SPRING
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The Dark House

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There was nothing remarkable about the photograph, no reason it should be the first to catch my eye. Because it was a palladium print, it made the house into a kind of medium gray that looked almost silky, the way certain black-and-white pictures do. The label beside it on the gallery wall read *The Dark House, 1975*.

An evocative title, but the mystery was immediately ruined by the accompanying explanation. The house belonged to the photographer, Roger Benson. He'd used it exclusively to develop and display his photographs, hence locals started calling it *the Dark House*, like a darkroom, but a whole building.

Even with that explanation though, something unsettled me about the house without it being overtly strange. And once I'd noticed the house, I saw it everywhere, scattered throughout the exhibition next to Benson's photographs of trees, desert landscapes, portraits of women in flowery dresses, old men with cigarettes in their hands. A few photographs in color showed that the house was in fact yellow. A yellow that when transformed into black-and-white took on the tone of lowering storm clouds.

One other photograph of the house caught my eye in particular, tucked away near the gallery's exit like an afterthought. This one wasn't shot by Benson; it was an archival print of the house from 1939, long before Benson owned it but noted in the accompanying text as the first year he'd visited it and showing that the house had been a fixture in Benson's neighborhood when he was a child.

Back then, the Dark House was at once vastly different and undeniably the same. It was smaller, scarcely more than a single-room shack. At the same time, the seams were visible, the place where the addition would be grafted on to grow the house into the one Benson had obsessively photographed. The outline of the later house was already there to my eye,

visible long before it had ever been conceived. The house in 1939 was the skull, and the extension Benson had built was the skin around it.

Furthering the comparison, the house had been bone-white then, an unpristine color like ivory or old lace. The roof was cedar shingle, and the whole building looked worn, leaning, as though the house was already tired, already old—youth carrying the seeds of age. It had been built sometime around 1910 or 1911, it seemed, though the precise date was uncertain.

It didn't help that darkness crowded the edges of the photograph, smudged, like thousands of fingerprints marring the picture over the years. I would have blamed the quality of the reproduction, except the shadows gathered in the windows too. They didn't reflect light so much as hold it at bay.

"Isn't that weird?" I asked Russ next time he circled past me in the gallery.

"Is it?" Russ shrugged.

Likely he was already thinking about the lunch I'd promised him in order to lure him to the museum galleries. Photography wasn't really his thing. He was much more into works on paper, and I could tell he was getting restless. I'd known nothing about Benson before visiting the exhibition, only that the Contemporary's photography exhibitions had impressed me in the past, and I had an afternoon to kill. Now I felt like I knew Benson too intimately, or one part of him at least—an obsessive part that left me unsettled.

But was it weird? I couldn't explain it to myself, let alone to Russ. Lots of artists fixated on a single subject and represented it over and over in their work. Why, then, did I think Benson's obsession with the house was strange? Was it just that the title had caught me, suggesting mystery, before it was easily explained?

I had a feeling talking would only make it worse, either entrenching me further in the sense of wrongness or making me see that my unease was flimsy. Plus, now that I'd thought of it, I was getting hungry too. I let Russ's question go and steered us toward the exit.

★ ★ ★

It shouldn't have surprised me that Russ was the one to bring the Dark House up again a

week later. We were at his apartment, Russ sprawled on the overstuffed couch that looked like it had survived a war, and me perched on the beanbag opposite. A low coffee table covered with Styrofoam and cardboard takeout containers separated us. Russ didn't own a TV. The whole room was dedicated to mismatched furniture, as if he'd designed the space with the lofty goal of hosting intellectual discussions, like an old-time salon.

Russ and I had roomed together in college, but we'd mutually agreed we were much better off as friends if we weren't living together. His design aesthetic was only one of our points of divergence. Another being that any leftovers, even ones clearly labeled, inevitably ended up devoured the second I left them unattended.

"I did some digging." Russ stabbed his chopsticks into a container of noodles and spoke with his mouth full. "On your photographer friend."

It wasn't just Russ's stomach that was insatiable. He had an endless appetite for knowledge too. He loved research, regardless of the subject, and could fall down internet rabbit holes with the best of them. Back in college, he'd spent more time in the stacks than attending classes, which is probably why it'd taken him twice as long as me to graduate.

"The house you're so interested in is in Providence, Rhode Island." I vaguely recalled as much from one of the labels and nodded along, sliding my carton of beef and broccoli in among its gutted compatriots.

"Benson bought the house in the late '60s and renovated it. He used the large front room as a gallery space and set up the back for his darkroom processing."

So far, nothing that I hadn't already read on the gallery walls.

"I would say it was weird that a struggling artist could afford to buy a house he never intended to live in, but it was basically a shack on the worst street in the poorest neighborhood, and it'd been empty for years by the time Benson bought it. Bad vibes, the kind of place that refused to sell."

Russ reached forward, claiming my abandoned beef and broccoli, then held up his chopsticks to illustrate his point.

"Here's weird thing number one. He never sold a single piece from the house gallery, by design. Even though he wasn't exactly rolling in money, he insisted that the works shown in the Dark House were for display only."

Russ paused for another bite before continuing.

"Weird thing number three."

“What happened to two?”

“I’m getting to that.” Russ waved my question away. “It’s more dramatic in this order.”

“Then why not make this two and the other thing three?”

“Reverse chronology,” Russ deadpanned, as if that explained everything. I shut up to listen.

“Benson committed suicide in the house in 1989.”

“Fuck.” I rolled my shoulders, realizing I was suddenly holding them tense.

“Maybe that’s just sad, not weird. But thing number two is definitely weird. Also obscure and not something that can be confirmed.”

“Well?” I leaned forward; Russ’s sense of showmanship was beginning to wear on me.

“Benson used to play in the house with a group of friends when he was a kid.” My expression must have been gratifying because Russ’s grin widened. “And I haven’t even gotten to the good part yet.”

“Where did you find all this?”

“In an interview Benson gave in 1987. He only talked about the incident once. Anyway, shush. So Benson and his friends had been hanging out in this abandoned house pretty much every day that summer. Then, out of the blue, one day they suddenly freaked out, all at once. They didn’t even talk about it, they just jumped up and ran for the door without knowing why. Nothing else was different, but a feeling came over them, Benson said.

“Benson was the last one out, and as he got to the door, he heard a girl’s voice behind him. She said, ‘Don’t leave me,’ or something like that. The house was basically only one room back then, so there wasn’t anywhere for anyone to hide, and he swore the voice didn’t belong to any of his friends. Besides, when he got outside, they were already out there waiting for him. There wasn’t anyone in the house behind him.”

Russ leaned back, looking satisfied.

“So was it a ghost?” I tried for scoffing, but it didn’t quite land. The same feeling that struck me when seeing Benson’s first photograph—an unnamed and unsettled feeling—crept up the back of my neck.

“Why not? Makes perfect sense.” I jumped as a third voice entered our

conversation.

I'd completely forgotten Russ's roommate Jared was there, even though I could see every part of the room.

"There are some places where bad things always happen, and they keep happening, no matter what you do. Ergo, haunted." Jared exhaled a stream of smoke.

Nothing about Jared should have let him disappear, but he had an uncanny ability to make people forget his presence until he had something to say. Six foot three, broad shoulders, a bit of a beer belly, a massive caramel-colored beard with a full head of hair to match, and a wardrobe that consisted entirely of Hawaiian shirts in the brightest colors known to man. Not exactly the kind of presence that should fade into the background, yet Jared managed it every single time.

"What?" I twisted to look at him, trying to hide that I'd literally jumped at his sudden interjection.

"There are places," Jared said, taking another hit, breathing more smoke in a way that made me wonder whether I was getting a contact high or whether it was just Jared's presence that always left me feeling like I'd fallen out of sync with reality, "where time is circular. There's no beginning or end, events just happen, like the turn of a wheel. Something bad happens, then it happens again. Or something else bad happens, but it's all part of the same thing. The cyclical nature of horror, you know?"

He spoke like everything he was saying made perfect sense, explaining a known pattern of the universe, an agreed-upon and established reality. Like a film student offering up a lofty explanation for why the masked killer returned for the sequel despite being killed at the end of the previous movie that didn't rest on the simpler reason of the studio seeing an opportunity to make more money. It left me feeling even more off-balance than before. I glanced to Russ for support, but he was busy inspecting the containers on the table, picking bites from each where food remained.

"A bad thing happened before Benson got to the house, or after, or during. It's still happening. He brushed up against one edge of the wheel and *boom*." Jared mimed a gun, brains blown out, suicide.

Russ hadn't elaborated on how Benson killed himself. But a shotgun

barrel stretching his mouth, bullet through the soft palate and out the top of his skull, felt right somehow. As though Jared naming it had made it so, fixing it in time from his vantage point in the future.

“You can go to the house, you know,” Jared said.

His tone was casual, conversational, but then he met my eyes with an intensity that felt wholly out of place given how long he’d spent quietly smoking while Russ and I talked.

“Like a museum?” My tongue felt too big for my mouth, weirdly numb.

“No, but it’s still there, and no one lives there.” Was he a research freak like Russ? An expert on little-known twentieth-century photographers? His expression gave nothing away.

“So,” he shrugged, slumping back in his chair like he’d already lost interest. “You can go.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked. It was very like Jared to spout obscure information out of nowhere, but it still unnerved me, every single time, and I was in the mood to push for once.

“I know things about houses, Lilly.” Russ gave me his best Eastwood squint.

The impression, along with the character name, pinged something in the recesses of my brain; I recognized the quote, modified to suit the current conversation, from *In the Line of Fire*. A deep pull, and somehow it unnerved me even more, because Jared was just so damned weird. I’d never understood what Russ saw in him. Maybe he always paid his rent on time.

“Especially haunted ones.” Here, Jared allowed a particularly large lungful of smoke to trickle from his lips, leaving it to rise like a curtain blurring his features – an unsettling effect.

The absurd thought gripped me that Jared himself was a ghost, which would explain his uncanny ability to go unnoticed in a room. I wondered again about that contact high, then decided Jared and Russ must have talked about the house and now, for whatever reason, Jared was trying to get under my skin. Best to let it go, not give him the satisfaction of seeing me disturbed. Somehow, though, I was left with the feeling that Jared had scored some kind of victory. I was thrown off my game, and he’d already shrugged the whole conversation off, forgotten. His attention shifted to lighting a

second blunt, or perhaps it was number three. He was already fading back into the décor of Russ's room, another forgotten piece of furniture.

"How about it?" Russ asked, a glint in his eye as dread crawled up my spine.

I didn't have to ask what he meant, or question what my answer would be. I could feel the road trip coming on, like a storm built up inside a bank of gray-yellow clouds.

"We could leave tomorrow," I told Russ. "First thing."

★ ★ ★

Dark House—1979

The artist leans over the developing tray, rocking it gently. Overhead, more prints hang to dry. A woman putting wash on a clothesline. A man and his teenage son loading crates of produce into the back of a pickup truck. A white clapboard church with its steeple pointing at the brightness of the sun.

They are timeless images that could belong anywhere or anywhen. Except, watching them develop, the artist knows—they only belong here; they belong to the Dark House. He knew even as he transferred the film from the camera, fingers sure in the complete blackness. He'd felt as if someone stood just behind his shoulder, waiting. And now his fear is confirmed. He won't be able to sell them, he won't even be able to show these.

Because she is there, in every single one.

Sometimes a girl, sometimes a woman, but always the same even when she changes. The hem of her dirty white nightgown peeks out from beneath the billow of fresh laundry. One pointed ear of a mask that sometimes looks like a rabbit and sometimes looks like a pig rises between the church pews. Her shadow falls against the side of the truck, even though there's nothing visible to cast it.

Even in the pictures where he can't see her, he knows she's there.

Sometimes he can go months without her appearing. There's never any way to tell, not until he's in the darkroom, feeling the held-breath sensation of her presence, watching over his shoulder, waiting to know she is seen.

She wasn't in the photographs when he took them. There's only one place she is, ever. This house. This fucking house. If he developed the pictures

elsewhere … But he never could.

He snatches the images from the line. He shreds them with trembling hands and lets the pieces fall. Fragments of a row of crops sprouting from the soil, scraps of an old woman's shoes. And the girl. The woman. The rabbit. Whatever the hell she is. Always, always, her.

The artist buries his head in his hands. They smell faintly of developing chemicals, but that doesn't stop him from scrubbing them over his skin.

What is he going to do?

What is there to do?

He will do what he always does. He will keep working. Keep taking pictures. And hope.

A board creaks somewhere deeper in the house. A sigh. Words, without breath, but words still.

I'm here, waiting for you. I'll always be here, right here where you left me. Waiting.

★ ★ ★

In person, the house looked exactly the way it did in Benson's photographs. Somehow, it looked the way it did in all his photographs, all at once.

I climbed out of the car, stretching, and my back cracked as I did. We'd left early and driven straight through, a roughly four-hour trip, with only one quick stop to refuel—Russ, not the car. It didn't matter that he'd brought snacks with him. For as long as I'd known him, Russ always ate like he'd just spent a week starving, and he was as happy to sink his teeth into gas station beef jerky as filet mignon.

"So what now?" I squinted at the house, its pale, indefinable yellow.

I'd been thinking of nothing but the house for a week, and now that we stood across the street from it, I didn't know how to proceed.

"This is your rodeo, man." Russ slouched against the side of the car affably. "Knock? Walk in like you own the place?"

I wondered if we should have brought Jared, since he knew so much about the damned place. But then I imagined him slipping right out of the car like a hitchhiking ghost somewhere along the way, ceasing to exist the moment I ceased to notice him. I suspected his role was as the creepy

foreteller of doom, sending other characters on their way with ominous warnings. His part in the story was done.

Russ trailed me to the door. I tapped at the frame, not sure I wanted the house to hear me, but also not wanting to catch it by surprise. Russ, less bothered, reached past me. The door was unlocked, of course. I stepped over the threshold, trying to make myself small, and froze.

Photographs hung everywhere. Tacked to the walls and dangling from pieces of twine, some pinned directly to the ceiling, others strung all the way across the room. Their shadows swayed—a storm of falling leaves, a murmuration of birds—making their number seem greater. I almost ducked, throwing an arm up to protect my eyes.

Russ collided with me from behind, pushing me a step farther into the room, and I realized I'd been mistaken somehow.

The big front room was empty, but I could see where the pictures were meant to be. The impression was so strong that my mind conjured them, casting their shadows on the floor and walls. If I concentrated, I might be able to make out the subject matter of each one.

I forced myself to make a circuit. The memory of all those prints rattled in the breeze of my passing, evidence that I was moving at an unseemly pace. Russ moved more slowly, inspecting the walls as if he really were looking at photographs and maybe even reading wall labels, his hands tucked behind his back, bending and peering. I suppressed the urge to ask him what he saw.

The floorboards creaked and I tried not to listen for an answering echo. Across from the front door, but offset just slightly, another door led further in. I'd seen the whole from outside, but inside, I couldn't get a sense of it. It didn't match up. I knew definitively there was no second floor, yet I could feel space stretched above me, pressing down on the other side of the ceiling. It felt occupied, expectant, watching.

In fact, the whole house felt crowded, the walls packed with time, frozen and layered like insulation. Other worlds, whispering and rustling together, sliding and murmuring like fallen autumn leaves. I couldn't explain it—the feeling or the images it conjured in my mind.

The big room was too empty and too full. Leaving Russ to his absorption, I crossed the second threshold quickly—like ripping off a bandage. No stairs

led upward, but that didn’t stop the sense of someone standing just at the top of a flight of them, bare toes curled over the first step, peering down at me with curiosity.

A series of smaller rooms greeted me, more than I would have expected. An uncomfortable number of corners. One where I imagined Benson did the actual work of developing. A closet-like room for transferring the film from his camera. A second closet-like room serving as an actual closet, lined with shelves.

The light from my phone, which I’d been using to see my way, caught on something tucked down in the corner, almost invisible between the lowest shelf and the floor. I crouched and hooked it out. My fingers came away grimy. A cheap plastic Halloween mask designed to cover the upper half of the wearer’s face: gray painted fur, pink nose, drawn-on whiskers, rounded bunny ears—or maybe it was a mouse—with more pink coloring the ears inside.

I slid my phone out of my pocket, taking a picture of the mask held at arm’s length almost as a compulsion. It immediately made me feel like some kind of grisly souvenir hunter, but one too cowardly to actually carry the mask out of the house. I told myself I just needed some sort of confirmation via technology that the mask was actually there. Though why was I so certain that it mattered? It could have been left by kids playing around like Benson and his friends had once upon a time. It didn’t have to point to anything sinister.

I looked at the picture on my phone. The empty eyeholes where a child might peer out stared back at me. They looked bigger in the photograph. The background also looked wrong, little flecks of color trapped in those eyeholes that should have been backed by just the wall.

I expanded the image. Instead of blurring, the eyeholes came into sharper focus, an image jumping out at me with sudden terrible clarity—a picture within the picture. Russ splayed out and bloody, his body twisted as if he’d been thrown clear of a wrecked car or fallen from a great height.

“Shit.” I let go of the mask and almost dropped my phone.

My thumb jerked to the delete button and hit confirm. I kicked the mask back into its corner and breathed hard.

What had I seen? Anything at all? With the image deleted, how could I be sure? Stupid. Or did that just mean it couldn't be my fault?

The thoughts weren't that coherent. Jagged scraps of impulse, action, self-preservation rising from my lizard brain. I slid my phone back into my pocket with shaking hands. I almost bumped into Russ in the main gallery room, walking backward, hands held out in front of me as if to ward off the mask should it try to follow me.

"Hey, man, you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost." Russ smiled at his joke. How was it the house didn't bother him? I stared at him stupidly.

Should I tell him? Out of the dark closet, it was easier to believe I hadn't seen anything at all. What good would telling him do? No point in us both being freaked out.

Back outside in the sunshine, hand braced on the roof of the car, the whole situation seemed absurd. I'd conjured a premonition of horror based on a weird trick of the light, a strange reflection. I'd been prepared for something terrible—like the photographs I imagined hanging everywhere when we first entered—so my mind supplied it. I'd let Jared, even absent, get to me.

I resisted the urge to peer into the back of the car, just in case we had brought him after all.

I told myself I was being paranoid. No such thing as haunted houses. Time isn't a circle. Bad things don't have to happen. For instance, if you turn back at the threshold when you hear a voice call out behind you not to leave her behind, you can simply hold out your hand.

All it requires is courage, a belief in the impossible, a choice.

"Lunch?" Russ caught my eye, hopeful. It was only eleven a.m., but I wanted to get the hell away, even though I wasn't hungry.

"Lunch," I agreed, a cowardly choice, and didn't say anything more.

★ ★ ★

Dark House—1983

The artist suspects he knows the results of the experiment even before he begins. Nonetheless, he sits on the folding chair in the center of the room, facing the camera, and lifts the wired remote in his hand. Each time he

presses the trigger, the shutter grinds like the scrape of bone on bone.

He doesn't smile.

Photographs slide from the camera, one by one, until the cartridge is empty.

He releases a breath, makes himself stand, and plucks one photograph from the pile of ten at random.

His expression is pained, jaw clenched tight. The shadows around his face speak of resignation. His image on the Polaroid finishes its reverse disappearing act, but there's more.

It's a chemical process and doesn't work that way—the artist knows this—but that doesn't stop it from happening. A hand ghosts into view, resting on his shoulder. Bitten-short nails, dirt-rimmed. The figure behind him bends at the waist, placing an unnatural mouth close to his ear.

He sweeps the photographs into a haphazard pile without looking at the rest. He pulls back the board waiting for just this purpose, stuffing the pictures beneath the floor. They join the others—the ones not crammed into the walls. The ones he can never show. The ones he shredded with his own hands, only to have them reappear. Again and again.

There are too many shadows in the house. They fill all the corners. And she is there in every one of them. Waiting.

How much longer can he bear it? How much longer can he endure?

★ ★ ★

If I could go back and change it, would I? Would I take her hand and lead her out of the dark? She begged me not to leave her there. If I could do that, would it change a thing?

My eyes burned, staring at the laptop, hunched atop my motel room bed. Russ snored obliviously in the twin bed closer to the door. Four hours—not an unreasonable drive back home, but since Russ had never gotten his license, it would have meant eight hours of driving total for me, so we'd decided to stay overnight.

I reread Roger Benson's words, the interview Russ had mentioned, the one and only time he'd talked about his ghostly encounter. Russ hadn't said anything about this part, Benson's regret. Had the quote even been there when he'd read it? Had the interview changed? Or was I just cracking up?

The Dark House, where time is a circle. Where bad things happened and keep happening. Where Roger Benson left a little girl behind when she asked for his help because he was afraid. What else was a ten-year-old boy supposed to do? Would it have mattered if he'd done things differently? According to Jared, Benson couldn't help her, no matter what he'd done. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen regardless. It had happened a long time ago. Was still happening, even now.

What else is a haunting, after all?

A moment that escapes the bounds of a single point in time.

A subject obsessively photographed.

A site, once visited, that won't leave the mind.

A house you must possess, because it already possessed you long ago.

I left as soon as it was decently light, scribbling a note for Russ. We'd passed the Historical Society on our drive in, conveniently near the library, so if one branch of research proved a dead end, I had a backup plan. I bought a muffin and coffee from the corner cafe and ate in the car, watching the door like a hawk. As soon as I saw a woman climb from her car to unlock it, I pounced, not even giving the door time to fully close behind her.

The Historical Society maintained the microfiche archives the library no longer had room to store. They'd been hoping to digitize everything, the helpful woman named Beth explained to me, but they hadn't received the grant they'd been counting on. She showed me how to use the machine, then left me alone.

Despite not knowing what I was looking for, only a vague sense of dread guiding me, I found it relatively quickly. Six children reported missing over a span of ten weeks in the summer of 1909. Their bodies found nearly a year later, badly decomposed, the remains of leather masks depicting various animals—at best guess, a sheep, a deer, a rabbit, a pig, a mouse, and an otter—tied over their faces, and in some cases, rotted into and fused with their remaining skin.

Cult activity, though to what end, the newspaper could only speculate. None of the perpetrators were caught. The article strongly implied reasonable suspicion could be cast in a certain direction, that direction being the wealthy side of town, or even all the way out of town, the Newport elite traipsing into

Providence to hunt away from their own backyards. The fact that the journalist's byline didn't appear again only seemed to prove the point.

It wasn't just the journalist who vanished either. The story vanished too—no follow-up articles about the deaths, despite their sensational nature. The murdered children weren't even named, and it struck me that it wasn't to protect their identities, but to help people forget they ever existed at all.

What I did find, elsewhere in the archives, was a map. A series of maps, actually, printed onto transparent sheets—layers of time—showing the woods where the children's bodies had been found growing into a residential neighborhood over the years. You can guess, can't you, at the overlap between the Dark House and the woods and the place where the last body to be excavated was found, bones cradled gently so that they could be transferred to a proper grave?

What would have happened if I'd gone back to the motel, dragged Russ out of bed and stuffed him in the car with a Styrofoam container of to-go pancakes? Headed for the border of Rhode Island and speeding all the way back home. Would it have changed anything at all?

★ ★ ★

Dark House—1939, 1967, and 1989

The house is too quiet, and so the artist hears all the wrong sounds. He hears the photographs rustling in the walls and beneath the floor, the sound of something perpetually trapped and perpetually climbing free. He's excavated them, burned them, torn them to shreds, but they're always there. They always return.

Small feet belonging to five children pound their way across the floor. He recognizes them, the ghost of his ten-year-old self turning to look back over his shoulder as he reaches the door.

"Wait!" the artist calls. His voice echoes, terrible and frail and old beyond his years. If he could do it all again, would things be different this time? His past-self's eyes widen, terror as only a ten-year-old can portray, staring at the unspeakable things in the house with him.

"Please, wait," the artist says. "Don't leave me behind!"

The artist hears the scrape of the door as the knob is turned. He turns as

well, to witness his older self crossing the threshold for the first time as the house's owner. Time, overlapping in terrible layers in the house, and he is there in each of them—old, young, and in-between. *Go back*, he doesn't bother to say. It's too late; he arrived long ago, he's already here, he will always be here.

The ceiling creaks, footsteps mirroring his exactly as they move across the house's nonexistent top floor. How much longer can he bear it? How long can this go on? He knows. Not one moment more.

He sets up the tripod, the Polaroid, the remote trigger, the folding chair, and sits facing the camera for the last time.

★ ★ ★

The smudged shadows from the archival photograph I'd first seen in the gallery, the one from 1939, had moved inside the Dark House, with me now as I returned, thickening every corner. The first thing that strikes me as I enter the second time is something I can't believe I didn't notice the first time around. The front gallery room, the addition to the house built onto the shack, the skull, contained no windows, only walls.

It should have been claustrophobic, but it was just the opposite. Too much space, too much time. Dizzying. And as irrational as it was, the only thing I could think to do was dig all that trapped history free.

I tore more than one fingernail, but the boards came up easily, as if that's what they'd wanted all along. Peeling away a scab to reveal the wound underneath, seeping and not yet healed. Behind the walls and under the floors, photographs. Hundreds of them, in all sizes and formats, slithering free. A flood of them. I might drown.

She watched me, approving. We witnessed each other, me looking at her in all those frozen moments of time, stretching forward and backward. A circle of time.

In some pictures, she'd aged. Impossibly. Yet—there she was in a picture of a barn painted bright red, a little girl in a dirty nightgown, barefoot and wearing a leather mask. In the next, she was an old woman, wrinkles visible where the plastic Halloween mask didn't cover her mouth or chin or jaw. She wore the same nightgown, grown with her to fit her current size. Feet still bare. And there again, a woman of indeterminate age, one hand with the nails

bitten down to the quick resting on the shoulder of a man seated in a folding metal chair, his eyes screwed closed in a wince of pain as he faced the camera down.

She didn't wear a mask in that picture, the one where she rested her hand almost lovingly on the photographer's shoulder. A severed pig's head covered her own, the ragged edges of its flesh resting on her shoulders and staining her nightgown a bloody black-red as she leaned forward to whisper in the photographer's ear.

I almost missed her in a picture of the house taken from the outside. Then I noticed the shallow depression in the ground, just about the right shape and size for a child's hastily dug grave.

I flipped through pictures, letting them spill through my fingers back to the floor. I didn't want to admit what I was searching for, but I couldn't stop. I found a picture that made me pause, not what I was looking for, but still.

Roger Benson had recorded his own suicide in a Polaroid picture like all the other photographs in various formats stuffed beneath the floorboards.

But obviously he hadn't survived to hide that particular picture beneath the floor—so had the house itself preserved it? Had Roger's ghost, the murdered girl, preserved all the photographs the way he'd preserved her for so long?

Again I almost missed her. Swallowed up wholly in shadow, only her bare feet and a few inches of her shins visible—disconnected from their person—behind Benson's chair. He balanced a shotgun in his mouth, just the way I'd imagined. His other hand held the trigger mechanism for the camera. The expression on his face was one of relief.

I couldn't see her face, of course, but I was sure that in this one photograph, she wore no mask at all. Just as I was sure of this: she smiled.

Would it have made a difference if Roger Benson had turned back as a ten-year-old boy? If he'd tried to help the girl when she called after him out of the dark? Her death had occurred long before he and his friends first visited the house in 1939. What could he possibly have done?

A cult murdered six children in 1909. Had they achieved whatever they'd set out to do, or was it only an unfortunate consequence of their actions, that they'd broken time? Maybe it had nothing to do with the cult at all. Maybe

Jared was right—a bad thing was always going to happen in the place where the Dark House would stand. The cult was just the means, the mechanism by which a cycle of the wheel turned.

When I looked down, my fingers cramped around a picture—not of Roger Benson, but the one I'd originally been looking for, the one I didn't want to admit I'd been looking for, refusing to let it go. I'd deleted it from my phone. I certainly hadn't printed it and hidden it beneath the Dark House's floor. Russ splayed and broken. Like Benson's suicide, like the little girl's death, the house had made a record. The house would not let Russ go.

I swept Benson's pictures back under the floor, keeping only the one tucked in the pocket of my jacket before returning to the motel to gather Russ, get him pancakes, and drive the hell home. If he asked me where I'd been, if I was satisfied by our journey, and whether I'd found whatever I'd come for, I wouldn't be able to tell him.

On our drive back home, I kept the windows rolled down, air blasting in my face despite the chill. Jared was right. The girl's death was always going to occur, no matter what Roger Benson did as a ten-year-old, or what he did in the years that followed.

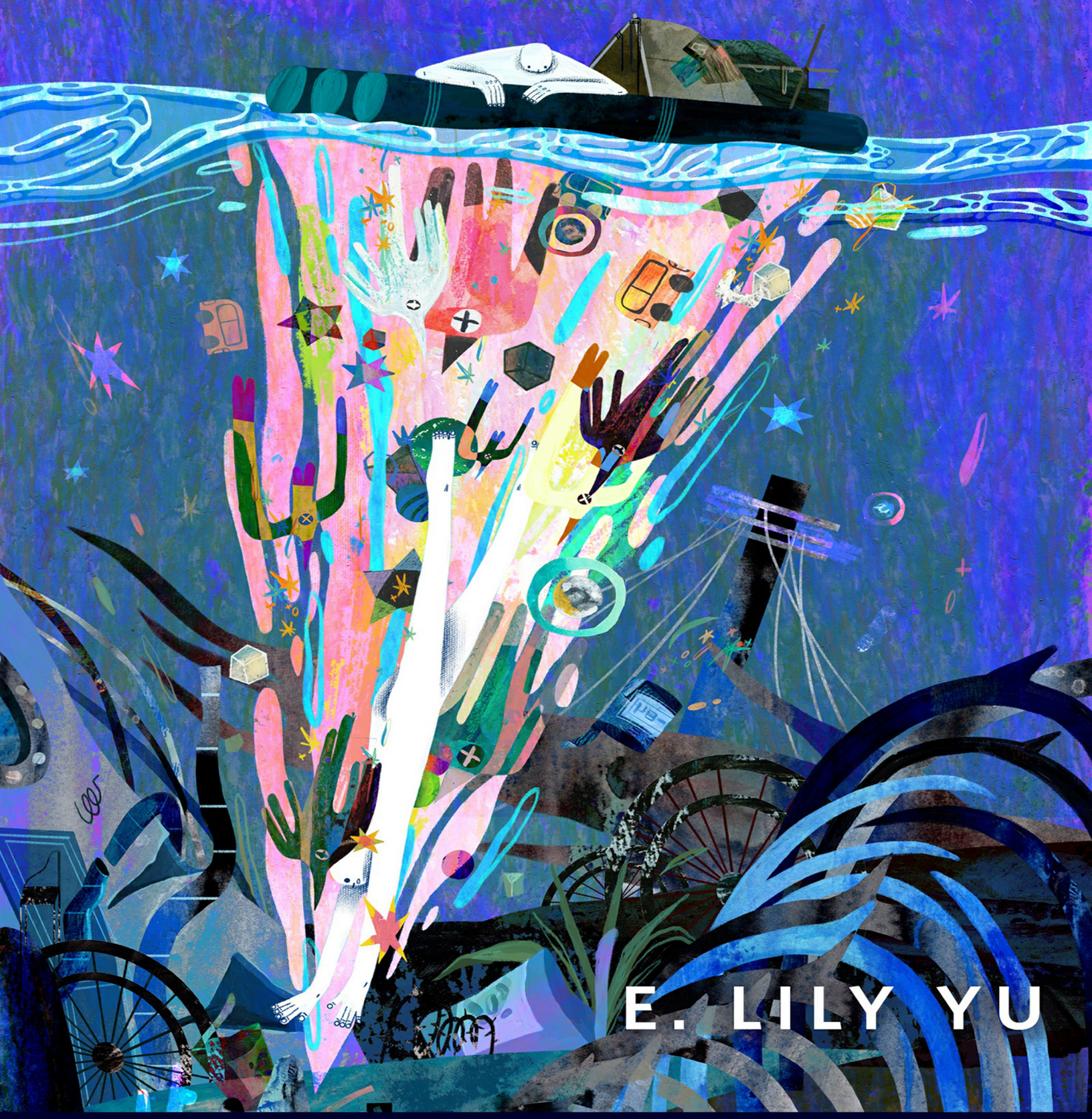
And so, I reasoned, it wouldn't change anything if I told Russ what I'd seen. The photograph had been deleted from my phone. And found again sealed away under the Dark House's floor. It burned against my skin even through my jacket pocket. If I'd somehow caught a moment out of time, what good would knowing about it do Russ? He might live the rest of his days in fear, trying to avoid a terrible fate and thus inadvertently causing it, like a Greek tragedy.

There are some things human minds shouldn't have to know, certain weights they can't bear without cracking. Just like there are certain places where bad things happen, and keep happening, no matter what you do.

It was too late when we walked into the house. It was too late when I invited Russ to the museum. It was too late when Roger Benson entered the Dark House in 1939, and too late in 1909 when a little girl vanished into the woods and never came home.

It's always been too late. Even if I could go back and change any one of the sequence of events leading to this point in time, it wouldn't matter,

because this point doesn’t exist on a straight line. All I can do is watch the story unfold. A witness, like Roger Benson, like the Dark House, brushing up against the edge of the ever-turning wheel.



THE RIVER AND THE WORLD REMADE

The River and the World Remade

E. LILY YU

illustration by

CHANGYU ZOU

Back before I wrestled the River for Sheckie and won, they called us the three troubles.

Sheckie was a cobbler of leather, cloth, and plastics. Oramon made clothes. I wove houses. I'd woven the house we lived in, but I was still learning then, and when it stormed the rain came through the roof in spits and dribbles.

"You should fix that!" Oramon would shout at me, as the rain put icy fingers down the back of my shirt.

"I will!" I would shout back. I never did.

We lived, in these latter days, in tall, airy homes made from bundles of plastic bags twisted thin as reeds, bound together with monofilament, windows inset with translucent panes of remelted LDPE. Our houses floated lightly on the broad green back of the River that had swallowed every river, the River that had crept across the doorsteps of our forefathers. The old houses, stick-built, cinder-block, and brick, went black and green with mildew, crumbled, and sank.

"You have to wonder what they were thinking," Sheckie said between dives, as we plumbed the wreck of a colonial for needles, cutlery, nails. We piled our wet treasures on a plastic sheet on our raft. "How they let it get this far. Why they never stopped."

But Sheckie was a philosopher. I didn't think so deeply, or ask so many questions, and neither did my brother Oramon. We looked after Sheckie, the two of us, knowing he hadn't the sense to look after himself. The River had brought him to us, sudsy and yowling, in a tub half filled with bathwater. Oramon lifted him out like a kitten by the scruff and finished the washing-up and put him in clothes. He couldn't have been more than two at the time.

Besides Sheckie, the River also gave us trash: single extruded slippers and molded jugs, swirling accretions of plastic, lumps of sodden cloth. It gave us odd-sized branches and uprooted trees, which we lashed into our raft. What we needed that the River didn't bring, we could find by diving, which was dangerous, or by boating to the world's graveyard.

That was our winking name for the landfill. It sat well above the River, smugly dry. The world's graveyard was where we found the aluminum and steel that we needed for knives, stoves, chimneys, and pots. Occasionally we hooked metal debris on our rods instead of muddy-tasting carp, but if we needed something fast, we went to the graveyard.

Sheckie and Oramon and I shared a single pair of scissors, the best scissors, which we had dug up from the world's graveyard. We had other scissors, of course, punched from unrolled tomato cans, but these were the best scissors, and we stole them back and forth

from one another.

Whenever I rowed out to weave a new house, balancing bundles of bag-threads on the back of the raft, I would steal the scissors the night before and sleep with them under my pillow, to be sure.

Oramon was clumsy—I always caught him. I dunked him face-first in the River to teach him a lesson. But Sheckie was good at slipping them out, between one snore and the next, and sneaking the not-so-good scissors in, so when I groped for them in my sleep I felt the right shape. Sheckie could get away with it. And Sheckie often did.

Not that I blamed him; tire rubber was a chore to trim, and more nights than not Sheckie's hands were gashful from slipped knives.

Still, the house-weaving was the best chance of all our work for a sack of snails and freshwater mussels, or bunches of watercress and mint, or a stack of dried fish. When I was called to weave a house, we knew we'd all eat. And so I slept with the good scissors and left at the first brilliant seam of dawn and worked day and night until the new house was done, its triple-peaked roof pointing proud at the sky.

Whoever had hired me, the new couple or family or circle of friends, would exclaim their pleasure, pound my back until I couldn't breathe, and salve and bandage my hands. I might even receive a disgruntled rooster, sharp and vicious, its feet hobbled with twine.

Those were good nights. The pot we had riveted from flattened coffee cans simmered for days, making the whole house fragrant, until even the chicken bones went soft.

So I was furious when I discovered, one afternoon in early fall, after rowing for two hours to where a new house was to be woven, the second-best scissors at the bottom of my kit.

"I'll push him in the River," I said. "I'll feed him to the fish."

I had mined a rich vein of Styrofoam the previous week and meant to gift it here, the whole precious stock of it, buoyant and perfect as it was. These were poor holy women, as there always have been. We three troubles would benefit from their good opinion. We would also benefit from the strawberries they grew in eared clay pots with the compost claimed from toilet rafts.

"We thought we should have a new one before the hurricane days," the old women said with a touch of apology, as if I didn't regularly row two hours to weave. "Our old house blew apart last year."

"What happened?" I said, lashing their new dock together.

"The builder was a lagabout. One storm, and—gone."

"What did you do?"

"Scattered," they said. "To families. Neighbors. They've put us up until now. But we live best together. Best if we weather the storms as one."

"Best," I agreed, though the yellow hurricane weather made all things eerie, other people included.

I had a tenth of the longhouse lashed into bundles by the time the evening fell red around us. This was half my regular speed, but the scissors were devilish, dull and sore,

and bit my fingers more than they cut the bags or monofilament.

“Do you have a lantern?” I said, thinking to work through the night.

“Yes,” the women said. “You may have it for a while, but then you must put it out and sleep. Jules’ brother has just enough space for you. No sense in overwork. The River buried all of that.”

They brought stewed fish to me while I worked, and I stopped and ate gratefully, my hands a mess of ache.

Jules’ brother found a blanket that smelled like dog to cover me with, and I lay down in a dry corner of his house. Outside, I could hear the women singing a song without words.

Weariness rushed over me in a long warm wave, and I sank into sleep.

On the second day, the holy women set aside their other labors and came to help. One had a knife that cut clean as a minnow through water, and this sped up the cutting, the bundling, the lashing.

“Wish I had a knife like that,” I said with an oily look at it, and the woman laughed and said it was worth more than a house to them.

“At least tell me who made it.”

It was a gift from the hurricane, they said. A piece of high-carbon steel rebar that had battered their old house, indeed helped batter it to bits. The holy women had forged it flat and sharpened it.

“But you weave houses,” they said. “How are your tools so poor?”

I grumbled to them about Sheckie’s theft and about Sheckie himself. Some of them clicked their tongues and made pitying noises like *that-poor-boy*. Ripe for plucking they were. I was glad for those who hadn’t. Sheckie had missed an excellent life by not drifting up here. Half the women would have buttered his baby face and half would have frog-marched him into decency.

“But you’ve hurt yourself,” the women said. “And the swamp doctor doesn’t come your way.”

“Give me your knife, then,” I said.

They laughed and gave me a stinking, stinging salve instead to rub into the red cuts in my hand. It did deaden the pain somewhat.

With their help and their knife, I finished the longhouse on its Styrofoam barge. Five days it took. I looked one last time at the knife, feeling a Sheckie-itch to steal it, and resisting with thoughts of strawberries. In place of the haystack of twisted plastic fibers I’d brought, the raft now held a box of spare medicine, ten yellow squash, and a heap of leathery dried fish to soak and chew.

“Hope this one lasts,” I said.

“We know how to find you,” they said.

The oars ate into my raw palms as I rowed slowly home. Most birds had died off long ago, but here and there a cantankerous heron flopped off, scattering water like glass and diamonds. Skeletal trees gone white with salt broke the surface of the River. The odd fish jumped.

Sheckie was trimming soles and uppers of tire leather by our house, humming, his bare feet paddling in the River. The scissors flashed silver in his hand. When he saw me, he jumped up and ran inside. As he ought. I was tired, but not too tired, once I'd tied up the raft, to chase him inside and out again, along the floating spans we had spun to other houses.

"I'm too tired to beat you," I said, hands to knees, panting, when I caught him. He'd shimmied up the peak of the fish-farmers' house, and his pointy, knobbly feet were threatening to undo my good work. The farmers had come out to gawk. "Come down from there."

"Say I'm forgiven," Sheckie said.

"Not forgiven," I said, "but not beaten either."

"Say you won't throw me in the River."

"Slide down," I said. "Slide down right now. Swear if your foot goes through this roof I'll dunk you fifty times."

He stuck out his lip at me—a sweeter look at two than seventeen—and alighted on the dock.

"Look at my hands," I said. "Look what your scissors did to my hands."

"I made eight whole pairs," Sheckie said. "Look at the fish-farmers' feet. Those are mine. Made shoes for Oramon and you too."

"It's hurricane days soon. What if I hadn't finished that house?"

"They'd be fine," Sheckie said, unflappable. "You too. Heard a story about the Land, by the by."

I grunted and headed for our house, for this was not a topic I wished to discuss with Sheckie. Not now. Not with the curious shine in his eyes, and the sky even now shuddering with algal hues.

He jogged alongside me, as persistent and sticky as he had been fast and slippery before. "Is it true? You've been everywhere; you must know."

"Haven't," I said. "Haven't been everywhere. Only three hours this way, three hours that." And I gestured broadly at the sinking, slimy gables around us.

"But have you seen the Land?" Sheckie said.

"Don't make me make Oramon toss you in the River," I said.

"You promised you wouldn't!"

"Said *I* wouldn't toss."

Oramon was back and unpacking the raft by the time we returned.

"You've been telling stories," I said to him.

"Not me," he protested. "The basket weavers asked him to make them shoes, and they talked while he was measuring."

"So the Land *is* real," Sheckie said. "You've been keeping it from me. Give me your shoes back, both of you."

"You haven't even given him his pair," Oramon said.

"Well, he won't get them now. Hiding all of that—"

“Like you hid my scissors?” I said.

“Not the same thing,” Sheckie said. “Hiding and whispering and this whole time knowing about roads and cars and ambulances and phones and not telling me—”

“There was no need,” Oramon said.

“I looked like an idiot! Them talking about TV and internet. My mouth open.”

Oramon said, “You could have closed your mouth.”

I said, “You saw a TV on one of our dives. Big black rectangle. Nothing much.”

“Give me those shoes back.”

“Enough,” I said. I was tired from the rowing and the running and now Sheckie yelling. “You’ve been to the Land. You, Sheckie. Yourself.”

“What? Lies.”

“At three,” I said. “Red blotches all over. A high fever. None of the medicine worked. I put you on the raft and rowed and rowed. Five, six hours. West. Eventually I bumped up against the Land and held you out to some surprised vacationers at their picnic, and they drove us fast as possible to the hospital. So you’ve been and seen. You just don’t recall.”

Sheckie’s mouth fell wide open again.

Then he sucked in a greedy breath and peppered me with questions.

“I didn’t see very much,” I said. “Was busy looking at you. They put a lot of tubes in you. A bunch of needles. I watched to see that you breathed.”

“Did they look like us?” he pleaded. “You must have noticed that, at least.”

“More or less.”

“More or less!”

He kicked the box Oramon had brought in, rattling the bottles.

“Quit it,” I said.

“Why didn’t you leave me there?” he said.

“Never thought of it,” I said. “You were family then.”

“I could have grown up on the Land!” he said. “With new things, with cars, with electricity—”

“The world laws hold there too,” I said. “Nothing new. No extruders of plastic. No oil drills. Only the old things melted and patched and fixed. Plus tree-dropped wood. Plus medicine. No meat from more than ten miles away. So not different from here.”

“You said *drove*,” Sheckie said. “Drove us to the hospital.”

“They’re running their old cars down. Not making more. Electricity only,” I said.

“What makes them so special?” he said, frowning. “Why do they have the Land, and we have the River?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Some lived there before the River came. Some lived here, and when the waters rose they moved inland.”

“Our family, most of this town, they didn’t leave,” Oramon said. “They waded through water in their living rooms. Then they moved to the second story. Then the attic. Then the roof.”

“They learned to build and remake things,” I said. “If they didn’t know already. Most

of the ones who left didn't know those things. That's why they left."

"The undersea cables connecting everyone—those corroded from the ends in. Soon as the sea spilled into basements. All the jobs depending on that …" Oramon shrugged. "Think they hoped they could continue, if they moved west."

"Could they?" Sheckie said. "Did they?"

"Don't know," I said. I was mud-tired, swaying. "Oramon, soak the fish. I'm going to bed."

"Useless," I heard Sheckie mutter under his breath.

That should have warned me. I knew the silver-slick look in his eye. But the house of the holy women and the long row home, then the run and all the shouting, had wrung me out.

I slept like a stone.

In the morning the smell of boiling fish was on my tongue, the light was murky, and Sheckie was gone.

This was not unusual for Sheckie, who roamed and dived and picked for junk whenever he pleased. But his clothes and his awl and his needle and threads were gone too, along with two fish and the second-best scissors. He'd left a pair of new shoes at the foot of my bed, and I pulled them on, sick. When I looked outside and saw the raft missing, I cursed. Gray fish-belly clouds swam over the sky, and a stiff breeze plucked the plastic reeds of our house.

"Let him go," Oramon said. "He'll come back if he likes."

"That's our raft!"

"He left the best scissors," Oramon said.

"I don't like it," I said. "I don't like it at all."

"You don't have to like it."

"But the sky," I said. "It'll be hurricanes soon."

"But not yet," Oramon says. "He can make it before then."

"Monster," I said. "You thimbled brain."

"I feel the same as him," Oramon said. "Just quieter."

"What?"

"If he'd asked, I'd have gone along with him." He raised an eyebrow at my expression. "You're the only one's ever seen the Land."

"It's nothing."

"It's different. Sometimes that's—"

"What does it matter?" I said.

"To know we could live differently? People have started wars for less."

"If he wants to go to the Land," I said, "he can. Good luck to him. I'm done with this."

"He's grown," Oramon said. He turned back to the coat he was cutting from an old sheet of vinyl, the best scissors flashing in his hand.

I made a circuit of our floating village, bridge to bridge, checking my handiwork for sturdiness and leaks. Where I noticed weakness, I added anchors of old wires and cords. A

shredding wind could come, but as long as the bundles stayed bound, the home would sit firm. The rising waters that drowned the old houses and towns only lifted our houseboats a little higher for a time.

Some months later, the rains would cease, and the River would shiver and shake off long brackish swells to the sea.

A fat raindrop plopped onto my nose. I had come to the fish-farmers' dock on my rounds, and now I glanced at the hollowed log they used, lashed up to their dock. More rain spattered down.

I knocked at the door.

"If I needed it," I said. "Say if our beloved idiot was caught out in a storm, having taken our raft but not knowing how to row. Could I borrow your boat?"

"And what if you lose it?" the father, Marks, said. "How do we tend to our pens? Should we starve, all of us, because of an idiot boy?"

"The bean-growers have a dinghy," the girl Twohey said. "Scavenged. A bit sinky," she added as an afterthought. "Haven't fixed it yet."

"Well," I said, nodding to them, "stay dry. We'll need the fish."

And I thrust my hands in my pockets and headed for home, meanwhile thinking with Sheckie-esque slipperiness how quickly I could unrope the log and make away with it.

The rain slammed down with the force of a soliloquy then. And with it, the wind.

I ducked into our home. Oramon was pacing back and forth, the floor flexing uneasily underfoot.

Rain slapped the roof. Wind whistled through the leaks and narrow places.

"What do you say now?" I said. The pallor of his face said everything.

"The fish-farmers have a boat," he said, ticking them off on his fingers. "Bean-growers too, though there's a hole in it."

"Right," I said, and ducked out again, into the storm.

For it was a storm by then: sky like the bottom of a rusted pan, rain driving sharp and silver into my face. Sloppily I stumbled back to the fish-farmers' dock. The farmers themselves were safely inside, their windows aglow. With wet and clumsy hands I undid the mooring and stepped into the log.

This handled differently from the raft. I unshipped oars and dug in, ignoring the water puddling at bottom and ankles, the unsettling roil of the River being fed.

West was easy by landmarks and habit for an hour—this particular white tree-crown, that crumbling chimney—even with the wind shirring water into steel, even with my eyes gone blurry with wet.

After that I did not know for sure, since the one compass we had was nailed to the raft. After that I rowed with worry in my stomach and sourness in my arms. I bellowed Sheckie's name, but no one could hear anything in that wind.

Branches snapped with a sound like chicken bones and flew past me, spearing the water.

My hands went stiff and numb with cold. The log constantly threatened to roll over

with me in it, and I bucked and swayed to stay upright. I cursed Sheckie for his fecklessness, the River for its treachery, the fish-farmers for carving such a sorry boat.

Hours I paddled, shouting, swearing, aching. The sky was river mud and snails.

I saw the chimney first.

A crumbling brick remnant protruded above the water by barely two feet.

Sheckie lay flat out on the raft, both hands clasping the chimney's cracked concrete crown. All else—oars, food, scissors—had washed away.

Every new swell of the River rammed the raft into the chimney. As I watched, another brick loosened and slipped away, sinking. Then half a brick came away in Sheckie's hand.

Though I shouted his name, he gave no sign of hearing.

The whip of the rain in my face, I steered the log alongside, flung the paddles onto the raft, and half leaped, half crawled aboard, nearly tipping us over.

That slight shift was the end of the canoe: it rolled, filled, and sank.

The stub of chimney gave way. Sheckie's hands dropped into the water. He made no other move.

I rolled him onto his side as best I could, waves sloshing us, threatening to steal the oars. I checked the waterlogged compass, set course, and rowed.

Perhaps another hour passed. Time seemed an antique concept now.

We ran aground before I knew it, the raft grinding into sand. It almost kicked me overboard. Sheckie stirred slightly, and the hot relief I felt gave me strength to shove his body onto land.

I had no rope to tie the raft. As soon as I stepped off, the River dragged it away. I didn't turn to watch it go.

There was a light on the hill. I battled the wind to climb toward it, each step as tiring as a mile.

What I remember is my knocking, and the door opening into a square of light, and Sheckie slumped on my shoulder, barely breathing. Then I pitched forward into blackness.

★ ★ ★

"You've had a bitter time," the doctor said. "But your fever's down."

The room was whitewashed mud brick, clean and dim. I was lying on a pallet of wool and shredded plastic, which crackled as a I shifted. The sound of rain on the roof was sweet.

She tipped me a cup of water, and I drank, tasting mud.

"Sheckie—"

"The boy's fine. He's sleeping now."

I sighed the longest sigh of my life and closed my eyes, and then I was too.

★ ★ ★

The Land had electricity, and at night all kinds of insects bobbed and danced about the lightbulbs set outside. We sat under one, slapping mosquitos, looking at the dark shape of the River.

“You’re not going to apologize, are you,” I said. “For stealing the raft. For fooling almost to my death and yours.”

“Do you want me to?” Sheckie said.

I grunted, noncommittal.

“Isn’t this better than the River?” he said. “They have so much! Even some running trains, they said, on the tracks that aren’t underwater. And I saw a house made out of an old plane!”

I grunted.

“Not as good as your houses,” he allowed. “And their shoes aren’t better than mine.”

“Soft,” I said. “Land makes you soft.”

“Maybe.”

“But if that’s what you want,” I said. “They surely need you.”

“You’ll be making a raft soon as you can,” Sheckie said, “won’t you. Oramon will be worried.”

“I’ll be making a new raft.”

“It’s just that, wood on the Land is scarce, and they have to leave every living tree standing. You can only take what washes up.”

“Is that so,” I said.

“It’ll take a long time, I expect,” he said. “Weeks. Months. Maybe years.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“So I expect you’re stuck with me,” Sheckie said. “For a while.”

“For a while, sure,” I said.

“They’re making you a crown,” he said. “With copper wire. I heard. That’s the most valuable thing you can get, on the Land.”

“That’ll be good for the raft,” I said. “Rope’s also good.”

“They said most people wouldn’t go out in a storm like that. For anyone.”

“Now that,” I said, flattening a bloody mosquito on my arm, “is a load of nonsense. Anyone on the River would.”

“But that’s the River.”

“That’s the River.”

There was a silence.

“I’ll come back,” he said. “Someday. You’ll see.”

I said, “I know.”

All around us the fireflies flickered their own bright codes.

SALT WATER

EUGENIA TRIANTAFYLLOU

Salt Water

EUGENIA TRIANTAFYLLOU

illustration by

J YANG

TOR DOT COM

Anissa touches the small round bone sprouting from the fish's back. The fish is a small, electric blue acara, with black eyes. It's cute but it's only a fish. Anissa feeds pellets to the fish as it swims inside the tank in her room, and takes a closer look at the bony thing. It could be the start of a skull.

"Please be a human head," she says to the fish. "Please, please. Even a small one would do."

She hopes that her fish will become a mermaid. Desperately wishes it. She squints hard, pretends that she sees the outline of eye sockets, the hollow of a future nose on its surface, but it's just wishful thinking. For now.

Gently, she takes the fish out of the tank with her small hands and puts it back in its place. Inside the bubble in her belly. The membrane around her torso softens and makes space to welcome it back. The acara fish swims fast between the walls of her belly, happy to be reunited with her. Anissa is only twelve and she knows there will be change. The acara will evolve in shape and form, turn into another species. Grow. But not turning into a mermaid would be a disaster. Everyone she knows is becoming a mermaid. Acaras are freshwater fish. They are bound by the limits of a lake or a river. They don't swim freely in the open seas or lurk at the bottom of the ocean hidden inside bright coral reefs. It could never be happy alone in a river. She knows it.

None of her friends' creatures are staying fishes. Most of them have developed a head, or at least a pair of shoulders and perhaps a human torso for the more mature ones. If her creature stays a fish, when she is really old and it's time for it to be released forever—in many, many years—it will swim alone in the river. A stranger among stranger creatures whose owners she has never met before or socialized with. Mom and Dad, her grandpa, and her great aunt are merfolk too. Without family or friends, she would be cursed to loneliness for eternity.

"Please, please be a mermaid."

★ ★ ★

Things Anissa will miss if her fish doesn’t become a mermaid:

- Her parents (and her grandpa, and her great aunt).
- Jacob, the skeleton boy.
- The taste of brine and the vastness of the ocean, the way she dreams of it every night.
- Her bike (but she can’t take that with her anyway, so what’s the point?).
- Eleni and Alex (when they are nice to her).

★ ★ ★

The membrane covering Anissa’s belly is semitransparent, like everyone’s. If a fish wants to be seen it can swim up to the membrane at the front where the belly button is. If it wants to be left alone to rest, or when it goes through a change, it can swim all the way to the back, where the spine meets the hip, or hide between the insides that lie behind the bubble.

Anissa’s fish never hides away. It constantly swims at the front of Anissa’s body as if trying to embarrass her. It never tires either. When Anissa goes to the pool the next day, wearing her bathing suit that leaves that part of her belly exposed, she can’t avoid her friends’ looks of curiosity and later their questions.

Children (mostly around her age, and some smaller ones whose mermaids have already developed a head like the bunch of show-offs that they are) examine each other constantly, comparing their progress. They peer through her membrane, Alex, Eleni, even Jacob, the skeleton boy—his merfolk still only a skeletal outline with no meat on its bones frightens the smaller children.

“What’s that thing on its back?” Jacob’s voice comes timid from under his fringe.

“Does it feel like a skull? Can I touch it?” Eleni’s fingers hover over Anissa’s bubble, like claws. Anissa takes a few steps back.

“Is it a clam?” Jacob asks, all excited.

“No, it’s a little hat!” Alex laughs.

“It’s not a hat!” Anissa protests.

Alex ignores her and waves at the smaller children who are usually impressed by his antics. “Look, everyone. Anissa’s fish is wearing a hat!”

The children flock around Anissa, shoving each other to see her hatted

fish. The acara—unlike Anissa—perks up at the attention and swims frantic laps around Anissa's bubble until her stomach is made queasy by the motion.

"Why don't you stay hidden for once?" Anissa whines and splashes water so hard, the instructor gives her a look from the other side of the pool that makes her fish freeze.

"Cut it out."

The instructor's attention turns back to the older children. The teenagers. At sixteen their creatures are mostly what they will be for the rest of their lives. Graceful and beautiful mermaids. And those whose creatures aren't mermaids have by now changed social pools or maybe stopped socializing altogether. Some people are just not compatible with each other when socializing, even if they are both saltwater creatures.

Anissa sighs. Four years at the latest. Perhaps she could be more patient if she knew that her fish would become a delicate and swift mermaid in the end, ready to take on the deepest seas. But she is not so certain this will ever happen. And she is terrified of what comes next if it does not.

Because now is the time for socializing.

Soon all the children gather in the middle of the pool, hands to their bellies. With gentle motions they take out their creatures and hold them in their hands. Eleni's creature is the most developed one, a mermaid with lush hair the color of kelp, strong shoulders, and a lean torso. Her tail is the electric orange of the betta fish she started as. She is as big as a kitten. Eleni beams and holds her a little higher so that everyone can see, even though her face has the expression of an angry bullfrog.

"She is getting prettier, see?" Eleni says, as if guessing what the other children think.

The mermaid doesn't speak like a human. Sea creatures communicate in other ways, but her voice is a trilling song, as angry as her face.

Alex picks up his merfolk too. It is less a merfolk and more a golden striped angelfish with long human arms. The head has taken longer than usual to appear, and the arms and part of the shoulders sprout from the sides, right behind the gills, making the fish look like it's shrugging all the time. Which, knowing Alex, is somewhat expected.

At least Alex knows the arms belong to a human, so it is only a matter of

time before the full merperson appears.

Soon, the instructor joins them, whistle in hand. She recites the rules of socializing.

“No shoving, no ignoring, and no hiding in the corals.” The last one she says looking at Jacob. “You swim together, or you don’t swim at all. You help each other progress.”

It is a good speech. Anissa thought it was inspiring when, as a nine-year-old she joined socializing for the first time. That was when her fish started to swim around her bubble instead of hovering around the bottom of her belly.

Four years.

“Let the merfolk free.”

Anissa almost loses the signal, but something swims past her, brushing against her calf and it brings her back. It is Alex’s shrugging fish, swimming not-so-gracefully. Anissa lowers her acara in the water, ready to release it.

“Hold on there,” the instructor says, one eyebrow raised.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“What is that?”

The instructor comes close and stands over Anissa and her fish. At that moment Anissa is very aware of the little bone on its head. She feels she needs to say something about it. Break the silence. Inside her grip, the acara is writhing for freedom.

She looks up at the instructor and tries to sound casual.

“The merfolk skull started to come out yesterday.”

The instructor’s face takes on a worried expression. She rests a hand on the girl’s shoulder.

“Oh, honey.” Her voice is much lower now, barely above a whisper, which makes Anissa’s belly queasy again. The other children draw a little closer to them, eager to listen. “That’s not a merfolk.”

The instructor writes something down on her notepad.

“That’s an octopus.”

★ ★ ★

Things Anissa likes about her electric blue acara:

- It’s sort of cute.

- Sometimes when she is sad, she watches it swim happily inside her bubble, its long fins flowing gently in the water, and it makes her smile.
- It’s small, so even though it moves around a lot it’s not too annoying.
- After the bone sprouted, her acara has slowed down a bit. Sometimes she even forgets it’s there.

★ ★ ★

An octopus is a thing made for the darkness of the ocean, Anissa’s mother says. It lives in the deepest deeps of the sea, hidden. Waiting to devour anything that enters its territory. Whoever has an octopus is selfish and antisocial. One of her mother’s childhood friends was an octopus. Her name is Ekaterina, and rumors say she has done much worse than be antisocial. Her mom purses her mouth shut as if she is offended by the mere memory of her unfriendliness.

Anissa doesn’t want to be antisocial. She cannot understand how someone would not want to socialize, even if it isn’t always fun. She doesn’t want to be an octopus either. She is pretty sure she isn’t. The children call Ekaterina a witch. They say she ate another creature once, a small fish.

“That’s nonsense,” Anissa says. But secretly she worries. If it turns out she is an octopus, this means she could be a witch too.

That’s why she must clear up this misunderstanding once and for all.

Her father protests at first. Anissa can’t possibly be an octopus, he says. It goes against what he has worked for all these years. Against this family’s values. When he examines her fish, the scrutiny sends chills down Anissa’s spine. But in the end, he reluctantly agrees to let Anissa visit Ekaterina. If anything, to prove the pool instructor wrong. He loves proving people wrong.

Ekaterina’s house stands at the edge of the city to the west, where the last of the townhouses with their community socializing pools abruptly stop and where the small patch of forest begins. The one that separates the city from the river. There is a small pier a few hundred meters into the forest where people take the freshwater creatures of their loved ones after they pass. Anissa has been to a couple of releases there. The water ran angry and cold, but the surroundings were peaceful, and Anissa kept wondering if the fish inside the river could see the trees.

This is a strange place for an octopus to live. Anissa half expected to be on a boat to an island, or at the very least to travel south, closer to the beach and the ocean. The house is a perfectly average townhouse save for the tallest fence she has seen. It rises around the garden as high as the windows of the second floor. None of the other houses have fences separating them. This really does feel quite antisocial.

Before Anissa has the chance to put one foot on the driveway, a curtain from a first-floor window is drawn aside and a harsh face appears. It's one of the most angular faces Anissa has seen, with sharp check bones, a pointy chin, and a beak-like nose. Anissa remembers the kids calling Ekaterina a witch and she blames them a little less now. As soon as the door opens, the woman comes out. Ekaterina doesn't have the fluid grace of an octopus. She is tall, and stiff, and awkward, and tall. Perhaps, Anissa thinks, Ekaterina is just nervous like she is. Or just annoyed that she has to socialize with someone. When she stands before Anissa in her full height, the girl wonders if the octopus stretches its tentacles in the space between her ankles and her ears, instead of swimming in her belly. Anissa can't see Ekaterina's octopus yet. A green plaid shirt, hanging loosely from her body, is tied right over her delicate hips.

"Do you like chocolate mints?"

This is the first thing the woman says. It catches Anissa by surprise.

"Yes."

Anissa hates chocolate mints. Mint is something you clean your mouth with. Chocolate makes your teeth deliciously dirty. They are natural opposites. Anissa doesn't like the confusion she feels when she eats them, but she wants to be accommodating.

"Good, because it's all I have." A smirk appears at the corners of Ekaterina's mouth. She turns around and lets Anissa follow her inside.

While the outside looks like a normal-ish house—with the exception of that antisocial fence—the inside is more like their local library right after the smaller children have visited. There are books everywhere. The floor competes with the chairs as to who carries the greatest burden of knowledge, but it's really the floor that's winning. There are books in languages Anissa can't read, but the ones that she can are all about creature biology and bodies

of water.

Ekaterina clears out a couple of chairs and climbs on top of one to reach a kitchen shelf that looks to be full of books as well. Except this one hides the questionable treasure of chocolate mints inside a tin box. She passes the box to Anissa and fetches a teapot that somehow also fits on that shelf. After they have settled on their chairs, Anissa takes her time chewing half a mint, then washes it down with the black tea Ekaterina has prepared for them. Now that Anissa can see Ekaterina's face up close, she doesn't look so serious. There are fine lines around her eyes and mouth that make her look like she is always smiling a little. Her mother is at the same age but her fine lines don't make her look happy.

After they finish, Anissa excuses herself and goes to the bathroom. The bathtub and the sink are also filled with books top to bottom. At least the toilet is free, Anissa thinks, even if she doesn't plan to use it at the moment. All the time she has been here she hasn't seen a body of water where her acara and Ekaterina's octopus could socialize but she wears her bathing suit all the same and comes out.

A sudden dread washes over her that Ekaterina will immediately acknowledge her as one of her own. Then a second one: that she will reject her as just a fish. The small of her back grows slick with sweat as she remembers her father's stare on her fish, but Ekaterina doesn't look at her belly. Her gaze lingers on her cup of tea in her hand and then Anissa's eyes.

"You're gonna catch a cold," she says calmly. "This room doesn't warm up enough."

Anissa is impatient. She is overcome with the urge to run outside and go back to her old pool. But she won't be welcome there again. Not until she knows.

"Can you tell me if it's an octopus?"

"Not really."

Anissa folds in on herself but her acara doesn't seem to share her agony. If anything, it swims on the side of her belly that's closer to Ekaterina, which might mean it recognizes its own and that's not what Anissa needs right now.

"Do you know if it's going to be one?" she tries again.

The woman puts down her tea and looks at the acara for the first time.

The lines around her eyes deepen and she shakes her head.

“No one knows what they are going to be until they have become it and then it’s too late. It’s too soon for me to tell. I only know you are going to be cold pretty soon.”

Anissa doesn’t move. This was such a waste of time. But then again where can she go? Is there any body of water where she is welcome?

“I need an answer so I can go back to the pool.”

“Very well then.” Ekaterina gets up and walks to the patio door that leads to the backyard.

“I can show you what an octopus looks like if you’d like that. Perhaps your fish will let us know.”

★ ★ ★

She might not be allowed back into the swimming pool, but her pool is waiting for her outside her house. Eleni, Jacob, and Alex, all three of them with curious faces. Anissa practically runs at them, as if they alone could make her forget what she saw at that house.

Of course, there are questions:

“Did you touch the octopus?”

“Did she try to eat your fish?”

“Is your fish still wearing a hat?”

Anissa takes a deep breath and tells them the story from the moment she arrived at the house until the patio door opened. Then she stops.

She doesn’t tell them about the giant pool. How Ekaterina glided through the water smoother than an eel. How—as they both stood thigh deep in the water—Anissa screamed when the long tentacles unlatched themselves from Ekaterina’s spine. Anissa can’t even figure out how she could see so far into Ekaterina’s torso. Maybe she just imagined it. But the tentacles unspooled from something behind the bubble, and they were long. Longer than Ekaterina was tall.

She doesn’t tell them that when the first tendril broke the surface of the water, she turned around, got out of the pool, and ran back inside the house. That halfway, she slipped on water, fell, and bruised her knee. But when she heard Ekaterina asking if she was all right, she got up and kept running until

she was outside. Safe from those horrible tentacles.

And she doesn't tell them she saw a tiny fish out of the corner of her eye in a tank Ekaterina kept in the backyard. That she is certain it was not just a fish, but someone's creature that Ekaterina would devour later. That they are right, and octopuses are horrible and oh, God, she might become one of them. Why was she even complaining about being a fish in the first place?

"So, are you coming back to the pool now?" Jacob asks just before Eleni pinches his arm.

Anissa looks at her half-dry clothes.

"I think I have to wait till tomorrow."

Eleni smirks as if she was waiting for this. "You are an octopus."

Before Anissa can correct her, Eleni takes Jacob's hand and pulls him away.

"We can't be seen talking to you now."

As they leave, with Alex trailing behind them, Jacob turns around and waves.

"See you tomorrow."

★ ★ ★

Later, in the house, her parents call the pool manager but there is nothing to be done. She can't go back until there's at least a hint of what her fish will become. That's ridiculous, her father says. He'll call some friends and find another mermaid pool that will take her. This one will go belly up soon anyway.

But Anissa has other things on her mind. Her acara is very quiet. It only sits at the bottom of her stomach now; heavy like a small, cute pebble. Its tail is moving a little, but the eyes are not shiny anymore, and its mouth sits half-open and still.

When she tells her mother, she puts a look on her face and a hand on Anissa's head. Sweetheart, that's natural, she says. Anissa is not sure what the expression in her mom's face means, but Anissa has tears in her eyes and a lump in her throat, holding down a thousand questions and no questions at all.

★ ★ ★

The next day Ekaterina's house looks tidier somehow. The woman greets her at the door and behind her Anissa can see an empty couch and, further back, the surface of a dining table. Also there are sweets. Not the icky chocolate mint variety, but actual cookies. Chocolate chip cookies, oatmeal and raisins, and even some gingersnaps. Ekaterina extends the tin box like a peace offering.

"I haven't had any visitors in a long time. I forgot how people react to my octopus," Ekaterina says apologetically. "And to chocolate mints," she adds with a brief smile.

Anissa wonders how someone can forget a reaction like the one she had yesterday. She feels a little bad about it though, so she only takes an oatmeal and raisins cookie from the box. Not a chocolate chip one. She doesn't deserve those. Not yet.

"I was thinking we could start with something different today," Ekaterina begins to say.

Anissa takes a large bite off her cookie. "Do you eat … fish?"

Ekaterina stops in her tracks.

Anissa swallows fast and takes a gingersnap cookie before the woman takes them away.

She doesn't.

"Who told you I eat fish?" Ekaterina's face is flushed now and there's a bunch of other lines between her eyebrows that don't look happy at all.

"I saw a fish in the yard yesterday." Anissa looks her in the eyes. Dares her to deny it.

The woman doesn't look stunned like Anissa expected. Only a little sad.

"That was—is Mike."

Mike sounds like a fitting name. A tiny name for a tiny fish, Anissa thinks. She can't even begin to guess how young the owner of the creature was. Younger than her for sure. As she thinks all that, she realizes she has followed Ekaterina to the backyard once more, tin box still in her hands. Anissa glances at the pool she was in last night and shivers a little, but they both draw near the tank.

Anissa has not seen this kind of fish before. Ekaterina calls it a harlequin

rasbora. Mike is about an inch long and copper red in color with a black stripe on the side of his small body. He is a friendly little fish, already approaching the glass where Anissa has put her hand. It reminds her of her acara. Or how it used to be at least. Anissa cannot feel much movement in her belly now, but her heart's pounding makes up for it.

"Who is Mike?" she asks. Mostly because she wants to distract herself from thinking about her acara.

"My husband's fish. What he left behind." Ekaterina puts her entire palm against the glass next to where Anissa's hand is and Mike approaches swiftly.

"That's not true," Anissa says. She leans even closer now. That's a small child's creature. Why is Ekaterina lying now? She has her where she wants her.

Ekaterina's voice becomes very cold as she asks, "How many pools have you been to, Anissa?"

"Not many," Anissa admits. "Just the mermaid one, but Dad will soon find us another one and—"

"There are pools where you'll see creatures you can't believe exist. There aren't many, but they exist. Pools with mixed bodies of water for all of us."

Ekaterina turns around and starts for the pool. Anissa can hear her heartbeat in her ears very loudly now because she knows that she will have to look at her belly soon. She squeezes the tin box against her torso while the woman speaks.

"Mike and I were together since elementary school. He was the funny one. A happy boy. Lots of friends." Ekaterina removes her bathrobe and stays in her swimsuit. Anissa sees nothing through the membrane this time, it's like her whole midriff is hollow.

The octopus must be inside the pool already.

"But then we grew up. Well, the rest of us did. My fish had already sprouted tentacles by then, and I was going through my rebellious phase." She turns to Anissa. "You are not rebellious, are you?"

Anissa shakes her head.

"Didn't think so." Ekaterina grins. Her legs are knee deep in the water, and something like a dog-sized ink stain paints the other side of the pool black. "Mike's creature stayed a tiny fish and kids started cutting him off.

You know how it goes.”

Anissa knows. Well, kind of. She wonders if the skeleton boy will be there tonight when she returns home.

“We stayed together until the end. That was a year ago. Rasboras are freshwater fish. Only. They are made for the soft water of forest streams and swamps. If I release him, I will never find him again. I tried to find a solution, asked so many experts. But there are no solutions.”

That’s why Ekaterina lives so close to the forest. It isn’t the river beyond that brought her here. It is the forest itself. Probably why she has all those books too.

“I am not about to eat him. But I guess I am not doing him any favors either.”

Ekaterina sits deflated at the edge of the pool. It’s the first time Anissa sees her not sitting straight. Not looking so tall. She looks more like Anissa when she can’t make up her mind. When she is unsure of something. Of everything. And Anissa is unsure a lot.

“I am sorry,” she whispers to the woman, and she means it.

Suddenly, as if she has just remembered, Ekaterina turns to the girl and says, “Let’s try this again, shall we?” She extends an arm at Anissa, like an invitation to dance. “Don’t worry, you’ll see it before it comes this time.”

Anissa’s feet stay firmly planted by the fish tank. It’s not the fear of the octopus that stops her from joining Ekaterina. Not anymore. It’s not even the fear of staying just a fish. Anissa realizes that what makes her legs refuse to take another step is the fear of not being a fish anymore.

“I can’t,” she tries to explain. “…my fish is not well.”

Ekaterina’s posture changes in an instant. She becomes the tall, composed woman again.

“Can I see?”

Anissa is terrified, but that’s why she came here. Sort of. She approaches in what seems like the slowest walk ever and, looking straight ahead, she shows her her belly. She feels nothing. The acara doesn’t stir at all. Anissa starts shaking. She imagines Ekaterina’s face full of pity or whatever her mom’s expression had been last night.

“It’s not moving,” she says. Because she needs to say something.

“Anissa.” Ekaterina’s voice is tender and comes from very far away, but only because Anissa is deep in her own thoughts. “I think I know what your fish is becoming.”

When Anissa pushes through her fear and looks down, the acara head has split in half and what comes from inside is the clear shape of a human skull.

“Oh…” Anissa’s voice breaks. “My fish is gone. I am a mermaid now.”

She puts her arms around her belly and lets the wave of grief wash over her.

“Are you? Besides, sometimes it’s okay not to name things. Not to know.”

Ekaterina stands, knee deep in the water, taller than ever, and spreads her arms, inviting Anissa inside. When the girl looks up at the woman, she only sees sorrow and kindness.

★ ★ ★

Anissa might have cried a lot. And Ekaterina’s bubble might have been strangely cushy against her face; and the octopus not so scary when it kept on its own side of the pool. She might have eaten a chocolate chip cookie too. So that was nice.

★ ★ ★

Things Anissa will miss about her electric blue acara:

- She knew exactly who she was with it.
- It was much braver than her and now she’ll have to make up for it somehow.
- That whatever Anissa might become next, it won’t be an acara. (And that she is not even sure what she is supposed to become.)
- Visiting Ekaterina. Can she still do that with her little fish gone?
- It was pretty smart as far as fish go. It probably knew it was time for a change and she should listen to it for once.
- Did the acara hurt when it let go?

★ ★ ★

When she comes home, Jacob waits there, alone, hands in his pockets. She doesn’t care so much about the others, but she asks anyway.

“They were here a minute ago,” he says, pointing somewhere between the houses.

He is a bad liar.

“I am coming to the pool tomorrow,” Anissa announces and sees his eyes open wide like Eleni’s bullfrog mermaid.

“So you’re a mermaid?”

She shrugs. “Nobody knows what they are going to be until they are it.” And when she meets Jacob’s vacant stare she says, “Maybe I am just a fish with a human skull. Do you want to scare some kids tomorrow?”


COUNTING
CASUALTIES
YOON HA LEE

Counting Casualties

YOON HA LEE

illustration by

JULIE DILLON

The Coalition highship's face changed its name from *grace under gunfire* to *counting casualties* when our fleet heard that Bekket-of-the-Spires had fallen to the deadships.

Let me tell you about Bekket. I never trod the pale shores or walked beneath the veiled shadows of its silver-tangled trees. I never climbed the almost-forever stairs of the spindle cities, never counted the fever-constellations they made of their stars, never combed the quaint stores for statues lathed out of starship hulls. I never thought of Bekket as a place I might visit among all the thousand thousand worlds.

But I knew of Bekket's poetry. Not all of its people were poets, but enough of them were. Not all of its poetry was beautiful, but enough of it was. The Coalition demagogues especially liked the line about—it had something to do with eyes and ideals and things we don't see. It's gone now.

When the deadships destroyed Bekket with razor-fire and erasure-choirs, all of Bekket's poetry was scratched out forever from every place it had ever lived.

I have a volume of Bekketer poetry bound in old, old paper. It's hash now, glitched-out garbage that no one will ever be able to read again. I would have disposed of it, but I couldn't bear to. So I honor the dead.

It was an open question why the deadships weren't using this ability to destroy our technology base; why they erased our symphonies and soap operas but not our stardrives. Our scientists debated the question, but short of being able to ask the deaders themselves, there was no way of knowing. The going theory was that they were demoralizing us before swooping in for the kill.

The deaders, for their part, weren't taking inquiries. Communication with them was as improbable as hoping that your pistol would wake up and learn the alphabet. We had sent words-of-greeting and entreaties in verse, videos, everything we could think of, only to be met with obdurate silence. They seemed bent on burning their way through our worlds. Perhaps we were only

obstacles on the way to somewhere else, but we had sent out scouts and all we found was more silence.

In any case, the bad news wasn't just the poetry. I always felt a moment's guilty gratitude that they hadn't done away with our computers or communications before remembering that we were still dealing with the death of a world. The people of that world, the animals slow and swift and sweet. The bad news was that Bekket-of-the-Spires was located on the Rose Curve of the Sieve, and no one had realized that the deadships had penetrated so far into the Sector.

My name is Niaja vrau Erezeng—vrau because I am neither man nor woman. As far as I know, the only other Erezeng left in the Coalition, or anywhere, is my cousin Damariev var Erezeng, who commands the *one-way run*. I did not want to be the fleet highship's commander any more than I wanted my life to be a crazed patchwork of bullets, angles, the carcasses of ships and the people inside them. But my homeworld died in the razor-fires—the deadships took our calligraphy from us, which hurt me even though I didn't care about it—and it only seemed right that I serve against them. It was simpler for Damariev. He was indifferent to the joy of shooting things, although he was good at it. But he was also good at loyalty, and he went where I did.

The Coalition's council sent us our instructions not long after the news of Bekket's fall came. Fleet 18 was to intercept the deadfleet in the Sieve and prevent them from advancing toward the Coalition's heartworlds, for values of "prevent" that meant "you will probably die in the attempt." It was terrible work and there was no one else close enough to do it. We were spread thin, and furthermore the void-storms made it difficult for them to promise us any assistance.

I could tell you about the heartworlds, but there would be no point. We would only know about each one's particular art, the jewel that defined it, when the deadships' erasure-choirs sang them out of memory. I remember in the case of Jai-binai it was political caricature. I hadn't thought I cared for caricature—so coarse, so savage—until Jai-binai was dust and bonedrift. Better not to think about the vast possibilities for loss.

Fleet 18 had fifty-four ships in it plus the highship. I knew the names of

the people who served on those ships, had them written into the secret crevices of my heart, and I knew their friends and follies and fears. The highship's face remembered them for me, too, but I made a point of remembering for myself. Like most ship's faces, it had a certain black sense of humor after over a century of service. It had nicknames for everyone, which I refused to divulge in the interests of preserving morale, and it liked to refer to me as "the latest unfortunate" when it bothered talking to anyone else.

It also went very quiet after every battle, once the guns sputtered to a stop, when it reckoned the dead. In case the numbers had changed, in case it had made a mistake, in case someone on the list had survived after all. It was never wrong; ship's faces never were. But it checked anyway.

We had been en route for twenty-nine days when we got the first indication that the battle ahead would be even worse than we had anticipated. I had a scout-web extended around the volume of space the fleet occupied, but it had holes; they always did. We were lucky to get as much warning as we did.

A scout-web is this, and this is why we use them as little as we dare. Take a flock of birds. Raise them from embryo and eggshell. They follow you wherever you go. They croon to the sound of your voice. They orient to you the way they should orient to the polestar, to the sun overhead, to the wheeling of the seasons even in a world of sterile days and stark nights. Tell them to fly, but punch holes in their wings so they can never get too far away. Encase them in shells of metal, give them fuel to fly. Tell them over and over to sing only when their eyes are burned out. And then send them to keep watch over you.

They will do it, you know. Every time. Scouts never complain.

The warning came piecemeal, in words of skew and scatter and fracturing sky. Captain Aron var Aris was the first to report it. He had one of the fleet's best scan operators, a woman whose homeworld, Starro, had once been known for its living arrangements of flowers and tame blinded birds. I sometimes look at videos of the arrangements. I would tell you the woman's name, I once knew it as closely as I knew everyone's, but the great art of her world had not been the arrangements of flowers, but its people's names. Now

the woman calls herself Flinch, and no one questions the choice.

In any case, Flinch told us what to look for sideways and forward, up and down, and none of it was good from any direction. The deadfleet numbered at least two hundred, and we knew from pallid experience that their ships were tougher and almost as fast, sisters to fire and thunder. They were swerving toward the Straits of Pierced Glass, which were known for their uncertain stellate weather, whorls and eddies of space where their drives and ours functioned treacherously or not at all.

I held a conference with my senior captains, all fourteen of them, and their ships' faces. Damariev, my cousin, smiling the way he always smiled. Some people thought he was insensitive, but I knew better. There were needles behind his eyes, and red red ice. He knew how bad the situation was. Makione vrau Enon, who was young for their rank, and had a mind that thought in clean straight trajectories that others didn't see until Makione pointed them out, and who had wanted to be an engineer. Jeuri vrau Kanzon, Nio var Merre, Lasura vel Kelas. I could tell you about all of them.

Even after it was over, I could tell you about all of them. That counts for something.

The faces projected themselves uniformly as black jackal masks with hellspark eyes, each considerately labeled with its name. Faces had a certain respect for tradition. As *counting casualties* liked to say, humans were so short-lived and changeable that it was nice to have some things to rely on, like basic protocol and the perennial popularity of coffee.

"Looks bad, is actually worse," was the first thing that *unhinged equation* said. It was the face of Aron var Aris's ship, and it had a reputation for understatement. "We might as well pack up and go home."

This was also the face's idea of a joke. The ship had been constructed in a system that hadn't been inhabited for the past 294 years, after an ecological disaster.

"Thank you," I said patiently. I had long practice being patient. "The deadships are taking a damned peculiar route through the Straits, as if they're not aware how bad the fluctuations get. Their loss, our gain. If we're willing to pass through Storm System Vulturehawk Nine, we can pin them as they're mewed up in the worst of the narrows."

“Could be a trap, sir,” Damariev said. His image flickered slightly, obscuring the angles of his face, the raptor’s eyes. He only bothered calling me “sir” during conferences, when hardly anyone else did, and I was honestly not sure why he did it even then.

“It’s consistent with their behavior throughout,” Lasura said. “They’ve always been willing to take a few losses if it’ll get them where they’re going faster, and frankly their ships are tough to begin with.”

“They could be headed toward any of two dozen heartworlds.” It was *counting casualties.* “Must be nice to be spoiled for choice. But the problem’s still the same. We could afford”—its voice was subtly ironic; we could all tell after the time we had spent together—“to lose Bekket and Nyo-o and Teufel-of-the-Devastation. We can’t afford to lose the heartworlds.”

The heartworlds were the technological and economic core. We couldn’t count on the deaders being content to demoralize us by erasing random pieces of culture. If we lost tech from the heartworlds, it could destroy the fleets’ ability to fight.

There was always the possibility that the deadfleet would remain consistent in its methods, but nobody wanted to lean too hard on the possibility.

“Well,” Damariev said, “we’re only outnumbered four to one and their ships are only half again as good as ours. What’s the panic?”

It’s never been clear to me whether my cousin feels no fear at all or is just better at hiding it. I’ve never asked.

I know what fear is. I see it looking back at me out of my eyes in the mornings, and I know how to keep it caged where it won’t get in my way. But every day it grows stronger, even if I’ve torn out its teeth and carved off its limbs. One of these days it will look at me with its gnawed-open eyes and tell me what to do, and on that day I will do whatever it says. I hope it will be a long time before that day.

“We know the terrain better,” I said. “If we can pin them in the narrows—that’ll be the hard part.”

“You’ve always been good at charts,” Damariev said, “so I presume you wouldn’t bring it up if it were hopeless.”

“I can’t believe you made it into university,” Jeuri vrau Kanzon said to

him. They had never liked Damariev's flippancy, and frankly I couldn't blame them.

"Well, technically I never finished," Damariev said, unoffended; he never was. He didn't have to say what had interrupted his desultory efforts to study comparative literature.

"Here's the chart," *counting casualties* said. It triggered the display. There was an unsettling whispering sound, like worlds seething silent. The ships' faces wouldn't tell me what the sounds meant to them. It was probably just as well.

"Two goads," I said after a moment. "They're not going to deviate hard from their current vector, so it's a matter of coming in from above and below, forcing them into the channel we want. The resulting spindle formation won't do them any favors once we come at them."

Lasura rubbed her temples. "That requires us to split our forces."

"Right, but once we've pinned them, we can take advantage of strait geometry to focus fire at our leisure."

"They can't be stupid enough to fall for that," Nio said.

"They're stupid enough not to go around," Damariev retorted. "Stupidity of some sort is involved in this somewhere. We'd be stupid ourselves not to take advantage of it."

"Could be a trap," Makione said. They weren't looking at any of us. Instead, they reached out and drew vectors through the turbulent colors and lines that represented Vulturehawk 9. "Must be in a real hurry if the deaders aren't willing to divert two days out."

"Old news," Lasura said. "They've been in a hurry for quite a while."

"We need a storm spike," Makione said, "but there isn't time to rig one."

"Coalition wouldn't thank us for that anyway," I said dryly. The storm system's reaction would probably make travel through the entire sector a hell's-gamble for the next several decades.

Void-storms challenge our stardrives, but require special equipment to detect otherwise. Older propulsion systems are unaffected, but they're also slower by orders of magnitude. There are stories of how desperate governments sent sleeper slowships through void-storms in an effort to surprise their enemies on the other side, only for their regimes to disintegrate

before their fleets arrived to fight.

"Tell me," I said to Makione, "how well have your scan upgrades held up?"

"Nothing's broken yet," they said, "which is a good sign. But we've yet to see if they'll be a significant improvement when reading storm-fluxes."

I thought about it for a moment. "Here's what we'll do."

Your ability to fight in a storm system depends sharply on the direction of your approach. You're playing a board game, but every time you move, your piece changes into something else. Humans can rarely perform the necessary calculations without the aid of a ship's face.

Once I asked the highship's face why it needed humans at all. After all, it had access to a variety of robots to perform maintenance chores, and it could trivially split its attention. It said only that it liked having someone to remember.

This is the game.

The problem with manipulating the deaders is that their battle logic is full of bizarre twists. You can't reliably scare them. They don't surrender, but sometimes ships will flee at random while the rest of the deadfleet continues to fight. And the terrible thing is that the diminished fleets are still capable of destroying worlds. At other times, reinforcements arrive just as we think we've overcome the latest fleet. Most of us are convinced that their tacticians are crazy, but on the other hand you can't argue with results.

After the meeting, after the captains and their faces had blinked out, I stared at the chart and its notations. They were all starting to look alike, numbers and topologies ground into dust. I leaned back in my chair and sighed.

"We'll survive this," I said into the humming silence. I didn't sound convincing even to myself.

"Say that again after the battle's done," *counting casualties* replied.

"I, at least, intend to," I said. That was one promise I'd be able to keep, despite what came after.

★ ★ ★

The first and last thing I will always remember about the battle is the pain.

The symbiosis between captain and face, or for that matter, between the crew of a ship and the ship's face, was not limited to strategizing. The faces monitored us more intimately than any doctor, especially when we were strapped in for maneuvers. They knew that we were human, with human limitations, and that excessive pain distracted most of us.

Most of the battle comes back to me in a haze of red and black. Red was pain. Black was more pain. And that was after *counting casualties* filtered out the worst of it.

I had made the plan. Now it was my job to survive while the faces handled the maneuvers. Humans don't have reaction times fast enough to do it themselves. Maybe the deadfleet uses a similar arrangement.

It's unclear what the deaders really want. That being said, they understand fear. We know this because they use it against us. In the Battle of Atrophus, they pierced Fleet 3 again and again, targeting Captain Ior var Valle's detachment. Var Valle was known for brave rhetoric, words of fire-splash and splendor, but worms chewed his heart. Every time the deaders so much as grazed one of his ships, he faltered. And finally he broke and ordered a retreat toward the main body of the fleet, which allowed the deaders to gain the initiative.

Atrophus's art was that of the mortuary circus. For a long while after, people made cutting remarks about how the battle had been its own circus. But if that had been the case, we wouldn't be able to remember it.

So. We couldn't scare the deaders into the strait. But we could let them think they had scared us, and let them exploit the apparent weakness.

★ ★ ★

What else I understand of the battle, in no particular order. I am trying to let go of linearity, as *counting casualties* advises me.

1. Gödel's incompleteness theorems teach us that certain facts transcend any attempt to prove them within their axiomatic system. Curiously, the deaders have not yet stolen our mathematics, unless you count the inverted architecture of Kerus-Tal.
2. The aftertaste of coffee.
3. Fleet 18's captains trusted me as much as they trusted anyone, even if some of them disliked my cousin. I had worked at it because the alternative was

unthinkable.

4. Two things turned the tide in my favor. First, the *faces* trusted me. It might be more accurate to say that *counting casualties* stopped caring whether it lived or died, whether our circumstances admitted any further joy. I do not know if the other faces felt similarly, but I have my suspicions.
5. Second, a memory of a field trip I'd gone on at the age of eight, and how much I hated memorizing dates. If the deaders had taken that from me, we wouldn't still be here.

★ ★ ★

"*Turn it off,*" I remember screaming as blood bubbled up into my nose and leaked from my eyes. "*Turn everything off. All the weapons.*" The deaders hadn't fallen for our stratagem, nor had the stellate currents slowed them. We could either fight them and die, or—

Damariev loved to fight and never surrendered, even when we fenced each other a lifetime ago. He would not have understood or approved. At least his ship, the *one-way run,* overrode him.

It wasn't surrender, although I'm sure it looked like abject cowardice. Too bad the pain didn't end. There was more screaming, most of it mine.

The deadfleet decelerated, flipped, matched our vector. No longer attacking us. Like an escort.

"Follow them" was the last order I gave. I assume *counting casualties* read my lips, because I doubted I had a voice left by that point.

I came to three days later. *Counting casualties* would have let me sleep longer in the regeneration tank. I insisted on rising, and made a point of avoiding mirrors. It wasn't as though anyone was going to write me up because my hair violated regs no one had cared about since the war began.

We met again, emergency meeting.

"Weapons remain powered off," Damariev said. "Maybe the deaders are AIs after all, and flawed ones at that." We all winced at the crudeness of the word. "I say we destroy them while we have a chance."

"They react faster than we do," Lasura pointed out. "We'd get one or two. Not the whole deadfleet."

I let them argue for a while, get it out of their system. Mostly because I was trying not to be sick. "We're still following them, yes?"

“Yes,” *counting casualties* said. It displayed a map for our benefit. “You didn’t give orders otherwise.”

“They wouldn’t be so stupid as to lead us back to their base,” Makione said. “More likely they think we’re particularly cooperative prisoners of war.”

An uneasy laugh rippled around the room.

“Did we lose anything, that last battle?” I asked. I didn’t mean people or ships.

Heads shook, one by one.

“We’d get some of them,” Damariev said, looking slantwise at Lasura.

“The key to ending this fucking war—”

The senior captains startled, except Damariev. The jackal-eyes of the faces burned red, and redder.

“The key,” I said, lowering my voice, “is finding out what the fuck the deaders want. Well, this is our chance. Maybe by following them we’ll get some insight.”

“What are we going to learn that all the brightest academicians couldn’t figure out?” Jeuri demanded.

I looked at them, and they cradled their head in their hands for a moment.

“Fighting them isn’t working,” I said. “We have to try something different.”

“Fine,” Jeuri said tiredly. “Fine. Nothing to lose.”

We went around the circle. Everyone agreed.

Nothing to lose, Jeuri had said.

I thought of my face’s name, *counting casualties*, and said nothing more.

★ ★ ★

We traveled for a long time.

Time can be measured. But the human mind does not understand piezoelectricity or pendulums, except when translated into the language of adrenaline and action. I asked the faces to formulate drugs that would make the journey tolerable.

The issue wasn’t physical degradation. We’d defeated that generations ago. Rather, it was the emotional strain of accompanying our enemies

through a hideous cycle of days, each one like the last.

Damariev was the only one who refused to take the drugs. I expected he would change his mind after the first year of the journey, or possibly the fifth. I lost track of the tally.

For my part, I slipped into a haze of honey-colored waking dreams. The ship's face had instructions to administer an antidote the moment anything changed. And faces, unlike humans, did not fall prey to boredom or bitterness.

For the longest time, nothing changed.

And then one of *counting casualties*'s robots approached me, and the needle stung my arm, and I knew we had arrived.

★ ★ ★

Imagine a castle vaster than a gas giant, a fortress of involute desires and labyrinth spires. Then imagine a castle dwarfing even that. You are not a speck, or a spark. You are smaller than that. It does not notice your existence. It would take you all your lifetimes to walk its length, which expands like a fractal shoreline.

This was the structure the deadfleet led us to, far from any known stars or unstars, far even from the grasp of dark matter.

Because old habits die hard, we had a meeting.

"We blow it up, of course," Damariev said. "A little antimatter goes a long way."

"We explore," Makione countered.

"It could be an overture to peace," Lasura said. The voyage had not destroyed her optimism. "Whoever's on this *thing*, we have to at least try to talk to them."

The three of them looked at me. "You haven't spoken," Damariev said.

"We explore," I said, with a nod at Makione. "I'll go."

"That's absurd," Damariev said—because he was loyal, paradoxically. "We can't risk Fleet 18's highest officer."

I smiled at him. I wasn't sure I was doing it right, from the way his eyes slitted. "I'm going." Among other things, I wanted to know if I was right about what we'd find.

“Besides,” I added, for the benefit of the others, and for Damariev especially, “we know what the chain of succession is. You’re next in line. Hold the fort while I’m gone.”

The faces did the real work. I didn’t need to say that. *One-way run* was one of the oldest and wisest of its kind. As long as Damariev listened to it, he’d be fine.

★ ★ ★

Assays carried out by robot probes showed that conditions within the structure were not inimical to human life, provided we suited up and took the usual precautions. I chose four other people to investigate the structure, all of them scientists in their former lives, even if one of them had been a computational geologist. Damariev wanted me to take weapons, or people with weapons, but I wouldn’t hear of it.

We split up, so as to cover the most ground. I had a camera feed linked directly to *counting casualties,* and from there to the rest of Fleet 18. We all did. If we didn’t survive, at least the others would be able to glean some clues from our explorations.

We entered through various apertures. At mine, lights came on one by one, in a swirling pattern like an elaborate pirouette. The deaders, I thought much later, had probably not originated that idea. Over the commlink, Damariev informed me that the deadfleet remained strangely quiescent despite our intrusion.

At first, I noticed only the lights, illuminating spaces on a grand scale.

Then I noticed the alcoves, several times a person’s height. Perhaps giants had created this place, or friends to giants. Perhaps, as now seems likely, different parts of the structure were built to different scales, for different visitors.

And then I noticed the alcoves’ contents.

I walked for seconds, minutes, hours; it doesn’t matter. Tasseled masks, beads of bone and kernel hanging limply from the luminous strands. Syllabaries enameled into the walls for our delectation, with commentary in several of our languages projected beside them. Cloaks radiant with starfire jewels, onto which judicial codes had been embroidered in impossible

iridium thread. Treasures beyond treasures, lavishly displayed.

I saw; and I knew.

I said it aloud, because someone had to. “It’s a museum. The deadfleet isn’t at war with us—not the way we thought. It’s collecting specimens for a museum. They’re *curators.*”

“I can confirm that,” one of the other explorers said, and then the rest as well.

I heard no response from the fleet—at first. “Fleet 18, do you read?”

“I heard you the first time.” Damariev. “Get out of there, Commander. I’ve had the faces running calculations. We have enough antimatter to blow this whole place into its constituent quarks.”

“Countermand,” I snapped. “Damariev, use your brain and *think.* If we do that, we won’t have enough fuel to get back home.”

“I’m fine with that if that’s the price we pay to save the Coalition.”

“Besides, this may be the only place where our cultural treasures still exist. Bekket’s poetry. Starro’s names. Atrophus’s circuses. We could preserve them yet.”

“We could stop the deaders forever. Because the poetry might still exist, but not our people. If we let them live, they’re going to wipe out the Coalition. For all we know it’s gone already.”

Counting casualties.

“Damariev—”

The commlink went dead.

I started back toward the entrance, alarmed by this display of temper. Damariev had always been loyal, but never before had it been so sorely tested. I might not survive the coming conflagration.

“Commander Vrau Erezeng to Fleet 18,” I said again and again. There was no answer, not even static.

I called the scientists. None of them responded, either.

A long time later—even now I don’t know how long, and I don’t care to—I reached the entrance. There was an alcove in the wall that hadn’t been there when I first came in. I passed it by, because my priority was returning to my ship.

There was no ship. No Fleet 18. I saw instead the sentinel deadfleet, still

in the same position. Debris glimmered in the light from the museum.

I'd been too late to stop Damariev from attacking the deaders, and my fleet was gone.

When I grew tired of watching the gyring of the particles, and tired of blaming myself for everything that had gone wrong, I hobbled back to inspect the alcove again. This time I lingered to look inside.

The deaders—or perhaps I should call them the *curators*—have a technology far beyond ours, one that can extract even abstractions. I do not know how they do it, and I do not wish for them to teach me. But what I learned, looking at that alcove, was how they had defeated my fleet, and my brave, doomed cousin, who should have followed my orders, just as he had done all his life. I know what it looks like when the deaders siphon things out of us and pin them to a museum display.

They had taken the greatest of Damariev's arts, and perhaps that of the fleet as well: our loyalty.

I do not know why the deaders spared me. Perhaps because I chose not to attack them, and every museum needs its audience. Perhaps I myself am one of the displays. All I know is that my air should have run out centuries ago, to say nothing of everything else, and yet I remain.

THE PUPPETMASTER

KEMI ASHING-GIWA

The Puppetmaster

KEMI ASHING-GIWA

illustration by

FRANCESCA RESTA

Uduak IX may have ordered an assassin to gut his niece in a holy monastery, but he is still a man of honor. As emperor of Johari IX, the greatest human-ruled planet in the Known Worlds, honor is an attribute to be expected. And so before he had her butchered, he gave the order that she would be allowed a single sheet of solar parchment and a holographic brush so she might write her last words.

Now Uduak steeples his hands over the great stone desk in his office and narrows his eyes at the messenger before him. “Well?”

The messenger jerks as if slapped awake from a trance. “Oh—forgive me, my lord!”

Uduak suppresses a sigh as she hands him a scroll before throwing herself at his feet. Though the traditional courier’s hood obscures her face, she seems like a useful young woman. Quick on her feet and genuinely eager to please, if a bit slow in other ways. Such a shame he’ll have her followed as soon as she leaves, and then disposed of. The scroll’s electronic seal appears untampered, but his enemies’ spies are everywhere, and one can never be too careful.

Uduak snaps the seal and unrolls the solar parchment. The bottom left corner is spattered rust-brown, the color of old blood. He allows himself the very smallest of frowns. Her death was supposed to be clean.

“The man who gave you this and sent you to me, what did he tell you?”

“Only that it’s done, my lord.”

Uduak notes that she doesn’t inquire *what* is done. He could use a messenger that knows not only to keep her questions unasked, but also to conceal all curiosity. Someone who follows orders without a word. But Uduak did not become emperor by refusing to make sacrifices. Or to sacrifice others.

“Good, good. You’ve done well.”

Uduak reaches into the drawer below his desk and pulls out a pouch heavy with gold coin. A ridiculous prize for delivering a single letter, but he’ll get it back. Not for himself, though. All those shining disks of precious metal will be delivered to the messenger’s family, along with a hollow promise to hunt down whatever brigand killed their unlucky daughter.

He tosses the pouch at her and she catches it easily. She doesn't even stand to do it. She just sticks out an arm from where she's kneeling and snatches the bag right out of the air. Lightning-quick reflexes—*really* such a shame.

He'll have the gold sent to her kin tripled. The thought does nothing for the guilt writhing in his gut— No. Not guilt, never that. Guilt is for lesser souls, for those who do not have the horrendous weight of an entire planet and its people resting upon their shoulders.

Anan, the captain of his guard, waves a hand at a nod from Uduak. The motion sensors inlaid into the wall register the movement and the door glides open for the messenger. The emperor waits for it to shut again, and then he begins to read.

Dearest Uncle,

May you reign a thousand years…

If only I really hoped for that. Then perhaps you wouldn't have sent the cutthroats. But you know I've wanted you dead since you threw me into that pit, and you were desperate to be rid of me. Have you always been desperate? Or, like everything else, did you change when spacetime ruptured four hundred thousand klicks from Johari IX, connecting our universe to the Umbra? Or when the demons poured through in their darkships and overran our world? I suppose it doesn't matter. You are what you are, as am I.

I didn't see a demon until I was fifteen. Mother wouldn't allow it. She wanted to shield me from the world for as long as she could, she loved me so. But you knew that. When I was born, your beloved sister stopped speaking of the great things you two would do together—of the glittering planets you'd visit, the grand temples you'd build. She stopped speaking to you entirely, now that she finally had the successor she wanted.

Eight-year-old Temaru, seated on the emperor's lap, gently pokes the mottled, pale ridge of skin across her mother's collarbone. "What about this one?"

"Ah, the Battle of Skytouching Mountain," Noriko IX murmurs. "Where I earned my very first scar from the very first of the demon generals. Joro the Spider. Half woman, half arachnid, all bloodthirsty. She was half as tall as the highest tower of this palace." She reaches up, presses her eight-year-old daughter's fingers deeper into the scar. "She grazed me with the blade-sharp edge of one of her eight formidable legs, just before my sword met her belly." She chuckles heartily as Temaru's eyes go ever rounder. "By the

Ghosts, I was sure I was going to die. Up until that moment I'd thought I was invincible, you know. I'd slain hundreds of demons by then, not realizing how weak they were compared to their masters until it was almost too late."

Temaru shivers. How lucky she is to have a mother as strong and brave as hers. If only her mother had more time to play hide-and-seek with her in the courtyard, to tell her all the stories of her epic duels.

"You have so many knights," Temaru says quietly, folding her small hands over her lap.

"I do."

"So why do you have to fight? Why do you have to go all the time?"

"Oh, my darling, I wish I didn't." Noriko takes Temaru's hands in her calloused ones. "A queen who does not shed blood for her people is not much of a queen at all."

"But…"

Noriko tilts her head, a brow raised in light admonishment. "How can I ask my knights to face the demons if I stay cooped up in my castles?"

Temaru pouts. "Uncle does." She knows she's being bratty but she can't help it.

"Yes." Noriko sighs through her nose, long and slow and tired. "Yes, Uduak does do that. One of the many, many reasons I am so grateful for you. I've raised you to know better. When the time comes, when you become Temaru IX, you'll have your own scars." Noriko pulls her heir into a tight hug. "But that won't be for a very long time. For now, the only battles you'll have are these!" Without warning she tickles Temaru until the little girl shrieks with laughter.

After much chasing and taunting, Noriko collapses onto the polished floor. Temaru flops over her.

"And these ones?" Temaru rolls onto her stomach and points at a set of three uneven scars at Noriko's hip, just over the gold-embroidered hem of her pants. They look like claw marks. "Who did that?"

"Ah, you." The little crinkles at the edges of Noriko's eyes deepen as she grins down at her very beloved, very confused child. "Those are stretch marks, little one."

Coddled though I was, I learned the signs that perhaps the war was not truly as over as the minstrels sang. The deepening lines of Mother's face. Fewer knights marching through the fortress gates each time they left. Less food at each meal. It was all so painfully obvious—how could you all think I'd miss any of it? I was only ten when Mother united the twenty squabbling clans into the Imperium, just a day over thirteen when the war she waged against the demons finally ended. But children see just as well as adults, and often better. I suppose we shed that knowledge when we shed our youth.

I was fourteen when Mother finally let me out of her fortress at the edge of the empire and into her traveling party. You know how much she hated the capital she let you rule in her stead, and she wanted me by her side now that it was safe. Well, safer. Every few months, we would pass through villages that one of the last few demon packs had gone through.

Now that I was out in the world, the signs I saw changed.

Before we even got to the villages, we'd cross over the surrounding fields. The crops would be as vibrant as ever, gleaming gold and emerald and scarlet under our great sapphire sun. Everyone forgot the richness of our planet when all the farmers were devoured before they could even pick up a hoe. But between neat lines of tilled black soil an army of weeds would be drinking up that richness as well. Swarms of iridescent insects would be gnawing at the leaves, and the smell of spoiled fruit would fill our lungs whenever the winds shifted.

The settlements would be as abandoned as the fields: no gleefully screaming children at play, no merchants yelling about their wares, no six-legged yiiji birds or bioluminescent flying marrae snakes perching on the rooftops. The doors would be locked, with no sign of forced entry. But when Mother's knights broke in, the reek of rotten meat would flood the air. No corpses, of course. You've never been on a battlefield, but your generals surely told you what braver souls have witnessed: the demons leave no bodies, only silence and the stench of fresh-spilt blood.

Mother always had twenty Whisperers travel with us at all times, each carrying a dozen of their sacred candles. They led worship circles and blessed the villagers we met, but their true purpose was to drip wax over the cold lips of corpses, forever sealing them so that their doomed spirits would not haunt the land. But we never found any dead, ever.

Once or twice a year we'd actually come across a pack of demons. We'd smell smoke, and then hear the screams. It was always in one of the outlying villages, where the rivers of wealth and technological commerce shriveled into streams. The creatures knew better than to attack the main cities and towns, where they would face lightning turrets and citizens armed with plasma guns. Mother was doing her best to equip every settlement, but the war was a costly one. And so, every once in a while, in some poor hamlet we'd find scores of villagers plucking arrows from their quivers, nocking them, drawing back their bowstrings, letting metal and wood fly. Again and again and again. But their arrowheads always sailed right through the monsters. Their weapons hadn't been packed in blessed salt for over a year, because the people had forgotten to prepare. They'd thought they were finally free of

the fanged horrors. That, or they'd simply run out of salt.

It never lasted very long, though. Mother would send her knights in and they'd slash down the demons with swords and axes of saltsteel, phase blasters and sun grenades. Demons fell only to great power; whether the arms were energy weapons or simple metal purified with prayer-woven compounds, it did not matter. Anything less than the finest tools of the mind and spirit only angered the creatures.

Once, I overheard two pages say that Mother had intentionally let some demons escape during the war so that the Imperium would always need her. Perhaps that was even right. Maybe the spies you paid to plant those rumors were telling the truth. But I'll never know, because you killed her. Are you surprised I know? Most witnesses of your crimes have vanished over the years, like a handful of ash thrown to the wind. But you have many, many crimes, Uncle, and you failed to close every pair of eyes that saw them. Eyes that come with mouths more than willing to open, after the application of a little pain and pressure.

I know that when reports came of an attack a week's ride away, you had a servant drug her wine with the venom of the quarter-moon spider. I know that when she went into battle seven days later, she collapsed before the demon she was about to relieve of a head. It took hers instead.

When did your hatred of me first blossom in your chest? When you saw my mother have me try on her crown for the very first time? A thin band of hammered gold without inscription or etched symbol. Even then I thought it weighed more than the whole world.

I have so many questions, Uncle. I suppose it's only fair that I answer one of yours. You never asked me what happened in the pit, but I saw the question in your eyes whenever you dared to meet mine. I know you burned with curiosity. Perhaps you still do, so I'll tell you what happened after you had your friends toss me into that well of darkness.

Temaru screams, and then weeps, and then whimpers, but she never hits the bottom. There is the sound of trickling water and she merely stops falling. She floats in seamless shadow for what feels like a century. Hunger and thirst never plague her; all she feels is the presence of what she cannot bring herself to name.

There is no light, but within the pit there are shades of darkness, and gradually Temaru begins to see anew. She sees faces shrouded in black, sees bloodied fingers combing through the eternal depths.

Temaru summons up what little strength she can. "What do you want from me?" she whispers.

The faces' mouths open, but only the sound of bones breaking and babes weeping comes from between their blackened teeth.

Icy fingers clamp around her ankles, so cold they burn her skin. Temaru

roars with a burst of newfound life, kicking and punching, but it is all for naught. Hands yank her across the empty expanse. They leave her curled up in a ball, shivering with terror, on what feels like a carved altar. And then she hears something heavy and wet crawl over slick stone. She shoves herself upright, swings her legs over the side, but there is only more nothingness. There is nowhere to run, let alone a place to stand upon beyond the altar.

In all the great ballads about the last surviving demon general, the Puppetmaster is possessed of a great, hulking form, with sinew like steel and muscles like marble. All lies. The truth, as Temaru now discovers, is that the Puppetmaster has no body. But He does have a mouth, and it is crammed with row upon row of fangs.

“Greetings, Temaru, daughter of Noriko, daughter of the House of Osu Meje.”

“How do you know who I am?” Temaru whispers.

“How could I not? You are the blood of her blood,” replies the Puppetmaster, as if that is at all an answer.

“Are you going to kill me?” Temaru asks. She is proud her voice does not quaver.

“When your mother defeated me, I made a blood bargain with her for my freedom,” the Puppetmaster croaks. “But your treacherous worm of an uncle bound me in darkness and dirt before our pact could be fulfilled.” He slithers around the altar. “Your mother wanted a shield only I could bear. Your uncle desired a sword only I could wield. They both wanted my subtlety, my shadows, my skill. And so Uduak forced me into a covenant with him. An eye, one single measly human eye, in exchange for a weapon beyond imagining. And now he has delivered two fine ones, though they are not his to offer. But an oath is an oath.” Temaru feels Him heave part of His endless mass over the edge of the altar. “So no, my child. I will not kill you. What I will do is so much worse.”

From the shadows come more shadows, swarming around her in a frozen tide. Temaru has no time to plead for her life, to even cry out.

When it is over, Temaru has lost an eye and the Puppetmaster has gained a puppet.

And when I clawed my way out of the pit, I was a magnificent weapon, was I not? I have to say I'm impressed. Hauling me from my bed the same day my mother died and sacrificing me to the Puppetmaster was not punishment enough for my audacity to be born and loved. No, not enough at all. Not to you. The Red Palace, once the prison of unwanted consorts and now the home of the lowest-ranked Whisperers, was the perfect place to banish me. None of my mother's last loyal retainers would ever think to look for me there. And there I remained, for every day in every year save a few monstrous ones. There I remained, until you sent honorless knights for me at the end of each month. A ride in the back of a cart later, I'd find myself at the door of whatever unfortunate wretch you wanted dead. I tried to stop your knights, and myself, and Him. But I was nothing but a prison for the Puppetmaster, and you were the judge and jailer both. Trapped in the socket of the eye you paid him, the Puppetmaster would call forth his demon puppets and everyone in a hundred-meter radius of me would die. The puppets would evaporate at sunrise, but the carnage they wrought would not. It was back to the monastery as soon as your so-called knights confirmed the death of your enemy. It could take a whole day, you know. Sometimes all that was left of the victim was a spray of blood, a broken tooth.

That was my life, until you sent her. Like every heir before me, I'd been taught that an imperial historian would be assigned to every reign, to chronicle the emperor's life from birth till death. The record, written without omission or oversight, would be kept under lock and key so that future rulers could learn from their predecessors' mistakes. But I did not expect you to have me included in your story. I thought you'd want me to fade from the annals of history. I should have known better: you wanted my tale in writing so you could gloat. So you sent her, the historian, my Yuna.

Near the end of the day's session, in defiance of her orders, Yuna does not immediately pack up the tools of her trade—recorders, scrolls of solar parchment, and holographic brushes. She remains on her threadbare cushion across from Temaru, gripping a stylus so hard it snaps in her hand.

"Yuna! What's wrong?"

The imperial historian's eyes are dark pools that draw in souls. Temaru has lost herself in them every time she sees Yuna, and she has seen the woman every day for the past year. But now those eyes are closed, the long lashes framing them spiked with tears. She is trying not to cry in front of Temaru, and she is failing.

"You're crying," Temaru says, aghast. She feels like something inside her own body is fracturing.

"Yes," Yuna whispers.

"Why?"

“Because I love you and I can’t protect you from him.”

Temaru goes very, very still. “You love me?”

“How could I not?” Yuna tucks the two halves of the stylus into the pocket of her robes. “I know you, Temaru Osu Meje, daughter of Noriko. You are kind and true, despite and in spite of everything your uncle and the world have done to you.”

All Temaru hears is that someone loves her, especially someone as gentle and clever and beautiful as the woman before her. Especially someone that she cares for in equal measure. “Oh.” Then, “Are you certain?”

“Don’t play the fool,” Yuna says, arching a brow.

Temaru can’t help but smile. “Who says I’m playing?”

Yuna sighs. She reaches across the splintered wood of the low table, sliding one finger under Temaru’s chin. The daughter of Noriko pulls in a sharp breath, her heart quickening. Life has taught her the hard lesson of not trusting anyone whose motives she does not know entirely. But there is no reason the imperial historian would say and do these things if she did not truly want to. Temaru had nothing to offer but blood and bone. And there is danger, great danger, in loving a monster.

Temaru brings her face closer to Yuna’s, until they share breath. And then she kisses her, because she can.

Unsurprisingly, imperial historians have a way of vanishing. They know too much, of course. But Yuna was a loyal servant of the Imperium, and a loyal servant would do her duty. The first thing I noticed about her was that behind the rolling cadence of her speech there was a hint of urgency. What was it like, to live every moment of your adult life knowing your days were numbered, literally, by the imperial horologists? I asked myself and pretended not to know the answer.

I’ve always wondered what your Whisperer spies told you about us. About her. If they wrote reports about how her eyes sparkled like jewels in the firelight, or how sometimes a secret smile would bloom on her face when she thought no one was looking. About how warm she was, how she radiated heat like a stone set in the sun for a summer’s day.

Or did they just tell you my loyalty was compromised? I know it was the latter, but I used to pray that it wasn’t. That, at the very least, you knew exactly how bright the flame you snuffed out was. I begged the Ghosts to make you feel the barest measure of guilt for what you did.

Protocol, decorum, rank… All those are for the imperial court, a thousand kilometers away from the mountains where you banished me. In the Red Palace, I could love her, and

she could love me. I never thought I'd be wanted in that way, ever.

And you took her from me.

I can count on my own fingers the number of times you spoke to me directly. But I remember that for one of those few times, you told me that no one would ever look at me like I was a person. That monsters like me couldn't have friends, couldn't have family. I should have known that was a warning.

I was such a fool, and Yuna paid the price in full.

I never realized why you never took me to the capital, until it was too late: you never wanted the people to know what a future without you would look like. I overheard so many of the Whisperers' stories: accounts of the black stone arches lost in the mist cloaking the great city, the streets paved with the same pale stone that forms the outer wall of the seven-story White Palace. As I write this letter, I look forward to seeing it for the first time. And I look forward to the world seeing me.

You were never a bad emperor. I'm not too stubborn or too proud to admit it. I know the poor bastards you made me murder deserved everything that came to them. Proper justice never finds every killer and criminal on Johari IX, after all. There is peace in the Imperium; science and art flourish across the planet as they never have before. As they never would have had your sister ever actually sat down in a council meeting. Until the end, my mother was as perfect a warrior as anyone could be, but we both know she would have made a terrible monarch. You, on the other hand… You were born to rule, and though I will never forgive you for your treachery, I could at least understand that you had done what was best for the Imperium. I understand also that the sharpest weapons are wielded by only one set of hands, so it was never a mystery to me why you hung Yuna in the monastery courtyard. Your only mistake was that you let me live so long after.

Here is something that no one but I will ever understand. We call the beings that came from the Umbra demons, but they're nothing like the monsters from Seedworld fairytales. They're as sapient as any of us. They have their own tongue, far richer than ours. A hidden language of signs and pheromones and color. You bound the Puppetmaster with human words, but His are stronger. They fill every sense we have and all those we cannot hope to dream of. His speech can subsume the thin, fragile lines of human communication—and then weather them away like a great flood over a city. All it took was the glisten of ink, the sweet smoke of incense, and the ten long years of my banishment to break the chains you bound us with. To free the Puppetmaster and myself. I wasn't surprised when He decided to remain with me. Interests tend to align when you're forced to share a mortal body.

It is no secret that I loathe you as much as you do me. But most of all, Uncle, I am grateful. It took a decade for me to feel anything but pain and sorrow and rage, but it's true. I am grateful for this power, grateful for my life—which is very far from over.

And I am so very grateful you gathered your allies and friends and sycophants all in one place for me. Everyone who ever hurt me or my mother or Yuna, who ever helped you hurt us. I suppose they all aren't within a hundred meters of you at this very moment, but those the Puppetmaster misses, I will find. And end.

May I reign a thousand years.
Your devoted niece,
Temaru IX

Uduak flings aside the parchment as if it has burned him. “The messenger, where is she?” he roars at Anan.

But the captain of the imperial guard isn’t there. There is only silence, and the smell of fresh blood.

And yet an answer comes, from right behind Uduak’s ear.

“Right here.”

Uduak shoves himself out of his seat and whirls around, his samite coat flying around him.

The messenger stands only two paces away, arms crossed over her chest. She unfolds them to throw back her hood. Her eyes—one brown on white, the other gold on crimson—narrow dangerously.

“Dearest Niece.” Uduak swallows thickly. He holds up the letter and crushes it into his fist, then spreads his arms wide and closes his eyes. “Get it over with.”

Temaru barks out a harsh laugh. “I already have.”

Uduak’s eyes fly open. “Pardon?”

She lifts a brow. “You’re not the only one who can forge a deal with a demon, Uncle.”

“I know that,” he growls. “I read your letter.”

Temaru smirks. “I’m not talking about myself. I speak of my mother.”

Uduak says nothing, though he takes a desperate step backward, bracing himself against the desk.

“She knew you would try to seize the throne for yourself.” Temaru gestures at the solar parchment crumpled in his hand. “That letter is written in her blood, collected by the Puppetmaster when their oath was made.”

“No!”

By the time Uduak looks back at the scroll, what he thought was ink has already crawled from the letter and onto his hands. The words shift and snap as they wind around his wrists. The fires of revenge burn hot. The old blood of his sister glows like molten iron as the hex’s chains tighten around him. The emperor screams, falling to his hands and knees, as he is branded.

“You thought yourself so clever,” Temaru sneers. “You thought yourself a dragon. But you and I both know that deep down, you’re nothing but a lowly serpent. A snake crawling upon its belly in the dirt and dust. My mother knew that too.”

How different this is from the endings she wrote during the days Uduak used her like a brush, painting her power across his dominion. Her killings were bloody but swift, gruesome but gracious. The man before her is whole, not a single drop of blood spilled, but his roars are like nothing she has ever heard before.

Temaru kneels before him and bows her head, a queen accepting her crown. She takes his chin between her thumb and forefinger. “We reap what we sow, dearest Uncle.”

Uduak’s shrieking lowers into wild and uncontrollable sobbing, the cries of a man cowering beneath death’s shadow. Beneath *her* shadow. His eyes roll back into his head, and his quivering form goes statue-still. Froth bubbles from his nose, his mouth, his ears. But he still breathes. The Puppetmaster is not done with him yet. There is more vengeance to be had.

The Puppetmaster fuses invisible lines of His power across Uduak’s prone body. He guides Temaru’s hand as she flexes her fingers and tests the strings. Then she yanks, hard, and spreads her arms wide. One last screech escapes the former emperor’s ruin of a mouth as he is torn asunder. With otherworldly precision, bone breaks and sinew splits. Shaking fingers separate into segments, hands fall from wrists, arms detach from shoulders while legs are pulled off at the hip. Finally, Uduak’s gaping, gasping head rolls from his neck. Still, no blood. Where the cuts are made, there is only shadow. Only an emptiness as deep and as hungry as the one into which he threw his niece.

Temaru IX kicks aside his torso as she strides across the room. Then the daughter of Noriko sits down in her new chair and calls for her dinner.

JEFFREY FORD

PRETTY GOOD NEIGHBOR

Pretty Good Neighbor

JEFFREY FORD

illustration by

FESBRA

It was a June night, warm but breezy. Lynn and the kids had gone to bed, and I was sitting out next to the giant rose bush with my neighbor Phil. The back of our house faced across our small yard and garden, to the side of the Victorian his dad had left him. We were drinking beer and smoking cigarettes and weed. He was telling me stories about his father who'd been a homicide detective in Camden, and about his cousin Donny, whom he described as "the walkin' prince'a death." The big old house, due to its poor upkeep, seemed like it could have been haunted. The cousins were both heroin addicts. Still, Phil was a pretty good neighbor, nice to the kids and Lynn, and Donny, back when he lived with his cousin, volunteered once to climb to the roof of our house, since I'm afraid of heights, and patch a hole near the chimney where bats were getting in at night.

At a lull in the conversation, I threw Phil my ghost story question. Back then I liked to ask people if they'd ever seen a ghost. It usually made for interesting conversation and, of course, I was chumming for story ideas.

He sat thinking for a while, and said, "There's a shitload of roses on this bush."

"I know, it's gone insane. What about ghosts? You don't even need a ghost, all you really need is a haunting."

He shook his head, smiled, and said, "I don't think anyone would call this a ghost story, but, you know, it's in the same ballpark." Phil hit a joint and said, "Donny's crazy. You know that. He used to have a lot of wacky ideas and plans. This was back in the days he lived here with me. Once when we were dead broke for a long time, Donny came up with the idea to rob this old woman who lived over by the park.

"'How do you know she doesn't live with anyone?' I asked him.

"'I've sat in the park and watched her place,' he said. 'She's alone, for sure. All we have to do is distract her. I'll get her attention and you slip inside

while she's talking to me and get whatever you can get.'

"We hadn't used in a while, and by then, that damp turd of a plan sounded like genius. So, we waited until it got dark. Those were rough hours. When we got down to it, I took up a position out of sight behind the hedges planted along the front of her place. Donny went to the door. If I heard him talking to the old lady and it sounded good, I was supposed to slip around to the side and back doors and give them a try. I was armed with my trusty paperclip that could work on just about any lock if you knew what you were doing.

"Donny rang the doorbell and a few seconds later the woman opened the big wooden door. 'What do you want?' she asked in a cranky voice, and instantaneously, he punched her right in the fucking face. I saw her glasses fly off and she dropped like a lead balloon back inside the house. Right there, I was ready to bag the whole thing. I mean, I'm a scumbag to some extent, but I want you to believe me, I have my limits. I'm not about punching old ladies. But then, before I knew it, he was back outside with a handful of money, two pockets full of jewelry, and a fresh pack of Marlboro Reds. We ran like hell.

"As we were hightailing it, I realized that we had just robbed a woman who lived only across the park and two blocks east of me. It was just starting to dawn how deadbolt dumb the entire operation was. Wouldn't you know it, we were tearing across the park, and we almost ran into this guy Postlethwaite, a massive tub of human goo, in front of the gazebo. Probably walking home from a feast at the Golden Dragon. He said, 'Where you asswipes heading?' We told him we were out for a jog, and he started laughing. We didn't stop to chat.

"Later that night, we eventually scored, and once the edge was off, I got scared. I was also pissed at Donny for hitting the old lady. I kicked him out of the house. And we'd been tight. Both sets of our parents crapped out in the first leg of the parent race, but me and him made a bond at fifteen and stuck together. I told him if I got nailed for the robbery, they could put me away and take the house from me. The mortgage payments are only like five hundred a month, but I was having trouble scraping that together after an accident at work where I hurt my back. Donny took it hard, but he left after only breaking some furniture.

“A couple of weeks went by, and I swore the cops were gonna appear out of nowhere and grab me. I decided to get off the stuff, so I went through withdrawal, at least tried to control the habit some. Who was I kidding? It turned into a fight to the death. Gagging, puking, sweats and tremors and hallucinations. I’d wake in the morning and feel like someone had beat me with a stick. Finally, I said fuck it and decided to score.

“I’d been off for almost a week. I left the house in search of. There was an apartment on the third floor over NCS, you know, the appliance repair place downtown, where a girl pretty reliably sold fifteen-dollar bags of cut-with-flour shit I used to get for ten. Any port in a storm, though. It was a nice spring night, and I was blazing along the sidewalk in a rush to get off. That’s when I noticed a car moving alongside me.

“I stopped and watched while it sped up for a few yards and then came to a full stop. It’s never a good sign when a car pulls over in front of you and all six foot five inches and three hundred and seventy pounds of Postlethwaite gets out holding a nine-millimeter pointed at the ground. He reached out and opened the back door for me. ‘Get in, Philly,’ he said. I thought of bolting, but the giant would have shot me in the back no problem. I’d seen him in action going to town on some loser who’d stiffed his boss, Mr. Marfen, who owned part of the heroin trade in Camden.

“‘What’s going on?’ I asked him.

“‘Get in the back,’ he said. Lifting the gun into my sight, he used it to wave me toward the door. ‘Don’t be stupid.’

“As I moved toward the car, my mouth went dry, and my throat closed. My legs were trembling. I slid through the door onto the back seat, and Postlethwaite said, ‘We got some company in there for you.’ It was Donny, who stared straight ahead like a zombie. The whole thing was a nightmare. The door slammed shut and locked. The big man got into his seat up front, and we were off.

“We went through town, and then Postlethwaite turned around. His head rest had been removed and he draped one folded arm over his seat. He had the gun in the opposite hand. ‘You two jerkoffs have gotten yourselves into deep shit now. Slacks’—he pointed with the gun at the driver—‘and I have been employed to deliver your bodies to the Meadowlands.’

“‘What are you talking about?’ I asked him.

“‘Come on. I saw you running through the park that night, running from having robbed Mrs. Marfen’s house.’

“‘Who’s Mrs. Marfen?’ asked Donny.

“‘You know who Mr. Marfen is, well, Mrs. is his mother. You socked Marfen’s mother in the face.’ Slacks and Postlethwaite laughed. ‘You’re some real simpletons.’

“‘You’re going to kill us?’ I said.

“‘Now what do you think? We kill you and toss your bodies in the marsh. It’s business, you know, nothing personal.’

“Right then we entered the turnpike north ramp and sped out of South Jersey. I was swamped, couldn’t speak or think. I experienced a half-assed version of my life passing before my eyes. It was what I’d always imagined drowning felt like. Postlethwaite turned around to face the windshield, and I tried to look at Donny to see what he was thinking, if we were going to try anything. There was nothing I could do alone, but Donny was made of rock. If Postlethwaite didn’t have a gun, his neck would have already been broken. These guys were really going to kill us, and we were going along with it so far like it was a Sunday drive.

“Donny was my only salvation. Still, if it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t have been in a jam with death hanging over my head. As much as I loved him, I knew right there that I was going to have to give him the heave-ho if I somehow got out of that mess. For the longest time, I mean miles and miles, I was in a daze, half dope-sick, half scared stupid, thinking about how I was going to get my life together and be a good person as soon as we escaped. You know, ridiculous,” he said, and laughed.

I said, “She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”

He nodded. “That’s about fuckin’ it,” he said, and passed me a beer. “So, we were driving along, and suddenly, Postlethwaite spun around and said, “You guys are in luck.”

“‘How’s that?’” I asked hoping he was going to tell us he’d let us go.

“‘You’re gonna be part of our experiment,’ said Slacks, smiling into the rearview mirror.

“‘We’re going up to a spot on the Hackensack River where it turns into a marsh. In Secaucus, across the river from the racetrack,’ said Postlethwaite. ‘You know anything about that area?’

“I shook my head and Donny just sat there like the mannequin he’d been for the whole trip.

“‘It’s polluted as shit,’ said the big man. ‘We’re talking tons of chemicals, industrial and military waste, just a giant cesspool of horror.’

“‘At the top of the list of Superfund cleanup sites,’ said Slacks. ‘They used to say that it makes the bodies decompose faster. That’s why they started taking stiffs there. But you remember from the dinosaur movie …… Love finds a way.’

“‘Not love, you idiot,’ said Postlethwaite. ‘*Life* finds a way. You have all that heinous jazz there bubbling up and then throw life into the mix, and what you get are these flesh-hungry giant newts, big as a man, that occasionally go upright,’ said Postlethwaite. ‘We call them Stumps, cause they’re dumber than you two.’

“‘They’re gonna tear your throat out and just keep chomping until they see daylight through your asshole. Ferocious motherfuckers,’ Slacks said.

“‘Are you for real with this?’ I asked.

“‘Swear to God,’ said Postlethwaite, putting his gun hand over his heart. ‘Nothing clears up the bodies like these things. They’re fucking awesome. We could sell them to the government. Their teeth go through bone like it’s marshmallow.’

“Two minutes later we were pulling over in front of a waste plant somewhere in Secaucus near the Hackensack River. It was cold out, and I was shivering uncontrollably. Before we headed behind the plant, through the six-foot weeds, they zip-cuffed Donny’s wrists in front of him. He looked like he was praying, but I knew he wasn’t. There was no need with me. Slacks had a gun on me, and I was too scared of dying to think about how to stay alive. Postlethwaite led the way with a flashlight on a trail that wound behind the plant down to the river’s edge.

“The boat they had staked there was a thirty-foot aluminum flat-bottom. It had a lot of room, useful for ferrying bodies, I guess. From where we boarded, I could see the silhouette of the marsh less than a hundred yards out

across the flow of the river. Trees and bushes and tallgrass. We pushed off. The boat had a small electric motor that was in no hurry.

“We crossed the Hackensack and then entered the wetlands, a maze of tiny islands of cord or sedge grass, some with fucked-up arthritic trees, sticker bushes with thorns as long as your finger. In some places along the meandering course, we’d come to a spot where the river ran more fully, and the islands were larger with taller trees. Donny and I were sitting on the middle seat, facing forward at Postlethwaite’s huge back covered in his shitty gray raincoat. Slacks was behind us at the outboard paying attention to steering around the islands.

“The big man had left the flashlight lit, lying on the seat next to him, the beam pointing back at us. For the first time since we’d left South Jersey, Donny turned his head toward me. I looked over at him and he winked and gave a very subtle nod. Immediately, I panicked because I had no idea what he meant by that. Was it *Don’t sweat it*? Or was he implying I should be ready to rumble? Before he turned his face away, I tried to see what I could in his eyes, but even with the flashlight, it was still too dim in the dark night to be sure.

“When Slacks left the middle of the watery path and headed toward a larger wooded island, I somehow knew that Donny was going to make his move as Postlethwaite tried to get out of the boat without falling on his fat ass. The prow scraped ashore on a small spit of sand. The engine died and I almost crapped my pants in anticipation. But nothing developed, on any front. Postlethwaite got out as graceful as a ballerina, and Donny followed him. I stumbled getting over the side and fell in a half a foot of poison marsh water. Slacks grabbed me by the collar and lifted me to my feet. I thanked him. ‘Move it along,’ he said, and waved his gun at me.

“By this time, I was thinking, you know, we were going down to the wire. Maybe I should make a break for it on my own. Maybe the face Donny made was just him saying goodbye. I thought about it that way and didn’t like it but knew it could have been true. We took a path through a gnarled forest of leafless trees, to a large pond that glowed slightly orange.

“‘The Stumps have a city down at the bottom of that pond. Get a load of the color,’ said Postlethwaite. ‘I’m going to shoot one of you, and the noise

will bring them swarming to the surface. Over time, and all the stiffs they've chowed down on, by now there's nothing they like more than gobbling human heads and asses. They eat the rest too, but not with the same savagery. Evolution is more than a theory.'

"'After that part,' said Slacks, 'when they rise up and eat whoever just bought the farm, we're gonna leave the other guy alive, and standoff at a distance to see if they'll eat a live person. To this point we've only seen them eat dead bodies, like turkey vultures would. But me and Posti have a theory that they'll now attack and kill for human flesh.'

"'You two fuckin guys,' I said. 'Do you hear what you're saying?'

"Postlethwaite laughed and said, 'I know … brilliant.'

"Sudden as a striking snake, Donny took a flying leap and wound up with his zip-tied wrists around Postlethwaite's beefy neck, riding the giant's back like a ragdoll. In the lightning surprise of it, the big man dropped the flashlight and squeezed off a shot, but it went wide.

"No one could see a fucking thing. The gun went off again, and I ditched onto the ground. Again, it went off, and this time I seriously heard a bone crunch upon its nearby impact. A weird sound followed, which turned out to be Slacks crying like a baby.

"I rolled to the flashlight, then took a chance and stood up. Donny was still in the process of trying to strangle Postlethwaite. The beam found Slacks curled up on the ground, crying. The hole in his leg where the bullet went through and shattered his femur was still smoking. Luckily, he'd dropped his gun. I retrieved it and told the big man to cease and desist. He was so out of breath by the time I got him to give it up, I thought he was going down for sure. Somehow, Donny had broken the zip tie and his hands were free. He disarmed Postlethwaite and punched him in the face a few times to simmer him down.

"The giant took the hits, shook them off, and said, 'Listen, the gun was fired, those fucking Stumps are going to be here lickety-split. If we leave Slacks for them, we can get away. If we try to carry him, they'll catch us and then we're going to find out for real if they'll eat living flesh. Who's for leaving Slacks?' said Postlethwaite.

"'No problem,' I said.

“‘My pleasure,’ said Donny.

“‘It’s unanimous,’ said the big man.

“All the time, Slacks was begging us to have mercy and take him with us.

“‘If you don’t shut up,’ said his partner, ‘I’ll shoot you again. Just lay there and take your lumps.’

“That’s when the pond hit a full boil. There was something coming up from below. We ran down the path to a point where we could still make out Slacks with the flashlight and hid behind some dead trees.

“‘Keep your eyes peeled,’ said Postlethwaite, “and you’ll see I wasn’t kidding.”

“We couldn’t see a damn thing, really. We just heard Slacks screaming to beat the band and even at the distance we were from him, I could hear munching, like the sound of somebody eating a roast beef hoagie in a dark kitchen. It wasn’t long before sounds of teeth biting bones and the screams became whimpers. ‘Let’s get the fuck out of here,’ I said.

“I turned to find the trail with the flashlight beam and instead I found, standing right behind us, a crowd of those things from the orange pond. They had blunt snouts and goggle eyes, and the width of their heads was the width of their necks down to shoulders and arms (I guess you’d call them); thick thighs and webbed feet with four toes, but big ones, pads on the tip of each one. Picture all that wrapped in a pale olive-green frog skin with tinges of orange, and you have the Stumps, except for one crazy detail: they had human junk. Like the one standing in front was carrying a club made out of an old, rotted table leg. He had a dick and balls, no exaggeration. Next to him, the queen? You know—vagina, etc.

“‘They’ve changed a lot since the last time we fed them,’ said Postlethwaite. ‘Looks like they’re all walking upright, and jeez, what’s with the balls and so forth? That’s what I call evolution.’

“‘Yeah but are they gonna eat us?’ asked Donny. He held his gun up and at the ready.

“I held the flashlight at their eye level, and they lifted arms across their faces, squinted, and turned slightly away. I also had Slack’s gun aimed at the closest one.

“‘Wait a second,’ said Postlethwaite, who stood on the other side of

Donny from me. ‘That guy there, look at him. Does he remind you of Westfelt? I swear he looks like him. Sure, he’s a salamander on two legs or whatever the fuck, but that forehead and those jowls.’

“‘He does look like Westfelt,’ I said. ‘He’s even got that mole on his left cheek. What ever happened to Westfelt?’

“‘Me and Slacks brought him out here and fed him to the Stumps. He ran afoul of Marfen.’

“‘So, what are you saying?’ asked Donny.

“‘They must have ingested his DNA and it became part of their evolution.’

“‘Fuck that,’ said my cousin. ‘When you hear a gunshot, Phil, count to six and then just start running. If one of these things gets in the way, blast it. Go for the boat. Don’t run before counting.’

“‘What’s the plan?’ Postlethwaite demanded.

“Donny turned and gut-shot the big man, who fell backward. When he did, the Stumps started forward en mass. The wound was crazy bleeding, and Posti yelled, ‘You fucker, Donny. You fucker.’

“I counted toward six but got to five and ran forward. Most of the folks from Stump City had passed me heading for the wounded tub of human goo. One of those things snapped at me as I tried to get past it, and I didn’t hesitate to shoot it in the face. I heard Donny’s gun go off again and again. And then he was behind me, and we were running down the trail. I turned back for only a second, pointed the flashlight, and caught a glimpse of Postlethwaite swinging mighty haymakers, clocking the Stumps’ rubbery heads as they dove in, teeth chomping for the big man’s big head and bigger ass.

“‘Don’t stop,’ Donny said. ‘As soon as they finish with him, they’ll be after us.’ Screams of agony chased us to the boat and all the way home.

“If you don’t believe me,” said Phil, “I understand. It seems farfetched, but I swear to God, that’s what went down. After we got back to town, we had to lay low, as word on the street was that Marfen was looking everywhere for Postlethwaite and Slacks. Reportedly he was nervous without his goons, so he wasn’t out looking for trouble. As long as that lasted, we’d be safe. After we got back, I didn’t hear from Donny until a few months later. It was the end of the summer, and he told me that he’d been diving in the

Delaware River with only flippers, a mask, and a snorkel. With a long rubber hose hooked to an acetylene torch, he was cutting the brass off a sunken ship.

"'That's a crazy man's job,' I told him.

"'It pays amazing. And I liked being in the water all summer, but I'm gonna need to find a place to stay through the fall and winter until the work picks up.'

"I knew he was angling to get back in my place, but I didn't want him. I'd spoken to a friend of ours who'd been to the trailer where Donny lived next to the river. The report was that he was diving during the day and snorting a coke/heroin mix at night accompanied by a pint of Mr. Boston Mint Gin and voluminous packs of Camels. The trailer the salvage company rented him had holes in the floor, and while he slept rats came up through them to get at his leftovers. That trip to the Meadowlands cured me of him. I talked to him until he mumbled too much for me to understand and I quietly hung up.

"A few days later he called late at night, told me he had one week to work and that he needed a place to stay for the fall and winter. It was already the beginning of October, and the thought of him in that dark, freezing water made it difficult for me to turn him down. Then he went on and told me he was being stalked by a large fish or something. Whatever it was, he didn't get a good look as the river water had been murky the last month, but it trapped him in a room of the sunken ship once for crucial minutes, to where he barely made it to the surface for air.

"I told him to ditch that job, and then he pleaded with me to take him in. I held the phone against my chest as he begged. I couldn't hear him, but I felt it in my heart. Eventually, I just hung up and turned my ringer off. Later that night, after using, I had a kind of vision of a memory. It was all wavy at the boundaries and the noises were exaggerated, but it was the time Donny got between me and my old man when he was beating me with his belt. I had done something wrong. My father was loaded and turned his anger on me. Donny decked him, a Camden city detective, and helped me outside, where we ran, him holding me up by the shoulder.

"The last time he called, he sounded frightened and incredibly high on a powerball, no doubt. My girlfriend was over, and I didn't want to bother with him. He said, 'Postlethwaite is back, banging on the door of my trailer right

now.’

“‘What are you talking about?’ I said. ‘How fucked up are you?’

“‘There’s a naked, pale green Postlethwaite at my door. He keeps repeating ‘Fuck you, Donny. Fuck you!’ in a voice you’d use to order a cup of coffee. He came out of the river.’

“‘How’s that possible, Donny?’

“‘I don’t know. Maybe, like Slacks said, love found a way…’

“That was the last thing he said to me. The line went dead, and I was glad it did. But my conscience started to get the better of me, and at the end of the week I went out to where his trailer was next to the Delaware to invite him to stay for the winter. It was overcast; it was cold. I pulled up next to the trailer. There were whitecaps out on the river. I got out of the car and went up the steps. I banged three times on the door and called out his name. Leaning over the railing, I peered into the side window.

“I was about to knock and call out again when I saw an enormous pale form, lumbering through the trailer’s shadows like a fish in murky water. That was enough for me. I ran to the car, put it in gear, and never looked back. From right there, I was sure Donny was gone.”

“A ghost story and then some,” I said.

Phil looked exhausted and had tears in his eyes. “At least a haunting,” he said. We each had a last beer and then packed it in.

No more than a week and a half after that night by the rosebush, Phil and his girlfriend, Margie, shot up over at Phil’s place. She died of an overdose, and the next day they carted him off to prison. The last I saw of Phil was from my kitchen window. The cops were leading him out to a wagon with his wrists zip-tied behind his back.

About the Authors

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