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About the Authors

**THE
PASSING
OF THE
DRAGON**

KEN LIU

The Passing of the Dragon

K E N L I U

illustration by

M A R Y H A A S D Y K

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

Kay turns right when she reaches the cove shore, away from the wind; it's nice not to have the howling December wind in her face for a while, each blast the stroke of a sandpaper palm across her cheeks. People sometimes forget how cold it can get in southeastern Connecticut; she certainly did when she decided to make this ... expedition, outing, jaunt, peregrination—whatever this journey is—during Christmas break.

The cove is frozen over as far as the eye can see, and each of her steps makes a satisfying crunch in the calf-high snow. She stops to catch her breath, the steamy exhalation clouding her vision momentarily. She peers up ahead and to the right, over the tall strands of cattails and reeds, snow-heavy cotton swabs, searching for a two-story house with a steeply pitched roof whose profile, etched in charcoal on the cover of Chilton's first chapbook, has been seared into her memory.

"Should be right around here," she mutters to herself before trekking on.

Excitement wars with embarrassment. This is such a silly trip, something her friends would make fun of her for if they knew. What is the point of visiting the house where her favorite poet no longer lives? What is the point of walking around the cove where he no longer walks? What is the point of a pilgrimage to the once abode of an avowed atheist?

*We reminisced late into the night—
Empty wine bottles rattling along the kitchen floor—
"Let it go, Freddy"—
Laughing like hyenas at this memory and that—
"Oh we were so young!"—
Until someone lit a cigarette and coughed.
Through the haze we looked at each other
Mesmerized by the void between
Our constituent atoms
Falling away from one another.*

Why is this poem her favorite? Does she also fear there is nothing but the void between atoms and among stars, once her syllables have dissolved back to entropic sound? What does it say about her that at thirty-four she already thinks her career as an artist is over, or perhaps that it has never started? Does she love herself too much, or too little? Why won't they love her paintings? Why?

She trudges forward; one step, then another. No firefly-festooned Fraser firs (like in Chilton's last poem, "Spontaneous Ornaments"); no reflections of

glowing cabin windows shimmering in water studded with moon jellies; no blinking buoys beckoning steadily to distant fishing boats; no nuclear submarines gliding through the waves, silent leviathans ready to enforce America's promise of peace through strength, moonlight scintillating off metallic hulls like fish scales—around her she could see none of the things that F. R. Z. Chilton wrote about. Between the frozen sea and the snowbound earth, she's a stick figure moving between white and white, leaving behind an extended ellipsis on a blank page, a Pollockian dribble against an empty canvas.

She peers through the darkening gloom, made hazier by swirling snow crystals riding fitful gusts. Still no sign of the house; she fiddles with her phone, but there is no reception and the map app leaves her in terra incognita. She's not dressed properly for a seaside winter hike. The cold seeps down the collar and up the sleeves of her inadequate coat, intended for short trips between the car and the Fresh Food Basket. She shivers and tries to walk faster, trampling through the snow.

She imagines Chilton returning here every summer, leaving behind the fancy parties in New York, Frankfurt, Athens, Amsterdam; leaving behind the cacophony of tongues, vintages, awards, jealousies, friends, foes, and lovers, all clamoring for his attention, gaze, approval; she imagines him holed up in his quiet refuge by the sea here in rural Connecticut, a hermit surrounded by his volumes of Homer and Ovid (one of which he had translated himself), Dante and Chaucer, Keats and Hopkins, Eliot and Stein, Sappho and Spencer, emerging only to take walks in the morning and evening, perhaps even over the very same sliver of land she's stumbling over now, penning the poems that would then be gathered into *Veni Vidi*, *Dry Spells*, *Sixty-Three Awakenings*, the books that will last long beyond the scattering of Chilton's own ashes into his beloved Aegean.

There is nothing remotely similar about their lives. What does she hope to accomplish by seeing his house, by walking the same ground, by breathing the same air—albeit in a different season? What can a woman whose paintings have been seen by fewer than fifty people hope to learn from a ghost whose poems have been taught to millions? Is it envy or hope that propels her to visit the site of her artistic hero's triumph?

What, after all, can she learn from Chilton? She cannot paint scenes of sun-dazzled beautiful young men in the Aegean, of the cry of a loon disappearing over a New England lake, of debating the finer points of Anglo-Saxon grammar with Seamus Heaney. What can she draw on but a tiny chain-link-enclosed backyard with dying grass; shadeless sidewalks dotted with bits of dried dog poop; the long checkout lines at the Fresh Food Basket, where she both wants and doesn't want more shifts; the faces of people in the city rushing about, busy, depressed, sensual, and empty, worried about not having more

money and so fearful of losing the little love they have that they cling to it, clutching so hard that they'll kill it and they know it. She tries to paint these things but she cannot seem to find a way to make the others understand the love and apathy and pride and terror, all of it, none of it.

Though she has never lived Chilton's life, she can feel the heat of his lusts, the cutting pain of his losses, the cool thrill of his dispassionate observations, the warm tingling of his moments of joy. But those who have gazed upon her paintings have not seen what she wanted them to see. When people say anything about her work at all, they use words like "quotidian," "realist," "sentimental," "outdated," "parochial," "limited." Chilton's poems are deemed universal while her paintings are not. Is this difference between them due to a gap in skill and talent or a disparity in something else—something immutable, faceless, immovable, unjust, something she can never overcome? The question gnaws at her—perhaps it's the question that lies behind this trip that she cannot even fully explain to herself.

As her shadow grows longer and her breath shorter, anxiety mounts in her heart, threatening to tip over into despair. She looks back: the footprints are already disappearing; she may not be able to find her way back to the parking lot.

Frustration makes her want to scream. To take the train down here and to rent a car and to take off time from work, just so that she can try to ... find *something* here that will keep her going—and now to fail. It's all so ridiculous. She *is* a failure. Her mother is right. She has failed as a painter, as an artist, as a productive member of society. She might as well sit down where she is and let the storm take her, become one with the snow-swabbed cattails, one of Pascal's thinking reeds.

Everything falls silent. She hears nothing. Not the distant traffic on the highway she took, not the Christmas songs in the mall parking lot she passed, not the last-minute rush of commerce and commercialized good cheer she escaped. Not even the howling of the wind. Snow falls around her quietly, in large clumps that stick to her jacket, to her hair, to her long lashes.

Something begins to glow in the south, beyond and through the falling veil of evening. Puzzled, she squints through the snow at it.

Suddenly, the sky is lit up bright as noonday—no, brighter. Her hands shoot up to cover her eyes instinctively. The frigid air that has been hounding her all day is replaced by warm gusts that caress rather than whip.

Cautiously, she uncovers her eyes. The snow and ice are gone. She stares, mouth agape, at the verdant grass that stretches from her feet to the cove shore, at the gentle aquamarine waves undulating beyond, at the sunlight sparkling among them—or maybe glints from dancing jellyfish? Dotted the grass are blooming flowers and glorious bushes she has never seen, as well as a few clumps of colorful mushrooms glistening like handfuls of jewels. Farther away,

trees gently sway in the breeze, their leaves whispering incessantly, carrying on in a dreamy language she wishes she knew.

She looks about in wonder. She's clearly not on Long Island Sound anymore, and this is no Christmas Eve.

There, she sees it, coming over the horizon, beyond the waves, a great sinuous presence with outstretched wings that seem to curtain the gap between heaven and sea, whose every inhalation and exhalation is a storm in the sublunary realm, a creature so grand that language deserts her. She stares at it, unblinking, greedily drinking in the sight, unwilling to be parted from it for even a fraction of a second.

Moment by moment, the creature approaches. Its shadow blots out half the sky. Its call drowns out all other sound. It seems to have a thousand eyes and no eyes at all. Each wingbeat feels like a breath taken by the universal lung, the perpetual bellows that drives all Life in the *Dao De Jing*. The creature is the platonic ideal of Creature, the very Form of all consciousness. Nothing in her life has prepared her for this.

In that moment, she understands all the poems she has ever read; she grasps all the paintings and statues and photographs she has ever puzzled over; she sees the grace in every sidewalk crack, every wearily slumped shoulder, every tired face asking, *What is this about?* She understands it all, sees it all, accepts it all. Everyone is heroic, the protagonist of their story, the only story they'll know from the inside out—true, unflinching, joyous in the face of the void. There is light in everything. It is all so *beautiful*. She's so delighted that she begins to laugh, only then realizing that she has forgotten to breathe and she's growing light-headed.

"I'm looking at a dragon!" she screams, not caring who hears her. "A dragon!"

The great dragon sweeps overhead and disappears among the clouds. She laughs; she cries; she babbles with tears streaming down her face.

Eventually, she notices around her the frigid darkness, the heavy snow, the biting gusts of wind, the silence that swallows her shouts of joy like a bottomless well.

It's Christmas Eve again, and she's back on the shore of southeastern Connecticut. The world has returned to the quotidian.

But how can it? She has seen a dragon. *A dragon!*

She stumbles through the snow back toward her car, guided by wild hope, the search for Chilton's house forgotten; she knows what she must do.

★ ★ ★

She paints.

She paints the dragon from every perspective: from above, as though gazing through the camera on a military satellite or the eye of God; from below, the way she remembers it, a mortal being peering up at transcendence; from the air, cinematically, as though the picture were a shot from a superhero film; from nowhere and everywhere at once, with the dragon fractured into a dozen perspectives all jumbled together in a prismatic collage.

She paints in a feverish state. No sleep, no food, no shifts at the Fresh Food Basket. She collapses to the floor, eyes still on the unfinished canvas, and slips into a dreamless slumber even as she tells herself she'll be closing her eyes only for a second. She startles awake in the middle of the night, stumbles to the fridge to pick up the only thing she finds in it, a shriveled lemon, and starts to paint again as she sucks on it, having turned on every light in the apartment.

None of the paintings suit. No matter how many layers of paint she slathers onto the canvas, the dragon under her brush looks absurd, fake, insubstantial, like something copied from a video game box, or one of those calendars they sell at a discount at the dollar store: *Unicorns and Dragons, Your Year in Magic, The Inner Druid*. Instead of breathtaking, the dragons she paints are mere lifeless clichés, puppets with no soul, no presence, no *transcendence*.

Never has she felt so keenly her own inadequacy as an artist. She crawls into bed and clutches a thick pillow over the back of her head, sealing herself away, thinking she'll never be able to face the world again.

Into her mind comes the poem where Chilton recounts the experience of going through the photographs of his father after his death.

*A bearded bear in orange
Trekks through Svalbard;
My sister and me, half-formed, one in each arm,
A progenitorial parenthetical;
Wedding, commencement, obligatory shots
From inside the airplane before he dove out of the sky;
Stiff poses with important men
Like logoed pens sticking out of a coffee mug;
I suppose I should cry, but I don't can't shan't won't.
Seven-and-seventy years in a shoebox,*

The penciled dates fading, gone,

Scales of the dragon I can never know ...

She wakes up, the seventh day after her return, and attacks the canvas anew. She paints what she saw on that New England winter shore: the preposterous grass, the impossible flowers, the lush, inconceivable trees,

already fading. She paints the still-iridescent waves, the nevertheless-glowing sky, the yet-shimmering air, the wisps of clouds all *pinning* after what was no longer there. She tries to paint the world not with the dragon in it, but the second after its passing.

Plato told his parable of dancing shadows of ideal forms, and Zhuangzi scoffed at the notion of capturing meaning with mere words. Because it is futile to apprehend the dragon with line and layer and color and shape, she tries to paint the trail left behind by the dragon, the echoes of its cry lingering over the trembling vegetation, the abating drift of clouds rearranged by its sky-rending wings, the way every speck of sea-foam, every fleeting shadow, every molecule of air cried out, *It was here! Did you see it? Did you see it?*

How can you not see the beauty in *every* moment of this world, the universality of *every* experience? The dragon is the Real, beyond mere Appearance, a realization of the Possible. Seeing the dragon and sharing it—this is her story. No one can see the dragon and be unmoved.

The brush drops from her hand, and paint spatters all over the floor—she’s been too busy to bother with laying down newspapers. She’ll lose her security deposit but she doesn’t care. Finally, she has created something that no one else could have—and it is absolutely, unconditionally universal.

★ ★ ★

Kay submits the painting to the spring show at ArtNow, her co-op. There are forty-six entries.

At the opening reception, like the other artists, she stands near her painting. Very few visitors stop. When they do, Kay avoids making eye contact, but she strains to catch snippets of their conversation.

“I don’t get it. Where’s the dragon?”

“What is that small thing in the corner? Is that it?”

“I think that’s a tree.”

“Why are there so many flowers if there’s snow around the edge? That’s weird.”

“Contemporary art is all weird.”

Why can’t you see the dragon?!? She bites down so hard that her jaw hurts. An artist craves an audience, but maybe not all audiences are crave-worthy. To calm her nerves, she sips from a glass of terrible wine.

In the end, “Best of Show” goes to Amondi’s photograph of plant specimens laid flat against a white background: milkweed pods resembling puffy green birds; a forsythia branch portraying a swarm of butterflies; a couple of young cactuses gently winding about one another in the manner of green caterpillars; a clump of mushrooms in the shape of a prairie dog, with earth still clinging to the stems. The title: “Vegan Menagerie.”

After the food is gone and most of the crowd has left, the artists mingle and move about the gallery, catching up with friends and checking out the other pieces.

“Happy spring!” says Olivia, probably the most successful member of the co-op, having sold at least a dozen paintings to people who weren’t related to her. She glances at Kay’s painting. “I see you went somewhere nice for Christmas break. Where did you go? Costa Rica? Belize? Oh!” The eyebrows circumflex as she listens to Kay’s response skeptically. “Connecticut? Huh.”

“Lovely. You have such an eye for color!” says Weiwei. Her eyes are so wide with delight and appreciation that Kay desperately wants to believe her—until she remembers Weiwei saying the exact same thing about her three-year-old daughter’s Halloween drawing, with that same expression.

“I’m reminded of this guy in Hokkaido who makes sculptures out of the bark ripped from trees by bears,” says Jack, who experiments with mixed media. “You should look up his work. You’ll love it.” The work shown at ArtNow always reminds him of other work by artists far away. She suspects this is Jack’s way to avoid ever giving an opinion—which is also an opinion.

As the evening goes on, Kay’s mood sours. These are people who have struggled alongside her for years—they’ve complained about the same public apathy, the lack of recognition, the unpredictable whims of the “art market.” They ought to understand her better than anyone else. Yet, no one seems to get what she’s doing. This painting, this thing she’s so proud of, isn’t connecting with others the way she hoped.

“*The Passing of the Dragon*,” Solana, her best friend, reads the title under her breath. Then she squints at the picture. “What prompted this sudden turn to allegory? I thought you were going to do more street portraits.”

“It’s not allegory.”

“Ah,” Solana says. She peers closer at the painting. “I’m not very good with the fantastic, so take everything I say with salt blocks the size of ice cubes—sounds like something Jack would make, doesn’t it? Cocktails served with salt cubes to challenge your tastebuds. ‘On the Rocks! For Realz!’ Sorry. I’m being unkind. He’s not that bad.”

“You were going to tell me your thoughts on my new painting,” Kay prompts.

Solana pauses. Kay can see she’s trying to find the best phrasing. “I don’t think it makes a lot of sense to have snow around a tropical forest. But what do I know? With magic, anything is possible.”

“No, it’s not ‘magic’ either.” Kay struggles to explain. “Magic” seems too small a word for what she saw, too close to a trick. Weeks later, she’s not even sure what she saw. Was it real or a vision? While the details of the incident are fading, the memory of that feeling of transcendence, of the world finally

making sense, has only grown sharper. She knows *that* is real. She tries to hold on to it.

But as she imagines herself telling Solana about her Christmas Eve, she cringes inside. It's too absurd. Solana takes pictures of old computer chips through a microscope, zoomed in so far that the etched circuits and components look like cityscapes. Her day job is designing chips for machine learning. Kay can't see how Solana can relate to dragons, even if there weren't any unicorns. "It's ... based on an experience I had. But I'm not painting literally what I saw. More the feeling of it ..." Her voice trails off weakly.

Solana waits a beat. "Well, I think it's very cool. If you do more in this style, you could consider bringing pieces to a sci-fi/fantasy convention. I bet they'll get it. Honestly, I think we can all try to think more about untapped markets and being shown outside galleries—art is a business too, you know?"

Kay wants to say that she's not doing this to pander to some "untapped market," but she knows Solana means well, so she nods.

"Do you feel anything when you look at my painting?" she tries again, struggling to keep the pleading desperation out of her voice.

"Tropical plants in the middle of a snowstorm make me feel cozy," Solana says. "I can see that working in a corporate office or a hotel lobby. Liv knows a developer who's interested in supporting local artists."

Suddenly, Kay feels very tired. Color seems to have drained out of the world. "I think I'm going to call it a night."

★ ★ ★

Kay opens a link forwarded to her by Solana.

**Celebrate the centennial of our favorite poet's birth this summer!
Submit your Chilton-inspired artwork today!**

"Y link?" she texts Solana.

"Thought you liked Chilton," Solana texts back.

She presses the call button. "I do. But I don't have any paintings based on his poems."

"Oh, don't be so literal. Anything can be 'inspired' by something else if you squint hard enough and write a convincing cover letter."

"But why should I?"

"You didn't read the whole page, did you? The Chilton Society got a huge grant from some billionaire who loves Chilton's poetry, so they're holding a big festival at his estate: writers, musicians, politicians, actors, all kinds of big names. If you get into this art show, thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, will see your painting. Liv will be so jealous. Can you imagine her face when she finds out you got in?"

Kay ponders the idea. Her eyes sweep over *The Passing of the Dragon*, leaning against the wall in a corner, bathed in the golden afternoon sun. A rush of excitement replaces her initial skepticism. An artist craves an audience, right? She imagines crowds thronging an opulent mansion turned into an art gallery for the week, everyone pausing before her painting, exclaiming in admiration.

She knows she shouldn't be daydreaming like this. She knows she should trust only internal, not external, validation. She knows that seeking the approval of "the market," pining for popularity, reaching for recognition—that way lies madness. These rules have been drilled into her since the day she told her high school art teacher that she wanted to be an artist.

But she can't help it.

This is the best thing I've ever done.

She borrows Amondi's camera to take a picture of her painting, taking her time on the computer to tweak the colors to be as true as possible. She agonizes over the submission email, in the end omitting the sighting of the dragon, knowing that telling such a story would mark herself in the eyes of whoever picks paintings for the show as a person to be avoided at all costs. Besides, she tells herself, surely they'll see the dragon themselves from the painting. How can they miss it?

No, the painting isn't about any of Chilton's poems. But both Chilton and she are dragon-seers. Not literally, of course—she doubts that Chilton actually saw the same dragon she did, otherwise he would've written about it. However, in his poems she can discern the same sense of light, of transcendence, of connectedness with the world that she felt when she saw the dragon. There's something universal that lies behind the work done by both of them—surely people can see *that*?

She takes care to tell the story of her Christmas Eve journey in such a way that "inspiration" can be read into it if one were so inclined.

Dear Centennial Committee,

The idea for this painting came to me when I was on a trip to visit Chilton's summer house in Waterley, Connecticut ...

★ ★ ★

"So which Chilton poem inspired *The Passing of the Dragon*?" asks the interviewer, a man with thick-rimmed glasses and almost no hair. He's wearing a festival volunteer shirt: *Words sting*. Kay seems to remember him introducing himself as a retired professor.

"Well, it's not *inspired*-inspired by any of them," she says.

The man looks at her. Through the bulging lenses his eyes appear extra large and dark, like the eyes of some exotic deep-sea creature from a nature documentary. He points to the sign over the entrance of the tent they're sitting in: FAN ART CONTEST.

Winning turns out to be quite a thrill. No, millions haven't thronged to see her painting, not even tens of thousands. After all, who's going to come for art done by no-name randos when they could be attending a concert from Kid Ika-Russ, who claims to be the "biggest Chilton nerd"? But, on the other hand, according to the RFID logs, over one thousand nine hundred and sixty-two visitors have passed through the tent housing the art contest finalists—that's an order of magnitude more than any show she's been part of—and they even voted her "Best in Show," which means that her painting will be on display at the Chilton Society's main gallery for a month. She's never won *any* art prize before, not even in grade school. Sure, she did have to pay for her own flight and hotel to get here, but a win is a win.

"The idea of the painting came to me while I was on a trip to visit Chilton's house in Waterley, Connecticut. But it's not based on any of his poems," she says. "I put this in the submission letter."

"So you want to withdraw your entry?" the man asks. He puts the cap back on his pen and closes his notebook. He takes off his glasses and folds them away. His phone is still there on the folding table next to them, recording, but he's going to get to that in a second.

"No!" she blurts. "Not at all."

The man looks at her again. Without his glasses, his eyes look too small, almost like he's squinting at her. "Tell you what," he says after a pause. "Tell me the last poem you were thinking of before the idea for the painting came to you."

The memory is already hazy, so she has to think about it for a bit before the title comes back to her. "'A Visit.'"

"'We reminisced late into the night'?"

"Yes. That one."

The man puts on his glasses, flips open his notebook, uncaps his pen.

She lets out a sigh of relief. This seems a good compromise. She's telling the truth and acknowledging the totality of her inspirations. She *was* thinking of that poem before the dragon appeared in the sky. Even if the two aren't directly connected, maybe there's some kind of sympathetic magic at work. What do people mean when they said that something is "inspired" by something else anyway? Can she really be sure that nothing in the train of thoughts that led to her painting involved one of Chilton's poems? Didn't Solana tell her that human artists aren't any different from the machine-learning networks built by her customers? In both cases, the learning mechanism, mechanical or biological, absorbs and absorbs and absorbs examples of art like a sponge until

you give it a squeeze, and out comes the juicy mash-up-fusion-origimitations? (She's not sure she's got that entirely right; Solana *was* talking very fast.) Can she really be certain that the aesthetic of Chilton's poems, poems that she's read dozens of times, hasn't altered her own style in some way that's hard to pin down? Isn't all art derivative, copies of imitations of homages of allusions of retellings of yet more copies? All art *is* fan art. She's sure she read some essay that argued that back in college.

"Tell me how 'A Visit' inspired your painting," the man says.

An artist craves an audience. She's seen a dragon and wants to share that vision, that feeling with the world. *This is the best thing I've ever done.* And this is her best shot at getting that break, putting her work in front of an untapped audience, people who otherwise would never see her painting. People who love Chilton as much as she does are the best possible candidates to see the dragon beyond the edge of the canvas, aren't they?

She takes a deep breath. "It was Christmas Eve, very cold. I was in Waterley, Connecticut, on a pilgrimage, I suppose ..."

★ ★ ★

Kay looks at her phone in confusion. *Who are these people?*

She just got back from a two-hour walk. She likes taking long walks along the river, where the elevated highway is only a distant hum over the wetlands preserve, and the shoreline path is filled with bikers and joggers and dogs and children. She likes watching their headphone-insulated faces as they pass her, their expressions intent, their minds far away. She wants to paint these faces, this feeling of being in one place but also another, of being embodied and disembodied at once. Now that she's seen the dragon, she thinks she can finally capture them the way they deserve, give them the light that will make them glow. She doesn't take her phone on these walks because she wants to stay in the moment. Stay here.

The message app shows 671 notifications. She's not sure she can name that many people.

Her walks have grown longer lately, a way to keep herself away from her computer. For a while, after winning the art contest at the Chilton centennial, she had checked the forum hosted by the Chilton Society obsessively. Her interview had been published on the website, along with a high-res photo of the painting.

A few threads sprang up to discuss her painting. One evolved from a debate over which part of "A Visit" inspired the picture ("The mushrooms in the bottom-right corner must represent 'constituent atoms falling apart from one another.'" "That is so literal!" "What do you expect from fan art by a middle-aged wannabe?" "People will do anything to get a little attention these

days.”) to a political flame war before moderators shut it down. In another, posters searched for Mediterranean plants in her painting and reminisced about European vacations. A third was full of memes mocking her and her painting. A fourth, created in response to the third, was filled with messages intended to be positive: “She must have worked so hard on that. Look at how much detail is in every flower!” “It’s so creative! I’ve read ‘A Visit’ so many times, but never interpreted it as a poem about an angelic visitation.” “Bad fan art would render this scene of a visit from Chilton’s old friends from France into some Norman Rockwell schlock. But the genius artist behind *The Passing of the Dragon* depicted it as a surreal mythical dreamscape of lush plants blooming in the middle of a kingdom of ice and snow—Persephone in Tartarus. It captures perfectly the emotional tone of Chilton’s masterpiece, in which the magic of connectedness, the bond between old friends, weaves memory into a bulwark against the cold dying light of mortality.”

Even as she holds the phone, she can see more notifications pinging in, scrolling down from the top. The number on the badge in the corner of the app icon ticks up. She doesn’t want to open it. Instinctively, she thinks the notifications are related to the painting. She doesn’t know why or how. So far, she’s had to seek out the comments about her—borrowing trouble, as her mother would have put it. What has changed?

She thought that fourth thread in the forum would make her happy. In fact, she had printed it out so that she could savor the praise. But it depressed her more than the thread of mocking memes. They were praising her for her hard work, for her dedication, for her willingness to devote her creative energy to the celebration of Chilton’s poem. Whatever was good in the painting was derived from Chilton’s artistry; whatever wasn’t to their taste, on the other hand, was left at Kay’s feet.

Having an audience, she has learned, can be a terrible thing.

The painting isn’t fan art—she had made that clear, she thought, in the interview. Yet, no one seemed to have read what she said in it—or, if they did, they got out of her words only what they wanted to. All that mattered to them was that her painting was the winning entry in an art show devoted to works “inspired” by Chilton’s poems, and the last poem she was thinking of before painting her picture was “A Visit.” She had thought it obvious that “inspiration” was a complicated thing, a matter of degrees and shades and types and indirection, but they have reduced her nuanced answer to: “fan art.”

This hurt more than the mockery, than the made-up “facts” about her life, than the comments on her appearance, dress, technique. The subtleties of inspiration, influence, originality didn’t matter. *Her* ideas were irrelevant. The painting had simply ceased to be hers. Context had overwhelmed the text.

The pain, the pain that aches in her chest, that sucks the pleasure out of every thought, that makes it hard for her to get out of bed in the morning, is

knowing that she is responsible for her own loss because she chose to enter the painting, to put herself next to Chilton, to find an audience.

She can't even bear to read Chilton anymore. These fans have soured for her the words of her favorite poet. She knows it's unfair, but she can't help it. No artist wants to be subsumed by another, not even by a hero.

And worst of all. No one is talking about the dragon. They don't see it.

Her phone buzzes again, vibrating in her hand, insistent, relentless, a little demonic, really.

"Never read reviews," Solana said to her. "Never read internet comments."

She knew Solana was right, but this wasn't helpful. She felt awful already. She needed sympathy, understanding, grace, not a lecture about how she was wrong.

"Go paint something else," Solana said. "Don't obsess over what's done. You'll make something better next time."

Kay was reminded that Solana hadn't seen the dragon either. *This is the best thing I've ever done!*

Not even her best friend understands her, not really.

The number on the notification badge jumps up by ten, twenty. Who are they and what do they want?

She has already lost her painting to Chilton's fans. Compared to that, what can be worse?

Resolutely, she taps the icon of the messaging app.

★ ★ ★

After days of obsessive research—it was the only way for her to feel she was making some progress, however illusory, toward getting her life back—this is her best reconstruction of what happened:

A group of activists in South America is trying to save a valley from commercial development, and lacking a charismatic bird or mammal or even flower to serve as an ambassador, they settle on a species of mushroom, the Splendid Soldier, a striking gilled fungus with a purple stem and a crimson cap. It's critically endangered and exists nowhere else. They turn the mushroom into a mascot, make postcards and indigenous handicrafts, knit llama wool plushies of an anthropomorphized version (The Little Splendid Soldier) with big eyes and protest signs (not guns; never guns) and then try to get celebrities to post pictures with the plushies on social media.

They don't have much success. It's hard to get people to love a mushroom, even in the form of adorable plushies, and no celebrity takes up their cause. In fact, a popular singer who Kay has never heard of is caught on camera making disdainful remarks about the fuzzy oversized mushroom shoved

in her face by an activist at one of her concerts. The obviously meme-able moment causes a minor ripple on social media before it's forgotten.

Aaron H., a harried writer for a website fueled by “engagement,” stumbles across *The Passing of the Dragon* while randomly clicking around his browser. He has recently written an article about the minor commotion over the singer who cursed out the mushroom-hugging activist, so, his mind, like a neural network trained on cell phone photos of that moment at the concert, is primed to pick out the fungus. He notices the critically endangered mushroom in a corner of the painting.

“This is a picture of a poem by a famous poet?”

He's on deadline. He has no time for research. He needs to write five hundred words and get them posted within the next thirty minutes to be paid fifteen dollars. He starts typing. “Famous Poet Supports Indigenous Claim to Valley.”

The article is so preposterous in its claim—the writer seems to have neither read the poem nor realized that Chilton died in the last century—that it goes viral. It fits perfectly into certain mass narratives that are always on the prowl for more confirmation. Some point out the absurdity of dragging a dead poet whose favorite subject consisted of the high-culture experiences made possible by being the heir to not one, not two, but three of the oldest family fortunes on Wall Street into a contemporary controversy over decolonization, as though Chilton could possibly have anything relevant to say on the topic. Others note that this particular article, high in opinion but low in facts, represents everything wrong with the “progressives,” ignorant of everything except their own righteousness.

In the incomprehensible logic of the internet, Chilton is soon forgotten but the mushroom becomes the latest social media sensation. Celebrities rush to take a stand, and the plushies now sell for hundreds of dollars online. The South American government with jurisdiction over the valley announces a halt in development plans pending further investigation (before quietly allowing work to resume a week later), and the activists celebrate a victory but warn that the work is not yet done.

Pundits and trolls continue to stir the discourse into a frenzy.

“Are we going to prioritize mushrooms over jobs?” “Indigenous voices must be heard.” “Capitalism needs to be saved from itself.” “Oh sure, American celebrities in private jets should *definitely* dictate policy in the Global South. Makes perfect sense, really.” “The development plan is backed by natives living in the valley.” “Are you seriously claiming there is a single monolithic ‘indigenous’ voice?” ... It deteriorates into noise exactly the way you think it would, following the same little script you've seen play out hundreds of times.

Through it all, as Aaron H.'s original article is reshared, clapped, hashtagged, and memexed around the web, *The Passing of the Dragon* remains

the hero image for the story, the icon for this latest outrage-hurricane to sweep through the attention economy.

Some hail the artist behind *The Passing of the Dragon* as a genius who boldly reinterpreted Chilton's poem to politicize a revered figure of high American literary culture, thereby forcing the insular U.S. elite into engagement with the consequences of globalization and empire. Others denounce her as a manipulative third-rate propagandist who appropriated an indigenous cause and movement to further her own fame. The inevitable backlashes are followed by the unavoidable backlashes to the backlashes, as everyone scrambles for the moral high ground, with accusations of plants and useful idiots and counteraccusations of conspiracies and false consciousness. Buzzwords, devalued and bleached through overuse in the cultural wars, are cast about like clutched pearls. In the process of this debate that goes nowhere, keyboards clack, electrons zoom, servers grow overheated and are then cooled as the GDP ticks up yet another notch (after all, that fifteen dollars paid to Aaron H. must be accounted for) and our species further enlarges its carbon footprint and contributes to entropy in the universe.

Kay loses count of the unread messages in her inbox. Writers for sites fueled by various brands of fear or rage come to Kay. Some try to entice her by offering a chance to tell *her* story. Others try to make outrageous claims in the hopes that she'll want to dispute them.

"Did you think people were too stupid to catch you when you deliberately altered a key element in a classic poem?"

"Be honest: when you painted the Splendid Soldier into Chilton's poem, were you trying to troll the left?"

"Why did you mock the struggles of an indigenous people defending their own land by comparing them to a creature of European fantasy?"

"As a woman of color and a second-generation immigrant, do you identify with the struggles of the oppressed 'mushroom people'?"

She tries to tell her story, the full story. She talks about Christmas Eve, about the search for Chilton's house, about the moment when the world changed forever for her. She had painted that mushroom because it was on the ground, among all the wondrous flowers and shrubs and trees and waves and clouds and light, so much light, when she saw the dragon. It's not a symbol, just one part of that vision of transcendence—though it's difficult to recollect, much less to hold on to, that feeling of connectedness with the universe now, as she's caught in a story she wants no part of.

She's resentful that she even has to tell her story like this. It puts the focus on the personal, reduces her art to biography, to reportage, when what she's really proud of is having figured out how to paint the unpaintable. She wonders if Chilton ever had to explain how he came to write "Che faceste dite su?" If Rodin ever had to explain how *The Gates of Hell* did or didn't fit into some

newspaper's conspiracy theory. If Cézanne ever had to explain why he chose to paint apples instead of pears. Why do some artists have to explain and justify and defend their art and others don't? Is it again about who is deemed universal and who isn't? She hates this feeling of paranoia and bitterness, but how can she not be when they ask such questions?!?

Yes, yes. Their hands hover over the keyboards impatiently. But what about the mushrooms? *What about the mushrooms?*

Impatiently, Kay tells them that she doesn't know why she saw the mushrooms; she saw lots of other wondrous things as well; she's not sure if and where and when she had seen images of the Splendid Soldier before her vision on Christmas Eve. When pressed, she admits that she can't rule out the possibility that she had perhaps seen the plushies somewhere on some tabloid site, perhaps in connection with that famous singer.

Even as she's talking, she can see from her interlocutors' bored eyes that they're not listening. They aren't interested in her story, in this strange, clueless, *mad* woman who claims to have seen a dragon. They already have the stories they want to tell; they already have the roles they want her to play. All she has to do is to drop the right keywords, and they will seize on them and apply the ready-to-wear labels onto her. No one cares about the dragon. All they want to talk about is the mushrooms. Why, why, oh why did she paint the mushrooms?

She stops talking. But it doesn't matter; the conversation goes on without her.

"How a Failed Artist Rebooted Her Career As a Political Hack."

"Of Mushrooms and Dragons: How to Be an Ethical Artist-Activist."

"'Mushroom Lady' Blames Hallucination for Lies."

"You Can Learn Everything about Bad Art from This One Painting."

"She doesn't even have the proportions right. The cap is much too large."

"She needs to take basic drawing lessons. Those mushrooms look like the work of a drunk three-year-old. It's sad how anyone can claim to be an 'artist' these days."

"Do you think the tribe might have a trademark or copyright claim against her?"

"She's trying to do something that L. G. Borhen had done so much better. But you know authentic activist artists never get any of the attention the poseurs do."

An artist craves an audience. By that measure, she's finally living the dream of every artist—her work is being talked about *everywhere*. Even her mother, who knows nothing about art and hasn't bought a new phone in ten years, congratulates her on their monthly call. She hangs up and then drinks every last drop of alcohol she finds in the apartment.

Nothing in her experience prepared her for this. It would be one thing if they were critiquing her attempt to paint the dragon. She could live with that. She's no stranger to withering commentary on technique, style, originality, execution. It's the fashion among some "aspiring artists" at the co-op to formulate their critiques in the harshest terms possible in the belief that they are doing the victim a favor because a "thick skin" is necessary for artists. She's never really understood their logic, however, since a thin skin, a vulnerability, a sensitivity toward the nuances of reality—a readiness to perceive dragons—is necessary to see the world's beauty, to *feel* the tingling in the fabric of the cosmos that is at the foundation of all art.

But they're not even talking about the dragon. In their eyes, her painting is only about the mushrooms. Mushrooms, mushrooms, mushrooms.

This painting is the best thing she's ever done because it is the heart of her story, the clearest expression she has ever managed of the universality of the particular—and they aren't even seeing it. She experienced a transcendent moment and tried to share it with the world, and the world then responded by kicking her in the teeth. This, this blindness is unbearable.



Kay can no longer paint. She reaches out to her co-op for support.

"If it were me, I'd take as many interviews as possible while people still care," says Olivia. "You finally got your break. Strike while the iron is hot! You don't have to talk about your fan art. Use the opportunity to sneak in your other paintings. Set up a Takuhatsu and get some patrons!"

The realization that Olivia is actually envious of her leaves her speechless. She finally blocks her when Olivia texts to ask for the contact info of bloggers who reached out to Kay.

"My neighbor was asking me this morning if I knew you," says Weiwei. Her eyes are wide open, as though she's sharing a compliment. "He's very progressive. He thinks you're amazing to have raised awareness for the people fighting for the mushroom."

Kay opens her mouth, but then she sees that there's nothing she can say in response. Nothing useful, at least. She closes her mouth and turns away.

"My advice: Don't worry too much about sending a message," said Jack. "You know, you remind me of that time when they asked Bob Dylan what his songs meant. 'Keep a good head and always carry a lightbulb.' Go Warhol. Trademark 'The Passing of Mushrooms' and sell your own stickers."

It's not about some "message," damn it! It's about not being turned into a prop in someone else's story. It's about believing that there is meaning in the universe, that you can see a dragon and tell people about it and not have them accuse you of having butchered mushrooms instead. She doesn't say any of

that, of course. Talking with Jack sometimes reminds her of trying to have a conversation with a pigeon. You think you're making progress until the pigeon takes off, leaving a wet *plop* behind on the picnic table.

"You have to tune out the noise," Solana tells her. They are having tea after dinner, while TJ, Solana's husband, does the dishes. The swishing of the running water, the clanging silverware, the squeak as each clean dish is slotted into the drying rack, everything in its place, the chorus of domesticity polished smooth by time, even the garbage disposal's deep drone serving as an occasional basso profundo, all of it makes her own depressed state seem unreal. She wonders if TJ, always practical and reliable, thinks of her as a whiner, someone with too much time and too little sense.

"You have to focus on the here and now, on things you can control," says Solana.

That's the problem, isn't it? Art, especially art by someone like her, is always seen as frivolous, unnecessary, an indulgence. Even though she's in hell, in more pain than she ever thought possible, an artist complaining about the reception of her work is never seen as worthy of sympathy. For those in the "real world," the pain of artists is illusory, effete, a joke.

"Whenever I show my photos, some dudes will always come up to me and tell me how I got some technical detail wrong in the artist statement," continues Solana. "They won't even shut up after they find out what I do for a living. The world has never lacked fools."

This should be comforting, but Kay doesn't feel comforted. Unlike Solana's microchip cityscapes, *The Passing of the Dragon* isn't technical. She doesn't have any objective expertise that she can lean on. She can't dismiss the chatter as noise from idiots. Deep down, she can't help feeling that the criticism is ... somehow deserved. It *is* her fault. If only she had painted better; had given it a different title; had told her story better, earlier, more movingly; were someone other than who she is ... if only. If only.

"The outrage-hurricane will move on if you give it fifteen minutes. It always does."

Solana is right, but she's also wrong. It's true that for most people, fifteen minutes, maybe fifteen seconds, is all the attention and thought they'll ever give Kay, enough time to scroll past a few memes featuring her picture, to tsk-tsk at *The Passing of the Dragon* and to laugh at how poorly she portrayed the famous mushroom, before being distracted by the next EyePunch video in their feed.

But while the internet has no attention span, it also never forgets. Kay is trapped in those fifteen seconds, in the memes, posts, screeching microblogs. Whenever someone looks up her name or *The Passing of the Dragon*, the top results will always be a snapshot of those fifteen seconds, a perpetual tempest from which there is no escape. This misunderstood painting, with those

mushrooms that she hates, will be the capstone of her artistic career, the only thing she'll ever be known for. She is the "Mushroom Lady."

The grinding of the garbage disposal rattles her bones, becomes unbearable. She sets down the teacup. "I need to go."



She stops searching for her name; she stops going to the co-op. She focuses on her job. No one at the Fresh Food Basket knows she paints; no one there has connected her to the "Mushroom Lady" (or, if they have, they haven't said anything to her). She can just be an employee, playing a role, her own story as opaque to others as theirs are to her. They don't know she's drowning, and that can be strangely comforting.

She makes up games for herself: she memorizes the locations of the barcodes on items so that she can scan them without turning them this way and that; she devises methods to slide everything along the counter so that the motion feels smooth, rhythmic, efficient; she challenges herself to use as few or as many bags as possible; she makes the image of TJ concentrating on doing the dishes at the sink, oblivious to everything else, her mental ideal; she learns to still her mind so that working feels like dancing, a poem made from beeps of the register and strobes of the laser scanner. She finds solace in being busy and leaves art behind.

Solana comes for a visit. Kay feels awkward. She's been avoiding her friend. She feels bad that Solana is working so hard to make her feel better, and it doesn't work—it's like Kay is failing her somehow.

Solana catches her up on the gossip at ArtNow. She talks about arguments with TJ and worries over her kids, about a new project she's working on: zoomed-in photographs of the innards of old video game consoles, the thick circuits and leaking capacitors and corroded contacts like the abandoned houses and avenues of a ghost town, the lost Avalon of our collective youth, where dreams once roamed.

Until this moment, Kay hasn't been able to admit to herself how lonely she's felt. That's the thing about depression. It oozes around you until all the color is drained and you think it's normal, that the world has always been that way. But then a friend shows up and reminds you that that's not true.

Kay listens. She's comforted by the sound of Solana's voice, by the aural and imagistic patterns in the everyday words, by the rooted presence of her friend. This connection, this solidarity—we may all be drowning, but we don't have to drown alone.

Solana pauses and walks over to the painting, leaning against the wall, face hidden. She turns it around so that the canvas is once again bathed in the sunlight streaming in from the window. She gazes at it intently, studying it.

“I don’t see the dragon,” she says.

Kay’s heart convulses, but the pain isn’t bitter; it’s a sharp prick, cleansing.

“But I see someone trying very hard to share something beautiful, and I’m sorry that I can’t see it,” Solana says. “Please tell me what you see, what you want me to see.”

So Kay does. She tells her about the wings that drape from sky to sea, about the cry that lingers long after in the snowy air, about the overwhelming sense of oneness with the universe, about her own attempts to depict it, about Plato and Zhuangzi, about how she ended up making the painting she did, a painting of absences, penumbras, shed scales. She tells Solana about the mushrooms, about the flowers, about the trees and reeds, about the jellyfish in the waves. Solana listens, asking a question now and then, good questions.

The words are mere tracks and shadows and echoes; they can never be the dragon itself. But there is also a comfort in following the tracks, tracing the shadows, listening hard for the echoes. She doesn’t feel so alone anymore, and that helps.

“We’re all trying to tell our own story,” Solana says. “And we make other people parts of our own stories. We’re meant to bring our stories together, to speak and listen and know that the stories are real and they matter. I’m glad you are a part of my story, and I’m sorry I didn’t listen to your story as well as I should have. Thank you.”

Kay gets up to make the two of them some tea. It’s still early in spring, and the air is chilly. It’ll get better.



Because Kay can no longer paint, she reads.

She’s fascinated by the experiences of artists whose signature work was misunderstood, drafted into stories they didn’t agree to. Octavia Butler, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, even the curmudgeonly Robert Frost. She reads an interview with Chilton. Chilton! Who she never would have imagined in a thousand years lacked readers who loved and saw exactly what he wanted them to see.

“If I cared about being understood, I’d stop writing.”

I wonder if I ever saw what Chilton actually wanted me to see, Kay thinks. Maybe I’ve only been fitting his poems into my life, making his words part of my story, weaving his dragon scales into my armor. I won’t ever know what he saw and felt and meant when he wrote, “Someone lit a cigarette and coughed.” I don’t understand him either, not really.

Life is one long story we tell ourselves to make sense of the world, and in our quest for meaning, we make other people players in our own

psychomachia. Sometimes the consequence of doing that can be terrible, like what happened to me. But it's worth remembering that everyone is trying their best to look for their dragon, to find the heart of their story, and to then tell it as well as they are able: the activists trying to save their valley, the Chilton fans celebrating their favorite poet, even Aaron H., even the trolls who called me a plant and a hack.

It's okay to take art that's out there and make it part of your own story, to read into it what you want, desire, need—it's inevitable, really. Maybe that is the only kind of universality possible.

But we should also try to remember that each artist has their own story. An artist doesn't just crave an audience, but an audience who can hear that story, who can affirm that the story matters.

Everyone deserves that.



Although Kay can no longer paint, she starts a site to review the work of other artists.

She spends hours with Amondi, listening to her, before writing her post.

Kay writes of Amondi's love of the capacity of the camera lens to flatten the world, to dissubstantiate flesh and bone. She writes about how whimsical and playful her vision is, how joy is at the heart of every photograph she creates. She writes about Amondi's unfashionable belief that the eternal is also political, perhaps even more than the personal. She writes of Amondi's ambivalence about the declaration that every photograph is a lie, about the nuances of shades of truth she sees in every black-and-white image. She makes no mention of Amondi's family, background, personal history—Amondi hates how her work is always reduced to her biography, how people presume to understand her work when they know only a few facts about her. Kay listens hard and understands why sometimes a story is more complete when it doesn't have all the parts.

The review doesn't garner a lot of hits or views, but it is the only review that Amondi ends up linking on her website.

Kay follows Weiwei around, observing her at work. She coaxes Weiwei, who is reluctant to talk about her own work, with openness, with empathy. She makes tea for the two of them.

She writes about Weiwei's watercolor technique: the use of layers of pigment and wash and shapes informed by complex mathematical formulae. She writes about Weiwei's brush bringing to life ghosts and angels, the insides of things. Kay doesn't make trite comparisons of Weiwei's work to "Eastern" traditions or invoke "non-Western" philosophies, the sort of thing people like to do to Weiwei when they see her or her name and decide they know what box to

put her into. Sure, brush painting influenced her, but so did her knowledge of the stars and her love of the Southwest, so why should Weiwei's own story be subsumed into "grander" stories other people think are easier to tell? Kay tries to tell the story Weiwei wants to tell—she knows she'll never get it 100 percent right, but that doesn't mean she shouldn't try.

Weiwei cries when she reads Kay's post. Her wife asks her what's wrong but Weiwei shakes her head and says nothing. She prints out a copy of Kay's review and keeps it in her studio, so that she can see it whenever she needs to.

Kay writes about Solana's circuitscapes. Instead of describing her images as metaphors for Big Tech, for the surveillance state, for the convergence of the digital with the physical, she writes about the wonder of exploration, of seeing the mechanistic as indistinguishable from the naturalistic, of admiring the physical exuviations of our infinite-facultied mind. She writes about the yearning for the numinous in Solana's exploratory photographs, a mysticism that Kay hadn't understood until she really *listened* and *looked*. It's not something that she's ever seen anyone else talk about in her friend's work. But it's always been there.

"Thank you," Solana says, after reading the post. An awkward pause follows—some feelings cannot be adequately expressed by words. "I suppose I have seen my dragon, too."

She even writes about Olivia. It takes time for Olivia to let down her guard, to trust Kay to listen. Behind the abstract formalisms in her paintings, behind the modernist references and ironic postmodernist reconstructions, there is a loving, premodern, primordial celebration of the color blue. It's true: you can't mistake a painting by Olivia; she has invented her own visual language, as idiosyncratic as the way she always wears a sea-glass charm. She may allow labels of this contemporary movement and that to be applied to her work, but beyond the commercial compromises, she's really trying to appeal to sentiment, creating paintings that are romantic in the oldest sense of the word.

Olivia doesn't thank Kay or even acknowledge the post when it goes up. But on that day everyone can tell there's a lightness to her movements, a smile that she tries hard to not show.

(Kay does not write about Jack. Some artists really don't have a story they want to tell, and that is fine, too.)

She doesn't like everything she reviews—who can?—but she strives to see what the artist was trying to show. It's surprising how rarely people do that.

The words are never enough—art, as always, speaks for itself. But the artists she writes about are grateful to Kay for listening, for trying to see, for being the audience they didn't even know they needed. She feels grateful, too, for she has also found a new story for herself, which is both a continuation and a revision of the old, a story about seeing the light in everyone, a story that connects, that roots her, that brings her joy.

Kay doesn't get much respect as a reviewer and critic—what she does is seen as insufficiently ironic, lacking rigor or distance. But she doesn't mind. She's not writing for other critics and isn't interested in their good opinion. (The critics are also trying to tell their own stories, like everyone else, and maybe they deserve their empathetic audience, too—it's just not going to be her.)

We're all doing our best to see the dragon and record its passing.

★ ★ ★

Kay brushes away the snow and sits down on the park bench. There's nowhere to set down the bundle with the painting so she holds it next to her, resting on her bag. With the holidays here and everyone bundled up in thick coats, the buses are especially crowded. Unable to squeeze onto one, she's already walked ten blocks with the painting, and she still has ten more blocks to go before getting home. Last-minute shoppers throng the street, passing in front of her like cattails seen from a coasting train.

Solana offered to have TJ drive her to pick up the painting since Kay doesn't like to drive in the city in winter, but Kay refused, saying she likes taking long walks. She's now regretting that choice, just a little.

*So much depends on a good blade,
Gliding over without cutting
The vague promises we make about Christmas.*

She smiles as she imagines the street emptied of cars, slick with ice like a frozen pond. How she would love to skate home now, like she used to do as a girl, as Chilton had done as a boy. (After a long hiatus, she's able to enjoy Chilton again, and for that she's grateful. His words have given her so much joy in her life that being able to read him again feels like recovering a part of herself.) She's a little sad that she'll never know what story Chilton was trying to tell with the poem. If the poet is to be believed in that interview, he'd be okay with other people taking his poems and fitting them into their own stories, even if they were about mushrooms and eyeballs and storms of outrage that he knew nothing about. Maybe that's a kind of transcendence, too.

She notices that inside the plastic wrapping, the cardboard pieces sandwiching the painting to protect it are coming apart. She needs to retape them. She removes her gloves and carefully unwraps the plastic, takes off the cardboard pieces, and holds the painting up while searching for the roll of tape inside her purse. It's not snowing and there's a lull in the wind; not too bad.

She's not sure how many people got to see the painting at the show that just closed. The gallery is small (it's the back room of a coffee shop), and the theme—"Invisible"—isn't very catchy. But Kay doesn't mind. She picked it

because she liked the people she met there. They were earnest and didn't know her at all. (There are still a few people at ArtNow who call her "the mushroom lady"; she still struggles with tuning them out.) Nobody made any comments when she brought in *The Passing of the Dragon*. Maybe they never saw it, or maybe they didn't care. (Solana is right that Kay overestimates the importance and power of the internet.) She hopes that at least a few people who saw the painting at the show found a positive and comforting way to make it part of their own pursuit of happiness.

She finds the roll of tape. She sits down, supporting the painting next to her on her purse so that it doesn't get wet. She rips pieces of fresh tape and tacks them on the cardboard piece in the back.

She stops to take a break. She's almost ready to add the front cardboard piece and secure it with the new pieces of tape. Then she'll wrap it up and brave the slippery sidewalk home, joining the crowd of weary pedestrians, each absorbed in their own coat and story, all ready to be anywhere but here.

The fog of her exhalation clears, revealing a man stopped in front of her. He's been walking for a long time, judging by the beard caked in flecks of ice. The red plaid trapper hat on his head is as ruddy as his cheeks. Annoyed pedestrians part around him like river water around a rock.

He's staring at the painting she's holding.

She tenses. *He recognizes it*. She readies herself for whatever stupid thing he's about to say.

"That's beautiful," he says. He lets out a long breath, and the condensation immediately adds to the frost in his beard.

She doesn't say anything, still unsure about him.

"We go through all this ..." His voice falters as he gestures at the world around them. He tries again. "And then to know something like that exists in the universe, and we're lucky enough to see it."

"In the painting?" she asks.

"No, that's not what I meant. Oh, I'm sorry, that ... that's rude." His face turns even redder. "I meant that I see something impossibly grand and beautiful has just gone through there, and this is the best we can do to remember it."

Her heart leaps. "The painting is called *The Passing of the Dragon*."

"Ah." He nods.

"Have you seen it?" she asks, not daring to believe.

"No, I've never seen a dragon," he says. "But I did hear the most incredible music, the music of the stars, once. It made my heart *sing*. I've never been able to hear it again, no matter how many times I've tried to recapture it. All I can remember now are faint echoes. Your painting ... it gives me the same feeling. You did an amazing job. It's the best thing I've ever seen."

For a moment, she's transported back to that Christmas Eve on Long Island Sound, when she briefly was in the presence of the dragon.

“Thank you,” she tells him. It’s inadequate, but these are all the words she can muster.

“Thank you,” he tells her. “Keep on painting the pictures you want to paint.”

“I will,” she says. She strains hard to not make another sound. It’s difficult to swallow and her eyes sting.

“Merry Christmas,” he says, and leaves. She watches as he disappears into the crowd.

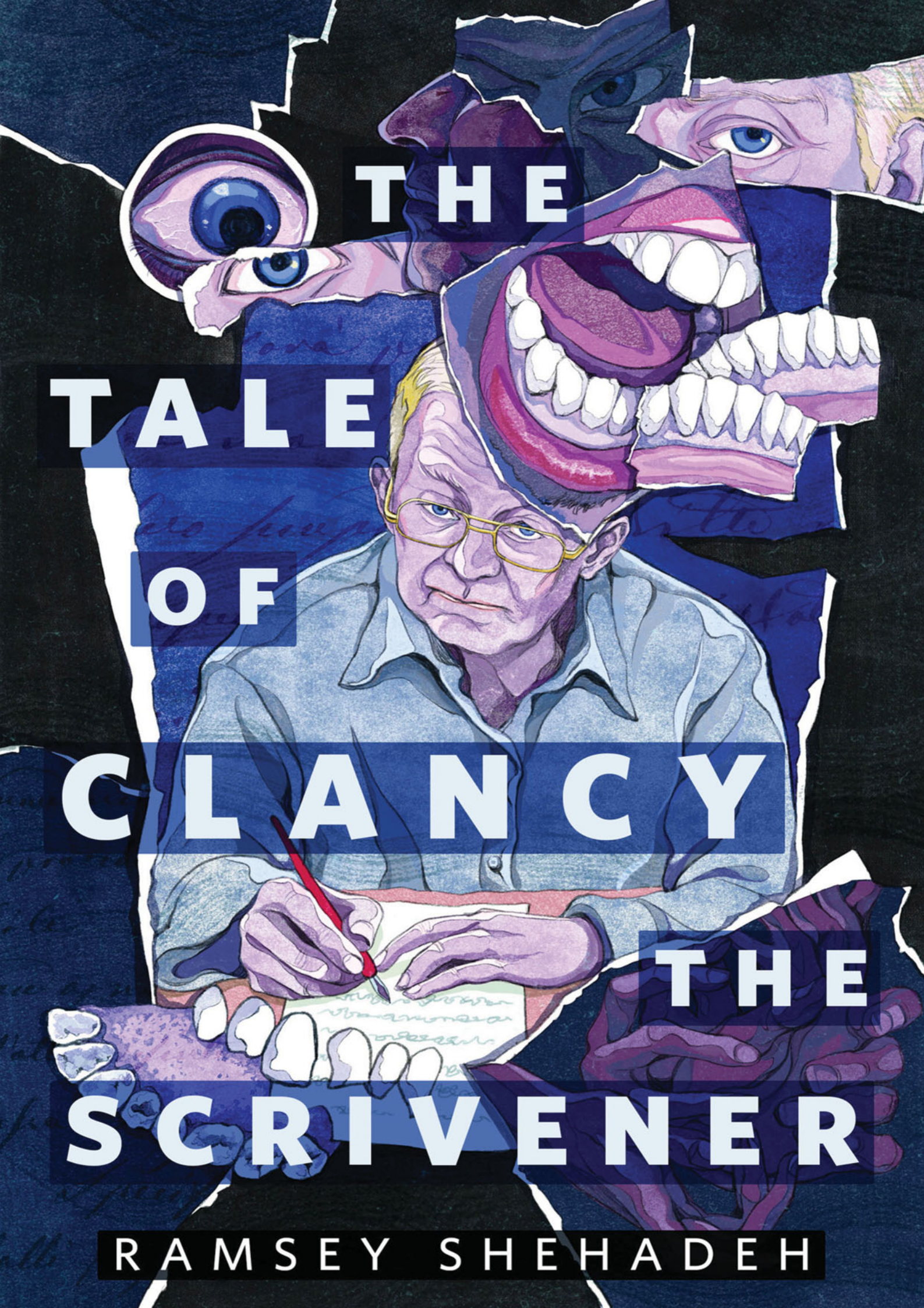
She doesn’t know when she’ll begin to paint again, not yet; she can imagine it though, and that already feels amazing.

She wraps up the painting, picks it up, and begins the long trek home, almost gliding along the ice, lifted by the light between her constituent atoms.



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THE
TALE
OF
CLANCY
THE
SCRIVENER

RAMSEY SHEHADEH

The Tale of Clancy the Scrivener

R A M S E Y S H E H A D E H

illustration by

W E S T O N W E I

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

The magazine is called *Antic: The Atari Resource*. It was published in 1984, but it's in perfect condition—or as close to it as can be expected for a century-old text. Its cover is bright yellow, with a picture of a jester popping out of a gray box. He's holding a joystick, and his head is a monitor.

The scavengers discovered it in the basement of a collapsed house twenty miles east of Yarrowdown. There were boxes and boxes of magazines, most of them lost to rats and water damage. By some miracle, this one survived.

I lay it carefully on my easel. Afternoon light filters through the scriptorium's front windows, illuminating scribes bent close over their texts. To my right, Harby works through a pulp detective novel; to my left, Teresa transcribes a fat textbook on microeconomics. There are twenty of us, sitting as we always do around four long tables arranged in a square in the center of the room. It's quiet, save for the sound of creaking chairs, sniffles and coughs and cleared throats, and the steady hiss of pen on paper. Occasionally Master Pascal, who sits supervising in the center of the square, rises to hold a murmured conference with one of the scribes.

Gently pinching a corner of the cover between thumb and forefinger, I open the magazine to its first page: an advertisement for a modem.

MPP-1000C Modem

Auto Answer / Auto Dial
Direct Connect to Phone Line
No Atari 850™ Interface Model Needed

New low price \$149.95

I stop, overwhelmed by memory. When I was young, I spent long hours using a device like this to log into contraband BBSes, browsing

forums and downloading pirated games, praying my mother didn't pick up the phone and kill the connection. The memories are distant and implausible: modems, computers, telephones, the infrastructure that bound them together, the electricity on which they relied. It feels like a dream.

A tap on my shoulder. I look up to see Pascal standing over me. "Woolgathering, Scrivener Clancy?" he says.

I realize that I've been simply staring at the ad for some time. "I believe I am. Forgive me, Master Pascal."

Teresa, sketching in a graph beside me, chuckles.

"See that it doesn't happen again," says Pascal, with a kindly smile. Before his ascension to Master Scrivener he was simply Pascal: a scribbler like the rest of us. He specialized in corporate brochures, but his great love was European travel agency pamphlets from the 1960s.

I root through my box and select a pen with a 4 mm nib, then draw out a fresh sheet of paper and begin. I transcribe everything: trademarks, company addresses, phone numbers, even the photographs, sketching them in to the best of my meager abilities. The Eternal Mother insists on absolute fidelity. *We must wrestle abstractions into submission*, she told us on one of her rare visits to the scriptorium. *Anything that cannot be fixed on the page is contraband. Anything that cannot be known utterly is a lie.*

As I work, I wonder whether I should bring this page to the censor's attention. The modem itself is unobjectionable: a solid thing with a single purpose that, once built, remained steadfastly what it was. But it was also the doorway to a purely abstract world, protean and unconnected to the stuff of reality. *It enabled an empire built on ether, disfigured by change*, I imagine Mother saying, in the strident cadences of her weekly sermons. *It was the death of knowledge, and the beginning of madness.*

The scriptorium is the antithesis of that empire. We capture the things the old world knew and immortalize them, salvaging what was real and preserving it on the page. Nothing is too trivial. Last week I transcribed a lovely little family cookbook, two dozen handwritten recipes on yellowing paper, bound loosely together and passed down the generations. The week before I copied a bus schedule for a route from Lakeforest Mall to Shady Grove Metro.

Mother's only requirement is that our texts be grounded in the fixed world. Their subject doesn't need to be true, but it must be *stable*. Scientific and engineering texts are always welcome. Fiction is generally allowed, so long as it's clearly identified as such. Literary memoirs are suspect, as they often straddle the line between reality and artifice. But holy texts are forbidden: the gods of the old world were intangible, unquantifiable and—worst of all—*malleable*, changing from generation to generation according to the needs of the faithful and the agendas of their priesthood.

Minutes of state legislatures: yes. Transcripts of sermons: no.

Darwinian evolution: yes. Lamarckian evolution: no.

Platonic forms: no. Aristotelean metaphysics: maybe. Postmodernist relativism: absolutely not.

And so on. The modem is on the edge of what's acceptable, but I decide to leave it in.

I move on to the editor's note, a retrospective of the magazine's first two years. I choose a pen with a finer nib and transcribe it quickly, moving down the page until I reach the final paragraph.

Well, that's last year; this computer business waits for no one. What are we planning? More of the same high-quality material by well-known and knowledgeable writers in the Atari world, continued dedication to accurate, readable listings, relevant production information and a genuine interest in things Atari.

This stops me. The editor's confidence in his magazine's future is bittersweet, certainly, and his quiet conviction that there would be a future for it to survive into is poignant. But the feeling it has unlocked in me is fear.

Another ancient memory floats to the surface, dark and glistening, unfolding like a serpent. Before I can look away I see myself standing in a narrow corridor between rows of stacked kennels, talking to a woman sitting with her back against one of the cages.

She's petting the Yorkie curled up in her lap. It's the golden summer between high school and college, the last day of my job at Montrose Pet Hotel. I'm eighteen years old. There's a dachshund straining at the end of the leash in my hand.

I squat down and ruffle the Yorkie's ears, glancing at its nametag. "*Edmund*," I say. "Weird dog name."

"I'm guessing they named him after Edmund of Langley," says the woman. "You know? First Duke of York."

Her name comes back to me across the decades: Allison. Allison has piercing green eyes, heavy black eyeliner and carmine lipstick. Her hair is piled on top of her head in thick, carefully disheveled curls. I've been working up the courage to ask her out for months.

"Right," I say, trying for something between knowing and sarcastic. "History nerds."

"History's a pretty cool thing to be nerdy about."

"Totally! Yeah. Totally. I'm totally pro-nerd." It's an inauspicious beginning. I forge on. "Hey, listen, *They Might Be Giants* is playing at the 9:30 Club tonight. I was wondering if you want ... I mean, if you'd like to..." I trail off.

She looks down at Edmund, scratching between his ears. "Are you trying to ask me out?"

"Yes," I say, relieved. "Thank you."

She smiles without looking up. I remember the little flutter of hope in my belly.

Then her eyes widen, and something new comes into them. Confusion, first, and then fear. Her cheeks puff out and her chest contracts, as if she's about to be sick. When she opens her mouth to speak her tongue flops out and drapes itself over her chin. And then it keeps coming, swelling as it emerges, snaking down to her chest like a necktie.

The Yorkie looks up at her, twisting its head left and right. The dachshund yaps and skitters backward, tugging at its leash. Allison surges to her feet, making a choking, strangled noise around the trunk of her tongue, staring down at it, and then at me, terror battling revulsion in her eyes. She tries to stuff it back in her mouth. But there's too much of it, and it's still coming.

Finally she turns and runs, clutching her tongue's thickening coils against her chest. I hear the door to the front bang open. Someone screams.

Everyone who was there when the plague began had a story like this: their first brush with the wave of spontaneous mutations that tore

through humanity, leaving twisted bodies and desperate monsters in its wake. This is mine. There are far worse images ambered in my mind—an anchorman’s head splitting gently apart as he read the evening news, spilling its contents down the front of his crisp white shirt; the thing my mother became, a head and thorax suspended between an arched profusion of arms, lifting her bloody face out of the remains of our dog—but Allison was the first.

I’m saved by the sound of the scriptorium’s door opening. I blink the nightmare away and look up to see Priscilla slipping quietly into the room and crossing to the long low bookcase on the opposite wall. She clambers onto it and settles down, cross-legged, on the top shelf.

Priscilla is a slight girl, nearly ten now, with wide onyx eyes and a serious mien that belies her years. She visits every afternoon, precisely an hour before evensong, to watch us at our quiet work. I don’t know why she does this, and there’s no asking her—she does not speak. Her steady gaze drinks everything in and gives nothing back. But her arrival is a sudden wash of light, chasing all these terrible memories back into the darkness.

I catch her eye and smile. She looks at me impassively for a moment, then away.

A throat clears. I look over to find Pascal staring at me. He inclines his head toward my easel, arching an eyebrow.

I smile and draw out a new sheet, and begin on the letters to the editor.

The afternoon proceeds peacefully, marked only by the slow shifting of the sun; the light slants through the western windows as it wanes, creeping across the floor and then climbing the far wall, spotlighting Priscilla as it rises.

At dusk, Master Pascal stands. “Thank you, I think that will do for today,” he says. “We’ll resume tomorrow, at lauds.”

And with that the silence breaks, like a great exhalation. Nineteen scribes stand up, stretch, put away their materials, chatting quietly. I envy their dexterity. It has been some time since I could simply rise from a chair, without several minutes of awkward effort.

A pleasant murmur fills the room. Teresa closes her text. “Plans for the evening, Clancy?”

“I have an appointment with that young lady,” I say, inclining my head toward Priscilla. “You?”

“Dinner with Claude.” She makes a face. “I think he’s going to try another one of his beet recipes on me.”

“Be steadfast, my dear. Beets can’t be in season forever.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself.” She smiles, ruefully, and picks up her bag. “Goodnight, Clancy.”

I watch her hurry out of the room. This work is hard on the young: their whole lives lie ahead of them, aching to be lived; they shouldn’t be spending their days transcribing the remains of a dead world. It’s a task best suited to people like me. I’ve lived enough lives. I’ll gladly dwell in the past until the end of my days.

Pascal wanders over and sits beside me as the room empties. “You were more distractible than usual today, old man,” he says.

I gesture at the text. “This one brings back some memories.” And then, realizing what I’ve said: “My grandfather told me about magazines like this.”

Pascal nods, his expression betraying nothing. He’s a small, fastidious, obsessively tidy man who arranges his pens in equidistant parallel lines and speaks in clipped bursts—each word carefully vetted, shaped, curated, and then dropped into place. We sat beside each other for the better part of a decade. Secrets are difficult to keep in those circumstances. He knows mine, I suspect—or the outlines of it—and I know his.

One day, in the third year of our acquaintance, I looked up to see an eruption on the side of his head: tiny hillocks rising from his skin just below the hairline, like a gathering tide, and rippling across to his forehead before subsiding again into his skull. It was the first of many such small incidents. A few years later, while we were chatting, I watched the pupil of his left eye stretch into an oval, strain for a moment, and then bud into two pupils; and then four; and then eight; until his eye was a swimming colony of tiny black holes.

I suspect that Pascal’s meticulous self-control is, at least in part, an effort to keep these little incidents at bay. The plague has touched him only lightly, but Mother does not make those sorts of distinctions: any changelings discovered within Yarrowdown’s walls are swiftly executed.

“Well,” says Pascal, standing. “Good evening, Clancy.” He turns to Priscilla. “And good evening to you, young lady.”

Priscilla stares at him. He smiles, nods, and crosses to the door. When he’s gone, she slides off the bookcase and approaches me.

I pull my cane out from under the chair, moving even more slowly than usual—I woke this morning to an ache that permeates my body, thrumming steadily like a migraine. It has been with me for nearly a week, worsening with each new day. I do not begrudge time its price, but this pain is something else. It pulses with the dull urgency of a premonition.

If the past is any indication, it will soon reach its crescendo. This time, I will end things before it can.

Priscilla watches me impassively as I heave myself to my feet. “Hello my dear,” I say. “Where shall we go today?”

She studies me, and says nothing.

I furrow my brow theatrically, in a pantomime of deep thought. “Now that I think of it, I believe that Mademoiselle Calax has prepared a fresh batch of peach ice cream. Perhaps we should pay her a visit?”

Her eyes widen slightly—a cataract of emotion, for Priscilla. *Which* emotion, exactly, I cannot say.

She arrived at Yarrowdown ten years ago, nestled in Ost’s arms. A scavenging party found her in a culvert, still tethered by an umbilical cord to her mother’s corpse. Priscilla lay on her back, staring up at the sky, tiny fists balled at her side, blinking slowly. She stirred only when Ost lifted her, turning her head to study her rescuer with flat, implacable curiosity.

“Mademoiselle Calax it is, then,” I say. I know better than to hold out my hand—Priscilla does not like to be touched—so I simply turn and make for the door. She falls in beside me, matching my glacial pace.

Watcher Croesus is sitting at the front desk, staring at the opposite wall. He turns his tonsured head slightly as we approach. “Done for the day, Scrivener Clancy?” he says.

There is something of the derelict motel to the man: at rest he seems not just absent but *uninhabited*. When he rouses himself to speak it is as if he has only recently arrived.

“Yes, Watcher Croesus. Another day gone.”

“May they follow one upon the other.” He turns his attention to Priscilla. His face, blank as death, sharpens into disquieting attention. “And what did you learn among the scribes today, little girl?”

I lay a hand on her shoulder, feeling a sudden urge to whisk her away from that impassive, smothering regard. She flinches, but does not throw me off.

“Priscilla does not speak, Watcher Croesus.”

“Yes,” he says. “One wonders—is she incapable of it? Or is it a choice?”

“I hope she will tell us one day.”

His eyes flick up to meet mine. “I wonder what she’ll say when she does.” He smiles, thinly, and holds my gaze for a long moment. There are whispers that the child that dwells unborn inside the Eternal Mother can project its mind beyond the womb, and that Croesus is one of its favorite vessels. Whenever a changeling is exposed in Yarrowdown, say the wags, Croesus is never far away. I do not put much stock in the superstitions surrounding the Eternal Mother, but it seems plain to me that Croesus is one of her spies.

“Have a pleasant evening, Watcher Croesus,” I say, and turn away, ushering Priscilla down the stairs to the exit. I feel his eyes boring into my back, and take care not to hurry. This is no great effort. I’ve been incapable of hurrying for some time now.

Outside, dusk fades steadily into night. I give Priscilla my cane and descend the stairs to the street, one hand on the rail, the other on her shoulder. We step into the throng and turn south, down Tributary Walsh.

The streets are humming with activity. I recognize only a few of the faces. It was once possible to know everyone in Yarrowdown, but our numbers have swollen over the years. Twice now, Mother has razed and rebuilt the settlement’s walls farther out, to make room for our burgeoning tribe. The top of the south wall rises over the roofline at the bottom of Tributary Walsh. Spotters move back and forth along its parapet, scanning the horizon.

I see Teresa in the lot across from the scriptorium, chatting with Claude, who’s holding a large, purple, papier-mâché llama’s head. She waves at me, then takes the llama head from him and mounts it on the metal post behind her home.

Most of the scribes live in this lot, each claiming a number of parking spaces according to their rank. Teresa's house, an ancient station wagon, is parked lengthwise across her two spaces. She's removed its tires and torn out most of the interior to make room for a cot and a low table, and hung seafoam-green curtains across the windows. A long planter sits at the head of her plot, filled with neat rows of succulents. The post on which she's mounting the head belonged to a parking meter once—but Teresa can no more imagine this than she could conceive of her house speeding down the road in rush hour traffic.

We reach the bottom of the boulevard, where it feeds into the hard river, and turn north toward the boulangerie. The river's slow asphalt groan is mostly obscured by the bright hum of the crowds moving along its banks, hemmed in on one side by storefronts and by the river on the other. I watch a young woman vault the railing and scamper laughing across its uneven surface, to the delight of her friends.

The hard river was a road once, stretching north from the old capitol to the continental fissure. It came alive soon after the plague began, turning overnight into a churning, half-molten, miles-long serpent. In those early days it ate anything that strayed too close to its banks, shooting out pseudopods of molten tar to drag unwary creatures beneath its surface, where it ground them steadily apart. Its low roiling growl reverberated for miles; I'm told. You could hear it day and night, mixed in with the screams of its victims.

But it has stilled over the years, and now appears to be frozen into miles and miles of tempest-tossed asphalt waves and jagged troughs. It's still alive, though; if you stare long enough, you can see it moving, very slightly. Every so often it rouses itself to eat. Last year Uriah Compost, reeling from drink, danced singing along its surface until a fissure opened and swallowed him whole. It took him a day to die. You could hear his muffled screams all through the compound.

The young woman jumps back onto the sidewalk, unscathed and still laughing. I smile at her, despite myself.

At the intersection with Tributary Leland we pass beneath the remains of old Prescott, hanging high above the throngs. He died yesterday, but Mother has not yet taken him down. In life, he was a kindly old man with an occasional tendency to become *two* kindly old men, joined at the back. When he was discovered, in the throes of his

Change, Mother had her men tear him apart. She crucified one of him here, and the other him just outside the walls, as a warning to any other secret changelings who might consider insinuating themselves into the society of Yarrowdown. The shaft of the cross is stained with the blood oozing from the tattered remains of his back, where he was once attached to himself. His chin rests on his narrow chest. His dead eyes bulge out of their sockets, staring out at nothing.

I see Priscilla looking up at him too and—seeking to distract her—bend down and point at the seamstress’s shop beside us. “I ate kebabs there when I was a boy, you know.”

Priscilla looks at me, then at the glass storefront. A woman sits in the window, repairing a dress on her sewing machine, peddling steadily at the treadle.

“It was called *Moby Dick*—the restaurant, I mean. Moby Dick was a whale from an old book.” I look at her, trying to decide if she knows what a whale is.

Watcher Croesus was right: I tell Priscilla my secrets. The old memories rise relentlessly to the surface in my dotage, no longer willing to remain buried. They superimpose themselves on the hard river now, smoothing its fractured surface into four lanes, raising stoplights at the intersections, re-erecting lighted signs over the storefronts. Here’s the Army Surplus store where young posers bought pocket knives and goths shopped for combat boots. There’s the steakhouse where I went on my first date, with a lovely frizzy-haired girl a head taller than me who sat chattering happily beside me in the backseat of a Civic as we sped down Route 355 in Friday night traffic.

I can’t talk to anyone about these things, not even Pascal or Ost: they’re ancient history, too long-ago for anyone alive now to remember. I shouldn’t be telling Priscilla about them either. I don’t know why I do.

“I came here with my friends,” I say. “If it was late enough they’d let us sit by the window for hours.” We stand watching the seamstress work. The crowd parts and seals around us, a few of them smiling at Priscilla, perhaps seeing an old man and his granddaughter out for a walk. It’s a lovely notion. The warmth of it saturates me, dulling for a moment the steady thrum of pain.

“We should go, my dear,” I say, presently. She nods—another single, sharp declination of her chin—and turns toward north.

Mademoiselle Calax's boulangerie is on the south bank of the river. We cross at Second Bridge and mount three short steps to a pink-and-blue door. A small bell tinkles merrily when we open it.

The boulangerie's front room is large and airy, with high ceilings and small tables scattered across its tile floor. One long, communal table stretches across the width of the front window. Mademoiselle sits there, chatting with a clutch of mummies still in stage dress. She looks up when we enter.

"Priscilla!" she cries, rushing over. "My, you're bigger every time I see you!" She leans in close, lowering her voice to a stage whisper. "I've put aside some ice cream for you."

Priscilla regards her for a long moment, considering. She looks up at me, then back to the Mademoiselle.

"Oh," says Mademoiselle, her face falling. "I'm afraid there's only enough for you, my dear."

Calax was born Annie Crenshaw, in the sentient city of Chicago. She crossed eastward along the continental fissure when she was a child, part of that murderous city's diaspora. She dresses like a Parisian model from the '60s, a style culled from the crumbling fashion magazines her mother left her. It befits her narrow, angular frame.

"I would gladly settle for one of Mademoiselle's excellent eclairs," I say.

"Then it is decided!" says Calax, clapping her hands together. She disappears into the back and returns a moment later with a perfect dome of peach ice cream in a shallow china bowl. A sculpturally exquisite éclair sits on the tray beside it.

"You have outdone yourself, Mademoiselle," I say.

Calax flushes. "You are too kind, monsieur."

We take the tray to the long bar set against the front window. Priscilla clambers onto one of the high stools and begins to eat: slowly, methodically, letting the ice cream melt in her mouth between each bite.

I watch her, feeling a smile play across my face. The plague struck before I was old enough to even imagine children of my own, and in its aftermath there was only the will to survive. Perhaps that's why I was so drawn to Priscilla when she arrived. I've watched her grow from a silent infant into a silent girl. When Ost asked if I would help take care of her, I happily agreed.

We've toured all of Yarrowdown together, Priscilla and I. I've taken her to mummer's shows and harpsichord concertos on the green; stood with her at the playground while she watched the other children at play; walked along the top of the wall to show her the ruins outside of Yarrowdown, and the hard river cutting a straight course through them—north to the fissure, south toward Obdurate Mary's territory. I've learned to notice the slightest shifts in her mood, and understand what they mean. I've seen her brief flashes of unguarded joy; I've held her when the demons overtook her and she withdrew, overwhelmed, into herself, to a place that not even Ost could reach.

It wasn't long before her joys became my own, and her occasional sorrows cut me to the quick. In those times I remember how my mother looked at me sometimes, with an inscrutable admixture of happiness and pain.

I look out the window. The memory of the setting sun ochres the horizon. Two lamplighters walk along either side of the hard river with their long flame-tipped poles, igniting the lamps that line its banks, leaving pools of flickering illumination in their wake. Lovers walk hand in hand in the gentle chiaroscuro.

Sitting beside Priscilla, watching this narrow slice of Yarrowdown, it's possible to imagine a better world: a past that's more than a tapestry of despair, a future not saturated with horror. I used to believe that these moments of grace were the delusions of a desperate mind, erecting a wall of lies around what remained of its capacity for hope. But I've come to see them for what they are: precious gifts, rare, and beautiful, and indispensable.

I'll be leaving all of this tonight. I've lived through five renewals since the plague began. The pain saturating my body augurs a sixth, and very soon. I told myself that the gift of life justified the agony, but I no longer believe that: the changes renew my body, but they do nothing for the withered places in my mind. I've plodded on for no reason I can name, beyond the guttural impulse to survive. Life long ago lost its savor. It's time to end it.

My only regret is leaving Priscilla. She has complicated things.

"Well," I say, reluctantly. "It's time we got back, don't you think? Ost will be worried."

Priscilla stacks her bowl on top of my plate and clambers off her stool and carries the tray to Mademoiselle Calax.

We cross the bridge and walk back in the cooling night. Watcher Croesus is still at his post when we enter the scriptorium, but he has retreated inside of himself, and does not stir. We take the stairs down to the lower level.

Two perpendicular corridors stretch out from the vestibule at the bottom of the stairs, with rooms on either side. These were classrooms once, before the plague, but they're apartments now. We turn down the rightmost corridor, toward Ost's room.

She opens her door before I can knock. "*There you are,*" she says, kneeling down to give Priscilla a hug. She looks up at me. Ost is a stout woman with broad Inuit features and kind eyes that bely the stern glare she's giving me now. "You're late, old man."

"My apologies," I say, smiling. "Time passes quickly in such excellent company. We visited Mademoiselle—"

The pain chooses that moment to slip its fetters. It surges suddenly through me, as if someone has touched an electrical wire to the base of my spine: racing through my body, lighting it afire, tearing down the barriers between my senses, flooding them all at once. I smell the pain. I hear it. I taste it.

When I become aware of the world again I am on my knees. Priscilla is beside me, at eye level now. Fear has replaced her mask of impassivity.

Ost is leaning over me, one hand on my shoulder. "Clancy," she says. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," I say, waving them off. "I'm fine." There's something burgeoning inside of me, a pressure against the inside of my skin. "Just light-headed." I try to stand, but cannot muster the strength. "Would you two help an old man up?"

They position themselves on either side of me and half-lift me to my feet. The pain crouches, hackles raised, gathering its strength for the final pounce. There isn't much time.

"Thank you," I say. "I think I'd better get some rest."

"We'll help you to your room," says Ost.

"No no, I'll be fine." Priscilla looks stricken. I smile at her. "Don't worry, my dear. I'll see you tomorrow, yes?" I regret the lie immediately,

and not just because I suspect she can see through it: it's deeply unfair. Hope is a rare and delicate thing.

"Goodnight then," I say, and turn away. Hurrying now, I make my way to the end of the hall and turn toward my room.

It's unusual for a mere scrivener to have lodgings in the scriptorium, but I pled my old bones and was granted a small room at the very end of the eastern wing. I enter it now, close the door and lock it.

I stagger over to the table beside my bed and light a candle, then yank open the drawer and pull out the knife: a stiletto with a long, wicked blade. I tear open my shirt and press the blade to my skin, between the third and fourth ribs. One quick thrust into the heart, diagonally and upward to compromise as many chambers as possible. It will be fatal, and quick—too quick, I hope, for my body to reverse.

But I hesitate. Priscilla's face surfaces out of the pain. I see her watching the other children at play. I see her returning Croesus's steady glare. Eating Mademoiselle Calax's ice cream with muted, meticulous pleasure. Sitting cross-legged on the scriptorium's bookshelf, waiting for me to finish my day's work. And then I see her doing all those things, alone.

A century ago I worshipped a benevolent god. The plague made a mockery of that faith, and in its aftermath I found myself with a choice: believe in an unimaginably cruel god, or in no god at all. I chose the latter. It was an easy decision at the time. But it has robbed me of an afterlife, and of the hope of seeing Priscilla there one day.

I put the knife aside. The pain comes in waves now, tidal striations that wash higher with each new surge, threatening to incapacitate me entirely. I rummage through the drawer again until I find the wooden stick I put there when I first moved into this room; it's walnut, hard enough not to shatter between my teeth. I put it in my mouth and bite down just as the first scream tears out of my body. The sound that emerges is strangled, and too loud. I glance at the door.

The wave subsides—gathering itself, I know, for the final assault. I drop to my knees, then topple onto my side. It has been nearly twenty years since the last time, but everything happening inside of me feels as familiar as yesterday. The pain barrels toward its apex, and then somehow, obscenely, spirals past it. I bite down harder on the stick. Begin to lose awareness. The pressure in my core swells. My mind

conjures images of my body's dissolution. Skin separating from muscle. Muscle separating from bone. Organs liquifying. Seeping out through the interstices of my disintegrating skin. Pooling beneath me in a viscous slurry. A terrible heat. A vertiginous emptiness.

One person has witnessed this transformation, an old woman who gave me shelter in her basement many years ago. She described my eyes deliquescing and leaking down my cheeks like tears; my ears sloughing away; my body deflating as it purged itself of itself. When I stopped screaming there was only the crack of new bones bursting through the husks of the old, the liquid squelch of my new body reforming in the detritus of its remains, and a kind of knitting, *hissing* sound.

My senses have failed. I am only a guttering awareness now. A creature of pure agony, cocooned in darkness.

Let me go whispers the awareness to itself as I
flail
burn
end
begin

★ ★ ★

When I open my eyes the candle has melted down to its base, flickering over a pool of wax. I blink myopically at the shapes it doesn't quite illuminate: the shadow of my bed, the shape of the table, the dim glinting line of the stiletto. A faint nimbus of light outlines the door.

I realize that I'm only seeing with one eye. I wonder for a moment if the other failed to survive the transition, but soon realize that there's something blocking it. I reach up with a trembling hand to peel off the obstruction and examine it in the flickering candlelight: a flap of skin, a remnant of my old face. I can just make out the deep wrinkles of my forehead, the familiar scar at the temple.

I lie still for a moment longer and then, gathering my strength, tear at the spent cocoon of myself and clamber out of it. I struggle to my feet and look down at the remains of what I was. There isn't much left: a discarded husk of skin in the liquified remains of my body. Bits of bone speckle the slurry.

For a moment I simply stare at it, unsure how to proceed. Most of my previous transformations have been outside. I retrieve two buckets and a

basin from the corner of the room and, working slowly, decant most of my remains into them. Then I take up a mop and swab at the floor.

It's sweaty, unpleasant work, but I'm only slightly winded when it's finished. My old body would have wilted under the strain.

I pick up my candle and go to the mirror. My face is still slick with the effluvia of the transformation, but I can see the changes clearly: the wrinkles that scored my cheeks are much fainter now, the thick purses under my eyes merely bags. The eyes clearer, less rheumy. Much of my hair has returned, in some semblance of its original color.

I'm older than I was after my last transformation, but markedly younger than I was yesterday. It will be noticed.

I pick up my scissors and cut away at the new hair on top of my head, then use a razor to trim it close to the scalp. There isn't much I can do at the moment about my new face; I'll wear a hat to keep it in shadow until I can borrow some makeup from the courtesans.

My neighbors are beginning to stir now; through the thin walls, I hear them grumbling out of bed, preparing for the new day. A door opens nearby, and clicks softly shut.

I cover the buckets, then look at the mirror again. I stoop my shoulders by degrees and shuffle experimentally around the room, affecting a limp, until I'm satisfied with the effect.

Then I pick up one of the buckets and open the door and limp outside, into the new day.

★ ★ ★

The last page of *Antic* is a series of capsule product reviews. I squint at their tiny text through my spectacles. I don't need them anymore, and looking through them all afternoon has given me a slight headache. I take them off and rub at my temples. I'll need to find a pretext to ask Master Glazier for a pair of simple glass lenses.

It's taken me much of the afternoon to finish the last few pages. I'll be sad when it's done—I've enjoyed dwelling in my past. But it's good to move on. There's so much of the present to be lived.

Pascal stands to dismiss us. "That'll do for today, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you."

The usual shuffle and murmur. I finish copying the last sentence of the last page, and close the magazine. When I look up, I see Pascal

studying me with a slight smile. “You seem well today, Clancy.”

It’s an alarming statement. I’ve taken care to move like an old man all day, and spoken as little as possible. No one seems to have noticed anything: partly because of my subterfuge, but mostly—I suspect—because of the natural invisibility of the elderly.

I return his smile. “The weather agrees with my querulous old bones.”

“It brings me joy to see it,” he says. “Tomorrow, then.” He gathers his things together and bustles out of the room, nodding at Priscilla.

The scriptorium is empty now, save for Priscilla and me. She slides off the bookshelf and makes her way over to me, moving with her usual clockwork precision. I turn in my seat, shoulders hunched, making a grunting show of it. “Well, my dear? What should we do today?”

She does not answer, of course. But there’s something new in her gaze: curiosity, and then apprehension, and then alarm. She sweeps her eyes over my face, down to my feet, then back up again.

I wait, saying nothing.

She reaches up and touches my cheek, sliding the tips of her fingers across shallow lines that were once deeper wrinkles. She withdraws her hand and stares at me, the wonder draining away until all that’s left is her silent, penetrating regard.

I consider lying to her again, but it would be futile—she sees a great deal more than most people. More importantly: I don’t want to.

“Shall we keep this between us, my dear?”

She says nothing. I stand up, reaching under my seat to retrieve my cane. Then round my shoulders, lower myself into a stoop, and bend my head into the shadow of my hat’s brim. “Better?” I say, winking at her.

She studies me critically for a moment, and nods.

“Good. Perhaps a walk in the park today?”

Watcher Croesus turns his head as we enter the lobby. “Good evening, Scrivener Clancy.”

“Good evening, Watcher Croesus,” I say.

“Productive day?”

“It was, thank you.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” He stares at me, lips pressed into a thin line.

“Well,” I say. “We should be on our way.”

“You seem different,” he says.

“Do I?” I keep my expression neutral.

“Yes. Less—if you’ll forgive me—decrepit.”

“Master Pascal said much the same thing,” I say, allowing myself a small chuckle. “Although—if you’ll forgive *me*, Watcher Croesus—he said it a bit more tactfully. I doubt it’s anything permanent. I have good days and bad.”

“Indeed.” He studies me a moment longer, then shifts his gaze to Priscilla. “Do you see it, young lady? Something different in your elderly friend?”

She returns Croesus’s steady gaze, then looks up at me. She shakes her head, and takes my hand.

Croesus smiles, thinly. “The young are precious, but unobservant.” He turns away from us both. “Good evening, Scrivener Clancy.”

But I’m still looking down at Priscilla’s little hand in mine. This moment, in exchange for a century of suffering. It’s a fair trade.

The writer would like to thank James Capparell for granting permission to quote from his editorial in ANTIC magazine.



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FORM 8774-D

ALEX IRVINE



FORM 8774-D

ALEX IRVINE

ILLUSTRATION BY
ZOE VAN DIJK

T O R
D O T
C O M

UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

BUREAU OF METAHUMAN, MUTANT, AND OCCULT AFFAIRS

**FORM 8774-D AFFIRMATION OF EMERGENT METAHUMAN,
MUTANT, AND/OR OCCULT ABILITIES/POWERS**

I. PERSONAL INFORMATION

a. Applicant

Answer each question as completely as possible. Incomplete fields will delay processing, verification, and certification of metahuman/mutant/occult practitioner status. Use only black or blue ink.

Name: _____ Alias(es): _____

Address: _____

Date of Birth: _____ This timeline? yes ___ no ___

If no, indicate date of birth in future: _____

alternate timeline:

Gender, if any: _____

Clone? yes ___ no ___

If yes, indicate time and place of creation, if known. _____

Cyborg? yes ___ no ___

If yes, indicate nature and function of cybernetic implants.

Citizenship: _____ Recognized terrestrial nation-state? yes__ no__

If no, planet of origin¹:

Thursday, 8:47 a.m.

Leelee's second cup of coffee hasn't even worked its pitiful magic yet, she hasn't finished deleting all her work emails or swiping down through the office Slack channel just so it's resting on the current message if her supervisor happens to come by and notice. Eight friggin forty-seven, and the superwannabe comes through the door. No knock, no hesitation. Her first appointment isn't until nine. "Excuse me. Miss Remsburg?"

Leelee nods. No point denying it.

"I'm Plumeria Reynolds. I believe I have an appointment. I know I'm a little early, but"—she looks slightly embarrassed but also weirdly proud of herself—"I just couldn't wait!"

Leelee could send her back out into the waiting room to wait for thirteen minutes, but what the hell, nothing is happening in here and if she starts early maybe that means, by some law of conservation of impatient applicants, that a thirteen-minute break will appear later in the day.

Ha.

"Sure," she says. "Have a seat."

Leelee has her own office, with a door and everything, an unusual perk for someone at her service level but mandated because many of the discussions that happen in said office are of a deeply private nature. It isn't easy to apply for recognition of metahuman or mutant abilities. There's a stigma. There's also an awesome factor, but Leelee knows that the supers who revel in the awesome without understanding the stigma and the burden are boarding the express train to Villain-Ville. She makes a note about them in her file.

Plumeria Reynolds, at first glance, does not appear to be such a person. She's wearing a skirt and blouse from a mall store—perfectly fine

but unremarkable, unlike many of Leelee's clients who come in wearing costumes of their own design and brandishing various fake weapons and artifacts. The real ones don't make it through security screening.

"You've filled out Form 8774-D?" Ms. Reynolds nods. "Let me just take a look."

Form 8774-D, *Affirmation of Emergent Metahuman, Mutant and/or Occult Abilities/Powers*, is just the first step in the process of being vetted and certified—but it's a critical step, and the hardest, because the temptation is to lie, to make yourself sound better, to be a Thanos in a world of Ant-Men. A big part of Leelee's job is working through Form 8774-D with claimants to get their answers in order so they don't get embarrassed later.

Plumeria Reynolds's form indicates that she is neither a clone nor a cyborg, and that she was born on Planet Earth. She claims powers of flight and energy projection, manifesting after...Leelee squints but can't quite make it out. "When did your powers first manifest?" she asks.

"Oh, my handwriting," Plumeria says apologetically. "I can hardly read it myself. The whole thing started on a fishing boat, if you can believe that. I was thirteen. My uncle caught some strange creature, none of us knew what it was, and my father told me not to touch it." She shrugs. "But I did. It was kind of slimy, and the slime got into me, I guess. Next thing I knew, I could do...well, all the things I wrote on the form there." She ends with a self-effacing little laugh that Leelee finds painfully endearing.

Leelee makes a note on Plumeria's form. "Okay," she says.

"Weird, right?" Plumeria leans forward. "But you probably hear lots of weird stories in your job," she adds, clearly hoping Leelee will repeat some of them.

"I sure do," Leelee says. "But you know, privacy laws..." It's her turn to shrug.

"Of course, sure." Plumeria nods a bit too energetically.

Leelee finishes scanning the form. "Everything appears to be in order," she says.

"Great!" Plumeria beams. "So when can I start?"

Inwardly Leelee cringes. How can so many people not read the basic instructions? When you download Form 8774-D from the department's website it comes with instructions. When applying for certified metahuman status, an applicant literally cannot get the form without the

instructions and an overview of the process. Yet several times a week she runs into this situation.

“This is not a recruiting office,” she says. The speech comes out on autopilot, she’s given it so many times. “The Bureau of Metahuman, Mutant, and Occult Affairs does not put you in touch with any other superheroes. We do not send you out on missions. What we do in this office is decide whether your particular suite of powers and abilities qualifies you to be a Certified Superhuman Practitioner. What you do with that certification is up to you...although several superhero organizations do keep tabs on what we do here.” She leans closer to Plumeria, because she likes her and wants to give her a little inside info. “Plus I know for a fact that the Dimensional Defense Agency has someone psionically monitoring our clerical staff, so if you fit their profile, they’ll be reaching out to you toot sweet. Possibly via your dreams.” Leelee winks, and then she’s all business again. “Your next step will be a demonstration of your abilities. Our department scheduler will contact you about that. Expect it to take a week or so.”

“Oh.” Plumeria is disappointed but trying not to show it. This makes Leelee like her more. “How long before the demonstration, once it’s scheduled?”

“We’re typically scheduling six to eight weeks out,” Leelee says. “I know it’s a long time to wait after you’ve worked up your courage to take this big step, and I wish it could be sooner. But that’s the process, you know?”

She stands and so does Plumeria. “What do you think?” Plumeria asks. “About my chances, I mean?”

“It’s not up to me,” Leelee says. “I just make sure the forms are filled out right. It’s all about the demonstration, and if you can do what the form says you can do, I can’t see any reason why they wouldn’t certify you.” She gives Plumeria a map to the demonstration site, way outside DC past Dulles Airport.

“Thank you for helping me,” Plumeria says. Then she leans in a little closer and asks, “Were you serious about the Dimensional Defense Agency?”

“Oh, yeah,” Leelee says, the *yeah* sounding more like *yah* because you can take the girl out of the Upper Peninsula but you can’t take the UP out of the girl. “They totally keep an eye on what we’re doing here. Drives our security guys crazy.”

They share a laugh and Leelee sees Plumeria out the door. That wasn't so bad, she thinks. Her coffee isn't even all the way cold.

★ ★ ★

At lunch she's talking with Drogba, one of the security guys. Everyone in BMMOA security is a super, usually a disabled vet from the Armageddon Phalanx or the Thule Armada, cashiered out of active service but still potent enough to keep most baby would-bes in line. "Tell you what," Drogba says around a mouthful of cafeteria lo mein, "no offense, but if I was just starting out now? No way I'd apply. Why do you think people do it?"

"A lot of them want to serve," Leelee says. "But there's also a lot who just want the validation. They want other people to know they're special. Didn't you?"

Back in the day, Drogba was known as The String, for his ability to manipulate matter at the subatomic level. The final battle of the Vortex Singularity left him a shadow of his former self, after he nearly tore himself apart creating a wormhole to drain the singularity out of space-time and into an interdimensional void. That kind of power, the kind of sacrifice, Leelee can barely imagine. Most people, even at BMMOA, don't know Drogba's story, but one of Leelee's skills is that people tend to tell her things.

"Nah," he says now, and she thinks he's sincere. "I figured once they saw what I could do, I'd be all set. Ain't no point in false modesty."

"True enough," she says. She's still thinking about that later when she gets home and finds Samir on the couch watching baseball. He's made dinner. They eat in front of the TV, half-heartedly arguing about what to watch. Leelee gets tired around ten. She takes her time getting ready for bed, and by the time she's crawling in Samir comes into the bedroom yawning. Everything happens in its prescribed order. Phones on chargers, alarms set, blankets shuffled around, lights out.

Every day is pretty much the same. Leelee likes it that way.

b. Applicant's Family

Name(s) of parent(s): _____

Address of parents if not same as above: _____

Planet of origin of parents if not Earth: _____ Alternate dimension?
yes__ no__

If yes, name dimension and indicate means of access (portal, wormhole, etc.)

Race of parents if not *Homo sapiens* ²: _____

If different races:

Parent 1 _____ Gender, if known: _____

Parent 2 _____ Gender, if known: _____

Other _____ Gender, if known: _____

Wednesday, 10:05 a.m.

This is one of the sad cases. Well, lots of them are sad, because people are so often deluded about what kind of powers they really have. But to Leelee, the saddest ones are the kids. Specifically, the kids whose parents have decided to ride the child's powers to the narcissistic Promised Land of Super Parenthood. The place where vicarious living, parasitic validation, and insincere performative patriotism mix. Leelee has spent way too much time observing the inhabitants of this terrible place, and it sure looks like she's about to make a return visit. She calls them NVPs, Narcissistic Vicarious Parents. The usage has spread through the office, a phenomenon of which she is inordinately proud.

They're five minutes late, just enough to let Leelee know they're calling the shots. Mom's all smiles, wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase. She strides in, reaching to shake Leelee's hand and present herself as the one in charge. "Angie Brooks," she says. Dad and the candidate slouch in behind her, two peas in a pod. "This is my husband, Derek, and daughter, Emmaline."

Emmaline is thirteen, skinny, shoulders hunched, doesn't make eye contact. Hair a patchwork of different dye jobs. She wears waffle-stitch long sleeves to hide the cutting scars under a My Chemical Romance shirt

that to Leelee's eye looks like it probably belonged to Dad first. He's also skinny and ill at ease, his hair a black roostertail that looks natural now but probably lent itself to quite a Mohawk back in the day.

Angie hands Leelee the form. Emmaline sits in the chair farthest from Leelee's desk and stares out the window. Her hand strays to her phone every five seconds, but she pulls it back, cutting glances at her mother. "She's very powerful," Angie says. "With the correct mentorship, absolutely Omega potential."

"That's not up to me to decide," Leelee says. She starts working through the form.

"Mom," the girl growls. "I want to go back to school."

"This is your future, Em," Angie says. "You can miss half a school day."

"We'll get you back before your art class," Derek says, trying to mediate. "Then we'll get to your lessons."

Lessons. Some parents actually pay older heroes to cultivate kids' powers. It's one of the purest manifestations of NVP syndrome. Leelee hates these cases. She wishes she could tell Emmaline that she'll survive and thrive, find her way despite her parents. But all Emmaline knows right now is she has some kind of power, but she doesn't want it. Or of course she wants the power; she's just terrified of everything that comes with it. Puberty is hard enough without mutant or metahuman latency starting to express itself. The halls of your average middle school, or high school, aren't forgiving spaces when it comes to being different. Leelee thinks they're better than they used to be, but still. Little Emmaline Brooks would just be Em the anime artist if she could. It's the parents who seize on the possibility of powers, like showbiz parents, and the kids suffer. "One hundred percent Omega potential," Angie says. "We have lots of people consulting who think she's really destined for the top."

"Ma'am, you don't have to pitch me," Leelee says. "Your daughter will be evaluated at her demonstration. I'm just making sure the paperwork is in order."

She's looking down at Form 8774-D as Angie keeps going. "She can teleport, you know. Actually teleport, not just move really fast."

Leelee has already seen that in the III.d response field but she nods to be polite. "I see that, sure. Also the kinetic blasts, and the other..." Angie has checked a lot of boxes. "We'll be vetting all of this in the

demonstration,” Leelee says. “Is there anything you want to amend?” She looks up.

Derek is looking out the window just like his daughter. Angie meets Leelee’s gaze. “We’re confident Emmaline will exceed your expectations,” she says. “She’s always been a very gifted child. Her test scores are off the charts.”

“Good enough,” Leelee says.

Leelee directs her next question to Emmaline. “Is everything in the form, or is there anything else I need to know?”

Emmaline looks Leelee in the eye—the first time she’s made eye contact with anyone since they walked in the door. “I hate this,” she says. “I’ll do the stupid certification but I’m never going to be a superhero.”

“That’s your prerogative, Emmaline,” Leelee says. “Completing the certification process doesn’t obligate you to anything.”

“Although of course you’ll understand things differently when you get a little older and you aren’t quite so...contrary.” Angie’s grin is tight. There are going to be words in the Brooks household tonight.

“So, what’s our next step?” Derek asks, again trying to keep his wife and daughter from going after each other.

Leelee gives them the scheduling spiel, hands them the map, and watches them go. The girl looks over her shoulder at Leelee as she walks out the door, eyes deep and haunted, jaw tight. She’s on a thin edge. If her parents drive her too hard, she’s going to crack. Either go rogue or turn full villain. But if she can get through the next few years without her parents screwing her up too much, she’ll find her strength. Leelee’s rooting for her.

“What would you do if we had a kid and the kid had powers?” Leelee asks Samir that night. Kids have come up before. He’s got a good job as a freelance programmer, they have enough common interests to have fun but enough differences that they have independent lives. His parents like her. Her parents like him. She’s thirty-three, so if she’s going to have kids it ought to be fairly soon. All this stuff churns through her head every time she has a kid client. It’s one of the ways she brings work home, and she hates it.

“You ready to have a kid?” he asks.

“Oh, I don’t know. Are you?”

He thinks about it for a little while. “Yeah. I think I would be.”

She lies awake that night, listening to Samir’s occasional snores and wondering what their child would look like. The future starts to take shape. She thinks she likes it.

II. ORIGIN OF POWERS

When did you first notice the ability/power?

Birth ___ Puberty ___ Other (explain): _____

Indicate the source of the power or the event/cause that bestowed the power. Check as many as apply.

Latent yes__ no__ Unknown yes__ no__

Energy exposure yes__ no__ Magical artifact yes__ no__

Scientific experimentation yes__ no__ Technological artifact
yes__ no__

If you checked any box other than “Latent,” name and describe the cause as completely as you are able. _____

Tuesday, 10:13 a.m.

Her ten o’clock appointment is a young kid with a history of family trauma brought in by a distant relative who is involved in experimental science. Leelee’s seen this one before, dozens of times. Sometimes the kid can make ants do the Macarena and nothing else; sometimes the kid turns out to be a psychokinetic juggernaut capable of shaking Planet Earth out of its orbit. You never know until you work through their applications and decide whether to move them along for a demonstration and further screening.

Brady Murthy is eight years old. His birth parents were casualties of the Calcutta Breach, along with approximately a hundred thousand other people. He was adopted as a baby by Maimuna and Gautam, both chemists. Began to show abilities...huh, Leelee thinks. "So, Brady, you started showing powers when you were two years old?"

"That's what my mom and dad say," he answers. Cute, bright-eyed kid. Skinny, lots of energy. He fiddles with the bobbleheads on Leelee's desk and Leelee doesn't tell him not to.

"It's true," his mother says. "When he was a toddler, he could touch a plant and the plant would grow."

"Now he can grow a tree from a seed to twenty feet tall, in just hours!" Gautam is bursting with pride. Real pride. Leelee loves to see that. Too many parents either treat their kids like freaks or go full NVP.

"I wish I could ask for a demonstration," Leelee says. She nods at her potted plants on the shelf by the window. "Those poor guys could use some help."

Brady's out of his chair before either Leelee or his parents can stop him. He runs a finger along one leaf of a spider plant. With a crackling noise, it doubles in size and sprouts a dozen babies, its leaves becoming a darker shade of green.

"Brady!" Maimuna snaps. "We are not to demonstrate here. You know that."

"Sorry, Mom." Brady shuffles back to his chair, head down.

Gautam doesn't care whether his boy was supposed to demonstrate or not. Barely able to contain himself, he points at the plant. "You see? A marvel!"

"I do see," Leelee says with a big smile at Brady. "And I'm grateful. I've had that plant a long time, and it never looked so good."

Brady smiles back. Leelee feels happy the rest of the day.

★ ★ ★

Samir's gone until Saturday, and Leelee enjoys the time by herself. He's gone once in a while for gigs, people flying him here and there. She doesn't have to keep track of it so she doesn't, except usually she knows where he is. Detroit this time.

She stays up late watching the news, and irritatingly it's all about superheroes because there's been a huge battle against an army of invaders from an alternate Venus. The reconstituted Vanguard combined with the North Star Sentinels to repel it, but there was a lot of damage in

Chicago. She talks to Samir about it late that night. “Good thing you weren’t there,” she says. “I know it’s dumb, but I worry whenever you’re traveling.”

“I know, babe,” he says. “Nothing to worry about, though. Just work.”

They shoot the shit for a while about TV, stuff they saw on Instagram, the usual. When he hangs up, Leelee enjoys the peace and quiet. She misses him but sometimes it’s nice to have the place to herself.

III. NATURE OF POWERS

Over what area of matter, energy, or spirit do you exert control, power, or influence? Check as many as apply.

a. Matter

Earth	yes___ no___
Stone	yes___ no___
Sand	yes___ no___
Lava	yes___ no___
Water	yes___ no___
Ice	yes___ no___
Vapor/fog	yes___ no___
Metals	
Ferrous	yes___ no___
Non-Ferrous	yes___ no___
Both	yes___ no___

Monday, 4:44 p.m.

The home stretch of a Monday, one of the times of the week when a working girl feels a glimmer of hope. That wasn't so bad, the mind says to itself. Only four more like that and we get another weekend. She's working through her last screening of the day, and then things take a hard right into Bonkersville.

He sweeps into her office, six-six, broad shoulders, sensational hair. Long cape with a high collar, full costume. Trouble, thinks Leelee, but the kind of trouble that is sometimes worth it. This is not a professional assessment; she issues a mental apology to Samir who will never know about the little tremor she just felt deep down in her belly. "Good afternoon, sir," she says. "You are..."

With a theatrical indrawn breath and a smoldering gaze, he proclaims, "You will know me as Brazagh-Nul."

Leelee makes a point of scanning her appointment ledger. "I'm afraid I don't see any Braz...can you say that again?"

"Brazagh-Nul," again with the deep breath through the nose and the glower. So much for little tremors. Now he's just annoying. Leelee knows she should, but she just cannot find any way to be sympathetic to his bullshit. "Yeah, I don't..." She looks up at him again. Why are the handsome ones always so weird? "Can you spell that?"

Brazagh-Nul huffs out an irritated sigh, collapses into a chair, and arranges his cape. "Brad Zigler."

"Ohhhhh, okay. There you are." Leelee turns on her professional smile and says, "Let's go through your materials, shall we?"

Zigler's claims are quite extravagant. He has checked almost every box under the Matter and Energy headings and listed various artifacts under III.f with names unlike anything Leelee has ever heard. She wonders if Zigler belongs to that common subspecies of applicants who basically fill out the form as fantasy versions of themselves. Some of those cases are almost as sad as the kids with NVPs.

"Mr. Zigler," Leelee says carefully, not knowing whether Zigler is lying, delusional, or even possibly accurate in his self-assessment. "You sure have checked a lot of boxes here."

"The form can only capture the merest shadow of my powers," Zigler says, his imperious demeanor restored.

"Some people's powers do fall between categories, it's true," Leelee says, just to be agreeable. "Okay, then. The next step will be scheduling

your demonstration. Someone from our office will be contacting you—”

“I will demonstrate nothing. Brazagh-Nul is not a performing seal.”

“Part of the validation process involves a demonstration of the powers underlying the claim to metahuman or mutant status,” Leelee explains patiently.

It’s almost always the same. They make claims, and in their claims Leelee can see their hopes, desires, fantasies, fears. She could diagnose every single one of them more accurately than any shrink. Let someone write their own origin story, and they’ll tell you everything you want to know about what matters to them. But what most of them can’t do is back it up. At some point, Form 8774-D always trips them up.

“Absurd,” Zigler says. “Yet if that is the price I must pay to escape the petty scrutiny of you and your bureaucratic anthill, very well.”

“Okay,” Leelee says, mentally putting him into the No Help Under Any Circumstances category. Some people you bend the rules for, but not if they talk to you like that. “We’ll be forwarding this for further screening, as we do with all applicants. Someone will respond at the number you’ve provided to schedule your demonstration under controlled circumstances.” She holds out the map to the demonstration facility.

“When?” Zigler snatches the map from her hand. “I cannot be made to wait for long.”

Leelee keeps her tone level, but Zigler is really getting on her nerves. “Generally six to eight weeks. Now I’m sure we’re both aware of the time, so—”

“I care nothing for the time.” Same imperious tone, and now Zigler presses against her desk so he can loom over her. “I care about you performing the service for which you earn your doubtless bloated salary, in a timely fashion!”

She shifts his category to her own personal ninth circle: WPOHIHWOF, Wouldn’t Piss on Him If He Was on Fire. “Someone will be contacting you, Mr. Zigler,” she says. “Have a fine rest of your day.”

“You will address me as Brazagh-Nul,” he says from the door, and then he’s gone in a sweep of his cape.

Leelee resists the urge to dump his file straight in the trash. He would deserve it, but it wouldn’t be the right thing to do.

So frustrating sometimes, this drive to be ethical.

Now it’s five o’clock. She neatens up her desk and leaves, waving to Louise and Drogba as she heads out the employee entrance at the rear of

For a brief moment, she thinks it might actually work. He stops. He takes a step back. He considers her as if he is making initial observations of a never-before-seen species of invertebrate. Then she realizes that there's a long distance—a galactic gulf, a dimensional rift—between appreciation of chutzpah and actual acquiescence. What really brings this realization home is the beam of magenta energy that lances out and destroys her desk, sending Leelee flying and covering her with blackened bits of particle board. Her appointment ledger drifts in charred flakes around her.

III.d for sure, she thinks. Given the magenta color and the overall personality of the MH, she's leaning toward arcane energy. So, he's one of the occult types, and those are always tricky because of the otherplanar and otherdimensional claims. How exactly is a mid-level administrator in a tiny office on Naylor Court supposed to check up on who's mentoring whom or siphoning power to whom in Limbo or Gehenna or some non-Euclidean beach resort on the shores of a fucking sunless sea?

“This is not how you optimize your certification process, sir!” she shouts over the general atmosphere of mayhem.

Louise and Reggie swing into action right about then. This isn't an ordinary baby super throwing a tantrum, though. It's a whole different threat level, maybe not Omega but not merely Eta or Theta either. Somewhere around Mu? More than any of the security people have handled since the last time they saved the world, which was a long time ago. Drogba bursts out of the break room. Before he can do anything, the rogue super knocks him flat. Reggie's cyborg eye shoots an energy beam that scorches the rogue's back. With a roar, the rogue spins around—straight into a haymaker from Louise. He crashes through another wall, and Leelee sees an opening. She runs like hell for the front door, but before she can get there the rogue explodes back into the ravaged common area, his skin crackling where Reggie's eye beam keeps hitting him. He leaps and tackles Reggie. Both of them crash into the security screening gate. Louise comes flying in with another series of thunderous punches, but they're overmatched. The rogue flings them both off and spreads his hands. Magenta energy slashes across the walls and ceiling.

Leelee has never heard a building collapse, but she's hearing sounds that sure sound like what a building would sound like if it was about to collapse. And there's no way out.

Until a super in a vibrant blue costume with a full mask punches up through the floor and leaps toward the rogue. The rogue tries to hit him with those magenta beams, but the blue hero is too quick. He ducks and feints and then he's right on the rogue, staggering him with some kind of martial arts routine. With every blow that lands, blue energy crackles from his fists. The rogue reels back, blasting the front doors out of their frames as he tries to get away, but the blue hero is on him. They grapple out into the street, and Leelee follows, getting out the door just as the front of the building sags inward and collapses. A cloud of dust obscures the battling supers. Leelee doesn't know which way to run. Occasionally a magenta beam lances out of the cloud. She does the safe thing and hits the deck near a parked car. The sounds of combat subside and the dust cloud dissipates. Leelee risks a glance over the hood of the car.

The blue hero is there. The rogue is unconscious at his feet. All of a sudden everyone for blocks around has their phones out. "That was scary," Leelee says.

The super winks at her. "All in a day's work, ma'am," he says.

Ma'am? Leelee is thirty-three years old. What child—or what kind of cornpone con artist playing to the cameras—would call her ma'am? Also she does not recognize him, and she suspects he hasn't been certified. He should probably be filling out Form 8774-D and meeting with her.

Before she can say any of that, though, the super is gone.

There's a rumble and a crash and Louise appears in the rubble, digging herself out and then holding a slab up for Reggie and Drogba.

"We are totally going to need a new office," Leelee says.

"Way things are lately," Reggie pants, "they're gonna move us to Silver Spring or some shit."

They stand there for a while after the rogue super is taken away. Samir arrives, looking shaken, and pulls Leelee into a fierce embrace. "Sometimes I forget how dangerous your job can be," he says quietly.

"Babe," she says. "It's all good. The blue guy, he was pretty impressive."

It is decided that they should all go have a drink, since there's no way to go back to work. It's a good decision. They all relax together. To Reggie, Louise, and Drogba, the day's events are old hat, and it isn't long before they're talking about it like a game they all went to.

"Hey, Leelee," Drogba says. "I saw what you did in there. I was peeking out the break room door waiting to make a move, but you almost

backed him down.” He glances at Louise and Reggie. “Did you guys see that?” They shake their heads. “Like a Jedi mind trick, you know?” Drogba turns back to Leelee. “Ever think you have a superpower?”

“Why is everybody always asking me that? No. God, no. At least I hope not,” Leelee says, and then she’s apologizing in case she’s offended him and buying another round of drinks.

“I’m telling you,” Drogba says. “Any intuition like yours, that ain’t natural.”

“Hundred percent,” Samir agrees. Leelee glares at him. “What,” he says, “you want me to lie?”

Leelee’s jaw is suddenly so tight she can barely get words out of her mouth. “I,” she says, “do not have a superpower. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Drogba says. Samir looks away.

★ ★ ★

That night she tells Samir she’s thinking about quitting. He nods and does what he always does when she talks about quitting, which is pack her a bowl. It has become something of a ritual, to the point where *I’m thinking about quitting* actually means *Wanna get high?* She says they should start using edibles like she always does, but there’s something in her that doesn’t want to let go of that burn deep in the lungs.

“You worried you’re going to get hurt?” he asks.

“Yeah,” she says. “Did you see what happened today?”

He watches the smoke drift out of his lungs up toward the ceiling. “I saw,” he says in that singsongy way he has when he’s considering carefully what to say next, “a situation, and people responding to the situation the way their excellent training prepared them to respond. Including you, babe,” he adds before she can get mad.

“All in a day’s work,” she says bitterly.

“Yeah, that was kind of over the top. But seriously, you kicked ass today. For someone with no powers, faced with that situation?” He extends a fist and Leelee feels the profound obligation to bump it. “Fuck yeah.”

They’re both pretty stoned. It’s nice. Samir has a way of making her feel centered, like he believes in what she’s doing more than she does, and that makes it a little easier for her to get up in the morning and do it all over again.

Thursday, 1:17 p.m.

The BMMOA office is rebuilt in an astonishing three days, thanks to the loan of a nanobot swarm from the headquarters of the Graviton Corps. Leelee enjoys the time off. Thursday morning she putters around in her office because the nanobots put some of her things in weird places. Putting a positive spin on this inconvenience, she takes it as a hint that it's time to shuffle things around a little, freshen them up. She doesn't have any clients until after lunch, which is chicken and rice from the halal food truck over by Logan Circle. Her mouth is still tingling pleasantly from the sauce when her one o'clock knocks on her office door.

"Hi?" the applicant says, peering around the doorframe. "So sorry I'm late." She strides to Leelee's desk, extending a hand. "Veronica Kirstein."

Leelee shakes and takes in Kirstein's presentation. Navy blue dress, knee-high boots with just a hint of heel. Nicely understated and confident...until you get to the six chunky gold rings, each with a different color stone. This sets off a little alarm bell in Leelee's mind. "Nice rings," she comments, to let Ms. Kirstein know she's paying attention. "Security is supposed to scan potential alien or arcane artifacts."

"Oh, security," Kirstein says with an airy wave. "They saw what I wanted them to see."

Leelee has an intensifying bad feeling about Veronica Kirstein. In her experience this feeling is never wrong.

"I'm afraid that's not really how we do things," Leelee says. "I'm going to have to ask you to return to screening and—"

In the next moment, Veronica Kirstein whips off her dress, revealing a charcoal-gray costume, high at the thigh and low at the bust, accented with a blaze of orange in a fiery V at one shoulder. The dress disappears before it can flutter to the floor, and Leelee's hair stands up as some kind of ambient energy propagates through the room.

Veronica raises her arms, showing off some finely toned triceps and arching her back a little in classic Sexy Wizard Lady style. The rings leak a spooky radiance out into the room. Leelee can barely stop herself from saying, Hey, I also am in possession of boobs, so can you maybe show me something more interesting? Like a real actual filled-out Form 8774-D instead of pretending you're in a Frazetta painting?

"I am Lady V, and you will hear me!" she cries. "Soon the world will hear me!" Leelee suspects theatrical voice training. A copy of Form 8774-

D appears on her desk, filling itself out in a flowing and quite legible cursive.

Okay, she thinks. Pretty impressive, but still against the rules. “I will hear you, as soon as you return to security, check those rings, and start this procedure the way it’s supposed to be started.” Leelee’s voice is calm, but the demonstration of power right here in her office—especially right on the heels of last Friday’s disaster—has her alarm meter somewhere between nervous and terrified. The appearance of the form right after she was thinking about it is probably a coincidence, but still feels weird.

Drogba appears in her doorway, flanked by Louise and Reggie. Leelee sure is glad to see them. “We got readings of some kind of power being used,” Drogba says.

“You certainly did, you rent-a-thugs,” Lady V snaps. “My powers, which I used to walk right by you.” She turns her attention back to Leelee. “You have the form. By any reasonable standard, even a stupid bureaucratic one, I have amply demonstrated that I ought to be certified. Let’s get this done.”

“It’s not really that easy,” Leelee says.

“I’ve been working with the Vanguard Alliance,” Lady V insists, some of her bravado falling away. “Kind of teaming up, not officially as a member yet. And I fought the Apocalypse Battalion shoulder-to-shoulder with Captain Cosmic. I am legit.”

“What do those rings do?” Leelee asks. “Where did you get them?”

“That’s all on the stupid form!” Veronica shrieks. Visible energy is spreading from the stones, wreathing her arms. The colors get more intense. There are tears on Lady V’s face. She’s not in control.

“Mm hm,” Leelee says.

At that moment Drogba does what the media used to call the String Thing.

Maybe he couldn’t annihilate wormholes or rearrange space-time anymore, but he still has enough power to squiggle some particles around in Lady V’s mind and drop her to the ground in a brainwave state more or less akin to deep sleep.

“Sorry,” he says as Louise and Reggie drag Lady V to the holding cell in the basement. Two in one week, Leelee thinks. She hopes it isn’t the start of a trend. “I feel for her, actually. It’s hard to get people to listen sometimes.”

“I’m taking the rest of the day off,” Leelee says.

“On your first day back? Somebody else is going to be Employee of the Month for sure.” Drogba nods at her desk. “You have to process her still, though, right?”

Veronica Kirstein’s completed Form 8774-D is still on her desk. Leelee sighs and sits. Due to a scandal a few years back about backlogs and faked certifications, BMMOA regulations state that interviewers must process applicants into the system immediately at the time of their interview...apparently even if they are on the verge of losing their minds.

“Catch a beer later?” Drogba asks.

Leelee’s already typing, a slice of her mind also taking the time to admire Veronica’s handwriting. “Yeah. That would be good.”

“The String Thing? Love that,” Samir comments later that night, when they’ve gotten him caught up. “Hey, what happens if someone actually does have powers but they don’t want to fill out the forms?”

“Well, it’s technically illegal,” Leelee says, “but rarely prosecuted. The way my supervisor explained it, if they’re still good guys what’s the point of jamming them up, and if they’re bad guys they’ve got worse charges against them once they’re brought in.”

Samir nods. “Good practical perspective.”

“I never woulda filled out that form if I didn’t have to,” Reggie says. His cyborg eye burns bright yellow, an artificial glare incongruous against the backdrop of dark wood paneling and softly clinking glasses. Leelee doesn’t like this place very much, but Reggie and Louise love it. They like to parade their sacrifices in front of the masses. Especially the rich, self-satisfied, insular DC masses.

Reggie is a retired cyborg soldier from an alternate future Earth. He was catapulted through timelines by a process Leelee has never quite understood, and then drifted through various superhero associations before having some of his hardware burned out in the Battle of Saturn’s Rings. Not many people know his whole story, but with the cyborg parts and all the scars, Reggie doesn’t really fit in among the loosened-tie crowd at this place.

“I think the certification process can also help people who are having trouble with their powers,” Leelee says. She’s thinking of Lady V, but also Emmaline Brooks. “I know sometimes people come into my office nervous or afraid, and by the time they leave they have a little peace of mind, you know?”

“If there’s a government form for it, it can’t be that weird, right?” Samir’s chuckling as he says it, but Leelee thinks that’s exactly it. “Yeah. Plus you get a tax credit if you fill it out and work with a government-certified hero group.”

Louise is shaking her head. “Maybe, but I think there’s probably a lot of people out there who haven’t gotten certified. I mean, a lot.” She leans toward Leelee, a twinkle in her eye. “You know what I mean.”

“I don’t,” Leelee says primly. Samir is watching her with a pretty intense expression on his face, and she wonders why.

IV. SUMMARY OF ACTIVITIES AND AFFILIATIONS

Do you have any known enemies? yes ___ no ___

If yes, list their names/known monikers/aliases. _____

Are you a member or affiliate of any metahuman group? yes ___ no ___

If yes, list names and registration status of each. _____

Do you benefit financially or materially from the use of your powers? yes ___ no ___

Are you engaged full-time in the practice of maintaining the public order or combating existing and emergent threats to life, property, and/or civilization? yes ___ no ___

Does your job or profession depend on your use of your powers? yes ___ no ___

If you answered yes to any of the previous four questions, do you maintain Metahuman/Occult Practitioner Coverage pursuant to established state and federal laws? yes ___ no ___

If yes, list insurer, group number, and policy number. _____

If no, attach Form **8805-PW, Waiver of Metahuman/Occult Practitioner Coverage.**

Have you received valuable items as a result of your membership in a group, league, or association of other metahuman individuals? yes ___ no ___

If yes, describe each item and estimate its value⁵ in the space provided. _____

Tuesday, 6:14 p.m.

On Tuesdays Leelee often works late because she has a book club at seven anyway, so it's not worth the trip home just so she can get back on the subway. She nods at the evening security guy—Alonso is his name, but she remembers seeing him in the papers when she was a kid as Viridian X. His superpower has something to do with intense expressions of the color green, which doesn't sound like much, but Leelee has been at BMMOA long enough to know that verbal descriptions don't always do a super's power justice.

The book is supposed to be really good but Leelee dislikes books about rich people and their ennui and how they rediscover their love for life by doing things Leelee will never be able to afford. As a result, she doesn't have much to contribute to the discussion. She has a strong sense that several of the other women in the group—there are no men—also hated it but don't want to say so. After book club she calls Samir. He's out with friends, subbing in for an absent member of his buddy Duncan's trivia team. "Come meet us!" he shouts over the bar noise. They're at the Alibi, which is more Leelee's kind of place than the stuffed-shirt place they were at the other day. Big windows, upbeat music, people having fun instead of making deals.

Leelee walks into the bar and looks around for Samir. She doesn't see him right away, but she does see a couple of his friends. Duncan waves at her and beckons her over.

The hairs on the back of her neck stand up a fraction of a second before the bar's front windows blow in. A coruscating sphere of energy, swirling in every color of the rainbow, drifts in as people cower behind the bar or in the short hallway leading to the bathrooms. Leelee stands and

watches. The sphere dissipates, revealing a figure within, backlit by spiraling lattices of prismatic energy that all trace back to rings on the figure's hands.

Oh, shit. It's Lady V.

"Hello, Veronica," Leelee says.

"Don't give me that friendly professional shit," she growls. "Where's your friend who scrambled my brain?"

Leelee shrugs. "I don't know."

"I'm sure. Do you know that I can't get certified now because you put my impromptu demonstration into your system as a symptom of unreliability?" Lady V floats through the air, a foot or so off the ground, in Leelee's direction.

Leelee finds this grandstanding pretty fake. "Well, Veronica, if you didn't want me to write about it, you shouldn't have done it in the first place."

"Oh, yes. I should be a good little girl and obey all the directives of dull, stupid bureaucrats like you. Very heroic." She's close to Leelee now, much too close, and Leelee discovers with terror that she can't move. "Well, I have a message for people like you, on behalf of people like me. Stay out of our way. And I have a special message for your friend..." She closes her eyes and Leelee can feel a tickle in her mind. *No*, she thinks. *Get out.*

Lady V's eyes open wide. "Oh. Interesting. Most people never know I'm there. Well, I got what I came for. Since your friend *Drogba* messed around in my brain to protect you, I'm going to mess around in yours. Just to show him, and all the rest of you," she snarls, looking around the bar. A few people are still cowering under tables, and yep, there are phones out. What the hell is wrong with you people, Leelee wants to scream. She can't talk, though.

"Show you," Lady V goes on, "what happens when you interfere with the natural order of things." She returns her attention to Leelee and reaches out her left hand. The three rings on it are blue, pink, and green. "Let's see," she says. "Pink or blue? I'm not really feeling green. Why don't you choose? Oh, wait, you can't speak, can you?"

Leelee remembers the blue hero from last week. She sure could use someone like that now.

"Maybe both," Lady V decides. A beam of pink energy sprouts from that ring, slowly growing toward Leelee's face. Wreathing it are tendrils

of blue. Paralyzed, Leelee watches them approach. If she could run, she would. If she could scream or beg, she might do that too. But mostly, as she faces what she assumes will be the end of her conscious existence, all Leelee can think is *For doing my job? This is what I get just for doing my job?*

She wishes she could see Samir again.

The blue tendrils have outpaced the pink beam. They writhe right up to Leelee's face, so close she can see tiny fractal patterns inside them, endlessly repeating—until another flash of blue absorbs and redirects them. The pink beam hits her square in the forehead. The sensation is unlike anything Leelee has ever experienced. She's outside herself looking down but she's also blind, her skin prickles, she's flooded with memories of things she hasn't thought of in years—a puppy run over in the road, the day she learned to tie her shoes, a cruel boy making fun of her at a middle-school dance, the first time she ever saw the ocean.

All of that in an instant, before Lady V screams in frustration and whirls to meet her attacker. The blue hero from last week flashes into view with a flying kick.

Leelee collapses. She can't form a coherent thought and something seems wrong with all of her senses.

Their fight is brief but devastating, at least to the bar. Light bulbs explode, rows of liquor bottles detonate, Lady V tries to annihilate the blue hero with sweeping beams of energy and he dodges them like a master thief somersaulting through security lasers. When he gets close, he delivers a staccato series of punches and kicks, each accompanied by those actinic blue flashes.

This would make a great TV show, Leelee thinks. But probably everyone thinks that about their job.

She's drifting into some kind of fugue and loses track of time. When she can focus her eyes again, everything is quiet except for sirens approaching. There's no sign of either Lady V or the blue hero. A few people are emerging from their hiding places, murmuring to each other in the kind of reverent tone people take when they've survived a brush with death.

Leelee feels like someone has put her brain in a KitchenAid. Also her body seems to be moving, and she doesn't know why until Samir is there, suddenly, cradling her. "I looked for you," Leelee says. "Where were you?"

His eyes are so beautiful, deep and dark and caring. She smells ozone. “Kinda embarrassing, but I got stuck in the bathroom,” he says. “I got here as soon as I could.”

Leelee has that feeling. She’s never wrong.

Right before she passes out again, she understands.

V. AFFIRMATION

I affirm that this form is complete and true to the best of my ability to determine the truth. I acknowledge that failure to answer truthfully is a violation of United States law punishable by fines and/or imprisonment.

Signature⁶: _____

Signature of parent/guardian if applicant is a minor: _____

Signature of Paid Preparer: _____

Paid Preparer address and license number: _____

Witness signature: _____

Saturday, 8:33 a.m.

She’s in the hospital for a couple of days getting various workups on her brain, which seems to be getting itself together pretty well, so they let her go home Friday afternoon and she crawls into bed and sleeps for sixteen hours. In the morning she goes into the kitchen and just sits, listening to the birds chirp and watching the morning light on the grain of the kitchen table.

Samir comes down a little while later. She lets him make coffee before she says it. “When were you going to tell me?”

“Um,” Samir says. He sits across from her and sips his coffee. “Tell you...”

“Samir,” she says. “You saved my life twice in a week and don’t get me wrong, I’m really grateful for that but it also means that you’ve been

lying to me for like three years, and that puts me in a very confused place.”

“I’m sorry, Leelee,” he says. “I didn’t lie to you just to lie to you.”

“I’m not sure it matters why,” she says, although of course it does. A silence stretches out until she can’t help but ask, “What do you call yourself?”

“I never could decide,” he says. “But the leadership, they decided on Electric Blue.”

“That’s not bad, I guess,” Leelee says. “Wasn’t that a song?”

“Was it?” Samir’s musical taste runs to techno and ambient stuff. He never knows anything playing on the radio. “So,” he says. “I know how you must be feeling...” He trails off. There’s a distant look on his face, like he’s listening to a voice only he can hear. Leelee’s intuition, or maybe it’s her suspicious nature, locks in on a possibility. “Are you...did you plan this conversation? Like, you rehearsed it?” When he doesn’t say anything right away, Leelee sits up straighter. “You did, didn’t you?”

“I did, yeah.” His voice is quiet, introspective rather than ashamed. “They wanted me to because they knew eventually you would figure it out. But I’m messing it up.”

“They? Are you in a group?”

He tries to lighten things up. “You’re filling out the form in your head, aren’t you?”

This makes her mad because she has in fact been filling out Samir’s Form 8774-D in her head and it infuriates her to be predictable. “Fuck you, Samir! You should have told me! You know I could lose my job. You know I—do I even know you? What other secrets do you have?”

His infuriating smile. “I...wet the bed until I was in high school?”

“Goddammit! It’s against the law! A law, I will remind you, that I sort of help administer?”

“Babe,” he says, obviously trying to placate her, but for some reason this doesn’t make her angry. That is one of Samir’s gifts. He never seems to be doing anything for the wrong reason. “Babe. I know. But you said yourself they never prosecute anybody. I mean...are you going to turn me in?”

She puts her face in her hands, takes a long deep breath down into the belly, lets it slowly back out. No, she’s not going to turn him in. But having an outlaw supe for a boyfriend sure wasn’t on her list of things she expected to happen in her thirties.

“Yes, I’m in a group,” he says. “And they asked me to get you to tell me when someone really powerful comes through your office. I told them I wasn’t going to put you in that position, and they backed off.”

“Who?” Leelee asks.

He tells her. My god, Leelee thinks. The Quantum Polyhedron. She knows that group. Everyone knows that group. They pulled off the Vacuum Counterstrike, the famous infiltration of a lava tube base under the Mare Serenitatis that permanently crippled the Eschaton Triad.

“So, they want to use me to recruit,” she says.

“Yeah.” He leans back, looks out the window. She gets a good look at his profile in the morning sunlight. Her heart quickens a little. “Recruitment is a big deal for the top groups,” he says. “Some people take it a little too far. The QP, they really want someone on the inside at BMMOA.”

“I don’t want to make you feel bad, but is that why they wanted you? To get to me?”

“I’m pretty sure I had something to offer them anyway,” he says. “But they did mention you from the beginning.”

This makes her feel better, like she has value even though she’s not a supe.

“There’s a shapeshifter in the group who suggested he could take your place,” Samir says, reluctantly. “I told him I’d kill him if he tried.” He makes that little noise in his throat that always means he’s about to say something else but is holding back. Eventually he lets it out. “So, um, he tried.”

“Oh my god,” she says. “So that wasn’t Lady V in the bar?”

“No. He had some plan to take you somewhere after he’d put on a show as Lady V. We found her. She’s all right, he needed to keep her alive as a patsy. She’s pissed, especially because the QP has her rings now. Anyway, that’s why I’m probably going to be out of the QP any minute now.”

“Good,” she says. “You’re better off without them, and they will totally lose their government contracts if they’re using unregistered talent.”

She lets it drop for a while, but a couple of hours later she walks into the living room where he’s sitting on the couch watching soccer. She stands between him and the TV.

“Are we going to make it, babe?” Relationships between normal people and supes are notoriously doomed. There are TV shows about it, millions of TikTok videos, an entire self-help industry. Everybody knows. And that’s what Leelee is, just an ordinary person.

“Not if you keep standing in front of the TV when Liverpool’s on,” he says.

She looks over her shoulder. It’s halftime and the studio talking heads are bantering. “Oh, please,” she says. She really wants to be angry at him—is angry at him—but several years of working at the BMMOA has taught her that secret identities are just part of the game.

Plus, Leelee knows Samir. She knows that his sincere smile is a little crooked, she knows the way his crow’s-feet soften when he can tell she’s worried or sad. He’s never been anything but loving to her. If that’s all an act, she’s going to go along with it. There’s a new ride ahead of her—of them—and Leelee wouldn’t want to take it with anybody else. Even if he did apparently call her ma’am once.

The decision made, she slides onto the couch next to him, nestles under his arm and exhales, long and easy. “You won’t tell anybody, will you?” he asks.

“Babe, no. Of course not.” She snuggles closer. Work is work and her life is her life. “It’ll be our little secret.”

“Whatever you do, don’t make me fill out that form.”

“It’s really kind of compulsory,” she says. “But I don’t have any enforcement powers.”

“I can live without the tax break,” he says.

“Sure,” Leelee says. On the screen there’s a local news break before the second half of the Liverpool game. The midday anchor puts on his concerned face and introduces a piece on budgetary consequences of super battles. The main interviewee is a city councilor who suggests the price of supers might be cuts to education funding.

“You should be a TV reporter,” Samir says. “The way you can sense bullshit, you’d ask the best questions.”

“Oh my god.” Leelee shudders. Her, on TV? “As if.”

“You do have a power, you know,” Samir says. He watches her, waiting. Leelee feels like she’s being tested. She wonders how many conversations in the Quantum Polyhedron’s subterranean hideaway are lurking behind this moment.

“No,” she says, looking him in the eye and daring him to make a sound. “No, I don’t.”



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¹ If applicant was born on a planet other than Earth, or if parent(s)' origin is unknown, complete and attach BMMOA Form **8804-UO, Displaced/Immigrant Metahuman Status Notification**.

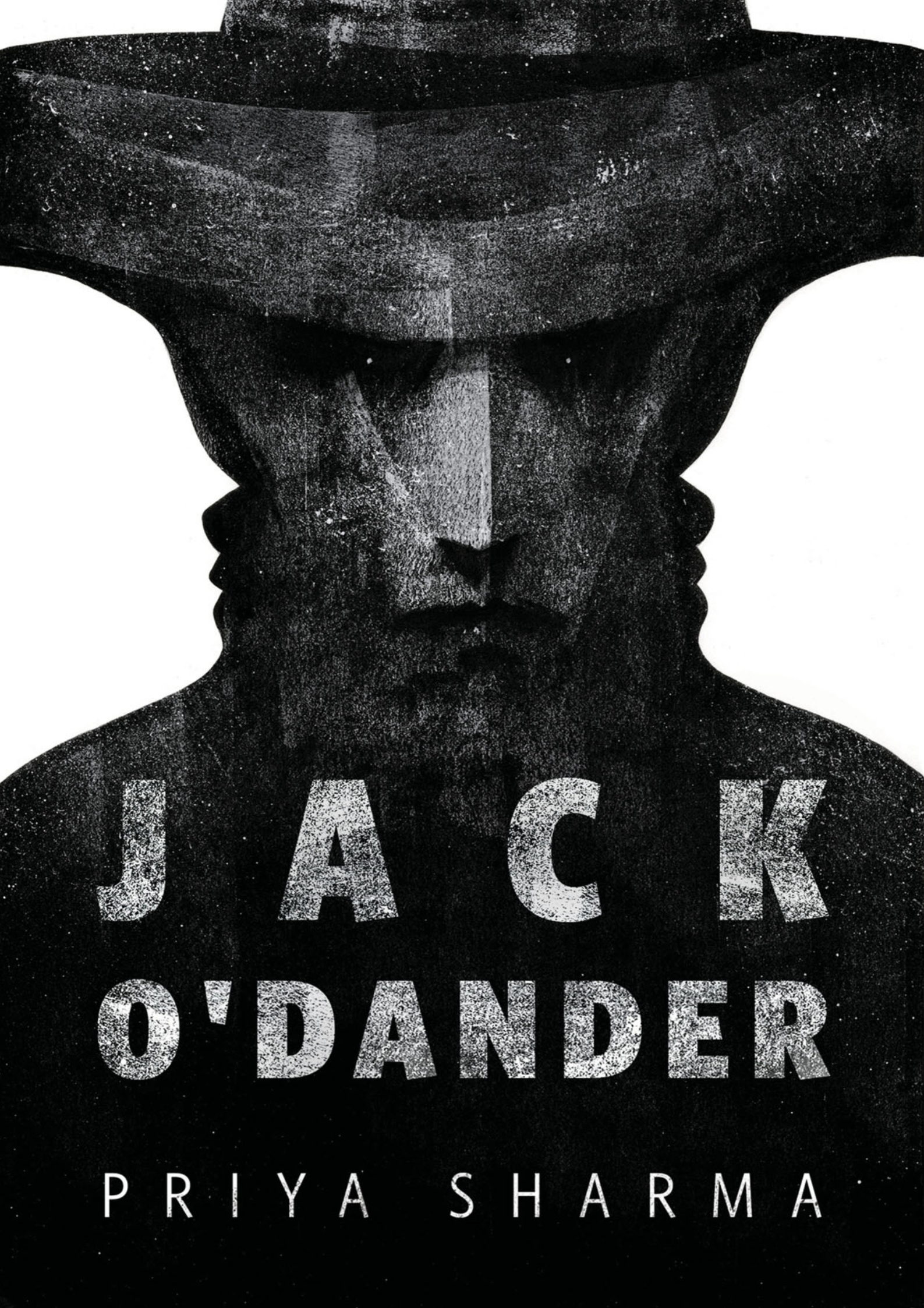
² If applicant was not gestated and delivered by a biological entity, complete and attach BMMOA Form **8804-NB, Certification of Non-Biological Origin**.

³ If you checked any of the categories within the group “psionic energy,” complete and attach DHHS Form **8809-AA, Registration for Telepaths and Psionic Adepts Act of 2015 Basic Information Form.**

⁴ Occult power is defined as power derived from otherplanar sources. These can include demons, devils, jinn, etc.

⁵ Items of sufficient value are subject to Internal Revenue Service policies on valuable gifts and professional courtesies. Consult Pamphlet 5454, *Declaration of Artifacts and Extraterrestrial Technologies*.

⁶ If applicant is not physically coherent or materially solid enough to sign the form, visit your nearest BMMOA regional office for proxy certification by a BMMOA employee. Notarized signatures, astral manifestations, and telepathic overtures are not considered valid substitutes for direct BMMOA certification. If presentation at a BMMOA office would entail risk of harm to BMMOA employees or others, contact your nearest BMMOA regional office to arrange an on-site verification. All requests for an on-site verification must be accompanied by BMMOA **Form 8791, Assertion of Inability to Present in Person.**



JACK
O'DANDER

PRIYA SHARMA

Jack O'Dander

PRIYA SHARMA

illustration by

J E F F R E Y A L A N L O V E

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

The backdrop Graham uses for the Zoom meeting makes it look like he lives in a luxury apartment, which is highly unlikely because Graham is hanging on to life by his fingernails.

Of a group defined by absences, he's had it the hardest. His mum told him that she was going out for a loaf. She locked him in and told him to stay out of sight if anyone knocked. He was six. A neighbour called the police because they heard him screaming with hunger. *Saved by shoddy, paper-thin walls*, he told us with a rueful smile.

Her body was found later on an abandoned building site. She'd escaped the husband who'd broken her jaw only to meet someone more monstrous while trying to supplement her meagre income with sex work. A desperate woman, reduced even further by the tabloid headline "Prostitute Slain."

Very few of us here like the press.

Graham at sixty still bears all the scars of a childhood in care. His Zoom box bulges with pent-up pressure. His shoulders are up around his ears.

The thing about Zoom is that people can't tell who you're really looking at. In my case it's the man in the box adjacent to Fiona, our facilitator. She asks him to introduce himself when Graham finishes.

"Hi, I'm Dan." He clears his throat and rubs his forehead with the back of his right thumbnail. "I guess I'm here for the same reason everyone else is. My sister Caitlin went missing when she was fourteen. She's never been found."

Every face on the screen distorts in sympathy. The possibility of being reunited is torture. The lack of closure. As if losing someone is a door that can be shut.

Dan and I are a unique subset in this group that overlaps mother, father, son, sister, brother, the murdered, and the disappeared. Dan and I are the siblings of the missing.

★ ★ ★

Memory is malleable. I've been asked what happened, over and over. I'm worried that I've invented details to plug the gaps, or subconsciously drawn on my family's version of events or news reports.

Some things I know to be true.

The smell of the sunblock that made us slippery and pale-sheened. The holiday complex at the edge of the new part of town, stacks of tessellating white apartments, bright in the sun's glare. Air-conditioning units that looked stuck on, metal shutters and tiled floors for coolness. The kidney-shaped swimming pools and plastic loungers spread with bright towels. The tennis courts. Palm trees. The glint of the gold necklace around Auntie Samantha's neck that caused such a ruckus.

Don't go up into the hills, the company rep warned us. Her lipstick was orange. I couldn't stop staring at her mouth. *There are wild dogs up there.*

★ ★ ★

I visit Mum every month. She's still in the house that was once home to us all. She won't move, insisting Isobel won't be able to find her if she does. She's redecorated everywhere except Isobel's room. I loathe being here. You can't wallpaper over unhappiness.

"Why do you hate me, Mum?"

"I don't hate you."

Not even that, then. My cheeks burn. It was a mistake to ask her.

"What a strange thing to say. Why do you always have to be so dramatic?" She shakes her head. "Not everything is about you."

I want to reply, *No, nothing is ever about me*, but I don't because it won't help.

"You're going to spout some cod psychology that you've learnt in therapy, aren't you?" Her pitch rises in mockery. "*You hate me because Isobel was taken instead of me.*"

"It's true though, isn't it?"

"Don't you dare. You'd enjoy that, wouldn't you? Making me to blame for everything."

Mum likes absolutes and extremes: always, everything, never. And blame is a particular sore point. Or rather, her perception of it. Mum was the most vilified in the end, to be fair to her.

The search for Isobel led nowhere. Not to a child-snatching ring. Not to a body in a drain. Not to the wild dogs living in the hills. My private, distant mother was an easy target for both suspicion and speculation. More than my easy-going, affable father. She was singled out as a negligent mother at best, or guilty of infanticide at worst, be it accidental or deliberate.

We're here now, so I persist.

"You were different with me to Isobel, for as long as I can remember."

"Different? What do you mean different?"

"Like I was in the way."

"You're being ridiculous."

I want to cry. I don't know if they're tears of anger or shame at allowing myself to be bullied like this, even though I'm a grown woman.

"You acted like I annoyed you. Isobel was only a child. She took her cue on how to treat me from you."

It's a eureka moment. The truth has crystallised in trying to talk it through. I was so angry at Isobel, but she was only a child. It was all Mum. The truth only makes my guilt worse.

"Oh God, Natalie, I'm seeing Samantha later and I haven't got the energy for both of you in one day."

I should've brought an umbrella because it's raining revelations. The overwhelming fear of weeping has passed. I pick up my bag.

"I'm your daughter, not your sister. And I no longer have the energy for you, either."

★ ★ ★

Isobel disappeared while we were on holiday. Disappeared. That makes it sound like a magic trick, doesn't it?

Aunt Sam and her family were already at the resort when we arrived. Our apartment was at the very edge of the complex. Theirs was further down the wide walkway on the opposite side.

They came over to meet us. Aunt Sam looked loose-limbed. Happy.

"Kelly!"

"Let me just get the bags unpacked." Mum smiled but always found a way to be busy around Aunt Sam. She was an expert at constructing barriers, even then.

“We’ve brought you drinks.”

Aunt Sam put down a glass for Mum, the same colour as the half-full one in her other hand. The contents were blood orange, with a wedge of pineapple jammed on the rim.

“Hey, come here, big man.” Uncle James put down a pack of beer. A head shorter than Dad, he clapped Dad’s back as they hugged.

I’m glad they’re still close friends. I’m not sure Dad would’ve survived without him.

Ellen, my cousin, stood in the middle of the room and spun around. At ten she was the eldest of us. The frilly hem of her sundress swirled out. She always had such nice clothes. They were handed down to Isobel and then to me.

Our fathers flopped in chairs, beer cans in hands, and started talking immediately. Aunt Sam fussed over us, telling us we’d grown, then perched on a kitchen stool. She called to Mum, who moved between the two bedrooms, unpacking.

Isobel was drawn to Ellen. I followed. Ellen carried a beach bag filled with things to show us. She pulled out a mobile phone.

“Mum? Ellen has a phone. Can I have one too?” Isobel pulled at Mum’s top.

Mum put a box of teabags and tubes of sunscreen on the kitchen counter. “No, darling, not until you’re older.”

“But Ellen has one. I’m only a year younger than she is.”

“When you’re older.” Mum sounded gentle but resolute.

“Here, have your drink.” Sam pushed the glass across the counter. “Go on. You’re on your holiday now.”

Mum picked up the glass and took a sip. “God, that’s sweet.”

Aunt Sam drained hers.

Isobel and Ellen piled into an armchair together. It was always like that when we cousins were together. I was six. Too babyish for them.

I could see a plastic panda in the beach bag full of treasure. I took the panda out. It was a pencil case. I unzipped it to reveal pens in neon and sparkly pastels. I pulled the cap off one.

“No,” said Isobel loudly. “You’ll break it.”

“Natalie, put it down.” Mum came over and pulled it from my hand. “Haven’t I told you not to touch other people’s things?”

“Oh, she’s okay—” Aunt Sam started to say, but Mum stopped her with a raised hand.

* * *

I arrive at the café twenty minutes early. I wanted somewhere nice, even though it’s not a date. A place with good coffee and homemade cakes.

After seeing Dan at online meetings for three months, I messaged him privately. Just a message of support. We kept in touch, soon talking every day. I wanted to meet him. I wanted to see if what I was feeling could survive out in the real world. I feel like I know him. I hope I’m not wrong in thinking he feels the same way too.

I stand up when I see him in the doorway. “How was the drive?”

“I got stuck outside Birmingham, but apart from that it was okay.”

I hold out my hand as he opens his arms. We both laugh and then I nod in consent. He leans down and I am enfolded. Nobody has ever held me like that before.

“I would have come to you.”

“No. The drive was good for me. I needed to be busy.”

“What will you have? I’m buying.”

I watch him as he studies the counter. He’s grown a beard since that first Zoom meeting. It suits him. His hair is a lighter shade that’s almost blond.

“A latte, please. And some chocolate cake. It’s not too early for cake, is it?”

“Never.”

We sit and wait for our order. The coffee machine splutters and hisses.

“Thanks for today, Natalie.” I watch his lips as he says my name. “I didn’t want to be alone.”

“I understand.”

“I know you do. That’s why I wanted to spend it with you. After Dad died I’d meet up with friends on Caitlin’s birthday, but I could tell they felt uncomfortable.”

“The world carries on turning, while we’re stuck. Waiting.”

Without a body, we’ve not been given permission to grieve.

“Yes.” He sounds grateful. “Someone I thought knew me really well once said, ‘You’ve got to let her go.’”

I've noticed he does that thing of rubbing his forehead with the back of his thumbnail when he's nervous. I want to clasp his hand in mine.

I hold up my coffee instead. "Happy birthday, Caitlin."

"Happy birthday, sis."

We talk about our lives. Work. His love of music. My love of cinema. It sounds like small talk after what we've shared, but I want to piece Dan together until he is more than the sum of loss. He's earnest most of the time and when he laughs he stops himself as if we're not allowed to be happy.

* * *

We were at one of the resort's swimming pools. Our parents were stretched out on loungers. Isobel and Ellen were splashing and shrieking. I put my head under the water and watched them swim to the pool's edge. Their legs scissored as they clutched the side. I surfaced. They were deep in conversation.

After we got out, our parents towelled us down. Ellen got something from her mum's wicker bag.

"Not near the pool with that, Ellen."

Isobel sat so close to Ellen that their upper arms looked welded together. Their wet ponytails stuck out at odd angles. I saw the phone in Ellen's hands. Ellen whispered in Isobel's ear, covering her mouth with her hand. She showed her something on the phone. They talked some more, voices hushed.

"Natalie, look at this."

It was the first time Isobel had spoken to me directly since Ellen had arrived.

"Come on." Ellen beckoned and moved aside to make space for me.

They showed me cat videos on the phone. Cats falling off kitchen counters. Cats in outfits. Cats staring at dogs. Cats chasing dogs. We had two cats at home. I wanted a dog but Mum said they were too much work.

Then they showed me another video.

It was taken from a bedroom, I think. There were Lego models on the windowsill. Someone was filming the street below. It must have been late autumn, from the light. It was already fading at a time when groups of children in school uniforms were on their way home.

There was a figure under the trees on the opposite verge. I couldn't see his face. He was wearing a dark suit and a black hat. His hands were in his pockets.

The schoolchildren hadn't noticed him.

"Who's that?" I pointed to the screen. He was turning: left then right, then left again. Watching each group of girls.

"She can see him. She can see Jack O'Dander." Ellen's nose was freckled and slightly upturned. She has grown into that promise of prettiness. Her facial tattoos and scars aren't armour. She's mortifying her own flesh. On the rare occasion that we meet, she can't look me in the face. I think she's suffered more than any of us.

"Who's Jack O'Dander?" I asked.

"If you can see him, it means he can see you. He'll come and find you."

I looked at my sister.

"It's true."

"Why would he come to find me?"

"To take you away. Then we'll never see you again."

"Can you see him?"

"No. Can you?" Ellen asked Isobel.

"No." My sister shook her head. I couldn't tell if she was joking or not.

When I glanced back at the phone, Jack O'Dander had stepped out from beneath the trees. He walked to the kerb and looked up. The streetlamp cast a shadow from the brim of his hat, hiding his face, but I could tell he was staring towards the window. In that moment, it looked like he was staring at *me*.

I snatched the phone from Ellen and threw it down. It landed on the tiled poolside. Ellen shrieked. Then she started to cry.

"It was Nat." Isobel drew up her legs and wrapped her arms around them.

Aunt Sam knelt down and put her arm around me. "What happened, sweetie? Was it an accident?"

"What have you done?" Mum stood over me.

"She did it on purpose." Isobel, my betrayer.

Uncle James picked up the phone and pressed the buttons. The screen was cracked. "It's dead." He sighed. "Told you she was too young for a

mobile.” He hauled Ellen onto his knee and hugged her. “It’s okay.”

“You apologise to Ellen right now.” Mum gripped my arm. “Do you think we can afford to replace this?”

“It’s okay. It’s insured.” Aunt Sam’s voice was soft and soothing. “What happened, Natalie?”

I couldn’t explain. I started to cry, too.

“Don’t fret, sweetheart.” Sam made a sad face. I wished she was my mum. “Let’s not make a big thing of it, Kelly.”

“Was it deliberate, Isobel?” Mum ignored Aunt Sam.

Isobel nodded.

“Right. Get your shoes.”

Mum marched me back to the apartment. People stared at us, a sobbing child and a mother, thunder-faced at some unspeakable misdemeanour.

★ ★ ★

Life after Isobel.

I came in after school and dumped my bag in the hall. I pulled a dirty bowl from the sink, rinsed it, and tipped in the last of the cereal. I ate it dry because the milk smelt off. It was early September, a yellow, buttery quality to the light.

It was just Mum and me by then. Dad told me: *You won’t understand this now, but your mum and I can’t help one another, not when we need the same thing.*

It was a shitty thing to say, because neither of them had considered what I might need.

After I finished, I opened the glass-panelled door to the lounge. The curtains were half drawn. Mum sat on the floor, her back against the sofa, phone clutched in both hands. I didn’t need to see to know that she was watching a video of us as children. I could hear Isobel’s voice. It sounded tinny and distant. She was singing. Mum didn’t look up. She didn’t see me. Not in the virtual world and not in the real one.

In fact, I knew the final time my mother had *really* seen me. It was the night she’d opened the door to our room and seen that Isobel’s bed was empty. She pulled me from the bed, where I was pretending to sleep, huddled up to the wall. She shook my shoulders.

Where’s your sister? Where is she?

I was mute with terror. She only let me go when Dad intervened.

Mum resented my every milestone. Puberty. My first day at high school. My first date. Graduating. Everything Isobel should have done before me.

Isobel was good at maths, wasn't she? Do you remember that poem she wrote? She could sing. Do you remember how she liked to paint? Isobel's potential eclipsed me. In the moment she was taken, a trajectory of possibilities were closed to me. She was a fragment of shrapnel that entered me, and I was remade around her.

* * *

It seemed like hours before Dad returned to the apartment on the afternoon that I broke Ellen's phone.

The bedsheets smelt unfamiliar. The twin bed opposite mine had an indentation in it, as though someone had slept there while we'd been out. Apart from that, all the room contained was a small wardrobe, a floor lamp, and a long mirror. Dad had put one of the empty suitcases in the corner, stood on its end. It looked huge. It was open, just a fraction. I hadn't looked at it before we went out, so I couldn't say whether Dad had left it like that or not.

The room was full of afternoon sun. It reflected off the white walls and had faded the prints of the old town hanging there. It only made the suitcase's maw worse. It was an absolute black, without shade or nuance. What did it hold? Was it large enough to fit Jack O'Dander? I imagined his fingers sticking out, widening the gap. Then him stepping out: one long limb, then the other.

I pulled the sheet over my head. The flimsy cotton couldn't protect me. I needed a duvet or heavy blankets to shield me. Sweat gathered in my creases and ran down my back. Fear held me there. It stopped me from running to open the bedroom door and to Mum.

I thought I could hear Jack O'Dander breathing.

"Where's Isobel?" Mum's voice was loud.

"Playing with Ellen." It was Dad.

The door opened. I pulled the sheet down.

"Hey, kiddo." Dad's expression changed. He sat on the bed beside me. My face felt tight and swollen. Dad placed a hand on my forehead, checking for a fever. He smoothed down my hair.

“Are you feeling okay?”

I nodded. I could see Mum. She was on the sofa, reading a paperback. She didn't look at me.

“Come on, chicken.” He pulled me onto his lap, arms around me.

“Natty, why did you break the phone? It's not like you.” He was the only person to call me that.

I wish I could've found the words. He might have understood. It might have changed things.

I'm scared Ellen and Isobel are lying to me about not being able to see Jack O'Dander.

I'm scared of Jack O'Dander.

“You won't be in trouble if you tell me.” He stroked my back. I felt comforted until Mum's shadow fell across the bed.

“Of course she's in trouble. She broke something expensive, although God knows why you'd give a phone like that to a child. Ellen's only ten.”

“That's not really our business, is it? And yes, I know what you're saying, but look at Nat. She's in a right state.” The strokes turned into a gentle pat. “You *are* sorry, aren't you?”

“Yes.” It came out high-pitched and childish.

“And you'll say sorry to Ellen and to Aunt Sam and Uncle James.”

I nodded because I didn't know what else to say.

“Good girl.”

Mum sniffed.

★ ★ ★

“Does this mean we'll be kicked out of the group?” I intertwine my fingers with Dan's.

His smile fades. I curse myself. I meant it as a joke, not a reminder.

“We thought we'd found Caitlin once. It was five years ago. Just before Dad died.”

Such is our pillow talk. I'm lying in the crook of his arm, naked. It takes all my self-control not to get up and pull on some clothes, making an excuse about needing the loo.

“It wasn't her, though. I think the shock of it finished Dad off.”

For an awful minute I think he might cry.

“I feel guilty all the time.” He *is* crying now. My stomach tightens but I put my hand on his cheek. “If I’d walked back from school with her that day, like I normally did, she would’ve been safe. But I was with a girl. It was the first time. You know.”

I want to comfort him, I really do. I put my arms around him, tight, and stroke his back so he can’t see my face. The truth is that I don’t want to know. Not about Caitlin or his loss of virginity. He wriggles out of my embrace to look at me.

“What do you remember about the night that Isobel went missing?”

Dan’s never asked me this before. I tense up. If he notices, he doesn’t say anything. So Isobel manages to even be here in bed with us, and Dan and I are knotted together by loss, not love.

Dan’s tears for Caitlin have been the foreplay to this moment. I know what Dan wants. I never talk about the night itself. Not in group. Not to anyone. I told my mother I’d been asleep and have stuck to this lie in the face of every authority.

I once asked if Isobel was dead. Mum slapped my face. Dad let her.

Dan must know my story. Dad makes sure no one can forget. It’s his reason for living. He fundraises and campaigns. *If only he’d shown that much gumption when we were married*, Mum once said. He visits the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Home Secretary on a regular basis. He is funded by millionaires. He thinks if he brings Isobel home, life will go back to how it was, even though it was awful. Or maybe it’s just to expiate guilt. We’re *all* guilty. Me more than anyone.

“What do I remember?”

Is it Dan’s way of asking *Why her and not you? Were you awake? Did you see him? Why didn’t you scream? Did you blank out the whole thing?*

“I’m not sure. It was a long time ago. I was only little.”

“You must remember something. What about the video?”

I don’t like this version of Dan. He’s got no right to question me.

“It was going around lots of British schools. Ellen told the police it was a joke, but they had to check it out. It was just a stupid children’s prank. It was of some bloke watching some schoolkids. If you could see him as you watched it, then he could see you too, and he was going to come and find you.”

“You must have been terrified.” He’s watching me intently. “What was his name?”

“I don’t remember.” I pull on my T-shirt. “It was just a silly thing that kids did.”

“You’re lying.”

“Why are you so annoyed?”

“I don’t see how you could forget that. And I thought we trusted each other.”

“Jack O’Dander.” Saying his name aloud is like pushing a needle deep into my flesh. All the pain is located on a single point. “There. Are you happy now?”

I can’t read Dan’s expression. It’s not unhappiness exactly, but something else that I can’t identify.

★ ★ ★

We went into the old town the day Isobel disappeared. Aunt Sam’s apartment was across the path from ours, halfway down the block. We met in the resort’s foyer that looked more like it belonged to a hotel. There was a marble counter and uniformed staff. They directed us to the coach. There was a queue. I think it was midmorning.

Isobel and Ellen rushed to sit together. Sam noticed my hurt look and held out her hand to me with a grin. “Will you keep me company?”

Dad followed James, but Mum pulled him into the seat beside her instead.

The bus was crowded so Sam pulled me onto her knee to give a seat to someone else. I liked it. Mum said I was too old for that. As we pulled off, I leant back against Aunt Sam. She kissed the top of my head. Her arms around me felt good. Safe. I looked out the window. The landscape was different to home. Drier. Paler. Flat-roofed houses, never more than two storeys. Chain-link fences. A collapsing shed in a field.

Isobel and Ellen, who had the seats in front of us, peered from the window to look at something. I turned to see it, too. We passed a figure on the road. The man wore a dark suit and a black fedora despite the rising heat of the day. He was thin and leggy, just like in the video. A trail of dust rose behind him.

“Did you see him?” I put my head through the gap between the seats.

Isobel twisted around to answer me. “Who? I didn’t see anyone.”

★ ★ ★

My phone rings. I'm surprised to see it's Dad. We normally talk on a Sunday night. I answer.

I know what he's going to say. The certainty of it makes me feel like something cold is running down the inside of my chest.

"Natalie, we've found her."

I don't know how to answer.

"Natalie, are you there?"

"Yes. Is it really her?"

"Definitely. It's been confirmed by genetic testing."

"Testing? When did you find her?"

"A month ago."

"Oh." We've been talking all these weeks and he never said.

"Isobel needs time. She's been through so much."

"Where she's been?"

"She's not ready to talk about it yet. Not to us, but she's been talking to the police. All I know is that she was in Spain until her early teens and then lived on the streets in Algeria for a few years. The investigator found her living in a commune in Greece. God knows what she's been through."

"Where is she now?"

"At your mum's." I hadn't spoken to Mum for months. "Don't say anything to anyone yet. She needs her privacy."

"You've not told Aunt Sam either?"

"Not yet. Isobel wants to see you first."

The thought made me feel sick.

★ ★ ★

We got off the coach and walked through the old town's square. We took photos by the fountain, water gurgling down one side of the statue of a woman holding a baby in one arm and a fawn under the other. Interpol examined those photographs later, in search of evidence.

Mum and Aunt Sam walked together at a slow pace, both frightened of putting a foot wrong. They're the same even now. Advance and retreat. Frequent skirmishes followed by short-lived peace.

They stopped to look at shop window displays. At the street hawkers' handbags and sunglasses laid out on blankets, ready to be scooped up in

a quick escape from the local police. I stood close to Aunt Sam while she looked at racks of postcards. Mum's stare made me step away.

Lunch was at a restaurant in a long stone barn. The waitress gave us menus in English before anyone had to ask, and then brought crayons and paper placemats to colour in while we were waiting. Mine was a picture of a unicorn. Isobel and Ellen both had fairy-tale castles.

Plates were put down in front of us. There was a bottle of wine, then another. I don't remember what the grown-ups were talking about. Their voices got louder. Combative. Even I could see the surreptitious glances from the other diners.

Then Mum leant over the table and pulled at the gold necklace around Sam's neck. She fished out the gold locket that hung beneath the neckline of Sam's sundress. It was engraved with an ornate scroll pattern. Sam had to lean forward, tethered by the chain.

"When did Mum give you that?" my mother asked.

Sam took it back, clutching the locket in her fist.

"Mum gave you Nan's diamond earrings," Mum persisted, "so I thought that I'd get her wedding ring and locket."

James glanced at Dad, who pushed a piece of fish around with his fork. I shoved the last of my chicken nuggets in my mouth, making my cheeks bulge.

"Here." Sam took off the necklace and dropped it on the table between them. "You just can't help it, can you? It always ends up like this, no matter what I do. I thought this holiday would be good for us all, but I can't keep trying. James, I want to go back to the hotel."

Uncle James held up both his hands in exasperation. Isobel and Ellen huddled closer together on the bench.

"Please. For me, love."

He got up. "Come on, Ellen."

"No, Daddy!"

"Ellen." His voice was low. I'd never heard him be so firm. "Now."

Isobel got up to go with Ellen, but sat back down when Mum shook her head at her.

I wanted to cry. Everyone was staring at us. I didn't want Sam to go. I didn't understand why, but it would be worse for me after she left.

Halfway to the door, Sam turned back. "Do you know why Mum gave it to me?"

“Because you’re her favourite.”

“No. Because she gave you twenty thousand pounds when you got into debt. I’ve never asked her for a penny. Not ever.”

Mum was red in the face.

“There, Kelly. You thought I didn’t know. Well, I do, and I kept my mouth shut because it’s got nothing to do with me. And here you are getting all huffy about a necklace that you once called bloody ugly.”

“You’re so perfect, aren’t you?” I thought Mum’s head was about to blow off. I knew that look. She was moving past reason into fury. “You’re so much better than me.”

“Stop acting like a child. Yes, I am perfect in comparison to you.” Sam had the last word. Mum hated that. The last word was always hers in our house.

When the door closed, it was Dad’s turn to get it.

“Why do you always do that?”

“What did I do? I didn’t do anything.”

“Precisely. You’re so pally with James. Why don’t you and him go on holiday on your own?”

“I would if I could.”

Mum blinked.

“Everyone thinks you’re the happy one. You want to be everyone’s friend. *Dave is so much fun*. You never back me up.”

“I can’t interfere with your family.”

“*You’re* meant to be my family.”

“Yeah, I am until I disagree with you, and then you tell me to butt out.”

“You’re happy enough when it comes to asking them for money.”

His gaze drifted upwards. He was biting his lower lip.

“Not now, Kelly. Not in front of the kids. I’m ashamed enough as it is.” He took a deep breath. “When did you get so angry all the time? You never used to be like this.”

I put my forefinger on the locket that lay on the table. How was it that it had caused so much trouble?

Mum turned in her seat to face me. She wore the same expression that she used for Aunt Sam.

“Don’t. Touch. That.”

I pulled my hand back as if I'd been burnt. Our waitress was watching us. She saw me flinch. After she cleared the table, she brought two bowls of ice cream. *For your beautiful girls, on the house,* she said. *Everybody likes chocolate ice cream.*

She winked at me. The kindness of strangers is staggering sometimes.



Everything was shuttered after lunch. A postprandial hush settled on the town. Tourists were sluggish as they shuffled through hot streets.

Mum and Dad walked in a silence that was heavy on us all. She stopped to check the map she'd got at the resort, and then folded it up and slipped it in her bag.

"The church is up there," she said to no one in particular.

We followed her along the narrow streets until we reached the oldest part of town.

My abiding memories of that afternoon are the colours. Whitewashed houses, so bright in the sunshine that it hurt to look at them. Doors painted cerulean to match the sky. Blue to fill your eyes.

We'd entered a labyrinth. Bougainvillea spilled flowers in rich purple over walls. Pots of red gardenias graced doorsteps and windowsills. Passageways led to private courtyards, making us double back. I heard murmurs from open windows, a soft song drifting from a radio. Our own footfall. The distant revving of a motorbike. I thought we were trapped and would never escape.

We came to a set of cobbled steps that rose gradually above us. I lagged behind my family. A door was ajar, halfway up. A woman sat in a cane chair in the entrance hall. The floor was a monochrome chequered pattern. Her face was turned to the sun, flower-like. She hummed to herself, sounding younger than she looked.

Something wound itself around my legs and I tried to stifle a cry. The woman stopped humming, her head turning in my direction. I realised she was blind. The cat was soft and silky against my bare calves. I could feel its tiny bones beneath its fur. When I reached down to stroke it, it darted away. It pushed its length against the door and then froze, looking deep into the hall, beyond where the woman sat. Something moved.

The woman called out, but I didn't understand what she said. The cat flattened its ears and hissed before it turned and fled past me down the steps. Startled, I ran up towards my family. The pale tower of the church peeped out over the rooftops above us.

I was breathless when I reached my parents, but they didn't slow down for me. Isobel clung to Mum's hand. We climbed until we reached a plateau from which God looked down on the town.

The church doors were huge, with Bible scenes depicted in bronze relief. They were patinaed by time except where people had touched them in reverence, revealing the true colour of the metal. These accents of faith shone brightly. Mary's head as she shied away from Gabriel at the Annunciation. The baby Jesus in his crib. The feet of Jesus as he hung on the cross.

I looked at Dad, but he had turned his back on us. Mum and Isobel went into the church. I stood on the threshold, caught between them, but then followed Mum in. It was cold inside, rather than cool. The coloured glass in the window behind the modest altar stained the stone floor with elaborate patterns. Mum lit a candle and put it on a rack with the others. I wondered if she had to blow them all out for a wish to be granted.

I felt sick after all the ice cream and the climb. I went back outside and joined Dad at the railing at the edge of the terrace. We could see the rooftops, some covered with washing lines and others with canopies. The alleys were laid out below. Slanted shadows. It was midafternoon. A hush had settled. The world was dozing.

All except for one person, who flitted across the mouth of one alley and into the next, coming from the same direction as we had. Jack O'Dander was a thing of limbs, an arachnid of a man. The blackness of his suit and hat made him an absence of space. Like he was a cut hole in the world.

I watched his dark progress towards us. Sometimes he'd disappear from view, only to appear somewhere much closer, like he'd magically transported himself from one spot to another. He groped along a wall as if he could read who'd been there with his fingertips. He came to a junction of alleys and got down on all fours to sniff the cobbles, trying to catch the scent of something. Someone. Me.

My sister nudged me as she clutched the railing with both hands.

When I looked back, Jack O'Dander was scrambling up a wall.

“Can you see him?” I asked her.

“See who?”

I opened my mouth and screamed until I was sick.

★ ★ ★

“Where are you?”

It’s Mum. I’m parked around the corner from her house.

“I’ll be a few minutes. I got delayed. Car issues. “

I hang up. I’ve been sat in the car for nearly twenty minutes. It doesn’t occur to me to tell her the truth. That I’m nervous. That I’m frightened.

It’s a shock when Mum opens the door. I’ve never seen her so bright-eyed. I don’t recognise her clothes. They must be new. She’s had her hair done.

“We’ve been waiting.”

It’s *we* versus *me* already.

“Go on then, don’t just stand there. Go through.”

Her giddiness is unsettling.

Dad and Isobel are at the kitchen table, mugs in their hands. They’re laughing at something. Mum goes over to them. They have already learnt how to be together.

“Hi.” I hover in the doorway. I’m the intruder here.

Isobel gets up, arms wide, waiting for me to go to her. She’s in her rightful place.

“Isobel.” It’s all I can say.

“Natalie.”

She has a Spanish accent. She’s tanned. Sunburnt, even. She has a nose ring and henna tattoos on her palms. She’s an exotic bird in English suburbia, but I don’t need genetic analysis to know she’s my sister. Isobel beckons me. Her hands are loaded with silver rings. I’m wood in her arms. She’s so thin that it’s painful.

“Hello, little sister.”

The way she says it makes me think she knows what I did, but how would she?

★ ★ ★

On the evening of the argument, we were put to bed early. There was a knock at the apartment door. I rolled over in bed. Isobel was asleep. It was dark outside.

“What do you want?” That was Mum.

“We can’t keep doing this. We need to sort this out, once and for all.”
Aunt Sam.

“You can’t come in. The girls are asleep.”

“Then come out here.”

“What’s there to talk about?”

Our door was ajar. I peeped through the gap. Whatever Sam said in reply was enough to make Mum join her outside. Dad slumped on the couch, the droop of his shoulders making him look more tired than he ever did after a day at work.

Their voices grew louder. More strident. Dad raised his head, listening. Then he got up suddenly, like something in him had snapped. He followed them out.

I tiptoed to the front door. It was a warm night. To my right, insects buzzed in the yellow halos of the lamps along the path. Some apartments were dark, others were awash with the light of televisions. Ours was at the end of the block, at the edge of the resort, so to my left there was only night falling on the service road, the hills, and the wild dogs. I heard them barking.

Sam walked backwards in the direction of her apartment. Mum went after her. At one point Dad grabbed her arm but she shook him off. Her face was contorted. Someone shouted from an open window above them and Sam held up a middle finger in response. That was so unlike her.

I went back to our room. Unhappiness rolled around in my stomach. Isobel was still asleep. Her head had slid off the pillow and she’d pushed the sheet off. A strand of hair lay across her face. I wanted to wake her but I didn’t dare.

I climbed into bed and pulled the bedsheet up under my chin. I turned to face the wall to try and block it all out. The front door creaked. I waited for the fight to continue indoors, but Dad had returned alone. He sounded puffed out, like he’d been running.

I sat up. It wasn’t Dad.

Was it Jack O’Dander? I was convinced of it, even though he wore a black sweatshirt and jogging pants, rather than his suit. His baseball cap

was pulled low over his forehead, hiding his eyes. He'd come for me.

I cowered against the wall, clutching my pillow to me. A poor defence. I couldn't hear my parents or Sam. The room was an echo chamber, my own heartbeat repeating so quickly that it deafened me. Jack turned from me to Isobel and back again, as if surprised to see two of us.

I pointed to my sister. Jack nodded and gently eased her from the bed.

* * *

Dan is due at my place for dinner. I've cooked things I know he likes. Chicken roasted in herbs. Dauphinoise potatoes. Dark chocolate mousse.

All Dan can talk about now is Isobel. What happened to her. Where she might have been. Why she's taken so long to come home. He hasn't asked to meet her.

"You can talk about her, you know," he says when I refuse to join in with his speculation. "This must be strange for you."

"I don't know what I feel." I do know, but it's nothing I can share with him.

He's trying to wear me down. At first his concern was touching. Then I began to wonder if this is a vicarious experience, his longing for his own sister. He's insistent, though. Invasive. I don't like this Dan. He's not what I thought he was. Is this where all relationships end up? The real person leaks out eventually and it's too late by then.

"You're still in shock."

"Isobel's a stranger to me."

"You just need time."

No amount of time will help.

My door cam buzzes. It's not Dan. Isobel is miniscule in the small screen. The drizzle refracts the light around her head. She turns her face from the wind.

"Hi, Natalie. Can I come up?"

She says it like her popping over is a regular occurrence. Mum or Dad must have given her my address.

"I'm expecting someone."

"I've let the cab go. Can I come in while I wait for another?" She speaks with a cordial authority that makes me feel six years old again.

Time is tight. I want to get her out of here before Dan arrives.

“This is nice.” She drops her wet coat on a chair and starts wandering about before I can stop her. “Very chic.”

I can’t tell if she’s being sarcastic.

“You’re expecting a man, aren’t you? How long have you been seeing him?”

“Three months. You’d better call a cab now, in case there’s a wait.”

She nods but doesn’t do it.

“What’s your lover like?”

Lover. A more carnal word than *boyfriend*. I blush.

“Don’t be coy, Natalie. Is he handsome?”

My smile is a taut line. None of this is right. We’re not loving sisters who can share intimacies.

“Is he gentle? Or do you like to him to be rough? Does he hold a pillow over your face?”

I turn and walk away, feeling sick. Is that what happened to her? Isobel follows me into the kitchen. She peels back the foil covering the cooked chicken that I’ve left resting in the roasting pan until it’s time to carve. She pulls off a leg with a deft twist and gnaws on it.

“Where have you been all this time?”

Isobel drops the bone on the countertop and wipes her greasy mouth with the back of her hand.

“I’ve told you already, but that’s not what you’re really asking, is it?”

“What am I asking?” I put the foil back on the chicken.

“How is it that I’ve survived?”

“And?”

“I’m alive because I made myself an ally to monsters.” Isobel’s enjoying this speech. She’s had a long time to rehearse it. “I thrived under Jack’s tutelage. If he was bad, I had to be worse to impress him enough to keep me alive. I was so pleased with myself, until the day he told me that you were a far better accomplice, even at the age of six.”

Jack. I turn and look out the window. She knows. She knows. She knows. She knows because Jack told her.

“We’re too old for children’s games. The question you *should* be asking is why I’m here now.”

Isobel comes up behind me and puts her arms around my waist, her chin resting on my shoulder. Her lips are close to my ear. I can smell the

chicken on her breath.

We can see the road. Hawthorn trees line the bottom of the garden opposite. The movement of their boughs in the wind catches my eye, so I don't see him at first.

I gasp. Jack O'Dander leans against the garden wall, his face in shadow. Isobel's arms tighten around me.

He steps forward and pushes back the hood of his parka. It's Dan. He crosses the road and stops under the pool of the security light so that we can see each other clearly. He rubs his forehead with his thumbnail. The gesture is all Dan, but his expression isn't diffidence. It's outright mockery.

I know what I felt instinctively at six years old when the man wearing the baseball cap, who didn't look like Jack, came into our bedroom. Him, Dan—they're just costumes for Jack O'Dander.

"It's okay, Nat," says Isobel, "I can see him, too."



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NOT THE MOST
ROMANTIC THING
CARRIE VAUGHN

Not the Most Romantic Thing

CARRIE VAUGHN

illustration by

ELI MINAYA

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

Ell's been the doctor on the *Visigoth* for less than a year. We've slept together all of three times. He doesn't know my secret—that won't happen for another year or so. Right now, no one knows that I'm not totally human, that I have a processor, wiring, self-healing—and that I remember everything. I record my whole life. Everyone just thinks I'm a big lunk of a field operative with a really good memory.

This is our first mission together. I'm looking forward to it. He's gone weird.

The two of us are on a run-down corporate shuttle ferrying passengers back and forth from a big commercial transport ship to the surface of Pan-Mineral 67B, an asteroid that's big enough to pretend to be a planetoid but small enough to pulverize to dust when it's mined out, to get to the last little bit of metals, which is what's going to happen tomorrow. The transport is third-party commercial and is fine, it's waiting to carry out the last of the personnel. The shuttle is Pan-Mineral and looks like it's a few cycles past regular maintenance. This whole operation is shoestring, because that's what happens when a company knows it's going to write the whole thing off as a loss at the end of its productive life span.

Most everyone else is going in the other direction—up and out. Officially, Pan-Mineral has an obligation to make reasonable efforts to ensure that everyone's gone before it sends in the explosives and pulverizers. But once it's gone through its reasonable-effort checklist, it's off the hook, and anyone who thinks it might be fun to try to dodge the last search is on their own. We're right on the edge of Trade Guild space, which means regulatory agencies may or may not be checking up on them. Which is why we got tagged for this job.

We need Ell's medical expertise for this, but he doesn't like being in the field. He's scowling, with his shoulders bunched up like he thinks he's going to have to charge through a door. At first I think it's a control thing—hard to control anything in a situation like this. He knows all the variables on the *Visigoth*, can plan for them and even change them to his liking. But this isn't his territory and he's stuck reacting.

Me, I love the unexpected. I love when the crazy starts happening. Predictable is boring. Ell likes predictable, and I'm thinking, how will the two of us ever get along? We're nothing alike. Good in bed only goes so far. I think that I'd like for us to be good out of bed, too. It means I'm fussing a bit, like a kid with a crush. I should be past that.

“What?” He narrows his gaze at me.

I realize I've got a goofy, lopsided grin on, looking at him. "Maybe try to relax? Everything's fine."

"Oh yeah, I'll just shut the nerves right off, thanks for reminding me."

Then I see it, the way he keeps looking over his shoulder, how he flinches when anyone gets too close.

"Hey," I say, trying to be gentle. "I've got you."

"Huh?"

"Your back. I'm watching it so you don't have to. That's my job."

He stares blankly, like I'm speaking another language, like he wants to argue. Like he doesn't believe me, and I try not to take it personally. Finally, he sighs. "Okay."

The shuttle runs a safety video with a litany of terrifying warnings on constant repeat. Where the survival suits are, what happens if everything catches on fire, zero hour for when the asteroid goes into the masher, and, more important, for when the last shuttle is scheduled to leave. Anxiety-inducing, for sure.

The full-disclosure section is especially eye-opening: The installation has a sealed landing bay and most of the living areas have atmosphere, but Pan-Mineral doesn't vouch for the quality and integrity of said atmosphere so supplemental breathing apparatus is encouraged though not required.

Well, okay then.

The rest of the passengers are cleanup and lockdown personnel from Pan-Mineral. Ell and I have respirators and air canisters from the *Visigoth*, much better quality than those around us. Nobody's looked us in the face to notice the difference, or to see if they recognize us. Why would anyone come here who didn't belong?

Buddy check: I look over Ell's mask and respirator—seals good, straps fitted, he's breathing steadily and not turning blue. He does the same for me. We put up the hoods on our coats, adjust our gloves. Everyone else does the same, and suddenly we all look like alien troglodytes.

After landing, the shuttle opens the vents to equalize the pressure and pops the main door to spill everyone out at once. They don't bother with airlocks because airlocks are expensive. Ell gets even more tense. Honestly, even I'm starting to twitch at the lack of consideration.

"It's okay. We won't be here long," I say to him, muffled through the mask.

"Graff, you're being patronizing."

If I try to give him a reassuring touch, just a pat on his shoulder, I'm sure he'll jump or scream.

We file down the ramp and into the scrum of the landing bay, a partially pressurized steel box full of floodlights and noise, crates and the machines moving them back and forth, air leaking out everywhere and no one bothering to fix the seals because it's all going to be gone in a day anyway. All the

infrastructure will get recycled when they chop up the asteroid. It's an efficient system.

"Reminds me of home," Ell mutters.

He isn't joking, I realize. I don't know anything about where Ell comes from. It's not in his dossier. I should know more about someone I've slept with more than once.

"Not a good thing, I take it," I say.

"It's ... too many people I can't help. I don't think I like planets."

"This isn't really a planet—"

"You know what I mean."

It's not a closed system that he can control, like a ship or a lab.

With false cheer in his voice as he distracts himself he says, "So where are you from? A planet? A station? Place like this or someplace with actual sky?"

"Planet." That's not giving away any secrets. I won't have to dodge until he asks for a specific name. I deflect before he can. "A pretty nice planet, actually. Clear sky, breathable atmosphere. Mountains."

"Maybe I can visit you there sometime."

Ah, no. No one from outside ever goes there. No one who isn't from there knows about it. Not answering him, keeping quiet, isn't lying. Not really.

"So why'd you leave?" he asks.

"See the galaxy, they said." I make it sound like a joke. "Make a difference, they said."

He actually laughs a little.

It's an image: two men hunched against the hostility around them, trudging like everyone else.

The mission is more vague than I'd like: retrieve off-network data and tissue samples from a lab in 67B's office section. Companies sometimes set up research labs in places like this because they want easy access to open space or cosmic radiation, their experiments rely on uneven gravity or other geological quirks of free-floating asteroids, and the rent is usually very cheap. This team was caught flat-footed. They were off-surface when Pan-Mineral issued the destruct order for 67B. The research team's parent company barred them from returning, because of the liability if they got stuck.

The team panicked—they had irreplaceable items still in their lab. So they hired an extraction specialist: us.

We're usually hunting down pirates and smugglers, retrieving hostages and cargo. Data and tissue samples is a new one, but it shouldn't be too hard. They've given us codes for the doors and terminals. Ell's got a portable cold-storage unit tucked under his coat. Identifying the tissue samples is his job. We've been assured that no one will be shooting at us, but we need to avoid Pan-Mineral's security so that we don't have to answer questions and they don't try to throw us out. Makes me wonder what this lab's actually been doing.

I want us to be in and out in an hour. Nothing motivates like a countdown.

The trick to infiltrating a place like this is to keep your head down and act like you hate life just as much as everyone around you so clearly does. You know a place is really shitty when human lives are cheaper than automation. Automation requires maintenance. People, you just replace. Also, there's something off about a place when there are no families around. This isn't anyone's home. Nobody's ever been born here.

On the *Visigoth*, we're supposed to be making life better for people, but no matter how hard we work, we keep ending up at places like this. We hunt pirates, smugglers, thieves, traffickers. The kinds of people who generally avoid the nice and pretty places that have parks and mowed lawns, sculpture gardens, and ubiquitous and well-maintained security cameras. Different kinds of crime happen there, but that's someone else's job.

Maybe someday we'll get a job on a resort planet with gorgeous beaches, or some glittering centers of art and culture. Fine dining and a night at the theater. I miss live music. *Good* live music, I mean, which isn't to say I haven't heard some very good music in the seedy underbelly of everything, buskers making do on scavenged instruments, blowing the doors off a place through sheer force of will and emotional engagement. Even at a campfire in the middle of nowhere under the worst circumstances, there's a good chance someone will start singing. But it's not the same as getting to relax while I listen. Best concert I ever saw: I can't actually pick, there are three that rise through my memories when I ask myself the question. And I can listen to them again whenever I want.

How do you keep track of it all, Ell will ask me a year or so in the future. I don't have to, I might answer. Everything's connected.

"Hey." Ell taps my shoulder. "You're not distracted, are you?"

I wonder what he sees that makes him ask. "What's the best concert you've ever seen? What kind of music do you like to listen to?"

"I've never been to a concert. Shouldn't you be paying attention to this?" He gestures to the chaotic ambience.

So. I now know that Ell comes from a shitty planet, maybe a lot like this asteroid, and has never been to a concert.

"I am paying attention. You okay?"

"You don't have to keep asking me that. I'll tell you if I'm not okay."

"You sure?"

He doesn't answer. I think: He doesn't trust me to take care of him. Then I think: He doesn't trust *anyone* to take care of him. Third, I desperately want to ask him: What hurt you so badly?

"You want to tell me about where you came from?"

"Can you promise you won't feel sorry for me if I do?"

I'm not sure I can promise that. We've gone to bed together three times, which is starting to seem like a lot. I like Ell. We live on the same ship, I work

with him, and sleep with him. And I want to keep doing it, which is an opportunity to progress in a relationship I haven't had since the academy. I'm a little put out that he doesn't want to tell me about his home planet.

But I can't push him to tell me because of everything I'm not telling him. And I can't tell him my secrets because they aren't entirely mine. I don't ask again.

The conversation dies.

The nice thing about the low-grade panic suffusing the place is that no one is paying much attention to us. I've got the layout in my memory. Ell is glancing nervously down passages, curving hallways opening into caverns, none of which is straight or makes sense because they follow the progress of the mining operation, tunnels dug into seams of metals and mineral deposits. I know exactly where we're going and don't hesitate.

A couple hundred meters in we reach an airlock sealing off the residential section and corporate offices, because people working here have to sleep sometimes, and sleeping in reliable atmosphere is generally considered the bare minimum for survival. I hate Pan-Mineral a little less, just for a moment.

Before we can cycle through, we hit an actual living security guard, a guy in an environmental suit that looks worn, the helmet scuffed, with visible patches on the sleeves and legs, like he's been working here awhile. Nameplate on his chest reads WEEDS.

He stops us. "This section's already cleared, no one is allowed in."

We knew access was restricted to this section. It's why we were hired to get in. The airlock cycles and spills out a trio who hurry away to the landing bay. Everyone's leaving, we're swimming against the flow.

I go a bit manic and chipper. "Hey there, Mr. Weeds. Special authorization issued for asset retrieval." I show him a handheld with official seals, several corporate logos, and lots of fine print. I forged the whole thing. "You'll see on that line there that Pan-Mineral will be liable for any losses if the retrieval fails. It'll only take twenty minutes, I promise. Plenty of time." He can't see my smile behind the breather, but he should be able to hear it.

The guard turns to Ell. "What about you? Is it a two-person job?"

"Technical crew," I say and point to the handheld. "It's all right there."

He should have let us in by now, but he's glaring. "You know, I'm *personally* liable if anyone is still in there when the bombs go off."

"First off, I promise you we won't be. Second, Trade Guild regulations state that good-faith efforts to clear the area fulfill the liability clause. I think this counts as a good-faith effort. You got a waiver or something I can sign, to let you off the hook?"

He doesn't, because it's easy enough to check that every person who's entered this airlock has come back out. This guy's being paranoid and twitchy, and I'm trying to be patient because his paranoia is understandable.

I press. "Please. We'll be in and out in twenty minutes, tops. You know how management gets on your case if you don't do the thing? I don't have time to go higher up to get my bosses to convince your bosses." I make my eyes look as sad and desperate as possible.

The guard steps aside and punches the control panel to start the airlock cycle. "Zero hour's been on the books for a week, you should have been in here way sooner."

"Yeah, tell that to my manager," I shoot back as I herd Ell into the lock. "Thanks, you're the best."

The door slides shut. Vents open and hiss air, equalizing the two sections.

Ell's eyes under his mask crinkle. An actual smile.

"What?" I ask.

"I'm enjoying watching you work."

He's never seen my field-ops work before this. I preen a little.

The light goes green, the inside door opens, and I pull down my breath mask and fill my lungs. The air has this metallic, tangy scent to it, and dust scratches my throat. Breathable but they aren't bothering to filter it anymore. I can handle it for twenty minutes.

Ell is more reluctant, but as we walk down the hallway, he pulls his mask down around his neck. Winces when he gets a smell. "I'm tempted to run an analysis on what we're taking into our lungs here."

"It's only twenty minutes," I say, and he glares.

This area is better laid out, a grid of levels and structures, neatly labeled. Almost like a ship interior, which I hope will calm Ell down. I find our destination, a nondescript metal door with a keypad, no other markings beside the address. It's locked, but I punch in the code the lab crew gave us.

And the light pops red. The door remains closed.

"Well, now what?" Ell says tightly.

I'm guessing Pan-Mineral locked everything down to keep people out. I'm also wondering if what's in here is really important enough to deal with all this nonsense. Either way, this is a small obstacle. This is why I'm the one who does these missions.

With my internal processor, I've already got remote access to the asteroid's entire network, keeping track of the countdown and all the other chaos. It takes about three seconds to drill through the security system and override the lock. I punch a couple of keys to make it look good, the light goes green, and the door opens.

"There, that's what," I say, beaming.

"How do you do that?" Ell says admiringly.

"Practice, I guess." Not totally lying, just not being totally accurate.

The first room is a small office-looking area with a couple of desks, a sofa, and a kitchenette. Packets of tea and instant soup are still lined up on the counter.

The desks are neat, organized. The lab staff left everything in order, expecting to come back. That's how fast 67B got put on the chopping block.

A door separates the office from the next room. It isn't locked and we go straight in.

This is the lab. A couple of safety lights are on, providing a soft amber glow. I turn on the main lights, illuminating all. It's just as neat and organized as the office, which is a relief. We won't have to go sorting through junk. Bottles and boxes sit labeled on shelves; a refrigeration unit hums against the far wall. An air filter must be running, because the room is missing the industrial tang of the exterior. It doesn't even smell much like a lab—no strong odor of solvents and antiseptics. There is something odd, though—earthy, organic. Fertilizer? Some experiment growing and rotting unsupervised, maybe.

I turn to Ell. "I'm suddenly more worried about breathing in a weird fungus than I am industrial fumes."

"You've got a point. I think I'd rather deal with carcinogens than necrotizing fasciitis."

"Well, that's a terrible thought. They'd have warned us, right? If they had something really awful floating around in here."

He laughs curtly. "You want to bet?"

With the generalized lack of intel on this job? No, no I do not.

I head for the terminal to download everything onto a memory stick while Ell scans the shelves, reading labels. Next, he opens the refrigeration unit.

"There's no tissue in here," he says. "Not so much as a microscope slide." He digs deeper, moving aside containers. "It's all reagents and solutions. I was expecting petri dishes, at least. Have you got an inventory file?"

I scroll and search, find the inventory. "Yeah, here."

He comes to read over my shoulder, his eyes darting, scanning lists of polysyllabic words that don't mean much to me. "These are all inorganic compounds. They were developing synthetic lubricants—they wouldn't have tissue samples here unless they were safety testing but I don't see any sign of that. So why did they send us for tissue samples?"

And why does it smell vaguely like ammonia in here? I give the room another look, and that's when I see the box of sand in the far corner, under a table. Missed it on the first search, because why would what we were looking for be in a box of sand under the table? On the far counter is a hopper full of some kind of kibble and feeding bottle hooked up to a faucet. Food and water. Litter box.

"Uh, Ell?"

If I focus, I can hear heartbeats. I can sense heat sources, especially if the room is chilled, but this one isn't. The heat was left on, so I didn't catch it right away, but I spot it now: on a high shelf, curled into a tight ball, tail wrapped around its body, green eyes glittering back at me.

Cat. It's a cat.



It's soft gray all over, fluffy, the size of a loaf of bread. It's been studying us the whole time with a vaguely managerial air.

"Welp," I say.

Ell puts a hand on his hip and sighs with consternation. "They could have just told us the tissue sample was still alive."

"I bet they thought we wouldn't go through the trouble for a cat."

"But we would for a stack of petri dishes or a set of test tubes? How does that make sense?"

I'm thinking of how this sort of thing looks on corporate memos, and yeah, the lab team probably assumed we wouldn't go through the trouble for a cat.

This job has now officially gone sideways. Not completely sideways, not like ninety degrees sideways. Maybe only twenty degrees sideways. I'll just have to think of this as a hostage rescue now.

Ell's studying me. "You're not thinking of—"

"What?"

"Well. 'Tissue sample' as a phrase doesn't specify 'alive,' and you've got this look on your face—"

"What? No!"

"Oh thank goodness." He slumps, relieved.

"Did you really think I would—"

"No, no, of course not." He touches my shoulder. Reflexively, I pat his gloved hand. We're both a little tense, it turns out. "So now what?"

We collect it, of course. Get it out of here, somehow. Do the job.

"Just give me a sec."

I take a couple of deep breaths to psych myself up and try to make my demeanor calm and reassuring. Take off my gloves, so the cat will smell person and not industrial grit. Cautiously, I approach the shelving in the corner, climbing up on the counter.

"Hey there," I murmur soothingly. "It's okay, everything's going to be fine."

I think I'm fast enough to just grab it and tuck it under my arm before it can murder me. I am not.

First, the critter arches its back and hisses, pressing itself even farther to the back of the cabinet. Of course it's scared, but that's not all of it. No, the problem is it knows what I am. It can sense the artificial current running through me, all the hidden bits of me that don't smell right. We have pets at home, cats and dogs and chickens and the rest, but they've grown up with us for generations, they're used to us. This cat has never met anyone like me and it's not taking any chances.

The cat swipes a paw and just about flies off the shelf, to the next set of shelves, to a table, then the floor, and under the desk on the opposite side of the

room, all in a second. It's just a streak of fur.

I let out a curse—that swipe got me, and a gash on my hand is welling blood. I stare at it a moment, resigned. I knew it was going to do that, and I let it anyway. So that's plan A trashed.

Ell snorts a suppressed laugh. “What, were you mean to cats in a past life?”

“I don't know. Maybe?”

“Is it bleeding? Are you okay?”

“I'll be fine.” I pull my gloves back on to hide the wound. My self-repair system is already handling it. It'll be healed within the hour.

The cat is in hiding, and we have five minutes left of the twenty I told the security guard. A few hours before we need to be off this rock, and that might not be enough time. It's not just about getting hold of the cat. We now have to rig up a climate-controlled carrier for the thing. And I'm going to have to forge live-cargo transport passes on the fly.

“I assume that thing's not carrying any weird bugs that would be a problem,” I say.

“I don't know, I need to check her over. I don't think so, though.” He settles on the floor, edging carefully toward the cubbyhole where the cat has retreated. A bit wryly he asks, “What's the plan, Commander?” We hardly ever use ranks with each other. This is a reminder that there's a mission on.

“I'm going to rig up a carrier. That'll give us a minute to think. Maybe we can lure it out with food?”

I go over the shelves again and study the boxes, bottles, and storage containers. There's a box, sealed with clasps, a bit bigger than cat sized. The problem with a makeshift carrier is air, and the fact that I don't know how long the cat will have to stay in there. Also, hard to get a respirator to stay on a cat's face. I hunt around some more, both in the lab and the front office, and find the emergency survival gear which includes a portable air bottle. Back in the lab I find an awl, some tape and tubing, and splice a feed into the box.

Next time I look over at Ell, he's sitting cross-legged on the floor and the cat is on his lap, bumping its head and rubbing its body against him. He's gently scratching its shoulder and whispering.

I think it's that exact moment I fall in love with Ell. Not just that I like him and like sleeping with him and want to do more of that. But an aching, overwhelming, my-heart-will-break-if-anything-happens-to-him feeling, because in the middle of a mission that has him low-grade freaked out, he's sitting on the floor making friends with a cat and it's perfect.

Gently, slowly, Ell takes hold of the cat, cradling it against his shoulder so it can't decide to flee again, and the cat nestles up to him, paws on his chest, eyes half closed. That rumble—it's purring.

I'm a little jealous of it, to be honest. “How is it?”

“Mrew,” the cat says, an almost musical tone.

“Good. Healthy. I hope you don’t need my help because I’m not letting go of her.”

Yeah, we probably won’t get another chance to catch it. Her. “Not a problem, I think I’ve got this done.”

I grab a pouch of kibble and an extra bottle of water to stick in my pocket. Find a bag to stick the box in that I can sling over my shoulder.

Murmuring all the while, stroking her to maintain her calm, he carries her to the box, slips her inside, and I get the lid on. Ell makes me move it back an inch so he can look in and make sure she’s okay. He puts in a handful of kibble. Her back arches, and she huddles there, looking small, but she doesn’t complain.

I sigh. We might actually get this done.

“Hey, let me see your hand.” Ell pats my arm.

I take off the glove and show him. There’s no blood, no scratch. Self-repair already finished.

“Huh. I could have sworn she scratched you.”

“Naw, she just missed. Maybe she didn’t have her claws out.” And that is a straight-up lie, and I power through it. I’m used to lying, I don’t know why it bothers me so much, lying to him. Just that ... I wish I didn’t have to.

We give the place one more look-over and don’t find anything else that could be classified as tissue samples. We get the hell out.

When we reach the airlock, we’re past the twenty-minute deadline I’d told the security guard. The problem with a choke point like an air lock is if the guard decides to press the issue, he can just keep us here without cycling the lock through. I can override the system through the network if I need to, but stuff like that attracts attention.

I take the bag off my shoulder and hand it to Ell. He gives me a questioning look.

“In case I need my hands free.” I’m not expecting a fight. But, well ...

He slips on the strap and hugs the carrier to him.

We put on our respirators, buddy check each other for straps and seals. Then we wait, in a closed little closet. I’m lining up contingency plans. Ell’s shoulders are back up by his ears, and his gaze has gone hard.

“Are we in trouble?” He says this so calmly, it’s hard to recognize as panic. He’s usually more expressive, emotive. But his voice has gone flat.

Yeah, Ell really hates being in the field.

“Trouble is a very broad term,” I say, then quickly add. “No, not yet.” Which won’t make him feel better, but I can’t lie about this.

Finally, air hisses and the light goes red, warning us of the hostile environment outside. The door opens and we flee.

“You’re late,” the guard says, stepping up like he’s going to get in front of us. Ell stiffens, his suppressed panic deepening.

“We are?” I say, playing dumb goon, and keep walking. “Well, it’s all taken care of now, nothing to worry about.”

“What were you doing back there?”

Ell hangs back, like he actually thinks we need to talk to the guy. I put my hand on his shoulder and haul him with me. He stumbles, a boot catching on the floor. I’ll pick him up and carry him if I have to, but that would draw an awful lot of attention. I mean, at this point I’ve decided I’ll carry Ell anywhere for any reason. But this will be easier if he stays upright.

He recovers and walks, keeping pace with me. The guard does *not* come after us, because we’re not his problem anymore. I’m relieved.

We’re on the third to last shuttle that leaves 67B.

When the shuttle takes off, everyone sighs, releasing tension. Even me. The compartment is filled with people carrying crates, bags, boxes, cargo. There’s not enough space and we’re probably violating weight and cargo regulations, but everyone manages to make room, squishing together, holding boxes on laps, tucking them under feet. Ell doesn’t look out of place, desperately hugging the case with the cat in it. I hope the thing is okay. I listen for scratching or meowing, but the rumble from the engines and the ambient noise of breathing and conversation drowns out anything the cat might be doing, which is probably for the best.

The air vents are blowing, and a green light comes on. The crew announces full atmosphere, and everyone pulls down their respirators with groans and sighs and all kinds of organic human noises.

It’s a nice moment. Fraught. I’ll remember.

Ell leans his head back and closes his eyes. Back on a ship, back in space, where he feels safest.

I tilt my head to speak softly, a private conversation. “It’s not a control thing, is it? I thought it was a control thing, that you can’t control all the variables in the field. But that’s not it. You’re afraid of getting stuck. Trapped. You felt trapped down there.”

His lips twist, smile or grimace, I’m not sure. His eyes are shining, tears gathering. He takes off a glove and rubs his eyes with the heel of his hand. I don’t have a handkerchief to give him, and I’m covered in grit so it wouldn’t help anyway.

“Yeah, I suppose,” he says. “My home planet—Brazon’s membership in the Trade Guild is probationary because they’ve had a civil war going for ... I don’t even know how long. Everyone’s conscripted. Mandatory. No one leaves. Governments don’t issue anything like passports. You’re born on Brazon, you fight for Brazon, grow up, have kids because that’s all there is to do really, and repeat. I trained to be a medic because I thought I’d be less likely to have to kill anyone.”

He slumps, miserable. He’s still got a death grip on the crate.

“This one time, Trade Guild sent down a delegation. Observers and mediators to try to sort out the mess. They do that every couple of years and it never works but they keep doing it. There was a bombing, one of them got badly hurt. I was the medic on hand, so I treated her. Saved her life. Stayed with her while we loaded her onto a shuttle to get back to her ship and better medical facilities. And ... suddenly I was in orbit. Off world, without authorization. I asked for asylum. The delegation gave it to me. I left home with nothing and never looked back. I was nineteen.”

His official dossier starts with him at medical school on Centauri. Doesn't mention where he was born. This is probably on purpose. It didn't seem odd when I first read it.

“You've never wanted to go back?”

“I'll be shot for desertion if I do. I'll never go back. Anyway. It was a year before I could step outside a building without having a panic attack. Five years before I stopped waking up from night terrors.”

“You still do. Or at least you did once.” The third time we slept together he broke out in a cold sweat, shivering, without waking up. I held him, whispering wordlessly, until he stopped.

“You didn't say anything.”

I shrug. By morning, he'd seemed fine. “Most people feel trapped on ships. Claustrophobic.”

“Ships are safe. It's hard ground that tries to kill you.”

I put my arm over his shoulders, just providing some comforting weight. Sighing, he leans his head on my shoulder, and I feel like I've won a prize. I kiss the top of his head, and finally he relaxes.

He's told me his secret. I still can't tell him mine, even though for the first time ever, I want to.

We go home, to our ship.

★ ★ ★

Immediately, Cat is the most popular living creature on the *Visigoth*.

We set up a habitat for her in a corner of the briefing room. Ell takes charge of her, which makes sense since he's our life sciences guy, but there's more to it. He's gone downright paternal. There's a box, a bed, a litter box, food and water, and pompoms on string that she bats around in an adorably theatrical manner. The whole crew comes to watch and coo over her, even crew that's supposed to be on duty, which requires a stern speech from Captain Ransom. But he's in there watching just as much as everyone else. What a novelty.

She is aloof enough that when she sidles up to a new person and makes a tentative rub against their hand, they are ecstatic, like they have been blessed. Like they've earned her affection. I'm pretty sure Cat does the aloof thing on

purpose, because people are so happy when she deigns to let them touch her, she gets double the attention. If they take her affection for granted, it wouldn't be special.

I never get past the door because she arches her back and her fur bristles whenever she sees me. "I saved your life, buster," I mutter under my breath, but it makes no difference. She'll never let me pet her and I'm trying not to take it personally. There's a rational reason for it. Too bad people aren't generally very rational about cats. The rest of the crew picks up on Ell's joke, that I was mean to cats in a past life, and cats remember.

I can't tell them the real reason. Let them laugh, they're enjoying it.

Ransom pulls me aside. "How'd he do?" He knows Ell has trouble in the field.

As much as I'd like to paint a rosy picture—and keep Ell around—I'm honest. I shrug a little. "He's not a natural, but he powered through. When he has a job to focus on he's fine."

"Is the issue aptitude or temperament?"

"Past trauma," I say. "Manageable."

"Would you take him in the field again?"

"Yes." No question. The guy's a cat whisperer, why wouldn't I take him everywhere, just in case there's a cat? "I checked in with him. He knows what his issues are."

Ransom gets that narrowed, calculating look in his eyes. "You like him."

I blush in response. "I'm perfectly objective."

"Oh, I know. Not saying a word."

He goes to sit on the floor next to Ell, who is playing with Cat.

I march off to ops because somebody still has to run the ship.

★ ★ ★

A few days later, we dock at Tre Ateyna, a large commercial station where we do a lot of business. Ransom, Ell, and I meet with the laboratory's team in a suite they've rented. It's a man and woman who I'm pretty sure are a couple. Doctors Whitson and Shula.

They don't even look at us. Their attention is solely on the soft-sided animal carry case slung over Ell's shoulder.

"Felicia!" the woman nearly screams, and they both rush forward, arms outstretched.

Ell quickly deposits the case on the table before they can tackle him, and in a moment the lid is peeled open and Cat—Felicia, apparently—is out, and the pair has enclosed her in a group hug. They're making lots of embarrassing noises of affection.

Cat doesn't look like a Felicia, but what do I know?

The man, neatly turned out, wearing an unremarkable suit, looks back at us. “Thank you so much. This means so much, thank you, thank you.” The woman sniffs back tears. She’s hugging Cat to her face; the animal looks nonplussed.

“Thank you for responding promptly to the invoice,” Ransom says wryly.

“Why the hell did you even have a cat there in the first place?” I burst. “And what’s with the tissue-sample excuse? Why not just tell us to go get your cat?” On the scale of low-intel jobs, the stakes on this one were pretty low, but I’m still put out.

Whitson says, “If we told you the target was a pet, would you have taken the job?”

Ransom looks like he’s biting his tongue.

“Called it,” I say. I turn to Ransom. “I think we need to add ‘successful hostage rescue’ to the invoice, though.”

“Anything,” Shula says breathlessly. “We’ll give you—”

Whitson puts a hand on her arm, and she falls silent. Yeah, everybody got what they wanted, no need to complicate things, right?

Shula hasn’t turned away from her cat. Sheepishly, she explains, “We weren’t supposed to have a cat there. We were out in the shuttle for a couple of days to collect mineral samples, she would have been fine until we got back, but ... Nobody expected the evacuation order when it came. Traffic control wouldn’t let us land, we couldn’t get authorization—”

“There should have been more lead time. There’s a collective lawsuit brewing against Pan-Mineral about that.”

Pan-Mineral isn’t going to care. Waiting would have cost them more money than a lawsuit will.

Ell says, “We would have, you know. Taken the job even if we knew the target was a pet.”

They might not have believed it if Ransom or I—the guys who look like soldiers, who look merciless—had said it. But Ell looks like a doctor. He looks safe. Even though he’s probably seen more blood and violence than either of us put together. Not to mention, Cat adores him.

They let Ell say goodbye to Felicia properly, one last scratch and cuddle, and we part ways.

Tre Ateyna is a good station for shore leave. Lots of fresh food, supplies, hostels with showers with real water and everything. I could use some shore leave.

“How much time are we spending here, anyway?” I ask Ransom.

“Let’s say six hours. You think that’s long enough to wait for any messages to catch up to us?” He sizes us up. Lifts a brow.

Long enough for messages to catch up to us. Yeah. Sure. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Right. You kids go crazy.” He makes a half-assed salute and stalks off toward the docking bays, leaving us to our own devices.

I glance at Ell. “Do you want to get a room? I mean, if you can still stand me after all this.” Not the most romantic thing I’ve ever said. Not the least, either.

“Yes, yes I do,” he says and hooks his arm around mine.

★ ★ ★

A year or so later, we’ve slept together a lot more than three times. I remember every single time, but Ell has lost track. And he’s learned my secret. I didn’t tell—an accident sliced me open and spilled out my partly synthetic guts. He had to put me back together.

He and Ransom would have been well within their rights to throw me out an airlock or ship me off to some secret R&D lab. But they didn’t. Still, it’s taken a while for us to get comfortable again. A lot of surreal conversations. Surreal for me, because I’m suddenly talking about stuff I’ve never had to explain, that I’m not supposed to talk about.

Honestly, it’s kind of a relief.

Right now, Ell and I are in his office in medical, eating noodle bowls on a lunch break. He hasn’t brushed his pale hair today, and he’s holding the bowl right up to his face so anything he drops goes back in. Very efficient. He’s pausing between bites, looking at me over his chopsticks. I keep shoveling in noodles, letting him look. He’s got a question brewing, in the furrow in his brow. Like he’s got a dodgy blood sample in front of him.

“Ask,” I say, between bites.

“How do you keep it all straight? If you remember everything, how do you know what’s important?”

The flip answer is that it’s all important. But I shrug. “The thing is you don’t always know what memory is going to be important while you’re living it. Something happens years later that reminds you of that one little thing. Unmodified memory works like that too. You know how you smell something and it turns out it’s the same floor cleaner that got used at the school where you went when you were five? You might not have thought you remember, but you do. It all gets cross-referenced. It’s the same for me. Kind of.” I wince because I’m not sure I’m explaining it very well.

“Huh.” Which could mean, “oh yeah,” or could mean, “I have no idea.” He seems thoughtful, his gaze downcast. “Like that stupid asteroid we were on that one time. The one that gave me the stupid flashbacks about home.”

The stupid asteroid job is one of my favorite stories.

I grin. “I was just thinking about that.”

His brow scrunches up even more. “Why?”

Remembering is one thing. Explaining is another. “You. You’re cute when you’re rescuing cats. You’re cute when you’re eating noodles. You’re just cute. It’s all connected.”

He gives me a familiar, fondly frustrated glare. “That’s almost romantic.”

“The cat really did scratch me, by the way. It just healed up before you saw it.”

“Hm. I’d forgotten about that.”

Things have changed. Things are tough. And good. “That mission was when I realized I love you.”

That gets a smile out of him. He gives his remaining noodles a stir. “Now that is definitely romantic. The sentiment, not the mission, mind you.”

“No, that was a shitty mission. It’s still one of my favorites.”

“Yeah. Mine, too.”



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The book cover features a central illustration of a vampire with a pale, elongated face, a red cape, and a black cloak. He stands behind two young girls with braided hair, wearing white lace dresses. They are holding a large, ornate key together. The background is a stylized, painterly landscape with several tall, cylindrical towers with crenellated tops, set against a warm, orange and yellow sky. The overall style is reminiscent of classic children's book illustrations.

THE LOCKED COFFIN

A JUDGE DEE MYSTERY

LAVIE TIDHAR

The Locked Coffin: A Judge Dee Mystery

LAVIE TIDHAR

illustration by

RED NOSE STUDIO

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

1.

The castle of Maidstone or Maid's Stone sat alone on a hilltop above a forest not far from a town of the same name. No doubt legend told that a maid was put to death by stoning there, or something equally horrid; in Jonathan's experience this was usually the case. It also happened that the castle was crawling with vampires.

He trudged after his master in the snow. Dark shapes flittered in the trees. Somewhere in the distance a wolf howled at the moon. Jonathan was cold, hungry, and miserable. But this was his usual condition.

They met few travellers as they made their way from Dover to distant London. What purpose Judge Dee had in going there Jonathan was sure he didn't know. The master went and Jonathan followed.

Something darted out of the dark and chittered at them. Jonathan jumped. Judge Dee turned his austere face on him but said nothing.

'What!' Jonathan said. It wasn't unreasonable to be scared in the dark, he thought.

'It was just a squirrel,' Judge Dee said, with a hint of disapproval in his voice.

Jonathan shivered but said nothing. Squirrels, he thought, were just rats with pretty tails. But he didn't say that to the judge.

They trudged through the snow until they came upon a small village in the moonlight. It sat beyond the trees. The houses were dark and the reflected moon hovered in the ice and only one fire burned at the far end of the village. It was there that the judge and Jonathan went.

They were somewhere between Wormshill and Nettlestead. East of Loose and south of Barming. Somewhere between Hucking and Yalding. It was that sort of place.

As they approached the fire Jonathan could hear a hammer hammering. They moved closer and saw a man banging nails into a coffin. He turned and saw them but registered no surprise. He nodded and they approached the flames. Jonathan warmed his hands and felt grateful. The man continued in his work.

After a time, he ceased and came to them. He was a tall, stooped man, with a long grey and white beard and dark eyes, with skin much weathered by the passing of years.

‘Welcome, strangers,’ he said. His voice was deep and rough, like old wood. ‘You are going far?’

‘To the castle yonder,’ Judge Dee said.

‘Maidstone?’ the coffin maker said. ‘I am finishing a job for the castle myself.’

He gestured at the coffin.

‘Did someone die?’ Jonathan said.

Both the coffin maker and the judge turned and looked at him oddly.

‘No,’ the coffin maker said.

‘Ah,’ Jonathan said.

‘For the master there, I presume?’ Judge Dee said.

‘Indeed. A custom job. Very fine. Walnut and cherry lined with the finest velvet from Arabia. Very comfortable. Very fine.’

‘This master, he is wealthy?’ Jonathan said.

‘He is a Norman,’ the coffin maker said, as though that explained it.

‘May I?’ the judge said.

‘By all means,’ the coffin maker said. He beamed with pride as the judge ran his long fingers along the inside of the coffin.

‘Is that a lock and key?’ the judge said.

‘Indeed it is, sir,’ the coffin maker said. ‘And I can tell you are a man of great taste and learning. It is an innovation, indeed it is, sir! So that the coffin may be locked from the *inside*, as it were.’

‘It is innovative,’ the judge agreed. He felt the sides. ‘This wood is strong.’

‘Only the finest, sir.’

‘You are an excellent craftsman,’ Judge Dee said.

‘I thank you most kindly.’

‘Is it far, the castle?’ the judge said.

‘It is over yonder, sir. Not far as the bat flies, as they say around here, nor is it far for a wolf. Yet I am but a man and prefer to travel in daylight.’

‘We shall press on, then,’ the judge decided.

‘But master!’ Jonathan said.

‘Yes? Jonathan?’

‘I am neither bat nor wolf myself,’ Jonathan said.

The coffin maker looked at him critically. ‘Indeed you are *not*,’ he said. ‘Let me measure you, if you please. Just in case. You are rather rotund and would take much wood. I would suggest something cheap and durable, as befits someone of your lowly station. Here, if you would just let me—’

‘Lay off, man!’ Jonathan said. He pushed away from the coffin maker in alarm.

‘Perhaps you are right, master,’ he said. ‘Yes, yes, let us press on, as you say. No time like the present for a journey, what?’

‘What?’ the coffin maker said.

‘I said, no time like the pr— Let go! I’m still a living man!’

Judge Dee turned his face and the light of the moon hit the fine bones of his jaw. It was possible that he smiled.

‘We are all of us measured for the coffin, good sir,’ the coffin maker said reproachfully. ‘For sooner or later we shall find ourselves in one. If you don’t mind me saying, I have always found great solace in this observation. It was made by my father before me, and his father before him, and my great-grandmother before him. She was a fine carpenter. She would have loved to see this latest innovation. I am sure it will soon be all the rage in Europe.’

Jonathan nodded distractedly. He stared at the coffin. It was a ridiculous affair, he thought. Velvet and cherry wood indeed! And a lock on the inside. It was the sort of stupid thing only a vampire could have thought of. And most likely regret a moment after they had lost the key.

‘I bid you good night,’ he said.

‘Go in health,’ the coffin maker said. And he went back to his job, whistling as he hammered.

Jonathan followed Judge Dee, and once more they went into the woods, and the dark swallowed them.

‘What an odd creature,’ Jonathan said.

‘But what a remarkable creation,’ the judge said. ‘It is almost a mechanical contraption. And did you see, he had cunningly built a hidden compartment on the inside, for the secreting of a glass of refreshment before bedtime, or something similar of that nature, I presume.’

Jonathan looked sideways at the judge, for his master was an ascetic who loathed the display of material comforts and possession, and this hideous coffin gave even Jonathan indigestion.

‘It is vulgar,’ Jonathan said. He felt quite pleased with himself for finally finding occasion to use the word, which he’d only ever heard the judge use.

‘Yet innovative,’ the judge said, taking no notice, which admittedly did hurt Jonathan’s feelings.

‘It is a bad idea, this coffin,’ Jonathan said. ‘Mark my words.’

The judge merely nodded. In short time they came out of the woods to behold the castle, a stout stone building in the Norman style. There were several watchtowers. There was a moat. That pretty much summed up Jonathan’s knowledge of architecture.

There were also horses. Jonathan found *that* out by stepping into a large pile of something they had left behind.

It was still fresh.

He wiped his foot on the flagstones miserably.

‘Who goes there!’ came the cry. ‘Be you predator or prey?’

Jonathan shivered. The voice was cold and mean and arrogant with it. In other words, a vampire’s.

‘I am Judge Dee,’ the judge said quietly.

There was a short startled silence on the other side of the moat. Then the drawbridge came down.

Judge Dee entered the castle and Jonathan followed. A small woman wearing riding gear appeared. She looked at the judge with easy familiarity.

‘Heard lots about you,’ she said. ‘I’m Lady Carmen. I’m afraid you’ve caught us just as we were about to set out on a hunt. We take hunting very seriously here. Would you like to come? How are your horse skills? Is that a human with you? Hello.’ She smiled at Jonathan.

‘Don’t be scared,’ she said. ‘I don’t bite.’

Her long sharp teeth told a different story.

A small and startlingly skeletal man came to join her. He too wore hunting gear.

‘Judge Dee,’ he said. ‘I am Odo, Earl of Maidstone and surroundings. I have been on this land since old William ceded it to me for my help in the conquest. That was a while ago, I think. I pay little attention to the world outside. Be welcome in my castle. Do you hunt? Can you handle a horse? We would welcome your company. I am famished for blood!’

Jonathan noticed that neither earl nor lady asked why the judge was there.

‘I hunt only the truth,’ the judge said; a little pompously, Jonathan privately thought. But Odo, Earl of Maidstone (and surroundings), nodded thoughtfully, and Lady Carmen clapped her hands in delight as though the judge had said something both profound and witty.

‘Sometimes the fall kills you. And sometimes, when you fall, you fly!’ she said.

‘What?’ the judge said.

‘It is a whatchamacallit, an aphorism,’ Lady Carmen said. ‘You know, a pithy observation which contains a general truth.’

‘But that’s ridiculous,’ Jonathan said. ‘If you fall you *don’t* fly. You’re not a *bird*. Unless it’s advice for birds. But that’s a terrible piece of advice for people. It is categorically unsound.’

‘Not if you’re a vampire,’ Odo said, not unreasonably. ‘Vampires can fly.’

‘Whatever it is you’re scared of doing, do it!’ Lady Carmen said. She seemed determined – Jonathan had to give her that.

‘What if you’re scared of snakes because they’ll kill you?’ Jonathan said. ‘What if you are scared of drinking milk because your body reacts unfavourably to milk, and will k—’

‘Kill you, yes,’ Odo said. He nodded thoughtfully. ‘The young chap is right,’ he said. ‘I would be rather scared of sharpened stakes, for instance, or villagers, but it would be most idiotic to go and play around with them, do you know.’

‘But it sounds so wise,’ Lady Carmen said.

Judge Dee said nothing, and looked sorry he had ever delivered that line about truth.

‘Ah, Stefan,’ Lady Carmen said. A third figure approached, pulling two horses behind him. He was a tall gaunt man, also a vampire, but evidently a social class or two lower than the others. His clothes were clearly worn for work and not for show, and they had a threadbare, faded look about them.

‘I brought the horses,’ he said.

‘We shall ride! What fun!’ Lady Carmen said, clapping.

‘What do you hunt?’ the judge said. He spoke softly but his voice carried.

‘Only servants,’ Odo said carelessly.

‘Bring the servants!’ roared Lady Carmen.

Several servants shuffled into the courtyard. They looked more resigned than scared. Two of them were chamber girls, one a hunchback cook, one a farm hand, and the last a valet. Or so they seemed to Jonathan. None of them looked very well. There was a pallor to their skin and their eyes were wan.

‘We’re here,’ the valet, who was youngest, said sullenly.

‘He’s mine,’ Lady Carmen said with glee. She glanced at Odo.

‘You can have the hunchback,’ she said.

‘I *always* get the hunchback!’ Odo said. But he didn’t argue. It occurred to Jonathan that Lady Carmen was not a person one usually picked an argument with.

‘Send out the servants!’ Lady Carmen roared.

Stefan, the tall vampire, shooed the servants to the open gate. They walked listlessly over the moat bridge and into the woods.

‘After them!’ Lady Carmen roared.

Odo smiled, showing long, needle-like teeth that made Jonathan shiver.

‘Let the Wild Hunt start!’ he screamed. Then he turned into a bat and flew clumsily after the servants. Lady Carmen and Stefan climbed the horses. Once over the moat, Lady Carmen looked back.

‘Are you coming?’ she said.

The judge shook his head. Lady Carmen shrugged, then melted into the darkness of the woods.

‘What odd creatures they are,’ the judge said.

‘Master?’ Jonathan said.

‘Yes, Jonathan?’

‘Why did we come here? I mean...’ Jonathan took a deep breath. A scream came from the wood, but it was muted, like the person who emitted it didn’t really feel very strongly about what was happening. ‘Has there been a crime? They did not seem to expect you. Or care that you are here at all.’

‘Indeed, Jonathan...’ the judge murmured. ‘They expressed no curiosity. Isn’t that, in itself, curious?’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘That,’ the judge said, ‘is plain to see. Come. Let us find a shelter from the night.’

‘Yes, master,’ Jonathan said. And he trudged after the judge into the castle.

2.

The castle of Maidstone or Maid’s Stone was draughty, the stone walls cold to the touch and covered in slimy moss. Rats darted through holes in the masonry. Jonathan’s feet crunched small bones. It was a typical vampire dump, Jonathan thought unkindly. Two small shadows materialised at the end of the corridor.

‘Boo!’ they said in unison.

Jonathan jumped. He emitted an unseemly scream. The two small figures giggled. Judge Dee frowned.

‘That is unbecoming,’ he said.

‘Sorry, Master Dee,’ the two said in unison.

Jonathan stared at the two figures. They were near identical and childlike, though their eyes were old, far older than any child’s, and when they smiled – again, in unison – they revealed small sharp white teeth set behind lips stained red with blood. Jonathan shuddered. He hated vampire children.

‘Who turned you?’ Judge Dee said severely. He did not approve of child vampires, either.

‘We never knew our mother-in-darkness,’ the two vampires said. ‘But she was very pretty.’

Jonathan also hated stupid expressions like ‘mother-in-darkness’. The judge said, ‘Name yourselves.’

‘I am Erzsebet,’ the child on the left said. ‘This is Margarit.’

‘No, I’m Erzsebet,’ the child on the right said. ‘You’re Margarit.’

The two of them giggled again.

‘Please follow us,’ the one on the left said. ‘Would you care for refreshments? We have fresh midwife blood, or farmer’s infusion, which is quite robust, with hints of elderberry.’

‘Jonathan,’ the judge said. ‘Do you require food?’

The two child vampires looked disdainfully at Jonathan.

‘There is some servant food in the kitchen,’ they said.

‘Then fetch it,’ the judge said.

They arrived in the common room of the castle. Jonathan was grateful to see a fire burning. He plonked himself down beside it.

‘*Why* are we here again, master?’ he said. The two awful children had vanished. The judge sat down. A servant appeared furtively with a plate of food, placed it beside Jonathan, and withdrew. Jonathan stared in appreciation at the chicken carcass. He nibbled politely on a chunk of cheese.

A glass of something red materialised in the judge’s hand. Judge Dee sipped and nodded.

‘Elderberry notes, indeed,’ he said.

It was near dawn by the time Jonathan went to his bed. It was *always* near dawn when Jonathan went to his bed. The judge had vanished, as he always did. Jonathan never knew where he slept, if he even slept at all. Around Jonathan the sounds of the castle gradually grew faint. The hunt had returned late, the Lady Carmen flushed of cheek and the taciturn Stefan more talkative. Apparently, he had spotted a great wild boar in the wood and pursued it in vain, and he thought it must be an omen, an indication that the god Moccus was abroad. Jonathan knew that some of the old vampires still worshipped gods long forgotten in the world of people. Jonathan did not particularly believe in pig-gods. He was just sad the wild boar remained at large, for Jonathan was exceedingly fond of chops and ribs.

Only the lord of the castle, Odo, remained in doleful countenance on their return, even as he licked his lips clean of blood. The twin girls were nowhere to be found, and the vampires had little of interest to offer in the way of conversation. It was evident to Jonathan that, as was common in the way of vampires holed up together in one place for an extended period of time, they all hated each other. Stefan, a Celt, clearly resented the lord and lady of the castle and his own lowly position. Lady Carmen seemed to loathe both her male companions and to rule the castle in everything but name. As for her nominal master, Odo, the man was like a walking cadaver, with the disposition to match. Jonathan had met such vampires before. They were as cheery as the plague.

He snuggled deeper into his thick blanket. He was given an adequate room in the servants’ quarters, and a small coal fire still burned. He was

warm, safe, and his stomach was full. He stretched out his legs and sighed with relief.

Two monstrous figures appeared above him, eyes red and fangs extended.

‘Boo!’ they said.

Jonathan screamed.

The twins giggled, and then they were gone.

Somewhere outside, the sun rose, and the living world awakened. For those hours of daylight, at least, there were no vampires. Jonathan rolled on his side. The coals in the fireplace died, but slowly, and the heat lingered on, until he slept.

3.

‘You see,’ Odo said earnestly, ‘someone is trying to kill me.’

Which at least explained why they were there, Jonathan thought with some relief.

They were sitting in the count’s private study, which had seven entire illuminated manuscripts, a small fortune which Jonathan saw Judge Dee wordlessly admire.

‘You must be a great reader,’ the judge observed.

‘What, these?’ Odo said, surprised. ‘No, never learned my letters. I just keep them to sell eventually.’ He puffed up his puny chest. ‘I have two Herbals, a Psalter, a Gospel, a Bible, a Homer, and a Glossary.’

‘Impressive,’ Judge Dee said. But he pursed his lips disapprovingly all the same. The judge valued learning and disliked people who were ignorant by choice.

‘Who is trying to kill you?’ Jonathan asked Odo.

‘Everyone!’ the earl said. He interlaced his bony fingers in his lap. ‘I do not know, in truth,’ he admitted. ‘They keep at it, though. It is becoming positively perilous! Only the other week an arrow came at me out of the trees during the hunt, and it was only by good luck that it missed my heart! And the week before it was a fall of rocks that tumbled downhill and nearly buried me in the stream. I fear the worst, Judge Dee! I am grateful that you came. You must stop them before it’s too late! I am getting so anxious I can barely taste my food these days. I cannot feel safe even in my own castle!’

Jonathan stared at the Earl of Maidstone with suspicion. These self-styled earls and counts were always getting murdered or plotting murder or slaughtering the local villein population (who didn’t count). But the earl really did look worried sick.

The judge sipped blood politely. He considered.

‘What of these two little girls?’ Jonathan blurted.

The earl startled. He looked this way and that as though checking no one was near.

‘Erzsebet and Margarit,’ Odo said. ‘Horrid little monsters. Centuries old. Utterly merciless. They hate me almost worse than my wife does!’

‘Can you not exile them?’ Jonathan said.

Odo shuddered. ‘Have you *met* them?’ he said. ‘I wouldn’t dare. Besides, they are favourites of Carmen’s.’

He looked very sorry for himself.

‘And speaking of your wife?’ Jonathan said. He was having to ask all the questions. The judge seemed enraptured in Odo’s Herbal.

‘She hates me most of all,’ Odo said; but he looked more philosophical about this. Perhaps all wives hated their husbands, Jonathan thought. He had admittedly no experience in this particular field.

‘What about the others, then? This groom, Stefan?’

Odo waved a dismissive hand. ‘The man’s a simpleton,’ he said. ‘A peasant. If I ever meet the vampire who bit him I would put a stake through his heart for the sheer affront. The man has common blood running through his veins. And, well, it’s not like we feed well here. English blood is soup-thin, nothing like the heady brew of a good Norman farmer or a well-bred Norman wench.’

He licked his lips, practically salivating. Jonathan suppressed a shudder. He could see *why* the earl’s companions might wish to kill him.

‘What about the servants?’ Jonathan said.

‘As if they’d dare!’ Odo said. He glared at Jonathan, then turned to the judge.

‘What do you think, Judge Dee?’ he said.

The judge put down the Herbal with some effort.

‘You are secure?’ he said.

‘As well as one can be,’ Odo said. ‘Come, I will show you.’

Jonathan trudged after them. Odo spent an hour showing off his arrangements. The room of stark stone at the top of the tower, to which only he had access. The hidden traps that would spring on an assassin attempting to enter. There were no windows, of course. The room was shut off like a tomb. But still there were spikes on the outside walls to prevent anyone climbing. There were nets to trap an unwary bat, and ingenious bellows to capture any in mist form. And the stout doors had a double lock on them, for which the Earl of Maidstone had the only key.

Jonathan had to admit it: Odo was thorough.

One did not get to live centuries as a vampire without getting good at not dying.

Just then the clear and piercing sound of a horn sounded outside.

‘The hunt!’ Odo said, clapping his hands excitedly. ‘Will you join us tonight, Judge Dee? Oh, it is such fun, to hunt for our prey!’

‘I would like to study your Homer,’ the judge said. ‘But...’ He glanced at Jonathan.

‘Master?’

The judge shook his head silently. They followed Odo back down to the courtyard. There, the scene was much as it was the night before. The Lady Carmen, bright-eyed and sharp of teeth, waited as Stefan brought out the same listless servants, the two chamber maids, the hunchback cook, the farm hand and the valet and the horses.

When Lady Carmen sounded the horn again the servants shuffled off into the night. The wild hunt followed shortly. This time, Erzsebet and Margarit joined them. The two girls turned into wolf cubs and slunk off into the night with sharp teeth glinting. Jonathan could hear their howls in the woods, and he shivered.

‘It must be them,’ he said. ‘Who would kill Odo.’

‘What of the servants?’ Judge Dee said.

‘They look barely fit enough to lift a fork, master,’ Jonathan said. ‘Let alone a crossbow.’

The judge nodded.

‘It is a disappointing case,’ he said. ‘It is clear to me...’ But he did not finish his thought, for just then they heard the sound of hooves, and the ringing of a small bell. A cart emerged out of the woods, a small but determined donkey pulling it and the coffin maker driving. A wolf’s howl sounded in the distance and then the flapping of leathery wings, and three dark shapes dropped out of the sky and turned into Odo, the Lady Carmen, and Stefan, the groom.

‘My coffin!’ Odo said. His lips were stained with blood, the colour stark on his pale face.

The coffin maker drove into the courtyard and stopped, and his donkey made a mess on the flagstones. Jonathan hid a smirk. The servants trudged back into the fold. They looked even worse than before, and it took six of them to bring down the coffin from the cart.

Odo was enraptured. He admired the smooth wood, the ingenious lock, the velvet lining. He squealed with delight at the hidden drinks compartment. He paid the coffin maker in gold. Jonathan saw how the Lady Carmen and Stefan glared at the earl with barely concealed hatred. He saw Erzsebet and

Margarit stand very still with cold fury in their eyes, as though already making calculations for the best way to get at the Earl of Maidstone in his sleep.

But Odo paid them all no mind. He made the servants bring the coffin upstairs and had it installed in his room. He invited only the judge and Jonathan to observe it. Odo had the only key, of course.

‘Now I can finally sleep in peace,’ he told them. He escorted them away. Behind them the door double-locked from the inside, and the traps were primed and set to wait for an intruder. Jonathan imagined the Earl of Maidstone slipping into his coffin at last and shutting it on himself. Locking the door to the coffin, also from the inside, and perhaps pouring himself a little coffin-time daycap from the hidden compartment before falling at last into a long and satisfied sleep.

Jonathan himself curled under the blanket. The birds called outside. He hated going to sleep with the birds calling outside.

The waking world woke.

And the world of the undead went to sleep.

4.

Jonathan woke at dusk and for a while all was well. The vampires still slumbered. Jonathan made his way to the kitchens, where wine skins that were no doubt filled with blood hung from the rafters. Some had bite marks in them and Jonathan turned his head in disgust. He found the listless servants sat by the fire and joined them. He picked hungrily at bread and cheese and half a game bird. It occurred to him someone had to be hunting, which meant someone had use of a crossbow.

He studied the servants one by one. The two maids looked far whiter than the sheets they laid out. The farmhand was skeletal, the valet looked a hundred years old. They were as sad an assortment of specimens as one could wish to find. Only the hunchback cook still had some fat on him. His face shone greasily as he dug into the food (competing with Jonathan for the remains of a pheasant), and in the light of the dying sun in the window his hump looked thinner. Jonathan made a lunge for the last drumstick, missed, and settled for mopping up the fat with a piece of bread.

He wished he and the judge were on their way to London. He had had enough of castles, moors, bogs, fens, marshes, and pheasants for lunch. He was sick of the countryside.

Give him a street! he thought. Give him the cries of hawkers on the docks, the cackles of painted Jezebels, the singing of drunks, and the chanting of

priests – give him a city!

‘Boo!’ two voices said close in his ear.

‘Oh, go away,’ Jonathan said.

The two little vampire girls stood there and sulked.

‘Where is your master?’ they said in unison.

Jonathan shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ he said, pinching the last bit of meat from the pheasant’s carcass. He stuffed it in his mouth and licked his lips. The two girls looked at him with moues of disgust.

‘What?’ Jonathan said. He looked at them closely.

‘What happened to you two?’ he said. The two girls looked distinctly... bruised, he thought.

‘Nothing!’

‘Where is *your* master?’ Jonathan said.

‘We serve no master!’

‘You live under his roof,’ Jonathan said. The two girls hissed at him. Then they simply vanished.

How did they *do* that? he thought. Turn into mist, or whatever it was that vampires did. He got up reluctantly, for the food was finished, and the servants sat there looking like bodies waiting for the grave. All was quiet in the castle of Maidstone.

When the vampires assembled for the nightly hunt, the Earl of Maidstone did not make an appearance.

Lady Carmen paced at first, then fumed.

‘Where is my lazy, no-good husband?’ she demanded at last. She looked a little bedraggled, Jonathan noticed. So did the groom, who was limping tonight. It was as though all the vampires had had a long and difficult late night last night.

‘Asleep, still, perhaps,’ Stefan said. ‘He has been lethargic of late. Shall we go without him?’

The hunchback cook touched his hump with a look of sudden hope on his face. Clearly, being fed on by Odo every night was not his idea of happiness. Not that Jonathan could blame him.

‘You don’t think...?’ Lady Carmen said.

‘My lady?’ Stefan said.

‘You don’t think something *awful* happened to Odo, do you?’ she said.

Stefan shrugged. Lady Carmen’s eyes shone, and the twins suppressed a giggle.

They all looked quite pleased at the thought. Even the servants perked up at the idea.

Jonathan wasn't sure what made Odo so unbearable to the others. He supposed that Stefan hated him for being an old Norman and for his part in the conquest of England; that his wife hated him for being her husband; and that the twins hated him for being above them in station. But in truth, vampires were just as likely to try and murder each other out of sheer boredom. It didn't take much.

Not that people were all that different, Jonathan reflected. People killed each other over the littlest things. Petty greed and jealousy and rage. It didn't take much.

As for the servants, they were probably just sick to death of being hunted every night. They looked drained.

'Master?' Jonathan said.

Judge Dee appeared soundlessly.

'His door is locked,' he said. 'There is no answer from inside.'

They all climbed the tower. The door stood firm before them.

'I daren't go in there,' Lady Carmen said. 'My husband has...traps and suchlike. He is a cunning, vicious creature.' She said it with pride.

'May I?' Judge Dee said.

The lady nodded. Judge Dee put his hand on the double lock. He concentrated and the locks sprung open. The other vampires looked surprised, then impressed. Dee was an elder. His powers were of a different calibre to theirs.

'Stay behind,' the judge said. He pushed the door open. 'Jonathan, follow me, please.'

'Yes, master...,' Jonathan said.

He followed cautiously.

The judge paused.

'You noticed the scratches on the locks?' he said.

'Master?'

'Someone attempted to unlock them last night. And one of the traps was activated last night, also,' he said, pointing to a spike that jutted out of the wall and held a torn piece of cloth on its very sharp point. Jonathan swallowed. He followed the judge deeper into the room.

'Something bad happened here,' Jonathan whispered.

'Something bad happened in this room every night,' the judge said.

They stepped deeper into the gloom.

In the middle of the room stood the coffin.

'Odo?' Jonathan said. His voice trembled. 'Odo, are you in there?'

'It's locked,' Judge Dee said. He ran his fingers along the side of the coffin.

‘From the inside?’ Jonathan said. ‘Can you open it, master?’

Judge Dee pressed against the thin gap between the two halves of the coffin. He frowned in concentration, then *heaved*.

The coffin sprung open.

Jonathan took a step back.

He stared at the inside of the coffin.

‘Oh dear,’ he said. ‘Oh dear.’

5.

Odo, Earl of Maidstone, was decidedly dead. He looked peaceful enough – what little was left of him, which was mostly a skeleton.

‘How?’ Jonathan said. ‘How did they get to him in *here*?’

The earl had locked the coffin from the inside. He lay inside a room that was itself locked. So how did he die?

‘And who killed him?’ Jonathan said.

Judge Dee shrugged. The others all crowded into the room then. The wife – the widow, Jonathan supposed, now – cried out, ‘My Odo! My Odo!’ and fell on the coffin. This display of grief only lasted for as long as it took her to search the skeleton for a key.

Lady Carmen held it up in triumph. ‘The vault is now mine!’

‘What’s in the vault?’ Jonathan said.

‘Gold,’ Lady Carmen said. ‘What else? *My* gold now!’ She turned on the others. ‘And don’t any of you think otherwise!’

Stefan inched his head in reply. Erzsebet and Margarit curtseyed.

‘Well,’ Lady Carmen said, turning to Judge Dee. ‘Thank you for your help, but as you can see we have everything under control here. And, well, my husband *did* die naturally, after all.’

Jonathan spluttered.

‘Your food seems unwell,’ Lady Carmen said to the judge.

‘I am not *food*!’ Jonathan said.

Lady Carmen flashed him a smile.

‘But you *could* be,’ she said.

The atmosphere in the room was tense. Jonathan was keenly aware of the skeleton in the coffin, of the four hostile vampires, of the fearful servants. Judge Dee was not *wanted* here. They were all happy with the outcome. Earl Odo was dead. It was a consummation that had been devoutly wished.

But then, Judge Dee was never wanted: not where the guilty awaited judgment.

The judge *will* judge. The judge *will* pass sentence.

The innocents avenged. The guilty punished. And so on.

Although, with vampires, no one was ever innocent and *everyone* was guilty.

‘Silence,’ Judge Dee said.

They fell quiet. The judge stood still in the middle of that locked mausoleum. He pondered. His eyes moved over the locks and traps, the skeleton, the suspects. Jonathan thought longingly of that evening’s pheasant. He had completely missed his midnight snack.

‘It is clear you all wished him dead,’ Judge Dee said. He raised a finger. ‘No, don’t argue. What is more, you all actively made attempts on his life.’

‘He was my master!’ Stefan said aghast.

‘My loving husband!’ Lady Carmen said.

‘Sure, I mean, we gave it a good try,’ Erzsebet and Margarit said together. ‘But he was hard to kill, the old bat.’

‘I mean, I may have shot an arrow at him a couple of times during the hunt...’ Stefan said, reconsidering quickly. ‘But that was all in good sport! Not...this! The coffin was locked *from the inside!*’

‘Ah, yes,’ Judge Dee said. ‘The old locked coffin mystery. Do you know, there really are not that many possible solutions to a murder in a locked room? I have made study of the various methods over the centuries. It is in the nature of our kind to go for the theatrical kill. Something that makes a—’

‘Splash,’ Margarit said, and Erzsebet giggled.

‘Indeed. Something overly complicated, at any rate, when a simple stake through the heart would do. Don’t you agree, Jonathan?’

Jonathan nodded. He had travelled with the judge for a long time, ever since Judge Dee pulled him out from under a pile of corpses, not from kindness but from a need for directions to the Black Rock and the horrors that dwelt there. Why he kept him by his side after, Jonathan never knew. But he had witnessed many of the judge’s cases, enough to know that the more ludicrous and elaborate the plot the more a vampire liked it. People killed each other easily, sometimes with kitchen knives and sometimes with sharp swords. Or they used their fists, or a rock. Anything close to hand. But humans lived short lives and acted quickly. Vampires had centuries to plot and plan.

‘You know, don’t you?’ Jonathan said. ‘You know already.’

‘I merely conjecture,’ the judge said. But he almost smiled, and he never usually smiled. The judge was still a vampire. He loved elaborate charades as much as any of his kin.

‘But let us consider the usual methods,’ Judge Dee said, ‘of the so-called “impossible murder”. The victim is found, alone, in a room that is locked

from the inside. How could it be? For instance, note that this room has no windows. Odo knew a window was a risk. After all, an ape could be trained to climb a wall impossible for a person and kill the occupier before vanishing as though it was never there.'

'What's an ape?' Margarit said.

The judge ignored her. 'A vampire, of course, could easily fly up as a bat. But again, there are no windows. So, this was not the method used.'

'Fascinating,' Lady Carmen said, not bothering to hide a yawn.

'Then there is gas. Noxious fumes that could be poured into the room through the keyhole or under the door. This, I believe, *was* attempted – in a manner of speaking. Is that not so, Erzsebet?'

'*I'm* Erzsebet,' the other twin said.

'I'm Margarit,' the twin Judge Dee had addressed said.

They both smirked, showing teeth as sharp as knives.

'You have the unseemly habit of terrorising the servants, I noticed,' Judge Dee said. He frowned in disapproval, for he was not a man given to frivolities, as Jonathan well knew. 'You sneak up on them and scare them before vanishing. Like smoke, as they say. Or mist, to be exact.'

'So?' Erzsebet said.

'So?' Margarit said.

'You attempted to invade Odo's sanctum last night, did you not?' Judge Dee said. 'You turned to mist, as is your wont, and attempted ingress through the keyhole. You could have murdered Odo inside his own coffin, then vanished as though you were never there.'

'You little monsters!' Lady Carmen said. Though whether she was enraged or proud of the girls wasn't immediately clear.

'I seem to recall Transylvanian tales going centuries back of a couple of silent assassins,' the judge said. 'The Terror Twins, who were condemned to death by the Council for their many crimes—'

Erzsebet and Margarit fell back from him in genuine horror.

'That wasn't us!'

'We didn't kill him, either! We tried, yes, we tried, but he had some terrible contraption, bellows, you see, which blew us right out of the room again! Oh, how I wish it was us who—'

'Shut up, Margarit!'

'*I'm* Margarit!'

The two girls stared at each other in hatred. They hissed fury.

'Very well,' the judge said. 'We shall leave that for the moment. Now, *another* possibility is, of course, poison.'

'Poison!' Lady Carmen said.

‘Such as the one you no doubt put into his drink,’ Judge Dee said. He reached inside the coffin and sprung open the hidden compartment, where a glass decanter and cup were ensconced. Judge Dee opened the bottle and sniffed.

‘Belladonna?’ he said.

‘This is preposterous,’ Lady Carmen said.

‘This is not even blood,’ Judge Dee said. ‘Just water coloured red with elderberry syrup.’

‘Odo was too fat,’ Lady Carmen said. ‘He needed to lose weight.’

‘And the poison?’

She shrugged. ‘It was worth a try,’ she said. ‘Did he drink it?’

‘No,’ Judge Dee said. ‘The glass is untouched.’

She shrugged again. ‘So what is it you want of me?’ she said.

‘For the moment, nothing,’ Judge Dee said. ‘Though I seem to recall a notorious poisoner some two centuries back, the Spanish Widow they called her, condemned by the Council to death yet never captured. Perhaps she hid in this dismal castle all this time...’

‘Absurd!’ screamed Lady Carmen. ‘And my castle is not...dismal! That’s just rude.’

‘We shall leave that for now,’ the judge said. He rubbed his hands together drily. ‘Now, some alternatives we could dispense with,’ he said. ‘The murder made to look like suicide, for instance. In fact, it is hard to even say *how* he died.’

‘On account of he’s a skeleton,’ Jonathan said.

‘Quite. No poison, no weapons I can see...Of course, the weapon could have been a frozen stake made out of blood, or even water. This is another popular method, you see.’

‘Where would we get ice!’ Stefan protested. ‘It is a very expensive substance, Judge Dee.’

‘Ah, yes, Stefan,’ Judge Dee said. ‘You already admitted to firing arrows at your master. Tales are told in this part of the world of men of the wood, who wear the green of outlaws and use the bow and arrow. Is that not so?’

‘So?’

‘A vampire archer was—’

‘Condemned by the Council some centuries back?’ Jonathan said. He couldn’t resist. ‘Was he called the Awful Archer? The Blood Curdling Crossbowman? The Sinful Sh—’

‘The second one, actually,’ Judge Dee said, looking, Jonathan thought, a little sheepish.

‘Of course, master,’ Jonathan said.

‘I am not him!’ Stefan said. ‘I lead a lawful life! I follow the Unalienable Obligations!’

‘There were scratches on the lock,’ Judge Dee said. ‘You *did* try to get in last night, did you not? You tried, but failed. You *all* tried.’

Judge Dee was not a tall man, but he towered over them then, and the shadows pooled to him and turned him into a great angel of darkness; and the other vampires fell from him in fright.

Judge Dee said softly, ‘But only one of you succeeded.’

6.

Jonathan hugged himself. His stomach rumbled. He was hungry and scared: the natural state of a mortal travelling with a vampire judge.

He wasn’t scared of the other vampires. He was only scared of what Judge Dee would do to them.

‘Master,’ he said tentatively.

‘Yes, Jonathan?’

‘You missed a method,’ Jonathan said. In his travels with the judge, he had experienced some of these other so-called ‘impossible crimes’.

‘Go on,’ the judge said, frowning.

‘It is the one where the victim was still alive when we came into the room,’ Jonathan said, swallowing, for he had the sudden and unwanted attention of all the vampires in the room. ‘And was murdered *after* the locked room – locked coffin, I mean, master, in this case – was opened.’

‘I had not brought it up because it was I who opened the coffin,’ the judge said. ‘And Odo was clearly dead then.’

‘Indeed, master,’ Jonathan said. ‘I just thought I’d mention it.’

The judge inched his head.

‘So where does that leave us, Jonathan?’ he said, and again he was almost smiling. ‘What cunning method did our murderer use? An ice arrow? Poison? Gas? A trained animal? Was it a faked suicide? Or was he fatally injured *outside* the room, stumbled inside, locked the door, climbed into his coffin, locked *that* again, and only then die?’

‘It worked in the Case of Praga Fatale,’ Jonathan said defensively. ‘Besides, that’s actually pretty common.’

‘Enough!’ Lady Carmen screamed. The shocked servants seemed animated for the first time. They turned to flee from the lady’s wrath, but the door was shut. Judge Dee let them out, then closed the door, trapping the vampires inside.

‘Tell us, then!’ Stefan said. The ancient little girls nodded in tandem. ‘Tell us and be done with it!’

The judge paced. He looked faintly bored.

‘Odo,’ he mused. ‘Earl of Maidstone. But before there was an Earl of Maidstone there was a Norman with a reputation for blood. He was hungry then. I rather think he died hungry, too. That man, Odo the Butcher they called him. He broke the Unalienable Obligations, and it was said he sailed with William the Bastard to England to escape the wrath of the Council’s judges...I wonder if it was the same man.’

‘Who cares, man!’ Stefan said. The gaunt vampire looked desperate and angry. ‘Pass your sentence and let us be done with it!’

But Judge Dee just shrugged.

‘The sentence for each of you was pronounced long ago,’ he said, ‘as it was for Odo. There was no call for me here. Nothing but old, unfinished business. Come, Jonathan.’

The judge turned. He opened the thick door easily. Jonathan slipped out after him. The judge replaced the door as it was and locked twice, this time from outside; and he pocketed the key.

‘Let us be on our way,’ he said.

Outside it was the depth of night, and for a moment everything was quiet and still; peaceful, even. Then Jonathan saw lights bobbing in the distance, faint as yet, but soon to grow brighter. It was the servants, he realised. After years of abuse they were free, and they had run to the nearest village and raised an army of their kin.

The villagers, marching on the castle with burning torches.

Jonathan almost laughed.

He followed his master into the dark of the trees. They went the other way, away from the fire and the mob.

Something bothered Jonathan. A detail, niggling in the back of his mind.

Something the judge had said.

Jonathan tried to put together the facts of the case. The impossible murder, the nightly hunt. The skeleton in the coffin. He tried to picture Odo as he saw him. What were his first impressions of the man?

Skeletal.

Famished.

‘I always get the hunchback,’ he said.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Judge Dee said.

‘It was something Odo said, the first time we met him,’ Jonathan said.

‘I see.’

And Jonathan suddenly thought of the wineskins he had seen hanging in the kitchen.

‘Some had bite marks in them,’ he said.

‘The wineskins?’ the judge said. ‘Yes, I noticed that, too.’

Jonathan thought of the poisoned blood untouched in Odo’s coffin. It wasn’t wine, the judge had said. It was water coloured with elderberries.

‘She didn’t *poison* him,’ he said, almost whispering. ‘She *starved* him.’

‘Yes,’ the judge said. ‘She did, didn’t she.’

‘There was no hunchback,’ Jonathan said. ‘I wondered why the cook alone seemed lively, even fat. His hump...’

‘Was a wineskin inserted under his clothes and filled with viscous liquid,’ the judge said.

‘Odo went hunting every night, but he never drank blood at all, did he?’ Jonathan said. He thought of the Earl of Maidstone’s red-stained lips when he came back from the hunt.

‘Elderberry,’ the judge said.

‘And he slowly starved...’

‘Starved to death,’ the judge said.

Behind them, flames rose into the sky as the castle started to burn. The condemned vampires trapped inside didn’t have a chance. But then again, they *were*, all of them, murderers. The world would not miss them, Jonathan thought. And he would not lose sleep over the loss of Castle Maidstone, or Maid’s Stone.

Judge Dee went into the dark and Jonathan, as he always did, followed him.



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About the Authors

Ken Liu is an award-winning author of speculative fiction. His books include the Dandelion Dynasty series (*The Grace of Kings*), *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories*, *The Hidden Girl and Other Stories*, and the Star Wars tie-in novel, *The Legends of Luke Skywalker*. He frequently speaks at conferences and universities on topics like futurism, machine-augmented creativity, the mathematics of origami, and more. He lives near Boston with his family. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

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Carrie Vaughn is best known for her New York Times bestselling Kitty Norville series of novels about a werewolf who hosts a talk radio show for the supernaturally disadvantaged. Her novels include a near-Earth space opera, *Martians Abroad*, from Tor Books, and the post-apocalyptic murder mysteries *Bannerless* and *The Wild Dead*. She's written several other contemporary fantasy and young adult novels, as well as upwards of 80 short stories, two of which have been finalists for the Hugo Award. She's a contributor to the Wild Cards series of shared world superhero books edited by George R. R. Martin and a graduate of the Odyssey Fantasy Writing Workshop. An Air Force brat, she survived her nomadic childhood and managed to put down roots in Boulder, Colorado. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

Lavie Tidhar was born just ten miles from Armageddon and grew up on a kibbutz in northern Israel. He has since made his home in London, where he is currently a Visiting Professor and Writer in Residence at Richmond University. He won the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize for Best British Fiction, was twice longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award and was shortlisted for the CWA Dagger Award and the Rome Prize. He co-wrote *Art and War: Poetry, Pulp and Politics in Israeli Fiction*, and is a columnist for the *Washington Post*. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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