making fun of her. She's having a meltdown."

Tatiana was declaiming to a trio of blondes. "I don't need your stupid sorority house! I have something better! I have him! And I can make him do whatever I want!"

She snapped her fingers, and the dragon rose into the air, writhing, and executed an awkward figure eight, releasing a softer version of the groan Elliott had heard in the conference room: the sound of continents shifting, mountains rising from the earth. His stomach twisted.

The three blondes gazed at the spot where the dragon was, but they were clearly puzzled. "What is that?" one said. Elliott recognized her as one of Russell's Honors students. Economics, if he remembered right. "A kite? She's really lost her mind."

"Yeah, she's crazy. Look, somebody must have called the cops."

To his left, he heard a group of students talking to one of the cops. "What is that thing?"

"I don't know," said the cop. "It doesn't look dangerous, does it?"

“Some kind of bird? It’s awfully big.”

Elliott blinked. They couldn’t see the dragon. They couldn’t see that it was a dragon.

Imagination. They didn’t have any, and neither did Tatiana. She was in school because everyone her age she knew was in school, because she was desperate for approval she was never going to get, because she couldn’t conceive of doing anything else. He thought of fantasy stories where lack of imagination was the downfall of the villain. Sauron, who couldn’t imagine that two hobbits would try to carry the Ring to Mount Doom. The White Witch, who couldn’t imagine the deeper magic from before the dawn of time. King Haggard’s Red Bull, who knew only the difference between what Haggard wanted and what he didn’t want.

Tatiana knew this was a dragon. She read fantasy; she’d heard of dragons. But she could only imagine a dragon as a weapon or an accessory, a piece on a game board. The cop and many of the watching students could only imagine a dragon as a bird.

“Make fun of me all you want,” Tatiana said, “but you can’t do this!” She gestured at the dragon and it groaned again, flailing, dragging itself through the air in a series of loop de loops.

“Oh boy,” the cop said. “What kind of bird is that, anyway?” Elliott heard him muttering into a walkie-talkie, calling for a MOST team. MOST was city, not campus, the officers dispatched to psychiatric crises.

His stomach sank. Tatiana was a royal pain in the ass, and her cruelty to the dragon was unfathomable, but in this case, at least, she wasn’t crazy. The dragon was real.

The problem was that anyone who claimed to believe her would be called crazy, too.

All right: The situation had just gotten more complicated. Freeing the dragon was imperative, but so was protecting Tatiana. She was very young, desperately unhappy, and undoubtedly burdened with several personality disorders in addition to the ones on her official record, but if Elliott could figure out some way to turn this around

before MOST showed up, she wouldn't wind up in jail or a psychiatric holding facility.

He and Bonnie and Mickey all knew the dragon was real. He scanned the crowd for other allies, and spotted two FAN kids he knew to be big Tolkien readers. Chaz was solemn, owl-eyed, and wore tiny spectacles that created the impression of a twelve-year-old impersonating an AARP member; Johnna, thin and dressed in clothing that appeared to have been sewn together out of leaves, stared at the dragon with an expression of bliss. "A green great dragon!" she said, and Elliott smiled, recognizing the Tolkien reference.

Chaz' gaze was even wider than usual. "It's all kinds of colors," they said. "Not just green. It's beautiful."

So other people *could* see it; he and Bonnie and Mickey and Tatiana's shrink hadn't been hypnotized somehow. "Tatiana," Elliott called. She ignored him. "Tatiana, let the dragon go. You're about to get into a lot of trouble. As in psych-hospital-level trouble."

She ignored him. She was fixated on the sorority triplets.

"Good lord," someone said next to Elliot. "She has a dragon, and this is what she does with it?"

It was Russell. Shelley stood next to him, gaping. "Both of you can see it," Elliott said.

"Of course we can see it." Shelley's voice was hushed, reverent.

"Bonnie," Elliott said, "what do you think will happen if she lets it go? Will it hurt us?"

Bonnie shook her head. "I think it will run. If it has a way out, it will take it. Most animals will flee rather than fight if they have a choice. I think we'll be safe."

"I hope to heaven you're right," Elliott said. "Tatiana! Tatiana Prentiss!" He used his best teacher voice, and Tatiana's gaze flicked toward him. "Tatiana, let it go. The cops are calling for a psychiatric evaluation. You're about to be in more trouble than you want to have to handle."

She squinted at him. "I'm not crazy!"

"I know you aren't. Bonnie and Mickey know that too, and so do a couple other people here. But not everybody can see the dragon, okay? If the cops who come can, well, they won't think you're crazy, but you can't count on that. Bonnie and Mickey and I will vouch for you, but they might just think we're crazy too. Let it go, Tatiana."

One of the sorority girls laughed. "A dragon? She thinks she has a *dragon*."

Tatiana flushed. "I heard that!" She gestured at Russell and Shelley. "They can see it too. One of you tell them! Mickey, tell them it's real."

"It's real," Mickey said, very gently, "and you're hurting it. Let it go, Tat."

The middle sorority girl looked up at the dragon, shading her eyes. "Sorry, but—"

Her neighbor nudged her with an elbow and said loudly, "Okay, I see it now. There it is. Don't you see it, Casey?"

"Uh, oh—sure! There it is!" She smiled brightly, pointing, but she was pointing in the wrong direction. Tatiana, looking miserable, followed the trajectory of her pointing finger, and just then there was a thunderclap. The dragon was gone.

Tatiana whirled in a circle, her face flushed as she muttered increasingly frantic incantations, and finally let out a wail. "Wow," Mickey said. "It looks like she's lost control of it for good. How—"

"Doubt," Elliott said. "Whatever other methods she was using, I'm pretty certain you can't hold a creature like that unless you believe in it completely. She said so herself in our meeting, remember? That it alleviates her ADHD because she has to stay so focused to summon and hold it? She could tell those young women were trying to humor her. She thought maybe they were right. She thought maybe all of us were trying to humor her too."

And here was the MOST team. Tatiana was still whirling, looking for the dragon. She'd started chanting, probably trying to summon it again. Elliott's heart sank. She really did look deranged. At this point,

it would have been better if the dragon were still present. Maybe one of the cops would have been able to see it.

"Tatiana," Elliott said. "I know you're upset. I do know, but you need to get a grip right now for your own sake, all right?" He felt awful. Telling upset people to calm down was the worst thing you could do, but he wasn't sure what else to say. He wished her psychiatrist were here.

"But it— He—"

"Yes, he's gone. Look, if you could hold a dragon even for a little while, why do you care about getting into a sorority? Why do you care about grades? Why even stay in school?"

Her back stiffened, but he had her attention now. "I'm not a quitter!"

"Why not? Organ Girl quit; she didn't need school when she could sell people body parts. It certainly wasn't because she was stupid. Why do you need school if you can summon a dragon? You could charge the people who can see him money just to look at him. You could use him to, I don't know, fly around the world. There have to be better uses of a dragon than inflating your college transcript."

Shelley was frowning at him. With the near-telepathy of long marriage, he could guess what she was thinking. *What are you doing, Elliott? Why are you encouraging her?*

He didn't know, but he kept talking. "What are you going to do with all these excellent grades you've extorted? Go to grad school, where it will be more of the same? Get a job where you won't be able to perform, because you haven't learned anything here except how to manipulate the system?"

Shelley's frown had deepened. Elliott was being cruel. He knew he was. But he was also telling the truth, and Tatiana needed to hear it.

She didn't answer. Had she even been listening to him? She'd sunk onto the ground, where she sat cross-legged, hugging herself. A MOST officer approached her, and Tatiana looked up at her and said, in a voice that shook only slightly, "Thank you for coming. I

know you're trying to help me, but I'm all right now. Do you want to talk to my psychiatrist? I can give you his number. I'll be seeing him tomorrow. I'll talk about this, I promise." It was as adult and rational as Elliott had ever heard her.

The officer said something Elliott couldn't hear and handed Tatiana a piece of paper. Tatiana wrote on it and passed it back, and the officer retreated to the edge of the quad, although she and her partner stood watching.

The sorority girls had wandered away, and almost everyone else had, too, except Bonnie and Russell and Shelley and the FAN kids. Elliott went over to them. "It might be best to go home. I don't think she wants people staring at her right now."

"Okay," said Chaz. They called out to Tatiana, "I hope you feel better," and turned to leave.

Johnna lingered a moment later. "Thank you for showing me that dragons are real," she said, and flashed Tatiana a peace sign before joining Chaz on their way back to the dorms.

Shelley came over to Elliott and said, "I talked to the MOST team. They're okay with this being handled on campus. The Disability Resource Center will follow up to make sure she gets to that appointment tomorrow."

Elliott nodded. Tatiana had drawn her legs to her chest and had her arms around them, rocking. He hoped MOST hadn't left too soon. But when he and Bonnie picked their way over the grass to Tatiana, she looked up at them, her face tearstained.

"I know you're sorry he's gone," Bonnie said, "but you were hurting him."

Tatiana looked honestly bewildered. "I was?"

Elliott frowned. "You said you touched him. You must have known how much pain he was in."

Tatiana shook her head. "But I didn't do that. Did I? That's how I feel all the time. I thought—I thought he'd be my friend because he felt the same way. I thought—"

She was starting to cry again. Elliot, appalled, stared at her. That glance of loathing she'd given him in the conference room: It had been loathing of herself, not him. And she'd shrunk away when Mickey challenged her. There had been cracks in her armor all day, but he'd been too blind to understand them.

She'd been putting on a complicated act for a long time. She must be exhausted. He still didn't like her, or what she'd done. He still wondered how she was going to work her way back to anything like reasonable social functioning. But she was fully human to him now, not a caricature of adolescent entitlement.

She was huddled again, sobbing. Mickey came over and put a tentative hand on her shoulder. "Tat. It's going to be all right. You have to tell people how you really feel, is all."

"I hurt him? I did that?"

"He's okay now," Mickey said. Elliott fervently hoped that was true. "He's free. Just don't ... don't *ever* do anything like that again, okay? Give up Extreme Wicca. Can't you just be a regular Wiccan, or Episcopalian or something?"

Tatiana shuddered. "I don't know what I'm going to do." She looked up at Elliott. "I mean, school and all. What you said. I don't know." So she'd been listening after all.

"Well, you have time to figure it out." That was Bonnie. "Here. Do you want to hold Siren for a little while?"

Elliott couldn't believe she was handing over her trusted companion, but Tatiana smiled and cradled Siren in her lap, stroking him. Elliott could see how careful she was being not to hurt the little creature. "I don't belong here, do I?"

"Where?" Mickey said. "School? Planet Earth? Life?"

Elliott winced at Mickey's bluntness—although he'd been every bit as blunt himself—but Tatiana didn't seem to notice. She handed Siren gently back to Bonnie. "School, to start." She looked up at all of them and fastened on Russell, standing a few feet away. "You're the Honors guy, right? I'm not smart enough to be here, am I? I'm not smart enough to be in school."

Elliot's stomach twisted. He wished he didn't agree with her. But Russell said, "I think you're perfectly smart. You need to find better uses for your intelligence, that's all. You're hardly the only person with that problem. But a dragon! Dragons are ancient! How old was that one you showed us?"

Tatiana looked down at her lap and said in a mumble, "I don't know. Really old."

"Yes," Russell said with a smile. "And what's the dragon's name?"

She blushed now. "I don't know. I never asked. I guess I should have asked."

"He wouldn't have told you," Mickey said. "Dragons don't reveal their true names."

Tatiana twisted a piece of grass. "Then I should have given him one."

Russell moved to kneel beside her. "Maybe he'd be honored, if you gave him a name. Just think what you could learn, if you could befriend a being like that instead of torturing it! Think what you could teach the rest of us. Think what that dragon has seen!" Tatiana squinted at him, blinking, and he said, "Universities are places where people value very old knowledge a lot of society doesn't care about anymore. They're also places where people believe in what isn't always visible. Quarks. Dragons. Justice. I'd love to learn from you, if you could find a kinder way to teach us. Do you think you could do that?"

Shelley reached for Elliott's hand, and the two of them shared a smile. Russell and his long view. He was throwing Tatiana a lifeline, and if she was indeed smart, she'd take it.



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About the Authors

[Dominica Phetteplace](#) writes fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in *Zyzzzyva*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *F&SF*, *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Uncanny*, *Copper Nickel*, *Ecotone*, *Wigleaf*, *The Year's Best Science Fiction and Fantasy* and *Best Microfiction* 2019. Her honors include a Pushcart Prize, a Rona Jaffe Award, a Barbara Deming Award and fellowships from I-Park, Marble House Project and the MacDowell Colony. She is a graduate of UC Berkeley and the Clarion West Writers Workshop.

[Stephen Graham Jones](#) was raised as pretty much the only Blackfeet in West Texas - except for his dad and grandma and aunts and uncles and cousins. He now lives in Boulder, Colorado with his wife, a couple kids, and too many old trucks. Between West Texas and now, he's published more than twenty books, including the novels *The Fast Red Road*, *Ledfeather*, and *Mongrels*, and the short story collections *After the People Lights Have Gone Off*, *States of Grace*, and *The Ones that Got Away*.

Stephen's been the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Fiction, the Texas Institute of Letters Jesse Jones Award for Fiction, the Independent Publishers Awards for Multicultural Fiction, three This is Horror awards, and he's made *Bloody Disgusting's* Top Ten Novels of the Year. Stephen teaches in the MFA programs at University of Colorado at Boulder and University of California Riverside-Palm Desert.



Susan Palwick's debut novel, *Flying in Place*, won the Crawford Award for best fantasy debut. Her second novel, *The Necessary Beggar*, won the American Library Association's Alex Award. She lives with her husband in Reno, Nevada.



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