

The background is a complex collage of abstract and organic elements. It features several overlapping circles in white and a muted orange color. There are also various patterns, including what looks like a close-up of a feather, a textured surface resembling bark or stone, and some circular motifs that could be seeds or cells. The overall color palette is monochromatic, using shades of grey, black, and white, with the orange circles providing a pop of color.

# TOR.COM SHORT FICTION

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**NOV/DEC  
2023**

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**NOV/DEC 2023 SHORT FICTION**

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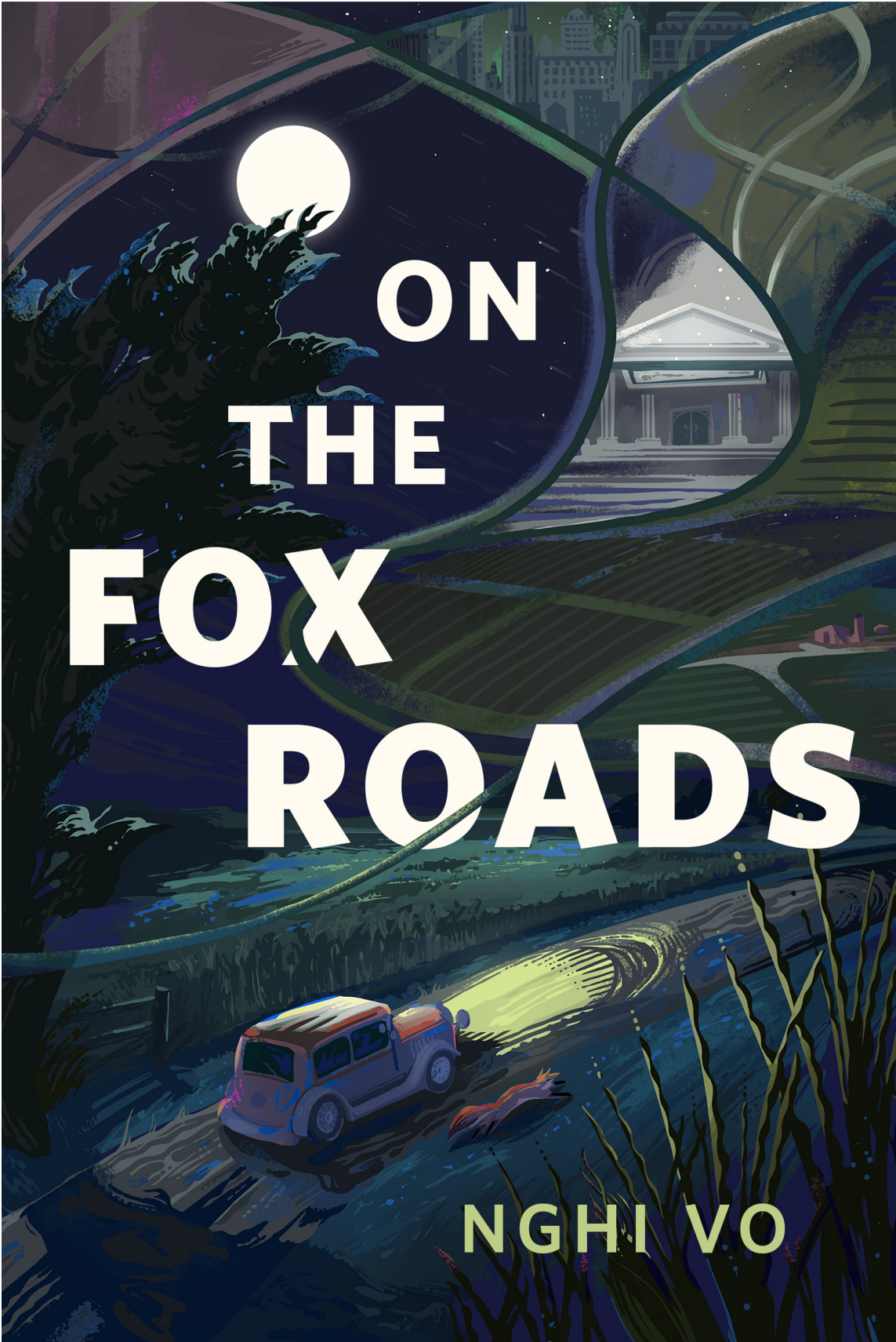
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A surreal illustration of a car driving on a road at night. The car is a vintage-style vehicle with a red roof and blue body, driving away from the viewer on a dark, winding road. The road is illuminated by a bright yellow light source, possibly the car's headlights or a distant light. In the background, a large, circular frame, resembling a porthole or a lens, shows a city skyline at night. A prominent building with a classical facade and columns is visible within this frame. The overall scene is dark and atmospheric, with a mix of blue, purple, and yellow tones. The title 'ON THE FOX ROADS' is written in large, white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the center of the image.

# ON THE FOX ROADS

NGHI VO

# ON THE FOX ROADS

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**NGHI VO**

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*illustration by*

ALYSSA WINANS

T O R  
D O T  
C O M

## I.

The fox roads run through October, no matter where you start or where you end.

It doesn't matter if you're coming across Lake Michigan from Indiana as the ice cracks under your tires or if you're trying to make it to Cicero on roads that were never paved for cars. The fox roads don't care about winter snow or summer storms, and maybe they bow to the gods of Tornado Alley, but I wouldn't bet on it.

The fox roads take you through October, before they cut down the corn and before the trees undress for winter, and they can take you anywhere.

All you need, she told me, is a reason to get out.

## II.

On a bright morning in late August, Chinese Jack and Tonkin Jill rode into Hooper, Indiana in a cherry-red Model A and pulled up to Third Bank and Trust like they owned it. I watched from the alley as Jack came around the car to hand Jill down. She stood on the running board for a moment, tiny and neat as a pin in her ivy-green dress and her black gloves, her face marked for me even across the street by sooty mascara and a mouth painted on with scarlet.

She looked the street up and down before she stepped off, and for just a brief moment, our eyes met. If she cared, she gave no sign, and she walked ahead of Jack into the bank.

The second the door swung closed behind them I made up my mind, and I was across the street, ignoring the rear door to grab at the handle on the front passenger's side. It wasn't locked, and I climbed in just as a shot rang out from the bank.

I threw myself over the seats into the back, squeezing behind the driver's side on the floor as the shouting started. It was one of the newer sedans, plenty of room especially if you've been skipping meals for a few weeks, and I rolled up tight against the front seat.

By the time I counted five, there was another shot, and then fresh screaming, and by a count of twenty Jack and Jill came out themselves, him with the gun and her with the loot. We tore out of Hooper like the town was on fire behind us, Jill laughing as if she was at the carnival.

"Fuckers built a goddamn hunter's blind in the loft," Jack snarled as the car hit the frontage road. "What the fuck, they turned the lobby into a goddamn fucking shooter's gallery. Lai, for fuck's sake, stop laughing!"

She couldn't, I don't think, as hard as she was going, and all I could hear was her laugh, shrill and loud and helpless at how funny the world was that would dare shoot at her.

"Lai, Lai, goddamnit! Right or left?"

She only laughed harder, which made him swear again. Somewhere behind them, behind us, the cops were rallying to run us to ground, and they would, if Jack couldn't make the river. The papers were full of the smoldering smashup when they got Hennessy and Jones in Bowling Green, and one that I saw got Hennessey's raw face as well, all the meat gone from the right as he flew and skidded twenty feet from the wreckage.

"Lai, fucking left or right?"

She held up a hand, waving him away as if he were asking if madame wanted to see the brunch menu, and through it all, she kept on laughing, laughing, until a shot rang out behind us and Jack swerved on the road before holding steady again.

"Lai!"

"Left! Left, I think!"

Jack swore again, something foreign and mean as venom, and he hauled the wheel so hard to the left that I nearly toppled to one side, even as wedged as I was. Another shot, and this one shattered glass, sending a shower of glittering shards down on me. A hot sting of pain creased my cheek, and some part of me knew that it would hurt much worse later, if there was a later.



There was an almighty bump, and the shocks groaned as if they were dying underneath us before all four wheels sat straight on the road. In the front, Lai slouched back in the seat, catching her breath with gaspy little sighs.

“Calm down, we’re fine now.”

“The fuck we are,” he said without heat. “Tell me where to turn off.”

“Not for a while. Just drive.”

“Yeah, yeah. Count the cash.”

That was about as good as it was going to get for me, I decided, drawing the Colt out of my jacket pocket. I came up in the back seat like a jack out of the box, lit up like my head was on fire, and I shoved the barrel of the Colt against the back of Jack’s neck, high up where the cradle of his skull met his spine.

“What the fuck—”

“27 Allison Road,” I spat.

“What the *fuck*—”

“The deed,” I said through gritted teeth. “The deed for 27 Allison Road, where the fuck *is it*?”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, you better put that gun the fuck down before I break your fucking face and—”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up, I just want—”

I didn’t get to what I wanted because suddenly there was something sharp slipped under my chin, there so fast that I felt the trickle of blood before I realized I had been cut.

“If you put a hole in his head, em yêu, all the jokes will fall out, and I’ll never laugh again.”

“I don’t care!”

“Oh, I think you do. I think you are very afraid right now, and that’s all right. So put that ridiculous thing down, and we can talk about Allison Road, all right?”

I might not have. I had been awake for two days, I hadn’t eaten for three, and some town boys beat me up the night before. My hands holding the Colt shook, and my thoughts were broken. I might have shot him just to

see the jokes run out like grain from a torn bag, but then the light went out as if I had closed my eyes, so fast and sudden that I shouted.

It was an enveloping kind of dark, so absolute I couldn't see Jack or Lai or the car we rode in. Instead, there were my hands numb on the gun, the trickle of blood that hit the collar of my dress and soaked in, the touch of the knife at my throat.

"Put it down," Lai said, and as the moon came out and silvered the naked trees beyond the glass, I lowered my gun, and she put down her knife.

### III.

The police had shot out the back window, and the gust of cold, wet, autumn air convinced me better than anything that we had left April behind us. It was a heavy, clinging kind of cold, one that decided it lived in your bones and then wouldn't leave until spring, if it left at all. I shivered convulsively in my thin dress, scraped myself up worse from the glass shards that clung like frost to the velour seats.

Driving one-handed, Jack skimmed out of his jacket and passed it back to me. I wrapped his jacket thick around my arm and knocked out the shards of glass from the frame, pushing them out onto the road behind us where they glittered briefly before they were lost to the darkness.

"Sweep the glass off the seat so you have a place to sit," Lai directed. "When we stop, you can clear out the rest."

"Oh, can I?" I retorted, and she turned to rest her chin on the seat, giving me a wrinkle-nosed smile that wanted very much to worm its way into my heart.

"I'd like it if you did. Don't you want to do what I like?"

"Lai, turn up ahead. And stop bothering with the little brat, we're dropping her as soon as we hit the state line."

"Turn right. And maybe."

Nervously, I fingered the Colt in my lap. It was an ugly lump of metal, surplus from the Great War like the man I'd stolen it from, like so much of Meade.

“Where are we?” I asked, and Jack, never taking his eyes from the road, was the one who answered.

“We’re running,” he said shortly. “We’re trying not to get caught or wrecked or gunned down or brought in and hanged.”

We came out of the night more slowly than we had gone in. The moon set, it got cold enough that I could breathe steam like a dragon, but then the sky got, not lighter, but less dark, less absolutely black. It started so slowly I could barely be sure if it started at all, and then it came on all in a rush, deepest violet to frailest blue, and through the trees, the sky in front of us lit up.

“We’re driving east,” I said suddenly.

Lai was sleeping slumped against the door; it was Jack who answered.

“We are.”

“You were making for the river. I know you were.”

He snorted, not unkindly.

“Kid, what you know is worth fuckall out here.” He yawned, adding, “Me too. She’s the only one who knows these roads, and she’s cracked like a plate.”

“We were going to cross the Wabash,” I insisted, because I knew the Wabash. My parents had come down to Meade by ferry on the Wabash before I was born. It would have been faster to take the train, but of course they weren’t allowed. Until they bought the store when I turned eight, we’d lived in a falling-down shack on the shores of the Wabash River, and I knew its swampy banks and green fireflies and lantern ghosts as well as I knew the alphabet. Like I knew *P* came before *Q*, I knew we had been making for the Wabash to cross west into Illinois. I knew the Wabash, and I knew that the sun should have been behind us if it was rising.

Dawn cracked the sky like an egg, and then with a hard bump that made me grunt, we were rolling along a wide wooden bridge, sharing it with a six-ox team and a wagoner who gave us a baleful look as we rumbled by.

I looked beyond the bridge’s low rail to see the expanse of water below us, a silty amber-brown shading to bright white where it stretched north and south. The Wabash was big enough to flood and ruin lives when it had a mind to, but this river would see the bottomlands and the lives that clung to

it as its rightful property, never thinking twice about reaching for what it was owed.

“That look like the Wabash to you?” Jack asked, and I shook my head.

“No. What river is it?”

“That’s the Mississippi. Up near St. Paul, maybe. We’ll find out when we stop.”

He sounded tired, and with Lai sleeping like the dead and uninterested in telling us more about where we had come to, I touched the Colt again, staring at the back of Jack’s head. Lai’s hair was sleek and straight like mink, but Jack’s hair was more like mine, inclined to wave with a curl at his nape. I imagined the barrel of the gun nestled there, asking my questions more sensibly this time.

Instead, I curled up against the back door in the cleanest corner of the back seat, my face inches away from the glass to watch the Mississippi roll away beneath us.

#### IV.

We passed by two gas stations, running the needle perilously close to *E* before we found one with a Black man at the meter, and Jack went to pay him while I dutifully swept out the seat like Lai had told me I would. For her part, she came out to perch on the hood of the car, a lit cigarette dangling from her fingers as she gazed off into the middle distance, her eyes half lidded.

As strange a trio as we made, the attendant studiously kept his eyes on his work. Jack and Lai looked like they had just stepped out of some fancy knees-up in Chicago for all that it was a day’s ride away, and they might have picked me up somewhere along the way to wipe up their spills. Still, Jack paid for the gas and then slipped the man three bills from his wallet with a certain tilt of his head.

“You never saw us.”

The man snorted, hanging up the nozzle from the pump.

“Never looked up to see your damn faces.”

He hadn't, either, and I realized much later that we were close to the North Woods, the warren of caves and thickets where downstate outlaws went when Cook County turned up the heat. The cops came through sometimes, collecting the eyes of gas-station attendants and diner waitresses, and the best way to get your eye back, Jack told me later, was to empty it straight out into the dirt, show them that it was just tires and shoes and asphalt, maybe a few tit pics to distract them.

"The law says they can only take one, but it don't say how good your eye needs to work when they give it back," he said, handing me his cigarette.

"You still got two good eyes," I said, and he grinned at me, showing off the chipped front tooth that gave him such a nasty sharp bite.

"Yeah? Next ask me if they're both mine," he said, and up close I could see now that one wasn't as dark as the other, whiskey-brown to coffee-black.

That was still a month down the road, however, and when the attendant went back into the station, Jack turned to me.

"So this is where you step off," he said. "You can probably hitch a ride, or—"

"No," I said, reaching for the Colt, but he held it up, stone-faced. I hadn't felt him take it off me, and I went red with humiliation and rage.

"No," I said again, but he shook his head.

"End of the line, kid, and—"

"What's Allison Road?"

Jack groaned.

"Fuck, Lai—"

"Shut up. I'm not talking to you."

She turned on the hood of the car, her legs in her sheer black stockings crossed at the ankle as if she was in church. She gave me a look up and down, and it was strange how she did it, as if she had already made up her mind about me, but still wanted to know if she was right.

"So what's on Allison Road?" she asked again, and I glared at her.

"It's my parents' store in Meade," I said, my hands fisting by my sides. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Jack sighting along the barrel of the

Colt and making a face as he did so. “The bank took it, and then you robbed the bank.”

“Did we?” she asked, interested, as if I was telling her about something that someone else did.

I went into the back seat where I had left the gunnysack carrying everything I owned except for the gun. I came up with a crumpled sheet of newsprint, and I threw it down in front of her. Jack sighed and went to pick it up, and smoothed it out to read the headline that I had memorized:

“Chinese Jack and Tonkin Jill Take Meade First Trust!”

Below in smaller letters, the *Daily Sentinel* reported it was their sixth robbery since February, and beside the lines of text there were their pictures. Jack’s was obviously a mugshot, hair messed and right eye swollen, scowling at the camera like he wanted to break it. Jill, whose name they didn’t know was Lai, looked like she’d been clipped out of the society pages, nothing but big eyes and cloche hat, the rest obscured by the white fur she wore.

“Ooh, I’m *cute*,” Lai cooed.

“I remember that one,” Jack said suddenly. “Bullshit score, it was like forty dollars and a bunch of dirt farm deeds.”

“It was the deed for my parents’ store, and I want it back,” I snarled, and I might have lunged for Jack just for looking so skeptical when Lai clapped her hands in realization.

“Oh, I remember,” she exclaimed. “27 Allison Road, it’s a little place, right? Green awning, oil paper over the glass in the door.”

Someone had pitched a rock through the glass the week before the bank came. My hopes lifted.

“Yeah, that! Give it to me.”

“Earn it.”

“What?”

That was me and Jack at once, giving each other suspicious looks before Lai spoke again.

“We’ve left money salted away all over the prairie. It’s going to take a while before we work our way back to that cache, and there are no straight lines when you run the fox roads.”



It was the first time I'd heard the term, and something about it made me shiver. I shook it off angrily as she continued.

"So come with us. Make yourself helpful. Run some errands, entertain me when Jack is having a bad day. That's not such a bad deal, is it? You can be agreeable for just a tiny little while, can't you?"

She poked my cheek with a playful finger, and I was so startled by the touch, I let her. No one in Meade, including my own parents, would have called me in the least agreeable. I almost argued with her, demanding my parents' property again, but Jack groaned.

"Oh, fuck all of this. You're not serious. We can't bring along some damn hick girl when we're working."

"I think it's a fantastic time to bring along some damn hick girl. I think it's the *best* time. Anyway, I want her."

That was it, that was the line that hit Jack like a sledgehammer between the eyes, always did, and he snarled, turning on his heel to get back in the car. Lai hopped down off the hood, and came to cup my cheek in her hand. I jerked away, but slower than I would have even a few hours ago. She was good at taming wild animals.

"Come on. A few weeks, a month at most, and you'll have what you want, and so will I." Then, more softly, "Come run away with us, baby."

I could have grabbed her, hit her, beat her up until she gave me what I wanted. Instead, I climbed in behind Jack, meeting his eyes briefly in the rearview mirror.

"So what now?" I asked, just to see what he would say, but it was Lai who answered.

"Now we're going to get you some clothes. I'm not robbing banks with any little bag of rags."

## V.

Lai took me shopping in Chicago, dragging me by my arm through the biggest Chinatown I had ever seen. I was dazzled and half afraid of the faces that looked so much like mine and at once were so alien to me. I'd grown up in Meade, a species of three with my mother and my father, and

as the one who spoke the best English, I got to write the rules on what that meant. Here, I could see that there were rules I was expected to follow because of how I looked rather than how I didn't.

Sharp-eyed Lai probably guessed how I felt, but she also didn't care, pulling me into one shop after another, shouting cheerfully for the clerk, shoving me in front as if I were a leg of lamb to be dressed. It took me two or three shops to realize that we weren't speaking English for the sake of my baby Cantonese. It was for her, because whatever she spoke, it wasn't what the people in Chinatown did.

"Oh, whatever, we're in America, we should speak American now, anyway," she said dismissively, handing me a silk shift through the curtain at the back of the shop. "Here, brassiere, garters, and then this on over before you try the dresses."

She dressed me from the skin out, shoes and underthings before I could even touch the dresses in blue ditty, pink dotted Swiss, a half dozen different florals and calicos. It was shocking at first, exhilarating after that, and then just exhausting by the time I limped back to the hotel room in my new shoes with my arms full of parcels.

"Are you going to make me turn tricks? Was that the kind of work you had in mind?" I asked, falling face-first onto the chaise. I was so tired, I might not have cared.

Jack prodded me in my side and stuck a mug of hot, harsh coffee in my hand.

"Nah, we'd have to gin you up in a cheongsam and give you an opium pipe if we wanted to make any real cash. We're dressing you for a bank robbery."

Bank robbers dressed up like bank presidents when they went to work. For guys like Dillinger and Floyd, before their faces got so famous, it gave them a spare few minutes while the onlookers had to figure out if this was someone they needed to be nice to, and sometimes it got them all the way to the vault before the cops were called in.

Of course Jack and Lai didn't have anything like that. There was no reason for them to be in a white bank. It wasn't like they were allowed to open accounts, and even if they were doing deliveries, they'd be expected

to wait outside for someone to meet them. Instead they went in shouting and shooting, Jack holding people off with guns, Lai grabbing what she could from the tellers and sometimes the rear office.

No one was ever going to mistake them for anything but exactly what they were, so why the pretty dresses and the sharp-cut suits?

“Because fuck ’em, that’s why,” said Jack, pulling up to the Holmsford Savings and Trust in Oklahoma.

“Because we’re prettier than they are, and we want them to see that when we take their money,” said Lai, reaching back to blot some lipstick from the corner of my mouth. “Now hop in front.”

I got behind the wheel as Jack and Lai entered the bank. Jack had been teaching me all week along the country roads bridging Illinois and Missouri. He was, surprisingly enough, a good teacher, patient when I flooded the engine or made it kick. I was eager to put my skills to good use, and the car purred underneath my hand like a big happy cat as I waited for them to come back out.

Time took on a slow, syrupy quality, as if the sun beating down had turned to honey. I was almost painfully aware of everything on the street, the two spotted dogs sleeping in the dirt in front of the general store, the old woman on a gray mare coming up the street. The door to the Holmsford Savings and Trust stood out like it was edged in black ink, and I counted my breaths, one in and two out, waiting for life to restart.

They exploded out the door like shells from a cannon, Lai laughing, Jack swearing, and they leaped into the car ... which sat absolutely still in its spot, still on. Lai laughed harder, Jack kicked the seat behind me.

“Start the damn car!” he roared as I slapped the parking brake, turned the key, pumped the spark lever like I thought it’d spit beer. If I thought time had slowed to a stop before, it made up for it now, speeding up until it seemed like a beating from the cops, jail, and a long stint the federal pen was practically on top of me.

I was shouting, Jack had grabbed me by the shoulders to try to drag me into the back seat and take my place at the same time, and finally, just as the police car appeared at the head of the street, Lai stifled her giggles enough to point:

“Gear shift! Gear shift!”

Realizing, I yanked it out of neutral, and the car roared forward into the street with the cops hot on our heels. I jerked the wheel to get around the old lady on the horse, spun it just as fast the other way to avoid a parked car, and then we roared out of town, making for Salt Fork River and the state line.

The gunfire started up, but this time, Jack was able to fire back with the rifle stashed under the seat. If I’d known it was there when I first hitched a ride, things might have come out very differently, but now I was just grateful for Jack returning fire with the modified Winchester, booming thunder to get the cops off our tail.

“Right,” Lai said suddenly, and there was a dirt road that I hadn’t expected, so close that I barely made the turning. The shooting kept up, and I drove on, white-knuckled, for what felt like forever until Lai told me right again.

It wasn’t my job to ask questions, it was my job to drive, and I did as the shots chasing us spaced out, one every two seconds, one every five. I would have asked what cops shot like that, but the answer presented itself too easily—it wasn’t the cops chasing us anymore.

Jack swore almost meditatively as he returned fire, but except for a brief glance forward and a reminder to stay on top of the spark lever, he let me drive, and beside me on the bench seat, Lai slid over close, draping her arm over my shoulders. We hadn’t practiced the fox roads because we couldn’t. You needed to be running to find them, and we hadn’t been before.

It felt like forever, the only sounds the periodic shots from a pursuer I couldn’t see in the window, Jack’s swearing, Lai’s murmured left or right. Something buzzed in my chest like the drone of a great hornet, and I let it sink into my bones.

“All right, darling. Right one more time.”

I was so sunk down in my head that I did it without looking, and my heart slammed sideways against my ribs as I realized that the only thing to our right was a deep ravine, the sides sheer stone and grown over with pine saplings that wouldn’t stop us for more than a second on our long drop down.

I yelled, and I would have tried to spin the wheel to save us from going over if Lai hadn't put her hand over mine, her fingers clamping down with iron strength and no visible effort as she kept me pointed straight down the slope.

Horried, I felt the car drop out from under us, the pine branches whipping at the windshield, the front wheels spinning on nothing as they reared over the edge—

—and then with a hard bump, we had all four wheels on the asphalt again, rolling along under a perfect October moon. I took a deep, scouring breath of cold air, tears on my cheeks, and I looked over at Lai, whose hand still rested on mine.

She was looking forward to the road, and I saw her in profile, her hat tilted back on her head to reveal the nearly flat plane of her face, the high round forehead that reminded me so much of a perfect eggshell, the way her red mouth was slightly parted as if she was starving for the moonlight and meant to eat it up. The sight of her punched the breath out of my chest, and then she tapped her fingers on my knuckles, settling back on her side of the seat.

"Not bad at all for your first time," she said with satisfaction. "You're good at running."

Jack stashed the Winchester under the seat and leaned forward. I thought he was going to smack me for the gear shift, but instead he slapped my shoulder with a broad grin.

"Nice work. First time Lai steered us into a gully, I couldn't do it, and it half tore out our engine."

Rules again, but these rules had enough tooth to tear out the engine on a Model A, and they had nothing to do with how I looked or how I didn't.

I smiled in the darkness, driving deeper into October and coming out somewhere close to Bowling Green.

## VI.

The papers figured out pretty quickly that we were now three instead of two, and they decided I was Chinese Jack's little sister rescued from a

disorderly house in San Diego and brought east.

“Why am I your little sister?” I asked, skimming the headlines and sitting next to Lai on the running board as Jack made eggs and bacon over an open fire.

“Probably because otherwise they’d have to start thinking about you two taking turns with me,” Jack replied absently, and Lai snorted.

“Like anyone would have you two!” she exclaimed, standing up and stalking into the woods.

The roads had dumped us out near Gatlinburg in Tennessee that time. Jack liked the mountains, said they reminded him of the stories his dad told about Dinghu Mountain near Zhaoqing, but something about them made Lai uneasy and mean.

I looked after her, a little brokenhearted, and Jack shook his head.

“She gets like that sometimes. Leave her alone, and she’ll come back.”

“She’s not gonna leave us out here to get shot and eaten by coyotes?” I asked, only half joking.

“Hasn’t yet.”

He was right. After her fits of temper, never all that common, Lai would come back to run between us, petting us, kissing us, telling us she was sorry, sorry, sorry, could we ever forgive her, she would make it up to us the minute we got back to a proper city with proper clothes and proper room service.

Jack was used to it, taking her kisses where he could get them, philosophical when he couldn’t, but I soaked up her repentance like a sponge, hanging on to her and demanding that she buy me food and dresses and pretty gold jewelry to say sorry. She liked spoiling me, and I liked being spoiled, but even then I could feel the cracks underneath it all, a creaking like lake ice that would hold your weight right up until it wouldn’t.

It helped that the rest was fun, nothing but fun, after I remembered that the gear shift needed to be out of neutral for the car to run. Jack and I split driving duties getting to the jobs, but I was always the getaway driver, perched in the front seat, waiting for them to come out, and when they did it was like fireworks going off. We shot down the road, faster than anything until the day came that we wouldn’t be, but that day was a thousand years



away as we careened down one country road or another, shooting it out with the cops until Lai told me left or right.

I learned to trust Lai's words even when they took us off a cliff, and the reward for that was driving under the silver light of an October moon, knowing that nothing in the world could touch us. Once, while Jack snored in the back seat, I asked her what they were. Why did they let us on, why did they care whether we lived or died?

"Oh, they don't care, even a little bit," she replied, her head leaned against my shoulder. "They probably wouldn't mind if we got out and offered up our bloods and our skulls to their mother the moon right now."

I shivered at the image, three mutilated bodies leaking black blood onto the moon-silvered roads, and she kissed my cheek comfortingly.

"It's fine, it's fine, em yêu. They let us ride because I know how to ask and you know how to drive. We know the rules, and they'll get their meal somewhere else."

I thought I understood at least some part of it. I had been hungry all my life before I joined up with Jack and Lai, both the hungers for food and money that were easy to understand, and the other ones that weren't.

A few days out of Gatlinburg, we found one of the caches that Lai mentioned. From absolute darkness, we eased onto a stretch of road somewhere in southern Illinois, the twilight just beginning to soften the edges of the high summer heat.

"Oh, hey, left up ahead," said Jack from the back seat, and this time he was the one who guided me through the half-grown corn to the tiny town of Slip. We stopped long enough to get supplies, paying the staff extravagantly to forget all about us, and we turned off the main road, and then we turned off the dirt track, driving until we got to a falling-down house just before full dark.

It had once been something special, full timber and stone in an area short on both, but now one side slumped over as if it was exhausted, and there was a hole punched from the roof clear through to the loft. Still there was a healthy supply of good firewood tucked under a tarp, and in short order, Jack got the woodstove going while Lai went after the floorboards with a pry bar and a wide grin.

“Come here. Come here and look at this.”

It was more money than I had seen in my life, stacks of bills bound together with ribbons, with string, in one case with the inner tube from a bike tire. She lifted the bundles of cash out one after the other to build a little wall between us, and then she reached deeper into the hole to pull out two dusty bottles.

“The fox roads want us to have a party,” she sang, and we did.

It was the kind of night that you only have a handful of times, but your mind insists that of course there were more. Of course there were more nights where you drank ridiculously good wine with people you loved. Of course someone fed you perfectly fried sausage under a real summer moon more than five times. Of course when you laughed, they kissed you, passing you back and forth between them like a present they wanted to share. It hurts too much to think of only having a night like that one just a few times in your lifetime, so you take the memory and stretch it out and make it last.

I woke up wearing Jack’s clothes, and when Jack reached for them, I shrank away without thinking, unwilling to give up the trousers or the shirt or the braces or the tie. I backed up right into Lai’s arms, which wrapped me up snug and sound.

“Well, that means I get to take you shopping again,” she said with enormous satisfaction.

I tried to explain it to them, but they didn’t need it, and after a few days in my smart new clothes and with my hair cut properly, I didn’t need the explanation either, not with them and not to myself.

## VII.

The thing that people who live on the coasts don’t quite understand about the plains states is that they go on forever. Winter lasts forever, the prairies last forever, and between Chicago and St. Louis there’s a countless number of small towns on a single stretch of road, sitting like pyrite beads stitched on twisting black ribbon.

There were plenty of small towns with banks for us to hit, and it was a good thing, because we never grabbed more than two thousand dollars at

any single one. Sometimes we were lucky to walk away with a couple hundred, enough to keep gas in the car, bullets in the guns, and food in our bellies.

Still, it was more money than I had ever seen. I thought we were rich, though Jack begged to differ. He was the one who priced out our expenses, knew to the penny how far two hundred dollars wouldn't take us. He knew who would take a bribe to look the other way and who wanted enough cash we were better off just dodging them. Once in a while, he talked wistfully about the big scores in places like Chicago and St. Louis and Little Rock. Lai said we were welcome to try, but we would do them without her because it was too much, too much heat, too much press, too many trains cutting our access to the real getaway roads, never mind the fox roads.

Still, it added up, and whenever we ended up in a town big enough for us to be anonymous, we blew in with money to burn. In Chicago again, Jack went to find a boxing club that would stand him a few rounds, mostly ones on the South Side, and Lai took me by the arm and said that I needed a new suit.

There was a tailor she liked in Chinatown, where she had bought me my first suit the month before, but when we crossed over to the little store next to the dim sum place, we found it locked up tight. A small sign in the window said that the two brothers who operated it had gone home to Fuzhou for the month, and I felt a little ill, thinking of how long it had been since I had seen my parents, how little I had thought about it until this moment. Maybe she knew what I was thinking, maybe she only thought I was disappointed, but Lai squeezed my arm.

"Oh, we'll catch them when next we're in Chicago. In the meantime, let's get you something small to tide you over, all right?"

We'd never be in Chicago together again, but I didn't know that. Instead, I followed her back onto the streetcar, taking my place next to the aisle to keep her from bumps and gropes. There were plenty of other tailors in Chinatown, even ones who wouldn't raise an eyebrow at what a queer pair we were, but for some reason, she took us all the way to State Street, wide and noisy with what felt like the whole world on the thoroughfare.

It was a hot summer Saturday, and people had turned out in their best. Everyone was there to spend money or make it, and the roving vendors, selling everything from pickles to shirts to shoes that would let you dance all night, moved through the crowds like a flock of darting birds to avoid the city police.

Lai grabbed a pair of red shoes from a woman packing up, slipping a dollar into her pocket as she hurried away. The shoes were leather with a smart ankle strap fastened a brass button, and she leaned on me with one hand while using the other to put them on. Her old shoes, black patent leather and the same ones she'd been wearing when I met her, she dropped carelessly on the street before taking a few fast dance steps.

"Oh, these are nice," she exclaimed. "I could dance back to the moon with these."

To my surprise, she led me straight to the brass and frosted-glass doors of Beecham's Department Store, one of the biggest in the city, certainly one of the nicest. The wide display windows featured dresses and suits spelled up to dance with each other behind the glass, diamond necklaces and gold watches wrapped around invisible necks and wrists, and that was nothing compared to the Christmas displays, which unbottled rare vintages of Warsaw winters to set their spectacles.

The doorman gave us a significant look, but Lai moved so fast and with such surety that he would actually have to bar the door against her to keep us out. It wasn't worth his time to do so—he couldn't even do it legally like they could in other states—but still the only faces among the customers and behind the counters were white.

"Lai, let's just go, they're not going to sell us anything here."

"What a good thing it is we're not here to buy anything."

Before I could stop her, she plucked a violet box from the display on an oak table, small enough to hide entirely under her hand. In a move identical to the one pushing money into the vendor's pocket, she slid it into the watch pocket of my vest before turning on her toe and whirling away.

She didn't run. I know that for sure, because when Lai ran, really ran, there was nothing in the world that could keep up with her. Instead she simply moved away from me so quickly that I didn't know I was being left

for a moment, only the red heels of her new shoes catching my eye as she whisked around a rack of wool jackets. I stared after her for a wild moment as someone shouted “Hey, stop!” and then I went after her, following her through the men’s department into jewelry.

Running, the protective civility we had had evaporated, and suddenly and irreversibly, we were visible, and we were targets. The cry went up, “Stop thief!” and I heard footsteps pounding behind me. Most of the shoppers lurched away from me, a few who were too slow clipped my shoulders as I went by, and one or two, assholes, tried to grab me. If they tried to grab Lai, I never saw it, and desperately, I focused on her red heels, running hard to catch up with her, because it was Lai, she couldn’t leave me, wouldn’t leave me, and all I had to do was catch her, catch up with her.

I ran so hard I was surprised I didn’t chip the marble floors, and when Lai splashed gleefully through the Lady Liberty fountain, I went right in after her. She stooped in the water for a brief moment, coming up with a handful of pennies that turned into quarters as she flung them into the crowd. The sudden mad scramble for silver stalled me up, nearly made me trip over a girl grabbing for money on her knees, but I won myself free just in time for Lai to dart into the café area.

I thought I had her cornered briefly—the tables were set close, and every table was packed, but she surprised me and that poor couple trying to eat their charlotte cake. One foot on the man’s knee, one just shy of the strawberry topping, and she was up and over, leaving me to blunder half into the lap of the poor woman who just wanted her dessert. I couldn’t go over the table like she could, so instead I slammed my hip hard against the corner, spun it, spun myself, and barely managed to gain my feet to chase after her.

I couldn’t see anything but her flashing red heels, I couldn’t hear anything but the roar of my blood in my ears, I couldn’t think anything but *Don’t leave me, don’t leave me, don’t leave me.*

The security guard wasn’t even chasing me. I rounded the corner, certain that I was closing the gap between us, and I found the guard instead. His hand came up in surprise, and more by instinct than anything else, he grabbed me by the scruff of my jacket as I started to turn. I looked around

desperately, but no red, no Lai, and I sagged, shocked and empty in his grasp.

It was only when he tried to pull me away, probably toward some back room to wait for the cops or something worse, that a more sensible fear took over. I went limp for a split second, making him pause, and at the same time, I tore out the buttons of my jacket, letting me slip it entirely as I darted away.

By some miracle, I was by the doors, and I blew through them, leaving a department store full of angry shouts and chaos behind me. When I got onto the street, I didn't stop running, even though I could hear Jack cautioning me that running's the way you get chased. Maybe he would like to take his chances with his fists, but I wouldn't, and I ran.

Chicago doesn't go on forever, quite, but it was drawn in sharp lines, and with a few stumbling steps, you went from luxury to poverty, from houses to railroad tracks.

I ran, and for some reason I couldn't stop running, and the farther I went, the faster I went as well. I ran through smoking yards where garbage was burned to sidewalks slick with blood where you prayed it was only cows and sheep getting slaughtered behind the high fences, and I cut behind the yard where a gardener trimmed the rosebushes only to emerge into one hosting a dogfight.

I moved faster, the transitions got harder and stranger. It felt a little like running through a rain of knives, but it was good, so good to know that no one in the world was going to catch me.

A room where a pair of Chinese sisters set each other's hair, getting ready for a night on the town.

Rats trotting along the river, so many and packed so solid that they moved like one animal, one mind.

A vaulted space full of people and the roar of arriving trains, the air thick with the promise of getting away.

A bunk on a rocking ship, a young sailor staring dreamily at something in a muscle magazine. He looked up, shouting even as he jammed the magazine under his pillow, and the sense of recognition was so intense that



I missed a step. I swore, crashing headfirst over a steel footlocker, throwing my hands up because I was going to hit the floor, and it was going to *hurt*.

Instead of hitting the wooden planks, I hit a brick wall, which was hardly less painful. The scrape of the raw brick took some skin off my upper lip and my cheek, and when it didn't yield, I ended up on the cement, curling up into myself as bolts of pain shot through my body, bright as lightning and gradually growing dimmer.

I focused on breathing, because it felt as if that was no longer guaranteed, and just when I thought it might be sort of fun to stand up again, a door opened farther down the alleyway, spilling out boisterous shouts. Suddenly some familiar swearing rose up out of the cheerful calls and Jack was there, crouching down in front of me and demanding to know what the hell had happened.

I tried to tell him *she left me*, but nothing came out but a sob, and, growling, he got an arm around me and helped me up.

I had ended up close to Chinatown, close enough, anyway, that he got me to a restaurant nearby. We settled in the booth at the very back, and they brought us garlic chicken on top of fat white noodles, topped with stinging green onion. I realized I was starving, and I wolfed down my portion eagerly, but Jack only picked at his, watching the door, absently rubbing his ribs where they had taped him up after.

I finished the dumplings he'd meant to for us to share, and I had started on his dish when Lai came in, smiling and calling to the girl behind the counter as if they were cousins. I almost started crying again, but she came to sit beside me, snuggling me under her arm with such a conspiratorial smile that I didn't care how hurt I was.

"You're so good, anh yêu, you're *so, so* good."

She leaned in to give me a little kiss on the cheek and to take back the little box she'd stuck in my pocket before straightening up to call for fish ball soup and more dumplings.

Beyond her, Jack gave us both a long, long look, his mouth curved down like the ends of a drawn bow.

## VIII.

Something changed after that, which is too easy to say. Things are always changing, whether you see it or not, and I didn't.

Jack got quieter, Lai got meaner, and every day I meant to ask them about the cache where they'd hidden the deed to 27 Allison Road, but every day I didn't. If I asked, they'd give it to me, and in my suit, drinking whiskey as I drove down the moonlit fox roads with two people who knew my right name, I never wanted anything less than to go home.

So we kept on through August, from Cherryvale to Green Bay to Waterloo to Carbondale, east to Zanesville, and west to Storm Lake, and if I drove fast enough, nothing would change.

The day we drove into Wilder, Illinois, the sky was low, swagged with clouds, and a wind stirred uneasily along the ground, blowing scraps of paper along the street and tugging at the hem of Lai's skirt like a kid begging for candy.

I slid into the front seat, my hat pulled down low over my eyes, and I watched them go in, Lai first because no one could take their eyes off of her, and Jack following, gun in hand. Driving getaway meant that I had to keep my eye on the street for anything that wanted to block us in or get in our way, but for just a second, I looked after them with a strange pain in my heart, something that ached right under my breastbone and kept me from drawing a full breath.

Then I went back to looking out for trouble, like I was meant to do, and they burst back out onto the street like fireworks, a rain of bullets following them. In mid-stride, Jack spun almost completely around, blood darkening his shoulder, the force of the bullet almost putting him on the ground. He kept his feet, and I shoved the car door open for him, let him grab on to it and pull himself in heavily.

Lai never got in at all, and I turned to see her at the driver's window, hopping up on the running board to lean in and kiss me, digging her nails into my chest hard before pushing herself out and running back toward the bank.

I screamed her name, or I thought I did, and then she met the two armed guards at the front. They saw her coming like a storm of red, right up in their faces before they could remember that she was dangerous. That was

all the time she needed, and two fast swipes with her hooked fingers left them bleeding from their faces as she turned and ran down the street.

Jack started to lurch back out the car to go after her, and before I could think, I gunned the engine, wheeling out of the spot as if it had caught fire. He got the door closed with his good arm, swearing the air blue, and we swung down the road after Lai.

I have one crystal-clear picture of her running, her red shoes gone, her hat flown off her head, her hair blowing around her face. Then it's a blur as I realized she was pacing the car and then outrunning it entirely, her body lengthening, her face tugging out like a muzzle, her red dress sweeping to hair and her fingers blackening as she pulled the yards and miles underneath her.

Lai outpaced the car, and then with the echo of a laugh in my head, she was gone, and the gunfire started.

For a second, the Ford actually slowed because I didn't know what to do next, not with Jack leaking blood onto the bench seat and unable to return fire, not without Lai laughing in my ear.

Then I realized, of course I did.

The Ford leaped forward like a fox itself, and I hit the highway doing at least sixty an hour and gaining. There had been talk recently, better guns for the cops, better cars, cooperation between feds that could hang you in Tennessee for a bank you hit in Wisconsin, but that was all slow, too slow to ever catch us. A laugh bubbled up in my throat as I yanked the wheel hard left into what looked like a live oak tree and found a little cow-path road that was never there. Right, and left, and right again, and I could feel the wheel tugging against my grasp. The Ford knew that it wasn't Lai guiding it but me, and while I was fine on the long stretches of the freeways between St. Louis and Chicago, the fox roads were something else.

Up in Wisconsin, north of Black River Falls and Rhinelander, the lumberjacks drag their logs from the pineries to the river to float them downstate. The drag marks become these broad ruts just barely wide enough to drive on, and bank robbers and bootleggers call them the cat roads. It's more than just lumber that the loggers drag away, when the land belongs to the Ojibwe and Menominee, and the crooks who run the cat

roads meet some fearsome trouble if they step one foot wrong and sometimes if they don't.

The fox roads were something else, I realized, as the light drained away and the moon rose in the sky. You only hit the fox roads if you're running from something, and I remembered my mad dash in Chicago, how fear had sent me somewhere else, saved me. Was saving us now.

Left. Another left.

Jack had stripped his jacket off and half his shirt as well. They were bloody rags, and the car smelled of whiskey as he applied it inside and out, as the old saying went.

"How are you?" I asked, and he nodded tersely.

"I'll live. How long has Lai been teaching you?"

I started to tell him about Beecham's, but then I thought about how she had looked at me that morning in Hooper, just for an instant, how she had held a knife to my throat and told me she thought I was afraid and that that was all right.

"Probably since the first day I met you."

We drove in silence for a while. Jack fell asleep, snoring heavily enough I never had to worry if he had died leaking blood onto the leather seat. The fox road rolled out in front of me like a ribbon—all I had to do was grab it and pull it underneath me to get to where I was going, wherever that was.

Before I could think too hard about what I was doing, I eased the car over to the side of the road. I knew right away that this was something I wasn't supposed to do, but if Lai wanted to tell me off, she could damn well come back to do it.

I figured it out, mostly, when I'd seen her muzzle, her neat black feet, the streak of russet red that was all that was left of her red dress. It's a hard thing to stay in a form that's not your own, even when you love the people who know you in it. It feels like flying when you can be what you really are, even if you love pretty dresses and golden jewelry. I still had some of mine stashed somewhere in Milwaukee, even if I probably didn't want to wear them anymore.

I sat on the running board, facing the cornfield. The moon cast everything in shades of silver with shadows so dark anything could be

hidden within them. I knew that there were things in those shadows that wouldn't mind taking a bite out of me or Jack, were probably thinking about it right now, but I could have one goddamn minute.

"Just because you went doesn't mean you can't come back," I said.

I listened for a response. Maybe I heard a high shrill laugh from the dark woods beyond the fields.

I breathed out to see the plumes of steam, and I reached into my jacket for a cigarette. Pulling out the pack I'd picked up in Waukegan (Flessner Bank, twelve hundred dollars flat), my fingers brushed against something hard and square. It was of course the little box she'd swiped in Chicago, and, the unlit cigarette dangling from my lip, I opened it.

It was a pair of cuff links, round and set in copper. I couldn't see the color in the dark, but I thought that when we emerged into summer again, they would flash a foxy amber. As well, there was a sheet of paper, folded so many times it was a square lump as hard as the box. When I pulled it open, I could read the word printed across the top clearly in the moonlight: DEED. Underneath it in smaller print, *27 Allison Road*.

My parents had built that store out of nothing, or rather, they had built it out of ten years washing clothes at the Grandee Hotel in Reno, another eight years on the farms around Meade. They had bought the store with the two rooms in the back to sleep in because they were ready to build a better life for me, and the fact that it was a life I hated didn't matter at all.

I stroked the deed with my fingertips, and the memories of the polished counter, the acrylic cash register buttons under my fingertips, and the bare plank floors rose up unbidden and unwelcome. My mother kept an enormous glass jar of pickles on the counter that no one ever wanted, even if they were free. My parents were right when they thought that Meade would deal with them as the only store in town. They were wrong when they thought that Meade would get used to them.

When the bank had taken the store, it had left a gap like a lost tooth on Allison Road, a bare dusty lot where it had been. My mother screamed after them, cursing in a language she refused to teach me, and my father just sat in the dirt, staring stoically back at the people who had come to stare at him. I sat next to my father in the same dust-gray dress that I had been wearing

when I met Jack and Lai, and under the fear and the grief and the stomach-turning fury, I was ferociously, ungratefully, stupidly happy to see it go. Now here it was again, lock, stock, and every barrel, and they could put it down where it had been or take it elsewhere, find another town, other people. They could take this deed, unfold it and set it down on waiting earth, and let it roll out the same barrels and dry goods and pickles for people who might like them better.

I could go back with it, I realized, pack myself up with the bolts of fabric and the sacks of flour. They'd take me back, and never speak of it. It'd be like I never left.

I put the deed away again, sticking it back in the box and sliding the box back into my vest. In a surprisingly short amount of time, I had gotten used to myself, and I realized I was in no hurry to give it up. Maybe I would someday, go back and take my place beside the pickles, but I didn't think so. I'd deliver the deed back to them, say sorry, and then it would be back on the road for me and Jack. Maybe we'd keep on as we were, or maybe we'd try our luck at something else. We'd met bootleggers running whiskey between Chicago and Montreal. The fox roads probably ran to Canada. With the cash we'd stolen, we could buy into some of the clubs out west, the ones that featured only Chinese performers. Hell, maybe we'd get real jobs.

I climbed back into the car, the still-sleeping Jack on my right, the hunter's moon on my left.

I started to drive.



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**cory  
doctorow**

*new york times*  
bestselling author



**the  
canadian  
miracle**

"One of our most  
important science  
fiction writers"  
—Kim Stanley Robinson



# The Canadian Miracle

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**CORY DOCTOROW**

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*illustration by*

WILL STAEHLE

T O R  
D O T  
C O M

*Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.*

—Fred Rogers (1986)

*It's a treat to beat your feet on the Mississippi Mud.*

—Bing Crosby (1927)

I arrived in Oxford with the first wave of Blue Helmets, choppered in along with our gear, touching down on a hospital roof, both so that our doctors and nurses could get straight to work, and because it was one of the few buildings left with a helipad and backup generators and its own water filtration.

Humping my bag down the stairs to the waterlogged ground levels was a nightmare, even by Calgary standards. People lay on the stairs, sick and injured, and navigating them without stepping on them was like an endless nightmare of near-falls and weak moans from people too weak to curse me. I met a nurse halfway down and she took my bag from me and set it down on the landing and gave me a warm hug. “Welcome,” she said, and looked deep into my eyes. We were both young and both women but she was Black and American and I was white and Canadian. I came from a country where, for the first time in a hundred years, there was a generation that wasn’t terrified of the future. She came from a country where everybody knew they had no future.

I hugged her back and she told me my lips were cracked and ordered me to drink water and watched me do it. “This lady’s with the Canadians. They came to help,” she said to her patients on the stairs. Some of them smiled and murmured at me. Others just stared at the backs of their eyelids, reliving their traumas or tracing the contours of their pain.

“I’m Alisha,” I said.

“Elnora,” she said. She was taller than me and had to bend a little to whisper in my ear. “You take care of yourself, okay? You go out there trying to help everyone who needs it, *you’re* going to need help, too. I’ve seen it.”

“I’ve seen it, too,” I said. “Thank you. I hope you don’t mind if I give you the same advice.”

She made a comical angry face and then smiled. She looked exhausted. “That’s all right, I probably need to hear it.”

My fellow Blue Helmets had been squeezing past us, trudging down the staircase with their own bags. I shouldered mine and joined them. Elnora waved at me as I left, then bent to her next patient.

I stepped out into the wet, heavy air of the Mississippi afternoon, the languid breeze scented with sewage, rot, and smoke. My clothes were immediately saturated with water sucked out of the ambient humidity, and I could feel myself pitting out. Squinting, fumbling for my sunglasses, it took me a moment to spot the group of angry men standing by the hospital entrance. Red hats, open-carry AR-15s. It was the local Maga Club. On closer inspection, a few of them were women, and while they skewed older, there was a smattering of young adults, and, heartbreakingly, a good number of small kids, holding signs demanding FOREIGN AGITATORS OUT OF MISSISSIPPI!

Bekka, a Cree woman from Saskatchewan who’d been my seat buddy on the helicopter ride, leaned in. “Straight outta central casting.”

At first, I thought she was right. Weather-beaten, white, unhealthy in that way poor Americans are, lacking access to basic preventative care. They looked so angry. Plus, the guns. But there was something else there, and I couldn’t put my finger on it until I spotted a sign being held aloft by a heavysset, middle-aged guy with wraparound shades and a sweat-sheened face: OUR LIVES MATTER TOO.

I knew he meant it in a gross way, but I couldn’t argue with it.

★ ★ ★

I had plenty of flood experience, thanks to my year in Calgary. I could fill sandbags, site and service pumps, work the levees, install reverse-osmosis

filters, dig WHO-standard latrines, and efficiently store and track emergency rations. I was good at comforting survivors, especially other women, who had often lost children. I'd never had children and I kept telling people I never would, but it turned out that there was something about the experience of a lost child that I could relate to.

I had also pulled bodies out of the water, almost all dead, but two living ones. One of those two was still alive, but the last time I'd video-conferenced with her, she'd clutched her soft toy and cried for her parents the whole time. No one ever found her parents, not even their bodies. That happened to a lot of people, even with the DNA stuff from the last quarantine lockdown. I was better at consoling parents with dead kids than kids with dead parents.

Mississippi was the same but different. Calgarians were traumatized but determined. They knew there was a better future ahead of them, and only sorrowed that it hadn't arrived fast enough. The new Calgary—on higher ground, out of the floodplain, fed by wind power, dense and vertical to preserve natural habitats that sprawl had been ceaselessly devouring—was springing into existence now, thanks to that furious energy. They wanted their future and they weren't waiting for it. They were taking it.

Mississippi was ... beaten. The university had been starved of funds for so long, becoming more and more dependent on the whims of individual donors, dilettantes with pet theories they expected to see taught. Ole Miss became such a joke that a group of grads had sued the regents unsuccessfully for lowering the value of their degrees. They lost early without a chance to make any substantive arguments, thanks to the binding arbitration clauses they'd signed on enrollment.

The music scene went next, with Ticketmaster/LiveNation buying and then shuttering the Lyric, then working its way through the college clubs, squeezing them for every dime and dropping them. Even the barbecue joints had been scooped up by a private equity fund, merged into a single corporate unit, and then turned into self-parody.

And at every step, the city and the state had either failed to stop Oxford's dismantling, or worse, had participated in it. No one believed help

would come. There was such helplessness, a sense that everyone knew what had to be done and that no one would ever do it.

At least they had the elections to distract them. Everyone had election fever. The eight state lawmakers who'd died when their motorcade was caught in a mudslide had all been lifers, five-termers, eight-termers, a *twelve*-termers. Also: all climate deniers. The Blue Helmets whispered jokes about science progressing eight funerals at a time, and I was appalled, but then they told me they'd first heard 'em from locals while out on pet rescue, scooping up skinny, shivering cats and dogs the drones had picked out. It was a good detail. Pets were grateful to be rescued and drones were good at distinguishing them from flood slurry and rubble. Something to do with all the cat and dog videos on social media providing endless training data.

The Blue Helmets always worked with local partners. That was our hard-and-fast rule: if there weren't locals onsite, we couldn't be onsite, either. We wanted to help, but that help had to be *with* locals, not *for* locals. If they didn't buy in, we couldn't be effective, and if we went ahead and did the work anyway, we'd burn the credibility we needed to do our jobs effectively.

So the snap elections were ... a challenge. The Republican-controlled state house had made a calculation that if they held the elections during the chaos, poor people would be too distracted and traumatized to vote, letting them fill those eight seats again. They didn't want a repeat of Texas.

But *Texas* sure did. The same national organization of Dealers who'd organized the largest voter turnout and the biggest political upset in a century were committed to flipping Mississippi next.

The national volunteers and their Texas vanguard who descended on Mississippi to mix voter registration with relief efforts muddled our mission, and we muddled theirs. Maga Clubs never cared about truthfulness and nuance under the best of circumstances, and in the chaos of the flood relief, it was easy for them to conflate "foreign aid workers" and "outside political organizers" and come up with "foreign interference in a US election." These were the six scariest words in the American phrasebook, words to conjure up a bipartisan QAnon/BlueAnon horde.

This made it extra hard for us to do our jobs. We couldn't deploy unless we were matched with a Mississippi team. The Maga-aligned teams wouldn't work with us, and the other teams kept disappearing into election-campaigning outings that we stayed the hell away from. There were days when we felt like tools that had been forgotten at the back of the shed.

"Remember," Bekka told me, after she'd skunked me at Set for the eighth time, "we're here to be part of their thing, not to do our thing. If you're here for the egoboo, you're gonna be disappointed."

I looked down at the final seven unmatchable Set cards and my pathetic pile of sets and sighed. "I know."

"I know you know, but it doesn't hurt to remind you." Bekka had a scar just to the left of her mouth, where something bad had happened. She never talked about it, but she touched it when she was drinking, sometimes, and got an angry look. When she smiled, like now, it was like an extra-special dimple.

"Let's go get a drink," she said.

★ ★ ★

We were stationed outside of Oxford, in an exurb that had been starved when the state cut its transit links to the city, where the only local employer was a gig warehouse that served as a regional distribution center for a bunch of second-tier e-commerce platforms that couldn't afford Amazon robots, not with Mississippi work going as cheap as it did.

The warehouse had been hit hard by the flood, and since the railroad tracks were still impassable, no one's apps were sending them hours. A few trucks came in or drove out with goods, but almost everything had shut down.

We set out on our bikes—fat-tired things with heavy locks and big mud guards over the chains and tires—and pedaled down what was left of the main street, looking for something to do. We heard the party before we saw it, that EDM-meets-Delta-blues that was the sound of the summer everywhere in Mississippi.

We homed in on the beats and before we knew it, we were outside a low-slung goods warehouse on a rail spur, with a huge crowd outside of it,

barbecuing on kettle grills and making blender drinks at a bar next to a noisy generator that was also pumping out the tunes.

I recognized Elnora a second before she recognized me and she broke off her conversation, snatched a red party cup out of the hand of a bartender who'd just filled it up, and jogged over to me, a million-dollar smile on her face.

"Hey, Canadian girl!"

"It's Alisha," I said. "And this is Bekka." Bekka dismounted and shook Elnora's hand, then Elnora handed me the cup. It was cold and filled with some kind of boozy frozen slurry.

"It's a Mississippi Mudslide," she said. "That reefer car there's run out of battery and the freezers in the warehouse have been out all week, so that ice cream's gotta get eaten *up*."

I took a sip. I preferred my booze on the dry side, but the mix of chocolate ice cream and bourbon was certainly refreshing. I didn't offer Bekka a sip—we'd had all our sharing habits beaten out of us years before, in Calgary, during the bad Beaver Fever outbreak—but Elnora's bartender had already set one up for her. The party cup—one of the cornstarch ones that had a tendency to disintegrate if you didn't gulp your drink fast enough—was already beading with condensation.

"I can't believe we're drinking Mississippi Mudslides," Bekka said.

Elnora's grin was tiny and tight. "We gotta get our bright moments where we can. Bartender over there was warehouse security until last week. They forgot to revoke his lock credentials. Life gives you SARS, you make sarsaparilla."

"Can't argue with that," Bekka said, and drank so much she gave herself brain-freeze.

"How are things at the hospital?" I had been out there the day before, working on the generators and then on the pumps and then the water purifier, in one of those days when everything I fixed revealed something else that was broken.

"Oh, it's your basic waking nightmare," Elnora said. That small smile again, and a tight voice. "Been sleeping there, pulling double shifts all

week. This is my first day off since—” She did some math in her head. “God, ten days.” I realized she was swaying.

“Remember the advice you gave me when we arrived? That goes for you, too. You can’t be a good nurse if you haven’t had any sleep or a decent meal.”

She slumped. “You’re right. But all the time I’m on shift, all I can think about is what’s going on outside. Soon as I get outside, all I can think about is what’s going on in the hospital. It doesn’t help that every minute I’m inside my screen is blowing up with messages about the election, and soon as I get to one of these things, it’s nonstop messages about the patients.” She made a cross-eyed funny face, but I could see she was really in pain.

“I know that feeling. We get it, too. Plus we get all the craziness of not being able to get out and help because everyone’s out doing election stuff.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “That shit’s so stupid. Who cares if Canadians are pulling your car out the mud without an American chaperone. It’s not like you’re programming the voting machines.”

“I agree, but it’s above my pay grade.”

“Mine, too.” She looked over at the bar where there was another Mississippi Mudslide waiting for her in the hand of a handsome, smooth bartender with a shaved head and a neat little mustache and a million-dollar smile. She took it from him and gulped some. “Damn. Okay, you convinced me. One—maybe two—more drinks and I’ll go home. Keep me company here until I go?”

I looked at Bekka, who’d been bemusedly following our conversation. She looked around dramatically at the dancing people, the amazing music, the frosty drinks. “I don’t know, Alisha,” she said. “We got a lot of Netflix to catch up on back in the tent.” But smiling when she said it.

So we danced. We drank. We drank more than two. The sun was down and the ice cream was gone before we stopped. Elnora leaned against the side of the reefer truck, looking tired and exhilarated at the same time.

“Okay, now will you go home and get some sleep?” I said.

She smiled. “I will, but not straight home. We’re canvassing now.”

I should have put it together before that, but I just hadn’t been paying attention. It wasn’t unusual to see people with Dealer pins or hats, after all,



and you couldn't move in Mississippi for hitting an election sign, but as I looked around slowly I realized they were *all* wearing the pins and the signs were *everywhere*.

I found Bekka. "This is an election-campaign party," I hissed.

"Uh-huh," she said. "Just figured that out, did you?"

I felt a horrible, sinking feeling, all that ice cream and bourbon congealing in my guts. "Bekka, shit—"

"It's okay," she said. "We're just hanging out—we're not painting signs or going door-to-door or—"

"Bekka!" Now the ice cream was burning its way back up my gorge. This was our one, die-hard rule. No politics. Ever. *Ever*.

"I gotta go." I heard Bekka making excuses to Elnora as I unlocked my bike and mounted up. She caught up with me on the washboard road a few minutes later, pedaling hard, her headlight sending my shadow shooting out ahead of me as she came up behind me.

"Alisha, you need to calm down, girl."

"Bekka, this is serious. I mean, maybe we got away with it, but this could blow the whole op. Jesus, Bekka, how could you let me—"

She cut me off and I slammed the brakes. "First of all, I didn't 'let you' do anything because you are a grown-ass woman. Second of all, I assumed you'd figured it out, same as me. Third of all, yeah, I support the GNDs, of course I do—they're the only people here that even pretend to care about indigenous justice, about people of color. That's not just a theoretical problem for me, it's personal, do you understand? You're Canadian, I get that, but I come from Road Allowance Métis, and my ancestors never signed a treaty. Our lands don't stop at the border. This is my country, just as much or as little as Canada is. So don't *you* presume tell me what *I* can do here, lady."

Fury and shame warred in me. I felt the tears prick at my eyes, and sweat coursed down my back. I wiped my eyes with my shirttail, and the tiniest of breezes cooled my stomach and back off to an infinitesimal degree. "Bekka, I'm sorry. You're right. What you do is your business. But I didn't realize until right at the end there what they were doing, what we were doing—"

She softened. “I believe you. If I’d understood that, I would have said something. I know you take this seriously. But do you honestly think you’re the only Blue Helmet that’s doing this? Do you think people who care enough about these people and this planet to come down here don’t care enough to help them elect leaders who’ll keep them from torching the world?”

I felt a wave of vertigo. “Bekka, come on, that’s not true. I mean, maybe some of our people are partying with the politicals or—”

“Girl, you are blind. Half of us are ringing doorbells with them. Putting up signs. Registering voters. You think this is a game with rules? It’s a fight for their lives and our lives, too.”

I was suddenly furious. “Of course it’s not a game. Bekka, it’s deadly serious.” My voice was trembling. *I* was trembling. “That’s why I take it seriously. If we’re going to be able to do this work in the future, we can’t get turned into a political talking point. We have to be neutral—”

"See, you *say* you don’t think it’s a game, but that’s not being serious, Alisha. If they elect another legislature full of sociopath deniers, we won’t be able to do this work in the future because *there won’t be any future.*”

I wanted to slap her. I had never slapped anyone, but oh my God did I want to slap her. I got on my bike and pedaled home instead.

★ ★ ★

I woke up sticky and hot, as usual. Hungover, too, which was less usual. Ice cream hangovers are the *worst*, with that pasty full-mouth pucker from too much sugar. My cot was already soaked with sweat. I realized I’d slept in—way in. It was high noon. No wonder the old high school whose upper floor we were using as dorms was so hot and muggy.

I needed a shower, so I grabbed my towel, still damp and stinking of mildew despite the silver ions they’d doped all our gear with, and headed to the old girls’ locker room. I was toweling off when I remembered what Bekka had told me the night before, my incredible, all-consuming rage. She had been angry, too, that must have been why she said what she did, just trying to hurt my feelings. Bekka had been through a lot of shit—I mean, we all had, but she’d had some really rough times growing up, and if there

was one thing I'd learned, it was that trauma could manifest in all kinds of unpredictable ways.

I'd halfway convinced myself that Bekka had just been raging when I got back to the room to discover her waiting for me.

"Alisha—"

"Bekka, it's okay. I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have freaked out like that. I disagree with your choice, but it's yours to—"

She cut me off. "Alisha. Shit." She looked terrible, worse even than I felt. Not just hungover, either. "I'm sorry," she said. Her voice broke. She handed me her screen.

It took a while for me to figure out what I was looking at. The footage was grainy, taken from a long way off with night scopes, but then the camera zoomed out and I realized it was a video of me, drinking Mississippi Mudslides with Elnora, dancing with her friends, chatting. I cranked up the volume and heard the narrator, a young man, Southern accent, local: "—Canadian so-called relief workers have been working actively with domestic agitator elements to interfere in our election, seen here literally dancing on the graves of our state senators, who the foreigners are hoping to replace with disaster socialists who want to exploit our terrible tragedy to impose their agenda on us."

The overwhelming dread from the night before was back, but what I saw next actually made me drop the screen: my own photo, ganked from a social media profile, with my name and dox—date of birth, email, social handles—on a chyron beneath it. The voice was still talking, but all I could hear was a roaring in my ears, and that's when I dropped the screen.

When I picked it up again, I was looking at more night-scope videos of doorbell ringers, blurrycam zooms on the faces of the volunteers, cutting to more social media doxings, my fellow Blue Helmets.

Bekka took the screen out of my nerveless fingers. I realized I was still wearing a towel. Woodenly, I began to dress. I even started putting on makeup, my hand shaking.

"Alisha, I'm sorry."

My makeup wouldn't go on right, not with all the tears, and I blotted my face on a T-shirt from the pile on top of my backpack.

“I’m sorry, too, Bekka. I’m sorry that I think this means we just totally, utterly fucked these people over. You know this means they’re going to lose the election, right?”

“You don’t know that. No one knows that.” But from the look on her face, I knew she agreed.

I didn’t even check my screen for jobs. None of us would be out working that day.

They burned a cross on the lawn of the old high school that night. They didn’t even wear hoods. They wore the red hats, and they had signs: FOREIGNERS OUT! STOP RIGGING OUR ELECTIONS! There were pictures of me dancing shopped with gravestones.



I was back in Toronto when they announced the Mississippi election results. Bekka and I hadn’t spoken once as we packed up our gear and got our transport assignments. The couple of times when our paths crossed during the bugout, we’d avoided eye contact.

But I’d seen Elnora one more time before I left. She was part of the group—the surprisingly large group—that turned up to thank us and send us on our way. She gave me a really excellent hug and told me to take care of myself and I told her to take care of herself and wished her luck and she wished me luck.

I threw myself into Blue Helmet work when I got back, going into the office to do admin stuff, taking the subway out to Etobicoke to work with the quartermasters on getting gear rehabilitated, inventoried, and back into the field. There were Blue Helmets departing every week, going all over the world, anywhere on fire, anywhere underwater, anywhere people were sick or roasting: Aleppo, Hong Kong, Lesbos, St. Petersburg, Cape Town. But not to America. Not even when lower Manhattan got hit with a storm surge that overwhelmed the seawalls and inundated the MTA tunnels.

The Blue Helmets I worked alongside in Toronto didn’t want to talk to me any more than Bekka did. Our group were pariahs, even if we’d been exonerated by our inspector general. The Canadian Miracle meant that we were the first generation in a century not to fear the future, a nation that was

relocating its coastal cities and building high-speed rail at a rate never before seen on the American landmass. We'd been so enthusiastic about exporting our courage and our hope. Now the Americans saw us as ideological fifth columnists, people whose help came with political strings attached. There was word that we would no longer be welcome in Brazil, and whatever progress had been made on a Blue Helmet mission to Mainland China had been squandered. Not back to square one. Back to square minus one million.

They blamed me. I blamed me.

For me, the Canadian Miracle had begun in Dundas Square, on election night, when a combination of disasters (befalling the other parties) and good fortune (for the one party that was willing to face facts) had catapulted the longest of longshots, Brenda Tchimanens, into the prime minister's seat. Every time I'd walked past the Eaton Centre since, I'd gotten shivers as I remembered the wild elation of that night, the sense that the unbelievable could at last be believed.

So I went back to Dundas Square for the Mississippi election results, and of course it was full of Americans, some of the seven million who'd made it over the border with whatever they could carry as their cities drowned (Miami), burned (LA), or succumbed to mosquito-borne dengue epidemic (Phoenix). They had the refugee look of people who weren't allowed to work and didn't know if they ever would be allowed to work, and they watched the show with murmurs and passed-around one-hitters and flasks. You could mistake them for solemn, if you didn't notice just how jittery they were.

I kept feeling like one of them was going to recognize me and denounce me for destroying the chances that they'd had in Mississippi, call me out as the Blue Helmet who'd danced on the graves of the state's lost senators.

But no one recognized me, and as the results rolled in, the jitteriness of the crowd turned to excitement, and then elation, a version of what I'd experienced three years before on election night, and we watched as, one at a time, the other candidates conceded, and then we watched the victory

speeches from Dealer HQ, and even spotted Elnora dancing in the background of one of them, and then I was dancing, too.

They enacted the state-level Green New Deal the on inauguration day, using the same legislative template they'd used in Texas and that they were about to vote on in California, Hawaii, and Minnesota. And, just as in those states, the Maga Clubs brigaded the local jobs-guarantee meetings to secure state funding that put their cross-burning asses on the payroll. It was clear they thought this was hilarious. No one else did. But if cushy government jobs for climate-deniers was the price of saving the planet, it was a small price to pay.



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KATHLEEN JENNINGS

SOME  
WAYS  
TO  
RETELL  
A  
FAIRY  
TALE



# Some Ways to Retell a Fairy Tale

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**KATHLEEN JENNINGS**

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*illustration by*

ERIN VEST

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

follow the story exactly, follow on, look behind, before, tell the other side or reveal that everyone was mistaken, or that events are true but the meaning forgotten,

or that the events change meaning if you shift them, depending on the consequences, or that a setting changes meaning if a story takes place in it,

make the mythic mundane, the mundane mythic,

or make the story itself a space, a sanctuary, a refuge outside of time to think and breathe before returning to the world, an interlude to recover, rediscover, be wounded, be lost, take heart, have it cut out,

or make the tale a presence that observes and pursues, that lopes alongside, that can be perceived in the world, that intervenes in it, that you must be rescued from, that you can turn to, that can be summoned (little house, little house),

or riff on the story, tell it backwards, turn it through, embroider it, weave it jacquard-wise through another tale, or wrap its husk around another story, or look very closely at what's already there, and dissect it, and stitch it together better or worse or wrong, or lean hard on its bruises, or change its moods, or hook chain tie yoke it to other tales,

or linger,

or drop a particular person into a role, or toss the story into another genre, or take all the ornaments from it and hang them on something quite different, ennoble it, humble it, pull its teeth, give it claws, send it to find its own fortune, to rescue its brothers,

make it a guardian for your children, or make it into a mask, or look behind one, or run beside the tale, breathless,

or consider the devastation (or delight, or minor inconveniences) left in its wake, or trace the logical consequences or the unexpected ones, or add a flavour, or dissolve the story into wine and drink it, drip poison into it and give it to another, sharpen it to a knife's-edge and hold it to a throat,

fashion it into a key, open the door you were not meant to open, ask the one question you must never ask, solve its riddles, tighten its laces, tighten the screws, add another stone to the weight, to the cairn, mark graves with this story, dig graves with it, bury it, wait to see what comes up,

or adjust one dial, kaleidoscope it, telescope it, tell something that almost looks like a story you knew but isn't quite, or make it necessarily universal or achingly particular, or a window or a door or a table or a bed or a lie,

or disclose that a part of history can be seen as this story, or through the lens of this story, or keep the story unchanged but play it in a different key, tell it in a different voice, use it to prick a conscience or a finger, get distracted by something shining on the ground while the story parades past on the horizon,

add blood, add fire, add love, take all of that away, find the bones of the story, grind them for bread, bury them under a tree and listen to hear what will sing in those branches,

make three attempts at retelling it, or seven, or twelve,

dangle it in a stream, use it to keep curses at bay, use it to call witches,

use it as a map, fail to rely on it, be failed by it, build a mythology out of it, make it jazz/punk/rock-and-roll, smash its icons, strip it for parts, make a mosaic, a shanty, a mansion, a coat, a spell,

fit it for speed, steal its names, its breath, demand it keeps its promise, keep a promise for it, or to it, or with it, be faithless, be faithful, take it in, let it rest by the fire and eat from your plate, name it (or be named by it, or give it your name), find it in the ashes and raise it up, find it on a doorstep and raise it as your own,

give it a chance to find its own feet, provide it with dancing shoes, iron shoes, shoes that burn or cut, trade it for something better, hunt it through all the woods of the worlds, call cities forests too, launch it into orbit, toss it like a ball,

play marbles with a dozen tales, play cats-cradle, let out its seams, make it over, hand it down, hand it back, recreate its earliest form, crawl through it like a passage through time, like a tunnel under a wall, use it to undermine a fortification,

use it as shade in summer, burrow into it for the winter, gnaw its carcass in a den, carry it out of doors and pile it with others into a barricade, wave the story from the walls, burn it in effigy,

or paint it like a picket fence, drop it behind you like white stones, unravel it like a red thread, recreate it in marble, mud, gingerbread, attach legs to it,

brood on it to see what will hatch, flee from its basilisk offspring, stumble into a mirage, stumble over the tale itself,

fall down its stairs, fall *up* its stairs, solve its murder, send its characters off to fight crime, to fight wars, set them free,

turn them loose, wind them up and let them go, listen at doors,

fold the story so small it could fit in a hazelnut, make it into three gowns, give it to the person who asks, hide your heart in it, hide someone else's heart in it, practise divination with its entrails, cut off its head and nail it over the gate,

give someone what they asked for or deserved or wanted, give them what they needed, give yourself what you lost, grant wishes, grant the *story's* wishes, make it all better, make it so much worse,

dress in its fashion, adopt its speech, remove its voice, give it someone else's, steal a rose from its garden, look in its distorting mirror,

cut the tale out of paper, see if it floats, see if it flies, burn it to see what appears in its smoke, burn it to keep warm, fold it into new shapes, make it an invitation, an accusation, a warning notice, a wanted poster, a challenge, a serenade, a prescription,

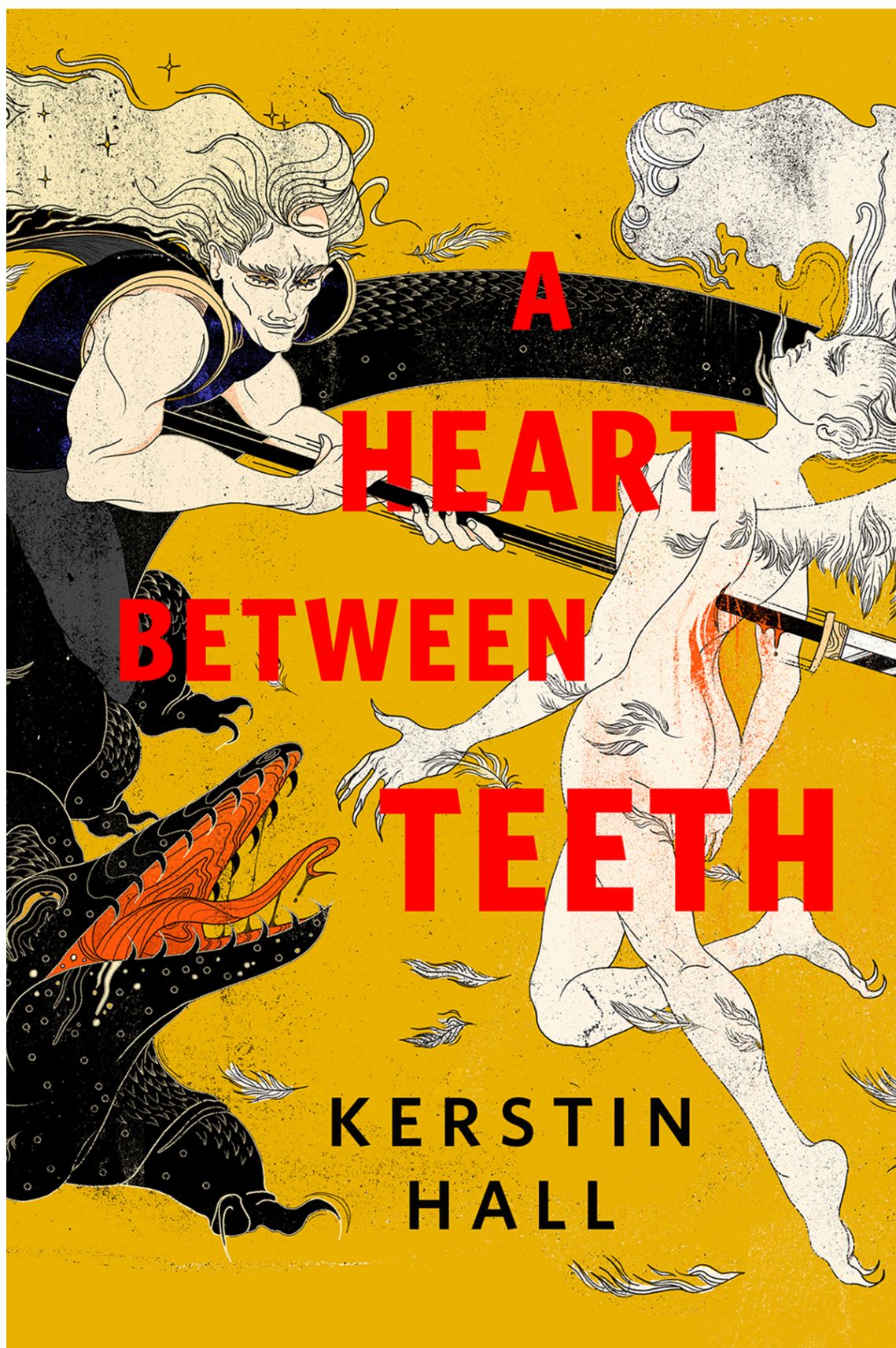
a basket of fresh bread and flowers, a nightcap and dressing gown, a quilt, a clever disguise, a very large false moustache, a gift left on the workbench in thanks, a mechanical nightingale, a bell on a cat, the sign by which you will know the true princess,

the irritant, the spindle, the smell of honey, the candle in the window, a hand of glory, the news upon hearing which someone, somewhere, will spring up from beside the fire exclaiming "Then I am the king of the cats!" and vanish up the chimney



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# A Heart Between Teeth

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**K E R S T I N   H A L L**

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*illustration by*

C R I S T I N A   B E N C I N A

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



On the night the 813th realm fell, Tahmais had been sleeping in her old bed. Another argument with Vasael—the same argument, really. She had stormed out of her ruler’s chambers, scorning her usual place beneath the demon’s sheets, and descended to her own quarters. Vasael had not said anything to stop her, but then, she never did. The demon had always been scrupulously careful in their relationship; a consideration born out of respect and integrity. Out of love.

Tahmais often wished her ruler would just snap and command her to stay.

As with most of the flightless dwellers of the 813th, Tahmais’ quarters were situated near the base of the lily spires, only a short distance from the ground. Vasael resided in the highest reaches of the towers, amongst colossal jade- and rose-coloured blooms. Lower down, it was warmer, and the wetland noise provided a soothing blanket of sound: the frogs and the soft rustling of the night waders, the creaking of the giant stems in the wind. Tahmais had a small pad platform to herself, wreathed in a tent of pale silk; she had a bed and a trunk for her limited possessions. It was quiet enough, and comfortable enough, but it wasn’t really home anymore; she had grown too used to Vasael’s nearness and now found the demon’s absence oppressive. Her sleep was shallow, punctuated by remembered snatches of their argument.

*And the realm? Where do we fit into your grand ideals, Vasael?*

*I have obligations. I can’t just sit by—*

*Of course you can. You’re a ruler; you can do whatever you want.*

The question that Tahmais did not voice—the one that she would never, ever allow herself to ask—always hung between them.

*What about me?*

It was humiliating. There was no way to say *please be a coward for my sake* when her ruler’s principles hung in the balance. It was childish and ridiculous and selfish, and Vasael knew she was thinking it, and the harder

Tahmais tried to bury her feelings, the shorter her temper frayed. They were fighting all the time these days.

It was not as if she didn't understand Vasael's position, she just—

“Tahmais!”

The shout jerked her awake. Tahmais sat up, confused; it was still dark, and there was yelling, movement in the air—the winged dwellers were in flight. A second later, Vasael landed on the waxy surface of her pad, her dappled silver wings folding sharply, expression wild.

“Get up,” she said. “I need you to cross to Res Oreq's realm, call for aid. It's Temairin; he's already here—”

“Vasael?” Tahmais' voice came out high and thin.

The demon crossed to the bed in three strides, and pressed her lips to Tahmais' in a hard, scared kiss, pulling her to her feet at the same time. “Go. I'll buy time until help arrives.”

“You should leave—get out of the realm—”

“He'll come for me first. While I'm his target, he won't pursue anyone else.” She pushed Tahmais toward the cords. “I'm sorry, my love. You were right all along.”

It seemed unreal, like she had been ripped from sleep into a waking nightmare. Tahmais could not make sense of the situation; she only saw the terror in Vasael's eyes. Her feet carried her to the cords, the slim green ropes that would hoist or lower her through the lilies' canopy, but her heart remained twined to her ruler's.

“Go,” urged the demon. “You know what to do.”

The pad tilted violently, and Tahmais nearly fell off the edge. Vasael's wings unfurled in a moonlit rush; she leapt into the air. Red spines thrust out from her fists and the ridge of her breastbone. Then the creature appeared, dragging its obscene bulk up the stem of the lily and onto the pad. Too large, too many legs, a shell the colour of wet tar, stalked eyes—Tahmais did not perceive more than that, because then she saw that the god was there too, astride the creature, and Vasael was falling, crumpling, and there was blood.

“I claim the 813th realm,” said Kan Temairin, loudly, clearly, irrevocably.

At his words, something *wrenched* inside Tahmais' chest—like a slender branch bent almost to the point of snapping—and the world went dark.



She lay on her back, and the ground beneath her dipped and rolled, undulating like waves. The air tasted of dust, and her skin itched. Only half-awake, Tahmais experienced a bleary confusion—where was she, why was the world moving, why was—

Then memory returned like cold metal sliding into her brain.

For a second, she lost control—her lips parted and a ragged sound of grief escaped her, a strangled moan. Vasael. Behind her eyelids, she could see her ruler falling; the wide arc of blood spraying across silk. This could not be real, this could not be happening. Here she was, still alive, and Vasael—panic rose up and wrapped its fingers around her throat. The 813th realm had fallen. Vasael was dead. Her ruler, her lover, the star around which her life had orbited—extinguished. Slaughtered. And the god ... Tahmais could see him standing on his awful creature's back, his bloody machete in hand. Could hear him speak the words: *I claim the 813th realm*.

Temairin. The god, his name was Temairin. God Emperor of Black Chitin, Master of the Spinelight, Ruler of the 194th Realm. And now too, Ruler of the 813th. Although a brutal swath of demon realms had been conquered in recent months, somehow the swiftness of the violence remained incomprehensible. There should have been an exception made; it should not have happened to the 813th, not to her home, not to Vasael. But all that the demon had ruled belonged to the god now; the realm, the channels, the dwellers. Tahmais herself.

He could be watching her at that very moment.

Tahmais breathed out. No trembling. No tears. She inhaled again, forced her lungs to work. The god had already taken everything, but he would not have the satisfaction of watching her fall apart. She was still alive. That was significant. She was alive, which came with responsibilities, whether she wanted them or not. She needed to learn what might still be salvaged.

She opened her eyes.

The light here held a different tint. Colder, bluer. Unfamiliar. Overhead, the sky gleamed stormcloud pewter, and dark-winged birds dipped through the air. She had left the 813th realm, that much was certain. Lifting her head hurt—something was wrong with her body; she was feverish and aching, and her mouth tasted of salt. Vasael's blood itched where it had dried on her bare skin.

What she had taken for the ground was in fact the chitinous carapace of one of Kan Temairin's beasts. Tahmais was roped to the creature, not to prevent escape, she suspected, but to stop her from sliding off its side. The creature moved soundlessly upon a tide of thin segmented legs; it was twenty feet long, and its appearance occupied the narrow divide between insect and crustacean. From her awkward angle, Tahmais could not see its head clearly, but she had the impression of a blunt wedge crowned by two pairs of swivelling stalked eyes. Its elongated black pincers weaved from side to side as it scuttled along the road: each easily the size of her whole body, oddly graceful in the way they swayed. Where its abdomen met the upward sweep of its thorax, a person stood.

They had not noticed she was awake. Tahmais lowered her head again. Her knowledge of Kan Temairin's realm was sparse, but she felt reasonably sure this was the 194th. The landscape here stretched wider, harsher; the scrublands on either side were pitted with unfamiliar vegetation.

Why had the god brought her to his homelands?

"Yes," said the person, the creature's handler. "I am aware."

There did not seem to be anyone else around; the person, who was almost certainly a dweller of the realm, spoke to the air. They had a soft, smooth voice. Cropped mousy brown hair and narrow shoulders.

"I exist to entertain you," they said. "Although I would sooner not."

A pause.

"Both," they said.

"Hello?" Tahmais' voice came out in a scratchy whisper. She wet her lips, tried again. "I greet you, dweller of the 194th realm."

The creature's handler turned. They had unremarkable features, weathered and lined, tanned; their body was probably a little over forty years old, but their eyes looked much, much older. They walked toward her,

perfectly balanced on the smooth carapace, leaving the creature to move unguided.

“I humbly beg an audience with Kan Temairin of the 194th realm.” The words tasted like ashes in Tahmais’ mouth. “I throw myself upon his mercy.”

The dweller stood over her, but their gaze hovered somewhere beyond her head.

“One day I will kill you,” they said, calm. “And when I do, I will make sure it is agony.”

They crouched beside her on the beast’s back, and drew out a black, bladed hook from the folds of their waistband. Tahmais thought they would cut the ropes and allow her to rise. Instead, they roughly lifted her left hand and manipulated her fingers straight.

With a clean, sharp jerk of the hook, they severed her ring finger.

★ ★ ★

They reached the walls of the city-palace by dusk.

Although the bleeding had slowed, Tahmais’ hand felt scorchingly hot. The stump of her finger throbbed with a thick, inescapable persistence—but she was glad of it. Perverse, she knew, but she clung to the gnawing pain all the same. Its fierceness kept her trapped in the present, obliterating, at least temporarily, both terror and grief. Better physical pain, better this terrible distraction than the suffocation of her loss. She could not think about Vasael. If Temairin wanted to maim her, so be it. Maybe he had meant it as cruelty or a show of force, but if so, Tahmais felt that the god had miscalculated.

The city-palace sat atop a ridge of craggy mountains, overlooking the flat expanse of the scrublands. The complex stretched for miles, surrounded by curved black walls that shone with a beetle-bright lustre in the light of the setting sun. The gates reared high: two bristling bowed doors. In her sickened state, they made Tahmais think of a spider’s chelicerae. Like entering the city-palace would be walking through the jaws of a vast, dark creature.

Temairin's dweller had not spoken since severing her finger. They had not even looked at her for the remainder of the journey; they had guided their master's beast up the winding grey slopes of the mountain with their gaze fixed ahead. They stopped when they reached the city-palace, and hailed the guards.

*I must see this through*, thought Tahmais. Her sweat had chilled on her skin, and she was shivering; both too hot and cold at once. The guards opened up the great gates to let them inside. As they passed under the arch, the air warmed and the smell of jasmine filled her nose, cloying and sweet. A garden. Voices echoed off the walls: shouting, laughter, a braying inhuman bark. Yellow-leaved trees hung with dark red fruit, and fireflies danced below their boughs. The dweller turned the creature left down a cobbled street.

"Excuse me." Tahmais' tongue felt rough as sandpaper.

They did not react.

"I must..." She was so thirsty, so exhausted. "Please, I must beg an audience with Kan Temairin. People are relying on me."

It was like speaking to the walls or to the trees; the dweller did not seem to hear her. They guided the enormous creature to the doors of a wooden building, a stable of sorts. All around, the garden echoed with the voices of unseen revellers. The atmosphere felt charged with a riotous edge, although perhaps that was only in Tahmais' mind; the lights had begun to blur and shimmer around her, and she felt her grip on lucidity slipping.

She flinched when the dweller jumped down from the creature's back. They walked over to where she lay, and sliced through the ropes binding her.

"Come," they said simply.

Tahmais sat up in a daze. A bad taste lingered in the back of her throat. She looked down at her mutilated, sticky hand, at the unnaturally wide gap that now existed between her middle and little finger, and the ringing in her ears swelled to roaring. *I want to go home*, she thought with a sudden fretful need. She lifted her uninjured hand to her mouth, fighting back the urge to throw up. It was too loud here, too fragranced, too strange.

"You will have your audience," said the dweller.

Tahmais dragged her gaze away from the wound, and found, for the first time, that the dweller was looking directly at her. Their eyes were dull brown, the colour of brackish water.

“You shouldn’t keep our ruler waiting,” they said. “He gets more creative when he’s bored.”

In spite of everything, Tahmais’ lip curled. *Our ruler*. The idea felt absurd, insulting. She belonged to Vasael alone; she would rather cut off all her other fingers than willingly submit to the demon’s murderer. She suspected her feelings were apparent on her face, because the dweller grimaced.

“You’ll adjust to your new situation,” they said. “Or you’ll die.”

It was a role to play, nothing more. Tahmais nodded stiffly. She should not have betrayed her feelings like that—and she would not do so again. Put on a mask of subservience and take stock of what could be salvaged, that was what remained to her. Responsibilities. Duty. There could be no mistakes.

She tried to slide off the creature’s flank, and her legs folded. The dweller caught her.

Even though their expression never changed, their hands felt warm and steady on her arms. Tahmais lifted her head to look at them. She could not have said why, but she had expected their skin to feel colder, harder; like their blade as it bit through tendon and bone. And yet, with the garden spinning around her, the dweller’s grip felt curiously reassuring. Strong, but ... ordinary.

They frowned, and pushed her away from them. Not hard, but firmly.

“This is not in your interest,” they said.

Tahmais did not know what that meant. Two other dwellers—men dressed in draped tunics and silver visors studded with black chitin—appeared from the stable. They approached the enormous beast and clipped twin metal cables to the holes bored through its neck plates. It produced an irritated rumbling sound in its thorax. Both men flinched, but when they pulled on the cables, the creature grudgingly followed them inside.

“This way,” said Tahmais’ escort, turning back toward the garden.

A hot wind gusted down the path and shivered through the trees. Tahmais trailed after the dweller, holding her bloody hand close to her chest. They did not look back; their shoulders were straight and their steps brisk, as if they wanted nothing more than to get away from her. In her fevered state, she found it difficult to keep up with them.

“What is your name?” she called.

“Not your concern.”

“Mine is Tahmais.”

“I know.”

“You cut off my finger.”

No response. Deeper within the gardens, someone gave out a hyena-loud cackle. The dweller came to a large building, long rectangles of yellow light pouring from its windows, and entered via a small, dark door. Inside, the walls of the corridor were a pale cream. They swam with strange movement; beads of light moving leisurely beneath the smooth surface. A pliant material covered the floor: brown, with the smoothness and elasticity of skin.

“I want your name,” said Tahmais.

The dweller exhaled. They kept walking.

“Lfae,” they said. “But again, this is not in your interest. Stay away from me.”

“Why?”

“Because you won’t survive the attention that my company attracts. You’ll understand soon enough.”

They reached the end of the corridor, where a great silver door was set into the shifting wall. It swung open before Lfae, and a coarse rush of sound and heat flooded the passage.

The banquet hall stood a hundred feet long, and almost as tall—the ceiling was lost in a hazy blue mist, and the walls marbled from ice white to navy as they climbed skyward. Gods and their attendants crowded the chamber; they gathered around tables laden with obscure delicacies and horrors, they bickered and lounged and talked. Concentrated together, their mingled power spiced the air, and their influence pulled reality thin.



Tahmais recognised a few of them, lesser gods who had moved through Vasael's circles. Not allies, exactly, but familiar faces. She was struck by the sudden terrible notion that any one of them might have betrayed her ruler to Kan Temairin.

Lfae was still moving, and she hastened after them. A few rulers looked up as the pair of them passed, but most kept eating or talking. A leopard-skinned goddess bared her long, curved canines at Tahmais, and her attendants lashed their barbed yellow tails like whips. It seemed the festivities were well underway; a fight had broken out on the other side of the hall, and the smell of blood was in the air.

From the head of the furthest and largest table, Kan Temairin surveyed the celebrations. He sat upon a straight-backed chair made of the same chitin as the exterior walls of the city-palace, and the ground before him roiled with hundreds of scorpions. He was a beautiful god; he had youth's easy grace, a sweep of pearlescent grey hair. He wore scaled gloves, each finger tapered into a perfect red point. There was no trace of Vasael's blood on him now.

"Lfae," he drawled as they neared. "My favourite returns at last. You must be hungry."

"I hope to strangle you with your own intestines," the dweller replied matter-of-factly.

Tahmais recoiled, but the gods around Temairin only tittered as if the disrespect were nothing remarkable. The dweller's expression never changed; Lfae stood tall and indifferent to the massed power around them, apparently bored by it all.

A satisfied smile spread over Temairin's face. He idly picked up his knife and pricked the blade to his tongue.

"Eat the successor's finger," he said. "The one you removed. Do it now, slowly—I want a sideshow."

The blood command worked instantly; Lfae reached into their pocket and retrieved Tahmais' severed finger. She gagged and looked away before they could raise it to their mouth.

"Barbaric, Temairin," said a pale goddess seated to the ruler's left. The woman had milk-coloured skin and a smooth rope of snowy hair; her lips

appeared obscenely red against her complexion. She had not joined in the laughter, but she made no move to interfere either.

“Come, Fanieq,” said Temairin. “Lighten up. You were bored.”

“And I remain bored.” The goddess waved a hand dismissively. “You could at least find a new dweller to torture, if you must play these juvenile games.”

“The others are too easily breakable, I find.” Kan Temairin turned to Tahmais and spread his hands in greeting. “In any case: welcome, successor. I am glad you made it here in one piece. Mostly.”

More laughter. Tahmais felt light-headed. Duty. Responsibilities. What did pride or pain or revulsion matter? Vasael had chosen her for a reason; under no circumstances would she betray that trust. She bent her knees and knelt before the god, prostrating herself. *For you, Vasael. For all of us.* The scorpions skittered away from her, stingers raised.

“Your Reverence.” She spoke to the ground. “I am honoured by your attention.”

“Oh, and she’s *polite*,” he said. “Lfae should observe this. Please, do go on.”

Tahmais took a deep breath. This was where it mattered.

“Your Reverence.” She kept her head down, kept her voice even. “I entreat you to show mercy to the dwellers of the 813th realm. I ask you to shelter and care for them, to bless them with kindness, to...” she stumbled, “...to love them as well as you can.”

Temairin’s foot tapped a rhythm through the air, inches away from her head.

“I see,” he said. “And these dwellers—they would have been *your* dwellers, had I not claimed the realm after conquering it. Correct?”

Her throat burned.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I was successor. They are—were my people.”

Vasael’s people.

“Interesting. I’m curious what the demon saw, that she would have made a goddess of you. I wouldn’t select bedmates, myself.” The god’s foot stilled. “Well, wouldn’t you prefer to rule them yourself?”

Tahmais could not help it; she lifted her head. “Your Reverence?”

“Your dwellers. Your inheritance.” Temairin looked down at her. “Don’t you want it?”

She felt at a loss—like the ground had crumbled, like the lights had been doused in water. The god stared at her with his unearthly violet eyes; waiting, expectant. All the while, Lfae’s chewing continued unabated, and with each second the sound cracked something deeper inside of her, something that wore thinner and more brittle, and came closer to snapping, and which she would never be able to repair. It seemed like Lfae was trying to be as quiet as possible. It did not help; the wet crunching was all Tahmais could hear.

“You conquered the realm, your Reverence,” she said shakily. “It is ... my claim as successor is forfeit. We are all your dwellers now.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” He sounded amused. “To ‘love as well as I can,’ wasn’t it? To do with as I please. But I don’t actually have any particular interest in that forsaken backwater realm, so perhaps I could leave it to you. What do you think, successor?”

The grinding of a small bone between teeth. Tahmais’ tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. “Why?”

The god raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“If you have no interest in the 813th realm”—she could scarcely breathe, scarcely think—“why did you kill Vasael?”

“Oh!” Temairin smiled, obviously pleased by the question. “That? Well, I suppose because I don’t think that demons should be permitted to live.”

The fragile, battered thing inside her chest gave way, and Tahmais’ mind went blank. She began to rise, her body moving of its own accord. There was no thought, no intention or plan, but—

“Do you need anything else, your Reverence?” asked Lfae. “Or does my standing here like a part of the furniture amuse you?”

Their voice was dry, without a trace of fear, and it brought Tahmais to a halt. Temairin’s gaze shifted to his dweller; this time a hint of irritation crossed the god’s perfect face.

“Dislocate your fingers, Lfae,” he commanded. “All of them. Start on your right hand.”

“Ruler’s mercy,” muttered the white-haired goddess, Fanieq. “Do you want to set up a rack while you’re at it, Temairin?”

The god ignored her. His gaze returned to Tahmais.

“I want a regent,” he said. “I want the 813th quiet, and well-behaved, and brought to heel—I want to never think of it at all. And you, successor, are known to the dwellers there. Correct?”

She nodded, unspeaking.

“They will heed you?”

Another silent nod. Lfae’s joints popped loudly; they had three fingers dislocated already. Their breathing grew harsh.

“Well, in that case, I suppose I can delegate the business of loving them to you.” Temairin made a sweeping gesture. “That would suit us both, would it not?”

There went the fourth finger. Lfae gave a small, suppressed gasp.

“Although,” said the god, eyes glinting, “I’ll have to be sure of your loyalty first.”

Tahmais’ skin felt too tight around her flesh. To her own ears, her voice sounded far-off. “What do you require of me, your Reverence?”

In a sinuous motion, Temairin rose to his feet. The scorpions gathered to him, climbing his legs to cover him like a living robe.

“Proof,” he said. “I have three tests for you. Complete them to my satisfaction, and you can return to the 813th and oversee it for me.”

“Theatre,” muttered Fanieq derisively.

Tahmais’ stomach clenched. She nodded swiftly, horror and a nauseous hope warring inside her. If she could care for the 813th realm, if she had the chance to shelter Vasael’s fierce, quiet people from this—of course. There could be no other choice. Lightless take him, it was more than she had expected from her lover’s killer.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Lfae made a low sound of pain. They had moved to their left hand, but now lacked the help of their right to effectively continue pulling their joints out. They trapped their thumb in one of the ornate curlicue running along the apron of the table instead.

“You’re very welcome, successor,” said Temairin. “And still so polite too. Lfae, stop that; you’re going to spill my drink. Leave the rest of your fingers alone.”

The dweller panted—their complexion wan, their skin shining with sweat, their eyes murderous. “One day, I am going to leave you choking on your own blood.”

“Yes, yes, of course you are. Go fetch the chest now.”

Lfae turned sharply and stalked away from the table. The gods chuckled. Temairin noticed Tahmais’ expression.

“They’re terrible, aren’t they?” he said cheerfully. “Endlessly amusing. I am beginning to think it’s impossible to break them; I’ve been trying for thirty years.”

She swallowed, unable to find a reply. She could not imagine spending her life as this god’s dweller. Although now she would, now he was *her* god too. Without Lfae beside her, she felt exposed; although they had just chewed and swallowed a part of her, she was far more frightened of the smiling crowd of rulers.

“So, successor, I gather that your demon was bedding you?” Temairin picked up his glass and leaned against his chair. The scorpions flowed around him, avoiding being crushed. “How did you find the experience?”

Tahmais flushed—half in rage, half in shame—and could not speak.

“Go on,” Temairin prompted. “Give me details.”

Her voice emerged dull. “I don’t think our intercourse was unusual, your Reverence. She invited me to her bed, and I was happy to please her.”

“Oh, come, a little colour. This was a longstanding arrangement?”

She nodded.

“And did she please *you*?”

Why should she feel humiliated? If these craven gods already knew about her relationship with Vasael, if they wanted to mock her for it, why should she care? Heart beating fast, Tahmais lifted her chin.

“More than I can express,” she said. “Her affection was the greatest gift of my life—I loved her, your Reverence, and I believe that she loved me.”

Temairin’s smile widened; he looked delighted. “Is that going to be an obstacle in your loyalty to me?”

She shook her head. "Not at all. I am yours to command."

"Ah, but that's no challenge; it doesn't signify if I blood compel you into obedience. I want your heart, successor. I want you to choose fealty. Ah, there's Lfae now. Shall we begin your first test?"

Tahmais turned. The attention of the banquet hall had shifted; the rulers quietened and craned to see Lfae, who was dragging a heavy sled across the room. They pulled it with their left hand; their right fingers hung nerveless at their side. On the sled was a familiar wooden chest.

Tahmais' stomach sank.

"I took the liberty of collecting your belongings, successor," said Temairin silkily.

Her chest from the 813th realm: now specked with Vasael's blood, and splintered on one corner where it must have been dropped or knocked. *Let it all be shattered*, Tahmais willed, even though her chest went tight at the thought.

Lfae stopped before Tahmais' table and threw down the sled's rope.

"Anything else?" they spat.

"No, that will do for now." The whole room's eyes had turned to Temairin. He revelled in the attention, exuding satisfaction like a sheen of light. He walked toward the chest, and necks craned to follow him. "Successor, if you would do the honours?"

Tahmais moved as if through a dream. She could hear the beat of blood in her ears with strange acuity, the sticky weight of her clothing. She crouched beside Temairin to open her battered old chest, and the bare skin on the back of her neck crawled like she was the one robed in scorpions.

She undid the latches and swung open the lid. With equal measures of fear and relief, she found the contents undisturbed. Clothing, cosmetics, wind bells and palm flutes, small tokens from other realms—a pearlescent shell holding a ball of light, a neatly made ragdoll, a knife that folded into silver paper. And there, nestled inside the case of woven reeds, were the whisper rings. Fourteen of them, each glass ornament a slightly different shade. Tahmais blinked. There should be fifteen. The coral was missing.

*Do not react*, she thought.

"What are those pretty things?" asked Temairin. "Show us, won't you?"

Tahmais stayed the shaking of her hand and gently picked up one of the whisper rings, the tourmaline. It was warm to the touch. Around the room, gods were standing up from their seats to observe the spectacle.

“Well?”

He knew full well what they were. Tahmais kept her head lowered and spoke downward. “Mementos, your Reverence. Nothing valuable.”

“Show us how they work,” he said, undeterred.

Tahmais closed her fingers around the smooth curve of the glass. These gifts were meant for her, only for her. Now, surrounded by these hateful, jeering deities, she raised the ring to her lips and blew softly through it.

“I noticed your hair first, obviously.”

Vasael’s voice—amused, resonant, slightly self-deprecating—rang clear through the room, and Tahmais almost lost control of herself then, hearing it again. The demon sounded a little shy, or flustered.

“When you arrived, it stood out, that pale colouring—it made me think of moonlight, or the sun on white silk. I considered changing mine to match.” A small laugh, cutting into Tahmais like a razor. “I’m glad I didn’t. I think I was embarrassing enough, honestly. Was I embarrassing, Tahmais? You seemed much better composed to me.”

Sounds of derision and mockery through the hall. Temairin waved his hand, as if calling for quiet, but it only encouraged his audience. Unaware, Vasael continued.

“I was unsure of myself, in a way I had not felt in a very long time. You undermined me without ever setting a foot out of line. It was so annoying. I liked you so much. I wanted your hair. I wasn’t sure what I wanted it *for*—to wear, to touch, to pull—but I found myself looking at it far too often. And of course, I had no idea how to approach you without it feeling ... well, I had too much power over you. You know, my usual worry. Although I swear you enjoyed vexing me.”

Tahmais remained stock-still beside the chest. Someone called: “I’ll pull your hair!” and there was a roar of laughter.

“I’m so fortunate, Tahmais,” said Vasael, and, from her voice, she was smiling. “I’m so lucky that you found your way to me. What were the

chances that, of all the realms in Mkalis, you were reborn to mine? It sometimes feels like a miracle that I was graced with you.”

The whisper ring fell silent, but conversation rushed in to fill the vacuum. Temairin’s smile, when Tahmais lifted her head, looked almost giddy.

“Very poetic, you demon,” he remarked. “To think that you inspired such devotion.”

She hated him. She did not think it was possible to despise anyone so much, but she held her feelings deep within herself and gave nothing for his amusement. She imagined herself as an ancient boulder beside the ocean: the water crashing against her face, herself unmoving. *It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter.*

“Smash it,” said Temairin. A few gods, sycophants, whistled approval, but others had already begun to lose interest.

Tahmais held the whisper ring a moment longer. Vasael’s voice, her words, her feelings. *It doesn’t matter.*

She threw it down against the hard tiles, and the glass shattered.

“Let’s hear your next love letter, then,” said Temairin.

In that moment, surrounded by the glittering gods and their bored decadence, Tahmais wished that she had died.



She was given a small, bare room at the city-palace. It had a little window that looked out over the mountainside, down to the plain. In the moonlight, the landscape appeared cast in silver.

Tahmais lay on the floor, her left hand cradled to her chest. She thought that she could feel Kan Temairin’s attention on her. As her ruler, he had the power to see through her eyes, hear through her ears. He could make her do whatever he wanted, and she would be unable to resist. With barely more than a thought, he could kill her.

He could not read her mind, however. That remained her own, out of his reach. She would not give him any amusement, or reveal her feelings.

She would not cry.



He had stolen her grief, she reflected. All meaningful avenues of release and mourning were barred to her now. He had stolen her grief, but here at least she could lie alone with the open wound like an ocean inside her, and feel its edges. Temairin could not make her love Vasael any less, only hate herself the more—and that was fine. In that moment, it seemed only fair recompense.

*I'm sorry, Vasael, she thought. I should never have argued with you. I should never have left your quarters that night. If I hadn't...*

Would it have made a difference? Would it have granted her ruler the time to escape? In her mind, she saw the dark arc of spilling arterial blood, the way that Vasael's body caved—

Tahmais breathed carefully.

*Duty, she reminded herself. Responsibility.*

Inside her, something had changed at the moment of her ruler's death. At first, Tahmais had assumed it to be shock, but the sensation had not faded in all the time since then. Now it struck her as too physical, somehow. Too immediate. A discomfiting coolness nestled below her breastbone, like a smooth river stone lodged beneath the interior curve of her ribs. Something pulled painfully taut.

They had talked about it—successorship, how it might work in practice. Vasael had insisted on having the conversation even though Tahmais hated the subject. When the demon first asked Tahmais whether she would accept godhood, she had framed it as a remote possibility. Just in case. It was only a precaution; if Vasael were killed by some accident or unforeseen disaster, Tahmais could ascend and claim the 813th. A contingency. The other dwellers would need a guardian, and they trusted Tahmais. Vasael trusted Tahmais.

*Don't sulk, Vasael had said, exasperated. I don't want to die. You are being ridiculous.*

*I would make a terrible goddess.*

*No, you wouldn't. You're stubborn as death, and you love the 813th far too much to let it come to harm.*

I love it because of you, Tahmais had wanted to say. Instead, afraid, she snapped: *This wouldn't be necessary if you just stopped taking such stupid*

*risks. You're getting too comfortable with the idea of dying; you think I'll be able to step in—*

*That isn't what this is about, Vasael sighed.*

*Then why now? This was never a consideration before you supported the Usurper's Bond. You never talked about contingencies then.*

The demon had looked weary. She folded her slim fingers together in her lap.

*If I'm conquered, it won't matter: your claim won't be strong enough to stand, she had said. So any risks I might be taking are irrelevant to this conversation. But if you do have the chance, if you can protect the others ... I trust you.*

"Won't be strong enough to stand." Tahmais silently mouthed the words to herself. That didn't mean that her successorship claim had vanished entirely. If she challenged Kan Temairin for rulership of the realm, she would be annihilated; his claim as conqueror was infinitely stronger—but she was still tied to the 813th. The acute pressure in her chest meant something.

She started at the sound of a soft knock on her door, and lifted her head. Outside, she could hear retreating footsteps. Her body was stiff with cold, and she winced as she stood up. Her hand had swollen around the black and bruised stump of her ring finger. Moving made it throb worse.

Outside the door was a small bundle: bandages, gauze, a flask of water, and a round clay vessel. Otherwise, the corridor was empty; whoever left the items had already disappeared. Tahmais knelt cautiously, picked up the gifts, and retreated into the room.

The vessel held a yellow mud that smelled strongly of anise. When she touched some to the skin around her wound, the flesh immediately cooled. A gentle numbness seeped into her, and, for the first time since her ruler's death, Tahmais relaxed. Just slightly. She blinked away the tears that pricked at the corners of her eyes, and methodically smoothed the mud over the rest of her hand, only avoiding the stump itself. Then she set the gauze to the wound—eliciting a suppressed whimper of pain—and unwound the bandage to wrap across her hand and keep it in place. A small scrap of paper fell out of the folds of the fabric.

Tahmais picked it up. She held it closer to the window and the moonlight.

*You can't hurt her now,* it read, in a very unsteady hand. *She is already dead.*



With the celebrations ending, most of the other gods departed in the morning, returning to their own realms via a myriad of channels. It was a long, drawn-out affair of goodbyes and rituals and negotiations. On Temairin's orders, Lfae retrieved Tahmais from her room, and led her up to the city-palace's parapets to watch the exodus. The dweller's finger bones were back in their sockets, and their hand looked ordinary, not even bruised. As ever, their face remained impassive. They did not say much, only that her second test would begin after Temairin had finished making his farewells.

The grasping wind tugged at Tahmais' clothes. She felt hollowed out and queasy, and the fever-touched pressure in her chest still lingered. Together with Lfae, she watched the rulers leave—and she studied each familiar god's face, silently asking: *Was it you? Did you betray her? Are you the one who let Temairin into Vasael's realm?*

"He told me that he has been trying to break you for thirty years," she said.

"Thereabouts," replied Lfae.

She did not turn to look at them. "How do you endure it? What he makes you do?"

On the road below the gates, Temairin embraced a goddess with birds tattooed over every inch of her skin. The animals moved, fluttering their black and gold wings. Her four human attendants crawled behind her on their hands and knees.

"It's only pain. That's all he can do to me. Pain." Lfae's eyes tracked the movement below. Their voice was indifferent. "And my spite is far greater than his imagination."

"That's all you have? Spite?"

Temairin made some remark, and the goddess laughed. He gestured to the attendants. She made a gesture of careless acquiescence, causing all of her dwellers to flinch in unison.

“It’s all I require.” Lfae rolled their shoulders, loosening some stiffness their back. “And all he deserves.”

Temairin strolled over to the cowering attendants and examined each in turn. He pointed to the largest; a man with hair only a few shades darker than Tahmais’ own. The other three dwellers sagged with relief, while the chosen attendant went rigid. Tahmais shivered.

“I could not live on spite,” she said. “And I don’t believe you do either.”

“Believe what you like.”

“Does being his favourite mean something to you?”

Lfae glanced at her sidelong. Dark circles ringed their eyes.

“It means,” they said slowly, quietly, “that while he is trying to break me, his attentions are not fixed on anyone else.”

The goddess compelled her attendant to stand, and then to follow Temairin back into the city-palace. The man’s face had gone slack with terror; his eyes as bright and shining as a lamb to slaughter. His ruler turned her back on him, and continued down the mountain road. She might as easily have gifted Temairin an old scarf. Tahmais lowered her gaze to the stone floor of the parapet.

“I know Vasael’s gone,” she muttered. “I’m not stupid. They were only mementos anyway; I didn’t care about smashing them. But thank you for the salve. It helped.”

A long pause. The wind whistled over the mountainside. A risk, they both knew, to say anything aloud when Temairin might be listening, but it seemed likely that he would be distracted at that moment, and not paying attention to them in particular.

“I did an unspeakable thing to you yesterday,” Lfae said at last. “Don’t thank me.”

“It was not your choice.”

“But I did it.” They shook their head and turned. “Come. He’ll be expecting you for his second test, and if you give him what he wants, you’ll

be one step closer to that regency. Try to ... try to remember what I told you.”

“Told me?”

They did not reply.

In daylight, the city-palace’s true size was apparent; it spanned miles of perfumed pleasure houses and shaded gardens, feasting halls and trophy cloisters, chambers for sleeping, for meetings, and for darker amusements—all of it Kan Temairin’s, and all of it only a tiny corner of the 194th realm. Many buildings featured slabs of the same black chitin that formed the outer walls of the complex.

But Lfae did not take her deeper into the warren. Instead, to Tahmais’s confusion, they led her back toward the stables where they had left their mount yesterday. Just past the building was a paved square surrounded by a high fence, which she initially took as a kind of exercise area for the animals. Rows of cushioned benches overlooked the square, and a few gods lolled around atop them. Kan Temairin sat on the highest bench, dripping with fat scorpions, basking in the sun.

“Ah, just in time for the main course,” he called, smiling broadly. “Thank you for delivering the successor, Lfae. You may now go retrieve lunch.”

“One day, I will cut out your eyes and spit into their sockets,” Lfae replied.

Temairin seemed in an indulgent mood; he leaned sideways on the bench and rested his chin on his hand. “You risk giving me ideas, my savage.”

“You clearly need them.” Lfae showed their teeth. “All you had yesterday was fingers.”

The god waved them away. “Go now.”

There was a considerable amount of fresh blood soaking into the stones of the square, Tahmais noticed. It trickled darkly between the cracks, and the smell hung thick and cloying in the air. *An abattoir*, she thought. What did Temairin intend for her to do here? He had brought friends to watch, which felt as ominous as the gore. The pale goddess, Fanieq, was amongst

those seated on the benches, but Tahmais did not recognise any of the others.

“Come closer, successor,” called Temairin.

Tahmais walked across the bloody stones. The day was warming quickly, and flies buzzed over the ground. At the foot of the benches, she knelt.

“How may I serve you, your Reverence?” she asked quietly.

“I see you have attended to your injury.”

Tahmais’ left arm rose into the air through no force of her own. The bandages unwound themselves, unspooling weightlessly around her hand. The gauze pulled free from the wound, and she gasped as pain ricocheted through her raw flesh.

“Ouch,” said Temairin. “That isn’t pretty.”

Tahmais lifted her head to meet the god’s gaze. He was wearing white today, and his scorpions were arrayed across the cushions.

“Of course, I *could* repair it,” he continued. “I imagine you saw that, despite their base ingratitude, I healed Lfae? I could restore your finger, flesh and bone, easy as breathing.”

*But you won’t.*

“But I won’t.”

*Lfae was right, Tahmais thought bitterly. You really do lack imagination.*

“As your Reverence wills,” she said, trying to keep her tone neutral.

“So polite, so polite.” He gave a small laugh, and most of the other gods dutifully joined in. “You see, successor, I need you to remember that you belong to a new ruler now. My gift might not be quite as pretty as your old love letters, but when you look at your hand, you’ll always think of me. A worthy memento, don’t you feel? And a reminder that I can take so much more from you, if I wanted to.”

“Of course, your Reverence.” Was that where this was headed? Would his second test involve some kind of voluntary bloodletting? The thought made Tahmais feel sick. She had no choice but to be strong; she could not afford to buckle or falter, but the rabbit-fast thumping of her own heart clawed at her resolve. She was no warrior.

“Oh, absurd,” said Fanieq abruptly, her tone one of incredulous disdain.

Lfae had returned. Tahmais turned automatically. The dweller was bent beneath the weight of the burden on their back, which they shrugged off once they reached the square. A cry escaped Tahmais' mouth; without thinking, she rushed toward the crumpled body on the stones.

Vasael's wings lay crushed beneath her back, broken and blood-matted. Her chest gaped with the dark wound that Temairin had inflicted. The sight of the demon pulled the air from Tahmais' lungs; she dropped down beside the body, wanting to draw her ruler into an embrace, wanting to cling to her. Vasael's death was ugly, but she was still beautiful underneath it, as if Tahmais only needed to scrape away the violence to bring her ruler back clean and whole. She touched the demon's arm, and then recoiled from the cold stiffness of the limb.

Lfae stood above her. They had not moved when Tahmais ran to Vasael, and now they kept their gaze fixed on Temairin, as if the scene at their feet was some embarrassing distraction better left unacknowledged. Tahmais felt the gods' eyes upon her, and hunched her shoulders. She had shown too much.

"How moving," said Temairin. "You truly are a devoted dweller, successor. It speaks well of you."

Tahmais rose unsteadily, and turned back to the benches. "My apologies, your Reverence."

"Come now, I appreciate your honest feelings. Such ardour. Lfae, give her the hatchet."

Lfae, for a moment, did not move. Tahmais glanced at them, uncomprehending. They still would not look in her direction; they only had eyes for Temairin.

"I think," they said slowly, "that I could torture you for centuries. It would still be less than you deserve."

Temairin smiled. "At least I also inspire *some* feeling in my dwellers. The hatchet. Or shall we start making meals of stablehands again?"

Lfae's face did not change. They walked over the side of the stable and picked up a worn, bloodied hand axe from the workbench in its shade. They returned to Tahmais and thrust the tool into her hands. She flinched at its weight.

“Very good,” said Temairin. “Now, successor, you have already been introduced to one of my ocur; it conveyed you to city-palace yesterday.”

From within the stable, there was a loud bang; as though something had collided with the interior wall.

“They’re useful creatures, but they do have considerable appetites.” The god leaned back on his bench. “Don’t worry; they won’t hurt you, not unless I allow them to. Lfae, open the door.”

*Don’t*, Tahmais thought, and tightened her grip around the hatchet. Her breathing had grown short. She did not know Temairin’s exact intentions, but her instincts screamed that she should run. Lfae walked over to the stable doors and drew up the heavy bar. They did not show any fear. The door swung outwards, and they moved over to the workbench, out of the creatures’ path. Tahmais took a step backwards.

Three ocur appeared at the entrance. In daylight, facing them from the ground, they seemed enormous. In a wave of sinuous, rippling limbs, they flowed out into the square, circling Tahmais and waving their black claws like scythes. Their dark carapaces shone in the sun.

“Time to show me your loyalty, successor,” called Temairin.

She felt like a rat cornered in a weasel’s nest. Her voice shook slightly. “Your Reverence, I don’t follow.”

“Feed them. You will have to divide their meal, of course.”

She was at a loss. The creatures spiralled around her; she looked down at Vasael’s body, and felt herself sinking. There was a scream in her throat. A wild streak of madness; she imagined burying the hatchet in her own neck. There was a hysterical voice inside her head, howling.

“Successor?” said Temairin, voice mild.

What was to stop her? In death, she might find Vasael again. In their next lives, reborn, they would draw together as the moon pulled the tides, like magnets, like gravity; they would be rid of this nightmare and free. The 813th was already lost. Tahmais felt giddy. What was to stop her? What was left for her to lose? She adjusted her hold on the hatchet. A quick, hard blow. No hesitation; she could not give the god time to react. Fast, sharp, and true. It would not hurt; if she were fearless enough, it would be over too quickly for her to feel anything at all. Her heart pounded. It would not hurt.



“Is that the best you could come up with, your Reverence?”

Lfae’s raised voice startled the ocur; the animals jerked at the unexpected noise. Tahmais looked toward the dweller. They were still leaning against the wall of the stable, their arms folded.

“I bet you were so proud of this test,” they continued, with unshakeable insolence. “I bet you schemed all night—and in the end, your grand idea was the butchery of a day-old corpse. Astounding, your Reverence. History will surely remember your subtlety.”

Temairin’s eyes narrowed. “You are beginning to tire me, Lfae.”

“So this is how you impress your guests.” They snorted. “Well, at least the demon was spared the pain of embarrassment. I’m sure she would rather be dead than play an active role in your melodrama.”

Tahmais’ mouth was dry. The ocur circled, circled, circled. Although Lfae had not so much as glanced in her direction, she knew that their words were meant for her. *You can’t hurt her now. She is already dead.* All along, they had anticipated what was coming. They had tried to warn her, prepare her, and even now, strove to press their message home. Vasael was dead; nothing worse could befall her. This was only an empty shell, this was only Tahmais’ own sentimentality weaponised against her. Just a body. Just one more memento. Just meat.

Vasael had selected her to protect the realm. Not for sentimentality, but for steel. *I trust you.* Tahmais slowly crouched down beside her ruler’s beautiful corpse. The demon’s dark hair had fallen across her cheek; she gently tucked it back. She was the successor; she had the spine for it, she was servant to her role—so obey.

She silently raised the hatchet, and brought it down hard.

The gods, distracted by Lfae, looked around sharply at the thud. Teeth gritted, Tahmais freed the tool. *Obey.* She mouthed the word like a prayer. Duty. Responsibility. Vasael would expect no less. She swung the hatchet again, and the force rippled through her hand, wrist, arm; she felt the blow travel through every muscle in her body. Do this, become regent, and salvage what the demon had devoted her life to building. *Obey.* Her breathing emerged in cracked gasps; her body felt like it belonged to

someone else, as if she witnessed her own actions from a great distance. Everyone in the 813th was relying on her. Vasael had chosen *her*.

“Well,” said Temairin softly.

Tahmais didn’t pause from her bloody task. The god could burn. They could all burn, all the rulers of Mkalis. Temairin wanted her to shatter—but she had thwarted him, beaten him, exceeded his expectations. In giving him what he asked for, she denied him what he desired, and through her daze swept a vicious rush of vindication.

She slammed down the hatchet. He would not win. Her body felt electric, her arms were red and wet. She would take it all back, everything, she would rip apart his life with her bare hands. With every breath, she would seek his end. For Vasael. For the 813th. For herself.

*Obey!*

The limb came away clean, and Tahmais threw back her head and screamed her defiance to the sky.

The ocr shied backwards, hissing. Shuddering and covered in blood, Tahmais lowered her gaze to meet Temairin’s. *Fear me, god. Watch me spit in your eye.* His expression remained cool, although his scorpions roiled around him, stingers raised in distress. What he saw on her face, she did not know.

“I am done here,” said Fanieq.

The goddess had risen. She stood, pale and impervious, and the other gods shrank from her like a physical force. Temairin’s head swung toward her, and he began to speak, but she cut him off.

“Consider our allegiance ended,” she said. “Our goals might have aligned, but your dweller is right—this is juvenile theatre. I will not be further sullied by association; should you seek to cross into my realm in future, I will slaughter you without hesitation.”

“Kan Fanieq—”

“No, be silent,” she interrupted, merciless. “I say this as a warning, Temairin: your crass immaturity will prove your undoing. I have no intention of being dragged down in that wake.”

In a fluid motion, a twist of the light, the goddess was down from the benches and walking away from the stable. Temairin stared at Fanieq’s

retreating back, the spool of her ice-white hair blinding in the sun, and his perfect face grew ugly. The threat of violence was in his limbs, his body had gone tight—but he did not move. A confrontation within his homelands gave him every advantage, and yet the goddess' power still exceeded his own. For her part, Fanieq did not even look back.

Lfae began to laugh, mirth spilling out of them.

"That must hurt, your Reverence," they said. "Oh, that must *sting*. Your highest ranked ally, wasn't she? But ultimately you are too much of an embarrassment."

"Hold your tongue!" Temairin hissed the command, his temper giving way.

Undaunted and gleeful, Lfae captured their tongue between their thumb and index finger, and continued speaking. "You netha could conthrol yourselth—"

Their words cut off abruptly as the god exerted a greater, silent power, although the dweller continued to shake with soundless laughter. Temairin himself was trembling; his gaze swept across his friends on the benches. The other rulers avoided his eyes. It was quiet. The ocur had stopped circling.

"Will that be all, your Reverence?" Tahmais asked, her voice low and hoarse.

He considered killing her; she saw it on his face. *You never could control yourself*. His lips thinned.

"Go," he replied. "Lfae, remain behind—I want you to demonstrate your obedience to my guests."

Tahmais hesitated, glancing at the dweller. Lfae smiled at her. It struck her as a curiously gentle expression. They made a small motion with their hand. *Go on*.

"A problem, successor?" asked Temairin dangerously.

Whatever was about to happen to Lfae, she had no power to help them. She bowed over the ruin of Vasael's corpse, closing her eyes against the sight. Then she turned her back on Temairin and walked away. Behind her, she could hear the ocur slithering over to feed on her lover's body. At the edge of the square, she dropped the hatchet. It clattered on the stones.

Only later, once she was back to her room, did Tahmais lift her hands to her mouth. Temairin was certain to be distracted; he would not see her. With care, she licked each of her fingers clean. Even in death, rulers' blood held power.

"I am successor," she murmured. "I am successor. I am successor."

It might have been her imagination, but she thought the hard pressure inside her chest grew stronger.



Nothing confined her to her room. No one seemed especially interested in her or concerned that she might pose a threat. Tahmais, by the late evening, began to suspect she had simply been forgotten. When the cold grey chamber at last became too claustrophobic, and she could no longer stand the oppressive intrusion of her memories—visions of shattering bone, sundered flesh, pale feathers—she got up and left the room.

She did not feel sane, not entirely. A strange calm had covered over her like an invisible film, elastic and smooth, and beneath it she felt almost cheerful. Strange things amused her: the idea of the other gods trying to reassure Kan Temairin, the memory of Lfae grabbing their own tongue. It was all absurd, even laughable. She wished she could tell Vasael about it. She wished the taste of blood would wash off her tongue.

The gardens were much quieter tonight. She wandered through the leafy pathways, alone and unhurried. The moon hung high in the sky, barred by white clouds, and it was cold. At a water fountain, she washed her hands and face. The stump of her missing finger hurt, but no longer pulsed with sickly heat; whatever salve Lfae had provided seemed to have worked wonders. The pain that remained was a persistent, dull-edged ache. As Temairin had said: a reminder.

*What else could you take, I wonder?* She gazed down at the rippling spill of moonlight in the fountain. *I am not sure what I have left to offer.*

She walked on. It was past midnight, and the city-palace rested uneasily. She saw no one else on the paths, and only once caught the sound of voices drifting through an open window. Although she had not truly slept since Vasael's death, Tahmais did not feel tired. It seemed better to be moving,

better not to close her eyes. She followed her feet, drifting, until she heard the sharp ring of metal on stone, and then she traced the noise to a dusty quadrangle nestled between two buildings.

Lfae moved like trapped lightning. Their body, unassuming at rest, transformed into something unearthly while in motion. They held a white spear loosely in their hands, but it was difficult to determine where the weapon ended and they began; the polearm seemed to bend and twist with them, supple as a vine. The dweller flowed and struck, bent and spun; each movement was as precise and controlled and elegant as an alchemical equation, as fast as quicksilver. For all their grace, they appeared devastatingly lethal.

Tahmais watched them quietly. Their expression was pure focus, unadulterated willpower. They looked unhurt. Whatever Temairin had done to them, he had subsequently repaired, and Lfae moved through each sequence of violence like steps in a dance. She had never seen them so at ease.

When they came to a stop, they let the spear fall to the ground. They took a few seconds to catch their breath, and the hot air from their lungs misted in front of their face.

“Stay away from me,” they said, panting.

“Because that’s in my own interest?”

They nodded. “Correct.”

“How so?”

Lfae grimaced. “Because anyone to whom I pay the slightest attention risks being used against me. Violently used. Possibly with my own hands—he knows I still flinch.”

“I see.” Tahmais gazed around the empty quadrangle. The buildings on either side were tall and silent; the walls chipped and gouged with broken spearheads. She gestured at the space. “And does he know about this?”

They snorted. “Of course he does. It amuses him.”

“I didn’t think you liked to amuse him.”

“I don’t. But it’s...” They wiped their forehead, and sighed. “One day, he’s going to make a mistake. One tiny mistake is all I need, just one careless little error. He’ll slip, and when he does, I’ll be ready. All I need is

one opening to kill him. If he finds my practice amusing..." A shrug. "Let him choke on that laughter."

*A nice fantasy.* "Do you think he's watching you now?"

"It's possible, but unlikely. He was drinking earlier, and has probably passed out by now." They picked up the spear, and a cruel smile touched their lips. "To be spurned by Kan Fanieq was a hard blow; he won't easily recover from that. I am surprised she tolerated him as long as she did."

They resumed their drills, albeit at a far slower pace. Tahmais watched them, tracing the point of the blade through the air.

"He said that he does not care about the 813th realm," she said. "That he conquered it just for the sake of killing Res Vasael."

Lfae arched their back, swinging the spear around in a clean arc. "Yes."

"I want to know who betrayed her to him."

"Thinking of vengeance?"

She shrugged.

"Your demon played with fire, making too many alliances. Pure naivety. If you want to apportion blame—"

"Vasael," said Tahmais, "was not naïve. She knew the risks."

"Given the results, that makes her choices even less forgivable."

She looked directly at Lfae, and spoke low. "She chose righteousness even though it killed her. I will pay for her choices until the end of time, and never hold that against her."

"You say that now—"

"I will say it always. Vasael did nothing wrong."

And it was true, Tahmais knew. All along, she had clung to her own selfish fears, her terror of losing the demon. When Vasael had joined the Usurper's Bond, a coalition dedicated to the protection of newly ascended rulers, she had felt betrayed. They had both known the decision would draw attention like a red target painted on Vasael's back. What was valour, what was kindness and honour, if it meant the demon's destruction?

But Vasael had been a usurper herself. She knew the cost of tearing a tyrant from their throne—the years of fear, the wrath of affronted gods, the solitude—and its necessity. Amongst the vulnerable crowd of newly ascended rulers, she had seen the shadow of her former self. Through the

Usurper's Bond, she had tried to be an ally to those rulers with none. No delusions, no misapprehensions about what might result. Vasael had stood to gain nothing and to lose everything. And she had.

"You truly bear no resentment," said Lfae, their voice strange.

Tahmais smiled without a trace of humour. "Oh, I do. But not for her."

The dweller had stopped their drill. They rolled the spear across their palm, an unconscious movement.

"Kan Parile," they said abruptly. "That would be my assumption. A nobody, a coward, ruler of the 872nd. He's been trying to curry favour with Temairin. I know he has sold out others."

"Parile," Tahmais repeated, tasting the name. Unfamiliar, and strangely disappointing. She shook her head. She had expected a revelation, something to give direction to her feelings, but no. Two syllables of emptiness. "Never heard of him."

Lfae gave a short bark of a laugh. "He is newly ascended; your demon might have established a channel with his predecessor. I doubt he will survive long. A poor choice of successor."

She nodded slowly. "Thank you."

"It's only a name." They turned away from her. "Leave now. Go back to bed."

"You remind me of Vasael, in some ways."

Lfae stiffened.

"I think you might be more subtle," Tahmais continued. "Far more subtle than Kan Temairin realises. Vasael was always open, and you are not like that, but still—I see her in you."

"You see nothing," they said harshly.

"It's your protectiveness, I think."

"Don't be absurd. What have I protected?"

"Me. Repeatedly."

They scoffed. "You delude yourself. That isn't surprising, given what you have lost, but—"

"You share her kindness," said Tahmais.

They whirled around.

“You don’t know me,” they snarled. “You are a grieving fool, trying to project what you have lost onto me, but I cannot help you, I cannot protect you, and I cannot *save* you. You are so close to completing his damned tests, but you’re going to throw it all away with this *idiocy*.”

Tahmais did not move. Lfae’s cheeks were flushed.

“I want you to know I’m grateful,” she said softly. “That’s all.”

She left them standing there alone, with the cold still air turning their breath to white clouds.

★ ★ ★

*So this is it*, Tahmais thought.

Having control of both the 194th and 813th realm, Kan Temairin had established channels to run between them. From the 194th, the passage opened just outside the walls of the city-palace, on the dusty plateau of the mountaintop. The channel itself was only a few feet long; its walls shimmered with sliding black oil, pearlescent and slick. The ground had a hard, grooved texture, like a tortoise’s shell. Through it, Tahmais could see the sky of home.

“Complete the last test to my satisfaction, and thereafter you may remain in the 813th,” said Temairin.

Dressed in a gold tunic and his mantle of scorpions, the god had recovered at least the semblance of a good mood. Tahmais did not trust his tight, calculating smile or pleasant voice; she knew that he remained furious about yesterday. While he dangled the rewards of success in front of her, he would undoubtedly also enjoy her failure.

“I will not disappoint, your Reverence,” she replied.

“So good to hear.” He strolled forward into the channel. “I hope you are taking notes, Lfae.”

“I hope you are eaten alive by worms.”

“Well, there will always be room for improvement.”

Tahmais followed the god and Lfae into the channel. Her skin prickled. *One more trial. One last test, and I will be able to shelter Vasael’s people. My people.* Whatever was to come would be awful, but survivable. And Temairin would not renege on his bargain; breaking his promises, even to



an irrelevant dweller, would mar his reputation all the more. As long as she obeyed him perfectly, she would win.

The familiar scent of the wetlands, dense, clean and dark, drifted from the mouth of the channel. Tahmais stumbled slightly, her chest going tight with yearning. She had already half-forgotten that rain-smell, the strains of damp soil and green fronds, the faint fragrance of the water blossoms. It hit her harder than she had expected.

“My new subjects, rejoice!” said Temairin, stepping into the realm. “Your ruler has returned.” He added, as an afterthought: “Face down, thank you.”

Tahmais emerged behind him. The 813th realm was deathly silent, and the cool air was still. Mist hung over the waters. For an awful moment, she thought that the figures collapsed along on the path were dead—hundreds of prone dwellers lined up, a parade of corpses, her friends, her makeshift family ... but no. Her people had simply prostrated themselves before Temairin, and lay perfectly still as he approached. The winged dwellers had weights shackled to their legs, and the sight quickened an anger inside Tahmais. Where were they supposed to fly, that the god could not reach them? There was no escape. Everyone lay in the mud, unmoving, denied even the smallest measure of dignity. If Vasael had not singled her out and made her successor, Tahmais would have been amongst them.

*Soon, she promised silently. I will right this. Soon.*

“I brought a familiar face today,” Temairin continued. “Greet my dwellers, successor.”

What could she possibly say? *I’m sorry, I’m so sorry she is gone.* Her voice came out low and raspy with feeling. “I ... I am glad to see you.”

“Look up,” the god commanded.

In perfect unison, a hundred mud-smeared heads rose from the ground. Faces she had known her whole life leapt out at her. Ami, Vasael’s messenger and scribe, always calm and composed, but now red-eyed and bloody-mouthed. Sivor, who cared for new arrivals to Mkalis, who had borne Tahmais’ own early fits of confused distress. Dacote, incorrigible gossip and the best singer in the realm, sporting a lurid bruise on his forehead. Their exhausted gazes settled on her.

“Successor, to whom do you pledge your loyalty?” asked Temairin loudly.

She lowered her eyes to the ground. “To you, your Reverence.”

“She’s hurt,” someone murmured. “Her hand—”

“To whom do you devote your life, your mind, and your heart?”

“To you, your Reverence.”

“And to whom do you owe thanks for disposing of the demon usurper of this realm?”

She swallowed. The words came out dead and flat. “To you, your—”

“What have you done to Tahmais?” Ami yelled.

*No!* Tahmais’ head jerked up. Ami’s body shook with anger; she wore her loathing for the god undisguised on her face. Temairin, however, did not seem to mind.

“Your former successor and I have an arrangement,” he said. “I’ve found her to be extremely tractable, in fact.”

Murmurs rippled down the line of bowing dwellers. Tahmais wanted to be sick. They did not recognise the danger; they did not know how easily Temairin could destroy them all. Her voice emerged breathless. “Please, don’t—everyone, please obey our new ruler.”

Audible gasps. Tahmais’ face burned. She knew how they would see her now; a faithless turncoat, a coward, stain on Vasael’s memory. She could not blame them—

“We are glad to see you too, Tahmais.”

Ami’s voice had lost its heat. Her gaze lingered on the bandages around Tahmais’ hand. She forced a tight smile, which made her bloody mouth look all the more painful.

“Welcome home,” she said.

Not trusting herself to speak, Tahmais gave a swift nod.

“Yes, listen to the successor,” said Temairin, apparently growing bored. “She sets a good example. Now, shall we see how construction is progressing? I tire of standing in the mud.”

At the base of the lily spires, where the green stems clustered most thickly, new slabs of flat brown stone had been laid: the foundations for a large, rectangular building. Walls of the same material had been erected on

three sides, but the last was only half-built, construction interrupted by their arrival. The god strolled down the path, and the dwellers remained prone on either side, a forced honour guard.

“I found the existing accommodations too exposed,” he said. “What do you think of my new hall, successor?”

*How could it have been built so quickly?* The weight of all that stone was sure to damage the lilies’ root structure; it looked grossly heavy and out-of-place. Tahmais wanted to tear it down. “I hope it will suit your needs.”

“It’s hideous,” supplied Lfae.

“I doubt I’ll have much reason to visit,” said Temairin, ignoring them. “But at least the workforce here proved capable, once suitably motivated.”

Tahmais repressed a shiver. “That’s ... good.”

A rich blue rug covered the floor at the entrance of the hall. Temairin stepped onto it, soiling it with mud from his shoes. He spread his hands, mocking, as he turned to welcome her and Lfae.

“Your last test awaits,” he said. “Come in.”

The roofless interior stood about sixty feet long and thirty wide, and the space was largely empty but for an enormous throne at the far end of the room. Black, and constructed from interlocking sheets of shining chitin, it sat like a scaled predator in its den. The floor around it was dressed in thread-of-gold rugs, against which its shining darkness appeared especially pronounced. The rest of the hall remained bare and chill, shadowed by the lilies.

Temairin strolled over to the throne, his steps echoing slightly in between the walls. Tahmais glanced around the room. There were no obvious clues what the test might entail.

“It is not easy, you know,” said the god, as he reached the throne. He ran his hand pensively over the black chitin. “Rulership. It entails a great deal of vigilance. You never know when your allies might turn on you, when loyalty might prove ... provisional.”

He beckoned for Tahmais to approach. With a dull feeling of foreboding, she obeyed, and knelt at the foot of the throne. Lfae remained standing.

“That is why I value action over words,” said Temairin. “If I asked you to cut your heart out of your chest, would you?”

She kept her gaze on the gold rug. “If you required it, your Reverence.”

“I do not.” There was a soft ringing sound; metal sliding across a smooth surface. Temairin pulled a long, thin silver dagger from the back of the throne. He turned it over in his hand, studying its length. “In some respects, I think that would be too easy for you. What is your opinion, Lfae?”

“That you would benefit from the removal of most of your organs.”

“Hm.” The god sat down on the throne; his scorpions climbed the arms and over the back. “Yet another example of your great subtlety and kindness.”

Tahmais breathed in sharply, the echo of her own words ringing in her ears. But Lfae only laughed.

“Not as drunk as I took you for,” they said. “Or maybe too afraid to sleep with your alliances crumbling around you. The tables turn so quickly; now that Kan Fanieq has spurned you, it’s only a matter of time before someone makes a play for the 194th realm. I hope a demon gets there first.”

“An attempt to divert me?” Temairin smiled. “Oh, you will need to do better than that. You *are* worried. Successor, stand up.”

Tahmais rose. Lfae had warned her, time after time. *Anyone to whom I pay the slightest attention risks being used against me.* She swallowed. Well, they had already severed and eaten her finger. More of the same. She could endure it. Only pain. Duty. Responsi—

“Take this,” said Temairin, holding out the dagger.

She did not allow her hand to shake. Perhaps it was to be self-mutilation after all. She took the dagger, which struck her as unexpectedly light. The hilt was smooth and cool under her fingers.

“Oh,” said Lfae.

Tahmais lifted her gaze, and found that Temairin was looking past her, to Lfae. A faint smile touched the god’s lips, a little ironic, a little hungry. Lfae merely appeared surprised.

“You admit defeat?” they asked.

“An odd way of looking at things,” said Temairin. “Typical of you, that arrogance. Perhaps I am just out of patience.”

“After all the years?” Lfae tilted their head. It was the first time Tahmais had heard them address the god in any tone other than scorn or anger; they sounded perplexed and slightly curious, like they had been presented with a riddle to solve. “I no longer amuse you?”

Temairin made a careless gesture, as if he could not even be bothered to answer.

“Unless...*oh*.” Lfae’s expression darkened. “You expect—”

“Successor,” the god interrupted. “Cut out my dweller’s heart.”

Tahmais almost dropped the dagger. “What?”

“Do this, and you will be regent of the 813th realm.” Temairin leaned back on his throne. “You do not need to fear; I won’t allow them to fight or run.”

There was a roaring in her ears.

“You want me to ... to kill Lfae?” she said faintly. “That’s your test?”

“No.”

Lfae’s voice was cold. The dweller remained as fearless and upright as ever; they glared at the god even as they spoke to her.

“I didn’t expect him to turn his trick around,” they said. “Try to use *your* kindness, your empathy ... No. He doesn’t want you to kill me. He wants you to *fail* to kill me.”

“I—” Her mouth tasted like ashes. “I don’t understand.”

“What is there to understand?” asked Temairin. “It should be simple. Unless, of course, someone else holds sway on your loyalties now? Perhaps someone who reminds you of your old ruler?”

Lfae shook their head in disgust, turning to her instead. They lowered their voice.

“Tahmais, listen,” they said. “Listen to me. He expects you to fail; he knows that you are too honourable and that you care too much, he knows that you pity me. It’s the same game he’s always played, except you can win this time.”

She clutched the dagger. The hard stone foundations felt as though they were sliding beneath her.

“Successor?” said Temairin.

“Don’t you see? He wants me to be responsible for your final failure,” Lfae spoke quickly, plainly, their eyes fixed on her. “After that, he’ll turn around and force me to kill you. But it doesn’t have to be that way. He thinks he knows you? Prove him wrong. Do it.”

“Too much,” she whispered.

“No, it isn’t.” Their face was fierce. “Think of your people. Think of Res Vasael.”

Tahmais jerked like they had struck her, and backed away. “Don’t—”

“Hand me victory. For all his efforts, he couldn’t find a way to break me. It’s only pain, Tahmais; give me my vindication.” Lfae stepped closer. “Set me free.”

“Last chance, successor,” said Temairin.

From his tone, the god believed that he had already won. Tahmais felt choked; she could not bear to look at him, could not stand his triumph after she had come so close to succeeding. It had all been for nothing; she would never be regent now. Too weak. Felled at the last hurdle by such a stupid, needless cruelty. She had given everything, lost everything—but not this. She would not do this.

“Please,” said Lfae.

*This is what your kindness brings.* Tahmais bit down hard on her tongue, tasting her own blood. *Fine.* She raised her head to meet Lfae’s eyes again. *The camaraderie of the damned. Some vindication.* They saw her resolve, and their face lit up with joy. That might have broken her; to see anyone so overcome with happiness at the prospect of their own death. Shaking, she lifted the dagger. Stepped toward them.

“Are you ready?” she whispered.

Their eyes widened slightly at the sight of her bloody teeth.

*Good,* Tahmais thought, and thrust the dagger, hilt-first, into their hands.

“I claim the 813th realm,” she said.

The pain was immediate and explosive; the hard knot of pressure between her ribs ripping into the air. A savage magnetism spun her around to face Temairin; her claim as successor collided with his right as

conqueror. The god cried out, more shocked than hurt, temporarily pinned to his own throne by violent forces rippling between them.

*Your claim won't be strong enough to stand,* whispered Vasael.

*I know.* Tahmais could feel her bones breaking, her body tearing apart beneath the assault of the contestation. Even with Vasael's blood, even back home where she belonged, the outcome was inevitable. *But then, it doesn't need to stand for very long.*

Through the agony, she saw it: the space of a heartbeat when Temairin's divinity slipped. For the smallest instant, rulership of the 813th realm tipped slightly in her favour; she was the goddess, and he was nothing—his authority meaningless, his rules founded on air, his laws mutable as water. In that moment, Tahmais was no longer his dweller.

And neither was Lfae.

They moved like their entire life had been spent waiting. Tahmais did not see them pass her; they were before the god, and the dagger was lightning in their hand, swift and unstoppable, and it rose and tipped Temairin's head upwards as it pierced through his neck and into his skull. The god did not make a sound. Briefly, his gaze rested on Lfae, and his expression held a hint of incredulity. Then he was dead.

The force that held Tahmais upright gave way, and she dropped, hitting the stone floor hard. She scarcely felt the impact; every part of her body already sang with pain. In the recess of her chest, her broken claim to the realm dissolved. Not a successor anymore, nor a ruler.

"Tahmais!"

Lfae's voice, far away. She tried to focus, and their face shimmered through a dark haze. Nothing like Vasael's, really. She was glad they were there. She felt her body lift, and the movement was excruciating.

"Hold on," they said. "I can—I can fix this!"

They couldn't, although they would try, she knew. Always kind. Missing whisper rings. Bandages in the night. Fingers out of joints. Grateful. The light changed, vague shapes receding from her or drawing closer. Not home. But not alone.

"I claim the 194th realm," Lfae gasped.

The darkness was warm, and she was cradled within it. The pain had not changed, only it seemed further from her. Only pain, that's what Lfae said. It felt easy to let go.

"Heal."

Something inside her kindled, and the world grew clearer; she saw Lfae's face above her and the blue of the sky. They were still holding her; their expression one of rapt attention. The broken parts of her body drew toward realignment, willed to mend, and then ... fell apart once more.

"Heal!" Lfae insisted, their lips wet with their own blood. "You will heal."

The same tightening, the same collapse. Tahmais' breath fluttered.

"I claim this realm!" snarled Lfae. "I have the power, I set the rules. Heal! Just *heal*."

With each repetition of the blood command, the response inside her grew weaker. Tahmais tried to shake her head, but failure seemed to only make Lfae angrier. Their breathing had grown erratic.

"He did this all the time. He fixed me over and over and over, until I couldn't even remember what he had broken. Until there was no part of me —" Their voice cracked.

With difficulty, Tahmais made her throat work. "You are not him."

Lfae cursed viciously. Their shoulders heaved with their breathing, and she saw that they were crying. Behind them, hazy in her vision, the city-palace of the 194th waited for its ruler.

"What was the point?" they asked. "If I have all this power, why can't I even do this? He could. He could always—"

Tahmais' body did not cooperate as it should, but she found their hand. Their weeping was completely soundless, but their body shook around her.

"Not him," she repeated.

"It isn't fair," they whispered.

Tahmais shook her head, and tried to smile. *It's all right*, she wanted to say. She wanted to say a lot of things: *take care of the 813th* and *thank you* and *I want to go home now*. But she was too spent, and she suspected that they knew anyway. She held their hand a little tighter. The world was growing darker, but she did not feel afraid. *It's all right*.



She was conscious of Lfae moving, the brush of something cool and glass-smooth to her lips. Then, Vasael's voice, familiar and aching. Close. Tahmais could not open her eyes to see her, could not make out the words from their sounds, but Vasael spoke and she followed, like tides to the moon, like magnets, like gravity; her love spoke and she followed her up into the air.



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# SUN RIVER

NISI SHAWL

# Sun River

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**N I S I   S H A W L**

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*illustration by*

X I A   G O R D O N

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

Princess Mwadi wheeled gracefully above the Nile. She flew in two birds, turning them in upward spirals to catch the last thermals of the day. Soon the sun would set, the air cool. But shortly before that she would be home.

She could have cut hours off her time. The desert route between Alexandria and Cairo was far shorter than this one. But Mwadi was kind to her mounts and didn't often ask them to betray their true natures, and then not by much. Far easier to persuade seabirds to travel along a river than to force them to abandon the water entirely.

Far easier to make these periodic journeys to the coast by occult means than to persuade her buffalo-headed brother, Prince Ilunga, to "allow" her to go there alone, in her own body.

She switched her eyesight entirely over to the younger of the gulls she rode, then swooped that one ahead of its elder. A barge piled high with bales of white cotton floated toward her, passed beneath her. They traveled in opposite directions and in opposite conditions: the boat was headed north to Rashit, loaded full of merchandise to sell in foreign lands across the Mediterranean; the princess south to Al-Maadi, the aristocratic enclave outside Cairo, and sailed through the sky empty-clawed, delivered of the reports her birds had carried to visiting spies.

At last! The sharp downstream spit of Gezira Island appeared ahead, swelling as she glided on southward. A change in the river's course had exposed this highly valuable land, Mwadi's sources informed her. So then greedy Cairo had expanded to cover it. Greying shadows filled the wide new boulevards erected here in the opening years of this nineteenth century by the British, and over there on banks reclaimed by Egypt's previous rulers, the Turks. But the low stone wall of the Corniche still gleamed as if made of gold, reflecting the sinking light of the sun for which, by many accounts, the city had been named. From behind a raucous cry pierced her four ears, stirred her two hearts. Mwadi cried out too, struggling against both birds' urges to dive. Fragrant garbage tossed from the decks of low houseboats called to her, bobbing temptingly up and down on the suddenly

murky waters. Below the surface a flash of silver—a fish? But she had anticipated this.

Firmly she imagined the brackish, half-salt pond she had ordered to be installed in her villa's garden, the schools of carp she raised there—picturing not just their bright colors but the barely visible tracks of their sinuous wakes, and more: the smell of their soft droppings falling to the pond's silty bottom, the dampness rising off the water's warm surface to cloud the air with their perfume. The birds' attraction to the trash immediately available lessened sufficiently for Princess Mwadi to conclude her flight home.

Alighting on the tall spire of limestone she'd had the builders place in the pond's center, Mwadi turned four beady orange eyes toward the pavilion on its shore. Yes. Her body lay where she'd left it, apparently drowsing on a divan. She turned her mounts' fidgeting attempts to plunge into the pond beak-first into a double arc passing over her body's head, and let go. And fell into herself.

Darkness. These eyes—the eyes she'd been born with—were shut. She kept them that way a moment more. Listening, she heard brisk footsteps—but far off. Good. Her instructions to the women who waited on her were to protect these special slumbers from intrusion. She stretched and moved her feet so they hung over the divan's edge and sat up slowly. In the evening dimness, the pavilion's silk awning and shadowy netting resembled the walls of a room in the “palace” where she'd spent several years of her childhood—the hotel her father, King Mwenda, had commandeered from Leopold II's European thugs. The hotel's gardens had crept in everywhere, green life seizing avidly on crumbling stucco and cement. And since her mother, Queen Josina, seemed to welcome it in, and also to prefer the garden's nooks to her royal chambers, Princess Mwadi had joined her there back then. She found comfort now in those memories....

Well, but that was long ago—before she'd learned to ride the birds, before Mademoiselle Lisette and Lady Fwendi taught her the rudiments of her craft. They would be glad to receive her latest intelligence report, but it would worry them. Perhaps they'd need her to act quickly—to hinder Ilunga in his idiotic flirtation with Britain before it bloomed into a formal

relationship. Would the prince inherit their father's throne only to become Victoria's puppet? If so, how could she cut the strings?

Best to prepare for any likelihood. Mwadi stood, smoothing out her creased skirt. She pushed through the netting to the path that would take her to the terraces and up—and paused.

Above the rustling leaves stirred by the evening's rising breeze came another, similar sound: a rhythmic swish of fabric, the fluttering back and forth of another woman's clothes. Whose?

Sudden as a storm, Rima Bailey swept around the path's gentle curve and flung her bare arms wide. "Look at you! Ain't you grown now? Litta bitty Bo-La turned into a fine young woman for sure." Rather than prostrating herself on the ground before the princess like the tiresome Egyptians, the actress seized Mwadi by her shoulders and pulled her into a tight embrace. In Everfair they'd been equals despite Mwadi's royal rank—trouper in Sir Jamison's play *Wendi-La*. Bo-La was Mwadi's role.

But the production was on tour. The last she'd heard they'd finished three months of engagements in Brazil.

Released from the actress's strong brown arms as swiftly as she'd been gathered into them, Mwadi shook herself straight. "How did you get past my serving women?"

Miss Bailey threw back her head and laughed. "Them cobwebs? They couldn't hold back a spider. They'll be followin me down here soon, though, if we don't head on up to your house mighty quick. I told them I had a short private message to deliver you from Queen Josina."

"You do?" It had been nearly a season since her mother had contacted Mwadi.

"Naw, not actually." The berry-dark lips quirked downward.

"Well, why say what you said, then? Why say anything? And what is it brings you here if you're not coming from my father's favorite?" Who could have sent whatever word she desired to send via a dozen other routes, now Mwadi considered the idea dispassionately.

Miss Bailey laughed again, an entirely different sound. Half a choke. "Child, you know my job is makin people believe lies."

The princess was no longer a child. “Take a holiday from your work, then. We’ll join the rest of my household now, as you suggest, and on the way you can tell me the truth.”

“Yeah.”

They walked together to the arbor at the bottom of the terrace steps. As they climbed upward night descended, closing the blossoms of the jasmine bushes planted on either side. Moths and mosquitos came near, attracted by oil lamps along the paths being lighted by small, self-effacing boys. Some of these lamps bore the pierced brass shades popular in the country of the princess’s birth.

They reached the terraces’ third level in annoying silence. One more to go. Vexed, Mwadi stopped, and tugged on Miss Bailey’s wrist to make her stop, too. They stood in clear sight of the balcony where Ilunga customarily held a lax court with his friends, other students at Victoria College. The balcony was obviously occupied: drunken voices slurred indistinctly from its tobacco-scented shadows. There could be no excuse for her overzealous attendants interrupting her tête-a-tête with the beautiful actress here. But it was also doubtful she’d be overheard. “Why did you need to speak to me alone?”

“They said you was sleepin.”

Not an answer. “Why?”

“But I know better. You ride anything besides seagulls?”

Even less of one. How should Miss Bailey know about that? Had Lady Fwendi—or her husband, Sir Jamison—been indiscreet?

The princess found to her irritation that she held Miss Bailey’s hand. She released it. Her mother had taught her that power lay always with the questioner, never with the questioned. She tried again. “What do you want with me?”

The hand had somehow found its way back to hers, claiming it now as the other woman’s possession. “You know, Brother Mo-La is kinda stupid, but he can see plain enough if we only talkin. An then he’s gonna wanna know what’s bein said. Better make him think we makin love.” She suited action to words, kissing Mwadi’s rosy palm, stroking her wrist, rucking up



her loose sleeve to reach the shivery skin that paled at the fold inside the bend of her elbow ...

“No!” Mwadi drew away. Hard as it was.

“So you go with men?”

She shouldn’t answer that. “With *you*!”

“Ah!” Miss Bailey’s hands and mouth returned. They moved to the thin cloth over Princess Mwadi’s armpit and nestled in. They—didn’t tickle. Not really. No, not at all. A barrier she’d never before been aware of broke. Pleasure poured through it.

The princess fought to surface from the flood. “But I have to know *where*.” That must make sense. She didn’t trust her voice for anything longer.

Miss Bailey’s head rose. Her tongue carved a riverbed beneath Mwadi’s shoulder blade. Beside her spine. Flirting with the back of the girl’s tingling head, the actress buried her face in the naked crook of Mwadi’s neck. Then lifted her lips and murmured low: “You wanna know where you goin with me?”

Mwadi nodded, a response which would be felt if not seen.

“I was plannin on a little jaunt to a buildin site.”

That seemed more like Mademoiselle Lisette’s sort of excitement.

Mademoiselle had been Miss Bailey’s lover once. For some time. Perhaps an attachment still lingered on the part of the actress. Mwadi set her steady hands on the actress’s smooth-brushed hair and moved her away. Gently. But firmly.

The actress smiled confidently. “Come on. Sir Jamison heard from his Lady Fwendi you learnt to ride gulls so fast you asked how many other sortsa birds you could study for mounts. You ever try on any around here?”

Was that all this was? The dalliance a cover for whatever scheme Miss Bailey wanted Mwadi involved in? She had said so. Shame pricked the princess’s eyelids, stinging them. To be used so, fooled so—

“Bo-La? You rather I invite you more formally? In front of your brother and all? As princess? I thought this would be nicer—”

“Hullo! What sport! Nigger hoors! Loongee, you’re the right sort, you are—no? Positive?” The jovial cries from the villa’s balcony ceased, hushed

by others of her brother's white friends. The unlucky merry-maker's ebullience subsided as they repeated their assurances that the women on the lawn below had not been hired for his entertainment.

"Pardon me! So awfully sorry!" The apologies grew louder as Mwadi walked quickly toward the library's French doors, then ceased abruptly as the women waiting there to open them swung them shut behind her. The noise revived briefly when, at the urging of Miss Bailey's polite rap on the glass, the doors reopened.

The actress slipped into the room with the offhand grace Mwadi remembered admiring at rehearsals. "Aloli, ain't it?" she asked the tall maiden on the door's right. Who bowed almost as deeply as she had to the princess. "Sweet name. Juicy."

"You would like water? Beer?" Many Egyptian Muslims frowned on alcohol, but Prince Ilunga's retinue expected and got plenty of exceptions to this custom of his adopted country's upper classes.

"I'll take whatever you're havin'."

After a day of fasting, Mwadi's body ravened. She ordered a supper such as the queen would have offered to guests arriving from an embassy. Primarily Everfairer delicacies: well-spiced soups served alongside heaps of stolid grains. A course of freshwater fish, to which she had the cook add shelled creatures from the river's highest reaches. Perhaps this was owing to her mounts' lingering influence? The whole was to be followed by iced fruit. And to begin, bean cakes and a gourdful of the local, peasant-made barley brew. And two cups.

Upon these appetizers' arrival the princess dismissed all her women but one. She ordered Aloli to stay, determined not to show any jealousy. Though she poured Miss Bailey's beer herself.

The actress took a healthy swig. "Good as I remember from Everfair." They sat on spindle-legged benches with curving backs, British furniture supposedly modeled on Egyptian antiquities. Ilunga treated these sorts of objects carelessly, so Mwadi had gathered as many she could into her private apartments, protecting and maintaining them. She took a strip of linen hung over Aloli's arm and arranged it on the little table between them, then poured her own beer and set the gourd on the cloth. She drained her

cup in one gulp. She hadn't meant to. She poured more, but held off from drinking it. She ate a bean cake instead, dipping it in a fiery red sauce that did nothing to assuage her thirst.

A scratch at the door signaled the advent of the first course. The servant woman Aloli went to usher it in. Mwadi bent close to the table and leaned forward so Miss Bailey would hear her soft speech more easily. Or did she speak softly so she could lean forward?

"I've experimented to expand my reach, living so far inland as I do here. I found a flock of kattar-kattars—"

"What you call them?"

"That's the locals' name: kattar-kattar—after their call. They're desert birds resembling pigeons, but far better fliers. I've ridden several at a time."

"You think you can get em to go where—"

The servant Aloli returned bearing a tray of covered dishes. She transferred them to the table with fluid motions more careful than Miss Bailey's, but just as pleasing to watch. If Mwadi had been in a mood to be pleased by them.

A loud knock came from the door. Swirling her shoulder scarf as if it were a cape, the servant turned to answer it, but before she took two steps it opened. Mwadi's brother entered, face shining with an inner heat. "So sorry to disturb you," he enunciated with too much precision. Behind him hesitated another man, his skin and clothing white against the passageway's gloom. "Scranners insists on apologizing to you as well as to me. Personally. And to your guest."

The white man followed the prince in then, crushing what looked like a slouch hat in his fidgeting hands. A shamed grin stretched his thin lips. "Deveril Scranforth at your service. Must beg your forgiveness for my very silly mistake a few minutes ago. I ought to have known—at any rate, abject abasement and all that. Are we quits?" One hand released his hat and was offered to the princess—to shake? Presumptuous of him.

"You served in Kenya?"

Scranforth started as if he'd overlooked Miss Bailey's sprawling beauty till she questioned him. "Ma'am?"

"Rima Bailey. The other 'nigger hoor.'"

White became red. "You oughtn't say such words."

"You did."

"Completely different cases." Her brother's friend appealed to Mwadi with his rough-lidded eyes. "Aren't they, Miss, umm—Miss?" The ungrasped hand dropped.

"Thank you for your apology." Mwadi rose to curtsy stiffly, without inclining her head one inch. Would he go now?

"You ain't answered me." Miss Bailey stood and stalked off from the table where Ilunga swayed over her neglected food, lifting the dishes' covers.

"I—what?"

"I asked did you serve in Kenya. Because of your hat—the kind they used to wear there in the police force. 'Scuse me; the army. So?"

"Ah—no! It was my cousin's. Grandison Sprague. He wore it when they were putting in the rail line under Lord Delamere. The Lion Killer?"

Lady Fwendi hated Delamere.

"Your cousin get eaten by one a them giant lions?" Looming now over Ilunga's friend.

"As a—as a matter of fact he did. Look here, Loongee, you want to pack it in and talk about selling off those shares in the morning?"

"I'll be fine once I have a bite. Fine. Need to soak up the excess spirits." The prince picked up Miss Bailey's abandoned porcelain spoon and helped himself to her groundnut stew. "Fine."

"But—the ladies? That is, we don't need to discuss business in your presence, Miss—boorish behavior by any standards."

More boorish than labeling them prostitutes and thus businesswomen themselves? Mwadi took note.

The second course had arrived, barely noticed. The serving woman fitted more dishes on the already crowded table. Ilunga plopped down in Miss Bailey's place and lifted another lid. A large fish stared up from its platter with one cloudy eye. Brown breasting glistened with fat.

"This will only take a moment. I swear. When I'm done we'll retire to my rooms. Finish the deal there." The prince stabbed a three-tined fork into

the fish and flaked off a bite. “Wait, though—Didi has shares to get rid of too. Don’t you?”

How Mwadi loathed her brother’s new habit of calling everyone by these “nicknames” he came up with. But as with his other and often more troubling habits—his Western dress, his immoderate consumption of alcohol, his gambling, his reckless abandonment of tradition-minded counselors for scions of Europe’s upper classes such as this very Scranforth—she practiced a pacific tolerance. For the moment.

So she answered him. “Yes, I have several shares in the Great Sun River Collector Company. Gifts from you. Why are they to be gotten rid of?”

Her brother gestured to his mouth, too full to talk, then to Scranforth.

The white man obliged with an attempt at explanation. “Well, the, er, the construction of the collector tube has hit a few snags. Delays, that sort of thing—reminiscent, actually, of Delamere’s Kenyan railway project, and of course the contractors your brother recommended aren’t to blame in the least. Though I’m led to understand cost overruns here have— Hang it! Difficult to describe the details of these things to a lady, don’t you know!” Scranforth twisted his mouth into a line as irregular as the brim of his nervously wrung hat. Mwadi wondered if what kept him from talking clearly about the situation was his own lack of understanding.

“No need,” her brother announced, shoving a bolus of boiled millet aside with his tongue. “Didi will dump any stocks I tell her to. Tell her tonight.” He swallowed, wiped his brow, and returned his attention to the fish.

“What’s your hurry, though?” Miss Bailey asked. “You got the Cairo Bourse right next door”—it was several miles away, in fact—“and you can be there soon as it opens just by leavin here first thing in the mornin.”

With a groan, Ilunga pushed the fish away. “I feel unwell.” Grabbing the platter’s cover from the bench pads beside him he inverted it and vomited into its shallow depths. As he slumped back, letting it tip dangerously, the serving woman ran to snatch it from the prince’s loosening hands. As she passed, a sour reek wafting from the improvised basin threatened to turn Mwadi’s half-filled stomach inside out.

“P’raps”—the white man shuffled backward to the door—“—p’raps that’s a better idea.” The prince rolled onto his side and emitted a series of moaning gasps. His arms waved in the suddenly thick air like the tentacles of a desperate octopus.

Miss Bailey plucked a brass vase from the hearth and dumped out the dried bulrushes it had held. “Here you are.” She thrust it at the hapless prince. Ilunga seized and used it.

No longer hungry, Mwadi ordered the food cleared away, climbed the stairs to her brother’s rooms, and sent his Egyptian valet to him. Then she walked the rich carpets to her own rooms.

Behind the door to her boudoir waited Miss Bailey.



“Where is my maid?” Not visible through the wide archway leading to her bed. Perhaps in the closet? Yet the louvres of the closet doors were dark.

“Hasina? I sent her away.”

Mwadi smiled. “Why don’t you ring for her to return, then?” Or move away from the bellpull.

“Awright. If you want. But I was thinkin we could learn to know each other better without company.” The actress got up from the gilt-armed chair where she’d been poised, uncrossing her pyjama’d legs. “Like I could show you my gun and my camera and tell you what I need you to do for me.”

“Gun?”

“Oh, I ain’t offerin violence. Look—I laid it down over there, on your vanity.”

Its curves interrupted by half a dozen shining crystal bottles, a brass silhouette showed on the vanity’s cluttered surface, familiar from Mwadi’s training as a spy: a shongun, the Everfair invention that flung poisoned blades at your targets in place of bullets.

“Sir Jamison give it to me in New York. Said I might need protection on our tour out West.” Miss Bailey shook her head and chuckled lightly, bitterly. “From Indians, I guess. Came in handy but not cause a them. Some cities ain’t so hot on mixed-race casts. Most of em.”

Mwadi picked the shongun up, checked the breech. Loaded. To be sure, it would be useless otherwise. She aimed it at her unexpected guest but immediately lowered its muzzle. After all, Miss Bailey could have shot her just moments ago, or poisoned her earlier, or— This was not about killing. “What are you doing? Why?”

“You don’t think I’d hurt you, do ya? I brought the gun to show how I’m serious about this.”

“About what?”

“About what the Lincolns hired me for. Stoppin the sabotage at the collector site.”

*A few snags.* “Is that the building site you wanted to take me to?” Princess Mwadi didn’t remember moving after she reached the vanity but here she was, within an arm’s length of Miss Bailey. She could smell the woman’s makeup cream. She could count the pulses throbbing in the hollow beneath her exposed collarbone. “And—and what was my job going to be?”

“You know the Lincolns, right? Hotel owners from Baltimore? They invested in the new production of Sir Jamison’s—”

“Of course I know them. I own Great Sun River stock.”

“Right—I hope you bought it cheap, back when they inherited the plans from the inventor—not them, but the daughter’s husband who worked for Mr. Shuman did, and it was practically worthless? Well, it’s been fallin lately till now it’s just about the same level of no good. They say they can put more money in another new show, somethin of mine if I— Bo-La, you need to sit down? This is a complicated story.”

Mwadi laid the shongun aside. With her emptied hand she reached for Miss Bailey and found that even the arm’s length between them had gone. She touched the beautiful actress at the juncture of hip and thigh. Taut muscles covered in pale yellow satin slid beneath her palm. “No. I don’t want to sit.”

“There’s a pitcher with water on the windowsill. Or maybe you cold? I seen a brazier in the corner.”

“No. Yes. Don’t be so obtuse. Come to bed. Isn’t that why you’re here?” She dared to hope. Despite the claim of what was really wanted: work.

“Yeah, Bo-La, but—”

Mwadi surged against the maddening woman’s warmth, threw her arms around her high neck, and clasped them behind that perfect column’s dark, near-iridescent sheen. Leaned up to kiss those berry-looking lips. Miss Bailey rocked back to avoid that but recovered her balance.

“But Bo-La, you—”

“In the garden you wanted me. What’s different now?” Mwadi began to tremble: little shivering crests of desire and troughs of doubt.

“Come on.” Irresistible arms guided the princess to the vanity’s bench. Away from the bed. Unyielding hands pushed her shoulders down so she sat there.

“Someone has to—to watch?” *What sport!*

“Naw.”

“I c-c-can get one of the servants—”

“*Naw!* Aw, don’t look so sad. Scoot over.” Sitting beside her, Miss Bailey took Mwadi’s hands in her own. But then did nothing with them.

“Listen. How old are you, Bo-La?”

“I had my birthday markets and markets ago.” In the month the British called July. This was October.

“How old?”

“Thirty-three seasons.”

“Sixteen years. Where I come from that’s barely big enough to do what we already done. Let alone what more we imaginin.”

What *we* want. Mwadi stopped her shivering. So was her age all that bothered Miss Bailey? “But you aren’t where you come from—you’re here! My father ruled our country when he’d lived just a season longer than I!” She grasped the hands that had held hers. “I’m grown! A woman!”

“Yeah. Sure. I can believe that. If I work on it. And I been tryna make myself a hundred percent certain you understand I ain’t in love with you. I figure sayin it straight out’s best. Best for both of us.”

“Love!” Mwadi laughed, a little wildly. “That’s none of *my* concern!”

“Ain’t it? You young.” The actress sighed. “And lyin. I got no time for that.” She stood and strode to the door.



“Wait!” Mwadi followed her. Caught her by one slippery beige sleeve. “If I did—if I decided to be in love with you and expected you to love me back, what—what then?”

“Then I would tell you, ‘Not yet.’”

Not yet. “Then when?” Mwadi gathered the pyjama sleeve tighter.

“When I’m free.” Disentangling herself from Mwadi’s clutching fist, Miss Bailey paced slowly back to the room’s center. “When I’m done with this assignment.

“Which is why I called myself, comin here tonight to tell you what I gotta do. And gettin your help.”

Turning, Miss Bailey went to the bookcase next to the boudoir’s entrance and came back to the bench carrying a black box. Not plain—latches and a strap decorated its top and sides. Glass-covered holes pierced one end. “My Brownie,” she said proudly. “A witness everyone trusts. Because everyone uses them.”

“You’ll catch the saboteurs with this?”

“You seen cameras before?”

“Yes, but—”

“I ain’t gotta catch em, just show what they doin in a photograph. Lincolns will bring the law into the picture.”

Mwadi eyed the camera box askance. “And you want me to do what? Fetch it to you? Fetch it away? I’ll need more than one bird to lift such an awkward thing as that.”

For answer, the actress pulled a small spool from her pyjama pocket and held it up between finger and thumb. “Think you can handle a couple of these, though?”



At dawn flocks of kattar-kattars gathered by a water hole miles to the house’s east. Under the awning which had yesterday been erected behind the villa, Princess Mwadi stretched out on her divan. Sleep would have been welcome after the restless night she’d spent in Miss Bailey’s—Rima’s—embrace. But she had agreed to remain awake and enter her chosen mounts.

Cool air stirred—the sun’s breath blowing across the waking desert, entering the tent where the southern wall had been rolled up. Filling her lungs with it she sang, high and pure as light from heaven, falling, sliding,

gliding down to the sand before her open door. Chicks fluttered nearer to her, nearer to their mother, gathered their courage and strutted all the way in, bodies brown and grey and black and buff, barred with yellow-orange and olive green. Preening heads bobbed once, twice, then stopped, transfixed by her stare.

Without stirring an inch Mwadi leapt into their eyes.

After that the supine form on the divan called to them no more. Her four kattar-kattars rejoined the rest of their flock. Together they swooped above the Cadillac Saloon in which Rima waited, parked alone on the rough track back to the rough road. Though they kept flying with their fellows they dived lowest, braked hardest, and flirted nearest the actress's scarfed head. She waved to signal her understanding of the princess's success and drove off.

Last night—this morning? Sometime during the tender hours of darkness, Rima had drawn a map showing where the seemingly ill-starred Great Sun River Collector rose and slumped and rose again. The princess had memorized that map, then burnt it in the brazier furnished to perfume her sleep. The sandalwood normally used to fuel it she left untouched. Another, saltier smell had driven out the bitterness of the map paper's smoke. Now, though she kept pace with the Cadillac, she recognized the winding route it traveled.

Soon the sun rose. Bright beams broke widening gaps in the dispersing clouds. Her mounts split once more from the rest of the birds—normal behavior for this time of day. But they wanted to go west, toward the promise of green shoots sprouting in the wheat fields nearer the Nile, while Rima swung off on a graveled track to the east, following it deeper into the desert.

She changed the birds' contrary impulses into a circle. Spreading her feathers, she caught the spiral currents of gradually heating air and cupped them beneath her wings. Not high—no higher than they'd go normally. But high enough that she saw what Rima must have missed: Ilunga's lilac-and-grey Napier speeding toward them through the sparse morning traffic.

How far away? A mile? Two? Hovering over the crossroads, Mwadi couldn't decide what to do. Should she shadow Rima and if necessary

retrieve the film she shot, as they'd planned? Or switch to watching Ilunga, to see what he was up to? Or—

Both. With a nauseating wrench Mwadi tore her mind in half, riding three birds east and one north. Though she'd long ago gotten used to how the land tilted and whirled beneath her when she flew, the vertigo caused by heading two ways at once threatened to toss her headfirst from the sky.

She'd done it before, going in different directions like this. Once. In a pair of gulls. She shut her panicked beaks on confused cries of "ga-ga-ga!" and continued to come apart.

Strongest were the blinding shards of sun spearing her eyes as she floated above the Cadillac's dusty wake, but simultaneously she plunged up the map toward her brother's swift approach while wondering why he'd come, was he still suffering from the evening's overindulgence, which it was best not to remember or she'd spew the contents of her crops like droppings on the sand—the road—the sand—the road, and she was past him! Bank with these wings, not with those, and come around flapping hard to catch up, but not so fast because the Cadillac had stopped. Rima jumped out. Lay flat. *Undulated* along the ground, like a snake, to disappear below the rim of a long-gone stream's dry bed.

Where had Ilunga's motorcar gotten to? Paying too much attention to Rima's movements, Mwadi'd lost control of her fourth bird. She prayed those remaining would be enough to provide any necessary backup. But how to arrange them so their presence would seem natural?

Her mounts proved attracted to a large patch of asphodel nearby. She let them settle, and as they gorged on the plants' buds she caught glimpses of Rima's goal: a sort of staging area from what she could judge, perhaps in the shape of a semicircle. Piles of pipes marked its approximate edges, some winking and glinting metallically in the morning sun, some a dull black.

The grinding roar of an engine grew louder and louder. It sounded nothing like Ilunga's Napier. Easy to take her mounts aloft again; they wanted to scatter, but Mwadi held them loosely yet effectively, keeping their restless circuits confined to the staging area. Beyond, rows of empty wooden cradles lined the grey sand.

A freight truck—source of the engine noise—became visible. It stopped in the staging area and two strangers opened its doors and clambered out. They spoke in Arabic, too rapidly for Mwadi to understand more than a few words. Something about finishing their task before the builders ripened. Opening the gate of the truck's rear compartment, they laughed and greeted a third man, who cursed them. Probably. But he laughed, too, when the crate he shoved off the truck's bed exploded open at their feet. Shattered glass tumbled out of its broken sides. More cursing. More laughter, shared by all the men now. The two from the truck's cab climbed up to join their coworker in tossing the entire shipment out to smash on the ground.

Mwadi's mounts saw curving shards of mirrors poking up from the ruins of a few of the crates. One had cracked apart to show a parabolic panel surviving miraculously whole—till a man jumped down to kick at its unprotected back. A shiver and it became a sparkling curtain collapsing into a heap of uselessness.

*A few snags.*

One man looked up to where her mounts circled. He pointed at them and the others shaded their eyes and looked too. Mwadi decided to fly the kattar-kattars a bit farther off. She wheeled over Rima's dry watercourse; when Rima saw the birds she beckoned for them to land.

Small stones lined the empty streambed. Mwadi reminded her mounts they needed grist for their gizzards and set them pecking.

"Good," said Rima. "I wound up the film and stuck the spool under that rock there. See it? You can carry that back—I'm gonna have a little talk with them saboteurs before I leave."

No. But Mwadi couldn't stop her. Already she was gone. And the princess had promised. Mwadi abandoned two of her mounts and pushed the last toward the crevice Rima had indicated. Dangling the heavy film roll from her gaping beak she launched herself into the pale blue sky. Stubborn woman.

Her bird's neck ached. She should have kept control of the other two kattar-kattars and traded the work off between them. How long could she stand the strain? How long did she have to? Focused on ignoring her pain, she let her mount's ears miss the purring advent of Ilunga's motor. But then

she saw the Napier itself, its colors unmistakable, though half-concealed in the dust cloud kicked up by its tires and blown ahead of it. Blown in the direction of the saboteurs and Rima.

She shouldn't turn back. The photographs were precious. Rima would want her to save them, to make the risks she'd taken worthwhile. Mwadi struggled grimly on, flying through air that had somehow become thick as porridge.

*BANG!* That wasn't Rima—shonguns fired quietly! She dropped the precious film and reversed her mount, going faster without her burden. Reaching the site again she smelled blood and gunpowder. Heard a muffled scream. *BANG!* Another shot.

She flew higher, out of bullet range she hoped. Below, the three saboteurs made fast feints toward Rima, who knelt on one knee, one long arm hanging loosely at her side, the other aiming the shongun at their faces. Behind the Napier crouched Deveril Scranforth holding a small, gleaming pistol. Of her brother the princess saw no sign. He would never have lent his motor out—not even to his closest friend. Where—

A sudden, dizzying shift in perspective and there he was—lolling head first off the motor-car's driver's seat. Bright rivulets trickled across his dark face and dripped to the floor—but he lived. In tentacle-like motions reminiscent of last night's drunken flailing, his arms fought to grab the steering wheel, the gear shift, anything with which to right himself. He kept hitting them and slipping ineffectually off.

Could she help? Where was she? Still riding a kattar-kattar—but a new one? No—a lost one regained. Once more her consciousness was doubled: she found herself both up in the air and perched on the Napier's roof, head tucked down and cocked sideways to peer in at the windscreen. What had triggered the link's resurgence? Proximity? Lack of movement?

The bird's protective coloration blended somewhat with the Napier's dust-covered grey paint. That and the gun battle had kept it from discovery so far. But surely—

*Shhk!*

A guttural cry burst from a saboteur stumbling, falling, clutching his thigh. The curling edge of the shongun's three-lobed poisoned blade

protruded above his red-stained fingers. His cry subsided into whimpers and curses.

“Shut up!” commanded Scranforth. “You’re not dead yet. I’ll kill you myself. You’ll tell no tales—”

“My photographs gonna reveal everything! Your whole scheme!”

The white man shot at Rima over the motor’s bonnet without aiming and missed. Mwadi’s recovered mount “ga-ga-ga’d” and tried to flee. She forced it into the Napier’s interior through the passenger-side window. *Shhk!* Rima’s return fire sent the bird screeching and flinging itself at the windscreen, pale gobbets showering from under its tail. The princess tried to calm it but her brother’s moans and bloody thrashing wouldn’t let her.

From above she saw Rima seize the shongun by her teeth and attempt to crank it one-handed. After every two shots it had to be rewound—but why not use both hands? She must be hurt.

Four blades left—the shongun had been fully loaded when Mwadi checked it last night in her boudoir. If Scranforth didn’t have any extra ammunition—or if he’d left it in the Napier, out of immediate reach—Rima and her attacker were evenly matched. But add in the two saboteurs still standing—

Without allowing herself time to think of the consequences, Mwadi dove. Claws out like an eagle’s, she aimed for the face of the man with the gun. Predictably he shot at her. Twice. Fortunately he missed. Pulling out of her unnatural stoop with just inches to spare, she felt her mount’s wing muscles tearing. Only a little, she hoped. She was able to gain the heights again, the men’s voices shrinking beneath her like their foreshortened figures.

Unless she viewed them out of the eyes of her other bird. Drying blood and shit smeared much of the glass, but the open window showed the pair of unwounded saboteurs huddled together. Indistinct murmurs escaped their conference. Then in silence they turned toward Rima and leaned forward, their intent clear: to rush her together.

So close! Mwadi urged the panicking kattar-kattar to exit the window she’d entered by. That would distract or deflect them. She couldn’t move!

Ilunga's arms wrapped her in a tight embrace. The bird panted, its heart speeding toward death. She should leave it before she died too.

Quickly she twisted her other mount midair and plummeted downward. The saboteurs gave up their charge and ran shrieking for the cover of their truck's cab. A third shot. A nearer miss. The fallen man sobbed something and began crawling toward the truck as well. Much better odds.

"Didi?"

Who had called her? Only Ilunga mangled her name so. Trapped against his heaving chest, her exhausted mount listened to his weakly whispered words with failing ears.

"I know. It's you. In there. Listen. Jealous. Don't be. Like me. You can't. Help." Alone each phrase made sense, but how to connect them? She couldn't ask him what he meant. She couldn't let these be his last words.

On her bird's next breath she fled it. Barely in time.

From the sky above she could see Scranforth duck beneath the Napier. He'd be able to hit Rima from under there, and he'd be safe from her one functional mount. But with only one bullet left—probably—

*BANG!* The actress hunched forward, caught herself with her shongun hand. Where was her wound—

The white man rolled free of the motor's chassis and sprinted toward Rima, launching himself at her silently like a striped hyena. He bowled her flat. The shongun shone in the sun just a foot away, but Rima struggled fruitlessly to retrieve it till Scranforth choked her motionless. Then he raised himself up on one elbow and stretched across the sand to steal his opponent's weapon.

Mwadi reached it first.

As she flew off with the shongun's trigger guard firmly in her mount's grip, Rima recovered. The kattar-kattar's last sight of her was of her flipping her scarf around Scranforth's neck, presumably a preliminary to strangling him as he'd strangled her.

Mwadi heard the freight truck roar to life. It passed her and turned north onto the Cairo road, going fast. Following her memory of the map she did the same, more slowly.

Far heavier than the film roll, the shongun was slippery, too. Her mount's feet ached when she finally unclenched them to let it plunge safely into the waterhole where her human body rested. And where she woke it.

Beside her head a brass clock told the time: one and one quarter hours till noon. Her servants would wonder where she'd gotten. But it could take a day—or longer—till they traced her here. She sat up carefully and poured a goblet of water while she considered her plight. And Rima's. And Ilunga's. Should she walk to the road she'd flown along, flag down assistance from whoever happened to be faring by?

But then the Cadillac appeared on the horizon. Then it came close and parked and disgorged her love. Stepping into the light, Mwadi greeted Rima's tired and radiant smile with her own, almost as battered, equally bright. They exchanged a quick, light hug—not tentative, only cautious, and even so Rima winced when Mwadi touched, once again, the juncture of hip and thigh.

“Damn fool grazed my side. Ricocheted a rock off my shoulder, too. Sir Jamison ain't gonna be happy how I spent my vacation.

“But look. Least I got your brother back alive.” The actress pointed to Ilunga lying on the motor's rear bench, her cape spread to cover him. A grimace told Mwadi he felt pain. Better than feeling nothing. “What he got to tell us about how he and his ‘friend’ turned up is worth more even than them photographs I sent you here with. I'll take em anyway, but later.”

Princess Mwadi thought she could find the place where she'd let them drop.

“No room for the tent with the prince in there, but we ain't got time to take it down now anyway. Need to get him to a doctor.”

You too, Mwadi thought but didn't say. “I'm ready.” She climbed in behind the steering wheel.





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THE  
SOUND  
OF  
REINDEER

LYNDSIE MANUSOS

# The Sound of Reindeer

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**LYNDSIE MANUSOS**

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*illustration by*

J O R G E   M A S C A R E N H A S

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The first thing Ada Cirillo noticed on the way to her girlfriend's family's Christmas Eve party was the way Lil looked out the window. Usually Lil was the talkative type, the beak that broke through Ada's shell and hurled her out to experience the world.

But as they drove through the limestone-blasted roadways of Missouri toward Saint Charles, where Lil's parents resided, Lil was quiet. Distant. She didn't rest her hand on Ada's knee as Ada drove through the light crust of snow on the highway. Instead, both hands knotted together in her lap.

"We don't have to do this," Ada said. "I'll drop you off and keep on to New York." The original plan was to drive from University of Kansas, where they both worked, straight to New York. Ada's mother lived in Brooklyn, where they'd planned to spend New Year's Eve.

"Huh?" Lil shook her head. "Oh, that's too long a drive to go alone, and my family will love you."

"You're awfully quiet about it," Ada said, nodding toward the space on the passenger window that Lil had fogged with her breath.

Lil shrugged. "Traditions, you know."

"My mom and her friends like to do robber bingo and eat baklava," Ada said.

"Not those types of traditions," Lil said, scowling at the window.

Ada shrugged it off; Lil often became waspish when she worried.

As they drove along the I-70, maneuvering around SUVs with artificial antlers above their car doors, passing Missouri towns along the highway, Ada wondered what type of tradition made someone contemplate the outside like tea leaves in a cup. Lil's shoulders visibly trembled. Ada wasn't sure what else to say.

There were infinite ways to spend the holidays. A week before Christmas, Lil and Ada's best friend, Levi, had invited them to one of his

family's Hanukkah celebrations and they'd agreed to go. At the last minute, Lil received a call. Ada remembered it clearly, had catalogued it like other moments in their relationship: Ada saw Lil's shoulders tense as they sat on the couch, saw Lil stare at the name on her phone—a Georgina Hill—and run to the bathroom of their small apartment.

Behind the bathroom door, Ada heard whispers, which turned into an adamant and repeated “Mom, no.” Then Lil's voice grew shrill. Begging, followed by a prolonged silence.

Lil came out of the bathroom and announced they were visiting her family for Christmas Eve.

“One night,” she said. “Easy as pie.”

In hindsight, after what she eavesdropped on in the bathroom, Ada should have prodded more, sat Lil down to get to the meat of it. But Ada would be the first to admit herself a topical person—often too afraid of digging under her spray-tanned, white skin. That, and Ada was never one to shy away from surface curiosity; she was more than happy to meet the family Lil spoke of but rarely saw. The Hills.

A stereotypical Midwestern family from Saint Charles, Missouri, with a long history. Ada had taken an interest and Googled the old stories. Sons split between Confederacy and Union; a patriarch who hanged himself on a tree branch that jutted out over the nearby Missouri River; legend of an affair between a niece and the young housekeeper, which Ada had found especially juicy.

Lil begged her to stop. “My family history is *not* one of your antique books.”

Ada was finishing her degree in medieval studies with a focus on restoring and collecting illuminated manuscripts—particularly family trees—while Lil taught freshman English composition, working up the poor adjunct route with money sent from her parents.

Ada stopped researching the Hills, honoring Lil's request. She had not reached Lil's immediate family, having started from the past and moving forward in time.

Now, they had arrived at the present. Ada maneuvered the sedan through the historic streets of Saint Charles to the Hills' house outside of

downtown, an ornately painted brown and blue Victorian with a large porch and a porch swing that hung heavy on one side. Two additions jutted out on either side.

Before opening the car door, Lil shrugged out of her puffer coat and laid it across the dash. Then she reached out and placed a hand over Ada's on the gear shift between them.

"There are some odd things about the house," Lil said. "They're all part of a story, and I know you like stories."

"I do like stories," Ada said, but Lil held up her hand.

"Remember that scene in *Christmas Vacation*, where they're in bed with the sap on their fingers?"

Ada didn't know where this was going, but they'd watched the movie together before, once or twice at parties. They both hated the movie.

"Ellen Griswold tells Clark Griswold that he builds events up in his mind," Lil said. She waves her hand around the top of her head. "He sets expectations no one lives up to. That's fucked up, right? Well, my Uncle Kurt was just like Clark Griswold. Believe me, Ada, you won't like this story, but—please know that I love you, and that's all that matters."

*What a speech*, Ada was tempted to say, but that distant, fearful look in Lil's eye stopped her.

"All right," Ada said. "I love you, too."

★ ★ ★

It took a moment for Ada to realize there were few Christmas decorations inside the Hill's house, and nothing on the outside. No wreath on the front door. No lights bordering the beautiful front porch. They walked into a dark wood-paneled foyer restored to its original glory, down to the sconces on the wall that looked like oil lamps but ran on electricity. The air smelled of warm bread and salty meat, and something muskier, like wet fur.

Rather than wreaths or holly, leather straps curled up the banister of the staircase. A huge, hammered copper bucket of fresh, from-the-ground carrots sat next to a grandfather clock near the entrance to the parlor, where there were voices mixed with subtle, classic Christmas music. Bing Crosby. Eartha Kitt.



Lil seemed to gather herself, then nodded to the leather straps on the banister.

“They’re actual reins,” Lil said. She stomped her feet to loosen the snow on her boots and hung Ada’s coat on an iron hook bolted into a wall. There were no other coats.

“Reins?” Ada asked.

“For horses and stuff,” Lil said.

“Is that a local thing?” Ada asked.

Lil shook her head, opened her mouth to speak, but Georgina swept in from the parlor.

“Oh wonderful,” she said, her voice loud and carrying. Ada figured it was Lil’s mother, Georgina, by the large, gold *G* stamped on a gold medallion hanging from a thin leather cord around her neck. Her hair was dark like Lil’s, though rather than Lil’s uneven bob, Georgina wore her hair straight and unkempt to the waist, jetted with silvery streaks. Georgina looked winded. Cheeks flushed, nostrils shiny from a runny nose she kept wiping at with a cloth handkerchief in a pocket of her plaid skirt.

“You must be Ada,” Georgina said, sniffing and holding out her hand. “So glad you could join us. I hope you like red wine, because we loathe white.”

“Red is fine,” Ada said, holding out her own hand to shake Georgina’s. Her skin was ice cold, a slight tremble to it, like Lil had trembled in the car.

“Is everyone here?” Lil asked, voice low.

Georgina smiled, all perfect white teeth. “No one is ever late on Christmas Eve these past few years. Dinner is ready, so we’ll begin the festivities.”

“I’ll do it this year,” Lil said, snatching Georgina’s other wrist. “Please.”

Georgina shook her daughter off softly, smile faltering but steadfast.

“No,” she said. “The plan is the plan, as your Uncle Kurt used to say.”

Lil flinched as if slapped.

Ada felt she’d missed something vital, and while her hand was still held by Georgina, she reached out with her free hand to grip Lil’s.

“Can I help?” Ada asked.



*“Of course.”* Georgina turned her smile back on, full-fledged and aligned. “But first, dinner. Get meat deep in your belly.”

Georgina turned heel and swept back into the parlor, Lil following behind, head bowed. Ada remained in the foyer, eyeing the reins on the banister, winding tightly up the stairs into darkness.



Dinner was a thick spiced stew with a dozen rolls of different bread to be passed and dipped. Ada sat in between Georgina and Lil at a long table in the dining room, paneled with wood as dark as the panels in the foyer. Also at the table was Lil’s Aunt Mindy—Georgina’s sister—who sat at the head. Lil’s cousins, Charlie and Butch, both looking in their early twenties, sat directly across from Ada, Lil, and Georgina, glancing at their mother, Mindy, and whispering in each other’s ears. At the other end was Lil’s Grandma Mabel, who gave hard looks to both her daughters that neither would meet head-on. Finally, Lil’s father, Patrick, sat at the foot. He was broad-shouldered, someone built like he used to be in amazing shape but now sagged at the corners. He had a thick head of gray hair that went every which way, reminding Ada of the classic pictures of Albert Einstein. He ate ravenously, scooping bits of meat out of the stew with bread that he had ripped apart. He had not said a word to Lil or Ada since they had arrived.

“It’s not you,” Lil had whispered, catching Ada staring. “He hates Christmas Eve. Soon he’ll dive into his private Scotch and drink until he falls asleep. Tomorrow, he’ll pretend it never happened.”

“That’s horrible,” Ada had whispered back.

Lil had shrugged.

Grandma Mabel had begun a droning speech, lamenting the old days of peace and duty, when Christmas was actually about Jesus instead of “stupid animals.” Ada nearly choked on the bread when she heard the last of it. She looked around the room, at Lil, wondering if someone besides her should ask what the fuck Grandma Mabel meant. Instead, everyone focused on their bread.

“Okay, Gramma,” Charlie said.

Butch leaned in from across the table and whispered, “She does this every year.”

Charlie nodded to Lil. “Staying the night?”

Lil’s own smile faded. “Ada is, too,” she said.

Charlie frowned at Ada. “Tough luck. My boyfriend came once. Never again.”

“What do you mean?” Ada asked.

Butch’s eyes widened. Brown like Lil’s. “You haven’t told her?”

As Grandma Mabel continued her speech, a loud thump sounded overhead, shaking the chandelier above them. The Hills paused, even Mabel, glancing up at the ceiling. It could not be a branch or acorns, as Ada used to hear those sounds often at her own home growing up in the forests of the Northeast.

This was heavier.

Another thump, and Mindy reached across the corner to grab Georgina’s wrist; Georgina shook it off, reaching across the table to grab another bread roll. She already had two untouched on her plate. Her hand hovered as another thump shook the house hard enough to rattle the wineglasses on the table.

“What is that?” Ada asked.

All eyes turned to Ada. Georgina’s eyes widened, then narrowed on Lil.

Lil opened her mouth, then closed it. She gave Ada a bewildered look she had not seen since they started dating a year back. In that moment, Ada realized their anniversary was on the 27th. They’d never discussed it.

Patrick cleared his throat, tugging his napkin from his collar and throwing it on the table.

“Patrick,” Georgina said.

“No, Georgie,” Patrick said, holding up both hands. “We’ve discussed this for five years. I stay, and you leave me be. I’m going to my study. Y’all made your bed.”

“Daddy,” Lil sobbed.

Patrick’s eyes fell on his daughter, and he frowned.

“Sorry, little scout.” His voice broke. For the first time, he laid eyes on Ada. “After the holidays, I will have the pleasure of meeting you officially,

Ada Cirillo.”

Another thump sounded above, and Patrick Hill grimaced.

“Damn him,” he muttered and left.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

The house shook. Ada felt it in her bones. Yet, she knew, above the dining room where they ate, there was nothing. A few trees leaning overhead. The dining room sat in one of the additions on the side of the original house.

Butch stood. “I’m out.”

“Me, too,” Charlie said, though he remained seated.

“Absolutely not,” Mindy said. “Patrick had nothing to do with it—he was out of town—but you owe it to your father.”

Charlie snorted. “He never gave a shit about us, planning his goddamn tradition, and you all went along with it.”

“It killed him,” Butch said, holding his head in his hands. “He was obsessed with sleigh bells, Mom. Christ.”

“I’m going to my Gabe’s house,” Charlie mumbled, slipping from his chair and out of the house so quickly that Mindy still focused on Butch.

“You need to show respect,” Mindy said. Her voice trembled like birdsong.

Ada, for one, wanted to know what the fuck was going on. Butch glanced at her and must’ve seen it in her eyes, because he pointed at her.

“Since ya’ll are so *respectful*, you’re having Ada do it?” Butch asked. “Let her shoulder the burden? Lil hasn’t fucking told her.”

Mindy’s head jerked so hard, Ada thought she heard it snap.

Lil shook her head back and forth, hair flying in front of her face. “I didn’t have time.”

“Bullshit,” Charlie said.

“Tell me what?” Ada asked.

Lil kept shaking her head like a toddler refusing to eat.

Georgina slapped the table with both hands, and Lil stopped, tears streaming down her face.

“We’ll do it now,” Georgina said. “Get it over with.” She turned to Ada. “Nothing will happen to you if you do this for us.”

“I’ll do it,” Lil blurted.

Georgina reached over and clutched Lil’s shoulder.

“You did it last year,” Georgina said. “That was enough.”

“But my girlfriend is fair game?” Lil asked.

Ada’s neck hurt from turning about the table, catching who was speaking and why. What did Lil mean by *fair game*? Ada wanted to push herself up and out, but Lil’s sobs made her hesitate.

*This is a turning point*, Ada thought.

If she left, she knew she’d leave without Lil. And like a child’s blanket, Lil had grown comforting and familiar in Ada’s heart. They shared an apartment. A bed. Space. The entire university where they studied and worked was sprinkled with memories of them falling in love, places where they’d made love. The drive to New York would be endless.

“We’re not using anyone,” Mindy said, then grinned sheepishly at Ada. “Lordy, it sounds like we’re doing a ritual sacrifice. It’s a Christmas tradition. That’s all.”

“You understand traditions,” Georgina said. “Like ... church! You go to church on Christmas Eve?”

“We’re not religious, so no,” Ada said. Why was she whispering? “My mom hosts a party with friends from her Knit-and-Bitch club. We play play games, you know. Eat gyros and baklava?”

She said it like a question, afraid she’d get something wrong and make the whole situation worse. But Georgina only held up her forefinger as if Ada made her point.

“Still a tradition,” Georgina said.

Lil raked her fingers over her face.

“We’ll put you in a coat and some materials, and then you’ll go on the roof and ... and thump like a reindeer,” Mindy said. Everyone seemed to wince at the word.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

The dining table shook. A glass of wine fell onto an ornate rug, already stained. No one made a move to clean it up.

Butch threw up his hands and made a run for it.

“Butch Michael Hill,” Mindy yelled. The front door slammed. Coats, Ada thought idly. Mindy’s sons hadn’t worn coats.

“There’s already thumping,” Ada said numbly, pointing above her head.

Georgina and Mindy looked at each other across the table. Ada continued her attempt to unpeel everything she’d heard. Materials. Uncle Kurt. Stupid animals. Thump like a reindeer. On the other side of the house, a smash of glass and a loud curse.

Georgina waved it off. “Patrick.”

*Thump.*

“We’re getting away from ourselves,” Mindy said. “Ada, follow Lil upstairs, and she’ll get you ready. There’s a window at the top of the stairs we’ve all used to go out on the roof.”

“What if I say no?” Ada said.

Grandma Mabel threw a roll of bread against the wall—pumpernickel—and covered her face in a wail.

“Then go,” Georgina said, sweeping her hand towards the door. Her long hair was as wild as Patrick’s now, a sheen of sweat on her brow. “Follow Mindy’s deadbeat sons. Leave poor Lil to do it again. She almost lost a finger last year from the cold. That’s why she’s crying.”

Lil shook her head and muttered to herself. “I-can-do-it-I-can-do-it.”

Georgina was full of shit. Clearly Lil wasn’t fit to do it herself, and no one else was volunteering.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

“I’ll come, too,” Georgina added. “Fast and fun.”

As if this weren’t something so fucked up. So, Ada stood. She followed them out of the dining room and up along the rein-wrapped banister to the top of the stairs. They came to a window just to the right of the top of the stairs, a burlap sack resting beneath the sill. Robot-like, Lil started taking things out of the sack and handing them to Georgina. A brown camo coat that smelled like cigars. Sized a men’s large. Georgina unzipped it and held it up.

“Can I wear my own?” Ada asked, limbs beginning to tremble.

“Oh no,” Georgina said. “We have to use this coat. It’s Lil’s uncle’s. You probably won’t want to wear your own coat again after this, though.”

Before Ada had a chance to ask why, Georgina started talking, taking one of Ada's arms and threading it through the sleeves, zipping it up to Ada's neck as if she were a small child.

"Lil's Uncle Kurt, Patrick's brother, was *really* into the holidays," she said. "He used to go upstairs each Christmas Eve, go out on the roof, and stomp around, mimicking reindeer. He was all about—what did he call it, Lil—oh, yes, the 'authentic experience.' Lil, Butch, and Charlie loved it as children, but they grew up, as kids do, and they lost interest. Kurt didn't. In fact, he tried to make it more authentic, growing out a beard, dyeing his hair. He even bought real reindeer hooves."

At the mention of the hooves, Lil took them out of the burlap sack. The smell hit Ada first. She wanted to throw up. It was two severed reindeer feet attached to sticks.

"You stomp these on the roof," Georgina said.

"I'm so sorry," Lil said. "Remember what I told you?"

"Stories," Ada said, stunned, holding up the feet in her hands.

Brown and white hair covered the dried-up skin. Ada's legs felt heavy as Georgina knelt to strap knee and elbow guards to her. Finally, Lil peeled the burlap sack off the bottom item, which was a helmet with two reindeer antlers attached. Ada leaned back, staggering, and nearly fell down the stairs.

"Now, now," Georgina said, catching her by the forearms. "It's not as heavy as it looks. These are female reindeer antlers—shorter and lighter than the males'. Did you know that? Both male and female reindeer have antlers?" She shook her head. "Kurt told us. He was so obsessed with reindeer he forgot all about Santa Claus. He found these on Etsy—you can find anything there."

Ada realized, horribly, that Georgina and Lil were as scared as she was, if not more. The wind started howling outside, and the thumping continued. Ada glanced out the window out onto the sloped roof that covered the side addition to the house. A small layer of snow covered the shingles. There was nothing else there.

*Thump. Thump.*

Georgina babbled: Kurt had made the helmet himself. He prepared each year, all year, for this moment, to make the sound of reindeer.

“Eventually, we’d had enough,” Georgina said. She placed the helmet on Ada’s head, tucking her hair behind her ears. The entire costume pressed down on her. She smelled like wet fur and decay.

As Georgina fumbled with the helmet’s straps and adjusted them, Ada heard the rest.

“We let Kurt do as he pleased,” Georgina said. “But five years ago, we decided no more. He went up on the roof, thumping with these goddamn hooves. We put on the TV real loud. A marathon of Christmas movies, drinking cheap Moscato and gorging ourselves on ham and pumpkin pie. It was loads of fun. Kurt tried to yell over us, telling us we’d regret it if we broke his traditions. He went up and thumped on the roof, and we turned the TV up so loud we couldn’t hear a damn thing.”

Lil stood behind Georgina; a stream of cry-snot dripped down her lip that she kept wiping away.

Georgina sighed again. The helmet was snug. It wasn’t going anywhere. Ada held both hooves. Georgina stepped back and grasped Ada by the shoulders of that awful-smelling, camouflage coat.

“We forgot about him,” Georgina said. “We didn’t realize the window had closed behind him; the piece of leather he usually kept there as a failsafe had fallen. Or maybe one of us took it as a joke. Who’s to say?” Georgina laughed, glancing at the window. “Anyway, he died on that roof trying to open the window. He smashed it with his antlers and hooves, and it did good damage, but he cut himself on the glass and bled out.”

“Fuck,” Ada started whispering. “*Fuck. Lil, why did you bring me here?*”

Lil covered her face and sobbed.

“Lil found him,” Georgina said plainly.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” Ada said. “I want to take this off.” “In a moment,” Georgina said, tapping Ada on the nose. “You’re going to go out that window, stomp a few times. Then you can come right back in. Easy as pie. Lil will wait for you, see? Do that, and the thumping stops. He won’t bother us again till next year.”

“Why can’t you just not do it?” Ada asked.

Georgina tilted her head. “You know, we tried that, but then the thumping never stopped. It got louder. We lasted until January seventh, and by then we’d almost lost our minds. Patrick threatened to open the gun safe, and my mother, Mabel, tried to leap out a window. Kurt was a stubborn bastard.”

Lil lifted up the window. A gust of cold air blew in. There was a thump that reverberated around the house. Then silence.

Ada held up the hooves like she was about to conduct a symphony. She smelled of cigar smoke and old, dead meat. She walked in front of the window and beheld the roof outside. It was two stories up, a flat, foot-long stretch that sloped downward at either side. If freezing didn’t kill her, the drop certainly might.

As if reading her thoughts, Lil leaned in, wiping at her nose.

“A few steps and then come right back in,” Lil said. “Then it’s done, we’re all done. I’m right here. I love you.”

“Can you tie a rope around me?” Ada whimpered.

Lil shook her head. She reached under the camouflage coat to Ada’s back jean pocket, where Lil knew Ada kept her phone. Lil slipped it out and put it in her own jean pocket.

“Don’t want that to break, right, honey?” she said, trying to smile.

Lil had never called her *honey* before. It sounded wrong. Deep and drawling. She blinked at Ada after saying the word, covering her mouth. Lil trembled and shut her eyes.

“That’s not— Oh god, I’m— I never wanted this,” Lil said.

It was an apology that was all-encompassing. Ada knew this was not just for this moment but for everything before, perhaps even as far back as when Lil was a child. Perhaps she never wanted Uncle Kurt to try so hard, even at first, even when it might have been magical. Ada also wondered if Lil meant she never wanted the moments leading up to it—their meeting, their lovemaking, and the choice to start sharing each other’s lives—and everything that would occur for them afterward. The phone call, the car ride, the dinner. New York might have well have been on the other side of the world.



Ada's stomach roiled, and she wondered, wearing the coat, the guards, the helmet, what would happen if she threw up all over it.

*Jesus Fucking Christ.*

A mosaic snapped together in her mind: she bet it was old venison in the stew—overstocked and freezer burned in their garage or something. All visitors' coats were likely stowed in their respective cars, because if they were brought in the house, they'd smell like Kurt's—of old cigar smoke and dead meat.

Georgina blabbered on behind them, seemingly overcome. Her *G* medallion blinked against the dim light. Someone yelled downstairs, Mabel or Mindy. It could have been a "Hurry it up!" or "Fuck it up!" Ada couldn't tell. With the window open, there was also laughter down the street, a car alarm, and the distant sound of bells.

Ada crouched and put her knee on the windowsill. She had to use her elbows to inch forward as she held the hooves. She gagged on the scent of them, the dried meat and blood around the sticks. Holy shit, she was doing this.

Her other knee came up, pushing her forward, and the snow seeped through to her skin even with the guards strapped to her. The helmet fell forward on her forehead, almost blocking her vision.

A couple of thumps. Sound like a reindeer.

"STOMP HARD," a voice yelled right into her ear, and she jerked away, moaning as she tried to regain her balance. The voice was low and rough, a rhythmic rural Missouri accent.

She raised her right arm, clutching the reindeer hoof handles. An image jingled in her head: a body slumped through a shattered window, split flesh, blood on the floor, antlers puncturing glass.

"BUT MY HANDS STILL HELD THE HOOVES." The voice in her ear again. Triumphant.

Ada brought her hand down hard onto the roof.

*Thump.*

*"HARDER!"*

Someone clapped behind her.

Ada raised her left arm. Warmth began grow along her arms and wrap her torso. Her thighs tightened, balanced. A little bit more. *A reindeer can pull up to three hundred pounds, after all, pull that much weight and still walk up to eight miles an hour.*

The least she could do was make a good thump on the roof.

The very least she could do.



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