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**REACTOR
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FICTION**

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I'll Miss Myself
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The Angel's Share
The Alice Run
Before the Forest
The Gulmohar of Mehranpur
Ace Up Her Sleeve

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I'LL MISS MYSELF

JOHN WISWELL

I'll Miss Myself

JOHN WISWELL

illustration by

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

Shaw couldn't sleep so he doomscrolled the multiverse. First there was a shaky video of a landslide on his commute to work, from a hill he'd never realized had been that unsound. Next was a wall of text ranting about an ex-girlfriend, who in Shaw's own universe he'd always wondered about asking out. Then came a picture of himself unboxing his new gaming PC, which in his universe he couldn't afford.

These Shaws were everything he could have been, all posting from other lives on AllOne. The possibilities of AllOne went on for as long as his thumbs could scroll.

One post made him pause and rub the bruise on his eyebrow.

Can anyone else not sleep?

Over nine thousand comments argued about whether they shared a genetic predisposition for insomnia, and about whether not being able to sleep was the same as insomnia. A never-ending string of replies argued about whether you could be addicted to melatonin. Some of this was so similar to things Shaw had felt that he wondered if he'd actually typed them himself in a daze.

AllOne chimed like a parallel self had messaged him. He thumbed around but didn't see any DMs. Annoying. This app was going to hell.

He turned his phone off and dropped his head on the pillow, staring at the yellow lights of the city reflected in his window. The pillow was too warm, so he flipped it. He thought about insomnia, and possible landslides on the commute to work, and the bare walls

of his apartment where he'd always meant to put up his posters. He never had.

Then he was back on his phone. Back on AllOne.

Nobody else wears a mask where I work. Does it matter if I wear one?

That one almost got him angry enough to comment. Almost. Instead he read the bickering about how many of their dads had died from COVID.

There were fewer universes than he'd expected. When Shaw was a kid he'd thought the infinite multiverse meant there were universes out there with goblins and wizards, and where the planet Mars could talk, and where hammerhead sharks ran everything and computers were invented by superintelligent algae.

How did I get fired from the same gas station twice??????????

But probability was less creative than the average bored child.

Does anything I do matter?

AllOne chimed again. This time he saw the direct messages. A pop-up from AllOne offered to auto-delete it.

THEM

How are you doing? Like how are you actually doing?

He didn't know if this was a bot, or if some jackass self was trolling other selves. Shaw scratched his head, thinking why anyone on this app would ask that. Everybody was miserable all the time.

So he made a joke out of it.

YOU

Give me your credit card information and I'll be doing great.

Shaw rubbed the bruise on his eyebrow again, using the sting to center himself.

Then the other Shaw replied.

THEM

Oh shit I got through?

YOU

Wonders of the multiverse, right?

THEM

It's been hell getting in contact with other selves.
AllOne's algorithm keeps auto-deleting and blocking us.

Shaw thought about the phantom chime he'd heard earlier. Was every chime he'd gotten on this app from another self trying to talk and getting blocked by an auto-moderator?

That seemed a bit much.

THEM

You need to know, AllOne is filtering what we see in our feeds.

YOU

I know AllOne filters. They get rid of boring stuff. Like I hid all the anime posts because those versions of me got really weird.

THEM

Anime is a diverse artform and you don't know what you're missing. But that's not the point. AllOne hides most parallel universes. You're not seeing most of what we are on here.

Shaw flipped over to his feed, where people were arguing about the worst political party. They didn't share the same America and yet so many versions of him were furiously sure.

YOU

AllOne shows me millions of other mes. We're not exactly stuck behind the Berlin Wall.

THEM

The algorithm shows us the ones that'll make us doubt ourselves. Make us feel confused and mad. But only enough to stay engaged. It filters infinity so all of us stay on the app. It's fucked some of us up. Fucked us up really bad.

Reading that made him want to bang his head against his window. AllOne wasn't out to get him. Too many versions of himself thought the world was out to get them.

YOU

Are you listening to yourself? It's an app. It's not killing us.

THEM

I tried to kill myself last year.

Shaw's fingers sweated around the edges of his screen. He pushed himself away from that sentence until he hit the headboard, clacking against his bare wall. His phone fell into his lap.

The screen glowed up at him. Those words were still there. He hadn't misread.

What the hell? No version of him was suicidal. He would have remembered.

YOU

I'm so sorry. I didn't see you post about it.

THEM

You couldn't see it. AllOne's algorithm segregates who sees what so we all stay perpetually engaged. If you really need the rest of us, it puts you in a limbo zone. No other self sees you. Like you're unthinkable.

YOU

What happened? To you?

That was a tacky way of putting it. He couldn't think of anything better. He put a fist over his bruise.

THEM

I jumped out my apartment window. It didn't have to happen. I didn't realize how bad I felt was until I was falling. It's why I'm messaging as many of us as I can.

YOU

You're messaging lots of us?

THEM

That's how I know I'm not the only one who's tried it.

YOU

Fuck.

THEM

It's a weird question to ask yourself but I need to ask: are you okay? Have you done anything? Caught any signs or behaviors? Because you shouldn't have to be alone.

He didn't know what to say. That other Shaw had to have an answer he wanted to hear. That other Shaw had to know what signs were alarming. But Shaw wasn't in that kind of dark pit.

Of course, this Shaw hadn't thought he was either.

"Until I was falling," he repeated out loud. That phrase swirled around in his head.

He had to say something. To at least comfort this other Shaw. Make him feel less alone.

Except the direct messages were gone. His whole DM window in AllOne was blank.

He refreshed it and found nothing. The whole conversation was gone. Like it hadn't happened.

He scrolled the arguments about Thai food and sea monsters and climate change in his feed, hoping to find that one Shaw. How could he find a needle in a stack of needles?

And would AllOne hide it if he asked about this publicly?

Thinking about what the hell to do, he carried his phone over to the window. He rested his face against the glass, like he always did when his thoughts spun up too hard. The coolness faded as the glass leeched warmth from his skin. It reminded him of visiting the aquarium when he was a kid, and his mom grouching that he always ran to the same one exhibit and it wasn't worth the money.

Without thinking, he banged his eye against the glass. His bruise lit up with pain, and he jolted.

The windowpane reflected his image, a gray silhouette. For the first time in a day and a half, he actually thought about how he'd given himself that bruise. How many times had he banged his head on the window without thinking?

His eyes moved from his reflection to the drop outside his window.

* * *

He didn't know how to do this. How did one simply defy a company that treated universes like fodder? How did he make first contact with a version of himself that the Terms of Service forbade him from knowing existed?

Randomly. That's the only way he could think to do it: with pure randomness. One Shaw posted a picture of a spilled milkshake on a sidewalk, with some text ranting about his awful day. He was as good a self as any to reach out to.

He opened the DM and tried.

YOU

Are you doing okay? Like, okay-okay?

No immediate reply. He waited so long that he found himself drifting back to his AllOne feed. To a surprisingly fervent argument about the coolest kind of sharks.

Then AllOne chimed.

THEM

What does okay-okay mean?

Well, the ice was broken. Now what?
Shaw thought with his thumbs.

YOU

Ever feel like AllOne is watching and choosing what you see? Like its algorithm was built to make us feel worse and powerless?

THEM

Don't they have people looking at our stuff? They can see you saying this.

He'd looked that up. Hopefully his other self was looking it up right now.

YOU

They don't employ nearly enough people to track most conversations, and their automod is flaky. AllOne believes in algorithms because algorithms can't unionize.

THEM

If this isn't a joke, you could get banned. Watch out for yourself.

Shaw brought the phone up to his face, his nose smudging sweat on the screen. It was real. God damn. That was genuine concern for himself—from himself. Something pinched inside his chest and a hiccup of a sob filled his mouth.

He felt tangible pride that this other version of him could care about someone else on a hard day, even if the person he cared about was technically him. He was caring about himself by caring about another self. The thought messed him up like crayons in a blender.

YOU

This is worth it. You're the first "myself" I've asked.

THEM

Asked what?

Shaw took the slowest breath he could. Then he typed.

YOU

Do you ever get overwhelmed and mentally spiral? For so long you're not sure how long you were doing it? And you just keep scrolling and spiraling without thinking about what's wrong?

The pause unfurled. Shaw couldn't help imagining this other self staring at his phone in disgust or clicking away to something fun. What if he got blocked and reported? This could kill his account. AllOne chimed.

THEM

Fuck.

YOU

Are you okay?

THEM

I'm fucking crying into my phone. Do you spiral like that too? How many of us do this?

Shaw wiped at his bruised eye, blinking his vision clear.

YOU

I don't know how many of us. There's only one way to find out. I'm going to message more of us. Maybe you could, too?

THEM

Why are we like this? Did we all get fucked up because our parents stayed together and kept fighting for forever?

Shaw's parents hadn't stayed together. They'd divorced when he was eight—and it'd been great. They'd both become more present with him. Dad had been so much happier and taken him to all kinds of aquariums until he got sick.

And he *still* had this problem. So what was wrong with him? What had happened to all the Shaws?

AllOne went blank. The app helpfully informed Shaw he had no direct messages. That connection with himself was gone.

He gritted his teeth and thought about the mouths of sharks. He hadn't imagined those in a long time. He'd forgotten he used to fantasize about what sharks would do to him if he fell into their tank.

★ ★ ★

He was a detective, and AllOne was the crime scene. He scrolled with purpose, making notes in a separate app. Just as many Shaws had divorced parents as ones who stayed together, and Dad was dead for many of them thanks to either COVID or his heart giving out. Shaws from all kinds of households seemed to rage and despair.

Was it the accident? Some Shaws posted pictures revealing the same road rash scarring he had all along his left leg. So it wasn't the motorcycle accident. It seemed in many different life paths he still ate shit off his motorcycle. Nobody seemed to have head trauma. Did he need to get himself checked out at a doctor?

COVID was worse for some than others. It'd killed a lot of their dads, whereas Shaw's was still alive and still complaining about college football. There were a couple posts suggesting a worse pandemic had followed COVID, and he didn't have the strength to look at that.

He caught himself heading to the window, forehead down, ready to bang his head in frustration. He caught himself with both hands against the window frame.

Whether or not he could figure out why this was happening, he had to do something.

★ ★ ★

The least he could do was warn others. Spook them into reflecting on their habits. Yeah, a decent number of his selves called him an

asshole or a snowflake or thought he was trolling. That still beat spending another minute at his window.

YOU

It's okay if you don't know why you're struggling. I'm just saying. Talk to somebody after we get blocked. A therapist or a psychiatrist, whatever the difference is. A rabbi. A priest. Whoever might help you and that you'd trust.

THEM

I don't know.

YOU

It's okay to be overwhelmed.

He was basically saying that to himself.

THEM

How did you know?

YOU

Others of us have self-harmed. More have thought about it. You're not alone.

THEM

I don't want to think about it. It makes me tired to think about it.

That was some real shit. Just this conversation made Shaw want to lie down.

YOU

It's hard for me to face it, too.

THEM

I haven't posted anywhere about this. I figured they'd ban me or something. I haven't talked to anybody offline about it, either.

YOU

About what?

THEM

A few weeks ago. I wasn't thinking. Just on reflex, I
tried to do it.

Shaw cupped his phone, eyes softening at the screen. His entire
body arched inward, emoting sympathy at a person who couldn't see
him. This other self had no idea. Shaw couldn't help himself.

YOU

What happened?

THEM

I'm not going to talk about it. I did it wrong. I didn't
mean to survive. I just fucked up so hard. I failed at one
more thing, you know?

YOU

I always feel like a fuck-up. Like I'm never getting anything done.

THEM

A lot of us are like that.

YOU

But you still being alive? That's doing something. That's a fucking
success to me.

THEM

Thanks, me.

The flippancy caught Shaw off guard and he barked a laugh. Of
course they had the same sense of humor. He thumbed a tear out of
the corner of his eye.

THEM

I never thought about DMing about this. About if
they're hiding what I'm hiding.

YOU

I didn't, either. Until one of us did it for me.

THEM

I'm going to do it for others. Because of you.

Moments later AllOne blocked them from each other. Shaw was left to stare at the empty, white walls of his room, wondering what he'd just kicked off. That suicide survivor self was going to start checking in on others. A week ago, another suicide survivor self had messaged him. Who'd started this? Had a survivor Shaw warned a Shaw who hadn't yet gone too far, who in turn warned a survivor, who would now go on to catch others who hadn't yet gone too far?

Could kindness be a paradox?

* * *

THEM

Holy shit. It's a rerun.

Shaw scrunched up his face at the message. This was a new response. Did this self think he was a bot?

YOU

I'm just checking in on you because a lot of us are hurting. Are you okay? Psychologically?

THEM

I know. One of us messaged me four days ago. I've actually started reaching out to us. I never thought a second me would check in.

Shaw's brain fizzled out. He was not smart enough to handle this kind of quantum mechanical nonsense. Someone had beat him to check on himself? Was the ripple of Shaws catching on, or was this one guy incredibly lucky?

THEM

We could get separated any moment. Let me ask you something. I need to know.

YOU

What?

Shaw would tell him anything. This could be a clever bot phishing for rogue Shaws and he'd still answer any questions it asked. It was worth the risk.

THEM

Do we just sit in a room hyperfocusing on sending out wellness checks to ourselves, the same way we previously fixated on the patterns of doomscrolling, and collecting shark posters, and all that shit? Or do we come up with the next goal for what you do after this? I've been dying to ask one of us who's ahead of me.

Shaw started typing an argument—that checking in on other Shaws was saving lives. This was important work. They had to lift each other out of the cycle that was hurting them.

But this Shaw was asking as much for himself as for any of them. Did he need something to look forward to?

Didn't they all need that?

Shaw looked through half-lidded eyes at his tiny apartment, the walls still bare, the take-out containers piling up beside his laundry pile.

What he was doing on AllOne was good. But it was also another fixation that hadn't gotten him out of the apartment much, even though he knew he could take his phone anywhere. He gritted his teeth, baring them, thinking of swimming monsters.

He pulled the cardboard box from under his bed, where he kept all the old art. He pulled out one of his posters and unrolled it. Blue hues were bleached from years of light exposure, yet the patterns on those fins were the same as he remembered.

Ninety seconds later, AllOne severed their connection. But by then, he'd already told his other self what he had to look forward to. What he had to do next.

He spammed the shit out of the multiverse. Every cool picture of a hammerhead shark circling a camera. Videos of eels trailing along a large pale belly. Every question about marine biology he could have just as easily looked up. His posts were chum in the water.

Most of the Shaws mocked him for still being in his “shark phase.” He dunked on himself savagely. They’d only gotten laid after they’d moved on, and he needed to do the same. No surprises there. He already knew he had the capacity to be an asshole.

In those times, he relied on the best skill AllOne had given him: scrolling with his eyes glazed over. Insults barely mattered, especially when he knew they were coming from a swarm of themselves every bit as insecure as he was.

What he picked out were the selves who responded enthusiastically to his posts. He DM’d as many of them as he could. After he checked on their mental health, if AllOne didn’t interrupt the connection too fast, he had more questions for them.

And they had answers.

THEM

Yeah, I’ve been in marine bio for six years. How long have you been studying?

He hadn’t studied. Not for one day.

Today was the beginning.

He messaged Shaw after Shaw, grateful for any that replied.

THEM

We made them out to be the worst monster on earth because occasionally we break into their home and they mistake us for food. Sharks aren’t monsters.

YOU

And neither are we. Right?

He kept reaching out.

THEM

I couldn't sit this one out. Sharks are getting screwed as the oceans get hotter. Their prey dies off. Fewer waterways are inhabitable.

He kept reaching out.

THEM

I get that it's been bad. But literally how long has it been since you got your feet wet?

* * *

Shaw closed his eyes and imagined his bedroom window, dim, catching the little yellow points of light from out in the dusky city. The blaring car horns and sirens, and his downstairs neighbors' band practicing. He could almost feel the hardness of the glass against his face, and reflexively he prepared to bang his head on it. Not reliving it was not an option.

There was no glass in front of him. No barrier out here, except the briny wind.

Shaw jumped and plunged off the edge of the boat, and down into the sea. The weights and chainmail made him plunge straight down, the sunlight fading like God was lowering the dimmer switch. The water enveloped him and pulled him down until his flippers hit the ocean floor.

The reef sharks swam at him with their pale snouts turned up, white bib underbellies absorbing all the light, so that their faces briefly looked like monks studying this new alien intruder. They swished past him and along a school of tiny silver fish.

He twisted in the water to watch them, body slowed by the friction, trying to follow the enormous strength of the sharks' tails. They were circling. They were coming back for him. One lithe reef shark came straight at him, tail swishing, black eyes eternally wide.

Shaw greeted the beast with a palm across the tip of its nose. For the shortest moment he'd never forget, it nuzzled into his palm.

Then it dashed away on water currents. It took the pinch in his chest with it.

That shark circled around, though. It swam through his general area, tail slow, seeking out the sensation that had just happened. Like his coach had taught him, he held up his armored palm for it to shove into a second helping of nose-pets. Then a third helping, before a chubbier reef shark butted in and discovered the joy.

For his entire session down on the ocean floor, the sharks never got tired of getting their snouts patted. Shaw never got tired of petting them, either.

When he surfaced, he didn't want to take the crane harness off. He wanted to go back down there right away, to hyperfocus on befriending fish. If he held on to it, could this be a new normal?

The entire ride back to shore was an opportunity to pump the boat driver and instructors for information. No, he didn't have a history with this stuff—not yet. No, he didn't want to take over the operation. He just wanted to pitch in. To show other people how this felt.

As the shore appeared over the prow, he sent one new DM. One a day, that was the limit now, to keep from obsessing while still letting him try to help. Every self deserved that much. He told this Shaw about how he was being deceived by the algorithm, and how he wasn't alone if he was in a dark place. He got so invested typing that the boat's driver squawked with laughter.

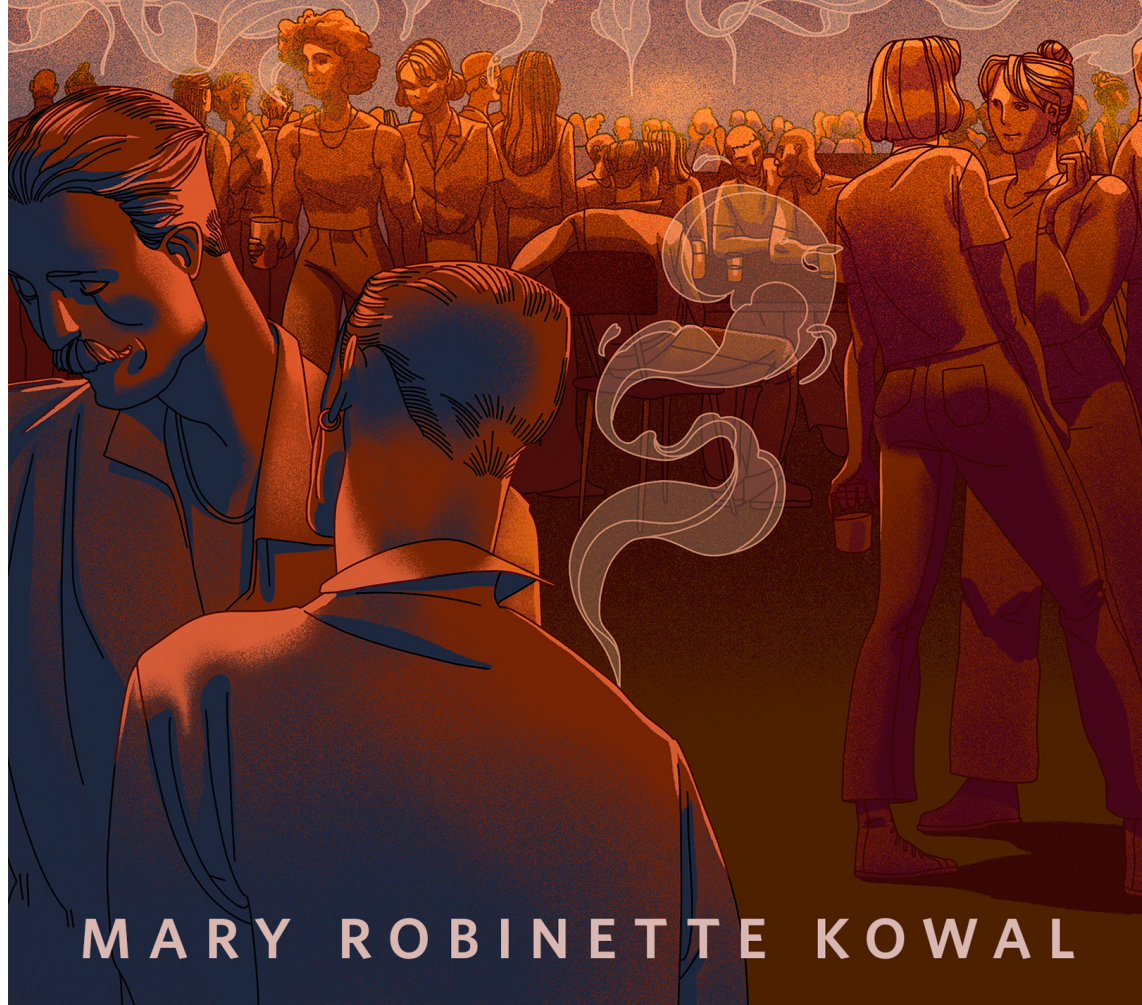
"You're on AllOne? Isn't that thing a nightmare?"



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IN
THE
MOON'S
HOUSE



MARY ROBINETTE KOWAL

In The Moon's House

MARY ROBINETTE KOWAL

illustration by

AVALON NUOVO

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

ARTEMIS 17 CREW SETS STAGE FOR FUTURE LUNAR EXPLORATION Special to the National Times

April 14, 1960, Kansas City, KS—In the desolate expanse of the lunar landscape, the Artemis 17 crew, led by astronauts Nicole Wargin and Estavan Terrazas, stands as a beacon of human ingenuity and determination. With Dr. Elma York at the ready in the command module above, the team diligently prepares for the transition as they await the incoming crew who will inherit the responsibilities of lunar-base construction upon their departure.

★ ★ ★

The ring on the back of Dawn's space helmet dug into her neck as she stared at the controls over her head. Wilburt flipped a toggle. "Engine shutdown."

Over the comms, the simulation supervisor said, "Good work today. Y'uns can come out now."

Graeham stretched in his seat and popped his helmet open. "Bloody hell, I thought we were going to crash into the Moon."

"God, I know. When we lost that thruster? Good work compensating." Dawn pulled her gloves off before going for her helmet. Beer and fried chicken seemed entirely necessary. "Want to head to the Alibi?"

"Oh—sorry." Wilburt unbuckled his harness and passed his helmet out of the simulator to the tech waiting for them. "I have ... a thing I need to do tonight."

"Copy that." She undid her seat belt, waiting for the men to climb out the narrow hatch first. "Graeham?"

He had twisted to his side, helmet in hand, ready to climb out. "Negative. Sorry. Maybe next time."

"Sure." Dawn watched them go. With her other crews, they'd gone out after every sim. But these two made excuses every time. They were the backup crew for the next Moon mission and ought to have bonded by now, but she'd done something, at some point, to offend both men. In theory, being backups meant they'd be assigned a slot on a later mission as part of building the lunar base, but if neither man liked her, Dawn could find herself booted from the team.

She passed her helmet out of the simulator, rolling to her side to begin extracting herself from the small landing module mockup, and

—
Dawn felt a familiar warm sticky shift in her MAG. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. Early. Ugh. The Maximum Absorbency Garment had not really been built with periods in mind. The engineers somehow thought that urine and menstrual blood had the same consistency when they most profoundly did not. But at least it was the end of the sim, so she ought have enough time to get to the locker room before she stained her spacesuit.

But now she really wanted that beer.

* * *

When Dawn walked into the women's locker room, someone was singing quietly in German, voice echoing off the tile walls. She rounded the corner and Heidi was standing in front of one of the mirrors, braiding her long golden hair back into the haloed crown she habitually wore.

Half of it was still down and fell to the middle of her back like a waterfall at sunset. Dawn stopped, putting a hand on one of the lockers, and wanted her sketchbook so she could capture the

glorious interplay of hair and the curve of Heidi's back. The way her raised arms framed her long neck.

Her voice was breathy and so very different than when she was in a meeting, when she was as crisp and proper as Swiss clockwork. And so smart. She would be quiet until something needed to be said and she would just casually insert the answer with the precision of a rocket sliding into orbit.

Dawn wet her lips and pushed every thought of burying her hands in that golden hair away.

She walked forward, briskly, as if she hadn't been lurking in the shadows. "I thought maybe—"

Heidi jumped, losing her grip on the braid. "*Mein Gott*— I thought I was the only one still here."

Dawn held up her hands in apology. "I'm so sorry. We had a long sim today."

"I know the feeling." Heidi wrinkled her nose and regathered her hair. "I was in Chicago at the Adler Planetarium doing star charts. Had turbulence all the way back in the T-33. Couldn't find a clean patch of air for love nor money."

Dawn grimaced in sympathy. "Want to go out the Alibi and grab a beer to commiserate?"

Immediately, she second-guessed the invitation as being too obvious. She turned to her own locker to grab her shower kit, rifling through to make sure she had a pad. Yes, although it was only for light days, leftover from the tail end of her last period. Still, it would get her to the Alibi, where they had vending machines in the bathroom.

"Sorry." In the mirror, Heidi wrinkled her nose in apology and even that was cute. "Sorry, but I already have plans."

"Sure." Dawn waved her toiletries kit and headed to the shower. Why did everyone have plans except for her? "Well, I'll catch you later."

★ ★ ★

Hair still damp from the shower, Dawn walked out to the parking lot, grimacing as she stepped into the wall of humid heat that was Kansas in May. She missed Vrřac even while knowing that the city she missed was the one from before the Meteor.

She sighed, fishing in her purse for her keys as her shirt started to stick to her back. The Alibi had air-conditioning. Even if Heidi had plans, there was a fair chance some astronauts would be there and she could maybe join them.

Laughter floated across the parking lot. Under a pool of light, Graeham and Wilburt got into the same car. They'd acted like they had separate plans, but it looked like both were going to the same place.

Dawn stood on the sidewalk for a moment, feeling as though she were back at university and the only woman in the chemistry department. No one had wanted to be her lab partner and she'd had to work alone.

If she'd been willing to flirt with any of the men, it might have been different.

Head down, she walked to her own car, on loan from the IAC while she was back on Earth. This was all right. People were allowed to make their own plans. Those plans didn't have to include her.

But lying to her about it? That made it feel like they were doing something she might want to do and that they just didn't want *her*. The bulge of the pad in her underwear reminded her of the main difference between her and her crewmates. They had never been obvious assholes about the fact that she was a woman, but then the "gallant" ones never were. This was among the many reasons the company of women was so preferable.

She slid behind the wheel of her car. Following them would be childish.

She stuck the key in the ignition. There would be nothing she could do with that information.

She started the car. But she was going to follow them anyway.

* * *

Half a dozen times, Dawn told herself that she was being stupid and every time, the anger at being excluded washed right over her. Graeham and Wilburt stopped the car across the river in a part of Kansas City she'd never been to.

Dawn sat behind the wheel of the car, watching them walk into a building that was clearly a bar.

She had wanted to be wrong that they were excluding her. Gripping the wheel, she closed her eyes for a moment. What she should do was drive back to the Alibi and spend the evening with people who wanted her. Or at least who weren't actively avoiding her.

Dawn opened the door.

These were her crewmates. She was tired of being shut out because she was a woman. They wanted a boy's night out? Fine, she could be one of the boys.

Dawn straightened her shoulders and walked toward the bar. WORKING LATE was painted on a window that was otherwise obscured with wavy glass. Pop rock thumped through the walls.

She opened the door, stepping into a haze of cigarette smoke. The music pulsed in her chest. The room was filled with men. The air-conditioning chilled the sweat coating her. She didn't see Graeham and Wilburt anywhere, but the men at the table closest to her turned.

A freckled white man in a business suit looked her up and down. "In the right place, sweetheart?"

She was back in chemistry, walking into the classroom for the first time after having come up through an all-girls school where she had been one of many. Dawn took a step back. "No. Sorry."

She turned and fled back into the humid night. The smart thing to do was to plan her approach and talk to Graeham and Wilburt at work. She shoved her hands in her pockets. Right. As if the problem of being a woman in aerospace was something that she could really work. Maybe Elma York could, but Dawn was just a face in the crowd.

Dawn walked back to the car and got behind the wheel. Maybe she could talk to Dr. York. During orientation, she'd said to come to her if there were any problems with "boys being boys."

Gripping the steering wheel with one hand, Dawn cranked the engine. She turned on the lights and pulled away from the curb. Her headlights caught a glint of golden hair wrapped into a braid like a crown.

She slowed to let the pedestrian cross. Long legs tapered from a brown plaid mini-skirt to white go-go boots . It took a moment before she realized that the pedestrian was Heidi.

Heidi crossed the street and walked straight to the bar with no hesitation. She opened the door as if she went there every night.

Dawn drove away. Her shoulders seemed to round and pull her down into the seat. So it wasn't that she was a woman. Graeham and Wilburt just didn't like her. And apparently, neither did Heidi.

* * *

Dawn pushed the door to her apartment open. Halfway to the Alibi, she realized that she just couldn't face the idea of walking into the bar and finding no other astronauts there or, worse, all of them there and tables too full for her.

Her roommate, Ljilja, looked up from the table where she was bent over a Portuguese language book. Dropping the book, the astronaut candidate grabbed a piece of paper from the table, and spoke in Serbian. "Direktor Clemons! Rekao je da ga pozoveš čim uđeš. Gde si bila? Ostavio je svoj kućni broj!"

For a moment, Dawn's mind was too off-balance to understand her first language. Then she caught up and switched to Serbian. "Clemons left his home number?"

"Zora!" Ljilja used her real name, untranslated for the benefit of the anglophone International Aerospace Coalition. She thrust the paper at Dawn. "Zora, I think you're getting an assignment."

Dawn shook her head and stared at the paper, caught between languages. Serbian was usually a relief after a day spent bouncing

between English, German, and Portuguese, but right now she felt so off-kilter. There were damn few reasons for the director of the International Aerospace Coalition to call her after hours, and none of them were good.

She answered in the language of the note, in English. "Have you heard anything about the prime crew?"

Ljilja shook her head. "Are you going to the Moon?"

"I don't know." She set her bag down on the table and walked to the phone. "Let's find out."

The phone rang three times before it rattled; in the background she could hear the clatter of dishes and conversation, "... about a puppy after you convince your mother." Director Clemons's distinctive posh British voice had a laugh in it that she'd never heard, which vanished into formality as he answered the phone. "Clemons residence."

"Hello, Director Clemons. This is Dawn Sabados. I have a note to call you?" She gripped the phone cord in her right hand and tried not to see Ljilja, who was pretending to be working on her Portuguese.

"Ah, Sabados. Wonderful. The prime crew has had a measles exposure. How would you like to go to the Moon?"

The world went white and gray around her. Fireflies seemed to dance across her body. So far, she'd only done runs to *Lunetta* or orbit and hadn't gotten to land on the Moon. "I would like that very much, sir."

"Splendid. Now we just need to find Schnöhaus and Stewman. We've much work to do over the next four days to get your team ready to fly."

Her team. Her gut cramped and she tightened her hand on the warm Bakelite receiver. "I know where they are."

★ ★ ★

Dawn parked the car down the street from Working Late. She had thought about telling Clemons where they were, and then she

remembered university and how hard she'd had to fight to be here. She wanted Graeham and Wilburt to know that she knew that they'd left her out of their plans.

If she could do a chemistry lab by herself, she could walk into a bar.

Dawn got out of the car and walked to the bar. Shoulders back and chin up as if she was prepping for a test. She opened the door.

The businessman looked up again, taking his hand off the thigh of the man at the table with him. A bouncer in a leather vest walked over to her. "Looking for someone?"

"I'm meeting some friends." She scanned the room, looking for Heidi's golden hair, and realized that there was another room behind the wall of booths. It was filled with women laughing. One sat on another's lap.

She looked at the men again. Shapes and laughter fell into place. This ... this was a gay bar. Her brain split into two simultaneous reactions – the desire to flee before someone saw her and the relief at not having to hide who she was. Since joining the IAC, she had buried that part of herself in exchange for access to the stars.

She spotted Graeham and Wilburt across the room, heads close and relaxed as she'd never seen them before. Heidi leaned against the booth next to them, laughter brightening her eyes beneath her golden crown. The tension through her shoulders sublimated away.

She didn't have to hide.

Dawn smiled at the bouncer, weight lifting as if she were sliding into orbit. "I see them. Thank you."

Slipping through the crowd, she headed toward the small group. Graeham saw her first and straightened in familiar panic.

Dawn held up her hands, smiling to try to let them know, before she got to them, that it was okay. Wilburt turned, eyes widening. Then Heidi looked up and flinched.

She stopped just outside their circle and the music beat through her heart. "No, no. It's okay. I'm..." She gestured at the bar, still not quite able to admit it out loud. "Also."

Graeham tilted his head, grin starting to form. "Bloody hell. All four of us?"

"So it seems." She felt Heidi's gaze like a chemical reaction and kept her own fixed on Wilburt and Graeham. "I thought you did not like me."

Wilburt's brows went up. "No. No, I am so sorry. We only..." He looked at Graeham helplessly. "Being on the same crew gives us an excuse to spend time together."

"I'm so sorry, my dear." Graeham slid out of the booth. "Join us and let me buy a round, hm?"

"I can't." She took a deep breath, so grateful now that her pride and spite had sent her here. If she had unwittingly sent someone from the IAC to find them here, all three of them would have been quietly removed from the astronaut rosters. "Clemons called. Prime crew had a measles exposure. We're going to the Moon."

Graeham's mouth dropped open. Wilburt let out a whoop that had the rest of the room turning to stare at them.

"*Wunderbar!* I'm so happy for you!" Heidi squealed and swept Dawn into a hug. The other woman smelled like strawberries and engine fuel. Dawn inhaled, burying her nose in the golden hair without meaning to.

And then she felt that uncomfortable sticky certainty that she'd bled through her pad.

"Damn it." Dawn broke the embrace, reaching for her bag. She hadn't changed pads when she got home. Even as she opened it, she knew it was pointless because she hadn't restocked since her last period.

"Problem?" Wilburt asked, brows rising.

She grimaced, rooting past crumpled receipts and fractured mints. "I have an aunt from a red town."

Maybe they had vending machines in the bathroom. Or she could ask—

"You ... you're worried they won't let you go because your aunt is communist?" Graeham's voice sounded very confused.

"What? No." She stopped digging through her bag and looked up to see all three of them staring at her with some confusion. "Why do you think I have a communist aunt?"

"Red town?" Graeham shrugged and looked between them.

Then Heidi made an *o* that puckered her mouth into the shape of a perfect kiss. "Oh! Your aunt. Yes. My aunt visited me last week."

"I wasn't expecting her and..." Shit. What if they wouldn't let her go because she was having her period?

"I know exactly what you mean." Heidi grabbed Dawn's hand. Her hand was warm and a little papery with dryness. "Come on."

Hand in hand, she followed Heidi through the men, across to the women's side of the bar and then to the restroom. The music was too loud to have conversation while they were walking.

The volume dropped in the bathroom, where the lights were brighter and reflected off the mirrors. Dawn's reflection was drab and unpolished beside Heidi's brightness.

Heidi opened her own bag and pulled out a portable watercolor kit to make room to fish around. "How did you know where to find the boys?"

"I ... um..." Dawn swallowed, twining her fingers together. "I followed them after work. How about you?"

Heidi pulled out a tampon and handed it to Dawn. "You mean, how did we find out that we were all gay?" She shrugged. "Bumped into each other here."

Dawn turned the tampon over in her hands. "You don't happen to have a pad?"

"Never worn one?" She looked toward the door back out into the main bar. "We could ask around, but from what I hear this is easiest to manage in space."

Dawn looked up in astonishment. "I don't remember that from training."

Heidi laughed, voice shockingly loud in the small room. "*Mein Gott*, no. Can you imagine Stetson Parker even acknowledging that part existed for anything except fucking? No, no ... this is from some

of the other women. Officially, no one has had a period in space because that would mean having meetings that none of the male engineers can handle.”

“They are such delicate flowers.” She closed her fingers around the tampon. “Thanks. I’ll give it a try.”

“If it hurts, that just means your angle of insertion is wrong—just like on a sim, honestly.” Heidi smiled at her, warm and inviting. “There are more of us. I can introduce you, if you’d like.”

Dawn stopped before she went into the stall. “Why didn’t I know?”

Tilting her head to the side, so the lights around the mirror cast her braid into a halo, Heidi shrugged. “I think—I think maybe you have been so careful that you wound up guarding yourself too much. The walls have not left room to let anyone in.”

Tears pricked at the corners of Dawn’s eyes and she nodded. It was just the hormones, nothing more, but the evening felt bright and tender. Her orbit had widened and she felt as if she could see the whole planet spread below her, instead of a tiny patch of wall.

* * *

The ring on Dawn’s space helmet rested lightly on her shoulders as she stared at the controls over her head. The *Eigene* had landed.

Outside their tiny triangular windows, the lunar surface glowed in the brilliant light of an unfiltered sun. Stark shadows of lunar dawn stretched across the landing site. She wanted her pencils so she could try to catch the crisp contours and the way the spacecraft parked opposite them glinted in the sunlight.

The small mound of the lunar base rested just beyond it, little more than a tube with regolith scraped over it.

“This is ... stellar,” Wilburt said.

Dawn laughed. “Do you have a joke for every occasion?”

“Naturally.” He flipped two pages forward in his checklist. “Though, I will note that my mother did not understand my

obsession with looking at the moon every night. She thought it was just a phase."

Dawn only half listened to Wilburt, trying to pay attention to her nether regions. She thought she was done with her period, but she'd also been in zero-*g* for three days. With gravity, even so mild as one-sixth of Earth's, she was nervous that her period might still be present. "A reminder that I'm going to want a moment for hygiene before we—"

Their radio crackled and Nicole Wargin's patrician voice greeted them, "*Eigene, Artemis 17. Welcome to the Moon.*"

"*Artemis 17, Eigene.*" Dawn's face went bright red inside her helmet because she'd forgotten that they were on hot mics. "The crew of *Artemis 18* is happy to be here."

Through the window, Dawn could just see someone in the other tiny ship wave at them. She waved back.

"When you finish your shutdown, we're standing by to help you unload supplies into the base. It's cramped, but it's home."

"Our team appreciates that." Graeham, as mission commander, responded with a grin. "And we brought some fresh fruit from Earth as a housewarming gift."

"Then your team is very, very welcome."

Dawn was never going to stop smiling. She turned to her checklist as Nav/Comp, working through her share of the landing procedures and noting stars for the report later. But really she was just giving Wilburt and Graeham the only privacy she could in the small quarters. Behind her, she heard the fricative hush of spacesuits brushing and a small, happy sigh.

She smiled at their happiness, staring out the window, then stopped as a brighter red star low on the horizon caught her gaze.

Mars. Maybe someday, this team could go there together. Maybe with Heidi. And maybe she could have the same joy of arriving on a new planet and being entirely herself.

Standing on the Moon, with the stars spread above them, brighter than diamonds, everything seemed possible for her team.



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THE
ANGEL'S
SHARE

MARTIN CAHILL

THE ANGEL'S SHARE

MARTIN CAHILL

illustration by

JAMES ZAPATA

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

The fifth time Mrs. Mead won the lottery, she finally had to admit to a rather annoyed IRS agent that her home had been infested by angels for around eight months now. The agent said it was time to do something about it. That or get arrested.

Mrs. Mead, fearing above all else the deep silence and loneliness that imprisonment would bring, agreed.

After donating eighty percent of her winnings, she finally called the exorcist she'd highlighted in the local paper five months ago. It took a few days to schedule an appointment, by which time the angels had healed several paper cuts, repainted the basement, and sent visions of her mother's spirit trapped in their hot embrace, eyes full of knowing, to help her fall asleep to.

When the exorcist arrived, Mrs. Mead took in the face of the man who had been staring at her for months now, his ad and information in the local paper burning a hole in her worn dining room table. He was just as fashionable as his photo, today dressed in a tailored maroon suit with burgundy suspenders. As he removed his hat, the same color as his jacket, she noticed his head was completely shaved, far different from the dark-haired pompadour in the photo. When she looked down at the ad in her hand to double check, he gave an easy smile and looked, if anything, a bit sheepish.

"Sorry for any confusion. The haircut and stubble are a newer look, but I paid for that ad and headshot last year. My line of work pays just fine, but good headshots are wicked expensive." He smiled, bright and easy, extending his hand. "Jude. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Mead."

Mrs. Mead put the paper down and shook Jude's hand. "Well, I think your new look suits you well. Margaret Mead. It's quite nice to meet you, Jude. Please, come in."

The minute he crossed the threshold, Jude's posture changed.

Gone was the easy way he moved, gone the languid look in his eyes. He paused like a hunter in the woods, hearing some faraway sound that could be anything with teeth, anything hungry. His gaze sharpened, and he held very still, eyes sweeping the room, landing on Mrs. Mead.

"Why, Mrs. Mead," he said, voice casual and calm, eyes steady and appraising, "you were very much not exaggerating the circumstances of your infestation."

Guilt surged inside of her like rising vomit. "How many?"

Left shoulder up, then down. Eyebrow cocked. "Hard to say. The air is . . . thick with them. At a guess, maybe thirty? Thirty-two?"

Putting a number to it staggered her; she hadn't felt so hollow since her mother's diagnosis. "That's . . . that's too many, isn't it?"

She hated asking silly questions, but it was a bad habit from her childhood; if she asked the silly question, someone else got to be the one to assert reality, to ground her in the truth, to hurt her. It didn't have to be something she had to do, give up the whimsy that maybe something strange or difficult could in fact be normal. She didn't have to be the one to say it. To make it real.

Jude gave a soft, sad smile that didn't try to reach his eyes. He nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Mead. Not everyone in this world is lucky enough to get even a single angel, let alone a whole radiance to themselves."

Before he could ask her more questions, she said, "Radiance?"

He was quick, Jude. If he saw her deflecting, he didn't say anything. Instead, he set down his briefcase. "Our taxonomy for a gathering of angels. Like a bonfire of devils or a humble of reapers. A radiance of angels."

Mrs. Mead let out a weak laugh. "I like that, a bonfire."

Jude knelt, opened his briefcase, and began to search through it. "Oh, yes. Demons and angels and other beings of the outer dark enjoy approaching people, but devils? Fiends *love* when a person comes to them. That's when the soul is at its brightest. For them,

anyway. They prefer to wait at their fire, salivating at the sound of footsteps."

He found what he was looking for, a candle with golden wax, thick as his forearm and just as long. "Did you know a soul is bright when it's suffering, Mrs. Mead?"

A pit opened in her stomach. Her heart fell toward it like a brick. "No," she finally managed, trying not to let her polite veneer crack.

Jude smiled at her, not unkindly, and began to look for a place to set down the candle. It was tough between the piles of newspapers and magazines and old dishes, the detritus of a life imploded. "See, another rumor. That a soul would be, I don't know, brighter when it's happier, as though happiness were the surprise it should glow for. But," he said, finally clearing away a space, "happiness is the norm for a soul. When all is well, a soul hums and glows like that final ember in a fire, just content and toasty. It's only when a foul wind comes by, kicks at that ember and tries to get it to go out, that it flares, becoming bright, desperate to hang on to that happiness."

Mrs. Mead didn't look at the dozens of shadows she saw out of the corner of her eye, many of them featureless, formless, but so hungry, she knew. They knew they were being talked about. As mindless as they could be, they knew their name when called.

"And angels, well." Jude chuckled as he reached into his coat pocket for a match. "Angels are everything they say and more. Miracles? Done and done. Light? They have that in abundance. Prayers? Oh, they'll answer you, time and time again. But they are also moths, and they're drawn to the flame of suffering. The brighter the hurt, the more angels flutter and clutter around it, aching to eat that hurt and make it better by any means necessary."

He struck the match against the heel of his black combat boot and put it to the wick before she could stop him.

The wick caught. But if a flame danced there, Mrs. Mead couldn't tell. She saw nothing but felt some alien light push on her, smelled something like sea air and ozone. There was no fire, and yet, some

element shimmered there, hazy and iridescent, at the top of the candle.

As it burned, Mrs. Mead gasped. From the not-flame, a fuliginous smoke poured forth, thick, a darkness deeper than midnight that spilled down the candle, down the table, and filled the room.

For a moment, the smoke danced around Mrs. Mead and Jude.

And then, as it flowed like shadow through the house, Mrs. Mead watched the smoke snag and catch, torn this way and that, displaced.

Displaced by the sheer weight and presence of unseen others in the room.

Around them, their hidden forms pulled into human sight by the black smoke and the not-light of the golden candle, Mrs. Mead saw in grotesque detail the thirty-two angels that had made a home of her long and earned suffering. They were many-limbed and vaporous and multi-jawed, some entwined around her or sprawled on the ceiling; some skittered across walls, and others were flapping on seven silent, membranous wings, and some were, frankly, just eyes, the color and width of the white noon sun, buzzing in the language of heavenly wasps.

Jude didn't look at any of the angels around him. Instead, he kept his gaze level and steady, staring at Mrs. Mead until she looked back at him. When they locked eyes, he said in his kindest voice, "Mrs. Mead, have you had any suffering in this house lately?"

Not long after, Jude was ushered out of the house, the door slammed behind him, and Mrs. Mead fell to her knees and wept at the foot of the stairs, having been unable to answer him.

As she did, dozens of wispy mouths alighted on her face and drank her tears before they could even think of falling past her lips. And in their feather-light, mycelial touch, in their soft, inarticulate whispers, she felt comfort.

★ ★ ★

Jude returned two days later.

He rang the doorbell and in the dark of her home, Mrs. Mead waited, praying he'd go away. And as always, her prayers were answered.

Dozens of silken, angelic tongues drank her words into them and went to make them real. Their voices overlapped, echoing around her as they moved to the door: *we'll get rid of him we don't need him no no no he doesn't know us he doesn't know you doesn't know what you need we do we know what you need mrs. mead don't we please let us help help help—*

But then, Jude did something. The angels that had raced toward the threshold slowed down and seemed to lose interest, drifting back into their cobwebbed corners, terrifyingly quiet.

"Mrs. Mead?" Jude said, voice muffled by the door. "Can you please let me in? I just want to talk. I promise I won't do anything you don't want me to do."

The quiet turned vicious as the suddenly silent angels seethed; it felt like a hot, rattling breath on the back of her neck. If they had not reacted so, she would have been tempted to let them charm her again with their serpentine assurances.

But they didn't want her to speak with the exorcist. And that was what made her get off the couch and make her way to the door, fighting through furious shapes every step of the way.

Turning that doorknob was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do (well, one of them).

But the moment the door opened, the angels scattered, drifting away, mindless once more.

Before her, in a tailored suit of houndstooth, stood Jude. On his lapel shone a bundle of herbs wrapped in what looked like a dandelion's stem. The air smelled heavily of rosemary and juniper. He smiled apologetically as he entered, gesturing at the herbs. "The ward won't hurt you; I promise. It just makes angels go a little hazy, forgetful. I figured I'd need it if we were to speak."

He waited there, briefcase held before him, and waited for her to respond. Then, "You do wish to speak, yes? I doubt you'd open this

door only to tell me off again.”

Why did she feel so ashamed? Why couldn't she look at him? She studied his boots instead, dark and thick-soled. Scuffed but sturdy. She wondered how many miles they'd seen, how many more they had to go.

“They . . . they didn't want me to open the door,” she said, still looking down. “Normally, they *want* so much. And that they didn't want this to happen . . . it made me think . . . that it was better to open the door.” Her voice, so soft. Her demeanor, small, tremulous. She felt like a child before this young man who was no more than half her age. When had she grown so small?

Jude's voice was level, and heavy with empathy. “When a radiance gathers, they tend to cede collective sentience for a lot of, let's call them base instincts. If it was just one or two angels, I wouldn't be surprised if you'd managed to have full conversations, help direct them a bit. But the way they've congealed here? Yeah, it's a lot of protective instinct. A lot of fear, especially of someone like me who could pry them apart.”

He leaned down and Mrs. Mead found herself looking into his kind amber eyes. “Opening this door was very brave, Mrs. Mead. I mean that. Thank you for agreeing to see me again.”

It had been so long since someone had spoken to her like a person. What was left of Mother howled. And the angels—the radiance—they mewled and pleaded and luxuriated, pawing at her soul.

“You're welcome,” she said. It felt good to be seen as a person, by another person, in this house of ghosts and angels.

Standing in the doorway, Jude gestured into the house. “Now, I want to make something clear, Mrs. Mead. I came back because you are a person who needs help; even if articulating it is tough, opening this door means some part of you knows what's happening is wrong. But you also need to know that I can only pry apart the radiance; you need to be the one to banish it. I'll help, but”—here his gaze

turned flinty and tough—"I can't do it alone. You need to put in the work. If that's something you want, say the word, and we'll begin."

Mrs. Mead lost herself in that hard gaze; something about it thrummed through her, igniting memory after memory of another's eyes, hard and unyielding. But those eyes couldn't hurt her again, they wouldn't let her, they took care of her, this was a mistake, a mistake, it was okay to make those, all she had to do was—

A sharp strike of green in her nose.

Her mind fogged, fuzzed. Mrs. Mead tasted honey on the back of her tongue, sweetness in the hollow of her throat.

She coughed, shook her head. Saw a dozen phantoms suddenly drifting away from her. Panting, heart racing, she looked at Jude, whose hand was on the herbs on his lapel. "I don't know if you understand just how deeply they've buried themselves in you, Mrs. Mead. It's possible they've influenced your mind more than you know. Have you found yourself not in control of your speech or movement these last few months?"

Mrs. Mead recalled the howling, the torture, the ending that had sent her into this terrible spiral. She remembered, word for word, how every command had been hers.

That was the true poison, she knew: in every instance, they had made sure it was her will, *her* choice, not theirs.

"No," she said, voice small and shaking. "No, only like now. When they're trying to—to—"

"Preserve their existence?" Jude chuckled. "Such is the way of every parasite. May I?" he asked, holding out a hand to her.

Before they could speak through her again, make her wrench the door shut, she grabbed his hand. She felt stronger, and the sharp smell of grass and honey came to her again. "I ask again," he said, "with your mind your own: Do you want my help? Do you want to banish the radiance?"

Strength was fleeting, she knew. If she waited, she'd say no. She'd remember the thousand reasons why the radiance was here, why they were latched on to her soul, what she made them do when

they weren't winning her lotteries. She could live in misery and satisfaction. It was easy.

But another voice within her, here for the moment Jude's magic cleared her mind, spoke up. And it said if she didn't get help, she would die here, drowning in that very satisfaction. She'd die just like the old witch and worse, be trapped with her forever.

It was enough. Mrs. Mead nodded, eyes wet, voice resolute. "Yes. Please come in. Please help me."

Jude nodded back and crossed the threshold. "First things first," he said, pointing at his jacket. "You're going to need one of these."

* * *

After a week of study, research, taxonomy, and labelling of her radiance, Mrs. Mead knew two things: one, Jude was very good at his job.

And two, if she didn't tell him the truth, he would find out for himself.

For every angel identified in the radiance, he grew closer to her terrible secret. Mrs. Mead had no idea there were so many different kinds. Lightculls and sundrifters, crucibles and witnesses, featherweighers and penances, on and on and on.

On day four, he shared an odd discovery that made her blood run cold. "I'm trying to go backward, make my way from the newest angels to the first that arrived. And while the last ten or so are benign angels of various orders, I'm noticing a real shift the older I get. See, there's an order of angels obsessed with justice and punishment, called smitebringers. Mrs. Mead," he said, turning to her with an appraising gaze, "you have . . . more than twenty smitebringers in your home. I do think it's time we talked about that, don't you?"

Hearing that number, part of her bitterly wondered why so few had answered her prayers.

Yes, she knew why. But such things couldn't be told, soundwaves doing little to convey the depth of pain, the hot red of scar tissue.

Such things could only be shown.

The next day, she brought Jude up to Mother's bedroom.

Hand on the knob, what she found she could say was simple.

"Please don't judge me too harshly, Jude. Please help me." She found she didn't want to look at him, to parse his scrutiny.

So she opened the door and let him look on the tableau within. For a moment, she thanked God, wherever the fuck he was, that there were only eight angels feasting on her mother's soul. That only a handful of her guardians surrounded her mother's gauzy, faint soul on the bed, framing what little remained of her like a beautiful halo.

Mrs. Mead knew how Jude would see them, huddled around mother's soul like campers by a guttering flame in the deep, dark night. Knew he would only see them as leeches, would read this length of light as a proboscis, or that shaft of flame as a fang, sucking and rending the spirit stuff of her mother into them, growing fat in a parasite's paradise.

But she just couldn't see them that way. She really had so little faith in anything, but what remained at the very bottom of her heart was in this room. It read that fang as a spear; it read that proboscis as a sword. They were *her* angels, no one else's. And they fought with tooth and claw, blade and spear, to keep slaying the monster who had spent all her long, hateful life hurting Mrs. Mead.

Jude said nothing, his face as impassive as a field of snow: cold and white, unmoving. His eyes roamed across the sight. The angels were so enamored, they didn't even know he was there. His ears twitched at the high, tinny sound of Mother's scream; so little of her was left, she sounded like a kettle boiling in the house next door. Most days, Mrs. Mead forgot she was even screaming, she'd become so used to it.

Well, add it to the list, she thought grimly. There were far worse things she'd become used to in this house already.

Jude drank in the scene like the angels drank of Mother. When he turned back to her, he had tears in his eyes, red and searching. Mrs. Mead stared back at him, not feeling a twinge of remorse, and

refusing to; she'd always been a sympathetic crier, would well up with ease at the sight of another's tears. But she would never cry for this monster again.

Jude opened his mouth, closed it. Opened it again, waited; when nothing emerged, closed his mouth once more.

The air became heavy with all that was unsaid. At some point, he must've realized what Mrs. Mead had realized some time ago: After such a lifetime of trauma, what the fuck could be said, really?

Walking over to Mrs. Mead, Jude led her out into the hallway, closing the door behind them both. And he folded himself over her, wrapping her in a hug that was tight and warm, and even if nothing could ever be said to make sense of it, it felt good, in this small way, to be seen.

An hour later, after tea and tissues, when each of them had caught their breath, Jude asked her if she was ready to send Mother on her way and free the radiance.

And Mrs. Mead, after a moment, said, "No."

Jude took a long, deep breath. Then: "You realize we can banish all of them but one, and if her spirit is still here, devoured as it is, they will all come back. More, possibly. Right?"

Mrs. Mead didn't think of herself as mean. But you didn't survive decades of abuse without a little meanness rooting itself in you, just enough to growl when you had to. That meanness flared, a hot cinder that burned her as much as it warmed her. "I understand that. I also understand that if she leaves, she won't get to suffer anymore."

Jude tried to hold her hands, but she pulled them back. "She made me suffer my whole life. And no angels came. Not until she was dying in that bed, in agony. Not until I *prayed* she would keep suffering, until she'd felt a fraction of the pain and terror I had felt my entire life. Because of her. I watched angel after angel arrive, drawn to her light, answering my prayer. I watched them eat, drink, sing over her. I watched her face as EMTs carted her dead body away, her horror that it wasn't ending. I have . . . decided so few

things in my life, Jude. But now I get to decide when she gets to leave.”

With a long sigh, he said, “Mrs. Mead, the punishment or joy due to the dead is out of our hands. With what I can sense of . . . your mother’s soul . . . there’s little doubt where she’s headed, if there’s even enough of her left to know it.”

The meanness made her snarl, her body trembling at ten thousand remembered hurts. “But I won’t be the one doing it to her. She won’t know she *hurt* me. She won’t know *I’m* the one hurting her now.”

If her meanness affected him, it didn’t show. “Mrs. Mead, do you . . . do you really think you’re alone here? I promise, you’re not the first person to try to destroy herself by indulging past pain.”

He stared at his hands intently. “I—I’m . . . this is pretty personal, Mrs. Mead, but I want you to know. When I was younger, when I finally knew I was Jude and began transitioning, I had some good people who stood by me, who helped me.” He paused for a moment, watching her from the corner of his eye. When she said nothing, he continued, “*That’s* why I came back, Mrs. Mead, to help you.

“But I had other folks, too, people close to me who . . . used that closeness. To try and hurt me. Stuff me back in a box that wasn’t me, lock me in a room that would always feel wrong.” Mrs. Mead saw in Jude’s jaw a tension she’d not seen yet, a weariness to his shoulders that he’d hid well while on the job.

“I, too, had people I would have gladly bled myself dry for if only they could know just how badly and how deeply they’d hurt me. I know that hunger, which is why I’m trusting you with all this, Mrs. Mead. Because I’ve spent years working to live for myself, here and now. Let myself live a little freer, even on the days I get angry, and the work is hard. And as best I can, I try and help others get the chance to do that work, too.”

Jude rubbed his eyes, and then turned that level, piercing gaze back to her. “I had good people help me realize that choosing my future and my happiness was the first step in that work. Because

why am I going to listen to people who are furious that I'm me, who still insist I'm someone else? The joy I feel being Jude can't and won't be contained by any box they want to keep me in. I want that freedom for you, Mrs. Mead. I really do. But you have to want it, too."

For a moment, his words almost made it. Almost sank right into her, body and soul; almost helped became a mirror to her own rage and pain. But no angels were needed to reinforce the scar-tissue walls she'd spent a lifetime building. Not even Jude's vulnerability could break through the solid walls of hate and sorrow around her heart.

She just stared at him, unblinking, golden forms wisping around her like a bright shroud.

Jude didn't reach for her again. He settled back on the couch, staring at the ceiling. He suddenly looked exhausted. He might have been just speaking out loud, but the words were for her alone. "So you'll really let her control you still? Even eaten as she is, with so little of herself left inside her anymore, you'll still let your fear of her winning keep you from your own happiness?"

Later, when she came out of her rage, when all she could feel was the cool touch of light on her cheeks, lapping at her hot tears, when all she wanted was the smothering blanket of wings to drown out the world and that fucking kettle whistling a house away, Mrs. Mead would concede that Jude was probably right.

But what the fuck did he know?

The angels agreed, every last one of them.

That was rare, all of them agreeing.

And so, it must have been true.

★ ★ ★

A week later, a slip of paper arrived under the door.

Mrs. Mead, it read, I am sorry our conversation last week ended in my causing you pain, though I do not regret my frankness nor my sharing my personal experiences. It was not my intention to hurt

you. But you must understand: if things keep on as they are, you will find no solace in your mother's suffering. You will suffer, too, and these angels care not about the source of their light, only that it is bright. Please, save yourself. You still have a full life to live. Do not let your pain drown you. And if you choose to, despite my warnings, please know I will miss you. For sooner or later, you will end up exactly as your mother.

She tore the letter in half, then quarters, then more and more, until the kitchen was filled with little bits of paper. With her angels praising her in their celestial songs and lowing laughter, she danced across them like she was a little girl again.

Mrs. Mead did not pick them up. Why bother? The house was as clean as it was ever going to get.

She spent the rest of her day watching her mother cry out, attempting words, and in failing, only weep. It was better than anything, and Mrs. Mead wished Jude were there, to make him eat his words.

* * *

A month passed. There was no word from Jude. There was no word from anyone, really. Mrs. Mead felt as though she were haunting her own life, moving from room to room, consuming food and water out of habit. At some point, she felt as though her waking hours, the ones she remembered, had become stage directions.

Walk here, eat this, sleep now, wake. But there was no one to direct her, the only audience her ghoulish radiance who cheered and clapped and drank her tears before they left the duct.

In that time, the local government stopped calling every time she won the lottery; they just dispersed the winnings to the handful of charities she'd provided. She kept the radio off so she would stop winning shock jock contests for this musician or that vacation. She finally had to make an auto-reply email to her boss, discouraging the promotions offered, insisting that divine intervention was not a good enough reason for a corner office. She learned to ignore her body's

changes, as the angels did their best to turn back the clock on her crow's-feet, her encroaching liver spots, her receding hairline; she thought of them like little gifts you get at holidays from children who don't understand the concept of gifts yet, who only get you what they think you might enjoy. Even on the days when she felt she could climb a mountain, when she felt so young, so energized, she forced herself to sit and do nothing, knowing it would fade as soon as she left the house.

And why would she leave anyway?

All this fortune and every day she found herself rapt before Mother's withering spirit. Mrs. Mead drank in her suffering, that tea kettle howl tinnitus now, an ever-present sound that simply was part of her every day. Some days, she wondered if there was a limit to how much she enjoyed this.

No, *enjoy* wasn't even the right word. She didn't enjoy it. But she needed it. She needed mother to know. And she'd wait as long as she had to for that to happen.

Another month went by. And then another. If the seasons were passing outside, Mrs. Mead didn't know it. If it rained, if it snowed, if a tornado spun toward her, she couldn't have cared less. The world outside her home fell into myth; when she looked out her windows, she could only guess at what was happening, for nothing made sense anymore.

She vaguely understood that she wasn't eating, wasn't showering or shitting; those had been replaced by the light of her radiance. *They* fed her, *they* cleansed her. They were in her blood, hot and gold, energizing her.

It didn't matter that the stage directions were fading, erased day by day. It didn't matter that the theater was getting dusty, gathering cobwebs. It didn't even matter that the audience had stormed the stage, sinking their fangs into the actors, listless and drifting and happy.

Mrs. Mead knew she wasn't dead or dying. Some vague part of her knew that she had simply given over her life to the angels. It let

her focus on Mother's suffering, and she was grateful.

Thinking had also left the realm of Mrs. Mead's control. She'd always believed her mind mattered, that it was one of the things her torturous mother couldn't control, couldn't snipe at, couldn't mold with threat or harm.

But as the angels became her, gave her life support so she could enjoy the culmination of her life's hurt, she realized: thought was just another burden, like a body, like a heart. Just another frail, breakable thing.

And so she gave it up.

Time passed; how much, she did not know. She had given in to the gold of her radiance; little else mattered.

So, when things changed, it took her too long to realize.

And when she did, it was almost impossible to stop or fix it.

She had become a frog submerged in a water-filled pot, the world changing degree by degree, so slowly she didn't even notice she was the one in pain.

It was when the vague form of her mother, a shadow among shadows, turned toward her in the doorway, and in a fit of pain screamed, "Just like you! To stand by and watch while I burn. Fucking ungrateful daughter I raised, I tell you that much."

The gold fell away. It had to, in order to make room for this fresh fright, this sudden pain. It lodged in her breast, fear in the form of a dagger, Mother's voice lunging into her, planting it deep. Mrs. Mead blinked away tears of molten light, lower lip trembling.

"W-what?" Her throat hurt. She hadn't spoken in months.

From the squirming cloud of light that was her mother's soul, a shape emerged; two lips formed a disdainful mouth and from it, her voice, ringing like funeral bells. "You're a disgrace, Margaret, I know you know that. No need for me to say it, I can see you know it. It's all over your face, wide as it is. But you're so dense, I'm doing you a favor reminding you. I imagine you forget, going to la-la-land where you think you have it all together. Always was like you, escaping to a

little world in your head where everything was bright and sunny. Waste of a mind.”

Mrs. Mead’s very nerves were on fire, every twitch of fear igniting them like a spitting live wire. She watched that mouth spew its filth and go quiet.

She waited. Waited like the hare waited for the owl to sleep, prey ready to run. *A last gasp*, she thought in that little corner that hadn’t given in to the radiance. *Just a little fitful ember; it will go out and then I will be free.*

The next morning, she was awoken by a familiar, awful scream. “You sleep the day away and can’t even help your poor, sick mother with a little breakfast? I may as well be dead, the way you treat me!”

Mrs. Mead came into the room to see those horrible eyes, dark and blue like the bottom of the sea, slitted like a paranoid viper’s, hovering over a mouth that hadn’t gone away.

She fed the specter of her mother cold oatmeal; like before, she complained with every spoonful, even as she sucked it down.

The next afternoon, Mrs. Mead, muscles atrophied, rearranged the bed for five hours, trying to find a spot to keep her mother’s reforming skin from being hit by sunlight. She could do nothing right, the sun following her like a terrible shadow. Her mother’s spirit, looking like a burn victim, swatted her with a ghostly hand.

Mrs. Mead flinched as she felt it brush her shoulder, cold and cruel and real.

The days came and went, dripping like blood from the edge of a knife, slow, deliberate. Her mother grew stronger as Mrs. Mead faltered, paled, weak in the knees and heart, confused and scared.

This couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t. She was dead. Gone. She had been gone! She *had* been!

Except . . . she hadn’t, really, had she? A voice spoke in the small corner left of Mrs. Mead’s mind that she could call her own, a little space her will had retreated to, like a child under the blankets, shivering in the moonless night. That part of her knew: her mother

hadn't left. Because she hadn't let her. Mrs. Mead had wanted to torture her, hurt her mother as she had been hurt by her.

Maybe this is karma, she thought, painting her mother's nails a garish pink, each one long and sharp enough to draw blood. *Maybe I deserve this*, she thought as her mother raked a nail across her cheek for sloppy work. *Maybe I will die and become a spirit, and she will hurt me back again, both of us stuck in some awful loop.*

But the truth was both simpler and more horrible than any question of cosmic justice.

Weeks after her mother began to return to the land of the living, Mrs. Mead awoke to the sound of more than thirty wispy mouths crawling across her.

Her angels surrounded her in a swarm of light. Their song was one she knew by heart: they only sang like this when they fed on a suffering so pure it crawled down their long, hollow throats, like honey, rich and thick.

She had lost track of them, she realized. She had always been so careful to know what direction their mouths were facing. But you couldn't watch what didn't want to be seen. What had begun to hunt you.

As they suckled at her, lapping up her tears and heartbreak and anger and fear, it struck her what had happened. Like Sisyphus staring down the boulder hurtling toward him, two truths came to mind at once.

The angels, fearing a loss of their food source, had created a new one for themselves.

And if Mrs. Mead didn't call Jude right now, she realized, she never would. She would die in every way that mattered.

More than that, her mother would live.

If there was anything to motivate her, it was that.

Every muscle in her body was either taut or sluggish; moving a limb felt like shoving against a brick wall, unyielding. And when something did move—a hand, a foot, an ankle—it seemed she was

trying to push through syrup, the world suddenly thick, the air redolent with concern as the radiance sensed her motives.

From their mouths and eyes and palms and even from the very fine hairs of their limbs came a deep and strident song, one sung in a key of command.

sit stop no sit down sit down sit down right now dearie darling sweetie honey honey honey please sit SIT WE SAID SIT SIT SIT SITSITSITSITSITSITSIIIIIIII—

The words fuzzed, garbled, became one voice droning at a pitch meant to drive her to her knees. The sound was both sharp and heavy, like a hypodermic needle being hammered into her skull.

Mrs. Mead tasted blood; she'd bitten her tongue hard. One knee gave out suddenly and she fell against the wall, forehead driven into the wooden doorway. It wasn't easy to see, suddenly; the world on the fringe of her sight was blurring, becoming hazy.

Her radiance was singing her down to the ground. Even ungentle as they were, she wasn't angry with them. She knew that desperation, that fire stirred by fear, to hold on to a thing that was harming you. She remembered her last conversation with Jude.

She rounded the corner, limping. Her phone was on the kitchen table.

In the doorway opposite, her mother stood, her shadow long and smoking with rage. Angels had gathered around her like a cloak and as Mrs. Mead took a step forward, the very air boiled, all their voices colliding, smearing together.

SIT SIT SIT SIT DOWN HONEY SIT DOWN SWEETIE YOU FUCKING IDIOT SOME DAUGHTER YOU TURNED OUT TO BE WEAK WEAK WEAK JUST LIKE YOUR FATHER SO WEAK CAN'T EVEN DO THIS ONE LITTLE THING AND HOW COULD YOU PATHETIC DIDN'T EVEN HAVE THE BALLS TO KILL ME YOURSELF SEND ME TO HELL AT LEAST THERE THEY'D CARE ABOUT ME BUT YOU YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE IT IN YOU WHAT CAN YOU DO TO STOP US STOP ME WE ARE HUNGRY WE ARE HUNGRY SO HUNGRY ALL WE WANT IS THE SWEET SONG OF SUFFERING AND YOU WOULD DENY US

*AFTER ALL WE DID ALL WE DID FOR YOU ALL I DID FOR YOU
RAISING SOME UNGRATEFUL BITCH WHO CAN'T EVEN MAKE A
PHONE CALL TO SAVE HER LIFE*

Mrs. Mead, tears in her eyes, mingling with the blood there, her vision red. Her hands, numb and pale; *they're stopping my heart*, she realized. Her phone, gripped in limp fingers, screen lighting up. Her mother, these angels . . . neither could touch her, neither corporeal enough to rip it from her hand, smash it to the ground.

With a shaking swipe of numbing fingers, the phone unlocked.

In a voice like judgment: *WE HAVE ONLY HELPED YOU WE HAVE
ONLY EVER LOVED YOU YOU LITTLE SHIT WE HAVE ONLY WANTED
THE BEST FOR YOU*

Bloody tears touched the corner of her lips; she tasted heat and sorrow.

For a fleeting moment, she knew what it was to be an angel.

In a voice like poison: *I HAVE ONLY EVER DONE MY BEST YOU
UNGRATEFUL GIRL ONLY LOVED YOU AS BEST I COULD DON'T YOU
THINK I WOULD HAVE DONE BETTER IF I COULD*

When she pressed the phone icon, she couldn't feel it. She saw his name as the last person who had called her. Who cared.

Together, their voices combined and shook her very soul like an animal in the jaws of a wolf, thrashing her into death.

*NO ONE CARES ABOUT YOU NO ONE WILL HELP YOU EVERYONE
WHO EVER COULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING YOU DROVE AWAY
YOU YOU YOU YOU'RE THE MONSTER YOU'RE MEANT TO SUFFER
HOW WILL YOU EVER GET HELP IF YOU'RE TOO WEAK TO ASK TO
ADMIT YOU NEED IT TO EVEN ACCEPT IT*

She didn't know if she pressed the call button. The red in her vision fled and the world was fading into darkness. It was so quiet. No one spoke. Her mother, the angels, and Mrs. Mead all held their breath, waiting to see who would win.

Mrs. Mead didn't find out because she blacked out, the world and its suffering, her suffering, dimming as she fell into someplace new, dark and cold.

She could only hope her mother wasn't waiting for her there, too.

* * *

It took a week for her to look Jude in the eye.

Not that she was unable to. Much was injured. Some would heal, some wouldn't. No, it was shame that kept her from looking into his eyes. It was harder because he wouldn't leave her alone to wallow.

Every morning while she stayed at St. Monica's Hospital, he'd come in, newspaper under his arm, cooling coffee in hand. He'd pretend she wasn't pretending to sleep, murmuring to her under his breath as he read, did the crossword. And when she could no longer pretend to sleep, she kept her eyes far from his for the rest of the day.

It seemed his patience would outlast her shame. After a week she finally looked at him and said in a whisper, "But I was so cruel to you."

He paused behind the paper. Then he folded it, set it on his lap, and looked at her, the setting light of the day casting his kind features in a light like gold. "And? Do you hold things said in anger against those in your life?"

Yes, she almost said. Then stopped moving her jaw, not trusting herself. Instead, she nodded. Then, "But I'd like not to. I'd . . . like to get better."

"You already are," he said, putting a hand on hers, stopping just shy of her intake bracelet. "You called me. Simple as that."

Despair seemed to grab her organs and pull them in, down, dragging her into its grip. "But I should've—there's so much I could've—" Tears threatened, and she hated herself; she had almost gotten herself killed, and here she was, crying over her own stupidity. She wanted to welcome that despair, welcome its pull, when Jude squeezed her hand hard enough to make her look at him.

His eyes were hard and bright, like pennies in the sun. "Stop that, Mrs. Mead. Stop that, please. For your own health." He tried to

smile, but the motion of his mouth didn't diminish the hardness in his eyes. "We both know how addictive the past can be, Mrs. Mead. How comforting its familiarity is in your hands, even as it cuts you, weighs you down like a stone. But you put it down. You called me. You chose your future. In the end, you chose to survive and see what tomorrow can be. More than that, all of your tomorrows? You get to choose how to live them. And I know, in time, that will be an exciting thing, though I know right now it's probably scary. But I promise, one day it will be a joyful feeling to decide what tomorrow is and know that when it mattered, you were able to put your yesterdays down."

Mrs. Mead found she couldn't stand the light of his gaze anymore. The words, she heard; she tried to be inspired by them, even as, yes, they scared her. She turned away, let her hand go limp in his. "And the house?"

Jude took his hand back, and his smile was gentler. "I . . . well, when I came for you, it was a mess. Apologies for the state of it, whatever that state is. I . . . sort of went into survival mode, just getting you out again. Had to rely on brute force and technique to clear out the radiance. I got as many as I could. Whoever's left will most likely leave once your mother's spirit is gone."

Something twisted inside her. The words barely eked out. "She's . . . still there?"

Jude's face was solemn, though his tone was kind. "I told you, Mrs. Mead. Only you can banish her. You have to be the one. I'll help; you won't be alone. But it has to be your decision."

He stood suddenly. "I'm going to go for a jaunt around the building, stretch my legs. Give you a little time. But I think after this experience, it shouldn't be a hard decision. Still. You have to make your own choices, Mrs. Mead. And you're finally able to now. In this hospital, you're free. And if you go back to that house and decide to pick that stone back up, you won't be free. Simple as that. I'm not sorry for saving your life, Margaret. But," he said, reaching down and

placing his right hand on top of her own, “only you can save your future.”

He left. The door clicked behind him. Without him, without the angels, without her mother, Mrs. Mead was alone for the first time in . . . well, years.

She savored it. Let the stale hospital air sit on her tongue like holy communion. The beep of her heart monitor thrummed through her. Every little disturbance to the quiet—breathing, sheets rustling, birds out the window—spiked through her, sparking off nerves used to violence and light and noise.

Mrs. Mead was completely alone.

Before, that would have terrified her.

And if she was being honest, some part of her still *was* terrified.

But the relief she felt was greater than the fear, and so, she wept in this new silence. Not only because she was free of her angels and ghosts.

But because in being alone, she felt at peace. She was . . . okay being alone. More than that, against everything her mother had ever screamed at her, everything her radiance had ever cautioned against, she found, after a few moments, that she liked being alone with herself, too.

Relief settled around her in the quiet, holding her like an embrace. In the utter stillness of the hospital room, Mrs. Mead breathed, joyous in the reverent quiet that she *could* be alone. She did have a future waiting for her.

And she felt ready to move toward it, finally.

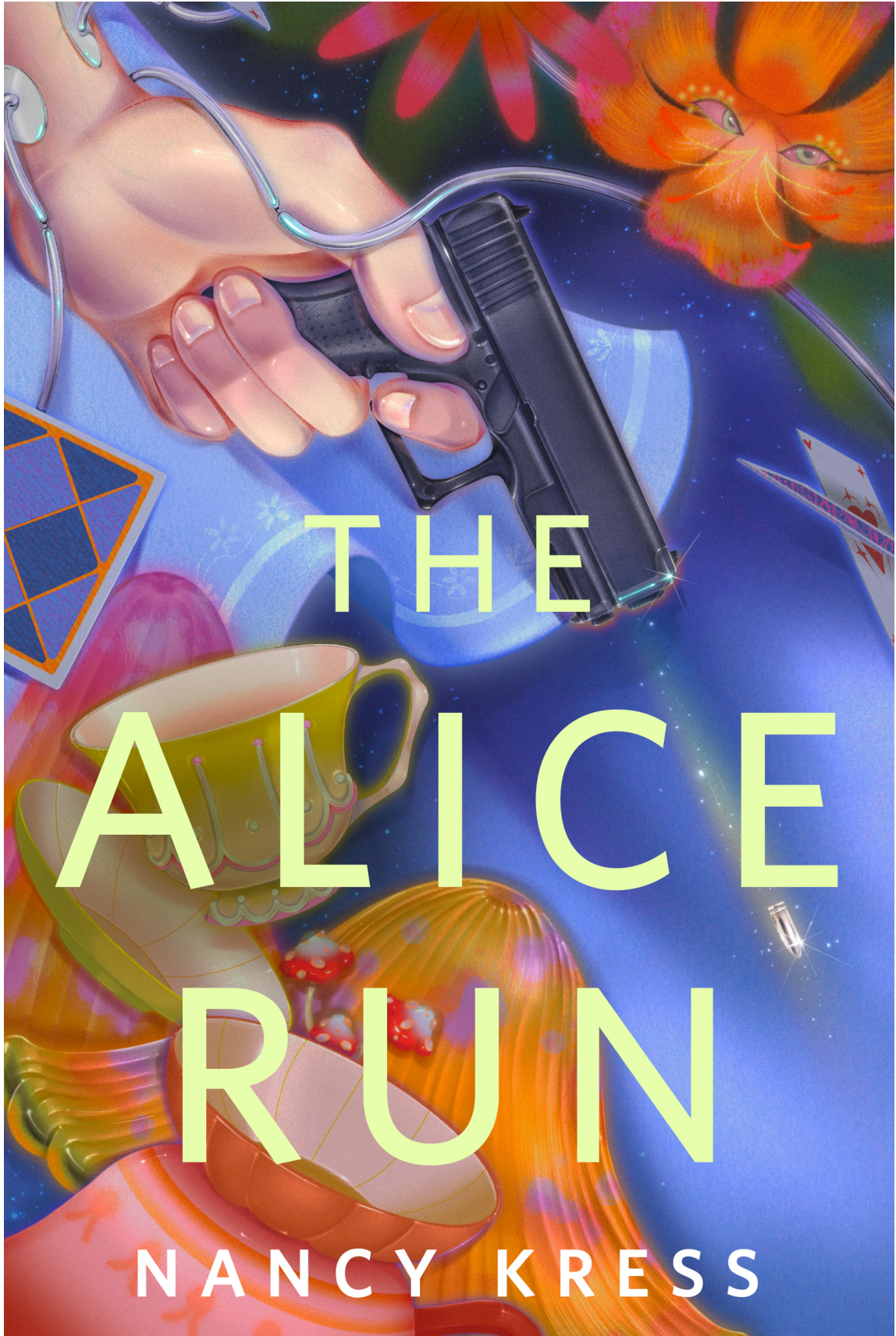
She lay in her bed, reveling in the silence, and watched out the window as the birds finished their songs in the fading gold light of day.

As night approached, Mrs. Mead felt a calm come over her, and she waited patiently for Jude to return.



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THE
ALICE
RUN

NANCY KRESS

The Alice Run

NANCY KRESS

illustration by

DANZHU HU

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

Six people ringed the patient's gurney. Amy Cole, Dr. James Ericson's assistant, didn't understand why two of the men were here, nor why the procedure was being done away from Jim's medical-research lab, but it wasn't her place to question Jim. Not that she ever would. You didn't question genius.

Jim's usual anesthesiologist sat on his stool by the patient's head. Miguel said, "Ready, Dr. Ericson."

"Good," Jim said, his blue eyes alight in a way that still, after a year of working as his tech assistant, made Amy's heart turn over. "Amy, start the run."

She keyed in the code on her console. The patient, a woman of forty, twitched slightly as the electric shock ran through the lead wires into her brain. Patients always did that. Dr. Wu, the physician present in case the patient developed medical complications, watched closely. Her eyes widened slightly as she checked the patient's monitors. This was Dr. Wu's first time, but Amy could have told her there was nothing to worry about. Jim had performed his procedure dozens of times in clinical trials; FDA approval would come soon. Someday Jim would win the Nobel Prize. Amy was sure of it.

The smart screen mounted beside the gurney glowed blue.

★ ★ ★

Where was she?

Instinctively, she moved from the base of the iron staircase to a surveillance position, her back against the closest wall. A vast space, too dimly lit to see the corners—a warehouse? Airfield hangar? As

her eyes adjusted, she could make out empty pallets, some broken, scattered throughout the space. A rat scurried past her and disappeared into a hole in the wall. The wall behind her smelled of damp.

An underground storage facility, then. Abandoned? Her hand moved of its own volition to her hip. Something was supposed to be there, and wasn't. What? And why was she wearing the kind of dress she never wore, full-skirted with—Christ!—petticoats?

Where was she?

Who was she?

Something moved toward her from the far darkness.

★ ★ ★

"Sometimes," Jim said to the two strangers, "it takes a while for the patient to speak. Until she does, of course, we won't know where we are."

The older of the two men, who'd been introduced only as Mr. Jones, said, "What if she doesn't speak? She's been in the coma since the accident."

Amy was startled by his harsh tone. Who were these guys? Never before had observers or even family members been allowed to view the procedure.

Jim said confidently, "Oh, Letitia will speak."

The older man's eyes narrowed, slits becoming slittier. "We'll see, won't we?"

★ ★ ★

Letitia's body subtly rearranged itself ... to do what?

To fight.

Why?

She didn't know, but her stance didn't relax until the figure coming through the darkness resolved itself into a short, spindly young man, hands empty, dressed only in bike shorts, no place for a weapon. Eighteen, maybe, with ears that stuck out on both sides

like the late king of England's. Closer, and she saw that he was an albino, white skin flushed with blood only on his fuzzy cheeks and in his pink eyes.

The boy said, "Please give me what's in your pocket."

Never taking her eyes off the kid, Letitia ran her hand over her skirt until she found a small pocket. She pulled out a thimble.

The young man reached for it. Letitia's fist closed over the thimble. "Tell me where I am."

* * *

"There!" Jim said. "I told you she'd speak!"

"Not to much purpose," Mr. Jones said, confusing Amy again. He sounded ... what? Somehow satisfied that the patient was still confused. No, not satisfied, but ... something.

Jim didn't seem to notice. He gazed at the smart screen, which remained solid blue. The patient's words had not been a clue.

* * *

"Why, don't you know where you are?" the mousy young man said. A mouse—yes. He reminded her of a mouse.

She didn't answer him, waiting.

"Please give me the thimble! Can't you see that the tide is coming in?"

She heard it then, the faint lapping of water somewhere in the vast dimness of the storage cellar. "Tell me where I am."

"Oh, here it comes!"

A sudden rush of shallow water, breaking into waves as it hit the wall behind her. Letitia tasted salt on her lips. The young man gave a cry and waded toward the iron staircase. Letitia followed. Her ridiculous dress slowed her and she ripped it off, struggling to stay on her feet as the water rushed forward. Underneath she wore camo-printed T-shirt and shorts, but there was no time to consider this. The albino was halfway up the stairs. How high would the

water rise? She could make out a trapdoor at the top of the stairs: Was it locked from above?

It was. The mousy kid turned on Letitia. "I told you to give me the thimble! It's my prize! I won it fair and square!"

Letitia shoved him aside and pushed hard at the featureless door, which didn't budge. The water was a tsunami. Nothing made sense.

She handed over the thimble. He touched it to the trapdoor, and it sprang open. They both scrambled through, the kid slamming it behind him.

* * *

"This is not working," Jones said, and there it was again, that weird note in his voice. "It's been half an hour already. I've read your work, Doctor. The 'patient' never takes this long to respond."

"No," Jim said; he never lied. "The longest before now has been only ten minutes. But time is different in the mind than in what we call reality."

"You have five more minutes," the stranger said. "This works in five or we're done here."

He was *ordering* Jim? And Jim made no response. Amy's unease grew, mixed now with faint resentment, and not only against Jones. She'd thought Jim shared with her everything about their work. Sometimes, when a patient responded particularly well, he took Amy out for a celebratory drink, and together they explored the possible implications of his revolutionary procedure. Those drinks in a nearby bar were important to her, even though the conversation never turned personal. Still, when he looked at her sometimes ...

And he never so much as mentioned his marriage.

* * *

Letitia and the kid stood in a forest clearing, facing a large house with bay windows and pointy-widowed turrets. Peeling paint, missing roof tiles, overgrown lawn, sagging porch, and an equally sagging, slightly ajar door. The albino kid's ears had grown even larger. And

longer. Now he wore a waistcoat and watch fob with his bike shorts, a grotesque combination.

"Why, Mary Ann," he said, "what *are* you doing out here? Run home this moment, and fetch me a pair of gloves and a fan! Quick, now!"

Gunfire erupted from the woods to their left.

★ ★ ★

Forty-eight minutes without another word from the patient—much too long. At Jim's instruction, Miguel adjusted the anesthesia. Sedating a patient was perhaps the trickiest part of the procedure; you had to blank out whatever light and sound were reaching patients' brains through their comas, yet not make the sedation so strong that deep memory and the unconscious mind did not connect. Or that a patient could not wake up. Amy felt sweat form on the back of her neck and between her breasts.

Jim must have been nervous, too, because he began to babble at the stranger.

"You mustn't interrupt the procedure, no. You do know how this works, right? Of course you do, you must have been briefed.... Suppose I just clarify for you again how important this is, how revolutionary? Coma patients don't usually respond to DBS—deep-brain stimulation—by waking up. But my procedure can waken them *if* you stimulate the exact right area of the brain, the master key to a very specific kind of memory: the memory algorithm by which we ordered the world when we were children. And do you know how children—how all of us, really, for our whole lives—interpret and construe the data coming to us through our senses? Through *stories*."

"Two minutes, Doctor."

"The stories we tell ourselves—that's what orders our reality! Stories define who we are and what we believe. And childhood stories, those that were important to us, go very deep in memory

and so are the key to recovering identity, which in turn enables coma patients to wake and—”

The patient spoke, so loudly that Amy jumped. The screen brightened into an image.

“There!” Jim cried. “Now we know where we are!”

★ ★ ★

“Why, Mary Ann,” the mouse-turned-rabbit said, “what *are* you doing out here? Run home this moment, and fetch me a pair of gloves and a fan! Quick, now!”

Words gripped Letitia and she said them aloud before she knew she was going to speak. “How queer it seems, to be going messages for a rabbit!”

Gunfire erupted from the woods to their left.

Letitia dropped to her belly and crawled toward the house. Her camo matched the tall grass. Blood sprayed over her: the kid. He hadn’t even had time to cry out. She reached the door of the house, pushed herself inside. She needed a weapon. But if the enemy already held the house—

What enemy?

The foyer was empty except for a dusty table holding a ceramic vase of dead flowers. Letitia dumped out flowers and dirty water and took the vase. All three doors off the foyer were locked. Bullets hit the front door; she sprinted up the staircase. These rooms were locked, too, except for a small closet lined with shelves of dusty linen and lit by a small, dirty window at the far end.

Nothing in here to use as a weapon. Wrapping the vase in a duvet to muffle sound, she smashed it against a shelf and equipped herself with a thick, sharp shard.

More bullets hit the house, but now they sounded dim, like a hail of pebbles. What the fuck?

★ ★ ★

The smart screen had brightened to a still image of a blond child in a blue dress and pinafore, standing beside a white rabbit in evening dress. Jim said, "It's *Alice in Wonderland*! A common key to memory, Mr. Jones, you'd be surprised how many bright children internalize it. You were told, weren't you, that our deebee can match illustrations from over two thousand children's books as soon as a significant phrase is spoken? The most popular are *Goodnight Moon*, the Harry Potter series, books by Judy Blume, Roald Dahl, Maurice Sendak—"

Jim cited a dozen more authors. Mr. Jones—if that was his name, which Amy didn't believe for half a minute—didn't seem to be listening. He stared at the image onscreen. It was a little blurry, which meant that it wasn't one of John Tenniel's original illustrations for Alice, but rather was one the AI had extrapolated from the Tenniel drawings to match the place in the story indicated by Letitia's words. If necessary, Amy could have sharpened and edited the image, but Jim didn't tell her to do so.

"Mr. Jones" scowled at Alice.

"Of course," Jim said, "no image that may appear on the screen is an exact translation of whatever Letitia is experiencing. It's merely the starting point. Memory isn't static, or even reliable. In the unconscious—as in dreams—memory blends with more recent experiences and transmutes into—"

"Be quiet," Jones ordered, with such cold anger that Amy's mouth fell open. Even Jim looked surprised. The new physician, Dr. Wu, raised her head to glance briefly at Jones and then returned her gaze to the patient. The man with Jones registered absolutely nothing. His face might have been a ceramic mask.

Jones said, "Get on with it."

★ ★ ★

The sound of breaking glass. The enemy was taking the house.

But ... the door was unlocked. Why come through the windows? And why hadn't any of the gunfire come from this side of the house? It all sounded like it was coming from the front porch. Was it

possible these were not soldiers but kids who didn't know what they were doing?

The shots that had killed the white mouse-rabbit-boy had been real enough. His blood was drying on her T-shirt.

The window at the end of the linen closet, too dirty to see through, was stuck closed. Working as quietly and quickly as she could, Letitia pried it loose and raised it a few inches. Cautiously she pushed out the edge of a pillow from the linen-closet shelves. No one fired at it.

Waiting cannily, or not there?

At the other end of the closet, she cracked the door. Now she could hear voices in the foyer below. Not adult voices, but not kids, either. Some seemed to be growls, some squeaks, some chirps.

"Well, it's got no business there, at any rate: go and take it away!"

"Sure, I don't like it, yer honor, at all, at all!"

"Do as I tell you, you coward!"

"Bill—Bill's got to go down the chimney!"

So they were going to attack after all. From the sound of it, they had a whole platoon.

A what?

No time to think. Letitia returned to the window, eased it up, peered out cautiously. No one at the back of the house.

Someone downstairs said, "We must burn the house down!"

Letitia called out, "If you do that, I'll set Dinah at you."

Dinah who?

This place would go up like dry kindling.

Swiftly she knotted a sheet to the linen-closet shelves. When she smelled smoke, she tossed the end through the window and climbed down, expecting to be shot. She wasn't. On the ground she dropped to her belly and crawled through the weeds to the forest beyond.

When she rose, a lizard standing on two legs was staring at her stupidly. He opened his lipless mouth to scream, and she decapitated him with the shard of vase.

Nobody else stopped her or, as far as she could tell, even saw her. The stupidest bunch of insurgents on the planet.

Bunch of *what*?

★ ★ ★

The smart screen had been frozen for fifteen minutes. Just when Amy was afraid the patient wouldn't speak again, Letitia said loudly, "If you do that, I'll set Dinah at you." The screen image morphed.

Alice, grown too large for the White Rabbit's house, scrunched into a room with her head pushed against the ceiling and her arm out the window.

Mr. Jones said sharply, "Who's Dinah?"

Jim didn't answer; Amy realized he didn't know the book quite well enough to answer. She spoke up. "Dinah is Alice's cat."

Jones exploded. "This is what's going on in her mind? Rabbits and cats and a giant child? This is ridiculous."

Jim said quietly, "No, sir. As I already explained to you, the book is the key, but it's not what's being unlocked. We can't see what's going on in the subject's mind because her own memories are coming to her filtered through the Lewis Carroll story."

"Memories of rabbits? Fuck it—I'm aborting this procedure right now."

Jim straightened. "I'm afraid you don't have that authority. I was told that this patient is vital to national security, which is why we're not performing my procedure in my lab, and that nothing should interrupt it."

"I told you no such thing!"

"Not you, sir. Someone higher up."

Jones went rigid. Amy made the large effort to turn her eyes back to her console. This steeliness was a side of Jim she'd never seen, hadn't suspected. And ... *vital to national security*? Why? How?

Jim said, "Miguel, adjust the sedation again. Level six. It may speed things up. Amy?"

"Brain waves and memory algorithms both holding steady."

“Good. We—”

Letitia’s body’s twitched as she said loudly, “I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then,” and the screen responded with the Tenniel illustration of a caterpillar seated on a mushroom and smoking a hookah. A tiny Alice peered over the rim of the mushroom.

Jim leaned over the gurney. “Letitia, who are you?”

The screen image didn’t change, but Letitia said to someone in Wonderland, “I can’t explain myself, sir, because I’m not myself.” And then, “I can’t remember things as I used to.”

Amy nodded. So that was why Letitia’s unconscious had seized on this story. Alice, too, had had identity issues.

Letitia began to recite Lewis Carroll’s parody of the Robert Southey poem:

*“You are old, Father William,” the young man said,
“And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?”*

Suddenly the patient laughed. Alice, Amy remembered, had not laughed at the poem; Alice had despaired at her own mangling of the stanzas. The laugh was not Alice’s but Letitia’s own response.

★ ★ ★

If the Caterpillar was no help, the Duchess was even worse.

Letitia had stalked away from the mushroom, flapped away a pesky pigeon, and come to another house, this one small for even a summer cottage, in a clearing ringed with trees. At the door, a courier in British army uniform was delivering orders to a servant in livery. The courier said, “For the Duchess. An invitation from the Queen to play croquet.”

The servant said, “From the Queen. An invitation for the Duchess to play croquet.”

Code, of course. Coming in via a back channel. Which side was running the courier?

Sides of what?

She stayed hidden, observing, until the courier left and the servant looked directly at her. He said from a lipless, frog-like mouth, "I shall sit here till to-morrow—or next day."

He'd made her. Unlike the courier, he wasn't armed. The house was very small, and if she could obtain a weapon inside.... Wait, why would a duchess live in such a dwelling, unless she were in hiding? No, "Duchess" was code, too. For whom? About what?

Letitia risked a test. From behind a tree she called, "How am I to get in?"

"*Are* you to get in at all? That's the first question, you know."

A trap? Maybe. The door still stood open. Using trees as cover and never taking her gaze from the servant, she moved until she could see inside the cottage. A single room, dense with smoke, held a ginger cat and two women: a cook facing the stove and a seated, richly dressed woman rocking a baby. No other visible occupants. On the wall to the left of the door stood a wire croquet set, balls and wickets racked at the bottom and wooden mallets upright in their slots.

Letitia said to the servant, who looked more like a frog every moment, "But what am *I* to do?"

"Anything you like." He looked up at the sky. "I shall sit here, on and off, for days and days."

The mallet was the best weapon Letitia had seen so far. She wanted it.

* * *

Just as Jim wished, the story was speeding up. Letitia said aloud, "How am I to get in?" and then, "But what am *I* to do?" The screen morphed to two footmen in livery, one a fish and one a frog, outside the Duchess's cottage. A moment later Letitia said, "There's too much pepper in that soup!" and another Tenniel drawing appeared: the bad-tempered Duchess rocking her pig-child.

Jones said, "Dr. Ericson, you know who I am. I demand to know who gave you orders to continue this travesty despite my abort."

"I'm sorry, sir," Jim said, "but I can't tell you that."

"You don't have the clearances!" Jones said.

Jim didn't answer. Letitia said, "Mind what you're doing!"

What was *Jim* doing? Who was this "Mr. Jones"? And *a national security issue....*

Amy didn't understand. Not anything.

★ ★ ★

Letitia darted toward the house, ready to take out the frog servant if she had to. He didn't budge. She ran inside and grabbed one of the croquet mallets. The two women presented no problem: flabby, encumbered by long bulky dresses, one grasping a baby and the other a ladle. Both wheezed; smoke and pepper filled the air. Letitia said, "There's too much pepper in that soup!" and backed toward the door, keeping in her peripheral vision the servant outside. He sat immobile, gazing at the sky.

"If everybody minded their own business," the Duchess growled, "the world would go around faster!"

"This *is* my business," Letitia said. She had no idea what she meant, but her words seemed to enrage both women. The Duchess shook the baby so hard that Letitia cried, "Mind what you're doing!" The cook threw a frying pan at Letitia; it just missed her. Letitia grabbed the baby with her free hand, holding it against her like a football, and ran. To leave the child behind would be murder.

The servant never even glanced at her as she raced past.

Eventually the path through the trees widened into a paved road. In the distance gleamed a white building clouded in mist. Letitia stopped running and looked down at the baby. It had become a pig. Startled, she dropped it, and it trotted quietly back toward the forest.

The Duchess's ginger cat strolled up to her and grinned.

★ ★ ★

"This *is* my business," Letitia said from the gurney, and the image on the screen did not change. Those words did not appear in Carroll's book. It was, Amy realized, another declaration solely the patient's. Jim's procedure was succeeding.

But then another twenty-eight minutes passed without a word from the gurney. Both Dr. Wu's medical monitors and Amy's tech screens showed no change. The words "This *is* my business" had not been significant enough to further trigger Letitia's memories. Those must be painful; anguished remembrances always surfaced more slowly.

Amy surprised herself with her sympathy for this particular patient. Was it because Amy, too, had loved *Alice in Wonderland* as a child? Or was it because she knew, at some deep level, the painful implications of fantasy?

She glanced at Jim, whose gaze moved back and forth between Letitia and the last Tenniel drawing on the screen. Back and forth. The drawing did not change.

★ ★ ★

The cat said, "Do you play croquet with the Queen today?"

More code. Letitia searched her memory; this sequence wasn't there. She opted for an open response. "I should like it very much, but I haven't been invited yet."

"You'll see me there," the cat said, and vanished.

TS Division, Letitia abruptly remembered, had a contract with Boston Dynamics for animal-shaped infiltration robots—had it included cats?

But ... what was TS Division? What was Boston Dynamics?

The answers were in that white building far ahead. She set off on the road. When it curved through a small grove of birches, she came upon a long, messy table set for tea. A large rabbit and a man wearing a top hat sat at one end with a little boy between them. The child seemed asleep. Top Hat looked at Letitia and said, "No room! No room!"

On the table beside the rabbit, lying negligently amid cake crumbs and used tea cups, was a Glock 30 9-mm.

She said carefully, "There's *plenty* of room!"

Top Hat said, "Your hair wants cutting."

More code. Words rose, unbidden, to Letitia's lips, startling her. "I think you might do something better with the time than waste it in asking riddles that have no answer." Why had she said that? What did it mean? Then more words as she looked at the other man, who'd become a large rabbit, "Your name is March. Caleb March."

"So it is," the man said.

★ ★ ★

Finally a new drawing on the screen: the mad tea party, one of Tenniel's best. At the long table sat the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, the Dormouse, and a sulky and hungry Alice wanting both information and tea. The image had been triggered when Letitia said, "There's *plenty* of room," but her other utterance was her own. Who was Caleb March? Amy glanced at Jim, but from his face she could tell that he didn't know, either.

Mr. Jones had gone impassive, his former show of temper replaced by something colder and deeper. Amy didn't know why she suddenly felt frightened.

★ ★ ★

"You should say what you mean," Caleb March said.

"I do," Letitia replied. "At least, I mean what I say."

Top Hat said, "Have you guessed the riddle yet?"

"No," Letitia said. "What's the answer?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Top Hat.

"Nor do I," said the little boy; he had a high, squeaky voice.

"I'm in the well," Letitia said, and didn't know what she meant.

"Of course you are," Caleb said. "Well in."

Pointless. They wouldn't, or couldn't, tell her anything. Letitia eyed the Glock, planning her move. When a quarrel broke out about

changing places at the tea table, she took her chance. With one hand she grabbed the gun; with the other she raised the croquet mallet. No time to check if the Glock was loaded.

"Nobody move," Letitia said.

All three tea partiers stared at her in astonishment. "You shouldn't talk," Top Hat said.

Caleb March said, "No. Just act."

The boy spoke again. "The Queen expects you."

Letitia didn't answer. She backed away from the table. No one tried to stop her. Top Hat lifted the child, who was now a mouse, up on the table and seemed to be trying to put him in the teapot. Caleb March looked at her steadily, and for the briefest flicker of time—

He'd reported in to her from Moscow that—

—she knew him, and then the memory was gone.

"Have better luck than mine," he said.

* * *

Now Letitia's words came so fast that Amy could barely follow. "I do. At least, I mean what I say," and "No, what's the answer?" and "I'm in the well." Although the screen image didn't change from the tea party scene, Amy's console verified that all Letitia's words were from *Alice in Wonderland*—almost.

"Dr. Ericson," Amy said, "in the book, Alice says, 'But *they* were in the well,' not '*I'm* in the well.' I don't know if that's significant."

"She's customizing Carroll's words to her own situation," Jim said, his voice neutral. But Jim was never neutral, not about anything. His enthusiasm was one of the things she loved about him.

To fill the suddenly strained silence, Amy said, "She *is* customizing the story, more and more. It won't be long now."

Letitia twitched on the gurney and said levelly, "Nobody move."

* * *

Back on the road, Letitia inspected the Glock. Loaded and operational. She tossed the croquet mallet into a ditch and holstered

the gun—when had her holster appeared? She wasn't sure. Of anything.

As she neared the white building, turrets and battlements appeared from the mist, then a moat and drawbridge. A phrase rose in her mind: *The most secure building in the world*. Letitia snorted. The castle flew flags with heraldic designs: black shamrocks, spear heads, hearts.

Two groups of people moved around on this side of the moat. Cautiously she neared the closer, smaller group, three gardeners cardboard-thin, who were busily painting a white rosebush red. Astonished, Letitia said, "Why are you painting those roses?"

"Why the fact is, you see, Miss, this here is a white rose-tree, but the Queen wanted it turned red."

A second gardener looked directly at Letitia. "She turned the Dormouse, too, you know. And she had the March Hare killed."

But the March Hare was alive ... Letitia had just seen him. Fog filled her brain, just "crept in on little cat's feet" ... whose words were those? Not either of the two people that Letitia was—wait, she was two people? What the fuck?

The ginger cat strolled from behind the rose-bush and stared at her steadily. Before it could speak, the gardeners cried loudly, "The Queen! The Queen!" and threw themselves flat on their faces. The cat vanished.

A procession approached from the castle, soldiers followed by dignitaries and finally the Queen, who raised her hand to stop the parade. "What's your name, child?"

Letitia said, "My name is Alice."

But it wasn't—was it?

"You are late to the game," the Queen said severely, "and you lost your mallet. You will have to use a flamingo. Come on!"

The entire procession wheeled in formation and turned toward the castle. Letitia walked beside the Queen, both last in the procession, which let her keep the soldiers in view. Abruptly they broke formation and ran toward the croquet game. The Queen said

no more about Letitia's having to play, so she watched the game. It was chaos: hedgehogs for balls, flamingos for mallets, soldiers bent double on hands and feet to act as wickets. The Queen rushed around, shouting "Off with his head!" at anyone who missed a wicket.

Then the cat was back, or at least its head was, hanging in the air like words on a teleprompter.

Like a what?

"How are you getting on?" the head said.

"I don't think they play at all fairly. They don't seem to have any rules, or don't pay the rules any attention."

"Neither does our side," the head said quietly, "but you're right, they are worse. Don't lose your head, Letitia. The Queen—"

Letitia. Her name was Letitia. Yes.

The cat's head vanished and the White Rabbit rushed up to her. But wasn't he dead? His blood spraying over her T-shirt ... or had that been the blood of a white mouse? "Mary Ann," the White Rabbit said, "have you seen the Mock Turtle yet? Do hurry! He's halfway through his song!"

"I don't—"

"No, you need to hear this! Hurry, child!"

He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the castle. Letitia allowed it; she had a sudden, overwhelming, and unexplained need to enter that fortress.

★ ★ ★

Quick images on the screen in response to Letitia's words: the Two, Five, and Seven of Hearts painting a rosebush. The Queen of Hearts addressing Alice. The head of the Cheshire Cat hanging in space. And then Alice, the Gryphon, and the Mock Turtle beside a body of water, the two beasts shedding tears. Tenniel had drawn Alice leaning against a rock, much smaller than the two beasts, knees down up protectively against her chest.

★ ★ ★

"The Mock Turtle's song is almost over," the White Rabbit said to Alice. "But at least you made it in time for the most important verse. Now listen and learn!"

A gryphon and a huge turtle stood behind an enormous boulder beside the moat, both sobbing. Letitia again drew the Glock; neither paid the slightest attention to the gun, although the turtle stopped trying to sing through his sobs to say, "You have no idea what a delightful thing a Lobster Quadrille is!"

"No, I don't," Letitia said. Could these two, or perhaps the White Rabbit, be used to get her inside the castle? "What is it?"

The gryphon looked at her from suddenly hard eyes. "I think you already know. Let the turtle finish his song. He knows the words better than I do. Mock Turtle, continue from where you left off."

The turtle sang:

*"You can really have no notion how delightful it will be
When they take us up and throw us, with the lobsters, out to sea!"
But the snail replied "Too far! Too far!" and gave a look askance—
Said he thanked the whiting kindly, but he would not join the dance.
Would not, could not, would not, could not, would not join the dance.
Would not, could not, would not, could not, could not join the dance."*

The White Rabbit said, "No, he wouldn't join. So they killed him."

"Killed whom?" Letitia said.

"Why, Caleb March, of course. You knew that, Letitia! Why are you so slow all the time? By now you should have realized—"

An alarm sounded, loud enough to make the White Rabbit clap his hands ineffectually over his ears; the ears were longer than the hands. The gryphon leapt up and cried, "The trial's beginning! Come on!" It grabbed Letitia's hand and pulled her along the path to the drawbridge. The Mock Turtle stayed behind, still singing his song of mourning.

★ ★ ★

Nearly another hour passed. No procedure had ever taken anywhere near this long. Finally Jim said, "By now she should have come out of the coma and realized who she is."

Jones snapped, "Which only shows that this fucking nonsense doesn't work."

Did it? Amy had never seen Jim this worried. Yes, one time before—when he'd gotten a phone call that his little son had fallen and broken his arm. That day, Jim had let Amy finish the procedure underway on a research subject. She'd been so pleased that Jim had trusted her, although of course their usual physician, not this unknown Dr. Wu, had been standing by.

Dr. Wu raised her gaze from Letitia to Jim, but whatever she saw on Jim's face, no reaction showed on her own. Miguel fiddled with his instruments. Jones looked tense, his silent companion impassive as ever.

On an auxiliary console screen, Amy brought up Lewis Carroll's complete text. It contained two more illustrations of Alice with the gryphon and the mock turtle, a drawing of a lobster, and pages upon pages of dialogue. Alice critiques the gryphon's song, relates all her adventures from the time she fell down the rabbit hole, recites another parody poem, asks the turtle for the Lobster Quadrille song. Alice talks a lot, even saying outright that "it's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then."

Yet Letitia said nothing. And nowhere in Carroll's book did Alice ever say "Killed whom?"

Amy hadn't even known that Jim and his wife had a son.

* * *

The drawbridge to the palace was deserted, the croquet game over. The gryphon and Letitia hurried under the raised portcullis and into the castle courtyard, where she halted so quickly that she nearly yanked the gryphon off its clawed feet. *I know this place. I am Letitia ... Somebody, and I know this place. I knew it before my accident.*

What accident?

The space looked nothing like the courtyard of a castle except in being open to the sky. Square blue-and-white pillars rose high, holding up nothing. Meaningless flags, statues, and bright green potted plants stood against the walls. In the center of the shining, black-and-white floor was a huge inlaid seal with words ringing a starburst. Letitia paused, trying to read the words, but they made no more sense than the flags.

But ... *I know this place.*

"Hurry, hurry!" the gryphon said, dragging her along. "Can't you see that the trial has already begun?"

At the far end of the hall, shallow steps rose to a space crowded with people. In the center, on a raised dais, sat the Queen, seated on a velvet throne and wearing a judge's wig under her crown. She looked grotesque.

"Whose trial is it?" Letitia said.

The gryphon didn't reply. He shoved her onto the end of a bench already jammed with a strange assortment of animals and people. A dodo on the bench ahead turned its head to glare at Letitia. In the defendant's box, looking scared, stood a soldier in dress uniform with red hearts sewn on the sleeve.

The White Rabbit, dressed now as a herald, blew three blasts on a trumpet. He unrolled a parchment scroll and read loudly:

The Queen of Hearts, she made some tarts,

All on a summer day:

The Knave of Hearts, he stole those tarts,

And took them quite away!

"No," Letitia said, bewildering herself. "It wasn't him. And it wasn't tarts."

"Shhh!" the gryphon said as the dodo turned around to glare at her again. "Keep mum!"

The Queen bellowed, "Consider your verdict!"

"Not yet," the Rabbit said. "There's a great deal more to come! Call the first witness!"

Top Hat took the stand. He gave testimony that made no sense, not even mentioning either the defendant or the theft but spending a lot of verbiage on the injustices of Time. The Duchess's cook and the dormouse followed, equally nonsensical. After each witness, the Queen shouted either "Consider your verdict!" or "Off with his head!" Neither command was carried out, although everyone looked uneasy every time she bellowed.

Finally the Queen glared at the White Rabbit and said, "Call the last witness or I'll execute you on the spot!"

The White Rabbit said hastily, "I call Alice!"

Two soldiers seized Letitia and thrust her into the witness box. The Queen scowled at her. "What do you know about this business?"

Letitia said slowly, "I don't know what I know, although I know that I know it."

"That's rubbish!"

It was rubbish.

No, it wasn't.

"Now tell the court what you know about—!"

The White Rabbit blew ear-destroying blasts on his trumpet. The Queen clapped her hands over her ears, knocking her crown askew. The Rabbit bellowed, "May it please the court, here's more evidence in this letter!"

"Off with his head!" the Queen shouted. Then, "But read the letter first!"

It wasn't a letter but another poem, which the Rabbit read so quickly that Letitia could understand none of the garbled words until abruptly he slowed and enunciated with the clarity of a Shakespearean actor:

He sent them word I had not gone

(We know it to be true):

If she should push the matter on,

What would become of you?

The Queen turned pale. She trembled so hard that her crown fell off. In a shaky voice she said, "Stop! Off with the prisoner's head!"

Sentence first—verdict afterwards!”

“No,” Letitia said. “You can’t sentence him without a—”

“Execute the witness, too!”

“—fair trial!”

But that was what the Agency, or someone in it, had done, covertly. Killed Caleb March in Moscow because he had discovered the highly placed mole in the Agency. As the Agency had tried to kill Letitia—it had not been an accident, but a botched hit—before Letitia could push the matter on and implicate the Queen, who had been selling top-secret information to the Russians.

Above the cartoonish velvet robe, the Queen’s face morphed into that of a man: Peter Jurgens, Assistant Director for Counterintelligence, Central Intelligence Agency.

If she should push the matter on, what would become of you?

What would become of Jurgens if Letitia, CIA agent, had been able to transmit her intel before the assassination attempt on her life? Arrest for treason.

Letitia drew the Glock and aimed at the Queen. Everyone in the courtyard rose up in a cloud to attack her. Letitia fired, shouting, “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!”

And woke up.

★ ★ ★

The patient’s eyes flew open, and then before Amy could even register the Tenniel drawing on the screen, everything happened at once.

“You’re the mole,” Letitia said to Jones while she struggled to sit up on the gurney. Even as Amy thought inanely *But Mole is in Wind in the Willows, not Alice*, Jones’s silent companion drew a gun and fired at the gurney. Miguel, seated between the shooter and the patient, screamed and fell off his stool. Jones fired again, but he wasn’t quick enough: with one hand Dr. Wu had already thrown Letitia off the gurney, tearing the lead wires from Letitia’s scalp and the electrodes from her body, as a gun seemed to leap into Wu’s

other hand—*a doctor? armed?*—and she shot at the gunman, who also fired. Dr. Wu collapsed behind the gurney. The gunman's chest blossomed into red and he fell backward. Amy couldn't move, couldn't think. More shots; one hit her console and it went dead in a spray of sparks. Jones, staggering sideways, turned to aim at Amy's side of the gurney.

To aim at Jim—

—who stood frozen, as if he could not believe what was happening, as if this were all part of Alice's dream.

But it was real, and Amy could reach Jim, could push him down to the floor, could reach him before Mole's wobbling gun he must be hit too he was going to fire at Jim but Amy could push him could save Jim's life—

She didn't. Her muscles made the decision without thought, without decision. She dropped behind her console for protection. Flat on the floor, she could see behind the gurney, where Dr. Wu lay motionless and bloody across Letitia, whose scalp bled from the torn-out wires.

Letitia held Dr. Wu's gun. She shoved Dr. Wu's body aside and rose to her knees—Amy could see the effort on her face, she'd been in a coma for how long Amy couldn't remember she couldn't think Jones was still on his feet aiming at Jim and Letitia had—

Letitia fired and Jones went down, falling so slowly, as slowly as Alice going down the rabbit hole.

Then silence.

★ ★ ★

The silence did not last. There were sirens, police, grim men and women flashing badges, forensic people examining and photographing the dead, and questions for Amy and Jim and Letitia, the conscious survivors. Miguel was dead. So were Jones and his gunman. Dr. Wu, a real physician but also a CIA agent, was taken away in an ambulance. Letitia, who turned out to be another agent,

refused to go to the hospital and sat answering questions, her head bandaged by EMTs. It was all bewildering.

Many voices, many questions, and yet nobody asked Amy the question she asked herself—why had she not tried to save Jim, not risked her own life to shove him to safety? She'd thought she loved Jim better than life itself, but she didn't. The knowledge settled onto her like a weighted blanket—the blanket she would never share with Jim. His wife was here now, sitting close to him holding his hand, every line of her body displaying her concern and devotion. Amy couldn't hear their words to each other, but she could read Jim's face as he reassured his wife.

There are many kinds of fantasy.

A cop stepped up to her. "Are you all right, miss?"

"Yes." *No.* She managed a polite smile and turned away.

She would have to find another job. Jim would give her a good recommendation. It would be too painful to stay here, to see Jim every day, to be brought face-to-face with her own slain delusions. Amy could not, would not, could not join that dance again.

Across the room, she heard someone say to Letitia, "*Alice in Wonderland?* Really?"

"Really," Letitia said, her face drawn with exhaustion and pain. "And it wasn't any weirder than—" she waved hand around the room—"than all this. But, shit, the trip to Wonderland worked."

"And it all seemed real?"

"Oh, yeah. While I was there, it was real as life." After a moment she repeated, her voice full of complexities Amy heard but did not understand, "Real as life. But you had to be there to feel the ... you had to be there.

"It was such a long sleep, and such a curious dream."



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**BEFORE
THE
FOREST**

KELL WOODS

Before the Forest

KELL WOODS

illustration by

MATT ROTA

REACTOR 

Junia remembered the beginning of the war without end. A comet had appeared in the skies above the Holy Roman Empire, a blaze of flame burning a path across the heavens for a month. By the time it had disappeared, Junia's mother and father had succumbed to the plague and she had left their small village on the Rhine to live in Breisach with Uncle Johannes and Cord. Panic at the comet's appearance, its meaning, ran high. The priests believed the comet foretold of evils to come. That God had sent it as a warning to the people to mend their ungodly ways: pride, swearing, fornication. Disobedience, greed and its lover gluttony. Witchcraft. They warned that God would punish them all if they did not repent.

Woe the great sinfulness.

Ten years old and grieving, Junia paid little heed to the sermons she attended with Uncle Johannes in St. Stephan's. Wasn't she being punished already? Hadn't God taken not one, but *both* her parents? As the years passed and the war that had sparked in the comet's wake blazed across the land, she came to realize that she had been wrong. Her punishment, *all* their punishments, had not even begun.

★ ★ ★

Cord had cared for her at first. She was sure of it. Beating away the other children when they were cruel. *Orphan. Waif.* Sliding the best piece of ham to her under the supper table in a greasy fist. Wicked grin; the best of him. Yet over the years her cousin had twisted, somehow. His body was strong and sturdy, but inside he was as gnarled and crooked as the old juniper tree in the courtyard, the tavern's namesake. Hard to say when it started. Was it when Junia's

body began to change? Buds blooming spring-sweet on her chest, apple-round hips? She supposed she had been beautiful, then. Certainly Uncle Johannes had kept a careful eye on her when she helped him in the tavern, clearing the empty plates and wiping the tables of scraps and spills, the occasional splash of vomit. Noting the way his customers watched her, the heavy look in their eyes. Sharp man, Uncle Johannes. Ran a tight business. Clean tables, good food. None of the fighting and dancing and groping in shadowy corners you'd find in some of the rougher establishments in the Fischerhalde. Junia had never once seen him share a glass of cherry-water or wine with his customers. *The kitchen would be better for you, Junia*, he had said, those little creases of worry showing between his peppery brows. *Safer for you there, mein Liebster*.

So she had gone to the kitchen, helped the cook prepare the dough for Knöpfle, squeezing its pale softness through the old noodle press, tossing it into the pot to boil. She had sliced the ham and cheeses, learned to bake butterbrezel and gingerbread. Turned out she was good at it, had a knack for throwing flour and salt and water in a bowl and lifting something wondrous out in its place. She had been happy, for a time. Until, when she was sixteen, Uncle Johannes died, leaving the Juniper Tree, and Junia, in Cord's hands.

Her cousin was not like his father. None of that calm, that wizened strength. Uncle Johannes maintained order with a glance, or a quiet word. Cord was all shoulders and fists, a storm rolling in from the Schwarzwald, blustering over the Rhine.

Junia continued to work alongside the cook in the kitchen. Without Uncle Johannes's presence, the customers grew bold, contriving ways to find her there. They would lean in the doorway, watching her work, or smiling when she stole scraps for the little tavern cat that was supposed to be catching mice, but was always at Junia's heels. Lazy, speculative smiles. What they wouldn't do, those smiles said, to get Junia into a shadowy corner. Catch her like a mouse. There were kind smiles, too, sometimes. Customers who talked instead of stared, who were interested in the thoughts and

feelings beneath Junia's bodice and skirts. Hardly mattered. Cord had beaten away any man who had come sniffing. *Filthy fucking foxes on the rut. I won't let them touch you, Junia*, he promised. *Won't let anyone hurt my sweet cousin. After all, there's just the two of us now.*

Just the two of us now.

She thought of that, over and over, when he crept down the hallway that night and into her bed, covering her mouth with his hand. When he slid between her legs.

Filthy fucking foxes.

* * *

Things got worse when the first of the little ones came along. Junia knew Cord had kindled one in her when her monthly bleeding stopped, when she was so wretched and sick in the winter mornings that she'd hurry from her room above the tavern—*quiet now, don't wake Cord*—and, feet freezing-bare, throw her guts up in the snow.

Only apples soothed her roiling belly. One morning, when the heaving and sweating and clinging to the juniper tree was done and the bile still steamed at her feet, she peeled one. *Too hasty*. The knife sliced into her hand. Blood spattered the snow. One drop, two drops, three.

Bad sign, that blood. No good would come of it.

Marriage, Cord had announced when Junia could no longer hide her swelling belly. *It is the best, the only option.*

Junia hesitated. By now she had learned that there were two Cords. There was the Cord she had known her whole life—greasy-ham grin and kindness—and the *other* Cord. This other version was not her cousin. It was as though the Devil himself, the Evil One, took hold of his body. It happened in the deeps of the night, usually, or when he'd drunk too much. At other times, too, when Junia least expected it.

Hard to say which one of the two regarded her now. She opened her mouth, preparing to deliver the words she had rehearsed again

and again in her mind —her mother had family in Freiburg, perhaps she might go to them instead of burdening Cord while he was still adjusting to managing the tavern—but had scarce drawn breath before he was throwing on his coat and striding out into the noisy bustle of the Fischerhalde, crowded with boats and nets and river, and up the steep street to St. Stephan's.

Banns were called. Congratulations given. Ring on her finger.
Just the two of us now.

★ ★ ★

The first of the babies, a boy, came at summer's end the year Junia turned seventeen. Mewling and screeching, red-faced and miserable. Cord, intent on running the Juniper Tree in a manner as different to his father's as possible, had taken to drinking till all hours with his patrons, sleeping till midday. *Keep him quiet, Junia. Clout needs changing, Junia. Latch it to your tit, Junia.* And she did. She kept and changed and latched, and latched and changed and kept, until there was no telling where Junia began and the tiny, tender-sweet limbs ended. Perhaps it would have been easier had she loved the boy. As it was, he was just another of her many chores, the only difference being that, unlike a newly scrubbed floor or freshly made bed, there was never an end to the tending of him. Occasionally Cord took the baby from her and strutted him about the tavern, boasting. *Happiest man in Breisach*, he said. *Apple of my eye. Hear, hear*, the patrons cried. Roar and clink, splash and splatter. More for Junia to clean later, she supposed as she bent before the enormous stone oven, scrubbing out its belly. The warmth, the dark, was oddly inviting. What if she were to crawl inside and close the door behind her? Would Cord ever find her? Would the baby cry? Or would she simply sleep and sleep forevermore, cradled in a bed of soft, warm ash?

★ ★ ★

Sometimes, in the quiet of the mornings or before the evening rush, Junia strapped the baby to her chest and climbed the winding streets to the old monastery. The noise of Breisach—the rumble of carts and horses, the flurry of the Marktplatz and the fortress—faded as she entered the gates. She slipped off her shoes and walked barefoot across the neat lawns, dotted with statues and fountains, the occasional monk or two, until the gardens opened before her, cool and green. All were carefully ordered: herbs for the kitchen—rosemary, sage and fennel. Plants of healing—lavender, self-heal and restharrow. One garden existed for its beauty alone—rose, foxglove and larkspur—while another, for reasons of science and learning, bloomed with witches' weeds: wolfsbane, hemlock and nightshade. An overgrown cloister led to an orchard, wild and thick as a forest. Life abounded there, but also death. Headstones were scattered throughout, the monks beneath them laying in eternal rest as they nourished the apple and cherry trees growing above.

A stone bench sat at the orchard's southeastern edge. Sitting there, so high and quiet, Junia could see the outer defenses far below, bristling with artillery. Breisach was a fortress city guarding the river Rhine, an artery in the mass of veins and fleshy undulations that made up the Empire. Separating France and Württemberg, the river was the primary route into the Spanish Netherlands, the Habsburg emperor's ally. Junia's gaze followed the line of water as it snaked south toward Freiburg. To the west, it branched into a vast and glittering marsh which, pocked with patches of forest and a village or two, rolled toward the hill they called the Emperor's Seat. And, beyond them all, the dark, beckoning curves of the Schwarzwald.

Sitting there, watching the birds as they flew from tower to spire, from wall to sky, Junia's shoulders ached with longing. *Let me fly, too.* She prayed for a means to escape Breisach, its walls and its loneliness. Or, if that could not be, she prayed for a life without Cord in it. More and more the running of the tavern was falling into Junia's hands. She was the one who met with the suppliers now,

who haggled over the prices of wine and pork, who promised payment while Cord slept his days away. If not for her, the tavern would have been filthy, rotting beneath a crust of grime and sticky, nameless fluids. If not for her, the suppliers, demanding payment, would have ceased to sell their produce to them at all. Cord was no help, no comfort. He was a sweaty presence in the dark when she longed for sleep. Hot breath at her ear, a rough hand pushing her face into the blankets. She prayed for the Evil One, who had stolen her cousin-husband's body, and, in a way, her own, to leave. And if that was not possible, she prayed for Cord to lose himself in drink and stumble over the edge of the Fischerhalde into the Rhine. *Long fucking way down.* She prayed for rest and for freedom, too. But she didn't get any, and she didn't get any.

★ ★ ★

"You bake well, Junia," Cord tells her one day. "Might be you should make more than just bread and Knöpfle. I'm going to let the cook go—we can no longer afford her. Someone will need to make the dinners, bake the sweets. Could be you?"

"Haven't I enough to do already?"

Stupid thing to say. The Evil One is wearing Cord's skin more and more these days. As though proving her right, his meaty hand flicks toward her with surprising speed, cracking her nose. Pain explodes. Three drops of blood, dark against the paleness of the linen, spatter her apron.

She stares at them, removed from the pain somehow, seized by a terrible knowing.

Another babe on the way.

Sure enough, another child is born to Junia and the Evil One. A girl this time, not that it matters. *Can't a man get some sleep, Junia? Where's my fucking dinner, Junia? Clouts need washing again, Junia.* The Evil One fills her husband's form more and more. He grows angry over the slightest of things, pushing Junia from one corner of the kitchen to the other. Slapping her here, cuffing her there. The

presence of the two children does little to ease Junia's misery. She knows she should love them, has watched other young mothers with their babes—the kisses, the smiles, the looks of unbridled devotion—and wills her heart to feel the same. It remains steadfastly indifferent.

And Cord, it turns out, is doing more than just drinking with his customers. Turns out he owes coin, and plenty of it, not only to his suppliers, but his patrons, too. He has rolled so many bones he can hardly keep track of what he owes. Turns out Junia will be the one to help pay it all back.

Make the dinners, bake the sweets.

★ ★ ★

The whispers arrive first. They drift downriver, eddy among Breisach's fishing boats, then ripple up its steeply cobbled streets. They grow louder, inking themselves on broadsheets, flying, spittle-drenched, from the mouths of priests during their sermons: the Protestant general Bernard of Saxe-Weimar has sold his soul to the French. Twelve thousand foot soldiers and six thousand cavalymen, plus artillery, are at his disposal. He means to conquer the Rhineland, carve a new territory for himself.

Fear, so strong you can smell it in the streets. If the Rhineland was a cellar, Breisach would be its finest, silkiest wine.

Saxe-Weimar takes the forest towns first. Waldshut, Säckinggen and Laufenburg. Rheinfelden is besieged and lost in a crushing Imperial defeat. Then Rötteln and Freiburg fall.

The people of Breisach feel the moment the gaze of the Protestant general settles hungrily upon them.

"He has something to prove," Cord says at the supper table, "after what happened at Nördlingen. Fucking disaster. Twelve thousand men dead on the field. His own horse shot out from under him. It was only luck and those enormous balls of his that allowed him to escape at all. If he wants Breisach, he will do everything in

his power to make it his. His reputation—or what’s left of it—depends upon it.”

“But Breisach is the key to the Empire,” Junia’s son says. He is thirteen now, tall and broad-shouldered like Cord. Apple of his father’s eye. “The emperor cannot let it fall.”

“He can’t,” Cord agrees, sopping up the sauce from his spätzle with a heel of bread. “Breisach lost, everything lost.”

Unease settles over Junia, as if a bad storm were coming. Life is hard enough without soldiers laying siege to the city, too. Isn’t she already salvaging the wreck Cord is making of the tavern? Cooking for its—increasingly disreputable—customers? Caring for the children, who, though growing rapidly—the girl is nine years old—still seem to claw at her all day with their wants and hungers and needs? Cord does the same at night, and she suspects that yet another babe is stubbornly—stupidly—clinging to the inside of her womb. She ladles more food onto Cord’s emptying plate and sits down wearily. *Breisach lost, everything lost.* That’s what they say at the emperor’s court in faraway Vienna. As if war hasn’t raged for twenty years, butchering cities like Breisach. Fire and famine, plague and ruin. They are fools, those Habsburg nobles in their finery. Everything was lost long ago.

Something warm and soft brushes against Junia’s ankle. The little cat is as devoted to her as ever. At night it sleeps beside her, its face close to hers. It is a tiny, purring comfort in the dark, a small piece of something for Junia alone.

“Breisach is impregnable,” Cord goes on. “She has never yielded her virginity. And she never shall.”

Junia’s son snickers at his father’s words—*virginity*—and his sister blushes. If the boy is a mirror image of Cord, then the girl is a reflection of Junia. She has the same blue eyes, the same fair hair. The same quiet, hopeless sorrow.

The cat pushes its head against Junia’s skirts. She reaches down, strokes its fur absently. Breisach, with its command of the Rhine, its impressive fortifications and precious bridges, had ever lured

enemies; it would not be the first time a Protestant general had set his sights on the city. The Swedes had tried to take it just five years before, failing when the Emperor's Spanish allies came to relieve it after a siege that lasted three months. The crows had pecked at Swedish corpses for weeks after, dipping and wheeling over the marsh. Junia had watched them from the monastery orchard, envying them their dark-winged freedom.

"Let Saxe-Wiemer come," Cord slurps around a mouthful of creamy noodles. "The Empire will not allow Breisach to fall. He will fail just as the Swedish did. I, for one, will enjoy watching it from our walls."

Even so, he spends the last of their coin—as well as borrowing more—to buy up black-salted hams and bags of flour, as many as can be had. "The rich shall suffer along with the poor before this is over," he tells Junia. "Let us have something to offer them in exchange for their beautiful tapestries, their silver plate and precious stones. We shall make our fortune if we play our cards right."

Junia can barely contain her disgust. Last time the siege, and the hunger that came with it, had been hardest on Breisach's poor. She had helped at the monastery when she could, picking fruit, plucking vegetables from the gardens, handing out bags of rationed flour to the poor who came, desperate and frightened, to the gates.

"There is power, and magic, in growing things," one of the oldest monks had told her kindly. "The land protects those who care for it. Remember that, my child."

She helps Cord move the supplies into the cellar alongside the casks of cherry-water and wine, schnapps and beer. Around them, the city stirs into readiness, its commander, Baron von Reinach, looking to its provisions, its walls and fortifications. Its precious well, the Radbrunnen, dug deep into the mountain below, will ensure the people have access to water. There is a garrison of three thousand soldiers and a hundred and fifty-two cannon at the Eckartsburg fortress, tasked with protecting the city.

It will hold.

★ ★ ★

Saxe-Weimar and his army arrive in early June. The citizens of Breisach hear the drums first—the heartbeat of an approaching beast. Junia is in the monastery orchard when the warning bells at the Eckartsburg burst into frantic life. She rises from the bench and runs to the walls. Far below, an enormous serpent is winding its slow curves—formed of men and horses, banners and wagons, artillery and oxen—out of the south. The morning sun glints on muskets and cannon, spurs, harness and pikes. *Hold the fortress by all means possible* was the order from Vienna. Hard to imagine obeying it as more and more soldiers come, endless and unrelenting: twelve thousand foot, six thousand cavalry. By evenfall, it is as though a city of canvas has surrounded Breisach, sprawling across the countryside, dotted with cookfires.

“Those Protestant bastards will not last,” Cord says confidently to his customers. “They might have coin in their purses now, but how will that help them in a week? A month? There will be nothing for them to buy, nowhere for them to spend it. They are camped in the mud like pigs. Time will work against them, along with its merry friends Hunger, Disease and Desertion. And if *they* do not end them, the emperor’s armies surely will!”

“They will!” Junia hears the customers slur over their tankards of beer and pots of cherry-water. “The emperor will not let Breisach fall!”

“We have provisions—”

“We have the Radbrunnen—”

“We have God on our side!”

But weeks pass, then two months. The Protestant army hauls in artillery, fortifying the surrounding countryside, digging a jagged line of communication between the French and Weimaranian camps. Hunger, Disease and Desertion are yet to make an appearance.

“We must wait,” Cord insists to his dwindling customers. Junia avoids the tavern rooms as much as possible now. The loyal patrons who enjoyed Uncle Johannes’s good food and wine, the pleasant

surroundings, are long gone. The Juniper Tree is no better than the lowliest pothouse. There is fighting and dancing every night. Dice, and dark dealings. She has learned not to glance into shadowy corners. "The emperor will send aid."

★ ★ ★

By August the cellar, like the rest of Breisach, is all but empty. The meats and cheeses are long gone, the flour dwindling. Cord has made a pretty penny raising prices, offering what few can now afford, but even he is relieved when an Imperial army of Bavarian mercenaries arrives and attempts to drive out the Protestant soldiers. They are beaten soundly back, the supplies and powder meant for the besieged city lost.

"They'll be back," Cord proclaims, helping himself to the last of the blutwurst Junia has scrounged from the cellar for supper. "The Empire cannot afford to let the city fall."

Junia tries not to see the fear in her daughter's eyes. "Eat, child," she snaps, getting to her feet. "And help me with the dishes. Do you think we've time enough to sit about crying and worrying?" The little girl wipes away her tears, collecting her father and brother's plates and bringing them obediently to the tub for Junia to wash. Junia does not miss the appraising look in her son's eyes as he watches his sister. It reminds her of the way Cord once watched her. Bile rises in her throat.

Breisach holds its breath, watching the horizon, hoping that the Imperial army will return and try again to lift the siege, but the Bavarians do not come back.

Saxe-Weimar, meanwhile, orders no batteries, no trenches to be opened. He merely digs in and holds fast.

"What is he waiting for?" Junia whispers as she surveys the Protestant army from the orchard. Beside her, the old monk, her only friend besides her little cat, takes in the ruined countryside, his rheumy eyes filled with unbearable sadness.

"It is hunger that undoes a besieged city in the end," he says quietly. "He's waiting for us to starve."

* * *

The summer drags on, the fear that has settled over Breisach ripening like wheat beneath the brutal sun, shimmering over the marshes and the Rhine. A silent, invisible enemy has wrapped its talons around the city.

Hunger.

The bloody skirmishes that punctuated the early weeks of the siege—daring sorties by the garrison to fight the enemy and gather supplies—happen less and less frequently now. There is no food coming in, and nothing to be done.

"We should close the tavern," Junia tells Cord. "Save whatever food we have for ourselves. Who knows how long this will last? We must think of the children, Cord."

"No," Cord says. "We must find more food, that's all."

"There is none to be had!" she hisses. "I've been to the market every day—"

"Then we must look harder."

Junia tries not to listen as Cord butchers the old cart horse in its stable. The gentle beast has served him and his father loyally, hauling casks of schnapps and sacks of flour to the Juniper Tree for more years than Junia can tell. When it is done and the carcass is hanging, enormous and bloody, in the cellar, he carries a haunch into the kitchen and hefts it onto the workbench. Junia, horror and sorrow warring in her heart, makes no move to touch it. The Evil One tilts his head toward the tavern rooms, a silent command to begin cooking for his customers. Junia, wiping away tears, obeys.

Horse, she soon discovers, is better boiled than roasted.

* * *

Summer gives way to autumn, and still Breisach suffers inside its walls. There is not a horse, donkey or mule to be seen alive, now.

The hideous sounds of their slaughter have at last fallen silent.

"We should have closed the Tree, saved the horse meat for ourselves," Junia says to Cord when he comes home empty-handed from the market. It is not safe for Junia to go there now. Not a week ago, a wealthy woman's kitchen maid was beaten, her meager purchases stolen. "We have nothing." Cord had made a staggering profit on the meals Junia had cooked with the horsemeat, but for what gain, in the end?

"Not nothing," Cord says. He draws something from behind his back. Three scrawny cats, their soft bodies hanging limp from his fist.

Junia stares at the cats, then at her husband. The Evil One looks back.

"Where is *your* cat, Junia?" he asks.

The cat, Junia well knows, is sleeping upstairs, a puddle of shadows on her side of the bed. A creature of habit, it is where it is always is at this time of day. Cord knows this as well as she.

"Don't, Cord," she says. She loves that little animal. Loves its purring warmth, its beautiful green eyes. "Please, don't."

The Evil One says nothing.

She wonders if she can get to it before him. Eyes the narrow stair, Cord's broad shoulders, the evil lurking beneath his skin.

He moves. She runs at him, catching at his arm, pulling him away from the stairs. He throws her off. Backhands her, sends her crashing into the table, scattering chairs as she hits the floor. Searing pain, a *wrongness*, deep in her belly. She stays down.

By the time she is on her feet again, it is done.

Cord barely glances at the blood on her skirts, the whiteness of her face, as he slaps four little bodies onto the workbench.

"We'll open soon," he says. "You'd best get started."

She wonders if he will hit her again. Glances at the knife on the board. Cord, however, walks heavily from the kitchen. A moment later, she hears the thud of an empty tankard on damp wood. The gurgling of liquid filling it.

As Junia cuts and slices, breathing through the pain shattering her heart and womb, something else cracks inside her. She barely feels it. Barely feels it, as she bundles what remains of the tiny thing she has lost and buries it beneath the juniper tree.

It never had a chance.

★ ★ ★

Hunger, as the proverb says, is a fine cook. By the end of October there have been several more attempts by Imperial forces to liberate the city. All have failed. In the final assault, the Protestant general himself rode out beside his men. An eagle hovered in the air above him, an omen of impending victory, a sign of witchcraft, or both, depending on which whisper in the Marktplatz you chose to believe.

“Bernard of Saxe-Weimar will triumph, mark my words.”

“When all of this is over, he will be left with nothing but bones....”

“Did you see that eagle? Only a witch could compel a wild creature to fly into battle like that.”

Junia cares little for the fate of the Protestant general. Witchcraft or no, she merely envies that eagle its beautiful, gold-brown wings.

Breisach is now empty of cats and dogs. Junia has cooked her fair share for the tavern’s patrons—or those with enough coin, at least—roasting the animals whole with herbs and spices. Cord tells her approvingly that the thighs of the dogs she prepares are as tender as saddles of hare.

She cannot believe that the tavern remains open, that Cord is still beguiling wealthy customers with promises of tender meat and fine sauces. She waits for the city officials to appear on their doorstep, outraged and ordering them to close, but it does not happen. One quick look at the streets of Breisach and it is easy to see why. The city officials have more than enough—and, at the same time, never enough—on their plates.

Every garden, every tree and every plant in the city has been stripped bare. Even the weeds thrusting their fragile heads between the cobbles or beside doorways are gone. When Junia goes to the

monastery, she finds its gardens have been looted. Every apple, every leaf taken. She finds the body of the old monk nearby. *There is power, and magic, in growing things*, he had once told her. *The land protects those who care for it*. She sees little power and protection here. The powerful ones have been and gone. They have taken what they wanted and protected no one but themselves.

"You old fool," she murmurs, when she has buried him in the orchard. It feels more like a graveyard now, the monuments and death lanterns stark between the leafless trees. Shadows and stone, where once there had been something green and good.

At last Cord is forced to close the tavern doors. Even the rich cannot buy a decent meal in Breisach now; there is simply no food to be had. The people are eating animal hides, boiling, scouring and scraping each piece before roasting or grilling it like tripe. Animal skins have taken the place of vegetables and cuts of meat in the Marktplatz. A crone sells a bitter-tasting draught she swears will ward off hunger and heartache; she is carted off to the fortress prison for her troubles. Books and manuscripts are also being sold for eating, along with drum skins, harnesses and belts. All of this, of course, costs money. Cord, however, refuses to buy a thing. "We shall not squander our hard-won savings now," he declares. "Not when the Emperor will send an army to lift the siege at any moment."

So Junia boils straw and candle fat, grinds bones and nutshells to make limp, tasteless bread. Hunger kneads its bony fingers into her relentlessly, poking at her empty belly, gnawing at her thoughts. Dark whispers unravel in the narrow streets: people, the whispers say, have been carving and cooking the flesh of their newly dead relatives before they prepare them for burial. Children, mostly; the city's young are suffering the most. The poorest of them have taken to hunting rats and mice in the streets. Junia has seen them clustered in ragged groups, cooking the animals over coals, skin and all, before wolfing them down. Fur, tail, foot—all provide nourishment. Though disgusted, Junia cannot blame them. However,

when she sees her own daughter bending greedily over one of the tiny creatures, something in her tattered soul stirs. She rips the mouse away and throws it back onto the coals.

"But Mama," the girl cries. "I'm so hungry!"

"We do not eat vermin," Junia snaps, dragging the child back to the tavern. She looks staunchly ahead as she goes, hiding her tears and her rage.

All for a fucking river.

She leaves the girl in the kitchen and stumbles down the cellar stairs. Surely there is something left? A wrinkled apple or two? A stray jar of sauerkraut rolled beneath the lowest shelf? There is movement in the darkness behind her, a gasp, scuffling. Junia peers into the shadows. Her son, all fourteen years of him, is standing over a kneeling girl. His hand knotted in her hair, her face pressed to his—

"What in God's name is happening here?" Junia demands.

"Calm yourself, Mother," he says carelessly. He pushes the girl away, ties his breeches. "I promised her some food, that's all. She's more than happy to earn it."

Junia pulls the girl to her feet. She is pale, her eyes large in her too-thin face.

"Go," she tells her. "I will find something for you to eat. There's no need—for this."

"What the fuck are you doing?" her son demands as the girl scurries upstairs. "She—"

"This is my house," Junia says, her voice death-quiet. "And you will not treat people so while you are within its walls."

"It's not your house," he says. "It's father's."

"And you think *he* will condone what you have done?"

The boy smirks.

Apple of his father's eye.

He shoves past her, climbs the stairs. He is almost at the top when Junia reaches him. She wants only to make him stop, to make him see her. To take back some of the power she has given away

and given away. Hunger, however, makes her clumsy. She trips on the stairs, sprawls. Her hands fly out, knocking at his ankles. He falls back, that height, those shoulders of his working against him. Down he goes, sudden and hard, his body jouncing on the stone steps, his head cracking on the flagged floor.

He doesn't move again.

Alone in the darkness Junia thinks of the juniper tree. How it looked when it was thick with berries. The way the children used to help her pick them when they were very small. They were sweet creatures, then, the boy and the girl. When Junia baked they helped, licking the batter from spoons, spreading the workbench with flour. Sometimes, when her heart was soft enough, Junia bought ginger and cinnamon, honey and cloves. She did not love her children, it was true—she loved no one, couldn't—but she took a secret, treacherous delight in baking for them, in seeing them peer blissfully over the trays, their button noses breathing the scent of warm gingerbread. Plump little hands, soft stubby fingers. If only the boy had stayed that way. If only Cord, and hunger, and the great sinfulness had not twisted him.

If only Junia's tears, her rage, were content to remain in the darkness.

★ ★ ★

That evening, when Cord rises from his slumber and comes down for his supper, he pauses on the stairs, sniffing.

"Odd's bod, Junia," he says. "What is that wonderful smell?"

"It is blood soup," Junia tells him.

"Blood soup?" He sits heavily at the table. "But where did you get the meat? The blood?"

Junia says nothing, only fills his plate with the rich, dark stew.

"Delicious," Cord says, tasting his first mouthful. "And perfectly seasoned, too."

Junia smiles. She thought of her son's round baby face, his sweet toothless smile as she cooked the stew, and her tears fell into the

pot. There was no need for salt.

"Give me some more," Cord says.

Junia obeys. It seems the more Cord eats, the more he wants. She and her daughter, the latter's face deathly pale and wet with tears, watch in silence as he eats and eats and eats, throwing the bones under the table. They ate their fill long before Cord rises, along with the girl from the cellar, who wiped her mouth with her sleeve, smearing the red-dark sauce across her lips, and thanked Junia before slipping out into the dusk.

"I must stop," he says at last, "else there will be none left for my son." He sucks on a bone. Part of a finger, Junia thinks distantly. "Where is he?"

She stares at him. All her livelong days, it's been give and work, work and give. *Scrub the floors, Junia. Bake more bread, Junia. Latch on to my cock, Junia.*

She will give no more.

"He is dead," she says. "And should you wish to remember him, you may look down your own throat."

Cord's face goes white. His daughter, sensing danger, hurries upstairs.

"But do not grieve, husband," Junia continues blithely. "If this blood stew of mine is as delicious as you say, then perhaps we should open our doors to our customers tonight. We shall make a goodly profit."

Cord is coming for her, eyes black with rage. He grabs Junia by the hair, throws her onto the stove. She catches herself before she burns her palms or knocks over the simmering pot of stew. He will kill her this time. She is sure of it. Part of her greets it warmly—an end to hunger and fear, to this appalling siege. Then she thinks of the girl upstairs. What will become of her if Junia leaves her here alone? Cord grabs for her, misses as Junia slides away.

"Fucking witch!"

Before she can move again he seizes the pot and hurls its contents in her face. Pain, blinding pain. Darkness and the burning

crimson of her son's blood.

Junia screams, clutches at her eyes.

Cord is almost upon her. She can hear his ragged breath, feel his pain and rage.

And yet Junia has rage enough of her own. Pain, too. She feels them coil within her, a serpent straining against her bones, her skin, eager for release. She lashes out, glimpses, despite her blurring, burning eyes, something nameless and dark leaching from her fingertips. It strikes Cord in the throat so hard that he flies backward, smashing into the wall. Crockery falls from the shelves above him, splintering upon his shoulders, his head, his thighs. A garner of flour crashes beside him, dusting the air with winter.

Power and protection, indeed.

Cord is gaping at her. "What in God's name was that?"

The shock on his face, the drivel of bloody snot clumping from his nose, the fear in his eyes drive Junia's pain away.

"That," she says, "was a fucking delight."

She reaches for the pot and scoops out what's left with one hand. Licks at the thick, sour liquid, chews the tender meat with relish.

It seems the Evil One has found a home inside her, too.

★ ★ ★

By November, the bodies of the city's living have become the graves of the dead.

When a captured Protestant soldier dies in the fortress, the prisoners in the adjoining cells tear holes in the walls—and then his body. Corpses have been stolen from the burying grounds so often that guards have been stationed there at night. Junia has glimpsed them, their shadows wavering beneath the death lanterns as they keep watch.

Children are going missing, too, the tales told in grim whispers on the winding, wintery streets. Soldiers promised a baker's son a piece

of bread if he would go with them to the barracks. Once they had him there, they butchered him.

She warns her daughter of the danger as she ladles her a bowl of fresh blood soup.

"Where is Papa?" the girl asks.

"Eat your soup," Junia says. She ignores the salty tears running down her daughter's cheeks and takes a mouthful, biting back a groan as the rich flavor melts in her mouth. Cord was a good father, a good husband, after all.

The girl's belly grumbles. She wipes away her tears and takes a tentative mouthful, then another, the spoon hastening as disgust fades and the will to survive takes its place.

Junia knows the feeling well.

Cord keeps them alive as winter arrives in earnest. More children disappear—seven from the Fischerhalde alone. Junia keeps a watchful eye on the girl, forbids her to step foot near the fortress, the barracks.

It makes no difference. The girl vanishes one snowy morning in early December. Junia searches the city, barely feeling the cold. Every closed shutter, every smoking chimney, taunts her. She staggers to a stop near St. Stephan's. Glimpses herself in a grimy window. She is thirty years old, yet she looks like a crone: hollow cheeks scarred by fire and blood, damaged eyes weeping, golden hair faded to grey.

That night the juniper tree loses its leaves and berries, its branches stark against the winter sky. By morning it is nothing more than a gnarled memory.

Junia no longer watches the armies from the monastery walls. She calls her little cat back to her with pain, slicing at her skin and letting the blood fall at the foot of the juniper tree. Waits in the moonlight as it scrabbles its way up through root and earth and snow. Bones push through its tattered fur. Grave-dirt stains its breath. Yet it curls beside Junia at night and follows her everywhere by day: along the Fischerhalde, or through the empty Marktplatz.

People stop and stare as Junia and the not-dead cat pass. They whisper of witchery and crook their fingers in the sign against evil.

Junia pays them no heed. Hunger, however, is harder to ignore. Luckily, there are still children in the Fischerhalde. She visits the burying ground with her little cat, draws the shadows around them both as she digs for bones. Grinds them into powder and bakes—with the last scatterings of ginger and cinnamon, the newly tattered magic rising within her—something treacherous and secret.

Plump little hands, soft stubby fingers.

No salt needed.

Nothing sweeter.

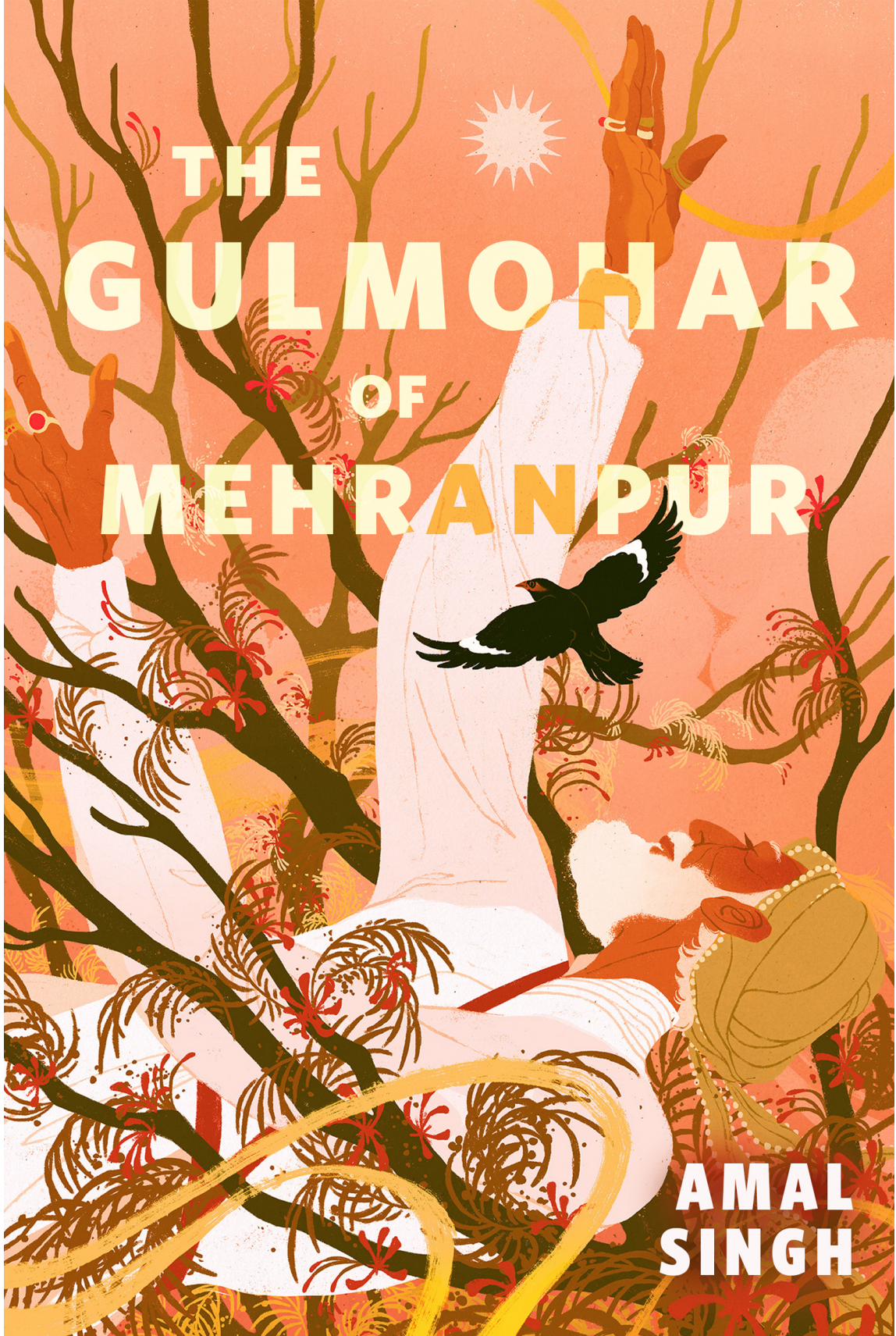
★ ★ ★

The Imperial fortress of Breisach surrendered on the seventeenth day of December in the year of our Lord 1638. The city commander, Baron von Reinach, was permitted to leave honorably, bearing his colors and two cannon. He retreated to Strasbourg, four hundred soldiers—all that remained of Breisach's garrison—and countless citizens with him. If you were watching the column march from the city gates, you might have been struck by the vivid colors of the banners rippling above, the glimmer of the winter sun upon harness and spur. You might have felt the beat of the drums, of booted feet and ironshod hooves. And, if you looked very closely, you might have seen a small white bird, wings outstretched, breezing above the defeated soldiers. You might have watched it turn south, toward the beckoning curves of the Schwarzwald.

A small white bird, its beak stained crimson.



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**THE
GULMOHAR
OF
MEHRANPUR**

**AMAL
SINGH**

The Gulmohar of Mehranpur

A M A L S I N G H

illustration by

S A M A N T H A M A S H

REACTOR 

The Nawab of Mehranpur stopped smoking his hookah and looked up at the new khansama through a thick haze of smoke. The cinnamon-infused hashish cloud made lazy wisps around the Nawab's ruby-studded fingers, clouding his vision. He flicked his hand, the wisps went away with a feline suddenness, and the khansama began to look more like a man than a mere idea, a quivering abstraction. The Nawab saw the man's audacity, his naaz, his tenacity, his tongue-click manner of speaking. He saw a man who carried an inscrutable pride on his bony shoulders, a man who was as sure of his words as the fact that the day waned into night.

More than that, the Nawab saw a man who wasn't afraid of certain death.

"If tonight was a moonless night," said the Nawab, "I would have had your head severed and paraded around the Fountains of Reshma."

"I am aware, Nawab Saheb," said the man.

"Say again what you said with such confidence, a moment ago. Say it so the court hears it again, like a thunderclap in a storm."

"I can prepare a meal that brings eternal youth."

The Nawab set aside the hookah. He straightened his back, and his bones cracked and groaned and complained in languages only bones speak, a language of age and whispers. And even his bones had heard the word "youth" from the mouth of the audacious man, the man who wore nothing but a simple tunic and a faded dhoti, with torn slippers and grime lining his toenails.

"I won't repeat the eon-old saying that even the walls have ears," said the Nawab. "But my walls listen. And then they speak to other walls. And then all the walls of Mehranpur speak among themselves, telling each other stories of my subjects, bringing back to me their discontents. So don't make promises in this court that the walls curl into rumours, that bring hope to the hearts of my subjects and to me."

"I know what you're implying, Nawab," said the man. "But what I say is the truth."

"You also know that I make available, from time to time, the heartiest and most sumptuous meals for my subjects, an envious feast, so that they spend the rest of their hardworking weeks with the taste of what we serve. And they continue to work hard, because they have another feast to look forward to, aside from dreary day-to-day meals of roti and daal and achar."

"I am well aware of your magnanimity, Nawab Saheb."

"Then go and make me a meal that brings eternal youth," said the Nawab. "But remember, if you fail, then you would have caused a grievous anguish to both me and my loyal subjects. And the punishment for that would not be meted out by me, but by them."

"I won't disappoint," said the man, giving the Nawab a curt bow. "I only have one condition."

"Speak freely."

"I would need a two-inch bar of gold, every day, as payment, for eighteen days. And not just any gold...not a corrupted alloy. But its purest form."

The Nawab summarily ignored the ask of gold. That was not what had surprised him. "What meal takes eighteen days to prepare?" The Nawab didn't like the agitation in his voice. But the agitation itself was a precursor to a rage that was hidden in his heart. The rage at this man's outlandish notions.

"A meal that brings eternal youth," said the man, his voice calm, unerring.

★ ★ ★

Later, in his bedchamber, his Diwan-i-Khas, the Nawab lounged with his begum and told her about the ache in his heart, and the rage in his heart, and the blood that swelled in his veins that told him myriad things about the state of the world.

"I am afraid one day this rage will get the better of me," said the Nawab.

"What is the root of all this anger?" asked the begum.

The Nawab fell silent. He had looked deep inside and asked himself questions, and asked others the same questions, and answers had always eluded him. Mehranpur was a mere district-state, subservient to the larger state of Alipur, where Mohammad Ali Shah ruled with an iron fist. When Ali Shah gave alms, and spoke of promises, and spoke of expensive grains like barley and rice and millet being imported from other lands, and other riches, he never included Mehranpur in his magnanimous decisions. On occasions, the Nawab of Mehranpur had himself walked to Alipur Palace, on scorched earth, showing his love and respect for the greater state, and given much of his hoards of ruby to the Shah, but to no avail.

Mehranpur had become a mere speck of sand. The Nawab feared the small district-state of Mehranpur might soon be uprooted by the whims of the Shah. And this fear brought about rage. And the rage often made the Nawab do inexplicable things. Things which reached the ears of the Shah, sometimes, completing a circle of misery.

The Nawab was also getting old. Age crept up to him, as his days morphed into years faster than a wind could change direction. And with the Nawab, Mehranpur aged too, and lived always at the cusp of disaster. And that's why the Nawab hated promises.

"You can always tend to the Gulmohar," said the Begum, twisting the hem of her dupatta into knots.

The Gulmohar, the Nawab's pride, once a majestic tree that was the envy of all eyes in all the states, grew in his orchard, but its edifice had recently begun to mirror the Nawab's various predicaments. Its bright saffron leaves had turned to rust and its bark had started shedding all around the grass it stood on. The cool, all-encompassing shade it once provided was now a patchwork blanket of shadow. In the morning, before the khansama's arrival, the Nawab had tended to the Gulmohar personally, sat down near its roots with chisel and manure, often singing to the tree. The nawab cut a despondent figure from afar, and the residents of the Palace spoke in hushed tones with each other about how lonely he had become.

Now, in the evening, the Nawab once again visited the tree and once again saw its drooping edifice. It escaped him, how, despite good quality manure, enough water, ample sunlight in the afternoons, the Gulmohar refused to thrive. It had started behaving like a stubborn child. But the Nawab couldn't discipline the Gulmohar like he would a stubborn child.

If he had any children, he would have learned better ways of discipline.

"Nawab Saheb, the Shah has sent a paigam."

The Nawab turned to face a sentry, who was holding a rolled parchment with a green ribbon and the unmistakable bright red wax seal of the Shah with a golden teardrop on it.

"Open it and read it to me, then," said the Nawab, facing the Gulmohar again. He felt the more his eyes strayed from the sight of the tree, the more it drooped. Even now, he could tell, the branches curved downwards a slight inch, when the sentry had disturbed him.

"It's by the powers vested upon me by the royal state that I decree..."

"The day won't wait around for you to read the preamble, just get on with it," said the Nawab, impatience dripping from his mouth like honey from a nest of bees. The sentry sighed.

"Nawab Saheb, it's written here that Mehranpur will no longer get any rice."

"How far have you studied, sentry?"

"I have studied enough letters, Nawab Saheb," said the sentry, his words quivering and shaking. "It's what the paigam says."

The Nawab snatched the letter from the sentry's hands. He read it in its entirety, trying to find any hidden meaning in the gaps between one alphabet and the next, again and again, until his eyes hurt from the effort and his knees buckled underneath him from the weight of it all.

★ ★ ★

Later that night, the Nawab dreamed of having children. Next day, at the fresh crack of dawn, as the Begum was feeding the mynah on the windowsill, the Nawab made his wish known to her, of finally expanding their family from two to three, perhaps four. When his Begum fell silent, and in her silence was all the

answer, and the mynah chirped and flew away, the Nawab quietly walked out of his Diwan-i-Khas and made his way towards the kitchen.

The smell reached the Nawab first, before the low murmurs. Even as he crossed the long, marbled walkway from his court towards the kitchens, the intoxicating aroma of garlic- and cumin-infused oil reached his nostrils. He hurried, but his footfall told its own tale. The Nawab's steps were loud and assured, and the sound of his boots against marble was like the sound of the first patter of rain. It was a sound of authority, and it was that sound that gave him away.

When the Nawab entered, the khansama was already facing the door, as if anticipating his arrival. But what was a stark surprise was the absence of any of the other bawarchis who normally assisted a khansama during the preparation of a feast.

"Nawab Saheb, if it isn't too much, I must ask you to leave the kitchen."

The first inkling of a long-subdued rage. The Nawab clenched his fist, then calmed himself. No other khansama had ever spoken to him with such impudence.

"Do you not wish to receive your first gold payment? Is today the first day of your preparation for whatever meal you promised me?"

The khansama's gaze lingered on the Nawab's face for far too long.

"Do you have the gold on your person?"

"I do," said the Nawab. He loosened a plain gold ring from his finger and handed it to the khansama. "I begin your payment with something that's valuable to me. This means that I trust you to do whatever needs to be done."

The khansama simply pocketed the ring, without as much as giving it a glance.

"I will," he said. "I have heard that there will be no rice, going forth."

"Therefore, I assume, a khansama will improvise."

"As a khansama must."

★ ★ ★

The Nawab's true name was known only to his Begum. It was a beautiful name, which meant, in a distant language, the wind that sings lullabies to a grave. The Nawab had increasingly started feeling nearer to the grave than being cradled by a gentle wind. He felt he wasn't being true to his people, especially the ones who spent scorching summer days digging to unearth gold just for the happiness of the Shah.

Most nights, the Nawab entertained the idea of laying a siege on the Shah's capital with his meagre army. Of course, he had heard of valiant efforts of five hundred men against fifty thousand, so he knew it could be done. But those five hundred were often led by capable generals. But the Nawab himself, with his weary bones and aching heart wasn't much of a commander. Nor was he a poet, who could soothe someone's heart just by his words. He couldn't even do so with his own Begum.

He could only look backwards at his youth. But the strange ways of the new khansama, the cadence with which his utensils made sounds against each other, the sound of the gentle simmer of a *something* being made over a kadhai, the slow bubble, the warm, nutty scent of spices, opened for the Nawab a window to the future. A future where another age waited for him. A bright future where, perhaps if he were to be rid of his cage of age, he would be rid of the tyranny of the Shah.

But was it even possible? Or had the silent wishes of the Nawab's heart somehow reached a cunning khansama's ears, and he had decided to take advantage of the fact? By looting him of gold, little by little, over eighteen days. And the khansama was strict about his ways too. No one was allowed inside the kitchen for the span of the fortnight and four days, not even the Nawab. For the next few days, the only time the khansama showed his face outside the kitchen was to collect his gold. The Nawab grew increasingly agitated as the last day approached. Despite all the powers he held, he had no way of knowing what meal was being cooked inside the kitchens.

On the eleventh day, as the Nawab was tending to the Gulmohar, he received another paigam from the Shah. This time, the Shah had requested the Nawab's presence in the court of Alipur. It was a curt letter, with only two sentences clarifying the Shah's will.

"He wants to spit in my face as he tells me that Mehranpur will be disintegrated into smaller districts, governed by his cronies," said the Nawab, after he read the paigam out loud in front of his Begum.

"If you take this news in a positive light," said the Begum, knitting a sweater, her keen eyes affixed on the wool patterns embroidered on the arm and how she continued them across the chest, "the thing you're most looking forward to, the meal of eternal youth, will be ready by the time you return."

"It's a useless endeavour," said the Nawab. "I don't even know what I will do with the youth that's promised to me. I am powerless now. I will be powerless then."

"I have heard that the Shah can be kind sometimes," said the Begum. "Maybe he showers some kindness upon us."

The Nawab couldn't fathom the eerie calm in his Begum's voice.

"Will you take care of the Gulmohar in my absence?"

"Of course I will."

Before leaving for Alipur, the Nawab cast one last, mournful glance at the tree that grew in his courtyard. The ten days of sun hadn't changed its edifice one bit. In fact, its leaves were now the colour of rust and its brittle branches one day away from falling to the ground. The Nawab feared his absence would mean the death of the Gulmohar.

. . .

It took the Nawab two days to travel to Alipur. When the dust-caked road morphed into smooth black tar, with signs painted white pointing in the general direction of the Shah's capital, the Nawab knew his meeting wouldn't be kind. The Nawab took the changing of the condition of the roads as an insult upon him. Because it was an insult, when the roads that snaked to the other districts saw their potholes filled and their cracks smoothed, and only the road to Mehranpur remained like a shoddy, broken thing.

Alipur itself was a city that was meant to put any visitor to shame. The Nawab had felt this shame all his life and he wanted to be done with it. So, he hurried his caravan as soon as it entered the city, not choosing to part the curtains to look outside at the shops that sold silk and cotton, and dates and walnuts, and the tall golden spires that gleamed even during the blackest of nights. When he stepped out of his caravan, he rejected what his peripheral vision told him and walked straight inside the Palace, where he was unceremoniously welcomed and ushered inside the resting chamber of the Shah.

Mohammad Ali Shah's vast, bulky frame was draped on a diwan. From a distance, the Shah was a painting of opulence and of indulgence, and of riotous colour, almost blinding to the eyes of the Nawab. When the Nawab curtsied, the Shah merely glanced at him, and then resumed nibbling his grapes, as if the Nawab's presence was as inconsequential as a fly.

"I thought you would not come," said the Shah. His voice was like the touch of a feather. A voice that didn't match his actions. "You didn't respond to my earlier paigam."

"There was nothing to respond to," said the Nawab.

"*Thank you, esteemed Shah of Alipur, we look forward to serving you better and falana...* Words like these. Don't you have manners, Nawab?"

"Why have you called me here?" said the Nawab, his voice at edge. "What was so important that couldn't be requested in another paigam?"

The Shah rose from the diwan, and the view was like a huge, heavy curtain, finally unfurling. When the Shah walked towards the Nawab, he felt the oncoming rush of a tsunami. When he finally stood an inch away from the Nawab, towering a hand-span over him, the Nawab felt the fear of god.

"I could crush you, right now," said the Shah. "But I just want the Gulmohar."

"Gulmohar...as in...my tree...the Gulmohar?"

"Gulmohar, as in, yes, your tree, your child, your pride, that Gulmohar. The same Gulmohar which I now know is dying. I believe it belongs in Alipur. It will thrive here. The Gulmohar of Alipur. Now that's a name that has a ring to it."

"You can't just uproot a tree and plant it somewhere else," said the Nawab. "My precious...tree...it's already unhealthy. It would require a mammoth amount of effort and I can't just give it to you. It will die on the way. There's no way even

you could revive it. Ask me anything else. I will give you more share of gold from the mines of Mehranpur. I would make them work double shifts.”

“I have plenty of gold, Nawab,” said the Shah. “You give me your tree, and I give you back your rice. And then I will give you more. Return, now, to Mehranpur, Nawab, and mull over my words. I need an answer in a week. If I don’t receive a paigam, I would assume that your answer is a no, and then Mehranpur will be subject, again and again, like it always has, to my various dissatisfactions. But if you say yes...well...the mynah will sing again.”

And then the Shah turned around and walked back to the diwan and lounged and spoke no more.

★ ★ ★

The Nawab’s misfortunes didn’t end there. On the way back, he had to battle a torrent of rain, and his caravan got lodged in mud, and it took five strong men, all wayward travellers, suffering from the same rain, to dislodge the wheel of the caravan and send the vehicle on its way again. The ordeal caused the Nawab’s already old skin to develop an infection, and by the time he reached Mehranpur, he was shivering and cold and sick.

The rage in his heart had taken a bestial form and was bursting through him even in sickness. The rage was at the world and the unfairness of it all. His Begum made him drink the milk of poppy at night and put him to sleep. In a delirious slumber, the Nawab hurled names at the Shah, and at his khansama, and at everyone who had wronged him in the past, ever.

The next day, the entire Palace was suffused with the scent of tempered cumin and garlic, and roasted tomatoes, and cinnamon and coconut and myriad other scents, an intoxicating medley of flavours. Yet, no one was allowed to see what dish the scents belonged to. The Nawab, wide awake at the crack of dawn, realised that it was the eighteenth day, the final day, the day he was meant to taste the dish of the khansama.

For some inexplicable reason, the Nawab felt he should taste the dish in the vicinity of his beloved, the Gulmohar. And so he ordered the khansama to bring him the dish in the orchard. Then, the Nawab showered and dressed in his finest gold-embroidered sherwani and stepped out into the orchard. The sun was another golden disk in a pale blue sky. None of the brightness of the morning seemed to touch the Gulmohar, which looked shrivelled and old. A cord of pincers tightened around the Nawab’s heart. An ache ran through his body. He couldn’t bear the sight of his tree, his beautiful tree, and so he averted his gaze and looked towards the entrance of the orchard, where the khansama was standing, holding a steaming kadhai.

The Nawab beckoned the man. The khansama took his time.

The smell, as always, reached the Nawab first. What had the khansama prepared for eighteen days? What wonders did that kadhai hold, what elixir simmered inside the dull, iron confines of the utensil?

"I thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve you, Nawab Saheb," said the khansama. "I present to you, the Red Daal of Issa."

The man thrust the kadhai under the gaze of the Nawab. And the Nawab saw what was simmering inside the kadhai for eighteen days. And the Nawab's quiet rage came up to the surface when he saw that it was just a daal, a plain old daal, tempered with cumin, garlic, red chilli oil swimming on its yellow-saffron surface.

A daal which could have been done in under an hour.

"What's this? Is this supposed to bring us all eternal youth?"

"Taste it, at least, and then present me with your verdict, Nawab Saheb."

"I'll have a verdict for you," said the Nawab, then snatched the kadhai from the man's hands, and threw it away. The kadhai, flaming hot, made an ugly arc, and so did its contents, the Red Daal of Issa—which wasn't quite red, but sort of a pale golden, like the sun—and fell near the base of the Gulmohar, staining the tree's bark and the ground around it completely with the colour of spring. And seeing his already dying tree smeared with the wasted daal, the Nawab's misery couldn't be contained, and he screamed in agony, and then ordered his guards to take the khansama and imprison him in the dungeons below the Mehranpur Palace.

Later, the Nawab wept in his bedchambers, burying his face in his satin pillows, as his Begum fanned his head. Night fell around the palace, balmy and quiet.

★ ★ ★

For three days, the Nawab mourned. And soon the date approached when he had to respond to the Shah with an affirmative answer. He couldn't bear to look at his dying tree, and he convinced himself that the Gulmohar's fate would be better in Alipur. In fact, every one of his pupils would be better off if they were in Alipur.

Mehranpur, just like the tree, just like the Nawab, was dying.

The morning before he was to draft a paigam to the Shah, the Nawab called upon his chief gardener to speak to him about the inevitable. The gardener was a quiet, reticent man, with patchwork skin, nimble fingers, and a sharp gaze. He met the Nawab like an old friend, but the Nawab spoke like he was singing a dirge.

"It pains me to say this," said the Nawab, in a defeated voice. "But you must call upon your years of hard work, talent, and perseverance, to do something for me. Call upon whoever you think is the most capable. Work with them. I want you to safely uproot the Gulmohar and carry it to Alipur. The Shah has demanded it."

"But why?" said the gardener.

"Because the tree is dying and Alipur would be better suited for its needs."

"Nawab Saheb, I don't understand. The Gulmohar has sprouted bright saffron leaves, and its bark is healthier than ever before."

"The price of lying in Mehranpur is terrible, so be careful. You are my friend, but I won't entertain..."

"Nawab Saheb, please come with me," said the gardener.

The Nawab followed the gardener into the orchard. What he saw there yanked the wind out of his lungs. His precious tree, the Gulmohar he had left to die three days ago, with its withering frame and blackened stump was living again. The bark was brown and clearly showed tree-age circles, and the branches were straight, erect, not drooping, and the leaves, oh the leaves, were reminiscent of a flower in the first bloom of spring, a dazzling saffron. The Gulmohar was living up to its name.

A word escaped the Nawab's lips, a question. "How?"

"I had been curious about the tree. I saw something near its base three days ago. A bright yellow smear. I can't be sure, but it seems to me that the tree has taken sustenance from that substance."

A whirlwind of emotions stirred inside the Nawab, but none of them was rage. Confusion, regret, bitterness, a yearning for something long gone. But no rage.

"Bring the khansama to me."

Later, the khansama was brought in front of the Nawab. Three days inside the dungeons, his thin frame slouching, bogged down by the heavy chains, and yet he had a slight smile on his face.

"All of us present in this court are seeking answers," said the Nawab. "Something inexplicable has happened."

"I have spent my life as a cook studying the properties of both food and gold and how they complement each other. Every day, for eighteen days, I simmered the daal under a low flame, while working with the gold you provided me. Every day, for eighteen days, I brought out the true essence of that gold and put it in the daal. It's that essence the tree now drinks sustenance from. And that essence will remain with the tree long after all of us have gone. A sustenance that could have been yours too."

The silence that fell between the two men was long and drawn out. Only the skittering of leaves outside could be heard, and the slow breathing of the courtiers, as they waited for the Nawab to announce something, a decision, a decree, so that they could obey, and then go back to their chambers to sleep.

"I can take another eighteen days to prepare something else, Nawab Saheb."

"No," said the Nawab. "I do not deserve that magnanimity. I deserve this humiliation for my short-sightedness. You may leave now. Please speak to the khajanchi for an adequate payment for your services."

This declaration came as a surprise to most courtiers, for certainly they had been expecting a miracle, of a life beyond what the Maker had given them, a life

that would go on and on, while their youth remained in stasis. But that was not to be, because of the Nawab's folly.

The Nawab stepped away, leaving the courtiers in deep thought, and with moments to reflect. The Nawab had his own reflecting to do.

His Begum had prepared a great, warm concoction for him, as she usually did, when the Nawab was under a dark cloud. Today, he was under the darkest of clouds, and the path in front of him was murky. The concoction had clove, cinnamon, ginger, and some jaggery. The Nawab took the cup from his Begum's assured hands and walked out into the sun, towards the shade of the Gulmohar that he had so sorely missed.

The Shah's words were ringing in his head. The fate of Mehranpur was a smoke-grab thing, waiting for the Nawab's one command. Their happiness, their misery, all up to the Nawab to decide. Yet, the Nawab had no answers. He thought of ancient poetry that held meaning in its meters and verses, answers to various conundrums, but none of the old poets held any answers for the Nawab.

He sat under the shade of the Gulmohar, sipping his concoction. The vast canopy of its branches hid the sun, allowing only a thin beam of light to pass. The singular beam fell on the Nawab's feet, illuminating them. There was immeasurable beauty in that moment, a gentle kindness that the Nawab felt the Gulmohar was bestowing upon him.

The Gulmohar had forgiven him for the neglect of all those years.

Then, a wind blew, and from the canopy overhead, two stray leaves detached, twisted and curled in the air, feather-like, and came to rest on the simmering surface of the Nawab's concoction. The leaves blended in the liquid immediately, leaving a thin, golden trail, like the afterthought of a flame. The Nawab tasted the concoction again.

The rage of all those years simmered down and he felt at tranquil ease. The Gulmohar wanted him to swim in that ease. The Gulmohar knew that his heart still beat for his city, his family, and his people. It knew that his resolve was unyielding, like a diamond. The Gulmohar had spoken to him, and after many years, the Nawab was listening.

It trusted the Nawab to do what was right.



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ACE

UP

HER

SLEEVE

GENOVEVA DIMOVA

Ace Up Her Sleeve

GENOVEVA DIMOVA

illustration by

ROVINA CAI

REACTOR 

The clocks struck midnight. With every chime echoing in the dark streets, the gap above Chernograd tore wider. With every chime, the sky spat out more monsters.

Kosara cast a glance upwards as she trudged in the ankle-deep snow, her face hidden behind a thick woollen scarf. She didn't stop to watch. She'd seen it all before: it happened every New Year's Eve. The new year had been born, but it hadn't been baptised yet. For the next twelve days, the monsters would be free to terrorise the city. Then, with the first cockerel's crow on Saint Yordan's Day, they'd disappear, leaving only destruction behind.

Kosara wasn't afraid of the monsters. She had pockets crammed with talismans and amulets, fingers skilled in weaving spells, and a tongue trained in magic words. She knew every monster's weakness: how the karakonjuls could be defeated with a clever riddle, the yudas shied away from their reflection in a mirror, and the upirs hated the stench of garlic.

Well, she was not afraid of *most* of them. There was one monster no amulet or talisman could defeat; no magic words or spells would chase away. One monster Kosara knew better than anyone in Chernograd, and yet had found no weak spots in his glistening, scaly armour. One monster she'd do her best to avoid this New Year's Eve, and for the twelve days after.

But as the chiming of the clocks finally died down and her steps sped up, she was left with the nagging feeling that she simply had nowhere to hide. She was trapped, just like everyone else in Chernograd. Trapped inside the city with the monsters.

In the distance, the Wall towered, an ink-black silhouette against the white snow. Its tentacles reached into the sky, preventing anyone from flying over. Its roots sank deep within the ground, stopping anyone from burrowing under. An impenetrable barrier.

A dark shadow crossed the sky above Kosara, and she automatically ducked into a church's arched entrance. She deeply inhaled the scent of incense drifting from within and let the chants of the priests calm down her thumping heart, before she risked peeking out again.

For a brief second, she was sure she'd seen the Zmey's large wings and his curved horns flying over the church's onion dome. She could have sworn she spotted his golden scales glinting in the moonlight. She was certain she heard his soft voice, *Why do you run from me, my little Kosara?*

She fished out her strongest talisman, fashioned from a boiled egg, a red thread, and a pair of rusty scissors. Her mouth began shaping the defensive spell, even though she knew it would be useless.

But then, a gust of wind scattered the snowflakes, and Kosara realised the Zmey wasn't there at all—she'd imagined it all. It had been nothing but the shadows swirling between the tall spires and the smoke pouring from the chimneys, painting wings and horns where there were none. It hadn't been his voice she'd heard, but the whistling of the wind.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, she thought. What was she doing, scrambling about like a scared animal at the first sign of danger? She knew very well the Zmey never came to her in his monster form. He always donned his human disguise first—the one he'd worn when he'd first fooled her into trusting him, six years ago.

She allowed herself a few seconds for her heart to stop hammering against her ribcage. Then she dashed across the city square, a space too open to be comfortable under a sky swarming with monsters. Her shadow followed her a few steps behind—they were both exhausted after a day of casting protective spells. Her

throat burned from the cold, and her breath escaped in short gasps as her nostrils filled with a familiar scent.

Nothing smelled quite like New Year's Eve in Chernograd. Fresh snow, warm fireplaces, fireworks drifting in from the other side of the Wall. And the monsters, of course, had a smell, too: a putrid mixture of blood and gore, and the reek of burnt fur as they hit the protective circles drawn around every window and door in the city. Roars and shouts filled the streets, and the clapping of hooves echoed. Somewhere in the distance, an air-splitting scream sounded. All around Kosara, the last passersby rushed, trying to get behind bolted doors—only their eyes glinted, visible in the sliver of skin between fur hats and wool scarves.

Finally, Kosara reached her destination, a glittering salon on the main street, the only bright spot among the dark snowdrifts. A tacky, elaborately carved and gilded sign hung over the entrance, its iron chains squeaking in the wind: THE WITCH'S REST. An enchanted drawing of a cauldron bubbled underneath.

Kosara raised her hand to knock on the door but hesitated, remaining frozen for a second. The Zmey would never think to look for her here, she was certain. And yet, she couldn't shake the feeling she was making a mistake in crossing the threshold.

The Witch's Rest wasn't named after its clientele—in fact, no self-respecting witch ever patronised it. It was named after its owner, Sofiya Karajova.

Sofiya had been kind enough to allow Kosara to hide there until the end of the Foul Days, but Kosara suspected her motives were far from altruistic. There was nothing worse than owing a favour to a fellow witch. Sofiya would come to claim it one day, undoubtedly at the worst possible moment, and she'd make sure it cost Kosara.

Before Kosara's knuckles had touched the wood, the door swung open, and a gloved hand caught Kosara's lapel, pulling her inside.

"Finally." Sofiya patted the snow off Kosara's shoulders with an abrupt gesture. "What took you so long?"

"I was getting ready."

“Were you?” Sofiya looked Kosara up and down, and Kosara knew what the other witch was seeing: her messy hair with snowflakes caught between the dark tresses, her mascara running from the wind and cold outside and settling in the scars on her cheek, her scruffy coat with brand-new patches on the elbows. Kosara, not wanting to be outdone, did her own slow, deliberate once-over of Sofiya.

Sofiya was a tall woman, always impeccably dressed in fabrics imported for eye-watering prices from the other side of the Wall. Multiple leather pouches with spells hidden inside hung around her long neck, and her bracelets chimed as she moved, adorned with never-blinking evil-eye beads. At her feet, two shadows waited—one was Sofiya’s own, and the other had been left to her by her grandmother. It was still alive after the death of its previous owner, a feat very few witches managed to achieve.

Every witch’s magic came from their shadow. With two, Sofiya was one of the most powerful witches in the city.

Not that she used her powers for anything good.

“Take that off,” Sofiya demanded, already stripping Kosara’s coat off her.

“Why?”

“I don’t want my clients seeing you in that old thing. I have an image to uphold. What did you have to patch it for? Couldn’t you just get a new one?” Sofiya rolled her eyes. Kosara’s coat hung off her elbow like a dead animal.

“Not exactly,” Kosara mumbled. She followed the other woman to the salon.

It was a dimly lit, stuffy space, filled with the scent of incense and countless silk cushions scattered across the parquet floor. Thick curtains were draped over the windows. Beneath their tassels glittered magical symbols meant to scare the monsters away.

A long table for seances commanded the centre of the room. It was covered in a velvet tablecloth trimmed in gold, and a large crystal ball was placed atop it, filled with swirling mist. A group of

men and women dressed in imported silk shirts and satin dresses sat around it, their gloved hands clasped together, their eyes shut.

One of the women slowly, secretively cracked her left eye open. Her pupil was enlarged and the iris around it was a bright, vibrant purple. She'd probably used enchanted eye drops.

As she spotted Sofiya leading Kosara through the room by the elbow, she raised a single painted eyebrow.

"Coming in a second," Sofiya said through her teeth. An unnatural smile had spread across her face. "You have to remember," she whispered, as she pushed Kosara past a curtain into the cramped booth behind, "I'm doing you a huge favour."

Kosara groaned as she plopped down on the soft cushions. "I know." She took a deep breath and spat the next part out quickly, like it tasted bitter on her tongue. "And I'm very thankful."

Once Sofiya was gone, Kosara leaned back against the cushions and placed her muddy boots on the low mahogany table, making sure she left a mark. Petty, but the other witch simply infuriated her.

Sofiya could have been out there today with the other witches, freezing to the bone in the snow, drawing protective circles around shops and houses. If Kosara could do it, then so could Sofiya Two-Shadows. Instead, she'd protected only her salon and had gathered as many rich fools as she could inside it, charging them a hefty fee for the privilege. Sofiya probably planned to hide here until the end of the Foul Days, never as much as showing her nose outside.

Kosara resented the fact that she, too, planned to hide here. She resented the opulent displays of wealth all around her because she herself couldn't afford the expensive fabrics, the mahogany furniture, the crystal ball. All because she'd lost her money in a stupid, doomed attempt to cross the Wall five years ago.

It had been a mistake. Not only because it had ultimately ended with her stranded on this side of the Wall with no money—but because, in hindsight, it hadn't been Chernograd she'd wanted to escape at all. It had been the demons from her past. Crossing the

Wall would have solved nothing. Yes, the Zmey couldn't physically get her on the other side, but he'd still be alive in her mind.

He'd know he'd won if he forced her to leave her city.

No, what Kosara needed to do was to defeat the Zmey once and for all. She needed to claim her city back.

The only problem was, she had no idea how. It wasn't an easy matter, defeating the Tsar of Monsters.

Kosara sighed, making herself comfortable between the cushions. Her eyelids grew heavy. Except, something—some sixth sense—was screaming at her that she couldn't fall asleep just yet. She was certain the Zmey wouldn't come to look for her here. And yet, her certainty had cost her before.

Kosara licked her lips and fished out an old, crumpled deck of cards from her pocket. She'd had it for years—six years, in fact. She'd bought one for herself and one for the Zmey. He'd been delighted with her present and had never thought to question her generosity.

Just like every year, she picked out the ace of spades and shoved it down the back of her boot.

Maybe she'd finally be able to use it. Maybe, just for once, her luck would work.

★ ★ ★

Kosara awoke with a start. Her neck was stiff, stuck at an unnatural angle on the cushions, and her toes hurt in her boots. She'd spent so long outside in the snow today, her throat felt raw.

On the other side of the curtain, in the main hall, the séance continued. Sofiya was loudly asking some long-suffering spirit under which tree in the garden, precisely, he'd buried his treasure, so his greedy nephew could dig it out. What a way to take advantage of the time of year when the boundary between Chernograd and the world of spirits and monsters was thinnest.

At first, Kosara wasn't sure what had woken her. Nothing in her little booth had changed, as far as she could see.

But then, she smelled the difference in the air. There was the scent of sandalwood and cinnamon coming from the main hall, where incense sticks burned. There was the smell of soot and coal, still clinging to Kosara's clothes and hair after a day spent outside.

But there was something else, too. Something painfully familiar: a wild, otherworldly scent, raw and magical. It made the hairs on the back of Kosara's neck stand up.

She scrambled up, thinking there might still be time to run, time to escape ...

Long, pale fingers pulled the curtain open.

Kosara's scream stuck in her throat. The Zmey's eyes met hers.

He'd come in his human disguise, as he always did—his frame filled the opening in the curtain, and his hair caught the light like molten gold.

He smiled his handsome smile. "May I come in?"

Kosara desperately blinked fast, hoping it might dispel him. Hoping she was simply imagining him again.

It didn't help. He remained standing there, just as solid as before.

"How?" Kosara spat. She barely heard her voice over the thumping of her heart.

"Excuse me?"

"How did you find me?" Her words came out strained. It cost her effort to push them past the lump in her throat.

The Zmey laughed. He had a pleasant, chiming laugh. "You didn't really think I wouldn't, did you? When have you ever managed to hide from me?"

Kosara stayed silent because she didn't want to admit the truth. *Never.*

But she'd never before fallen so low as to ask her least favourite witch in town for a favour. She'd truly thought she was safe here—that, perhaps, had been her downfall. Kosara could see it now: Why would a witch who had no qualms selling trinkets to rich fools

instead of doing real magic ever feel bound by the witches' honour code? Sofiya must have ratted her out to the Zmey.

Kosara had made a mistake trusting her. It wasn't the first time she'd put her trust in the wrong person.

"Kosara, Kosara, Kosara..." The Zmey shut the curtain behind him and, without waiting for an invitation, sprawled himself on the cushions opposite her. He'd taken his snakeskin coat off and wore a simple, old-fashioned linen shirt, embroidered around the cuffs and neckline. The last couple of buttons were left undone, showing off his sculpted chest, covered in tiny, glinting golden hairs. "When will you give up?"

Kosara's eyes snapped back to his face. "Give up what?"

"Trying to run away from me. When will you accept your rightful position by my side?"

Kosara stayed silent again. *Never.*

"I can give you everything you've ever dreamed of," he said. "I can make you rich beyond your wildest imagination. All you need to do is to say the word."

Kosara knew this play well. Every year, it was the same. He'd managed to lure her into his palace once when she'd been young and stupid, and there was no way she'd ever return there. That last time, she'd been lucky to make it out, drunk on moon wine and half-starved after spending months eating nothing but enchanted fruit, and she'd only managed it with her mentor's help. It had taken months for her head to clear, and for her eyes to stop imagining shadows lurking in every corner.

He'd been grooming her, she knew, to give him her magic.

"Why are you here?" she asked, even though she knew the answer. "What do you want?"

The corners of the Zmey's mouth twitched. "You."

Bullshit. He didn't want *her*. He wanted her power.

He simply thought she was an easy target because she'd fallen for his lies once before.

But, God, there was still some tiny part of her, hidden deep within, that felt flattered by his words. Some tiny part that yearned to snuggle in his familiar arms, and simply end this stupid game of cat and mouse. It had been so long. She was so tired.

Kosara had to keep that part of herself under control because it was an *utter idiot*.

"Why are you here?" she repeated, slightly more forcefully. Nevertheless, she didn't dare raise her voice. She couldn't allow herself to make him angry, or else he'd raze Sofiya's salon to the ground, and Kosara's debt to the other witch would grow too costly.

"Well, now." The Zmey produced a crumpled deck of cards from his back pocket. It was a mystery how it even fit there—his trousers fit him as if painted on, revealing every muscle. "Don't tell me you've forgotten our little tradition."

Kosara gave him an even stare. She hadn't forgotten. Every year, the Zmey demanded they play a game of cards. He always suggested the same wager: a lock of hair. At first, Kosara couldn't figure out what his aim was. For him, winning a lock of her hair wouldn't mean much. He wasn't a witch, and his magic wasn't precise enough to use it to control her through it. She'd simply assumed it was a convenient way for him to force his presence on her, since he knew she couldn't resist a good gamble.

But then, she couldn't help wondering if she underestimated his power. Every year, he found her that bit faster. Every year, the fog that fell over her brain in his presence grew thicker. Since he never lost a single game, he had five locks of her hair now. What would he do if he won a sixth one? What if that was what it took for him to finally force her back under his control?

The trouble was, Kosara couldn't refuse him. Winning a lock of *his* hair was her only route to true freedom. With an artefact that powerful, she could prevent him from ever coming near her again. If she learned how to keep him away, she'd come one step closer to defeating him.

“Fine,” Kosara said through gritted teeth, painfully aware she was taking too big a gamble yet again. But how likely was it that the Zmey would win six games in a row? “Deal.”

Without saying a word, the Zmey began dealing: one card for Kosara, one for him. One for Kosara, one for him. Finally, he placed five cards face up on the table.

The rules of Kral were simple: each player held two cards. Whoever had the highest combination at the end of the third round won. You were allowed to swap your cards with the five face up on the table, but you had to do it carefully, so as not to alert your opponent to what you held. If your opponent guessed the exact cards in your hand, you lost.

Kosara looked down at her hand and groaned, but only internally. Just as usual, she held two weak cards: a five of diamonds and a three of spades. Her luck never seemed to work when she played against the Zmey. If she didn't know better, she'd think he'd enchanted her—used his collection of locks of her hair to place a hex on her. Except he'd sworn he possessed no such magic—and she'd seen no evidence that he did.

If he could already do a spell as intricate as a hex on her luck, he wouldn't be so desperate to steal her power.

Kosara scratched the scar on her cheek. From the corner of her eye, she spotted a queen of hearts placed face up on the table. She didn't look at it directly, too aware of the Zmey's eyes on her. She could take it, but then she would have to hope for a jack to come up next. What were the chances of that happening?

Given her luck so far, minuscule.

“Are you going to fold?” the Zmey asked after a few seconds.

And accept defeat this early? No way.

Kosara shrugged. “I'm simply letting you go first.”

The Zmey smirked and with a quick, fluid gesture swept the queen off the table, discarding one of his cards face down. Either he was bluffing, or he was holding a jack.

Kosara swore under her breath. She shouldn't have let him take the queen. She wasn't playing smart. She wiped her sweaty palms on her trousers and took several deep breaths, forcing her heartbeat to slow down. *Focus.*

She couldn't lose this one. *Stupid, stupid, stupid witch,* she chided herself. For whatever reason, the voice in her head sounded an awful lot like the Zmey's.

He smirked, as if he could read her thoughts. Then, he slowly, deliberately, placed another card face up, to replace the stolen queen.

Hope rose in Kosara's chest. Could it be, finally, after all these years?

A king of spades.

Don't let the corners of your mouth twitch. Don't let your eyebrows go up. Don't even look down at that card.

This was good. This was more than good—it was perfect.

That king of spades would be useless to her in combination with either of the cards she held. She, however, had an ace up her sleeve. Well, in her boot. Together, the king and the ace made the strongest combination in the game.

The only problem was, she couldn't reach for the ace and risk the Zmey noticing.

She lifted her eyes to his and saw the glint in them. His smile had acquired a sharp edge. His fingers impatiently drummed on the table, waiting for her next move.

Kosara knew exactly what those fingers felt like wrapped around her throat. She swallowed hard.

But then, her eyes fell on her shadow. Now, there was an idea ...

The booth was gloomy, and her shadow was barely visible, stretched along the wall behind her. Kosara tried to summon it, but there simply wasn't enough light.

"It's getting a bit chilly, don't you think?" she asked casually.

A single line appeared between the Zmey's eyebrows. "I wouldn't say so."

“My fingers have gone numb. Give me a second.” Kosara placed her cards on the table face down, careful so the Zmey wouldn’t catch a glimpse of them. Then she clicked her fingers.

A small orange flame danced at her fingertip. Its glow warmed her hands and face.

It reflected deep within the Zmey’s eyes as he watched her. “Are you stalling?”

“Not at all. I just need a minute to warm up.”

By the flame’s light, Kosara’s shadow grew darker. She summoned it again, reaching for it with her mind. Nothing happened. Kosara risked clicking her fingers again, making the flame brighter. The Zmey watched her without blinking.

Her shadow twitched as if shaking itself from a deep sleep. Its head slightly, almost imperceptibly turned to Kosara.

She’d done this trick during countless card games. Usually, everyone was too busy watching her for tells—staring at her face, trying to see if her toes nervously tapped on the floor. No one paid attention to her shadow.

No one but the Zmey. Every witch’s magic hid in their shadow, and he knew it. He rarely let her shadow out of his sight when they were together.

Which made it the perfect distraction.

Kosara didn’t let her eyes follow her shadow as it slid under the table. Instead, she stared at the Zmey, and he stared back at her, his smile still spread across his face.

He must have thought she couldn’t tear her gaze away from him. The truth was, Kosara didn’t even see him. The corner of her eye followed her shadow.

A shadowy hand appeared, creeping over the tabletop. It was difficult to spot, in the many dancing shadows now covering the booth, animated by Kosara’s flame. The only reason Kosara saw it was she knew what she was looking for.

The shadowy fingers reached for the deck. They quickly thumbed through, so fast they were a blur, looking for the ace of spades ...

A thud sounded. Kosara flinched, her left hand dropping off the table to dangle next to the back of her boot.

A dagger—glinting steel, with a gilded handle encrusted with rubies—pierced the deck of cards, pinning it to the table. It trembled from the force with which the Zmey had thrown it.

The Zmey, himself, was still. He looked as if he hadn't even moved.

"What was that for?" Kosara asked, keeping her voice level. Her heart thumped so hard in her chest, she was worried it might be visible through her shirt. Her fingers inched towards her boot.

"Oh," the Zmey said, pulling his second dagger, the twin to the one sticking out from the deck of cards. He used it to clean his sharp nails. "I thought I saw something. I must have imagined it."

Kosara shrugged, nonchalant. On the inside, however, she was celebrating. He'd fallen right into her trap.

"You must have." She clicked her fingers. The flame between them disappeared.

In the fraction of the second before both their eyes acclimated to the gloom, she picked up her cards from the table, adding the ace of spades to her hand and seamlessly sliding the five of diamonds up her sleeve.

Quickly, before she lost her nerve, she swiped the king of spades from the table.

The Zmey looked at her for a long moment. The dagger was still in his hand, its rubies casting bloodred reflections across the booth.

"Are you going to fold?" Kosara asked, deliberately taunting him. The corner of her mouth twitched like she was trying to suppress a smile—which, in fact, she was. The Zmey, however, thought he knew her. He'd think she was bluffing.

"Wouldn't you just love that?" He exhaled through his nostrils. "I can't possibly fold, given what I'm holding."

Was he bluffing? It didn't matter. There was no combination in the game that could beat Kosara's cards.

The Zmey slowly put his cards down on the tabletop. First, he revealed the queen of hearts. Then he flicked over his second card.

The jack of hearts. A great combination.

But it still wasn't good enough to defeat Kosara's. Just as slowly, she showed her cards, her gaze fixed on the Zmey. She'd treasure that memory forever: the moment the ace of spades appeared on the table, and the Zmey's eyes first widened, then narrowed.

He inhaled sharply. "You cheated."

"No, I didn't."

He stabbed the table with his dagger, and it remained there, stuck in the mahogany, parallel to the one still penetrating the deck of cards.

"How did you cheat?" The Zmey stood up and towered over Kosara. She resisted the urge to cower in her seat. "I was watching you."

She looked up and met his gaze. Blue, like the centre of the flame. "I didn't cheat."

"How?" he hissed again. Hot saliva flew from his mouth and landed on her cheek.

Kosara wiped it with her sleeve. "Please behave," she said, sounding calmer than she felt. Her fingers trembled, so she hid them under the table. On the floor, her shadow trembled, too. "I wouldn't have played with you if I knew you were such a sore loser."

The Zmey took a deep breath, his chest puffing up. Kosara wanted to bolt to the door. She didn't. She held his gaze.

"Check the deck, if you don't believe me," she said.

That was a gamble. She couldn't be sure whether her shadow had managed to sneak the ace from his deck away before the Zmey caught it.

The Zmey smirked, no doubt expecting her to be bluffing again. He pulled the dagger from the now ruined deck and flicked through the cards, slowly at first, then faster and faster. A single vein on his temple began pulsating. Kosara tried hard not to fidget.

Finally, the Zmey swore under his breath. He threw the cards on the table, and they scattered, raining all over Kosara's feet.

She allowed herself a small exhale. He hadn't found the ace.

Thank God.

"Damn hag," the Zmey spat out, but he didn't threaten her again. He might be a terrifying beast from another dimension, but he did have his own moral code he stuck to. This was why he despised cheaters so much.

This was also what made it particularly satisfying to cheat him.

Kosara raised her hand, palm up. "Come on," she said. "Pay up."

The Zmey lifted his dagger in one hand and grasped a clump of golden hair in the other. Then, with a fast gesture, he chopped the hair off. It left a gap just above his pale ear.

Kosara grabbed the lock of hair from his hand before he changed his mind. When her skin brushed against his, she drew away as if she'd been burned. The Zmey was scalding hot.

On his forearms, where he'd rolled up his sleeves, his pale flesh bubbled, half revealing the golden scales hiding beneath. Kosara blinked, and for a second she was certain she'd spotted his curved horns rising from his head, so tall they almost touched the ceiling.

She found the amulet in her pocket and gripped it in her hand. If he tried something now, she'd be ready. She had a lock of his hair.

He grinned, and his teeth were long and sharp, crisscrossing in his mouth "I hope you look at it every day while I'm gone." His forked tongue licked his lips. "And think of me."

And then, just when Kosara was ready to begin reciting her defensive spell, he turned around and left. The booth's velvet curtain swished behind his back.

For a long moment, Kosara didn't dare move. She sat still, until she heard the Zmey's steps fade and the bell above the salon's door chime.

In the main hall, Sofiya's droning voice kept asking the spirits questions. Her clients were still oohing and ahing. The smell of

sandalwood and cinnamon drifted in, slowly replacing the Zmey's wild scent lingering behind.

Between Kosara's fingers, his hair was smooth and metallic. She grasped it tight in her fist. A triumphant smile split her face. Finally, she could escape him. *Finally.*

★ ★ ★

The Tsar of Monsters waited, perched on the roof opposite Sofiya's salon. His talons grasped the red roof-tiles. The snow had grown heavier, but he didn't feel the cold. Each snowflake landing on his golden scales evaporated with a hiss.

It was the last night of the Foul Days. He didn't have much time left now.

The door to the salon had stayed shut all night, while his monsters wreaked havoc outside. A group of karakonjuls had tried breaking in just after midnight. He'd watched with mild interest as they burned themselves on the protective circle drawn around the door again and again. Finally, frenzied and bloodthirsty, they'd given up and chased a stray cat up the street.

They hadn't caught it, or else the Zmey would have had to intervene. He had a weak spot for cats.

At nearly six in the morning, just as the sun crept over the rooftops and his monsters began to disappear off the streets, the door to the salon opened. Kosara crept out, her hands hidden deep within her pockets, her dark eyes searching the snowy street.

He knew what she was looking for. Him. He loved the hold he still had over her, after all these years.

He watched her until she disappeared from view. There was a certain quality to the way she walked, like a startled rabbit trying to find cover, that triggered something primal in him. He barely resisted the urge to swoop down and grasp her between his talons.

He couldn't do that. He wouldn't. If he forced her to return to him, she'd never be truly his—and therefore, neither would her

magic. No, he'd wait until she sought him out herself. Until, desperate and tired of being alone, she returned to him.

His fingers inadvertently found the tender flesh where several of his golden scales were missing—in his human form, this was where she'd forced him to cut off a lock of his hair.

She'd cheated. He was certain of it. He knew her better than anyone. He knew all her tells.

She'd cheated, and he would find out how. And once he knew, he'd make her pay for it.

He swept down to the ground, transforming back into his human form midflight. What had jumped from the roof had been a monster, horned and winged. What landed was a young man with golden hair. For a brief second, he stood in the street, letting the snowflakes land on his naked skin. Each transformation made him so hot, as if he were on fire.

Then, he enchanted clothes onto himself—a white shirt, dark trousers, and a long, iridescent coat, flowing from purple to green to gold, like snakeskin.

He walked into Sofiya's salon without bothering to knock. She'd invited him inside once, and that was all he needed. No lock or spell could keep him away now.

He crossed the salon quietly, careful not to wake Sofiya, asleep with her cheek pressed against the tablecloth, her face illuminated by the crystal ball. She hadn't told him Kosara intended to hide here—he'd had to find out from someone else. Interesting. He'd always assumed a couple of gold coins every other year would be enough to buy the witch's loyalty. He'd underestimated her.

Her guests were lying on the floor, huddled among the cushions. He'd made sure none of them spotted him during his last visit—it wouldn't do his reputation any good if the whole town discovered he'd lost a game of cards against some witch.

Finally, the Zmey reached the booth. He closed the curtain behind him.

It still smelled like Kosara, soot and smoke and so much *magic*. Gods, it drove him mad.

He looked around the booth quickly, and then, rather undignified, fell to his knees and peeked under the low table.

It took him a while to find it, but in the end, it was there, just as he'd suspected. The ace of spades from his deck of cards, hidden under the table leg. The one her shadow had snatched just before he'd caught it. If Kosara hadn't been so confident she'd fooled him, she would have retrieved it herself.

Or maybe she'd left it there on purpose. Maybe she'd been worried he'd ambush her on her way home and catch her with both aces in her pocket.

In any case, she'd made a fatal mistake.

The Zmey smiled a vicious smile. He'd make her pay for this. She'd be his again.



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John Wiswell is a disabled writer who lives where New York keeps all its trees. He won the 2021 *Nebula Award* for Short Fiction for his story, "Open House on Haunted Hill," and the 2022 Locus Award for Best Novelette for "That Story Isn't The Story." He has also been a finalist for the Hugo Award, British Fantasy Award, and World Fantasy Award. His stories have appeared in *Uncanny Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Diabolical Plots*, *Nature Futures*, and other fine venues. His debut novel, *SOMEONE YOU CAN BUILD A NEST IN*, will be published by DAW Books in Spring 2024. He can be found making too many puns and discussing craft on his Substack, johnwiswell.substack.com, or sign up for email updates [here](#).

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